

WHERE IS MY SON?"

Of *course* Lord Cassius greeted them with the question that Sophie had been hoping to avoid.

She'd realized as they were teleporting to the Shores of Solace that Keefe's father had no idea his son was missing— and it'd probably be better to keep it that way. But Lord Cassius would never answer questions about his pathfinder without knowing why she was asking. And lying to Empaths was annoyingly challenging.

So she cut straight to the brutal truth: "Keefe ran away."

Normal parents would've cried—panicked—pummeled Sophie with questions.

Lord Cassius simply smoothed his already perfect blond hair and stepped aside to let Sophie, Ro, and Sandor into his fancy beach house.

He led them to the farthest corner of the property, to a bougainvillea-lined patio facing the ocean, and settled onto the only chair—a chaise covered in worn turquoise pillows.

"I assumed this would happen," he said as he flicked a speck of lint off his pristine gray cape. "If Keefe had come home with me—"

"He would've run off even faster," Ro finished for him. "Probably left a Keefe-shaped hole in one of the walls."

Lord Cassius's lips curled into a smile—but it was a dark, twisted thing. "Such bravado coming from the one whose job was to prevent something like this from happening."

"Yeah, well, wasn't it *your* job to make sure no one did creepy experiments on your son, instead of signing him up for them before he was born?" Ro snapped back. "And while we're discussing failed responsibilities, shall we acknowledge the fact that it's *also* a father's job to make sure their child feels happy and secure and loved?"

"Is that what your scar displays?" Lord Cassius said, referencing the jagged mark that ran the length of Ro's spine. "Your father's *love*?"

Ro reached behind her, trailing her fingers gently along the rough, raised skin. "You're right. My father *did* make this mark. He's done the same thing to all his most trusted warriors. And when he cut it, I felt his pride, and respect— and yes, I actually *did* feel his love. Can Keefe say the same about *anything* you've done for him?" She waited for Lord Cassius's smile to fade before she added, "You elves like to talk about ogres as if we're these cold, brutal creatures. But I've never seen anything as cold and brutal as the way you treat your son."

Sophie wanted to hoist Ro on her shoulders and parade her around the room—but that would probably get them kicked out of the Shores of Solace.

Still, she hoped Lord Cassius could feel her disgust slashing through the air.

He looked away, staring at the darkening horizon. "How long has Keefe been gone?"