



THE AZURIAN AFSANA

Days
Of
Revenge
JAWAIRIA ALI

FOR YOU, I'D BURN
EVERYTHING TO ASH.

I

The Azurian Afsana

DAYS OF REVENGE

Jawairia Ali



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To Alicia Raime Clarke

Taken too soon

May you Rest In Peace



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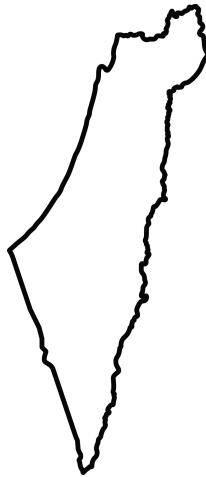
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About The Author

Coming Soon

#FREEPALESTINE



Please note my book has nothing to do with Palestine whatsoever, but it is my duty as a Muslim to educate you on the truth of what is happening in our world. The following few pages are filled with facts from trusted sources, and I advise you to take the time to read and educate yourself on the subject. There is no shame in not knowing something. However, when you choose not to learn, you are subject to ignorance. You only have to be a human to understand the pain of others.



MOST PALESTINIANS [ARE] BORN TO BE ONE OF THOSE: A MARTYR, PRISONER, DETAINED, OR LIVING WITH A BIG [SUFFERING]. – MOTAZ AZAIZA, PALESTINIAN JOURNALIST

Many don't know the story of Palestine. Some don't understand. Others don't care to accept that, yes, the brown man can also be a victim. You might have been told a narrative that paints a different picture. Or you might not have been told a narrative at all.

- **The Before**

Before 1948, the state of Palestine was a diversified hometown of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian people. When World War I ended, the Ottoman Empire was defeated, leaving Britain to occupy Palestine. The land was divided into sixteen significant districts while being under British colonization. Jewish migration continued for many decades, which wouldn't have been possible without Britain's support. This was done without permission from the native Palestinians and was heavily funded by the West.

- **The Zionist Movement & Zionism**

The British colonizers decided to use the existing land of Palestine to create the settler state of Israel. Zionism is an anti-Islam settler colonial pseudo-Jewish movement. Its main goal is to establish an alleged Jewish state in Palestine. We refer to it as an *alleged Jewish state* because there is no proof in the Torah of such a pseudo-homeland in the state of Palestine. Palestinians saw the British support for Zionism as unfair and, in 1936, revolted against the occupation. Thousands of Palestinian lives were lost during this three-year uprising, as well as many British citizens and Zionists. Eventually, Britain dismantled the Palestinian revolution, leaving them without any political and military leadership. The British also began to limit Jewish migration, which led to Zionist militias carrying out bombing attacks. After transferring a file to the United Nations, the British ended their mandate on May 14, 1948, leaving behind armored weapons and tanks to the new settler colony of Israel. The UN suggested dividing Palestine into an Arab and Jewish state, which led to the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. As Zionists celebrated their new state, surrounding Arab nations fought for the liberation of Palestine. But even with the support of other Arab nations, they were outnumbered.

In comparison, the Zionists had foreign military, political, and financial support. Israel then grew beyond the UN partition lines. By April 1949, more than eight hundred thousand Palestinians were ethnically cleansed through mass murder and forced evacuations. This is very well known as the Nakba.

- **The Nakba: The Catastrophe**

The Nakba, which means The Catastrophe in Arabic, was the violent displacement of over eight hundred thousand indigenous Palestinians. They were forced to evacuate their homes to be pushed into refugee camps in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, as well as other neighboring countries.

- **How is it still happening today? Well, Apartheid.**

What is Apartheid?

First of all, it is a violation of public international law and refers to a policy that segregates based on race. This usually happens when one group commits inhumane acts on another racial group, maintaining domination and systematically oppressing them.

Israeli Apartheid

The settler colony of Israel continues to control Palestinians while also stealing their land through a crude system of apartheid led by the Israeli Occupation Forces. The native Palestinians remain in five different geographical groups with varying levels of freedom and rights. These five groups are East Jerusalem, Gaza, “Israeli” territories, the West Bank, and those living in exile, indigenous to the land but are not allowed to return.

How does Israel control the Palestinians?

- Continuation of Land Theft and Natural Resources
- Home Demolitions
- More than 700 Checkpoints for Palestinians

- Military Blockade of Gaza
- Denied Rights for Exiled Palestinians to Return
- Jewish Only Road Systems
- Mosque of Al Aqsa Occupation

- **The Events of October 7, 2023**

The supposed Israeli-Hamas War we see in the headlines of our mainstream news didn't begin on October 7, 2023. Instead, it started 75 years ago. After living under the extensive control of the occupation, Hamas fired a bombardment of rockets from the Gaza Strip. They managed to enter Israel, seizing military vehicles and taking hostages. Hamas claims the surprise attack was a response to the repeated sacrilegious acts towards the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Who or What is Hamas?

Hamas stands for the Islamic Resistance Movement, and the group politically controls the Gaza Strip since 2007. Hamas is not the spokesperson for the people of Palestine, and innocent civilians should not be a target of their actions.

- **The Response of Israel**

Israel responded by declaring war and bombarding Gaza. Through airstrikes, Israel has been bombarding civilian buildings, hospitals, and schools while also detaining many in the West Bank—some of the weapons used, such as illegal white phosphorous bombs, which are extremely dangerous. It can stay dormant on the ground, but exposure to oxygen causes it to ignite. Inhaling the smoke from these bombs leaves sudden scarring of the lungs, which can eventually suffocate people to death. The substance also melts flesh and burns to the bone, causing horrific injuries and death. Since October 7th, there have been continuous bombings

day and night, and many Palestinians have become martyrs, more than half of whom are children.

- **#FreePalestine vs #IStandWithIsrael**

When we say Free Palestine, we do not mean the indefinite killing of the Jewish people or the killing of any people for that matter. Palestinians want and deserve freedom through decolonization, and we want Palestinians to receive their land back. We want those Palestinians living in exile to be able to travel to their country with ease to visit family.

When you say I stand with Israel, you support the illegal apartheid and war crimes being committed by the settler colony of Israel.

- **Why should this matter to you?**

If you stand against genocide and the killings of innocent civilians of any race or country, then you might be shocked to know the truth. Your tax dollars fund the Israeli Defence Force. While America suffers from homelessness and an atrocious healthcare system, Israel has free healthcare. Infuriating right?

- **How Can You Help?**

Donate

Palestine Children Relief Fund

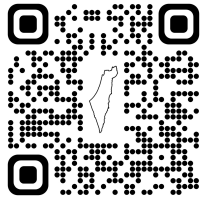
Protest

You don't have to join a protest to protest, but doing so is extremely powerful. You can also call your city representatives and ask for a ceasefire.

Boycott

This demands a change of lifestyle, which cannot happen in just a day. As a person who lives and breathes Starbucks, it was hard to let it go. But at least now, I'm not supporting genocide. Use bdnaash.com to see what brands and companies are Israeli or not.

This QR Code will lead you to a document with articles, posts, and videos to further educate you. I have also assembled a list of documentaries and books if you want to learn more. The document also includes websites for donations and bdnaash.com, the platform used to ascertain if a brand or company has ties to the Israeli Occupation. Thank you for taking the time to read these few pages.



Content Warnings

Though this novel is a work of fiction, the content within may be disturbing to some. Below is a list of trigger warnings I advise you to read through to ensure you make the best decision when reading this novel. Please understand that this book includes many explicit sex scenes, and if that is not your ideal topic to read, I would not recommend it. Please understand your mental health and wellbeing are essential. I apologize if I have missed any. **And please read at your own risk.**

- Abusive Parents
- Alcohol
- Blood
- Childhood Trauma
- Death / Murder
- Depression
- Divorce
- Domestic Abuse
- Explicit Sex
- Incest (Rape by a Family Member)

- Infant Loss
- Kink & Erotic Sex: Biting, Breathplay, Chocking, Oral Sex, Power Dynamics and Ruined Orgasms
- Miscarriage
- Pregnancy
- Rape & Sexual Assault
- Suicide (Mentioned in Author's Note)
- Violence in General
- Violence Towards a Pregnant Woman
- Weapons: Daggers, Knives & Mention of Gun



Author's Note

People who should NOT read this book:

- Humans under the age of 18.
- Humans who are triggered by the things mentioned in the previous content warnings page.
- Humans who do not like explicit sex content (smut) and will most likely leave a bad review because “there was too much smut.”
- Humans that are related to me in any way, shape, or form.
- Humans who are my parents.
- Humans that know my parents.

Please, for your sanity and the sake of my dignity, put it down.



“WHAT WOULD LIFE BE IF WE HAD NO COURAGE TO ATTEMPT ANYTHING?” - VINCENT VAN GOGH.

As a child, I had a hard time making friends, and when I did make friends, I ended up making those who held the wrong influence. But in high school, I befriended a girl who was not just sweet, but she was life itself. She had a heart of pure gold that housed all her troubles. She had the softest voice that made you forget your worries even though her night had been

literal shit. We were kids without much of an understanding. She was abused and exploited by those who were meant to protect her. She was meant for greater things, but the universe had other plans. Sadly, she took her life on March 18, 2013, and my life was destroyed. It has taken me almost a decade to acknowledge her suicide wasn't my fault because I always burdened my fifteen-year-old self for not doing something, for not helping. Ten hard years of repeatedly telling myself I was placed on this Land for a reason. And now I have finally found my reason. The character of Adirah is a tribute to her because she was indefinitely divine.

This is a message to the little brown girl who wanted to achieve her dreams and be different, but her parents told her otherwise. She is told her life is centered around marriage, kids, and a household. But what is not mentioned is the explanation of how she is not obligated to manage a household at the expense of her dreams. However, she is obligated to raise her children on the right path. How can she do such a task without an education? How can she do such a task when you tell her her dreams aren't valid?

This is a message to the little adventurous brown boy who wanted to be an artist, a photographer, or even a comedian, but his parents told him that engineering or a family legacy was the only way to go. Many people will tell you "*no.*" But it is up to you to find the courage and believe in yourself with all your heart. Believe in yourself enough to look them in the eye and say, "*watch me.*"

You are more than capable of what people hold you accountable for. If you had asked me at the beginning of the year, hell, if you had asked me in June 2023 that I would be writing a novel in just three weeks, let alone publishing it, I would've laughed and told you that you had lost your mind. I stumbled across Bookstagram to review books. Instead, I met the most amazing people who inspired me to become an author. Let my journey of accidentally becoming an author inspire all of you who want to be something, all of you who want to bring your voice into the world to inspire the next generation.

We live in a world where the truth has suddenly become expendable. We are surrounded by evil. Children have become our last priority, and the color of your skin determines the importance of your life. Our voice is always mistaken when we speak out against our oppressors. We are deprived of basic human rights the Almighty birthed us with. But we laugh and say this is life.

Bullshit. Don't fall for these lies. No one can define your life. Only you can.

All My Love,

Jawairia Ali



Playlist



Enchanted – Taylor Swift

•

Thunder – Imagine Dragons

•

Love Like This – ZAYN

•

Magic – One Direction

•

Main Rang Sharbaton Ka – Atif Aslam

•

You & I – One Direction

•

Empire – Shakira

•

Tere Vaste – Sachin Sanghvi and Jigar Saraiya

•

Apna Bana Le – Arjit Singh, Sachin Sanghvi and Jigar Saraiya

•

Vulnerable – Selena Gomez

•

You Belong With Me – Taylor Swift

Set Fire to the Rain – Adele

•

Aye Dil Tu Bata – Sahir Ali Bagga

•

Little White Lies – One Direction

•

Unstoppable – Sia

•

Memories – Maroon Five



Dictionary

MAIN CHARACTERS

- **Adirah Gaudin** – a•dee•ruh gau•deen
noun
female main character, the Goddess of Air
- **Royce Wolfe** – roy•s w•ulf
noun
male main character, the CEO of Wolfe Legacy

MORTAL CHARACTERS

- **Ava Sophia Evans** – a•va so•fee•a ev•uhnz
noun
male main character's ex-girlfriend
- **Colton Wolfe** – kol•ton w•ulf
noun
male main character's father
- **Danish Jafar** – d•ah•nish j•a•far
noun
the childhood best friend of the male main character
- **Darius** – day•ree•us
noun
female main character's ex-boyfriend, deceased
- **Haider Jafar** – h•ae•dh•er j•a•far
noun

Danish's five-year-old son
name meaning, lion

- **Jared Tran** – j•eh•red tr•a•n
noun
assistant project manager at Wolfe Legacy
- **Kinza Qureshi** – k•in•zah khu•ray•shee
noun
Adirah's best friend, neurosurgeon
- **Mykel Duran** – mi•chea•l do•ran
noun
high school and college friend of Royce, FBI agent
- **Nadine Wolfe** – nay•deen w•ulf
noun
male main character's mother
- **Novah Duran** – no•vaa do•ran
noun
mentioned wife of Mykel Duran
- **Saima Hafeez** – sai•mah ha•feez
noun
Danish's ex-wife and Haider's biological mother

PLACES

- **Aasmaan** – aas•maan
noun
the realm of rewards, heaven
- **Azure** – a•zoor
noun
the land where the immortal Gods reside

- **Duzakh** – d•ō•zakh
noun
a realm of punishment for those who were evil during their life
- **Island of Mona** – i•land of mo•na
noun
a fictitious Island created by the Goddess of Protection located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean
- **Irving Bay** – ir•wing b•ay
noun
a fictitious place in California existing between San Jose and Los Angeles
- **Treks Café** – treks ka•fay
noun
a fictitious small restaurant that sells coffee and desserts
- **Wolfe Legacy** – w•ulf le•ga•see
noun
a fictitious architectural firm

THE TWENTY-ONE AZURIANS

- **Illiyān** – ill•yan
noun
the God of Sky and Thunder, King of Gods

AIR REALM

- **Laleh** – la•leh
noun
Goddess of Aasmaan and Night, Queen of Gods

- **Ehaan** – ē•haan
noun
God of the Moon
name meaning: full moon
- **Eshaan** – ē•shaan
noun
God of the Sun
name meaning: light, desire, and wishing
- **Adirah** – a•dee•ruh
noun
Goddess of the Air, Winds, Tornadoes, and Cyclones
name meaning: noble, strong, and majestic

EARTH REALM

- **Jahaan** – ja•haan
noun
God of the World
name meaning: world, universe
- **Fasil** – faa•sil
noun
God of the Seasons and Animals
name meaning: separating, distinguishing
- **Zalzeh** – zal•zey•h
noun
God of the Earthly Natural Disasters: earthquakes, volcanos, landslides, and droughts
name is derived from zalzalah, which means Earthquakes

FIRE REALM

- **Sephtis** – sef•tees
noun
God of Dead, King of Duzakh, the Dark Lord
name meaning: eternal death
- **Jabeen** – ja•bean
noun
Goddess of Hearth Fire, Childbirth, and Home
name meaning: motherly love, affection
- **Azar** – a•zaar
noun
God of War and Anger
name meaning: fire
- **Dilbar** – dil•ber
noun
Goddess of Love and Healing
name meaning: lover, someone with a blossoming heart

SPIRIT REALM

- **Pagham** – pay•gaam
noun
God of Herald, Messenger God
name meaning: message
- **Tamanna** – ta•man•nah
noun
Goddess of Sleep, Dreams, and Wishes
name meaning: desire, wish, and ambition
- **Muskaan** – mus•kaan
noun
Goddess of Emotions
name meaning: smile

- **Ruhin** – roo•heen
noun
Goddess of Spirits, both good and evil,
name meaning: spiritual, divine

WATER REALM

- **Daryah** – dar•e•yah
noun
Goddess of Water
name meaning: sea, ocean
- **Rustam** – roos•tum
noun
God of Sea Animals
name meaning: brave man, tall and strong
- **Bahadur** – ba•ha•dor
noun
God of Tropical Storms and water-based natural
disasters: hurricanes, tsunamis and flash floods
name meaning: brave, bold
- **Mona** – mo•na
noun
Goddess of Protection
name meaning: one who lasts forever

THE QADIMI AND OTHER WORDS

- **Afsana** – af•sa•na
noun
Legends, “The Azurian Afsana,” The Legend of
Azure
- **Atash** – af•sa•na
noun

Representative of the Fire Realm
name meaning: fire, flames, ignite

- **Dilbari** – dil•ba•ree

noun

state of being loved,

- **Hawaa** – ha•wah

noun

Representative of the Air Realm
name meaning: air

- **Sohrab** – soh•raab

noun

Representative of the Water Realm
name meaning: hot red water

- **Rayehe** – raw•ye•he

noun

aura, an abstract atmosphere surrounding the
immortals

- **Raysah** – ra•ee•sa

noun

the name of Adirah's feather dagger

- **Ruh** – rooh

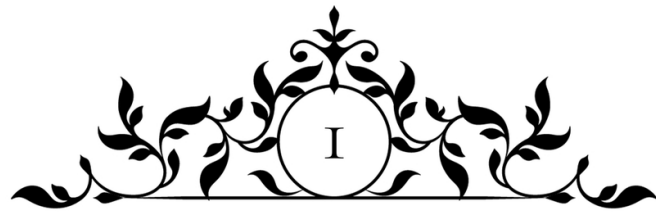
noun

Representative of the Spirit Realm
name meaning: spirit, breath of life

- **Zameh** – za•mey•h

noun

Representative of the Earth Realm
the name is derived from the word "zameen,"
which means earth



Royce



Prologue

The immortal Azurian Gods lived among the few of their kind, strong and proud, hidden from the mortal world, Earth. Their ruler and King of all Gods was Illiyan. He was a ruthless dictator who established his roots by committing heinous crimes appropriate to his narcissistic personality. While he descended to the land of the mortals to fulfill his needs, his beloved wife, the mother of his children, was a prisoner in his many-acre castle.

He had only one daughter.

Adirah was the youngest of the three, the most curious, but born with a pure heart. The older were her twin brothers, dominating as the sun and moon gods.

She rode on her father's shoulders and explored the gardens in Azure. The King of all Gods would even let his precious princess paint his nails. As she grew older, she became aware of her surroundings. She wondered why the King was allowed to descend to the Land of Mortals, but the Queen wasn't.

"You will never leave the castle," she would hear him say to her mother.

"That's mighty kind of you," Laleh would return the remark sarcastically. "You're sadistic. I hope you know that."

"I may be sadistic, my Queen, but you are why I find myself quite charitable sometimes."

"Charitable?" she scoffed. "Indeed, in fucking every living mortal."

When he was about to grab Laleh by her throat, Adirah appeared from the shadows, leaving Illiyan bewildered. Laleh loved nothing more than her children. She knew her eternity was bound to her husband and never fought her way. Maybe it

was the way he would pamper her. Or maybe deep down, she always knew he'd come back to her.

The Kingdom was sublime, broken into the five elemental realms, and built by the King of Gods. A home, a sanctuary, where he once worshipped the grounds Laleh walked. The castle he built housed many rooms through which Laleh would run, screaming out his name, hoping he'd come to find her—the castle where her laughs once echoed through the halls.

He'd find pleasure in their little game of hide and seek and curl up beside her at the end of the day as she told him how the sun died every night to let the moon breathe. He was her day, and she was his night. The *Ravaan*, a solid river, ran through the kingdom. From where it came, no one knew. The Azurain Afsana¹ said it was a gift for those so pure, but the chaste soon disappeared. The Kingdom of Azure grew as more rays from the sun fell to its grounds, birthing immortals. Illiyan became a combination of sensation and savagery as his kingdom grew, but he wanted more. He fought with other lands, destroying their kingdoms and gaining their army and people. He elected officials to serve as the council or elders. The Qadim were five brothers, one from each element. Air, fire, water, earth, and spirit, standing guard and taking action against any immortal with immoral actions.

But even they were oblivious to the crimes that had been implemented. Crimes that had made Illiyan more powerful.

“How was the Land of Mortals?” her mother would inquire after Adirah returned from her scavenge. She liked collecting seashells. She'd bring back a different one for Laleh each time.

“It was nice, Mama,” she'd smile and talk about the many things she encountered. Laleh felt as if she were there alongside her daughter, longing to return someday to visit the Land of Mortals.

It all changed after Adirah's eighteenth birthday when she got her powers, now able to control the winds and clouds and form tornadoes and cyclones. Illiyan no longer saw Adirah as his daughter. No longer as someone he needed to protect but instead as someone he needed to *fuck*. He abused and

exploited her innocence. He would walk out of her room wearing the vainest of smiles, while her mother and brothers would pretend as if a minute before, they hadn't heard her begging the monster to stop.

Adirah pleading with him to break from his ways only encouraged Illiyan. It gave him a thrill no one ever concurred in him.

As time went on, her screams stopped. Adirah spent more and more time on the Land of Mortals instead of returning to Azure. Eventually, she met a mortal man, Darius, who proved she was worthy of all the love in the world.

"Adirah," how her name would escape his lips made her love him even more.

She'd long for him during her days on Azure, and he'd wait for her back on Earth.

All hell broke loose when the King of all Gods uncovered her secret.

"Where were you?" Illiyan walked into her room late one night, bare-bodied.

"Is your wife and mistresses in the hundreds not enough for you, father?" She sneered. "That you take advantage of your flesh and blood?"

"You met someone," he said, giving her a peal of haughty laughter, "a mere mortal. What makes you think he'll suffice?"

He lunged over and gripped her throat, smiling as she gasped for air.

"He's not a monster like you," she whispered.

"Right, I'm the monster. Is that what he's been teaching you? That your father is a monster? I brought you into this universe, and I'm the monster. I gave you a home. I gave you everything. Yet I'm the monster!" Illiyan snarled.

"You take advantage of everything, Illiyan. You were supposed to protect me, but instead, you've destroyed me!" She cried out.

His daughter's words took aback Illiyan, who decided to end her revelations and disappeared into the night. Adirah spent the night fearing the worst, hoping Illiyan would not return. He didn't. He was nowhere to be seen.

On the ninth of August, three days before his birthday, Darius was reported missing. Only he wasn't missing. Adirah gasped when she saw his lifeless body neatly sprawled in front of her room. His neck was snapped, and a hole was burnt through his heart.

The agony he must've felt. She thought.

Adirah didn't understand what to feel. Anger? Sadness? Hatred?

"That is the difference between a mortal and I." Illiyan bellowed, appearing in front of her, content with the mortal's death. "You were and always will be mine. And you are forbidden, just as your mother, to set foot off the land of Azure."

"Why?" she asked, tears streaming down her cheeks, "why must you be the epitome of every story? Why must everything orbit around you?"

"Because I'm the King of all Gods!" He sneered with cold eyes. "No one can surpass that. I take no shame in my crimes."

Adirah whispered not a word. She lost all her will to live. Instead, she slammed the door and collapsed back on her bed, Darius' corpse still resting outside. That night, she wept and wondered when one understands enough is enough.

Sometimes, a bit too late. She thought.

She grabbed a bag stuffed with necessary clothes, snuck into her mother's room to steal the last probability of seeing her again, and descended into the Land of Mortals with Darius' limp figure.

"I'm sorry, I brought this on," she whispered over his grave, a ritual she'd seen many mortals indulge in. "May you rest in peace, my love."

The following day, thunder erupted on the Land of the Mortals. This was the beginning of Illiyan's wrath, understanding his daughter had abandoned Azure.

Somewhere hidden amongst the tall buildings, Adirah smiled, but she vowed she'd be back to take her revenge.

1. Afsana – Persian word for tale or fable, in this case, a legend

I

Coffee Hottie and Oscar the Grouch

Adirah



“Ready for our weekly budget meeting?” I plopped myself on the floor beside my best friend, who was also my roommate.

“No, not really.” Kinza sheepishly muttered, opening the budget section in her disc-bound planner.

“Why?” I asked, raising my eyebrows, “What did you do?”

“I might have broken some rules?” She brought up the planner and covered her face, “I bought a Barbie Doll.”

I groaned, “Oh god, not another one.” I handed her a slice of pizza.

“Two, actually.”

It was our last day in this shabby but well-loved apartment. Tomorrow, we would move into a three-bed townhouse on the edge of Irving Bay. I rarely stayed in one place. But something about Irving Bay was infectious.

“Hey, you’re one to judge,” she said, shoving the pizza into her mouth. “Did you ever call the coffee hottie?”

“How the hell do you know he’s a hottie?” I asked.

“Well, he must’ve been.” She smiled. “You slept with him.”

I laughed, “No. I don’t see that relationship going anywhere. Plus, I was too drunk to remember what he looked like.”

Also, the truth was I didn’t do relationships. Kinza was the first person I had warmed up to in a very long time, and the thought of leaving always left a hollow feeling in my stomach. She had grown on me, and though she had the complete opposite personality, she made me feel loved.

As the mortals call it, I didn’t have much of a family. The family I had included a loving mother who was too scared to speak up, two twin brothers who had turned a blind eye to every immoral act existing in our home, and an ego-centric, lust-eyed father who was just a creep.

Oh, did I mention they were immortal gods?

Kinza rolled her eyes. “You say that about everyone I try to set you up with.” Another bite of pizza. “You’re going to die alone, you know.”

“Oh really now? Says the girl who’s turned down five rishtas ¹ this week.”

Kinza was the sister I never had. I was the youngest of three and also the strongest between you and me.

“You go marry them then,” she said, frowning. “I’m worthy of a prince, okay?”

She strutted her shoulders as if she were sitting on a throne.

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. Maybe one might fall through our roof.”

She punched my arm. “Anyways, I still think you should call him.” She shrugged her shoulders.

I didn’t think that was a good idea. Or at least a valid idea. The last person I had one of those relation-kind-of-ships with was killed in the most gruesome way ever.

Illiyan wasn’t always like this. At least with me, he wasn’t. I was the definition of daddy’s little princess, and he never laid a finger on me or looked at me with such a gaze until my eighteenth birthday.

After killing Darius, my father forbade me to leave the Kingdom of Azure, a said to be pure land. But to some, it was just a myth. The Kingdom of Azure was very much more than a myth. It was beauty all over.

I left, of course. After a month of grieving and hiding, I finally understood the ways of the Land of Mortals and put myself through a morbid education system known as college. I majored in architecture, as I loved being innovative, and seeing my creations rise around the country made my heart swell with joy. I adapted my name from just a given name to adding a surname. Adirah Gaudin, and created a backstory that my family was from France. Naturally, they were all dead.

Before people started getting suspicious, I would pack my things every five years and disappear without an excuse. My last job, however, lost its shares, and the company employees were transferred.

Fate transferred me back to Irving Bay, where my love story with Darius started.

Every Saturday night, my best friend and I would sit down to discuss everything house-related. Even without a planner filled with cute stickers, I was the more organized and condoned, while Kinza always bought a thing or two that upped her budget by about thirty bucks. And her stuff would be lying all over the house. We weren't broke. But paying off Kinza's student and bank loans had become our priority.

We skimmed through the weekly expenses. "See, you drink too much coffee." She pointed to all my coffee purchases from Treks.

"Hey, it's delicious."

"So was the coffee the hottie made." She smiled, nudging me with her elbow.

Two months ago, I was nominated as Senior Project Manager at Wolfe Legacy, an architecture firm slowly building its credibility. Last week, my position was made official. Kinza and I celebrated with a couple of other friends. She was

the designated driver since she didn't drink. I had too much to where my immortal body couldn't tolerate it.

And I brought him home. The only problem was that I didn't know who *him* was. He left his number and made a delicious coffee, saying he was running late for a meeting.

And that was that.

"If I text him, will you shut up?" I asked.

"Maybe." She smirked.

"What would I even text him?" I went on. "Oh hey, hi, I'm the girl you fucked a few nights ago and made coffee for. Wanna do it again?"

"That's actually perfect."

"Shut up." I groaned. "I don't even know if I want a relationship."

"Yeah, yeah." She rolled her eyes. "How long are you going to let the creep ruin your life?"

Illiyah. Kinza knew bits and pieces about my past. My rapist father was one of them. I wasn't the one to go around telling people my business, but with Kinza, it was different. It was as if she lured those answers out of me without asking anything. She knew the partial truth that my family wasn't dead, and once, I had a boyfriend who was proclaimed dead.

It always felt nice to get stuff off my shoulders.

She would talk about how her mother thinks she's getting too old for marriage and how Kinza won't be able to give her grandchildren.

"I don't know," I whispered. She wrapped me in a hug.

"I know it's hard. But you have to know that you're allowed to be loved."

"Why is that so hard to believe?" I asked.

She sighed. "I don't know, Addy, but I think the move will be good."

I wasn't too sure about that. It was time for me to start packing up and move to a different location, but something inside me kept telling me to stay. It wouldn't be long before my father or one of his warriors discovered my *Rayeh*² had so meticulously kept hidden and dragged me back to Azure. However, I knew that Illiyan would never let me out of his sight this time.

I dreaded the thought. "Yeah," I added, resting my head on her shoulder, hoping she was right.



"Well, that's the last of them," Kinza chirped as she loaded the last few boxes onto the gaudy yellow moving truck. We slept on sleeping bags because everything else was packed up. The only things left were our respective cars and the key to give back to the manager.

"You wanna get some Treks before we go?"

I gave her a childish grin. "Is that even a question to ask? Like yes, and also a donut while we're at it."

"And you say I mess up the weekly budget," she laughed.

"What are you going to do with those Barbie's anyways?" I asked, scrunching my nose. We were heading to Treks Café with Kinza in the driver's seat.

"I'm going to pull off their head, switch their bodies, and pose them on our bookshelf."

"For a minute there, I thought you were going a whole different direction."

She laughed. "It's a thing, apparently."

"I don't even wanna know."

"You know what your problem is?"

"Enlighten me, o' so wise one." I joked as the little bell rang, announcing our arrival at Trek Café. I took a whiff of

that heavenly coffee and sugar smell, leading my mouth to water.

“You need a hobby,” she said, breaking me out of my trance. “Like the coffee hottie.”

“I have a hobby.” I laughed. “It’s called drawing pretty buildings.”

“No. I always told you that your art has the potential to become a business. And you *do* get paid for it,” she explained. “That’s not a hobby. God, you never listen to me.”

She walked up to the counter and ordered our usual. For her, it was a Trek’s special Americano, and for me, a cappuccino, regular foam with vanilla sweet cream instead of milk. She also added a box of donuts and a slice of coffee cake.

“What do you think he does?” I asked as we waited for our order.

“Serial killer?” She said playfully.

“Yeah, I’m totally calling him back now.” I shuddered. “By the way, that was sarcasm.”

“I’m kidding. He’s probably a stand-up guy if he left his number.”

“Or someone wanting me to be his next victim.” I laughed.

“Okay, but why the coffee?”

“To lure me in. Okay, that’s enough about me,” I said. “What about you?”

“Oh, you know, the same old. My mom sends me a dozen pictures of guys, and I always say no.”

“They can’t really be that bad.”

“I’m a neurosurgeon, Addy.” She sighed. “They want the money, kids, and the perfect wife who will sit on her ass all day at home making perfectly round rotis³. Do I look like the kind that makes perfectly round rotis?”

I scrunch my nose, holding back laughter. After all, we were in a public place. “No, hell no. You’re more capable of making

rotis in the shape of continents.”

“No, after I’m done with them, they will not be called rotis.” She rolled her eyes. “And the whole saus-bahu drama, that shit to me is simply annoying.”

I laughed. “I imagine it could be nice. But you’re not the person to take orders.”

“No, I’m not. You know if the coffee hottie has a brother equally as talented in making coffee as him, I’ll marry him.”

I could only laugh at her remarks as the barista called her name.



It took all of Sunday to unpack the previously arrived furniture, assemble a few new shelving units, and unload the truck.

Kinza had decided to buy a townhouse in Westside Irving, probably in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Irving Bay. She forced me to come along because she didn’t want me living alone. Secretly, I think she’s the one that didn’t want to live alone.

I only agreed because I would pay rent to Kinza to help her pay off her mortgage. It would be a nice change from a leaking roof and the usual broken toilet, and a bonus since the house was built on a cliff and had a perfect view.

“Are you almost done?” She shouted from the house.

“Yeah, there are few left,” I shouted back. “Thank you for helping, by the way.”

That wasn’t at all true. She initially helped with the furniture and a few boxes but decided to start setting the big bookshelf, which, to our dismay, didn’t come with any instructions. At this point, everything was everywhere, and the bookshelf was more of a wooden tent we could prop in a corner.

“This bookshelf is a nightmare,” she said as I walked in with a box of clothes.

“Are these yours?” I asked. “It doesn’t have a name.”

“At this point, I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Just put it somewhere, and we’ll figure it out.”

“I’m almost done with the boxes, and then I’ll come help you.” It had gotten dark as I was unloading the rest of the boxes off the truck. As I walked off with the last box, I tripped over the uneven sidewalk and found myself spitting out some profane words while crashing into a wall.

“What the hell?” The wall groaned.

I quickly realized the wall was a tall and burly human.

“Mother fucking fucker!” he grunted, looking down at his white shoes while one of his thick arms wrapped around my waist to keep me from falling.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. “I wasn’t looking.”

“It’s fine.” He scowled, finally taking his sight off his shoes and planting them on me. His scowl softened as his glistening obsidian eyes looked into mine.

“I think I’m good,” I said. “You can let go of me now.”

“Oh shit. Yeah,” he said, releasing me from his grip. “Next time, watch where you are going.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I smiled.

“You just moved in there?”

“No, we just like driving around in a horrid yellow truck.” I rolled my eyes. “And you know, spending our weekend unloading boxes and building furniture when we could easily be doing something else.”

He snorted. “Right.”

“And what are *you* doing here?” I questioned, arching my eyebrow.

He pointed to the house built next to ours. “I happen to live there.”

The houses were built on the same acre of land, split down the middle. His land and property were both bigger, extending

towards the end of the cliff, while ours ended right before the main road.

He walked past me, strands of his shoulder-length hair moving with the wind, as he took an unhealthy swig from his beer bottle and walked toward his house, leaving the smell of his cologne still lingering in the air. For some odd reason, it felt familiar.

I watched as he walked up the doorsteps of the house and unlocked the door.

Great, Oscar the Grouch is our neighbor.

- [1.](#) a marriage proposal
- [2.](#) scent, aura
- [3.](#) round flatbread in South Asian culture

The Girl From the Bar

Royce



A sign saying “Besties Before Testes” hung on the door, and I chuckled. After three raps of knocks on the door, the girl from earlier opened the door.

“Nice sign,” I said, appreciating the elegance of her face, her amber eyes reflecting the light of the moon and her teeth softly biting down on her bottom lip.

“Do you need help?” I gulped, taking my eyes off her, and stared into the mess in her home. “With whatever the hell you’re building?”

“Oh, the bookshelf?”

I recognized her from the bar a few days ago. She and some of her friends were out drinking, and she had gotten hammered. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t hammered as well, but we took a cab to her house, where her body moved with the rhythm of mine. And that night, everything was perfect. That night set the bar for every other night I could ever have. But deep down, I knew I would feel nothing close to what I felt when she touched every inch of my body, and I hers. The gentleman’s move was to leave her my number,

which was entirely against my rules. While doing so, I couldn't resist the Trek Ground Espresso she had lying on the counter, making her a cup.

"Yes, your constant yelling is disrupting my football game," I admitted.

"Come on in." She opened the door wider, and I saw there were two of them.

I put my beer on the table as she introduced me to her friend. "This is Oscar the Grouch from earlier."

Oscar the Grouch, aye? Well, two can play that game.

"Oh, right." The other girl said. "Well, if you can figure this out, I'll be damned."

I chuckled, picked up the only piece of paper that must've come with the unit, and pulled out my phone. "If you read these things, you'll know their instructions are *online*."

"Yeah, we knew that," her friend said, rolling her eyes. "What were you even doing outside at this hour?"

"Maybe he's a serial killer."

"No, and if you must know, I take a walk or a run to clear my head every day," I said, wondering why the hell I was explaining my business to strangers. "And *Trippy* here decided to crash into me on the sidewalk."

"I have a real name, you know," Trippy said.

"Yes, I'm sure you do." I smiled, knowing I hit a nerve. "But I'm going to call you Trippy."

I focused on putting together the shelving unit, now and then asking for a screw or a part of the shelf. Half an hour later, it was finally finished and standing against the wall. "You guys need this huge shelving unit for books?"

"Yeah," Trippy pointed to five to six good-sized cardboard boxes on the floor. "Those are all books."

"What the hell do you guys do with them?" I asked. "Eat them for breakfast?"

“No, what kind of people do you hang around?” She laughed. “We read them like normal human beings.”

“Okay, then. Well, I better get going,” I said, grabbing my bottle, which had warmed up.

“Wait!” Trippy’s voice stopped me from stepping out the door. “Would you like a donut? It’s the least we can do, and we’ll try to keep down the noise.”

My gaze shifted from the box of Trek’s donuts to linger on her infectious smile. In the end, I couldn’t resist either. “They have the best coffee,” I said before grabbing a glazed donut and walking out their front door.

But right as I closed the front door, “You know he’s better than the coffee hottie.” Trippy’s friend said.

Coffee Hottie and Oscar the Grouch. I chuckled to myself, knowing they were, in fact, talking about me—two nicknames I never imagined for myself.



As Monday morning rolled around, my father, the retiring CEO of Wolfe Legacy, had called thrice. The calls were the same, telling me to get my shit together and that I was the family company’s only heir.

“You better be on time,” He said, his voice stern and cold.

“Yes, sir,” I muttered.

“Royce, I’m not kidding.”

“I get it, Dad. I’m not kidding either.” I rolled my eyes and jabbed the call-end button.

Most kids get the talk about birds and bees when they are fourteen, but I always got the speech about being the only heir, the future of Wolfe Legacy.

My relationship with my parents was anything but a relationship. My mom fancied the perks of being wealthy and didn’t do much of a job of being a mother. She hired a

babysitter, Vanny, and was out and about with her irritating high-class friends; mind you, they all have kids who are equally snobs. Vanny worked days, nights, and even midnights to raise me into the part of the person I am today.

To say my father loved the spotlight was an understatement. Wolfe Legacy had built itself a name in just a couple of years. And my dad was to credit for that. He never missed advertising the company at Galas or other events and always wanted me to tag along. I kindly declined.

Okay, maybe not that kindly.

Up until now.

He was retiring. My dad had bought his third home in the quiet beach side of Irving Bay and decided it was time to spend some good quality time alone with my mom.

I shuddered at the thought when he first explained.

I got ready for my official first day at Wolfe Legacy, and when I walked outside, I half expected to catch Trippy yelling at a bird. She looked like the kind that would yell at a bird if it got her way. But she was nowhere to be seen. I was confused at the feeling of disappointment and reminded myself I was here on a specific plan that didn't include falling head over heels for a girl I met in a bar, even if that girl tasted and felt like sweet heaven.

You have plans, Royce. She's trouble.

“Good Morning, sir.” My father's assistant, Millie, greeted me with a perky smile as I entered Wolfe Legacy. “I hope you found your way, alright?”

“Well, I can't say I'm excited. I was better off enjoying the mountains and cliffs while parasailing on the Island of Mona.”

“It must've been a gorgeous sight. I've heard nothing but amazing things about that Island.” She agreed, handing me a file. “This file was to be given to you when you entered the door. Mr. Wolfe's orders, sir.”

“You should visit sometime. And please stop with that, sir absurdity,” I said. “It’s Royce.”

“Well, Mr. Royce, this newly assigned deal is critical to the company.”

“What is not important to this company?” I asked.

She smiled. “Mr. Wolfe wants you to look it over, and if you succeed, you will be titled as the new CEO.”

“If I don’t?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Of course, he didn’t. That’s my father for you.” I rolled my eyes. “Thank you, Millie.”

We had stopped in front of my office.

“Anything you need, just call. ” She reminded me.

“Again, thank you.” I entered to find my father sitting on the bench opposite my table.

“I guess you do listen sometimes.”

“Yeah, if you were around more, I might have been the prodigal son.” I rolled my eyes.

“I do hope you succeed in life, son. I only want what’s best for you.” He explained.

“This deal?” I asked, changing the subject. “Why is it important?”

“Because it was *his* dream.” My father breathed reluctantly, and just for a sparse minute, I saw a different side emerging from beneath his usual icy demeanor. “I expect you in the conference room. Don’t make me wait.”

I gave him a short nod.

I wasn’t thinking about anyone’s dreams these days except mine. Once I was elected CEO and the company was in my name, I treasured the idea of moving our headquarters to Los Angeles. A plane ride away, and also the heart of the business world.

Which is why I didn't need anyone, *especially* Trippy, coming in between my plans.

His dream. My father had said. I opened the file and was in awe.

The project was for Yellow Dwarf, a well-known video game company from Japan that was expanding its business on American soil. They had a central building in White Bridge City, but that was nothing compared to what they wanted to build here in Irving Bay.

Millie walked in as I flipped through the file.

"Yellow Dwarf wants *us* to design a building for them?" I prompted.

"Yes," She said, smiling. "And Mr. Royce, you are needed in the conference room. "

I gathered the file and followed her through the halls before stopping in front of the conference room. My father stood at the front of the room, the logo of Yellow Dwarf displayed on the screen, along with a potential sketch of what the building might look like.

That sketch wasn't in my file.

My father introduced me to the group. "This is my son Royce. He's never on time. As you know, I am hoping to retire soon. If my son lands the deal, he becomes your problem, not mine," He joked. A soft laughter erupted from the group but quickly died as my father spoke again.

"Introduce yourself."

"After that cringeworthy description, do I need an introduction?" I muttered under my breath. "Right, I'm Royce Wolfe. I enjoy football, beer, and silence, but I'm excited to lead you through this project."

"Well then, you all have tasks to focus on, and if Royce has no questions, you are all free to go."

"I do have one question," I said. "Who drew the sketch?"

That's when I spotted her sitting in the back, her dark brown hair pulled away from her face into a ponytail, displaying the elegance of her features, her eyes filled with heavy makeup, and her once soft lips were blood-red. She slowly stood up, and I had to mentally stop myself from looking like a lunatic.

"I did, sir." She involuntarily bit down on her bottom lip, and something inside me awakened.

Trippy had found her way into my workplace, too.

Oh fuckin hell. Just fucking great.



The rest of the day went smoothly. The team was productive and had started compiling a file to present to the board directors on Friday, which was set as the deadline.

I caught Trippy again during her lunch break and decided to steal a few moments of her time.

"You didn't tell me you worked for Wolfe?" I questioned, stepping beside her.

"You didn't tell me you were a Wolfe." She returned.

"I have a feeling you don't like me much," I smirked, grabbing an apple from the basket.

She scrunched together her eyebrows. "I don't *know* you much to like you. Or even to *not* like you."

Okay, fair point.

I had to increase my pace to keep up with her walking in her clicking high heels.

"Did you know?" She asked, turning around.

"Did I know what?"

"That I worked for you?"

"No, honest to god, I didn't."

“Okay, I’ll believe that for now.” She smiled, taking a bite of her sandwich and disappearing around the corner.

I didn’t realize Millie had snuck up behind me until I heard her singing praises of Trippy.

“Ms. Gaudin is the Senior Project Manager.” She smiled. “She’s been an amazing upgrade from the previous one.”

“Senior Project Manager?” It was as if I had lost the ability to comprehend basic information.

“Yes, you know the person who oversees the project, the planning. The one in charge?”

“Oh, right, right.” I said, mentally slapping myself to gain attention, “And where might her office be?”

“Third floor, it’s the one smack in the middle. You really can’t miss it.” She smiled slyly. “I suspect you will be visiting often.”

“Why?” I asked, trying to focus. *Was Millie reading my mind?*

“Well, she’s the lead on the project, of course,” Millie explained, “and you need to understand the framework if you want to present it to the board on Friday.”

She threw me that perky smile as she walked towards the elevators.

So much for staying away.

At the end of the day, we had a collective briefing, where mostly Trippy did the talking, which, needless to say, I wasn’t too mad about. There was a spark in her wanting her ideas heard, wanting to find recognition, and what she brought to the table was more than exceptional. I watched as she used her hands to explain her words, wishing those hands were once again running down the lines on my chest as I would bite down on her lip, letting her moans fill the room.

“Can I ask for a favor?” I asked Millie later that evening. Most of the team had gone home, including Trippy.

“It’s in the job description, Mr. Royce.”

“I want their files.”

“To be clear, you are talking about Ms. Gaudin’s team’s files?”

I nodded. “Yes. I want to know where they are coming from before I start barking orders.”

She laughed. “I will have them on your desk first thing next morning.”

I got up, shutting off the computer. “Thank you, Millie.”

“I’ll leave Ms. Gaudin’s on top,” Millie said as I left my office.

“Have a great night.” I smiled.

I saw the sly look shine in her eyes. She sensed what was happening in my head regarding my senior project manager. And what she sensed was true. The files were just an excuse to get access to *hers*. If I was to work day and night with this woman, I wanted to know everything about her.

Ms. Gaudin.

After swallowing a box of easy-cook macaroni and cheese and chugging a beer bottle for dinner, I finally collapsed into my bed. It wasn’t my usual preference, but today had been a long day. I checked my messages as if it was a ritual to get a good night’s sleep and saw one from Trippy. I sat up in my bed, opening it to read it.

Hey, we met a couple of nights ago at a bar. I’m not sure if you remember.

She then sent a bunch of heart emojis, and my mouth formed a goofy smile. The tiring feeling disappeared, and all I wanted to do was spend the rest of the night texting her.

Hey, how could I forget the goddess that made my night euphoric?

I thought maybe you had forgotten about me.

Confession: I don't exactly remember you. I drank way too much.

No wonder she hasn't recognized me.

I had been itching for an excuse to talk to her.

And I also don't remember the "euphoric" things you may have done to me.

That is a total shame.

I've been meaning to text you. We moved, so it's been hectic.

I'm Adirah, by the way.

You're named after the lost Princess.

Yes.

I hope you have a name. Though my roommate nicknamed you "coffee hottie."

I don't mind calling you coffee hottie for the rest of our "whatever-you-want-to-call-this-ship"

You can call me Eli, and we can start by being friends.

Though I wouldn't mind doing euphoric things again.

She sent a bunch of blushing emojis. And the three dots appeared, signaling she was texting back.

I would like that.

I sent the text before I even had the chance to rethink the lie. She sent a text back with a screenshot of the contact card. The name read Eli with a coffee emoji. I couldn't help but lay back and think about how she was probably lying in her bed right next door, smiling like I was. A month ago, my father insisted I stop my travels and run the company. There was something in his voice, and the way he asked, no longer benign but more hostile as if his life depended on me running the company. His exact behavior stuck with me until Trippy made her way back into my life last night, leaving me to question my principles.

My thoughts were focused on the girl next door, and my heart sank. The girl from the bar, Trippy, Ms. Gaudin, had a name.

Adirah. My Adirah.

The Talk About Ice Cream

Adirah



The week was progressing slowly now that most of my time was consumed with being in the same room as Royce freaking Wolfe. Kinza was out on a night shift, and I was alone in the house. To make use of time, I decided to lay out on the balcony and read a book in peace.

I still couldn't get the picture of Royce, hair neatly tied, dressed in black, with a contrasting gray overcoat, and a pair of sunglasses strung on the silver chain around his neck, walking into our conference room like it was any Monday. I had sunk deep into my chair at the sight of him, but he had to signal me out by admiring the sketch.

Well, it was a pretty good sketch.

Even with his unique attire, he had grace. The type that had you blushing to your core. While his father had always been a professional suit-and-tie person, Royce seemed more of those who found adventure wherever they went. Wolfe Legacy wasn't just an architecture firm. We built relationships with our clients and created the best-suited project for them. Maybe Royce is what the company needed.

I made my way onto the balcony with my headphones raised to their utmost volume, laid down on the blanket I had fixed a

couple of nights ago, and propped my feet against the railing.

“Maybe he’s a werewolf that only replies at night.” Kinza had said. Leave it to Kinza to brainstorm the weirdest explanations.

I was halfway into my current read, lost in a fantasy land, when something stirring caught the corner of my eye. I let out a blood-curdling scream, followed by a bunch of profane words.

“Shut up already,” Royce muttered. “It’s just me.”

“How long have you been out here?” I whispered in shock, frozen against the wall, barely recovering from the scare.

“A while. Before you came and disrupted my setting with your obnoxious music.” He took a swig of his beer and leaned against the balcony rail. “What the hell are you listening to anyway?”

I removed my headphones, “You know, I’m starting to think you seriously might just be a serial killer.” I choked out, waving my hand in front of my face to help my breathing. “And there’s nothing wrong with me listening to Imagine Dragons.”

He chuckled but didn’t respond.

I sat there staring over at his balcony in the dark and awkward silence. I couldn’t see him but only make out his silhouette. His hair was left loose, flowing around his face, and even in the dark, his eyes stood out, reflecting the moonlight.

“You know that’s not healthy,” I said.

“I know.”

“Of course, you fucking do,” I muttered.

“What?”

“Why beer?”

“Because it has better nutritional value than soda.”

“You’re kidding.” I shook my head, surprised at his answer.

“No, I’m dead serious. It doesn’t have sugar, it doesn’t have fat, and it provides vitamins.”

“So you just drink just for *fun*?”

“Yes, Trippy. I’m not addicted to it or anything. It’s nearly impossible to get me addicted to anything.”

I deadpan stared into the darkness, fully knowing he was staring back.

“Where’d you learn to draw?” He asked a while later.

“Really, out of all the questions you ask that?”

He shrugs.

“I majored in architecture in college and self-taught myself a few things. I like drawing pretty buildings.”

“Understandable.”

“What about you? Besides your serial killing hobby, do you have any other ones?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I travel to different parts of the world, touring different countries, famous landmarks and sites. On my last trip, I was at the Island of Mona.” His demeanor lit up as he mentioned world travel. He leaned away from the shadows and came more into view. Royce was huge. His legs were a mile long, and his body looked like he could easily lift a truck. Maybe even two trucks. *At once*.

“The Island of Mona is beautiful.” I smiled.

“You’ve been?”

I shook my head, “No. But it’s a vacation goal of mine.”

“I never wanted to come here.”

“Why *are* you here?”

“To take over the company.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” I asked. “You could’ve said no.”

“No, I was forced to take over.”

“Again, no one can force a grown-ass man to do shit,” I said. “Especially one that looks like bigfoot.”

He sat in silence, pondering over what I had just said. “If you put it that way, I don’t know.”

“That’s okay too.” I smiled. “I hope you figure it out. What are you going to do after you take over the company?”

“I plan on moving it to the heart of LA.”

“What about the people who work here?”

“Transfer them with a stable job.”

“Why go through all that trouble when you could just keep it here and enjoy the cliffs and the beach?”

“LA has more business, while Irving barely exists.” He muttered. “I mean, it’s nice and everything, but I think LA would be better for the company. But I would totally miss Treks Cafe.”

“You could just open another branch in LA,” I suggested. I disagreed with his plans but couldn’t disagree with his statement of how amazing Treks was.

His head bobbed in the darkness. “I will have to think about that.”

We stood in silence for a couple of minutes. “What about you?” He asked. “You seem to be hiding a lot?”

“And how exactly would you know that?” I arched my brow.

“I read your file. Why do you move?” He asked. “You move about every five years, leaving pretty good jobs without a trace. But you’ve been at Irving for more than five years. What are you hiding?”

As years passed, I usually erased all knowledge of my past, only keeping the relevant details. I couldn’t tell people I’d been on the run for thirty years when I looked like I was barely allowed to drink.

“Well, technically, I did move. From the city side of Irving Bay to the richer side.” I flashed him a sarcastic grin, hoping

he'd drop the subject.

He chuckled again. The moon shone on his figure as he was leaning against the railing. His face was all means perfect, and the short smiles he gave here and there were lethal. Enough to make me want to stare at him forever. The smell of his intoxicating yet addicting cologne blew over with the breeze and the scent of earth. His oversized t-shirt hid all his sculpted muscles, but I gazed into his dark eyes, wondering what secrets *he* hid from the world.

What I wouldn't give to figure out what Royce Wolfe was all about.

"You didn't answer my question," He said, breaking me out of my daze.

"What was the question again?" I asked, silently wishing he'd ask another.

"Why do you move so often? And so calculated." He asked again.

"That should be none of your business," I said.

"Hey." I heard him call as I slammed the door shut.

Dick. Fucking asshole.

Irving Bay held my deepest and darkest secret, as it was the city where I fell in love for the first time but lost my title of being the princess of Azure. I had never stayed in the city itself. Instead, I moved out to the opposite side of the country and settled in Siesta Key, Florida. But this time, something, a feeling, maybe even a desire, forced me to stay.

Darius always said he'd never move away from Irving Bay. He always said the ocean brought him a sense of peace.

"You know I'd never move away from Irving," Darius said, brushing the hair strands from my face.

He leaned against the rocks at Irving Bay Pier while I sat in his lap, my hands wrapped around his neck.

"How come?" I asked.

"Because it gave me you." He smiled, pulling me closer.

His hands grazed my spine as he concentrated his eyes on mine. "I don't know what I'd do without you." He whispered. "When I met you, I never thought I'd be dreaming about desperately wanting to be yours."

I rested my head against his. "I love being yours," I said softly.

My phone ringing brought me back to reality. Tears had pooled in the corner of my eyes, and I cursed Illiyan for making me feel so helpless. I had been in love with the most sensational man ever. Maybe that's stretching it, but Darius was everything.

Everything but *immortal*. And to some degree, I still loved him.

Hey, how are you?

How are things?

Hi, yes. Great. Totally peachy.

You're mad. My phone just lit up on fire.

I wasn't mad. I was furious. Royce dared to ask a question to which even I couldn't answer.

Guess who my boss is.

How many guesses do I get?

Elton John

No, no, Elvis.

Wait, no. Final answer Bob Ross.

I freaking wish. Royce Wolfe.

He also happens to be my annoying neighbor.

Wasn't I lucky? An obnoxious neighbor and an obnoxious boss.

WOW, you work for Wolfe Legacy?

Unfortunately, yes. Senior Project Manager.

And what exactly did your boss do?

He read my file.

Okay, I'm lost. Isn't he supposed to know who you are?

He had a point. But you don't ask people about their deepest, darkest secrets.

Right?

Plus, I had no intention to trust Royce Wolfe.

I mean, I read my employees' files as well.

But I could be wrong.

He is, but don't ask me questions about it.

Ohhhh, so you have secrets.

I have a proposition I just came up with for you.

I smiled, reading his text.

What proposition?

A dirty version of 21 questions. But instead of 21 questions, only 10.

And if I don't answer the questions? What's the penalty?

For each question you don't answer, I get to have my way with you.

I sent him a couple of hot face emojis. His text had me questioning how dirty this conversation was going to be, and I wondered what he meant by *having his way*.

Intriguing. When do we start?

First thing tomorrow morning.

I'm not letting you win.

We'll see about that. I'm going to bed.

My phone has fallen on my face. Twice.

Goodnight, amare.

Amare. That meant love in Latin. Darius used to call me that as well.

The heart emoji at the end of the message left me feeling giddy. I threw the phone on the other side of my bed and wondered what the hell I was doing with my life.



The next day, Royce tried every move in the book to apologize. He stalked me in the morning, following me wherever I went. After lunch, I found a random rose attached to a card. The card displayed an image of a sad apple and read, "I'm sorry. I'd like to apple-ogize". I would be lying if I said I didn't laugh. We both ended up in the elevator together, but he wasn't successful even then.

At first, he didn't say anything.

"Hey, look, I'm sorry."

"For what exactly?" I scrunched my eyebrows together.

He took a step closer, reaching his hand over my shoulder.

My breath hitched as he slowly pulled his hand back and revealed a shredded piece of paper. "I'm sorry for prying into your life, which I have no business in trying to understand. I'm your boss, and I should be professional and not divulge myself into your personal life."

I smiled, not saying a word, as the elevator dinged, and I walked off.

Royce Wolfe might be Oscar the Grouch, but he did have a heart in the middle of those intricate layers. And I was hell-bent on peeling each and every one of those layers.

Good morning.

I'll start easy with your first question.

Would you fuck me again?

Don't hate me? But no.

It was the honest truth. I wouldn't. Something had drawn me to the secrecy of texting Eli, wanting to unfold the mystery of who he really was. But I also wasn't sure where I stood. Royce was right. I was supposed to move. And every day, I was questioning why I hadn't.

I want to see where this relationship goes before committing myself to you.

Thank you for being honest.

But considering the last time was hella euphoric?

I'll be standing at your door for the rest of my existence.

I was judging myself harder than ever for not remembering that night. He felt like a sweet guy, but then the thought of him being a sinister weirdo crept into my mind.

But then why would he make coffee? I thought to myself.

Serial killers do nice things all the time. To lure in their victims? What if he's a serial killer?

It all just felt too good to be true. But a tiny part of me hoped whatever it was would be perfect for me, him, and us. I started my investigation into learning the secrets of the man who presumably made the best coffee I had tasted.

I texted him an earnest question.

What's your favorite ice cream flavor?

I chuckled to myself, remembering when I asked Darius the exact question, which left him bewildered.

"What's your favorite Ice Cream Flavor?" I asked.

We were still in the first few weeks of our relationship, spending most of the weekends in his house, built alongside the Irving Bay Pier.

"Really, out of all the potential questions you ask about my favorite ice cream flavor." He said, with smiling eyes.

"A girl can learn much from a guy's favorite ice cream flavor." I laughed. "Like if you say strawberry, I might reconsider this relationship, but if you say coffee, chocolate chip, or butter pecan, I might love you forever."

"I guess starting today, my favorite ice cream flavor is butter pecan," Darius said, snaking his arm around my shoulders and pulling me close.

"Hey! Just the person I was looking for," Millie said, walking into my office and breaking me out of my daze. The memory was apparent. I heard my laugh as an echo, his smile imprinted in my mind, and the smell of his fresh cologne lingered as if he had just walked by.

"What did I do?" I asked, raising a brow.

"Nothing, I have orders from the boss."

I nodded. "Okay, but first, I have a question to ask you. Hypothetically, if you loved someone, but you know, due to

circumstances, they passed away, and you started gaining feelings for someone else. Would that be a betrayal?"

"Well, the first person is dead." She started to say. "Wouldn't they want you to live a happy life?"

"What if you're supposed to be meant for them?"

"Well, unless you plan on dying soon and joining them, I think it's okay to start dating someone else."

"Yeah, dying is not an option," I mumbled.

"What?"

"Hypothetically speaking," I said. "What did you need me for again?"

"Mr. Royce asked me to give you these." She said, handing me a bunch of blueprints. "He needs you to check these and have them ready for him tonight."

"Tonight? Has the prick lost his mind?" I shrieked. "Millie, there are five, six, I don't know, seven maybe blueprints here. I need more than tonight."

"I'll talk to him."

"No, you know what, forget it. I'll have them by tonight. It's not like I have a life of my own." I threw my hands in the air before I smiled at her. She left my office, startled by my behavior.

I walked into the big glass-paned room, where we usually worked on projects, and the room with the only big enough table to lay out all the blueprints. I spread out the blueprints so that they lined up together. They were all designs for the Yellow Dwarf's gaming housing. The first thing I did was number each of them and begin my work. My team and I had been designing the basic foundation of each room of the new building that was to be built. Jared was my assistant manager, and he usually did most of the heavy lifting, which made my job easier. On each blueprint, he had attached little notes letting me know what needed to be looked over. I pulled out my phone one last time to answer any texts I had, knowing it would be a long night.

What does ice cream have to do with anything?

Is this a trick question? I feel like it is.

Maybe?

Okay, I would say rocky road. Or even chocolate chip.

You passed the test. If you would've said strawberry. I would've had to decline your offer of fucking you.

Royce walked into the room towards the end of the workday with two boxes of ice cream, strawberry, and butter pecan and sat down on the edge of the table. I didn't realize he was sitting close, and when I turned, I crashed straight into him, forcing him off the table.

"Is this a thing with you?" He asked, his arm holding me from falling completely to the ground.

"What are you doing here?"

"I brought you dinner." He smiled, pulling me back up and helping me stand.

"Royce, ice cream is not dinner."

"In my book, it is." He casually sat on the table and stabbed the solid strawberry ice cream, slowly licking it off the spoon.

His eyes glistened as he repeated the action, only this time locking his eyes with mine. Sparks ignited through my nerves, and I mentally slapped myself, trying to focus on the project.

I gave in a while later, picking up the box and peeling off the plastic film. We had started discussing building measurements, and my brain wasn't comprehensive enough to do math. "You know strawberry is disgusting."

“It’s why it’s my favorite. Always in stock at the grocery store.”

I rolled my eyes and filled my mouth, the ooey-gooney goodness that was butter-pecan, while Royce stood twirling a pencil in one hand, watching my every move with his famished eyes.

“How’d you know this was my favorite?”

“Lucky guess.” He smirked.

I could tell he purposely wanted me to stay into the night as everyone was vacating their office. He played every move in the book. Starting with the stalking, the random flower with a note, and finally, the meeting up in an elevator. All of his plans had failed.

Until finally, he found a weakness. *Damn you, butter-pecan ice cream.*

“Am I forgiven now?” he asked in a low voice, closing the gap between us. Our noses almost touching.

I nodded, slowly sliding my spoon across my tongue and licking off the dessert.



“Where the hell were you?” Kinza asked as I walked in through the front door.

“I, yeah, I, shit,” I said incoherently, remembering I had left the file I was working on in my office.

“What?” She asked, trying to understand what I was trying to say.

“No, sorry. Royce has been upgraded to massive dick, and from now on, he will be called that.” I started. “He had me working on a project, and I left the stupid file in my office. I was going to work on it here before I left for work in the morning.”

“Awh, I kinda liked him as Oscar the Grouch.” She laughed. “It suits him well.”

“He’s a creep,” I said. “He bought me ice cream for dinner.”

“Oh, for sure, he’s a creep. Anyone who buys you a whole carton of ice cream is a creep.” She rolled her eyes. “Come on, Addy. Live a little. He clearly wants to fuck you.”

“Yeah, like he probably does with every other woman on the planet.”

“On my behalf, he’s all yours.” She grinned. “Anyways, there’s pizza and a movie if you’re up for it.”

I nodded and told her I was going to change first. The house was a work in progress, and we tackled a box when we could. She had scheduled surgeries, one after another, and sometimes extended night shifts due to staff shortages. Sitting in my room, my thoughts shifted to how Royce had acted throughout the day as if he needed me to forgive him for a silly mistake. It was *almost* sweet.

We stood so close when he asked if I had forgiven him that it made me want to press myself into his body and inhale every bit of his intoxicating scent.

We stood inches apart, Darius staring into my eyes.

“I could stay here forever,” Darius said, kissing my forehead.

“I could, too.” I smiled, looking up into his eyes.

He leaned over and pressed his lips against mine, soft at first, deepening with every second. My nails dug into the nape of the neck, pulling strands of his hair.

I loved how he made me feel. Wanted, protected, and loved. He pushed me onto the bed, hovering over me as his kisses trailed to my neck. I let out a moan filled with contentment. His hands softly grazed between my thighs as if addressing them to part. This time, he didn’t tease. After a few strokes of his tongue, he pushed his way into my entrance, letting me feel his length every inch of the way.

He held down my hips as he pushed against them, and his opposing friction amplified my arousal.

“Darius,” I moaned into his neck before a wave of heat took over, tightening my muscles around him and flowing my arousal over his member.

My arousal provoked his as he thrust with force and speed, filling my inside with his heated ejection. He dropped beside me, his hand resting between my breasts, his eyes staring into mine.

“Marry me, amare.” He whispered into my neck. “I want to spend the rest of my life being lost in you.”

“Addy!” Kinza’s voice brought me into reality. “Hurry the hell up!”

I realized I had just gotten aroused by remembering the last time I had intimacy with Darius and one of the last times I saw him.

Alive.

My thoughts quickly shifted to Royce being the one kissing my neck as I wrapped my legs around his waist. How would he feel?

Being around him today constructed feelings I didn’t know existed for anyone other than Darius. It reminded me why I never stayed in one place until Irving Bay.

I needed help, and I needed it fast.

Unfolding a Family Secret

Royce



My life was now consumed with the thoughts of the girl next door. She'd spend her nights calmly reading, her obnoxious music making its way over to my side of the balcony, which I had soon learned to love.

"Turn it down." I'd mutter.

"No." came her reply.

This became a routine. Then, one morning, I caught her hanging, literally hanging, on a twist of bedsheets, balancing herself on the brick wall. She jumped down from the wall and grabbed her shoes.

"What in the fucking hell are you doing?" I immediately regretted asking.

"Hi." she smiled as if this wasn't unusual.

"You like Spiderman that much?"

She laughed, "No, it's nothing like that. What happened was we decided to switch the locks, to make them, you know, aesthetic? On the door?" she said, pointing to the front door. "But we put them backward."

“Doorknob. It’s called a doorknob. And how the hell do you put in a doorknob backward?” I walked up to their front door and jiggled the doorknob. It came loose in my hand, and I pulled it out. ”You know the cool thing about these things? They come with instructions.”

“Yeah, the stupid instructions were written too small, and we thought, how hard could it be?” She shrugged.

“Here, I solved your problem,” I said, handing her the door knob. “Your door is functioning, it just won’t lock.”

“Can you fix it?” She asked, handing it back.

“Of course, because that’s my job description, you know?” I said sarcastically, rolling my eyes in the process. This girl was going to be the death of me.

“Well, you broke it.” She said, crossing her arms across her chest. “You’re going to fix it.”

“Excuse me? I broke it?” I screeched. “It wasn’t fixed in the first place.”

“You’re the one that jiggled it.”

“You guys really couldn’t find another house. It just had to be the one beside mine.”

“Oscar the freaking Grouch.” She muttered, trying to walk past me, but I stood her in the path. She grabbed her bag from the bushes and bumped into me. Her face was conveniently close to mine, and her intoxicating vanilla scent wanted to bring me down to my knees.

“Your perfume thing,” I whispered. “What is it?”

“It’s a warm vanilla and sugar scent. Why?” She said softly.

“It’s nauseating, but in a good way,” I said. “I’ve smelled it before.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear, “Thanks? I think.” I moved out of her way.

“I’ll have someone fix your lock,” I sighed in defeat as she got into her car.

The bedsheets still hung from the window. “Oh, what the hell,” I said, mentally slapping myself.

You couldn't walk the other way, Royce, could you?



We were a day away from having to present the sketches for the building to the board directors before they officially approved and made the decision to send it out to Yellow Dwarf. Adirah led the team, catching mistakes and driving them to exceed their usual norms. She was in the glass table room again, briefing the day's work, when I walked in and sat myself down at the table, respectfully, in a chair this time. She shot me a glare, and I covered part of my face and made a kissy face so only she'd bear witness. I could tell she was annoyed at that point because she ordered everyone to leave. She grabbed a few binders and started to walk out behind them, but I reached out and grabbed her hand as she walked past.

“How about you and I spend some quality time together?”

“We do that enough, considering you're always telling me to turn down my music.”

“Hey, I'm only looking out for you. You'll blow your brains out one day. I'll have to wash my balcony with acid.” I shudder. “Anyways, how about dinner? And we can go over the presentation for tomorrow.”

“Aren't you hilarious?” She rolled her eyes.

“I'd like to think so.” I grinned.

“And by dinner, I presume you mean ice cream?” She said, raising her eyebrow.

“No, this time, anything you want.”

“What is something you hate eating?” She asked.

“Pizza?”

“There’s seriously something wrong with you. You’re ordering a pizza from Dane’s Pizzeria.”

“No, anything else. Please.” I scrunched my nose, “It’s just the texture.” I stuck out my tongue, and she laughed.

“Hey, you said I could choose. So I did.”

“Fine pizza it is.” I walked right into that one.

“How’s the lock, by the way?”

“It works fine. Thank you.”

“Don’t let me catch you hanging from your window again. I’m not going to throw the sheets back. I’ll let them hang there for someone to come rob you.”

“You seriously are Oscar, the freaking Grouch.” She rolled her eyes before walking out of the room.

I sat on the table, trying to find the menu for Dane’s Pizzeria on my phone and wishing I’d kept my mouth shut. I couldn’t help but smile at the thought of spending the rest of the night with her. Most would appreciate having pizza for dinner. But even as a kid, I was not too fond of the idea.

“No, no!” Vanny smiled. “You don’t spit out food.”

A six-year-old me sat at the dinner table, picking out all the vegetables from the pizza Vanny had made for dinner right after I spit out a mushroom, which landed under the dinner table.

“But Vanny,” I pouted, “It’s weird.”

“Okay, how is it weird?” She asked.

Vanny had been the mother I yearned for. She’d care, cuddle, and read me stories during bedtime, only to be replaced by my actual mother in the mornings, who didn’t understand my love for pancakes instead of waffles. Eventually, after enduring so many fits, my dad hired her full-time. She’d feed me breakfast and take me to school before going to college herself. She’d then come home right before I did and spend the rest of the day taking care of me before tucking me into bed at night.

“Because it’s lumpy and squishy.”

“Okay, fine. See Royce, we communicate our feelings.” She explained. “And spitting isn’t nice. You’re a big kid now.”

“Okay, I’m sorry,” I said. She grabbed my plate and replaced it with vegetables, rice, and stew.

“Do you need help?” She asked.

“No, I’m a big boy, remember?” I grinned.

“You sure are,” She said, scuffing my hair. “Come on, eat up. It’s almost bedtime. You have school tomorrow.”

I ordered the pizza and had the room set up for the late-night meeting. I stood looking over the blueprints in admiration at Adirah’s precision in every aspect of the buildings. Yellow Dwarf wanted to not only create a building for their headquarters but also wanted the fans to feel as if they were in a video game while visiting the building. Adirah came up with the idea to use one of their video games as a brainstorm to create the building.

“Hey.” She said, walking in. “God, it smells delicious.”

“No, it doesn’t,” I complained. “Hey, so I was looking over the building where they want their offices set up. What if we separated it with a bridge?” I picked up a scratch paper, copied her sketch, and drew in the bridge.

“Wait, yeah, we could use one of those screens and make it seem like they were walking on fire or something.” She grabbed the pencil from my hand and leaned over, drawing over what I had drawn. Perfecting each angle, adding minor details, and making my idea come alive. “There, how’s that?”

“How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“You just added all this shit with literally a sentence to go on.”

“Royce, I need you to sit down for this.” She said, pushing me into a chair. “I’m awesome.” She whispered.

She leaned in really close, and her scent of vanilla filled my nose. I had to stuff my hand into my pocket, holding back the urge to wrap my hand around her waist and pull her in for a kiss. She noticed the tension in the air and sat in a chair beside me, focusing on the blueprints.

I hadn't felt this way about anyone since my college days. Ava Sophia was the girl everyone wanted but couldn't have because she had the biggest crush on me, possibly the only bachelor who wanted nothing to do with her. Eventually, I caved. But that relationship didn't last long. For her, I was a desire. When it faded, I became like the rest of them. I never felt butterflies or noticed what she wore, but with Adirah, I calculated her every movement without even knowing it.

The way she played with a pen while listening to someone explaining a critical task.

The way she smiled when her sketches turned out the way she wanted them to.

The way her eyebrows scrunched together when she was serious or thinking hard.

And the way she decided to wear whatever the hell she wanted, like me. One day, she'd have her hair neatly curled and her shirt tucked into her dress pants, and a matching blazer would be draped over her shoulders. On other days, she'd wear shirts with Disney characters and jeans.

"And what are you going to eat?" She asked, sitting down beside me.

"I'm not hungry," I said, shaking my head.

"Yeah, I don't buy that." She rolled her eyes. "How come you don't eat pizza?"

"The texture of it bugs me."

"You don't take off the toppings and eat it?" She raised her brow.

"No."

She pulled a slice from the box, pulled off the toppings, and held it up for me to bite. "Here." She smiled.

Involuntarily, I took a bite.

“See? It’s not so bad.” She said.

It’s not so bad when you’re the one feeding me pizza. I thought to myself.

“So why are you always grouchy?” She asked, taking a slice for herself.

“I am not.” I laughed.

“Yes, you are. Remember the first time we met? And like yesterday morning, you acted like you had a stick shoved up your ass.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Well, you almost stepped on my white shoes the first time we met.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. What about drinking beer like a lonely serial killer on your balcony?”

I laughed. “I’m also not lonely.”

“Are you sure about that?” She scrunched up her eyebrows.

“Yes, I’m sure about that,” I said, staring at her, pizza sauce smeared around the corners of her mouth. I wiped them clean, brushing my thumb over her lip.

She stared at me in shock. “You had pizza sauce on your face,” I explained.

“Yeah, thanks.” She tucked her hair behind her ear, her cheeks turning bright, and I couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to kiss her while she was aware of what was happening.

I waved my finger around the slice of pizza. “Can you give me another bite?”

“Awh, is the big grouchy Wolfe scared of pizza?”

“Shut up,” I muttered.

She looked into my eyes and silently picked up my pizza slice, barely holding it before my mouth. My hand gently wrapped around hers, tugging it closer and taking another bite.

I could sit for days and stare into her amber eyes, never wanting to fall asleep.

“What?” She said softly. “I was joking.”

I shook my head, smiling. “I know.” I wasn’t about to admit that I liked, no idolized, the situation at hand. I wasn’t about to admit that I was sinking deeper into a void where only I’d exist.

With her.



The next morning, I sent her the dirty text of the day—*eight more to go.*

Describe an ideal romantic evening.

Her texts came in as I was about to get up for a shower.

Okay so.

Please don’t think I’m trying to extort you or anything.

But I always wanted to tour Irving Bay.

Go sightseeing? Find new restaurants? Just making a day out of it. I feel like that’s more fun than just an elegant dinner with champagne.

A devilish thrill erupted in my mind, wanting to tease her right before a big presentation.

Seriously, Royce, really?

I wouldn't mind spending an entire day admiring you. I would enjoy it.

I'd spend the rest of eternity admiring her.

We have a presentation today. I hope my boss can keep his shit together.

He doesn't have his shit together?

The man wears overcoats, jeans, and boots.

What if I wore an overcoat?

I'd take it off and burn it.

Follow-up dirty question: What else would you take off?

Something about this woman made my blood spry. Spending much of the night going over blueprints and watching her eat pizza made me feel a new set of emotions I hadn't felt in a long time.

And her goddamn fucking scent.

That vanilla scent was intoxicating. It lingered with me everywhere I went, and I couldn't understand why it felt so familiar. The way she dominated the workspace had me in awe. But she thoroughly reveled under my touch the night we became one. It may have been the alcohol in her system, but part of me wondered how she would look with her hands cuffed behind her back and hollowed cheeks as she choked on my dick.

I'd proceed to take off all your clothes.

And?

I'd run my tongue down your abs. Stopping where your dick meets the rest of your body. Biting down and then running my tongue along your hardened dick.

Damn, she bites. Her text turned me on way more than it should've. And she didn't stop there.

I'd tease the tip before taking you all the way until you come in my mouth.

And I'd swallow it.

The thought of her in front of me, on her knees, following my every command became a vivid image. Her glistening amber eyes would look up at me as she took in my length, *all of my length*, gagging as the tip hit the back of her throat. My hand would be tangled in her hair, controlling her in every way. I let my head fall as a muffled moan escaped my throat. My hand gripped the sheets. And before I knew what was happening, just her three texts alone had sent me free inside my shorts. The warm liquid seeped through the fabric as I ran my hand through my hair before taking a picture and sending it to her.

Have a fantastic day!

This fucking girl. I couldn't help but laugh.

Later, I walked into the office with long strides, looking confident, but inside, my bones quivered with agitation.

“Hey, are you ready?” Adirah popped into my office, bright eyes and bushy-pony-tailed.

“Why are you so happy?”

“Some of us actually like to share our ideas. But it’s a collective effort on this project.” She smiled. “Nervous?”

I gulped down a bottle of water. “Is it that obvious?”

“Come on, you’ll be fine.” Sparks erupted in my veins as she grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the door. The morning incident had me disoriented enough, and when she didn’t let go, I didn’t pull away either. I just left it there, as if my hand belonged interlaced with hers. Once at the door, she squeezed my hand, signaling this was my moment.

“I’ll be out here.” She smiled, pointing her index fingers to the ground.

I went inside and smoothly walked up to the podium and explained our project. The pictures of Adirah’s hand-drawn blueprints were displayed on the screen, and I was more than happy to paint a picture of what the building would look like. I got a few “oo’s” and “aa’s,” but my father sat at the edge of his seat as if he *wanted* me to fuck this up. By the end of the meeting, the board was immersed in the thought that Yellow Dwarf wouldn’t be just a building for their headquarters. It would be an experience on its own. I thanked the board and asked if they had any questions. Naturally, my father was the one who piped up first.

“Why did you and your team consider including the fan base of Yellow Dwarf as a part of this project?”

“I believe it came from my love of video games. I always wanted to see the place where they were built and how they were built. I want to think there are many adolescents as such, wanting to understand the world of their favorite games.” I glared at my father, “I wasn’t fortunate enough to experience this myself, but throughout this process, I had only such an idea in mind. Plus, it’s also what the company is looking for.”

That shut him right up.

“Thank you for your time, and I hope you consider this project a chance.” I flashed the most bogus smile before I walked out of the room to Adirah standing against the wall. In one hand, she held a beer bottle, the other water. She held them up as if asking which one? I snatched the beer.

“See, I’m telling you, you’re going to turn into a beer bottle one day.”

I smiled. “Thank you,” I said. “For everything.”

“When will we know whether they liked it or not?” She eagerly asked.

“Monday, I believe.” We parted ways. I was still taking swigs from my beer bottle when my father and Adirah simultaneously sent texts. I opened the one from Adirah first.

Sorry, I messed with you earlier.

I think he nailed the presentation.

I couldn’t help but smile. Her enthusiasm kept reminding me how sincere she was, all while I was sending her texts pretending to be someone else. I never did well with presentations. My legs always turned to jelly.

“Hey! How was your presentation?” Vanny asked, picking me up from school.

“Well, I didn’t shit my pants.”

“Hey, what did I tell you about using that language?”

“That using that kind of language is not nice,” I muttered. “And we shouldn’t use it. Even if people around us use it.”

She reached over and ruffled my hair. “Exactly. Now, what happened?”

“I think I did good,” I said, getting into the car. “But Drake laughed at me.”

She fastened my seatbelt. “Why did he laugh?” She asked.

“He said my poster was trash.”

“Okay, look. There are mean people in the world, okay? You must understand that not everyone will like you or what you create.” She explained. “But that doesn’t mean you aren’t worthy or intelligent, okay?”

I gave her a nod.

Vanny had a way with words. I might not have understood the meaning back then, but now they make much more sense.

“I sent you a text.” My father stormed into my office.

“You do realize there’s a sign that says, ‘Please knock before entering,’” I said, scrunching my eyebrows.

He grunted in response. I opened the text and read it out loud. “‘We need to talk.’ Well then, Mr. Wolfe, please talk.”

“At least try to act professional.” He rumbled, throwing my half-drunk beer bottle into the trash.

“Hey, I was drinking that.” I pouted.

“Do your top buttons not work?” He said, pointing at my partially revealed chest.

I didn’t follow the societal norms of a CEO by wearing a suit and tie and always looking like I had an edge. I usually dressed in t-shirts and jeans with chains dangling around my neck, a look my father despised.

Today, however, I sported a suit with a button-down shirt left open halfway. The edge of my tattoo peeked through, and my chains dangled around my neck to top the look.

“Is this the talk you wanted to have, Mr. Wolfe? Are you here to criticize how I live my life?” I asked. “Mind you, I’m a grown-ass adult, and I can wear my shirt however the hell I like.”

His posture shifted as he handed me a file. “Congratulations, you’re the new CEO of Wolfe Legacy.”

“That was quick.”

“The design was too good to give up.” He gritted through closed teeth.

“Bet.” I let out a sarcastic laugh. “You must be very happy.”

“Grow up.” He muttered, rolling his eyes.

He gave me a cold look over his shoulder before leaving the room, leaving me to ponder again about Adirah. Her idea had just landed me the enterprise, and I couldn’t help but want her by my side with her prospering ideas every inch of the way.



“Hey, Millie?” It was late at night. Millie was setting up tomorrow’s schedule, and I was looking into the finances of Wolfe Legacy.

“Yes, Mr. Royce.” She said.

“Fucking shit Millie, how many times do I have to tell you? It’s Royce. Just Royce.” I muttered. “Anyways, why are there transactions to hospital bills for a *‘Melissa Santiago’*?”

Millie turned white as if the color had just drained out of her soul. “I don’t know.”

“Are you lying to me?”

She caved after she saw my icy glare. “Your father pays Ms. Santiago’s hospital bills.”

“My father isn’t the charity type.” I pushed. “So why is he paying someone’s hospital bills?”

Millie scribbled something with a pen on a sticky note and handed it to me.

“It’s her address, and if Mr. Wolfe asks, I didn’t tell you anything.”

“He’ll have to go through me now to get to you.”

Once settled in my truck, I dialed one of my best friend’s number. Since returning from the Island of Mona, I hadn’t contacted anyone.

“Royce, the big man.” He beamed through the phone line. “How have you been? Are you back?”

“Hey, Myk. I’m just hanging in there. Yeah, I came back two weeks ago, I think? Maybe three.” I said. “And I need to cash in a favor.”

“Yeah, anything.”

Mykel and I go way back. He ended up as a new student during our senior year, and before the bullies of Irving Hill Academy ripped him apart, I took him under my wing. We went to university together, and he took the criminology route, now working as a behavior analyst in the federal bureau.

“Is looking someone up illegal?” I asked.

“Depends on who you need to look up.”

“I just got elected CEO of Wolfe Legacy, and I was going through the finances and saw some interesting payments.”

“Well, congrats, man. See, you were meant for bigger things.” He chuckled. “And how interesting? Like criminal or unusual?”

“I think it falls under unusual?” I said in a questioning tone. “You know my dad isn’t into charity, yet there are a bunch of payments to Melissa Santiago from the company for hospital bills.”

“Okay, that’s not too bad. Text me the name and anything else you can.” He said. “I’ll have Leah run it and get back to you.”

“Thanks, man. Have you talked to Novah after the whole shooting incident?” I asked. The phone line went quiet.

“Look, man, sorry if that riled up some feelings.”

“No, no. It’s just no one has mentioned her in a while. And it brought back some memories.”

“Did you file a divorce?”

“No, I don’t have the heart to.” He said softly. “I keep thinking she’ll come back. She’s running her own team in D.C. now.”

“That’s good. A better upgrade, considering she worked under you.” I laughed.

“Shut up.” He laughed as well. “I’m not that bad.

“Sure. Whatever helps you sleep at night. We need to grab a beer sometime.”

“Yeah, we should. Text me the details, and I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” I smiled, ended the call, and texted him the name and the address Millie had written down for me.

Three years ago, a shooting in Irving Bay resulted in Mykel losing everything he loved. In college, he fell in love with Novah, and their love became a fairytale love story you only read about. She had been a medic in the army but soon left when her father fell ill. She joined Mykel’s team, staying close to home to take care of her father, who sadly passed away months later. She soon fell pregnant, and they both got married. Mykel couldn’t be happier, and everything seemed perfect. The last case they worked on together resulted in the killer chasing them down, and to save Mykel’s life, Novah jumped in front of him. She lost the baby. Mykel never forgave himself and couldn’t bear to be in the same room with her. After a while, the director offered her a job in Washington D.C., which she took, and Mykel asked to be transferred to the Los Angeles Unit. It had been a while since he and I and our other friend Danish had gotten together.

The roads were quiet at this house as I drove home. I couldn’t help but think about my father’s behavior. He was the one who decided to retire. And what struck me was he didn’t feel an ounce of admiration that I created a fantastic presentation in a week. All of it was unusual. I knew my dad wouldn’t just hand me a company without having a motive. I was a pawn in his master plan, but he didn’t realize I wasn’t here to play a game.

“You don’t love me enough.” I huffed one night as he stood in the home office sorting through the paperwork.

“Who filled your head with that crap?” He asked.

“Vanny says not to use that language.”

“Fucking Vanny.” He seethed under his breath before walking past me and out of his office. I followed behind but stopped in the partially closed doorway of the kitchen.

“You’re filling his head with nonsense.” I heard my father yell.

“Excuse me?”

“Did you tell him that we, his parents, don’t love him?” He yelled.

“I didn’t say that,” Vanny explained. “Mr. Wolfe, your son expressed his feelings about how you don’t make enough effort to be around him. I only told him that’s not true.”

“He’s my son.” His voice was venomous. It got quiet before I heard a muffled scream.

To this day, I’m not sure what my father did or did not do with Vanny, but she was different after that. She kept her ground but still showed affection. Her eyes always looked lost, and she never commented on my father’s parenting again. If I ever mentioned it, she’d smile and change the subject.

“Hey, you’ve been sitting out here for a while.” Adirah walked up to the rolled-down window of my truck and held up a beer. “You’ve converted me. I just bought a couple on my way home.”

I smiled at the gesture and took the beer as I exited my truck. “You want to come inside for a minute?”

She pretended to be shocked. “Oh wow, is the big bad Wolfe inviting me to his serial killer lair?”

I shot her a glance of amusement. “Yeah, be careful. You might just be my next victim,” I smirked, leading her inside.

“This looks pretty normal.” She looked around, eyeing the furniture, “But why is everything gray, white and black?”

“I don’t like colorful things. Like you and Sparky over there,” I said, tilting my head towards her house.

“According to Google, bright colors can motivate and energize your mind.” She smirked. “No wonder your brain doesn’t function. And on top of the filth you drink.” She held up the beer bottle.

“You’re drinking it too,” I said huskily, closing the gap between us. I still wasn’t over the actions of this morning. My hand wrapped around hers, the one that held the bottle, and brought it to my lips, taking a sip. “They liked the project. They’re going to go through with it.”

She eyed the bottle before taking a sip herself. Her eyes sparked up more than life itself when I said the words. “*They liked the project.*”

She squealed in excitement, “You’re serious?”

I nodded. “And you’re looking at the new CEO.”

“Congratulations, *Mr. Royce Wolfe.*” She smirked. “I presume that’s what we will call you from now on?”

“Please don’t,” I said, pushing back the urge to slam my mouth against her.

She grinned and drifted to my bookshelf, running her fingers across the spine. “What’s with the obsession?” She asked, looking back in my direction. “Almost all these books about Azure are rare.”

“What if I told you that I think The Kingdom of Azure could be real?”

Her face lit up as she continued to read the spines. “I’d say we finally have something in common.”

“You think it’s real too?” I asked softly, walking over to where she stood. I stared at her as she strode across, her fingers touching the spines.

“I like to believe in fairy tales, especially since the stories about the Kingdom are filled with love. You even have the book about Dilbar?”

“The Goddess of Love and Healing.” I smiled.

“Yes, her name means soulmates.”

“A stranger, you come to realize. Someone who makes your soul come alive. A *dilbari*.” I finished.

The Azurian Afsana called soulmates *dilbari*, the state of being someone’s beloved.

“I didn’t know you knew so much.” Her eyes twinkled with delight under the dim lights.

“Have you ever loved anyone?” I asked, my hand slowly reaching over to tuck her hair behind her ear just as a phone rang, with Mykel’s name popping onto the screen. She smiled at me, taking a few steps back as I answered the phone.

“Hey, I found who you’re looking for.” He said.

“This quick?”

“Yeah, Leah was still in the office.” He explained. “Royce, Melissa Santiago is dead.”

“Then who the hell is the money going to?”

“I can look into that if you want.”

“I’ll send you some transcripts in the morning, and did you run the address?”

“Yeah, the house was under her name. But it there’s a case of arson on it from thirty years ago.”

“A case of arson? What the hell?”

“There’s a whole case on it, Royce.” He said with seriousness. “I’ll have Leah look into it and see what I can do.”

“Thanks, man, I owe you a lot,” I said, running a hand over my face.

“In the meantime, don’t go digging around.” He advised, “I’ll send a secured laptop, which you can use. This looks like some serious shit.”

“I’m lost.”

“For your safety, you dumbass.” I almost heard his eyes rolling as he said the sentence. “Let me put together a file, and I’ll come up there myself.”

“Okay, fine, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” He said, disconnecting the call.

I turned around to face Adirah. She reached over and touched my arm, and a look of concern appeared in her eyes. “Is everything okay?” She asked softly.

I don’t know, Trippy. I don’t know.

Dinner With the Boss

Adirah



Royce was disturbed entirely when I left the previous night. It ached me to see him distressed, and I shook off the feeling of wanting to help. Kinza was again stuck in an emergency through the night. And when I left for work the following day, she was fast asleep on the couch. I walked into my office early next morning, reading Eli's texts.

This one isn't dirty, but it's for my own research.

What is something you hate?

Like anything?

Yes.

Going into the water. I mean, I love the beach.

I just don't go into the water.

How come?

It's personal.

And I don't think I'm ready
to share that.

The peaceful ocean. Illiyan had even managed to ruin that. I've only been in the water voluntarily once. That was with Darius.

"How come you don't go into the water?" He asked softly.

"I just don't," I said, resting my head on his chest.

He never knew the real reason, even though later on in our relationship, I admitted I was the Goddess of Winds.

"How about you and I go together?"

I shook my head. "No."

But he didn't take no for an answer. He pulled off his shirt, revealing his perfectly sculpted muscles. He held out his hand. "I'll drag you in there if I have to." He smirked.

Holding tight, I placed my hand in his, and we walked to the shore's edge. I felt the water brush up against my feet. I gasped and started to walk backward.

"Hey, hey." He pulled me in close.

"I can't."

"It'll be fine." He said, closing the gap between us. "Close your eyes."

He leaned in as I closed my eyes, his lips softly brushing against mine. He pulled his hands around my waist and

deepened the kiss.

“Open them.” He whispered.

I felt the water rise to my waist. We were far away from the shore. I wrapped my hands around his neck. “See?” His lips brushed across mine. “It’s not that bad.”

“When you put it like that, it’s not.” I smiled.

“Are you ever going to tell me why you don’t go in the water?”

I always wanted to but never had the heart to admit the truth. It stayed at the back of my head, an aching memory that could not be forgotten no matter how hard I tried.

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

He kissed my forehead, pulling my shivering body closer to his. “You don’t have to tell me. I’ll love you either way.”

My phone buzzing brought me out of my daze.

That’s fine. You can tell me when you’re comfortable.

Or not, it’s up to you.

His response made my heart swell.

After going through our recent files, I decided to take them to Royce and explain them myself. Part of me only wanted to make sure he was okay. “Hey, I need you to look these over,” I said, placing files and sketches on his desk. “Some of them need to be signed. I can go over them if you want?”

“Yeah, just put them there.” He said, not turning away from his screen. “And it’s fine.”

“Are you okay?” I asked, scraping my feet against the carpet. I stood there for a while before he finally looked my way.

“Do you need anything?” He jabbed.

“No, sorry, I asked,” I said, shaking my head. I went back to my office and found Millie waiting. “What’s wrong with him today?”

“Mr. Royce?” She asked.

I nodded.

“I’m not sure.”

“It’s fine. It’s none of my business. I’m going to take the rest of the day off.” I smiled. “I left the files for the Yellow Dwarf project on his desk. All he has to do is go over them.”

Millie nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind if he asks.”

“Thank you.”

“We’re looking good with the timeline. The directors of Yellow Dwarf still haven’t scheduled a formal meeting, but we’re certain it’ll happen towards the end of the week.”

“Okay, thank you, Millie.” I smiled, “And if Oscar the Grouch needs me? Just have him call.”

Millie let out a laugh. “Good one.”

“They both have a lot in common, you must admit.” I shot her a grin before walking into the elevator and disappearing.

Oscar the Grouch woke up on the wrong side of the trashcan today.

Excuse me, but who?

My stupid boss. Royce Wolfe.

However, part of me ached to see him upset, and I couldn’t help but wonder if this was related to the phone call from last night.



When I walked out of Wolfe Legacy, leaving Oscar the Grouch in his office, I didn't have a plan for where I wanted to go. Eventually, I decided to walk and visit Darius' grave, just a few blocks from here.

"Hi, can I have some red roses?" I said to the lady at the stand.

She shook her head, not understanding what I had just asked.

I smiled, "Hablas ingles?"¹

She again shook her head. "No lo hablo ingles."² She pointed to the flowers. "Quires alguna flor?"³

"Si, quiero rosas."⁴

She took a couple to wrap up a bouquet of roses, "Aqui tienes."⁵

I paid her for the flowers, "Gracias."⁶

She gave me a smile. "De nada querida."⁷

I smiled back before walking away and pulled out my phone and saw missed messages from an unknown number.

Hey, why'd you leave? I'll look over the files. I'm sorry I blew you off.

Goddammit.

Adirah, answer me. I'm sorry.

Just let me know you're Okay.

I quickly realized these messages were from Royce.

I'm fine. I had to attend to something personal.

I can come back if you need me.

Oh, thank fuck.

And his last text was intriguing.

After work, instead of the office, meet me at my place.

I had no idea what he had in mind, but I wanted to know what was wrong with him. Plus, he owed me an apology. *Again.*

I sat at Darius's grave, which I dug thirty years ago. I smiled at the thought of him never fearing death.

"What's the point? If you know something inevitable, it's inevitable." He smiled. I sat on his lap with my hands interlaced in his. "I see life with three different meanings."

"Care to explain?" I asked.

Darius believed life had three definitions. The dictionary definition, the fixed definition, is that life is just the mere existence of an animal or human being. Second, you can have your life to mean whatever you want. It was a bit vague, I suppose, but it meant well. *You* were in control of your own life. The last stated that your life is exponential from the day you are born until you die. Your life is meant to be lived to the fullest.

"I want to do something with my life." He said, grazing his thumb across my lip.

"What would that be?" I asked.

“I don’t know yet.” He smiled. “Isn’t there something you’d want to do?”

I shook my head, “I guess I never thought about it.”

He made me feel alive. The way he kept himself unrestrained, just flowing with life itself.

I sat against his tombstone, shivering from the memory and ignoring the world passing by.

“Do you remember how I told you I would start a company?”

I gave him a nod. “You called it your empire.”

“Our empire.” He smiled. “It just got finalized.”

Darius yearned for the positive things in life. He wasn’t just an optimist. He drifted on cloud nine, cruising through every obstacle as if they had no meaning. “I built it all for you, amare. For us.”

“That’s more than amazing.” I smiled, looking into his eyes. “We should celebrate.”

“I like where this is going.” He smirked.

Nothing was passionate about how we moved that night—desire fueling one another, riding each other’s euphoria till we felt alive.

But he was *dead*. Murdered.

Both his life and my life were stolen.

Some fucking immortal I was.



“Where the hell were you all day?” Royce’s voice boomed in the empty halls of his house when I walked in later that night.

“Why do you care?” I shot back, looking around his perfect house. It was almost too perfect.

“In a mood, are we?” He asked.

“You’re one to talk,” I grumbled. “Do you need anything?” I mimicked his gruff voice from this morning, and he stood staring as if the world had turned upside down.

He held his hands up and waved a spoon in defeat. “Okay, first of all, I do not sound like that. And I’m truly and deeply sorry, Trippy. I shouldn’t have treated you like that.”

He placed his hand on his heart and formed puppy dog eyes.

Holy fuck. It was hard to resist saying no.

“Yeah, the next time you wake up on the wrong side of the trash can, drink some coffee, or better yet, bang your head against the wall.” I rolled my eyes and pulled the file off his table. But it wasn’t the file for the Yellow Dwarf project.

“I will have to try out the second one.” He smirked.

“Who the hell is Melissa Santiago?”

His eyes bulged, and it seemed they wanted to crawl back into his head and lock themselves away. Forever.

“That’s nothing. The Yellow Dwarf file is the blue-colored file.”

“Royce, don’t you dare lie to me again.” I rambled. “Or so the Gods of Azure help me. I will walk out right now.”

“Okay, okay, fine. But come over here. And stop with the yelling.”

Whatever he was cooking, it smelled delicious. “Where the hell did you learn to cook?”

He laughed, “What? You think I keep this body with take-out?” He took the file from my hand. “I found some interesting, I guess you could call it, financial transactions, which I was looking into.”

“Oh, how interesting?” I asked, looking into the pot over the stove.

“I’m not sure yet.” He said.

“Is that what the call was about yesterday?”

He nodded, holding out the spoon. His eyes insisted I give it a taste. I sampled the sauce, all while not looking away from his eyes. The sauce heated my taste buds just the right amount and soon became a tangy blend, leaving me wanting more.

“That’s delicious.”

“I had a nanny because my parents were too busy to raise the one kid they had.” He rolled his eyes. “Vanny taught me everything I know. She used to cook stuff like this, and when I grew up, I longed for her cooking. So I decided to learn.”

“Awh, that’s sweet.” I smiled, hopping to sit on the marble counter, “Do you still talk to her?”

“She left when I was seven, and I never heard from her again.” A disappointed frown formed on his face.

“Maybe you should try finding her,” I suggested.

“Maybe I should.”

“So I have a question for you.” I started. “Why the Neanderthal look?”

He burst out laughing, a genuine hearty laugh, with a perfect smile and dimples showing through his beard. “*Neanderthal*. Holy shit.” He was still laughing.

“What? Your hair’s wild, usually everywhere, except when you’re in the office.” I started, “Then you wear like the most atrocious outfits.”

He had a unique style, but at home, I usually saw him with oversized shirts and dull gray sweatpants, and his hair was let loose, except today, it was neatly tied at the back of his head. He shared my obsessions with having a ring on almost every finger and long chain necklaces. And the strangest thing was that he wore a bandana around his wrist.

“I guess. I like being comfortable.” He said.

“What’s with the bandana?” I reached over and traced over the slightly visible paisley designs.

“Back in college, some friends and I decided to do a mountain climbing tour.” He explained. “ We were climbing a

mountain in Alaska when I tore one of my tendons in my shoulder. It was this whole medevac situation. My friends went on, and I was stuck there for about a month. And one of my nurses gave this to me. She said it was lucky.”

“So it’s your lucky charm.” I wrinkled my nose. He nodded and grabbed a plate, spreading the pasta and sauce dish before placing it beside me on the counter.

“Are you a fork or spoon kinda person?” He asked.

“Hands,” I said, grabbing a bow-tie pasta and stuffing it into my mouth.

“That’s hot.” He smirked. “Now I have to make you my next victim.”

“Oh, so that’s your fetish aye?” I laughed more at the fact that he wasn’t annoyed by the serial killer joke, only now he was in on it, too. “Watching people eat? That’s odd, don’t you think?”

“I have tons, none that you’d want to find out.” His voice turned thick as he admitted to being someone with erotic kinks. “Okay, I have a question for you.” He said, pulling up a chair to the counter. “Who decided to name you after the lost goddess?”

“My aunt,” I whispered. The truth was, my parents were expecting a boy. I have two aunts. My mother’s sister, Daryah, the Goddess of the Oceans, and my father’s sister, Jabeen, the Goddess of Hearth Fire. Once I was born, my aunt Daryah named me Adirah, strong, noble, and powerful. But lately, I felt far from any of it.

“What happened to her?” He asked softly. “You don’t talk much about your family.”

I don’t talk about my family, period. They are not your typical reality TV show family. They are the immortal Azurians, a family that held grudges and a family that took advantage. In the end, they were still a family that protected their own.

I stayed quiet, not wanting to answer the question. And he didn’t push either.

Instead, he talked about his own family. “My parents weren’t around much. I had an uncle, I vaguely remember him, but my father says he disappeared.”

“That seems to be a reoccurring situation in your family,” I said.

“I think there’s more to the story.” He shrugs, finishing the last of his pasta while I barely consumed my third bite. “Don’t get mad at me, but you haven’t answered the question I asked you last night.”

“Which one?”

“If you ever loved anyone.”

I hesitated to answer.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to you impose or anything.” He started. “It’s just you mentioned that you liked fairy tales and love stories, which must’ve meant that you had someone that made you feel like you were in a fairy tale or something.”

I was stunned to hear Royce speak that many words at once.

“I did.” I sighed. “He’s dead.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.” He said softly. “What did you need me to look over in the file?”

He added a few spoonfuls of pasta to his plate and grabbed two beer bottles from the fridge. He popped the tops and handed one over to me.

I took a quick swig, “I don’t remember, but I made notes of everything so you can check it off as you go.” I said.

“I’ll have it to you by the morning.” He smiled, his dimples slightly showing.

We ate in silence after that, giving each other a few glances and smiles.

“I’m sorry I acted like Oscar the Grouch today.” He said as I helped him with the dishes. He stood conveniently close, now and then brushing against me. Our fingers would touch, and he didn’t seem to mind it.

“It happens. I’m giving you a pass this time.” I grinned. He had somewhat of a charm, and I hadn’t noticed until today. “How come you don’t have a girlfriend?” The question just slipped out.

“Are you saying that I’m attractive?” He asked, raising his eyebrow.

He’s your boss. He’s your mortal freaking boss. Didn’t you learn the last time?

“What? No. Remember I said you’re a Neanderthal.” I defended.

But fuck yes, he was attractive. He was made with perfection.

He laughed. “Yeah, I need that as a sticker, maybe even a doormat. And to answer your question, I don’t do relationships. The last time I was in one, that meant something was probably back in college. She was a fucking con artist. Ava will play with your feelings and then dump you because she’s over you.”

“You got dumped in college?” I said, crossing my hands over my chest. It was hard to believe this man ever got dumped.

“No, I caught her cheating.”

“Oh, ouch,” I said. “And what about after her?”

“No, just a few flings here and there.” He said, closing the small gap between us. “My recent will probably be the death of me.”

“You like her that much?” I asked softly.

“I do.”

My gaze fell as a wretched feeling took over in my gut. He reached over his hand, lifting my chin. He slung his arm over my shoulder as he walked me to the door.

“Again, I’m sorry for treating you like shit.” He said softly. “You’ve been doing an amazing job with the project, and I shouldn’t have taken my anger out on you.”

He stood in the doorway, filling the entrance with his burly figure, and before I returned to my place, he leaned in and kissed my cheek. His hand rested on my hip. A sense of excitement came to life inside me. But I realized his admission from earlier, and it took all my will to take a few steps back before I started thinking with my heart and not my brain.

I walked back in the direction of my home. “Thank you for dinner,” I called out when I reached my steps.

He bowed with his perfect smile and went inside.

I just had dinner with Royce Wolfe.

Royce freaking Wolfe had just kissed me.

And this had nothing to do with the Yellow Dwarf file like he had promised. For all I knew, he had already taken a look and just asked for formality.

Had I just gone on a date with my human boss?



Royce met me in my office early the following day and handed me the audited file. “It’s perfect.” He smiled. “Millie also scheduled a virtual meeting for which I need you to be present.”

I nodded. “Anything else, Mr. Royce.” For a second, I saw the glint in his eyes turn satanic. Last night’s encounter had me wanting more. I wanted his hands to run all over my body, his dirty little mouth on mine. The burst of heat started to rise inside once again. I held on to the table, supporting myself and trying not to fall.

“No, Ms. Gaudin. Your presence will suffice.” He bit his lip and pinched my cheek before he gave me a smirk on his way out.

What the fuck was happening?

I pulled out my phone to read the dirty question of the day. Instead of one, there were three.

What's the naughtiest thing you've done?

What's your favorite kind of foreplay?

Tell me a sexual fantasy you never had fulfilled.

How the hell was I supposed to answer the last one?

Before I answer your lovely questions, how about you answer one of mine?

Amare, that's not how it works.

Something you hate? I'm doing my own research.

Well, not much. But I do hate people who lie. And play games.

Well, shit.

I get that.

I wouldn't say I like being used or controlled, either.

Fourth Question: What if I was to control you? During sex?

You're one of those?

Only if you want me to be.

I would be lying if his behavior didn't spark an interest.

I've never tried that before.

There's so much I need to teach you.

Why?

To ruin the chance of anyone else trying to make you theirs.

Why?

Because amare, I'm beginning to think you were made for me. And I for you.

To set you free.

Double shit.



The virtual meeting consisted of many “hms,” “mms,” and Royce shifting his weight from one leg to another. As well as a lot of compliments on the design. Mr. Asuka, the head of Yellow Dwarf, congratulated Royce on exceeding his expectations, and of course, Royce had to be humble.

“I didn’t do it alone, sir.” He smiled into the camera. “Ms. Adirah Gaudin is why this project is truly amazing.” He sat with his legs extended under the table, his elbow resting against the glass, and his finger tangled in the thick of his beard. He reached under the table with his free hand and rested it over mine, gently stroking my palm.

His hand shifted to my thigh, gently gliding upwards and stopping before my center. All the while, his eyes stayed glued to the screen as he caressed my inner thigh with the edge of his fingers. I sat there without movement, silently wishing he’d never stop.

“I will have my assistant email the details for our meeting in White Bridge City.” Mr. Asuka said. “Thank you. Working with you has been a pleasure.”

“The feeling is mutual, sir,” Royce said before signing off. He had taken his hand back, and I sat there mourning the loss.

He turned to everyone in the room. “I know I might be harsh sometimes, but I’m grateful for the effort you all put into this project.” At the end of the sentence, his eyes landed on me, and I looked down. I could feel the heat in my cheeks as his gaze bore right into my skull.

“For your exemplary work, I say we have a bit of a celebration. Office party on a yacht?”

And right when he said that my face turned white.

1. “Do you speak English?”
2. “No, I don’t speak English.”
3. “Do you want some flowers?”
4. “Yes, I want roses.”
5. “Here you go.”
6. “Thank you.”
7. “You’re welcome, my dear.”

The Company Yacht Party

Royce



Was it mean of me to throw a party on the one domain Adirah said she doesn't explore? A little.

I knocked at her front door, reading the sign that never gets old, "Besties before Testes."

"Hey," Kinza opened the door.

"Hey Sparky. Is she ready yet?" I asked. "I thought I'd save her the trouble and take her with me."

"Excuse me? But Sparky?" Kinza raised her brow.

"She's Trippy, you're Sparky. My two obnoxious neighbors." I grinned from ear to ear.

"I see why she calls you Oscar the Grouch." Kinza huffed. "And yeah, she said she's not going."

"What? Why not?"

"Because she doesn't *do* water." She stated. "Her words, not mine."

"Can I come in?" I asked, "I'll talk to her."

“Yeah, sure.” She smiled and let me in. “She should be out on the balcony.”

Adirah had expressed concerns about not going throughout the week and a half. When I asked her why, she said it was none of my business. My smart mouth had returned with, “You’re going, even if I tie you up and throw you in the back of my truck like the serial killer you claim me to be. She finally caved yesterday, but her fear caught up with her today. I walked the route to her bedroom, and sure enough, there she was. Her head rested on a pillow, on the concrete, and her legs perched in the air. I could hear the music from her headphones from where I stood behind the slightly open glass.

Her room was baby pink, with one wall filled with books and all sorts of trinkets. I picked a frame that held countless seashells and sat down on her bed as she took notice.

She looked up at me, “I’m not going.” She mouthed.

“Yes, you are.” I mouthed back.

She opened the door and walked inside, taking off her headphones and throwing them on the bed beside me. “I can’t go.”

“And why the hell not?” I asked, balancing myself on her bed.

I held up the frame, and she immediately understood the question.

“I like seashells. They each have their own story.” She smiled, taking the frame and putting it back on the shelf.

“Why can’t you go Trippy?” I asked again.

“Because I’m afraid to go in the water.” She admitted softly.

“Fine, if you’re not going, I won’t either.” I sprawled myself on her bed, kicking off my shoes. “I’ll just stay right here.” I grabbed her weathered teddy bear and wrapped it into a hug.

What a lucky son of a bitch, that bear. He smelled like her, too.

“You are a frickin’ dick.”

“Thank you.”

“And a massive one at that.”

“I will stay here for the rest of the day.” I closed my eyes, pretending to go to sleep.

“Royce,” She whined. “Fine.”

“What?”

“I’ll go.” She rolled her eyes. She pulled some clothes from her closet and stood at the foot of the bed, “Do you mind?”

I do, actually. But I didn’t tell her that.

I closed the gap between us. Standing conveniently close, I slipped on my shoes. I took the time to admire her soft pink lips, wishing we weren’t going to a yacht party, where she’d be lost amongst the crowd, and instead, I would have the privilege of spending the day learning every curve of her body.

“I’ll protect you, Trippy, from the big bad Kraken waiting to get its hand on you,” I said.

“That doesn’t persuade me to go.” She wrinkled her nose. “Why do you specifically need me there?”

“You’re my lucky charm, Trippy.”

“I thought that was your bandana.”

“Well, I’m greedy, and I want both.” I huffed.

“Fine, fine. Just don’t start whining like a baby.” She smirked. “That would be embarrassing.”

I returned to the kitchen and poked around their fridge for a beer.

“Yeah, sure. Take whatever you want. It doesn’t cost money or anything, you know.” Kinza’s remark startled me.

“Shit, I sometimes forget there were two of you. Equally annoying.” I said, walking over to where she sat. The kitchen counter was covered with medical books and printed articles. “Are you in medical school or something?”

She shook her head. “Thankfully, those days are behind me. I’m a board-certified neurosurgeon.”

“Oh god, people trust you to be around their brain?”

“Yes, I’m pretty good at my job.” She said proudly. “I worked my ass off for this. I finished high school early and put myself through the torture of medical school. And after residency, I finally made it. All to please my parents.” She tried to hide the eye roll, but I was far too familiar with the feeling.

“You have parent issues too, huh?”

“The worst.” She smiled, resting her face in her hands. “I just wish they’d see the effort I put in.”

“You know, sometimes, you must learn to do something for yourself for a change.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?” She eyed me.

“My father, he never wanted me to be the CEO. I can feel it. But instead of wallowing for his affection, I do things how I want.” I gave her a nod. “I think you should too.”

“I might just take your advice.”

I smiled. “So then, what’s all this?” I asked, pointing to the mess.

“We have a patient that has such a rare case, and my team has no idea what to do. I’m trying to find a solution. He’s a kid with a brain tumor, but if we are to remove it surgically, there’s a risk of him going into a coma.”

“And if you don’t, he dies,” I said, finishing her sentence.

She nodded.

“Must be tough,” I reassured.

“Yeah, he’s just a kid, you know? He has his whole life to live in front of him.” She sighed. “It’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair,” I added.

“Okay, enough about me. What’s the deal with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“What are your plans with Addy?” She pointed a pen in my direction. “She’s kinda like more of my sister than my biological one. And I swear if you mess with her feelings, I will end you.”

I held my hands up in surrender. “I plan to do no such thing.”

“But you plan to do something?” She smirked.

I shook my head. “I don’t do relationships.”

“Well, look at that,” She said, resting her elbow on the counter. “You both have something in common. You’ll be perfect together.”

Adirah walked down moments later, dressed in white, her hair left down but messily tied bangs.

I couldn’t help but stare.

“Well, let’s go before I change my mind.”

Kinza smirked, “You guys have fun now.” She laughed. “And Royce, remember. I will end you.”

“Wait, what?” Adirah said, looking over her shoulder before I pushed her out the door.

“You wanna grab anything to eat?” I asked as soon as we were in the car.

“Why won’t there be food on your stupid yacht?” She rolled her eyes as she looked out the window, building after building as we drove through the street.

“No, there will be. I just wanted to know if *you* wanted anything?”

She turned to look at me, and from the corner of my eye, I could see her facial expression had turned soft. Whatever anger she had melted away. “Can we get Treks?” She said softly.

“Anything for my lucky charm.” I grinned. I reached over and rested my hand on her thigh, as I did during the meeting. Only this time, she weaved her fingers with mine, her gaze still fixed out the window.

Did she feel something for me, too?



We left the shore a little before the afternoon. The captain sailed for a while before lowering the anchor and asking to be called if needed.

“Hey,” I said, gathering everyone’s attention. “I know this isn’t something you guys are used to. My father, well, you’ve all worked under him and know how he rolls. I’m seriously amazed at the work you’ve put in, and I hope it will become a continuous cycle. I’m new to all this. And I don’t particularly appreciate giving orders, you know, but I guess that is part of the job description. But I’ll try to be more of a helpful boss than a grouchy, pain-in-the-ass type boss. So, I hope you’ll help me figure out this new chapter in my life, which I was not ready to take on. And if you are to take anything from this experience, it’s that I am not my father.”

I raised my beer bottle while everyone did the same with their champagne, “To us, and to a better Wolfe Legacy future.”

While everyone was talking, I snuck out to the back of the boat and sprawled myself on the seat. I could see Adirah, from where I was perched, laughing and enjoying the time.

“I know what you’re doing.” Millie’s voice brought me back to reality.

“And what exactly is that?” I said, sitting upright.

“You like her, don’t you?”

“Who?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Mr. Royce.” She scolded.

I gave her a smile before I took a swig of my beer and ran my hand through the loose strands of my hair. “I don’t know what I feel,” I said softly. “You know I’ve always been about travel and finding the next adventure. I never experienced these kinds of feelings that I feel for her now. Knowing my

history and her history, I don't know if it's the best thing for us. ”

“I understand that, but I think you should still talk to her.” She smiled. “It doesn't hurt to try, right?”

But I couldn't tell her. I couldn't just walk over there, kiss her as my life depended on it, and walk away months later, shattering her to pieces. My plans didn't include her, and I intended to keep it that way.

I looked over to where she stood, still standing with her coworkers but looking in my direction.

She caught me staring and walked over to sit down beside me.

“So, why are you grinning like a crazed horse?” She asked.

“Did you just call me crazy?”

“Not in so many words.”

“I just like seeing you happy.” I quickly realized what I said, “Along with everybody else, I mean.”

“Of course.” She said. “Can I ask you for advice?”

“I don't know if I'm qualified, but I'll offer my honest opinion.” I joked.

She rolled her eyes. “You remember the coffee hottie?”

Oh, fuck me.

“Vaguely.” I lied.

“Yeah, well, I kind of want to meet him.” She said.

My heart started racing. *She wanted to me meet me?*

“Okay? So what is the problem then?” I asked, raising my brow.

“I'm scared.”

“What, you think he might be a serial killer too?” I laughed.

“No, I don't do relationships either.” She whispered. “What if I end up liking him and break his heart?”

Shit, you and me both.

“Welcome to the club,” I muttered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She asked, raising her brow.

“I may or may not like someone,” I admitted.

“Well, maybe if you took your head out of the trash can once in a while, you’d see you’re worthy of someone loving you.” She smiled, placing her hand on my cheek. “You’re not all bad, you know? And the right person will see that beneath all these layers of grouchy-ness, there’s a loving and caring man.”

It’s you, I wanted to shout. You’re the right person that sees me for who I really am.

I took her hand in mine. “Should I tell her?”

“It’s always worth a shot, Royce.” She smiled. “She could end up being your *dilbari*.”

She walked back to her friends, leaving me to ponder what she had just said.

You have to tell her the truth. I thought to myself.

I didn’t want someone else to love me. I wanted it to be her. I wanted her to love me with all her heart, and I’d surrender myself every time.



The day slowly turned into night, and having an enjoyable escapade, many said their goodbyes to go home. Until it was just me, my beer, and the stars left alone on the cliff’s edge.

“Where’d you go this time? You were gone for quite some time.” My father asked as we met in the foyer. He was on his way to work, and I had returned from the Island of Mona, located just to the east of the Bahamas, somewhere drifting in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

“Island of Mona,” I replied. I had just graduated college, and my father thought my travels and explorations were excessive.

“You know you could be helping in the company.”

“By what? Being your assistant? Your coffee boy? Or better yet, your garbage boy?”

“You should start getting serious about this, Royce.” He scolded. “You’re the heir to the Wolfe throne, and I expect you to understand that value.”

“When are you going to understand what I value?” I walked away before he had the chance to answer the question.

My father always had his reasons for his actions. He never just *did* things. He was calculated and methodical, sometimes even manipulative. But he was only calculated in the means of benefiting himself.

“Hey.” Adirah sat beside me, pushing her hair over one shoulder before lying on the stones and dirt.

“Hi,” I said softly. “You didn’t go home? I thought you might have caught a ride with Millie or Jared?”

She shook her head. “I was still on the boat. Working on some things for the project.”

“I thought you hated the water?”

“I don’t hate the water. I don’t like the memories it brings.”

I nodded. The last time I pushed her, she slammed the door, and I had to labor my forgiveness from her. The thought of her staying raged with me never sat right with me. Even the first day she bumped into me, almost butchering my white sneakers, that soft look on her face made my anger melt away. Everything happened so fast that night in the bar. It wasn’t until morning, as she lay wrapped in my arms, peacefully sleeping, that I realized how flawless she was, even in her drunk state. Every ounce of me wanted to stay and watch as she woke up with the sun and keep her in my arms until time declared us to part.

When I didn't say anything, she kept speaking. "You said you thought that Azure was real." She smiled, tilting her to look at me.

I nodded. "I did. I always think about how the books are written in so much detail."

"What do you mean?"

"Illiyen, he's the God of the Sky and all other Gods? It's a whole hierarchy, and it's admirable."

Her face illuminated as we lay talking about Azure. "You know there's a story about the lost goddess, not many people know." She started.

"And what is that?" I propped myself on one elbow, taking a swig and finishing my beer before tossing the bio-degradable bottle to the side.

"Adirah is a Goddess, but she is also a princess in the Kingdom of Azure." She started staring up at the sky. "And they say that when the gods turn eighteen, they receive their weapon and find their powers. She found her powers, but her weapon didn't seem like a weapon."

"What was her weapon?" I asked. She was invested in the storytelling. I stared at the perfection sculpted across her face as she used her hand to bring the story to life. Her amber eyes held the reflection of the moon. The wind would gracefully blow strands of her hair loose, and she would reach out to tuck them behind her ear.

"She was handed a feather. That sounds stupid, but this feather was a ruthless dagger. Of course, nothing made sense then, but it did to Illiyen. He was already bestial. The way he was possessive about his wife, he did the same with his daughter. He knew that if he took away her morale from the start, she would never fight back or go against him. He would rape her, but she was still free to do whatever she wanted."

"So basically, he began brainwashing her into thinking that his behavior was okay."

She nodded. "One day, she met someone, and they fell in love. But she didn't know it was love. At first, she always

thought that whatever her father was doing was out of love. Until this human taught her otherwise.”

“Does this human have a name?” I asked, completely invested in the story myself.

“Not that I’ve read.”

I nodded, and she continued, “He taught her what human life was like, and even though Azure is said to be the most beautiful of lands, she preferred the Land of Mortals. As time progressed, she got scared of her father finding out about them and told the mortal the truth about who she was. But the mortal didn’t care. He still loved her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.”

“A few days later, her father found out, and it went downhill from there. Illiyan, because of his egotistical nature, thought Adirah was his and never thought she’d find love. And when she came clean, he had the human killed and forbade her to leave the land of Azure. But that was the last straw for her. And the story says she left. She wasn’t kidnapped or lost, but in fact, she ran and lives somewhere among the mortals, hoping for the day she’ll get her revenge.”

She sat up after finishing the story. “I don’t know, I always liked this story better.”

“How come?” I said, scooting myself close to her. The wind had become stronger and slightly colder through the night. I took off my button-down shirt and placed it around her shoulders.

“You want to know the real reason I don’t go in the water?” She asked softly, looking into my eyes, thinking whether I was trustworthy of the answer.

“You don’t have to tell me. If you don’t want to.”

“My father, he’s, you could say something like Illiyan.”

It took me a second to realize what she had meant.

“He raped you?” I said quietly.

She let her face fall between her knees in an angle that looked directly at me. Her eyes were welled up with tears, and

they fell as she blinked. “He’d hold me underwater, just enough, so I wouldn’t drown and repeat till he got off on it.”

I sat there speechless, not knowing what to say or how to respond. How the hell do you respond to that? By saying I’m sorry? *No, that’s utter bullshit.* And my dumbass forced her to go into the water.

“I’m sorry for forcing you to come along today,” I said softly, looking down at the ground.

“You didn’t know.” She smiled through the tears. “Besides, I had a good time.”

“I still should’ve tried to understand where you were coming from.”

“Royce. It’s not your fault that my father is a monster.” She whispered, reaching out to interlace her fingers with mine.

My mind shifted to remembering how happy she was today. I could see how much she loved the water, how much peace it brought her, but at the same time, the angst took over.

“Do you like being in the water?” I asked.

“What?”

“Like without your whole father situation, do you like being in the water?”

She gave me a nod and stared out into the ocean. “It’s peaceful.”

“Hey, come on,” I said, getting up and pulling her up along with me.

“What?”

“We’re going to jump off this cliff.”

“Royce, what? No.” She shook her head.

I took a hair tie off my wrist and tied my hair into a ponytail. “Look, someone wise, and most likely dead, once said that fear only keeps us focused on the past, and when we look to the future, we fear what is to come. Instead, we should take

into account that at this moment today, we are living and doing okay.”

“But I’m terrified of the water.”

“No, you’re not. You look at the water like you want to be floating amongst the waves, getting lost with the currents.” I said.

The corners of her mouth lifted a little.

“You’re terrified of what *happens* when you go into the water, but that only happens with your piece of shit of a father. But right now, he’s not here. So the chance of whatever crazed shit he does happening is zero. And I might be a grouch, but I promise you, you’ll be safe with me.” I pulled off my shirt, threw it to the ground, and held out my hand. She hesitated at first but surprisingly placed her hand in mine. “Today, I’m going to teach you what the human taught her.”

“What?”

“The human taught the goddess how to face her fears. I mean, look at you. You’ve come so far on your own, and you still don’t see it.”

She stared at me with hopeful eyes. “Close your eyes. And concentrate on the sound of the waves crashing against the shore.” I told her, pulling her into me. She closed her eyes for a while, and her body relaxed. A wide smile spread across her face, and I couldn’t help but feel a compulsion telling me to kiss her.

I took off, running, pulling her along with me, and promptly jumping off the cliff’s edge. Our bodies hit the water with a great splash. The water stung my skin with contact, and I went under, holding onto Adirah the whole time.

I quickly brought her through the surface, wrapping my arms around her waist. “Hey.” I whispered into the crook of her neck, the both of us trying to catch our breath, “You’ll always be safe with me.”

She let out a small laugh as she rested her head on my chest. Her hands wrapped around my neck as her breathing started to slow down into a natural rhythmic pattern.

And then I brought my lips to hers, needing to kiss her. With her eyes closed, she deepened the kiss, sliding her tongue against mine. Her fingers grazed at the nape of my neck, tangling between the loose strands of my hair. She pulled her legs around my waist, and my grip around her tightened.

Her body bows backward as my kisses trail down her jawline, neck, and to her chest. She let out a soft moan, which brought me back to reality, realizing what I had just done.

All this time, I had been replaying the first night we met, which had now turned into a fantasy, a combination of acts I wanted to perform on her and her to perform on me.

And now that I had her, it didn't feel right to have her.

Her soaked shirt adhered to the curves of her body, which stood perfectly with the moonlight. I wanted to do so much more. "I think we should go back," I whispered, leaning in again for a kiss.

Her hands curved around my face as her fingers stroked the thick hairs of my beard, her lips following my move before she rested her forehead against mine.

"I know." She whispered, placing her lips on mine one last time.

We dragged ourselves out of the water, holding onto each other as if the water had bonded us together.

"I know this might sound like a stupid question. But would this be considered cheating?" She asked.

"No."

But all I wanted to admit to her was that the guy she thought she was cheating on was, in fact, me.



"So Melissa Santiago had, or rather has, a daughter." I had been on the phone with Mykel for over an hour as he went through the details of his findings. He had someone send over a laptop and told me to guard it with my life. The day went by

slowly. Adirah kept to her office, avoiding any contact with me. She had Jared send up the files that needed to be looked over, which confirmed she was still baffled by the kiss. She usually did those tasks herself, explaining each file, even though it was tedious and mediocre.

“This is too clean,” Myk said a while later.

“What do you mean?”

“When someone disappears or wipes themselves off the face of the earth, they still leave breadcrumbs somewhere. You know they slip, or their photo pops up in a gas station surveillance,” He explained.

“But Melissa was completely off the grid. Even her daughter doesn’t have anything linking to her.”

“Witness protection?”

“No, if she were, I would’ve had a few US Marshals lined up in front of my office.” He chuckled, “I’ll put the rest of my team on it and see what else we find.”

“Okay, thanks, man,” I said, ending the call.

It was time for my usual sit on the balcony, but instead, I found myself at Treks. The heavenly smell made my mouth water.

“Hey, can I get a tall caramel crunch cappuccino and a donut?” I smiled, recalling when Adirah offered me a donut after building their bookshelf. “Make that two.”

I sat towards the back of the shop, pulling out my phone to text Adirah while I waited for my order.

Hey.

You still haven’t answered my questions.

Oh right. So, my favorite foreplay? Physical touch.

Um, that naughtiest thing I've done?

Does sex on the beach count?

And I'm not telling you my sexual fantasy just yet.

Elaborate on physical touch.

Kisses on my neck, your hands all over my body, your tongue on my clit.

Double yes, please.

You're playing with fire, you know?

Maybe I want to burn.

Holy fucking shit. I almost walked out without my order because of how frantic she was making me feel. My nerves flustered, and a burning sensation surfaced through my skin.

"Royce?" The barista called out.

I snatched my order without a second thought and was out the door. Adirah lived up to her name, even though she didn't understand herself yet. I couldn't wait to bring out that side of her that was dangerously sweet but filled with an overpowering edge. Once I was back home, I went out to the balcony. Her music was surprisingly not as loud.

"So you *do* annoy me with your loud ass music," I said, sitting down against the railing.

She turned her music up, flashing a grin in my direction.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” I said. “I just, things came up.”

“You don’t have to explain, you know.” She said.

“I got you a donut.” She immediately lit up as I handed her the donut through the bars.

“How’d you know I like chocolate?”

“It goes with your personality,” I smirked.

“You know I’m not even going to ask.” She said and returned her attention to her book, occasionally picking up the donut for a bite.

“Are we going to talk about last night?”

“I think it’s best if we don’t.” She smiled with sad eyes. “We both want different things, right?”

No, we don’t, you want me, and I want you.

“Yeah, exactly.” I lied.

“Exactly.” She said, peering through the rails of the balcony. “So it’s best we just leave it at a kiss.”

I nodded, and we sat silently, munching on our donuts until I remembered her text.

Maybe I want to burn.

“What happened with Kinza’s patient?” I asked, wanting to know if she was alone in the house.

I wanted to hear her moans and cries after she went through the exhilaration I was about to put her through.

“Yeah, she’s pulling an overnight shift today, working on it. I think they’ve come up with a solution.” She said. “Why?”

“Oh, I talked to her about it the other day, and she was worked up about it,” I told her. “Just wanted to make sure she’s doing okay.”

“Yeah, I guess some things are just hard to endure.”

“I’m going to go to sleep. It’s been a long day.” I said a few moments later. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Thank you for the donut.”

“Don’t get used to it.” I chuckled before drifting back into my room and shutting the balcony door.

Are you sure about that?

Because when I’m done with you?

You won’t be the same again. Ever.

Maybe I don’t want to be the same.

My mouth formed a sly grin. *Baby, you have no idea what you just signed up for.*

Touch yourself.

Wait, what?

You said you wanted to burn, right?

Let me be the match to light up your flames.

Take your index finger, starting at the bottom, and slide it up to your clit.

Then?

Imagine me kissing your neck.

My hands cupped around your breasts.

Put a finger in.

I could hear her soft moans, which meant she was still outside.

I'd bite down on your nipple, kissing you all the way down to your thighs.

Two fingers.

I'd slide my tongue over your wet cunt. Till you beg me to make you cum.

Make me cum.

She sent the text with a couple of hot face emojis.

And my fingers would replace yours.

I'm so fucking close.

My fingers would move faster, and you'd scream my name when you had your orgasm.

Her moans got louder, and it took all my self-control multiplied by a million not to go out on the balcony and watch her like the crazed serial killer she thinks I am. And that's when I heard her cry out *my* name.

She cried out, “*Oh Royce.*” in the sexiest way possible.

Fucking hell.

I found myself standing under a cold shower minutes later, wondering what the hell this goddess of a woman was doing to me. She had literally crashed into my life, and as much I wanted her to stay away, the closer she appeared. She was in my neighborhood, my office, and now in my head. She was everywhere, and I couldn’t get her out. I had told her not to play with fire, but I forgot that the match gets burned first. *That’s it. You have to tell her who you are.* That was my hard-ass dick speaking.



My father’s call woke me up early the following day.

“Dad, you realize not even the birds are up at this hour?” I muttered, rubbing my eyes, trying to get them to focus in the dark.

“I just wanted to see how the deal was coming along.”

“Dad? You realize that’s not your responsibility anymore?”

“Can’t I ask what’s going on at the office?”

“I thought the rules were we don’t talk about work?” I said, remembering the times he would ignore my question if I asked about a project. He always said I was going to take over one day. But he never put an effort into teaching me how the company worked. “Why suddenly change? Or were you not ready to give me the company?”

“I just thought I’d call up my only son.” *Lies. Fucking Lies.*

“Oh, wow, you should be awarded Father of the Year.” I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, everything’s going good.”

“Okay, well, I’ll talk to you soon.”

Well, that was a weird phone call.

Since I was already up, and my father’s call disturbed me in more ways than one, I pulled out the secured laptop and

logged onto the company website. Navigating through, I looked for the company details. There was nothing stating that the company was my father's. I clicked on a link that led me to all the legal jargon of the company. Scrolling below, I found the reason for the odd phone call, and everything suddenly made sense. The company was under *my* name, and it had been since the day it was built almost thirty years ago.

I called Mykel, "Hey." I said as soon as he picked up.

"You realize that the sun is still sleeping." He said sleepily.

"Yeah, screw that. I think I found something." I said. "Apparently, Wolfe Legacy wasn't started by my father, like he claims. Also, the company is legally bound under my name so that no one could change it."

"Weren't you supposed to inherit the company?"

"That's what my father's been telling me, but how do you inherit something already in your name?"

"Yeah, that's a good point." I heard him yawn. "Shit, okay. I'll have Leah look deeper into it."

"Also, it says here I am to inherit the company before my thirtieth birthday."

"Isn't that in a couple of months?"

"Myk?" I said softly into the phone. "I kinda met someone."

"No fucking way. I am completely awake now."

"She's taken over my life and my fucking soul. I can't get her out of my head. I've been talking to her through texts. She doesn't know it's me. But she knows who I am. Does that make any sense?"

"Wait, so you're texting her with an alias? And she knows you, though?"

"She's my senior project manager." I sighed.

"Look, my advice? Just don't take her for granted. If you really like her, tell her. Talk to her, and whatever you do, just remember you'll be a better person because of her."

“Thanks, Myk. I just, I never felt like this before.”

“Like you want to spend every second of the day with her?”

I nodded to myself. “Yeah, it’s fucking unreal.” I laughed.
“Hey, I need you to do me another favor.”

“I’ll add it to the list,” He chuckled.

“Find out what happened to Darius Wolfe.”

Mr. and Mrs. Royce Wolfe

Adirah



*I*llyian marched into my room, pushing my mother, Laleh, out of his way.

My brother Eshaan, the God of Sun, grabbed me from my father's grip. "Father. Stop with this monstrosity." He yelled.

But Illyian looked at him with a menacing glare and pushed him aside. He grabbed me by the roots of my hair and dragged me through the castle.

At this point, I had stopped struggling as it was no use. He yanked me out to the water, the Ravaan, the continuously flowing water in Azure.

I heard my mother screaming, telling him to take her instead, but he took no attention. His signature vain smile spread across his face. At that moment, he only wanted me.

He forced my head underwater. Being immortal, I couldn't drown and die. Illyian knew it, too. He held me in place as I kicked and punched, but soon, I'd pass out, and he would let me go. Letting my body float to the top of the water, forcing me back to consciousness and repeating until he was satisfied.

Even though I couldn't drown, part of me had died. And it felt as if that part was still dead. This became a haunting

experience that lived in the back of my head. And every so often, I was reminded.

All I kept thinking about throughout the day was how Royce kissed me. Passionate yet protective. But I couldn't figure out why I trusted him enough to tell him something that made me vulnerable. But even then, he didn't look at me with pity. He tried to make things better.

"I think we should stop." He had said.

I wanted to tell him to keep going. I wanted him to rip off my clothes, kiss me, and do everything he could dream of doing.

What I couldn't understand was why.

My thoughts shifted to how Royce had made me dinner to apologize for his behavior and kissed me that night, too. I didn't need to go to the yacht party, but he begged me to come along. He was right. From such a young age, I treasured being in the water. Azure only had one body of water, the Ravaan, and my aunt Daryah would sneak me out of the castle and take me there, only if I promised to stay dry.

"Adirah, you've got your clothes wet again." the Goddess of Seas stood over the Ravaan, looking at a toddler-aged me, soaked from head to toe.

"Your mother will first kill you and then me along with you." She laughed.

"But I like being in the water."

Daryah grabbed me into her arms and balanced me on her hip. "I know you do. And after you've been a good little girl and have finished eating your lunch, you can play in it again. We won't tell your mom."

She teasingly brushed her nose against mine, and my giggles filled the castle's corridor.

I hadn't thought much about Azure in the past thirty years. Being around Royce and being able to talk about it reminded me of all the memories I had. The memories that had been tarnished because of Illiyan.

My thoughts shifted back to remembering the kiss under the cliff, and something inside told me it wasn't supposed to happen. But all I wanted was Royce's soft lips trailing down my body, his dark, inky eyes gazing filled with desire as he dipped his head between my legs and made me feel exhilarated. Hell, that's what I imagined when I moaned out his name last night.

What if he heard you? I thought.

I sat in my office, sorting out the papers for the Yellow Dwarf project, the boring part of being Senior Project Manager. Soon enough, I was bored and pulled out my phone to read Eli's texts.

You answered all my questions except one.

I'm not going to answer it.

I admit defeat.

Well, that's a shame. I would've loved to make your fantasy a reality.

The truth was, I didn't have a *sexual fantasy*. And with Darius, being intimate transpired without a reason. He had always been loving, while Eli seemed mischievous.

You can make last night a reality.

Are you saying you want to meet up in person?

Yes.

When and where, amare. I'll clear out the whole day for you.

Hell, I'll clear out the rest of eternity for you.

"Why the hell are you smiling at your phone?" Royce stood at my door with files in his hand, a while later.

"Take those away," I said, waving and shooing him. "I don't want to see another file till tomorrow."

"Well, that's not possible. You need to pack your bags."

"What, why?" I asked, confused by his statement. "Am I being fired?"

"No, the hell." He laughed, "Why would I fire my lucky charm? We're going to White Bridge City."

"We? As in, you and me?" I asked, pointing back and forth.

He looked around, "I don't see anyone else in the room."

"Isn't Millie more qualified?" I squinted my eyes at him, covering my face with my phone. Being alone with Royce in a random city sent chills down my spine. The things that could go wrong were too many to count.

"Is the Yellow Dwarf building Millie's idea?" He asked, leaning against the door frame. "Are you afraid to be alone with me or something?"

I shook my head. "No, why would I be?" I asked.

Yes, I kind of am.

"I was just wondering. Serial killer an all you know?" He smirked.

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. When do we leave?"

"Tonight."

"I may or may not have had a thing planned." I shrugged, setting my phone on the table, "I guess I don't anymore."

“Sorry?” He said in a questioning manner. “I can ask Millie to book us for the morning?”

“No, no, don’t do that. I can reschedule. It’s not a big deal,” I said. “I know this project is very important to you and the company.”

“But if you have something that needs to be taken care of?” He said, “I think you should take care of it.”

I took a deep breath and flashed him a smile. “It can wait. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I would hate to have it turned down. You can leave the files on top of the others.”

He walked inside and placed the files on my table. “I’ll have a car pick us both up tonight?”

“Okay,” I said. “When’s the flight?”

“Ten.”

I can’t.

Why not?

Oscar the Grouch and I are going to White Bridge City.

How about I meet you there?

You would do that?

I’d do anything for you.

Well, that worked out perfectly. Alone in a random city, with someone who could be a deranged serial killer, and my boss, Oscar the Grouch.



Being about forty-thousand feet in the air seems scary, especially when you're in an aircraft that may or may not blast out of the sky. But I relished being in the air. The Kingdom of Azure was broken into realms, ruled by five elements.

The Air realm held the skies, the heavens, the sun, and the moon.

Water was self-explanatory, with Daryah being the Goddess of Seas. But there was also Mona, who was the Goddess of Protection.

Sephtis was the Ruler of *Duzakh*, or Hell as the mortals call it, but not all the immortals who possessed the fire element stayed in *Duzakh*.

The immortals possessing the earthly elements were those of great beauty, except Zalzeh, who controlled earthquakes and other natural disasters. Throughout the years, he had grown to wear a permanent scowl on his face that, no matter how hard you tried, wouldn't budge.

And the Gods of spirits, one of which was Pagham, who was the herald through Azure, but also the one who brought the mortal souls to their final destination.

Illiyen wasn't bound to any element, even though he was the God of Sky and thunder. He was the King of Gods, which made him selfish, unjust, and unafraid.

Royce was asleep the moment we took off. We were booked in business class, and we got comfortable seats all to ourselves. But I couldn't sleep. This project was too big for me, and the anxiety kept gnawing at my brain to make everything perfect. It wasn't until the previous senior manager screwed up that the management and board began to notice who I was. Usually, I stayed away from the attention and hid in the shadows, knowing I wouldn't stay for long. But it was as if Irving Bay was giving me everything I ever wanted.

My fairytale life.

We landed a couple of hours later, but because the airport didn't have a boarding bridge ready, we were told to wait on the plane.

"Are we there yet?" Royce whined, waking up.

"Sometimes I seriously wonder why the hell your father made you boss." I leaned over and took off his sunglasses. "Seriously? Even in an airplane."

"What?" He said defensively, "They help me sleep."

"Here," I handed the Yellow Dwarf file. "I simplified everything. And wrote you little notes too."

"You didn't sleep?"

I shook my head.

"Adirah." He said, shaking his head.

Strangely, I liked it when he said my name. It was the first time he had said my name. He always called me Trippy or, in the office, Ms. Gaudin. But never had he called me Adirah.

"What?" He asked, arching his brow.

"You've never called me by my name before."

He smirked. "Do you like it when I call you by your name?"

He chuckled when I sunk into my seat, not wanting to answer the question. But I soon got tired of the silence. The wait seemed eternal. The lights were dimmed, which started to make me lethargic.

"What's something you want to do in life?" I asked, breaking the silence.

"That's an oddly specific question." He asked sarcastically.

"Fine. Something related to love," I smirked, folding my hand over my chest.

He sat thinking about the question for a while. "Kissing someone in the rain." He said softly. "I always thought it'd be cute."

Cute? I stared at him as if he had three eyes instead of two. Royce most certainly was not a *cute* type of person. He

seemed more of a do as I say or else kind of person. The person who had to be in control. The person who'd strap you to a bed and set you free with his tongue.

Okay, maybe that was a bit extreme.

“What? What’s going on in that dangerous little head of yours?” He asked when he saw me eyeing him. “It was your stupid question. What about you? What is something you want to do regarding your love life?”

Not have my father kill my next boyfriend? Was that too much to ask?

“To have the cliché fairytale, fall in love, kiss under the stars, surprise engagement, and the main event would be a fairytale wedding in a castle, and then go on to have three kids, two girls, and a boy.”

“You have it all figured out, don’t you?” He said, chuckling. “And you thought my preference for kissing in the rain was weird?”

“No, I didn’t say that,” I said immediately, defending myself.

“Then what exactly did you say?” He asked, leaning over the middle of both seats.

“I didn’t think you were a cute type of person.”

He laughed. “Yeah? What kind of person do you think I am?”

“The one who always has to be in control.”

He burst into laughter. “That I am.”

I sat there watching his dimple show through his wholehearted laughter. Royce had a sweet smile, though he didn’t smile as much.



We got to the hotel in one piece. At least I did. I wasn’t too sure about Royce.

“What do you mean, *Mr. and Mrs. Royce Wolfe*?” He shouted to the man behind the reception desk.

Oh, Gods of Azure, help us.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I asked.

He was on the phone, “I’m handling it.” He snapped.

“Yeah, hi. Did you book one or two rooms?” He asked, presumably Millie on the phone.

His attention turned back to the man. “She booked two rooms, so tell me why you have my Senior Project Manager listed here as my wife.”

Oh, holy fuck. I could burst out laughing, but I felt Royce would chuck the vase of flowers from the reception desk straight at my head. I also didn’t want to share a room with Oscar the Grouch tonight.

“Sir, I didn’t book the rooms.” The man objected in a voice barely audible. “And we currently don’t have any other vacancies.”

“Oh fucking hell.” He looked over at me and then listened to what Millie said on the phone.

“Millie, it’s a honeymoon suite.” He barked, “Do I look like someone on a honeymoon?”

That did it. I broke into laughter and walked up to the desk. “I’ll take the key.”

“What are you doing?” He asked.

“Look, as much as I would *love* to share a room with you? I’m exhausted.” I rolled my eyes. “By the way, if you didn’t notice, that was one hundred percent sarcasm.” I took the key and smiled at the poor guy. “Don’t mind him, he’s always grouchy.”

“Oh, for fucks sake.” He groaned. “Millie, I will call you back.” He ran a few steps to catch up with me, already on the elevator.

“The first one to the room gets the bed,” I smirked.

Throughout the elevator ride, Royce's eyes remained glued to my face.

"Isn't this the part where you carry me in?" We stood at the door of around, and I batted my lashes, handing him the key card.

He slid the key card into the designated spot, and in one swoop, he pulled me into his arms and carried me into the room. I yelped, throwing my arms around his neck.

"You can take the bed." He breathed before setting me gently onto the delicate silk sheets that concealed a fluffy mattress.

"No, it's fine." I smiled. "I'm going to review our notes after I shower."

"Don't argue with me. I'll go over the notes in the morning." He said.

Oh, so that's how it's going to be.

"When's the meeting scheduled for again?" he asked, taking off his jacket and button-down shirt and throwing them on the bench at the foot of the bed. He walked back to grab our luggage before slamming the door shut. He stood wearing a white sleeveless shirt, just tight enough to expose the minimum outline of his muscles, and I couldn't help but stare.

"It says it's at nine." I gulped. *It was going to be a long stay.*

He grabbed a pillow and fluffed it around before collapsing on the couch. I proceeded to fish out a few things from my carry-on and walked into the bathroom to wash off the musty airplane scent I was most certain anyone standing within three feet beside me would be appalled by.



I had fallen asleep while working on the projects, the papers spread across the bed.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you something,” I asked as the sun began shining through the curtains’ seams the following day. I had just gotten ready and was waiting for the room service to deliver breakfast.

“Hmm.” The pillow was now on top of his face, and I may or may not have had a few thoughts on how to use it as a weapon on Royce.

“I’m going to go out after the meeting,” I said. “If something goes sideways, can you come get me?”

“I’ll do you one better. I’ll beat him up.” He said from under the pillow, voice muffled under the pillow.

“How do you know it’s *him*?” I asked. “I could be meeting up with a friend I’ve known for a long time.”

“Are you?”

“Okay, fine. Whatever.”

He chuckled from underneath the pillow.

I was excited for today. I was finally making a name for myself with my designs, and I wouldn’t let Royce ruin my mood. I didn’t know how I felt about Eli just yet. Sure, I was attracted to him, but I was skeptical that he might not be anything I imagined him to be. And I hoped I wouldn’t have to call Royce.

When room service came with our breakfast-in-bed trays, most of the food shaped in hearts, Royce exploded.

“I thought I told you guys she isn’t my wife.” He said, jabbing a thumb in my direction.

“Sir, it comes with the hotel room.” The room service staff’s answer barely made its way to my ears.

“It’s fine,” I said, taking the trays, and turned my attention to Oscar the Grouch, sitting with elbows resting on his legs and rubbing his tired eyes. “The hell is wrong with you today?”

He shook his head. He was more agitated than average.

“I want them to sign this project.”

“Well, get your shit together.” I said, “And wear something professional and human, not Neanderthal.”

“But Neanderthal’s were humans.” He groaned.

“Royce, I mean it. If you walk out that door in jeans and your shirt buttoned halfway, I will smack you so hard your ancestors will feel it.”

He looked up at me, his mouth forming a smile. “Shit, I think my ancestors felt the threat too.”

“I don’t care.” I grabbed a plate of fruit and some waffles before I sat down to look at the notes one last time.

Royce got up to shower, and on his way to the bathroom, he stopped in front of me, taking a few of my grapes and pinching my nose between his fingers. He smiled before he closed the door to follow through with his fifty million-step hair routine. At least that’s what I tell myself every day so I can sleep at night, knowing he has gorgeous locks.

Halfway through his pampering session, he stuck his head out the door, “Can you get my shirt?”

“No, I’m not your maid.” I scoffed, rolling my eyes as far as they would go.

“Fine, I will walk out there with nothing. No clothes, no towel, nada.” He challenged. And Royce seemed like the person who would go along with such a threat, so I gave in. I went to grab his shirt from the garment bag that hung beside the front door of our room.

“You seriously want me to look like a prude?” He remarked.

“You don’t need to look like one,” I smirked, handing him the shirt. “You are one.”

“Is that any way to talk to your boss?”

“The one who’s always grouchy and drinks too much beer?”

“Yes, that one.” He smiled. “He sounds like a piece of work.”

“He’s an annoying pain in my butt.” I rolled my eyes and pulled on my shoes.

“I feel confined in this.” He said, standing in front of the mirror, putting on his coat, his hair neatly tied, the millions of bracelets gone, only his bandanna peeked from beneath the sleeve, and his annoying yet dashing sunglasses hung on a silver chain dangling from his neck. But the guy still wore his jeans.

“I thought I said professional?”

“These are my nicer jeans.” He grinned.

“Please shut up,” I said. “We have to go.”

A black car was waiting for us as we walked out of the hotel, and soon enough, we sat in the conference room of Yellow Dwarf’s headquarters.

“Water will be fine,” Royce told the assistant, who had asked if we would like anything to drink.

“Are you capable of sitting up straight?” I asked, pointing to his legs stretched parallel to the table. His back was slumped against the chair while his hand rested on the glass, and the tip of his sunglasses lodged in his mouth.

“Nope.” God, he was infuriating.

Mr. Asuka walked in a moment later with a few other people and shook our hands. “I’m glad we finally get to meet. I have to say I’m very impressed with your ideas.”

“Sir, all that credit goes to Ms. Gaudin.” he smiled humbly, pointing to me.

“So let’s start.” Mr. Asuka stated. “My team will be coordinating with you regarding the building process. Jay is my CEO, Terry is my CFO, and you’ve met my assistant, Lina?”

Royce nodded, “Yes, I’m glad to be working with all of you.”

Then, we began the presentation. He did most of the work, explaining the building foundation and the reasoning behind

the design. Now and then, he'd glance over to me and smile.

"This is quite exceptional," Jay said after the presentation. "How did you come up with it?"

"Though I give Ms. Gaudin credit, she prefers it to be more of a collective effort. You all didn't want a building but an experience for their fans. Ms. Gaudin took inspiration from your game to create these blueprints. Your fans would appreciate it more if we made their favorite video game a reality."

"But Mr. Wolfe came up with the bridge. But he can't draw." I smiled and gained a few laughs.

"I would like to start as soon as possible." Mr. Asuka said. "Are you willing to tour the building to get more of a visual on how we work and everything?"

"That's great, and I think Ms. Gaudin would appreciate that very much."

For the next hour and a half, we walked around the building. Royce was instantly absorbed into the video game world, asking questions along the way. From being grouchy since we landed, seeing him smile and savor the experience was finally nice.

"I think we should keep the office setting the same," I said in the car.

"How come?"

I pulled out my phone and showed him the sketch I had made and the picture I took of the office. "It looks like a maze if we tweak it just a bit, and since we had the idea of having a bridge going to the offices, we could mimic the floors to look like lava is flowing through."

"You never cease to amaze me."

I turned away to look out the window before he noticed my cheeks turning pink.



Where are we meeting?

Or are you picking me up?

I will be running a bit late. But I'll have a car pick you up and take you to Rustam.

You booked Rustam's?

Like I said, anything for you, amare.

The driver will be there by 8.

My mind couldn't help but wonder if Illiyan was watching my every move.

Royce disappeared after dropping me off post-meeting, saying he had something meaningful and personal to do.

I mulled around the room, waiting for time to go by, and eventually settled into reading the book I had started on the plane, a fiction novel where a princess returns to her kingdom and finds everyone dead, but a neighboring kingdom's prince rules the kingdom. When the time came, I got ready, but Royce was still not back. I shot him a quick text letting him know I was leaving and that he could ask the hotel reception for the card key. The black car drove me to the well-known restaurant named after the God of Sea Animals himself, *Rustam*.

"Hi," the hostess, Harper, as her name tag suggested, asked in a spirited tone. "Do you have a reservation?"

"Yeah, hi. My name's Adirah Guadin?" I said, soon realizing I had no idea under what name Eli had reserved our table.

“Oh yes, you’re listed here with Mr. Elias.” She smiled. “I’ll take you to your seat.”

I nodded. *Elias?*

We walked towards the back, where the restaurant had private seating booths. The back of the booth was a big paned window that gave the perfect view of the city, while the two sides were white-colored walls. The entranceway held up a curtain that could be closed for privacy. The seats and table were colored gold, and everything screamed luxury.

Harper handed me a menu after I was seated. “He will be here shortly.” She gave me a smile.

What other secrets did Eli or, rather, *Elias* have?

And as if I wasn’t confused enough, Kinza’s voice played devil’s advocate in the back of my mind. *He’s for sure a serial killer.*

The waiter brought wine and a platter of small bite-sized crab cakes and closed the curtains on his way out. After sipping the most delicious wine I had ever tasted, I pulled out my phone and immersed myself in a fantasy kingdom.

It wasn’t until moments later that Eli showed up, and I sat staring in shock.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked.



Romance



Red Riding Hood Meets the Wolfe

Royce



“**W**hat the hell are you doing here?” She asked, with duck sauce smeared on her bottom lip. I sat down beside her and brushed off the sauce.

“You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to do that,” I said. Her eyes were still the size of golf balls until she realized that I was her date. Her red dress hugged her body with perfection. “You look like a sexy version of Little Red Riding Hood.”

“Royce Elias Wolfe,” I said between licking my fingers.

“You knew it was me all along.” She said softly.

I grinned. “I knew it was you since you crashed into me while moving boxes.”

“How come you never said anything?”

“Maybe because I don’t have my shit together?” I smirked.

“Oh shit.” She said, covering her mouth.

I laughed. “I enjoyed every moment of you tearing me apart.”

She looked at me softly, “You actually wore a suit.”

“Just to prove how serious I am,” I said. “My Senior Project Manager wants me to be more professional.”

“Oh, she sounds like an awful monster.” She joked with a chuckle.

“She’s not that bad, though she tends to trip over things occasionally.” I said, leaning in, “But I think it’s just an excuse to get close to me.” She smacked my shoulder with the back of her hand.

“This proves my case.” She said, slamming her phone on the table.

“And what case might that be exactly?”

“That you’re a selfish and an egotistical dick.” She scolded. “And yes, you’re a massive one at that. At what point in time did you think this was okay?” She was waving her hands all over the place, and I sat there amused, watching her as she let her anger loose with every word spurted.

“Am I, now?”

“And what about all those times you played with my feelings? Your ass was sitting right next door, probably watching some stupid football game and sending me sexts, making me feel more deprived than I already was. And then you had the audacity-“ I wrapped an arm around her waist, pulled her closer into my own space, and crashed my mouth against her. She melted against my body, deepening the kiss before closing her eyes and sinking into a rhythmic breathing.

“Shut the hell up.” I breathed between the kiss, my mind soaring in another universe.

I pulled her onto my lap, her hands wrapping around my neck as our tongues fought for control. She freed herself from the kiss before pressing her lips onto my neck, biting down with her teeth.

That was going to leave a mark.

My finger traced down her collarbone and trailed down the sparse display of her cleavage. Her head arched back, and she

let out a whimper.

I let my finger descend from her breasts, stopping right below her stomach.

“I couldn’t tell you who I was,” I said, teasingly toying with her exposed thigh through the slit of her dress.

“Oh, right, because you are a serial killer.”

“No, because I wanted to be sure I was serious about you.”

“And what made you sure that you were serious?” She asked softly.

“The cliff,” I said. “I mean, you’re the first one-night stand to pop back up so obnoxiously into my life on multiple occasions. I’m beginning to think it’s fate. You’re also the first to drive me insane.”

“My pleasure, *Mr. Royce Elias Wolfe*.”

“Don’t,” I growled into her ear. “Or else I won’t be able to resist you anymore.”

She bit her lip as her cheeks turned from a warm pink shade to a bright rose.

“I think we should order,” I said, settling against the seat as her hands rested on my chest. “If you keep that up, I might just eat you instead.”

She blushed almost as red as her dress. “Why don’t you then?” She said, leaning over, revealing more cleavage.

My hand followed her spine. “Because, amare, I want to savor every minute I spend worshiping you. I want you to feel how insane your vanilla scent drives me. And only I’m allowed to hear how good I make you feel.” I breathed.

She sat down beside me as I called for the waiter to order.

“You’re still a massive dick.” She said. “That whole running your hand down my thigh situation, don’t think I forgot.”

I leaned in, “I might just have one too.” I whispered into her ear, causing her to spit out some of her wine. I reached over,

gently running my finger across the inner part of her thigh.
“What like this?”

Her breath hitched before she shifted from my reach. “I shouldn’t be forgiving you this easily for messing with my feelings.”

“Don’t lie to yourself. Deep down, I know you wanted Eli to be me.”

“Aren’t you full of yourself tonight?” She raised her eyebrow.

I shrugged, pinching my thumb and index finger close together, “Maybe just a little.”

The rest of the trip went as planned. We returned to the Yellow Dwarf building that day to finalize the project and sign some paperwork. While I had thought the hotel room was a horrible idea and might have been a bit extreme about the situation, it worked out in our favor.

Okay fine. Drastically extreme.

We slept in the same bed that night, her body brushing against mine as I circled my hand around her stomach.

“You probably think I’m crazy.” She said, after admitting she wanted to take things slow.

“Well, not in so many words.” I chuckled. My remark earned me a blow of her elbow to my chest.

“I just, I don’t know where I am right now.” She admitted, her fingers playing with mine. “I don’t want to go head-on into a relationship and break your heart.”

I buried my head deeper into her neck and inhaled every last bit of the vanilla scent I had grown to love.

“I understand. We can take things slow.”

“Thank you.” She whispered. “So, do you really like strawberry ice cream?”

I grinned. “Would you not fuck me if I say yes?”

“I’ll make an exception for you.”

“I actually do like Rocky Road. But I don’t mind eating strawberry ice cream.”

“You have two phones?” She asked.

I nodded. “One personal and one business. I texted you with my personal.”

We lay there in silence. Only the sounds of our breathing and heartbeats could be heard.

“I’m sorry I lied,” I said softly. “For that, I’ll grant you one wish. Whatever it is, whenever it is. Okay?”

“What if I ask you for Wolfe Legacy?” She teased.

“Consider it yours.” I smiled, kissing her cheek.

“Did you hear me that night?” She asked, looking up at me a few moments later.

“By that night, do you mean when you wanted to burn, and I told you I was the match to light your flames?”

“Yes.”

I pressed my lips against her neck. “Yes, I did hear you. I want to hear it again.”

We lay tangled in each other for the majority of the night. The presence of one another administering comfort we longed for but had never found.

“I know the guy usually says this?” She whispered, staring up at me in the dark of the night. “But you’re mine now.”

“Possessive much?” I asked, kissing her, starting with just a peck, which didn’t fuel my thirst and turned into a series of kisses along her jawline and neck.

“Very.” She whispered.

“You didn’t answer one of my questions. Do you know what that means?”

She shook her head.

“That means *I* get to ruin you for anyone who tries to make you theirs.” She turned around and sunk herself into my chest.

“I get to make you mine and *only mine*,” I said in a thick voice, to which she smiled.

“I’m already yours.”



We were back in the office the next day, and Millie couldn’t take her eyes off the bite mark that had turned a hideous mix of color between purple and black.

“Dare I ask?” She wrinkled her eyebrows.

“Mosquito bite turned allergic reaction.” I grinned, acting as if that was the most believable excuse.

“Sure, sure. Let’s go with that so *you* sleep better at night, Mr. Royce.” She mocked. “However, I am glad Mr. Asuka confirmed the deal.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t have done it without Adirah.” I smiled. “What else is on my agenda?”

“Mr. Royce, your father wants you to call him immediately.”

“Oh, screw him. What else?”

Millie was taken aback, “You also have a board meeting early tomorrow morning. I can give you the briefing or contact Danish about plumbing permits while you complete the paperwork.”

“Yeah, I’ll do the permit thing. Also, when you call, ask Dani if he can come over today. And ask Adirah if the blueprints for the plumbing of the building are finished.”

“First name basis?” She smiled. “Are you sure you would rather not call your father?”

“Millie, I’ll call him. And I don’t like the whole prefix ordeal to begin with. So yes, I’m calling her Adirah in the most professional way possible.” I smiled. “Thank you.”

“Of course, I’ll give Mr. Danish a call.”

I nodded, “Hey, Millie, are there any rules against dating a coworker?”

“Not that I know of Mr. Royce. The board does frown upon it as it may interfere with projects, but if you are certain it won’t cause a problem, it should be fine.” She smiled. “Word of advice? Don’t let company rules stop you from something meant to be.”

“I was asking for a friend.”

“Of course, Mr. Royce.” She laughed before walking away.

The idea of calling my freaking prick of a father, who had his calculated agenda, brought a feeling of disgust to my stomach. Back in White Bridge City, Mykel had emailed me some files regarding my uncle, Darius. One of the files was documents to a submitted missing report, which was quickly retracted because allegedly Darius had been found. And no further police investigation was done. He disappeared only after a year of starting a company. My father always told the same story of how Darius had met someone and chose her over the family. I never understood why he would start a company, something he dreamed of doing, and drop it in the middle. He never stayed in one place and thrived at being creative.

“You’re like me.” He said, laughing at a six-year-old me picking up a caterpillar off the ground. “Just a bit on the small side.”

Darius took me on camping adventures now and then. This resulted in me traveling around the world and enjoying the outdoors.

“I’m not small,” I muttered, kicking a rock.

“It’s okay. You’ll be as big as me one day.”

“Are there bears here?”

We were camping during my summer vacation, not too far from Irving.

He shook his head. “They don’t have bears here.”

“Yeah, only these annoying mosquitos,” I groaned, slapping the air.

My uncle laughed. “We have to start small, remember?”

“I thought it was go big or go home.”

“It’s both.” He grinned.

“Is that why you started Wolfe Legacy?”

“It’s my big dream to own the best architect company in the world.”

“What about your small dream?”

“To take you with me everywhere I go.” He rustled my hair.

“You’d do that?” I asked with hopeful eyes.

“You’re my little lion. Who else is going to show you the world?” He smiled.

That day, I was the happiest six-year-old in the world.

Mykel was able to find surveillance footage of him. On the night of his disappearance, he was standing with two men, and I didn’t know if it was the devil talking, but one looked a hell of a lot like my father.

“Hey, Dad,” I said into the phone. “How is the beach?”

“Royce,” He said, always having a cold yet formal tone.

“Millie said you wanted me to call you?”

“I just wanted to check on the Yellow Dwarf project.”

“It’s going great, Dad,” I said, proudly remembering the trip. “We signed the deal and are expected to start working as soon as the permits come through.”

“That’s good. Let me know if I can be of any help.” I heard a voice I presumed to be my mom calling him in the background, and I immediately had the urge to hurl my phone across the room.

“Yes, actually, I wanted to know why you never told me that Uncle Darius started the company?”

“Who the hell told you that?”

“He did when I was like six. We went on a camping trip. He was pleased about it.” My mouth formed a smug smile, knowing I had just caught my father off-guard.

“He did start the company before handing it off to me.”

“Okay, thanks for clearing that up,” I said before ending the call.

“Before handing it off to me.” My fucking ass.



“Hi,” Adirah smiled as she entered my office, quickly realizing we weren’t alone. “Millie wanted me to give you the blueprints for the plumbing. They aren’t finished yet, but I still wanted to explain everything to give you an overview, if that’s okay.”

“Yeah, of course. This is Danish Jafar.” I pointed to my best friend sitting across my table. “Ms. Adirah Gaudin, she’s the Senior Project Manager and the brains behind the idea.”

Danish and I were enemies at the age of six. He hung out with the cool kids on the playground while I stayed immersed in my books and studied my verbs and adjectives. We didn’t become best friends until fifth grade when his parents split, and everyone blamed and bullied him. We became inseparable, and after college, he traveled with me on a few of my adventures before his father forced him into a marriage. His marriage ended in a nasty divorce two years later. But he received full custody of his five-year-old son, who at the time was only two.

Adirah laid out the blueprints, coming over to stand beside me. She explained everything to Danish while I sat there watching her graciously answering every question he asked.

“Okay, that looks great.” He said, clapping his hands together. “When you guys are finished, send or knowing you, you’ll probably bring over a copy, and I’ll take a final look. If everything is great, I’ll gladly sign the permits.”

“You bet I will.” I grinned.

“I’ll ask Jared and a couple of others to finish up on this.” She said, her body gently brushing against mine as she picked up the blueprints off the table. “I’ll let you know when they are finished, Mr. Royce.”

I sat in my chair with the stupidest smile as she left, closing the door behind her.

“What the hell was that?” Danish asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You slept with her, didn’t you?”

“What, no.”

“Don’t lie to me. I know you like the back of my hand. She’s a fucking employee.”

“She’s also my neighbor,” I said, rolling my eyes. “And I slept with her before I knew she worked for Wolfe.”

“You didn’t bother to tell me any of this?” He protested. “How long has this been going on?”

“Ever since I came back.”

“You fucking asshole.” He muttered. “So now what? You don’t stay in one place. Who’s going to tell her that?”

“I didn’t know how I felt about her, you know?”

“And what made you so sure?” He smiled, slouching in his seat.

“She put her trust in me.” I sighed, remembering how broken she looked that night on the cliff when she told me about her father raping her. “I think I’m falling hard for her. I just want to be around her every second of the day.” I sighed.

“What?” Danish stared at me in shock. “Say that again.”

“Shut up.”

“The famous Royce Wolfe, the man who doesn’t do relationships, in love?”

“I said shut up.”

“Well, I’ll be fucking damned.” He said, laughing.

“How’s Haider?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“I know what you’re doing.” He laughed. “And he’s doing good. He loves being in school, so there’s that. Just full of energy, you know, it drives me crazy.”

“Just the two of you?”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’m ready to enter the dating world. After the shit show that was my marriage. And I like being his hero.” He shrugged and smiled. “What about you? Any kids on the way?”

“Shut up. I only slept with her once, and I respect her too much to do something with her before she’s ready.”

“Oh shit, you are falling.”

After talking and catching up, he had to return to the office.

“You should’ve called me when you got back.” He said, shaking my hand, “Is Myk free? We should get together sometime.”

“He’s helping me on a case, but I’ll ask.” I said, “A cabin trip would be nice.”

“Oh hell yeah, that would be fun. I need a vacation away from the office.” He smiled, “But apparently, you’ve been having the fucking time of your life.”

“I will fucking kill you.” I laughed. “You won’t let this down, will you?”

“Hell no.” He chuckled before leaving my office.



Later in the day, I pulled out my phone to text Adirah.

Meet me in the parking lot.

What, like after work?

No, now.

Okay?

I sent the text, impatiently standing beside my truck, waiting for her to arrive. She walked into the parking lot, looking around, searching for me, and when she passed my truck without noticing, I grabbed her by the waist and twirled her around a few times, with her screaming and laughing along.

“What is wrong with you?” She laughed as I encircled her into a hug.

“I can’t help how I feel about you.” My brain whimsy from her presence.

“And how do you feel about me?” I had my fingers interlaced with hers, crossed over her chest.

“I’ve been thinking about you all day,” I said, kissing her cheek. “You purposely brushing up against me in my office didn’t help my immature dick.”

“You noticed that, huh?” her cheeks turned bright red.

“You’ve stolen my dreams, amare,” I whispered. “I want to keep you in my heart, all to myself, forever.”

Her head fell back as she laughed. “Who knew you were a hopeless romantic?”

“I’m serious. You’ve become the center of my universe, Adirah. And I wouldn’t want it any other way.” Her eyes glowed staring up into mine, and her soft smile spread across her face as she brought lips to mine. Her kiss was soft, the taste of coffee lingering on her tongue. I was immediately intoxicated with her vanilla scent and deepened the kiss, wanting to stay in her arms forever.

“Royce, baby.” She murmured.

“The thought of you in my arms keeps me awake at night.” I breathed, kissing her neck and trailing my lips up her jaw. “Wondering about the many ways I could make you feel loved.”

“You think about me?” She asked in a small voice.

“All the damn time.”

“I have to go back.” She said softly.

“Baby, no. I’m not letting you go,” I whined, hugging her tighter.

“Royce, Jared’s probably freaking out with the blueprints.” She warned. “And we need it finished.”

“Stay, just a couple of minutes.” I pushed her up against my truck, which immediately started blaring. “Fucking shit.”

She jumped as I found my keys to turn off the alarm.

“Tell me again why you drive a huge ass truck?”

I waved my hand up and down, gesturing over my body. “Do you see this? Does this look like it’ll fit in a tiny ass car?”

She shook her head, holding back a laugh.

“Plus, it has character.”

I’ve had my Mercedes truck for a while now, and along with me, it has been through a lot.

“Oh right, the Neanderthal persona.” She laughed, her head arching back. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. “Plus, it’s probably useful for your serial killer hobby, too.”

“Yes, you know I keep my tools in the back. Very handy.” I laughed, pointing to the back of the truck. “Also, the seats don’t get all bloody. I can throw the body in the back.”

She laughed again. “So, is this the new normal? Meeting up in parking lots?” She asked.

I slowly nodded. “It could be, but only because I don’t want you to be the girl labeled as the gold digger after her new boss.”

“How sweet.” She pinched my cheeks.

“Adirah, I respect you too damn much. And you don’t need to be sleeping with me to get to where you’re trying to go.”

“I, well, I, thank you?” She smiled, scraping her shoe against the asphalt.

“So until we’ve figured things out, this stays between you and me.”

“Okay.” She smiled shyly, tucking the loose strands of her hair behind her ear.

Damn, Adirah, what the hell are you doing to me?

“Have dinner with me tomorrow night?” I asked.

“Are you asking me out, Mr. Royce Wolfe?” She smirked, her hands resting on my chest. I pulled her closer, wrapping my arms around her waist.

“Yes.” I grinned like a small child staring at the variety of candy in a grocery store. I pressed my lips to hers. I couldn’t get enough of her, and with every kiss, I wanted more.

“And just dinner?” Her fingers stroked the seam of my jeans.

“Keep that up, and I won’t wait till tomorrow.” I rasped, staring into her mischievous eyes. “We’ll just skip the rest of today.”

“I’ll see you then.” She kissed my cheek, and I let her free from my arms. But I quickly pulled her in for one last hug before she disappeared around the pillar and back into the building.

Well, there goes LA.

I was back in my office sifting through paperwork when a sharp knock on my door interrupted my thoughts.

“Come in,” I called, shocked to see my mother standing, poised, with a stack of files in her hand.

“Mom?” I said. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.” She said. “We need to talk.”

“If you’re here, who is with Dad?” Clearly remembering, I heard someone in the background on our phone call earlier.

“Hell, if I know.” She muttered. She handed me a file.

“How long has this been going on?” I asked, shocked.

“I don’t know Royce. Frankly, I don’t care.” She rolled her eyes.

“What are these?”

“Paperwork for the company.” She said. “I thought you probably figured out a few things?”

“No, I haven’t,” I said, gesturing for her to sit. “However, I’d like to be enlightened with what the fuck is going on.”

“Royce.” She warned, but I wasn’t having any of it.

“Why all of this now?” I asked, looking through the papers. “Is this what I am? A pawn in your guys’ game?”

“No, you’re not.” She explained. “The company was never your father’s. When Darius started the company, your father was about to file for bankruptcy.”

“What does Dad going bankrupt have to do with anything?”

“Your uncle started the company. Your father thought he was too unrestrained to run it.”

I chuckled, “Kinda like how he thinks about me.”

She smiled, “Yes, you and your uncle are very similar.”

“What happened after?”

“Your father wanted him to sell the company to him, but Darius didn’t, saying it was his dream. That he had found the love of his life, and this was the beginning of their empire.”

“And that made Dad pissed.”

“Basically.”

“What did he kill him?” I joked.

My mother stayed quiet.

“No.” I stared at her in shock.

“He might not have killed him, but I don’t know at this point.” She whispered. “He did have had something to do with Darius’ disappearance.”

“Dad always mentioned he was dating someone. Maybe she knew something?”

“We never met her.” My mom started, “But Darius was fascinated with her. He had a whole dream, Royce, marrying her, starting a family, being with her forever.”

“But that meant that Dad would’ve never recovered from bankruptcy.”

She sadly nodded. “You know how Darius was always full of light.”

I chuckled, “Yeah, I remember him running through the halls yelling, ‘Where the hell is my favorite nephew?’ He’d bring me a souvenir from his travels.”

“Mom? Why is the company under my name?” My voice was dripping with seriousness and hatred.

“I think he always knew how cunning his older brother was. And took precautions.” She admitted. “The company under your name meant your father had no say. Even though he could run it for all those years, he still had to run it by Darius’ rules.”

“And now, my father wants me to hand him the company legally.” I sighed, understanding the game at play.

She nodded. “Yes. And don’t you dare make that mistake?”



My mom left a while later, admitting she might be thinking of leaving my father. She apologized for not telling me sooner, and I told her the damage had been done. I sat pondering in my office. I hadn’t told her that I was looking into the situation myself. It was best to keep it to myself until I figured out what was happening.

“What’s the update with the whole mess?” I called Mykel in the afternoon to update him on the information my mother had shared.

“I was just going to call you.” He said. “I can’t do this over the phone anymore.”

“Why? What did you find?”

“I found the daughter.”

“Wait, as in Melissa Santiago’s daughter?” I asked, sitting up.

“Yes.” He said. “It turns out Melissa Santiago was never in the United States. She was receiving treatment for cancer in Brazil.”

“Myk, who’s her daughter?”

“Vanessa Lopez.”

“Vanny,” I said softly into the phone.

“You know her?”

I nodded, quickly realizing he couldn’t see me. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Yeah, I’m coming up there, most likely tomorrow.” He said, “And I’ll meet up with you then.”

“Thanks, Mykel.”

“Don’t mention it.”

I found her. Or at least Mykel found her. I never was a fan of my father or his work ethic. But I never thought he’d be so cynical. And the thought of my mom following along for the fame and money disgusted me even more.

What had he done to Vanny? Better yet, what had he done to Darius? A set of questions erupted in my head. Questions I had no answers to.

It wasn’t until later, towards the end of the day, that I saw her again.

“Hey,” She knocked on my partially open door.

“Hi,” I replied.

“Okay, well, I’m here regarding work stuff.”

“Oh,” I said, pouting with disappointment.

“I need you to review this list and this file.” She set a slim stack of paper at the corners of my desk. “And Jared will be done with the blueprint tomorrow.”

“Anything else.”

She shook her head.

“Let me rephrase that. Anything else not business related?” I asked, interlacing my fingers into hers.

“I thought we were sticking to parking lots.”

“Well, no one’s watching.” I smiled. “So maybe I could, you know, kiss you?”

“Or not.” She shook her head, with the corners of her mouth forming a sly smile.

“Okay then,” I said, letting her go. She was about to leave my office but instead turned back around and crashed herself into me, kissing me hard.

“I can’t believe you were about to let me go just like that.” She said softly.

My hands pressed against the curves of her face as I softly brushed my lips against hers, biting down on her bottom lip as her demeanor relaxed, “Only because I knew you wouldn’t leave me without a kiss.” I smiled, running my hands through her hair. “Adirah, amare, please stay with me forever.”

A Cabin in the Mountains

Adirah



“Wait, so Oscar the Grouch is the Coffee Hottie?” Kinza stood in the kitchen, hands on her hips, wearing a pink apron with the word *Barbie* written in big letters. “Addy, you seriously don’t remember him?”

She pointed in the direction of Royce’s house.

“Nope.” and it was the truth. I didn’t remember a single detail of the night.

“But he’s, like, scrumptious. Like his fucking dimples and God, his hands.” She said, waving around a spatula.

“Do you have a crush on him?” I laughed.

Kinza scrunched up eyebrows. “I cannot have a crush on a guy that calls me *Sparky*.”

“Oh shit yeah, he calls you Sparky.” I laughed even harder.

“How the hell do you not remember a guy like him?”

I shook my head, balancing myself on the counter. We were also making test cookies for her hospital’s annual bake sale charity fund-raiser, which was happening in a couple of weeks. “I don’t know. But never in a million years would I have pictured Royce to be the coffee hottie.”

She laughed. “You should bring him to the fundraiser.”

“I don’t think we’re at that stage.”

“Shut up.” She scoffed. “You’ve slept together, and whether you remember it or not, it counts. So you’re bringing him.”

“What if he says no?”

“Go ask him.”

“Now?” I shrieked, closing her planner. “It’s almost midnight.”

She looks out the kitchen window, “His light is on.”

“God, Kinzy, you’re freaking annoying.”

“Look, my parents have been trying to get me to go to Pakistan to find someone. My sister’s getting married. And they think it’s a perfect opportunity. Yours is next door. You have no idea how lucky you are.” She placed her hand dramatically on her heart. “So lucky.”

She waved her hand, telling me to go, before spreading the cookie dough on a cookie sheet.

I rang the bell in the middle of the night, half hoping he wouldn’t answer. By the third ring, I told myself it was a sign to leave and started to walk back toward our house before I heard the door open, and he half ran to catch up with me.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” He growled, snaking his arm around my waist and crashing his lips against mine.

“I thought you were asleep,” I said after he let me go.

“Before texting you goodnight?” He said, shocked, “I would never, Trippy.”

Royce always texted goodnight. Even before I knew who he actually was, there would always be a goodnight message with a heart.

“I, actually, I wanted to ask you something,” I said, finding the courage and the right words to ask him to Kinza’s

fundraiser. “Kinza’s hospital is doing a bake sale fundraiser to raise money for treatment for kids.”

“Like a charity fundraiser?”

“Yes, and she kinda asked me to ask you to come with me to the fundraiser. Cause you know the more, the better. And their stuff is usually good. By stuff, I mean their food.” I rambled on as he stared into my eyes, waiting for me to shut up.

“What do you want, Adirah?” He whispered.

“I want- I don’t-“ I said incoherently before putting my thoughts together and admitting, “I want you to come. With me. As my date.”

“Then I would be more than pleased to be your date, amare,” He said, kissing my cheek. “And hey, don’t ever walk away from me again.”

“Understood,” I said, bobbing my head up and down.

“I would invite you in, but I’m working on something with a friend.”

“You have friends?” I asked.

“Hey, I’m a very likable person.” He buried his nose into the crook of my neck, inhaling that vanilla scent he was infatuated with. “To last me through the night.” He grinned before pinching my nose with his two fingers and disappearing into his house.

I couldn’t help but feel ecstatic at the thought of Royce being my date.

“What did he say?” Kinza asked the minute I walked into the house.

“He said yes.”

“Told you.” She displayed the biggest smirk on her face, “You need to start listening to me more.”

I rolled my eyes and hopped back onto the counter. “We need to hang out more,” I said. “We barely see each other now.”

“I know.” She groaned, dragging out the word. “The live-action of Aladin should, I think, be playing in theaters. Or we could cry over Tony Stark dying.”

“The second option.” I made a sick face, pretending to vomit. I don’t like the live-action of animated films.”

“They have a Lion King coming out too.”

“No. Please, No.”

“That’s what I said. I’ll see when I’m free, and we can do a movie date. Just you and me, though. We’re not bringing along Oscar the Grouch.”

I nodded. “That’s fine. We haven’t spent time together. It’d be nice.”

She pulled out the cookies from the oven. “Okay, these are your options. Which one is the best?”

I eyed the tray, which was still burning even to the touch. I pulled off a chocolate chip cookie and stuffed it into my mouth.

“This one,” I said, with cookie bits all over my mouth. “It’s hot, though.”

“Yeah, no shit, Sherlock.” She laughed. “But is it good? Or good good?”

“It’s fucking delicious.” And we both stood laughing.



I was back in the big table room the next work morning, looking over the blueprint Jared had finished.

“Hey, I think this looks good.” I smiled at him, “But could you recheck the measurements on this one over here? I know it’s supposed to be one-fourth scale, but it seems slightly off.”

“Okay.” He nodded and went back to work.

“Good morning.” Royce strolled in wearing all black, his hair in a half ponytail, and I couldn’t help but stare. “I brought

my favorite people my favorite coffee.”

He set the coffee on the table and brought a cup with my name. “This one’s yours.” He whispered loud enough for only me to hear. “Just the way you like it.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking a sip and realizing it had the same taste as *that* night. I looked up at him with bulgy eyes. He gave me a nod and smiled.

“What are you guys working on?”

“The blueprints for plumbing, we’re almost done,” I said. “I asked Jared to look into the measurements on this one.”

“When will they be finished?”

“Late afternoon, sir.” Jared’s voice peeped from the corner. “I know they were supposed to be done today.”

“Hey, it’s fine.” Royce smiled at him before turning towards me, subtly closing the gap between us. “I’ll call Danish to tell him we’ll come by tomorrow morning. You’ll be coming along as well.”

“Me?” I squeaked.

“Senior Project Manager, remember?”

“Oh, right.” I said, my hand slapping my forehead. “I knew that.”

“We’ll go once they are finished.” He winked before leaving me alone with my staff, dazed.

I turned my attention back to the blueprints, periodically taking sips from my coffee. “Are these the offices?” I asked Jared.

He nodded. “I’m having a hard time figuring out where to start.”

I sat down, looking over the blueprint. “How about you follow the maze?” I grabbed a scratch piece of paper and drew a simple sketch of the potential office setting with a different colored pen marked where the plumbing would be.

“Like this.” I showed him the paper.

“Okay, that could work. I’ll get on that.” Jared smiled. “I’ll have the measurements checked. And also finish up with this before lunch.”

“That’s the last of them, right?”

“Yeah, this is the last one.” He confirmed.

I nodded. “Thanks, Jared. I’m going to go out for a while. Do you think you can manage?”

“Yeah, where are you going?” He asked.

“Uh, to call my roommate, she wasn’t feeling well.” I lied.

“Okay.” His insidious smile suggested he knew something was up. “Right.”

Hey, C-Wing Stairs.

Now?

No, next year.

Okay, okay, I’m coming.

He stood waiting for me when I opened the door and walked out onto the balcony.

“Hi.” He flashed a wide smile, dimples showing.

“Hi.” I smiled back.

“Is there a reason why you told me to come here?” He said, holding out his hand.

“So I need a reason to come see you?” I placed my hand in his, and he pulled me into a hug.

He chuckled and leaned in, placing a soft kiss on my lips.

“Trust me when I say this,” He said, pulling away, “You don’t need a reason to see me. Ever. I’ll come running

wherever you are.”

“A bit poetic, are we?” I laughed.

“I just,” He said, pausing, “what are you doing to me, Adirah?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“I want to be around you all day. At night, I want you to sleep in my arms and wake up with you the next morning.”

I stared dumbfounded at the words coming out of this scrumptious man’s-Kinza’s words-mouth.

He brushed his fingers through my hair. “I never felt like this about anyone. Why?”

“I can’t get enough of you either,” I whispered, finally finding my voice.

I wanted to be around him too. *If that wasn’t cliché enough.* And that wasn’t a lie. Yes, I loved Darius to the ends of Azure, but Royce was a journey I wanted to last a lifetime.

Stop comparing them. One’s dead.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.” He murmured before his eyes locked with mine. He pressed his lips onto the curve of my neck, my hands resting on his chest.

“Royce.” I moaned, making him smile.

He continued kissing my neck and jawline, eventually fusing his mouth with mine. He pushed his tongue against mine, and I felt safe for the first time in a long time. He was no match for Illiyan, but I felt as if I belonged in his arms.

He went back to kissing my neck. “Your vanilla scent thing. What is that? Like, I can’t figure it out. But I know I’ve smelled it somewhere.”

“It’s a perfume found on the Island of Mona,” I said. “Well, like the ingredients to make it are.”

“Island of Mona.” He repeated. “No fucking wonder.”

“Why?”

“It’s the longest trip I’ve been on. And I’ve been there a couple of times because I fell in love with the scent of gul-e-safedi.”

“The white flower.”

He nodded. “It’s so addicting. I want to be around it all day.”

“It’s the only perfume that doesn’t have me sneezing my guts out.” Which was a blatant lie.

I used the perfume to mask the scent of my *Rayekeh*. And this particular perfume was the only perfume strong enough to do so. The Island of Mona was created by the Goddess of Protection, Mona. She created the Island in the middle of the ocean solely for those lost at sea. The gul-e-safedi was a small white flower scattered all over the island, which she created for Azurians to help us mask ourselves from the other lands during war. My perfume had the flower infused inside, which to mortals would smell sweet but held more importance for immortals.

There was a moment of silence between us as he connected his forehead with mine, closing his eyes. “You were really meant for me, weren’t you, amare?”

Was I?



“Where are you going?” Kinza eyed my outfit. Considering it was almost midnight, she was right to question my choice of jeans, a crop top, and a denim jacket.

“Out?” I shrugged.

“Yeah, I can clearly see that. I was hoping for more of a detailed answer.”

I closed my eyes and huffed. “The cliff. We were supposed to have dinner but ended up working late.”

“Is he going to be there?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “He’s not answering his phone, and his house is dark.”

“Aye, stay safe. Take a knife or something. Better yet, take the whole set.” She pushed the holder housing our cutlery knife set towards me, and I laughed.

“You’re hilarious.”

She grinned. “I think so, too.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“And come back home if he’s not there. I don’t want to have to call a manhunt for you.”

I laughed, “Okay, *mom*.”

I drove out to the cliff, which had become a monument for love. Sure enough, he was sitting at the edge, his truck parked not far.

I sat beside him without saying a word, and he immediately wrapped his arm around me.

“Are you okay?” I asked softly.

“I don’t know.”

“Okay.” I rested my head on his shoulder. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He shook his head. “How’d you know I’d be here?”

“I didn’t. I just guessed. We were supposed to have dinner.”

He rested his head against mine. “I know. I’m sorry. Something came up. It’s not that I don’t trust you or anything. I don’t know what’s going on at this point.” He whispered. “I’ll still make you dinner.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything.” I smiled up at him. “Are we going to your house?”

He shook his head again. “I have a cabin in the mountains. I want to take you there.”

“You realize that’s what serial killers say to their victims?”

“Okay, yes. It sounds creepy, but I promise you’ll be safe.” He chuckled. “I’ll even guard the door through the night while you sleep if that makes you comfortable.”

“I know I’m safe with you.”

We drove back to our respective houses. I grabbed a pair of clothes before telling a half-sleeping Kinza I would spend the night with Royce. I sat in his truck as we drove down the winding road lined by gorgeous trees. His left leg was propped up against the door. He steered the wheel with one hand while his other interlaced with mine. We picked up a couple of boxes of Dane’s Pizza, even though he insisted on making dinner.

“It’s late. It’s super late. And you’re clearly tired.” I glanced over at him.

“Fine pizza, but I get to eat from your hands.” He smiled. “That’s the only way I’ll eat it.”

“Okay.” I grinned. “You don’t even drive like a normal person, do you? And you realize that’s probably not safe?”

“When the hell are we ever safe?” He shrugged. “How long will it take you to understand I’m far from normal?”

“You take being comfortable to a whole new level.” I laughed. “You’re not far from normal. You don’t even come near the scope.”

“I realized most of your shirts have holes. Or they are too tight, and you don’t own many suits like a normal CEO.” I continued.

“They actually come like that. And too tight, huh?” He smirked. “So you do stare at me.”

“No, I don’t.” I turned my head away, hiding my burning cheeks.

He kissed my hand, which was secured in his. “I’m fine with you staring at me because I stare at you all day, too.” He grinned, and at this point, my cheeks were in flames.

The cabin stood practically in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by greenery and many trees.

“Wow, this is totally giving serial killer vibes, even though it’s beautiful,” I said, laughing.

“I might just keep you here forever if you keep laughing like that.”

We walked inside, and he immediately added wood to the fireplace, lighting a fire.

“When I was a kid, we always came here.” He smiled, remembering the memory.

“With your parents?”

“No, my uncle, Vanny, and Danish.”

“Oh.” I smiled. “Vanny was really close with you guys?”

“She became family. And my uncle looked after her.”

“I have a question. You always mention your parents and uncle. How come he lived with you?”

“My grandparents died when my father and uncle were young, so they basically just had each other.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me along. “Look,” he said, pointing to a wooden beam with height marks in different colored crayons.

“This place holds many memories for you, doesn’t it?” I said, tracing over the marks.

“The best.” He smiled. “And I want to make more. With you.”

“Is that why we’re here?” I smirked.

“I mean, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Your uncle sounds like an amazing person,” I said.

“I only have vague memories, but they are all good ones.” Standing behind me, Royce wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his chin on my head. “There was a time when I struggled in school, and he thought I needed a tutor, but my father wanted me to switch schools. My uncle? He had a fit.”

“And then what happened?”

“My dad didn’t listen to him and ended up switching my school, and I had to start all over.”

“Is that why you don’t get along with your father?” I asked softly.

“That and fifty million other reasons.”

“What about your mom?”

“My mom’s a character.” He chuckled. “She puts up a persona that she wants you to see. But hides what’s really inside. She’s lived that way for so long that she didn’t realize the damage it caused me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“What about your mom?” He asked softly.

“My mom, oh god. She was amazing. She loved us more than anything in the world. She used to take us out in our gardens and read our stories about how the moon met the sun.” I beamed at the thought of my mother running her fingers through my dark hair while Eshaan and Ehaan pulled flowers from the dirt, throwing them at each other.

“I would love to hear it.”

“Really?” I smiled.

He walked me out to the patio, where I took a whiff of the fresh mountain air. We sat on the sofa as he opened up a box of pizza. As before, I pulled off the vegetable toppings and held up a slice. He took a bite, never taking his eyes off mine.

Laleh was the Goddess of Aasmaan, the Heavens in Azure. She was the Queen to the throne and my beloved mother. Illiyan loved her at one point, hypnotized by her essence before he became incapable of feeling empathy. He made her his Queen. But it grew further when he tried to quench his thirst for power. She wasn’t always imprisoned in the castle, but when Illiyan saw others look at Laleh and admire her beauty, he grew furious. Eventually, she stopped fighting him because she knew Illiyan would always return to her.

My mother loved us far more than she ever loved my father. I never blamed her for what happened. I never blamed anyone. No one had the power to face Illiyan. When Illiyan descended on the Land of the Mortal every night, she'd gather us and tell stories. Sometimes about the greatest warriors, some fairytales, and my favorite, the love story of the sun and moon.

"The Afsana says that the sun and moon are complete opposites. Sun was fierce and filled with rage. Moon was calm and collected. They admired each other dearly, but they could only meet for a few moments every day. And every day, they would try their best to have one more second than the previous day." I started. Royce laid down with his head resting in my lap, staring up at me with his obsidian eyes as he chewed on the last bites of the pizza slice.

"Do you want more?" I asked, laughing.

He shook his head.

"Right, even though they had yearned for a more prolonged glimpse, they never could. That made Sun furious. He wanted nothing but to be with the Moon. He wanted to spend time with her, but he failed every time. One day, furious with his fate, he disappeared. He just upped and vanished. Moon called out for him, begging him to shine his light. Without his light, she was nothing. She wasn't glorious, and she wasn't attractive. She was just a big rock circling the most beautiful planet."

I ran my hand through his hair as he lay invested in the Afsana.

"But as stubborn as he was, he never came. Soon, flowers began to wilt on the Land of Mortals, and harvest became scarce." I continued. "The mortals were quickly out of jobs and suffering from poverty, and the death rate increased. Then, one day, as calm as she was, Moon had enough. 'Don't you see?' She called out to him in the dark. 'They need you. I need you.' The Sun heard her, but he was still raging and didn't shine his light. She kept encouraging him, reminding him she was just a rock without his presence. She reminded him that she was beautiful because of him."

Royce reached up, brushing his thumb across my lip. “You make me beautiful.” He murmured.

“Though Sun was furious, her words struck his heart. He let go of his anger and rose out from the east the next day.” I continued. “He shone his light on the Land of Mortals, and that evening, as he was getting ready set, he met Moon on the narrow bridge of time. ‘I’m sorry.’ He apologized. ‘I will die every day so you can breathe every night.’ He smiled at her as he began to disappear, knowing she, in fact, was the real beauty in the sky.”

I ran my hand through his hair. “What?” I asked as he glanced up at me in awe.

“That was the most beautiful story I’ve ever heard.” He smiled. “I want it in writing.”

“You want me to write it down? Like on a piece of paper?”

He nodded.

“Okay.” I smiled, running my hand through his hair.

“It’s late. You, I mean, we should go to sleep.” He said, getting up and slipping on his shoes.

“Sleep?” I asked innocently.

“Yeah, you know the thing you do with your eyes closed?”

I punched his shoulder, “I mean, you just want to sleep?”

“Oh baby, if you have other ideas,” He said, pulling me onto him, “Then I don’t mind staying up through the night, learning every curve of your body.” He said before crashing his lips against mine.



Nothing has felt more amazing than Royce’s tongue sliding over my clit. He didn’t waste time. Instead, he had me lying on the bed inside, underneath him, in seconds. My clothes were sprawled across the floor, and the skin of my neck, at this point, had a reasonable probability of being bruised.

“Royce.” I moaned softly, which only provoked him more. He dipped his head between my thighs, gently pushing them apart with his hands. He dragged his tongue from my entrance and fixated on my clit, sucking, kissing, and licking.

“You remember what I said about making you mine?” He said, hovering over me, pressing his lips against mine.

I nodded.

“I licked it.” His voice was deep and laced with lust. “Now it’s fucking mine.”

I lay whimpering at his every touch, running my hands through his hair. The moonlight shimmered through the open window alongside a breeze, making my skin tingle. I pulled at the neck of his shirt, signaling him to take it off. A sly smile spread across his face before he lifted off his shirt and tossed it to the floor. He had a tattoo on his chest, a lion encircled inside a compass. He leaned back in and crashed his lips against mine. His fingers brushed my core, spreading the saturation before he inserted a finger. “You being this wet for me gives me a shit ton of pleasure.” He breathed. “Beg amare, beg me to let you come.”

My eyes closed as I focused on the immeasurable pleasure of Royce, bringing me close enough to my climax but stopping a second before.

Satanic, but why did it feel so fucking good?

“Royce, baby, stop teasing me.” My voice was trembling, unable to utter essential words of English. The pulsing of his finger accelerated. A small “oh” escaped my throat.

“I’m only playing your game. It’s time you learned what it feels like to be brushed up against and not be able to hug you or kiss you. Or do this to you.”

With a sly smile, his mouth found its way to my throbbing clit, and he gently sunk in his teeth, all while his dark inky eyes fixated on mine. I gasped, pushing back the desperate need to come.

Not yet, I tell myself, wanting to ride out the thrill longer.

“I bite too, amare.” His voice sends shivers down my heated lower half, forming a new sense of pleasure. My heart began to race faster at his confession, and every muscle in my body became taut under his touch. I dug my finger into the sheets as he grazed his lips back up my body. Everything he did was calculated and with meaning. The questions he asked weren’t for his pleasure. He wanted control over my body. *Royce freaking Wolfe tried to control me.* And I was more than pleased to succumb to his touch. He kissed my neck and down to my chest, softly biting my nipples and switching from one breast to another.

“Royce,” I cried out. My back bowed inwards as he rewarded me with another finger, hitting the sweet spot in my core, forging my legs unstable, and fulfilling his command from earlier.

“Oh shit.” I moaned, blinking up at the ceiling with a cloudy gaze. The build of heat turns into a stinging pleasure. “Royce. Make me come. *Please.*”

His sly smile returns, and he pulls out his wet fingers, leaving me with a heaving breath. “Show me how badly you want me to make you come.” He stood at the foot of the bed, licking my arousal from each finger one by one. *I hadn’t seen a more sexier sight.*

“You fucking bastard. You could’ve just let me enjoy it.”

He leaned in close, his hands resting against the bed frame, as he pushed his sheathed shaft between my thighs. “Now, where is the fun in that?” He smirked. He took two of my fingers into his mouth, sucking them wet. “Touch yourself. Take your fingers and slide them up from the bottom to here.” The front of his thumb circled my clit as he finished his sentence. I followed his command like a moth drawn to a flame. *The flame he lit.* Sliding my fingers up to my clit as he watched, his gaze filled with nothing but lust.

“Then?” I quoted our texts.

His smile turned predatory. “My dick is getting a bit impatient, amare, but I’m not going to do anything if you don’t want me to.” He murmured, kissing me softly.

“Are you fucking crazy? I could kill you right now.” I shrieked. “I want you, Royce. I want all of you.”

He didn’t need my permission. He had me quivering. Breathless under his control. But the fact that he asked made me want him even more. He gave my clit one more swipe of his tongue before taking off his bottoms. He pulled out a condom, about to tear off the packaging, but I shook my head.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine,” I said, knowing there wasn’t the slightest chance of a Goddess getting pregnant by a mortal.

He aligned his erection between my thighs, teasing me with the tip, before slowly pulsing in. I cried out his name as he filled every bit of me possible. He pounded his hips at a ceaseless pace. “Fuck me like you mean it, *Mr. Wolfe.*” I moaned.

At the sound of his prefixed name, something inside him snapped. His hand cradled the back of my neck, perking my breasts. Seeing him wild enough to lose all and any form of control satisfied me beyond perception.

“I’m just getting started,” he whispered into my ear, sending a flare of heat down my spine.

His eyes closed as he grabbed my hips, tilting my body so that he could reach deeper. My fingers dig his back, and he groans at the slight sting. “Damn, Adirah.” My name on his tongue sounded majestic. “I fuckin’ need you.”

“You know I’m yours,” I rasped.

My cries of pleasure filled the room as I rocked my hips to his rhythm. Calm and collected, Royce sifting through paperwork in his office was a sexy sight on its own. But seeing him bound to me was something on the edge of addicting. He felt this way for *me. With me.* Enough to come out from behind a veil, let go of his principles, and love me. His hands gripped my hips tighter, and his thrusts were filled with more force. My breath hitched as the heat rippled through my body, and I fell apart, just as he promised. *Completely ruined.*

He thrusts his hips harder as my outburst prompts a smile filled with affection on his face. “Adirah,” He moans and follows into his demise. His build trembles as his sticky release fills my space. He immediately crashes his lips against mine, falling beside me and pulling me into his arms.

“Shit.” He said with a heavy breath. “Fuck.”

“Yeah. Was this how it was last time?” I turned and ran my finger over the intricate artwork of his tattoo, making a silent reminder to ask him the meaning later.

“Oh fuck no.” He smiled. “This was way better.”

“Royce?” I said with a heavy voice. “I want to be with you forever.”

He grinned, “Amare, you know how I said I’d ruin you for everyone else?”

I nodded.

“You’ve ruined me for everyone else.”

His lips brushed softly against mine before he tilted his head and kissed me. “I didn’t know where I stood with the company or even with you until now.”

“Where do you stand?”

“Now, I know that I only want to love you.” He smiled, “And to be loved by you.”

The Problem with Mr. Hemmings

Royce



“So, remember when you proposed the game of ten questions?” We were driving to Danish’s office to finalize the blueprints. She sat in the passenger seat, her hands resting between her thighs.

“Yes?” I said, stealing a glance.

“I have a question of my own.”

“Okay?” We had stopped at a red light, and I took the advantage of drinking a few gulps of water.

“Your favorite sex position.”

“Holy shit,” I said, coughing up a few drops of water. “Warn a guy, will you?”

“Shit, I’m sorry.”

“You did that on purpose.”

“I didn’t know you’d choke on your water, though.” She laughed.

“Okay, fine.” I laughed, “So I have this fantasy in my head.”

“Like sexual fantasy?” She asked.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“How about instead of telling you, I show you instead? Over the weekend?”

She nodded. “Okay.” She said softly.

“And you?” I turned to look at her for a second before turning my attention back to the road.

“Do you want to know for research purposes or a repeat of last night?”

I grabbed her hand, interlacing my fingers, “I wouldn’t mind a repeat of last night.”

“I don’t have one.” She said softly.

She turned away, smiling out the window, but didn’t say anything for the rest of the trip. Her index finger kept caressing the seam of my jeans, and before leaving the truck, she kissed my cheek.

“Hey, how’s it going, bro?” Danish greeted me with a hug and a fist bump and smiled at Adirah before he asked us to sit down.

“The files?” I asked Adirah.

“Yeah.” She said, handing over the files.

“What is this for again?” Danish asked.

“You know the company Yellow Dwarf?”

“Yeah, yeah, they make video games. I thought they were in Japan?”

“They have a small building in White Bridge City, but they want to build a headquarters in Irving.”

“Oh wow. And they hired you guys. That’s big.”

“Yeah, my dad was somehow able to land them, and when we presented the building sketches, they loved it.”

“Wow, that’s great work. I’m happy for you, bro.”

“She deserves the praise,” I smiled at Adirah, “You should seriously see how quickly she works.”

“Yeah. I’m glad to hear that.” He said, signing the papers and handing them back. “Do you think I could talk to you?”

“Yeah, sure.” I turned towards Adirah, “Wait for me by the truck?”

“Okay.”

“What?” I asked when we were alone.

“The hell are you doing?”

“Danish, Danny. Get off my case.” I warned, “She makes me happy. For the first time in a long time, I feel alive. I’m serious about her.”

Danish let out a sigh. “Shit, I had no idea. I thought it was just a one-time thing.”

“No, I haven’t thought about all that long-term shit, but for now, I think we’re both on a mutual understanding of where we stand.”

“Look, just knowing you, you’re fucking wild. Don’t jump into something that you know might hurt you or her.”

“I want to be with her every fucking second of the day.” I smiled, thinking about last night. “She makes me feel something. I don’t know what it is. But it’s like I’m finally enjoying life.”

“That stupid smile on your face says it all.” He laughed.

“You want to go down to the cabin this weekend?”

“Yeah, sure, I’m going to bring Hadi, though.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. Haven’t seen the little Rugrat in a while. I miss him.” I nodded. “Also, I’m going to bring her.”

“Damn, you never brought anyone but us up there.”

“I already took her.” I grinned

“You must really like her.” He smiled. “Let me know when you figure out you for sure love her.”

“Why?”

“So I can make fun of you.” He laughed. “Imagine the headlines. The heartthrob of Wolfe Legacy, the man who doesn’t do relationships, finally falls in love. The number of copies I’d sell.”

“You read the interview?” I asked. A couple of days after being announced as the CEO of Wolfe Legacy, I was invited to interview for an architecture magazine called *On the Rise*. “You know, sometimes I fucking wonder why the hell I stay friends with you.”

He laughed even harder as I exited his office and returned to my truck.



Adirah had fallen asleep under the stars as we sat on my patio, reviewing some files regarding the Yellow Dwarf project. I carried her inside and tucked her into the covers, kneeling beside her. I watched her breathe like the deranged killer she had jokingly named me, and it was the most peaceful thing I’d ever seen. I planted a kiss on her temple before leaving.

“Hey,” I called Mykel for our daily discussion of the case. He was also the “friend” from the other night. He stood at my door that evening, coming straight from the airport.

“Hey, how’s it going?” He said.

“The project’s doing good. We’re moving forward and everything.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“That dick didn’t,” I said, quickly realizing he was talking about Adirah.

“Yeah, he called me today.” Mykel laughed. “Right after you left his office, actually.”

“I will murder him.”

“Sure, admit your crimes. It’ll be easier to arrest you.” I could feel the smirk that was probably displayed on his face.

“Shut up,” I muttered.

“Hey, there’s no shame in loving someone you know?” He said a few moments later. “Take it from me, I screwed up big time, and I don’t know how to fix it.”

Mykel and Novah’s relationship was something you read about in fairytales. He hadn’t set his eyes on anyone else after their relationship, blaming himself for losing their child.

“She never blamed you for what happened.” I started. “It was what you did after that she couldn’t handle it.”

“But I am to blame. She saved my life.” He muttered. “She shouldn’t have.”

“Don’t fucking say that. And I think you still should try to get in touch with her. You know, take your head out of your ass?”

He was quiet for a while before speaking, “Don’t make the same mistake I made. I took her for granted, without knowing she could easily be taken away. Just don’t get lost in becoming the best that you forget you’re at your best when you’re with her.”

We were a messed up bunch of friends, and I guess that’s why we got along so well.

“Myk, talk to her. I know that’s easier said than done. But you will never know how she feels, and she’ll never know how you feel if you don’t at least try,” I said softly before changing the subject. “Okay, what have you got for me?”

“Well, I have the address of the daughter. Let’s go over there tomorrow.”

“So, you want me to come along?” I asked. “Do I get a gun?”

“Fuck no. I don’t trust you with a fork.” He laughed. “And I mean, you know her, right? She’d probably be more comfortable talking to you.”

While talking on the phone, I heard Adirah scream.

“The hell was that?” He heard it, too.

“Shit, I don’t know. I gotta go.”

I didn’t bother ending the call and ran up the stairs, throwing open the door. She was curled up in a ball on the bed, screaming, “No. Leave me alone.”

I turned on the light. “Adirah,” I said, shaking her so she’d wake up.

“Adirah, amare?” I shook her harder. “Wake up, it’s just a dream.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and her body shivered as beads of sweat formed on her forehead. Her eyes searched the room, looking around, trying to figure out where she was.

“Hey, hey.” I pulled her close in. “You’re here with me,” I whispered. “You’re safe.”

“Royce,” She sobbed. Her hands clutched onto my arm, “He, he was there.”

“Your father?” I asked, my voice laced with venom. “He shouldn’t be called that.”

She nodded. She sat there, her breathing slowly finding an orderly pace.

“It was a nightmare.” I brushed her hair away from her face, trying to calm her down.

She rested her head back against my chest and closed her eyes.

“Hey, do you want water or something?” I asked softly.

She shook her head. “No. Just stay with me. Please don’t leave me alone.”

“I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.” She was still shaking, “It was just a dream, baby. Just a dream.” I said softly tightly cradling her in my arms.

“Royce, what if he finds me?”

“Isn’t he dead?” I asked softly.

She shook her head. “No, they’re all alive. To avoid the conversation, I say they’re dead. It’s easier.”

“He can’t hurt you. I won’t let him. He’d have to go through me to get to you.” I kissed her. “I’m going to get you some water, okay?”

She nodded.

When I say I ran down the stairs, I mean Usain Bolt-ed down the stairs, grabbing a bottle of water and a glass. And when I returned, she sat there shaking against the bed, her legs curled up and her head resting on her knees. “Here,” I said, pouring her a glass.

“Thank you.”

“How long?” I asked as she gulped the final sip of water.

“How long what?”

“How long had this been going on?”

“It started when I turned eighteen.” She choked out. “Two years. Mostly every day.” She sat there, her head resting on my shoulder, before admitting, “Royce, I don’t want to do this anymore. I want to stop running.”

“Come here,” I said, setting the bottle on the nightstand and pulling her into my arms. “If he doesn’t find you? I’ll find him myself and put an end to his sorry fucking ass.”



She walked down the next morning wearing my sweater over her pink shirt and denim shorts.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “Thank you. For last night. You probably think I’m fucking crazy.”

“Aye, come here.” I wrapped her into a hug. “How could you possibly think that?”

“I don’t know.”

“I care about you, amare,” I said, inhaling her vanilla scent and kissing her neck. “I’m losing my head thinking about you every fucking moment of the day, and you think I’m caught up on your past.”

“I just, I, well, I just thought that it’d bother you.” She started to do the rambling thing she does when she’s trying to explain something uncomfortable. “And I don’t have nightmares that often. I don’t know why I had that one last night.”

“Adirah.”

“Yeah.”

“Baby, you don’t have to explain your past to me, you don’t have to talk about your father with me, and you most certainly don’t need to worry about how I feel about you. Whether you remember it or not, you became mine that first night, and you’ll always be mine. I’m going to make sure of it.”

“How come you call me ‘amare’?” She asked.

“Because everyone uses the word ‘love.’ I like being different.” I smiled. “I mean, I can call you Trippy.”

“Shut up.” She punched my shoulder, laughing. “You really aren’t helping anyone by wearing all black.”

She kissed my cheek and hopped onto the counter.

“You aren’t helping anyone by being so cute yourself.” I smiled. “And I thought that *chairs* were made for sitting.”

“You’ve kind of rubbed off on me.” She admitted, grinning from ear to ear, “I like being rebellious now.”

“I made coffee, and do you want pancakes or waffles?” I said, handing her a cup of coffee.

“How original.” She chuckled, reading the text on the coffee cup. “World’s Best Boss.”

“What? It’s fitting for yours truly. I mean, I am the best boss, right?” I said, closing the gap between us and trailing a finger across her jaw, “Unless you want to tell me something?”

She shook her head, holding back a laugh.

“I’ll take some pancakes.” She smiled.

“Excellent choice. Considering I prefer pancakes myself.”

“Texture issues?”

I nodded. “So, am I still worthy of the coffee hottie title?” I asked as she took a sip.

“Yeah, this is my drug now. Coffee made by Royce Wolfe.”

“It was my first day back from the Island, and seeing Treks all over your kitchen, I couldn’t resist.”

“How come you left that day?”

“I had a stupid board meeting. But it was worth figuring out what we meant to each other together. Right?”

“Yeah,” She smiled.

“You know if you weren’t dressed ready for work, I’d rather eat you for breakfast.”

“We still have time, and if you drive your Neanderthal truck a little faster, we’d be there right when the meeting starts.” She suggested.

“You’re going to be the end of me, Trippy.” I grinned as she wrapped her arms and legs around my neck and waist, balancing herself off the counter.



My arms snaked around her waist, pulling her on top in the middle of the bed.

She pressed her hands on my chest as she rocked her hips back and forth. She brought her lips to kiss mine before moving onto my neck, kissing and sucking the sensitive skin. She pulled up my shirt, trailing her tongue down the outline of my abs, savoring every inch of my body.

My body heated up all the way down to my cock.

“Take this off, I don’t care if we’re fucking late,” I whispered, tugging at her shirt. She pulled off her shirt, and

soon, her shorts joined the mess on the floor, soon after.

She hungrily bites down hard on my lip, and I taste blood. She tugs at my jeans, not breaking the kiss, and I immediately shrug them off. She sat on top with her legs spread apart on either side of my body, my erection resting against her center. She rocked her hips, her breasts brushing against my lips as she gripped the bed's headboard. I drag my tongue along her skin until I meet her peaking nipple. Taking one of her breasts into my mouth, sucking and kissing, and gently massage the other.

"Oh, Royce." She moaned softly, and I was once again burning for this woman, just like that.

"Adirah," I groaned, circling my thumb over her clit.

"Royce, I'm so fucking wet." She whimpered, and I slid my finger inside.

"I know, baby, you're fucking wet for me," I said pulsing my finger.

She let out a moan as she fell forward.

I locked my arms around her before giving her a warning, "I'm not going to be gentle this time."

"Who said anything about being gentle?" She whispered into my ear as she bounced on my finger. "I want you to fuck me so my soul ends up in another dimension."

Her greedy words made me proud. This was *my girl*. And I had just taught her to let herself loose. "I'm so fucking in love with you? You have no idea." I pulled out my fingers, sitting up on the bed.

And without another word, I got up and bent her body over the mattress, her ass arched up towards me. I glide my hand over her naked body, relishing every curve, before sliding my finger down her entrance.

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop teasing me?" Her fingers curled around the bedding as I circled her clit with my thumb.

"Oh fuck." She moans, gripping the bedding tighter.

My hands fist around my erection as I tease her by rubbing the tip along her slick entrance.

“Royce, I want you. I want you now.” She gasps. I wanted her, too. This was supposed to be a quickie. But being hasty with Adirah didn’t sit right with me. She was a goddess meant to be worshipped. She was meant to be treasured.

I turned her around, wanting to watch her as her *soul floated into a different dimension*. We lay in the middle of the bed, her legs spread apart, resting on my shoulders. She screamed as my mouth clamped onto her clit, softly biting the tender skin, my fingers curling and pulsing inside. The long, slow strokes of my tongue had her clawing at the sheets, wanting more. I glide my tongue over her clit, one last time, making it wet enough for my cock to slide in easily. I devoured her like I hadn’t eaten in days, my finger still pulsing, with a rhythm her body was slowly getting used to. As her back arched, in wait for her orgasm, I pulled out my fingers.

“Royce,” She moaned.

“I’m not finished,” I said with a wicked smile.

I had her hands pinned above her head as I eased my way inside, a few inches, then immediately thrusting forward with force. She gasped, struggling to free her arms. I rocked my hips, pushing deep inside.

“Kiss me,” I whispered, leaning into her, and she overpowered me with intensity. Her hand curled onto my neck, her fingers gently caressing the side. “It was your plan all along, wasn’t it?”

“What?” She asked, confused and breathless.

“The whole going slow thing. That was all bullshit.” I shifted my angle, plunging deeper inside, and she cried out my name, “You just knew if you played long enough, you’d get what you want.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” She breathed. “Fuckin’ hell Royce, you’re so big it fuckin hurts.”

“Serves you fucking right,” I growled.

Soon enough, her body relaxed as it got used to the rhythm. I couldn't remember the last time I wanted someone so immorally or even wanted to release this badly. I felt her core tighten around my cock, heightening our pleasure.

“Fuck me harder.” She moaned.

The heat burned through my veins and up to my skin. My muscles ached, and my body was filled with gratification.

“Royce!” She screamed my name, her hips quivering beneath mine, as her cunt clenched around my cock. “Fuck baby, more.”

I pick up the pace and thrust harder, and a little more sets her over the edge. She drenches my cock in her come, and her orgasm pushes me over the edge. My orgasm tears through me, flooding her space, ripples of pleasure throbbing through my spine.

I let go of her arms, and she immediately envelops me into a hug, pushing me on my back and climbing on top with my cock still inside her.

She buries her head into my chest with her knees resting on either side. I lazily trail my finger up and down her spine. “We have to get to work,” I said softly.

“Ugh.” She groaned. “I like having your dick inside me.”

“My dick likes being inside you too.” I kissed her forehead. I had never been this comfortable or carefree. But being with her, like this, completely bare and without a care in the world, is something I longed for and finally found. I was a ruined man, and it didn't bother me one bit.



We were only a half hour late for the board meeting, and I didn't regret it.

“Hello, everyone. Sorry for the delay. Her car broke down in the middle of the road.” I grinned, holding back my laughter.

“I couldn’t leave my Senior Project Manager stranded, could I?”

“Yes, of course. Shall we begin?” Mr. Hemmings asked.

Millie turned off the lights, and we discussed the Yellow Dwarf project. The board instantly became immersed in the presentation. Adirah and I took turns explaining the slides. She thoroughly explained the thought process behind the designs, and the board was entertained.

“Any questions?” I asked when the lights were turned back on.

Mr. Hemming spoke up first. “You mentioned the cost would range somewhere around five hundred to seven hundred dollars per square foot. Is there any way to lessen the cost?”

“Sir, we only want the best for the company. If we were to scope down the cost, the materials would also have to be scoped down. And if there was a natural disaster or a bit of storm, the building would erode faster and could even collapse.”

He nodded.

“When would you say you’ll finalize this project?” another board member asked.

“We’ll start working on the model in the upcoming week.” Adirah confirmed, “I think we should have everything finalized by the end of the month. Then we can start the building process.”

As everyone packed up, Mr. Hemming said, “Mr. Wolfe, I want to speak with you privately.”

“Yes, sir, Millie can direct you to my office. I’ll be there shortly. I need to clear something up with Ms. Gaudin.” I flashed him a smile.

I pulled her into my arms after everyone had left. “Have I told you how fucking sexy you look wearing my sweater?”

“The statement might have flown past my ear. I wouldn’t mind hearing it again.” She smirked.

I leaned in to peck her lips. “Amare, for as long as I live, I’ll never let you go,” I said softly, my hands drifting around her face.

“You know, I always tell myself I’m strong and assured with who I am. And then, for so long, I had put on this role where I took everything thrown at me. But I was never happy. I tried, and the happiness lasted for a short time, but a constant fear always lingered in my head. After so many years of running, it’s finally nice to feel a sense of belonging.”

I pressed my lips against hers, softly biting down. Her eyes closed, and her demeanor relaxed as she secured herself in my arms.

“Adirah, You’ll always belong with me,” I whispered as we broke the kiss. I took her hand and placed it above my heart. “I love you. I’ll always love you.”

Wait what? Did I really tell her I loved her?

Her eyes were filled with affection as she reached to kiss my cheek. “I love you too, Royce Elias Wolfe.”

“I think I’m going to faint.” I joked, pretending to be light-headed.

“I’ll catch you.”

“I promise to love you forever,” I said softly into her ear, becoming intoxicated with her vanilla scent. “With my heart and my dick.”

She burst out laughing, “I would expect nothing less.”



I sat in my office, listening to Mr. Hemming giving me the rant about professionalism, how a CEO has to look the part to play the part, and all the other bullshit I usually take through one ear and out the other. He also mentioned how it wasn’t healthy being both the owner and CEO and that I should ask my father to rejoin the management.

Uhm, so he can tell me what to do all day, no thank you.

“Did my father ask you to spew all that bullshit?” I asked angrily, getting up from my seat.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Sir,” I started, folding my arms around my chest and coming over to sit on the table’s edge, close enough to where the smell of my cologne would invade his breathing, giving him a sense of intimidation. “I appreciate the gesture and truly understand what you are trying to say. I will not change my appearance just because society has associated wearing suits and ties with the businessman role.”

Mr. Hemmings sunk into his seat. The signs of regret were displayed across his face.

“I’m trying to say that you’ve worked for my father, played by his rules, and maybe even looked up to him because he’s this great human, right? I want to inform you I’m not my father. As the owner of this company, I get the last say. I have the right to change whatever needs to be changed as I see fit. That includes my employees and my board members if they are not happy with the work ethics of Wolfe Legacy. Are we clear, Mr. Hemming?”

“Yes.”

“Now, I asked you a question. Did my father ask you to spew all this bullshit? I did land the biggest deal this company has ever had, and I’d like to think I am doing something right. My employees have been working their asses off. Ms. Gaudin and her team have been exemplary, so whenever you get the chance, please tell my father, Mr. Colton Wolfe, that he is no longer a part of Wolfe Legacy. And anything regarding the company’s business doesn’t concern him anymore.”

Mr. Hemming nodded, and I pointed to the door.

“Millie!” I shouted seconds after he left.

“Yes, Mr. Royce?”

“What’s his history? And the hell is his problem?” I asked.

“He’s been here since your father took over, so you could say he’s always had your father’s back.”

“Ah, now that makes sense.” I propped my feet on the table and swirled a pen between my fingers. “Well, he can shove a stick up his ass for all I care.”

Millie laughed. “I don’t think he’s that much trouble, but he does know the board members and has worked with them for a while.”

“I know I’m not the ideal picture for running a business, let alone a multi-million dollar company. But this company was a dream; my uncle built that dream from scratch but didn’t have the luck to run it. I’m going to make that dream come true. No matter how hard I have to play the game. And Adirah’s team, they aren’t going anywhere.”

“Of course, they are not.” She laughed.

“No, not because of Adirah, okay, maybe a little bit because of her, but the way they work together, I don’t want to take that away from them, you know?”

“Of course, Mr. Royce.” She smiled, “Anything else?”

“Can you get me the employee files of each board member? It’s time I put myself into the game.”

“So the whole LA thing?” She asked. I had mentioned it to her one day, asking her for advice about moving Wolfe Legacy to Los Angeles. She had said to strive to become the best, so the business came to me, not vice versa. It’s time I showed the world what Wolfe Legacy was all about.

“No, we’re staying right here.”

“And I’m sure that has nothing to do with Ms. Gaudin?”

“Oh, Millie, it has everything to do with Adirah Gaudin.” I grinned.



Mykel rang the doorbell and pulled out his badge.

“Are you okay?” He asked as I took a swig of my beer, swishing it around in my mouth.

“Is it that obvious?” I asked.

“Yeah, you look like you’re about to shit your pants.”

“Shut up.”

“Danish told me about Adirah, and when I told him I knew about her, he was *livid*. I felt the fumes through the phone.”

“Why are you both so invested in my love life all of a sudden?”

He laughed. “Cause we want to see what will happen to the man who swore off all relationships.”

“I didn’t swear off relationships. I never found anyone to invest my time in.”

“I haven’t seen you like this about anyone, not even Ava. You guys were a hell of a thing.”

“Ava was addicting at first, but it wore off.” I laughed. I thought about the times I’ve been amazed by Adirah’s creativity. And how gracefully she put together the Yellow Dwarf project. “She’s made me a beggar Myk.”

“Oh, nice.” He scrunched his nose. “Do you do that on your hands and knees?” He chuckled. “Or hanging in the air.”

I punched his shoulder, and he laughed even harder. “I will write this down as assaulting a federal officer.”

“You’re both dicks.” I groaned as an older man opened the door.

“Hi, can I help you?” He smiled.

“Hey,” Mykel said, showing him his badge. “I’m Special Agent Mykel Duran, and I’m looking for Vanessa Lopez?”

He nodded and invited us in. “I’m not sure how this works, but would you guys like some water?”

“No, we’re good.” Mykel smiled. “This one brings his drink with him, apparently.”

“Okay, she’s putting the kids down for nap time. I’ll go get her.” He said, disappearing up the stairs.

Moments later, he returned with Vanny. She hadn't changed a bit.

"Hi, can I help you?"

"Vanny?" I said, barely audible. I left my seat and enveloped her in a hug. "It's me, Royce."

Hearing my name, she hugged me back tighter. The same smile from years ago appeared across her face.

"Oh God, you're taller than me. I still remember when you were this tiny little kid who hated pizza." She laughed.

"I guess you making me eat my vegetables paid off." I smiled.

She nodded, sitting beside her husband. "That's Royce."

"Xavier." he reached over to shake out my hand. "She's told me a lot about you. At least the six-year-old version of you."

I chuckled. "She practically raised me. She's more of my mom than my actual mom."

Vanny stared at me with proud eyes. "You're the face of Wolfe Legacy now? The heartthrob CEO." She said proudly. "I saw your interview in that magazine."

"I did that interview after we landed the Yellow Dwarf project."

A smile spread across her face, "How can I help?"

"Do you know Melissa Santiago?" Mykel asked.

She nodded, the smile slowly faltering. "She was my mother. She died from lung cancer a while ago."

"There was a house in her name that burned down. Do you know anything about that?"

"The house in Irving Central?" She asked.

"Yeah, when I had my technical analyst look up the house, that house was under her name."

"Have you opened an investigation into the disappearance of Darius Wolfe, special agent?" She asked, her eyes enraged. "I would advise you to do so."

“He asked me to a couple of days ago,” Mykel said, pointing a finger at me.

“Vanny, what do you know?” I asked softly.

“If I tell you anything, I don’t want anything to be traced back to me. I don’t want Colton Wolfe coming after me or my family.”

“Colton Wolfe, as in his father?” Mykel sat, shocked.

“There’s more to the story, special agent. But it’s not my story to tell.” She got up and pulled a file from the media console placed neatly against the wall. “Two days before he disappeared, Darius came over and gave me this and said to give it to you if you ever came asking for answers.”

“What’s in the file?” Mykel asked, taking it from her. My name was written neatly in the corner, and the file was sealed.

“I have no idea.” She admitted. “I’m only telling you this is because Colton Wolfe is a monster that should be behind bars.”

“Vanny, he’s still my father,” I muttered quietly, the protective side of me speaking out. I wasn’t too sure of my father’s actions anymore. *Was he a monster, as Vanny said?*

“Have you been getting money from Wolfe Legacy?”

She shook her head, “No, he was paying my mother’s hospital bills. When she first fell sick, Darius was the one who had it set up. But after he disappeared, the money stopped as well. Which is why we had to shift her to Brazil.”

“Vanny, what happened with you and my dad?” I asked softly. “That one night.”

She interlaced her hand with her husband’s, folding her legs on the couch. “He told me because I was a minor, he hadn’t had his way with me yet. He would make me regret I ever existed the day I turned eighteen.”

“Which is why you left the next year.” I seethed.

She nodded.

“So you weren’t the mystery girl Darius was dating?” I asked.

“No, hell no.” She laughed. “We were far from that. We had more of a brother-sister relationship. But he was crazy about her, whoever she was. I practically grew up in Darius’ arms. He called me kid, for God’s sake.

“So you never met her?” I asked.

She shook her head. “You know how he had this concept of having a big and small dream?” She smiled.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“He said she was his big dream. Everything that would happen after would always end up being a small dream. He called her his queen and wanted to give her the fairytale happily ever after. They were going to get married.”

“Do you know anything about his disappearance?”

She shook her head. “I only know that the brothers fought after Darius forced me to tell him what Colton said. This was about two or three days before he disappeared.”

The more she talked about the incident, the more my father seemed like a guilty party in Darius’ disappearance.

We left a short while later. “Don’t be a stranger.” She smiled as she closed the door.

“Can you hold on to the file?” I asked. “I don’t think I’m ready to open something from my potentially dead uncle.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” He smiled. “Whenever you need it, just let me know.”

I pulled out my keys. “Oh, also, you’re coming to the cabin on the weekend. It’s not an invite. It’s an order special agent.”

“What, why?”

“What do you mean why?” I asked. “Like old times, you, me, Danish, and few, additional. We haven’t been in the same room for a long time. It’s time we changed that.”

“It’ll be nice to meet the woman that made you a beggar.” He teased.

“You guys are horrible. You guys are fucking annoying.” I muttered.

Mykel burst into laughter. “Yeah, but you still love us. We got caught up with life. I think the last time we hung out was before the shooting.”

“Yeah, and then you transferred, Danish got divorced, and I left for the Island,” I shrugged.

“I’ll see you on the weekend.” I opened the door to my truck.

He laughed, “Looking forward to it.” He said before getting in his car and driving away.

II

Burgers, Fries, and Metal Cuffs

Adirah



“Well?” Kinza asked Royce as he stood in our kitchen on a Friday morning munching cookies after he had suggested we should carpool to work.

“I need like five more to give you my best opinion.”

“No, no, and no.” Kinza huffed. “I’m not making anymore.”

Royce laughed, “The chocolate chip and these.” He picked up another sugar cookie, and Kinza immediately waved a spoon caked with cookie batter. The batter flew and landed on his face, and we all laughed.

“Can you start packaging these?” Kinza asked. “First, make ten boxes with both cookies, and then divide the rest so there’s just two of the same cookies in a box.”

I nodded, and before going to work, we spent most of the morning packing the cookies, but a few still needed to be finished before the weekend.

“We’re done with everything for the project, right?” Royce asked as he drove us down the road.

I nodded. “Yeah, I think we can start building the models.”

“I’m going to ask Millie to schedule a video call with Mr. Asuka to confirm everything one last time.”

“That’s a good idea.”

When we got to Wolfe Legacy, he kissed my cheek. “I love you.” He said softly before dropping me off near the side of the building. His truck disappeared into the parking area, and I walked into the building with a giddy smile.

Jared walked into my office a moment after I arrived. “Did we get the approval on the permits?”

“I thought I gave those to you already?” I asked.

“Nope, I haven’t gotten a file.”

“Okay, do me a favor and call a meeting in the big table room, and I’ll update you guys on the project.”

I stood at the front of the room a while later, my team seated along the table. “So we’ve gotten the basic part of the project done.” I started. “The board meeting finalized the project a couple of days ago. I did talk to Mr. Royce, and he’s going to talk to Mr. Asuka one last time to get the green light, and then I guess we can start building the models.”

“What do we do in the meantime?” Jenessa piped up.

“If you want, we could brainstorm ideas about what the model should look like?” I smiled. “I have a few things noted if you want to start with that. Or we can take a break.”

“I think we should take a break, just clear our heads,” Jared suggested. “And then after lunch, just throw around a few ideas.”

“Yeah, that sounds perfect.” I agreed.

The day progressed quicker than I had hoped. After our lunch break, I cleaned up the big table room after we discussed the project non-stop, only to be graced by Royce’s presence.

“Hey.” He looked around to see if anyone was watching.

“Hi. We just finished up for the day.”

“Mr. Asuka will review the papers and reply on Monday.” He smiled. “But that’s not why I’m here.”

“Really, why are you here then?”

He smirked and seated himself on the table. His hand gripping my hip, pulling me towards him as he took a deep breath of my vanilla scent. He placed a kiss on my cheek. “Have dinner with me. At the cabin.”

“Just dinner?” I teased. I pulled on his belt and slowly slipped my hand inside.

“Keep that up, and we’ll skip straight to the entertainment.” He rasped, staring into my eyes.

“I wouldn’t mind that.”

“I thought I’ve told you to watch yourself when you play with fire?”

“And I thought I’d told you to let me burn.”

“Shit, you know, if the fucking room weren’t fully glass, I’d take you right here.”

“What’s wrong with it being glass?” I challenged.

“You’re mine.” He growled into my ear before pulling me into a deep kiss. “Only I get to see you like that. Destroyed and falling apart.”

“I’ll see you at your truck,” I said softly, biting my lip.

“You fucking bet.” He mandated before walking out of the room.



Royce drove me home. But he was disappointed that I first had to finish packaging the cookies.

“She’s working late. And I promised her I’d help any way I could.” I laughed as he sat, pouting. “You can help me. We’ll get done faster.”

“When is Sparky’s fundraiser?”

“It’s throughout the day on Monday,” I said. “But you can also send in a donation.”

“You’ve been to one before?”

“I went the last two years. To support Kinz.”

The rest of the evening was spent with me warning Royce not to eat any cookies as they were accounted for.

“She won’t notice.” He replied.

“Royce, she’s a neurosurgeon. She’s practically magical. She’ll sense there’s fucking cookie missing from the driveway.”

“You guys are truly something. Aren’t you?”

“I know I say she’s my best friend, but she’s so much more than that,” I said softly. “She’s the one person that cared enough and listened. She’s helped me through a lot.”

I had never really made a friend until I met Kinza. There were always a few people here and there that I hung out with, but Kinza was different. It wasn’t till a little over a year ago she had finally earned her degree, which was a proud moment. Her parents had constantly pressured her into going into the medical field and were never pleased with her choice of specialty. But she held her ground, saying this was what she wanted to do. When she decided to buy a house, she first admitted she bought it for us.

“Hey, what about me?” He sulked. He stuck out his bottom lip, and I stood watching. The playful side of Royce is something I could get used to.

“Baby, you know I love you.” I grinned.

I stacked the boxes of cookies along the counter and shot Kinza a text.

The cookies are all packed.

I love you so freaking much.

We're going to the cabin early.

Have fun.

She sent the text with the smirking emoji, and I couldn't help but smile. I grabbed a bag filled with clothes and essentials. We drove through the winding road in short glances and silence. Royce wasn't a person of many words. But when he did talk, it was mesmerizing. Even the simplest things he said had me in awe.

"How do burgers and fries sound?" He asked as we were driving past a bunch of trees.

"That sounds delicious." I reached over, untying the drawstrings of his sweatpants and slipping my hand inside. "But I'd rather enjoy a hot dog."

"We're continuing with this?" He asked, and I nodded. "You also realize I am driving?"

I pulled out his cock, teasing the tip with my thumb, bringing it to life. "When are we ever safe?" I mimicked his voice.

"I walked right into that one." He muttered, clutching onto the steering tightly.

My fingers lazily circled the tip. He looked over, staring into my eyes. "Shit, here I thought you were some innocent little golden girl. But you're just full of trouble."

"Eyes on the road."

"Fucking hell, Adirah." He rasped as my finger progressed to trace the veins on his cock. His hands gripped the wheel, trying to keep a handle on the situation. "You know how you told me to let you burn?"

I nodded. "Very clearly."

He laughed, his head tilting back and his full smile on display. "I'm about to do more than just letting you burn."

“Are you going to make me beg?” I smirked, with my hand fisted around his cock.

“Amare, I’m about to turn you to ash.” The look on his face turned predatory as he pulled into the driveway of his cabin. “There’s no coming back from that.”



His heat died down as we walked inside. Dinner was burgers, french fries, and, of course, Royce’s favorite beer. As promised, he worked fast to make the burgers and set the table.

“On a normal day, I would make these fresh on the grill.” He pointed to the freezer patties he had cooked on the stove. “But you’ve made me a starved man. And not in the literal sense.” He peered straight at me as I sat munching on the fries, giving me more attention than his food.

“You want one?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I made those for you.”

He took a bite of his burger, the sauce smearing into his beard. I reached over, wiping it with my thumb. Warmth poured through my body as I stole glances, looking up at him from my burger between bites.

“So, you remember how we talked about having a fantasy?” He asked, finished with his burger.

I nodded.

He pulled out a pair of handcuffs and placed them in the middle of the table.

“Are those handcuffs?” I gawked. “And where the hell did they come from?”

“Yes. And would you believe me if I said thin air?” He said jokingly.

“What do you plan on doing with them?” I asked, not taking my eyes off of the metal bracelets.

“I plan on putting them on you.”

“And then?”

“I guess you’ll have to agree to find out.” He smirked before getting up to wash his plate.

Massive fucking dickhead.

I picked the cuffs up off the table and walked up behind him. “What if I say no?”

“Then they stay off.”

“No matter how much you want them on me?” I asked softly.

“How much I want something doesn’t matter.” He started, turning around to face me. “What matters is that you’re okay with it. I wouldn’t want to put you in a situation where you’d feel helpless. I promised you that you’ll always be safe with me. I meant it.”

My fucking heart. I couldn’t help but love this man more than I already did.

“Royce.” I tucked my head into his chest, his arms securing me into a hug. “Kiss me.”

“You don’t need to ask me twice.” He smiled. The amusement in his darkened eyes turned to pleasure. His hands slid underneath my shirt. His fingers traced my spine as he shifted his weight, fusing his mouth with mine. His kiss was soft at first but became soaked in intense greed after realizing I didn’t have anything on underneath.

“You sly little fox. And you didn’t tell me either.” He whispered.

I raised my hand from behind and dangled the cuffs before his face. “Cuff me,” I smirked. “Then fuck me, *Mr. Royce Elias Wolfe.*”

A visionary satisfaction spread through his demeanor, and his fingers dug into my back, bringing a new meaning to pain and pleasure. “Damn, I fucking love you.” He breathed, not once taking his mouth off mine.

I touched his face, running a hand across his cheek and twisting the loose strands of his hair around my finger, pushing our lips harder together. “Let me love you the way you love me,” I murmured, breaking the kiss.

“What? Do you think these are for me to enjoy? I will make you enjoy it as much as I do.” He promised as I detached from his hold, placing the cuffs in his hands. I turned around and pulled off my shirt before disappearing around the hall and into the bedroom.

His mouth formed a smile as he walked into the room, finding me sitting on the bed, legs crossed, almost teasing. He fell to his knees and leaned in for a kiss, bringing his hand around my face, “You’re sure about this?”

I nodded.

He gently pushed me onto my back before sliding off all my bottoms, leaving me completely bare. Hovering over me, he brushed his thumb across my bottom lip, “Pick a safe word.” He said, slowly pushing his thumb into my mouth.

“Coffee,” I mumbled, and he laughed.

He spread apart my legs, pressing his wet thumb in circles over my clit. I closed my eyes and let out a small moan, surrendering to his touch.

“Adirah.” His voice was deep. “Look at me.”

I did as I was told, propping myself up on my elbows and locking my gaze with his. He gently slid two fingers inside, and my breath audibly escaped my mouth, “Royce,” I moaned, “You’re teasing.”

“Am I?” He smirked, watching me bite down on my lip.

He sunk his head between my thighs. I felt his tongue softly slide along my entrance before his mouth clamped onto my clit, sucking and kissing it sore.

“Oh, Royce,” I cried as he gently bit down. Tiny pricks of heat began flushing through my veins.

“Why the hell do you taste so fucking amazing?” He praised, licking harder. “So fucking addicting.”

“I thought you didn’t get addicted to anything?” I smirked.

He pulled me off the bed. Pressing his lips against mine, he ordered, “Turn around.” Turning around, I brought my hands behind my back, and he locked them in place with the cuffs. He had me bent over the bed on my stomach, trailing kisses from my neck down my spine before his head was between my legs, kissing and sucking my clit.

“Amare, I’m a fucking captive for your love, for your fucking body.” He flicked my clit with the tip of his tongue. “For your fucking pussy. And I don’t want a refund.”

“Royce,” I moaned louder than before. He pulled back and forced two of his fingers inside, and I whimpered, tilting my hips and positioning myself right where I wanted him to be. His lips brushed against the curve of my neck, sending a rousing spark to my core. “Royce, make me come,” I pleaded.

But he had withdrawn his hand and gently pulled me back by my hair. His arms wrapped me from behind, his thumb circling my clit.

“You don’t get order me, amare.” He murmurs against my skin. “I want you on your knees.”

I did as he said. At the foot of the bed, I stood on my knees, and he let his sweatpants fall around his ankles. I kissed his inner thigh, bringing my mouth to softly kiss the head of his cock. Trailing my tongue around the sensitive spot I knew would have him trembling.

A low growl escaped his throat, and his grip stiffened, pulling the strands of my hair. Circling my tongue around the head, I bit down teasingly, satisfied with my reprisal. “Adirah,” He let out a heavy breath as I brought his length into my mouth as far as he could go.

“Fuckin’ hell.” He groaned, his head arching back. His hand tangled into my hair as he forced himself farther until I gagged. A pricking pain erupted in my eyes.

He thrust once again, his cock hitting the back of my throat. He pulled me up by my hair, crashing his lips against mine. Nothing was passionate about how he moved tonight—

just pure carnal possessiveness, addressing that I was his and *only his*.

He pushed me back onto my knees, tears formed at the corner of my eyes as he dragged me gently along his cock by my hair. He moaned as I worked him with my tongue. He thrustled one last time, and the hot liquid seeped into my mouth, embossing its salty taste.

He slowly pulled out his cock. "Swallow it." He breathed, pulling me up with my hair, and I swallowed, licking my lips, his cum dripping down my neck.

"Do you know how fucking insane you are driving me right now?" He said, seating me on the bed. His finger dug into my chin, lifting my face so I was staring directly into his inky eyes. "You're fucking mine, you understand?"

I nodded, watching him stroke himself leisurely, staring at my exposed frame with his dark, lust-filled eyes.

"You'll always be mine." Without warning, he fills my cunt, and the hint of pain laced with immeasurable pleasure returns. My cries fill the room as I try to take as much of him as possible. He undoes the cuffs and soon covers my body, thrusting hard and fast.

"Royce," I scream as he finally lets me liberate my release, my body quivering with the rawness of our fucking. He pounds himself again, my name on his lips, as he comes for a second time.

I barely have time to recover as he pulls himself out, grabbing me by my wrist and standing me upright. His come trickles down my thigh as he fuses his lips against mine. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pleased to finally be able to touch him and bite down on his lip. "I hated not being able to touch you," I whispered.

"You're fucking amazing." He whispered, kissing my forehead and rubbing his fingers where the cuffs were restrained. "You can touch me all you want."

We spent the rest of the night lying in his bathtub, his hands trailing over my bare skin and the warm water comforting my

bruised core.

“Have you done this with anyone else?” I asked softly.

“No.” He nuzzled his nose into my neck.

“Why me?”

“Cause you need to be set free from the little shell you hide in.”

“I don’t hide.”

“Yes, you do.” He said, kissing my shoulder. “You’re so much more than you give yourself credit for, Trippy. You’re fucking majestic, like a lost goddess discovering her powers.”

It was scary to see how much truth his words held.

“I love you, amare. I love you so fucking much,” He whispered. Kissing the curve of my neck. “I’m bound to you for eternity. I’ll love you till the day I die.”

His words brought me back to reality, and one day, the truth will air, but Royce Wolfe would never love me the same. I rested my head against his chest, interlacing my fingers with his. The way he asserted his dominance but still showed love had me giddy at the thought. “I love you too.”

“I feel like myself around you. In a way, you set me free, too.” He admitted, so soft I barely heard him.



As morning came, I wasn’t the same person. My body ached in places I didn’t apprehend, and my legs were sore from his size. We were tangled together under the sheets. I rubbed my nose against his, waking him up.

“Hi,” I whispered, biting down on his lip.

“Trippy.” He addressed with a smile. “Are you okay?”

“From last night?” I laughed. “Hell no. I can’t feel my legs.”

He chuckled, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I trailed my finger down his chest, tracing over the lion tattoo drawn on the left side of his chest. “I’ve been meaning to ask. What does it mean?”

“Confortare. Vivere gratis.” he said.

I knew that line. I knew that line all too well.

“It’s Latin,” I said.

“Yes, it means to be strong and live free.”

“During his college years, my uncle was part of a program that studied architecture from different eras. He had the chance to visit landmarks from Imperial Rome, like the Roman Empire?” He explained. “I wouldn’t know. I didn’t pay attention in history class. But from what he told me, he loved how they were built. And he came up with confortare, vivere gratis for motivation.”

“Roman architecture is stunning. It’s one of my greatest inspirations.”

He propped himself on his side, his head resting against his elbow. His free hand trailed down my side. He spread apart my fingers to interconnect our hands.

“The lion is meant to be strong, and the compass symbolizes a life with free will.” He said softly, kissing my hand. “What about you? Do you have any tattoos I should know about?”

“I’m surprised you haven’t seen it.”

“What is it?” He asked, pulling me closer. “Maybe you should find out for yourself,” I said with a mischievous smile.

“Adirah,” His breath drifting across my neck, “I’m so fucking in love with you. You have no idea.”

I moved my hand down to his crotch, gently brushing my fingers along the seam of his sweatpants.

“I thought you were sore beyond repair.” He questioned with a smug smile, pulling me on top.

“I don’t think anyone or anything can fix me.”

“Yet, I’m the one that is burning, Adirah.” He murmured, his fingers hungrily itching to pull off my shirt. “You’ve set my heart on fire.”

He pulls my shirt up. His fingers trace the outline of my body while his eyes search for the artwork I teased him about. My back bows in pleasure as he finally discovers the row of feathers engraved on my hip in white ink. “That’s fucking beautiful.” He whispered, brushing his thumb across.

What he thought was a tattoo was an emblem for Goddess of Winds. *My emblem.*

At eighteen, the Azurian Gods get their powers and stop aging. They turn immortal. Not all Azurians were Gods. But all Azurians were immortal. Some were warriors, and the majority were commoners. The commoners were still important, only without any rank or title. Most of the commoners were from other lands. The lands that Illiyan attacked and took over. The warriors get a sword, but the Gods get a specialized weapon based on their power. The *Qadimi*, the appointed council of Azure, gave me a dagger shaped like a feather called *Raysah*. And accordingly, the tattoo was engraved with a fire rod on my right hip.

A row of three feathers flying in the wind. A symbol of strength, freedom, and power.

Noises downstairs broke us from our daze. “Shit,” he muttered. “They’re here early. Fuck. And here I thought I would get to have to have some fun with you.”

I let out a wavering laugh. “Tonight?”

“Tonight.” He promised.



“Hey,” Mykel smiled. “I’m Mykel. And I’m finally glad to meet the woman who put a leash on this guy.”

Mykel hugged me awkwardly as we stood at the bottom of the stairs.

Royce gave him a lighthearted laugh. “Myk, no one can put a leash on Royce Wolfe,” He winked. “I think she can agree with that.”

He walked over to the fridge and pulled out a box of pancakes. Mykel scrunched his face. “Bro. Don’t tell me that shit.”

He laughed harder as I climbed onto the counter and stuffed some blueberries into my mouth. Mykel dug around the fridge, pulling out a bottle of beer and popping it open with the edge of the countertop.

“Get me one too.” He requested.

“Isn’t it too early for beer?” I asked.

“It’s never too early for beer.” They said in unison.

“But Danish will disagree,” Mykel said. “He calls this stuff filth.”

“Where is he anyway? Or was it just you?”

“It was just me. I don’t think he’s here yet.”

“Kinza’s the same.” I smiled. “You’re a cop?”

“No. I work in the behavioral analyst unit as the special agent in charge in the Los Angeles branch of the bureau.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“It means he gets butt hurt when you call him a cop. He gets inside the bad guy’s head, finds him, and shoots him,” Royce said. “He might seem tough, but he’s not, though.”

Was Royce fucking jealous?

“Jealous much?” Mykel smirked. “We analyze the offender’s motivation and anything that might help us catch them. Like their victim pool, the severity of the crime, and even their relationship to the crime if possible.”

“I am not,” Royce muttered.

He grabbed a plate of hot pancakes. “Bro, trust me, you have nothing to worry about. I’ll always be Novah’s till the day I die.”

“Who’s Novah?” I asked in a small voice once Mykel had gone to sit on the patio.

“His wife.”

“He’s married?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

“What happened between them?”

“There was a shooting here in Irving Bay a few years ago. They were working on a case together. The suspect tried to kill Myk, but Novah jumped before him and saved his life.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“No, she is alive and well. She was pregnant and ended up losing the baby.” He appeased. “They both drifted apart.”

“Did they at least catch the guy?”

Royce nodded. “Yeah, Mykel threw himself into the case, which was his first mistake. He became too aggregated in his work, and when she really needed him, he wasn’t there.”

“That must’ve been hard for him. Both of them.” I peeped over Royce, looking outside. Mykel sat on the patio, eating his pancakes and scrolling through his phone. “And then what happened?”

“They’ve been together since college, never spent a day apart. ” Royce sighed, “He ended up transferring to Los Angeles, and I think she runs a team in DC now.”

“They’re still married?”

Royce nodded. “I’ve told him to talk to her or let her go. He can’t sit around torturing himself like this.”

“He blames himself, doesn’t he?” I asked.

“Yeah, we’ve told him multiple times it’s not his fault.” Royce shrugged, “But honestly, he’s the only one who can fully understand the pain. It hurts me to see him hide behind a fake smile. When I know he goes home and relives the shooting every day.”

“That’s not healthy.”

“It’s not. He’s been getting help. I don’t know if he’s keeping up with it.”

“Uncle Royce!” a high-pitched voice screamed through the door, followed by a small dark-haired toddler crashing into Royce. The boy latched himself onto Royce’s leg. “Fucking shit,” Royce winced.

“Language.” Danish rolled his eyes, a bag slung on one shoulder, his hands gripping onto bags of groceries, and a stuffed dinosaur tucked underneath the other. He placed the groceries on the counter. “Don’t be teaching him that. I’m going to put these up in the room.”

“Hey, superman.” Royce pulled him off the floor and whooshed him through the air before tearing a piece of a fresh pancake and handing it over.

“Where’s the syrup?” the kid asked.

“This is Haider. We call him Hadi. He’s my little Superman.” Royce kissed the kid’s cheek. He walked to the fridge, grabbed a syrup bottle, and squeezed it onto a plate.

“Hi, Hadi.”

“Hadi this is Adirah.” He smiled before whispering in the kid’s ear. “She’s my girlfriend.”

“She’s pretty. Do you love her uncle Royce?” Hadi asked in the same whispering tone.

“Very, very much,” Royce replied, locking his eyes with mine. He whooshed Haider through the air again. I felt my heart melt as I watched him make this little boy’s flying wishes come true. There’s nothing more sexy than a grown-ass man playing with a kid as if he’s their age. He caught me staring. Biting his lip, he gave me his signature smile before putting Haider back on the ground. Haider ran to the patio and jumped onto Mykel, screaming, “Uncle Myk.” Their laughs filled the air, and I couldn’t help but notice how close these three were. They weren’t just friends. They were brothers with their own unique stories. They were a family, bonded together by their love. They might have spent the distance apart, but their hearts were united.

“What’s going on in that dangerous little head of yours?” Royce’s hand lifted my chin, brushing his lips against mine. “Amare, what did I do to deserve you?”

“Do you want children someday?”

“Considering you want three, I don’t really have a choice now, do I?” He smirked.

He actually remembered that.

“And what if we aren’t able to have kids?”

“What are you getting at?” He asked softly, closing that gap. He fused his mouth to mine, biting and sucking on my bottom lip before pushing his tongue inside. My hand rested on his cheek while he wrapped his arm around my tiny frame in an eager embrace. He deepened the kiss, greedy for more.

“Royce,” I moaned, heat picking my skin.

“Baby.” He stood heaving, and his hands trailed down my thighs. “Whether we have kids or not, you’re still mine, and I won’t love you any less.”

“Why the hell are you so understanding?”

“Because I’m so in love with you.” He breathed, connecting our foreheads. “I don’t know if I can wait till tonight.”

“Can you promise me something?” I asked softly.

“Amare, I’m yours. Anything and everything. It’s yours.”

“Don’t ever leave me. Even if I ask you to leave, please don’t leave me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of ever leaving you. You’re all I think about. You’re the reason I breathe, and I wouldn’t want my life to be any other way.” He pulled me into a hug. “It’s going to be okay.”



“You fed me pizza. I’ll feed you pancakes.” He said before brushing his tongue over my lips to brush off the maple syrup.

After scarfing down a few pancakes by Royce's hands, I went to take a shower. When I returned, wearing Royce's oversized t-shirt, leggings, and a towel wrapped around my head, they were all sitting on the patio. Hadi was running around chasing after a butterfly. I couldn't help but stare at how peaceful everything looked. A life that I always dreamed of but was robbed of. It reminded me of how my brothers and I would run through the gardens of Azure, hiding behind trees and bushes, while Illiyan and Laleh would try to find us. Illiyan's vain smile quickly displaced the memory as he'd enter my room every day and wrongfully take what wasn't his.

"They freaked out when I told them I was taking the weekend off." Mykel laughed.

"You need a month off after the crap you do," Royce said. "What about you? Talk to the ex-wife?"

"Her parents called the other day saying they missed Hadi and when we are visiting." Danish shrugged. "I wanted to tell them to fuck off."

"Shit, I would too. After the hell she put you through, they stood by her." Royce looked up and saw me standing, staring out into the open. "Hey."

I came and sat beside him. He handed me his beer and kissed my cheek. "Are you okay?"

I nodded

"I'll go grab another one."

"This is the first time I've seen him like this." Danish turned towards me.

"We used to tease him by calling him the lone wolf, and he'd always return with 'wolves mate for life, and I'm looking for my soul mate.'" Mykel chuckled. "He's become unrestrained around you."

"I'm hoping that's a good thing?" I said, taking a sip of the beer.

"It is." Danish laughed. "Royce has always been the one to root for love. But he always stayed away from it. And after my

marriage ended, he was more pissed about it than I was.”

“Why was Royce pissed?” I asked, curious to hear the story.

“My family’s rich. Her family was rich, too. Our fathers thought building a partnership by arranging a marriage between their children would be amazing.”

“They do that?” I sat in shock.

“There’s nothing wrong with arranged marriages if they are done for the right reasons.” He reassured. “But we constantly fought for dominance over one other, and life doesn’t work that way. I thought things would change after we had Hadi, but they only got worse. Saima’s demands grew, and my mental health became shit.”

“I can never understand some women. They’ll get everything in the world and still want more.”

“That sums up Saima. Her parents backed her every action, saying it was their daughter’s *right*.” He rolled his eyes. “After we divorced, I tried to make the effort to have her talk to Hadi, but she never really wanted anything to do with our kid, and I just let it roll that way. It saves me the headache.”

“I bet.” I took another sip of beer as Royce sat beside me, pulling me into his chest.

“Remember when that used to be you and Novah?” Danish said, pretending to be sick, but Mykel threw a pillow that landed on the floor, missing Danish completely.

Royce grinned. “Remember when they snuck off behind the cabin, and we spent hours looking for them? And when we found them, he turned like a new shade of red.”

“Yeah, what were you doing out there, Myk.” Danish teased

“Fucking my goddamn wife. That’s what I was doing out there.” He muttered. They all burst into laughter.

“How long have you all known each other?” I asked. Hadi had stopped chasing the butterfly and snuggled into Mykel.

“Danish has known him the longest. They grew up hating each other until his parents split?” Mykel started. “And I had the

unfortunate pleasure of meeting these two in high school.”

“I’m hungry.” Hadi grinned.

“Come on, let’s get something to eat.” I held out my hand, and he immediately jumped to grab it. I thought I’d let Royce spend time alone with his friends.

“Uncle Royce says you tell the best stories,” Hadi said as we walked into the cabin.

“Oh, really. Is that what he said?”

“He said you believe Azure is real, too.”

I scooped up Hadi off the floor and balanced him on the counter. I pulled out a bowl and opened a bag of chips that had been lying on the counter. “What do you know about Azure?” I challenged, raising my brow.

“People say it’s a myth, but I think it’s a magical world of fairytales.” Hadi displayed the biggest smile, his little eyes glistening as he spoke about magic and fairy tales.

I smiled. “Would you like to hear a story, Hadi?”

He sat there, intensely bobbing his head. I grabbed him off the counter and took him back outside. Royce eyed me as I sat down on the grass with the five-year-old in my lap, stuffing chips into his mouth.

“Okay, so do you know the story about the Goddess of the Sea and the God of Sea Animals?”

He shook his head.

“Daryah is the Goddess of the Sea. She commands all the bodies of water, and she is the younger sister of Laleh. She was calculated and harmonious. On the other hand, Rustam was the complete opposite. He was also a God in the Water Realm and spent most of his time riding the waves with dolphins and sometimes sharks. He’s said to be curious and playful, always joking.”

I gave Hadi the last of the chips and put the bowl aside.

“Do you want to know a fun fact about dolphins?”

Hadi was invested in the story. His eyes glistened as he listened to every word.

“Bottlenose dolphins have a signature whistle unique to each dolphin. When Rustam declared his love for Daryah, he created a unique whistling sound for her so she’d know wherever he would be.”

I heard shouting from inside the cabin and looked back to the patio. Mykel had fallen asleep, and Danish was on his phone. “Hey, can you sit with your dad while I check on your uncle Royce?”

I took his hand as we got up and walked him over to Danish. “Do you know what happened?”

“His father called,” Danish said, picking up Hadi. “He’s probably chewing him out for something office-related, which annoys me a lot. It’s Royce’s company. He can do whatever the hell he wants.”

“Language, remember?” I smiled. “I’ll go check on him.”

I walked back into the cabin and found him yelling on the phone, ending the call. Royce tossed his phone to the side and sat with his hand covering his face.

“Hey, baby, are you okay?” I sat beside him, holding onto his arm.

“I should’ve told you about this sooner. But I just. I don’t know why I didn’t. It’s not that I don’t trust you or anything. Because I do.” He was rambling in broken sentences, trying to put his thoughts together. “I was looking into the company financials a while back and came across some hospital bills that seemed off to me. And I’ve been digging into the disappearance of my uncle. It was his company that he started about thirty years ago. But he was only able to run it for about a year. Yellow Dwarf was his dream. He wanted Wolfe Legacy to be the best. I feel like he knew someone would try to take this all away from him.”

My fingers dug into his bicep while I let him fall into my arms. I tried to understand the situation and, at the same time, kept him from falling apart.

“Mr. Hemmings talked to my father about my meeting with him the other day, and my dad just called me to chew me out. He said I wasn’t handling the company properly. And that I wasn’t professional enough. My head hurts from all this shit. From all the lies and deceptive stories my father has created. Everyone thinks my father is a collected and warm-hearted person. But the man is pure ice. My uncle knew something would happen to him, and he left the company in my name. “

That timeline was beginning to seem awfully familiar. “What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I think my father had something to do with my uncle’s disappearance.” He whispered.

“Your father?” I asked softly. It felt as if someone had snatched the world from beneath my feet. I anxiously sat there reviewing the timeline Royce had laid out. Darius had started a company a year before he was killed, and that was almost thirty years ago. He had a nephew who was around six or seven at the time.

“I know this is our empire, but I put the company under the little nugget’s name.” Darius had said. “He’s my everything.”

“Whatever seems best to you.” I smiled.

“I’m happy. Are you happy?” He asked.

“Ecstatic. Your happiness is my happiness, right?” I smiled, leaning closer to him. “So whatever makes you happy makes me happy.”

He never once mentioned his brother or wanted to hand the company over to him.

“Yeah, my dick of a father.” Royce’s mumbling brought me back to reality.

“What was his name?” I asked, gathering up the courage to face the possible truth.

“Who? My uncle?” He asked, pulling me onto his lap.

I nodded.

“Darius.” He said softly.

His Name Was Darius

Royce



“His name was Darius Wolfe,” I muttered, burying my head into the curve of her neck.

Darius Wolfe was a character. He was funny and friendly but blunt when he needed to be. He was the curious and adventurous type, always looking for the next experience.

“Death is inevitable, right?” He would say, “So why not live life to its fullest?”

And the man lived his life. He traveled worldwide, built his dream, and even fell in love. Only the inevitable he never feared caught up with him, erasing him from the face of the Earth, but never from my heart. I loved my uncle. He was the one person after Vanny who truly cared about my well-being. When my father mentioned Yellow Dwarf was his dream project, I couldn’t disappoint him.

Hadi had fallen asleep just as the night fell. I stood grilling burgers just as Adirah walked up behind me.

“Hey, are you okay?” I asked. “I didn’t mean to scare you like that or anything. It has been heavy on my mind, and you’re the first person I actually talk to about these things. You

have a way of snatching the truth from me. I don't want to lie to you."

She stood staring, her honey-amber eyes filled with affection.

"I'm fine. I should be asking you if you are fine." She smiled, reaching up on her toes to kiss my cheek.

"I'll be fine as long as you are in my life."

She tucked her hair behind her ear. "Is this what you meant when you said fresh burgers?"

"Hell, yes." I grinned. "They are better than the frozen shit."

She grabbed some fries from the platter, munching on them as we stood silently.

"So why did you choose architecture?" I asked.

"I just like drawing buildings and then seeing them come to life. I love that Yellow Dwarf will be something I worked on."

"And you did an amazing job."

"What about you? Why do you love to travel so much?"

"I think because it somehow brought me closer to my uncle. My father never gave me the love Darius did, and when Darius disappeared, I always longed for it."

She encircled her arms around me from behind. "Why do you always say disappeared?" She asked softly.

I stood silent for a while. "They never found his body. So I hold to that one percent of optimism, thinking he might still be alive somewhere living his best life."

I turned around, facing her, and we stood enveloped in each other's arms. "I'm sorry you have to live through that." She whispered.

"Thank you for understanding." I breathed. "You taught me how to live again." I pressed my mouth against her, biting down on her lip. Her arms lazily wrapped around my neck, playing with the little hairs too short to fit into my messily tied

hair. Adirah and I were so indulged in each other that we didn't hear the burgers sizzling.

"Who's going to tell him he burned the burgers?" Mykel's voice rose from behind.

"You're the cop. You do it." Danish muttered.

I stuck out my middle finger, erupting them into laughter. I stole one more kiss before I turned to flip the burgers. "They are fucking idiots." He said. "Don't mind them."

After eating, Mykel sat contemplating whether to look over a case one of his team members had sent. He settled on looking over the case and then going to bed.

"Even on your time off. You still work." Danish rolled his eyes.

Mykel sipped the last of his beer. "Shut up. No one asked you for your opinion."

"Well, you still got it." Danish chuckled as Mykel walked back into the cabin.

"You've been quiet," I asked Danish. All through dinner, he focused on his burger and the open sky.

"She's getting married. And her parents want Hadi to be there."

"No. Fuck no." I grumbled. Adirah ran her hand softly through my hair, playing with the loose strands, as I rested my head in her lap. "She gave up her fucking rights to the kid a long time ago. I'm not going to allow it. They'll have to go through me first to put him through that."

Haider was our pride and joy. The kid was sometimes whiny but was the light in our almost shitty lives. After Saima left, we all became his guardians, one way or another.

Danish nodded. "Thanks. For a second, I forgot I was the actual dad with your speech." He joked before getting serious again. "I'm scared. For him."

"It's going to be fine. Besides, you aren't entitled to give her shit. You know I've never been jealous of a five-year-old as

much as today.” I laughed, intertwining my hand with Adirah’s, resting it over my chest. “He stole my girl for the whole day.

“Well, he is the cutest thing,” Adirah smirked. “You have a tough competition.”

“Yeah, his teachers say he’s the life of the party.” Danish sat with admiration. “Kids are so pure and full of light, I don’t know how anyone could think about harming them. You have to be some special kind of demon to one, let that thought cross your mind, and then two, act upon it.”

“There’s a special place in hell for those demons,” Adirah muttered.

We sat in silence for a while until Danish stood up to leave. “I’m going to bed. Don’t start a fire or anything.”

A hitching laugh escaped from my throat.

“You both make me want to pull the fucking hairs out on my fucking arms one by one.” He yelled. “The hell is wrong with you?”

“What happened?” Vanny was there, too. We both sat petrified to the bone. She looked at us and immediately sat Darius down.

“These little boogers lit a tree on fire.”

“How?” She asked, startled.

“Apparently, this one brought fireworks.” He said, pointing to me.

Vanny’s laugh echoed in my mind.

“Fire?” Adirah asked, bringing me out of my daze.

I stood up, grabbing her hand, “I’m going to show you something.”

I led her through the trees planted at the back of the cabin, soon emerging into the clearing. We stood in front of a couple of small palm trees at the end of the property, overlooking a cliff. The trees held together a hammock. “What exactly are we looking for?” She asked.

“One time we were here, I snuck in firecrackers, and Danish and I ended up lighting this tree on fire.” I laughed, pointing to the burned spot on the tree.

“Oh, you drove them crazy, didn’t you?” She laughed. “And now you’re driving me crazy.”

She crashed her lips to mine, and I pulled her up, wrapping her legs around my waist. Drowning in lust, I pushed her head aside, having definite reach to her neck. My lips trailed down the curve of her neck, down her clavicle, stopping at the neckline of the shirt she was wearing.

“We can’t fuck on that.” I breathed heavily, “And if I take you inside, you will have to be quiet.”

“How can I stay quiet after the shit you do to me, Royce Wolfe?”

“You’re tempting me.”

“Am I? Mr. Royce Elias Wolfe?” She pressed her nose against mine as she sensually breathed out my name.

I couldn’t hold back my desire for her any longer. I wanted her like a drug. I needed her because I was addicted. And I couldn’t stop because I wouldn’t exist without her.

I couldn’t exist without her.



Her hands rested on my chest as she sat on top. My thumbs toyed with the edge of her shirt, caressing her exposed skin. She brought her lips to mine, gently planting a kiss before moving to my neck and slowly down my chest, savoring every inch of my body.

“Take this off.” She whispered, tugging at my shirt. Immediately, I pulled my shirt over my head, tossing it to the side.

“Your turn.”

She teasingly pulled off her shirt, revealing her perfect curves and that little tattoo I was obsessed with. My hand cupped around her breasts, pinching her nipples between my thumb and pointer finger. Her head fell back, and she let out a small moan that had me connecting my mouth to hers.

“Adirah,” I groan through the kiss, her fingers tracing over the outline of my muscles.

“Royce. Elias. Wolfe.” She smirks, feeling proud as she pauses to say my name.

I slid down the bed, positioning her wet cunt over my mouth. “I’ve told you more than enough times that you need to be careful when you’re playing with fire.” I slid my tongue through her entrance before she could say anything. She moans, lifting herself, her knees on either side of my head.

I pulled her back down, sliding my tongue inside, penetrating her cunt. She grasped the headboard as I held her down to keep from moving.

“Royce,” She whimpers, trying to lift herself from my grasp. “It’s too much. I’m going to come.”

“No, not yet.” I urged. I sucked her clit, absorbing every bit of her vanilla essence. I gripped her ass as she rocked her hips back and forth against my mouth. My own body was taut from the heat, my cock itching to be inside.

I had her on her back the next second, forcing my fingers inside. My tongue darted over her clit, and she cried out my name. “Royce, baby, please. Make me come.”

I loved seeing her beg. But tonight, I wanted to worship her. *I wanted to be the one that begged her.*

My fingers pulsed faster, and she lost all comprehension. Her hands roamed over her neck as she tried to hold on. “Amare, let go.”

I gave her clit one more suck before curling my fingers inside, making her come into my mouth.

And I consumed every bit of her release.

Her legs fell in defeat to her orgasm. “Kiss me.”

With the taste of her arousal still raw on my tongue, I leaned down, fusing my mouth to hers. She gently touched my cheeks, kissing me back with force. “I play with fire, your fire, because I love being ruined by you over and over again.” She whispered, breaking the kiss. “I only want you.”

I hovered over her, letting her words sink in. “I’m yours amare. I’ll always be yours. You’re my stranger that makes my soul come alive.”

“*Dilbari.*” She said softly, sinking back into the bed. Her hands fluttered to undo my pants, sliding inside to free my cock. “Lay down.”

Seeing her in command sent a wave of electric currents through my nerves. Her hand gripped around the base of my length while she lazily trailed her tongue to circle the tip. I groan, and she beams in contentment. She plays with the head more, licking the slit before sliding my cock into her mouth. Her hands fall between my legs, and she let her fingers trail my inner thighs.

Now it’s my turn to beg as she strokes my cock in rhythm, moving faster and sucking harder. I groan heavily. My legs tremble as I grab onto a handful of her hair. She smirks, locking her mischievous gaze with mine. “Fuckin’ hell, Adirah.”

She rewards me by sucking harder on the head. Her hand grasps my sac, kneading and watching as I lose a sense of who I am. “Amare,” I choke out, my voice strained from her pleasurable actions. She knows what is coming because her movements pick up speed. “Fuckin’ shit. I’m going to come.” I rasped, “And I want you to swallow it.”

I barely finished the sentence because she sucked my cock one last time and set me free, squeezing out every bit of the hot liquid into her mouth. She sits on the bed with her hands resting on my thighs, strings of cum and saliva hanging from her lips. I pull her on top of me. “Who the fuck are you?” I whispered. “Why the hell was that so fucking hot?”

Before she has a chance to answer, my mouth crashes against hers. “*Dilbari,*” she says, pulling back. “That’s why it’s

so fucking hot.”

My hand caresses her spine as she uses her thumb to wipe off her lips. “You’ve made me a fucking beggar. Royce Wolfe never once begged.” I said.

She smirked. “*Royce Elias Wolfe* will now forever beg.” She let my name drip from her tongue. “You’re not a beggar. You’re a fucking ruined man with no chance of restoration. You’re mine, *Wolfe*. It’s time I put a leash on you.”

Oh, holy fucking shit.

I sat there staring in awe. “Keep talking like that. I’ll probably end up coming again without any effort.”

She fell beside me, wrapping her arm around my waist and tangling her legs with mine. “I love you.” She smiled up at me. “Like I love you a lot.”

“How much exactly?” I joked.

“If there’s a word that exceeds infinite? Than that much.” She whispered onto my neck.



“Does it snow here?” Adirah asked, coming down the stairs the following day. She kissed my lips, playfully giggling, to which Haider had some thoughts to offer.

“Euw,” He scrunched his nose. “Uncle Royce, you’re kissing her on the *lips*.”

I had half a mind to tell the kid his dad did the same to his mom while conceiving him.

“A little, like towards the end of December? It’s not as much to turn the ground white, but it gets freezing.”

“That’s sounds beautiful.”

“Maybe we should come here, just you and me.” I smiled, kissing her again.

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

Haider groaned once again. He sat on the counter, chucking mini M&M's into his mouth, refusing to share. His exact words were that M&M's were terrible for my old health, and I would end up in the hospital with chocolate poisoning, whatever the hell that was if I ate them. But for kids, it was okay because it gave them superpowers.

Kids with their fucking imagination.

"Really, Superman?" I laughed, kissing her again. He stared at me in disgust. "If you give me some M&M's, I'll stop."

He handed over a few of the colored candy, feeling defeated.

"Here." I handed him a plate with chocolate chip pancakes, and his face lit up again. "Do you want to sit outside?"

He shook his head and tore a big piece, stuffing it into his mouth. "Thank you, Uncle Royce. You're the best."

Adirah stared at me dumbfounded. "Danish doesn't give him chocolate because he's afraid Hadi's teeth will end up with cavities." I clarified. "Danish loathes going to the dentist."

"My dad's scared of the dentist," Haider laughed.

"I am not." Danish came down the stairs, yawning, and poured himself a cup of coffee. Mykel followed shortly after, only he rummaged through the fridge for a beer.

"You guys need to cool it with the beer." Adirah stood with her arms crossed over her chest.

"Seriously," Danish agreed.

"Yeah? Says the girl who down a whole bottle of alcohol in one sitting." I laughed.

"Wait, what?" Mykel turned around, staring right at Adirah. "And you're alive?"

"Yeah, she drank a two hundred dollar cabernet sauvignon on top of a tequila shot I got her without puking that night in the bar."

"Holy shit. Are you sure you're human?" Mykel laughed.

“No wonder she didn’t remember me. I mean, how do you forget this?” I continued, pointing up and down my body.

“Narcissistic much? He thinks he’s the male equivalent of Scarlett Johansson.”

“You got me a tequila shot?” She asked innocently.

“I did.”

“And what did I do with it?”

“You drank yours with the salt and lime but took mine and dripped down my chest and licked it off.”

“You’re fucking lying.”

“Am I?” I smirked, my voice getting low. “How the hell do you think we ended up at your place? You really think I would’ve let you leave the bar after doing that?”

She stood blushing, walked over, and wrapped her arms around me from behind. “I wouldn’t mind doing that again.” She whispered into my ear.

I laughed before getting irritated at Mykel rattling everything in the fridge. “What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

“The fuck happened to all the beer. There were like two left yesterday.”

“Myk, open the other side of the fridge,” I muttered.

He opened the right side of the fridge and grabbed a bottle, popping the top off the counter. “Can I have some?” He held out his hand in front of Hadi, and the kid gave him the candy in abundance.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” I screeched in a high high-pitched voice.

“Language.” They said in unison.

“I’ve been asking this little booger for some since, like, the sun came out, and he told me it’s bad for my old health.” Danish was laughing hysterically, and Adirah soon joined in.

“Uncle Mykel needs the superpowers. He chases bad guys.” Haider said with a smug look spread across his face.

Mykel lifted Haider off the counter and balanced him in his arms. “You’re my favorite nephew.”

“I’m only looking out for you, Uncle Royce. I love you too.”

“You better, or else no more chocolate chip pancakes.” I walked over and planted a kiss on his cheek. “You guys want to order pizza for dinner?”

“Since when do you eat pizza?” Danish asked.

“Since I met her.” I tilted my head towards Adirah, earning a whistle from Mykel.

“Where were you all our lives?” Mykel joked.



The cabin trip ended quicker than I had hoped. Danish and Haider were the first to leave that night, but not before I promised Haider to take him to the movies.

Mykel and I talked a bit about the case before he left, leaving me and Adirah alone.

“We should get back.” She smiled. “I need to review the projects so we can start building the models.”

I pulled her into my arms. “I want to stay here, with you, forever.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear, her liquid gold eyes glistening under the room’s soft light. “That would be the dream, wouldn’t it?” She said softly. “Kiss me.” She wrapped her arms around my neck. “I feel like I’m in a fairy tale.”

“You are. You’re in my fairy tale.” I affirmed.

She smiled. “So you really want to spend the night?”

“Okay, fine. How about you tell me a story about one of your travel adventures?” She started. We sat on the couch, and

she laid her head on my extended legs. “And then I’ll tell you the story I told Hadi about Daryah and Rustam.”

“You really want to hear a story?” I ran my hand through her hair. “I don’t think I have a story as good as yours.”

“Just anything.” She looked up, smiling. “I want to know what it’s like.”

“Okay, I spent a summer in O’ahu, one of the Hawaiian Islands. It’s such a beautiful place, and they have this thing where you can swim with the sharks without a cage or anything.”

“So you’re literally in the water with real live sharks.” She stared up at me in shock. “Didn’t that freak you out?”

I shook my head. “I mean, at first, it did a little. But there’s a misconception about sharks being man-eaters. When, in fact, they don’t really prey on humans.”

“They don’t?”

“Nope. They usually feed on small things, like fish and stuff. And when they see a human, they think, ‘Oh, a predator.’ The tour reminded me that sharks are beautiful creatures and should be protected, you know? But so many of them have been removed from the ocean. They take their fins, and some people just, you know, kill them for sport.”

“That’s awful.” She sighed.

“Your turn.” I grinned and traced the side of her face.

“In the Afsana, it’s said that Daryah always said the water was her first and only love until Rustam came along. She would sit out on the beach, her feet dipped in the water, writing messages or poems on little pieces of paper. She would wedge them into these little glass bottles and throw them into the water.

“Rustam found one of her notes. She had written a poem.

*You call it madness,
But I call it love
I see you in the waves
But you see me nowhere near, far, below, or above.*

In the last line, she referred to the five Realms in Azure. By near, she was referring to the living on the Water Realm and Earth Realm. Above would mean the Air Realm, below obviously referred to the Fire Realm where Sephtis' *Duzakh is*, and far meaning the realm of the Spirit Gods."

"Oh wow, I would never have guessed that." I intertwined my fingers with hers, bringing her hand to my lips. I sat mesmerized by how her eyes glistened as she told the story.

"One day, Rustam found the note." She continued. "But didn't know it was Daryah, throwing them into the ocean. He asked around, but no one knew it was Daryah. He caught her one day. He sat beside her and handed her the paper with the written poem. 'I found it floating in the ocean, thought you might want it back.' He told her. She ignored him. 'It's not polite to litter, you know.' At this point, she was annoyed. 'Don't you have some fish to feed?' He replied by kissing her on the cheek and walked back into the water. When submerged from his torso down, he told her, 'You might not see me in the waves, my love, but I see you near, far, below, and above' and disappeared into the waves. She'd sit out waiting for him every day, but he never came. Until one day, she heard a whistle.

"She saw come up from the water, surrounded by dolphins. She stood, walking towards him, and said, 'I'm the Goddess of the Ocean. I rule the waters and command the waves. How could you possibly think I wrote that poem for you?' He smiled. 'Because I'd die to be at your command.' He fell back into the water, disappearing again. After that day, he'd whistle for her, and she'd always find her way to him because, in the end, she fell in love with him, too.

"Do you always do that?" I watched her wave her hands around, explaining her sentences with her hands.

"What?"

"Moving your hands around."

"Yeah, I feel like I'm giving my words life." She laughed, waving her hands more intrusively in front of my face.

I pulled her up so she was resting against my chest. I closed my eyes, letting my head fall into the crook of her neck. Her vanilla scent invaded my nose. “How come you always tell the best stories, Adirah?”

“I don’t know.” She squeaked. “I just love reading about Azure, and these stories have been stuck with me for a long time.”

“You’re fucking amazing,” I whispered, kissing her cheek. “You’re a fucking masterpiece. I can’t resist staring at you. I didn’t know I could love someone as much as I love you.”

Her cheeks blushed crimson, and she kissed the palm of my hand. We sat there entangled in each other’s arms while I thought about how once she had described her fairytale life. I’d take her on her dream date of touring Irving Bay’s restaurants through the weekend and surprise her with a ring in the end. I would let her plan her perfect fairytale wedding. And how we’d have three kids running around, our house filled with laughter and joy. I saw myself planning a life, an eternity with Adirah.

It didn’t scare me one bit.

I knew it would always be her holding my hand in the end. Losing her was the only thing that churned my stomach the wrong way. I couldn’t help but love her more and more each day, hoping our love would never end.

Adarvan the Noble Warrior

Adirah



“Are you okay?” Jared popped into my office as I sat with my head resting against my chair, staring at a blank screen.

“Yes,” I said, snapping out of my daze. “I was thinking about the best approach to start building the model for the Yellow Dwarf project.”

“Well, we could start by using the WLS software and just setting up a basic structure.” He suggested. “And we could also divide the work so that not everyone is working on the same thing simultaneously, and it might be quicker.”

He referred to the unique software Wolfe Legacy Studio, where we digitally created models for our clients. The software was a big game-changer for the company, giving clients a better feel of what their building would look like. The software also had a cool feature that allowed you to take a tour of the facility and see the potential final product.

“Okay, yes,” I said. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“I’m sure you would’ve eventually.”

“Have the table room set up with the tablets, and have Jenessa check the software on each of them.”

“Jenessa isn’t here today.” He explained.

“Why not?” I asked why one of my employees didn’t show up when we were working on a heavy project.

“Her sister, Nellie, went cliff diving and had an accident.” He explained.

“Oh my god. What happened? Is she okay?”

“I don’t know, and last I heard, she was in a coma.” Jared shrugged. “Last I heard, she hit her head pretty hard.”

“Okay, just have someone set up the tablets. I’ll check the software myself, and we’ll begin working on the models after our lunch break.”

While Jared went about setting the table room, I stood in the elevator, hoping I’d find Royce alone in his office.

“His father and mother are here,” Millie informed me as I approached his office. “They’ve been going at it for a while.”

“Why?” I asked, glancing at his door. “What happened?”

“Something about how he treated one of the board members. And his father wants to be appointed CEO again. When Royce asked what happened to his uncle, his father slammed the door. I’ve been itching to peek through the glass on the other side.”

“I don’t get why it’s such a big deal.” I rolled my eyes. “Royce, I mean, Mr. Royce owns the company, right?”

Millie nodded.

“Then it shouldn’t matter to anyone.” I rolled my eyes.

“I think there’s something else going on.” She said softly. “I think Mr. Royce inherited the company. And Mr. Wolfe isn’t fond of that.”

A few moments later, the door opened, and Mr. Colton Wolfe walked with his wife hand in hand. He sneered his eyes at me in a lingering stare before quickly disappearing into the elevator. “What in the FUCKING HELL!” I heard Royce yell. I immediately rushed inside to find a big hole punched into the

wall. He stood in the middle, trying to comprehend what was happening.

“Royce,” I whispered, closing the door. His hand was covered with dripping blood that began to stain the carpet. He stood in the middle of the room, shaking with anger. I carefully walked over and sat him down. I grabbed him as he fell into my arms, tears staining his cheeks. “Baby, what happened?” I asked softly, but he shook his head.

“Come on, we’re going to have lunch in a hospital,” I murmured, wiping my thumb across his cheeks. He didn’t say a word but followed me out of his office.

Millie gasped when she saw his hand. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Can you have Jared start the model? Tell him I’ll be a little late.”

“Is there anything you need done specifically?” She asked.

“Have him start on the base of the building with everyone. Tell him to put in the measurements and work on building the foundation. I’ll come to coordinate the rest.”

She nodded and picked up a few of the bigger drywall pieces before she phoned in a custodian.

“Care to explain what the hell just happened?” I asked when we were en route to the hospital.

“No.” He muttered. “Your car is fucking small.”

Well, okay then. The ride to the hospital was silent. Royce sat in the passenger seat, his leg bent, resting against the door. His hand was covered in dried blood, and he rested his head against the seat, pinching his eyes.

“Are you okay?” I asked in a small voice.

He grunted but still stayed quiet. After finding a parking spot, I helped him out of the car. He winced in pain when his hand hit the door. “Fucking hell.” He muttered. I was about to grab his hand, but he slung it over my shoulder. He rested his chin on my head as we entered the hospital’s emergency room.

“It hurts.” He gritted through closed teeth.

“Yeah, I know.” I rolled my eyes.

“The hell happened to him?” Kinza asked, pulling me aside in the emergency room after Royce had been admitted.

“I don’t fucking know,” I said. “All I know is that there was some drama with one of the board members. His father had a fit and called him when we were at the cabin during the weekend. And today, I think he asked to be appointed as CEO.”

“What the hell?” She rolled her eyes. “He’s handling the company as best as he can, right? You’ve been telling me the project is huge for the company.”

“The project is going great. We’ve had so much progress, and he’s doing an amazing job. ” I said. “I’d like to think we all are. And I’m not saying that because I slept with him, but he’s really understanding. I know there’s something else going on. He won’t tell me.”

“You know his hand or a bone in his hand is probably fractured. His face is like yellow.” She said, peeking out from the wall and looking at Royce sitting on the bed with his hand covering his face.

“Yeah, he’s in a shit ton of pain but still keeps acting like he’s Captain America over here,” I said. “I’m going to go be with him.”

“Just let me know what happens. And if you need anything.” She smiled. “Oh, and are you still coming to the fundraiser? They changed it, so it’s during the night now.”

“Yeah, of course. Do you want me to bring the cookies from the house and help you set up?”

“I would love that.” She hugged me. “But if you want to stay with him, I understand.”

“Okay, I’ll come after I wrap up with work,” I said, returning to Royce. He sat with his jaw clenched from the pain. I ran my hand through his hair and kissed his temple.

“Did they give you something?” I asked, and he nodded.

“Do you need anything else?” I asked, and he shook his head. “Water?”

“Are you sure?”

“Fuckin’ hell, Adirah, I said no.” He muttered. “I just want to be left alone right now.”

“What?” I asked, hoping I didn’t hear him correctly.

“I said I don’t want anything.” He seethed, glaring into my eyes. “I don’t want water. I don’t want to talk about what happened. And I don’t want you hovering over me like I’m some helpless little kid.”

“Royce, baby,” I said softly. I tried intertwining my fingers with his hand, but he pulled it away. “I’m not judging you for what happened. I just want you to be okay.”

“No, Adirah, I’m not okay. Do I fucking look okay? My fucking hand hurts like hell. And the vein in my head is about to burst.” He propped up his leg, resting his elbow on his knee, covering his face with his hand. “And what part of I want to be left alone right now, didn’t you get?”

“Royce?” His tone took me aback. I understood he was in pain but didn’t think he’d take his anger out on me. *Again, for the third time.* Seeing him amid a storm ached my insides. Was this a regular occurrence with Royce? Was I supposed to pretend his behavior was okay, even though I didn’t enjoy it? Mainly when it was aimed towards me, when all I tried to do was help.

“Stop fucking trying to make everything okay. Stop trying to be this sunshine of a fucking person. It’s irritating at times.” His hand clenched into a fist that he drummed on his forehead. “I don’t need you or anyone to understand shit.”

Sunshine of a person? I was irritating?

“You really want me to go?” I asked in a voice barely audible, unable to muster the courage to continue the conversation.

“You know what, screw you,” I muttered when he didn’t answer. “Forget, I asked.”

“Adirah.” He realized what he had said and tried to grab my hand, but I stepped back.

“I’ll stop being irritating, Royce.” My voice cracked towards the end of the sentence.

“Amare.” He called out as I walked away.

I turned around. “Don’t.” My voice wavered, and I was on the verge of crying. “Call me that anymore.”

The walk back to my car felt longer than it should’ve, each step harder than the previous. It was as if I was walking through quicksand, sinking deeper and deeper in my sorrow. I expected this from everyone else in the world, but not Royce. Never Royce. It wasn’t until I got in my car that I realized I had been crying. I sat there reliving the past five minutes. My vision was blurry from tears. I don’t know what happened in that office a couple of hours ago, but I planned to find out.



After hearing what happened, Jared asked if he should take charge. I sat in the table room, wallowing in my anger-filled tears. He had no right to treat me like that. Royce had no right to walk into my life, trap me in his stupid, crabby heart, and amount me to dirt.

“Are you okay? Do you want to take a break?” His voice was filled with concern. “I can guide them through the project if you want to take the rest of the day off.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s fine. I can manage.”

“Is Mr. Royce going to be okay?” He asked in a soft voice.

“I don’t know, Jared, hopefully everything works out.” I flashed him a fabricated smile, letting him know I was okay and everything else was fine, even though internally, I was falling apart.

“What if we added like these kinda rock things around?” He changed the subject. He used the pen to drag some rocks to fill the side walls. It didn’t look right.

“Can you pull up an image of that castle in their game?” I asked, focusing my attention.

“Yeah, of course.” He took a few moments to find the castle. “Here.”

“Yeah, you see how the outer wall is made of stone. How about we made it something similar to that?”

“Oh, that’s what you meant.” He said. “Like this.”

“Oh my God, yes.” I smiled, seeing the building come to life.

We spent the rest of the workday building the model. After wrapping up, I spent the rest of my evening helping Kinza, and a few of her friends set up for the fundraiser.

“How come they changed it to the night?” I asked as we laid out the cookie boxes on the table.

“They have a few people coming in to do a speech and will end up continuing the fundraiser through online donations.” She explained. “I’m glad you made it, though.”

“I needed to be out and surrounded by alcohol,” I muttered.

“Are you okay? Is Royce okay?”

“Can we not talk about him right now?” I mumbled, trying to forget Royce’s behavior.

“Why do you seem off today? More on the quiet side. That’s unlike you.” She noticed. “Did you guys fight?” Her voice got low and cold, “Do I need to explain the sign on our door to him? I did warn him I would end him if he ever hurt you.”

“Calm down, Sparky.” I laughed.

“I will punch you if you call me Sparky again.” She grumbled. “I will also punch him where the sun doesn’t fucking shine.”

I downed a glass of champagne, quickly grabbing another as she pondered her plan. “But wait, what if you guys can’t have babies after I punch him? That would be mean of me.”

I coughed up my champagne, immediately setting my full glass on the table. “The hell is wrong with you?” I asked, wiping my mouth.

“What?” She shrugged. “You guys would make cute babies.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh god, my throat hurts now. And what part of let’s not talk about him didn’t make its way to your brain?”

She grinned, showing her perfect teeth. Her brown eyes filled with mischief. She was still dressed in hospital scrubs, saying it had been a long day. *Ladies and gentlemen, my best friend.*

“Are we still on for the movie?” I asked, watching as the area filled up with more people.

“Yeah, I’m free tomorrow. We can go then.” She smiled. “Okay, don’t turn around, but your knight in not-so-shining armor has arrived. His hand is definitely broken. Metacarpal fracture, I believe it’s not that bad, which is why they let him go.”

“Fucking shit.” I gulped down the champagne again as Kinza waved over to Royce. “Don’t fucking call him over here.”

“Too late.”

“Hey, Sparky,” Royce kissed the top of my head.

“Sparky is about to turn into Firey after the stunt you just pulled.” She crossed her arms over her chest, eyeing his bandaged hand.

“Can I talk to her?” He asked softly. Kinza rolled her eyes before walking away.

“Amare.” He breathed.

“I told you not to call me that,” I said in a small voice. Tears pooled around my eyes.

“Adirah, let me make it up to you.”

“Is that what you do, Royce? You take your anger out on people, treat them like the fucking piece of shit they are because no one is better than Royce freaking Wolfe.” I closed my eyes and let the tears fall.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not enough. You had no right to treat me like that.” I grabbed my phone off the table. “You wanted to be left alone. Consider this as me leaving you alone.” I tried to walk past, but he managed to snake his arm around my waist and pull me into a hug.

“I thought I told you not to walk away from me.” He breathed onto my neck.

I leaned into his touch, and the smell of his intoxicating cologne filled the air. He used the edge of the thumb of his injured hand to brush away the fallen tears staining my cheek. “I just wanted you to be okay,” I whispered.

“I know.” He said, hugging me tighter. “I’ll always be okay with you in my arms.”

“Is it broken?” I asked softly.

He nodded. “Yeah.” He muttered. “It’s going to take a while to heal.”

I sighed. “Was it worth it?” My fingers clasped onto his button-down shirt, resting my head on his hard chest, desperate to pretend as if the morning hadn’t happened. He stayed quiet and ran his good hand up my spine. “Let go of me.”

“No.” He frowned.

“Fucking let go of me,” I mumbled, coming to my senses. At this point, some of the guests were beginning to notice. “Royce, people are starting to stare.”

“Let them.” Royce does a decent job of keeping his expression empty, but the little crinkles forming at the corners of his eyes give him away.

I took a deep breath. “Was I always disposable to you?”

Shocked, he stepped back before securing me into an embrace again, afraid as if I'd run off for good. "What did you say?"

"I asked you if I was expendable," I repeated myself.

"How could you? Why would you? Why would you even think that?" He strayed, his brows tugging together in annoyance. "I didn't mean to call you irritable. You are anything but."

But I didn't believe that. A part of me didn't want to consider it had mistakenly slipped out. "Forget, I asked," I muttered, releasing myself from his grip. "Forget I ever existed. I don't care."

"Adirah. *I fucking care.*" His frown deepened as I turned around. My eyes shut from the stinging sensation and the anguish pounding through my body as I turn to leave. I could feel him staring, his stern gaze burning a hole in the back of my head. My conscience counted upon me running back into his arms, where he'd pull me in for a kiss, letting the world know he cared. He'd tell me he was genuinely sorry and would do anything for my forgiveness. But instead, I found myself walking away from the man who stole my heart—the man who stood by his promise of ruining me for anyone else.

It was good, though, right? I was bound to leave one way or another.



I sat at the edge of my bed, trying to understand the recent events. Kinza had caught me sitting in my car and staring at a tree. She had bought butter pecan ice cream. We stayed up half the night watching *Friends* and giggling like little teenagers. My thoughts were disturbed after I heard Royce's truck pull into his driveway, and I couldn't help but watch through the window. His hand held onto a bottle of water for a change, but I sat shocked when he opened the passenger, and out fell a girl with short dark hair, her heels dangling on her fingers. He closed the truck door and looked up, meeting his eyes with

mine. His eyes were remorseful, but I immediately hid behind the curtains, hoping he didn't see me. When I looked back, he was gone.

Who was she?

I sat back on my bed, drawing up a timeline of Wolfe Legacy, hoping I'd find something to help make sense of the situation, but my mind kept thinking about how he made sure she was okay as she stumbled out of his truck.

Are you awake?

It was past midnight when I texted Millie, looking for answers. Instead of texting back, she called.

"Hey," I said into the phone.

"Hi Adirah. Are you okay? I know today has been a rough day."

"I'm okay. I think." I sighed. "I wanted to know what happened today."

"Okay, today's fight wasn't just about the board meeting but more of a fight for power."

"Fight for power?" I asked. "How?"

"Colton Wolfe never wanted his son to become the CEO. When Royce's uncle built the company, he made Mr. Royce the legal owner after a certain age. I'm unsure as to what happened to Darius, but Mr. Wolfe always told people he was the owner. Mr. Royce has been digging around. I'm not sure what he's found. I'm sure he's been unfolding secrets that Mr. Wolfe didn't anticipate for them to surface. "

"Did his father hit him?" I asked softly, remembering his cheek was redder than usual.

"I don't know what happened behind closed doors, but it wouldn't be the first time this has happened." She said before ending the call.

I opened my laptop and searched for articles about Colton Wolfe before he became the company CEO. This led me to

find several articles regarding his bankruptcy and a few articles linking him with Darius' disappearance. There was one that was particularly interesting. I stared at the photo in the article. I hadn't seen Darius' face in over thirty years, and I couldn't help but cry, thinking that this was all a twisted game to steal his company. A company that was his dream.

"You should do this." I took his pencil and drew a few details on his sketch, modifying the design. He was working on a freelance design while the company was still going through the approval stages.

Darius stared at me in awe. "I'm the one who majored in architecture, right?"

"I believe so." I laughed.

"You should be running the company with me."

"No, I'd rather wait for you to come home instead." I smiled, running my fingers down his arm.

"Yeah, I think I'd like that too." He whispered, turning around. "I finally have everything I ever wanted."

I found myself sobbing as I read through the rest of the article. At the bottom was a photo from a surveillance camera where Darius' front faced the camera. His sleeveless green hoodie and white jeans were imprinted in my memory as they were the clothes I had buried him in. The caption mentioned the photo was from a retracted police report and was the last appearance of Darius. I sat haunted by the photo that must've been taken moments before his death. Before, his neck was brutally snapped, and he lost his life. The police have not been able to identify the other two men in the photo, but the more I stared, one of the men seemed awfully familiar. He wasn't my father, but he was still Azurian.

Adarvan. Illiyan's right-hand warrior. The noble warrior of Azure, as he was called in the Kingdom. A warrior who showed no mercy. He beheaded those who stood in the way of Illiyan's rule without giving it a second thought. Seeing him in the photo, the puzzle pieces began to fit together. The

questions I had been asking for the past thirty years suddenly had answers.

Illiyen didn't kill Darius. He formed a plan just as he always did and had Adarvan do his dirty work. Adarvan lured in Colton Wolfe, and they worked together to end Darius.

The sneer Royce's father gave me today made sense. He knows who I am.

He knows I'm Azurian.



“So Tony Stark dying, right?” Kinza stood at the counter buying our tickets for *Avengers: Endgame*. A movie we had grown to love and watched more than enough times. We were just about to enter the theater when I heard a familiar high-pitched voice followed by a mini human crashing into my legs.

“Hi Adirah.” Haider squealed. I picked him up off the floor, looking around for Danish, but instead, I saw Royce standing with his broken hand a distance away.

“Hey, Hadi.” I smiled. “What movie are you here to watch with your dad?”

He shook his head. “I didn't come here with my dad. Uncle Royce made me a promise. We're going to watch Avengers.”

“Of course he did,” I muttered. “And, of course, you are.”

“Who's the kid?” Kinza asked, smiling, before her eyes landed on Royce. “I thought no Oscar the Grouch.”

“I didn't invite him. This is Danish's kid.”

“Who the fuck is Danish?” She questioned as Royce walked up, stuffing the tickets into his pocket.

“Language.” I scolded.

“Oh shit. Right.” She gasped, realizing she had said another profane word, immediately covering her mouth.

“He’s my best friend,” Royce spoke, calmly holding out his arms to grab Haider.

“No, I want to sit with Adirah.” Hadi pouted, his little arms tightening around my neck. Royce ran his good hand through his hair, looking for the right words.

“It’s fine,” I said softly, looking away. “You should get him something to eat.”

Royce nodded before asking, “Do you want anything?”

“No. I’m fine.” I whispered before walking into the theater, clutching onto an excited Hadi.

Great. Just super fucking great.

Royce came to sit beside me, his knees touching mine, while Hadi sat on my lap. The theater was empty, except for a few people scattered about. Hadi leaned back and brought his voice down to a whisper. “Are you mad at Uncle Royce?”

I eyed Royce, looking at the screen, slowly munching on a candy bar, a bucket of popcorn in his lap. “Why would I be mad at Uncle Royce?” I asked, in wonder as to what Royce had told him.

“He said he was mean to you.”

Well, at least he told the kid the truth.

I nodded. “Yes, he was.”

“He also said that he said he was sorry.”

“He did.”

“So why are you still mad at Uncle Royce?”

Royce turned his head, his eyes meeting mine. “Because sometimes saying sorry isn’t enough. What happens when you break a glass plate?”

“It’s a goner. And you have to throw in the trash carefully.”

I smiled at his response. “Do you think saying sorry will fix the plate?”

He shook his head. “Nope. It’s broken.”

“You can say sorry and apologize a million times.” I started, my teary gaze locked with Royce’s. “But if you can’t uphold your actions, your words don’t mean a thing.”

Hadi grabbed some popcorn while Royce’s hand twitched, desperate to wipe my tears before they fell. I turned away, looking back at the screen.

“You want to get lunch somewhere?” Kinza asked just as the action in the movie had died down.

“Yeah, that’d be great.” I smiled, taking a deep breath. “Sushi?”

“Fuck yes.”

“Language,” Hadi said.

“Well, kid, you clearly know the words. Just don’t use them till you are like twenty. Or else your dad might have a heart attack.” She told him, reaching out to pinch his cheeks and pulling him into her lap. “You’re so cute. Who’s your favorite Avenger?”

He shook his head, “I like Loki.” A sly grin spread across the five-year-old’s face, clearly knowing Loki was not an Avenger.

“You have great taste. I like you.” They bumped his fist, getting lost in their conversation.

In the middle of the movie, Royce’s hand found its way to interlace with mine. He kissed the back of my hand before resting it against his chest.

“When I told Myk about you,” He started, “He told me not to take you for granted.”

“Are we going to talk about the drunk girl from last night?” I blurted out.

“It’s nothing.”

I pulled my hand away from his. “Then we have nothing to talk about. Enjoy the movie. You can go your way when it’s over, and I will go my way.”

“Adirah, can you stop fighting me for one second?”

I was fighting him? He was blaming me.

“Royce, *you* wanted to be left alone. Not me.” I gritted through my teeth, forcing my voice to stay low, even though I wanted to shout and scream. “I fucking left you alone. You brought home a fucking bimbo, which, honestly, I don’t care what you fucking do with your life anymore.”

His eyes met mine. “You don’t mean that.”

“I mean it in every fucking way possible.”



I mulled through lunch with Kinza. “Okay, I’m sorry.” I sat after a while of silence. “I know this was supposed to be relaxing and fun.”

“Hey, it’s okay, honestly. I’ve missed you.” She squeezed my hand. “The kid is adorable, by the way.”

“Danish is single,” I smirked. “If you want a kid as a package deal to throw off your parents.”

She laughed. “Why, what’s wrong with him?”

“Honestly, he’s sweet. They unanimously hate his ex, so that points to him being the normal one.” I shrugged. “How’s work?”

“Work has been stressful. Actually, that’s an understatement. We’re so understaffed, it’s not even funny anymore.”

“Also, it’s a big hospital that probably has funding.”

“No, it’s a government hospital. And the government is shit.”

I laughed. “Yeah, things related to power are usually shit.” I agreed. “How was the fundraiser?”

“It went amazingly well, especially after Wolfe Legacy was our biggest donor. I’m sorry. I’m trying really hard not to talk about him.”

“Biggest? Like he donated the most money?” My eyes bulged from their sockets. “God, I swear, he’s fucking everywhere.”

“Look, I don’t know how qualified I am to give you relationship advice after I think most men are mediocre.” She chuckled, stabbing a piece of fish and dipping it in the sauce. “But give him a chance to make it up to you. Set some non-negotiables, and let him know it’s over if he breaks them this time. I know the distance is eating you apart.”

“He yelled at me in the hospital. He had no right. And then he brought some bimbo home, saying it was nothing.”

“Wait, wait, hold up. *What bimbo?*”

“I don’t know who she is. But I feel like he knows her from somewhere.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Cause it looked like he fucking cared about her.” I sighed. “She was drunk and stumbling. And even with his broken hand situation, he was trying to get her in the house in one piece.”

That sounded more hypocritical laid out on the table than it did in my head.

“Yeah, I do need to end him,” Kinza muttered, finishing her plate. “You want to order more?”

“Yeah, like one more platter?” I grinned, stuffing maki into my mouth and licking off the sauce from my finger.

“My sister’s getting married.” She said after a while.

“That sounds fun.”

“I just hope I can catch a break from work and be able to go.”

The shiny gold accent glistening under the sunlight caught my eye as we waited for the second sushi platter. He stood with a smug smile outside the restaurant as if he had finally achieved victory triumph, and I supposed he was right to smile.

Adarvan. And he was staring right at me.

'Hello princess.' I heard him say. Warriors could communicate through their minds, a helpful tactic during wars. They were trained by the finest and learned how to transmit their thoughts to others. Others meant Gods as well. *'You've been troublesome to locate.'*

After thirty years, he had finally found me. I stood glued to my seat, staring at the man so far, yet close. I tried moving a finger, a foot, but I couldn't take my eyes off him.

'The King has been looking for you to bring you back to Azure.' He lowered his head, a gesture to acknowledge that I was still a princess, a runaway, but still a princess, and he was only a warrior, immortal, but a warrior.

'You should prepare to come home. Before I come with my men and the King himself to drag you back to Azure.' He said before disappearing into the air.

"Adirah." Kinza's voice brought me back into reality. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, fabricating a smile.

Word would get back to my father about where I was. And that would put everyone in the middle of my fight. The fight I had been running from for thirty years. The war I wasn't ready to start at any cost. In the process, I had let my guard down and put my friends in danger. I put Royce in danger. Staying mad at Royce might be the only safe option.



Kinza came home to darkness and silence. After lunch, she dropped me off, saying she would visit her parents. I sat at the bottom of the kitchen counter, and she shrieked when she saw me move my bottle of alcohol to my mouth.

"What the actual hell?" She uttered, turned on the living room light, and knelt beside taking a survey of my depressed state.

“What’s wrong?” She took the bottle from my hand. “Addy, are you on a suicide mission?”

“I’m sorry.” I sobbed.

“Addy, fucking hell, you better tell me what is going on.”

“I can’t tell you, but I can show you.” My voice quivered. “I’m not who you think I am.”

“Whoa, whoa, are you some spy working for the government? Because then I don’t know you.”

“Hold out your hand,” I said softly. She questionably and slowly inched her hand while I twisted my first two fingers together and circled them over her palm. Immediately, a mini tornado formed on her palm, swirling like its own being.

“Addy, what the hell is that?” She shrieked, sticking her hand away from her body as far as she could. Her eyes were about to drop out of her sockets. I pulled out my feather from my pocket and cut a slit down my palm, only freaking her out more.

“Why is your blood, *not* blood?” She said in a more frantic tone. “Addy, I’m going to have a heart attack, but what the fuck are you?”

“I’m the lost Goddess of Azure,” I whispered, resting my head against the kitchen cabinets as the wound on my hand closed, and there was no trace of it ever being cut.

“I’m dreaming, right?” She said softly. “Please tell me I’m dreaming.”

I wistfully shook my head, closing my palm on top of hers. “You’re not. And I think you should go to your sister’s wedding.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s found me.”

“But the story of the lost goddess,” She stopped midsentence, realizing the situation.

“That would mean Illiyan is your father.” She said softly. “He’s the one that did all those horrific things to you?”

I nodded. “The King of Gods is indeed my father.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Back up. You’re the lost goddess.” She calculated, “So that would mean you fell in love with a mortal?”

“Royce’s uncle. Darius.” I pulled out my phone and showed her the article I had found the other night.

“That guy you always talked about, that was him?” She asked silently. “What happened to him?”

“I always thought Illiyan found and killed him because he fell in love with me. But there’s more to the story.” I briefly explained how Royce’s father might also be involved, and he most likely had an idea that Azure was more a reality than a myth.

She looked at me, bewildered at everything happening, before she reached over and encircled me into a hug, wiping the tears from my cheeks. “I’m so sorry you had to go through all that.” She whispered. I felt her tears flowing onto my shoulder. “I want to be mad at you for hiding the truth. But please know I’m not. No one should have to go through what you went through. A father is supposed to be your biggest protector. Who the hell do you turn to after he’s the one who abused you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hey,” she said, sitting back on her legs. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Kinz, he’s not some monster we can lay out a box trap for. He’s the cunning beast who hunts his prey.” I explained. “And he takes everyone that matters to his prey along with them.”

We sat there against the kitchen cabinets. She asked me to do the “tornado thing” again and sat holding out her hand as the little funnel of air twisted around. I could tell she was still bewildered, but that was the beauty about Kinza. She saw people for who they really were.

“Adirah?” There was a knock following Royce’s soft voice at the door. I looked at her with pleading eyes, and she nodded

before clapping her hands to get rid of the tornado and then got up to answer the door.

“Hey, Grouchy,” She said, opening the door, and I held back my laughter.

“Hey, Sparky, thanks for inviting me the other day.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “I came to check on Adirah.”

“Of course, thank you for the donation. She went to bed early.”

“Is she okay? I miss not being with her.” His voice filled with concern.

“Well, maybe you should’ve thought about that before you yelled at her.” She said seriously. “And who’s the bimbo?”

“I know I took my anger out on her.” He muttered. “It was wrong. The bimbo is a friend from college. She needed help.”

“I’ll let Addy know you stopped by.”

“Okay.” His footstep faltered away, soon impossible to be heard.

“Friend from college?” She sat back down beside me.

“That could only mean one person.”

“Who?”

“Ava, his ex.”

“Shit, Addy, you need to talk to him and fix all this.” She groaned, pulling me into her arms. “When the hell did everything turn to shit?”

“I don’t know. And I know. I love him too much to hurt him.” I sobbed, “I want to live my life with him. Kinz, I fucking love him, and I don’t think I can live without him.”

A Haven Under the Cliff

Royce



Ava stood on my doorstep late at night after I had just wandered from Adirah's place. "Is this going to be a regular occurrence?" My brows tugged together as I stood in the doorway. Her hair was a mess, her lipstick smeared. The smell of alcohol was strong enough to make me drunk. She was going through a divorce, but it seemed more of a mid-life crisis, just happening a bit earlier than usual.

"Just this one night." She slurred, pushing past and collapsing on the couch.

I shook my head. "How long are you going to keep this up?"

She stayed quiet, closing her eyes. I brought out the trashcan and left her an ibuprofen tablet with water on the table. "Don't go puking on my couch." She was gone the second her head hit the cushions.

I sighed and took a shower, all while thinking about Adirah. I settled into my bed and pulled out my phone.

Hey.

Last I checked, I was instructed to leave you alone.

How many times do I have to admit I'm sorry?

I want to be left alone, Royce.

I can't do that.

And why not?

I fucking miss you. I miss your vanilla scent.

Her scent was the drug that kept me alive, the drug that kept me sane. I had been more than just an ass, but I realized too late. My father had barged into my office, demanding to be CEO again. After he critically stated he was retiring.

"You are the owner. Isn't that enough? You don't need to be the CEO as well." his voice rumbled. My mother gripped his hand, her gaze falling to the ground.

"Colton." She said softly. "You're being a bit harsh."

"Harsh? He hasn't seen harsh." My father raised his hand, the palm hitting my cheek. A sting shot through the left side of my face. I saw red before I clenched my fist and punched the wall. A stunned look appeared on my father's face as he stepped back before walking out of my office without another word.

I stood there watching the wall pieces slowly crumble to the ground. "What in the FUCKING HELL!" before Adirah walked in and sat me down, holding me so I didn't fall apart.

And what did I do? I blamed her instead for my anger.

I saw her standing at your door. That's Ava, isn't it?

Yes. But it's not what it looks like.

Is she still there?

Yes.

Royce, you're a grown-ass man. You're free to do whatever the hell you want. I'm sorry I ever got in the way.

I'd like to disagree.

She didn't reply.

Adirah, please talk to me.

I was desperate to go talk to ring her doorbell again, but I knew Sparky wouldn't appreciate it. I would have to wait until morning. *Fucking hell, it was going to be a long night.*



I stood in the kitchen, making coffee, not having the appetite to eat anything else, when the doorbell rang. Ava answered it. "Hi, can I help you?"

"Yeah, no. Hi. I was at Treks to get coffee, and since he had a broken hand, I got him a donut." Adirah's soft voice made it to my ears, but because I was a coward, I stayed in the kitchen. "I know he's been going through a lot, so yeah. I'm going to

go. And sorry, I would've brought more if I knew he had company."

That sly little sexy fox.

"Ava, who's at the door?" I called out, walking towards the door.

"I think it was one of your neighbors." She said, slamming the door. She made her way towards me, biting down on her lip. "I need a favor."

"Considering that's all I've been doing for the past couple of days? I'm not surprised." I rolled my eyes, taking a sip of my coffee.

"I need a job."

"I don't have an opening in the project department," I informed her, taking the brown bag with the donut. Adirah had written, 'Don't get used to it' on the front. And I chuckled reading it.

"Then where do you have an opening?"

"Paid internships in marketing, I believe," I said, munching on my glazed donut. "Why do you need a job all of a sudden? Didn't you get a shit ton of money from the bastard?"

She became quiet. Next to Wolfe Legacy, her father owned a pretty hefty company himself. He married Ava with his partner's son, hoping to strengthen the company's shares. Similar to what Danish's father had done with him. Only Ava's ex turned out to be violent and abused her in many ways, more than one.

"Sophie, what are you not telling me?" I asked softly. Her head perked at the mention of the name I once used to call her by.

"I turned down the money because I don't want to deal with him every month. And I told my father I no longer want to be around his company."

I sighed. "I'll see what I can do."

“I’m sorry.” She said softly, sinking onto the couch. “For everything I put you through.”

“Well, it’s in the past. I’ve moved on. You should, too.” I smiled. “Put your life back together. It’s easier said than done, but it’s not impossible. I have to get ready for work.”

A unison chatter of “Good Morning” erupted from Adirah’s team, asking me if my hand was okay as I walked into the table room later that morning. I smiled, giving them the basic details and ensuring everything was fine. She stood at the table’s edge, ignoring me as she leaned over the tablet, working on the model.

“Ms. Gaudin, where are we with the project?” I stood staring, and she worked, directing my questions towards her.

“We’re working on the model.” I pointed to the tablet.

I walked over, pulled a chair beside her, and sat conveniently close. “Show me. Is this from the game?”

“Yeah. I thought it’d be interesting if we took inspiration from the castle in the game. Not copy it or anything, but have similarities.” She waved her hands around the screen, guiding me through the creation.

“Is this all you’ve done so far?” I asked, slowly reaching over and trailing my hand down her thigh.

Her jaw clenched, and she gripped the drawing pen with force, her knuckles turning white. “Some of them have started on other parts of the building.” She gritted before excusing herself and walking back to her office.

I followed close behind, closing the door as she leaned over the table for support.

“Is that coffee from you? I mean, did you make it, like last time?” She stuttered, eyeing the cup on the middle of the table, with the words ‘just as you like it’ written across.

“Yes,” I mumbled.

She picked up the cup and threw it in the trash.

“The fuck did you do that for?” I didn’t wait for her reply. Instead, I grabbed onto her arm and turned her around. “Look, if you want to play this game, we can play it all day. That won’t change the fact that I love you. It won’t change the fact that I’m pissed at myself more than you are for how I treated you. And it most certainly will not change the fact that you are and always will be mine.”

I slipped my splint arm around her waist, closing the space between her, and crashed my lips onto hers. Surprisingly, she didn’t push back. Her arms wrapped around my neck, communicating she missed me too. Her body relaxed against mine, and I finally fueled my lust with her vanilla scent. I bit down on her lip, sucking and kissing, forcing her anger to flow away. Her hands dropped around my waist, pulling her body into mine, the warmth bringing me the comfort I missed throughout the night.

“Firstly, I’m fucking sorry. All the ways I can be sorry, I’m sorry. I’ll get on my hands and knees and beg if I have to.”

She smirked. “Now that would be a sight, wouldn’t it? I thought Royce Wolfe never begs.”

“Amare, for you, I’ll beg for your forgiveness for the rest of my life.”

She stayed silent.

“Secondly, there is no Ava and I. She came asking for help a couple of days ago. And last night, as well. She’s been going through some things and needed help. So I helped her.” I explained.

She took a step back. “What? Have you opened a hotel for your ex-girlfriend?”

“No, fuck no,” I said, pulling her back. “I’m not cheating on you, nor would I ever cheat on you.”

“Okay.” She said softly. “I don’t share what’s mine.”

“You’re mine, I’m yours, end of the fucking story.” I reminded her. “I don’t want to be shared. I willingly want to be the man you daringly ruined for anyone else.”

“I’m still mad at you,” She uttered. “You can’t just walk in here like you own the place and think a kiss will make everything alright.”

“I *do* own the place,” I said, lazily twirling my finger around in a circle.

“You know what I meant.”

“And maybe a kiss won’t make everything okay.” I flashed her a grin. “How about I let you cuff me this time?”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” She said, walking out of the office and back into the table room as everyone stood in wait for her to explain what had just happened. I walked by slowly, listening to their conversation, pretending to concentrate on a random file.

Jared was the first to talk. “I knew it.”

“You did?” She asked.

“Yeah, I’ve seen the way he looks at you.” He stood with his hands crossed over his chest. “He looks at us like he wants to plunge a stake into our hearts.”

I held back a laugh.

“Jared, cool it with the vampire novels.” She chuckled.

“Oh, that guy from the bar?” The conversation floated over. “Yeah, whatever happened to him?”

I watched as she pointed to me, and they all stood staring through the glass. “That’s him,” she confirmed, leaving everyone with a jaw-dropping stare.



“Millie!” I shouted from my office, from behind closed doors the next day, “What the fuck is this?”

I had been sifting through the pile of paperwork on my desk when I came across Adirah’s resignation letter.

Millie stuck her head in through the slightly ajar door. “It’s what the heading says it is. Mr. Royce. A resignation letter.”

“Yeah, I can read that. But I want to know why the hell this is on my desk?”

“Ms. Gaudin asked me to put it on your desk.”

“Is she in her office?”

Millie shook her head, “No, Mr. Royce, she didn’t come to work today.”

“Cancel my meetings and everything else I have planned.”

“But Mr. Royce? You have a board meeting, plus an interview.” She said, concerned. “You are already knee-deep with your father.”

“Tell them to take a stick and shove it up their ass.” I rolled my eyes. “Who’s the interview with?”

“Let me check.” She said, scrolling down her tablet. “It’s for Ava Evans.”

“Yeah, tell her she got the job,” I muttered before grabbing my keys and walking past Millie.

I stood in front of her door, genuinely thinking we were okay. When Kinza opened the door, I didn’t wait for her to invite me in. “Where the hell is she?” I rumbled. “And don’t you dare lie to me?”

“Cool it, Grouchy.” She made circles with her index finger and thumb before exhaling deeply. “She’s out back.”

I walked into the backyard and found Adirah sitting on the bench, her hair messy and her head stuffed between her legs—an almost empty alcohol bottle sloped from her hand.

“Do you want to tell me what the hell is going on?” I asked, kneeling beside her.

“He found me, Royce.” She was petrified.

It took me a minute to understand who she was talking about. Lost in my problems, I hadn’t acknowledged how she was doing yesterday.

“Your father?” I asked softly, eyeing the almost empty alcohol bottle. “Did you drink all of this?”

She nodded.

“The fuck, you’re going to get alcohol poisoning. Come here.” I pulled her down into my arms, collapsing on the grass.

“So that’s how it’s going to be?” I rested my chin gently over her head as she cuddled into my chest. “You’re just going to leave everything behind?”

She stayed quiet.

“What made you think the right thing to do was to run? From the life you’ve built here? From *me*?”

“I don’t want you fighting my battles.” She said quietly, taking a sip from the bottle. “I don’t want you getting in the middle of this.”

“Give me that,” I grumbled, taking the bottle and dumping it on the grass. “I made your problems my problems the day I met you.”

Her whole body shook as she finally sobbed her worries into my chest.

“Hey,” I whispered, resting my hand on her cheek and wiping her tears with my thumb.

“I don’t want to drag you into a mess where you don’t belong.” She blurted between sobs. “They’re dangerous people, and I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“Amare, the minute you tripped into my life, I made it my personal agenda to be a part of your every mess.” Her petite frame stayed curled against my chest, gradually calming down. Adirah always stood tall and strong. Her sarcastic personality was something I had grown to love, and overall, she made me a better person. Seeing her vulnerable and miserable ached my heart. I had lost my mind in just the few days we spent apart. The thought of her disappearing for good brought on a feeling of torment I wasn’t prepared for.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at a board meeting?” She asked moments later.

“You’re more important,” I kissed the side of her head, wiping the tears from her cheeks as they fell. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I’ve always been the problem.” She muttered.

“Who the hell told you that?” I asked. “Remember what you said on the boat the other day?”

She shook her head.

“You told me to take my head out of the trash can once in a while, and then I’d see that I’m actually worthy of being loved,” I quoted, remembering the bright smile on her face. “But maybe you should start taking your advice.”

“Is your hand okay?” She asked, her teary eyes looking up at me.

“I’m fine.” I smiled, pressing my lips against hers. I paused before admitting what had happened in the office. “I punched the wall because he slapped me.”

She stared at me in shock as her mouth transformed into a small ‘o’. “He did what?” She asked softly.

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“Has he done that before?” She intertwined her fingers with mine, kissing the back of my hand.

I nodded. “Yeah, he’s done it a couple of times.”

We sat there in silence, comforting each other’s sorrow before the sun became unbearable to stand.

“You want to go inside? The sun is scorching. And I don’t want to smell like a fucking wet cow.”

When she didn’t respond, I carried her to her room and fixed myself beside her.

“Royce.” She whispered. “You don’t have to stay.”

“The hell I don’t,” I whispered back.



“You really took the day off for her?” Kinza asked as I looked for a beer bottle in their fridge.

“I’ll take an eternity off for her.”

“She needs you. She doesn’t admit it, but I can see it.” She admitted. “She used to be shy as hell, you know?”

“We’re talking about the same person, right?” I chuckled. “The same person that threatened to smack me so hard, my ancestors would feel it?”

“Yeah.” She laughed. “Adirah used to be quiet when she first moved here. But I think you and your company showed her her true potential.”

“Yeah, Wolfe Legacy is different. We rely more on community building and creating relationships with our clients. We also listen to our employees.”

Kinza nodded. “Look how far she’s made it up the chain.”

“I know. It makes me so mad to see that she’d throw everything away cause of her dick of a father.” I said. “I just don’t get how someone could be that cruel.”

“Yeah.” She muttered. “I don’t know either. Does she talk to you about what she went through?”

“She talked to me about it once when we went on the boat and told me why she doesn’t go in the water.” I sighed. “I felt like a total dick forcing her to go.”

“She wasn’t asleep when you came by last night,” Kinza confessed. “I just, I don’t know. I had to lie for her.”

“Besties before testes, right?” I laughed.

“You’re good for her, you know?” She sighed. “I haven’t seen her light up like she does around you. She’s been depressed ever since you yelled at her. Don’t do that again.” Kinza pointed a finger at me in a scolding manner.

“She is good for me too,” I admitted. “I’ve been shitty without her too.”

“Stay with her? I’ll be home earlier. I don’t have any surgeries scheduled today, and then I’ll babysit her.”

“No, you go do your thing,” I assured her. “I’ll take care of her.”

“Are you sure?” She asked as she grabbed her bag.

I nodded. “She’ll be fine.”

Once upstairs, I shifted into the covers and snaked my arm around Adirah’s waist.

She immediately interlaced her fingers with mine. “Did you eat anything?” I asked, breaking the silence, caressing her soft skin with the edge of my thumb.

“No, but I’m about to.” She turned so her body rested against mine before bringing her lips to mine. Her kiss tasted of nothing but alcohol. Even then, I savored every second of it.

“I thought alcohol for breakfast was against your code of conduct.”

“There are exceptions.” She whispered.

“I’m going to get drunk just because all I can taste is the alcohol,” I whispered as she straddled herself on my legs, her hands on my shoulders.

“Shut up and kiss me.” She said.

“You’re drunk, I don’t think I should.”

While I sat resisting, she kissed me practically everywhere, on my face. She threw off her knitted top, her fingers digging deeper into the thick of my beard.

“Adirah,” I groaned as she unbuttoned my shirt, her slightest touch sending sparks through my veins.

“What?” She whispered.

“Why do you make me feel so good?” I growled before rolling her over to position her underneath me.

She grinned and held her hands over her head.

“No, we’re not doing that today.” I smiled. “I have something else in mind.”

I kissed her lips one last time before pulling her up with me. “Come on.”

“Seriously?”

“Where exactly are we going exactly?” She asked.

“Now, if I told you? Where would be the fun I that?” I laughed.

“Royce,” She whined. “My head hurts, every part of my body hurts, and I’m sorta kinda depressed. I don’t need you to play games with me.”

“Okay, fine.” I huffed. “There’s this little place underneath the cliff we jumped off of. I’m taking you there.”

The ride became silent, with only the swift sound of the truck driving through the roads. When we got to the bottom of the cliff, Adirah stepped out and smelled the air, spreading her arms out as if she were a majestic bird ready to take flight.

“You know I could’ve brought a bathing suit. If you told me.”

I pulled out a duffel from the back of the truck and snaked my arm around her waist. “You don’t need one when you are around me.”

“Right, what was I thinking?” She blushed.

“And you don’t have to go in the water if you don’t want to,” I said softly, pulling out the blanket and pillows and setting them beside the rocks.

“You make me feel safe.” She said, wrapping her arms around my neck. “I’ve never felt like that before.”

“I always protect what’s mine,” I said, pressing my lips gently against hers.

“Oh, am I equivalent to property now?” She laughed.

“No, not even close,” I said, shaking my head. “You’re mine in the sense of being in my heart till I die. And even then, I’m

taking you with me. Your happiness, your issues, your interest, your insecurities, that addicting vanilla scent, and that sexy little tattoo? That's all mine."

She stood on her toes, pressing her mouth softly against mine, and her tongue traced over my lips, and I lost the will to live. I forgot about the issues in the company, my father, my office looking like a wreck, and even the Darius case. I let the daylight soak through my skin as Adirah tugs on the hairs at the nape of my neck. My hands wrapped around her ass, closing the millimeter gap between us. She gasped against my mouth, her touch becoming exploratory, as I stood with my arms around her, letting her love my body as she pleased.

"Royce." She breathed against my chest. "I need to tell you something."

"Seriously?" I asked, and she tugged on the hem of my shirt. "Now?"

"Royce." She whispers so softly I barely hear her.

"I'll make you deal," I said, brushing her hair away from her face. "This is our haven. We don't talk about work, our families, your dick of a father, or anything else for that matter. Just me and you."

"Just me and you." She repeated.

"Amare, I know you're scared," I whispered. "I know you're terrified of your father finding you. But you'll always be safe with me."

"I can't lose you too." was the last thing she said before I gently pushed her onto the blanket. She pulled off her shirt and threw it to the side. "How do you expect to fuck me with one hand?"

"Amare, all I need is one hand." I grinned. "I love you too damn much, and I'm going to show you how much I fucking love you."

She grabbed a fistful of my shirt and pulled her lips to mine, kissing me with a fierceness I matched. She slowly grasped that I was more on the sensual side of pleasure. Having been trapped for years, she freed me with her captivating touch. The

burning sensation of pleasure ignited like wildfire as she rubbed against my dick in the best rhythm possible. I moaned out her name, provoking the corners of her mouth to lift into a desire-filled smile. She pulled off my shirt, throwing it to the side.

With her legs locked around my waist, I balance myself on shaky knees, pulling off her shorts and sliding her underwear down her legs.

I placed a soft kiss on the inside of her thigh before I shoved her legs apart, trailing kisses up her thigh before sliding the tip of my tongue from her pussy up to her clit in a perfectly straight line. She rests her legs on my shoulder, giving me the perfect access.

“Royce, holy fucking shit, ” I’m rewarded with her screaming my name into the open sea.

Her hand digs into the sand around the blanket as I devour her pussy like a starved lion, hungry for more, my kisses branding her mine. Her legs quake over my shoulders as I bring her to the edge of her climax, only to rip away moments before she shatters around me.

“Fucking hell Royce.” She groans, clenching her fist around my hair, adding more pleasure. Her taste complements her vanilla scent, sweet and intoxicating, a taste I found myself craving extraneously. As her breathless moans became needy, wanting to release herself free, I rewarded her by inserting a finger, finding her drenched in her arousal for me. Her back arches off the blanket and sand, her hands floating above her head as she lets her body relax with my touch. I couldn’t help but stare, inserting another finger, watching her scream my name. I insert a third finger, with my lips pressed against her clit, sucking the bundled nerves, pumping faster and once again bringing her to her edge. Only this time, the burning sensation within me rushes through my spine as she falls apart before me. But I don’t stop. My fingers pulse inside, her core spasms around them, and her moans turn into rhythmic heavy breathing, slowly resolving into a tranquil state.

Eventually, I hovered over her, looking deep into her smiling eyes, knowing this side of her would only ever be mine.

“Why is it always like we’re doing this for the first time?” She breathed heavily. “Every time better than before.”

“Because every day I love you more and more,” I whispered, pressing my lips against hers. Her fingers trailed down my spine, sending shivers throughout my body. The only thing standing between us are my jeans and her bra, which is the first to go.

I found myself lost in her vanilla scent, shifting my kisses from one breast to another. Haven was the best way to put it. Just two embodied souls, living in the moment, setting each other free. Her hand reached out, tracing the outline of my bulging dick through my jeans.

I pushed away her hand. Considering I needed forgiveness, I wanted to make her feel loved, a feeling I took away amid my anger.

“I thought this was *our* haven.” She noticed.

“Let it just be yours today. Considering the alcohol you drank. ”

“Stop trying to be like Big Bird when you are clearly Oscar the Grouch.”

“I’m trying to be more like Cookie Monster,” I smirked, kissing her forehead. Her legs wrapped around me again, pulling me forward so my erection was pressed against her center. “Adirah.” I moan out her name as my head fills with justified lust.

“I want you on top, amare,” I whispered, laying beside her as she climbed on top. She pulled down my jeans halfway, my boxers along with them, freeing my hardened cock. Her fingers teasingly trace the veins down to the base. I trace her pussy with the bottom of my thumb before sinking in two fingers, finding her still soaked. “Fuckin’ hell,” I mutter. She bounces on my fingers before I pull them out, bringing them to my mouth licking off her sweet taste.

She lets out a hitched breath, her eyes watching my every movement. Her eyes remain on mine as her tongue circles over the tip of my cock, trailing down to the base. “Is this you asking for forgiveness?”

“This is me telling you I’m defeated in your presence,” I said. I pulled off the lucky bandana and tied my wrists together, pulling the cloth with my teeth. I brought my hands over my head, allowing her to destroy me beyond repair.

“You need to stop thinking your some fucking Captain America.” She whispered. Her lips kissed the head before sliding down, my cock hitting the back of her throat. She works my cock, teasing, kissing, and sucking, extorting my moans. She stops and looks me in the eye, “And let someone else take care of you for a change.”

“I only want you,” I murmur, letting my head fall back as she bites down on the head. “Oh fuck, Adirah,” I whispered, my eyes rolling into the back of my head. She lines my cock with her entrance, slowly pushing herself down. Her hands rest on my chest, her head arched back. My hand was itching to reach out and grab a handful of her breasts that royally bounced with her every movement.

It was as if she had read my mind and grabbed my hand. “Do you want to touch me?”

“Yeah, fuck yeah.”

“Good, because I’m not ready to forgive you yet.” She whispered, leaning into my ear. Her hips rocked over my cock, trailing her kisses on my chest. I stared at her dumbfounded, watching her tease me as she ran her fingers over her nipples, knowing I wanted to be the one doing that. She’d just given a whole new meaning to the word haven, and fuck, I wanted to stay here forever.

Her rocking gets faster, her cunt fully encompassing the whole of my cock, as if she was molded just for me. The fire spreads through my body, my eyes glued to the sight of her body arching, her breast bouncing, and her small, needy moans making me see black. She tilts her hips, bringing herself down one last time. “Royce,” She cried, digging her

fingers into my chest as her core tightened around me. Her second orgasm brought me to my edge, and I closed my eyes as my mind stopped existing in the presence and sank into the darkness beside her. A satisfied smirk spreads across her face as she wipes off the trickling liquid from her thigh with her finger and then licks it clean.

“You like fucking with my head, don’t you, amare?” I muttered.

“Is it irritating?” She laughed, undoing the bandana and running off into the water. I followed behind, drowning in my laughs. Adirah had become everything and more in such a short time. At this point, I wasn’t addicted anymore. *I was consumed.* I fell in love with her courage, integrity, creativity, and intoxicating vanilla scent, bringing me down to my knees. *Every fucking time.*

She wrapped her arms around my neck as we stood in the water, bringing her lips to mine. “I love you.” She whispered through the kiss.

“God, I fucking missed you.” I hugged her tighter. “You’re not going anywhere, you understand? You’re staying right here with me.”

I was the stupidest man ever to think I could live without her. And at that moment, I knew I couldn’t let her go. *I wouldn’t let her go.*

An Alliance with the King of Duzakh

Adirah



“You can’t protect me forever.” Royce had caught me packing my clothes.

“The hell, I can’t!” he yelled. “And I thought we were done with this conversation.”

“Clearly, you didn’t understand that I can’t stay here,” I complained.

His hands rested on my shoulders, then slowly down my arms. “How long are you going to run?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

“And where do you plan to go exactly?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered again.

“Oh, so you have everything completely figured out.” His sarcastic remark sent a chill down my spine as he threw his hands in the air. I stood in silence. My heart ached, along with every other organ in my body.

“Did you ever love me? Or was I just a pawn in your twisted game?”

“Royce.” His question stung, but I knew he had a right to feel how he did. It was my fault that I let our relationship

stagger this far. It never was supposed to.

“What? I think it’s a valid question.” He shrugged. “Considering it’s so easy for you to pack your shit up and leave. And all I get is a resignation letter.”

“How dare you think I took advantage of you!” I cried. “I’m leaving because I fucking love you. I can’t lose you too.”

“You keep telling yourself that, okay? You know what? Keep running and being miserable and all the other shit you are. I don’t fucking care anymore.” He threw his hands up before walking out of my room. “You wanna leave? Be my fucking guest.”

“Royce,” I yelled after him. “Stop.”

“Just, just fucking stay away from me.” He muttered before slamming the front door. A couple of moments I heard his door slam as well.

I could hear him throwing things inside while I slid down at the foot of my bed, my eyes flowing with tears.

And we were back to square one.



Later that day, I chucked rocks into the water instead of going to work, mad at the universe for destroying my happiness. When, in fact, it was all my fault. If I had stuck to my plan and left Irving like I had left six other cities with no problem, I wouldn’t be here crying. Royce wouldn’t be at home sulking.

“Hi, Adirah. It’s been a long time.” A familiar voice said from within the tides.

Daryah. She stood above me gracefully, with her dark blue highlighted hair shining down to her waist. Without thinking, I got up and enveloped her into a hug. My sobs were apparent, leaving me powerless.

“I’m sorry,” I choked out.

“And what exactly is that for?” She asked. She sat me down on the sand with her arms still around me.

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

“Your mother told me everything that happened.” She started, her voice filled with sympathy as she brushed the stray hairs from my face. “I don’t think I’ve fully processed it. And whenever I think about you, all I see is rage.”

I stared at her in shock. Daryah didn’t feel rage. Being closer to the moon, she was a solution-finder rather than jumping head-on into a fight without a plan. I turned away at the mention of my mother. I’ve been running for so long that I forgot I had a mother.

“Is she okay?” I asked softly.

“She’s fine. She asks about you whenever I visit her.” She smiled before asking the fundamental question, “You love him, don’t you? I saw you jump off the cliff with him the other day.”

I nodded.

“He loves you too.”

I shook my head.

“He’s out here more than you think. I know your brother Ehaan would say the same.” She smiled. “You know what they say after all, the sun is witness to your presence, but the moon is witness to your secrets.”

“How are they?” I asked softly.

“Everyone’s good. We miss you.” She gave me a soft, remorseful smile.

“I can’t go back there.” I shook my head.

“How long are you going to keep running Adirah?” She said thoughtfully, the smile on her face disappearing.

“I don’t know.” I pulled up my knees and let my head fall.

“Adirah, you have a chance to be with him, to love him, for him to love you.”

“But Daryah, he’s a mortal.”

“So he’ll die.” She rolled her eyes. “Big deal. You’re an immortal goddess that controls the winds and clouds. You seriously think you won’t be able to do anything about it?”

“I don’t feel like a goddess anymore.”

“Adirah, your father, is a monster that needs to be stopped. You’re the only person strong enough to stand up to him.”

“Me?” I squeaked. “Can’t Sephtis, like, burn him to ashes? Or even you? You can, like, drown him or something.”

“You know well Sephtis doesn’t leave *Duzakh*, and you can’t drown an immortal. Especially not the King of Gods.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I said, grabbing a fistful of sand and letting the grains slip through my fingers.

“But Sephtis has a plan.” She said softly, “If you’re willing to hear it. He needs your help.”

“That would mean I would have to strike a deal with him.”

“You would.”

The mention of Illiyan being defeated made my heart happy. “Fine, where do I find the King of *Duzakh*?” I muttered, knowing I would be walking into my demise.



I sat on the cliff where Royce and I had once jumped off into the water, pulling out the grass from the little crack in the dirt. That day, I felt safe and loved, a feeling for which I would give anything. I thought I was alone, but I was wrong. Royce came over and sat beside me without saying a word. He stared at me with puffy eyes, his hair undone, blowing in the wind.

“I shouldn’t have said what I said earlier.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too.” He said softly.

“Apologizing has become a regular occurrence between us.”

“We can make it work.” He suggested. “Right? I could fly out to wherever you are.”

“Royce, what part of I don’t want to lose you, don’t you get?”

“I can’t.” He started. “I can’t be without you. It hurts me even to process the thought that I’d wake up every day knowing you’re not here. Do you realize how I would feel living through that?”

“Royce.” I rested my head on his shoulder.

“It fucking hurts everywhere, okay? I won’t be able to touch you, hold you in my arms, kiss you, love you. I want *you*.” He was crying, the pain visible across his face, even though he tried to hide it by blinking and looking away. But I saw the glistening of little droplets on his cheeks. “I’ve always wanted you from the first night till now.”

“I’d rather have you stay mad at me forever than to know you are dead and six feet in the ground. I don’t want to experience that again.” I mumbled, wiping my thumb across his cheek.

“How bad can he be?” He said with tearful eyes. They fell as he blinked, gutting me in the process.

Immortal God, vaporizing humans, bad.

“Baby, stop.” I choked out, holding back my tears.

“At first, just your vanilla scent was nauseating, but it felt good.” He continued, avoiding everything I said. “Then everything about you became addicting. And no amount of rehab will fix my addiction.”

I press my palm against his cheek, and he pulls me into a soft kiss.

“Did you know you were always going to leave me?” He whispered.

I couldn’t lie. “Yes.”

“Of course, you knew.” He muttered, nodding his head.

I shook my head. “I wasn’t supposed to fall in love with you.”

“Love, love, right,” He chuckles, “Adirah, I think we both have a different definition of love.” We sat in silence a while longer before he got up and dusted his jeans.

“Where are you going?” I asked, following behind.

“To get used to the fact that you won’t be there to fall asleep right above my heart. The heart that was yours to keep forever.”

“Royce.” I grabbed his hand, but he shook it off.

“Let me get used to it, Adirah.” He cried out. “Because I don’t know what else to fucking do. Our love wasn’t even worth a fight in your eyes.”

“Royce!” I called out after him, but he didn’t turn around and soon disappeared into the bend. I heard him drive off, and I stood there, wallowing in guilt. Seeing him broken brought an empty feeling to my stomach. And seeing him crying out his feelings shattered me into a million pieces.

I saw rage. And I decided I wanted to end Illiyan, once and for all.



“Well, I’m here.” I rolled my eyes as I stood in front of an abandoned warehouse. Only the faint sounds of cars passing by were heard. The door creaked open when I knocked and found myself walking inside, hoping some crazy clown wouldn’t jump out at me.

“I thought I heard something.” A cold voice spoke from the darkness at the top of the stairs. “Welcome, Your Highness, the lost Goddess of Azure, to my humble abode.”

“Sephtis,” I muttered.

“The one and only.” Even though I couldn’t see his face, I could hear the smug smile that was displayed on his face. The dark lord himself had descended to the Land of Mortals. *Just*

fucking great. He was the most obnoxious of the Azurians and had little empathy for anything. He was the devil, God of the Dead, King of the *Duzakh*.

“I was told to meet with you,” I asked, forcing a smile and walking up the stairs.

“Precisely why I’m here.” He said with a ‘duh’ tone.

“I thought you never left *Duzakh*,” I smirked, looking around the warehouse. “And what the hell is so humble about rusting metal?”

I finally reached the top of the stairs, where he stood tall, handsome as ever, dressed in a sleek black, with only a gold chain complementing the look.

“Well, for one thing, my princess, I don’t have visitors. I was tired of listening to all the desperate, screaming souls. ‘Sephtis, do this, or Sephtis, I regret what I did.’ It was infuriating.” He rolled his eyes and rubbed his temple. “So I thought I’d drown myself in tequila. And sex, because nothing else brings tranquility to the mind.”

“Sephtis. I don’t want to know what you do in your free time.” I said, scrunching my eyebrows.

“I see you’ve been getting your hands dirty with yet another human.” He shook his finger in a ‘tsk tsk’ motion. “Didn’t you learn the first time?”

“Shut the hell up and give me a glass,” I muttered.

He poured me a drink, and I gulped it in one sip. The glass clunked against the marble, “More.” I said. Even his warehouse, ratted and torn, was doing better than my love life. Marble counters, leather chairs, and the view was perfect.

“Whoa there, Princess, that’s some expensive shit right there.” He said, putting away the bottle and pulling out another one. “Even I don’t drink that much.”

“Like you said, nothing else seems to bring tranquility. We’re in the same boat.”

“Exactly. I am pleased you are here to listen to what I offer. I have a proposal.” He smirked.

“What might your proposal be?” I said, crossing my hands across my chest.

He walked over and stood in front of me before enveloping me in a hug. I was surprised by the action. Sephtis wasn't one to show emotions towards anyone.

“Are you okay?” I asked, hugging him back. “I think you've been drinking too much tequila. You've forgotten your morals.”

“Adirah, I might be the King of *Duzakh*, but I still know right from wrong. What you went through, no one deserves to go through that shit.” He said softly, warmth spreading through his eyes.

“Look, I don't need your pity.”

“I'm not giving you my pity, Princess.” He muttered, releasing me from his grip. “I'm giving my advocacy for putting Illiyan in his place.” He motioned for me to sit on the couch as he sat before me.

“Why?”

“Because he had something horrendous done to my wife.” He choked out, his voice cracking.

I sat there dumbfounded. “When did you have a wife?”

“A long time ago.” He said softly, his look miles away, remembering his life back then.

“Why isn't this in any of the Afsana?” I said.

“I don't like telling my life story. I don't like people to know about my failures, especially about those failures that led to the death of my loved ones.” His gaze met the floor as he spoke. The guilt was apparent across his face. He blamed himself for what happened.

“Loved *ones*?” I asked. “As in multiple people?”

He nodded.

“The Afsana says you became the God of the Dead because Illiyan was jealous of you. He didn't want anyone to challenge

him. So he had you become the Ruler of the Fire Realm and outcaste you to the flames of *Duzakh*.”

Sephtis let out a cold laugh. “That’s what he has you, all of you, believing. I wasn’t always the King of *Duzakh*, my Princess.” He admitted.

I stared at the man in front of me. I’ve only had a few interactions with Sephtis, mostly because he didn’t mingle with the rest of us Azurians. You would see others from the Fire Realm in the gardens or on the grounds with the warriors, but Sephtis only came for the meetings.

“You’re the King of *Duzakh* because she’s down there,” I said in a small voice, concluding my thoughts.

“Yes.” He whispered. “It’s my punishment for wanting to be fucking happy.”

“And you can’t do anything to get her out because if she ends up in Laleh’s heaven, Illiyan will send her back down, possibly having you inflict more pain on her.”

He nodded.

“She was a mortal,” I inquired after moments of silence.

He nodded again.

“How’d she die?”

“*Adarvan*.” He whispered, tears clinging to the corner of his eyes, but all I saw was rage.

“Sephtis?” I asked softly. “Is Darius down there too?”

He gave me a long, hard stare. “Yes. I was able to take him out of the fire.”

I realized too late that I had my arms wrapped around him, but surprisingly, he hugged me back.

“It’s nice to have someone understand your anger.” He said softly.

I nodded. “So what’s the plan?” I asked, pulling my feet up and getting comfortable.

“Are you ready to ally with the King of *Duzakh*, Princess?” His demeanor returned to usual as if just seconds ago, he wasn’t sputtering out his most vulnerable thoughts. Sephtis doesn’t make deals out of the kindness of his heart. But instead, he always asked for something in return.

“Am I going to have to sell you my soul?” I laughed.

“Nonsense, you know you can’t do that. However, when the time comes, there is something I do want from you.” He got up and returned to the counter, filling his glass.

“And what might that be?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“You know what, Sephtis? I’m not doing this,” I said, throwing my hands in the air, getting up, and heading for the stairs.

He shrugged, picked up a red apple from the basket, and used a pocketknife to cut off slices. “Fine, then I’ll have Adarvan find the Wolfe and drive his dagger through his heart.” He jabbed the knife in the air in a stabbing motion.

The thought of Adarvan standing over a beaten-up Royce frightened me. “You wouldn’t,” I said, shocked.

“I would, and you know it.”

I turned around and sat back down. “How do I know you won’t double-cross me?”

“Princess, the King of *Duzakh* is many things. But a liar isn’t one of them.” He smirked before picking up his glass and explaining his plan.



“My name was Ashkan.” He started. “And before I was the renowned King of *Duzakh*, I was once a warrior, in love with the most beautiful girl ever to exist.”

“You were a warrior?” I squeaked in a voice so low, speechless from his confession.

“I was.” He confirmed. “Corruption took over my land, and Illiyan waged war, saving us from the situation. He wasn’t always a bad person.”

I nodded, “I know.”

“He pulled me out of the debris. I was just a kid back then. I still remember the sorrow in his eyes, telling me that my kingdom was no more. My parents and family were no more. He took me under his wing and raised me in that castle, saying if he had a son, he wanted him to be just like me.”

He took a deep breath before continuing with the story.

“I met her in a bar. There were specific days that she’d come in, and I’d pretend I was there for, you know, other purposes I will not digress into.” He coughed, and I scrunched my nose, understanding what he meant by other purposes. “Anyways, I walked in one day, and she wasn’t supposed to be there. But she stood over one of her father’s men, her stiletto heel pinned right, you know...” He pointed his finger down to his crotch.

“Right, I get it. Please continue.” I muttered.

“Okay. After torturing the man, she walked over to where I was sitting and grasped me by my throat, asking if I had a death wish. I, of course, found it hilarious. I asked her if she would be the one to strangle, and she proceeded to ask if I knew exactly who she was.” Sephtis shifts in his seat, a soft smile displayed on his face, remembering the moment.

“And did you know who she was?” I rested my chin in my hand, intrigued by his story.

“I did.” He smiled again. “She was the daughter of the Mafia King, Alessandro Lombardi. Sienna Lombardi. She told me if I ever laid eyes on her again, she would, in fact, strangle me herself. And I, being captivated by her presence, told her I’d welcome it.”

“And then Illiyan found out?”

“No. I was the one who told Illiyan about her. I told the man who embraced me as his child when he had his own two at the time that I didn’t want to live on Azure. I wanted to live with

her. He told me it came with a cost. I'd have to give up my powers." The angst in his voice returned.

"You were going to become a mortal for her," I whispered.

He nodded. "She fell pregnant soon after, and I was happy to accept that life. But Illiyan, with his selfishness and power fueled by greed, wouldn't let me succumb to becoming a mortal. He wouldn't let his mighty warrior fall into the hands of a mortal. Illiyan is calculated but never does his own dirty work, especially if it involves someone he cares about. Or at least he pretends to care because, in the end, Illiyan only cares about himself."

Sephtis shifted forward in his seat, his brows scrunching together. "He sent Adrarvan on a mission, saying this was his test to become his right-hand warrior and kill Sienna and my unborn child. The noble warrior did just that. I found her in the most gruesome state possible. Adarvan had ripped out my daughter, *our daughter*, from her, and Sienna painfully bled out, holding our baby."

He slammed his fist on the edge of his seat before looking up at me with tearful eyes. I sat quietly, processing his tragedy, unable to understand how one could be so cruel.

"So, my Princess." He spoke, breaking the silence. "Do you see why the King of Gods must be put in his place?"

I nodded. "Tell me what I have to do," I whispered. "I'll do it."

"*Duzakh* has a dungeon, deep in its center, that I have carved out precisely for him. I have fueled my anger by her screams for over a century, and I'm about ready to have him beg for mercy, which I will not give."

"And how will the King of Gods descend to *Duzakh*, considering he doesn't visit often?" I asked, crossing my hands over my chest.

"I have a plan for that," Sephtis said. I sat in silence, waiting for him to tell me. "What? Did you think I was going to tell you?"

“Yes? Considering you want me to help you with your so-called plan?”

“You’re hilarious. I’m only going to tell you what you need to know.”

“Oh, just great,” I muttered. “When will this exactly happen?”

“On the day of the Summer Solstice. My fire will burn stronger than it does compared to any other day. His air will ignite it further.”

“Sephtis, that’s in five freaking days.” I shrieked.

“Well, my Princess?” He smiled, “I guess you better start counting down to the days of revenge.”

I sat in a disoriented state, my mind soaring through all the possibilities of this being a horrible idea.

“I can’t do this alone. If I could, I wouldn’t put you or anyone in this situation.” He muttered, breaking the silence. “I know you’re scared, but you must trust me. Meet me at the gates of *Duzakh* on the Summer Solstice, Adirah. And remember, you made an alliance with the King of *Duzakh*. If you go back on your word, know that I will have the Wolfe suffer the most painful of all deaths.” His voice rumbled from the darkness, leaving me shivering before I exited the warehouse.

Five days. I had five days.

Before all hell turned loose.

Before, I had to stand before my father and look him in the eye.

Five days before, I plunged myself into my demise.



Day Five

I returned to the office the next day, but Royce wasn’t there. I felt a hint of disappointment but also relieved that I wouldn’t

have to face his frown all day long. I sifted through the paperwork, hiding in my office until Millie came to exhume me from my misery.

“What on earth is wrong with you?” She stared at my red, swollen face, with a worried expression spreading slowly across. “Are you okay? Did you and Mr. Royce have an argument?”

“It’s much deeper than that.” I sighed.

“Oh god, is that why you resigned?”

“No, it’s personal.”

She nodded. “Okay, I’m going to pretend I understand what’s happening, but please know I’m here with whatever you need.”

“Thanks, Millie.” I smiled.

She handed me a bunch of papers. “I need you to check the numbers on these.”

“Okay, I’ll have them to you by the end of the day.”

“And I meant it. Call me if you need anything.”

“Actually, can you do me a favor if Royce comes? Don’t tell him I’m here.”

She nodded. “Okay, but if he barges in here, I tried my best.”

“Thank you.”

Royce didn’t barge into my room.

He never made it to the office.

When I got home, the lights were on in his house, and for a second, I just wanted to ring his doorbell and jump into his arms the instant he opened the door. But instead, I walked into my house, setting my things on the kitchen counter. Kinza’s suitcases were neatly lined up in the corner.

“I don’t want to leave you here.” She said as I walked in through the door.

I wrapped her into a hug. “I’ll be fine. I promise.”

“You’re making me leave because you have to protect him.” She admitted.

“I can’t protect you both,” I admitted. “It’s the only way I know you’ll be safe.”

“Please be okay.”

“I will,” I reassured her, fighting. “Have a great time, enjoy your sister’s wedding. I want to see pictures.”

“Addy.” She sobbed, hugging me tighter.

“Thank you for putting up with my shit.”

“I would smack you in the back of your head any other day.” She laughed through her sobs as my phone vibrated, alerting me of an incoming message.

I know this is my heart talking, but I fucking miss you.

It felt like forever since I’d seen him, the last time being on the cliff yesterday. I repeatedly wanted to spit out the truth, lift it off my chest, but I couldn’t bear to lose him. He was mad. I was okay with that. But losing him could possibly kill me.

“Is it Royce?” Kinza asked, and I nodded. “Go talk to him.”

“Kinz.” I sighed.

“Go.” She pushed me towards the door as I replied to his texts.

I thought you wanted to get used to me not being here.

I know. I can’t.

I need you. I’ll always need you.

His texts came in unexpectedly, and even then, I felt flustered inside. As if that was the push I was waiting for to

drop my resignation and fall back into the same routine. I didn't realize how much I needed him, too. I was exhausted from working on the project, and the ordeal with Sephtis shook me to my core.

Amare, I miss you.

The last text came with a picture attached. His back was turned, standing under the water. His hand rested on the shower wall, and a bit of light shone on his glistening skin. And just like that, my heart overpowered. I gathered the courage to walk next door and jogged to his doorstep, finding it unlocked. I quickly disappeared inside without a second thought. I could now hear the water, and my heart began pounding as if it wanted to jump out of its cage. I could see his outline through the fogged glass, his bulging muscles, and the hint of his lion tattoo. Something inside me tightened. I found myself slipping off my clothes and joining him in the shower. I wrapped my arms around his chest, and he immediately sighed heavily.

“I need you too,” I whispered, kissing down his spine, “I missed you too.”

He arched his head back, and I saw his fist wrapped around his lengthened cock. He turned around, crashing his lips against mine. “Amare,” He breathed. His fingers stroked my jawline as he continued to kiss down my neck. With full force, he pinned me against the tiles. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he sucked on my neck, biting down and sending electricity through my veins.

“Royce.” I moaned. “Baby.”

His thumb rubbed my swollen lip, trailing his fingers down my body. He closed his eyes, resting his head against mine as his mouth formed a serene smile. His thumb found my clit, gently stroking and making me feel enchanted. My nails dug into his back, and he groaned from the pleasurable pain, using his finger to spread my opening and lining himself, ready to thrust inside.

“I hate you.” I gritted. “I hate how you can fucking control with just three words.”

“Stop lying.” He whispered onto my neck. “When, in fact, you know you’re the one controlling me.”

I inhaled a bit too quickly as he eased himself inside. Slowly, he pulls out and slams inside in a continuous rhythm. The cold of the wall doesn’t feel discomforting. Instead, there’s a whole new tingling sensation from him stretching me. His pumps build my orgasm as his thumb strokes my clit. I close my eyes and rest my head against the wall, only to snap open as he pushes harder.

“Look at me.” His rough whisper had me staring into his eyes as his thumb and hips worked their magic, eventually causing me to give out.

“Oh, holy fuck.” I whimpered as my release evoked his. He continued to push back and forth until he finally unraveled in front of me, one hand against the wall and his bandaged one on my chest, the hot liquid flowing away with the water. We stayed connected for moments after my hands stroked circles on his chest while his body supported our weight.

“I haven’t been able to think ever since I realized you’re not going to be here anymore.” He pleaded, brushing the wet strands of my hair away from my face. “Don’t leave.”

“I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if something happened to you,” I said in a small voice.

“Nothing is going to happen to me, amare.” He gently touched my face, the gauze scratching my cheek. “Nothing is going to happen to us.”

“Royce,” I rested my head on his shoulder. “I’m sorry. You know I’d give anything to be with you.”

“But you still can’t be with me.” He finished.

I softly shook my head, “I’ll always love you.” I whispered in a voice so low I barely heard it.

“This isn’t love, Adirah. It’s an addiction, an obsession.”

“Is it wrong to be addicted to something, someone wonderful?” I asked.

“Adirah.” He said, biting down on my lip and gently pulling it till he reached the end. “Baby, don’t leave me.” He whispered as a last attempt, hoping to change my mind.

“There’s a saying that goes, if you love something, you should let it go. And if it comes back, it was meant to be yours.”

“The hell I should.” He muttered. “What kind of a fucking idiot do you think I am?” He shook his head before setting me down on the floor.

“Royce.”

“There’s an event for the Yellow Dwarf project this weekend. I want you to come with me.” He said, changing the conversation.

He brushed the wet strands of hair from my face. “If these are the last days we spend together, I rather enjoy our time together.”

“Royce-“

“It’s a harmless event.” Softly kissing my cheek, he said, “And then I’ll leave you alone.”

But I didn’t want him to leave me alone. This was all just confusing, and I realized that Daryah was right.

How long was I going to keep running?

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Just know that if you leave. I will never love again.”

“Royce, that’s not fair.” I sighed. “You’re meant to be happy and live your life.”

“Adirah, I told you before, I don’t want to be shared. I don’t want my love to be for anyone else but yours. I’m meant to be happy and live my life with you.”



Day Four

“I think I have everything,” Kinza said, closing her carry-on and hopping onto the bed.

Yellow Dwarf was celebrating the achievement of finally opening their first building on American soil, and Wolfe Legacy was hosting a Gala over the weekend. Kinza was flying around the same time. Kinza had booked her flight for Pakistan and would arrive a day later than her parents because of her last scheduled surgery.

“Did you pack your Barbies?” I teased.

“Yeah, if I do, I’ll never hear the end of it.” She laughed. “You know I’m going only because you told me to.”

“You’ll be safe there,” I said, placing my hand in hers.

“Just, you, I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I don’t know what to say to you. On the one hand, you’re a powerful Air Goddess, and you can probably disintegrate me with the snap of your fingers. Then, on the other hand, you’re still my little Adirah, who drinks Treks like it is the only thing keeping you alive and puts her hands over her face, sobbing everything Mufasa dies.”

“Remember the time when I first moved in?” I asked her, remembering the day.

“We stayed up talking most of the night.” She smiled. “And before we knew it, it was morning, and we both were passed out on the couch.”

I laughed. “It all started in Irving Bay, you know. It’s where I met Darius and fell in love. When the previous company transferred me here, I knew it was a bad idea, but I always thought about how harmful it could be. And after thirty years, I finally got to be close to Darius again. I’d move somewhere else in a couple of years. But then I met you. I’ve never met

anyone like you. Being here reminded me how much I loved Irving Bay.”

“You also met Royce.” She watched as I unknowingly smiled, “Your eyes light up when his name is mentioned.”

I collapsed on the bed, thinking about my relationship with Royce, how, in such a short time, he’d shown me the world I always wanted to live in. He taught me to face my fears. Instead of shunning me, he stood behind me every step of the way, letting my potential shine. He saw my potential before I realized I had any, and instead of telling me, he challenged me, allowing me to understand my self-worth.

“And ever since you guys started fucking each other? You both are happy, too.” She grinned. And I threw a pillow.

“I’m going back to Azure,” I admitted softly. “I can’t have them going after Royce.”

A knock at the door interrupted our conversation, followed by Royce’s mellow voice calling my name.

“I’ll get it,” I said, getting off Kinza’s bed and walking downstairs to open the door.

“Hi.” He smiled.

“Hi, what are you doing here?” I asked softly.

He handed me a box. “I came over to give you this.”

“You want to come inside?” I said, taking the box, opening the lid, and peeking inside. Whatever was inside was wrapped in delicate tissue paper. Even if I tried, I couldn’t guess what it was.

He shook his head. “Not that I don’t want to.” He said, closing the gap and kissing my forehead, “ But I have to meet my dad.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

“But maybe you can come over tonight.”

“Okay,” I whispered again, holding back tears.

He left shortly, looking back, smiling before getting into his truck and driving off. I closed the door and sank to the floor, the box resting beside me.

“What is that?” Kinza walked down the stairs, coming to sit beside me. I shrugged, lifting the lid and unwrapping the tissue paper. In the box, there lay the most delicate green dress with the slightest hint of a sheen.

“Now you’re kind of obligated to go.” She said smirking.

Once again, Royce Wolfe played a card that only made me love him more.

A Letter From Darius

Royce

I stood in the foyer of my father's house, listening to the conversation between him and a voice I didn't recognize.

"What do you mean, you found *her*?" My father's voice was low, but I could still hear it. "I thought you said she ran away after we got rid of Darius?"

So, he was involved in Darius' disappearance.

"She did. Which is why I've been here for the past thirty years looking for her, a request made on behalf of her father."

"What do you want with me, Adarvan?" my father choked out. I pulled out my phone and started recording the conversation, planning on sending it to Mykel for evidence. "I've already helped you out once."

"I only have your best interest, Mr. Wolfe. Considering last time, I handed you the company."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Same circumstances. I know your son has replaced you as the company's chief officer."

“How many times have I told you? Royce Wolfe is not my son.”

I let those words sink in before walking back over to my truck. My father was indeed a sadist, methodically plotting events that only benefited him. A while later, I saw the man walk out our front door before getting into the back of a black SUV and driving off. My father had called him Adarvan. *Why did that name sound familiar?*

“Hey, we need to talk,” I uttered as soon as Mykel picked up the phone.

“Okay, come to the office, and I’ll have them clear my schedule.”

“You still have the file, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, I didn’t open it or anything.”

“I know. That’s my ticket to figuring shit out.” I drove down streets, lost in thought. What had my father meant by admitting I wasn’t his son?

“I’m here to see Mykel Duran?” I told the man standing at the front of the government building. He nodded and, shortly after confirming, let me in. I was led to the conference room, where I didn’t have the patience to sit. Instead, I paced back and forth, scraping my heels against the carpet.

“Hey, are you okay?” Mykel asked, walking inside.

“Yes,” I said, unsure of the words leaving my mouth. “No. I don’t fucking know.”

“Okay, sit down and let’s talk.” He pulled out a chair, motioning for me to sit. “Denise!”

“Yes?” She poked her head through the door.

“Can you make sure the camera’s off in the room?”

She nodded before walking over and disabling the system. “Anything else?”

“Can you bring me my coffee? And have Garcia bring me that sealed file on my desk that says ‘Royce.’ Thank you.”

“They know I’ve been working a case, the director too.” He cleared the air. “I told him I’ll let him know once I knew something.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Hey, what the hell are friends for? Now you want to tell me what the hell is going on?”

“My dad, he called last night, asking me to come over, right?” I started as Mykel sat across from me, listening. “And then today I went over there, didn’t really tell him, just thought I could walk in unannounced. But he was with someone.”

“A woman?”

“No, some guy, business partner maybe? I don’t know. But they were talking about how he had found someone. He also admitted to having something to do with Darius’ disappearance.” I pulled out my phone and replayed the recording.

Mykel listened closely as it was a bit hard to hear. “What does he mean by you’re not his son?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

There was a knock on the door. “Sir, here are the files you requested and your coffee.” The woman, Special Agent Garcia, set the item on the corner of the table. And she walked out of the room. I grabbed the file, removing the tape that sealed the inside contents. Even after thirty years, the papers were neatly placed, and a letter in Darius’ elegant handwriting addressed to me sat at the top.

My Dear Royce,
How are you, kid? You’re probably all grown up, looking for answers to your father’s lies. But no one seems to be telling you the truth. Let me tell you the truth. If you are reading this, that means I am no longer of the living. I will start from the beginning and tell you the story

of an extraordinary boy who was robbed of his life and a special someone who stole my heart the minute I set my eyes on her. You were born a healthy and grumpy baby to Melissa and Asher Santiago during the year's longest night—the Winter Solstice. The Afsana has it that the King of *Duzakh* fuels his power by kidnapping the sun, leaving the world in a blanket of a cold night. You came into the world full of light and cries, but all was taken from you in the greed for power. Your father, or at least the man you know as your father, formed an evil plan that became the end of your parents, Vanny, and me.

“Shit, I can’t fucking read this,” I muttered, stuffing the paper back into the file, resting my face in my hands.

“Hey.” Mykel’s hand rested on my knee. “Look, as much I hate seeing you like this, you need to read it.”

“I know.” I sighed.

“Look, you are welcome to stay here as long as you like.” He said, getting up. “I’ll make sure no one bugs you. And send me a text if you need anything. Water? Coffee? Candy bar?” He smirked, leaning in close. “Cocaine? I’ll steal some from evidence.”

I laughed, “Shit, actually, that doesn’t sound too bad.” I pulled out the letter again. As I read further, my life slowly shattered with every haunting word. Who was Royce Wolfe? Everything I was had just been a lie.

Where do I even begin with Colton Wolfe? Your mother worked for your father as his assistant before the company went bankrupt. At the age of three, you contracted an illness, and your parents didn't have insurance and couldn't get the care you needed. And you most likely would've died. Colton paid for your treatment, and to return the favor, he wanted you as his son. The woman you know as your mother suffers from hypothalamic dysfunction, which causes infertility, amongst other things. Nadine isn't okay, and she never will be, and the only reason she's standing is due to the treatment she's been getting for years. After blackmailing your parents, he bought you, saying you were now biologically his. He gave you a life of luxury, thinking he'd train you to one day run his company. Why? Because Colton Wolfe didn't want any of his money going to the bank or me, his brother. But he didn't account for his company failing and his lifestyle turning to dust. We'll pause those events, and I'll tell you how I fell in love with a Goddess.

Wait, what now?

I always had a fascination for Azure, and I hope I passed that along to you. Azure exists, Royce. It's more than a reality. It's living, breathing with a pure form of life one can only imagine. I met at her Treks. I don't care much for their coffee, and I probably sound like a madman for saying that, but their glazed donuts are something I could live off of.

I smiled, remembering how, on every trip, he'd have a box of glazed donuts ready. It's where I developed my obsession with them, but Trek's coffee had replaced the blood in my veins.

She sat reading a book, her hair shining under the narrow rays of sunlight coming from the window. She eyed me looking at her and told me it wasn't polite to stare. And from that moment on, I became infected by her beauty and grace. Her name was Adirah, the Azurian Princess, the Goddess of Winds.

Adirah? He had to be joking. The Kingdom of Azure was a myth, a fairytale equivalent to Cinderella or Beauty and the Beast. I took a deep breath, read over the sentence, and continued.

In a short amount of time, she became my ecstasy. She was a great inspiration behind Wolfe Legacy, my dream. She's pure innocence. Her eyes glow at the discovery of every little thing,

and her smile is charming enough to trap a soul.

The Afsana's regarding her are fabricated. Illiyan wouldn't want anyone to know the truth. I plan to take her away from that life and give her everything she deserves. I was over the moon when she said yes to marrying me, but it came with a cost. It's the reason I'm sitting here pouring the truth from my heart because if not me, you will fall victim to my brother as well. My brother wants the company, if not legally, then by force. Colton has been secretly meeting with Adarvan, Illiyan's right-hand man, the noble warrior, as they call him in the Kingdom. They've been trying to put an end to me. To us, and without creating a scene. I have known of Colton's philosophy ever since we were kids. He's calculated and manipulative but always gets what he wants, so I stayed one step ahead. I will always be one step ahead. Wolfe Legacy is yours. I'll let Colton have his fun. I'll let him live his life, even if he takes mine. But when he's dug himself so deep into a hole, I'm going to be the one to fill it back up, suffocating him to his downfall.

The only other person who knows the truth is Vanny, which is why

she would babysit you in the first place. Find her Royce. She's the only one that you can trust. I think I've explained everything, and if I haven't, you're a smart kid. You'll put two and two together. I loved you like my kid, and I know you deserve more than a material company, but it's the least I could do for standing on the sidelines and not doing something until it was too late.

Take care of yourself, Royce. Eat a glaze donut for me. You are stronger than your doubts and much more capable than you think. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

I love you.

Darius Wolfe.

I put the letter down and ran my hands down my face. *What did I just fucking read?*

The man from my father's house, Adarvan, was the Azurian warrior. In just a few minutes, everything began to make sense. The lies began to unfold, and I understood that Colton Wolfe could eliminate me without a problem. My head was heavy with emotions I wasn't able to process. Adarvan had just found his prize, Adirah. *My fucking Adirah.* Darius' Adirah and my Adirah were the same person. Being. Immortal. Whatever.

I skimmed through the rest of the files, including my actual birth certificate, company papers, and his written statement saying he wasn't pressured to list the company under my name. And then the ounce of hope I had, thinking Darius' Adirah was someone else, faded into the air. Tucked between the last papers was a photo of him and *her*. She was as beautiful as ever, her dark brown hair flowing down her back,

and she hugged him from behind, her eyes glistening just as they always do. It felt surreal to see him. I ran my finger over Darius' face. I hadn't realized I was crying until I saw the tears puddle onto the pages in the file.

"Hey, are you okay?" Mykel walked in, and I immediately shoved the photo behind the pages.

"Yeah, I need a few moments to sort this shit out. And then I'll come talk to you." I said, closing the file and wiping my face.

"That's fine." He said, patting my shoulder before we walked out of the room. "Aye, be careful."

I shouldn't be trusted with driving, but I made my way through the crowded roads with only one thought on my mind. Adirah was the Goddess of Winds. *My dilbari was the Goddess of Winds.*

When she told me the story about her father raping her, she meant Illiyan. The same father that raped her for two years, and the same father that by now had figured out his daughter had fallen in love with another Wolfe.

Sparky stood outside, loading a suitcase in her car, and walked over when she saw me pull into their driveway.

"Hey, is Adirah home?" I said, rolling down the window.

"No, she went to the cliff to clear her head."

I nodded before backing out of the driveway and driving toward our beloved cliff. She sat there, her back turned and headphones blasting music, tuning her out from the world. I sat down beside her, and she immediately jumped.

"Oh shit." She said, taking off the headphones. "Hi."

I couldn't help but feel bitter and irritated, but seeing her made my stupid heart do cartwheels inside my ribcage. I handed her the photo.

"What is this?" She asked softly before realizing who the photo was of.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” I asked softly, staring down at the dirt.

She stayed quiet. “Where’d you get this?” She asked, running her finger down Darius’ face. The look on her face proved how much she loved him. And to have him taken away in mere seconds must’ve broken her to pieces.

“He left me a file with a bunch of shit. I just figured out my life was a lie. My whole existence was a lie.” I muttered, picking up a rock and throwing it over the cliff. “Were you ever going to tell me?” I asked again.

“I wanted to. I was going to that day at the beach.” She said softly.

I chuckled, remembering how I had told her we weren’t allowed to talk about anything but us. “Right.”

We sat there in an awkward silence before I finally asked the question that was bugging me from the beginning.

“Why’d you come back to Irving Bay?”

“Royce, I was transferred when the previous company closed.”

“Yeah, no, I know that. You could’ve declined the offer and asked to be placed elsewhere.” I said. “So why’d you come *here*? Did you know Wolfe Legacy was his company?”

“What? Do you think I came here seeking revenge?” She shot back.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” I said in defense, knowing I had meant it exactly.

“Who I tell would I seek revenge from? You? Your father?” She shouted. “I never even knew what he had called his company, and I didn’t realize he was your fucking uncle until you told me his name. Hell, I never even knew he was a Wolfe, Royce! Which sounds stupid as hell, but it’s the fucking truth.”

“Did you love him?” I asked softly after a moment of silence.

“I loved him more than anything in the world. Enough to leave Azure behind.” She admitted.

“It makes me wonder if you ever loved me.” I chuckled, looking ahead.

Okay, that was cruel. I could feel my anger surfacing through the millions of other emotions.

“Royce, don’t.” She said, tears forming in her eyes. “Don’t you dare question my love for you.”

“I want to see it,” I whispered. “Because part of me still doesn’t believe you are, you know, *you*.”

She pulled out the feather dagger, *Raysah*, from her back pocket, and without a second thought, she plunged it into her inner thigh, dragging it down the middle. Her blood was golden, *talayi*, just as the legends had written. She bit her lip to keep from screaming, and I could see the pain written all over her face.

“Are you fucking crazy?” I yelled out, removing my shirt and pressing down onto the slit she had just carved. “Why the hell would you do that? You could’ve moved some goddamn clouds or ripped a tornado through the fucking trees.”

“Don’t. Question my love for you.” She repeated through closed teeth.

“Okay, okay. Fuck, who knew you were a fucking psycho too?” I pulled her into my arms. “Don’t fucking do that again. Like ever.”

“I don’t feel love for you, Royce.” She winced, tears staining her cheeks. “What I feel for you surpasses love. It doesn’t have a name or an explanation. But I know if something were to happen to you, I wouldn’t leave Azure behind.”

She paused momentarily, her eyes glowing, removing my hand from her thigh. The wound had started to heal slowly, but the *talayi* was still visible on her skin.

“I’d burn it to ash.” She snarled, in a tone I’d never seen her use, before getting up and walking away.

“Where the hell are you going?”

“To get my life back. Whether you want me in your life or not.” She said, getting in her car and driving away.

And I let her. Even her blood smelled fucking amazing.

Adirah was an immortal goddess, and I was just a fucking human who would soon cease to exist. She was right about one thing. We were doomed from the start.



“Where’s Colton?” I asked, walking into my father’s house. My mother, or the woman I thought was my mother, stood at the bottom of the stairs. She wrapped me in a hug.

“He’s in his office with a business partner.”

“How’d you do it?” I whispered.

She stayed quiet and hugged me tighter. “I’m sorry, Royce.”

At the admission of her apology, Adirah’s words came into play. “Someone close to me once said, you can apologize more than enough times.” I quoted, “But if you can’t uphold your actions, your apology won’t mean a thing.”

I pulled myself out of her embrace and walked into my father’s office, finding my father sitting across from Adarvan.

“Royce, can you please wait outside?” His fake smile blackened my vision, and I wanted to slap it off.

“What do you want with her?” I glared at the immortal, “What do you want with me?”

Adarvan sat disoriented, shocked by my questions. But my father spoke up. “Royce, please, we can do this another time.”

I fixated myself on Adarvan, ignoring my father. “I asked you a question,” I muttered.

He stood up from his chair, smoothing his shirt, understanding his little game of charades was over. The game

of venal lies they had been playing had ended. “The King wants his daughter safely returned.” He lied, walking closer.

“Royce,” Colton warned.

“The King doesn’t want his daughter back.” It was terrifying watching Adarvan, who could easily behead me, take small steps, closing the distance, but I stood my ground.

“Why doesn’t the King want his daughter back?” He snarled.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know the story?” I smirked, curling my already broken hand fist, and right as he stood inches in front of me, I connected it against his cheek. Adarvan fell back, and I took the opportunity to pounce on top of him, throwing him onto the chair. The chair crumbled to the ground, and he quickly got up and landed a blow on my face, pinning me against the wall. His hand squeezed around my throat, making it hard to breathe.

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with, mortal.” He seethed against my bleeding face.

“The Noble Warrior.” I choked out. “Noble, my ass. You’re a criminal on my land.”

His eyes bulged, letting me slip from his grip onto the floor. “What are you talking about?”

I laughed softly at first but slowly turned cynical. “Why’d you kill Darius?” I asked.

“Illiyen said the mortal was a threat to Azure.”

“Did you ever ask or even think about why a mere mortal would be a threat to The Kingdom of Azure? The Land of Immortals? A land that is flowing with fucking beings that can’t be killed. They heal in minutes when they are wounded and hold the power to pop a human head off with their bare hands.” I rasped.

He took a few steps back.

“Do you know what he plans to do when she returns?” I seethed, slowly dragging myself off the floor. “He will entrap

her in the so-called castle he calls home. He will rape her day in and day out.”

“He wouldn’t.” Adarvan’s eyes bulged bigger. “He couldn’t.”

“But he already did.” I breathed heavily, tasting blood all over. “Why do you think someone would run from the one place they call home? No one runs away because they want to. They are forced to.”

“He couldn’t.” the Immortal repeated himself, “The King’s her *father*.”

“Now you see how immoral the King is,” I shouted through the pain. “Did you think Royce Wolfe would sit on his fucking ass and watch you take her from his arms?”

He stood staring, trying to process the narrative I had laid out for him—the truth.

“I fucking love her,” I shouted once again. “More than anyone else in the world and your world. She’s mine for eternity.”

I spat blood into his face before turning to my father—or, rather, Colton Wolfe.

“And you. I don’t have words for you. You knew all along.”

“I didn’t know you had been involved with her.”

“I’m more than involved now, father. I’m invested. I’m a captive. And I advise you to invest your blood money, your black money, all the money you have in the best lawyer, Colton, because I’m coming for you with everything I have, and I won’t sit until you are sulking behind bars.”

He started with a cold stare, trying to stay calm, but I could tell he was well-daunted, understanding that he had fallen into the trap he had laid for me.

In one swift move, I grabbed the letter opener from my father’s desk and plunged it into Adarvan’s shoulder. He cried out in pain. I dragged myself towards the door, my hand scorching in pain.

“She’s *my fucking universe now*. Lay one finger on her, and I swear I’ll figure out how to make an immortal like you regret it.” I growled, leaving him bleeding his gold *talayi* onto the expensive afghan carpet while my father stood with jutting eyes, trying to comprehend what had happened.

I forced myself into my truck and drove to the one place where I knew I would find comfort—*her arms*.



I lazily knocked in front of her door, hoping she’d answer. She took one look at me and lunged forward, catching me as I fell into her arms.

“Royce, what the hell?” She breathed, sitting me down on the couch. “Baby, what the hell happened?”

“Do you have beer? Or alcohol or poison? Or like everything all at once?” It sounded like a good combination. I looked up at her, my eyes drooping. She disappeared, bringing back a beer, washcloths, a container of water, and other supplies.

She handed me the beer and a tablet, which I gulped down. “This is going to hurt.” She warned before dousing my hand with disinfectant, and I howled in pain. I lay in watch as she proceeded to bandage my hand. She tried to hide her burdened expression, but I knew her too well.

“Amare,” I said in a strained voice. “I’m sorry.”

She ran her hand down my face, using the washcloth to wipe off the blood. “Who did this?”

“No one.”

“Okay.” As she proceeded to wipe off the blood, rinsing the washcloth, the water started to become murky with my blood. A smirk formed across her face as she took my half-drunken beer, gulping it down before leaning into me to whisper, “I’m so fucking wet for you right now.” She said, biting her lip before walking towards the kitchen with the bloody

washcloths. Her words granted me enough strength to pick myself off the couch and follow behind.

“The hell have you done to me?” I asked, pinning her against the wall.

She twisted two of her fingers together, twirling them around. The air around me slowly became scarce as she repeated the question. “Who the fuck did this to you?”

“Adarvan.” I choked out.

“Now, was that so hard?” She smirked, letting go of the air.

I crashed my lips against her, pressing her frame into the wall. Whatever she had done sent shivers down my spine. *I fucking loved it.* Even though my body ached from the fight, and my hand seared in pain, my cock was itching to tear its way inside her. “That’s how you want to play?” I muttered, biting down hard on her neck.

“Royce,” She cried, wrapping her legs around my waist.

“I might not be a fucking immortal, but trust me, no immortal can make you come the way I make you come,” I growled into her ear. “Bed or counter.”

“Counter.” She moaned. A smile spread across her face as she dug her nail into my back. “I don’t think we’ll make it to the bed.”

I continued to kiss her neck down to her breasts. “You want to help me?” I confessed, knowing it would take me hours to get her shirt off. I didn’t have hours.

She smirked, pulling her Mickey Mouse shirt over her head and dropping it to the ground. “How about I take yours off too?”

Holding her against the wall with just my middle, I reached my arms over my head, letting her take off my shirt.

“Let me love you, baby.” She whispered, running her hands down my chest and pulling on the waistband of my jeans. She traced her fingers over the v-shaped lines. She slid down from my hold before undoing my belt and pulling everything down. Her hand fisted around the base of my cock as she slid down

from my hold. She turned us around. I was now pinned to the wall as she knelt before me, circling her tongue lazily around the tip. She slid her tongue into the slit before sucking the head. Her teeth sunk into the soft skin, and I gripped the wall for support.

“Fucking hell, Adirah.” I rasped, pushing myself against the wall. “Don’t stop.” She liked the praise and dragged her tongue along my length. I fisted my hand into her hair, forcing her to gag on my cock before pulling her up.

She again twisted her finger, sucking the air. “What did Adarvan want?”

“Nothing,” I lied in a constrained voice, and she sucked away more air. “He wanted to bring you back to your father.”

“Baby, I can play this game all day and not get tired.”

“I know. I’m all for playing too.” I smirked. Seeing her in power brought a new meaning to the word pleasure. A sensation only she could inflame. “I could get used to you being immortal. Knowing how I breathe only for you. I’d let you deprive me of it any day.”

“Fucking shit, Royce. You make everything sound magical.” She pulled me in for a kiss. “I’m tasting blood from kissing you, yet you are here being a fucking poet.”

“Royce Wolfe is only a poet for you.” I bit down on her lip, “Your love made me magical.” I took the chance, pressing her chest flat against the marble counter. With one hand pinning her place, I knelt behind her, placing a gentle kiss between her thighs. She let out a desperate moan as I clamped my lips onto her clit, giving her just a sample of what was about to come. I trailed my hands down the inner part of her thighs, spreading them apart, teasing her with soft kisses.

“Royce, baby, *please*,” she moaned.

My hand left her back, trusting she’d stay in place. “I like hearing you beg,” I whispered before I spread her legs further apart, dragging my tongue across the perfect line of her wet cunt. Her hips lurched backward, begging for more. She pressed her wet cunt into my face, and I stifled a groan. I

sucked harder, grazing her clit with my teeth, watching her legs shake with pleasure. “Royce, please. I want to come on your dick.” *And here I was, ready to drain every ounce of her arousal.*

I hauled myself off her kitchen floor, teasing her cunt with the tip of my cock. In one aggressive movement, I thrust my way inside. She screamed my name, reaching her hand back to interlace it with mine. I rocked back and forth with hard thrusts as she closed her eyes. Her core began to tighten, but I slowed the speed, wanting to ride out the euphoria as long as possible. My thumb circled her clit, and she clamped her free hand onto the counter edge.

“This is for lying to me,” I whispered down her neck, kissing her back as I thrust with force.

“Oh fuck.” She was quivering.

“This is for thinking I’d be okay with it.” Another thrust. Another row of kisses.

“Royce.” She let out a strangled scream.

“And this is for thinking I couldn’t protect you after I told you that you are mine.” I took her hand and guided it over her clit. She pressed her thumb around in circles as I forcefully thrust one more time. Her cunt tightened as I gripped her hips with two hands, still pumping into her. Her orgasm quaked through her so hard I had to catch her from falling. Her contracting muscles led me into my euphoric release, my cum dripping down her thigh as I pulled out. Her legs were still shaking, unable to stand, so I gathered her into my arms. I stood bruised and batter, but she wanted to love me even then. Her love gave me all the strength I needed. Her love kept me from collapsing into a dark void from where there was no way of coming back.

“I love you.” I kissed her sweaty neck, “I love you so damn much.”



“Hold out your palm.” She smiled. We sat on her bed as the sun went down, her back resting against my build as I traced little circles on her exposed thigh.

What?” I asked.

She held her hand, palm facing up, demonstrating for me to do the same. I put my hand out, and she crossed her middle finger over her index, swirling it in the middle of my palm. There was a little tornado circling about. I was awestruck by the little funnel twirling with life.

“How’d you make that?”

“It’s in the job description.” She laughed before her voice got quiet. “You didn’t have to pick a fight with Adarvan.”

“Actually, I kind of did. He looks at you like you’re a prize he won at a fair.” I murmured.

“Royce.” She whispered.

“He failed to realize you’re my prize. You’re my treasure.” I smiled, looking into her honey-amber eyes. “I promised you I’m bound to you for eternity. I can’t. No, I won’t allow myself to love someone else.”

“Royce.” She whispered again.

“You made my reality worthwhile. Did you really think I’d let you go without a fight?”

She pressed her lips to mine, her eyes filled with affection.

“Can I ask you something?” I had been itching to ask her this question.

“Yeah.”

“What was he like?” I asked softly.

“Who?”

“My uncle. Darius.”

“The opposite of you.” She teased, trailing her finger down my face.

I chuckled but stayed quiet for a moment before asking her another. “Did you see him?”

She stared dumbfounded. “See him?”

“Yeah, like his corpse.”

“Oh. Yeah. What I think happened was my father had Adravan snap his neck.” She sighed. “But I don’t know.”

“Darius wrote you both were going to get married,” I whispered.

She nodded. “It’s funny how you plan things one way, but the universe has other plans. I had my life planned out with Darius, but the universe gave me you instead. I was always meant to be with you.” She rested her palm on my cheek, pulling herself onto my lap. She reached over to the nightstand and pulled out a bottle. “I know you don’t want me to leave. I don’t want to leave either. But for the nights I will be gone, a little part of me will always be with you.”

She sprayed the perfume on her wrist and wiped it beneath my ear, and I closed my eyes. I grabbed her wrist, bringing it to my nose and inhaling every bit of her scent as if it were a drug. *It was my drug.*

“Do you want to go see him? Like where he’s buried.” She said moments later.

I agreed, wanting closure. Finally, I let myself acknowledge that Darius was, in fact, dead. We stood out in the middle of nowhere, a little past midnight. “You know he always said he never feared death.”

She smiled. “Yeah, he always said, why fear something inevitable?”

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around you being immortal and that you also loved my uncle. Just know you made him fucking happy. And now I know why.” I chuckled awkwardly.

“He used to call me amare too. But what Darius and I had is nothing compared to what we have.” She said softly. “I learned to let him go. I don’t think I could ever let you go.”

“That’s not weird at all,” I said, an awkward laugh escaping my throat. “Not weird at all. But I guess I spent so much time

with him, I was bound to be like him.”

“You’re not like him.” She laughed. “I mean, except for the traveling part, but he was collected. You’re fucking unhinged.”

“Unhinged?” I arched my brow.

“Completely unhinged.” She said through her smile. “And I like having the manic in my life.”

“Do you, now?” I said, running my hand down her spine.

“Yeah, it makes me feel satisfyingly sinful.” She admitted. “Everything is a new adventure better than before.”

My hand wrapped around her waist, pulling her close. “I’ll give you an adventure every fucking time,” I whispered, pressing a kiss on her neck.

“This is great, you know. We’re fucking feral for each other as we sit at my dead ex-boyfriend’s grave, who by the way is also your uncle.” She uttered.

Okay, she had a point.

“He’s not my real uncle, you know?” I said, finally letting go of the heaviness on my chest.

“What do you mean?”

I told her what Darius had written in the letter, and she was in tears by the end.

“Royce?” She wrapped her hands around me, pulling me closer. “That’s awful.”

“It’s been a hell of a day.” I sighed. “Even though I’m truly hurt by you not telling me, I still want to be in your arms and bore you with my shitty mortal problems.”

She stayed quiet, her head resting on my shoulder, her silence only eating me more, “Those stories you told me about Azure.” I started.

“They were true,” She said softly. “Down to every detail.”

We drove back, but the ride was filled with an awkward silence.

“Do you want to come in? Or stay?” She asked as we sat in her driveway.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I want to be left alone tonight.”

I saw her hurt expression from the corner of my eyes, and I left before she could convince me to stay. I couldn't stand to see her cry. But I also didn't want her to see me cry. I took my time walking through the foyer of my house, pulling out my phone, and calling Mykel.

“We need to talk.” I sighed. “Not like in your office or anything.”

“Yeah, of course, whatever you need.” He said, taking a moment. “Are you okay though?”

“No. Not one bit.” I admitted, ending the call. Seeing her did make me feel better, but I still wanted to be left alone.

I grabbed a beer and walked out onto the patio but saw her sitting on the grass. Her back turned towards me.

I couldn't help but laugh. We couldn't stay away from each other, even if we tried. I smiled as I sat before her, pulling up my knee, “Am I supposed to get used to this?” I asked, taking a swig of beer.

She shook her head. “Consider it a one-time thing.”

I nodded. “And why are you here?” I smiled.

“I wanted to show you something.” She said. “Remember when I asked you what you wanted to do in life?” She pointed her thumbs behind her, explaining her words with her hands.

“Yeah, on the plane ride, I asked you to be specific, and you said love-related.”

“And you said you wanted to be kissed under the rain because it sounded cute.”

I chuckled, gazing into her eyes. She raised her index fingers to the sky, bringing together the clouds until little droplets began to fall. She kept merging them until it was raining, but only in my yard.

“Can I have the honor of taking your rain kiss virginity?” She smiled, wrapping her hands around my neck.

I laughed, running my hand through my hair. We stayed silent, staring into each other eyes. My smile was filled with love as I touched my lips with hers. She brushed her nose against mine, and the feeling of needing her returned. I let my body fall into hers, locking my arms around her waist.

“The hell have you done to me, Adirah?” I whispered, standing up and pulling her along with me. “I’m supposed to be pissed as shit with you right now.”

I pressed a kiss onto her cheek.

“This is *me* asking for your forgiveness.” She said in a voice barely audible. We stood staring at each other, the rain soaking through our clothes, looking for sanction, as if our world hadn’t crumbled around us. She placed her hand on my cheek. “This is *me* letting you know that if something were to happen to you because of me, *I* would never forgive myself. You promised to keep me safe when, in fact, I’m the one who needs to keep you safe, even if that means letting you go. I can live knowing I loved the most incredible man to walk the Land of Mortals. But I would never be able to live knowing he is buried six feet underground because I wasn’t immortal enough to save him. Don’t position that kind of torment on me.”

She made the sky rain for me.

I pulled her closer, brushing her wet hair from her face. “Fucking hell, amare, I love you. I’ll always love you, and I’ll die with your name engraved into my heart.” The word love didn’t express what I felt for her anymore. “Fuck the whole till death do us part. I’m never letting you go.”

She grabbed my hand, placing a kiss on my palm. Leaning down, I held her face in my free hand, kissing her softly. She deepened the kiss, pushing past with her tongue. Under the rain, her vanilla scent loomed around, leaving me breathless. And even as I held her shivering body, adhered to mine, I couldn’t help but mourn the inevitable loss I knew was soon coming.



Revenge



Long Live the King

Adirah



Day One

Even though we had a mutual understanding of our relationship, Royce still wanted to be left alone. “I want to figure out some things before I do anything else. I can’t afford to make mistakes.” He had said with his hands wrapped around my face.

He didn’t call or text and stopped sitting out on the balcony. The only time I did catch him was when he was sitting on the cliff, but the moment he saw me, he got up and drove away. I wasn’t prepared for this, even though I should’ve been. But his behavior, which in some sort was valid, only brought me misery. And with Kinza being in Pakistan, I was all alone. I spent yesterday finalizing the model with Jared so that it could be presented at the Gala later today. Royce hadn’t come to work this past week, and I was annoyed by it. The end of the week rolled around quicker than I had expected, and early Thursday morning, I found myself staring at the dress Royce had bought, wondering what his reaction would be tonight.

But what if he wasn’t going?

Without a second thought, I grabbed my phone and sent him a text.

Hi.

Hi.

I miss you.

Neanderthal or Prudish?

A mix of both.

I know you told me to stay away, but are you home?

Why don't you come find out?

A sigh escaped my body as I battled my emotions of wanting to go to his place and wrap my arms, wanting to forget the past few days ever happened. I found myself not moments later standing in front of his door.

“Amare,” He said, opening the door, wearing nothing but sweatpants. His hair was messily tied back, and he held a beer bottle between his fingers. “Are you going to stand there or come inside? You’re going to burn my pancakes.”

I couldn't help but laugh as he sluggishly ran into the kitchen to flip his breakfast, “You want some?” He asked. He pulled off a piece from the ones he had lying on a plate and held it in front of my mouth. I took a bite before hopping onto the counter.

He poured me a cup of coffee, slowly inching it towards me. “Are you going to throw it out?”

I shook my head, “No.” I laughed softly, taking the cup and drinking a sip.

He stood aimlessly, staring at the stove.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked softly.

“No.” He said without hesitation before admitting the truth, “I don’t know.”

“Do you hate me?” I choked out.

“What? No.” He said, turning off the stove. He pushed my legs on either side of his waist, pulling me into his build. Setting the cup down, I wrapped my hands around his neck and buried my head into his chest, inhaling his worn-out cologne smell. He touched my chin, lifting my face, before gently brushing his thumb over my bottom lip.

“I could never hate you.” He whispered before crashing his lips against mine. He deepened the kiss before pulling back and leaning over the opposite counter.

“Royce, tell me how to fix this.”

“That’s easy.” He chuckled sarcastically. “Don’t leave.”

“You know, I can’t do that.”

He nodded. “I don’t know if I could trust you right now. I thought I could. But Adirah, I don’t know. I know you tried telling me, and I’m seriously trying not to blame you. I guess it was my fault for breaking my own rules.” He was rambling on like he did when he was overwhelmed. “My life isn’t my life. My parents aren’t my parents. And you’re not human, which means one day, I’ll die, and you’ll still be here. And like, there are so many other things.”

I hopped off the counter and walked to where he stood. I reached over, touching his arm, but he flinched away. “Royce,” I whispered. Seeing him fighting his emotions and not knowing what to do broke me.

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to hurt you in the process.” He muttered. “Which is why I keep telling you to stay away from me.”

“I can’t stay away from you, Royce.”

“I trusted you like I’ve never trusted anyone before.” He yelled. “I loved you with all my heart. I gave you everything. And what did you do? You shattered my world. *Our world*. The world where you and I were supposed to live our so-called happily ever after.”

He picked up a glass and threw it across the floor, followed by a plate and a holder filled with spoons.

“Royce, I couldn’t tell you.”

“It’s always I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t do that with you, isn’t it?” He muttered. “Did you ever think about what would’ve happened if you did tell me? We could’ve been stronger.”

“I told you everything else,” I whispered.

“It wasn’t fucking enough!” He yelled, “You made me fall in love with you to the point where I can’t go back! I fell in love with you because you’re fucking amazing. And I wanted you to see what I see when I look at you. I can’t look at you how I used to, knowing you didn’t trust me enough. I let you love me in ways I don’t even love myself. I let you see that side of me that I don’t share with anyone.”

I stood silently, not knowing what to say.

“And now I have to come to terms with you living in another *world*. That’s not fair. Not fair to me, and not fair to you either.” He threw another glass, but I jumped in the way, the glass shattering against the side of my head. He stood confused, and the look on his face immediately changed from anger to concern in mere seconds.

“Are you fucking crazy?” He gasped, immediately grabbing a towel, pressing it against my head, and pulling me into his chest.

“I’m fucking crazy about you.” I let the tears flow without a care. The idea of losing him made the fluid in my stomach churn, slowly taunting me as I fought back the urge to vomit.

We stood there, his arms wrapped around me, for what felt like hours before he looked at me with teary eyes. “It wasn’t supposed to hit you.”

“I know.”

“Stop making me hurt you more than I already have.” He murmured. “I see the pain in your eyes when I express my feelings. I know it’s killing you, knowing you can’t fix this by twisting your fingers.”

I shook my head. “You haven’t done anything but give me unconditional love, Royce. And it hurts me to see that I’m why there’s pain in *your* eyes. But I can’t sit around and do nothing. I can’t wait for someone to find us. Or find you and put an end to you. The torment will slowly eat me away until I’m living but no longer alive. I will always be living, but without you, I’m nothing. How would I ever forgive myself if something ever happened to you?”

“I’m sorry.” He said again.

“Royce. It’s not your fault.” I whispered. It wasn’t anyone’s fault but mine.

Tomorrow was the day of Summer Solstice, the day everything was to turn into ash.



I stood staring at myself in the mirror. The dress gave off the slightest iridescence shine, swooping slightly, showing off my cleavage, cinching at my waist, and the ruffle hem flowing just a bit down my thighs.

“I was just going to knock.” Royce stood at my door right as I opened it, his eyes pausing to take a glance. “Why the hell do you have to look so damn beautiful?” He held out his hand. I immediately interlaced my fingers with his, walking down the steps.

“And why the hell do you have to look like a five-star meal?” I smirked, staring at his black jeans and suede boots,

which he had paired with a dark green tee and blazer to match my dress. His hair was tied in a ponytail, and his wrists were covered with all his bracelets. His other hand sported the splint and his lucky bandana. Leave it to Royce to dress casually for a special event.

“Are you trying to tempt me, amare?” He growled, tugging me off the steps. His arms encircled me in a hug as I inhaled every bit of his cologne, knowing it would be something I longed for.

“Most certainly not, *Mr. Royce Elias Wolfe.*” The sensual look I had grown to love returned in his eyes.

“I fucking love it when you say my name.” He whispered into my ear. “We’ll finish this after the Gala.”

Yes, we most certainly will.

I bit my lip. “Shall we?” gesturing to the driveway.

“Yeah, but first, I got you something.” He reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out a square box. “I don’t know what the future holds for me, you, or even us, but you taught me something.”

I took the box from his hands and popped it open. “And what is that?” Tucked inside was a black braided rope bracelet. The metal in the middle read *Confortare. Vivere gratis.* There was a little charm dangling from the bracelet.

“That I was worthy of love. Your love.” He smiled.

“Why is it half of a heart?” I asked. He took the bracelet from the box and slipped it around my wrist.

He held up his arm. “Because I have the other half.” He connected the charm. “Keep a piece of me wherever you go.”

Royce drove us to Wolfe Legacy, which was decorated for the event. Hundreds of lights strung, wrapping around the front of the building, bringing a sense of luxury. A black carpet was laid out leading into the building. He was a complete gentleman, opening my door, helping me out of the truck, and walking me down the carpet with his hand snaked around my waist.

Mr. Asuka met us in the front. “Your choice of attire never ceases to amaze me, Mr. Wolfe.”

Royce grinned, shaking Mr. Asukas’s hand. “Sir, it is an honor. But would you please share your thoughts with my senior project manager? She thinks I don’t dress professionally.” He turned towards me and winked.

Mr. Asuka laughed. “I think in this day and age, you should do what makes you comfortable.” He smiled at Adirah. “You look lovely as ever, Ms. Gaudin.”

“Thank you. I hope you are enjoying the celebration.” I smiled.

“Yes, quite fantastic, if I do say so myself. Your team did an amazing job with the model.” He gave us another smile before walking in the opposite direction, leaving Royce standing beside me.

“You look like Cinderella.” He whispered.

“You look like Tarzan when Jane teaches him to clean up.” I held back a laugh.

Royce burst out laughing. “You will never stop making fun of my clothing choices, will you?”

“What? It was a compliment.” I defended. “I think the only time I’ve seen you in a suit is when you met me in Rustam.”

“That’s because you are the only one that deserves to see me at my best.”

“You look amazing no matter what, though you know how I feel about you without your clothes.”

“Just say the words, baby.” I swatted his chest, and he let out a laugh. A wash of relief spread through my veins, seeing him in a better mental state. And the guilt soon took over, knowing tonight would be my last night with him. He smiled at me and mouthed I love you just as the lights dimmed. Millie stood at the podium in the center of the event, announcing the company’s most significant achievement.

“Good evening, everyone. I am pleased to have you all here today to celebrate Wolfe Legacy’s greatest achievement. The

project was a dream of Wolfe Legacy's founder, Darius Wolfe, who unfortunately no longer stands with us today. But his nephew, Mr. Royce Wolfe, worked hard with Ms. Adirah Gaudin and her team to create an astonishing design for our clients from Japan, the well-known video game company Yellow Dwarf. Next month, we will be starting construction on the new Yellow Dwarf Headquarters, inspired by their own beloved video game, The Shadow Prince. Now, I would like Mr. Royce Wolfe and Ms. Gaudin to join me here on the stage to share more details on the project." She smiled at the crowd as everyone applauded.

"It's time you let the world know what you're capable of." He said, holding onto my hand as we walked up the steps. He took the microphone and began his speech.

"Good evening. My uncle and I were very close, and I vaguely remember him telling me he had started an architecture firm. You know, I always remember seeing him happy. He fell in love, and his happiness was as if it was radiating all around him. He made others happy. My father forced me to return from the Island of Mona, and I was handed a file upon my return. On my first day, I walked into the conference room and was left in awe by the sketch displayed on the screen. Colton Wolfe, the retired CEO of Wolfe Legacy, introduced me in a cringe-worthy way, but that didn't stop Ms. Gaudin's team from collectively bringing their ideas to life. She created a design that is not only significant to Yellow Dwarf but also a unique constitution."

I stood smiling from ear to ear.

"My role was to approve their work of art, but if I'm being honest, Ms. Gaudin didn't need my approval. In this experience, she taught me some things about life, which I was completely oblivious to. The main being is that there are no impossibilities in having a dream and being in love. I always wondered how my uncle could be filled with so much happiness, but I understood when I met her."

Wait, what now?

He turned and shifted his position so that his side was now turned towards the audience, but he was facing me. “I’ve been working through many emotions in the past couple of days—anger, hatred, guilt. But that feeling of love always consumed the others and let me tear through every obstacle.”

He slowly walked over and placed his hand in mine.

“I made you a promise when we first met that I’ll always keep you safe. I’ll forever stand by that promise till my last breath.” He wasn’t talking to the crowd.

He was talking to me. He was talking to them.

“That first smile made me a captive to your love. And I’m so fucking glad it did because I can’t see myself without you anymore.”

From the corner of my eye, I glanced into the crowd. Everyone stood quietly, watching Royce snake his arm around my waist. My cheeks filled up with heat, but I still smiled. “I’m so in love with you, and the disease worsens daily.” He joked, and a few chuckles were heard from the crowd. “But you’re the reason I get to live every day.”

I encircled my arms around his neck, melting into his heavy frame as if we were molded for one another. Two pieces of a puzzle, finally fitting together. He let the microphone fall to the ground before his hands held my face, fusing his lips to mine.

The perfect mic drop.

The crowd applauded while the media rushed forward, asking questions. Royce Wolfe didn’t just tell the world I was his. It was an open message to Adarvan and his father, a threat, letting them know I wasn’t to be messed with. As he broke the kiss, he lifted my chin and smiled. The sadness in his eyes was faintly visible, but his admiration overpowered. He stood proud without a care in the world. “You didn’t need to sleep with me to get to where you always wanted to be.”

“Of course.” I smiled. “I knew that. It was just a bonus perk. Besides, I’ve grown to love my boss’s dick.”

Pressed against him, I felt his erection grow. “It fits perfectly in your wet pussy.” He whispered into my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

He turned slightly towards the crowd, shielding me for his next move. He placed his hand between my legs, dragging his finger down the seam of my shorts. “Are you wet for me right now, amare?” He whispered. He got his answer when he slipped his hand inside, pulling aside the thin fabric of my underwear. He stroked his finger in a perfect line, parting my cunt to tease my clit. I held back a moan and pressed myself against his chest, trying to hide my expression. Being on a public stage while Royce rubbed my clit was beyond thrilling. *Who the fuck was I?*

“So fucking wet.” He pulled out his hand and covertly licked the tip of his finger, smirking, and then turned back to the crowd as if two seconds ago, his inky eyes weren’t filled with lust, ready to tear off my clothes. His hand rested at the base of my spine as he walked me off the stage.

He gave a short yet cautionary answer to the questions he got after the kiss. “I wish to keep my personal life private. However, I had to share the gem that captivated my life before anyone started pointing fingers. Adirah is my life, and I will protect her at all costs. No, she didn’t seduce me, and no, she didn’t do it for the money. Our story started long before I became Wolfe Legacy’s CEO. Fate just happened to bring us together under one roof, participating in an art we both love and admire.”

We spent the rest of the evening dancing to serene music, lost in each other’s eyes.

“I wish you both all the best.” Mr. Asuka said at the end of the event.

“Thank you.” Royce shook the man’s hand before asking the valet to bring his truck around. “My place or yours?” He asked softly.

“The first night, back in White Bridge City, you said I had one wish.”

“Yes. I did.”

“Well, my wish is to spend the night at our haven. Just me and you.”

His hand around my waist pulled me closer to him once again. “Okay, baby. Okay.” He smiled.



The thought of this being our last night crushed my soul. I hadn't told him. I wanted to tell him, assuring him everything would be alright. But I didn't dare to tell him, knowing he'd beg me to stay.

Fucking sue me.

The ride was quiet. He had taken off the shirt and overcoat and thrown on a jacket on his bare top half. His hand stayed interlaced with mine as if he knew something I didn't.

“What?” He said when he caught me looking.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“No, there's never just nothing with you. There's always something.” He laughed.

“What? I can't admire my fucking boyfriend?”

“*Dilbari.*” He corrected, placing a kiss on the back of my hand.

I stared into his mellow eyes. “*Dilbari,*” I repeated.

“See, it just sounds way better.”

“Are you okay?”

“The truth?” He asked.

“Of course.”

“No. I'm not. I still haven't processed any of this. But what I have accepted is that I will always love you. I know I will always love you.” He said, softly squeezing my hand. “I don't know if I'm mad at you. I don't think I am. I don't feel rage or

anything, but it hurts when I think about you not trusting me enough.”

“I trust you, Royce. I trusted you way before I knew it was you.” I said softly.

“I know. That’s why I can’t find any validity for my anger towards you.” He said, kissing my hand again. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine.”

“I collect them for my mother,” I whispered after a long silence.

“What?” He glanced over.

“Before all this shit happened, before Darius, I used to come down here and bring Laleh back a seashell.”

“You’re talking about the frame.” He said softly, remembering the odd look he gave when he saw a photo frame filled with different types of seashells.

“Yeah, she would say each seashell was a symbol of love left behind in the sand. Each seashell has its unique story because the markings and colors are believed to be its fingerprints. Just as every love story has its uniqueness.”

“That’s beautiful. There aren’t many Afsana’s on Laleh, but how you illustrate her tells me she must’ve been an amazing mother.” His thumb caressed my hand as I sat looking out the window. I held back tears at the memories of my mother, thinking of how helpless she had been, how destroyed Illiyan had made her, but she always stood her ground. She always showed affection.

“She was the best.” I choked out.

“Hey, maybe there will be an Afsana written about us.” He smiled, kissing my hand as we reached the bottom of the cliff. “The mortal who fell captive to the Goddess of Air.”

I felt the knot in my stomach tighten, feeling ten times worse about how he would be waking up alone the following day. He didn’t waste much time setting up the back of his truck into the perfect bed for us to spend the night on.

“Come on,” He threw off his jacket before he reached out his hand. “For a Goddess, you’re tiny.” He pulled me onto the back of his truck, wrapping his arms around me.

“I’m not tiny. You’re just a Neanderthal.”

He laughed. “I was thinking.”

“This can’t be good,” I smirked.

“Shut up.” His hand rested between my thighs. “We need a small dream and a big dream.”

“That’s easy.” I smiled. “Our small dream would be a second Wolfe Legacy, and our big dream would be our fairy-tale happily ever after.”

“That sounds perfect.” He said as he pulled me on top of him, straddling his build.

Our mouths were frantic, immediately trying to fuel the thirst we had been avoiding through the night.

“Right, so where was I.” He smirked, breaking the kiss.

“I believe your hand was down here.” I guided his hand over my shorts, and he caressed the seam with his finger. He stared into my eyes.

“Sometimes I forget you’re an actual *Goddess*.” He whispered, kissing the back of my hand. “Which means I *do* actually get to worship you.”

His hands tangled in my hair, kissing me with force, and he pushed his tongue inside. I planted my hands over his shoulders, pressing myself against his bare chest. “Every fucking bit of you.”

He pressed his mouth delicately down my neck. Desire filled my core as he scraped his teeth against the thin skin of my neck, leaving me gasping for air.

“Royce,” I moaned.

“Amare,” He said, slowly lying me down on the inflatable mattress as he went back to kissing and sucking my neck. I ran my hands down his chest, teasing his nipples with my fingertips.

“So you know how I said my fairytale had three children.” I started.

“Yes.” He nipped down to my chest, kissing over each breast through the fabric of my dress.

“I can’t actually have kids. Well, technically, I can, but I mean, you are a mortal, and I, I mean Goddesses, can’t bear the child of a mortal.” I rambled as I dug my heels into the back of his thighs. His kissing and sucking was making it hard to talk.

“Then I guess we won’t have kids.” He said and went back to kissing the living shit out of my neck, bruising the skin.

“That’s it?” I asked.

He stopped and stared into my eyes. “Yes, that’s it. Do you want to make a whole issue out of this? Or would you rather have my tongue brand you? I physically prefer the second option, but you tell me.” He kissed my cheek, stopping to glance into my eyes. “But like there are other ways, like adoption. Plus, we have Hadi. We can always take him. I’m sure Danish would love a vacation for the rest of his life. And when Hadi becomes a riled-up teen, we’ll hand him back.” He shrugged.

“You’re not mad?”

He shook his head. He propped himself on his forearms, barely hovering over me. “When the time comes, I promise you we’ll figure it out. But I’ll love you no matter what.” He kissed my nose.

“Show me how much you love me.” I breathed.

“Amare, I plan on doing much more.” His voice had turned heavy with greed. He jumped off the truck, opened the back door, and pulled out a duffle bag. He hopped back onto the bed and pulled out a bottle of tequila.

“You didn’t.” My head fell back as I laughed.

“Does *Raysah* cut through this? Or is it just for stabbing people?” He asked, holding up a green lime.

I laughed and handed him the dagger. He sliced the lime into quarters.

“You came prepared,” I said, taking a slice.

“Of course I did.” I held out my hand as he sprinkled the salt. “So I didn’t bring glasses. Considering we both like drinking straight out of the bottle, we’ll be fine.”

He took off my dress. “Why the hell do you smell so fucking addicting all the damn time?” He said, bringing his hand between my legs as he fell back onto the bed. He stroked through the soft material of my underwear. My heart pumped harder as his finger inched underneath, gently grazing over the wet skin. He slid a finger inside, and I let out a moan.

I let the liquid from the bottle drip onto his chest while I licked off the salt.

“Look, I want to try something later. But the second it gets uncomfortable, and I mean the second you start to feel this isn’t appropriate anymore, you say coffee, and I’ll stop.” He said softly.

I nodded, surprised at his request but curious about what he had intended. “Okay.”

“I fucking mean it, Adirah. The last thing I want is for you to resent me. I’d never hurt you.” He slipped another finger inside, rubbing his thumb in slow circles on my clit.

I rocked my hips against his fingers. “You could never hurt me.” I moaned incoherently.

He groaned as I bent down, slowly trailing my tongue down his perfectly sculpted abs, licking off the tequila. He pulled out his fingers, and I pulled off my shorts and underwear, adding them to the growing pile of clothes. I smiled, sucking on the lime, before taking a swig straight out of the bottle. The fingers of his broken hand roamed over my ribs gently and down to my hips.

His fingers grazed over the feathers on my thigh, adding a tingling sensation flushing through my vines. “That’s your emblem.” He murmured.

I nodded, repeating the tequila act, leaving out the salt and lime. I made my way, kissing his neck, sinking my teeth into his skin, and leaving him moaning in pleasurable despair. “Amare, oh fuck,” He whispered, closing his eyes. My lips found his, fusing themselves in a frantic motion.

His hands ran down my bare spine, deepening the kiss. “For every half-ass lie you told me? I’m going to make you beg, plead even.” He said, breaking the kiss. His voice was laced with hunger.

“I thought you were the beggar now,” I murmured, running my finger down his face, standing over him with my knees on either side of his head. I took another swig from the bottle before screwing it shut and tossing it into the pile of clothes.

He shook his head, “I already begged for my forgiveness. It’s time for you to beg for yours.” He pulled me on top of his face aggressively, holding me down tight with his hands. He ran his tongue down my cunt, circling my clit, aggressively kissing, sucking, and biting, as I tried to push his head away.

“Royce, Royce, Royce,” I cried out his name, digging my finger into the side of the truck to keep from collapsing. My back arched inward as he nested closer, devouring like a starved man. He let out a satisfied moan before pushing his tongue inside my cunt. He used his hands to rock my hips back and forth. “Royce, I’m going to come.” I cried out.

“Yeah?” He breathed, “Says fucking who.” He pulled himself from underneath, resting against the truck’s walls and sitting me on his lap. He pinned my hands behind my back, sitting me on his lap. “I get to tell you when to come.” He growled, biting down on my pert nipple, sending a shot of ripples through my body. The thumb of his free hand circled my clit in a vigorous pattern.

I stared into his mischievous stare. “Royce,” I whispered, beggingly.

His mouth formed a devious smile, knowing he’d made me ecstatic with his tongue. His eyes traveled over my body, and his touch sent electricity through my nerves, leaving me powerless.

“Are you going to come, Adirah?” My name rolled off his tongue, leaving me with a heavy breath.

I shook my head, biting my lip. “Only if you tell me to.”

His obsidian eyes became murky as he let go of my arm and laid me on the bed, “That’s my good little Goddess.” He whispered, sending a shrill down my spine. He spread my legs apart, slamming three of his fingers inside. The intensity of pleasure and pain merged throughout my body, forming a different sensation. “Fuck.” I cried out.

“Yeah, we’re just getting started.”

He continued teasing, kissing, pulsing, and roaming over my body. He didn’t leave a single inch, not even a smidge, of skin unknissed, branding me with his lips. His dark gaze stared into my eyes as he leaned over, pressing hungry kisses down my neck.

He made his way back down, his tongue now sliding up and down on my clit, his hands cupped around my breasts. He would bring me close to my breaking point but quickly rob the moment.

“Royce, *please*. Fucking hell.” I stuttered. At this point, I was pleading.

“What do you want, Adirah? What does my good little Goddess want?” He wavered. “Do you want me to let you come?”

“Fuckin hell. Yes.” I choked out. “*Please*.”

“No.” He whispered into my ear, pulling out his fingers, the sensual feeling replaced with a low hum.

“Fuck you,” I muttered, and he smirked.

He dug his fingers around my jaw, looking far into my eyes. “Don’t you ever think, and I mean ever, I’ll be okay with you lying to me.” He laid me down, and instead of three, he slammed two fingers inside. They curled inside as he pulsed. “Now, be the sinful Goddess you are, and come for me, screaming my *full name*.”

I smirked and played my own game. “Only if you drain me dry.”

He laughed with his head tilting back and pushed his tongue against my clit, sucking as I rode out the wave of my orgasm. My nails dug into the nape of his neck as I fulfilled his request and cried out his full name. “*Royce. Elias. Wolfe.*” And he rewarded by continuing to suck and lick—his greedy moans laced with approval, devouring what was rightfully his.

My arms stretched over my head as I revealed under his touch, his kiss, and how he wanted to cherish, protect, and fuck me like an animal all at the same time. His devious smile was back as he licked off my arousal, pulling off his pants. He fisted his rock-hard erection, standing over me and pushing inside. His cock was seated fully into my depth as he lingered over me for a few seconds, taking everything in. His hand traced around the veins of my neck before wrapping around my throat, pressing gently on either side.

“You’re not the only one that bites.” He kissed the soft skin of my breast before biting my nipple. “And you’re not the only one that can take away the ability to breathe.” He smirked, pressing harder, ultimately taking control of my body. And I let him have his way, just as he always wanted. “You’re fucking mine.”

With one hand still inflicting pressure, he pressed his other hand closed into a fist, firmly on my lower stomach before he pushed forward.

“Royce, baby, holy fuck,” I cried, choking. At this point, it wasn’t coherent. He groaned, thrusting faster, the sounds of our fucking mixed in with the crashing waves.

The intensity of pleasure gained control over my system as his body slammed against mine, over and over, before finally, my core tightened around him, forcing both of us off the edge together. I pulled him closer to me as his cock throbbed inside, splurging his warm arousal. He collapsed on top of me, burying his head into my neck. “Fucking hell, don’t leave me.” He said, catching his breath. “Your fucking scent, your taste, and now you, in your state of submission, has driven me

fucking mad, Adirah. You're more than everything I ever wanted."

His heart pounded against mine, and we stayed locked in each other's arms, catching our breaths and caressing each other's bare skin.

When he finally rolled over, his hand trailed up my thigh, wiping the remnant of his secretion as it trickled out of me. His fingers slid up and down the line, smiling at me all while he did. He brought his finger to my mouth, pushing it inside, letting me lick off our merged arousal. "I've never touched, smelled, or fucked a girl as beautiful as you." He said, pulling my bare body against his. "Are you okay? Or was it too much?"

I stared into his eyes. "I think I just found my new high." He was right. I was ruined. *Fucking ruined.*

How do I come back from Royce Wolfe choking me?

He burst out laughing before kissing my cheek. He yanked open a blanket covering my bare, shivering body, closing the gap between us. "What am I going to do without you?"

I forced a smile, knowing I didn't have an answer.



The Summer Solstice

Royce was peacefully asleep as the morning sun peeked from the water's edge. My fingers traced through strands of his hair. I planted a kiss on the side of his face, *my last kiss*. He looked so peaceful, and it hurt me knowing it wouldn't last long.

I stayed glued in place but knew I had to leave before he woke up. Everything was just perfect until it wasn't.

I got dressed and tucked a note, along with the story of Sun and Moon, under the blanket. As I ascended into the sky, the air growing thinner, Royce's figure growing smaller, and then

ceasing to be seen, I felt the angst of rage and revenge surging over my emotions.

What Royce and I had, or more so created, was what many longed for in their lifetime, and I had just left my greatest gift behind.

I stood at the gates of Azure, the same as thirty years ago, white and shining against the bright sunlight. Behind the main entrance were the five Gates of Realms—one for each element. I stood before the Fire Realm, pushing the heavy stone door with my pointed finger. I was not expecting it to open.

I walked inside, immediately regretting every life decision I made to end up in this situation. The black stone bridge sat over a burning fire, where continuous screams erupted, causing me to hold my hand over my ears.

“Sephtis?” I called out. But the Dark Lord was nowhere to be seen. I’d never been in Sephtis’ realm and wasn’t thrilled at the idea either.

The bridge continued for miles before I finally reached his empty throne. The screams drowned down as I stood by the luxurious leather seat, but they could still be heard in the distance. My eyes fixated on the girl confined in the corner, her once long, luscious brown hair, now dried and matte, tied messily into a ponytail, leaned against the wall, trying to stay as far away from the flames as possible.

Sienna Lombardi.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered. “Where the hell is he?”

There was a row of alcohol bottles neatly lined by the throne. I grabbed one of the bottles and stepped through the curtain of flame surrounding her. I stayed quiet as she quenched her thirst, the alcohol stinging her throat.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” His voice echoed off the walls. “I thought I told you to wait outside.”

I glared at him through the fire. “Get her some fucking water.” I snarled, avoiding his question entirely.

“It’s not going to work.” He muttered. “You can’t save her. I tried so many times. But what I should’ve saved her from was from me.”

“Sephtis, stop. ” I ordered. “Stop wallowing in your guilt. Stop thinking like a victim and start acting the sinner you are.”

He stood staring, “You’re calling me a sinner.”

“Yes,” I said daringly.

“I see now why the Wolfe is infatuated with you.” He smirked. “But tell me, what did he say when you told him there’s a slight chance you might not be coming back? Ever.”

I stayed quiet.

“So you didn’t tell him.” He laughed.

“You know what? At least I had the decency to stand up and do something about it.” I bellowed. “What the hell did you do? You let her burn. Look at her, she’s barely fucking conscious.”

His gaze fell to the floor. “Adirah, don’t you think I’ve tried?” He yelled. He was angrily shaking, the bottom of his heels bursting into flames. “Don’t you think I fucking tried everything I could to take her out of the fire?”

I left the flames, and Sienna let out a flat wail. I glanced at her before turning my attention back over to Sephtis. “You loved her as Ashkan, right? Where’s Ash? Would Ash sit back and do nothing?”

He walked up to the flames and put his hand inside. His hand began to melt with the flames. “Ashkan is no more.” He whispered, pulling back his hand. “The fire is untouchable for me. If I do, I burn along with it. I don’t die, but the agony repeats itself. I spent decades with her, letting myself burn, over and over, until she told me to leave.”

“Try harder, Sephtis,” I said, squeezing his shoulder.

“Are you always like that?”

“Like what?”

“Nice, cordial, and admirable.” He muttered. “It’s sickening.”

“Are you always like that?” I shot back, not waiting for him to reply. “Annoying, obnoxious, and cowardly?” I crossed my hands over my chest as he glared straight at me as if staring into my soul.

“I feel for the Wolfe. He had to deal with so much.” He asked.

“And I feel for the Mafia Princess. She had to deal with your broody ass.” I replied. “I can go on forever, Sephtis, but we’re on a time limit here. And seeing as how we’re going to piss off Illiyan, take her out of the fucking fire.”

“Can you stop air?” He asked, his mind finally beginning to function.

“What do you mean stop air?” I asked.

“The element of air ignites the element of fire. Fire needs about sixteen percent of oxygen to stay alive.”

“You want me to suck the air around from her like a vacuum?”

“Yes. Just so the fire dies down a bit. Maybe I can take her out then.”

I nodded. “It’s worth a try,” I said, twisting my fingers and twirling the air around her into a tornado. Then quickly pulled it away. The fire began to die slowly, but it would ignite again. I pulled more air forcefully, planting my feet into the ground, hoping I wouldn’t fall off the edge. The fire began to dull, then a few moments later, it was only a flame. Sephtis stepped inside, pulled her into his arms, and hugged her frail body close to his. I let the air go, and the fire ignited once again. His forehead connected with hers, tears flowing down his cheeks. He stared up at me with grateful eyes.

“You have no idea how happy you’ve made my soul.” He let out a wavering laugh. After more than a century of anguish, the King of *Duzakh* had finally gotten an ounce of serenity.

“You dealt with this daily?” I asked softly.

He nodded. “Now you see why I prefer the warehouse princess?”

Shit, I preferred his warehouse too.

“What’s the plan, Sephtis?” I asked, my anger returning.

“Finish him.” He muttered. His rage-filled gaze returned, and he looked me straight in the eye. “I want you to finish him so he’s no longer standing. So, he’s no longer capable of talking. The only thing he will be capable of is breathing. I will make him breathe in fire, the way he made my Sienna breathe in fire for the past hundred years.”

Seeing her limp in his arms threw me over the edge. “Is she going to be okay?” I asked in a small voice. “Do you want me to take her to Laleh?”

“No. NO.” He roared. “Not until the beast is dealt with. She doesn’t leave my sight.”

“Tell me what I have to do,” I said, knowing there was no going back from this. There was only from now on, either to my victory or demise. “Sephtis, tell me what I have to do to stop Illiyan.”

“It’s cruel of me to ask.” He said, “But I want you to return to him as if you realize the mistake you have made by running away.”

“I want you to follow through with everything he says. Follow through to that last moment when he thinks he’s defeated you. The King of Gods wears his thunder around his neck, hidden in a pendant with the Azurian crest engraved. I want you to take it and drive *Raysah* through this heart.” He growled.

“He has to touch me?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” He muttered. “Remember, you made an alliance.”

An alliance I was starting to regret. After walking out of *Duzakh*, I could’ve easily kept walking. Back down to the Land of Mortals, back into Royce’s arms, asking for his forgiveness for leaving him there stranded. Begging him to understand who I was and how much I loved him. But a part of me knew the constant fear of looking over my shoulder for Adarvan, my father, and even Sephtis would drive me mad. A

small part of me knew that living with me might be filled with unconditional love, but it would be deprived of everything else.

Eshaan was the first to find me walking through the halls of our castle. His eyes bulged. “No, it can’t be. Oh, thank fuck you’re alive.” He sighed before encircling me into a tight hug as if never to let go.

I hugged him back. “I’ve missed you, brother,” I said softly.

“I’m sorry. I’m fucking sorry. I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness. We all don’t.” He cried.

I placed my hand on his cheek, wiping away a stray tear. “But I forgave you all long ago,” I whispered. “Where’s Mama?”

“She grieves for you.” He whispered back.

“And Ehaan?”

“He’s probably with her as well.”

I nodded. We stood there entangled in each other’s arms for a long while before I let him go. He took a step back. “Why are you here?” He asked, with a staggering stare. “Why *did* you come back?”

“Adarvan.” His name alone sent a cold chill down my spine. Eshaan face turned as light as his blond hair.

“He found you?” He asked, his soft green eyes filled with fear as I acknowledged the Noble Warrior had achieved his mission.

“Where is *he*?” I asked in a cold tone, referring to my rapist father. “Tell him I’ve come to surrender at one cost.”

“And what cost might that be?” His venomous tone rose out from behind the columns before he stood in front of me as vain as ever. “I thought I sensed the exquisite taste of your *Rayehe*.”

I held back a gag. My father hadn’t changed one bit. Illiyan was charismatic with his looks—the sole reason mortal women threw themselves at his feet, begging him for more.

Illiyen treasured the concept of begging. His dark, wavy hair correlated with the dark glare in his eyes as he took a few more steps, standing inches away.

“How have you been, Illiyen?” I held my ground, though my legs said otherwise.

His fingers reached over to trail down my jaw, and I closed my eyes, flinching at his touch. “I’ve crestfallen. Mourning over your departure, my princess.” He closed the gap, and I felt his breath on my neck.

“Illiyen,” I whispered. “Leave him alone.”

“Now, why would I do that?” He brushed away my hair from my neck, revealing the weak bruising marks around my neck. Illiyen matched the prints, fitting his hand as if it belonged there. “I forbade you to leave.” He barked, tightening his grip. “Your King gave you orders, but you disobeyed me.”

“I know.” I choked out, holding back my tears and the putrid feeling growing stronger in my stomach. Eshaan stepped forward, but I held out my hand. “No, let him. As long as he promises to leave Royce Wolfe alone, I promise to surrender and never leave his sight.”

I stared into his dark, beady eyes, the smile of vain growing as he laughed, but I wasn’t going to let Illiyen have his victory. Not today. *Not ever.*

“Why should I listen to you?” His voice echoed through the halls, and by then, everyone stood watching. “I don’t need you to surrender. You fell to your demise when you fell in love with the mortal again. And surprise, surprise, he’s a fucking Wolfe too.”

“Illiyen put her down.” My mom’s voice rose stern from behind the columns.

His head snapped in her direction. “Put her down?” He questioned. “So that she can run away again? Tell me, what is it with these Wolfe men?”

“Put her down so she can breathe.” She yelled.

“She didn’t need to breathe when he did it. Why am I any different?” His attention centered on me again. “I gave you everything you could ever need. But you still went looking for more.”

His grip tightened with every word he spewed in vain. My hand clutched onto his arm, trying to inflict pain of some sort, but it only made him more pleased. My eyes saw a black fog slowly growing darker. The image of Royce’s smile flashed before me, and his hearty laugh rang in my ears.

“Someone wise and most likely dead once said that fear only keeps us focused on the past.” He had once said. “Stop focusing on the past, Adirah.”

I fought the urge to comply with my conscience and fall into the black fog, which would only give Illiyan more power.

And then it happened. My eyes closed, and Illiyan stood tall, thinking I was gone. He brought his free arm around to clutch my faltering body, releasing the grip on my throat. I heard my mother’s cries, thinking there was no possibility of saving me now.

She was wrong.

There was no saving *him* now. Illiyan’s fingers trailed down the side of my hips. I felt his lips brush against my neck, trailing down. “You were never supposed to become someone else’s.” He whispered before carrying me out of the halls and into what once was my room. “Never.”

His grip on my throat returned as he ripped off my shirt, leaving me in a sports bra and shorts, bracing himself to restate his actions from thirty years before.

“Everyone loves me, adores me even. Why don’t you, my princess?”

Before he realized it, I had pulled off the gold chain dangling around his neck. The small pendant engraved with the castle neatly encased his bolt of lightning. I broke the pendant, slamming it against the foot of the bed. Electricity sparked throughout, lighting the room on fire.

“What have you done?” He bellowed, realizing I had been playing him all along.

Sephtis stepped out from the shadows, “The question that should be asked is, what have *you* done?”

I took Illiyan’s distraction as a small beacon of hope and pulled out my feather, plunging it straight into his heart. His *talayi* spurted everywhere as he gasped for air, which I kept vacuuming away. Sephtis made the flames stronger, and soon, the room started to crumble around us.

He knelt before Illiyan, digging his nail into his face. “I came to you not as a warrior but as your so-called son you claimed me to be, knowing you’d be the only one to understand the growing feeling of love. After all, that’s how you and Laleh started, right? I loved *her*. I loved her to the point where I was willing to become a dying mortal for her.” He cried out. “She was going to make me a *father*. But everything has to be about you. You think you care. This is not how you show your affection, Illiyan. Your narcissism led you to have my daughter ripped out from her mother. Your arrogance let Sienna bleed to death.

“He ripped her out like it was any fucking Tuesday. An innocent unborn child. Children are a gift, Illiyan. They are a hope for an incomparable future. They’re supposed to be protected at every cost and, not tortured in the most brutal of ways, not killed in school shootings. Not bombed indefinitely by airstrikes and most certainly not ripped out from their mother’s womb in vain. What kind of cancer are you infected with, to not realize the severity of your actions?”

Sephtis was bursting into flames as I dragged myself away from Illiyan as far as possible, bursting into tears. “I thought of all people you would understand what it means to be a father.” He muttered coldly, “But when Daryah came to me about the heinous things you had done to Adirah, I understood why you had no empathy. Your lust for power, the land of others, and the happiness of others has consumed you. You’ve become a demon. You’ve become a malignant spirit. When does it stop? It sickens me to know you feed off the misery of others.

You're a beast that needed to be stopped by the one weakness you didn't know you had. The crazed lust for your daughter."

Sephtis let his face go violently, allowing Illiyan to plunge to the floor. He took one of the metal bars that had fallen to the ground, heating it in the fire, before wrapping it around Illiyan's wrist and securing it in place. "What did I do wrong? What did Sienna do to you, Illiyan? What did my unborn do to you?"

"I couldn't have you give up your powers." Illiyan choked out, the thick *talayi* spurting out of his mouth. "I needed you here. You were my greatest prize."

"I needed her." Sephtis seeted. "*I need them.* And now, your defeat is my greatest prize."

I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy the howls of pain from Illiyan's suffering. The King of *Duzakh* took his prize, with me following close behind, throwing Illiyan into a dark abyss with flames igniting about.

"I spent many years carving this out just for you. Enjoy your time in eternal hell." Sephtis snarled as he chained Illiyan's wrists and ankles to the craters. "Long live the fucking King."

His wrists were chained, as well as his ankles, to the craters, and finally, Illiyan, the King of Gods, was disenchanted to his dismay. Sephtis spat into the fire before handing me back *Raysah* and walking down the long bridge, disappearing.

I slid down the wall, pulling my leg up to my neck and burying my head into my knees.

It was over.

The nightmare was finally over.

But why did it feel like it had just begun?

I didn't know how long I'd been listening to Illiyan's screams, as if they were the sound of music, but I was brought back into reality when I heard Daryah calling my name.

"Adirah?" She came and knelt in front of me, handing me a clean shirt, and that's when I realized I had been sitting here in a bra and shorts. "Come on. It's your mother."

“Mama? What happened to her?”

“The lightning struck her.” She whispered. “She’s weak, and she’s not waking up.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means Azure needs a ruler, a king, a queen.” She sighed. “Azure needs you.”

The Start of Another Addiction

Royce



I woke up ready to an empty bed, a cold blanket, and a note tucked beneath. The corner of the paper rustled with the wind. “Adirah?” I called out groggily before getting up and rubbing my eyes. I pulled out the note, unfolded it, and let my greatest fear come to life.

The Afsana of a Wolfe and His Goddess

He came into her life, a surging storm promising to destroy the lost princess. She was the Goddess of Air, a runaway staying away from love as far as possible. They met in a bar, two broken souls, finding amenity in each other under the soft light of a crescent moon. Their bodies molded for each other, their kisses a simple gratification, and their touch electric. Fate brought them together, and he couldn't stay away. She trusted him with her dark past, finding their conversations salutary. She could've, she should've, walked the other way before she fell into a hole with no way out. He saw her in turmoil, fighting a battle in her mind, and he came out from behind a veil to love and cherish her how she deserved. She, in turn,

brought him comfort. She gave him a meaning to life, a reason to stay in Irving Bay, surrendering herself to his love. He stood behind her, fueling her strength. He was her lion, her King. They lived in a fairytale, a fairytale the princess knew she'd have to shatter to face reality. The day came too quickly when her world collided with his, and the hunter found his prize. Desperate for his safety, she made an alliance with the Dark Lord himself.

On the day of the Summer Solstice, she was to finally have her Revenge. Her return was never guaranteed as the universe can play a cruel game, but the hope for their love lights a beacon of hope that one day she'll stand in front of, and he'll welcome her back into his arms. He'll make her beg for her forgiveness, and she'll succumb for eternity.

Her name will permanently be engraved in his heart and his in hers.

*Forever Bound,
Adirah, The Goddess of Air*

She actually left.

I skimmed over the second page, quickly realizing this was the story I had told I wanted in writing. I sat for a good while, trying to comprehend the situation. *She was actually gone.* And not in a neighboring state. She was in a different world. A world I had no access to. I wanted to scream in pain, and when I tried, I couldn't find my voice. I wanted to turn back the time and fall in love with her all over again. She'd cried last night, knowing she might never see me again, but never once laid the burden on me though she had known days.

She went headfirst into a battle to protect *me*.

"Millie?" I called her phone.

"Mr. Royce, are you okay?" She asked, her voice sounding tired from waking up way too early.

“I’m sorry for calling you this early, but can you please ask Danish and Jared to coordinate the Yellow Dwarf project today?” I whispered, barely finding my voice. “I don’t think I’m capable of facing life today.”

“Mr. Royce, are you okay?” She asked, concerned. “Are you hurt? Do you need help?”

“I don’t know what I need, Millie,” I said before ending the call.

My body ached all over, and what hurt the most was the only person I yearned to share my pain with was gone. Something possessed me to drive to the cabin, and thankfully, I made it in one physical piece.

But internally, I was certain I had left some pieces behind at the Haven.

I pulled out my phone, ready to shut it off, but realized Danish had called multiple times.

“What?” I muttered into my phone, calling him back.

“The hell is wrong with you?” He uttered. “Why are you not in the office? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Royce. I know you. You are nothing but fine.” He raised his voice. “The hell happened.”

“Nothing,” I whispered.

“Okay, where are you?” He asked, clicking a pen. “Are you at the cabin?”

I stayed quiet.

“Royce, I fucking swear I’ll have Myk track your phone.” He warned. “I’ll find you either way.”

“I’m at the cabin.”

“Where’s Adirah?” I dreaded that question because now I had to admit she was gone. I had to make it a reality that she was never coming back.

“She’s gone.” I choked out and jabbed the call-end button. I wasn’t ready for the “whats” and “hows.” *Hell, I wasn’t even prepared for the “why.”*

He sent a text instead.

Royce, don’t fucking do something stupid.

I’m not.

Look, I know you’re not going to talk.

So I won’t ask.

I’ll handle things at work, but I’m going to have Myk check on you.

Don’t do anything stupid.

Royce, I fucking mean it.

Okay.

I don’t fucking trust your deranged ass one bit.

He was right not to trust me, considering Mykel found me in a paralyzed state, with my hand barely gripping a bottle of alcohol.

“Garcia, call a fucking ambulance,” I heard him yell as he ran over, begging me to keep my eyes open. “Royce, look, I

need you to keep your eyes open. Royce? Can you hear me?"

He cradled my head, talking continuously. "I'm going to fucking kill you myself." He muttered.

I let out a choking laugh. My body burned, and my eyes stinging in pain. "Shit, I think I'm going to puke." I rasped before actually emptying my stomach over his pants and shoes.

"Fuck," He got up and grabbed the nearest trash bin, and ordered. "Here, force yourself to puke it out."

"No," I muttered.

"Bro, what the hell is wrong with you?" He asked, holding up my head.

"I love her," I whispered, my thoughts shifting to her glistening amber eyes and her intoxicating smile that turned me into a beggar. I smiled at how I'd lay in her lap, and she'd run her hand through my hair, telling me stories from the Immortal Land.

"Royce," Mykel said. "Just hang in there."

I nodded, knowing everything was a lie. I wanted to be underneath her body as her hands roamed over my bare chest, loving me until it only hurt. I hurled once, against wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Shit Myk, I can't. I'm fucking sorry." I muttered before closing my eyes and seeing nothing but pitch black.



"He did what?" Danish's voice made it to my ears, a seething whisper.

"He drank a bottle of, I think, Everclear and fucking passed out," Mykel explained.

"See, I was right not to trust him."

I quickly realized I was alive, with a throbbing headache and a desert sand throat. The slight beeping of the hospital

machines sounded like a dreaded morning alarm. “Myk.” I rasped, trying to lift my arm, but it lay flat over my chest.

He immediately rushed over, Danish following close behind, “Oh, thank fuck.” He muttered. “Are you okay?”

“Myk, it hurts,” I whined like a baby.

“What hurts? Do you want me to call a nurse?”

I shook my head. “No, it hurts that she left, and she’s never coming back.” I let my head fall back, tears flowing through the corner of my eyes.

He ran his hand through his hair. “Shit, I don’t know what to do.” He muttered to Danish. “I’ve never seen him like this.”

It wasn’t until late into the night the hospital said I was good to go. “Keep him away from any sort of alcohol.” The nurse told Mykel.

“Yeah, I’m about to handcuff him to the bed.” He muttered, grabbing my stuff and helping me walk out. Mykel took me home, constantly glancing back and forth as I laid my head back, resting against the seat.

“Your car is fucking tiny too.” I laughed.

“Well, sorry. I’m not a goddamn tree.” He smiled, the lines on his face fading away. “Danish said the project is ready to start building. They need the board’s approval. And your signature.”

“Shit, I’m going to have to present that.” I rolled my eyes as we pulled into the driveway of my house. Kinza stood at her door, ready to head into a night shift at the hospital, but immediately dropped her things, rushing over to me out of Mykel’s car.

“Grouchy? What the hell happened?” She muttered, slipping her arm around my waist as I staggered to the front door.

“Did you know?” I asked softly.

“Addy? That she was going to leave?” She questioned. “Yes, she mentioned she was going back to Azure.”

“So everyone knew but me.” I chuckled.

She took a minute to speak. “Would you have let her go to put Illiyan in his place?”

“No,” I whispered.

“Now you see why she couldn’t tell you?” She walked me into the house and sat me on my couch. She took a look at my bandaged fingers, “Did you break them again?”

I nodded. “I punched an immortal.”

“Oh god, Grouchy. It’s killing me seeing you like this.”

“I’m sorry, Sparky.” I gave her a reassuring smile, letting her know I’d figure things out. “But you know what the funny thing is? I’d do it all over again if I had to. I’d fall in love with Adirah all over again.”

“Love makes us all stupid, doesn’t it?” She laughed. “It makes everything more beautiful. I’d die to have what you and Adirah had. She’ll be back soon. Your love for her will bring her back.”

Her words were filled with hope, but her eyes said otherwise. She squeezed my shoulder before meeting Mykel at the front door. They stood for a couple of minutes talking to him before parting ways.

“I don’t want you climbing no fucking stairs.” He ordered once he slammed the door with his leg, balancing a duffle bag and a couple of files. “You’re not allowed to move. At all. You need something, ask.”

“Okay, *Dad*.” I rolled my eyes. “But what if I need to go to the bathroom or shower?” I asked.

“Well, you have a backyard. Use the water from the pipe.” He shrugged. “And I’m staying here for the next decade, so get comfortable.”

“I will kill you if you stay that long, Myk.” I huffed.

“I should record this,” He smirked. “Or write it down. It’ll be easier to solve my murder case.”

“Fuck you.” I laid my head back and closed my eyes.

“I know what you’re going through.” He said in a soft voice moments later. “You barely knew her. You’ll get over it.”

“She’s not just some fucking girl, Myk.” My eyes snapped open. “Are you over Novah yet?”

He shook his head and ran his hands down his face. “Shit. What the hell happened? She just fucking left?”

“No,” I muttered. “She was always going to leave. In Darius’ file, there’s a letter. Read it.”

“Oh, right, we were supposed to discuss the file.” He opened the file and pulled out the letter to read it.

I pulled out Adirah’s note and threw it in his direction.

“Then read this.” I choked out. “It’ll all make sense as to why I look as if my heart has been ripped out, stomped on, and fed to a pack of hungry lions. And then the remainder of the chewed-up pieces jammed back into my ribcage.”

“Well, thank you for painting such a vivid picture.” He muttered.

And it truly felt as if someone had ripped my heart from its cage and dragged my soul from my feet. I was breathing, but I wasn’t alive. I was now just a walking corpse.



She stood in the bar, and her sweet laugh drifted through the loud music, settling a sensational feeling in my stomach. A feeling that I had been ignoring for years. Her dark hair was swooped to one side as she chugged her drink straight from the bottle. She wore a white dress, the bodice finished with lace, and a ruffled white fabric hung down her mid-thigh. The dress hugged the curves of the body admirably. I sat at the bar, watching them celebrate, enjoying her time with her friends, amazed how the two hundred dollar cabernet sauvignon in her hand was meant just for her.

As the night progressed, her friends encircled each other in hugs before leaving. “I’ll be in the car.” one said.

She nodded, looking straight at me. "Yeah, I'll just be out."

"You've been eyeing me all night." She said, walking up and sitting down beside me.

"You guys serve lime slices with tequila?" I asked the bartender.

The bartender nodded. "Salt, too."

"Yeah, give me two," I said, staring into her amber eyes.

When he filled up the shots, she took hers, licking the salt and drinking the liquid in one gulp before sucking on the lime. She noticed mine had still been sitting in place. "Are you going to drink it?" But she didn't wait for my answer and instead dripped down my neck before licking it off. She pulled out her phone and sent a text before focusing on me. Her fingers gently grasped onto my chin before pressing a kiss against my lips. It was all the permission I needed. My hands wrapped around her waist, closing the gap between us. "Let me take you home."

"That's what serial killers say." She murmured.

"I'm not one of them."

"Yeah, how do I know you're not lying?"

"You don't," I smirked. "Do you still want to take the risk?"

We took a ride back to her apartment, and all through the drive, her scent filled the air, sweet and intoxicating. It was addicting. I didn't waste time pulling off her dress once we got to her apartment, reveling under her touch and infatuated with her kisses all over my body. She led me to her room, slamming the door shut. And I let myself drown myself in her scent. Falling deeper and deeper until all I saw was black.

I woke up a mess, screaming her name, profusely sweating, and quickly realizing I was in my room. My mind was playing a game, reminding me she was gone. Mykel walked into the room and stood at the foot of the bed. "It's been almost a month, Royce." He said softly, setting a glass of water onto the nightstand and taking the empty whisky bottle away. "You should go see someone about it."

“I don’t want to go see someone about it. I want to see her.”

Mykel huffed. “Buddy? I need you to stop sulking and get up on your two feet, okay? Danish is running the fucking company by himself. Your company, if I may add, and this needs to stop.”

I gave him a nod, knowing he was right. He knew the truth and had immediately told Danish. And the both of them had been nothing but supportive.

“He’s never going to get over her.” I heard Danish mutter one day as I lay almost passed out on the couch. “It’s like what happened with you and Novah, only she’s a fucking celestial being.”

“I can’t process it.” Mykel sighed. “But fuck, I hate seeing him like, and not being able to shit for him.”

But now it had become a problem.

It had been a month since I last saw her. But my anguish felt as if I had been burdened for years. A lot had happened in the past month.

Mykel had built a strong case, suing my father for withholding the truth and blackmailing my parents. He added a case of assault and said we might be able to use the office incident. And with the bit of evidence he had, he reopened Darius’ disappearance case. We were waiting for a court date while my father was advised not to leave the city, and if he did, he would be found guilty and immediately sentenced.

Nadine fled, but not before taking a day to visit me and apologize for all the pain she had caused. “I know I don’t have the right to stand before you because I’m equally to blame.”

“You are,” I muttered.

“But I still am sorry.” She said softly. “I know that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Sorry doesn’t change the past, but I still forgive you. Even though you were a shit piece of a mother, you still showed a bit of feeling than him.”

She smiled sadly. “You’re a likable kid. You grew on me.”

I got up to hug her. “I don’t mean to sound harsh.”

“I know Royce, I know. I came knowing you might turn me away.” She nodded, patting my back. “You’re capable of amazing things, Royce.”

“I know,” I said. “Where are you going?”

“I guess you may have rubbed off on me. I’ve decided to travel. Get away from Irving Bay for a while. I’m divorcing Colton and going on a cruise with some friends.”

“I wish you all the best,” I said as she got up to leave. “And, mom?”

“Yes?”

“Let me know if you need anything.”

The corner of her eyes pooled with tears upon hearing my words. “I don’t deserve you.” She choked out before leaving me alone in my house.

Wolfe Legacy was awarded another project, which we started working on immediately.

“Are you officially back?” Millie beamed as she met me in the front of the building.

“Yes, I am.” I flashed her a smile. “Miss me?”

She laughed, handing me a stack of applications. “We still need to appoint a Senior Project Manager.”

“No, we don’t. Have all the projects directed to me, and I will oversee them.”

“Mr. Royce, how will that work?” She stood staring, confused. “You will be overwhelmed.”

“Mille, instead of finding a Senior Project Manager, find yourself an assistant. Find two if necessary.” I smiled. “I know you need one. And please don’t speak to me about this again.”

She nodded, startled at my request, as I disappeared into my office.

At this point, we all knew Adirah wasn’t coming back. It was the hard truth to accept. For me, it was as if I was reliving

the pain. Darius disappeared, and no one knew what happened to him until now.

He was dead.

Adirah wasn't dead. *She couldn't be.*

But part of me knew she wasn't alive either, and the uncertainty of her not being okay ate at me every day. I refused to believe she was anything but okay.

All that was left of her was a bottle of her vanilla scent, her handwritten note, a gorged scar that didn't want to heal in my heart, and her intoxicating smile that would never leave my sight. A flask of whisky replaced my beer bottle, hoping to evaporate any feeling of love. But even I knew that feeling would never go away.

I slowly slipped away from the person I once was into someone who felt like life had no meaning. In such a short time, she had become my everything, and to let go was beyond my capabilities. I couldn't accept the truth that she was gone.

But no one was going to replace her.

No one *could* ever replace her.

The Kingdom of Azure

Adirah



I had done it. I burned Azure to the ground. I had burned the castle and the gardens all to ash.

All to protect *his* life.

“I’ve tried everything.” Dilbar cried out. “The electricity stops for a while but then starts again.”

All month, the Goddess of Love and Healing stayed by Laleh’s side, hoping she’d finally open her eyes.

“It’s my fault,” I muttered, looking at what once had been pure bliss or beauty.

“How is it your fault?” Eshaan asked.

“I should’ve never left.”

It was Ehaan who wrapped me in a hug. “Considering I’m the God of the Moon, I was mad when you left. I realize now that was just me being selfish.” He admitted. “What happened to you should’ve never happened. And we all should’ve done something about it.”

My brothers sat beside me on either side. “You were always the strongest of us three.”

I grinned. “I know.”

We laughed before the silence spread between us again.

“I’m scared.” I sighed. “I’ve been away for too long, and I don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t think anyone knows what to do now. But we can’t just leave Azure without a ruler. Someone to train the warriors, someone to feed the commoners.”

“I know.”

“We can’t do it. There’d be too much chaos.” Ehaan and Eshaan were one and couldn’t be split apart.

“Mama always told the story of the sun and the moon as a love story.” I shrugged, remembering being wrapped around Laleh’s arms as she told us countless stories through the night before we drifted off to sleep.

My brothers and I eyed each other. “We don’t love each other.” They said, scrunching up their nose. “Most certainly not.”

“Be quiet. You’d think I’m the older one.” I laugh.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” Ehaan whispered.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“There is one person you could talk to,” Eshaan said.

“Sephtis?”

He nodded.

“I guess that’s my only hope.”



“Are we even?” My voice echoed as I stood before Sephtis, lying on his throne with his legs perched over the handle and his head slumped over the other.

He nodded quietly.

“I need your help,” I muttered. “Again.”

He sat upright with a smirk spreading slowly across his face.

“No. I’m not making an alliance.” I laughed.

The smirk disappeared.

“I need advice.”

“Really Princess? What made you think that the King of *Duzakh* was qualified to advise you?”

“You aren’t. You’re just the only one that won’t lie to me.”

He smiled. “I will take that as a compliment.”

“They want me to take the throne.”

He folded his hands across his lap, glaring straight at me. “I’m going to tell you something from experience.” He started. “It won’t work.”

“What?”

“You and the Wolfe. It’s not going to work. I always despised long-distance relationships, but this?” He pointed back and forth, “I know it seems like it will. You think you’ll make sacrifices and everything will be perfect until it isn’t. You can’t have his kids. He obviously will get frustrated. He’ll get old, and you’ll be the frustrated one. Let alone Azure will probably have something else wrong with it in the next year, and you’ll need to help out with that.”

“But he said we’ll figure it out when we cross into that phase of life.”

“That means he wants kids, Adirah,” Sephtis said softly. “Something he’ll be deprived of his whole life.”

“You’ve thought this through.”

He nodded. “Do you know how a small piece of land became the Kingdom of Azure?”

I shook my head, sitting down on the steps by his throne, and he came to sit beside me.

“It started as a love story.” He smiled. “The love story of the King and the Queen.”

“Illiyan and Laleh?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Who would’ve thought Illiyan could love someone?”

“Illiyan wasn’t always cruel. He once had a soft heart, but his cruelty lay beneath the softness, waiting to leap into action.” He said. “The Afsana goes that Azure was a piece of land that floated just above Earth, hidden from a mortal’s sight. It had a beautiful landscape throughout each element but with just one river, the *Ravaan*, running through. One could only imagine its beauty. Most immortals are said to be born from rays of sunlight with our golden blood, *talayi*—a gift from the sun. Our *talayi* can never run out. Before there were warriors and commoners, there were Illiyan and Laleh. Sun made Illiyan, but Moon made Laleh.”

“She was made from his light.”

“What?”

“Laleh, I mean Mama. When we were younger, she told us a story about how the two bodies loved each other but could only meet for a few moments on the bridge of time.”

“She told you a story about her and Illiyan. Before they existed as beings.” Sephtis smiled. “When Sun and Moon were tired of trying to satisfy their love, they created the immortals. And when they first met as beings, they didn’t find anyone more pleasing than each other. He built the castle for her, with so many rooms, each with a different view, so she’d never be disinterested. They had your brothers and you out of love. I still remember the day you were born. It was filled with chaos.”

“You were there?”

“Yes, I was still a warrior back then. Illiyan had finished conquering a neighboring kingdom, which left Laleh wounded right before she gave birth to you. And you should’ve seen how it tormented Illiyan.”

“She never told us that,” I murmured.

“When he knew he was now a father to a little princess, he was ecstatic. You were the cutest little thing Azure had ever seen.” He laughed. “But fuck did you cry.”

I let out a genuine laugh.

“He cherished you dearly, claiming you as the twenty-first Azurain. The one and only Princess of Azure, the Goddess of Air itself. He gave you the full element because he loved you so much.”

“Sephtis? What happened to my father to make him so cynical and twisted?”

“Illiyān’s the kind of person that wants more. He’s never satisfied with whatever he has. And he takes what he wants. He figured out what conquest meant when he set foot on the Land of Mortal. You know the mortals always fight wrongfully, taking other people’s land as if it were their own. At first, Illiyān was kindhearted about it. Like when he conquered my kingdom, for example, believe it or not, he did it out of the kindness of his heart.”

“And then what happened?” I asked, resting my chin on my hand.

“Then the little land of Azure wasn’t enough. He started more wars, killing everyone and anyone who stood in his path. He always had the upper hand because he was immortal. Most lands he took over weren’t Immortals. They had superpowers such as mine. We were bound to fire. But we weren’t Immortal. But nothing could kill Illiyān.”

“How’d you become Immortal?”

“The *Qadimi* turned me immortal on behalf of Illiyān’s request,” Sephtis muttered. “It comes with a cost.”

“What cost is that?”

“You lose your memories from your previous life. It’s as if you are reborn.” He sighed. “It took me over a century to figure out how to defeat Illiyān, and I couldn’t do it alone.”

“It’s over now,” I whispered.

“Is it?” He said, looking ahead. “Nothing feels right anymore.”

“I know.” I agreed. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Let him go, Adirah.” His words sunk, forcing out the tears lying in wait to be released into the open.

“I love him.” I sobbed, curling my head into my knees, as Sephtis wrapped me into a hug.

“I know.” He whispered, pressing a kiss on the side of my head. “I know, My Queen.”



“So this is goodbye?” Kinza stood in front of me with teary eyes. “Like, for real? Good-bye?”

I nodded. “How was your sister’s wedding?”

“Screw that.” She said, enveloping me in a hug. “Come visit, or however the hell that works.”

I grinned. “Only if we watch Lion King and eat butter-pecan through the night.”

“It’s a date.” She smiled, hugging tighter. “Addy, I don’t want you to go.”

“I don’t want to go either,” I sighed, “but at this point, I don’t have a choice.”

There was a moment of silence as we stood hugging each other.

“He’s not the same anymore, Adirah. The day you left, he ended up in the hospital with alcohol poisoning.” She said softly.

“But he doesn’t drink alcohol? I mean, like hard liquor. He only drinks when he goes to a bar or something.”

“I guess that day he did. Mykel found him in his cabin, almost passed out. He won’t replace you in the company either. He’s barely home now.”

“Is he at home now?” I asked, finally finding my voice.

“He said he was going out onto the cliff?”

“I just wish I could give everything up. But I can’t. Azure needs me, or else the land will fall. Azure is the only home I ever knew, and I can’t let everyone down. At least not like Illiyan did.”

She gave me another hug. “And I wish I had the power to make you better.” She smiled. “But I know you guys will end up together one way or another.”

She stood at her door as I walked down the road, disappearing. I found myself standing a reasonable distance away from the edge of the cliff. He sat with his feet dangling, and I walked right behind him, running my hand through his hair. Only he couldn’t feel a thing.

The wind must’ve picked up my vanilla scent because he yelled out my name, getting up and staring right at me, but for him, *I wasn’t there*. I controlled what I wanted him to see, feel, and hear.

“I’m sorry. I’m truly sorry.” I whispered, and he stood frozen in his steps.

“Adirah, don’t fucking play games with me.” He cried. “Let me hug you one last time.”

It was tempting. So tempting. Knowing I would never be able to escape his grasp, I whispered one last time. “Goodbye Royce Elias Wolfe.” Before leaving him behind and descending onto the throne that was never meant to be mine.

I was the Queen of all Immortals, Ruler of the Winds. The lost princess had returned with a shattered world and a broken heart.

I sat by my mother’s bed, squeezing her hand in mine. “Mama. I’m sorry.” I whispered, crying tears, as I begged her to wake up.

“Is she any better?” Ehaan came and sat beside me. I shook my head.

“I don’t know if she will get any better.”

“She has to.” He reassured me.

I nodded, closing my eyes, and we sat there in silence. The only sounds of our heavy breathing filled the room.

“He passed out again,” Ehaan said softly, which only intensified my crying.

“Is he ever going to be okay?” I asked.

I broke him. I broke his world into many pieces—too many to count. I walked out of the room and kept walking until I reached the end of the castle and let out an outcry, forcing the clouds to boom with thunder.

He was never going to be okay.

I was never going to be okay.

Nothing was ever going to be okay.

Even defeated, Illiyan still rose as the winner. I stared out into the open; the Kingdom of Azure was leveled to the ground—the once beautiful gardens, withered and brown. Even the *Ravaan* stopped sparkling and flowed through the Realms in a dull, dutiful manner.

No one had seen a more depressing state. I leaned my head against one of the columns of the castle, counting the stars in the sky and soon watching the sun beginning to rise, signaling a new day, I walked back inside, where Pagham stood with a message.

“After what has happened The *Qadimi* want to summon a meeting, my Queen.”

I nodded. “Let them come.”



The *Qadimi* were five immortal brothers elected by Illiyan himself during the creation of The Kingdom of Azure. They kept order within the elements and also within the kingdom. They stood tall just as the sun shone brightly in the sky, walking in unison with a flat expression on their faces.

I stood up from my throne, bowing my head. “Good Morning.” I smiled.

“Good Morning, my Queen.” Ruh smiled.

“What brings you here today?” I asked, knowing the *Qadimi* only honored the Kingdom with their presence when trouble emerged.

“We heard about the recent events and came to offer our condolences.” He said.

“Of course.”

“The Kingdom of Azure needs to enter a new era.” He started. “Though they have made you their Queen, do you think you’ll be able to rule a Kingdom from which you have been absent for thirty years?”

I took a moment to collect my thoughts before I opened my mouth.

“I didn’t want to be made their Queen. But circumstances have made me the better suitor. Azure trusts me more than any Immortal to sit on the throne.”

“Yes, but we heard of a mortal.”

“The mortal isn’t of your concern, my good master. I have left that life behind. I understand my loyalty is Azure, and I shall abide by it. I accept to take the throne. The throne that belongs rightfully to my mother. The Kingdom of Azure is my only home.”

They nodded and stood in silence before he spoke again.

“For your first order of business, you should start by locating a traitor.”

“Excuse me?” I asked. “Traitor?”

“The defeated’s right-hand man. The Kingdom so blatantly calls him the Noble Warrior.”

“Adarvan.” I sneered. I saw Sephtis’ first curl and started to steam when he heard the words Adarvan had fled.

“Yes, Adarvan has fled, so he is not to face any punishment or be accounted for his actions. The Qadimi want him to surrender and accept his punishment for abiding with the defeated.” Ruh stated. “After all, there’s no such thing as not knowing, but there is such a thing as turning a blind eye.”

The words sparked fear in my heart, knowing Royce could be in danger.

“You still love him.” Ruh noticed. ” The mortal.”

I gave Ruh a soft smile before getting off my throne and walking to stand in front of him. “The Mortal once asked me if I loved my previous boyfriend, my fiance Darius. I told him I loved Darius enough to leave Azure behind. He then proceeded to ask me if I loved *him*.” I stood looking Ruh in the eyes, unafraid to show my love for Royce. “I told him I loved him enough to burn Azure to the ground. And I did just that.” I stood with my arms held out, pointing to the destroyed land.

I continued. “Royce Wolfe will always have a piece of my heart, which shouldn’t raise questions about my loyalty to Azure. If I am ever to leave Azure, I promise you will walk out the gates and into his arms as a mortal, not as an Immortal being, not as the Goddess of Winds, and most certainly not as the Queen of Gods. That’s my promise to the *Qadimi*.”

“The question at hand is how do we, or I, bring him back?” I asked Ruh.

“My Queen, the first step is to locate the warrior, and from then forward, it is your duty to Azure to capture him and bring him to us.” He smiled preciously. “We will return eighteen months on the Winter Solstice to present his punishment. If he has not been caught by then, you will not be fit to be called the Queen of all Gods.”

They turned around on their heels and exited the way they came.

“Fucking shit.” I heard Sephtis mutter. “Who let the fucking dog out?”

I couldn’t help but laugh.



I descended to the Land of Mortals one last time and stood in the shadows, looking at him through the glass of his hospital room.

Royce Wolfe lay in a hospital bed. The man who taught me the strength of a lion lost his strength along the way.

“Hi.” Danish saw me standing in the corner and walked over.

“Hi,” I whispered. “How’s Hadi?”

“He’s doing good.” He forced a smile. “How are you?”

I shook my head, wiping my cheeks, “I’m fine.” I said in a barely audible voice.

“You’re clearly not. But knowing Royce, you’re probably as reluctant as him.” He said. “It’s okay to admit you’re hurting.”

I stood quietly, watching his chest slowly rise with each breath.

“He still loves you.” Danish looked ahead.

“I know.”

“Is Azure okay?” He asked.

“You know?”

He gave me a short nod. “Everything only made sense after.” He sighed. “Did you want to go see him?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

“When Saima and I, my ex-wife, split up. The only thing I wanted was to be even close to her. No matter how much of an annoying bitch she was.” He started. “What you and Royce had, I can’t imagine the pain you are going through. But if you want him to heal, if you want yourself to heal? You both have to let each other go. I don’t know what you have to handle, but he needs to start handling his life, and he can’t from a hospital

bed. If you truly care for him and want him to heal? Let him go.”

I nodded without saying a word. As much as I hated hearing his words, Danish was right. “Can I see him one last time?” I choked out.

He nodded, leading me into his room. He closed the curtain before squeezing my shoulder and walking out. Royce lay unconscious, sleeping peacefully.

My hand involuntarily interlaced with his, and I brought it to my lips, placing a soft kiss. His inky eyes snapped open.

“Adirah. It was you on the cliff,” He whispered. He fixated his gaze on me as I nodded before letting his head fall back onto the pillow.

“Take me with you.” He murmured before the machines started beeping and the nurses inside and pulling me away. I stood in the middle, watching the chaos unfold as the machine flatlined and his body became unresponsive.

My feet became glued in place, and Danish rushed over to catch me before I fell.

If only I had stayed away.

If only I hadn’t met Royce Wolfe.

He’d be alive.

Epilogue

A tale that started with the hopes of love had ended in rage and tragedy.

As time went by, Adirah forcefully began to rebuild the Kingdom of Azure, restoring the nation piece by piece. The castle Illiyan had once built was demolished, and a new one was to be made in its place.

“I don’t want anything that reminds me of Illiyan.” She said to her brother as they watched the castle crumble before them. “I don’t want him to exist in this new era of Azure.”

The chase for Adarvan continued, as he was nowhere to be found. Sephtis took the lead, helping in every way he could, while Adirah dealt with the problems within Azure.

“You will still have to catch him yourself, my Queen.” He explained. “I can only help you find him.”

“I understand.” She nodded. “I have unfinished business with him anyway. I want to wipe that smirk off his face. No one touches my Wolfe and gets away with it.”

Adirah hadn’t returned to the Land of Mortals. She didn’t have a heart to. *“If you truly care for him and want him to heal? Let him go.”* Danish’s words stuck with her in hopes that Royce Wolfe would eventually heal.

The Queen of Gods spent her night by her mother’s side, looking out the window at the heavenly body in the sky, remembering how Sun fell in love with Moon. Her thoughts were consumed with how Royce lured her with his flames, igniting a fire that proved her notable in her light. He had given her strength. In turn, she granted him tranquility. All to be shattered in the end.

“I’ve tried everything,” Dilbar, the Goddess of Love and Healing, whispered one night as the once twenty-one

Azurians, now twenty, stood at the foot of Laleh's bed. "I have a suggestion, but I don't think anyone will like it."

"There had to be a way to wake her up," Daryah said.

"We could ask Illiyan," Dilbar said quietly.

"I thought I'd told you all, not to mention his name." Adirah's voice boomed through the room. "Even at his defeat, he destroyed me. He wanted me to stay unhappy. Without Royce, I sit in agony, knowing what we had was special. But it never could be because of Illiyan. To me, Illiyan being down there doesn't give me serenity. It's a constant reminder that I lost. Twice."

"I'm sorry," Dilbar said, "I just thought because it's his lightning, he might know of a way to reverse it."

"No. I'll find out how to fix this myself. Let him burn in anguish in the fire he ignited for himself the day he started raping me." She muttered. "I have all the time in the world now to figure this out."

Dilbar squeezed Adirah's arm. "It's going to be fine. You both are meant to be. You'll find a way back to him, my Queen."

Wolfe Legacy changed as Royce stepped down from his position as CEO and instead appointed Danish as the new CEO while he spent a month on the Island of Mona, holding onto that gul-e-safedi scent that reminded him of Adirah. He couldn't get her out of his head, no matter how hard he tried. While everyone told him it was the alcohol, he knew it was her standing at his bed that night. The night he died. Without her, he had become a shell.

When he returned to Irving Bay, he announced a new building was to be created in the heart of Los Angeles, his original dream. The scar left on his heart began to repair as time passed, but not without repercussions. Royce lost his adventurous nature, his Neanderthal look, as Adirah would say, and found himself accepting a more prude-ish look. He became more reserved, drowning himself in Wolfe Legacy and their many projects. He shortened his long locks so that they

hung just below his ears. He gave up his truck and resorted to the company car and a chauffeur, fully adapting to the businessman role. Royce Wolfe had turned into the typical billionaire.

When the topic of hiring a new senior project manager came up, he removed the title from the company's job offer list altogether. The office Adirah once used was turned into a project room, set up with tablets, erasing her existence from the company.

“As I've said, all projects must be sent to me. Consider me your new project manager.” He told the team with a cold stare. “Don't make me repeat it.”

He slammed the stack of applications down onto the table before leaving the room. No one, not even the board, questioned his actions because they knew he could replace them within minutes.

Mykel visited his office one day, handing him the document for their case against Colton Wolfe, stating it was ready for trial. In just a couple of months, Royce would stand pleading his innocence in hopes of putting the man who ruined his childhood behind bars for good. “He'll pay for what he did,” Mykel said, patting his back.

“Did you figure out the situation with the house?”

Mykel shook his head. “I think it was to destroy evidence, but since there's a new house built in its place, I can't say for certain.”

“Fucking hell.” Royce ran his hands over his face, pinching the corners of his eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“Fuck no. Not in the slightest.” Royce shook his head.

Every night, he sat at the cliff in hopes the Adirah would appear, and he'd hold her in his arms, hug her, kiss her, and love her the way he always did. He doused his lucky bandana with her scent, keeping her close by. Then came the time for a New Year. Seasons changed, and snow fell. Wolfe Legacy

moved to the heart of Los Angeles, but Royce couldn't bear the thought of leaving Irving Bay.

"I want you to run the Los Angeles branch." Royce had told Danish.

"I thought that was your dream?"

"Dreams can change."

"Royce, you can't keep waiting for her," Danish whispered to his best friend.

"I'll keep waiting for her till the day I die, even if it drives me insane, even if she had ruined me beyond repair. I can't-I won't love anyone else but her."

"But you can't become a coarse of a person."

"When you've loved the most beautiful woman ever to exist and lost." Royce muttered, sipping his glass of whiskey, "You have no choice but to become coarse."

Adirah stood at the gates of Duzakh, calling for Sephtis. After her brother had mentioned, Sephtis was busy doing *other things*.

"What?" the King of Hell stood before her, scowling at her interruption.

"What is wrong with you?" She jabbed. "We need to find Adarvan, and you're having the time of your life."

"I do recommend it. It relieves stress." Sephtis scrunched his brows. "And stress is something you are brimming with."

"Shut up." She rolled her eyes. "Sephtis, I need an answer."

"Adirah. I'm working on it."

"Why must you be so obnoxious?"

"Why must you torture me with questions?"

"Because you can't follow through with one simple task."

"Yes, I can."

"No, you can't."

"Yes, I can."

“I’m not doing this with you.” She huffed. “Azure has been restored, and we can’t wait for Laleh to wake up. I’m calling a meeting tomorrow, where I expect you to be spirited and flowing with ideas. It’s been enough. Azure needs to return to how it once was.”

“I understand,” Sephtis said softly before she turned her back and disappeared.

The Land of Mortals had become a part of her history.

She loved twice and lost twice. The latter shattering her beyond repair. She preferred to be left alone, forcing a smile when needed but ultimately drowning in her thoughts and sorrow. She sat in front of her mother’s bed each night, telling the story of how a princess fell in love with a grouchy prince and found her courage bound within his love. Her brothers would stand in the doorway watching her break apart each night, remembering how Royce Wolfe had shown her unconditional love and what was taken was a promise-filled future.

The day of the meeting rolled around. But Sephtis, along with Pagahm, was nowhere to be found. The Azurians took their place, each proving their suggestions and theories.

“I think we should look into other Lands. He might be living there happily,” Tamannah said.

“I think the bastard is still on the Land of the Mortals.” Azar huffed in place.

“Doesn’t Azure have a way to track their warriors?” Asked Jabeen.

“Where’s Sephtis?” Asked Adirah. “I deliberately asked him to come up with his ideas.”

“I haven’t seen him, my Queen,” Azar said softly. “He’s probably having his way with some mortal women as we speak.”

Adirah rolled her eyes at the naive actions of the King of *Duzakh*, wondering how she could torment a God who already punishes her for a living.

“Where is Pagahm?” She asked next. “I get he’s the messenger, but who needs a message this urgently?”

As they say, speak of the Devil, and he shall appear. But in this case, it was literal.

Sephtis stood behind Pagahm, his arms crossed over his chest, glaring at everyone in the room.

“You all think I’m incapable of doing my job, right?” He smirked. “I’ve located the dog.”

Adirah got up from her throne, locking her gaze with Sephtis.

“What are you talking about?”

“Adarvan has been traveling through the states, leaving a trail of dead souls,” Sephtis said. “Noble warrior, my ass.”

“Where is he now?” She asked.

“Dunkirk, New York.”

“Well, we have to go get him.”

“Now, wait a second there, my Queen. It’s not that simple. His killings have been gruesome, but the officials haven’t been able to link them all together.”

“And how exactly *did you* link them together?”

“The victims have one thing in common.” Sephtis sighed, handing her a file filled with articles he had gathered together. “They all look like you.”

Adirah quickly skimmed through each article. “And the officials have nothing on these cases?”

“No, they don’t.”

“Are you sure he’s the killer?”

“My Queen, every killing has been clean. Too clean. Only someone trained to kill could meticulously pull this off.”

“I will help you with whatever you need, my Queen,” Sephtis said. “I know I sound like a broken record, but this is your task, and you will lead the way. After all, we don’t want to give the *Qadimi* any leverage.”

“Of course.” She sighed, lowering her gaze, her mind turning in a million different directions, wondering how to catch the immortal warrior.

“Speak,” Sephtis ordered Pagham, his face displaying a glare.

“Ah, yes. My Queen.” He started, “I come bringing a message.”

“Yes?”

“Lord Sephtis has summoned you to *Duzakh*.”

“He’s standing right there.” She pointed a finger just as Sephtis started to walk away.

“Sephtis, why do you want me to come with you to *Duzakh*?”

“Tell her.” He barked before leaving the room.

“Lord Sephtis has summoned you, my Queen, to *Duzakh* on behalf of a mortal.”

“But mortals can’t summon the Gods.” She said, startled at the request. “Who’s dared summoned me?”

“My Queen,” Pagham uttered.

“Pagham, who?” She yelled.

“Darius. My Queen. Darius Wolfe.”

to be continued...



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jawairia Ali is a Pakistani American, born and raised in Los Angeles, California. Her spark of writing inspiration came from film, which spurred her on to capture the images in her head on paper. To her surprise, it turned into a complete book: *Days of Revenge*. Jawairia is a self-taught artist, a working mom, and a current pre-med student. She is passionate about ASL, children's education, and is a dedicated advocate for mental health and human rights.





COMING SOON

The Azurian Afsana

Days of Revenge - January 29, 2024

Days of Rage - September 2024

Book Three - Early 2025



The Royal Paradox

The Royal Bet - Mid 2024

Book Two - Mid 2025