

Chapter 3: Silver Hair, Golden Sparks

KIERYGAN'S POV

Orryx returned moments later, leading my horse, Blizzard, by the reins. The beast was massive. Snow-white, with a mane like silver thread. Just like the girl's hair might have been, had it not hung in dull, oil-heavy tangles from long neglect.

Blizzard's breath fogged in the frozen air as he stepped forward, hooves crunching over ash-dusted snow. The girl, still absorbed in the wonder of the world around her, didn't notice him. Until the horse's breath steamed against her cheek.

She turned... and found herself face to face with a creature she'd never seen before.

With a sharp shriek, she toppled onto her backside, scrambling away as if she'd just encountered a demon rather than a gelding.

Then, suddenly still, she shut her eyes while the horse lowered its head to sniff her. One hand clutched her chest, as if trying to hold her heart in place. The warriors who witnessed it burst into laughter.

I nearly joined them.

But something else caught my eye.

A icker.

No more than a faint shimmer of gold-white light, like lightning behind clouds, crackled across her skin. It arced up her arm, brilliant and alive, before vanishing the instant it reached the black bracelet on her wrist.

The strange metal glinted, absorbing the power like a thirsty thing.

My gaze narrowed.

I would question her later about the bracelet, about who she was, about what the hell she really was. But not now.

Now, we had to move.

The sky was bruising toward dawn, and the longer we lingered, the more time Malric had to regroup. To run. To vanish.

"Callum," I called. "Put her on the horse."

He nodded and stepped toward her, offering a hand. "Come on, girl," the gruff commander said, his voice awkwardly softened. "Up you go."

But she stiffened, dragging herself backward across the snow, her eyes darting towards me as if pleading.

Something in my chest gave way at that. A foolish, fragile thing—but it felt like trust.

I exhaled. "Fine. I'll do it," I muttered, already reaching for her.

She inched at my touch but didn't resist. She was too drained. Frightened. All bones and skin and trembling uncertainty.

I lifted her into the saddle. She sat awkwardly, unsure of where to place her hands, eyes locked on the horse's mane like she expected it to turn on her.

"You'll live," I said atly, swinging up behind her.

My arms caged her in. One hand on the reins, the other steadying her at the waist. She tensed but stayed silent.

Orryx gave a signal, and he and Callum shifted into their wolf forms. Orryx's black as pitch, Callum's a gleaming gray.

The girl gasped as they padded ahead of us, and once more sparks aared along her skin. This time, the energy was sharp and angrier. Fear again. I noted it carefully. The crackle of light appears when she's afraid.

And just like before, the bracelet drank it all down. The gold-white light crackled, climbed her arm... and vanished into the strange black band. I watched it fade, my grip tightening on the reins.

Orryx's black wolf turned to us, golden eyes locking on mine. A silent signal to move. There were no sparks this time, but I still felt her inch before her hand clamped around my arm.

"For someone capable of killing many," I said, "you're awfully jumpy."

Her grip slackened. She turned her head slightly, eyes narrowing.

"What?" she asked, like she hadn't heard me right.

I didn't answer. Instead, I gave Blizzard a light nudge with my heel, and the horse began to move. The girl jolted at the sudden motion, her hand snapping back to my arm in a panic, clinging as if she might fall.

We rode in silence for hours, the sky bleeding from indigo to gold. When we reached the lake, the sun was just beginning to rise above its mirrored surface, casting ripples of light across the still water. Mist clung low over the shore, ghostly and silver.

The girl kept twisting in the saddle, her head turning left and right, taking everything in. The glinting frost on the tree branches. The way sunlight fractured on the surface of the lake like shattered glass. Even the soft crunch of hooves on the frozen earth seemed to mesmerize her.

I caught myself watching her. Part habit, part curiosity. This so-called witch, or whatever she truly was, deed every expectation. Powerless, yet volatile. Fragile, but unpredictable.

Eventually, the wonder faded, replaced by weariness. I felt it happen. The subtle shift in her posture, the soft slump of her shoulders, the way her grip loosened from my arm like sand slipping through her ngers. Her head began to loll forward, sleep overtaking curiosity.

I called for a halt. I could use a moment to rest, too.

We stopped in a small clearing near the lake's edge, the ground rm with frost and scattered pine needles. I dismounted rst, the saddle creaking beneath me. Then I reached up and lifted her down.

She didn't resist. She only blinked slowly, dazed and quiet. She was light in my arms. Too light.

If the wind blew harder, I half-feared she'd vanish with it. Like smoke, or the last breath of a dying re.

"Sit," I said curtly, nodding to a fallen log. She obeyed without a word.

I pulled a small roll of bread from my pack, along with a ask of water, and handed both to her.

She stared at them but didn't move.

I frowned. "Why aren't you eating?"

Her eyes stayed xed on the bread. Quietly, almost too quietly to hear, she said, "I'm not allowed."

That stopped me cold. Someone as starved as she was would have lunged at the bread. But instead, she inched from it, as if it might bite her. And the way she said it, so matter-of-fact, like it was just another rule she'd memorized. It unsettled me.

Rage surged in my chest, sharp, sudden, and blinding. But not at her.

At them. Malric and Morwenna.

A dog in our kingdom would have been treated with more dignity. It disgusted me.

I didn't speak, but the fury must have carved itself into my face, into the way I stood. Too tense, too still. Her eyes lifted warily to meet mine, and I saw it there. Worry. She thought I was angry with her.

"I... I'm sorry," she stammered.

Then, as if to correct some invisible mistake, she tore off a piece of bread and shoved it into her mouth, chewing slowly. She savored it like it might be the last thing she ever tasted. Maybe it was the rst real food she'd had in days.

Or even weeks.

I looked away, jaw clenched, swallowing the heat burning up my throat. When I nally spoke, I made my voice steady. Measured.

"You don't have to apologize," I muttered. "Just... eat."

I sat on the log beside her, though I left a few spaces of air between us—enough to give her the privacy she clearly needed.

Then I saw Orryx across the clearing, waving me over with a sharp nod. I stood, glancing down at her.

"Stay here," I said rmlly. "Don't move."

She paused mid-chew and gave a small nod.

I strode over to Orryx, where he stood near the edge of the trees, scanning the horizon.

"We keep heading west," he said. "But if we're to reach Altierra before sundown, we need to move in an hour."

"Very well," I said with a nod. "Tell the others. Prepare the mounts."

Altierra. My home.

While my re reduced Malric's kingdom to ash, another faction of my men struck Altierra that same night. Cutting down loyalists and reclaiming what was rightfully ours.

I had expected to feel triumph in that victory. But all I felt was a cold knot in my chest that refused to thaw. I didn't know what I'd nd there. But I knew it would remind me of a kingdom I once failed to defend.

Then I heard a scream. High. Sharp. And familiar.

My head snapped toward the sound. The log where I'd left the girl was empty. The unfinished bread lay in the snow, the water spilled. Drag marks streaked the frost-covered earth.

"She was taken," Orryx said, already moving.

We didn't waste a second.

He bolted ahead, shifting into his wolf form mid-stride. I vaulted over the frost-lined brush and shifted in mid-air, wings exploding from my back as I launched skyward in a single beat.

The trees shrank beneath me as I climbed higher, scanning the canopy.

I spotted them right away.

A man—his scent marking him unmistakably as a werewolf—hailed her through the underbrush. She fought back. Scratching, kicking, doing everything she could.

But her body was thin, starved of strength. Frail. There was only so much it could do.

I dove.

The force of my descent bent trees and split branches, a roaring gale tearing through the forest ahead of me. I struck the earth like a meteor, even have diving deep into the wolf's torso. Bones crunched like dry twigs. He didn't even have time to scream.

His body crumpled beneath me.

The girl started screaming again. But not at him. At me.

It was a raw, guttural sound that split the air. Light burst from her skin, crackling like wildre. And then the earth began to tremble.

I swore under my breath and leapt back, slipping behind a tree, out of her line of sight. In one breath, I shifted. My bones twisting, skin reshaping, until I stood human once more.

When I stepped out, she was still on the ground, trembling violently. Her breath came in shallow gasps, her eyes wide and wild. But the moment she saw me, just me, the screaming stopped. The light faded. The trembling earth stilled.

She stared at me like she wasn't sure I was real. Her lips parted, her voice barely audible.

"I—I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to move. I... I didn't... he made me."

Her voice broke on the last words. Her gaze dropped, like even speaking that small truth might earn her punishment.

That obedience again. That fear. It had to be beaten into her over the years, shaped, twisted, until she became this. Another wave of fury surged through me, but I held it down. I didn't respond to her apology.

I just crouched beside her, watching the tremble in her hands, the way she refused to meet my eyes. That cursed bracelet still pulsed faintly, leeching the last sparks from her skin like a parasite.

My voice came low, rough. "You're safe now," I said, offering her my hand. "We're going home."

"Home?" she echoed. Not really a question, more like she was testing the shape of the word on her lips.

I nodded anyway. "Let's go."

Her violet eyes clouded with uncertainty, darting between my face and the hand I held out to her. After a long moment, she released a slow, unsteady breath.

Then, carefully, she placed her hand in mine and let me pull her to her feet.