

## Chapter 4: The Girl with No Name

KIERYGAN'S POV

The girl was asleep in my arms by the time we crossed into Altierra.

Her head rested lightly against my chest, her breath warm and steady, the faintest crease between her brows betraying the unease that never quite left her, even in her sleep. I leaned back slightly in the saddle, adjusting my posture, so her head wouldn't slump forward. She was too fragile already. I wasn't about to let her wake with a crick in her neck on top of everything else.

We rode like that for at least another hour. The rhythm of Orryx's horse ahead of us, the crunch of hooves over frost-hardened ground, the hush of winter air curling through the trees.

Altierra had changed.

The land bore more scars than I remembered. Burned groves, shattered stone markers, whole patches of forest thinned by ash and neglect. But even through the ruins, there were signs of life returning. New thatch roofs on homes long abandoned. Magic-weaved lanterns oating at rest above cleared paths. Smoke curling from chimneys again.

And beyond it all, Solmere.

The capital stood like a silver jewel on the valley's edge, cradled by mist and mountains. And there, still rising, proud and deant, was Drakemont Castle.

My home.

The witches had done well repairing the keep overnight. Vines that once strangled the towers have been hacked away. Shattered stained-glass had been replaced. Not with the original colors, but with new panes that shimmered in unexpected hues, beautiful in their own right. Even the spires that had collapsed under Malric's rule had been rebuilt, their stones still pale and unweathered by time.

As we passed through the gates, she stirred in my arms.

Her eyes uttered open, blinking against the light of the setting sun. Slowly, her gaze swept across the unfamiliar courtyard—the wide paths, the icker of mage-re in the sconces, the snow-dusted gardens just beginning to bloom again from ruin. She said nothing.

"This is home," I murmured.

Her head turned, slowly, taking it all in. The tension in her shoulders returned as her gaze caught on something in the distance—an old, narrow tower that stood slightly apart from the rest of the castle. It was one of the few structures we hadn't restored fully yet.

Her eyes locked onto it. And though she said nothing, I could feel the thought forming in her mind.

She must be thinking she'd been taken from one prison to be thrown into another.

"Don't worry," I said, answering the question she didn't dare voice. "You're not staying there."

Her head snapped toward me, startled.

"You're not going to be locked away," I added, my tone gentling despite myself. "You'll have your own room. A real one."

Still, she didn't answer. But her ngers curled into the fabric of my sleeve, gripping it tight—like a lifeline in unfamiliar waters.

I gestured toward the entrance. "Follow me," I said. "I'll show you your room."

"My... my room?" she echoed, the words fragile. Like she couldn't quite believe them. Like she didn't know what a room of her own meant.

I turned toward the doors. "Yes," I said simply. "Yours."

She followed. Hesitant. Slow. But she followed.

The doors creaked open at our approach, and warmth spilled out to greet us. Golden light from hanging chandeliers, the faint scent of aged wood and lavender oil woven into the stone.

Then, suddenly, people ooded the hall. They were all cheering, celebrating our victory.

I glanced back at the girl still lingering at the threshold. She looked lost. Overwhelmed. Like she wished she could disappear.

Before I could step toward her, a pair of arms wrapped around me. I pulled back slightly to look, though I already knew who it was. Mirael.

She was radiant in a red, glittering gown that clung to every curve. "We made it," she said, her voice bright with triumph, then pressed a slow, lingering kiss to my lips. "We're nally home."

I did not return it, but I did not pull away either.

When she drew back, her eyes swept over my shoulder. The shift in her expression was immediate. "And what, exactly, have you brought with you?"

I shrugged and slipped out of her embrace. "I took her from the tower."

Mirael gasped, disbelief and disapproval danced across her face. Her eyes narrowed as she studied the girl who had her head down, ngers twitching, eyes xed on the oor.

"That... thing," she said slowly, deliberately, raising a freshly painted nail to point, "is the witch?"

"I know," I said, at. "I couldn't believe it either."

I turned to the crowd, offered a brief speech, then reached for the girl's hand before her shaky knees could give out.

I was already guiding her toward the grand staircase when Mirael's voice rang out behind me. "Where are you taking her?" she demanded.

I glanced over my shoulder but didn't fully turn. "Her chambers," I said, my voice clipped.

Eyes followed us, whispers trailing behind. I didn't care. Let them look. I wanted them to see the weapon I held.

We turned down the west wing on the third oor. It's mine alone. No one enters without my leave. Farthest from the great hall. Quiet. Defensible.

I stopped before the room directly opposite mine.

This is where the girl will stay. Close to me. Easier to watch her. The fact that Malric sent a werewolf to retrieve her means she's more valuable than she looks.

And I intend to nd out exactly how much.

She froze as I pushed open the door to her room.

It was spacious, but not ostentatious. Soft stone walls met dark wood beams, warmed by the amber glow of hanging lanterns. Heavy velvet curtains framed tall windows that overlooked the snowy gardens below. A re crackled in the hearth, casting ickering orange light against the high ceiling.

The bed stood at the center of the room. It was large and sturdy, draped in deep blue linen. It offered a quiet, unassuming kind of comfort.

Bookshelves lined one wall, only half-lled, waiting to be claimed. A small table with two chairs rested beside the window. A wardrobe stood slightly ajar, revealing neatly folded clothes with soft fabrics, simple cuts, nothing extravagant. There was a bathroom tucked behind a carved door. Everything she would need. Nothing she would fear.

She stepped in slowly, cautiously, like one wrong move might make it all vanish. She didn't touch anything. She just looked at the re, the bed, the shelves. Then back to me, confusion shadowing her face.

Like she didn't believe this was for her.

I cleared my throat. "It's not much. But if you need anything else, books, warmer clothes, anything... just ask," I said. "I'm right across the hall."

She reached toward the pillow, ngertips hovering as if afraid to disturb it. Then her gaze dropped to her hands, still streaked with soot and dried blood. The moment she saw them, she snatched them behind her back, ashamed.

Silence stretched between us. Then I asked what I should have asked much earlier.

"I never got your name," I said.

She blinked, like the question didn't make sense. "My what?"

I softened my voice. "Your name," I repeated. "What is your name?"

She swallowed hard, voice trembling. "... I don't know."

A low growl threatened in my chest, and I pinched the bridge of my nose to keep it down. "What do you mean, you don't know?" The edge in my tone slipped through despite my effort. "What did they call you?"

Her eyes met mine, hesitant, uncertain. "Girl," she whispered, the word fragile, almost a confession. "They call me... 'Girl.'"

A tight knot coiled in my chest, anger bubbling uncontrollably. Malric. Morwenna. I cursed them both silently for their cruelty. For denying her even the simplest dignity—a name.

"That is not a name," I ground out, teeth clenched.

I must have spoken more sharply than I intended, because her body inched, and her arms instinctively wrapped around herself. An instinctive, defensive gesture, as if bracing for a whip's lash.

I exhaled a long, slow breath, forcing my anger back down. "Alright," I said, my tone softer now but still rm. "I will give you a name. Later."

Another breath. "I'll think of something that suits you."

Of all the tasks waiting for me, naming the girl shouldn't have mattered. I could've given her the rst name that came to mind. But after all this time, after everything, it felt like it should be something tting. Something beautiful. Something she might actually like.

So... later it is.

I summoned two of the castle maids, Emma and Grace. I asked them to help the girl bathe and change into fresh clothes. They curtsied, eyes bright with curiosity but kind, and readily agreed.

I gave the girl one last glance before heading for the door. "When you're ready, come down to dinner," I said. "Emma and Grace will show you the way."

Her eyes widened. "Dinner?" The word came out startled, almost alarmed.

I forced my mouth into something that might pass for a smile. "Yes, dinner. We traveled a long way. You must be starving."

She nodded, though her gaze lingered on me, weighing my words, searching for intent.

I'd nearly crossed the threshold when she spoke again.

"Do you... have a name?"

I looked back.

"Kierygan," I said quietly. "Kierygan Drakemont."