

NOCTURNAL HEARTS (BOOK V)

The background is a dark, monochromatic illustration in shades of grey and black. It features a central skull at the top, surrounded by various roses and floral motifs. A window with a grid pattern is visible in the lower left, with a faint rainbow or light source behind it. The overall mood is somber and macabre.

BRUTAL BIRTHRIGHT

ELLIOTT ROSE

BRUTAL
BIRTHRIGHT

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by Elliott Rose

Brutal Birthright

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Published by: Cosmic Imprint Publishing

Cover Design: Maldo Designs


Copy Editor: CreedReads Author Services

1st edition, November 2023

Paperback POD ISBN: 978-1-7385953-4-1

Ebook (EPub) ISBN: 978-1-7385953-3-4

Ebook (Kindle) ISBN: 978-1-7385953-5-8

 Created with Vellum

For those who enjoy indulging in the darkness.

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FIELD MAP &

EXPLORATORY NOTES

Blank for



Fae Dominion



Not to be explored



Mountains
(Healing Waters)



Simple Faerie

A Blank Guide to the
realms & places of
exploration
beyond the limit of
non-magic lands



Sprites



Soterian Realm

Not to be explored

Non-Magic
(caution)



Demonic Realm



Yet to explore

Ancestral Plane



Vampire Territories



Shifter Clans

Not to be explored



Underworld Territories



Alex Clans (Water fae?)

Living Legend

To accompany field notes
& expand upon as explorations allow
across the realms of the supernatural

Fae

*Notable for pointed ears
A fondness for material possessions
magics to conjure items of golds
and gemstone kind



Vampires

*Strength & heightened senses
*Myst-mysting will transport
vampire/Vampiress to known location
(can be amplified by consumption of
blood for memory access)

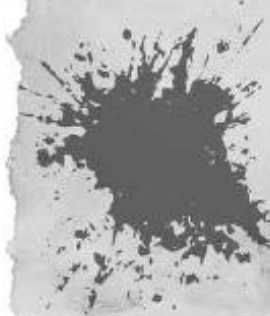


wolf/wolven shifter (Werewolf)

*Strength & heightened senses
Transfiguration between animal
form—that of regular being
Gifted with knowing/intelligence

witches

*powers of connection to 'Source'
Magics of varying elementals
in addition to other gifts bestowed
& beings of self-healing abilities
*Powerful witches may PORTAL
to travel anywhere hence they desire



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Brutal Birthright is a paranormal romance novel that contains dark elements, blood and blood play, knife play, breath play, degradation, biting, torture/interrogation, mutilation (*non-graphic/off page*), death (*on page/non graphic*), plenty of spice, explicit sex, discussions of the loss of a sibling (*occurs off-page, alluded to, non-graphic*).

For more information please visit my website.

This novel is Book Five in the Nocturnal Hearts series of interconnected-standalones. Please note, this book and others in the collection are written using British English spelling.

playlist

Go Fuck Yourself - Two Feet

Counting Bodies Like Sheep To The Rhythm of Wardrums - A Perfect Circle

Middle Finger - Bohnes

Paint It Black - Epic Trailer Version - Hidden Citizens, Rånya

Terrible Thing - AG

A Little Messed Up - june

The Devil Within - Digital Daggers

Love and War - Fleurie

Blood // Water - grandson

Dogs of War - Blues Saraceno

ANGELS & DEMONS - jxdn

Go To War - NOTHING MORE

Hurt Me Harder - Zolita

This Is War - Thirty Seconds To Mars

Hatef--k - The Bravery

Daddy Issues - The Neighbourhood

my strange addiction - Billie Eilish

After Dark x Sweater Weather - mikeeysmind

Graveyard - Halsey

Fire On Fire - From "Watership Down" - Sam Smith

Rolling In The Deep (Acapella) - Adele

Devil Devil - MILCK

Bravado - Lorde

Demons - Imagine Dragons

War of Hearts - Ruelle

In The Woods Somewhere - Hozier

A Little Wicked - Valerie Broussard

Like Lovers Do - Hey Violet

Love Is a Bitch - Two Feet

Sleep Alone - Bat For Lashes

Bad Romance (Epic Trailer Version) - J2, SAI

The Lighthouse - Halsey

Better Man - Guitar/Organ Only - Pearl Jam

I Don't Give A... (feat. Zeale) - MISSIO, Zeal

Messed Up - Once Monsters, Chloe Adams

I'm Falling (Feat. RY X) - Black Coffee, RY X

Miss YOU! - CORPSE

Sociopath - StayLoose, Bryce Fox

Hurts Like Hell - Fleurie, Tommee Profitt

I'd Rather Go Blind - Etta James

Beggin' - Måneskin

Welcome to Astracadia Academy.

A place for supernatural beings from across the realms to learn and strengthen ties together in a way that has never been seen before.

Your accommodation for the year will be located in Trelithia Hall.
Consider this your home away from home.

At Astracadia, we welcome all kinds of magic, power, and gifts to be celebrated and honed during your year of studies. However, there is absolutely zero tolerance for using abilities upon other students, unless it is in a permissible, consenting situation.

We have students enrolled who span a range of ages, from a couple of decades to several hundreds of years. As you will quickly realise, age is not a requirement nor a barrier concerning entry to Astracadia. (Neither does it denote superior abilities). The only rules we expect all students to follow include showing respect to their classmates, honouring the blood wards surrounding the academy grounds—which are in place for your protection—and to be advised that should you leave the academy grounds at any time, our guards will not be responsible for your safety.

The elite Astral ranks will be the goal for many of you and is a highly competitive, rarefied honour to achieve. Only the few who succeed in completing all tasks and assessments to the highest ability will have the opportunity to be selected.

We look forward to seeing you at the upcoming summer solstice ball to celebrate the beginning of this inaugural academic year.

Ruby
Her Royal Highness
Queen of the Fae Dominion

CHAPTER I

“Don’t be an asshole.”

Rowan gritted his teeth. Tightening his grip on the smooth handle of the blade, he allowed himself to imagine it was his brother’s neck for a fraction of a second.

“Fuck off, princess.” He glared at Niall, keeping the weapon firmly in his grasp while folding both arms across his chest. “I’m not fucking doing it.”

They could take their pathetic requests for his help and shove them. Since when had he become some kind of servant, seemingly at the endless beck and call of the fae?

Battle and warfare were his domain. Not babysitting a bunch of feeble royal guards who could barely bring themselves to stick a pig with a knife. Let alone defend themselves, or this gaudy godsdamned palace, from an attack.

“Do you need me to beg? Is that what you want to hear, you sick fuck?” Niall looked ruffled. *Good*. “Your brother isn’t asking this favour. Ruby is. Remember her? Last I checked, the two of you were friends, no? If you even know what that concept means.”

This prick—his blond-haired prissy little shithead of a brother wouldn’t stop running his mouth. If he wasn’t careful, Rowan would have to shut it for him.

He shoved his sword back into its holster. Clearly, he wouldn’t be left alone to continue training or be given a single moment of peace around here.

Ever since arriving at the fae court, it had been one thing after a-fucking-nother.

But he had reluctantly accepted Ruby, queen of the fae, into their life. Niall's fated mate as it transpired.

A member of their growing Nocturne family of witches, if you could call their giant *mess* that.

Fated. Fucking. Mates.

He rolled his eyes internally.

It wasn't long ago that the only time he saw his brothers was to pummel the shit out of them while sparring together before leaving them in the dirt. Gifting Niall and Lachie a busted lip or shattered nose as a reminder to *always* train harder.

Those sorts of trivial injuries would heal quickly enough for witches as powerful as he and his siblings. But it didn't stop them from hurting like a bitch. A timely reminder that you never knew when your head might be severed from your shoulders.

If three hundred years of fighting and fucking and surviving had taught Rowan anything, it was to expect the unexpected.

He and his brothers had shouldered the responsibility of safeguarding their realm for centuries. Yet, they had been enlisted to protect other supernaturals from the dark forces of the House of Elharean, time and time again. A role he'd filled without question for so long that he couldn't remember a time when he wasn't drenched in blood.

Waging an ongoing war against an enemy that seemed more like smoke than anything substantial. Always liable to shift and change and evade in the most unpredictable of ways. Yet, Rowan and whoever he wound up shoulder-to-shoulder alongside on the battlefield had come out on top more often than not.

But now, his two brother's lives revolved around something much more dangerous.

Love.

His eldest brother, Lachie, spent his time drooling after the Guardian of the Realm. Niall now occupied his days acting as round-the-clock protector to his own mate, the fae queen.

One thing was abundantly clear... Rowan was the only one who didn't have a head filled with nonsense. He wasn't thinking with his dick, either.

He didn't put it past Niall to be doing exactly that right now.

"Ruby put you up to this?" With a scowl fixed in place, Rowan dragged a tattooed hand through his hair. He'd allowed it to grow longer since he'd been here at the fae court. A reminder of just how much time had passed since he'd last been able to return home.

Home.

The only place he truly felt at peace.

The only place he could block out the rest of the world and all the fucking assholes in it.

"No, actually. She didn't want to bother you knowing you were nearly finished with your agreed time here." Niall shifted his weight, leaning up against the stone archway. They stood in the giant training hall, newly built alongside the fae palace—now transformed into Astracadia Academy—where Rowan had been temporarily assigned for the past year.

Twelve moons. That was how long it had been. On secondment, living out of rooms he'd barely spent any time within, with the mind-numbing task of attempting to train the fae royal guards to protect their own bloody palace. But now his duty was over, and he was ready to get the fuck out of there, finally.

Until the next demands for the warlord's services came calling, it was time to go live his own damn life.

"Well, then she guessed right. I'm leaving. Can't save your prissy little ass this time, sorry."

A snort from Niall filled the silence between them. Rowan swiped up his shirt from the ground; the scent of sawdust and earth filled his nose as he scrubbed it over his face. Surrounding him with sweat and dirt and magic and the ever-present self-loathing that came with being good for only one thing.

The arena echoed like a vast, empty cavern. The two brothers were the only ones left now, as the rest of the fae guards had long finished training for the night and returned to their quarters.

Another reminder that this place was a far cry from the calm of watching deer graze the lush grass surrounding his cottage. Hidden amongst the forest, the simple wooden cabin was his sanity and sanctuary all in one. Shit, he missed the quiet. The breeze as it rustled the leaves. Water bubbling across mossy rocks in the nearby stream. Dappled sunlight filtering through the forest. He yearned to get back.

“There’s been another slaughter.”

Rowan stilled.

Fuck.

His brother’s lips thinned. A telltale sign of the truth behind his words. Niall might be the golden fucking princess and always quick with a joke, but in this moment, his body language was as easy to read as a book.

“The shifter who was due to run the combat training programme here at the academy was one of them. Their entire group was found just this morning. Not far from the village. A hunting party came across the bodies.”

He twisted the shirt into a tight ball.

“Elhorean doing?” Rowan already knew the answer. The House of Elhorean had fallen only weeks earlier. After succeeding in opening what was known as the Seal of Elhorean and creating a portal to an unknown realm, their dark sorcerers had unleashed magic the likes of which none of them had ever seen before. The kind that was powerful enough to

eradicate their own leader, toppling the throne and leaving a void in its place.

So far, they were all waiting for whoever, or whatever, would inevitably spring up and take the place of the dark power that had attempted to infiltrate and wield control of the realms for countless centuries.

The House of Elharean was an old enemy they knew well. The kind of sorcerers and dark witches who favoured sick and twisted dark magic. Beings who didn't think twice before they used, abused, and took whatever they desired without mercy.

The Nocturnes had lost their other sister—Lachie's twin—to those masochistic fucks two hundred years ago.

Rowan would be damned if he allowed other innocents to suffer a similar fate.

“It was hard to tell. Sorcery, for sure. There were markings found on the bodies that we haven't yet been able to identify. All decapitated with what looked like the use of a blade, not force.”

That ruled out Styge vampires or other shifters in-fighting amongst themselves. Neither of those would bother with weaponry. Claws and teeth would have done the necessary damage. Rowan's fingers twitched. Muscle memory and magic honed over centuries knew the exact swing and force necessary to master a blade and sever the head of another from their shoulders.

Wounding a supernatural being wasn't enough to kill them. Most would heal rapidly using their own powers. Of course, you could weaken an opponent with magic, hexes, or enchantments... but to truly end their life required severing the head.

He'd lost count of how many times he'd dealt a deathly blow.

But Rowan had other ways of honouring the gruesome tally.

“You know how much it hurts to admit you're the best we've got.” Niall practically choked on his words. “But it's the

truth. We need *you* to oversee their training. We have an entire class full of student enrolments starting in the morning. Ruby *needs* this academy to be a success, no?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and blew out a long breath.

Fuck. This. Shit.

“So what? I have to teach a bunch of green-fucking-younglings how to fight? Wipe their asses? Blow their noses? What else do you want me to do? Teach them how to spell and count to five?” He snarled and tossed one of his knives at Niall. If he was going to agree to this, at least he could beat the shit out of his brother as compensation.

Niall’s blue eyes sparked with mischief. He tossed the short blade up and caught it with the other hand. Weighing it for a moment before shucking out of his own shirt. The golden-haired fucker had a few inches on him in height, always being the tallest of the Nocturne brothers despite being the youngest, but his muscled frame remained leaner than Rowan’s.

“Smart. At least that way, you’ll be able to mop up the blood quicker.” He’d already eyed where Niall had forgotten to guard his ribs. His arm was held just a fraction high, exposing a weakness to be easily exploited. Too cocky and self-assured, as always.

“Well fuck you too, brother.” Beginning to circle to his left, Niall relaxed into his usual lazy grin. “And no, you don’t have to do anything but teach the class how to fight. Weapons. Combat. Strategy. All the kind of shit that makes your dick hard.” Niall flashed him a wink and gestured in the direction of his trousers. *Asshole*. “Then, by the end of the year, they’ll graduate into different skill levels. The best of the best will undergo specialist assessments throughout the year. Those who pass will form an elite team, the Astrals, who will be able to pick where they choose to serve across any of the realms.”

An elite team of warriors. At least that was mildly interesting.

Rowan couldn't imagine they'd be capable of much unless these younglings had been gifted with blessings from the Goddesses. And in his three hundred years, he'd only come across a rare few beings who'd earned his respect on the battlefield.

In his experience, most couldn't tell their own asshole from the tip of a sword.

Niall rushed at that moment, trying to catch him off guard, but Rowan ducked under the swing of his elbow. Using the momentum to shove Niall straight past him, the satisfying thud and groan as his brother hit the dirt of the training arena was music to his ears.

"How long will I be required for?" Rowan towered over him, watching through narrowed eyes as Niall hopped back up to his feet.

"Most likely the full academic year. Once word gets out that the previous instructor was found mutilated in the forest... No doubt Ruby is going to have her work cut out for her to ensure the rest of the staff don't quit before the academy has even opened its doors, no?"

Rowan swung out to block the incoming lunge from his brother. Jabbing three times quickly up into his unprotected ribs, then elbowing him to the nose for good measure. Because fuck him.

"You asshole. That was a cheap shot." Bright red coated Niall's forearm as he wiped at the blood now gushing from his nose.

Rowan tossed the short blade from his right to his left hand, then back again. An act so simple and effortlessly connected to his magic he could feel every molecule in the weapon at his command. No matter what implement he wielded, it was an extension of his very soul, and that made Rowan deadly.

Who knew why the Goddesses had chosen to bestow him with this gift from Source, but he'd known how to properly harness the power of a blade before he could walk.

He flexed his neck from side to side. Shit, it felt good to see his baby brother bleed. At least if Niall was going to come here and beg, he could do it bathed in crimson.

“Ruby is going to kick your ass for that the next time you train together.”

As if that would ever happen.

But the little queen was feisty, that much he'd learned in the time he'd known her. Whenever they'd had an opportunity to exchange blows here in the training arena, she proved more than capable of holding her own. His brother's mate knew weapons—and was able to use her fae magic to create some of the finest he'd ever had the pleasure of using or owning—he'd give her that.

Her sister knew how to wield weapons, too.

While Ruby might be the epitome of level-headed, pragmatic, and grounded sensibility, her sister was the opposite in every way. Wild. Uninhibited. Rash.

With fiery eyes and a sharp tongue that would get her into trouble.

And a mouth that...

Fuck. Rowan growled to himself. Circling his brother with one eye warily observing each motion. He'd shoved all thoughts of the dark-haired fae out of his mind in recent months. He didn't give a shit where she was or what she was doing with her life these days.

He hadn't seen her since that day at Ruby's coronation.

Which suited him just fine.

The smartass thought she could swan in with some bullshit elevated status on the grounds of her sister being the queen. Given favours and a prime placement within Ruby's royal protection detail at the palace... not to mention the way she'd directly disobeyed his orders that day.

Putting countless lives at risk.

Heat surged through his bloodstream.

That little girl knew nothing, and he'd been sure to put her in her place at the coronation. She could run off and cry to her sister for all he cared.

For fuck's sake. Now that he was going to have to stay here after all, maybe he needed to take care of this tension rolling around inside him. Rowan didn't have time for distractions. Especially not ones that were centuries too fucking young.

If he needed to blow off some steam, he knew exactly where to go... and how much it cost.

Simple.

Efficient.

Complication-free.

Only there was a massive godsdamned complication. He hadn't been inside any pussy, let alone a mouth, or an ass, in six fucking months. Since she'd wormed her way into his dreams. Plaguing him at night between the regular nightmares like a torturous siren's call.

He needed to get a fucking grip.

"So, you'll do it?" Niall spat a glob of blood onto the ground. Grinning at him with red coating his teeth. He could handle it. The bastard would heal in mere seconds.

"Let me get in another couple of shots in at you, and then you'll have my word." Rowan hated being around this place. A royal court dripping with gold and jewels and pretentiousness that made him want to carve out his own eyeballs. He couldn't stand the thought of another year away from the seclusion of his cottage and the simplicity his mind craved. But war and battle followed no matter where he went, and it would seem the trail of bloodshed, once again, had come to lay itself at his feet.

"We'll need your expertise with setting a blood ward perimeter. Running daily checks of the boundary around the academy. All the kind of shit that makes you jizz your pants, I'm sure."

Oh, he'd get more than a couple of good shots in as payback for that. His brother's mouth was going to get him into all sorts of shit running like that.

“When do I have to begin? And I will be left to train these students exactly as I see fit, I assume? Do whatever I want with them?” Rowan pointed his blade at Niall's chest in warning as his brother tried to shift closer. *Prick.*

“Your first class starts tomorrow. Day one for the new academy.” Niall's eyes flickered all over, looking for a weak spot. He wouldn't find one. “And run them into the dirt for all I care, you ugly tattooed mess. Be brutal. Ruthless. It's what you're best at, no?”

CHAPTER 2

“Welcome to Trelithia Hall.” The thick parchment in Oriana’s hands proudly announced in brilliant gold lettering. Her official residence and commitment for the coming year. One that she was going to stick to, no matter what.

She hitched her leather satchel across her shoulder. Taking a deep breath as she surveyed the crush of bodies gathered in small groups, chatting and laughing. Some looked lost, no doubt still attempting to find their lodgings amongst the endless corridors and passageways of what used to be the royal residences.

Not that she’d have any such problem with navigating her way around. The obnoxiously large stone archway and gilded staircase filling the space before her was familiar territory. After all, she’d been living here at the palace—now converted into an academy—for months already. Being sister to the newly crowned queen of the fae wasn’t exactly the path she’d imagined for herself last winter. And yet here she found herself, on the cusp of her first day as a fucking student in her sister’s newly minted learning centre for supernatural beings.

Astracadia Academy.

She huffed out a long breath, blowing a stray curl from her face. No sense stalling any longer. This was exactly what she’d asked for, after all.

Upon being crowned at her coronation, Ruby had been generous enough to offer her a position within the royal guards

without question. Even bloody well asked if she'd like to join the academic staff in some capacity. Shit, the faith she placed in Ri was the purest kind of love anyone could ever hope for. Unwavering as always in trusting her adoptive sister to guard her back. After all, the two had spent thirty-odd years training, fighting, and hunting together.

Only now, everything had upended in spectacular fashion. Ruby was the new queen and had found her fated mate in Niall of Nocturne. They were sickeningly obsessed with each other—and fucking each other's brains out at every opportunity. As happy as she was for Ruby, there was nothing worse than constantly feeling like the third wheel in their sappy little love story.

It didn't matter that they had been inseparable since her parents had taken in Ruby as a baby. Now her sister had stepped into her royal bloodline and taken over the crown, not that she'd had a choice in the matter, Ri didn't need to be hanging around like a tattered sheet flapping in the wind.

Directionless and without any true notion of what she wanted to do with her immortal life. That was the outfit Ri found herself rather uncomfortably wearing.

Life in their secluded mountain village amongst the Dark Fae had been blissful. But things had been too comfortable there. Days upon days spent roaming the mountains and training with other warriors wasn't enough to keep Ri from losing her mind. Without Ruby for company, she was only one second away from screaming into the void.

The opportunity to enrol in the academy had been a lifeline, and Ri was determined to prove herself. Even if it meant swallowing her pride and sucking it up as a lowly student for a year. She wouldn't be able to hide her connection to the queen—there was no way to avoid their obvious connection to one another—but at least she could use this year to complete the necessary training and earn her place in the elite team being formed. By the end of twelve moons spent living and training here at the academy, she was determined to succeed in gaining her place, no matter what.

The Astrals.

Elite warriors who would be hand-picked. Only the best of the best who survived the rigours of the year ahead.

Securing her place among those rare few who passed the brutality of training and assessments... that kind of achievement could never be taken away from her.

Neither could it be assumed to have been handed to her on a golden platter.

Nope. No handouts from the queen. No favours thanks to her sister's throne. No gilded chambers filled with the trappings of pampered luxury.

Just blood, sweat, and probably tears. But they wouldn't be her own. Those would come from whoever she was pitted against.

Ri came from a long lineage of battle-hardened Dark Fae. She'd be sure everyone knew not to judge a book by its cover. It was far too easy to see a short, curvy, pointy-eared fae and assume all she was good for was manifesting pretty trinkets through magic. Fae society at large had become vapid and obsessed with material wealth over centuries. Shunning her kind and forcing them to retreat into their mountain home centuries ago amid disgusting rumours.

Fuck that. She much preferred it when her trinkets were shaped like arrows and blades anyway.

All the better for hunting with.

Besides, everything had begun to change—albeit very slowly—thanks to the efforts of her sister upon ascending to the throne. The Dark Fae had long spent their lives hidden away from the majority of fae society. Now, her sister had not only broken a generational blood curse on the royal lineage, but she had transformed fae society and stripped away the lies and rumours that had plagued their community for so long.

Ruby was a shining star. The kind of special soul who would change their dominion forever more.

Which was as impressive as it was demoralising at times. Ri had never once been jealous of her sister, but she certainly couldn't help feeling like an inadequate slug some days in the face of everything Ruby was managing to achieve.

Trudging up the staircase, Ri kept her head down and wove through the throngs of other students coming and going. The hum of voices drifted up the stairwell from the entrance to Trelithia Hall. This was the residential wing where the students would be based during the academic year. Converted from what had once been a vast array of opulent, empty palace rooms.

Ruby had taken one look at the lifestyle favoured by previous royals and turned everything on its head. Uncovering dark secrets that had lingered in the shadow of the throne for untold centuries. Dismantling the deep-seated prejudice that had been entrenched for so long in the fae dominion, calling their kind—the Dark Fae—anything from whores to traitors. But Ruby had revealed the truth almost as soon as she took over the throne and immediately set about proving there was no truth to any of those dark rumours. Fuck, she'd been determined to sacrifice her own life in order to do so.

Surviving the curse upon her royal lineage was only one of her sister's many awe-inspiring accomplishments. Not only that, but she had immediately turned her attention to the entire purpose of the fae court. Overhauling the palace and turning the vast number of gilded buildings into an academy and a legacy to be proud of.

Astracadia was destined to be a place where all supernaturals could come in order to learn and train together. Forging bonds across realms and dominions like nothing ever seen before.

She twisted her lips; if there was anyone determined enough to begin a legacy of this nature, it was her sister. That little creature was as relentless as a dog gnawing on a bone when she set her mind to something.

As Ri climbed to the third floor, no one gave her a second glance. Right now, she was just one of many getting ready to

begin their first day tomorrow. The anonymity was a relief. What she needed was a fresh start.

A chance to prove she wasn't what *he* said she was.

Heat flooded her cheeks, recalling the way his acerbic words had sliced straight through her that day. Ruby's fucking coronation of all times and places. She hadn't seen nor spoken to the asshole since he publicly humiliated her six months ago. And for all she cared, he could be long gone from her life.

Screw him. He didn't know the truth of what happened. The ogre had jumped straight to assuming the worst and judging her by her inexperience.

But what did it say about her that his angry words lashing her that day had left her in a seething mess while, at the same time, her clit throbbed with need?

She hated his stupid, handsome face.

And yet wanted to feel the weight of his cock on her tongue.

Ri tugged on the shoulder strap of her bag. Shoving all thoughts of *him* and his dick out of her mind. She wound her way down the lengthy corridor until her assigned room came into sight. Each student had their own small quarters, with a private bedroom, shared bathrooms, and the first floor had been converted into a sprawling casual area and dining hall. Everything students would need while living and studying on-site here at the academy for the year.

Students. She hummed to herself at the odd concept when considering immortality. There was a myriad of beings here. With their respective ages ranging from centuries-old vampires, to witches, right through to fae like herself who had barely seen thirty winters.

Age had no bearing on skill. Experience and magic were two separate entities.

It felt strange having been privy to so many late nights planning all of this with her sister, and now here she was, in the thick of it all, about to settle into her own room. As she spotted the room designated to be hers for the year, she saw

doors on either side of hers propped open. Laughter floated out from groups gathered in the bedrooms flanking her own.

It was comfortable enough. Bed. Desk. A large, vaulted window which overlooked the vast estate. Through the glass panes, the lush, leafy tops of broad trees towered over neat pathways. Gardens stretched in the direction of the training arena and in the distance the ornate glass and iron enclosure of the herbarium could be seen.

Tossing her small bag onto the plush blankets, she paused and stretched her arms above her head. Debating for a moment whether to strip down from her training leathers and remove the stash of weapons strapped to her body. This all felt awkward and unfamiliar. What was she supposed to *do* until training began in the morning?

Make friends or some shit?

“... All the teachers and academic staff are mated. I heard the queen made it a rule only to appoint someone if they were already bonded with a fated mate or multiple mates. Supposedly, it was to ensure there could be no risk of inappropriate behaviour between students and the staff.” A female voice floated in from across the hall.

“You know why that is, don’t you? The queen would know all about *inappropriate* behaviour.” A male laugh followed.

Ri bristled. She flexed her fingers, resisting the impulse to grab a blade from her thigh and barge in there. With a deep breath, she closed her eyes. Threatening to sever the heads of her fellow students wouldn’t be the best look for day one.

“Yeah, I heard the queen was sneaking around fucking her bodyguard for months. Obviously, she doesn’t want to risk even more scandal attached to her name or the academy.” The high-pitched giggle made her teeth clench.

Oh, that was it. This gossiping bitch was going to taste the tip of Ri’s blade...

But as she swung around—ready to storm across the hall and choose violence against whoever was in there talking shit about her sister—a flash of pink hair and a bright smile filled

the doorway to her room. A sprite blocked her exit, looking serene and mischievous all rolled into one. Ri went to snap at whoever this was to get the fuck out of her way, but the stranger simply put her finger to her lips and then gestured for her to follow behind.

Who knows why, maybe out of sheer curiosity, but she bit her tongue and dutifully followed.

The sprite skipped ahead, pink hair bobbing around her chin, and stopped just inside the doorway of the room opposite Ri's. The voices dropped off at the sight of the willowy figure with sharply tipped ears and pointed features. Swathed in a soft, flowing purple dress, she looked like a gentle sunrise.

"Don't mind us. You must be the expert on all things here at the academy?" She flashed a sweet smile at the group, who had suddenly gone quiet at their arrival. "I didn't know we had designated gossips living on each floor. Sounds like you've got plenty to say on shit you know nothing about."

Ri suddenly liked this little pastel-coloured creature a whole lot.

"What do you care? And who are *you* anyway?" A shifter with long blonde curls glared from where she sat on the bed.

"I'm Brynne of the Abagarth Riders." She turned and fluttered a wrist in Ri's direction, beckoning her closer. "And this is..." Her eyebrow cocked in silent question.

"Oriana. Evidently, we're all neighbours." She gestured around the room, then rested a hand over the blade tucked at her hip. A male shifter sat beside the gossipy one on the bed. From the matching set of blond curls, pale grey eyes, and symmetrical noses, she presumed they must be twins. Perched around the room were two others, a female fae and a male witch.

"Wonderful. I'm Vanya... and this is Glade." The blonde bitchy one might not have actually rolled her eyes, but it was right there in her tone. She acted like all the students here were already under her manicured thumb.

Just wonderful. A year of putting up with that kind of prissy attitude right next door was going to be like living the dream.

“Ok, and how about the rest of you? You got names, too?” Brynne pressed. Eyeing the others who sat there looking at the floor.

“Saskia.” A red-headed, freckled fae raised a hand. To her credit, she looked like she didn’t want to be there.

A witch with almost white hair hanging low across his deep kohl-rimmed eyes tapped ringed fingers against the windowsill. “Atticus.” His expression gave nothing away as he studied them all in return.

“Well, since we’re neighbours, how about agreeing there’s no need for gossiping and being dicks, hmm?” This Brynne character looked soft and squishy, but if she came from the Abagarth Riders, no doubt the girl had steel in her veins. After all, back in her home territory, sprites eventually became dragon riders.

“Well, it isn’t *gossip* that all the teaching staff are mated. That’s just a fact. And it’s safe to assume there’s only one reason no *unmated* teachers are present on campus.” Blondie twirled her hair with a smirk.

“And it’s safe to assume that you can keep the queen’s name out of your mouth. Especially when her sister lives right across the hall.” Ri had enough of this shit. Swivelling on her heel, she left gasps in her wake.

Let them choke on that little tidbit.

“Ohhh, we’re going to have so much fun this year. Are you honestly the queen’s sister?” Godsdamnit, the sprite had followed her back across the hall. Before Ri could say anything, the purple-clad figure bounced onto the bed. Making herself right at home.

“Yep.” Ri fidgeted with the gold chain around her neck.

“I thought she was an orphan... or... that the previous king had never claimed her as his child... fuck, sorry, I don’t mean to be disrespectful.” Brynne nibbled on her bottom lip. A faint

silvery line of a scar ran along the side of her freckled cheek, just below her wide sky-blue eyes.

“My parents adopted Ruby as a baby. We grew up inseparable.”

“And wow... Now you’ve got a queen instead of a sister. I bet that makes for some interesting family dinners, huh?”

“Something like that.” Ri blew out a breath and relaxed a fraction. “Just call me Ri, by the way.”

“Ri, that’s pretty. So, judging by the fact you’ve got more knives strapped to you than I can count and that you look scary as fuck, I’m going to guess you’re headed for the training arena in the morning?” Brynne gestured up and down in her direction.

“What gave me away?” Ri couldn’t help but smirk. “How about you, little spriteling? What are you specialising in?”

“The same, although I hope to pick up as many extra herbalism classes as possible. I might be destined to ride a giant fuck-off dragon one day back home, but this year, I want to learn as many healing techniques as possible.”

She grimaced. “I can’t say I’m looking forward to those classes. My skills are better suited to fighting than studying... books aren’t really my thing.”

Brynne’s face lit up, and she practically levitated off the bed. “Well, it’s your lucky year, scary girl. For I shall be your good-luck-bookworm.” At the sight of confusion furrowing Ri’s brow, she flapped her hands around. “I’m a big ol’ book nerd. Absolutely *love* studying. So, you help me with being a badass in training, and I’ll help you with the book stuff. How does that sound?”

Sounds perfect.

“He’s hot, don’t you think?”

“Who?”

“Atticus. He’s got the whole tortured soul, but the right person could fix him, kind of energy.”

“I guess so. I didn’t really notice.”

Too busy getting fucked in dreamland every night by a hulking tattooed beast of a man.

“Oh, shit. Are you seeing someone? Mated? I’m sorry, I just assumed... you’ve got a ‘fuck off, I’m an independent bitch’ kinda vibe going on.” She crinkled her nose and waved both hands in a big show of highlighting the skin-tight training leathers and knives Ri still wore.

Her snort came out louder than intended. “Definitely not attached.”

Definitely.

In no way was she allowing *him* to keep manipulating so much brain space.

“Ok, good, because we are going to be taking advantage of the line-up on offer here this year. Have you seen the cheekbones on the vampires? Not to mention the way I would not say no to being pinned down in the woods by one of those shifters.” Brynne fanned her face.

Ri rolled her lip between her teeth to stop from laughing.

“Wait—have you got yourself a sigil? For protection? A girl can never be too prepared.” Her friend pointed in the direction of Ri’s hip.

“Um, yes.”

As soon as she’d found out about that kind of magic from her sister, Ri had been quick to procure one for herself. Thanks to Ruby’s connections, and a rather drunken night with her group of witch girlfriends, Ri now had the star-shaped tattoo on her hip, which allowed for carefree fucking and fooling around.

Not that she’d found anyone worth her time to fall into bed with since getting it, mind you.

Spirits and fucking ancestors, she really just needed some good dick. Maybe that would help her focus on making it through to the Astrals. At least the odds were high of finding someone else here looking for a no-strings-attached good time.

And Brynne seemed like the perfect partner-in-mischief to search for those types of adventures with.

Maybe a half-decent fuck would finally eradicate the tattooed asshole who played the starring role in every orgasm she'd given herself over the past six months.

Ri shook off her wandering mind and eyed the purple floaty fabric hanging around the sprite's legs. Picking up a long edge of the material, she rubbed it between her fingers.

"This is cute, but I think I'm going to have to use my magic to organise you something more appropriate to wear in the arena tomorrow... unless you've packed anything that doesn't resemble a—"

"Finish that statement... I dare you, scary girl." Brynne jumped up off the bed and propped her hands on her hips. Eyes dancing with laughter.

Perhaps this year would have a little fun to it, alongside the requisite hard work, after all.

"Come on, let's get out of here. I want to explore the grounds a little... and I'm guessing you know this place better than all of us if your sister is in charge?"

Ri nodded, following her new-found friend out the door and sealing her room behind her with her fae magic. "You could say that."

They both threaded their way back down to the main hall on the first floor, avoiding the various clusters of lost-looking students. Brynne continued to talk relentlessly, taking notes on, and complimenting everything Ri wore. Wistfully claiming she'd love to have such long glossy curls and the fierceness to pull off having one side of her head shaved, too.

"It's not entirely accurate, what Vanya was saying, you know." Brynne nudged at her with a shoulder. "Not *all* the teaching staff are *mated*. My father knows some of the guards here, and when we arrived this morning, they were all talking about a recent attack."

Attack? Ruby would surely have mentioned...

“Somewhere near the village—a group of shifters were found dead, and the professor who was supposed to be in charge of our combat training was among them. They’ve had to make an urgent replacement in time for classes to start tomorrow.” Her voice dropped low. “And not only that, but according to the guards, it wasn’t just a teacher who was killed; a student was found dead also.”

CHAPTER 3

Ri didn't have time to find her sister and grill her about not only one but two deaths. Or why the fuck she decided not to inform her of an attack in the nearby village right at this moment in time. One involving a teacher and a student, no less.

They'd been through enough shit with keeping secrets from one another. The kind that had nearly stolen Ruby's life.

Wasn't this exactly the kind of information Ri was supposed to know? Just because she'd enrolled in the academy as a student didn't mean she'd settle for being kept out of the loop on essential details. Only a day ago, she'd still been the go-to protector and guard for Ruby, working alongside Niall.

This was exactly the kind of information she *should* be kept abreast of. Especially when it came to the protection and safety of her sister. Fuck, she'd rather drop out of Astracadia and return to guarding Ruby full-time than risk her life again.

But right now, tracking down the queen would have to wait.

Priorities. Ri reminded herself.

She had every intention of putting in an excellent training session for her first day.

Then, she'd hunt down Ruby and tear her a new one.

"You can all pair off and start warming up together." The bulky-looking fae with blond hair barked at them from across the training arena. Finnic, or Finn as he introduced himself,

was apparently the armourer within the fae guards here at the palace.

He'd muttered something when they first assembled about being brought in to help with their training but that he wasn't their actual professor. He didn't seem too worried if they milled around while waiting for whoever was in charge to appear—busying himself by arranging various weapons against the far wall of the large compound.

Ri had brought her own satchel full of her favoured blades, along with her own bow and quiver of gold-tipped arrows. Not to mention the knives concealed all over her body.

She wouldn't be needing any of those hand-me-down-looking weapons Finn was fussing with.

The building for their combat training was open-sided, with large stone archways, a wide-span roof, and a dirt-covered floor. Perfect for whatever assessments and lessons in fight technique they would have to endure over the coming year.

Ri glanced around. Where the fuck was Brynne? The class of about fifty students was busy getting into pairs and beginning to run through some simple exercises. She saw the golden heads of the twins over on the far side of the arena, and through the sea of unfamiliar faces, both Saskia and Atticus were pairing off with unknown class members.

“Over here, scary girl.” With flushed cheeks and sounding a little breathless, Brynne's familiar shock of pink hair flew towards her.

“Thank fuck. I thought I would have to beat up a stranger on day one.” Ri shook her head. “Where have you been?”

“Filling up on pastries... didn't you see the breakfast spread? The food here is something else.” Her big eyes rolled back in her head.

“Lesson one, spriteling. You'll find training much easier without a belly full of pastry weighing you down.”

“And lesson one for you, scary girl... in the breakfast queue is where you'll get the best information. Have you *seen*

the new combat professor?”

“No, why? Are they awful?” She stretched out her shoulders.

“He’s the hottest fucking thing anyone has seen. Tattooed. Broody. Total lady killer.”

Oh, shit.

Ri’s stomach plummeted.

It couldn’t be...

But before she could even try and breathe for just a second, a murmur went up around the group. Bodies closed in on all sides as the class moved towards whatever had captured their attention.

She could practically hear Vanya’s shirt buttons pop open as she shouldered past to get to the front of the group. “Well, hello there, professor-fuck-me. That right there is one very *unmated* man.” The shifter whispered far too loudly. Clearly trying to be anything but subtle with her raspy purr.

And all Ri could do was twist the grip of her satchel in her hand. Heat flaring across her skin. She kept her head down, gaze firmly locked on the leather beneath her fingers. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He was here.

Rowan of Nocturne was everything she shouldn’t desire.

Three centuries older than her.

Practically a member of their family.

One of her sister’s most trusted allies—as unlikely as their friendship appeared on the outside.

And yet Ri couldn’t erase him from her thoughts.

He’d unknowingly invaded. Commanded. And she’d been futile to resist.

The sudden jerk of an elbow into her ribs came from Brynne, who then dragged her by the arm to join the throng of students. All of them now standing in a sort of semi-circle

around the two men at the front who spoke quietly together. They'd ended up right at the front before she could dig her heels in, turn tail, or flee. Nowhere to hide now.

Why the fuck didn't Ruby mention that he was part of the academic staff?

She allowed her hesitant gaze to drift over him for a second, where he stood just off to one side with Finn. Their heads bowed as he listened to whatever the armourer was saying.

His scent of leather and the forest and something like sandalwood smoke tugged at her core with frustrating ease.

The sweep of mussed dark hair hung longer around his face than the last time she'd seen him. Was that blood up the side of his inked neck? Ri felt her stomach swoop as she took in the way his black shirt hugged the chiselled torso she'd spent far too many nights imagining looming over her.

Rowan had the audacity to steal her sanity and ruffle her composure. Trapping her in a forcefield of obscenely muscular, tattooed, deadly strength.

Shit. As if she'd voiced every single one of her thoughts out loud, his head snapped up and turned her way. A lethal look about him as his wolfish stare landed on her immediately. Even from this distance, the ring of silver encircling his irises gave him a predatory energy. Set against brilliant blue orbs that haunted her dreams.

Only this wasn't the type of blush-inducing interaction she'd grown accustomed to while lying awake and alone in her bed at night.

No. The giant man covered in ink standing before her wasn't a charming knight set to sweep her off her feet. This was a venomous snake. Beautiful. Deadly. Coiled and braced to strike.

A born killer.

Who glared back at her with flared nostrils and barely leashed rage.

But as fast as he'd singled her out amongst the crowd of students, he surveyed the rest of the arena. Cool indifference masked any reaction he'd initially shown at seeing her here. Perhaps he'd been just as unaware of her enrolment in the academy as she'd been of his presence?

He folded his arms across his impossibly broad chest, then spoke for the first time. And fuck if the sound of his deep rumbling voice didn't set her heart fluttering in the back of her throat.

Ri had imagined that voice in her ear giving all sorts of commands. The kind that instantly made her clit throb and pussy clench.

Fuck. She wasn't even paying attention to his instructions. Only the movements of his mouth. The clench of his scruffy jaw. How his throat worked. She shook her head, dragging her attention and sanity out of the clouds and back to ground level.

"No magic. No shifting. No enchantments or otherwise enhanced weaponry." Rowan's deep rasp hung in the air as he listed off orders while the class around her hung on his every word. "I don't give a fuck about your powers. When you're in this arena, unless otherwise specified, you're training for the moment you do *not* have access to your gifts."

Even the males seemed transfixed by him. Not that Ri was surprised. They probably wanted to be fucked by him too.

"This year, a large part of what you will learn is training that will prepare you for the worst-case scenario. Which will hopefully mean that even if you never need these skills, you'll at least have a fighting chance of surviving in battle."

The next moment, she realised he must have stopped speaking because other voices began to pipe up. Most sounded high-pitched and as disconcerted as she felt. The swarm of moths in her stomach fought each other for wing space. Closer and closer, the voices came until she heard Brynne pipe up and introduce herself to the rest of the group.

Crap.

All too soon, it was her turn. Eager-looking eyes from the rest of the class swung her way, putting her right at the centre of attention.

Ri cleared her throat. Looking Rowan square in the eye, she jutted out her jaw. “Oriana. Dark Fae. My speciality weapons are short blades and a hunting bow.”

And as quick as the words were out of her mouth, the next person to her left was speaking. The asshole didn’t show so much as a twitch of recognition or acknowledgement. She didn’t want—or expect—preferential treatment here in any shape or form. But he was *friends* with Ruby. His own brother was her sister’s fated mate. Their paths were intertwined, whether they liked it or not. And he’d just blankly moved to the next person without so much as a grunt or nod.

Rage started to simmer throughout her insides.

She’d already endured one campaign of humiliation from Rowan of Nocturne.

Fuck him if he thought he could treat her like that for the duration of this year.

But as she tossed around all the ways she hated his ridiculously perfect face and body and way of commanding the room, her eyes couldn’t help drifting to the hard lines of his frame.

Rowan was just *enormous*—a solid wall of a man. Witches in the Nocturne family all seemed blessed with unbelievably good looks, but he was different from his siblings in so many ways.

Not to mention the tattoos covering nearly every inch of visible skin, rising from his fingers along his arms and disappearing beneath his rolled shirt sleeves.

Goddesses save her. Why was she such a harlot for veined bulging forearms? The way those muscles popped and glistened with a light sheen of sweat—

“Oriana.”

His gravelly voice made her jump.

Shit.

Darting her tongue out to wet her bottom lip, she realised the entire class stared at her expectantly. *Again.* Rowan's piercing gaze locked onto hers, but his expression remained cool and distant. Shuttered away behind a fortress.

“Care to share with the class an example of a weakness you might take advantage of in an opponent? Or are you uninterested in listening to instructions during your time in this academy?”

Oh.

OH.

Fuck him.

Fuck him.

Ri's fists curled into balls at her sides. He had no idea what had transpired that day during the coronation, and here he was, still intent on belittling her in as public a manner as possible. Screw that. She wasn't going to take any shit from this witch.

“There are many, actually.” Ticking off her fingers as she spoke, Ri plastered on a serene smile. While on the inside, she delighted in the thought of flinging her blades at his chest. “Greed is obvious. Money and power will always be easy leverage to use. Followed by exploiting younglings or family. You'd be surprised how many selfish beings place a higher value on material possessions and would gladly sacrifice those closest to them, so one can never assume what they will value more. Secrets are always a sure way to expose an opponent. And lastly, a mate bond or fated soul connection is the perfect weak point, no matter how tough an adversary may seem.”

Her cheeks burned, and silence echoed through the arena.

Defiance slipped through her bloodstream as Ri gathered her long hair over one shoulder and raised an eyebrow at Rowan. “Would you like me to continue, or should I allow someone else in the class an opportunity to demonstrate their willingness to obey *commands*?”

Nothing fucking ruffled the composure of this man. He simply turned to a rugged-looking vampire and pointed at his chest with one of his short swords. “And how does a mate bond get confirmed across species? The kind that can be used to determine a weakness?”

The dark-headed vampire with roguish hair sweeping across his eyes—Ri vaguely remembered him mentioning his name as Etienne, or *E* as some called him—dutifully answered.

“Through blood bonds. Biting and tasting of blood for vampires and demonic beings, or sensing for shifters.”

Rowan swung around, the point of his blade now fixed on Vanya.

A flare of something hot surged in Ri’s stomach.

“You. What about witches and fae?”

She was certain Vanya squeezed her tits together as she answered in a saccharine voice. “Fae and sprites recognise their fated mate through a kiss. While witches have the power of *choice*, they aren’t bound by a fated connection if they choose not to be.”

“How do we avoid those things being used against us then?” Brynne stuck her hand up.

Rowan arched a dark eyebrow. Letting her words hang in the air for a long moment before he responded.

“You want to survive?” He growled, “Never let someone taste your blood, watch yourself around wolves, and don’t go kissing fae or sprites.”

That primal sound and the words *kissing fae* sent a coil winding low in Ri’s core. Goddess-fucking-damnit, she shouldn’t be fixating on those words and how everything sounded so deliciously rough coming from his mouth.

But before Rowan could continue with his next line of questioning of another student, Vanya interrupted. *This bitch was getting on her last nerve*. “Excuse me, *sir*... but you’ve learned all our names, and yet haven’t told us how you’d like

us to address *you*.” She stood twirling a golden lock of hair around her forefinger. Innuendo slithering all over the place as she batted her eyelashes. *Cunt face*.

Ri’s fingernails dug deep into her palm.

Brynne made a gagging noise beside her.

“The queen has made it clear all academic staff are to be addressed formally...” Rowan appeared to chew over something for a moment. “But I don’t give a shit about that. In the heat of battle, there are rarely times for formalities, only showing loyalty and respect.”

And with that cryptic statement, he spun on his heel. Disappearing and leaving a rather bemused-looking Finn to lead them in training drills for the rest of the class.

Not before levelling Ri with a long look that spoke volumes.

Loyalty and respect.

Oh, yes. He’d know all about that, wouldn’t he? Yet he clearly held it against her for a truth he’d never know. She would rather chew her own arm off than give him the satisfaction of thinking that he’d gotten under her skin.

Fucking prick.

CHAPTER 4

F *uck.*
Long dark hair cascading over her shoulder. One side of her head shaved to reveal a delicate, pointed ear tip. Brown eyes with flecks of faint coppery gold kissing the innermost ring. Deep bronzed skin.

Tits for days.

An ass that couldn't be ignored.

She wasn't supposed to be here.

A pretty fucking package with an infuriating mouth.

Rowan strode out of the training centre, barely keeping hold of his composure.

No one had mentioned that she was fucking enrolled in the academy as a *student*. The last he'd seen or heard, she'd been holed up in Ruby's private chambers here in the palace, given some foolishly elevated status as part of the queen's personal guard detail.

The girl was barely thirty winters old and didn't know shit.

A fact she'd proven that day at the coronation. Headstrong and foolish and ignoring his commands. Thinking she had the right to disobey a direct order.

Now, here she was. In his class. The one he'd agreed to take over as a godsdamned favour to her sister for a whole year.

Which meant he couldn't do shit about it. Raising it as a problem with Ruby would lead to... well... questions.

The kind he had no inclination to answer.

His fingers balled and then flexed over and over as he made his way to the catacombs. Maybe it wasn't the best look to leave Finnic in charge of the first training session, but the prick could manage on his own. They were only ever going to assess and group the class based on their skill level to begin with. Nothing dangerous or difficult.

No. The only danger here was the little fae girl who had caught him by surprise. Turning up where she bloody well shouldn't be.

She'd barely opened her pouty mouth, and all that sass came tumbling out. The kind that could get her killed or, worse, get someone else killed. Because clearly, the little girl thought she knew everything.

He couldn't believe this shit. While his brothers were all standing around with their dicks in their hands, Rowan was going to have to look after a bunch of younglings. Not only that, but he was stuck with *her*.

Oriana.

Her name flickered across his tongue.

All kinds of fucked up thoughts raced through his mind. Namely how it would feel to have her on her knees looking like a goddess at his feet. How he'd fisted his cock too many times, imagining her breathless moans as she choked on him. What it would feel like to sink into her tight, hot little cunt.

But there was a mile of distance between fantasising about something and crossing that line.

And in this case, the line was a trench filled with poison and bordered with a giant sign saying, '*Do not fucking touch.*'

Niall had completely ignored that line with her sister, Ruby. The very queen of the fae, whom he was most definitely *not* supposed to have touched. He'd gone about nearly getting

himself killed by thinking only with his dick and chasing after pussy.

Leaving Rowan to pick up the pieces.

“Hello brother, make anyone cry today?” As if he conjured the idiot just by thinking of him, Niall’s voice rang out in greeting when he reached the base of the stone staircase. Cool, dank air rushed up from the cavernous space hidden below ground.

“No, but it’s not yet noon.” Rowan flipped a middle finger in reply.

There was no way he was in any mood to entertain his brother right now. If he even looked at him the wrong way, he’d be liable to end up with a blade through his thigh.

“Thought I’d find you down here surrounded by the stench of death. You’re done with class rather early, no?” Niall raised an eyebrow.

“What do you want?” Jabbing both hands through his hair, Rowan took a deep breath through his nose.

As always, there was nothing but mischief gleaming in his brother’s blue eyes. Trying—but never succeeding—to find a chink in Rowan’s armour.

“Just came by to see how you wanted the perimeter checks to operate. We’ve got the fae guards from the palace stationed around the academy, and the forest surrounds have blood wards in place. But judging by how savage the attack was and the proximity of the village...” His brother leant on the metal table in the centre of the room and tapped a forefinger. “You’ll have thoughts on what action is best to take, no?”

Rowan knew his brother was only concerned with one thing. His fated mate’s protection came paramount to everything else. Hundreds of students and academic staff were insignificant to him when all he truly cared about was Ruby’s safety.

His weakness.

“We need to put a section of the guards onto canvassing the wider region. Keep eyes round the clock on the villages in the area. See if we can find any information from the locals or catch wind of any other suspicious deaths that might be connected. Leave the forest perimeter checks to me. And we’ll need to find an expert who can translate the markings on the bodies found... speaking of which, have you heard from our fucking sister lately?”

Niall rolled his eyes.

Of course not.

Trying to predict the actions of Brigid of Nocturne was like trying to grab wind in your fist. Their youngest sister was the most gifted Seer in existence. But that didn’t save any of them from being constantly infuriated by her bullshit.

Especially when they could actually make use of her meddling presence for once.

“I’ll see if Ruby can track her down. She seems to have the gift of harnessing Bri’s wild spirit for a few moments, no?”

“Who fucking knows.” He clenched his jaw. Ready for this conversation to be over and to be left in peace. “If that’s all, then get the fuck out. Go get your dick sucked in the throne room or whatever it is that you two do all day, golden boy.”

“Ruby is going to have your balls if she ever hears you saying that kind of shit, and I will *gladly* be standing back watching while she does her worst.” With a deep rumbling laugh and a mock salute, Niall portaled away. Disappearing in a swirl of fine smoke as he shook his head to himself.

Fucking finally.

Leaving Rowan with the quiet he so desperately craved. He’d spoken more in the past thirty minutes than he probably had in the past week. Maybe even an entire month. His skin itched and felt too tight all of a sudden. Like some kind of twisted, black-hearted hermit crab, he wanted to crawl out and find a new shell to inhabit. Down here, among the bones of the dead, was one of the only places he’d ever been able to calm his racing mind in this place.

Bracing both palms on the table in front of him, he dropped his head down. Squeezing his eyes shut didn't do anything to drown out the sight of her. The way his imagination ran riot at the mere thought of the little fae he most definitely should *not* be picturing moaning beneath him as he pounded into her.

But all he saw in his mind was those wide fuck-me eyes staring back at him as she wrapped her pouty lips around his length. Humming as he tapped the back of her throat over and over. Whimpering and begging to ease the ache between her thighs...

Fuck, he needed to pull himself together.

Somehow, Rowan needed to figure out how he was going to get through an entire year of training Oriana. Especially if he was going to do so without having a permanently hard cock.



He could portal anywhere.

Just up and leave right now.

In less time than it would take to sling a blade back into its holster, he could return to his home and be surrounded by the silence of trees and lush forest undergrowth, knowing there wasn't another soul as far as he could see.

But instead, he found himself wandering back to the training arena—long after the class had ended, of course—because he had to find that idiot Finnic and work out what the fuck he was going to do next.

Before tomorrow, when his big fucking problem, dressed in tight training leathers that fit her curves to perfection and left absolutely nothing to the imagination, reappeared.

And if he'd noticed the girl, then no doubt all those horny little assholes in the class had noticed her too.

Rowan spotted the head of golden hair over on the far side of the space, crouched down and doing something with the weapons they'd approved for the students to train with. At least an even playing field was created by giving the whiny little shits rudimentary tools such as these to work with. No opportunity to hide or attempt to gain favour from behind an enchanted sword or use of magic.

They'd have to earn their ranking based on skill and skill alone. A fact which he was sure would break some of them before they'd even truly begun. Rowan was expecting at least half, if not more, to drop out before they reached the end of the first month.

He could sense the softness in them. None had ever seen the true horrors of battle. They hadn't experienced the ghosts that lingered in the mind long after making the split-second decision to kill or be killed. Those were the kinds of choices that chipped away at a soul until there was nothing left.

War forged a being's very identity. Going through the fire and coming out the other side bloody and bruised and changed for an eternity.

Knowing you'd taken a life was a unique burden that came with every slick sound of a blade cutting through flesh.

"There he is, the witch of mystery himself." Brilliant white teeth blinded him as the fae turned and hit him with a broad smile.

Sweet fucking Spirits. It felt unnervingly like looking at a replica of his brother, Niall.

Maybe that was why he'd been on edge ever since he found out he'd been landed with Finnic. The guy was too much like the other blond-headed pain in his ass for Rowan's liking.

But if there was one thing he could begrudgingly admit was going to come in useful was having an armourer on standby. He might as well assist with the training and weaponry instead of pissing around. The kid seemed

enthusiastic, which was mildly irritating but not an entirely intolerable quality to have.

Rowan grunted and crossed his arms. Standing over the fae with his legs spread.

Yeah, he liked that his bulky frame took up plenty of room and gave him the upper hand without saying a word. If that made him a dick, so what? He wasn't here to make friends. It was the small pleasures in life you had to grab hold of sometimes.

“Not the talkative type, I'm guessing?” Finnic rested his arms over his knees. Still perched on his haunches. “That's ok. I'm more used to working alone with only the forge and my magic for company. So, we're a right pair then, aren't we?”

A pair?

Rowan hadn't wanted to be anything but left the fuck alone for the past century. Maybe even longer.

But the Goddesses didn't bloody well quit when it came to their demands for his services. They'd ensured their executioner was always available to get blood on his hands.

What was he supposed to do with this wet-behind-the-ears fool? From the way he was grinning up at him... did he want to hold hands and braid each other's hair or some shit? This entire situation was a joke.

“Sparring went well. Some of them have definite potential to make it into the elites. Others have got a *lot* to learn.” He pushed to standing. The fae was about a head shorter than Rowan but broad-shouldered. Looking like his chest was made of solid steel hidden beneath his shirt. *Who the fuck wore a white shirt to a training arena?*

Finnic bent down to collect a couple of the swords. A neat line stretched between them of all the weapons laid out in rows on the dirt floor. Rowan tensed up, his shoulders squaring and jaw clenched as he tracked the movements of the fae. Why hadn't the class put them back themselves? Did this idiot think he was their servant or something? Prepared to get on his hands and knees to tidy up after them at the end of training

each day. He probably thought hugs were a good idea too... or some kind of sappy shit like that.

Fuck that for a joke.

Rowan's eyes narrowed as the man methodically put away each of the weapons into their respective wall mounts inside the alcove just off the training arena. All the while, he continued talking non-stop about the students in the class. Who had sparred against whom. The way he thought best to rank them all. Weaknesses and tells he'd observed as they'd run through the practice drills with their partners.

At least Finnic demonstrated an ability to somewhat pay attention to detail. Even if he looked a heck of a lot like his idiot brother, their personalities couldn't be more different. The thought of having to put up with a smartass like Niall for a whole year, on top of this bullshit teaching situation, made his fingers itch to sink a knife into something. Or someone.

"Why are you doing that?" Rowan dropped a heavy boot onto the blade of the sword Finnic reached for next. Pinning the weapon to the dirt and preventing him from picking it up.

The fae grinned up at him. *Maniac.*

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because those little pricks need to do this themselves. You let them push you around on day one, and they'll never respect you." Rowan gritted his teeth. He was about fucking done with today.

"Oh, I get it." He tapped the toe of his boot and nudged him off. Continuing to collect up the weapons and store them away as he spoke. "You think I let the class run off and left me to tidy up after them?"

Rowan arched an eyebrow. Something that obvious didn't deserve an answer.

"By the way, you're going to have to figure out what you want to be addressed as during classes," Finnic called over his shoulder. "Don't get me wrong, I can't see you as the *Professor Nocturne* type either, but there's only going to be so many times you can dodge that question before they just start

coming up with their own names for you. And trust me, you don't want that from a bunch of younglings with too much time on their hands."

Stars, he was so done with all of this. And it was only day fucking one.

"Rowan. They can call me that." He grunted.

"Great. Now we just have to work on your verbal skills, and then we might be getting somewhere, blade-slinger."

Oh, fuck no.

"No." No way were they going to be trading nicknames like buddies.

"No?"

"No nicknames."

Finnic gave him a wink and another of those big, toothy grins. Did this fucker ever stop smiling?

"Sorry. No can do. We've all been calling you *blade-slinger* ever since you got here." Clearly, the expression on Rowan's face was a dead giveaway because Finnic smirked and tried to smother a laugh with a cough into his fist. "You didn't know that was the name the fae guards gave you when you first arrived at the palace and started training them? What's that been, like, a year now?"

Rowan stifled a groan and scrubbed a hand over his jaw. This was not happening. Maybe he'd had an aneurysm, and this was his final voyage before reaching the ancestral plane.

"And to correct your earlier assumption, no, I didn't allow the students to leave their mess for me to tidy up after them. It's just the armourer habits in me that I can't shake. Call me picky or pedantic, but I needed to inspect all the weapons individually before packing it in for the day." He crossed over to Rowan, holding out one of the heavy long swords in two calloused palms to show him. "Checked each of them for flaws or evidence of tampering during class. Any runes carved into the metal or sneaky enchantments placed when I wasn't looking. See?"

As the fae held the sword and tilted it in the light, Rowan could see the faint glimmer of a runic engraving just above the hilt of the blade.

Sneaky little pricks, indeed.

“I caught a few other examples like this on some of the other blades, all done by the same witch, judging from the magical signature embedded in the metal. But easy enough to get rid of.” With one hand, Finnic passed over the location of the runic symbol, using his fae magic to manipulate the metal. Erase all evidence and removing the enchantment in one fluid swipe of his hand.

As he turned away, he carried on talking out loud about how to nip that kind of behaviour in the bud with the students. Plans for the next day with their training assessments. Ways they could structure the group to ensure skill levels were most accurately grouped together.

Maybe he had more going on behind that stupid, lopsided smirk than Rowan had given him credit for.

Fae magic connected to material things, giving them a unique affinity for precious metals and gemstones and opulence. Unlike witches, who had the ability to harness elements and power directly from Source. Rowan could portal anywhere in the blink of an eye and cross between realms if desired, but his magic could never create tools of such immaculate quality as this armourer.

Finnic had been born to forge precious metals into weapons with his bare hands.

Rowan had been born to wield them in battle.

What a fucking pair indeed.

CHAPTER 5

Sleep evaded him, as always.

Some nights were more violent than others. But the constant memories of war, death, and the sheen of blood forever coated his dreams. Leaving him a tangled, sweaty mess in his bed, tossing and turning without respite.

Which led him here. To the dawn perimeter check that Rowan had assured Niall he would handle personally. Other guards from the fae court were busy investigating the shit going on outside the academy. But at least he could keep himself occupied while remaining inside the blood wards.

Jogging through the thick, swirling mist was likely the closest he'd hope to come to a glimpse of peace before this day began. Before enduring classes and training and all the duties he wished he didn't have to shoulder.

The forest was heavy with morning dew, and a grey shroud clung low to the bed of pine needles and moss beneath his boots. Fog billowed softly and blanketed the ground in a thick tomb of silence. Reaching out with his magic as he traversed the boundary, he made note of where there seemed to be a lingering presence from the day before. Nothing more than a whisper, but the remains of magic were still detectable. Undoubtedly left over in the places where students had gone off exploring around the grounds yesterday.

But this morning, there was nothing but eerie, dense wisps of mist to accompany him. And that suited Rowan just fine.

Tall pines and firs extended around this southern border to the academy grounds, while a deep lake lay hidden in the heart of this forested area. Since he'd first begun training the fae guards—long before Ruby had come up with her grand plans for Astracadia—he'd made a habit of venturing here each morning.

No one came here.

And that was exactly why he liked it.

The perfect opportunity for a morning plunge to clear his head and shake off the assault of images left lingering. Nightmares that followed him like a foul stench.

As he turned down the lightly worn track he'd formed over the months and months of returning to this very spot, he slowed from a run to a jog and then a walk. Reaching behind his head, he tugged his shirt off in one motion. Eager to feel the cool water against his overheated skin.

But as the cotton slipped over his head, Rowan froze.

His magic sensed a presence immediately.

Someone else was here.

The hackles on the back of his neck pricked up. Fuck this. Coming here was *his* private sanctuary. His only opportunity to get a godsdamned sense of calm. Whoever was here could fuck right off...

His eyes dropped to the neatly folded stack of clothes on the smooth rock—training attire and a set of blades he recognised immediately.

Shit.

Goddess-fucking-damnit.

As he stood there, with his shirt crumpled in his fist, sweat slicked across his chest, and muscles heaving, there she was.

Deeply bronzed skin poked above the waterline as she leisurely moved through the crystal-clear lake. Water droplets beaded on her shoulders and clung to her thick eyelashes. Her hair slicked in a long line down her back, with the way it had

pulled back from her face somehow highlighting the perfect heart shape and angle of her cheekbones.

The girl was all sensual curves and a feisty demeanour. The kind of brash energy that belied her diminutive stature. How something so small could be so fierce was a mystery shrouded in what must undoubtedly be magic.

She was unexpected. And that unsettled him. Creatures that came rushing at him out of the blue usually wound up eating the sharp end of his blade.

Blood rushed to his cock as he soaked in every inch of her. Through the water, he could see she wasn't naked, but he sure as shit didn't make as much of an effort *not* to look as he should have.

Fuck. There were so many ways this little fae was off-limits. But his dick wasn't getting that message, thickening in his trousers with every stroke she swam towards the shore.

Centuries too young. Friend's sister. A student.

His student.

Swimming closer and approaching the shoreline, she looked up and spotted him by the water's edge. Dark almond-shaped eyes rapidly widening, and flushed lips hanging open.

Now his cock was completely hard, pressing against the front of his pants.

He needed to move. Leave. Get the fuck out of here before she started getting out of the water, and he saw even more of her near-naked body. Fuck knows he'd jerked himself off enough times imagining her tits and curves bouncing on his lap.

Then, as quickly as she noticed him, her features shut down. Her mouth set in a firm line, and the softness that had been there just a moment before was gone. Instead, her dark eyes flashed with irritation. Pink stained her cheeks from the cold, but there was steel in her aura now.

Good. She should hate him.

More to the point, he *needed* her to hate him.

Her presence was just a distraction. A girl who was nothing more than a pretty package and a pain in the ass that he didn't have time for.

“You shouldn't be out here.” Alone. At all.

She hissed something inaudible in reply and ducked her head underwater before resurfacing.

“I was just leaving.”

Droplets rolled down her cheeks, caressing the soft skin before hitting the plumpness of her bottom lip.

Rowan sucked in a breath as he watched her tongue sweep out and lick away the excess.

“You're going to be late for class.”

If she replied, he didn't hear it. The pounding of blood in his ears and every effort to will his cock to behave drowned out everything around him. As she made her way out of the water, he stood rooted to the spot but dropped his eyes away, looking out over the calm expanse of turquoise water.

A sight he usually inhaled with fervour.

But instead, he couldn't focus. Not on the deep shades of green coating the far shoreline. Not on the protruding rock face he so often swam to each morning. Not on the family of waterfowl ducking and diving for their quarry below the surface.

His every sense was painfully aware of her nearness. And if he gave in and stole a glance her way, well, that would be the least of his problems. Keeping his lewd thoughts about Oriana to himself was the only way he'd make it through this year.

But a flash of something out of the corner of his eye did him in. Instead of maintaining his focus—no, because he was every inch an asshole—he shot a glance her way.

Her back was turned as she dried off her smooth skin, and as his hungry eyes devoured how her curves moved, he took in the expanse of ink she'd been hiding away from sight.

A large serpent coiled down her right side, passing along her ribs, caressing the softness of her stomach and swell of her hips, before extending further down her right thigh. It was a simple design, one that suited her. Black outlined scales against her tanned flesh. The end of the artwork stopped abruptly just below the crease of her thigh, as if it had been interrupted.

She whirled around on him, shoving her top down and covering up those perfect tits before he could sneak a glance at those too.

Rowan tossed his shirt on the ground and crossed his arms. Careful to keep his body turned towards the lake. Fuck it. She knew he'd been looking, and he wasn't about to back down from this argument, but he didn't need her knowing how easily she affected him.

“Don't stand there and judge me, you prick.” Her words spat out with venom. A rosy flush across her cheeks and the way her breath hitched made him wonder why she was so embarrassed. The girl had nothing but raw beauty to be proud of. He might be an unmitigated dickhead, but he wasn't above acknowledging she was stunning.

Look, but do not fucking touch.

Oriana quickly fastened her trousers and continued to shoot daggers from her eyes. “I'm well aware the tattoo is unfinished, ok? But each scale has meaning to me. It represents a moment when I could have taken a life and chose not to.”

Why was the girl babbling?

“It reminds me that even though I might have been able to end a life, in the heat of the moment, I didn't. It gives me something to cling to on the days when I don't want to face who I am or what I have been trained for.”

Her chest was heaving, and her eyes slightly wild. Goddess knows she looked like fire, ready to consume anything in her path. Untamed passion shimmered through her aura.

As usual, words were of no use in a moment like this. He poked his tongue against the side of his cheek, weighing the *right* thing to do. Actions were the only language one could genuinely rely on. And in this instance, he didn't trust himself not to say something they'd both regret.

Shoving his pants off, he kicked them over to join his shirt and made for the water's edge. Careful to make sure the little fae saw nothing but the back of him. He muttered curses to himself; the fact his cock seemed to have ideas of its own was fucking inconvenient, to say the least.

Behind him, the girl also swore under her breath.

As he dove headfirst into the water, he was left with Oriana's departing words ringing in his ears. Ones he agreed with wholeheartedly.

"You're just a fucking brute."



Ri was ready to bite someone's head off. The way Rowan just stood there and studied her. In total silence. What a complete and utter pig.

He'd said nothing, as usual. Instead, his eyes dropped to her tattoo in silent assessment, as if he was judging her—which was even more infuriating due to the fact he was the one without a spare inch of skin left unmarked by ink—then stripped off and walked away. Heading into the water without so much as a word.

Who did that?

Rowan of Nocturne. Apparently.

Leaving her flustered as fuck and with her pulse thundering in her throat. There was something about being the subject of his scrutiny that turned her body into a molten mess. The intensity of his gaze anytime she had the misfortune to be

consumed by it was like being thrown into the midst of a pulverising storm.

One she couldn't ever seem to claw her way out of.

Even more embarrassing was how she'd been unable to stop herself from spilling her guts all over the lake's edge. Telling him something so vulnerable and personal within seconds. What a complete moron. She wanted to stab herself in the hand.

Ri couldn't even wrap her mind around the sight of his bared back, shoulders, ass... every flawless inch of the man was covered in an intricate network of designs. Thousands of them crawled over his skin and flexed as he moved. No colour. All were various shades of midnight black, ash, and onyx.

His lethal body was a work of art.

One that had now seared itself into her memory with every ripple and flex of taut muscle.

She collapsed into the empty seat beside Brynne. Who, of course, had been the consummate student and arrived *early* at the herbarium for their morning class. Her books already laid out neatly on the long wooden bench, the sprite softly hummed away to herself as she devoured the pages. *What a psychopath.*

"Spirits. You really do get off on this shit, don't you?" Ri huffed out a breath and slapped the stack of textbooks down in front of her. From the reading list and course materials they had been advised would be necessary for herbalism classes, she already knew this year would be painful indeed.

At least an afternoon spent at the training arena would be filled with opportunities to swing a blade at someone and maybe land a punch or two.

Preferably while picturing Rowan's face on the receiving end.

At least that would give her something to focus on, other than imagining her tongue tracing over every inch of his tattooed skin.

“Good morning, welcome to your herbalism class.” A stunning vampiress with silky brown curls and startling green eyes appeared out of thin air in the centre of the herbarium. She cradled a stack of books in her arms, which she set down on the far end of the benchtop.

The high-domed glass structure was filled with all sorts of plant species, with several long benches occupying the centre of the space. It felt like a cross between a laboratory and a rainforest, with the class seated around the longest sides of each workbench. An assortment of strange-looking glass vials and oddly shaped equipment lined the middle of each bench, with enough of each that they were obviously going to become well accustomed to using whatever contraptions these might be.

“We’ll be guiding you through your classes for the year.” She flashed a bright smile around the room, then turned to the mountain of a vampire who mysted into the space without warning and appeared behind her. His scowl did nothing to hide how ridiculously handsome he was. “This is Professor Acemodeus, and you can call me Professor Nelloix. I will give you all a pass on formalities because calling me *Professor Acemodeus-Hunter* is a mouthful of torment I don’t wish to inflict upon any of you.”

A round of laughter billowed up from the room.

With an added twinkle in her eye, she whispered loudly, “And yes, this is one of my fated mates... I promise he’s capable of more than just scowling at you all.”

Which garnered the professor an admonishing look and a growl from the back of the unbelievably gorgeous vampire’s throat.

Seeming content to ignore her mate’s surly mood, she proceeded to bounce around the room, directing them towards which chapter they would be working from in their textbook. Followed by instructions on how to harvest and prepare herbs properly.

Ri sighed with relief when Brynne took charge of the necessary reading of instructions for the both of them. Leaving

her free to pulverise the freshly cut herbs—putting every ounce of frustration behind the act of pummelling the ingredients—and begin making the paste for whatever healing potion this would eventually become.

Something about being suitable for administering to poisoned flesh wounds.

“Now we know why the queen only appointed *mated* staff members. I’d do either of them. They’re both insanely gorgeous.” A hushed voice floated along the bench from where a group of other students were working.

Of course. The blonde curls bobbing around as she held court at her end of the table belonged to none other than Vanya. This bitch just couldn’t seem to keep her mouth shut.

Brynne looked up and scoffed. “It must be nearly a full moon. That girl is a horny mess.”

There was no way to stifle the snort of laughter that burst out. Ri felt the eyes of several other students glance her way before returning to their work.

“... the only reason she’s been placed so high in training after one session is because her sister is the queen.”

Oh, fuck no. Ri’s head snapped up, and she honed in on where Vanya was whispering with a group of other students. But there was no mistaking the way they each tried to surreptitiously look over at her.

This bitch had better hope she didn’t get paired up with Ri for sparring. She was in no mood to fight fair or go easy on the shifter. Claws could come out for all she cared, but Vanya would be the one to lose. Of that, Ri had no doubt.

“Ignore her.” Brynne nudged one hip to bump against her own. “She’s just jealous.”

Well, after how unsettling this day had been so far, Ri would relish any opportunity to draw some blood.

Only the Goddesses seemed to be laughing at her expense, because in the next moment, she felt the presence of the

vampiress beside her. Cocking her head to one side and casting her brilliant green eyes over Ri for a long moment.

“Oriana?”

“That’s me.” Her neck prickled with the sensation of the entire room staring at her.

“You’re excused from the rest of this morning’s class. The queen needs to see you.”

Oh, great.

Of all the times her fucking sister could demand her presence, this was it?

Sniggering from down the far end of the workbench accompanied her as she packed up her books and made to leave. With every step towards the large glass doorway, she fought the urge to fire an arrow right between each of their eyes.

Filled with murderous thoughts and cursing Ruby beneath her breath, she flung through the doorway, only to find herself bumping straight into an imposing frame. The force of knocking into him sent her things sailing to the floor, and the air whooshed out her lungs.

Her next sucked-in breath was filled with the all-too-familiar scent of sandalwood.

Ri immediately ducked down to gather up her books. But from the way her body reacted as if on cue, she already knew exactly who blocked her exit. Heavy-set black boots loomed only inches from her scattered belongings. Looking up, she was met with a stern glare and stony jaw.

She wasn’t supposed to desire this man with eyes like liquid sapphire.

Rowan.

CHAPTER 6

Something in his jaw ticked.

The heavy weight of Rowan's stare made her toes curl.

"Get the fuck up off the floor. Your sister needs to see you."

"Well, screw you too. *Brute.*" She hissed. Tucking the books against her chest, she stood up and spun away. Determined to put an ocean of distance between herself and the all-consuming presence of this man. All she needed to do was head along the pathway through the rolling grounds. A familiar path she'd walked a thousand times before. One that would take her far from this man and safely to Ruby's study housed inside the academy.

But before she could storm off, a large paw wrapped around her upper arm, and Rowan halted her escape with an impossibly tight grip. As she stuttered out a string of curses, his punishing hold only intensified.

Her words disappeared into a void, along with their surroundings.

As soon as they touched solid ground, Ri yanked her arm away. She glared at his stupidly handsome face, willing her body not to react to the heat of his touch. His scent. His overwhelming masculinity that consumed all rational thought.

Screw him.

“Ri, you’re finally here.” A swathe of turquoise curls and squealing engulfed her in a fierce hug.

She was positive a rib cracked under the whirlwind of her sister’s affection.

“Are you sure you’re a queen?” She gasped. Grateful for the distraction from doing something stupid—but no doubt immensely satisfying—like kicking Rowan in the balls.

At least he’d had the sense to set her down and move out of striking distance. After portaling them both and then depositing her so unceremoniously at her sister’s side, she wasn’t in the mood to pull her punches.

From where she looked over her sister’s shoulder, she could see him and Niall begin talking in hushed tones straight away. Or more likely arguing, judging by the way Rowan was visibly grinding his jaw.

“Nope. Not at all.” When Ruby stepped back and gave her a big grin, her cheeks looked flushed. If someone didn’t know her sister well enough, they would never notice, but there was definitely a dishevelled look about her...

“*Urghh*, ew. You two have been fucking in the throne room again, haven’t you?” She punched her sister’s shoulder and rolled her eyes.

Those two were unbelievable.

All Ruby could do was open and close her mouth several times before darting a quick glance over at the two Nocturne brothers. Ensuring they were now well out of earshot.

“Shut uppp.” Ruby whispered. Her eyes still flicked towards Niall and Rowan. Both cast an imposing image where they had stopped just outside the large glass door that led from the cabin’s living space. Only they seemed to have squared up to one another with arms folded and looked like two bulls in the middle of a standoff.

Oddly enough, unless she’d witnessed Rowan move, she would never have known he’d left her side.

For such a big man, he had a quietly feline ability to slink around unheard.

She blinked around at the space, one that certainly made up for any simplicity on the inside with an absolutely spectacular view. One that swept in a jaw-dropping visage through large windows overlooking a waterfall and thick forest. They had portaled to Ruby's private cabin in the Soterian Realm. A very, very long way away from the academy and the fae dominion indeed.

"Thanks for pulling me out of class, bitch. Why are we meeting here and not at Astracadia, Ru-Ru?"

"Look, I feel awful. I didn't even get to see you on the first day of classes. Is it so wrong for me to want to make sure everything is going well? Especially without prying eyes and ears."

"You mean to make sure everything is ok for *me*, or for your precious *academy*?" She arched an eyebrow.

"Both." Her sister chewed on the inside of her cheek. Looking adorable and effortlessly regal, yet badass as always, with her swathe of floral tattoos down both arms. "Don't hate me, but I feel like you're my very own eyes and ears for all the shit no one will tell me."

"So, I'm your spy then, am I?" Ri shook her head with a chuckle.

"No." She feigned a gasp of shock. "But you'll tell me the truth, won't you... everything is going smoothly for you so far?" Her sister's meaning was obvious in those soulful brown eyes. In her endlessly caring way, she wanted to know if there were any complications from being Ruby's own sister and all that kind of familial connection entailed.

"Of course." No, she wouldn't be telling her sister of the run-ins with blonde bitch-face and her circus of adoring fans. Nor would she be mentioning the way Rowan of Nocturne seemed to have it in for her. She'd much rather fight her own battles.

After all, that was the entire reason she'd asked to enrol in the academy in the first place.

Ruby wandered over to the small kitchen area and poured coffee from a steaming pot. One that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere on the table. Niall's magic was clearly at work taking care of his mate, even from where he remained preoccupied outside. It was all so fucking effortless having a witch to take care of little things like that. Copious orgasms and coffee produced on demand? *Lucky bitch.*

The earthy, warm scent filled her nose, and Ri reached over to snatch the first cup, barely giving her sister a chance to finish pouring.

“Hey.”

She evaded Ruby's slap at her hands, took a big slurp, and then grinned like a fiend over the rim. Spirits, she'd missed *this*. Just the two of them, winding each other up and sharing weird little private jokes together.

But there was undoubtedly another reason she'd been whisked away here without warning. Ruby must have had another reason to summon her like this. Not to mention, Ri still wanted answers to the news that Brynne had shared yesterday.

No matter how bloody good the brew in her hands tasted, she couldn't allow herself to be lulled into a false sense of security that easily.

“Oh no, wait just a second, Ru-Ru. You can't expect to distract me with delicious coffee.” Ri tapped impatiently on the wooden table between them. “What the shit is going on? There are deaths and attacks, and you're keeping things from me. Just because I chose to enrol in the academy doesn't mean you get to suddenly cut me out of the loop. A month ago, I would have been out hunting down whoever was responsible... heading up a team of guards for you... Stars, you even asked me to be one of the members of the academy *staff*.”

“I know. I know. Don’t hate me... I just didn’t want to stress you... and *of course*, I’ll still share everything with you. There just wasn’t much of a chance. Niall and I spent most of the last few days having to convince Rowan to take the position, not to mention making sure the blood wards were established.”

Her mind latched on to that little morsel of information like a hawk swooping on a field mouse. As it turned out, the big brute didn’t want to be part of Astracadia after all?

Interesting.

“Ru-Ru... just breathe.” There was a touch of panic in her sister’s voice, and she hated that she hadn’t been there right alongside her to help navigate it all. “I can drop out. I’ll come back and join the—”

“No fucking way.” Ruby glared at her, just about sloshing her coffee across the table as she set her cup down forcefully. “You are going to absolutely crush it. You’re going to make the Astrals. Or I’m going to come down there personally and kick your perfect little ass.”

Well, she could at least try.

“Ok, ok, I’ll stick with the stupid training.” Rolling her eyes at her sister’s dramatics, she buried her nose in the heady aroma of the coffee clutched between her hands. It wasn’t long ago the two of them had spent every day together, doing exactly that—trying to kick each other’s asses—and it was still so bizarre how far apart their lives had drifted in only the space of a few short months.

“So, Rowan...”

Her head whipped up, taking in her sister’s gaze, which was fortunately trained on the two men where they still stood talking outside. A little patter of dread mixed with excitement dared to lurch around inside Ri’s chest. Surely her sister didn’t suspect anything. She’d been so careful not to let any hints slip about how her mind had far too often strayed to Ruby’s new friend over the past few months. As weird and unlikely as their connection was, he’d played a significant part in not only

saving her sister's life, but also in reuniting her and Niall when everything had nearly fallen apart.

Ruby and Rowan had become... *close*, if you could call it that.

Ri had to take another big gulp of coffee to squash down the feelings that tried to bubble up. This wasn't jealousy. *Was it?*

"He'll hate every minute of what I've asked him to do. But I couldn't risk appointing someone *unmated* who I didn't know or trust. There are still so many who would choose to believe gossip and innuendo rather than the truth about Niall and I being fated mates or the real circumstances of how our relationship began... so it would help me sleep better at night knowing that you can keep an eye on him for me."

This time Ri nearly spat her coffee across the table.

"You want me to do *what?*"

"Just keep an eye out. Let me know if there's anything I should be worried about. He might seem like an impenetrable grumpy fortress, but I can't help feeling like I've thrown him into an impossible situation." Ruby grimaced and swirled the contents of her cup. "He's handsome, in his own strangely murderous kind of way, and there will no doubt be lots of *admirers*. So if you can just... you know..."

"No. I don't get where you're going with this. Please elaborate, Ru-Ru." Actually, she'd much rather her sister didn't. What the fuck was she talking about? Ri's heart felt like it was going to drum its way out of her chest at any moment.

"You know... warn them off. Do your thing. Wave some knives around and be all sassy like you always are."

This was insanity. It was now Ri's turn to stand and stare open-mouthed.

She sure as shit wasn't about to act as Rowan's keeper. Nor did she have any interest in inserting herself between him and whoever might try to get in his pants. Spirits and fucking Stars, she'd rather gauge her own eyes out.

But Ruby babbled on in a completely one-sided conversation. Waving her arms around and prattling on about how determined she was to make sure Astracadia built the finest reputation for itself as an academic institution. She knew there'd been enough lingering rumours about her sneaking around with her bodyguard, which Ri didn't have the heart to confirm was still the case, and then continued on and on about how she needed this all to be a success.

No rumours.

No drama.

No forbidden affairs.

Ri's head spun, and she dug the pads of her fingers tightly against the warmth of her cup.

“Why is this making you so uncomfortable?” The all too familiar penetrating gaze from Ruby was all over her like a rash. “Shit, you really *do* need to get laid, Ri. How long has it been?”

“None of your fucking business.” Nope. She was not having this conversation.

“That'll be easy enough to fix. I hear there are lots of hotties—”

A deep cough behind them cut Ruby short. Peeking around over her shoulder revealed the sight of Niall and Rowan. Right behind where she stood with her back to them. The familiar smirk and mischievous grin plastered all over Niall of Nocturne's face was directed at her sister. Meanwhile, the glowering tattooed figure beside him seemed entirely unimpressed.

Oh, this was just fucking great. How long had they been standing there? How much of that conversation did they hear?

Ruby gave her man a withering look and waved the brothers off like they were a pair of giant, muscular flies. “Like I was saying, there's plenty of opportunity for you, Ri. Find yourself a hot date for the solstice ball coming up. You can get dressed up, look gorgeous, and scratch that itch.”

She willed the ground to swallow her whole.

Continuing in a flurry of activity, Ruby was muttering something at Niall while snapping her fingers impatiently. Truth be told, Ri couldn't focus on anything being said in the space around her. She was far too occupied with the considerable effort it took not to burst into flames of embarrassment.

The entire situation was made even worse by the fact Rowan silently judged her from where he stood. Like he always damn well seemed to. Ri felt it in every goosebump raised on the back of her neck.

Suddenly, an ornate golden key on a chain was thrust into her hands. Ruby was right there, talking a mile a minute. Something about being a *keyholder* and having the power to portal directly here to the Soterian Realm whenever she wanted if she used this enchanted item.

One that was unmistakably drenched in Nocturne magic.

Her fingers flexed around the palm-sized golden key adorned with runes and flourishes carved into the metal. Weighing its heavy density in her palm, she studied it quietly. This key was the type of artefact that reeked of power, the kind that belied its small and rather innocuous appearance.

As she stared down at it, Ruby's chatter began to sink in.

This key represented freedom in the palm of her hand.

A way to be able to come and go across realms as she pleased. Travelling out of the fae dominion using a type of magic her kind simply didn't have the ability to wield. Fae were unable to portal like witches or myst like vampires. They usually had to rely on the magic of others if they required that kind of thing.

Excitement bubbled in her chest at the potential opportunities this might give her. All the places she could explore. How she would so easily be able to slip away from the academy whenever she liked, without having to say a word to anyone.

But faster than she could start planning her first adventure, or properly study the fine carvings and filigree patterning on the key, it was snatched out of her fingers. A blur of a tattooed forearm was all she saw as the item was promptly taken away.

“No.” The gravel in that familiar bark sent her stomach into a swan dive. Far too close and brushing the fine hairs against the side of her cheek with the force of his command.

Ri whirled around. Threats and murder on the tip of her tongue. Fuck this. She was not going to be treated like a youngling. Only, before her words could form, her traitor of a sister hauled her backwards. Dragging her towards the far end of the cabin, and wrestled Ri like she was a spitting cobra.

Oh, she was spitting alright.

Before her stood the two brothers, once again staring each other down and seemingly arguing. Niall gestured between the key now wrapped in Rowan’s giant fist and jabbed a finger in the direction of where Ri was being hauled off to.

At least *one* of the Nocturnes was on her side, it would seem.

“Ri.” Her sister cautioned. Keeping her voice low.

“Fuck him. He thinks I can’t be trusted.” Her fingers itched to manifest a blade from thin air and hurl it towards his jugular. She wouldn’t miss, even from this distance.

Ruby grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a squeeze. Forcing her to meet her eyes.

“I probably rushed into that in the heat of the moment, Ri. I’m sorry. I was just excited to see you, and that was stupid of me to try giving that to you without consulting him first. I trust Rowan’s judgement, and I think he’s just looking out for you.”

“Oh, no. Don’t you fucking dare take his side, Ru-Ru.” She fought against her sister’s hold. Jabbing a finger against her chest. “It’s demeaning and controlling as fuck.”

Swivelling her gaze between Ri and the Nocturne brothers, Ruby twisted her lips as if calculating her words.

“Rowan is a complicated creature. He doesn’t speak about feelings or thoughts or emotions. But he will show you his intentions through actions.” Ruby guided her by the arm closer to the doorway at the far end of the room. Any further and they’d be outside, in the shade of the waterfall that enclosed half of the cabin and hid it from the world. “He’s most likely showing you exactly what he’d do to protect you... just like he would a little sister.”

Ri’s chest flushed.

An indignant sound caught in her throat.

Sweet fucking Stars, did he see her as a *sister*? A youngling?

Her cheeks heated.

She most certainly did not have dreams about this man that were anything less than seeing him as a tree she wanted to climb.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Shame flooded through her.

Of course, he didn’t view her in the same way. All Rowan of Nocturne saw when he looked at her was a defenceless, immature girl who had no brains or ability.

And she didn’t know what stung a sharper blow to her ego. Was it that he considered her incompetent? Or that he wasn’t attracted to her?

Either way, that shit hurt like a double sucker punch to the kidneys.

CHAPTER 7

“I swear I’ll behave.” Ri slathered on every inch of sarcasm she could muster.

But Rowan remained a sealed fortress. Shut down and glaring at nothing in particular when they rematerialised outside the herbarium.

The asshole refused to give her back the one item that would allow her to leave the fae dominion whenever she pleased. Still intent on being an outright controlling prick.

With her ego now thoroughly bruised, to add insult to injury, she’d had to be portaled back to the academy by her tattooed minder. Whereas, if he’d only allowed her to keep the damn key, she could have returned by herself.

No need to be grabbed roughly by the elbow and dragged back as though she required supervision.

Her humiliation was palpable.

And the sick fuck probably devoured every moment of her discomfort.

She pacified herself with vivid imaginings of the vast array of locations where she could drive a knife into his body. Mind you, the fucker probably wouldn’t even feel a thing. Ri wasn’t entirely sure he was capable of emotions.

It was an entirely lost cause trying to convince him to give her back the magical key she’d been gifted—for all of a split second—and to make matters worse, her own bloody sister had rolled over and listened to his command without question.

As if she implicitly trusted his blackened, shrivelled-up heart to make all the decisions around this place.

Wrenching her arm out of his grip, it took a willpower forged of steel to maintain her composure. There was no fucking way she'd let this witch know how much he'd gotten under her skin.

She'd officially reached her capacity for tolerating his heat and scent and ability to consume every one of her brain cells, and desperately needed to put some distance between herself and the overwhelming proximity of his body. Having his fingers wrapped tight and pressing into her arm as he portaled them back to the academy had her imagination running riot.

Leading to an onslaught of images and lurid details of the exact locations on her body she'd prefer to feel his powerful fingers wrapped around.

Not only that, but she still had to survive an afternoon of training *with him* and all his big dick energy in the arena later that day.

To her immediate relief, she spotted a group of familiar faces seated together on the grassed area amongst the network of pathways and manicured garden beds. She scuttled away from the herbarium in a direct line across the lawn towards them, not giving Rowan so much as a backwards glance.

Ri hurled herself to the ground, flopping straight into Brynne's lap, sinking into her pastel-coloured flowy skirt with all the grace of a trout on dry land.

"Have fun being summoned by the queen?" The sprite peered down at her—pink hair haloed by the dappled sunlight in the trees overhead.

"*Ugh*. I don't want to talk about it."

"Here." Atticus reached over and nudged something cool against her arm. To her delight, he held a bowl of chocolates in his outstretched hand. Ri scrambled to take it from his silver-ringed fingers, pushing herself upright and shoving one in her mouth.

The burst of ambrosia and honey and richly spiced flavours melted on her tongue.

Thank fuck. At least one witch around here could make himself useful. As she grabbed another with a tiny hum of satisfaction and handed back the bowl, the conversation picked back up and carried on around her.

“Are we dressing to match, or are we each wearing a different costume?” Brynne popped a grape into her mouth.

Oh, the solstice ball.

“It doesn’t really matter what you wear. The night’s almost guaranteed to turn into an orgy.” Etienne grinned, all fangs and sharp features. “Just imagine how wild it might get, the first time everyone here will have a chance to cut loose since classes began.”

Ri had no doubt the vampire was right. Astracadia was swarming with impossibly attractive supernaturals who’d have their first opportunity to get dressed up and spend an evening soaked in magic and fae wine.

Hedonism was going to be the central star of the evening.

The night already promised poor decisions and darkened corners where all sorts of mischief might transpire.

“With everyone drunk or on spice, and in semi-disguise, there’s no telling what will happen.” Saskia giggled, her wispy curls bouncing around her face. “I’ve already got my dress and mask... have you sorted yours yet, Brynne?”

Of course. A masquerade ball on the summer solstice, when inhibitions dropped low, and spirits soared high. The perfect excuse to leave your usual demeanour at the door, hide behind a mask, and indulge in a little escapism for the evening.

A night when the veil would be thin between worlds. Leading to all kinds of mystical and magical experiences while dressing up as whoever, or whatever, you desired to be for the midsummer festival.

Ri had no idea what she’d dress as, but that was the least of her concerns.

While Brynne and Saskia carried on discussing their outfits for the ball or something equally asinine, what captured her attention and refused to let go was the sight of Rowan. He was still exactly where she'd left him outside the herbarium, and his broad frame lingered annoyingly in the corner of her eye.

She could make out his impossibly large shoulders, brooding in stature, just off to one side of the pathway. To her disgust, the familiar and infuriating sight of blonde, curly hair was right there with him. Standing about as close as possible without touching, the girl was all high-pitched giggles and drool practically coated the shifter's face.

Vanya and her big tits could go stumble into a crevasse.

Ri didn't care.

It was none of her concern.

He'd been nothing but rude and arrogant and demeaning.

But her fucking sister had now made it her problem. Asking Ri to be, what? Some sort of spy? Keeping tabs on anyone who so much as attempted to get close to Ruby's precious little pet, Rowan?

Spirits and fucking ancestors. She'd clearly done something in a past life to deserve this special kind of torment.

As much as she despised him, unfortunately, her body hadn't received the message. In fact, her pussy was an entirely lost cause. Practically begging to be let out of her pants to play whenever his bulky, tattooed body came anywhere near.

Right now, she was turned on, and angry.

Never a good combination for making sensible decisions.

"So, who's taking me to this ball then?" The flush of whatever magic was in those chocolates felt all sorts of wonderful rolling through her tense muscles. She arched an eyebrow at Atticus and Etienne, who lay sprawled beside one another, each propped up on an elbow.

Both looked immensely fuckable.

Etienne's lip curved into a devastating smile. Running the tip of his tongue over a fang, his heated stare raked over her from head to toe.

And her body didn't so much as bat an eyelid. Unlike moments before when all it took was to breathe the same air as Rowan of Nocturne and her underwear caught on fire.

"How about it, scary girl?" They'd all picked up Brynne's nickname for her. "Atticus and Brynne are going together. Saskia's going with Glade—fuck knows why you said yes to that jerk, by the way—what say you and I see how well we match?"

"Oh, you think we're a match huh, bloodsucker?" She liked Etienne. He was fun and flirty, but that's all it would be between them, unless...

Shit. Their conversation from back at the training arena came rushing back in.

Never let your blood be tasted.

Don't go kissing fae.

In all honesty, the concept of being fated to another terrified Ri. She'd cut out her own tongue before admitting it out loud... but the notion of having the constant threat hanging over her of suddenly being bound to another by a mystical and Goddess-given source of power?

No-fucking-thank you.

That sounded like the worst kind of entrapment. Being the kind of instantaneous removal of her free will that was enough to make her blood turn cold.

It sent a shudder through her if she ever thought too long about the consequences of one seemingly innocuous kiss. Nothing about it seemed fair or reasonable, that simply because of her fae blood she would forever be wondering if the brush of her lips against another's could spell the end of her life as she knew it.

What if that someone was cruel? Malevolent? Abusive?

Even worse, what happened to those who wound up rejected by the very mate they had been fated to be with?

The Goddesses could be equally as cold as they could be kind. Ri had seen enough of that spiteful manifestation of their power in her years alive to last a lifetime.

And while her mind spun in circles, tormented by the thought of *fate* and *kisses* and *being mated to another*, still out of the corner of her eye, she could see Rowan and Vanya together. What the fuck could they be talking about for this long? At that moment he glanced over towards their group, and she immediately dropped her eyes.

Screw him.

“Is that a yes, scary girl?”

Ri turned back to Etienne and fluttered her eyelashes.

Being horny and angry was going to get her into so much trouble.

“Sounds like fun... but are you sure you want to risk getting close to a fae? Wouldn't want you to risk revealing all your weaknesses now, would we.”

He chuckled and cocked his head. Daring her with silent questioning.

“Maybe I should just let you taste my blood right here and now and be done with it?”

“You sure you want all your friends to see the look on your face when you orgasm on the spot, pretty thing?”

“Oh shit, no thanks, scary girl.” Brynne giggled, dragging her away and trying to throw her body in front of Ri like a floral shield. “None of us need to be scarred by that image.”

“Well then, how about a kiss, and we get it over and done with?” Ri challenged. *Fuck. So fucking reckless.*

“Let me take you to the ball, and then perhaps I'll let you push me into a dark corner and have your wicked way. Even better if it's at knifepoint.” He reached over with his free hand

and fingered the tip of one of the gold blades secured in her thigh holster.

Ri liked this vampire. Well, she liked him enough to harmlessly flirt in a platonic kind of way. Who wouldn't enjoy appreciating that flawless cheekbone structure up close? But all it was between them was *words*.

Certainly not heat.

No thundering pulse of desire.

Unlike her wayward thoughts about the muscular tattooed witch she couldn't seem to shake, no matter how hard she tried. Especially at nights when she found herself alone. Soaking in the bathtub and running her hands across her body, imagining it was his calloused palms.

He'd be rough, but tender. Sliding a hot, possessive grip over her sex. Gripping tight and with clear intent to let her know just what he wanted. What he would *take*.

Fuck. She hated every second of yearning for him, but was drawn again and again into fantasies of Rowan. Imagining the way his molten sapphire eyes would rake over her with burning intent. Hearing his commands as he fucked her senseless. Ri had been wound so tight the night before that each orgasm had rolled through her body over and over while her fingers frantically worked her clit in quick circles. Panting into the darkness of her room, she heard his deep voice right in her ear. Everything about him exuded heat and carnality and raw power in her mind's eye.

Ri had moaned softly, while biting her lip in a futile attempt to try and keep quiet. When she imagined the thick length of him sliding in deep, waves of pleasure crashed through her body, time and time again. Picturing Rowan as he fucked her relentlessly. In her wild imaginings he gave her no choice but to submit to his control.

There was no question in her mind that he would be dominant and wickedly all consuming.

And the needy, wanting part of her got off on that.

But instead, here she sat, being surveyed by a vampire.

Was Etienne a cocky prick who exuded confidence like it was as natural as breathing?

Sure.

But there was nothing more to this flirtation for her than an appreciation of a handsome face and a charming manner.

Did she actually want to say *yes* to the vampire? Or was this her impulsive side that she so often regretted listening to in the cold light of the following day? A tiny part of her brain leaping in and making decisions for her in the heat of the moment, the kind that invariably left an awful taste in her mouth afterwards.

As if the answer danced over to her on the breeze, she saw Rowan start walking their way. Striding towards the training arena in an arc that would bring him close to where they all sprawled on the grass together.

Close enough for what her reckless side needed anyway.

Just as he drew level with their group, she leant forward and fixed Etienne with a stare through her thick eyelashes. His cocksure grin widened with the kind of outrageous confidence that only a vampire could possess while waiting for her agreement.

Ri made sure her next words carried loud enough for anyone—but especially *him* just as he walked past—to hear.

“Of course, Etienne. I’d love to go to the ball with you.”

CHAPTER 8

The rest of the week leading up to the solstice ball passed in a blur.

Training.

Classes.

Eat.

Study.

Sleep.

Repeat.

She'd managed to avoid any further run-ins with Rowan, with time in the training arena largely spent under the watchful eye of Finnic. The hulking witch lingered on her periphery, of course, but he seemed intent on giving Ri a wide berth, and she couldn't help but feel relief every time his gaze slid over her and moved on to a different student.

Only to then burn hot and bright with a sting in her gut that he *had* passed over her.

She was a fucking mess.

Without a doubt, she wanted to focus on her pathway into the Astrals. Keeping her sights on the long road ahead to the upcoming assessments that would ensure she made it to those elite ranks. That was her goal and entire reasoning for enrolling in Astracadia as a student in the first place.

She could still see the look on Ruby's face when she'd told her this was her decision, instead of accepting her own sister's

offer—practically gifting her a golden opportunity to become one of the academic staff.

Ri still couldn't believe that Ruby considered her capable enough to shoulder the responsibility of *teaching others*.

No. It hadn't been the right thing back then, and it wasn't now, either.

This was the right move. Enrolling and training and pursuing her future as an elite warrior. Achieving a place in the Astrals was going to give her the surety of a future not forever tied to being in the favour of the queen of the fae. As much as she loved her sister, Ri couldn't bear the thought of eternally being in Ruby's debt like that.

But proving herself as capable and worthy of making it through to the elite of the elite? A goal like that spurred something inside her. It honed a determination to succeed on her own merits that drove her to push harder and further and faster each day. Collapsing into bed at night with the sweet taste of satisfaction on her tongue.

Still, she remained unable to resist sliding her fingers over her clit and climaxing with Rowan's name silently hanging on her lips. Another routine she'd seemingly fallen into a trap of indulging.

Every night, without fail.

All around her, life in the academy had settled into somewhat of a routine for the students. Most of the time, there was talk of the ball, which was now only one more night away. Then, her evenings were invariably spent surrounded by the assortment of friends she had found herself in the middle of. Saskia, it would seem, had a true affinity for using her fae magic to create luxurious dresses and jewels dripping with opulence, and Brynne had been in her element designing everyone's outfits. Both girls relished with far too much satisfaction the process of keeping Ri shut out and in the dark about her costume for the ball.

Brynne had insisted that it needed to be a surprise. Something about Ri being too stubborn to agree to wear a

masquerade-appropriate ensemble unless it was thrust into her hands at the last minute. Which, unsurprisingly, was close to the truth.

When Ri had innocently asked if there would be places to hide her favourite knives beneath the dress, the withering look from the sprite had spoken volumes.

It was better to be given no choice in what she would be wearing and leave Saskia and Brynne to coordinate everything. Ri would most likely—ok, definitely—protest if she had prior warning.

It wasn't as if she loathed dressing up or looking nice for an occasion. But rarely had she seen much use in attending an evening that required flouncing around in tulle, silk, and godsdamned tiaras when she would much rather be practising her aim with her blades.

“Oriana, you'll be paired with Etienne for this drill.” The voice of Finnic cut through her thoughts, dragging her attention back to the heat and dust of the training arena.

Sure enough, the vampire in question flashed her a wink and dragged a hand through his hair to rake it back off his forehead.

“Ready to lose, scary girl?” He taunted.

“Not fucking likely, bloodsucker.” She hefted the weight of the sword they had been working with during today's session. It was a long, solid blade. Awkward and heavy, and the size of it didn't flow as easily with her frame or stature the way her own weapons usually would. Ri longed to feel the delicate string of her bow beneath her fingertips. To hear the high-pitched hum of her arrows as she let them fly with deadly precision to sink into their target.

But Rowan had rightly pointed out that this wasn't about relying on what was *familiar* during battle. Becoming part of the elite ranks of the Astrals would require warriors and hardened souls who could navigate their way through any challenge or manner of foe that came their way.

Regardless of what weapons might be at their disposal.

She needed to be prepared for the worst-case scenario, and reluctantly admitted that learning to fight using these ugly as fuck swords was one means to that end.

“You’ll have three rounds. First to a critical strike wins the round. No draws, best out of three wins.” Finnic crossed his arms across his broad chest and nodded towards the centre of the arena.

“Does this count towards our ranking?” Ri rolled her wrist, swinging the blade in a wide arc while eyeing Etienne, who stood about five feet away. Still grinning with that wildly overconfident look on his face that no doubt lured many a willing *blood whore* into his bed. He cocked an eyebrow at her and then proceeded to strip his shirt off in one fluid motion.

Ri hated to admit that it was hot. A move to try and distract her, no doubt. *But she’d much rather see someone else shirtless...*

No.

Fuck.

Focus.

Her fingers flexed around the smooth handle of the sword. Readjusting her grip and surveying the makeshift sparring circle, now surrounded by the rest of their classmates who eagerly watched on. The group had slightly diminished in numbers since the first couple of days when they’d been brutally put through their paces until everyone was either throwing up, wobbling on their feet, or looking deathly pale.

At least with each drop-out, it increased her chances of reaching her end goal.

“Yes. This will be counted in your weekly rankings.”

Crap.

There was no way she’d concede points to a cocksure vampire today.

She narrowed her eyes at Finnic, who simply smirked back. All blond hair, tanned skin, and dimples. Fucker.

A prickle of awareness at the back of her neck told her exactly where Rowan stood. Off to one side, as usual, surveying in silence from a distance. Judging. Always bloody well judging. But after a week of being out of his line of sight, right now, his eyes were most definitely on her. It left a flutter in her chest that she certainly wished would fuck right off.

“Ladies first.” Etienne swung his own sword in front of his body, gesturing for her to close the gap between them. Baiting her to rush in and leave herself exposed.

“I do love a man who knows that ladies always *come* first.” She blew a kiss at the vampire, relishing the laughter that rolled through their audience. “But in this case, you’ll have to prove you know what you’re doing, boy. Don’t waste my time fumbling around.”

Etienne’s grin turned wicked.

They circled each other slowly, moving in a wide arc, the half-dozen paces between them starting to narrow with each step they took. Ri kept her gaze firmly locked on the vampire’s stance. She knew he had a much longer reach than her, but that would leave him exposed in other ways when he finally swung an attempted blow.

“Oh, darling... I most certainly know what I’m doing; don’t you worry your pretty little head about that.” The gap continued to close. Metal glinted, and the sheen of sweat across Etienne’s bare chest highlighted his lean muscles. “The question is, how many times do you think I can make *you* come until you’re trembling beneath me, begging for mercy? Three times, perhaps? Maybe four?”

With every word Etienne spoke, she could feel the heat and weight of Rowan’s stare sinking into her. She tightened her grip once more and braced her muscles. Playtime and teasing words would have to be over soon, or else she was going to potentially miss out on much-needed ranking points.

That alone was motivation enough for her to take control of the situation.

Cocking her head to one side, she raised the tip of her blade to point at Etienne's groin. "I'll gladly take my pleasure, bloodsucker... but don't expect any favours in return."

With the challenge thrown down between them, suddenly, it was on. Tension snapped, and the invisible threads holding them back vanished. The clang of metal clashing against metal filled the space when they collided together. Razor sharp fangs were bared in her direction as Etienne let out a snarl, and her own teeth gritted together on a low growl.

They matched each other blow for blow. Strike for strike. Except Etienne's height towered over her, leaving Ri having to battle upwards against him each time. He had the upper hand, quite literally, but she didn't care. With each shift closer, she could see an opening just below his ribs.

Snapping out with her sword, she pushed with all her force and then shoulder charged towards his torso. Without being able to use his mysting abilities here in the training arena, the vampire was left just as exposed as any non-magical being.

There was a satisfying crunch as the point of her shoulder made contact with the base of his ribcage, and she swung in the next breath upwards towards his neck. The tip of her blade came to rest just below his chin.

"*Strike,*" Finnic called out.

Brynn's familiar squeal rang out from somewhere over to her left.

"Better believe I'm coming for you now, scary girl." Etienne shook his head. Steel flashed in his eyes as he righted himself and pointed at the ground between them in invitation with his sword.

"Will that be *coming* for me with your cock in your hand while you're begging on your knees?" She ran her tongue over her teeth. Nervous anticipation hummed through her bloodstream as she weighed up whether to strike quickly or calculate her next move.

But Etienne made the decision this time, lunging forward and taking over the space between them with his bulk. She

barely had time to swing her weapon to connect with his before he rained down blow after blow. Ri blocked and deflected to the best of her ability, all the while shifting backwards.

“Run all you like...” He grunted as metal clashed between their heaving breaths. “I’ve got you cornered.” With a forceful swing, he knocked her blade down towards the dirt, and the tip dug heavily into the ground. Catching her completely off balance and causing her to tumble onto one knee, Ri turned too late. The shiny glint of steel kissed her throat, framed by Etienne’s triumphant gaze staring down at her from over her shoulder.

“*Strike.*” The call came from the edge of the circle.

Goddess-shitting-dammit.

She cursed beneath her breath.

“What was that, darling? I couldn’t quite hear you begging for mercy?”

“Just wait til my blade is up against your balls; then you might wish you had a different opponent, *darling.*” She righted herself, but the sting of losing that round still hummed in her ears.

And she could still feel the deafening weight of Rowan’s stare. Silently casting his assessment on her every single fucking move. It enraged her. Infuriated her. Violence ran hot and unrestrained through her blood at the knowledge he was still so intent on pointing out her failings.

It was probably his idea to pit her against Etienne like this in front of everyone.

No doubt he’d planned it all.

A roar of defiance built in her chest, and before she knew what she was doing, Ri leapt forward with her sword in two hands—hacking and slicing her way towards the vampire, who blocked and evaded each wild motion.

There was no finesse to this round, just raw fury and ambition bursting and bubbling like lava in her veins.

But she didn't see it.

In her blind haste to win... to prove *him* wrong... she only realised the elbow connecting with her jaw was there in the split second before the blow landed. Far too late to evade it. Instead, all her body weight was focused on swinging the length of heavy metal in her hands towards Etienne's chest.

The vampire sent her flying. Sprawled in the dirt on hands and knees. Her jaw was on fire, pain radiating from where he'd connected with a direct hit. Her sword clattered to the ground near the edge of their gathered classmates. To add to the pulsing agony in the side of her face, the pointed tip of the vampire's weapon nudged her chin up to look at him from where she knelt on the floor bathed in indignation.

Strike. Finnic's call sounded muffled and distant, like she was underwater.

She'd fucking lost.

Lost.

Now, points that should have been hers wouldn't go into her ledger. Instead, they'd be accrued against Etienne's name, putting him further up the rankings. All because she'd allowed that asshole to get into her head.

"Nice try, scary girl." He tutted. Far too smug and handsome for his own good. "What should my prize be for winning?" Outstretching a hand, he clasped her forearm and tugged her to standing.

"Aren't points enough?" She gritted out. A tang of copper coated her tongue, and as she swiped an arm across her mouth, there was a sheen of blood when she pulled away.

He surveyed her through a narrowed gaze and then dipped his head close to her ear with a low whisper. "Maybe my prize should be knowing you won't be wearing anything under your dress tomorrow night at the ball, hmm?"

And being every inch the infuriating vampire, he drew back and shot her a hint of wicked fang, then swaggered over towards where Atticus stood alongside Brynne and Saskia.

Ri bit her tongue and hurriedly wiped more blood off her lip with the back of her hand. A thousand snarky retorts hung on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to lash him with stinging barbs in return for his audacity, but instead, swallowed it all down like shards of glass. The prick had won this time, fair and square. She wouldn't fucking let it happen again.

While the next pairing was being called by Finnic—Atticus up against Glade—she quickly bent to swipe up her dropped sword. As she reached for it, a heavy boot landed on the handle.

Oh, fuck no.

She would gladly hack his foot off at the ankle and toss it in the lake if he dared think he could humiliate her further right now.

Looking up, she was met with an intense glare. Darkened storms clouded Rowan's normally piercing blue eyes. He didn't just look unimpressed but furious with her.

“You'll stay back after class has ended, Oriana.”

She opened her mouth to protest, only to be cut off with a snarl. His lips curled back; a warning flashed amongst the thunder in his eyes. Clearly, the dick had forgotten how to communicate in anything but primal mannerisms.

Rolling her eyes, she clamped her mouth shut and glared at his boot, still holding her weapon captive beneath the heavy tread. “Fine. Please may I collect my sword, *sir*?”

He made some sort of grunt and kicked the handle towards her. Moving away like a furious dark cloud as the resounding clash of metal filled the air. She slunk to the back of the crowd of students, keeping her head down and unwilling to make eye contact with anyone. The last thing she wanted—or needed—was anyone's pity or commiserations. She'd rather gnaw her own arm off than have someone feel sorry for her.

At least the other students seemed far more interested in each ensuing round. Their focus remained intent on each battle as Finnic continued calling out subsequent pairings, strikes, and victors.

Finally, the last round ended. Everyone was in various states of bloodied, dirty messes. Half the class grinned wildly with the spoils of their winnings, while the other half nursed their bruises and flesh wounds. Feeling grumpier than ever and still smarting over her loss, Ri hung back as the class began to disperse, and students made their way back to Trelithia Hall for the night. Just as Brynne waved at her from across the far side of the crowd, she sensed the looming dark presence without needing to see his face.

Brynne clocked the situation immediately and mouthed the words ‘*see you later*’ with a grimace before heading back towards their rooms with the others.

“You’ll complete ten rounds of the assault course before leaving class.” Rowan stepped in front of her with arms folded, still looking like someone had shoved a stick up his ass. Pompous dick.

Wait. His words sunk in.

The fucking assault course?

Was he for real? That had been part of their training on the second day and formed a track that wove deep into the forest throughout the outer reaches of Astracadia’s grounds. It was designed to be wearying and downright bone-numbing, even for a supernatural being. Enchanted obstacles that they were required to climb, scale, and crawl under, with each one more magically taxing than the last.

That day had been the killer blow for most of the students, some of whom had dropped out of the class immediately afterwards.

It had been torturous enough completing the course several times while surrounded by friendly faces and other classmates to nudge each other on and lend a hand when someone inevitably wound up flat on their face in a muddied pit.

Now, he expected her to go *ten rounds*? Alone?

That was going to take her hours. But there was no way he’d see her flinch in the face of his challenge.

He wanted to break her, but she was already cracked and damaged.

Ri would prove just how high she could soar on broken wings.

Nevertheless, she'd officially reached her capacity for biting her tongue today. If she was going to face Rowan's brand of punishment, she'd at least enjoy unloading all the frustration and fresh sting of her loss onto him.

He could wear the torrent of verbal barbs she'd been swallowing back.

Fuck him.

"Just because I'm short and curvy and fae... and not a muscled behemoth like you... you think you can judge me? Deem me unfit for this academy? Punish me with this bullshit, for what reason exactly?" She hissed. Her fists clenched into tight balls at her sides as her fae magic desperately wanted to manifest her favoured golden blades.

Ones that would look perfect sunk into his stupid tattooed neck.

His sneer of indifference and the way he looked down on her... Ri was ready to accept any consequences there might be for assaulting one of the academic staff. Bonus points if she succeeded in inflicting grievous bodily harm.

"Size or physical shape is no determination of skill or power, Oriana." Fuck, she hated the way he said her name. Wrapped in a gravelly tone that strangled her senses and sucked the air from her lungs. "I've seen creatures the size of mountains felled by forest sprites no bigger than the palm of my hand. I've seen every shape and sized supernatural creature fight to great success... irrelevant of their *muscularity*, as you so eloquently put it." A tick formed in his jaw as he surveyed her. His darkened eyes narrowed, flicking up and down the length of her body.

He left a searing trail of goosebumps in the wake of his gaze.

“No, I couldn’t fucking care less about your physical appearance.” Ri sucked in a sharp breath like she’d been kicked in the sternum. “What I care about in this training arena is your mindset and determination to be the best you can possibly be. Which, based on the farce that I witnessed in that sparring session today, is sorely lacking.”

But oh no, the asshole still wasn’t done. He stepped forward, looming like a mountainous shadow.

“So, you are going to get the fuck out of my training arena and complete that course. *Ten. Times.*”

His words lashed her, venom and contempt in his tone as he dismissed her like one of his lowly foot soldiers.

With that, he strode off towards where Finnic was busy fussing with the racks of weapons against the far wall and tossed him the blade that she hadn’t even noticed he’d taken out of her shaking hands.

She burned white hot with rage.

Shame scalded her skin and left her cheeks on fire.

That. Godsdamned. Asshole.

As she set off at a jog down the dirt path that wound from the training arena towards the entrance to the forest and began making her way towards the first of the obstacles she would have to scale, she spat curses under her breath.

What a colossal fucking brute.

CHAPTER 9

Begging was all too common.

Pleading... a frequent occurrence.

Sometimes they pissed themselves. Others would make any number of pathetic attempts to bargain their way to freedom.

Interrogation was an art form, and Rowan always knew exactly how to use his magic to the greatest *effect*.

In rare cases, like the fae sat bound and gagged in the chair before him, suspects would sob relentlessly. Snot streamed from the man's nose as he wailed like a newborn.

Knowing the weaknesses of a captive was one part of extracting information. In this case, the blood soaking through the fae's trouser where the knife jutted out of his thigh, well, it wouldn't do more than hurt like a bitch.

Fae were slow to heal, amongst the least physically resilient of supernatural beings. Their magic could manifest trinkets and baubles and precious metals with ease. But they'd spent millennia becoming more and more greedy for the vanity of wealth. Using their magic for shit that didn't matter.

What good were riches in the afterlife?

Material possessions were of no use in the ancestral plane.

The guards had found this prick sniffing around the far reaches of the academy, close to the northernmost extent of the blood wards. He reeked of the House of Elharean, but there

was something off about the way he'd been stumbling through the forest, poking his nose where he shouldn't have been.

Rowan knew he was meant as a distraction.

But a distraction from what exactly?

Those were the details he intended to extract from this snotty, putrid man.

Vomit had long since dried on the floor of the catacombs while Rowan had been patiently waiting to decide whether this fuck-face was worth his time.

“Shit—Goddess—Fuck. You told me he was going to be *ready*... not still covered in blood.” He twitched at the sound of his eldest brother's exasperated sigh behind him. Two distinct, familiar presences portaled into the large stone chamber and let out heavy sighs at the same time.

“Fuck's sake. Is that a kidney?”

Looking down at the fleshy lump on the floor beside his boot, Rowan nudged it through a slick trail of congealed blood back towards its owner.

The man would survive perfectly well without it.

But removing a few organs or body parts usually had the desired effect without needing to waste his magic in the act of interrogation.

Nothing quite like utilising knives to extract the information he required.

“I don't stroll in and tell you how to run your shit,” Rowan growled and straightened to his full height. Taking in the sight of both Lachie and Niall dressed in midnight black suits, he narrowed his eyes, “You both look like a pair of prized dicks.”

“Told you he'd go for the kidney. Pay up, *your majesty*.” Niall whacked at Lachie's shoulder with the back of his hand, then gestured towards his pocket. Taunting him with an old nickname from when their eldest brother used to be the Guardian of the Realm. Not that his role had been a royal designation, but the title alone had provided their younger brother with far too much of an easy target when doing his

best to infuriate his brother at every turn. And invariably succeeding. Lachie was a broody asshole and always far too easy for Niall to wind up.

With a dark curse and glare, the eldest of the Nocturne siblings withdrew a short knife in an ornate silver sheath from the inside of his jacket and tossed it towards Niall.

“You’re late for the solstice ball, asshole. And while being half naked and soaked in blood might be your idea of a good time, you need to sort your shit out.” Lachie hitched his shoulders inside his jacket. The witch had a natural talent for being a pompous cocksucker at all times.

“Ruby sent us to get you. Obviously, she knows you well enough by now to understand... whatever *this* is...” Niall dipped his chin in the general direction of where he stood shirtless and looming large over the fae strapped to the chair. Grinning like an absolute air-headed idiot at the disdain written all over Rowan’s face.

Fuck that for a joke.

He’d secretly hoped to avoid the ball entirely.

But the queen of the fae was cunning. He’d give her that.

“Are you going to bathe me? Wash my balls for me, princess?” He sneered at Niall.

“Just get fucking moving, would you?” Lachie pinched his brow. “I could really do without imagining your hairy balls right now.”

“At least I’ve got some. I hear Belle’s got yours locked up in her purse.”

The sight of his brother’s fists clenching and unclenching was almost enough to have him crack a smile. Niall had it right. Lachie *was* far too easy to poke at, especially where his fated mate was concerned.

He reached over and yanked the blade free from the man’s thigh. More fucking sobbing. The crying was endless with this one. He flicked a wrist in the fae’s direction as he wiped the slick crimson onto his trousers to clean off the metal.

Within a blink, a silvery sheen of the enchantment drew down around him, encasing the man within a translucent bubble. All noise finally stopped, and his body sagged despite being restrained and with a gag stuffed in his mouth. He could stay here rotting in a prison of his own imagination for the night, and Rowan could pick back up where they left off tomorrow.

Perhaps a little time spent reliving the events of the past few hours in his mind's eye might loosen the asshole's tongue.



Rowan skulked into the back of the ballroom after being herded by his brothers to clean himself and dress in the ridiculous suit Niall had thrust at him. A simple mask in place to cover his eyes. He'd opted for a painted effect by using his magic. Fucked if he'd wear an *actual* mask. Deep crimson smeared and flecked his skin with a burnt black effect that resembled dragon scales.

He didn't have to hide behind a costume. The bloody centuries of war was the only mask Rowan needed to wear—a monster's guise.

Fuck knows what his brothers were meant to be dressed as, but they'd disappeared off to trail after their women like obedient little lapdogs. He could easily spot them amongst the crowd on the dancefloor, looking all kinds of soft and besotted. Nothing he'd done to train them over the past three centuries had safeguarded them from the kind of weakness they'd so willingly exposed themselves to.

Fated bonds were a choice for a witch. By joining with their women, both Lachie and Niall had chosen to lay their hearts vulnerable and exposed to anyone who might try and attack.

Idiots.

Both of them.

He skirted the edge of the crowd. Students were bloody well *everywhere*. All of them either drunk on fae wine or indulging in spice. Thick clouds of pungent, herbaceous smoke wove around the vast ballroom. Magic hung in the air above the heads of the gathered throng, with the opulent gilded setting glinting like a thousand tiny jewels. The high ceiling filled with a jostling assortment of floating orbs emitting a soft golden light.

A shifter stumbled into him carrying two large goblets of fae wine, the contents sloshing onto the floor and narrowly missing the godsdamned suit. Rowan had no qualms in pinning the prick to the wall with his magic. A silver streak of light lashed out and slammed him against a pillar, immobile, mute, and wide-eyed. He didn't even bother to say anything; just arched an eyebrow and carried on his way.

Good luck joining the rest of the party. The fucker could stay there in magical restraints until morning.

Finding a corner well away from the dancefloor, he took up a vantage point overlooking the sea of bodies grinding and writhing together. The midsummer solstice had well and truly taken hold, with no doubt all kinds of debauchery likely to ensue the longer the evening wore on.

He needed a fucking drink to get through another minute of this shit.

Using his magic, he pulled a small gold flask from thin air. Raising it to his lips, oaked notes of whiskey slipped down with a delicious burn. At least from here, Rowan could observe at a distance while also fulfilling Ruby's wishes for all academic staff to be in attendance. The familiar sight of Nelloix—herbalist witch, now a turned vampiress—caught his eye with her two vampire mates on the far side of the ballroom. They had been brought in to run the herbarium programme as botanical and potions experts, respectively. He'd yet to properly meet them, but he already knew enough about both of the mountainous-looking vampires. The other, who was nearly as thoroughly decorated with tattoos as Rowan himself, was rumoured to be one of the best trackers across several realms.

On the other side of the crowd, Finnic's blond hair bobbed as he talked animatedly with a dark-haired fae male. He'd mentioned something about his own fated mate, but in all honesty, Rowan hadn't really been paying attention.

Laughter broke out in ripples throughout the crowd. Bodies pressed up against one another, moving as though entranced by the heavy beat of the music filling the night air. The entire place reeked of desire and sex and lost inhibitions. Each hit of spice and downed glass of fae wine only served to stoke the flames higher.

As he raised the flask once again to his lips, he stilled.

Her.

Moving through the crowd, with one hand wrapped in the grip of the cocky fucking vampire, Etienne. Dressed in a shimmering silver dress that left little to the imagination. It fell about her breasts without anything holding it in place and barely reached mid-thigh on her diminutive frame. Her mask draped across her cheekbones with a sweep of crystals, matching the glint of diamond jewels wound through her long hair. The ethereal look came complete with matching gossamer wings that flickered and slowly beat with magic, creating the illusion of hovering between her bared shoulder blades.

A faerie of eons past.

She was being pulled towards the thickest crush of the dancefloor. Laughing. Stumbling. Slapping at his shoulder with her free hand, but not in protest. No, the girl was willingly being led away from the rest of her group of friends. Of course, he wanted to get her alone where it would be easy to disguise wandering hands and bodies pressed together.

Rowan chewed down the next slug of whiskey. His fingers flexed against the smooth metal of his flask.

The vampire was all fangs and hands.

Roaming his greedy touches across the curves of her body in a way that he had no fucking right to.

But she didn't push him away. She let him run his hands all over her. And no matter how hard he tried, Rowan couldn't take his eyes off every place the dickhead dared to covet. A filthy little bloodsucker who had barely seen a century of existence, and this girl allowed him to grope her.

Flushed cheeks and bright eyes behind the jewels of her mask responded to every sway of their bodies to the beat.

Fuck.

He needed to leave. There was nothing good to come of staying here, and from the way his cock had started to stir at the sight of the girl... no, that was risking territory far too dangerous. He'd made an appearance here tonight—as requested by the queen—and now he'd gladly retreat in search of some fucking peace and quiet.

Peace. And. Fucking. Quiet.



“I need some air,” Ri shouted at the vampire. Even though they were squashed against each other in the crush of the dancefloor, she could barely hear herself think over the sultry beat and deafening noise inside the ballroom.

As much as she was enjoying the feel of Etienne's possessive hold on her body and indulging in the sensation of maybe being desired for a moment in time, the fae wine had sunk its claws in.

Or maybe it was the spice.

Who fucking knew, but she'd set out on a crash course to enjoy the evening. With Brynne's bad influence, they'd had a party worthy of the Goddesses in her rooms while getting ready for the ball together. So much so that they'd almost ended up being late.

“You want me to join you, scary girl?” Etienne's eyes glimmered with the reflection from the magical orbs of light

floating just above their heads. His cheekbones looked even more devastating, caressed by long shadows.

She could so easily make terrible decisions with this vampire.

“No, you stay here. I’ll be right back.” Flashing a smile, she ducked and threw herself amongst the melee of bodies. Quickly slipping away, she set off on a zig-zag route for the outer reaches of the ballroom. Bumping into other dancers as she swayed under the haze of wine and magic.

The ballroom used to be part of the fae palace and was a stunning ode to opulence. Nearly every surface was covered in gold or draped with precious jewels, and it felt all too surreal being here now as a student rather than at her sister’s side while Ruby ruled as queen.

She covered her mouth to stifle the laughter bubbling up.

Her sister. A godsdamn queen. Of all fucking things.

Finally, she carved a path through the sea of almost-fornication going on—pushing past couples and groups who were very nearly moving on to the next phase of the evening right in the middle of the ballroom—and burst out into the warm evening. A soft glow of lantern light sprawled across the vast marble terrace and lit up the garden’s edge that lay just beyond the wide railing.

The moon hung plump and full in the sky, surrounded by wisps of clouds caressing her soft edges. Even the cosmos was indulging in the night’s festivities, it would seem.

Ri sucked in a deep inhale of the fragrant summer breeze. At least the terrace seemed to be deserted except for a few silhouettes of bodies gathered down the far end, passing the telltale glowing red cherry of spice back and forth as they shared it with one another.

Her head throbbed, and blood sang with the lingering effects of wine. The potency and concoction of magic-infused drinks she and Brynne had indulged in was kicking her ass. She just needed a little quiet for a few moments to gather

herself. It wasn't like she'd left Etienne to go looking for *him*...

No. She had been on a mission to avoid any sight or hint of Rowan this evening—content to wrap herself around the handsome vampire and try to forget about her torturously gorgeous tormentor.

But Goddesses save her from her own foolish self. She'd felt the pang of something hollow in her chest the longer the evening went on, and she *hadn't* seen him. Getting dressed in this stupid silver costume—as a fucking delicate little faerie, which Brynne had thought was hilarious, pointing out with a slurred giggle, '*because you're fae and your name is Ri!*' over and over—she had actually felt beautiful.

Only to realise that she was stupidly disappointed when there had been no sign of him to see her dressed in something other than the sweat and dirt of the training arena.

Spirits and Stars. Ri lowered her forehead against the cool marble of the railing. The smooth stone acted as her anchor while she gripped tight, swaying slightly on her feet.

“Are you hiding from the crowds too?”

She jerked upright at the sound of the feminine voice close by. Her eyes slightly unfocused, and a fuzziness coated her tongue.

“I'm sorry, didn't mean to startle you.” A witch with long dark hair piled on top of her head, and a simple velvet green dress was clasping a glass of wine. Her winged mask looked like elegant feathers and moss.

“No—I'm ok—Just needed some air was all.” Ri smoothed the front of her dress down. Suddenly aware of how short it was compared to the elegant long gown her companion wore.

“You look absolutely stunning.” She shot a little smile from beneath her mask and gestured to Ri's wings. “I love the idea of adding the illusion of wings.”

“My friend thought it was a funny play on my name.” Ri shrugged, leaning back against the railing and watched the shadows of the ballroom through the large windows.

“You’re not normally an ancient faerie from folklore, then? Just a regular old student?” The witch giggled. “Don’t worry, I’m not usually a bird or a ball of moss, or whatever it is that my costume was supposed to be. Just a struggling academic trying to learn to get better at spellcasting and runic divination.”

“Ugh. That sounds awful.” Ri groaned and tilted her head back to the sky. “I bet you have to spend your life staring at grimoires and scrawled notes from old crusty spells.”

Another tinkling laugh. “You guessed it. I’m buried up to my eyeballs in dusty texts in the back of the library all day.”

That was Ri’s idea of a nightmare.

At least the herbalism classes she had to endure were mostly practical potion-making to break up the tedium of textbook study. And thank fuck for Brynne being on hand to stop her from setting the bastards on fire when she lost her temper with them.

“Honestly, I’m just out here because I was looking for someone, but I don’t think they want me to find them.” The witch shook her head with a rueful smile.

“Honestly? I think I’m doing the opposite. Trying to avoid someone who doesn’t even know I’m looking for them.” Ri couldn’t help but laugh. Who was she kidding. It wasn’t a handsy vampire she was trying to avoid, but a tattooed muscular witch. Or maybe it was that she wanted to see him, but at the same time, didn’t want to see him? Or perhaps it was the fae wine talking, and she really should just put herself to bed before she made any truly regrettable life choices tonight.

“You’re training for the elites, then?”

Ri blinked, her mind a little hazy. “Yeah, I’m in the programme to join the Astrals... I mean, if I make it, that is.” She added hastily.

“Something tells me you’ve got what it takes.” Her companion glanced up at the windows and her brows lifted. “You know what, I’ve just seen my *someone*... I’ll leave you

to enjoy the rest of your solstice night. Might see you around if you ever venture into the library one day, fighter girl.”

With a quick wave, the witch moved off along the terrace towards the wide glass doors. Ri spun around, her buzz still going strong, and began to wander a little deeper into the shadows. She didn't feel ready to follow the other girl and return back inside just yet, and the quiet hum of the beat to the music and the cicadas on the warm breeze had her body feeling somehow softer. More relaxed than before.

She followed the railing along to where a small alcove formed. It disappeared around a corner from the main terrace on a curve, and was a secluded space decorated with potted jasmine. The moonlight cast a pale glow over the marble, fireflies danced in slow circles in time to the music, and her dress glinted in an effect that combined to make everything look like a fairytale come to life.

Ri hopped up to sit on the railing, gripping the edge beneath both hands and swung her bare legs and ridiculous heels in time to the music. She *should* probably get back soon. If Brynne and Saskia hadn't already fallen into bed with someone—or multiple someones—they would probably be wondering where she was.

It just felt nice to be out here. Added to that fact, the lull of the warmth on her skin felt too good to pass up. She could stay here a little longer.

Only her momentary glimpse at a little seclusion was shattered in an instant. Ri sucked in a hasty breath as she sensed the looming presence.

A dark figure appeared around the corner. His face was hidden by the depth of shadows shrouding his form, but there was no mistaking who it was.

She recognised him immediately.

He was here, after all.

CHAPTER 10

The night had practically turned into an orgy.

With far too much shit going down in dark corners, Rowan's teeth were even more on edge than normal.

He'd lost sight of the girl after she'd ducked off into the crowd, but at least she'd ditched the vampire trying to shove his dick against her every two seconds.

Something told Rowan he really *shouldn't* go out onto that terrace. But an instinct he'd learned never to doubt propelled him to move. Circling the edge of the crowd, he made his way through one of the sets of large glass doors.

It was quiet out here under the pale glow of the solstice moon. Most students who ventured outside had probably disappeared into the gardens to get their cock sucked in the bushes.

Maybe he'd keep watch on things from out here on the terrace for a while longer. At least the intense noise of the crowd was more muffled and...

A glint of silver caught the corner of his eye. Disappearing around the darkened corner at the end of the railing.

Fuck.

Fuck.

He didn't need to get anywhere near this—her. But skulking around in the dark on the solstice with any number of drunken idiots leering after her was unacceptable. Not while

she was intent on being a walking temptation wrapped up in a costume that left nothing to the imagination.

This was what Ruby would want, after all. Someone to look out for her sister while she was too fucking drunk for her own good.

If only his dick would get that same message.

Like an idiot, he followed behind. Tracing her slightly uneven footsteps in complete silence. Was she humming to herself? The girl had no fucking clue of her surroundings, too lost in the haze of magic and fae wine and Goddess-knows what else her group of friends had indulged in before the night began.

She slowed and hopped up to sit on the marble railing, looking like she was going to tip back over the edge at any moment. But in that same moment, her senses finally picked up on his presence.

The softness he'd witnessed a glimpse of in her face just before immediately hardened to firm edges. Exactly as they'd done when she first saw him that morning at the lake.

Rowan scrubbed a hand over his mouth. Willing his cock to stop jerking to attention at the sight of her breasts threatening to spill out of the top of her dress.

No time like the present to get this shit over with.

“Go inside, Oriana.”

He didn't give a fuck about decent or polite conversation. If the girl hated him, so be it. At least her safety could be assured, and his blackened conscience could be somewhat appeased for the night.

But instead of saying anything, she sat there studying him with those slightly almond-shaped eyes. Her bare shoulders bathed in moonlight, casting a glowing—almost ethereal appearance. A faerie with her gossamer wings and crystalline glimmers highlighting her features. Those plump lips painted a deep rose colour were parted as she swayed a little on her perch.

This was the last thing he needed right now.

“How surprising. A brute giving commands.” She cocked her head and surveyed him in the shadows. Delicate fingertips dug tight against the edge of the marble to hold herself steady. “I see you’ve dressed as the spawn of a demon tonight. Quite fitting. Well done.”

That mouth of hers...

“Get. Back. Inside.” He gritted his teeth so hard his jaw ached.

She laughed. Fucking threw her head back and the throaty, raspy noise went straight to his cock.

Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he stepped closer. Erasing the distance between them, while his lip curled into a sneer. This little creature had no bloody clue.

“I was here first. *You leave.*” Her wrist waved a dismissive arc in the air. “This isn’t your training arena to spit commands at me.”

“You can’t be out here—alone—in the dark.” *Fuck.*

“And why is that exactly? I can’t be alone... or is it that the two of us can’t be seen out here alone?”

She baited him. Putting on a serene smile and testing his every last measure of patience. If this was one of his guards, he’d have no issue demanding their instant compliance.

Batting her long eyelashes at him, she pouted. “Oh, but it was fine to corner me all alone when I was just *the sister to the queen*, and you felt like you could belittle me with absolutely no qualms about anyone seeing.” The girl tilted her head to one side as she continued on. “But now that I’m your student, you don’t know what to do with me... and the easiest thing for the great Rowan of Nocturne to do is bark orders and attempt to get rid of me.”

He heard the growl leave his own throat without warning. Rumbling through the dark on the gentle night breeze.

“I’ve seen too many little girls like you get broken. When they think they’re invincible and know everything. Just

because you've been blessed with supernatural blood doesn't absolve you from the cold blade of death." He stepped forward again. If she wouldn't listen, then at least he'd stand over her until she fucking moved.

"You're just a weak little faerie. No magic. No gifts. Just a talent for gemstones and gold." He canted his head to one side. Mirroring her movement while keeping his eyes firmly locked on hers behind that crystal mask.

Do not look down. Do not look down. Do not look down.

Her tongue darted out to wet her bottom lip. Wide eyes bouncing all over his face the closer his body drew to her own in the dark.

"Annnnd, that makes you angry?" She evaded the point, reaching up to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and then a wicked gleam flickered in her eyes. "Ohhh... I get it. This isn't about me disobeying your orders. It's about you wanting something you can't have."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

She was infuriating and so damn drunk, and his fingers itched to wrap around that slender throat. To feel her pulse hitch as he squeezed with just the right pressure.

"In case you've forgotten, your own sister nearly fucking gave her life—no, actually did give her life—to end any more trouble for or manipulation of your kind. So the least you can do is respect that and not go throwing yourself in harm's way like a fucking fool." Somehow, he'd wound up so close he almost stood between her knees. Heat radiated between them and ate up every molecule of air.

Tension and angst buzzed through his body like an angry hive. He wasn't going to touch her. Couldn't give in to this ridiculous notion.

But, oh fuck, she was looking at him with something dark and desirous in her big eyes. And while he stood over her, with his hands still wedged deep inside his pockets, she shifted her hands. Moving slowly to hitch the soft material of her dress higher. Sliding it up, up, up her bare legs revealing more

bronzed skin and softness and all the parts of her that an asshole like him should never admit to wanting.

“I don’t think you know what to do with me, do you, brute?” That breathy fucking rasp in her voice. Sent a fresh rush of blood to his already alert cock.

Fucked if he could resist looking down. He was already dancing in the flames by still being here, and something had hold of him deep inside his chest that refused to let go.

“Trust me, I know exactly what to do with a woman.” He poked his tongue against the side of his mouth and dragged his heavy stare across her body. Taking in the rise and fall of her chest. The shudder in her breathing when he stopped for a second to watch the swell of her breasts. “I know exactly what makes a woman scream with pleasure. I know the exact spot to hit with my cock sunk deep inside a wet pussy that makes a woman clench and moan.”

He should leave. Should stop talking right fucking now. Remove himself from this entire situation.

But instead, he remained rooted to the spot, transfixed by her heated gaze.

The silver material continued to bunch. Inching higher and higher towards the apex of her thighs. Her pouty lips hung open, and lust glazed her eyes under the weight of his filthy words.

This was so wrong.

Why couldn’t he leave?

What the fuck was he even saying?

“Mmm... half the students at this academy want to know exactly what you would do to them if they ever got you alone in a dark corner.”

Shit.

Shit.

Students and the fucking academy and all the flood of consequences of where this conversation had headed towards

came rushing in.

“You need to get back inside, find your friends, and be with someone your own age, little faerie.”

Her fingers stilled around the edge of the dress. And like a fucking fool, he couldn't resist glancing back down. The bunched-up shimmer of silver in her lap left only an inch of shadow hiding what lay beneath.

“What if I don't want someone my age... they don't interest me.” Oh, he needed to get the fuck away. “There's much more interesting things to explore elsewhere... things that I shouldn't want.” The slightest shift of her fingers hooked his gaze. Rowan's nostrils flared as he sucked in a long breath.

The shadow of her pussy came into sight. Any moment now, he'd see it. He'd see it, and he'd be stuck, transfixed. This was the second he needed to walk away and get out of there.

Shit, even just godsdamn portal himself and disappear. But he couldn't move.

As if the girl had some kind of hold over him, one that felt as powerful as the strongest hex or enchantment he'd encountered, meant he clung on *only just* to not doing something they might both regret.

Bronzed skin. The softness of her upper thighs where they touched. More and more of her was revealed with every agonising breath. Their heads almost touching as they both focused on the spot where her hands held onto the hem of her dress.

This was it.

No going back.

A shadowy outline of the crease of her upper thigh inched into view. Fuck. He let out a ragged breath. Was she not wearing anything underneath her dress?

They weren't touching, yet here he stood, entranced by the most intimate part of her. His cock throbbed and pressed against the front of his trousers. Send him to the fucking

ancestors; he was hard as stone and ready to flip her over this railing and fuck her senseless.

At the thought of her bent over and moaning as his cock sank into her tight wet heat, he muttered a silent curse under his breath. Pre-cum already leaking inside his pants.

She made a soft noise in the back of her throat. Sweet and delicate and full of wanting.

Out of the darkness, a burst of laughter—a clatter of a door being thrown open—shattered whatever spell had kept him transfixed. The bubble they'd been in burst, and he took a hasty step back.

What the fuck?

His gaze snapped up to meet hers. The consequences of whatever that had been between them doused over him like taking a plunge into the depths of an icy lake. This was not good.

Not good. Not good.

He jerked his hands out of his pockets, not missing the way her stare landed on the evidence of his rock-hard erection in his trousers, and shoved his fingers through his hair.

Another step back. A mile. An ocean. He needed to put as much distance between them as possible—right this second.

“You need to focus on why you came to this academy. Not run around showing your cunt like a whore.” The words spat out, cold and crude. Because that’s all he was. An unmitigated asshole, and she needed to be under no uncertainty of her hatred for him.

But as he turned to leave, she just had to have the last fucking word. Her raspy voice called out after him, cutting through the night.

“I might be a whore, but you’re the one who was watching.”

CHAPTER II

Two weeks of punishing trainings.

Two weeks since the night of the solstice ball.

Each day Ri stepped into the arena became a battle to keep her composure.

She needed not have worried about what might or might not have happened after her little altercation with Rowan on the terrace that night. Because the man had turned into a frozen tundra. Devoid of emotion or personality or any fucking shred of decency.

Even the other students, who previously had swooned after him as though the sun shone out of his firm ass, began to grumble. Their drills and combat practice tripled in intensity, leaving them all in various states of ruin by the end of each class.

Then, true to form, Rowan would invariably command that she stayed behind and complete the assault course on her own. Always for reasons that were vague and unspecified, but it never ceased to give Vanya and her cronies a source of glee as they waved her off on her solo efforts.

Leaving her returning to her rooms late at night, dripping in sweat and the sharp sting of humiliation.

Brynne had begun to worry. Even suggested she should go and talk to Ruby about whatever was going on. But the thought of involving her sister made her palms sweat. There was far too much residual confusion and sexual tension left rolling around her body after the night of the solstice that she

couldn't even wrap her head around how she might raise the issue with Ruby.

Plus, there was every chance her sister would see straight through any half-truth or lie she might attempt to concoct.

Then, there was the very possible risk she'd have to submit to an interrogation about why she hadn't hooked up with anyone the night of the ball. What was she supposed to say? *'Oh, no, I ignored all the suitable options in favour of nearly showing my pussy to my teacher, who is the better part of three hundred years older than me.'*

Wisdom and good decisions were clearly not her friends in this particular season of life.

"Hey, scary girl." Etienne appeared beside her as if she conjured the smug vampire just by remembering how she'd abandoned him on the dancefloor that night of the solstice. Leaning up against the stone wall with crossed arms and a self-satisfied smirk. They were neck and neck on the leaderboard for points, a fact she was both pleased about and also highly irritated by.

She wanted to kick his smug vampiric ass on her way to reaching the Astrals. Not just barely scrape by him on almost equal points.

"What do you want, bloodsucker?" She bent down to collect the array of swords and knives she'd been running drills with over here on her own. Ready to scuttle back and return them to the armoury before Finnic had kittens about the state of his precious stash of armaments.

That man was unreasonably besotted with his weapons.

"Guess we're paired up again. Some new tactical manoeuvres we are going to run through." He nodded towards where Finnic was instructing different members of the class to pair off. From the looks of the groupings, they'd been assigned based on points ranking and positioning on the leaderboard.

"Fine. But I promise you'll lose... *again*." She flashed him a smile and batted her eyelashes sweetly. There was no denying the greedy bitch inside her chest loved any

opportunity to win against him. And their rounds together over the past couple of weeks had been evenly matched. If she remembered correctly, they were tied for successes and points right now.

Ri hurried over to shelve the weapons, casting a quick glance to make sure Finnic was still occupied, then made her way over to stand beside Etienne.

It would appear that this new training session was non-weaponry, focused solely on physical conquest and overpowering your opponent. Ri pursed her lips and shot Etienne a look out of the corner of her eye. There were a lot of things she could do to beat the vampire when it came to strategy, hand-to-hand combat, and use of different weapons... but wrestling him into submission?

Unlikely.

The vampire was young in bloodsucker terms—around a century old—but he was still incredibly strong. Lean and muscular and with plenty of height on her short stature.

She already didn't like her odds of succeeding in the arena today.

As she turned to face down Etienne, a shadow loomed up beside her.

“I'll take over here.” The all too familiar scent of sandalwood mixed with that deep gravel voice made her core clench.

What in the Spirits and the Stars was this?

Etienne did his best to school his features, but there was no hiding the slight lift to his eyebrows—a hint of a smirk danced on his lips. The vampire nodded and followed the line of Rowan's blade where he pointed in the direction of Finn. Dutifully obliging as he headed over to where the fae stood waiting.

Ri didn't know where to look. Her entire vision suddenly consumed by the obscenely solid presence of Rowan's torso. The sight of his shirt, slightly damp and hugging his muscles, was mouthwatering. Rolled sleeves hit his elbows to showcase

the artwork lined all over his forearms, only further accentuating the network of veins she wanted to reach out and slide her fingers along.

For the love of the Goddesses, this was torture.

She hated him.

Despised him.

Maybe if she repeated it enough times, she might actually believe it. There was a fine line between hate and... well... infatuation. And Ri honestly didn't know which side of that line she fell face-first on.

Whatever. She couldn't stop thinking about falling on his cock, so that gave her every answer she needed really.

“Are you just going to stand there, little faerie?” The low rumble in his chest forced her eyes up to meet his own.

Standing only inches from her, she had to crane back just to look at him and it immediately put her off balance. His whole entity shook her foundations. And taking in the cool blue of his eyes from this proximity was utterly hypnotic.

Eyes that had seen so much bloodshed.

Ri couldn't even begin to fathom what his life had been like until now. All she knew was that the witch possessed magic given by the Goddesses themselves, pertaining to war and weaponry. For what purpose was anyone's guess. But there was a startling depth to this man behind his calculating, asshole exterior. Of that, she was certain. But she pitied anyone who dared venture into that shitstorm unprepared to wage a battle of a different kind in order to survive.

Either way, he'd been a dick to her on the solstice.

And he'd been hard.

She wasn't drunk enough to mistake the evidence of that in his trousers right before he'd called her a whore.

Ri's nostrils flared as she recalled just how turned on she'd been by his crude words. Why did that do something to her?

“Just sizing you up.” She muttered. Rearranging her posture and jutting out her chin.

What the fuck was she supposed to do with all *that*? He was the equivalent of wrestling a godsdamned mountain, when she was just a flea.

Maybe she could bite his ankles?

“Take that long to make a decision in battle, and you’d be dead.”

Dick. Perhaps she’d bite his nose off.

“I wasn’t aware of a time limit.” Her fists clenched. Her core ached. Her pussy... well, that needy little bitch had all sorts of wayward intentions that she did her best to ignore.

“Are you incapable of completing this task? Shall I dismiss you from my arena?” Just when she thought he couldn’t be more of an irredeemable ass, he went and sneered at her like that.

That pushed her into the red mist. Calling her a whore was one thing. As fucked up as it was, she liked that. But threatening her position here at the academy? No fucking way would she tolerate anything of the sort. In an instant, she flung herself at him, somehow launching to try and tackle him around the waist. His hard body didn’t give an inch, and her palms wrapped around the planes of his back. Feeling the heat of him beneath her fingertips and scalding her cheek as she crashed against his figure.

Only for her to bounce off and land in a crumpled heap. Dirt kicking up around her in a small cloud.

Ri pushed onto her knees, huffing loose strands of hair out of her face. As she raised her eyes, the all too familiar sight of his boots filled her line of vision. *Again*. So close. If she looked up now...

There was no mistaking the way his eyes seared over her with sharp intent. Knelt before him, with her hair wild and a few wisps of curls fallen loose around one side of her face, she would only have to lean forward, and his cock would be right there. So close she could easily run her fingers up and unfasten

his trousers. His muscled thighs within arm's reach for her to grip hold of. The perfect angle that would allow him to slide past her parted lips and thrust into her mouth.

Fuck.

Rowan sensed it, too.

She heard the sharp hiss as he sucked in a breath.

The air crackled with magic between them.

Why in the Stars was she always finding herself in this position? And what did it say about her warped sense of attraction to this witch that she wanted to wind herself around his legs like a cat.

The moment the image burst into her mind it sent her heartbeat pulsing in her clit.

“You’re so fucking stubborn.” His voice dropped lower. A warning, or a threat maybe.

His stern glare rounded out her humiliation.

“Says the brute who cut in on my training partner.”

Ri pushed up to stand and dusted her palms against her thighs. Twisting her hair up into a top knot, a silent stand-off ensued between them while she wound her long curls and secured them in place. All around them the rest of the class were a mass of bodies thudding and colliding. Figures wrestling each other to the floor with audible grunts.

She felt the air stall in her chest, leaving her breathless and confused. Cursing herself for lusting after someone she couldn't have. The kind of classic fucking disaster that she shouldn't be so strung out by.

“Are you really so determined to fail this class, little faerie?” Crossing his arms only further highlighted the inked designs curling over his skin. His head tilted ever so slightly to one side, and those intense bluish-silver irises punished her.

But there was no mistaking the way his tone dropped into a hush. As if he didn't want anyone else to hear him call her that. And fuck if that didn't make her thighs clench. The

thought of the two of them, alone and secluded somewhere in the dark as he whispered in her ear with *that* dark tone.

Shit.

It was all she could do not to combust right then and there.

That night at the solstice, standing with their heads together gazing at the sight of her dress inching up her thigh, had revealed something between them. Illuminating dark desires within the pale glowing moonlight on a night doused in magic.

“It seems you are the one determined to fail *me*.” She glared at his perfect, strong jaw. Anything to avoid the intensity of being ensnared by his gaze. “This training arena—reaching the elites—it means everything to me. So, if you want to kick me out, just get it over and done with. No more pretending to tolerate me simply as a favour to my sister.”

Silence stretched and snapped between them like a wolf’s bite.

“You have to work with your strengths. Not against them.” He took a step forward and Ri barely held herself steady rather than flinching away. Coming around to stand just behind her, Rowan stopped so close she could feel the heat radiating off his chest, extending from her nape to the base of her spine. The scent of him consuming her and dragging her under in a powerful hold. “Ask for help, *little faerie*.”

A shudder ran through her body as his words gusted close to her ear.

“Why should I?” Her mouth was so fucking dry.

“Because in battle, you never operate alone.” They weren’t touching, but she could feel him and the presence of his magic as it wrapped around her. His sheer size overwhelmed and isolated her from anything else in the training arena. She was only aware of him and the coil winding low in her core.

He stepped back around to stand in front of her again like a giant stone wall.

“You set me up to fail. *Sir.*” She eyed him apprehensively. Trying desperately to keep her breathy voice even and not sound like she was panting after him. Spirits only knows what that would do for his over-inflated ego. “There’s no chance of you allowing yourself to be flung into the dirt in front of this class, and you know it. Hence, I never stood a chance.”

“Ah, so the little faerie has finally come to her senses.” That husky, low voice was going to haunt her dreams tonight.

“Ok, so how am I supposed to complete this assessment... if my partner is unwilling to participate.” Ri huffed out.

He frowned. Jaw muscles clenching as if he chose his next words carefully. “You can practise more advanced techniques. Just learn the positioning and holds today. Get those right, and instinct will do the rest next time you require them.”

She nodded carefully.

Quietly, methodically, he instructed her on where to grasp an opponent larger than her. Explaining how to use her low centre of gravity and the size of another being—a would-be attacker—to her advantage. His voice washed over her in a sensual rhythm, leaving her stomach swooping all around before plunging into a swan dive.

“Well, go on then.” His arms remained folded. Legs spread. But he nodded his permission for her to demonstrate what he’d just explained.

She hastily licked her bottom lip. Eyes bouncing all over his frame. Fuck, why did he have to be so overwhelming in his masculinity. So damn lickable. Ri was determined not to look at his face because she was certain her own must be bright pink.

It took everything not to make a sound when she first placed her hands on his body. Her palms felt the searing heat of him through the thin layer of cotton. If she hadn’t been nearly deafened by the thunder of her own pulse in her ears, she was certain his magic crackled around them.

Was he...

She bit her bottom lip. Trying—and failing—not to fixate on the thousands of questions ricocheting around her mind. Did he think of her differently since that night? Was he attracted to her? Had he been left as shaken and unbearably turned on after disappearing from the terrace as she'd been?

Did he fist his cock and imagine her the same way she fantasised about him burying his face in her pussy?

Her cheeks singed.

Every finger trembled.

But Rowan allowed her to continue touching him. Each of her movements felt awkward and tentative at first, then gradually became more decisive with gradual repetition.

All the while, he kept his hands to himself.

She wanted nothing more than to know what it would feel like to have his rough palms all over her.

“Again.” He gestured with a dip of his chin for her to repeat the movement. “I won’t bite.”

Oh, nope. No. She was not going to allow even a fraction of an inch of *charming* Rowan to invade her senses.

“I think that’s absolute horse shit.” She snorted.

“Good girl. You *are* capable of learning something, it would seem.” Her brain stalled at the single drop of praise leaving his lips. Followed by the sharp sting of indignation at his taunting words.

She might be learning how to train for battle and warfare, but she was almost certain this witch was going to be the death of her.

CHAPTER 12

“Hurry up, scary girl. Let’s go!” Brynne’s voice carried across the arena. Evidently, their group of friends were amongst the rest of the class heading to the tavern at the nearby village. Some shit about *bonding* and getting to know one another, and the little sprite had made it her personal mission to ensure Ri joined them for the evening.

As she neared, they linked arms and followed behind the rest of the group. Saskia dropped back to walk with them, and up ahead, she could see Atticus and Etienne in amongst the small crowd.

Ri didn’t want to glance back, lest she was made to stay behind and complete more laps of the assault course after class. Although something told her Rowan would let her leave unscathed today. There had been *something* different in his behaviour throughout the course of the training session.

Even if her stupid little fluttering heart wanted to believe in an attraction on his part, what was she hoping for? Ruby had been clear in her aims and dreams for the academy, and she would never do anything to intentionally harm her sister.

So by that logic, ignoring the fan club gathered around Rowan with hearts in their eyes, and instead leaving to grab a drink with her friends was a much better idea.

Sensible.

Practical.

Level-headed.

All the things that Ri had for so long been told she wasn't.

She could absolutely be that woman—the one who made the logical decision and put her impulsive nature to one side.

“Spirits, I can't believe you got out of there in one piece today.” Saskia breathed out a laugh once they were in the clear. Wandering along the path towards the forest at the edge of the academy grounds.

“Oh yeah, I totally thought we were going to have to abandon you to the clutches of the assault course again.” Brynne giggled. “How many times...”

“Don't even start.” Ri groaned. “Too fucking many is the answer.” She had the aching bones to prove it. Fae didn't heal as quickly as shifters, or vampires, or witches, and her body seemed to constantly be screaming at her lately.

“I thought we were going to the village?” Saskia called up ahead to the others.

“There's a shortcut through the forest.” The familiar sight of Etienne's fangs and smirk flashed back at them.

As they walked and talked, the girls fell into easy conversation about classes and their lives back in their home realms. Brynne had endless stories about nearly being roasted from head to toe by her older brother's dragons. Meanwhile, Saskia came from a small village in the far reaches of the fae dominion. This was her first time away from her family. They traded stories of lovers and flings and left each other nearly in tears laughing at the particularly embarrassing sex stories they'd each experienced before choosing to come to Astracadia.

These two were feeling more and more like sisters to Ri every single day.

She desperately wanted Ruby to meet them but wondered what the likelihood might ever be now that her life revolved around being queen. There was so much she missed about the time when her sister was just *there*... and now... she wasn't.

It didn't take long before they were nestled in a cosy corner of the walled garden outside the tavern. A lazy summer

evening glow of gold adding to the atmosphere. Ri had a tumbler of whiskey thrust into her hand by Brynne, who insisted that it was the best—shifter made and brought in from their forested realm. The scent of jasmine and low hum of cicadas surrounded them in the garden. She felt content enough to sit back and savour her glass while listening to her friends laugh and swap jokes.

This felt good.

The whiskey felt damn good.

She reluctantly admitted to herself that this *was* enjoyable.

While her goal for this year might be to reach the Astrals and prove she could be the best, having a night like this to unwind was exactly what her body and mind needed, too.

“Do you want another?” Atticus tapped one of his ringed fingers against the wood of the table, gesturing towards her nearly empty glass.

“I’ll go get this round.” She wanted to stretch her aching muscles, and the pleasant buzz of the whiskey had her feeling like she could happily float away on the breeze. Ri shimmied her way out of her seat and headed off through the large, double wooden doors.

The inside of the tavern was dim and smelled of oak and embers and something hoppy. Most patrons were outside enjoying the warmth of the balmy evening, but there was enough of a crowd gathered around low tables in here, too. As she slid up to the bar, she saw the fae owner wave from down the far end, indicating that he’d be with her in a moment. She nudged her tumbler across the golden-topped surface. The length of the bar curved around in a large horseshoe shape, and the room’s ornate interior was typical of everything in the fae dominion. Luxury and opulence at every turn.

“The girl who was hiding? Is that you, fighter girl?” A voice popped up at her elbow. Ri turned and was met with a face she didn’t recognise. Long brown hair in a plait over one shoulder. Light greyish blue eyes. Fine cheekbones and flawless porcelain skin.

“Do I—” Ri’s brows creased in confusion.

“Oh, right...” The witch let out a small laugh, then partially covered her features with both hands. “The solstice ball? Moss and feathers on my face?”

She snapped her fingers and pointed at the woman. “Library girl, right?”

“The one and the same.” Without the costume and the drunken haze of fae wine, she recognised the witch now.

“Are you here with friends from the academy?” She nodded her head towards the garden area.

“Sure am. You?” Ri motioned to the barman that she’d like a refill plus half a dozen others. She’d have to figure out how to get all the glasses back to the table without losing the contents of the drinks everywhere. If someone bumped into her and spilled them, she’d be liable to lose her temper and shove a knife up their nose.

“You’re in training for the Astrals, right? With Rowan of Nocturne?” The witch’s question snapped Ri’s attention at the mention of his name.

She nodded. A little unsure of where this was going. She didn’t fancy having to intervene with another potential Rowan admirer. The words of her sister about *keeping an eye out* ringing in her ears.

“Just be careful, the Nocturnes...” The witch reached out and wrapped a gentle hand over her forearm. But as she opened her mouth to say more, a voice called out Ri’s name from over by the doorway. *Wait, what?*

Turning to see who had tried to catch her attention, she felt the witch slip away.

“Hang on, what were you going to say?” She touched the witch’s elbow to make her pause. There was something of a warning in her bright eyes. Not the swooning over Rowan she had been steeling herself for, and that made her neck prickle.

“Oh, it’s nothing... go on and catch up with your friends. I’ll see you round at the academy.” Chewing the inside of her

mouth slightly, she seemed to make a quick decision, then leant forward and whispered. “Just be careful, will you? It’s worth asking yourself, how much can anyone really trust the Nocturnes?”

Ri was left with confusion written all over her face, watching the witch slip off towards the crowded tables at the other end of the tavern before the ringed fingers of Atticus swooped in to grab the tray full of the glasses from under her nose.

“Couldn’t wait for you all night.” His kohl-rimmed eyes narrowed on her and he shook his head. “You might be able to kick my ass at training, but you *suck* at getting a round of drinks.”

She craned back around to try for one last look at where the witch had gone to, but gave up when Atticus prodded her with an elbow to keep moving towards the garden.

“...that’s how I got this scar.” Brynne was flushed a perfect shade of pink to match her hair piled on top of her head, showing off the delicate points of her ear tips covered in several diamond studs. “Dragon-inflicted scrapes and burns don’t heal. I’m lucky I walked away with just this scratch and didn’t wind up a charred corpse. Never mind the strips my brother tore off me for sneaking into the lair while he wasn’t around.” She made a grabbing hands motion as Atticus set the tray down and he rolled his eyes at her.

“You’re insane. What were you thinking?” Saskia’s eyes were about to pop out of her head.

Ri slid in beside her two friends. Her distracted thoughts still half on the mystery seed the witch had just planted in her mind. Atticus squeezed in beside her, resting one arm on the back of the wooden bench seat behind her shoulders.

“Stubborn pig headedness. My brother told me I couldn’t do it...” Brynne shrugged and tipped back her glass.

“And so you just had to do it in order to prove you *could*.” Ri muttered into her own whiskey.

“See? Scary girl gets it.” The warm embrace of Brynne wrapped round her, and she planted a sloppy kiss on the side of her face. Then, pulled back with a high-pitched giggle, swiping roughly at the evidence left on Ri’s cheek with the sleeve of her top.

“Wow... that is *not* who I expected to see here tonight,” Saskia whispered loud enough for them to all hear.

“Who?” Someone at the table asked, but Ri already knew. It was like her senses had become attuned to him and his magic. Without seeing or hearing him, she just *knew*.

“*Professor-fuck-me.*” Another voice from further down the table gasped.

Ri felt her head begin to pound. Her body responded to his proximity and her nipples hardened.

“Did you know the rumour is that he never kisses or does anything to risk a *weakness*?”

“I heard that too.”

“Wouldn’t matter to me. He could do whatever he wanted and I’d say, thank you.”

The gossip flowing around the group was more than Ri could take. She certainly didn’t want to be thinking about Rowan of Nocturne right now. Let alone hearing about how he did or didn’t *kiss*.

Her imagination was vivid enough as it was.

But again, she felt that awareness—the undeniable sense of being scrutinised by him. Darting a look up, she was instantly captured by his piercing blue stare. Electric and smouldering with something ancient in the depths of his eyes. Before they flickered to something just over her shoulder, the blue darkened almost instantly. His jaw ticked and lips curled into more of a sneer than usual.

“Has he got blood on him?” Brynne cocked her head and murmured, giving a little wave in his direction. That seemed to divert him from whatever had captured his attention, and he nodded stiffly before carrying on inside.

Sure enough, as he turned to go through the doorway to the tavern, there was a distinct trail of dried blood that rose up from the collar of his black shirt and reached up the side of his face into his hair.

Was it his own? Or someone else's?

Ri felt like her heart had stuttered inside her chest. Forgetting its own rhythm while he held it captive.

Leaving her with the same question rolling around inside her mind the whole way back to her room that night... *How well did she know any of the Nocturnes?*

CHAPTER 13

No matter the beginning, the end was always the same.
The nightmare of a blade slicing through her neck.

Her head rolling to the ground with a sickening thud.

Lifeless blue eyes that once sparkled with so much mischief and joy, would stare back at him from the barren wasteland beneath his feet.

Time and time again, his knees hit the dirt and his stomach emptied itself at the knowledge of what he had just done. The most vibrant of lives taken with only a single blow from the sword clenched in his fist beneath ghostly white knuckles.

Brigid.

The same fucking brutal and grotesque nightmare over and over. Unrelenting and without change now for the better part of a century. At first, it was vague, wafting in on the tide of sleep with only pale, formless concepts that left him unsettled. Then, gradually, the images became clearer. The sounds more vivid and grisly. Each time a new detail would arise to taunt him.

Flecks of blood on his sword would glisten a brighter crimson.

Her sleek black head of hair would be instantly recognisable as he made out individual strands against her fair skin.

The worst was the moment he saw her face clearly for the first time. He nearly passed out after he woke up gasping and

keening. Feeling like his chest had caved in. Unable to tell if what horror he'd just witnessed—fuck, inflicted at his own hand—had been real or all in his mind.

Sleep became a newfound enemy after that night.

Rowan couldn't remember the last time he'd found peace amongst the dark hours. The visions that plagued him became all-consuming. Apocalyptic landscapes and death... so much fucking death...

Being forced to execute his own fucking sister.

Never knowing *why*.

He sat on the edge of his bed, head bowed and rubbing his temples. Counting the threads of the richly patterned carpet adorning the floor of his rooms between his feet.

Outside, a thick shroud of fog billowed in the dim light of lanterns in the courtyard. Rowan would shrug it off, run the perimeter, head to the lake. Just like always. By the time he'd finished that familiar course of events, he might just be feeling sane enough to deal with things like tracking down those responsible for the murders they had yet to find answers to.

No classes today.

At least that was one reprieve.

Silence enveloped the academy, and it was a balm to his aching head. A deep-seated pounding against the inside of his skull that no amount of magical healing could resolve. But throwing himself into the lake usually helped to wash away the sweat and lingering torture of his nightmares.

He rose and tugged on some pants before dragging a shirt over his head. Both black like his twisted, battle-weary soul.

She hadn't appeared at the lake again after that morning.

And he didn't know whether he was relieved about it or not. Some kind of sensation that he didn't want to dare acknowledge lurked on the edges of his consciousness. A screwed-up kind of obsession with the girl that he couldn't shake.

No matter how often he fucked his fist.

Which had become far too frequent. Thinking of her perfect tits and pouty little mouth and soft swell of her thighs each time he stroked his cock and jerked out his release. Cum and pent-up frustration shooting everywhere.

Since the morning at the lake. Then, the solstice. He'd been doubly fucked.

Nearly seeing her cunt that night at the ball had been too risky. The perfect glimpse of forbidden temptation to drive him insane. But it was his own godsdamned fault. He'd stepped so far over the line that night that the consequences had him by the balls. Trapped in a waking torment where he never slept, saw her every day, and then when he wasn't around her, there was little he seemed able to do to stop thinking about her.

What she was doing.

Or more to the point, *who* she was doing it with.

Fuck. He'd wanted to rip the arm off the kid with the rings and the moody stare for daring to have his arm around her at the tavern. The girl had no idea how stunning she was, of that he was certain. She didn't seem to notice the trail of panting fucking assholes lined up behind her wherever she went.

So, when he'd run through the thick bank of fog lying eerie and heavy amongst the forest, all he saw was her dark eyes staring up at him from between his legs as she knelt on the floor.

As he plunged into the lake, the sound of her breath hitching and the image of her teeth digging into that puffy bottom lip teased him no matter how deep he sunk below the surface.

And when he arrived at the training arena, he'd already imagined her perfect fucking tits and hard nipples beneath his hands. How he wanted to suck down on them until she moaned and begged to be fucked into tomorrow.

Was it the most messed up thing to walk in half-hard and thinking about all the ways he wanted to have his student bent

over? Probably. But even worse, was walking in and realising she was already there.

Like his every sordid fantasy had appeared, he might as well have cast an enchantment and made her manifest in the flesh. Dressed in her training leathers that hugged her thighs and ass like a second skin, with a cropped top that exposed a sliver of flesh at her waist and the swell of her breasts. Her long hair was pulled up high today, revealing those fine tips of her pointed ears.

His fists clenched at his sides. What the fuck was she doing here so early?

“I’ll leave then, if my presence is so offensive at this time of the morning.” Her wild tongue was out and snapping her retort at him before his brain had caught up with his body. She had a pile of weaponry laid out at her feet, and she huffed out an exasperated breath. Bending over to collect them, he could hear her eyes rolling.

Shit. Did he say that out loud?

“No. Stay. You’re here for a reason.” Trying not to grind his teeth into dust, or stare at her ass. He ran a hand over the back of his neck. As she straightened up and fixed him with a glare, he gestured for her to pick a weapon. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

A flare of interest in her eyes made his stomach knot. Since when had he ever given a crap about anything or anyone? Yet here he found himself far too invested in seeing her succeed in her quest to make the elite ranks of the Astrals.

Pushing her to be the best she could be, even if she despised him for his methods.

“Are you ready to bleed for me, little faerie?” He studied her closely.

The tiniest of growls left her throat.

A shudder flickered across her tanned skin.

Both hatred and desire for him was bound up in the same breath.

Well, the feeling was fucking mutual.

She chucked a sword towards him, with far more force than was necessary, but he easily caught the handle. Weaponry was connected to his magic. She could have slung it with the pointed end aimed at his chest, and he'd still have caught the damn thing with ease.

Small mercies, seeing as there was steel in the girl's spine and menace in her dark eyes.

Rowan nodded for them to begin. Each moving forward and weighing the other's mettle with careful steps. Eyes focused on all the small cues. Watching for the slightest shift in body positioning that could be exploited.

The little fae matched him step for step. Neither willing to be the one to make the first move.

“Do you still think I'm irresponsible?” Her eyes didn't waver from their spot locked on his hand holding the sword. Keeping her body loose as they circled one another, just like she'd been trained to do. “Do you consider me foolish? Some silly little girl who doesn't know anything?”

Ahh. The day of the coronation.

Of course, it would come down to that. While on the outside she'd pretended to be unaffected, there must have been something in his remarks that day that stung. Good. She needed to hear it if she was ever going to live up to her potential.

“I think you're my student.” He crowded towards her. Using his bulk to eat up the space between them in one quick stride. Leaving her reeling backwards but far too slowly. “I think you're Ruby's sister.” He continued. Gaze locked on the spot where her pulse thrummed in her neck.

She back-pedalled as fast as he advanced, holding her sword between them, but he allowed his own to hang loosely at his side. There wasn't a chance of her getting the upper hand now he had her on the run.

And fuck, his blackened heart loved to chase down his prey.

“I think you have a lot to learn, little faerie.” The edge of the training arena was fast approaching behind her. Only a few more steps and she’d be up against the wall beside the armoury.

“So you do...” Her gasping breaths came faster now. “You still think I know nothing.”

Rowan flexed his fingers around the handle of his sword.

“Only the foolish believe they have nothing left to learn, Oriana.”

Watching her dark eyes bounce all over his figure was like a drug. Her pupils dilated, and her nostrils flared as their bodies drew closer and closer. The space between them began to crackle with the presence of his magic, and he was enough of an asshole to enjoy the way it unsettled her. Sensing his power in the ether surrounding them seemed to put the girl on edge.

Two more strides forward. As she tried to evade him, her shoulders collided with the stone surface. The breath left her lungs with an audible gasp, yet she held the sword firmly before her. Pointed towards his sternum, grasped in both hands, and his cock just about leapt out of his trousers at the sight of her.

Send him to whatever hellscape he deserved right now because he was so far gone from being capable of making good decisions.

“You’re only *playing* at being a warrior. Your skills are mediocre at best. You’re too cocky and impulsive, and you’ll never have the dedication to realise your true potential. *So get the fuck out of my sight.*” The girl relayed his own words from that day back to him verbatim.

Hurt and anger and the lingering sting of what she knew was the truth played all over her face as she spat out a perfect imitation of what he’d said to her all those months ago.

“That ego of yours bruises too easily.” Fuck. Her chest rising and falling with each breath was impossible to drag his attention away from. The slight quiver in her breasts as she

craned to stare up at him. Looming over her like this and using his height to his advantage was a dick move, but he felt drawn to her. Inexplicably so. Like his body physically couldn't stand to be separated from her own.

“Nothing left to bruise when it has been torn out and stomped all over.”

Rowan surveyed her for a quiet moment through a hooded gaze. Relishing the way she squirmed under his attention.

“You asked to be a student.” A statement. Not a question. He'd suspected as much from the way she'd been so determined to prove herself in the training arena.

Her pointed chin tipped up in silent confirmation of his suspicions.

“That day...” She paused, chewing on her bottom lip.

“I know what happened.” At that admission, her eyes widened. “The guard you *allowed* to leave his post the day of the coronation. I know all of it.” He dipped his head lower as he gritted out those words. It seemed to surprise her, but it really shouldn't. Did she truly believe he wouldn't know everything that went on when it related to those under his command?

The plump curve of her lips dropped open as he could see her mind scrambling for a retort. But he wouldn't let her lash out and escape this time.

“You disobeyed a direct order that day, Oriana,” Rowan growled. “While you *thought* you were helping out that guard and doing him a favour by relieving him of his post—even though it was well-intentioned to allow him to search for his missing family—you put the entire coronation in jeopardy. There is no room for rash decision-making when it comes to war. Success can only come from trust in those by your side, and you proved that *trust* was the last word in your vocabulary when you went against the chain of command.”

She had to fucking learn.

There was no avoiding the raw, bloodied truth of a fight.

If there was nothing else he could do to protect her...

Her body slid along the wall, attempting to escape him. Inching closer to the alcove where the rest of the armoury was set back from the main arena. Oh, she thought she'd be able to hide in there? Well, she had another thing coming. There was nowhere to run to. He'd make sure of that.

He stalked after her as she rounded the corner. Both of them stepping into the enclosed space lined with racks holding a vast assortment of blades, bows, and shields.

"If you're always looking for a battle, you're only ever going to be armed with blades." She was breathing hard. Wide eyes locked on his own and holding him captive with so little fucking effort it was pathetic. "And to someone who is only ever looking for a fight, every problem can be solved at the tip of a sword." Her voice was quiet now. Barely a murmur.

Either the fire inside her was about to fizzle out, or suddenly burst into a raging inferno.

To illustrate her point, the sharp tip of her blade pressed against his sternum. A gentle pressure, but one that could so easily dig in and leave him bleeding within a second. The exact moment the metal touched him was like the air ignited between their bodies in the confines of the alcove.

Inferno it was.

In an instant, she was all lust-blown eyes and soft panting breaths. His cock pressed hard against the front of his pants at the sight of her crowded before him. Flanked on one side by the arched doorway to the arena, and on the other by a rack of broadswords. His hungry gaze consumed every inch of smooth bronze skin along her shoulders and neck and chest. Expanses of soft flesh that he wanted to leave covered in his marks.

"Don't think I won't use this on you." Her breathy fucking voice was going to undo him entirely.

He studied her from beneath hooded eyes, devouring the telltale way her pulse hammered in her neck. With one hand he reached forward and wrenched the sword out of her grasp. His

fingers flexing for just a second over her own, before he tore the weapon from her and fisted it in his own grip at his side.

“Oh, you think you’re in charge here, do you, little faerie?”

She stared up at him with her head tilted back against the wall, and a soft whimper left the back of her throat. Shit.

Do not fucking touch. Do not fucking touch.

Repeating those words didn’t seem to be working.

Keeping his hands to himself was nearly impossible. Not when she looked at him like *that*. Not when he knew she was just as close to crossing the forbidden line between them as he was.

But there were other ways he could get this obsession out of his system.

The command left his mouth before he could take a second to think about the consequences.

“Turn around. Hands on the fucking wall.”

CHAPTER 14

“**H**ands on the fucking wall.”

Ri’s body shuddered under the weight of his dark command. Lightning shot through her veins and surged down to her toes. She spun around immediately.

Every second they’d drawn closer and closer out there in the training arena had left her insides burning up in a frenzy of angst and wanting and a heady potion of raw desire.

Her palms scraped against the rough stone wall, and she could feel the heat of his body surrounding her from behind. Just like the last time they’d been in this position. Only now, they were hidden away in the dimly lit alcove of the armoury. The heavy wooden door to the training arena was wide open—but somehow that made the whole thing more arousing.

The fact he was here. Like this. With her. Knowing they could so easily get caught?

Shit. That did something wicked to her body.

Heavy breathing filled the space between them. Rowan left her positioned there in a thick, suffocating silence. Knowing that his penetrating gaze was locked on her body, well, that had her squirming to relieve the growing ache between her thighs.

Suddenly he shifted. His words came hot and thick, and she felt the dangerous proximity of him as his lips nearly brushed against the shell of her ear.

“This cannot fucking happen, little faerie.” Sex and barely leashed frustration crackled in the air. Winding around them and nipping at her flesh. “I’m your teacher...” There was no mistaking the raggedness of his breath as it gusted across her nape. Sending a rolling wave of goosebumps down each of her bare arms.

“Then what are we doing, brute?” Send her to the ancestors right now. Ri was burning up from the inside with every second she remained unable to move. Stuck in a prison of her own choosing. This was so messed up, yet nothing could make her shift from the position she had willingly—fucking enthusiastically—put herself in.

Some kind of wild noise burst out of him. Quiet and menacing, like an ancient force.

The distinct sound of metal against metal made her jump as he dropped their swords. Both clattered to the ground, landing just beside where her foot was blocked in by his heavy-soled boot.

“Every day, you taunt me. *Tempt me.*” Oh, fuck. His gruff voice was at her ear instantly. Rowan was somehow not touching her and yet imprinting himself on every inch of her skin at the same time, with just his presence. “Here’s the thing, when I see you, all I can think about is you like this... How I want to own that pretty cunt while your hair is wrapped around my fist. The way that perfect mouth of yours was made to take my cock. What your tight little ass will feel like when you beg me to fuck you *there* because no one has before.”

Ri couldn’t hold back the desperate-sounding noise she made as he fingered a loose curl at the side of her neck. The backs of his knuckles grazed over her skin with a featherlight touch that shouldn’t be possible for a man of his nature.

She relished in the satisfaction of knowing it took every ounce of his restraint not to touch her the way he obviously wanted to.

The way *she* wanted him to. Roughly. Possessively. Frequently.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve imagined bending you over that table right there and fucking you until that smart mouth of yours can do nothing but scream my name.” A rich, savage, rumbling noise left his chest and extended through every cell in her body.

Ri’s eyes darted to the side, where she saw the table positioned in the middle of the armoury. And she could see it all. Perfectly imagine how it would feel to have the edge of that table cut into her hip bones as he slammed into her from behind. The bruises his fingers would leave where they dug into her thighs as he pinned her down.

Her pussy clenched, and a raw whimper fell from her lips.

This man was about to talk her into an orgasm.

“You’re mad at me.” Goddesses, she sounded so needy.

“I’m fucking furious with you.” Suddenly, his hands thudded against the wall just outside her own. Caging her body fully and pressing up against her in a swift movement. Her back against his front. Heat seared and trickled down the length of her spine...

Fuck.

Shit.

His cock.

Right fucking there and jugged hard against the top of her ass.

Whatever she had imagined in her wanton fantasies about how *big* Rowan of Nocturne might be hadn’t been an exaggeration.

Ri’s eyelashes fluttered, half-lidded eyes surveyed where their hands lined up side by side and pressed against the cool stone wall. His tattooed knuckles and inked backs of his hands dwarfed her own. The long lines of muscle and veins of his forearms snaked up and traced a path through the intricate patterns adorning his skin.

Everything buzzed and pulsed and throbbed inside her. Feeling him like this, breathing heavy in her ear and with his

giant muscled chest blanketing her... she was so close to falling apart already.

What the fuck would it actually be like if this man touched her properly?

She'd probably just incinerate into a pile of ash on the spot.

“Are you going to punish me?” She bit her lip, hard. Unable to stop the trembling in her muscles even if she wanted to.

“I bet you'd like that, wouldn't you? *Dirty little faerie.*” Goddesses save her. There was nothing but raw, filthy intent in his voice. It threatened too much pleasure. The kind Ri wasn't sure she'd ever be able to walk away from if she was given even the smallest taste.

And why the fuck did his crass words turn her on so much?

She was a strong and confident and capable bloody warrior. Yet he turned her body into a raging, lusty mess every time he called her something that *should* be demeaning.

But instead of shame coming from his mouth, it somehow felt like liquid gold smothering her from head to toe. Like his every word was a reward.

It didn't make sense, but her pussy was more than on board with the idea.

“Touch yourself.”

Two words were all it took to send her spiralling up somewhere high in the atmosphere. Floating on a cloud, looking down on what was happening in this dimly-lit alcove, hidden amongst the sharpened tools of death and destruction.

With a shaking hand, she obeyed. Moving to shove one hand down the front of her pants, with the other still pressed against the rough stone surface like her life depended on it. His grunt at her ear sent another throb straight to her needy clit.

Rowan was so much taller than her. She knew he could see over her shoulder. Could watch the sight of her hand disappear below the waistband of her trousers. She stifled a whine in the back of her throat when his thick cock jerked against her lower back.

It was so fucking dirty.

Completely forbidden.

So hot she could hardly stand it.

“Whoring yourself out in the middle of training. Such a filthy thing.” His head bent lower, and the next moment his teeth scraped down the curve of her neck. The groaning noise he made was more animalistic than anything she’d heard before. Rumbling through her back from where his muscled chest pinned her in place.

She couldn’t breathe.

His lips hovered over her skin.

The sting of where he’d scraped a trail sent lightning racing through her blood.

Ri whimpered as she felt how soaked she was between her pussy lips. Her middle finger grazed the swollen bud of her clit. Rubbing a small circle nearly had her coming undone straight away. How had this asshole been able to wind her up so expertly and play her body without even laying so much as a finger on her?

“I loathe you.”

“Your wet cunt says otherwise. Show me your fingers.” He demanded.

Hissing out in frustration at the loss of contact, she dragged her hand out. Feeling the evidence of her juices slide up the front of her stomach, leaving a long, wet line.

Now, the shame hit like a tonne of bricks. Her cheeks burned like wildfire and she couldn’t drag her eyes away from the evidence of her arousal coating her fingertips. Glistening in the soft light.

Rowan made a tight noise in the back of his throat.

The wall of him—every insanely muscled inch—tensed at her back.

All of a sudden, he moved like a viper. Reaching out to snatch up her hand, he gripped it tight in his big paw, leant forward... and wrapped his lips around her wet fingers.

Ri's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open on a strangled noise. The sensation of him sucking on her fingers and the feel of his hot mouth was enough to buckle her knees. Only his mountainous frame, the cage of his arms, and the way she was half-pressed against the wall stopped her from sagging to the floor.

The raw, hot, dirty sound he made at her ear consumed every inch of space in her brain. Hypnotising her with his ruggedness as well as the promise of his cock.

Which was now pressed against her ass. He'd shifted his hips lower, and now that rock-hard cock of his throbbed against her.

The thought of taking him ... there. Goddess-fucking-damnit he was huge, and that made her clench in anticipation. She could feel the sheer size of him brushing up against her, and it sent a dizzying whirl of pleasure straight to her toes.

What in the Stars was she supposed to do with herself now Rowan knew how she *tasted*? The want and desire to know the same about him and to savour the taste of him flooded through her. If there was one thing Ri knew she was talented at outside the training arena, it was giving head. She had no shame in admitting that. It turned her all the way the fuck on, and there was nothing like fingering herself while enjoying a thick cock tapping the back of her throat.

All of which left her in a spiral of near orgasm just imagining what that might feel like with him in charge.

But before she could try and collect her scrambled brain and form coherent words to that effect, he let her fingers go from his mouth with a last long lick of his wicked tongue and a wet sound that made her shiver.

“You think I was furious with you before?” He shoved her hand back down towards her pants, then slapped his palm against the wall. “Now I’m insane for the taste of you, little faerie.” Rowan’s voice dripped with malice as he ran his nose along the pointed tip of her ear.

Ri was almost certain she’d forgotten how to breathe.

“Dirty whores don’t get to stop unless they’re told. *Get back to it.*”

She’d never moved so fast in her life. Heart pounding out of her chest and blood thundering in her ears. Ri worked her finger over her clit, knowing she was already so worked up and desperately close to coming.

Would it be the worst thing in the world for Rowan of Nocturne to know he could make her come in the space of a few panicked heartbeats?

Probably.

Even more dangerous would be him possessing that knowledge... while also having commanded her to orgasm without having done more than whisper in her ear and *watched*.

That only spiralled her closer to the crest of the wave. With each circle of her swollen clit the stupid godsdamned whimpers coming from her parted lips grew louder.

“Fucking soaked, aren’t you? I can hear how wet and desperate you are.” His fingers flexed against the wall. As if it was punishment for himself, for wanting this, for allowing this to happen between them, that he refused to put his hands on her.

“Please...” She wanted this to last. Not to be over so soon. Something blared in the back of her mind that even though they’d somehow ended up here, there was every chance it would be the only time.

And if that was the case, she wanted so much more than just the feel of him grinding against her fully clothed with only his hot words at her ear.

“You don’t get to ask for anything. You’ll take what I give you and be fucking grateful for it.”

Well, shit.

That low command did otherworldly things to her body. Her nipples were hardened to tight points. Scraping against the inside of her cropped top with aching perfect friction.

Only, she wanted his rough palms squeezing and pinching her tits instead. Ri needed to know what perfect amount of pain he’d administer with his pleasure.

“Don’t you want to touch me?” The begging in her voice was ridiculous, even to her own ears. Tomorrow, she might be embarrassed about that, but right now, she was lost to the sensation of her finger moving faster and faster.

“What I want... and what I can have...” His stare was unmistakably fixed on her hand, circling frantically inside her trousers. His weighty gaze tracked every movement for an unbearably long pause before he continued, “Those are two very different things.”

“Don’t you ever break the rules, brute?” Fuck. Please. *Please*. Ri was breathless, with the silent words on repeat inside her mind. As if running the words over and over in a soundless loop might somehow break his resolve.

Rowan’s silence spoke volumes.

He sucked in a ragged breath.

Oh, shit.

Was he considering it?

Would he cross that line... for her?

And if he did, would she even be able to handle what that might mean for the two of them?

“Stop thinking so fucking hard, and *come*.” Rowan latched on to her neck and bit down.

“Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. *Oh, fuck.*”

Stars and a white-hot burst of sparks burst through her body. The crest of her orgasm broke and dragged her into such a forceful release she nearly doubled over. With his teeth clamped tight on the crook of her neck and his cock shoved against her ass, the waves of pleasure shuddered through her, and she sagged back against his body. Her finger still moved in ever-slowng circles over her clit while her empty pussy clenched over and over.

That was... insanity.

What sort of madness had just consumed her?

Ri's mind currently lingered somewhere in outer space. Her body had blown to pieces, and she was certain she'd have to scoop her soul up off the floor.

She was still floating back down when he roughly grabbed her wrist and yanked her hand out of her pants. Dragging her fingers up to meet his mouth, his tongue wrapped around her middle finger and he sucked down. Making a dark noise, he cleaned off every last bit of her release and fuck if that didn't make her pussy start to wake back up again.

Goddess-fucking-damnit.

Rowan's lips ran the length, gliding over each knuckle until he reached the tip, and he nipped the soft pad of her finger. Before dropping her wrist like it scalded him.

All too quickly, the spell snapped, and the moment vanished.

He muttered an ancient curse and pushed off the wall.

She felt the gust of air from directly behind her as he portaled. Disappeared without so much as another word. Leaving her suddenly alone, surrounded by the scent of sex and forbidden fantasies.

And infuriatingly, still aching for him.

CHAPTER 15

He crossed a line.
Several fucking lines.

Selfishly and foolishly, despite knowing exactly what he was doing, he thought it would eradicate her from his system.

But it only made it a million times worse.

If Rowan had been hungering for just a glimpse at this girl's sweetness before, now he'd allowed himself a taste.

Now... he was fucking starving.

The only fucking thing he wanted was to feast on the honeyed nectar of her. To hear her breathy little whimpers and moans. To know what it would feel like to have her spread out, wet, and wanting beneath him.

Over the course of the ensuing weeks, he kept himself as busy as possible. Hardly a difficult task, between running the training arena and monitoring the protective shield of the blood wards and trying to find some answers to the godsdamn mystery of the murders.

Keeping on top of the shitheap laid out at his feet was enough to have his hands itching to swing a blade, preferably at one of his brothers. But desperate times and all... Instead, he'd gotten used to taking his frustrations out by throwing himself into pounding the trails around the academy's forested perimeter. Swimming as far and long and deep into the lake as possible almost gave him a temporary reprieve.

But his thoughts strayed back to that day, time and again, without fail.

In that moment, he'd seen it. His hands beside hers. Tattooed and rough and capable of snapping a neck like a twig or swinging a blade with precision. Hands accustomed to delivering a fatal blow. Her small, delicate fingers splayed on the wall right alongside his own. The hands that were capable of lethal force in their own right—even more so when properly trained—but for now were fresh with the innocence of youth.

The difference between hands that had lived through thirty winters as opposed to three centuries of warfare.

She was everywhere. Like his own personal ghost of horny, illicit decision-making. There was nowhere to hide from the consequences of his own fucking actions. Which was only made worse by the fact that it didn't seem to affect the girl... at all.

She carried on as though nothing had happened between them.

That day he'd cut in on her training with Etienne had been a mistake. Knowing how her hands felt all over his body as she'd practiced each manoeuvre was slow and insidious torture. But fucked if he'd have stood by and permitted that jerk off to touch her like that. Something dark and possessive had taken hold of him in that moment; he'd made the choice to greedily steal her for himself. Only now, he was completely screwed.

There were only so many ways he could prevent the vampire from training with her. Pairing her up with some of the other students wasn't going to do her any favours. They were by far the two most likely candidates for the Astrals. Which meant they, more often than not, would need to spar against each other and push each other while in class.

Never mind the fact that he couldn't keep stepping in and training her himself without drawing unwanted attention. Could he?

And after all that, he now found himself sitting through a security debriefing with the royal guards, with his mind firmly elsewhere. This wasn't the way things were supposed to bloody well go. He'd lived too long and seen too much shit for a pair of tits to distract him like this.

Only that was the problem, wasn't it?

She was more than just a piece of ass.

He'd somehow found himself intrigued by her fierceness, as much as she infuriated him with her rash behaviour. With each passing day, she honed her skills and worked fucking hard. Committing resolutely to everything thrown at her like a hurricane carving a path through all that dared stand in her way.

Oriana had upended everything. And that was an enormous fucking issue considering the position they both found themselves in.

He jolted as Finnic clapped him on the shoulder. All around him, the rest of the fae guards pushed out of their chairs and made their way out of the room. Fuck. Rowan pinched the bridge of his nose, resting his elbows on the long table filling the centre of the room.

“You alright there, blade-slinger?”

Just peachy. Definitely not thinking about how to get away with fucking a student in secret.

“No nicknames.” He grunted.

“I've been thinking about the symbols found on the bodies,” Finnic ignored him and propped a hip on the edge of the table. “Lukah—my fated mate—he's working with the vampire coven to transfer their texts and library here. I wonder if that might be something he could look into or keep an eye out for any similar kinds of markings?”

That wasn't the worst idea. They were no closer to identifying the strange symbols found on the bodies discovered in the woods before the academy opened. And his bloody sister was still refusing to make an appearance. Of all the times she might have been useful to them, it could be

almost guaranteed that Brigid of Nocturne would be absent just when they needed her.

And of course, the meddlesome little witch would appear at the most inconvenient of times, too. Rowan shifted in his seat. With her *knowing* about all eventualities, there was no hope of keeping his thoughts about Oriana hidden, considering his younger sister's gifts as a powerful Seer.

Thank fuck for her vows of non-intervention. Despite knowing-all and seeing-all, she was sworn to the Goddesses to never interfere in the outcome of fate. At least he wouldn't have to threaten her at knife-point to keep his secrets.

"I'll have my brother get you a copy of the symbols recorded. Chances are there might be nothing observed or noted down anywhere, but it's worth a try." Rowan unfolded himself from the seat and shoved a hand through his hair. "Get out of here. Go home. You're seeing enough of my ugly face at the armoury as it is."

The fae grinned at him. "Looks like you could take your own advice, blade-slinger."

"Yeah, yeah—I'll still bust your ass in the arena tomorrow, and you know it."

Finnic let out a hearty laugh. "Don't count on it. I've got some new blades for you to test out for me, hot off the forge."

Shit, was this kid growing on him? Rowan waved him off with another grunt. Watching him pass through the doorway and head off through the maze of corridors. Up here in the far wing of the academy, the building overlooked the manicured gardens. At one time, this had been the royal residence. Now Ruby and Niall chose to live in their own private sanctuary outside the fae dominion and had given over the sprawling assortment of palace buildings to be used in the running of Astracadia.

Further along, the far wing housed the student's accommodations—Trelithia.

Something stirred inside Rowan, knowing that Oriana was in there somewhere amongst the myriad of rooms and gathered

students.

How it wasn't all that long ago that they first encountered one another right here inside these very walls. The night Ruby sacrificed herself to end the blood curse of her royal lineage. He'd watched her slay the woman who cursed her sister without so much as a moment's hesitation.

Little did he know the girl with fire in her eyes, an acidic tongue, and white-hot vengeance coursing through her veins would become so ingrained in his life.

The thought of heading back to his own empty rooms was about as appealing as a cold bowl of slop. So instead, he made for the direction of Ruby's study located here at the academy, knowing that wherever the queen might be, his brother would be right by her side. And if he was going to hand over the symbols to Finnic's mate to keep an eye out, then he begrudgingly needed to find the prick who currently held the information.

Rowan only hoped he wouldn't walk in on something that he *really* didn't want to see.

Those two could barely keep their hands off each other.

As he rounded the end of the echoing hallway, lined with opulent fabrics and walls of ornate gilded mirrors, the vast staircase lay just up ahead. The academy was silent at this time of evening, with only a few lanterns glowing from the landing to cast a golden shimmer through the halls.

He'd just started to move up to the next floor when out of the corner of his awareness, he saw movement on the steps the next floor down—a flash of familiar dark hair. But there was something different about the girl tonight. Rowan's brow creased as he tracked her hunched body language, clutching books to her chest and hurrying down the flight of stairs.

Within a second he'd portaled the distance between them—magic that under ordinary circumstances shouldn't be used for such a small thing. But fuck the supposed rules of magic right now.

The girl pulled up short. Eyes wide and brimming with hot, angry tears.

Fuck.

He folded his arms, blocking her path. Their heights evenly matched for once where she perched on the steps and he stood on the landing below.

“Oriana.”

“Fuck off.”

Well, there was no dampening her fighting spirit.

“You’re upset.”

“Well, don’t you win the prize for outstanding observational skills. Get out of my way, brute.”

His jaw ticked as he fixed her with a stern look.

One that hopefully conveyed something other than how gorgeous she looked dressed in... fuck... *not* training attire. His eyes quickly took in the simple cream-coloured dress she wore, tied at her waist and with soft fabric that fell around her knees.

She let out a frustrated sound, trying to step past him, but his bulk filled the space.

“Just let me go. This is none of your concern.”

But the redness around her eyes told a different story. One that instantly made him want to hunt down whoever had caused her pain and inflict retribution triple-fold.

Voices drifted down from the open stairwell on the floor above them, coming from the direction of the library. At the risk of being seen, Rowan shifted into action before he could stop and make any kind of rational decision.

His palm wrapped around her arm and he portaled them both. Disappearing from the stairwell in the blink of an eye. When they reappeared, she was busy shoving at him and hissing to be let go. Little did she know a fight like that would only make his dick hard.

“What. Happened.” It wasn’t a question. He released his grip, but stood over her. The room was dark, but enough of the late evening glow from outside filtered through the window to highlight her face. Shoving his hands firmly in his pockets seemed like the safest option. Rowan couldn’t quite be sure of what other entirely insane thing he might do in her presence.

Oriana might freak out when she realised where he’d brought her. Better to leave them in the dark for now so to speak.

“It’s none of your concern. Just stupid rumours and gossip and nothing that I haven’t already heard a thousand times over.”

Her jaw jutted out in defiance, but those dark eyes refused to meet his own.

“Looks like they must be right then.”

That made her gaze snap to his in an instant—a tiny growl in her throat.

Rowan studied her closely. “Whatever they said, I’m sure they’re correct.”

A glint of gold flashed in her palm. The tip of her blade immediately connected with his sternum as she applied a light pressure and glared up at him. All heat and defiance and simmering rage.

Utterly captivating.

“You think they’re right? That I’m being favoured because the queen is my sister? That I should never have come here and that I should just fuck off back to the Darklands and hide in the mountains?”

Leaning forward, he added a little more pressure to the tip of the blade clutched in her fist.

“Hmm... maybe they’re correct in thinking that way, and you *should* leave. That way, you’d let all those assholes prove they were right about you all along. That you’re just a weak little faerie, with nothing but your sister’s name to fall back on.”

Oh, she was vibrating with anger now. All traces of the tears threatening to spill over had been eviscerated in the wake of the searing heat radiating off her.

“I swear, I’ll shove this blade so far up your ass...”

Rowan took that moment to strike. Disarming her and taking the blade in one fluid motion. She could produce a hundred more with her fae magic, they both knew that. But she allowed him to stand over her. Defiant as fuck and absolutely stunning.

“That anger you feel—channel that. Use it to your advantage. Don’t let them gain the upper hand.” He shifted forward and she backed up in the darkness. Awareness sparked in her dark eyes that they were very much alone. Mounting tension crackled in the space between them.

“You don’t know anything about how I *feel*.” Wide eyes bounced from his lips to his chest to the dimly lit room over his shoulder.

He clicked his tongue. Greedily he tracked the goosebumps that immediately coated her bare arms.

“You think I can’t tell the way your body responds because I’m not a creature who senses blood?” He slowly circled her. Studying her. His captive, trapped in a snare where the more she tried to struggle, the tighter it would bind her.

Rowan didn’t need to be a fucking shifter or a vampire to know exactly how her body responded to his magic and proximity.

His voice dropped low as he kept his gaze locked on her. “Your pupils dilate when your emotions run high. The flecks of gold shimmer brightest when you’re angry and about to foolishly lash out. That’s just one of your tells, little faerie.”

Coming back around to stand in front of her, he slid the tip of the fine blade along her sternum. Her almond eyes held his own as her body shuddered when the tapered point gently grazed against her skin.

“But when you feel something else... lust... desire... or high emotions of an equally intense nature... there’s a richness

to those eyes of yours. And then there's this..."

He slid the blade down between her breasts.

She sucked in a quick breath.

His cock was so fucking hard.

"The way this beats faster. Your breaths start to shallow."

As if to illustrate his point, she darted out a tongue to moisten her lips. Soft, breathy pants filled the quiet between them.

"What do you want? You've had your fun at my expense."

There were a *lot* of things he wanted.

"I'd like to see you pushed up against the wall." Their bodies moved in sync with one another. Ri shifted backwards as he advanced, gasping as she collided softly with the silk-covered wall at her back.

"Rowan." A warning. A plea. Either way hearing his name coming from her mouth made his dick throb and pressure wound low in his stomach.

"Shh. Don't make a sound, little faerie. Don't want anyone finding out about your dirty little secret."

"You brought me here. I—we—shouldn't be here like this." She was trying to protest, but her voice was low and raspy and sexy as fuck in the darkness.

And when her eyes flickered to his mouth again, gazing hungrily and dragging the soft flesh of her bottom lip through her teeth... his resolve finally broke.

Stabbing the short blade into the wall just beside her head, he caged both arms on either side of her body and bent down to growl in her ear.

"We shouldn't. But if I touched you right now, what would you do?"

CHAPTER 16

“This can’t happen.” Ri gripped the wall. Certain that her heart was about to burst out of her chest.

One minute, she’d been surrounded by the whispers of random students in the halls outside the library. The next, she’d been accosted by the last person she expected to find roaming this wing of Astracadia in the evening.

Now, she was equal parts aflame with anger and white-hot desire.

With his growling rumble at her ear and his muscled arms caging her in, she was a trembling, overheated wreck.

Her veins might as well be filled with lava.

“What would you do?” Rowan demanded again. Pulling his head back to stare down at her, those eyes of his glowed silvery blue in a thin ring around his blown-out pupils.

He was terrifyingly beautiful.

The kind of physical specimen they carved marble statues of and worshipped.

Magic and power and masculinity rippled off him like an invisible cloak. Leaving her feeling unsteady on her feet and doubly glad for the wall at her back to keep her upright.

There were so many things that threatened to tumble out of her mouth. He wanted to know what she would do if he touched her? Firstly, she’d no doubt turn to a smouldering wreck on the plush carpet below her feet. Secondly, and more

importantly, is what she *wouldn't* do, which was a very short list.

In fact, Rowan could quite possibly do anything he wanted and she'd be grateful for the opportunity.

Goddesses save her from herself. There was no hope of taming his ego if she ever accidentally let that thought slip out.

"If you did..." She fumbled over her words. Feeling tongue-tied and wet and needy for him to relieve the ache between her thighs. "It can only be this one time."

Her fingers pressed harder against the wall.

Rowan's nostrils flared.

A pounding rhythm in her ears drowned her sanity. Dragged under with each whoosh of heated blood.

"I—I don't know if I would be able to stop if it was more than just this once. But I couldn't do that to my sister. There's no way I would go against her wishes."

His eyes dropped closed and he sucked in a ragged breath. Agreement? Or something in close enough proximity to that.

Rowan of Nocturne was wild and untamed. But fiercely loyal to those who earned his trust; that much was evident in her time knowing the man. Spirits, that turned her on more than anything. Seeing how much he wanted this and what it did to carve him up into pieces shouldn't be as satisfying as it was.

Her pussy hummed with delight at knowing he wanted her as badly as she wanted him.

"One time," he murmured. Looking down at her through hooded eyes.

Ri's stomach did backflips. Her thighs trembled. She bit down on her bottom lip and his eyes locked on her mouth with a breathtaking fierceness.

This was a man intent on devouring her alive.

Not gentle. No. She didn't want that. If this was her only opportunity to have this moment, Ri wanted *him*.

She slid down the wall to her knees. Watching the flare of his magic illuminate a silvery glow in the air around them. His breathing became more ragged as she reached out and smoothed her palms up his thighs.

Those impossibly strong arms of his still rested up against the wall, trapping her between his spread legs and the solid surface at her back.

Ri wasn't submissive by nature. Far from it. But Rowan released something inside her that felt right to give him this position while she still maintained her own power. The kind that she could easily wield even from her knees.

Knowing how eagerly he watched her was a rush. Having his eyes on her was always an intense and slightly unnerving experience. But now... here... like this... she felt like she could soar straight to the moon and back on pure adrenaline.

All she needed now was his filthy words. The ones she knew would be coming any moment. His darkness flickered out and made her shiver in the fucked up kind of way she longed to be treated.

Rough. Demanding. Bossy. Degrading.

When paired with his raw desire, those things did something to her.

Wound her up and made her come alive in the most pleasurable kind of way.

Sliding her hands down his muscled thighs, Ri dipped her head lower still, all the while tilting her chin back to keep her eyes on him and relishing every searing drop of heat in his gaze. A muscle ticked wildly in his jaw. Tension radiated off him in waves as he studied her movements like an apex predator. There was only going to be so long before he snapped and she planned on winding him as tight as possible.

Ri tucked her hair over one shoulder, then bent down and placed a kiss to the toe of his heavy boot. A feral noise rumbled around the dark room like thunder, and her inner walls clenched. She could feel herself getting wetter and wetter with every second on her knees for him. Then, moving

across to the other boot, she did the same before raising her eyes back to meet his.

Pure, dark menace and barely caged lust swirled beneath his heavy brow.

She swallowed a hum of pleasure.

Still on her knees, Ri moved to unfasten his trousers, letting his rigid cock spring free. At the sight of him, her mouth watered. Rowan was everything she'd begged for in her dreams and more. Thick and veined and leaking a bead of pre-cum from the swollen tip.

He hissed out something that sounded like an ancient curse, then took one of his giant hands off the wall and fisted himself. Stroking along his length as he gazed down at her with something unreadable in his expression but an aura about him that sent a throbbing heartbeat straight to her clit.

She wet her lips, but waited. Unblinking.

Rowan studied her. The pulse still working in his jaw. But something flared in his eyes that made her feel like she'd just been showered with silent adoration.

And she'd give anything to feel that sensation tumble through her body again.

But the moment shifted quickly.

He moved with lethal speed. Using the other hand now to spear in her hair, he yanked tight against her scalp. Shit, if that didn't send a fresh flood of wetness to her already-soaked pussy.

“So eager to get on your knees.” A sneer tugged at the corner of his lips. Fuck, yes. This was the side of Rowan she wanted tonight. “Open up and put that smart mouth of yours to work.”

Fisting the head of his cock, he smeared the pre-cum along her mouth, then tapped at her bottom lip. Still keeping her held exactly where he wanted her.

He made a sound of approval low in the back of his throat.

Ri's body lit up like embers soaring high above a wildfire.

As the crown of him slid over her parted lips, she braced herself against his thighs. Squeezing lightly to convey exactly how she wanted him to treat her.

The deep groan that left his mouth as he thrust across her tongue was so fucking hot she wanted to shove her hand beneath her dress. Her nipples ached as the tight buds pressed against the soft material. She had to work to take him deeper with each shift forward of his hips as he fucked her mouth, but finally tasting him and his masculinity was sending her mind spiralling with pleasure.

As he slid part-way out, she swirled her tongue over him. Tracing along the veins and close to the tip. Which seemed to finally undo him. Finally loosing whatever battle for self-control he'd been waging up until now.

“Filthy little faerie. Where did you learn to suck cock like that?” She couldn't help but moan around his length as his hand fisted tighter in her hair. “Such a pretty little whore on her knees.”

Ri was already a mess. With each dark word her pussy clenched and her clit pulsed and her tits begged for his touch.

He tapped the back of her throat over and over. Thrusting in roughly and taking total command of her body. Using her. And she was so turned on and out of her mind with the need to come it would have been shocking if she didn't already know the effect Rowan so effortlessly had on her body.

Opening her throat, she swallowed around his tip as he drove deep. Fucking her face mercilessly. Drool gathered at the sides of her mouth, and her eyes watered with the sheer size of him taking over and commanding every piece of her focus. His dark curses and filthy words spilled freely. With each thrust forward, she felt his cock throb on her tongue. The salty hint of pre-cum and the taste of his skin filled her mouth. There was no mistaking the way his breathing became more and more ragged, and the grunts he made grew louder as her throat worked him.

“You’re going to have me addicted to the feel of your hot mouth, seeing you soaked and needy like this, with those lips wrapped around my cock.” Anger coated his words. A beautiful snarl curling at the edge of his lips as he punched his hips forward once, twice more, then roughly dragged her off his length with a wet pop.

Spit clung in a long line between her lips and the tip of him. His eyes took in the sight with something feral blooming within his dilated pupils. A low whimper of pleasure escaped her throat. She ran her tongue out to catch the line of spit and felt how bruised and puffy her mouth was when she licked over her lips.

The best fucking feeling.

Her lungs ached and she floated somewhere up around the ceiling.

Ri didn’t know what was happening but would gladly give over control of this moment. She had expected him to shoot cum down her throat, but instead, he looked like he waged a war on the inside with himself. And there was every chance she had foolishly put her heart in prime position to become a casualty.

Guiding her up on wobbly feet, he moved her backwards across the carpet. She blinked slowly in an attempt to take in her surroundings—figure out where the fuck they were. Feeling like an owl, wide-eyed and swivelling her head as she tried to adjust to the blackness in the room.

But the faint smell of sandalwood and woodsmoke and the unmistakable presence of him was everywhere.

Was this his quarters at the academy?

She’d been here once before. That awful night when Ruby sacrificed herself and Ri’s world turned upside down. Only, she couldn’t exactly be sure; her memories of anything from that moment in time were hazy. Clouded by the anguish of pain and fear and pure vengeance that she’d gladly deliver again without hesitation.

Ri had been too swept up in fearing for her sister's life that night to truly notice Rowan of Nocturne the first time she laid eyes on him. But then, maybe she *had* on some cellular level, and it was her brain playing catch up with this intense attraction to him knotted and twisted deep in her soul.

Now? Now he was like a wall of heat consuming her and moving her to sit on the edge of a table on the other side of the room, just beneath a window. Over his shoulder, she could see a messy bed, with soft-looking sheets tossed to one side, and her brain froze at how real this suddenly felt. How illicit. Private even. She was truly here, in the place where Rowan slept at night because he'd brought her here by choice.

And somehow, she didn't know what to do with any of that information.

This was intimate.

Rowan didn't *do* intimate.

But it was also possibly the most secure and hidden place he could have taken her, one that guaranteed no intrusion from others, and that made her blood pump faster.

She gripped the edge of the smooth wood like a liferaft in a storm. Watching him closely as he lowered into the chair in front of her. So close, their legs brushed one another, the coarse fabric of his trousers against the smooth skin of her bare legs. Ri noticed he'd tucked himself away and before she could open her mouth to protest, he cut her off with a rough noise somewhere deep in that impossibly broad chest.

One that said, *be quiet*.

For some reason, she listened.

He rested his elbows on the rounded sides of the heavy-set armchair. Tapping over his lips with two inked fingers. A row of heavy dark lashes framed the vivid sapphire of his eyes. Being studied in silence by Rowan was as arousing as any foreplay she'd ever experienced in her life.

"You think I won't hurt you." There was no question in that statement. "Well, think again, little faerie. I can. Don't

doubt for a second that I am capable of that and more. There are so many ways I could enjoy hurting you.”

Why did that make her thighs quiver and her pussy clench in anticipation?

His darkened eyes roamed over every inch of her body. Drinking her in like an oasis in the desert. Then they stopped on the bunched material hitched around her thighs. From where he sat he'd have a perfect view of her soaked pussy the second she either shifted her dress or spread her legs.

“Show me.” His command had a straight line to her clit.

The whimpering noise she made came from somewhere near her ribcage.

Ri shifted her weight to free the material from under her ass, feeling the cool smooth surface of the table press against her skin. Reaching beneath the rucked-up hemline of her dress, she dragged the incredibly small strip of lace and silk down over the crease of her hips. Suddenly painfully aware of just how little the garment had covered and incredibly turned on knowing that Rowan was about to see what she had on beneath her dress today after all.

She'd worn it thinking of him while slipping on the fine material and relished the way it hugged her body.

Now, here she was. About to show him exactly what sucking his cock did to her.

As the pale fabric edged down her thighs and came into view, her fingers felt clumsy. Beneath the intensity of his stare, she fumbled to drag the underwear over her soft flesh.

“Stop.” Oh, fuck. He'd changed his mind? Didn't like what he saw? Was about to humiliate her again and throw her out?

Every muscle froze. Her drenched underwear was stuck nearly at her knees. Heat erupted across her chest and raced up to her cheeks.

Rowan shifted forward in his seat. Eyes on the patch of wet silk initially before snapping up to meet her embarrassed

stare. With one calloused hand, he reached out and hooked a forefinger around the material, then dragged it towards him. The sight of his tattooed hand hovering there between her legs sent sparks flying through her bloodstream and an ache blooming inside her pussy.

With nostrils flared and a lethal darkness in his eyes, he lowered his mouth and took a deep inhale. Right over the drenched material. That action alone would have left her melted into a puddle on the tabletop, even if he stopped there. But instead, he hooked the soft material even closer and brought it to his mouth. Running his flattened tongue over the surface before biting down with his teeth.

The noise he made was otherworldly.

Her heart threatened to leap out of her mouth.

Rowan dragged the underwear the rest of the way down her legs. His broad shoulders level with her knees, and his head so close to where she wanted him she might combust.

This fucker was a king, and she had somehow stumbled into his court unprepared for the games he liked to play.

Her eyes traced the outline of his mouth and she couldn't help but drag her own bottom lip through her teeth. That brought her a growl and Rowan's eyes drifted to the spot where she bit down on the soft swell and lingered there, feasting on the sight of her mouth.

"I've been starving for a taste." He murmured.

A shudder—a thrill—ran through her body.

Wait, what? "Don't you never—I thought you didn't ever —" Her scrambled brain refused to form the word. *Kiss*.

Magic thrummed in the air around him and rippled across her skin, soft like a feather. His eyes narrowed. "Don't believe everything you hear. Besides, there are plenty of other ways I can taste you, little faerie."

Well, fuck.

CHAPTER 17

“Just this once.” Ri swallowed heavily. Aware with every shuddering breath that this was going against everything. Defying her own sister’s rules and wishes, regardless of her being queen or not, she would never hurt Ruby intentionally.

But this thing between them... it needed to be flushed from their system.

Just this one time.

If she could pretend that was all this was—all a man like Rowan would ever want with someone like her—then the sun would rise tomorrow, and they’d each carry on with their lives.

No more of this tension between them, threatening to snap and incinerate all that it touched. She could focus on the Astrals. He could go on with whatever bloodstained pursuits he had in his future.

“Mmhm.” Rowan made a sound of pleasure. Like a wolf who knows their prey has exhausted itself.

“No one can know.” Not Ruby. Not anyone. The silent understanding passed between them with a crackle in the air.

“Stop talking. I need to see your needy little cunt.” Oh, fuck. There was no stopping the pathetic noise she made as she dutifully obliged. Sliding her knees wide and flushing right down to her toes with a hot coat of shame.

He stayed right fucking there. Leant forward with his forearms resting on his knees. Legs splayed and still fully

dressed. While she bared herself to him.

The cool air hit her overheated skin as she shifted to reveal the most intimate part of herself for his scrutiny. Spirits and Stars and all things cosmic in the universe. The proximity of him, and the way he surveyed her, sent her body into a riot of colours. Prickling her on the insides with the colliding feeling of somehow being simultaneously judged and desired.

Fuck that did things to her like she'd never encountered before.

It was like gulping down the deepest lungful of spice and being drowned in a vat of fae wine at the same time.

The bright ring of blue mixed with silver flashed around the edge of his dilated pupils. His jaw ticked. He sucked in a deep inhale—right fucking there between her thighs—and she was caught between trying to buck towards his mouth and bolt for the door.

Only she didn't get a second to think which way to go, before his mouth was on her. Biting and kissing the tender flesh of her inner thigh. Scratching her with the dark scruff of his jaw and marking her so fiercely there was no way she'd heal any time soon. With each bite down he soothed the sting with his tongue, giving her a wicked preview of what he might do to her when he finally put his mouth on the spot she so desperately needed him.

Her clit throbbed.

Each bite drew another clench of her inner walls.

She was making soft, panicked noises of terror and pleasure all rolled into one.

“Just because I'm not going to kiss you doesn't mean I cannot taste you, little faerie.” He repeated the words straight to her soaked pussy, and she nearly lifted off the table. So sensitive and swollen already that the mere gust of his breath had her panting.

Ready to beg.

Shit. He really wasn't going to kiss her in all this. Something in the back of her mind tried to wave an emergency flag to protest that she didn't know how to feel about that. But having Rowan leaving his marks all over her upper thighs—no denying that he had stamped his claim there—was the hottest and dirtiest and most intensely erotic thing.

“Only a filthy girl would have a soaking wet cunt after getting fucked in the face like that. Show me how drenched you are from being the perfect little whore for me.”

Then his hands were finally against her bare skin. Searing and rough where they gripped beneath her knees and splaying her outer thighs. Drawing her wider still for him and yanking her ass right to the edge of the table.

Ri's breath hitched high in her throat, and her hands shot behind to slap against the table in order to steady herself.

And then he was right there.

His mouth closed over her pussy and she tumbled into a brilliant white haze of pleasure.

Sucking and licking and kissing his way over every exposed inch of her. Feasting on her wetness with long laps of his tongue. Sliding right through her core. Teasing her entrance, before roaming up to circle her clit.

She was going to come. *Already.*

This man had edged her so expertly that she was primed and ready to combust within seconds.

“*Oh, ffffuck.*” She whimpered. “I'm already—I'm going to —” Ri couldn't stop and think about the fact this was going to be over so soon. Her one and only chance to have Rowan of Nocturne, and she was about to come all over his face the second he breathed on her clit.

But maybe that was all he wanted. A quick, sordid encounter. To have this over and done with so he could get rid of her.

And that thought, of him using her, was the thought that sent her straight over the edge. Whimpering a string of

incoherent words like *yes, right there, I'm coming* into the darkness. Her pussy clamping down on nothing and her hips bucking towards his mouth.

Stars burst behind her eyelids, small noises of pleasure hummed in her chest, and her blood felt like it had been set on fire. Everything ached for more of him. Thirsted for every drop he'd be willing to give.

There was no denying she'd beg if he asked her to.

But as her racing heart battered around inside her ribcage, she realised he wasn't moving.

Fuck, he wasn't stopping.

She squirmed beneath him. Which only earned her another bite. This time to the very edge of her pussy lips, which made her jolt. Pain stinging through her and then drawing her pleasure back to the forefront of her awareness again.

“Try and get away from me again, and you'll be punished.”

“Oh, God—” Her words died. Her mind melted.

Rowan shoved two fingers inside her. The slick sound of how wet she was filled the room. Her head tipped back at the feel of him pressing inside her for the first time.

A dark groan sent vibrations through her pussy. His mouth stilled for a moment, and he muttered something dark and ancient before fastening back over her like he was pissed off she was so wet.

Fucking fuck.

He plunged in and out of her while his mouth continued to tease at her clit. Working her back up to the edge in embarrassingly quick fashion.

“Fffuck. Please.” She tried to shift her hips to get his fingers even deeper, but with the bruising hold on one thigh and him devouring her like his last meal, she didn't have much choice but to allow the orgasm to be wrenched out of her.

She was a shaking, whimpering mess beneath him.

Rowan made a noise that sounded like approval, or maybe disdain; she couldn't be sure anymore—still moving his fingers slowly in and out of her. Drawing out right to the edge and circling her entrance before sliding deep inside. She couldn't look at him. Her body was ablaze and liquid all at the same time. Her nipples ached to be touched, squeezed, and played with, but there was no way she could articulate any of that.

He'd just made her come twice like it was nothing.

If she'd ever had any doubts as to the danger of this man, now she knew.

She should absolutely be terrified of him.

Rowan spelled danger and trouble and agony.

Which was further reinforced when, instead of pulling away, he wedged a third finger inside her. Dragging a low moan out of her throat. She sagged down, until her head tipped back to hit the table with a soft thud. The weight of his gaze on her was too much; even with her eyes screwed firmly shut she could *feel* the way he watched her.

There was no way...

But her body had other ideas.

Maybe she'd never finished the second orgasm, but the third one reared up with teeth and claws, ready to crawl out her throat with a silent scream.

As his thick fingers stretched her wide and he pumped in and out of her, his filthy words washed over her in a way that shouldn't have made her buck her hips and clamp down on him, but did. All the hot and dirty things that fell from his mouth drove her into a whimpered, moaning mess as he called her a *little faerie whore* and a *filthy girl* and, through a gritted jaw, told her that her *desperate cunt begged for his cock*. Ri came on his fingers with a broken moan as his teeth grazed her clit.

She'd been right that day in the armoury. This man could absolutely talk her to orgasm.



Rowan had survived nearly three hundred years of battle.

Could wield any weapon like an extension of his own body.

Spoke the language of combat and counter-manoeuvres and tactical expertise that only his magic could decipher.

But he'd never found himself in a situation like this before.

Where his every instinct had been to keep the girl locked away in his room. To indulge in whatever this growing obsession was. To hear her sweet, breathy little moans and feel that silky wet channel squeeze around his cock.

To tell the world to get fucked and drown in the heady pleasure she'd provided.

Fuck. She'd been so godsdamned wet. Coating his tongue and his face and his hand in the kind of addictive nectar he'd never imagined could be within his grasp.

For someone to be so unbelievably soft and pliant for him, yet able to meet his hard edges with her own fierceness.

This was a girl who wouldn't break under his force. Merely bend and flex and show resilience in a way that made his dick hard and his balls ache.

Dragging three orgasms out of her wasn't enough. But it would have to do.

So rather than giving in to the insanity threatening to burst out of his chest, he did what anyone would do who had just barely restrained themselves from shoving their dick inside the hottest, sweetest cunt he'd ever tasted.

He left.

Well, more accurately, he delivered her... and then fucked off.

Rowan made sure she was covered up, took her back to her quarters—in fact, portaled her there just to be certain they'd avoid prying eyes—and then disappeared. Leaving her standing there in her small room, flushed with the glow of orgasms.

It was an asshole move. One that might earn him a few savage words from her at a later occasion.

But it was the only way he knew how to close that proverbial door. He barely let himself glance at her bed or doorway because knowing where she'd be at night was an infinitesimal detail he didn't trust himself to know.

There was no sense in lingering. Not when there was no issue of farewell kisses, affection, or anything soft between them.

Softness didn't belong in his life.

It was a one-time thing.

Getting it out of both of their bloodstreams.

Practical.

Only, who the fuck was he kidding? When it came to Oriana, the battle ground wasn't mapped out in dirt or forest or mountain terrain. It was in the curve of her breast, the soft swell of her stomach, the arch of her spine.

What he wanted involved things like filling her with his cum, laying claim to every inch of her, and then sucking on her perfect tits until she writhed and moaned beneath him, begging to be filled again.

He regretted not having torn her dress off and indulged in taking those stiffened buds in his mouth while he had the opportunity.

Fucking fuck.

Images rushed at him constantly that night, through 'til the next morning. Accompanying him wherever he went like a vengeful shadow. Including while heading to retrieve the details of the mysterious symbols from Niall—carefully avoiding Ruby in the process. He didn't trust himself to look

her in the eye and not reveal that he'd been fantasising about her sister's cunt.

A glimpse of perfect pink. Her swollen centre. That pouty little clit, stiff and begging for him to suck down and fondle in slow circles with his tongue.

He thought for a moment about walking away from the academy, from everything. To just tell the queen he was done with this shit and to leave.

To remove himself from this entire clusterfuck of a situation.

It was a miracle no one had noticed them in the stairwell, portaling away at a time of night when a teacher should be nowhere near a student. That would be impossible to explain, even with solid-sounding reasons like *her sister is the queen*.

Rowan suspected that might draw even more undue attention due to that fact alone.

Whichever assholes had been talking about her last night didn't deserve to be enrolled in Astracadia. They didn't fucking deserve to breathe the same air as Oriana. But unfortunately, he wasn't here to play the black-hearted herald of retribution; he was here to teach.

No matter how eagerly his fingers itched to hold his blade to their throat.

He shouldn't, no, more precisely, couldn't be more involved.

Tasting her might prove yet to have been a mistake, but he didn't regret a single second.

Instead of hunting down who he'd love to drag to the catacombs for a little private conversation, he dutifully met with Finnic and the slender-built, dark-haired male who was the armourer's fated mate. As they prattled on, and he only half paid attention, he scrubbed a hand over his mouth—a hand that still had her scent all over it—clinging to him like a fever dream.

While they were busy discussing unknown malevolent magic and where the origins might have come from, he drifted lost in thought, far away from the training arena.

Floating somewhere in a realm where blood didn't coat his dreams and he didn't slay his own fucking sister every night. A place where, in the distance, he pictured a glimpse of a life he didn't deserve.

CHAPTER 18

“Scary girl, where’d you go?” Brynne eyed her over the top of their books. Seated across from one another in the open floor plan area of the library, they’d been pouring over notebooks and herbalism assignments for the better part of the evening.

But Ri’s mind had been about as far away from the book lying open in front of her as could be.

“Huh?” She blinked at her friends. Saskia sat at the far end of the table with a fortress of dusty manuscripts built up around her. Atticus was lazily thumbing through a grimoire. While Etienne was seated next to her, holding a book open on his lap, but rather than paying attention he eyed the group of shifters that sat at the nearby table with outright hunger.

They giggled and eye-fucked him right back.

Ri rolled her eyes. Kicking his chair to knock the front legs back onto the floor.

Brynne sat her own notebook down and stretched her arms high above her head. “Your body might be here, but your brain is *clearly* elsewhere. Want to call it quits for tonight? We could head into the village?”

“Fuck, yeah. I’m about done with this bullshit for today.” Etienne tossed the book on the table.

“You only want to go find a sweet young thing to corrupt.” Saskia mused out loud, but didn’t take her eyes off the manuscript in front of her. Tracing the outline of shaky handwritten potions and spells with one finger.

“And?” He chuckled darkly.

A loud snort burst out of Brynne, who began to shuffle her things together. “While you might be trying to set the record for biggest blood whore in the academy, the rest of us are able to control ourselves.”

“Technically, a blood whore is whoever is a willing *participant*. Not the vampire in question.” He smirked.

“Whatever you say fang-fuck-boy.” She pushed her chair out and scooped up the stack of texts. Looking as buoyant as ever after a day with her nose in a book. Meanwhile, Ri felt like she’d gone ten rounds with the dreaded assault course. On second thought, she’d have much preferred that.

“You go ahead... I’ve got a few more things I want to finish up here.” Ri rolled her neck. It wasn’t exactly the truth, but a variation of it. She’d been occupying herself here these past few evenings. A vain attempt to distract herself from the ever-present thoughts of Rowan—and the knowledge he’d kept her underwear—by combing the library archives for information on the Nocturnes.

Ri couldn’t have him. Nor could she expect anything more than their illicit moment together. But the preoccupation with *him* still endured.

Not to mention that the words of the witch she’d run into at the tavern kept floating back to her at strange moments like an ebbing tide.

How well does anyone really know the Nocturnes?

That little seed of an idea had been an itch she started to scratch. It had begun the night after they’d crossed the forbidden line, when she was so desperate to have his hands on her that she nearly gave in and went looking for him.

So now, she had this fucked up new activity to occupy her time which was stalking his family lineage of witches through the archives.

Yes. She was ten ways to messed up and well aware of it.

As her friends all filed out of the library and left her to it, she set off for the far recesses of the vast space. Losing herself among shelves full of diaries and ancient manuscripts that had recently been transferred here from the vaults at the vampire palace. Thanks to Ruby's connections with the vampire coven, Astracadia now housed the largest collection of records from supernaturals across the different realms.

Eons of history lined the impossibly high shelves stretching so far above her head she had to crane to see the top. Rolling ladders lined each long bay. As she descended deeper into the library's archives, the rows upon rows of books muffled any sounds from the main area where the tables and seating for students filled the central chamber.

Back here was like a private hideaway, and her racing mind found a solace back here that she clung to.

She tugged a couple of leather-bound diaries down off the shelves. Ones that were written by witches from several centuries ago and documented life at Castle Nitorna in the Soterian Realm. The very ancestral home of the Nocturnes, well, at least since Rowan's brother Lachlan had come into time acting as the Guardian of the Realm. A title, or more aptly a responsibility, bestowed upon whoever the Goddesses deemed to be the most powerful witch in existence at any given time. Ri knew that mantle had now passed to Lachlan's mate, Belle. An Ampher witch who had the ability to take on the powers of anyone and anything around her—amplifying that magic to untold heights of power.

She shuddered at the thought. It meant that Belle could tap into magic of all kinds, including the darkest possible.

Ri couldn't imagine what that kind of burden must be like on a soul.

But Belle was kind, sunshiney, and a complete antithesis of the brooding scowl permanently affixed to Lachlan of Nocturne's features. In that regard, she could see the similarities between Rowan and Lachlan straight away. They'd met a couple of times, thanks to occasions when she had accompanied Ruby on what might be termed *queenly business*.

Back when Rowan was just a hulking tattoo-covered mess to lust after in her dreams. Not like her current predicament of knowing the taste and weight of him hitting the back of her throat.

She thumbed through the wafer-thin pages. Shaking thoughts of the tattooed brute from her mind. There wasn't anything to catch her attention in these books other than descriptions of the castle and the lands and the uses of magic unique to the Soterian Realm. Certainly nothing to be found regarding *the Nocturnes*.

These past few days had been torture. Not seeing him, thanks to the schedule of classes and subsequent rest days from the training arena, was both a blessing and a curse. Ever since their *one-time-only* encounter, she'd been walking around lost in a dense fog of memories from that night.

How the fat head of his cock had slid across her tongue.

The searing heat of him staring at her spread pussy.

Agony and ecstasy of how his wicked mouth worked her.

Not to mention the way he'd staked his claim on her body. Bruises left where his hands gripped her thighs. The purple imprint of his teeth on her flesh still lingered even now.

Fae were slow to heal, and that fucker knew exactly what he was doing.

Each time she dressed or undressed, there were reminders staring back at her of where his mouth and fingers had been.

"... Symbology and sigils can mostly be found in this section." A woman's voice floated towards her, slightly muffled but distinctly close by. Maybe only a couple of rows over from the sound of it. Ri glanced up, and if she crouched slightly, it was possible to look through the small window of space left between the tops of the books and the base of the next shelf above them.

Like a narrow-slitted peek down the many, many lines of hidden secrets held within these pages.

She caught sight of a slender wrist reaching up to point at something up higher. Then, a billowy kind of silk blouse in mint green. A glimpse of coppery-coloured hair falling past the fae's pointed ears.

But there was another body with her. She only saw his back, but recognised the bulk of his frame instantly.

Her fingers tightened on the leather binding in her hands.

They stood close enough to brush against one another. She watched with a churning in her gut as the fae tucked her hair behind one ear. Felt her heart stall as one of those delicate, fine-boned fingers grazed against the sleeve of his shirt when she lowered her hand.

Ri ducked lower, her eyes desperately searching to see where Rowan's hands were. Dreading how it might just tear her apart if he was touching her. But the small slit between the books and the infernal bookshelves was too small. His muscled frame and height took up too much of the space in the narrow stacks where they stood.

Ri's imagination filled in all the details of what she couldn't see.

They'd be pressed together.

His scent would surround the woman.

Those startling blue eyes would be looking at *her*.

Suddenly she was caught in a vice of terror. One part of her wanting to know what he was doing here, with a delicate fae librarian who laughed softly and spoke in such hushed tones that she couldn't make out what was being said. Yet at the same time, she wanted to bolt out the door and not dare look back.

Rowan wasn't her property. He wasn't anything to her, other than her very *forbidden-to-touch* teacher.

Of course, he'd have an abundance of other women lined up waiting for him.

Librarians who liked to be pushed up against the bookshelves while he bit down on their neck and shoved his

hands...

Spitting hot jealousy curdled in her stomach, and her cheeks stung like she'd been smacked across the face.

His distinct rumbling baritone filtered through the slim gaps, but she had no hope of making out what was said. And her mind had already descended into a chaotic spiral anyway. Certain that he was whispering filthy things in *her* ear the way he'd done when they were alone only a few nights ago.

She hurriedly backed away. Ri spun, blindly headed for the furthest end of the stacks and to make her way back to her desk in the library's main foyer. Bumping the book in her hand against the shelf she'd been spying through as she went to turn around.

Anger and anguish wrestled in her throat.

She had nothing. No one. There wasn't anybody she could talk to about this feeling that sank like a stone in her chest, and it was all her own stupid fault.

Foolishness and rash decision-making once again coming back to taunt her mercilessly. It had been such a fucking colossal mistake to allow herself to fall under his spell that night.

Ri snuck along the back wall, where narrow, high-peaked windows let in the glow of lantern light from outside and the low seats nestled against the glass overlooked the gardens below. Romantic window seats to sit and read to a lover. Or the perfect place to hide out with a dainty, porcelain-skinned fae librarian.

The image nearly made her choke. Ducking her head, she tried to move as quietly as possible. If she followed along this end of the rows upon rows of books, she'd eventually reach the tables, gather her things, and be gone from here.

"Going somewhere?"

Goosebumps erupted on her arms. Rowan stepped out of the shadows of the long row to her right. Immediately blocking the way forward, with his massive shoulders nearly filling the entire width of space.

No way past the man-mountain surveying her with a scowl on his lips and a pinched brow.

“Let me pass. I’m leaving.” She twisted her lips. Trying to do anything but look at him. Which was impossible. He was *everywhere*.

Scents of sandalwood and nights spent in the forest clung to him.

“You’re here late.” Fuck this. She wasn’t in the mood for Rowan’s bullshit. If he was pissed at her for interrupting whatever he had planned with the woman, she didn’t intend to stick around to hear it.

“Fine, I’ll go the other way then.” Ri muttered and spun on her heel. Tossing her head back and jutting out her chin as she did her best to put distance between herself and her tormentor.

What she would give to have that fucking magical key right now.

Being able to disappear at a time like this was exactly what she needed. Not to be dogged by Rowan’s looming shadow.

Ducking down a row—any fucking place that would take her far, far away from whatever she’d just interrupted—she blindly ploughed straight into a solid chest. Letting out a quiet *oof* as the air escaped her lungs.

Goddess-fucking-damnit. It infuriated her that he could just manifest out of thin air like a murderous apparition.

Rowan poked his tongue against the side of his mouth and stood resolute, barring her exit. With arms folded, his molten sapphire blue eyes raked her from head to toe, leaving her both chilled and burning up beneath his gaze.

“What the fuck do you want?” Ri felt like she was going to burst out of her skin, shifting her weight and clutching the hefty book tight to her chest. She threw him her best eye-daggers for good measure.

“Spying, little faerie?” The corner of his mouth indented, and she didn’t dare let herself imagine it might be a crack of a smile.

This man already scrambled her senses. If he smiled, it might devour her whole. She'd be trapped in the path of a shark revealing a wide set of jagged teeth set amongst powerful jaws.

"No."

"Then why are you running?" He stepped closer.

Ri held her ground. "I'm not *running*."

"Don't forget, I know all your tells." His gaze dropped to the swell of her breasts, where her chest rose and fell faster now that they were here... together. So close she could make out the lines of ink reaching up the side of his neck and front of his throat. Another moment where they found themselves lost in the murky grey of twilight and poor decisions.

"How fascinating for you." She huffed. "Let me pass."

Rowan's eyes narrowed. "Got somewhere else to be? *Someone else* to be meeting at this time of night?"

Fuck him. Her fingers twitched. The cool, smooth edges of her two short blades were just a quick reach away, tucked side by side in her thigh holster. Right alongside her bare pussy.

Which she now realised was absolutely *delighted* at the proximity of Rowan.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She had forgone anything beneath her dress today, what with the sultry heat of late summer and the buttery soft fabric that felt divine against her skin. It hadn't been a conscious decision, but now that he lingered so close...

He could slide his hand beneath the hem of her dress and see exactly how her body responded to him. And she didn't know what turned her on more. Having her teacher know that her pussy was soaked, or getting away with something that felt so forbidden?

But she wasn't going to be made a fool of. Not after being unceremoniously dumped back in her rooms. Definitely not considering the way he'd left so suddenly after commanding her to come undone three times.

No matter how perfectly the dwindling light caressed his strong jaw.

“Maybe I’ve got somewhere to be. Or maybe not. But none of it is your business.”

“Who?” He forced her to step back against the row of books. One shoulder awkwardly bumping up against the rigid spines.

His eyes dropped the length of her body, hovering at the flowy hemline of her dress where it fluttered just below her knees.

“Maybe I should ask who *you* are here with?” That had his eyes snapping up in an instant. Hitting her with the shade of startling blue she would forever associate with this man.

Rowan’s mouth formed a hard line, and he leant one arm high above her on the shelving. Nothing about this was appropriate. If someone was to see them here like this... there was no excusing the way he pressed her up against the hard barrier digging into her spine.

The way adversaries might when holding their captive at knifepoint. Or lovers.

Maybe here, in this moment, they were one and the same.

He didn’t deny being here with the woman, and that had her seeing red. “Evading the question? How predictable. Well, in that case, you can go fuck one of your other whores gagging for your cock.” Her lips curled, and the snarl was out before she could do anything to calm the frustration seething in her chest.

Something cracked beneath his grip on the shelf above her head. Hopefully, it was the sound of the bones in his hand breaking.

“Such a filthy mouth on you. What will it take to stop it from getting you into trouble?” Suddenly, his other hand was at her throat. His big paw effortlessly collared the front of her neck, and he pressed down.

She tried to stop her mouth from dropping open but failed miserably.

Ri liked what she liked. No sense in hiding from that. Her sister was the one who needed soft, kind words. She'd often teased Ruby whenever they'd opened a bottle of fae wine together and stuffed themselves full of bread and cheese while snort-laughing about sex and bedroom stories. Saying how she'd be likely to cry if anyone called her names or was harsh.

But Ri had always known she possessed a darker side. One she needed to indulge with the right partner.

Tastes that ran far different from those of her sibling.

Her throat worked down a swallow, and Rowan made a dark, primal noise. His fingers lightly massaging the spot captured in his searing touch. She sent him a look that she hoped said *get your hands off*, but the whimpering noise coming from her lips said anything but.

With a grunt, he tore his hand away, then fisted the material at the hem of her dress. Knuckles grazed her thighs and as he did so sent a riot of sensation crawling straight up to the spot where his bite marks decorated her flesh.

“These fucking dresses.” His gaze followed where his hand held onto the charcoal-coloured fabric.

Send her to the ancestors. He was going to find out. The heat coming off her pussy would be unmistakable through the thin fabric.

Then his hand was there. As if he'd heard her thoughts and her heart pounding so loud it might shake the books from their perches. Diving beneath the fabric and cupping her sex. *Her drenched, bare core.*

Rowan swore through gritted teeth. His eyes dropped closed for just a second as his fingers and thumb parted her and teased between her pussy lips.

She was going to collapse right here, right now. Plummet through the floor like an anchor descending to the depths of the ocean.

Her breath hitched when he grazed her swollen clit, and his furious gaze was right fucking there. Looming large and threatening as his nose almost brushed against her own.

“Such a dirty little faerie. Walking around with a bare cunt. Just begging for someone to lift up this dress. Desperate for someone to come along and fuck you.”

“Maybe I am. Clearly, you’re not going to.”

His fingers stayed unmoving. The asshole wasn’t going to do anything but linger in a possessive hold.

“Stay away from those boys.” When she made a noise of protest, he pinched her clit. It took everything not to fill the library with a scream. “Those scrawny pricks in your class want you. I see the way they look at you.”

Panting, she shot murder and threats at him with her eyes while her hips betrayed her and lifted against his still hand. Desperate for friction. Fuck, she wanted him to do something—anything to relieve the ache blossoming in her core. “You don’t get to have any say in what I do, or who I do it with.”

Of course he didn’t reply. The tightness of his jaw told the entire story. He couldn’t refute it because she was right.

“You want me to fuck you like I’ve paid for it? As if I’ve tossed some gold at you like a cheap whore?” He hissed. With his fingers gripping her pussy and his hard body covering hers, it wasn’t much of a leap to imagine him taking her hard and fast right then and there.

Which elicited a thundering sensation right down to her toes. Pleasure and wanting and desire all rolled up in the filthiness of his mouth hovering so close to her own.

So dangerously close.

“Screw you.” She wanted to snap her teeth at him.

His lips curled in a sneer.

Now it was her turn to have no words. Because other than begging him for exactly that—to cast the rules aside and fuck her—Ri didn’t trust what might slip past her lips.

“Not going to happen.” Rowan pulled his hand away. Leaving her clit throbbing and ready to cry out in anguish at the loss of contact.

Bringing his thumb up, he traced the line of her lower lip. Tugging it down as he swept along the plump curve, covering her in the scent of her own arousal. “I don’t understand this obsession, little faerie. How I can’t eradicate you from my every waking thought. And trust me, I’ve tried. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were the one with the magic of an enchantress. Maybe you’ve cast a spell on me?”

He studied her with a face so hard and fierce and handsome it made her heart stutter.

“Other girls might want someone to treat them like a precious little princess. But I *see* you. You deserve someone who understands how to treat you as their perfect fucking whore. Don’t forget that.”

And like the venomous, entirely dangerous creature Rowan could be, he dropped his head to the side and bit down on the flesh at the base of her neck. Taking her skin between his teeth so hard he’d leave fresh marks.

Another claiming.

Before he disappeared.

Leaving her gasping and stinging and dripping wet.

CHAPTER 19

He didn't go far.
Couldn't.

Knowing how soaked she was and bare below that fucking dress. Every primal, possessive, asshole cell in his body wanted to throw her over his shoulder and carry her out of there.

He hadn't been lying when he told her what she did to him. If the girl had been a witch, he'd be certain this feeling lodged like an axe in his chest was a hex or an enchantment.

But no. Just a fierce girl with a fondness for knives and a talent for dragging his darkness out to tangle with her own.

From his perch up in the high walkway on the upper reaches of the library, he stalked after her. She was too wrapped up in the rush of heated blood—or maybe that was just his own thundering pulse and stiff cock colouring his vision—to do anything more than dart a furtive look around before heading back to gather up her few things.

Still clutching the large volume against her breasts as if it were some sort of leather-bound shield. He was almost certain she didn't know what was in the book. Or care.

His suspicions were promptly confirmed when she tossed the book onto the stack atop the returns cart and then hurried out the large double doors.

Rowan portaled to his next vantage point. Tracking her as easily as any of his targets on the battlefield over the years.

Stars, he needed to teach this girl how to be more aware of her surroundings. He mentally filed away some additional sessions on the assault course after class where he could create some scenarios for her to navigate.

Maybe he'd stalk her through the forest himself.

Fuck. His cock throbbed at the thought.

Jabbing a hand through his hair, he followed at a distance. Keeping a close eye on her from the higher levels of the winding stairs. The very place he'd found her the other night, brimming with rage and tears and vengeful thoughts.

Or was that him who had the taste for vengeance hot in the back of his throat after seeing her like that?

A voice called out to her from the ground floor.

She leant over the railing, peering over and saying something back.

But Rowan didn't hear the words exchanged; his every sense prickled as the air simmered with *something*... something he didn't like one fucking bit.

Moving quicker now, he saw her bound down the stairs. It was the other fae girl she had become friendly with from their training. Saskia maybe? The two were closing the distance between them, but the air thickened with whatever presence his magic detected.

Vile and clogging, like a putrid stench of death.

All too familiar after hundreds of years of watching bodies pile up around him.

Rowan's eyes darted around and his magic reached out to detect whatever, or whoever might be causing this. Moving faster, but not fast enough. He had to make a split-second decision.

Risk the girl knowing his interest in Oriana, or risk that this might be every bit as dangerous as the hackles rising on the back of his neck sensed it to be.

Fuck it. He portaled straight to her.

Only, as his boots made contact with the stairs and he opened his mouth to call her name, a black cloud tore through the space above the central stairwell. Driving down towards the two girls with vengeful force. Looking like a whirlwind of onyx glass shards.

He did the only thing he could—throwing out a shield of his magic as he reached for her arm. Those wide dark eyes met his own, panic and confusion etched all over her face as the blackened entity rained down with a deafening roar.

Then, just as quickly as it appeared, it was gone.

Leaving him clutching her arm so tight it would probably leave bruises. But his hold on her had stopped Oriana from collapsing to the ground. Instead, her head lolled forward and her body went limp as a result of the force. It punched against the protective barrier of his magic in a pressure wave, the likes of which he'd never encountered before.

Godsdamnit. Rowan checked her quickly, satisfied she was still breathing at least. Gathered her into his arms...

And stilled.

Behind her lay the other fae girl. Saskia.

Her skin covered in symbols he recognised immediately. The same as those found on the bodies outside the academy.

Blood pooled and dripped down the steps below her body.

He blew out a long breath. If there was anything he'd pray to have relieved Oriana from, it would be the sight of her friend being beheaded in front of her eyes. Rowan could only hope she'd been knocked unconscious in the split second before it happened.

Guilt and bile rose in the back of his throat. Taking in deep, slow breaths, he cradled her soft body against his chest and surveyed the macabre scene at his feet.

The grotesque reality of death for a supernatural being.

He'd been too slow. If only he'd made a move a fraction of a second sooner, his magic might have shielded both girls. Or

it might have been insufficient to protect either of them. Fuck. His chest burned at the realisation.

A haunting knowledge that whatever that entity was, if he hadn't been there, it would have undoubtedly killed Oriana too.



Three things happened in quick succession.

Rowan took the girl slumped in his arms to the safest place he knew. Somewhere he could leave her for a few moments and not go out of his mind with worry. Followed by finding Finnic and putting him in charge of the fae guards and barking out orders to secure the academy grounds. Then, he delivered the news to the queen and his brother.

Leaving out the part about Oriana, for now.

It wasn't necessarily the right thing to do, but in battle there was rarely ever a clear black or white answer. And in this case, there was no way to explain him being there, with her, without fielding questions he didn't have the answers to.

Added to the fact that Ruby would demand to see her sister immediately when he had zero interest in relinquishing her from his protection.

She was safest under his watch.

Of that, he was fucking certain.

Being the queen she was, Ruby took it all in her stride. Death was as much of a familiar foe to her as any. Moving to make contact with the girl's family and make arrangements to have her body returned to them. Niall handled the observations of the markings covering her skin where the entity had carved them into her pale flesh.

Which left Rowan able to slip away.

The moment he laid eyes on Oriana again—sleeping on her side, with her dark hair fanned out across the pillow

beneath her head—he felt like his lungs began to function properly once more.

He hadn't been back here in too long. *Far too long.*

Glancing around the room, he tried to see it through the eyes of someone else. The small details, like the way the forest outside almost kissed the glass panes of the cottage window. How the long lines of the soft cedarwood planks on the walls each held their own knotted story. The muted silvery-grey of the cashmere blanket laid over top of white linen sheets. Perfect for keeping cool on long nights spent tossing and turning in a fever of nightmares and restless sleep.

Other than the occasional unwanted intrusion from his fucking family, no one came here. That was exactly how he liked it. Endless blood wards surrounding the property—safeguarding it from trespassers—ensured it stayed that way, too.

Rowan sank heavily into the high-back chair in the corner. Resting his forearms on his knees and dropping his head forward into his hands. Shit. There was no plan here. No foresight. Just instinct and adrenaline and an urgent need to protect the tiny girl lying curled on her side in his bed.

Which had him immediately jumping to his feet. Unsettled energy surged through his blood and dug deep into his bones. He moved out through the wooden door, careful to shut it quietly behind him and inhaled in the familiarity of the space around him.

His sanctuary.

A flick of his fingers was all it took to use his magic and light the small hearth, more out of habit than any actual need for warmth. He wandered to the cabinets of the small kitchen area set against one wall. The small cabin was everything he needed. A place to rest his soul and enjoy the deepening shades of dappled green light filtering through the leaves outside.

Subtle scents of woodsmoke and moss and cedar washed over him. Soothed him just a fraction.

He fished out a bottle of whiskey and a glass before making his way back to the chair beside the fire. One single, heavy-set armchair. Because he never needed more than that for himself when he was here.

A realisation that suddenly made him even more aware of the presence of *her* still sleeping in the other room. His room.

His fucking bed.

Rowan tugged out the stopper to the bottle with his teeth and decided to forgo the glass entirely. Slugging back a long draw and relishing every burning drop as it slid down his throat. He allowed his head to tip back against the cushioned fabric and stared up at the open beam work in the high-pitched roof above him.

Outside, slate tiles covered the steep A-frame angle of the roof. He should probably check them for any damage that might need repairing before leaving again. Moss clung to those tiles in a way that he secretly loved because it helped make the place look even more like a part of the very forest it sat quietly within.

He'd been known to use his magic to help it grow a little faster from time to time.

As the whiskey drawled a lazy path through his veins, he studied the flames through hooded eyes. The lifeless eyes of the girl's severed head stared back at him in a sickening reminder of his nightmares. *Just how Brigid looked back at him, night after night.*

Tipping the bottle back again, he savoured the oaky notes. The liquor eased some of whatever fucking vice had been threatening to crush his ribcage. His magic sensed Oriana was still knocked out. Whatever force had struck her had left her body sleeping off the aftereffects, and he let out a heavy sigh at the knowledge her world would turn to shit in the morning.

As he stored the bottle back in the cabinet, along with the unused glass lined up next to the unused dishes and cups and other useless mundane things sitting waiting for his eventual return, he mulled over what to do next.

Ultimately making a decision based on nothing but pure selfishness. Like a dragon hoarding treasure and threatening to breathe fire over all those who might dare thief a single item from his lair.

Rowan slipped quietly back into the bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed to unlace his boots. Toeing them off gently, before settling on his back. The bed dipped beneath his bulk, but not enough to rouse the girl from her healing slumber. With his hands folded over his torso, he stretched out his weary body alongside hers on top of the soft blanket. Listening to the way her soft breaths gusted over the pillow. Soaking in her tiny sighs and fingertip twitches that punctuated her breathing.

Lurking like a monster in the gloom next to the princess who was more than capable of slaying said dragon all on her own.

And as he drifted off to sleep, for the first time ever, he didn't wake to nightmares.

CHAPTER 20

Ri woke up with a start.

Voices calling her name and hammering on her door roused her from a deep sleep. The kind that left her stumbling across the room feeling as though she'd been drugged.

Blinking to herself and muttering curses under her breath, she rubbed her eyes. Swaying on unsteady legs as she crossed the plush carpet of her room.

“Ok. Ok. I’m coming.” As Ri quickly twisted her hair into some sort of controlled mess on top of her head her magic reached out to unseal the entrance.

Only to be almost flattened. The wooden door slammed on its hinges and she was accosted by Ruby barging in like a stampede, followed by Niall. As he shut the door behind them, she caught a glimpse of Brynne’s face looking pale and several other sets of eyes peering in.

Had Brynne been crying?

A shiver ran the length of her spine.

Ruby was still wrapped tight around her. Babbling complete nonsense and stroking her hair and guiding her to sit back down on the edge of her bed like she was a fucking invalid.

Meanwhile, Niall prowled the far wall beside the window as if he were a caged animal. The darker side to his magic

didn't usually make an appearance, but there were distinct wisps of coal coloured smoke filling the air around his body.

"...couldn't find you... not answering... your rooms were sealed..."

Ri rubbed her temples.

Why was her head so godsdamned sore? Did she fall or hit her head in training?

Wait, no. She hadn't been training yesterday.

Her last memory was of the library.

Her blood ran cold, then red hot. *Rowan*. Him crowding her against the shelves at the back of the library. Rushing to get out of there. A mad dash to put distance between them after the way he'd marked her, then disappeared on her.

Goddess-fucking-damnit.

"Oriana, I swear to the bloody Spirits, if you don't start answering my questions, I am going to gut you like a fish."

She blinked weary eyes at her sister.

Ruby stood there with arms crossed and a wild expression. No, not wild. Terrified.

"I'm sorry, Ru-Ru. Can you start over? My head—" She'd barely got the words out before Ruby was tackling her again, sobbing into her shoulder.

"Where were you? We've been trying to find you all night so we could tell you first... and then you were missing, and I panicked..."

Dread started to creep up from her toes.

"Is it Ma? Pa?" She interjected. Oh, fuck. If something had happened back at home...

"No. *No*. They're fine. It's nothing to do with them." Ruby hesitated and glanced up at Niall. Her big eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "It's Saskia."

The dread wound its way up the back of her throat.

“What about her?” But Ri already knew. Something terrible had happened.

“I’m so sorry, Ri. I know she was a friend of yours.”

But Ri was already off the bed and joining Niall in pacing the small space. Clutching her arms around her stomach, she felt woozy and sick and her head still pounded like a hammer against an anvil.

“What happened?”

“We don’t know.” Niall supplied from beside her. His hands shoved deep in his pockets, and a grim veil drawn across his usual smirk and cheeky demeanour. “But whatever it was, we suspect it was the same fate to befall those found the day prior to the academy opening.”

Ri’s head swivelled between her sister and Niall.

“You mean the murders you conveniently didn’t tell me about.” She didn’t know what to feel. Her friend was dead, and it could all too easily be something or someone who might ultimately be after Ruby. “What happens when it’s *you* they come for next time?”

Ruby twisted her hands in her lap.

“Your sister is protected.” While Niall might sound confident, she knew there was no guaranteeing anything.

“There’s no way to know that for sure.” She argued. “Look, I’ve said it before, I’ll say it fucking again... I will drop out of Astracadia and come back to work in your protection guard—”

“No, Ri. You won’t.” Her sister was up and standing with her hands braced on her hips, and the familiar look of defiance reflected back at her.

One similarity they shared, if not by blood.

“Anyway, that still doesn’t answer my question. Where were you?”

Ri blinked again.

Then swallowed quickly.

Darting out her tongue to wet her lips, she tried to search her brain for an answer that was anything but the truth.

In the library, with Rowan's hand up my dress.

Which didn't actually explain the mystery of where she'd been for the rest of the night anyway.

"I don't know what to tell you; I was right here. Must have just been sleeping heavily." *Lies.* "Training had kicked my ass, and I needed to sleep it off to heal. I took a potion I made in herbalism class, and it knocked me out."

Lying to her own sister. A whole new fucking low.

None of which resolved the question of how she got back to her rooms. The last thing she remembered was leaving the library.

Ruby's eyes crinkled ever so slightly at the corner. Studying her like a hawk.

"Honestly, Ru-Ru. I'm sorry I didn't hear you, or that I scared you. It wasn't intentional." She stepped forward and grabbed her sister to pull her back into a hug. Being the subject of her sister's scrutiny was not high on her list of desires in this moment.

"What happens now, *princess?*" Niall leant one shoulder up against the wall beside the window. Surveying the grounds. His eyes darted over the groups of students coming and going below. "We're going to have to tell everyone before rumours start flying and panic sets in, no?"

Ruby blew out a long exhale. Tension strained at the corners of her mouth, and while it was a rare sight to see her fierce fighter of a sister cry, her bottom lip quivered.

"Hey, Ru-Ru... it'll be ok." She brushed her sister's long turquoise curls back from her face. While they'd hardly seen one another in recent weeks since the opening of the academy and in the months since she'd ascended to the throne, right now, it was just the two of them being there for one another.

Just as they'd always done.

“I’ve been taking care of the arrangements with Saskia’s family. We’ll hold a memorial and blessing here at the academy for students who wish to attend.” Ruby brushed away the moisture from her cheeks with the heel of her palm. “Then we’re going to triple down on finding out anything we can about these symbols and whatever dark magic is behind them. Fucked if I’m going to let the House of Elharean, or whoever is attempting to take their place, from daring to attack Astracadia.”

She paused for a long moment, shooting another look at Niall.

“Like I said, I don’t know where he is.” He shrugged.

“Who?” The words were out of Ri’s mouth before she could punch herself in the face for being so desperate.

Ruby made a grating noise in the back of her throat. “Fucking Rowan is who. We haven’t been able to track him down since he informed us of the attack last night.”

Something prickled the back of Ri’s neck.

He knew?

And all of a sudden, an onslaught of memories started to flood back in. Glimpses and flashes. Her rushing out of the library. The flight of stairs. Saskia’s face smiling up at her when she peered over the railing to look down. Quickly followed by the thunderous noise that consumed her senses. Blanketing her in a pulsing fog that threatened to burst her eardrums.

Then blackness claimed her.

But not before she thought she felt—no, she knew with complete certainty it was—his rough palm reaching out to grab hold of her arm in a bruising hold.

Ri slapped her hand over the spot. Instinctively going to cover the evidence of any marks.

Oh, shit. Oh, shit. That was the least of her concerns.

He’d fucking bitten her.

Spinning around, she made for the tall wooden doors of her wardrobe, leaving Ruby talking in hushed tones with Niall over by the window. Jerking open the door on one side where a mirror hung, relief immediately flooded through her as she scanned her reflection. Thank fuck.

The black jersey she wore over the top of her dress was high-necked, covering where there were definitely going to be teeth marks left indented in her skin. Buttery soft and big enough to drown her.

Hiding behind the door, out of sight of her sister and Niall, she hooked a finger in the collar to tug it down slightly.

Her cheeks flamed as she took in her reflection.

A bluish-purple bruise sat right at the base of her throat. In the fleshy part just above her collarbone.

In addition to looking like she'd been attacked by a creature in the woods, wild curls framed her face, and the attempt she'd made to throw her hair in a high knot on top of her head was half falling out. She was still in her dress from yesterday, only she now wore a finely woven cashmere jersey over the top that most certainly wasn't hers, and she had no recollection of putting it on.

Lifting the neck to cover her nose, she took a deep inhale.

Sandalwood.

Ri wasn't sure which way was up.

Did Rowan save her from whatever attacked Saskia? Her friend was dead. She had no memory of what happened. Now she found herself dressed in presumably his jersey, yet had woken up in her own bed with her door still sealed shut... and... and...

She tried to level out her shallow breathing. Rather than pass out on the floor and worry her sister further, she needed to go find her friends.

Brynne. *Fuck.* Now, her puffy red eyes in the hallway made sense.

Which was exactly where she headed as soon as she'd gotten rid of Ruby and Niall. Promising to check in with them both before the end of the day. As a gloomy fog shrouded the entire academy that afternoon, she sat with Brynne and the others, shedding tears for their friend and exchanging stories from their short time together.

None of them were strangers to death, but to lose a friend in such a cruel and unexpected attack was shocking, to say the least.

But it reminded them all of why they were here. What they were training for.

Ultimately, they could never know what the future might contain. Whether that meant eons of life stretching out ahead of them, or only a few more short breaths before that final death knell tolled.

Losing Saskia was the ultimate reminder that nothing was promised. Even for those who claimed immortality.

So, while they mourned their friend over the week that followed, with classes paused and blessings held in solemn tribute to her memory, Ri stuck close to Brynne. She checked in with Ruby each day. And all the while she looked out for a glimpse of tattoos or dark hair hanging across sapphire eyes, but never saw him.

Her brute.

Not that he was hers.

But in some part of her mind, she'd started calling him that, and now couldn't stop.

She had a thousand questions to ask. None more pressing than how she'd come to be wearing his clothes or how she'd wound up back in her own quarters that night.

However, answers never came. And as the week dragged on, the heaviness only seemed to cling tighter to Astracadia. Surrounded by a perpetual blanket of low-hanging grey clouds that clung to the tree tops and drifted across the manicured gardens in billowing sheets of dense fog.

The academy mourned the loss of one of its own in its own way.

Until one morning finally dawned bright and glistening when they were set to resume their normal routines. With dew drops coating the leaves and bright flowers bordering the footpaths, the day they finally returned to classes arrived.

His sapphire eyes found hers the second she entered the training arena.

CHAPTER 21

The vampire—Etienne, slammed the girl into the dirt. His smug fucking face lit up with satisfaction at having flipped her legs out from beneath her.

Again.

“Prick.” Oriana smacked at his shoulder, demanding that he get off her.

While it was torture having to watch the slimy fucker touch Oriana in a way he had absolutely no right to, at least she looked ready to tear the vampire’s guts out through his throat.

“Strike.” Finnic’s breezy voice called out from somewhere on the other side of the arena.

“Just putting you in your place, scary girl. Flat on your back, looking up at me while I rule your world.” Etienne grinned as he gripped her forearm. Yanking her up to standing.

Rowan seethed.

Violence consumed him, along with a roaring desire inside his chest to take this vampire by the fangs and snap them. Then do the same to his neck. He’d gladly forgo using any weapons in favour of his bare hands.

But this was the training arena.

He was their teacher.

The students had to complete these sparring sessions. He needed to tolerate every sickening second of watching the two

of them together as she continued to shine and take step after step towards reaching her goal of making the elites.

Or, more to the point, Rowan had to endure every torturous moment of this limp dicked vampire touching what didn't belong to him.

For her.

“Your ego could rule the entire dominion. You know that, right?” Her taunts still came thick and fast.

The two were tied neck and neck at four strikes apiece in a best of eleven rounds. Hand-to-hand combat. No weapons. Only wrestling and grappling and slinging each other into the dirt.

Oriana swiped a bright red swathe of blood from her cheek. Looking like a battle-hardened Goddess, wearing the evidence of where her face had slammed into the ground two rounds prior.

Etienne smirked back with blood-stained fangs from where she'd landed a knee to his face. The crunch that had rung out around the arena had been particularly satisfying.

Students surrounded them on all sides, baying for blood.

Rowan hung back slightly, as usual, but he could see and hear everything from here.

“Fuck him up!” The little sprite, Brynne, shouted over the cheers where the ring of their classmates watched on.

The two were the last remaining pair to complete their sparring round for today's class.

Brynne wore the wide grin and busted lip of victory from her rounds against the shifter girl, Vanya. She'd taken down the blonde pain in the ass and had every right to be on a high after an emphatic, scrappy as fuck win.

He'd be glad to never see any of these students again, except for the little fae.

The shifter girl had backed off in the past week, thank the fucking ancestors. There was only so much more of her getting

in his face at every turn, with bullshit questions and thinly veiled excuses to try and get him alone before he might have had to take steps to officially reprimand her.

Although Vanya had certainly seemed more reserved since Saskia's death, there was something haunted in her eyes. Rowan recognised that look immediately, and more than once he'd seen her twin brother Glade pull her off somewhere to talk privately.

He didn't seem to be faring too well either these days.

Rowan suspected the wolf had been hit hard by the death of the girl, although he wasn't sure if there had been anything more than a passing friendship between the two of them. He was sure he'd seen them getting close the night of the solstice, but then again, he hadn't been paying much attention to anything beyond a certain silver-clad, drunken faerie.

But right now, there was no time for lingering on unanswered questions because his hands were fisting the handles of his swords. Etienne rushed her, and she narrowly missed being hit by his shoulder. Instead, glancing off to one side, she hit and spun, using his weight against him.

Just like Rowan had taught her to do.

Fuck, that made his dick stand to attention.

The brash little fae whom he was equally furious and obsessed with.

Where she should be screaming at his stupid face or sticking him with a blade for disappearing without a trace... instead she was listening and learning from him.

Which was evident in the way she managed to pin Etienne to the floor, straddling his torso with the dickhead's bulk beneath her.

Rowan barely fought back the urge to launch himself in there and rip her off him.

She needs this. It's for the Astrals.

Sucking in a deep breath through his nose, he shifted his weight.

With her chest heaving, the girl winked at the vampire. “You look rather pretty on your back, bloodsucker.”

At least that earned her an indignant growl. He slapped her thighs to move her off just as Finnic called out the strike.

Rowan imagined snapping each of those fingers clean off, one by one, and setting them on fire.

Finnic called the strikes coming from each of the next rounds. With agitation and blind fury growing like a wild thing inside Rowan’s chest as their sparring seemed to linger on and on and fucking on. He was glued to the spot, unable to look away. At the sight of every place the vampire touched her all over her body, it was like another iron being added to the fire. Glowing white-hot and ready to cause destruction.

Finally, when Rowan thought he couldn’t take another second of watching their sweaty bodies slam against one another, the final *strike* was called out. Finnic grinned maniacally. The students erupted into a frenzy. Oriana wore the brightest smile he’d ever seen... and she radiated with pleasure.

Her ecstasy of victory was a palpable, rippling thing.

And all he could do was stand there silently plotting all the ways he might discreetly murder the vampire in his sleep.

She swung her gaze around, clearly looking for him among the crowd. But as their eyes locked for the briefest second, he saw her brow crease, taking in his appearance. He knew he looked like a vengeful black cloud and didn’t fucking care.

A better man would try to disguise this ugly, bleak sensation crackling and hissing in the air around him.

Well, if she had any sense, she’d have recognised by now that he wasn’t a good man.

Finnic strolled over, his hands in his pockets and a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. “She did well today. That puts her highest on the points ranking out of the entire class.”

Rowan grunted. His narrowed stare still fixated on the spot where she was surrounded by other students congratulating

her. Joking with her. Gently taunting the vampire, who looked just as pleased as anyone to see her succeed.

Fucking suck up.

The fae carried on, ignoring his singular grunted replies. “Lukah is still working through the manuscripts. He’s found some leads to start chasing that seem promising for the symbols and their origins.”

This time, the noise he made came out more like a snarl.

As he watched on, the witch with the dark eyes and the rings slung an arm around Oriana’s shoulder.

Her friend, the sprite, talked animatedly at her with sparkling eyes.

The group looked like they were heading out of the training arena together. No doubt, back to the student accommodation wing.

In his periphery, Finnic wouldn’t stop fucking talking.

“Put together a briefing. We’ll assemble the rest of the guards tomorrow.” Rowan snapped.

That cut him off at least. With a wry smile, Finnic shook his head. “You got it, blade-slinger.” As he headed off towards the armoury, he whistled to himself like a godsdamned ray of sunshine.

Most of the class had filed out, leaving only a handful of students lingering in the stone archway, including the girl. Her eyes darted over to him again.

At least he didn’t have to hunt her down for this.

“Oriana.” He tasted ash and rage on his tongue.

Her shoulders stiffened. But she halted and spoke to her friends for a moment. They carried on without her while she stood in the wide archway, framed by the lush greenery of the academy gardens just outside. Sunlight dappled in where the heavy afternoon sun filtered through the trees.

“What?” She crossed her arms. Any trace of her excitement from the high of her win had faded upon hearing

the tone in his voice.

“Ten rounds of the assault course. *Now.*”

If there'd been a blade in her hand, he was certain she would have hurled it at his skull.

“*No.*”

“No?” Rowan hissed. Advancing on her, with arms folded and teeth gritted.

Her eyes bounced around the empty arena before settling on the place where Finnic worked, finishing up whatever fussing over the armoury he felt compelled to do today.

“Fuck you. I'm not doing it.” Her throaty whisper remained low enough for only the two of them to hear. “Kindly take your assault course and shove it, brute.”

They were toe to toe now. Standing just inside the confines of the training arena, but in full view of anyone who might care to walk by at that moment. Not to mention Finnic whistling some inane tune to himself as he fondled his precious collection of swords.

“You will run the course, or so help me...”

“So help you, what?” She cocked her head to one side. “Try and make me. See how far that gets you.”

“I'm in no mood for your bullshit.”

“And here's a word of advice... I'm in no mood for yours either.” This time, her small golden daggers appeared in her fists, manifested by her fae magic, and she shoved one against his chest. “I've done nothing to deserve punishment or additional training. I won my battle today fair and square, and whatever your fucking problem is, you can go and take it out on someone else.”

Rowan's jaw clenched so tight he thought his teeth might grind to dust.

“I'm warning you, little faerie.” He was barely holding back from doing something he really shouldn't. The leash frayed and was about to snap any second.

Her weapon shoved harder into his shirt. This time slicing through the fabric and embedding into his skin.

“Warning me? *Warning me?*” Flames danced in her eyes as she canted her head back to hold his stare. “You fucking vanished, without so much as a word. I *know* something happened that night—the night we lost Saskia—and you were too much of a coward to even have a fucking conversation with me.”

She spat out the words and continued to press the dagger harder. Deeper. Blood began to well and soak the front of his shirt, and he couldn’t care less. His fists clenched, and the threads to his self-control that were barely clinging together were about to tear apart.

“There were far more important places I needed to be.” He had plenty of reasons for staying away. Namely, that he didn’t trust himself anymore around this girl.

“Oh, how convenient. I hope you had a wonderful time with whoever she is.”

Rowan stilled.

“Watch that mouth of yours, Oriana.”

Her chin jutted out. The girl was defiant as fuck and looked like the darkest kind of temptation for his blackened soul.

“What a surprise. You won’t deny it.” Blood coated his chest beneath his shirt as she continued to bear down on the blade. The wetted material of his shirt clung to the slick line trickling down his stomach.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, little faerie. I’d advise you to stop running your mouth before it gets you into more trouble.” He closed his hand around her fist. Swallowing it in his giant palm. Taking control of whatever futile attempt this was to threaten him with her dainty little knife. “If you want to stab me, do it fucking properly. I don’t have all day for your tantrums.”

She growled. A noise that did nothing but kick some primal urge into life inside him. Becoming a visceral,

demanding thing in his gut.

“Maybe I will. And maybe after I’ve sliced you open, I’ll go find someone who knows how to handle me, who knows how to fuck me, because clearly you don’t—or maybe you’ve forgotten what to do—because you’ve had every opportunity with me and you’ve done *nothing*.”

Her chest heaved as tension and desire and fury whipped around them like a vortex. Those words ripped apart whatever tenuous hold he’d maintained on his sanity.

She had no idea. *No fucking idea.*

A warning rumble burst out of Rowan’s chest, and before he knew what he was doing, he reached out with his free hand and grabbed her by the back of her hair. Not caring for one second about the way she yelped at the roughness of his grasp. She’d poked the beast, and now the consequences were coming to claim their brutal satisfaction.

Yanking her towards him, whatever next move he intended to make was so far removed from any kind of sane decision he might as well have been soaring straight towards the sun. Ready to godsdamn burn, along with the consequences of what he was about to do.

In one thundering heartbeat, he took her mouth, crashing his lips against hers and portaled them out of the training arena.

CHAPTER 22

Rowan tasted like oak and magic and forbidden fruit.

The ground dropped out from beneath her feet, and her head spun. A roaring of blood inside her ears collided with blinding sparks at the backs of her eyes. A kind of ancient magic that started in her fingers and toes, racing through her veins like an arrow to plunge deep into her chest.

This wasn't just a kiss. Rowan single-mindedly consumed her. Fucking her mouth with the kind of confidence and power she knew would be her ruin.

With one hand fisted tight in her hair, he growled against her lips and threw the blade away. Allowing it to clatter to the floor before he wrapped the other hand around the front of her throat. His large palm was hot and slick with the blood that had dripped down the handle of the weapon.

This was the kiss of a man who was savouring his last chance to capture a breath before drowning.

Maybe they were both drowning.

No—there was no fucking way this was real. Ri's brain shattered into a thousand sparkling shards and then melted with the intense furnace of raw desire and want claiming her mouth.

Rowan was kissing her, and it couldn't possibly be...

Sagging against his hold as her knees gave out, she fisted the front of his shirt—his very fucking blood-soaked shirt. The sticky wetness of the material beneath her fingers only added

to the onslaught of sensations tumbling through her. A battle between her mind and body that threatened to tear her in two.

As if he could sense her panic and desperation hurtling around on the inside, he drew back with a dark noise. Giving her a scathing and smouldering look through hooded eyes. “What?” He rumbled.

Fuck. That look alone could burn entire realms to the ground.

Breathless and aching for more, she darted her tongue out to swipe across her bottom lip. Confessing the truth danced on the edge of her tongue—a struggle warring within against the relentless tug of fate.

But fear triumphed. She took the cowardly route instead.

“Nothing.” *More lies.*

“You’re lying, little faerie.” Rowan’s big fingers flexed to squeeze the front of her neck.

It couldn’t be possible.

“I’m surprised you know how to kiss, is all, brute.” Her fingers dug tighter against his chest. “Seeing as you *never* kiss, it’s a miracle you know what you’re doing.”

That bought her another scorching look. A raised eyebrow. Powerful fingers tugged on the hair at her nape and held her captive.

“I didn’t say I never do... I just don’t make a habit of it with fae.” He spat the words out and jealousy slithered up her spine. The mere thought of him being with other fae... all those who he might not have kissed, but had most likely done plenty of *other* things with.

I don’t need to kiss you to know how you taste.

Ri’s entire world as she knew it was crashing around her ears. That single moment their lips first touched had changed every-fucking-thing.

Her heart thudded in the back of her throat.

“Fine. Whatever. You know what, I changed my mind—”

He cut her off ruthlessly. Ignoring the words tumbling out as he sealed his lips over hers again. Capturing her breath and taking her mouth roughly this time. Demanding every inch of her to yield to his full attention.

Fuck. *Yes.*

Ri's entire body glowed and sparked to life. The tightened buds of her nipples pressed against her top. Every subtle shift of their bodies against one another dragged the material over the sensitive peaks. Winding her desire into a tight spiral.

This time, as Rowan kissed her, she was more aware of everything. *Of him.* The glide of his tongue over hers. Dancing and tangling and lapping at her, with little nips at her bottom lip in between that made her pussy clench.

She whimpered as he sucked on her tongue, and that only stoked the intensity of his fire.

Rowan was heat and sex and purely carnal in the way he held her securely beneath him. Groaning with pleasure when he felt her pulse begin to race harder beneath his palm.

He began walking her backwards, both hands still wrapped tight around her neck as he kissed her so deeply she lost all sense of time. It was like he was making up for eons... lifetimes... all those lost moments when he'd never allowed himself something as potent as *this*.

Did he realise?

Surely not.

He had a choice—whereas she was bound by something uniquely terrifying.

Ri's soul soared and cartwheeled and descended into a screaming freefall. She had to stay anchored in this moment and only this. Not allowing herself to even think for a second about what she now *knew* for certain.

Behind her, something solid halted their blind progress across the room. Her ass hit a table, and Rowan lifted her onto it in one effortless motion using one hand to grasp the back of her thigh. His bulk and frame pinned her there, standing

between her legs and still gripping onto her throat with such fierce possessiveness it made her greedy heart preen inside her chest.

He drew back. The familiar, captivating blue of his eyes burned right through her as he rested his forehead against hers. She could see his chest rising and falling just as rapidly as her own.

At least she wasn't the only one falling apart.

"I couldn't fucking stay away." He murmured. "I tried. Believe me, I did."

"Why did you?" She didn't want him to stay away. No matter how reckless it was to admit that.

He pulled back. Looking down at her with something unreadable in his darkened gaze. "*Why?* You're asking me why I wasn't there? Because, little faerie, I feel like I can't even fucking breathe without seeing your face. Every moment I'm not near you, my lungs burn, and it is impossible to concentrate on anything except knowing that you are safe. It aches somewhere deep in the marrow of my very bones to know I can't touch you whenever I want to. So, you're honestly going to sit there and ask me why I wasn't here? When the entire academy has been crawling all over you, and there's not been one moment when you're not being watched?"

Deep in her core she felt the surge of desire rise like the crest of a wave.

Rowan leant forward, tugging her bottom lip between his teeth. Leaving her shuddering beneath him.

Then he was right at her ear. His hot mouth brushed up against the sensitive skin, rasping out a low and dark warning. "I couldn't trust myself. This thing inside me wants to own every single fucking part of you, little faerie. I'm not good. I'm not kind. I'm nothing but savagery and death and the fucked up carcass of war that the Goddesses cursed me with." His teeth grazed her earlobe. "So, you're either in this inferno with me and burning like I do, or you walk away right now.

And I'm warning you that even if you do try to leave, I can't promise that I'll let you because that's the kind of blackened-hearted asshole I am."

Fuck, if that didn't send her flying on wave after wave of arousal. She was slick and wet and so needy for him that she couldn't stand it.

Hearing Rowan declare those things... he might as well have reached into her chest and grasped her thudding heart in his fist.

Little did he know it was his for the keeping.

"Just you try getting rid of me, brute. I dare you." She barely mustered up the ability to form words.

He surveyed her from behind those thick eyelashes. Drinking her in until she squirmed and panted beneath his rough hold.

With a voice like velvet, he murmured, "You should fight me, little faerie. I'm the worst kind of creature. The kind that wants to lay claim to your soul."

"Then do your worst." *Please.*

She was beyond ready for everything he had to give. This man already had total command over her body, knowing the exact way she desired to be treated.

Of that, there was no question when it came to Rowan. He liked the same fucked up games she did.

"If you wanted gentle and good, there's the fucking door." His lip curled in a sneer that made him look a thousand times more godly and ancient. Handsome as fuck and impossibly gorgeous.

"I want to know the worst of you." Her mouth was so fucking dry. She swallowed heavily, and his eyes flared at the feel of her throat working beneath his palm.

"You want to know what kind of man I am?" He stilled, and his voice dropped dangerously low. "How I like to fuck?"

All Ri could do was whimper. The ache in her pussy had her shifting and squeezing her thighs together to desperately try and relieve some of the tension.

He clicked his tongue and cupped her jaw. Sliding his thumb over her bottom lip before hooking it into her mouth and forcing her to open for him.

Pure adrenaline replaced her bloodstream.

The faint hint of copper hit her tongue.

“Well, here it is, little faerie. I like to edge. I like to tease. I like to have you begging. I like to control and own, and when I use words that shouldn’t turn you on... *but they do*... I like that the most.”

Goddess-fucking-damnit. She was done. This man had ruined her already.

He shifted his hold and pressed two fingers inside her mouth, forcing more of the taste of his blood to coat her senses. Ri was convinced she might melt into a pool of lust right there on the table.

As he held down on her tongue, his eyes glittered dangerously. “I will never intentionally hurt you unless you ask for it. And if you ever say stop, that is exactly what will happen. Nod if you understand.”

Ri could only move slightly, but it was enough. Not to mention the enthusiastic *yes* she screamed with her eyes.

Seeming satisfied, his gaze drifted over her. As if he strategised every move he intended to make. Carving a path towards his goal. Ever the warlord, even with his hard cock pressed against her core and his fingers gagging her.

In the next breath, his hand left her nape. In a manner that could only be *Rowan of Nocturne*, he whipped out a large blade. Before she knew what was happening, he’d expertly slid it down her sternum—pausing for just a moment to hook his fingers tighter in her mouth before dragging the sharp edge down the front of her crop with a whisper-soft tearing sound. The point of the weapon easily disposed of the fabric when he

cut through the straps at her shoulders next. Working fast and methodically.

Her bared nipples tightened as cool air hit her flesh. Sending goosebumps following every place the cold metal caressed her naked skin.

Rowan's jaw ticked as he watched her, breathless and squirming and fully exposed from the waist up. A feast laid out for him. Then he carefully slid the tip of the blade towards her pussy. All the while, his eyes bounced between her mouth, to her eyes, down to her breasts.

She could feel the saliva building up as he ruthlessly held her tongue down with his fingers. Her jaw felt like it was on fire.

A couple of swift motions rocked her with the force of the blunt side of the weapon where it plunged and dragged against her stomach. He was cutting away anything standing in his path, and she felt like she might soar into the evening sky.

It was the single most erotic thing she'd experienced.

Being taken apart by this man. Surrendering to his control.

This might be her new favourite drug.

Her eyelashes fluttered closed as the material of her pants disappeared. Leaving her sat in nothing but a scrap of soaked silk covering her throbbing pussy.

Rowan's breath fanned hot against her ear, making her jump slightly. Every nerve ending had been set alight beneath his determination to strip her bare for him.

She was dimly aware he was still fully clothed, which stoked her arousal even higher.

"I'm going to ruin you." He nipped her earlobe, then swirled his tongue over the spot. Reminding her in vivid detail of just how good his mouth on her felt the last time. "You're going to fucking forget about anyone else who has dared go near this pussy."

If her heart could leap out of her chest, it would.

Saliva had pooled in the corners of her mouth. It was humiliating and messy and had her clit pulsing with need.

“This,” He slid the tip of the metal along the crease of her thigh. Hooking it between the fabric and her overheated skin, “Is fucking *mine* now.” One swift tug on one side of her hip, then he repeated the motion at the other. Caressing her soft flesh with the deathly sharp point. Expertise in every careful slice. The way he controlled the metal beneath his impossibly large palm was breathtaking.

Slap.

Her eyes flew open. The sting of where he'd slapped her inner thigh with the flat of the blade blossomed and rippled straight to her drenched core. Rowan looked down at her with a pinched expression between his brows, somewhere between uncontrolled rage and single-minded determination.

Flipping the weapon end over end, he caught the handle with a reverse grip so that the tip pointed towards the ground. The kind of sexy, predatory movement that shouldn't make her moan wantonly around his fingers, but she was powerless to stop it. Naked and shivering and desperate to have him finally seated inside her.

With one of his powerful thighs, he nudged her legs to open wider. Spreading her obscenely in front of him, Rowan's gaze dropped down to stare at her sex for an unblinking moment. Calculating whatever spell he might cast upon her body next. Then he lowered the handle of the blade, using it to part her pussy lips. His hungry eyes traced the spot where he ran the blunt end up through her wetness, coating the weapon in her juices before bringing it up to his mouth.

The noise that left his chest rumbled like thunder. A primal, otherworldly sound that was absolutely filled with need. His pupils were fully blown out, and he pinned her with every smouldering inch of his gaze. Running his flattened tongue over the glistening evidence of her arousal.

Shit, that was dirty and so unbelievably hot.

Clearly, this man intended to kill her with sexual prowess.

She wasn't going to survive this night intact.

Every part of her pulsed and quivered. Desire threatening to consume her whole.

Whatever that taste of her did, it flipped something inside Rowan. Turning him into a raging force of nature as he let her mouth go and snatched up her lips with his own. Groaning darkly against her as his tongue shoved deep inside with a searing hot kiss. She heard the dull thud of his blade embed into the wooden surface of the table beside her. His hands worked at his trousers and freed himself within seconds. Magic and obsession playing an equal part in the frenzy of need to claim her.

The way he took her mouth said it all.

Between the two of them, they were nothing but searing hot touches. The only sound being Ri's throaty moans against him, filling the lengthening shadows of the room. Followed by a gasp as she felt the fat head of his cock press against her. Hard and commanding.

"Please," She panted into his mouth. Fuck it. If she sounded desperate, it was the truth.

He drew back and wrapped that blood-stained palm around the base of her neck. Like a grim collar—or a promise. Fisting his cock, he dragged it through her wetness, teasing her with each slick glide up and down to coat himself. All the while, his fingers tightened their grip around her throat, and his eyes devoured the sight of her swollen and wet core.

"*Ffffuck.*" Ri's hips bucked towards him as he pumped against her clit. But all too quickly, he slid back down to tease the tip at her entrance. She mumbled savage curses at him, getting closer and closer to outright begging the longer he kept up this torture.

Magic coiled around them. Glowing silvery threads winding and flexing in the ether as if it were a living thing. She could feel it prickling against her bare skin, like an electrical storm that threatened to explode straight overhead.

His cock worked over her clit again. Sending her mind reeling and her orgasm cresting.

“Such a filthy thing.” Rowan’s fingers pressed down tighter around her neck. “Your cunt is just begging to be filled, little faerie.”

White sparks lit up behind her eyelids. That pressure spiralled her pleasure in just the right way.

Through gritted teeth, she felt the ferocity of his words right down to her bones. “This cunt is mine. When I take you, I want you coming on my cock straight away.” He grunted and pressed the tip at her entrance. Stretching her around him and holding there for a long, torturous second.

He moved away.

Another slick glide up and over her clit.

More pressure on her neck.

She was going to come.

Her hands flew up to grip his muscled forearm. Mouth hanging open in a silent plea, a roar of blood crashed in her ears and heat pulled tight in her core.

With a dark curse ringing around them, he shoved inside. Filling her with a forceful thrust of his hips. Letting the hold of her neck loosen, the air sucked down into her lungs with a sudden rush. She was so wet he sank right to the hilt as sparks flew in a million directions. Her pussy clamped down on him and her climax tore through her like wildfire.

“Fuck. *Ffffuck.*” Rowan groaned darkly. Thrusting with a punishing pace as he fucked her straight through her orgasm.

One giant hand gripped her hip in a bruising hold while the other remained collared around her neck. Holding her still as he thrust into her.

“My. Perfect. Fucking. Whore.” Her body sparked, and pleasure continued to soar higher as his words were gritted out with each punch of his hips.

Ri was clenching around him. Whimpering. A complete mess.

She'd never felt so alive and yet torn apart at the same time.

“*Oh Godd—*”

He bucked into her with a growl. Teeth bared against her throat.

“Again.” Being ordered to come shouldn't be such an erotic thing. But here she was. Consumed by fate and desire. Helpless to fight against the command he had over every part of her.

And he didn't even know it.

His cock dragged against her walls with the perfect stretch and friction. Goddess-fucking-damnit he was *huge*. And hitting so, so deep. The perfect spot to have her digging fingernails into his forearms. The rasp of his trousers against her thighs with each jolt of his hips, and the front of his shirt dragging over her aching nipples, reminded her that he was still fully clothed. Fucking her into a whimpering mess on the table.

While she had no sense of where they were. Had just spread her legs and begged for his cock.

They were certainly not in the academy from what she could tell. A thick, woodsy essence mingled with the scent of sex in the air gave the only hints as to where they'd portaled to.

But Rowan fucked any lingering questions straight out of her lust-fuelled mind.

“Keep squeezing. Just like that. *Fuck.*” Suddenly, his teeth were on her shoulder, and one hand dropped between them. Working her clit. Biting down with enough force to have her crying out as she shuddered under his expert touch.

She clung to him as her orgasm swept her over the edge. Plunging her into a blazing white shower of stars and sensation.

With a curse, Rowan pulled out. Flipping her over roughly to bend her over the edge of the table. Manhandling her body while her brain disappeared into another realm altogether. One where she floated on waves of pleasure and thudding heartbeats. Loud moans fell from her lips. The kind of sound Ri didn't even know she could make.

His bulk slammed her against the table. Solid wood cut into her hips. Pain mixing with the heady pleasure of feeling so fucking full. One of his palms reached round to cup her breast, and he muttered something ancient as he pinched her nipple. Rolling the tight bud between his fingers and tugging on the aching point. As she clamped down around him again, overwhelmed with pleasure, she didn't know where the last release ended, and this one began.

But it rolled through her as she flattened her palms against the table and melted under his rough touches.

Rowan's thrusts faltered. He hissed out an ancient curse, and then with a deep groan, his cock throbbed inside her. Filling her with his hot release.

As she gradually rejoined her body, his hips lazily moved in and out. She felt him drag a trail of burning, wet kisses up her spine and down the side of her neck. Treasuring her and murmuring words against her ear in an old language she didn't recognise, but the sentiment was clear. Bathing her in a warm glow of magic and adoration that made her chest swell with glee.

When he pulled out of her, Ri wasn't sure she could feel her limbs anymore. Every part of her felt heavy and drenched with the weight of pure pleasure.

But then she felt Rowan readjust his position slightly. His fingers dragged over her pussy lips, and the weight of his gaze was upon her from behind. Bared to him in the most intimate kind of way.

"Such a beautiful little faerie whore." She felt her cheeks flush as she realised he was swiping up his cum and pushing it back inside her with two fingers.

“*Shit.*” Ri whimpered. Unable to lift herself off the table. She squeezed her eyes shut. The overstimulation of him pressing back into her with his thick digits was almost too much.

Rowan clearly wasn’t satisfied or done with her yet. Instead, he took his time. Fondling and caressing her in a way that was so at odds with the powerful, ruthless fucking from moments earlier.

Finally, he scooped her up off the table. Or what was left of her at least. Ri felt like nothing more than a limp puddle gathered in his massive arms as he tucked her tight against his chest. She felt his chuckle rumble over the spot where his mouth hovered against her hair.

“If I’d known this was how to quiet that sharp tongue of yours... I would have fucked you senseless sooner.”

CHAPTER 23

Soft, breathy moans filled the quiet.

A sound he selfishly wanted to hear all the fucking time. Like a hook sunk deep into his chest, he'd rapidly become tethered to drawing out her mewling little noises of pleasure. Along with the silky feel of her pussy clenched tight around his cock.

Her delicate fingers brushed against his scalp. Threading through his hair and fuck that felt so good. She was still drowsy. Half asleep. Fucked into a state of complete bliss after a night when he'd been inside her more times than he could count.

There was nothing like the taste of her sweet, sweet cunt.

She came on his tongue, bucking and fisting the sheets and looked every inch a warrior Goddess from where he positioned himself between her thighs. Rowan had the perfect vantage point to look up at her as his tongue worked over her swollen clit. From here, he could take in the evidence of his bloodied handprint, still wrapped around her throat like a perfect collar. Her taut nipples, glistening from where he'd sucked down on them, begged for more attention. That long mane of dark hair was now wild and tangled. Thick, sooty lashes fanned across her pink cheeks.

Fuck, his cock was desperate to get back inside her. Rowan nipped at the fleshy swell of her thigh, making her shudder just the way he knew she fucking loved. His hot palms grabbed the soft curve of her hip as he flipped her, dragging

her ass up so she was on her knees. Boneless and pleased and still foggy with sleep beneath him.

Her fire was addictive, but Spirits, he could spend far too long enjoying this pliant, soft version of her.

Stretching her arms out on the bed, she put that perfect ass right on display for him. The flex of her spine guiding him to fist his cock and press inside.

Fuck. So fucking wet for him.

“Only dirty fucking girls know to arch their back like that.” He pumped his hips deep. Dragging low moans from Oriana as she pressed her face into the mattress. “Your greedy little cunt wants my cock so badly.”

More awake now and spurred on by his words, she arched even more for him. Opening up and teasing him with a sultry look back over her shoulder.

Rowan’s cock throbbed. He was already close. She’d just made it even harder to hold back. The girl knew exactly what she was doing, and fuck, if that didn’t make his balls tighten in anticipation.

Thrusting harder, he cursed violently under his breath.

“*Ffuck*. You’re making me want things I can’t have, little faerie.” She made him so fucking reckless.

Those breathless pants of hers were undoing him. Fast.

“Like what?” Her walls fluttered around his length. Causing him to groan and drop his eyes closed for a second. Trying to regain some kind of fucking control.

She wanted to know. Well, who was he to deny her? He had too many fantasies left to explore when it came to this girl.

“Your tits, your mouth.” Looking down, he spread her ass cheeks and watched his cock slowly glide in and out. Feeling her eyes on him with every clench around his cock as he slid out to the tip, then drove back in to sink to the hilt. “*This ass.*” He dug his fingers into her soft flesh.

A needy whimper tumbled out as she dropped her forehead against the bed.

“Have it all. I want you to take everything.” She was thrusting back to meet him as much as she could beneath his firm hold.

“Fuck. You can’t say shit like that to me. It’s going to make me want to keep you. My own little faerie whore. Ready and spread and wet and begging for my cock.”

Her body lit up beneath him and tumbled straight into yet another orgasm. Coming hard and loudly with her pussy squeezing him so tight he saw stars.

“You like that idea, don’t you? It’s ok; your dirty little secrets are safe with me. You’re just as fucked up as I am underneath that pretty exterior. If only they all knew the real you. The one who wants to be let out of her cage.”

Rowan’s chest was heaving. Each thrust accompanying his words was echoed by her pleased cries. Tension built low in his stomach and his hips began thrusting faster. Chasing his own release while she was still rippling around his length.

Dropping forward onto his hands, he bucked into her. Slamming their bodies together as he bit down on the crook of her neck. Spirits, he wanted his marks all over her body. Wanted to leave no uncertainty as to who she belonged to... in secret.

With a guttural groan and a curse, his cock jerked. Ropes of cum spilling inside her and filling that silky hot wetness with the evidence of him.

He was deadly serious when he said he wanted to claim every part of her. Knowing she would be walking around filled with his cum all day—the thought of that alone settled something deep inside the fibre of his being. Meanwhile, the sight of her wearing his marks on her bronzed skin like an assortment of purple-hued victor’s medals made his blood quicken.

This girl calmed his storm and awoke his passion all in the same breath.

He was fucked.

And undoubtedly an asshole for taking advantage of the fact her fae magic didn't allow her to heal as quickly as other supernaturals.

Not. A. Good. Man.

Oriana was stretched out beneath him, smothered by his weight as he ran his nose down the side of her neck and kissed her delicate, pointed ear tips. She was damn near purring with contentment.

“A girl could get used to waking up like that.”

He felt his cock twitch, still seated inside her.

“I need to fuck you again.” His mouth brushed against the sensitive point of her ear, and he hungrily devoured the way goosebumps erupted over her arms. “But first, I need to clean you up.”

That brought out a series of protests and whines as she tried to escape from beneath him and burrow her way under the covers.

Smirking to himself, Rowan pulled out of her tight wet heat, and took a moment to watch his cum gather at her entrance. It only took a long second before she started to squirm beneath his gaze. Goddess-fucking-damnit, he just wanted to stay like this, holed up here in the forest forever.

But that would lead to far too many questions. Somehow, he suspected Oriana wasn't going to be willing to risk bringing about an interrogation down on her head at the hands of the queen either.

His big palms grabbed her around the waist and hoisted her up. Leaving her screeching and kicking in defiance as he tossed her over his shoulder. Rowan gave her a spank on her ass for good measure, a reminder not to try and fight him at every turn.

She stilled immediately. Breathing hard through her nose.

Rowan ran his rough palm over the spot to soothe the sting. Massaging lightly. “Did you like that, hmm?”

“Maybe.” She sounded mortified.

Tucking that away for later, he gritted his teeth. There was no way he could let himself get distracted—more distracted—right now.

As he stalked across the bedroom, he felt her body twist behind him. Craning her neck to look around and take in their location. The dusky-purple light of dawn filtered through the fine curtains covering the bay window over the bed. Seeing the interior of his cottage for the first time, even though she’d been here before.

She made a strangled noise. “This is your...”

“Home.” He grunted.

“Oh.”

“It’s not what you expected?” Rowan set her down on her feet by the door. Eyeing her with equal parts desire and trepidation. All at once, he was painfully aware of her reaction to his private sanctuary.

“No.” She looked up at him with puffy, kiss-bitten lips, and shimmering dark eyes.

He raised a single eyebrow in question. There was something behind that *no*. He knew it.

Shrugging, she looked around. “I expected a cave full of blood and bats, is all.”

That earned her another swat on her perfect ass. It took everything to stifle the moan threatening to burst forth when he could tell how much that turned her on.

Grabbing her by the hand and enjoying the way her tiny fingers curved perfectly against his palm, far too much for his own sanity, he led her through the door off to the side of his bedroom. Only to have her suddenly halt behind him with a squeak.

Looking around with wide eyes, she carefully took in the moss-covered walls, open roof letting in a gentle breeze, and the sight of pastel pink clouds drifting high above them with the impending sunrise. The basalt flagstones on the ground

were cool beneath their bare feet but not uncomfortable. On one side, the curved stone formed an outdoor wall of running water to wash under. On the other sat a deep granite recess, a pool perfect for bathing when it was filled with steaming hot water.

Magic had its uses. Namely the look of awe on Oriana's face as she took it all in.

“Now, get under there so I can clean you... and then fuck you.” He nipped at her earlobe. Pushing her towards the cascade of spray.

She opened her mouth to protest, then caught a glimpse of her reflection in the small mirror hanging by a large fern.

Her fingers flew up to touch the coppery-looking ring of fingerprints forming a collar around her throat. Turning to him with lips hanging open.

It took everything not to crow with triumph.

As Rowan backed her under the gently running water, he spun her around so that her spine was flush against his chest.

Shit. He was insatiable for this girl. His dick already hard, and more than interested in getting inside her pussy again. But he focused on using his magic to wash off the mess he'd made of her last night. Infusing healing potions into the stream of water to help speed her fae magic.

While water softly caressed every inch of them, he was busy running greedy hands all over her. Cupping and fondling the soft swell of her breasts, tracing over her pussy and dipping into her slick channel before gliding around and over her ass. Cataloguing every inch of her curves and using his magic for healing as his palms worked their way hungrily across her skin.

Not that it was a purely selfless act. If he wanted to fuck her again so soon, he needed to make sure she wasn't sore. Oriana might like pain intermingled with her pleasure, but he only wanted to give that to her in the right way.

Like he said, magic had many uses. But Rowan didn't get off on causing undue harm where sex was concerned.

“Tell me about Saskia.” Her quiet voice interrupted his thoughts. “You were there. I know you were. Tell me the truth of what happened.” Resting her head back against his chest, she melted beneath him while he continued to run his hands all over her warm skin.

She might be a boneless mess under his touch, yet that clever brain of hers was still working away, even after begging him that she’d combust if he gave her any more orgasms last night.

A plea he ignored. She was full of shit, and she loved every shaking, quivering moment.

“You don’t remember?”

Oriana gave a small shake of her head. Just as he suspected.

It was hardly surprising the exact details were foggy, considering the fact she’d been hit by the powerful shockwave of whatever magic had killed her friend, but fortunately only knocked her unconscious.

Fuck, it could have been so much worse. He didn’t even want to consider what might have occurred if he hadn’t been there.

“Dark magic.” He said. Stroking some of her damp hair back off her face. “I was watching you leave the library—”

“Stalking me.” She batted at his hand. A quirk tugging at the corner of her lips.

“Keeping a watchful eye.” Ignoring her, he continued. “Things happened fast after you leant over the railing.”

Rowan kept his tone even as he relayed the events that came next but cut himself off when he got to the part about Saskia’s body.

“I’m no stranger to death, brute. Don’t do her memory a disservice by avoiding the details.”

He paused, then told her everything. Not skipping over any of the gruesome images that were so deeply etched in his

memory. How could he forget, considering the uncanny way it reminded him of his own nightmares involving Brigid.

“Thank you.” She murmured, bringing his palm to her mouth and kissing the roughed callouses decorating his skin. “I can’t believe you brought me here that night, and I don’t even remember.”

“You snored the whole time.”

She made an indignant sound in the back of her throat.

“I’ll bet you stared at me with hearts in your eyes all night. Besotted with my radiance.”

“More like I tried to smother you with a pillow. Even when you’re asleep, you refuse to keep quiet.”

Her lips twitched and curved with a smile she couldn’t hide.

Fuck, he loved seeing her softness contrasting his rough edges. He didn’t deserve any of it, but like a hungry monster, he devoured the sight of her fingers wrapped over his tattooed knuckles.

Here they stood discussing things like honouring death and memories of loved ones and yet their naked bodies were seeking each other out. Rowan shifted his hold on her body, playing with her nipples. Pinching and rolling them and tugging on them in a way that made her cunt slick for him. He sucked and licked at the side of her neck as she writhed beneath his attention.

“You’re already dripping wet for me, aren’t you?”

A shudder rippled through her body.

“Touch yourself, dirty girl. I bet you’re almost ready to come just from playing with these perfect tits, like the little whore you are.”

“Oh, fuck. Why do I like it when you call me that?” With a whine, she pushed a trembling hand between her legs.

“Always that middle finger, hmm? That’s what your needy little clit begs for at night when you think of me?” He rumbled

in her ear. Making her bite her bottom lip with a tiny angry moan. His height gave the perfect vantage point as he stood looming over her from behind. Giving him just the right angle to watch her finger part her pussy lips and rub desperate circles over that aching bud. His gaze traced the blush erupting across her chest following his taunting words. Mixed with her desire, it consumed her with obvious pleasure.

Taking his own pleasure and dragging it right alongside hers, just from watching her like this, to coil and wind higher again.

She was close to coming already.

Fucked if he could keep his dick out of her any longer.

“I know you’re no stranger to death.” He took her hands and guided them to the rock face of the wall. Kicking her legs apart, he notched himself at her entrance. “That night we first met. You were so fierce. So powerful. I recognised something in you when you killed the woman who hurt Ruby.”

Sliding inside her with a low moan, their bodies both hummed in unison with dark, tingling satisfaction.

“She deserved to die. I wouldn’t have let anyone else have the satisfaction of ending her life.” Oriana had been a vision painted in blood that night. Seeking vengeance for her sister without a second’s hesitation.

A true warrior.

His slow, deep glide had her straining up onto her tiptoes as he hit deep. Again and again.

“I know.” He murmured. It was after that when everything had gone to shit with the coronation and the way he’d been unable to control that wild spirit of hers.

But now things were different.

She was different. Not changed, but refined. More like a blade that had been sharpened. Taking the raw material already there and polishing it to become the best it could be.

“What happens now? What do we do?” She dropped her head forward between her arms. Back arched for him.

Moaning softly with each of his thrusts.

Fuck. He didn't want to think of that. Not while he was balls-deep inside her silky wet cunt.

Rowan shifted his thumb down to her ass. Pressing lightly against her entrance. Teasing that bundle of nerves and applying just enough magic to create a lubricating sensation.

The hitched noise she made told him exactly how good that felt.

"I don't know. But what I can tell you is that I'm serious when I say you belong to me. I don't fucking share what's mine, little faerie." He pressed his thumb deeper. Breaching the ring of muscle and working her gently with his magic in time with each slow pump of his hips.

She darted a look back at him over her shoulder. Puffy lips parted and eyes glazed over with lust. But there was something in her energy. A lingering question, or maybe a thousand of them. Namely, the unspoken loyalty to her sister, perhaps?

And like the asshole he was, he carried on fucking her and refused to enter that kind of dangerous territory.

"Have you ever taken someone here?" Rowan's eyes dropped down to where his thumb teased her ass.

"N—No." The way she clenched around him was a sure sign her orgasm was about to claim her once more.

"My good little whore." Fuck. He'd be thinking about nothing else but claiming that part of her from now on.

"Please. Please. Ffffuck."

Picking up the intensity of his thrusts, he reached round with the other hand to rub her clit.

"The middle finger, just the way my dirty faerie likes it." She fell apart beneath him as his words washed over her and his cock thrust deep inside her.

"Unghhhh. Fuck. Yes. Just like that." As she clamped down on him, Rowan's own orgasm shot through him. Hot

cum spurted inside her with each jerk of his hips against her ass.

Both of them panting and moaning, they were lost to the waves of sensation dragging them both down into the depths. Or maybe it was tossing their bodies up high to get lost amongst the pillowy clouds. He couldn't be sure, but wherever he was being taken, it was with her. And that seemed to be the only important thing at that moment.

Once they'd finally stumbled back to sanity and reality, winding up back in his bedroom to get ready to leave, he could feel her eyes on him.

As she dressed herself—producing new garments identical to those he'd sliced off her the day before—she levelled him with a firm stare.

“We keep this between us.”

There was no question in there. Only an instruction. Stars, this diminutive girl, would no doubt command an army with ease if she ever needed to.

“What about Ruby?” He slowly buttoned his shirt. Watching her blink rapidly, and something strained at her features.

In a second, he was in front of her, forcing her chin up with a crooked finger to meet his eyes. “Fuck the bullshit rules, Oriana. Your sister and my prick of a brother broke every *rule* there was. But I understand you don't want to hurt her. So, yes, this stays our secret.” For now.

Relief flooded her face. Those lines of tension immediately smoothing out.

“Things are hard enough for me as it is at Astracadia with having the queen as a sister. The last thing I need is for my position in the Astrals to be compromised. I couldn't bear for all my hard work to be taken away from me.”

Rowan chewed it over, then gave a stiff nod. “Fine.”

He didn't like it. But if there was anyone who understood how life rarely delivered anything good or kind or easy, it was

him.

Right now, he'd gladly take complicated and messy if it meant keeping her.

The dragon hoarding his gold even when threatened with those who might slay him for it.

“Oh, and let me be very clear about this one thing, brute...” She squared her shoulders and stabbed him in the chest with a forefinger. “I don't share what's *mine* either.”

CHAPTER 24

Ri was certain her head might explode.

At the very least, her brain had probably melted and leaked out of her ears.

What the fuck was she supposed to do now? Knowing for certain that Rowan of Nocturne was her fated mate.

Rowan.

Of all the beings across all the realms and myriad of lifetimes.

It had to be him?

The grumpiest, most demanding man she'd ever encountered. Who made her knees weak and her pulse race like a stallion whenever he so much as arched an eyebrow in her direction.

Yep. She was undeniably fucked. What in the Goddesses names was she supposed to do with that information?

Certainly *not* tell him. Of that, she was in full surety.

The man already had one foot out the door, ready to disappear to who knows what impossibly difficult-to-reach realm at the first sign of anything that looked or sounded like *emotions*.

Sex? Driving her wild? Possessiveness is the heat of the moment? Feeling the intense pull of an attraction to her?

Oh yes. He had all those things more than under his complete control. Rowan ruled that area of his immortal life

like a king. Not once blinking at the dramatic change in circumstances between them.

But this was something she knew had no place in his vocabulary... *fate and love* were concepts Rowan of Nocturne sneered at. Added to the fact that as a witch, he had a choice in who, if anyone, he might bind himself to. Well, that realisation left Ri in a scramble to hold on to something as her entire world felt like it collapsed around her with a deafening roar.

With a single kiss between them, everything had unravelled in the most incredibly intense and intimate way. She inwardly cursed the fact her fae blood left her no say in the matter. Ri didn't want to be tethered to another in an arrangement that was forced or predetermined by the Goddesses. Not when Rowan was the kind of man more likely to cut off his own arm than commit to an eternity bound to another by force.

Fuck, she'd rather chew off her own foot than have that either.

It was ridiculous. Idiotic. Unbelievable that beings with such unpredictably long lifespans might be threaded together at a soul level. What was she supposed to do now?

Lying to him last night about the kiss had been the only way to survive everything that singular moment revealed.

Was she proud of it? No.

But this realisation was like having a weight crushing her chest while she lay prone and pinned to the ocean floor.

There was no way she could bring herself to beg Rowan to accept her as his fated mate. Even the mere thought of him rejecting her sent humiliation curling hot and tight in her stomach. He'd already proven how easily he could judge her and publicly shame her in some sort of misguided attempt to prove she had a lot to learn.

Ri would be the first to admit, albeit rather begrudgingly, that he had been right that day. While her intentions had been for the best, she ultimately proved to be reckless in her actions.

The kind of selfish thinking that didn't take into account many other moving parts.

So now, here she stood. Locked in an endless maze of her own mind, where the only solution seemed to be heartbreak at every turn. No matter which way she looked at it, she'd have to forgo her bond with Rowan. Could she ever allow herself to hope, and it would be against all odds or possibility, that the man might one day choose her?

A shiver ran down her spine. Not sure whether the thought of belonging to someone—or more specifically, Rowan—in that way gave her a thrill of excitement, or a deep sense of trepidation. The two emotions seemed far too closely connected at present.

Especially when her mind and body were still coming back to reality after a night spent with a tattooed brute of a man who had allowed her to be broken apart and put back together in the best way possible.

They might as well carve her a gravestone now and be done with it.

Herein lies the remains of Oriana. Cause of death? Unyielding pleasure and orgasms at the hands—and beneath the skilled tongue—of Rowan.

At least she wasn't deranged.

Or going insane.

This feeling of all-consuming rage and spitting jealousy she'd been experiencing whenever she thought of Rowan with someone else. Every facet made complete sense now.

Even if she hated the knowledge that fate had stepped in to change the course of her very existence.

Ri stood staring at her perfectly made bed. The one she most definitely had *not* slept in last night. After Rowan portaled her to her rooms, he left with a searing kiss and a stern look that promised all sorts of wicked deeds when he next succeeded in getting her alone.

Leaving her floundering to find her brain. It must have fallen on the floor somewhere in the midst of that moment. Ri was left under no uncertain terms, this wasn't going to be a *one-time-only* thing between them. His sapphire gaze burned into hers in a way that told her to expect much, much more.

He knew what he did to her. There had been something far too smug beneath that tightly sealed expression. Rowan might not give much away, but there was no mistaking the swagger as he disappeared, allowing Ri to head to class as if nothing were out of the ordinary this morning. She'd already decided to forgo a visit to the dining hall. There was no way she could handle seeing that many faces and trying to act like there was no big secret hidden behind her kiss-swollen lips.

Not like she'd just had her world upended, her pussy worshipped, and her soul thoroughly fucked into satiated bliss.

Next, it was time for a quick check to ensure that all Rowan's marks were covered—and with a small gasp, she made a mental note to *always* remember to check the mirror from now on. The side of her neck was decorated with bites that weren't going to be healing anytime soon. *Prick*.

No wonder he'd had such an air of smug satisfaction leaving her alone.

She might as well have his name tattooed around her neck like a collar.

The asshole would love that.

Perhaps she could discreetly make herself a healing salve in herbalism class to speed the process up? If she planned on spending any more time alone with Rowan, she suspected his marks were going to become a regular thing.

As Ri stepped out into the quiet hallway and sealed her door behind her using her magic, she gnawed on the inside of her cheek. Lost in the all-consuming thoughts of what this might mean.

Call it pride, or foolishness, or dumb stubbornness. But she would voluntarily travel to the ancestral plane rather than tell Rowan they were fated to one another.

She wanted him to *choose* her.

There was no other option.

By keeping this detail from him, at least, that gave him an opportunity to make a decision. She wasn't some starry-eyed little girl with an infatuation. If this attraction between her and Rowan was potentially going to evolve into something more... Well, she needed it to be organic. Not forced. Not coerced by the Goddesses.

Rowan claiming her as his in the bedroom was one thing. All that possessive, alpha behaviour was easy enough to fall under the spell of. Merely scratching an itch when the two of them needed to satiate this physical need, hammering hard in both their chests. But choosing a future where she was a part of his life, wherever that journey took them after this year was through? Knowing they had connected on a level beyond just chemistry and something forbidden that drew them together in a fiery crescendo of desire?

That was what she wanted. Even if it terrified her to think what his decision might ultimately be. *What if he decided she wasn't worth it?*

"Fuck's sake, scary girl." A small hand grabbed her by the arm. Brynne's flushed face darted into her line of vision. "If you ever make me run like that unnecessarily outside of training, I will take one of those pretty little knives of yours and use it to hack off all your hair while you sleep."

Ri bit her lip. Trying to rearrange her expression into something that didn't look quite so plainly guilty. She wasn't going to last five minutes today without giving their secret away. Not where the pink-haired whirlwind now attached to her arm was concerned.

"I was calling your name all the way from back at the stairwell." Brynne slapped her shoulder with a free hand. "I couldn't find you last night, and I wanted to see if you—" Her friend screeched to a halt.

Mouth hanging open, she flicked her eyes up and down Ri's figure once and then a giant smile spread across her face.

“Ohhhhhh, fuuuuuck... you had sex last night, didn’t you?!” She whisper-screamed. Pointing at Ri, then quickly clapping her hand over her mouth.

Shit. Think quick. Find a reasonable half-truth. Anything will do.

Grabbing Brynne and tugging her along at a brisk walk towards the training arena, she cursed under her breath.

“Yes. But—”

“Tellmeeverrythingwhatandwhoandwhere.” Her little sprite-sized barnacle vibrated on the spot with glee. And the closer they got to class, the more the sense of panic built inside Ri’s chest. She had to nip this in the bud right now, or else Brynne was going to be up her ass with a million questions for the rest of the day.

“It’s someone from the village.” She blurted out. Fuck. Keep it simple and straightforward. That was the only way to navigate this disaster without shipwrecking herself on the rocks of her own lies. “We met the last time all of us were at the tavern.”

Brynne was nodding eagerly, gobbling up every crumb of information. Fingers dug tightly into Ri’s arm.

“And?”

“And what?”

“I swear to the Spirits, scary girl. Give me something to work with here. I’m suffering through the driest of dry spells even though we’re surrounded by a gourmet feast of hotties.”

Ri closed her eyes and shook her head. Unable to help the wry smile wanting to creep onto her lips at the sound of her friend’s whining protests.

“Just because your pussy has been closed for business lately, doesn’t mean I have to go spilling secrets about who’s treating mine well.”

“It’s not closed, just neglected.” Brynne pouted. “And not for lack of trying either.”

“Look, there are reasons I can’t say anything else. But I promise you’ll be the first to know when I can.”

“So... let’s say we go to the tavern tonight... then maybe you can at least let me guess if he, or she, or *they* are there?”

Ri rolled her eyes. “Not happening, sorry.”

They crossed through the threshold of the training arena just as Brynne made a series of frustrated noises and pinched Ri on the waist for good measure.

“I’ll find a way to dig those mysteries out of you.” She hissed.

Opening her mouth to reply, her words were cut off by the very man consuming every corner of her mind.

“Something you’d like to share with the rest of the class, Brynne?” He was all stern glares and firmly set jaw. Looking like absolute, mouthwatering perfection.

And completely fucking unruffled.

Whereas Ri thought she might dissolve into a puddle at any moment.

Brynne squeaked something that sounded like a *no fucking way*, then dragged Ri off towards the far side of the arena to gather up their sparring equipment from the armoury. At least she could busy herself with blades and avoid her cheeks bursting into flames just from the weight of Rowan’s cold stare.

Fuck. How was he so good at this?

Had he done this kind of thing before?

Right then and there, she wished the thought hadn’t occurred to her. Because no, Rowan had not been having illicit affairs with other students in the mere few weeks since the academy first opened its doors. That was just her lust-crazed fated bond being an irrational, jealous little bitch.

CHAPTER 25

“You look...” Finnic appraised him with an odd expression.

“What?” Spit on the ancestors and stab him in the eye already. Rowan had just about had enough of this day and wanted nothing else but to get Oriana alone.

After their morning session in the training arena had ended, he'd found himself in the midst of a briefing with Finnic and the other fae guards to discuss the symbols and what had been found among the archives by his fated mate Lukah.

Something long-winded and boring about lost connections to other realms that had long been sealed off from the likes of their world and the known lands within it.

It was all just smoke-like whispers of information. Nothing tangible. Rowan had been close to barking at them all for wasting his time but thought better of it.

Lukah seemed like a crier.

Besides, it was his own damn fault he'd been stuck in the briefing in the first place. He could have stabbed himself in the neck for being the one to insist they met today.

Only a day ago he'd been focused on whatever—or whoever was behind the deaths and potential threats on the academy. Now? Now he had a cock that ached to be back inside his pretty little fae.

His.

Goddess-fucking-damnit. How was he already acting like she belonged to him after only one night together? The way he'd felt the urge to mark her over and over had been near impossible to fight.

She could count herself lucky he'd only given her a fraction of the teeth marks and fingerprints he wanted displayed on her smooth skin.

"I was just going to say you look different today. *Lighter*, somehow. If that is even possible." Finnic smirked and used the sword he was cleaning to gesture a circle in Rowan's direction. "But of course, that could just mean I've gotten too used to your tall, dark, and grouchy routine."

He bristled.

"Should have known you'd turn mad eventually jerking off over those weapons all day." Rowan scowled. Everything inside him itched to get out of here.

But they had one final class to complete for the afternoon. Even if he did want to march out and find her, throw her over his shoulder and portal away from all this shit, he couldn't. The students were currently completing their required laps of the assault course and instructed to work as a unit to navigate the new obstacles he'd placed out amongst the forest for today.

Which meant his stubborn, feisty little prize would have to wait.

Proving just how talented and fast at learning she was, the girl had completed all the required tasks alongside her friend, Brynne, with ease. While the sprite had struggled through some of the more challenging weaponry techniques, Oriana had seemingly waltzed through them without so much as a hair out of place.

The talented little thing was improving rapidly day by day.

Whoever found her placed in their realm as part of the elite team of Astrals would be receiving a valuable asset indeed.

The thought of her future sent his brows furrowing and a dark cloud descending.

She'd been adamant when she'd insisted they keep things between them a secret. There was no denying the real fear in her dark eyes when faced with the threat of losing everything she'd worked so hard for. Of all the asshole things Rowan had done in his life, putting that goal of hers under threat was something he knew he'd never forgive himself for.

Despite how selfishly he wanted to make sure she was publicly claimed as his.

It tugged at something deep inside his chest to think of her words. *I don't share what's mine, either.* Did she honestly think he'd even so much as looked at anyone else since she'd stormed into his life? But seeing her match his possessiveness with her own brand of feisty passion was fucking hot.

The girl knew exactly how to twist the knife in his gut and make him bleed.

Finnic whistled as he stroked and caressed his weapons. Making sure they were all put away in the armoury after inspecting each and every single one. Occasionally pausing to remove a marking or sigil that had wound up engraved in the metal. Tutting under his breath but maintaining that ludicrous smile on his face.

A noise from outside the training arena had his ears pricking up and his magic reaching out on instinct. The group of students were approaching, chatting amongst themselves in high spirits as they swapped stories of whatever beating they'd taken at the hands of his enchanted obstacles.

Some were obviously bleeding. Others limped slightly. Which gave him a sense of twisted satisfaction.

No sense in making it anything less than a realistic battle scenario.

His eyes quickly found her among the usual group of her friends. At least the vampire and the witch kept their hands to themselves, seeming more interested in the pair of shifters they were following closely behind.

Flush-tinged cheeks. Almond eyes brightly sparkled. Sweat glistened on her bronzed skin, and her aura shimmered

with the kind of contentment one felt when having achieved a victory.

She looked ready to be fucking devoured.

As if she heard every filthy thing he planned to do to her, she darted a hand up to smooth over her hair. Shooting a quick look his way from beneath her heavy eyelashes, then turned back to her pink-haired friend. Oh, but he saw the way she twisted her hair over her shoulder. Coveted with a hungry glance the way she slowly licked her bottom lip.

Their class was over for the day. Students were filing out of the training arena and heading for Trelithia Hall for the night. A heavy gold glow hung in the air with the sun beginning to drop in the sky as evening approached.

“*Sir*, we were just wondering...” At the sound of the voice behind him, he whirled around to find Vanya and a small group of her female friends standing together. All nibbling their lips and trying to put on some kind of enticing performance. Fuck he was sick of this shit.

He could practically feel the daggers magically sharpening in Oriana’s hands from across the other side of the arena.

“Would you be able to offer us some further tips for using the bow and arrows? You’ll have seen we haven’t been faring as well as some others in the class.”

One of the other girls chimed in. “We’re terrible at it and wanted to know if you might be available for some one-on-one tuition?”

“You know... after class.” Vanya made an attempt to smile. A move that would no doubt have plenty of the idiots here panting after her. But right now, the girl was doing nothing but embarrassing herself.

“It’s no wonder you’re falling behind.” He crossed his arms and glared them all down. Each visibly shrunk like mice trying to dart back into a hole. “None of you have done anything but cut corners in my class, and it is only Finnic here who has saved your asses from being penalised.”

Their mouths opened and closed in silent indignation. A couple of them shuffled their feet and kept their eyes pinned to the floor.

It was the truth. Finnic *had* identified their lack of full participation in the assault course. Rowan had been keen to give them enough rope to see how far they'd go with their bullshit. Turns out their timing couldn't have been more beneficial.

“So, since you're all here and keen for extra tuition, you can complete twenty rounds of the assault course. Right fucking now.”

With the sound of protests falling behind him as he turned on his heel, he paused and shot Finnic a narrowed look over one shoulder. “Deal with this shit. Make sure they don't skip a single obstacle.” He grunted. Then stalked over to where Oriana lingered on her own, with steam rising from her tensed shoulders. Sure enough, a glint of sharpened gold was clenched tight in each fist.

“Oriana.” He fought a twitch threatening at the corner of his lips.

The girl was fuming.

Fuck, if that didn't make his balls ache.

“Did you need something, or am I free to leave?” There was murder in her eyes as her gaze tracked the figures making their way back out of the arena in the direction of the assault course. Finnic strolled behind, whistling and with his hands shoved in his pockets. Only a few more moments and they'd be alone.

“Everything alright over here?” He crossed his arms. Surveying her figure with a hungry, raking look down the length of her curves.

She shivered beneath the intensity of every spot of bare skin his eyes clung to. Clever little thing had amended her usual training leathers with her magic to give herself a high collar today. Disguising the evidence of where he'd laid claim to her.

It didn't matter. He'd be seeing what lay beneath the material soon enough.

"Of course." She flexed her fingers around the handles of the small daggers.

"I believe you left some weapons lying around." Rowan tapped a thick finger against his forearm. "Rather careless behaviour."

The flare of defiance in her eyes sent a rush of blood straight to his cock.

Rowan reached around to unsheath one of his swords from the holster on his back, then tossed it to the ground between them.

"Looks like you need to put that away in the armoury." He nudged it towards her with the toe of his heavy boot. Sure enough, a tiny growl left her throat. Shit, it was a heady thing driving her to fight him.

The satisfaction of fucking her into submission would only taste that much sweeter.

"No fucking way." There was enough of a hint of panic in her eyes as they widened. Scanning the training arena quickly, looking past his broad shoulders.

"No?" He quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Someone might see." She hissed under her breath.

Gritting his teeth, he resisted the urge to adjust his thickening cock in his trousers.

"Get. In. The. Armoury." Each word ground out in a dark, low tone.

"Make me." While he enjoyed her fight, he also wasn't sure he could keep his hands off her much longer.

Then there would *really* be something to see.

"You're going to walk into that armoury, so I can take you away from here and fuck you. Or else you'll find out exactly what my handprint feels like on that perfect ass of yours."

The excitement sparkling in her eyes nearly undid him. She wetted her lips with her tongue and bent down to pick up the blade. All the while keeping her eyes locked on him. When she pushed up to standing, she twirled it in her grip.

Tapping the pointed end against his chest, she rolled her bottom lip through her teeth. “And what if I want both of those things, hmm?”

Fuck.

The growl that left his chest sent her scurrying towards the alcove of the armoury.

Rowan took slow, steady strides after her. Controlling his breathing with every pace drawing him closer to his prey.

Ready to snap her up in his jaws and hear her scream.

As he rounded through the doorway, his stride faltered just a moment. Oriana sat perched on the edge of the table, legs spread and her hands pressed on the gap in between. Forcing her breasts together as she eyed him with nothing but mischief and desire.

“How silly of me, I forgot what your instructions were. Did you say you wanted me to put weapons away?” She glanced at the sword where she’d laid it on the table beside her. “Will there be a punishment for not listening?”

Prowling towards her, there was no way he’d be able to hold back any longer.

Her gasp filled the void space as he reached her, hands scooping beneath her rear, and portaling them away from the academy within a split second. Mist swirled around them as he groaned into her mouth and dug his fingers of one hand into her hair. The other was hungry and demanding against the curves of her ass.

“Hi, brute.” She breathed as they drew back a fraction, both panting. Nipping his bottom lip, she flexed her fingers against the muscled planes of his chest. Hitting him with a small smile curving the corners of her pouty mouth. A feeling surged in behind his ribs, the kind that he enjoyed far too much for his own good.

Scowling because this was dangerous territory, if he allowed her to see how easily she pried open the chinks in his armour, he tugged on her hair.

“Oh, right, sorry.” She batted her eyelashes. “Punishment.”

“It’s not punishment when you sound so fucking eager.” He growled.

Her lips contorted as the smile threatened to take over.

“Then tell me what you want. *Please.*”

Rowan scrubbed one hand over his mouth. This girl was going to be the death of him.

“I want to undress you slowly and fuck you fast, my little faerie. Then I want to take my time sinking into you over and over while you moan my name. I want to have your cum smeared all over my mouth and then fill that tight little cunt of yours until you’re dripping.”

Her lips parted and breaths shallowed. That glassy look took over her eyes as she let his words wash through her.

“That doesn’t sound like a punish—” Rowan cut her off with a big hand wrapped beneath her jaw. Savouring the heavy swallow beneath his palm that made his cock throb. Pre-cum beading at the tip.

True to his word, he slowly peeled everything off her until she was naked. Using his magic to rid her of each piece of clothing and enjoying every second of just how eagerly her body reacted to his control. Her dusky rose-coloured nipples tightened to hard buds, and her cheeks tinged pink at the way he stripped her bare.

Well, she had better fucking get used to it.

All he had left in his hand was her blades and thigh holster, while the rest of her clothes were piled on the floor at their feet. He had plans for this punishment, and it didn’t require him to shed his clothes just yet.

In fact, he had the distinct impression Oriana quite enjoyed the way it made her feel to be the one on display for him.

Keeping one hand firmly on her throat, he arched an eyebrow at her. “Still in the mood to give me that smart mouth?”



Rowan tossed her blades and holster down on the floor, all the while taking extra care to make sure they slid right across the other side of the room to be well out of her reach. He clearly didn't trust her not to try and reach for them as a way to fight back against whatever punishment he had in store for her.

A dull thud signalled the moment her weapons hit the skirting board below the kitchen cupboards. Meanwhile, his thick fingers pressed harder against the side of her throat... challenging her to say anything.

Ri contemplated it. She really did. But from the wild look in his eye and the way her body was already on fire for him, she was already a puddle beneath his touch.

This fucking asshole barely needed to breathe on her, and every part of her body began to arch and respond. Knowing without a doubt that he held a fated connection over her very soul.

“Hmm. Maybe you can listen, little faerie? Got nothing to say now that you're naked and whoring yourself out for me?”

Oh, fuck, why did his filthy mouth have such an effect on her? She whimpered beneath the heavy press of his fingers around her throat. The ache of her budded nipples and tightening of her core was already leaving her slightly dizzy with pleasure.

And the punishment hadn't even begun yet.

“I think you need to be reminded why it is important to listen to instructions.” His sapphire blue eyes scorched her. Raking over her body from his imposing height as he began

walking her backwards. Still grasped by the front of her neck and with clear intentions to take this into the bedroom.

Ri's mouth popped open, and she darted out her tongue to wet her bottom lip. The anticipation of what was to come was almost too much to bear.

As they cleared the doorway, Rowan moved so fast she barely had time to react. One moment, she was upright, the next, she'd been draped over his lap as he sat on the edge of the bed.

She was faced with the sight of the floorboards and his heavy boots while her bare ass was right where he wanted.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Her body clenched with arousal and excitement and the tinge of fear, knowing what was to come next but also having complete trust in Rowan to make this feel good for her. Although, if the size of his giant palm was anything to go by, this wasn't going to just be a little sting.

This shit was going to hurt.

In the best way possible.

“Fuck off.” She tried to wriggle against him. Not really trying to get away—or able to even if she really wanted to—but playing into this game between them. He liked her fire, as much as he professed to detest it, and she knew this would only make it hotter for the both of them.

Rowan would very quickly discover just how wet she already was, and he hadn't even laid a hand on her... yet.

Crack.

One stinging blow landed across her ass as he growled something ancient and dark sounding.

“You don't get to argue or fight your way out of this.” He followed the first blow with another on the other cheek.

Both smacks sent heat blooming and curling beneath her skin and her core clenched. The pain rippled through her,

quickly turning into a molten heat between her thighs.

“Don’t fucking touch me, brute.” She spat out. Her hands fisted the sheets on the edge of the bed and she bit down on her lower lip. Ready for the inevitable to keep on coming.

Two quick blows came one after the other. She was writhing harder now. Unable to stop the low moan in the back of her throat that escaped past her lips when he roughly slid his hand between her legs. Fondling at her entrance and sliding through the wetness gathered there.

Everything felt hot and tingly and bright sparks of pain intermingled with pleasure were busy rushing around her body.

“What a soaking wet cunt. Looks like you’re a good little whore who likes her ass being turned red.” He plunged two fingers in and out in shallow thrusts at her entrance, and the wet sounds filling the room were absolutely filthy.

Heat raced up her chest and onto her cheeks. Without thinking, she arched her back and spread wider to give him better access.

That earned her two more quick slaps across the already stinging flesh. Causing a sharp yelp to burst out of her.

She fucking loved this. It felt so right with him.

“I don’t think you’ve learned your lesson at all. You’re just a dirty girl who gets off on this shit.” The rougher edge to his voice now made her pussy clench. He was clearly just as affected by this game, and his hard cock jutting against her hip was evidence of that.

“Make me learn then.” She hardly recognised her own voice. Breathily and dripping with sex. Ready to push him to really show her what he wanted to do right now. To use her and take his own pleasure in just the way she would be happy to allow him to.

“Such a smart mouth. Let’s see how you talk back when you’re choking on my cock.” Rowan growled and shoved her off his lap. “Get on your fucking knees.” Without anything remotely gentle in his handling of her, Ri found herself naked

and dripping wet, knelt on the hard wooden floor between his thighs.

And deliriously happy.

With shaking hands and a stinging ass, she fumbled to free his cock from his trousers. Fuck it was so erotic seeing him like this in front of her. Dressed in his ensemble of black and savagery, while she knelt at his feet in nothing at all. Knowing full well that this moment between them was orchestrated just as much for her as it was for him.

Holding her safe in the knowledge that every filthy word from his lips dripped over her like honey and gold, making her feel treasured beyond all jewels.

The thick, veined length of him was velvety smooth beneath her touch as she stroked him from the base to the tip. Waiting for his next command or move, she gazed up at him from her position and soaked in every hard, handsome angle of his jaw and cheekbones.

Reaching forward, one of his large paws tightly gripped the hair at her nape, while the other took hold of his cock. Fuck. Seeing him grip himself roughly like that sent a pulse straight to her already aching clit.

Ri wanted to touch herself. Play with herself. Pinch her nipples and rub that needy bud, just to get some relief from the way her body was already spiralling high with pleasure beneath his command.

But instead, she dutifully waited.

“Fucking perfect little whores like you just love having a cock in the back of your throat, don’t you?” He yanked her forward, then tapped his cock against her lips. Smearing pre-cum all over her mouth before shoving inside when she parted for him.

Rowan’s groan of pleasure nearly had her dissolving into the floor.

As the thick length of him slid over her tongue and she tasted him, with salty tanginess filling her senses, she allowed him to take control.

Using her. Chasing his pleasure. Grunting as he controlled the pace of her sucking him down. Over and over.

Muttering curses and filthy words that washed over her skin to match the timing of each moment he tapped the back of her throat. She was a mess of saliva and tears leaking down her cheeks and so turned on she could barely think.

Being used by Rowan was the kind of experience she'd gladly beg for more of as soon as this was done.

She felt his cock throb and jerk against her tongue, and all of a sudden was being pulled off him. Only for Rowan to hold her still as he fisted his cock and shot his release all over her breasts. Coating her in ribbons of cum as he let out a feral sounding noise.

Ri's mouth hung open and her heartbeat pounded in her clit. She was certain she would fall apart the moment he finally shoved inside her. Her body was a dancing collation of colours and pulsing lights.

"Clean it up, little faerie." The blue in his eyes was now dark as night and he stared down at her through a hooded gaze. Something that might have been terrifying if she didn't know the way his smouldering intensity would take care of her pleasure in the most unbelievably perfect way.

Before she could lean forward to take him back into her mouth, he swiped through his cum with a finger. Running up the valley between her breasts and hooked it roughly into her mouth. Smearing it over the corner of her lips and pressing down on her tongue to hold her there for a long moment. When she whimpered and closed her lips around his knuckle, he made a dark noise of approval.

Goddess-fucking-damnit, she was ready to beg to be allowed to come.

"Get on the bed. Ass up for me, little faerie." He gripped her chin tight for a second, then pushed her away.

Ri didn't need to be told twice.

She'd barely gotten into position when the bed dipped behind her and she felt Rowan's big palms smooth over the

spots that must be bright red. Making her flinch a little as he slid across her overheated flesh.

She felt that same, undeniably arousing sensation of him taking his time to look at her. Knowing that every intimate part of her was spread out and bared for him in the most filthy and erotic way. It left her squirming beneath the weight of his stare as he took in her exposed flesh. Ass up in the air. Legs spread for him.

Fucking fuck. This man had officially ruined her for an eternity.

Then he used both hands to spread her ass, and if she thought her face was already flushed before, it now erupted into a raging bonfire. Rowan silently studied her, while his fingers lightly kneaded her ass cheeks, working the blooming heat just below the skin from his earlier spanking.

Ri dropped her forehead to rest against the soft sheets. At least if she was going to melt into a pool of lust, she could be satisfied in the knowledge that it was thanks to Rowan's expert manipulation of her body.

Just when she didn't think she could take any more of this silent foreplay, his cock was right there. Nudging the fat head against her entrance and sinking in just to coat the tip in her slickness before he slid his length through her pussy lips to nudge against her clit.

She nearly came on the spot. The intense pleasure of him finally making contact against that bundle of nerves had her moaning and pushing back against him for more.

“Such a greedy fucking cunt you've got. Dripping wet and begging for my cock.”

There was no denying any of it. She murmured all the words she'd be mortified to admit sounded a lot like exactly that. All forms of begging and *yes please* and *more thank you*.

Her entire body flew into ecstasy as he shoved roughly inside, without warning. Filling her so deep and straight to the hilt on a single glide. His fingers gripped her hips and he held there for just a moment, no doubt wrestling composure

because she was teetering right on the edge of her own orgasm.

Ri could feel her pussy fluttering and clenching around his cock, and it took all her strength to hold her body up rather than disappearing into a boneless limp heap of pleasure.

Then, he shifted and began to fuck her hard. Deep, long strokes of his cock that left her clawing the sheets and chasing after each breath that was knocked from her lungs.

He was hitting a spot that was so fucking perfect, and she could just about feel him at the back of her throat at this angle.

There was no holding back the low moans and cries as she simply let Rowan take control and command her body. As she tumbled quickly into her release he hissed through gritted teeth behind her, continuing to fuck her right through every clench of her pussy around his fat cock, and she floated somewhere on wave after wave of bursting heady delight filling every inch of her.

Barely coming down from that high, she felt something cool and wet run over her ass. She whimpered with anticipation.

Ri had been with her fair share of other sexual partners in the past. They'd fooled around... *back there*. But nothing more than a little stroking and some lubricating potions to make things more comfortable.

Nothing like the prospect of this.

Certainly nothing like the feeling of Rowan's magic. Whatever sorcery he was using made her body respond with eager whimpers. Ri arched back against him, begging for more when his thick fingers started working gently inside her. Moving past his knuckles. Stretching her and soothing her and making her feel loose with pleasure.

"Ohhh, fuck me. *Harder*." She was coming again. The mixture of how good he felt fingering her ass and his cock thrusting inside her over and over, sent her straight back over the edge.

Rowan bit out dark curses as he pumped deep into her and his rhythm began to stutter. Hips moving against her ass in a jerking motion and cock swelling and throbbing as his own release spilled inside to fill her. While at the same time, the force of her own orgasm left her shaking and clenching around his cock and his fingers.

And the only thing Ri could do was lie there. Spent and satiated and floating on a fluffy cloud of pleasure as he dropped hot kisses along her spine. Soaking up every murmured drop of adoration for her. A soft place where he told her just how perfect she was and she glowed like the morning sunrise feeling his gentleness and care for her.

The tiniest glimpse of the softness he pretended to be incapable of.

Finally, just when she had regathered enough strength to try and turn over, wanting to drag him down against her chest and hold onto him with all her might, she felt a heavy palm hold her in place. Followed by the shift of his hand between her thighs and then the sensation of his thick fingers pushing into her.

Oh, fuck. Ri squeezed her eyes shut, trying to squirm away as he pushed his cum back into her. With her traitorous pussy and fated bond, each preening and humming with delight at the knowledge *this* was what he wanted to do with her.

She wriggled again only for Rowan's words to have her immediately shutting up and obeying.

“Lie still like a good girl.”

CHAPTER 26

Fuck. His mind, his body, and his soul were in a million different places at the same time. Seeing her spread out beneath him, flushed and dripping with his cum. That was a sight he wanted to devour at every opportunity.

The obsession with this girl was only growing stronger.

She matched him in so many ways. Fought him in others. The kind of equal he'd never expected to find. *Ever*.

Wrapping her tight to his front, he strode towards his outdoor bathroom. Feeling like he could fly with the sensation of her soaking wet pussy pressed against his torso, mixed with his cum leaking out of her. As it should fucking be.

They'd nearly reached the door when his magic prickled with awareness.

He stopped short, muscles tensing.

"What's wrong?" Shit, she sounded so mellow and half asleep already. Nuzzled perfectly against his neck. There was no better feeling than the way this girl clung to him after screaming through an orgasm.

A loud noise came from somewhere outside the front entrance to his cottage.

Godsdamnit. He swore under his breath as he recognised who it was instantly. Letting ancient curses fly freely as he squeezed his eyes shut. Of all the times this could be happening.

“Nothing—It’s Niall.” What the fuck did that blond-haired prissy little dickhead want. More importantly, why was he *here*?

She untucked her head from his shoulder, and he itched to cradle her tight to him again. Looking at him with widening eyes that said everything. No words were required to interpret the sudden panic flitting across her features.

Fuck. “I’ll get rid of him.” Setting her down on her feet, he reached around to push open the door. “Can you shield yourself from him?”

Not only was his brother poking his nose around where he didn’t belong, but his empath magic could sense the emotions of others. It was fucking annoying, and their entire family had learned to shield themselves at a young age to guard against his magic.

If Oriana wasn’t able to use her magic to create a shield, he’d know she was here. Shit. Shit. Shit.

But, of course, his little warrior took it all in her stride. She quickly composed herself and arched a perfect eyebrow, propped her hands on her very-fucking-naked hips, and levelled him with a look that said *no shit*.

Her tits looked incredible.

Relief punched him in the chest.

“You’re just asking for another punishment.” Then he stooped and quickly bit down on her jaw before shoving her through the doorway. “Just stay out here under the water until I come and get you. Keep that pussy warm for me.”

She moved away on slightly wobbly legs, flashing him a smile that was all sweetness and the kind of goodness he shouldn’t ever be allowed to touch, then promptly created a shield with her magic. He sensed it straight away, like a clear bubble surrounding her and cutting off the presence of her aura from outside detection.

At least that was one of his problems resolved. Now he needed to turn his mind to more pressing matters. Namely how he’d prevent himself from tearing his brother’s throat out.

Niall knew better than to come here. His entire family knew better than to disturb him. That was the entire reason he'd set up the blood wards surrounding every inch of the property. All of which demanded the kind of sacrifice designed to weaken a would-be intruder.

Giving blood should be the least of Niall's concerns right now.

He'd be lucky to leave here in one piece.

Rowan stabbed his legs into a pair of trousers, then swiped up a shirt. He should be sliding back into the tight, wet, cum filled pussy waiting for him. Not dealing with his godsdamned brother.

As he stormed across the living space and threw open the front door, he took in the sight of Niall standing at the gateway entrance. He was still working on giving the blood required to satisfy the first blood ward, which in theory, would allow him to pass. However, there were at least another eight enchantments laid between where he stood and the wooden porch outside his cottage.

Without Rowan's intervention, it might take him hours to even get within a whisker of the front door.

"What the fuck do you want?" Rowan gritted his teeth. Shoving the crumpled shirt over his shoulders before wrestling it down his torso.

"Lovely to see you too, you black-hearted prick." Niall shoved the small blade he'd used to cut open his palm back into the holster strapped across his ribs. "Always a tad dramatic, no?" He gestured to the space between the two of them—about twenty feet. The kind of distance Rowan would gladly maintain, especially knowing the secret he harboured inside.

"Is someone dead?" That was about the only acceptable excuse for disturbing him.

"Probably, somewhere," Niall smirked. "But this will hopefully prevent death. So let me in before I bleed out all over your pathway."

Ah, yes. The magic infused in his blood wards prevented a witch from accessing their healing powers. A particularly satisfying addition to the spells.

“Fine. But make it quick.” With a cast of his magic, he granted Niall access. Eyeing him warily as he loped his way up the front steps.

“Why? Got somewhere to be?” Niall cast an eye over him, then pushed past to head inside. Spirits fucking save his brother from an untimely early demise. “Whiskey?” He called over his shoulder. Already rummaging in the cupboards seeking out Rowan’s stash. Typical.

He made a concerted effort to inhale deeply through his nose. Clenching and flexing his fingers that wanted to reach for something sharp and deadly. As he shut the front door, the sight of Niall busy making himself at home greeted him. The dick-face had one boot propped up on the kitchen table as he slouched in a wooden chair. Rowan marched over, smacked his foot off, then grabbed the bottle before retreating to the other side of the room. Another occasion warranting a reason to forgo a glass.

There were too many of those these days, it would seem.

Feeling more on edge than he could ever recall, he took a long slug straight from the bottle. Niall’s piercing blue stare was still on him as he swiped the back of his hand over the wetness coating his mouth.

The scent of her pussy still lingered there.

Rowan shifted his weight, leaning against the countertop. Glaring back at his brother, who studied him over the rim of his glass. Silence stretched to fill the space, only punctuated by the heavy creak of the wooden floorboard beneath Niall’s chair as he shifted his weight.

“Get on with it then, princess.” This unwelcome visitation needed to be over. Immediately.

Niall swirled the amber liquid thoughtfully, then drained the rest of his glass.

“There’s a possible connection between the bodies found, the symbols, and the Seal of Elharean being opened.” His brother tapped a finger against one thigh. “Ancient magic, or whatever it is... there’s every possibility it could be primordial even. But all the information dug up so far from within the archives points to something we haven’t seen in any of these realms for longer than anyone can remember, and it appears that this *force* has taken the place of anything that used to be known as the House of Elharean.”

A clammy feeling rose up the back of Rowan’s neck. That old familiar feeling whenever the Goddesses came calling for the warlord’s services once more like a bell tolling an eerie and haunting peal in the distance.

“There’s every possibility those Elharean dicks are bullshitting.” His thoughts drifted to the whimpering, snivelling idiot he’d interrogated recently. There had been nothing of value to come out of that man’s mouth. Only dribble about how the dark sorcerers were loyal to a new leader.

Which was nothing surprising and hardly new information, considering their throne had been toppled. Of course, those insipid followers would immediately crawl up the ass of whoever offered them another twisted fucking opportunity to grab at power.

“Well, we need to go over the new information at hand, no? You’re required back at the academy... and we can carry on this merry little conversation there.” Niall pushed up to stand and nodded towards the door.

“Sure.” Like fuck he’d be going anywhere.

“This is serious shit, Rowan. You need to come with me now.”

He grunted. Placing the bottle back in the cupboard, readying himself to drag his brother’s scrawny hide out the door by a fistful of his prissy blond curls.

“Fine.” Stalking across the room, he had nothing but determination to shut out Niall and the rest of the world.

Nothing, or no one, was going to have him leaving until he was good and fucking ready. “Now fuck off.”

“Alright, alright, I’m gone.” He raised his hands and shrugged. “Being such a dick all the time is a little unbecoming... even for your blackened soul.”

But then Niall paused with one hand on the doorframe. His long fingers tapped on the wood for a moment before he turned back. Mischief danced in his bright blue eyes as his gaze dropped to the floor and then back up to meet Rowan.

“Oh, and say hi to Ri for me. A little word of advice for next time... you two might want to make sure she doesn’t leave her weapons lying around on the floor, no?”



The smug look on Niall’s face needed to be wiped off. Preferably by connecting his fist with the cunt’s jaw.

Both stood across from one another in the catacombs. Rowan wasn’t going to be the one to speak first. If his stupid brother hadn’t shoved his nose in where it wasn’t wanted, they wouldn’t be in this mess.

There was a reason he’d kept things between him and Oriana hidden away at his cottage. And that peaceful, safe haven had been ruined within only a couple of days.

He wanted to break the fucker’s bones and grind them into the dirt.

After Niall left, there’d been no time to do much more than fill Oriana in. Watch her pretty features contort through a full spectrum of emotions, then portal them both back to the academy. Leaving her tucked up in her own bed with a quick reassurance that he’d be back soon.

But not before he potentially smashed his brother’s face in.

With each passing minute of stony silence on Rowan’s part, the idiot across from him only smirked wider and wider.

Until finally, he couldn't hold in his smug self-righteousness any longer.

“Never thought I'd finally see the day I could hold something over you. Can't say it doesn't feel anything less than fucking incredible.”

Rowan's resolve might snap at any moment. He could feel the muscles in his jaw ticking furiously.

“I kept your secrets.” He snarled.

Niall leant over one knee. His foot propped on a chair. Dragging out the moment like a godsdamned fiend. “Mmm. That you did.”

“Then you'll know exactly what to do with any ideas you've got about what this is or isn't. I can guarantee you this situation is beyond the comprehension of your puny little brain. So don't even try.”

His brother scratched at his short beard. Lips quirking in that infuriating way that made Rowan want to reach over and rip his face off.

“Look at you using all your big words. I can't decide whether I'm surprised or simply aghast that anyone would let you put that monster cock of yours near them.”

For fuck's sake.

“This isn't time to be dicking around.”

“I feel like there's too good an opportunity to miss for a joke in there—”

“Niall.” He barked. Slamming off the wall and carving up the distance between them. Luckily, there was a table separating the two of them because he'd gladly have had him at knifepoint already.

“Stars. Take a breath and quit grinding your molars, would you. You're the one who couldn't keep it in your pants, no?”

“Says the asshole who couldn't keep his dick under control around the queen.”

“Look, that was different.”

“So different.” He drawled. “Do enlighten me.”

“Ruby and I are fated together? A soul bond?” Niall waved a hand in the air. “Any of that jogging your memory? I know all your brain cells are probably in your balls right now, but come on.”

He dropped both palms onto the table. Levelling his brother with a look that promised eternities of pain and anguish.

“Unless...” One eyebrow cocked in his direction.

Oh, shit no.

“No.” Rowan spat out the word.

“So, this isn’t a fated situation going on here that we need to be aware of... because that changes things, you know.”

Of course it wasn’t. There’d been no sign of anything when he’d kissed her for the first time that night. Just her usual mouthy self. Intent as always on testing his limits.

This thing between them was nothing to do with the fates or soul bonds or whatever ridiculous notions his brothers had gotten themselves involved with. All they could think about these days was *fated mates* and the notion was insanity at its finest.

His lip curled, and the look he gave Niall was all that was needed to have his brother chuckling to himself.

“So what, you’re just fucking around with Ruby’s sister, hoping that you won’t get caught?” Rowan refused to answer anything more. This was a conversation that he was more than ready to be done with.

Niall shook his head. Muttering something quietly to himself. Then he pointed a finger in Rowan’s direction and narrowed his eyes. “While I hate to admit that you’re right, I *do* owe you for keeping my secrets... but you need to come clean to Ruby. I won’t lie to her, so if she suspects something, I won’t deny it.”

He glared at that outstretched finger, imagining how satisfying it would be if he bit it clean off.

“I’ll give you one month to sort your shit out. And I swear on the ancestors I hope you know what you’re doing, Rowan. Trust me, if you hurt her sister, I can guarantee Ruby will take more than just your balls for this. She won’t have any trouble with coming after your head.”

CHAPTER 27

“F uck. Yes. *Harder.*”
Please.

Ri moaned as her sensitive nipples scraped against the wooden surface with each punishing thrust. Her walls fluttered around Rowan’s cock as he pumped deep from behind her. They’d barely reappeared in solid form inside his cottage when he’d stripped her bare and bent her over the table.

It was so fucking hot when he lost his control.

Two weeks had passed. Neither of them had found it within themselves to reveal their secret yet. Instead, they’d silently chosen to disappear into one another. Sneaking around and fucking like they might be starved of oxygen if they didn’t get to be together at every opportunity. Racing against some kind of cosmic hourglass where the sand was trickling faster than either of them could have imagined.

Giving Rowan a reason to drag her out of the academy in a whirlwind of teeth and bruising fingers against her skin, that was one of her new favourite games to play.

And he was an oh-so-willing opponent when it came to sex.

“*Fffffuck.* Your cunt is so wet for me.” The gravel in his voice made her clit throb.

He was still fully clothed and pounding his hips against her ass, with one big hand wrapped around her neck, pinning her

to the table. Hitting so deep, she saw stars, and flames surged through her bloodstream.

“*Unghhhh. Yes.*” She clawed at the table. The crest of her orgasm already threatening to bowl through her with lightning speed.

“Don’t you fucking dare come yet.” Rowan tightened his grip. Shifting his fingers to wrap around the side of her neck and press against her airway. “Smart-mouthed little faerie whores don’t get to come until they’re told.”

Yeah. She’d absolutely earned this kind of punishment.

The best kind.

Ri whimpered deep in the back of her throat. Bright sparks flew through to each of her fingertips and down to her toes that barely touched the floor.

With a rough-sounding curse, Rowan pulled out. Then flipped her over in one swift movement. Laying her flat on her back so that he stood like a commanding force between her spread legs at the edge of the table.

She had to bite her lip to stop the mewling little begging noises that threatened to spill from her tongue. Aching for all of him. Surging, raw desire rolled through her body in wave after wave.

Rowan reached down with a hot palm and cupped her nipple. Roughly squeezing the stiff peak until she squirmed and her back bowed with pleasure. Then he growled and slapped the side of her breast.

The stinging pain quickly melted into euphoria.

How did this man know exactly what her body needed? It was so much more than magic or spells or his ability to drive her insane with need for him.

“Is this all it takes to shut that mouth of yours? Stuffing you full of my cock?” Furious blue eyes cut into her. His fingers, rough and seeking against her hips, held her still as she tried to buck up towards him.

But he pinned her down and refused to give her the release she so desperately chased after.

“Please.” Please. Please. She was out of her mind with the need to come. Rowan had been edging her for what felt like hours. Dragging her to the precipice and then cruelly denying her over and over.

He pressed a heavy palm against her throat. Collaring her with his thick, inked fingers and looking down at her splayed out before him like a feast. Or maybe a sacrifice.

Something darkened in his eyes before he cocked his head to one side. The predatory action and utter menace in his expression made her pussy clench. Goosebumps rippled down her arms, and she suddenly felt very, very at his mercy.

But this was the game she’d signed up to play, after all.

Rowan had promised never to hurt her... unless she asked for it. But right now, there was more of the warlord present in him than usual. And she wasn’t sure why that made her pulse race with a chaotic blend of trepidation laced with excitement.

The quiet noise of metal being unsheathed filled the room.

All of a sudden, the sight of one of her gold daggers flashed across her vision. Rowan weighed it in his big paw while the other remained locked around her throat. Squeezing with his fingers, he increased the pressure for a moment, then released it, over and over. Watching her through hooded eyes. Ri could feel her heart in the back of her throat, hammering wildly as tension wound and thrashed inside her body.

Well, fuck.

Not knowing what his next move would be was hypnotic. Addictive. The kind of shit she knew better than to allow herself to be so transfixed by, and yet here she lay. Ready and willing and enthusiastically awaiting his punishment.

His perfect little whore indeed.

“I think it’s time you bled for me, little faerie.” He murmured darkly. Flicking the blade around his fingers with the kind of deft precision that left her panting. Promising all

sorts of wicked deeds with each glint of gold running over his tattooed knuckles.

As she squirmed and softly moaned, he brought the tip of the blade to the indent just below her collarbone. Pausing for just a second to fix her with a heated gaze that set her soul alight. Giving her the opportunity to say no if she didn't want this.

But oh, how desperately she did.

“Do it.” Her breathy voice was enough to tip him beyond whatever momentary restraint he'd been able to wield.

Quick, bold movements pressed down against the soft swell of her breast, at the spot just below her collarbone. Carving into her flesh with a precision and grace that belied his bulky stature. This was a man who wore the suit of war like a second skin, and weapons were his tools to paint his masterpiece.

She felt the sting of a razor-sharp edge, followed by a cool, soothing sensation rushing through her—magic seeped beneath his fingers and down into her body. The welling of her blood around the spot was evident as he drew the blade back, and the golden tip was painted in stark crimson.

Something dark and desirous flared in his eyes as he ran the flat of the weapon across his tongue. Leaving a smear of bright, bloodied victory painting the curve of his lower lip.

Goddess-fucking-damnit, he looked even more gorgeous than ever.

Lowering the blood-covered metal towards her mouth, he offered her the other side.

“Open up, like the dirty little thing I know you are.” Her jaw slackened, and she obediently parted her lips. There was something wild in his blue eyes as he slid the bloodied point across her outstretched tongue, allowing her to taste herself in those coppery notes.

He hummed his approval and dragged the flat side of the blade down her chin, leaving a trail of wetness—that must have been more blood—before continuing a path down her

sternum. Trailing between her breasts with gentle pressure. Not cutting into the skin, but with every searing inch the dagger gently touched, it was a reminder of just how easily he could slice her open if he wanted to.

“So beautiful when you bleed.” He leant forward and ran his tongue over the spot where he’d cut her skin. The hot, wet glide of his mouth against the sharp sting of the fresh wound sent her mind racing. He ran his tongue down and swirled it around her nipple. She could feel the fat head of his cock nudging against her soaked entrance as he shifted his weight over her.

The blade was dropped onto the table just above her head.

Rowan took her mouth with a groan.

He shoved inside her with a punishing thrust. The sudden intrusion filled her so perfectly after being wound into such a prolonged frenzy.

As he sucked on her tongue and bit down on her lip, the tang of copper raced between their mouths. Driving thrusts forward were so hard and fast that her breasts bounced, and it was only his hold around her neck that kept her from shifting across the table.

“Ffffuck.” Rowan groaned against her mouth. “*Unghhh*. My perfect faerie. Come all over my cock.”

Who was she to disobey an order like that?

Ri’s world filled with bright sparks, and her orgasm raced through her.

Each deep thrust of Rowan’s cock inside her dragged her cries of pleasure against his mouth. Wave after wave drew out and continued as she clenched around his length.

He grunted against her lips and then she felt his own release pulse inside her. Filling her with hot cum as they gasped against each other. Foreheads pressed together, while the room felt as though it was a spinning top in the wake of their joint orgasm.

Rowan lazily moved inside her as she lay there, both of them taking a quiet moment to catch their breath, and she closed her eyes enjoying the feel of him slick and hot inside her pussy.

Sliding two strong palms beneath her, he lifted her boneless figure still keeping himself seated inside her, and shifted them across the room. With effortless movements he sat back in his big armchair by the fireplace, positioning her to straddle him. The still-hard length of him impaling her and so deep it made her eyes roll back in her head.

“Shit.” She breathed hard through her nose. Eyelashes fluttering closed as she sagged forward against his chest.

“Did you think I was done with you, little faerie?” He gave his hips a slight thrust up into her. Stars burst behind her eyelids. Her swollen clit rubbing against his hard stomach muscles made her jolt.

Ri made a soft noise. Unable to think straight with him filling her so deep it felt like she could feel him in the back of her throat.

“Here.” A strong finger hooked under her chin, and she fluttered her eyelashes open. Eyes heavy and gaze unfocused. Rowan tilted a glass towards her and she dutifully took a sip. Something sweet and honeyed flowed over her taste buds and left a slight burn as it went down the back of her throat. But it immediately made her feel warm and glowy all over.

Magic.

As she came back to herself a little more, she twined her arms around his neck. Rowan rested his head against the back of the armchair and studied her through heavy-lidded eyes. He took a long sip of the honey-coloured drink and then set it down on the sideboard beside them before picking up a roll of spice.

Her mouth dropped open. Somehow Rowan of Nocturne, fully clothed, indulging in spice and liquor while she straddled his cock, naked seemed altogether scandalous. A picture of

hedonism and lust. Yet she also loved the way it made her feel so powerful.

“What?” The corners of his lips twitched as he used his magic to light the end, then raised it to his lips and sucked down a long inhale.

Ri flexed her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck. Twirling the longer strands and scratching her nails gently against his skin. His eyes were so different in this light, seeing him relaxed and seated in the comfort of his throne. Blue, like calm, coral-laden waters basking under a midday sun.

She watched him smoke in silence. Still *very* aware of him hard inside her and the wetness slicking her thighs from the mixture of their cum. But he didn't move to fuck her or thrust up into her. Just seemed content to watch her with a weighted stare.

Holding the spice between thumb and forefinger, he took a long drag into his lungs, before blowing the cloud of sweet, pungent smoke out his nostrils.

“You're so beautiful.”

Oh, fuck. She might dissolve into a puddle right here and now. Hearing Rowan call her beautiful just shot straight to the top of her list of favourite things in the entire world.

She immediately wanted to hear those words from his lips again.

And again.

Ri leant forward and wrapped her lips around the end of the spice. Keeping her eyes on him as amusement danced on the corner of his oh-so-kissable mouth. Sucking down a deep inhale, the embers flared, and the burn filled her lungs perfectly. Then, she sank her mouth against his and shared the smoke with him.

It was so heady and erotic and divine.

A perfect moment reserved for just the two of them.

Nothing else mattered.

Not the academy. Not her sister's rules. Not the fact that she'd lied to everyone, including Rowan, about everything.

Right here, she could melt into the long, comfortable stretch of silence between them and ignore the deep sense of foreboding that had been brewing. The sense that *something* was coming.

As if he could tell her thoughts had strayed, his brows furrowed. Ri traced the crease in his forehead with her thumb.

"Tell me." She murmured. Wanting to pry as deep as he might let her, lest he discover her own treasure trove of secrets lurking beneath the surface.

Rowan skimmed his hot palm up her waist. "My earliest memory is knowing exactly how to kill another." He dropped his eyes to rake over her body. Leaving her shivering at the way he devoured every curve with hunger. "One glance at you, and do you know the first thing I saw? It wasn't the way your hair reminds me of silk, or the softness of your skin, or the way the light glints in the gold flecks of your eyes. No. It was the exact spot on your neck I could squeeze to cut off your breath. Followed by the perfect place where my blade would slice cleanly as I severed your head."

He took another long drag on the spice. Allowing his words to hang thickly in the air like the smoke billowing around them. Those blue eyes traced her mouth, still calm, but there was so much hurt hidden behind them. The kind that she desperately wished she could give him some reprieve from.

"So go on, little faerie... try and tell me again how I am anything but the dangerous bastard the Goddesses created me to be."

"I'm quite fond of dangerous things, brute." She ran her fingers over the stubble of his firm jaw.

He held the spice up to her mouth, then stroked his thumb over her bottom lip as she blew out a long exhale.

"There's a *but* in there somewhere."

She dragged her teeth over the puffy swell of her bottom lip.

Was now the time to reveal how uncertain she felt about them being together?

Rowan's fingers caressed over her hip. "Oriana."

Fuck. All it took was him saying her name with that dark rumbling tone and she was putty in his calloused hands.

She focused on his shirt collar, fiddling with the material as she blurted out the words that might make him disappear faster than she could blink.

"Look, if you were a vampire or had telepathic magic, you could at least meddle with my mind and give me some kind of reassurance that we're in this together. I know I might seem confident and filled with all the certainty in the world—and do I feel that way when I'm with you *like this*, when it's just the two of us—but as soon as we're out there... that's the moment I start to worry." She chewed the inside of her mouth for a moment while Rowan absorbed her torrent of words. "I overthink things. I start to doubt. And I can't help it. My impulsive side gets the better of me, and it takes about five seconds before I've convinced myself you're about to turf me out of your life."

Wincing, she darted a look at him, only to be met with what could only be described as a softness in his usually stern expression.

It made her heart do little pattering somersaults.

"You never have to doubt with me. Even for one second."

Butterflies rioted in her stomach.

"I know I'm not easy, brute." Ri protested.

"Listen well, little faerie. You're everything I never knew I could hope for or even deserve. The only Goddess-given bright spot in an otherwise bleak existence until now."

He took another long inhale of spice, blowing it out slowly before continuing.

"Before I met you, things came only in shades of grey or crimson. Now it's like there's a whole palette of colour to my life that I haven't even been aware I could dare to reach for.

My greatest fear is that this is all a dream, and one day I'll wake up and find that my bed is cold and I'm submerged back into the endless murky, bloodiness of life without you in it."

She realised her fingers were clenched in his shirt front. Her mouth hung open. Then she gave a little shove against his muscled chest.

"I don't think I've ever heard you willingly say so many words all in one go before. You've been practising, haven't you?" Ri teased.

Spirits, she was ready for this man to be naked and fucking her again. After a speech like that, her clit was begging for attention.

"There's a lifetime of regrets I carry around, little faerie. Making sure you feel safe with me is something I wish to keep well away from that list."

"So, I'm not a regret?" This entire conversation lit her body aflame.

"The furthest thing possible." He dropped the last of the spice into the glass beside him with a small hiss as it hit the dregs of the liquid. "A headache? An infuriating test of my endless patience—"

Ri just about choked. "You? Patient?"

And in that moment, a miracle occurred. One side of his mouth lifted into a wry smile, and her entire world flipped on its axis.

A smiling Rowan was absolutely soul-destroying. She was irrevocably fucked now.

He playfully slapped her ass. "I'm practically a deity of patience compared to you."

Her mouth opened and closed to try and protest, but he cut her off with a stern and yet somehow completely filthy look.

"Tell you what... I've got an idea. Use your magic to make two blades." He nodded towards her hands where they still pressed against his chest.

“Is this another game where I get to bleed for you?” She raised an eyebrow at him. Another swat to her ass made her clench around his length.

Rowan hissed and gave her a warning growl.

“Fine. Will this do?” She produced two short golden throwing blades—her favourite kind.

He wrapped a big palm around each of her fists and then raised them, still holding the blades so that they pointed upright between their faces. Ri shot him a confused look. What the fuck was this about?

“You want reassurance when we’re out *there*.” He inclined his head towards the big window. Only the faint outline of trees was visible in the near-dark outside his cottage. “Well then, just know, if I do this...” He proceeded to move her hands to touch the tips of the two blades together with a light tap.

Ri watched on, utterly confused.

But Rowan was looking back at her with heated eyes. “If I do that, just know that in my mind, this is what I’m really doing.”

He ran his nose up the column of her throat, dragging wet lips across her skin and inhaling deeply with a groan somewhere deep in his throat. Then he crushed his mouth to hers. Devouring her with lips and teeth and tongue. Long languid strokes told hold as Ri could do nothing but allow the blades to drop to the floor beside them and pant breathlessly against his mouth. Shifting her weight to begin rocking back and forth, riding his cock with little undulations of her hips.

When they briefly came up for air, she swallowed heavily. “Duly noted, brute.”

Which earned her another smack on her rear while his teeth pressed against her throat.

And that’s when he proceeded to really fuck her. Again. And again. Through so many orgasms, she lost count. Until the early light of dawn began to creep over the horizon, and the birds started to chirp as the forest awoke outside.

Where, once again, reality crept in and stole away the moment they'd been able to hide away in so perfectly.

CHAPTER 28

Of all the things Ri expected when she made her way to training a week later, it was not for Rowan to be missing.

They'd continued to steal moments together whenever they could, but there was no guarantee they could always sneak away to his cottage. So, on the morning when she woke up in her own rooms without the usual cocoon of Rowan's warmth and heavy arm trapping her against his body, the sense that something was amiss cut straight to her core.

A cold foreboding in the air sent shivers down her spine. Ri made her way to the training arena early, hoping she might find him there. If not, perhaps he'd taken off to the lake on his own, as he sometimes did as part of the pre-dawn patrol he still maintained. But somehow, she felt like she already knew the answer.

Low mist clung to the ground, shrouding the academy in a dense fog. Blanketing everything it touched with the unmistakable heavy kiss of dew. It set her nerves on edge and her spine tingling with a sense of dread.

Rowan was a creature she had begun to understand in layers. Just as she peeled away one, there were more beneath that took a lot longer to reveal their secrets. She certainly didn't expect him to spend every moment of every day by her side—no matter how much her stupid bitch of a fated bond squealed with delight at the idea.

No. There was no reason for her to expect Rowan to behave like anything less than the lone wolf he was so used to being.

Honestly, the fact he even welcomed her into his bed, or stayed in hers the handful of times they fell asleep in her rooms was nothing short of a miracle.

Ri was undeniably addicted to the forbidden moments when he gagged her and fucked her quietly up against the door inside her room, knowing other students were milling in the hallway right outside.

But instead of finding his familiar broad shoulders or blue eyes when she arrived at the training arena, she was only met with Finn's wide smile and dancing eyes. Looking fresh and unbothered as he always seemed to manage to do. Honestly, there was something eerie about the way that man always seemed to bounce around with so much enthusiasm.

"You're here early." He tossed her a wink before ducking back into the armoury.

Fuck, she really didn't think this through. She couldn't exactly ask outright if Rowan was here now, could she?

But her silent hesitation was cut off when Finn re-emerged, holding out a bow and quiver full of golden-tipped arrows for her.

"Seeing as you're here and have nothing better to do with yourself, go take these for a spin for me, would you?" Her fingers reached out eagerly. Flexing around the smooth curvature of the bow and allowing the weight of it to dance on her fingertips. Feather light and obviously made of the finest materials if the armourer before her had anything to do with it.

"Are you serious?" She couldn't contain the hint of excitement in her voice. It had been so long since she'd been able to simply enjoy using a bow or firing an arrow without the constant awareness that each missed or misfired shot might affect her standings with reaching the elites.

"Head out to the range." He shooed her off. "I'll follow you out there in a minute to see how they fly."

Ri hid the grin threatening to consume her entire face as she scurried outside. Despite the early morning quest to find her brute, locating Rowan of Nocturne could wait. Surrounded on all sides by the billowing mist, she could still work with the nearest targets set up on the perimeter of the forest. This was where the track beneath her feet continued an all-too-familiar path winding off to the assault course. But for now, she could set up her position here where the tree line began to thicken, and the scent of damp pine needles beneath her feet rose up to surround her in a blanket of wilderness.

So much like the familiar scents of her mountainous home territories, she suddenly felt weightless. Buoyant even.

There was every possibility she might be placed somewhere similar if she made it to the Astrals, which was looking more and more likely with every passing week. But there was still a long road ahead through the remainder of the year, and their most strenuous assessment yet was fast approaching.

Rowan had already dropped enough hints that she needed to expect the unexpected when the time came. Whatever lay in store for the class was going to make running the assault course look like a game made for younglings.

Attaching the quiver to her thigh, Ri withdrew one of the long, slender arrows from the sheath, and gently ran her thumb over the pointed golden tip. The entire shaft had been coated in a shimmering metallic substance, one that no doubt made for durability... and deadly precision.

She notched the length against the string and drew back into the stance ingrained into her muscle memory. Ri didn't need to think twice about positioning her elbows, or her core, or the angle of her chin. It all just flowed through her like a dance where she became one with the bow under her command.

This must be what it felt like to soar high on wings. Without even needing to think about the technique, only existing in the moment when the world turned quiet, and all you needed to do was breathe.

Drawing back, the tension pulled with perfect weight as she eyed her target amongst the tall timbers. Only the slowly drifting curtain of mist lay between her and the marker she aimed for. On a careful breath, she allowed the arrow to soar. Relishing the familiar song of the weapon flying through the air as she let it sail on its path.

Perfect arc and trajectory.

The arrow landed true to its mark with a dull thud. Just as she anticipated.

She grinned down at the bow loosely gripped in both hands. This was a beautiful piece, and she felt like her chest expanded with a sparkling beam of light. Somehow Finn had entrusted her out of everyone to handle such a thing of beauty on his behalf.

Turning it over in her hands, she was just about to admire the carvings along the inner curvature of the bow itself when she heard a crack of a twig behind her. Lighter footfall than could belong to Finn.

On instinct, she whirled around, already with a new arrow cocked against the bowstring, ready to aim at whoever crept up behind her.

“Don’t—shit—I didn’t mean to startle you.” Big eyes met her own. The young witch stood frozen to the spot with several large books clung against her chest and a bag slung loosely over her shoulder.

“Stars. You’ve got a death wish creeping up on me like that.” Ri breathed out a laugh. Easing the arrow out of position and allowing the bow to go slack.

The girl winced. Shooting an apologetic look. “I didn’t want to put you off your shot.” She gestured with her delicate chin at the marker where the golden arrow jutted out from the dead centre of the target. “You were breathtaking, by the way. I can’t imagine being that good at something... anything.”

“The giant fuck off stack of books you’re holding says otherwise.” Ri waved the arrow towards the intimidating

tombs wrapped in her arms. “If you can manage your way through that, I defer to your academic mastery.”

She let a small curve form along her lips. Her eyes beamed a little brighter against the dull grey morning.

“Can I watch you do another?” Stepping a little closer, she eyed the bow and the golden feathers protruding from the quiver at her thigh.

“You want to have a go?” Ri held it out and the girl immediately coughed out a laugh. Shaking her head vehemently, her nose scrunched up.

“Uhh. No. But I like to appreciate someone else excelling in their craft.”

Ri twisted her lips in a wry smile. There was a very good reason this gentle girl spent her days with her nose in potions books and grimoires and not taking elbows to the nose inside the training arena.

She dutifully turned and took aim. Letting another arrow fly with a steady breath. Satisfaction hummed through her chest as the pointed tip sank deep into the wood right alongside the first one. Dead centre on her chosen target.

The little gasp of appreciation had her turn and eye the witch, who was looking between her and the target with awe. She bobbed a little curtsy and propped the bow on the ground in front of her, resting both hands on the end.

“What brings you out here anyway?” Ri had half expected Finn to have joined her by now, but there was no sign of the man yet. She didn’t want to waste too many arrows without showing him exactly how well they were performing.

“I love the woods here. It reminds me of home, and while I do enjoy being cooped up in the library surrounded by books all day...” Her words drifted off and ended with a shrug. Looking up into the spindly pine needles sticking out at all angles on the branches above their heads, they both stood in silence for a moment. Breathing in the cool, crisp morning dew. The thick trunks disappeared into the shroud of mist like tall ghostly sentinels watching over them.

Ri's thoughts suddenly drifted back to the girl's warning from that day in the tavern. And considering the fact Rowan had now decided to vanish on her for the morning, she suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to press her for a little more on whatever it was this witch seemed to know.

Not that she was concerned about him as such... more just a curiosity she needed to satisfy.

Or, at the very least, more ugly gossip she could take steps to quash.

There was enough of that still clinging to the halls in whispers about Ri and her sister, the queen, that she couldn't bear to have anything similar start to spread about the Nocturnes.

"You said something the last time we met." Ri mused out loud. Drumming her fingers on the bow. "About the Nocturne witches."

The girl flicked her gaze down to meet her own, looking almost bashful at the reminder. *Interesting.*

Maybe it was just gossip in the heat of the moment, after all?

"Look, I really shouldn't have said anything..." She toed a piece of bark on the ground.

"But you did." Ri pressed.

"It's just... your sister being the queen and is fated to one of the Nocturnes... and then the other brother is here *suddenly* as one of the academic staff without warning." Twisting her fingers together, the girl was clearly uncomfortable bringing it up again.

Which made Ri even more curious to know where this was going.

"And?" This witch wasn't going to get off lightly for spreading undue gossip if Ri had anything to do with it.

"No one ever questions how they became so prominent, you know? I spend all day with my nose in historical texts and ancient manuscripts, and there's never any mention of how

they came into their power or how they achieved the status they hold across so many of the realms.”

Ri was about to speak but then paused. The girl was certainly right. When Ri had tried to look for information herself, there had been nothing to be found. For a family of such powerful witches, there were scant records of anything relating to them or their ancestors.

Maybe it was the all-round eeriness of the morning, or maybe it was something else, but for some reason, that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

“And their sister—Brigid of Nocturne—she’s reportedly one of the most powerful Seers ever to exist.” She certainly lived up to that name. Ri had met Brigid briefly, prior to enrolling at Astracadia. Times when she’d accompanied her sister on visits with her group of girlfriends and at Ruby’s coronation.

In fact, now that she considered it, Brigid had swooped in and rescued her from complete humiliation at the hands of Rowan that day.

All of it—the coronation and every scathing word he’d unleashed on her—seemed like a distant memory. How viscerally she’d loathed Rowan back then compared to her feelings for him now.

But something held her back from telling this girl that she’d met the infamous Brigid of Nocturne.

“Look, all I’m saying is that we get told who to trust, and are we just expected to believe that at face value? For so long, everyone has said that the Nocturne witches are who can be relied upon. But do they not have just as much blood on their hands as any dark sorcerers?” She chewed the inside of her mouth, clearly deciding whether to carry on or not.

“You think there’s more to their story?” Ri’s fingers flexed around the bow. Her stomach felt more and more unsettled as their conversation wore on.

Suddenly, she just wanted to gaze into Rowan’s sapphire eyes and hear his rumbling voice tell her that everything was

going to be ok. That he was her safe place to land.

The warlord who had spent three centuries covered in blood.

Who knew how to end a life before he could walk.

Ri's stomach twisted into knots.

“Did you know they had another sister?” The witch almost whispered so quietly she didn't hear her hushed tone. As if she worried the very trees themselves could hear her speak.

“What?”

“The eldest of the Nocturnes, Lachlan, had a twin.”

That slapped Ri across the face. No one had ever mentioned another sister in their family. Not even Ruby in all the time they'd both spent around Niall.

Certainly not Rowan.

“Oriana, are you down there?” Finn's voice carried from up at the training arena. Cutting through the moment as the two stood together in pensive silence.

“Yes, over by the first target,” Ri called out in reply, shouting back through the fog. “Hey, you don't have to rush off.” She started forward as the witch turned away.

“No, I really should go.” The girl mumbled into her books. “I'll catch you around sometime.”

Shit. Ri kept getting caught off guard in these impromptu conversations and forgot to ask the girl her name.

“You'd better have slotted that bastard right through the bull's eye—” Finn's voice grew louder, and his feet crunched on the gravel path.

“Hey, wait, I forgot to...” But the witch had scurried off into the thick bank of drifting mist, and something told Ri that even if she did hear her, the girl was in a hurry to get out of there.

Goosebumps travelled down her arms.

Another sister? Why had no one mentioned her? Was that some big family secret? And if so... what could possibly have happened that meant no one ever spoke of her?

CHAPTER 29

“**W**here the fuck have you be—is that *your* blood?” Oriana flew towards him. Her rushed steps across the wet stones drew nearer.

He’d heard her footfall descending into the catacombs but hadn’t been able to bring himself to respond as she started to call his name, searching for him from the top of the dank stairwell.

The night was already long into the small hours.

She shouldn’t be out at this time.

Not on a dark moon when there was almost no light to see by. Especially not when whatever they had just witnessed might be unleashed on the academy at any moment.

Oriana could defend herself in many ways. But not from *this*.

His head remained dropped between his shoulders when he heard her gasp. Rushing to his side and dropping to her knees, she took in the sight of him. Slumped on the ground with his back against the wall, Rowan knew he reeked of gore and death, and the acrid taste of blood still lingered in the back of his throat.

But if he thought he would be in for anything less than Oriana’s fire...

“All.” *Hit*. “Fucking.” *Hit*. “Day.” *Hit*.

Her tiny fists pummelled his chest to punctuate each word.

“You weren’t in class. No one said anything about where you were... and I couldn’t ask more than once without it seeming suspicious.”

“I didn’t expect to be the one being reprimanded for not attending classes.” He grimaced. That entity had slashed his ribs well and good. They were only just knitting back together. Ribs were the worst.

“Don’t be smart with me.” She fumed.

“Wouldn’t dream of taking your place as the smart-mouthed one out of the two of us.”

“Stop evading.”

Smart little thing, indeed.

“You’re hurt.” Dark eyes pierced him. Closely assessing his features.

“Already healing.” He grunted. Softly attempting to hold her clenched hands away from the worst of his wounds. It wasn’t exactly a lie, but he knew the process of recovering from such an onslaught would take his magic a little longer than usual to repair the damage.

“You’re a shitty liar.” Deft fingers gently lifted the tattered edges of his black shirt. She sucked in a disapproving breath as she took in the bright red gashes crisscrossed along his chest and stomach. Blood had dried to create a more garish look than was actually the case anymore. Although he’d lost more pints of crimson in facing down whatever that *thing* was than he’d care to admit.

Hence why he’d landed here and stayed put.

A safe, quiet place to lick his wounds after he’d ensured Niall returned safely... metaphorically speaking anyways.

“We need to get this off so I can take a proper look at you.” Protesting was futile. The girl already had the near-shredded shirt by the hem and inched it carefully up his torso. Clucking her tongue at him to move his arms off his knees so she could lift it over his head. The damn thing was nearly torn clean off his back.

An ocean of silence rolled around the catacombs as she saw the bloodstained evidence coating his skin.

“Stop fussing.” She didn’t need to see him like this.

Petite fingers hooked under his chin, forcing his head to lift and meet her stormy eyes. Oriana knelt between his boots, not looking at him with pity—he couldn’t fucking stand it if she’d felt sorry for him or some kind of bullshit like that—but instead, her eyebrow arched, almost in a challenge.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realise you were a snarling animal when wounded. Now shut the fuck up and take us to your cottage so we can get you clean. You reek of death.”

Somehow, those words were the exact balm his battered weary soul needed to hear in that moment. Oriana didn’t panic or worry over him, just took all his beaten-up state in her stride. Of course, he knew thousands of questions were just waiting to pour forth like a torrent. But for now, she kept the dam securely in place.

He damn near let out a groan as he portaled them straight to the open-air bathroom at his cottage. Using his magic to not only fill the stone pool for bathing but to light a candle in the single lantern hanging from the moss-covered wall. Stars glittered in the dark sky overhead, spreading a carpet of a million pinpricks of light against the inky blackness of the moonless night. When he turned, he gritted his teeth, catching a flash of himself in the mirror’s reflection.

Dark streaks coated everywhere, from his neck down to the waistband of his trousers. Leaving the sight of reddened, puckered slashes through his tattoos that continued to heal with each passing moment. Rowan added an extra healing spell to the steaming waters to help aid the process.

Oriana stood with arms folded, eyeing him carefully, not making a move to undress, which was entirely unacceptable. Fuck whatever flesh wounds he’d sustained; she better be naked and in his lap immediately.

“Get your ass over here.” His teeth gritted.

“No.”

“Don’t make me take you over my knee.”

She hooked her hair over one shoulder and flicked dark eyes up and down his bloodied torso. “No way. I’m staying fully clothed until I get some answers.” With arms crossed and a defiant tilt to her chin, her stubbornness was on full display.

Rowan sighed heavily. Shucking out of the rest of his clothes, he plunged into the steaming pool. All the magic infused into the water set to work immediately. Easing the sting and the burn of his partially healed wounds and accelerating the process of repairing each wound. As he dipped his head below water and scrubbed fingers through his hair, he could not only feel the pain ebbing away, but the energy he’d expended during their fight began to return.

Straightening up, he allowed the droplets to run off him. Stripping away all the bloodied evidence of the night. As he settled back against the side, seated on the rock ledge, he watched his little faerie studying him with a solemn yet curious expression on her delicate features.

“Niall and I went to investigate the portal that had been opened.” Scooping up a handful of water, he cupped it to his face. Using both hands to scrub over his brow and stubbled jaw.

Known as the Seal of Elharean, this was the kind of dark magic they had attempted to destroy for centuries. A portal to an unknown realm, opened by their dark sorcerers, releasing a kind of magic that was unfathomable. The type of power that no one in living memory had encountered. So potent that whatever had been unleashed toppled their own Elharean dynasty in a single strike barely moments after the Seal had been opened.

The vampiress Nelloix—one of the herbalism professors—had been manipulated and used to open the chasm. She and her fated vampire mates had survived what was, from all accounts, a battle that none saw coming. Ultimately, the House of Elharean succeeded in their ongoing quest to harness the power of the Seal, but in doing so, tore the very fabric of reality to unleash a primordial kind of power. A deep rift

descended into places unknown, with beings able to travel between their realms and take prisoners.

After the events that day some had organised search parties to descend into the cavernous rift opened below the House of Elharean's once-glorified mountain fortress. Disappearing through the portal in order to try and find those who had been taken, but to his knowledge none had been seen or heard from since.

Now, as witnessed by Niall and himself, the place was a smouldering heap. Charred rock was all that remained, surrounding an endlessly deep chasm in the ground.

That was where the two of them had encountered the entity. The very same one that had killed Saskia that night, and every sign pointed to it being responsible for the other murders. Leaving behind the litany of markings on the bodies of its victims like a gruesome calling card.

It was also where he'd recognised scenes from his nightmares that made his blood run cold. In that moment, things around him began to feel more like a prophecy than a recurring dream.

As Rowan sat, lost in his thoughts, he felt the water slosh beside him. Looking up from where his hands still covered his face, he saw Oriana sink into the water and sit on the ledge beside him.

"You seemed a little preoccupied for the hundred questions I had ready to fire at you." She shrugged her shoulders. "Plus, this pool looked amazing, and I couldn't wait all bloody night for you to rediscover the ability to speak."

He fought back a twitch threatening the corner of his lips.
Smart ass.

"You've healed." She murmured, almost as if to herself, while tracing soft fingertips over his ribs and up along his chest.

"We came across the entity that killed Saskia." He watched her face. Seeing her eyes widen just a fraction at the blunt news. "It emerged from a portal that had been opened not long

ago. We don't know what or who has control of it, but all we do know is that it comes from the other side of that chasm."

"And it sunk its claws into you." She furrowed her brow. "How is Niall?"

"Still a handsome dick. He got off lightly. When it first struck, I was in direct line of it and took the majority of the force before we could shield ourselves."

His brother would be fine. But it still didn't resolve any of their problems, nor did they have any answers on how they were going to prevent it from striking again. There was no fighting whatever dark magic controlled the thing.

They had merely done their best to survive the onslaught until they could escape. Bloodied and with flesh torn apart.

And with fresh glimpses into the nightmarish landscape that had plagued his dreams for so long now. He'd recognised the smell and the barren wasteland immediately.

They sat together in silence for a while. Steam enveloping them in feathery clouds, while Oriana's fingers ran hypnotic patterns over as many of his tattoos as she could easily reach.

He could happily get lost in her soft touch.

"What do your tattoos mean?" Oriana pushed him to lean back against the lip of the sunken pool. Reaching to grab one of the nearby bottles of potions he had on hand for whenever he needed to recover after battle. The thick liquid poured out into her palm and before he knew it, she was washing his arms and chest with gentle strokes.

Closely studying each line of ink as she did so.

She knew he didn't have any answers to what they had encountered tonight, and showing just how well she understood him, she trusted he would tell her more when he was able to. That was all there was to it for now.

"Each one represents a life I have taken." He watched her with rapt fascination. The way her lips gently pursed as he soaped his skin and occasionally stopped to stroke a fingertip over a pattern or a design. Some were individual objects that

had specific meaning. A depiction of their weapon, or helmet, or insignia. Others were more esoteric. The feather he'd seen on the ground not long after dealing the final blow, or the type of leaves growing on the trees overhead. Then, in other cases, the more common reminders of death had felt appropriate. Skulls peered out from the surface of his skin, intermingled with cherry blossoms, oak trees, and all manner of weaponry.

“Your own way of commemorating their life.” She tilted her head as she worked the soap in soothing strokes across his muscles.

Of course, this girl understood when she herself had the exact opposite committed to ink as a reminder on her own body. All the times she *could* have but chose not to.

Whereas Rowan had never been given a choice. The Goddesses had set his destiny in motion from day one.

“Come here.” The words slipped out quiet but firm.

This time she dutifully obeyed. Shifting over his lap as he spread his legs wide under the water. His hard cock—because when was he ever not hard around this girl—pressed against her slick core.

Slowly, she reached down and grabbed hold of his length, stroking him with a firm grip before notching the broad head at her entrance. With mouth slightly parted and a flush to her bronzed skin, she sank down over him.

The glide inside her, with how wet she was for him, was enough to have a low groan burst out of his chest.

“Fffuuuuck.” Rowan swallowed heavily. Her silky, tight heat felt like a dream. The kind he could gladly lose himself in if it meant leaving behind all the bloodshed he'd been forced to endure.

“*Brute.*” Her breathy moan made his cock throb seated all the way inside her.

“Ride it, my perfect little whore.” Splaying his fingers across her ass, he palmed both cheeks. Squeezing and kneading and parting them as she slowly rode his cock. The

water swirled around their bodies as she arched and flexed against him with her arms slung over his shoulders.

Surrounded by her soft, breathy whimpers and moans, he could already feel himself nearly ready to burst inside her. He shifted so that he could tease at her ass. Gently massaging and soothing with his magic while working one finger inside her as she purred with pleasure in his lap.

“So fucking filthy. You like that, don’t you, my dirty, little faerie.” He nipped at her jaw, then tugged the swell of her bottom lip between his teeth. Soaking up every single noise and movement of her body responding to the sensation of his magic working her. As he pressed further inside, she arched her back to give him more access. Rolling her hips to take his cock and finger even deeper.

Then he went in for the kill. Using his other hand to slide between them, he circled his thumb over her clit. It only took a couple of firm strokes before her moans intensified and her nails dug into the back of his shoulders.

Dropping her forehead against his neck, her entire body shook as she chanted. *“I’m coming. I’m coming. I’m coming.”*

The way her hot, wet pussy clamped down around him was his undoing. Feeling her ass grip around his finger and her cunt rhythmically working his cock at the same time, Rowan let out a low growl.

His cock jerked, and hot cum shot forward. Even though she was still riding him, he held her firmly in place and thrust into her from below. Allowing his magic to pulse through his fingertips against her clit and her ass in a way that he knew would extend her orgasm like a rolling wave.

Fuck she felt like nothing he’d ever experienced before. Calm and fire all rolled into one glorious moment when he forgot everything and the rest of the world fell away. Leaving only her.

After they’d both come back down to themselves, he swiped across her bottom lip with his thumb. Running the pad over the spot where he’d held her between his teeth.

“You make me forget how to breathe, yet I also feel like my blood is going to burst out of my body at the same time, little faerie.” His eyes searched hers. Still glazed with lust and arousal and looking like godsdamn perfection.

Humming softly, she ran her fingers up the back of his neck to tangle in his hair. Then flashed a little smirk at him.

That brought out a growl. “What?”

“I like this dishevelled puppy look on you.” Her nails dragged along his scalp, which only made his hips thrust up into her sharply.

“Did you just call me a scruffy dog while my cock is inside you?” He thrust again to emphasise his statement. Devouring the way her mouth popped open and a little whimper of pleasure fell from her lips.

She hummed. “Stars, you’re so sensitive under all that tough guy exterior... If you’d let me finish. It’s sexy. I like it a lot, brute.” Wriggling her hips like a little vixen, she began to grind down on him again just a fraction. “You know, the first time I saw you, there was nothing out of place. You were just this sleek, composed exterior. The warlord with an armour that nothing could penetrate.” Dancing her fingers over his shoulder muscles, she tapped on the firmness of him while working her own magic. Shifting slightly over his length with the way her pussy was slick and filled with his cum.

“And now?” His eyes flickered between her own.

“Now I feel like you’re letting the true strength of you show.” She paused to bite her lip as they could both feel another release building between them. “Yes, there might be some softer parts exposed—just a crack here and there—but you’re stronger when others can know your heart.”

“So what does mine say, little faerie? My heart that’s now apparently exposed.” His deep voice was barely a whisper. Digging his fingers tight against the softness of her flesh, he worked her hard against him now.

“I’m still learning the language. I’ll get back to you when I’ve figured out how to translate what it means when it

speaks.” She was breathless. Heat raced between their bodies, and her tight nipples grazed his chest.

After a confession like that, there was only one place he wanted to have her. Standing them both up, he kept her legs wrapped around his waist. Magic dried their bodies off in the short distance between the water and his room.

Only this time, as he walked them both over to the bed, he took her mouth with his own. Sliding his tongue deep, in a slow but powerful glide. Eating up every moan against him as she allowed him to fuck her mouth with the kind of heavy, dominant strokes he wanted to give her pleasure from.

Sitting down with his back against the head of the bed, he palmed both breasts and took in the magnificence of her. Still in his lap, exactly where he wanted her to be, with his cum seeping between them, but right on the edge and desperate for release.

“What do you want?” She pushed his hair back off his forehead. Cheeks flushed and lips puffy from his kisses.

It wasn’t a question about sex. This was something much deeper passing between them in this quiet moment. One where they both teetered on the edge of falling into an abyss of quite a different kind.

One that Rowan had never dared venture into before now.

With his head tipped back, he watched her through hooded eyes. Now was the time to stop running from what he wanted. The only time he’d ever felt confident to actually take what was being offered, and from the last person he ever expected.

His voice rough, he fixed her with a penetrating gaze. “I want a life. I’ve been cursed with three hundred years, and I haven’t lived a single day. I want the kind of life you make me wish for, filled with long days in the sun, swimming in the ocean, and star gazing at night on a new moon. But most of all, I want you there with me. We could do all of those things, or none of them, and somehow I’d feel happiness like I’ve never been able to taste before.”

And as his words hung in the air around them, he felt her clench and sob out soft whimpers of pleasure. Riding out her climax that was quickly chased by his own. Breathlessly, she crushed her mouth over his and murmured her agreement.

“I need you, brute. All of that. Only you.”

She wanted that, too.

She wanted that with him.

And he didn't deserve any of it.

CHAPTER 30

Pressure bore down on her throat with unrelenting fury. Her breaths began to shallow, and in her semi-awake state, Ri vaguely had the sense of being pinned beneath a massive bulk.

What kind of unwelcome dream was this?

She fumbled with her hands in the dark. Only a faint crack of grey seeping into the room indicated that dawn had arrived. But she was still firmly in the grips of slumber, groggy and trying to make sense of what was happening around her.

Latching on to the source of the pressure tightening, she recognised the presence immediately. It was Rowan. One part of her sagged with relief, while the other felt a rising sense of panic. This wasn't *Rowan*, but something else—some other part of him.

And as her eyes cleared of sleep and adjusted to the light, she felt the tight grip begin to choke her. The force of his hands around her neck jerked her body awake immediately. Ri made a tight noise beneath him, her eyes flickering over his face that didn't see her at all.

Whatever he was witnessing behind those unseeing eyes certainly wasn't her.

Thumping at his forearms and begging to struggle beneath him, Ri felt her chest tighten. As her airway became more and more restrained, she kicked out, but his huge frame was too overpowering. He was all tense muscle and predatory intent.

Rowan's pale face and unblinking eyes stared into her own with a fierce snarl etched onto his features as he squeezed and squeezed, until finally Ri thought she was going to pass out. Blackened dots crept in around the edges of her vision, and her mouth hung open. No sound passed her lips, no matter how hard she tried.

Until finally, she gathered enough strength to produce a blade in her fist. Slamming it into his forearm with all her might. A final attempt to draw him out of whatever nightmare he'd become trapped within.

Blood welled and ran down his arm, dripping all over her chest in hot rivulets as she watched him wake. A sharpness appeared, clearing away the cloudiness in his blue eyes. Focusing with a couple of blinks on the scene before him. He jerked backwards with a pained noise. The blade flew from where it had still been tightly clenched in her fist, and Ri choked down a lungful of air. Her hand clutching and rubbing the bruised skin as she doubled over onto her side.

"Fuck." Rowan barked and erupted out of the bed. Both hands shoved in his hair as he lurched on unsteady legs across the room. Still not fully back in his body, but instinctively trying to put distance between the two of them.

Which Ri didn't hesitate to resolve immediately.

There was no way she'd allow Rowan to paint himself as a monster.

"Don't you dare." She winced as her voice came out scratchy and hoarse. Ri swung herself out from beneath the tangled sheets. Crossing the room to him, she buried her face in his tattooed chest and wrapped her arms tight around his torso.

Every muscle in his body was taught and primed as if for battle. Beneath her ear, his heart thundered wildly, and his skin felt clammy to the touch. At least his wounds from yesterday had all fully healed, thanks to his magic, although she still felt certain she could see every inch of ragged skin if she closed her eyes.

Ignoring every growling protest and attempt to walk backwards out of her clutches, she latched on tight. Drawing him to her and holding steady.

His big palms pressed against her shoulders, trying to shove her away from him but, at the same time, unable to bring himself to be forceful with her.

“I’m—I can’t—” Mumbled words barely made it past his lips. She didn’t need to hear him say anything. When he came to and saw what he was doing, the look on his face had been one of sheer horror. Stricken and mouth gaping open as though he couldn’t suck air into his lungs either.

Rowan didn’t ever shake. The man wasn’t one to falter, but right now, she sensed he was teetering on the crumbling ledge.

“I trust you. You would never hurt me.” Ri kept her head firmly pressed against the spot where his heart hammered in panic. “You didn’t hurt me.” Her fingers dug into the muscled contours along his spine.

“*Please.*” The plea of a man who wanted to be released and held tight all in the same breath.

She knew the feeling.

“Come back to bed.” Ri gently tugged him as she walked backwards. Keeping her voice soft as she guided him over to the edge of the mattress and pulled him with her. His chest heaved like the flanks of a horse after bolting at full flight.

As she settled them both back under the covers, he watched her with wide, searching eyes. His gaze locked tight on the spot around her neck where there would no doubt be bruises soon, if not already blooming on her skin.

Ri took one of his big paws in her own and brought it up towards her throat. With a violent hiss, he tried to jerk his hand away. But she gripped hold of him tightly. Placing a kiss on the inked patterns of his knuckles and insisted he kept the connection with her warm flesh. Bringing his fingers up to brush over the skin and remind him she was still here.

“Feel that,” she murmured softly. Pressing his clenched fist against her pulse, ensuring the backs of his knuckles made

contact with her skin as she cradled his big hand in her own. “That is still beating. I’m not harmed. You didn’t mean to touch me that way.”

His blue eyes flickered away. Something dark descended over his features, and his jaw pulsed.

“I would have fucking slaughtered you.” Gravel and remorse sat heavy in his tone.

“No. You wouldn’t have.” She slowly unfolded his fingers one by one and rested his calloused palm over the curve of her throat. Stroking across the back of his hand as she nuzzled into his touch.

“You should be running from me.” His gaze still refused to meet her own, but he paused on the sight of his hand lightly resting over the column of her neck. A deep frown knitted his brows as if he wanted to dissect his own touch, bone by bone.

“May I remind you that I don’t need a *good man*, brute.” Ri rested her palm against the side of his face. Watching on as the tension flickered there for a moment before softening almost imperceptibly into the contact. “I need you and your chaos and your faults, to match my own.” Whatever sliver of him she could hold tight to, she would with all her might.

It would have to be enough.

She shared Rowan with demons that haunted both his dreams and his waking hours.

Maybe she could find a way to help ease some of that burden.

They lay together in a soft cocoon of silence for a while. Allowing the soft shades of morning light to begin filtering in and turning the room from a cool, grey to the warm glow of sunrise. Ri quietly thanked every ancient deity that today was a day with no classes. Nowhere for either of them to be. No need to leave this little nest they’d formed if they didn’t want to.

A low rumble from somewhere deep inside his chest travelled through her palm. “It’s always the same. The dread of having to make a terrible decision. One that is beyond

horrific.” His thumb stroked absently at the curve of her throat. “Battles that never end. Faceless enemies in a landscape painted in nothing but red dust and blood.”

Ri mirrored his movements, stroking the stubble on his jaw. Listening as she watched his mouth move and slowly unwind from whatever torturous grip his own mind had on him.

“I’ve had no choice for as long as I can remember. The scenario is always the same. And every time, I wonder why I agree to do it. What could possibly be powerful enough to make me see it through to the grisly end?” His eyelids dropped closed and squeezed tight for a moment. Relieving whatever horrors lay awaiting him each time he stepped into the realm of sleep.

“The Goddesses burdened me with the knowledge that I would be the one to end it all... but every day for centuries now, it has become clearer that it has to be at the price of my sister’s head.”

Ri’s chest tightened at his words. They sounded hollow and far away. Like he’d been wrung dry of all possible feelings—erased of any tenuous thread of lingering emotion—that could ever be attached to such a terrible idea.

“The worst of all... even more than knowing I voluntarily end my own sister’s life... is knowing that Brigid understands all of this. She sees everything. But my sister had not once said a word, and it eats at my very core.”

She twined their legs together and cupped his jaw, drawing his face down towards hers until their foreheads were touching. He felt like a giant wrapped around her.

“Can we go somewhere?” Ri whispered. Unsure of what to say, but also knowing that Rowan didn’t expect her to respond to everything he’d just shared. Prophesying the slaughter of your own sister at the tip of your blade wasn’t exactly a topic that called for further discussion.

But she sensed they needed something to resolve the fear he’d instilled in himself that he couldn’t be rough with her.

There was only one way to reassure him she wasn't a fragile little thing. If Rowan of Nocturne was her fated mate, this was the side of him she needed, like the heart beating in her chest. And this man had to understand that no matter what, he could still be that way with her.

A way to erase that haunted look behind his eyes when he'd scrambled away across the room.

Rowan's sapphire gaze snapped to lock on her own.

"Hey, brute." She allowed a small smile to tilt her lips up at the corners, and she rang her fingertips over his mouth. "Wherever you want to go, let's go. Preferably somewhere we can wash off these nightmares of yours."

His thumb stroked over her pulse as he mulled the idea. Then nodded against her touch.

Ri couldn't help but squeal as he moved too fast for her to react. One moment she'd been curled up against his broad chest; the next, she was being scooped up in his tight grip. A large palm splayed over her ass as he wrapped her around his body.

Both of them very, very naked.

"What—" Her words were cut off as they portaled, straight from the warmth and comfort of his bed and with a small shriek bursting out of her mouth, Ri didn't dare look at where he'd just taken them.

"You don't need clothes for this, little faerie." And the next moment, they were both submerged into calm, crystal-clear water. Freshwater. A lake. For a moment, she nearly found her heart in the back of her throat, thinking he'd taken them to the lake at Astracadia. But no, when she dared to peek over his shoulder, this wasn't a place she recognised at all.

Ri had been prepared to shriek at the impending cold. Instead, the pleasantly warm temperature of the water lapped over their bodies as Rowan walked them further out until she began to feel the buoyancy of the deepening lakebed.

Winding her arms around his neck, she cast her gaze at wherever they'd come to. It was a stunning rocky outcrop with

a large set of boulders and what looked like caves across the far side of the lake. On one side, willows hung in low sweeping tendrils caressing the top of the water. Over to the other direction, she could see high mountain peaks tinged purple with wisps of clouds clustered around the tops.

What was this place? Did it mean something special to him?

Ri allowed herself to soak away the chaos of thoughts and confusion about this man. He was so endlessly complex and impossible to decipher.

As their bodies floated together, so studied the lines of ink rolling across his muscled shoulders. Had he essentially told her he loved her last night? In a very *Rowan* kind of way of course—right after fingering her ass and making her come so hard she saw stars and forgot her own name.

Then there was the matter of the time slowly ticking by day by day. Niall's ultimatum around informing her sister of what was going on between them.

But without having an actual answer for that, Ri felt... well... unable to form coherent thoughts. It was like fate had reached into her mind and withdrawn all her faculties when it came to Rowan. Leaving her infuriatingly devoid of logic or rational thinking.

Which was Rowan's cue to invade her mind once more. In a blink she was submerged, dragged under without warning and the shimmering clear lake water all around her rippled with threaded beams of sunlight reaching down to the pebbled bed. She kept her eyes open and watched as Rowan floated before her, with air bubbles streaming slowly out of his nose and his dark messy hair slowly twisted around his face.

As his blue eyes held her own, there was a peacefulness to him that she'd never witnessed. Silvery threads of his magic extended around their bodies and wove through the water, easily keeping them submerged. A terrible weight had lifted off him in the soundless space beneath the surface. Reaching out to tug her through the water towards him, their mouths met

and he passed his breath to hers as they slowly kissed in an underwater cocoon.

Ri wanted to stay down here forever. In the quiet of Rowan's embrace and heated kiss. Wrapped in the sensual perfection of these aquamarine depths.

But her brute had other ideas. Portaling them back to the surface, now at the place where she'd seen caves on the distant shore of the lake. Gently undulating rock protruded from the clear blue waters, with a pale cream texture that sparkled in the early sunlight.

A shallow cove formed a circle around them, with smooth-edged ledges of the rock visible below the surface.

Mind you, there wasn't much time to appreciate the natural beauty of this secluded place. Rowan's cock juttied hard against her stomach, and he towed them both through the water until his back rested against one of the rock ledges.

"No one else has come here." The heat behind his words, rasped against the shell of her ear sent a flood of wetness to her pussy. Hearing the unspoken *before you* in that statement sent lust raging a wild course throughout her body.

Ri ground herself unashamedly against his erection. "Then own me here. Fuck me right here, brute."

His cock slid against her slick entrance beneath the water as she straddled his lap. Bracing her knees either side of him against the smooth surface of the rock, and holding tight to his shoulders. Ri shifted her weight and rocked her pussy back and forth against his length and they both groaned together.

There was no hiding how soaked she was for him. Slippery and easily gliding against him as she tilted her hips. Water lapped at her tight nipples, overstimulating her with each shift and thrust.

Ri bit her lip as she felt him slip inside. Filling her to the hilt easily and enjoying the sizzling pleasure of being stretched around his fat cock.

A dark noise rumbled in Rowan's chest beneath her body. Her fingers tightened against his tattooed shoulders. Two

fathomless pools of deepest sapphire stared at her from beneath a heavy-lidded expression. She felt his strong grip take hold of the curves and creases at the top of her thighs, and he held her firmly down on his length. Forcing himself even deeper and allowing the thickness of him to keep stretching her channel.

“You’re going to scream for me, my little faerie whore.” He surged forward and bit at her jaw. “No one else gets to hear your pleasure but me.” The scrape of his teeth continued down the curve of her neck. Biting a trail down the column of her throat, while he firmly rocked her against his pelvis.

Her swollen clit pulsed and sparked with pleasure.

“*Rowan.*” She gasped. Feeling his mouth close around her aching nipple, sucking and swirling around the tight bud, before grazing it with his teeth.

When he bit down, Ri was cresting the edge of her orgasm within seconds. With her release rising up to claim her only a moment later when Rowan circled the front of her throat with one big hand and squeezed tight. Thrusting up into her as she let out a long moan against his hand. Powerful waves rolled on and on as her pussy clamped down around him.

“Fuck. That’s it.” He murmured. A hoarse groan into the secluded space of the cove. The only noise being the soft lapping of the water against the rock ledge behind him and Ri’s whimpered cries of pleasure.

“More. *Please.*” She would happily beg. If it meant getting more of this man... having him touch her exactly the way she wanted him to. Without remorse or concern that he might hurt her. She was so gone for him, there was no end in sight to how easily she could get lost in the pleasure only he could give.

“So fucking greedy.” He moved in a blur. One moment she was impaled on his cock, the next she was bent over the rock ledge. Her sensitive nipples pressed hard against the smooth stone, feeling the sun-warmed rock from her chest down to her stomach and beneath her palms.

Rowan had her positioned exactly where he wanted her. The water's edge hit her upper thighs, exposing her to him. Inviting him to take whatever he wanted.

She was all his.

Ri nearly lost it when she felt his mouth *there*. His wicked tongue swirled and pressed against her ass as he ate her like a man starved. Every muscle in her clenched. Her clit pulsed and ached. She felt her legs begin to shake and the trembling sensation rolled straight down to her toes.

“Dirty fucking girl.” He bit her ass cheek, then soothed the sting with his hot mouth.

Yes. This was the man she needed. The one who could treat her roughly and also worship her completely.

Shoving back inside her from behind, Rowan's cock hit an even deeper angle in this position. He fucked her with sharp thrusts, drawing right out to the tip, before plunging back in again. Rocking her body forward to drag against the warm stone. Winding her into a frenzy as she clenched around him.

“Fffffuck. Yes. Oh, Godd—” Ri was a babbling mess. The angle of his thrusts had her panting and crying out each time he hit that spot so fucking deep.

“*Ungggh.* This cunt is mine to own whenever I want.” His possessive words left a hot wave of pleasure in their wake. She knew he was watching himself slide in and out as his big hands had her ass spread wide. Each jerk of his hips forward was a promise to make good on those words.

A shiver of delight ran straight down to her toes.

His movements paused just when he pulled out to the tip, and she felt him shift behind her. Then a cool, liquid sensation hit her ass. An unmistakable spark of magic flew across her skin. Whatever he'd just coated her with back there was immediately relaxing her and winding her pleasure up higher at the same time.

Every muscle relaxed, with a buzzing feeling rippling and dancing in her blood.

“Your cunt belongs to me, little faerie. And this perfect fucking tease of an ass is mine to own.”

Well, fuck. If that didn't send a crescendo of delight straight up her spine. Desire and wanton pleasure took over and she couldn't help but arch her back and moan with ecstasy. That fucking magic he'd just coated her with was like a drug.

But she'd never felt clearer in her mind and body.

She wanted this. Him. Everything.

“Please. I want you, brute.” She whimpered and clenched with anticipation beneath his hold.

“Relax for me, little faerie.” His big fingers worked her now. Amplifying the potency of the lubricating sensation. Then pressed forward, gently easing past the ring of muscle. Her body was sparkling and soaring just from his touch alone.

“I need...” She had barely got the words out when the broad head of him replaced his fingers.

“You're going to take my cock and give me those sweet little sounds of surrender, my perfect faerie whore.” Then he started to move. Easing himself in and out of her ass with ever-deepening thrusts.

Between his magic and the pleasure he'd wound her into so expertly, her body melted beneath him. Loose and pliant and overwhelmed with feeling so fucking full. It felt like he was everywhere, and she floated away on a soaring cloud of bliss.

Rowan's dark curses accompanied each shallow pulse forward as he worked inside. She could feel the weight of his self-control warring against his need to fuck her.

There was nothing more to her than whimpering moans and pleading noises for him to take exactly what he desired.

And that was when she felt it. His hips sank against her ass when he seated himself fully inside, and they both let out a desperate noise of pleasure. There was no more waiting. He fucked her roughly. Tenderly. With equal parts adoration and

brutal perfection. Indulging her body the way only he knew precisely how to.

Ri's orgasm rolled up with a long, endless, soul-shattering cry. She moaned loudly and cried out Rowan's name over and over. Clenching around him as he bit out dark curses and his own orgasm chased straight after hers.

He bucked into her roughly. Fingers biting into her hips as he filled her with his cum.

She was undone.

Taken apart.

Put back together.

All by this man.

Her brutal warrior and tender lover.

The next moment his body covered hers, with his cock still thrusting in and out slowly. Strong arms wrapped beneath her body, squeezing her tight against his chest, and she could feel his heart hammering just as fast as her own.

"You did so well, my little faerie." His lips pressed against the side of her neck, and she instantly turned into a swooning puddle beneath his heavy bulk.

"But don't think I'm finished with you." The heat and raw sex in his voice made her chest purr with delight. Only for his next words to have her clenching around his length in anticipation of what was to yet to come.

"I need to feel you coming on my cock again... and see you dripping with my cum, like my perfect whore."

CHAPTER 31

Nervous energy raced back and forth across the training arena. Looking around, Rowan surveyed how each of the students each had grim determination plastered on their faces where they stood swinging weapons, stretching, and bouncing on their toes.

Good.

They'd fucking need it.

He'd spent the better part of the morning establishing the obstacles they would be required to face as they each made their way through the forest. The regular assault course they were used to had been transformed into various enchantments that would form a progressively difficult set of circumstances to face.

Each student would enter alone. Facing down whatever they encountered with nothing but their wits and their weapons at their disposal. All were given free reign to use whatever magic they possessed as part of completing the assessment, but that would only get them so far.

This was a test of endurance and mental fortitude. Not whether a witch could use their magic or a vampire could use their speed. Nor would a shifter be able to barge their way through with snarling teeth and claws while in wolf form. This was going to push each of them far beyond their limits.

Rowan expected there to be plenty of blood spilled today.

In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if this eliminated some from the class entirely; those who were falling to the lowest in

the rankings might choose to walk away after this.

He'd established new blood wards—designed to keep out anyone who wasn't partaking in the assessment for their own safety—and the forest was effectively one large fortress. A network of more and more complex obstacles forming a maze of sorts. There were some that led to dead-ends, requiring whoever went through to backtrack and reorient themselves. While others lead on to another, then another.

Some would incapacitate the students in some way. Sensory deprivation. Loss of abilities. Being restrained.

Others would unleash enchantments that simulated an attack. There was no actual danger of being savaged or wounded, but to whoever was in the midst of the spell it would seem more than real. Including the types of potential wounds inflicted.

They'd feel searing pain and see exactly the kinds of garish sights only battle could sear into the mind's eye.

They'd still bleed.

Survival and endurance would prove just as crucial as expertise with being able to fight off whatever assailants came their way.

As he cracked his knuckles and glanced around the vast space, he spotted Oriana looking focused. Her favoured blades strapped across her body and bow slung across her back. Whereas many around her could hardly contain their restlessness or nerves, she exuded calm.

He'd found it impossible to sleep. Choosing instead to stay awake beside her as she drifted off to sleep in his arms. After the terrifying reality of what he almost did to her that morning... all it would have taken was for him to have a weapon within easy reach.

The consequences were unthinkable.

Unbearable.

So instead, he lay there through the dark hours, watching over her like some kind of brooding sentinel. Sleep was a

luxury he could afford to live without. His magic would easily accommodate a stretch of time without that kind of rest.

He'd lived through worse hardships than having a soft, beautiful girl wrapped in his arms.

When morning eventually came, she'd been fast asleep and snoring, with her long hair tied up in a messy pile on top of her head. Her dark eyelashes fanned across her bronzed cheeks, and shit if that didn't make something deep inside his chest ache.

Absently, he rubbed a hand over the spot right above his ribcage.

Maybe he'd been hit harder yesterday when he and Finnic sparred together than he thought.

The usually maniacal grin of the man himself beamed around the training arena as he began to call names, order of entering the course, and set them into a line-up of sorts. Ignoring the sight of one of the students rushing out the main doors to throw up, Rowan strode over to join Finnic.

His eyes flitted over to Oriana once more. This time she snagged his gaze with her own for just a second before ducking her head. He knew it was fucking greedy to want her attention right now of all times, but he couldn't help but feel something uneasy in his stomach.

There was no doubt she'd excel in this assessment today. The girl was proving time and time again to be able to stay clear of the vampire, Etienne, on the rankings. But a churning deep in his gut left him wanting to grab hold of her and take her away from here.

Only problem was that she would most likely never speak to him again if he dared such a thing.

The order in which the students were to go about completing the assessment was determined by ranking. Weakest scores would go first. Which meant as the current highest points holder, Oriana would be the last one to enter the assault course for the day.

One by one the line began to enter the forest, a single student at a time. He had arranged the maze of obstacles and scenarios to bring them in a full loop so that they exited almost at the same point they entered. Which provided a blood-soaked preview to the next student waiting in line to take their turn.

As each student eventually emerged, some more battered and wide-eyed looking than others, the line began to dwindle down. Throughout the early stages of the course, there were some who almost crawled out. Complete with broken limbs, torn clothing, and most of them had tracks of dirty tears down their bloodied faces.

Finnic directed most of those immediately towards the healing bay to be attended to in the main building of the academy. Fortunately, the little sprite, Brynne, seemed to fare well. She bore some bruised welts along her cheekbone and a large gash down one arm, but she still managed a small smile for her classmates and gave Oriana a quick hug before she headed back to her rooms.

The afternoon wore on and on, with distant shouts and cries occasionally echoing out of the forested gloom. When they finally reached the last two—Etienne and Oriana—the sun was sinking low on the horizon. There were already patches of mist starting to form amongst the edges of the treeline, which would no doubt thicken once they made their way deeper into the trees themselves.

His fingers itched to drag her into the armoury and tell her what to expect. As if she could sense his thoughts swirling around, she cocked an eyebrow the next time he shot a look at her. To the left of him, the vampire took off using his speed, disappearing amongst the pines within the blink of an eye.

Leaving himself, Finnic, and Oriana to await his completion of the course before she could enter.

Rowan swallowed heavily. Keeping his arms crossed, he fixed his gaze on the treeline at the end of the path extending from the doors to the training arena. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Finnic start to drift off towards his precious

stash of weapons to begin his daily checks. All the while, seeming entirely caught up in studying his notes from the day's assessments.

Oriana moved to stand just off to one side of the open doorway. She kept her eyes locked on the last place they'd seen Etienne, but rounded on him with a quiet hiss. "If you dare try and give me special favours or advice, I'll cut your balls off."

His teeth ground together. That fucking feeling in his gut just wouldn't relent.

So, instead of saying anything, he kept his jaw firmly clamped shut. Knowing full well that he was a bristling porcupine, while she appeared to be the embodiment of serenity.

Her fingers traced over her weapons as she readjusted their positioning on her body. Ran through each of the arrows stocked in the quiver strapped to her thigh. Tested the string on her bow. A methodical checklist of everything at her disposal before stepping into the unknown.

Preparing herself for what was to come with all the assuredness of someone far beyond her years.

Fuck. He had barely registered the thought—that she was, in fact, centuries younger than him—when Etienne emerged from the treeline at that same moment.

Not using his vampire speed or mysting abilities. Instead, he limped slowly up the gravel path. Blood streamed from a large cut on the side of his head. His sword was slicked with crimson, dripping slowly from the tip of the blade that hung loosely in his grasp, and with one hand he clutched at a gaping wound on the side of his abdomen.

From the dark stain extending around the place he held onto, it was evident he'd lost a lot of blood himself in the process.

Rowan silently cursed himself and this godsdamned assessment. He'd been the one to place every enchantment and

hex. Used his magic to create every foe who would need to be defeated in order to make it through and out the other side.

If she emerged looking as battered as this, how could he live with himself? Yes, she'd heal, but the thought of her being gravely injured while out amongst the forest on her own made his neck feel clammy.

Thoughts of seeing his own hands wrapped around her slender neck came rushing back in.

Was this any different?

He'd be causing her harm, even if this time it wasn't at his own hands.

Finnic rushed past them to offer a shoulder for Etienne to lean on as he slowly inched his way along the pathway drawing closer to the training arena. Giving him a smile that the vampire grimaced at in return.

"Oriana." He muttered under his breath, not sure what the fuck he was going to do or say or how to navigate this impending sense of dread filling every inch of space inside his lungs. But when he turned his head towards her, all he saw was the back of her.

And her middle finger.

So instead of doing what every fibre in his body yearned to do, which was to portal straight to her and cut this off before it even began, he watched on silently as her tiny frame disappeared into the darkened edges of the forest surrounded by a thickening cloud of mist.

The deafening silence was only drowned out by the roaring of blood in his ears.

CHAPTER 32

The scent of rust and the tang of fresh blood clung to Ri's nose as she entered the forest. Hanging thick in the air like a gruesome, pungent odour. The slick residue of those who had come before her shone in certain spots. A bloodied handprint against a rock here, a slash of red droplets coating some fallen pine needles there. Following the dirt trail she had run so many times, the path now felt like a map on the back of her hand.

Only this time, everything was different.

In a way that caused the back of her neck to prickle with anticipation.

She gripped the handle of her bow, one arrow already cocked and ready to take aim as she crept towards the point where the tree trunks became more gnarled and denser. Light struggled to reach the forest floor, with thin, ghostly wisps of mist threading along the moss-covered ground.

A chorus of chattering birds normally followed her every move as she traversed the path of the assault course through this area of the woods, but today the stillness sent an eerie feeling down her spine.

Clearly, whatever magic Rowan cast had scared off the usual creatures who liked to watch on with curiosity from the shadows.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, she flexed her fingers and readjusted her grip. There was no knowing when the first of the challenges would appear, but she was in no

doubt whatever came first would be designed to weaken her right from the outset.

Rowan would be sure to throw his students straight into the flames. His blackened heart would settle for nothing less than blood from the very beginning. Letting them deal with whatever came along afterwards while already hindered in some fashion. Just as he'd been doing with them inside the training arena every day.

Teaching them to survive and learn how to fight when the darkest moments came. Not when circumstances were stacked in their favour.

A snap of a branch was all the warning she received before a roar burst forth and a blur of grey skin and long talons launched towards her. Ri had her first arrow fired immediately, swinging round and cutting down the skeletal-looking assailant with a shot straight to the head before they'd reached her. But others emerged at the same time from the far side of the path. A pack of at least ten of the ghastly-looking creatures swarmed towards her.

Snatchers. Ri had heard of them, seen them roaming in groups before. Creations of the House of Elharean tasked with one intent only, and that was to cause as much physical harm as possible. Mindless beings with long, razor-sharp claws instead of fingers and sunken faces with sewn-up-looking skin where there should be a mouth.

They were nightmarish things. And despite knowing that this was all an enchantment and none of it was real, there was the distinct possibility of being injured. The trail of blood through this part of the course was evidence of that.

Ri moved quickly. Loading and reloading her arrows to fire with precision and rapid efficiency. She was able to dart her way back towards where a large knotted tree trunk lay fallen beside the trail and scampered to the top of it to give herself leverage over the Snatchers crowding towards her at ground level.

While their lethal claws could easily slash and maim, they weren't fast or agile. And as long as she could remain calm

and pick them off one by one, they wouldn't pose too much threat to her. Although for less experienced students, the sight of a pack of these sickly grey-looking apparitions would have no doubt proved overwhelming.

No wonder there was so much blood everywhere.

Hitting her mark with each arrow, Ri crouched low on the trunk. Loose bark shifted below her boots as she swung a wide arc, surveying just beyond the trees for any sign of more of the creatures. But the trees sat silent.

At least her first test was over. Now to continue through the rest of the unknown sequence that lay ahead.

Quickly hopping down off the massive trunk, she restored her quiver with a quick use of her magic. Gold arrows refilled the leather pouch, and she set off at a jog. There was no telling what might appear next, and she wasn't going to sit here waiting.

The dirt path followed the familiar route through several physical obstacles constructed of logs and boulders. Each designed to be climbed over, squeezed past, or crawled beneath. But one thing they all had in common was a type of magic embedded in them that drained energy and powers the longer you took to move past them.

Ri emerged from crawling beneath the last tunnel of criss-crossed logs, having to wriggle on her belly and slide through the dirt to be able to get to the other side, and dragged herself to her knees. When she made an attempt to stand up, it was like suddenly being held down by weights tied to her neck and ankles. The effortless use of her magic from moments before to produce more weapons felt like a pale shade of what she was used to, as if her magic had drifted out of reach.

Shit.

This was exactly why Rowan had forced her to complete this assault course so many times. If she'd had any less experience with navigating these obstacles, she might have been caught off-guard by the impact of the way they drained her magic so powerfully.

But at least now, with Goddess-knows what lurking just around the corner, she had the benefit of growing more resilient after all her extra after-class rounds of this assault course. Learning how to shake off the after-effects of the enchantment faster and faster each time.

Heaving herself up to her feet, Ri unhooked her bow from behind her and once again set off following the path. Mist continued to thicken and swirl around her feet as she pressed forward.

Only, she made it barely thirty paces before something brushed up against her calf. As she swung around to face this next challenge, a thick wall of grey fog met her searching gaze. Within a second, she'd been slammed by the throat and knocked straight on her back. Hot, slicing pain throbbed at her neck. She realised her arms had been pinned, and her legs were being wrapped so tight she couldn't move her ankles.

Shooting agony tore through her as if a thousand glass shards were piercing into her flesh. Then she saw, out of the corner of her eye, the flailing thick tendrils of whatever this attack was from. Like barbed lengths of vine coated in spines and thorns. The lengths were so heavy they thudded against the ground with a force that sent tremors through the dirt.

As the jagged points dug deeper into her, a dizzying sensation began to pump through her bloodstream. Some kind of toxin was being released, and with every second she lay here bound and held firm against the forest floor, she was being filled with more and more of the poison.

Ri began to thrash against the restraints, but each shift only tightened them around her arms. They climbed higher towards her shoulders, and she watched on in horror as a thick length of almost black-looking twisted vine thudded down across her torso. She let out a scream of pain as the vine dragged itself across her midriff, shredding the parts of her top and skin it came into contact with. On a second slap downwards, the barbs sunk deep, leaving puncture wounds.

Even if she still had her bow in her hands—which had been thrown several feet away when the first blow knocked

her flat on her back—that type of weapon would be useless here. Her best hope was to try and hack off the vines wrapping her and hope that she could escape beyond its clutches before any new bindings took their place.

With weakened magic and seeing white spots hazing at the edges of her vision, Ri sucked in a deep breath. Forcing herself to focus intently on producing just one blade. If her magic could just muster up enough strength to manifest one in her palm...

Several agonising moments passed. The pain ratcheted up like searing hot knives plunging deeper and deeper beneath her skin as she screamed through gritted teeth.

Then, the cold glide of smooth metal appeared in her palm. In one jerking motion, she ripped the blade through the bindings around her wrist. Slick, oozing residue coated her skin where the vine was cut open. The vile smell was suffocating as it stuck to the back of her throat.

Ri didn't want to risk the odour of whatever toxin lay within this thing. There was every chance it might be just as powerful when inhaled as it seemed to be when it was pumped straight into her bloodstream.

Blindly hacking and slashing and not even paying attention to where she sliced her own flesh with the blade, Ri scrabbled backwards. The barbs were still sunk deep into her arms and legs and torso like long, blackened claws. Lengths of the twisted tendrils hung off her, leaking the foul-smelling residue. But she needed to keep moving and get to safe ground.

She quickly ducked in a half-stumble to scoop up her bow where it had landed close by. Nearly face planting into the dirt as she did so. Her mind was a hazy ruined mass of pain and the toxin running riot through her senses. The skin on her palm tore off as she hit the gravel path. Pushing up to a half crawl, half run, she made for a small rocky outcrop where she could slide between large boulders and tree trunks.

As she collapsed against the damp granite at her back, she used the blade to dig out the thorns and barbs still embedded in her skin. Blood ran freely everywhere as each hacked-off

tendrils finally came loose, and she flung it as far away as possible. Part of her foggy brain kept glancing at them, lying in the dirt, expecting them to regenerate and come after her again.

The poison was still in her blood. The fogginess in her mind wouldn't shift. Making everything swirl in front of her and the sound of her heartbeat in her ears sounding like a rushing waterfall. Ri blinked several times, trying to clear the feeling of cotton wool dampening her every sense, to no avail. This was going to hamper her throughout the rest of the tasks that still lay ahead, and all of a sudden, there was a very real moment of fear rising in her throat.

It was one thing to be injured physically and have to make adjustments when fighting. But quite another to feel like your mind wasn't your own.

A chattering noise began to swirl in amongst the darkness behind the nearest trees. Fuck. Ri's legs felt wobbly, and she wasn't confident she could even see straight to shoot her arrows anymore. She'd be relying solely on hand-to-hand combat at close range, which was less than ideal. Her limbs felt as though they had been coated in lead and sunk underwater.

Never mind the fact her mind felt like it was submerged also.

To her toxin-addled brain, the chattering noise began to sound like laughter. Like an eerie feminine giggle taunting her from within the depths of the mist and the thick gnarled branches of the pines surrounding this place.

Tremors started to wrack her body. She didn't know what kind of impact this enchantment would have on her, but there was every chance the poison might begin to debilitate her further the longer she waited. Knowing how Rowan would have designed these tests with resilience in mind, he'd be sadistic enough to create punishments for those who sat around licking their wounds.

She could practically hear his gruff voice telling her to stop being such a little bitch and get up.

Get. Up.

Ri made a feral noise through her clenched jaw as she dragged herself to standing and chose to leave her bow slung over her back this time. Instead, she grabbed another blade and carried one outstretched in each trembling hand. Fuck, she had no control over the way her body was convulsing and shuddering.

Each step forward was a slow shuffle now. There was no hope of moving any faster without falling on her face. She could hardly determine where the ground was. It seemed to move beneath her like a rolling wave.

Mist banked and swirled in front of her face like ghostly dancers. Enclosing her suddenly in a shroud so tight she couldn't see the trees or the sky or even the large boulders she knew lay just off to the side of the path.

And just as she stepped another foot forward, a dark shape materialised in the middle of the path, moving towards her so fast she didn't have time to react in her mind-haze. Their bodies collided, and Ri made to slash in the direction of whatever had just hit her when she realised this was no assailant. Pulling back just in time before the dagger clutched in her fist connected.

Blonde curls. Soft curves. Wide eyes that were puffy and red-rimmed. Blood coated most of her body and stained her torn clothing.

“Vanya?” She croaked. What the fuck was Vanya doing out here? Had she not returned from her own turn going through the course earlier?

“Oriana?” The girl sniffed, and still, that same wide-eyed look hung on her face. As if she was also suffering under the same confusing effects of the toxin.

Ri's mind was like sludge. Trying to form words. Attempting to figure out what should be happening here. Something didn't fit right for Vanya to still be stuck inside the assault course... but the threads of her rational thoughts hung limp and disconnected in her mind's eye.

“Hello?” Another voice called through the mist.

What the fuck? Was someone else here, too?

Goosebumps trickled down the back of Ri’s neck. Her body immediately reacted to the presence of whoever was approaching them through the fog.

Vanya had clutched onto her shoulder, just as much of a trembling mess and barely able to stand. Her body weight sagged against Ri’s, and she saw there was blood pooling on the ground below the shifter’s boot. She must have been badly wounded somewhere on her thigh. The girl was haemorrhaging a river of blood.

The two could only stand there as the footsteps drew closer and closer. A faint outline of a figure moved towards them, and the mist seemed to billow and part as the dark shape of shoulders and a head began to grow clearer.

“Oh, thank the Stars, it’s you.”

Ri blinked once, twice. Unsure whether this was the poison at work or truly... really... could she even trust her own mind right now?

“Why are you here?” She somehow formed words. Looking at the serene face of the witch she’d talked to all those times and never found out her name. “You... you aren’t supposed to be here.”

Panic suddenly took hold. How was Ri supposed to extract all three of them safely? This witch belonged in the library; she wasn’t a fighter. And Vanya looked like she was about to pass out at any moment.

Then, the witch rolled her lips together and a strange expression came over her face.

“It’s always the same. *You’re not supposed to be here.*” She walked forward and cupped Ri’s face in her hands. “For once, I’m exactly where I am supposed to be.”

And the shift happened in an instant. Instead of the young witch she recognised, the face before her morphed and changed. She still looked the same, but now it was like her

hundreds of years of life had suddenly flown into her aura. Power surged through the air around them with a crackling hiss, and an ancient darkness took the place of the gentle eyes of the girl Ri had spoken with.

This was a witch of dark power like she'd never encountered before. It seethed in the air, and the crackling, chattering noise now echoed louder. As if it was part of the very mist they had become surrounded and cloaked within.

“Who the fuck are you?” Ri shoved her hands away, and the witch—or sorceress perhaps—allowed her hands to fall but didn't step back.

“All in good time... all in good time...” She mused, almost talking to herself as her red-painted lips pursed.

Fuck this. Shoving the limp body of Vanya to the ground, she lunged with her blades outstretched. Maybe this was all part of the test. Maybe...

But in an instant, her body was locked in place. Both blades clattered to the dirt, and excruciating pain lanced straight up her spine. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

The last thing she saw as the witch stepped towards her was a black swirling cloud of dagger-like shards thundering towards them and wrapping both her and the witch inside a violent, frenzied storm.

Then, the world dropped out from beneath her feet.

CHAPTER 33

Rowan paced a line in the dirt. Over and over.
It had been too fucking long.

The others had all completed the tasks—even the most pathetic weaklings within the class—and exited the forest in half the time that had spanned since Oriana entered the forest. Now it was almost dark and she hadn't returned and he was about to start swinging a sword.

She was the best of all of them. This didn't make sense, and as much as he wanted to race in there and go looking for her, there was something holding him back. Because what if she wasn't in trouble and had just struggled to complete all the required obstacles?

It was quite possible the girl would never forgive him if he tried to swoop in and fix her problems for her.

That feisty, stubborn streak in her was too strong for her own bloody good.

But that was what he...

Rowan rubbed at his chest with the heel of his palm. He didn't know what it was or what it made him feel. This sensation taking hold of his rib cage with clutching hands and threatening to tear the entire thing straight through his chest was like nothing he'd ever experienced before.

"You're either going to grind your teeth to dust or wear the tread off those boots." Finnic eyed him carefully. "Or maybe

you're going to hack at my neck with your sword. I'm not entirely sure, blade-slinger."

He glared at him with a look that hopefully detailed exactly how he would slice his head from his shoulders if the man didn't keep quiet.

In that second, a hint of movement caught his eye. The mist had descended low over the forest but still only clung to the edges of the treeline, and a figure moved out from the long shadows of the pines.

His head snapped up and took in the sight of the figure crumpling to the ground the moment they reached the outer extent of the woods. Without hesitation, he portaled the distance between the training arena and where she had fallen to the ground.

Fuck. *Fuck*. Rowan barked out a volley of ancient curses into the fading light. His instincts had been certain something was wrong. She was injured. He should have gone to her. He needed to—

And as his boots crunched onto the gravel in front of her, every muscle in his body froze. The limp and bloodied figure wasn't Oriana.

It was the shifter girl. Vanya.

She'd finished her round in the assessment earlier in the day. Why was she here now? What the fuck had she done with Oriana?

Rowan's fingers flexed into tight fists. The sound of running footsteps behind him drew closer at a rapid pace. Finnic raced past him also muttering curses and he dropped down to lift the girl's head.

A thick crimson tide washed over his vision. His eyes scanned quickly amongst the trees, hoping—stupidly wishing—that he'd catch a glimpse of her dark hair and feisty spirit. Imagining just how much he'd love to see her saunter out from amongst the darkened forest with both middle fingers raised in his direction.

For the first time in centuries, he stood frozen. Immobilised by the rage and all-consuming need to rain down whatever destruction was necessary to ensure her safety.

“Where is Oriana?” He barked. Already formulating a plan to burn the forest to the ground if that was what it took to find her.

The blond girl was silently sobbing, blood caked her clothing and one entire side of the material covering her leg was soaked through. Finnic shushed her and tried to help her up, but she was almost incoherent with pain and delirious ramblings.

“The girl.” Her eyes were cloudy and hazed over. “In the forest—I tried—Couldn’t stop it—” Vanya’s mouth opened and closed on gasping, desperate breaths.

“What girl?” Finnic gripped her chin. Holding her steady as her body convulsed. “Fuck. We need to get her to a healer immediately.” His voice dropped low and he shot a glance at Rowan.

“What. Girl?” There was no fucking way he’d be taking her anywhere without an answer. She could bleed out for all he cared. “Answer me right fucking now.”

Her eyes rolled back in her head as she cried out in agony.

“*Rowan*. We need to move her.”

“I don’t give a shit.” He jabbed his hands through his hair. “*Fuck*.” He roared.

As Finnic scooped her up in his arms, he sliced at Rowan with a glare. But it was at that moment the girl’s head lolled back and a whisper dropped out of her mouth that made Rowan’s blood turn cold.

“*Fiadh*.”

Teeth bared and ready to make this little bitch suffer the consequences of lying; he rounded on her. “What the fuck did you just say?”

“She said... to tell you... her name... *Fiadh*.”



“It’s not possible.”

Lachie sat with an ashen face and his head resting in his hands. As ever, Belle was positioned by his side. Neatly perched on the arm of the chair, with a pensive crease between her brows.

Ruby paced the length of the room under Niall’s watchful gaze. They’d barely contained her when the news had been delivered that Oriana had been taken.

And by something or someone, purporting to be their sister. One whom they had all presumed to be dead for the past century.

“We saw the bodies that day.” A deep voice rumbled from the far corner. Fehrn, the hulking great lump of a shifter wolf and practically another brother to them, had his arms folded around the shoulders of his witch. From where he stood, the confusion and disbelief was a palpable thing extending amongst them all.

“For a start, you only saw fragments of bodies. There was no telling exactly who lay among the dead that day.” Rowan inwardly shuddered. He hadn’t been there when it happened, but the moment his sister had lost her mind had scarred her twin, Lachie, to the point he almost sacrificed himself on a suicidal plan to bring down the House of Elharean single-handed.

“Her Ampher power would have been uncontrollable,” Belle murmured. As a witch with rare Ampher powers herself, she knew more than anyone about how Fiadh’s magic may or may not have allowed her to survive the carnage she’d unleashed that day.

“I don’t fucking care what you all did or didn’t see two hundred years ago. We need to move. *Now.*” Rowan

thundered. Making every head in the room snap in his direction.

He'd had enough of this bullshit of sitting around talking and planning. He needed to be out there looking for her. Fuck knows what might have happened to her in the time they'd wasted.

"Rowan." The pleading eyes of Ruby met with his own. "We need to wait." She didn't know what her sister meant to him. Yet none of that mattered right now.

"No. I don't fucking care. Either we move now, or I'll be going alone with or without the help of any of you pricks."

The tense standoff was broken by the arrival of three more bodies in the room. Nelloix and the two vampires, Ace and Hunter, mysted into the room. The vampiress was already talking before they'd even materialised.

"Ruby, I'm so sorry." She rushed to hug the other woman, while her two vampires nodded solemnly at the rest of them gathered in the room.

"That's the blade we found." Ruby broke away from the hug, but nodded towards the bloodied knife laid out on the table.

Rowan ground his teeth with impatience. This was taking too fucking long. But the vampire, Hunter, was reputed to be the most highly skilled at his craft in tracking anything or anyone across realms.

He examined the blade where it lay on the table before picking it up and holding it at eye level. Studying the surface and then pausing to take a series of deep inhales along the length of the surface.

The entire room watched on with bated breath. Only the sounds of a distant hum of wind against the glass windowpanes disturbed the silence enveloping them all.

If he had any hope of finding her, this was a necessary torment he'd have to temporarily endure. Otherwise, the prospect of tracing her location to an unknown realm was

going to require time. Something he wasn't prepared to waste in the search for her.

And whatever this sensation was that threatened to tear right through his chest at any moment, he had never encountered this sort of feeling before. One that had him on edge, ready to slice his way through an army to get to her if necessary, while also wanting nothing more than to find her and disappear with her forever.

“Well?” He'd about reached the limit of his patience with whatever sniffing and licking of the blade this vampire was taking his time with.

Bright violet eyes shot up to narrow on him with distrust. Just enough of a hint of fang appeared below the vampire's curled lip as he studied Rowan from head to toe.

“It reeks of the Seal of Elharean.” Hunter tossed the blade back down onto the table. Immediately moving across to stand beside Nelloix, he crossed his arms and surveyed the room, where they all waited for him to continue. “Whatever sorcery was involved in taking her came from or has been in contact with that portal. The dark magic is unmistakable.”

Someone hissed in a sharp intake of breath.

“So that is where we head.” Ruby was already nodding and bristling to move.

Rowan's fingers flexed. His swords already affixed to his back and ready in their holsters.

“You think she's been taken through the portal?” Lachie stood from his seat. A heavy furrow in his brow as he watched the vampire closely. The entire room had begun to shift restlessly with their impending departure.

About fucking time.

“No doubt.” Hunter nodded at both of his fated mates in turn. “I'd know that magic anywhere. We were there the very moment that portal opened.” He stroked at Nelloix's hair to brush a curl behind her ear and murmured something to her softly. The strain on her face was clear to see, knowing her own involvement and the way the House of Elharean had

abused her. The dark sorcerers had forced her to open the portal that fateful day.

“And what if it is truly Fiadh?” Niall spoke for the first time since they’d gathered.

The room fell quiet again, the shock still evident among them at the seemingly impossible thought.

“It doesn’t fucking matter.” Rowan’s jaw clenched as he growled in Niall’s direction. “Whoever that is, it is not our sister any more. And they won’t be spared any mercy from my sword.”

He fixed each of them around the room with a dark stare.

They’d better be prepared for bloodshed because he was going to single-handedly destroy anything and anyone that stood in his way to get to Oriana.

“I don’t care who it is. Their head will roll for this.”

CHAPTER 34

Staring down at her feet—well, not her own feet, the slightly longer and more pointed boots than she'd ever owned or worn herself—Ri watched on as her steps took her along a darkened corridor.

Her body felt as though it was floating somewhere between the dusty flagstones and the cold air of the ceiling above her head. The location was unfamiliar, as was the sensation running through her veins.

Freedom? Was that this feeling?

Deep rumbling noises and booms echoed from somewhere that sounded far below where she currently stood. The kind of noise that made it feel as if the very ground itself was splitting in two and tearing itself apart.

The kind of ominous energy that one might feel if they stood on top of a volcano about to spew forth violence all over the landscape.

With a violent shudder, dust and dirt fell from the high stone arched ceiling overhead. Ri felt herself flinch ever so slightly but then didn't recognise the movements of her own body either.

Her hands were unfamiliar, and it took a few blinks to recognise that what she was seeing wasn't her own body. Perhaps this was a dream, or she was witnessing someone else's memories.

That was it.

She realised now.

What she was seeing was through the eyes of another. However, she didn't know whether this was happening to her in real-time, wherever her corporeal body might be right now, or was this some kind of enchantment?

Everything seemed foggy and clouded if she tried to recall how she got here, where she was before now.

It was the strangest sensation of appearing partway through a story without knowing the beginning.

Another deep and dreadful rumble far, far below her feet had her attention brought back swiftly to her surroundings.

The path was unfamiliar, even to whoever's memories this scene belonged to. Ri got the distinct impression that this was the first time they had tasted freedom in a very long time. Far too long. The simmering rage deep inside her bones pulsed and whipped like a cat's tail. Quietly stalking towards a potential victim and ready to exact vengeance.

Only there was not a soul in sight. The halls of this place were echoing. Empty. Devoid of life.

Whoever had been in charge here or had kept this individual captive—the one who's memories she was seeing—seemed to be no longer present.

And that created a surge of displeasure.

Power began to hum through the veins of Ri's phantom body. Something new and potent and virile began to soak into the air just above her skin. Her body greedily sucked it in through every pore as though they had just crawled through a desert and finally discovered fresh water.

She felt the power begin to sweep through her form and accelerate with every passing second.

The kind of magic like she'd never experienced before. An untapped and ancient source that began to build and build and build.

Ampher power being restored after centuries of abuse and manipulation.

Ri became aware of a large doorway up ahead, thrown open on its hinges as if blasted from inside. The top of one side hung limply outward, partially wrenched from the great stone wall it would usually have been affixed to. A sulphuric, tangy smell clogged the air, and putrid waves of smoke wafted towards her ankles.

But instead of feeling trepidation or hesitation about what might lie beyond this destroyed doorway, there was only the rising sense of power and the possibilities that came with magic being restored.

And what a source this was that replenished that power, long since stripped from whoever this body belonged to.

Their soul stretched and purred, being able to fully inhabit their true form once more. Like they'd been able to fill out the skin they'd simply been existing within for far too long.

Wrongfully imprisoned. Cheated. Manipulated.

The words pulsed inside Ri's mind. She could taste the acrid hunger to seek revenge in the back of her throat. Such vehemence lay behind each of those words. She was in no doubt whoever this was would stop at nothing to achieve retribution for whatever suffering they had endured.

Suddenly, they were inside a great hall. Bodies littered the flagstone floor, all in various states of mutilation and torn to pieces. But that wasn't the most disturbing sight. Right through the centre of the space was a giant chasm extending down into the bedrock below wherever this was. Steam billowed forth from the gaping mouth, and the source of the smell burning up the inside of her nose became clear.

Casting a look around, there was no obvious sign of life. But the proximity to this chasm gave her the first unobliterated hit of the immense power surging from within the depths of its yawning mouth.

A portal.

Power the likes of which her Ampher magic had never tasted.

It was potent and wicked and filled up every inch of her being to the point she felt like she might burst.

After centuries without *any* magic, this was like having her soul filled with unadulterated power bled into her veins from the Goddesses themselves.

Ohhh, yes. She could get used to *this*.

Inhaling a deep lungful of the surging, invisible force emitting from the chasm, she felt it ripple through her body like the moment hot oil clashed with water. Powerful pops and sparks and hissing in her blood as her magic took on board everything hanging in the air and began to amplify it.

She was already more powerful than she had ever been before they took her.

The House of Elharean would be nothing in the face of the power she now wielded.

And she would ensure they paid in rivers of crimson for every second they had kept her locked away in captivity.

Ri found herself standing before what looked like the remnants of a throne. One made of red crystalline shards, now shattered into rubble on a raised dais. The body of what must have been the House of Elharean's leader lay mutilated and savaged in a twisted heap. Only a crown coated in blood remained where their head should have been.

The sight made Ri's stomach churn, but the body of whoever she was viewing this scene through merely laughed.

She bent down and lifted the crown with a slender finger, running a thumb over the dried blood and hummed with satisfaction at the sight.

Perfect.

Then, the figure raised it and affixed it upon her own head. Humming softly to herself as she stepped over the pools of blood and lingering evidence of whatever battle had taken place here.

From somewhere on the far side of the hall, a low, croaking noise drew her attention. The figure—Ri now knew

this was the body of a witch—portaled across the space in a heartbeat. It left Ri slightly disoriented at the sensation as she saw it through someone else’s eyes, but the feeling of immense pleasure inside their chest told her everything she needed to know.

Whoever this was had been without their magic for a long, long time. It had been forcibly taken from them. And now they were intent on exacting revenge on the House of Elharean.

But it would seem that something extremely violent had happened, that had toppled their Elharean dynasty and freed this being in the process.

And this was somehow all connected to the yawning chasm still leaking immense power in the centre of this space. The portal spewing steam and a sulphuric odour.

Standing over a figure lying face down on the ground, hair matted with blood and a leg badly snapped below the knee, Ri looked on at the grisly sight. Without so much as a second’s hesitation, magic flowed from the hands that were not her own, and flipped the man’s body over.

Sickening glee at the sight of whoever this was thundered through her.

This man was someone they despised with every inch of their soul.

A master manipulator.

Her husband.

And here he lay, broken and tormented at her feet. Just how she’d lain awake imagining for centuries now. She’d so often wondered how this moment would taste if she ever had the pleasure of being the one to take her vengeance on him. Now, the fates had given her exactly the kind of blood-soaked retribution she’d thirsted for.

She’d be sure to gorge on the pleasure of his death at her hands.

“Fiadh?” The man’s voice cracked as his eyes struggled to stay focused. A flash of fear morphed into absolute terror as he

blinked up from where he lay on his back.

“Hello, husband.” A voice that sounded familiar to Ri, but one she couldn’t place in the haze of this memory, spoke out loud for the first time. “It’s been a long time. How interesting you still know my face.”

His already pale skin turned ashen grey. The look of a man who knew he would meet death in mere seconds.

“Please.” Another croak. Only the words rang hollow across the lifeless hall. This was not a man asking for pardon or to be spared. He was begging for a merciful death.

One that he did not deserve.

But the power called even more strongly from the chasm behind where she stood. Ri could feel it swelling and building with ever-increasing pressure. The air around her body began to hum and buzz with the potency of her magic.

Ampher power absorbed everything and amplified it, giving the rare few witches ever to exist with this gift an unmatched and unrivalled ability.

Harnessing this primordial power emitting from the portal behind her? She would be unstoppable in her quest to seek revenge on those who abandoned her to this miserable fate.

Her own family.

A sneer lifted her top lip as she looked down on the grey face of the man. His wheezing breath caught in his throat, and his lips were a mottled purple colour. To think she once idolised this fool. Her young, naive self had allowed him to manipulate her. Groom her. Convince her that she would be given everything she desired if she left with him and joined the House of Elharean.

Only to be locked away for two hundred years as soon as she’d signed herself over to him in marriage. Stripped of her magic before she had been able to understand what their dark sorcerers were doing to her. Imprisoned in this rock fortress, never to see the light of day or taste freedom again.

Until now.

“Allow me to help you, exactly as you helped me all those years ago.”

With a deft flick of her fingers, his body dragged along the ground under the force of her magic. Moving towards the edge of the chasm, closer and closer, she strolled casually beside him. Looking around, she settled on the sight of a hefty-looking sword that would serve her needs adequately. Drawing it to her outstretched hand with her new found power.

It vibrated through her cells like wearing a second skin. One that she'd always been made for.

This was more like it.

Ri gagged as the hand in front of her gripped the sword and hacked down with a crude stroke. Removing the man's twisted leg below the knee. She was no stranger to blood or death or the sight of an injury. But there was something in the malevolent glee inside the chest of the witch that made her stomach want to empty itself.

As the man howled in agony, unable to move, he begged incoherently for the end to be swift.

Only this time, she drove the pointed end of the sword straight down into his throat. A sickening crunch of cartilage and bone mixed with a gurgling sound of blood spewing forth. Twisting the blade this way and that, she savoured every second this man suffered.

Then she tossed the blade. Slick with his blood to join the pool of crimson forming beside his body. And in one swift motion of her wrist, she used her magic to wrench his head from his shoulders.

Never before had Ri witnessed power of this magnitude. It was terrifying to behold. And yet the woman's memories—the means by which she observed all of this—simply overflowed with the kind of dark satisfaction that came from centuries to plan her revenge.

As she looked on, the woman stepped forward into the opening of the chasm and allowed her portaling magic to take hold. With smoke swirling around her and the overpowering

scent of sulphur in her throat, she heard a voice echo inside her mind.

The woman's voice.

“Wake now, Oriana.”

CHAPTER 35

Swimming into focus before her was the face of the woman she now knew was the subject of those memories.

Fiadh.

But how this all connected to Ri and what she was doing here was like a dense fog inside her mind. How did she even get here? She tried to move but found herself bound in place. Her hands wrapped in restraints behind her back. Seated in a chair made of black marble, with a chill encapsulating her in the darkened space that still seemed to echo with those memories from her mind's eye.

They were all so vivid.

She could still hear the squelching sound of the man's neck beneath the tip of the blade. The grotesque noise of his body being torn apart.

Ri leant forward and vomited onto the floor. Coughing and choking as her stomach emptied itself.

"Oh, I had expected a little more from you, fighter girl." Fiadh mocked her in a sickly, sweet voice. Imitating the way they had spoken back at the academy when Ri had no idea who this witch truly was. "Looks like my brother hasn't been training his recruits very well if you can't handle the sight of a little beheading."

The acidic taste burned up the back of Ri's throat, and she spat out a glob of saliva to try and rid her mouth of bile.

“Why am I here?” She ignored her taunts. If there was any hope of surviving this, Ri needed to keep her wits about her. There was no telling how powerful this woman might be. Certainly, if the glimpse at her power from those memories was anything to go by.

A shudder ran through her at the thought.

“Oh, don’t worry, it isn’t you I want, Oriana.” The woman flicked a finger, and all evidence of where she’d been sick moments before vanished in an instant. The room around them immediately morphed, shifted, and turned into an ornate throne room. One that was outfitted with polished black stone floors, walls, and golden torches lined the walls. Glimmering opulent chandeliers hung from the ceiling, casting a flickering glow across the polished surface of the stone. It reflected the light and made it bounce around in a way that left Ri feeling dizzy.

“Then just let me go. If it isn’t me you want, I’m nothing and no one.” Fuck she hoped Ruby was safe. There was no telling what this witch might do if she attempted to manipulate her sister into giving her whatever it was she wanted out of this.

But then her mind stopped short on what Fiadh had said moments before.

Her brother?

Suddenly, a collision of memories and pieces of conversation hurtled together in her mind. This was their sister. The one who was never mentioned by any of the Nocturnes. And now that she had been shown her memories, it all became clear.

Fiadh had been imprisoned by the House of Elharean all this time.

Did Rowan know? Had he been privy to such a horrid truth all along and done nothing to help her?

“Ahhh... you are a smart girl, aren’t you?” Her captor drummed her fingernails on the side of her onyx throne. Looking at her now, Ri recognised the crown sat atop her head

was the same one smeared in blood that she'd seen in those memories. Only this was not the throne room or hall she'd witnessed in the scenes Fiadh had shown her. This was somewhere entirely different. And Ri had no idea where she might be.

Or even what realm they might be in.

Something slithered down her spine with the knowledge that she was most likely on the other side of whatever that portal was.

How the fuck would she ever hope to return... or be found?

There must have been no hiding her thoughts, as Fiadh began to laugh as she studied her through piercing blue eyes.

Eyes that resembled Rowan's.

Fuck, now that she knew it, there was so much she could see in this witch that resembled the other Nocturne siblings. Only this woman had an aura about her that was menacing in a way that was awe-inspiring and terrifying in equal measure. Her siblings might be powerful in their own right, but this witch possessed a power that far outreached any of their magic combined.

"I'm sorry to say, you're just a pawn in the middle of a game that has been two centuries in the making, Oriana." Fiadh crossed her legs and rested her chin on the palm of one hand. "But I would say it won't be long before your vengeful knight makes his appearance."

Ri shook her head. *No*. She didn't want him anywhere near this woman. He might be skilled in battle, but against this kind of dark magic? His swords and powers were no match for her.

"He won't bother. I'm just a student at the academy. You might as well just be done with me because no one will come looking for me."

Even as she spoke the words, the flash of mirth on Fiadh's face told the entire story. She knew just how important Ri was... maybe not to Rowan in the way he was important to her, but certainly to the likes of the queen.

“Oh, don’t worry about your precious Rowan. It isn’t him I’m after either, but he is going to deliver me exactly who I *do* want in exchange.”

Ri’s head pounded. This was too much. She wanted to scream and fight and defend not only herself but those she loved with all her heart. Yet, here in this place, her magic was impotent. When she pushed to reach for the power that usually hummed inside her, it wasn’t there.

A plummeting sensation in the pit of her stomach made her realise immediately that this place was indeed somewhere vastly different from the realms in which they inhabited back at home. A place where a primordial kind of power took everything and turned it on its head.

If there was any hope, it wasn’t going to come in the form of magical abilities. It was going to come through grit and determination to fight her way out of here.

But there was no sight of a weapon of any kind, and of course, she’d had all her own removed from her body, she realised with that sinking feeling growing heavier.

“So what am I? Some sort of bargain or exchange?” Ri winced as she tried to shift her hands behind her back, only to feel sharp barbs of magic dig into her wrists, followed by a wet, warm trickle of blood running down her palm.

“That you are. I’m truly sorry it had to involve you and the other students at the academy, but there was no other way.”

Ri stiffened. No other way? This bitch had murdered innocents just to get close to her.

“You murdered my friend. Others from the academy.”

“War is rarely won without loss of innocent lives. I should know.” Her bright eyes flashed startlingly cold.

“Then what is it you want? Take me instead.” Ri gritted her teeth.

Fiadh rose from her throne and crossed the short space between them. Pausing in front of Ri and tilting her chin up

with a finger. As she gazed down with glacial indifference in her features, she pursed her lips for a moment.

“It is quite simple, really. All I want in exchange for you, pretty, pretty Oriana, is to possess the soul of the creature who did this to me.” Her features darkened into a mask of fury as something passed over her like a violent sweep of power.

“I want Brigid of Nocturne.”

Ri blinked heavily. How could Brigid of Nocturne—her own sister—be the one to cause all of this? She didn’t understand.

“But...” Ri faltered.

“Brigid will come to me.” Fiadh gripped a tighter hold on her chin. Forcing her head to remain tilted back to meet her gaze. “That sister of mine knew this day was coming. Has known everything all along. And now she is going to pay for the consequences of her actions.”

“It wasn’t her fault—”

“Yes. It was.” The woman snapped. Shoving her face away and stepping backwards as if Ri had scalded her. Fury rippled through the air around her like a tangible thing. “My sister is the most powerful Seer in existence and knows *all*. Yet she allowed me to be manipulated and tortured for two centuries. None of them did anything to save me, all because of her.”

She flexed her fingers, and Ri suddenly panicked at what might happen if she decided to unleash that immense power dancing in her veins.

“But all Seers are sworn to the Goddesses. They cannot intervene or interfere in fate.” Ri felt numb as she tried to defend actions that had ultimately led to Fiadh’s untold misery.

How could they have left her in the clutches of the House of Elharean for all that time?

Nausea set in at the thought of everything Fiadh must have endured. And the sickening realisation—that she would feel the same way should she have found herself in a similar position—was enough to have her mind reeling. What if Ruby had

abandoned her for centuries despite knowing exactly where she was and what was being done to her? Would she be able to say her desire for revenge would burn any less hot and rampant after so long being abused?

“Ah, but you see, the Goddesses don’t exist in this realm, my sweet little Oriana. Here, I am free to do whatever I like, with power that is growing stronger every day.” To illustrate her point, she arched an arm and the entire roof of the throne room opened up to the sky above.

To Ri’s shock, the world outside was a deep reddened sky, with the tops of barren ochre-coloured mountains sitting jagged against the horizon. The kind of landscape that conjured up images of a wasteland. One where life battled constantly to seize control and power from others.

This was a place where you either learned to survive or were quickly destroyed.

“I understand your pain.” Ri swallowed hard. Still gaping at the desolate hellscape surrounding whatever fortress this was that Fiadh had created for herself. “But it wasn’t your family’s fault. I know they love you.”

Her chest ached for what this woman had endured. But her heart beat for Rowan, and her soul yearned for him. Even just the thought that Fiadh might destroy that was a notion she could hardly stomach.

“Do I not deserve retribution? Why should I have suffered for so long when my own flesh and blood knew exactly what was happening to me and did nothing to save me.” She hissed.

Ri shook her head. Hot tears pricking her eyes while a tightness crawled up the back of her throat.

This was always going to result in war. There was no other way.

Suddenly Fiadh straightened, and a glint of satisfaction appeared in her eyes. She whirled round to face Ri and clapped her hands together.

“Well, my dear. It appears we didn’t have to wait long at all. Your rescue party has arrived.”

The blood drained from Ri's face. Her limbs went numb. This couldn't be it. She hadn't been able to come up with any kind of plan or figure out a way to escape this impossible situation and now all too soon the worst was about to happen and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

"How is this going to end?" Shaking her head, she searched Fiadh's face. Pleading with her. Beseeking her to consider another way out that wasn't *this*.

But there was nothing except pure vengeful spite coating Fiadh's expression now.

Ri knew it was too late. There was nothing to be done.

The witch spread her arms and tilted her head back, soaking in more of the power that pulsed in the air like a heart beat of impending doom.

"It will end just as it began, Oriana.... With bloodshed and tears and the loss of innocent lives."

CHAPTER 36

Emerging through the other side of the portal, Rowan could immediately sense the difference in the atmosphere. Whatever hellscape of a realm the Seal of Elharean had opened a connection to, power and magic worked differently here.

That much was clear.

Which left him uneasy as fuck.

The entity he and Niall had barely staved off an attack from didn't appear to greet them with violence this time. Instead, a darkened cloud hung high above their heads in the reddened sky.

Watching their arrival. Ominously shifting on the winds as it balled and then thinned out over and over like a swirling storm of death and destruction.

He didn't know what to make of this place. Where the air sat thick in the back of his throat, and the ground beneath their feet was a crimson dust. Mountain ranges with jagged peaks filled the horizon, surrounding what appeared to be a vast empty basin extending for miles on either side of where they had appeared when crossing through the chasm entrance.

The portal emerged as if through a tunnel into this vast, desolate space that none of them had ever encountered before.

It was no wonder the power emitting through the Seal felt primordial. This realm had been disconnected from any he was familiar with, despite the past three centuries of his life moving between all manners of lands and dominions.

Flexing his fingers around the handle of his drawn blades, he pulled on his magic, only to confirm the suspicion he had harboured since the night he and Niall had first investigated the other side of the Seal.

Their magic was of no use here.

“Have your weapons ready.” He grunted towards the rest of the group alongside him.

Both of his brothers flanked him with Fehrn, who had already transformed into his wolf form prior to entering the Seal. With each of them joined by their fated mates who carried their own weapons.

“Our magic...” Niall glanced at his hands and raised an eyebrow in question. Realising there wasn’t going to be any tapping into his usual power while here.

“It won’t work in this realm,” Lachie said. Fisting his own swords with one in each hand. He stopped and surveyed those gathered behind them. An assortment of the fae guards Rowan had personally trained emerged through the portal. They were just as skilled in battle as any, and without knowing exactly what they might encounter in this land, they were all going in blind.

Rowan’s jaw clenched tight as he scanned the reddened landscape before them. Nothing stood out as an obvious location to begin searching for Oriana, and that made his thirst for blood only grow hotter with each passing second.

She was here. He knew that much.

There was no doubt in his mind that Fiadh—or whoever had stolen her—would come to them. She’d taken Oriana for a reason, and if whoever this was wanted to draw them all out, then she’d fucking gotten her wish fulfilled.

The bitch was as good as dead in his eyes.

If she’d so much as laid a finger on Oriana... there was no telling what he’d do to eviscerate her. He might even grant this being with death after a few hundred years of torture.

“Without our powers, this is potentially a suicide mission, no?” Niall was looking intently at Ruby. Something silent passed between the two of them.

“Not all of us are without power.” A quiet voice spoke up from behind his eldest brother. Belle had a tight expression on her face, as though wincing with pain.

“What is it? I swear I’ll get you the fuck out of here straight away.” Lachie wheeled round with a snarl and was already all over her before any of them could blink. Grabbing her by the shoulders and inspecting her for injury.

“I’m... I’m fine. The power here is unsettling, is all.” She reached up to place her hands on Lachie’s chest. “While I cannot access any of my magic from our realm, my Ampher is taking on board what exists here.”

“And?” His brother looked ready to start a war just at the sight of Belle in mild discomfort.

Maybe Rowan did now understand a little of what his brothers felt when they looked at their women. He had already slaughtered entire armies in his mind single-handedly since learning of Oriana being taken.

“I’ll be able to work *with* it. Potentially harness it.” She held her hands up for them all to see, and there were black veins spreading along her arms, stretching in a tiny network that seemed to be growing from her fingertips towards her upper arms. “But this is dangerous. Darker than anything I’ve experienced before.”

“*Fuck.*” Lachie jabbed his hand through his hair. “I won’t risk losing you again, my fierceling.” His voice dropped low.

“We have to do this.” Belle took his face in her hands and shook her head determinedly. “We find Oriana. Whatever it takes, we’re in this with you, Ruby.”

Rowan’s chest tightened under the strain. While he knew there was no sense in rushing into the unknown, for the first time in perhaps ever, he had no battle plan to enact. Just raw driving need to find her and get her to safety.

Fuck plans or strategy. Savagery was all he needed in order to ensure her safe return.

A commotion sounded behind the line of fae guards. All of a sudden pink hair and wild eyes rushed towards him. Brynne was brandishing her own weapons and talking a mile a minute at the man right beside her.

Finnic had arrived, too.

It would seem they had brought the entire class of students with them. All armed to the teeth with both their own weapons and those Rowan recognised immediately from the armoury.

“You honestly thought you could leave us out of this? After this is what we’ve been training for?” Brynne was glaring up at him with arms folded. “Ri is the best of us and we would all happily die fighting to get her back.” She gestured with her chin to the growing number of bodies emerging from the portal.

Behind them, the vampires Hunter, Ace, and Nelloix all followed. Clearly they had transported the students to the entrance of the Seal itself.

“She’s right. We’re here for Oriana.” Finnic held his hand out to grasp Rowan’s forearm. But held on for a fraction longer than was really necessary. His usually mirth-filled eyes were solemn. Something flickered in his expression as he studied Rowan for a long moment, then stepped back.

Rowan wasn’t sure what the fuck that was about, but he was already about a second away from snapping someone’s neck, and he didn’t need Finnic trying to get in his fucking head.

Leaving them all to debate amongst themselves and form a plan for where to begin searching, he moved to the edge of the outcrop where they stood. It was elevated a little and hung out as a protrusion of jagged ochre-coloured rock. The sharp edges and planes of the loose gravel crunched beneath his boots, and he hunched down to drag a finger through the dust.

There was no clear sun overhead here. Just an eerie haze to the sky, making it impossible to know what time of day it

might be. Nothing seemed to exist in the place that they could see.

It left them fucking blind. Even with their eyes wide open.

At their backs, the opening of the portal shimmered like a heat ripple above the flat basin. An easy route to leave by should they need to extract any who might be injured. Or worse, if there were dead bodies who needed to be transported back to their homes and loved ones.

Rowan fought back the urge to roar with fury. His skin felt like it was going to burst, and his heart threatened to launch out of his chest any second.

All he could keep imagining was her mangled corpse and the sickening knowledge that he'd been too late to save her. Suddenly, the sight of the head rolling beneath his blade morphed into Oriana's face staring back at him, lifeless from the red dirt, and he gripped his swords so tight his knuckles popped under the strain.

Having a small army did nothing if he didn't fucking know where to begin looking for her. She could be anywhere. Might be held somewhere, tortured and suffering. She might be—

Suddenly, the dark cloud of the entity lurking in the sky above them began to shift and morph and intensify. Shit. Rowan realised they were all out in the open. Exposed as fuck and at the mercy of that thing if it decided to strike.

He'd barely swung round and started to move back towards the others when a sharp popping noise pierced the air around them. It knocked each of them down like a pressure wave as it collided with their bodies. Some landed on their hands and knees, while others were able to shield themselves hunched over.

Dirt and sand and violent darkness swept towards them like the front edge of a storm, and when it cleared, what was left in its wake was a sea of grey-skinned creatures. Snatchers and other grotesque beasts. All with unseeing eyes, clammy skin, and long talons instead of fingers.

Amongst them stood two figures. One had a crown on her head, coated in splatters of dried blood. Dressed in a dark gown and cloak that shimmered like the shards of the entity he'd seen kill Saskia, then attack both him and his brother that day.

Beside her... was Oriana.

Rowan's fury billowed over with a snarl, mixed with relief that she was in front of his eyes. All he needed to do was dispatch this hoard of monsters in his path, which he'd gladly do with ease.

From this distance, he couldn't tell if she was unharmed, but at least she was standing upright. That didn't mean there wasn't some kind of dark magic at play. It also didn't guarantee that her mind remained in one piece.

A tightness balled up in his chest at the thought of her brilliance being ripped away from her. To never be able to hear her laugh or threaten him with her smart mouth again.

Rowan surged forward. Ignoring the shouts behind him, he pointed his sword at the sorceress. Then stopped dead.

Fiadh.

"Fuck me. It is her." Niall's voice sounded distant and echo-like beside him. He could hear Lachie swearing under his breath. There was a low rumble from Fehrn's wolf as it paced around their flanks.

"It has been a long time, *brothers.*" A voice he hardly recognised called out across the distance between them. Her army of creatures inched forward, all snarling and scraping at the ground as if barely being held back from launching their own attack.

Fiadh had once been kind and sweet and brilliant. His memories of his sister were of a young girl who loved running through rolling meadows and finding butterflies hidden amongst midsummer flowers. That was before she withdrew into herself more and more when none of them knew the extent to which she was being groomed. Then came the moment they all thought they'd lost her, when her Ampher

magic had exploded with uncontrolled anger and power that no one had seen for eons.

Two centuries had passed since that fateful moment.

They'd all dealt with what they long presumed was her death in their own ways.

Now, here she stood before them in the flesh. Exuding the kind of terrifying magic that made any dark witches from the House of Elharean look pathetic in comparison.

“As much as I have imagined the day I'd see your faces again, there's only one Nocturne I am interested in.” She clenched a fist, and Oriana's body contorted in agony. She let out a silent scream, and Rowan nearly lost it.

“You're dead, Fiadh.” He roared. Swinging his wrist, he was ready to start hacking his way forward immediately. It was only Ruby's hand on his arm that stopped him from carving a path to her.

“Rowan, stop. Whatever magic your sister has right now, it must be similar to what Belle is experiencing. It is darker than anything we've ever encountered before, and it could do more damage than you know.”

He glared down at her. Detesting the fact the fae was right. Fiadh could slaughter Oriana in less than a heartbeat with the kind of power she was wielding.

“Give us Oriana.” Rowan bristled. Calculating exactly how many of these grey-skinned monsters he'd need to dispatch before he could grab hold of his woman. Thirty-two if he took the direct line through the heart of them. At least eighty if he worked around the edge of their gathered force.

Didn't matter. Either way, he'd slaughter all of them before leaving here today.

CHAPTER 37

“Your choice. Give me Brigid, or the girl dies.”

Fiadh’s magic continued to wrack Oriana’s body with pain. Forcing her to contort and bow under the pressure. Each strangling hit that went through her figure hunched over on the ground at his sister’s feet was like a knife to Rowan’s own gut.

That was the final thread to his composure snapped and gone.

Surging forward, he hacked through a melee of grey flesh and slashing claws. These fucking monsters were nothing but an inconvenience, but one that he had to fight his way through nonetheless. All around him, the slick sounds of flesh slicing open and the heat of battle flooded his senses.

The familiar tang of blood hung in the air, so thick he could feel it coating the inside of his mouth. Lingering on his tongue like an unwelcome memory of all the centuries when this had been the only force driving him forward each day.

Rowan slashed the neck of one of the Snatchers, narrowly avoiding long blackened claws as the creature swung out towards his shoulder. As the slimy body crumpled to the ground, he hacked clean through the neck, relishing the swift kill, then, on an upswing, immediately sliced through the body of another daring to come near.

There was no finesse to this onslaught. Just hacking and swinging with all his might. Without use of any magic, this

was an all-out bloody brawl amongst a swirling cloud of reddened dirt.

The others followed his lead. Vampires moved in flashes, in and out of his vision, as they dispatched hundreds of bodies, using their speed to tear throats out and wrench heads off to be tossed in the dirt. One of the vampires appeared to be a monstrous form himself, more shadow than solid flesh as he tore a bloody path through the battle lines.

But Rowan's focus was only on one location. Straight ahead. He carved a decisive line through the midst of the melee, keeping his attention on her and only her.

Oriana was still alive. Thank fuck. But with every step he drew nearer, his pulse thundered harder with renewed fear biting deep. What if he came so close but was ultimately too late.

Had all those nights dreaming of his sister's death been a precursor to this very moment?

Fuck. His feral roar matched the moment he ploughed through the last of the bodies. Slashing and decapitating with a ferocious energy that surged from somewhere deep inside his chest. Right now, he had his sights set on the small figure bent over on the ground, with blackened edges to his vision tunnelling him into laser focus on her.

His Oriana.

He needed her to be safe.

But Fiadh's Ampher magic was unstoppable. Even if he'd been able to use his own magic, Rowan knew he'd be no match for her. Whether here in this realm or their own. He yelled as the force of it plunged into his body and had him collapsing to his knees.

"Very impressive, brother. You always did know how to rule a battlefield." Fiadh stared down at him with black eyes. Indifference haunted her voice as power surged out of her and filled the air like a pulsating rhythm.

"Oriana." He grunted. So close now he could almost reach out and grab her by the arm. But the space between them

might as well have been a giant chasm for how powerfully bound his sister had them both. Stuck at arm's length away and unable to move a muscle.

She tilted her head sideways in the dirt at the sound of his voice so that their eyes locked. Tears streaked grimy black lines down her face, and her vision was unfocused. But she could hear him. Somehow, she'd made it through whatever torture his sister inflicted and remained conscious. That made his heart thud doubly hard in his throat.

Fiadh was a dead woman walking.

“Such a shame our gutless sister is once again going to ruin innocent lives for her own selfish gain.” Fiadh crouched down beside Oriana and stroked some of her hair from her face. Then, sunk her fingers deep and tugged her head back roughly. Forcing her to bow under the strain.

Rowan spat out a torrent of violent curses and death threats. Promises of all the ways he would ensure Fiadh suffered for another two centuries when he got his hands on her.

Meanwhile, the bitch laughed. Her face was entirely unrecognisable from the sister he had once known so long ago. Nothing but a cold, menacing shell of the girl who had once been proud to show him the rocks she collected or the flowers she had plucked.

This sadistic creature was going to be gutted and fed her own intestines until she choked on them.

“I think even that punishment—while creative, I'll give you that—might be a little harsh, no?” A familiar voice appeared at Rowan's shoulder.

“Brigid, fuck, you need to get out of here.” He growled. Staring up into the sparkling blue eyes and elfin-looking face of his younger sister, who had appeared by his side out of thin air.

She shooed him off with a flick of her fingers laden with gold rings and glanced around with a hint of amusement on her face. Taking in the sight of the rest of their family fighting

their way through the remains of the army of monsters at his back.

“Well, Fiadh. You’ve caused quite the scene, no?” Brigid stepped daintily past Rowan and perched on the edge of a reddish boulder. Drawing her gold dress to one side in the process. As Fiadh straightened up and surveyed the other women, he realised his two sisters couldn’t be more different in this moment. One looked to be the harbinger of death and destruction for them all, while the other resembled a curious ray of sunshine.

And Rowan felt his stomach violently flip as he recognised this scene. Down to the exact outfit Brigid was wearing. The way her sleek black hair sat around her jaw. Each ring garnishing her elegant fingers.

He’d seen those fingers clawing at the dirt.

Each night, that mess of black hair had thudded to be ground beneath the force of his blade.

“Get. The. Fuck. Out. Of. Here.” He hissed at Brigid. Every part of him screamed and tried to tear in two, all in an effort to get to Oriana, but also save his sister from whatever fate was about to deliver on a cruel, crimson tide.

Fate could be fucking damned right now if he’d allow either of them to be harmed.

“You knew.” Fiadh finally spoke. Her voice sounded hollow and filled with an ancient malice.

Brigid nodded. Her pointed chin and dancing eyes tilted upwards to hold her gaze. “I did.”

“All this fucking time?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t deny it?” Fiadh’s voice shook with fury. The dark magic running through her veins made an ominous crackle in the air, and the entity under her control began to coalesce at her back like a pulsing shadow.

“I knew everything. Saw everything.” Brigid shrugged and rearranged herself to sit cross-legged. As a Seer, she was

gifted with knowledge of all permutations of the future, but even in this moment, he couldn't fathom how she could be so calm.

Not when there was a fucking battle going on behind them and a deranged woman intent on revenge standing before them.

Rowan's fingers dug into the dirt. Trying to anchor himself. His mind raced to try and figure out a way out of this but came up empty-handed every time. There was a very real possibility they all might die here today.

He didn't fear death, but knowing that he might fail in the only thing that mattered—protecting Oriana—that made his blood surge with violence.

A need to protect her that was so utterly all-consuming he practically crawled out of his skin.

"I'll strike a bargain with you, Rowan." As if Fiadh heard his thoughts, she turned to him now. "One last call for your services as the warlord, then you will be free to live the remainder of your immortal life in the peace you so desperately crave."

"Fuck you." He spat in the dirt. "The girl goes free. You have Brigid here, and she has nothing to do with any of this."

"*Your services,*" Fiadh demanded as she gripped Oriana's body with any surge of magic that made her cry in anguish.

He let out a warning growl. "Let her go unharmed, and you have my services."

"Take Brigid's head... and in return, you can have the girl alive."

The world around him ground to a halt. Sounds and colours and senses all compressed into a bleak nothingness as her words registered in his mind. Echoing around in a spiral of miserable realisation that his prophecy was somehow real.

Unthinkably so.

He couldn't speak, and his stomach caved as it threatened to hurl bile into the red dust. Why? Why him? What could this

possibly be meant for, and what reason could the Goddesses fucking have for this kind of twisted eventuality?

Fingers lifted his chin, and Brigid's piercing blue eyes met his own. A softness that wasn't there before passed between them as she stared down at him with a quiet smile. "You've done it thousands of times before, no?"

In his dreams. She knew he'd gone through the motions over and over and over.

But that couldn't be their fate.

It wasn't possible.

"Don't fear what comes next, brother. We've both seen it all. We know what is to come."

Fuck this. No. He wasn't going to accept that this was either of their destined paths. Rowan wanted to tear Fiadh apart. He wanted to save Brigid. He desperately needed to hold Oriana and feel her pulse softly thudding beneath his fingers.

White hot rage burned up the back of his throat, and just as he was about to argue that this was insanity or try and find a means of battling their way free of this torture, a sound like a thunderclap pounded down from above them.

The sky rained blackened shards, and everything in Rowan's vision slid sideways as the explosion of potent magic roared with a terrifying release. Pinning his body flat to the ground with the force of whatever had consumed everything around them.

His ears were ringing, but he could move.

No longer restrained by Fiadh's magic, he crawled through the dirt that hung thick and acrid in the air. Unable to see more than a foot in front of him after whatever had caused the explosion, he dragged himself on his belly the short distance to Oriana.

She was coughing on the red dust, with her skin and hair all coated in a thick layer. No doubt he was the same. His hands cupped her face, checking that she was truly here.

Needing to feel her beneath his touch just to prove to himself this wasn't an illusion.

“My brave faerie.” He quickly scooped her against his body. “We have to move.”

What he would fucking give to be able to use his magic right now and disappear from this place in the blink of an eye.

But they would have to fight their way out of this mess.

Nodding, Oriana clung against him. Able to stand at least but unsteady on her feet. Rowan didn't stop as he dragged them in what he could only hope was the direction of the portal. Fuck, he didn't know where the others were, having lost all sight of them while being held under Fiadh's control.

But as they made their way through the thick cloud of reddish-brown dust, he realised the others were gathered together. The bodies of the monsters they had been fighting were all obliterated on the ground, covered in the symbols they'd been searching for the answers to when they'd found them in their own realm.

And everyone seemed to be watching something with horror in their expression.

Rowan turned, and what he saw made his blood turn to ice.

There were two swirling black entities now, plunging and weaving in the sky in twisting and torquing balls of onyx shards. Each battled the other in a fight extending from the billowing dust on the ground and rising high up into the sky above their heads.

One being controlled by Fiadh.

The other controlled by Belle.

Two Ampher witches harnessing the primordial magic of this hellscape. The kind of violent and unfathomable magic that had caused the explosion that flattened everything in its path moments before.

“Belle... the Guardian... she killed all of the Snatchers and other creatures.” Brynne came running over, her face splattered with black streaks of blood and her body covered in

a thick layer of dust. “Ri, I was so worried; thank fuck you’re safe.” She dropped their foreheads together and held her friend by the shoulders.

“I’m ok.” A raspy croak was all his little faerie could manage, and he gripped her waist tighter. Urgency still pressed at him to get her to safety, but he couldn’t leave Belle to fight this thing alone.

Lachie must be going out of his mind with worry. He needed to make sure his brother didn’t do something completely suicidal.

Turning to the sprite he barked out a string of orders. “Brynne, you need to take her and the others back through the portal. Etienne can myst you back to Astracadia.” Looking across he saw the vampire in question, who appeared at their side immediately.

His blood-stained hands and face were evidence enough of the destruction he’d been able to cause.

“But—”

There was no question in his mind that this needed to happen. He wasn’t going to take any pushback or fight from her right now. She was the only glimpse of good in his blackened life, and fuck if he’d risk her not reaching safety.

“Oriana. You are going to follow orders.” He took her by both shoulders and desperately wanted to kiss her, hold her tight, fucking vanish far away from this place, but none of those things were possible right now. So instead, he shoved a sword in her shaking hand and wrapped her fingers tight around the handle. When he was satisfied she wasn’t going to drop the damn thing, he grabbed his own.

As she watched him with reddened eyes, he brought the tips of both swords together and narrowed his gaze. Piercing her with a look that he hoped to every fucking Star in the cosmos conveyed what he wished he could say.

She tried to shake her head, but he nodded. Tapping the metal again as her lip quivered. She was fierce and incredible,

but her part in this fight was over. Surviving whatever enchantment and torture Fiadh had inflicted was enough.

Rowan barked at Etienne to *move*. Shoving her into the arms of the vampire, he fixed him with the kind of look that should convince him his life would no longer be worth living if he didn't get them back to the safety of the academy. Then, he turned and raced to find his brothers amongst the clouds of dust and deafening roar of magic colliding in battle.

“Lachie.” He yelled. Spotting his brother barely being held back by Niall and Finnic. The wolf form of Fehrn snarled and snapped as he held his ground, preventing their brother from trying to get to where the two witches were locked in battle with one another.

“You’ll get yourself fucking killed.” Niall hissed.

“Get the fuck off me.” Lachie seethed with fear and rage and palpable distress. His eyes bulged wide as he watched helplessly.

The two women matched each other blow for blow, with the dark entities colliding against each other in great surges of power. The shards clattering and smashing in the sky.

Belle was holding back the destruction, and none of them could do anything in the face of this kind of dark magic.

Reaching his brothers, he helped Niall restrain Lachie by grabbing his other arm and pinning him back against his bulk. He could feel every muscle tense and desperate to lash out and didn't miss the wild look in Niall's eyes as he tried to remain focused on his brother, but clearly wanted to make sure Ruby was safe, wherever she was amongst the thick dust swirling in the air.

It was almost impossible to see anything and with each clash of the Ampher magic above them it set off another shock wave, stirring up more of the reddish dust and choking them all.

Suddenly, Belle's body seemed to glow with a brilliance that wasn't there before. Her power surged in a torrent that blew back Fiadh's magic. Standing beside her was Brigid, and

his sister seemed to be channelling some kind of additional power into Belle. Giving her an even greater source of power to tap into.

Then he heard Brigid's voice in his head, as clear as if she was standing right beside him.

“Get everyone through the portal. Belle will follow you; I'll make sure of it.”

Rowan grunted as he bore the brunt of an elbow to the ribs from Lachie.

“Like fuck I'm leaving her.” He bellowed. They'd all heard Brigid's voice too.

“She's strong... and can hold Fiadh back for the moment, but you have to move.”

And as they watched on, Rowan could see Brigid begin to shift them both backwards. Still channelling the force that was overpowering Fiadh, but they were clearly beginning to retreat towards the portal.

“We're taking her with us. But I can't do it if you're in fucking pieces, can I?” He latched on to Lachie and began to drag his howling brother by force. Niall was doing the same and yelling for Ruby as they moved.

“We're here. Hurry.” Rowan heard Ruby's shout from behind them.

“Get them all through.” That was Finnic's voice now. Issuing commands over the thunderous noise of dark magic against dark magic.

The dust was so thick it coated their eyelashes and made it hard to see. But he realised they were on the edge of the portal now. Lachie's voice was hoarse with bellowing for his woman, and he nearly wrenched his shoulder from its socket, trying to escape their hold.

Belle was close to them now, her back towards them and still facing Fiadh with primordial magic pouring out of her and her skin coated with a spiderweb network of dark veins.

“*Now.*” They all heard Brigid’s command like a lightning strike inside their minds. One moment, Belle was standing before them; the next, she’d been thrown backwards by the force of Brigid’s magic. Tossing her limp body into Lachie’s arms, and the shockwave pushed them into the portal.

Rowan stumbled as he looked back and saw his two sisters. Brigid had a serene look in her eyes as she raised both hands, and the shimmering edge of the portal began to close. Knitting itself together like a silvery thread hanging in mid-air.

Fuck. She was sealing herself in there and saving them all.

Fiadh’s expression was one of pure malevolence. Hatred and fury spewed out of her as she unleashed a final screaming explosion of black shards in their direction. The entity she controlled hurtled towards them.

He saw Finnic beside him a fraction too late. The idiot had stayed by his side while the others disappeared back to their realm.

Throwing his body over the man to act as a shield, he tumbled them both backwards, deep into the portal, just as he felt the atmosphere around them shift.

And the world went black.

CHAPTER 38

Seeing Rowan stagger into the room carrying the weight of Finn around his shoulders was the sight Ri had been anxiously waiting for.

She'd nearly chewed her fingernails down to nothing under the watchful eye of Brynne, then had any number of different healing potions and kinds of magic shoved her way. Being prodded and poked to within an inch of her sanity as she was checked over after her ordeal with Fiadh, but she wanted to scream that she was fine. It wasn't any physical injury doing her harm; it was the bone-deep ache inside her chest that had her soul torn apart not knowing where Rowan was.

Or if he was ok.

If he didn't return, she'd find a way back to that hellscape somehow. Of that, she was certain.

She couldn't fucking lose him. Not her fated mate.

But the overwhelming relief at the sight of him was quickly replaced by a pit sinking in her stomach. Like she'd plummeted to the depths of the ocean.

Ri watched on in slow motion as he deposited Finn and gave him a firm grip on the shoulder. As if the dirt coating all of them and lingering shock of what had just occurred was an everyday thing.

Then, Rowan collapsed to the floor.

Nothing could prevent the noise that tore out of her. Ri didn't give a fuck about anything or anyone or whatever

secrets until now might have prevented them from revealing their connection... she was on him in an instant. Shaking his impossibly heavy shoulders and trying to turn his giant frame over.

No. No. No.

He felt so cold. The usual furnace-like heat coming from his muscled frame was extinguished. Seeing his ashen face was torture, as she tried to shove him and get some kind of response. Willing him to rouse from whatever *this* was.

Rowan was stronger than anyone she knew.

He'd survived three centuries of battle.

But... nothing was happening. He lay there, like a felled timber on the carpeted floor, with his face turned to one side and dark hair coated with reddened dirt, half covering his face.

Ri was aware she was shouting, but there was no coherence to her words. Just desperate pleas and begging for someone to help. To do something. To try and fix him.

Please.

Tears tracked down her cheeks, which were still completely covered in a thick layer of red dust still stuck to her.

Blinking as hands pulled her backward, she could make out Ruby through the tears but couldn't make sense of what she was saying.

They were trying to take her away from him, and Ri lost her mind. Digging her fingers into the cotton of his shirt, she refused to be moved from him. She wasn't going to leave his side.

Then, Niall was there, gently moving her out of the way so that he could get a good look at his brother. His usual easy-going nature was gone, and his brows furrowed as he took in the state of the one person none of them would ever expect could end up like this. Pulling at Rowan's shirt, the material gave way to reveal a sight that made her heart nearly stop beating entirely.

Symbols covered his lower back and side that looked as though they had been crudely carved into his flesh. Ghastly black shards embedded into his skin and they were everywhere she looked. More seemed to appear the longer she sat, gradually turning numb beside him. There was a seething mass of blackened flesh and dark magic below the surface of his tattooed skin.

Ri was going to be sick. She slumped backwards into Ruby's arms, and that's when she could hear Finnic speaking.

"The idiot fucking put himself in the way. If it wasn't for him, that thing would have killed me." Held in the embrace of Lukah, his own fated mate, he explained what Rowan had done.

The stupid, selfless asshole had saved Finnic's life. And in turn, left himself at the mercy of whatever this entity had done to him.

Or whatever it was doing to him on the inside.

"We have to save him. Ru-Ru. Please." She begged, with hot tears streaming down her face.

Her sister tugged her in tight against her chest. Soothing her with gentle noises and reassurance that they would do everything they could.

"Can't we take him to the Goddesses?" Ruby was speaking with Niall over her head now. Ri felt like she was floating out of her body. Somehow, observing the bustle of the room around her while also being here. Her sister and Niall had been through their own nightmare, and the Goddesses had seen fit to help them the night Ruby sacrificed herself.

So why the fuck weren't they taking him there now?

"It's spread too far to try and move him." Niall was running magic through Rowan's body as fast as possible. Attempting to contain the spread while also help him heal. Or, at the very least, fight off whatever darkness was beginning to take hold. "Without knowing what this is, all I know is Fiadh intended for it to kill. Just like with the other attacks."

Finn looked distraught. “And your other sister is still there... stuck in that fucking place.”

Looking up at the man, Niall jabbed a hand through his hair. His face was drawn with pain. “Bri is strong. She knew what she was doing.” But there was a weight to his words that left them all in no doubt that he wasn’t fully convinced either.

“Is Belle...” Alright? Alive? Fuck. Ri couldn’t stomach the thought that all of this had occurred because of her. She should have just let Fiadh take her life and spared everyone else from this fate.

Sitting half slumped against her sister on the floor, she couldn’t take her eyes off Rowan’s grey face. Tilted towards her, she wanted to reach out and stroke fingers over his strong profile, but he was still lying flat on the floor as Niall continued to work on him.

“She’ll recover. Lachie took her straight to Castle Nitorna. They’ve got healers there, and not to mention Nell, plus Lia went with them also, who will all take care of her.”

Ri sniffed through the thickness of her throat. Like a rope coiled tight that refused to relinquish her from a strangle-hold as she suddenly felt the wash of dread that she might lose this man.

The man she loved with all her heart.



“It’s *him*, isn’t it?” Ruby spoke softly against her forehead, pressing her lips to give her a kiss as she walked into the darkened bedroom. She stroked a loose strand of her hair behind the pointed tip of Ri’s ear.

For a week now, Ri had remained on watch beside his bed. But nothing had improved.

Rowan still didn’t wake.

Almost as if his soul was trapped somewhere else, not in his body, or that was how it felt to Ri. It was like he was beside her, but not at the same time.

A convoluted mess of broken soul threads that left her chest aching and raw.

She knew he wasn't dead. He still had a heartbeat and a pulse whenever she'd laid beside him with her head over his chest and let silent tears run down her cheek, listening to the quiet thud below his ribcage.

But beyond that, she was one half of a soul bond floating and spinning through space without a tether. The strong, reassuring presence of Rowan and their fated connection was gone, and every day she sat here at his bedside, she felt the tiny flicker of hope inside her begin to struggle a little harder to remain alight.

They'd shifted him here to his cottage in the woods after every healer known across the realms had taken their time to work on him in the initial days after the attack. But the bitter truth remained that the entity had taken hold of him, with the kind of primordial power that had been enough to wrench his physical body into a plane of existence that was somewhere far from here.

As Ri looked down, she realised that she was cradling Rowan's big palm in her hands over her lap.

Clinging to him like her life depended on it, because it fucking did.

The only thing that mattered was Rowan.

She nodded dumbly. An understanding passed between them in the special way they'd always had as sisters. Blood didn't matter. Their connection was just as fated as it was with the men in their lives.

Ri had refused to leave after they'd moved him here, and Niall had quietly agreed to let her stay on and keep watch.

At least he knew something of the truth between them, and she knew it would only have been a matter of time until he told her sister.

“I understand why you didn’t say anything.” Ruby sat down on the edge of the bed, facing Ri’s spot where she curled in the big armchair. She’d pulled it up beside the bed and spent most of her days sitting here as the sun traversed the sky and the shadows shifted around the room.

“But that doesn’t mean there’s not a part of me that can’t understand why you chose not to.” Her sister looked exhausted. The strain of everything the Nocturnes had been through clearly showing in her eyes.

“We just wanted time.” Ri looked at the figure lying on the bed. The inked patterns across the back of his hand that she gently traced and stroked with the pads of her fingers. If she didn’t know any better, Rowan was in a deep sleep and might wake at any second. But she’d cried enough tears to last an eternal lifetime in the past few days when that moment never came. No matter how hard she prayed to the Goddesses to make it happen. “I was so stubborn and didn’t want my place in the Astrals to be taken away from me... And now...”

She chewed on her bottom lip.

“And now it all seems insignificant. I get it.” Ruby knew as well as anyone what it meant to nearly lose your fated mate.

The two sat in silence for a while before Ruby got up and busied herself, making them both some herbal tea. It was nothing Ri couldn’t have done herself, but knowing how weak she felt these days, it was a relief to have her sister here, even for just the short moment she could spare to spend time away from her life as queen. Then, as she sat back down and handed Ri her steaming mug, her sister narrowed her gaze slightly.

“Does he know?”

“Know what?”

“That you are fated to one another?”

Oh, that.

Ri took a long gulp and cradled the warmth of the cup against her mouth.

“No.” Her exhale was long and shaky.

“Oh, Ri.” Those big brown eyes of her sister welled up.

Fuck, now she was going to make her start crying all over again.

“How did you know?”

Ruby sipped on her own tea for a moment before answering quietly. “You love him in the way he needs to be loved. Not forcing something on him, or trying to sway him to be different. That is the kind of connection between souls that can’t be anything but fated.”

Now, she was swallowing a lump threatening to form in her throat.

“But you barely saw me or Rowan, while we were at the academy.” Had her sister seen them together all this time and never said anything?

“That’s true... but the moment you were taken, I’ve never seen Rowan fearful of anything, and he was afraid of losing you.” Her sister reached out and squeezed her thigh. “Speaking from experience, as someone who hid things from Niall, I’m what you might call an expert in spotting the signs now.”

Which was all well and good, but it didn’t solve the issue that remained.

Rowan was lost. And she didn’t know when or how or where to begin to try and find him.

“What if he doesn’t come back to me, Ru-Ru?” She huddled her knees up against her chest. Feeling all of sudden like the thundering tidal wave of emotion that had been lurking in the shadows was about to consume her.

But then her sister was right there, fixing her with the fierceness that could only be the warrior and queen that she had always been meant to be.

“He will fight to get back to you. I saw it in his eyes that day. That man would crawl through fire a thousand times over and then a thousand more to find you, don’t doubt it.”

CHAPTER 39

Rowan's stomach felt like it had been taken to with a boot. His insides felt pulverised to a tender mush as if they'd gone ten rounds against a bull's horns.

Or maybe he'd just been stabbed and gutted like a hog.

He groaned and stiffly bent over one raised knee. One hand steadied himself with fingers dug into the dirt.

His eyes blinked once, twice, then he lurched to his feet. Everything about this scene was horrifyingly familiar.

The exact weight of the dirt beneath his fingers... the place where her head would always roll and stare back with lifeless eyes, was just over there...

As his head jerked around, the bloodied sword lay where it fell. As always.

Rowan felt lightheaded.

No.

No.

He'd escaped this terrible reality. He'd been able to rescue Oriana. They'd gone through the portal just as...

"How's the head feeling, brother?"

Spinning round and reaching on reflex for weapons—that to his horror weren't there—his heart lurched.

Seated on a rock, cross legged, and glinting within mischief as always, sat Brigid.

“This isn’t possible. I—You—” He jabbed a finger in her direction.

He didn’t know what the fuck was happening, and that made him entirely too uneasy.

This could be any kind of enchantment or hex. His mind could be being manipulated to see all this when in reality, he was held captive.

Or worse.

“Oh, it’s real enough.” Brigid fluttered fingers his way. “But wherever your actual body is, you’re doing a lot of healing right now. Safer to keep your mind and soul somewhere otherwise occupied.”

“Don’t twist your bullshit around me, Brigid.” He growled. There’d been enough lies by omission from this woman to make an immortal weep.

“Look, I’m just acting as a last line of defence here. As much as I wish I could say you’re a tough customer, your body was a little... compromised, shall we say.”

What the fuck was she on about?

“Where am I?”

“In temporal or corporeal form?”

“Brigid. Don’t fucking play me.” He whirled on her, eyes flashing with fury.

He needed to get to Oriana. Needed to see that she was safe.

“Your essence is here, in the in-between.”

That didn’t explain shit.

“Where the fuck is my body?” Gritting his teeth, he felt something in his jaw pop. But then it wasn’t actually his jaw, which left his mind reeling.

There wasn’t time to discern who he needed to murder for taking him away from Oriana, he just needed to get to her as fast as possible.

“Where?” His barely leashed fury bubbled inside.

“I’m not exactly sure, but last I could tell, you were being very well looked after. Lots of healers. Plenty of potions and magic to help contain the poison.”

She cocked her head to one side, and those bright blue eyes held his gaze. That’s when it all flooded back in.

All of it.

Fiadh striking out. Him covering Finnic and hoping he’d managed to save the foolish prick as he dragged him backwards into the portal.

Brigid closing the chasm between worlds behind them. Seemingly offering herself as a sacrifice in the process.

“How are you—you’re here?” He couldn’t fathom it. This was fucking confusing, and he only wanted one thing.

Oriana.

And to hold her as he tried to tell her exactly what she meant to him. He’d been a complete idiot not to tell her when he had the chance.

“I’m not the only one who walks in dreams, you know.” His sister claimed mock horror, with a hand plastered against her chest, that he could even dare insinuate that she wasn’t able to fuck with his head at all times.

“Has it been your doing all along? This endless fucking nightmare?”

He might just slit her throat for real if it was and he ever got the chance to see her in the flesh again.

She let out a tinkling laugh. “Goddesses, no.” She waved him off. “That’s something far beyond what I could ever dabble in. Call it a premonition or your own Sight that left you rolling around in that field of nightmares.”

“But you knew about my dreams? Saw what I did to you?” Rowan narrowed his gaze.

Her sleek black hair bobbed around her chin as she nodded. “Oh, the number of ways I’ve viewed my own

potential death... the stories I could tell..."

She was officially mad. Of that, Rowan was certain.

But what came now? They'd abandoned her to a hellscape realm with a sister intent on destroying her.

"You can stop worrying about me, you big lump."

He fixed her with a glare, then turned to look out over the desolate landscape they found themselves in. Reddish-tinged dirt stretched for miles but disappeared into a cloudless hazy horizon. A dreamscape he'd come to know so well.

"Besides. We've got more important things to discuss Like you telling Oriana you love her, no?"

Rowan's head snapped back towards the impish smile written all over his sister's face.

Scrubbing a hand over his mouth, he shook his head slowly.

"You can't hide shit from me, and you know it." The woman was nearly wriggling on the spot with glee, looking entirely too smug and satisfied with herself.

"Well, go on then... since you obviously know every fucking detail." This wasn't happening. Nothing could be less appealing than having a conversation about this with his own sister when they'd barely survived the madness of their other sibling.

"It'll have to be a grand gesture..." she tapped her lip, staring somewhere far off in thought.

"No."

"... She's gone through enough shit putting up with you; the girl deserves something romantic." Brigid continued, resolutely ignoring him.

Oriana deserved the stars and the moon, of course. But he wasn't about to say that out loud for Brigid to delight in.

So, instead, he grunted and kicked a rock on the ground.

“You have to show her through your actions, no?” Brigid’s grin was growing wider by the minute. “If you don’t want to lose her, how far will you go to show her what she means to you?”

Rowan stiffened and turned his attention to Brigid with a snarl. “Who said anything about fucking losing her?”

He didn’t trust his sister’s tendency for riddles and mind games. Especially not when it came to his girl.

“Keep your sword sheathed.” Her eyebrows waggled at him, and those blue eyes danced with glee at his obvious discomfort. “I’m just saying that unless you choose her, what’s to say she will stick around? That little warrior has big dreams, and where do you think you fit into those my surly brother dearest?”

Fuck. She did have grand dreams for her life. A vision that she wanted to achieve. There was no denying that her thirty-odd winters paled in comparison to his jaded and weary three centuries of existence, but she was a constant reminder that he hadn’t really lived in all that time.

That was all it had been for him. *An existence.*

Not a life.

Or certainly not one that he wanted to spend time reminiscing on.

Being with her allowed him to see everything in vivid, sparkling detail that he’d been blinded to until now.

Oriana had to be a fool if she didn’t follow where her heart took her, and was that really going to be allowing herself to be kept away with him? Living in his solitary godsdamned existence amongst the forest, sealed off behind a fortress of blood wards?

Would she be happy living that kind of life? Would it be enough for someone as vibrant as her?

She had a sister, a family, and friends. What did Rowan have other than a loathing of anyone and anything that threatened to spoil his peace?

Except for *her*, of course.

“So is that a yes? You’re ready to learn how to put a voice to those feelings battering around inside your ribcage after all these centuries?”

“Fuck you.”

“Aww... it really is sweet seeing you finally meet the one person who might tolerate you for an eternal lifetime.”

Rowan sank down on his haunches.

“That’s the exact problem.” He stabbed his hands into his hair. Fuck’s sake. How was he even contemplating having this conversation with Brigid of all the godsdamned beings to exist?

“What is?” She knew. But his sister was a master in the art of pretending *not* to know.

“How to rationalise this kind of life. This kind of power.” He stared down at his hands. “Knowing exactly how to take a life? Being the dispenser of moral justice time and time and time again at the tip of my blade while the Goddesses look on from wherever the fuck they are.”

He could almost see the lingering stains. All the centuries of blood his hands had been drenched in.

War had seeped into his very bones.

But what was he to do now that he no longer wanted that to be the marrow of his existence?

“I didn’t have a choice in this,” Rowan growled. Pissed off didn’t begin to explain how he felt at the knowledge that he could never change who he had been destined to be.

“Oriana has spent her life recording the moments when she chose peace over violence. Whereas I have brought nothing but a trail of death and destruction with me wherever I am called to go.”

Brigid stared back at him with a small smile on her face and knowing in her eyes, but she still didn’t say a word.

“The only time I truly feel at peace is with her, Bri. How do I ask her to be my shelter from the storm when I’m the fucking violence raining down from the sky?”

Something tight sat like a wedge in the back of his throat.

“You have gifts, no?” She leant back on her hands and studied him closely.

“Death isn’t a gift.”

“Perhaps all you see is the things you’ve done in your life until this point... and think that those things define you forevermore. Just because you have been tasked with something by the Goddesses in your past, that doesn’t mean you cannot ever deserve to know happiness.”

Rowan let out a heavy sigh. “And what about you? Does the same apply? Where does your happiness come now that you’re stuck wherever you are with our murderous sister?”

Throwing her head back, she let out a sharp laugh. “Don’t worry yourself about Fiadh. I’m much more useful to her *alive* than chopped up into small pieces and fed to her monsters.”

He didn’t doubt that. Having the most powerful Seer in centuries under her command would be something terrifying indeed. What she might choose to do with Brigid still didn’t bear thinking about.

“Besides... who’s to say I didn’t have plans of my own, hmm? That I don’t have someone I’m long overdue to meet now that the portals have aligned, so to speak?”

Well, shit. He’d not considered that.

“Do you mean—”

“Deflecting onto me won’t allow you to escape this conversation. Now... where were we?” She twisted her lips and gave him a wink. “Ah, that’s right. Grand declarations of love.”

Oh, fuck that for a joke.

“Now, I want you to listen to me, Rowan of Nocturne, and listen well.” Brigid was standing in front of him now, and he

had to blink several times to realise that whatever dream state they were in allowed her to move like smoke. “What are you doing here? You’ve got a body you can return to and a beautiful woman who loves you... What more is there to life than proving that you are capable of earning trust and love and receiving compassion? What more is there than being willing to give *yourself* compassion?”

He found himself staring up at his sister. Wise as the heart of the cosmos and looking a thousand times more powerful than her youthful outward appearance. An elfin-like creature with a soul that saw the darkest depths of everyone around her and somehow still lived with a lightness he couldn’t fathom.

Carrying such a weight that most would collapse beneath such a burden.

But not Brigid.

“Oriana can love you, yes... but can *you* take the ultimate step of being the man who loves himself complete with all your scars? Someone worthy of her love? There are plenty of weak men out there who will take the care she has to give, and they’ll be greedy and hoard it and make themselves feel good. But will they be able to challenge her? Fight for her? Push her to be the best version of herself?”

No. No, they fucking wouldn’t.

And he’d be damned if he allowed anyone else to ever get close enough to his girl to even think they had the right to breathe the same air as her.

The space around him began to spin and churn.

As if his decision had been the key to unlock the door that might release him from being trapped in this space of in-between.

The air around him took on an ethereal glow and the dream space they had both been inhabiting morphed into blackness. Brigid’s face and body dissolved before his eyes. His body began to feel weightless, and her cheerful words followed him as he became sucked into the darkened void.

“I’ll see you again, brother. You deserve to go and find your peace, no?”

CHAPTER 40

When Rowan felt like he'd thudded back to solid ground, his eyes creaked open. The wooden rafters of his cabin swam into focus as he found himself lying on his back. Spirits and fucking Stars, his entire body felt like it had been flattened. A bone-deep ache spread right through to his extremities, and his eyes struggled to adjust to the light.

It was as though he'd been asleep for a lifetime. Not just the few moments he'd been speaking—or astral projecting or whatever the fuck that was—with Brigid for.

All he knew was that he needed to find Oriana. Someone needed to tend to her wounds inflicted at his own sister's hands, and he'd be fucked if he allowed anyone else to touch her considering all that they had just endured. It would be his magic, and his alone that tended to her. He had to know she was going to be alright after whatever Fiadh had put her through.

He'd barely had time to register her face in the room, covered in a thick layer of red dirt, after getting Finnic safely back to Astracadia. Now, for whatever reason, on returning from the in-between, he'd ended up back at his cabin.

Why had they moved him here for such a short space of time? It was godsdamned ridiculous.

Shoving into his boots and fitting his blade holster to himself, he was already portaling back to the academy within moments. Cursing beneath his breath, whoever dared to move

him, never mind how the fuck they had gotten past his blood wards so quickly.

But all of that could wait.

Rowan made fast work of arriving back at the academy. First, to Ruby's study, where it was likely they'd all still be gathered, but the place was empty. Frowning to himself, Rowan went straight to Oriana's rooms in Trelithia, but upon landing inside her private space, it almost seemed like it wasn't even lived in. Rowan's scowl grew darker with each passing second. There was something weighing on his chest the longer he went without finding any trace of her.

He even checked the catacombs but couldn't find sight nor sound of anyone. How had they all vanished since returning through the portal?

It was only moments ago they'd all been right here, covered in the grime of battle.

Fuck, of course. His mind was struggling to catch up with his physical form. They'd all have gathered at the place he should have checked first.

He portaled to the training arena, half expecting the place to be crawling with dust and noise and bodies after what they'd all just been through. But as his boots hit the ground, only a cavernous silence greeted him. In the faded light, he swept a look around. All the while, the tension inside his chest was reaching breaking point.

The arena was deserted. Only a small light could be seen glowing from inside the armoury, and as he stalked across the space, Finnic appeared in the doorway.

The blond idiot looked like he'd seen a ghost.

Must have been more of a shock suffering that attack from Fiadh than he'd been expecting.

He also looked fresh and tidied up. Rowan's gaze narrowed on the formal attire he wore, but his mind was running a million miles an hour and didn't have time to figure out what the fuck that was all about.

“Where is she?” He demanded.

Finnic stood there with his mouth hanging open.

This wasn't the time to test his patience. Rowan was on him in an instant, shoving him roughly up against the wall with a snarl.

“I said, where the fuck is she?”

It was like she'd vanished completely. There was an ugly curling sensation in his gut, his vision hazing slightly as his magic felt drained—it was almost like he'd just used all his power and strength and needed time to recover.

Which was fucking laughable.

Finnic was grabbing hold of his shoulders, babbling some incoherent nonsense. Trying to talk to him, but Rowan wasn't listening to any of it.

Because he didn't fucking care what he had to say.

If it wasn't about Oriana, he wasn't interested.

“Don't piss around. Tell me where she is.” He was about one second away from shoving his blade down the prick's throat.

“The ballroom, that's where they all will be.”

Well, of course, he didn't think to look for her there. That was a fucking weird place for her to be, but whatever. He didn't give a shit.

“But wait, she's...”

Not bloody likely. Being gone even that short amount of time while he was in whatever dream he'd been in with Brigid and while his body healed had been torture enough.

Ignoring Finnic's pathetic whinging and protests, he portaled straight to the ballroom, the exact spot where he'd stood that night of the summer solstice and watched his little faerie, and as he landed on the polished marble, he realised now how much he'd already been halfway to loving her back then.

She might have infuriated him, but there was no denying that she had meant something to him, even if he'd been too much of a thick-skulled fool to realise it for himself.

Materialising just inside the heavy gilded doors, he stopped short.

The ballroom was packed on all sides.

But this time, it wasn't with revellers or dancing. Nor was there the sea of battle-weary bodies he'd been expecting to encounter.

This appeared to be the middle of a ceremony of some kind.

His gaze swept over the sight before him. Bouncing rapidly to take it all in.

Rows upon rows of students lined both sides of the floor, and at the far end there was a raised platform erected. At the head of the room stood Belle, in her role as Guardian, and she was flanked by other dignitaries from across the realms by the look of it.

He could see his brother Lachie standing off to one side, with eyes only for Belle.

Rowan was seeing the scene in front of him, but his mind couldn't reconcile the details with how he'd left them all as they'd returned through the portal.

It had only been moments before that he'd witnessed Belle in the grips of the dark magic she'd used to fight off Fiadh. With his own eyes, Rowan had watched blackened veins spread throughout her body and then seen the moment she was hurled back through the chasm by Brigid's magic.

It was barely minutes ago that he'd been wrestling to hold his brother back from getting himself killed... wasn't it?

To look at them both, they seemed different.

As if an inordinate amount of time had passed.

Rowan's heart began to beat triple time.

His fingers curled into fists.

Ice flooded his veins.

Why hadn't he been able to find Oriana?

Standing to one side of Belle, the familiar figure of Ruby was shaking the hand of the vampire, Etienne, and awarding him what looked like a parchment scroll wrapped in gold and a medallion of some kind she was proceeding to affix to his suit. Niall, of course, stood barely two paces behind her.

Rowan was about two seconds from razing this academy to the ground in order to find his girl when the mood in the ballroom shifted.

The bloodsucker headed across to the far side of the stage, and the applause that had rippled around upon seeing him receive whatever presentation had been handed to him simmered down to a hush.

Ruby was speaking now, addressing the gathered students, but it was the shadowy outline just off to the side of the stage that had Rowan's every ounce of attention.

Words washed around him that made his body break out in a cold sweat. Realisation began to sink into his awareness, leaving him light-headed.

“Next, we are delighted to present to you our top graduate into the elite of the Astrals. This year has been one of immensely trying and difficult circumstances, and no one here today is more proud of what this incredibly talented individual has achieved. Please, can everyone join us in an Astracadia salute as we celebrate Oriana.”

She stepped forward out of the shadows, and Rowan could hardly breathe.

Long black hair was swept over her shoulder to one side. A charcoal-coloured dress with long fitted sleeves hugged her figure, while ornate gold and jewelled flowers sat atop her head. Oriana moved onto the stage as if floating there.

Rowan's pulse thundered in his ears so loud it drowned out the cheering and whistles from the students gathered. The entire room was a crescendo of noise and celebration.

Meanwhile, dread filled his stomach.

This year?

Their graduation ceremony?

It wasn't fucking possible.

Before he knew what was happening, his feet were carrying him up the aisle down the centre of the makeshift auditorium. With each row of students he stormed by, whispers started to roll like a wave of thunder building behind him.

Fuck.

His eyes bored into his little faerie, the love of his entire fucking life, and the beating heart of his world.

And the sickening realisation filled him that this ceremony should not be happening *now*.

Not when it was only a moment ago in his mind that he pulled her from Fiadh's clutches.

The thud of his heart as it battered against his rib cage was deafening. Only growing more erratic and pumping wilder the closer he got to the edge of the stage.

She must have realised something was going on, as everyone on the raised platform turned towards him at once. And one by one, everyone's expressions morphed into a thousand different variations of shock.

Niall was halfway to grabbing Ruby by the arm, ready to whisk her away to safety, when he stopped dead and stared as if he'd never seen his own brother's face before.

Belle had both hands covering her mouth. Eyes bulging wider by the second.

Lachie had drawn both swords from his twin holsters, then frozen in front of her.

Behind all of them, the dignitaries from across the various realms wore a thousand shades of utter confusion as they watched him prowl forward.

But he barely gave them a second glance, keeping his gaze firmly focused on his every reason for fucking living and breathing.

As he hurdled the edge of the stage, she dropped her scroll and medal.

Oriana's gaze bounced all over him. Dark liquid eyes took in his appearance.

Her perfect pink lips hung open in a small O shape, and she shook her head silently.

He furrowed his brow. Why was she stepping backwards? A torrent of panic and confusion and bewilderment flashing across her face. That wasn't going to be happening.

"No. It can't—You're..." she barely uttered the word before he pounced on her.

It can. It will be.

This girl needed to understand he would never leave her.

Scooping her up against him, Rowan took her mouth as his arms wrapped around her so tight he had every intention of staying that way forever if that's what it took to have her realise he was truly here.

She froze beneath him. He could feel the shock rippling through her and refusing to let go.

But he couldn't stop. Slowly caressing her mouth with his own, lovingly stroking her and coaxing her to soften for him with each brush of his lips and soft caress of his tongue. He cradled her head with both hands and cupped her jaw.

He poured every emotion into that kiss. It was soft and raw and desperate. Exactly the way he felt when it came to this girl.

Drawing back with a heaving chest, he rested their foreheads together.

"I'm going crazy. Tell me I'm dreaming." Her voice cracked, and tears streamed down the soft swell of her cheek. Her tiny hands gripped his wrists, and each finger flexed

against him. Rowan couldn't fucking stand that she was crying. "This can't be... Is this real?"

He brushed a thumb over each side of her face. Wiping away the wetness gathered there.

"Feel this." He shifted her fingers over his heart that raced to escape his chest.

She'd better fucking believe it this was real.

"No. I've wished for this for so long." She'd screwed her eyes shut now. Shaking her head she pushed him away. Or attempted to, at least.

Rowan let out a low growl. He wasn't going to move an inch.

"Rowan..." Behind him he could hear Ruby sounding like she was begging with him. A desperate sadness in her voice that made his jaw clench.

As he looked down at the beautiful girl before him, he felt an overwhelming sense dawn on him that he'd been gone for far too long. His stomach plunged at the thought that maybe he was too late after all.

Brigid had warned him, hadn't she?

Fuck. What if Oriana had been apart from him all this time and decided her life was better without him in it?

"This isn't real. This isn't real." There was a hint of panic in her voice now.

His creased brow deepened into a dark glare at the sight of her shaking her head and trying to escape from his hold.

That wasn't going to be happening.

She might have had to live without him for the past, however long it had been, but he had already told her once before. He wouldn't be damn well letting her go.

She could bloody well fight him if she wanted.

"I'm here. I'm never leaving your side. I told you I wasn't ever going to let you go." He dropped kisses over her tear-

stained face as he spoke. “Congratulations, my perfect faerie.”

Quiet sobs wracked her body, and her eyes flew open. Staring up at him with disbelief.

“I thought I’d lost you forever.” This time her fingers dug into his shirt, no longer trying to push him away, but holding tighter and tighter and drawing him in.

He pressed their foreheads together again. Taking a deep inhale and suddenly feeling like his lungs could expand once more. Just having her back in his arms was like taking the first breath after being submerged and struggling without air.

“My black fucking heart aches for you. It beats only for you.”

Rowan could feel the weight of the audience they had for this moment. He’d burst in on her ceremony. Leapt up on stage like a man possessed and kissed her in front of a sea of onlookers.

There was no time like the present to show her just how deadly serious he was about this. About them.

How he’d rather be dragged through the underworld and ancestral plane fighting till his last breath before he’d let this woman be separated from him again.

“I love you, Oriana.” Slowly, he dropped down to one knee in front of her, holding both her small hands wrapped in his calloused grip. As he did so, a volley of gasps rocketed through the entire building.

Screw them all. He wanted the entire realm to witness this.

“I don’t have a ring because I know you don’t give a shit about anything like that.” He eyed her with a silent instruction not to dare move as he let her hands go but pressed them against his chest to keep her right there where he wanted her. Then, Rowan withdrew his blade and offered it to her with both hands. “Will you become a Nocturne? Allow me to remain by your side? I’m yours to command, in this eternal life and whatever lies beyond this one.”

Silent tears tracked down her cheeks, and the rest of the world around them dropped away. Nothing mattered but this moment as they hung in space, staring at each other for a long heartbeat.

“*Yes.*” She breathed. The most perfect drop of salvation from her soft lips.

All around them, the ballroom burst into chaos. The blade now forgotten, as he allowed it to drop to the ground at their feet, and Rowan scooped her into his arms. Cheers and hollering and whistles surrounded them, while magic was let loose by someone in the audience, creating a shower of sparks and glittering explosions above their heads.

His heart swelled with pure, unfiltered love as she threw her arms around his neck, and he nuzzled into her hair. Inhaling a deep lungful of this girl. *His woman.* Digging his fingers tight to hold her tiny size up against his chest and wrapping her legs around him.

“Do me the honour... and allow me to be the best version of a man I could ever hope to be. *For you.*”

“Say it again.” She whispered into his neck.

He chuckled. Running his nose up the side of her pointed ear tip. “Which part? I don’t think I can remember everything, it wasn’t exactly planned.”

She huffed out a breath, then drew back to study him and traced her fingers over his jaw.

“You know which part, brute.”

“That I’m insane for you? Or that I love you, my little faerie.”

Her smile could have lit up the entire realm.

“I love you, my brute.” She kissed him deeply now. Allowing her fingers to sink into the hair at the back of his neck as she melted into him.

It only took another moment before Rowan reluctantly had to pull back because they were quickly surrounded on all sides. While he refused to let her go completely, he set her

down and drew her back against his chest in too allow for the wave of hugs and kisses that were smothering and congratulating them.

In between thumps on his shoulder from his brothers, tearful pecks on his cheek from Belle and Ruby, and squealing excitement from Oriana's friends and classmates who ran up onto the stage... it was complete and utter chaos.

Everyone was fucking crying. And he'd had more than enough of seeing his girl with tears in her eyes.

Rowan gave Ruby a long look as she finally let go of her sister from a fierce hug. "Oriana is all done here?"

To which she nodded in reply, wiping her eyes and turning into a hug from Niall, who was grinning broader than he'd ever seen before.

Thank fuck for that.

He didn't need their permission, but it was the least he could do to ask, since he'd just cut off their awards ceremony in the most dramatic way possible.

Taking his girl in his arms, he brushed a curl behind her ear and then lowered his mouth to hers. As the noise and the crowd disappeared, and they portaled away, he whispered against her lips.

"I love you, my beautiful faerie."

EPILOGUE

“You’re going to come for me, little faerie.” Each punishing thrust had Ri slammed hard against the door of their bedroom. “Like I already told you... You’re going to give me one orgasm for every day I was away from you.”

Ri’s core clenched, and her pussy walls fluttered around his fat cock.

“That’s almost...” She gasped for breath as his hips punched forward again and again. “...three hundred orgasms.”

Rowan tightened his hold on her ass and made a growling noise.

“I’ve got a lot of time to make up for... and your needy little cunt is always begging for my mouth or my cock.”

She whimpered against his shoulder. The pleasure building and building inside her as the material of her dress bunched higher around her hips.

They were both fully clothed.

And very late.

For their own Binding ceremony, no less.

“I don’t care about anyone or anything beyond these walls. As long as you call yourself mine, little faerie.” Rowan demanded her attention.

“We shouldn’t be doing this. Everyone is waiting.”

His teeth nipped her earlobe. She was both relieved he wasn't leaving her covered in bite marks right now, while at the same time disappointed he wasn't marking her for this special moment.

“Let them fucking wait. I need to feel you coming on my cock again like my perfect little whore.”

Not like that hadn't already happened too many times to count last night.

Ri moaned loudly.

“You're going to ruin my makeup...” A deep thrust. “My hair...” Another punishing drive forward. “My dress...” She begged. But Rowan simply growled again as his cock hit an angle inside that had her vision blanking with pleasure.

“Nothing magic can't fucking fix.” His mouth sank down over hers as he consumed every ounce of breath in Ri's lungs. Thrusting against her tongue with his own and devouring her just the way she wanted him to.

Each kiss from this man was like a jolt of lightning straight to her soul. Her fated mate, who loved her wholly and unequivocally of his own choosing. Ri could hardly believe it might be true, after all this time.

Which was why they'd made the decision to have their Binding ceremony two weeks after he'd finally come back to her. A fortnight since the day he'd stormed into the midst of her graduation and award for making it into the elite Astral ranks. Despite the euphoria and overwhelming relief at having him by her side once more, Ri still woke up every morning terrified it had all been a dream... only to find his hulking frame wrapped around her, squeezing tight even in his slumber.

“*Oh, fffffuuck.*” Ri whimpered against his mouth. But she knew it was futile to protest. Her entire body trembled right on the precipice, and it only took two more swift thrusts inside her before her inner walls clamped down around his length. Tingling raced through her right from her toes up to her head, and she clung on as Rowan drove into her.

“Ungghhh. Fffuck.” His own release shot forward as he let out a deep groan in her ear. Filling her with his cum.

As they both floated back into their bodies, Ri allowed herself to melt into his hold. Having his powerful arms around her was something she'd developed an even stronger addiction to.

“My beautiful little whore... We can do whatever the fuck we like.” He was still thrusting into her, with a trail of hot, wet kisses left against her neck and down to her collarbone. The slickness of his cum mixed with her own, making lewd noises as their hearts raced in time with one another.

“I can't believe I let you tempt me with orgasms.” She dropped her head with a soft thud against the wooden surface of the door behind her.

Rowan's eyes glinted with wicked satisfaction as he drew back and looked at her.

“My cum inside you and that pretty flush on your cheeks after coming all over my cock? I couldn't wish for anything better when we stand up there in front of everyone.”

Ri covered her face with her hands in embarrassment and felt him pull out of her. She knew there was no hiding what they'd been doing in here, with all of their nearest and dearest waiting just outside in the forest clearing for them.

As Rowan lowered her to the floor on shaky legs, she felt him kneel, but keep his big hands on her hips to steady her in place. Then he gently and oh so carefully lifted each foot one by one and slipped the soft, silky material of her underwear back on. Following the path up her legs with kisses along the sensitive inside of her knee and thighs.

Goddesses fucking save her. This witch was going to have her begging for more any second.

He was clearly intent on driving her wild as he placed an open-mouthed kiss over the silk now covering her pussy and gazed up at her with hooded eyes from between her legs.

Achingly handsome, as always.

She brushed a lock of his wayward dark curls out of his eyes. “My entire heart is yours, brute. With or without a Binding ceremony.”

“And mine is in your hands, beating only for you.” And just to prove he knew exactly what she needed from him, he bit down on the soft flesh of her inner thigh. Leaving a bruising mark that he immediately soothed with his tongue.

Ri made a tight noise in the back of her throat. Her body instantly overwhelmed with sparks of sensation in the midst of still recovering from her climax. While Rowan stood up to tower over her and gently caressed his thumbs across the swell of her cheeks, followed by the corners of her eyes. Easing his magic over her skin and fixing the ruined makeup she’d done for herself earlier.

Then he shot her a wink, and her clit throbbed.

Rowan was entirely too dangerous when he turned on his charm. And it made her fluttering heart pound even faster knowing that she was the only person who ever saw this side of him.

But little did he know she’d kept her own secret just for this moment. Threatening Ruby and Niall with all sorts of lingering pain if they were to dare breathe a word of their fated bond before the ceremony.

Now, the moment had come when she was about to reveal it all to him.

Which should be terrifying, but after everything they had been through—after the torture of not knowing if he would ever return to her—she was bursting to share this surprise.

As equally terrifying as it would be to finally say the words out loud for the first time.

Ri smoothed out her dress, a simple black design that flowed to the floor like black liquid with a high slit up one side. Looking almost as powerful as armour, but still soft and moulded to her curves in a strapless bodice. All along one side, following the path of her tattoo, were replica silver scales

that cascaded down her torso and then faded into the material of the skirt.

She had affixed matching silver threads with her magic through her hair to form woven stars in the long braid pulled over one shoulder. Which, at a glance, had fortunately all stayed in place despite Rowan fucking her senseless up against the door.

She had never felt more ready.

Knowing that Rowan also wanted this was more than she could have ever hoped for.

“Let’s go. The sooner we do this, the sooner I can bend you over and fuck you again in that dress.” His big paw wrapped around her own, and Rowan tugged her out of her reverie. Making her skin tingle as his heated gaze swept the length of her body.

Spirits and Stars and all things mystical in this world, she couldn’t believe this was finally happening.

Not only had the seemingly impossible finally become reality—that he was here and healed and loved her—but they could openly be together. Bound as souls forevermore.

Ri felt like her heart was going to burst with the flood of happiness roaring through her veins.

As they exited the cabin and out onto the wooden porch, she gasped. In the fading twilight, the purple sky was lit up in a thousand shades of sunset over the treetops of the forest. Set against a foreground of brilliant green foliage where the leaves of early summer were filled with glimmering orbs of light someone had created using their magic. All along the path—normally barricaded from the outside world by Rowan’s numerous blood wards—hung glowing lanterns, flickering amber and gold to light their way to the ceremony.

She clung tight to Rowan’s hand, threading her fingers through his tattooed knuckles and feeling like she might float away with sheer giddy delight. Which only soared higher inside her as they followed the lit path and made their way towards the forest clearing.

Gentle music wound its way through the trees, and murmuring voices up ahead began to hush as they drew closer, followed by a loud burst of whoops and cheers once they came into sight. Whistles burst through the air, and Ri couldn't help but stifle a squeal and bury her head against Rowan's upper arm.

The gathering was a hum of excitement and joy, with the crowd parting when they walked into the clearing hand in hand. A place that had so often been used as the Nocturne's own training ground here among the towering trees had now been filled with an overflowing energy of vibrance, excitement, and love.

It was absolutely perfect, and she undoubtedly had Ruby to thank for everything.

As they drew to the middle of the clearing, a space was left just for them, and a glittering array of lights danced like a sparkling curtain to frame where they stood.

Rowan drew them both to a stop and turned to face her, reaching out to take both her hands in his own now. Ri darted a look to one side at the gathering and found all the faces of all those they both wanted here to witness this moment.

Her eyes fell on Brynne first, wearing a pastel pink gown to match her hair, who stood flanked by Etienne and Atticus. Her eyes were puffy and red already as she sniffled and wiped at her tears. "Love you, scary girl." She mouthed silently and then tucked herself under Atticus' shoulder. Etienne shot a knowing wink her way as his eyes flicked quickly between her and Rowan, and he brushed the tip of his tongue over one fang.

The pink in her cheeks flushed deeper as she bit her lip and quickly looked just over from the vampire to where Finn and Lukah stood just alongside them. The fae had his broad arms wrapped around his partner from behind, his chin tucked on the other man's shoulder, and the wide grin on Finn's face was enough to light up the entire forest grove. Another piercing whistle came from him, and laughter rippled through her

friends despite Lukah trying to half-heartedly swat his arm and scold him.

Across the other side of the gathering, the unmistakable frame of Lachie stood behind his witch, Belle. Right next to them was the looming presence of Fehrn towering behind Lia, his big arms wrapping her body to hold her back against his chest. Alongside them, Nelloix, Ace, and Hunter were huddled close. All looking preternaturally beautiful, the vampiress' misty emerald eyes crinkled with a smile as she blew Ri a kiss.

She didn't need to look any further to know who was coming next. A quietly sobbing Ruby, dressed in a beautiful gold and turquoise gown, was tucked beneath Niall's arm. She had both arms wrapped around his waist and rested her head against his chest. Her big dark eyes brimming as the two locked gazes with one another.

Ri had to blink fast to hold back her own surge of tears, ready to start falling at a moment's notice.

And flanking them was Ma's beaming smile, and Pa's stoic broodiness. With more evidence of tears from the bright eyes of her mother. She clutched a bouquet of bright purple flowers Ri recognised immediately as being from just outside their mountain home. Cradled in her father's massive arms was the tiny, wriggling, furry white form of Twig. Their little dog was all alert ears, wagging tail, and bright pink lolling tongue.

"Fuck's sake, if anyone else starts crying, I swear I'll call this whole thing off," Rowan growled.

A ripple of laughter shot through the crowd, followed by hasty wiping of eyes from more than one of the group. While Brynne simply continued to sob into Atticus' shirt.

"I'm not joking." He leaned close and grumbled in Ri's ear.

She quickly lifted his knuckles to her lips, planted a kiss across the ink on his skin, and smiled. "I don't doubt that for a second, brute."

Knowing the time had come, her heart launched into her throat.

Looking over at Belle, she gave a little nod. As the Guardian of the Realm stepped forward to stand before them, two delicate rings of silver began to form in her hands. Woven metallic threads formed an array of flowers and leaves to make a pair of simple, elegant crowns.

“May the Goddesses bless you with an eternal life of peace and tranquillity. May your souls find rest and safety with one another.” Belle said softly and held out both hands, offering the crowns towards Rowan first.

He placed both of Ri’s palms flat against his chest. Once again, giving her that stern look and command not to dare move, just as he’d done before. Then lifted the smaller of the two from Belle’s outstretched hold.

Taking a moment, he cleared his throat, swallowing heavily as his sapphire gaze drew her in. Then he placed the crown on her head and gently rubbed a loose curl of her hair between his finger and thumb before speaking.

“Oriana, my little faerie, you are the keeper of my blackened heart and balm to my immortal soul. I’m a creature of few words...”

A quiet laugh came from the direction of Niall and Lachie, which garnered them glares from both Ruby and Belle in turn.

“Which is why I can only offer you my every breath and eternal love. I’ve spent a lifetime searching for you, and I don’t want to spend another moment without you.” He hooked a finger under her chin, tilting her face upwards, and brushed his thumb over her bottom lip.

Butterflies erupted in her stomach as he bent down and softly caressed her mouth with his own.

“This time, with everyone here as witness... allow me to be yours, little faerie.” He whispered against her lips.

“Yes. Please be mine, brute.” Ri breathed out unsteadily as she clutched her fingers against his muscled chest.

A soft squeak of a noise came from somewhere over in her sister’s direction.

Then, all of a sudden, it was her turn to complete their Binding ceremony. She swallowed heavily as she lifted the crown from Belle's palms and looked up at her mountain of a man standing before her.

The corner of his lips twitched, with a flicker of amusement in his piercing blue eyes, and she nearly melted on the spot.

Within a single breath, he was bent on one knee before her, holding onto her hips with hot palms searing through the soft fabric. Ri swallowed heavily as she placed the silvery crown over his mussed dark curls. Of course, he looked unbelievably handsome, all in fitted black. She wanted to throw herself into his arms, but there were necessary things to say first.

Now was the time.

A scene she had replayed in her mind's eye over and over throughout every long day and night without him. Hoping without any certainty that she would get the chance to tell him one day.

Tracing her fingers gently over his lips, she jumped when he playfully nipped at them. Of course, he would instantly become pure charm and sex and power in this moment.

"My brute. My love." She bit her lip, trying to find the words to say the thing she'd been holding in ever since that night they'd first kissed.

Rowan rubbed his thumbs over the swell of her hips and arched an eyebrow. The handsome asshole would absolutely know she didn't usually stumble over her words, and the playful challenge in his expression said it all.

"Ever since the first day we met, you've pushed me to be the best version of myself. You gave me something I didn't know I even needed until I met you, and that was the drive to find myself... and while doing so, you helped me find something else at the same time. The last thing I was expecting to ever find."

The liquid sapphire of his gaze burned into hers, and Ri chewed the inside of her lip for a long second. Steeling herself

for what was to come next. She reached down and cupped his strong jaw in her hands. Taking a shaky, deep inhale through her nose under his watchful eye.

It was now or never.

“In discovering my love for you, Rowan of Nocturne, I also found my fated mate... and I stand here today asking *you* to allow me to be yours in return.”

Rowan’s eyes darkened, and his pupils dilated. His entire body stilled. The grip of his hands over her hips tightened while his fingers dug in with a bruising hold.

Soft gasps filled the night air from among the crowd.

“Oriana,” he murmured. Moving faster than her rapidly-welling eyes could take in, Rowan wrapped her in his arms and lifted her up so that they were at eye level. “You knew this whole time?”

She couldn’t do anything but nod dumbly. Rolling her lips to press together.

“You are the most beautiful and stubborn thing I’ve ever encountered.” Rowan rested their foreheads against one another. Lips twitching as he fought off the hint of another smile. Oh, fuck, was she a goner for a secret smile from Rowan of Nocturne. “I’m so fucking relieved to hear that you have no idea. Please, please, don’t make me go another second without you officially becoming a Nocturne.”

Ri nodded. Tears rolled thick and fast down her cheeks as she grabbed his face and kissed him.

There was no stopping the celebrations now as noise erupted all around them. Music blossomed and filled the clearing, and as she drew back, she could see everyone hugging and kissing. Some had already begun dancing as the clearing shone with magic and pulsing orbs of light. Flower petals rained down from above their heads like brightly coloured snowflakes.

She nestled against his chest and felt Rowan kiss her hair as he squeezed her tight against his torso.

Then, his quiet words were right at her ear; his wicked mouth pressed up against the pointed tip. Ensuring no one else would hear amongst the revelry going on all around them. “Hearing you say that I’m your fated mate is the best thing to happen to me in three centuries of misery before I met you. But don’t think for one second you’ll get away without punishment for that, little faerie.”

A shudder of anticipation rolled through her as his dark chuckle rumbled through his chest and into her own body.

She could gladly bottle up that rich, velvety sound and drink it for an eternity.

Which was what they now had together.

Forever intertwined as kindred souls. No matter how blackened or bruised their essences might have been before finding one another, none of that mattered now.

From this moment onwards, they were simply divinely matched.

A pair of nocturnal hearts, beating as one.

THANK YOU FOR READING

If you'd like to read a very sexy extended epilogue for Rowan and Ri, you can find that and more - including all the bonus chapters for the Nocturnal Hearts series here:

<https://www.elliottroseauthor.com/bonuses>



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Pull up a comfy chair. This is going to be a long one.

I can hardly believe that we have reached the end of the *Nocturnal Hearts* series. Rowan's story has been a long time coming, and his journey to connecting with Ri (and finding himself along the way) was an absolute soul-melting experience to put onto the page. There were plenty of late nights—and welling-up with 'I love them so much' kinda moments—poured into writing this book. I was well aware of just how much everyone was hanging out waiting for our tattooed brute's time to shine. I hope you loved the journey of this sexy, stabby pair of lovers finding their happily ever after.

If you're hanging out to know what comes next, this book marks the end of the *Nocturnal Hearts* era - with the next series of books set within the same world: *Villainous Hearts*. (*And yes, some of you eagle-eyed readers might have picked up on a particular character or three who will be making their appearance in this new series of interconnected-standalones.*)

The biggest thank you I have to share is to my absolute-everything, Lazz. The *Nocturnal Hearts* series simply would not exist if it weren't for you. Thank you for championing these books, these characters, and supporting my journey as an author in so many ways—both big and small. Your 'job' if I could even call it that is so much more than PA to the Elliott Rose-verse... I love you endlessly.

I also could not do what I do without the support of Mr Rose. My favourite MMC inspo and BTS support, who puts up with my regular disappearances off into my writing cave. I

love you. Thank you for holding down our life when I'm swooped off my feet by *The Words*.

Thank yous, kisses, and massive hugs also need to go to my team who have made this book possible. Heather Creeden for hyping, editing, and polishing up my words. Sandra at Maldo Designs for creating the most incredible and magical covers for the Nocturnal Hearts series. You two ladies are everything.

My beta-besties and street team babes. THANK YOU. Thank you for making this journey an absolute dream come true. Swooning for you and your magic. Thank you for cheering me on, giving me incredible feedback, and sharing so much love for Rowan and Ri.

Huge thanks go to the other amazing Indie Romance Authors who have allowed me to come hang out in your world, chat about books, and be the most amazing virtual-support-squad I could ever have dreamed of! You know who you are and ILYSM.

Lastly, the biggest squishy VIRTUAL HUGS have to go out to my wonderful ARC Team. I couldn't do any of this, or have my books reach all the amazing readers out there without you sprinkling creative fairy dust all over the internet. Your love for Nocturnal Hearts, these characters, and this book makes my heart flutter. I don't know what I would do without each and every one of you.

A last thanks goes to you, the one holding this book. I am endlessly grateful for you supporting my stories and I hope you have enjoyed stepping into the Nocturnal Hearts world—whether this is your first foray into the books in this series, or if you have read everything from the very beginning. Thank you so much for being here and reading.

Bring on the Villainous Hearts era.



LEAVE A REVIEW

If you enjoyed this book, please consider taking a quick moment to leave a review. Even a couple of words is incredibly helpful and is what us Indie Romance Authors thrive on.

(Well, that and coffee)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Elliott Rose is an indie author of paranormal and dark fantasy romance. She lives in a teeny tiny beachside community in the south of Aotearoa, New Zealand with her partner and three rescue dogs. Find her with a witchy brew in hand, a notebook overflowing with book ideas, or wandering along the beach.

- Join her reader group [The Cauldron](#) for exclusive giveaways, BTS details, first looks at character inspo, and intimate chats about new and ongoing projects.
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