



A STARLIGHT-AND STORMS NOVEL

BENEATH
THE
STARLIGHT
AND
STORMS

RUMER HALE

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STORMS



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CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[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](#)

[THANK YOU FOR READING](#)

[Also by Rumer Hale](#)

[About the Author](#)

Beneath the Starlight and Storms

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Edited by Moon and Bloom Editing

For those that fell in love with fairy tales but wanted the adult version, this one's for you...

PROLOGUE



WILD, cruel, beautiful things lay hidden beneath the surface of everything. Beneath the dirt that lays waste to rot. Beneath the beasts that hunt and kill. And behind innocent eyes that hide their true nature.

Everything is hidden beneath the surface, but like most things... they soon rise.

CHAPTER 1



SHADOWS WEAVE through flashes of light as I move through the portal. Time moves endlessly until it doesn't. Until everything stops and I'm pushed through the icy barrier that leads me to another world.

My knees and hands collide with the rough ground and a sharp slice of pain shoots through them. I wince and glance over at the portal, the icy wind whipping my long blonde hair across my face as it closes with a flash. And with it, my last way back to Neverland. My home.

Or what it used to be.

I can never go back now. Not after everything that happened. Not after everything *he* did.

I fist my hands as my eyes burn and blur from the tears that threaten to spill.

How could I have been so foolish? How could I have been led so easily and been blind for so long?

Because you're a fool, Tink. A stupid, naïve fool that believed anything and everything Peter said.

And all because he once promised you love. *His* love.

Something he never had to begin with.

I shake my head, disgusted at myself for not spotting a monster when he was staring right at me. With my past, I should have been able to see beneath his mask straight away. But just like always, I only ever saw what I wanted to see and ignored the sick, twisted feeling in my gut telling me something wasn't right.

That something was *never* right.

The reality of everything hits me and I shiver as the cold seeps into my

body. I glance down at the white slip of a dress I'm wearing, the fabric too thin and fragile to shield me from the icy weather in this Realm. *Wherever that may be.*

Foolish, Tink. I'm alone in a strange new Realm with nothing and no one, and the first thing I do is feel sorry for myself.

I pull my long blonde hair around me to help guard against the cold bite and glance around.

Where am I? I could be anywhere. That portal didn't have a location on it when I made my escape from Peter and Neverland.

A grunt and slashing sound filters in from somewhere around me. I turn only to find a large, dark metal structure sitting in front of me. It's wide enough to hide a dozen men, but still doesn't hinder the small light filtering through on each side of it. My eyes travel up its size as it towers above me. It's at least double my height. My gaze finally lands on the night sky above and its dulled starlight.

A pang of pain shutters through my chest as I look up at them, already missing Neverland and its beauty.

But even though they hold none of the vibrance that Neverland has, they're there. And along with them is a familiarity that makes me feel less alone.

I take a deep breath and nearly choke on the putrid smell that invades my senses. It quickly seeps into the small space around me, making me dizzy and nauseated with the stench.

I move to the opening on my right, hoping to get away from the foul odor and step around it.

Only to realize I've landed right beside some sort of brawl.

More than half a dozen men are fighting. But the closer I look, the more I notice the separation between the two groups.

Though they all wear dark clothing, six of the group wear identical head-to-toe black attire, the only hint of color is a silver crest of a star and a strange, twisted swirl in the middle of their chests.

While the other two men wear something more casual. The one furthest away from me wears a long, dark coat that swirls around him as he moves against those in black. His face, though, is hidden in a slash of shadows.

The other man is a little closer so I can make out his shoulder-length wavy black hair. There's an amused smirk on his face as he flings something that glints in the moonlight at the other group.

A quick shift in the dynamics of the groups forces the fight closer to me.

Taking a step back, I contemplate hiding behind what must be a large waste container, but immediately gag the minute I get closer. The smell lingers around me, churning my empty stomach.

A loud shout bellows from somewhere to my right, making me jump.

I turn my head and immediately spot one of the men with the silver crest standing far too close for my liking. The only relief is that he has his back to me, his focus on the man with the long coat and the other man wearing the amused smirk.

With my survival instincts outweighing my distaste for the rancid smell, I take a slow step back away from the man closest to me when my foot hits something that clangs.

He whips around, his dark eyes widening when he spots me and the only thing visible in his head-to-toe black attire.

“*Fae*,” he whispers.

How did he...

I sense no magic or power coming from him. His entire being is as blank as a human and as far as I’m aware, humans can’t sense other beings. And to look at me, you would see nothing *but* human. My long blond hair, sea-green eyes, petite nose and full lips make me look like any other female human. So, how he knows what I am, doesn’t make any sense.

There are no pointed ears, no allure or great beauty that the high Fae hold. Nothing. A dud Fae is what any other magical being or supernatural would assume if they saw me. Nothing more.

I’m quickly snapped out of my stunned state when he abandons his fight with the others to pursue me.

Scrambling backward, my back hits the cold metal. I glance around for a weapon, for anything that will help me protect myself when I feel it begin to slowly rise inside me.

Power. *My* power.

It slithers beneath my skin, begging to be brought forth and released. And right now, it looks like it’s the only weapon I truly have to protect myself.

But just as I always have, I shove it down.

I can’t use that power. For it brings nothing but destruction and pain.

Nothing is worth using it. *Nothing*.

The man reaches out to grab me when a small flying object shoots between us, forcing him back. It twirls around, glinting off the moonlight

before heading back toward him. This time slashing across his arms and legs.

He snarls in pain, narrowing his eyes at me as if I'm the one causing it. I open my mouth to tell him otherwise, but the menacing look he gives me stops me in my tracks.

The flying blade continues to torture him, stopping him from moving any closer to me. I don't question my good fortune and inch away from him. With him distracted, I quickly get out of his path. Only for another black armored man to block me, his scowl just as menacing.

"You're coming with us." He grabs my arm with a bruising tightness, making me wince.

"There must be some mistake. I don't know who any of you are." Or even *where* I am.

But my confusion is only met with a glare as he yanks me forward. I try to pull away from him when his eyes widen, and he quickly drops my arm before flying backward into the wall.

I wince as he hits it hard before dropping to the ground with a thud.

How...

Whipping around, I look over at the fight, only to find the man in the long coat has turned in this direction. But he's still too far away, his face still hidden within the shadows to get a proper look at his face.

Before I get to question why he just saved me, he turns back to the four remaining men wearing black in front of him.

The man with the black wavy hair stands on the opposite side of them. He catches a glint of something silver in his hand before slinging it at one of the black-clothed men.

It's moving too quickly to make out. But from the grunts and gasps I hear of pain; I'm guessing it's something sharp. And the same thing used to take out the man now out cold and bleeding behind me.

Glancing over at him, I realize I'm wasting an opportunity to escape.

Looking for some form of exit, I soon spot a small alley that leads out of this open area. But unfortunately, the only way to get to it is through whatever brawl I've stumbled upon.

A flurry of action ensues as the four men in black quickly become three. The man in the long coat and his ally easily work in tandem and gain an advantage over them.

Weighing my options, I watch as the last three of the black clothed men put up a fight against the other two. None of them look my way, all too

preoccupied by each other.

I contemplate my options as I look toward the small alleyway. *Maybe I can edge around them and get out of here unnoticed?*

At this point, it was my only option. Once I get out of here, I can figure out where I am and form a plan.

Sticking close to the shadows, I start to move toward the alleyway, giving the fight a wide berth, when one of the men in black flies up into the air and lands on the ground in front of me, groaning in pain.

With wide eyes, I take a quiet step back, hoping he doesn't notice me, but he glances up and spots me, making my stomach drop.

His eyes widen just like the other man before him. And just like him, they quickly morph from shock to anger.

My heartbeat thunders in my chest and panic claws at my throat as I try to come up with some way to escape him.

Before I get a chance to come up with anything, he gets up and takes a step closer.

"Fae," he growls.

But that one word from him brings the attention of the last two of his group as they rush over, abandoning their fight with the other men.

I don't get much time to think about their fascination with a Fae or how they can tell what I am before they have me in their harsh grip.

Shadows suddenly appear, lifting from their skin and swirling around their bodies with me still in their hold. Slightly stunned at what I'm witnessing, I notice only too late as the shadows start to grow and expand, swirling around me too.

My eyes widen as panic threatens to suffocate me, their grip on me tightening as I try to pull away from them.

What if they take me to the Fae Realm?

I yank and pull, but their grip is like steel shackles. More shadows appear, coiling further around me and slowly encasing me in an icy darkness.

The air becomes stagnant as I'm slowly dragged into their darkness.

Just as the shadows reach my neck, the man in the long coat appears beside us, his back to me as he places his hand into the swirling shadows. Within seconds, they disperse, allowing me to take a deep breath.

Grabbing hold of the man nearest to him, he yanks him backward before sending a burst of energy toward the other two. They fly backwards, freeing me from their tight grip as they hit the nearest wall and slump to the ground

with a groan.

The man that saved me moves to take a step toward them when they quickly stretch out a hand toward each other. Shadows snap out of their hands, forming like snakes and gathering around them and their unconscious friends before they quickly disappear into thin air.

“Damn it.” My savior turns around, his body stiff, his eyes narrowed as he glares at me. But that glare quickly turns to shock as I stare into a pair of familiar stormy blue eyes.

“*Hook?*” I breathe.

CHAPTER 2



HOOK WAS ALWAYS TALL, but now he is even more imposing. Standing at least a head taller than me, his dark brown hair is shorter and more refined than the disheveled mess he once wore.

His otherworldly blue eyes almost glow in the moonlight as they stare at me in stunned silence. But there's also a glint of darkness and pain in them that he doesn't try to mask.

His face is just as strikingly beautiful, but now with a ruthless edge to it that hints at a hidden darkness beneath.

An icy shiver slides down my back as I'm reminded of the monster I just escaped. One that hid his own nature just long enough for me to become prey in his games. By the time I realized it was all a lie, it was already too late.

Pushing down the panic threatening to swallow me whole, I force myself to focus on the man in front of me. And on the air of power that comes with his presence alone. On his broad-shoulders with his form fitting dark clothes that reveal a well-trained build. On the sliver of smooth golden tan on his neck and hands.

And *not* on the fact that it's been three years since I last saw him. Three years since he left Neverland. And three years I've been left alone with someone that became soulless.

"*Tink?*" Hooks shock wears off quicker than mine as he dons a calculating smirk before glancing behind me, his body turning stiff.

"I can only guess Peter is not far behind if you're here." There's a cold bite to his tone that makes me wince. He doesn't notice it as he continues to look around, his frown deepening the longer he does.

"It's just me," I tell him, swallowing the lump in my throat and taking a

small step back.

Hook pauses, his frown turning on me as he searches for something on my face. “You came to the Mortal Realm all by yourself?”

Mortal Realm? I glance around at the dark area, only slightly lit by tall lamps.

“That’s where we are?” I try to think back to what I know of the Mortal Realm. I know a lot of different creatures and beings come here to get away from their own Realms. That it acts as a kind of safe haven for those that no longer wish to return home.

A sliver of relief seeps through me at the thought.

Even after everything that’s happened since coming here, maybe luck was on my side after all.

I glance back up at Hook as he narrows his eyes on me, and I realize that maybe even luck has its limits.

He gives me a hard stare. “You expect me to believe that you just decided to take a little trip to another Realm? The same girl that swore she would never leave Neverland?”

Could... I swore I never *could* leave Neverland because three years ago, I thought staying there was my only option.

But even though that was no longer the case, the last few months opened my eyes to what I would become if I stayed any longer.

I would become a monster just like Peter. And I promised myself I would never let that happen.

Hook looks at me like he has it all figured out. But he hasn’t got the slightest idea of what I’ve gone through, and I wasn’t about to let him judge me on some decision I made when I thought I didn’t have any other choice.

I would rather jump into a large pit of flames than go back to Neverland. To Peter. After all, Neverland was *his* now.

“Things change.” I tell him, swallowing hard while trying to portray a confidence I didn’t feel.

Something flickers in his eyes as he quickly glances behind me before landing back on me, a look more intense and filled with frustration and a hint of pain.

He grits his jaw. “Just like that? Because the Tink I knew would never have gone back on her word. She would have lived and died on that hill long before anyone tried to change her mind.”

She would have. But that was before her safe place became part of her

nightmares. Nightmares that slowly came alive to trap her in the never-ending darkness. A place where monsters thrived and lived off her pain and suffering.

That was before she knew that even beautiful smiles and kind eyes hid terrifying monsters that enjoyed being soulless and cruel.

“As I said, things change. People change.” I avoid his eyes as they scan my face, searching for something I hope he never finds.

He gives me a thunderous look. One that makes me take a larger step away from him.

As soon as I do, he stiffens before closing his eyes and breathing out a frustrated breath.

When he opens them, his eyes are less intense, more dulled as he watches me with a feigned indifference.

“For old times’ sake, let’s say I believe that little lie. Then at least tell me why the Hunters singled you out?”

Grateful for the reprieve and switch in topic, my mind plays over his words, wondering what he means. *The Hunters?*

I frown up at him. “Who?”

“The men who tried to take you?” He raises a single brow and a glimmer of lethal menace seeps into his eyes, reminding me of the Hook I once knew. The one who would go to great lengths for those he cared about.

And even though he’s probably angrier that they escaped rather than the fact that he saved me, the familiarity of that look and him being here makes me feel safer than I have in a long time. It makes me feel bolder and more like the old me.

“I don’t usually stop and ask kidnappers why they choose their victims.” I narrow my eyes on him and a spark of amusement flares to life in his.

“And that little lie would have worked for you, if not for the fact that they headed straight for you as soon as they saw you.” His amusement only grows, along with a grin to match as he waits for a reply.

I shake my head at him. “I don’t know what you expect me to say. I’ve never met them before today.” And I never want to meet them again either. Not if I have my way.

“I find that hard to believe,” he taunts as if trying to get a rise out of me. To challenge me like he always used to. Just so he could play one of his never-ending games.

But I wasn’t in the mood for playing any more *games*. Not when the kind

I've had to live through this last while left my life in the hands of a cruel beast.

"I really don't care what you believe." I give him an impassive look while feeling a flare of anger at how everything has turned out in the end.

Something flashes in Hook's eyes. It's there and gone before I catch it.

"There she is," he whispers, a hint of relief flashing through his eyes.

He steps forward and his musky scent hits me, momentarily distracting me from his words as I'm brought back to a moment in time, three years ago, right before he left Neverland.

Soft-spoken words and gentle touches. Whispers and promises of something more and a kiss that burned and blazed to life before leaving nothing but lingering embers behind.

Pushing back the memory, and the lingering burn and pain it left, Hook's words finally filter through my mind.

"Who?" I ask.

He moves back, a tilt to his lips and spark of light in his eyes as he stares down at me.

"A glimmer of the fearless Tink I once knew."

Fearless? The thought alone seems laughable. Especially with all the foolish choices I've made.

Now that I think about it, when was I *ever* fearless? When I ran away from everything and everyone and came to Neverland? Hid there and shut myself away from the world and everyone in it?

No. I was *never* fearless. I was just too frightened to do anything else. And if not for Hook and Peter showing up not too long after, I never would have had any contact with anyone ever again. I would have stayed there until I died. *Alone.*

The Tink he once knew was long gone. But I don't tell him that. Instead, I feign any regrets and fears I have for anger and aim it right at him. It grows into something real as he smirks at me, and blazes to life as that same smirk grows wicked, his eyes trailing down the length of me before finding my eyes once more.

"I guess you're right. Some people *do* change." His tone turns husky and deep, his eyes darkening.

As if transported back to that day on the beach three years ago, my body grows heated under his dark stare.

I step back, and away from him and whatever this is trying to spark to life

between us. And accidentally bump into the man that was working alongside him.

Standing just a couple inches shorter than Hook, with wavy black shoulder-length hair and warm brown eyes, he gives me a friendly smile that puts me at ease.

With a bemused look, he glances from me to Hook. “What’s the plan, boss?”

Boss?

I shake off the multiple questions coming from that little title and start to think of what I’m going to do now.

Hook watches me for a moment before answering him. “She’s coming with us.”

I balk at his words. “No. I’m not.” My basic knowledge of the Mortal Realm tells me I should be able to blend in and find some place to stay until I can figure everything out. My Fae appearance isn’t really an issue with me already looking like a human. The only power I have is being able to sense other energies and heal quicker than a human. It’s not something anyone can sense *from* me. So anyone else from one of the other Realms will assume, as always, that I’m just a dud Fae. Just like Hook.

My other... *form* will never be revealed, so I have nothing to worry about.

And thanks to my ring, my location is blocked from those wanting to find me. I run my thumb across the base of my middle finger out of habit, and my stomach swiftly drops when I find it bare.

My ring... I glance down at my hand, hoping my fingers are just too numb with the cold to feel it, but my finger is completely bare.

How did I not notice it was gone? If I don’t have my ring, they’ll be able to locate me with a simple spell. And everything I’ve worked for will have been for nothing.

I take a deep breath and quickly shove the panic down so I can think logically about this.

It’s been nearly seven years. They won’t be checking for you every minute of every day. You have time. Time to find it or figure something out.

You have time.

I push down the last of my fears and focus on finding my ring while Hook’s words slowly filter in around me.

“This isn’t Neverland. You play by *my* rules here. So, you can either

come of your own accord or come kicking and screaming. Either way, you *are* coming with us.”

I ignore Hook’s attempt to scare or rile me up—my missing ring is a much bigger problem than him right now—and I continue to search for my missing ring.

I use every ounce of desperation inside me to spot some glimmer in the dark but the longer I look, the more I realize how hopeless it is. It could be anywhere from Neverland to here. And that could include the many Realms between them.

My shoulders drop with the realization, my stomach twisting and churning.

It’s more than likely long gone, and along with it, any measure of freedom I thought I had.

What am I going to do now?

I won’t be able to stay in one place for too long, that’s for sure. And I’ll have to keep moving and be on my guard anywhere I go.

My mind starts to spiral into unknowns and what-ifs when Hook steps closer, narrowing his eyes on me. I open my mouth to tell him he’s better off leaving me where I am when he swoops down and throws me over his shoulder.

The blood rushes to my head and quickly knocks me out of my stunned shock at Hook’s bold move.

“Hook! Put me down.” My eyes widen as I realize he’s moving us out through the small alleyway. I try to escape his grasp but no matter how much wiggling, kicking or hitting I do, he doesn’t budge.

“Hook!” I shout.

Hook continues to ignore me as we come out of the alleyway and out toward a large black machine. Or at least that’s what it looks like from my upside-down position as I try to make it out.

Similar to a carriage, large wheels sit beneath the machine, but these ones are plated with a shiny iron, the wheels thicker. Two small doors sit above them with dark windows that stop me from seeing what’s inside, only making my fears grow.

My logical mind tells me it has to be a carriage. And if I weren’t being forced into it against my will, I might even have enjoyed inspecting it to see what it’s capable of. But as I move closer and closer to it, all that’s screaming inside me is that if I get into that machine right now, I’ll become another

prisoner. One who may very well never escape if Hook has his way.

“Hook!” Pushing against his back, I lean up and try to twist around to smack his hand off me, but as I do, his grip tightens, instantly stopping me.

“Let me go,” I grit out just as I drop back over his shoulder, the blood rushing to my head once more.

He chuckles. “You’re going to fall if you keep that up. And we wouldn’t want anything to happen to that pretty little head of yours, would we?” One of his hands slides dangerously close to my upper thigh, his tightening grip making me freeze.

“Put me down,” I grit out. “Or I’ll—”

“Or you’ll what?” He finally releases his tight hold only to slowly drag my body down his front before letting me go.

Thinking he’s finally come to his senses and is letting me be on my way, I soon realize how wrong of an assumption it is when I look up and find him staring down at me. His dark eyes filled with a possessive look.

He raises a brow while silently waiting on a reply.

Choosing to ignore him and his challenging stare, I take a step back and watch his eyes darken, the spark of challenge only growing.

I take another step back when my back hits something hard and cold, snapping me out of the little spell he has me under and back to the problem I’m in.

I make a move to go around him but within seconds he has me caged against the machine.

“Or you’ll *what*, Tink?” A savage grin slides across his face as his eyes light up. “Will you run? Hide?” Leaning closer, his chest brushes against mine as he dips down to my ear.

“Or maybe even attempt another pitiful attack?” He chuckles as I shove him back.

He finally moves but stays close enough that I wouldn’t have a chance to make a run for it.

I narrow my eyes on him, allowing my building rage to show through my eyes as I stare straight at him.

“Don’t ever touch me again. Or next time be prepared to lose a hand.”

Instead of taking my words as a threat, Hook’s eyes grow heated, turning darker as he cages me against the machine once again.

“Even with one hand, *blinded* and without a weapon, I’d have you on your back and at my disposal in seconds.”

He dips his head to the side of my face. “Don’t worry though. I’ll make sure you enjoy every second of it.”

I wiggle a hand free and make a move to slap that smug look off his face. But his own hand whips out, grabbing my wrist and stopping me.

I open my mouth to demand he set me free when he moves quickly and before I know it, he has me in his arms and is throwing me into the black machine.

I land on the soft chairs as he slides in beside me, blocking my way out.

I turn to see if there’s another way out, but I don’t know how to open the strange window door on the other side.

Turning back to him and his insufferable smirk, I glare at him, imagining ways to strangle him.

“If you don’t let me—”

Hook moves quickly, leaning closer to me, his eyes never leaving mine as his right hand reaches around me. My heart rate kicks up speed as that musky scent slides over me once more.

“What are you...”

I clench my hands and shake off the strange hold he has over me off, reminding myself that I’m his captive. That this Hook isn’t the one I once knew.

But it’s all too late as I notice the flicker of amusement in his eyes, one filled with a mischievous glint as his hand whips back around and he straps me in with a click.

He chuckles as I shove him back to glance down at my bindings. “Let me out of this... *contraption*.”

His chuckle only grows, his eyes now sparkling with amusement. “It’s a seat belt.”

“I don’t care *what* it’s called, only that you’ve tricked me and tied me up. Release me now.”

I should have known better than to let my guard down with Hook. He thrived on games and challenges, and it seems I was his newest one.

“You’re not bound. It’s for safety.” The sparkle in his eyes only grows.

Unperturbed by the glare I give him, his eyes dip to my body. “Your hands and legs are still free.”

I pause as his words filter past the growing rage. He’s right. My legs and hands *are* free. Which only makes me frown. Why tie me up but leave me half free?

Before I get a chance to think about it, he leans in once more.

“Besides, we both know that if I were to tie you up, you’d *never* escape.” His eyes dip to my lips before returning to my eyes.

“But that might be something you’d also enjoy.” His grin turns smug.

My body freezes at his words. “I didn’t realize you were still so delusional after all this time.”

Hook’s smug look cools, the spark of amusement in his eyes quickly dimming at the cold bite to my tone.

“You’d be surprised how far people are willing to go to maintain the delusions they have and forego the truth that stares right back at them.” He clenches his jaw before looking away and out a window that reveals only darkness.

I frown, ignoring the swift change in him as I realize I can see out the dark windows even though I couldn’t see into them.

Maybe it’s some type of spell...

Glancing around the strange carriage machine, I notice the space is divided into two. The back section Hook and I are in is large enough to fit three people while the front has two singular seats spaced out. And I can see out all the dark windows, though none of them reveal anything other than a long barren road and deserted buildings on each side of us.

Looking back at the straps across my body, I run my hand along the length of it and down to the seat where it’s connected to a small contraption. My fingers hit off a button and it clicks, releasing me immediately. A flutter of excitement rushes through me at my small victory.

Only to deflate as I turn and spot Hook staring right at me.

He gives me a look full of undisguised fascination. “Are you going to behave?”

I contemplate my next move while ignoring him.

Feigning boredom, I glance at the door to my left and notice a button near the window and wonder if it also releases just like the straps.

With a small plan in mind, I peek a glance at Hook, not missing the light of challenge in his eyes, daring me to try it.

But just like every time before, his hard looks never made me fear him. It only made me want to push him to see how far he’ll go. And he passed my little test each and every time. There was never anything I could do or say that would make him snap.

The only thing that hurt me was when he left Neverland. And even

though he's grown into a ruthless man. One I really *should* fear. I don't. At least not at this moment.

I fear more of what awaits me should I not find a replacement for the ring. I fear *them* hunting me and bringing me back to the Fae Realm.

The thought alone pushes me to move quickly.

Giving Hook a mock frown, I finally reply to his unanswered question of behaving.

"Most definitely..." I give him a small nod, forcing my expression to seem more deflated than hopeful as I inch a hand along the chair toward the door.

But as soon as I find that little button, I allow my triumph smile to show, right before I press it.

"...not." Turning, I quickly make a move toward the door and open it. But within seconds Hook has it pulled shut and straps me in once more.

Multiple clicks sound out around the machine, and I watch the little button disappear.

I deflate as my eyes collide with Hook's as he sits back and silently stares at me. A swirl of grey storms and silver lightning try to draw me in once more. But this time I'm no longer willing to fall for his games.

"You've had your fun. But no matter what you try, you won't escape me." His cocky attitude drops, if only for a moment, revealing a flicker of pain.

"Not this time," he whispers, and when that flicker of pain quickly disappears, it's replaced by something far more savage.

I open my mouth, about to tell him where he and his idiotic, possessive ways can go, when a click sounds out and the front door opens.

Hook's friend from the brawl gets into one of the front seats, quickly shutting his door with a click, and effectively cutting off any ideas of escaping the same way. He twists around to look at Hook.

"Where to Boss?"

Hook drags his eyes from me to look at his friend, a cocky smirk sliding across his face as if nothing happened.

"Head home, Cash. It's time Tink sees how a *villain* truly lives."

CHAPTER 3



THE MACHINE beneath me moves faster than any boat I've been on and is far smoother in motion too.

I glance out the windows as dark buildings disappear along the long road to reveal an eerie forest. It encases us on both sides, closing over us as we move through it, making the already dark night seem even darker.

Small red eyes peer from deep within it, making me shiver. I glance away from the ominous forest and down to my left hand where my finger sits bare, only a small mark from where the ring once was.

What am I going to do now? Apart from trying to escape my newest captor, I need to find another way to stay hidden. And the only way I know how to do that is to find another witch. One that can do the type of magic a Darling witch can.

The only good thing to come out of the last three years stuck on Neverland with Peter and his form of *games*, was finding out I had another option to stay hidden.

And although Neverland appeared when I needed it the most, I found out that a Darling witch could give me freedom in a way I never thought was possible.

They were able to perform spells powerful enough to mask my presence. Just like Neverland did.

And even though I never planned to leave Neverland, Peter's demand to covet what he would never have, forced my hand in the matter.

My escape to this Realm was not planned but rather a string of lucky mistakes. And even though my ring is lost, more luck seems to have trickled in by landing in the Mortal Realm.

The one Realm the Darling witches are supposedly from.

But Peter also made it sound like a Darling witch would be hard to find, even in this Realm. That they were elusive creatures that liked to stay hidden. And with the ability to perform such intricate and powerful spells, I could understand why.

Glancing down at my bare finger once more, a memory of when Peter gave it to me flashes across my mind. When he told me how hard it was to find the Darling witch he brought to Neverland and how lucky I was to have him. That I *belonged* to him now and he would make sure those looking for me would *never* find me.

An icy shiver rolls down my back as I remember the cold dark look in his eyes as he promised me that. And how I made a decision then and there to do whatever it took to get away from him. Even if it meant leaving Neverland for good.

The road beneath us turns rocky, jarring me from my thoughts. I glance out the front window, my eyes widening when I realize we're heading straight into the open sea, the smooth road and forest long gone behind us.

My stomach drops as we get closer and closer, the machine we're in not slowing in the slightest.

I glance over at Hook as he stares out his window, his body relaxed, his eyes unfocused as if lost in easy thought and not on the fact that we're all about to drown.

"What are you doing? Stop this machine before you kill us all," I grit out, panic leaking through my words.

Hook's eyes flicker to me with a lazy gaze. "It's called a car, a *Mustang*, to be exact."

Mus—tang? I shake my head. He must be crazy. He's lost all common sense since coming to this Realm. Or maybe he was always like this, and I didn't realize it.

I look forward, my stomach twisting and turning as I watch us move closer and closer to the sea and only seconds away from hitting the water.

"Hook!" Squeezing my eyes shut tight, I reach out and grab whatever is nearest to me and brace for the rush of water about to hit us.

A low chuckle sounds around me as I hold my breath and damn Hook to Neverland and back. My lungs burn the longer I wait but I hold on, readying myself for the impact that is sure to hit any second... But it never comes.

I finally release my breath, no longer able to hold it and peek one eye

open and then another when I realize no water has entered the machine.

Maybe Hook has changed his mind and decided not to kill us after all?

The tension falls from my body as I glance out at the dark glistening water that's only lit by the moon above and watch on as the machine glides above it like a ship sailing on water.

"Is it magic?" I ask him.

What did he call it? *A car*. Can all cars sail atop water like ships in this Realm? I don't remember hearing about them in the Fae Realm, but most of my knowledge came from books, so it was probably outdated information anyway.

The longer I look at the dark sea, the more it eases my panic, slowly ebbing it away until I'm as calm as the slow dragging waves that pass us.

"There's a long bridge right under us. It's invisible to those that don't know about it and only me and my men can access it. The water around us and under us is just an illusion. Once we touched the water, we became part of it and if anyone were to pass by while we were crossing, they would only see the sea. From the moment we hit the water, we've been shielded. The entire island we're heading onto is."

Turning, I glance at Hook and the small grin at the corner of his lips. I narrow my eyes on him when something flutters beneath my hand. My gaze drops to it, only to find my hand gripping his like a vise.

My eyes whip back to his.

"I think it's safe to let go now." His grin turns devilish as I snatch my hand away and clear my throat, looking back out at the sea just as a large island appears.

Wait... he said shielded... Could it be possible that it was like Neverland? If it was, that would mean I wouldn't need to find a Darling witch. At least not yet. I would be safe.

But that also meant I'd have to stay on the island... With Hook.

My hope for another option quickly fades with the thought as we pass through a small tunnel leading onto the island.

A long winding path spans out in front of us, one that is lined with large trees on each side. And further ahead, at the heart of it, sits a big and beautiful manor. Its grey and black brick walls act like a beacon even from this distance.

The path we're on soon curves, winding around a wide bend that leads upwards and towards it.

Up and around we go, until we move towards the center where the manor sits. We come up the side of it and once we're close enough; I spot a garden sitting off to the side and a glimpse of the large forest behind it.

Moving closer to the main entrance, I spot a dozen large men in dark clothing all standing by, waiting at the main doors. Each one of them looks imposing, each one of their facial expressions and body language screaming nothing but violence.

Any thoughts of staying here until I figure another way out vanishes as I scramble to come up with a new plan.

The men move forward as we slow down to a stop making my insides twist and churn. The door beside me opens with a click and I don't think, I just move.

Clenching my fists tight, I wait until the door fully opens before aimlessly punching out and making a run for it.

I hear a grunt and chuckle as I head around the side of the large house and toward the huge forest, I glimpsed moments ago.

I move through the garden making my way past the wide bushes and vibrant flowers visible even in the dark and try to find some place to hide while I figure a way off this island.

The further I move into the forest, the thicker the trees get, giving me hope. Each one of them is wide enough to hide at least three of me. And will hopefully give me enough coverage to stay hidden for a while.

Keeping my fast pace, I move past most of them, moving deeper and deeper into the forest, past more and more thick trees. Light flitters out above me, encasing me in darkness, slowing me down.

I pause for a moment and glance around. But all I see is darkness.

Raising my hands, I move forward, trying to figure a way out of the dark. Stumbling forward, I move as quickly as I can until eventually, the thick trees start to thin out and the moon's light slowly filters in around me.

Quickening my pace, I rush forward when I start to feel the forest ground beneath my feet grow hard and uneven.

I glance down for a moment, my eyes widening as the forest quickly ends and a rush of ocean water hits my ears as I end up at the edge of the island.

I quickly stop myself before I fall over the steep cliff and into the dark ocean.

Releasing a breath, I glance behind me before looking out at the ocean again and weigh my options.

My eyes try to see further out into the ocean, but all I'm met with is utter darkness.

I could jump and try to make a swim for it until I find land?

But even if I were able to survive the steep drop, steer clear of the rocks below and swim through the hazardous waves, there was a chance that there were no other islands or land for miles. Just a wide-open ocean that goes on forever. And even if I were to find my way back using the way we came in, the illusion Hook mentioned might stop me or make this situation worse.

And that was all without the dangerous creatures that may lurk beneath the ocean's surface.

An icy shiver crawls down my spine as I remember the huge crocodile that once hunted the waters around Neverland. And the terror it brought me daily, taunting me, until one day it finally disappeared for good.

Something ripples beneath the water below. Something large that makes me shudder and take a step back. I keep moving until I'm back at the edge of the thick trees.

Realizing the ocean is no longer an option, I turn and brace myself before heading back into the forest.

But before I move through the darkness, I slow my breath and glance up at the dark sky, noticing the starlight is much more striking here than back where the portal opened.

The longer I stare at the soothing stars, the more settled and calm I become, and my mind becomes more focused on the task at hand.

There was a possibility that I could be shielded right now, or it might not work the same as Neverland, only shielding the island itself.

If it was masking my presence, it meant I had time. Time to come up with a plan to find a Darling witch and figure out where I wanted to go from there.

But that also meant I was stuck here with Hook and whatever plan he thought he had for me until my escape.

If it was only shielding the island, it meant I was already running out of time. And I needed to get off this island and get moving as soon as possible.

I listen out for any movement before taking a step into the forest. I move quickly through the darkened spot of the forest until the moon shines above me once more, guiding me as I weave through the trees while I listen out for any other sounds.

But apart from the rustle of trees and my heavy breath, there's nothing. No sound of anyone searching for me or rushing through the forest to find

me.

After a few minutes, I stop to catch my breath, my body trembling from the cold and exhaustion.

I glance up at the sliver of dark sky visible, the thick trees still masking it and my thoughts turn to Hook and the men I saw waiting for me.

It's possible that he and his men have already given up on looking for me, thinking I wouldn't get very far. Especially if the rest of the island had steep drops and hazardous cliffs like the one I saw. Getting some sleep was surely a better option than traipsing after me in the dark.

Glancing around, my exhausted body reminds me that it's been a while since I've slept and even longer since I ate something. Pushing aside the thought of food for the moment, I focus on looking for somewhere to get a couple of hours' rest.

I just had to bide my time. Hook and his men were sure to leave the island again and hopefully soon. I could sneak out in one of those machines they called *cars* and then start my search to find a Darling witch.

I push back the plethora of problems that come with that thought. The main one being I'd be defenseless while searching for a Darling witch or where to even start, and instead try to find a dark group of trees to hide in.

Moving forward, I make it only a few steps before I hear a twig snap from somewhere behind me.

My entire body freezes as I listen out for anything and everything around me.

Maybe it's just a forest animal...

Even with that naïve thought, my body grows colder as I slowly turn around. Only to be met with a pair of stormy blue eyes.

"Did you think I wouldn't find you?" Hook taunts with a smirk.

I don't answer or let myself think. Instead, I run, and his deep chuckle follows me. I hike my dress and push my tired body up past a thick grove of trees, their complete darkness and eerie presence perfect for a hiding spot but with Hook so close behind me, I can't let him find it so soon.

Instead, I move around them to the cluster of thick trees spread out around it and over towards a tall, thick bush I saw moments ago.

But I never make it to the bush as Hook somehow catches up to me, blocking my path, with eyes full of dark delight as he watches my every move.

"How long are you going to keep this up for?" He asks, sounding more

intrigued than bored or annoyed, his expression full of mischief. As if this is all just one big game to him. Just like in Neverland when we used to pass the time and play tricks on one another.

“This isn’t a game, Hook.” But the mischief in his eyes only grows as his eyes light up.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Tink. *Everything* is a game. So, for old times’ sake, let’s have some fun. If you can outrun me and make it back to the entrance of the house, I’ll let you go.”

I freeze as his words finally filter through my mind.

“Just like that?” I ask, my eyes narrowed as I wait for the following laugh at my naivety.

“Just like that.” He nods, a light of a challenge in his eyes that reminds me of a happier time.

“And if I don’t make it in time?” I ask.

Hook never hurt me with his games. But even if I could believe that he would go through with his end of the deal should I win, there had to be some type of catch. There always was with Hook.

Hook’s eyes darken, his smile growing wicked. “Then... you’re *mine*.” Something flashes in his eyes, it’s too quick to catch but I don’t miss the possessive tone in his voice.

No longer willing to be anyone’s possession, I shake my head and quickly shoot down his silly idea.

“We’re not kids, Hook. I’m not going to play any more of your silly games.”

“Why?” His grin disappears and along with it the light in his eyes.

“Because this isn’t Neverland and no matter what you say, this isn’t a game. My life isn’t a game. To you or anyone else.”

Hook’s eyes narrow to slits as he searches my face for something.

“Don’t tell me the fearless Tink I once knew is afraid?”

Right now, I feel anything but fearless. Even jumping into an unknown portal was down to dumb luck. But there’s something about the tone of his voice and the cocky look on his face that raises my hackles as I narrow my eyes on him.

“I’m not afraid of you.” Or at least I wasn’t afraid of the Hook I once knew. But even the people you think you know can change and morph into something completely different. *Peter taught me that lesson the hard way.*

As if he knows it’s a lie I just spun, amusement flashes in his eyes, along

with a challenging look.
“Then prove it.”

CHAPTER 4



“WHAT?” I frown at his challenging stare.

“I’ll even give you a head start and point you in the right direction.” He steps closer and searches my face for something before glancing behind me.

“Head straight through those trees, pass that bush you were heading for and keep moving until you come to the garden. It sits directly behind the house. Only a few more steps and you’re free.”

Free... I glance behind me and swallow hard as I try to see past the thick trees of the forest to get a glimpse of the house. But it’s too dark, the trees too thick to see beyond it.

“You could be lying,” I tell him, questioning his motive. He could be sending me in the wrong direction or tricking me with this farce of a game.

“Do you think I’m lying?” He asks with a softness to his voice.

I glance back at him. His soft voice is a vast contrast to the possessive, dark gleam in his eyes that reveals one thing... If he is telling the truth, he wasn’t going to give up easily.

Why I was even considering this idiotic idea made no sense. But if I really thought about it, I was going to try to escape anyway. Trying it his way could possibly give me a quicker way out.

I pin him with a hard look. But it seems to be all he needs as an answer as he takes a step back, a slow grin sliding across his face.

“Ten...”

I glare at him as his eyes light with delight. Of course, the bastard would only give me a ten second head start. I should have known better than to have an ounce of hope.

But even with his short head start, I would not give up. I would run as fast

as I could and make it.

“You should be running,” he sings, taking another step back from me, his eyes glittering with mirth.

Damn him.

That grin grows into a look of wicked delight as I take a step away from him, my movements hesitant as I keep a watchful eye on him.

“Nine...”

I narrow my eyes on him before swiftly turning and running as fast and as far as I can toward the house.

“Eight...” Hook shouts from somewhere behind me, the delight in his tone only pushing me to go faster. Even when my legs soon tire, and my feet start to turn numb.

“Seven...” His distant laughter follows me as I weave around the trees. I push on, ignoring the tremble in my legs and the cold night air as it seeps into my bones.

I no longer hear Hook and his taunting countdown, and my sliver of hope grows. Only to soon fade as I hear multiple twigs break behind me.

I try to listen out as I keep moving but quickly notice that I’m slowing down as I try to hone in on the sound that is now moving closer and closer in my direction.

Something that shouldn’t be able to move that quickly. At least, nothing human.

The thought of wild beasts laying hidden within the forest never crossed my mind until now.

An extra dose of adrenaline rushes through my system at the thought and I pick up my speed once more, pushing my body beyond its limits.

Just as my energy starts to wane, I spot the edge of the garden and grit my teeth as I press on, the possibility of my freedom giving me the extra push I need to keep going.

With a renewed sense of energy, I rush toward it, my eyes marking three thick trees spread out before it.

I move past the first one, ignoring the wild beast behind me as it moves closer. I quickly reach the second tree while my mind already moves to the last one I need to pass before I reach the garden.

A jolt of panic rushes through me as I hear more twigs snap closer behind me. It seems whatever beast is following me, has gained ground on me.

Ignoring the urge to look behind me, I think on my feet and instead of

continuing on past the third tree, I rush around its thick width and hide behind it. Hoping my swift disappearance will distract the beast long enough for it to forget about me.

Trying to catch my breath, I listen out for any sound. But everything around me grows silent. Too silent. As if the trees themselves have stopped moving and are also waiting for something to jump out and attack them.

Time seems to crawl by as I continue to wait, lighting my nerves the longer I hear no sound. Seconds pass, feeling almost like hours with nothing happening, lulling me into a false sense of security.

Knowing I can't wait much longer with Hook on my tail, I move slowly, peeking around the tree to try to spot the waiting beast. But there's nothing there.

Staying hidden behind the tree, I scan the area for anything in hiding but still find nothing. Relief quickly fills me as I turn around.

Only to jump as I'm met with a pair of familiar blue eyes and a savage smirk. I take a step to move but he moves quicker, blocking my path.

"There's a beast," I tell him, hoping it shows up soon to distract him. But that smirk only grows.

"What beast?" he asks, his eyes lighting with amusement as if this is all some joke. That I wasn't just running for my life and freedom.

"Something was chasing me," I grit out.

He takes a step closer. "Apart from my men and now you, there's nothing other than small birds on this island."

But then...

"The only *beast* that was chasing you... was *me*." His smile turns wicked at my look of confusion.

Then the entire time, there was never any beast... It was him.

"You cheated." I glare daggers up at him. "But how did you move so fast?" He was just a human, or was he?

"A story for another time. All you need to know right now is that you lost. And that means you're mine." A gleam of something lights up Hook's eyes.

I shake my head, taking a step to the side but he leans forward placing his hand on the tree, blocking me. I try to move to the other side but his other hand snaps out, caging me in.

"I don't belong to you or anyone else." Flashes of being shackled and beaten slide across my mind as I look for a way out. My stomach twists and

churns, my chest turning tight.

“You can’t just take what you want. I don’t belong to you.” I don’t belong to anyone but myself.

Hook’s eyes narrow, losing some of the lightness from them. “You’re on my island. There’s no way off it unless I allow it. So, until I decide otherwise, you’re stuck here with me.”

It’ll be like Neverland if I stay here. And it seems like I’ll be trapped by another monster too.

He shifts and a glint flashes across my eyes. I follow it, spotting a small dagger on Hook’s hip. With my mind still in survival mode, I quickly grab it and shove him back a step before placing it at his throat.

But instead of fear lighting his eyes, they dilate and turn dark with lust. I shiver at the intense look he gives me. A look that turns challenging as he moves closer toward the sharp blade.

“Don’t move,” I warn, and hold it in place just as his skin meets it.

“Such a vicious little thing,” he breathes, his tongue darting out to wet his bottom lip. I hold the dagger in place, but he pushes forward, not heeding my warning. A drip of blood coats the blade and he chuckles.

There’s a madness in his eyes. Nothing as dark and cold as my last captor or the ones before that. But it’s there. And I know it won’t be long before he becomes just like them.

I hold my stance and tighten my grip on the hilt of the dagger.

“How far are you willing to go?” He smirks as if he already knows the answer.

But do I? Am I willing to kill someone? But not just someone. Could I kill Hook? Could I take his life and watch it slowly drain from his eyes as he leaves this world forever?

In truth, I already know the answer. I knew it the day I found out what my power could do and when I chose to never use it again.

My grip loosens as I pull the blade back. A look of disappointment fills his eyes as he moves forward and grabs it.

“Never show an enemy your weakness.” Unflinching, his grip tightens on the sharp blade before he flings it to the side, his aim hitting a tree dead center. I look back at him as he moves quickly, throwing me over his shoulder and carrying me towards the house.

“Hook! Put me down.” I hit and punch his back and try to kick my way off him, but his grip tightens around my legs, holding me in place.

“No. You’ve had your fun and now it’s my turn.”

“My—You’re insane! I was trying to escape. None of that was fun.”

He chuckles and the deep sound of it vibrates through my body. “Are you sure about that?”

“Of course, I’m sure,” I grit out.

“Sure.” Hook chuckles again.

“Let me down... *please?*” I attempt a pitiful plea as a last resort.

The scenery blurs around me, making my head spin. I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment and open them as Hook slides my body down his before placing me on the ground.

“*Don’t* try to run again,” he warns.

“Or what?”

His eyes narrow on me as he opens his mouth to reply but I cut him off.

“This place may be shielded but I’m guessing it’s just an illusion like you said. What’s stopping me from walking right out of here?”

“You mean apart from the many watchful eyes and me?” he drawls, too cocky for his own good.

“You’ll have to let your guard down sometime.” I glare up at him.

He steps closer, his eyes darkening. “When it comes to you, Tink, you’ll find that you hold my undivided attention. So, try as much as you want but you won’t ever escape me.”

I clench my fists and ignore his lie. I *will* escape him and this island. And soon.

Oblivious to my refusal to become another one of his prisoners, he continues on.

“And you’re wrong. The island is not only shielded through a powerful illusion. It’s also spelled.”

I freeze. “So, everyone on this island is spelled?” A flicker of hope rushes through me at the thought of being hidden right now and having one less thing to worry about. But one look at Hook shaking his head and it shrivels up.

“If someone really wanted to find anyone on the island, with the right spell, they could.” His eyes narrow on me as he straightens up.

That means I’m running out of time.

“But without my permission, everyone in this Realm knows better than to try anything so foolish.”

Everyone in *this* Realm... but not in others. And it’s in those Realms that

hide far more frightening monsters than the one in front of me. Far crueler and more corrupt with none of the humane side Hook may still have inside him.

I avoid the dark look he gives me and glance around wondering why it's so warm in the garden.

Only to realize we're already inside the manor.

CHAPTER 5



A LARGE IMPERIAL staircase with ornate hand-carved woodwork immediately draws my attention. It sits in the center of a huge foyer, twisting off to each side, and curling up and around to the floors above.

There's a deep blue landscape on the wall right behind the center of it. A moving illusion of some kind with clouds now darkened by dusk. And in the middle sits a large moon that casts light along the staircase.

It's as if I was glimpsing a small scene from a fairy-tale. It's breathtaking.

My eyes move to the high ceilings and the luxurious furnishings around the room, making a bold statement of wealth, power, and high status.

With an old elegance fit for a King, it somehow blends seamlessly with a newer modern style making the room feel warm and welcoming instead of cold and stiff.

And even though there are not many windows, the light in the spacious room made it feel as if there were.

The air shifts beside me and from the musky scent that envelops me every time he's near, I know it's *him*.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Hook's voice is soft. A tone I'm not used to hearing. I turn to look at him when I remember that we were outside only moments ago but somehow are now both inside.

"How did we get inside so fast?" I watch his face for any little tell he might accidentally reveal to me. The slight twitch to his left eye when he used to feel guilty over something. The faux smile that didn't reach his eyes when he was sad. Or the small dimple on his right cheek when he was happy.

But I see none. Instead, his mouth curls upward. A sliver of a smile I'm

not used to seeing on him. But there's mirth in his eyes, and a mischievous glint I once knew as his playful side.

"I walked *really* fast," he says, with a lightness to his tone that holds a hint of teasing.

"How?" I push, ignoring the urge to go down memory lane with him and the pull of a connection slowly coming to life the longer I spend time with him. I didn't need to be betrayed by any more people. I was better off by myself.

Hook's only reply is a slight smile before he faces the staircase. "The scene before you is magic. An advanced illusion, just like the shield. But on a smaller scale."

I push down my annoyance at his elusive behavior, remembering that Hook only ever tells you what he wants, when he wants. Trying to force his hand would get me nowhere.

Instead, I focus on what he just said and wonder why he just told me it.

"Why are you so forthcoming with this information?" I assumed he would keep any and all of his secrets regarding anything magical to himself. Especially since he's not willing to reveal how we moved so fast from the outside to where we are now.

He must have a magical item of some kind.

Back when the portal opened, he was able to throw a person into a wall with one look. But Hook never had any powers on Neverland and unless he's figured out how to change what he is, he was still just human. And as far as I was aware, humans didn't possess any magical abilities. So, it had to be a magical item of some kind.

Though I never heard of a magical item allowing a human with not only the ability to move so fast, but to also be able to fling someone with a single thought.

Hook looks at me with a crooked smile and a spark of delight in his eyes. "There are many objects, items and places in this house that are created, imbued, and made from magic itself. This..." He glances over at the illusion. "... is one of them."

"And?" I still didn't understand why he was so forthcoming with this information. Maybe he was trying to distract me long enough to play another trick on me and trap me further. I glance around the room once more to be sure no one is hiding in waiting. But for now, it seems it was just me and Hook in the large room.

That glint of mirth in his eyes only grows as he stares at me. “Nothing is what it seems here. Should you happen to lose your way, know that there is a watchful eye at every turn.”

“Is that a threat?” I narrow my eyes on him, finally realizing where he was going with this.

A slight curve tilts his lips as he turns to look ahead. “Merely an observation you should be aware of. And one of the reasons, I will know if you *try* to escape. Not that it will do you any good.”

“I’m not staying here. The moment I get a chance I *will* escape. Even if I have to go *through* you to do it.” I clench my jaw, gritting out each word. Unlike me, Hook wasn’t naïve. He had to know that I would escape the first chance I got. Whatever plans he thought he had for me didn’t matter nor would it hinder any plan I made going forward. I would get out of here, and soon.

I had no other choice.

Hook’s replying chuckle is low and deep, setting my nerves alight. He turns completely to me, his eyes growing dark, possessive.

“This place is a fortress. Apart from the spells I have spent good money on to lock down this place heavier than Fort Knox, I have eyes everywhere. So, unless I allow it, you’ll be staying right where I want you.”

I clench my fists at my side. “And that’s supposed to be here? With *you*?” He’s just like Peter. Just as selfish and probably as cruel. I can’t stay here. I can’t become trapped again.

“Now you’re catching on,” he drawls, which only made me angrier.

“No matter what you do or say, I *will* get out of here.” I fought like hell to get out of the three years of torture Peter put me through. I was not going to stay here only to go through it all again.

Hook’s face brightens but it’s deceiving. There’s no light in his eyes. Just a simmering darkness that spirals.

“Ah yes. You’ll try to *tinker* your way out. But you’re forgetting one thing...” He steps closer, forcing me to step back. This only makes his smile widen.

“This isn’t Neverland where you can make some makeshift home or use that skill of yours to create something that will fix all of your problems. You’re in the Mortal Realm now. Not only do we have magic here, but we also have advanced technology.”

“I’ll adapt. I always do.”

Hook leans in once again, but I stand my ground and narrow my eyes at the soft smile on his face.

“Something I’ve always admired about you.” He releases a harsh breath before straightening up.

“But it’s dangerous in this Realm and you’re too naïve to see it.”

A sharp laugh falls from my lips and his body grows stiff. “What are you trying to tell me, Hook? Because by that idiotic reasoning, it makes it sound as if you think you’re saving me somehow? By *kidnapping* me?”

Hook opens his mouth to reply but pauses, leveling a glare on something behind me before raising his hand. A small object that glints across my vision flies into his palm.

Hook ignores the glare I send him while he inspects the item. I open my mouth to tell him where he can go with his foolish reasoning when a familiar voice calls out.

“He went straight for the Gallery. Just like you said he would.” Cash walks into the room holding a young man about the same age as him by his collar.

Cash smiles down at him but this time there’s nothing friendly about it. And for the first time since coming here, I start to realize just how much trouble I am in.

The man’s eyes widen as they jump from Cash to Hook. “Wha—What?”

Hook casts him a brief look. “Did you really think you slipped onto this island so easily? And without being spotted?”

The man’s eyes widen in shock. “I…”

Hook gives the man a twisted smile. One more cruel and savage than Cash’s. It only hinted at the true monster hidden beneath.

“Nothing happens in my home without my knowledge. *Nothing*. Should anyone make it past my defenses, it’s because I allowed them to do so.” He gives me a pointed look before focusing on the man once more. “Nothing more.”

The man gulps. “But… why?”

“The why should be obvious. You have something I need.” Hook inspects the item once more.

The man gulps as his face turns ashen. “What could I—”

“Information.” Hook’s eyes narrow to slits. “Three nights ago, there was an attack on Trell House, and a very priceless relic was taken.”

“I never—”

Hook gives him a sharp look. One that silences him immediately. “There was a thief there that same night. One who simply... *vanished* into thin air.”

“I never took it. I swear.” The man shakes his head as he begins to sweat profusely.

“No, but you saw who did. Tell me who you saw, and I won’t gut you right here.” The threat of death falls from his lips like it’s an everyday occurrence.

“I didn’t see—”

Hook gives the man a vicious look. One I would not want to be on the receiving end of.

The man takes a minute to collect himself, his gaze jumping around the room before he forces out a reply. “There were men. A group of them. All dressed in black with the Eternal star woven into a patch on the front of them. They—”

“The Eternal what?” Hook’s tone is as sharp as a blade, his gaze cutting as he narrows his eyes on him.

The man looks nervously from Hook to Cash. “The Eternal Star... It’s a star shape with the eternal symbol woven through it.”

Hook shares a look with Cash before glancing back at the man. “Did you see where these men went?”

“No...” The man blanches at the look Hook gives him. “I swear it! I didn’t stick around afterward. I just took the gold and left.”

Hook frowns before glancing back at the item in his hand. He runs his thumb along it, and I get a good look at what it is. A silver bracelet. The chain is delicate with a small oval piece of marble in the center.

“Who sold you this little trinket?” Hook asks the man now trembling so hard I can hear the rattle of his teeth.

“I... I found it,” the man stutters.

“You mean you stole it.”

The man clears his throat before attempting a smile but instead it comes out looking like more of a pained grimace.

He swallows hard. “I may have... *acquired* it at the black market.”

Hook focuses back on the bracelet. “It masked your presence while you were stealing at Trell House?”

“Y-yes. I overheard that the wearer only needed to think of something or someone they needed to... stay hidden from and you’d become invisible to them.”

My interest immediately peaks at his words and any thought of trying to make another run for it flees my mind.

I thought my only other option would be the Darling witches. But it seemed Peter *did* lie to me after all. There was another way out of all of this.

I just needed to get my hands on that bracelet. If I can get a hold of it, then I can easily escape Hook and stay hidden from anyone else that is looking for me.

“Take it to my office upstairs.” Hook takes one last look at it before handing it to Cash.

He glances at the man that now looks close to passing out, his entire body trembling in fear with Cash’s grip the only thing holding him up. “But *after* you find out what else he knows.”

“Yes, Boss.” Cash drags him away while he screams and begs to be let go.

Before I get a chance to try to subtly enquire about the bracelet, another man walks in just as Cash leaves. His face is covered by a black hood with the rest of his clothes just as dark.

He heads straight to Hook but pauses when he spots me.

I can’t see his facial expressions, his hood still covering his face, but he tilts his head towards me as he looks at Hook.

Hook nods a reply to the man’s unspoken question, and he answers immediately.

“It was a bust. We found a similar item but it’s not the one we needed. And the men that were guarding it were not too happy to see us. It didn’t end well... for them.”

Hook’s mood swiftly changes. He becomes the man of nightmares, of dark stories and tales of horror. And the ruthless man Peter told me he was.

The hooded man clears his throat taking a step back. “Arden is usually never wrong when it comes to this type of information...”

Hook grinds his jaw. “He lied to us and sent you on a wild-goose chase.” His eyes grow unfocused as he stares ahead. “I’ll deal with him.”

The man nods before turning to me. I can’t see his face, his features still hidden beneath the shadows of his hood, but I can feel his stare on me.

He’s probably wondering why I’m still standing her free, instead of tied up in chains. Or maybe he’s here for me, ready to drag me away just like the thief a moment ago.

My body tenses as my mind flits from fight-or-flight mode. But before I

get a chance to figure out how I want this to go, Hook steps closer to him.

“You can leave,” Hook grits out, staring angrily at the back of his head.

The hooded man quickly turns and dips his head to Hook before disappearing into one of the many halls on this floor.

Hook’s intense mood slowly falls away from him as he silently stares at me, wearing a strange look I can’t decipher. Before I get the chance to figure it out, he swiftly turns and heads up the staircase.

“Follow me.”

“And if I don’t?” I stay where I am, not willing to give in so easily. Even if the bracelet was up upstairs, it wouldn’t be up there that quick. And I needed to stall Hook’s plans for me until I found it.

Hook pauses, his foot hovering mid-step in the middle of the staircase before he steps back and turns to me with an excited look of anticipation filling his eyes.

“Then I’ll be more than happy to personally come down there and give you a helping hand.” His smirk grows smug when he sees my defiant expression drop.

“You seemed to enjoy it so much last time.”

I glare up at him. “You—”

He gives me a look that dares me to push him on this. A look that tells me he’s more than willing—even happy—to come down here and do what he promised... or more.

I snap my mouth shut and clench my fists to slowly follow him up the stairs while cursing him the entire time.

His arrogant smile grates on my nerves as I try to curb my temper and focus on how I’m going to find that bracelet and get out of here and far away from him as soon as possible.

As I move past the blue landscape, I notice that up closer, the illusion seems more real. So real that if I were to reach out, I could feel the soft clouds flow through my fingers and the cool breeze of the night that follows.

I drag my gaze away from it and begrudgingly follow Hook up to the next floor when what I really should be doing is running in the opposite direction.

His eyes flick back to me every few seconds as if he’s aware of my thoughts and I scan around for the nearest exit just in case.

I’m surprised he’s not taking me down toward a basement or underground cell. But maybe his prisons are all upstairs, hidden behind a wealth of luxury.

It wouldn’t be the first time I came face to face with something ugly and

rotten that hid behind something deceptively beautiful.

My stomach drops when I reach the second floor and I see how many halls and doors there are.

How in the Realm am I going to find his office? Or a way out of here?

Similar to a maze, it opens up in every direction with doors lining the wide spaces around them.

Hook glances behind to make sure I'm following him. I catch his amused look and give him a dirty look that makes him smirk.

We take a sharp turn right and left and then another right before moving down a long hall. My head is dizzy by the third time we turn down another hallway with each one starting to blend together.

They're become all too similar to distinguish any slight differences that would help me find a way out of here.

My hope further plummets the longer we move down another hall. We take another sharp left into a similar hall. But this time it's one with a dead end and only one set of double doors at the left side.

Hook moves to it and opens it before stepping inside. I hesitantly follow him in, wondering what horrors lay behind it.

Taking a deep breath, I brace myself and take a step... Only to find no horror or hidden monsters waiting for me. And the more I look, the more I see that there's not a single thing that would make me want to bolt out of here or run away in fear. In fact, it's the complete opposite.

But this can't be where he's keeping me. This room is... *beautiful*. It was open, elegant, and serene. The colors of the room were a soothing palette of pale pinks, beautiful golds, and soft white and grays. There were gray shelves to my right with books and trinkets that immediately draw my attention. A white desk with a gold leaf detail sitting below it with intricate carvings.

There's a large four poster bed in the center of the room with soft pink satin bedding and two white doors with more delicate swirling carvings that lay on each side of it.

Instead of a normal window overlooking the garden, there's a large circular bay window with enough room to sit two people. And even though the window is closed, the air in the room isn't suffocating or dry.

The entire room is intimate yet inviting, cozy yet spacious.

Everything and more that I've always wanted in a room and a space of my own.

But... there has to be a catch. Maybe this is another illusion? Something

to throw me off guard before he shows me the dark cell he's really keeping me in.

I glance at the white floor beneath my feet, its plush fabric is the softest furs I've ever felt.

It *feels* real. But that illusion on the staircase also felt real. And it was most definitely an illusion.

This has to be a trick. My eyes scan the room trying to find the deception. But the illusion is so good, I can't even sense its power.

My gaze catches on the two doors on the sides of the bed. They're probably hiding the true horrors I'll come to soon fear.

I try to push down the panic bubbling up inside me and remind myself that I'll heal. Many may think I'm a dud Fae, but I still heal like one and I'll move past whatever he tries to do to me. I will escape. And when I—

“One is a closet. The other is a bathroom with all the amenities you should need... You do remember what a bathroom is.”

I hear the amusement in Hook's tone and glance over at him. He's staring at me with a strange look, showing none of that amusement on his face.

“*This* is where you're keeping me?” It has to be a lie. A trick.

Amusement finally flashes across his face. “Would you prefer something else? Maybe one with a larger space or a better view?” I hear the taunt in his tone and narrow my eyes on him as he chuckles.

“Yes, Tink, this is where you'll be staying. There's no catch or illusion. What you see here is real.”

Nothing is ever just that. There is always something hidden beneath.

I glance around the room again trying to spot the illusion. I push out my senses and try to hone in on it. But there's nothing. Nothing that reveals he's lying.

“Why? Why here and not a cell? And without any bindings?” I glance back at him to catch his wolfish grin.

“Would you prefer to be tied up?” He takes a step closer to me. “If that's the case, then I have a far better place to do it than some dark cell.” That grin grows wicked, his tone shamelessly suggestive. “In fact, my bed is *always* available.”

My body stiffens at his words. “If this is where you're keeping me then get out.”

I don't expect him to listen, but he does, a smug smirk on his face as he makes his way towards the door.

“I’ll have someone bring you something to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.” And in truth, I wasn’t. But even if I were, I wouldn’t have taken anything from him.

Hook has his hand on the door handle when he stops and turns back to look at me, that taunting smirk nowhere to be found.

Something in my gaze must tell him I was reaching my breaking point when it came to him and his *games* as he nods a reply.

“So be it,” he whispers, sounding almost somber before opening the door and leaving, softly closing it behind him. And leaving me alone with my thoughts. Thoughts that soon rise up and remind me how much of a mess I was in once again.

I glance around the room that was beautiful in my mind moments ago, to see it for what it really is—A pretty prison, a gilded cage. No matter how Hook dresses it up, that’s all it is.

I’m just one of his prisoners here. But unlike the rest of them, I wouldn’t be for long. I was going to do whatever it took to get out of here.

But first I needed to find that bracelet.

With a renewed sense of purpose, I step silently over to the door and listen out for any sound before chancing my luck and twisting the handle. Only to find it unlocked.

I pause for a moment, shocked that it wasn’t locked. *Did he forget to lock me in?* Or maybe he left it unlocked thinking I would never try to escape after his little warning.

Or maybe this is all just some elaborate game to keep him amused to pass the time.

Either way, it was going to be his first and last mistake for underestimating me so easily. If there’s one thing I’m truly confident in, it’s my ability to be endlessly resourceful.

I slowly pull the door open and peek outside. Only to find the hall empty and Hook nowhere to be found.

Foolish man.

Naïve I may be, but even though three years have passed, he should know better than to think I would give in so easily.

Once I found Hook’s office and in turn, that bracelet, I was out of here. But more than that I would finally be free.

From more than just Hook.

CHAPTER 6



TIME DRAGS on as I move through the maze of halls. It must be one of those magical things Hook told me about this place because I've been moving through them for what feels like forever and getting nowhere.

Every hall looks the same. Every cove, chair, painting, and floor is similar. Every door and bedroom is laid out in the same way.

At the start, I followed Hook and the direction he was going in. But I soon lost him, and then the halls split off in multiple directions. And that left me with picking random places to go.

Even then, I still ended up in what looked like the same hall with multiple twists and turns.

I slump down onto the nearest chair in the hall I'm in and try to come up with another way to find Hook's office. This blind search was getting me nowhere fast.

Where could it be?

I barely get a moment to think before I hear movement down the hall from me. Moving quickly, I duck into the nearest cove.

Hook's voice travels down to me, along with another. A voice that sounds familiar.

Cash.

I move to the edge of the cove, trying to get closer while remaining hidden, but even then, their words aren't as clear as I'd like.

What I can make out from their conversation are the words 'Arden' and 'meeting'. But what I really hear from that is that they'll be leaving this place and the confines of the strange shield soon and that I'll need to be ready by then.

A bubble of excitement flutters through me as they move further away, their voices soon disappearing.

As silently as possible, I quickly follow after them and hope that I don't get caught. But my quick-thinking plan soon falls apart as I soon lose them in an attempt at caution and get lost in the maze of halls once again.

Before I give up hope, I follow the long hall to my left and take a sharp right. It leads me to a hall similar to the one my pretty prison is on, except for one slight difference. While there's the same double doors that lead to what I'm assuming is a bedroom just like mine, there's also a single door beside it, unlike my dead end. And something in my gut tells me to look inside.

Knowing that feeling has never led me astray, I move toward the room, glancing quickly behind me to make sure no one is silently following or watching me.

Once I'm at the door, I make a silent wish to whoever is listening that this works and then turn the handle.

Just like I had hoped, the door is unlocked and opens to reveal the thing I've been searching for all this time.

An office. There are intricate designs on the large ornate black desk and expensive looking furnishings spread out across the entire room. I doubt this could be anything other than Hook's office.

A small rectangular window sits to the left of the desk revealing the dark night and moon outside, reminding me I haven't got any more time to waste.

A flutter of excitement bubbles up through me once more as I move further into the room. Only to look behind the desk and wince.

Dozens of boxes sit beside a wall of wooden shelves. While plenty of tiny, hidden spaces fill the rest of the room. So many places a tiny trinket, such as a bracelet, could hide.

But maybe I'll get lucky and find it laying on a surface, just hidden from the eye to see.

With my slip of hope, I move to the large ornate black desk first and look under the stacks of papers and around the strange objects spread out across it.

An expensive-looking gold and black pocket watch catches my attention. There's a strange symbol around the face of the old watch with a marble set in the center.

The more I focus on it, the more I hear the tick as it grows louder, echoing throughout the room until it's all I hear. Everything else around me grows silent and calm as I'm pulled under its spell.

Time seems to slow and stop as I find myself falling into a lull with the promise of peace.

But just as I'm dragged further into its grip, something in my chest flutters and my power ripples beneath the surface of my skin, quickly dragging me out of the haze I was slowly falling under.

I throw the strange watch under the papers on the desk and step away from it before glancing around me. Nothing looks any different.

I look over to the window and the dark night sky stares back at me reminding me of the time. But unless an entire day has passed, I doubt it's been more than a few minutes.

Just in case, I pause and listen out for any sound, specifically any shouting, looking for a missing prisoner. But hear nothing.

Glancing back at the piece of paper where the watch lays hidden, I shake off the last of whatever eerie thrall it had me under and focus back on my search for the bracelet.

Moving to the drawers beneath the desk, I check inside and around them, but apart from more strange objects and a black dagger, it's not there.

Taking a deep breath and releasing it, I turn and head for the pile of boxes in front of the shelves that span out across the entirety of the back wall behind the desk.

Not wasting any time, I search in each and every box and between all of the items, but quickly find it's not in any of them.

Moving to the shelves, my gaze catches on a glint of something shiny. But as soon as I move closer, the shred of hope I had, shrivels up as it turns out to be just a long clear crystal.

Picking it up, I inspect it. It's light enough that you would barely feel it, its length and width the size of a long finger. But what has me more fascinated is the small, intricate gold runes traveling up and down it.

Just like the watch, I feel drawn to it. To its power. But unlike the watch, it doesn't try to pull me under any strange spell. Its energy is more subtle, like a brush of air whispering past me.

The runes seem familiar somehow, though I can't place where I've seen them before.

With too much time wasted inspecting old relics, I place the crystal back where I found it and continue my search.

Where could he have put it? Maybe he—

“Looking for this?” A familiar teasing tone makes me freeze. I twist

around only to find Hook leaning against the opened doorway, a smirk on his face as he holds up the bracelet I've been looking for this entire time.

But it's something in his look that pushes back any fear of being caught.

A wolf's smile slowly slides across his face, revealing everything I need to know.

He *knew* I'd come looking for it.

"How did you—"

"Your eyes lit up when you saw it earlier." His smile grows smug as he moves into the room and toward me.

I tense as he moves around the desk to stand in front of me. "I know that look. Every time you found something new that washed up on the shores of Neverland, you wore the very same expression."

"Maybe I just want it because it's pretty." I don a neutral expression, his words reminding me of the past we shared and with it, dragging up feelings I wanted to long forget.

A smile shadows his lips. "You're not that materialistic. You don't care about wealth or owning something just because it's *pretty*. You never did. Not for as long as I've known you."

"That was before. I'm not the Tink you once knew." And it was the truth. So much has happened in the last three years that I doubt I was anything like the version he once knew.

Even *I* didn't know who I was or what I really wanted in this life. I was never really given the choice to decide for myself. All that I knew was that I wanted to be free. Free to make my own choices. Free to live the life I chose. But *what* that actually meant, was something I had yet to figure out.

"But you are," he frowns, as he searches my face for something. "She may be buried beneath the surface. Beneath layers of shadows of something I have yet to figure out. But she's in there."

The complete surety in his tone makes me pause. The way he continues to search my face for something I know he will no longer find makes my rising anger for tricking me, simmer. And slowly disappear as his frown grows.

Because no matter how much he thinks he knows me. No matter how many little memories there are between us, there are too many dark and twisted ones that came after that made them fade into the nothingness. And along with it, any trust or happiness I had with them.

I didn't trust Hook anymore. I had no reason to.

"Why do you care?" I ask, while knowing he doesn't care the slightest. At

least not about me. Why would he? He doesn't need me here. I have no powers that he knows of. And there's nothing I can give him that he doesn't already have or can buy.

Hook regards me with a strange look before straightening up and holding the bracelet between us. "Tell me why you want this?"

"And if I do? Will you give it to me and allow me to leave?" I eye the bracelet as it swings from side to side.

"Possibly." He squints his eyes, exaggerating the thought of it. But I spot the lie immediately and narrow my eyes on him.

"*Liar.*"

Hook chuckles as his dark eyes find mine.

"Just give me the bracelet and I'll leave," I assure him. "You'll never have to see me again. You have my word."

Something flashes in his eyes as his smile drops, but it's too quick to catch before that smug smirk returns. This time though, there's no playfulness in his eyes, no glint of amusement or dash of devilment. Instead, there's a hint of dark pain that slowly slips out.

"You know I can't just let you leave." His words are void of any true emotion, and any drop of hope I had dries up quickly.

"Can't or won't?" I seethe, my anger quickly rising to the surface once more as I clench my hands at my sides.

Hook moves closer until he's a hair's breadth away from me, forcing me to take a step back. My back hits the shelves, stopping me from moving any further and leaving me in Hook's grasp.

"Both." His eyes darken as he looks down at me. But there's something in that look that scares me, setting my nerves alight as I look for a way out.

"Hook—"

As if he's able to read my mind, his eyes soften and that look disappears. "You're not afraid of me. Not really. You know I'd never *really* hurt you."

"No, you'd just kidnap me," I argue, feeling none of the confidence my tone reveals.

"Maybe it's for your own good," he counters.

"Or *maybe* it's just an excuse you made up to make yourself feel better about the fact that you *kidnapped* me," I grit out.

"As defiant as ever." He smiles as if he enjoys seeing me angry. Raising a hand to each side of me, his eyes hold me hostage as his arms trap me in.

"You seem pleased by that." I glare at the man who seems to be able to

push every one of my buttons simultaneously.

“Oh, I am. Immensely.” His eyes light up and that smile grows.

“So that’s what this all is about? You want me to challenge you?” Was this all just some joke to him?

I glare at him as he shifts closer, his eyes darkening as the mood quickly shifts in the room.

“I want you to let go and just have fun because you can. Like old times.”

“We’re not kids anymore.”

He gives me a sly grin. “Age shouldn’t define whether or not we have fun. Society and their rules have always been an obstruction for any *true* joy or happiness.”

“Rules exist for a reason,” I tell him, knowing he’s never followed a damn rule in his life. In fact, I’m betting he chooses to do the opposite, if only to prove a point.

He shakes his head, giving me a look that says I should know better. “Rules exist to act as a guide and nothing more. Most should never have been created, while the rest can be bent or broken.”

“Is that how you’re able to convince your conscience of your morally gray decisions?”

Hook always had a way with words. He always made me question things. There was never black and white with him. There was always a gray area where he could wiggle his way into and find some plausible reasoning as to why it should be that way.

But the world didn’t work like that. All the Realms had rules that needed to be abided by to maintain order. It is how it’s always been and always will be.

But it looks like Hook will never accept that.

“Everyone already thinks I’m a villain, so why not play the part?” He smiles but it doesn’t reach his eyes. It makes me pause.

“But are you? A villain?” I don’t know why I ask him when the evidence is right in front of me. He kidnapped me only hours ago. But... he also saved me before that, and he’s right, he hasn’t hurt me. Whether that changes, is another thing.

“And if I am?” he asks in a soft tone, his eyes scanning my face before dipping to my lips.

The energy between us kicks up a notch making it hard for me to focus on anything other than the way Hook looks at me. Like I’m something precious

to behold. Like I'm not just something he can control or own.

Like he truly cares what I think and feel.

But right now, I don't know *what* to feel. With one look he has my mind twisting and turning, questioning things I thought I had long moved past. And reminding me of a moment long ago of a stolen kiss and a whispered promise.

A slight shift in his body brings my attention back to the bracelet between his fingers, and it quickly snaps me out of my foolish thoughts.

My mind is just playing tricks on me. Or rather, Hook is.

This is just another one of his games to get what he wants. And something he will never have. Me.

But maybe I can use it against him. Maybe I can play him at his own game.

A small plan comes to mind as I give him a tentative smile. His eyes brighten and slightly widen as I reach up to his shoulder and slowly slide my hand down the length of his arm to his hand.

"Tink," he breathes. His eyes grow dark as his breath picks up. I'm so close to the bracelet in his hand that when he moves forward, I feel the cold brush of metal against my fingers.

Just a little bit closer.

I lean forward, my eyes dropping to his lips as my hand caresses his. His fingers twitch and I feel the bracelet loosen from his hold.

Just before his lips reach mine, I pull it from his grasp and quickly duck under his arm and around the desk before placing it around my wrist.

Hook's eyes widen in shock before a sharp laugh tumbles from his lips. He turns to me, his eyes still as dark as they were moments ago, but this time filled with light and happiness.

"That wasn't very nice." His heated gaze follows me as he straightens up and fully turns around to me.

"You said you wanted me to *play*." I shrug and fix the bracelet on my wrist while trying to calm my racing heart.

"That I did. But there's only one problem with that little game of yours." He gives me a knowing smirk, one that makes me feel uneasy as he slowly moves around the desk.

"And what's that?" I meet his gaze and the dark glint in his eyes makes my stomach drop.

His smirk grows into something smug as he leans back against the desk

and crosses his arms.

“I’d rather you find out for yourself.” He dips his head toward the bracelet on my wrist. “Go ahead. Try it.”

I frown at his cocky attitude but quickly focus on the bracelet, thinking of disappearing from everyone that’s searching for me, including Hook and everyone here.

Closing my eyes, I search for its energy and try to grasp onto it. A rush of warmth flows through my chest. But I don’t know whether it’s the bracelet working or my excitement at something finally going my way.

I open my eyes to see if it’s worked and if I’m invisible from Hook, when a warm presence slides up behind me making me freeze.

Hook leans in, his breath whispering across the side of my cheek, making me shiver.

“It won’t work,” he whispers before pulling back.

“Why not?” I whip around to him as my plans start to crumble hearing his three little words.

There must be a trick to it. Maybe I’m not thinking about it right or maybe it first needs to be activated somehow.

“Because it’s already been drained,” he retorts, smirking to hide the delight that lights up his entire face.

My heart plummets at his words. I glance down at the bracelet as anger soon replaces my excitement, burning through my chest like a flame.

“There’s no power left to help you... *disappear*,” he continues, oblivious to my frustration and misery.

Drained? I frown at the bracelet just as the flames in my chest fizzle out and drop like ash to the floor. Just like my entire plan and any hope of choosing a life for myself disappears.

“It needs to be charged.” There’s humor in Hook’s voice, like he’s toying with me. But I don’t care. All I care about is the little piece of information he revealed.

That there’s still a way for this to work.

I glance up at him to find him watching me with a look of intrigue and something else I can’t pinpoint before he suddenly narrows his eyes on me.

“Tell me who you’re running from, and I’ll help you.” The conviction in his voice makes me freeze.

I swallow against the lump forming in my throat. “You would betray me just as easily.” Just like *he* did. And I would not make that mistake twice. Not

even for him and his heated looks and pretty promises.

“Is that what you think?” He pulls himself up to his full height, his look now guarded.

“Has dear Peter been telling you all about big bad Hook while painting himself to be the hero?” he sneers.

My chest grows tight at the mention of Peter.

“He...” I shake my head, stopping myself. Peter told me many things about Hook, and all were full of horrific tales of bloodshed and cruelty, but I’ve learned not to trust everything Peter told me. And for some reason, Hook doesn’t scare me. Not his dark looks or vicious smiles.

But that doesn’t mean Hook is someone I can trust either.

“It doesn’t matter. I know the only reason I’m here is because there must be something you want from me. For the life of me, I can’t think what it would be. You have everything and the means to buy whatever you don’t have. But I *know* there’s going to be a catch. So out with it. Tell me what you want so I can be on my way.”

Hook surprisingly loses some of the stiffness in his posture and looks at me silently for a moment. His silent gaze unnerves me, and the longer he stares at me the more I feel as if he can read the secrets beneath my skin. Secrets that need to stay hidden forever.

“You always were too smart for your own good. And you’re right. There *is* something I want from you. But it looks like there’s something you need from me too.” He turns and walks back over to the desk. Leaning against it, he looks right at me.

“So... how about we make a little deal?”

CHAPTER 7



“WHAT KIND OF DEAL?” I eye the treacherous man that likes to constantly provoke me with a wary gaze.

“Those Hunters showed up a few months ago out of the blue. And since then, they have caused me and my people nothing but trouble.”

“Hunters?” I frown, already lost on what he was talking about.

Hook smiles at my confusion. “The men dressed in black from the carpark.”

Car...park? He must be talking about that place where the portal opened.

“What do they hunt?” I ask, knowing I’m not going to like the answer.

A savage smirk makes my stomach flip as he replies. “Anything that’s powerful enough, but as of recently, I’ve seen them take a liking to *Fae*.” He gives me a pointed look. “My men have also just confirmed this.”

“Then how would I be able to help you if I’m someone they... hunt?” I frown.

Hook gets up from his leaning position against the desk and moves in front of me. “That’s exactly why I need you.”

But it still makes little sense to me why he would *need* me. He has men that are stronger and more skilled. And that’s without the magical objects that he has in his possession or the secrets that he has enabling him to move anything with just a thought.

What use could I possibly be to him with those things at his disposal?

“If you help me with this, then I’ll not only let you keep that bracelet, but I’ll also help you find a more permanent solution. One that won’t ever drain.”

“Why would I want to keep a useless bracelet?” Unless he lied to me, and it’s not actually drained. I narrow my eyes on him and his eyes light up.

“Because I have a way to... *charge* it.”

Of course, he does. He also seems to have an answer for everything, too.

“How? How can you *charge* it and how can you find me something more permanent?” I’ve never heard of anyone being able to do that. It has to be another one of his tricks.

Hook smirks at me, giving me a look that says he knows I don’t believe him and yet still finds it amusing.

“I have many, *many* talents. Most you are unaware of...” Suggestion bleeds through his tone as a wolf’s smile slides across his face.

“But the main one you should be aware of, is my ability to find rare and unique treasures of the magical kind.”

“But... but you’re *human*.” A jolt of shock shoots through me as I search his face and his eyes for anything that would reveal otherwise.

“Half,” he teases with a small smile. But I ignore it, still too stunned at his little confession.

How did I not know? How did I never sense it? I reach out trying to do just that. To sense something, anything. But like always, all I sense is human.

“And your other half?” I press while still searching his face for something that would reveal it. But apart from those otherworldly eyes, I find nothing out of the ordinary. Or nothing out of the ordinary for Hook.

Nothing about him ever screamed *average*. From the sharp line of his jaw, down the length of his body and every hard and taunt muscle in between. To the way he moved as graceful as a Fae but as stealthy as a hunter. To the way he captured everyone’s attention with his presence alone. To his mesmerizing electric blue eyes that could easily enthrall or enchant you. Reveal every emotion or cut you hard in one look.

“It’s not worth discussing.” He brushes it off as if he’s discussing the weather and not something important.

But my head spins with this new information he revealed.

I try to think back to what I’d heard of him from Peter. The vicious tales of how he easily conquered lands and pillaged villages and towns.

I used to brush it aside, thinking no human could do such a thing with many of the towns and villages in other Realms having magical beings to protect them.

But now?... Now I start to question if maybe it was real. If Hook could always do what he says and is able to find unique magical items to use. If it is, then he could have the ability to cause havoc and destruction just like

Peter said he did.

Now that I think about it, having the ability to fling someone through the air or move as fast as a Fae or Demon makes sense now. And if he really had the ability to find these rare items, then he could be more powerful than anyone ever realized.

I still can't sense any power from him though. But it could be a magical item blocking me from sensing his power. And something he's always had on him, even back in Neverland.

I start to see him differently. And start to question everything I know about him. Every moment we spent together and the stories I heard from Peter after he left.

It's silly to feel hurt that he never told me about this. Especially when I haven't told him my own secrets.

But that's what I am feeling right now.

Hook frowns as if sensing my shifting mood, losing any of his playfulness to watch me.

"All you need to know is that I can help you get you what you want."

I wanted to know a lot more than that. Like how he was able to hide this ability from me. Or why? But it's also not something I could outright ask him.

I doubted he even knew what it was I wanted. I didn't *want* to have to hide. But it was a necessary evil.

"How?" I ask him, while wondering why he wants to help me at all. He left Neverland without so much as a backward glance. So, whatever this is, it's not for my benefit.

He wants to make a deal. But I have a niggling feeling that it will weigh heavily in his favor and all my restless thoughts and irrational emotions will be for nothing.

"You also said you could charge this bracelet? Is that another one of your hidden *talents*?" I raise my hand and shake the silver bracelet on my wrist.

Hook loses his frown and quickly dons a boyish smile as he reaches out to take my hand.

"My ability spans further than simply sensing rare relics and treasures of both the magical and normal kind." His fingers move to my wrist and my skin tingles from his touch.

I ignore it and any other treacherous feelings that try to make themselves known. Especially when Hook shifts closer, and the warmth of his body

slowly seeps into mine.

“Some objects allow me to manipulate the energy within them. While others, I can simply use and control,” he murmurs, his lips dancing around a smile as if he already senses what his nearness is doing to me.

His words finally filter past the haze riddling my mind, leaving me stunned silent at his admission.

Not only can he find and use these items himself, but he could also manipulate and imbue them with his own energy.

It's not an easy feat to be able to control magical items you haven't created yourself. The most powerful Fae, Witches and Warlocks even had significant issues accomplishing that. So, to be able to *control* them, *manipulate* them and *give* them power is... extraordinary.

It was no wonder he only ever followed his own rules. With this type of power, who would go against him?

He watches me for a moment, his expression turning guarded the longer he stares at me. A strange look flashes across his face. A look that makes it seem as if he's questioning whether he should reveal anything more.

I don't move an inch, and hope that my eyes convey how much I want him to continue. Even after him revealing this secret about himself, I didn't fear him. At least I didn't *think* I did. I feared what he could do with that power and what he could become if he used it against me.

But something inside me tells me he'd never do that.

It takes a moment of my complete stillness before he gives in, and his eyes move to the bracelet.

A warmth encircles my wrist and I watch him closely for any changes that may reveal this power. But apart from the sliver of warmth swirling my wrist, I feel nothing.

It takes a moment but then I notice the slight change that reveals it. His power. I wouldn't have spotted it at all if not for the fact that I wasn't solely focusing on his face.

It's his eyes.

His *stormy* blue eyes.

I used to think it was a glint of light from the sun, or something I must have imagined. But it's been there right in front of me the entire time.

The air in the room quickly shifts the longer he stares at the bracelet. I look closer, my focus only on those blue irises, and watch as the semblance of a storm swirls inside them. It builds and grows until his blue eyes darken

and a flash of lightning strikes through them.

The warmth I felt moments ago grows and spreads further around my wrist, pulsing once before disappearing completely.

He glances at me as his stormy eyes clear and those electric blue eyes stare back at me.

“I’ve manipulated it now to give you what you wish. But there’s a catch.”

“Of course there is,” I mutter, watching as his smile grows and eyes brighten.

I cut him a glare and wait for him to share this little catch.

“Some magical items have an expiry date before becoming ordinary once again.” He dips his head to my wrist.

“And the bracelet is one of these items?” I ask, my hope starting to fizzle and dissolve as I realize what he’s saying.

He nods his head. “It was nearly completely drained already. But it had some residue of energy left over from the previous wearer. I was able to manipulate it and imbue it with enough of my power to give a kick start. It should give you one more chance to use it.”

“One more chance? What does that mean?” I grasp onto the sliver of hope before it distinguishes completely. Any chance he gave me was better than nothing right now.

Hook gives me an impassive look, but I don’t miss the flash of frustration across his eyes before he closes off any revealing expression.

“Meaning that whatever you pick, it will stay that way. I won’t be able to manipulate it again to give you another shot. Meaning you will only be able to choose one thing to stay hidden from. And after you choose it, you won’t be able to change it.”

So, I can choose to either hide from him and this island or choose my other larger problem that’s haunting me. But I can’t have both.

My shoulders drop as I realize I’ll have to come up with another way to escape Hook. If I only have one option right now, he isn’t the most pressing issue at hand.

“How far does that one thing extend to?” I didn’t just have one person I needed to hide from, there were many. So, if this only worked on one person, it would be useless to me.

I ignore the questioning look he gives me to stare at the bracelet.

After a moment of my silence, he sighs, exhaling his frustration, before answering me.

“From what I can gather from our little thief earlier and what I’ve sensed from the bracelet itself is that you can think of a building or group of people that share some sort of connection. The connection can be through bond, blood or a similar power.”

“Then how did the thief hide—”

“The thief was able to hide from the entire House of Trel because of the connection that House has with one another. A House doesn’t need to be of the same blood to form a connection. They’re family through a bond they share. He focused on that bond and was able to stay hidden from them all.”

Bond, blood or power...

Blood wouldn’t work as I needed it to expand larger than that. I had no bond that I could pull on like those in House Trel, so my best option was power.

They all had a similar power only a certain group of High Fae had. I could focus on that and in turn *them*.

Wasting no more time, I focus on them and their powers. The one thing that joins them together as I try to activate the bracelet. I keep them in my mind and silently pray this works.

The bracelet heats, growing hotter before pulsing again. A flutter inside my chest spreads outward and a feeling of safety, similar to Neverland washes over me.

And somehow, I know that the bracelet heard my call and granted my wish.

“You’ve activated it,” Hook confirms. “Whatever you chose. It will now stay that way.”

I glance up, my stomach sinking at the look in his eyes. A look that has far too many questions in it.

“Tink...Who—?” He starts, but I pull my hand out of his and move a step back and clear my throat.

“What makes you think I won’t just run off now that I have what I need?” I quirk a brow.

The question does what I intended it to, making him lose that questioning stare and bringing a spark to his eyes.

“You mean apart from having to get past me and off this island?” he says with a cocky grin.

“Yes,” I grit out. “Apart from that *little* issue.”

He chuckles low in his throat, his eyes lighting up with humor just like

every other time I seem to let him get to me.

“Two reasons,” he says, straightening up.

“One. Not many people can do what I can. I’m not exaggerating when I tell you that my talents are rare. There’s not one person in this city or the next that can do what I can, nor have I met anyone in any of the Realms I’ve come across.” There’s no smugness to his tone or expression. Just a surety in his voice, like it’s a fact of the matter.

“And in order to even attempt to push power into a relic like that, especially those already created by magic, you need to be able to match the frequency it’s on before binding it to you. Both of which are not easy feats,” he tells me.

“But all of which you can easily do?” I ask, as I piece together everything he’s just revealed.

“Exactly.” He gives me the smug look I was expecting moments ago and waits for me to speak.

There was just one little problem with his little revelation. I can agree that he’s probably the only one out there that can do everything he can, but I also knew for certain that there were others that could mimic certain abilities he had.

A Darling witch may not be able to manipulate, imbue and control a magical item, but they could cast a spell powerful enough to do what I needed.

So, all his little speech told me was that there’s not a Darling witch in this city and that if I needed to find one, I’d have to search further out.

But to even consider that, I’d first need to escape Hook and his fortress. And considering what I just found out about him and his abilities, I doubted it was going to be as easy to achieve as I originally thought.

But none of that should matter now. At least the part about finding anyone that can do what he can. I already had the bracelet, and it was charged and activated now.

Unless there was some catch, I was unaware of.

“You mentioned finding a more permanent solution? Why would I need it?” I ask.

He smiles like it’s one question he hoped I’d ask. “I may have been able to manipulate it and charge it. But it won’t last forever. You’ll need something more permanent.”

I look down at the bracelet and focus on its warmth. The bracelet pulses

as if answering my call and I feel a small measure of safety from those that hunt me, my presence in this Realm, not an issue for now.

But even if I have one problem dealt with, I still had another.

Hook.

“So, if I help you, you’ll let me keep this bracelet and find me a more permanent solution? And then what?” I question, searching his face for any tell that would reveal this is just another one of his games. But once again, I find none. “Will you just let me go?” I push, needing to hear him say it. Needing to hear him tell me that I will be free once I did what he asked of me.

“Exactly. Sounds like a fair deal, does it not?” Hook smiles, but something flickers in his eyes that I don’t catch.

I look at him warily not believing for a second that there will be anything *fair* about it. But push aside my growing doubts for now to listen to what he wants.

“What *exactly* is it you want me to do?” I didn’t want any more half-truths or veiled lies or games. If he wanted my help with something, he needed to ask me outright.

As if reading my thoughts, Hook’s smile widens before growing into something wicked. Something that has a sense of dread rolling through the pit of my stomach.

“I want you to be my bait.”

CHAPTER 8



THE LOOK in his eyes tells me he's completely serious. That this is most definitely not some idiotic joke.

I take another step back from the madman in front of me.

Why is it that everyone wanted to use me? Why do they always have an ulterior motive that suited only them?

I knew there had to be a catch. Something that would cost me way more than I realized, and in this case, it was my life.

Hook didn't want my *help*. He wanted to *use* me. Just like everyone else.

"So, you can hand me over to them and solve two of your problems at once?" I shake my head, my guard truly and firmly up.

"I think I'll pass and take my chances without your so-called *help*." I cut him a glare, ready to fight him on this but instead catch his eyes soften.

"No, Tink. Despite what you may think of me, I would never let them have you, nor would I ever go back on my word." The sincerity in his voice makes me pause.

"Why?" It would quickly solve his problem and he could go back to his life before the Hunters arrived and I dropped into it.

"Because I may be the villain of your story, but I'm not a monster." He takes a step closer to me, a sinful smile sliding across his lips.

"Cruel? Most definitely." He moves another slow, calculated step, his eyes trained on me and every move I make.

"Vicious? Even more so..." He takes another step, and then another until he's standing right in front of me once more, his eyes blazing down on me, holding me captive.

"And utterly ruthless in every way," he says in a dangerous tone. "But

only for those that deserve it.”

But *who* deserves it? And just because he’s choosing not to add me to that little list doesn’t mean he won’t suddenly change his mind when the time comes.

“How do I know you won’t double-cross me?” My voice is low and shaky, sounding strange to my ears.

“I guess you’ll just have to take my word for it.” His eyes darken with a pained look before he takes a step back, giving me the space I needed to think.

I mull over his words as I consider his deal. If I believe him and he betrays me, I’ll be stuck with those Hunters and could end up some place I might never escape. Or worse, they could end up taking me to the Fae Realm and then death would be a reprieve from what awaits me there.

I run my thumb across the oval stone on the bracelet and feel a thrum of its power since Hook charged it.

I could escape. Now that I have the bracelet and it’s already charged and activated, technically, I could go anywhere I please and hide.

But then... It’s also not a permanent solution. It will eventually drain. There’s also the little problem of having to find a Darling witch before it does, or everything I did to escape will be for nothing. And that’s assuming I even figure out where a Darling witch lives.

I didn’t want to be on the run for the rest of my life either.

I glance up at Hook as he watches me patiently. Something I didn’t think he had in him.

A flutter of warmth spreads throughout my chest as a sliver of hope rises up inside me.

What if he’s telling me the truth? What if he’s willing to protect me and also help me in exchange for me becoming his *bait*?

The permanent solution he had might end up changing everything for me and for the better. Then I could avoid more than one problem and go live the life I wanted. Whatever that may be.

But in the end, it would be *my* choice. And that’s all I ever wanted.

“Say that I believe you and I agree to be your bait. Then I have some... *terms* I’d like to add to this so-called deal.”

Hook’s eyes twinkle with amusement, finally losing that dark, pained look. “Letting you keep the bracelet, finding you a permanent solution *and* keeping you safe from the Hunters isn’t enough?”

“No.” I give him a deadpan look. If I was going to risk my life for his little cause, I wanted something more.

Hook smiles as he moves back to the desk to lean against it.

“Go ahead then. Tell me your terms,” he says, his tone amused.

I clear my throat, not expecting him to give in so easily. But I wasn’t going to throw away this opportunity so quickly.

“I don’t want to be treated as a prisoner. More of a... *guest*. And I want to be able to come and go freely.”

“Giving you a room full of luxury didn’t show you that you were never truly a prisoner here?” His brows lift in surprise.

“Prisons aren’t always dungeons and cells. And freedom can come in many forms.” I give him a pointed look.

Neverland was supposed to be my way to freedom. But it ended up becoming another prison like my life before it.

Hook quickly loses any amusement from my words as his entire body seemed to stiffen.

“You were always allowed to move freely about my home. No one will ever stop you, if or when you want to explore. But unless you’re with me or one of my men, you can’t leave the island. Not until we have our little Hunter problem solved.”

His eyes grow hard and cold. “Their shadow abilities are not something I’ve ever come across and they seem to be able to appear and disappear at will. I can’t protect you if they get a hold of you.”

I try to spot some twitch or flaw that reveals a lie, but I don’t find any. And his *request* seems reasonable enough. I didn’t want to be caught by the Hunters either.

An icy shiver crawls down my back at the thought.

Either way, my options were extremely limited and no matter how resourceful I was, it didn’t change the fact that I was in a Realm I knew the bare minimum of and with no permanent solution to keep me hidden.

For now, it seems, this bracelet and Hook’s deal was my best option.

“Fine. If you do as you promise...” I wince, trying to force the words out, knowing somehow, somewhere, I’ll live to regret them.

“I’ll be your... *bait*,” I grumble.

A ghost of a smile brushes his lips as he gives me a look that makes me want to take back my words immediately.

Placing his hand in the air between us, he quirks a brow at me.

I roll my eyes at him and take his hand to shake it. But the minute I place my hand in his, he lifts it to his lips and places a soft kiss on my fingers.

“It’s a deal,” he murmurs, his eyes darkening as they meet mine.

A warm shiver slides down my back and his smile turns carnal. With one last heated look, he releases my hand and turns to make his way to the door.

The haze across my mind quickly disappears as he moves further away from me. But it also reminds me of something he said earlier.

“You said there were *two* reasons. But you only mentioned one?” I ask.

The first reason was that he was the only one able to do what he did with the bracelet and also be able to find me a permanent solution. But he never mentioned what the second was.

Before reaching the door, he turns around to me, a look of delight slashed across his face that makes my stomach knot.

“When I add my energy to any item, a small... bond is formed between us,” he tells me.

A bond? What does that have to do with me?

My confusion must show on my face as his smile grows.

“Meaning once you have that little bracelet on, there’s nowhere you can run or hide that I won’t be able to find you.”

My back goes ramrod straight as I realize what he means.

I can’t take the bracelet off. He may not know why, but he knows I desperately need it and will choose it over my pride or stubbornness.

“Should you escape. I *will* eventually track you down,” he says with a dark laugh before turning back to the door.

He pauses with his hand on the handle before twisting around to look at me.

“Besides that, in twenty-four hours the bracelet will be useless to you. And unless I charge it before those hours are up, it will be drained of all its magic, becoming as ordinary as a piece of jewelry.”

My stomach drops as he finally reveals the true catch.

Flames burn through my chest as I give him a withering look. “You—”

“I guess you better get used to having me around.” Hook gives me a wicked smirk. “Looks like I’m the *only* one that can help you now.” Opening the door, he walks out of the office, chuckling to himself while I curse him from this Realm to the next.

CHAPTER 9



A SLASH of pain echoes throughout my body as the blade comes down once more. I scramble back in the darkness, but it coils around me dragging me forward. My gasped scream falls on deaf ears as rough hands hold me down.

I scream until my throat is raw, until fire burns throughout it.

But no one comes to save me... They never do.

The blade swings down, this time hitting its target. A piercing slash of flames claw down my back followed by a shooting pain that takes my breath away.

And that's when I hear a crack...

I bolt upwards, gasping for air as the remnants of the nightmare tries to suffocate me.

Power slithers beneath my skin, begging to be released. To come forth and rain destruction around me.

Taking a deep breath, I push it down. Just as I always have. I will it to stay beneath the surface. Beneath the broken shards and slither of darkness.

Nothing is worth the destruction of using it. *Nothing.*

It rumbles before answering but listens to my command as always.

Glancing around, it takes me a minute to realize where I am. The bed is soft beneath me, the room warm.

But it's that warmth that prevents me from feeling the fresh air filling my lungs. Instead, the air turns suffocating, slowly strangling me. My eyes look for something to distract myself with but all I find are the shadows as they slide along the walls and ceiling, dragging me back into my nightmare once more.

A dark figure stands at the door, momentarily shocking me, but I blink,

and it disappears.

Grabbing my chest, I look around, hoping the other shadows have disappeared too. But they're still there. They grow, making the walls seem closer while the ceiling slowly presses down on me as tightness claws at my chest.

Air. I need air.

I quickly move to the large window and try to open it, but I can't find the latch.

My eyes burn as dread fills me. I needed out. I needed out, *now*.

Open! Please open...

My hands shake as I fumble along the frame for the lock. My fingers hit something metal, and a click sounds out, finally freeing me from my suffocating prison.

Pushing the window open, I fall forward as the entire window opens outward, just like a door.

I catch myself on the small balcony hidden outside and swallow down a large gulp of the cool night air.

Needing more freedom from the enclosed space, my eyes spot a small spiral staircase that swirls down the wall and is only hidden by the large tree that sits in front of it. It leads straight out into the garden and forest.

Without a second thought, I move down the steps and quickly make my way to the garden. My feet hit the cool grass, each step like a salve that settles my soul until the chaos and pain within me becomes silent and numb.

I walk with no direction in mind. With no hope for anything other than the calm it brings my mind, body, and soul.

Cool air slowly fills my lungs and I finally feel like I can take a deep breath.

I pause, closing my eyes and tilt my head up towards the vast sky.

Sounds slowly filter in around me. The chirping of small birds. The rustle of trees as the wind brushes past it.

Slowly opening my eyes, I look up at the dark sky and its twinkling starlight. The longer I stand there, the more serene I feel until the last of my panic slowly ebbs away.

With my gaze set above, I lay down and let the stars slowly soothe me back to sleep.

* * *

Light surrounds me, encasing me in its warmth. A pleasant breeze whispers across my cheeks and my eyes flutter open.

I glance around the room in confusion when the faded memory of last night hits me, making me freeze.

I was outside. I was sure of it. But then... *How did I end up back here?*

The window is still ajar, bringing a warm breeze in. I narrow my eyes on it, trying to figure out how I could have got back here.

Did I walk in my sleep? It would be a first if I did.

Too tired to wrap my head around the mystery, I get up and move to the door on my left, hoping it has a tub I can use.

But I open the door only to find a closet with lines of shelves all filled with clothing, shoes and jewelry.

Stepping inside, I glance around at the large space, its size at least half that of my room, and wonder who owns all these clothes.

My fingers trail along the dresses hanging off to one side as I eye the shelf of sparkling jewelry.

Hook was right about one thing. I didn't care about expensive things or pretty dresses, but even I could appreciate the subtle beauty of some of the gems laid out before me.

My eye catches on a small set of shell earrings that reminded me of the beautiful shell Hook once found for me in Neverland. But when he left, I couldn't find it again. And once Peter took off the mask he wore, the last thing I could think about was pretty shells.

Why did Hook leave all these clothes and expensive looking items here? Was it a mistake?

I pull out a couple of dresses and size them up to me. They all seem to be close enough to my size which only makes my frown grow.

But the clothes were already here before I came so someone must have lived here before me.

I glance down at my dress, now wrinkled and dirty, and cringe. I couldn't stay in these clothes any longer. Not with dozens of clean clothes at my fingertips.

And Hook wouldn't have left all these clothes here if I couldn't wear some of them...

My eyes fall on a pair of blue trousers, the fabric a little rough looking but still soft to touch. I pull out the nearest top and I find some delicate undergarments that look far too small but silky soft against my skin.

Trying not to think too much about it, I grab them, along with the other pieces of clothing and head out of the closet and to the other door around the bed.

The sheer size of the room is far larger than the walk-in closet. A huge white bathtub sits in the middle of the room with a large standing gold-framed mirror to the left of it. There's a double wash basin to the right of the room with white marbled streaks of gold. While the floor is its mirror image, but in black.

Even though I've lived in Neverland the last few years, I grew up in the Fae Realm and from what I've seen so far of this Realm, many things are similar. The main difference seems to be that the Mortal Realm uses machinery with items to help their everyday life, whereas the Fae Realm uses magic. But the basic workings of most furnishings and items are similar.

After I put the clothes down and freshen up, I tinker with the bath taps until I get the right temperature. Slipping out of my dress, I throw it to the side and step into the most luxurious stream.

Or at least that's what it feels like.

The warm water slides over my skin like silk, soothing me instantly.

After a moment of basking in its warmth, I notice a line of bottles laid out to the side. Reaching over, I pick up one and smell each bottle until I find one I like, using it to lather and rinse out my hair before cleaning my body.

The mystery of how I got back to my room comes to the forefront of my mind. What if it wasn't me? Would someone else have moved me? But then... *who?*

Stormy eyes flash before me but I shut them out immediately. He would sooner leave me to freeze and find amusement in it.

No, I had to have made it back myself somehow.

Pushing the thought away for now, I lay back and enjoy my bath while it's still warm and try not to think of what being here with Hook means. Or what our little deal really entails.

But my mind decides that's *all* I can think about now.

What was I thinking? I agreed to be his bait! To lure out those Hunters so he can be rid of them once and for all.

And what happens if he goes back on his word and betrays me? He said

he would never do that but just because someone says something doesn't make it true.

I've learned that the hard way.

But what if he keeps his word? A small voice whispers in my mind.

What if he does... Then I would not only be safe from these Hunters, but I'd have fulfilled my side of the deal. I would end up with the thing I needed the most and finally be free from *all* my problems.

If it were that easy, I would have wished upon every shooting star to make it come true. But nothing was ever that simple.

Even Hook's deal had a catch.

Twenty-four hours... I would have to see him at least once a day to charge the bracelet or it would be drained forever.

I glance down at the bracelet and a small pulse from it reminds me it's there protecting me, shielding me.

Sighing, I lean back and let my mind wander about the mess I have myself in when all too soon the water starts to turn cool. I stay a little longer. Until my fingers are wrinkled and there's a bite from the cold water.

Heaving a sigh, I drag myself out of the tub, quickly drying myself off before throwing on the clothes I picked out.

Glancing in the long mirror, I watch the girl that looks closer to a human of this world than a Fae stare back at me.

After a night's rest and warm bath, my green eyes seem a little brighter and my long blonde hair has a healthier shine to it.

After finding a brush near the sink, I take my time untangling the many knots before leaving it down to dry in its usual wavy curls.

Moving back into the room, I head for the closet to hunt down a pair of flat shoes and throw on the first pair I find. Only to realize that they're a perfect fit.

Just like the clothes...

My stomach grumbles, reminding me I haven't eaten anything in a while and I drop the mystery of the perfect sized clothes and shoes for now.

I turn and frown over at the door wondering how long it will take me this time to get through the maze of halls to find something to eat.

Begrudgingly, I get moving down the hallways and take a few estimated guess turns based on yesterday's exploring and hope for the best.

But by some streak of luck, it doesn't take me that long to find downstairs.

A couple of misguided turns have me lose my way for a moment but after that I end up just outside an arched doorway and what smells like a kitchen.

Smiling to myself, I step inside and scan the room for something to eat. But that smile quickly drops when I spot the small machines on every surface and countertop with no sign of food in sight.

But I can still *smell* the food. So, I know it must be in here somewhere.

I move forward and begin opening draws and cupboards. Some reveal more machinery while others store cups and plates.

A bag of brown powder sits in the next cupboard, I pull it down and the smell drifts around me, making my stomach growl again.

This has to be some sort of food from this Realm. *But do I just eat it as it is?*

I dip a finger in it to taste it, wincing when the grainy texture makes me want to gag. I move to place it back in the cupboard when its intoxicating scent makes me pause.

Maybe I just have to mix it with something. It can't smell that good and *not* be edible.

I glance around at all the small machines on the counter and try to figure out if it will go into one of them and magically appear as something tasty. Tinkering around with the small black one beside me, I add the brown powder into the small container and press some buttons when the machine revolts and attacks me, spitting the brown powder all over my white top.

Sighing, I swipe the brown powder off as much of the top as I can, but most of it clings to it, instantly staining it.

I wince and then glare at the machine for ruining it. And wonder how it would feel if I were to throw it on the ground, smashing it into tiny pieces.

I'm debating doing just that when Hook walks into the kitchen. He takes one look at me and immediately starts laughing.

I narrow my eyes at him, too tired and hungry to find humor in this moment.

He chuckles, wiping a hand across his mouth but unfortunately not wiping away the smirk that now seems to be a permanent fixture on his face.

"Why is there coffee all over you?" His eyes dip to my ruined top.

I frown, glancing down at the brown powdery substance now in splotches and streaks down the white top.

"That's what this stuff is called? It smelled nice but it didn't taste as good as it smelled—"

Hook chokes on another laugh. “You... You *tasted* it? Like that?”

I wince as heat rises to my cheeks. “Is it not... *edible*?”

“Not like that.” He laughs again when my stomach rumbles loudly, only making my embarrassment grow.

He obviously hears it too. But instead of making fun of me, he clears his throat and steps up beside me. It’s only then that I notice what he’s wearing and how tight his top is. It clings to every hard muscle and is drenched in sweat as if he’s just been fighting or training.

His scent hits me as he starts cleaning the brown powder off the table, and I have to remind myself that not everything in the Realm tastes as good as it smells.

No matter *how* good it smells.

After the brown mess is cleaned up, he pulls out a cup and does some tinkering with the black machine and brown powder. It makes a strange buzzing noise before he places the cup in the little empty space that curves inward on it.

The buzzing sound grows louder as it turns the brown powder into a dark steamy liquid that pours into the cup.

An even more divine smell seeps around the kitchen making my mouth water.

Once the buzzing stops, Hook takes the cup and lifts it to his lips making me frown.

Of course, he made it for himself.

I reach up to the same cupboard to get a cup to make one for myself when he stops me. I narrow my eyes on him, but he just gives me a soft smile.

“It’s hot.” He blows into the cup before passing it to me.

I take it and glance down at the dark liquid before raising a brow at him.

“Poisoned?” I ask with a small smile.

“Most definitely.” His reply is instant, making my smile grow.

Staring right at him, I take a sip and then a gulp, ignoring the burn as it slides down my throat.

Laughter filled his eyes as he walks over to a large set of cupboards. I stop drinking my new favorite drink long enough to peek into it.

No wonder I couldn’t find the food. It was hidden among the cupboards, blending in with them.

Hook takes out a few items while I stare down into my cup and wonder

what type of magic it holds. The more I drink, the more awake and refreshed I feel.

“What did you call this again?” I needed to know so I could figure out where to get more of it. Especially after I leave this place.

Hook glances over his shoulder, a soft, happy look on his face that catches me off guard.

“Coffee,” he tells me. Shaking his head, he turns back to the counter and starts chopping something. I walk up beside him wondering what he’s doing and where he got the sharp knife from.

I take another sip of my coffee and frown when I realize it’s all gone.

“How do I make more?” I glance back at the coffee machine wondering if it will revolt once again.

“Eat something first. I don’t want you to be so full of energy that you grow wings and fly away.” His look is full of glittery humor.

But if that was possible, I would’ve downed the entire bag of brown powder the second I found it.

“Scared you couldn’t catch me?” I taunt.

He steps closer, forcing me to take a step back as his eyes grow darker.

“Not even a little. I’d enjoy every moment of it, relish in the hunt itself before plucking you from the very sky only to pin you down and make you mine.”

That insufferable—I bend my knee and aim it between his legs only for him to catch it and push me back into the counter and lean into me.

“Did you want to *play*, Tink?” His eyes sparkle with humor, but I don’t miss the heat hidden beneath.

I shove him back, and his deep laugh echoes throughout the room as I cuss him out. He opens his mouth to say something when Cash walks in and heads straight for the cupboards that store all the food to take out a piece of fruit. Or what looks like fruit.

Turning to us both, he leans against the island counter and takes a bite.

“Arden should be at the spot in a couple of days.” Cash finally looks up from his food and freezes, his eyes bouncing from Hook to me. I glance up at Hook to find him still staring at me, his lingering gaze making my body slowly heat.

“Good.” Hook wets his lips before turning back to prepare the food. It takes a moment for my mind to finally catch up to what they’re saying. They’ll be going out soon, leaving here to meet someone called Arden.

My eyes light up at the chance to go with them and see more of this Realm.

“Take me with you.”

Hook stiffens up as he glances from me to Cash. But I don't give him a minute to question it.

“You told me I'm not your prisoner here,” I push.

Cash chuckles, drawing my attention to him. “Prisoner? Your room was —”

Hook gives Cash a sharp look that stops him from finishing his sentence. “The Hunters are still out there. It's dangerous.”

Placing my cup on the table, I take a step closer to him, crossing my arms. “Was it all a lie then? Was everything you told me a lie?”

Hook glares at me. “No.”

“Then prove it. Take me with you. I can be useful.” Possibly... More than likely not. But I still wanted to go. I wanted to feel like I wasn't a prisoner here and Hook needed to prove it.

“She's not wrong. You know he likes her type. It might distract him long enough to slip up and get the information we need quicker.”

“What type?” I ask.

Hook gives him a vicious look and Cash clears his throat, raising his hands in silent surrender.

I ignore their little spat and focus on my goal.

“You said you never break a promise,” I hedge.

Hook grinds his jaw before giving me a narrowed look. He turns back to the food and attacks it with fury.

“She's coming with us,” he grinds out.

“Yes, Boss.” Cash gives him a nervous glance before his eyes quickly flicker to me. He dips his head to Hook's back before turning and disappearing out the side door.

The air in the room is stagnant, but all I can think about is the thought of getting to see more of this Realm and a rush of giddiness flows through me.

“Here.” Hook turns and passes me the plate of food he was working on before heading out of the kitchen without a backward glance.

I warily eye the plate of what looks like colorful fruits and small pieces of bread with meat on it and wonder if he tampered with the food when I wasn't looking.

Though I suppose if he was going to mess with me, it would be

something more creative than to tamper with my food.

I take a small bite first and when I don't drop to the ground or break out in green spots, I dig in, eating every last morsel.

When it's gone, I expect the strange flutters in my stomach to disappear now that I'm full. But they're still there, making me wonder if the cause of it wasn't the hunger to begin with.

CHAPTER 10



I DIDN'T KNOW what to wear as Hook never mentioned where we'd be going to meet the man named Arden. So, I threw on a tight pair of leathery, black trousers and matched it with a beautiful dark blouse that had a low V shaped neckline, long flowing arms and a tight waist with small buttons on it.

Hook looked a little more dressed up in his black suit, white shirt and red tie that matched the small flowers on my top. But since meeting him again, I noticed suits are all he wears. He must have dozens of them in every color.

"And what exactly is it you do?" I ask Hook. He's sitting beside me in the black car he calls a *Mustang*.

We've already passed through the bridge and barrier and are now on a long, open road with large trees on both sides of us.

"With my ability, I'm able to find any rare item that is lost or hidden. Sometimes people come looking for something they've been searching for or want, and I'll supply it. For a certain price, of course."

"Of course," I give him a deadpan look that makes his lips twitch. "It must come in handy to have an ability like that."

"Always use every tool at your disposal," he says in a deep voice that seems to vibrate along my nerves.

Even if I wanted to, I couldn't use *every tool* at my disposal. My powers were too destructive to be unleashed.

I'm not resentful of it. But ever since he told me about these hidden abilities and this side to him I never knew, my mind has been running over memories from our past, picking apart everything, and trying to figure out if he ever used it when he was on Neverland.

I suppose he wouldn't have a need for it. The island had everything we

needed. Plenty of fresh food, a handful of freshwater streams, and lots of materials you could use to build a shelter.

But that was Neverland before Peter got his hands on it. Before he tainted it with memories of pain and torture. Before the soft brush of warm sun in the morning became a stifling heat I longed to hide from. Before the fresh sea air and cool ocean became tools to torture me with.

The only reprieve I had was at night with the stars. My hand built wooden house was already destroyed, burned down by Peter for daring to question him. And along with it my collection of tools and handcrafted possessions. My collections of unique stones and the handheld mirror with glittering gems. Gems that were placed all over my room to mimic that night sky that always had a way of soothing me.

The gems... that Hook had found.

I turn to look at him. "Is that why you were always able to find those shiny gems and stones for me? Because of your ability?"

He turns to me, his blue eyes twinkling. "Yes. That little collection I found for you would be worth millions in this Realm by the way."

"Too bad I left them all behind then," I mutter, more to myself. I didn't care for pretty things, but those gems and stones were special. They did more than just soothe me, they lit up the spacious room, glittering off the sunlight outside to bring the stars to life in the day.

"I can always go back and get them for—"

"No!" I shout before realizing it. "I mean. I don't need them anymore." I clear my throat, trying to cover my little outburst but it's too late. Hook is already watching me closely. A meaningful look in his eyes.

"Tink—"

"What does this Arden do for you?" I quickly change the subject, not wanting to talk anymore about Neverland or him going anywhere near it.

The air in the car turns stagnant as I wait for his reply. I look away but I can still feel his eyes on me as I shift nervously.

Another beat of silence passes before he finally answers, his tone controlled, lacking any mirth or emotion.

"Arden is one of my many eyes and ears. He's in many of the social circles I deal with and has a certain talent for overhearing useful information. He's someone I call on every now and again when jobs are a little more *straightforward*..." A shadow of a smile curves his lips as I look at him. "And less interesting."

His words finally filter through the jittery feeling rushing through me.

“*Less* interesting? Then what kind of jobs are *more* interesting?” I’m assuming most of the items Hook *procured* weren’t simply handed over so easily.

His smile turns wolfish, and I know his reply will be something that irritates me.

“The kind that gives you one hell of an adventure.” There’s a dark underlying tone to his words that makes me pause.

“What kind of *adventure*?”

A mocking smile flickers across his face.

“That precarious fine line between life and death.” His tone is almost wistful, making my irritation grow.

“Is everything just a game to you?” I snap. It made no sense to me how he could treat life so recklessly. Especially when I’ve fought so hard to keep mine. When I’m *still* fighting so hard to just have my freedom.

His smirk turns into something twisted, something dark. “Like everything else in this world, death is just another adventure. Why fight against it? Why fear it when you can fly alongside it?”

I didn’t fear death. I know no one lives forever. But there was a difference between knowing your limits and pushing beyond that, all for the thrill of an adventure.

Death was not a game.

It was resolute. Final.

It was pain and suffering. And agony to all those left behind.

I ignore the idiot beside me long enough to notice the large black gates we pass through, to a long brick path with large bushes and trees on each side.

“Where are we?” I ask as the car pulls up in front of a red and black brick building. It’s as tall as a castle, but its width is far wider in size.

“The Shroud. A place where many men come to enjoy themselves.” The suggestive tone in Hook’s voice leaves no room for what that means.

“Enjoy themselves... We’re going to a pleasure house?” I’d heard of them in the Fae Realm. Places where men and women would go to enjoy themselves.

It wasn’t something I wanted to see then, and it’s not something I wanted to see as my first official visit in this Realm, either.

My eyes veer to him and narrow while his smirk grows into something

else, something savage with a vicious bite.

“You said you wanted to come. And after all, I *never* break a promise,” Hook says with a condescending grin and bite to his tone.

This is why he didn’t want me to come. He didn’t want me to ruin his little day of *fun*.

I clench my jaw and turn away from him, regretting every decision I ever made since coming to this Realm. The biggest one, making a deal with him.

The car stops outside the building. I ignore Cash as he opens my door and head straight towards the main entrance while Hook’s dark chuckle follows me.

As soon as I’m near, the doors open inward, revealing a large open foyer.

Small chairs and tables are spread throughout the room with a long bar in the middle and private booths along the walls. And even though it’s early enough, the lighting is dim, making it feel much later in the day.

A handful of people sit in small groups, but apart from the odd look here and there, they all keep to themselves.

Hook catches up with me in a few quick strides with a contrived smile. “If you wanted to *come* that bad, you should’ve told me you were in need of some extra attention. I’m *always* available to be taken advantage of.” His voice is husky but with a wicked edge to it.

“Not even if you were the last male in all the Realms.” I give him a venomous glare, each word biting.

Something dark flickers in his eyes just as a man dressed in black greets us, dipping his head in respect to Hook before guiding us through the foyer and over to the left where a handful of private booths sit.

The man dips his head once more and walks away but Hook ignores him, his eyes solely on a man at the center of a group of women a few feet in front of us.

From the dark look Hook gives him, I can only assume this must be Arden. For some reason, I thought he would be older. More mature. But he looked no older than Cash.

His hair is the color of Fae trees in summer, a deep beige with flecks of gold. He has an angelic face, but his deep brown eyes reveal a sharp glint of darkness. A calculating look full of trickery and deceit.

The clothing he wears looks expensive, as if he’s purposely flaunting his wealth for all to see. The way he holds himself speaks volumes of his status and where he comes from and wants everyone to know it too.

We stop at the end of his table, but he's too absorbed in the redhead closest to him to notice us.

The redhead turns and spots us, her eyes widening when they fall on Hook.

The man, Arden, looks at her confused for a moment, before glancing in our direction.

The charismatic smile slips from his face as it quickly drains of color. A slash of fear floods his eyes before he quickly masks it with an awkward laugh.

"Hook, my friend." With a fake plastered smile, he waves his little group away before focusing back on him.

The girls hurry away giving Hook a wide berth.

"Please, have a seat. How have you been?" Arden's eyes fall on Cash and then me, his look growing hungry as they trail up and down my body.

"Did you bring me a present? Name your price? You know I'm good for it."

I open my mouth, ready to tell him the only type of *present* he'd receive from me, when Hook beats me to it.

"She's not for sale." I glance up and catch the storm in his eyes as he glares at Arden. But he's oblivious to the sudden change in Hook's mood as his eyes continue to trail up and down my body, making my stomach turn.

"Pity. I would get a lot for her... Or keep her for myself." Disgust fills me as I listen to him talk about me like some *object* to be bought or traded.

I move to take a step forward when Cash stops me. I open my mouth to ask him why he's choosing to let that vile man get away with what he said when I hear a strangled cough.

Turning towards Arden, I watch his eyes bulge as his hands move to his neck, clawing at some invisible force that looks as if it's strangling him. His face contorts in pain and turns red as he gasps for air.

How...?

I glance at Hook to find him clenching his jaw as he stares him down with a vicious look full of hatred.

"Don't ever look at her. Don't talk to her or about her. Don't mention her to *anyone*. If I find out you have uttered a single word about her, I will *personally* make sure you regret it. Do I make myself clear?" Hook grits out each word, his tone barbed with malice as his mouth curls into a sneer.

It takes a few long dragged-out seconds with Arden's face now turning

blue, but he finally manages to force a nod.

Hook cuts him a thunderous look before releasing whatever power he has over him. Arden gasps and coughs as he takes in large gulps of air.

“On to business.” Hook sits down in one of the chairs with a nod for me to sit beside him. But the only space available is the arm of the chair and I don’t want to be any closer to him than I have to be.

He gives me a challenging look as if to say, *‘Afraid?’*

I narrow my eyes on him and plonk down onto the armrest as ungracefully as possible.

Afraid? What could I possibly be afraid of? Him?

Hook gives me a cocky smile and leans back, his arm reaching around me but thankfully not touching any part of me as he stares at Arden like he’s a piece of dirt.

I glance over at Cash as he dips his head at me, a small smile on his face that makes me give him a questioning look. He shakes his head before glancing at Arden, his smile dropping the minute he focuses on him.

Utterly lost at their strange behavior, I glance back at Arden to find his focus completely on Hook and no one else.

“I thought we had an agreement, Arden.” Hook’s tone sounds bored, but I can feel the charge of slow building rage in the room, and I know it won’t take much for Hook to lose it.

Laughter and cheers bellow out from across the room, drawing my attention to the small group of men and women having fun together. And even though this is a pleasure house, I start to wish I was over there with them rather than here with Hook.

Giving up on my hopeless desires, I turn back to the conversation between Hook and Arden.

“Of course. I would never break any agreement between good friends.” Arden laughs nervously, his eyes darting around the room as if looking for the nearest escape.

Scooting a little further back on the chair, I freeze when I reach Hook’s arm. I start to scoot forward when his hand moves, and his thumb starts tracing little circles on my hip.

I glare at him, but his entire focus is on Arden.

“Then enlighten us as to how my men ended up with a completely different relic than the one I found?” He retorts.

I contemplate breaking that little thumb when the air drops in the room. I

watch Hook just as he gives Arden a vicious look.

“You gave us false information.”

Arden smiles, but it’s clear it’s a smile born from fear. “I would never—”

“Do *not* lie to me,” Hook growls with a hard set to his jaw.

“I... I might have had a *small* problem.” Arden chuckles nervously.

“Someone else came along before your men arrived and asked *extremely nicely* if they could have it.” Arden swallows hard as Hook gives him a hard stare.

“They took it from you by force?”

Arden nods, losing some of his feigned ignorance. “Forced their way in and demanded it. I had no choice but to give it to them.”

“But instead of making me aware of it, you did a bait and switch?” Hook’s hand flexes at my side, the first crack in his calm demeanor.

Arden leans forward trying to plead his case, oblivious to Hook’s rising temper. “The item I found was a better replacement. It’s more sought after and powerful. I thought maybe—”

“I don’t pay you to think for yourself. I pay you to get what I’ve asked for and nothing more.” Hook’s eyes flash in fury as he growls out each word.

Cash takes a step closer, glaring at Arden with fire in his eyes. “Our men said the mere mention of your name had the others firing at them.”

Arden begins to sweat, his slow building fear quickly turning into utter panic. “The owner of that rare artifact wasn’t too happy with a previous job I did for him. I thought why not get us both something we want?” He wets his lips while fumbling around his words.

“You’d get a better deal on a powerful artifact and if you happened to sort out my *little* problem along the way, then it was a win-win for us both.”

From the look Hook was giving him and the tension radiating off him, I doubted he felt the same.

“So, you not only lied to us and hid the fact that my item was stolen. But you also used my men and sent them in blind while you were fully aware of the danger.”

Arden's eyes widen in fear. “Everyone is aware of how powerful your men are. And the artifact *is* more powerful, I promise you that. I thought I was giving you a better deal.”

“You admit you used us?” Hook sounds calm. Too calm.

Arden’s gaze darts around us at the people that try to subtly watch what’s happening, pleading with any of them for some help. But no one interrupts

us. In fact, most move further away and avoid looking anywhere near this direction.

Arden swallows hard. "I... I just... What I mean to say—"

"You can no longer be trusted. That much is clear." Hook stands up and straightens his jacket. "Cash."

Arden raises his hands in front of him. "There's no need to—"

Cash walks over to Arden and drags him up by his collar.

"Who was the buyer?" Hook demands, giving Arden a hard look.

"I don't remem—" Cash yanks Arden hard, making him splutter an answer.

"It was Basilius' men," Arden gulps. "The young Lord of the Dark Realm."

Cash gives Hook a wary look. "It won't be easy to get back."

Hook clenches his jaw. "No, it won't. But we'll figure it out."

"Tink." I'm so absorbed in the little display of macho behavior that it takes me a second to realize Hook has called my name. I look up at him and find his eyes void of any emotion.

"Go get a drink. Get what you want but stay close to Cash." He steps forward and drags Arden out of the booth before disappearing down a small hallway to the right of us.

It takes a minute for my stunned brain to catch up to Hook's *orders*.

That thick headed— Stopping myself from losing it, I stand and make my way towards the bar, blocking Hook and his cold behavior from my thoughts completely. I'm halfway there when I feel someone following me.

Turning, I find Cash right behind me.

"I don't need a chaperone," I tell him.

Cash frowns as he glances around. "Don't be difficult, Tink. This isn't the type of place for someone like you."

Someone like me? What did that mean?

"I can take care of myself, Cash. I've done it far longer than I've known Hook and will continue to do it, long after."

"But—"

"*Don't follow me.*" I turn around, eyeing the room for something to do and spot the bar off to my far left. By the time I turn back around, Cash has already disappeared.

Glad that someone was actually listening to me for once, I head toward the bar. A green-eyed bartender with a charming smile and short brown hair

greet me with a nod.

“Does Hook have an agreement here?” I ask.

He nods while cleaning down the counter. “He has a tab set up, yes.”

“Good.” I glance over at the table of women and men I saw earlier and notice they look like they could use another refreshment before turning back to the bartender.

“I’m a good friend of his. He’s told me to get whatever I want. So... what’s your most expensive drink here?”

The bartender shares a secret smile with me like he knows exactly what I’m up to but is more than willing to play along.

His head tilts toward the rack of black bottles to the left of him. “Fae wine of course. It will set you back a fair bit for one bottle, though.”

I hum, tapping my chin as if I’m considering it. “In that case, let’s send half a dozen to that table over there.” I point to the table, but my eyes are watching the bartender as his smile grows. “With thanks from Hook, of course.”

He chuckles. “Of course.”

“I’ll take one of those bottles now, too,” I tell him.

The bartender’s smile grows as he turns to get the bottle of fae wine for me.

The redhead from earlier slides up beside me wearing a similar smirk. “Sounds like you’re looking to have a bit of fun. I might just know a place you can let your hair down.”

I take the fae wine from the bartender, thanking him before waving the red head forward.

“Lead the way.”

CHAPTER 11



“NAMES GISELLE, BY THE WAY.” She gives me a smirk as she leads us down a hallway, just past the bar.

“Tink.” I open the bottle and take a swig as we move through a set of double doors. We take a couple of left and right turns along a long hall before coming to a door that seems to be hidden off to the side.

“Well, Tink. This is where the real fun happens. *Away from the men,*” Giselle giggles as she opens the door, revealing a group of girls. All extremely beautiful and more than able to hold their own against any high Fae. They meet my hesitant stare as I step inside and survey the soft-looking chairs and small dressing tables sprinkled throughout the small room.

A tall, lithe girl with long dark brown hair and knowing gray eyes looks me up and down. “Well, this stray isn’t as bad as the last one.”

“Hey!” A girl with short pink hair shoves her a little, but the lithe girl with gray eyes just smiles at her before tilting her head to me.

“What? It’s the truth. The guys will eat her up,” she says.

The guys? She thought I was— I take another swig of the drink, a slight warmth spreading through my chest before I attempt to set her theory straight.

“I’m not here to join your little... club.” The leering glances from the men outside alone would stop me.

Giselle chuckles as a couple of the girl’s frown. “Don’t be so disappointed, she’s with Hook. None of us want a blood bath, not unless it’s the kind we’d enjoy. And when Hook plays, nobody has fun but him.”

The girls freeze, their shocked eyes veering to me in question, but I turn to Giselle, narrowing my eyes on her.

“I’m not *with* him,” I argue.

She raises a brow wearing a secretive smirk that makes me frown. I might have come with him today, but that didn’t mean I was with him.

“Not like that,” I tell her. A deal is the only thing between us. One I would quickly pass on if there were another option.

A woman with straight black hair sighs. I glance over at her and her stunning heart-shaped face and deep amber eyes that immediately draw you in. She gives me an exaggerated pout.

“What I wouldn’t do to have a taste... just a little.”

A fire in my chest ignites at her words. I try to shake off the unexpected reaction and focus on what she confessed.

“Hasn’t he ever...” I glance around at the girls with a questioning look. Some of them stare at me with horrified expressions while the rest wear a dreamy look filled with lust.

The girl with knowing gray eyes chuckles. “You must be new. Hook isn’t interested in our company.”

The rest of the girls nod their heads, agreeing with her. But it didn’t make any sense to me.

“Why does he come here, then?” I ask.

“Business. *Actual* business.” Giselle replies, taking the bottle from my hand and drinking a few gulps before handing it back to me.

A beautiful girl with shocked deep green eyes and long, wavy deep red hair stands up, her brows raised at each of the girls. “Are we all talking about the same Hook? The ruthless beast that scares the crap out of everyone he comes in contact with?” She shivers. “His name alone dredges up fear.”

She looks at me with a frightened expression on her face. “I’d run if I were you. If he has his eyes set on you, you’re not safe.”

He’s not *that* scary. I open my mouth to tell her as much when Giselle nudges me over to one of the seats beside the girls.

“None of that, Kenna. He came with her and from the look in his eyes, he’s definitely not leaving without her. She’s here to have a little fun, show him exactly who’s in charge and then be on her way.”

Just as I take a seat between the now curious gray-eyed girl and Kenna, a couple of men barge into the room.

Both are tall, their build wide and presence intimidating as they glance around the room. The tallest of the two has wavy golden blonde hair that meets his shoulders. His forced smile and pale, glassy blue eyes make him

seem approachable, harmless. But I quickly spot the slight twist to his lips, and the darkness slowly spreading in his gaze. A look that many men I've come across wear like a mask but reveal sooner or later.

Both of the men look intoxicated, his slightly shorter friend even more affected with his clothes and short, dark hair more disheveled. But I didn't miss the same dark, cruel look in his eyes that his friend has.

It seemed my time for a little fun had ended before it even began. These men were here for trouble and nothing more.

"Where's my girl?" The tallest of the two looks menacingly at us. His words are slightly slurred as he scans the room.

Giselle sighs as she stands up, trying to shove them out but they don't budge. "You know this room is out of bounds to you lot. If you want to see one of the girls, put in a request at the front desk."

His smile quickly dries up as his dark gaze veers to Giselle. "Tell me where she is?"

"She's working," Kenna tells him, rolling her eyes.

"She's..." He narrows his eyes on the redhead beside me. "Where?" He snarls as he moves quickly and grabs her by the arm, pulling her up.

"Hey!" I stand and grab hold of her other arm, pulling her back to me. His eyes swiftly cut to me. There's a cruel, twisted look in them. One I was all too familiar with. And because of it, I knew I couldn't let any of the girls go with him or his friend.

I tighten my grip on Kenna as she trembles beside me. Before I get a chance to push him away, he lets go of her and grabs me, shoving me sideways. I twist my body trying to avoid the nearest table but my head slams into the corner as I hit the floor.

"Stop it!" Someone screams around me as pain explodes throughout my head making me dizzy.

I blink away the dark spots in my vision as the rest of the girls move toward me. The door bursts open behind them making them pause as a couple more men spill into the room wearing the same dark look the two in front of me have.

My stomach churns as I realize just how much worse this has gotten.

"Leave her alone!" Giselle shouts as I try to push myself up.

The other men drag her out just as I get to my feet. The rest of the women shout and scream but it's no use as the new men shove them out before closing and blocking the door.

It's only then that I notice I'm the only girl left in a room with four intoxicated men all wearing that same dark look I've come to hate and fear.

"What have we got here?" A short balding older man asks as he steps closer with a leery expression.

"Looks like someone new." The red headed man beside him chuckles as his eyes fill with a twisted eagerness. The sound of it sends an icy shiver down my back.

"Where's Nova?" He asks the man in front of me.

"Off playing elsewhere," he grits out with a cold, twisted look in his eyes. A look that's now completely aimed at me.

"Looks like we need a replacement then," The red head says, but I try to keep my eyes on those closest to me and figure a way out of here.

"Looks to me like we've already found one." The short, balding man says with a hungry look in his eyes.

On instinct, my power slides up, battling its way to the surface to end this. But I hesitate. If I do use that power, I could end up destroying more than just them and this room and I couldn't do that.

Before I get the chance to think of a plan, the man in front of me reaches out, grabbing me by the throat before slamming me into the nearest wall.

I try to gasp for air, but his grip tightens, cutting off any chance of it. I claw at his hand, but he uses his grip to push me up the wall until I'm at his eyes level.

He opens his mouth to say something, but the door slams open with a crack, making him pause. With his tight grip not loosening the slightest and a snarl on his face, he whips his head to the intruder.

Dark spots seep into the edge of my vision as the power beneath my skin flutters wildly to be set free.

But that's when I hear it. A familiar growl that has those flutters slowing down to a flicker as everything inside me eases.

"Who are—" The man grits out just as grunts and screams of pain sound out to the left of me. I catch his eyes widen and his grip on me loosens before he completely releases me and flies backward into the opposite wall with a hard grunt.

I drop to the ground, holding my throat as I draw in gulps of cool air. Glancing up my eyes meet a pair of electric stormy blue eyes that are alight with fury.

"Hook." He moves quickly, helping me up, the look on his face growing

more savage, more ruthless as he stares at my neck.

“I’m fine.” I assure him, having dealt with much worse and knowing it will heal soon. But he ignores me to check for himself.

The warmth from his fingers seep into me, taking away the remnants of cold from my body.

But instead of Hook feeling the relief I do, the spark of fury in his eyes turns to a blaze of rage as he clenches his jaw.

Hook’s eyes flash with thunder and the air charges around us with his power as I feel a trickle of a wet slide down my face. I reach a hand up to the spot on the side of my head and wince when I touch it.

An inhuman sound, closer to that of a beast, rumbles from his chest as he turns to the man that inflicted the wound.

Before I get the chance to ask him what he’s going to do, another man slams down beside him just as Cash appears beside us.

“Cash. Take Tink home. I have some unfinished business here,” Hook says in a controlled, dangerous tone as he slides off his coat and rolls up his sleeves. The rest of the men try to make a run for it. But one sharp look from Hook has them flying backward into the room.

“What—?” Before I can stop him from doing something foolish, Cash quickly moves around me, blocking my view of Hook and the men.

“Come on, Tink. You don’t need to see this.” Cash tugs my arm, gently pulling me out of the room.

“See what?” Just before the door closes, I catch the looks of horror from the men as Hook slowly walks towards them.

* * *

It’s been hours since Cash dropped me off. He sent Ryland—the mysterious hooded guy I first saw when Hook brought me here—up with a jar of ointment for the cut on my forehead.

Ryland finally revealed what he looked like beneath his mysterious hood, and it was nothing like what I expected. I thought he was someone that was shy with a quiet nature.

Instead, I found a rugged, pretty boy with a roguish smirk, mischievous

green eyes and short, light brown hair. And though he was slightly shorter than Hook, he was just as broad as him with even more inked patterns and designs all over his arms and neck.

But he disappeared just as quickly as he came, leaving me to nothing but my endless thoughts.

I know it was foolish of me to go off on my own. I was in a strange world that I didn't know that much about. But I never thought something like that would happen.

I was only exploring the place Hook brought me to... the place he didn't *really* want me to go. I thought it was because he wanted to have some fun. But now I'm starting to think it was because he was trying to make sure something like this didn't happen.

Hook just had a way of getting under my skin and pushing me. He always did.

Time passes in slow drugging waves and before I know it, it's night. The stars are slowly blinking awake and he's still not back.

A sliver of worry slips past my defenses, and I start to think about what he could've gotten himself into.

His words from earlier flutter across my thoughts. Of the types of *adventures* he's drawn towards. The type that usually involves his life being put at risk.

I shouldn't care. Not about him. He's probably off enjoying himself, having fun while I'm worrying over nothing.

But nothing I come up with seems to stop the uneasiness that is growing inside me.

And then I hear a familiar voice and quickly shut that pointless emotion down.

Following the irritating noise, I head out of my room and down the twists and turns of halls just as Hook walks into his own room.

I follow after him ready to give him a piece of my mind when the sound of water hits my ears followed by a low, husky chuckle.

"Did you want to join me?"

I glance up at Hook, wearing a smug smirk, his dark eyes lit with a hint of amusement.

"I..." I glance around and it's only then that I notice I've followed him into his bathroom. My eyes swing back to him and his chest where his top half lays bare and on display. His extremely built, well-defined chest, that

revealed every smooth and toned muscle.

I'm lost in some strange haze of heat for what feels like too long, when my eyes finally land on the blood and small cuts sprinkled across his chest.

"What happened?" I step forward to inspect them, but I can't see how deep they are with all the blood.

"Let's just say a few people needed to be taught a lesson." Delight rings out in his dark tone.

"What kind of lesson?" I look up to meet his eyes and a flame ignites inside them.

"Nothing your little, innocent mind needs to worry about." The way he says it makes it seem like that part of me needs protecting. Like I'm too young and naïve to understand the type of people in this world that are evil, corrupt and ruthless.

But I had seen more blood and gore than anyone should have in a lifetime. And met even more depraved, despicable people that seemed to taint anything they touched.

Pain and torture were nothing new to me, nor would it ever be.

"I'm not that innocent." I glare at him and something in my look makes him pause. He straightens up before narrowing his eyes on me.

"Tink..."

"Where are your healing supplies?" I glance away from him and his questioning gaze as I look for something to clean his wounds with.

"There's a first aid kit under the sink." His tone is different, softer. I ignore what it does to me and go to the spot he pointed out to find a small black bag with bandages, ointment and a bunch of small wet cloths.

Turning to him, I pull out a cloth that smells like alcohol and narrow my eyes on his faint smile.

"You're an idiot," I tell him.

His smile grows. "Oh, I know. A fool too lost to admit it, but damned either way."

I ignore his reply and step closer to him to see where I should start.

My eyes flick up to his and I watch his look grow heated as he stares at me.

"This means nothing," I remind him. Even if my body is betraying me, it is attraction and nothing more.

I start cleaning the blood, noticing there's a lot of it. The other men must have gotten in a few good hits.

Serves him right for being this foolish.

“It means something,” he finally replies. Feeling his eyes still on me, I glance up and catch that soft look that quickly morphs into his usual smug expression.

“Not many of my men are willing to *personally* clean me off after a good fight,” he says, a hint of mockery in his voice.

I press harder on the wound I’m working on, and he narrows his eyes on me, making me laugh.

Instead of getting angry though, his eyes soften once more. I clear my throat, avoiding that look and move to a deeper looking cut.

“I guess you’re not as good as you think you are.”

“No, I’m better.” His tone is confident, cocky. As if this is all just another game to him.

“Then what do you call this?” I press harder on one of the larger cuts and watch his smirk grow.

“I call it *fun*,” he chuckles, and I call him every idiotic name I can think of.

It only makes him laugh harder.

“Fun? You call getting hurt *fun*?” If I thought he was losing it before, I knew it for certain now.

“I would say, you should see the other guy. But dead men don’t tell tales.” He says it with a dark laugh, like it’s the best thing he’s heard in a long time. But every muscle in my body tenses up on hearing that word. *Dead.*

“He’s dead? You... you killed him?” I ask.

His smile grows into something wild, something savage. “I killed them all.”

“Why?” I breathe as he moves closer, my eyes drawn to his lips as they curve upward.

I glance back at his eyes, trying to find an ounce of regret or some sliver of remorse for what he’s done. But I find none.

“Because no one touches you. No one lays a single finger on you,” he grits out. “They do and they’ve already signed and sealed their deaths in blood.”

I shake my head at him. “You can’t kill everyone that touches me. That’s not—”

“What a good man would do? But I never said I was a good man. In fact,

I'm the complete opposite. I'll hunt down anyone who even looks at you wrong. I'll destroy everyone that hurts you and not lose a wink of sleep over it. I'll make them suffer in ways they can't even imagine. And I'll do it all with a damned smile on my face."

"Why are you telling me this?" I stare at him with wide eyes as I try to understand where all this is coming from.

"I'm not a good man, Tink." He gives me a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "I prefer to live between the shadows and in the dark. But I'd like to think there's more to me. More than the beast that lives beneath the surface. More than the villain that everyone thinks I am. I've made choices I regret. But I can be more, I can *become* more... If you give me the chance."

A chance... Does he want to go back to the way it was? To the friendship we had before he left Neverland?

Hook searches my eyes for something. An answer to his own silent question. But I don't know what he wants from me. Or what answer he expects.

The days of us playing games and looking out for one another were long gone. I barely knew the man in front of me nor did I trust him. How could I?

I was no longer the Tink he knew, either. No matter how much he thought otherwise. And no matter how much I wished things were different, it wouldn't change what happened. It wouldn't change everything we went through or what we've become.

As if hearing my thoughts, a pained frown settles across his face.

"Tink...I'm—"

"I need to check your back." I swallow hard trying to break the intense look between us.

His eyes shutter and grow distant before he turns without a word. Something in my stomach twists and knots at seeing that look. But I push it aside for now.

My eyes land on his back, on the dark ink that runs along it and every thought before it disappears.

Long black, broken and twisted wings spread out across the top of his back and along his shoulders.

My fingertips reach out and trace the length of the wings as they break off. Some are completely broken while others are twisted and shaded darker.

Hook shudders beneath my touch, making me pause.

"Tink..." he breathes.

“Why wings?” I ask, ignoring the warm tingle beneath my fingertips.

Hook tenses up. “They’re a reminder.”

“For what?” I push, hoping he’ll answer while another part of me feels foolish for even asking.

He grows quiet, so I take the hint and start to clean his back when he starts to speak, his voice cracking.

“That nothing in this life comes without pain and sacrifice.” He slowly turns around, glancing at me with an expression full of remorse. It’s as if he’s slowly drowning in it.

“That even those who sacrifice with a selfless heart can come to regret it.” Reaching out, he softly takes my wrist and I feel the familiar warmth as he charges my bracelet. My eyes don’t leave his as his power flares to life. A dark storm full of gray clouds and thunderstorms shroud his eyes. They clear just as quickly as they had appeared before his eyes dim once more.

“And in the end, that’s all you’re left with. Something broken, twisted and full of regret.” He says with a voice empty of any emotion.

The warmth from his touch soon turns cool as he gently releases my wrist. He glances at me once more, a hollow look in his eyes, before stepping around me to head out.

Something in me screams to say something to him. Anything. Before he leaves like this.

“I don’t know what giving you a chance means,” I tell him and turn to find he’s stopped at the doorway, his body stiff, his hands clenched by his side as he keeps his back to me.

“I don’t know if I can trust what we used to be,” I tell him honestly. I didn’t know if I could trust anyone after what Peter did to me.

“But... I’ll try,” I promise.

A ripple of warmth fills the room as he loses the stiffness in his body. He moves to turn back to me but stops himself before nodding a reply and leaving.

“I’ll try,” I whisper to myself as I stare at his retreating back. A promise that I hope I don’t come to regret it.

CHAPTER 12



NIGHTMARE AFTER NIGHTMARE clashes together becoming something beyond illusion and memories as they seep out around me feeling all too real.

Pain follows screams that burn and slash across my body. Thorns coil around me, digging into my skin before slicing up my back and curling around my neck, slowly suffocating me as they tighten.

I'm choking, gasping for air when I jump up in bed and stumble toward the window. Opening the hidden window door, I rush down the small staircase and further out into the forest until I find the spot I'm drawn to each time this happens.

I lie down and let the cold seep into my bones turning them numb and hope that the turbulent thoughts racing through my mind will soon follow.

I count the stars. Once. Twice. Before doing it again. More stars appear and I start over. I repeat my little game until my heart rate slows and my mind drifts with a hazy numbness that makes everything around me seem soft and silent.

I'm so lost in the starlight that I don't notice someone coming up beside me. I turn to look at him as he lies down, leaving a small gap between us, as he sets his gaze on the stars above.

"What are you doing?" I ask when he makes no move to say or do anything else.

Hook's gaze doesn't leave the stars as he raises his arms to place them behind his head. "I thought that was obvious. I'm star gazing."

Of all the places on this island, he had to choose *this* one. My spot. The spot away from everything and everyone.

I know I said I would try to give him a chance—whatever that means—

but I needed something to myself.

“Well, star gaze somewhere else. This is *my* spot. Go find your own.”

“This entire island is *my* spot.” His lips dance around a smile, his voice laced with amusement.

And he’s right, this was *his* island. But if he had an entire island to star gaze, why does he have to sit right here? Here, where he is so close, I can feel the warmth from his body as it slowly removes the haziness from the thoughts that made me feel numb. Here, where he is sitting so close, I can see the glint of light in his eyes from the stars above. Here, where his scent lingers around me, drawing me in and confusing every emotion and instinct I thought I had.

“Then it’s big enough for you to find a different one. One that’s not right here.” I glare at him, but he ignores me, still staring above. Or at least I think that’s what he wants me to believe. But I catch the smile that curves his lips the longer I glare at him.

After a couple of minutes of getting no reaction from him, I give up and look back up to the dark sky in an attempt to let it soothe my rising frustration.

I’m only starting to forget the insufferable man beside me when he interrupts my thoughts, reminding me of his presence once more.

“You don’t sleep often.” He says it like a statement, not a question. But the softness in his voice makes me glance his way.

He turns his head and meets my gaze with a frown creasing his forehead.

Instead of answering him, my eyes trail over his face and the dark shadows that sit under his eyes.

“You don’t look like you’ve been sleeping much either.”

My deflected reply only makes him scowl. “Don’t change the subject and answer me.”

I laugh at his demand and the way he assumes I will willingly tell him any and all of my deep, dark secrets, just like that.

He narrows his eyes on me, but I spot the glint of light in them. The part of him that always seems to love it when I laugh at him. Even if it’s at his expense.

“Do you always get what you want?” I ask him, nearly sure the answer is yes.

“No. Not everything.” The glint dims in his eyes as he glances back up at the stars.

“I thought someone like you would just take whatever they wanted and damn the consequences.” Just like he’s done with everything else.

He clenches his jaw. “It’s what I should have done. But I can’t change the past any more than I can influence the future.” There’s a dark, pained undertone to his voice that makes me wonder what Hook regrets so much that he still bears the pain from it.

“What does—”

“Tell me what plagues your dreams and I’ll tell you a secret.” He turns to me, this time so he’s on his side, his hand holding up his head.

“A secret about yourself?” I ask and wonder if he’ll tell me what he regrets so much.

He nods and the sincerity in his eyes tells me this isn’t another joke or game. But I hesitate, and he must see it on my face as his brows knit together the longer he watches me.

“Is there something you fear? Or someone?” His entire body grows taut as he waits for my reply. But to tell him what truly haunts my dreams could be more trouble than it’s worth.

“Why do you care? Surely you have better things to do than think about my silly sleepless nights.”

“*Nothing* about your sleepless nights is silly.” His eyes narrow on me before they slightly soften. “And I’ve *always* cared. I was just too young and foolish to admit it.”

My heart flutters wildly at his words. He doesn’t give me a moment to think about what he just said before he pushes for a reply.

“Tell me... Tell me and I’ll destroy everyone and everything that’s ever caused you pain.”

Ever? That list would be longer than my arm.

Looking back to the sky, I laugh at his joke only to realize he’s not joining me. I glance back at him to see his expression is completely serious, and the look in his eyes tells me he’ll follow through on it too.

“If it’s a villain you need, then use me. I’ll protect your dreams and your future, even if you don’t want me to protect anything else.”

I swallow hard, avoiding his intense gaze to look back at the night sky.

What I wouldn’t have given to have that option once upon a time? What would I have traded for just one person to be there for me? To *protect* me.

“Why would I want that?” I whisper the words as if asking myself too.

“Because I’m ruthlessly vicious and willing to do what most people

won't." He says with a savage edge to his voice.

"Even if it gets you killed?" I frown.

"When you've got nothing left to lose, you quickly learn that survival is just a game. One you get better at the more you play it." I glance over at him to see his eyes darken with pain.

Nothing left to lose. He has an entire Realm at his disposal. He fights for fun, and people fear him, not the other way around.

"You must know how to play it well then, considering you're still alive." I clench my jaw and look away from him again, more angry with myself and the predicament I'm in, than him and what he just shared.

"Why be afraid of something when I can be something to fear?" There's a hint of dark amusement in his voice and I know if I were to look at him, his eyes would be alight with mirth.

"No one fears nothing in this world. Besides that, why would I want anyone to fear me?" I feared many people because of what they did and had the power to do, but I never wanted to be like any of them.

"Because when people fear you, *you* hold power over them. And when you hold that power, you have all the control."

Why does it always come down to power and control? Why can't those with power help those that have none? Why control them when you can be someone they look up to?

Hook continues, oblivious to my growing agitation. "You feel lost and overwhelmed right now because you have no control. There's something or someone that you fear, and it has you in its grasp. So, if you can't fight back right now, if you can't become a bigger monster than it, then find someone who can."

Find someone who can... Like who? I glance over at Hook with a raised brow.

"Someone like you?" I ask.

He nods. "Exactly. I wasn't always the monster I am today. I was once a lost, broken boy like the rest of them and you can't break what's already broken, but you can sharpen those edges and use them as a weapon. I became a weapon because I had no other choice. But if you let me, I'll become your weapon, too."

The promise in his voice has my heartbeat quickening once more as I stare at him, struck silent by his words.

I remember how lost and broken he was when he arrived on Neverland.

It's probably one of the reasons that we all became so close, having it in common.

And I guess people forget that no monster is ever made. They're usually born from the chaos and cruelty of others.

Hook wasn't born a monster, neither was I. Something changed us, forced us to become something more than what we were in order to survive.

And I've survived long enough to know I no longer needed anyone to fight my battles for me nor did I need another *weapon* at my disposal.

"Tell me... Tell me something. *Anything?*" Hook pleads with a small frown and soft look.

I swallow hard knowing that his words have affected me, and I was going to reveal something I never told anyone.

"My dreams are mostly endlessly dark. So much so that when I wake, it's all I see." I stare back up at the sky and focus on a group of stars all huddled together.

"I fear that darkness because of what lies within it. Monsters. Beasts. Cruel beings." I swallow hard against the lump in my throat as I remember my last *dream*.

"They all sit and wait, ready to attack. And when they do, I can't tell whether it's real or not."

My eyes follow the glittering stars across the sky. "There is nothing bright in that darkness. No glimmer of light. So, when I come out here and see the stars, see their shining lights, I know I'm no longer in that nightmare. When I come out here, I know the monsters and cruel beasts can't touch me. I know I'm safe. The stars have a way to soothe my fears like nothing else in this world. They are my one constant. No matter where I am, all I have to do is look up and they're there."

Hook is silent beside me, too silent. I feel his eyes on me, but I force myself to keep looking at the stars. Not willing to look at him and see the pity in his eyes.

I know it sounds childish to be afraid of monsters in the dark. But I'd rather him think that than find out the truth.

That the monsters hidden within my darkness are very real. And when I wake up panicked and afraid, needing to find a sliver of light to guide me out of it, it's not because it's a nightmare my frightened brain made up, but a memory that has become all too real once again.

When he's still silent after another moment, I chance a glimpse at him

and grow surprised to find his eyes are filled with warmth, not pity. But there's a glimmer of darkness there too. He holds it back as he gives me a shadow of a smile.

"I've told you what you've asked for but instead of a secret, tell me a story," I ask him. "Just like when we were younger." The sliver of pasts we've revealed was more than enough for tonight. I didn't want to live in the past anymore. I wanted to escape to a different world. One where I was already safe and happy and where the darkness and what it held inside it could not reach me.

"You told me something obscure with plenty of holes. But don't worry, I love a good, cloaked mystery."

I should've known better than to believe Hook wouldn't see past my little story and read between the lines. I just hope he doesn't take this any further.

But from the savage look he gives me; I can tell it's far from over.

"A story?" Warmth bleeds into his eyes as he glances at me.

I nod. "Just like old times." That's what he wanted wasn't it? For us to be like we were before.

A glint of laughter fills his eyes as he looks up at the sky once more. "Once upon a time, there was a little Fae named Tink. She lived on a magical island hidden from everyone and loved nothing more than a good ole adventure—"

"An *actual* story." I reach over and smack his arm, making him chuckle.

"But you haven't heard the best part. The part where a dashing young lad named Hook, sneaks in under the cover of night and steals her away."

"Hook!" I snap. He chuckles again and it lights up his entire face making me pause my next attack.

"Fine," he says, his eyes still sparkling with laughter. "*Once upon a time...*"

CHAPTER 13



A COUPLE of weeks pass with Hook becoming fixated on something he's working on. So much so that I barely see him most days. It makes me think that the small talk we had in the forest was all in my head.

If not for our nightly visits as he charges my bracelet, I don't think I'd see him at all.

I should really think of it as a bonus, not having him around so much anymore. But surprisingly, I don't.

I glance around the room at all the books and new items in here. I only had to mention something, and it would be delivered to the room within hours.

I guess it was Hook's way of helping me adjust to this Realm. But he should know better than anyone that I didn't really need any of it.

I will try to watch what I say from now on just in case he adds it to my ever-growing pile of things.

The last few sleepless nights catch up on me as I get up and stretch my tired body.

Sleep still slips through my grasp with nightmare after nightmare coming in waves. Even though the room is large, the ceiling and walls still close in around me forcing me to my spot outside in the forest.

Though every morning, I magically appear back in my bed. Waking up as the sun flares through my open window, telling me the day is already half gone.

Today is a bit earlier than usual with the sun only starting to rise.

My body groans as I head into the shower, my mind only focusing on my new little addiction.

Coffee.

After a quick shower, I drag my body out and get dressed, quickly realizing that coffee is the only thing keeping me awake at this stage.

There has to be some secret magic in it. Something no one is willing to share with me.

I asked Cash about it once, and instead of letting me in on the secret, he just laughed and laughed before walking away. But there's just no other way a drink could give you so much energy. After a few minutes of practically inhaling it, I feel like myself again and no longer like the walking dead.

I'm halfway to the kitchen when I hear Hook and Ryland's voices.

Ryland usually keeps to himself but every now and again he'll sit in the kitchen with me and have some breakfast. He doesn't utter a single word most times, but he somehow knows that I don't want to be alone and keeps me company.

I edge closer to the voices on my tippy toes and try to make out what they're saying.

"We've been watching him and his men. There's definitely something sketchy going on. There's been murmurs of the hunters working with him," Ryland says.

"Did you get anything from Arden?" Hook asks him.

"He backs up what we found. Apparently, Lord Basilius is trying to make his own setup in the Mortal Realm, away from the Dark Realm."

Hook hums. "Let me guess. The hunters are only too happy to help?"

"That's what I'm thinking."

"But what are they getting in return?" Hook asks.

"We haven't figured that out yet," Cash grunts.

Hook sighs. "Let me know when you do."

"Will do, boss."

A set of footsteps disappear but the other stays. I hold my breath, not wanting to get caught for eavesdropping. It takes a couple of seconds before the footsteps move in the opposite direction and further away from me.

I release the breath I was holding, feeling foolish for holding it in the first place and head to the kitchen.

After a couple of weeks with nothing to do but roam this place, I noticed that if you pay enough attention to the halls, there are some features and slight differences in the design that helps you distinguish one hall from the next. And since then, I've been able to make it to the kitchen in half the time.

I quickly take out the pod coffee machine and start it up. The other coffee machine with the glass pot tastes much better but with how tired I am feeling, I need something fast.

My stomach growls, making me realize I also need to eat.

Peter used food as a way to keep me weakened and because of it my stomach no longer needed the amount of food I used to eat.

But it wasn't long before Hook noticed I wasn't eating much. And now whenever I forget a meal, he has someone send something to my room.

Breakfast is usually there by the time I wake. But I'm up earlier than usual this morning.

I inhale my coffee before glancing around the kitchen to try to figure out what I can use to make something to eat.

My gaze falls on the eggs in a little tray on the counter. They're not as tasty as the kind I had in Neverland and they're at least three times smaller. But I enjoyed them the last time they were mixed and made for me.

But how to make them? I never watched it happen but surely, I can figure it out myself.

My eyes land on the glass coffee pot. I know it boils the coffee so surely it must be able to heat up other things too.

Turning on the glass coffee machine, I find a bowl from the cupboard and look around for what else I'll need. The eggs definitely had some of that small white grainy salt the humans use on everything, but it also had something else in it. Something creamy and slightly sweet but familiar. But from this Realm, not Neverland... *What was it?*

I walk over to the fridge and open it, looking through a couple of items and tasting a few, but none of them smell or taste creamy or sweet. A small, yellow rectangular block of something catches my eye. I hesitate before reaching out and sliding my finger along the side of it and taste it.

The minute it hits my tongue, I know it's what I've been looking for.

I take it over to the bowl and add a piece before cracking the eggs and adding a bit of salt. I mix it together with a fork until it's all one color and then add it to the empty heated coffee pot.

The eggs start cooking immediately but I notice I have to keep a slow stir so they don't burn. They're done in minutes.

I'm emptying my mixed eggs onto a plate when I hear someone come into the kitchen behind me.

It's probably just one of the staff here. They usually keep to themselves

and never talk back to me any of the times I've tried, so I ignore them and focus on not burning my hands.

"What are you doing with the coffee machine?" I pause, surprised to hear Hook's voice. He moves over to me and the scent of musk and sandalwood drifts over me reminding me how good he always smells.

"Cooking breakfast," I mumble before placing the coffee pot down.

"That's not what—" He glances down at my breakfast with a frown. "How did you...?" He steals my fork and spears a piece of egg before eating it, his brows raising in surprise when he does.

"Not bad. But you could have got one of the staff to make you something." He hands me back my fork before stepping back and leaning against the counter.

"I wanted to make it myself." I eat some of my eggs, surprised at how good they taste and remember to make them in the coffee pot from now on.

"I forgot how you always had a natural talent to make something from anything." There's a shadow of a smile on his lips and a whimsical look in his eyes.

"Just because something has a purpose doesn't mean it can't be used in other ways too," I remind him.

In Neverland, I had to learn how to quickly adapt if I wanted to survive. But even before that, I've always had to make do with what I had.

I turn to pour my second cup of instant coffee but feel his eyes on me the entire time.

"Do you want one?" The cup nearly makes it to my lips just before he reaches out and diverts it to his. His eyes never leave mine as he takes a sip.

"I meant your own." I narrow my eyes at him as amusement flashes across his.

Releasing my hand, he licks his bottom lip as his eyes continue to watch me intently. "It tastes much better this way." His voice grows husky, sending a tingle of warmth down my back.

"What way? When it's stolen?"

He gives me a sinful smile. "Some things just taste better when they're stolen."

From the heated, dark look in his eyes, I knew we were no longer talking about my drink.

I clear my throat. "Well, keep your thievery to things *other* than my coffee."

He moves forward until he's right in front of me. "And what if I wanted to steal something else?"

"Like what?" I ask as his eyes blaze down at me, holding me captive.

He slowly leans in, his eyes moving from my eyes to my mouth, before he dips down and places the softest brush of a kiss against my lips.

"A kiss," he breathes, before stepping back.

For a few seconds I can't speak, completely stunned silent at what he did.

"I'll stay away from your coffee. But I can't promise I'll stay away from anything else."

But as soon as he finishes speaking, my mind catches up and my first thought is to kick him or teach him a lesson for being so cocky and bold to play this kind of game.

Violence wins out and I choose to go with the former option, placing my coffee down before moving to kick him. But his hand snaps out and he easily catches my leg.

A wicked smirk grows on his lips and he pushes me against the counter before leaning his hard body into me.

"If you wanted another kiss, all you had to do was ask," he murmurs, his eyes smoldering. "No need to attack me. Though I do enjoy whatever form of foreplay you're into." He gives me a wolfish smile.

But instead of falling for another one of his tricks, I decide to beat him at his own game and turn the tables on him, teaching him a lesson.

Faking a shy smile, I reach up and pull him closer to me. His eyes widen as I quickly lean forward and place my lips to his, teasing him with soft brushes of my lips.

It takes him less than a second to snap out of his shock before he grips me tighter and releases a throaty groan.

I melt into him, forgetting for a moment why I started this little game as I become addicted to the taste of him.

Heat pools low in my belly as his tongue parts my lips and he takes control of the kiss. Our movements grow more urgent as a haze of pleasure settles over me. I get lost in each caress, each brush of his lips and talented tongue.

He wanted me. I could feel it. Wanted more than just a game.

He starts to draw out a hunger inside me. One that calls out to his own in a blaze of heat.

The desperate need to consume and claim me, takes me by surprise. And I

start to realize that maybe Hook asking for a chance was something far different than what I originally thought.

The thought alone is enough to snap me out of the little haze I'm under and back to the game I was playing.

I wait until his body relaxes, until he releases my leg to the floor before pulling slightly back and yanking my knee up and straight into his groin.

He grunts in pain, bending over as I step around him and try to catch my breath.

Shaking off any lingering heat, I narrow my eyes on him as he fights to stand up straight.

But instead of looking at me with anger or frustration, his eyes are alight with heat and lust.

I ignore what that look does to me. "This is me using all the tools at my disposal. But that is not something that will *ever* happen again."

With a sinful smile stretching across his face, a glimmer of a challenge lights his eyes.

"We'll see," he breathes.

"No, we won't," I tell him. Before he gets the chance to reply, I turn and walk out of the kitchen and his husky chuckle follows me.

Reaching a hand up to my lips, I still feel a tingle from my stolen kiss. Another *unforgettable* stolen kiss.

I guess Hook was right after all. Some things *do* taste better when they're stolen.

CHAPTER 14



LOUD MUSIC and lights drown out the lingering apprehension about coming out tonight. Hook's eyes flicker to me and then down to the short, black dress I'm in before glancing away and clenching his jaw.

He murmurs something to Cash that I can't make out. But whatever he says makes Cash chuckle and earn himself a dark glare.

The two other men in dark clothing he brought with us tonight, take a step back with Hook's quick shift in mood making even *them* wary.

But whatever mood Hook was is now, was his own fault. He was the one that suggested coming out tonight, saying I deserved a night to have some fun. So, fun I was going to have. Whether he liked it or not.

We move through a dim hallway and up a set of stairs that bring us out into a wide-open room. Soft music plays as small groups of women and men relax around tables and chairs spread out throughout the room.

There is a small bar to the right and a stage on the opposite side of it with a dozen girls dancing on it.

One girl stands out among them all. Her long brown hair cascades around her as she dances in slow sensual moves. While her glittering, short, silver dress clings to her figure, entrancing anyone who looks at her.

I'm so drawn to the girl that I don't realize I've stopped walking until I hear a familiar husky voice beside me.

"Business first and then we'll have some fun. There's another floor with dancing that we'll head down to after this. I promise." Hook takes my arm, leading us along the side of the floor to another long hall. But my eyes keep drifting back to the girl on stage.

My view of her quickly disappears as we step into a room with no door.

Once we cross the threshold, all sound from the outside fades away.

I frown glancing back at it, wondering what type of spell it has on it.

“Hook, my friend,” a deep, rough voice greets.

Turning back, I find a man with shoulder length dark brown hair and deep golden eyes. He gets up from the long wooden desk that sits in the middle of the room and just like Hook, something about his presence screams power while promising violence should you cross him. His tall height and warrior build only added to it.

I tense up when he steps around the desk but relax when he greets Hook like an old friend, an easy smile on his face.

“Dagon.” A smile played around Hook’s lips.

Hook nods at his two men that came with us, and they whip out a black case I didn’t notice they had.

They open it in front of Dagon just as Hook takes a seat. From my angle, I spot the corner of a black vase with gold runes.

I ignore Hook’s attempt at trying to get me to sit beside him—learning my lesson the last time—to see more of the strange vase.

Dagon’s smile grows as he lifts it out of the case to inspect it. The gold runes shimmer in the light as he looks at it in awe.

“You never disappoint,” he whispers.

“I’ll have your other request soon.” Hook tells him but I catch the frown he gives me from the corner of my eye.

I ignore it and whatever it means to continue watching Dagon as he gently places the vase back in the box.

“No rush. I know you’re good for it.” Dagon locks the box before placing it behind his desk.

“Do you know how long I’ve been looking for that? *Years*. And you find it in a couple of weeks.” He shakes his head looking up at Hook. “How’ve you been?”

“Busy,” Hook grunts.

Dagon’s eyes glance over at me and pause. His eyes lighting with curiosity. “I can see that.”

“I’d advise you to not see anything, Dagon.” Hook glares at him, making the man in question smirk.

“I’d never make an enemy of you, Hook. You can keep your secrets.” Dagon raises his hands, chuckling before he grows serious.

“I have another... *request* if you can swing it. It’s not time sensitive, but

I'll pay double or do a trade."

A glimmer of intrigue lights up Hook's eyes. "You must really want it if you're willing to do a trade with me."

"Let's just say you have your secrets," Dagon says as his eyes briefly flicker over to me before returning to Hook. "... and I have mine."

"Fine. Tell me what you need," Hook smirks.

Dagon pulls out a roll of paper from somewhere under his desk and opens it out on top of it. Hook, Cash, and the two men get up and go over to look at it.

With their broad forms, I can't see past them to see what's on the paper. Nor can I make out anything from their soft mumbled conversation, so I zone them out to glance around the room.

It's nothing like Hook's office, lacking the extravagance and expensive furnishings. It has a sleek look and modern feel to it. The floors are a shaded black that matches Dagon's long desk and chair. The only other furniture in the room is the chair Hook was sitting on. And apart from the couple of abstract paintings and set of black shelves, the gray-muted walls are bare.

A silver material catches my eye on the shelf behind Dagon, reminding me of the girl that was dancing outside.

I wonder if she's still there.

I glance behind me and out into the hall. People pass every now and again, but I can't hear them and from the looks of it, it doesn't look like they can see or hear us either.

It has to be an illusion or spell.

I take a step back towards it and when no one stops me, I turn and take another until I'm stepping out through the doorway and into the hallway.

But instead of landing in the hall, I step out onto the edge of a loud dance floor.

I glance behind me, but the room I was in moments ago has disappeared and in its place is a crowd of people dancing.

Loud music filters in around me with people screaming and laughing. Whereas it was cozy and quiet moments ago, this part of the club is the complete opposite. There are crowds of people everywhere.

Glass shatters from somewhere to my left, drawing my attention to the huge bar lined along the wall.

Multiple bartenders work quickly trying to get through the massive crowd in front of them.

Hook mentioned another floor with dancing. This must be it.

I wince when I realize what Hook will do when he finds out I'm no longer in the office. Especially after the constant lectures he gave me about sticking near him before we left.

But if I was on a different floor, how did I find the one I was just on?

My eyes land on the bartenders again. Surely one of them will know how I can get back to the office.

I take a step toward it, but without Hook's glare and vicious looks, the people around me move closer, blocking my way.

But with no other way, I push forward and slowly make my way through them, eventually ending up right beside the top of the bar.

I open my mouth to call the nearest bartender when someone calls him away for a drink. Another bartender comes close but just like the last one, they quickly get called and pulled away.

Maybe I can just go explore and try to find it myself?

I turn back towards the crowd, ready to push my way back through them once again, when a loud hypnotic beat blasts around me and a mass of people rush to the floor, effectively blocking my way through them.

The crowd quickly grows, shoving me backwards into the bar. A couple of women closest to me turn and apologize before turning back to their group.

I turn to the bar counter while I try to come up with some other way of getting out of here.

Someone slides up beside me and a strange energy washes over me.

"Can I get you a drink?"

I turn to look up at the man beside me as his dark eyes rake over me. He is dressed in all black apart from the blood-red top he is wearing. He has short black hair and an alluring smile that sends a chill crawl down my spine.

"I can tell your Fae, but you must be half. Though that little tease of a scent already has me all worked up," he chuckles and the sound of it makes my skin crawl.

I focus on his energy once more. Ash and blood invade my senses as I realize what he is. A demon. And by the looks of the red ring now flashing around his dark eyes, he is a blood demon, too.

A sense of dread rolls through my stomach at the thought.

"How about you and me go somewhere a little more... *private*?" He licks his lips as his eyes slowly trail down my body.

“No, thank you,” I force out while trying to look for a way away from him.

“Come on, babe. I promise to make it worth your while.” He moves closer to me, and his scent invades my senses, and something in my gut screams at me to get as far away from him as possible.

I move a step back when someone places their arm around me making my body stiffen.

“There you are. I thought I told you to stay where I could see you.” I look up and find a man with light brown wavy hair and warm brown eyes staring back at me. He gives me a strange look before attempting to subtly tilt his head toward the demon in front of us.

He turns to him and gives him a wide smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Thanks for looking after my girl. I’ve been looking for her and her friends all night.”

“Fucking figures.” The demon frowns glancing between us before muttering something I can’t make out. He turns and shoves his way through the crowd.

They quickly give way before closing in around us once again.

“Sorry, I could see he wasn’t taking the hint and thought you could use a little help.” The man quickly takes his arm off me with a wince.

I shake my head, relief filling me once the demon is out of sight. “No. Thank you. I appreciate your help.”

“No problem. I’m Ben, by the way.”

“Tink.” I glance up at him and try to sense anything from him. But I find nothing. He must be human.

A look of amusement flitters across his face as he tilts his head to the side. “That’s an unusual name.”

“It’s... more of a nickname. But I guess it just... fits,” I tell him.

Ben nods politely. “Yeah? How did you get it?”

Hook, actually. But I don’t tell him that and my silence doesn’t seem to bother him as he continues to talk.

“I wish I could have a cool nickname, but you can’t really do much with Ben.” He gives me a smile before glancing around.

The song changes and the crowd slowly starts to disperse enough that I can see a few feet in front of me. But there’s just more tables and people further out with no signs telling me where the office could be.

“Are your friends around? Or?” Ben gives me a warm smile but

something in his eyes seems... off. Like there's a slight coldness to them.

I shake it off, thinking I'm just being paranoid after meeting the blood demon, to answer him.

"Actually, I'm kind of lost. My... *friends* are on another floor. But I don't know which one or how to get there." I glance around again but apart from the dance floor and blaring lights bouncing around it, everything else beyond it is dark and I don't know which way I should try first.

"Okay, well it's my first time here, too. But I've heard a bit about it. Let me get a drink and then I'll help you look for your friends." He turns to the bartender, and one comes over to him in seconds, making me frown.

I turn back around just as a group of giggling girls pass me before heading off the dance floor and into the dark space behind it. A minute later, I spot another group head the same way.

There has to be something over there. Maybe a bathroom or a way out?

I start to move toward it when Ben steps in front of me with two drinks in his hands.

"Here, I got this one for you." He places one of the drinks in my hand. I glance down at the green mixture as a fruity smell drifts up to my nose.

"If you don't like it, I can get you something else?"

"No, it's fine. I..." I give it a little sip and a delicious fresh fruity taste slides down my throat.

"Good." He watches me as I take another sip. He seems nice enough.

"Can you describe where you were?" He frowns. "I know there are three floors here. One above and another below."

I ignore the strange cold shiver running down my back and answer him.

"We walked through another floor like this except there were fewer people and a smaller stage. The—"

The music booms as cheers ring out right before a hypnotic beat blares through the room once again.

He winces at me, leaning in. "Sorry? What did you say?"

"There was a small stage in the room. But it wasn't as big as—"

He shakes his head again, pointing to his ear. "I'm sorry, I can't hear you. One sec." He steps closer and leans down so his ear is at the side of my face.

I instantly want to move away.

"Sorry. What did you say?" he asks as he places a hand on my shoulder. The scent of him makes me want to recoil, twisting something in my stomach, but he's just being nice. I could at least see if he knows which way

to go.

I glance down at his arm just as a throng of people move closer, caging us in.

“The room had soft music and girls dancing on a smaller stage and—”

A hand comes from behind me shoving Ben backwards. I whip around to find Hook in front of me and the strange churning in my stomach quickly eases.

Until I see the look on his face.

The area around us quickly clears as Hook glares at everyone. His electric blue eyes are full of storms and lightning and he’s clenching his jaw so hard it looks ready to snap.

Without looking at me, Hook takes the drink from my hand and brings it to his nose, taking a sniff.

“Hook?” I ask. But he ignores me, narrowing his eyes on something behind me as he passes the drink to one of the men that appears beside us.

“Cash.” Hook grits out his name and something moves behind me. I ignore it to focus on Hook and his strange behavior.

“What’s going on?” I ask him again.

Hook finally glances down at me. His eyes scan every inch of me before he looks me straight in the eyes. “How much did you drink?”

I frown. “Just a sip. Why?”

Cash comes up beside us and throws something heavy against the bar. When I glance over, I realize it’s Ben. He’s splayed out against the counter, his eyes wide and full of fear. There’s blood running down his nose and a red gash on his forehead.

“What are you doing?!” I go to move toward him, to help him, when Hook stops me.

“Don’t waste your breath. He’s nothing but scum,” Hook growls as he dips his head to Cash.

“I’ve got it, Boss.” Cash walks toward Ben as Hook grabs my arm and pulls me through the dispersing crowd.

I glance back over at Cash to find him dragging Ben off in the opposite direction. When I turn back to Hook, I find that we’ve already made our way to another hall. But it’s completely empty. Hook has probably scared everyone off with this strange mood.

“Hook.” I try to yank my arm out of his hold, but he doesn’t release me. We keep moving until we’re at the end of a hall that forks in two.

“Hook!” I shout. “Where are we going?”

“We’re leaving before I burn this damn place down.”

CHAPTER 15



I GLANCE around at the hall Hook is taking me through. *Is this the way we came in?* I shake my head and try to stop getting distracted.

“Let me go!” He doesn’t. “You’re hurting me.” I lie, but he drops my arm immediately, turning to look at me.

“Show me.” He reaches for my arm when I step back from him.

Rubbing a hand down his face, he takes a step back before releasing a harsh breath.

“What happened back there? Ben was a nice guy, he—”

Hook’s eyes whip to me, a look of pure rage alight in them. “*Ben?* Ben is not a *nice* guy. He’s a vile piece of trash that should never exist.”

“You’re not making any sense.” I don’t understand. Ben didn’t do anything wrong.

“Do you have any idea what could have happened to you back there?” Fear flashes across his face before it disappears behind a feral look of fury.

I frown. “He was just being nice. We were going to—”

“*Nice?*” Hook chuckles, but there’s no humor to it. “That *thing* back there wanted to...” Hook stops himself while shaking his head and clenching his fists.

“He would’ve done a lot more than just be *nice*,” he hisses.

“What are you talking about? He was just going to help me get back to the office. But now after seeing whatever mood you’re in, I should have probably just stayed there and enjoyed myself.” Maybe not with Ben but I could have found a group of human girls to get to know. Most of them looked friendly enough.

“That piece of scum wouldn’t have taken you back to any office,” he

seethes, the anger blazing to life in his eyes once more.

“And if you wanted to enjoy yourself. All you had to do was ask. Not run off—”

My harsh chuckle cuts him off. “I didn’t *run* off. I stepped outside. It’s not my fault there was a damn portal where a door should be,” I snap, angry that he continues to assume I’m running away despite our agreement.

He narrows his eyes on me but loses some of his ire at my words.

Is that what was wrong with him? Does he think that I ran off?

But if that was the case, then why did he treat Ben the way he did?

“Is this all just one big game to you? Am I? Because I don’t always want to play games, Hook. I want to enjoy myself and have fun. I want to experience new things and figure it out along the way. I didn’t disappear on purpose, but I don’t need your permission to go do something either. I don’t belong to you or anyone else.”

Hook stalks forward, walking me backward until my back is pressed against the wall.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Tink,” he breathes. Staring down at me with flames in his eyes.

“You *are* mine. You’ve *always* been mine. And this time... I’m not letting you go.”

Before I realize what he’s doing, he slams his lips to mine, silencing any reply I have. Heat unfurls inside me as he teases me with every stroke, every swipe of his lips.

The shock of his cocky move quickly fades and I grab his jacket to push him away, but he pulls back before I do, his eyes flitting from my swollen lips to my face.

“This isn’t a game to me. I’ve spent years imagining what it would be like to taste you... touch you. And not a single one of them comes close to this.” He shakes his head as if in a daze, his eyes zeroing back in on my lips. “Not one,” he whispers before his hands slide to my neck and face.

No one has ever touched me like this. No one has ever made me feel so... *alive*. As if I’m all they see and breathe. Unfamiliar feelings flood my body, my nerve endings feel like they’re on fire.

Something in the back of my mind tells me that I should stop this. That nothing good will come from it. But then he dips his head and there’s a blaze of desire in eyes that can’t be feigned. He leans into my body and the warmth from him seeps into me and I become lost in a wild, desperate need to pull

him closer.

“Hook...” I breathe.

He presses his lips to mine and every thought and worry disappears. Deepening the kiss, he devours my mouth with deep sweeping strokes of his tongue that leave me breathless and craving for more.

My body quickly heats up once more with desire as the kiss turns hungry and full of fiery passion. It was all-consuming but this time it had his rough edges and jagged pieces on display.

I bite his lip and a low groan rises up his throat. He lines up every hard inch of his body with mine. But even with his body pressed tightly against mine, I ache for more as I become addicted to the feel of him. Craving him like he’s my own personal poison.

Dragging his lips from mine, he begins to kiss and suck down the length of my jaw and neck. I tilt my head back against the wall as each swipe of his tongue sends a bolt of heat to my core.

“Hook...” I breathe.

“You’re mine, Tink,” He groans while placing open-wet kisses on my neck. “No one touches you. No one,” he growls before dipping down to meet my lips again.

But his words are the bucket of ice I needed to hear, snapping me out of my heated daze as I realize what this is.

This is Hook trying to lay claim to me and mark me as his. To own me and control me just like everyone else.

But I belonged to no one. Especially not *Hook*.

Just as he tries to deepen the kiss once more, I bite down on his lip, hard, hearing a groan before I shove him back. Even with my rough shove, he barely moves. But it’s enough to get his attention.

“There’s my vicious little Tink.” As if he thinks this is all just another game, he gives me a savage smirk and licks the blood from his bottom lip before leaning back in.

I shove him back again before narrowing my eyes at him. “I’m not *your* anything and I belong to no one. This was a mistake. We’re nothing more than enemies and stuck together until our deal is over.”

That smirk turns carnal with a vicious edge to it. “We’re enemies, are we?”

“Yes. We are.” I glare up at him, pushing against his chest but he still doesn’t budge. Before I know what’s happening, he grabs hold of my wrists

and places them above my head, holding me still. His dark look turns intense as storms shadow his eyes. A warmth encircles my wrists and a flutter of energy flows through them. Something flickers in the back of my mind but before I can think about it, he releases his hold on them.

I open my mouth to deny everything I'm feeling right now, every sliver of desire, when he dips his head and runs his nose up the length of my neck to my ear, making me gasp. He does it again this time but adds a soft kiss just under my ear.

I close my eyes at the sensation, wanting more, craving his touch as he draws me in once more.

"*Liar,*" he breathes.

My body stiffens as his reply quickly snaps me out of the haze of pleasure I'm slowly falling under once more. I shove him back. This time he moves with a husky chuckle and a smug look on his face.

"Just because my body reacts to you doesn't mean anything." Maybe I was attracted to Hook. But that was all it was. A physical attraction.

I was inexperienced and foolish for letting that attraction override my common sense.

"It could happen with anyone else." And it could. There were probably plenty of men in this club right now that I could be attracted to.

Hook's look turns dark as his smile drops. "No one touches you. No one will ever lay their hands on you."

His reply is enough of an answer to tell me everything I need to know. That I was right, this was him trying to own me and nothing more.

"*You will never touch me again.*" With a vicious glare, I turn around and quickly head out of there, his dark laugh following me as I aimlessly go in a direction, I hope is the right one.

With some stroke of luck, I make it outside before Hook does and find Cash already waiting by the black car. He opens the door for me and gets into the driver's seat, quickly starting up the machine before pulling away from the club.

Still lost to my anger, it takes me a second to realize that there's one person missing from the car. I glance back at the club as it grows smaller and smaller.

"What about Hook?" I ask. Not that I should care if we leave him behind. He deserves to walk back.

Cash glances at me through the little mirror in the middle. "He has some

business to finish. He'll be home later."

But my bracelet... I glance down at it, soon feeling the energy inside it. My mind thinks back to a moment ago in the hall, my eyes widening when I realize what he did.

The storms in his eyes and the brush of warmth... He already charged it.

I glare out my window as the dark night passes me, my emotions just as confusing as my thoughts as they play on repeat.

"Why did you and Hook do that to Ben?" I look back in the little mirror in the center that reveals Cash's face.

His eyes widen as he glances back at me. "Hook didn't tell you?"

I frown. "Tell me what?"

Cash sighs, shaking his head, mumbling something I can't make out. "Why did you leave the room, Tink?"

Something in Cash's tone makes me pause. He's not accusing me, he's just curious. It's what makes me give him an honest answer.

"I didn't know about the doorway being some sort of... portal. I just wanted to see something outside of it. I was going to stay in the hall. But then I ended up on a different floor. And I didn't know how to get back. That guy, Ben, came up to me and said he'd help me. That's all."

Cash grinds his jaw, and his hands tighten on the steering wheel. "That piece of shit back there, spiked your drink, Tink. And he most definitely was not going to take you anywhere near the office."

I lean forward but the straps stop me from going too far. "Spiked?" My mind turns to potions and spells. The type that is dark and evil and my stomach drops.

But he was human, wasn't he? I didn't sense any power coming from him.

"Drugged. Like a small potion but human made. They slip them into your drink when you're not looking and before you know it, you feel ten-times more drunk and can no longer tell one face from another."

My breath catches in my chest as I deflate back into my seat. "Why would he...? I mean, I don't even know him..."

"You're a beautiful girl, Tink. And men like that, they know you're well out of their league. They know they'll never have a chance with someone as kind-hearted as you, so they take it. They take it without guilt or shame and deserve nothing more than to live among the worms and dirt six feet under."

Ben lied to me. My instincts warned me something was off about him.

Something his warm eyes and kind smile couldn't tell me. But I didn't believe it.

I doubted myself. *Again.*

But how could I trust that feeling when Hook's sly smirks and heated gaze told me I could trust him, trust Hook? When I know all he wants to do is own me?

"He didn't come alone, either. He had a group of friends off doing the same thing around the club. I shouldn't be telling you any of this. Hook will kill me for making you worry. But you don't need to ever worry about them again. Hook is dealing with them. They won't ever hurt you or anyone else."

My body shakes on its own but not from fear. From anger. My chest burns climbing up my throat as if ready to breathe flames.

The dark power stirs beneath my skin as an answer to my rising anger. It's the bucket of cold water I need to snap out of it.

I push the power down and focus on staying calm.

Staying quiet the rest of the way back, I lose myself to thoughts that help distract me. But my mind instantly drifts to thoughts of Hook.

That's why he was so angry. He wasn't angry with *me*. He was angry because of Ben and what could've happened.

What could've happened... I was so foolish, so naïve in this Realm that I could've let something horrific happen, all because I thought someone was being nice to me.

I should've known better. After all, Peter was nice in the beginning. Before Hook left.

We arrive back at Hook's before I know it. I ignore Cash's look to start up to my room, but he reaches out to stop me.

"He cares about you, Tink," his voice is soft as he frowns at me.

I shake my head. "He thinks this is all a game, and he wants to own me, nothing more."

Cash's eyes widen as he releases my arm. "He planned this entire night just so he could spend some time with you. He's been wanting to dance with you since he came up with the idea to go out. He thought Dagon's club would be safe. He may be over the top when it comes to you. But it's *you*, Tink."

Me? "What does that mean, Cash? Why me?" Could this be just another one of Hook's games? Something that has yet to be revealed to me.

"I can't..." Cash shakes his head, stopping himself. "You need to talk to Hook. He'll explain."

“Explain what?” I push.

“Why he cares,” he says before turning and leaving me more confused than when I started.

Still angry with not only Hook, but myself, I move up the stairway and keep moving until I find my room. Taking a quick shower, I throw on some light nightwear and head for my bed. Ready for another restless night just like every other before it.

But after the night I had, I hoped that I would have just one night of rest. Just one.

Throwing my damp hair up into a bun, I reach over and turn off the light before I get under my covers and lie down.

Only to freeze at the sight before me.

A dark night sky comes alive before my eyes with thousands of tiny stars slowly blinking to life across it.

Bright, beautiful starlight that slowly soothes my restless thoughts and turbulent emotions. I take a deep breath and a cool air drifts down to me making me feel like I was outside, instantly easing the tightness in my chest.

Similar to my room in Neverland, Hook gave me the stars. He plucked the starlight and night sky and placed it in my room across my ceiling.

But more than that, he gave me a light in the darkness and a place where I could feel safe.

Cash’s words about Hook caring about me flash across my mind.

He cares... The stars above me prove it. If he just wanted to own me, he wouldn’t have done this. He wouldn’t have gone out of his way to put my mind at ease. The thought alone soothes something inside me.

My heart was another issue. I was scared to trust myself and what I felt because I’ve been wrong before. The people closest to me have always betrayed me. So why would he be any different?

As if the sky full of starlight can hear my hidden thoughts of Hook, a storm of color sweeps through it. A swirl of green follows a pulse of blue and a strike of pink. The array of colors mix together to form new ones to become something breathtakingly beautiful.

My mind finally relaxes, my thoughts drifting away as I watch the magical sky above me. I stare at the starry night until my eyelids grow heavy and slowly close as I drift into a peaceful sleep. One with stars watching over me and stormy blue eyes following me close behind.

CHAPTER 16



I WAKE with a small smile on my face after a full night's sleep. I haven't felt so refreshed and awake in so long.

"Sleep well?"

My smile falls as I spot Hook leaning against the doorway. I try to gauge his expression for something that will tell me what he's feeling. But he looks as hesitant as I feel.

Is he still angry? Am I?

"Breakfast." Hook tilts his head to the bedside table where a full spread of fruits and the buttery pastries I've come to love lay. Along with a steaming cup of coffee.

I mumble a thank you before glancing up at him. "About last night..."

A flare of anger flashes through his eyes as he continues to stare at me. But I know this time his anger isn't aimed at me.

"I didn't know about Ben... what he did... What he was *going* to do. This Realm is new, but I shouldn't have been so naïve. It won't happen again."

As if my words were all he needed to hear, he adopts his normal confident stance but with a softer smile.

"I need to go on an... *errand*," he tells me.

I nod and reach over to get my coffee while it's still hot and take a sip. Even though I don't really need it right now, I've come to enjoy it and don't think I can live without it anymore.

"Come with me?"

I freeze and glance over at Hook, thinking he'd already left.

"Why?" After last night, I thought he'd try to lock me up and throw away the key.... well *try*, at least.

He raises a brow, but there's a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. "You said you wanted to experience new things."

I nod a reply as I wait for the catch.

"Eat up and I'll bring you someplace fun." He leaves with a smile on his face, making me weary of what I might have accidentally agreed to.

But as soon as I realize I'm going to see more of this Realm, a flutter of excitement rushes through me as I quickly devour my food and rush to get ready.

A pull on a pair of soft trousers Cash told me were jeans and match it with a short silk cream blouse that has long sleeves, a tight bodice, and a low dipping back with a bow. I leave my long blonde hair down in its normal waves, throw on a pair of flat shoes and rush downstairs hoping Hook hasn't already left without me.

"Hey."

I stop on my way out of the main door and turn to Cash.

"Going somewhere?" He asks.

I nod. "Hook has to go out on an errand and wants to bring me along."

Cash's eyes light up. "Is that what he said?"

"What do you mean?" I narrow my eyes on him.

Cash walks backwards, a cheeky smile on his face. "Oh, nothing. Have fun." He turns and disappears before I get the chance to ask him anything else.

I sigh, already starting to regret my choice as I head for the car. Hook is leaning against it, his head turned to the side as he gazes out around him. His clothes are more casual than usual, with a dark pair of trousers and a black top. It's rolled up to reveal the black ink running down his arms. Reminding me of his broken wings and what he told me.

But I quickly stop myself from going down that pixie hole, especially when it only leads me to think about every inch of his hard body.

He turns and spots me, smiling immediately before opening the door for me.

"Your chariot awaits, my lady."

Cash's words play on my mind, and I start to wonder if he's trying to trick me.

After quickly making sure no one is sneaking up behind me, I glance around me before walking around the entire car. My frown only deepens when I find nothing amiss and come back to an amused Hook.

“Looking for something?” he asks with laughter in his voice.

“The catch.” I cross my arms and wait.

He dons an innocent look. One that doesn’t suit him. “There is no catch.”

“Really?” I push.

“Really.” He gives me a tight-lipped smile. But there’s also a spark of something there too. Almost as if he’s excited about where we’re going. It makes me want to at least see what it is.

Warily, I get into the front of the car as Hook moves to the driver’s seat, his smile growing the longer I stare.

He chuckles. “You’ll have fun, I promise.”

* * *

It turns out Hook’s version of some place *fun* was called a shooting range. A place that people go to so they can shoot thick metal pieces called bullets at targets.

I should’ve known better than to trust him when he said this would be fun. It seems his version of fun greatly differs from mine.

I narrow my eyes at him as he explains everything about the small weapon, he calls a gun.

He then goes through my stance and the best way I should hold it but all I can think about is how much I want to use him as my target practice and see how fast *he* can run while I hunt him down.

“Why do I need to learn this?” I ask.

He places a small metal bullet in the gun. “You’re in the Mortal Realm now. Many of the humans use these weapons. They’re just as effective against most beings from the other Realms too.”

My thoughts flash to Ben and what could have happened last night. Is that why Hook brought me here under the guise of it being *fun*?

He moves behind me in the little booth, shaking me from my thoughts as he raises my hands to wrap around the weapon before stepping back.

“Now, take your time and aim for the targets.” The targets were little red circles painted on a piece of large paper with an outline of a figure drawn onto it.

The paper was already way too far away and the red dots, tiny. I don’t know what he expected me to accomplish with this. But in order to be done

and over with it as quickly as possible, I aim for the red dot on the figure's head.

Just before I shoot, Hook quickly moves behind me. When I release the trigger, the force of it pushes me backward. The recoil sending fear and exhilaration flooding through my body. But Hook holds me steady as the bullet hits the side of the wall, not even close to where I aimed.

“Why am I doing this?” I ask again. He still hasn’t given me a proper reason for it. And I didn’t think I’d ever have to use a weapon like this.

“There are enemies everywhere. You need to know how to protect yourself.” His smile turns thoughtful as he watches me.

“You should train with me as well.”

“And why would I want to do that?” I had enemies, just as everyone had. But none I would be able to fight against. Trying to do so would only end up with me in more pain.

The only thing I could do was to learn how to take a hit and deal with the pain. My body always healed, and my mind would soon follow.

“You should be able to use every weapon at your disposal.” His eyes trail down my body. “Including that body of yours.”

I elbow him in the gut, and he moves a step back, chuckling.

His eyes softened a little. “Seriously. Train with me and I’ll teach you how to defend yourself.”

I watch him warily, wondering what the catch is or if this is just another one of his games.

“No strings,” he answers as if reading my mind again.

“Why?”

His eyes blazed with an emotion I couldn’t read. “You seem to be a magnet for trouble. Let’s call it peace of mind and leave it at that.”

“Whose peace of mind?”

“Mine. Now…” he bends closer to my ear. “Try again.”

With Hook’s hands on mine, he guides me to the middle of the figure, the largest red dot of the image, before stepping back.

I aim and shoot. The bullet hits just outside the red circle Hook had me aim at and even though it was close, I still find no enjoyment in it.

I glance down at the gun, preferring a dagger or sword in my hand, the weight of it too heavy and uneven.

“If I was ever in need of a weapon. I think I’d prefer to stab them,” I tell him honestly.

He moves closer so his front is lined up to my back once more and leans down to my ear.

“To stab someone, you’d need to be close enough to do any real damage,” he breathes making me shiver.

“And the only person that should *ever* be that close... is *me*.” He says in a demanding, possessive tone that has my body stiffening.

“So you want me to stab you?” I ask, more than willing to test it out his little theory.

I feel his smile at the side of my face. “I’m more than happy to be your sacrifice.”

Twisting around to him, I find his face full of light, instead of his usual smugness.

“Your turn.” I hand him the gun, happy to be rid of it. He takes it as I move to his side to watch him, placing more bullets in the weapon before looking right at me.

But instead of focusing on the target, he raises an arm, his hand steady, his eyes unblinking and he shoots.

There’s no possible way...

I turn to the target when he’s finished to see all six shots have hit every red circle, dead center, before glancing back at Hook with wide eyes as he places the gun down.

“How did you learn how to do that?”

“Give me a gun and I’ll destroy each of your enemies, one by one. But give me a sword and I’ll decimate them in seconds.” He looks at me and smirks. “Just like you, I prefer to be up close and personal when I destroy my enemies.”

“But apparently, I’m only allowed to stab *you*.” Something I’m more than happy to do right now with that cocky look he’s wearing.

“Yes, my vicious, Tink. *Only me*,” he winks at me, and my irritation kicks up a notch.

After Hook stows the gun away and cleans up, we head back out to the car. He makes it to my door before I do and opens it for me. I ignore his attempt at being chivalrous and quickly get in, more than ready to go back to his island after a wasted morning.

But after a few minutes of driving, I start to realize we’re not heading in the right direction, and we should have nearly been back at the bridge by now. Glancing out the windows, I look around us, not recognizing anything

about the scenery or the way we're going.

"This isn't the way back." I give Hook a questioning look.

His only reply is a small smile as he stares forward.

"Where are we going?" I ask, hoping it's not another one of his ideas of *fun*.

"You'll see." Hook finally glances over at me, his eyes sparkling with excitement. He reaches out and presses some buttons and warm air starts to blow around us while the seat beneath me heats, seeping into my bones and warming me up immediately.

I look down at the seat, wondering how that's possible before glancing over at Hook with a question on the tip of my lips. But he's already focused on driving, so I turn and look out the window, watching the sky darken and the buildings blur past us. It isn't long before trees rise up in place of the city and then fade away to reveal wide open land.

By the time we reach our destination, dusk has already fallen with the dark night not too long behind, making me feel instantly at ease.

The car stops and I move to open the door when it's opened from the outside for me. Hook stands there with a shadow of a smile on his face that makes me feel uneasy. He closes the door behind me as I glance around trying to figure out where we are.

Cars are all around us, all lined up and from what I can see, empty. A few feet in front of us sits a large hill, but there's no one else around. The more I look, the less I see and start to wonder what type of fun Hook has in mind now.

He smirks at me like he knows what I'm thinking. Walking backward he moves toward the hill.

"Come on," he waves me over.

Preparing myself for the worst, I head over to him, and we start up the hill.

"Ready?" His smile only grows as he pulls me up the last couple of steps to reveal what looks like a little hidden world.

In the distance, I spot a huge white circular machine that slowly spins. If I squint, I can just make out the small swinging chairs on it and the people inside them.

Red and white tents are spread out by the dozens before it, with stalls of food and what looks like colorful games.

"What is this place?" I ask Hook as we move down the hill and into the

crowds of laughter and bright faces.

“A pop-up Carnival,” he tells me. I glance at him to see he looks more happy and relaxed than I’ve seen him in a while.

“Pop-up?”

Hook nods. “They appear for a couple of days before packing up and moving somewhere else.”

“And people just come here to have fun?” A couple pass by laughing at each other as the girl eats some soft pink cloud thing.

Hook chuckles. “Is that so hard to believe?”

I guess not. I’ve heard of Fae carnivals that had majestic beasts and performances but nothing like this. Nothing with so many people, especially couples, having fun.

“Do you want some?” Hook asks.

I glance up at Hook with a questioning look, as he tilts his head to the girl with the pink cloud. She picks off some of it before placing it in her mouth.

“The pink cloud?” It must be some type of food, but I can’t understand how. It looks too soft, too light, to taste of anything.

“It’s called candy floss,” he smiles as he takes my hand to pull me over to a small stall. There’s a man twirling a stick in a circle metal machine. But all I can think about is the warmth coming from Hook’s hand in mine and how nice it feels.

I shake it off to focus back on the man making the strange food. Nothing seems to be happening as he continues to turn the stick. Until out of nowhere the pink cloud stuff appears, slowly gathering around it.

“Is it magic?” I take a step closer to look at it.

Hook’s eyes flash with laughter as he shakes his head. He passes the man some paper notes I’ve come to learn is the currency in this Realm, before taking the pink stuff and waving it in front of me.

I frown looking at it in apprehension. As if reading my mind once again, he smirks at me before taking a piece and placing it in his mouth.

It can’t be that bad if he’s eating it... And it *does* look good. Now that I’m this close to it, it also smells really good.

“Well, if you don’t want any...” He slowly turns when I finally give in and reach out and grab it.

I hear him chuckle as I turn around and rip a piece off, testing the texture in my hand before placing a small piece in my mouth. It melts instantly on my tongue leaving a delicious, sweet taste behind.

I whip around to Hook. “You were lying. It *is* magic.” Just like the coffee.

Hook shakes his head with a boyish smile as he pulls me forward through the throng of people. All while I focus on eating my magic pink cloud.

It’s gone before I know it, as if disappearing into thin air. I stare at the bare stick with a frown wondering if a little pixie snuck up on me and stole the rest of it.

“How about a hotdog?”

I glance up at Hook in horror, hoping I heard him wrong. I did not want to ever eat one of those cute fluffy animals that I saw on the small hand-held machine Cash watches.

I thought they were a type of familiar for the humans in this Realm, most treating them like family. Why would anyone want to *eat* them?

I tell Hook and he chokes out a laugh.

“If you want to eat those poor little creatures, tell me so I can go somewhere else.” I can’t believe he’d actually eat one of those—

“It’s not made from *actual* dogs.” Hook shakes his head with laughter still lighting his eyes.

Oh. The tension slowly eases from my shoulders. “Then why do they call it a hot *dog*?”

Hook is whipping his eyes, still chuckling when he looks at me. “It’s because the meat inside is—” He pauses, shaking his head as a small frown forms. “Actually, never mind. But I promise you that it’s not made from real dogs.”

I narrow my eyes on him. “I don’t know if I should trust any more of your promises.”

“I promise you’ll like it.” A teasing smile crosses his face before he moves over to a different stall while I glance around.

My eyes are drawn to a colorful stall across from us. There are dozens of bottles lined up with people trying to throw a small metal circle around the top of it.

A girl jumps up and down after landing one and then points at a big fluffy blue toy. The entire back of the tent is filled with them. All in different shapes and sizes.

My eyes fall on a long dark green crocodile, reminding me of the one that used to hunt the waters around Neverland until one day it disappeared as if never there.

I turn around as Hook hands me a long piece of meat with a soft looking bread around it. It smells similar to some spices and food they used to cook back at Hooks, so that has to be a good sign.

Sniffing it once more, I tell myself that this may be some sort of trick, but Hook wouldn't be so cruel as to deceive me about this. At least, I hope he wouldn't.

Glancing at him, I take a small hesitant bite, watching his expression to see if he really is just messing with me. But all I find is a soft look in his eyes as he waits for my reaction.

As soon as the strange meat passes my lips and I get my first taste, I know Hook isn't playing this time as it turns out to be delicious.

"What do you want to do now?" he asks.

I'm halfway through the hotdog, my eyes finding the bottle game once more when I hand what's left of my food to Hook.

"It's delicious but I can't eat any more." The candy floss before it was deceptively filling.

He chuckles and takes it from me, eating the rest in two bites before disposing of the tissue.

"Come on, let's check out that game you have your eye on and then we'll go explore." He pulls me over to the stall with a playful smile. "That's if you're not too afraid."

I narrow my eyes on him noting that he's only trying to get a rise out of me. But soon realize that it's also working.

"I'm not afraid of anything, James Hook." I use his full name and realize I've never told him mine, too afraid of what it may reveal of my past. And as soon as he gave me the name Tink, there was nothing else I wanted to be called.

He grabs his chest feigning a wound. "Oh, the full name. I must be in trouble now."

I roll my eyes at him as we reach the bottle game. He's still chuckling as he gives the man behind the table paper currency in exchange for some circular rings that he hands to me.

"Go ahead. Try it." He tilts his head toward the bottles.

A flutter of excitement rushes through me as I aim for one of the bottles furthest away from me.

And miss by a long shot.

Knowing I probably overestimated my ability for such a game, I try one a

little closer, but I miss just like the last one. With stubborn determination, I try harder this time, aiming for the bottles closest to me but each one falls to the side of the bottle or goes behind it.

With the last metal circle, I concentrate and throw it hard, aiming at the one right in front of me. But instead of going anywhere near the top, it hits the side of the bottle, nearly knocking it over.

Why did all the other people before me make it look so easy?

I hear a strangled laugh at the side of me and turn to narrow my eyes on him.

“You try it then.” He may be able to shoot a straight shot, but this wasn’t as simple.

Hook gives the man more paper notes in exchange for another set of metal circles. He takes them in his left hand and starts to throw the first circle with his right hand.

Without even blinking, he lands it around a bottle.

It was probably just a lucky shot.

But then he does it again, landing it over another bottle with ease.

My mouth drops as he throws another one and lands that one too. And another one. Each one of his metal circles lands around a bottle until they form some shape that I quickly realize is a ‘H’.

“Show off,” I mumble, looking anywhere but his smug smile.

He chuckles and the sound of it starts to grate on my ears. “Pick one.”

I glance up at Hook wondering what he means but all he does is tilt his head at the fluffy toys while his eyes never leave mine.

But why would he give me his winnings? Trying not to think too much into it or the way he’s looking at me, my eyes scan the soft toys, landing on the green crocodile once more.

I catch Hook watching me from the corner of my eye, his eyes sparkling at my visible discomfort.

“Do you need me to slay another crocodile?” A secret smirk appears, slowly sliding across his face.

A cold shiver slides down my spine as I stare back at the crocodile. More frightened of the memories than the toy itself. But I most definitely did not need a reminder of that... monster of a creature.

Wait... Hook’s words finally filter through my mind.

“Another?” I turn to look at him with a frown.

“Never mind.” His smirk only grows as he tilts his head towards the stall.

“Pick one.”

Realizing I’m not going to get an answer, I turn back to the fluffy toys, spotting a small black one in the shape of a dog.

I point it out and Hook chuckles as the man hands it over to me. There’s a hidden patch of white fur underneath it, that for some reason makes me smile.

I *feel* more than see Hook move closer. “I can get you a real one.”

I freeze at his words, not fully understanding why he’s offering to buy me one.

“I wouldn’t know how to look after one.” I tell him honestly. And even though I love the idea of having one of those beautiful animals. I hadn’t the slightest idea of how to take care of it.

I run my hands through the soft fur, happy enough with my toy for now.

“I’d help you.” At the sound of his soft tone, I look up at him but he’s not looking at me. Instead, he’s looking ahead, his eyes unfocused as if he’s not looking at any one thing. His body grows tense as if waiting for my reply.

“Maybe one day.” I tell him. *One day when I was finally free.*

Hook nods, not hearing my silent promise. We move up past the rest of the game and food stalls to a huge white tent with a sign that says, *Hall of Mirrors.*

I follow Hook inside to be welcomed by a darkened hall. Long rectangular mirrors taller than Hook are placed in angles everywhere I look. Some reflect off another beside it, giving the illusion of dozens of more mirrors. White smoke seeps around us only adding to the strange mysterious atmosphere.

“It’s a maze of mirrors? But what’s the purpose?” I glance at them trying to sense any energy from them. Maybe each of them transports you to another mirror somewhere else in this hall?

“To find your way out,” Hook says, a glimmer of laughter lighting up his face.

That’s it? All I had to do was find my way out of here?

My eyes are drawn to the floor as the smoke slithers along it, and I spot a strange pattern. Tiny green triangles are almost hidden beside some of the corner of mirrors, pointing in a direction my instincts were telling me was the way out. While others had little red circles beside them. I had a feeling those symbols kept you inside the maze.

Stepping further into the mirror hall, we come to a fork in the maze. I immediately spot the little triangle on the one in front of me. Before I get a

chance to see if my little theory is correct, Hook turns to me with a challenging gleam in his eyes.

“Let’s see who can escape the maze first. If I win, you’ll owe me something. A promise.” He raises a brow, a shadow of a smile on his lips.

“And if I win?” I ask, fully aware that I was going to win this little game easily.

That shadow of a smile grows into something wicked. “Then I’ll owe you a promise.”

“Fine, but you’re not allowed to use any abilities.” My keen observation skills didn’t fit under that list, so really, I wouldn’t be breaking any rules.

“Deal,” he says.

We shake on it before I stuff my toy dog’s foot into the top of my trousers. Hook watches me with an amused smile before he backs up and walks towards the opposite hall. With a challenging glint in his eyes, he turns and disappears into the smoke and mirrors.

With my dog now secure, I move quickly through the maze of mirrors, ignoring anything but the floor and those tiny green triangles. It takes me a couple of minutes with the maze being deceptively vast, but I continue to follow each one until I come out to the back of the tent where the exit lays.

Smiling to myself, I turn and head back inside. Even though I’ve already won this little game, I still wanted to play a little more and maybe even turn the tables on Hook and his deal. It was about time he became the hunted.

Following the red circles, I find they lead you to little spots in the maze that try to trap you in a loop or bring you to a dead end. But there are green triangles nearby, quickly leading you out of it.

All too soon, I find Hook. His back is to me, but he catches my reflection in one of the mirrors. His eyes light up as he whips around. But I’m already gone, coming around the back of the mirrors on the opposite side of him.

“Wrong way,” I laugh before disappearing just as he turns around in my direction.

“Tink...” he warns but there’s a gleam of excitement in his eyes as he follows me. Or what he thinks is me. But it’s only one of my many reflections. Another one has him twist around into a mirror thinking he caught me as I smile back at him.

Laughing again, I wave a goodbye from my spot as he turns but I’ve already disappeared once again.

Using my little trick, I play a game of cat and mouse with him. Drawing

him into one of the mirror traps or dead ends before appearing behind him and disappearing with the dark smoke.

It isn't long before I spot the spark of irritation in his eyes as I evade him once more. I lead him into one of the mirror traps again loving the look of growing frustration in his eyes. He whips around once more but before I get the chance to disappear, he appears before me, walking me back into the mirror wall behind me.

"You cheated! You used that speed ability," I accuse with a glare.

"I cheated?" He asks with a growing smirk as he looks down at me. "What about you?"

I raise my chin. "How did I cheat?"

"You figured it out somehow." He studied my face with a questioning gleam in his eyes.

I shrug. "Maybe. But that's not cheating."

"I should've known better," he mumbles to himself before shaking his head as a small smile twists his lips. "Go on, then. Tell me what it is you want?"

I hum to myself, pretending to think on it but I can't think past the heat of his body as he leans closer into me.

"I think I'll hold on to it for now," I tell him.

As if just realizing our position, I watch his eyes grow heated as he stares right at me.

"Holding your cards close to your chest," he murmurs. "I approve." He gives me one last heated stare before moving back, finally giving me room to think.

"Just let me know what you decide."

I nod a reply as I use the green triangles to lead us out of the maze of mirrors. It reminds me of his own little trick.

"What powerful item gives you the ability to be so quick?" I ask as I take my fluffy dog out of its secured spot on my trousers and make sure he wasn't harmed in our little game.

"This." Hook raises his arm as we exit the tent and I spot the watch that pulled me under in the office a while ago.

An icy shiver crawls down my back as I remember what it did last time when I stared at it for too long.

"It can slow down time too?" I ask and he glances at me with furrowed brows.

“How did you...” He shakes his head. “Never mind. I should know better than to ask when it comes to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You always had this natural intuitive ability that would lead you in the right direction or reveal something you’d need. You always knew what to do and where to go even though you were never there to begin with. It made me think that even if you were a Fae without magic, that nature had a way to give you something back.”

“Is that why you called me Tink?” I ask, trying to subtly move us away from the lie I told him.

“One of the reasons,” he nods.

“And the other?”

“I’ll tell you another time.”

I smirk, shaking my head at his playful smile as we walk past a large crowd that is gathered around something. But I can’t see what has them all so enthralled and excited.

With a glare from Hook, they quickly part to reveal a man dressed in a black-and-white striped suit and large black hat as he demonstrates something.

“What is he doing?” I ask as he pulls a long piece of red ribbon from his sleeve. It goes on for a bit before he bows with a smile.

“Magic trick,” Hook mumbles with a frown watching him.

“That’s magic? But he could be just hiding them in his long sleeves.” Surely this can’t be magic. I reach trying to sense any powers or energy. But I get nothing.

He pulls a thicker piece of red ribbon from his left sleeve and does the same trick, garnering small claps and laughs. But as he takes another bow, the ribbon begins to float upward, slithering around his arm before wrapping around both his wrists and tying them together with a bow.

The claps grow as he frowns down at his wrists, now trapped together. He glances back up, quickly covering his frown with a wide smile before raising his arms.

The crowd cheers as I glance up at Hook and spot the twinkle in his eyes.

“You’re doing this.”

Hook’s only reply is a dazzling smile.

I look back at the man just as a third piece of ribbon falls from his right sleeve and starts to wrap around his legs. Round and round it goes until the

man is unable to do anything but jump a step forward.

I laugh at the confused look he tries to cover with another smile as the crowd cheers at him.

Glancing up at Hook, I find him smiling down at me. "Having fun?"

I nod, realizing I *was* having fun. More fun than I had in a very long time.

"Come on. I want you to see the Ferris Wheel." We move through the stalls to come to the large white circular machine with swinging seats.

It's huge. Way taller than any of the trees we climbed in Neverland. There's a long queue of people along the side of it, but Hook ignores them, moving straight past them.

"Don't we have to go behind them?" I ask just as we come up to a man sitting behind a small, white desk. He gets up immediately and nods to Hook before opening a small rope for us, waving us forward with a smile.

Hook walks us over to one of the swinging chairs and waits until I get in before sitting down and pulling a long thick bar over us.

Placing my new soft dog on my lap, I look around just as the machine starts moving.

"What do you think?" Hook asks as we move higher and higher, inching closer and closer to the night sky just as the stars begin to appear. It starts off as one and then two and before I know it, the entire sky is full of them.

The ride stops when we're right at the top, making me feel close to them and it reminds me of the gift Hook gave me.

"You gave me the stars. Why?" I turn to him. As if feeling my stare, he too turns back to look at me.

"Because it was something I could give you. And you deserve a night without your dreams becoming nightmares." He frowns and gives me a look as if to say it's as simple as that.

"Because you should *never* have to wake from a dream so dark, it leaves you in fear. Or wonder what lies waiting within it." His frown deepens and a dark glint enters his eyes.

"I won't let anything harm you in or out of the darkness. But know that there is nothing inside it that I won't hunt and kill. You're safe with me." His dark eyes blaze with an emotion I don't recognize as he searches my face for something.

But I'm struck silent by his words to form any reply. It's been so long since anyone cared about what I think or feel that all this time I've been waiting for his trick or game to be revealed. When it wasn't a game at all. It

was just him caring.

“Thank you,” I finally reply before clearing my throat of emotion.

He gives me a soft smile before looking around us and slowly adopting his usual confident persona. “There’s a job I need to finish off in a couple of nights. An *event* I have to go to and could use your help with.”

The mention of an event already has my interest piqued, but it further rises once he says he needs my help.

“My help?” I question. Surely, I heard him wrong. What could he possibly need my help with?

“You should be warned though. It could get messy.” He nods, attempting to look serious but I spot the glint of light in his eyes.

“Messy?” I try to smother my smile. I was well aware of the trouble Hook used to get into and can only imagine the things he did now.

He hums a reply. “I might also have to do some questionable things.”

“Let me take a wild guess and assume it will involve stealing, tricking or conning someone?”

Hook’s smile grows as he nods, giving me a thoughtful look. “There’s a heavy possibility.”

I quirk a brow. “And maybe even get into a fight or two?”

A savage smirk slides across his face. “Most definitely.”

I laugh as a warmth fills my chest. This moment between us felt like we were back on Neverland with a world full of possibilities ahead of us.

“What do you say? Ready to join me on a little adventure?” His eyes brighten as a rush of excitement fills me.

“Count me in.”

CHAPTER 17



“STAY CLOSE TO ME.” Hook fixes the cuffs of his black suit jacket for the third time since we arrived outside Lord Basilius’ manor.

His entire suit is black-on-black, a dark contrast to the white tie with small skulls on it. And apart from the small, matching silver skull cufflinks, every other item he wears is also black.

But it makes his electric blue eyes stand out, drawing me to them each time he glances over at me.

“There are many dangerous people here that would—” I take the crook of his arm and glance up at the large manor.

“I’ll be fine.” It wasn’t the first time I’d been to something like this. And although I never thought Hook’s event would end up being a ball, I was excited to be here.

The young Lord of the Dark Realm was celebrating his official move to the Mortal Realm, and it was supposed to be a night to remember. Or so Cash told me.

Hook glances down at me, his eyes still as intense as they were when he first saw me in this dress.

One that looks like it was carved from the stars themselves. And with Hook’s ability to attain such unique items, I wouldn’t be surprised if it was.

The skin-colored bodice clings to my body with hundreds of sparkling silver embellishments woven into every curve before cascading down the length of me.

My blonde hair is in thick wavy curls with one side pulled away from my face by a butterfly clasp that matches the elegant style of the dress.

“Thank you for the dress. It’s beautiful.” I look down at my bracelet to

make sure it's still on my wrist before glancing back at Hook.

His eyes darken as they travel down the length of me, his eyes lingering on the long slit that reaches the top of my thigh. He opens his mouth to say something just as the doors open.

He takes a step forward, his grip tightening on me as we step into a grand foyer full of people already mingling and laughing.

Some people greet Hook with fear in their eyes while others just dip their heads or stare. He ignores most of them and leads me straight into the large ballroom to the right. There's a group of people dancing in the center of it while smaller groups stand off to the side, talking or eating from one of the tables of food laid out against the walls.

The entire ballroom is decorated in soft golds that mix with a silky black, weaving throughout the large-open space to give it an over-the-top extravagant feel. One that those with too much wealth only seemed to be able to achieve.

Soft music drifts around me from some invisible instruments as we move further into the room.

Something dark catches my attention from the corner of my eye. I look over toward it and find two huge black beasts standing off to the side.

"What are they? And why are they in this room?" I whisper to Hook.

He follows my gaze and curses when he spots them. "Hounds of the Dark Realm. Lord Basilius must have expected some form of trouble to bring them here. It's said that they're able to scent fear."

I have never seen anything like them. Though they had similar features of the small human familiars I've come to adore, they were far larger in height and width, easily reaching Hook's shoulder. With long pointed ears, a large snout, sharp teeth and a build similar to the beasts of the Fae Realm, they looked like a force to be reckoned with.

"Why would scenting fear be something the Lord could use to protect himself?" Surely half of the room was fearful of the pair of beasts and their watchful, red-rimmed eyes. There was also an intelligence in their sharp gazes, and a dark type of energy that seemed to seep from every part of them as they watched the room.

An icy shiver crawled down my back the longer I stared at them.

"It's not a normal type of fear that they scent. They pick up on the kind that's born from ill-intent," Hook explains.

"Are they going to be a problem?" I ask him as I try to remain calm. But

considering we were here with ill-intentions; it was becoming increasingly harder to do so. Especially when every time I glanced over at them, they seem to be larger, darker or more imposing. Their presence alone was something to be fearful of. Let alone what they could possibly do to you.

“They shouldn’t be. We’re not here to hurt the Lord. Nor do we have any ill-intentions toward him. Rather we need something from him. We should be fine.” Hook’s tone is smooth and confident. But I catch the nervous tick at the corner of his left eye that he tries to hide. He’s just as worried about them as I am.

We keep our distance from the hounds and move to the opposite side of the room. And when they pay us no mind, I finally start to relax.

“Let’s stay here for a bit.” Hook glances around the room. A couple of people come over to talk to him about needing something, but he glares at them before telling them to contact him through the usual means or not at all.

“I normally avoid these kinds of events.” Hook narrows his eyes on their retreating backs.

I glance around at the people eyeing Hook like he’s their new ticket to happiness.

“Because they usually want something from you?” I ask, feeling sad at the thought.

“That, and I prefer my own company. These things bore me to death.” He swipes a drink from a passing waiter, knocking it back before handing it to a random passing man. The man takes it without question before quickly moving away.

“Well in that case, maybe I should leave? Let you wallow in your boredom alone,” I retort, attempting to hide the smirk on my lips.

His eyes narrow on someone trying to inch closer to him before turning to me, his eyes instantly softening. He takes my hand and places a soft kiss on it. “You wouldn’t dare. Besides, you’re the exception. *Always.*”

Something warm fills my chest at the soft tone in his voice.

Cash’s words about Hook wanting to dance with me at the club flashes across my mind.

Maybe I could make it up to him and dance with him here? I open my mouth to ask him when a man with white shoulder length hair and flawless porcelain skin steps up beside us. He wears an air of power and wealth like a second skin. And though his smile is sincere, I see the sliver of darkness that hides beneath those dark brown eyes.

“Hook.” His voice was soft, pleasing to the ears but there was also a slight coldness to it.

“Basilius.” Hook clenches his jaw but pastes a smile on his face. Basilius’ eyes drift to me before moving back to Hook.

“I was told you didn’t come to these types of events?” His cold tone grows curious.

“I made an exception.” Hook gives him a savage smile.

“How generous of you.” Basilius’ eyes trail back to me, and I feel Hook’s hand flex in mine.

“May I be so bold as to steal your beautiful date for a dance?” Lord Basilius gazes down at me, a hint of warmth filling his eyes.

Hook’s hand tightens on mine before he smirks at Basilius and slowly lifts it to his lips, placing another soft kiss on it.

“It’s up to Tink.”

Basilius raises a brow, a small smile lighting up his face. “Tink? What an unusual name. But of course. It’s always the lady’s choice.”

Basilius waits for my reply and a small plan forms in my mind. Would it help Hook if I kept Basilius busy long enough to find what he needs?

Hook didn’t tell me exactly what we would be doing here. But he did tell me he’d need to retrieve something important.

I glance at Hook wondering what he wants me to do but he’s not looking at me and I don’t know how to tell him about my new little plan without giving it away.

I glance back at Basilius. “I’d love to.”

Hook stiffens before finally turning to look at me wearing a blank look I can’t decipher. He places another kiss on my hand before releasing it and stepping back.

“Shall we?” Basilius moves us out onto the dancefloor before placing a hand on my waist and taking the other to lead me along with the music. But as we move my eyes keep drifting over to Hook.

My eyes follow him as he storms across to a group nearer to where we are on the dance floor, before he stares blatantly in our direction.

I frown, thinking my small plan is pointless if he doesn’t use this time to find what he needs.

“Why is it that I’ve never met you before?”

I glance up at Basilius to find his eyes on mine.

“It’s my first time in this Realm.” I tell him before glancing back over to

Hook to find him still there, now openly glaring at Basilius. There's a wide empty space around him as if the people close by can feel his temper and are steering clear.

I try to tell him to go look for what he needs but he's no longer staring at me. His furious glare is set on Basilius and where his hand sits on my waist.

"Ah, that makes sense. And before that?" It takes me a minute to remember what we're talking about.

Focusing back on Basilius, I give him a small smile. "Nowhere worth mentioning."

Basilius chuckles and leans in. "Beautiful and mysterious," he whispers. "A deadly kind of woman indeed. You and Hook are... together?"

Together? No, that didn't seem accurate. But we also were, in a way. I was naive but I wasn't blind to see there was something there between us. Something that went beyond our shared pasts and friendship.

I can't deny the way he makes me feel. Anger is at the very top of that list but so is the constant surprise that slips beneath it and the dark heated desire that weaves it way through every word and touch.

"It's all very... *new*," I finally admit to Basilius and myself.

"He's a fool if he hasn't already made a move." Basilius' eyes follow the direction I'm looking in before turning back to me. "If I had found you first, you'd already be mine."

I raise a brow at his bold statement. "So confident even though we've just met."

His smile grows. "But I know a rare beauty when I see one. I wouldn't be so foolish as to let you out of my sight nor let another man steal a dance with you."

I couldn't help but laugh at him and his absurd thought process. "Are you forgetting, it was *my* choice."

"And you chose *me*." He smiles and a hint of arrogance glimmers in his eyes.

"I..." He's right, but not for the reason he thinks.

The song ends and I take step back from him as he frowns.

"Let me show you around? I have a hidden garden that was just completed. It's breath-taking."

"Maybe some other time?" I reply, while having no thought to go through with it as I glance around for Hook.

Basilius' eyes grow heated as he takes my hand and lifts it to his lips. I

stiffen and start to pull it back, but another hand appears and takes it, holding it in his grasp.

“I can take it from here.” Hook gives Basilius a dark smile and glare to match. But something inside me instantly eases at his touch.

“Of course.” Basilius’ eyes grow cold once more as he gives him a tight-lipped smile. One that is just as fake as the one Hook wore before our little dance.

They stare one another down before I clear my throat wanting to hurry this along. We were still in the middle of the dance floor and people were starting to stare.

Basilius turns to me, his smile instantly warming. “Thank you for the dance. If you change your mind, I’ll be around.” He frowns as he dips his head to Hook before leaving.

Hook pulls me over to the side of the room where a table of food lays. The remnants of tension quickly eases from my shoulders as I pick up a small cake with white frosting.

“What did he ask you?” Hook grits out, his eyes on Basilius’ retreating back as he moves across the hall to his Dark hounds.

“He wanted to show me his new garden,” I tell him.

“Did he now?” Hook clenches his jaw, the look in his eyes murderous as he glares openly in his direction. “And you said?”

“Does it matter? You wasted the time to glare over at us instead of going to look for the item you came here for.”

Hook looks stunned before turning to me with a frown.

I raise a brow. “You didn’t honestly think I *wanted* to dance with him?”

He clenches his jaw, taking a step closer to me. “Then you should have said *no*.”

I should have but I thought I was actually helping.

“He was a good dancer, at least.” I shrug.

“If you wanted to dance, you should have asked *me*.” Hook’s eyes narrow to slits as he glances back to where Basilius was.

I look at him, really look at him and finally decipher that look of his, smiling when I do.

“You’re jealous.” I expect him to deny it. To roll his eyes at me and tell me I’m crazy.

But he doesn’t.

His eyes blaze with anger as he turns to stare at me. “Of course I’m

jealous. I'm jealous of *anyone* near you. The thought alone makes me want to rip them apart."

I bite my lip, hiding the smile that wants to spread across my face.

"Then maybe I shouldn't tell you what else he said," I tease.

Hook freezes before he whips back around to the dance floor, his eyes narrowing on the room around him.

"What are you looking for?" I swipe my finger through the white frosting.

"That bastard Basilius. He's going to—" Just as Hook turns around; I swipe the frosting across the top of his nose.

He looks at me with incredulous eyes, his nose now adorably covered in white.

"Did you just—?"

I nod. "I did. Now what are you going to do about it?"

A slow wicked smirk slides across his face as he wipes the frosting from his nose with a finger and then places it in his mouth, sucking it off with a seductive smirk, and quickly turning the table on my little game, sending heat spiralling through my core.

He leans in, his eyes darkening as they drop to my lips. "If you want to play Tink. All you ever have to do is ask. But be warned... Once we start this game, I won't stop."

"How—"

A buzzing sound cuts off my question and our heated moment.

"Damn it." Hook glances at his watch before something flashes in his eyes. It's there and gone before I catch it.

"This conversation is far from over. But it's time." Hook grabs my hand and pulls me out of the ballroom.

Wait... What? "Time for what?" I ask.

Hook looks around as we move through the throng of people and out of the room.

Once we're outside, a loud commotion sounds out from inside the ballroom. I try to twist around to see it, but Hook's grip tightens on me.

I glance up to him and he gives me a subtle shake of his head.

Murmurs from inside of the room filter outside to the people around us but it's too low for me to make out what has happened. Though whatever it is has their eyes light up in excitement as they rush in to check it out.

Hook walks us slowly out into the foyer just as Lord Basilius' men choose to check out the commotion inside.

“What was that?” I ask him just as the last person heads inside, leaving us completely alone.

“Our diversion.” He smirks back at me as he quickly pulls me up the stairs and along the hall of the second floor, taking a left and a right before coming to another long hall with small coves.

Why are there always so many halls?

Hook stops for a moment, allowing me to catch my breath as his eyes focus on something in the distance. I glance in the same direction but there’s nothing there.

“Hook?”

“Cash has a diversion running to give us time to search but I’ve already sensed the relic. We just need to get to it and get out of here before anyone notices it’s missing.”

“What type of diversion?” It didn’t sound like anything bad. In fact, most people were running *toward* it, instead of *away*.

Hook’s smirk turns mischievous. “Cake.”

“Cake?” That’s it? That’s what had everyone running towards the room with an excited gleam in their eyes. Was everyone really that hungry?

Hook’s eyes sparkle with laughter. “One that’s infused with pixie dust.”

I freeze. Pixie dust was extremely rare. Finding some was not easy, even with his ability. And in order for it to work, it had to be given freely. Which Pixies never wanted to do.

How he was able to accomplish such a feat while also finding someone to create something edible with it, was beyond impressive.

I shake my head as I glance down the hall. “Nobody will come looking for us? Even after they’ve finished eating it?”

Hook gives me a look full of mischief. “Did you know that pixie dust has a natural aphrodisiac in it?”

My brows raise as Hook’s smile grows sinfully wicked. “I can promise you that no one is leaving that room. A small bite of that cake will create a ravenous hunger that can’t be easily satisfied. At least not anytime soon.”

My mouth drops open when I realize what he’s done.

“You... you started an... an *orgy*? At Lord Basilius’ welcome ball?” Now I understood why Cash said it was going to be a night to remember. No one would soon forget about it. Not for a long while.

Hook chuckles as his eyes heat with lust. “One hell of a welcome, if you ask me. He can thank me another time—” He freezes before whipping around

at something. Narrowing his eyes on something in the distance, he curses before quickly grabbing my hand and pulling me into the nearest cove. I open my mouth to ask him what's going on when low warning growls hit my ears, making me freeze.

By the sound of it, there were at least two angry beasts. And both were heading this way.

CHAPTER 18



HOOK FROWNS DOWN at me as the growls get closer. “Do you trust me?”

“Not even a little.” My quick reply makes him smirk as he pushes me further back into the small dark cove, pressing me up against the wall and blocking behind us with his body.

The cove isn’t very deep. Anyone passing by would see us, but from the way Hook covers my body, I don’t think his plan is to hide us.

“Hook,” I whisper, wondering what his plan is as my heart flutters wildly in my chest.

“Shhh.” He slides a hand down my thigh and lifts my leg around his waist. I can’t make out his face, but I feel his eyes on me as our heavy breaths mingle as one. He presses into me, and I gasp, the angle letting me feel every delicious hard inch of him.

“So beautiful,” he whispers. I feel him draw closer before he places a soft kiss on my neck, making me moan. Heat unfurls inside me as his lips trail down my chin and along my jaw.

He groans. “Do you know how many times I’ve imagined ripping that dress off you tonight?” The husky sound of his voice slides down my back making me shiver.

“How many times I’ve wanted to touch you,” he breathes as he trails open-mouthed kisses along my neck. “Hold you...”

A growl sounds out and I freeze. I start to panic thinking we’re going to be attacked and eaten by the huge beasts but instead of making another run for it, Hook’s hand slides down the side of my neck, then down the length of my arm before trailing slowly around my back.

“Hook... The hounds...” A whimper escapes me as he kisses back up my

neck.

“I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise. Let go and just *feel*.” His lips find mine once more, dragging a moan from my throat and silencing me with a kiss that leaves me breathless and needy. Every part of my skin is sensitive as he seeps beneath it, beneath the barriers I’ve slowly built. He splits them open, leaving me bare just for him.

But instead of feeling vulnerable or scared, I feel empowered, as something full of hope rises up inside me. Some part of me that knows what’s happening between us is bigger than just a kiss. It’s bigger than my fears or worries and that if I just jump, if I just let go. He’ll be there to catch me.

He moves back a fraction and I slide my hands up to his chest, needing to feel him just as much as he needs me. His heartbeat quickens beneath my palm, a complete contrast to the slow, sensual kiss he gives me, dragging out this moment between us as if we have all the time in the world.

“Hook...” I whisper as I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him closer once more.

A low whine comes from somewhere behind Hook, threatening to drag me out of the haze of pleasure I was falling into. But Hook pulls me flush against him, driving my body insane with need. His grip tightens on my thigh as he continues to slowly work my body up into a heated frenzy and I soon forget about anything other than him and his touch.

I’m so lost in the haze of pleasure that it takes me a moment to realize there’s no more growling behind Hook.

As if he too realizes it, he slowly releases my thigh, but he doesn’t move back just yet. “We need to move,” he breathes, still not moving an inch.

I nod and he places a soft kiss on my lips before stepping back and out of the cove. I take a moment to calm my racing heart and heated body before following him.

His dark eyes watch me as I slip from the shadows, and I shudder at the dark, hungry look he gives me.

Something was shifting between us. Something that meant more than the desire filled looks and slight touches. I felt the pull between us grow. That sliver of a thread that seems to draw me to him each time he was near.

No matter how much I try to deny it.

“Why did they leave?” I ask him as I glance up and down the hall. There was no one other than us two here.

“They were hunting us because they scented your fear and my... ill-

intentions.” Hook gives me a savage smile. “I needed to change what we both were feeling. And fast.”

“They sensed our desire instead and got confused before leaving.” I say more to myself than to him.

But he nods a reply before a devilish gleam enters his eyes. “I thought on my feet and ran with it.”

“And if it hadn’t worked?” What would have happened if it wasn’t enough, or those hounds still wanted to attack? What would he have done then?

His dark eyes grew serious and settled directly on mine. “*Nothing* was getting near you, Tink. You never had anything to fear.” He reaches out and takes my hand and quickly leads us down the hall before taking a swift left. This place is just as bad as Hooks’ manor, with as many twists and turns.

“How do you know exactly where to go?” I keep my voice low while glancing around to make sure no one is following us. Especially those hounds.

“I can sense it.” He pulls me around another corner before glancing back at me.

I smirk at him. “Ah, yes. One of your talents.”

He gives me a savage look. “One of many.”

I’m about to ask him what the rest are when he stops outside a door. There’s nothing special about it but whatever is on the other side has Hooks’ eyes lighting up and a cocky look sliding across his face.

He pulls out a small gold key from his pocket and runs his thumb along the edge of it, before placing it in the lock and turning it. I hear a click and his smirk grows as he turns the handle and walks inside.

“How did you do that?” I ask as he pulls me into the room and shuts the door behind us.

“It’s a universal key.” He shows me the gold key before pocketing it.

“Universal? Meaning you can get into *any* room?”

He chuckles at what must be my shocked expression. “Exactly.”

With something like that in the hands of Hook, I can only imagine the trouble he gets into with it.

“Must come in handy.”

He gives me a roguish smile. “I usually prefer to do it the old way. Makes it more challenging, but time isn’t on our side tonight.”

I shake my head at him as he turns to survey the room, a look of

concentration on his face as his eyes turn to storms, his power coming to life before they land on the desk.

“Simple minds,” he mutters as he walks over to it and opens a drawer. I glance into it but apart from some ink and papers, there’s nothing else in there.

Hook bends down and pulls out a small black dagger from his pocket and slides it across a wooden piece on the top of the draw. It drops quickly revealing a small hidden compartment above. In it there’s a small black box, half the size of my hand. Hook takes it and places it in a pocket inside his suit jacket. He puts the draw back in place and grabs my hand pulling me out of the room with him.

Closing the door behind us, I open my mouth to ask him what happens now, when I hear multiple voices coming our way.

They must not have been in the ballroom with the pixie cake.

I look at Hook with wide eyes. We can’t have made it this far only to be caught.

Something flashes in his eyes before he places a finger on his lips. I nod as he quickly glances around before moving us in the opposite direction.

And much further away from the main entrance.

My heart races as we silently sneak through the halls trying to get away from the voices. But it’s as if they know exactly where we’re going and keep following us.

They gain on us just as we come to a stairwell. This one is much smaller and not as grand as the one at the entrance.

“I saw something down there.” The voices grow louder, gaining on us.

Hook glances over the staircase, before quickly pulling me down it. We make it down the stairs with no one following us, only to come out into a group of men. All of them are wearing Lord Basilius’ crest.

They freeze, all turning to us with looks of suspicion.

“What were you doing up there?” A tall man with graying hair asks.

Hook gives him a mocking smile as he grabs my hand once more and we make a run for it, no longer worrying about being quiet.

“Hey, come back here!”

A bubble of excitement rushes through me as I realize how much fun I’m having. Even though we are being chased.

Hook chuckles as he glances at me. I open my mouth to ask him what’s so funny when he narrows his eyes on something behind me.

I glance back to find Basilius' guards catching up on us. We make a few sharp turns before we find an opening leading us outside. But this time it looks like we've ended up at the back of the manor.

There's a huge maze that sits further down to the left of us with large flowers, bushes and greenery everywhere around it.

Hook pauses as he glances around, probably looking for our way out when I hear the men grow nearer.

Eyeing up a large bush just before the maze, I grab Hooks' hand and quickly pull him over to it, just reaching it as the men catch up to us.

"Where did they go?"

I peek around the bush just as the guards come out into the back garden. They move a few steps trying to search for us, but they don't come anywhere near the maze or us.

After a couple of minutes, they group near the door with matching frowns.

"Maybe they went around the other way?"

The shortest guy they all seem to be referring to shrugs as if already bored with the idea of chasing us down again.

"Talon will kill us if he finds out we didn't at least look around a bit."

"Fine. Search the grounds. But it was probably just a couple of frisky guests."

They break off into two groups. One heads around the side of the house while the other heads back inside.

I give it another couple of minutes before letting myself relax. Smiling to myself, I turn to Hook to let him know they're gone.

But he's already staring right at me with a look so heated that whatever I was about to say quickly becomes forgotten.

With two quick strides forward, he takes my face in his hands and slams his lips to mine.

Unlike earlier with its slow, sensual build, this kiss is full of fire and passion. A bruising kiss that scorches my lips and makes my heartbeat race. Hook kisses me like he wants to consume me, like he wants to sink beneath my skin and never let go. I melt into him, into his warmth, surrendering to the kiss. To him. To the raw, untethered passion building between us.

My fingers curl into his shirt as he draws out a hunger inside me. One that's as wild and desperate as the blaze of heat burning throughout me.

But instead of stroking that fire, Hook's kisses slow down. I grab his

wrist, willing him to stay with me in this moment, for a little longer, but he pulls back, his eyes scanning my face for something as a myriad of emotions swirl behind his gaze.

“Tink...” he breathes. “I need to tell—”

“Boss?”

Hook clenches his jaw as Cash calls out.

“Hook?” I frown, watching something flicker in his eyes. He continues to stare at me a minute longer as if debating something before releasing a heavy sigh.

“Over here,” he tells Cash.

Cash comes around the bush, his brows raising as he glances between us.

“Was I interrupting som—” Hook gives him a sharp look and Cash’s smirk quickly drops as he clears his throat.

Hook gives me a soft look, an apology that makes me smile before he gives his full attention to Cash. “Any luck?”

“No. We couldn’t find any evidence of him working with them.”

Hook frowns and starts to ask Cash more questions. I turn and look at some of the garden while they talk, giving myself and my overheated body time to cool down.

Something red catches my eye at the opening of the maze. A flower I’ve never seen before. I start to move toward it when Hook calls out.

“Don’t go far.” I turn to look at him.

“I won’t.” I give him a small smile before walking over to the flower. It’s right at the opening of the maze and only a few feet away from them both.

As I move closer to it, I start to see more of them. All different shapes and sizes. There’s a larger one on the bottom with a strange blue coloring at the center.

I bend down and touch it when the ground suddenly shifts beneath me.

CHAPTER 19



AN ENCHANTING GARDEN greets me with a cool breeze. I glance around to find I'm in a sea of beautiful flowers. Even in the dark, I can see how vibrant they are.

To the side of me sits clusters of colorful trees. And across from that is an open lake that glitters against the moonlight.

Many of the flowers remind me of the Fae Realm. So many colors that awaken old memories of a time before Neverland. Scorching-oranges, burning-browns, and molten-reds. The fresh green of Summer. The vibrant pink budded blossoms of Spring.

I bend down to inspect a red flower. As soon as I get close enough, my stomach drops.

It's a flaming butterfly. A flower that's only native to the Lands of the Sun Fae.

Panic rises up inside me, threatening to choke me. I must have stepped through some type of portal. This has to be the Fae Realm. Those flowers only grow there.

No. No. I can't be here. They would have sensed me by now. I had to leave. I had to get out... I— My eyes fall on a pale purple flower across from it, instantly freezing my fear.

I had seen that exact flower in a book when I was younger. I remember it because of its beautiful light coloring. Everything in the land of the Sun Fae was vivid and bright. Whereas this was soft and subtle. It's cool coloring is so different from what I was used to seeing.

The small curling petals swirl around a powdered white bud. It is said to have healing properties when mixed with healing waters. But it was from the

Land of the Moon Fae.

In all my years in the Fae Realm, I never heard of either native plants existing in the other.

My dread slowly eases as I realize I couldn't be in the Fae Realm after all. Not if both flowers were here together.

But how are they here? And *where* is here?

Finding a clearing with a swirling gray brick path, I move through the sea of flowers toward it and over to a grove of trees on the other side. I spot a white smoke tree sitting at the edge of it. Moving closer, I see its black branches with silver tips clawing their way up from a smoke white trunk. A tree only native to the land of the Moon Fae. Whereas the tall, deep beige tree with flecks of gold beside it is from the land of the Sun Fae.

Just like the flowers, both trees are from a different Fae land, but neither can exist in the other.

A dark tree with slithering shadow branches behind them both finally confirms my theory. I wasn't in the Fae Realm. I couldn't be. The shadow tree was most definitely from the Dark Realm. Lord Basilius's Realm.

Basilius... He mentioned a hidden garden. Maybe this is something he created or had made. But how?

I walk over to the large lake and look around me. More flowers and trees I recognize from books I've read of other Realms or seen since coming to the Mortal Realm spread out around me. With others I've never seen before.

I move down the lake, but as soon as I reach the edge of it, something stops me. An invisible barrier of some kind.

I reach out to touch it and my hand hits a solid wall. Or what feels like it. I glide my palm along it and follow it around the field of flowers and back over to the grove of trees, to where I find it ends.

Turning around I reach down inside me and try to sense how far the strange barrier goes. I draw on the power around me and feel the different energies of everything here. I push further out with my senses and find that the barrier isn't huge.

It expands to the edge of the trees, the field of flowers and lake and goes no further. Beyond it is nothing. No energy. No life. Just an emptiness, a black hole.

I open my eyes and what I see before me is all that is here. I wasn't in another Realm at all. There is nothing beyond the trees or lake. It was just this garden. The entire space is no bigger than a quarter of the size of Hook's

Island.

Hook... How do I get back to him? Surely there's a way just as simple as the way I came in.

"Tink?"

As if the thought of him alone calls him to me, he appears across from me, a worried look on his face that soon disappears once he spots me.

He moves over to me, his eyes scanning my face.

"I'm fine." I glance up at him as his eyes run over every inch of me, making sure there's not a scratch on me before he's happy.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone else here," I tell him.

He nods before glancing around, narrowing his eyes on the grove of dark trees.

"I don't think we're in another Realm. There's an invisible barrier that runs along the edge of the field and trees. It's small. A lot smaller than your island."

"It looks like a pocket world," he says.

"A pocket world?" I never heard anything like it before.

"Small places created for one thing or another. A garden for instance. Or a room."

"Why?" Why would someone go to the trouble to create such a thing? The power it would take alone would be extreme.

"For privacy, fun or whatever you require." Hook glances around, his gaze finding the lake and field of flowers. "I haven't come across many. They take a lot of power to create and sustain."

Just like I thought. It seems like such a waste but who am I to judge?

"How do we get out? I can't see any doors or portals." I look at Hook. "How did you follow me in here?"

One corner of his mouth twists slightly. "I inspected the bush and around it when you disappeared."

"Did you touch anything?" I ask.

"I ran my hand across the flowers to see if there was something hidden behind it."

Flowers... The red flower with a blue center flashes across my mind. I glance around for anything similar when I find a tall bush with one not too far away from us.

"Did you touch a red flower with a blue center?" I ask, my mind already coming up with an idea of how to get out of here.

Hook frowns as his gaze swings to me. “Yes. Why?”

Before I get the chance to test out my little theory, Cash appears beside Hook. His wide eyes sweep around the garden. “Woah. Where are we?”

“Basilius’ hidden garden,” I mumble while looking around for more blue and red flowers.

From the corner of my eye, I spot Hook freeze.

“Basilius’ garden? The one he wanted to show you?” Hook narrows his eyes on the garden, a sharp look in his eyes that makes me think he’d actually consider burning it down.

“Either of you figure out how to get out?” Cash asks with a wince.

“We’re working on it.” Hook clenches his jaw as he glares over at the shadow tree.

I shake my head at him before moving toward the bush with the red and blue flower.

“I think I have an idea,” I tell them.

Both give me their undivided attention before following me over to the bush.

“I noticed a red and blue flower before I came in here.” I point at the flower. “If I’m right, it should bring us back to where we were.”

“But you can’t be sure?” Cash asks with a furrowed brow.

I shrug. “I have a good feeling about it.”

Hook gives me a soft smile before glancing at Cash. “Only one way to find out.”

Hook steps forward and reaches out to touch the flower. The moment his fingers graze it, he disappears, making my heart drop to my stomach.

Did he really just blindly take my word for it? What if I was wrong and he ended up in another Realm? Or some place worse?

I take a step toward the flower, ready to go after him when Cash steps in front of me, blocking my path.

“Cash?” I glance around him, trying to make sure the flower hasn’t also disappeared before my eyes.

“Don’t worry, he’ll be fine.” Cash’s gaze softens as he watches me.

“What if I was wrong? What if he ends up someplace else and gets caught?” The thought alone sends a spear of dread through me.

Cash raises a brow, his eyes filled with amusement. “Caught? Hook?” He shakes his head. “Hook would never be caught unless it was a part of the plan.”

I give Cash a frown. “But we nearly got caught a few moments ago by Lord Basilius’ men. We had to make a run for it.”

Cash chuckles, his eyes sparkling with humor. “If you were running from anything, it was because Hook wanted to *play*.” He shakes his head as a reminiscent look seeps into his eyes. “He hasn’t done that in a long time,” he murmurs.

“Done what?” I push.

“Play for the fun of it.” He glances at me. “He gave up on doing something for the fun of it when—”

Hook appears a few feet away from me with a wide smile on his face. “It worked.”

My nerves instantly ease on seeing him. “You were sent back to where we were?”

Hook nods. “A little further into the maze. But yes.”

Cash claps his hands and rubs them. “Let’s get going then.” He moves towards the bush as Hook steps up beside me with a strange look. It morphs into a bright smile that slowly slides across his face.

“Actually Cash... We’ll catch up with you.” Hook slides off his jacket and folds it before placing it beside the bush. Stepping back into the clear area, he beckons me to him with a smirk.

“I believe I owe you a dance.”

Cash chuckles before leaving us to it, disappearing with one touch just like Hook did moments ago.

I smile at Hook, stunned but delighted that he remembered. “Shouldn’t we try to get out of here before someone catches us?” But even as the words leave my lips, I make a move toward him.

“Catch us?” Hook takes my hand and spins me around before pulling me close. “They would never dare catch Captain James Hook,” he whispers.

I narrow my eyes on him playfully. “So, you *were* just playing all along?” Cash was right.

Hook’s eyes grow intense. “I would *never* have let them take you.”

I give him a soft smile as we start to dance.

“There’s no music,” I remind him.

“Then we’ll create our own,” he says with a grin, lopsided and devilish. As if the mention of music summons the sound, a soft melody begins to play in the back of my mind.

The attraction I felt earlier blazes to life once more, luring me in and

holding me captive. I can't take my eyes away from his as he gazes down at me. A heated look that ensnares me, mind, body and soul.

He looks at me as if I'm something to cherish, to worship and savor all in one.

Whatever was happening between us wasn't slow and soft. It was wild, brilliant and bold. It pushed every boundary I had made. Every barrier I had created and made me feel something deep. Something vast.

But as soon as my thoughts grow hopeful, my mind reminds me of the reason I'm here to begin with.

It's a swift reminder that this happiness I'm feeling now will soon come to an end one way or another.

After all, a deal is a deal. And if I want to stay hidden, I needed to go through with it.

What happens when it's over? Do we just go our separate ways? Do I just ignore these feelings growing inside me?

I know he must feel it, too. It's in every glance and heated gaze, every shared and thoughtful moment.

But I'm still his bait. No matter what way I try to think about it.

And without this deal, without Hook finding me a permanent solution to stay hidden, I'll be hunted until I'm found. That much I know.

"I can see your mind is thinking hard about something. Let go, Tink." Hook twirls me before pulling me back to him, my back to his front. The warmth from his body seeps into mine, making me shiver.

"Let go," he whispers against my ear. "Let go and just be here with me. Just you and me." I feel the rise and fall of his chest against my back as he dips his head and places a soft kiss on my shoulder.

Every thought and worry drifts away as he spins me once more, dancing with me in the clearing until everything around us becomes a blur. Until it's just the two of us in this moment.

I let go and just feel. Him. Us.

I forget about my past fears and future doubts and plant myself firmly in this moment. In the here and now.

I carve each heated look, each warm touch into my memory, knowing that whatever happens from here on out, I will at least have this moment etched forever in my mind.

* * *

Once we arrived back at Hook's, he was immediately called away. I'm already in my bed, showered and in something light, watching as the stars shift above me.

But even with them watching over me, I can't seem to turn my mind off. It keeps drifting back to the last few hours and my time spent with Hook.

The dance. The cove. The way his body felt against mine.

I raise my hand to my lips, remembering the taste of him. How he kissed me like he wanted to devour me. How he held me like he never wanted to let me go.

My eyes flutter shut, and Hook's face appears before me, remembering the moment as if it was happening once again.

I lean into him as our lips meet, a soft brush at first before he teases my mouth apart and slides his tongue in, taking control of the kiss.

A throaty groan claws up his throat sliding down my back and drawing me into his embrace.

Just like back in the cove, one vivid memory and taste of him is all it takes to crave everything and more.

My body heats up once more and a deep pleasurable ache pools low in my stomach.

I let my hand drift down my body imagining Hook's touch as he glides his hand over every curve.

With my eyes closed and mind solely on Hook as he slowly works my body into a frenzy, I imagine his husky voice, his taunts and teasing, and lean into the pleasurable heat building inside me.

My breath comes out in tiny pants as I writhe between the sheets needing a release to this build-up of sensations in my body. Squeezing my thighs together does nothing to ease the growing ache at my core.

A moan slips from my lips as I drag my hand further down my body. Lower. Lower. Until I'm sliding my hand down to my core and imagining it's his touch. A touch that soon turns demanding and rough as I slightly widen my legs.

My memories, needs and wants become something new as an image of our bare skin melding as one flashes before me, followed by whispered pleas and wicked promises.

Fingers thread through my hair as another hand glides across my stomach. Hot, open-mouthed kisses tease as his wicked chuckle caresses the side of my neck.

My thighs open further as my fingers continue to slide across my core. My lower stomach contracts and a rush of heat hits me. I know I must be close when every muscle in my body tenses up with anticipation.

Hook whispers my name in a plea, in a promise and a curse and that's all it takes to push me over the edge. I call out his name, gasping in pleasure as my release hits me like a shattering star.

I arch into it, savoring every sliver of sweet bliss before I finally open my eyes.

My breath comes out in short raspy waves as I slowly come down from my high. I try to calm my racing heart when I hear a noise to my right and glance over to my door.

My entire body freezes when I spot Hook standing in the doorway. His hands clenched at his side; his entire body strung tight like a bow while his dark eyes settle directly on me.

CHAPTER 20



MY MOMENT of pleasure soon turns to shock and then quickly morphs to embarrassment.

“What are you—I mean... How long have you been standing there?” He couldn’t have been there the entire time... could he?

I shiver as the heat in his eyes expands. “Long enough to see you come apart with my name on those beautiful lips.”

My mouth drops open at the hungry, possessive look that flashes across his face.

“I...” I scramble for something to say, *anything*. And end up saying the first thing that comes to my mind.

“Why are you here?” I ask and immediately regret it. This is *his* home, after all. He can come and go as he pleases.

His eyes trail up and down my body as a sinful smile slides across his face. “Did you forget our little nightly routine?”

I frown at him, my mind hazy, my thoughts only on that growing heat in his eyes.

His smile morphs into something else. Something savagely, wicked. “To charge your bracelet.”

Oh.

“Tell me what you were thinking?” His voice was so husky it was almost inaudible.

“I think you should charge the bracelet and leave.” I clear my throat and glance anywhere but at him. Anywhere but the piercing gaze that tries to make me reveal my secrets.

“No,” he growls. With fire in his eyes, he moves forward until he’s

leaning over me with a look that makes me melt into a puddle beneath him.

“No?” I ask as my eyes widen on his.

His gaze fills with lust. “I can make every wicked, delicious thought of yours come to life. There’s nothing your mind can come up with that I haven’t already thought of. That I haven’t already dreamed, imagined or fantasized.” His voice, deep and sensual, sends a ripple of awareness through me.

“Did I touch you?” he asks as his eyes darken.

I bite my lip, not willing to tell him.

The air around us turns electric as Hook’s smirk grows into a knowing look.

“Did we kiss?” He leans down and places a soft kiss just under my ear, making me shiver. I feel his smile as he places more kisses along my jaw and neck before moving back to my ear.

Enjoying this little push and pull game we’ve started, I keep my mouth shut, unwilling to say a word.

I’ve been starved of this kind of passion for far too long. I can no longer deny the desire flaring to life between us. Nor stop the flames now ignited, the deep ache that’s slowly consumed my thoughts. Craving every touch and taste he gives me.

“Tell me.” He groans, biting down on my ear.

Unable to help myself, I moan. “Yesss.”

He captures my mouth in a hungry kiss, teasing me until I’m aching for him. Until my entire body burns for more. More than his soft touches and hungry kisses.

He leans back all too soon, giving me a smoldering look full of heated promises. With the barest brush of his fingertips, he draws a path across my collarbone, my skin tingling as he teases me.

“If you want the bracelet charged then you’ll tell me *exactly* what you were thinking before you made that delicious sound.” The atmosphere in the room grows thick with lust as he waits for my reply.

“Resorting to another bargain?” I whisper as he leans down with a devilish grin, capturing my lips once more and drawing out a long, languid kiss that leaves me breathless.

He groans before pulling back, his eyes glowing with a savage inner fire. “You should know by now. I always get what I want in the end. And bargaining isn’t the only tool I can resort to when it comes to you.”

A soft chuckle slips free of my lips. “You mean to trick, maim, or steal something from me?”

Humor flares to life in his eyes at my words but it soon becomes shadowed by the dark gaze he gives me. One that slowly and seductively slides down my body.

Dipping his head, he places a kiss against the curve of my neck making me shiver.

“I’ll slip under your skin when you least expect it,” he reveals. “Seep into your mind and trick your thoughts into believing I’m something more than the man I am.”

Leaning back, his grin turns wolfish as he gazes down at me. “I’ll caress, stroke and kiss every inch of your body, leaving your lips bruised, your body maimed in my touch as I mold it to mine.”

My heartbeat throbs in my ears as a pleasurable ache builds inside me with his wicked promises.

“But most importantly, I’ll steal your heart. I’ll slip past your defenses like the thief I am, strip away your barriers to possess it. To covet the thing I want the most. Protect it as if my life depends on it and guard it with everything I am.” There’s a possessive desperation in his voice. One that contradicts the soft tenderness now in his expression.

A new and unexpected warmth surges through me at his words. But before I get the chance to absorb them, he shifts, distracting me once more.

With one hand on the bed, he holds himself up as he moves the other down my neck and over the curve of my breast to my stomach.

Lower. Lower. Stopping only to trace small circles around my hip, teasing me further, making me desperate for his touch.

“So soft...” he breathes against my lips just before he kisses me long and hard, claiming my mouth as he moves his hand lower again, sliding his finger under my clothes and into my wet heat, drawing a deep, shuddering moan from my lips.

I hear the quick intake of his breath as he does it again but this time slower, so slow I feel every inch of his rough fingers as they drag against my swollen core.

His nearness, his warmth, makes my senses spin and my mind lost to the feel of him.

Dragging my lips from his, I bury my face against his throat as I rock into his touch, needing more.

“Hook...” I plead as desire pools between my legs once more.

He chuckles, pulling back to look me in the eyes. “Tell me *exactly* what you want?” His silky voice holds a challenge as he gives me a possessive look, one filled with a desperate need and longing.

No longer caring about who wins our little game, I grip his head and drag his lips back to mine, releasing everything I feel right now into it and leaving him with a blistering kiss that tingles my lips.

“Touch me, Hook. Make me feel... *everything*,” I pant.

Hook freezes, his body shuddering as his gaze turns molten.

“You’re *mine*, Tink.” He growls as he leans down, his lips lingering just above mine. “And I’ll *always* belong to you.” He presses a soft kiss on my lips, a whisper of the promises to come as I try to absorb his vow.

But words and thoughts soon blend into a haze of lust as soon as he touches me.

Placing a soft whisper of a kiss against my mouth, he drags his lips across my jaw, moving down my neck before sucking and kissing down the curve of my shoulder. Just as his fingers slide against me once more, his teeth graze my shoulder leaving a bite of pleasure that sends chills throughout my entire body.

His mouth moves down to my breast and over the soft material, his lips linger there, brushing warmth across it.

A soft gasp escapes my lips at the new sensation before he leans down and places his mouth against the material, sucking and kissing my hardened nipple.

His fingers slow down matching the same rhythm as the kiss against my breast.

I fist the sheets beside me as the deep ache inside me throbs.

“Please,” I whimper as my orgasm builds. Each stroke of his fingers charging the air around us, creating a torrid of heat that ignites and burns through me, pushing me closer to that pleasurable edge.

“Come for me, Tink,” he groans, the huskiness lingering in his tone. “Let me watch you fall apart,” he urges, his voice begging me with that sinful tone of his. It’s almost enough to undo me.

“So close...” I plead just as his thumb presses down on the small bundle of nerves while he strokes his fingers up and down me. It becomes too much as an overload of sensations hits me all at once.

Just like before, every muscle in my body tenses up but this time it’s so

much stronger. This time the orgasm is deeper, more intense as it rushes down my spine, the building heat exploding before spreading across my entire body in waves.

Hook buries his head in the side of my neck as a hiss of pleasure escapes his lips.

My legs are still trembling in the aftermath as he moves back, taking my lips in a bruising kiss that lights every nerve inside me.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pull him closer, pulling his hard body on top of mine.

“Tink...” he breathes.

A loud knock sounds out around us breaking our haze of lust. Hook freezes, turning his head to glare at the door and whoever is interrupting us.

Someone clears their throat. “Sorry, boss. But there’s something you need to see... *Now.*”

My body stiffens as the realization of what just happened between us settles in.

Hook opens his mouth but stops himself, sighing before he turns to look at me. His angry look immediately turns soft as his eyes trace every inch of my face.

“I know you’re scared. I’m damn terrified. But I want this. I want *you.*” His voice is thick with desire as he touches my face gently, placing a soft kiss on my forehead before dragging himself off the bed.

“Give this a chance, Tink. Give *us* a chance.” With one last lingering look full of desperate longing, he turns and leaves, softly shutting the door behind him.

CHAPTER 21



HEADING INTO THE KITCHEN, I pause at the door when I spot Hook already there making some food. With his bare back to me, I let my eyes take in every muscle on display before moving lower to the gray bottoms that hang dangerously low on his hips.

“Enjoying the view?” I hear the humor in his voice before he glances over his shoulder with a small smile.

“Not really. You’re blocking the food,” I tell him with a smirk.

He shakes his head, chuckling. “Since you’re already up, you can help me with this.”

Moving closer I see he’s making eggs with some colorful vegetables from this Realm. It already looks delicious and smells even better.

“Fine. But only if you share.”

“I’ve already put extra on for you.” Hook smiles as he pulls me to him, my back to his front as he places a long wooden spoon in my hand. He wraps his hand around mine as he glides it through the food.

“What are you—”

My words cut off as he places a soft kiss on the side of my neck. And then another. And another until I’m slowly losing myself in the feel of him.

His arms tighten on me when the food sizzles, quickly bringing me back to the present.

I nudge him away from me and check the food to make sure it isn’t burned before spinning around to him and lightly hitting him with the wooden spoon on the chest.

“Stop distracting me.”

His eyes sparkle in delight as he narrows them. “Oh, you’ve gone and

done it now.” Before I get a chance to realize what he means, he grabs me and places me on the counter beside the stove. Widening my legs, he steps between them and places his hands on either side of my face.

With a hungry look full of desire, he leans in and kisses me. It’s a slow drugging kiss meant to make me pay in the best way. The kind that has me gripping his arms to pull him closer and make sure he never stops. Leaving me with soft teases and tastes of him that make me melt.

All too soon, he drags his lips away from mine, the look in his eyes telling me he’s just as affected.

“What are you doing to me?” He whispers to himself, his eyes hooded.

“The food is going to burn,” I murmur, questioning the same thing about him, my eyes still on his lips as he leans in once more. But the smell of the food reminds me of what we’re supposed to be doing. And even though his lips taste good, I needed actual food right now.

I smile at his dazed look and push him back before hopping off the counter. “It’s the first time I’ve made food the human way.” I was still using the coffee pot for everything I needed to cook, but I could see how useful using this pan and little rings of heat would be for other things.

Hook chuckles as I quickly plate the food. It’s a little darker than I’m sure it’s supposed to be thanks to our little distraction, but it still looks edible.

“I’m a good cook but an even better teacher,” Hook says.

“Is that so?” Handing him a plate, we move to a couple of stools around the kitchen island before digging in, nearly inhaling the food in a few bites.

Hook nods. “Also exceptionally talented. Highly skilled. Incredibly intelligent and—”

“And apparently *extremely* modest.” My eyes widen with false innocence.

Hook narrows his eyes on me before he pounces, grabbing me and throwing me over his shoulder.

“Hook,” I laugh. “Put me down.”

“Never!” Hook declares with laughter in his voice.

“Hook!”

He chuckles. “Come on. I have everything set up.” Memories of last night flash across my mind and I squirm, clearing my throat.

“For what?”

“I told you I’d teach you how to defend yourself. We’ll start now.”

Cash walks through the side door, pausing when he spots us. I wave to him, and he smiles.

As if sensing him, Hook turns, leaving me to stare at the heated rings and counter.

While I dangle here with the blood rushing to my head, both men stay silent, and the air quickly drops in the room.

“Hook, put me down.” Hook slides me down to the floor before glancing back at Cash with a narrowed look on his face.

“Spit it out, Cash,” Hook grits out.

Cash sighs, frowning at me before giving Hook a hesitant look.

Hook releases a harsh breath before giving me a soft look. “Head to the gym and I’ll meet you there in a minute.”

I glance back at Cash and the serious look on his face before nodding and heading out of the room. As soon as I walk out of the door, Cash starts talking.

I pause to listen in.

“One of our men overheard something interesting. Apparently, the Hunters are feeling cocky. They’ve been asking around about a particular Fae.”

“Where?” Hook growls.

“Near the edge of the city in the black-market sector,” Cash tells him.

They both grow silent for a moment before Hook speaks again. “We might be able to use this to our advantage. Let’s spread the word that she’s been spotted in the area and see what comes back to us.”

“Will do.” I hear Cash leave and I make a move, walking quickly down the hall and around the corner.

There’s no doubt in my mind that I am the Fae they’re talking about. Fear churns in my stomach at the thought of the Hunter’s now actively seeking me out, adding another problem to my ever-growing list.

I glance at the bracelet on my wrist, feeling some measure of comfort from it.

For now, at least, I’m safe from the biggest problem. But if I wanted the life I’ve always dreamed of having, one where I can make my own choices and live the way I want, I needed to be more independent.

Hook was right. I needed to learn how to defend myself and fight back. At least against these Hunters.

But first, I needed to figure out where in this maze of a place, a room called the *gym* was.

* * *

After twenty-minutes of roaming around the place, Hook eventually finds me and brings me to an underground area where the large room he calls a gym is.

It's no wonder I couldn't find it. I didn't even realize there was an underground area.

The room is huge with its height the size of at least two floors. The entire expanse is open with sectioned off areas of different objects and machines. The flooring is a thick blue padding that's soft to walk on.

Hook gives me a quick tour explaining what everything is. There are dozens of machines that work out every part of your body. Machines that you can run on, but you never actually move from the same spot. Other machines look similar to stairs but move just like the running machine and still never really move you from the same spot.

Then there are other objects. Long bars with thick metal rings on the end that come in all different sizes. Hook explains that they're for toning your body. His eyes trail down my body when he says it and then murmurs something about not changing a thing.

Shaking my head at him in amusement, I smile and follow him.

We pass a wide, raised rectangular structure that looks similar to an arena before moving to a large open space on the soft blue floor.

Hook stops in the middle of it and turns to me. "We'll start with some basic moves and maneuvers and then work our way up. The main areas you're aiming for will be the eyes, nose, throat, and groin. When we move onto more advanced techniques, we'll add the chest and knees too."

"Why those areas?" I ask.

"Because it doesn't matter how big or skilled your attacker is, hit any of those areas and it'll hurt them long enough for you to get away."

I give him an amused look. "Unless it's a Vampire. Or Demon. Or Shifter. Or—"

"Baby steps. Let's start with human attackers first." A wry smile quirks his mouth. "Aim for any of those spots and then run."

"What if they already have a hold of me?" I think back to when the Hunters grabbed me and pulled me into their shadows. I was helpless and couldn't get away from their hold.

From the frown Hook's wearing, it looks like he's thinking the same thing.

"I'll teach you how to escape a grasp first."

"Okay." I plant my feet wide, and Hook gives me a look as if he doesn't know whether to laugh or frown at me.

"Have you been watching that WWE show with Cash again?"

"How did you—Never mind. Yes, I have, and it's been very educational." I bend my knees a little, trying to get the right stance just like them.

Hook swallows his laugh before clearing his throat. "You do realize they're all scripted fights?"

I freeze before glancing up at him. "Scripted?"

"Fake." His voice and eyes are full of amusement.

"Are you sure?" I straighten up with a frown.

Hook nods. "Positive."

"But... they looked so real." Warmth floods my cheeks as I realize how silly I must have looked a moment ago.

Hook chokes back a laugh but I ignore it.

"What is the point of it then?"

Hook clears his throat, his eyes sparkling. "Entertainment."

I guess I did find it entertaining, especially now that I knew no one was seriously hurt.

"They're all really good at faking an injury too." Some of them look *really* believable.

Hook shakes his head at me, smiling. "Okay. I'm going to grab your wrist. When I do, I want you to rotate your arm to the side my thumb is on and pull as strong as you can. We'll try it a few times until you get the hang of it."

I nod and Hook snaps out to grab my wrist. I twist my arm but don't pull hard enough and he ends up pulling me towards him and placing a soft kiss on my nose.

"Try to pull harder this time," he murmurs.

We try it again and this time I pull and yank my arm away from him. Hook smiles at me as my hand gets free.

My small victory is short-lived when he reaches out and grabs my other hand and pulls me toward him.

"That's cheating," I argue.

Hook chuckles. "You were supposed to run."

I wince. "I guess I forgot that part."

"Try not forgetting this time." Hook places another kiss on my nose before releasing me.

This time, I'm ready for him. When he grabs my wrist, I quickly twist it and pull hard before turning and running as fast as I can.

But apparently, it's not fast enough.

Hook catches up to me in seconds and wraps his arms around me. "Gotcha," he whispers.

"This doesn't seem fair. How am I supposed to escape something like this?" Neither of my hands are free and there's no way I can get out of his hold. He was also cheating with his abilities. There was no way he could move that fast without them.

"With this." He places a kiss on the back of my head.

"Thrust your head back hard enough to make it hurt." He takes my hand and spins me around to face him. Lifting my hand up he bends my fingers and hand, so my palm is facing upward.

"When you've escaped their hold but can't get away from your attacker, there are other moves you can use. If you are face to face with them, thrust the palm of your hand in an upward angle at their nose." He mimics what I've to do before forming my hand into a fist.

"Or punch them straight in the throat. It'll buy you enough time to get out of there." Hook steps back. "Come on. I want you to try those moves and know each one inside out before we finish for the day."

It hits me that we're the only two people here. Which means he wants me to use all those moves on him.

A small smile stretches across my face at the thought. Maybe I was a little vicious after all. Because the thought of attacking Hook excited me.

"You want me to attack you?" I quirk a brow at him, trying to subdue my growing smile.

Hook chuckles at the look on my face. "If you attack me, I can promise you neither of us will end up practicing."

"And what would we be doing instead?" I take a step closer to him.

His grin turns wolfish as his eyes darken. "Something far more physical." His eyes trail down my body, leaving a trail of heat in its path.

I narrow my eyes on him trying to mask the heat now flooding my body at his words. But as always, he somehow knows exactly what I'm thinking and gives me a knowing look before turning and walking over to a spot near

the wall. He pulls something large out and drags it over to me.

“This is what you’ll be practicing on,” he grunts, moving to the side of the large object to stand beside it.

It looks like someone took a mold of half a body and attached it to a stand.

“Meet Pan.” Hook narrows his eyes on the fake mold.

I freeze when I realize the name. “Pan?”

Hook gives me a slight nod as he watches my reaction. My eyes drift back to the mold. But the more I look at it, the more I see how battered and beaten it is. It’s discolored and mangled in places as if it’s been through countless rounds of brutal attacks.

“He looks a little... *rough*.” More than a little, in fact.

“Don’t worry. He’ll take whatever you throw at him.” Hook glares at the inanimate object, clenching his jaw. “And do it with a damn smile on his face.” The temperature drops as every sliver of humor flees the room.

I glance at Hook and his stiff posture and realize I never really found out what caused him and Peter to become so distant... so hateful towards each other.

Peter told me so many things about how vicious and ruthless Hook was. How he would destroy anything he touched and caused nothing but ruin wherever he went. That he could never be trusted and if I were ever to meet him again, I should run.

For death only greeted you when you met *James Hook*.

But once upon a time, and for a short time, the three of us were friends. Friends that looked out for one another in a world where everything and everyone was against us.

And in one single, stormy night, everything changed. Hook left Neverland with a promise to never return and stayed true to his word.

Peter never told me what had made Hook leave but not too long after he did, the stories came.

Stories that made me hate Hook. Each one more rotten and twisted than the next.

And I easily believed them. After all, they came from Peter’s mouth and everything he said must be true.

I frown as I take a step toward *Pan*, disgusted at myself for being so blind. Why did I *always* believe what Peter told me? Why did I never question anything or push him for answers?

If I had just questioned one of the many things my instincts told me was wrong, I would've seen Peter for what he really was. I would have been able to stop months of torture and pain.

A heaviness settles in my stomach as Hook shows me how and where to strike that will give me the best chance of hurting my attacker before escaping. My body moves on auto pilot as my mind keeps wandering back to our shared pasts and how many stupid mistakes I've made.

So many mistakes that could have been avoided if I trusted myself.

I ignore the bubbling pain inside me and focus on the moves Hook has shown me. For the next hour, we go over each one until my movements become more fluid and I'm able to remember each one as if it's already stored into my muscle memory.

"That's enough for today." Hook says.

But I've still got so much anger inside me, so much pain that begs for a release.

I slam my fist into *Pan's* chest, willing my pain to transfer to something else. Pan can have it; he deserves to feel an inch of the pain I've had to endure at his hands.

But the pain stays where it is inside me and grows, moving into my chest as it twists and tightens.

You're a monster... Words spoken to me by the very people who brought me into this world. People who were supposed to love and care for me.

Letting my mind race with that pain and anger, I move my body and slam my fist into *Pan's* face.

It barely moves an inch, only fueling that anger further. I do it again and again until I imagine not only Peter's face but everyone who wronged me. Everyone that treated me like I was worthless. Everyone that wanted to use me for their own gain, not caring about how it would affect me.

A sliver of dark power slides upward just as arms wrap around me, holding me still. I release a shaky breath as Hook's arms tighten.

"Who?"

I freeze at the quiet rage in Hook's voice. The air shifts as he slowly releases me to move around me.

"Tell me who hurt you. Tell me and I'll—"

"You'll what? You'll destroy them all?" I swallow hard, shaking my head. If only he knew the truth. If only he knew who the real monster was. But then maybe it would make no difference to him.

How I would love to not feel the same. To not feel the pain and remorse that suffocates me night after night.

“How easy it must be to be able to live without conscience. To be able to take what you want without any morals.” I turn to leave when Hook grabs my arm to stop me, forcing me to look up at him.

“You think I have no conscience? That I’m a heartless *monster* with no morals?” There’s a vicious, wild look on his face but it’s his choice of words that hit too close to home making some of my ire ebb. I slightly deflate realizing that my anger isn’t really aimed at him.

To be truthful, I’m more envious of him than anything else. Envious that he does what he wants with no remorse. Whereas I live with it, daily.

“I think you take what you want and damn the consequences,” I whisper.

“How I wish it were that easy. But nothing in this life ever is.” He smirks with no humor, a cool look in his eyes that slowly warms as he releases me.

“I’m selfish. Cruel to those who deserve it. Ruthless to many more. And monstrous when I need to be.” His eyes search mine, looking for something I doubt he’ll find.

“I’ve never denied that. But even a dark, heartless monster like me has his limits. And you seem to be mine.”

I frown at his words as he steps closer. Slowly reaching out he places his hand at the side of my neck, brushing his thumb along my cheek. An action that is a complete contrast to what he just told me.

“They call me a villain and I guess to them I am. But I don’t care about what others think about me. I only care about *you*. I care about your past and your future. And I especially care to know who has hurt you.” He grits out as anger darkens his eyes. “So, if it’s a villain you need, then fine. Make me your villain. Paint me as dark as you can and make me out to be the monster, they all say I am.” His dark stormy eyes alight with passion and fury.

“But don’t forget, I’m *your* villain... *your* monster and *nothing* will take you from me. I’ll burn this world anew before I ever see anything bad happen to you. Before anyone lays one finger on your head. They can all burn. They can all taste my wrath. But not you. *Never* you.”

I swallow hard at the look he gives me. An intense look full of pain and promises. There’s another look there too. One I’m too afraid to look further into for the fear of what that would mean. What it *could* mean, if I let it.

Hook wanted to protect me. To keep me safe. But it wasn’t me who needed protecting. Because they’re not the true monster in this story.

I am.

CHAPTER 22



A COUPLE of weeks pass as we settle into a routine. Breakfast with Hook, and sometimes Cash or Ryland. Then to the gym to work on my self-defense, where Hook cheats and out runs me using his powers, toying with me before he heads off with either Cash or Ryland for work while I go read or explore the house and island.

Neither of us mention my little break down and we mostly continue on as if it never happened. But sometimes I catch Hook watching me too intently. As if trying to read the secrets from my skin or capture them from my eyes.

I decide to become a little too focused on my task at that point and he eventually leaves me to it.

I'm on my way into the kitchen for breakfast when I find Hook and Cash in an intense stare down. Both wearing layers of anger and frustration like a second skin.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Cash's eyes flicker to me before moving back to Hook. "Good timing. Now you can talk some sense into him."

Hook glares at him one last time before he turns and walks over to me. He opens his mouth to say something but then stops himself, giving me a look I can't decipher, before quickly heading out of the room.

"Cash?" I frown at Hooks retreating back as he leaves, before looking to Cash.

Cash sighs. "It's time Tink. We're *this* close to getting them. We just need you."

A jolt of nerves shoots through me when I realize what he's talking about. But I knew this day was coming. And once the Hunters are out of the way,

Hook can finally focus on finding my permanent solution to stay hidden.

But that still doesn't explain Hook's mood.

"Then what's wrong with Hook?"

Cash scrubs a hand down his face. "He doesn't want to do it anymore. He wants to try to figure something else out. Another way that doesn't involve you."

"But why?" It doesn't make any sense. This is why I'm here, isn't it? Our deal.

Cash gives me a look before shaking his head. "You'll have to ask him. But Tink... you're our best option. Nothing has brought the Hunters this close to us. We have a real chance of catching them and figuring out where they come from and what they have planned."

Cash moves closer to me, glancing over my shoulder before looking back at me. "Hook doesn't want you to know this, but a lot of Fae have been going missing. And they never show up again. It's bad. If we don't do something soon, I don't know how many more people are going to disappear."

What? My stomach drops. "Why didn't he just tell me?"

Cash gives me a sad look. "He didn't want you to worry."

Guilt floods me as I think of all the Fae that have gone missing while I hide here protected and safe.

Cash shakes his head. "Talk to him, Tink. Hook will do anything for you. Get him to see that this is our best option. Our *only* option right now. We won't let anything happen to you."

Cash leaves, heading out through the side door while his words tumble around in my mind and heart.

No matter what way I think about it though, I know he's right. This *is* our best option. It's not just me these Hunters are after, they're targeting other Fae too.

I couldn't help the Fae in the Fae Realm, but I can at least help those that are here. I can help stop the Hunters from hurting them and anyone else.

Whether or not Hook liked it, using me as bait was our best option.

* * *

I find Hook in the gym, attacking one of those heavy hanging bags like it's his worst enemy. I stop and watch him for a moment, in shock and awe at his ability. Each move is powerful and vicious. Each attack meant to cause serious damage.

It shows me that what we've been doing in our lessons is child's play in comparison. And I have a long way to go if I want to be even half as good.

I shake my head as I walk over to him. As if he senses me, he stops but doesn't turn around.

"Tink—"

"I'm going to do it. I'm going to be your bait as planned." If I say my piece and go, maybe we can move past the argument about to happen.

Hook whips around, a slash of anger etched across his face. "No, you're not."

Or maybe not.

"This was our deal." I step closer to him. Maybe I can reason with him, make him see sense.

"Forget the damn deal," he growls.

What? I take a step back as if he just hit me. How can he go back on his word just like that?

"But... you *promised*." My voice is barely a whisper. But Hook hears it, his eyes softening.

"I'll get you what I said. That won't change."

His words slowly filter in, making me frown. "So you're still going through with your side of the deal and yet you expect me to just... forget about my side of it?" I shake my head. "No. I also made a deal and I also keep my word."

Hook clenches his jaw. "It's different and you know it."

"How is it different? Nothing has changed. The Hunters still need to be caught." And now that I know about the Fae, we should move quickly before more are taken, *or worse*.

Hook's eyes widen as he steps closer to me, looking at me as if I'm going to disappear right in front of him.

"I'll figure something else out." He frowns as he turns around and yanks his gloves off with a snap before throwing them to the floor.

I walk closer to him, not willing to give up on this. "I know you're worried, but we can't sit by while others are going missing and getting hurt. I can't sit back knowing Fae are disappearing when I can do something to

help.”

Hook tenses up. “Cash told you.”

“*You* should’ve told me,” I accuse.

He whips around. “Why? So I can add to your nightmares?” He steps closer. “Did you think I forgot about them? Or how you cry out in your sleep as if you’re in pain? As if someone is physically...” He releases a harsh breath, clenching his jaw.

“I want to destroy whoever caused them. I want to rip them apart with my bare hands and make them suffer infinitely.” He shakes his head as my heart races in my chest.

“So *no*, Tink. If I can protect you from everything that’s fucked up in this world, I will.” His dark eyes settle directly on mine with the silent vow slithering beneath them.

I swallow hard as knots twist and turn in my stomach. “Even if others suffer for it? Even if they get hurt or worse?”

Hook nods. “I don’t care about others. I’m not the hero. I never said I was, nor do I want to be. I’m selfish. What I want is you, and I’m not willing to give you up or put your life in danger.”

No, he’s not the hero, but he’s also not the villain everyone says he is either. He was just a man. One that would go to great lengths for those he cared about.

But I couldn’t let him pick me over those innocent people. My hands were already tainted with blood.

It wouldn’t make up for my past mistakes. But if I could save at least one person, one Fae, I had to do it. *We* had to do it. Because I couldn’t do this alone.

“What are we Hook? You and me? Are we not equals? Because I thought we were. And equals work together.”

His eyes darken with pain. “That’s where you’re wrong, Tink. I’ve never seen you as my equal.”

My heart drops to my stomach, thinking I’ve assumed too much and got everything wrong.

And then he looks directly at me, and I know I’m not mistaking the soft, vulnerable look in his eyes for something cruel. A look that tells me he cares more than he should.

“You’re more. So much more.” He shakes his head. “There’s nothing good about me. I have a dark heart and a twisted mind.” His eyes sink as he

sighs.

The knots in my stomach unravel as I shake my head at his skewed view of himself.

“You really don’t see yourself clearly then,” I tell him. “Ryland and Cash are your family. The people that work here would also do anything you ask of them and not because it’s their job. They’d do it because you’ve earned their respect and loyalty. They know you care about them. You’ve even gone so far as to protect the people you don’t know. And you still think there’s nothing but darkness in you?”

A flash of surprise lights his eyes as he watches me.

“If you’re dark then so am I. So is everyone else here. And maybe that’s okay.” I take a step closer to him. “Without the dark we’d never see the stars. And without the stars nothing else exists out there.”

Hook’s eyes soften. “Tink—”

“I understand that you want to protect me. But I also don’t want to go back to the way I was. To when I didn’t have a voice or a say in what happened to me. You can’t hide me from all the bad things, Hook. Because keeping me blind to what’s happening around me is really just taking my choice away. I don’t want to go back to being in a prison. No matter how pretty or appealing it is.”

Hook’s eyes widen as he takes the last step to me before taking my hands in his. “That’s not what I want. That’s *never* what I wanted.”

“I know. So let me make my own choices. Let me be the one who decides what I can and cannot face. Don’t let your fears take my choices away.”

The thick, stagnant air in the room slowly fades away as Hook releases a harsh breath. He pulls me into him, wrapping me in a tight hug.

“Promise me you’ll do everything I ask? Promise me that you’ll follow every instruction, every—”

“I promise,” I tell him, and I mean it. I wanted to help but I also wasn’t as naïve as I once was. I knew this was going to be dangerous.

But I also now know what it feels like to be surrounded by people who care about you. Truly care without any strings or motives attached.

And I don’t want to ever risk losing that.

The world was dark enough without having someone by your side. But it is even darker when you have nothing to fight for.

CHAPTER 23



THE MARKET SPREAD out before me is nothing like anything I've seen before. Most are small but open, blending in nicely with the modern design and layout of their Realms.

But this one is nothing like that. This one looked like it was slowly rotting away.

And even though it was still daylight, there was a shroud of darkness cast over it.

Once you stepped into it, it seemed endless. A large, abandoned area now a maze of dark clothed stalls, muddy ground and a foul, pungent smell that I had nothing to compare it against. Its stench permeates the stale air and cloaks my clothes and hair as I move through a large throng of people.

A few steps in and I'm already lost among the crowd, blending in so easily with the dark clothes Hook gave me.

Even though our aim was to be seen by the Hunters, Hook thought they would spot the rouse if it didn't seem like I was hiding or blending in, and bring attention we didn't want.

Though the longer I look around, the more I see how easy it would be to become lost here. There are so many faces that are drawn, hollow and empty of any joy or light. The air is full of despair and hopelessness.

It makes me realize why Hook was so worried about bringing me here.

I thumb my bracelet and try to look out for one of them but it's like trying to spot a dark spot on a dirty ground.

Hook, Ryland, and Cash are all somewhere close by, even if I can't see them. They were masters at this game and knew what they were doing. I just had to trust them.

I push my fears to the back of my mind and move forward, quickly passing the eyes that follow me. The energy coming off most of the people here was nothing good. If I didn't keep my wits about me, the Hunters would be my last problem.

Keep moving forward.

The further I walk in, the thicker the crowd grows, doubling within minutes and surrounding me, forcing me to push my way through.

I come to a tight space where multiple stalls spill out into the small pathway. Body parts of creatures line the sides with furs and hides of more around me.

I hold my breath as I move past them, taking a left into another part of the market when I feel something touch my shoulder.

I whip around to find a small man with short black peppered hair and warm green eyes that quickly narrow on me.

“You shouldn't be here,” he chides.

Are his words a threat or a warning? I try to get a feel for his energy, but it doesn't feel malicious or dark like the others.

He glances around quickly. “Leave before they find you.”

They? Does he know about the Hunters? “The Hunters? Do you know where they are?”

He hushes me, glancing around again, this time with fear in his eyes. “You must leave at once. Do not come back here, child.”

But that's not an option for me and the sooner I find them, the sooner I can leave.

“Can you tell me where I would find them?” I push, hoping he'll hear the urgency in my voice.

He glances at me, narrowing his eyes before shaking his head. “No. And if you were smart you would not ask such a foolish question.”

I open my mouth when he quickly turns and disappears among the crowd, leaving no trace of him behind and no way to follow. I slightly deflate but at least I know we are in the right place. The Hunters had already made their presence known here and would surely come back once again.

I move forward through the next part of the market when my eyes fall on a stall full of unique jewelry. I walk toward it and pick up a random item pretending to inspect it as I glance around to get a feel for the new area I'm in.

Apart from the odd stare here and there, everyone keeps to themselves. I

try to spot anyone that may seem suspicious or too eager. But that seems to describe everyone here.

Time moves on with nothing exceptional or exciting happening. More people come and go. More stalls open and close as I move from one stall to the next. And before I know it, the already gloomy sky darkens and night falls.

I sigh as I look around at the people. I've been here far longer than I expected with no sign of the Hunters.

Maybe they already spotted Hook and decided to leave or maybe they've already moved on from this place.

Either way it was looking like this plan wasn't going to turn out how we expected.

I place the random item I picked up on another stall and shake my head at the seller when she tries to entice me to buy it at a better price. I turn to leave when I feel a tap on my shoulder. Ryland appears standing right beside me, inspecting a black piece of rock.

"Hook thinks it's a bust. So, we'll—" Screams and shouts sound out somewhere close by. Ryland drops the rock and heads straight for it. But a large crowd quickly develops blocking my view.

I take a step in the direction Ryland went when I feel a slight tug at my side.

Glancing down I find a young girl with brown sorrowful eyes. Something niggles at my senses, my eyes widening when I realize that she's also Fae.

I bend down when a loud howl sounds out, followed by cries of pain. I glance over to the spot, but my view is still blocked by the larger gathering crowd.

Turning back to the girl, I find her no longer there. I quickly look around, pushing myself through the crowd but just like the old man that warned me, she's already gone as if disappeared into thin air.

I turn around heading back towards Ryland to see if he can help me find her when a large hand wraps around my arm, yanking me sideways through the large crowd and into a small dark alleyway.

I'm jerked to a stop and whip around to face a man I've never met before. But with his dark clothing and the strange silver symbol, I know exactly who he is. A Hunter.

A moment of panic hits me before I remember I'm not as helpless as I once was.

Using the move Hook taught me, I twist my hand under his grip before yanking hard. The hard pull makes me stumble backwards but frees me from his grasp.

I move further back into the alley, quickly glancing around for another way out, my stomach dropping when I realize there is none. It's a dead end and my only exit is through the Hunter.

I turn back to find his eyes full of anger on me. "You could have been something useful."

"Useful for what?" I ask, trying to buy myself another moment to come up with a plan to get away from him.

I could fight him. Use the moves Hook taught me. But I had a feeling that once he got hold of me, it wouldn't be so easy to escape that hold a second time.

Instead of answering me, he smiles at me. The kind of smile that's ugly and twisted, before taking a step closer to me.

I quickly glance around for anything I can use as a weapon and find a chunk of dirty rock on the ground. I lunge for it just as he reaches me and freezes.

He frowns before his eyes widen in surprise. Before I get a chance to figure out what's happening, an invisible force yanks him sideways straight into the wall beside us, knocking him out cold.

A shadow appears, followed by footsteps, revealing Hook and Ryland. Hook heads straight for me with a frown on his face.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I immediately relax at seeing him and nod my reply, but he continues to search my face and body for any injuries.

"I'm fine. I had everything under control." Lies I tell myself. But not a word came out shaky or broken so I take it as a win.

He smiles at me like he knows but doesn't say any more on the subject.

Ryland appears behind him. He glances over at the Hunter lying on the ground and back to me before choking back a laugh.

"Mighty fine weapon of choice you have there," Ryland's gray eyes glimmer with humor.

"How about you come over here and see just how *good* of a weapon choice it is?" I raise a brow at him in a challenge. The side of the rock is jagged and with enough force I'm betting you could seriously maim someone if needed.

Ryland rolls his eyes at me, but I don't miss the small tilt of his lips before he turns back to inspect the Hunter.

Hook gives me a look of amusement as he shakes his head. "You can put down the... *weapon* now."

I glance at the rock in my hands, realizing I'm still gripping it like a vice, ready to attack. Throwing it to the side, I wipe my palms before taking Hook's outstretched hand.

He glances over at the Hunter with a glare while my mind runs over the last few minutes, wondering if there was anything I could have done to prevent being caught.

I was watchful of who came near me in the market. But there was something that distracted me. The girl... The Fae girl. I squeeze Hook's hand and he instantly turns to me.

"There was a Fae girl here at the market. She looked like she wanted to ask me something but got frightened."

Hook frowns as he shares a look with Ryland. "Don't worry. We'll find her."

Ryland bends down and checks the Hunter's clothing. "What should we do with him, Boss?"

Hook's grip tightens on me as he leads us out of the alley. "Take him with us. It's about time the Hunters became the hunted."

* * *

A couple of days pass as things start to settle back down. I don't hear much from Hook, Cash or Ryland, but the small glimpses I've seen of them tell me it's not going too well.

The Hunter has apparently found a way around any truth serum or potion they have and is making it extremely difficult to get anything out of him.

I slowly make my way towards the kitchen, ready for another silent morning by myself when I walk in to find Hook and Cash already there.

My sliver of happiness shrivels up when I spot the stare down going on between them again. I roll my eyes at them and head to the fridge to get some water.

On my way back I join in, staring them both down with narrowed eyes. *I bet I can beat both of them.*

They turn to me, looking at me like *I'm* the crazy one here. But I'm still not willing to lose this little game. I hold my stare and wait for one of the weaklings to break.

Mirrored smiles make them both blink, crowning me the winner. *As it should be.*

They shake their heads at me and the tension in the room evaporates, disappearing immediately.

I open my bottle of water and take a sip. "Are you going to tell me what's happening now, or do I have to beat it out of you both?" Just like I beat them seconds ago.

Instead of fearing my threat—like they should have—they laugh at me. A big boisterous laugh that has Cash wiping the sides of his eyes.

It's not *that* funny.

Once they've calmed down. Hook starts talking.

"We haven't got much out of our little captive. He seems to be immune to everything we've tried so far. We've got bits and pieces, but nothing makes sense. It's not going to be as easy as we thought."

"That's why you both looked so angry?" Things never usually work out the way you plan. They should have taken that into account well before they came up with whatever they thought was going to happen.

Hook shares a look with Cash. "No. It's the bits and pieces he's revealed that have us both on edge. There's talk of an attack of some kind, but we can't find a location or what they're looking for."

Hook frowns as he looks at me. "We also looked into the whereabouts of the Fae girl you mentioned."

I straighten up, hoping Hook or Cash has some good news about her.

Cash sighs. "I asked around the market. Those that were willing to talk told me she's been showing up there on and off for about a week with no sign of parents or family."

Has she been alone all this time? What if the Hunters find her?

"We have to find her," I tell them.

"We did. Sort of." Cash gives Hook a look before turning back to me. "But she said she'll only talk to *you*."

I glance between them both. "Then what's the problem?"

Hook's frown deepens. "Think about this for a minute. Why you?"

I raise a brow and give him a look like it should be obvious. “Probably because I’m also Fae and a lot more approachable than big scary men like you two.”

Hook’s frown disappears, suddenly replaced by an amused smile while Cash covers his chuckle with a cough.

“She’s just a child, Hook. She doesn’t look like she has anyone around her to help.”

Hook sighs. “Something just doesn’t add up.”

I take Hook’s hand. “We’ll go see her together. I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“Fine, but you don’t leave my side.” Hook glances down at our joined hands.

“Deal.” Warmth spreads through my chest as a smile stretches my lips.

Hook shakes his head at me before tilting his head at Cash. “While I have another little... *talk* with our Hunter, Cash is going to train with you today.” Hook lifts my hand to his lips, placing a soft kiss on it before heading out of the kitchen.

I look at the man in question with a raised brow. “You’re training with me today? Really?”

Cash chuckles. “Yep. It’s about time you learned how to use some daggers.”

CHAPTER 24



I GLANCE around the derelict building Hook and I are in. Cash is waiting outside in case the girl isn't here yet.

The building isn't too far from the market, so it gives me hope that we'll find her soon.

That is until I notice just how awful the building is. My heart drops the more I look around it. The dark, dirty floor and rotted metal that lines it. What's left of the shattered windows, and not least of all—the smell. A foul, pungent stink that I can only compare to the rot of an animal corpse. But one that has laid in the sun for far too long.

I can only imagine what trouble the girl is in if she chose this place to stay hidden.

With Cash's daggers concealed beneath my coat, into the side of my dark jeans, I feel a small measure of relief should anything happen. Even if it was only one lesson I had with him.

A small rattle draws my attention to a large metal container sitting in front of one of the walls beside a doorway. I step closer when I spot a small figure peek out before quickly hiding once again.

"It's her," I whisper to Hook as I take a step toward the container. She's obviously frightened. Maybe it wasn't the best idea to bring Hook along. But I doubt he would have let me come by myself.

One look at him tells me I'm right.

"Tink," he warns.

"She's right there, Hook."

Hook frowns as he glances around. "Something doesn't feel right."

I glance back at the container just as the young girl peeks out once more.

Her frail body, dirty skin and matted hair breaking my heart.

We can help her. I know we can. I just need to get to her to convince her to come with us.

“She’s just a child, Hook.” I take a slow step toward her and when she doesn’t move or dart out and scurry away, I take another.

Hook tries to follow me, but I give him a look, pleading with him to let me do this. If we lose this opportunity to get to her, who knows when we’ll be able to get another chance.

Hook sighs but nods, his eyes glued to each step I take.

I continue my slow measured steps until I’m right beside the container. I turn and take my last step, finding the young girl huddled behind it, shaking. Bending down, I reach a hand out to her, leaving it there in the space between us. I needed to earn her trust and not just take it unwillingly.

It takes a moment, but her little hand slowly reaches out to mine, her eyes darting from my face to my hand in hope.

All of a sudden, she grabs it and the look in her eye’s changes to something else, something close to guilt as I’m sucked into the dark.

“TINK!”

Hook’s roar follows me through the darkness as we emerge in another room. I can tell we’re still in the same building from the smell and same dirty ground. But whereas there was bright light from the windows in the other room, this one was cloaked in darkness, with only shades of light filtering in from the crumbling ceiling.

But it’s enough to make out large ruins of pillar-like structures that are spread out around the room, and a handful of cars slowly rotting away around them.

Why would she have brought me here?

“I’m sorry.”

I glance down at the girl as she drops my hand and takes a step back.

“Sorry for wh—?”

“Good job.”

I freeze at the male voice before spinning around. Only to find four Hunters staring back at me. All of them are wearing black with the strange silver crest on it but this time I can make out their faces.

Two of them are identical twins with brown hair and dull blue eyes, the only difference is the myriad of scars each has on the opposite cheek.

The Hunter standing closest to them is taller than them both, with ashy

blond hair and violet eyes but it's the shorter dark-haired Hunter standing in front of them all, the one staring at me with nothing but violence in his eyes, that has my stomach dropping and throat feeling like it's about to close up.

Before I get the chance to panic, a gasp sounds out around the silent room drawing my attention to the group of people behind the Hunters.

Two couples are huddled close together. The oldest looking male with dark hair openly glares at the Hunters, while the two females and younger male all keep their sad eyes on the young girl beside me, looking at her like she'll disappear any moment.

And all seem to be Fae.

"You have her now. Please let my daughter go." A young woman who looks to be a few years older than me reaches a hand out to the girl.

"Please." A tear falls down her face making my heart clench.

Guilt floods me as I realize this is all my fault. The Hunters wanted me and hurt these people to get to me.

The dark-haired Hunter in front of me looks to be the leader of the group with the other three all deferring back to him. He ignores the mother's pleas as his eyes flash ominously at me.

"You didn't really think we'd just let you go." A dark smile slides across his face as the group of Fae freeze.

"You Fae are far more gullible than we thought." He shakes his head in disgust before nodding to the Hunter with the violet eyes.

I needed to get them out of here, but how? I wasn't exactly in the best position myself.

My hands slide against the daggers hidden at my sides and I try to think back to the short lesson Cash gave me.

But any thought of a plan is taken out of my hands when the two male Fae rush toward the twin Hunters, attacking them.

With them distracted, the young girl rushes toward the younger female Fae.

"Mom," she cries.

Her mother envelops her in a hug, holding her tight while the older female places kisses on her face and rubs soothing circles on her back.

A glint of steel catches my eye and I turn to catch the leader of the group of Hunters making a move toward the females.

Acting on instinct, I pull out one of the daggers from my waist. Pinching the blade between my fingers and palm, I aim and throw it just like Cash

taught me.

With some stroke of luck, the blade hits close to my target. And by target, I mean the Hunter. He grunts and looks down at the blade sticking out of the back of his leg before glaring up at me.

I was aiming for his upper back but after one lesson with Cash, it's better than nothing. The women rush over to me with grateful looks before glancing over at the other Fae.

"I'm sorry I tricked you." The girl huddles closer to her mother with a sad look.

"It's okay. It's not your fault." I give her a small smile as I try to think of how I was going to get us all out of here now.

"Get them." The leader grits out to the other Hunters. But the Fae men are still keeping the twins busy, using random metal sharp objects around them as weapons.

The Hunter with the violet eyes breaks off and heads straight for us. But I notice his eyes are set on me and not the women. If they really are here just for me, maybe I can draw them away from the girl and her family long enough for them to get out of here.

Taking a step back, I watch the leader narrow his eyes on me as I quickly glance around for a way out.

The crumbling pillars and what's left of the cars might give me coverage and time to think of something else... Or long enough for Hook to find us. The bracelet should lead him to us soon. I just had to buy us some time and make sure none of them get close enough to use their shadows on me.

Just before the Hunter with the violet eyes reaches us, I break off and run for the closest pillar, silently thanking Hook for making me run on those running machines every day.

The Hunter takes the bait and chases after me, leaving the girl and her family alone while the wounded leader limps slowly behind him.

Spotting some crumbling rock on the ground, I pick it up and randomly throw it toward them, hoping it will knock one of them out as I move toward a large deteriorating car.

Hiding behind it, I spot a doorway on the other side of the room. It's past two pillars and a handful of broken cars. But it looks like it's my only option.

The Hunter quickly finds me, but I'm already moving toward the doorway, pushing my legs to go faster as I pass the cars and pillars.

Just a few feet away from it and the violet-eyes Hunter appears from

nowhere, blocking my way through the doors.

Narrowing his cold, darkening eyes on me, he moves towards me. Once he's close enough, I strike out using the palm of my hand to thrust upward at his nose just like Hook taught me.

He stumbles back a step but is not deterred by his bloody nose, as he shakes it off quickly and advances once more. I dodge his grasp and put as much force as I can into punching him in the throat.

I guess he didn't expect me to have any other tricks up my sleeve because my punch ends up hitting him exactly where I aim, his eyes widening as he chokes out a gasp, before falling on his knees as he hunches over in pain.

Turning, I run through the creaking doors. Only to realize I'm in another rundown room like the one I just left.

I quickly glance around but the leader appears in front of the doors with a piece of cloth wrapped around his fresh wound.

The twin Hunters appear beside him a moment later and all span out either side of me, caging me in.

I glance behind me for another way out, but I realize too late that I've cornered myself in.

One of the twin Hunters reaches me first but just before he grabs me, I pull out my last dagger, holding the hilt in my palm and slice it sideways as I move past him.

When I hear a grunt of pain, I know I've hit something important. I don't think much about it as I make my move to the other side of the room and away from them.

My mind wanders to the other Fae, hoping they're safe. But the small distraction costs me as the leader appears in front of me, a snarl on his face as he blocks my way.

I start to back up when I spot shadows slithering along the ground towards me. Turning, I find more heading right for me before they form into two figures.

Whipping around, I find another shadow forming into the Hunter with the violet eyes, his bloody nose still bleeding, just as the leader reaches us.

They all surround me in a circle, glaring at me as they move toward me.

Seeing no way out of this, I start to panic. If they take me in their shadows, I'll never be able to escape them.

They move closer, closing off any chance of escape. My chest tightens as one of them reaches a hand out to grab me.

I tense up ready to attempt to fight my way out of this once more. Even if it's just to buy myself a couple of minutes. But the room around us rumbles before it shakes and moans. Dust falls from the ceiling as cracks climb up the crumbling walls.

The Hunters freeze, narrowing their eyes around them. With the slight distraction, I take a step back, but the leader of their group whips his head toward me, his stare menacing.

"Get her," he roars.

They all move toward me just as the walls blast open across from us, revealing Hook. His eyes find mine, his look of fear and panic quickly subsiding. But it's soon replaced with a vicious look filled with pure rage as he aims his gaze directly on the Hunters surrounding me.

The uninjured twin reaches out to grab me. A soft brush of a finger is all that touches me before they all fly backwards and away from me.

Hook moves straight for me as Cash and his men filter in behind him.

"Are you okay?" Hook asks. I feel the slight tremble in his hands as he checks me over.

A grunt of pain and the sound of movement comes from behind him. Hook spins around, placing himself in front of me just as the Hunters gather once more and attack.

Hook easily dodges the violet-eyed Hunter's punch before he slams his fist into his throat. He goes down just as the twins appear beside him.

But Hook is ready for them as he grabs one of their wrists and twists. I wince, hearing the crack as the one twin drops to the ground, howling in pain. The other slashes out at Hook, but he easily dodges it before performing some fast-twirling kick that ends up with the Hunter knocked out on the ground.

Hook glances up, his eyes widening to something behind me.

"Down," he shouts.

I quickly crouch down just as I hear something fly above me. Turning around I find the leader of the Hunters on the ground with a large dagger in his neck. His eyes are still open but they're completely empty with no sign of life.

I straighten up as Hook and Cash move toward me.

Cash glances at the Hunters with a frown. "You could have left us one to play with."

Hook gives him a glare before glancing back at me. "They nearly had

you, Tink.” The look in his eyes morphs from panic to fear.

I take a step toward him. “I know, but—”

Ryland comes up beside us. “We found a group of Fae with the girl.”

“Are they okay?” I ask, hoping that they’re all safe.

I feel Hook tense up at my question but ignore his strange behavior to focus on Ryland.

“The two males are a bit banged up but it’s nothing a healer can’t fix. The others will be fine with some food and rest.” Ryland gives Hook a look before heading over to the injured Hunters.

I nod my thanks and breathe a sigh of relief before turning to Hook. Expecting a look of relief or happiness, instead I find his expression unreadable, and a dark look in his eyes.

CHAPTER 25



“WE’LL TALK ABOUT THIS LATER.”

It was all Hook said to me before he told Cash to bring me back to the island. That was two days ago, and since then, he’s done everything to avoid me.

But I’d had enough of his stubborn attitude. He can’t just shut me out when he’s angry with me. I’d rather him shout at me and reveal what’s wrong than have this silence.

After searching in every room of the house—or what feels like it—I find him in the gym, trying to beat another heavy bag into submission.

The minute I enter the room, he freezes, the muscles in his inked back bunching up as he stares ahead.

“Tink... not now.” I hear the threat and underlying strain in his voice but ignore it and walk straight up beside him needing an answer, needing something more than the silence I’ve endured these past couple of days.

“How long are you planning to keep this up?” How long does he plan to make me suffer for a mistake that was out of both of our hands?

Hook opens his mouth to say something but shakes his head, stopping himself before going back to punching the bag, pummeling it like his life depends on it.

“Hook!” My voice is sharp, letting him know that I wasn’t going to give up anytime soon.

Clenching his jaw, he slams his fist into the bag making it swing backward with the impact before turning to me.

“What would you have done if I hadn’t shown up? How far were you willing to put your life at risk?” His dark eyes spark, demanding a reply. One

I'm sure he already knows the answer to.

"I would have fought," I tell him, and in truth I would have. Until the very last moment. Just like I have every day of my life.

That girl and her family didn't deserve to be dragged into this. For whatever reason the Hunters wanted me, and from the looks of it, they were willing to go to great lengths to get me. I couldn't leave them there when I had the chance to help, no matter how he felt about it.

Violence and fear flashes across his face. "You could have died!" He growls, before turning and striking the bag with a swift punch.

"It was obvious what you were doing." He grits out, seething as he slams his fist into the bag again. Blow after blow, he hits the bag, one harder than the next making the fabric stretch and weaken.

"You were using yourself as bait." Another punch makes a hole that starts to grow. "Luring the Hunters away from the Fae to protect them," he grits out.

One last hard blow causes the bag to split in two. A dark grain spills out onto the floor as Hook puffs out sharp, angry breaths. He stares at the broken bag with narrowed eyes, the blaze of rage not dimmed in the slightest.

I watch him as he tries to stamp out his anger—but to no avail. I watch him and try to see it from his perspective, to try to understand why he can't see why this was the only way.

We waited as long as we could. If we had waited any longer, then that little girl and her family would be dead. I was sure of it.

There was no light in those Hunters' eyes, no remorse or guilt for what they did. *Or were going to do.*

"I'm the reason that little girl was taken in the first place. The Hunters wanted *me*, Hook. It was my responsibility to right that wrong."

He whips around, his eyes burning with anger, ready to tell me how wrong I was. But he doesn't get to make rules and then choose which ones I was allowed to follow. I was *his* bait first after all.

"Have you forgotten our little *deal*?" I remind him. His eyes widen slightly as if only just realizing it too.

"The reason you brought me here was to be *your* bait. So how can you justify—?"

"It was a lie," his voice cracks and along with it, his anger. His eyes find mine as they fill with remorse.

The frustration slowly building inside me quickly melts, replaced with

confusion.

I knew that he no longer wanted to risk my safety with the Hunters because of how close we had grown. But it was as if he was saying it was a lie from the very beginning. That he never intended to use me as bait at all.

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why would you make a deal with me then?”

The silence between us grows as he swallows hard, watching me cautiously.

“*Why, Hook?*” Why would he bring me here at the beginning, if not to use me to get closer to the Hunters? That was our deal after all. And if that wasn’t the case then why make a deal with me at all?

He’s using you. Playing with you. Just like everyone else.

I freeze at the thought but push it aside to try to get some answers.

“What was the point of it all?”

“It was the only way I knew how to keep you safe.” He swallows hard as his eyes reveal another side of him. One more vulnerable and full of pain.

“The Hunters immediately set their sights on you, and I knew they wouldn’t give up so easily after you escaped them. They’d hunt you until the very end.” He looks at me with a frown. “I couldn’t let them get a hold of you. You have no idea what they’re capable of.” He clenches his jaw and rips off his gloves, throwing them to the floor beside him.

“Why didn’t you just tell me? Why lie?” I ask.

He gives me a sad smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “You would never have come here willingly but it was the safest place I could think of.” He shakes his head as his smile drops.

“I knew you would never believe me if I told you I was just trying to keep you safe.”

I open my mouth to deny it but then remember I wasn’t the same girl that came through that portal anymore. The girl that trusted no one. Least of all herself.

He was right. I wouldn’t have believed him. He was Hook after all. The boy that left us. Left *me*.

I would have thought he was just trying to mess with me. Or hurt me. Just like Peter.

A sliver of light enters his eyes as he continues. “You were always so stubborn back in Neverland. You always wanted to do it *your* way and never wanted help. Fiercely independent but extremely guarded.” He gives me a

strange look. It's there and gone before I can figure out what it means.

"You're smart. Incredibly so. You wouldn't have taken my word for it. And you would have figured out sooner or later how to escape the island. It was only a matter of time."

True. I was already planning on escaping in one of their cars the night I arrived. I guess he knew me better than I thought.

"When you showed an interest in the bracelet, I found my opportunity to keep you here a little longer. Until I could figure out how to help you. How to make sure you stayed safe and away from the Hunters. And whatever else you were running from." He gives me a look that tells me he knows there's more to my story. But he doesn't push for answers, and I ignore it to focus on what he just revealed.

"But *why* Hook? Why do you even care?" He left Neverland without telling me. He left and never thought of me again. Or at least I assumed as much. He had three years to come back and prove it otherwise, but he didn't. Why does he care now?

Maybe it was regret. Maybe he regretted leaving without so much as a goodbye and that's all this is. His foolish conscience after getting to know me once more.

But then I look in his eyes and see the emotion burning through them and I know it can't be the reason.

He steps forward but stops himself when I give him a look. I don't know what he wants from me. What he expects me to say. I never wanted him to leave Neverland. And if he'd have given me the chance, I would've begged him to stay.

But I couldn't go back and change the past and I didn't know if he would even want that.

As if reading my thoughts once more, his brows snap together before a glint of steel enters his eyes and he stares at me unblinkingly.

"From the moment I first laid eyes on you and every other after that, I knew what you were to me."

"What am I to you?" I ask as a storm of lightning flashes through his eyes.

"Everything," he breathes, his eyes slightly widening as if he too is surprised to hear the words leave his lips.

He moves closer and this time, I let him, stunned silent by his admission.

"You're *everything* to me, Tink. You own me, mind, body and soul.

Blinded me with your beauty. Your kindness. Your heart. And held me captive from the moment I looked into those endless green eyes.”

My throat tightens at his words. It doesn’t make sense. None of it.

“Why, then? Why leave Neverland if you felt that way? Why couldn’t you just tell me?” I croak.

He swallows hard as a flash of pain moves through his eyes. “I never wanted to give you up. But I knew you would never be mine. You already had someone who loved you. Someone who would look after you far better than I ever could.” His eyes shutter and my heart sinks as I start to realize what he means.

“Peter,” I murmur.

“*Peter.*” He releases a harsh breath as he shakes his head, squeezing his eyes shut as if he can shut out the pain along with it.

Opening them, he looks straight at me. But pain is all I see staring back at me. Pain layered with sadness and resignation.

“You loved him. I saw that. Saw it every time he made you laugh and smile. He would take better care of you than I ever could.”

He was wrong. What he saw between me, and Peter wasn’t love. It was an infatuation. It was make-believe. A fairy-tale that was fake.

“I’m not a good person. I never was. I was broken long before I came to Neverland, and half the man I should be, but I can’t change that. You deserve better. You deserve *more*. And me thinking that I can be something more than what I am, is a lie.”

He looks down at his hands, opening them palm up. “I’m good at killing. Fighting with every weapon you can think of. I’m savage. Brutal. And vicious to anyone who crosses me.”

He squeezes them tight as he clenches his jaw. “At least I thought I was. I thought there was a shred of hope for something...” His shakes his head. “But when it came down to it, I couldn’t protect you.”

“What are you—”

“It was a trap,” he cuts in. “The Market. The Fae girl. All of it. I knew it. I *knew* something was wrong. And still I let you walk right into it.” He pales as if re-living the moment over again, speaking as if he’s too ashamed to admit it.

But it was no one’s fault.

“Neither of us could have predicted what was going to happen. I was the one that decided to go there. Not you. *I* made that decision.”

My words have no effect on him as his expression closes up.

“You’re new to this Realm. You don’t understand it. You don’t know what the people are like. What motives they have. I should’ve known better. I shouldn’t have been blinded by...”

He stops himself but I already knew what he was going to say. His stiff body and blank expression revealing more than any words he spoke aloud.

“By what? By us?” I ask, my stomach churning as I wait for his reply.

“I won’t make the same mistake again,” he says, but it’s the anguish in his voice that slowly destroys me because I know what it means.

But he didn’t get to do this. He didn’t get to blame himself for something that was out of his control and let his fears and doubts win.

I *can’t* let him do this. I can’t because I finally see. I finally know what this stomach churning, heart racing feeling is. The push and pull that’s constant between us. The warmth I feel in my chest that spreads whenever he’s nearby.

“You’re pulling away,” I accuse, more hurt at the thought of him leaving me now when we finally have a chance at something together.

He swallows hard. “I’m keeping you safe.” The light in his eyes slowly fades and something in my chest tightens when it does.

“No, you’re giving up. You’re taking the cowards way out. I may be naïve. I may be new to this Realm. But I’m not so blind as to see what people are really like. I know there’s cruel people out there. I know that not everything is black and white—”

“I panicked.” He whispers so softly I barely hear it but the agony in those two little words is enough to stop me. Enough to make me want to move close to him and make that pain go away.

“I *never* panic.” He continues, his voice cracking as he dips his head.

I stop myself from going to him, my own panic fleeting as I listen to each strained, heavy word and hope he’ll see reason.

“But I did. I couldn’t sense the bracelet. I couldn’t lock onto it. The time I wasted trying to focus and you could’ve been...” He swallows hard, shaking his head.

“You deserve better,” he chokes out as his eyes dim with pain. “I *can’t* protect you.”

Protect me? But doesn’t he see? That’s *all* he’s done.

He protected me in the club with Ben. He sat with me for hours throughout the night, talked to me until I no longer feared the nightmares and

memories that haunted my dreams. He created a sky full of stars for me and showed me a world that I could be happy in. He showed me what happiness really was.

He's done nothing *but* protect me and I... I've done nothing but be blind to it all. Blind to him.

My heart races in my chest as it finally hits me.

I was falling for him. Settling into my chest, a soft warmth brushes against my senses as if agreeing with me.

He tries to move past me, but I block his path. "Do I not get a say in this? You just admitted that you've cared for me from the moment we met. But what about me? Don't you care what I think? What *I* want?"

His eyes shutter. "Tink—"

"I left Neverland through an unknown portal with one wish. One wish to be somewhere I was safe and cared for. And of all the places I could have ended up. I landed in the one Realm you were in. Not only in the Realm, but right beside you."

I didn't believe in fate until now. But it couldn't be a coincidence.

"I want *you*, Hook," I admit. Finally to him, but more so to myself. I was still afraid. But not of him. Of what this could mean between us if I just let it grow into something beautiful.

Maybe it was always meant to be this way. Maybe we were always meant to have to fight for it. To fight for each other and learn how to let go of our fears and doubts.

"I want everything you can give me. All your jagged pieces and rough edges. I want your darkness and your light. I want it all."

Devastation shadows his face as he avoids looking at me. "Everything I touch turns to ruin."

"Then *ruin* me."

CHAPTER 26



HOOB FREEZES as I take the last step to him and reach up. His body shudders as soon as my hand caresses his face and tension seeps from him. As if my touch alone soothes something inside him.

But too soon he pauses, his body quickly growing stiff once again as he hesitates instead of just trusting me and letting go.

“You’ll just let me walk away and leave this. Leave us?” I pull back as frustration bleeds through my voice. But I barely make it an inch before he wraps his arms around me, pulling me tight against him as his eyes flash.

“I was *never* going to let you walk away,” he warns.

Placing my hands on his arms, I feel his tight muscles bunch beneath my fingers.

“No?” I raise a brow, wondering where he was going with this.

“No,” he growls, as his hands slide up my back. “I was going to keep you here. Hide you away from everything and everyone that could cause you harm.”

I bite my lip, trying to hide my smile as a flutter of amusement rushes through me at his words.

“We both know I would never agree to that.” I slide my hands up his shoulders, watching his eyes darken before placing them around his neck. “Besides you said it yourself, I’m extremely resourceful. I’d eventually figure a way out,” I remind him.

His lips twitch as his eyes lighten. “Then I’ll have to find a way to keep you busy. Train you to become something everyone fears.”

“Even you?” I didn’t fear him even though I knew he was capable of so much more. But would he fear me if he knew what I could do?

He shakes his head, his eyes softening. “I would *never* fear you. But maybe you should fear me. There’s something dark inside me. Something that seeks it out.”

He frowns, probably thinking that this news upsets me. But it just makes me feel closer to him. To know he also has something dark inside him.

“Your darkness doesn’t scare me. I see all of you. And not one jagged piece frightens me. I don’t need you to protect me, Hook. I just need you by my side. I need you to be brave. Here and now.”

Instead of hearing me, listening to what I was trying to tell him, the stubborn man only hears what he wants as his frown deepens.

“I *want* to be able to protect you. Always,” he says.

“Then protect my heart. It’s already yours.” I tell him and mean it.

I needed him to keep it safe. Because he wasn’t the only one who feared the darkness within. Should anything ever happen to him, I don’t know what I would do or become.

His eyes widen. “I don’t deserve—”

I lean forward and press my lips to his, silencing any more of his doubts.

“I don’t care what you think you deserve.” I breathe against his lips. “I want *you*. All of you. And unless you don’t want me—”

“I want you. I’ve always wanted you. There was never a doubt in my mind about that.” A hand slides up to the back of my neck as his grip tightens on my body.

“Then take me,” I tell him, a challenge in my tone.

“Tink...”

Unable to help myself, I lean forward and capture his mouth, silencing him once again. He parts my lips on a throaty groan, kissing me long and hard. I surrender to him. To the blaze of heat surging through me.

Something inside of me calls out to him, claiming him. Whether it was his darkness and mine, I didn’t know. But I knew I didn’t want it to stop.

He drags his lips from mine, his lids heavy, his breath ragged. “My beautiful, vicious little thing. You have my heart and all its darkness. You always have. It was yours from the moment I met you and will be yours until I take my last breath. I’ll be your darkness from here on out. But only if you’ll be my light.”

His look is guarded as if I’d deny him. But I wouldn’t deny him anything right now. My reply is nearly immediate.

“Deal.” Before he gets the chance to deny it his vow or change his mind, I

capture his mouth once more. This time teasing him and taking my time to enjoy the taste of him. The way his mouth molds to mine. His tongue dipping and swirling around mine.

I torment him with promises of what's to come. Lure him with every teasing bite and stroke.

He finally catches on to my little game as he drags his lips away once more.

“Are you sure you want to play right now?” His body grows taunt as he watches me. “Because if we do, I’m not going to stop until I’ve claimed every inch of you.”

But that’s exactly what I wanted. I want him to claim me and from the growing dark look in his eyes. He knew it too.

“Do it. Make me yours, Hook. You own me, mind, body and soul. It’s yours to take or ruin.”

A spark of desire lights his eyes as he lifts me up. I immediately wrap my legs around him as a wave of excitement rushes through me and his eyes settle on me.

I see the moment something snaps inside him as he slams his lips to mine, claiming me in a possessive need that’s filled with raw passion.

He draws out a deep desire full of hunger inside me. One that has been long awaiting to be called. Consuming me like wildfire. Like flames that burn and melt. Until there’s nothing but the two of us as we become untethered to the world around us.

The room shifts and blurs around me as we move. Glimpses of the dark cloudy blue staircase and the long hallway blink across my vision in a haze of lustful kisses and touches before we reach my room.

As soon as the door shuts, clothes fall to the floor, and we make our way over to the bed.

Hook hovers over me with the stars behind him, our ragged breath the only sound in the room as I fall into his stormy blue eyes.

His eyes trail down my bare body, leaving a heated path in its wake.

“Beautiful...” He dips down, teasing my lips apart before sliding his tongue in and taking full control of the kiss. One brush, one taste is all it takes to crave everything and more.

I deepen the kiss, reaching around him and trailing my hand down his back. He leans into me, the warmth from his body pressing me further into the bed with every hard inch of him pressed against me.

Heat unfurls inside me as he drags his lips from mine only to place open wet kisses down my neck leaving me breathless.

“Hook...” I moan, as he continues to kiss down my neck.

“I’ve been dreaming of tasting you since I slid my fingers along your wet heat and made you come apart.” The husky sound of his voice slides down my back making me shiver.

“I want to hear you scream my name this time.” He crawls down my body, his lips leaving a scorching trail of flames.

I surrender to his touch as he continues to kiss down to my center, to my core before sliding his tongue along the length of me. A bolt of pleasure shoots through me and my hands reach out, my fingers tangling in his hair as a reckless, savage lust unlike anything I’ve ever felt before captures me in its snare.

He groans and the vibration sends ripples of pleasure up and down my spine.

I’m lost in every little sensation, when his mouth and tongue slides over the throbbing bundle of nerves at my core and the slow building tingle becomes a deep ache that coils in my lower stomach.

“Please,” I whimper, feeling close. *So close.*

But instead of moving faster, he slows down, drawing out each stroke, savoring every taste as my searing need flares higher. Burning brighter. Pulsing. Until I’m lost in a sea of rising pleasure.

I fist his hair, holding on tight as I arch into him, screaming his name as I fall apart and slowly bask in the haze of sensations.

Dazed and breathless, my boneless limbs melt into the bed beneath me. A hand caresses my thigh as fingers burn into my tingling skin.

Hook’s husky chuckle sends a delicious shiver of heat through my body as his possessive gaze captures me. He slides up my body, meeting my lips in a bruising kiss that draws another moan from my throat.

Desire pounds through my heart, chest, and head once again.

He pulls back and I take him in. He is breathtaking. Every inch of his hard body, his hypnotic eyes and devastating looks.

“I want this...” I tell him. “I want you.” I run my hand down his sides before gripping his back and urging him on.

His gaze grows possessive, filling with dark lust. He pushes his hips against mine and surges into me in one deep thrust.

I gasp as a twitch of pain makes me tense up. It quickly disappears

allowing me to absorb the feel of his hard, thick length inside me. And every ridge as he stretches and fills me up, joining us as one.

An unfurling of desire races through me, anticipating his movement but it's only then I realize he isn't moving. Not an inch. His entire body is as stiff as a board. Tense and hesitant.

"Hook?" I question.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he grits out each word slowly as if in pain.

It takes a moment for the haze of lust surrounding my mind to slowly retreat. But the longer he doesn't move, the more obvious it becomes. Every part of his body is tense as if he's trying not to hurt me. And I finally realize why.

But it didn't change anything for me. I was already falling for Hook. Whether or not my body was untouched bears no consequences to me.

"Why does it matter?" I tighten my legs around him and feel him twitch inside me drawing a deep ache within.

He groans as if feeling it too but holds his stiff position, his restraint driving me insane. "It matters because I could have made it special. I could have—"

"It's perfect," I moan as he shifts his weight slightly. "I'm here with you. Nothing else matters. Now, please. *Move*," I beg as I arch into him.

The tension finally falls from his body as he leans in to kiss me, his dark eyes burning with need.

He pulls back, dragging himself nearly fully out before he slides back into me, torturously slow. So slow I feel every inch of him. Before dragging himself nearly all the way out and doing it again. And again. Leaving me breathless each time.

Pleasure like nothing I've ever felt before slides up and down my back, spreading outward.

"Hook... Faster, *please*." I wrap my legs around him, urging him to move. But he gives me a throaty chuckle before pulling back and looking at me.

"Oh, no. Nothing about this is going to be quick." He slowly slides back into me and moves his hips in long, undulating strokes, teasing me, making the heat build once more. His slow punishing pace continues, burning me up from the inside until my legs shake from the slow building heat.

"You deserve to pay for not revealing something this important." There was an edge to his tone that excited me. Something that told me I'd enjoy

Hook's way of punishment.

"I'm going to mark you so deep that you remember this night forever. So that it's seared into your mind, burned into your body and etched into your very soul. I'm going to consume every inch of you until you know who it is that has claimed your heart."

He leans in and nudges my head to the side before placing soft wet kisses on my neck and shoulder. My legs tremble from the building pleasure, the blazing heat that envelops me. But he continues with his agonizingly slow rhythm, sliding in and out of me until my entire body is ignited in flames.

I can't think, my mind a haze of pleasure. Each slight movement makes me gasp and moan, clawing at his back as he continues to torture me. To drag out this moment between us as I soar higher and higher.

Ripples of pleasure rush up and down my spine as our ragged breaths blend as one.

A tormented groan slips free of his lips, telling me he's just as affected. But he keeps his relentless, punishing pace, making me burn and ache with need.

Something inside my chest warms, getting hotter and hotter, blazing to life before moving outward. It overwhelms my body, flooding every nerve, every cell and demanding I push it toward Hook. Give him everything I have.

It was as if my soul was calling out to him. Needing to claim him as deep and as infinite as he's marked me.

"I know... I know..." he whispers, placing soft kisses along my neck as he continues to bring me higher and higher.

I don't take in his words or what they mean. I can't think past anything but the feel of him as he slides into me once more and I come apart, shattering into a million glowing stars as blinding pleasure envelops me.

I open my eyes just as his slide shut in ecstasy. He throbs and pulses inside me as I watch him come apart and the pleasure drags out forcing me into another smaller orgasm. I moan, arching into him.

He catches himself just before he falls on me, his breath ragged, his eyes finding mine. And that deep, warm feeling from earlier pulses somewhere inside my chest, tethering us together.

Was joining always like this? This is intense.

"You undo me," he breathes, looking at me as if I'm something precious.

A deep feeling of peace settles inside me making me feel complete. Whole. And full of warmth. *His* warmth.

It spreads through my chest but once I focus on it, I start to feel something else.

My powers.

They slither beneath my skin, wanting to reach out to Hook.

The warmth quickly turns to a sharp tightness as I begin to panic and lose myself. I try to pull it back before it unleashes and causes more pain, but I can't seem to stop it.

I go to move, to get away from Hook to keep him safe but one look at him has me pause.

My breath hitches as his blue eyes glow and swirl into storms full of lightning.

My powers pull back, as if lulled into a peaceful sleep bringing that warmth back to the surface once more.

Hook leans in and kisses me. He kisses me until I forget every worry, every pain, creating something new and beautiful between us. A memory that chases away even the darkest of nights and lighting it up with a sky full of starlight and storms.

CHAPTER 27



WARMTH. It fills me completely, tethering me to slumber's sweet bliss. The remnants of Hook's soft touches linger on my skin, the memory now etched into my soul.

A night that stretched on, full of pleasure and laughter. And of how even after he carried me into the bathroom, taking care of me and my body and every need and want, showing me a soft tenderness, I'd never known.

I float, untethered, my heart unbound and full until slowly light filters in. Keeping my eyes shut, I bask in this feeling, in the light, grasping onto it as long as I can.

No nightmares seeped into my dreams, twisting them into something dark and restless. No memories came to haunt me.

I smile at the thought, finally opening my eyes and waking to arms surrounding me, protecting me in their embrace. Slowly shifting, I glance up at Hook's sleeping form, my eyes tracing his long lashes to the shape of his nose and down to his mouth and full lips.

As if sensing me watching him, a slight curve tilts his lips upwards, and he opens his eyes.

"Morning." His voice is husky and deep, sliding down my back like silk.

"Morning," I whisper.

His grip tightens on me as he pulls me to him, tilting my chin up before meeting my lips with a soft brush that quickly deepens.

It only takes a couple of seconds before I'm lost in the taste of him. Each brush of his lips and swirl of his tongue is addictive, making me crave more. More of him, and more of his scent and touch.

But he pulls back to look at me. "I need to tell you something."

“Is it what you are? I haven’t been able to figure it out yet.” I reach a hand up and trail my fingers through his hair. “Are you secretly an orc?”

There’s a twinkle in his eyes as he takes my hand and places a soft kiss on my fingers. “Would you care if I was?”

I shake my head, smiling. “No. Even if you were an orc, I’m sure you’d somehow make it look pretty.”

He narrows his eyes at me playfully. “You mean manly, rugged and handsome.”

I laugh and he smiles a soft, warm smile he seems to only share with me.

As if I can’t help myself, I drag him back to me, reclaiming his lips once more. He meets me stroke for stroke, this kiss quickly turning more demanding with a savage edge to it that consumes me, teases me and claims me all at once.

Without breaking the kiss, he moves until he’s hovering over me.

My chest warms, getting hotter and hotter, blazing inside me as it tries to push outward. Just like last night, it overwhelms me, flooding my body and every nerve with an urgency I don’t understand.

His throaty groan sends warm tingles down my spine, momentarily distracting me. I moan and deepen the kiss wanting to consume every sip and savor every taste of him. His hand roams down my body, when suddenly a knock sounds out, making him growl.

Pulling away he narrows his eyes toward the door. “Someone *better* be dying,” he grits out.

Someone clears their throat. “We have a little issue with that special... *job*. It needs your magic touch.”

“Is everything okay?” I ask Hook. There were a lot of jobs they did I didn’t know about, but nothing that ever made Cash sound so... panicked.

Hook’s eyes soften. “Everything is fine.”

“Nothing serious?” I frown.

Hook sighs, shaking his head. “No. I promise. It won’t take long.” He kisses me one last time before getting up and sliding on his trousers.

He gives me a smirk as I watch him. It grows into something sinfully wicked the longer I stare.

“Stop looking at me like that or I won’t be leaving anytime soon.” He shakes his head again before leaning over me.

I bite my lip and watch his eyes darken. “Maybe that’s my plan.”

“Well then maybe I shoul—”

“Car is ready to go.” Cash clears his throat once more before his steps quickly move away from us.

Hook places a kiss on my head before taking a step back. But that warmth blazes to life in my chest. My hand starts rubbing it if only to ease the strange feeling as it expands, overwhelming me once more.

I frown as Hook stares at me, his brows falling. “We’ll talk later, and I’ll explain everything.”

“Explain what?” I ask as the feeling pulls outward making me look down at where it is.

“Later. I promise.” His voice is strained, making me look back up at him but he’s not looking at my face, he’s looking at my hand as it rubs small circles into my chest where the strange warmth is.

“Do you... do you know what this is?” I glance down at my chest as if I can see the warmth light up from inside it. But I can’t, making my frown deepen.

“Hook?” I question, still staring at my chest.

“My other half... it’s Fae,” he reveals.

I freeze, my hand pausing over my chest as I glance up at him.

But he’s already gone.

* * *

Fae.

Hook was Fae. Or at least half.

The minute he told me, I realized what the warm feeling inside me was.

We were mates. We had to be. There was nothing else that explained it. Nothing else that explained this feeling inside me or this tether between us.

I never questioned Hook being my mate because it was never a possibility before. He was human and possibly something else. I never sensed Fae from him, so I assumed it was a weakened bloodline from a warlock or witch. Especially with his unique ability.

My true mate could *only* be Fae. Even if he had one drop of Fae blood.

I still couldn’t understand how he was able to block it from me for so long.

After his little reveal, I've been trying to track him down all day. But anytime I get close to finding him, he somehow disappears.

For the last few hours, distractions have come in the form of gifts. And each and every one of them had my name on it.

Everything from dresses and clothing to jewelry and books. The last couple were handwriting notes promising lessons or trips to different parts of this Realm.

They keep coming until the end of the day, with there being nineteen given in total. Why Hook was sending me so many gifts didn't make any sense. He knew I didn't need any of these things.

I had to admit; they were pretty and most of the jewelry and clothing was stunning. While the books must have been hand-picked with most of them looking like something that would interest me or I could learn from. But I needed none of it.

Just when I thought the strange gift giving day was over, a twentieth gift arrives as I walk into my room.

Only this time it's the room itself, filled with hundreds of flowers. Nearly every surface is covered in some vibrant or sparkling color.

Most I don't know the name of, but it doesn't matter. They're all breathtakingly beautiful.

I glance down at my bed—the only surface clear—to find a red dress and shoes laid out with a note on top of it.

“Put these on and meet me in the dining room.

Yours, Hook.”

I roll my eyes and smile at his *request*. Yet I take the dress and put it on anyway. Just as I expected, it fits me like a glove, the thin fabric extremely soft against my skin, the length of it hitting just below my knees.

I head downstairs to the dining room, ready to get some answers. Not only about the abundance of gifts I've been showered with but also what else Hook has been keeping from me.

A bundle of nerves rushes through me as I walk down the hall and into the room. But as soon as my eyes find Hook's and the warm smile he wears, they quickly disappear. He's wearing black trousers and a white shirt with the

top part unbuttoned. He looks relaxed and happy but as soon as his gaze finds mine, they grow heated and trail down my body, making my skin tingle and heart race.

As if drawn to him, pulled by that tether between us, I move toward him, the question on the tip of my tongue. I open my mouth to ask him when someone clears their throat beside us.

Turning, I find Ryland and Cash wearing matching boyish smiles and an amused glint in their eyes. Both are wearing suits. The dark black and blue one Cash has on is more tailored to his lean body whereas Ryland's plain gray and black one looks a tad too short for his muscled frame. As if he outgrew it years ago.

I glance around and realize we're all dressed up. But for what?

A delicious smell hits my senses, and my eyes finally notice the table of food with a large brown and gold cake in the middle.

"What are we celebrating?" I ask them.

Cash gives me a funny look. "Your birthday, of course."

It's... *My birthday?* I try to remember when it is and when I do, I realize my birthday is this month. It's been so long since I attempted to celebrate it, that I completely forgot. But it's tomorrow, not today.

My eyes find Hooks and he gives me a knowing look. One filled with a hint of sadness.

"But it's not until tomorrow." I glance between them.

"Hook planned it this way." Cash smiles, tilting his head toward him. "He wanted to make up for twenty years of missed birthday presents and he wanted to give you your twenty-first present on your *actual* birthday."

"Hook..." I turn to look at him as my heart fills with emotion.

His eyes are soft with a tender look in them, a vulnerability that he only reveals to me.

"Get a room," Ryland coughs out wearing a mischievous smile, breaking up our little moment.

Cash laughs but it's quickly cut off when Hook gives him a hard look followed by Ryland.

Ryland clears his throat and both him and Cash suddenly find the rest of the room extremely interesting.

Hook places a kiss on my hand. "We thought you'd like to celebrate your birthday with a family meal."

Family... My heart stutters at the thought. I glance around at each of

them and realize that's how they see me. As part of *their* family.

My throat tightens with emotion. I have a family now. A true one that really cares. Cash has looked out for me from the very beginning while Ryland slowly became someone I could lean on and talk to, and Hook...he was more than family.

Hook glances at the others before looking back at me. "We may not be the most conventional family around, but none of us would leave the other behind. We're here for each other always. No matter what."

A slight burn niggles at the back of my eyes as I take in his words. I glance away and try to blink back the tears threatening to spill and it's only then I see what else they've done for me.

Decorations of shooting stars fall from the ceiling. Flowers adorn every vase while another small table sits off to the side, full of my new favorite snacks and treats.

"This is..." I shake my head, not able to find the words. Hook takes my hand as if he knows just how I feel.

"It's perfect... Thank you." No one has ever done something so thoughtful for me. My birthday was never celebrated in the Fae Realm and by the time I found Neverland, I'd nearly forgotten about it.

Hook asked me once and I told him. It was just before he left Neverland, and I didn't want to remember it again after that. But it seemed he never forgot.

"We all know about your little addiction." Cash gives me a secret smile pulling me from my thoughts. My mind flits to Hook and last night but then Cash tilts his head toward the table and the large cake in the middle.

"It's coffee flavored," he chuckles.

Coffee...

Hook's lips dance around a smile as I glance at him and wince remembering my first experience with it. He leans down with laughter in his eyes.

"Don't worry. This kind *is* edible."

Unlike its raw form, I bet it tastes a lot better too.

Hook moves around the table and pulls out my chair. I walk over and thank him before sitting down.

He places a kiss on my shoulder before taking the seat to my left while Cash and Ryland take the seats directly across from us, making me smile.

Hook plates up some food for me—all my new favorites from this Realm

by the looks of it—as I glance around at each of them and their relaxed and happy faces.

I never had this. I never had family meals or people that cared about me.

But family didn't always have to be people related by blood. They were proof of that.

We eat until we're full and there are tears running down our faces from laughing so much. I learn far more than I need to about what Ryland and Cash used to get up to when they were younger, but I love that they give me a glimpse of their life before I came here. It makes me feel all the closer to them.

As midnight draws nearer, I realize just how perfect the day ended up being. The perfect first birthday.

Hook takes my hand and brings it to his lips. "Come somewhere with me." The soft look in his eyes makes me want to follow him anywhere without question.

I nod and he helps me up. But before we go, I turn to Ryland and Cash.

"Thank you for tonight. It really was perfect."

Cash gives me a warm smile before getting up and coming over to me, wrapping me in a hug.

"Happy Birthday, Tink." He pulls back and gives Hook a smile. "We'll do it again soon. Maybe we can make it a regular thing."

I catch Hook shaking his head but there's a warm smile on his face. "I'll think about it."

Poking his side, I watch his smile widen into something else. Something more savage as his eyes darken.

"They might have to wait a while. I want you all to myself and I don't plan on giving you up anytime soon." Hook runs his thumb in a little circle on my hand, his eyes dark as they scan my face.

Throats clear loudly behind us, snapping me out of my little Hook daze as I turn toward Cash and Ryland. But their mischievous smirks drop, their eyes widening at Hook before rushing out of the room.

I turn back to Hook to see what look he gave them that had them scramble out of here so quickly but he's shaking his head with a small, amused smile on his face.

"Come on. I have something I want to show you." Hook leads me towards the back garden. As soon as I step outside, I gasp at the display in front of me.

Like a mirror image of the night sky above, there are hundreds if not thousands of small lights cast in a huge net over most of the garden blending in with the stars above.

Vibrant sparkling blue flowers line a long path while small white lights float around us. I reach out to touch one and a warm tingle brushes along my fingers.

A small tug on my other hand pulls me forward but my gaze is still enraptured by the display surrounding me. Each small light twinkles above and near me making me want to reach out and capture them.

I'm in awe of their beauty and the sheer mass of them that I don't notice we've stopped until I hear a husky chuckle.

I glance at Hook and the soft smile on his face and the warmth in my chest spreads, growing wings and fluttering drawing me toward him.

It quickly reminds me of what I've been wanting to ask him all day.

Before he says anything. I step closer, looking up into his eyes. "Hook..." How do I ask him this? How do I tell him?

"I think... I think we might be mates." I open my mouth to tell him more about what I've been feeling and the signs that were there. But he sighs and gives me a hesitant look that makes me pause.

"I know, Tink," he says.

Three little words and everything inside me freezes. With the next three nearly destroying me.

"I've *always* known."

CHAPTER 28



“YOU... YOU *KNEW*?” I shake my head as the thick fog tries to wrap around my mind and drag me under.

He knew we were mates and never told me, but *why*?

“Tink...” Hook reaches for me as I take a step back, needing some space. Anger sits at the corner of my mind, just out of reach as a mixture of confusion and hurt settles over me.

He *knew*. He knew we were mates, *even in Neverland*, and never said anything. He just... *left*.

“Why, Hook? Why didn’t you tell me?” I look at him making sure he sees the pain in my eyes. The accusation and hurt he’s inflicted with only a few words.

He flinches as if I’ve physically struck him but remains silent.

“Why?” I demand. I don’t understand why he would keep something like this from me. I need him to explain.

He gives me a sad look. “You know why.”

I clench my fists as my pain soon turns to anger. “No, I really don’t. You left. You—”

“Peter.” Hook’s eyes flicker with pain. It matches the torrent of agony now growing inside my chest at the realization.

“You had Peter,” he says.

Peter...

Hook takes advantage of my moment of shock and steps closer. Hurt flashes in his eyes as he reaches for me before stopping himself.

“I wanted you to be happy. I wanted it more than I wanted my own happiness. And if that was with *him*, then so be it.” Clenching his hands at his

sides, his eyes beseeches me to believe him. To believe that what he did was for the best.

He thought I would be happy. After all, Peter always looked after me when Hook was with us. It wasn't until he left, did Peter slowly start to show his true colors.

But even then, I was still oblivious to it.

It took months of manipulation and slowly crafted lies before I even started to question if it was wrong. But by then he had already created a web of doubt in my mind. One so deep and vast that I didn't know what was real or fake anymore.

I look into Hook's eyes and see the truth swirling around them.

He truly thought I would be better off without him. He didn't know what the real Peter was like. He didn't know the type of games he liked to play or how much he enjoyed the look of pain in my eyes.

He didn't know how alone I was without him.

He left for *my* happiness... And yet his absence brought nothing but pain.

I never understood why it hurt so much after he left. It was as if something important was missing from inside me. But now I know it's because we're mates. And when he left me in Neverland, he took a piece of me with him.

"Tink..." He reaches for me again, but I pull away from him and step back.

"You chose Peter," he tells me. But he's wrong. I never chose Peter. Peter was all that was left. I had no one else.

"I chose Neverland. I chose it because I couldn't..." leave. I couldn't leave at the time. I didn't know there was another way to stay hidden from my past. I thought I had no other option.

When he left, I couldn't go with him. Not that he ever gave me the choice to.

He frowns. "You loved him. At least back then. I saw it."

I shake my head at his blind sightedness. "We were *kids*, Hook. I was lonely. So lonely that I would've clung onto anyone that showed me a sliver of kindness."

Hook's frown only grows. "I knew Peter would look after you. I knew you would be safe—"

A bitter chuckle slips past my lips, cutting him off. "Peter, keep me safe? *Nothing* about Peter is safe."

He's a man who quickly morphed into a manipulative monster wearing many masks and each one crueler than the last. A man that used and manipulated me, keeping me exactly where he wanted.

If it wasn't for seeing him bleed, I'd have thought he was a beast.

Hook freezes as something flickers in his eyes. "Did..." He swallows hard. "Did he hurt you?"

Panic spreads through my body as I realize what I've just said. "Forget I said anything—"

"Tell me." He pleads, his entire body as taut as a bow.

"It doesn't matter now," I promise him and mean it. I didn't want Peter to take any more of my time. *Our* time.

"Tink..." He steps closer to me and takes my arms stopping me from moving back another step.

"He hurt you?" he asks as his voice cracks.

I glance at the devastated look he wears, and my stomach churns as I realize I have to tell him the truth. He deserves to know.

"Peter isn't who you think he is. At least not anymore. He's cruel and manipulative. And enjoys the pain of others."

Hook pales, taking a step back as if I had hit him. He opens his mouth to say something before stopping himself and shaking his head. It takes him another moment before he's able to speak.

"I was a fool to think it would be that easy. That you would be better off with him." His face grows haunted as he frowns, his eyes growing distant for a moment before he focuses back on me.

"It was him, wasn't it? Your nightmares? That's who you were running from when you came here." he seethes, his eyes darkening.

I stay silent, not knowing how to answer. Yes, my nightmares were of Peter and what he did, but not only of him.

But Hook takes my silence as confirmation as he turns and slams his fist into the tree near us, leaving a large dent behind.

"I left you with him. I left you..." His voice shakes with fury as he turns to me.

"I ripped my heart out and left it with you on that Island... and it was all for nothing." His eyes fill with agony as he shakes his head.

I step toward him. "No—"

"He hurt you, and you suffered because of my foolish decision." Something shutters in Hook's eyes. But it's the blank look that follows that

truly scares me. I watch as he slowly shuts down and pulls away, truly believing that this is his fault.

Uneasiness begins to stir in my stomach. "It's not your fault."

His eyes darken with pain. "How can you say that—"

"Yes, you left. Yes, you should have told me we were mates. But it wasn't *you* that inflicted the pain."

"Inflicted the..." His body goes rigid with tension at my words, his eyes glittering with anger.

"I'm going to *kill* him," he says in a dangerous tone. His words send nervous chills up and down my spine.

I see the moment Hook decides he's leaving for Neverland and know I need to stop him before it's too late.

We've already lost so much time together. I wasn't willing to lose anymore.

Hook goes to move back when I reach out and grab him, stopping him. "You're not leaving. I won't let you."

"Tink. I need to—"

"I don't ever want to go back to Neverland again." It was never going to be the same even if Peter wasn't there. He tainted it with cruel memories I never wanted to re-live.

"You don't have to. I'll take great pleasure in doing this myself." His expression hardens as his eyes narrow and grow calculating.

"You promised to stay by my side," I remind him as my throat tightens and a cold tremor runs through my body.

Hook lifts my hand and kisses the tips of my fingers as his eyes become distant. "It won't take me long. A couple of days max."

"No. You are *not* going to Neverland," I insist.

His eyes light up with wild, dark storms. "Peter needs to pay for what he did. When I find him, I'm going to cut out his—"

Hook gasps as a bloom of deep red quickly spreads down his white shirt, my heart stuttering to a stop, my blood turning ice cold as I spot the arrow now sticking out of his shoulder.

CHAPTER 29



“HOOK!” I catch him as he falls into me, grunting in pain.

“We need to move,” he grunts, reaching up to his left shoulder, his hand trembling as he touches the arrow embedded into it.

“But—”

Hook yanks me to the side of him as another arrow slams into the tree behind us.

“Now, Tink.” Hook rasps.

I wrap his good arm around me and start moving further into the forest. With no direction in mind, I look for a place that will give us enough cover to assess how bad his injury is.

But as soon as we move into the forest, a thick dark smoke seeps in around us obscuring our path.

“What the—”

Another arrow slams into the tree to our right. I gasp and try to quicken our pace. But Hook is struggling to keep up as it is.

The smoke thickens, clawing at my throat and burning my lungs. I cough, inhaling more and more as we move through it. It seems endless, with no way out.

Hook curses, urging me to pick up our pace. “Try to hold your breath as much as possible,” he coughs.

“What is it?” I try not to choke as I breathe in more before holding my breath.

“Some form of magical gas. It has a paralyzing agent in it.” Hook sways into me as we move forward.

I didn’t feel like any part of me was going numb. The smoke was making

my throat raw from coughing, but other than that I felt fine.

But one look at Hook told me something wasn't right.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

Hook grows paler, his breaths becoming shaking and uneven. "Just keep moving. It's starting to thin out ahead."

Keeping the corner of my eye on Hook, we move deeper into the forest and through the black smoke. I try to taper my worry every time I see him wince and lock his jaw in pain. But my panic only grows, my worries twisting into tight knots in my stomach.

We finally come out of the thick smog when my feet hit something uneven. For a minute I think we have to be near the edge of the island with the rocky ground. But there's nothing but thick trees around us so it had to be somewhere in the middle.

Hook stumbles into me just as something coils around my leg making me pause. I try to free myself from whatever plant I've stepped into as Hook turns to me with a questioning look.

Glancing down, I find a black vine slowly tightening around my ankle.

"What—?" Hook starts to say just as another vine slides around my other leg. He spots it just as it gives a hard yank.

He grunts in pain as he grips onto me, keeping me in place as he focuses on the vines around my ankles. They break off, releasing me from their hold just as more vines slip out from the forest towards us.

A thicker vine whips out from my left, slicing my arm. Another appears cutting my side. I look for a way out, but more and more black vines appear, blocking my view.

I glance down at my arm, the slice thin enough that it should've healed by now. But then I notice how bare my wrist is, my bracelet missing. I look around me, but all I see is the black vines.

My stomach drops as my throat tightens. *What am I going to do now?*

Hook grunts, bringing me back to our problem here and now and I push the bracelet to the back of my thoughts. It's the least of my worries right now.

Black vines crawl from every direction. From the trees above and the ground below, and everywhere in between. All heading straight for us.

I glance at Hook as his body stiffens. His fists are clenched tight as his eyes light up. Power seeps out around him, building and building until he reaches a hand out and releases it, creating a clear path in front of us.

I grab his arm as he sways and I move as quickly as I can through the

path he created. We come out of the vines and take a moment to catch our breath and get our bearing's. I turn to Hook to see where he thinks we should go.

"We won't be able to get through that. It's probably blocking off that entire side of the island," he says.

I was too focused on Hook to spot the huge thick, black trees that coil in strange circular webs creating a barrier behind him. Something moves in the center of it, and I take a step back, dragging Hook with me.

"There's something in there," I whisper to him, and he stiffens.

"Let's move around it," he murmurs, tilting his head to the right of us. But I don't miss the tremor in his voice revealing how much pain he's in.

"Head that way." He turns to move around when I notice how pale his face has become. His breathing was growing more and more shallow and there was a rattle coming from his chest that made a sense of dread roll through the pit of my stomach.

I pull him to a stop, without much resistance, proving how exhausted he really is.

"You need to rest. I need to check your wound."

He nods, attempting to smile but it comes out as a pained grimace.

"There's a grove of trees... not too far from here," he rasps.

My heart twists in my chest as we move toward it, but each step seems to take a lot out of him making it feel like we were climbing up a steep mountain instead.

"Just a little further," I tell him, urging him on as we finally move into the cluster of thick trees. I help him sit down in front of the thickest one to check his wound.

It looks like the arrow went straight through so I should be able to break off the tip and pull it out. It also doesn't look like it hit anything important, but it looks raw and inflamed, as though it's already infected. It will need to come out as soon as possible.

"They're all traps," he rasps. "The smoke. The vines and whatever those dark webbed trees were. They've made sure to move us where they want us."

"Who?" I ask, slightly distracted as I focus on what to do with his wound.

"The Hunters."

I freeze, my body tensing with shock. "How were they able to do this? How were they able to get past your barriers?" Not only the barrier. But also, Hook's guards and his spells and watchful eyes. How would anyone get past

all that and go unnoticed?

I quickly glance around wondering if they're watching us now.

"They were already inside," Hook winces as I try to rip his bloodied shirt open. It's thick with blood and was clinging to his skin around the wound making it hard to pull it off without hurting him.

"How?" I ask.

Hook gives me a look full of regret. "Our captive. The first Hunter we captured from the market. He must have been the decoy. A way to test out our defenses and weaknesses."

With his mind busy with our intruders, I tear open his shirt as quickly as I can.

Hook hisses through his teeth in pain before leaning his head back against the tree and closing his eyes.

"I should have seen it... Should've known when we couldn't get any information out of them. And what I could get was planted, a ploy to manipulate us into falling into their plan. Setting it up so they could slip in the rest before attacking."

I pause. "The rest?"

Hook opens his eyes and looks at me, a worried look on his face. "I sense dozens, if not more. But they're moving too quickly for me to get a proper read on them. I—" He narrows his eyes, frowning.

"Hook?"

He glances in the direction we came, his eyes widening slightly when he looks to the ground. I follow his direction and spot them. Shadows. Long, slithering, dark shadows that slowly move along the forest floor, destroying everything they touch. The trees turn black, the leaves and branches rot off before quickly turning to dust.

I turn to Hook, ready to help him up so we can get moving when I spot his eyes glowing and a storm swirling inside them.

Energy quickly swirls around us before shooting out and disappearing. Hook is panting by the time the energy dissipates around us. But the shadows stop in their path as if frozen in time.

Hook squeezes my hand and I look up at him. He's pale. Too pale.

"It will buy you some time." Hook slumps further against the tree, out of breath. "There's a small boat hidden—"

Seeing where he's going with this, I stop him with a hard look. "No."

I ignore the glare he gives me to see what I can do about his wound. He

tries to push my hand away but it's trembling so much, he can barely lift it.

"Take the boat and get away from here," he demands.

I clench my teeth at the stubborn fool. "I'm not leaving you."

Hook's hand trembles once more as he slowly reaches for my cheek, his eyes pleading with me to listen to him. "Tink... please... I beg you—"

"Stop trying to get rid of me and start thinking of a way we *both* can get out of here. Because the only way I'm leaving here is *with* you." I glare at him.

He releases a harsh sigh, dropping his hand as if he's too weak to hold it up any longer. He narrows his eyes on me, but I catch the spark of light in them.

"Still as stubborn as ever."

"I just found you, Hook. I'm not willing to give you up." I frown, not wanting to think about anything other than us both getting out of this safely.

His eyes soften. "Tink—"

"If I break the pointed tip from your back, I should be able to pull it through from the front. It'll hurt like hell though." I check the wound again before glancing up at Hook. I watch his face grow paler and his breaths grow shallower. There's worry in his eyes along with something else I'm not used to seeing.

Fear.

"Hook?" I push, needing to do this now before it gets any worse.

He swallows, giving me a small smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Do it."

With one last look at Hook, I help him sit forward and move around him. I rip off long pieces of cloth from the end of my dress and place a couple of them on my knees.

Before he changes his mind, I grab hold of the tip of the arrow and quickly snap it off. Hook grits his teeth as sweat starts to trickle down his face. I quickly move around to face him.

"On the count of three..." I tell him. He nods, growing paler.

"One..." I grasp the end of the arrow, getting a good grip. "Two..." I yank it out as hard as I can and drop it to the ground. Picking up the cloth, I put pressure on the wound.

A groan is ripped from his lips. "I should've known you'd be sneaky."

I give him a small smirk as I take his hand and place it on the wound to keep pressure on it while I rip off a longer piece of fabric from my dress. Bending him forward, I use the long piece of fabric to hold together the other

pieces of cloth on his wound, tying it as tight as I can.

Hook removes his hand from the wound as I tie the knot. Covering my hand before I move it, I look at him and his eyes as they fill with a myriad of emotions.

“Thank you,” he breathes.

I shake my head at him, giving him a small smile. “Now, where do we find this boat?”

Hook grows hesitant but I give him a look that makes him sigh.

“On the left side of the island, there’s a secret passageway between the cliffs that lead to a small rocky cove.”

I pause. A *secret* passageway... That leads us off the island...

A flicker of amusement flares to life in his eyes as he watches me.

“So what you’re telling me is, I could have escaped that first night after all?” I narrow my eyes on him enjoying seeing a bit of color flood his cheeks.

“No, Tink. Because even back then I wasn’t willing to let you go. No boat, car or even portal was going to take you from me. Not again.” His voice is firm, resolute.

I could see it in his eyes that he meant it too. He would have hunted me down, no matter how far I got. But unlike when I first came to this island, a sense of relief fills me knowing he was never going to let me go.

“Let’s get going,” Hook grunts as I help him up and we start moving once again.

We travel through the grove of trees and out into more of the thick forest. We walk as fast as we can as I watch Hook try to hide his pain.

I’m about to ask him to rest for a moment, if only to bring some color back to his face when I spot the cliffs.

“Nearly there,” I tell him. We head toward the cliffs but no matter where I look, I can’t find the small passageway Hook spoke of.

It’s not until he points me in the direction do I see the narrow trail hidden between a patch of trees. The trees have coiled up and around the large rocks on both sides seamlessly blending in with its surroundings. Unless you know where you’re heading and get close enough, you would never find it.

We move through the small trail as quickly as possible coming out to the small cove Hook spoke of.

There’s a small area that allows you to reach the ocean whereas the rest of the area joins the rocky cliffs and treacherous sea.

Spotting the boat together, we freeze. A boat that’s now in pieces,

shattered beyond repair as the chunks of wood slam into the rocky edge of the cove wall.

“Damn it,” Hook growls as he scans the area, his eyes unfocused as he looks around. “They lured us here.”

“It won’t be long until they show up—” He gasps, bending over in pain.

“What is it?” I ask.

Hook shakes his head as I help him move to sit down against a thick rock to our left.

Pushing back the dread that’s slowly building inside me, I kneel down in front of him, ignoring the helpless look he wears to check the wound, hoping the bleeding has slowed down.

Removing the cloth, I freeze when I see the wound is now covered in small black lines curling around it, and slowly spreading outward.

I gasp. “What—”

“It was poisoned... the arrow,” he rasps.

I blanch as my heart stops, my entire body turning to ice. *No.*

We just found each other again. This can’t be happening.

My eyes find Hooks and the sadness and pain in them nearly breaks me.

He takes my hand in his, there’s a small cut along my arm from the vines that still hasn’t healed yet. But I don’t feel it. I don’t feel anything other than dread and panic at what Hook just revealed.

“I’m sorry I let it hurt you.” He frowns still looking at my small cut like it’s something far more serious than his poisoning.

“They’re not poisonous, just slow to heal.” His frown deepens as he stares at it.

I open my mouth to tell him to stop being foolish when his words hit me. He protected me from the vines, kept them away from me as much as he could. But... how?

And then I remember... He always has magical items on him he taps into to use. He must have used them to protect us.

But it doesn’t look like he protected himself at all. From the small cuts and rips all over his clothes, it looks like he took the brunt of it. It looks like he shielded me from most of it, leaving himself vulnerable.

I check the cuts along his neck, stomach and legs. But unlike mine, his weren’t healing. They were turning dark with the same thread-like dark lines crawling out from them.

Swallowing back the panic threatening to take me whole, I look into his

pain-filled eyes.

“*Why, Hook?*” I ask, wanting to cry and scream at him for being so foolish.

“It was the only thing I could do to make sure you were safe,” he grimaces, a vulnerable look on his face as his hand falls to his lap.

“Hook?” The panic bleeds through my voice as I look down at his unmoving hand.

“The smoke had a paralyzing agent in it. It’s slowly working its way through my body. I’m slowing it down as much as I can, but I don’t think I’ll be able to move in a few minutes.”

Magical gas...

Hook’s words come back to me, and I remember feeling nothing and thought we got through unscathed. But the longer I watch Hook, the more I think that maybe *I* was the only one that came out of this unscathed.

I glance back at his wound, its dark thick stringy coils now curling outward, attempting to move over his shoulder and across his chest.

Panic bleeds into every inch of my body, taking my breath away.

I can’t lose him. I can’t—

“I think I can heal from it, but the paralyzing agent from the smoke is blocking my ability somehow. It’s taking everything in me to push it back.”

Hope floods my chest with his words, allowing me to take a breath. “So, if you just rest it will heal?”

I need him to say yes. To tell me he’s going to live. That’s all that matters right now.

“It should.” Hook grimaces. “But you need to get out of here before—”

“That’s good.” I cut him off and ignore his defeated look to focus on the positive. He’ll live if I can buy him enough time to heal.

“Just focus on healing and I’ll... I’ll figure something out.” I nod to myself, the relief of his words hitting me with force.

Glancing around, I try to think of a plan. If Hook can rest, he can heal.

He can’t use anymore of his powers or using what’s left of his energy could kill him. So if he does try anything, I could always knock him out.

I just need to keep us hidden from the Hunters long enough to give him time to heal. But, how?

There was nowhere else to go. The other side of the island has those dark webs blocking it. And whatever Hook did to push them and their dark, destroying shadows back would only buy us a little time. I couldn’t go back

the way I came either with the smoke and vines. And the dark, treacherous sea was no longer an option without a boat.

I wasn't the best swimmer and Hook wouldn't be able to move soon.

Feeling trapped with no option or way out, dread coats my skin as panic rises up inside me once more. But something else also rises up.

A sliver of power.

I promised myself I would never use that power again. Not after what happened the first and last time I was forced to use it.

But now as I stare into Hook's eyes... My mate. I know I would do *anything* to protect him.

But if I use that power and get us out of this mess, I'll also be leading an even bigger threat to us. Though it looks like it may be our only option right now.

I'd have to deal with the consequences of it after. When Hook was safe and healed.

I look at Hook when he freezes, his entire body turning stiff as his eyes look past me into the forest.

"They're here," he breathes.

I whip around trying to spot the Hunters but can't see anything. Not until I look to the ground.

A cold shiver runs down the length of my spine as dark shadows slither out from the edge of the forest towards us.

With no other option, I turn to Hook, hoping he won't hate me for keeping this from him.

"I should've told you, but I was scared. So scared of what you would think of me." I swallow hard and try to slowly loosen my reins on the power hidden within me.

He would be right to fear me after this. To hate me. But I can't let him die.

A look of confusion flashes across his face as I let the power build and build until it slithers just beneath the surface of my skin. Until a different kind of monster awakens and breaks free from its cage that I forced it into long ago.

"Tink... what are you—?"

"You've always looked after me. But now it's my turn to protect you." No matter what it takes.

With one final look at Hook, I take a quick step back from him and turn

towards the dozens of Hunters as they form and gather around us.

“Tink!”

I drown out Hook’s panicked scream as I let myself feel every inch of dread and panic, letting it feed my dark power.

Every sliver of fear and pain, I use it, letting it rise up and up inside me.

Until finally... I let go.

CHAPTER 30



POWER LIKE NOTHING I've ever felt before unleashes like a tidal wave, pouring out of every cell in my body and knocking the Hunter's back.

Unshackled. Unbound. No longer caged beneath my skin, it settles around me.

Power. The energy inside me feels almost infinite as my senses sharpen.

I am me but also *more*. Something wild, cruel, and beautiful. Something that is far more violent, ruthless and vengeful. It lay hidden beneath the surface of my skin. And beneath my innocent eyes that held my true nature.

But like everything hidden. Sooner or later... they rise.

The world around me becomes something far smaller as my mind expands outward, seeking, searching. Before marking each and every Hunter.

I reach out further and sense Ryland and Cash in the house. Both are unconscious but alive.

Hook was also right. There were dozens of them. All spread out and heading toward us once more.

Though in this form, I know somewhere deep inside me that they could never hurt me, too weak in nature and power to go against what I am.

The energy slides over my body like a second skin as I pull the vast skies to me, cloaking the Hunters in darkness, taking their vision and turning them blind to everything around them.

I watch them as they attempt to see through it, to use their shadows to find an invisible threat but it's no use.

They can't escape me or my power. Nor do I want them to.

They hurt my mate. I feel his pain as if it were my own. He had depleted nearly all of his reserve of power, slowly draining his life instead of focusing

on healing and pushing the poison spreading through his body out.

And all to save us. To save *me*.

They would not escape me. Or go easily into this dark night.

They would suffer. I would make sure of it.

Like a gravitational pull, I drag them closer before holding them in place.

My dust appears, clouds of it forming above each Hunter, gathering around them before seeping into them.

I sense the Hunters trying to heal and fight the invisible threat. But it's too late. The dust has already settled inside them. They've already begun to grow hotter and hotter, slowly burning them from the inside out.

I drown out their screams and raise my hand as glittering black flames surround it.

I pause, watching the stars glide through it, having never seen anything like it before. My first and only other time I used my powers and fully transformed was nothing like this.

Narrowing my eyes on the Hunters, I push it outward toward them. A night full of dark flames and stars burn through them, finishing them all off instantly.

They become dust, the very thing that destroyed them. Before drifting away on a cool breeze.

Long, curving wings span out around me, before softly fluttering behind me.

Wings that were now nothing like the ones I had before. Wings that were once so thin they were nearly translucent.

Fragile. Delicate. Breakable.

They enjoyed breaking them. Testing them. Calling me a freak for being different. For being something they only saw as ugly and weak.

They were nothing like the Sun Fae's huge, powerful, white feathered wings with tips of gold. Or the Moon Fae's wide, black feathered wings with tips of silver.

But now they were just as beautiful as them. The translucent base was similar to my old wings but now with a touch of the dark night sky woven into it.

Thousands of gold and silver stars shimmered along every inch of them before dripping to the ground and disappearing like glittering pixie dust.

I spread them out around me, their width three times the size of me. And though they felt as light as a cool breeze, I knew that if I were to take flight,

they would be as strong and as fierce against even the most turbulent of winds.

A gasp sounds out from behind me making my body stiffen. Hesitantly, I turn and look back at Hook, ready for his look of disgust and horror at what I had just done.

But apart from a spark of confusion, all I find is a look of relief that's filled with pure love. There is no disgust in his eyes and not a flicker of judgment.

"You're beautiful, Tink. Those words will never be enough to describe your beauty. Describe how magnificent you are. But you should—" Hook gasps and falls to the side, unable to stop himself.

I rush over to him, my legs faltering for a moment as my body starts to grow weaker from the power I used. But I manage to catch him before his head hits the rocky ground and sit him up.

Something small and black falls out of his pocket.

I pick it up. "What is—"

"My promise," he whispers. My heart flutters at his words and I glance up at him.

"And your final, twenty-first birthday gift. I promised I would find you a way to stay hidden and I have. Happy Birthday, Tink." He takes a moment to catch his breath before attempting a smile.

Hook breathes a sigh of relief. "I knew you were never a dud Fae. You were always too special. Thank you for doing what I couldn't. Thank you for saving us."

But in this form, I realize that isn't true. I may have saved us from the Hunters, but I can already sense *them* drawing closer.

I'm also growing weaker by the minute. And even though I knew my limit had not even begun to be reached, I had kept it locked away for too long and in turn it had burned through me too quickly.

I won't be able to fight them when they arrive.

But maybe I don't have to. I grip the small, black box in my hand.

I have something that can save us. Or save *him*.

My heart sinks when I realize what I must do. What choice I must make in order to keep Hook safe and alive. All this time I was lost without him and now I'll be lost once again.

Pain like no other spreads through my body, my heart feeling as if it was twisting and tearing into two.

How can I be in so much pain and not bleed?

I didn't want to leave him. I didn't want to go back to a world where pain only existed. Back to a place that never showed me love or care, and that only ever saw me as a weapon.

I didn't want to break any of the promises I made to him.

"I can no longer move but I wish I could hold you right now. Touch you," he breathes.

My eyes find his as he stares right at me, unblinking. "I can see it in your eyes. You thought I'd fear you, didn't you? But I've never seen anything more beautiful. More magnificent. And I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure you know it."

My heart clenches in agony at his words and he frowns as if feeling it too.

I open my mouth to tell him how sorry I am for what I'm about to do, only to freeze, sensing them draw closer.

With not much time left, I quickly place the necklace around his neck. Holding it in place with his hand over it, I pull on the mate bond between us, the warmth that tethers us together and hope that it will still work this way.

Hook's eyes widen. "What are you doing?"

Keeping hold of his hand, I focus on the one thing I want it to do. To protect him. To keep him hidden from those that are coming here. Those that will hunt and kill him without a second thought.

"Tink!"

Closing my eyes, I focus on the pendent and push everything I have left into the mate bond between us, willing the necklace to grant this one wish for me.

After a moment, the necklace pulses as if answering my worries making my fears slowly ebb and ease.

I open my eyes as Hook fights to stay conscious. His eyes are starting to droop from exhaustion, his breathing shallow.

"What... did... you—"

"I love you, Hook. I think I've loved you for a long time now. But I was just too stubborn and foolish to see what those feelings really meant." I shake my head at myself, already missing what could've been between us if we had been given the chance.

"But it's too late now. I'm always too late." I blink back the burning tears threatening to spill.

"Goodbye, Hook." Hook's eyes widens as he tries to reach for me, but

he's now completely paralyzed from the neck down. Not wanting him to use any more of his powers, weakening himself further, I push a pulse of power toward him, knocking him out.

Before they arrive, I push everything I have left in me into him, hoping to quicken his healing. I give him every last drop of energy, hoping it will aid him in some way.

My body sways as I watch the blackened lines start to recede until they're completely gone.

Relief fills me as I quickly check all his wounds and find all black strings gone and most of them nearly completely healed.

"I hope one day you can forgive me and find happiness," I murmur as I look over him, trying to remember every detail of his face.

Completely drained I transform back, no longer able to hold my other form. Exhaustion hits me tenfold, but I shake it off and drag myself away from Hook when my heart and mind scream at me to stay.

The world spins as I move away from him, my heart breaking with each step. But I know I need to move as far away from him as I can. Just in case the pendent doesn't work the way I want it to.

A few steps further away from him and *they* arrive.

A large bright, circular portal opens, and dozens of Fae guards march on through it, tainting the air with the threat of violence and bloodshed.

Their golden armor glints against the moonlight, revealing who they are. The elite. All highly trained and ruthlessly vicious.

The royal army of the Sun Fae.

I try to stay still. To not make a sound or movement knowing from experience that every one of them will use any excuse to *subdue* me. But my entire body is on edge as the guards move a little too close to Hook. I tense up but they stop where they are and all turn to stare at me and only me.

Relief quickly fills me as I realize the necklace is working to keep Hook hidden from them. He's safe and even though I'll never see him again, him being alive is all that matters.

The guards warily move toward me, as if ready for a fight. But I don't fight them, too weakened after my transformation. I also couldn't risk them accidentally finding Hook or searching the grounds and finding Ryland or Cash.

So I don't try to stop them when they roughly grab my wrists, and place familiar gold cuffs on me that cut off access to my powers.

I don't stop them when they push me a step forward closer to the portal, and a place I promised myself I would rather die than return to.

Instead, my eyes fall on Hook's slumped form and the slight bit of color that has returned to his cheeks. I stare at him and try to memorize every detail. Not wanting to forget a single thing about him. And knowing that thinking about him, safe and well, is the only thing that will help me get through each day from here on out.

I stumble as the guards pull me to a stop a few feet in front of the portal.

The guards form a tight circle around me just as another person steps through it.

I freeze when I see who it is. The Sun Fae King. And the last person I ever thought I'd have to see again.

I glance up at him and try to hide my look of fear from him, knowing all too well how much he enjoys it.

Towering over me, he's still just as imposing as ever, his vicious dark green eyes filled with every ounce of malevolence as they glare down at me.

With a cruel slant to his thin lips, he glares down at me as if I'm nothing. Just the way he always did.

"I hope you've enjoyed your little *vacation* because you will never get the chance to take another. *That* I can promise you."

I try to hide the icy shiver as it slithers down my back from the threat in his words, from the promise of punishment and what's to come after I disobeyed him and stayed away for so long.

But he catches it and smiles. A twisted, vicious kind of smile that only a true beast could mimic.

"Guards, take your *Princess* home. Her time to return is well overdue."

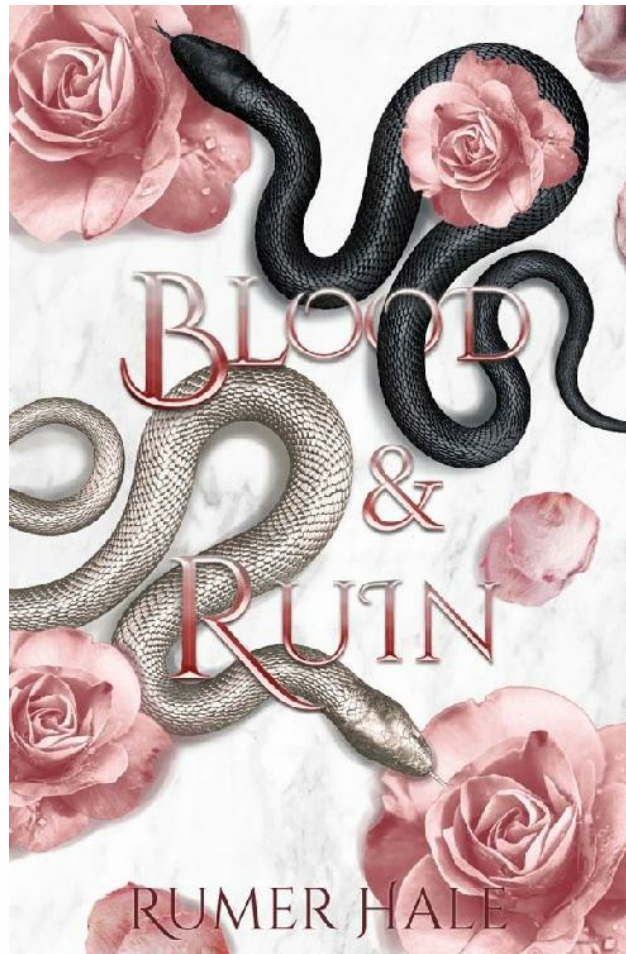
THANK YOU FOR READING

Thank you so much for reading the first book in the Starlight and Storms series, it means the world to me that you gave it a chance. If you enjoyed it, I'd be beyond grateful if you could take a moment to leave a review.

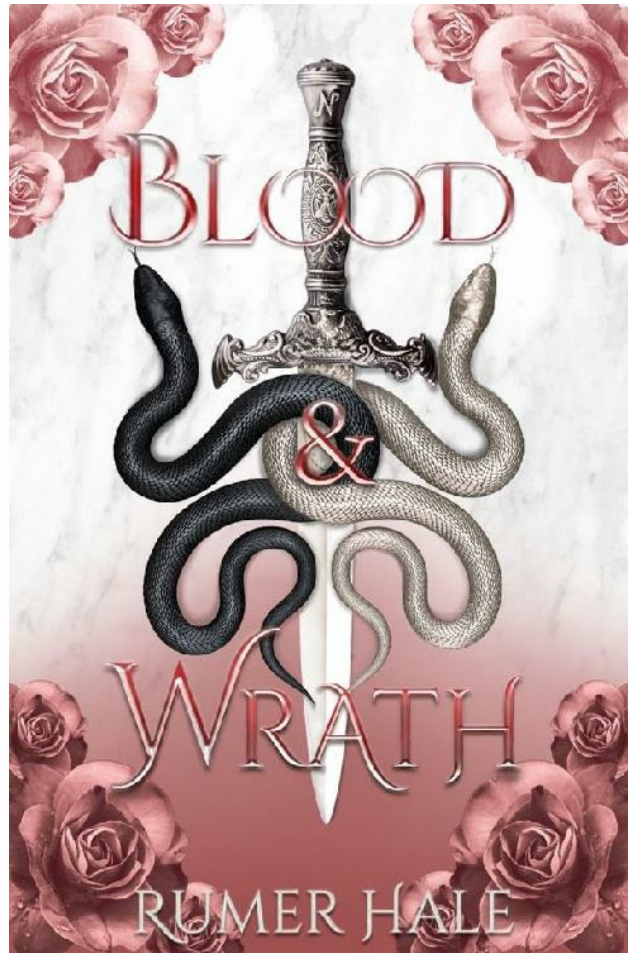
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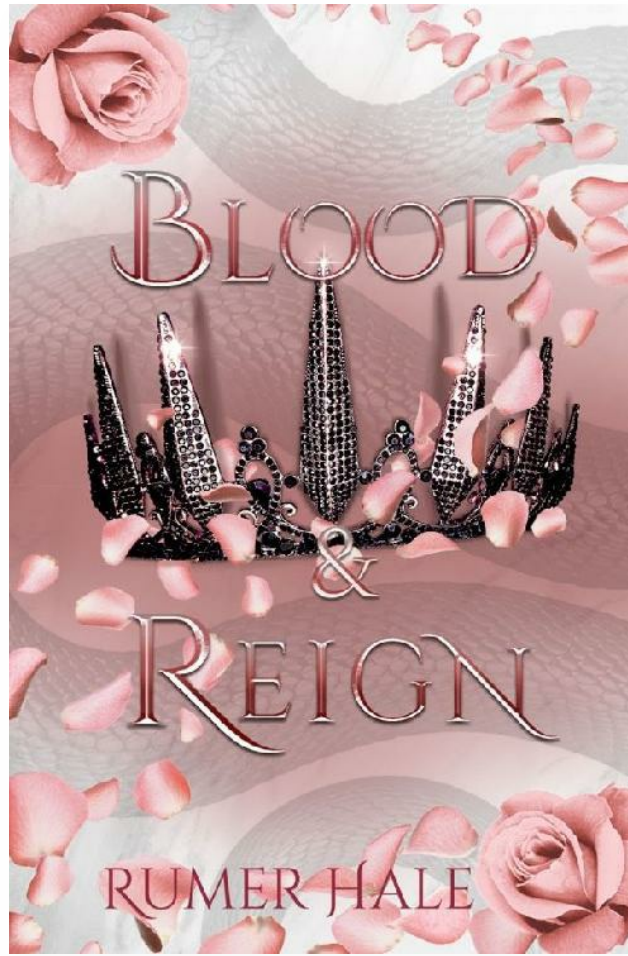
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rumer Hale is an emerging author of Paranormal/Fantasy Romance. She enjoys reading and creating worlds filled with magic and romance.

Keep up to date with future releases and teasers by joining her Facebook Group, *Rumer Hale's Reader Group*, or find her on TikTok and Instagram: @rumerhaleauthor

