

Bride of the Hollow King

By T.S. Everly

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Chapter 1

The Letter

I woke beneath a canopy of thorns, with the taste of blood on my tongue and the feeling that I had been running from something I could no longer remember.

For several breaths, I did not move. I only lay there in the cold press of dead leaves and damp earth, staring up at the black branches tangled overhead, trying to understand why the forest seemed to be holding itself so utterly still. There were no birds calling from the pale trees, no insects murmuring in the undergrowth, no wind stirring the ragged edges of the gown spread around me like spilled moonlight. Even the thorns above me appeared frozen in place, curved and waiting, as if they had bent close in the dark to watch me wake.

Then pain returned, slow and intimate, unfolding through my body one ache at a time.

It lived in my wrists, where silver marks crossed my skin in delicate, cruel lines; it throbbed at my temple, where dried blood had stiffened in my hair; it burned beneath my ribs with a strange, hollow persistence, not like a wound, but like the echo of something torn out.

I drew a careful breath, and the bodice of my gown tightened. Stiff with beading, it bit into my ribs. I looked down. Torn silk, ruined lace, tiny jet beads sewn in the shape of climbing vines. Once, this dress would have silenced a court. Now, streaked with mud and blood, it was a ghost of itself. It was a bride's dress.

A bride's dress.

But the thought conjured up no memories. No visions of a face, ceremony or a hand reaching for mine. Instead there was only a blank room with no doors, where memory should have been.

I knew I was Shayla Ashbourne. I knew the village of Greymere, where I had been born, and the river that cut through it like a brown ribbon after rain. I knew my father's voice, low and practical, warning me never to bargain with anything beautiful after sunset. I knew the smell of our kitchen in winter, the creak of the stair beneath the third step, the shape of my mother's silver comb, though she had died before I was old enough to wear my hair properly pinned.

I knew all of that with perfect clarity. But why was I dressed for a wedding? And what are these silver burns on my palms and wrists? The past year was a page torn from a book, the story continuing on without it.

Something moved through the trees then, and the sound of it reached me before I could name what it was. Not a footstep. More like the slow drag of something long and unhurried across dead leaves, the kind of sound that belonged to a thing that had never needed to hurry.

I stopped breathing. The forest had already stopped everything else.

My heart was very loud in the silence. And beneath its beating was a quieter certainty, the kind that lives in the stomach rather than the mind. Between the trunks to my left, darkness shifted where there was no cause for shadow, moving through trees that stood white as stripped bone, their high branches laced so tightly together that no sky showed through them at all. Below, a narrow path threaded between their roots, one I had no memory of walking.

The darkness moved again, and without thinking I pushed up onto one elbow, felt pain tear open beneath my ribs, and reached to free the gown from where it had wound itself around my legs. The silk was soaked through and heavy, and when I pulled, a hooked thorn caught the fabric and drew it slowly taut.

Then tighter.

I went still.

It had not snagged me by accident. I felt that with a certainty that turned my skin cold. The thorn had curved through the lace of my skirt like a finger through a ring, holding me in place with a delicate and deliberate pressure.

“No,” I whispered, though I did not know whether I was speaking to the forest, the moving shadow, or the rising panic in my chest.

I struggled against the thorn entangling my gown as darkness unfurled between the trees. Something impossibly tall stood before me, too thin and jointed to have ever been human, its limbs bending with a grace that suggested no bones at all. Its shadowy form had a blurred and unfinished face except for the mouth. That was impossibly clear, curling into a smile that emptied my lungs and rooted my feet to the ground.

Terror seized me before thought could—a tightness in my throat, a quiver in my thighs, a primal command to run. I yanked at my gown; the thorn tore a strip of lace but held fast. The creature cocked its head, as if smelling my fear. Then my hand struck something hidden under the leaves. It was a folded piece of parchment.

The moment I touched it, the thorn released my dress. Clutching the letter to my chest, I scrambled backward as the shadow-creature slithered a black, many-knuckled hand around a tree trunk. The parchment had been sealed with red wax stamped by a black rose encircled with thorns. My pulse quickened - I knew that mark and that I should not be holding anything that bore it.

I opened the letter and recognised the handwriting as unmistakably mine. I held my breath as I read the first line: “I chose to forget.” I blinked and read on: “Don’t let me remember until you understand what the vows truly cost.” Then the final confession: “I loved him enough to destroy us both.”

For a heartbeat, all was silent. The creature lunged. A strangled sound tore from my throat—not a word, just a raw denial. My hand flew up on its own, a desperate shield against the inevitable. A flash of silver light burst from my palm, cold and sharp, like moonlight given an edge as it poured through me and into the forest.

Thorns erupted from the earth in a wave of black vines, ripping soil and twisting skyward with a sound like silk tearing on teeth. They ensnared the creature before it could reach me, coiling around its limbs and throat. It shrieked and thrashed until black blossoms unfurled along the vines, each centre glowing with silver light.

Bound by those living thorns, the creature writhed and howled as they dragged it underground. Silence fell so complete I could hear my own blood pulsing. The silver glow faded from my palm, leaving only ache and the memory of power I did not understand. I sank against a tree, the letter crumpled in my hand.

The forest had obeyed me. The black roses overhead watched with their silver-lit centres, a hundred unblinking eyes. I leaned against the bark, forcing air into my lungs. My name was Shayla Ashbourne. I was in Blackthorn Wood, wearing the ruins of a wedding gown, with a year of my life stolen. And this letter, this warning I'd written to myself, confirmed only one other thing: I had loved him enough to destroy us both.

A distant bell tolled low and resonant, vibrating through the earth and every thorn around me. One toll, then another, then a third. Despite every instinct urging me to flee, I rose. The gown dragged at my legs, but the thorns drew back, creating a path where none had been. Black roses bloomed beneath my hem, petals unfurling in my wake like a funeral procession—or a bride's walk to the altar.

I passed through an arch of thorns and saw it: a palace of black stone rising at the wood's edge, spires twisted by thorny veins, silvered roofs glowing faintly in the grey sky. Bridges arched between towers like ribs, windows gleamed like watchful eyes, and every wall throbbed with living thorns. It was neither beautiful nor terrible, but the shape of a dream on the brink of a nightmare.

From the tallest tower came the bell's next toll. At its sound, a flood of recognition overwhelmed me. I did not remember arriving here, or the man I had loved enough to lose myself. Yet the hollow ache beneath my ribs knew those black towers, and pulled toward them with such longing I nearly fell to my knees.

The letter slipped from my fingers, but a thorn caught it, lifting it back into my hand. I accepted it, too afraid to let it go. Then the wind rose, scented with rain on stone, dying roses, candle smoke, and something darker—warm, masculine, achingly familiar. For a heartbeat, I was elsewhere: his hand at the small of my back, his mouth at my throat, his rough voice whispering, say you choose me. Then the memory vanished, leaving only cold air, the thorns, and the bell tolling for a bride who had forgotten her vows.

I should have fled. My letter had warned me. Yet behind me lurked hungry shadows, and ahead lay the answers I yearned for. Within those thorn-wrapped walls lay the truth of my past self's choices and the name I had sacrificed a year to forget.

Carefully, I folded the parchment and tucked it against my bodice, pressing it close to the hollow beneath my ribs. The thorns parted wider, revealing a moss-speckled path of dark stone. As I stepped onto it, every bell in the Hollow Court rang as one, welcoming me home.

Chapter 2

The Man Who Knew Her Name

The bells did not stop. Their sound rolled from the palace in deep, solemn waves that sank through my skin and into my bones. Each toll was a physical blow, striking some hidden hollow inside me. My hands trembled, the silver marks on my palms burned, and the letter against my bodice felt heavier than parchment, its words gaining a terrible weight now that the Hollow Court had answered them.

The path beneath my feet was made of black stone, slick with moss and scattered with petals that shone like dull silver in the dimness. It had not been there before. I was certain of that. The forest had opened it for me, and the thorns lining either side now bent away from the torn edges of my gown as if afraid to touch me, though out of fear or reverence I could not tell.

The palace waited at the end of the path and it seemed to grow larger with each breath I took. As terrifying as it looked there was still some traitorous part of me that ached at the sight of it.

Fear was a simple command: run. Hide. Heed the warning in my own hand and flee the sound of these bells. But my feet kept moving, drawn forward by a pull beneath my ribs so sharp it was almost painful. It felt as if some invisible thread, tied from my heart to that tallest tower, was slowly being wound tight, leaving me no choice but to follow.

I had taken perhaps twenty steps along the path when the forest changed.

The bells did not stop, but beneath them came another sound: the heavy, rhythmic strike of hooves moving quickly over hard ground. At first, I thought it was another trick of the court, another memory rising through the trees to torment me, but then the sound came again, clearer now, from somewhere deeper within the wood to my right. The thorns in that direction drew back all at once, and through the gap between the white trees came a black horse with silver charms braided through its mane.

The rider wore no helmet and no visible crown, yet the forest bowed to him. But I barely saw it. All I could see was the hard line of his jaw and the severe cut of his mouth. He brought the horse to a halt a few paces away and looked down at me. His gaze wasn't just recognition; it was a burning attraction. It was a physical touch that stripped away the fog of my confusion and left a raw, shocking awareness in its place. The bells didn't just die in my chest; they were silenced by the sudden, frantic beat of my own heart.

I had seen beautiful men before, but the man before me was not beautiful in any way I recognised. He was not merely handsome, not even striking in the manner of a natural disaster or a burning city. Instead, his face had the quality of a mask caught mid-transformation: a profile sharpened by half-remembered cruelty, eyes the colour of old storms, and hair black as wet earth, pulled back from his temples in a way that accentuated the angle of his cheekbones.

He dismounted in one smooth motion. The horse, a vast beast with eyes like obsidian, bowed its head and melted away into the trees as if relieved to leave me alone with its master. He stood over a head taller than me, his form lean and roped with muscle not concealed but emphasised by the cut of his coat. The threads that bound his clothing shimmered faintly, a

colourless iridescence that made the outlines of his limbs seem momentarily uncertain, as if they vibrated between one world and another. He moved closer. The moss and petals beneath his boots did not stir, as if the earth itself knew better than to disturb him.

I had heard stories of the fae courts beyond Blackthorn Wood, of beautiful creatures with old eyes and bargains hidden behind their smiles. Looking at him, I understood at once that the stories had been too gentle. I found myself locked in his gaze, unable even to shiver. I wanted to look away but the compulsion remained, a gravity that insisted on my attention, a summons that would not be denied. The air around him thickened, until I could taste the metal in it, sharp as the scent of blood.

It was not a normal kind of fear that gripped me. It was the kind that brought clarity, not confusion; a kind that allowed me to see every detail of him, every faint scar at his jawline, every impossibly precise thread of silver at his cuffs. He filled the world, even the space behind my eyes. When he spoke, I expected the sound to be velvet, or poison. Instead, he simply stood there silently, watching me as if waiting for me to understand some vital truth.

I had the immediate, certain impression that he was dangerous. My hand flew to my bodice, a foolish, reflexive gesture to shield the letter hidden there. His gaze dropped to my fingers, then lifted back to my face, sharp with knowing. He'd seen the movement, understood it completely.

"My name is Caelan," he said. The words moved through me with deep certainty.

"You know the name," he said.

"No."

"Liar."

"I know the shape of it," I snapped, the words torn from me by a jolt of feeling so intense it was like lightning down my spine. "Not the man."

That hurt him. I saw it in the sudden ice that chased the pain from his eyes. His voice turned formal, each word honed to a killing edge.

"I am Caelan, King of the Hollow Court." The name slid into me, a shard of memory and want. "Lord of the Blackthorn Wood, keeper of the Thorn Throne..."

With every title, the invisible thread tied to my heart pulled tighter, a searing cord of possession. "...and the man you were to marry before you vanished and left my realm to rot."

Chapter 3

The Hollow Court

The palace remembered me. I felt it the moment Caelan led me through the great doors, his hand still closed around mine. The cold air of the forest disappeared behind us, replaced by the scent of stone, old roses and candle smoke. The entrance hall stretched high above my head, its black marble columns wrapped in living thorns, its silver-veined floor faintly pulsing beneath my feet.

I wanted to pull away from him, but I did not. The thorns had quieted when he touched me. The cracks in the path had stopped spreading. Whatever bound me to this place, he was part of it, and I was too scared to ignore it.

A row of tall mirrors lined the walls. At first, they showed only my reflection: a woman in a ruined wedding gown, with blood in her hair and fear she was trying very hard to hide. Caelan stood beside me in dark riding leathers, composed and cold, his hand around mine as if he had every right to hold it.

Then the nearest mirror changed. The hall inside the glass was bright with candlelight. Music played somewhere beyond view, and every thorn-wrapped column was heavy with black and silver flowers. Courtiers lined the room in silk, velvet and jewels, their faces turned toward the centre of the hall. Toward us.

I saw myself as I must have been before everything went wrong. The wedding gown was whole, the silver beadwork catching the candlelight. A crown of blackthorn rested in my hair. My hand was in Caelan's, but I was not trying to pull away from him then. I stood close enough that my shoulder brushed his arm, and when he looked down at me, there was nothing cold in his face.

There was desire and pride, and something more dangerous than both. The mirror clouded before I could look away and I pulled my hand from his.

"You saw that," I said.

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"A memory."

"Mine?"

"The court's."

I looked at the mirror again, but it showed only my pale face and the torn neckline of my gown. "The court has memories?"

His voice was a low murmur that seemed to vibrate right through me. "The court has many things it should not have." He was looking not at the mirror, but at me, his gaze dark with secrets I suddenly found myself desperate to unravel.

That was not an answer, but I was beginning to understand that Caelan gave the truth in pieces, either because he did not trust me or because the full shape of it was worse than I was ready for.

The thorns around the nearest column began to move. They crept downward, their tips turning toward me like seeking needles. I stumbled back, but before I could cry out, Caelan

moved. His arm snaked around my waist, yanking me back against the hard wall of his chest. The thorns froze inches from my face. I was trapped between him and the watching court, his body a solid heat against my back, his breath stirring my hair.

We both looked at the thorns. "I did not do that," I said.

"No," he said. "Not alone."

The answer settled between us, heavy and unwelcome. I could feel the court pressing in, a palpable presence in the walls that seemed to hum with satisfaction at our contact. It knew the space between our bodies, and it wanted that space gone. A part of me recoiled from the pressure, but another, deeper part felt a strange pull toward him, a longing to close the distance the court so clearly despised. I pulled my wrist from his grip, but the motion felt hesitant, a rebellion my body wasn't fully committed to.

The thorns shivered but did not move closer. "You speak as if I am part of this place," I said. "You are."

"I don't remember choosing that."

For a fraction of a second, his expression tightened, the mask of cold composure cracking to reveal a flash of raw hurt so intense it stole my breath. It was gone as quickly as it appeared, but the image was seared into my mind.

"That makes two of us," he bit out, the words laced with a bitterness that told me my absence had been a wound, not just an inconvenience.

Before I could answer, the great doors slammed shut behind us. The sound echoed through the hall. Somewhere deeper in the palace, another door closed, then another, each one farther away than the last. It sounded less like a welcome than a warning.

From the far end of the hall came a growing whisper. Figures stepped from the shadows, their silent confidence that of predators. They were fae. I knew that before anyone told me. Too beautiful, too still, too sharp around the edges of their smiles. They were all unnervingly beautiful, with eyes that held ancient secrets and grace that was not quite human. Yet as they filled the hall, my attention remained tethered to the man beside me.

Among these sharp, glittering creatures, Caelan was the centre of the storm, a darkness and power so absolute that even their immortal beauty paled in comparison. He belonged here, and some treacherous part of me whispered that I belonged with him.

Their clothes were black, silver and deep red. Jewels glittered at their throats. Black roses were pinned to lapels, woven into hair, fastened at wrists with thin chains of silver.

Every face turned toward me. "The missing bride," someone whispered.

"She returned."

"She does not remember."

"She remembers enough to hold his hand."

A few of them laughed softly. Caelan's shadows spread across the floor.

The laughter stopped. He did not raise his voice. "Leave."

No one moved at first. Then a woman in a dark plum gown stepped forward, her silver hair coiled high and her eyes fixed on me with open dislike.

"My king," she said, bowing just enough to be insulting. "Surely we may welcome her home."

Caelan's hand settled on the small of my back, a gesture of possessive ownership for the entire court to see. His touch burned through the ruined silk of my gown. "She is not yours to welcome," he said, his voice soft but carrying a finality that brooked no argument. "She is not yours at all."

"Then she is still yours?"

The question moved through the room with immediate interest.

I felt Caelan's attention shift, though he did not look at me. "Careful, Lady Morwen."

Lady Morwen smiled. "I only wondered whether unfinished vows still count after a bride abandons them."

I should have stayed quiet. I knew that. I was in a strange court, surrounded by creatures who seemed to blame me for a disaster I could not remember causing. But something about being discussed as though I were a broken contract made fear burn into anger.

"I'm standing right here," I said.

The room went still. Caelan's hand shot out, his fingers wrapping around my arm just above the elbow. His grip was a firm, silent command. He didn't look at me, but I felt his touch like a brand. "Shayla," he said, the single word a low vibration against my skin.

I ignored the warning, the heat of his touch, everything. "If Lady Morwen wants to accuse me of something, she can do it to my face."

For the first time since entering the palace, the court looked less certain of me.

Morwen's smile sharpened. "Very well. Did you abandon him willingly, or did you simply grow bored once the crown became inconvenient?"

I had no answer, and the silence stretched, heavy with Morwen's triumph. Shame burned in my throat. Just as I opened my mouth to say something—anything—Caelan stepped in front of me, partially shielding me with his body. He didn't touch me, but I felt the heat of him, a wall of power between me and the hostile court.

Then, he answered for me. His voice dropped, losing all warmth, all inflection. It was the sound of winter, of stones grinding together in the deep earth. "One more word," he said, "and you will spend the next century beneath the lower halls."

The threat wasn't loud, but it filled the hall, a promise of cold, slow eternity that made my own blood run cold. Morwen's smile vanished and the rest of the court lowered their eyes.

I looked at Caelan then and saw something I had not expected. He was not defending me because he trusted me. He was defending me because, whatever I had done, their judgment belonged to him first. That should have offended me but instead it made my pulse quicken.

Caelan held out his hand. "We need to move," he said.

"Do we?"

"The court is listening."

"The court seems to do a lot of that."

His thumb brushed the back of my hand, a fleeting, intimate gesture that sent a shiver through me. His mouth almost softened. "You used to say the same."

The words landed quietly, but they unsettled me more than Morwen's accusation had. They made me imagine another version of myself standing in this hall, speaking too boldly, testing him because I liked the way he looked when challenged.

I placed my hand in his and the thorns above us bloomed silver.

Chapter 4

The Bride's Chamber

Caelan led me away from the entrance hall down a narrow corridor. The black marble gave way to dark stone veined with silver, and the thorns that covered the walls grew thicker here, twisting around sconces and doorframes. Their flowers were closed, though I felt them turn toward us as we passed, toward the place where our hands were joined.

It was hard to ignore his fingers around mine, the cool strength of them, the quiet certainty of his grip. Every time I considered pulling away, the walls seemed to tighten, and every time I let my hand remain in his, the palace settled a little. I couldn't hide the fact that I found his touch steadying.

Behind us, the voices of the court faded, though not entirely. They followed in whispers through the stone, repeating my name bitterly:

"Shayla Ashbourne."

"Bride."

"Betrayer."

"Returned."

Caelan's jaw tightened with every murmur, but he did not turn back. I watched the side of his face as we walked, the sharp line of his cheek, the bruise-dark shadows beneath his eyes, the mouth that knew how to be cruel because it had forgotten how to be anything else.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"To your rooms."

I stopped so abruptly that his hand pulled against mine.

"My rooms?"

He looked back. "Yes."

"I have rooms here."

"You did." An edge of bitterness entered his voice.

"I don't want to go there,"

"No?"

"No."

"Would you prefer the dungeons? They are less comfortable, but if familiarity is not a concern, they may suit your mood."

I glared at him. "Do you speak to everyone this charmingly?"

"Only women who return from the dead in wedding gowns and refuse to answer reasonable questions."

"I have answered your questions. I don't know anything."

"That is not the same as answering."

The corridor shifted before I could reply. A door appeared ahead of us where a moment before there had been only stone and thorns. Black wood emerged from the wall with silver vines carved around the frame and a handle shaped like a rose stem. The palace had decided where we were going, whether I liked it or not.

Caelan noticed my hesitation. "It will not harm you."

“You keep saying things like that as if you know for certain.”

“I know this room.”

“And do I?”

His expression softened a little. “You did.”

I hated that word more every time he used it.

He reached for the handle, then paused and glanced at me. It was the first time since entering the palace that he seemed to consider asking permission rather than taking action and expecting me to follow. The courtesy, small as it was, unsettled me more than his arrogance.

“Open it,” I said.

The room smelled of moonflowers, old paper and something faintly sweet that made my chest ache before I understood why. The scent had faded with time, but it lingered in the curtains, in the carved furniture, in the folded sheets visible through the half-open door of an adjoining bedchamber. It was a lived-in scent, intimate enough to make me feel I had walked in on someone else’s private life, even though that someone had apparently been me.

The chamber was larger than my father’s entire cottage in Greymere. High windows looked out over the inner gardens, though the glass was partly covered by thorns, and the light that entered through them was silver and dim. A writing desk stood near the window with papers arranged in neat, impatient piles. A long dressing table occupied one wall, its mirror covered by a dark cloth. There were shelves filled with books and jars of ink, a low couch upholstered in deep green velvet, a wardrobe carved with roses, and near the hearth, a chair pulled close to another chair as if two people had once sat there often and no one had dared move either of them since.

The fire was unlit, but the room was not cold. Nothing had been stripped away. Nothing had been cleared out. The room had not been preserved like a shrine, exactly. It looked paused, held at the moment before someone expected its owner to return. A ribbon lay across the dressing table. A book rested open on the arm of the couch. A pair of slippers waited beside the bedchamber door, one slightly turned, as if kicked off in haste.

My throat tightened.

“I lived here,” I said.

Caelan remained at the threshold. “Yes.”

“With you?”

His gaze followed mine to the open bedchamber door, and something shuttered in his expression. For a long moment, he said nothing.

“Not officially,” he finally said, the words low and rough.

Heat flooded my face, a traitorous blush that had nothing to do with memory and everything to do with the implication in his voice. My body remembered a life my mind couldn’t grasp—a life where this man had crossed the threshold into my bed. He didn’t look away from my reaction. His eyes darkened, tracking the colour in my cheeks as if he had every right to watch it, to be the cause of it.

I crossed the room because standing still felt dangerous. The desk seemed the safest place to begin. Papers were stacked there in my handwriting, and I braced myself before touching them, half-expecting another violent memory to seize me but none came. There were notes

instead, fragments of court etiquette, lists of names, sketches of flowers, a few lines of what might have been a poem and then had been angrily crossed out.

Near the edge of the desk was a small black book bound in leather. I opened it.

The first pages were ordinary enough. Notes about the palace, observations about the court, a list of foods I liked, with a line beneath it that read, *Caelan pretends not to notice, then has the kitchens send me pear cakes.*

I stared at that sentence for longer than I should have. Caelan had moved into the room, though he kept his distance. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

"That usually means something."

I closed the book slightly to make clear I did not intend to read aloud. "Did you send me pear cakes?"

His face betrayed him for a moment.

"Yes," he said.

"Why?"

"You liked them."

There was no cruelty in the answer, it was just a fact, and for some reason it hurt more than the sharper things he had said. I looked down at the page again and tried to imagine the woman who had written it. She had noticed his small kindnesses and she had trusted them enough to set them down in ink.

"What happened to her?" I asked quietly.

Caelan did not pretend to misunderstand. "I have asked myself that every day for a year."

The honesty settled heavily between us. I turned to another page.

The tone changed. There were fewer observations now and more questions. The handwriting grew tighter, the pressure of the pen deeper. Phrases appeared and reappeared with increasing urgency.

The throne listens when vows are spoken.

Not a blessing. Not a witness. Consumption?

Ask C. what the first bride gave.

Do not ask Veyran directly again.

The final line on the page was underlined so hard the nib had torn the paper.

The throne does not bless vows. It eats them.

The room seemed to grow quieter around those words. I felt Caelan come nearer before I saw him. His presence altered the air, not by magic, but because some buried part of me was aware of him no matter where he stood.

"What did you find?" he asked.

I angled the book toward him without handing it over.

His gaze fell to the page.

For once, he had no immediate answer.

"You knew this?" I asked.

"I knew the throne took power from vows."

"That is not the same thing."

“No.”

“Did you know I was afraid of it?”

His eyes flicked to mine. “You were not easily frightened.”

“That is not an answer either.”

His mouth tightened. “No. I did not know.”

I wanted to believe him. That was inconvenient, because wanting had already proven itself untrustworthy where he was concerned. I looked back at the page and searched for something that might anchor me, something practical.

“Who is Veyran? I wrote that I shouldn’t ask him directly again.”

Caelan’s expression darkened. “Why were you asking him anything?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps because he answered questions without turning every conversation into an accusation.”

His eyes narrowed. “Veyran never answers a question unless the answer profits him.”

“Then maybe you should have told me that before I apparently spent enough time here to make notes.”

“You did not need me to tell you to distrust him.”

“I don’t remember what I needed.”

The words came out sharper than I intended, and they stopped him. His gaze held mine across the little distance between us, and some of the anger left him, leaving something worse. Weariness. Guilt, perhaps. I did not know him well enough to say. I knew only that the sight of it made the ache beneath my ribs stir.

I looked away and continued searching the desk. There was a drawer on the left side, locked. I knew it was locked before I tried it, and I knew where the key was before the thought had fully formed. My hand went to the underside of the desk, fingers finding a small hollow beneath the lip of the wood. A key had been taped there with a strip of black ribbon.

Caelan noticed. “You remembered that.”

“No,” I said, though my voice lacked certainty. “My hand did.”

I unlocked the drawer and looked inside to see a small collection of objects: a broken silver hairpin, a dried black rose, a torn scrap of red fabric, a thin blade with a dark handle, and another folded piece of parchment.

I opened the letter carefully. It had not been written in the same hurried panic as the letter from the forest. The letters were slower, deliberate, each line shaped as though the writer had taken care to remain calm.

If I forget, it is because I chose survival over certainty.

If I return, do not trust the first version of the story.

The king loved me.

The throne wanted me.

Those two truths are not the same.

I read the lines twice before I trusted myself to breathe. Caelan had gone very still.

I did not want to show him the note but it felt cruel keeping that sentence from him when he had spent a year believing the opposite. His face altered when he read it. Whatever he had built inside himself to survive my disappearance, some part of it shifted. His fingers closed

over the edge of the desk, and for a moment he looked less like the Hollow King than a man who had just been given back something broken and did not know whether he was allowed to hold it.

“You wrote this before you vanished,” he said.

“That seems likely.”

“You believed I loved you.”

I folded the note, but the words were already between us, intimate and sharp. “Didn’t you?” His silence was a confession. When I dared to look up, his control had fractured. The anger was still there, a banked fire at the edges of his gaze, but it was swallowed by the raw want I’d seen in the mirrors. He crossed the space between us in two strides.

“Do not speak of her as if she were someone else,” he said, his voice a low growl. His hands came up to frame my face, his thumbs brushing my cheekbones. “You are her.”

His touch was a brand. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think past the heat of his palms against my skin, the nearness of his mouth. For a second, I thought he would kiss me. I think I wanted him to.

Instead, I said, “I don’t remember loving you.”

The words were a bucket of ice. The want in his eyes shuttered, replaced by the familiar coldness. He dropped his hands and stepped back as if burned. The small victory felt hollow.

I turned from the desk and moved to the dressing table. The cloth over the mirror drew my attention with the same pull the palace had held in the forest. I did not touch it immediately. The mirrors in the hall had shown enough.

Caelan followed my gaze. “Leave that covered.”

“Why?”

“Because you covered it.”

Caelan’s hand closed around my wrist before I could pull it down. “Shayla.”

The warning in his voice was real, but so was the fear beneath it, and that made me want the mirror even more.

“What did I see in it?”

“I do not know.”

“Then why are you afraid of it?”

“Because you were.”

I looked at his hand on my wrist. His thumb rested over my pulse, and the pressure of it made my thoughts briefly and embarrassingly uneven. The thorns around the window stirred.

“Let go,” I said.

His eyes lowered to my mouth, and his grip loosened, though he did not release me. “You have no idea what you are asking when you say that.”

The words were quiet enough that they should have been harmless. They were not. They moved through me with an old familiarity, and a memory pressed suddenly against the back of my mind.

My wrist in his hand. Not here. Not like this. A darker room. Candlelight. His fingers pinning my hand above my head, not cruelly, but with a control I had asked him for. My own breath catching, not from fear. His mouth by my ear, asking if I wanted him to let go.

I stepped back, or tried to but the dressing table struck the backs of my thighs. Caelan released me at once and the memory vanished, leaving heat in its place and a silence too thick to ignore.

His face had changed. "You saw something."

"No."

It was a poor lie.

He knew it. I knew it. The palace probably knew it too, because the thorns at the window bloomed all at once, silver-hearted and shameless.

A muscle moved in his cheek. "Do not lie to me about that."

"About what?"

"About wanting me."

The room went utterly still. The directness of it stole the answer from my mouth. A wiser woman would have denied it with enough force to be convincing. I only stood there, pulse racing, caught between the memory of his hand around my wrist and the present fact of him standing close enough that I could see the small scar through his lower lip.

Caelan's voice dropped. "You may hate me. You may fear me. You may have forgotten every vow you ever made in this court. But do not look at me as though I am still welcome in your bed and then pretend you feel nothing."

Anger saved me from the worst of my embarrassment.

"I don't know what I feel."

I looked away first and pulled the cloth from the mirror before either of us could say something. The glass beneath was black. Not clouded. Not dark from lack of light. Black, as if the mirror had been filled from behind with ink. For several seconds, nothing happened and then words appeared but not in silver this time but in red.

ASK HIM WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THE VOWS BEGAN.

The room went cold. Caelan read the words over my shoulder.

"What happened after the vows began?" I asked.

He did not answer. The mirror's surface rippled.

An image formed slowly: a ceremonial chamber beneath a blood-red moon, thorns twisting through the ceiling, candles burning in a circle around two figures. I knew them even before the vision sharpened. Caelan and me.

He wore black and silver, his hair loose, his face unguarded in a way that made my chest hurt. I wore the gown from the forest, whole and shining, and when I looked at him, the love in my own face was so clear that I wanted to turn away. It felt indecent to witness something so private when I could not feel the memory of it properly.

In the mirror, Caelan held out his hand and placed mine in it. The thorns overhead bloomed and the vision trembled.

Then the image changed. The candles went out. Caelan fell to one knee, his hand pressed against his chest. I saw blood on his mouth. I saw myself reaching for him. I saw a man standing at the edge of the circle, face pale, eyes bright with something that was not surprise.

Then I saw the throne. Not in the chamber, and yet somehow beneath it. Behind it. Inside it. A shape of black wood and silver veins, awake in the dark.

The mirror cracked from corner to corner and the vision vanished. I realised I had stopped breathing.

Caelan stood behind me, close but not touching. His hands were fists at his sides.

“Was that man Veyran? Why was he there?” I said.

“He was my advisor. Of course, he was there.”

“That is not what I mean.”

He said nothing.

I turned to face him. “Did he know what the vow would cost?”

Caelan’s silence changed the room more than any answer could have. A knock sounded at the door, and then again, polite and perfectly timed.

Caelan’s expression became composed before he spoke. “Enter.”

The door opened, and the man I had seen in the mirror entered the bride’s chamber as if he had every right to be there. He wore a long coat of pale grey embroidered with black roses, and his golden hair was tied neatly at the nape of his neck. His gaze took in the open drawer, the uncovered mirror, the notes on the desk and the distance between me and Caelan.

Then he smiled.

“Forgive the interruption,” he said. “The court is unsettled by Lady Shayla’s return.”

“I am not sure the court’s feelings are my chief concern,” I said.

His eyes settled on me. “No. I imagine your own are proving demanding enough.”

Caelan moved slightly, not quite stepping in front of me but close enough to remind me that he could. “Why are you here, Veyran?”

Veyran bowed his head. “The lower halls have begun to open.”

I looked between them. “What does that mean?”

Veyran’s smile softened, and I disliked it even more. “It means the Hollow Court is eager to continue what was interrupted.”

The thorns around the window tightened against the glass. Caelan’s voice was very calm. “Leave.”

Veyran did not move at once. His gaze returned to me, and for the first time, something beneath his polite mask showed itself.

“You should rest, my lady,” he said. “Returning from the dead is rarely gentle on the body.”

“I’m not dead.”

“No,” he said. “Not yet.”

Caelan crossed the room so quickly I barely saw him move. One moment Veyran stood by the door, elegant and amused; the next, Caelan had him by the throat and pinned against the wall hard enough to make the thorns above them recoil.

The room went dark at the edges. “Choose your next words carefully,” Caelan said.

Veyran did not struggle. That frightened me more than if he had. His amber eyes flicked to me over Caelan’s shoulder.

“She has been back less than an hour,” he said softly, “and already the court is blooming for you again. How long before you mistake hunger for love a second time?”

Caelan’s grip tightened.

“Caelan,” I said.

He did not look at me. I should have been afraid of the violence in him but I was aware, with unsettling clarity, that the violence had risen because of me. Because Veyran had threatened me. Because whatever Caelan believed I had done, some part of him still moved as if my safety mattered before his pride.

“Let him go,” I said.

A pause. Then Caelan released Veyran and stepped back. Veyran straightened his collar, his composure barely disturbed. “Wise. The court is listening, after all.”

Caelan’s shadows gathered around his feet. “Let it.”

For the first time, Veyran looked genuinely annoyed. He bowed to me, then to Caelan, and left without another word. The door closed behind him with a soft click that felt more threatening than a slam.

For a while, neither of us spoke. I turned back to the mirror. The red words were gone, but a faint crack remained through the centre of the glass.

“What are the lower halls?” I asked.

Caelan did not answer immediately. When he did, his voice was quieter than before.

“The oldest part of the palace.”

“And the throne is there?”

“Yes.”

“Is that where the vows began?”

His gaze met mine in the broken mirror.

“Yes.”

The room felt smaller than it had when I entered.

I looked at the notes on the desk, the locked drawer, the black mirror, the gown waiting somewhere in the wardrobe, the life that had apparently belonged to me and now felt like evidence left by a woman I was not sure I trusted. The woman who had written warnings to herself. The woman who had loved a king. The woman who had chosen to forget him rather than finish what she started.

Caelan watched me through the mirror.

For the first time, I wondered whether he was as trapped by this room as I was.

“You said these were my rooms,” I said.

“They are.”

“Then I’ll stay here tonight.”

His jaw tightened. “No.”

I turned. “No?”

“You are not staying alone.”

The words were a command, and the heat that had quieted between us roared back to life. “I did not invite you to stay with me.”

“I don’t care.” He took a step closer, crowding me back against the desk. The hard edge of it pressed into my spine. “Veyran was in this room. The throne is waking beneath our feet. You are not safe.”

“And you are?” I challenged, tilting my chin up.

A dark smile touched his lips. “No.”

He closed the distance. One hand planted on the desk beside my hip, caging me in. The other came up to my throat, his thumb tracing the frantic pulse there. I expected pressure, a threat, but his touch was shockingly gentle.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Answering a question you asked earlier,” he murmured, his eyes dropping to my mouth.

“You wanted to know if I loved you. Does this feel like love, Shayla?”

His mouth hovered over mine, close enough that I felt the restraint in every breath.

“Tell me no,” he said.

I should have.

Instead, I rose to meet him. It was a kiss born of a year’s worth of anger and grief and want. Suddenly Caelan pulled away and moved to the door, then paused with his hand on the handle.

“Shayla, you did love me.” His voice soft, controlled and devastating.

Then he left me alone in the bride’s chamber, with my old life scattered around me, the mirror cracked at my back, and the throne beneath the palace whispering a vow I no longer remembered making.

Chapter 5

The Lower Halls

For several minutes after Caelan left, I stood exactly still, staring at the closed door and listening for the sound of him beyond it. I could not hear him breathing, could not see his shadow beneath the threshold, but I knew he was there. Somewhere on the other side of the door stood the king who believed I had betrayed him, who had threatened courtiers for speaking my name too freely.

The bride's chamber felt different without him in it. Quieter, perhaps, but the quiet had weight. The thorns at the windows had stopped moving, though their closed flowers remained turned toward the centre of the room, and the cracked mirror above the dressing table reflected nothing but the dark shape of my own body. I looked pale and strange in the ruined gown, with my hair loose around my shoulders and silver scars bright at my wrist. If this room had belonged to me, it belonged to a woman who had known how to hide things. The drawer beneath the desk, the key under the wood, the mirror covered with cloth.

I returned to the desk and opened the little black journal again. The first pages made my chest ache with their carefree details and observations. Pear cakes. Court names. A complaint about the draught in the western gallery. A note that Caelan hated being interrupted while reading, followed by the observation that he only pretended to be annoyed when I did it. I read that line three times, trying to reach whatever feeling had made me write it, but memory stayed just out of reach.

The later pages were harder to read as the handwriting grew tighter.

The Hollow Court feeds on bargains, but the throne feeds on permanence.

A vow is not only spoken here. It is taken.

Ask why no queen has survived the full binding.

Do not let Caelan dismiss this as fear.

That last line stopped me. I traced the words with my fingertip, feeling the groove where the pen had pressed hard into the paper. Do not let Caelan dismiss this as fear. It sounded like irritation. Familiar irritation, even. Not terror of him, exactly, but frustration that he had not listened quickly enough.

On the next page there were names written, each one followed by a date. Most meant nothing to me. *Elarra of the Glass Isles. Maeve Thorneborn. Seris of Alder Mere. Isolde Vale.* Beside each name was the same short note.

Bride. Bound. Gone.

The fifth name was different.

Amara Lorne. Mortal. Refused completion. Died below.

The ink beneath that line had smeared, as if I had touched it before it dried.

A cold feeling moved through me. Mortal. Refused completion. Died below. I looked toward the floor, as though the lower halls might hear me reading about them.

I was reaching for the next page when someone spoke from the other side of the door.

"You have found something." Caelan's voice was low, but the door carried it clearly.

I closed the journal. "Are you listening through the wood?"

“No.”

“Then how did you know?”

A pause. “The room changed.”

I glanced at the thorns. They had not moved as far as I could tell, but the air had become colder. “The room tattles?”

“It reacts.”

“To me?”

“To us.”

I disliked the small emphasis he placed on the word. “Who was Amara Lorne?”

The silence that followed was heavy with the answer he did not want to give.

“Caelan.”

“She was the last mortal woman brought to this court before you.”

“Brought as a bride?”

“Yes.”

“And she died below.”

Another pause. “Yes.”

I looked down at the journal in my hand. The leather cover had warmed beneath my fingers.

“Did you know her?”

“No. She died before I was born.”

“But you knew the story.”

“Everyone knows the story. Most tell it badly.”

“Then tell it properly.”

The handle turned and the door opened only a few inches. Caelan remained outside, visible through the gap, his dark hair loose around his face and his expression set in the guarded calm I had already begun to resent.

His gaze held mine through the narrow opening, a silent question that had nothing to do with entry. “May I come in?”

My cheeks burned, but I refused to look away. “For the purpose of answering my questions.”

“And if I have questions of my own?” he murmured, the sound like a low vibration through the wood.

I swallowed. “Then you may ask them.”

He pushed the door open and stepped inside, closing it so softly the latch barely clicked. But he did not stop there. He crossed the space between us until the toes of his boots nearly touched the hem of my ruined gown, until I had to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. The scent of him—night air and iron and something fiercely alive—wrapped around me. His fingers brushed a loose strand of hair from my face, his touch a spark against my skin.

“This is a dangerous game to play in a room that remembers everything, Shayla.” His thumb traced my jawline, and I forgot how to breathe. For a moment, I thought he would kiss me again. I wanted him to. Then he stepped back, a mask of control settling over his features once more, and the distance he put between us felt like a physical blow.

I held up the journal. “Amara Lorne. Who was she?”

Caelan's expression sobered. "A mortal woman from the northern villages. She was chosen by the court, not by the king."

"Chosen for what?"

"For a binding. The Hollow Court was already weakening then. The old magic had begun to rot in its roots, and the throne wanted a queen with mortal blood. Mortal vows hold differently here. They carry life in a way fae vows do not."

I swallowed. "So, they brought her here and tried to marry her to a king."

"Yes."

"Did she love him?"

"No."

That answer came quickly, and with enough feeling that I wondered which part of the story he hated most.

"She refused at the final binding," he continued. "The throne had already taken the first vows. When she would not complete them, the lower halls opened. The court says she was punished for breaking faith. Your notes seem to suggest you believed something else."

"I wrote 'died below.'"

His eyes lowered to the journal. "Then perhaps you found the older account."

"What older account?"

"There are records beneath the palace. Not the histories shown to the court but other ones."

I stared at him. "And you did not think to mention those?"

"I did not know you had been reading them."

"But you knew they existed."

"Yes."

His mouth tightened. "You had been here for months before you found them. I thought you wanted privacy."

"I was investigating whether the throne intended to eat our vows. Privacy feels like a minor concern."

A shadow crossed his face. "I did not know that was what you were doing."

For a moment neither of us spoke. The anger I had been gathering faltered because, beneath my frustration, I began to fear that I had hidden too much. Perhaps he had trusted me too little. Perhaps both things had been true, and the ruin between us had been built from smaller failures long before anyone bled on parchment.

I opened the journal again, more gently. "There's another line. It says no queen has survived the full binding."

Caelan looked away.

"That part is true, isn't it?"

"It was true."

"Was?"

"You were meant to be different."

"Why?"

His gaze returned to me. "Because I chose you before the throne did."

The words moved through the room and changed it. The thorns near the window loosened. A few silver flowers opened, slow and silent. I hated that the palace made a spectacle of every feeling we tried not to name.

“You chose me,” I said.

“Yes.”

“How?”

His eyes stayed on mine. “In the mortal village near Blackthorn Wood. You were arguing with a merchant who had overcharged a child for bread.”

“That was when you decided to marry me?”

“No. That was when I decided you were trouble.”

Despite everything, a laugh escaped me. It was small, startled, and gone quickly, but it altered his face. For the briefest moment, Caelan looked at me as if he had been waiting a year to hear that sound.

I looked down first. “And after that?”

“After that, you kept appearing where you should not have been. In the old chapel. Near the border stones. At the edge of the wood with a knife you did not know how to use properly.”

“I carried a knife?”

“You carried three. None well.”

“That seems unkind.”

“It was accurate.”

A strange warmth opened in my chest. Not memory, exactly, but the shape of it. I could almost see myself standing before him with a blade in my hand, insisting I knew what I was doing while he watched with infuriating patience.

The floor groaned beneath us.

Caelan moved in a blur, closing the distance between us. His arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me back against his chest as the floor gave another deep groan beneath us. His body was a wall of heat and strength behind me, his hand splayed across my stomach, holding me fast. The sound stopped.

“It’s the bond,” he said, his voice a low rumble against my ear. “It reacts when we are close, when the truth is close.”

I could feel the hard beat of his heart against my back, or perhaps it was my own. My mind screamed at me to pull away, but my body leaned into his touch, starved for a comfort I couldn’t remember. The word ‘bond’ was a cage, but his arms felt like... something else. Something I had chosen. With a strength I didn’t know I possessed, I pushed myself out of his hold. The floor held steady, but I felt like I was falling.

“We need those records,” I said.

“No. You are not going below tonight.”

“Then when? After Veyran has had time to remove whatever he doesn’t want me to see?”

Caelan’s expression darkened. “Veyran cannot enter the lower archives without me.”

“Can you be certain of that?”

He did not answer quickly enough. I closed the journal and tucked it against my chest. “You said the lower halls have begun to open. You said the records are beneath the palace. You said

I found the older account before. If I was afraid enough to tear out my own memory, then whatever I found matters.”

“It matters,” he said. “That does not mean I will hand you to the dark because you have decided patience is inconvenient.”

“I am not asking to be handed anywhere. I am asking you to take me.”

His eyes changed and the words caught up with me a second too late.

Heat rose at once, and this time there was no mistaking the way his gaze dropped to my mouth.

“That is not what I meant,” I said.

“No.”

But his voice had lowered, and the denial did nothing to lessen the sudden pressure in the room. I remembered the mirror in flashes: his hand at my wrist, his mouth near my ear, the way my body had known him before my mind could explain why. Caelan took one deliberate step back, as if distance were a discipline he had to enforce by force of will.

I should have let the distance remain but instead, I stepped after him.

His eyes darkened. “Shayla.”

The warning in my name was soft enough to ignore.

“I don’t know what is memory and what is mine,” I said, hating the tremor in my voice and the way his gaze sharpened at it. “I don’t know whether I want you because she did, or because I do.”

His jaw tightened. “That is exactly why you should not come closer.”

“Then tell me to stop.”

Caelan looked at me for a long moment, and in that silence, I understood that there were versions of him who might have used that invitation against me. The king. The wounded man. The lover who had been left with blood on the floor and no body to bury. But the man in front of me only stood there, breathing carefully, as if the wrong movement might ruin us both.

“I cannot command you away from me,” he said.

His control broke by inches, not all at once. His gaze moved over my face, my mouth, the bare line of my shoulder where the torn gown had slipped, and when he looked back into my eyes there was nothing careless in him.

“Do you want me to touch you?”

The question went through me with more force than any demand could have.

“Yes,” I said.

He crossed the space between us with a restraint that made every step feel deliberate, and when his hands came to my waist, they settled there lightly, waiting.

I lifted my face, and he kissed me. It was not the furious, punishing kiss of earlier. It was slower than that, more dangerous because of its patience. His mouth learned mine as if he had been denied it for so long that taking too much at once might break something. One hand remained at my waist while the other rose to the side of my throat, his thumb resting just beneath my jaw where my pulse betrayed me.

I made some small sound into his mouth, and whatever restraint he had left thinned. He kissed me deeper.

The room seemed to tilt around us. My hands found his shoulders, then the back of his neck, fingers sliding into the dark hair I had apparently once known well enough to grip without hesitation. He drew me closer, and the feel of him against me was so familiar that my body answered before thought could interfere. Heat moved through me, low and insistent, and the hollow beneath my ribs flared as if the broken bond had been waiting for skin, breath, and permission.

Caelan pulled back just enough to look at me.

“Still yes?” he asked. The words were rough.

“Yes.”

His mouth returned to mine, and this time there was nothing gentle in the way I kissed him back. I wanted the memory. I wanted the present. I wanted to know where one ended and the other began, and when his hand slid from my waist to the small of my back, bringing me flush against him, I stopped caring that I did not have an answer.

The backs of my thighs struck the edge of the desk. Papers shifted and something fell to the floor.

Caelan’s hands tightened at my waist, and then I was on the desk, lifted as easily as if my body had always known the path of his hands. He stood between my knees, one hand braced beside me, the other at my hip, and the sight of him there — dark-eyed, breathing hard, beautiful in a way that felt almost cruel — sent a sharp pull of want through me.

He bent his head to my throat. The first touch of his mouth there emptied my thoughts.

I remembered this. Not fully, not as a scene I could hold and examine, but as sensation. The scrape of his breath. The careful pressure of his teeth. The way he paused each time I inhaled too quickly, waiting for me to choose again. I tilted my head back, and his mouth moved lower, to the place where my pulse beat hard beneath my skin.

The thorns at the window bloomed wildly. Silver light spilled through the chamber and Caelan stilled.

I felt him notice the room, the court, the magic gathering around us with too much interest. His forehead rested against my collarbone, and for several breaths he did not move.

“What?” I asked, though I already feared the answer.

“The palace is listening.”

“I don’t care.”

“I do. Not because I don’t want you,” he said, voice low and strained. “That is not the problem.”

“No?”

His mouth twisted, almost pained. “The problem is that I want you badly enough to forget what this place does with wanting.”

The words cut through the heat more effectively than cold water could have. I looked past his shoulder to the thorns at the window, to the silver flowers opening and opening as if they had been invited to feast.

Caelan stepped back, but only after helping me down from the desk, his hands steady at my waist until my feet were on the floor. The absence of him was immediate and frustrating. I hated that he was right. I hated more that he had stopped because he was right.

For a moment, we only stood there, too close, both breathing as if we had run a long way.

"You should sleep," he said at last.

"I don't think sleep is going to help."

"It may keep you from making reckless decisions for several hours."

Suddenly the wardrobe door opened. Not fully. Just a crack. Enough for darkness to show between the carved roses. Enough for a cold breath to move across the chamber and extinguish every candle at once.

Caelan swore under his breath. The wardrobe had not led to another room when I entered. I was certain of that. Now the gap between its doors showed a narrow stone stair descending into blackness. The air that came from it smelled of damp earth, extinguished candles and roses left too long in water.

From below came a whisper.

Shayla.

The voice was not loud but it did not need to be. It spoke from somewhere beneath the floor and inside my bones.

Caelan was in front of me before I took a step. "Do not answer it."

"I wasn't going to."

"You were leaning toward it."

"I was looking."

"You were listening."

That was true, which made me angrier. "It knows my name."

"The palace knows many things."

"Does the throne?"

His face gave me the answer.

The whisper came again, softer this time, almost coaxing.

Bride.

"Fine," he said. "I will go with you and you will stay beside me. You will not touch anything unless I tell you. If you hear your own voice speaking from below, you will not follow it."

I looked at the stairway. "That happens?"

"In the lower halls, things that should not happen have made a habit of happening."

"Comforting."

"I am not trying to comfort you."

"No," I said. "You're trying to frighten me into obedience."

His eyes met mine. "Is it working?"

"Not especially."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "No. It rarely did."

We crossed to the wardrobe together. He did not offer his hand, and I did not ask. The palace seemed to scorn our pride; the stairway yawned, growing deeper. With a sharp exhale, Caelan

held out his hand, his gaze fixed on the abyss.

I placed my palm in his. His fingers closed around mine, calloused and warm, a startling anchor in the cold air. The darkness did not just ease; it recoiled, pulling back from the heat that sparked between our hands. A current ran up my arm, a feeling of rightness that warred with all my fear.

The stairs were narrow. Caelan went first, his grip firm, his thumb stroking slowly over my knuckles with each step down. My shoulder brushed the cold stone, but all I could feel was the burning point of contact where his skin met mine, guiding me into a darkness that felt less like a threat and more like a secret we were about to share.

After the first turning, the sound of the bride's chamber disappeared. After the second, the air changed completely. It was older here. Not merely colder, but older, heavy with magic that had been shut away and left to sour. Silver veins ran through the walls, though they pulsed weakly, and thorn roots pushed through cracks in the stone.

"Were these halls always part of the palace?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Before the court?"

"Before the court had a name."

"And you thought I should sleep upstairs?"

"I still think that."

"You're very committed to being wrong."

He glanced back at me. "You used to say that too."

"You keep telling me things I used to say."

"You keep saying them."

That silenced me for several steps.

At the bottom of the stair, the passage opened into a low hall lined with doors. Some were wooden, swollen with damp. Others were made of iron or bone-white stone. Symbols had been carved above each one, but when I tried to focus on them, my eyes slid away.

Caelan noticed. "Do not read the old marks."

"Why?"

"They read back."

We passed three doors before the first sound came. A woman crying, quiet, exhausted sobs from behind a door of pale wood. My fingers tightened around Caelan's.

"Is someone in there?"

"No."

"You didn't even look."

"Because I know that voice."

I studied his profile. "Who is it?"

"My mother."

He did not slow, and I realised that he had learned how to walk past that door long ago. The crying continued until we turned the corner, then stopped so abruptly that the silence left my skin cold.

"Was she queen?" I asked.

“For seven days.”

“And then?”

“She completed the vows.”

I waited, but he gave no more. His hand had gone rigid around mine. I had many questions, and for once I did not ask them. There were some wounds that would not open cleanly in a corridor beneath a cursed palace.

The archives lay beyond a pair of black doors carved with thorn branches and closed eyes. Caelan placed his free hand against the centre, and the doors opened inward silently.

The room beyond was vast, far larger than anything the passage should have contained. Shelves rose into darkness, packed with ledgers, scrolls, bones etched with writing, jars of sealed ash, and thin silver plates inscribed with names. A long table stood in the centre beneath a chandelier that held no candles. When we entered, pale flames appeared one by one above it.

The light revealed dust, ink, and a red stain on the stone floor. I released Caelan’s hand before I could think better of it and walked toward the table.

The room shuddered and Caelan reached for me again, but I lifted a hand. “Wait.”

The shudder stopped. Not because he touched me. Because I had spoken.

The flames above the table bent toward me.

Caelan came to stand at my side, his expression unreadable. “It remembers you.”

“Everything here seems to.”

“No. This is different.”

The room dissolved into a memory. I was here, in a dark green dress, my hands braced on this very table. Caelan stood before me, so close I could see the flecks of silver in his eyes. We were arguing, our voices low and sharp.

“You knew,” I accused, my hands curling into fists on the wood.

“I knew what I was told,” he shot back, his own hands gripping the lapels of his coat as if to keep from reaching for me.

“You wanted that to be enough.”

His face in the memory was a portrait of anguish. He took a step forward, his hand lifting.

“Shayla.” The way he said my name then... it was the sound of a man watching his world break. It was the sound he’d made the night before, when his mouth had been on my throat.

“No,” I snapped, stepping back from his touch. “Tell me why you didn’t ask.”

The memory shattered on the cruelty in my own voice, leaving the ghost of his touch on my skin.

I gripped the edge of the table. Caelan’s hand hovered near my back but did not touch.

“What did you see?” he asked.

“We fought here.”

“Yes.”

“About the throne.”

His silence confirmed it.

I looked at him, and the anger in the memory had left an echo inside me. “I told you that you failed to ask something.”

His eyes closed briefly. "Yes."

"What?"

Before he could answer, a book slid from one of the shelves and landed on the table with a heavy thud. The cover was black, the title stamped in tarnished silver.

The Mortal Bindings of the Hollow Throne.

Caelan stared at it with such cold hatred that I knew, before opening it, that this was what he had not wanted me to find. He looked broken, stripped of his crown and his composure by the sight of it. I reached out, not to the book, but to him, my fingers finding his wrist.

"Whatever is in here," I said softly, "we face it." His gaze lifted to mine, raw and unguarded. He gave a single, sharp nod. Only then did I open the book.

The pages were thick and uneven, filled with cramped handwriting. The first section listed old vows and the names of those who had spoken them. The second recorded failures. Amara Lorne was there, her name written in the same careful script as in my journal.

Mortal bride refused completion. Throne denied full claim. Vessel expired in lower chamber after separation from king.

I read the line twice.

"Vessel," I said.

Caelan's voice was low. "The old court did not value mortal lives."

"And the current one?"

His gaze remained on the page. "Not enough."

I turned to the next page. There were notes about mortal blood, living vows, the difference between love freely given and loyalty compelled. Some lines had been scratched out. Others were underlined. I understood little of it until I reached a passage written in a different hand.

A mortal bride may strengthen the Hollow Throne only if the king's claim is returned in equal measure. A vow of crown alone will fail. A vow of desire may bind. A vow of love will feed the roots.

The words seemed to darken as I read them.

A vow of love will feed the roots.

My stomach turned. "It needed me to love you."

Caelan said nothing.

"And you knew that?"

"No."

The answer was immediate, sharp and wounded.

He held my gaze. "No, Shayla. I knew the court believed a mortal queen could restore the old magic. I knew vows carried power. I knew the throne had taken from my line for centuries. I did not know it would use your love as the offering."

The room listened. I felt it in the shelves, the flames, the red stain beneath the table. His face had lost all its kingly distance, and what remained was too raw to dismiss.

I looked back at the book because looking at him was becoming impossible.

Below the passage, in handwriting I recognised as my own, a note had been written in the margin.

Then do not let love be the final vow.

My breath caught. Caelan leaned closer, his chest pressing against my back, his breath stirring the hair at my temple. The warmth of him seeped through my dress, making it impossible to think. "You wrote that?" he murmured, his voice rough against my ear. "I... I think so." My own voice was a thread. His hand came to rest on the table next to mine, his fingers brushing my own. A jolt went through me, sharp and deep. I turned my head, my lips parting, and found his face was only inches away. The world narrowed to the stormy grey of his eyes, the hard line of his mouth. He was going to kiss me. The air crackled with it, with the scent of old paper and want.

The book flared with red light. The page beneath our hands did not just shift; it burned with new words, scrawled in blood that turned to ink before our eyes.

Ask what vow he spoke after you fell.

Caelan flinched back as if struck, the spell between us broken. His sudden absence left me cold, my pulse hammering against my ribs not from the book's magic, but from the loss of his.

"What vow did you say?" I asked.

His expression closed.

"Caelan."

"No."

I laughed once, without humour. "You cannot keep doing this."

"I can if the answer will hurt you."

"Everything hurts me. I woke up in a forest wearing a wedding gown and carrying a letter from myself telling me I loved you enough to destroy us both. I am past delicate."

His jaw flexed. "You fell when the first binding took hold. The throne began to draw from you. I tried to stop it."

"How?"

I looked down at the silver scars on my wrist and hand. They no longer seemed random. They looked purposeful.

"And the throne has been waiting ever since," I said.

"Yes."

A sound came from the shelves behind us. Slow clapping.

Veyran stood between two shelves, pale coat untouched by dust, his expression calm. "I wondered how long it would take you to bring her here."

Caelan's shadows spread across the floor. "You cannot enter this room."

"No," Veyran said. "I could not. Not until she opened the way."

I felt the blood leave my face. He smiled at me. "Thank you, my lady."

Caelan moved, but the floor split before he reached him. Not wide, but enough to separate us from Veyran. Cold air rose from the crack, and beneath it came the low, patient sound of something waking.

Veyran looked at Caelan. "You always were too sentimental to rule this court properly."

"And you were always too eager to mistake cruelty for wisdom," Caelan said.

"Cruelty keeps kingdoms alive."

"No. It keeps men like you close to power."

For the first time, Veyran's smile faded.

The book beneath my hand began turning pages on its own, faster and faster until they blurred. Then they stopped near the back, on a page that had been torn halfway from the binding. Only one sentence remained.

If the bride returns and the king still loves her, the throne may yet complete its claim.

The archive doors slammed shut and the pale flames above the table went red.

From somewhere below, deeper than the lower halls, the throne spoke.

Finish.

Chapter 6

The King's Vow

The word moved through the archives without sound.

Finish.

It did not come from any mouth. The word resonated up from the stone beneath my feet, vibrating through my bones until it settled behind my ribs. Caelan stepped in front of me. The movement was instinctive, and that told me more than any declaration could have. Whatever he believed I had done, whatever anger he had nursed for a year in the hollow place I had left behind, his body still chose protection before pride. I hated that some bruised, frightened part of me wanted to lean into it.

Across the split in the floor, Veyran watched us both with impatience.

"The throne is patient," he said. "But patience is not mercy, Shayla. Remember that when you kneel."

"My purpose," I said, "seems to have been badly explained to me."

"You were told enough."

Caelan's shadows gathered at his feet, dark and restless. "Careful."

Veyran looked at him and smiled. "Always so protective. Even now. Even after she left you with a dying court and a half-made vow clawing at your bones."

Caelan did not move, but a brutal stillness fell over him, and I felt it as a sharp, cold pang in my own chest—an echo of the vow still caught between us. The red flames shivered, and the crack in the floor widened as if the palace itself had just drawn a pained breath.

Veyran saw it too. His smile deepened.

"He did not tell you that part, did he?" he asked me. "Of course, he did not. Our king prefers noble omissions. They allow him to feel less dishonest."

I looked at Caelan's back. "What part?"

"Not now," Caelan said.

"That usually means exactly now."

His head turned just enough for me to see the hard line of his profile. "Shayla."

My name in his mouth should not have affected me in that place, with the floor split open and the throne whispering through the walls but it did.

Veyran adjusted one cuff. "When you broke the circle, you did not free him. You only prevented the throne from finishing its meal. Every day since, it has taken a little from him instead."

I went still. Caelan's silence confirmed it before I could bring myself to look at him.

"That is why the court decays," Veyran continued. "That is why the thorns creep through the palace and the lower halls open in their sleep. The throne is starving. The king is paying just enough to keep it alive, and not enough to satisfy it."

I turned toward Caelan. "Is that true?"

He did not answer immediately, and I found that I already knew the shape of the answer. I had seen the bruise-dark hollows beneath his eyes. I had seen the way the palace settled when he touched me, the way

the shadows moved too quickly when his control slipped. He was not only angry. He was being consumed slowly.

“Yes,” he said at last.

One word, and the floor seemed less steady beneath me.

“You let me believe I had only hurt the court.”

His gaze met mine. “Would it have helped you to know you hurt me?”

The question was not cruel, and I had no answer for him.

Veyran’s voice sliced through the silence. “Touching. But your guilt is irrelevant. The throne is hungry, and a debt is owed. The binding must be finished.”

“Why?” I asked.

He tilted his head. “Because without it, the Hollow Court dies.”

“And with it?”

“With it, the court endures.”

“That was not what I asked.”

Veyran’s expression thinned.

I looked back at the book on the table. The torn page still showed the same sentence, its ink dark and wet-looking beneath the red light.

If the bride returns and the king still loves her, the throne may yet complete its claim.

The king still loves her. I did not look at Caelan when I read it again. I could not. The words had already moved too deep, stirring in places where memory should have been and leaving pain in their absence. Love, in this court was a weakness. A thing the throne could use.

“Claim who?” I asked. “Me, or him?”

Veyran smiled again. “Does it matter?”

“Yes,” Caelan said.

His voice had changed. The anger hadn’t left it—it had settled, the way a blade settles when someone finally decides to use it.

Veyran noticed. For the first time since entering the archives, his confidence faltered slightly.

Caelan turned away from him and faced me fully. The red light showed too much of him. The tiredness he had hidden beneath command. The strain at the corners of his mouth. The old hurt that had sharpened into something he could survive carrying. I understood, with sudden and unwelcome clarity, that he had not only believed I abandoned him. He had believed I abandoned him to die a slow death.

“Listen to me,” he said.

“I am listening.”

“No. You are preparing to blame yourself, and I do not have time to drag you out of that particular habit.”

The accuracy of it startled me into silence.

“You did not know the full cost,” he continued. “Neither did I. Whatever you did that night, you did because you believed it would stop the throne from taking you, me, or both of us. You left warnings because you knew someone had lied. Hold on to that, even if you do not yet remember it.”

I swallowed. "You sound very certain for someone who has spent most of the evening accusing me."

His expression tightened. "I had a year to become cruel. I did not have the truth."

The words fell into the space between us, and the chaos of the archives seemed to recede. He was so close now I could feel the heat radiating from his body, see the faint silver threads pulsing at his throat. The air thickened, tasting of magic and old paper and something that was just him. I had the sudden, mad urge to close the distance, to press my palm against his chest and feel if his heart was still beating like a mortal's.

Without thinking, I reached toward him.

He caught my wrist before I could touch him, his grip a sudden heat that stopped my breath. The contact sent a jolt through me, a current of fire and ice that had nothing to do with magic. His thumb traced the scars there, a slow, possessive caress that made the air thicken between us. "Do not pity me," he said, his voice low and rough.

"I wasn't."

"No?"

"I was going to check how badly it had hurt you."

Veyran lifted one hand, and the shelves behind him opened with a long, grinding shudder. Something slid from the darkness between them: a length of silver chain, thin as thread at first, then thickening as it came into the light. It moved with purpose, uncoiling across the floor toward the table.

Caelan pulled me back. The chain struck the place where I had stood a heartbeat before and wrapped around the table leg. The old wood blackened beneath it.

"Enough," Caelan said.

Veyran's composure had returned, but there was anger beneath it now. "I agree."

The chain tightened. The book slammed shut.

A second chain slipped from the shelves. Then a third.

The archives began to change around us. Doors appeared between the bookcases, each opening onto a sliver of the same vision: the ceremonial chamber, but endlessly repeated, each version more decayed than the last.

Caelan's hand left my wrist and settled at the curve of my waist, his fingers splaying wide as he tugged me behind him. The solid heat of his palm burned through my dress. "Stay behind me."

His arm tightened, pulling me flush against his back for a fraction of a second, a possessive anchor in the chaos. The palace reacted instantly with a bloom of silver light along the walls.

Veyran saw it. His gaze sharpened. "There. That is what none of you understand. The court does not need your trust. It does not need her memory. It needs that."

His eyes moved to the place where Caelan held me.

"Enough feeling to feed the roots."

Caelan released me instantly, but the damage was done. The silver light crawled through the shelves and into the floor, filling the crack with a dim, hungry glow. Beneath it, something massive shifted. The throne was not in the room, and yet I felt its attention settle over us with terrible focus.

Finish.

This time, the word came with an image.

Caelan on his knees in the ceremonial chamber, blood on his lips. Myself in the wedding gown, palm cut open, silver scars blazing as I reached toward him. Veyran at the edge of the circle, watching not with surprise but calculation. Behind him, half hidden by shadow, Lady Morwen held a silver bowl filled with dark liquid.

The vision vanished.

I gasped. Caelan turned to me. "What did you see?"

"Morwen was there."

His expression hardened. "No. She was not."

"She was. In the vision. She had a bowl."

Veyran's face changed.

It was quick, but I caught it and so did Caelan.

The grinding of the shelves ceased. The whisper of the flames died. Even the air seemed to hold its breath, thick with what had not been said.

"What bowl?" Caelan asked.

"I don't know. Silver. Dark liquid inside it."

Caelan turned very slowly toward Veyran. "You told me Morwen had been removed before the vows."

"She was," Veyran said.

A memory pressed against the back of my mind, sharper than before. Candlelight. My hand shaking. Morwen's plum-dark sleeve near the edge of the circle. A bitter taste on my tongue. Caelan's fingers brushing my cheek as he asked whether I was afraid. My own voice answering no, though my heart had been racing.

I touched my mouth. "I drank something. Before the vows," I said. "Morwen gave me something."

Veyran's eyes flicked to the crack in the floor, then back to me. "Ceremonial wine. All royal bindings require it."

Caelan's voice dropped. "I did not drink."

"No," Veyran said. "You were never the one who needed softening."

The words had barely left his mouth before Caelan moved. This time the throne did not stop him.

He crossed the broken floor in a rush of shadow, seized Veyran by the front of his coat and drove him back against the shelves. Books rained down. A silver chain snapped upward, but Caelan caught it, and the metal burned his palm with a hiss. He didn't let go. A dark, terrible part of me thrilled at the violence in his grip, at the raw possession in his voice when he demanded, "What did you give her?"

Veyran's breath left him hard, but he smiled through it. "Truth, in a form she could bear."

Caelan slammed him into the shelves again. "What did you give her?"

The silver chain burned brighter around Caelan's hand. I could smell scorched skin.

"Caelan, stop."

He did not hear me, or he heard and could not obey. His shadows had filled the space around him, writhing against the red light, and the silver veins beneath his skin were brighter now. The throne was feeding from his anger. I saw it in the floor, in the shelves, in the flames overhead.

“Caelan.”

I stepped toward him. The journal in my hand snapped open, pages whipping in a wind I could not feel. A familiar line from my research appeared across the paper, a principle I had noted weeks before the wedding.

Root and branch seek balance. Rage invites, sorrow denies.

I did not have time to understand. I crossed the crack and pain flashed up through my feet as if the floor had teeth, but I reached him. Veyran saw me coming and for the first time looked afraid. I placed my hand over Caelan’s burned one, where it gripped the silver chain.

He went still and the shadows dropped. The pain of the chain entered me, hot and bright, but it was nothing to what followed. His grief crashed into me—not a memory but a drowning. I felt the shock of the empty chamber, the sting of a thousand whispering courtiers, the ceaseless drain of the throne. Over it all was the raw, unending sound of his own voice shouting my name into the woods, again and again.

Then one final memory, clearer than the rest. Caelan kneeling beside a pool of my blood in the ceremonial chamber, pressing my torn letter to his chest without knowing what it said because the words had vanished the moment I disappeared.

The pain broke. I stumbled, and his arms were there, catching me and pulling me flush against his chest. The world narrowed to the solid wall of his body, the scent of scorched metal and something that was just him. He breathed my name, a ruined sound against my hair. For a moment, Veyran and the throne ceased to exist; there was only the heat of him, the desperate strength in his grip, and the sudden, impossible thought that I would let this whole kingdom burn to stay in his arms.

“You looked for me,” I said.

His eyes searched my face. “Everywhere.”

Behind him, Veyran moved. I saw the glint of the silver chain too late. It wrapped around my waist and yanked me backward. Caelan caught my hand, but the chain pulled again, dragging me toward one of the open doors between the shelves. Beyond it was the ceremonial chamber, lit by a blood-red moon.

“Let her go,” Caelan snarled.

Veyran stood beside the door, one hand raised, his face pale with effort and fury. “I will not let you destroy our last chance because a mortal girl reminds you of a life you can no longer afford to want.”

The chain tightened around my ribs. Caelan held on to me, but the silver marks on my wrist flared, and his grip slipped an inch. Pain shot through my arm. The throne wanted separation. It wanted fear. It wanted him desperate and me helpless and the old pattern repeated until someone finally surrendered.

A memory opened inside me, sudden and complete. I stood in the ceremonial chamber with the taste of bitter wine on my tongue, listening to the vows being spoken. Caelan’s hand held

mine. His eyes were clear and full of a love so certain it frightened me. Then the throne woke beneath us, and I understood, far too late, that it was not blessing the vow. It was entering it.

I had looked at Veyran and he had smiled. Then I looked at Caelan and realised he did not know.

The memory snapped shut. I stopped fighting the chain.

Caelan's grip tightened. "No."

I met his eyes. "I know why I ran."

"Shayla, do not let go."

"I didn't betray you."

The words changed him. The doubt he had carried like armour cracked across his face, and beneath it was pain, hope, disbelief, all too much to hold at once.

Veyran pulled harder and the door to the ceremonial chamber widened.

"I didn't betray you," I said again, because I needed him to hear it before the throne took whatever it meant to take. "I saved you from finishing a vow that would have taken both of us."

Caelan reached for me with his burned hand, careless of the blood. "Then save me again by staying."

Gods, I wanted to. Not just to stay, but to turn back into his arms, to feel his mouth on mine, to forget the throne and the vows and let him burn away every memory but this one. The desire was so sharp, so absolute, that the throne answered it. The red light swelled around us, a sudden, devouring hunger, and Veyran smiled, seeing it.

I remembered Veyran's words from the vision, his voice a triumphant whisper behind the vows:

Love will feed the roots.

I understood then why I had written the warning. Not because love had been false, but because it had been real enough to be used. So, I did the only thing I could - I let go.

Caelan shouted my name as the chain dragged me through the open door and into the chamber where the vows had begun.

Chapter 7

The Circle Beneath

The chain dragged me into the ceremonial chamber hard enough that my knees struck stone. Pain shot up my legs, sharp and immediate, but it helped. It gave me something real to hold while the chamber arranged itself around me, familiar and wrong at the same time. The blood-red moon hung overhead though we were deep beneath the palace. Its light spilled through the thorn-wrapped ceiling and fell across a floor carved with a circle of silver roots. Candles burned around the edges, each flame red at the core.

I had been here before. The knowledge did not arrive as a vision this time. It settled into me with sick certainty. This was where I had stood in my wedding gown. This was where Caelan had held my hands and looked at me as if the whole rotting court could be remade by the force of what he felt. This was where I had tasted bitter wine and realised too late that the ceremony had been prepared by people who did not care whether we survived it.

The silver chain loosened from my waist and fell away.

I pushed myself upright, one hand pressed against my ribs. The door behind me had vanished. There was only black stone where it had been, though I could hear Caelan somewhere beyond it, his voice muffled by the walls as he called my name.

I went to the stone and struck it with my palm.

“Caelan!”

The chamber answered instead.

Bride.

The word moved through the floor and up through my bones. I gritted my teeth and stepped back from the wall, forcing myself to look at the circle. I understood more now than I had when I first woke in the forest, but understanding had not made the fear smaller.

I understood now that the throne did not want love in the way people meant love. It wanted the power love made when it was trapped. It wanted longing sharpened by separation, guilt made holy by sacrifice, desire forced into vows before either heart could choose clearly.

When Caelan and I touched by choice, the palace quieted. When we began to trust one another, the old magic shifted away from hunger. But when we were torn apart, when one reached desperately for the other, the throne woke eager and bright. It did not want us together, it wanted us bound.

A door opened on the far side of the chamber. Veyran entered first, his pale coat torn at one shoulder and dust in his hair. Lady Morwen followed with a silver bowl in both hands, her plum-coloured gown trailing behind her. She looked as composed as she had in the entrance hall.

“You remember enough, then,” she said.

I touched my tongue to the inside of my mouth. The remembered bitterness returned at once.

“You drugged me.”

Morwen smiled. “Softened you. There is a difference.”

“Not to me.”

“No. Mortals do prefer simple words for useful things.”

I looked at the bowl. The dark liquid inside it gave off no steam, but the air above it trembled.

“You gave that to me before the vows.”

“To make the transition gentler.”

“To make me easier to use.”

Her smile thinned. Veyran stepped beside her, his attention fixed on the silver circle. “You misunderstand the court’s needs because Caelan taught you to think of them as cruelty. The Hollow Court is not a village romance. It is not a cottage with warm bread and pretty feelings. It is an ancient kingdom built on exchange. Power must come from somewhere.”

“And you decided it should come from me.”

“The throne decided that.”

“You helped.”

“Yes,” he said, and for once did not dress the word in apology. “Because a dying court does not survive on sentiment.”

The stone behind me shuddered. Caelan was trying to get through.

Veyran heard it and looked almost pleased. “Good. He is close.”

The chamber warmed at once, the silver roots in the floor brightening. They were reacting to him. I understood the shape of the trap then. The throne had separated us so it could make our reunion desperate enough to use. It wanted him to break into the chamber half-mad with fear. It wanted me frightened enough to reach for him without thinking. It wanted the old vow completed not in trust, but in panic.

The wall shook again. This time a line split through the stone, thin at first, then widening. Shadows poured through it like smoke beneath a door.

Caelan’s voice came clearer. “Shayla, move away.”

I did not. “Do not come in angry.”

The shadows paused. On the other side of the wall, silence fell.

I raised my voice. “That is what it wants. It wants you afraid. It wants you desperate. It wants us to reach for each other before we can think.”

A low sound moved through the chamber. Displeasure. The candles bent toward me with their red hearts burning brighter.

“Very good,” Veyran said quietly. “Unfortunately, knowing the shape of a snare does not always keep one from stepping in it.”

He lifted one hand and the silver circle flared opening pain up across my palm. I gasped and looked down. The old scar had split, not fully, but enough for blood to bead along the line where I had once cut myself. The drops fell to the floor before I could stop them. The silver roots drank them in.

The wall cracked wider and Caelan saw me then through the break in the stone. There was no king in that moment. No Hollow Court, no crown, no careful restraint. There was only the man from the memories, the one who had looked everywhere for me, the one who had offered his life because the throne had reached for mine.

“Do not,” I said, because I saw what the sight of my blood did to him. But the throne saw it too and the crack burst open.

Caelan stepped through, shadows wrapped around him and silver burning beneath the skin at his throat. His burned palm was still bleeding. His eyes found mine first, and the relief in them hit me so hard I nearly moved toward him.

Caelan looked at the circle, then at Veyran, then Morwen. His voice was calm enough to frighten even me. “If you touch her again, there will be nothing left of you for the lower halls to keep.”

Morwen laughed softly. “Still so dramatic, Your Majesty.”

Caelan’s gaze moved to the bowl in her hands. “You poisoned her.”

“Prepared her.”

“You took away her will.”

“No,” Veyran said. “We reduced her fear. There is a difference.”

Morwen tilted the bowl and a single drop of dark liquid fell onto the silver circle.

Memory slammed into me so hard I doubled over. I was back in the ceremony, standing beneath the red moon with Caelan’s hands around mine. The court surrounded us in a half-circle of silk, jewels and sharpened smiles. Veyran stood near the throne’s shadow. Morwen approached with the bowl.

“For courage,” she had said.

I had looked at Caelan.

He had frowned. “Is this necessary?”

“Tradition,” Veyran had answered. “For mortal brides only. The body resists old magic unless invited to receive it.”

Caelan had not liked that. I remembered the pressure of his fingers tightening around mine.

“You do not have to drink,” he had said.

And I had smiled at him. Not because I trusted the court. Because I trusted him, and I mistook that for safety.

“I’m not afraid,” I had told him.

The wine was bitter. I tried not to show it. At first, it only warmed me. Then the edges of the room softened. The candles became brighter. The court’s faces blurred. Caelan remained clear, painfully clear, his eyes on mine as if he could keep me anchored by looking hard enough.

When the vows began, I felt the throne wake beneath us. It slid into the words before I understood what was happening. The vow was not being witnessed. It was being consumed. Each promise Caelan spoke tightened around my ribs. Each answer I gave opened something in me wider. The love I felt for him rose to meet the magic, and the throne reached for it with endless hunger.

The memory broke. I came back to the chamber on my knees, with Caelan crouched in front of me and his hands on my shoulders.

I gripped Caelan’s sleeve and forced myself to stand. He rose with me, keeping one hand at my back. The touch was steady, not possessive. The circle dimmed.

“The throne feeds on forced vows,” I said. My voice shook, but the words were clear. “On fear. On sacrifice. On love twisted into obligation.”

I turned to Veyran. “That’s why you separated us. Not because the throne wants us apart forever. Because panic makes better food.”

For the first time, Veyran looked truly angry. Morwen recovered faster. “You have remembered fragments and mistaken them for wisdom.”

“No,” Caelan said. The word was quiet.

“She is right,” he continued. “When I touched her in anger, the palace opened. When I touched her by choice, it quieted.”

Veyran’s voice sharpened. “A comforting theory.”

Caelan looked down at me. “What did you do last time?”

I closed my eyes, reaching for the final piece of the memory. For a moment there was nothing. Then I felt the black blade in my hand. I saw Caelan on his knees, blood at his mouth, his second vow tearing itself from him as he offered the throne his life for mine. I saw the roots reach for him. I saw myself understand that the throne did not care which of us it took, so long as love delivered the offering.

So, I had cut my palm. Not to finish the vow but to interrupt it. Blood had struck the parchment hidden in my bodice, the letter I had written to myself before entering the chamber. The words had vanished from Caelan’s sight and bound themselves to me instead. I had used my own memory as the price of refusal.

I opened my eyes. “I chose forgetting,” I said. “Not because I wanted to leave you. Because memory held the path back to the vow. If I remembered too soon, the throne could use it to pull me here.”

“No,” Veyran said.

The chamber trembled. Morwen flung the remaining contents of the bowl across the circle.

Caelan pulled me against him as the liquid struck the floor. Dark steam rose, and the old magic surged. The circle came alive, not bright silver now but red, crawling toward our feet.

The throne spoke again.

Vow.

Beside me, Caelan stiffened. His hand tightened around mine, not enough to hurt, but enough for me to know he was fighting something inside himself. The throne wanted his voice. It wanted his vow. If it could not make him afraid, it would try to command.

“Do not speak,” I said.

His jaw clenched.

“Caelan.”

His eyes met mine. They were full of pain, and beneath it, fury at being used again.

I lifted my bleeding hand between us. “Choose me. Not the throne. Not the court. Not a vow. Me.”

Veyran shouted something I did not understand and stepped toward us, but Morwen caught his sleeve. She had seen what I had seen. The circle was weakening again.

Caelan turned my hand over and pressed his mouth to the cut across my palm.

Not as ritual or as claim, but a kiss, warm, deliberate, and entirely his.

The throne recoiled. Every candle in the chamber went out except one.

In the sudden darkness, Caelan's voice was low against my skin. "You."

The word was not a vow, but it broke something all the same. The silver roots beneath the floor cracked and Morwen screamed.

Veyran lunged for the circle, but the chamber tilted beneath him, and he fell to one knee. The silver bowl rolled away from Morwen's hands and struck the edge of the throne's shadow. It split cleanly in two.

A passage opened behind us. Not the one we had entered through. This doorway was narrow, lined with pale flowers instead of thorns, and beyond it I saw stairs leading up into grey light.

"The court is losing hold," Caelan said.

Veyran raised his head, blood at the corner of his mouth and hatred stripped bare across his face. "You think this ends because you found a tender loophole? The throne marked her before she ever loved you."

Caelan's hand tightened around mine. "Move."

But Veyran smiled, and there was victory in it. "Ask her why Blackthorn Wood took her in the first place."

The chamber stilled and I felt Caelan go cold beside me.

Slowly, I looked at him. "What does he mean?"

Caelan did not answer.

The pale doorway began to close.

"Caelan."

His eyes held mine, and the truth there frightened me before he spoke.

"You did not wander into this court by accident," he said.

The stairs behind us narrowed.

Veyran laughed softly from the broken circle.

Caelan pulled me toward the fading doorway. "I will tell you upstairs."

"No more later. Tell me now."

The throne stirred beneath us, sensing the fracture.

Caelan's face tightened with regret. "Your family promised you to the wood before I ever found you."

The doorway closed around us before I could ask what that meant.

Chapter 8

The Promise Before the Wood

The doorway closed around us, and for a moment there was no palace, no chamber, no throne beneath the floor, only grey light.

It wrapped around me with a coldness that felt almost clean after the lower halls. Caelan's hand was locked around mine, his grip tight enough to hurt, but I did not pull away. I could not have if I wanted to. The world was moving too quickly, the stairs beneath us folding upward and sideways until direction lost meaning. The pale flowers along the walls blurred. The air smelled of rain, wet leaves and old stone.

Then we were thrown out of the passage and into a garden. Caelan turned as he fell, taking the impact with his shoulder and keeping one arm around me so I landed half against him instead of the ground. The gesture was so automatic it left no room for thought. He held me, I breathed against him, and for one dangerous second my body forgot the argument waiting between us.

Then his words returned.

Your family promised you to the wood before I ever found you.

I pushed away from him and stood, unsteady on the damp grass.

We were in the inner gardens I had seen from the bride's chamber window, though they looked different from below. The palace rose around us, dark walls and thorn-covered balconies silhouetted against a sky bruised with dawn. Black roses climbed the archways, and pale flowers grew in thick patches along the paths, their petals still closed against the chill.

Caelan rose more slowly. His burned palm was still bleeding, though he seemed less concerned by that than by the expression on my face.

"Explain," I said.

He looked toward the palace, where the thorns had gone still. "Not here."

"No. We are done with not here. We are done with later. You had time to tell me before Veyran used it as a knife."

His jaw tightened. "I was trying to get us out alive."

"And now we are out. So, speak."

A few silver flowers opened along the path between us. Caelan noticed them too, and something in his expression hardened. "Your mother came to Blackthorn Wood when you were a child."

"My mother died when I was young."

"I know."

I folded my arms, tucking my hands against my sides. "What does that mean?"

"There are villages along the edge of the wood that still remember the old bargains. Most pretend they are stories until they need something badly enough."

A cold pressure settled behind my ribs. I thought of my father's cottage in Greymere, of the way the villagers had always avoided the tree line after sunset, of the iron nails above doors and the bowls of salt left on windowsills. I had grown up with those habits. Superstitions, my father had called them, though he had never removed a single nail.

“What did she need?”

Caelan’s eyes held mine. “Your life.”

I shook my head. “No.”

“You were sick.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“You were four years old. Fever. Seizures. The village healer could not help you.”

“No.”

The word was a shield thrown up too late. It wasn’t the facts I denied, but the cage of a story they were building around me. I did not want another piece of my life handed to me, blood-slicked. I wanted one memory, just one, that was mine alone—untouched by thrones, vows, or bargains older than mercy.

“Your mother carried you to the edge of the wood and begged for help,” he said. “The wood answered.”

“The wood.”

“Yes.”

“Not you.”

“No. I was a boy then. I had not yet taken the crown.”

The relief that followed was brief and ugly. It mattered to me, too much, that he had not been the one to claim me. Then the rest of it caught up.

“What did the wood ask for?”

Caelan looked away.

“What did it ask for?”

“You, when you came of age.”

The words settled into the unease I had always felt at the border stones, into the way the trees had seemed to watch me, into my father’s anger whenever I wandered too close to the woods and his fear whenever I asked why. Some part of me had known. Not clearly, not in memory, but in all of that.

“My mother promised me away.”

“She promised the wood a life in exchange for a life.”

“My life.”

“Yes.”

The quiet of his answer was its own kind of blow. I turned from him and walked blindly down the path, needing distance before the pressure in my chest could shatter into sobs.

I reached a fountain choked with black leaves and gripped the stone edge. The water inside was dark, but morning light trembled over its surface. For a moment I saw my reflection: pale, furious, exhausted, with dried blood at my palm and my wedding gown torn at the hem.

“My father knew,” I said.

Caelan came no closer, but I heard him behind me. “Yes.”

My father, with his rough hands and careful silences. My father, who had taught me to mend nets, bargain with merchants, and never walk under blackthorn after dark. My father, who had told me my mother loved me more than breath and had never once said she bought that breath with a debt.

“He let me grow up beside that wood knowing it was waiting for me.”

“He tried to keep you from it.”

“That is not the same as telling me the truth.”

“No.”

The agreement made me angrier. I wanted him to argue, to defend my father—to give me a target for all this hurt. But he simply gave me the truth and left me alone with its weight.

The water in the fountain stirred. An image formed on the surface: a woman kneeling at the edge of Blackthorn Wood with a child bundled in her arms. Her hair was dark, tangled from rain, her face hollowed by fear and exhaustion. I knew her without remembering her. My mother. She held the child so close I could barely see the small flushed face against her breast.

Me.

“I will give anything,” she whispered.

The trees bent toward her.

A voice came from the wood, low and layered, older than any court.

Anything is rarely yours to give.

My mother began to cry. “Please. She is my only child.”

The branches shifted. Thorns gleamed in the rain.

Then give what she will become.

My mother lowered her face to mine. Her grief was terrible, but her hope was worse. I understood her in that moment, and I hated that I did. She had not been thinking of the woman I might become. She had been thinking of the child dying in her arms.

“I promise,” she said.

The image dissolved. I pressed both hands to the fountain, my cut palm stinging against the cold stone.

Caelan spoke behind me. “The bargain should have brought you to the wood when you turned eighteen. But it didn’t.”

“Why?”

“You refused to go quietly.”

A bitter laugh escaped me before I could stop it. “That does sound familiar.”

“You found old charms. Salt, iron, rowan ash. Your father helped for a while, but the debt had already woken. The forest began calling to you. You came to the border stones again and again, trying to understand why you could hear it.”

I remembered then. Not fully, but enough. Standing barefoot on damp grass with my nightdress clinging to my legs. My father’s lantern swinging wildly as he ran toward me. His voice, hoarse with fear, telling me to come away from the trees. My own hand stretched toward the blackthorn branches because someone inside them had been singing my name.

I swallowed hard. “And that is when you found me.”

“Yes.”

I turned. Caelan stood several paces away, dark against the pale garden, his injured hand hanging at his side. His shoulders were set, his jaw tight, and he did not look away from her—the stillness of a man who had decided to take whatever was coming to him.

“Did you know what I was?” I asked.

“At first, no.”

“But later.”

“Yes.”

“When?”

His gaze did not leave mine. “Before I asked you to marry me.”

I stared at him. “You knew I had been promised to the wood, and you married me anyway.”

“I married you because I thought it would protect you.”

“Why?” I exclaimed. “Strategy? Pity? Did you think if the wood already owned me, you might as well use me to save your throne too?”

His expression changed and I realised with small satisfaction that I had hurt him.

“No,” he said.

“No?” I stepped toward him. “You knew I was bound here. You knew what the court wanted. You used every truth you kept from me. How can I believe your love wasn’t just another part of the design?”

Caelan looked down at his burned hand, flexing the fingers once as if testing whether pain still answered. “I tried to send you away.”

A memory flickered. Caelan standing at the border stones in a dark cloak, rain in his hair, telling me to go home. Myself laughing because I thought he was arrogant and impossibly handsome and far too serious.

“You were terrible at it,” I said before I could stop myself.

His mouth curved faintly, but there was no real humour in it. “Yes.”

The memory grew clearer. I had returned the next day with a basket of apples and a knife hidden in my boot. He had known about the knife immediately. I had been furious. He had taken one apple, bitten into it, and told me the blade was badly balanced.

Pain tightened my throat.

“I liked you,” I said.

“Yes.”

“You liked me.”

“Yes.”

The second answer was softer.

The garden settled around us. The flowers along the path opened further, one by one, but this time they did not feel hungry but attentive. Caelan took one step closer, then stopped, letting me decide whether the distance changed.

“I knew the bargain would pull you into the wood eventually,” he said. “I searched for a way to break it. The old records were full of warnings, but one thread ran through them—a mention of a ‘sovereign vow,’ one given freely, that could sometimes challenge an older claim.”

“Marriage.”

“A true binding. Not a court arrangement. Not a bargain. A vow freely given.”

“And the throne twisted it.”

“Yes.”

“Because Veyran and Morwen knew.”

His face hardened. “They knew enough. More than I did.”

The water in the fountain darkened again and this time, the image came without warning.

I stood in this same garden, months earlier, wearing a green dress and a furious expression.

Caelan faced me near the fountain. He looked tired, as if we had been arguing for a long time.

“You should have told me about the bargain the moment you knew,” I said in the memory.

“I was trying to find a way out before I frightened you with a truth I could not yet fix.”

“That was not your choice to make.”

“I know that now.”

“No, Caelan. You know it because I am angry. That is not the same thing.”

The memory shifted. He reached for me, then stopped before touching me. “I love you.”

The woman I had been went very still.

I felt her anger. I felt her wanting. I felt the awful, complicated pain of believing him and not forgiving him at the same time.

“Then trust me with the dark parts,” she said. “Do not only love the woman who laughs in your bed and challenges you in your hall. Love the one who needs the truth before it becomes a trap.”

The image vanished and I found I was crying.

Caelan saw, and the restraint in him nearly cracked. I watched him fight the instinct to come to me, and because he fought it, because he understood now that comfort could not be taken any more than love could, I went to him instead.

“You should have told me,” I said.

“Yes.”

“I need to hear you say it properly.”

He bowed his head. Not as a king. As a man who had failed someone he loved. “I should have told you,” he said. “The moment I knew the bargain touched you, I should have given you the truth and let you decide what to do with it. I told myself I was protecting you, but I was also afraid. Afraid you would run. Afraid you would hate me. Afraid that if I placed the whole shape of the court before you, you would see too clearly what loving me might cost.”

“And I did hate you,” I said.

“Yes.”

“But I still loved you.”

His eyes lifted to mine. The space between us was suddenly charged. “Do not say more than you mean,” he said.

The warning was gentle, and that nearly undid me.

“I don’t know what I mean.”

He closed the distance in a single step. His uninjured hand came up, not to touch me, but to hover an inch from my cheek, trembling with restraint. “Then let this be what you mean,” he whispered, and the sound was rough with everything he had held back.

He leaned in and his mouth found mine. It was not a gentle kiss. It was a claiming, a desperate question, a history of arguments and stolen moments told in the press of his lips. I answered him with the same fire, my hands tangling in his shirt, pulling him closer until there

was no space left for ghosts or bargains. He lifted me onto the stone ledge of the fountain, his body slotting between my legs. The torn fabric of my gown was a useless barrier. He gathered the skirts in one hand, his knuckles brushing the bare skin of my thigh, and the garden, the court, the entire weight of my past fell away. There was only the scrape of his stubble against my neck, the possessive heat of his mouth, and the feeling of being utterly, finally found.

Chapter 9

The Wood's Claim

The moment was broken by a bell ringing deep inside the palace.

Once.

The sound moved through the garden and into the walls. The flowers closed. Caelan turned toward the palace, and every trace of warmth left his face.

“What is that?” I asked.

“The court being summoned.”

“By whom?”

Before he could answer, the windows above us filled with light. Figures appeared behind the glass, dozens of them, their faces turned toward the gardens. Courtiers. Servants. Shadows wearing courtly shapes, all watching us.

Then Lady Morwen's voice spilled from the palace, amplified by old magic and sharpened by triumph.

“By order of the Hollow Court, the mortal bride is named oath-breaker, false queen and danger to the realm.”

Caelan's shadows moved at once. I caught his arm before he could turn toward the doors. “Wait.”

Morwen continued, her voice carrying through every stone. “The king has failed to bind her. He has failed to protect the throne. He has placed mortal sentiment above the survival of his people.”

Veyran spoke next. His voice was measured, each word placed with the care of someone who had never once needed to raise it.

“Until the binding is completed or the bride is surrendered to the wood that first claimed her, the court will withhold allegiance from Caelan of the Hollow Throne.”

The garden dropped into silence.

I looked at Caelan. “Can they do that?”

“Yes.”

“What happens if they withhold allegiance?”

“The court fractures. The houses choose sides. The throne weakens faster.”

“And you?”

He looked toward the watching windows. “I become a king with a crown and no court.”

The palace doors opened at the far end of the garden. Courtiers began to emerge, dressed in black and silver, their faces solemn with judgment. At their centre walked Morwen, perfectly composed, and Veyran, pale and cold-eyed. Between them came four guards carrying a long box of dark wood bound in iron.

Caelan moved slightly in front of me and this time, I let him.

The guards set the box down on the path. Morwen lifted the lid to reveal a gown. Not the ruined wedding dress I wore now. Another one. Older, simpler, made of deep green fabric embroidered with blackthorn branches. At its centre rested a crown of woven wood and iron.

Something felt wrong in my teeth before my mind caught up.

Caelan's voice was low. "No."

Veyran looked at me. "Before she was the bride of the Hollow King, she was the promised child of Blackthorn Wood. If His Majesty refuses to complete the royal binding, the court will honour the older claim."

The crown inside the box shifted and thorns woven through it began to bloom.

Caelan's shadows spread across the path. "You will not touch her."

Morwen smiled. "Then finish the vow."

There it was, the trap made plain. It was a perfect trap laid out on the path. The gown in the box, the watching court. One choice led to the wood, the other back to the unfinished vow. Two paths to the same end: our breaking. The throne was hungry, and it didn't care how it was fed.

I stepped out from behind him. Caelan's hand caught mine. "Shayla."

I looked at the gown. Then at the watching court. Then at Veyran, whose face held the careful patience of a man certain the game was finally within his control.

"You keep offering me to things," I said. I moved forward, our hands still linked. I stood before the box and looked down at the crown my mother's bargain had made for me.

Then I looked at Veyran.

"If the wood has a claim," I said, "then I want to hear it from the wood."

"That is not necessary."

"No. I think it is."

Morwen's smile faded. "The wood does not answer summons."

I touched the bleeding cut across my palm, and felt the garden wind change.

Beyond the palace walls, far past the thorns and black gates, something old turned its attention toward us. The flowers at my feet bent toward the earth.

Caelan's hand tightened around mine, but he did not stop me. I lifted my bloodied palm and spoke to the trees I could not see.

"Blackthorn Wood," I said. "If I was promised to you, come and tell me what you are owed."

For a moment, nothing happened and then every thorn in the Hollow Court bloomed black. The flowers opened without sound, thousands of them at once, spreading across the garden walls, the palace balconies, the windows where the court stood watching. They were not like the silver-hearted blossoms the palace had made before. These were dark all the way through, petals thick and velvet-soft, their centres so deep that looking into them felt like trying to remember something you had never known.

Caelan's hand remained around mine. His grip tightened once, then eased, as if he had reminded himself that holding me too hard would not save me.

The air changed first. The palace had always smelled of roses, stone and old magic. Now the scent of rain-soaked earth pushed through it. Leaves. Moss. Bark split by weather. A forest floor after a storm. The smell belonged to the mortal world and to something older than any mortal thing.

Beyond the open palace doors, the path darkened. Roots broke through the marble. They came slowly at first, thin black threads pushing between the stones. Then thicker roots

followed, twisting over the path, around the iron-bound box, beneath the feet of the guards who tried too late to step away. One cried out as a root curled around his ankle. It did not hurt him. It only held him still.

Caelan's shadows moved in answer, not attacking, but watching the roots with the same wary intelligence.

Morwen recovered first. "This is forbidden," she said.

The roots stopped moving. For one breath, I thought the wood had listened to her. Then every black flower in the garden turned toward Morwen and she fell silent. A voice came through the walls.

Forbidden by whom?

It was not loud. The words entered the garden from every direction, deep and layered, carrying the scrape of branches and the quiet of buried seeds. I had heard that voice in the fountain vision when my mother knelt at the edge of the trees with me dying in her arms. Hearing it now, awake and near, I felt something in my chest push outward, like a seed splitting its casing before the root knows where to go.

Veyran bowed. The movement was smooth, but not graceful enough to hide his fear. "Ancient one."

The flowers turned toward him next.

False steward.

A murmur moved through the court. Veyran's face tightened.

Caelan looked sharply at him. "False?"

Veyran ignored him, though a muscle worked in his jaw. "The Hollow Court recognises the old bargain. We seek only to honour what was promised."

No, said the wood.

The single word entered the garden and ended the murmuring at once.

I felt Caelan go still beside me. Veyran's composure flickered. "The mother promised the child and the father gave his silence."

The mother begged.

The roots around the box tightened. The green gown shifted inside it, its embroidered blackthorn branches stirring as though caught in a wind.

A mortal promise made in terror is not a feast. It is a wound.

The words struck through the garden. I looked down at my bloodied palm, the sting a sharp echo of the past. My mother's face in the fountain—her grief, her desperation—rose in my mind. For months, I had held onto a simple hatred for the woman who bargained me away. Part of me still clung to it. But the wood's voice held no judgment, only a deep, ancient pity. It spoke of her not as a seller, but as a suppliant, a woman whose wound was deep enough to be heard.

I swallowed. "Then what do you want from me?"

Caelan turned his head toward me, but he did not interrupt.

The flowers shifted again. This time, they faced me.

What was promised.

My throat went dry. Veyran smiled faintly, recovering some fragment of confidence. "There. You see?"

The roots struck him. They did not pierce his skin. They wrapped around his wrists and throat, dragging him one step forward before stopping. He kept his feet, but barely.

Not ownership, said the wood. Return.

I did not understand. "Return what?"

The answer came in images, not words.

The garden vanished around me, though my body remained standing in it. I saw Blackthorn Wood at night, trees bowed beneath silver rain. I saw my mother laying me on a bed of moss, her hands shaking as she pressed kisses to my fevered face. I saw roots lift around me, not to claim, but to cradle. Green light moved beneath my skin. My small body arched with pain, then settled. Breath entered me again.

Then the image changed. Something came out of the wood and entered me. Not a spirit. Not a soul. A seed of old magic, dark and living, placed behind my heart to keep it beating. It did not own me, but it was part of me. It had grown as I grew, quiet under my skin. When I crossed into the Hollow Court, the throne had sensed it and reached for it.

The floor was under my feet again, and the room was too bright. Caelan's arm circled my waist, pulling me back against the hard lines of his chest. His heat soaked through my gown, a grounding anchor in the dizzying revelation. His voice was a low murmur meant only for me, his breath warm against my temple.

"What did it show you?" I leaned into his strength, looking up at him. The truth felt too large to say, but the solid reality of his body against mine made it possible to breathe.

"The wood didn't ask for me because it wanted a bride."

The black flowers opened wider.

"It put something in me."

Caelan's face changed. "What?"

"A seed. Magic. Life. I don't know."

Veyran's eyes sharpened. Caelan noticed both reactions, and his voice dropped. "You knew."

Veyran did not answer.

Caelan's shadows spread across the path. "You knew what she carried."

"The court suspected," Veyran said.

"The court," I said, "or you?"

His gaze moved to me. "You have no idea what lives in you."

"Then explain it."

The roots tightened and the wood spoke again.

The Hollow Throne stole from the root. It drank what was not offered.

I saw again the binding circle, felt the throne waking beneath us. It hadn't just been reaching for my love, but for what lay beneath it. The wood's magic. Love was the key Veyran had used to unlock the way. My mortality wasn't the prize; it was the vessel for something older and more powerful than their rotting throne. That was why they needed me.

I looked at Caelan. "Did you know?"

"No."

He answered before the question had finished, and I believed him. Not because belief was easy, but because the wood did not correct him. The flowers remained still.

Caelan seemed to understand that too. Some of the tension left his face, replaced by something colder as he turned to Veyran.

“You brought her to the throne because of the seed.”

Veyran lifted his chin as much as the roots allowed. “I brought the Hollow Court a chance to survive.”

“You let me believe marriage could protect her.”

“It could have.”

“No,” I said.

The shape of the trap resolved in my mind. Caelan, thinking a stronger vow could save me. Veyran, letting him believe it, leading me to the circle like a lamb. It wasn’t enough to have my body; the throne needed my heart, willingly opened by love. It needed Caelan’s vow to be the final lock in a cage built around the seed inside me. The cruelty of it was breathtaking.

“You needed me to love him,” I said to Veyran. “Not because the throne cared about romance or marriage, but because love made the seed reachable.”

The garden went quiet and Morwen looked away which was answer enough.

Caelan’s expression became so still that I feared it more than rage. “You used me.”

Veyran laughed once, softly. “Everyone used everyone. That is what courts are.”

“No,” Caelan said. “That is what you made mine.”

The black flowers bent toward him, and for one moment I thought the wood might let him kill Veyran then and there. Part of me wanted it. A larger part knew vengeance would only give the throne another open door.

I laid my hand over his forearm, my fingers spreading to feel the taut muscle beneath his sleeve. It wasn’t a plea, but a claim. I felt the change in him instantly—a current of rage that ran from his skin into mine, then quieted under my touch. His shadows, which had risen like hackles, settled back around his feet, obedient not to his command, but to mine.

Veyran saw the gesture and, even bound, found enough spite to smile. “Still choosing him. After all this.”

“I am choosing not to become you.”

The wood’s roots released the guards. They stumbled back, gasping, but the roots around Veyran remained. Another root curled around the iron-bound box and lifted the green gown from inside it. The crown rose after it.

I stepped back before I could stop myself and Caelan moved with me.

The gown floated in the air between us and the court. It was beautiful, I saw that now. It looked like something a girl might wear at midsummer in an old village, if that village still left offerings at the edge of the trees and believed the forest listened.

The crown turned slowly. Blackthorn, iron, and small white flowers hidden among the thorns.

The wood spoke.

Return the seed, and the bargain ends.

My hand went to my chest.

Caelan's voice turned sharp. "No."

I looked at him. He was staring at the crown, his face stripped of colour. "No."

"What happens if I return it?" I asked.

Caelan's eyes snapped to mine. "You do not ask that."

"I need to know."

"You heard what it said. It kept you alive."

I pressed my hand harder against my chest, as if I might feel the seed beneath my ribs. I felt only my heartbeat, too fast and too human.

The wood answered at last.

What was given may be given back. What grew from it remains uncertain.

"That is not an answer," Caelan said.

It is the only honest one.

Veyran seized the silence. "If she returns the seed, the throne dies faster. The court collapses. The old houses turn on one another before the next moon."

"Still worried about the court," I said.

"Someone must be."

"No. You are worried about losing the thing you have spent years trying to control."

Morwen stepped forward. The black flowers turned toward her again, but she did not stop. There was fear in her face now, yet something else too. Desperation.

"You think him cruel," she said, nodding toward Veyran. "You think me worse. Perhaps we are. But you have walked these halls for less than a day with your memory broken and your king at your side. You have not heard children crying in the east wing because their shadows are being eaten. You have not watched servants vanish when the lower halls open. I have. Every morning I count who is still here and every morning the number is smaller."

Caelan's mouth tightened. "You held nothing together. You fed the rot."

"We delayed it."

"At her expense."

"At everyone's expense," Morwen snapped. "That is what rule costs."

The words struck harder than I wanted them to. I tried to hold onto my anger, but the image of a child crying for its shadow pushed through. Morwen and Veyran were monsters. But this palace held more than just them. Servants, courtiers, children... people who hadn't built a trap around my heart. If the throne died, did they die with it?

Caelan saw the thought in my face.

"No," he said quietly.

"You don't know what I was thinking."

"I do."

I turned back to the wood. "If I return the seed, does the Hollow Court die?"

The roots shifted.

The throne dies. The court changes.

Veyran gave a sharp laugh. "Convenient wording."

The flowers tightened and the wood continued.

The throne is not the court. The crown is not the land. The root remembers what the palace forgot.

Caelan went very still.

I looked at him. "What does that mean?"

He did not answer but Morwen did.

"It means treason," she said.

Caelan's eyes remained fixed on the black flowers. "It means there was a court before the throne."

The garden listened.

His voice lowered, not in fear now, but in recognition. "The first Hollow rulers did not sit above the root. They served it."

The roots beneath the marble pulsed once as Veyran swore under his breath.

I looked from the pulsing roots to Veyran's rigid face. He was staring at the throne's work with a kind of desperate ownership. This throne hadn't always been the heart of their court; it had made itself the heart, feeding on vows and brides and fear. Veyran wanted to preserve the monster because he understood how to use its cage.

But the wood was offering something else, a different kind of ruin.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked the wood.

Caelan looked at me as if the question itself wounded him.

Choose.

I almost laughed. Of course. After all the bargains made over my body, after every man and monster who had tried to decide whether I should be bride, vessel, queen, debt or sacrifice, the wood had finally offered one thing no one else had – a choice.

I looked at the hovering crown. Returning the seed felt like returning my own breath—I might not survive it. But keeping it meant the throne would never stop reaching. Completing the binding with Caelan would save the court only to feed our love to the rot. And if we did nothing? I could already see Veyran turning the houses against each other as the palace devoured itself from below.

There was no clean path. I turned to Caelan. "If the throne dies, what happens to you?"

His eyes searched mine. "I do not know."

"Because of your vow?"

"Yes."

"The one caught in the roots."

"Yes."

I nodded, slowly. "Then we need to free you before I decide what to do with the seed."

Caelan stared at me. "Shayla."

I lifted my chin. "No more choices made in panic. No more vows under threat. No more deciding while someone has a knife at one of our throats."

The black flowers opened wider. The wood approved, or at least it did not object.

Veyran's voice went cold. "You cannot free him without entering the throne's root."

"Then that is where we go."

Caelan stepped closer. "You are not walking into the heart of the thing that tried to consume you."

"Not alone."

His gaze dropped to my mouth, and for a beat, the world narrowed to the space between us. I could feel the heat of his body and something raw and possessive flickered in his eyes. "You were always insufferable when afraid," he murmured, his voice a low caress that sent a shiver through me. "And you were always irritating when protective," I countered, my own voice softer than I intended. A ghost of a smile touched his lips, a dangerous, beautiful thing. "Yes." The word was a raw admission, a promise that settled between us with the strange, heated comfort of a remembered intimacy.

The wood lowered the crown back into the box, but the gown remained suspended. Its fabric shifted, dark green and alive with old magic. A root carried it toward me and laid it over my arms.

The wood spoke one final time.

Wear what was promised. Break what was taken.

The black flowers closed. The roots withdrew from the marble, except those binding Veyran. They tightened once around his wrists, then released him so suddenly he stumbled. The message was clear enough. The wood had answered my summons, but it would not fight the whole court for me. Not yet.

The garden filled with ordinary sound again: shaken breathing, silk moving, distant stone settling.

Veyran straightened slowly. "This changes nothing," he said.

Morwen's eyes narrowed. "You have no idea what entering the root will do."

"No," I said. "But I'm beginning to understand that neither do you."

Caelan turned to the watching court. When he spoke, his voice carried without force, reaching the windows, the balconies, the open doors behind us.

"The throne has fed on this court long enough. Any house that wishes to follow Veyran may do so and be judged by what follows. Any house that wishes to know the truth will stand aside while Lady Shayla and I go below."

Veyran laughed. "You think they will choose uncertainty over survival?"

A voice answered from one of the balconies.

"I would choose not to be eaten by my own palace."

A ripple moved through the court. Lady Morwen spun toward the voice, but more murmurs followed. Not many and certainly not enough to call victory, but enough to crack the silence Veyran had mistaken for agreement.

Caelan looked at me. For the first time since I had woken in the forest, he did not look like a man trying to keep me from the truth. He looked at me steadily, no careful distance in his expression, no braced readiness to catch whatever I might say—only a question he had not yet put into words, and the patience to wait for my answer.

We turned toward the palace together, my ruined wedding gown dragging across the garden path and the promised green gown folded over my arms. Behind us, the black flowers began to fall, one by one, covering the marble in soft, dark petals.

At the palace doors, Caelan paused.

“What is it?” I asked.

He looked toward the shadowed hall beyond. “The root is beneath the throne. The fastest way is through the old chapel.”

“Why do I feel there is something dreadful in the old chapel?”

“Because there is.”

“Of course, there is.”

He glanced at me then, and in that look was pain, apology, fear and something steadier than all three.

“The old chapel is where I first asked you to marry me.”

The green gown in my arms grew warm and a memory stirred. A ruined chapel beneath moonlight. Caelan standing before me without a crown or court, rain in his hair, looking almost nervous. Myself laughing because I had never imagined a king could look so uncertain. His hand open between us, palm up, waiting.

The memory vanished before I could hear my answer, but my body remembered the feeling of it. I looked at Caelan, and a sudden, sharp ache went through me—a grief for the memory I couldn’t fully grasp.

“Then we should go,” I said. “I’d like to know what I told you.”

He held out his hand, palm up. I laid my hand in his, and his fingers closed around mine, warm and strong. The contact sent a jolt through me, not of magic, but of something far more potent.

Chapter 10

The Old Chapel

The Hollow Court did not try to stop us. The palace had made its feelings known all day through cracks, blooms, whispers and mirrors, yet now it let us pass through its dark halls waiting to see which way blood would fall.

Caelan walked beside me. His hand remained around mine, but lightly, so that I could let go whenever I chose. Earlier, his touch had been warning, restraint, sometimes protection offered before I knew whether I wanted it. Now it felt like an agreement between us.

I carried the green gown over my arm. The fabric had stopped moving, though warmth remained in it, a slow pulse that did not match my own. The blackthorn embroidery caught the dim light as we walked, and every so often I felt the thread shift beneath my fingers. Enough to remind me that the wood's gift was not merely cloth.

Behind us, the members of the court followed at a distance. Some had vanished into side halls the moment Caelan gave them permission to choose. Others remained at the garden doors, whispering in tight groups, waiting for someone braver or more foolish to decide what loyalty meant now. But a number of courtiers had come after us: Lady Morwen among them, Veyran beside her, several lesser nobles whose names I did not know, a few servants with frightened faces, and guards whose hands rested on their weapons as though weapons would help if the palace itself turned hungry. I looked back to see Veyran's eyes on me.

"You are very quiet," Caelan said.

"I'm trying to decide whether I'm about to save the court or make everything worse."

"There may be overlap."

I glanced at him. "You're going to have to become better at comfort if we survive this."

His mouth softened slightly. "You used to say I was better when I stopped trying."

The words settled between us, gentle and painful. I wanted to ask what that meant. I wanted to ask whether I had ever found comfort in him so easily that effort had only made him awkward. Instead, I looked down at the gown.

"Did I wear this before?"

"No."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

I looked at him. "You recognise it."

His gaze moved to the fabric. "I have seen drawings. Old ones. Before the throne. The first queens wore green."

"Queens of the Hollow Court?"

"Not queens, exactly. Root-wives, in the oldest records. It is not a title the current court likes to remember."

"Root-wife," I repeated.

"Yes."

"That sounds worse than queen."

"It may have been better."

I studied his face, but he was looking ahead now, expression distant. "What were they?"
"Women who carried old forest magic and bound themselves to the land, not the throne. They were not always wives in the way mortals use the word. Some married kings. Some ruled alone. Some were chosen by the wood and never touched a crown."

"And then the throne replaced them."

"The throne centralised what had once been shared."

"That sounds like a polite way of saying it stole power."

"It is."

The green fabric warmed under my hand. I thought of the wood's voice in the garden. The throne is not the court. The crown is not the land. Perhaps the Hollow Court had not begun as a place of hungry vows and sacrificial brides. Perhaps it had become one slowly, century by century, each ruler taking more because taking had begun to feel like survival.

I looked back again at the courtiers. Morwen's face was closed, but her attention flicked to the gown and away. She was afraid of it. The hall narrowed with the thorns growing thicker here. Their branches had wound themselves around old statues set into alcoves along the walls. Most were broken. One had no face. Another had lost both hands. The third wore a crown carved from thorns and had roots rising around her feet.

"Who is she?"

He looked at the statue. "No one knows."

"She wore the green gown."

"Yes."

The statue's stone dress bore the same blackthorn pattern across the bodice. Her hair fell loose down her back, and though her face had been worn almost smooth, there was something familiar in the angle of her chin. Not because she looked like me. Because she looked like someone who had refused to lower it.

The gown in my arms stirred and a whisper brushed the edge of my hearing.

Not yet.

I turned sharply. Caelan's hand tightened, then eased. "What did you hear?"

"Something said not yet."

He looked at the statue. Veyran stepped forward. "Old stone makes old noises."

The statue cracked. Just a thin line across the place where its mouth had been. A few of the servants lowered their heads in fear. Morwen came to stand beside Veyran, her plum gown whispering over the floor. "The old chapel is beyond this hall. If we are truly indulging this dangerous theatre, perhaps we should continue before the throne decides to answer in its own fashion."

Caelan turned to her. "You are free to leave."

"I am free to ensure my court is not handed over to a forest because its king has lost patience with civilisation."

"Civilisation," I said, "seems to involve a lot of drugging brides."

Her gaze cut to me. "You know very little of what has been done to keep this place standing."

"I know what was done to me."

The doors to the old chapel stood at the end of the hall, half covered by thorns and silver root. They were taller than the doors to the bride's chamber, but less ornate, made of weathered black wood strapped with iron. No jewels. No carved roses. No courtly beauty polished over rot. A simple arch of stone rose above them, and across it someone had carved words in a language I did not know.

Caelan stopped before them. His hand had gone still around mine.

"You asked me here," I said quietly.

"Yes."

"Before everything went wrong."

"Before I understood how much had already gone wrong." There was no bitterness in his voice, only regret.

"What does the writing say?"

He looked up at the carved words. "No vow is sacred unless refusal is honoured."

The sentence moved through me with unexpected force. I thought of the ceremonial chamber, the wine, the throne pressing itself into our promises. I thought of my mother at the edge of the wood, begging for a child's life and giving a future neither of us had understood. I thought of all the ways refusal had been treated as an obstacle rather than a right.

"No wonder the current court abandoned this chapel," I said.

Caelan's mouth curved without humour. "Yes."

Caelan opened the doors. The chapel beyond was smaller than I expected. I had imagined grandeur, a forgotten temple fit for ancient magic. Instead, it felt almost bare. Stone benches lined the walls. A cracked aisle led to a raised platform where no altar stood, only a living blackthorn tree growing through the floor. Its trunk rose into the ceiling, branches disappearing into stone, and its roots spread across the platform before sinking again beneath the chapel floor.

Light entered through narrow windows high above, grey and rain-coloured. Dust hung in the air. The chapel smelled of earth and cold stone, not roses. Caelan entered first, then I followed with the green gown. The moment I crossed into the chapel, the thorns covering the doors withdrew, curling back from the wood in slow recognition. Behind us, the courtiers murmured, but none stepped inside until Morwen did. She walked in with her head high, as if pride could make the room less ancient. Veyran followed last.

A memory came without warning. Moonlight through the high windows. The chapel not clean, exactly, but swept and filled with candles. I stood near the blackthorn tree in a simple dark dress, my hair loose because Caelan had once admitted, with great reluctance, that he preferred it that way. He stood before me without a crown. No court. No witnesses except the tree and the rain against the glass. He looked younger and less guarded.

"I cannot offer you safety," he said in the memory.

I laughed softly. "That is a dreadful proposal so far."

"I know."

His face changed, and the tenderness in it made my breath catch in the present. "I can offer you the truth, as much of it as I know. I can offer you my name, my protection if you want it and my absence if you do not. I can offer you a place beside me, never beneath me. If you

refuse, I will take you to the border myself and stand between you and any creature that tries to drag you back.”

The woman I had been went very still. I felt her then. Not as a stranger. Not fully as myself either. A woman standing at the edge of a choice, frightened by how badly she wanted him and angry that wanting had not made the choice simple.

“And if I accept?” she asked.

Caelan’s throat moved. “Then I will spend whatever time I am given proving that a king can kneel without making a prisoner of the woman before him.”

He did kneel then, and the sight of him—a king brought to his knees not by power but by want—shattered the last of my anger. He took my offered hand, his lips brushing against my knuckles before he rose.

“You should know,” I whispered, as he drew me closer, “that I am still furious with you.”

“I know,” he murmured, his hands finding my waist, his body a warm, solid presence in the damp chapel air. “And I do not forgive you yet.”

“I know that too,” he said, his gaze dropping to my mouth.

“I may never become the sort of queen your court wants.”

“I do not want the sort of queen my court wants.” His lips brushed mine, a promise and a question. “I want you.”

The memory deepened, his mouth claiming mine, a kiss that tasted of rain and shadow and a desperation that matched my own. It wasn’t forgiveness, it was surrender.

I came back to the chapel with tears in my eyes and the green gown clutched tightly against my chest. Caelan had not moved, but he was watching me with such careful stillness that I knew he had guessed where I had gone.

“You asked me here,” I said.

His voice was low. “Yes.”

“You gave me a way to refuse.”

“I tried to.”

“And later, in the ceremonial chamber, they took that away.”

His gaze lowered. “Yes.”

The blackthorn tree rustled though there was no wind. Behind us, Veyran spoke. “Charming as this memory may be, it changes nothing. The chapel had no authority once the throne accepted the royal binding.”

Caelan turned slowly. “No. The throne had no authority once the chapel was abandoned.”

Caelan stepped toward the blackthorn tree. “That is what you hid. Not only the seed. Not only the wine. The court’s first law was not obedience to the throne. It was consent before vow. The throne survived by burying the law that limited it.”

Morwen’s expression tightened, but she did not look surprised

“So, you knew,” I said.

Her eyes met mine and the court went quiet. Morwen looked older suddenly. Not in her face, which remained smooth and elegant, but in the exhaustion beneath it. “I knew the chapel mattered.”

“That is not an answer.”

“No,” she said. “It is the only one I can afford.”

Caelan’s shadows shifted. “You are done deciding what truths are too costly.”

Morwen laughed once, bitterly. “Are we? How noble. How convenient, now that the cost falls most heavily on someone else.”

I watched her carefully. “What happens if the first law is restored?”

She said nothing. Veyran answered for her. “Chaos.”

“No one asked you.”

His face hardened. Morwen looked at the tree. Then at Caelan. Then, finally, at me. “If the first law is restored, no vow made under fear, deception or compulsion can continue feeding the throne.”

Caelan went still and my heart began to pound.

“The king’s vow,” I said.

Morwen’s mouth tightened. “Would weaken.”

“Break?”

“Perhaps.”

Veyran turned on her. “Morwen.”

She ignored him, though I saw the effort it took. “The throne would lose centuries of bindings at once. Noble houses would lose power inherited through forced bargains. Old debts would be questioned. Some creatures bound into service would walk free. The court would not collapse neatly into goodness, if that is the fantasy forming in your mortal heart. It would fracture in ways none of us can control.”

“And the alternative is letting the throne keep eating people,” I said.

“Yes,” Morwen snapped. “That is the alternative we have lived with for longer than your little life has existed.”

The insult should have angered me. It did, but not as much as the fear beneath it. Morwen was not defending cruelty only because she enjoyed it. She was defending the only structure she believed stood between the court and ruin.

Caelan moved beside me. “The first law. How is it restored?”

Veyran laughed. “It is not.”

The blackthorn tree shifted and a root rose from the chapel floor. It moved toward me, slow and deliberate, carrying something caught between its dark coils. A blade. Not the black-handled knife from the bride’s chamber, but an older thing, made of dull silver and wood. Its edge was clean. Its handle was wrapped in green thread. The root stopped at my feet and I heard Morwen whisper something under her breath.

“What is it?” I asked.

Caelan’s voice was quiet. “A witness blade.”

“Meaning?”

“Old vows were not signed with ink.”

I looked down at my palm, where the cut from the ceremonial chamber had begun to close. “Blood again.”

“Not as a sacrifice,” he said. “As testimony.”

A second root rose, this one reaching for Caelan. His shadows drew back as the root touched his burned hand. It curled around his wrist without tightening and guided his palm upward. The burn from the silver chain was deep, the skin raw and darkened. He had ignored it so completely that guilt moved through me before I could stop it. The root turned his hand palm up while another root lifted mine. Our hands hovered over the chapel stones, not touching while the tree waited.

I understood with a clarity that made me colder than fear. The first law required more than discovering a forgotten rule. It had to be spoken by the people whose vow had been corrupted. Caelan's half-offered life. My stolen consent. The wood's seed inside me. The throne's claim tangled through all of it.

"No vow is sacred unless refusal is honoured," I said.

The words carved over the door warmed behind us. Caelan looked at me. "You do not have to do this."

"I know."

"I mean it."

"I know."

He held my gaze, and I saw that he did mean it. He would let me walk away, even now, even if the court fractured and his vow kept draining him and the throne found another way to reach for both of us. He would hate the consequences, but he would honour the refusal.

That was why I could choose.

I reached for the blade and out of the corner of my eye I saw Veyran move quickly. Too quickly for the guards to react. He drew a small black shard from his sleeve and threw it toward the tree. The chapel darkened as it struck the trunk, and the blackthorn gave a sound that went through me like pain. Caelan's shadows struck Veyran across the chest and threw him back against the wall. Morwen cried out, not in fear for Veyran, but for the tree.

The branch above us split. Dark sap ran down the bark. The witness blade fell but I caught it before it hit the floor.

The moment my fingers closed around the handle, the chapel vanished. I stood in the old binding circle again, but it was not the ceremony I remembered. This was older. The throne was newly carved, its silver roots bright and clean. A woman in a green gown stood before it with the witness blade in her hand. Around her, courtiers knelt. A king stood beside her, crown removed, head bowed.

"No throne may feed where choice is absent," the woman said. "No crown may bind what fear has spoken. No vow may stand if refusal is denied."

The king cut his palm. Then she cut hers. Their blood fell to the roots, and the roots did not drink. They listened. The vision shifted. Centuries passed in fragments. The throne grew larger. The chapel gathered dust. The law was copied, then hidden, then called symbolic, then forgotten. Brides stood in circles without blades. Kings spoke vows without knowing what the roots took beneath them. Courtiers smiled as consent became ceremony and ceremony became appetite.

Then I saw myself. Not in the green gown. In the ruined wedding dress, standing in the ceremonial chamber with blood on my palm and horror in my throat. I had remembered the

first law too late. Not fully, but enough. Enough to know the throne could not be allowed to finish. Enough to cut myself and bind the memory away before it could use my knowledge to drag me back. The vision ended. I was on my knees in the chapel, the witness blade still in my hand.

Caelan crouched before me, his voice a low anchor. "Shayla."

"I saw it," I breathed. "All of it."

His hand hovered near my face and I leaned into his touch, my cheek pressing into the heat of his palm. His thumb stroked the skin just beneath my eye, wiping away a tear I hadn't known had fallen. The world narrowed to that single point of contact. I wanted to turn my face, to press my lips to his palm, to forget the blade in my hand and simply exist in the shelter of his gaze.

"Pull it out," I said.

Caelan followed my gaze. "If it is iron from the dead root, touching it may poison the bond further."

"Then don't touch it with your hand."

Veyran was on the floor, pinned there by Caelan's shadows. Blood marked his mouth, but his eyes were bright with fury. Morwen stood near the tree, staring at the wound in its trunk with an expression I could not read.

"You kept that shard," Caelan said to Veyran.

Veyran smiled through the blood. "One keeps useful relics."

"It came from the throne," Morwen said.

Her face had gone ashen. "From beneath it. The dead root."

Caelan's voice was cold. "You gave it to him?"

"No."

Veyran laughed softly. "You left it where I could take it."

Morwen's eyes grew wide and she shook with disbelief. That was the first time I understood. Morwen had been cruel because she feared collapse. Veyran had sought collapse if it left him standing in the centre. They were not the same, and he had let her believe they were allies for as long as her fear served him.

I stepped toward the tree. The chapel floor trembled under our feet as the tree bent toward the blade. I raised it to the black shard.

"Together," Caelan said.

He offered his burned hand but not to take the blade from me but to steady mine. This time, when his hand closed over mine, the chapel did not dim. It brightened. We drove the witness blade beneath the shard and pried it free.

The tree shuddered. Dark sap spilled over our joined hands, hot enough to sting. Caelan's jaw clenched, but he did not let go. The shard fell to the floor and cracked into pieces. There was no other way to understand the sound. The chapel filled with air, deep and clean, and every thorn along the walls burst into white bloom.

The root at my feet lifted again, this time touching the witness blade, then my bleeding palm, then Caelan's.

I looked at Caelan. "If we do this, your vow might break."

“Yes.”

“And the throne might weaken.”

“Yes.”

“The court might fracture.”

“Yes.”

“You are very calm about that.”

“I am not calm.”

“No?”

“No.”

His eyes held mine, dark and steady. “I am afraid. But not of your choice.”

That was the answer that decided me. I placed the witness blade against my palm and reopened the cut. Pain flashed, clean and brief. Caelan took the blade after me and cut across his own palm without hesitation. Our blood did not fall until we chose to turn our hands downward.

When it struck the chapel stone, the carved words above the door burned silver. Caelan spoke first.

“I, Caelan of the Hollow Court, refuse any vow taken from fear, deceit or stolen will. I refuse the throne’s claim on the life I offered in desperation. I refuse to call sacrifice love when choice has been denied.”

The chapel shook. Far below us, the throne screamed. The sound tore through the palace, through the court, through every root and wall. Courtiers cried out behind us. The blackthorn tree bent beneath the force of it but did not break.

Then it was my turn. I felt the throne reach for me through the floor, furious and starving. I felt the seed behind my heart answer, not in obedience, but in recognition of another old thing waking. I lifted my head.

“I, Shayla Ashbourne, refuse any vow spoken through poison, fear or hidden truth. I refuse to be bride, vessel, debt or offering unless I choose the name myself. I refuse the throne’s claim on my love.”

The scream stopped. Silence fell so suddenly that the whole court seemed to hold its breath.

Then the floor split beneath the chapel tree as a root rose from below, black and silver and pulsing with trapped light. Around it wound threads of shadow, blood-red magic, and something I knew before I understood it.

Caelan’s vow. It was still caught in the throne’s root, exactly as Veyran had said. Half-offered. Half-refused. Draining him one slow day at a time. Caelan went very still beside me.

The root reached toward him. I stepped in front of it.

“No,” I said.

The root stopped.

Caelan’s voice was rough. “Shayla.”

I did not look away from the root. “You have taken enough from him.”

The root pulsed. The throne’s voice came from below, stripped now of elegance.

Owed.

“No,” I said. “Offered under terror. Refused under law.”

The witness blade warmed in my hand. Caelan stepped beside me, his bleeding palm brushing mine. “Refused under law,” he repeated.

The root cracked and light spilled out. Caelan staggered, a harsh gasp torn from his throat. I moved without thinking, my body a brace against his. He was a dead weight for a second before his arms locked around me, holding on not just for balance but as if I were the only solid thing in a collapsing world. His face was buried in my hair, his breath coming in ragged bursts against my neck as the last threads of the throne’s claim snapped.

He shuddered against me, a long, violent tremor of release that went through us both. The final thread broke, and the root collapsed into ash. He held me tighter, his shoulders shaking with the first free breaths he’d taken in years. The silver veins at his throat faded as he stared down at his own hands, his expression one of such raw, vulnerable disbelief that it felt more intimate than a kiss.

Behind us, Veyran made a sound of pure fury. “You have doomed them,” he said.

The chapel doors flew open. A wind moved through the room, carrying voices from every part of the palace. Servants crying out. Nobles shouting. Children laughing. Stone cracking. Chains falling. The court was not dying, it was waking. Then the floor beneath us gave one violent shudder.

Caelan caught me, pulling me hard against his chest as the ground bucked. His body was a shield around mine, his heart hammering against my back. For a moment, with the roar of the collapsing palace around us, there was only the solid feel of him, the scent of night and winter in his coat.

Morwen looked up, horror returning to her face. “The throne.”

The palace groaned, a deep, structural sound of something ancient breaking apart. Caelan’s hold gentled but did not release, his hand resting on my arm as he looked toward the chapel doors. “The throne is collapsing into the lower halls.”

“And if it falls?” I asked.

“The root falls with it.”

My hand moved to my chest. The throne had lost his vow, but it still had a path to the magic inside me. If the root collapsed before we chose what to do, it might drag the seed down with it.

Veyran laughed from the floor, shadows still pinning him. “You wanted a choice. Choose quickly.”

The old chapel shook again and the blackthorn tree bent toward me, its white flowers trembling. Caelan held out his hand and together, we ran toward the throne.

Chapter 11

The Root Beneath the Throne

We ran through a palace as the halls shifted around us, opening where there had been walls, closing where there had been corridors, spilling silver dust from ceilings carved with roses and old battle scenes. Somewhere above, glass shattered. Somewhere below, stone cracked with a deep and final sound. The Hollow Court was waking and it meant every hidden thing in it had begun to move at once.

Caelan kept hold of my hand. His vow had broken free of the throne, and I could feel the difference in him with every step. He moved faster now, not because the danger was smaller, but because pain was no longer dragging at his bones. The silver veins at his throat had faded almost completely. His shadows were sharper too, not wild with anger as they had been below, but clear and responsive, striking fallen stone from our path before it could hit us.

I ran in the ruined wedding dress the throne had tried to claim, carrying the forest gown the wood had offered, one hand gripping silk I no longer wanted, the other clutching something I didn't yet know how to wear.

Behind us came the court. A handful of nobles with frightened faces followed by guards and servants. Morwen moved among them, one hand pressed to the wall for balance, her silver hair loose from its pins and white petals still tangled in it from the old chapel. She had not tried to flee. I did not yet know whether that was courage, guilt, or calculation.

Veyran was not with us. Caelan had left him pinned in shadow inside the chapel. I feared it would not hold him for long, but there was no time. The throne was collapsing into the lower halls, and if Caelan was right, the seed behind my heart might be dragged down with it.

I did not know what would happen if it was.

We reached the entrance hall. Most had cracked. One had shattered entirely, spilling silver glass across the marble. Another still stood whole, its surface black except for three words written in red.

THE ROOT HUNGERS.

I stopped before it. Caelan looked back. "Shayla."

The mirror changed. For one breath, I saw the throne chamber below: black wood splitting, silver roots tearing themselves from stone, a hollow beneath it widening into darkness. The throne was not only breaking. It was reaching. Every root still alive was straining upward, searching for the nearest source of old magic. Searching for me.

The image shifted again and I saw Veyran standing in the old chapel. He should have been pinned but instead he was on his feet, one hand braced against the blackthorn tree. Caelan's shadows still coiled around his ankles, but they were thinning. In his other hand, he held one of the broken pieces of the dead-root shard.

He looked into the mirror as if he knew I was watching. Then he drove the shard into his own palm and the glass went black. Caelan swore.

"What did he do?" I asked.

Morwen had come up behind us. Her face had gone ashen. "He made himself heard."

"By the throne?"

“By whatever remains of it.”

Caelan’s grip tightened around mine. “He will try to redirect the collapse.”

“To where?”

Morwen looked at me.

“No,” Caelan said.

Morwen’s mouth tightened. “If he can give the throne a path to the seed, it may take her before the root falls completely.”

“And if it takes me?” I asked.

The palace answered before either of them could.

A crack split through the entrance hall floor.

Not wide, but deep. From it came the same red light as the binding circle. The green gown over my arm warmed suddenly, and behind my ribs something clenched, the way a fist does before it closes all the way.

Caelan stepped toward the crack. I caught his arm. “Do not.”

His eyes were on the red light. “He is forcing the way open.”

“And if you pour rage into it, you help him.”

He looked at me, and I saw the war in him, that old, furious instinct to shield me warring with the fragile trust between us. It was a weakness Veyran had counted on.

Caelan took one slow breath. “Then we go carefully.”

The route to the lower halls had changed. The grand staircase at the far end of the entrance hall had sunk into the floor, revealing another stair beneath it, older and rougher, cut directly into black stone. The walls around it were wet with silver sap. Each step pulsed faintly.

Morwen drew in a breath. “The king’s stair.”

Caelan looked at her. “That was sealed.”

“It was. The throne is calling every old path back to itself.”

Caelan turned to the small group gathered in the hall. “Anyone who comes farther may not return.”

Several courtiers stepped back at once. A young woman in servant grey lifted her chin. “My brother is in the lower halls.”

Morwen looked at her sharply. “Elian was taken?”

The servant’s face tightened. “Three nights ago.”

I looked at Caelan. For an instant, the king’s mask fell, and I saw a flicker of raw guilt tighten his jaw.

“How many?” he asked Morwen.

She did not answer.

“How many have been taken?”

“Enough,” she said.

“That is not an answer.”

Her pride faltered. “Seventeen since winter.”

A cold silence followed.

Caelan’s face went very still, the muscles along his jaw working once before stopping. “And you did not tell me.”

“You were dying by inches. The court was watching for weakness. Veyran said if the houses knew how often the lower halls opened, they would break from you before the next moon.”

“Veyran said,” Caelan repeated.

“He used your fear well,” I said.

Caelan turned toward the stairs. “Then we get them out if they are still living.”

“And the throne?” Morwen asked.

He looked at me. “We free whoever we can,” I said. “Then we decide what happens to the root.”

The king’s stair did not twist as the wardrobe stairs had done. It went straight down through the palace, narrow and steep, with walls close enough that shoulders brushed stone. The air grew colder with every step, and the sound of the collapsing throne became clearer beneath us. It had stopped sounding like anything human. Now it was the sound of something enormous being forced apart, stone against stone, the palace itself coming undone at the seams.

At first, no one spoke. Then Caelan did, quietly enough for only me to hear.

“If the seed is pulled from you, I may not be able to stop it.”

“I know.”

“I need you to understand that.”

“I do.”

His hand tightened, and he stopped, turning me to face him on the narrow stair. The stone walls pressed in, leaving barely a handspan between our bodies. “No,” he said, his voice low and intense. “You are very good at saying you understand while walking into danger you have not fully imagined.”

“Is this the time to list my flaws?” I whispered, acutely aware of his closeness.

His gaze dropped to my mouth for a fraction of a second. “I have a long list. I am choosing restraint.”

The line, and the way he said it, sent a jolt of heat through me that had nothing to do with fear. A reluctant warmth spread through my chest. It sounded like us—a half-remembered melody played in a new key.

“I understand,” I said, my voice softer than I intended. “I may die.”

His jaw tightened. “Yes.”

“And if I keep the seed?”

“The throne, or whatever rises from it, will keep trying to reach you.”

“And if I give it back?”

“The wood said what grew from it remains uncertain.”

“That may still mean death.”

“Yes.”

We reached a landing where the wall had cracked open to reveal a narrow passage full of pale roots. Through it came a child’s voice, crying weakly.

The servant girl behind us made a broken sound. “Elian.”

Caelan released my hand only after I nodded.

He moved to the passage and sent his shadows ahead. They slipped between the roots, careful and quick. A moment later, the roots recoiled, and a boy of perhaps ten stumbled into the stairwell. He was thin, grey with cold, and alive.

The servant girl caught him so fiercely that he cried out, then clung to her just as hard.

"There are others," he whispered. "Below."

Caelan crouched in front of him. "How many?"

"I don't know. The doors move."

His eyes shifted to me, and he recoiled. "You're the light it wants," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

The boy swallowed. "It kept saying the bride had the root-light and when she came back, it could stop being hungry."

Root-light.

The seed warmed behind my ribs, no longer hidden, no longer willing to pretend it was only mine.

Caelan stood slowly. "Morwen, get them upstairs."

The servant girl protested at once. "No. I can help."

"You have helped. Now get your brother out."

For a moment I thought she would argue. Then the boy began to shake, and she made the better choice. Morwen stepped aside to let them pass, then looked at Caelan.

"I am not leaving," she said.

"I did not ask you to."

Caelan's expression was cold. "You know the lower court paths. You know which houses hid servants below when the throne began to feed. If you truly want this court to survive, you can begin by helping me save the people you endangered with your silence."

Morwen looked as though she would rather be struck.

Then she inclined her head. "As my king commands."

"No," Caelan said. "As your conscience commands, if you can still hear it."

She had no answer for that.

The lower halls were no longer quiet. Doors opened and closed on both sides of the stair, revealing fragments of rooms caught in the throne's collapse. A nursery with empty cradles rocking. A banquet hall where the food had turned to ash. A flooded corridor full of floating candles. Behind some doors, people called out. Behind others, things that were not people called in voices stolen from those we knew.

Caelan opened only the doors Morwen marked with a hand signal.

"What rooms are those?" I asked, as Caelan moved toward a door she'd marked.

"Living rooms," she said, her voice tight. "An old, horrible name for places the lower halls keep people before deciding what to take."

We found six more people before the stair ended. Two servants. One guard. A courtier I recognised vaguely from the entrance hall, though his beauty had been stripped by terror. A child with black eyes who might not have been human but clung to Morwen's sleeve. An elderly woman who slapped Caelan across the face the moment he freed her.

“That,” the woman said, voice shaking, “is for letting the palace get hungry enough to eat my grandson.”

Caelan bowed his head. “You are right.”

The woman’s anger crumpled. She began to cry. I wanted to touch Caelan, but my hand stayed at my side. He stood unflinching before her, accepting the weight of his crown and all the truths that had festered beneath it. When the rescued group had been sent upward with two guards, only five of us remained: Caelan, Morwen, three guards, and me.

The final door stood at the bottom of the stair. It was made of black wood and silver root. There was no handle and no lock. At its centre was carved the shape of a crown. Caelan touched it, pressing his palm flat against the carved crown but nothing happened. He didn’t move. I stepped up beside him and laid my hand over his. Our fingers interlaced over the cold wood. For a second, we just stood there, his strength a solid presence against my palm.

The seed in my chest flared, answering the touch. The door split down the middle with a groan of ancient root revealing the throne chamber beyond. It was not the ceremonial chamber from my memories. It was beneath it, older and far less beautiful. The air was hot and wet, and the floor was made of tangled roots as thick as pillars. They rose from a pit of darkness and wrapped around the base of the Hollow Throne, which hung half-collapsed above the void. Its black wood had split in several places. Silver veins ran through it, pulsing weakly, and red light leaked from the cracks.

At the centre of the chamber stood Veyran. He had beaten us there. His face was pale, his right hand blackened from the dead-root shard, but he stood before the throne with his chin lifted and his shoulders loose. Around him, roots held three figures suspended above the pit.

One was a guard, one was Lady Morwen’s child-faced courtier, and the third was my father. For a moment I did not understand what I was seeing. My eyes kept sliding off his face like it was something they hadn’t learned to process yet. Older than I remembered and thinner. His hair was more grey than brown. He hung unconscious in the roots, wrists bound above him, his head fallen forward. There was blood on his temple and dirt on his boots, as if he had been dragged a long way.

Caelan said my name, but I barely heard him.

Veyran smiled then, and all the old polish returned. “I wondered which would reach you first,” he said. “The seed, the king, or the father who lied to you.”

Caelan’s shadows surged, but the throne roots tightened around my father’s chest. He gave a weak, unconscious groan.

“Do not,” Veyran said pleasantly. “The throne is unstable, and I would hate for grief to make anyone careless.”

Morwen stared at my father with open shock. “How did you bring a mortal through the gates?”

Veyran did not look at her. “The old bargain knew his blood.”

My father stirred, his eyes opening slowly. For a second, he looked at nothing. Then his gaze found me. Recognition dawned in his eyes, followed by a wave of shame so profound it seemed to fold him in on himself.

“Shayla,” he whispered.

I had imagined seeing him again. Not often, but in flashes since waking in the forest. I had imagined anger and questions. I had not imagined him bound above a hungry throne.

“You knew,” I said.

His face crumpled and that was answer enough. Veyran spread his arms slightly. “The throne requires a path to the seed. Love opened it once. A king’s vow nearly opened it again. But blood guilt is older than both.”

Caelan’s voice was lethal. “Let him down.”

“Gladly. Once Lady Shayla gives the throne what it needs.”

I looked at the root-bound throne. It was dying. I could feel that now. Not in a human way, not with pity, but as pressure. Hunger. Panic. It did not want to vanish. It had fed for so long its hunger had become the only law it knew.

The seed behind my heart answered it, bright and alive.

Caelan took my hand. “Look at me.”

I could not. Not while my father hung above the pit. The man who had raised me, lied to me, loved me badly, feared the wood, feared the truth, and still somehow ended up here because every bargain made in panic had roots.

“Shayla,” Caelan said again.

This time I turned to face him. “The throne wants you choosing from fear. Do not give it that.”

Veyran laughed softly. “Beautiful advice from a man who chose every important thing from fear and called it protection.”

Caelan did not look at him, his eyes staying on mine.

“He is right about me,” Caelan said. “I did choose from fear. More than once. I hid truth because I feared losing you. I offered my life because I feared yours being taken. I have mistaken protection for trust. But I am not asking you to choose me now.”

The throne pulsed red. Caelan’s hand warmed around mine. “I am asking you to choose without letting any of us become the knife at your throat.”

The words entered me slowly. My father. Caelan. The court. The seed. The throne. The wood. Every path offered itself as urgency. Save him. Save them. Save me. Save yourself. Finish. Return. Bind. Refuse. My mother, my father, Caelan—they had all chosen from that place and called the result my fate. But it was only a cage built of their fear. I stepped away from Caelan and the throne flared, eager at the separation.

I looked up at my father. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Tears ran into the lines of his face. “Your mother made me swear.”

“That is not enough.”

“I know.”

“Then why?”

“Because every year you lived felt stolen, and I was afraid if I spoke the truth, the wood would hear me admitting the debt.”

The answer was small, both human and cowardly.

“You let me walk blind.”

“I did.”

“You let me think the fear was mine.”

His eyes closed. “Yes.”

I wiped at my face with the back of my hand, angry to find tears there. “I loved you.”

“I know,” he whispered.

The throne roots loosened slightly around my father, not from mercy, but because the fear in me had changed shape. The fear hadn’t vanished—I could feel it, a cold stone in my gut—but I was no longer letting it steer.

I turned to Veyran. “You keep trying to make me choose quickly.”

“The chamber is collapsing.”

“Then speak quickly. What happens if the throne takes the seed?”

His smile returned by a fraction. “The Hollow Court survives.”

“No. What happens?”

Morwen answered before he could.

“It becomes what the throne is now,” she said. She spoke as if the words cost her nothing, because nothing was left. “Only stronger. The seed would restore the root, but through the throne’s appetite. It would bind the court more deeply than before. Servants, houses, border villages,” she continued. “Any vow tied to Hollow law would feed it. Not all at once. Slowly. Permanently.”

“And you knew that?” I asked.

She looked at Veyran. “No. I suspected. I told myself suspicion was not knowledge.”

The throne groaned above the pit. A root snapped loose from the ceiling and struck the floor near us. One of the guards shouted. The chamber was breaking faster. Veyran’s patience finally fractured. “Enough moral theatre. The court either survives with power or dies with principles. There is no third path.”

The green gown over my arm warmed. I looked down at it.

Wear what was promised. Break what was taken.

I unfolded the gown. Caelan understood before I spoke. “Here?”

“I don’t think we have time to find a dressing screen.”

Despite the throne cracking above us, despite my father bound over the pit, despite Veyran’s fury, a startled laugh moved through one of the guards.

Caelan turned his back at once, positioning himself between me and the others. His shadows rose around us, not as a wall I could not cross, but as a curtain.

“You do not have to wear it,” he said quietly.

“I know.”

My fingers went to the torn laces of the wedding gown. They were knotted, stiff with old blood and forest dirt. I struggled for one furious second before Caelan, still facing away, lifted his hand.

“May I?”

The question was a low murmur in the dark space his shadows had made. It settled my fury, replacing it with a tremor of a different kind.

“Yes,” I breathed.

He turned just enough for his body to brush mine, his eyes locked on my face as his knuckles

grazed the skin of my back. A jolt went through me, sharp and desperately wanted. His fingers were deft and warm against my chilled skin, and with every knot he loosened, I felt something in my own chest come undone. The air grew thick, hot. My breath hitched. It was not just memory in my skin; it was a present, undeniable hunger.

When the last lace fell free, his fingers lingered for a second at the base of my spine, and I had to bite my lip to keep from making a sound. When the ruined gown loosened, I clutched it to my chest, my heart hammering. Caelan turned away again, but not before I saw the darkness in his eyes, a reflection of the same fire I felt in my blood.

I stepped out of the wedding dress and into the green. The fabric closed around me without buttons, hooks or laces. It shaped itself to my body, warm and steady, the blackthorn embroidery spreading from bodice to hem as if growing into place. Something in me settled, the way a door does when it finally meets its frame.

The seed behind my heart quieted. Caelan turned back and for a moment, the throne chamber vanished from his face. He looked at me with such naked desire that my hands went still at my sides.

“Shayla,” he said.

Morwen whispered, “Root-wife.”

The title echoed in the sudden silence. The throne heard it, and the raw hunger in the chamber faltered, turning uncertain.

I stepped toward the pit and Caelan moved with me. The witness blade had remained in my hand without my noticing. Its wooden handle was warm. I lifted it and pressed the edge to my palm, where the cut had closed again.

Caelan caught my wrist, gently. “What are you doing?”

“Testimony,” I said.

Understanding flickered through him. He released me and I cut my palm. Blood welled bright against the green fabric and the throne surged toward it. I did not let the blood fall into the pit. Instead, I pressed my bleeding hand to my chest, over the seed.

“Blackthorn Wood,” I said.

The chamber stilled. The throne hated the name but Veyran hated it more. I spoke again, louder. “You gave this life when I could not ask for it. My mother promised what was not hers to give. My father hid what was not his to hide. The throne tried to take what was never offered.”

The seed warmed beneath my hand.

“I will not feed the throne,” I said. “I will not surrender my heart to fear. I will return what can be returned, keep what is mine to keep, and let the rest answer to law.”

The roots beneath my feet began to turn green. Veyran shouted and lunged forward, but Morwen stepped into his path. He stared at her in disbelief.

“No more,” she said.

He struck her. Caelan’s shadows caught him before he could strike again, slamming him to the floor and pinning both hands this time. Veyran fought, but the throne was no longer listening to him. Its attention was fixed on me. The seed moved. Something tore loose behind

my ribs, wrong in a way I had no name for. I nearly doubled over, but Caelan caught my elbow and held me steady without pulling me away from what I had chosen.

Something lifted from my chest. I felt it at once. The life the wood had given was now my own, inextricably wound with my being. But the part held in debt, the old bargain made in terror, loosened.

Green light spilled between my fingers. It flowed down my arm, through the blood on my palm, into the witness blade, and from the blade into the roots beneath us. The throne shrieked and reached for it, but the green light moved past the throne and into the older root beneath. The chamber split open with the sound of earth after rain. Below the throne, beneath the black and silver tangle, another root woke. It was not beautiful. It was old, scarred, and half-buried under centuries of theft. But when the green light touched it, the root answered.

The throne began to die. The black wood cracked from crown to base. Silver veins went dark. Red light poured out, then faded. Roots that had fed on vows for centuries withered and fell away from the living root beneath them.

My father dropped but Caelan's shadows caught him before he hit the pit. The other two captives fell after him, and the guards rushed forward to drag them clear. Veyran screamed and it was not the sound of grief. It was the raw, furious scream of a creator whose masterpiece had been shattered before his eyes.

"You stupid mortal girl," he spat from the floor. "You think the old root will thank you? You think land magic is kinder than throne magic?"

"No," I said, shaking with pain and effort. "I think it was there first."

The throne gave one final groan then the Hollow Throne split apart. A wave of force threw us back. In the instant before we hit the floor, Caelan twisted, pulling me against his chest and taking the brunt of the impact with his own body. For several moments, I could hear nothing but my own heartbeat.

Then silence. The throne was gone. In its place rose a living root as wide as a tree trunk, dark green beneath black bark, threaded with soft light. It climbed from the pit and spread into the broken floor, not taking the chamber by force, but returning to a place that had once belonged to it. The seed behind my heart was still there. Changed, but there.

Caelan's hand came to my face, his thumb stroking my cheekbone. "Shayla."
"I'm alive." The words were a ragged whisper.

His eyes closed, his whole body shuddering with a relief so stark it stole my breath. And in that moment, I leaned into his touch, tangled my fingers in the front of his tunic, and pulled him down to me. Our mouths met with the force of the throne's collapse—a desperate confirmation of life, a clash of teeth and a sweep of tongues. He tasted of dust and power, and his arms banded around me, lifting me against him as if to fuse us together on the broken floor. For a wild, breathless moment in front of my unconscious father, traumatised courtiers, and a dead throne, I did not care.

The sound of a guard clearing his throat finally broke us apart, but the heat of his body lingered against mine, a promise made in the ruins. Morwen sat a few paces away, one hand pressed to her split lip. She was staring at the living root with tears in her eyes.

"My lady," one guard said softly.

I turned to see my father was awake. He lay on the broken floor, supported by the servant whose brother we had saved. His face was grey with pain, but his eyes were clear enough to find mine.

"Shayla," he said.

The old anger returned, a familiar heat behind my ribs. But I went to him anyway, not because guilt pulled me, but because I chose to.

"I am sorry," he whispered.

I knelt beside him. "I know."

"I thought keeping the truth from you would let you live free of it."

"No," I said. "It only left me alone with it."

His face crumpled again. "Yes."

There would be more to say. But for now, I held the apology the way you hold something fragile before you've decided where to put it down.

A scraping sound came from behind us. Veyran had managed to rise to his knees. Caelan turned, shadows ready, but Veyran was not looking at him. He was looking at the living root with disgust and something like fear.

"You have ended the throne," he said. "Do you understand what you have done?"

Caelan started toward him, his face a mask of cold fury. I reached out and caught his wrist. His skin was warm, his pulse hammering against my fingertips. He stopped, but didn't look at me at first.

"Caelan," I said softly.

He turned his head slowly. His gaze was fire and shadow, but it softened when it met mine. The fury receded, replaced by a deep, listening stillness.

"He should answer to the court," I said.

His eyes stayed on mine, a silent conversation passing between us. He was king. He had every right to vengeance. He was choosing my counsel instead. He gave a single, sharp nod.

Above us, bells began to ring. Not the summons bell from the garden. These were different. Clearer. One after another, from towers I had not known the palace had. The sound rose through the broken halls, out over the gardens, through the gates and into Blackthorn Wood.

Those bells weren't a sound of victory, but of change. They washed over Caelan as he stood beside me, just a man with blood on his palm and dust on his face. The throne was gone. The vow was broken. In the quiet, the only sound from the floor was my father's steady breathing. Behind my own ribs, the seed of the wood felt less like a bargain and more like a beginning.

He looked at me. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"No."

His expression softened. "No."

"But I think I'm mine."

"Yes," he said quietly. "You are."

The living root rose behind us, bathing him in a soft green light that carved his face from the shadows. The court could wait. The woods could listen. The memories stirring inside me could fall silent. In that moment, all of it faded to nothing next to the man before me, the king who had waited through silence and ruin.

He didn't hold out his hand. He stepped into my space, fingers finding the bare skin at my nape and threading into my hair. The touch was possessive, but no longer claiming. He pulled me flush against him, and the only hungry thing that answered was the low, guttural sound of my name on his lips. Only him.

Chapter 12

The Choice That Remained

By morning, the Hollow Court had learned how loud freedom could be.

It was not the clean, triumphant sound stories promised. From where I stood, I heard a door slam open down the hall, followed by a shouted name. A child's running footsteps echoed from a wing of the palace that had always been silent. Near the kitchens, a woman was weeping—not in grief, but in rage and relief. This was freedom's sound: the noise of a house remembering it was full of people, not subjects.

The thorns remained on the walls, and the corridors were still dark enough to make any sensible person cautious, but the air had changed. In the throne room, the living tree had grown through the broken dais, its roots sunk deep into the place where the throne had been. White flowers opened across its branches, and every so often one fell silently to the floor.

I stood at the edge of the old throne room wearing the green gown the wood had given me. It had altered itself sometime in the night, shortening at the hem, reshaping at the sleeves, fitting me without making a prisoner of my body. I had tried not to think too much about that. I had survived a vow-eating throne; I could accept helpful tailoring from a sentient forest.

My ruined wedding dress lay folded in the bride's chamber. I did not know what to do with it. Burn it, perhaps. Bury it. Keep it as evidence. In the end, I had folded it myself and left it on the bed, not as a relic, but as something I was not ready to touch again.

I watched Caelan as he stood across the throne room speaking with Morwen and three members of the court whose names I had already forgotten. He looked exhausted. There was a bandage wrapped beneath his torn shirt where the root had struck his shoulder, and another around his burned palm. He should have been resting. Instead, he was listening to people who had spent years bowing to him and were now discovering the dangerous pleasure of disagreeing aloud.

He caught me watching and something in his face softened.

A voice spoke beside me. "He will be insufferable now."

I turned to find that Morwen had crossed the room without my noticing. Her silver hair was braided down her back, less elaborate than before, and there were shadows beneath her eyes that even fae beauty could not turn into elegance.

"Only now?" I asked.

A brief curve touched her mouth. "No. You are right. He has always had the tendency."

We stood together in uneasy silence.

Across the room, Caelan returned to his discussion, though his attention flicked toward us more than once. I suspected he was trying to decide whether Morwen was about to insult me, threaten me, or both.

"What will happen to you?" I asked.

Morwen did not pretend to misunderstand. "That depends on how generous this new court decides to be."

"You helped Veyran."

"Yes."

“You poisoned me.”

“I carried the bowl.”

“That is not a defence.”

“No,” she said. “It is an admission.”

I looked at her properly then. There was no performance in her face now, or less of it. Without the throne behind her, Morwen seemed smaller and more dangerous at the same time, stripped of certainty but not pride.

“I thought the court would die without the throne,” she said. “I thought every cruel thing done to preserve it could be weighed against collapse and made bearable. That is not an apology. It is only the truth.”

“Do you regret it?”

Her eyes moved to the living tree. “Some of it.”

“At least you’re still charming.”

This time, she did smile. “You see? Insufferable. Both of you.”

I should have hated her cleanly; it would have been simpler. But I saw the faint tremor in her hand as she held it at her side, the exhaustion that had settled deep in her bones. This court had too many wounds for simple feelings, and I saw that justice here would be a slow mending, not a swift revenge.

“What about Veyran?” I asked.

Morwen’s smile vanished. “Gone. Several of his allies were with him.”

“Where?”

“There are old ways beneath the palace. He knows more of them than he should.”

“That seems concerning.”

“It is.”

“Will he come back?”

Morwen looked at me as if I had asked whether night followed dusk. “Yes.”

“What does he want now?” I asked.

“Power,” she said. “But more than that, vindication. He will need the court to fail without the throne. If we survive, then every monstrous thing he did becomes harder to excuse.”

I looked at the tree again. White flowers drifted down around its roots, covering the last dark scars in the marble.

“Then we survive,” I said.

Morwen gave me a sharp glance. “We?”

I regretted the word at once. Across the room, Caelan had stopped speaking. Of course, he had heard. Fae hearing was sharper than a human’s, and he had always been attuned to me. For all I knew, the tree was gossiping through its roots besides.

“I haven’t decided anything,” I said.

“No. And I would not recommend deciding while half the court is waiting to make a symbol of you.”

“That sounded almost protective.”

“It was strategic. Do not become sentimental.”

“I’ll try.”

She left me with a faint bow that managed to be respectful and irritating at the same time.

Caelan approached only after she was gone.

"She threatened you less than usual," he said.

"I think that was her version of an apology."

"Morwen's apologies often require interpretation."

"You'll have to teach me the language."

"If you stay."

The words landed softly, and the air in the vast room seemed to still. He must have felt it too, because he stopped a few paces away, giving me space as if it were a fragile gift. The courtly arrogance was gone. The demand was gone. All that remained was the question that had been buried under the world's ending.

I looked at the living tree because it was easier than looking at him. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

No hesitation. No clever answer. Just the truth, given to me because I had asked for it.

My throat tightened. "Even though I don't remember all of it?"

"Yes."

"Even though I might never love you exactly the way she did?"

Pain moved across his face, but he did not hide from the question. "I do not want you to become her for me."

I looked at him then and he held my gaze.

"I loved the woman you were," he said. "I failed her in ways I will spend a long time answering for. But you are here. You are not a memory I get to recover. You are not a vow I get to finish. If you stay, it should be because the woman standing in front of me wants to."

The tree above us shifted, white flowers stirring though there was no wind. I wanted to be unaffected by that answer. I wanted a clean space inside me where all choices could be made wisely, slowly, without the heat of old desire or the ache of half-retained memory. Instead, the chapel came back first—the smell of cold stone and beeswax—and then the missing year pressed in behind it, and then there was only him: the king he had been standing just behind the man he was trying to become, the two of them occupying the same face.

"I don't know what I want forever," I said.

"Then do not choose forever."

The relief was so sudden it almost made me laugh.

Caelan's mouth softened. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just nice when one of us says something sensible."

"I have my moments."

"Rare, but notable."

His smile appeared then, small and real, and the sight of it did something dangerous to my heart.

I stepped closer, into the circle of his warmth, until the air between us was a held breath. He went very still, a statue carved from tension and want, but his hands remained at his sides. I appreciated the restraint. I also wanted to shatter it.

“There is something I do want,” I said.

His gaze dropped to my mouth, his own voice lowering to a rough whisper. “Tell me.”

I lifted my hand and pressed my palm flat against his chest. Through the worn fabric of his shirt, his heart hammered a frantic, steady rhythm against my skin. His own. Free of the throne. Free of the vow that had been draining him one slow day at a time.

“I want time,” I said. “I want the truth, even when it is ugly. I want no one making choices for me because they are afraid.”

My fingers curled slightly against his shirt.

“And I want to know you without a throne between us.”

His breath changed.

“That,” he said, “I can give you.”

“Can you?”

“Yes.”

“Even if I decide to leave?”

His jaw tightened, but he answered. “Yes.”

The word cost him. I saw it. I felt it beneath my palm, in the hard beat of his heart. He would let me go if I asked him to. He would hate it, and it would hurt him, but he would let me walk out of the Hollow Court with my own name, my own life, my own will.

That was why I kissed him. Not because memory pushed me. Not because the palace bloomed or the court demanded or the old bond pulled tight between us. I kissed him because I wanted his mouth under mine and because, for the first time since waking in the woods, wanting did not feel like a trap.

Caelan did not move at first. Then his restraint broke on a quiet sound, low in his throat, and his hands came to my waist. I answered by pressing closer, by sliding my hands up his chest and around his neck, by opening my mouth beneath his until the kiss deepened and the room narrowed to heat, breath and the hard line of his body against mine. He backed me toward the wall, then stopped before I touched it.

“Still yes?” he asked.

The words were rough enough to make my knees weaken.

“Yes.”

His mouth found mine again, and this time there was no court watching, no throne listening, no silver roots brightening beneath the floor. Only Caelan, alive and warm and shaking slightly beneath my hands as though I were the dangerous thing in the room.

I drew back just enough to look at him. “Where?”

His eyes darkened. For one breath, the question hung between us, practical and indecent and suddenly impossible to take back. Then his mouth curved, not quite a smile.

“Your chamber,” he said.

“That seems presumptuous.”

“It is still yours.”

I took his hand. We left the throne room through a side corridor while the court argued softly behind us, too consumed by its own uncertain future to notice the way its king vanished with the woman they still did not know whether to fear.

The palace did not interfere. No doors slammed. No thorns reached. No mirrors whispered warnings from the walls. The corridors opened before us with a quiet that felt almost like permission, and when we reached the bride's chamber, the black wooden door stood waiting.

The room was softer than I remembered. Morning light filtered through the thorn-covered windows, pale and silver, touching the desk, the covered mirror, the couch, the bedchamber beyond. The papers I had scattered were still on the floor. The journal lay closed on the desk. My ruined wedding gown rested where I had left it, folded carefully at the foot of the bed.

I stepped inside and turned to face him. "Come in, Caelan."

He crossed the threshold. The room did not react. No sudden bloom of thorns. No whisper from beneath the floor. No hungry magic pressing itself into the space between us. The silence that followed was only silence.

Caelan watched me shut the door, and all the restraint he had carried from the throne room seemed to gather in his body at once. He looked more undone standing still than he had running through collapsing halls. Bandaged, bloodied, exhausted, beautiful enough to make my anger at him feel briefly inconvenient.

I went to him. The kiss was not careful now. It was not cruel either. It was the release of every interrupted touch, every unfinished memory, every moment when the throne had turned our wanting into a weapon and forced us to step apart. His hands slid over my waist, then stilled at my hips, gripping just enough to make me feel the strength he was holding back.

I wanted the strength and the restraint. I wanted the man who had learned to ask and the king who trembled when I answered. I pushed his coat from his shoulders. His shirt followed more slowly, because of the bandage and the wound beneath it. My fingers faltered when I saw the bruising there, the angry red line where the root had struck him. Caelan caught my hand before I could pull away.

"I am not made of glass."

"No," I said, looking at the marks the throne had left on him. "But you have been made to bleed often enough."

I touched the edge of the bandage, then the skin beside it. He drew in a slow breath, and this time the sound had nothing to do with pain.

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes, but not enough for you to stop touching me."

I laughed into the kiss, and the sound broke something open between us. Caelan smiled against my mouth, then kissed me harder, and the laughter became a gasp when he lifted me, carrying me through the open bedchamber door as if he had done it a hundred times before. Perhaps that was why my body knew to wrap around him, why my hands found his hair, why the bed seemed to rise beneath me like a memory finally choosing to become present.

He laid me down and stopped. He stood at the edge of the bed, breathing hard, his eyes moving over me in the green gown, over the loosened hair, the silver scars on my wrists, the blood-dark line across my palm. There was hunger in his face, yes, but not the kind the throne had known. I reached for him.

"Come here."

He did. Slowly at first, bracing one hand beside my shoulder, lowering himself over me with care for his wound and for me. The first brush of his body against mine stole the breath from my lungs. He was warm, solid, real, and when his mouth found the hollow beneath my jaw, memory rose in me like a tide.

I knew the shape of his shoulders. I knew the sound he made when my nails dragged lightly down his back. I knew that if I turned my head and offered him my throat, he would pause there, breathing me in as if restraint itself had a taste.

Then he kissed the place where my pulse beat wild beneath my skin.

“Memory?” he asked against my throat.

“Some.”

His mouth stilled. “Too much?”

I threaded my fingers into his hair. “Not enough.”

His hand moved over the green gown, following the curve of my waist, my hip, my thigh, and the fabric responded to him as though it remembered being given by the wood and had no patience for buttons. It loosened beneath his fingers, not falling away all at once, but opening where I wanted it to, where my breath caught. He touched me as if he had spent a year remembering and had finally been asked to forget enough to learn me again. Every stroke was patient until I made it impossible for him to remain patient. Every kiss deepened when I answered. When I arched against him, he said my name with a reverence that made heat coil low in my body and spread outward until I could no longer tell whether I was remembering desire or inventing it from the beginning.

I drew him closer, impatient now, needing the weight of him, the press of skin, the proof that the space between us belonged to neither throne nor vow. His breath broke when my hands found him, and for a moment the careful king vanished entirely. There was only Caelan, shaking above me, his forehead pressed to mine, his control fraying in a way that made me feel powerful and cherished at once.

“Tell me,” he said.

I knew what he was asking.

“Yes,” I whispered. “I choose this.”

His eyes closed. The last of the gown slipped aside. His body covered mine. The first full press of him against me drew a sound from us both, and for a heartbeat we simply stayed there, breathing together, skin to skin, alive in a room that had once held only evidence of what we had lost.

Then he moved. Slowly enough to let me feel every choice. Deeply enough to make thought loosen its hold. I clung to him, to the shifting muscles of his back, to the warmth of his mouth, to the broken sound of my name when I pulled him closer and asked without words for more. The world narrowed to the rhythm of us: his hand in my hair, my mouth against his shoulder, the slide of skin, the old bed creaking softly beneath us. Pleasure built without magic forcing it, without the palace blooming for it, without anything ancient listening for a way inside.

When the first wave broke over me, I cried out against his mouth, and Caelan followed me over with a sound so raw I felt it in my chest. He held himself above me for one trembling

second, then lowered carefully, his face buried against my neck, his breathing ragged and warm.

Neither of us moved for a long while. Outside the window, the thorns remained still. Eventually, Caelan lifted his head. His hair had fallen over his eyes, and there was a softness in him I had only seen in memories.

“Still here?” he asked.

I touched his face. “Still here.”

The smile that moved across his mouth was small, exhausted and devastating.

I should have said something clever. Something sharp enough to save us both from the tenderness settling over the room. Instead, I drew my thumb across his lower lip and let myself feel the dangerous simplicity of wanting him again.

“I don’t know what this means,” I said.

He turned his face and kissed my palm. “Then we will not name it yet.”

“Very sensible.”

“I am trying to impress you.”

“You’re naked in my bed. You may have already made your strongest argument.”

A laugh broke from him, startled and low, and I felt it everywhere his body still touched mine. The Hollow Court could argue beyond the walls. Veyran could hide in whatever old passage had taken him. The living root could grow where the throne had fallen, and the wood could wait with all the patience of ancient things.

In that room, with Caelan’s hand resting open against my ribs and my heart beating freely beneath it, I let myself have one thing without turning it into a vow.

I did not know how long we lay there. Time had never been especially trustworthy inside the Hollow Court, and after the throne’s death it seemed even less certain of itself. Morning light shifted across the floor, pale and silver through the thorns at the window. Somewhere beyond the chamber, voices rose and fell: the court arguing, servants calling to one another, doors opening that had not opened in years.

Caelan’s thumb moved slowly over my ribs, a small, absent stroke that made it difficult to remember all the reasons I should be sensible. He had not fallen asleep. Neither had I. We were too tired for sleep, too raw for easy silence, too aware of what waited beyond the door.

“You should go back,” I said.

His hand stilled. “Should I?”

“You are still king.”

“For the moment.”

I turned my head to look at him. “That sounded ominous.”

A faint smile touched his mouth, but it faded quickly. He lay beside me with one arm bent beneath his head, the bandage at his shoulder loose, his hair falling dark across the pillow. Without the coat, the shadows and the cold distance, he looked less like the Hollow King and more like a man who had survived something he had not yet allowed himself to understand.

“The court will want answers,” he said.

“The court seems to want many things.”

“Yes. That has been one of its defining flaws.”

I almost smiled. Then I thought of the living tree in the throne room, of Morwen's tired face, of servants standing in doorways as if waiting for permission to belong to themselves. I thought of Veyran slipping through old passages with allies at his back and vindication in his teeth.

"He'll come back," I said.

Caelan did not pretend not to know who I meant. "Yes."

"Soon?"

"Perhaps."

"And if he does?"

"Then we will deal with him."

We. The word settled between us. He turned onto his side, careful of his shoulder, and looked at me with that still, exact attention that had once felt like possession and now felt like restraint waiting for permission.

"I do not mean to claim your answer," he said.

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

I did. That was the inconvenient thing. I believed him now, at least in this. He would let me leave. He would let me stay. He would stumble sometimes, because he was still arrogant and wounded and shaped by a court that had called hunger tradition, but he would try. He was already trying.

A knock came at the outer door. Caelan's expression changed at once, though not fully into the king's. The man remained visible beneath it now. That mattered.

"My king?" Morwen's voice carried through the chamber. "The court is assembling. Also, if you are both alive, it would be strategically useful for someone to confirm it before three noble houses decide your absence means abdication, death or an invitation to be dramatic."

I closed my eyes. "She really does have a gift."

"She considers it one."

Caelan reached for his shirt, then paused and looked back at me. "I can send her away."

"No." I stood, taking the sheet with me for a moment before the green gown stirred meaningfully on the chair. "Apparently, I'm expected somewhere."

"You are expected nowhere unless you choose to be."

I let the sheet fall and reached for the gown. It wrapped around me before I could work out where the fastenings were, settling against my skin in soft green folds. Caelan watched, and this time the hunger in his face was quiet enough that I could smile at it.

"Careful," I said. "The court is waiting."

"I am developing a deep resentment of government."

"Another defining flaw?"

"Almost certainly."

We dressed in companionable silence, though silence was not the same as peace. My future waited beyond the door with thorns in its hands. The court might fracture. Veyran might return. My father was somewhere in this palace, alive and ashamed, and I did not yet know

what forgiveness would look like, or whether it would come at all. My memories were still incomplete. My heart was still deciding what shape love might take when no one forced it into a vow.

When I opened the door, Morwen stood in the corridor, eyes travelling over us with one swift, merciless glance.

“Well,” she said. “At least no one can accuse either of you of failing to restore morale.”

“Morwen,” Caelan warned.

I laughed before I could stop myself.

Morwen’s gaze flicked to me, and something like approval appeared and vanished. “Good. You’ll need that.”

She turned and began walking without waiting to see whether we followed. Caelan offered me his hand. I looked at it for a moment. Once, taking his hand had quieted the palace because something hungry wanted us close. Now the corridor remained still. No blooms. No whispers. No silver light crawling through the walls.

Together, we walked toward the throne room. The living tree waited where the throne had been, white flowers drifting through the air like soft, impossible snow. The court turned as we entered. Some looked relieved but some were clearly afraid. Some angry enough that I knew Morwen was right: survival would not be simple.

I looked past the court, through the high windows, to where Blackthorn Wood waited beyond the palace walls. It did not call. It did not claim. It only stood beneath the grey sky, ancient and patient.

For today, I stayed. Not because I was promised or bound. I stayed because the choice was mine, and after all the borrowed vows, stolen memories and hungry crowns, that was the first magic I trusted.

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