

PROLOGUE

I don't know how I escape, but I don't stop running until a definite destination comes to mind. There are few safe havens left to turn.

I skid to a stop at a crossroads, wrapping my arms around my thin, soaked dress. My dark hair is a stringy mess matted to the top of my skull from the rain, a few loose strands painting my face. The cool weather wreaks havoc on my already overworked appendages. My sky-blue eyes blink through the precipitation at the signs. Hilnora to the left, Sorcha just beyond that. Sorcha is the better option, but I'm worn thin and need medical attention, which Hilnora offers.

My chest tightens. Swallowing hard, I force my way to the cottage I once called a second home, even though it's been over two years since I was here. The lights are off as I near the backyard. It's a good sign—maybe I can slip in and out unnoticed. Mentally, I don't think I can handle seeing...

I collapse against the patio door, my back to the window. My entire form quivers from exertion. A sob rolls from my lips as I search the woods around the house.

"Moirra?"

My eyelids squeeze shut. Not now. Please, not now.

The patio doors fling open, and there he is. Caleb.

My heart takes a slow putter start when he bends to my level.

"What happened?" He asks, lifting my head into the light. The black and blue of my face catches in the glow, and he swallows.

I don't answer. Words are too hard to form, not just because of the beating I took earlier. Or because my lungs are battered from the long run. It's him.

"Come on," Caleb says at last, helping me to my feet and guiding me inside. We take a sharp right to the small bathing space.

"You're freezing," he mutters, easing me to the ground. I curl my shaking thighs up to my chest, watching as he wades his fingers through running water till it's warm. I see myself in the long mirror, and my lips are blue; my normally honey-toned face is ice-white.

"I'll be fine," I manage as he helps me up again. I can't quite stand on my own. My figure is still adjusting to solid legs and the effort from sprinting. Reluctantly, I lean against him for support.

I'm mildly embarrassed as he undresses me. His hands are swift and professional, but I can't shake the ounce of shame that fills me at being naked in front of him.

Caleb eases me into the water, letting go only once I've sunken completely inside. The steam curls around my face, immediately improving my mood.

"Let me get you something hot to drink," he says, backing away. "And clothes—I think I still have some around here..."

He disappears, which is for the best. I drop my head against the bathing stone's lid, waiting for my trembling to stop. Even with the chill subsiding, I can't beat back the tremors from fear and adrenaline.

Bruises stretch across my form. I can feel them populating, and I ache to return to zeph form, where the pain is non-existent.

But the bruises are nothing compared to the welts on my wrists.

I peer at the intricate whorls and twists of Zechiris' brand circling each joint, cursing me to this body. They burn something fierce, and the skin bearing the mark is a sickening crimson. Maroon and yellow splotches of agitated flesh bubble around the wound. I'm not sure how I kept them hidden from Caleb.

They need to be cleaned and disinfected, I tell myself. But try as I might, I can't bring my shaking hands into the water. My head falls into my hands in defeat as a dry sob escapes. My lungs simultaneously choke on and gasp in air, hysteria bubbling throughout.

At least Zechiris didn't hold me down and carve them. The cauterized flesh is almost a kindness.

Kindness? *You call this kindness, idiot!* My mind wails, setting off a new wave of hysterics.

I'm composed when Caleb returns, silently dropping a pile of clothes on the floor. I move my wrists into the shadows to keep them hidden, just in case. I can't explain what they are; what they mean. Not to him.

Caleb glances my way once, his soulful gaze lingering with my own before leaving me alone again.

The steam dissipates, and I peer around the tiny room.

Glass bottles line the lip of the stone tub. I sit up to look them over. Taking one between my palms, I lift it to my nostrils and close my eyes. One whiff assaults my olfactory with wisteria and honey. But it's stale. These items have gone unused for a while.

Because they aren't Caleb's.

I put the bottle down gently, sparing a glance at the clothes. They don't belong to me, although the size is comparable at first glance. On top is a simple olive green halter dress. My throat dries as I collect the object.

This whiff brings caramel skin and golden brown locks. Laughter and bed sheets.

I toss the dress away in a huff. What gives him the nerve to bring these to me?

The stretchy black pants beneath aren't as bad. They smell of lazy days in the garden. This is a different girl—skin as dark as the Land and a familiar tousle of almond curls. *This*. Friendship, not lust, lingers here.

I towel off, pull on the pants, and make do with the simple blue jacket at the bottom of the pile. Nothing else is beneath it, but that's preferable to the dress.

Other women have worn it, but his scent is still prominent because it's all his.

I'm finally warm enough to sustain my unused skin, and I get out, stretching to ease my sore limbs.

After procrastinating longer than necessary, I leave the room and enter the open space where Caleb waits with tea.

He's silent as he passes me a cup, sinking into the settee once I have a firm grip. He sips from his own glass, not bothering to look at me.

The air is heavy and uncomfortable. I'm acutely aware of our stirring emotions, polluting the space between us. Caleb's confusion, external calm, internal bitterness, and longing—overwhelms me. Something about serot form makes these things so much more noticeable.

"Are you feeling better?" He finally asks.

"Yes," I mutter, taking another long sip. My black hair is drying. I gently touch the locks, realizing I must get used to them again. Styling is out of the question, but perhaps a simple ponytail will suffice. It settles just past my shoulder blades, itching the skin not covered by Caleb's jacket.

He stands, restless, and moves around the room, playing with his chestnut hair.

“It’s been two years,” he finally says. It’s an unnecessary comment. I’m agonizingly aware of how long it’s been.

My eyes drift back and forth as he paces, like watching the clock.

“You just vanished.”

“It was for the best,” I say.

Even though I thought about this moment countless times, I still don’t know how much I can tell him; how much I *want* him to know.

He faces me. “Your uncle said you were in trouble.”

“You spoke to my uncle?”

Aaron never mentioned it, but instantly I know why. If I knew Caleb was asking about me—looking for me, it would be harder for me to stay away. Harder to focus on my task.

The useless task that it is.

Caleb nods absently. “Several times. He always said you were safe but unavailable.”

I fold my fingers into my lap.

“I suppose you know he’s dead?”

Caleb’s cocoa eyes turn to me with surprise as he sinks back beside me on the settee.

“What?” He wonders. “When?”

“A week ago,” I murmur, leaning against the settee. “I didn’t know where else to go.”

The liquid in my cup is a watery brown, but all I see is Uncle Aaron’s face contorted in pain. My last sight of him.

I don’t know how I quash the tightness in my chest. The last thing I need is to mourn the loss of my last remaining family member, my only confidant, in front of the man I love.

Loved? I’m not even sure where my emotions stand right now with Caleb.

I set the glass down more forcefully than necessary and stand.

“I should go.” I glance at the door. “I’ve already stayed too long.”

His thick brows curl into his forehead, and he stands fast. “That’s it? You’re not even going to give me an explanation? One day, you were there; the next, you were just gone. I was afraid something happened to you.”

The air turns with his emotions, but his voice remains frustratingly calm. He’s always had amazing self-control.

I debate how to respond. I could remind him I don't owe him anything; accuse him of not being *that* worried, since he had other women here over the years; point out that I stayed away just as much for his safety as mine; tell him *why* Uncle Aaron was murdered.

I shrug, tugging the jacket tight around me.

"It's not for a serot," I settle on, touching the sliding glass door. "And the beings looking for me are dangerous."

"Stay the night," he blurts.

I hesitate, my resolve to leave wavering. It would be so easy to fall into his bed and sleep the night through. So easy to curl up together, his arms spooling me close. I miss Caleb's soothing touch. Not even on a sexual level – Caleb's too much of a gentleman to try anything. He wasn't just a lover; he'd been my best friend.

But what comes after tonight wouldn't be so easy. An argument is brewing here beneath Caleb's concern for my safety. And if the argument doesn't undo me, then the risk of Zechiris tracking me to him will.

"I can't," I say, my composure breaking for the first time in his sight.

He takes a step forward. To what – hold me? Promise everything's going to be ok?

It's not.

Embarrassed and desperate to escape, I slip into the cool night air.

I hear him call from the door when I near the wood line.

"You'll always be welcome here."