

Bonus Epilogue

Vera



“**I**t’ll be complete in just a few more days,” says one of the men in charge of the construction of the bridge that spans the canyon between Shift City and the forest beyond. “If you’d like to cross, I’ll show you the progress.”

Ikar nods and holds out his arm for me to place my hand on, encouraging me to come with, but I shake my head. I’ve already taken a chance to peer over the edge of the canyon from several feet away. What I remember to be dark murky water rushing below that waited to swallow us in its clutches the last time we crossed is now bright and clear—the filthy fog that hovered between the walls replaced with sparkling mist. Still, new or not, bridges and I don’t get along. I’ll stay safely planted on *this* side of the forest today.

I don’t miss the way Ikar directs two of our personal guards to follow me as I head back toward the Shift Authority Office. Having a constant guard follow me is one of those things about becoming queen that I haven’t quite

gotten used to, even though it's been months now. I admit, though, it does make me feel safer in this city of shifters.

I head toward the side of the office where I can still view the bridge without so much of the wind in my face and lean my back against the wall while I watch Ikar traverse the length of the almost-completed bridge. He nods as one of the men who built it explains the design and structure, pointing here and there. I can't hear what the man says from this distance. I don't think I'd be able to hear even standing right beside him with the wind that continues to howl through the canyon below. I scrutinize the bridge carefully, impressed that it hardly moves beneath the weight of the men it holds and the strong gusts that blow against it.

Rupi shuffles back and forth along my shoulder, her fluff tickling my neck every now and then. "You think we'll cross that bridge again one day?" I ask her.

She stops shuffling.

I glance down to find her eyeing me, and I chuckle a little at her knowing look. "Yeah, I don't think so either."

We watch Ikar inspect the new Shift Forest sign on the other side of the canyon before he walks the length of the bridge and returns to the side where we wait.

The craftsman bows deeply and after a few last words between them, the man returns to the bridge to continue his work, the set of his shoulders proud. *The inspection went well.* No more travelers will risk death on this bridge if we can help it.

Ikar's eyes lock on mine, a smile tugging at his lips as he strides toward me. I just *know* he's thinking of the last time we were here.

I don't step away from the wall as he nears; instead, I

smirk back at him as he places a forearm above my head that drapes me in his shadow.

“You sure you don’t want to venture through the Shift Forest with me today?”

Honestly, I’d follow him anywhere, but if I have a choice...

“You know where I’d really like to go?” I flutter my lashes, preparing him for my request.

He leans in closer, until his lips tease mine.

“We could stay right here,” he whispers.

We could. We’re hidden. Sort of.

I kiss him once, and though I’d like to continue, I’ll not be swayed from my plan.

“We need to pay Miss Mate License a visit.”

He groans and drops his head. After a moment he finally responds. “No.”

I lift his chin while I laugh. “I need to see for myself what the gold vial was.”

“Darvy is trustworthy. Let’s just believe him,” he says with exasperation.

“Come on, it’ll only take a few minutes.” I slip out from beneath him and tug him toward the city. He grudgingly allows me.

We stroll through the manicured topiary gardens, and I’m filled with wonder again at the golden-eyed shifters in their whimsical setting. We pass all varieties of bright-colored shops and houses with odd-shaped windows and gold door handles that line cobbled paths. Other pathways carry us around large burbling fountains teeming with every animal from wolves, banthas, squirrels, and birds, to cats, a

rabbit with horns, and even a lion, who gather to drink from the depths of the cool water.

I squint a little closer at the lion. “You don’t think that’s Silas, do you?” I whisper to Ikar, clutching his forearm while Silas’s threats to the high king when we were captured ring in my ears.

“No. He’s been arrested and his clan of shifters disbanded.”

“And the everwisps?” I ask hopefully.

“I can’t arrest every flower in the forest,” he says dryly.

I’d argue further about that, but we arrive at 3rd and Main. The familiar sight of the Mate Bond Licensing office brings a smile to my lips. I open the small gate and, with Ikar’s hand still in mine, step through. He resists, but I wordlessly tug him through behind me. Lush flowers spring up so thick from the gardens on either side of us that their petals brush our boots and trousers and leave the path to the steps that lead inside nearly overgrown.

“Maybe I’m in luck and this place is closed. The garden is untamed,” he mutters.

I turn the handle and a little bell rings inside. “Look at that, they’re open,” I nearly squeal. I’ve been waiting months to see the gold vial label.

Miss Mate Bond scurries around the counter, just as round and cheery as before. Her short curly hair bounces with her steps, and she greets us with clasped hands and bright eyes. “The king and queen of Moneyre,” she gasps. “I’m *honored* to have you in my humble office.” She eyes me closely. “Didn’t you mate bond with someone—”

“Don’t worry. It was him.” I interrupt, gesturing with a thumb at Ikar. “He had a glamour is all.”

She smiles as if confused, and I suppose she probably is. Our story is an interesting one.

“We’re here to see more mate bonds.” If I don’t hurry, Ikar will leave before I’ve accomplished my goal.

“Oh, yes, of course.” She leads us to the wall of vials, a variety of colors stacked neatly in rows with labels beneath. “Here we are. Do you need any suggestions today?”

“No, thanks.” I smile, eager for her to leave so I can find that label.

She bows once and scurries back to her desk across the room, leaving Ikar and me alone. I’m surprised when rather than a glower on his face there’s a bit of curiosity in the furrow of his brows. He leans closer and reads a label.

This is my moment. I immediately spy the gold vials at the top. “...Never Apart.” I read aloud, eyes lingering on the words. “Darvy was right.” I frown. “How did *he* know?”

Ikar shrugs. “I haven’t asked him yet.”

I scan the other bottles, reflecting on the day we first entered this shop as criminal and bounty hunter and smile.

The mate bond wore off months ago, and Ikar was never more happy to show me how much he loves me than the day it finally faded. And every day since.

“All business? What does that even mean?” Ikar shakes his head.

“Should we buy another one? For old times sake?” I ask.

He chuckles. “No. Darvy warned me—”

“What about Adventure?”

“We have plenty of that.”

“Never Apart again? You *are* leaving for a few months soon... I’d appreciate the dream connection.”

He considers it, but then with a devilish glint in his eye,

he reaches over my head for a bright pink vial and jokingly puts it in my hand. “Maybe. But what about this one?”

My heart skips a beat as I read the label twice. *This is too perfect.* “Reproduction?” I whisper, glancing around his shoulder to make sure Miss Mate License doesn’t overhear.

He snickers as he takes the vial from my fingers and moves to replace it.

I smirk, though he can’t see it. “No need. We’ve got that taken care of.”

He freezes; the vial almost slips from his fingers. I take it and carefully replace it before I turn to face him.

His brows pull together in a frown as if he can’t believe what he heard. “What did you say?” he whispers, though we both know with his excellent hearing he didn’t miss it.

“We won’t be needing that vial,” I say quietly with a growing smile.

He looks down at my waist with wonder, then up to my face. “Are you sure?” He steps closer and runs his hands down my arms until my hands are in his.

I nod, unable to hold back the wide grin on my lips.

Our hushed conversation seems to have caught Miss Mate License’s attention, her chair creaking as she leans to listen until I fear it’s going to tip.

I waste no time pulling Ikar out the door of the shop. He lets me lead him back to that place in the forest where we mate bonded all those months ago, a new tension strung tight between us the entire way. As soon as I stop in the trees and long grass, I spin around and his arms come around me, his face nuzzled into my neck.

“How long have you known?” he murmurs.

Queen of the Night

“I wasn’t sure at first, but it’s been a couple weeks now, and—”

He stops my words with his lips on mine, his hands sliding up my arms and cradling my jaw. Emotion sparks within our embrace, cooled by the softest breeze that flutters through the leaves of the trees surrounding us. Joy and wonder accompany the nerves that tingle as the knowledge that soon we’ll be parents settles between us. I slide my hands around his waist and pull him closer, deepening our kiss... and never more grateful to call him mine.

