A GOLDFINCH DOES NOT FALL



THE PLATED PRISONER SERIES

RAVEN KENNEDY



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Cover Design by A.T. Cover Designs Formatting by Imagine Ink Designs Editing by Polished Perfection Chapter Artwork by Luke Serrano Remember, you are stronger than the dark, and you have the wings to fly.

Table of Contents

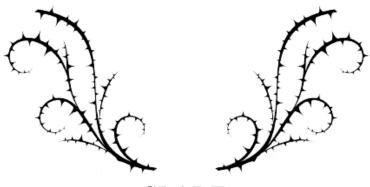
About the Book

- 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
- Chapter 30
- Chapter 31
- Chapter 32
- Chapter 33
- Chapter 34
- Chapter 35

- Chapter 36
- Chapter 37
- Chapter 38
- Chapter 39
- Chapter 40
- Chapter 41
- Chapter 42
- Chapter 43
- Chapter 44
- Chapter 45
- Chapter 46
- Chapter 47
- Chapter 48
- Chapter 49
- Chapter 50
- Chapter 51
- Chapter 52
- Chapter 52
 Chapter 53
- Chapter 54
- Chapter 54
- Chapter 55
- Chapter 56
- Chapter 57
- Chapter 58
- Chapter 59
- Chapter 60
- Chapter 61
- Chapter 62
- Chapter 63
- Chapter 64
- Chapter 65
- Chapter 66
- Chapter 67
- Chapter 68
- Chapter 69
- Chapter 70
- Chapter 71
- Little Sun

Acknowledgements
Also By Raven Kennedy
About the Author

CHAPTER 1



SLADE

My courtyard is a hectic rush of soldiers.

I exit the castle, slightly out of breath from rushing around in preparation to leave. A couple guards come over to ask me questions, and then I turn my attention forward after they hurry away.

I count three dozen timberwings that stand between Brackhill's castle doors and the sloshing moat. The water reflects a spoiled moon, gone yellow like cream that sat out too long.

All the soldiers are in their fighting leathers and thick winter wear, while the timberwings are paired up and being strapped into their own armor of black leather and metal breastplates to protect their vulnerable chests.

The beasts are antsy, talons digging into the cobblestone, sharp eyes on the sky. The soldiers know the risks, but the animals know the energy, and every single one of them is sensing the nerves, the suspense, the bloodlust.

They always do, when it's time to go to war.

Beside me, chunks of black rock litter the ground like a heap of scattered coal from Queen Kaila's earlier arrival. The black obelisk is now ruined and splintered.

Crumbling. Just like my fucking patience.

I want to leave now. I've hurried to ready myself, to ready my Premiers and my Wrath, and I need to get going.

My mind keeps spinning, gut twisting with this new truth that Lu brought. That the bridge of Lemuria is unbroken. Remade. Connected to the fae realm.

How the fuck did they rebuild the bridge? How does Seventh Kingdom even exist?

When I flew over Seventh years ago, all that was left was a fissured and freezing land of white and gray. No people. No animals. No cities. Just emptiness within the clefts. The only thing that seemed to remain was a lingering echo from the magic that had pierced through it like a shattered mirror.

I remember the wrongness of that echo. It reminded me of the scent that loitered after burnt food had been tossed away. A lingering unpleasantness that didn't let up.

All that was left at the edge of the world was nothing. Nothing at all.

My father—The Breaker—broke that bridge hundreds of years ago, long before I was born. Powerful magic that made him the crown's greatest ally. Made him famous and wealthy.

And now, someone or something took that broken bridge and *fixed it*.

I don't know if my father is involved or even if he still lives. I don't know who ordered this invasion into Orea, and I don't know the state of the bridge itself.

But none of that matters. All that matters is *her*.

I now have a way to get to Auren. I've failed to open a rip, failed to fulfill my promise to find her, but now, there's hope.

My rotting heart aches more incessantly. Pulsing in tune with my adrenaline, except instead of a beat, it just thrums, *go go go*.

Go to the bridge. Go to Annwyn. Go to her.

My hand delves into my pocket, my fingers twisting around Auren's scrap of ribbon.

"I will find you. I will find you in that life. I fucking promise you that. But you have to go. Please, baby."

The memory of my cracked plea haunts me. So does the way she'd said my name. The way she'd looked at me, with pure devastation.

My heart throbs with pain that seems to emanate from two different sides. Left and right, up and down, inside and out.

I can't wait any longer.

Releasing the ribbon, my gaze searches the dark courtyard, the surrounding torches casting off an orange glow through the night. I see

Ryatt organizing his handpicked Elites, the profile of his face lit up by the torch flame.

He's motioning toward a pair of timberwings, while a few Elites fix the straps of the harnesses. Between every pair of beasts are the reins of a carrying compartment, woven from thick leather and stiff rope. War panniers. Able to hold soldiers and weapons for the timberwings to carry between them as they fly.

Not the most comfortable way to travel. Also not the quickest since the beasts will be weighed down. But it's a tried-and-true method used for centuries during Orean battles.

Thirty-six riders on thirty-six timberwings—that's eighteen pairs. Per pair, that's five elite soldiers carried in the war panniers. That's one hundred twenty-six soldiers we can fly in with us to try to ready Ranhold for invasion.

One hundred twenty-six. Against thousands of fae.

But our plan is to head straight for Ranhold, to ready Fifth Kingdom's army, and for me to strike the fae with my magic. Meanwhile, our Elites and King Thold's will do everything possible to stop them from advancing.

Give Orea a chance, my brother begged me. So that's what I'm doing.

I reach Ryatt, and when he sees me, he dismisses the soldiers he was talking to.

"How much longer?" I ask as soon as we're alone, very aware of the impatience tingeing my tone.

Ryatt is in full commander leathers, his expression stoic and professional. "I'm still waiting on six more Elites, and the smith should be bringing up the weapons within the next hour. The kitchens are readying the ration packs as well, and King Thold is also preparing—"

A growl scrapes up my throat. "This is taking too long."

He gives me a look of exasperation. "I'm going as fast as I can. I'm trying to get everyone ready for you to leave at first light, but preparation takes time."

"I don't have time," I say, harsher than I mean to. I know my brother is working his ass off to get us everything we need, but even their quickest is too damn slow.

With an impatient glance around the courtyard again, I see how far off we still are from leaving. Some timberwings haven't even been fitted with their saddles yet.

go go go go go

I can't resist this push anymore.

"I'm going ahead."

Ryatt's brows lift in surprise, just as Lu and Judd walk up to join us.

"You're leaving right now?" Lu asks as she stops beside me. There's no missing the tired circles under her eyes.

"I can't wait. I need to move. I can't stand still a fucking second longer."

"I'll go with you," she immediately offers, but I shake my head. She might be too stubborn to admit it, but she needs a few hours of rest before she gets back on a timberwing again. It's been barely five hours since she got here and told us about the fae attacking Highbell.

"No," I tell her. "Go get a few hours of sleep and then leave with the rest of the contingent."

"But—"

"That's an order, Talula."

She scowls at me. "Don't pull that shit with me." Her tone is sharp, but I don't miss the flash of relief in her eyes. She really does need some fucking sleep.

When she looks over and sees that Judd's grinning, she slams her forearm into his stomach, making an *oof* escape him.

"Hey!" he complains. "I wasn't the one to call you by your whole name! Why'd you hit me?"

"Because of that dumb smile on your face."

"My smile's not dumb," he defends as he rubs his stomach.

Rolling her eyes, she looks back to me. "One of us should go with you."

"You'd only slow me down," I reply. "Argo is the fastest timberwing. If I can travel on my own, I can get to Ranhold quickly without having to wait on anyone. Since Ryatt is staying behind to command the army here, that means I'll need you and Judd to lead the Elites and help King Thold with his group too. They haven't traveled through Fifth often. You two know the quickest path and how to handle the elements. So does

Digby." When she still looks dubious, I add, "Besides, you'll only be half a day behind me."

"And once you reach Ranhold?" she asks.

"I'll tell the new King Fulke about the threat and make sure he readies his army. Then I'll drop as much magic as I can against the fae. After that, I'm heading straight for the bridge."

I can see that Lu still doesn't like the idea of me going alone, but she bites back whatever argument she might have. That's how I know how exhausted she really is.

"I'll see you at Ranhold," I tell her. "Now get some sleep, Captain."

"Fine," she relents before turning to Ryatt. "Make sure someone sends for me when it's nearly time to depart."

Judd opens his mouth, but without even looking at him, she points at his face and tells Ryatt, "*Not* him."

Judd grins again.

Ryatt smirks, shaking his head. "Don't worry, I'll send for you."

Lu nods and then looks back at me. "Be careful," she says, dark brown eyes solemn.

"I will be."

As she walks off, I see her stop and talk to Digby before heading inside. I glance at Judd. "Go let King Thold's guards know to alert him that I'll be flying ahead."

"Will do." He gives me a salute. "See you in the shitty snow kingdom. Next time, let's try to have a war on one of the warmer continents, yeah?"

"Sure," I say dryly.

As I watch Judd lope away, an abrupt pain in my chest makes me grimace, and I press my fingers over my heart. Ryatt's attention narrows on me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I quickly reply, dropping my hand.

"Slade..."

"I just need to go, Ryatt."

His lips press together in a hard line, but he nods. "Okay. I'll get them moving as quickly as possible so they're right behind you."

"I know you will."

My brother walks with me as I head for Argo. He's easily spotted amongst the other beasts because he's larger, and he currently has his barkcolored wings shoved out and his face twisted in a snarl. He's playing a game of dominance, ensuring he has a twenty-foot radius surrounding him, and snapping at any of the other timberwings who dare set even a single talon too close. Still, he's a lot friendlier now than he used to be before he nearly died.

"Territorial beast," I mutter as I stroke him on the side.

He blinks at me unrepentantly. Then he turns his head, and his demeanor changes instantly. Snarl gone, tense form going lax.

I look over to see the little girl, Wynn, skipping up to him. Her sister is right behind her, both of them out of their Second Kingdom religious gray robes and instead wearing colorful dresses.

Wynn tosses her arms around Argo's neck as soon as she reaches him. He bends his head around her in what I think is a timberwing's rendition of a hug, nuzzling into her curly black hair.

When she pulls away, she looks up at me. "Does he have to go to war?" she asks, her big brown eyes teary.

I can't help but feel guilt at her sad tone.

"I'll keep him safe."

She sniffs, and her older sister, Shea, places a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Wynn just wanted to say goodbye. She became very attached to Argo while she healed him during our trip here."

Flicking my gaze up to Argo as he nuzzles against her, I smile. "He's obviously become quite attached to her as well."

When I hear Wynn's sad sniff again, I crouch down in front of her and meet her eyes. "Argo has let me be his rider for a very long time," I tell her. "He loves flying, and he's very fast. He's going to be just fine."

"He got hurt with you before," she reminds me, honest accusation in her young face.

Shea's fingers tense. "Wynnie," she reprimands.

I shake my head. "No, your sister is right. He did get hurt with me." I glance back at Wynn. "I give you my word that if things become too dangerous, I will send Argo back." I hold out my hand. "Deal?"

The girl takes my hand and shakes. "Deal."

"Good," I say. "And I also wanted to personally thank you again for healing Rissa."

She squirms a bit, like she's feeling shy. "You're welcome."

Rising back to my feet, I look to Shea. "You've received everything you need?"

"More than. Thank you, Your Majesty," she tells me before looking down at her sister. "Come on, Wynnie, time to go. The king is very busy."

Wynn looks at me. "You'll really make sure he isn't hurt again?" "I promise."

"Okay," she says with a nod. Then she hugs Argo one more time, and the two sisters walk away, hand in hand.

I glance over at Ryatt, and my brother nods, already knowing what I'm thinking. "Don't worry, Isalee and Warken are making sure they're well taken care of. And don't tell him I told you, but Osrik bought them their own house in the city. A nice one, right on the river. He doesn't want the girl to know it was from him though."

"Doesn't surprise me."

"You know him," Ryatt says. "Os never wants people to know if he's done something nice."

"If he heard you say the word *nice* in the same sentence as his name, he'd punch you in the gut."

Ryatt smirks. "Probably."

Turning, I start checking over Argo's buckles one more time, ensuring my pack is secured. Then I swing myself up onto the saddle and glance down at my brother. I can see the nervousness in his expression, even though he hides it well. Everyone is nervous. After centuries of fae being gone from this world, this isn't a threat Orea ever expected to face again.

"Keep Argo *and* yourself safe," he tells me, tone going quieter so no one else around will hear.

"I will. And I'll take out as many of them as I can before I head for the bridge."

"I know you will. Fight fire with fire, and fight fae with fae," he says with a small smirk before his expression grows serious again. "Orea definitely has a chance with you on our side."

"Not just me. Orea has a chance because of you."

He swallows hard, and guilt hits me again, because I can see how much my words mean to him. I should've been saying these things sooner. Should've given him this position a long time ago. I was so used to being his older brother and protecting him, that I stopped him from being able to step into the role of a protector too.

"Send word as soon as you get to Ranhold."

"I will," I reply.

If we need to mobilize Fourth's army, he'll be ready.

There are so many other unsaid things between us, but there's no time. Instead, we share a drawn-out look, and then I give him a nod. "Lead well, Commander."

He bows at the waist. "I'll protect Fourth with my life."

That's what I'm afraid of.

"You'll find Auren and our mother," he says, not an inch of doubt in his voice, because he knows I won't settle for anything else. "Be careful," he murmurs.

"You too, brother."

My grip tightens on the reins, and my chest tugs with both emotion and pain.

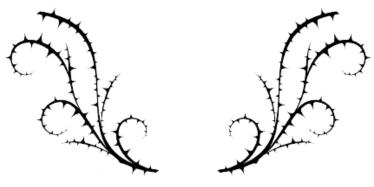
But the pull to get to Auren tugs harder.

go go go go

With one last nod to Ryatt, I nudge Argo with my heel, and he lifts us into the night sky. The other timberwings on the ground screech at our departure, envious that we're on the move.

My pulse jumps—leaps—because *finally*, I'm on my way. Finally, I'm heading toward her. And although pain throbs in my chest and I can feel my veins pulsing with poison, I ignore it. Because I'm going to her, and nothing, not even this rotting fucking heart in my chest, is going to stop me.

CHAPTER 2



SLADE

Argo goes upward to gain altitude, the dark of the night enveloping us like a shroud. Below, my brother lifts his hand in a shadowed send-off.

I face forward again when we pass over the moat, leaving my castle behind as we fly toward the city. The capital is dotted with streetlamps and lanterns that hang inside the bobbing boats where they drift up and down the rivers. Every flickering flame reminds me of just how many people live in Brackhill alone. People that I'm responsible for.

Let it topple. That's what I told Ryatt about Orea, and I meant every word. But that was before an outside threat broke in.

I could see it in Ryatt's eyes. The accusation. Buried deep, but there. The army invading Orea is *my* species. My people. He didn't say it aloud, but I could hear it all the same. To some degree, it's my responsibility to protect Orea against my own.

Give Orea a chance.

Get to the bridge.

Two birds, one stone. I can pass by Ranhold, and then head straight for Seventh. It will only add a handful of hours to my travel, half a day at most as I dump power there to deter the fae. Then I can get to the bridge.

I hiss through my teeth as another twinge of pain surges in my chest. It arcs down my veins, shooting through the roots of rot in my arms. I flex and fist my right hand, trying to shake the sensation off.

It doesn't go away.

But I grew up enduring pain, so my tolerance is high. My father didn't allow anything less. If I can put up with what he meted out, I can push through for Auren.

As if in challenge, the rotting organ in my chest throbs harder, but I grit my teeth.

Push the fuck through.

I re-grip the reins as we pick up speed, and soon, Brackhill City and the castle disappear behind us. Argo must sense my urgency, because he's flying like he's racing the night.

And winning.

We're eating up the distance, and at this rate, I know we'll make it to Ranhold in record time. Thank fuck.

Through the night, we fly over Fourth Kingdom. My eyes stay peeled, my teeth gritted. All I can do is count the seconds between the throbs of pain. It drums in time with the incessant push to hurry.

go go go go

I can't open a rip, no matter how hard I try, but I can get to that fucking bridge.

I have to.

Right before dawn, Argo spots a flock of birds mid-flight. He drops out of the cover of the clouds, attention locked on his prey. They don't even see him coming until he's swooping down, scooping two of the winged creatures up into his wide maw. The sound of their shrieks is cut off by snapping bones and a litter of feathers.

I lock in my knees, bracing as he swoops for a third. "Argo—"

Intense pain slams into me so abruptly that I jerk in the saddle. The sensation pitches brutally into my chest, stealing my words. Stealing my vision.

It clutches me as sharply as Argo's teeth snap through those bones. Except it's happening with my fucking *heart*. Lancing it through, bleeding me out.

I lurch on the saddle, body falling forward. It feels like I'm being sliced open in the middle of a sea, and a whirlpool of poisoned water is pumping into me. I jerk my gaze down to where the pain radiates, and my eyes widen.

My rotting heart has started to swell.

It's lifting my leather jerkin. Making it distend outward with dizzying agony, and I realize what's happening.

It's about to burst.

No.

My heart is choosing *now* to give out on me? Right when I finally have a way to get to Auren? When I'm finally on my way?

I'm not dying. I fucking refuse.

But my body seems to have other ideas.

My heart is filling my body with poison. It feels like hot, acidic rain pouring in, flooding it past capacity, washing out all my blood and stinging every vein.

I look at my wrists and hands where my rot has pumped in. Every inch of visible skin is riddled with so many black lines it nearly overruns my flesh.

I lose the ability to hold on. My grip slips off the reins, body jerking as I slam against Argo's back, unable to sit up, unable to do *anything*. I feel more than see Argo curl his head around to look at me, and then there's a deafening roar as I start to slip sideways.

Fuck!

Panic pounces, limbs flailing as I start to fall.

I jerk to an abrupt stop as the straps holding me to Argo's saddle cinch, keeping me seated, though they strain with the stretch.

The saddle starts to twist over Argo's middle as my body tips until I'm hanging off his side. This one strip of leather is the only thing keeping me from plummeting through the air.

The pain is unimaginable.

Argo roars again and tries to twist his body to get me back where I'm supposed to be. But I can't move. I'm paralyzed from the spasms, can feel the poison leaching up into my neck, my cheeks, my eyes...

Darkness blotches my vision just as I feel Argo dive.

My stomach hits my throat as we speed through the air. The leather strip twists, making me pitch backward as it slips, and I get torn off the saddle. The only thing still connecting me to Argo is the single strap wrapped around my waist.

If the leather were to snap...the buckle to fail...

Pain spreads out like bolts of lightning through my entire body.

Fuck fuck fuck—

I might be dead before we hit the ground.

The air whips at me, jerking my body left and right as Argo continues to roar. Continues to dive.

I'm streaming behind him like a flag caught in the wind, and then the strained strap on the saddle *snaps*.

Without the tether, the air whips me away like a leaf in the wind, and instead of being pulled down with intention, I start to truly fall.

I fall and fall, staring up at the dark.

I have a moment to wonder if this is what Auren felt when she fell through the rip. If this is my punishment for sending her in there alone. I gasp and flail, terror fisting me.

I'm falling.

Dying.

Heart about to burst through my chest, rot ready to rupture.

Body ready to slam into the ground.

I brace myself.

But just before my inevitable crash, Argo dives down and catches me with his feet, talons circling around my arm and leg. I wince from the pressure, but within seconds, he's dropping me again, and I thud against solid ground, rolling and skidding across wet grass and spongy soil before coming to a stop.

I land half-slopped into a bog, my entire right side drenched in muddy water.

The pain wants to debilitate me, wants to keep me hostage, but I fight past it. Remind myself of what I've endured at the hands of my father.

Move.

Move move move—

A roar rips from my lips as I fight against the anguish for control of my body. Mud threatens my airway, but I command my body to obey anyway. Reaching one arm up, I grip hold of the grass, straining as I pull myself up.

The pain is all-consuming, my vision still stained with spills of ink, but somehow, I get my knees under me and manage to crawl out of the muck, grip by grip. Then I drop and roll onto my back, dripping in sweat, shaking all over, ready to fucking puke.

I move my hands down and rip open my coat and leather jerkin, exposing my chest. My heart looks like it's ready to explode. Like a massive blister full of pus, except it's singed brown and leaking roots of black.

Not fucking good.

I can see every vein that leads out of it pulsing, pumping more poison into my system. Instead of the rotted lines staying contained to my upper chest and arms, I'm absolutely covered in them, breaching down my stomach and hands, even blackening my fingernails.

I'm riddled with so many that it doesn't even look real.

Argo nudges me on the arm, making distressed noises low in his throat. He lowers himself, urging me to get up, so I lift my hand and reach the strap around his neck.

But before I can attempt to pull myself onto his back, my body convulses. I lurch backward, breath stolen from me as the torment reaches a crescendo.

And I know.

This is it. I'm dying.

But my life doesn't flash before my eyes. She does.

Auren floods into me, memories consuming me entirely. There aren't enough, not nearly enough. But I see them. Feel them. Hear them.

The little moments. Like when I'd watch her without her even realizing it. Taking in the side of her face while she ate, watching her walk up the stairs, seeing her smile at something Judd said. It's the sound of her voice as she told me her truths. The scent of her hair when she laid upon my chest.

It's the big moments too, when she was entirely too magnificent for this world. When she made everyone else seem small and dull in comparison. Her vengeance and her strength and her kindness and her light.

I was always meant to find her. To see her.

This can't be it.

This can't be all.

A rasping breath cuts out of me, tines dragging against my ribs with a clatter. "Auren," I gasp out. As if she can hear me. As if I can say everything I need to say.

Moisture gathers at the corners of my eyes, shedding the misery of my failure. Of everything I'll never get to see her do. The little and big moments I'll miss. I wanted them all. I wanted to see and experience and have all of her, forever.

And now I can't.

Misery drenches me, while rot starts gushing into the ground. Argo whines. My heart slogs.

I stare up at the swarm of branches from the twist-root trees, slunk in this bog, while my heart pumps out a poison that's killing me.

I choke as it reaches my lungs and infects my breath.

My heart is so distended now, it sits like a stone over my chest, rising like a hunching creature ready to tear free.

But still, I try to fucking fight.

Because I will always fight for her. For as long as I can.

My entire body shakes, limbs numb, pain encompassing, but I force movement anyway, because I will not give up. I will not give in.

If this is the moment that I end, I will end with my fight for her.

As long as there is breath in my lungs and a heart in my chest, I will fight for her with everything that I am.

I growl, my throat tearing open with the determined sound and spilling out into the air, making birds explode from the trees.

With desperate struggle, I turn. Shove my knees beneath me. Pump my arms up, and then strain to reach Argo's strap at the back of his neck. All of it a battle between life and death.

Do not give up. Do not give in.

Fight for her.

I pull myself up, head swimming, vision bolting, legs threatening to give out. But I clench my fists around the strap, and I fucking stand.

"Auren. Need—to get—to her," I pant through gritted teeth.

Neck twisted around, Argo blinks at me, whining low in his throat. But stubborn perseverance hooks into my voice and yanks the resolution out. "I'm going to find her. Fucking get to her..."

The pain in my chest reaches a poisoned peak, and I suck in a thin breath that has my lungs ringing with warning that it might be my last one.

I can't take in another. I try, but I can't.

Panic consumes. My eyes go wide and wild as black spots block my vision. The agony in my chest is about to burst my heart, and I know my fight doesn't matter anyway because *this is it*—

And then, everything changes.

I'm suddenly hit. Not with pain, not with death. But with her.

Something shifts. Death pauses.

I suck in a breath, feeling her in my inhale.

It's as if she's standing right here next to me. No—even more than that.

It's as if...

Her scent floods my air. I can taste her at the back of my tongue. Feel her warmth consuming me like a fire consumes a forest. It starts to eat up every toxic limb and rotten root that exists within me.

Her flame, her sun, it blazes. Delves into every crevice, burning away every pinch of polluted blood. It swarms around my near-bursting heart, and I feel her essence grab hold. Fist me in her light.

And then something deep inside of me suddenly...collides.

SLADE



I can scent her.

Her warmth. It consumes me.

My knees buckle.

My rotting heart suddenly swells. *Bursts*.

Something shifts.
My two sides...they *mend*.

Something else tears free.

Scales erupt over my chest, bursting from what I thought was my dying heart.

A roar sounds in my ear. Souls tether.

My aura pulses. Changes.

I can feel her.

AUREN

I gasp.

Breathe.

The air of Annwyn. The air of Orea.

I pitch backwards.

The beast and the seed surge. *Combine*.

My back heats. Rot delves. Not with death, but rebirth.

Life tears free.

Two souls reach out. Clasp. My ears echo with two heartbeats.

With a bonded song.

My aura flares. Changes.

I can feel him.

