

## Chapter One

Lightning flashed across the black sky, recharging my soul as it illuminated Ayden's earth-brown eyes. Thunder crashed, beating as if it was my own personal drum, the energy beneath my skin alive and thrumming.

"One more kiss and then I really must return to my post," Ayden whispered as he wrapped his arms around my waist and touched his soft, supple lips against mine. In just two short weeks we would be sealing our mating bond, and I could barely believe it. Most days since he proposed were spent in fear that my parents would change their minds about allowing me to mate for love instead of political gain or power.

It was the darkest hour of the night as we stood on the cobblestones outside the palace, our bodies pressed flush against each other as I distracted him from his work. Ayden had completed his guard training the year before at just twenty years old and had been putting in the effort to work his way up the ranks—until I came around and turned his mind to something else.

I sighed and ran my hands down his chest, feeling his lean muscles through his lightweight armor, making my way lower until I found what I was looking for. And squeezed

lightly.

Ayden groaned and spun me around, leaning me up against the warm stone wall next to his recently vacated guard post, and pressed his body flush against mine. I could feel him growing harder through my thin chemise, my cloak long since discarded on the ground.

He lifted my tanned knee and wrapped my leg around his waist, his fingers skimming my body as his hand traveled up my thigh, tingles spreading across my skin in anticipation.

Our lips collided, his tongue seeking entrance before swirling around mine, going through the familiar dance as we had for the past three years since we were eighteen years old and our friendship blossomed into something more.

I'd hardly been able to contain my excitement when he'd finally asked for my hand a few months before. Though my parents had agreed I could mate whom I pleased being that I was the spare child—my two older sisters held the responsibilities of the throne—I assumed their goodwill would wither eventually. So far it hadn't and I didn't intend to push my luck.

I knew the king and queen wished I would set my eyes higher up than a guard, but I wasn't concerned about his station. Ayden was the kindest soul I'd ever met and I'd rather bind myself to him than any political alliance like the others in my Court.

A crack of lightning streaked across the sky as Ayden's hand found my bottom and he rubbed his length against my soft flesh before freezing, removing his lips from mine and lifting his head in confusion.

"What is it?" I whispered, droplets of rain beginning to fall from the clouds above.

"Do you hear that?" Ayden asked, lowering my leg to the floor and looking into the distance, squinting in his attempt to see better in the darkness.

"It's just the storm," I said, pulling his face back to mine, but he refused to budge, his eyes focused on the shadows beside us.

“Listen,” he urged, his brown curls already damp and beginning to plaster to his forehead. “What do you hear?”

I strained my pointed ears and heard faint growling followed by the sound of claws scratching against stone. “It’s probably some sort of animal,” I said, the torches extinguishing from the rain, making it even more difficult to see.

Ayden picked up my cloak and tossed it to me, pulling out a sword from the sheath on his waist as I wrapped the fabric around my shoulders. “Something doesn’t feel right about this. Go back to the palace and I’ll check it out,” he said as he took a step forward.

I snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous. You know I’m not going anywhere, so just hand over a dagger.”

He shook his head in exasperation and pulled out the bronze dagger with a jeweled hilt that I’d bought him for his last birthday. I loved knowing he carried around something from me wherever he went.

The women of the Kalamia were trained in combat alongside the men, so Ayden knew not to argue when I said I was staying. Of the two of us, I was the better fighter, though he didn’t know the full extent of my training. Almost no one did.

I was the Sentinel. The sword of Kalamia, meant to investigate and dispatch any threats to the throne. As the third child of the crown, I was unlikely to become queen, so I’d been given extra lessons in secret in order to prepare me to take up the mantel. I’d only begun my duties last year. Nobody outside of my family had knowledge of my real position.

Once I proved myself as Sentinel, I would be permitted to unveil myself and take over Kalamia’s armies, though that wouldn’t happen for many years. Not that it didn’t stop me from daydreaming about that eventual day. There was no greater honor for me than leading our armies.

The scratching picked up again, claws clacking against the stone walkway which wrapped around the palace, the noise breaking only for the claps of thunder.

Ayden took off, not in the direction of the palace, but toward the strange sounds.

I hurried along the path to catch up with him just as a growl pierced the air. My back stiffened, a chill running down my spine. I fought the instinct to pull Ayden back because I knew that would only distract him, so I adjusted my grip on the dagger and kept my body erect and ready.

I could just make out a blurry shape through the blackness before a streak of lightning erupted, tossing a ray of light over the space before us, both of us letting out simultaneous gasps.

In all my years exploring the deserts of Kalamia, I'd never come across a beast such as the one that stood before us. Thick, black fur coated its enormous body, rippling muscles showing through, giving no doubt to its power.

And there I stood, nearly nude, rain disrupting my vision, without armor or a proper weapon. I couldn't even rely on my power without a trigger. And definitely not during a storm. It was my father who could control lightning, but he was likely fast asleep, the storms giving him the same peace they provided me.

The high fae of Kalamia were able to wield the hotter elements to some extent, but we all need triggers to activate them. I had twin metal grieves for my arms that I clashed together to create sparks that allowed my control over flames, but they were back in my rooms, too far away to be of use. I cursed myself internally for being such a fool, imagining what my trainer would say. Vanner would likely slap me silly if he discovered I'd left the palace in such a state.

Ayden had a very low level of power and the most he could do was warm his body. It

had never mattered to me that he came from a common family before that very moment. Because our people bred for power, the elite were the strongest, the lower-class ending up with much weaker power levels. It had never been important how powerful he was until we stood before a beast even Aish wouldn't allow in her realm.

Ayden swallowed audibly before lifting his sword, which seemed hilariously inadequate to fight the monstrosity that crouched before us, readying itself to strike. I tried to fight the urge to flee— my position as Sentinel gave me the tools to apprehend fae, ones who were large and strong, but this creature was on a wholly different level.

Twin horns adorned either side of the beast's head, gleaming in the soft light as it opened its maw, snarls ripping from between massive fangs. That was the only warning we received before the beast struck.

It jumped straight for Ayden, but Ayden rolled out of the way just in time, leaping up and swinging his sword wildly. His blade connected with the creature's chest, black blood seeping through the gaping wound. The close miss nearly brought me to my knees in fear. No fae that I'd ever encountered had *black* blood. Whatever this abomination was, it certainly wasn't fae. And Ayden couldn't even summon a shield to protect himself. Only the strongest could. My shield would do nothing for him, as it wasn't something I could extend past my own body.

The beast howled in pain, swiping out wildly with a clawed paw.

I tightened my grip on the dagger and moved forward with a jab toward the beast's shoulder, hoping to hit an artery as my heart pounded in my chest. Though if I was being honest with myself, I had absolutely no idea what the anatomy of the creature was. It had black blood, for Aish's sake!

The beast noticed at the last moment, ducking out of the way as my blade soared right

by, missing him by a hairsbreadth. I cursed and fixed my stance, wishing I had something bigger than the dagger, but trying to keep its attention on me instead of Ayden.

The graceful way the beast swerved around and deflected our weapons made me wonder how advanced its thought processes were. It was almost as if the creature could think in a strategic way. If I wasn't out of my mind in fear, I would be impressed with the beast's incredible fighting prowess.

Ayden made contact, his sword slicing off the tip from one of its horns, black blood pouring from the hole in the horn and down its face, a putrid scent assaulting my nostrils.

The beast stumbled, smacking into Ayden and shoving him to the ground as it blindly shook its large head, its maw opening wide.

A high-pitched keening pierced my ears, digging into my skull as I latched onto the sides of my head, my face screwed in agony. My power surged inside me, begging for release, but there would be none. Even if I had my bracers, they would be next to useless in this dratted rain.

The beast swiped out angrily with its paw, not able to see through the blood covering its face as its claws extended, ready for maximum damage.

Ayden wouldn't have time to get out of the way from his position on the floor. Ayden, the boy who'd captured my heart and stood by my side through all of my crazy schemes, was about to be mauled.

I did the only thing I could think to do— I leaped forward, landing between them, my back facing toward the beast, my shield forgotten in my haste. Ayden's eyes looked up at me horrified as he watched the beast's claws swipe across my back, a searing pain burning through my torn flesh.

I fell into Ayden's waiting arms and he dragged me out of harm's way, placing me on

the ground before jumping up and swinging out with his sword.

I twisted around, screaming in agony from the simple movement, and watched in horror as the beast knocked the blade out of Ayden's hands.

It snarled, spittle flying from its angry maw, before extending its claws and sinking them into Ayden's stomach. My breath halted, panic slamming into me as Ayden gurgled, a trickle of blood dripping out of his mouth.

The beast, its claws deep in Ayden's belly, yanked up, tearing through his abdomen all the way to his throat. Ayden dropped to the ground, his body motionless as the sounds of feet pounding along the pavement and weapons unsheathing reached my ears.

My mouth wrenched open, a terrible scream splitting through the darkness as I lay there, unable to move as I watched the life bleed out of Ayden's eyes, his fingers stretched out toward me on the cold, stone ground as the beast slipped away into the shadows.

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