



# ZODIAC ACADEMY

BEYOND THE VEIL

CAROLINE  
PECKHAM

SUSANNE  
VALENTI



# BEYOND THE VEIL

---

ZODIAC ACADEMY #8.5

CAROLINE PECKHAM

SUSANNE VALENTI

*Beyond The Veil*  
Zodiac Academy #8.5  
Copyright © 2023 Caroline Peckham & Susanne Valenti

Interior Formatting & Design by Wild Elegance Formatting

All rights reserved.  
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

Beyond The Veil/Caroline Peckham & Susanne Valenti – 1st ed.

# CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author Note](#)

[Also by Caroline Peckham & Susanne Valenti](#)



*This book is dedicated to all those who wait for the living to join them beyond  
The Veil, watching ever on, and to all those they left behind. May you be  
brave enough to follow the longings of your heart to far-flung places,  
adventure into the unknown, take leaps of faith and dare to dream bigger  
than the moon.*

*Be brave, be hopeful, be you.  
And give them the show of a lifetime.*

## FOREWORD

*This is a bridging book which takes place beyond The Veil (in the land of the dead) during the events of book 8 in the Zodiac Academy series. It should be read after book 8 to avoid spoilers for that book and holds the answer to what takes place for the characters who are held within the clutches of death by this point in the story, as well as vital clues to the conclusion of this epic series.*



*Welcome to Solaria.*

*Note to all Fae: Lesser Orders will be sent to the Nebula Inquisition Centres if seen using Order gifts aggressively. All traitors of the crown will be sentenced to death in the palace amphitheatre, and their executions will be televised as a warning to insurgents.*

*King Lionel Acrux has pledged to make Solaria powerful once more and has vowed upon the stars to protect the loyal, honourable Fae of the nation at any cost.*

*The King's United Nebular Taskforce will be watching.*

*All hail the Dragon King.*

# Darius



Death struck me like an anvil to my chest, my soul hurled from my body to collide with the afterlife so hard that the crash of a gong rang out, making The Veil itself rattle with the force of my passing.

I leapt to my feet, my fist colliding with the closed gate which had trapped me here, and I bellowed Roxy's name as my path to her was cut off eternally.

My fist hammered against The Veil so forcefully that for several minutes, I didn't even notice the silence in my own chest, the lack of movement where my heart should have been pounding.

I sucked in a sharp breath as I stumbled back, my hand pressing to my stomach as I found a silk shirt where my armour had been, the silvery fabric unblemished and my hands clean of blood and grime. A golden cloak hung from my shoulders, a circlet falling across my brow as death dressed me in the clothes of a warrior, hailing me as some hero in the moment of my greatest failure.

I refused to accept it. Any of it.

I hurled myself against The Veil and fought harder, bellowing my refusal at death, demanding the ferryman take me back across the raging river which I could hear but couldn't see. Time turned to nothing as I raged against the truth of what I'd lost, of my failure, of all I'd left behind in life.

This wasn't happening.

It couldn't be happening.

“Darius?”

My blood chilled as I took in that voice, the soft, gentle embrace of it wrapping around my name as I realised what must have happened if she was here too.

I didn't want to turn, didn't want to look at her and confirm this unspeakable truth, because if the two of us were here, then my departure from the land of the living would have destroyed so much more than just Roxy's life.

Her hand landed on my shoulder, and I almost broke as I recognised the feeling of her presence close to mine, the memories I'd once let myself forget resurfacing. I remembered her holding me in her arms as a child, crawling beneath the sheets in my bed and whispering stories to me in the dark. I remembered curling up in her arms and feeling safe beneath those sheets, a world hidden away from the fear I didn't even fully understand in my father's presence.

“Mom?” I breathed, my voice cracking as I forced myself to turn, to look into the depths of her tear-lined eyes as she peered up at me.

Her hand moved to my jaw, those tears spilling over as she broke in the face my death, her own passing not even seeming to register with her, and I just had to watch her shatter before me. My beautiful, brave, mother, broken by the monster who had destroyed her life all over again.

“You had so much to live for,” she whispered, and somehow, I saw what she meant, like her memories were playing out for me within my own head, shared between us as she opened the gates of her mind to me.

I was running through Acrux Manor with Xavier at my side, giggling as I grasped his pudgy hand, and we sought out somewhere to hide from her in our game. I was growing year after year, feeling the love and pride and pain she had experienced as she was forced to stand back, as she watched Lionel beat and brutalise me in an attempt to make me into the creature he desired. And she feared he might succeed.

I saw myself with Roxy, saw the way she looked at me when I wasn't paying attention, how she let her walls crack sometimes and the love she felt for me spilled through. I saw my mom's heartbreak when she found out we were Star Crossed, felt her unending hatred for my father and what he had cost me. Then I felt her explosive joy when we'd defied the stars despite it all. I felt the pride she'd experienced when watching me turn against my

father, the love consuming her as she saw me soaring over the battlefield.

It was endless, her love for me, only matched by her love for Xavier too. Xavier who had been left behind, all alone without either of us now, the truth of that a horror I couldn't bear to accept.

"How?" I gritted out, unable to face any of the other questions ringing inside my skull.

"Xavier was wounded," she breathed. "He was running, fleeing the battle along with the other rebels, and someone had to hold the way clear for them. Hammy and I...we chose to give every drop of our magic to shield the retreat for as long as we could."

At her words, I lifted my head, finding Hamish beyond her, his hand on her shoulder, that gleam of death clinging to him too as he looked to me with utter heartbreak in his eyes.

They had been redressed in death just as I had, my mom wearing a gown of shimmering silver which swept down to her feet and made her look like an angel come to comfort. Hamish was dressed as I was, a warrior laid to rest with a golden cape pinned over his shoulders.

"We used all of our power to stop that cretinous turd from following our dear children," he swore. "We gave everything so that Xavier and Geraldine might stand a chance at survival."

"And they got away?" I demanded, looking around us, spotting more and more people, though there were no others who I recognised close by. The landscape surrounding us was coated in a golden haze, buildings and mountains just visible through it but nothing substantial enough to hold my focus as I hovered on the precipice of death.

"They did," Hamish confirmed, and Mom nodded, her thumb sweeping across my cheek as she tried to contain her grief over seeing me here too.

"We gave all we had until there was nothing left for us to fight with," she swore to me. "And when Lionel came, we only had our Orders, but we knew...we knew that we weren't a match for him and those who followed on his heels in their shifted forms."

"I would have fought him to the last breath," Hamish snarled fiercely. "But I wouldn't risk him taking my sweet Kitty for his own ever again."

I crumbled at those words, understanding the choice they'd made, the sacrifice they'd taken upon themselves. Because they were right, my father would have taken her if he could have. He would have taken her and punished her and committed all kinds of horrors before he ever let her find

relief in death.

“Thank you,” I gasped, reaching for Hamish as my chest shook with emotion, and I drew the two of them into my arms, holding them close and finding some small measure of solace in the fact that neither of them could ever be hurt by him again.

My mom’s slender frame was dwarfed by mine and Hamish’s, and I swallowed a thick lump in my throat as I felt her tears falling against my chest, her fingers coiling in the fabric of my shirt.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she sobbed, and the weight of my own failure crushed me as I nodded my agreement, my eyes meeting Hamish’s over her head.

“Your queen will be most tormented by this loss, my boy,” he said, clapping my arm bracingly as he tried to offer me some comfort, sensing the grief of his own passage from this world pressing down on him. “Fate has been cruel indeed this day.”

Something tightened in my chest, the feeling of true sorrow clinging to Hamish on my behalf overwhelming me. He was hurting for me, for my death and the pain it would cause those I loved. He was disappointed, and yet he wasn’t looking at me like I was a failure.

“I re-watched the battle and saw you fighting your father when I arrived here,” he said roughly. “I saw it all and I...you should have won. Fate was a wicked thing in that moment, and I cannot fathom the thoughts of the stars when they saw fit to take you from life and the love of your dear queen. It was a brave and honourable sacrifice you endured, and it was not without meaning. Xavier lives because of you. And many more besides him managed to flee the battle when the tides turned, making the most of the time you bought them to escape, ready to fight another day. You gave all you had.”

“But it wasn’t enough,” I replied, my words hollow, vacant, the unending need in me for another outcome to this fate more than I could bear.

“Never think that you are not enough,” Hamish growled, his grip on me tightening, and he took my jaw in his hand, locking his gaze with mine as he seemed to peer directly into my soul. “You fought with all you had, unflinchingly and without fear, giving yourself entirely to a fight that could have righted the world. You fought for love and justice, and you should have won. I am endlessly proud of you, dear boy. Endlessly, utterly proud of the man you proved yourself to be.”

Words abandoned me at that declaration, something inside the hardened



steel of my chest caving at the pure honesty he was offering me with those words. The man who had sired me had never once been proud of me like that. His pride in any accomplishment of mine had been purely a reflection of his own ego, any talent he saw in me something he simply claimed as his own doing.

Lionel Acrux had never cared what kind of man I was, nor what kind of honour I claimed, he only ever saw me as an extension of his own achievements, a puppet he could trot out to bolster his own self-worth. And even if he had been proud of me in my own merit, it was all too clear now that I never would have felt anything like the emotion I was experiencing from Hamish Grus's declaration. He made me feel like I was a man worth knowing, worth following, worth something far more important than my name or any title I might claim.

"Roxanya Vega was right to deny your bond when it was offered," my mom added. "Because it was the push you needed to find yourself, to become the man I had always known you could be. You set out to prove yourself worthy of her love, but in finding what was needed to do so, you became so much more. I have been proud of you from the first moment I held you in my arms, but I am honoured to have been there to watch you step into your destiny as fully as you did."

I shattered then, held between my mother and the man who she had found such brief and pure love with. I broke between them, for all I had failed to do, all I had lost and all the life which had been waiting for me beyond that moment on the battlefield.

Fate was a wicked mistress to have stolen all of us from the embrace of life, and I bared my teeth against the injustice of it all, letting myself fall apart.

I gasped as I felt the power of the woman who I had pledged my life to whipping out with such ferocity that it could be felt even here, beyond death.

I looked up, expecting to see her as I released my mother and Hamish, instead simply hearing the words which tore from her, the pure, undeniable power of them making the entire world quake.

"I will tear the heavens apart for this," Roxanya Vega snarled, the curse of a true queen lashing across the heavens and scoring them with her conviction. "I will shred your world to pieces and rip your hold on destiny from your fucking fists with blood and fire and vengeance for this," she screamed at the stars, her power making the ground beneath me tremble,

magic unlike any I'd ever felt before burning its way between the realms as she forced the stars to take note. "On my life, I curse you. On his life, I curse you. And for our fate, I'll end you!"

The power which blasted through The Veil pushed me to my knees, and I turned my face up towards the heavens too, a snarl on my lips as I joined her in that curse and made a vow of my own.

If she refused our fate, then I would too. I would fight with whatever power remained to me and use whatever I could to see an end to this injustice. If there was any way for us to reunite our souls once more, then I would give all I had to do so.

There was only her.

My one, my only, my wife.

# Hail



I clung to the golden railing that ringed the great orb in The Room of Knowledge, watching Roxanya break over the loss of her one true love upon a battlefield of decimation, while my other daughter fled to the mountains, bound to a curse so dark I had never seen the likes of it before.

“Merissa,” I rasped. “There must be something we can do.”

My wife’s hand wrapped around mine, our fingers threading as a sob of grief left her. She no longer possessed any gifts of The Sight here, those powers tossed to the breeze of mortality. In this eternal palace of death, we were little more than observers of the world. I was no longer allowed to fight in wars nor shift the tides of destiny, but I could not let go of this.

There were many souls in this room, watching that same giant orb, seeing living Fae through the eyes of the stars themselves, witnessing their fates play out like a show on a screen. There were some who never left here, those who crept up to sit upon one of the gilded seats of this circular room which, at its heart, was little more than an auditorium for the living. Those who never left their perches were enraptured by the living, destroyed by all they’d lost. They watched until they became husks of themselves, barely distinguishable as Fae, their bodies nothing more than flickering shadows, but their eyes.... those ever-watching, never-blinking eyes remained. The remnants, we called them. Most of their kind watched the living from the privacy of their own rooms within the Eternal Palace, fading away without anyone even knowing

they were gone. The door to the beyond crept up on them then, no doubt, when they were almost entirely lost, its silent hinges swinging open, a promise of oblivion beckoning them into its embrace.

I'd watched Fae pass straight through that door to the supposed sanctuary and solace promised beyond it, each of them satisfied with their death and at peace with the lives they'd left behind. But for those whose ties to the living were as strong as mine, passing on into the embrace of eternity was not an option.

I assumed that was why some souls remained here rather than staying in the privacy of their own personal sanctuaries within death. The Room of Knowledge was open to all, meaning the door would have to approach them in front of any who might be present, giving them a better chance at resisting its lure. So long as they latched onto something in life, they could keep their grip on this eternal palace, even when their features blurred and they all but forgot who they had once been.

"We cannot change fate," Merissa said, her grief slicing through her beautiful features. Her deep bronze skin near glittered in this place, and her ebony hair shone like starlight. My wife had been a vision in life, and death had immortalised that beauty, the stars always seeming close to her, like she was their prized possession beneath their eternal roof. Though even they could not lay a claim to her that was deeper than mine. They could admire her all they wanted, but they could only envy the king who she had chosen as her keeper.

I accepted her words, aching to step out of this place more than I ever had before, to return to the living and destroy the man who had caused all of this. Lionel Acrux was the root of the pain in my family's lives and the lives of so many others. If I had only seen it sooner, if I had stopped him while I still reigned on earth...

The orb was a great ball of silvery light which twisted and shifted like a pool of fog-drenched water. It used the power of the stars to show those of us lingering in death what was occurring within the realm of the living. It was enormous, taking up the centre of The Room of Knowledge, which was effectively an amphitheatre, countless gilded seats ringing the orb and rising up all around it on every side. Each soul who sat watching it could view their own heart's desire at once. Golden arches swept overhead, grand awnings hung between them to shelter those who sat on the seats, but directly above the orb itself, a hole in the roof let the stars look down upon the glistening

ball of power. The sky there was ever dark, the stars bright within it, their strength echoing over us at all times.

The Veil hummed with the power of so many battle-worn souls spilling through it at once, and I bowed my head, knowing what was coming. We had watched as Catalina and Hamish made a final stand against Lionel, and now it was time to greet them after so many years apart. There was freedom in their deaths, and it had not been in vain, I had seen that much, but it still pained me to know more of my friends had fallen.

Them, I could face. I could handle it, but it was the other man who was moving this way that I could not stand to greet. The one who should have remained in the realm of the living with my daughter, bound to her, protecting and loving her.

“Is there no justice left in the hearts of the stars?” Azriel Orion’s sharp voice drew my attention to my left where he stood watching reality play out, his dark hair unkempt as always and worry lines etched across his forehead. He reached for the orb with shaking fingers that curled tightly into a fist, his own grief potent.

In our rooms, we all had access to a window which gave a view of those we had loved and left behind in the living realm, but here we could see more, we could widen our view to watch something as all-encompassing as a battle as it took place. So here we had gathered. Here we had watched as the rebellion our children had spearheaded had fallen to ruin and Lionel Acrux had once again triumphed where he had no right to.

I pressed my hand to Azriel’s shoulder, drawing his focus to me.

“What have you seen in the great orb?” I asked, wishing to share his burden with him in hopes it might lighten the load a little. So much was taking place at once, and it was impossible to keep track of anything more than the fates of my own children.

“Lavinia has taken Lance hostage. He has offered himself to her in payment for Gwendalina’s curse,” his voice cracked. “He made a Death Bond on it, Hail.” There was pride shining in his eyes, but fear most of all, and a weighted sigh left me.

My mind sifted over this new fact. There was hope in this offering his son had made, a chance for Gwendalina to escape the binds of her curse, and my gratitude to Azriel’s boy spilled forcefully through my chest.

Azriel’s daughter, Clara, stood just beyond him, her gaze still riveted to the orb. Her dress was silver and flowing, her eyes bright as they reflected the



swirling glow contained within the sphere of knowledge. She looked a little younger than the age she had truly died, her brown hair cut to her ears and the freckles dusting her nose looking as though they had seen the kiss of the sun recently.

I squeezed Azriel's arm. "Your son's love knows no bounds, and I know well that he would die for my daughter. But he is no fool. He would not make such terms with no hope in sight."

Azriel swallowed thickly, nodding to me, distress written into his features.

"Dad," Clara croaked, turning away from the orb and pressing her face to Azriel's chest. "She's going to torture him."

Azriel held her tight, and I turned back to Merissa, who was lost to the orb's offerings again while tears tracked silently down her cheeks. To see her like that was another knife in my unbeating heart, and rage took root in me, climbing up through my chest like ivy growing beneath a baking sun. I may have been long dead, but my wrath was as robust a thing as it had been in the Fae realm.

"I will not stand for these fates," I snarled, moving closer to Merissa. "Keep watching over them, I will go to the stars."

I turned my back on the orb and made a path for the arching doors, hostility decorating my face.

"Hail," Merissa called after me, her voice so full of grief it broke what was left of my restraint. "Bargain with them. I will offer anything to free our children from the curse of the stars."

"Of course, my love," I replied, then shoved the doors wide and made a few souls stumble aside from the ferocity of my sparking aura.

Merissa knew well I would do as she willed, but we had tried countless times to offer anything to the stars to break the curse laid upon our daughters by Clydinius. The fallen star, a creature who had not followed its rightful path once it had tumbled from the heavens long ago, twisting the laws of old and changing fate. It should have released the power within, offering it up to the world as a final gift as was decided by the ancient stars themselves. Instead, Clydinius had thwarted nature and unbalanced the true path, setting a curse upon my family for generation after generation with the deal it had offered my ancestor.

The broken promise had taunted me so deeply in life, and now it remained to taunt me in death. I knew its truth. It was the second truth I had

perceived within the afterlife, finding the memories of all that had happened in the lead up to my demise and watching them play out from the sanctuary of my room in the Eternal Palace, the first being that of Lionel's Dark Coercion over my mind.

The bitterness of that terrible day still laid deep within me, and I did not believe it would ever be put to rest until Lionel's soul passed into the eternal fields of chaos, hurled through the Harrowed Gate, or tossed down into the raging river which led to that place. Only pain awaited him there.

He deserved that, but far more besides. I would see him through the boundary of The Veil myself, I would walk him on his final path and lay him at the feet of the one they called Crucia. A being of death designed by the stars themselves to inflict unimaginable torment upon the souls of the wicked for all of time. That creature possessed blades forged from agony itself, able to cut apart the essence of a Fae and bind them in infinite suffering.

Only then would my soul find peace.

I moved across the landscape of The Veil, pacing through the picturesque valley beyond the palace, bathed in the golden glow of the sun above. A tower lay to the east of the Eternal Palace, its shadow long and its gaze perpetual. The Stars' Spire, where starlight lived within the walls and moonbeams danced like living creatures across the ornate floor. The whisper of the stars themselves carried on the wind that swept through its glassless windows, the taste of destiny colouring the air.

I didn't pause as I reached the stone archway which led into the tower and stepped onto the stairwell where few Fae ever dared to step, climbing the spiralling stairs that rose up and up forever, the structure as white as purest sunlight and almost blinding to look upon.

I climbed ever on, the power of the beings above pressing in as I approached the entrance to the Halls of Fate. I would not be permitted there, but a king of the living still held sway as a king in the afterlife. They listened to me even when it meant nothing, but at least they would hear me. And today, they would do more than that, I was determined of it.

I made it to the door that stood weightlessly at the peak of the stairway, nothing below and nothing above. It was a simple door forged of something dark, like the absence of light between stars, and the space around it was foggy, the strange clouds made of a lambent, sparkling light.

I pressed my hand to it, the forces in the air trying to make me retreat, to turn me away from this need of mine. All wants faded in The Veil, that was

what they'd told me when I arrived. Eventually, I would want for nothing, because I would either possess everything, find peace, and move on, or I would become a remnant. One of those lost souls with their ever-watching eyes, clinging to the living and losing grasp on true death. The stars often told us to seek solace, find acceptance, embrace harmony. Then we would truly rest. We would feel the call of the Destined Door, and we would walk through it into bliss.

There was no resting for me, and I would not become one of those ruptured beings who had forgotten their own name. I would remain Hail Vega and stand at the side of my wife for all of eternity. But while my daughters remained in peril and Lionel Acrux still walked the world, I would always be afflicted by their suffering, and I would not bow to the whims of the stars while my family were in danger.

"Open this door," I commanded, my voice ringing through the air with all the conviction of a monarch. I was power embodied, and they would not keep me out this day. They would hear me and my demands, and they would damn well answer them too.

*"Father of the flames,"* they spoke, but they did not open the fucking door. *"We know what it is you seek. But fate lies not in our hands."*

"You are the stars!" I boomed. "If it does not lie with you, then what are you worth? Are you nothing but false gold? Gleaming prettily with no true value at your core?"

*"You know well that we cannot intervene. Clydinius holds their fates in his grip."*

"He is but one star!" I roared, my voice echoing out into the strange clouds around this door. "How can you not have the might to take on just one of your brethren? What greatness do you truly possess if you cannot do this?"

*"Once a star has fallen, it is beyond our intervention. All that lies in the living realm can only be influenced by our power, not ruled by it."*

"Then send another star down there to destroy your brother," I commanded.

*"Clydinius has broken the laws of old. When we fall, we must release our power. No other star would dare do what he has done and defy the Origin. It has already led to a mighty unbalance. Chaos cannot be righted by more chaos. Now rest, regal soul of the eternal, this is not your fight."*

"It is my daughters' fight, so it is mine," I snarled.

*"It is not your fight,"* they repeated, and I felt their presence withdrawing,

leaving me with no answers nor solutions.

But I was not even close to done. I would find a way to send word to my daughters, my children, and tell them what the broken promise was. I'd learn how to push deeper into the barriers between worlds and offer them the truth that the stars continued to keep from them.

If the stars truly wanted balance, they would tell my children the truth of the promise so that they might keep it. But I knew why the stars held off; I had sensed it when I'd questioned them on it once. Even stars could feel fear, it seemed. And the last thing they wanted was for Roxanya and Gwendalina to choose to raise Clydinius into Fae form, the power he could wield then would be some unimaginable terror. But the stars had just confirmed there was no other way. So I would make it my duty to force them into relinquishing that truth to my children.

# Darius



This place was ever changing, a song whispering answers on the wind at the merest hint of a question whenever it had crossed my mind.

I had been here and there, somewhere between while caught in the embrace of my mother and Hamish, but with a yank which felt like I was cast through a sea of starlight and darkness, I found myself standing on that hillside where I had felt the last furious beats of my heart before death had stolen me away.

It was instantly obvious why fate had delivered me to this place, the power of Roxy's curse on the stars summoning me to her in her moment of earth-shattering grief.

I fell to my knees beside her, my own body sprawled in the dirt beneath her as her wings created a cocoon over it.

The shock of seeing myself there should have been more than enough to break me, but I was ruined by the utter devastation which lined every inch of Roxy's bruised and bloodied body.

I was there but not. The wind which lifted tendrils of her ebony hair did nothing at all to me while I remained beside her, a ghost without substance. Looking down only confirmed what I already knew; there was nothing of me here. I was observing this, not living it. Her grief and need for me must have summoned this wretched piece of me back to her, and my pain in our separation was only multiplied by the forced confrontation.



“I’m here,” I told her, reaching for her arm, but neither my words nor my touch could cross The Veil for her to behold them. I was here, but I wasn’t.

Roxy lay prone across the blood-stained chest of the body which had once seemed so intrinsically mine, her entire being trembling and tear stains carved through the dirt on her cheeks.

I sucked in a breath as I took in the jagged cut to her palm, understanding it as the knowledge of what she’d sworn for me. The promise that had radiated through the foundations of the realms themselves.

There were eyes on us now. All-seeing, all-knowing eyes belonging to creatures which seemed to be holding their breath, watching, waiting, wondering...

I didn’t have to wonder though. My beautiful, broken, warrior of a wife was no mystery to me. Those words she had spoken had been full of truth and purpose, the power of them casting ripples through the fabric of fate. Destiny was shifting, uncertainty reigning, and I would be ready to fight on from beyond The Veil in whatever way I could.

I shifted closer to her, my knees in the dirt beside hers, and yet I couldn’t feel it, couldn’t feel anything aside from the soul-crushing grief which surrounded her. I wasn’t able to do anything here, wasn’t able to comfort her in any way, to show her that I would never truly leave.

“I’m here, Roxy,” I growled more forcefully, reaching out to brush my fingers through her hair, but my touch met with nothing, and she didn’t so much as blink in my direction.

Pain shredded the fragments of my heart as I was forced to watch her shatter for me, her silence this piercing, soul destroying thing which ate into me and made me bleed for her while she just lay across my vacant body, willing the world to change its mind on our fate.

My gaze shifted to the dagger which had stolen me from her world, the mixture of her blood and mine on it humming with a power so ancient it felt like the air was trying to recoil from it. There was menace in the oath she had sworn upon that blood, a dark promise which coiled from it into the very fabric of all that existed around us and beyond.

She was still bleeding from the wound she had carved into her own palm, her pain making me suffer while I was forced to simply observe it.

Power roiled within me, a deep and unending well of it stirring with so much more than the depths of my flames and ice. There was a purity to my magic which I had never noticed before crossing into death. But now that I

had, it was like a song whispered into the corners of my mind.

I needed to return to her, needed to get back to her and draw her into my arms, banish that most powerful hurt which I could see destroying her from within.

“I’m right here, Roxy,” I insisted, louder now as I pushed to my feet, that power rising within me, churning and roaring and begging for a way out of this fate.

I reached for her, my entire being radiating that power as the air around me hummed with it, a clang of magic echoing against the walls of death which contained me, a roar resounding through the air as the force of it bucked, and I threw everything I had into fighting this path.

Someone started calling my name, the desperate plea on their lips rocking the foundations of my fracturing soul. But I ignored them and the truth of what I was now.

I couldn’t be in a place without her. I couldn’t go back on the oaths I’d made to her so soon. She was mine and I was hers. We weren’t destined to be apart. I refused it.

Roxy cupped my body’s cold jaw in her hand and found my lips with a kiss so bittersweet that it stole the breath from my lungs. My eyes fell closed as I felt the press of her lips against mine, the ghost of me almost tasting her as her tears dripped against my cheeks before she drew back.

As she released her hold on my still body, the sensation of her abandoned me entirely, a strangled cry escaping me as I was abandoned on this dark path, the space between us so thin, yet completely impenetrable.

“Your soul is bound to mine,” she breathed against the unmoving lips beneath her, and the pure, potent energy which made up all that I was now stirred in reply, the heart and soul of me needing her to know I agreed with those words more deeply than she could ever know. Goosebumps prickled her skin and her spine straightened as if she might have been able to feel that, and her words were rougher as she went on. “And I won’t rest until I make every star in the heavens fall for trying to cleave us apart.”

“Yes,” I growled, all the power I owned ratcheting up within me, blazing with a need for an outlet, my desire to touch her making everything surrounding me quake. I reached for her bleeding hand, urging her to feel me, to know I would never truly leave her.

Roxy looked down at the cut on her palm, seeming to feel that raw energy which had connected us from the very first time I laid eyes on her. Her blood

knowing mine, her power aching for my own.

She curled her fingers closed around the wound, her limbs trembling as she stood, the fatigue and pain which so clearly held her in its deathly grip making me ache to reach for her, to hold her in my arms and lend her my strength.

Roxy looked down at my broken body and I could feel her love for me in the ferocity of her heart-breaking gaze. It passed through The Veil with ease, that feeling so far beyond any barrier that might try to part us.

My warrior queen. The last one standing on a battlefield so drenched in blood and ruin that none but the stars themselves could have ever foreseen it. It was a tragedy beyond measure, the blow struck against our rebellion so harshly that I feared what it would mean for the war as a whole. But one look at the face of Roxanya Vega as she surveyed that blood strewn battlefield made it clear to me that this was no end play. This war was not won, the fight not over. I had never once seen that girl back down from anything, and even here, in the midst of defeat, her husband's blood staining her hands and her whole world shattering around her, she still stood tall and defiant, daring the world to come for her.

A breath left her in a cloud of vapour which rose and then dispersed as she surveyed the devastation of the battlefield, a hardness sinking into her skin which made my own flesh prickle. That girl had been born with a wall of iron surrounding her heart, gilding her spine, and edging her tongue, but I watched as that iron turned to steel before me, her walls becoming impenetrable, her pain sinking deep within her until she was using it as a foundation for her very soul.

She wasn't going to break. She was rallying herself for the fight of her life, and I was right there beside her, urging her on.

Roxy picked up her sword, her own blood mixing with all that already stained it as the wound on her palm continued to bleed in honour of the oath she'd sworn on it.

I watched as she faltered, the weight of all she'd fought for and all she'd lost pressing down on her so heavily that I knew any other would have buckled beneath it.

I moved closer to her, wrapping my hand around hers where she gripped that sword, even if she couldn't feel it, pushing whatever strength I had into her, offering up whatever remained of me at her service.

"You can do this. You were born to wear the crown, and you can bear the

weight of it no matter how heavy it becomes,” I swore to her.

Her jaw tightened and I growled my approval.

“Fate has never forced you to bend to it before,” I said, a phantom tarot deck appearing before me as I spoke the words, The Lovers mocking me from the top of the pile, blood splattered across them, a flame scorching the stiff card on which they’d been painted.

I took the deck and held it before the woman I loved as her eyes fell closed, her resolve hardening. I cast The Lovers aside as I felt her will pressing in on me, followed by Five of Swords who whispered of defeat, then the Death card, King of Pentacles, the King of Swords, Roxy’s will shoving them aside as she ignored their whispered words, as if she could somehow tell which card was being drawn, as if she could feel their power even here beyond The Veil and refused to hear their words. More and more cards tumbled to the mud and blood by my feet until finally, The Chariot met with my fingers, and I fell still. Vengeance, war, triumph.

Roxy’s lips tightened as she latched onto that meaning, like she’d been the one to shuffle the deck, her will alone forcing the result she required as she chose her own fate.

“Defy the stars,” I said fiercely, willing her to do so with all I was and all I had.

She released a breath and forced her eyes open once more, the divide between us growing as she did so, The Veil fluttering between us, parting us despite how desperately I fought to remain there with her.

She sheathed her sword in the filthy, bloodstained scabbard which hung from her hip, her chin high as she looked out across the battlefield, her beautiful features void of all emotion, that fire which ignited her soul all but snuffed out in the face of her loss.

The devastation surrounding her was unreal. Charred and blackened ground circled her, the last stand of the Nymphs reduced to nothing in the face of her terrible power.

She was trembling, her body spent, energy sapped, and I could see how thin her resolve was. The grief that consumed me was compounded for her; all she could see of me a dead body on the ground. She was so alone. And all I wanted was for her to know that I was still here, that I would never truly leave.

Whether it had anything to do with the strength I was battling to offer her or not, Roxy straightened. Shivers wracked her body, and she curled her right

hand into a fist, the blood dripping between her fingers from the deep cut on her palm as she set her eyes on the far side of the battlefield and that strength in her eyes flared brighter at last.

“I’ll be back,” Roxy murmured to my corpse, the pain that promise caused almost dropping me to my knees. This couldn’t be it for us. I couldn’t be cursed to simply watch over her from this moment on, never able to pass through The Veil which divided us, never able to hold her in my arms again.

Roxy flexed her wings and for a moment, it seemed like she would take off, but she banished them instead, a heavy sigh escaping her as her Order form retreated, making her seem so much smaller than before, so much more alone.

She strode away across the battlefield, and though I tried to follow, the heavy fall of my feet met with resistance, my boots scraping over the dirt inch by inch, weighted manacles seeming to wind their way around my arms.

A defiant roar escaped me as they tightened, pulling me back, the strength of my will the only thing keeping me standing there, my boots carving ruts into the dirt, my muscles bulging with the force of all I was.

But it was no good.

With a final bellow ripping from my throat, I was hauled back, the distant figure of my one love stolen from sight, my spine colliding with a hard surface and all sense of her disappearing entirely.

# Hail



Darius materialised before me, almost fully corporeal once more as the stars dragged him away from the world of the living and deposited him in the great hall of the Eternal Palace where all souls found a home beyond The Veil.

They didn't much like when we did that, but it was impossible to fully control the desperate yearning of lost souls to return to those they'd left behind. Those who remained in this place, refusing to move on, were full of strife, the Fae realm still holding answers, hopes, truths, and loves that none of us could let go of.

The huge room opened out around us, souls coming and going, the vaulted ceilings painted with points of time when fate had turned and changed everything. Some of the images detailed here were so long forgotten that it was impossible to say when they'd been or what had happened in that moment which had once been so important. Others were fresher, the hall expanding to include them, moments from my own life and the lives of my children now marked there among countless others. Points of time that seemingly mattered, a ceaseless story woven from the Fae's very first ancestors right up until now.

I folded my arms as I came eye to eye with the man who had sacrificed himself out on that battlefield in the name of all he cared for. I knew him. I had watched him long enough, seen the poor choices he had made, witnessed

the stubbornness of his soul. And all in all, I was still undecided on whether I liked him or not.

“Hail,” he breathed, no submission in his eyes nor bending of his back, nor any use of my former title.

“Darius,” I said curtly.

“Roxy is-” he started, sweeping toward me with passion in his eyes, but I cut over him in a baritone voice.

“I believe she prefers her friends to call her Tory.”

His jaw tightened. “I think I know what my wife prefers. And I am no mere friend.”

A growl rumbled in my chest, and he raised his chin, all challenge. Little did he know, I had been waiting a long time to pick this fight.

“Darius.” Merissa’s voice came at my back, sorrow washing through her tone. She swept past me, wrapping her arms around him, and he stiffened in surprise.

“Merissa,” I growled. “Have you forgotten what he did?”

“He offered up his life for those he loves, including our children.” She whirled on me, gaze full of fire. “He has redeemed himself in my eyes.”

“I believe he has balanced out the scales, returning him to ground zero,” I said.

“We don’t have time for this,” Merissa hissed. “We need to help our children.”

“We can’t help them now,” Darius said darkly. “What good are the dead to anyone?”

“Do not wallow in self-pity any longer, there is much we can do.” I twisted around, finding Catalina Acrux standing there at the side of Hamish Grus.

Grief closed around my heart, and I did not want to accept that some of that pain belonged to the man who now stood at my back. But I could let it be seen when it came to these two noble Fae.

“Well bless my gollywobbles,” Hamish stammered, jaw opening and closing as he stared from me to Merissa, then fell down to his knees with a wail. “All hail the Vega line!”

Catalina gazed at me in disbelief, then shook her head in apology. “Forgive me for all my ex-husband did to you. I never knew, I swear it.”

I frowned, the tightness of my chest speaking of that shame of mine. “And the same to you,” I said, dipping my head a little as we shared in this

dark truth. Both victims of the same tyrant, both helpless to escape him during our lifetimes, though I supposed she had come closer than I ever had.

“I’m so sorry you had to see your son cross over before his time,” Merissa croaked, descending on Catalina and hugging her tight, and Catalina released a sob that was laced with heartache, her eyes latching onto Darius over my shoulder.

“It was my failure that led me here,” Darius said bitterly. “But my time would have come to an end soon enough either way. Dying in battle was preferable at least.”

I glanced back at him, my shoulders tight, fury daggering through me, but fuck, I couldn’t deny the pain I felt at his words. I turned from him again before he could see any glimpse of it on my face, retreating behind a wall of duty. “We must make a plan.”

“Anything, sire.” Hamish sprang back to his feet. “I am at your service like a walrus in a dinghy, oar grasped a-tight in my flipper.”

“You are not in service to anyone now, Hamish,” I said. “My crown lays in The Palace of Souls, awaiting my daughters’ claim upon it.”

“Hamster bear, is that you?!” a warbling voice filled the air that was laced with sorrow, and I found Florence Grus bounding towards us with tears streaming down her cheeks, her light brown hair flowing out behind her like a cape. Her black dress was covered in purple wolfsbane flowers, and she held her large breasts as she ran to stop them from bouncing.

“Well bless my bachelor’s button,” Hamish gasped just before Florence collided with him, leaping up to kiss both of his cheeks. She was a tiny woman, barely past five feet in height, and Hamish was a tower of a man. I had known both of them in life, had seen their love for one another burn with all the wildness of high school passion, and had always admired the purity of it.

Catalina broke apart from Merissa, wiping the tears from her cheeks as she eyed Florence with uncertainty.

“Oh, Hamster,” Florence cried, grabbing his hand in her tiny one with a loud sniff. “I have waited upon this day for eleventy hundred years, it seems. Yet I could never have fathomed it to come as soon as it has, nor as wickedly for it to fall upon your bodacious brow.” She turned to Catalina, letting out a high-pitched shriek that made me wince, then she grabbed her hand too. “Lady of the new dawn, I saw you rise from the scaled nightmare who imprisoned you like a whelk in a rusted boat bottom. I have wept in your



moments of pain, I have rejoiced in your moments of glory, and I have fallen for you almost as deeply as my big Hamster has.”

“Oh, wow, um...” Catalina looked to Hamish, lost for words before opening her mouth to speak again, but Florence barrelled on.

“If friends could be lovers, you would be mine,” she hiccupped. “We shall be the merriest of Madelines. And don’t you worry your Petunia about my dalliances. My days of wiggling the wango stick are long gone, and even if they weren’t, I would have no mind to pursue the past.”

“Florry, my dear,” Hamish rasped. “I am so deeply apologetic to walk into the land of the dead with my heart in the grasp of another, and yet, at the very same time, I cannot apologise at all, for my love for Catalina is as true and as desperate as ours once was.”

Florence nodded, smiling through her tears and bringing Hamish’s and Catalina’s hands together between hers before releasing them and stepping back. “Time is a taddler of a teapot, Hamster, isn’t that what you always said?”

“Yes, Florry,” he croaked before looking to Catalina and drawing her close. “A taddler indeed.”

Catalina smiled at Hamish, her love for him so clear, it made the air glitter. Without true, corporeal bodies, it seemed our aura spilled from our souls more easily here. Perhaps that was why everything seemed to shimmer with a faint golden fog. I hardly remembered a time when the world hadn’t appeared as such around me.

“Forgive me.”

I turned at the familiar voice, finding Azriel Orion there with urgency in his eyes as he looked between us all. “Catalina - it’s your son. Your, uh, *other* son. He’s in great peril. On the verge of death.”

“Xavier,” Darius gasped.

“What can I do?” Catalina ran to Azriel in terror, and he turned, beckoning us after him.

Merissa hurried to me and I gripped her hand, her fingers sliding between mine, and I found a fortress of pain housed in her eyes.

“We will do all we can,” I said, raising my free hand to carve my thumb along the line of her cheekbone.

“I cannot bear to see another person we love walk through The Veil,” she whispered, her features pinched in stubbornness like she could will it not to be so. And knowing my wife, she would do just that.

“Come,” I said, and we hurried to follow the others, moving through the Eternal Palace, the walls barely tangible in places, revealing only shimmering stars beyond, like a view into a ever-present night sky.

We stepped out into the golden glow of the ethereal landscape within The Veil, and Azriel led the way down the curving path which led to The Room of Knowledge. We climbed the stone steps, then moved through the arched entrance where we all crowded close to the swirling orb, surrounding Catalina as she gazed at the reality of Xavier’s fate within it, her knuckles blanching as she gripped the golden rail.

“What is this place?” she breathed.

“Simply think of Xavier and you will see him here,” Azriel explained, motioning to the swirling orb.

She nodded, Darius moving to grip her hand as she did as instructed, and the space before her shifted, revealing Xavier.

He lay prone on his back, his features pinched in pain and his face terribly pale. Geraldine stood at his side in her giant Cerberus form, offering him the anti-toxins in her saliva, the power of it so fierce I could almost taste it here in the land of the dead. Catalina became less visible, her soul reaching for Xavier’s, and suddenly we could see her in the glimmering orb, standing at her son’s side, laying a hand on his arm. I reached for Catalina’s soul, offering her the power that still thrummed within me, and Darius hurried to follow, slipping away into the space between realms to lay his own hand on Xavier.

Merissa’s power joined mine, then Hamish’s, Florence’s, and Azriel’s followed. Together, we gave what we could and watched as minutes turned to hours, time like water here, one drop flowing into the next, but finally Xavier’s features grew less taut, and a flush of colour returned to his skin.

Catalina and Darius came back to us, and the power my soul harboured withdrew into this false body of mine. Elemental power didn’t exist here, at least not in the way it had in the living realm. We were pure energy, and the magic of our souls could not be stripped from us.

I moved to take a seat in the ring of stands which circled this room, swiping a hand over my face before settling my gaze on the shimmering orb and seeking out my daughters and son.

I found Roxanya first, the light of dawn brightening the dark hollows of her eyes as she stared across thousands of soldiers who had fought in the battle.

“Glory is an accolade coveted by so many,” she called to them. “It is what a lot of us expected to claim when we faced our enemies on the battlefield at last, and yet it is not what many of you feel you found. What glory can be found in defeat after all?”

Silence stretched out and I sat up straighter, my daughter’s voice commanding all attention, and Merissa moved to join me. We’d felt the power of the curse she’d placed upon the stars when she had found her husband dead on that battlefield. Every soul in this place had felt that, and I was on edge because of it.

Never had I heard of a living soul affecting the space between realms with their power like that, never had I heard of any arrogant enough to curse the stars themselves. But she had done it, and if the fire in her expression was anything to judge by, she had no intention of going back on that promise.

My gaze strayed to Darius whose attention was now on her too, his hands tight around the railing as he stared at her, the power of his emotions undeniable, the need in him to return to her palpable. But that wasn’t a fate they could claim, no matter how desperately they may have wished for it. Roxanya continued to speak, and I gave her my full focus once more.

“What glory can be found when standing shoulder to shoulder with men and women you don’t even know while united against oppression and persecution? What glory can be found when standing firm against a tide of tyranny so all-encompassing that you feel like a grain of sand trying to resist an entire ocean? What glory is there in seeing Fae you love cut down and butchered by monsters weaving shadows and creatures born of darkness? What glory can you claim when you fight against a leash which has already tightened around your throat? When laws are written against your rights and a false king dons a crown and no one manages to knock it from his over-inflated head?”

Roxanya’s face was laced with pain and all the loss she had faced, leaving me with the burning need to wrap her in my arms. But I had long lost the chance to comfort my little girl. I had only ever been able to watch as she struggled through all the pain life had offered her, never able to offer the embrace she had so often needed.

“What glory is there in fighting a losing battle? In standing with blade in hand and magic burning fiercely through you, against a force far bigger than your own, without fear ever once making you flinch? When even the stars won’t help us, and the night turns dark with shadows? What glory is there

then, I ask you?”

Roxanya gripped the pommel of her sword and went on, her voice full of spirit and ire.

“Every one of you standing before me and every Fae who fell on that battlefield fighting by our sides knows the answer to that question. Because we don’t need glory. We only need to know that we are fighting for what is right. We are fighting for freedom from oppression and the end of a tyrant. We are standing up and saying no more. And Lionel Acrux may have sat his scaly ass on my father’s throne, but he is nothing but a serpent perched on a pretty seat. I don’t bow to him or his false crown. Do you?”

A deafening roar of defiance met her question, and a dark smile curved her lips that was worthy of my own.

“No war is won in a single battle,” she went on. “No kingdom claimed with one fight. And though we may have bled for our cause on that field of chaos and carnage, they bled for it too. We cut them in that fight. We made them bleed for us and a thousand tiny cuts can kill just as surely as a single blow to the heart. So I say we keep cutting Lionel Acrux and his shadow bitch bride in every way we can. We cut and slice and carve them up and we keep fighting and fighting them until the bitter end, when I know in my soul that we will claim more glory than any of us ever dared wish for!”

Darius shoved away from the railing at the edge of the orb, smoke spilling from his lips as his Dragon stirred and Catalina went after him as he stalked off into the palace.

Pride spilled through me, and Merissa laid her hand on mine, her expression echoing my own feelings. Then as one, not needing to say anything at all, we sought out our other daughter in the orb, finding her in the belly of a dark cave with a cloud of wicked omens clinging to her.

My pride gave way to terror, and I stared helplessly at my flesh and blood, not knowing how I could help her.

“Gwendalina,” I called to her, aching for her to hear me through the space between realms, to think of me and draw me close so that I might remind her she was not alone. Oh to hold her in my arms now, to promise everything would be alright.

“You can fight this, my darling,” Merissa called to her, and the world shifted, tilting on its axis as we were drawn to her through our desperation alone.

I fell to my knees before my little girl, her face pinched in pain, eyes shut

as shadows shifted and wriggled across her body. Though I knew it wasn't her own agony she lamented, but of those she had left behind on the battlefield after the violent beast of shadow had forced her to kill time and again.

"You are not that creature," I growled, reaching for her, and cupping her cheek. She blinked at that very same moment as if she could just sense the warmth of me.

"We're here," Merissa promised, kissing Gwendalina's temple, and brushing her fingers into her hair, though it didn't truly stir beneath her touch. "You possess the blood of the Phoenixes, but not just that. You possess my blood too. The blood of the Voldrakian royals. Generation after generation of warriors who fought and bled for each other. This beast is your enemy and yours alone. You will defeat it, darling, I have no doubt."

The air shuddered and The Veil forced us to release our grip on her, stealing us away where I found Merissa looking to me in agony.

"She has faced down each of her demons and come out victorious," I said with passion. "This will just be another mark of her greatness once she overcomes it."

Merissa blinked back tears and her jaw tightened as she latched onto the truth of my words. "They are fighting battles we should have raised them to face. They should have been far more prepared for the grim days they have endured."

"Then we must marvel at how well they have navigated the evils laid at their feet without us to raise them," I said, and her eyes brightened. "I know that Gwendalina will overcome this one in ways we cannot yet foresee."

"When one falls to the dark, the other shall be their guiding light," Merissa murmured with a frown, those words familiar to me.

"What is it?" I asked in concern, laying my hand on her knee.

"When they were born, those words were whispered to me by the stars," she said.

"Yes, I remember now," I said, nodding slowly. "It must mean they balance one another. A harmony forged of fire and ice. Between is where they find true peace."

"If they cannot find their way back to one another, I fear what will happen. The balance starts with them, but it does not end there," she said mysteriously, and I realised what her mind had moved to.

"The Zodiac Guild," I said.

We had discussed it countless times, but it was Azriel who truly led the charge on that front. His hunt for the Guild Stones had not ceased even in death, and the importance of them was unfathomable – if his and my wife’s predictions were correct. And Marcel’s of course.

As if summoned by the thought of him, Marcel appeared, the tall man walking through the crowd of souls gathered around the orb. Irritation stirred within me at the sight of his handsome face, his resemblance to my son too stark to ignore. He had his black wings in place as always, bronzed chest bare and a look of all-knowing about him that already had my teeth grinding.

“We were just talking of the Guild Stones,” Merissa called to him, and his eyes slipped our way, frustration pooling in my chest at her inviting him closer.

“Ah, yes. I have *seen* more glimmers of fate hinting towards the reformation of the Zodiac Guild,” Marcel said as he arrived.

He no longer held any access to The Sight here, but both he and Merissa were capable of seeking glimpses of the future in the orb, their power too great for even the stars to stop them finding truths now. “That path seems far from easy to claim, however.”

“Yes, Lionel’s reign makes it less likely than ever,” Merissa agreed, rising to her feet and I got up, coming face to face with Gabriel’s biological father. “But where there is possibility, there is hope.”

Marcel inclined his head, then his brows lowered. “Gabriel is in grave danger,” he said thickly, terror crossing his dark eyes. I had witnessed my son be taken by Lionel Acrux, had roared to the stars to see him freed, to be given a new fate. But their silence was as damning as Gabriel’s current path was, and my fear for him knew no bounds.

“I shall do everything in my power to protect my son,” I said fiercely.

“As will I,” Marcel said, nodding to me. “I foresaw his life long ago, and I know him intimately.”

“Not so intimately as the man who raised him,” I said coolly. “You may have had pretty visions of his life, but I know his truth.”

“I have seen him take many paths. I have known him as he is and as he could be. Some would say, there is no greater knowing of a person than that,” Marcel said, but before I could start an argument, Merissa interjected.

“We must do what we can for our children,” she said firmly, gripping my arm. “And while we cannot change their current fates, we can stoke the flames of the fire that will blaze a path towards a better future for them. The

answer lays in the greatest weapon known to Fae kind. Knowledge. The whereabouts of the Guild Stones and the truth of the broken promise. If we can find a way to provide these to our children, then we will be handing them knives fit to carve fate and shape it into something blissful.”

She swept away from us towards Azriel, and I hurried to follow, feeling Marcel close at my back and clenching my jaw as he shadowed my movements.

“I can take it from here,” I told him, but he brushed past me, his wing slapping me in the face, causing me to stumble a step so that he reached Azriel before I did.

Azriel turned to him with fear clouding his expression for his own son, and I let my frustration with Marcel ebb away as I focused on the task at hand. If finding the final Guild Stones could help my family, then I would break the heavens apart to find them, and once I had handed them to my heirs, I would find a way to reveal the broken promise and help my daughters break the Vega curse once and for all.

# Darius



I strode through the huge doors of a palace without end, a growl ripping free of my throat as I stalked down pristine golden hallways where the half visible forms of dead Fae loitered as if looking for something to occupy them.

Smoke rolled up the back of my throat, the Dragon in me desperate to break free of my flesh but as the shift threatened to take over, I felt a rupture spilling through me. A feeling so alien that it stole my focus, the need to shift overwhelming me and forcing me to give in.

I gasped, buckling forward and taking hold of the closest wall. Instead of transforming, my Dragon broke free of me, racing up and out of my body, roaring ferociously as it took off, leaping from a huge stone balcony and tearing away from the palace towards the stars beyond.

“What the fuck...” I stared after the enormous golden Dragon, my mouth falling open as I watched it race away from me, fire billowing from its jaws as it roared loud enough to rattle the walls of the ethereal palace around me.

Another roar answered it, a purple Dragon leaping over my head, the force of its wings lifting my hair as it passed, and I had to resist the urge to duck. I watched as it raced after my Dragon, the two of them blasting fire at one another, dancing through the sky in a symphony of wings and fire, not quite fighting, more like playing.

“Scared the shit outa me the first time that happened,” a deep voice said



behind me and I whirled around, power balling in my fist, expecting to see my father there then falling still as I found a stranger instead. But that voice...

“Don’t you recognise your own uncle?” the man asked, rolling his shoulders back and lifting his chin.

He was a big motherfucker, clearly a Dragon Shifter like me, and now that he mentioned it, there was something familiar about him. He had a look of Lionel about him, that same blonde colouring to his hair and something around the nose, but this man was bigger, his chin squarer, brow more prominent and he looked to be around my age.

“Radcliff?” I guessed, wondering how many of these little reunions I was going to have to endure in this place. I may have been glad to have the opportunity to speak with some of the dead, but an uncle who had died before my birth hadn’t been high on my list of priorities.

“In the flesh. Let’s get a look at you then. I’d say you’re almost as big as me now...”

Radcliff Acrux, the man who had been born to become the Fire Lord, sauntered closer, swirling a glass of liquor in one hand, a red smoking jacket seeming to unfold itself over his body, the twin of the one my father favoured. I eyed him with interest, uncertain what to expect from this stranger who shared some of my blood. In all honesty, I had no further interest in my Acrux heritage. I was happy to leave all claims to it behind in the taking of my wife’s name. I was a Vega now.

Radcliff stopped before me, raising a hand to the top of his head before moving it towards mine. He angled it upward so his palm brushed my hair, making up for the few inches of height I had on him, then grinned.

“Yes. A dead match. And you’re nearly as broad as me too.” He indicated his chest and I glanced at him. He was big, yeah, but bigger than me? Not so much.

“Look, I’m not really interested in some drunk, muscle-measuring-get-to-know-my-uncle shit. It sucks you got stung by that mosquito and died and all, but I really have more important-”

“It was a wasp,” Radcliff hissed and for a moment the golden light wavered, a darkened room appearing around me, Radcliff immobilised in his own bed, his younger brother smiling down at him as he held the jar containing the norian wasp to his chest.

Lionel’s eyes were bright with glee as he watched his brother die, there

was a heat to his expression which only ever awakened with cruelty and violence. I knew it well.

“Now there will be no question over which of us is destined for greatness,” Lionel hissed as he murdered his own flesh and blood like a coward.

“If we’re swapping stories about whose life that motherfucker ruined more than I’m pretty sure I win,” I said flatly, waving my hand so the room disappeared, flashes of beatings, Dark Coercion, what Lionel had done to Roxy and finally my own death at his hand surrounding us until we were drowning in the horribly tragic reality of my life.

Radcliff sighed, wafting the memories away like they were nothing but a fart on the breeze, and we found ourselves standing on the stone balcony once more, our Dragons darting through the air beyond.

“Well, I had to put up with the little runt stealing my life, watching him connive and wheedle his way into power from this golden palace of nothing while I just lingered here, never changing, witnessing all the ways I would have prospered where he failed,” Radcliff griped.

“Maybe you should move on,” I suggested, turning away from him to look up at my Dragon again. Longing filled my chest as the need to be at one with it consumed me. “Seems like all you’ve done with your afterlife is obsess over that bastard. I think you need a new hobby.”

“Says the man whose eyes are full of revenge,” Radcliff scoffed. “Mark my words, Darius, you’ll be stood here in another twenty years watching him, hating him, wishing all the worst on him while unable to do more than fuck with things he doesn’t even care about.”

“My obsession doesn’t lie with the man who sired me,” I dismissed, my heart aching for all I’d lost. “If I end up trapped here, that won’t be what I’m stood here watching.”

Even as the words left my lips, they cost me something, the admittance that I *might* be stood here in twenty years’ time watching someone at all. The idea that I wouldn’t find a way back from this fate was a wound I couldn’t let fester.

“But I won’t be here at all,” I added darkly.

Radcliff blinked at me then barked a laugh. “Oh, I do love it when the dead refuse to accept their fate,” he said, clapping a hand down on my shoulder. “But you aren’t the first who swore to return, and you won’t be the last. I’ll tell you what you will be though, son.”

“What?” I growled, not liking his patronising tone.

“Disappointed. The sooner you get comfortable here, the better. Because there is only here or what comes after, should you wish to pass beyond.” He glanced to the side, and I followed his gaze over the edge of the balcony to the sweeping lawn below, an arch climbing up out of the shadows there, mist twisting through vines which grew around it, and a door of glimmering light forming in its centre. There were whispers coming from within it, soft and peaceful, promises of more, of an ending which was utterly complete.

Radcliff shuddered, barking a command for the door to leave us be and it spilled away into grains of sand as if it had never been there at all. Yet somehow, I knew it was still close by, waiting for us to summon it again, knowing its time would come.

Radcliff gripped my shoulder and drew my focus back to him. “Nothing that came before will ever be yours again unless it steps through The Veil and joins you here. And even then, unless fate is kind and sends them soon, they won’t miss you the way you ache for them. Time heals and grief fades. People move on. Your pretty bride will likely find a new husband in time and when she passes over, she won’t be looking for you anymore.”

“Fuck you,” I snarled, shaking his hand from my shoulder but he caught my arm, refusing to let me leave.

“I’m not telling you this because I’m a son-of-a-bitch like your daddy,” Radcliff growled and there was something in his eyes which stopped me from striking out at him again. A deep sadness laced with the kind of pain I didn’t want to understand. “I’m telling you because it’s true. Right now, you still feel connected to them the way you were when you died because it’s fresh. They think of you all the time, they grieve you and the power of that pain, that connection, it draws you back. It might even let you slip into their world from time to time and let you be with them again. Except you aren’t with them. They can’t see you or feel you – hell, you’ll be lucky if they feel strongly enough about you to allow you to a flip the page of a book. That’s what it is, see?”

“No, I don’t see. It sounds like you’re rambling,” I growled, and he huffed out a breath laced with smoke.

“Them. Their pain, grief, love, whatever you want to call it, but the power of what they feel for you is what lets you go back rather than just sitting here staring into the great orb in The Room of Knowledge like a forgotten spectator, or lingering alone with your memories in your room here in the

Eternal Palace. So for now, especially right now, while it's fresh and their love for you burns with the agony of your loss, you'll be able to step back and see them clearly, maybe stir the wind around them, drop a flower in their lap if they care enough to look for you, but that's it. And while you fight to hold onto them, they'll be working to let you go, to move on, to...fucking live their lives without the constant pain of your loss. So in time you won't stir the wind, they won't react if you try to brush your hand over theirs. When you go to them, the details surrounding them will start to fade, get fuzzy, until one day – poof. You're sitting on your ass watching from out here instead of over there. Their need for you will fade as they find a way to move on, to cope with your loss-”

“You're saying I won't be able to visit them like that once they start dealing with their grief?” I asked, a frown furrowing my brow.

“One by one,” he replied. “One by one by one, they'll move on. Your bride will likely be the last, but I've known folks whose spouses are the first to forget them and push them out into the cold. I don't say it to be harsh, I say it because no one told me. I had to figure it out on my own, watching from further and further away as my girl grieved, then found a way to deal with it and finally moved on. She married someone else, she has her own family. I feel the pull whenever she thinks of me, but it's less and less often now. And I can't cross back to see her anymore. Haven't been able to do that in years. It's not a bad thing, not for them at least, and for us I guess it's a sign that we should just move on ourselves, cross over, let it be done.”

Radcliff sighed, stepping back, and swiping a hand over his face, a sadness clinging to him which bit into me. I'd never given much thought to this man who had died before my birth. Never really wondered about him or the life he would have led, aside from speculating whether things might have been different for me with Lionel if I hadn't been the direct Heir. Then again, knowing my father, he would have groomed me to challenge for the position of Heir anyway, likely putting even more pressure on me than he had. Though I doubted there was ever any future for Radcliff available once Lionel had decided to take his place. He clearly hadn't believed he could win in a fight with his brother Fae against Fae, so murder was the obvious path. And if Lionel hadn't succeeded in that then I likely wouldn't have been born at all.

“Sorry,” I said roughly, making myself look at the man before me, the uncle who should have been well into his fifties yet stood before me frozen in

his twenties, his life ended before he'd had a chance to really live it at all. I guessed we had that in common.

"For what?" he asked curiously.

"For my father being a total cunt."

Radcliff snorted. "Yeah. Well, I'm sorry too."

"For my father being a total cunt?" I guessed and he grinned.

"Yeah, that'd be it. Looks like he fucked us both over in the end. If anyone had told me Lame Lionel would end up here, seizing the throne of Solaria for himself, placing a crown upon his head, and seeing almost all of those more powerful around him dead in the quest for it, I would have laughed in their faces and told them to go check the cards again. But here we are. He won. By cunning, deception, and unFae tactics, but he won all the same."

"Not yet he hasn't," I refused. "The Vega twins are rising. They'll hunt him down and gut him before this is done."

"Seen that in a vision, have you?" Radcliff asked with a low scoff, and it was clear he didn't believe it would come to pass, but I knew better.

"I don't need to. I've seen it in my wife's eyes. And I can tell you now, that nothing in their world or this one will ever stand in the way of those twins. They were born to rule. And I get it, you've been here a long time, forced to watch while Lionel rose to power, taking down every obstacle in his path by whatever means necessary, and you've lost hope that anyone can stand in his way--"

"He saw the Savage King dead, boy," Radcliff growled. "Hail Vega was the most powerful Fae of our time--"

"That time is done," I replied firmly. "But the time of the Phoenixes is beginning now. They *will* rise to power. And I *will* be there to help see it come to pass."

I turned and stalked away from my uncle, the golden Dragon bellowing in the skies above before racing after me, diving straight from the air and slamming back into my skin again, making me whole once more.

I didn't slow my pace, trying to forget his words as they carved their way deeper into my skin. The people I loved wouldn't simply mourn me and move on. They wouldn't forget me. They wouldn't give up. Roxy had sworn a curse upon the stars, promising to change our fate and I wouldn't be convinced to do anything other than help her in that quest. So I needed to figure out how I could defy the stars from within this place.

I didn't know where I was headed, only that I needed to do something to keep that vow, and as the palace warped and changed around me, I found myself stepping out into a garden thick with flowers, the air filled with the rustling wings of a million butterflies as they swarmed overhead. They danced and shifted, creating unnatural shapes with the combination of their bodies.

I thought of her, my heart aching for the night we should have had together, celebrating our wedding, consolidating our union. I wanted to hold her in my arms and have our first dance, but instead I found the butterflies twisting themselves into her shape, burning wings beating hard on her back.

I could almost feel the wind rushing through my hair and as I pushed into that sense of her, the world fell away once more, The Veil retreating, letting me push back through until I was with her again.

"Roxy," I breathed, but she didn't react at all, her face set with determination, her wings beating hard as she flew, a net of air magic towing Geraldine along with her through the sky.

With a thought, I shifted, a Dragon's roar escaping me as I fell into the body of the beast, no longer separate but whole, as we should be, though no answering echo replied from the valleys below. I was there with her, but I wasn't.

The sun was rising, illuminating the land bit by bit as the shadows lifted and I blinked as I recognised the landscape stretching out below us. Acrux Manor lay just over the next rise. I'd flown these skies a million times, knew this land better from the air than I did from the ground. What was she doing here?

Roxy wheeled to the side, putting the sun at her back so she would approach the manor in the thick of its light, shielding her from view of anyone on the ground.

"Oh, in the valley of the fruit of my loins, sweet Petunia shall rise and claim her salmon," Geraldine called, swinging her flail aggressively while she was propelled through the air with Roxy's magic. She looked completely insane and at least as terrifying, the armour she wore glinting in the sunlight, the pointed tips on her breastplate looking sharp enough to cut.

With a jolt I realised why they must have been here, my shock over my own death having pushed all thoughts of my brothers from my mind, but I'd left them here not long before my death and one look at the manor below showed the pulsing shadow rift still very much in place in the courtyard

outside.

“No,” I gasped, my body yanking away from Roxy and Geraldine, dissolving then reforming in the centre of that courtyard. Horror gripped me as I took in the sight of the other Heirs and their families, each of them tethered to the shadow rift, their magic rolling into it from their bodies while they were forced to replenish over and over again.

I ran to Caleb whose jaw and chest were coated in blood, his fangs bared and desperation in his eyes as he looked towards the others.

They didn't know I was gone yet. They hadn't been grieving me so I hadn't felt the pull towards them from their side of The Veil, but now I knew what had become of them after I'd abandoned them to save Xavier, I couldn't help but rage against the stars for cursing us even further.

“Cal?” I reached for him, gripping his arm in a fierce hold and he turned his head towards me, glancing at the place where my hand lay almost as though he had felt it. “I'm here. Roxy's almost here too, I-”

I turned from him, looking up toward the sun, just about spotting her and Geraldine in the sky. But the wards were still up, the power my father had channelled into them over years upon years still standing, keeping them out.

I spared a glance for Seth who ran endlessly on a turning ball of stone, and Max whose face was crumpled with the pain of Fae who were being tortured by Nymphs beside him as he was forced to feed on their suffering, then I broke into a run and leapt into the sky.

The Dragon tore from my limbs, and I flew hard for the dome of magic that I knew surrounded the manor. Roxy plummeted from the sky overhead, her sword drawn, Geraldine right beside her, the two little more than a streak of light descending from the heavens.

“For honour and death and the true queens!” Geraldine cried, her words finding me as I summoned all the power of everything I was and everything I had been, tearing up to meet them as little more than a blur of raw energy.

Roxy held her sword up, Phoenix fire bursting along the length of it as she hurtled towards the wards. She swung it with a ferocious cry, a bird of red and blue flames erupting from its tip.

Power blasted from her, and I threw myself and all the power I had into the wards from below just as her magic struck it from above, colliding with it so hard that I broke apart in the explosion that followed.

The world fractured and spun around me, and I fell in and out of The Veil, flashes of reality coming too fast for my mind to fully comprehend.

Roxy and Geraldine were fighting with the ferocity of feral beasts, my brothers crying out warnings from their positions chained around the stone altar, blood spilling, Nymphs screaming. Geraldine in Cerberus form, Nymphs swarming my girl, an eruption of ice then an explosion of fire hotter than the pits of hell itself.

I materialised in the Acrux Manor courtyard again just as a shield of solid ice broke apart, a great wave of water crashing across the soot-stained stones and broken altar, revealing my queen standing among a pile of ash beyond it, panting, wounded and utterly devastating.

I stared at the beauty of the woman who had claimed me for her own, my soul thrashing with the desperate need for her to see me too, to turn my way and meet my gaze with the blazing fire in her eyes.

The closest wall of the manor was in ruins. The house which had been home to so much pain for me, my mother and brother, now falling to rubble at her back while the Heirs found themselves free of the hellish fate that had befallen them.

She was hurt, a jagged wound carved into her side, frozen with ice to stem the flow of blood though she was in desperate need of real healing. I moved to her with little more than a thought, my presence here entirely my own, no other Fae aware of me in the slightest, and I was surprised by the sharpness of the pain that carved into me at that realisation.

Radcliff's words burned into me as I looked between the people I loved most in this world, wondering if he might have been right, if this might be the closest I ever got to them in this life again.

The thought alone was enough to close my throat over, my chest heaving with a panic I refused to feel.

No.

I wouldn't accept that fate. I'd find my way back to them. Whatever it took, I'd do it.

"My daughters have been forged in a fire far hotter than any a Dragon might hope to tame."

I flinched at Hail Vega's voice, turning to look at him as he moved between the flashes of reality which were swirling around me. I wanted to stop and experience what was happening with the people I loved but time seemed to be leaping forward in sudden jerks and gasps, flashes of what they were doing appearing then fading just as fast.

"Why is it like this?" I asked, reaching for Roxy as she strode towards the



house I'd grown up in, her jaw set with determination, her power making the air crackle around her.

She passed straight through me, not pausing or flinching, simply heading inside with Max, Seth and Geraldine closing in around her.

"The Veil doesn't follow the rules you lived by when you were on that side of it," Hail replied, waving a hand towards Roxy and the others as they moved into the house, leaving us outside by the broken altar and the destruction the battle had wreaked. "Our desire isn't what draws us to it, it's their need for us which allows us to step close, to experience time the way they are. When their grief or need is sharpest, we can experience it the best, our reality drawing so near to theirs that we can even reach between the two, press through The Veil and influence certain things around them. But we can never truly be with them. We can never really change anything."

"I need to go back," I said, turning my back on the damaged building and it all fell away as I did so, leaving the two of us standing in a grand hall, banners hanging from the walls which glowed with that golden hue, depicting a Hydra bellowing to the stars.

Hail sat and a throne appeared beneath his ass before he could fall to the floor, with gilded Phoenix wings sprouting from the back of it, one blue and one red. He reclined into the throne like it was as natural as breathing to him, his legs spread wide, his arm hanging loosely over one side.

"Sit," he commanded, a nod of his head making a grubby three-legged stool appear for me.

I arched a brow at it then sat, not really giving a shit if he offered me a throne or a toilet to sit on, I only cared about figuring out how I was going to keep my promise to his daughter.

"You've been here long enough to know how this place works," I said, resting my forearms on my knees, keeping my tone level despite the sneer on his lips. "I need to know how to get back."

"Back?" Hail snorted. "You think if there was a way back, we wouldn't all have taken that path?"

"I made a vow," I said, ignoring his sneering. I didn't really care if he liked me or not, I just needed to know where to start looking for the fate I intended to seize.

"Which vow was that?" Hail asked. "The one where you swore to chase my daughters out of their academy? To rid them of their birth right and inheritance in one fell swoop? The one which drove you to make them relive

their worst fears and ended with you near drowning my-”

“The one where I swore to love and protect your daughter with all that I was for all the time I had in that world and the next. The one that I joined her in when she vowed to change our fate at the cost of the stars if that was what it required. She has sworn to defy destiny in the matter of my death, and I have sworn to do all I can to defy it too. So will you help me, or would you rather allow your distaste for me to leave her grieving and alone for the rest of her life?” I demanded.

Hail sighed heavily. “I preferred the blonde one,” he grunted.

Merissa clucked her tongue as she appeared suddenly, stepping out from behind the throne as if she’d always been there. She looked more like the twins than Hail did, her features reminiscent enough of theirs that it hurt to look at her for too long.

“You mean the Vampire who threw Roxanya off of a roof and broke her spine in a blood frenzy?” she asked sweetly. “Honestly, Hail, next you’ll be saying you preferred the mortal who drove her off of a bridge and left her to drown.”

Hail straightened at the reproach, his attention shifting from his wife to me once more. “I did rather enjoy watching you beating the shit out of that son-of-a-bitch,” he said to me, and my lips lifted in a grim smile.

“I’d have killed him if I didn’t know Roxy would have castrated me for it. She deserves her own chance to kick his ass one day if she wants it.”

“Regardless of who might like to kick whose ass, it’s safe to say that Roxanya’s taste in men leaves a lot to be desired,” Merissa interrupted, the look she gave me letting me know that she’d seen all there was of the mistakes I’d made.

I dropped my gaze to the ground, but she moved to stand before me, lifting my chin so that I met her eyes again.

“I meant what I said before,” she said softly. “You made up for your poor choices in my eyes as well as in the eyes of my daughter. Besides, I always knew you’d be the one for her. I held you as a baby when I was pregnant, and I saw it.”

“You saw me and her together?” I asked, clinging to that fact, and wondering if it might give me a clue into the way this might all work out. “How old were we? Did we have a family? Did we find a way back from this mess or-”

“You know it doesn’t work like that,” she said softly, brushing her hand

against my cheek in a maternal gesture which still felt unnatural to me after so many years of my own mother's coldness. I knew she hadn't wanted it to be that way, but it didn't change what I had grown up with, didn't make me any more used to a mother treating me this way, like she cared about more than just what I could give her. "I saw a hundred possible fates, all of which tangled the two of you up with one another. None of them mean you can thwart death itself."

I stood suddenly, knocking the stool over in my haste as I moved away from her. "If neither of you know anything that can help me then I'll seek it out myself," I growled, stalking away from them.

The Veil fluttered around me as I walked, the corridors I'd grown up in appearing in place of that golden, ever-changing palace. Roxy was walking ahead of me, fire blazing all around her as she moved from room to room, burning every last piece of it to the ground.

My heart swelled at the sight of it, watching her as she struck out against my father, stealing something from him which he would mourn far more than the life of any Fae. This manor had been a symbol of his wealth and power. To see it destroyed by his enemies would destroy a piece of him in turn.

The thundering boom of the roof cracking overhead had me moving faster, closing in on her as she fell still, her eyes closing like she was drinking in this moment.

A sharp stab of pain lanced through my chest which I knew had come directly from her, the tears rolling down her cheeks clear as I made it to her. She was hurting. Because of me. Despite all the promises I'd made to her, I'd done it again, hurting her worse than I ever had before by leaving her when I'd promised to stay.

I moved up behind her, coiling my arms around her waist, leaning in to press my lips to her neck, goosebumps rising across her flesh at my touch like she really could feel me.

"I'm here," I promised her again. "And I'm not giving up. We'll rip The Veil to shreds if that's what's required for us to be together again. I'm yours Roxy. There is only you," I swore, holding her tighter while the world fell to ruin in her flames surrounding us.

"I'll burn it all if that's what it takes," she breathed and I could have sworn her words were for me, that she'd felt me there, knew I wasn't giving up.

"Then burn it all, beautiful. Every fucking piece of it," I growled, because