

## Chapter 2: What Are You?

KIERYGAN'S POV

I yanked the girl's arm away from her face, expecting resistance. There was none. Just the brittle lightness of her bones, the ne tremor wracking her body, and the cold bite of metal pressed into her skin.

My gaze dropped to her wrist.

A band. A bracelet tight against her fragile bones, forged from a mineral I had never seen before.

The metal was pitch black, but it shimmered with an eerie iridescence. Violet. Blue. Crimson. The colors shifted with every movement, like oil refracting light—only darker, deeper, almost alive in its intensity. A slow, pulsing sheen that seemed to drink the torchlight rather than reect it.

I leaned in, frowning.

Encircling the band were small, orb-like crystals, perfectly set, as if grown from the metal itself. Each glowed faintly, their hues swirling like trapped storms: ember-red, lava-orange, and the black of scorched stone. Something about them tugged at memory—familiar, yet twisted. Like the remains of dragonre after it's been corrupted.

I didn't know what this thing was. I knew only that it was not meant as an ornament.

But that isn't my concern right now.

It's the girl crumpled before me, and the question that claws at my mind: how could this frail, trembling creature have played a part in erasing my kind from existence?

I gripped her arm, rm but careful. Any tighter, and her bones might snap like twigs. Her skin was ice-cold, but beneath it, I felt it. A pulse. A hum. Faint, but undeniable.

Magic.

Buried deep. Suppressed. But it was there.

I leaned in closer. "What are you?" I asked, my voice dropping to a low growl.

She didn't answer.

She just trembled, barely breathing, like a leaf caught in a storm that had never passed. Her eyes stayed xed on her knees, as if the ground could shield her from me.

Frustration coiled tight in my gut. "Look at me," I ordered.

I reached for her chin, tilting her face up to me. Forcing her to look.

And then... gods.

Her eyes.

So purple they were nearly luminous, twin galaxies dusted with starlight. Beautiful. Terrible. The kind of eyes that had once looked up at the stars and belonged to something ancient.

A breath caught sharp in my throat; I had to wrestle it back down.

"I asked you a question," I said, slow and deliberate, each syllable laced with heat. "What are you? Are you a witch?"

Still, she said nothing.

She only shrank further into the stone, as if hoping the wall might open and consume her whole. Her silence wasn't deant, it was hollow. The silence of someone long past breaking.

Orryx stepped forward and took the torch from my hand, raising it higher to cast more light on her face. "Maybe she can't speak, Kier," he murmured. "Looks like she's been in this tower too long. Maybe she never learned how, or maybe she's forgotten."

I rose to my full height, eyes scanning her from head to toe. Barefoot. Bruised. Wrapped in what might once have been a dress, now just strips of cloth stained with dried blood and ash. Her hair clung to her face in tangled, matted locks. She looked more like a ghost than a girl. Like something left to rot in the dark, forgotten even by her conspirators.

Could it be...? Could she be an unwilling participant?

The thought cut sharper than expected. Guilt, sharp and sudden, coiled in my chest.

But still, some stubborn, blood-stained part of me whispered: This could be a trick. A disguise. A spell cast to earn my pity. A snare, timed to strike when my guard drops.

"Stand," I commanded, my voice cutting through the cold silence.

She didn't move. She only stared at me, eyes wide, unblinking.

I narrowed my gaze and gestured sharply. "I said, stand."

Still, no response. Was she deaf too?

With a growl of frustration, I crouched and took her arm—not harshly, but rm enough to demand action. Her skin was clammy and cold, bones sharp beneath the grime. I nudged her upward.

Slowly, shakily, she obeyed.

She pushed herself up with the help of the wall, legs trembling beneath her like a newborn fawn. Every movement looked like it cost her.

I sighed, the sound scraping my throat. "I don't have all night," I muttered.

Without warning, I wrapped my arm around her narrow waist and hauled her over my shoulder like a sack of grain. She weighed almost nothing, my sword had more heft. She didn't even struggle. No screaming. No ailing. Nothing.

That stillness unnerved me more than a ght would have.

"Let's move," I barked.

My warriors obeyed at once, fanning forward to clear the way as we exited the cursed tower.

Her hands were cold where they clutched weakly at my elbow. Then, at last, she made a sound.

A whisper, fragile as frost, yet somehow it cut straight through me. "Please," she breathed. "Don't take me outside."

My steps faltered. My grip tightened instinctively around the backs of her knees, anchoring her more securely against me.

"So she speaks," I said, more to myself than anyone else.

I continued forward. The sooner we were out of that cursed tower, the better. But I felt it again—her small, trembling hand sting into my tunic. Tighter this time.

"It will kill me," she said, her voice raspy. Like someone who hadn't spoken in a long time. "The air outside... it will kill me."

The dread in her voice rooted me mid-step. It was pure, guttural fear. I glanced over my shoulder. Her eyes shimmered with panic.

I hesitated, unsure if what she was saying was true. But something told me she'd been fed that lie, probably to keep her here, to stop her from running.

I shifted her higher on my shoulder and resumed walking. She squirmed, not out of deance, but of fear.

It lasted only a heartbeat before she went still, as if surrendering to whatever death she believed waited in the wind.

Outside, snow had begun to fall, quiet and cold against the burning ruins behind us. I set her down gently on her feet. She stumbled, knees buckling in the snow. Her hand ew to her throat.

She was holding her breath. Panic lled her face, eyes clenched shut, as though waiting for her lungs to betray her.

Then, she gasped.

The air rushed in cold, sharp, and clean.

Her mouth fell open in shock as the realization hit: she could breathe it. She's still alive.

I shook my head in disbelief. "Who told you such lies?" I asked.

She looked up at me, and once again, those purple eyes, now lit by lantern lights and the burning remains of the castle, caught me off guard.

She hesitated. "M-mistress," she whispered, the word so faint it nearly vanished between us—as if speaking it aloud might earn her punishment.

I tossed a coat and a pair of boots in front of her. She inched when they hit the ground with a soft thud, then just stared at them.

I clicked my tongue. "Do you want to freeze to death, girl?" I snapped. "Put them on."

She jerked, startled, then scrambled to gather her things. She fumbled with the coat, nearly tangling herself in it before dragging it on, then bent for the boots—lacing them with ngers that moved like she'd never done it before.

With a quiet sigh, I knelt in front of her. "You'll trip like that," I muttered, more to the laces than to her, as I tied them myself.

Once I was done, she straightened, tightening the coat around her and taking a few hesitant steps, as if trying to get used to the weight of the boots on her feet. Both were far too big for her.

They were all I could nd for now. Still, better than the thin rags she'd been wearing, barely shielding her from the cold.

The sound of approaching footsteps made me turn. Orryx stepped out from behind me, followed by another familiar gure.

Callum.

A seasoned werewolf warrior, Callum and his family have served our kingdom since before I could wield a blade. He is loyalty made esh, his instincts rarely wrong. But he's half-wild at the best of times, and his mouth rarely checks in with his brain.

"That's... the witch?" Callum asked, his voice edged with disbelief.

His gaze dragged over the scrawny, dirt-streaked girl huddled before us. His jaw tightened. "Do you still plan on killing her?" he murmured, low enough that only I would hear.

I didn't answer right away.

I could. Maybe I should. It would be justice—clean, nal. The end of the one who helped burn my family, my kind, my kingdom to ashes.

But... did I still want it?

I turned to look at the girl again. She wasn't watching us. She was scanning the world around her. Her gaze darted to the sky, the snow, the scorched ruins. Even with ash on her cheeks and fear in her bones, she looked... awestruck.

As if she were seeing the world for the rst time. Even if it was a world on re, it was still more than what she'd known inside that tower.

I turned back to Callum. "No," I said at last, my voice like steel cooling in the snow. "I'm taking her with us. She may still prove useful."

I glanced at Orryx. "Get my horse. I'm riding."

Flying in dragon form would be faster. Lightning fast. But I couldn't risk it. Not with her. The last thing I needed was to terrify the girl into silence... or worse, madness.