

CRESCENT CITY

HOUSE
of
FLAME
and
SHADOW

PROLOGUE

The Hind knelt before her undying masters and contemplated how it would feel to tear out their throats.

Around her own throat, a silver torque lay cool and heavy. It never warmed against her skin. As if the taken lives it symbolized wanted her to endure death's icy grip as well.

A silver dart on a dreadwolf uniform: the trophy for a rebel wiped off the face of Midgard. Lidia had acquired so many that her imperial grays couldn't hold them all. So many that they'd been melted down into that torque.

Did anyone in this chamber see the necklace for what it truly was?

A collar. With a golden leash leading right to the monsters before her.

And did those monsters ever suspect that their faithful pet sat at their feet and pondered the taste and texture of their blood on her tongue? On her teeth?

But here she would kneel, until given leave to rise. As this world would kneel until the six enthroned Asteri drained it dry and left its carcass to rot in the emptiness of space.

The staff of the Eternal Palace had cleaned the blood from the shining crystal floor beneath her knees. No coppery tang lingered in the sterile air, no errant drops marred the columns flanking the chamber. As if the events of two days ago had never occurred.

But Lidia Cervos could not let herself dwell on those events. Not while surrounded by her enemies. Not with Pollux kneeling beside her, one of his shining wings resting atop her calf. From another, it might have been a gesture of comfort, of solidarity.

From Pollux, from the Hammer, it meant nothing but possession.

Lidia willed her eyes dead and cold. Willed her heart to be the same, and focused on the two Fae Kings pleading their cases.

“My late son acted of his own accord,” declared Morven, King of the Avallen Fae, his bone-white face grave. The tall, dark-haired male wore all black, but no heavy air of mourning lay upon him. “Had I known of Cormac’s treason, I would have handed him over myself.”

Lidia flicked her gaze to the panel of parasites seated on their crystal thrones.

Rigelus, veiled as usual in the body of a Fae teenage boy, propped his delicate chin on a fist. “I find it difficult to believe that you had no knowledge of your son’s activities, considering how tightly you held his reins.”

Shadows whispered over Morven’s broad shoulders, trailing off his scaled armor. “He was a defiant boy. I thought I’d beaten it out of him long ago.”

“You thought wrong,” sneered Hesperus, the Evening Star, who’d taken on the shape of a blond nymph. Her long, slim fingers tapped the glimmering arm of her throne. “We can only assume that his treachery stemmed from some decay within your royal house. One that must now be scourged.”

For the first time in the decades the Hind had known him, King Morven held his tongue. He’d had no choice but to answer the Asteri’s summons yesterday, but he clearly did not appreciate the reminder that his autonomy was a mere illusion, even on the misty isle of Avallen.

Some small part of her relished it—seeing the male who’d strutted through Summits and meetings and balls now weighing his every word. Knowing it might be his last.

Morven growled, “I had no knowledge of my son’s activities or of his craven heart. I swear it upon Luna’s golden bow.” His voice

rang clear as he added with impressive fury, “I condemn all that Cormac was and stood for. He shall not be honored with a grave nor a burial. There will be no ship to sail his body into the Summerlands. I will ensure that his name is wiped from all records of my house.”

For a heartbeat, Lidia allowed herself a shred of pity for the Ophion agent she’d known. For the Fae Prince of Avallen who’d given everything to destroy the beings before her.

As she had given everything. Would still give everything.

Polaris, the North Star—wearing the body of a white-winged, dark-skinned female angel—drawled, “There will be no ship to sail Cormac’s body to the Summerlands because the boy immolated himself. And tried to take us with him.” Polaris let out a soft, hateful laugh that raked talons down Lidia’s skin. “As if a paltry flame might do such a thing.”

Morven said nothing. He’d offered what he could, short of getting on his knees to plead. It might very well come to that, but for now, the Fae King of Avallen held his head high.

Legend claimed that even the Asteri could not pierce the mists that shrouded Avallen, but Lidia had never heard of it being tested. Perhaps that was also why Morven had come—to keep the Asteri from having a reason to explore whether the legend was true.

If they were somehow repelled by whatever ancient power lay around Avallen, that would be a secret worth abasing oneself to keep.

Rigelus crossed an ankle over his knee. Lidia had seen the Bright Hand order entire families executed with the same casual air. “And you, Einar? What have you to say for your son?”

“Traitorous shit,” spat Pollux from where he knelt beside Lidia. His wing still rested on her leg like he owned it. Owned her.

The Autumn King ignored the Hammer. Ignored everyone except Rigelus as he flatly replied, “Ruhn has been wild since birth. I did what I could to contain him. I have little doubt that he was lured into this business through his sister’s machinations.”

Lidia kept her fingers loose, even as they ached to curl into fists. Steadied her heart into a sluggish, ordinary beat that no Vanir ears would detect as unusual.

“So you would seek to spare one child by damning the other?” Rigelus asked, lips curling into a mild smile. “What sort of father are you, Einar?”

“Neither Bryce Quinlan nor Ruhn Danaan has the right to call themselves my children any longer.”

Rigelus angled his head, his short, dark hair shimmering in the glow of the crystal room. “I thought she had claimed the name Bryce Danaan. Have you revoked her royal status?”

A muscle ticked in the Autumn King’s cheek. “I have yet to decide a fitting punishment for her.”

Pollux’s wings rustled, but the angel kept his head down as he snarled to the Autumn King, “When I get my hands on your cunt of a daughter, you’ll be glad to have disavowed her. What she did to the Harpy, I shall do to her tenfold.”

“You’d have to find her first,” the Autumn King said coolly. Lidia supposed Einar Danaan was one of the few Fae on Midgard who could openly taunt an angel as powerful as the Malleus. The Fae King’s amber eyes, so like his daughter’s, lifted to the Asteri. “Have your mystics discovered her whereabouts yet?”

“Do you not wish to know where your son is?” asked Octartis, the Southern Star, with a coy smile.

“I know where Ruhn is,” the Autumn King countered, unmoved. “He deserves to be there.” He half turned toward where Lidia knelt, and surveyed her coldly. “I hope you wring every last answer from him.”

Lidia held his stare, her face like stone, like ice—like death.

The Autumn King’s gaze flicked over the silver torque at her throat, a faint, approving curve gracing his mouth. But he asked Rigelus, with an authority that she could only admire, “Where is Bryce?”

Rigelus sighed, bored and annoyed—a lethal combination. “She has chosen to vacate Midgard.”

“A mistake we shall soon rectify,” Polaris added.

Rigelus shot the lesser Asteri a warning look.

The Autumn King said, his voice a shade faint, “Bryce is no longer in this world?”

Morven glanced warily at the other Fae King. As far as anyone knew, there was only one place that could be accessed from Midgard—there was an entire wall circling the Northern Rift in Nena to prevent its denizens from crossing into this world. If Bryce was no longer on Midgard, she had to be in Hel.

It had never occurred to Lidia that the wall around the Rift would also keep Midgardians from getting *out*.

Well, most Midgardians.

Rigelus said tightly, “That knowledge is not to be shared with anyone.” The edge sharpening his words implied the rest: *under pain of death*.

Lidia had been present when the other Asteri had demanded to know how it had happened: how Bryce Quinlan had opened a gate to another world in their own palace and slipped through the Bright Hand’s fingers. Their disbelief and rage had been a small comfort in the wake of all that had happened, all that was still churning through Lidia.

A silvery bell rang from behind the Asteri’s thrones in a polite reminder that another meeting had been scheduled shortly.

“This discussion is not yet finished,” Rigelus warned the two Fae Kings. He pointed with a skinny finger to the double doors open to the hall beyond. “Speak of what you have heard today, and you will find that there is no place on this planet where you will be safe from our wrath.”

The Fae Kings bowed and left without another word.

The weight of the Asteri’s gazes landed upon Lidia, singeing her very soul. She withstood it, as she had withstood all the other horrors in her life.

“Rise, Lidia,” Rigelus said with something that bordered on affection. Then, to Pollux, “Rise, my Hammer.” Lidia shoved down the bile that burned like acid and got to her feet, Pollux with her. His white wing brushed against her cheek, the softness of his feathers at odds with the rot of his soul.

The bell tinkled again, but Rigelus lifted a hand to the attendant waiting in the shadows of the nearby pillars. The next meeting could wait another moment.

“How go the interrogations?” Rigelus slouched on his throne as if he had asked about the weather.

“We are in the opening movements,” Lidia said, her mouth somehow distant from her body. “Athalar and Danaan will require time to break.”

“And the Helhound?” asked Hesperus, the nymph’s dark eyes gleaming with malice.

“I am still assessing him.” Lidia kept her chin high and tucked her hands behind her back. “But trust that I shall get what we need from all of them, Your Graces.”

“As you always do,” Rigelus said, gaze dipping to her silver collar. “We give you leave to do your finest work, Hind.”

Lidia bowed at the waist with imperial precision. Pollux did the same, wings folding elegantly. The portrait of a perfect soldier—the one he’d been bred to become.

It wasn’t until they’d entered the long corridor beyond the throne room that the Hammer spoke. “Do you think that little bitch really went to Hel?” Pollux jerked his head behind them, toward the dull, silent crystal Gate at the opposite end of the hall.

The busts lining the walkway—all the Asteri in their various forms throughout the centuries—had been replaced. The windows that had been shattered by Athalar’s lightning had been repaired.

As in the throne room, not one hint of what had occurred remained here. And beyond the crystal walls of this palace, no whisper had surfaced in the news.

The only proof: the two Asterian Guards now flanking either side of the Gate. Their white-and-gold regalia shone in the streaming sunlight, the tips of the spears gripped in their gloved hands like fallen stars. With their golden helmets’ visors down, she could make out nothing of the faces beneath. It didn’t matter, she supposed. There was no individuality, no life in them. The elite, highborn angels had been bred for obedience and service. Just as they’d been bred to bear those glowing white wings. As the angel beside her had.

Lidia maintained her unhurried pace toward the elevators. “I won’t waste time trying to find out. But Bryce Quinlan will no doubt return one day, regardless of where she wound up.”

Beyond the windows, the seven hills of the Eternal City rippled under the sunlight, most of them crusted with buildings crowned by terra-cotta roofs. A barren mountain—more of a hill, really—lay among several nearly identical peaks just north of the city border, the metallic gleam atop it like a beacon.

Was it an intentional taunt to Athalar that the mountain, Mount Hermon—where he and the Archangel Shahar had staged the doomed first and final battle of their rebellion—today housed scores of the Asteri's new hybrid mech-suits? Down in the dungeons, Athalar would have no way of seeing them, but knowing Rigelus, the positioning of the new machines was definitely symbolic.

Lidia had read the report yesterday morning about what the Asteri had cooked up these last few weeks, despite Ophion's attempts to stop it. Despite *her* attempts to stop it. But the written details had been nothing compared to the suits' appearance at sunset. The city had been abuzz as the military transports had crested the hill and deposited them, one by one, with news crews rushing out to report on the cutting-edge tech.

Her stomach had churned to see the suits—and did so again now as she gazed at their steel husks glinting in the sun.

Further proof of Ophion's failure. They'd destroyed the mech-suit on Ydra, obliterated the lab days ago—yet it had all been too late. In secret, Rigelus had crafted this metal army and stationed it atop Mount Hermon's barren peak. An improvement on the hybrids, these did not even require pilots to operate them, though they still had the capacity to hold a single Vanir soldier, if need be. As if the hybrids had been a well-calculated distraction for Ophion while Rigelus had secretly perfected *these*. Magic and tech now blended with lethal efficiency, with minimal cost to military life. But those suits spelled death for any remaining rebels, and damned the rest of the rebellion.

She should have caught Rigelus's sleight of hand—but she hadn't. And now that horror would be unleashed on the world.

The elevator opened, and Lidia and Pollux entered in silence. Lidia hit the button for the lowest sublevel—well, second lowest. The elevators did not descend to the catacombs, which could only

be accessed by a winding crystal staircase. There, one thousand mystics slumbered.

Each of whom were now focused on a single task: *Find Bryce Quinlan*.

It begged the question: If everyone knew that the Northern Rift and other Gates only opened to Hel, why did the Asteri bother to expend such resources in hunting for her? Bryce had landed in Hel—surely there was no need to order the mystics to find her.

Unless Bryce Quinlan had wound up somewhere *other* than Hel. A different world, perhaps. And if that was the case . . .

How long would it take? How many worlds existed beyond Midgard? And what were the odds of Bryce surviving on any of them—or ever getting back to Midgard?

The elevators opened into the dank dimness of the dungeons. Pollux prowled down the stone walkway, wings tightly furled. Like he didn't want one speck of dirt from this place marring their pristine white feathers. "Is that why you're keeping them alive? As bait for that bitch?"

"Yes." Lidia followed the screams past the guttering firstlight sconces along the wall. "Quinlan and Athalar are mates. She will return to this world because of that bond. And when she does, she will go straight to him."

"And the brother?"

"Ruhn and Bryce are Starborn," Lidia said, heaving open the iron door to the large interrogation chamber beyond. Metal grated against stone, its shriek eerily similar to the sounds of torment all around them. "She will want to free him—as her brother and her ally."

She stalked down the exposed steps into the heart of the chamber, where three males hung from gorsian shackles in the center of the room. Blood pooled beneath them, dribbling into the grate below their bare feet.

She shut down every part of her that felt, that breathed.

Athalar and Baxian dangled unconscious from the ceiling, their torsos patchworks of scars and burns. And their backs . . .

A constant drip sounded in the otherwise silent chamber, like a leaking faucet. The blood still oozed from the stumps where their wings had been. The gorsian shackles had slowed their healing to near-human levels—keeping them from dying entirely, but ensuring that they suffered through every moment of pain.

Lidia couldn't look at the third figure hanging between them. Couldn't get a breath down near him.

Leather whispered over stone, and Lidia dove deep within herself as Pollux's whip cracked. It snapped against Athalar's raw, bloody back, and the Umbra Mortis jolted, swaying on his chains.

"Wake up," the Hammer sneered. "It's a beautiful day."

Athalar's swollen eyes cracked open. Hate blazed in their dark depths.

The halo inked anew upon his brow seemed darker than the shadows of the dungeon. His battered mouth parted in a feral smile, revealing bloodstained teeth. "Morning, sunshine."

A soft, broken rasp of a laugh sounded to Athalar's right. And though she knew it was folly, Lidia looked.

Ruhn Danaan, Crown Prince of the Valbaran Fae, was staring at her.

His lip was swollen from where Pollux had torn out his piercing. His eyebrow was crusted with blood from where that hoop had been ripped out, too. Across his tattooed torso, along the arms above his head, blood and dirt and bruises mingled.

The prince's striking blue eyes were sharp with loathing.

For her.

Pollux slashed his whip into Athalar's back again, not bothering with questions. No, this was the warm-up. Interrogation would come later.

Baxian still hung unconscious. Pollux had beaten him into a bloody pulp last night after severing his and Athalar's wings with a blunt-toothed saw. The Helhound didn't so much as stir.

Night, Lidia tried, casting her voice into the moldy air between herself and the Fae Prince. They'd never spoken mind-to-mind outside of their dreaming, but she'd been trying since he'd arrived

here. Again and again, she'd cast her mind toward his. Only silence answered.

Just as it had from the moment Ruhn had learned who she was. What she was.

She knew he could communicate, even with the gorsian stones halting his magic and slowing his healing. Knew he'd done so with his sister before Bryce had escaped.

Night.

Ruhn's lip pulled back in a silent snarl, blood snaking down his chin.

Pollux's phone rang, a shrill, strange sound in this ancient shrine to pain. His ministrations halted, a terrible silence in their wake. "Mordoc," the Hammer said, whip still in one hand. He pivoted from Athalar's swinging, brutalized body. "Report."

Lidia didn't bother to protest the fact that her captain was reporting to the Hammer. Pollux had taken the Harpy's death personally—he'd commandeered Mordoc and the dreadwolves to find any hint of where Bryce Quinlan might have gone.

That he still believed Bryce was responsible for the Harpy's death was only because Athalar and Ruhn hadn't revealed that it was Lidia who'd murdered the Harpy. They knew who she was, and only the fact that she was vital to the rebellion kept them from spilling her secrets.

For a moment, with Pollux turned away, Lidia let her mask drop. Let Ruhn see her true face. The one that had kissed his soul and shared her own with him, their very beings melding.

Ruhn, she pleaded into his mind. *Ruhn*.

But the Fae Prince did not answer. The hate in his eyes did not lessen. So Lidia donned her Hind's mask once again.

And as Pollux pocketed his phone and angled his whip anew, the Hind ordered the Hammer in the low, lifeless voice that had been her shield for so long now, "Get the barbed wire instead."

PART I
THE DROP

1

Bryce Quinlan sat in a chamber so far beneath the mountain above that daylight must have been a myth to the creatures who dwelled there.

For a place that apparently *wasn't* Hel, her surroundings sure appeared like it: black stone, subterranean palace, even-more-subterranean interrogation cell . . . The darkness seemed inherent to the three people standing across from her: a petite female in gray silk, and two winged males clad in black scalelike armor, one of them—the beautiful, powerful male in the center of the trio—literally rippling with shadows and stars.

Rhysand, he'd called himself. The one who looked so much like Ruhn.

It couldn't be coincidence. Bryce had leapt through the Gate intending to reach Hel, to finally take up Aidas's and Apollion's repeated offers to send their armies to Midgard and stop this cycle of galactic conquest. But she'd wound up here instead.

Bryce glanced to the warrior beside Ruhn's almost-twin. The male who'd found her. Who'd carried the black dagger that had reacted to the Starsword.

His hazel eyes held nothing but cold, predatory alertness.

"Someone has to start talking," the short female said—the one who'd seemed so shocked to hear Bryce speak in the Old

Language, to see the sword. Flickering braziers of something that resembled firstlight gilded the silken strands of her chin-length bob, casting the shadow of her slender jaw in stark relief. Her eyes, a remarkable shade of silver, slid over Bryce but remained unimpressed. “You said your name is Bryce Quinlan. That you come from another world—Midgard.”

Rhysand murmured to the winged male beside him. Translating, perhaps.

The female went on, “If you are to be believed, how is it that you came here? *Why* did you come here?”

Bryce surveyed the otherwise empty cell. No table glittering with torture instruments, no breaks in the solid stone beyond the door and the grate in the center of the floor, a few feet away. A grate from which she could have sworn a hissing sound emanated.

“What world is this?” Bryce rasped, the words gravelly. After Ruhn’s body double had introduced himself in that lovely, cozy foyer, he’d grabbed her hand. The strength of his grip, the brush of his calluses against her skin had been the only solid things as wind and darkness had roared around them, the world dropping away—and then there was only solid rock and dim lighting. She’d been brought to a palace carved beneath a mountain, and then down the narrow stairs to this dungeon. Where he’d pointed to the lone chair in the center of the room in silent command.

So she’d sat, waiting for the handcuffs or shackles or whatever restraints they used in this world, but none had come.

The short female countered, “Why do you speak the Old Language?”

Bryce jerked her chin at the female. “Why do you?”

The female’s red-painted lips curved upward. It wasn’t a reassuring sight. “Why are you covered in blood that is not your own?”

Score: one for the female.

Bryce knew her blood-soaked clothes, now stiff and dark, and her blood-crusted hands did her no favors. It was the Harpy’s blood, and a bit of Lidia’s. All coating Bryce as a part of a careful

game to keep her alive, to keep their secrets safe, while Hunt and Ruhn had—

Her breath began sawing in and out. She'd left them. Her mate and her brother. She'd left them in Rigelus's hands.

The walls and ceiling pushed in, squeezing the air from her lungs.

Rhysand lifted a broad hand wreathed in stars. "We won't harm you." Bryce found the rest of the sentence lurking within the dense shadows around him: *if you don't try to harm us.*

She closed her eyes, fighting past the jagged breathing, the crushing weight of the stone above and around her.

Less than an hour ago, she'd been sprinting away from Rigelus's power, dodging exploding marble busts and shattering windows, and Hunt's lightning had speared through her chest, into the Gate, opening a portal. She'd leapt toward Hel—

And now . . . now she was here. Her hands shook. She balled them into fists and squeezed.

Bryce took a slow, shuddering breath. Another. Then opened her eyes and asked again, her voice solid and clear, "What world is this?"

Her three interrogators said nothing.

So Bryce fixed her eyes on the female, the smallest but by no means the least deadly of the group. "You said the Old Language hasn't been spoken here in fifteen thousand years. Why?"

That they were Fae and knew the language at all suggested some link between here and Midgard, a link that was slowly dawning on her with terrible clarity.

"How did you come to be in possession of the lost sword Gwydion?" was the female's cool reply.

"What . . . You mean the Starsword?" Another link between their worlds.

All of them just stared at her again. An impenetrable wall of people accustomed to getting answers in whatever way necessary.

Bryce had no weapons, nothing beyond the magic in her veins, the Archesian amulet around her neck, and the Horn tattooed

into her back. But to wield it, she needed power, needed to be fueled up like some stupid fucking battery—

So talking was her best weapon. Good thing she'd spent years as a master of spinning bullshit, according to Hunt.

"It's a family heirloom," Bryce said. "It's been in my world since it was brought there by my ancestors . . . fifteen thousand years ago." She let the last few words land with a pointed glance at the female. Let her do the math, as Bryce had.

But the beautiful male—Rhysand—said in a voice like midnight, "How did you find this world?"

This was not a male to be fucked with. None of these people were, but this one . . . Authority rippled off him. As if he was the entire axis of this place. A king of some sort, then.

"I didn't." Bryce met his star-flecked stare. Some primal part of her quailed at the raw power within his gaze. "I told you: I meant to go to Hel. I landed here instead."

"How?"

The things far below the grate hissed louder, as if sensing his wrath. Demanding blood.

Bryce swallowed. If they learned about the Horn, her power, the Gates . . . what was to stop them from using her as Rigelus had wanted to? Or from viewing her as a threat to be removed?

Master of spinning bullshit. She could do this.

"There are Gates within my world that open into other worlds. For fifteen thousand years, they've mostly opened into Hel. Well, the Northern Rift opens directly into Hel, but . . ." Let them think her rambling. An idiot. The party girl most of Midgard had labeled her, that Micah had believed her to be, until she was vacuuming up his fucking ashes. "This Gate sent me here with a one-way ticket."

Did they have tickets in this world? Transportation?

She clarified into their silence, "A companion of mine gambled that he could send me to Hel using his power. But I think . . ." She sorted through all that Rigelus had told her in those last moments. That the star on her chest somehow acted as a beacon to the original world of the Starborn people.

Grasping at straws, she nodded to the warrior's dagger. "There's a prophecy in my world about my sword and a missing knife. That when they're reunited, so will the Fae of Midgard be."

Master of spinning bullshit, indeed.

"So maybe I'm here for that. Maybe the sword sensed that dagger and . . . brought me to it."

Silence. Then the silent, hazel-eyed warrior laughed quietly.

How had he understood without Rhysand translating? Unless he could simply read her body language, her tone, her scent—

The warrior spoke with a low voice that skittered down her spine. Rhysand glanced at him with raised brows, then translated for Bryce with equal menace, "You're lying."

Bryce blinked, the portrait of innocence and outrage. "About what?"

"You tell us." Darkness gathered in the shadow of Rhysand's wings. Not a good sign.

She was in another world, with strangers who were clearly powerful and wouldn't hesitate to kill her. Every word from her lips was vital to her safety and survival.

"I just watched my mate and my brother get captured by a group of intergalactic parasites," she snarled. "I have no interest in doing anything except finding a way to help them."

Rhysand looked to the warrior, who nodded, not taking his gaze off Bryce for so much as a blink.

"Well," Rhysand said to Bryce, crossing his muscled arms. "*That's* true, at least."

Yet the petite female remained unmoved. In fact, her features had tightened at Bryce's outburst. "Explain."

They were Fae. There was nothing to suggest that they were better than the pieces of shit Bryce had known for most of her life. And somehow, despite appearing to be stuck a few centuries behind her own world, they seemed even more powerful than the Midgardian Fae, which could only lead to *more* arrogance and entitlement.

She needed to get to Hel. Or at the very least back to Midgard. And if she said too much . . .

The female noted her hesitation and said, “Just look in her mind already, Rhys.”

Bryce went rigid. Oh gods. He could pry into her head, see anything he wanted—

Rhysand glanced at the female. She held his stare with a ferocity that belied her small stature. If Rhysand was in charge, his underlings certainly weren’t expected to be silent cronies.

Bryce eyed the lone door. No way to reach it in time, even on the off chance they’d left it unlocked. Running wouldn’t save her. Would the Archesian amulet provide any protection? It hadn’t prevented Ruhn’s mind-speaking, but—

I do not pry where I am not willingly invited.

Bryce lurched back in the chair, nearly knocking it over at the smooth male voice in her mind. Rhysand’s voice.

But she answered, thanking Luna for keeping her own voice cool and collected, *Code of mind-speaking ethics?*

She felt him pause—as if almost amused. *You’ve encountered this method of communication before.*

Yes. It was all she’d say about Ruhn.

May I look in your memories? To see for myself?

No. You may not.

Rhysand blinked slowly. Then he said aloud, “Then we’ll have to rely on your words.”

The petite female gaped at him. “But—”

Rhysand snapped his fingers and three chairs appeared behind them. He sank gracefully onto one, crossing an ankle over a knee. The epitome of Fae beauty and arrogance. He glanced up at his companions. “Azriel.” He motioned lazily to the male. Then to the female. “Amren.”

Then he motioned to Bryce and said neutrally, “Bryce . . . Quinlan.”

Bryce nodded slowly.

Rhysand examined his trimmed, clean nails. “So your sword . . . it’s been in your world for fifteen thousand years?”

“Brought by my ancestor.” She debated the next bit, then added,

“Queen Theia. Or Prince Pelias, depending on what propaganda’s being spun.”

Amren stiffened slightly. Rhysand slid his eyes to her, clocking the movement.

Bryce dared to push, “You . . . know of them?”

Amren surveyed Bryce from her blood-splattered neon-pink shoes to her high ponytail. The blood smeared on Bryce’s face, now stiff and sticky. “No one has spoken those names here in a very, very long time.”

In fifteen thousand years, Bryce was willing to bet.

“But you have heard of them?” Bryce’s heart thundered.

“They once . . . dwelled here,” Amren said carefully.

It was the last scrap of confirmation Bryce needed about what this planet was. Something settled deep in her, a loose thread at last pulling taut. “So this is it, then. This is where we—the Midgard Fae—originated. My ancestors left this world and went to Midgard . . . and we forgot where we came from.”

Silence again. Azriel spoke in their own language, and Rhysand translated. Perhaps Rhysand had been translating for Azriel mind-to-mind these last few minutes.

“He says we have no such stories about our people migrating to another world.”

Yet Amren let out a small, choked sound.

Rhysand turned slowly, a bit incredulous. “Do we?” he asked smoothly.

Amren picked at an invisible speck on her silk blouse. “It’s murky. I went in before . . .” She shook her head. “But when I came out, there were rumors. That a great number of people had vanished, as if they had never been. Some said to another world, others said they’d moved on to distant lands, still others said they’d been chosen by the Cauldron and spirited away somewhere.”

“They must have gone to Midgard,” Bryce said. “Led by Theia and Pelias—”

Amren held up a hand. “We can hear your myths later, girl.

What I want to know”—her eyes sharpened, and it was all Bryce could do to weather the scrutiny—“is why *you* came here, when you meant to go elsewhere.”

“I’d like to know that, too,” Bryce said, perhaps a bit more boldly than could be deemed wise. “Believe me, I’d like nothing more than to get out of your hair immediately.”

“To go to . . . Hel,” Rhysand said neutrally. “To find this Prince Aidas.”

These people weren’t her friends or allies. This might be the home world of the Fae, but who the fuck knew what they wanted or aspired to? Rhysand and Azriel *looked* pretty, but Urd knew the Fae of Midgard had used their beauty for millennia to get what they wanted.

Rhysand didn’t need to read her mind—no, he seemed to read all that on her own face. He uncrossed his legs, bracing both feet on the stone floor. “Allow me to lay out the situation for you, Bryce Quinlan.”

She made herself meet his star-flecked stare. She’d taken on the Asteri and Archangels and Fae Kings and walked away. She’d take him on, too.

The corner of Rhysand’s mouth curled upward. “We will not torture it from you, nor will I pry it from your mind. If you choose not to talk, it is indeed your choice. Precisely as it will be *my* choice to keep you down here until you decide otherwise.”

Bryce couldn’t stop herself from coolly surveying the room, her attention lingering on the grate and the hissing that drifted up from it. “I’ll be sure to recommend it to my friends as a vacation spot.”

Stars winked out in Rhysand’s eyes. “Can we expect any others to arrive here from your world?”

She gave the truest answer she could. “No. As far as I know, they’ve been looking for this place for fifteen thousand years, but I’m the only one who’s ever made it back.”

“Who is *they*?”

“The Asteri. I told you—intergalactic parasites.”

“What does that mean?”

“They are . . .” Bryce paused. Who was to say these people

wouldn't hand her right over to Rigelus? Bow to him? Theia had come from this world and fought the Asteri, but Pelias had bought what they were selling and gleefully knelt at their immortal feet.

Her pause said enough. Amren snorted. "Don't waste your breath, Rhysand."

Rhysand angled his head, a predator studying prey. Bryce withstood it, chin high. Her mother would have been proud of her.

He snapped his fingers again, and the blood, the dirt on her, disappeared. A stickiness still coated her skin, but it was clean. She blinked down at herself, then up at him.

A cruel half smile graced his mouth. "To incentivize you."

Amren and Azriel remained stone-faced. Waiting.

She'd be stupid to believe Rhysand's *incentive* meant anything good about him. But she could play this game.

So Bryce said, "The Asteri are ancient. Like tens of thousands of years old." She winced at the memory of that room beneath their palace, the records of conquests going back millennia, complete with their own unique dating system.

Her captors didn't reply, didn't so much as blink. Fine—insane old age wasn't totally nuts to them.

"They arrived in my world fifteen thousand years ago. No one knows from where."

"What do you mean by *arrived*?" Rhysand asked.

"Honestly? I have no idea how they first got to Midgard. The history they spun was that they were . . . liberators. Enlighteners. According to them, they found Midgard little more than a backwater planet occupied by non-magical humans and animals. The Asteri chose it as the place to begin creating a perfect empire, and creatures and races from other worlds soon flocked to it through a giant rip between worlds called the Northern Rift. Which now only opens to Hel, but it used to open to . . . anywhere."

Amren pushed, "A rip. How does that happen?"

"Beats me," Bryce said. "No one's ever figured out how it's even possible—why it's at that spot in Midgard, and not others."

Rhysand asked, "What happened after these beings arrived in your world?"

Bryce sucked her teeth before saying, “In the *official* version of this story, another world, Hel, tried to invade Midgard. To destroy the fledgling empire—and everyone living in it. But the Asteri unified all these new people under one banner and pushed Hel back to its own realm. In the process, the Northern Rift was fixed with its destination permanently on Hel. After that, it remained mostly closed. A massive wall was erected around it to keep any Hel-born stragglers from getting through the cracks, and the Asteri built a glorious empire meant to last for eternity. Or so we’re all ordered to believe.”

The faces in front of her remained impassive. Rhysand asked quietly, “And what is the unofficial story?”

Bryce swallowed, the room in the archives flashing through her memory. “The Asteri are ancient, immortal beings who feed on the power of others—they harvest the magic of a people, a world, and then eat it. We call it firstlight. It fuels our entire world, but mostly them. We’re required to hand it over upon reaching immortality—well, as close to immortality as we can get. We seize our full, mature power through a ritual called the Drop, and in the process, some of our power is siphoned off and given over to the firstlight stores for the Asteri. It’s like a tax on our magic.”

She wasn’t even going to touch upon what happened after death. How the power that lingered in their souls was eventually harvested as well, forced by the Under-King into the Dead Gate and turned into secondlight to fuel the Asteri even more. Whatever reached them after the Under-King ate his fill.

Amren angled her head, sleek bob shifting with the movement. “A tax on your magic, taken by ancient beings for their own nourishment and power.” Azriel’s gaze shifted to her, Rhysand presumably still translating mind-to-mind. But Amren murmured to herself, as if the words triggered something, “A tithe.”

Rhysand’s brows rose. But he waved a broad, elegant hand at Bryce to continue. “What else?”

She swallowed again. “Midgard is only the latest in a long line of worlds invaded by the Asteri. They have an entire archive of different planets they’ve either conquered or tried to conquer. I saw it

right before I came here. And, as far as I know, there were only three planets that were able to kick them out—to fight back and defeat them. Hel, a planet called Iphraxia, and . . . a world occupied by the Fae. The original, Starborn Fae.” She nodded to the dagger at Azriel’s side, which had flared with dark light in the presence of the Starsword. “You know my sword by a different name, but you recognize what it is.”

Only Amren nodded.

“I think it’s because it came from this world,” Bryce said. “It seems connected to that dagger somehow. It was forged here, became part of your history, then vanished . . . right? You haven’t seen it in fifteen thousand years, or spoken this language in nearly as long—which lines up perfectly with the timeline of the Starborn Fae arriving in Midgard.”

The Starborn—Theia, their queen, and Pelias, the traitor-prince who’d usurped her. Theia had brought two daughters with her into Midgard: Helena, who’d been forced to wed Pelias, and another, whose name had been lost to history. Much of the truth about Theia had been lost as well, either through time or the Asteri’s propaganda. Aidas, Prince of the Chasm, had loved her—that much Bryce knew. Theia had fought alongside Hel against the Asteri to free Midgard. Had been killed by Pelias in the end, her name nearly wiped from all memory. Bryce bore Theia’s light—Aidas had confirmed it. But beyond that, even the Asteri Archives had provided no information about the long-dead queen.

“So you believe,” Amren said slowly, silver eyes flickering, “that *our* world is this third planet that resisted these . . . Asteri.”

It was Bryce’s turn to nod. She motioned to the cell, the realm above it. “From what I learned, long before the Asteri came to my world, they were *here*. They conquered and meddled with and ruled this world. But eventually the Fae managed to overthrow them—to defeat them.” She loosed a tight breath, scanning each of their faces. “How?” The question was hoarse, desperate. “How did you do it?”

But Rhysand glanced warily to Amren. She had to be some sort of court historian or scholar if he kept consulting her about

the past. He said to her, “Our history doesn’t include an event like that.”

Bryce cut in, “Well, the Asteri remember your world. They’re still holding a grudge. Rigelus, their leader, told me it’s his personal mission to find this place and punish you all for kicking them to the curb. You’re basically public enemy number one.”

“It is in our history, Rhysand,” Amren said gravely. “But the Asteri were not known by that name. Here, they were called the Daglan.”

Bryce could have sworn Rhysand’s golden face paled slightly. Azriel shifted in his chair, wings rustling. Rhysand said firmly, “The Daglan were all killed.”

Amren shuddered. The gesture seemed to spark more alarm in Rhysand’s expression. “Apparently not,” she said.

Bryce pushed Amren, “Do you have any record about how they were defeated?” A kernel of hope glowed in her chest.

“Nothing beyond old songs of bloody battles and tremendous losses.”

“But the story . . . it rings true to you?” Bryce asked. “Immortal, vicious overseers once ruled this world, and you guys banded together and overthrew them?”

Their silence was confirmation enough.

Yet Rhysand shook his head, as if still not quite believing it. “And you think . . .” He met Bryce’s stare, his eyes once again full of that predatory focus. Gods, he was terrifying. “You believe the Daglan—these *Asteri*—want to come back here for revenge. After at least fifteen thousand years.” Doubt dripped from every word.

“That’s, like, five minutes for Rigelus,” Bryce countered. “He’s got infinite time—and resources.”

“What kind of resources?” Cold, sharp words—a leader assessing the threat to his people.

How to begin describing guns or brimstone missiles or mech-suits or Omega-boats or even the Asteri’s power? How to convey the ruthless, swift horror of a bullet? And maybe it was reckless, but . . . She extended her hand to Rhysand. “I’ll show you.”

Amren and Azriel cut him sharp looks. Like this might be a trap.

“Hold on,” Rhysand said, and vanished into nothing.

Bryce started. “You—you can teleport?”

“We call it winnowing,” Amren drawled. Bryce could have sworn Azriel was smirking. But Amren asked, “Can you do it?”

“No,” Bryce lied. If Azriel sensed her lie, he didn’t call her out this time. “There are only two Fae who can.”

It was Amren’s turn to start. “Two—on your entire planet?”

“I’m guessing you have more?”

Azriel, without Rhysand to translate, watched in silence. Bryce could have sworn shadows wreathed him, like Ruhn’s, yet . . . wilder. The way Cormac’s had been.

Amren’s chin dipped. “Only the most powerful, but yes. Many can.”

As if on cue, Rhysand appeared again, a small silver orb in one hand.

“The Veritas orb?” Amren said, and Azriel lifted an eyebrow.

But Rhysand ignored them and extended his other hand, in which lay a small silver bean.

Bryce took it, peering at the orb he laid on the floor. “What are these?”

Rhysand nodded to the orb. “Hold it, think of what you want to show us, and the memories shall be captured within for us to view.”

Easy enough. Like a camera for her mind. She gingerly approached the orb and picked it up. The metal was smooth and cold. Lighter than it should have been. Hollow inside.

“Here goes,” she said, and closed her eyes. Pictured the weapons, the wars, the battlefields she’d seen on television, the mech-suits, the guns she’d learned to fire, the lessons with Randall, the power Rigelus had blasted down the hall after her—

She shut it off at that point. Before she leapt into the Gate, before she left Hunt and Ruhn behind. She didn’t want to relive that. To show what she could do. To reveal the Horn or her ability to teleport.

Bryce opened her eyes. The ball remained quiet and dim. She put it back on the floor and rolled it toward Rhysand.

He floated it on a phantom wind to his hand, then touched its top. And all that had been in her mind played out.

It was worse, seeing it as a sort of memory-montage: the violence, the brutality of how easily the Asteri and their minions killed, how indiscriminately.

But whatever she felt was nothing compared to the surprise and dread on her captors' faces.

"Guns," Bryce said, pointing to the rifle Randall fired in her displayed memory, landing a perfect bulls-eye shot in a target half a mile off. "Brimstone missiles." She pointed to the blooming golden light of destruction as the buildings of Lunathion ruptured around her. "Omega-boats." The *SPQM Faustus* hunted through the dark depths of the seas. "Asteri." Rigelus's white-hot power blasted apart stone and glass and the world itself.

Rhysand mastered himself, a cool mask sliding into place. "You live in such a world."

It wasn't entirely a question. But Bryce nodded. "Yes."

"And they want to bring all of that . . . here."

"Yes."

Rhysand stared ahead. Thinking it through. Azriel just kept his eyes on the space where the orb had displayed the utter destruction of her world. Dreading—and yet calculating. She'd seen that look before on Hunt's face. A warrior's mind at work.

Amren turned to Rhys, meeting his stare. Bryce knew that look, too. A silent conversation passing between them. As Bryce and Ruhn had often spoken.

Her heart wrenched to see it, to remember. It steadied her, though. Sharpened her focus.

The Asteri had been here—under a different name, but they'd been here. The ancestors of these Fae had defeated them. And Urd had sent her here—here, not Hel. Here, where she'd instantly encountered a dagger that made the Starsword sing. Like it had been the lodestone that had drawn her to this world, to that riverbank. Could it really be the knife from the prophecy?

She'd believed that destroying the Asteri would be as simple as obliterating that firstlight core, yet Urd had sent her here. To the

original world of the Midgardian Fae. She had no choice but to trust Urd's judgment. And pray that Ruhn, that Hunt, that everyone she loved in Midgard could hold on until she found a way to get home.

And if she couldn't . . .

Bryce examined the silver bean that lay smooth and gleaming in her hand. Amren said without looking at her, "You swallow it, and it will translate our mother tongue for you. Allow you to speak it, too."

"Fancy," Bryce murmured.

She had to find a way home. If that meant navigating this world first . . . language skills would be useful, considering the extent of bullshit still to be spun. And, sure, she didn't trust these people for one moment, but considering all the questions they kept lobbing her way, she highly doubted they were going to poison her. Or go to such lengths to do so, when a slit throat would be way easier.

Not a comforting thought, but Bryce nonetheless popped the silver bean into her mouth, worked up enough saliva, and swallowed. Its metal was cool against her tongue, her throat, and she could have sworn she felt its slickness sliding into her stomach.

Lightning cleaved her brain. She was being ripped in two. Her body couldn't hold all the searing light—

Then blackness slammed in. Quiet and restful and eternal.

No—that was the room around her. She was on the floor, curled over her knees, and . . . glowing. Brightly enough to illuminate Rhysand's and Amren's shocked faces.

Azriel was already poised over her, that deadly dagger drawn and gleaming with a strange black light.

He noted the darkness leaking from the blade and blinked. It was the most shock Bryce had seen him display.

"Put it away, you fool," Amren said. "It sings for her, and by bringing it close—"

The blade vanished from Azriel's hand, whisked away by a shadow. Silence, taut and rippling, spread through the room.

Bryce stood slowly—as Randall and her mom had taught her to move in front of Vanir and other predators.

And as she rose, she found it in her brain: the knowledge of a language that she had not known before. It sat on her tongue, ready to be spoken, as instinctual as her own. It shimmered along her skin, stinging down her spine, her shoulder blades—wait.

Oh no. No, no, no.

Bryce didn't dare reach for the tattoo of the Horn, to call attention to the letters that formed the words *Through love, all is possible*. She could feel them reacting to whatever had been in that spell that set her glowing and could only pray it wasn't visible.

Her prayers were in vain.

Amren turned to Rhysand and said in that new, strange language—their language: “The glowing letters inked on her back . . . they're the same as those in the *Book of Breathings*.”

They must have seen the words through her T-shirt when she'd been on the floor. With every breath, the tingling lessened, like the glow was fading. But the damage was already done.

They once again assessed her. Three apex killers, contemplating a threat.

Then Azriel said in a soft, lethal voice, “Explain or you die.”

2

Tharion's blood dripped into the porcelain sink of the hushed, humid bathroom, the roar of the crowd a distant rumble through the cracked green tiles. He breathed in through his nose. Out through his mouth. Pain rippled along his aching ribs.

Stay upright.

His hands clenched the chipped edges of the sink. He inhaled again, focusing on the words, willing his knees not to buckle. *Keep standing, damn you.* He'd taken a beating tonight.

The minotaur he'd faced in the Viper Queen's ring had been twice his weight and at least four feet taller than him. He had a hole in his shoulder leaking blood down the sink drain thanks to the horns he hadn't been fast enough to avoid. And several broken ribs thanks to blows from fists the size of his head.

Tharion loosed another breath, wincing, and reached for the small medkit on the lip of the sink. His fingers shook, fumbling with the vial of potion that would blunt the edge of the pain and accelerate the healing his Vanir body was already doing.

He chucked the cork into the trash can beside the sink, atop the wads of bloodied cotton bandages and wipes he'd used to clean his face. It had somehow been more important than addressing the pain—the hole in his shoulder—that he should be able to see his face, the male beneath.

The reflection wasn't kind. Purple smudges beneath his eyes matched the bruises along his jaw, the cuts on his lip, his swollen nose. All things that would fade and heal swiftly enough, but the hollowness in his eyes . . . It was his face, and yet a stranger's.

Tharion didn't meet his own gaze in the mirror as he tipped back the vial and chugged it. Silky, tasteless liquid coated his mouth, his throat. He'd once done shots with the same abandon. In the span of a few weeks, everything had gone to shit. His whole fucking life had gone to shit.

He'd given up everything he was and had been and ever would be.

He'd chosen this, being chained to the Viper Queen. He'd been desperate, but the burden of his decision weighed on him. He hadn't been allowed to leave the warren of warehouses in the two days since arriving—hadn't really wanted to, anyway. Even the need to return to the water was taken care of for him: a special tub had been prepared below this level with water pumped in directly from the Istros.

So he hadn't been in the river, or felt the wind and the sun, or heard the chatter and rhythmic beats of normal life in days. Hadn't so much as found an exterior window.

The door groaned open, and a familiar female scent announced the identity of the new arrival. As if at this hour, in this bathroom, it could be anyone else.

The Viper Queen had a crew of fighters. But the two of them . . . she treated them like prized racehorses. They fought during the prime-time slots. This bathroom was for their private use, along with the suite upstairs.

The Viper Queen owned them. And she wanted everyone to know it.

"I warmed them up for you," Tharion rasped over a shoulder at Ariadne. The dark-haired dragon, clad in a black bodysuit that accentuated her luscious curves, turned toward him.

Tharion and Ariadne were required to look sexy and stylish,

even as the Viper Queen bade them to bloody themselves for the crowd's amusement.

Ariadne halted at a sink a few feet away, surveying the angles of her face in the mirror as she washed her hands.

"Still as pretty as ever," Tharion managed to tease.

That earned him a sidelong assessment. "You look like shit."

"Nice to see you, too," he drawled, the healing potion tingling through him.

Her nostrils flared delicately. It wasn't wise to taunt a dragon. But he'd been on a hot streak of making stupid decisions lately, so why stop now?

"You have a hole in your shoulder," she said without taking her gaze from his.

Tharion peered at the ghastly wound, even as his skin knitted closed, the sensation like spiders crawling over the area. "Builds character."

Ariadne snorted, returning to her reflection. "You know, you throw around your attraction to females quite a bit. I'm starting to think it's a shield."

He stiffened. "Against what?"

"Don't know, don't really care."

"Ouch."

Ariadne continued examining herself in the mirror. Was she hunting for herself—the person she'd been before coming here—as well? Or maybe the person she'd been before the Astronomer had trapped her inside a ring and worn her on his finger for decades?

Tharion had done what the Viper Queen had asked regarding Ari: he'd woven a web of lies to his Aux contacts about the dragon being commandeered for security purposes. So the Viper Queen didn't technically own Ari as a slave—Ari remained a slave owned by someone else. She just . . . lived here now.

"Your adoring public awaits," Tharion said, grabbing another cotton wipe and holding it under the running water before beginning to clean the blood from his bare chest. He could have jumped in one of the showers to his left, but it would have stung like Hel on

his still-mending wounds. He twisted, straining for the particularly nasty slice along his left shoulder blade. It remained out of reach, even for his long fingers.

“Here,” Ariadne said, taking the wipe from his hand.

“Thanks, Ar—Ariadne.” He’d almost called her Ari, but it didn’t seem wise to antagonize her when she’d offered to help him.

Tharion braced his hands on the sink. Ariadne dabbed along the wound, wiping up blood, and he clenched the porcelain hard enough for it to groan beneath his fingers. He gritted his teeth against the stinging, and into the silence, the dragon said, “You can call me Ari.”

“I thought you hated that nickname.”

“Everyone seems inclined to use it, so it might as well be my choice for you to do so.”

“Was that your thinking when you abandoned my friends right before a deathstalker attacked them?” He couldn’t keep the bite from his voice, antagonizing her be damned. “Everyone expected the worst of you, so why not just be the worst?”

She snorted. “Your friends . . . you mean the witch and the redhead?”

“Yes. Real honorable of you to ditch them.”

“They seemed capable of looking after themselves.”

“They are. But you bailed all the same.”

“If you’re so invested in their safety, perhaps you should have been there.” Ari tossed the wipe in the trash and grabbed another one. “Who taught you to fight, anyway?”

He let the argument drop—it’d get them nowhere. He couldn’t even have said why he’d felt inclined to bring it up now, of all times. “Here I was, thinking you didn’t care to know anything about me.”

“Call it curiosity. You don’t seem . . . serious enough to be the River Queen’s Captain of Intelligence.”

“Such a flatterer.”

But embers sparked in her eyes, so Tharion shrugged. “I learned how to fight the usual way: I enrolled in the Blue Court Military

Academy after school, and have spent the years since honing those skills. Nothing cool. You?”

“Survival.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but the dragon turned on a booted heel. “Ari—” he called before she could reach the door. “We didn’t, you know.”

She turned, eyebrows rising. “Didn’t what?”

“Expect the worst of you.”

Her face twisted—rage and sorrow and a drop of shame. Or maybe he was imagining that last bit. She didn’t answer before stalking out.

The dripping of his blood again filled the bathroom.

Tharion waited until the potion patched most of the holes in his skin, and didn’t bother tugging the upper half of the black bodysuit on before following the dragon back to the heat and smells and light of the fighting ring.

Ari was just getting started. With impressive calm, she squared off against three male lion shifters, the enormous cats circling her with deadly precision. She turned with them, not letting the lions get behind her, her skin beginning to glow with molten scales, her black eyes flickering red.

Across the pit, the one-way window that peered over the ring reflected the glaring spotlights. But Tharion knew who stood on the other side of it, amid the plush finery of her private quarters. Who watched the dragon fight, assessing the intensity of the crowd’s roar.

“Traitor,” someone hissed to his left.

Tharion found two young mer males glaring at him from the risers above. Both clutched beers and had the glazed look of guys who’d already downed a few.

Tharion gave them a bland nod and faced the ring again.

“Fucking loser,” the other male spat.

Tharion kept his eyes on Ari. Steam rippled from the dragon’s mouth. One of the lions lunged, swiping with fingers that ended in curved claws, but she ducked away. The concrete floor singed where her feet had been. Preliminary blast marks.

“Some fucking captain,” the first male taunted.

Tharion ground his teeth. This wasn't the first time in the past few days that one of his people had recognized him and told him precisely how they felt. Everyone knew Tharion had defected from the Blue Court. Everyone knew he'd defected and come *here* to serve the Meat Market's depraved ruler. The River Queen and her daughter had made sure of it.

Captain Whatever, Ithan Holstrom had once called him. It seemed he truly embodied it now.

You gave that up, he reminded himself. He could never again so much as set foot in the Istros. The moment he did, his former queen would kill him. Or order her sobeks to rip him to shreds. Something twisted in his gut.

He was aware that his parents lived only because he'd gotten messages from them expressing their outrage and disappointment. *We already lost one child*, his mother had written. *Now we lose another. Defecting, Tharion? What in Ogenas's depths were you thinking?*

He didn't write back. Didn't apologize for being so reckless and selfish that he hadn't thought of their safety before committing this act of insanity. He'd not only sworn himself to the Viper Queen, he'd bound himself to her, too. After all the shit that had gone down in Pangera . . . no place else was safe for him, anyway. Only here, where the Viper Queen was allowed to rule.

He watched Ari pace in the ring. *You gave that up*, he told himself again firmly. *For this*.

“You're a disgrace,” the other mer male went on.

Something liquid and foamy splashed on Tharion's head, his bare shoulders. The fucker had thrown his beer.

Tharion snarled up at them, and the males had the good sense to back up a step, like they might have finally remembered what Tharion was capable of when provoked. But before he could beat the living shit out of them, one of the Viper Queen's personal guards—one of those glassy-eyed Fae defectors—said, “Fishboy. Boss wants you. Now.”

Tharion stiffened, but he had no choice. The tugging sensation

in his gut would only worsen the longer he resisted. Best to get this over with now.

So he left the assholes behind. Left Ari with the lions, who'd be deep-fried in about twenty minutes, or whenever the dragon had put on enough of a show to please the audience and did what she could have accomplished without so much as stepping into the ring.

He had no doubt there'd be some vendor waiting in the wings to scoop up the cooked carcasses and sell them in a food stall nearby. It wasn't called the Meat Market for nothing.

The walk upstairs, to the room behind that one-way window, was long and quiet. He willed his mind to be that way, too. To stop caring.

It was easier said than done, when everything kept circling: the failed attack on the lab, Cormac's death . . . They'd all been so fucking dumb, thinking they could take on the Asteri. And now here he was.

Honestly, he'd been headed this way for a while before that. Starting with the debacle with the River Queen's daughter. Then Lesia's death a year ago. This last month had been a culmination of that shit. Of what a pathetic, weak failure he'd always been beneath the surface.

Tharion knocked once on the wooden door, then entered.

The Viper Queen stood at the window overlooking the pit, where Ari had switched to taunting the lions. They were now frantic to escape. Everywhere the cats lunged to flee the ring, a wall of flame blocked their exit.

"She's a natural performer," the Viper Queen observed without turning. The ruler of the Meat Market wore a white silk romper cut to her slim figure, feet bare. A cigarette dangled from her manicured hand. "You could learn from her."

Tharion leaned against the wooden doorframe. "Is that an order or a suggestion?"

The Viper Queen pivoted, shiny dark hair swaying with her. Her lips were painted their usual dark purple, offsetting the snake

shifter's pale skin. "Do you know the lengths I went to in procuring that minotaur for you tonight?"

Tharion kept his mouth shut. How many times had he stood like this in front of the River Queen, silent while she ripped into him? He'd lost count long ago.

The Viper Queen's teeth flashed, delicate fangs stark against the purple of her lips. "Five minutes, Tharion?" Her voice dropped to a deadly purr. "A great deal of effort on my part, and all I get out of it, all my crowd gets, is a five-minute fight?"

Tharion gestured to his shoulder. "I'd think goring me and then hurling me across the ring was spectacle enough."

"I'd have liked to see that several more times. Not witness you flying into a rage and snapping the bull's neck."

She crooked a finger. That tugging in his gut increased. As if they possessed a mind of their own, his feet and legs moved. They carried him to the window, to her side.

He hated it—not the summoning, but the fact that he'd stopped any attempt at defying it.

"To make up for you blowing your load," the Viper Queen drawled, "I told Ari to drag out her fight." She inclined her head to the ring. Ari's face had gone empty and cold as she made the lions scream under her flames.

Tharion's gut churned. No wonder Ari hadn't stayed long to talk to him. But she'd helped him anyway. He had no idea how to unpack that.

"Try a little harder next time," the Viper Queen hissed in his ear, lips brushing his skin. She sniffed. "The mer punks really drenched you."

Tharion stepped away. "Is there a reason you called me up here?" He wanted a shower, and the relief that only sleep could offer him.

Her lips curled upward. She tugged back the pristine sleeve of her romper, exposing her moon-pale wrist. "Considering how little heart you put into your performance, I thought you might need a pick-me-up."

Tharion clenched his teeth. He wasn't a slave—though he'd

been stupid and desperate enough to offer himself as such to her. But instead she'd offered him something nearly as bad: the venom only she could produce.

And now, after that initial taste of it . . . His mouth filled with saliva. The scent of her skin, the blood and venom beneath it—he was helpless before her, a hungry fucking animal.

“Maybe if I offered you some before your fights,” she mused, forearm extended to him like a personal feast, “you would find a bit more . . . stamina.”

With every scrap of will left in him, Tharion lifted his eyes to hers. Let her see how much he hated this, hated her, hated himself.

She smiled. She knew. Had known when he'd defected to her, to this life. He'd told himself that this was a place of refuge, but it was getting harder to hide from what it really was.

A long-overdue punishment.

The Viper Queen slid one of her gold-painted nails down her wrist. Opened a vein churning with that milky, opalescent venom that made him see the gods themselves.

“Go ahead,” she urged, and Tharion wanted to scream, to weep, to run, as he grabbed her arm to his mouth and sucked in a mouthful of the venom.

It was beautiful. It was horrific. And it punched through him. Stars flickered in the air. Time slowed to a syrupy, languid scroll. Exhaustion and pain faded to nothing.

He'd heard the whispers long before he'd come here: her venom was the best high an immortal could ever attain. Having tasted it, he didn't disagree. Didn't blame those Fae defectors who served as her bodyguards in exchange for hits of this.

He'd once pitied them, scorned them.

Now he was one of them.

The Viper Queen's hand trailed up his chest to his neck, tracing over the spot where his gills usually appeared. She scraped her painted nails over it—a mark of pure ownership. Not only of his body, but of who he was, who he'd once been.

Her fingers tightened on his throat. An invitation, this time.

The Viper Queen's lips brushed against his ear again as she whispered, "Let's see what kind of stamina you have now, Tharion."

"We can't just leave Tharion in here."

"Trust me, Holstrom, Captain Whatever can look after himself."

Ithan frowned deeply at Tristan Flynn from across the rickety table. Declan Emmet and his boyfriend, Marc, were chatting up a vendor at one of the Meat Market's many stalls. The owl-headed Vanir was the third person they'd spoken to tonight, hoping to get news of their imprisoned friends—the twelfth lowlife they'd contacted in the past two days.

And Ithan was getting sick enough of their fruitless talking that he taunted Flynn, "Is this what Fae do? Leave their friends to suffer?"

"Fuck you, wolf," Flynn said, but didn't take his eyes off where Declan and Marc worked their charm. Even the usually unflappable Flynn now had bags beneath his eyes. He'd rarely smiled in the past few days. Seemed to be sleeping as little as Ithan was.

Yet despite all that, Ithan went for the throat. "So Ruhn's life means more—"

"Ruhn is in a fucking *dungeon* being tortured by the Asteri," Flynn snarled. "Tharion is here because he defected. He made that choice."

"Technically, Ruhn also made a choice to go to the Eternal City—"

Flynn dragged his hands through his brown hair. "If you're going to complain, then get the fuck out of here."

"I'm not complaining. I'm just saying that we've got a friend in a bad situation literally *right there* and we're not even trying to help him." Ithan pointed to the second level of the cavernous warehouse, the nondescript door that led into the Viper Queen's private quarters.

"Again, Ketos defected. Not much we can do."

"He was desperate—"

“We’re all fucking desperate,” Flynn murmured, eyeing a passing draki male carrying a sack of what smelled like elk meat. He sighed. “Seriously, Holstrom—go back to the house. Get some rest.” Again, Ithan noted the Fae lord’s exhausted face. “And,” Flynn added, “take that one with you.” Flynn nodded to the female sitting ramrod straight at a nearby table, alert and tense. The three fire sprites lay draped around her shoulders, dozing.

Right. The other source of Ithan’s frustration these days: playing babysitter for Sigrid Fendyr.

It would have been smarter to leave her back at the Fae males’ house—his house now, he supposed—but she’d refused. Had insisted on accompanying them.

Sigrid insisted on seeing and knowing *everything*. If he’d thought she’d crawl out of her mystic’s tank and cower, he’d thought wrong. She’d been a pain in his ass for two days now, wanting the complete history of the Fendyrs, their enemies, Ithan’s enemies . . . anything and everything that had happened while she’d been the Astronomer’s captive.

She hadn’t offered up much of her own past—not even a crumb about her father, whose history she hadn’t known until Ithan had filled her in, how the male had long ago been Prime Apparent until his sister, Sabine, had challenged him and won. Ithan had thought she’d killed him, but she’d apparently sent Sigrid’s father off into exile instead, where Sigrid had been born. Anything other than that was a complete mystery. Part of Ithan didn’t want to know what circumstances had been so dire as to make a Fendyr sell his heir—sell an *Alpha*—to the Astronomer.

That heir was only sitting quietly right now because she’d taken two steps into the Meat Market and sneered, *Who’d want to shop at a disgusting place like this?* Promptly making Declan and Marc’s work infinitely harder by earning the ire of any vendor within earshot.

The whisper network here put them all within earshot.

So Flynn had ordered her to sit alone. Well, alone apart from her fiery little cabal. Wherever Sigrid went, the sprites went with her.

Ithan had no idea if that bond was from the years in the

tank, or from a shared trauma, or just because they were females living in a very male house, but the four of them together were a headache.

“It’s too dangerous for her to be out in the open,” Flynn went on. “Anyone can report a sighting.”

“No one knows who she is. To them, she’s a random wolf.”

“Yeah, and all it takes is one mention to Amelie or Sabine that a female wolf is in your company, and they’ll know. I’m shocked they haven’t run right over here already.”

“Sabine’s ruthless, but she’s not dumb. She wouldn’t start shit on the Viper Queen’s turf.”

“No, she’ll wait until we cross into the CBD and then ambush us.” The angels had long ignored anything that went on at street level in their district, too preoccupied with the comings and goings in their lofty towers.

Ithan glared at the male. Normally, he got along fine with Flynn. Liked him, even. But since Ruhn and Hunt and Bryce had disappeared . . .

Disappeared wasn’t the right word, at least for Ruhn and Hunt. They’d been taken prisoner, but Bryce . . . no one knew what had happened to her. Hence their presence here, seeking any intel they could get their hands on after Declan’s computer searches had been fruitless.

Any information on Bryce, on Ruhn, on Athalar . . . they were desperate for it. For a direction. A spark to light the way. Something that was better than sitting on their asses, not knowing.

Ithan glanced at the chair beneath him. *He* was currently sitting on his ass. Not knowing anything.

Before he could let self-loathing sink its teeth into him, he rose and stalked over to where Sigrid sat monitoring the patrons of the Meat Market. She lifted brown eyes full of irritation and disdain to him. “This is a bad place.”

No shit, he refrained from saying. “It has its uses,” he hedged.

He’d gone straight to the Fae males’ house when he’d hauled Sigrid out of the Astronomer’s tank. They’d stayed there while Flynn

and Declan pretended that all was normal in their world. While they continued working for the Aux, Prince Ruhn's absence dismissed as a much-needed vacation.

Ithan had been waiting for soldiers to show up. Or assassins, sent by the Asteri or Sabine or the Astronomer.

Yet there had been no questions. No interrogations. No arrests. The Autumn King hadn't even grilled Flynn and Dec, though he no doubt knew something had happened to his son. And that where Ruhn went, his two best friends went with him.

The public had no idea what had happened in the Eternal City. Granted, Ithan and the Fae warriors didn't know much either, but they knew that their friends had gone into the Asteri stronghold and hadn't come out again. The Asteri, the other powers at play . . . they knew that Ithan and the others had also been involved, even if they hadn't been present. And yet they hadn't made a move to punish them.

It wasn't a comforting thought.

Sigrid angled her head with lupine curiosity. "Do you come here often?"

With anyone else, he might have made a joke about pickup lines, but Sigrid didn't know or care about humor. He couldn't blame her, after what she'd been through. So Ithan said, "When my work for the Aux or my pack demands it. But rarely, thank the gods."

Her mouth tightened. "The Astronomer frequented this place." That day Ithan had gone back to the Astronomer's place to free her, he remembered, the ancient male had been over here buying some part for her tank.

"Any idea who he patronizes?" It was more of a casual question than anything.

Sigrid peered around. If she'd been in wolf form, he had no doubt her ears would have been flicking, picking up every sound. She replied without taking her focus off the teeming market, "A satyr, I heard him say once. Who sells salts and other things."

Ithan glanced to the balcony level—to the shut green door where the satyr lived. He knew who she was talking about, thanks

to all those past visits on behalf of the Aux. The lowlife peddled in all kinds of contraband.

Sigrid marked his shift in attention, tracing his line of sight. “That’s his place?”

Ithan gave a slow nod.

Sigrid shot to her feet, eyes gleaming with predatory intent.

“Where are you going?” Ithan demanded, stepping into her path.

The sprites jolted from their nap, clinging to Sigrid’s long brown hair to keep from being thrown off her shoulders.

“Are we done?” Malana asked, yawning.

“We’re terribly bored,” Sasa agreed, stretching her plump body along Sigrid’s neck. Rithi, the third sister, hummed in agreement.

Ignoring the sprites, Sigrid’s teeth flashed as she faced Ithan. “I want to see why this satyr thinks it appropriate to supply people like the Astrono—”

“We’re not here to cause trouble,” Ithan said, and didn’t move an inch from her path. But she stomped around him, pure Fendyr. A force of nature—one he’d just begun to see unleashed.

Despite that noble bloodline, Ithan grabbed her arm. “Do *not* go up there,” he snarled softly, fingers digging into her bony arm.

She looked down at his hand, then up at his face. Her nose crinkled with anger. “Or what?”

The steel of an Alpha rang in her voice. Ithan’s very bones cried out to submit, to bow away, to step aside.

But he fought it, pushed against it—met it with his own dominance. The Fendyrs might have been Alphas for generations, but the Holstroms weren’t pushovers. They were Alphas, too—leaders and warriors in their own right.

Like Hel would he let this female push him around, Fendyr or no.

Flynn’s chair scraped the ground, but Ithan didn’t take his eyes from Sigrid as the Fae male stalked over and hissed, “What the fuck is wrong with you two? Go snarl at each other somewhere it won’t be noticed by everyone in the gods-damned Meat Market.”

Ithan bared his teeth at Sigrid. She bared hers right back.

He said to Flynn, still not breaking Sigrid's stare, "She wants to go confront the salt dealer about his association with the Astronomer. The satyr who got in all that trouble last year."

Flynn sighed at the wooden ceiling. "Now's not the time to go on a self-righteous warpath, sweetheart."

Sigrid looked away from Ithan at last, though the wolf part of him knew she wasn't conceding in their battle of wills. No, it was because she'd found another opponent to face. "Don't speak to me like I'm some common female," Sigrid raged at Flynn, who held up his hands. She whipped her head back to Ithan, "It's within my rights—"

"You have no rights," a male voice said. Marc. The leopard shifter had stalked up behind them with preternatural grace. Though he was in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, the male still had an air of sleek professionalism. "Since you technically don't even exist. You're a ghost, for all intents and purposes."

Sigrid slowly turned, lip curling. "Did I ask for your opinion, *cat*?"

Normally, Ithan would have been glad to engage in some inter-shifter rivalry. But Marc was a good male—her disdain was utterly misplaced. Declan sauntered up beside his boyfriend and slung an arm around his broad shoulders. "I think it's past someone's bedtime."

Sigrid growled. But the sprites drifted from her shoulders to float in front of her face as Sasa said carefully, "Siggy, we *are* here to . . . do other things. Perhaps we could come back another time."

Ithan almost laughed at the nickname. Someone as intense as the female before him had no business being called *Siggy*.

"The next time they let us out of the house," Sigrid said, bristling. "In days or weeks."

"I'll remind you," Declan drawled, "that you're currently Sabine's primary enemy."

"Let her come find me," Sigrid said without an ounce of fear. "I've a score to settle."

"Luna spare me," Flynn muttered. Ithan could have sworn he caught the sprites nodding their agreement as they resettled

themselves on Sigrid's shoulders. The Fae lord turned to Declan and Marc. "Anything?"

The couple shook their heads. "No. It really does seem like the Asteri put a lock on the information. Nothing's getting in or out." Silence fell, heavy and tense.

It was Sigrid who said, "So what now?"

Only two days out of the tank and she was already assuming the mantle of leader, whether she knew it or not. A true Alpha, expecting to be answered . . . and obeyed.

"We keep trying to find out what's going on," Declan said with a one-shouldered shrug.

Flynn blew out an exasperated breath and plopped onto his chair again. "We're no closer than we were two days ago: Ruhn and Athalar are being held as traitors. That's all we know." That was all Marc's inside source at the Eternal City had been able to glean. Nothing else.

Declan sank into a seat and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and index finger. "Honestly? We're lucky we aren't in those dungeons, too."

"We have to break them out," Flynn said, crossing his muscled arms. Rithi, on his left shoulder, made an identical gesture.

"Urd knows what shape they're in," Declan said bleakly. "We'd need medwitches on hand, probably."

"You've got healing magic," Flynn countered.

"Yeah," Dec said, shaking his head, "but the kind of injuries they'd have . . . I'd need to be working alongside a team of trained professionals."

The thought of what those injuries might be to require such a team of medwitches made them all fall silent again. A heavy, miserable sort of quiet.

"And," Declan challenged, head lifting, "where would we even go once we rescued them? There's no one on Midgard who could hide or harbor us."

"What about that mer ship?" Flynn mused. "The one that picked them up at Ydra. It outran the Omega-boats. Seems pretty damned good at hiding from the Asteri, too."

“Flynn,” Marc warned with a glance at the teeming market. All those listening ears.

Ithan kept his voice low. “Tharion could get us onto that ship.”

He expected Flynn to roll his eyes at the mention of helping Ketos, but the male glanced to the second level. “He can’t set foot beyond this market.”

None of them had seen or heard from the mer male since he’d left for Pangera. But they’d learned of his whereabouts thanks to a neon-green piece of paper taped to a lamppost, advertising an upcoming match in the Viper Queen’s fighting pit with Tharion as the main event. It was clear enough what had happened: the male had defected from the Blue Court and run straight here.

Ithan countered, “Then we ask Tharion how to get a message to them.”

Declan shook his head. “And what then? We all live under the ocean forever?”

Ithan shifted on his feet. The wolf in him would go insane. No ability to run freely, to respond to the moon calling his name—

“*She* lived in a tank for the gods know how long,” Flynn said, gaze darting to Sigrid. “I think we can manage a cushy, city-sized submarine.”

Sigrid flinched—a crack in her usually cocky exterior.

“Careful,” Ithan warned Flynn.

The sprites murmured their comfort to Sigrid, their flames now a deep raspberry. But Sigrid silently rose from her seat and walked toward a nearby vendor selling opals. The sweatshirt and pants Ithan had given her hung off her lean frame, swishing with each step.

“You need to remind her to shower,” Dec said a shade quietly, eyes shining with concern.

She hadn’t known what shampoo was. Or soap. Or conditioner. Hadn’t even known what a shower was, and had refused to step into the stream until Ithan had done so himself, fully clothed, to demonstrate that it was safe. That it wasn’t some version of a tank.

She’d never slept in a proper bed before, either. Or at least not one that she remembered.

“Okay,” Declan said, drawing attention back to the matter at hand. “We’re clearly not learning anything by asking around, but let’s think about it . . . Ruhn has to be alive. The Asteri wouldn’t kill him right away—he’s too big of a political presence.”

“Yeah, so let’s go rescue him,” Flynn pushed. “Him and Athalar.”

“What about Bryce?” Declan asked so softly it was barely a whisper.

“She’s gone,” Flynn said tightly. “Went wherever.”

Ithan didn’t like that tone—not one bit. “What, you think Bryce bailed?” he demanded. “You think she’d willingly leave Ruhn and Hunt to the Asteri? Come on.”

Flynn leaned back in his chair. “You got a better guess about where she might be?”

Ithan restrained the urge to punch the Fae lord in the throat. Flynn was angry and hurting and scared, Ithan reminded himself. “Bryce doesn’t give up on the people she loves. If she went somewhere, it’s gotta be important.”

“Doesn’t matter where she went,” Flynn said. “All I know is we have to get Ruhn out before it’s too late.”

Ithan glanced at the second level again, that sunball captain part of his mind calculating, thinking it through . . .

Dec gripped Flynn’s shoulder, squeezing tight. “Look, the mer ship isn’t a bad idea, but we need to think long-term. Need to consider our families, too.”

“My parents and sister can go to Hel for all I care,” Flynn said.

“Well, I want my family to be safe,” Declan snapped. “*If* we’re going to rescue Ruhn and Athalar, we need to make sure no one else gets caught in the cross fire.”

Dec looked to Ithan, and Ithan shrugged. He had no one left to warn. Would anyone even miss him if he were gone? His duty was to protect the wolf at the stall across the way. Out of some stupid hope that she might . . . He had no idea. Challenge and defeat Sabine? Correct the dangerous path Sabine was leading the wolves down? Fill the void that Danika had left?

Sigrid was a loose cannon. An Alpha, yes, but she had no training.

Her impulses were all over the place, too unpredictable. With time, she might learn the necessary skills, but time wasn't their ally these days.

So Ithan said, "You want to save Ruhn and Athalar? That mer ship is the only way we can cross the ocean unnoticed. Maybe the mer on it will have some idea how to break them out. They might even help us if we're lucky." He pointed to the second level. "Tharion's our way in."

"Seems convenient," Flynn said at last, "given that you were insisting we needed to spring him loose from here."

"Two birds, one stone."

"Tharion can't leave," Marc mused, "but nothing's stopping him from talking to us. Maybe he can provide contact information."

"Only one way to find out," Ithan said.

Flynn sighed, which Ithan took as acceptance. "Someone's gotta tell her to go home." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder toward Sigrid.

"And be her escort," Dec added.

"Not it," Flynn and Ithan said at the same moment.

Declan whipped his head to Marc and said, "Not it," before the leopard could grasp what was going on.

Marc rubbed his temples. "Remind me how it is that the three of you are considered some of the most feared warriors in this city?"

Dec just kissed his cheek.

Marc sighed. "If I have to bring *Siggy* home, then Holstrom has to be the one to tell her."

Ithan opened his mouth, but . . . fine. With a mocking smile to the males, he walked over to retrieve the Alpha. And spare the opal dealer from her endless questions.

How do you know it bestows luck or love or joy? What do the colors have to do with anything? What proof do you have that these work?

He couldn't tell if it was curiosity, pent up from years in that tank, or sheer Alphaness, needing to question everyone and everything. Needing order in the world.

Ithan put a hand on Sigrid's elbow to alert her of his presence,

but again she flinched. Ithan backed away a step, hands up as the opal dealer watched warily. “Sorry.”

She didn’t like being touched. She’d only let him touch her to wash her hair that first night, when she’d had no idea how to do it.

Ithan motioned her to walk back toward the males, and she fell into step beside him, a healthy distance away. Most wolves needed touch—craved it. Had the instinct been robbed from her by those years in the tank?

It made it hard to be annoyed with her when he thought about it like that.

“How do you get used to it?” Sigrid asked over the hiss of cooking meat and bartering shoppers. Behind her, the sprites were still hovering by the array of opals, exclaiming over the stones. How the three sprites had adapted so quickly to this strange, open world was beyond him. They’d been trapped by the Astronomer, too, locked in his rings.

Ithan asked, “Used to what?”

Sigrid peered at her hands, her thin body beneath the sweats. Passing shoppers noted her—him—and gave them a wide berth. “Feeling like you’re stranded in a rotting corpse.”

He blinked. “I, ah . . .” He couldn’t imagine himself in her shoes, suddenly a body of flesh and blood and bone after the weightless years in the isolation tank. “You just need time.”

Her eyes lowered. It didn’t seem to be the answer she was looking for.

“Sigrid,” he said again. “You’re . . . you’re doing great.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” she asked.

“That’s the name Sasa chose for you,” Ithan said, offering a friendly smile.

“Why do I need a name? I’ve lived this long without one.”

“An Alpha should have one. A *person* should have one. The Astronomer let you take the Drop—you’ll be alive for centuries.”

When pressed, she’d revealed that she’d somehow made the Drop in the isolation tank. She couldn’t tell him when or how, but he’d been relieved to hear she had that protection.

“I don’t want to talk about the Drop.” Her voice was flat, dead.

“Neither do I.” He would have liked some answers about what she’d experienced, but not now. Not when they’d reached the three waiting males. The sprites, finally emerging from the depths of the opal stall, raced over, three plumes of flame streaming across the bone-dry warehouse.

“So, do we go knock?” Flynn asked, pointing to the metal, vault-like door at the top of the stairs. The entrance to the Viper Queen’s private lair.

Marc caught Ithan’s eye. Had he explained to Sigrid that Marc would escort her home?

Ithan cringed. No, he hadn’t.

Marc glared. *Coward*, the leopard’s look seemed to say. But he tensed, going still. “Stay quiet.”

The others obeyed, the two Fae males reaching for the guns at their sides. The Meat Market bustled on unawares, selling and trading and feeding, and yet . . .

Marc’s tawny eyes scanned the warehouse, the skylights. He sniffed.

Ithan did the same. As shifters, their senses were sharper than those of the Fae.

From the doorway behind them, the blend of smells from the open night leaked in, the reek of the sewers beyond . . .

And the scent of converging wolves.



3

I don't know what language the tattoo is in," Bryce insisted. "My friend got it inked on me when I was blackout—"

"Do not *lie*," Rhysand warned with soft menace. He'd kill her. Whatever the language was, it was apparently so bad that it might as well say *Stick knife here*.

Amren stalked around Bryce, peering at the tattoo no doubt still glowing from beneath the material of her white shirt. "I can feel something in the letters . . ." Bryce tensed. "Get Nesta."

Azriel murmured, "Cassian won't be happy."

"Cassian will deal. Nesta will be able to sense this better than I can." Bryce turned, placing Amren and Azriel back in her line of sight right as the former insisted, "Get her, Rhysand."

Bryce's knees bent into a defensive crouch. How much would this hurt? Would she stand any chance of—

Rhysand vanished again.

Before Bryce had finished rising to her feet, he returned, a familiar female with golden-brown hair in tow. As she had earlier in the foyer, the female wore dark leathers akin to those on Azriel and Rhysand, and stood with an unruffled, cool sort of calm. A warrior.

Her blue-gray eyes slid over Bryce.

Bryce slowly, almost numbly sank back into her chair. Whatever was in those eyes—

The female said quietly to the others, voice flat, almost bored, “I told you earlier: There’s something Made on her. Beyond that sword she carried.”

“Made?” Bryce, caution be damned, asked the newcomer—Nesta, she could only assume—at the same time Amren pointed to Bryce’s back and asked, “Is it that tattoo?”

Nesta just said, “Yes.”

All of them stared at Bryce once more, expressions unreadable. Which one would strike first? Four against one—she wasn’t getting out of here alive.

Amren said quietly to Rhysand, “What do you want to do with her, Rhys?”

Bryce clenched her jaw. Even if she stood zero chance of winning, like Hel would she take her death lying down. She’d fight in whatever way she could—

Nesta jerked her chin at Bryce, haughty and aloof. “You can fight us, but you’ll lose.”

Fuck that. Bryce held the female’s stare, finding a will of pure steel gleaming in it. “You try to touch that tattoo and you’ll find out why the Asteri want me dead so badly.”

She regretted the retort instantly. Azriel’s hand drifted toward the dagger at his side. But Nesta stepped closer, unimpressed and unintimidated.

“What is it?” Nesta asked Bryce, motioning to her back. “How is a bit of writing on your skin . . . Made?”

“I can’t answer the question until you tell me what the fuck *Made* means.”

“Don’t tell her anything,” Amren warned Nesta. She pointed to the doorway. “You did your job and told us what we needed. We’ll see you later.”

Nesta’s brows rose at the dismissal. But she looked at Bryce and smiled sharply. “It’s in your best interests to cooperate with them, you know.”

“So they’ve told me,” Bryce said, fingers curling into fists at the sides of her chair. She tucked them under her thighs to keep from doing anything stupid.

Nesta's eyes gleamed with amusement, marking the movement.

"Our . . . visitor needs rest," Rhysand said, and gracefully stalked to the door. Order given, Amren and Azriel strode after him, Nesta following only after staring at Bryce for another heartbeat. A taunting, daring look.

Yet as Azriel reached the threshold, Bryce blurted to the winged warrior, "The sword—where is it?"

Azriel paused, glancing over a shoulder. "Somewhere safe."

Bryce held Azriel's gaze, meeting his ice with her own—with that expression she knew Ruhn always thought looked so much like their father's. The face she'd let the world see so very rarely. "The sword is mine. I want it back."

Azriel's mouth kicked up at the corners. "Then give us a good reason to return it to you."

Time dripped by. Trays of simple food appeared at fairly regular intervals: bread, beef stew—or what she assumed was beef stew—hard cheese. Foods similar to ones back home.

Even the herbs were familiar—had the Fae of this world introduced them to Midgard? Or were plants like thyme and rosemary somehow universal? Strewn across space?

Or maybe the Asteri had brought those herbs from their own home world and planted them on all their conquered planets.

She knew it was a stupid thing to contemplate. That she had way bigger things to consider than an intergalactic garden. But she quickly lost interest in eating, and thinking about everything else was . . . too much.

No one else came to see her. Bryce entertained herself by tossing peas from her stew into the grate in the center of the floor, counting the long seconds until she heard a faint *plink*, and then the hiss and roar of whatever lurked down there.

She didn't want to know. Her imagination conjured plenty of options, all with sharp teeth and ravenous appetites.

She tried the door only once. It wasn't locked, but a wall of black

night filled the doorway, obscuring the hall beyond from sight. Blocking anyone from going in or out. She'd flared her starlight, but even it had muted in the face of that darkness.

Maybe it was some kind of fucked-up test. To see if she could get through their strongest powers and wards. To feel her out as an opponent. Maybe to see what the Horn—whatever was *Made* about it—could do. But she didn't need to throw her starlight against that darkness to know it wasn't budging. Its might thundered in her very bones.

Bryce scoured her memory for any alternative escape tactic, reviewing everything Randall had taught her, but none of it was applicable to getting through that impenetrable power.

So Bryce sat. And ate. And threw peas at the monsters below.

Even if she got out of here, she couldn't get off-planet. Not without someone to power her up, activating the Horn in the process. And from Apollion's hints, Hunt's power was far more compatible with hers than most. Granted, Hypaxia had powered her up against the deathstalker, but there was no guarantee the witch-queen's magic would have been enough to open a gate.

And did she *need* a gate to get home? Micah had used the Horn in her back to open all seven Gates in Crescent City, blocks away. When she'd landed here, there had been no gate-like structure nearby. Just a grassy front lawn, the river, and the house she could barely make out through the dense mists.

Only the dagger—and Azriel wielding it—had been there. Like *that* was where she'd needed to be.

"When knife and sword are reunited, so shall our people be," Bryce murmured into the quiet.

To what end, though? The Fae were horrible. The ones here weren't much different from the ones she knew, as far as she could tell. And the Fae on Midgard had proved their moral rot again this spring, locking vulnerable people out of their villas during the demon attack. Proved it with their laws and rules keeping females oppressed, little more than chattel. Bryce had twisted their rules against them at the Autumn Equinox to marry Hunt, but according

to those same rules, she now technically *belonged* to him. She was a princess, for Urd's sake, and yet she was still the property of the untitled male she'd married.

Maybe the Fae weren't worth uniting.

But it still left her with the problem of getting off this planet—one of the few worlds to have ever succeeded in ousting the Asteri. Daglan. Whatever they were called.

Bryce leaned against a wall of the cell, knees to her chest, and tried to sort through it all, laying out the pieces before her.

Hours stretched on. Nothing came to her.

Bryce rubbed at her face. She'd stumbled into the home world of the Fae. The world from which the Starborn Fae—Theia and Pelias and Helena—had come. From which the Starsword had come, and where its knife had been waiting. If Urd had some intention in sending her here . . . she sure as fuck had no idea what it was.

Or how she'd get out of this mess.

“We shouldn't have brought her with us,” Flynn murmured as they hurried through the stalls of the Meat Market, aiming for an alternate exit on the quieter side of the warehouse. “I fucking *told* you, Holstrom—”

“I ordered him to bring me,” Sigrid cut in, keeping pace beside Ithan, the sprites dimmed to a pale yellow as they hunched on her shoulders. Something in Ithan twinged at that—an Alpha, defending him. Taking the responsibility, even if it implied that he *could* be ordered. The Alphas he'd lived under for the past few years had used their power and dominance for themselves. Danika had used her position to support those under her, in her own brash way, but Danika was gone. He'd thought he'd never encounter another like her, but maybe—

“Sabine would have found us anyway,” Ithan said, “whether we were here or at the house. It was only a matter of time.”

They entered a long service corridor with a dented metal door at its other end, a half-assed *EXIT* painted on it in white lettering.

Definitely not up to code. Though he doubted a city health and safety inspector had ever set foot in this warren of misery.

“Do we split up?” Dec asked. “Try to shake them that way?”

“No,” Marc said, claws glinting at his fingertips. “Their sense of smell’s too good. They’ll be able to tell which of us she’s with.”

As if in answer, howls rent the warehouse proper. Ithan’s entire body locked up. He knew the tenor of those howls. *Prey on the run.* He gritted his teeth to keep from answering, to clamp his responding howl inside his body.

Beside him, Sigrid was a live wire. Like the howls had triggered a response in her, too.

“So we make a run for it,” Flynn said. “Where do we rendezvous if we get separated?”

The question hung in the air. Where the fuck was safe in this city, on this planet? Considering their connections to imprisoned traitors, the list of options was short as fuck. Where would Bryce have gone? She would have found someone bigger and badder . . . or smarter, at least. She would have gone to the gallery, maybe, to its protective wards, but Jesiba Roga’s sanctum was gone. Griffin Antiquities had never been repaired or reopened. Which left—

“We make it to the Comitium,” Ithan said. “Isaiah Tiberian will shelter us.”

Dec lifted a brow. “You know Tiberian?”

“No, but Athalar’s his friend. And I’ve heard he’s a good male.”

“For an angel,” Flynn muttered.

Sigrid demanded, “We’re going to the angels?” Disdain and distrust spiked each word.

The howls in the warehouse closed in: *We stalk the darkness together.*

“I don’t see another option,” Dec admitted. “It’s a gamble, though. Tiberian might go right to Celestina.”

“The Governor’s cool,” Flynn said.

“I don’t trust any Archangel,” Marc said. “They’re bred and raised into unchecked power. They go to those secretive academies,

ripped away from any family. It's not conducive to raising well-balanced people. *Good people.*"

At the exit, they paused, listening carefully to the sounds beyond. They couldn't smell anything through the metal door, but the howls behind them drew closer. Whoever was in the warehouse would reach this hall in a matter of moments.

Another howl—this one familiar. "Amelie," Ithan breathed. If they turned back, they'd face a fight with the second-most powerful wolf pack in Lunathion. Yet to go through that door into the unforgiving city, no certain allies to shelter them—

Sigrid did them all a favor and shoved the door open.

And there, standing in the alley beyond, stood Sabine Fendyr.

Sabine let out a joyless laugh. Her eyes met Ithan's, filled with nothing but hate, and then she faced Sigrid, Ithan's dismissal clear. He was nothing and no one to her. Not even a wolf to acknowledge.

Ithan bared his teeth. Flynn, Dec, and Marc clicked off the safeties on their guns.

But Sabine just said to Sigrid through a mouth full of fangs, "You look exactly like him."



Pain and dark and quiet. That was the entirety of Hunt Athalar's world.

No, that wasn't true.

Those things were the entirety of the world beyond his tortured body, his sawed-off wings, the aching hunger writhing in his stomach and thirst burning his throat, the slave brand stamped on his wrist. The halo inked anew upon his brow by Rigelus himself, its oppressive power somehow heavier and oilier than the first. All that he had achieved, regained . . . wiped away. His very existence belonged to the Asteri once more.

But inside him, beyond that sea of pain and despair, Bryce was the entirety of his world.

His mate. His wife. His princess.

Prince Hunt Athalar Danaan. He would have hated the last name were it not for the fact that it was a marker of her ownership over his soul, his heart.

There was Bryce, and nothing else. Not even Pollux's barbed-wire whips could rip her face from his mind. Not even that blunt-toothed saw had severed it from him, even as it had hewn through his wings.

Bryce, who had gotten away. Gone to Hel to seek aid. He'd stay here, let Pollux rip him to shreds, cut through his wings again and

again, if it meant that the Asteri's attention stayed away from her. If it bought her time to rally the force needed to take on these fuckers.

He'd die before he told them where she was. His only consolation was that Ruhn would do the same.

Baxian, bloody and swaying on the other side of Ruhn, didn't know where Bryce had gone, but he knew plenty about what Bryce had been up to lately. Yet the Helhound hadn't given Pollux an inch. Hunt would have expected nothing less of a male Urd had chosen to be Danika Fendyr's mate.

It was quiet now—the only sound the clank of their chains. Blood and piss and shit coated the floor beneath them, the smell almost as unbearable as the pain.

Pollux was creative, Hunt would give him that. Where others might have gone for stabbing in the gut and twisting, the Hammer had learned the exact points on the feet to whip and burn to cause maximum agony while keeping his victims conscious.

Or maybe it was the Hind who'd learned those tricks. She stood behind her lover and watched with dead eyes as the Hammer slowly—so slowly—took them apart.

That was the other secret he and Danaan would keep. The Hind—what and who she was.

Oblivion beckoned, a sweet release Hunt had come to crave as much as Bryce's body entwined with his. He pretended, sometimes, that when he fell into the blackness, he was falling into her arms, into her sweet, tight heat.

Bryce. Bryce. Bryce.

Her name was a prayer, an order.

He had little hope of leaving this place alive. His only job was to make sure he held out long enough for Bryce to do what she had to do. After his series of colossal fuckups over the centuries . . . it was the least he could offer up.

He should have seen it coming—part of him *had* seen it coming a few weeks ago, when he'd tried to convince Bryce not to go down this road. He should have fought harder. Should have told her this outcome was inevitable, especially if he was involved.

He'd *known* not to trust Celestina with her whole *new Governor, new rules* bullshit. He'd let her win him over, and the Archangel had fucking betrayed them. All that talk about being a friend of Shahar's—he'd eaten it up. Let the memory of his long-dead lover cloud his instincts, as Celestina had surely gambled it would.

What was this but another Fallen rebellion? On a smaller scale, yes, but the stakes had been so much higher this time. Then, he'd lost an army, lost his lover—had known she was dying as time had stretched and slowed around him. Had known she was dead when time had resumed its normal speed once more, and the whole world had changed.

Yet the ties that now bound him to others—not only Bryce, but to the two males in this dungeon with him—had become unbearable. Their pain was his pain. Perhaps worse than what he endured before.

Shahar had been given the easy end. To die at Sandriel's hand, to die on the battlefield, swift and final . . . It had been easier.

A few feet away, Baxian groaned softly.

Hunt's arms had gone numb, shoulders popping out of their sockets from trying to support the weight of their bodies. He mustered his energy, his focus, enough to say to Baxian, "How . . . how you doing?"

Baxian let out a wet cough. "Great."

Next to Hunt, Ruhn grunted. It might have been a laugh. Their only options were screaming and sobbing, or laughing at this giant fucking disaster.

Indeed, Ruhn said, "Wanna . . . hear a . . . joke?" The prince didn't wait for a reply before he continued, "Two angels . . . and a Fae Prince . . . walk into . . . a dungeon . . ."

Ruhn didn't finish, and didn't need to. A broken, rasping laugh came out of Hunt. Then Baxian. Then Ruhn.

Though every heave shrieked through his arms, his back, his broken body, Hunt couldn't stop laughing. The sound bordered on hysteria. Soon tears were leaking down his cheeks, and he knew from the scent that the others were laughing and crying as well, like it was the funniest fucking thing in the world.

The door to the chamber banged open, echoing off the stones like a thunderclap.

“Shut the fuck up,” Pollux barked, stalking down the stairs, wings blazing in the dimness.

Hunt laughed louder. Footsteps trailed behind the Hammer—a dark-haired, brown-skinned male followed him in: the Hawk. The final member of Sandriel’s triarii. “What the Hel is wrong with them?” he sneered at Pollux.

“They’re stupid shits, that’s what,” Pollux said, strutting to the rack of torture devices and grabbing an iron poker. He thrust it into the embers of the fire, the light gilding his white wings into a mockery of a heavenly aura.

The Hawk prowled closer, peering at the three of them with a close scrutiny that echoed his namesake. Like Baxian, the Hawk hailed from two peoples: angels, who had granted him his white wings, and hawk shifters, who’d granted him his ability to transform into a bird of prey.

Those were about all the similarities between the two males. For starters, Baxian had a soul. The Hawk . . .

The Hawk’s gaze lingered on Hunt. Nothing of life, of joy, lay in those eyes.

“Athalar.”

Hunt nodded to the male in greeting. “Asshole.”

Ruhn snickered. The Hawk pivoted to the rack, where he pulled out a long, curving knife. The kind that was designed to yank out organs on the withdraw. Hunt remembered that one—from last time.

Ruhn laughed again, as if almost drunk. “Creative.”

“We’ll see how you laugh in a moment, princeling,” the Hawk said, earning a grin from Pollux as the Hammer waited for the poker to heat. “I heard your cousin Cormac pleaded for mercy before the end.”

“Fuck you,” Ruhn snarled.

The hawk shifter weighed the knife in his hands. “His father has disowned him. Or whatever’s left of his body.” A wink at Ruhn. “Your father has done the same.”

Hunt didn't miss the shock that rippled over Ruhn's face. At his father's betrayal? Or at his cousin's demise? Did such things even matter down here?

Baxian rasped to the Hawk, "You're a fucking liar. Always were . . . always will be."

The Hawk smiled up at Baxian. "How about we start with your tongue today, traitor?"

To Baxian's credit, he stuck out his tongue toward the Hawk in invitation.

Hunt smirked. Yeah—they were all in this together. To the bitter end.

The Hawk cut his stare toward Hunt. "You'll be next, Athalar."

"Come and get it," Hunt gasped. Ruhn extended his tongue as well.

The Hawk simmered with rage at their defiance, white wings glowing with unearthly power. But slowly, a smile lit his face—horrific in its calculation, its gradual delight as Pollux turned, the poker white-hot and rippling with heat.

"Who's first?" the Hammer crooned. The angel stood poised, silhouetted against the blazing fire behind him.

Hunt opened his mouth, his last bit of bravado before the shit-show began, but in the shadows behind Pollux, beyond the fireplace, something dark moved. Something darker than shadow.

Not Ruhn's shadows. The prince didn't seem to be able to access those when constrained by the gorsian shackles. Only the prince's mind-speaking abilities remained.

This shadow was different—darker, older. Watching them.

Watching Hunt.

Hallucinations: Bad, because it meant he had some infection that even his immortal body couldn't fight off. Good, because it meant he might quietly slip away into death's embrace. Bad, because it meant the Asteri might turn their attention fully to Bryce. Good, because the pain would be gone. Bad, because he still held out some stupid, fool's hope deep in his heart of seeing her again. Good, because Bryce wouldn't come looking for him if he was dead.

Across the room, the thing in the shadows moved. Just slightly.
Like it had crooked a finger at him.

Death. That was the thing in the shadows.

And now it beckoned.

Night.

Borne on a raft of oblivion, Ruhn drifted across a sea of pain.

The last thing he remembered was the sound and sight of his small intestine splattering on the ground, pain as sharp as—well, as sharp as the curved knife the Hawk had plunged into his gut.

He wondered when the shifter would disembowel them with his talons in his hawk form, as he was fond of doing. Ruhn could imagine it easily: the Hawk perching on his torso and clawing out his organs, pecking at them with that razor-sharp beak. He'd heal, and then the Hawk would begin again. Over and over—

Ruhn had been a fool to think nothing that happened down here could be worse than the years of torture at his father's hands. The burns, the gorsian shackles his father had put him in to keep him from fighting back, keep him from healing—then, at least, he'd developed his own ways of surviving, of recovering. But now there was only pain, then oblivion, then pain again.

Had he died? Or been a whisper away from death, as Vanir could be if the blow wasn't truly fatal? His Fae body would regenerate the organs, even slowed by the gorsian shackles.

Night.

The female voice echoed across the starlit sea. Like a lighthouse shining in the distance.

Night.

Here, there was no escape from her voice. If he roused himself, the pain would wash over the raft and he'd drown in it. So he had no choice but to listen, to drift toward that beacon.

Gods, what did he do to you?

Anger and grief filled the question as it came from all around him, from inside him.

Ruhn managed to say, *Nothing you haven't done a thousand times yourself.*

Then she stood there with him, on his raft. Lidia. Fire streamed off her body, but he could see her perfect face. The most beautiful female he'd ever seen. A flawless mask over a rotted heart.

His enemy. His lover. The soul he'd thought was—

She knelt and extended a hand toward him. *I'm so sorry.*

Ruhn shifted beyond her reach. As much movement as he could manage, even here. Something like agony flashed in her eyes, but she didn't try to touch him again.

He must have been killed today. Or come close to it, if she was here. If he had no defenses left and she'd broken through that mental wall for the first time since he'd learned who she was.

What had they done to Cormac to render him irrevocably dead?

He couldn't stop the memory from flooding him, of sitting beside Cormac in that bar before they went to the Eternal City, of that one moment he thought he'd glimpsed the person his cousin might have been. The friend Cormac might have become, if he hadn't been systematically stripped of kindness by King Morven.

It shouldn't have been a shock to Ruhn, that the two kings had disowned their sons. Though one king had fire in his veins and the other shadows, Einar and Morven were more alike than anyone realized.

Ruhn had always held some scrap of hope that his father saw the Asteri for what they truly were, and that if it ever came down to it, his father would make the right choice. That the orrery in his study, the years spent looking for patterns in light and space . . . that it had meant something larger. That it wasn't simply the idle studying of a bored royal who needed to feel more important in the grand scheme of things than he actually was.

That hope was dead. His father was a spineless fucking coward.

Ruhn, Lidia said, and he hated the sound of his name on her lips. He hated *her*. He turned on his side, putting his back to her.

I understand why you're angry, why you must hate me, she began

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hoarsely. *Ruhn, the . . . the things I've done . . . I need you to understand why I did them. Why I'll keep doing them.*

Save your sob story for someone who gives a shit.

Ruhn, please.

The raft groaned, and he knew she was reaching for him again. But he couldn't bear that touch, the pleading in her voice, the emotion that no one else in the world but him had ever heard from the Hind.

So Ruhn said, *Fuck your excuses.* And rolled off that mental raft to let the sea of pain drown him.