



Chapter Eight

I'm on the shore. In the moonlight, the lake is black. The scars on my wrists have opened again. Darkened blood spills through my fingers. The thread of Leta's magic is still tied to me. Lit up with a pale glow, it stretches away, pulled taut into the darkness. The light stutters, and the magic gives a single, terrible *wrench*.

But everything I saw in the vision made from Arien's sigil has vanished. The shadow-blurred parlour. Leta, sorrow and wonder in her voice when she spoke my name. The heat of her kisses as the spell wove between us.

All that's left behind are my final words, like an echo in the air.

Stay with me.

Beneath my feet, there is a path marked across the ground. It leads into the water. I start to follow.

Distantly, I hear Arien call out to me. 'Rowan, stop! You can't—'

On my wrist, lines spiral out from the sigil. Covering the inside of my arm, the crook of my elbow. Darkness beats alongside my pulse. I can feel how it wants to spread farther. Become an inextricable part of me.

I take another step forward. Stars fill the sky above the lake. Beneath, the water shimmers with their reflected light. A wave crests against my feet.

Arien grabs hold of my arm. He starts to drag me back. My bloodied hand clenches the empty air. I open my mouth to speak, but all that comes out is a snarl.

I struggle, trying to pull free. Arien forces me back, away from the water, as I fight against him. My teeth are bared. My fingers clawed. Poison is in my veins, speared through my heart. His hand locks tighter around my wrist, and he drags me to the edge of the forest. My knees give out, and I sink to the ground.

I try to get back up, but Arien pushes me down. I growl at him. 'Let me *go*. I have to get back to her, Arien. I have to—

' More darkness spirals loose from the sigil. It crosses my palms, bands my fingers. My vision starts to blacken. The ache in my chest is a twisted knife. A familiar *pull*. The same demanding hunger of the Corruption. I am ink and mud and poison.

I'm lost, I'm lost, I'm lost.

Arien shoves his hands against me. Magic rushes out, smokelike, from his palms. A sharp, cold burst of power tears through my chest. I'm stilled for a moment; then I gather

myself. Twist loose from his grasp. I reach for his throat; he clamps his hand around my arm. Anger sets his features. He glares at me with magic-darkened eyes.

His voice turns fierce. 'Rowan. *Don't.*'

Hurried footsteps sound from the trees, followed by a frantic shout. 'Arien!'

A flare of light sparks over us, a sudden flash. Clover rushes across the shore, her eyes lit gold, her expression furious. She grabs my wrist. Her power burns through me. I bite my tongue. Taste fresh blood.

'Enough!' She digs her nails into my arm. 'Rowan, *stop!*'

I stagger back, consumed by heat and brightness. I let out a hiss as Arien pushes me to the ground. Mud seeps through the back of my shirt. Cold against my fevered skin. Arien and Clover lean over me. Their hands are on my chest. Their magic weaves around me, a snare of light and shadow. I arch upward, eyes pinned to the moonlit sky. Blackened water spills from the opened cuts on my arms.

All I can think of is Leta, tied to me still. Leta, in the world Below. The sigil at my wrist gives a final pulse. The last, pale light of the spell-thread fades. But I don't want it gone. Not the spell or the pain or the poison. Once it goes quiet, Leta will be lost, faded into that shadowed dark. I'll never be able to reach her again.

'*No—*' I struggle, trying to get free. 'You can't—'

My voice is raw. I can feel the lake in my lungs. Clover grabs hold of my shirt. Twists the collar tight in her hand.

She drags me toward her. She shoves a vial to my mouth, and bitter liquid pours over my tongue. I choke on the draught, trying to spit it out, but her fingers press against my jaw, forcing me to swallow. The familiar blur of the sedative floods through me.

It works quickly. My limbs go loose, my heartbeat sluggish.

Arien and Clover hold me, trapped, for a moment longer. The feel of their magic against my skin is unbearable. I choke, struggling to breathe. I want to be anywhere else but *here*.

Finally, they release me. I curl forward, gasping. I'm shaking all over, uncontrollable shudders that I can't hold back. Clover puts her hand on my shoulder. Strokes a gentling circle against me. Then she catches hold of my chin. 'Look at me. Are you still *you*?'

I try to focus on her as another shudder tears through me. My skin is sweat streaked, though I am unbearably cold. I glare at Clover and Arien. 'I'm not going to change into a woods wolf and devour everyone.'

Arien raises a brow. 'Aren't you?'

'Not yet.'

Clover shakes her head at us both. She lets me go, then takes a ribbon from her pocket and starts to tie her unbound hair back into a braid. Her cheeks are bright with anger. But when she speaks, she is on the verge of tears.

'This was so completely *reckless*. You could have been hurt, worse than this. You could have—' She cuts off, lips pressed together. Shakes her head when the words don't come.

Arien knots his fingers in the cuff of his shirt. ‘I had to try, Clover. I had to know.’

She stares out at the lake. Blinks rapidly, fighting back tears. ‘I just . . . don’t want to lose you—either of you—as well as Violeta.’

Arien looks at her solemnly. ‘But if there’s a chance that Leta might still be alive, how can we *not* try to find her?’