



The Fate of a Faun

LORD OF RATHE DUET
BOOK TWO

USA TODAY & WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHORS

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Fate of a Faux (Lord of Rathe Duet Book Two)

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*To the girls who fall for the villains...
Their hearts are only black until you
tear them out.*

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Mate of a Royal

Note from the Authors,

Dear Readers,

This is the second book in a duet and must be read after book one, FATE OF A ROYAL. You can find book one here:

<https://geni.us/FATEOFAROYAL>

This book deals with darker themes that may be considered triggering for some readers. Please be mindful of your own as you dive in...

Turn the page and enjoy the wicked ride!

XoXo,

Amo and Meagan

One



L ondon

BEN CROUCHES DOWN AND I RUN FULL SPEED, HOPPING ONTO his back the way I have a hundred times before. My arms tether around his neck, as his wrap behind my knees, and I press a fat, sloppy kiss to his cheek. Smiling against it, I hold him tighter, fighting the tears threatening to slip free. The last thing I want after a day like we've had is for him to see me cry. Again.

The fact of the matter is ... our worlds are changing. No, that's not right. Our worlds have changed, and there's no way around what happens next.

I'm going to lose my best friend.

I *have* to lose my best friend; he just doesn't know it yet. That's what's best for him. I'm a disaster that's only going to get worse, by the looks of things, and he's been through enough because of me.

I mean shit, he was—

“Lon, stop.”

Warmth fills me at his soft words. Like the syllables wrap around my heart and remind me why he's home.

Ben has always been good at reading me, sometimes too good.

Pressing my temple to his head, I look forward into the dark night and a chill runs over me. Tucking my head into his neck, I close my eyes, fighting the moisture threatening to build there.

"I love you, you know that," I whisper. "I love you and I'm so proud of you."

"It was just one goal in a game that meant nothing." He chuckles, but it's more than that and he knows it.

He's overcome and accomplished so much, and he still has a lifetime of happiness headed his way. God knows if anyone deserves it, it's him.

We reach the door, and he eases me down, spinning to pull me into his arms. "Everything is going to be okay, London, I promise."

He can't possibly keep such a promise, but I don't say that. I don't say anything, just nod into his chest.

"Nine tomorrow?" he asks.

I nod, looking up into his hazel eyes. "Nine tomorrow."

"Lon." Ben gives me a warning look and it takes effort to roll my eyes when the last thing I'm feeling right now is playful.

The last few days have weighed so heavily on my mind, and I hate what's to come. "I'm fine."

Slowly, he presses his lips to my forehead and pushes me through the door.

My uncle Marcus greets me in the entryway, grinning wide until he sees my face, and his arms open instantly. I don't hesitate but throw myself into them and cry.

"Awe, come on now, Little Crow. It can't be that bad," he soothes, the same way he has done all my life.

"I'm going to ruin his life."

My uncle laughs and pulls back, hooking my chin between his fingers. "Honey, no, you're not. You're the light of the boy's life. You're all he has now."

"I know, and because of that, he's going to stay here and go to a junior college. He's so much better than that."

"He's doing what feels right." My uncle smiles softly. "He doesn't want to leave you, especially now that his grandma Betsy is gone."

"This is a full fucking ride! A college team... a college team he didn't even try out for, that he never even heard of, and they want him!" I stress. "Uncle Marcus, I don't think you get it. He told me admission and acceptance timelines closed *months* ago. He's already enrolled at the JC and he just happens to get this offer now? This is huge. It's ... kismet or whatever."

Something swims in my uncle's gaze, but it's gone before I can decide what it was. "I don't know about that," he says, almost cautiously. "I think you should encourage him to stay here."

"Uncle!" I snap, my head tugging back.

“Not forever, but maybe JC for a year and then he can apply somewhere else. Somewhere ... not so far away.”

I’m shaking my head before he’s even finished. “No way, this is epic for him.”

“It is, but—”

“No buts.” I stomp my foot like a brat. “Make him go!”

My uncle lifts a brow and I feel the frown taking over my face before I know it’s coming.

“I’m different,” I argue what I know he’s thinking. “I suck at school and hardly passed. Honestly, I don’t even know how I did, but Ben? He worked his ass off. He can be persuaded, I know it.”

“You didn’t even want to go to the school tour they invited you to, and that was basically your free pass to party at a college for a weekend, so how the hell am I to convince Ben to move hours away from home when all you guys ever talk about is staying close together?”

My brows pull at his words, and he looks at me funny.

“Wait...” I tip my head. “Daragan State is the same school that sent me that invitation for the senior campus cruise?”

“You know what, I think I’m confused,” he says, turning toward the counter to pick up his phone. “Never mind me, so what are we in the mood for, hmm?”

He starts talking about ordering late night DoorDash, so I nod and head back to my room. Uncle Marcus has a habit of doing that. It’s almost like he gets his timelines confused.

The small trashcan under my desk that never gets used, because I never do homework, stares back at me. The same two pieces of paper from a few months ago are still sitting at

the bottom, the envelope hiding the very invite my uncle is talking about.

Digging around the candy wrappers, I lift it out and drop my ass on the floor to read it—something I didn't do when it was first delivered.

Uncle Marcus has a bad habit of piling mail on the kitchen counter, so I had found it by accident one week when we were cleaning. I unfold the thick embroidered paper.

“Dear London V. Crow.” I scoff, rolling my eyes. “Not sure where they got the V from. No wonder I stopped reading before I even started.” Grabbing a sucker from my pocket, I tear off the top, stick it in my mouth, and start again.

“Dear London V. Crow, on behalf of the Daragan Admissions Department, we would like to formally invite you to attend Daragan State University's Annual Senior Campus Cruise as a visiting future scholar. Should you like what you find during your time here, consider this your acceptance letter. At Daragan, we pride ourselves in academic excellence and— Well, there you fucking go,” I break off from the printed words, glaring at the paper. “Reason number two I didn't read this thing.”

Academic excellence? *Please*. Maybe this was meant for an actual person named London V. Crow. I don't even have a middle name. Not that it matters. I missed the response date by a mile and am the furthest thing from academic excellence.

But Uncle Marcus was right, even if I get the sense that he pointed it out by accident. This is the same school that wants Ben.

What are the chances...

My eyes burn and I blink back the flames, feeling for the first time the steady stream of hot tears rolling down my cheeks.

The moment my lids flick open, I'm no longer sitting in my old room in my hometown. The memory fades into darkness and then I'm left alone under the blinding light of my newest hell—a magical holding cell at the center of Rathe. My real hometown.

The realm I was born into.

I'm a fucking Gifted. Not a human like I've lived the last eleven years believing.

It's as debilitating of a thought as it is a freeing one.

Finally, I understand why the moon calls to me and why everything is better under the blanket of midnight. I know now why I woke at the same time every night, waiting for something that never came. I know why I could never find peace or comfort in the human world no matter how hard I searched for it.

Because it wasn't my world and I never belonged there in the first place.

The only time I didn't feel like a girl in someone else's skin was when I was with—

My fingers twitch. I look to my hands, the glass urn a soft murky green, like the color of cat's eye marble, not so unlike my best friend's eyes. They were the prettiest shade of hazel

when he smiled. Not that the person who picked it out knew that.

Ben's body was turned to ash not thirty minutes after it went cold.

"The dragons jumped at the chance to serve a Royal," Knight's vicious tone and voided eyes flash in my mind. I tighten my hold on all that's left of the boy who never let me down.

The numbness comes and goes, and right now... it's nowhere to be found.

I feel everything, and it's too fucking much.

Ben is gone, murdered right in front of me... by my mate; in cold, vengeful blood.

The look in his hazel eyes flashes in my mind, and a shudder runs through me. It was utter helplessness and fear that swallowed him whole. What makes me want to bang my head against the hard floor below, until everything goes black, is how Ben wasn't only afraid for himself in that moment, he was afraid for me.

He knew he was about to die, felt the sharp sting of the blade against his throat, and in that single moment his eyes met mine, his horror shifted. He knew he couldn't save himself, and he worried what would happen to me in the moments that followed. He has no idea I was the reason his life was about to end or that the man taking it was the one I was literally born for.

Fuck. I squeeze my eyes closed, the pressure behind them like the weight of a thousand fists.

Ben...

“I see you received my gift.”

Ice shoots through my veins, freezing my muscles in place.

Footsteps shuffle closer, and I pull at every single ounce of fucking strength I have left in an attempt to not appear half as broken as I feel, but all I can manage is to lift my eyes.

I know who the voice belongs to, but looking up into the void blue eyes of King fucking Arturo Deveraux is something I’ll never be prepared for. He’s terrifying. His entire being screams power. So much so it prickles along my skin like hundreds of bee stings all at once. I tense further when he steps right through the glowing magical bars keeping me locked in this closet of a cell, as if they were but a figment of my imagination—the burns covering my skin from trying to throw myself through them prove otherwise.

If my flesh is still capable of such human traits, then I’m one hundred percent sure the blood has drained from my face.

“Did you come here to kill me?” I ask meekly. I can hear the willing anticipation in my tone, even if I don’t recognize the scratchy voice it’s spoken in.

He tips his head, watching me closely, reading me the way only a Dark King with gifts of the mind can. “If I wanted you dead, do you think you would have woken at all?”

“If you’re anything like your son, then yes. I do. It’s more... dramatic. He clearly likes to put on a show.”

“Mmm,” the King hums, his eyes trained on mine. “Yes, he’s like his mother in that way. They all are, in fact.”

His penetrating gaze is too much, so I drop mine to the urn once more.

“He was your lover before Knight?” King Arturo wonders.

I don't answer. I don't care what they think and talking about Ben won't undo what's been done. It'll only hurt worse, but the pain is already so damn paralyzing I can hardly take it.

It's with that thought I look into the King's eyes and remind him, “I murdered your daughter. Your only daughter. I took from you. I've ruined your Royal reputation by mating with your son. If I get the chance, I will ruin him too. I want to ruin him. I want to tear him apart from the inside out and watch as his heart stops beating. I hate him.”

Kill me. End me.

Eat me whole for all I care...

I wait, welcoming death, praying to the depths of fucking hell, where this family likely spawned from, but the King of Dark Magic doesn't move.

His expression doesn't change. No anger or rage or even impatience shows on his face as he pulls his hands from his suit pants pockets. He tugs at the thighs, bending to his knees until he's eye level with me.

Instead of addressing what I've spoken, he says, “If you wish to survive this, forget who you became and remember who you were, Little Crow. You don't...you die.”

With that, the King of fucking darkness stands, but before he walks away, he whispers, “The gift of the dark gods shall not pass on to just any, yet you hold the key in your hands. Remember that, Little Crow, and just when emerald eyes fall upon you, feast until you feel its soul.”

I watch the man until he disappears completely, and with every moment that ticks by, my mind races, the King's words playing on a loop in my head for what seems like hours.

If you wish to survive this, forget who you became and remember who you were.

The riddle from the King's mouth can mean one of two things, but I have no idea which is the correct answer, if either. The Deverauxs are manipulative and cunning, and no words from any of their mouths will ever mean a damn thing.

The King said I received his gift. He can only mean one thing.

Ben's urn.

He had my best friend's dead body sent to me, set on the bed next to my head, so when I woke in this fucking prison it was the first thing I saw.

A reminder, I'm sure.

Of what they can do—any and everything their black hearts desire.

Fury boils deep in my core and I dive headfirst into it, begging the angry darkness to take the rest away, but it's too fresh. The cut too fucking deep.

My body starts to shake, convulsing where I sit, my legs crossed on the tiny mattress. And then something inside me snaps. It's like my ribs have cracked beneath my skin, and I cry out.

My insides rage, my arms shooting out, hands flying open, and then there's a sense of doom that falls over me.

My eyes fly open, just in time to watch the urn as it crashes to the floor with a deafening crack.

“No!” I shout and electricity sparks from one finger to the next, my gift fighting to be freed from this prison but the curse over this room is too strong. My head snaps back until I’m staring up at the stark white ceiling, and a scream tears from deep inside my chest, booming around the small space as a heavier current races through my body a moment later. But it’s not my gift. It’s the demand from this prison not to attempt to use it, and it’s not done.

Poison seeps from every corner like thick fog until it’s swallowing me whole, but it doesn’t stop at stealing sight and sound. It scrapes across my skin like the scales of a snake, slithering and circling my every limb, whirling around me like a mummified vortex, robbing me of air.

I struggle to breathe and gasp, before faintly hearing the slightest hint of a voice.

I close my eyes and focus, slowly opening them once more.

The room is clear of smoke, my body is free of any pain ... and Sinner Deveraux is standing just four feet away, head cocked as he stares through the red laser beams caging me in.

“Thought you’d take better care of the most important person in your life.” He frowns, looking to the left.

It takes me a moment to catch on, to register the mocking tone in his voice, and my attention snaps to the side.

My heart ceases at the sight. Literally stops beating and I grasp at my chest, desperate to rip my own heart out just to stop it from feeling.

The urn lies in dozens of pieces at my feet, what’s left of Ben’s body spilt all around like a pile of dirt waiting to be swept away. Like trash. Like nothing.

“Oh my god!” I fall to my knees, scrambling closer. My hands shake as they brush across the floor trying to save the sandy bits. Shards of glass slice my hands and I think I’m crying. Blood rolls down my palms and fingers, thickening the ash into clumps of goo and I fall back on my ass.

“Fuck!” My face falls in my hands, one of the small shards cutting against my cheek, blood smearing into the clamminess of my skin.

I’m a fucking idiot!

I’m so sorry, Ben. I’m so fucking sorry.

My body quakes, my ears ringing so loud, like a fucking echoing scream that’s playing on repeat. It takes a moment for me to hear the laughter.

I look up, and this time Sinner’s smirk is deeper than the pits of hell. The difference between him and Knight, while undetectable to others, is blatant in my eyes. But I can’t pretend seeing Knight’s face staring back at me isn’t easy. I want to vomit. Scream.

I want to fucking die. I feel the insides of what’s left of me wilt like stubborn flowers unwilling to stay alive.

“You can’t let me in your head that easy.” He looks at his phone screen. “See what happens when you do?”

An illusion.

There was no pain or poison. He fucked with my head, and I allowed it, and this is the result. The King probably wasn’t even here.

Blood rolls over my elbow, splatting along my thighs. “Fuck you.” I don’t feel the distant throbbing of pain where

the shards of the urn had cut me. The pain of that is simplistic up against the heartache of losing Ben.

“You were so close to doing just that, weren’t you?” His blue eyes pop up, shining like the shadow of a fucking psycho. “If it weren’t for your mate.”

I grind my teeth together until the physical pain makes itself known. “Fuck. You.”

A dark chuckle leaves him, and he stares for a long moment.

“I barely poked the edge of your mind just now, Little L, and—” he snaps his fingers “—open sesame. Are you sure you’re one of us? A defective Gifted maybe, the fates trying to apologize for allowing the spawn of the infamous Slasher to live? ’Cause I gotta say, daughter of Acheros Lacroix, that was as easy as manipulating a human.” Met with silence, he continues. “I know you’ve been gone a long time, Villaina, but —”

“Do not call me that.”

His eyes narrow and he steps forward, his body half through the red barrier and half out. “But you are Villaina Lacroix. There is no denying that fact.”

“I’m denying nothing, but Villaina died a long time ago.” I hold his gaze steady despite the fucked-up shit going on in my head. Like a mass pileup on the highway, it’s pure fucking chaos. “Just ask your mother.”

Sinner’s facial expression goes blank, and I know I struck a nerve.

“Watch yourself, ice princess, and get ready. You’ve only just entered the gates of fucking hell.” Sinner pins me with a derisive look and his meaning cannot be misinterpreted, not

that the words were necessary. “Just wait until you see what’s inside.”

Sinner stalks off, anger rolling off him in waves and I sink farther to the floor.

I might have been gone a long time, but even I know what happens next isn’t anything good. Even so, I can’t bring myself to care about tomorrow, because I have to focus on the single thought that’s holding me together tonight.

These spilled secrets and the consequences of keeping them have been absolute shit for me, yes, but it’s no picnic for the Dark Royals of Rathe either.

It’s a small victory, if you can even call it that, but it’s all I have.

So, I’ll take it, hold it close, and hope that tomorrow, I’ll find another reason to live ... or the quickest way to die.

Whichever comes first.

Two



K night

HATE RUNS THROUGH YOUR BLOOD HOTTER THAN ANY OTHER emotion. It was inevitable that where she and I were concerned, it would never come easily. Nothing meant for me was ever going to come easy. I'd have to rip it from its home and squeeze the life from it. Make it beg. Crawl. Yearn for me. She was no fucking different, so I don't know why I'm surprised that she is who she is.

"You gonna finish that, or what?" Silver asks from opposite me, his legs spread wide and his glass half empty of whatever poison he's drinking tonight.

I needed it. More than ever.

Bringing the rim of my drink to my lips, I let the liquid burn its way down my throat. It was her. All a-fucking-long it was her. I should be mad. Fuck, I am mad... but the more time goes on, the more the dulling ache turns into a ball of fire, and the pain I feel in my chest has nothing to do with the betrayal of finding out she killed my triplet. Nothing. It's that she's not here, with me, on my lap and on my dick.

What kind of bullshit is that?

“Knight!” Silver taps my foot with his, just as I sink the rest of my drink.

Dark powder lines the table between us, and every time the strobe light flickers in the background, it hits the small glitter particles in the Fae dust. The darker the dust, the stronger the magic, and this shit is pitch-black.

I hiss at my best friend, baring my teeth. “What?”

“Goddamn...” He leans back in his chair, and I watch as he moves over his shoulder and grabs one of the dragon waiters by the waist, pulling her down onto his lap. As he shifts her long blue hair off her shoulder, her eyes turn to slits as they land on me. Silver smirks as he whispers in her ear and she hurries off, snatching a few empty glasses on her way back to the bar.

It’s no surprise that The Dungeon is patched up far better than it was after the explosion. Crimson burns against stone pavement cracks, flowing down from the lava waterfall that rolls over the wall behind the bar.

I rest my head back against the headboard, desperate for an out. Anything to take my mind off the last twenty-four hours.

The ceiling is void of any cover, giving a direct view of the dark night up above. Planets illuminate against the onyx-colored backdrop. I wonder how loud I need to scream for one of the gods to come down and fuck my shit up.

“Don’t even fucking think about it, Legend.” I can feel my brother’s ideas from here. He wants me balls deep in a distraction and to renounce the bond I have with London.

“So, you’re good with her being your mate? Someone who fucking murdered our sister?”

I clench my teeth so tight I swear I could hear them crack.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” I lean forward and swipe the rolled gold bill and shove it up one nostril, snorting the perfect line of Shadow Fae dust. It hits me all at once and my head swims in a pool of colors. Colors that aren’t even on the palette. Vibrant purples line around Legend’s body as he leans into a young shifter who was dancing in the lava moments ago. I watch as he hurries himself between her fat tits, sucking on her pierced nipple and running his tongue around the little swollen bud.

I didn’t want to come out tonight, but both Silver and Legend knew I needed it. A distraction. Just not the kind Legend thinks I need.

“I don’t want to talk about her,” I say, grabbing the rolled pixie herb from behind my ear. “And I don’t need a distraction like that.” I light the end and puff on it, allowing the smoke to settle down my throat in lavender and mint waves, before exhaling.

My eyes shoot up to the cage that’s hovering in the sky above The Dungeon, zoning in on the loud cheering and yelling. On another hand... that is something I can get behind.

I push up from my chair and shove the girl who was dancing to the side of me away. She stumbles to the ground but quickly collects herself, swiping the coal off her pants.

Legend looks between her and me, chuckling through a cloud of smoke. “Changed your mind? You do wanna dip your fingers into some new pussy?”

I ignore him, envisioning myself leaving the flat surface and floating. Before I can catch what any of them are saying, my feet lift off the floor and my body drifts higher and higher

until I'm passing the ring of Jupiter and opening the cage entrance door.

“Wow, wow! What do we have here, ladies and gents?” the referee announces, and I bypass his shirtless figure to look up at the chairs filling the colosseum. Concrete pillars line the outside of the octagon, with bench chairs leading upward, farther into the sky. From below in The Dungeon, it didn't look like much, if anything.

The referee circles me slowly, swiping his red painted lips across his cheek, his eyes sparking with gleam. Peasant. No doubt excited that someone like me has stepped into the Blood Chamber.

“Say, it's a Royal...” the crowd up above roars so loud it would almost be piercing had the blood rushing behind my ears not been so deafening. He takes the mic away from his mouth, tilting his head when he inches closer to me. “My Lord, you and I both know that I can't put you in here. You'll kill any and everyone, and as much as we all love bloodshed...” his voice lowers as he leans into my ear, “it isn't good for my pockets, you feel?”

I snatch the mic off him, bringing it to my mouth and looking up at the bright lights beaming down on us. Old and new blood stains litter the area, the smell of sweat and saliva heavy in the air. “One million gold bills to the first person who can knock me out for one second.”

Silence. Motherfucking crickets. And then a stampede.

The referee snatches the mic back off me, laughing nervously into it. “Just so you know, you all willingly agree that your life is on the line to participate in this debacle.”

I grab my shirt from the collar and tug it off my chest, tossing it onto the ground and swinging my arms out wide as I crack my neck.

Turning to the entrance, I follow the line that leads up to the stadium chairs. Man after man, desperate for money. Hungry for it. Can't blame them. Most of them have families, and if I gave a fuck, I'd pretend to knock myself out to every single one of them that needs it, but I'm not a fucking Argent, and I need the fight more.

The blood.

The carnage and distraction.

When a bond burns as hot as the one I share with London, it takes equal amounts of chaos to put that shit out.

Before I can turn to face my first opponent, a fist connects with my cheek. *Crack!* I don't even flinch. Not a fucking single hair lifts from my head when I slowly turn to face whoever it was that took the first shot. An Ordinary, standing around the same height as me, chews on his lower lip, flicking his hand in the air like it hurt.

It would have.

"Really?" I deadpan, before reaching forward and flicking his forehead. "Stop!" I call out as soon as his body hits the ground. I stare around the place at every person that's in the line, waiting for their chance to fill their empty pockets with a mill cash. "This is not for the weak. I will fight back—I need it. No Ordinaries." I watch as the line thins down until there's only half left. Maybe twelve, or twenty. Couldn't fucking care.

The next guy that steps forward flashes me a devious grin, the pointed tips of his fangs flaming against the moonlight.

“Well shit. I’m here for a good time, not a long time, Knight!”

I don’t recognize him. I don’t know who any of these fuckers are, but they sure as fuck know me. I take in my next fight. Bigger shoulders, dried blood crusted along his lips. Vamp. For sure. And a messy one at that since he can’t even clean last night’s meal off his mouth.

He materializes in front of me at the speed of light, but before he can take his hit, my hand is on his invisible throat and slowly, the rest of his body surfaces back into view. He stares down at me in shock, and I raise a brow.

“Nice try. Kind of.” Lifting him off the ground, I toss his body up into the crowd and choke on my laughter. “Okay, it’s getting more interesting. Still nowhere near enough.”

In combos, hands fly at my face and chest. Punch after punch as the next person comes in. I didn’t even see him. The hits feel good, but not enough. I want to feel pain drip from bare wounds if only to make whatever the fuck is going on inside of me feel miniscule.

Laughter leaves me with every hit as I take them. Again and again, he moves from my face to my chest to my stomach. With a one hand, backhanded swipe, I smack the shifter to the side, and he flies into the air, over the chairs that line up the colosseum and into whatever abyss lies within the solar system of Rathe.

Running the tip of my thumb over my lip, I shrug. “Didn’t even break the surface.” I look at the line of remaining people. The ones who are still standing. “All at once.” I gesture for them to come forward, just as I hear Legend cackle behind me.

They rush forward with a roar of energy. *More*. I need *more pain*—

As if the thought alone somehow conjured the feeling, a sharp sting stabs at my spine, like the cut of a fresh blade slipping beyond flesh and hitting bone.

I tense a moment, brows slashing together as my vision blurs and heat explodes in my chest. I blink, and the Gifted men coming at me come back into view a split second before their blows connect. I open my arms, welcoming what they have to offer.

A loud piercing sound ripples through the air and everyone stops mid-fight. Hot wires coil in my gut and I feel time tick slower inside my head. It almost echoes through the space. Like a reminder of *pain* or the warning of it coming. The sound pushes past the throbbing of my own blood gushing through my body, and the hairs on the back of my neck prickle when I register what it is.

There have been three times this alarm has ever sounded. The first was to declare who had won the war—my father. The second time to announce the birth of the Dark Crown's first heir, Creed's birth, and the third? When my sister died.

This isn't good.

Hands grab my arm and I flinch away from them, not realizing it's Legend. I don't want anyone to fucking touch me. The thought of anyone, even so much as breathing too close to me, makes my skin crawl.

She did this to me.

“Knight!” Creed snaps, and everything comes into clear vision.

My breathing slows, finding my brother's rampant eyes.

His hands come to my cheek. “We need to leave. This could mean anything.”

“I know.” I blink past my rage for a second, before Creed reaches into his pocket and I look around the space to see everyone else doing the exact same. “What is it?”

Legend shoves his phone in my chest, and I blink down at the alarm that’s going off in the background. This really wasn’t good.

“Are you fucking—”

“Look!” Legend pushes his phone farther into my chest and I watch as everyone around me slowly disappears. I don’t know if it’s out of sight or my own mind pushing them out.

I snatch the phone out of his grip and start reading the words on the screen. I read them over and over again until they begin to blur together. A hollow echo starts roaring in my chest.

“Impossible...” I whisper, all the anger I felt moments ago gone. Poof. Evaporated. “It can’t be...” I read the words again, the siren now scratching on my last nerve.

I read the private message that dings in our group thread next.

MOTHER: MEET AT THE CHAMBER.

I SHOVE LEGEND’S PHONE INTO HIS CHEST, INHALING DEEPLY and reciting the old tongue until black vines start growing from the ground until rounded into a perfect oval. The inside turns a deep obsidian black and spreads like a virus until it fills

the space. I shove Legend through and quickly close the Chamber's portal.

The silence is deafening, and the more that time goes by, the longer my agitation grows. I pull up another portal, the simple kind, a stark difference to the Royal portal, and step through when I see the headquarters.

The throne comes into view first and everything around it fails to exist. The meeting place where we've always held the Gathering of Stygians, now too big a space. The ceilings too high, the room too wide. I smell the twist of melted metal as soon as my feet hit the ground.

A wave of searing hot anger rolls over me. I flick my head to the side and the loud snap of his neck breaks the silence. My speed picks up, and the closer I get, the more the reality of what's in front of me comes into view, the taste of blood slipping down my throat like it belongs there. All other details fade to nothingness as I bend down, swiping my finger in the sticky red pool at my feet.

I remember the first time I truly noticed my father's eyes. I was young. Young enough to only just notice that they're a twisted shade of blue. The kind that looks like enchanted skies or cursed waters. Blue, white, cobalt with a hint of silver. They were the color of everything, yet nothing at all.

Or they used to be. Until right now. They stare back at me with an emptiness only death can touch. Bleak and pale, they'd seen three thousand fucking years—all for what? To be taken away by some piece of shit that would never even come near to as important as he was.

Royalty.

King.

Father.

I stand back to my full height, stepping closer to where his head was once attached to his neck. Cut completely off and now at his feet, I study the dagger that's sticking out where his head should be. The handle simplistic and melted clumps of silver. Reaching forward, I grip the molded iron and force its blade from my father's flesh, watching as blood spills from where it clotted around the sharp point. I tuck it into my belt and step backward, anger snapping down my spine like a jolt of electricity desperate to break all the rage I've tried to contain free.

I can't blink past what's in front of me.

The tungsten throne's surface catches the moonlight through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows at the back. This room has been a space for sanctuary in the past. Where Father would announce wars, births, threats, every other fucking thing that needed an audience, with the rest of the Stygians watching on their televisions at home. Mass balls, weddings, it all happened here. In this room. Where the throne never left. Now the two high pointed edges that reach up to the ceiling show nothing but murder. Deceit. Someone murdered the King of Darkness and now... now we are all going to war.

Three



L ondon

MY CHEEK IS COLD AGAINST THE MARBLE FLOOR OF MY CELL, my palms flat against it as I stare through blurry, tear-filled eyes at the mess before me.

If I went off human world time, I would guess I've been staring at these fucking walls for several days now, but it only took me one to remember this place. It may have even been this very cell, in fact—someone's idea of a bit of added fun, I'm sure.

The last time I was here I was thrust in front of hundreds and put on trial for my father's crimes.

I was fucking five.

The Queen, my nightmare of a mate's mom, stood at my side that day, advocated for me in ways I didn't understand then, and to be honest, I still don't.

My dad murdered the Gifted in cold blood. Argent people. Stygian people. People on the Royal Court and many more. He didn't have a type.

He killed anyone he felt like killing when he felt like killing them.

He's a legend of the worst kind.

Either way, a merciful, soft queen would recognize a child is a child and what her four-hundred-and-fifty-five-year-old father—who looked like a Russian mobster in his prime up until the day he was executed—had done had nothing to do with his little girl.

But Queen Cosima is no merciful, soft queen. She's the complete opposite.

So why did she speak on my behalf that day? Did she know Knight and I were mates? Was it because her daughter was my best friend?

I think back to my father.

Russian mobster.

If my throat wasn't dry from lack of fluids and my mind didn't feel like it was a construction zone in the city, I would laugh at that. Bet he'd put a dagger through his own heart if he heard such a "giftless" term. I don't remember much about my dad, but I could never forget his hate for humans. Well, now that I actually fucking remember my life before I was London.

Unfortunately, I have my murderous mate to thank for that.

I hate you, Knight Deveraux.

I swear a little voice in the back of my mind whispers, *I hate you too.*

Clenching my eyes shut a moment, I reopen them.

I've been lying here for who knows how long, and the tears won't stop. They puddle beneath me, the salty taste seeping into the corner of my lips and their cracked edges, but I don't feel the sting. Just as I don't feel the shards of glass sticking from my skin from several failed attempts at scooping Ben's ashes into a pile, but all I managed to do was make a bigger mess of everything. It doesn't help that they're inches from my face, and so with every shaky breath I take, they disappear a little more.

There's a hollowness in the center of my chest, a fucking pit of darkness I can't escape, and I wish it would swallow me whole already. End me. I also wish I could say it's all for Ben, because in my mind it is, but I'm not just a human girl who only has a heart and a head to deal with.

No, I'm Gifted. Saddled with something deeper that only makes sense to others like me. Where a part of me literally belongs to someone else, just as that someone else belongs to me. To find that person and not have them ... to have them and then lose them, it's the worst kind of torture.

For the Giftless, broken hearts can mend, but a literal torn soul? Not so much. I hate him.

I hate how bad my entire being aches for him.

It's disgusting.

Ben's fear-filled gaze pops into my head, and I scream, jerking a moment later when the ashes fly around from the gust of my shouts.

"Fuck!" I wipe my snotty nose, scrambling to my knees and swiping my hands across the floor, only the ashes stick in random spots from my tears and more.

“Dammit!” I panic. If I knew how to use my magic, this wouldn’t be an issue. I could conjure something or cast a spell or who knows! Maybe my power was the art of cleaning, and I could save all I have left of Ben.

But I can’t do that, and I don’t know the extent, or lack thereof, of my magic because the Deverauxs took that from me. Maybe I should be grateful I wasn’t murdered the second Temperance was, that someone, somewhere dared to cross them, to spare me, but I’m not.

I wish they had killed me then. I wish I had died that day eleven years ago. If I had, Ben would still be here.

He never would have met me, so he never would have died because of me.

I cry harder, growling at nothing and everything, and I fall back onto the floor. I roll onto my back, tears falling into my ears and hair as I start to shake.

It’s all my fault. Everything is my fault.

Temperance is dead.

Ben is dead.

My uncle is probably dead.

My mate and I wish each other were dead.

“Fuck.” My entire being quakes and I can’t take it.

I throw my hand out, feeling around in the mess until I find a large enough piece of glass, and then I close my fist around it, squeezing until its blade buries itself into my palms.

There’s nothing left for me in this world or the human one, and even if there were, I wouldn’t want it.

So, with a heavy sense of numbness, I lift the sharp shard and drag it from my left wrist to the bend of my elbow. Rolling over, I fist Ben's ashes, watching as my blood mixes with them, creating a pile of mush that cannot be saved.

I don't want it to be saved.

I want to die right here beside him.

I don't want to feel the empty pit Knight will never fill.

I don't want to breathe the air that's stale in comparison to when he's near, only I don't *want* him near.

"I hate him! I hate everyone!" I cry.

My lips part, and I scream until I can't anymore, burying my face in my hands, then banging them against the floor over and over until the blood not only comes from the wounds I created, but the new ones I've earned. My knuckles are deformed, the bones cracked, my body too heavy to hold as I slump backward, hitting my head on the edge of the cot on the way down, but I don't fucking care.

I'm so.

Fucking.

Done.

Exhaustion falls over me like a warm, weighted blanket, and for a moment I wonder if it's time. The ambience of calmness feels like a shot of heroin, and I shiver when ice rolls through my veins like death itself welcoming me home.

Please let it be time...

"How's my little troublemaker doing—" I think I hear through the ringing white noise pounding at the back of my head. "What the fuck?!"

My eyes peel open just as someone drops beside me. His face is blurry at first, but then baby blue eyes are staring into mine. They're wild, tired ... and something else I can't name.

“Ledge?”

“Yeah, baby, hold on.”

“No.” I pull away, but the movement is broken, shaking my head. “What are you doing here? Le—leave me alone.”

“Ain't happening.” He wraps his arms under my body, lifting me with zero effort, and sets me on the bloody cot while he looks me over more. “What the fuck is all over you?”

“What your brother left of my best friend,” I tell him, searching for a reaction through heavy lids. He either doesn't give one or my focus is too fucked to catch it. Likely the former.

“I need to get you to a healer.”

“I don't want to be healed.” I try to pull myself out of his hands, looking to the wide cuts on my arms, blood still rolling over my skin in warm waves. I raise my eyes to his stubbornly. “I want to die.”

“Yeah, well, you're not human, remember?” He lifts his shirt over his head, pressing it gently to my cheeks. “It's gonna take more than that. All you're doing is leaving yourself weak for someone else to finish the job or worse.”

His words hit hard, and I start to cry again, suddenly the weakest version of myself.

“So do it! Send your mother in. I bet she would get off on it, twisted bitch.”

“For fuck's sake.” He swoops me into his strong arms, cradling me to his chest.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

He ignores me, and as he turns, my head rolls to the side. Through murky vision, I take in the blood-stained floor with dark clumps of muddled ash and all the glass shattered over marble. The splatters of blood paint the walls like something out of a horror movie and darkness weighs down on my chest.

“Leave me here, Legend.”

“Shut the fuck up, London,” he snaps, holding me tighter.

“I hate you and your family,” I tell him, but the warmth of his body draws me closer, so I move the shirt hanging over his shoulder, pressing my cheek to his bare skin.

“There you go, baby,” he whispers, his lips running along my blood-caked forehead. “Now, let’s get out of here, hm?”

There are screams and shouts and then ... darkness.

A smile curves my lips because finally.

Finally ... the Grim Reaper has come for me.

I’m ready for him to take me home.

I win.

I wake with a pounding so heavy; I swear someone is delivering blow after blow as we speak. And they must be wearing brass knuckles because goddamn does that shit hurt.

There's a ringing in my ears and my limbs burn like a flame curling around what's left of them.

"He's going to fucking kill you, man," someone says.

There's a scoff and then, "Just fucking get on with it. I'll deal with my brother."

What... my body twitches.

"She's waking up."

The fire grows stronger, and I scream, my back bowing. My eyes fly open and I shoot up, but my shoulders are shoved back to the flat surface in the same instance. My head snaps left to find Silver, his eyes white as a ghost, fingers covered in blood. I look down, watching as he presses them against my skin.

I pull at my strength, tearing free for a moment, and then Legend's face is above me.

"London, if you don't sit your fuck—"

I headbutt him with a growl. My head explodes with pain as more blood pours down my face, but I smile manically when the pain finally touches the void in my chest. Blood pours from his nose, dripping over my face and my chest and he growls back, slamming me down.

Panic seers through me, and my body begins to shake as if they shot me with a two-prong taser on full fucking force.

Legend's eyes pop wide.

"You see that?" Silver hisses.

"Are you hurting her?!" he shouts.

"Well ... yeah, man. Hurts before it heals."

Heals.

Silver is healing me.

“No.” I yank my arm, but the second it moves, it’s as if flames lick their way across my flesh, and a scream bubbles up inside of me again. Something is shoved into my mouth, so I bite down as hard as I can, my tongue instantly hit with rosemary and gasoline. It’s a toxic concoction that makes my tastebuds dance. My eyes open.

It’s Legend.

A smirk pulls at his lips, but the creases at the edge of his eyes give away his concern. Concern for me. “Bite it off if you need to, anything to shut you up.”

I sink my teeth farther into the flesh of his fist and he growls, a groan mixed into it.

If I were thinking right at the moment, I would roll my eyes, but I can’t see past the pain...and he kind of likes it.

“Almost done,” Silver whispers.

Forcing myself to look, I watch as he spins his fingers and wrists this way then the next, twisting and turning, fingers playing as if pressing the keys of a piano. Slowly, the deep gashes he reopened begin to close until all that’s left are the smears of the mess I made. His eyes pop up to meet mine a moment, and then a piercing shriek fights its way up my throat as he breaks every bone in my hands at once, resetting them in the next.

The pain is gone as soon as the last pieces of me reconnect and my muscles slump with fatigue.

Slowly, Legend takes his fist from my mouth and brings it to his, his tongue flicking across his flesh until the blood is gone. He pins me with a scowl. “I should spank your fucking ass.”

“Fuck you, and I didn’t ask to be healed.” I tear my hands from Silver’s when he reaches out, likely to inspect his work.

“Knight would murder me if I let you die.” Silver glares.

“Scared little bitch—”

“Don’t start problems with me, babe. You’re going to need me one day and—”

“You’re fucking delusional.” I close my eyes.

“Your body needs to recharge.”

“Recharge,” I mock. “I’m not a fucking battery.”

Someone’s phone rings, and then Legend says, “Fuck, we gotta go. Now.”

“I’ll stay with her a little longer and then take her back.” Silver offers as he reaches toward my chin, sighing when I jerk away. “She shouldn’t enter a portal yet.”

“She’s not going back.” Legend swoops forward, lifting me in his arms once more.

“Legend, you can’t—”

“Yes, I can,” he cuts Silver off, gripping me tighter.

A moment later, I’m blinded by the opal colors, my eyes clamping closed, face turning into his chest.

A wave of nausea falls over me, my body swirling as if stepping off a shitty ride at the old county fair.

“Are you fucking insane?!” Silver hisses.

“Yes. I am.”

“She can’t be here, Legend!”

My body jostles as I open my eyes, realizing we're already through the portal and on the other side of it.

Crimson walls with black glittering whirls line the hallway, giant golden candlesticks floating beside them and flickering between fire and light with each step Legend takes, only the first five feet ahead visible at a time.

The ceiling isn't a ceiling at all, but a gateway into oblivion. No stars shine above, no galaxy is within reach, just the air of darkness.

"Where are we?" I wonder.

It's quiet. Too quiet. There are no guards to be seen, not a single servant or staff member crossing the halls as we move past them.

A sick feeling stirs low in my stomach, my pulse pumping harder by the second.

With each step taken, it only gets worse...

Knight

Like earlier, there's a knock in my chest. Right in the fucking center. Pressure presses against my ribcage, but it's different than the sensation I got at the end of the fight.

It's stronger.

Deeper.

And it's fucking tugging at me. I have to look down to make sure my flesh isn't ripping from my fucking bones. My throat begins to strain, and I throw my head up from the pile of fucking info spread out around the circular table.

Creed glances my way and Sinner glares from behind his laptop screen.

"What is it?" Creed sits back in his chair cautiously.

I look over at the couch, empty, the files Legend was going through abandoned there.

I shoot to my feet. "Where's Legend?"

My brothers swing around, and they're on their feet as quick as me.

"I didn't even hear him leave." Sinner spins to look at me. "Knight... no."

I swallow. Fuck.

That's not what this is, is it?

I felt some shit and then learned my father was murdered. Fucking dismembered.

Not my brother too. For our dad, we'd search the fucking worlds for his murderer.

For our brother?

We'll burn them all to the fucking ground.

But this... my pulse thumps harder until it's ringing in my ears.

My feet move without permission, my brothers on my tail. Just before I can throw the doors leading to the hall open, a gust of wind comes from the other side, bursting the doors open, rattling them on their hinges.

My blood runs cold then boils, the sight maddening and abating at the same fucking time.

London.

Covered in blood and grime and pressed against my brother's chest.

Holding on to him.

Touching him.

Jealousy burns deep in my bones, and my hands ball into fists, every part of me aching to go to my mate. To remove her from his arms and take her into mine, but I force that shit away, draining myself of the weakness she bleeds into me just by being near. By existing.

Fuck this.

Fuck her.

“Knight,” Creed edges.

“Leave him,” Sinner snaps back.

Legend simply keeps coming forward, his chin held high. Silver stands back to stay out of this. As he fucking should.

Rage boils beneath my skin and I jerk the exact moment he does.

At warp speed, he whirls her around until her back hits the wall, spinning again in time to catch my fist to his jaw.

“What the fuck?!” I seethe, hitting him with a left this time, refusing to look at the girl who dropped like a fucking sack against the floor. “You got some fucking nerve, brother.”

He says nothing, taking my third hit before fighting back.

He shoves at my chest and I stumble a single step, lurching forward and tackling his ass to the ground. He throws up a portal and knocks me through it, and then we're slamming into the wall at the other end of the room. His hand is on my neck, but I crash my head into his, reopening a wound that's already there and whip him around, throwing him to the ground before stomping down on his throat.

"Enough," Creed barks. "Get the bitch out and let's get back to work."

In my peripheral, Silver moves forward, and my head snakes around, staring as he drops beside London with slow, cautious movements.

That's when I finally look at her for real.

Her hair is matted with blood and what looks like dirt. The blood on her arms is soaked into the clothes she wears, and her skin is pale. Bruises mar her face and arms, and before I know I've done it, I'm standing over her.

Her palms are pressed to the floor, her eyes hardly open and head lulling from side to side.

Silver reaches out to touch her, and she flings an arm up, but then her eyes lift, crashing with mine.

She gasps, her lips parting.

Something crushes in my palm, and when a hand lands on my shoulder, I look to find Sinner. His eyes are white as he dips his chin, his fingers wrapping around my wrist.

I look down to find Silver's wrist, the one that went to her in my grip, the bones broken, his hand folded the wrong direction. I let go, taking a step away, and then another.

"Explain," I manage to force out.

“She tried to off herself,” Legend reveals.

Pain sears me, my chest caving in as a growl fights to be let loose from my throat. My Ethos stirs, begging to be free, but trapped beneath the truth of me and the girl before me.

He wants to go to her. Wants her to call him out and set him free.

Fuck that.

She doesn't deserve his loyalty. She's trying to leave us.

Fuck all this.

“Silver healed her,” Legend finishes.

London's eyes are dead as they stare into mine. No sign of the fire or sass I came to crave. To fucking need. No sign of anything.

She's void, a hollow bag of brittle bones.

A broken little doll.

Just as she deserves.

Acid coats my insides, but I welcome the sting.

I'll let it eat me whole, if it takes with it the appetite for the one thing my body swears I want but refuse to have.

I bend down, locking my limbs when they dare to shake in anger, dare to reach for her. To fix what's broken.

I lose the battle, and my fingers skate along her temple, tugging her hair from where it sticks to the blood along her head and brushing it back.

Her eyes close, likely by accident, and the sight does something to me. So, I force the tip of my claws from my fingers and let them scrape along her skin.

Three small droplets of blood appear, and I wait for her to wince. To shout and cry in pain, but she does neither.

She does nothing.

I glare at her, slowly pushing to my feet. “If this is your cry for attention, you wasted perfectly good blood, little doll.” I look to Legend and then Silver. “You should have left her to die.”

And then I walk away, but not before I hear her voice.

It invades my mind, and without anyone able to see, I close my eyes to listen.

“Told ya,” she rasps.

My best friend scoffs a laugh and I want to tear his tongue out.

I want to choke the life from her. How dare she speak to him like they’re friends, but not react to me. She has to be burning on the inside, like I am.

Waking in cold sweats.

Searching the dark corners of her nightmares.

Or maybe not.

Maybe this is just on me.

The fates testing my strength.

They took our King. Our father.

Maybe they will take her next.

My knees buckle at the thought, and I catch myself on the table before falling to the floor like a bitch.

I hate her.

I hate what she’s done to me.

I hate what the truth has done to us.

Growling, I tear through the doors and wait for my brothers to step through. The moment they do, I set in on Legend.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I boom, throwing a barrier spell up so she can’t listen in like the snake she is. I step toward Legend. “You bring her here?! This is a fucking sanctuary for *Royals*. The place where not even our most trusted are to be allowed and you let in a bitch who murdered one of us?! Who’s to say she’s not responsible for Dad’s death too?”

Legend lifts a brow. “Kind of hard to kill a king when you don’t even know how to use your powers.”

“Maybe she does, how would you know?” I shove at him, but he doesn’t budge, and then we’re chest to chest. “You think you know her better than me, little brother?” Anger radiates from my every pore, and I can’t stop it.

Legend smirks, and I reach forward, ready to tear his fucking heart out. He’s baiting me and he’s enjoying it.

Sinner and Creed step in, tearing me away and Legend laughs, dropping onto the couch he snuck away from, flipping into his half of dad’s files like he didn’t just make this ten times harder.

I jerk free, shoving my brothers off me and glare at my youngest one.

“She was beating the shit out of herself. Cut her arms from her wrist to her elbow, banging her head and fists on the marble until the bones broke so bad, Silver wasn’t sure he could get them back right without a senior level healer. She

hasn't eaten or drunk anything in four days, and she wants to die."

My insides coil, twisting, and I swear the monster within me sinks his claws into my fucking flesh from the inside.

Legend's eyes lift to mine knowingly. "We just lost our King, our fucking father, Knight. We can't lose her too."

"She's no one."

He nods slightly as he settles back on the sofa. "Maybe. But the beast shaking in your chest disagrees. She stays until he demands otherwise."

Swinging around, I punch the fucking wall over and over until it's a pile of rubble at my feet and my brothers say not a fucking word, because as much as we all hate it, it makes sense.

This isn't about her. It's about me.

I might not want her near, but there is a part of me, a part I can't control, that does, and the last thing the people of Rathe need is an unhinged Royal on the tail of a dead one.

My mother will take to the skies tonight to make the announcement I'm not ready for.

To take the first step toward what comes next.

I don't want it, but it doesn't matter.

The King of Darkness is dead...

It's time for a new one.

Four



London

SLOWLY, MY EYES PEEL OPEN AND THIS TIME, I'M NOT LYING on that same bloody marble floor, but tucked in a pillowy bed and wrapped in silk.

My hands go to my eyes, and I rub them hard before looking around the room.

It's giant and dark with expensive golden shit all over, but I don't care enough to look closer. It's all the same at the end of the day. Royal this, money wasting that.

These motherfuckers wouldn't last a day in the human world without the golden, magical fucking spoon they've been dealt. They have no idea how to struggle or survive on their own.

So, they're made to go to Rathe U for a few years after graduating their version of high school here in Rathe, so fucking what. It teaches them nothing.

Well, at least not the Stygians. The Argents maybe, but those of Dark magic?

All it does is feed their filth. They find humans they want to toy with and they fucking play. They play until they get bored, and then it's on to the next.

I thought I was just a toy, and damn if I wasn't a willing one at one point, but now here I am. Lying in a bed of fucking silk with dried blood all over me and the same clothes from four days ago.

Lifting my arms from beneath the blankets, I inspect the damage, only to find nothing but thin lines from where the cuts were. Hate and shame fill me, and I look away.

I've never been suicidal, and maybe I'm not now. Maybe I thought about how I'm a fucking immortal being and knew it would only hurt for a while, but at the end of it I would be fine.

Maybe I didn't. I can't say for sure.

Pushing up, I swing my feet over the side, waiting for the pain to rush in and knock me over, but it doesn't come. I'm fully healed and it fucking sucks because the only pain left is of the mental kind. The kind that hides its scars deep inside your mind where no one else can see them.

At the thought, my insides seem to shrivel, causing me to wince.

Oookay, so it is still physical, but that, I'll have to get used to, because I refuse to allow the one person who can stop that particular part of the pain to do so. Not that he would.

He'd rather die, I'm sure.

I mean, that's not a bad idea...

No. He'll only kill me first and I don't want him to get to live out that fantasy of his. He doesn't deserve to get

everything he wants, so if someone is doing the killing, it's me.

Slowly rising, I move to the window, but as I push the black curtains back, a heavy level of grey smoke appears, swirling and sparking angrily and I jump back.

“What the fuck?” But as it continues to spark, something within me eases, a false sense of security settling over me. Still, I step forward again, and this time, I slide the window open.

At first, the smoke suffocates me. It sweeps in, whirling around me, squeezing my lungs until there's nothing left within them. Nothing but the savory taste of ... whatever the fuck this is.

But then it eases, pressing against my skin like the softest of pillows. My eyes close on their own accord, and my palms open, the smoke tethering itself to my hands as if to hold them, and for a moment, my lips twitch to smile.

Finally, something soft. Something ... loving.

My eyes fly open at the naïve thought, and I throw the window closed, stumbling away from it.

The smoke grows enraged then, slapping at the glass so heavily I wait for it to crack. Rushing forward, I yank the curtains closed, and after a moment, the sound stops, but I don't look to see if it's gone. Clearly, I'm not supposed to see what's beyond these walls. Truthfully, it's probably nothing but the rings of fucking Saturn.

Turning around, I glare at the pristine room, walking over to the golden dresser and throw everything off it with one swipe of my hands. Crystal crashes to the floor, and this time, I do smile, and then I move to the fireplace in the corner. I take

the stones from within it and drag them along the walls, scratching and scraping every inch I can reach.

I knock the nightstands on their ass, and tear the drawers from their brackets, shucking the contents all across the room. I shred the sheets next, tearing open the pillows and spilling the red feathers within them all over.

Hopping up, I run back to the fireplace, searching for an on button or book of matches so I can burn this fucking place to the ground, but there is none.

“Because magical motherfuckers don’t need such things to kickstart the flames.” I growl, tugging on my hair as I rush for the bathroom door.

It’s made of glass, so I kick it with the bottom of my bare foot over and over until it cracks, and then I throw my shoulder through it, stomping on the glass, ready to destroy everything in sight. The first thing I see when I walk into the giant ass space made of pure glass, is the stand in the corner.

It’s an addict’s wet dream. Bottle after bottle, of what who the fuck knows because it’s all sitting in crystal decanters, but who fucking cares. It must be something good if it’s here.

I head right for it, removing the tops and throwing them behind me.

I swig from the first bottle, shaking my head as it burns its way down and then I drink from the second one. The third, fourth, and so on. Swiping the back of my hand across my mouth, I hold one bottle in the other, using it to knock the rest to the floor. Not all break, but all spill, the liquid rolling over my toes and beyond.

Then I move to the red crystal platter.

Small powder containers are filled to the brim with I can only assume is Fae dust. Some pink, some blue, some pink and blue, but the last one is the one I go for. The one I'm not so sure is like the others. It's red, gleaming, and something tells me it's the strongest.

I pull it to my nose, and my eyes roll back at the mouthwatering scent, it's like sugar-dipped saffron. I pour some between my thumb and pointer finger, licking it off with one swipe.

My body sways instantly and I pull in a full breath, exhaling as my muscles relax. As my insides turn to mush and flutter with excitement. The utter emptiness a fucking gift, now more than ever.

I turn the shower on, peeling my clothes from my skin one item at a time and take another long drink from the bottle. I sway a little, a small, numb smile pulling at my lips, but as I spin back around, I catch my reflection in the floor to ceiling mirror, and everything in me freezes.

“Holy shit,” I breathe, stepping closer to the counter.

My fingers tremble as I bring them to my cheeks, hollow as if lacking life, my under-eyes black as if I really am as dead as I feel. The blood on my arms didn't seem so bad when I first looked down at them, but in this mirror, I see everything. They're caked, coated, as are my legs.

There's still a cut on my forehead from where I wouldn't allow Silver to finish healing me. Blood sticks in clumps of my hair. It's matted and dark and ... not just my blood.

It's ash and glass and yeah, a bit of Legend's blood too.

I turn my head, spotting the small shards gleaming just before my hairline and rather than look for some tweezers to

tug them free, I press my hands down over the spots, rubbing and digging them in further. I rub until they're imbedded beneath the skin.

Fresh blood leaks into tiny droplets, too small to fall but not too small to see. That's when my eyes snap down, to the spot on my neck.

Teeth marks, deep and proud in the skin.

My fingers brush over the spot and a tingle runs down my arm, through my body until every nerve inside me is alight. My eyes fall to my thighs and I spread them, staring at the mark there as well. It's gleaming, seeming to vibrate beneath my skin, or maybe that's my chest.

Am I growling?

I grip my throat, feeling the vibrations there and hiding the mark.

My palm shakes and I close my eyes as a shiver races down my spine, but the second I do, I see him.

Dark and deadly. Strong. All-consuming and life altering. Safe.

"No." I shake my head, forcing my lids open. "Fuck no."

I saw him in the hall. His shirt was wrinkled and untucked, like he spent the night fucking me from his system with some meaningless bitch and couldn't be bothered to change. His eyes were black beneath too, likely from lack of sleep and some serious party favors of the royal, magical fucking kind. And again ... a sex marathon.

Pressure falls on my chest at the thought, but I bite into my cheek to block it out. Glaring at his mark on my skin. His stamp.

His claiming of his mate before his rejection.

“Fuck you, Knight Deveraux,” I slur. “I’ll cut you from my skin my damn self.”

With that thought, I take the bottle in one hand and a wine corkscrew in the other.

KNIGHT

Mother prepares to address the masses, the sky lighting as she appears within it as one giant live projection for her protection.

Her announcement is being aired across the realm; an emergency beacon having bloomed through the skies alerting everyone something was to come. The beacon hasn’t been used in centuries, so there’s no doubt our people wait on bated breath to hear what the Dark Queen has to say. Guaran-fucking-tee it’s about to be last thing they expected to hear tonight.

They probably think they’re here because of the continued attacks on the royal properties. The last having killed four Fae who weren’t even supposed to be at work that day but were called in last minute.

My brothers and I sit around the table together, watching through a mirrored monitor Creed conjured. It floats between us, the edges glowing a deep blue that will shift to red when she opens her mouth to speak.

Our people couldn't be more wrong as to why they were called tonight, and Mother wastes no time. As always, she digs the knife in without hesitation.

"The King is dead." She speaks with the strength of a Queen, holding it together for her people.

We stare in silence and tension crawls up my spine, knowing every home, layer, and fortress in these lands is just as quiet in this moment, her words no doubt sending a shockwave through the Gifted community.

"In the name of the demons who guard these walls, I promise you this person will be found and their execution a public one for all of us to enjoy." Mother pauses as if there is a crowd below, and she can hear their cheers.

Sinner scoffs beside me, pouring each of us another round of laced scotch. "She loves this game, don't she?"

I nod absentmindedly, watching the dark streets of Rathe, hoping the person responsible for our father's death will show himself.

"Let us not forget that our loss is also our gain." Mother's hand lifts, outstretched to the galaxy above and I feel the frown building over my face.

Throwing his hand out, Creed flicks the screens away, and we watch as they turn into nothing but smoke that fades above us.

"What do you think she'll say?" Sin wonders.

"What else can she say but the truth at this point?" Creed glares at nothing, fully fucking aware that's the least likely option.

“She plans to kill her, doesn’t she?” Legend crosses his arms.

My heart clenches, but I stretch beyond it, forcing the feeling away.

“Pretty sure the Little Slasher was already supposed to be dead considering how she acted when Creed outed her in front of everyone,” Sin quips angrily. “Someone was sloppy when they should have just chopped her fucking head off like d—”

“Don’t,” I growl before I mean to, my nostrils flaring as I try to get a fucking grip.

I press the heels of my palms into my eyes and growl.

I don’t want to be the fucking King, and I sure as fuck don’t want some random at my side.

The problem? This is not a choice.

It’s the way.

It’s what is and there is no changing that. And with our father dead, the little bit of time I would have had to come to terms with all this is no more.

I’m the next King of Darkness and in Rathe, a King cannot rule without his Queen.

As if that word alone conjured her, the tattered bond between us tugs.

I know the second she’s near, the stupid fucking bond I’m cursed with stirring with life, forcing me to tighten the chokehold I’m continuously forced to keep, but I’ve been doing it for days now, longer if you count all the times I fought her before I learned the truth.

It's weakening me. My gift unable to fully recharge because it's in a constant state of use. My skin prickles and my insides burn, begging me to go to her, to touch and hold and fuck her, but fuck her and fuck this bond that thinks it's in control. It's not.

It will never be.

It can't fucking be.

Forcing my eyes to stay focused forward, I ignore the bone crushing sensation to go to her and pretend I don't notice the probing looks from my brothers.

I bite into my tongue, the cinnamon flavor of my blood filling my mouth and I let it seep from the corners of my lips.

Instantly, the very moment it touches the air, London's head snaps this way. I feel her gaze like the touch of a dragon's tongue. The burn, the sharp cuts that seem to drag along my skin.

My limbs tremble with need, too many to name, and like always when it comes to the white-haired wonder, I lose the fucking battle.

My gaze snaps up. Her glass-like eyes lock with mine and my pulse jumps in my chest.

Mine. Every inch. Every fucking bit.

No! *Fuck!*

My jaw shakes as I stare at the bitch who stole my future. My sister. My fucking sanity.

You'll pay for all of it, Little London.

A smirk pulls at her lips, her head cocking like the brat she is, and I want to tear her lips from her flawless face. Fuck it up a bit. The blood she's covered in does nothing to hide her beauty. Quite the fucking opposite in fact.

That's when I see what I didn't before, what the rage blocked.

London is stumbling into the room where my brothers and I sit, all four of us staring right at her ... completely.

Fucking.

Naked.

She stops then, lifting her leg and spreading it until she's wide open before us, her foot balancing on the edge of the couch.

I drink her in, my mouth watering, chest rumbling at the sight of her bare pussy. Her hand slides along her thigh then, and I trail her tiny fingers all the way to the apex of her thigh. Toward my mark.

A spark ignites beneath my skin and my cock hardens, my tongue running along my lower lip as I watch her caress the spot, and I swear to fucking hell, I feel her touch inside me.

Deep beneath my flesh and bone, she strokes the monster there with every brush of her finger. Her hand glides higher, fingers slipping between her legs.

A low groan sounds, but it's not mine. It comes from beside me, breaking through the lust.

All at once, we move. I twist and my brothers jump from their chairs, swiftly putting distance between us before I tear their eyes from their heads.

They don't get to look at her. To see her cunt that belongs to me.

I growl in their direction, head whipping around to look at the source of the problem.

“London,” I rumble, my chin tipping to my chest.

The doors behind her burst open then, and Silver comes running in.

“She's g— ” He comes to a screeching halt at the sight of her naked ass. “Oh fuck.”

“Yeah, too late,” Sin laughs as Legend screams, “Silver, run!”

Silver's panic-filled eyes fly to mine, and cautiously he takes a slow step backward. “Knight...”

My lip curls, and I feel my gift rise to the surface. Before I realize it, I'm moving at the speed of light, his throat locked in my hand and body lifted into the air.

I squeeze, crushing his windpipe, my lips parting with a growl.

“I—”

A husky, drunken chuckle has me blinking, and slowly, I look over my shoulder.

She's sitting on the couch now, legs stretched at her sides in a full fucking split, pussy open and wet.

“Fuck,” Creed snaps from somewhere, and when they're all before me, I free Silver, who I'm only half holding on to now.

“What's the matter, my lord?” She runs her fingers through her pussy lips. “You don't want me. I don't want you ... so

why can't I have them? I only have three holes, but I bet we can be creative for the fourth. Especially with Sinner's... imagination."

I dart toward her, but her hand swiftly goes to my mark on her neck and I still, the sensations of before washing over me.

Want. Need.

Fuck, I can feel my cock wrapped in her heat. It's like I'm inside her here and now.

She laughs again. "Yeah, that's a nasty little trick I learned by mistake."

"I'll kill you," I force past clenched teeth, desire flooding my every fucking vein, eyes glued to the rhythmic way she rubs my mark on her satiny skin.

My mark.

Mine.

Fuck!

She chugs more scotch, the shit ten times more potent than the stuff she's used to. "I bet this one's your favorite..."

Her fingers, coated in her arousal, trace my bite on her thigh and something knocks at my chest.

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" She looks down. "Such a perfect bite. Perfect mark."

Suddenly, she grabs something from behind her, a loud scream tearing from her skin as she stabs it in the center of the place I claimed her first.

I fall to my fucking knees, the others shouting in shock around me.

“What the fuck?” Sinner jerks forward.

London’s teeth clench and she cries as she pulls the corkscrew out, stabbing it back into the flesh over and over again.

“Stop her!” Creed screams, but Legend is already there, reaching for her.

Before I know what I’m doing, he’s flipped over my back and tossed to the ground.

Spinning, eyes fucking wild, and sanity gone, I dart my hand out to fucking kill her, here and now, but London’s head snaps up and she thrusts a hand out.

My body surges into the air, legs and arms stretched straight out as I fly backward until my head and back are knocking into the wall on the opposite side of the room. No less than sixty fucking feet.

“Fuck,” Creed booms, moving for her, but she jumps to her feet, her head thrown back like she’s fucking possessed, and fuck me, maybe she is. Her bones break beneath her flesh as she wails into the air.

“Shit!” Legend rolls to his feet.

The windows vibrate, the glass shaking and falling to the floor, and when Creed touches her bare skin, her head whirls his way.

She gnashes her teeth at him, eyes blown completely fucking black.

It’s enough to make Creed pause, and she laughs. It’s dark, echoed in death and destruction. She laughs manically before taking the fucking screw and stabbing it into her neck.

I lurch over in pain, anger eating away my senses.

She thrashes then, jumping down and charging at Creed.

He dips, dodging her swing of the crystal bottle, but as he comes back up, she manages to hit him across the head.

Blood pours from his ears and she chuckles again, turning to Sinner.

Sinner's eyes glow white in an instant, his lips moving as he throws up an illusion, but she smirks, somehow seeing through it. She dives right off the edge he left her on, giggling as she falls toward the boiling lava below. When she breaches its surface, she locks her eyes on his, and drags him down with her, drowning him in his own trickery. Slowly, the illusion fades.

“Take her out,” Silver panics. “She's ... this is—”

I lurch to my feet, coming up behind her and taking her head in my hands. She growls, clawing my eyes until blood seeps into my vision.

“Knight,” Legend prompts with a shout.

My insides rage against me, but I look around at my brothers, at the shock and concern on their faces.

I turn on my own soul once again.

I snap her fucking neck, and she falls to the floor with a slump.

She dies for the third time.

Fuck.

Five



Knight

THE ALCOHOL HADN'T TOUCHED THE EDGES OF MY STRESS, and neither had the Fae dust, but I sat still. Void of anything more than what I knew was happening. The lights flickered to the deep base of some fucking mortal song as I slowly raised the bottle of blue liquid to my mouth, allowing the sting of potency to burn my lips before swallowing. I hiss through the trail of fire it leaves in its wake, until it finally settles in my gut.

“You know that shit could kill you, Knight.”

“Not me,” I growl, keeping my eyes locked on the ceiling. Hooks bolted in, where rope connects and dangles down for the dancers.

The Mage must slide into my booth—the darkest fucking booth in the club—because her voice sounds closer. Blinking through the haze, it's obvious how delayed my thought process is.

But I don't care.

I need answers and I know I'm not going to get any tonight, so tonight, I'll drink. For him.

For her. And because of how much I hate her.

Jesus. I am fucked up.

“Now, now, my lord...” her voice dips low and I finally drag my attention off the ceiling and bring it directly to her. Zhara is the kind of Mage you find yourself wondering how good she'd feel around your cock. I didn't have to wonder hard, since I laid her flat on her back more times than I could count.

Personally? Mid.

She flicks her long black hair over her shoulder, the glossy strands hitting the strobe light every time it flashes. “Do they know anything about the King's death yet?” Her head tilts to the side, and I watch as her fingers start tapping against the table. She's restless.

“Whatever you want to say, spit it out.”

Pause. Then she reaches over and takes the bottle of alcohol off me, bringing it to her burgundy-colored lips for a long swig. “I don't have anything to say.” She swipes the bottom of her lip with her thumb. “For now.”

“But,” I snap, forcing my mouth open when she hands the bottle back to me to take another drink.

“But. I feel something.”

My eyes drift over her shoulder to the front door, where they open slightly and a small figure wearing a hood walks through, heading to the other end of the bar. The girl pulls out a stool and slides over top. I wonder if she'll remove her hood.

“Knight?”

“What?” I come back to the Mage. “Spit it out. I’m not in the mood for riddles.”

She slides closer to me, and I lean back, needing distance.

“If you’re here for my dick, *Zhara*, then I suggest you go elsewhere because all I’ll give you tonight is a death wish.”

She chuckles, her head tipping back before settling back on me. I can’t be fucked with her trickery tonight, so I turn back to the young girl to see if she’s removed her hood yet, but the seat she was on is empty.

Swallowing the rest of my drink, I slide out of the booth, needing distance between me and this fucked up reality. First the King, then the fight with London. The stubborn fucking bitch. Any time she’s angry all I picture is my hand around her throat and my cock in her mouth. In that order.

“Wait!” The Mage’s hand stops me as she squeezes my arm. “Knight...”

I look down at her one last time, watching as the color in her eyes turns to an opaque white.

“There’s... fire. And snow. Cold... so cold... but... so hot?”

I force my arm out of her grip. “Once again you’ve proven neither of your lips are worth shit.”

Six



London

THE KING IS DEAD. THE KING IS DEAD, AND NO ONE TOLD ME. I had to find out by listening to the guards and their boss as they shifted some of them around at the last minute. There must be hundreds of them marching up and down these halls, their steps silent, no proof of their presence outside of the sight of them.

I'm not sure why it stings to know the boys didn't tell me but why would they? I'm not one of theirs ... not that I want to be.

But Knight must be—

No.

I clench my teeth. Fuck Knight.

The King probably deserved it, but even a girl raised on the outside can understand the seriousness of such an act. I'm not sure what a place like this does when something of this caliber hits them, but I know it can't be good.

Sighing, I keep my feet moving when I just want to drop to the floor and sit there forever.

The guards tasked with walking me down a bunch of empty hallways come to a stop and the stone wall before us disappears, a door materializing in its place.

The four men dressed in all black with ski masks of some sort pulled over their faces, leaving only their eyes visible, straighten, their bodies completely in sync going unnaturally stiff as they step to the side. Backs pressed to the wall, they look ahead, seeing everything but staring at nothing.

It was what my human-trained brain would call morning when I woke to the shouts of the Deveraux brothers outside the room they locked me in— something they seem really fucking fond of for some reason.

I had time to change into the pair of jeans and hoodie I found sitting on the dresser, use the bathroom, and run a brush through my tangled hair before the door finally swung on its hinges, revealing Creed on the other side. He glared, saying not a word as he came toward me, but I caught the cautious steps he tried not to take as he approached. I didn't show that I noticed, but on the inside I felt a hint of satisfaction before it quickly washed away.

He came toward me, spit some words I couldn't understand and then we were here. Or I was here—back at the fucking Ministry building.

Only this time, I wasn't thrown in a cage like a bad little Gifted.

I have no idea what's on the other side of this door, but as my palms start to sweat and my pulse begins to climb, I have a small idea.

“If you’re waiting for someone to open the door for you, I would suggest you think again, Ordinary.”

Ordinary, right. I’m no longer “the Giftless girl”. I’m almost worse.

A bottom feeder in a shiver of sharks.

Ordinary because they’ve seen no proof of significant power and they have no bloodline to link me to. I’m just some lost Giftless girl who found her way home, after all.

I knew the minute the “Elder”, a councilman who introduced himself as Odin, leader of the Monsters, had addressed me as “London” when I woke in that cell the first day, that the Royal Family didn’t spill the tea. I have a sneaky suspicion as to why, but honestly? What the fuck do I know.

Clearly, not enough.

I glance at the woman beside me. She looks my age but must be four times that if she ‘speaks for the monster of Rathe’, as she claimed when she introduced herself. Whatever the fuck that means.

She’s over six foot tall, so a full foot taller than me, with fiery red eyes and hair to match. It’s long and sleek, as is her neck. Her jaw is a little too sharp and if she were in the human world, people would see long fingernails, but the sharp points extending from her fingertips are no nails. They’re claws.

And they’re painted pink.

I have no idea what kind of monster she is by looking at her, but the way she keeps staring at my neck gives me a small idea.

“You know, you don’t look like a Victoria.” I pinch my lips to one side, my gaze skating the length of her. “More like ... a

bitch.”

The woman jerks forward, but the moment she moves, so do the guards.

The woman’s face goes blank and she faces forward, so I roll my eyes and reach for the handle. My skin sears instantly.

“Fuck!” I yelp, looking to my palm and the charred skin hanging there. I glare at the burn when six letters glare right back.

Reject.

My head snaps her way, just in time to catch her smirk, not that she tries to hide it.

Reject?

My heart thumps in my chest.

Victoria reaches past me, bringing her face inches from mine. She stares into my eyes as she runs her tongue along her lower lips. “My mistake. Let us hope there’s a healer around somewhere who is brave enough to touch you or that’s going to sting a while.”

Brave enough?

I don’t have time to think about that as Victoria has my face in her palms a second later and her red eyes begin to swirl with silver. “I’m going to take off your magic restraints and you are going to behave like a good little Gifted. You will not speak. You will not run. Most importantly, if you attempt to use magic, you will fry from the inside out.”

A small frown begins to build along my brows and really, I want to fucking laugh, but then she blinks, a proud smile pulling at her lips, and I realize...she’s serious.

She expects me to listen. Curiosity tugs at my mind, so I decide to give her what she wants, nodding like a good Gifted.

Her hands hover over my wrists and the red laser-like lights that coil around them, creating what looks like an infinity loop, turn blue. From blue it fades to black, and then all that's left of them is a fading cloud of smoke.

I rub at my left wrist, hissing at the burns the restraints left behind but it's nothing compared to the pain in my palm.

Finally, she pushes the door open, but all I can see on the other side is darkness.

Pulling in a long breath, I take a step forward, but then something kicks in my chest.

It thumps and stirs and swirls, and I know.

My mate is on the other side of that door...and he's *pissed*.

Good. That makes fucking two of us.

Knight

Once again, I know the second she's near, but this time it's not the bond that has my entire being tingling. It's the smell of her blood.

My head snaps in her direction the exact moment hers does mine; it's like a knee-jerk reaction we can't fucking control.

Her spine goes stiff, and her hands are folded behind her body.

Instantly my eyes trace every inch of her, searching for the break in her skin that's sending her scent straight into my lungs and all the way down to my fucking cock, but I can't find it, the hoodie and jeans hiding nearly every inch of her tiny frame.

It only takes her a split second to realize I'm not the only one out here and slowly, she faces forward.

Her eyes fly wide as she looks out at the people below and she takes a small step back. The second her foot moves, Victoria, one of the Ministry's pets, shoves her forward. It takes all the effort I can muster to keep my feet in place.

The muscles in my legs tense and pull, but I stretch through the ache, denying the part of myself determined to get to her, and focus on my mother ahead instead.

She levitates over the edge of the edgeless balcony overlooking the bridge that separates our realm; her red gown blowing in the midnight wind making her look like a true nightmare.

Her last message was a grave one and she is out here looking the part of the wicked widow, but it's nothing different from the norm, aside from the fury in her eyes.

The Elders advised against our conclave tonight; said it was dangerous considering my father's murderer was still walking our streets, and that's just one more instance of proof the Ministry makes us weak.

Forget him being our father for a minute.

Our King was fucking murdered. The King.

The man born for the sole purpose of his role and duty. Who spent a lifetime serving and speaking for our kind. For the Stygians and the fucking Argents, if they came asking for a bit of help painting a grey matter black.

This is when our people, the true and worthy Gifted, come together most.

We're pissed, hungry for retribution. For answers but it's more than that.

It's the matter of fate.

Fate is what we're made of. Fate of a Royal, or was it Fate of a Faux?

The Ministry said people wouldn't come out tonight and neither should we.

I smirk to myself.

Shows how much they know.

The corridor is full, Argents and Stygians alike standing shoulder to shoulder for as far as you can see as they wait for what they know to come next, while once again being hit with something they couldn't have seen coming.

I imagine every time the Argents are called upon, it's with fear and uncertainty that they travel here, being it's the same way they learned of the death of their own Royal Family centuries ago, followed by the shock of a Ministry forming in its place, and the refusal of our father to relinquish his title.

And why the fuck would he?

He was the fucking King of Darkness, and rightfully so.

We will never bend to the so-called Ministry. We didn't then and we sure as fuck won't now.

“Following the death of a king, royal decree states the dark throne shall pass to the firstborn son ...” she turns her head, looking to the left of the crowd. “However, it also states a king shall bestow his crown upon the first of royal blood to unlock their Ethos by way of a mate. My people, King Arturo was prepared to do just this before a traitor took his life.”

It takes mere moments for the whispers to begin, growing louder and louder by the second, but they quiet when she opens her mouth once more.

Lifting her chin and outstretching her hands, Mother continues. “I stand before you today to announce there is a new King of Darkness on the horizon.”

Our people hang on her every move. On her every breath, so when she turns, looking over her shoulder, her eyes meeting mine, they follow.... but at their angle, they can't possibly see which of their Lords their Queen's gaze lands on.

So, they wait, staring in rapture as a red carpet appears.

The thick, shiny mane of the monster who skinned its own back for this honor today starts out no longer than the length of my hockey stick, but as my shoe meets the fur, it grows, rising higher in the air with each step I take, creating invisible stairs. They rise higher and higher into the open night air, until I am standing above my mother. Until I am standing above all.

I grind my teeth until there's a deep crack.

Never in my life had I heard such true silence, and a split second later never have I witnessed such roars.

The people rejoice, their love for my father instant and without fault rolling over to his chosen son. Because in their eyes... the fates never get it wrong. To them, this moment means I was written in the stars and blessed by the blood of our ancestors lifetimes ago.

But they don't know what I know.

That my mate, my bond ... is bullshit.

There are two things nearly all Stygians have in common.

They love their kind more than all.

And they hate The Slasher more than any.

That is only one of the many reasons my mate cannot be.

Mother rises, not standing at my side as the crowd stares on. Slowly, her head swivels my way, her eyes meeting mine. She dips her chin and waits.

My eyes move behind me, latching on to London's as she stands as far back on the balcony as she can in attempt to hide.

Her features are lined with tension, too many emotions to count flash across her face as her gaze holds mine. Her hands fall to her sides, and my brows snap together at the sight.

My lips curl, my head whirling, but I clear the air from my lungs, erasing the scent of her.

I don't even have to look at my brother, he moves on his own.

Sinner dashes for her, grips her by the shirt and tosses her clear over the edge. Before she knows what's happening, she's freefalling to the ground a solid seventy-five feet away.

The crowd gasps, probably the Argents, those weak motherfuckers, and her scream pierces the air as she continues to fall to her death—the sound yanking at every nerve in my body.

My mother chuckles at my side, and just before London hits the ground below, her body jerks to a harsh halt.

I look over my shoulder to find Legend's eyes closed, his mouth moving as he manipulates the air to save the treacherous Gifted.

Knew he would be the one. He likes to act like he's not as calculated as Creed, but he is. He'll use this to his benefit, I'm sure.

"Enough playtime, son," my mother warns quietly.

Lifting my chin, I get to the point of this meeting.

"The fates are testing me," I tell them. "And I will not fail. My Queen must be worthy of her crown, and that girl before you, weak and hovering above you without a clue of how to escape the simple spell holding her there, is not."

London's eyes find mine and I stare directly into them. "I reject your bond, London Crow. May you burn like your ancestors."

Every word is like venom rolling over my tongue. My throat threatens to close, my heart hammering wildly in my chest, threatening to tear through the flesh and throw itself at her feet, if only so she would pick it up and stroke it with her soft touch.

The crowd begins to whisper, and those whispers grow electric as mothers and daughters and more begin to piece things together.

“From here, this very instant,” Mother’s voice booms as she draws herself higher, but still lower than me, and the crowd quiets once more. “Your of-age daughters are to report to the Faelific Fortress. At the break of dawn, they will be tested there, and the top five scores will immediately be moved into the Ward Wing on the estate.”

Just like that, their hope spiking higher than ever fucking before.

My mother smiles wide, her voice booming. “The next Queen of Rathe is among you. Let the evolution of the King... begin!”

Seven



Knight

OUR MOTHER OPENS A PORTAL, GLANCING BACK AT THE FOUR of us expectantly.

Creed steps up, Legend right behind him, and her eyes narrow when neither Sinner nor I move.

“Knight...” she warns, fully fucking aware it will make no difference.

Legend turns to me, brows dipped in anger. “You’ve just rejected your bond in front of all the civilians of magic.”

Sinner steps beside me.

“You said you had this handled.” Creed shakes his head, his face void of any emotion but his thoughts are real fucking loud. He’s almost as pissed as Mother. “Walk away.”

Sin scoffs beside me and I look to Mother’s side, intending to catch my father’s eyes...but he’s not here. He would see and he would approve.

Because the man knew what the fuck was up just as all four of them know I cannot walk away after what the bitch

dared to do. Can't and don't fucking want to.

Creed frowns, then closes our mother on the other side of the portal, all three of my brothers standing with me. They always will.

The crowd remains and the Ministry steps forward to close out the conclave, informing everyone of what we learned this morning—classes at Rathe U are on a temporary hold until the courtship is complete.

I hook right, following the guards as they move back toward the far edge of the Ministry building. The lead steps up, and the barrier falls instantly, the door materializing in a split second.

The shifter walks through, and the men fall aside in unison. Three on the left and three on the right, they stand shoulder to shoulder with their arms at their sides, creating a path for Sin and me.

We step inside.

The shifter spins to face the future King, just as I anticipated, a smile spread across her lips.

My hands dart out and I grip the poor excuse of a dragon by her neck.

Victoria's eyes turn to flames, her skin heating beneath my touch. There is screaming and shouted demands coming from behind us, and then the barrier is closed, locking the entirety of the Ministry outside.

I bait the fucking beast, my claws spurting from my fingertips, straight into her skin until her trachea is in my grip.

A deep snarl sounds from within her, and fire explodes from her nostrils in thick sprays.

Sin's chest hits my back in an instant and I can feel his anxiety rise, but I don't push into him, answering without words.

My hand begins to shake, my grip loosens and then the fire stops. Victoria's palm wraps around mine, triumph sparking in her eyes.

My face is charred, skin melting and hanging in thick chunks. I can hardly see beyond the mess she made of me. My lips are nearly gone, so what a fucking sight it must be when my bond, the part of myself I pissed off, catches up to what we're doing here, and my fangs break free in a slow, purposeful descend. They tear through what's left of my face, sending a fresh trail of blood down my neck.

I see it in her eyes, the moment she realizes she's a dead dragon.

“And you're supposed to be the lead of a team of monsters?” My claws still stick in her neck. I dig them a little deeper as I turn my face from right to left, my gaze never leaving hers. “Is this what her hand looked like after your little prank?” Deeper. “Was her flesh falling at your feet like mine?”

Victoria whimpers in shock. “But she's a reject. She—”

“Belongs to your future King,” Sinner growls.

Her brows dip. “But—”

Dug in as far as they'll extend, I drag my claws down ... and they slice her open like a ripe fucking watermelon. Victoria convulses, so I snap her spine next, and her body slumps to the floor.

Wiping my hand on my shirt, I step over her and continue down the hall.

“But fucking nothing.”

London

I feel the power swirl from beneath my body and I slowly drift to my feet, swiping my hair out of my face. I take in the people around me.

So. Many. People.

The smirks, the smug grins, the disdain. I hate it here. What had just happened? I didn't want to be Knight's mate, but what did it mean that he just publicly renounced our mating? I can still feel him inside of me, so I know that it isn't that simple.

Lost in my train of thought, I don't realize how much smaller the space around me has gotten.

I step backwards, attempting to put some distance between me and the crowd of Gifted, when I bang into someone behind me.

“Oh, look who it is. Fresh meat?” someone murmurs.

Another laughs. “Hardly fresh. Let’s play with her a little. Open her up and see if she has a heart.”

I jolt back again but the space tightens.

Suddenly, a hand wraps around my right palm and I’m being pulled through the sea of people. I don’t even know who it is, and I don’t care. All I know is I need to get out of here and whoever this person is, is helping me do that.

Bodies brush against mine the faster we go, and then we’re dipping down a small alleyway. The hooded figure pushes me against a brick wall before removing the garment from her head and resting it on her neck.

Kaia stares back at me with wide brown eyes, the kind that resemble bark. Which is fitting, considering she’s an earth pixie and the notorious ganja dealer. “We need to get you away from here, London. They’ll want your blood if they find out whose blood runs in your veins and without the Royal’s protection, I am afraid you’ll be cooked meat.”

I suck in a breath. “You know...”

Kaia shrugs a shoulder.

I swallow hard, unsure of what to do.

But what the hell can I do?

I let out a deep sigh. She’s right. As much as I hate the situation I’m in. “I just need to go back to Earth.”

She shakes her head. “No way! You can’t. I couldn’t allow you, at least not now. Right now, I need to take you somewhere safe in Rathe.”

“You got somewhere in mind?” I fold my arms in front of myself, waiting for her to answer. I haven’t seen Kaia since the first time I met her, but I knew straight away that she was one

of the good ones. Or maybe I'm deluded and she's as crazy as everyone else.

Before I can voice my worry, she closes the distance between us, resting her hands on mine. "I'm not. I mean, I am one of them, but not like that. "

"How?" I'm too lost looking for answers on why she would want to ignore a possible beef with the Royal Family when I look down to my hand to see it healed. "I mean how are you not too afraid to go against them?"

"It's not about fear." She tosses the hoodie back over her head, waving her hand over my body. Electricity prickles all over my skin when I look down to notice my other clothes have been replaced.

"This your style, I'm guessing."

I take in the tight leather shorts, fishnet tights, black and white Jordans, and band T. "Not bad, Pixie."

"Come. We have to leave now." She circles a portal in front of us. The opaque colors churn together like a colorful tornado, and we both step through. I don't realize I do it without so much as second guessing whether I trust her or not until it's too late.

The portal snaps closed behind us and I'm instantly swept into the world of a pixie Fae. The dirt beneath my feet crunches, but when I look closer, I notice the sharp little twinkling of glitter scattered through it. The smell—oh god, the smell. Like freshly cut blades of grass after a light rain shower of rosewater. Trees burst from the ground below, reaching for the night sky and I tilt my head back to get a better look at the branches. Soft lilacs, shades of burnt orange and blushing pink.

“Sorry about the mess. My aunt is away, and I can’t be bothered wasting pointless energy on cleaning.”

My mouth hangs open slightly as I try to catch my words. I shouldn’t be so surprised. Kaia is an earth pixie. They’re not only eccentric, but they ooze confidence. You can’t tell them anything other than what their intuition tells them. This is no different.

“Do you live in the forest?” I ask, turning around the space. I spot a wooden kitchen hidden behind a line of shrubs, before other items in the sitting room start to become obvious. A large screen floats in the air, directed toward a pink L-shape sofa.

“Nah.” She unbuttons her cape and tosses it onto a rose-gold table. “The forest lives with me.” Even with the naked eye, I can’t see where the forest ends. She falls down onto the sofa, holding my stare. “There are walls—” she almost rolls her eyes. “I’m not a complete anim—” she stops herself, seemingly thinking about her next words. “Well...”

I choke on my laugh, carefully making my way to the other side of the sofa. There’s a small coffee table between us with a stack of Louis Faeton and Saint Lycan piled on each other. I almost laugh at the names, wondering if the human world knows some things are secretly stolen from this realm or the other way around.

“You don’t have to worry.” She runs her fingers through her hair to pile it all onto the top of her head. “I swear to you I have pure intentions.”

When I don’t answer, she studies me closely. “Do you know how to read people’s intentions?”

Not very long ago, I would have said yes. That I'm fantastic at reading people. That my intuition was always right, but now?

I shake my head, feeling stupid. I hate this. I don't do well when exposed and vulnerable. The only person who I could freely fall apart in front of is gone now. You have to be careful who you fall apart in front of, because most people will steal bits that belong to you without the intention of giving it back.

I swallow past the new lump that's formed in my throat. "No. I guess not."

Kaia's eyes move all over my face, and I swear she's deciding what to tell me next. She's risked landing her ass in hot water by helping me. I know that I at least owe her some confidence.

"Sorry," I add, my shoulders sagging in defeat. "I'm finding it hard for me to trust anyone from this world."

She leans forward and slides off the top of the coffee table, revealing a hidden drawer. She starts moving things around before taking out a long rolled—I'm guessing joint, and a small clear bag of purple glitter.

She nods. "That's to be expected with your history."

She lights the end and I sink further into the couch, allowing myself a second to let my guard down. It's not like I have any other options right now. I don't even know how to conjure up my own portal to get me out of here, and as much as I know Kaia wants to help, I'm guessing there's a reason why she didn't open a portal straight back to Earth. Not that I'm even sure I have anything to go back to there.

I can't possibly face what I thought was my home without the boy who made it feel like it was.

“Speaking of.” She hands me the burning blunt and I look between her and the ganja.

The last time I did this was with the Mage, and I can’t say that I hated it. In fact, my life could not possibly get any worse at this point. So, I take it, bringing it to my mouth. Inhaling, I let the sweet smoke settle at the back of my throat before slowly exhaling through my nose and mouth. It takes seconds for the effects to take hold, and as each one passes, my muscles relax even more until my eyes weaken and my mind feels lucid.

“Why aren’t you mad at me about my father? And how do you know about him when, as far as I can tell, no one else does?”

She stares off into the distance. She probably won’t answer me. I wouldn’t answer me.

“I have my ways and I have my reasons.” She reaches into her pocket for her phone. “Reasons I’m sure I will share one day.”

I lean my head on the back of the sofa as I bring the blunt back to my lips, inhaling, before my lips form an O and I push smoke rings up to the sky. Kaia can say all she wants, but if this is an actual house, why are there no ceilings? What if it rains?

Shit. Does it rain here? Has it rained here?

I think back to when I was young, but my mind can’t focus on anything for longer than five seconds.

Fuck, I’m high.

“Shit...” She chuckles, pulling me out of my stoned stupor. “Well, he may have rejected you as a mate, but he just murdered the dragon shifter who burned you.”

I swallow roughly, and I hate that my saliva feels like sandpaper. I'm tired of feeling hate and resentment—images flash through my head of Ben falling—sinking—dying—no, the fuck I don't.

“Probably because he wished he could have done it first.” I didn't mean to say it out loud, and I'm partially glad it was barely a whisper, so she may not have caught it. Or if she did, she's not saying anything.

“Well... things will be different now, going forward, since they've announced a courtship for his royal penis.”

I choke on the smoke in my mouth, my lungs burning when my coughing becomes uncontrollable. “That is awesome.” After a few seconds pass, we both lose it. Laughter so deep erupts out of me and it feels good. If only for a second.

To feel anything but sadness and resentment.

Eight



K night

WHEN I WAS A KID, MY MOTHER REDESIGNED MY ENTIRE ROOM without telling me. It wasn't a big deal. A simple click of my fingers and shit was back to normal, but I remember it pissed me off. She couldn't tell me from Sin if our marks weren't showing, so it was funny for her to think she had the slightest clue what I would want in a remodel. I wasn't mad about the design; it was the fact that she did it for control. To control.

Just like now.

“Step forward, please.” Her long, coffin shaped fingernail the color of ash taps against the marble black throne that she sits upon.

If our father was alive, he wouldn't be here for this. You put a bunch of thirsty females and my mother playing her control card and you wouldn't find him anywhere nearby.

If he were here this wouldn't be happening.

Who would dare kill our King, and on the throne he sat on no less?

Legend kicks my foot and I turn to face him. With me at my mother's right, Legend beside me, Creed beside him, and Sinner at the end, I should have been prepared for the smart-ass shit that's about to fly out of my little brother's mouth.

"Five hundred souls that you fuck all of them within the first week."

I flip him off, spreading my legs wide and running my finger over my upper lip. Mate or not, I have an obligation to fulfill, one I never wanted, but I'm the son of Arturo Deveraux. The first Lord to find his mate, so as much as London is killing me, literally I'm sure, it doesn't matter.

It's simply a part of my path to my legacy.

Is it natural to reject the soul that was created to own yours? No. Common to? Fuck no. In fact, it's one of the worst moves our kind can make.

It's not as easy as throwing her away. I wish it fucking were, as that would make what comes next a hell of a lot easier. Not that I need easy. I don't.

I can handle anything thrown at me and I'll do it with a fucking smile, the blood of any who stand in my way painted in pride across my fucking skin.

Still, I sure as shit plan to stand before the Roaring Flame of Rathe, where the guards of the past wars began their journeys to victory, to chant to the monsters of the night who lived before us and hope one of these girls can take London's place in time. On the throne, in my head, and on my cock.

The third part looks to be a small possibility as the first chosen follows her Queen's instructions and steps forward into the glass case before her. The entrance seals behind her, locking her inside, and with a quick flick of mother's hand, the

cube like box slowly eases down the long hallway leading toward me.

The hall is pitch black, as is the room we occupy. There're only two sources of light in the space. One from the red relic at my feet, giving the chosen nothing more than the silhouette of their possible future forced mate. The second comes from the cube itself.

Every edge is illuminated, a golden glow cascading over the girl within it. She stands tall and statue still, her long red hair hanging loosely down her back in large waves. Golden pins are pressed above her ears and the entirety of her neck is swallowed by a looping necklace the same shade, the end curled and pointed against her chest.

“This is Ophira Octave.” Mother spins her finger, and the cube begins to turn, giving us a view of the girl at all angles.

“Vamp?” I guess.

“Siren.”

Our chairs sit four feet above ground, and the cube continues forward until it's two feet from the first step. The redhead parts her golden gown at the slit, revealing long, lean legs as she drops to her knees before me. Her silken hair falls gracefully over her shoulders, and she holds there, head bowed before us.

I cock my head, attempting to tap into hers, and frown when I get nothing.

“The cube blocks all magic from coming in or out.” I look to Creed who smirks in his seat.

“Eyes,” Mother demands.

Ophira's head raises, her lips curving into a demure smile as her golden gaze finds mine. "My Lord." Her voice thick with lust.

The golden necklace around her neck begins to spin, disappearing completely until the item catches my eyes once more, this time wrapped around her arm, until the head of a serpent is hissing above her knuckles.

My lips curve to one side, and from the corner of my eye, I notice Legend lean closer.

"Your friend?"

"Something like that." She fights a smile. "Perhaps I'll have the opportunity to tell you more another time."

Attention on the serpent, I run my finger over my lower lip. "Perhaps you will."

Ophira nods once, rising to her feet and then the light around her fades until she's nothing but a shadow.

The cube lifts into the air, moving to the far left of the room and then the second is called in.

This time, the glass glows a deep red, not unlike the color beneath my feet. It's dark and daunting and I can't help but lean forward.

The girl inside stands just as the first, her dark hair as straight as can be. It lays like a silk curtain over her shoulders, falling nearly to her waist. No jewelry lays across this one's skin, but teeth marks decorate her wrists like the most coveted of bracelets.

"There's your vamp." Sinner stretches his legs out, sitting back in his seat.

She's my nothing.

The thought burns its way across my mind before I can stop it and I clench my teeth until the heat is nothing more than that of a candle wick. Acid fights its way up my throat, forcing me to swallow any sort of response I might have had, and then the vamp, which she must be because our mother didn't correct Sin's statement, is before me.

Her dress is short, skintight, and black. See-through black.

Rhinestone crossbones cover her nipples beneath the sheer material and a rhinestones strip so thin lies between her legs—her way of showing me her pussy is well waxed.

When she drops to her knees one leg at a time, every inch of her is on display, and while my brothers adjust themselves in their jeans, I have to work to keep the frown from my face.

“Evangaline Valur,” my mother begins, the girl's head still bowed. “Her Ethos has been unlocked. Her mate was murdered two years ago.”

I sit forward at that.

Her mate was murdered.

She lost her mate and here she stands. Well, kneels.

“She would be my first choice, a good way to avoid having to execute your own wife should her fated pop up down the road.”

“You will have no choice, Mother.”

“Eyes,” she speaks as if I hadn't.

The brunette lifts her gaze to mine. They're a basic brown, but there's definite thirst shining in them... and it's not for my blood.

“It is an honor to kneel before you, my King.”
Evangeline’s tone is daring.

“Future King. My father is still your King.”

“Forgive me, my Lord. Allow me to kneel before you somewhere more private to make it up to you?”

The light in her box flicks off before she has a chance to stand, and she’s carried away until her cube is hovering a few feet from Ophira’s.

“But I thought you liked that one, Mother?” Sinner baits but gets no bite.

“Number three.” The third box is called.

The light shines a soft blue, and the girl it shines on is a tall, lanky thing. Rather than her best gown, she wears a flowy yellow dress that hits her feet. Her bare feet painted as pink as her short hair.

The box spins as my mother says, “Willow Falour. Fae.”

“What kind?”

“Spend some time with her, and you shall see.” My mother cocks her head, her disdain for the girl’s appearance clear as fucking day.

Shame colors Willow’s fair skin and she drops her eyes before she’s instructed, desperate to be done with this, I’m sure.

She looks up when instructed, and a sheen of glitter reveals itself in her green eyes.

My gaze narrows a little, and she starts to panic, but I hold a finger to my lips. Leaning closer so she can see that same sheer in my own.

Looks like we both needed a little Fae dust to get through today.

“My Lord,” she whispers.

My mother scoffs at the girl’s nervous tone and with a flick of her hand, sends her away.

“Next we have someone who knows you all well.”

This box moves quicker than the others, the light within it a flat white, and none other than Alexandra Kova stands inside. Her blonde hair is as perfect as always, her smirk as sure as ever.

I’ve fucked the girl enough times to know what she’s thinking—she will be the new Queen of Dark Magic. There is no doubt in her mind.

“But she’s Ordinary,” Creed clips. “An Ordinary as a Queen?”

Mother doesn’t even bring her to the front but sends her to the left with the others. “The assessments were as fair as they come, and somehow that Ordinary scored the highest.”

My head snaps her way. “Seriously?”

“Mmm,” Mother muses. “Yes, she—”

“She scored second.”

The intruding voice has all our attention snapping down the hall. The final girl stands there, but Odin, the man who sits on the council in representation of the Monsters, whispers to himself and the girl disappears.

“You doubt me?” Our mother rises from her throne, dark energy seeping from her skin.

“I do not doubt. The results did show young Kova as first seed, however—”

“Odin,” our mother warns, and I watch the woman closely.

“As much as you wish to control all—” the Monster boldly interrupts, continuing, and my mother’s entire being begins to shake. “Some rules cannot be broken. Those of the court are one of them, but you know this, Queen Cosima, so I’m sure it was just a ... *small* oversight on your part, yes?”

“Do not—”

“Reveal the fifth, Monster.” My skin prickles. “I haven’t got all day.”

The man’s eyes move to mine, a man my father knew well, and after a long, steady hold, he gives a slow nod.

He dips his head, closing his eyes, but no glass cube comes forward.

Instead, a portal begins to take shape before me, the whirling colors lighting up the room completely. It opens, and a husky, rhythmic laugh fills the air.

My insides clench, my pulse spikes, all to come to a complete standstill.

I fly to my feet in seconds as frosty hair burns my retinas, soft hands curving over the back of a couch, fishnet fucking stockings wrapped tight around her curves. With the speed of light, I jerk forward, grabbing the white hair by its roots, and haul it through the opening.

Someone shouts, but the gateway is closed before I can figure out who it was, and then London is lying at my feet.

Her wide eyes snap all around, glossy and intoxicated. Finally, her glass eyes land on mine and my fucking fingers ache to ease her... but when five seconds later she jumps up with a glare, I want to wring her fucking neck.

“Who the fuck was that, and where the fuck were you?!” I demand.

“Excuse me?!” she screams. “Fuck you! Who do you think you are?”

“Watch your tongue.”

“Watch yours, you coward! Murderer! I—”

Her mouth seals shut, lips disappearing, and fear instantly clouds her eyes. I look at my mother, whose eyes have turned completely white.

“Enough,” I snap.

My mother’s head turns my way, her glare slowly appearing as the color comes back to her gaze. She faces forward then and eventually, London’s lips are freed.

It takes a moment, but I remember why we’re here... and that I was waiting for the fifth and final chosen who would be on the court for the Evolution of a King.

“No.” I look to the Monster. “Fuck no.”

I can’t live in the same quarters as her.

Can’t see her every fucking day.

Can’t go an entire fucking day without seeing her either...

Fuck!

Odin takes a single step forward. “Rejected or not, the fated holds the first spot in the courtship. This is how it has been since the beginning of time. Fate demands it.”

“Wait...” London shakes her head, spinning to look at the boxes in the corner, the girls hung up and on display, like toys in a store. Essentially, that is what they represent. At least at this stage anyway.

“Wait!” she shouts this time. “I have to be on the courtship? The courtship that is only taking place because we don’t want each other as mates?!”

My chest bows, and I have to slam my fist into it to straighten.

Her words shouldn’t fucking hurt, yet it feels like the dagger at my side is digging into and twisting beneath my ribs, and it’s bullshit.

I don’t want her.

I rejected her.

Not the other way around.

“Knight.”

I look to Creed, who holds my gaze, speaking without words.

There is no getting out of this.

Baring my fangs, I look to London. “Fine. But know now... this isn’t your opportunity to work your way back, traitor.”

Rather than sink into herself, London steps up. “Oh, don’t you worry, *my Lords*, I won’t ever let you forget what I did to you, just like I will *never* forget what you did to me.”

“I will make you regret ever laying eyes on me.”

“Oh, baby...” she coos, her eyes growing dark. “You already did.”

Bitch.

Nine



L ondon

I GLARE BACK AT KAIA AS I RELAY WHAT JUST HAPPENED. “Did you hear what I just said?” When she doesn’t answer me, I click my fingers in front of her face in an attempt to pull her out of whatever the fuck is going on inside that cute little head.

“Sorry—” she blows out a cloud of smoke, before butting out her joint and rounding the kitchen counter to meet me. Her hands come to my upper arms. “I can’t help you with this, Lon.”

I sigh, shaking my head. That wasn’t what I was asking her, even though I love that that was the first thing she thought about straight after I told her I’d been courted into the castle of corpses with his royal fuckboy and his four little hoes. Okay. That may not be a fair observation—actually, no. Fuck him and fuck them.

“I wasn’t going to ask you to help me.” I slide out the little trunk made from a large tree trunk, lowering myself down and watching the clock that’s hanging on the wall in the lounge

click. “I have two hours to pack my things and be there, Kaia. Not that I have anything to fucking pack because Knight never allowed me to go back and get my stuff.”

“If I offered to take you to get your things, would you go?” she asks knowingly, using logic to try to erase one bad thing from my mind.

The answer is no, I wouldn’t. I couldn’t possibly face my dorm after what I witnessed there. For all I know, it’s been emptied, all my belongings thrown away like the carpet soaked in my best friend’s blood.

How am I supposed to sleep in the same place as Knight knowing what he’s capable of?

I look back to Kaia. “I need you to do one thing for me.”

“What is that?” she asks, and in a matter of hours I feel like I can trust her more than I can most people I’ve known for years. Beside from the fact that she has proven herself, my spirit, whatever the fucking thing is that lives inside of me, feels at peace whenever she’s around.

I can’t deny that.

I lean forward, turning my head to the glass window behind her and watching as the soft pink sky begins to burn into a mustard yellow. “Wait—why’s the sky doing that?”

“Hmmm?” She turns in her chair to follow my line of sight. “Oh, well, when there’s a forced Evolution of the King due to a Royal—or future Dark Lord—who has rejected his mate, it knocks off the balance of magic until the courtship has ended and the new Queen is crowned.”

I blink at her, willing for her to continue since she blurted it out as casually as one would their grocery list.

“Sorry, I’ll continue.” I watch as she stands from her spot and moves toward a large bookshelf. One that I didn’t recognize any other time that I’ve been here. How did I not see that? It’s hardly even a bookshelf. The wall dividing the kitchen and the living area parted by a wall filled with books. None I’d recognize, until a bright pink and blue spine comes into view. *Boys of Brayshaw High*. I almost choke on my drink. I was obsessed with that book. The fuck is that doing here? My eyes find the other book beside it. *The Silver Swan*. I should ask Kaia why she has *The Elite Kings* on her shelf, or what kind of messed up shit she’s into reading—because I need recommendations, but I kinda want to ask her why she put both of them so close together. I’d read both. Having those authors in the same vicinity, not just shelves, is enough to scare my ass back to Earth.

“As I was saying,” she skips over both books. Thank god. And stops at a leather-skinned older spine. “The balance of magic has been knocked around, so things are going to start changing around here. It affects us all, London. In so many ways.” She finally turns to me, holding the book open and placing it onto the table in front of me. “But since I only have two hours, I’m going to try to make this quick.

“Stygians are dark, you know that already, but what you don’t know is that during Yemon, the imbalance of a royal’s bond, things start to go haywire. Lines will be drawn. We start to expose our shadow selves. You can’t trust anyone, not even me. There’s increased crime and killings, unlawful feeding, and even incest. As soon as Yemon is over, everyone is back to normal, but until then, London, I fear you’re in even more danger.”

I fail to wrap my head around this, and I think it’s mainly because I can’t see these people being possibly any worse than

what they are right now. “How so?”

She holds my eyes, and it’s the first time I feel the fizzle of fear trickle down my throat as I swallow. “Because you’re right in the heart of the very place that wants to kill you.”

“Shit.” I lean back in my chair, but when that doesn’t give me any chance of relaxing, I shoot to my feet and start pacing around the kitchen space. The dirt—that feels more like Kinetic sand—melts between the cracks of my toes, and every time I close my eyes to think of a new plan, it’s eradicated into tiny little bits and shat out by a fucking six-foot-three beast that currently holds my entire fucking heart.

I hate him.

“Okay, so everyone goes crazy until Knight finds his Queen.” I hate that that felt like acid coming up my throat. “What else?”

“Well.” Kaia flicks through the book, and I lose focus once more when that burning orange hue in the sky deepens to a darker shade. Not quite red, but no longer orange.

“Fuck.” Kaia squeezes her eyes closed and a bead of sweat slides down the side of her temple. Her lips form into an O and she slowly expels a steady breath. “Okay, as I was saying, everyone starts to expose their shadow selves. This means the parts that they hide from the world, purposely or by denial. We are not good people, London. We’re all animals, essentially, just mystical beings all living by one single code. One code that allows us to coexist with one another, and that code is nonexistent during Yemon.”

“What code is that?”

The ground vibrates beneath my feet and birds fly from the trees around us. The sky slips into a murderous red, and Kaia’s

voice comes out soft. “That we’re not enemies.”

“Kaia...” I warn, stepping backwards slowly.

“I won’t hurt you, London.” Kaia shuffles forward quickly, disappearing through a doorway that leads to her room. I follow her, desperate for what else she can give me but understanding the urgency.

She’s buried in her closet, clothes flying out from the glass encasement. Not a single wall in this house isn’t made from glass, except that bookshelf, that has probably disappeared now.

A thick patch of white cotton is laid out on a smaller section of the room, with little leaves as pillows. A large tree grows directly from the center of the room, shooting up out of the ceiling and stretching out to the sky, and behind that is a miniature pond, with water the same color as portals. A glassy mirrored color, that my fingers itch to touch. It looks like it’d feel like silk to touch. I want to touch it.

Something is shoved into my chest and I’m staring back down at my earth fairy friend.

“Don’t touch it.” She dashes behind me, and I slowly turn to watch her. “As I was saying, you don’t have to be afraid of me. I won’t hurt you. My shadow self doesn’t care to hurt you, but there are a lot of people here who do simply because their King deemed you unworthy. If they find out who your dad was, it will be ever worse, so you need to get to that ridiculous fortress as quickly as we can get you there. There’s a protection shield around the Royal Estate, and the Faelific Fortress is located at the furthest edge of it, so Yemon never interferes with courtships while they’re happening. Everything in there should remain the same. It’s nature’s way of reminding us why it’s important to have a King and Queen

lead.” She’s opening and closing drawers when I swear, I hear her mumble, “So long as no one breaches.”

“Will you tell me your shadow secret?”

She scoffs, finally zipping up the final items into the small duffel bag I’m holding. “No. Well...” she drifts off slightly. “Maybe one day. But you’ll hate me.”

“I doubt that.” I want to roll my eyes, but I don’t. “But why don’t I feel weird?”

Her eyes turn to slits. “Don’t know. Good question. Ask someone else because you need to go.”

“Am I portalling?” I ask, internally gearing up for the whirlwind of a trip.

“Only a Royal can portal onto the Royal grounds.” Her mouth stretches wide as she wiggles her brows. She presses her fingers into her mouth before whistling out loudly. I hear the clap of wind in the distance, so I automatically look up ahead of myself, wincing when the fiery red sky burns my retinas to even gaze at. Just as I’m about to give up, a dark figure glides through the air. Two wings that span out so wide I don’t see the end points, and a large neck connected to a body.

I swallow roughly, ignoring the way my mouth dries at the sight of a— “Dragon?”

She wiggles her brows at me. “Yes. But you can’t keep him.”

I stumble to the ground slightly when a loud thud almost shatters the glass at his landing. “Yours?”

“Well... long story.” Kaia takes my hand with hers and drags me through the house, until we’re at the front entrance

of a clear door. She waves her hand in front of herself, and it swings wide open, exposing the deep shamrock shaded scales of an actual fucking dragon.

A big one. Not a small one.

“Guess you can tell me along with your shadow story.”

I reach out to touch its rough scales but think again when its large, red eyes find me. Shit, this thing is scary, and I know they come bigger than this—usually in a different shade of black too.

I don't even get to ask her who this person is behind the shift when she tosses me onto his back where a saddle harness is strapped around his large body and his scales pinch into my skin.

Kaia cups her hands around her mouth as she yells up at me. “Hold on! He flies fast!”

“What?” I yell back, the wind already causing my long hair to whip around my face. Kaia doesn't even answer when the dragon pushes up from the ground with an aggressive float and I hold my breath as the forest house below me comes more into view. I hold on to the harness and peak over the side, the smile on my mouth stretched wide enough to break my face. Wow. Kaia's house is bigger than I thought. I can see the almost invisible outline of her house, but nothing inside of it. So, we can see out from inside but not from out to in.

Good one.

The dragon's wings hit the air fast as his nose drives forward, so fast I almost slip, grabbing on to the leather straps tighter. I swear I hear him huff beneath me as he continues to glide us forward. Did this dragon just side-eye me in dragon talk?

Black clouds part for us as we gain speed, and it's so scary how different Yemon is to what Rathe usually looks like. The planets all line the sky, only this time they don't look like pastel backdrops to your favorite dreams, they look different. Angrier. Darker. Soiled.

My smile slightly falls at how this is partially all my fault. This land, their world that they all live in and love, is like this because Knight and I couldn't put our differences away and—
No! *What the fuck was that?*

Reasonable. My shadow self is obviously fucking reasonable.

I run my hand down the mane of the dragon. "Get us there faster, please."

He lets out a low groan before launching forward.

I slide off his back and take my duffle back from his side, carefully watching him. It's a weird feeling, not being scared of something that historically speaking, I should be afraid of. Dragons are impulsive, hot-headed, and unpredictable. They don't care who they burn, they're going to open their mouths anyway.

Like that bitch Victoria.

Did Knight really kill her because she burned me?

Doubtful.

"Thanks for the ride," I whisper, not being able to help the fact that I want to touch him even more. Feel him beneath my palm if only to test how hot his fire may be.

Fucking Yemon!

"Oh good, you're here."

His voice isn't what surprised me. I kind of hoped if anyone, it would be him who is here to greet me.

Legend stands on the marble patio, his feet crossed at his ankles as he leans against one of the many pillars at the front of their house. House. Pfft. You can't call this monstrosity a house. It's more like a big, fat deceitful hell.

Legend is shirtless, with his jeans hanging low and his chest glistening with sweat. He waves the dragon off with a roll of his eyes and I cling on to my bag as it finally lifts from the ground with a flap of its wings, and he's once again a shadow in the sky.

As soon as he's gone, I bring my attention back to Legend. "I can't say that it's nice seeing you, Leg. I'm not entirely happy that I'm here."

"Hmmm..." He takes his steps two at a time as he meets me, and the closer he gets the more I want to take back what I've decided to do. Not that I've decided to do this, exactly, since it's a fucking order to be here. Take me back to Earth and all their little mundane parties. "You know, you did kill my sister, and your father did reign murder on Rathe for years, but sure, baby girl!" He rests his arms around my shoulders, pulling me in close. "Keep being mad at me."

At his admission, I retract a little with guilt. He's right. I hate that he is, but he is. If anyone has any right to be mad, it's him. Just not Knight because he's a murderous bastard.

"Do I even want to know what's happening in there right now?"

"Well..." Legend chuckles as we both make our way up the stairs and he brings his hand to the small face on the door handle. It's not until I stare at it for a few seconds that I notice

the horns carved into the metal. “That depends, our little London.”

Our. Great.

Cause being *one* of theirs isn’t bad enough.

The door widens and he gestures inside with his arm. “You ready to start straight away?”

I follow his line of sight and almost want to step back. Run. Maybe jump back on that dragon and let him fly me anywhere but fucking here. I don’t know what I expected with the door opening, but it wasn’t what I’m staring at. Maybe a foyer. An area where the stairs start, and the lounge is tucked away.

No. That’s far too.... human for this kind.

A ballroom is spread out through the space, and people are dressed in their finest gowns and suits. Music is playing in the background, and there’s a large stage at the front of the room where a single crown sits. Black and lined with dark feathers, flames of fire flicker out of the spokes from behind it, burning with a relaxed sway.

My skin warms at the sight, and it’s almost as if I can feel the heat of the fire from here. People ignore it, walking all around and chatting in small clusters.

How is it that no one pays it any mind?

It’s magnificent, whispering darkly in my ear, the words too low and fast to catch, maybe even spoken in the native tongue I’ve long forgotten.

It’s calling to me and—

A throat clearing has me blinking and the whispers are gone. I look around, realizing no one has spotted me yet, and

take in the attire.

“What the hell?” I turn to Legend. “Was I the only person who didn’t get the memo we were playing Addams Family?!” I hiss. “I don’t even own clothes for—” I gesture to the area. “—this!”

“For what?” he asks, and his lips touch the nape of my neck.

I shiver, my eyes closing briefly. “For this!”

“Open your eyes and tell me what you see....”

I’m annoyed that he’s being Legend, but I open my eyes anyway, and my blood turns cold, the room spinning on its axis until it’s hanging upside down.

The floor that was once painted with white patterns over glossy wood, is now licked with red. The walls are black, but the edges at the top are leaking some sort of inky liquid. Knight has a red-haired girl in the grip of his hand, his nails sinking into her neck as his lips are locked on her shoulder. Her naked body is pressed against his partially naked form, and I can feel vomit rolling up the inside of my throat.

His other hand meets her nipple, and he pinches hard, before forcing her body back to face him and taking her mouth with his. He picks her up by her throat, slamming her down onto one of the rectangular tables so hard the food that’s lined over it splatters. The people around him are all having some form of sex, and the fog that swims around their feet smells like death.

Even though I hate it—I can’t help but watch. I want to die. It feels like a knife slicing me over and over again until I’m nothing but bare wounds and raw meat.

Knight spreads her legs so wide, I can see her pussy from here. Open and weeping, dripping with cum. Before I can blink, he drops to his knees in front of her and covers her with his mouth. His tongue is clearly working her into a tizz, as his jaw jerks with every stroke.

Her back arches and her hands fly out to her sides, desperate to grab on to anything to help. When her rapid breathing slows after her orgasm, she goes limp, and when Knight pries his face from between her legs, blood covers his skin and the tip of her cervix hangs from between his fangs. He bit and tore it from her body.

A scream tears out of my throat as I stumble backwards, but that scream merges with laughter, and when I try to turn and run, I'm met with a brick wall and no Legend.

Tears streak my cheeks, and I don't give a fuck if I look crazy—that shit is fucked!

Classical music starts playing again and my panting breath levels as the ambient lighting changes from that dark musty color to a lighter shade. One that reminded me of the original ballroom scene.

More laughter sounds from behind me and then Sinner rounds my body, a satisfied smirk on his lips.

The room spins once again, now upright and utterly ... normal. Well, the Gifted version.

I grind my teeth, annoyed that this fucking asshole got me again. Before I turn, I carefully dry my eyes so no one will know, but when I shift my arm, what I'm wearing catches my eye. Black straps cross over my torso and barely cover my nipples, leaving ample cleavage and side-boob as the bottom of my gown sprays out into a waterfall of gothic lace. There's

a split on the side that goes all the way up to my hip, exposing my lack of underwear, and I touch the ends of my long, white hair to feel it straightened into a sleek board.

I hate you, Legend, but also thank you. Pervert.

Slowly, I turn, straightening my shoulders and pushing away everything that just happened moments ago.

It's showtime, and if anyone is dying in this movie, it's Knight. And maybe his wannabe bitches.

Ten



K night

THE HAIRS ON THE BACK OF MY NECK SPIKE, LETTING ME KNOW she's finally arrived. Not that I was waiting. My fist tightens around my glass.

I still can't believe after publicly renouncing London, I'm forced to play this game. Finding a Queen in the four chosen was bound to be a nightmare and not the fun kind, but deciding on a Queen amongst them when the one who was created to be her is within reach? So fucking close I can literally smell the maddening scent of her flesh?

I shake my head.

Why is she sweating?

Is she hot?

Instantly, I look to the far-left corner of the ballroom where the fire fairy swings high in the air, each sway of her legs fanning the flame that frames the crown. I should tell London to move closer so she can feel the energy it bestows on the chosen—

What the fuck?

My brows crash in the center and I down what's left of my drink, staring into the bottom of the empty glass and wishing I had the power to snap my fingers and find it full once more.

I could snap, and the staff zip in and do exactly that as quickly as I can blink, but what a gift it would be to be able to do it on my own.

“Another, my Lord?” Ophira, the redheaded siren, rasps, her long fingernails petting the golden snake wrapped around her throat.

“Is that how it sleeps?” I ask, noticing how the body appears as hard as real gold.

Her lips curve to one side, the rim of her eyes glowing red. “She never sleeps, my Lord. If she did ... many men would perish.” A dark smile forms on her face. “Most would be unnecessary deaths.”

My eyes slide left, locking onto the purest of white hair I've ever seen, and I can't look away as London climbs the steps towards the bar.

Her dress falls open, exposing her bare skin clear up to her hip.

She's showing others what's mine and I should fucking kill her for it.

She freezes, her head snapping this way and our eyes lock. She swallows, and it's not until her eyes drop to my hands that I look down.

Covered with dried blood and large shards of broken glass clenched between my fists.

A small ache forms in my chest, but it vanishes before I can figure out where the fuck it came from or why it's there.

“Perhaps I can ask to share quarters with the young reject? I could rid you of your problem in the span of one moon—”

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm lurching for the redhead's neck, my claws drawn and starved for the feeling of broken flesh.

Silver's deep groan fills my ears, and when I blink, it's his scent that hits my nostrils, his body wrapped around mine in a tight hug, Creed's face over his right shoulder, Sin's over his left.

As one, they shove forward, driving me back until we're gone from the room entirely. Silver's hands find my shoulders, and it takes a second to realize he's pulling on me so he can yank himself away.

My eyes fall to the gaping holes in his chest, and I look to my hands, the sharp weapons that live within them nowhere to be seen.

Silver's skin begins to glow, the wounds sealing as he heals himself from within. When his eyes open again, he points his finger at me before stepping back through the open portal, closing it right behind him.

I'm left with my brothers in a room in the royal manor. I throw myself to my feet, snapping my fingers and creating a portal, but I'm so worked up I can't fucking see straight. I don't know what kind of shit they're all playing but I'm not here for it.

Creed snaps the portal closed with a casual hand. “Relax,” he demands. “Now.”

“Fuck you.”

Legend joins us then, popping up behind me. “It won’t be him who’s fucked if you can’t control yourself.”

“It’s not me!” I shout, and my brothers pause, all three moving closer to one another, confusion pointed my way. “It’s *not*.”

“Knight—”

“It’s not fucking me, Creed!” I shout, rage building. “You think I would act like a fucking crazed animal during Midnight Mating over her? A traitor? A weak girl who loves humans like they’re worth more than the blood in their veins? A fucking Gifted who doesn’t even know how to open a damn door without grabbing the handle?!” I throw myself back against the cushions. “Fuck no and fuck her. I fucking *hate* her.”

As I say it, sharp pain slices through my sternum as if the earth fairy at the party tonight extended her thorny vines straight into it.

Creed glares, shaking his head, while Sin simply stares, probably wondering if he should torture her a little harder to make me feel better, but it’s my little brother who bends at his knees, bringing his face level with mine.

“Wrong,” he says matter of fact. “It is you and you know it. It’s a deeper part of you. The truest fucking part. The part that knows what you really are and what it wants and what it *wants* is the girl who belongs to it. There is no denying this. London belongs to you. Literally. You can hate it and you can hate the girl, but until you break the bond completely, those are the facts. Lying to yourself will only make you mad. Trust me.”

I growl, angry because I can't fucking speak. Can't acknowledge. I did that. For a split fucking second, I let go. I wanted and I caved, and she was perfection in my palms.

And then I learned the truth.

London Crow, no, Villaina Lacroix, isn't intended to be the Queen of Rathe. No, she's the test for its future King. Me.

The fates gave me the daughter of The Slasher to test my worth. To test not just the monster beneath my skin, but the man who wears it; and I will not fucking fail by giving into the weakness that's crept beneath my bones because of her. Make no mistake. That is exactly what she is.

A weakness.

A plague, bound to destroy everything she touches.

Slowly, I push to my feet and my brother rises with me.

The answer is easy.

I just have to destroy her first.

And I will.

London

The servers wear silver pasties over their nipples and a strip of translucent glitter covers their slits, the rest of their bodies completely bare. Glitter makeup is elegantly scrolled above and below their eyes, some drawing all the way to the

hairline in thick swirls, others curving down the sharp bones of their cheeks.

The points of their ears are subtle and soft seeming, silver clips running along many of their lobes, though not all. As if it's a choice. Nice to know some people in this world still get some of those.

“Maybe I'm the only one who doesn't,” I mumble.

“Doesn't what?” a satiny voice whispers into my ear.

My eyes close, and goosebumps break across my skin.

“I ...” My head falls to the side.

“You what?”

“Mm,” I moan lightly, my eyelids flutter. “I have no choice.”

“And what would you do if you did?” A hot tongue runs along the exposed skin of my shoulder. “Tell me, sweet girl.”

I clench my thighs together on the first swipe of heat, and my teeth sink into my lower lip on the second. There's a crash and then a gasp, and I blink, a fog clearing from over my eyes.

I whip around, coming face-to-face with a wild-eyed and fang-baring chaos, but it's not the sight of the Gifted who might end up Knight's bitch, who is clearly a vamp by the fucking way, that steals the breath from my lungs.

It's the sheer, crackling mirage between us. It's clear, glass-like, but not.

My eyes narrow slightly, hers booming wide.

I reach out to touch it, my fingers sliding through with ease, and the moment my skin meets it, my body lights up. A

million butterflies burst in my chest and the tension in my shoulders washes away.

The feeling and whatever this thing between us is falls away when hands wrap around the girl's head, one braced on her chin, the other on her forehead.

Blue eyes lock and hold mine, and without breaking the contact, he snaps the vamp's neck, leaving her body to fall in a harsh thump at his feet.

Creed.

He steps over her, so he's now hovering above me. The brother who hated me from the start studies me for a long moment, and I jolt when a vibration rattles along my temple.

He's trying to get in my head, and if the anger that builds with each passing second tells me anything, he can't.

With that, he goes to walk away, but just before he passes my ear, he speaks in a furious hiss, "She's on the edge of going feral. The blood on your lip is a single fucking drop, and still, she couldn't resist." He leans in closer then, hissing his whisper, "Imagine what would happen if she smelled a little more?"

I spin, watching as he strides across the room with the same air of confidence as his brother, his words playing in a loop in my head for what seems like hours. It's not long until his father's slip inside too.

If you wish to survive this, forget who you became and remember who you were.

I'll never get to ask him what he meant by that, but as I almost spilled to the spellbinding, bloodthirsty—if the brother I least expected to be of any use to me was trying to tell me what I think he was trying to tell me—vamp currently fighting

for my mate's mark, I have no choice. That's not me being a whiny bitch. That's fact.

I'm a major piece on the board in a game I don't want to play, a prisoner of the Royal Court.

My attention snaps toward the left of the room, where Knight and Sinner laugh with a gang of girls, and ice fills my veins, stinging my skin like frostbite.

The feeling so potent, my eyes snap down, and I frown at the gleaming wave of blue hues coming from beneath my skin.

I quickly fling my arms behind my back, my gaze flying around as I take a deep breath.

Well, that's ... new.

London.

I gasp, my muscles locking when a hushed voice enters my mind. I stand silent, and just when I've convinced myself I imagined it, the intruder is back.

London, if you can hear me, you must listen. You need to run. Learn and leave.

My nerves spike to an all-time high, my hands flying to my head and holding it as I whip around, looking from right to left. From left to right.

“Who... who's—”

When I spot people staring at me, I snap my mouth shut, forcing myself to calm down.

I can't freak out. Not here.

Not ever.

I have no reason to listen to a voice inside my head, especially when it's likely Sinner playing his mind tricks, if not another Deveraux brother, but if it is one of them, their plan of freaking me out is going to backfire with the word choice.

Learn and leave. That's what he said.

And he's fucking right.

That is what I need.

Not to hide and cower, not drown in sorrow from all I've lost or simply try to survive. I need to learn how to.

I'm not giftless. I have gifts... I'm just not so sure what they are, but that doesn't even matter yet. I need to learn the basics, all the things the rest of the people my age learned a decade ago. The things I was learning before I made a mistake and killed Temperance and was ripped from my home and tossed in a new one. If I had learned faster then, maybe she would still be alive.

Sadness falls over me, but I push it away. I can't go back, but I can use the time I'm forced to be here to my advantage.

Just like that, I decide.

I'm going to learn and then I'm going to shock the shit out of the Deverauxs.

Fake laughter burns my ears as I narrow my gaze on the damn vamp who's no longer temporarily dead on the floor but has made her way back to Knight's side with the rest of his whores.

Alex fucking Kova being one of them.

Last time I saw her she was naked on top of my best friend, eating away his energy to power her own. These

people, they think they can do whatever they want. They take when they want. Touch when they want.

Kill when they want...

Rage burns deep in my chest and I welcome the pain.

“Fuck it. Might as well.”

With my head held high and a face as blank as ever, I head right for them, reminding myself over and over that fear is a human trait and at the end of the day... I am not human.

Ironically, it's a terrifying thought, but it's also empowering because I'm not fucking human.

I'm more.

Just like that, the tension rolls off my shoulders in weightless waves.

My lips pull up on one side and I no longer give two fucks if this ridiculous dress stays in place or if my pussy is out for all to see. I've never been modest and I sure as fuck won't start being so in a place that sees sex as a casual greeting.

Knight senses me after the first step I take, and yeah, maybe I did attempt to reach for the bond that lays frayed between us, but he pretends he doesn't until he can no longer ignore me.

Until I'm all he can focus on, and his head is forced to face this way.

His eyes narrow, but he remembers he doesn't give a fuck and paints his face blank just as fast.

Snagging a crystal flute full of swirling glitter, I toss back the weird-ass liquid without caring what it is. I step right up to the group, and with speed I didn't know I had, I snap the

bottom off the glass, slicing it across my open palm, and then drive it into that bitch Alex's neck, swiping my blood over her cheek along the way so my scent is mixed with hers.

Blood spurts wildly, and I step back, laughing as the bitchy vamp's eyes become framed in deep red veins, her fangs descending and sinking into Alex's flesh. People shout, spells are thrown, but it's too late and everyone knows it— the vamp is lost to blood lust.

The bitch must be put down.

Knight's the one who jerks forward, his entire hand disappearing into the brunette's chest, coming up with her black heart in his hand after he tore it from her body.

For the second time tonight, the vamp slumps to the floor and this time, she won't be getting up.

People move about, but I pay them no mind.

My eyes are glued to my mate's, riveted on the utter fucking shock that covers his face.

Ben would love to see this.

My heart aches at the thought, but I hold my smile strong, because if I can't have my best friend, he can't have his kingdom. I'll take it from beneath him if I have to.

As if reading my mind, Knight's jaw ticks with fury, so I cock my head with a grin flicking my tongue along my palm to clean the cut.

“One down... three to go.”

With that, I spin on my heels and move for the dance floor.

If the numbness is going to kick back in, I might as well let my muscles burn a little.

I haven't even fully turned back around, the smirk still smug on my mouth, when a hand comes to the back of my neck, paralyzing me. My knees turn to jelly as he squeezes roughly, forcing my head back in attempt to stop him.

Lips come to the shell of my ear. "Jealousy doesn't look good on you, Little London..."

I force myself out of his grip, but I'm not delusional. I know that if he didn't want to release me, I wouldn't have been able to step away from his embrace.

Turning, I bring my eyes up to his slowly, intertwining my fingers with his bloody ones. I bring them to my lips, sucking his index finger into my mouth while fluttering my lashes up at him.

"Maybe not," I tease, swiping the corner of my mouth with a flick of my thumb while lowering his hand. "But blood does."

Before he can do anything else crazy, like finally kill me this time, I dance my way through the sea of people, swiping a glass of sparkling blue Faepagne from a waiter. Closing my eyes, I let my hips sway to the music, lifting the glass to my lips. The bubbles evaporate over my tongue, leaving the heady notes of silver behind the potent alcohol. The song shifts into a more mellow tune, but I don't stop. I can feel the claws of chaos slowly itching their way across the surface of my skin, and at any moment—they could break.

"I knew you could dance...." Legend's hand comes to mine as he forces me into his chest, both of his hands finding the waltz starting position. The glass slips from my hand but

doesn't crash over the floor, Legend taking care of it with a simple quirk of his perfectly shaped brow.

"How are you so pretty?" I ask, stepping back and following his footsteps. The lights dim even further, just as he dips me backwards. The ceiling moves like a milky way, with thick clouds protecting a burning sunrise. The entire ballroom stinks of magic, but you don't have to smell it to see it around you.

He pulls me up gently, placing his hand on my mid-back.

The corner of his lip twitches. "Haven't you heard? I'm the Devil's favorite."

I ignore him, not wanting to engage in small talk. His eyes narrow and they fall to my mouth. "How many more chosen are we going to have to call in? Are you going to kill them all? I need to know so I know to shop in advance."

My mouth slams closed, and I grind my teeth. I hate that I fed right into what they thought I was going to do and what he wanted me to do. No matter how good it felt.

"Hmmm?" Legend lowers himself to meet my eyes. "Knocking off the girls one at a time is hardly surprising. Did you not think we had backups?" Legend stands straight, looking over my shoulder for a brief second. "Honestly, this isn't the first Yemon and almost every time, people get eighty-sixed."

"I don't like when you talk reason, Legend. Say something else."

He grins down at me, bringing his mouth to my cheek. He's so close I can feel his potent cologne burning the hairs up my nose. "When you're done playing with the useless, come find my dick to fuc—"

The air is pulled out of me when the song switches to Rhianna's "Skin" and a hand is squeezing my upper arm, forcing me around to collide with a chest. A larger one. One I recognize and right now, despise.

"If you think I'm sharing you, you're wrong."

I don't bother to hide the bitter chuckle that erupts from my chest. "I'm not yours to share."

His grip around my waist intensifies, and I swear I hear my ribs crack. "Wanna try that again?" His tone is barely above a whisper.

"No. I won't. Because I'm not yours to share. You took away that right when you killed my best friend and openly admitted that I wasn't yours."

"You're still mine, London, and beside the fact that I have to find a Queen—" he stops dancing and I feel the sharp sting of his fang across my shoulder. "You're still my mate."

This time my fingers find their way up to the back of his neck, forcing him down to my level. His hair brushes the tip of my nose and I have to hold my breath a few seconds to recollect myself. Unlike Legend, Knight's cologne isn't too strong. It's a whisper of threats laced with rose, oud, and mountain ash.

"You may be my mate, but I will never be yours." I push away from him, having had enough of whatever this bullshit of a night was. How's that. The first night of this Yemon and I've already killed someone and almost fucked my mate's brother.

Wish it wasn't an almost so I could at least feel better about the fact that tonight, I'm sure, Knight will be taking someone else back to his bed.

Eleven



K night

MY KNEE WON'T STOP JIGGLING. CHAOS WAS THE FIRST THING I remember feeling as a young boy. My mother used it to pacify my need for death.

“You need to relax.” Legend kicks my foot with his, but I ignore him.

Keeping my gaze leveled on the wall at the opposite side of the room. Shadows bounce against the chandeliers that dangle from above, and every now and then, I find myself counting to ten to calm that itching madness that wants to tear right out of my fingertips, just like it did as a kid.

Then, my mother would drop my ass in the middle of a field and let me ruin everything in my path. It was a coping mechanism. One I hadn't practiced in some time, hence London's damage.

“You don't know what the fuck I need.” I raise my glass to my lips, swiping the leftover Fae dust that's around my nostrils.

“Actually, I have an idea,” he teases, and I don’t have to follow his line of sight to know exactly who he’s looking at. She shifts her pale white hair over her shoulder, and anger aside, I feel my dick harden in my pants at the sight of her.

Fuck.

I let my glass sit against the pillow of my lips. I can’t help but wonder if whoever it was who killed the King is bold enough to attend this ball tonight. You had to have a pair of heavy-set balls to take him out, so I’m guessing yeah. Fuck yeah, they’d float around a cute little fucking ballroom just to see how we react. I hate that they see us but we don’t see them.

Fire touches my chest, and my eyes fly down to London’s hand, where another guy touches hers at the exact moment. She flutters her lashes up at him from below, leaving a ghost of a flirty smirk decorated over her mouth. Cheeky fucking bitch.

Legend leans into me. “You gonna handle that?”

I know what he’s asking—if I’m going to cause a scene. And I would. But the way London is lately, we all know that she would have no problem throwing back as much as I give. I don’t want drama. Not after the death.

I push up from my chair, downing the remainder of my drink and leaving it on the floating iron that’s hovering to the side of my throne. Taking the steps two at a time, people part like the Red fucking Sea as I close the distance between us. The closer she gets, the more that same anger boils.

I reach out to her arm and yank her into my chest. The guy she’s talking to steps backward slightly. His eyes catch mine, and I bare my teeth, watching as his face pales slightly. *Pass.* I

wondered whether someone so bold to kill the King would be the very same who would touch a Lord's mate.

“Ah—back up!” London's hand is on my chest, forcing me away.

It's cute that she thinks she can, so my eyes shift between her hand and her face, doing nothing to hide my grin.

Wrapping my hand around her frail wrist, my grin is gone when I pull her back against my chest and start escorting her across the other side of the room.

“I don't much like this distance between us, *mate*,” I bite against her earlobe. “The only time there should be air between us is when I'm sucking the final breaths out of yours.”

I see the twin golden doors in the distance, and as much as London can, and does, fight against me, she knows she's no match. It's like a baby rat fighting for its life as I dangle it by its tail above a den of pythons.

As soon as I kick the doors open, I shove her forward until she stumbles, and she catches her fall with her hands, shooting to her feet.

“Let me be clear, *mate*.” The word hadn't left my mouth before a fist is flying into my face. I don't even bother to whack it away, taking the blow face-on and smirking at her when she screams, clutching her knuckles in her palm.

“I hate you!”

“Ditto!” My hand finds her throat and I fling her across the room until she crashes against a wall lined with books. They stumble to the floor, but I don't care because this little bitch has tested my last nerve, and what I did have left she already burned the second she pissed me off.

I squeeze her cheeks so hard her lips pout.

“You don’t touch another man around me, London. Wanna see what happens if you do? Or is this warning enough for you?” That same rage burns quietly in the back of my ears. “Answer me!”

“Fuck you.”

The corner of my mouth curves upward and I lean forward, so close our lips touch. “Gladly.”

Her jaw tenses and she tries to turn away just as I fall forward and into the crook of her neck. I feel my heart bouncing against my chest like a fucking stripper on a pole. I hate this. What she does to me. I want to take it all away but instead, I always find myself right here. Inhaling her like a drug, like it fucking belongs to me. Because it does. And if it didn’t, I’d kill every dealer on the street and lock her up in my basement just to claim it as *mine*.

“London,” I whisper against the crook of her neck. “Fuck me like you fight me.”

She blows out a steady breath, but I feel the little bumps raise over her flesh, setting off my own.

“I hate you,” she whispers so softly I almost miss it.

“We’ve gathered that, but—” When she doesn’t turn to me, I squeeze her chin and force her lips onto mine. “I’m still only yours to hate.”

She fights it at first. Refusing to open her soft lips until my tongue dips inside. Her warmth covers me from my head down to my toes and I reach behind her back, locking her in place so she’s flush against me. Her little body shakes beneath me just as her weight falls, but I catch her, scooping her up and forcing her legs around my waist.

Deepening the kiss, I suck on her bottom lip as she reaches between us, unbuckling my belt and forcing my jeans down over my dick. Because of the simplicity of her gown, I only have to graze my hands up her thighs to lift it further until the silk falls off her body like milk does to honey.

She pauses for a second, but it's too late, because her other hand is wrapped around my cock and I've slid her dress to the side, dipping my finger between her crease and circling tightly, catching her mouth again to distract myself with her kisses of death.

Her hand finds the back of my head as I aim my cock against her entrance. Cold shivers riddle through my spine when I feel her warmth caress the tip of my dick. With a hand on her throat, I groan as I force myself inside.

"Fuck," I gasp, grinding my teeth as I slowly inch myself further and further inside of her.

I pull back, and then pump forward, locked in a trance of her body against mine. Her lips on mine. Her tongue against mine.

Mine, mine, mine.

With my other hand, I force her dress down over her swollen nipple, pinching it between my fingers so hard she hisses with a bite of my lower lip.

I grin against her pillowy lips, picking up my pace and working myself hard inside of her.

"Knight, shit..." She tries to shuffle forward, but I feel my balls tighten as her walls clench around me like a fucking vise.

Her back slaps against the bookshelf as her clit rubs against my pelvis. My cock hits the edge of her cervix with

every pump, and her legs tighten around my waist as her breathing becomes more desperate. I catch every moan with a flick of my tongue, my fangs elongating the closer I get to blowing my nut.

Her body tenses and I feel the exact moment she releases herself around me. Her body jerks violently as cum gushes over my shaft and travels down my balls. I squeeze harder around her throat until I feel her esophagus crack in the palm of my hand.

“Fuck, London...” I groan, so close I can feel the heat ready to explode out of me. I just know it’s going to be violent and hard. I’ve wanted this for too long, to have her hate-fucking me with bruises all over her body.

I feel the cool metal against the back of my neck and I almost want to roll my eyes.

“You think that’s gonna stop me from coming?” I urge, challenging her with a steady glare.

She doesn’t answer, but I feel the slice of the blade split my skin open behind my neck. Adrenaline spikes through my veins and my grip on her throat intensifies even further. Panic flashes in her eyes for a second as I slow my thrusts.

“Gonna have to do better than that, baby.” I reach behind my neck to grab the blade from her, bringing it to her mouth. I dip it inside, watching as the red liquid falls over the swell of her perfect lips before letting it fall to the ground as I pull out, only to force her around shoving her face down against one of the bookshelves.

Wrapping her long hair around my wrist, I yank her head back and slap her ass with my other, tilting my head to take in the scene. “You know I like it when you fight.”

I drive back inside of her so hard her back arches and the scream leaving her mouth will leave stories on these walls.

I pump her hard. Rough. And quick. Even though she pulled a fast one on me using the same fucking blade that killed the King.

“Knight!” she yelps, but I don’t let up.

“What?” I snicker. “You want me to stop?”

“Ye—”

I fuck her hard, my balls thumping against her drenched pussy with every thrust. Her cunt weeps with her pleasure, leaving tear drops sliding over my balls as little convulses leave her. Her body is the toy I never knew I wanted, and now that I have it, I’m going to take it apart and study it from the inside out. See what makes her fucking tick.

“You know you’re mine, London—say it.” When she doesn’t answer and she tries to fight the moans falling from her mouth, I tug even harder on her hair, so much I’m sure I ripped some from their follicles. “Say it!”

“Egh! Never—” I pull my dick out from inside of her and watch as my hot cum shoots out all over her ass and dress. I back up, putting myself away as she stumbles meekly to the ground.

She looks up at me from her position, her hair knotted and her makeup smudged. “I hate you.”

“Maybe. But your pussy doesn’t.”

I turn to leave, unable to wrap my head around why the fuck I just did that. A mixture of annoyance and disbelief floods me, and I know what I have to do. I do. Because no

matter how much I try to fight it, I know that London is a real liability. She just tried to fucking kill me mid-sex.

The bitch is crazy. If I can't earn her forgiveness, I'll fucking take it from her without her even knowing.

Twelve



L ondon

I STARE BACK AT THE LARGE DOOR THAT ROUNDS OVER THE edges in an arch, before moving back to the thick carpet. The white is almost a slap in the face to everything that I'm not. The purity of this thing alone insults me.

I bring my hand to the crystal knob. Obsidian. Twisting the handle, I push it forward and gape at what's sprawled out in front of me. Pristine walls and glitter sparkles against the large chandelier that hangs in the middle of the room. It fucking burns. Everything burns. The smell of kindled caramel filters through the air in soft waves and I slowly slip out of my stilettos, leaning down to pick them up before taking another step.

This shit better be an illusion. And fuck. Is there somewhere I can wipe the cum off my ass like a cheap bitch who just got fucked for forgiveness? I can handle Knight. Knight to me is like riding a bike... if the bike was on its way to hell. Is he going to think I tried to kill him? Probably. *Did I try to kill him?* Probably.

I step through the threshold. “Fuck.”

“Oh! You’re here!” A woman rushes out from one of the doors at the end of the room, carrying a basket. She’s taller, leaner, and has blonde hair that’s cut short around her neck.

She places the basket on top of the bed and the blanket moves like a fluid wave. “I’m Angela, your maiden.”

“My what now?” I raise a brow, unsure of what to think. A white, clean aesthetic bedroom with the only bursts of color coming from the feminine flowers planted into the corners and walls of the room, and now a maiden? Legend needs to get his ass out here and pull this illusion away. Sinner sure as shit won’t.

I drop my heels beside my bed, resting my hand on one of the gold pillars. I give it a little shake to test. Just as I thought. Pure gold. “Fucking douchebag.”

She rolls her lips beneath her teeth but busies herself with the basket, laying the lotions out on the bed. Unicorn glow, pixie scrub, hemp body oil. I would never need for anything.

“I’m just in the bedroom on the other side of that door.” She looks over my shoulder and I follow her sight. There’s a wall behind my bed, but on the other end of that wall is a door—a lot smaller than the one to get in here. The ceiling is high, and I follow the trail of white lily’s growing like vines through the pillars lining the ceiling. This room is definitely to punish me.

I rush to the other side of the space, where net curtains are draped. Forcing them apart, my heart deflates when I stare back at a blank wall. No patio. No window. Just a wall on the other side of curtains. This is definitely deliberate.

“Is everything okay, Miss?”

“Would it matter if it weren’t?” I catch her eye over my shoulder, and the fairy offers a small smile because we both know the answer so what’s the point of saying it out loud?

“If you sleep, sleep when the glitter glows a midnight blue. When you see coral it’s what you would call morning and lavender the rest of the time. This is the only way you’ll be able to track human time here.”

Our gazes lock and mine narrows. So, did she get the same ‘lost Gifted girl’ story as the Ministry seems to have?

“Does everyone know I was raised in the human world?”

“You hated the room before you even walked in, but it remains the same with each passing moment,” the woman says. “Rathe-raised Gifted are far too spoiled for that.”

A small laugh breaks from me and I swear the woman spins to hide her smile.

“There’s a full wardrobe in the closet and the schedule of events will show itself should you stand in front of its doors. Next up is breakfast in the Gnomes Gardens. Your one-on-one with Lord Deveraux will be your final task before it all starts again.”

“One-on-one?” My stomach sours, and when I press my palm to it, I’m met with smooth satin. Looking down, I find I’m no longer in the sexy dress Legend dressed me in, but pure white pajamas, baggy and covering every inch of my skin from my neck to my ankles.

Sighing, I drop my head back squeezing my eyes closed, but when I open them, I gasp.

The ceiling has shifted, the skies showing themselves above, but that’s not what has my lips parted.

It's him.

Kaia's dragon friend hovers above, its giant wings flapping to hold it steady, sending a gust of wind over my face and blowing my hair into my eyes. I scramble to tuck the loose strands behind my ear so I can stare at the magnificent beast again ... but it's gone, and in its place is a vortex of white fucking clouds.

"You guys realize you're hosting a courtship for the future King of Dark Magic, right? A Stygian, not an Argent?"

"Of course, my lady." She pulls the bedding down, and then hovers her hand before the bedside table. Suddenly steam rises from the small teacup. Her gaze meets mine over her shoulder, and she offers a hesitant smile. "However, the rooms are spellbound by blood. Your blood. What you see is what the Ministry has deemed you are."

"That doesn't make sense."

"We do not gain answers from things such as common sense. That is a human practice. This—" she points around the room "—is a result of your humanity. It consumes you."

Humans have better qualities than most I've met in Rathe so far, but I don't say that to this woman who has likely never left the lands. I stick to the facts.

"I'm not Argent. I'm of Stygian blood. I mean shit, my d—" I cut myself off. "I mean, if I'm supposed to be the future King's mate, I've got to be pretty dark, right? Like ... a few steps below The Slasher, dark..." I throw it out, testing to see if she knows more than she's said.

"Do not speak of him in these walls," she hisses in a whisper, swiftly coming my way as she looks around the room. Her eyes shine a bright green as they hold mine, and

when she speaks, it's in a hush. "The Faelific Fortress is a place of safety and sanctuary for all kinds."

"So, I've heard."

"Did you hear why it was created?"

Tension rolls through me and while I feel like I can make an educated guess at this point, I want to hear it from the maiden's mouth. I shake my head no.

"For those believed to be hunted by you know who and the families that were left behind after the fact."

The Gifted my father spared after murdering some of their family members, she means.

The maiden, my maiden, goes on. "We continue to protect the civilians of magic to this day, hence why the courtship is held here. Yemon cannot breach these walls; they were built of the bones of the first Fairy to ever walk these lands. Here, you are safe from what is beyond these walls."

But not what lies within them...

She doesn't say it but the way she tips her chin says it all.

I jolt when the woman grabs my hands, but there's a softness about her that has me allowing her palm to meet mine.

She murmurs so low I almost miss it, and when her brows raise, I speak the words with her in unison.

"Using tongue is not the simplest of ways when most can simply think or snap what they wish and make it happen, but it is the quickest way to learn and requires little energy." She releases me and steps back, frowning at my chest. "Not what I would have expected." Her eyes find mine. "Until next time, my lady."

The woman bows, and then her entire being shrinks until she stands no higher than my kneecap. She disappears through the tiny door in the corner and it's not until I go to put my hands on my hips that I realize what happened.

Gone are the white satin pajamas every suburban mother in the human world likely owns, and in its place ... a faded Daragan State Hockey T-shirt.

A choked sob escapes me, and I fall to my knees where I stand, clenching the T-shirt with my fists. Tears fall from my eyes, and I don't bother trying to fight them.

I drop back on the ugly carpet and close my eyes, clutching the old cotton and wishing it was my best friend's hand, not his old practice shirt that probably isn't even real.

As I stare down at it a little longer, something in my chest stirs, a fogginess falls over my vision and energy zips through my fingers.

My vision clears, and suddenly it's not Ben's old T-shirt I'm wearing, but a large jersey instead, only this one isn't Daragan State. It's Rathe U and printed across the back as I peek over my shoulder is the last name Deveraux.

This is Knight's jersey.

Guilt like never before falls over me, weighing me down until I can't breathe. Until I'm certain, I'll suffocate from it.

Why is my subconscious always consumed with thoughts of him? I tear the jersey off, but can't bring myself to toss it, so I stuff it beneath the pillow and tug on the satin robe my maiden set at the foot of the bed.

I fucked him. I let him touch me with the same hands that murdered the most important person in my life. I'm a fucking disgrace. A complete mess.

Or a disaster really.

And I'm breaking.

"I miss you, Ben."

So.

Fucking.

Much.

Thirteen



K night

HER HEART STOPPED BEATING. I KILLED HER WITH MY HANDS,
and she was reborn as she was intended.

As mine.

Her skin a flawless shade of pale, her cheeks a natural pink. Her snowy hair somehow whiter, as if frostbitten by the deepest depths of winter, it shines beneath the dusts of nebula above, tempting me to take it with my fist. To wrap it tight and lift her where she lies. To crawl over her, and pry her pouty, pillowed lips apart and slip my cock between them.

I could.

It'd ruined her.

A fucking traitor to the Royal Court, that's what I thought her to be, but I was wrong.

So fucking wrong.

This girl, she holds a part of me deep inside her. If I knew where she kept it hidden, I might just tear her open and take it

back, but I'm no fool. I know that's not how this works just as I know what happens next.

It's already happening. I feel it, deep in the center of my chest where they say the bond is created. It's no longer a hollow ache searching for something it cannot find. It's found her.

It wants her.

I want her.

I grit my teeth, denying the thoughts I can't control.

The hollow heart that showed itself the moment she was within reach back on Earth, is full now, but there's a hole that shouldn't exist. It leaks like black tar, burning its way through my veins with each dying star above.

She must feel it too.

The strain on her gift, the chains wrapping themselves around it—punishment from the fates for denying the gift it gave me—not that she even knows what her gift feels like.

But I will win the war against my mind, even if the reasons are now different than they were an hour ago.

I will give up the little doll, whose perfection I'm teased with.

I can't keep you, little London.

My fingers twitch to touch what's mine the moment I think it, so I call on the winds above, gliding it along her cheek.

Her lips curve in her sleep and I have to look away.

Just hours ago, I had her wrapped around my cock. Now, it feels different. Like a goodbye.

I bring the lip of the bottle to my mouth, unable to take my eyes off her silk skin. Her leg is propped out of her sheets, in direct line of the heavy moonlight breaking through the starlight glass above. This isn't what I wanted, but I know I'm backed into a corner with no fucking choice.

Placing the now empty bottle of Scotch on the table beside me, I stand to my full height. I can still smell her all around me, her stench clinging to me like it belongs there. Because it does. Everything about London belongs to me, even her anger and wrath. I'd wrap that shit in my arms and let her implode against my touch. Fuck, but I hated her.

But I hated even more that I didn't hate her at all.

Hissing, I grind my teeth and close the distance between us until her bed hits my shins. Leaning forward, I move her blonde hair away from her cheek and stiffen when she rolls to her back, her silk robe parting and exposing her flawless flesh. Two perfectly pink nipples stare back at me, her toned belly tensing when she widens her legs.

"Fuck..." I growl, lightly running the tip of my finger over the inside of her exposed thigh. It's not heat that crawls through my entire body at the simple touch, it's ice.

Like frost being sprinkled through my blood. *I need her.* But I can't have her. I don't deserve her, and she doesn't want me.

She would never want me.

"You make a habit of watching me while I sleep?" she whispers sleepily, but her body doesn't move.

"Sometimes. Other times I come in your mouth and you don't even know it."

She has no smart remark, just stares, a sadness I can't stand in her eyes. "Knight?"

I lower myself down onto the edge of the bed, trying hard to refocus on the lone tub that's sitting in the middle of the room. Only I start to imagine London in that tub naked and all the different ways I could fuck her in and around it.

I clear my throat.

"I don't want to hate you, but I do." Her words bring me back to the present. London is a hard woman, and she doesn't soften her edges for anyone. I loved that about her. She'd take whatever she fucking wanted and didn't give a fuck what that looked like to anyone. I would say narcissistic if she didn't have so many admirable traits that pushed against the term.

She must roll to the side because the bed moves beneath me.

"I'm going to hate you forever, Knight. I know me." Her voice drowned with sleep.

I have to fight with myself to not look at her to see if she's even really awake. I know this, but knowing and listening to the words as they leave her lips is very fucking different.

"I'm never going to forgive you and I'm going to make your life miserable." The final word is a ghost of syllables on her mouth, and when I turn to finally look at her, I'm surprised to see her eyes weak on mine. "So, for right now, can you just lie with me."

It's like a punch to the gut, only the fist is holding C4 and it explodes inside of me.

Kicking off my shoes, I slide beneath the covers, holding my breath when she moves over for me. Her energy gentle

when she lowers her head on my chest, and I finally release the breath I was holding in. The first in fucking weeks.

London and I have been many of things, but gentle toward one another is not one of them. I squeeze my eyes closed as images flash inside my head from earlier. The *truth* running through my mind like a reminder of how fucking stupid I've been. How blind. *Tricked*.

She lifts her leg on top of mine and I slightly part my legs to give her more access. Silence beats between us, her heart thudding against my ribcage. I turn slightly, just as she curves her head to look up at me. I catch her lips with mine. Fire erupts deep in my chest and my hand finds her hair, fisting it against her scalp. She moans softly as I gently lift her. She straddles my waist without breaking the kiss, her tongue diving into my mouth and caressing mine. I shift my hands higher up her thighs, moving her silk gown until my hands land on her ass.

Catching her lip with my teeth, she shuffles forward, her hand coming between us. Reaching into my pants, she takes out my dick and slowly directs it against her entrance. I groan slightly when she lowers her little body over my shaft, the slickness of her walls squeezing my girth. Reaching up her long, slender back, I pull her down and wrap both arms around her, deepening the kiss. She leaves whispers of her whimpers over my lips, and they're the kind I want to fucking tattoo there. Grinding against me, our bodies slap together between a sheen of sweat as I squeeze her ass tightly, my breathing picking up.

Resting her forehead on mine, her lips hover slightly. "Knight, I—"

“—shut up.” My hand comes to the back of her neck, and I force her back down to meet mine. “Don’t.”

Her mouth moves from mine and settles into the side of my neck. A sharp sting erupts over my skin when her teeth pierce the side of my throat before she presses me flat on the bed. I growl softly in protest until the valleys of her massive tits are right there in my face. Leaning up, I take one into my mouth, flicking the tiny bud around my tongue until I have to fight the urge not to bite it. Her hips pick up pace as she rubs herself over me, circling her pussy against my throbbing cock. My balls tighten and my toes curl as I feel myself slowly start to lose control. Electricity bites all over my skin and I shove her back down again until her fat tits are pressed against my chest and her mouth is back on mine. Her tongue moves with mine slowly, baiting her body until it picks up speed once again and her mouth follows the cue. Slamming my eyes closed, my demon rears to the surface with the temperature of her body so close to mine.

Mate.

Mine.

Ours.

Her wet cunt clenches tight around me and the restraint I was holding back crushes my airways. Her body jerks against mine as hot cum shoots out of my cock. I slam her over me even further and she lets out a throaty scream. I swallow her pain, massaging the back of her head as she slows her pace. She collapses over my chest, her little heart fluttering against mine as I stare up at the ceiling above.

She yawns, resting her cheek on my chest. I wait until her breathing levels out before I press a gentle kiss to her head and whisper, “*Dormi nunc, donec suus ‘super.’*”

Fourteen



L ondon

DARAGAN ISN'T SMALL, BUT IT ISN'T LARGE EITHER. IT somehow sits right in the middle. The township is quiet, yet modern, especially with all of the buildings they always seem to be renovating along the roads. Joey's sticks out at the end of the street. It's a large building that curves around the corner, right at a busy set of traffic lights. The streets are extra crowded this morning, and the air a little colder than usual.

I zip up my jacket and follow Justice as he enters the diner. Heat crashes into me as soon as the door opens. Dammit. It's always hot in here. The place is forever full, and the cooks are always busy. I would go as far as to say that Joey's is in the heart of Daragan.

Justice leads the way to our usual spot and I slide into a booth, sitting comfortably at the edge of the red leather seat, shuffling out of my coat.

"So, what do you think?"

Unzipping my pocket, I pull out my phone and ChapStick.
"Hmmm?"

“You weren’t even listening, were you?” he sulks, his bottom lip drooping.

Girls are a sucker for that bottom lip. I don’t suck on anything unless it’s over six foot and has a red flag hovering over their head.

I wasn’t listening, though. “No...”

He rolls his eyes. “I was asking you if you guys have any plans this weekend?”

I love that he says, “you guys,” already aware Ben and I are a duo that’s not to be fucked with. Letty comes sometimes, but for the most part, she’s the smart one. Sticks her head down and does her work. Where Ben goes, I go, and where I go, he better fucking come too. Call it codependency... because it is.

“Why?” I ask, picking up the menu and scanning through, even though I already know what I’m going to order.

“There’s a party happening—”

“Jus, no offense, but after the last party you took me to, I don’t know if I’m up for it.” I squash the memories of the massive rager Justice dragged us all to a month ago. I tried to blame it on his school friends, since he doesn’t go to the same college as us, but I couldn’t. Straight up, Justice is just trouble, and you put him and Ben together and it’s a catastrophe.

“Aw, come on! If that threesome would have happened, it would have been fun. At least for you, since I know Ben doesn’t swing his big dick this way.”

“Justice...” I tsk, shaking my head just as a waiter comes to our table with her little iPad. “I can’t take you anywhere.” I’m about to yap off what I want when I feel a wave of heat whip past my face. Like being kissed by a furnace, I swear I

can feel warmth penetrate my skin much closer than I've ever felt.

In the background, I hear the doorbell sound as heavy footsteps pile in, but I tuck my long platinum hair behind my ear and flash the waiter a smile. "Could I get the cheeseburger, please?"

"Girl..." Justice snatches the menu off me. "You always get that."

The waiter leaves just as Justice sighs, running his hands through his hair. "Look, it's—I'm throwing the party. But one, you can't tell my moms, and two, you seriously can't tell my moms."

I stop drinking my water. "You're in so much trouble."

"Just tell me you'll be there."

"Fine!" I widen my eyes at him, smiling. "I'll be there." Movement catches my attention from behind him and I look to see what it is.

My stomach falls to my feet when I'm met with those sharp blue eyes I've been thinking about. He's with a group of other guys. Whatever Justice is yapping about now turns into white noise because holy shit.

Why the fuck do I keep seeing him everywhere now? He looks different today. His hair looks scruffier, but somehow it only makes him more sexy. Rough around the edges. Like a jagged blade one would yield as a weapon. I look around the guys he's with, and my cheeks flush when I realize how attractive they all are. Jesus. What the fuck? They all have darker hair except one, and I would probably go as far as to say that they could all be brothers.

That one, though. I'd bet he uses his dick like a weapon, serving up a raw, rugged ride. My favorite kind.

He rolls his bottom lip into his mouth quickly before his tongue slides over the base and I greedily wait for more.

“Good!” Justice hits my leg with his before shifting over his shoulder to see what I'm looking at. “Oh god, Lon. Look, I'll fuck you, okay? You can stop being so desperate. Ick,” he jokes, flicking his fingers out at me.

“You're such an idiot.” I shake my head as the waiter places our plates down on the table. They're anything but ick. Clearly, Jus has his beer goggles on already. “So, this party...” I try to distract him. “Are you expecting hella people? And how do you actually propose you're going to get away with this? Literally your whole street is friends with your moms.”

“I know.” He finishes squeezing ketchup onto his plate before sliding it over to me. “Which is why we're not having it at my house. We're having it somewhere else.”

I've known Justice for about a year now, but we didn't actually hang out together until I started working at his parents' shop—my short visits here last year were fully dedicated to spending time with Ben. Jus isn't as close in our friend group, but I'm one hundred percent sure that's because he doesn't go to our school. His is across the bridge and on the other side of the city. Why he refuses to attend ours is simple. It's the lesser school. Although... I've not seen much of this school myself, but I haven't been here long, so that's no surprise.

“Where?”

He shrugs off my question. “At a friend's.” His phone starts ringing in his pocket, and he reaches inside, his face

paling. “I’ve got to get this. Give me a second?”

I watch as he shuffles out of his seat and moves toward the other side of the diner. His back is turned to me so I can’t make out what he’s saying, which is annoying. I need the distraction. Anything to keep me from perving on the guys opposite us.

I slip out from the booth and make my way to the bathroom. There is no way my eyes won’t stray. It’s like my body is refusing to listen to my command to ignore the hot boys and it wants—no—needs to do the opposite. I swear my muscles strain as if I’m forcing them to move, just to keep my neck from turning and feet from carrying me in their direction.

I literally rolled so hard on Molly, I imagined one of them watching me while he got his dick, that I’m sure is divine, sucked in a floating fuckin’ house.

My hormones need to chill the fuck out.

The small hallway leading to the ladies’ room is empty when I reach it, the lighting too dim for a restaurant in my opinion. I’m about to press on the door to enter when an arm is on mine, turning me around and forcing me up against a wall.

“What the fuck!” I try to whack the hand away, but a palm is pressed tight over my mouth to shut me up and I’m staring into a pair of angry blue eyes. The intensity of them resembles more of a turquoise color than anything else, like the shade of swirling waves off the coast of a tropical island, dark and light at the same time. And right now, they’re a raging fucking tsunami and I’m the land it yearns to destroy.

He tilts his head to the side, his hand sliding down just enough to free my lips. This guy is pissing me off. Is he

stalking me? “What’s your name?”

I shove him off me again, ignoring the way my heart thrashes around in my chest the second my fingers brush against the bare skin of his arms. “This how you ask every girl her name?”

My words are strong, but on the inside, I’m freaking the fuck out.

I’ve always wondered if I’d come across another Gifted during all my time here in the human world, but I could never say for sure. But this guy, *these* guys...

They are not human, I know it.

It’s in the way energy sparks from his skin pressed to mine. It’s not overwhelming, almost like he’s holding himself back, but it’s there, like kindling at the first strike of a match.

I force the panic away, focusing instead on my anger at being played like a toy.

The corner of his mouth curves upward slightly as if my rage amuses him. “Not usually, no. Answer the question.”

“I’d rather not.”

He brings his hand back to the base of my throat, moving me gently up against the wall once more. I think I feel a slight tremble in his touch, but his tone makes me question my senses because it’s calm and controlled. “Huh. Funny how you didn’t play this hard to get with a tongue down your throat.”

“Fuck you.” I go to walk away from him, but he blocks my path.

My eyes flick over his shoulder, which is hard to do since he’s literally a foot and some taller than me, towering and caging in my small frame like a beast would his next meal. His

posse stands behind him, two with dark hair and unnaturally pale skin like his, and one with the oddest shade of silver I've ever seen. They almost feel unnatural. Their energy is unreadable.

My eyes catch on the broody looking one to his left for a moment. When he shifts closer, his darker blue eyes narrow accusingly, and a look of frustration draws his features tight the longer he stares into mine. When his lip curls cruelly, I cave, bringing my attention back to the guy before me.

“What is it?” I pop a brow. “You guys want to gloat? Maybe rub it in that I, the female, was the desperate one? I was drunk, and if you want to get real here, the kiss was purely a game piece that I needed to get someone off my back.”

“Yeah, because that was it...” he answers blandly. “What’s your name?”

A scoffed laugh leaves me, but when his glare only sharpens, I clear my throat, and this time, when I try to shoulder past him, he lets me.

A little more rattled than I'd like to admit, I grab my phone and wallet, heading out the front door to wait for Justice. Fuck those guys. No matter how hot he is...

No matter how hot they all are.

The doors open again, and I stand up straighter, expecting to see them walk out, but Justice is running his hand through his hair, the wrinkle lines between his eyes deep. “I’ve gotta go back to work. I’ll walk you back to campus if you want?”

“I can walk, Jus. Everything okay?”

He stays on his phone, the worry lines getting deeper. “Not really. Hey!” He shoves it into his pocket, his demeanor

changing. Bringing me in closer, he presses his lips to my forehead. “I’ll call you, okay?”

“Sure!” I watch as he walks the opposite way, running across the road and looking over his shoulder every two seconds.

As if someone was chasing him.

Or stalking him...

Starved since we didn’t get to eat after all, I drag my cranky ass back to campus.

When I get home, I kick the front door closed, unbutton my jacket, and toss it onto the small table in the lounge when a small envelope falls out. Our room is one of the smaller ones offered here on campus, but it was the only one available in the coed dorms. We weren’t about to complain. There was no way in hell Ben and I would be separated again, even if it was only by a few hundred feet or so. We’re all each other has.

I lean down and pick up the envelope, tossing it onto the table and kicking off my shoes. I fall down onto the sofa, resting my head against the edge when my phone starts blaring in my pocket. I swipe to answer it when I see Ben’s name flash over the screen and the first selfie we took with each other. His pierced tongue is out, his dimples sinking into each side of his cheeks, and his honey brown eyes glistening with mischief.

“Yes?”

“Did Justice tell you about his party?”

“He did.” I stand, making my way to my bedroom to gather everything for a shower. Fatigue has long since poisoned my muscles, and as every second passes, I feel myself fading. Damn. “Are we going?”

“Definitely.” That’s code for he has found someone to get with while he’s there.

“Mmmm. And what’s her name?” I ask, picking up my belongings and making my way out our door to the showers. We could have lived off campus, but neither of us could really afford it right now, which is another reason we settled for a two-bedroom dorm. It’s nice enough to call home.

“Ahhh, you will have to wait until the weekend because she’s coming with us.”

I drop my shit on the counter and shuffle out of my clothes. “Fine. Are you finished? I need to shower.”

“No! What do you want for dinner? That’s why I called. It’s my turn to cook, but I can’t be fucked.”

“Anything. I’m not that hungry tonight. More tired.”

“Oh?” he asks, and I know I’m not getting rid of him anytime soon, so I switch ears and make my way to the showers.

“It’s no big... it’s just—” Do I tell him? My best friend who can read me like the fucking alphabet? He’s going to see my lies all over my face when he digs, so maybe I can give him a ploy for now. I don’t think I’m ready to admit that a certain someone is occupying all my damn time. “—nothing. I’m due for my period, so I’m being extra sensitive.”

“Oh!” He brushes me off. “Need some tampons or some shit?”

“Ben...”

“Maybe some ice cream?”

My Ben, always trying to take care of me.

My smile softens. “Okay, I’m leaving you now.”

“I know, vodka and ice—” I hang up on him, chuckling while tossing my phone onto the counter with my clothes. I rush through the shower, scrubbing up in half the time before stepping out and into my shower slippers. I scroll through Instagram on my way back, flipping through Ben’s story. He’s a ho. A different girl every week will have his attention, but does he ever talk about them with me? No. So who is this one and what makes her different? Maybe he’ll finally settle down. God can only hope.

Kicking the door closed, I toss all of my things into my room and shuffle into one of Ben’s oversized shirts I’ve officially claimed as my own that stops above my knees and some knitted socks. Ben won’t be back for another hour, so I grab my laptop and open up my assignment.

School sucks. I’m here because I’m doing what every other person does at my age, but there’s a lingering ache that continues to pound deep in my gut anytime I think about the future. I can never see it. I’ve tried, but all I see is nothing.

Flipping my laptop closed with a harsh clap, I sigh, throwing myself back on the bed. My head turns and I look to the door and before I can talk myself out of it, I jump to my feet and rush out into the kitchen area.

I bite my lip as I stare down at the envelope.

Uncle Marcus isn’t here to talk me out of opening it this time and I mean it *has* been a year since one has shown up. I always wondered if I’d be like other Gifted and get my ‘invitation’ to attend Rathe U, the school for the Gifted here in Daragan. The school Justice goes to, and if I had my guess, those guys from the diner this morning. Not that I could accept it if I had, and if I had ... I wasn’t made aware of it.

As far as I knew, my living in this town was a secret, just like my existence is supposed to be. My uncle tried his best to get me to stay back home, but he knew it was a losing battle the moment Ben decided to go to school here. It's almost like it was ... fate. My best friend and the only person I can't live without choosing the one school that would bring me closer to my past. To the me I was supposed to be instead of the one I pretend I am.

A basic human girl without a clue to the magic that walks these worlds, but I do know of the darkness that hides out there.

It lives inside me, flows through the very blood that fills my veins.

I open the fucking letter.

My eyes scan the header, and staring back at me in large bold ink, the letter R pops from the paper, lighting, a shadow forming and twisting around it.

The letters R A T H E slowly forming until the name of the realm I was born to stares back at me.

Rathe. My home.

A hint of sorrow for the life I lost washes over me, but I push it away and read what they have to say.

“Dear, London Crow,

The King is dead.”

“Oh shit...” I break, wondering if that should make me feel sad or not, but it doesn't. I continue. “And a new King is on the horizon. By strike of daylight, we wish for you to join us here at the Faelific Fortress in Rathe where a courtship for his hand is underway. Your future King seeks his Queen, so

accept this invitation, and join us. *Accept* this offer and come home once and for all.”

My lips clamp together and a chortled laugh bubbles up before it breaks free.

Smiling, I shake my head, staring at the page as if it's grown horns, and honestly? It could.

“Go home,” I muse. “Are they fucking crazy?”

I heard all the stories.

My dad? He was a fucking cold-hearted murderer; I'm talking a hundred times the men who haunt the humans' nightmares. My dad was a literal one.

No joke, he's in the fucking Book of Nightmares. I'd be slaughtered on sight if they learned whose bastard child I am. It's the very reason my uncle hid me away all these years.

Clearly, not well enough.

That's probably my fault though. I'm the one who insists on learning magic even though I can't use it. It's just the basics I was already being taught in grade school before we had to flee—levitation, mind protection, and persuasion ... plus or minus a few I snuck along the way. I'm sure the Gifted have a way to track power found outside of Rathe. I probably lead them right to me even if I never did tap into the principal power my parents' blood passed down to me.

But the letter is addressed to “London” so maybe they don't know who I am, just that I'm like them?

Still ... me? The Queen of Darkness?

“Yeah, fucking right.” I reach across the counter, leaning on it as I bite into an apple with a grin, staring at the paper

below me. “They really expect me to, what? Say ‘*I accept this offer*’ and just—”

My voice cuts off as a dark cloud appears before me.

I jolt back, the apple falling to the floor as a whirling fucking vortex appears, pinks and blues and purples spinning and spinning until a portal appears. I haven’t seen one in so long, I almost forgot what they looked like. But this one? It’s different. It pops and cracks and all the fear, the warnings my uncle drilled into me over the years about the importance of avoiding all things magic at all cost bubble to the surface.

“Fuck!” I shout, slamming my eyes closed. My hands come up to cover them and I shake my head. Maybe it will disappear.

It takes a few moments, a door slams, and I jolt, whipping my head to the side.

A small lady appears through a tiny door I’ve never seen before, her length growing as she gets closer.

She smiles, then frowns. “Good morning, my lady? Everything okay?”

I look around, and panic flares. I’m no longer standing in my dorm at Daragan.

I’m in a bed, tucked beneath silk blankets in a room of black glittery walls with the fucking galaxy spinning above me.

They really expect me to, what? Say “I accept this offer”

...

I slam my hands over my eyes and throw myself back in the bed, cursing the idiot I am.

Fucking magic!

Fifteen



L ondon

THE WOMAN STARES AT ME STRANGELY, BUT THEN HER EYES shift and she looks around the space as if seeing it for the first time. “Huh,” she quips, coming back to me as a bright smile pulls across her lips. “Well, that was settled quite fast, wasn’t it? Welcome to the dark side, my lady. Lord Deveraux will be pleased when he hears of this.”

Cautiously, I crawl from the softest sheets I’ve ever fucking felt and stand, wobbling a little as I do, the effect of the portal clearly still making me unstable. Confused as shit, more so by the fact that this woman is acting like she knows me, I tread carefully. “Uh-huh.” I take note of what must be the exit door, considering the one she came through is so tiny I’d be blocked at the shoulders if I even attempted to climb through. “And what exactly do you think it is ... *Lord Deveraux* will be pleased about?”

The name feels weird on my tongue, and a strange heat blooms behind my ribs. I’ve known the Royal Family’s last name for as long as I can remember, but I haven’t thought of them in, well, ever that I can think of.

Rather than answering, the woman giggles to herself, shaking her head as if what I've asked was funny, and shit maybe it was. Women around here probably know what Lord Deveraux piss smells like, they're likely that obsessed.

“Okay, my lady.” She begins, throwing the closet doors open and revealing a massive number of gowns and clothing options on the other side. “Breakfast in the Gnome Gardens doesn't require formal attire, but keep in mind your one-on-one with Lord Deveraux will follow later in the day and there will not be time for a wardrobe change, and seeing you won't know how to use your magic, you may want to consider that when choosing an option for the day.”

Okay, so they think I was just thrown to the wolves the last eleven years. And technically, I have been... but I'm also a girl, and the literal best part of being Gifted when I have to hide it, has been the perks that come with magic. One of the first things I taught myself was how to Cinderella my ass. I've been my very own fairy godmother ever since.

But maybe I should hide that little fact since technically, you're not allowed to practice magic if you haven't passed defensive magic teachings given in first year, according to my uncle anyway. I vaguely remember being in school here, but I don't remember all the rules and mumbo jumbo that went with it.

“Come, I'll prepare your bath.” She spins, her short, choppy pixie cut flaring as she does.

Unsure why, I follow behind, hoping I'm not walking myself to my own execution.

We step into the large open bathroom and my mouth drops at the luxury of it all.

Its black marble and crystals, and can only be described as a woman's wet dream.

The bath is already full by the time I look into it and I frown at the massive spa-like tub. Surely this isn't used water, right? The leftovers from whoever the hell might have stayed in this room before me.

But then the woman holds her hands over it, and within an instant, steam rises, bubbles fluff, and the soft scent of lavender fills my nose.

"There." She smiles, turning to me. "That should be just how you like it."

It dawns on me then, and a smile stretches across my lips.

The moment it does, the woman looks startled. She takes a step back, but halts when I nearly shout, "You're Fae!"

Her frown is instant, her mouth opening as if to say something, but then a sharp knock has her lips clamping shut. "Yes, my lady. I am. Angela," she says, nodding her head. "Bathe. I'll get the door. You must be ready before the clouds in the sky clear."

She scurries out of the room, and I stare after her a moment.

After the what?

I look up, and sure enough, a bruised purple sky hovers above, the clouds slowly drifting from the center, so I do the only thing I can think of, while wondering if I'm about to wake up from a weird ass dream, knowing I'm not. I'm in Rathe.

I get in the fucking bath.

BREAKFAST IN THE GNOME GARDENS.

The lady in my room, Angela, had said that, so I'm not sure what I expected, but this is ... not it. Why, I don't know, because it's literally exactly that.

Breakfast.

With gnomes.

In a garden.

A garden with sprouting stems and blooming flowers, with small clouds of rain hovering over tiny dirt patches, and floral walls killing and creating new colored Morning Glories like an LED light strip set on fade mode.

And again ... real fucking gnomes!

They're taller than I would have guessed, most standing to my hips, and wearing the same small scowls across their faces. Their hands are gloved as they carry trays of what I'm guessing is food, to the long, C-shaped table curving the edge of a giant ivory wall.

If I had to guess, I would say this breakfast is going to be buffet style, which seems odd considering I'm ninety-nine percent sure this is the courtship the letter spoke of.

I mean, what else would it be? I wasn't transported here randomly.

Or I was, but nobody came to the room I woke up in to give me a breakdown of what to expect here. I was given no

rules on how to act or how to address the future King and his family.

Am I supposed to bow? Give a little curtsy, maybe?

I snort at the thought.

No, that has to be way too human for these people.

Shit, for all I know I'm supposed to offer my neck for him to sink his teeth into as a gift, like some twisted version of Sleeping Beauty.

Glancing around, a small smile pulls at my lips. The gnomes could play the part of the Seven Dwarfs. Wait, no that's the wrong fairy tale. It's with that thought that a loud boom sounds. It's crisp, as sharp as thunder perfectly timed as if to remind me this isn't a place of fairy tales. It's the birthplace of the dark King. Rathe, I mean. Not...what did the letter call it?

Faelific Fortress.

OMG, duh, that woman was Fae!

The thunderous sound rumbles once more and just across the gardens, where the fluorescent green shrubs are nestled between thick stumps of marshmallow-colored mushrooms, a portal appears.

Suddenly my heart starts to pound within my chest. My fingers go clammy around the glass of glittery shit a male gnome shoved into my hand the moment I entered—it's bubbly, but it's not any champagne I've ever tasted, an' I've tasted them all.

I stare at the center of the gateway, waiting for the Royal Family, assuming that's who it's going to be, to step through

and just as a sheet of blackness appears beyond the opal rings, a snarky voice pipes up at my side.

“I spent way too long wondering why in Merlin’s name he would want you here, and in the end came up with nothing.”

Just like that, the bitch gets my full attention.

I spin in my boots, or the ones that I took out of the closet anyway, and face the chick at my side.

“You must be Regina George.”

The girl’s head yanks back as she stares at me like I’ve grown a second one.

The poor Gifted will never know the greatness that is *Mean Girls*.

“Sure, pretend you don’t know my name or what I look like naked and on top of your best friend.” Her eyes gleam with something I could only guess as pride. “Or should I say old best friend, you know, since he’s nothing but dust.”

I smash my lips to one side, nodding at the girl because one ... what is she talking about, and two... *what the fuck is she talking about?* The who is obvious, being I only have one best friend but... “So, you fucked Ben?” I ask, looking her over. It could happen. We’re at Daragan State and she could be a student at Rathe U.

We cross paths all the time ... not that the humans have any idea they’re anything but a group of rich kids at a private university.

“Yes,” she spits, seemingly growing angrier by the second.

“Okaaay, I’m guessing he didn’t call afterward as in ... duff, dust?” A small laugh leaves me, and I shrug my shoulder.

Atta boy, Ben. “You want me to apologize for him or something because I can, but it’s not going to get him back in your bed.”

Her eyes narrow further and her hand shoots out to grip me, but before she can, a larger one locks around her wrist. Her gaze snaps up and she lets out a little girl cry that has the owner of the hand chuckling near my ear.

It’s a sexy sound, and I turn my head just as he steps up beside me.

“Let go of me,” she demands.

“Nice to see you too, Alex.” Slowly, he releases her, lifting an expectant brow.

“Ugh.” She rolls her eyes. “Why am I even wasting time over here?”

“I don’t know, why are you?” This time it’s me who cocks my head.

“Bitch,” she hisses, shoving past me, and both me and the guy at my side chuckle.

Pushing back one of the loose strands of hair I left down from my high ponytail, I smile at the blond.

He’s tall, but everyone is compared to me and my five-foot.

“Thanks, pretty sure she was going to melt me or something.”

He chuckles again, shifting so he’s facing me full on and I bite at the inside of my cheek.

“More like suck out your soul.” He nods, grinning when my eyes go wide. “She’s a power bank.”

Power bank, I read about them. They feed off the energy of others to boost their powers because they don't have enough strength on their own.

“Right, yeah.” I nod, bringing my drink to my lips and finishing off the liquid.

The same male gnome appears the second I move it from my lips, frowning and shoving a new, full glass into my hand.

“Thank—” And he's gone.

Another sexy laugh.

I face the guy once more, his green eyes bright against his fair skin and even though his light hair is combed a little too perfect to a side swipe, his eyes are framed with thick, dark lashes. “I'm London.”

I hold my hand out and he smirks down at it, slowly lifting his and taking it, and for a moment I wonder if handshakes are, yet another human trait not used in this world. But then he takes it in his, only instead of tucking his palm into mine for a firm grip, he gingerly wraps his long fingers around my own.

“I'm Zeke,” he shares, slowly lifting my hand to his lips.

I fight a smile, waiting to see what his thick lips will feel like against my skin, but before they can touch me, something presses against my back, and I'm jolted forward.

Zeke releases me in a flash, his hands coming out to catch me as I'm about to fall into him, but I don't. Two arms wrap around my waist, yanking me backward so hard the air is knocked from my lungs. I gasp.

In the same second, two men with wide, strong backs appear in front of me, their hair as black as their suits as they stare down my new friend Zeke.

“He was just rescuing me from Bitch Barbie. No need for whatever... this is.”

One of the hands on my waist comes up clamping around my mouth, and then warm lips are pressed to my ear. “Shut the fuck up, Little London.”

My spine goes straight, the voice rattling something in my bones but it might just be because I didn't have to tell whoever it is my name, he already knows it. Well, my fake name technically, so not a huge concern.

Right?

“Yeah, you heard her.” Zeke peeks through the space between their shoulders, and the pair shift in unison. “I was simply helping her... Knight.”

A small laugh bubbles up and the hand over my mouth clamps harder.

“Watch it, trouble,” he whispers. “You really want him to tear the heart out of someone else so soon? And the son of the headmistress?”

A frown builds over my brow, and I stiffen when the person chuckles.

“Actually, he'd probably love an excuse to do just that.”

Who is *he* and who the fuck is ... well, he.

I don't know, but I'm done with being manhandled like a doll.

I bring my hands up, sliding them along the muscles beneath the suit around me, and what do you know, the man softens a bit. Just enough for me to guide them higher, until I find the skin of his wrists.

I sink my nails into them, digging until they break through.

He hisses in my ear, tossing me away, and I chuckle, spinning.

The moment our eyes meet, I gasp, glaring a moment later.

“You!” I grit, reaching forward and shoving him hard in the chest. He doesn’t move, not even an inch.

Instead, he steps forward, causing me to take a step back, but I slam into a wall.

Scratch that. Two walls.

“Me.” He grins, lifting his arm and licking the blood marks clean. I don’t know why, but my eyes follow the action, flicking back up to his when he tucks his tongue back in his mouth.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I glare. “Did you follow—”

I cut my words off, dread spilling down my spine in hot tickles.

Oh my shit, are they the ones who figured out I was a Gifted girl pretending to be Giftless?

Did they sense my power or something and show up at that diner specifically to look for me?

Are they like the Gifted version of bounty hunters?

A hand grips my shoulder and I’m spun around, coming face-to-face with another pair of blue eyes, these ones belonging to the silent angry one from yesterday.

“What—” I begin, but my question dies in my throat when I look to the person at his left.

My mouth drops open at the inconceivably attractive asshole smirking beside him. He’s the identical version of the one who pinned me against the wall yesterday... only there is a clear distinction between the two. Even if I don’t know what it is.

“You ... son of a bitch.”

“Accurate.” He chuckles darkly, running his tongue over his teeth. “But you might not want to let her hear that.”

“I kissed you!”

His eyes narrow slightly, and he looks to the one at his side, who hasn’t stopped staring at me, glare hardening by the second.

“I kissed you and you guys tried to make me think I kissed the other one!”

“...the fuck,” he mutters, pretty sure by accident. He takes a half-step forward, eyes flying between mine. “London?”

The big, playful whisperer who had his arms wrapped around from behind comes to stand at their side.

All three stupid gorgeous men stare at me intently. The smirks, anger, annoyance, and even the teasing, long fucking gone. They’re blank slates, void of any inkling that could have possibly clued me in to what they could be thinking.

The sound of breaking glass and loud shrieks of a female break through our ball of silence, and we all turn around.

Alex, as Zeke called her, laughs maniacally as she stares down at a bleak looking girl with soft pink hair curled in a ball at her feet, blood seeping from her ears.

I jolt forward, unsure of what to do but sick of this bitch already. Before I can get close, I'm yanked backward, and this time when I try to break free, I can't. Held against my will like a fucking hex locked around my body. My feet heavily rooted in place.

Panic surges within me, making my pulse beat harder against my chest. A woman with long, dark hair and a giant glistening crown appears around the corner, milky white tethers seeping from her palms, twisting and wrapping around Alex.

Alex's eyes fill with tears, but she doesn't struggle.

I would smirk if I could move my lips.

Serves the bitch right.

I wait for the Queen—because holy shit that is the fucking Queen! —to read her the riot act.

“Now, now, Ms. Kova.” Her voice is silken and dark. “Don't start the fun and games without your future King here to see it. You know how much he loves them.”

In my head, I have officially dropped my mouth open because what the fuck?

What is this shit?

What the fuck did I get my dumb ass into by laughing the words 'I accept' like the fool I clearly am?

I mean I am all for the dark and desponded, but I can tell without having spoken a single word to the girl currently bleeding into the sparkling sod beneath her that she didn't do anything to deserve it.

Is that how women in Rathe roll?

My anxiety prickles, but as I shift my eyes, the only thing I can fucking move thanks to the man wrapped around me, it settles a bit.

All the women are dressed in the most ostentatious gowns. Some figure-hugging and sleek, others low-cut but long. Their hair is down in big curls and their faces soft and lips mostly ripely red for the taking. They wear heels with glitz and glitter that make their legs look impossibly long, especially compared to my fun size self.

Clearly, they all want the seat we're here to fight for. They look the part of the princess, and I mentally high five myself for going with the complete opposite of what I figured a king would want.

Thick black liner cuts the curve around my eyes, paired with heavy charcoal shadow and raven-licked lips. My hair is pulled up in a high, sleek pony, flowing straight down my spine, only keeping the two chunky face-framers out to direct the curves of my face.

My breasts are held together by a leather corset; but not the dominatrix style, just a subtle, *I don't fucking want to be your pretty little trophy* style. Tight around my stomach, and an inch above my belly button. The matching leather pants come up just beneath the dangly belly ring and are tight all the way down to the ankle. The black boots cuff around the ankle and add nothing to my height.

Movement to the left catches my attention, and I stare intently, tension suddenly whirling in my belly as the wall of ivory parts, and mother fucker!

It's him, the guy from the diner and the twin at my back. The one I have been thinking all along I kissed. The one who I

saw getting his dick sucked outside that Gifted party they didn't think I could see.

My heart shudders in my chest, beating violently and demanding I go to him. Touch him.

Mine.

What the fuck?

He's wearing a suit, tailored to perfection and his dark hair is messy, but that kind of messy where it looks perfect. Delicious. The kind you can picture staring down at when his face is buried between your legs.

Too bad he's a fucking asshole, but why does the sight of him today feel so different than it did twenty-four hours ago. There was something then, a sizzling attraction, but this is... not the same.

My lungs literally ache as if desperate to fill themselves with his scent. It makes no sense, and I don't like it. My eyes catch the bite mark on the side of his neck, and for a moment I swear I feel the familiar taste of plasma spill down my throat.

Why is he here?

Why are any of them here?

I need this brunch to be over with so they can go away, and I can get on with ...whatever the fuck I'm supposed to do here. Not sure what that is but my own personal goal?

Avoid the future King, whoever he is, like the plague and make sure he hates what he sees when I cannot.

As if reading my thoughts, and to my horror, the Queen of freaking Rathe turns, holding her hand out. "Ah, son, you have arrived."

Every inch of me goes cold. Son.

Son?!

“Where are your brothers?” she asks him, and I hardly hear it over the crackling in my ears.

When the men at my back say, “Here, Mother,” it’s as loud as an EDM nightclub.

Sons.

They are the *sons* of the Queen.

The guy who watched me from across the arena after the hockey game, who I witnessed with a girl on her knees before him, who cornered me in that diner yesterday ...

He is the future *King*.

The moment I think it, his turquoise gaze snaps up, locking with mine for the first time today, and it is *nothing* like before. It’s ... more.

A whirl of emotion gains speed in my gut, as if he’s physically forcing it into me with his own mind.

I feel them.

I feel *him*.

Like a storm beneath my skin.

Like a plague that can’t be beat.

Like a walking fucking nightmare with blue eyes and death as a soul.

He had to know I was getting that letter. That must be why he was at the diner yesterday. Normally I would tell myself I’m being paranoid, but not this time. He cornered me and now I’m here, standing fifteen feet from the future King of Rathe as

a contestant in a competition of sorts for the place at his side. He's a complete stranger to me and yet I'll be expected to fight for him.

To obey him.

Probably even to please him, because there is no way a guy like him won't want to test drive his future Queen before giving her the crown. I shiver. He has another thing coming if he thinks I'll fight for something, or someone, I don't want.

And I do *not* want this.

The good news is, I'm not the only girl here, so it shouldn't be too hard to avoid his attention. After all, I bet every Gifted girl in existence would give anything to be the one he chooses in the end. So yeah, it shouldn't be too hard to fade into the background.

As if he can read my thoughts, as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking... *Lord Deveraux's* gaze narrows, still frozen on mine and as I look to the side, I realize it's not just the future King's attention I have.

I have his brothers' too.

Sixteen



Knight

“EXPLAIN. NOW.” CREED WASTES NO TIME, SNAPPING THE moment he throws up a barrier spell, closing off my brothers and me at the edge of the garden.

“Watch yourself, brother,” I warn. I’ve been tested too many times in the space of forty-eight hours. I’m almost tapped out.

“Fuck you,” he seethes. “What did you do, Knight? She was unreadable!” His eyes widen and he shakes his head, but he says nothing.

“He did what they did.” Legend looks to me, not needing Creed to explain what he saw when he looked into her head this time, because he had the chance to look her in the eye himself. “He stole a part of her for his own selfish reason—”

“I didn’t steal—”

“Yes. You fucking did. You took from her what our parents took from her, or whoever the hell left that girl alive and

tossed her to the human world like she was nothing. She's not."

"She murdered our fucking sister." Sinner speaks through clenched teeth, stepping up to Legend. "Our fucking triplet! Deveraux blood! *Your* fucking blood!"

"Actually," I shove my hands into my pockets, stepping closer to the edge of where the garden ends over the cliff face. The ocean down below crashes against sharp rocks. "She didn't."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Creed steps closer to me, and I side-eye him when I feel the heat of his body.

Creed. The hothead brother who acts on impulse, well, not usually, but did with her. Now all I want to do is crush his fucking head and bang it against a wall that has *London was fucking innocent* graffitied all over it. I turn to face all of them, bouncing between Creed and Legend. Legend, because I know deep down he thought something was off with London. He wanted to like her, and he hated that.

I should have seen that as my first sign. "You've lost the fucking plot to your mating, brother..." Creed seethes, baring his teeth. "Why should we save her? She. Murdered. Temperance."

Part of me wants to keep pushing him just to see how much I can get out of him. It's amusing how much she gets to him. Creed has a button stamped with London's name over it, and I'll probably make it my mission to flip it every now and then whenever I want.

"Knight, he's right. You're being a fuckwit." Sinner this time, and he brings his hand to my arm. I don't move, staring down at the connection. "Do I need to push your dumb ass off

this cliff for you to wake the fuck up! She *killed* our fucking sister! We need to *punish her* forever. Fuck your mating bond.”

“How much did you take from her?” Legend demands.

Anger licks down my spine, making my blood boil and I rub my finger over my lower lip. “Why do you care, little brother?”

Creed interferes, eyes narrowing. “Fuck you.”

I stay on Legend. “You worried my girl forgot all about you?” I step closer, my shoulder tightening. “That she has no recollection of your lips on hers? Your hands on her flesh under her dress?”

“I should punch you in the fucking face,” he growls, meeting my advance with his own. “You keep playing these games and things will only get worse. Keep fucking with ‘your girl’ and next time she tries to off herself she’ll be sure to find someone to help her do it so there’s no chance of saving her. We both know how easy that would be, considering she’s standing in the way of another bitch and the crown they’re after.”

“Let her die!” Sinner screams, throwing a hand out and suddenly the bubble we’re within turns a vaporous gray. Demonic smoke has come to protect us from prying eyes. “She doesn’t deserve our loyalty.”

“Man, fuck you!” Legend barks. “You’re just pissed cause you like her, and you hate everyone, and now you’re just a guy she kissed at a party thinking you were your fucking twin!”

Sinner growls, darting forward, but Creed grips him by the neck before he can snap our little brother’s.

“Enough,” he hisses. “Not here and not over her.” He says ‘her’ with more disdain than I’d have thought possible. “She’s not worth it, and soon enough, she’ll go out with the rest of the trash.”

Sinner tears from Creed’s hold looking at me, and I see it then. In my twin’s eyes is a hint of uncertainty.

His emotions have always given me whiplash.

All of this is giving me fucking whiplash.

“That girl is the rightful Queen of Rathe.” Legend frowns. “You can’t just throw her to the Monsters for what she did when she was a child. You might not want her, she might not be able to be Queen, but you have to protect her!”

“What do you think I’m doing, huh?!” I finally fucking break. “We got it all wrong.”

My chest heaves, a deep ache starting at the center of my ribs, and I press against it, about to drop to my fucking knees. All she is, is a fucking weakness.

I had caved for her. I let her in in ways I never had anyone, ways I swore I never would. It took a hard ass minute but finally, I was ready. Ready to be her mate, to claim her as mine, and wear her mark proudly. Indefinitely.

It was in the haze of the morning, my mind, still catching up to the decisions my subconscious made, so when her secrets came for all of us to hear, I reverted to the only thing I knew.

Family above all.

Blood for blood.

I let anger consume me and I did what a Deveraux is raised to do.

I took. I took without thought and without regret. I took without a fucking care.

I fucked up on a major level, shot straight to vengeance like a fucking boy, instead of demanding answers like a man.

My brothers watch me closely, but it's Sin who steps forward, tension tightening his tone, 'cause he's a perceptive motherfucker. Especially when it comes to me.

"Brother?" His brows draw in. "What do you know that we don't?"

I look to Creed, who nods, and when he tries to pry into my mind, I open it up for him. His face falls instantly, his hand latching onto Sinner's shoulder.

Sin's eyes turn white, and then the scene plays out for him and Legend to see, just as Creed is seeing it in my mind, Sin's illusion leaving no detail out.

I wince when the blade sinks into my flesh, and stumble slightly. London sucks on my mouth with the dagger still to my neck, when everything turns black.

Darkness whirls around the space, the walls cracked like the roots of the ancient tree and the ground shakes beneath our feet.

Tears swim in my wife's eyes as she lowers to the floor beside our little girl.

"What the hell happened here?" I look around, a lifetime of death and war allowing me to remove myself from the emotion of what's before me.

Temperance's eight-year-old body cold at my feet.

"You said it was getting better."

My Queen's glossy glare snaps over her shoulder, locking with mine. "That is all you have to say right now?"

"Did you lie to me?"

Her eyes flare white, and she turns back to the princess of Rathe, lifeless on the floor. She brushes her dark hair from her face and stands.

"No one can know what happened here today," Cosima demands, locking her sadness away.

My eyes narrow, waiting to hear what plan she could possibly have.

I hear her before I see her, the soft little voice echoing down the empty halls of the royal manor.

"London's bridge is falling down, falling down..."

Panicked, I throw my hand out to fling the door closed before she gets too close, but the door freezes mid-way, slowly reopening.

My eyes snap to my wife, narrowing but before I can ask what the hell she's doing, Villaina skips through the doorway, white hair bouncing behind her. "Tempy, I'm here—" her feet stop, and a piercing scream fills the air.

"Fuck." I dart forward, dropping to one knee and pulling her into my chest to hide the sight. "You should not be down here, Villaina."

She sobs, her body beginning to shake uncontrollably, and a chill covers her skin. She pulls back, big icy-blue eyes locking with mine. "What happened to Temperance, King Arturo?"

My mouth opens, but before a single word can escape, Cosima is there.

She pats Villaina's head, looking up, causing tears to spill down her pale cheeks.

The Queen smiles at the little girl, placing her palm on the back of her neck... and then she snaps it.

Her body falls lifelessly into my arms, and I look up at my wife.

She lifts her chin. Her eyes lock with mine. "End her."

"Cosima," I bark, lying Villaina's lifeless body down and shooting to my feet.

"Someone must go down for this." She lifts a shoulder. "Her father was a monster. It makes sense, Arturo. End. Her."

"You do not make the rules here, my Queen. I am the fucking King, and that girl is written in our future more than any other before her!"

"Be that as it may," she seethes, facts not something she's fond of. "If people learn the truth about what happened here today, the Ministry will use it against us. Against our sons. They have been searching for a way to overthrow us for years. This might help their case."

"I will kill them all now, today, and be done with it they dare."

"No. That will bring war."

"A war I will win," I remind her, even though she's wrong.

The council could never rage against us. We have a thousand times more Gifted on our sides than they could ever wish for.

“The girl already lies at your feet,” Cosima tries to reason. “She doesn’t breathe. She will feel... nothing. Think of your sons and do as you must, for if you do not... I will tell them all she is at fault for the fall of our beloved princess. She will die either way.”

With that, my wife lowers to the ground beside our daughter.

I could very easily override my dear wife, but that will do nothing to stop her from spreading the lies about the little girl at my feet. I could end her with no pain, spare her the death the Ministry will demand of her.

But then what of the future of Rathe?

Without another thought, I take Villaina Lacroix into my arms and leave the room.

My wife said to do as I must. To think of my sons.

That’s exactly what I’m going to fucking do.

Sinner’s eyes snap closed, and it takes a moment for him to reopen them. When he does, they’re back to blue, only this time with spiderweb cracks over his irises for a split second. Because Legend was right.

Sinner hates everyone and trusts no one, but London? He liked her even if he didn’t want to and she liked him too. She somehow understood there’s a mask he must wear and accepted the one he chose. She accepted him, even if she didn’t want to. Fate doesn’t give a fuck about your feelings. It puts people in your life for reasons that you simply cannot see right now.

“Fuck.”

Legend runs his hands through his hair, pacing as much as the small space allows. He comes to a stop in front of me, his arms hanging to his side. He opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out and he looks off.

“How much,” Sin finally asks. “How much did you erase?”

“Remember the letter we found in her room the night everything went to shit, the one warning her from Rathe?” I ask. “She got it the day we cornered her at the diner when she was out with Justice. She just never read it back then, so I toyed with her memories, taking them back to that day. I gave her knowledge of her gifts and made it seem like the letter was the invitation to the courtship. She was sleeping the entire time, the memory playing out in her head like it was real. The moment she opened her eyes this morning is the moment she thinks she was portalled here.” Pressure digs at my chest, but I ignore it. “Everything after that day at the diner is gone.”

“So, the mating bond?” Sin’s jaw ticks. “Ben?”

I say nothing. I don’t have to.

They know what day I’m talking about. It was nearly our beginning. Before I ever touched her. Before she knew she was mine ... even if she didn’t want to be. It was before everything.

“Drop the barrier,” Sin says.

Creed shakes his head, but Sinner isn’t going to allow whatever thought or excuse he has to deter him.

“Drop the fucking barrier, Creed.” Sinner smooths down his suit jacket, squaring in his shoulders and jaw, fully expecting Creed to do exactly what he’s asked.

He does. First, the fog around us clears, and the moment the barrier falls Sinner stalks forward, Legend right behind him.

Creed's expression is more unreadable than the others, his mind likely whirling as he decides what to do with that information and how he's going to take it. He stares at me a moment, before slowly turning, so I do the same, following his line of sight.

As expected, our brothers are already on their way to her.

She stands across the gardens before a giant chocolate waterfall made up of cobblestone. The young gnomes who found their way to her at her side.

They laugh and shove dessert after dessert toward her, and London smiles as she takes a small bite of each, her palm overflowing to the point she has to hold it against her body to try and keep them from falling.

The smallest of them all, dressed in a flowery pink dress and long, yellow braids, slips between her legs, spinning round and round as she holds on to another.

"They sense her power," he says, and I nod without looking away. Unable to. History and fuckery aside, there's no denying that London would make a phenomenal fucking Queen.

The young here have a way about them. They can pick up on what's on the inside, even if hers is lying temporarily dormant.

London laughs then, and the sound vibrates through my chest, forcing me to clench my teeth until I feel one crack. It'll heal, but I wish it wouldn't. I deserve to break, even if only

physically, for what I've done to her, for what I'll continue to do.

Sin and Legend reach her, crowding from behind. The young gnomes scatter just as my brothers claim the space at London's side.

They cage her in, her head whipping from one to the other, but neither speak. They just stand, staring down at her, and slowly, the corner of her mouth lifts.

Her lips part, and I don't know what she says, but both Sin and Legend give curt nods.

"What did you see?" I finally ask, keeping my eyes trained on the girl who has no fucking idea who I am to her. "When you looked in her head, what did you see?"

Creed is silent a few more moments, and it's almost too fucking much, but then his hand clamps over my shoulder.

"Chaos," he says coolly. "Pure. Fucking. Chaos."

Fuck.

London

All at once, the unconventionally adorable gnomes divide, the treats they didn't get a chance to pass my way falling to the

grass; only to disappear the moment they do. Worry whirls low in my belly as I watch them run full speed toward the budding rose bushes ahead. They don't slow down; they go straight through them little by little, their bodies growing fuzzier and fuzzier as if the flowers are no more than a portal for them to jump through.

Shit, maybe they are.

I don't have to wonder for long what scared them away, as a large shadow appears on the ground ahead of me a blink later.

I know who it is without looking. Or I have an idea and my guess is it's two of the four. Sure enough, as I tip my head over my shoulder, there they are. They come to stand beside me, so I take a half a step back so I can look at them both.

Neither says a word, the pair standing stiff and simply staring.

I've never had the attention of royalty, and never in my life did I think I would have the Royals and Rathe this close, so despite my usual confidence, a small ball of anxiousness forms behind my ribs.

I do the only thing I can think of and awkwardly lift my hands while pushing out my belly as if to draw their attention to the massive stack of snacks I'm holding there, and lift my right hand, taking a bite of the one closest to my lips.

"Want some?" I offer.

Both stand perfectly still for a moment, and it's the twin who dips down, choosing to bite off the edge of a caramel dipped apple, some shiny shit sprinkled on top. It also happens to be one of the treats in the hand pressed to my body, so in true playboy fashion, as I'm assuming young Lords would be,

his turquoise eyes snap up to mine just when they're level with my breast.

The sharp points of his teeth are barely visible, but they are there, and it makes me wonder if he's a vamp. I've never seen one in real life that I know of and I always kind of wondered, "Do vampires die in the sun?"

His brows snap together, and slowly he lifts himself up, licking the pink dust from the corner of his mouth, just as his brother begins to laugh.

It's a nice laugh. Deep and a little naughty, and when I look into his eyes, I decide if it's him. I would bet he's the youngest, though they are all close in age, but this one has a hint of ... not exactly softness, but something that the others don't. A sense of morality maybe, if only the smallest bit. "I'm Legend," he says, almost as if his name saddens him somehow. "No, vamps don't die in the light."

"They can," the other offers.

When I look at him, I find he's already staring.

"So, they do or they... don't?"

"Don't by walking in the sun. Do if they piss you off bad enough... or if they get blood lust and have to have their hearts ripped out on the dance floor after a girl—"

He rushes, but Legend shoves him hard enough to make him stumble.

When he rights himself, he pastes a big fat smirk on his lips, and I know.

I was so right.

Major playboys.

Maybe I won't be so bored here after all...

“Baby girl,” Legend, as he introduced himself, warns as he slips behind me. “Don’t look at him like that. It’ll only encourage him.”

“Maybe I want to encourage him.”

“Sure, go ahead.” He chuckles. “If you want to see how monsters die.”

My muscles stiffen and both brothers laugh, shifting to stand in front of me.

“It’s all good, Little L, encourage me.” The twin grins, running his tongue along his lower lip, but it’s more playful than anything. “I might die, but only for a few minutes, so... worth it.”

There’s this strange feeling between us, like a web weaved, the kind you’d find on the back of a menu at a diner during Halloween. Where you have to take a pen and try all the paths until you reveal the right one. The one that leads to another side. *Their* side.

“I’m Sinner.”

I nod, looking over him in his all-black suit. “Fitting.”

The third brother joins us then, the one with the angry eyes from yesterday, who looked ready to tear my head off, but he doesn’t appear that way now. He’s ... distressed.

For some odd reason, my fingers twitch, lifting and fully prepared to ease the lines along his temples away, but I yank that bitch back to my side before it gets chopped off.

You can't go touching a motherfucking Lord, London!

“Creed,” he says. No hello, no ‘my name is’ or even an ‘I’m’ like Sinner started with, and I’m starting to get nervous, so I pretend it was a pop quiz.

“Meh. Hit or miss for me, but I do love me some Sublime.”

Creed blinks, annoyed, but again ... there’s something hiding behind his expression, something I’m not so sure he wants me to see, yet I can.

“My brother isn’t one to listen to what the human world calls music.” *His* voice wraps around me like silk, cocooning me in a ball of pleasure as it kisses across my skin. And it does. All the way to my toes.

Slowly, the fourth, possibly final brother steps before us.

Instantly, my gaze glues itself to his face, but his bounces across his family, and I don’t imagine the way his throat stretches with a swallow just before he finally swings his attention toward me.

My pulse jumps in my chest. Literally. It bangs so hard against my ribs I have to take a step to keep me from falling forward.

Those blue eyes of his darken as they hold mine, if only a single shade. “He prefers to listen to the sounds women make when they scream for him.”

He stares, as if he’s waiting for me to ... I don’t know, honestly, but what he gets is a laugh, and just to be sure I don’t say something that gets me burnt at the stake or whatever the fuck the Royals do nowadays, I stuff a mini cupcake in my mouth.

I realize the mistake the second I make it, as all their eyes fall to my lips.

I lift my hand, quickly covering my mouth and I chew faster.

“Name’s Knight,” he says, his words slow and almost ... careful. “I—”

“You’re the future King of Rathe.”

His frown is instant, but he gives a curt nod.

“You’re the reason I was forced to come here.”

“Forced?” He lifts a dark brow. “Pretty sure it was an invitation.”

“Right. The formality of the illusion of consent.”

Sinner’s lips curl up into the kind of smile someone gives you when you share a secret with that person, but I scowl at him and look back to ... Knight.

“If you think I want you here, you’re wrong.” Knight’s face hardens.

“Well, that makes two of us. Anyway... I would give you my name, even though you asked for it *so sweetly* yesterday, but I’m going to take a wild guess and say you already know it.”

The fake one I was raised under, I hope...

As if he knew I wanted confirmation, likely assuming it’s some gag-worthy reason a real crown chaser would want—like knowledge the future King knew of her existence—and not because my identity is a complete fucking secret, he says it.

“Your name is London Crow.”

The tension lining my body eases a tad, and I tip my head, no confirming or denying. “How did you know I was Gifted?”

His eyes narrow, and I watch as his brothers flick their gazes his way.

“We’re the Royal Family. We know everything,” he says coolly.

I let my smirk free, because he *did* just call me London. A small, raspy laugh works its way from my throat, and my eyes snap the way the thick vein in his neck throbs harder.

Tossing another treat in my mouth, I take a few steps back, my gaze locked on his. “We’ll see about that, won’t we?”

I spin in my boots, walking over to the long table. A male gnome appears, grabbing my hand and yanking me around it, letting me go when we reach the seat that was apparently reserved for me. It smells of freshly cut grass and hot baked goods. The table is lined with poppy’s, irises, and platters of colorful foods that make my mouth water. The wall behind us is completely made of glass, overlooking whatever it is that’s appeared, and directly in front of us is an endless meadow of colorful beds of flowers, blooming right before our eyes.

It’s not long before the Deverauxs find their seats at their table, and while I wait until my glass of what the gnome called Faepagne is refilled for the second time, I look up.

My lips part with a gasp.

The Lords of Rathe are but fifteen feet away, all four pairs of blue eyes locked on me.

What’s strange is that while their faces give nothing away, I know the truth behind their masked expressions, and each tells a different story.

Confusion.

Uncertainty.

Hope.

And the strangest one yet...regret.

For what and why, I don't know.

And honestly?

I don't fucking care to.

I can't be Queen of a realm that my father wreaked havoc on. A realm I know virtually nothing about, and as if those two reasons aren't enough... I don't want to be.

I want to go home, eat shitty takeout and spend the next three years of my life hating every minute of college but living for every day rooming with my best friend, Ben.

As I look around the table at the other gorgeous girls, even that bitchy girl Alex, I'm thinking it won't be too hard. I imagine most of them would kill for a seat on the throne, possibly even literally. It should be easy to fade into the background, especially if the redhead at the end wants what she was called here for. She looks like a straight fucking goddess, and who knows, maybe she is.

Do those exist here?

I don't know, but either way, I bet she's mega powerful and that's exactly what the crown requires. Money and power and beauty.

I've only got one of those, so again, it shouldn't be hard to score the lowest on the list of future royal baby makers.

But then I face forward, unintentionally locking eyes with the future King and suddenly... I'm not so sure.

Seventeen



K night

THERE'S A NEW GIRL.

Of course, there's a fucking new girl. In London, when she still had all her memories, thought she was getting rid of one of the women who could potentially be mine, she was mistaken.

The thought of her jealousy, of her being possessive over a man she hates has my cock twitching in the stupid fucking suit I can't wait to peel off.

I'd like to peel that leather off her.

I'd take my claws and hold them out before her so she could watch as their length grows into sharp points that could cut through her with zero effort. I would drag them down the front of that devilish black corset, reveling in the sight of it popping open, and her tits bouncing free, but I wouldn't stop there. I would keep going straight down, over her mound and lower until I could push up, right into her tight pussy and it is tight. It's so fucking tight.

“Bro.”

My eyes slide left, and Sin lifts a dark brow, his gaze snapping to where I'm hard beneath my slacks. I simply bring my drink to my lips, downing it and then look forward once more.

Sinner's chuckle is low, but he swallows it when Mother snaps her head over her shoulder with a glare.

"As I was saying," Mother speaks slowly, turning back to the floating image she threw up before us. "Her name is Ivana. She's a shifter. Youngest in her family and daughter of one of our own."

I stare at the face on the screen.

She's attractive. The exact girl I would have sought out for a night of raw fun.

Her hair is long and as black as can be. Her skin slightly darker in color, but it's her eyes that have me leaning forward in my seat. Her irises are grey as coal, lips painted in my favorite shade—blood red.

I try to imagine my cock between them, to picture her hair wrapped around my fist, but just as it comes to fruition, the hair turns white, the eyes frosting over, and I curse to myself.

"So, she's Stygian born?" Creed confirms. "Familiar with the ways of Dark magic?"

Mother smiles proudly, her chin raising. Her eyes glow bright for a moment, and she nods. "Familiar with, advocates for, and holds the most power amongst her peers at Rathe U."

"It sounds like you're picking favorites, Mother." Legend frowns.

"I am." She dips her chin slightly, flinging her black nails out and the image disappears. Her eyes narrow now, and I

know what's coming. "What happened today at the gardens?"

"I tapped into royal magic to manipulate London's mind."

"Good. That little bitch was getting out of control."

I keep my expression cool, nodding slowly. "Yes, she was. It shouldn't be a problem any longer."

"You mean we don't have to worry about her trying to kill everyone at every turn and becoming the daughter everyone expected the spawn of The Slasher to be?" A strange expression crosses my mother's face, one I've never noticed before but can't read.

Or maybe I haven't been paying close enough attention...

"Exactly." I agree.

"She no longer remembers she's Knight's mate," Sinner offers what I can't bring myself to say.

Mother looks at me, my mask in place, and then her shoulders fall the slightest bit. "Son..." she whispers, coming over and placing her hand on mine. "That must have been a difficult task." Her eyes gloss over slightly. "But it goes to show the strength you have. You were meant to be the King of Rathe, my boy, and what a King you will make." Her palm comes up, resting on my cheek.

I don't say a word but jerk my chin in acknowledgment, and a soft smile curves her lips.

It's gone the moment the door across the room is thrown open, Silver and his father, my father's number one guard, and closest friend, enter.

Both pause, bowing their heads and waiting to be addressed.

“Speak,” my mother demands.

Vicente looks at her and then the four of us. “There is a lead on King Arturo’s murderer. We must go now if we wish to capture the shifter before he flees.”

The four of us fly from our chairs, but Mother throws her hand out to block us. “I will not send my sons into danger.”

“Psshhh...” I mutter beneath my breath. Since when?

“Please, Mother.” Sinner rolls his eyes, stepping beyond her and we follow.

Vicente throws up a portal and steps back, my brothers already climbing through, but I look to Mother.

She presses a hand to her chest. “Be safe, son. I’ll have the one-on-ones moved to another time.”

I stare into her eyes a long moment and when her lips curve the smallest bit, I nod. “Yes, Mother.”

I step right through, Vicente at my back.

I don’t know what we’re headed into, I don’t know who the fuck this shifter is, but it doesn’t matter.

For Vicente to lead us here, he must know something, and if there’s one thing my brothers and I are good at, it’s getting what we want from a person.

Even if we have to tear it from them one drop of blood at a time.

My memory flashes to the night I had bit into London’s thigh hard enough to draw blood, and it makes my own pump harder in my veins.

Yeah, thank fuck those one-on-ones were cancelled or I might have done something real fucking stupid... like bend

her over the table and fuck her until she bled.

Sighing, I push to the front of the group, throwing the broken wooden door open at the end of the hall.

Wide, yellow eyes meet mine on the other side, and then the fucker does something I hoped he would.

He runs.

The four of us chuckle as I peel my suit jacket from my body, tossing it to the side.

“Ready or not, motherfucker...” and then all at once, we split in every direction. I take off in a heavy run, everything around me turning black except for the pounding shadow of a human form flashing red. Picking up my pace, I tear open the buttons of my shirt, my hands coming into view for a second. My skin grey and sleek, my nails pointed sharp and black. I feel the hunger of death rush through my veins the faster I pump my legs. I need to feel him. To feel his blood wash over me the same way I’m sure my father’s did him.

My evil doesn’t just hover above the surface, he rears his ugly head in full view and when my teeth sharpen, I know I’m in form.

The red figure gets closer and closer, and as soon as he crashes into my chest, my evil is away and my human form hands are around his neck and all-night vision gone.

His yellow eyes stare back at me with panic, his lips puckered with fear. “I don’t know what you’ve heard!” Tilting my head, I move his long hair from his ear and bite at him.

“A fucking fox...”

“Figures...” Sin grabs him by the ear and throws him against the wall behind us. People are walking up and down

the alley, but none of them take notice of us. Running with the air of protection, it wasn't going to happen fast.

I swipe his blood off my mouth. "Get up."

The fox stumbles on two legs, pressing his hands against the brick wall. He squeezes his eyes closed the closer I get, until my boots touch his feet. "I'm going to kill you, but first, show me what I want to see..." Drawing out one single nail, I stab it into his temple and my eyes roll to the back of my head.

The room is dim, filled with dark smoke and any time I try to wipe my eyes clean, it fills the space more. Whoever it is they're protecting is strong, because this fox wouldn't be enough to block me out. Footsteps echo and I follow the pounding of feet. It's useless me being here since his mind is guarded by someone even more powerful than a Royal. I'm about to withdraw my fingers when mumbling catches my attention. I try to follow the words, the soft tones. Step after step, their voices grow clearer until a loud piercing scream erupts through my ears.

I pull back, sneering at the fox.

He gives me a sly smirk, before bringing his hand up to his throat, and slicing the sharp end of his nail across his skin. Blood spills from the incision as he falls to the ground.

"Fuck!" I stumble backwards.

"What'd you see!" Vicente asks, searching my eyes. The desperation we all have, to find the killer, can't damage the process. I can see it from here how fiercely he wants to find the person or persons, as do I.

"Absolutely fucking nothing."

London

I'm not sure what the hell those brothers are up to—mainly Knight, if I'm allowed to even call him that in my head—but I know it can't be good. From what I could tell, most of their attention remained on me all through the luncheon. Gauging by the odd and downright murderous expressions I've had pointed my way while we wait around for the man of the hour—or you know, century, whatever—to come back and once again grace us with his presence for the bullshit one-on-one we are apparently mandated to attend.

We're literally walking around the gardens aimlessly, like cattle waiting to be slaughtered.

Oh my god, what if that does happen?

What if they off us one by one until there's only a single girl left standing?

No, that can't be how this works... right?

I turn to the pink-haired girl who has been trailing Alex's every step all afternoon, probably plotting her revenge for whatever it is she did to her earlier.

“So, hey, do they kill us if we don't live up to *Lord Deveraux's* expectations?”

The girl's wide, green eyes snap to mine, and I've caught her so off guard she starts laughing.

A small smile spreads across my face. "What, I'm for real. How does this work exactly?"

The girl composes herself, licking her lips as she narrows her eyes at me. After a moment she tips her head. "You don't want to rip my head off and feed it to the dragons, do you?"

"Dragons?!" My eyes bug. "What the fuck?"

Her mouth pulls to the side. "You're like...weird."

I lift a shoulder, looking to the side and what do you know, another glass of Faepagne appears!

"Thank you, Frankie." I smile at the angry looking gnome, but he just grunts and walks away.

"His name is *not* Frankie?"

"Probably not, but when all he did was grunt when I asked him what it was, I told him I was calling him Frankie. I think he secretly likes it."

"What makes you say that?"

"He keeps coming back." I smile. "So... will they kill us off one by one like some kind of sacrificial voodoo shit, or what?"

She blinks at me, shaking her head. "I ... no. No, they won't kill us. Excuse me." She rushes away like I freaked her out, but whatever.

I spin, coming to a halt when none other than Zeke steps up. "Hello again."

He smirks down at me. "Hello again."

I open my mouth to speak when a voice booms over the gardens.

“The one-on-ones for today have been canceled. Return to your quarters. You will be expected for dinner and dancing when Saturn’s ring flares its brightest.”

I look back to Zeke, raising a brow. “So.”

“So.” He lifts a joint between us and I grin.

“Lead the way...”

He cackles loudly, taking my hand with his and shoving the joint between his lips with his other. I don’t even bother stopping him to see where we’re going. Everything is too weird. The courtship being the least weird thing that has happened to me today.

“Here!” Zeke drops to his knees in front of me, gesturing to his shoulders. “Jump on them!” I hook my legs around him and yelp when he tucks my shins into his arms to steady me. Once I’m on top, he laughs. “Close your eyes and count to ten.”

“What!?” My hand finds his hair for a better hold.

“Come on! I know a place, but I need you to close your eyes.”

There’s a lot of things that I’ve questioned over the years. A lot. Even understanding our world, and trying to conceal it, those things haven’t even scratched the surface of the past twenty-four hours.

What could possibly be worse?

I close my eyes.

Wind whips around my neck as a rush of adrenaline puts me in a chokehold. I try to swallow past the excitement but it's already time to open my eyes and when I do— “Oh my god!”

He chuckles, dipping into the water, and I watch as liquid gold swallows my legs from my knees down. I fall backwards, arms stretched wide as the liquid wraps around my arms like a warm hug and all my emotions that I'd been feeling moments ago calm.

I breathe in and out, as whatever it is I'm floating in carries my weight. “This is so lovely.”

“Right?” Zeke is right beside me. He brings the end of the joint to my lips and I take it, inhaling the sweet taste of something that doesn't quite taste of weed. When he moves his hand away from me, I'm almost dreading the choking fit I'm about to have, but instead, smooth smoke clouds leave my lips and the effects take charge. I feel my muscles completely relax, as I roll forward and to my feet.

Zeke is already taking another hit when I find the area around us. Purple trees flow over the small little swimming area we're in, with fat shrubs, the brightest green scattered all around us. Turning over my shoulder, I expect to see more greenery but instead it's the emptiness of the solar system. The mauve and gentle coral colors display our solar system and meet the infinity edge-style pool. Saturn hovers calmly behind us in the perfect backdrop.

“Wow.” I bite my tongue, my cheeks flashing red. “It's so beautiful here.”

“Isn't it?”

I smile at nothing and everything, fully fucking blissed out. “So why are you here? Is the future King courting you, too?”

Zeke's raspy chuckle fills my ears and I close my eyes, following the little speckles of light that dance behind them. "Sorry to disappoint, but no. There're always a dozen extras here for the courtship, males and females. We're witnesses of sorts, stand-ins to dance with the girls at the ball to keep them occupied when the Lord is busy."

"So, basically, you drew the short stick and had to come?"

"With classes at Rathe U cancelled until this is over, I had nothing better to do anyway. Besides, I get to hang out with you," he teases, swimming up beside me, just as a distant alarm signals.

"Shit." His face falls. He grabs me by the hand, yanking me out of the solvent gold that feels like silk.

"What's wrong?"

He tugs so hard his hand will likely leave a bruise, but it's the panic in his eyes that has me tripping after him, allowing him to pull me rather than tear away.

"Yemon."

Yemon?

My brows crash but I pump my feet, keeping up with him as we head for a giant wall behind us. Ivy weaving is braided up its massive length in never-ending parallel columns, thorns growing from nothing, getting larger with each step we take in its direction.

"We have to get back inside the walls. They know we're missing, and the only reason they would have looked is if there's—"

A loud screeching has us both freeze. Zeke whips around. "Danger," he finishes his thought, but I hardly hear him.

That scream. It wasn't the kind I've ever heard. It was sharp; the sound scraping over my skin as if I was physically touched by it, and it was shrill. A scream you'd expect to hear from a warrior running into a losing battle. A cry of imminent death but it being abruptly cut off.

I spin to face the same direction as Zeke, just as a head rolls across the grass like a fucking basketball, coming to a stop near our feet.

I gag, lurching forward slightly.

"Stop moving!" Zeke urges quietly, and instantly my muscles lock.

Right then, I spot a shadowed figure hovering above the golden pond. It takes a few seconds for me to realize it's a body hanging from its clutches. One missing its head.

I squint for a better look, but then the wind whirls, and my wet hair lashes like a whip, slashing into my face until I feel a trickle of warmth rolling down my skin.

"What is that?"

"It's a shadow beast." He speaks low. "They don't have eyes, so she can't physically see us, but she *can* sense us and our movement."

"She?"

"Shadow beasts are ... how do I explain. Mother nature? They watch over and protect the barriers to our world."

"So why are we afraid of something that's supposed to protect us?" Maybe the body in her hand is one of a traitor?

"We're at a crossroads. We have no King. Our future King has rejected his mate." Zeke cuts a quick glance my way. "Sorry." He looks forward again, missing the frown that

crosses my expression. “I’ll explain more about Yemon later just, don’t move.”

My arm still raised partially in the air, my hair in my hand, I bring my eyes forward, just as the *shadow beast* meets the grass line.

My blood pumps harder in my veins and my feet twitch to run, to fucking flee, but where the hell would I go? Not through the literal killer wall behind us.

“Portal?” I whisper.

“Can’t portal in or out of the Faelific Fortress. It’s protected. Only Royal blood can get through that way.”

Fuck.

Where’s a Deveraux when you need one?

The thought has something hitting against my ribs, a strange mist of ... I don’t know what it is whirling in my mind.

The shadow beast moves slowly like a balloon in the sky, it’s movement at the mercy of the wind, and while it whipped and raged before, it’s dulled now to a soft breeze, our stillness playing tricks on the beasts’ senses.

As it grows closer though, I finally get a full look.

She’s tall; no less than ten feet. While essentially being made up of a thick, black fog of sorts, there are defining characteristics. The fog frames what would be a face, laying over her head like a hood, intended to protect her identity. It falls like a large cloak, or maybe its intention is to look like a dress, the length swaying behind its form.

She is majestic, and when the thick black clouded figure lifts its arms, something strange flickers in my chest. I take a

step forward before I know what I'm doing, soft whispers filling my ears, but I can't hear them, so I take another.

“London!” Zeke hisses. “Stop!”

My feet carry me forward, until I've broken out into a light jog.

I need to get to her.

But then footsteps sound from behind me, and a hole opens in the beast's face, the deafening scream that escapes her ringing out like a fucking grenade in my eardrums.

Pain erupts in my temple, my hands flying to cover my ears as I bend at the knees, crying out in pain. Movement catches my attention, and my head snaps up.

My eyes fly wide in panic as what looks like white blood rolls from where the eyes should be. The body is tossed at my feet.

I open my mouth to scream again, but I'm cut off when Zeke grips my elbow.

“Come on!”

I stumble to my feet, and we dash across the yard. Zeke is yanked backward, and my shoulder pops out of its socket from the force of him having no time to let me go.

A loud cry of pain escapes me as I push to my feet. I whip around as the woman, if you can fucking call her that, grips his leg and then his head, before beginning to pull.

Gritting my teeth, I turn frantically, searching for a way to save him with my arm hanging dead at my side.

Zeke's eyes turn white, then roots explode up from the soil, wrapping around the beast's form, as the large figure's

lower half turns from a thick, seemly solid black cloud to a thin layer of grey fog.

Zeke begins to fall to the floor, but the creature shrieks louder this time, and then she has him once again. She lifts him into the air, slamming him down into the hard earth, but he flips a hand out, eyes still white and then the grass turns to a bed of water.

He submerges completely and the beast thrashes, reaching inside, but coming up empty. When she screams again, the water blows aside in a swift wave, and his eyes widen. His arms fly up, but she snaps his wrist before he can do a thing, and his howl echoes around us.

She grips his neck, thick bands of smoke weaving around him.

His panicked eyes find mine and I jerk forward.

Run, he tries to say but his mouth won't move.

She squeezes, as do the bands around his body, just as the crack of his bones sear my mind.

“No! Stop!” I scream, darting closer.

Blood slips from Zeke's ears and mouth as he tries to shake his head, but I keep coming.

The beast screams at me, her free arm darting out, as mine shoots up in what is sure to be a futile attempt at protecting myself, but then a harsh zap stops me. My eyes fly open to find her screeching, her mouth agape as a continued shriek fills the air.

I look to my palm. What the...

She barrels toward me; Zeke still being crushed in her arms and my working hand shooting out yet again.

I stare, shocked when a long string of flickering light pours from my fingertips. It's an icy-blue color, and it sparks when it meets the thick smoke bands around Zeke. The tethers release him instantly and he falls to a heap on the ground.

Something inside me surges and my chest bows. My eyes flicker and twitch from darkness covering my sight. I blink, and just like that, the fog clears.

I dash for Zeke, but she comes for me full speed.

This is it. We're about to die.

I drop over him, covering his body with mine and wait for death to come. I could be patient for death, but her screams grow louder. I open my eyes.

A clear frost flickers around us, encasing us in a small igloo.

"A shield," he coughs, holding his stomach. I look to him; his eyes flare wide. "London, your eyes..."

"Huh?" I pant, shaking my head. I wince when the beast pounds at the ...shield? "Come on." I grip him with my good hand and tug.

He cries out in pain. "I can't. Everything is broken. I can't fucking move."

"Do you want to fucking die?!"

"Feed me."

My head snaps back. "What?!"

"Just cut your hand. I need the energy. I'm a Mage, I can draw from the earth. I can fix enough to get us through the gate to a more legitimate healer."

When I just stare at him, he shakes his head in pain. “It’s feed me or fuck me, London. It’s the only way to strengthen my power right now.”

I nod, opening my palm. Before I can try to find something to cut it with, a root spurts from the ground, falling limp into my hand. For whatever reason, I know what to do, closing my palm around it as it whips itself free.

When I open my palm, blood drips from my hand. I lift it to his lips as he runs his tongue along the cut and his eyes flash white.

He grunts, teeth clenching and gleaming red as small snaps and cracks sound.

The shield around us cracks and we jolt.

“Ready?” he wheezes.

I nod, and we jump to our feet, the shield moving with us as we dash for the giant wall of angry thorns.

“Fuck!” he shouts, head whipping from one side to the other, but I keep going.

“London, wait!”

The shield sparks angrily as it meets the protective wall, but I move closer anyway.

“We have to try another way!” he screams.

“Wait!” I shout back and he freezes. “It’s...”

“Opening,” he mutters in disbelief, looking at me curiously.

Ice absorbs the vines, dying and breaking into small snowflakes that melt before they touch the ground, and then the stone wall does the same.

We shove through the second it opens enough, falling to the grass.

When we look back at the wall, it's already sealed, the beast left crying on the other side.

I fall to my back, Zeke beside me, and we look up into the dark skies. After a moment, I turn my head and we look to each other at the same time. Our skin bruised and bloody, soaking wet from the golden pond.

Laughter bubbles from my chest as we both burst out laughing, rolling onto our sides as it takes us over.

A menacing growl rattles behind us and I freeze, worried we let the beast in, but when I snap my head up over my shoulder, the air seizes in my lungs for a very different reason.

Knight Deveraux, the future fucking King, stands behind us, shirtless, bloody and completely enraged.

Shit.

I scamper to my feet, just as he reaches me.

“It was my idea,” I rush out.

Knight's hand shoots out, wrapping around my neck. He slams me into the wall, and I cry out as my shoulder is forced back into place from the impact.

“Well, this position is familiar, isn't it?” I spit, remembering how he grabbed me at the diner.

His body shakes as he gazes down at me. “Why are you ___”

He cuts off short, his nostrils flaring, but then my wrist is in his free one. He glares at the small cut, but then he brings it

to his nose, inhaling, and while his eyes close for a split second, they fly open in the next.

His pupils blow wide, rage whirling within him as his chest begins to rumble. It's as if a caged animal lives inside it, begging to be freed so it can eat me alive.

I shrink at the sound, and I hate it, but it's deeper than my will. Something inside me submits to him in that moment, some weird future King, all mightily powerful asshole type shit, I'm sure.

“String him up,” Knight rumbles, eyes holding strong on me.

“Fuck,” Zeke chokes, and when I look over Knight's shoulder, I find his brothers have joined us, all also shirtless and covered in blood that must not be theirs.

Not sure who makes it happen, but Zeke is lifted into the air, legs and arms stretched out wide like he's being fucking crucified.

“His bones are broken! You're going to hurt—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Knight screams into my face, his spit spraying along my skin, and his hold on my neck tightens.

Anger floods my veins and I fight against him.

His eyes flicker with shock as he steps back slightly, hand falling from my neck. I'm dropped with a heavy thud.

I cough, rubbing at my throat. When my head lifts to glare at him, I find his eyes narrowed on me, a hint of shock painted across his expression, but it's gone a moment later and the rage is right back. He approaches again, pressing his chest into mine, forcing my head to tip back all the way to keep my eyes

locked with his even though he's a fucking giant compared to me.

With his body pressed this close to mine, my mind plays tricks on me, whispering, yes, keep him there. That this is where I want him, right fucking here against me.

It's so strong the fury begins to die on its own and it's replaced with a heavy need, one that not only pulses in my veins, but between my legs. My eyes fall to the smears on his chest and the sudden urge to lick him clean slams into me.

His chuckle is all knowing and snaps me out of it.

“You gave him what belongs to me?”

Uh... “What?”

He bares his teeth, lifting my sliced palm between us.

Wait. “My blood?” I ask, confused.

He opens his mouth to bark at me, but Creed clamps a hand on his shoulder and after a moment, Knight steps back.

Creed gets in my space. “What he means is you are on this courtship. Because of that, every part of you belongs to him.” Creed tries to explain, but it's not a line of truth. I can sense his lie.

It smells sour in the air around us.

“But he was going to d—”

“London,” Zeke cuts me off, and we look at one another.

That only pisses Knight off further.

Giant fucking claws descend from his fingertips, and I stiffen, watching wide-eyed as he walks over to Zeke and slices him from wrist to armpit in both arms before I can even blink.

I gasp, darting forward, but Sinner bumps his chest with mine, glaring down at me. “Bad little doll. Stay.”

“What the hell are you doing?” I shout, looking around and noticing others have come out of the building to see what’s going on.

“Watch your fucking mouth,” Sinner hisses quietly, calling my eyes back to his. “You do not question your future King. Do you understand?” His threat is menacing.

Biting my tongue, I force myself to nod when all I really want to do is kick him in the fucking nuts, but I don’t know how things work here yet and don’t want to die today because of my big ass mouth, especially when I just fought off a beast made of fucking fog!

Jesus, fuck, how is this my life now? I need to find a way to call Ben...

“What will he do to him?”

Sinner shakes his head, his knuckle coming up to run along my cheek. “No, Little L... it’s not what he will do. It’s what *you* did.” Sinner moves so fast I can’t track him, and then his arms are around me from behind and I’m moved to stand before Zeke.

Knight turns, looking me in the eye as he slices his claw from Zeke’s thigh down to his ankle, splitting his pants and flesh and then he does the same to the other.

I gasp, staring in shock as blood pours from his every limb.

Knight approaches me slowly, his eyes wild and hard and he pins them on me.

It's odd, how fucking terrifying and vengeful he looks in this moment, yet his touch when he grips my fingers and pulls them up to his lips is so damn gentle my body melts in his brother's hold.

He looks to my palm, the one that isn't cut and then back at me. "You gave him your blood, so I will drain his body of every ounce so that no part of you lives within him, and then I will break every bone in his body that is still intact. I won't allow him to be healed until he's spent the night hanging in the air for all to see as a warning of what happens when someone fucks with what's mine."

He presses closer to me, ignoring his brother's arms wrapped around me completely and then his teeth are bared and I watch, transfixed as his canines descend into sharp fangs.

I gasp, yet my toes curl in my shoes.

And then, so swift I don't see it coming, he sinks his teeth into my palm, biting so hard I feel the vibration of my bone meeting his teeth.

I cry out in pain, but he growls so deep around me, his eyes turning white as he sucks from my open flesh. He releases me just as fast, licking across my skin as his mouth drips with my blood.

"Take her back to her room and lock her in there."

"What—"

I'm thrown over Legend's shoulder in the next second, kicking and screaming but it's to no avail. What feels like seconds later, I'm tossed through my room door, my ass hitting the floor with a hard thump.

Legend glares down at me in disappointment. “You could have died.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t,” I snap back.

He scoffs, shaking his head and when he speaks it’s in warning, “Be careful, London ... or you will.” He slams the fucking door.

Throwing myself back on the carpet, I glare at the galaxy above.

“Fuck my life!”

Eighteen



K night

WHY THE FUCK DID I BITE HER LAST NIGHT?

My body had just settled the slightest bit, the desperation for the taste of her tampered down by the earlier kill of the fucking runner, but then I smelled him on her. Smelled him on her.

I fucking snapped.

And now?

Now her blood runs through me once more, and my every fucking nerve ending is on fire.

I have no idea what this chick, Ophira, is saying, but if the golden snake around her neck keeps hissing at me, I'm going to eat him for fucking lunch. All I can think about is London.

I taste her every time I move my tongue, smell her every time I take a breath.

This courtship is such bullshit. I have no idea who I'm going to pick, but much to my mother's pleasure it will likely be the new girl.

She's Stygian, came from one of our own. It's the cleanest.

Definitely not gonna be this chick. Ain't no way this snake is sleeping near my cock at night, so it's with that thought I stand from the table.

Her golden eyes lift to mine, a slight frown building along her brow. It only takes her a second to realize what's coming, and her eyes begin to swirl.

“You will not be the Queen of—”

I don't get the last word out before the snake has released her throat and she inhales what seems like her first full breath, and when she speaks, her tone is like an exotic whisper that electrifies me. “My Lord, come to me.”

I turn the moment she speaks the words, taking a single step toward her and she climbs to her feet, but it's when her palms touch my chest that my mating bond flares, kicking and clawing at my insides with vengeance.

I snap out of it, and when she opens her mouth to speak again, I dart a hand out, latching it around her throat and breaking her windpipe.

“Almost worked, little siren.” My free hand darts up, gripping the snake in the air as it lunges at me. I snap its neck in two.

Tears fill Ophira's eyes as I toss it to the floor and her away from me.

“Knight?” Mother walks up.

“She tried to use her siren call against me.”

“What a stupid, beautiful girl,” my mother murmurs, pushing Ophira's hair from her forehead. “Dismiss her, my

son.”

I meet Ophira’s eyes, speaking what she tried to prevent. “You are unworthy of the crown and released to Rathe.” The instant the words are spoken, a cloud opens above us, raining down on her until she’s swallowed by the ground.

Sighing, I sit down.

Mother smiles as she pats my chest, spins and heads for the door. “Next!”

Here we fucking go again.

Nineteen



K night

THIS TIME IS DIFFERENT. WITH THE RAGE STILL BURNING against my mating bond, I'm even more desperate to get this bullshit over with. Find a queen. One who isn't smart enough to know that I love her, but deluded enough to think she can be queen. I look over the people sitting around the table. Now with me at the head. I still don't know how I feel about being pushed into a position I was so sure would be for Creed, but the longer I sit on the throne, the more I feel the ghosts of my ancestors demand I be there.

"Knight. Have you decided your top three?" Odin asks, his face carefully masked. He represents the Monsters and is usually the quieter one during a meeting. The one who hovers in the background and watches. Never gives too much, and always keeps his distance. I think that's why my father hated him the least of all the councilmen, maybe even liked him, if only a little.

"No." My finger taps against my now empty glass of hard liquor. "I hate them all." I flick my finger in an upward motion

and my empty glass is slowly refilled with more amber liquid.

“Well.” Legend chuckles, and if he wasn’t so fucking far away, I’d choke him out. “Not *all*...”

I grind my teeth, ignoring all the questioning gazes. When I can’t ignore any more, I drop my focus to the ground beneath us. It’s completely clear, with fat puffy clouds passing through the bottom of our feet. From a distance, you can see the city of Stygian, the castle, the catacombs, and the high arch of the bridge that separates us. I pause when the showgrounds come into view. Deep mahogany, blood red, and teal blue lights flash from down below, as the circle of the Ferris wheel spins. People down below have no fucking clue what the fuck goes on up here in this little floating room of secrets.

“Well, we need a new King if we want the balance to remain between us all. The longer it goes on, the more likely the risk of the civilians of magic deciding they might like to push boundaries. And let’s not get started on the bitchy Shadow Beasts.”

“They won’t push any boundaries,” I whisper from behind my glass, removing the top buttons of my shirt. “Because if they do, I’ll kill them.” And I would. *All of them.*

“Like you killed the man who you went and...”

“Tortured?” I raise a brow at Magdalena. “You can say the word you know, doesn’t make you any less ... *Argent.*”

Her eyes narrow and I know she’s thinking about the way she found her son hanging in the gardens two nights ago—temporarily dead and nothing but a bag of broken bones.

“You should not be *interrogating* anyone about the King’s death without the entire Ministry present,” she dares. “Your

father—”

“My father is dead, and in case you’ve all failed to realize, I will not do things his way. Bottom line?” I look across the room, meeting the eye of each Ministry member representing a different faculty of Gifted. “I don’t trust any of you. Likely never will. If I get a tip from my people that could lead my family closer to the person who killed our father, our King, my brothers and I will do whatever we feel is fit, and there isn’t a damn thing anyone in this room could do to change that.”

“There have been some whispers. About the reject.”

My eyes slice to Agro, the man who represents the Fae, the vein in my neck stretching as I reign in my rage at his choice of word.

Silence falls, and the clouds at our feet grow darker, soft sounds of thunder cracking within them. *It has started.*

I shouldn’t fault him for it. I did reject her, tossed her to the wolves—literally, with Sinner’s help that day on the terrace. So, yes, she’s a reject. Bound to live a life of solitude and shame, but that doesn’t make me want to tear his head off and feed his brains to his family for dessert for mentioning her. In fact, I’m open to keeping her locked in her own little room in my castle as I live out this reign. She could be my pet. Fuck her when I need, and then use my fake Queen as a show for the people.

“What about her?” The words leave me slowly, but I manage to keep the expression on my face my usual one of *don’t fuck with me*, so it should garner no suspicion.

They have no idea I’ve accepted my mess of a mate, that I fucking love her, even if I can’t keep her. That I’m the one whose insides are slowly growing darker, not hers.

“Her origin. It’s in question. The Ministry has decided to investigate—”

“No.” The word is clipped and venomous and when I lean forward in my chair, my brothers do the same.

They didn’t invite us into this ‘mandatory meeting’ they called after hearing about the trip we took to the edge of the Night Walkers woods, but no one in this room dared to question it when we slid in four strong.

“No?” The man tips his head. “Lord Deveraux, we are not asking your permission. We are telling you there is a cause for concern, and it is not one that can be ignored. The King, your father, was murdered. She is an outsider, raised in the Giftless world and a few days ago—as far as she led everyone to believe, naive to the power she may or may not possess, but we have all seen the proof of that lie—she called on her gifts when she broke the rules of the courtship and stepped outside the Faelific Fortress walls. For that alone, she should be denied and forced to leave, but since we don’t know the extent of her power or the bloodline it’s sourced from, it’s safer for everyone she stays here. Yemon would be the end of the girl after her public rejection. We need to know why the fates would give this girl to you. The answer lies in the blood that runs through her veins.”

“The fates are testing me. That is it,” I force past clenched teeth. “The girl is worthless. Ordinary. A non-fucking-concern and only here because you forced her on me after I dismissed her.” I look to Magdalena, then the rest of them. “You want to investigate someone? Start with the people in this room.”

Shock paints across the Ministry’s faces, anger slowly bleeding in.

But come on now, how shocked can they be? I've been nothing but trouble for them since the start. They know I never believed in their ways. Fought back at every turn.

Honestly? I'm probably the last Deveraux they hoped would rise to King. Well, maybe last before Sinner, but still. They wanted Creed or Legend, not the rogue brother.

"You can't possibly be serious!" Agro shouts.

"I'm dead fucking serious." I cock my head. "Like I said, I trust none of you, and if I find out some or all of you conspired to kill our King, I will make good on our Queen's promise to the people. I will kill the person or persons responsible in the most public and painful way possible. I will take no prisoner. I will bathe in the motherfucker's blood, so if it was one of you...end yourself now, because when we get ahold of you?"

Sin's vicious chuckle whispers across the room and we stand. We don't use the fucking door.

We throw up our portal right fucking here, on top of their coveted round table and hop up on top of it.

We get the fuck out.

Twenty



London

HE SMELLS LIKE THE PINK-HAIRED GIRL, AND FOR SOME reason it creates this annoying prickling feeling along my spine. It's accompanied by this insane internal need to wash his skin of her. With my tongue, one glorious lick at a time.

Fuck me, I need to get a grip.

No, damn, duh he smells like her considering she had her one-on-one before me. In fact, they all did. I would make a joke about saving the best for last, but the expression on Knight's face as he grips his glass so hard his scarred knuckles turn white, I'm guessing that's not the case.

He literally looks pained to be here.

"Do you really have no control over any of this?"

My question must catch him off guard because his head snaps my way, a scowl already in place. I simply shrug. "I mean, clearly you don't want to be here, and you've already said you don't want me here, so ... do you really have no control?"

He eyes me a long moment, and for a fleeting second, I think I spot a hint of softness, but when he blinks it's gone.

“No.” He brings his glass to his lips, finishing it off, and reaching for the bottle for the third time since he sat down ... a whole five minutes ago. “There are a lot of things I can dictate, and a lot I will change when I'm King, but this is not one of them. This is written in the ashes of our ancestors. There is no changing the Evolution of a King.”

“The room beside mine. It was the redhead's,” I trail off.

Knight's eyes narrow on me, but I don't cower and look away.

She's gone and from the gossip in the breakfast hall this morning, she would only be gone if she were killed or dismissed, and the girls swore they didn't off her. It was kind of weird how they all looked at me as if I were the one who did it, but all I could do was laugh at their accusing glances.

Why the fuck would I kill any of these girls? They're the only chance I have at freedom. He has to pick one and the sooner the better. I've got a college class to tank and a best friend to get tanked *with* waiting on me.

“Yes,” Knight finally says. “She is gone.” He watches me closely, as if searching for something he can't quite see.

So, he did get rid of her.

“As of fifteen minutes ago, so is the Fae,” he offers, those eyes penetrating and swimming with more than I dare to name.

I don't know which girl he's talking about. I have no clue who is what around here, but I don't care enough to ask him which two girls remain at the moment because now I'm even more confused.

He was so pissed at me the other night, yet I'm still here. What could she have done that was worse than sneaking out of this fortress with another guy when you're supposed to be fighting for the King's hand, let alone the crown? Not fucking much that my brain can come up with. Granted that doesn't mean much being this is the most time I've spent around the Gifted in over a decade.

"So then why am I still here? If you can decide when you're sure of someone, why not send me home?"

"You are home, London," he says deceptively but calmly. There's a glint of fire in his eyes.

I shake my head but say nothing and he doesn't like that.

"Come on." He shoots to his feet so fast I jolt.

When he holds his hand out, I hesitate, but then those deep blue eyes fall to mine. They peer deeper, seeking the secrets of my soul and while I want to wither away, I can't. Something inside me stirs, a sudden burst low in my belly and I clench my abs to hide it.

His gaze lowers, and I realize my lips have parted. Those eyes slice up to mine and he tips his chin the slightest bit.

I don't intend to move, but my body has other plans. My palm finds its way to his.

An electric shock shoots down my arm as our skin connects and I gasp when he yanks me from the chair so hard my chest slams into his.

He's so fucking tall, so *much*, my knees begin to shake. His free arm comes around me, pressing me closer and his fingers find the underside of my chin. He lifts, forcing my eyes to stay on his.

“Close your eyes, baby,” he whispers.

Baby.

My eyes close and just as they do a flash of pale skin and muscle assaults my mind.

Teeth and a sharp sense of pain-infused pleasure.

Rough hands and angry words.

Slow movement and tender whispers...

“Baby...” he whispers.

My eyes fly open again, my heart pounding in my chest. As I stare up at him, confusion creates panic in my mind, but my thoughts die on my lips when I look around.

“Holy shit...”

An obsidian-colored waterfall flows from over a tall cliff filled with bright pink and lime green flowers that twist up to meet the top. The trees reach over with thick claws, offering a taste of magic that hides behind the barrier. Whatever this place is, it's beautiful, if not pure. A figure of his imagination, maybe?

My feet come to a stop and just as they do, Knight's arms come around me from behind. He hugs me to him, and I stop breathing.

The future King of Rathe is holding me as if I'm a flower he's afraid to break. His touch is gentle and soft and almost ... hesitant. Like he's not sure he should.

Like he's not sure he wants to.

Maybe this is how it goes? He has to test out the feel of his Queen in his arms and see if he can stand the touch of her.

I should burp or something disgusting, try and turn him off as much as possible, but my body doesn't seem to catch on to my mind's sense of survival because with the next breath, I lean back into him.

At the same time, we both let out a long, slow breath, as if we'd been holding it.

A calm I've never felt settles over me, but at the same time, something pokes at me from the inside. It knocks at a door I can't see, and I desperately search for the handle so I can open the door to reveal what's on the other side.

I'm not sure how long we stand there, or when I closed my eyes, but his whisper has them flying open.

"I can't keep you."

Moisture blooms, fogging my vision, but I swallow past it. "I know." And I do.

I know more than he does that he can't. For whatever reason that I'm here, I know that even if there was a smidge of him wanting me, me being me and who I am means that could never happen.

Does he know who I am? Who my father was? Is that why he said that?

He whirls me around then, gripping my upper arms as anger builds along his brow.

"Lord Deveraux..." I trail after a moment.

His lip curls and he shoves me away.

A portal appears and then I'm falling....

I scream, my head spinning with one hundred different colors that aren't on the palette before I'm back in my room.

Well, my temporary room.

Instantly, I'm hit with a strange sense of loss. My hand darts out to grip the wall as I take in a deep breath. When anxiety spins around my stomach like acid, I rush to the bathroom.

I don't know why, but tears fall down my cheeks and I swipe angrily at them.

What the fuck do I have to cry about?

“Get a fucking grip, London!”

I turn on the shower, heading back to the room to grab a pair of pajamas, but come to a complete stop when I find Knight now standing in the center of my room, his chest heaving.

Fear licks down my spine, but it's followed by something else. Something I don't want to admit.

“I can't keep you,” he repeats angrily, but with each word, deep creases frame his features. “I don't want you.”

I nod, eyes trapped in his as he grows closer until he's right in front of me.

“I fucking hate you,” he rasps.

A sharp pain forms behind my ribs, but as I look at him, it fades.

It fades because ... he's lying.

I can see it, smell the sour stench his words left behind, but even if I couldn't, I would know. I can sense it plain as day. I don't know how, but I can, and I would bet my life on it.

Knight Deveraux doesn't hate me.

He doesn't hate you because he doesn't know you...

“Yes, baby. I do.” Torment bleeds from his words and he steps closer. “More than you fucking know.”

My brows crash. “How did you—”

My words are cut off with the sharp bite of his kiss.

I gasp, but all that does is give him the opening he clearly craves. His tongue dives into my mouth, searching, fighting, and he growls, tearing me closer.

“Kiss me back,” he demands.

I want to, but I shouldn’t.

“Kiss me back...” This time it’s a desperate plea, one stronger than my will.

I kiss him back.

And oh, my fucking fuck.

My insides pulse, my entire body coming alive as I sweep my tongue with his, our lips moving like they’ve known each other all our fucking lives. Like they were meant for this, for each other.

It’s a stupid, sobering thought and I tear myself away.

My hand slaps over my mouth and he growls, prowling forward and erasing every bit of space I put between us until my back is against the wall.

“I fucked up. I want to take it all back,” he growls angrily. “I’ll take your anger over this fucking lie.”

“I don’t understand.”

Knight grits his teeth, tearing away as his fingers dive into his hair and he pulls. When he finally looks back at me, there’s a raging inferno. “You are going to fucking hate me. More now than before, but I’m not sure I fucking care.”

His mouth slams into mine again and I fight it, but then he dips down, gripping my thighs and my legs wrap around them as if they belong.

“You can’t be my fucking Queen, London,” he growls against my lips.

“I don’t want to be.”

That pisses him off and he tears me from the wall, only to slam me back against it.

His hands dive under the small dress I wore today, and he doesn’t hesitate. His fingers dive right inside, my moan loud and needy as his entire body shakes at the sound.

“I fucking missed you,” he murmurs into my neck, and I let him talk his madness because the feel of his fingers inside my pussy is too much for me to care that he’s picturing me as someone else.

He works me relentlessly, grinding his cock against my thigh as he does, and my head tips back.

“Fuck,” I rasp, tugging on his hair as his lips come back to mine.

“I might have to keep you too.”

Too.

Too?!

His words are like a fucking ice bath, and my muscles freeze.

Literally.

Knight jerks back, and I fall to the floor as he looks to his fingers as if I burned him.

I stare back at my skin, noting the new tinted blue.

He turns to his fingers, my arousal coated across them... as hard as ice.

I pull my dress down, taking backward steps but he keeps coming.

Panic flares and I throw my hands up to keep him away. He goes flying, his back crashing against the opposite wall.

My mouth falls open and my knees begin to shake.

“Oh shit. I am ... my Lord, I ... please don't kill me!” I finally beg. “Please, I—”

“Your eyes,” he says quietly, climbing to his feet. “They're black.”

I swallow, blinking, fighting the urge to run to a mirror and see for myself.

“I saw it before, at the sanctuary.” His words are lost on me. “But there they are.”

His words, they're not angry, they're... awestruck.

I tense as he grows closer but don't dare move, in case I accidentally use some other kind of magic against a fucking ruler.

He approaches and I stay perfectly still as his eyes search mine. I stare, transfixed as his gift comes to the surface, his eyes glowing solid white, like every other Gifted I've seen so far.

But he said mine are black, and Zeke mentioned something too.

Knight nods. “Zeke saw them. The Ministry, they saw too, in his memories.”

Knight's white orbs continue to swirl, and heat explodes in my chest.

Energy pulses through me and a low rumble tremors from some deeper part of him.

“Knight.” I don't mean to use his name.

“She's...” He stares into my eyes as if he's not seeing me. As if he's seeing someone or something else. “She's fucking perfection.”

An instant later, his face transforms. Anger and frustration flaring, and he backs away from me. His lip curls as he bares his teeth.

“Stay the fuck away from everyone, do you understand me? My family especially, and if I see you near Zeke again, I will fucking strangle the life out of you over and over again, and only when you're a pile of worthless fucking flesh on the floor begging for it to end, will I kill you.”

With that image seared into my mind, he leaves, and nothing in my life has ever been clearer than the thought that assaults my mind a moment later.

I have to get out of here.

I have to get the fuck out of here and now.

The thought shouldn't bring sadness. This is what I want.

To leave. To go home.

So why the fuck does my heart feel like it's breaking and not for the first time?

Knight

It worked. My acceptance the night I stole her memory of me and our bond, of the way I killed Ben in cold fucking blood.

Her Ethos has been set free, and she's fucking magnificent. Strong and dark and growing more restless by the day.

Fuck! I need to get her out of here before she slays everyone who stands in the way of what she wants.

Me.

My bond.

My fucking monster that weeps for her behind the cage I've locked around him. Not that I could set him free if I wanted. She has to accept me as hers for that to happen, and I've erased the only fucking chance of that. I stole my own fucking mate from me.

I can't fucking keep her. They will kill her if they find out who she is, I remind myself.

Or they'll try and she'll end up doing what they all feared—she'll tear through them all one head at a time just like her father did.

Or I'll kill them all for trying to touch what's mine and lead my people into war before the crown is even placed on my head.

I need her away from here. I could make it happen with a single sentence like I did the snake chick, but the words won't fucking form. It's why I haven't picked a fucking Queen.

I can't give her up. Not yet.

Maybe not ever...

Twenty-One



London

THERE'S A SHIFT IN THE AIR. A BAD ONE.

Tonight, dinner is being served in the same hall as it has been since I arrived, but this time, not only is the entire councilmen table empty, the Royal Family's table is too. Or almost anyway.

Queen Cosima is here.

She sits alone in the center chair; the chair Knight has occupied every day but today.

It's not the fact that she's the only one here that has me on edge, it's the way she stares solely at me.

Every few moments, there's this prickling feeling in my mind, as if she's trying to break down a barrier, one I had no idea I had thrown up, but I'm beginning to think I might not have to.

The defensive spells all Gifted are required to learn that help keep others out to prevent persuasion is a simple one, but I think Zeke was right in his assumption. I think I have a

shield of some sort, because there is no way the bit of magic I've come to learn could keep the strength of a Queen out of my head.

What's even stranger?

She's not the only one staring.

The girls all share whispers as they look at me, and the server's hands shake each time they appear at my side to fill my glass or place my food before me.

They jump when I thank them and when they disappear into the air, the hint of rotten cider fills the air, fear.

They *fear* me.

But why?

Because I saved mine and Zeke's asses the other night? I hardly did a damn thing, and these people are shifters and Fae and shit. How scary can I possibly seem?

Wait. He said the Fae is no longer here, and I realize then the pink-haired girl is gone.

I lean over, taking my chances and whispering to the black-haired chick. "Where are the Lords?"

Her creepy grey eyes snap my way, narrowing. She stares for a moment then flicks her attention to the left before bringing them back. "They were here when I walked in. They got a call and then all four ran out of here."

"You would know that if you were ever on time." My attention snaps past the dark-haired chick to find Alex.

The moment my eyes meet hers, she cowers, shoulders lifting as she abruptly faces forward once more.

I flip her off, even though she's not looking, and go back to eating. Just as my teeth sink into a freshly cut strawberry, the dark-haired girl's voice reaches my ears.

"They know who you are." Her words are like a wind's whisper and my head snaps in her direction.

A frown crosses my brow when I spot her with a mouthful, her attention pointed at the empty table ahead.

What the hell...

"Stop looking at me," she says then, and my head whips forward.

The Queen narrows her eyes and I quickly drop mine to my plate.

The girl's lips part slightly, and it's her voice I'm hearing, but it seems no one else can tell. I force myself to take another bite, waiting for more.

"I'm carrying my voice to you, you fool," she chastises. In my peripheral, I see her look the opposite way of me. "Your eyes. They turn black when your gift surfaces." *So, I've heard.* "The only person in our history that has happened to are the fallen kings and queens of our past... and The Slasher."

A thunder cloud sparks above us not a moment after the name leaves her lips and I remember what the maiden said—his name is not used here.

The Queen's chair scrapes against the ground and my eyes slice her way.

"You're no queen, so that means you're a dead bitch walking." The dark-haired girl smirks to herself, sitting back in her seat.

The Queen's palms are pressed to the table, but she doesn't stand.

Instantly, my legs begin to tremble.

They can't know.

My dad's eyes turned fucking black?! Great! So much for blending in!

I jump as the doors at the end of the hall burst open and the Ministry walk in, several guards at their backs, their ski masks pulled low to hide their identity.

It's the first I've seen them here at the fortress and the way my hackles rise, my fingers aching to the point of pain, that I know it's because of me.

Do they really know about my dad, or is grey-eyed bitch just trying to scare me away?

Oh fuck, what if Knight told them what I did to him? You can't use magic against the rightful King, against any of the Royal Family, and not pay for it with your life.

My panic settles a little when the Ministry doesn't start screaming and shouting and demanding my head, but rather step up to take their seats at the left of the room. They speak amongst themselves as their food is delivered, but then the masked men draw my attention.

They walk in a single file line, marching silently across the long stretch of the dining hall, but every four feet taken, one guard at the front takes a sidestep, then faces the room as the others keep moving past.

They're placing themselves four feet apart across the entire perimeter.

My panic is back full force because while I might not have been raised here, the Giftless do some fucked up hazing shit I've stumbled across at college. I know a game of cat and mouse when I see one. If the girl is being honest, I'm the fucking mouse in this trap.

They've yet to reach this side of the room, so I quietly rise, excusing myself for the restroom, but the moment my feet hit the floor for the first step, silence begins to fall over the space.

I take a second step, and then another, and then...

"She's running!"

"Get her!"

"Stop, daughter of The Slasher!"

Oh shit!

"She killed the King!"

Oh. *Fuck.*

I take off, my feet pumping widely, and I silently thank myself for choosing sandals today. I run out the door, focusing on the latch a moment, hoping I can somehow figure out how to lock it, but rather than the bolt turning, the whole fucking thing explodes like a bomb. Flames and smoke barrel outward until the entire wall is hidden.

Gifted scream, but I keep running.

They think I killed the King? The King?!

What the actual fuck?!

A loud zap sounds and then pain explodes down my spine.

"Ah!" I cry out, my back bowing as warmth runs down the length of it, telling me I'm bleeding, but I keep running,

cutting around the giant silver fountain and head back for the gardens.

As I come around the corner, a wall of fire rages before me and I jolt back.

“Stand down, traitor!”

My head whips over my shoulder to find several Gifted not far behind.

My skin heats from the lick of the flames, and I screw my face up.

“Okay, Gift, whatever you are. You better fucking come through again.”

I bolt forward.

There are screams and shouts and one of them is my own as I run right into the inferno, eyes squeezed closed and braced for pain, but when my skin doesn't melt from my bones, I open my eyes to find a sheet of ice covering me.

I book it, escaping the fire and when I look back, the flames evaporate into nothing.

A man with long golden hair and a long blue cloak throws his hands to the sky and lightning booms above.

I keep running, the wall just fifteen feet ahead.

Come on, come on, I chant over and over.

And then my body lurches forward, my face slamming onto the concrete ground with a hard crack.

I groan, pushing up on my palms, blood pouring from somewhere on my face. “Fuck,” I grunt, trying to stand, but my feet won't move.

Gasping, I look back.

Red rings glow around my ankles, tightening until I scream into the air. This time, I do smell the scent of burning flesh.

I look to find the entire Ministry, the chosen, and the others who are here to witness the courtship filling the yard.

“You can’t die here.” I whisper to myself, but as the words leave me, I *feel* the words I spoke. I feel them somewhere deep inside me as if I’ve spoken them to someone else and that someone is listening.

Suddenly, thick bands of black smoke breach the walls of the fortress, billowing down and spanning out over the group.

“It’s Royal magic!”

“Demonic smoke!”

“Silence! The Queen is among us. It comes to protect her from that monster!”

Fuck! I’m dead.

This is it.

The living, demented smoke flies toward me, submerging and I hold my breath, clenching my eyes closed. I wait for it to shock me, to strangle and bring my worst nightmare to life. Tears spring into my eyes as I say a silent goodbye to Ben, wishing I wasn’t away from him for so long before my last moments.

Knight...

My throat closes when his name whispers across my mind and I don’t know why. I hardly know him, and he was never going to be mine anyway.

As the first tear slips down my cheek, it's swiped away with a soft, satin-like touch. Slowly, my eyes open and that thick, dark smoke they said that came to protect their Queen brushes over my skin like the hand of a lover. It's light and tender and as it whirls around my feet, the red burning bands spark before turning to ash. The Royal magic, as they called it, cocoons me in a pillow of darkness. A giant, protective cloud.

I'm carried into the skies, and the smoke thins just as we reach the edge of the wall, revealing my face to the Gifted below.

They gasp, shout, and scream, each recoiling. Someone throws a barrier up between them and me as they shout words in our language of origin, but I don't know what they're saying. I'm not sure what they see as they look at me, but the horror on their faces isn't missed.

I can imagine it's a sight.

No part of me feels like *me*.

I feel... stronger. Bigger.

I feel fucking freed.

Like the me I was supposed to be.

Like the me the fates intended for me to be.

"She's ... ascended," someone says.

The smoke carries me higher, above them all.

Above the fortress until I'm standing on a pillow of blackness, the stars within reach.

The Queen breaks from behind the barrier, her being brimming with rage, but then her eyes widen ... just as my

body is flipped upside down.

My ass lands on something hard, and a little shriek leaves me when I realize I'm sitting on a leather saddle ... on the back of a fucking dragon!

I lean back, but it whips its head around, green eyes narrowing. He huffs and I jolt and I swear he—it has to be a he, right? —rolls his eyes.

Like a pilot avoiding turbulence, the dragon drops down a solid ten feet, so for a few moments I'm free-falling, before landing on the saddle once more.

“Okay!” I scream at the bratty ass dragon, reaching out for the straps. I wrap them around my fists, holding on for dear fucking life. No sooner do I have them does he point his nose and fucking soar.

I don't know where I'm going or if anywhere is safe for me at this point. All I know is I don't feel fear, black veins scale the length of my arms, and I'm riding on a fucking dragon.

Knight

My boots crunch over the loose rubble as the air barely starts to thin out the darkness left over from London and the chaos she fought back with. I grind my teeth, ignoring the chatter behind me coming from Silver and Creed.

“Where the fuck did she go?”

Creed pauses his whispering to Silver, as if I couldn't hear the both of them anyway. I can still feel her as though she is standing right in front of me. I blink past the hallucination of the smoke outlining her body when Creed's hand touches my shoulder. "News is quickly spreading about who she is, Knight. We need to go and figure out how we're going to handle this."

"Did you know?" I ask the words I've wanted to since finding out who she was myself. A secret I would have died with had it meant keeping it away from everyone.

"What?" Creed snaps and Silver falls completely silent. "No. I suspected something was off with her from the start but not this."

I turn to face him, ignoring the smell of sulphur and mountain ash from the dragon shifter that swept up and took her.

"Did you?" he asks, both brows raised. When I don't answer, he chuckles, shaking his head and relaxing his shoulders. "Of course, you did."

"Let's go." I push through both of them, flexing my fingers in the palm of my hand when my nails sink into my flesh. I can feel the burning rage that has simmered deep inside of me slowly come to the surface as I take every step closer to the castle. Jogging up the steps, I swing the door open and ignore the two guards standing in the foyer, heading straight for the family room at the rear of the house that overlooks the cliff-drop to the solar system. This was my favorite place as a kid to play. Now... now all I feel is rage and annoyance.

My mother shoots up from the high-tilted throne in the center of the room and in front of the burning fireplace. "Knight! What—"

“—you don’t fucking speak.” My tone is barely above a whisper as I round the small bar table and reach for the first thing that I see. The room falls silent. The Ministry members all stare back at me with a mixture of expressions. Mostly anger and confusion, but one.

One. That same one. Odin hangs back, a glass of whiskey dangling between his fingers as he leans against the wall in the darkest area of the room, his eyes fixed on me as if in waiting. Waiting for me to scream? Yell? Throw a fucking fit that these fucking mutts just chased off my mate?

No. That’s not what that look is.

I swirl the liquid around in my glass, just as Silver and Creed finally meet us in the room, all eyes on me. I watch as a tiny water tornado circles in my cup as I fight the vivid flashbacks of the memories I took from my father the second London cut me with the same knife that was used to kill him, unlocking magic I didn’t know existed. *Trust no one.*

My father was the Dark Lord. Ruler of Rathe, a place far worse than hell. How, you ask? Well because it exists. My father was a brutal ruler, but that’s what made him a great King. There was one thing he always put first though, and that was his legacy.

My eyes fall to my mother, who sits nervously on her throne, her finger tapping against the arch where her arm rests.

I take another sip of my drink, before slowly lowering it back onto the counter. “I don’t answer to any of you.”

“—Ah, you would find that you—”

A growl from deep within the cages of where I keep my monster hidden vibrates through the room, rattling the hanging

portraits on the wall. “I. Don’t. Answer. To. You.”

Storm stands, straightening his white shirt. “I’m sorry, Knight. You can warn us all you want, but for a time older than yourself, this Ministry has existed so that we can remain balanced—” Before I can blink, my feet fly across the room and my teeth are in his throat. I feel the pulsing of his heart beating against my sharpened teeth as I sink them further into his jugular. My eyes roll to the back of my head when I feel his heartbeat slowing. *Thud. Thud.* Until nothing.

One Elder down, three to fucking go.

Give me a fucking reason...

I rear my head back, my teeth still clenched around the veins in his neck as I shove his body away. It falls to the Queen’s feet and I lick the residue off my lips, swiping my mouth with the back of my hand as I watch for her reaction. Gasps sound around the room but my mother remains unbothered. She simply kicks his body away slightly before folding her leg over the other and patting her skirt straight again.

Energy vibrates from the corner of the room where the man is who is always silent. Watching. It’s almost like sound waves rolling into me from him and for a moment, I remain completely still.

Silent.

Warmth connects both of us together like an invisible vine of venom twisting and knotting and meeting in the middle. I step around the body, closing the distance. Holding Odin’s stare, my fingers wrap around the bottle of whiskey in his hands. A gesture. A silent agreement that all along, this man has been on my side. I didn’t know him for shit and hadn’t

spoken two words to him, but I knew. *I knew deep down* that whatever or whoever he was, he was for *her*.

He nods silently, his fingers releasing the bottle and I bring it to my mouth, swirling a large gulp back, because she was *missing*. Gone.

I rest it down and glare at the entire room. “My mate has gone, and this Ministry is over.” A couple of people shuffle in their spot, and I know that once I leave the room, they’ll have words to say, but they won’t get the chance to. “I don’t give a fuck if you agree or if you don’t. If you *fight me*, I will *kill* you and every single person that you love.”

Someone clears their throat and my head snaps right to them, the veins around my eyes like spiderwebs as I try to tame the wild rage that is threatening to take over.

“Son.” My mother doesn’t even finish the next words when Sin steps in front of me, baring his teeth.

“Anyone got a problem with what my brother is saying...” Sinner turns his head over his shoulder, and I see the dimple in his cheek sink in when he smirks slightly at me before going back to the strangers in our home. “Then speak now or I’ll *forever slaughter your peace*.” Silence.

I keep my eyes on my mother, my jaw ticking. She studies my brothers before coming back to me. I watch as she slowly sinks into her chair, rolling her hand out as if to hurry, but I’ve said what I’ve said and right now, this shit isn’t what’s important to me.

Right now... I need to find London. Right after I find the little cunt that leaked who she was.

Twenty-Two



L ondon

I REACH OUT TO THE CLOUDS, LAUGHING LOUDLY WHEN THE mist of rain residue dampens my palm. The sky is darker tonight because of Yemon, crimson red aggressively painted through the sky.

I inhale deeply, closing my eyes and squeezing the leather harness. Despite what just happened, I feel myself relax. My muscles release all of the anxiety and fear. When I open them again, the wings of the dragon slap against the air as he drives us forward. I reach out, my hand touching the tough scales of his long neck. “You saved me.” He continues to fly us forward, and I lean down, fatigue spiraling through the marrow of my bones. “Sleep.”

He huffs, and if I didn’t know... I’d say it was in agreement. With his wide body offering me a secure space to crawl forward, I rest my head against him and close my eyes. “Just for a second.”

“Oh my god!” I shove Ben playfully as I fall backwards onto my mattress, my hair fluffing up around my face. It was

the night of my sixteenth birthday, and of course Ben was being Ben and not wanting me to go and explore the big bad world of high school partying. I think this is why my uncle liked him so much. Because deep down, even though Ben was far from a nerd, he just had a particular taste, and that taste would always be swallowed very quickly whenever I was in the picture. I used to feel bad for the girls he dated and slept with. They all knew that I was his priority, but as the years went on, I found myself thankful that I could be that person for him, or he most likely would have tripped and fell into Nick Cannon territory with his hundred kids.

“What? She was hot, wasn’t she?” He falls down onto my computer chair, resting his foot up on the side of my bed. I turn my head slightly, bringing my eyes to his.

“Yes, she was very beautiful but, Ben, she was a bully in middle school!” I widen my eyes at him, urging his memories to move to the frontal lobe of his brain.

He clicks his fingers together, leaning forward until his face is close to mine. “Right! The swim team, when she shoved that girl in two seconds before we started, all because she had heard that she was a threat.”

“That amongst other things.”

“Like the time I saved you from her library antics with the yogurt?” He raises a perfect eyebrow and I lose myself in him for a second. The only person outside of my uncle that I’ve truly felt connected to and comfortable around. I wish I made friends as much as friends wanted to make me, but the truth was that I wasn’t interested. He gave me everything I’d ever need in a friend and then some.

“I was purposely not mentioning that...” I hide the chuckle behind my smirk.

He reaches forward, curling my hair around his finger. "When are you going to get it, Lonnie?" He leans forward, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. "I'll always save you."

The bed beneath me shakes and I moan, swiping the dribble from my mouth as I scrub the sleep from my eyes. I almost slide sideways when I remember I'm riding an actual fucking dragon.

A dragon!

Shoving upward slightly, I peek a look over the side to see the outline of an island. I can't make out much right now, but the rugged edges of the cliff and sand clouds hovering above have me ducking my face into the collar of my shirt to filter out the particles. The dragon beneath me tilts forward to slightly nosedive toward what looks to be an island, and the closer we get, the more I realize what this place might be. I've read the Book of Nightmares more times than I can count trying to find a way to feel connected to the world I didn't grow up in, and I'm pretty sure this is the island it speaks of.

The tips of mountains get larger the closer we get, the concrete buildings, and worn huts hanging from trees. The dragon takes a hard right, before soaring down. The wind whips me across my forehead before he lands on the ground with a loud thud.

I swing my legs over the side, my feet hitting dust. Behind us, the cliff drops off into nothing but a bed of fog, and when I poke my head around his giant body, I see the entrance of a cave. It's jump off the edge or walk through darkness. Fuck, I think it is the place I've read about.

Running my hand up the long side of the dragon, my hands bumping over the mountains of scales, I reach his face,

touching the side of his chin. He moves into my embrace, his eyes closing slightly as he huffs.

“Thank you.”

His head dips slightly, before he gestures toward the entrance of the cave. I look between him and the dark hole. “Really?”

A low sound vibrates from his belly as his feet patter. *Yes.*

Shit. Am I really going to trust this dragon? But even as the question enters my mind, it’s not long before it exists, because yes. Yes, I am going to trust him.

KNIGHT

There were two things I was absolutely sure of the second I met London Crow. One, she was fucking crazy, and two? I wanted to make her hurt just so I could lick her wounds better and leave the residue of my poison laced within her blood. I wanted her to *want* me. To *need* me. In true London Crow fashion, she fought the mating bond at every fucking chance she got. She was wild and untamable. That’s what I admired most about her. Figures. Of course, the fates would put someone like her as my mate because any different and I’d be bored.

They knew what I needed.

They didn’t test me.

They fucking blessed me with a beautiful curse that is London Fucking Crow.

I step closer to Alex, tilting my head to study her. I knew it was her. There was no one else stupid enough to do it. She'd let her jealousy cloud her judgment, signing her fucking death warrant.

She lost us all the minute London came around. Our time and energy were no longer free to fuck the royal cock-hungry Ordinary.

“Knight, please, I thought you denounced the bond!” She pulls on the ties around her wrists. I feel Legend step up behind me.

“Everyone get out.”

Legend pauses. I turn my head slightly over my shoulder. “Now.”

I wait until I hear the door close, and the silence falls around us. Unbuttoning my shirt, I make my way to the dresser in the corner of the room. “Do you know whose room this is, Alex?”

The fact that I'd put my cock in this mudslide itches the back of my head. An itch only a six-inch blade can scratch. When she doesn't answer, I raise my brows. “Hmmm? Don't go quiet now...” The chair she's tied to scrapes across the floor and I turn back to face her, shuffling out of my shirt. “We both know how *loud* you tend to be...”

Her eyes fall over my chest, down to my abs and lower. I almost want to rip her fucking eyeballs out and feed them to her.

“I—I thought you would like that I did that, My Lord...”

I snicker, my heartbeat slowing the longer time goes on. Even without London anywhere near, I can still feel her presence, as if she stains the walls in every room she walks into. “I’m not your Lord...”

I close the distance between us, until my boot meets her bare foot. She tugs on the ties around her wrist, hard enough for Hellhounds Bite to sprinkle down to the floor in droplets of lava.

“Please... please don’t kill me.”

“It’s your fault she’s being hunted now.”

“Bu—” before the words can leave her sinful mouth, I reach into her chest until I feel the pounding of her heart beating against my palm. *Thud. Thud.* She gasps, her mouth falling open into a perfect O as the blood slowly drains from her face. She turns a ghastly shade of white, before crimson slowly leaks out from between her lips, sliding down the side of her chin and dropping onto my boot.

“They want her dead. Because of you.” I squeeze a little, just enough to feel the heavy organ turn to jam between my fingers. The whites in her eyes burst red, before I yank my hand out, holding the dying symbolism for love.

Her body falls back, and I’m left staring at the dark hole left in her chest where her heart used to be. Tossing it onto her lap, I hear the door close behind me as I swipe my nose with my bloody hand, stepping backwards while keeping my eyes on her withering corpse.

“Okay, I knew that was going to happen. Why the fuck did they leave you in here alone?” Silver pats me on the shoulder, but it does nothing. Nothing to simmer the rage that I feel bleeding through me as every second passes.

“I need to find her.” I turn to face the door, reaching for my shirt and tossing it over my shoulder just as Sinner walks through.

He holds my eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Even before I can truly register what I’m feeling, he picked it up.

Throwing the doors open with nothing but a thought alone, a sudden sharpness stabs at my chest, and my brows crash together as I widen my feet in attempt to hold my balance, but still my body sways. My muscles don’t freeze or clench; they tear, one by fucking one.

My brothers turn at the sound of the door.

My face constricts, lips fucking trembling from an ache I’ve never felt. A pain so fucking sharp my eyes fall to my chest to see what the fuck has been driven through it, but the only blood on my skin is blood I spilled moments ago.

“What the fuck.” Sinner darts for me, and within a second I’ve crossed the long hallway, falling to the floor as my legs give out.

My knees crack against the marble floor and every part of me fucking crumbles from the inside out.

The pain is sharp and fucking searing, like someone’s taken the scales of a silver snake and ground them, injecting them straight into my black-blooded veins.

“Brother, talk to us.” Legend’s eyes trace my blood smeared body, attention snapping over my shoulder to take in the massacre I left behind me.

I growl, teeth clenched and fangs freeing themselves as my claws do the same, but the moment they’re at full descent, they

retract.

I gasp, dropping against my brother's chest. "I think ... fuck. I think I'm fucking dying."

Sin and Legend look from me to Creed, hoping our big brother has the fucking answers.

When Sin's eyes narrow, I tip my head to look up at Creed.

His arm shifts so I'm cradled in it so he can see me better.

He presses on my chest, right over my heart. "Knight..."

As if out of my own fucking body, my head flings back as my eyes roll into the back of my fucking head. An animalistic scream tears out of my chest viciously. My limbs start to shake when they lay me flat against the cold marble. I dig my nails into the ground, banging my head against it until I hear it split from the impact and warm liquid spills down my skull.

I pant, trying to catch up with what is happening to me. It feels like a fist was driven into my skin; my chest plate torn wide open.

And then... nothing.

An overpowering sense of numbness falls over me, my body going still, eyes wide and I swear to god, my heart stops fucking beating. Blood stops flowing.

Gifted or not, the blood in our veins is vital, a source of our power. Our hearts, though black as a winter's night, are what keeps us alive and moving, what keeps us sane and prevents us from going feral. The birthplace of our bonds before our souls' feast on them.

It's what links us to our mate—

Electricity shoots down my spine and I snap upright, panic like I've never felt prickling over my skin. Loss like I've never fucking known. *Except we know that's not true.* I know loss. I pretty much kicked the bitch out the door and locked it behind her.

"No." I jump to my feet, slamming at my chest with my fist. The bubbling fury that won't leave is intensifying as I walk in fucking circles.

"No, no, no..." I clench my eyes closed, searching the depths of my fucking soul. Stretching my magic beyond reason.

Baby, no...

I drag my hands through my hair, tugging and tearing and spinning. My glassy eyes meet my brother's. "Creed."

His face falls, eyes dropping to his feet.

"Creed, no. It has to be something else!" I shout, but I know my words are pointless.

Because I know.

I know because that part of her, the tether that linked me to my mate, my fucking girl to me, it's torn. Severed at the very base.

The bond I fought against, the calm I craved, the fucking home she created within me, the purpose she gave me without even fucking knowing it... all gone.

"I can't fucking feel her."

"What do you mean?" Legend pushes forward. "What do you mean, Knight!"

Sinner steps up, shoulders tight, expression tense as he works his way into my mind. “She’s ... gone.”

Gone.

The bond is gone.

My soul is torn.

My heart empty.

Mother comes around the corner then, eyes wide with panic when she spots me on the floor.

But then something strange happens. She freezes, takes me in from head to toe, her expression smoothing out as she comes to the conclusion all on her own. “So, she’s finally dead.”

It’s not a question. It’s a stated fact, one that rattles my bones and leaves me powerless. Literally.

I feel no energy coursing through me. No spark or being beneath my skin.

London. My beautiful, dark little doll... is dead.

And it’s all my fucking fault.

No sooner does the thought weave its way through me when an explosion sounds.

A fire starts at the end of the hall, the doors flying off in hundreds of small shards.

My brothers jump to their feet, power surging from their fingertips and then the room behind me is washed away by a fucking tsunami.

The water whirls this way, the fire growing and billowing from the other side, and then the skies open up.

Thunder and lightning rain down above us, zapping at my skin and jolting me.

I feel none of it.

My brothers yell.

Our mother shouts.

I close my eyes, begging the fucking monster who created me to take me in his arms and keep me there until I'm nothing but ash at his feet.

Twenty-Three



London

THE MOMENT I STEP THROUGH THE TUNNEL, I HEAR THE HEAVY wings of the dragon who saved me beat against the wind as he leaves me in the unknown. It makes no sense, but a sense of loss wraps around me knowing he's no longer here. I lift my chin in stubbornness and let the darkness of the cave swallow me whole.

With each step I take, a new sensation washes over me. Strange sounds echo against the damp stone walls.

There are sharps snaps then harsh screams, blood-curdling cries for help, and then total silence. Strangely, quiet falls like a weight, dragging my shoulders down until every step is a hard fight. My feet feel like a bag of stones as I force them forward, deeper into the darkness with no sign of light to come. And then the sounds begin again, only this time they're closer.

The deep growl vibrates through my mind, ricocheting from right to left, left to right, and then a sharp sting scrapes down the length of my spine. My back bows, my palm flying

and pressing against my chest as my heart beats ten times faster than before. If I weren't dead, technically speaking, I would swear I was having a heart attack. The pain is that real, that ghastly. Then, once again, silence.

Fearful of what might come next, I hesitate to move, but whatever spirits lie within this cave clearly aren't a fan.

Wind swoops in behind me and it's either take a step or fall flat on my face, so I move my damn feet, forcing them one in front of the other, and again, everything gets worse.

The muffled screams and whispered words are no longer distant sounds.

They're beacons, echoing around me and swallowing me whole as reality comes crashing down around me.

Images flash across the walls as my entire body shakes. I take them in like watching a carousel of Polaroid images flick through a projector.

Me at Ben's hockey game ... staring at Knight and his brothers across the arena.

Me kissing Sinner thinking he was Knight at a party.

Me sitting on Legend's lap as Sinner pretends to be Knight, his tongue fucking mine.

Me on my back, Knight naked and hovering above me.

Me running, Knight catching me and waking in Rathe.

Fighting him.

Hating him.

A bond beating to life in my chest.

Needing him.

Wanting him.

Knight's possessive touch, his tender words whispered.

The Queen's sharp glare and the harsh revealed truth.

Knight's hatred and disgust.

My escape.

My dorm.

Ben...bloody and breathless, lifeless at the feet of the man
fate says was mine.

I fall to my knees as the dryness of my throat feels like
swallowing sandpaper. The tangy taste of vomit slithers up my
throat as the acid spills out of my stomach and onto the damp
ground beneath me.

I crumble, pain and sorrow threatening to swallow me
whole as everything comes back at once.

Knight's acceptance turned vengeance.

Me broken in a cell my so-called people put me in.

The King's visit.

The sanctuary.

Knight's soft hands and broken whispers. His accidental,
unmistakable love and complete and total acceptance.

His claiming.

His letting me go...

I wail into the darkness, the images cutting off with one
last picture across the walls, only this one isn't from my own
memories, but his.

It's Knight on his knees, alone in his room, wishing for a
way to be mine.

I hurl more vomit toward the ground.

Hatred and confusion created a toxic cocktail that has me wishing I could turn back and throw myself off the cliff I was dropped on that led me to this moment, but the spirits won't allow it. I've entered their cave, and they want me out.

Once again, I drive forward, falling several times as my knees and pulse crunch and scrape against the hard ground. The skin on my knees splits open, but I don't care. I need out.

Just when I'm sure the pain is too much, that I can't take it and it alone will kill me where I crawl, a light appears at the end, the figure of a female shadowing the front.

"We've got a new girl!" she shouts, her voice raspy and thick.

My body falls, my muscles giving way as she reaches into the cave. Her hands grip me around my upper arms as she yanks me from the depths of whatever hell this cave is made of.

The girl stands above me, head tipped to the side with the sun that I haven't seen in days bright behind her.

"Welcome to Exile Island."

I was right.

This *is* Exile Island, where the unwanted and unwelcome Gifted are thrown.

But I shouldn't know that.

That wasn't a real memory, me reading that book.

It was a fake one Knight gave me when he stole the truth from me.

I want to be angry, but I dig deep down, searching for that rage, begging it to build, but I can't find it, and that makes me want to spew all over again.

Who cares if he did it to steal my pain and fix what he broke.

It's wrong. He killed my best friend because he thought I killed his sister.

I should hate him, but I don't know how.

Not anymore.

Not after everything.

And for that ... I hate myself.

Wait.

Wait!

Thought I killed his sister?!

I close my eyes, searching for the memory once more. A memory that once again isn't mine.

It's his and it's clear as day.

I didn't kill Temperance Deveraux... so who the fuck did?

My mind is a fucking mess, a million thoughts I can't make out swarming me all at once, to the point I feel dizzy. My vision keeps blurring, but I blink through it, trying to focus on the warmth of the sun as it beams against my back. I'll

admit, I've missed it while in Rathe. Growing up in the human world might sound like a nightmare to most Gifted, but there were a lot of parts I can appreciate now that my mind is mine again.

Like the sun and the ocean. I look toward the edge of the island, the sharp rocky cliffs that look like they lead into nothing but clouds. My senses are on fire, a hundred times what they were. I hear the crash of waves below. I smell the salt in the air.

Exhale Island isn't in Rathe.

It's hidden on Earth.

I try to focus on the fact that I'm on familiar ground again, seeking a sense of peace but there is none. Now more than ever I feel like I don't belong, but as I look to the gorgeous girl leading me down the black stone path, a small pain forms in my chest for her.

Because really, she must feel it too. Everyone here must, and I imagine that's the point, forcing them out of their homes and into a world they don't even belong to.

It's a punishment crueler than death.

The girl adjusts the dagger at her hip, tossing her long, wavy black hair over her shoulder as she looks up toward the sky. I follow her line of sight, my eyes widening as not one, but three dragons shoot up from behind the cliff, wings stuck to their side as they race high into the sky and the sound of their bodies shooting overhead. As fast as they appear, they're gone, nothing but a trail of smoke in their wake.

"Holy shit."

The girl chuckles. "Yeah. They're more competitive than the lycans," she says, facing forward and I take her in better.

Her leather boots are a deep brown and heelless, reaching just above her knee. Her pants look like leggings, but the material isn't one I recognize, and a black tank top tucked into the waste. She wears some sort of holster over her shoulders. It's the same color as her boots, the thick bands curving around her shoulders and meeting at her spine where the straps become one. It lies flat against her back, looping around her ribs and clips like overalls without flaps. She has a dagger slipped in the sheaths on both the right and left side and a holster belt clipped loosely around her waist, two small pouches on each side, but I couldn't guess as to what's inside them. She even has a small headpiece—again, a perfect match for the gear and boots—that lies across her forehead, the straps hidden beneath her thick black hair.

A small jewel is pressed into the center of it and when she glances at me over her shoulder, I spot matching ones pressed into her skin at her temples. Her eyes are as dark as her hair and her lips a thick mauve color. She looks like some kind of warrior princess who just stepped off a mythical battlefield.

She smiles and I realize I've been checking her out for the last five minutes.

“Sorry.”

“Don't be,” she says in that raspy tone of hers, her gaze traveling over me. “You're not so bad yourself, little one.”

Right. She must be an easy five-nine. Maybe taller.

Fuck, I probably look like some wallowing, weak excuse of a woman to her.

I'm all five feet, eyes puffy red from tears, and I probably have dried vomit on my knees. My arms are wrapped around my middle to try and dull the ache.

Little L.

Little London.

Little Doll.

I wince as the Deveraux boys' voices assault me all at once, shaking off the strange vibration that throbs deep inside my mind.

Thankfully, the girl begins talking, so I work extra hard to focus on her.

“So, like I said, this is Exile Island. Considering the way you looked at the dragons, I’m going to assume you’re not completely familiar, so let me break it down like you’re a newbie. This place is for the unwanted, untamed, and uncontrollable. Most people assume it’s all about the bad guys being kicked to the curb for bad shit, but that’s not exactly true. Nearly a hundred percent of the Gifted here are Stygian. They did do bad shit, but bad by the Ministry’s terms. Some are here for as little as refusing to go to Rathe for university, others killed in cold blood according to the people who sentenced them.”

“So, no one is really all that threatening?” I ask, hoping for the right answer.

“Oh, no.” She laughs. “They’re all threatening at this point and, girl, don’t get me wrong. I was only getting started. We do have murderers, feral shifters, and downright psychopaths. We have people who lost faith in the Dark Crown, others who hate the Ministry, and those who rebel against it all. Those who weren’t so dangerous when they arrived, are now, because this place exists to drive you mad.”

She pauses, the black stone path ending a half an inch before her boots. She opens the pouch at her left side, pulling

out a small fistful of glittery black dust. She blows it in a straight line before her.

The rocky path leading to the tree line several miles away begins to blur until a black hole opens in the center of it, revealing the truth—the distant path is an illusion meant to block out what's on the other side.

The girl looks back at me. “If the Giftless were to stumble upon the island, this little trick would keep them walking in place for miles and miles.” She smirks, sweeping a hand out as if proud. “After you.”

“Has that ever happened?” I wonder.

She nods. “Couple times. They were drained dry by the vamps within minutes of landing.” She shrugs. “The illusion is the result of the last one, and hey, that helicopter they flew in on gave us shit we never thought we'd come across. Anyway. Go.”

Pulling in a full breath, I step through the opening, my eyes widening as I take in the site. The concrete buildings and old huts are built deep in the trees I spotted when the dragon flew us closer, and for the first time, I spot more Gifted. A few dangle by their legs from tree branches, while others fight and wrestle in a giant bed of mud.

There's shouting from the left and deep growls from the right and my feet slow.

“This is a calm afternoon.” She notices my hesitation and turns to fully face me for the first time. “I guess I should just tell you now, if it wasn't obvious already. You're going to hate it here. It's not a question, just a fact. You're officially alone as far as your past life goes, and it will never get better. The pain will never dull. This isn't one of those everything heals with

time situations. On Exile Island, it's the opposite." She looks behind her and back to me again.

"You're completely blocked from everyone outside of this place. To them, you no longer exist, other than in their memories, but they're not blocked from you."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning if you're connected to someone, or like running in a pack or something that links you to others, you will feel them every single day, always, but they won't know that. They'll feel nothing from you, so in time ... they will heal and forget you, but you will never be offered the same reprieve. It's a twisted game the Ministry likes to play with us. Torture without touch, we like to call it. Judging by the way you came out of the cave, it revealed some fucked-up shit to you. And based on my experience, I'd say you have a mate. Sorry, but you'll feel him for the rest of your life and unfortunately, there's no way for you to take your own here. It's literally the only magic that's blocked here. Temporary death is a common tool all of us use, but permanent?" She shakes her head, her long dark hair falling over her shoulders in massive waves. "The Ministry would never allow us such luxury."

I look around the island.

It looks like something out of that show Ben used to watch, *Naked and Afraid*. Everything is makeshift, but with added touches of magic. And helicopter parts.

The trees are tall, blocking out most of the sun and the water sits still along the shore. For the Gifted, the darkness and energy the galaxy provides is not just a preference but a necessity. It's an energy source for their power, one of the reasons those at Rathe must feed on others so much to keep

their bodies fueled, meaning the people here feed off one another to keep themselves going.

As I think it, I pause, wrapping my arms around myself as pressure falls on my chest.

That's not my knowledge. That was straight out of Knight's mind and memory.

He's literally woven within me now.

It's as soothing as it is revolting.

"So, the Ministry runs this place?" I hear myself ask, trying to focus on anything but the incessant tug-of-war inside me.

"We run it, but they created it. It's a never-ending prison. Eternal hell and not the fun one." She turns, walking backward with a smirk. "Probably not the welcome speech you were hoping for but be happy it was me on cave watch today and not Frenchie. He's a prick." She sticks her hand out, her fingernails painted a shiny black. "I'm Haide."

I hesitate, wondering if I should spill all my shit up since lying fucked me and got me here.

Knight fucked me and got me here...

Literally.

I swallow. "I was raised as London, but my Gifted born name is Villaina... Lacroix."

Her brows jump. "Well ... some of them will definitely kill you, but again...you can't really die here so." She shrugs, throwing her arm over me. "Let's go meet the others, little Slasher, but you might want to hang on to this."

Haide passes me a small knife I didn't see her pull out and faces forward. "New blood!"

Fuck.

Twenty-Four



K night

MUFFLED SOUNDS RING OUT AROUND ME, BUT MY EYES WON'T open.

Darkness, a new, heavier kind than I'm used to, seeps into my veins, weighing me down until I'm nothing but a black void. Hollow and starved for something that no longer exists.

I'm fucking dying. Or a part of me is, and it's stealing my strength one memory at a time. This is like nothing I've researched about when a bond is broken or rejected. When that happens, the rejected goes insane, lost to blood lust or completely fucking feral. Like London was on her way to becoming before I erased myself from her mind.

It's never been proven, but the whispered rumors in Rathe say that's how The Slasher was born—a man thrown away by the woman the fates gave him. It makes sense when you think about it. As the days following a broken bond go on, and the self-loathing turns into something else, the rejected begin to crave the blood of the bonded. They feast on those with tethered souls.

But this? I try to swallow. This empty, depraved helplessness clawing at my organs is not a bond being broken.

It is the result of the death of your soul keeper, the final *extraction* of a bond.

My mate is dead.

My London ... dead.

My body shakes, and I vaguely register it's from the touch of another, but I fall deeper into my mind, seeking hers. I search the depths of my gift but all I find is an empty fucking hole where she used to be. A heart with no beat. A sky with no stars.

A king without his fucking queen.

Baby, I'm so sorry.

“Knight!”

I jolt, eyes peeling open to find a blurry, bloody version of my older brother. “Creed?” I rasp, swaying.

What the hell?

My wrists are bound by fire, as I tilt my head up to see what I'm tied to, only to find a rope glowing a brilliant red connecting me to the ceiling. “Fuck. Where are we?”

Creed hangs beside me, kicking Legend awake as I turn to find Sinner on the other side, trying to pull himself up from the rope.

“Can't. Fuck. They've got us by a Hellhounds Leash.” The very same shit my father used to keep his Hellhounds secure until we needed them. “Who did this?”

Creed finally kicks Legend hard enough for him to stir awake. “I don’t know. The last thing I remember is going to sleep.”

I scan over my memories, trying to think of the last thing I remember. “I killed Alex, then my body, it felt the bond leave me and I—” I squeeze my eyes closed. “Fuck. Then I don’t know. I don’t remember anything after that.”

“I know who this is...” Sinner growls, finally dropping in defeat. “The fucking Ministry. Only they had access to dad’s Hellhounds, and only to them are we a fucking threat.”

“I don’t give a fuck. They’re dead.” I look around the space to try to find our options, but the dulling ache in my chest refuses to release me. Like a fucking constant throbbing of guilt, London’s claw marks that she left on my heart have no chance of leaving. I’m not sure I want them to. If the pain of losing her is all I have left, then I’ll feel it for the rest of my life.

“There’s no exit. If I’m guessing right and it is the Ministry, then we’re locked in the vault below the meeting room, since it’s the only place no one can enter unless you’re a Ministry member.”

“So, in other words...” Legend laughs manically. “We’re fucking stuck in here until they don’t need us anymore.”

“Or kill us...” I say through gritted teeth.

“Why the fuck would they kill us?” Sinner asks from the side, and I have to fight everything inside of me to not tell them what I’ve been thinking all along. Or maybe they already know. *No. They don’t.*

“Have any of you noticed how calm mom has been since dad was murdered?” I keep my eyes peeled to the one door in

the room. Waiting for it to open, for one of the Ministry members to stroll through and finally tell us what the fuck has been going on.

Had they wanted this all along, to kill us, only waiting for the King to die? Possibly. Most likely.

“Expand on that.” Creed tries to turn toward me. “Are you saying she put us here?”

“No, I’m saying she isn’t at all upset about the fact that her *mate* is dead.”

“Where the hell is Mom? She was with us, in the hall.” Legend frowns between us. “Think they killed her like they likely did dad?”

“No,” Sinner spits. “They’d make us watch if they did. She’s likely locked up somewhere with talons in her temples so they can steal her every last bit of information to use shit against us.”

I tug on the rope again, even though the fire burns through my skin. The way I continue to heal is a weak distraction from the turmoil that’s spinning inside of me. I think over the people in the Ministry.

I killed Storm, leader of the Ordinaries, so that only leaves three other options.

Magdalena, leader of the Mages and ruler of Rathe U. Naw. Too weak. Her need for attention outweighs her want for chaos and destruction, and she has a son to think about. Not that his existence outweighs her position.

Odin, leader of the Monsters. Quiet. The silent leader in the corner who watches other people make decisions while obviously compiling his own opinion internally. I’d never really noticed him much until the King died. *Suspect*.

Agro speaks for the Fae. Don't fucking like him or his god-complex. Definitely him, but he couldn't do this alone.

And the Royal Monarch—us—rulers of all Dark Creatures that rule every nightmare you were told as a kid.

Who. The fuck. Out of these people would do that. *Only two.* Agro and Odin.

Someone kicks my leg and I look up to see Sinner glaring at me. "Get the fuck out of your head."

"I can't feel her anymore." I let the words fall from my lips, even though I want to chew them up and spit them out. The room falls silent.

"Are you sure, Knight..." Legend breaks first. "Are you sure you didn't just ... finally manage to break the bond like you wanted?"

I didn't want that. Or I did but that was before, that was in the very fucking beginning. Even when I hated her, when I took her and locked her away, when I thought she took someone I loved from me, and when she wanted to leave me to go to Ben, I still wanted her, I just didn't know it was me. I thought it was the bond forcing me to feel what I was.

I was fucking wrong.

It was me.

I did want her.

I do love her.

"He didn't break the bond." Creed grabs everyone's attention then, but his eyes don't leave the door. "He completed it." Finally his eyes move to mine. "I saw it in his head the day he let me in to share the truth about Temperance's death with us all."

“Knight?” Sinner’s tone is laced with more frustration than I’ve ever heard, so I look to him. He stares long and hard, a small frown etched across his face.

I didn’t tell my twin and I tell him everything. He’s hurt and he wants to know why. He deserves that. All my brothers do.

“I knew if people found out who she was it was over for her. They would never accept her as their Queen. There was only one thing I could give her in this life, so I gave it.”

“Her Ethos,” Legend breathes.

I nod, moving my eyes back to the door.

“Did you see it?” Sinner wonders.

My lip twitches despite everything. “She would have been fierce if she had half a chance to figure out what lived beneath her skin.”

A sharp ache jabs at my ribs and I inhale deeply, welcoming the pain.

Mother never showed a sign of pain, never got her black veins either.

Creed’s head snaps my way.

“We’re going to get out of this, and when we do, we will find who took from you, brother. They won’t get away with it. It’s fucking on as soon as we get the fuck out of *this*.” Legend gestures to the ceiling. Just as I’m about to open my mouth to answer, footsteps echo through the walls. Boots slap against puddles of water, and then a distinct sound of heels clinking across the concrete.

“Two of them. A woman. Magdalena?” Sinner whispers around the clunking sound of the rope hitting the ceiling.

“Nah. Can’t be. She’s a vindictive bitch, but she has too much to lose.”

“True,” Creed answers, just as the door handle shakes and everything else around me falls away, because whoever walks through this door has just signed their death warrant.

“Hello...*brothers.*”

Twenty-Five



L ondon

I'VE BEEN LYING IN A HAMMOCK HAIDE HUNG FOR ME AT THE farthest edge of the forest for I don't know how long, trying to make sense of some of the things going on in my head, and as painful and confusing as it is... I think I figured some of it out.

The night Knight came into that room at the sanctuary, he didn't only erase the pain and my knowledge of the bond between us, he accepted it.

My angry, broken mate accepted me. He *bonded* with me.

My bond is alive, his claiming complete.

The black veins along my body and the very blood that courses through me is infused with his.

My Ethos is awakened.

It's a part of himself he didn't have to give me, but did, even if he couldn't have his own unlocked.

He gave me all of him, and then he let me go as best he could, knowing that meant he would never ascend to his higher self. Never become the King he was meant to be. He

did that for me, the girl he swore he hated. That wasn't good enough or strong enough.

The girl he said he didn't want.

He lied. To me and himself.

Knight freed me from the prison I accused the fates of locking me in, closing himself on the side of the bars he released me from.

I can see him in my head, hear him in my thoughts now that the barrier is broken in my mind, but I don't understand the empty numbness I'm feeling from him right now. Why is he in pain? Why does he mourn the loss of me?

He chose to let me go.

That's what the courtship was about. He couldn't take me as his Queen, and he knew it, so he was prepared to take another.

He probably did the minute I was no longer in his face, reminding him of what he wanted and couldn't have.

The thoughts mixed with the raw ache, that isn't my own, are too much, so I use my newfound shield to block it out, but then the moment he's cleared of my consciousness, the pain intensifies. It grows so strong I roll, flipping to the ground with a hard thud.

I pant, digging my hands in the dirt as the stabbing sensation shoots through me and I throw my head back with a scream.

A scream that cuts off when the bushes behind me rustle in warning. Spinning, I freeze.

Six Gifted inch toward me, their teeth sharp and eyes wild. They would look human, if only not for the monstrous

features of their faces.

They're vamps.

The blood in my veins runs faster, pulsing harder at my throat and I swear it's as if my gift is taunting them. Daring them to come closer, but that bitch needs to chill.

I can't take six vamps at once.

I'm not even sure I can take one!

They all circle around me in full form. My link to Knight's mind tells me they aren't just vamps, they're the kind that are birthed from demons, cured over time to become exactly that—evil. No redemption lays in the pits of their eyes, just torment. Greed. Malice.

“Well, well...” one of them croaks, and it leans down slowly, reaching out to touch me with its long, colorless fingernail. “What did the dragon drag in...”

I whack its hand away, glaring up at the ugly creature. “Something that's not for you.”

It chuckles, leaning back while holding its belly. The rest of its little clan follow with their hyena-like laughs. The trees bend with the wind, as the gray sky peers down at me from above. Bleak. Colorless and toxic. This island is a photograph trapped in sepia, blind to the naked eye.

Before I can answer, something sharp sinks into my neck and I freeze, my muscles paralyzed. I reach up slowly, my hand coming to a head of thick, unwashed black hair. Grease slides over my fingers as I slowly squeeze a pile of it in my hand and pull back with a loud scream, her teeth still connected to my vein.

“Motherfucker!” I shout through gritted teeth, shoving the girl away. This is it. This is how I die because there’s no way I can fight them. Blood gushes out of the wound on my neck, and if that doesn’t kill me, these blood thirsty animals will.

“Oh no...” the vamp on the floor croaks, dread visibly washing over her as her shaky hands slowly lift to her lips. Her eyes widen, icy dread as clear as day, as she gazes up at me, her pack slowly retreating with each passing second.

Fear bristles through the leaves that swirl around my feet, and for whatever reason that I do not know, I don’t run. She looks up at me, the skin around her eyes softening as she slowly shuffles to her hands and knees. “Forgive me, Queen. For we did not know.”

“What?” I breathe, the world tilting sideways until I lose my balance. The ground growing closer and closer to me is the last thing I remember before everything goes black.

Sweat drips down the side of my face and my heartbeat slows. I suck in a deep breath and try to open my eyes, only they refuse to part. Fuck. What the fuck is happening now.

Hands lock around my ankles, shaking me. “Wake up, London. Wake up.” I try again, but nothing’s working. The voice is familiar, but not enough to touch the sides of my brain.

“London!” A loud screech pierces my ears and I fly up from where I’m lying, my eyes wide open.

With my heart stammering and sweat sleek over my skin, I take in my surroundings. A long dark corridor sits in front of me, with nothingness on either side. A small red dot sits at the other end, and I stammer to my feet slowly, careful not to fall.

It's like the inside of a dream, one that isn't quite a nightmare, but isn't exactly pleasant.

"London... follow my voice, baby..."

"Knight?" I whisper, the hairs on the back of my neck raising. This could be a trick. Those stupid fucking vamps and whatever games they're playing, and not to mention Haide.

"It's not, baby. Follow my voice..."

"I don't believe you..." I answer through a soft whisper, unable to fight the magnetic pull that's directing me down. As much as I want to fight it, the red dot expands the more I walk, and I know I'm getting closer to whoever it is.

"The last time I fucked you, I took your memories."

It is him.

I gasp, annoyance drowning out the noise. "I hate you," I whisper, unsure if it's true.

"I know, baby. But walk to me."

I allow my feet to take me to the end, as each passing minute goes by the more my body relaxes. It's Knight. I know it is. Finally, the red dot is now large, a single door sitting on the other side. I reach forward, squeezing the handle to push it open but it doesn't budge. I try again, this time more forceful and calling on my Ethos to help me. I crash forward when it gives way unexpectedly, stumbling to the ground. Filtered a brilliant red, tears prick the sides of my eyes when I see the carnage around me. Blood and brain matter splatter the walls, as I count the bodies on the floor.

One.

Two.

Three.

“Knight!” I scream so loud my throat burns—

I fly up from the ground, dust whipping around my face in a tornado as the stones bite into the palms of my hands. Heat rolls over me in waves, as I take in the vamps surrounding me. There’s more this time. Twenty or so, all gathering around me. I turn to break away but stop when hot flames lick the dark air. Burning embers crack through the night and I turn back to the monsters in front of me. I’m not entirely sure if they’re all vamps, but they’re all *something*.

I can ... feel them.

“Villaina...” Her voice drifts in from behind me and I shift slightly, the gravel beneath my boots crunching. Haide emerges from behind the flames, coming into full view. Her dark hair is slicked down perfectly but left in a sleek wave that travels down her lean back. Black charcoal stains the rims of her eyes, her makeup so polished it’s undoubtably magic. There’s no question how beautiful Haide is, even though I don’t quite know if the right word is beautiful, since she’s slightly terrifying. Her cheekbones are as sharp as the sword she carries strapped to her hip, and her lips remain stained with her signature mauve shade.

She clears her throat, just as she lowers herself down onto a chair made of a tree stump, gesturing to the other beside her. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were checking me out.” She holds my stare. When music starts playing in the background, and the monsters all busy themselves with whatever else they’re doing, I slowly take her offer.

“Maybe you don’t know better.”

She hands me a glass filled with a thick white substance, and I take it. “Well, if you’re going to poison me, I think I’ve got no more fight in me.”

She sighs, crossing her leg over the other until the slit that stops at her hips from her tight leather pants falls open slightly. “I’m not going to poison you, Villaina.”

I bite my tongue, wanting to correct her with London, only I almost lose myself in the why. Why does it bother me that she’s calling me Villaina? I preferred it to London for so long... until I heard what it sounds like coming off Knight’s tongue. I let the silence sit between us, as some Lana Del Ray song plays. The fire cracks beside Haide, and I lose myself in the embers, the color deep inside reminding me of the nightmare just moments before. Do I tell her about that? I don’t trust her, but I don’t *not* trust her either.

I lift my glass to my mouth and let the opalescent liquid sit on my lips for a moment, before swallowing. I wince, my face scrunching. I don’t know what I was expecting but it wasn’t that.

“In the human world, this would be called tequila. Without the texture...”

She laughs, resting her hand on the armchair as a couple of naked women begin dancing around the fire. Their crimson hair blows in the wind as they move to the music. For a second, I’m painfully aware of my surroundings. The two heavysset men standing protectively behind Haide, and the party that’s unfolding in front of us.

“These buildings?” I point up to the abandoned skyscrapers that line both sides of the dusted street. It looks like New York City ten years after an apocalypse. “Do people stay in them?”

Haide shrugs, turning her chair to face me more. “Some do. Others don’t. Like me...” her head tilts. “When are you going to ask me?”

“Ask you what?” There are three things I want to ask her, so I’m going to need her to be more specific.

“If I’m going to help you save them?”

I pale, lowering my drink slowly to my lap. “Out of the three things I wanted to ask you, that wasn’t one of them.”

She smirks, and the way it curves over her perfectly straight teeth is criminal. Alarm bells should be ringing, but there’s also something about her aura that’s warm. She reminds me of a Black Tourmaline crystal. Dark, mysterious, sexy, grounded, and tough as fuck. “Well?”

I turn to face the masses, to see they’ve all broken off into groups, or are dancing in front of the fire, listening to music and drinking. I didn’t expect something so... human.

“I don’t know if I can trust you enough to ask you.” I should ask her how she knows about it, but I’ve given up on asking that same question. I only ever get the same response.

“Try me.”

I gesture out to the party. “Why didn’t they kill me?”

“Because you hold darkness inside of you that we bow to. I sensed it the moment you arrived. Next question.”

I shift around to face her. “Why would you help me?”

She leans close, the tip of her nose almost touching mine as she looks between my mouth and my eyes. “Because I’m bored.”

My eyes narrow. “Not good enough.”

“Because I can,” she answers honestly, her eyes widening slightly. She lifts her hand up and clicks her fingers, as dark smoke explodes around us with a bang. Glitter and black vapor rain from the sky, and I bring my hand up to cover my mouth, holding in my cough. The air thins out once again, only this time everyone who was here is now gone—including the two guards who were standing behind her.

“How’d you do that?” I ask, skeptical but intrigued. I don’t know how to read her. She’s nothing like I’ve ever met before.

“Magic. The only kind that I *can* do.”

I search her dark eyes, convinced she’s got to be a siren. “How?”

She studies my face closely. Seconds pass, until I think she’s not going to answer. “I was born here, Villaina.”

I lean back in my chair. Once again, the words have been taken out of my mouth. “Really? What does that mean?”

“It means I don’t exist.” She blinks over my shoulder slightly, before coming back to me, shuffling forward even further, her voice nothing but a whisper. “It means I can get people out...”

I pause, my pulse hammering. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not.” She winces. The sad frown I expected to see doesn’t come. The girl is cold as stone. “I wish I was.”

“So why are you still here if you can get people out?” I hiss harshly, afraid people can hear and put her in danger, which makes no sense since I shouldn’t give any fucks at all. I’ve only just met her, and technically, she left me for dead.

She shakes her head, the braid plaited into the side of her head moving over her shoulder. “I don’t want to. This is my home, it’s all I’ve ever known.” Her smirk is back. “But you? You, I can help.”

“I don’t know if you can. My nightmares aren’t exactly reliable.” I roll my eyes, annoyed with myself and how many I’ve had since meeting Knight.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Villaina...” she laughs, standing. “They’re all a message. You just have to figure out who the message is from.” She takes my hand with hers and I take a moment to look at it. Her wrist is decorated with leather bangles and charms. She’s a contradiction to all the ugliness Knight’s mind holds about this hellhole of an island.

Standing to my full height, which is not much beside her, I chew on my lip. “I saw red. Blood. Death. I think—” I hold her eyes. “I think they’re hurt, but they’re not dead.”

Her brows jump. “They?”

My hackles rise, darkness swirling at the edge of my vision, the sudden need to defend and protect them burning through me.

Haide raises a single brow, her amused gaze dropping to my hands. I look down to find them balled into fists and almost get embarrassed. It’s such a Giftless thing to do.

“So, you are mated, then.” She smirks, her attention falling to my neck. “I wasn’t sure if that battered bite was a reason for my heart to break or just your kink showing.”

I huff a laugh, the tension braided through my bones settling some, and I get the feeling that it was her intention when her eyes melt with unexpected softness.

But then her words creep a little deeper, and suddenly I'm no longer on an island for the exiled, and the eyes I'm seeing through are not my own.

A frown pulls at my face as the memory claws at my heart.

My skin prickles and my insides burn, begging me to go to her, to touch and hold and fuck her, but fuck her and fuck this bond that thinks it's in control. It's not.

It will never be.

It can't fucking be.

Forcing my eyes to stay focused forward, I ignore the bone crushing sensation to go to her and pretend I don't notice the probing looks from my brothers.

I bite into my tongue, the cinnamon flavor of my blood filling my mouth and I let it seep from the corners of my lips.

Instantly, the very moment it touches the air, London's head snaps this way. I feel her gaze like the touch of a dragon's tongue. The burn, the sharp cuts that seem to drag along my skin.

My limbs tremble with need, too many to name, and I lose the fucking battle.

My eyes snap up. Her glass-like ones lock with mine and my pulse thuds in my chest.

Mine. Every inch. Every fucking bit.

I don't have words for the heaviness the image and warring words leave behind as they fade into the back of my mind.

Seeing myself through Knight, I looked like a fucking psycho, a bloody broken mess standing there naked in front of everyone, mangling the mark he had left on my skin, driving the dual corkscrew into my flesh over and over. That's not what kills me though. It's the internal battle within Knight's mind that night that has my throat closing.

I thought he hated me for who I was or maybe for what I wasn't, but even when he thought I killed his sister, he couldn't let me go, no matter how hard he tried.

He was fighting against us, pretending our bond wasn't exactly what he wanted. That I wasn't exactly what he wanted, when the truth is ... I was.

Oh Knight.

The pain he's in now, it's different than he felt that night.

"I can feel him," I say quietly. "Something is wrong."

She breathes out a long breath, her shoulders relaxing. "You trust me."

"No, I—"

She brings her hand to my cheek and my eyes close at the connection. Warmth radiates through me. "We're going to save him."

"Them."

Her lips twitch. "Him, them, whoever the hell they are. I don't care. We save them. Kill who hurt you, and then I'll come home."

"You make it sound so simple." I look around. "People here will turn on you if you take me and leave them behind."

“People here will fight alongside you should you ask them.” Her words are strong and clear. She must see the disbelief in my gaze, so she reaches up, tucking my hair behind my ear and holds me still. “There is darkness running through your veins and not the kind that runs through theirs. I’m not linked to Rathe as they are, but I have grown up around Stygian born. Everyone on this island stems from the blood of dark souls, me included. For some reason, those souls recognize you as more, so therefore, you are.”

“Why aren’t you asking me why that is?”

“Because by the look in your eyes, Villaina Lacroix, you’re not really sure what the answer is yourself.” She regards me a moment before continuing. “I don’t need to know what you did to be dropped here and I don’t care about your life back in Rathe or wherever you came from. None of that matters to me. None of that is my business since I am nothing beyond this island.”

I watch her closely. “But?”

She nods. “But since the minute you landed on this island, my blood has run warmer than ever before. My magic is pulsing beneath my skin. Do you know what that tells me?”

“That I’m toxic.”

Haide laughs loudly, shaking her head as she stands up. “Yes, girl. Toxic as fuck, but I’m with it.” She holds her hand out, so I give her mine, letting her pull me to my feet. “I’ve sat around on this island for seventeen long ass years waiting for my purpose to reveal itself, wondering why the fates would bless the damned with a child who’d be damned just the same.”

“And now you think I’m the reason?”

She shrugs, smirking as she steps back. “Probably not, but that would be some shit, wouldn’t it?”

The both of us share a small laugh, and I watch as she pulls one of the daggers from the sheath at her side. She tosses it to me, and I catch it by the handle, eyeing my reflection in the sharp blade.

My white hair is brighter than ever before, and when I look into my eyes, a shadow shows itself. It steps closer to the surface staring back at me. It has no shape that I can see, but it’s strong, dark, and it’s *hungry*.

For vengeance.

For *him*.

A smile curves my lips and I swear she smiles back.

I look to Haide.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

She sticks her thumb and pointer finger between her lips and whistles.

I stare, turning when the floor rumbles and shakes beneath my feet. The wind whistles, thundering and roars, and then I see them.

Four, five ... six dragons curve over the edge of the cliff, their giant talons digging into the earth as they land with a bellowing boom that makes me stumble where I stand.

And then a seventh joins, but he doesn’t drop in the tight line the others have created, he soars overhead, slowly lowering until his massive body is before me.

He dips his head to the ground and still those green eyes are above my head.

“Hi again, friend,” I whisper, a strange sense of sadness falling over me but the moment my palm presses to his thick, sharp scales, it melts away. My scowl is small, and I swear the dragon turns into my touch. Tears build up in my eyes, but I don’t know why.

“Okay, new girl.” Haide calls and I look to find her already climbing onto the back of a giant, red dragon. “Where to?”

I move, climbing up on my dragon’s back and wrapping my hands around the reigns as I look to her. Closing my eyes, I try something I haven’t before. Something I’m not so sure will work.

I let myself fade to the background, allowing my bond to float forward and take control.

And then I see them.

Sinner, Creed, and Legend hang there, blood smeared along their chests and faces, small cuts and open gashes mar their skin. I suck in a breath.

They are in trouble. They were captured.

The eyes I’m seeing through must be Knight’s because he’s the only one missing. I try something, looking down and a whimper fights its way up my throat.

The dragon, my dragon, purrs beneath me, and my shaky palms instinctively flatten against him.

The handle of a dagger sticks from Knight’s gut, the blade buried deep into his flesh. Blood pools at his feet in a giant puddle, and rage dipped with fear licks across my skin.

Where are you, baby?

Something jolts at my mind, fighting against my intrusion, and suddenly Knight thrashes. The boys look over, frowning. Their lips move, but I can't hear sounds. I only have sight.

I look around, spotting the blood-splattered walls, all white in color, but it's the long red ropes made of magic that have my anger flaring.

I know those ropes, they're the ones that caged me in not that long ago.

I blink, looking to Haide. "You're not going to like this."

The dragons rise in unison, pink and blue swirls whirling overhead, and Haide lifts her chin, squaring her shoulders. Her decision already made regardless.

"Where to, Villaina?"

"The Ministry's meeting room."

The moment the last word leaves my lips we're swallowed into a vortex, the growl of a dragon ringing in my ears.

I'm coming, Knight.

I'm coming and I'll end them all.

Twenty-Six



K night

I'M GETTING DELUSIONAL. THE LOSS OF BLOOD TOO MUCH FOR my already weakened state.

They're draining us of our energy, and with it, our gifts. They can't take everything, the blood in our veins isn't the only place Royal magic lives, but they know that, just as they know they could never defeat us at full strength. They couldn't even defeat us at our weakest, but that's what my father's Hellhound chains are for.

If he knew these people would use these on his heirs, he would have torn their limbs off one by one, and only when their families lay dead at their feet, their beings nothing but a head on a torso with a slow beating heart, would he have ended them.

If he lived long enough to witness the betrayal of his own heir, he would kill her too.

I'm going to kill her.

How the fuck is she alive?

London was sent away, gone, taken from me and her home, then killed...all because of her. My own fucking blood. My triplet.

She will die slowly. Painfully and publicly.

My mind aches again, and I clench my jaw, looking to my brothers. They're in the same state as me—knives buried in their flesh; blood spilt at their feet.

The council wants us dead. Gone.

They want Rathe for their own, and as I look at my brothers, knowing my sister is helping the enemy, that *she* is the enemy as well, I fear that's exactly what they'll get.

Fire burns all around me, engulfing the streets and closing me in a ball of black smoke. At first, I wonder if it's our watchers, if the smoke is that of our ancestors who've come to protect us, but when the thick cloud creeps closer, stealing my senses, I know I'm wrong.

But I am Gifted, a Royal. Deveraux blood courses through my veins.

Fire cannot kill me, and smoke cannot trap me, so I push forward, stepping through the flames. Power stirs in my chest, circling and growling, but as it reaches for the surface, it's yanked by its chain.

A chain that can't be cut.

A lock that can't be broken.

Only one person holds the key to set me free, and I drove her to her death.

I killed her.

“You tried.”

My muscles freeze, the flames around me roaring and raging, but the smoke has lifted higher into the air, allowing me to see through the licks of red and blue.

White is what I find.

A sheet of it.

Long and sleek and blowing and then black eyes meet mine.

My heart leaps, jumping to life as if hit with a lightning bolt.

I try to run to her, but that only pushes her further away.

Like I did.

That was all I did was drive her backward, so I stop where I stand to see what she does when given the choice. Will she run and never look back?

London smirks, the flames flickering across her face, the veins in her neck pulsing as the blackness appears, zipping down her limbs like twisted twine and broken webs.

She’s magnificent ... and she’s headed right for me.

She steps closer and the flames bow to her, softening to nothing but a low flicker kissing at her feet.

The bond tugs from the shadows of my soul, literally dying with need for her, and my foot moves forward before I realize I’m moving.

The fire hisses, seeking retribution for my action and melts the flesh around my knuckles until they're but bare bones. It swirls around her, guarding her and sends her hair blowing, wrapping it along her lips.

She smiles around it and it's like a sword to the spine.

Soul fucking altering.

"Baby?"

I gasp, head whipping from right to left as I sharpen my vision.

The doors have been flung open and you can feel the power flickering in the air.

They're making a show of it, will likely broadcast it to the people of Rathe in warning or latch lies to us to destroy our name.

"They're coming for us." Creed's voice is hollow but strong. "If you get an opening, take it. No matter what."

No matter if it's Temperance, he says without actually saying it.

"And if there is no opening?" If they thought this through and this is fucking it. The end of an era. The death to our line.

The fall of the Dark Crown.

Creed nods, looking at each of us, his eyes settling on me. "Then we'll see each other in the next life."

We turn to one another, words we don't need to speak aloud passing through us.

At least we'll die together.

We wait.

A head rolls in first, and then the soft thump of boots carries down the hall.

My heart fucking jumps when London strolls through, bloody dagger hanging in one hand, and dragging a body with the other.

She drops the leg of the guard and he instantly kicks at her.

His eyes turn white, and I open my mouth to warn her, but before the color reaches his pupils a dagger flies through the air from down the dark hall, slicing right into his throat.

“Thanks,” she calls over her shoulder and a female voice answers, “They in there?!”

Legend yanks in his chains, a deep rumble stirring in his chest.

Creed and Sinner go on high alert.

But I can only stare at the girl before me. Her eyes find mine and hold and it’s just like in my nightmare—she’s exactly how I saw her.

Frosty hair and big black eyes, veins threaded down across her like ashen tattoos to the skin.

She’s fucking beautiful, but she’s no beauty.

My girl, my *mate*... she’s the worst of them all.

“My little demon.”

Her eyes flare at my rasped words and the bond sparks in my chest.

“I should end you myself.” She creeps closer, and she doesn’t stop until she’s right in front of me.

My eyes trace every inch of her face, and my cold skin warms. “But...”

“But a Queen could never kill her King.” Her tone is soft yet strong.

I tug at the chains, needing to wrap my arms around her, but all it does is send a shock through my system.

London’s limbs shake with anger at the sound, her eyes flying up to the powerful restraints.

She reaches for them, but I yank back.

“No!” I frown, too weak to move when she simply advances again. “It’s cursed.”

London smirks, taking the Hellhound rope in her fists. “So am I.”

Her head snaps back, mouth opening, and my brothers and I gape as thick, grey fog pours from her mouth.

“Demonic smoke,” Creed breathes, awestruck. “It lives inside her.”

“How?”

He shakes his head, and we stare at the fucking magnificent little creature before us. My creature.

My fucking future.

The veins in her forearms pound against her skin, the long scars from where she sliced herself open glittering.

The fog spreads the length of the room, taking my brothers and I in its arms. The red ropes turn blue, and then black and then fade to ash as we’re lowered to the floor. Too weak to stand, we slump there, stretching our limbs and listening to the war just outside these walls.

London didn't come alone.

She drops at my feet, taking my face in her palms. "They're coming. We only have a few minutes." She nods and then lowers my head into her neck.

I don't hesitate. I sink my fangs into her neck and drink her in, her blood lighting up my insides like never before. She gasps but presses me closer, whispering, "Sinner needs energy," she tells me.

She's not exactly asking, but she is making sure I'm not going to fight her on this. If I did, she might just kill me, because this perfect fucking woman didn't just come here for me. She came for all of us.

She came for her family.

I pull my teeth from her, lifting my lips just enough to free the words. "Feed him."

My mouth falls back to her skin and she shifts instantly, whispering his name.

I feel the moment his teeth puncture her skin, but my bond doesn't want to murder him, instead it sits calm ... almost grateful for our mate's devotion.

"Haide, please," London begs someone, fighting against the pleasure this moment shouldn't bring but does. "They're too far. It can't wait. There's no time."

There's a low curse behind me, and then footsteps.

"Here," the girl says sassily.

"Get away from me," Legend snarls.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." I hear the flop of leather, and the unmistakable sound of a weapon drawn, and then a new scent

fills the air. She's cut herself, and her double yelp tells me both my brothers have latched on.

As fast as they complain, they growl and I drop back on my ass, breathing deeply and relishing in the reboot of energy.

"What the fuck?" the girl croaks.

I look over to find the dark-haired girl staring wide-eyed at her wrist, and then I look at Legend. His teeth are descended, claws cutting through the marble at his feet. Blood drips in thick lines down his chin and a deep rumble vibrates toward the girl while Creed still sucks from her tanned skin, his eyes on her face the entire time.

She looks to Legend and his eyes turn white. The girl shakes, trying to tug herself free but he holds her still.

"Villaina," the girl edges expectantly.

London runs her hand through Sinner's hair as he feeds from where he bit through the fabric over her thigh. Her eyes meet mine and so much passes between us with that one look. Too fucking much.

She opens her mouth to speak but the harsh beat of thunder crackles in the air and her eyes widen.

All of us jump to our feet, bodies still wounded, but energy full. Power washes over me, and I look down to find black tactical pants and a black long sleeve now covering my skin, my brothers in matching gear.

London smiles, proud of her work, and I grip her by the throat, yanking her to me.

She gasps, dark eyes fucking brilliant and shining with my own reflection. Mine flare white and her lips curve even

higher. I dive in, ready to attack her fucking lips, to finally feel them on mine again, but just as they press to her skin, I'm not met with fluffy fucking velvet. My eyes narrow and I reach up to find a ski mask pulled low over mine and my brother's faces.

We're dressed like the guards, and I glare when I realize she's not wearing one. Her and the girl match in clothing, but both leave their faces exposed.

"I don't need to hide." London flips her hair over her shoulder, spinning for the dark hall. "I want them to see me fucking coming."

And then she bolts and fuck me.... we follow.

"London!" I yell out toward her when she rushes through the long corridor. The masses of people down below are loud, and I know that once we step out of this area, eyes are going to be on us.

"No time to talk, Knight—" I reach for her arm and pull her backwards, stopping her step.

"This was the council." I search her eyes.

"And?" she asks, widening hers as if to ask *is that it?*

I clench my teeth. I want to warn her about Temperance. I have no idea what we're going to find when we get out of here, and I don't want her caught by surprise, but as I look at her, I know she needs no warning. She's ready to mangle all who dared to touch her mate. Me.

She fucking came back for me when I didn't deserve it.

Standing tall, I vow to forever deserve her from this moment.

If my sister gets in her way, I'll clear it, painting the path with the blood of our own. I shake my head. "Never mind. Go on."

She continues walking beside the girl she called Haide, and I hang back a little to get my brothers in earshot.

"Who's that girl?" Legend asks, his eyes focused on her. "And why the fuck is it like her and London have known each other for a long time?"

"Maybe they have..." Sinner adds, as we pass empty rooms and get closer to the stairs that lead us up to the main room. "There's a lot that has been taken from her. Let her have a fucking friend."

"Do we really want to let the little psycho befriend a bigger one?" he complains again.

Sin looks his way. "How do you know she's crazy?"

Legend scoffs like it's a stupid question and Sinner smirks.

I roll my eyes when they start bickering about dumb shit, taking the steps two at a time until we're in the familiar meeting room. It feels the same, only the chair where my father usually sat is empty.

Anger pulses through me once again and I have to fight with everything inside of me not to lose control. Not to lose control *again*.

"Is it safe to talk here?" Haide asks, looking around the room. The rectangle table takes up the majority of the space with the golden chandelier hanging delicately above. The walls are made of glass, giving a direct view of Rathe down below as we circle in orbit, constantly, always watching what is happening below.

“Yes. It’s the only area of Rathe that is cut off from everyone. It’s where we hold our meetings with the Ministry.”

“Ahhh...” Haide clucks her tongue above her mouth, lowering herself onto the gold chair at the head of the table, kicking her boots up to rest on top. Her eyes bounce over each of us, leaving out London. “This glorious Ministry.”

“London.” She gets all our attention with that, but she keeps her gaze locked on mine. The girl is brazen, I’ll give her that, meeting the eye of the future King so openly. And then the brat cocks her head to the side, offering the perfect angle to her sharp jaw. She resembles Tomb Raider, what with her tanned skin, sharp features, and bright green eyes. There’s something else though. She’s a rebel, through and through. Where the fuck did London find this girl?

“To be fair.” London laughs, her fingers dancing across the wall as she heads toward the window. She looks over her shoulder, smirking at Haide. “You said he didn’t want to know and two didn’t care.”

Haide narrows her eyes and my insides riot, wanting to jump up and tear them from their sockets, but London’s laughter and the following smile Haide gives has my muscles relaxing. She’s not a threat, I remind myself.

If she were, London would have killed her the minute she no longer needed her help.

“So ... my people were right.” She crosses her arms. “You are their Queen.”

“Your people?” Legend glares.

Slowly, the girl drags her gaze to Legend, and it’s as though the whole room falls silent. She gives no emotion and

no answer to his question.

Sinner smiles from one to the next and Creed sighs, shaking his head. “*Here we go.*”

“We need a plan.” Legend pivots, leaning against the window, watching as the room continues to float directly over the colosseum. “Everyone is down there, like they’re waiting for something.”

“Oh, they are!” London follows Legend. “Your death. No doubt the council was going to make a show of it, and they wanted the whole of Rathe to witness just how *bad* they are.” My fingers itch to be near her and any time she puts distance between us only makes me want to tear her apart just so I can always keep part of her with me.

A smirk touches my mouth as my eyes darken on her. She looks up at me, and if I could reach out and touch the tension between us, it’d leave burns that challenge even hellfire.

“Well, since they think that you’re all still locked up and bleeding out below, why don’t we portal on down there and kill them first?” Haide shrugs, checking her long black nails. “I’ve always wanted to peel back the many layers Magdalena has suggested she had through the years. You know... for shits and gigs.”

My eyes narrow on London’s new psycho little friend, but before I can say anything, Legend must kick her under the table when he drops into the chair because her body jerks forward and her mossy eyes turn sharp on him. I have no doubt Lege can handle himself, but she even makes me question myself.

“What psych ward did our little London break you out of?” He stares her down.

Haide challenges his stare, as the corner of her mouth curves upward in a sinister smirk. “Well wouldn’t you *love* to know.”

“You guys know that remix Machine Gun Kelly and Travis Barker did... what was it called?” London pretends to think to herself, looking up at the ceiling. I push away from the wall I’m leaning against, losing the fight of being separate from her for this long. The closer she gets, the harder my heart thrashes in my chest and all I want to do is grab her by her hair and drag her the fuck out of here. Before I can stop myself, my hand is on her throat and I’m shoving her against the glass, my teeth sharpening at the ends as I feel her pulse thud against the palm of my hand. She bats her lashes up at me. “A girl like you.”

“You guys can fuck all you want later. For now, we need to handle this.” Creed’s voice dissipates in the air like ice does against humidity. “Knight!”

London flashes me a wide smile, one that shows her white teeth. “Later, lover...”

“There will be Argents prepared to fight for the council,” he speaks what we have all likely come to realize.

There is just no way the council could get away with this shit without some sort of army at their disposal. The fox’s head games and the scream we heard with his obvious involvement in the King’s murder is proof enough of that. The question is... which woman was brave enough to kill our King?

I have a fucking feeling I know *exactly* who it was.

Anger tears through me and a growl leaves my mouth as I release London from her hold, turning back to Creed. “We kill

them all.”

Creed nods in approval, waving his hand up to pull up a portal. Vines grow from the ground as roses and thorns wrap around the ancient frame.

“Remove your masks. We cannot hide from our people. The Stygian need to know we live and rise against this.” Creed steps through first, as Haide turns over her shoulder, winking at Legend who’s still glaring at her back.

“What’s wrong, brother...” I nudge his shoulder before snatching London’s hand with mine. I’ll be fucking damned if I let her out of my sight ever again. “Don’t like the new girl?”

He sneers, following us through. “Did you see her pet the hair of that guard’s severed head with a smile?” He shakes his head. “She’s fucking crazy.”

I think what he means is that she’s crazier than him, our logical, but ferocious when called for it, little brother.

Twenty-Seven



K night

THE PORTAL SNAPS CLOSED BEHIND US AS WE MATERIALIZE IN the center of the stadium. Dust kicks up around us as the crowd in the stands quiets completely. I find Magdalena instantly as she pauses what she's saying, turning to look at us all. Her mouth drops open suddenly, as Agro moves closer to her.

His eyes fly wide and then his hands lift.

Thunder cracks above, clouds materializing in the span of a breath, blocking out the people's view of the circular arena. This is where people battle during the placement trials at Rathe U. This is where the final determination is made—are you Argent at heart or does the organ that beats in your chest bleed black like us true Stygian.

“I am so sick of that thunder, motherfucker,” London grits, throwing her arms down, sending sparks into the earth and then lifting them to the skies. Lightning sparks across the place, crackling and booming on all surfaces and then it comes together, to form one giant lightning bolt. It hits the deck with

a fierce clap, the wood and the seats the remaining council sit on turns to ice.

London smirks, then cocks her head. “Haide?”

“Dying to play.” The dark-haired warrior fucking princess steps forward.

Magdalena’s eyes narrow on the girl and Haide laughs, waving her fingers at her, and then faster than even my eyes could process, she’s pulled a dagger from her side, and thrown it.

It whistles through the air at warp speed, sticking straight into the center of the deck.

She smiles, standing back and slaps hands with London without looking.

Her lips form a small O, as she lets out a quick breath, as if to blow out a simple candle. The ice cracks, the Ministry’s eyes widen, and then it breaks, sending everyone on it tumbling into an avalanche of ice.

Magdalena breaks their fall by turning the ice to a wave of water, surfing down its surface.

Odin leaps forward, eyes wide as he looks from us to the Ministry. “What the hell is this?” he barks.

His next words are cut off as the Mage throws up a barrier, yanking him backward and then the war cries begin.

Yemon is still in effect and the skies begin to bleed, distorting our vision just as there is a break in the storm clouds.

“Knight!” I whip around, relief flooding through me as I spot Silver, Vicente, and several other of the royal guards slashing through the fog and leaping over the stadium walls.

They jog up, braced and ready, bowing and slapping their fists to their chests.

The Argents rage, throwing weak spells at the shield London holds strong, but she doesn't let them hit her sheet of impenetrable ice. She bats them away with a flick of her wrist and a grin, sending them back to the person who sent them to us.

"It could be their shadow selves..." Silver mentions, looking to his father who looks to me.

"We kill them all." The commander of our army states the only words worth speaking, the ones he already knows we came down here prepared to live by. "Where is the Queen?"

"I am here!"

We all yank around at that, watching as Mother slips from a portal, her long black hair blowing in the winds, dress torn and covered in filth.

My eyes narrow, but when a low growl sounds, I look to my mate.

The blackness in her veins spark against her skin and her lip curls.

"Today, we fight together." Mother glares at her. "For our people. For... your realm."

London's body starts to shake but before anyone else can say a word, Vicente slides over.

He blocks my mother from London's view, and the commander bares his neck to London. "She is our Queen... today, my Lady. Tomorrow, we welcome a new." He holds her gaze.

Slowly, London's lips curve and she gives a subtle nod.

“Let’s end this.” Mother merely lifts her chin, and then her hands, her eyes glowing white as tethers of blue and white whip into the air. “Drop the shield.”

“Look, lady, she doesn’t fucking answer to—” Haide’s words are cut off, Legend’s hand clamped over her mouth.

“Quiet, new girl,” he warns and Haide sinks her nails deep into his skin.

“Bitch.” He tosses her.

London looks to me for approval, and I nod.

The shield falls, and Mother sends her power at the Argents full force.

But London throws her right hand up, turning it to rain, and then her left lifts.

I don’t know what the fuck she does, but one by one, the Argents’ chests split open from neck to belly button, their hearts falling to the dirt at their feet before their bodies even register what’s happened.

Haide laughs, spinning her fingers and glitter whirls, slowly falling over all of them, shining against the crimson. “So pretty,” she sighs.

“Fuckin’ nut job, I swear,” Legend mumbles.

Agro screams angrily, and then all the gates are opened, Argents flanking us from all directions. Hundreds of them rush in.

“You must love to watch your people die, Fae.”

I run forward, gripping one by the throat and tearing his head off, tossing it at her feet as I bend, swiping the legs out from under another. He drops onto the ground, and Creed

presses his feet into his back, yanking his arms from their joints before his fist enters his back and tears out his spine.

Magdalena howls in anger, and then I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, black tar thousands of feet below.

Sinner's chuckle sounds and then it's gone, and when I look at him, his white eyes gleam as he stares at her with a grin.

She shakes, cowers, and I have no idea what he's showing her, but I don't care.

I keep moving toward Agro, checking in on my mate after every few Argents I end along the way.

She and Haide are laughing, playing the Argent traitors like a human game we were forced to participate in at Rathe U. Dodgeball. London flings one and Haide jumps twenty feet in the air to avoid it. Haide sends one flying and London pretends to be a ballerina, spinning and lifting her hands, creating a circle just big enough for the body to slip through.

"I win!" Haide shouts in triumph, spinning and driving a dagger into the neck of a girl who's snuck up behind her.

"What?!" London snaps, dropping to her stomach to avoid a fire ball and sends back a giant fucking boulder made of solid ice. She glares over her shoulder at her new friend. "He didn't touch me!"

"Drop of his blood landed on your forehead. Counts!"

London mumbles something I can't hear and keeps moving.

I grin, facing forward and when I do, my brows snap together. "They're running!"

"Go," Mother shouts. "I can handle these ... things."

I hesitate, as do my brothers, this is our Queen. Our mother.

Vicente understands, bowing his head. "I will protect the Queen. We will find you."

We take off, watching as their portal begins to close, but London opens her mouth, and the demonic smoke shoots out like a fucking cannon, straight into the small opening and someone screams, loud and bellowing.

"Gotcha," London mutters to herself.

We reach the portal, and Silver closes his eyes. Slowly, the portal opens, just big enough for us to climb through. We come out on the bridge of Rathe, just as flames engulf it from one side to the next.

Haide blows and it scatters, but the moment she stops, it returns.

Through the flames, I spot Agro tugging Odin along, Magdalena just ahead of them.

"Fight us, you cowards!"

The smell of burning flesh surrounds us but London drops, pressing her hand into the cobblestone. Slowly the flames turn to icicles and when she leans forward, sliding her tongue along one, it melts like lava.

"I'd fuck you," Haide nods, her head snapping forward. "They're getting away."

She takes off, and with a scoffed chuckle Legend follows, the rest of us right behind.

Sinner throws a wall up in front of them, and Magdalena turns it to ash.

She sends power forces at us, but we block, throwing them back at her.

Agro calls to the thunder and London turns the thick clouds to rain clouds, and he yells into the skies.

They spin, taking off, Odin tripping at Agro's side, but just as they reach the doors of the Ministry building, Vicente, his men, and our mother appear.

They step forward.

The Ministry members freeze, spinning.

We step forward, and then the clouds clear, the red of the skies dulling to a sparse pink. Doors open and close, footsteps beat against the pavement as the whispers and screams of the people of Rathe reach us.

“Our Lords!”

“It's the Lords!”

“The future King lives!”

“Our Queen has risen!”

“We'll fight with you, my Lord!”

Pride and warmth burst in my fucking chest and we look around as the Stygian, as our fucking people rage, running right for the still open portal angry Argents are charging through.

They meet in the middle in loud booms and harsh cracks as Dark and Light magic collide.

A small hand slips into mine and I look to London, the black of her eyes having cleared, the icy-blue brimmed with tears as she looks at the sight behind us. “Those are our people.”

My heart leaps in my fucking chest and she looks to me, a softness I've craved, that I need, in her gaze. "Those are our people, my King. My mate," she whispers for only me to hear.

"Baby—"

"Not now."

It's not a refusal. It's a promise.

I face forward, moving to stand two feet ahead of the others, my Queen at my side, her eyes black once more.

London

OH, FUCK ME, IT'S TOO GOOD, THE WAY THE MINISTRY members gawk at me, wide-eyed.

Yeah. Just like your dead King.

I tense slightly when one jerks forward, lowering to one knee.

"This gets you out of nothing, Odin. You are a traitor just as they are," Knight seethes.

Odin, that's his name, I'd forgotten.

His eyes lift and when they do, they're glossed over. "I am no traitor." He hurries to his feet, coming forward. "I don't know what—"

His hand comes to my arm, and Knight pulls me away from him, baring his teeth.

“Touch her again, Monster, and I’ll take my fucking time killing you.”

Odin’s eyebrows knot together. “What—”

“What—” Magdalena clears her throat, plastering on a wide smile. “Knight, think about this, we can start over and —”

Knight’s hand is on her throat and he’s lifting her off the ground before she can get in another word.

“Listen up!” His tone is forceful. “As I said before, the Ministry is over. If anyone intends to challenge this, be sure you’re making the right choice.” Knight’s fingers sink into the flesh around her throat as blood drips over his hands. “Because it’ll be the last one you ever make.” He yanks his hand back and her body falls to the ground. He squeezes what’s left of her throat in the palm of his hand as residue and blood molds around his fingers. He tosses it down on top of her body as a small giggle breaks out from behind me.

Haide claps her hands excitedly, her eyes bright like Christmas morning. “My turn!”

Legend grabs her from the back of her throat to stop her, only she spins in his grip, grabbing him from around his own, and slams him onto the ground. He coughs a splatter of blood, holding his stomach.

He laughs, leaning up until his nose touches hers. “Oh, this all you got, baby? That was barely foreplay...”

“Haide!” I snap, looking between the two new enemies. Jesus fucking Christ. What we don’t need is to have an obvious crack in our apparent “strong side”.

“I don’t know what is going on, Knight, but whatever they did, I was not part of...” Odin raises his hands up, stepping closer to me. “Just ask Vicente, if you don’t trust me.”

Knight’s head lifts, and he looks to the silver-haired man standing beside Cosima, staring blankly down to Magdalena’s corpse and back to Knight.

“What happened?” Vicente asks as he slips past Odin and Agro, coming to stand near Knight and me. “I must hear it directly from your mouth,” he tells Knight.

“Exactly what I’m sure you’ve suspected. They trapped us, tied us up and tried to have us killed.” Knight offers. “Tried to lock up London too, but she got away before they could.”

Vicente takes another careful step. “Who is ‘they’?”

Agro finally pushes forward, his face burning red. His ears grow until they curve around his head. “We did it! You brats don’t know the first thing about running a Kingdom.”

“You killed the King?” I ask blankly, my lashes fanning out over my cheeks.

“Did you know that when your mother gave birth to all of you, we all knew what you were...” Agro adds, ignoring my question.

Once we have the clarification of their part in the King’s death, I know that will seal his fate, and whoever else helped them. It also means the falling of a system that had helped the wheels of Rathe spin without casualties. Shit is about to change going forward.

“Kill him, kill him! Long live the Dark King!” The crowd chants. Knight takes another step closer to Agro as their chanting grows, turning to roars and screams.

“Let me finish!” Agro snaps at Knight, straightening his suit. “After your mother gave birth to you all, we knew you’d be just like your father.”

I’d never thought much about what the Lords were. I think most of us assumed they were Monsters. The kind that can only be born from royal blood.

Agro straightens his shoulders, just as Vicente stands between me and Odin. “Belial, Judas, Cain, Nero...” he looks between Knight and his brothers as my mind thinks over all of the memories I’ve had of Knight in the past few months I’ve been with him, and more importantly, mated to him. “They mean anything to you?”

“The six demons of Lucifer...” it leaves my mouth in a whisper, more to myself than to anyone else. Power surges through me.

“I know *what* we are, Agro.”

“Oh, I know...” his tone catches my attention and I bring my eyes to him. “But she didn’t.”

“Wait! Six?” I stop them all. “There’s four of you, your sister, and? And who is the sixth?”

Knight turns over his shoulder slightly. The muscles on either side of his jaw bounce. *You know who the fuck the sixth one is, baby. Stop playing dumb and don’t act surprised.*

I stare back at Agro.

“And?” *Holy what the fuck?* How am I the sixth? Why am I the sixth!

“And you’re all doomed...” he answers, his eyes wide. “But I did not kill the King.”

“Was it ... *her?*” Creed asks.

Her? Who is her?

Knight cuts me a quick glance but gives me nothing, and my mind begins to race.

I'm missing something.

“Oh no,” he chuckles. “But she was quite helpful when —”

Knight launches forward and a loud crack snaps through the air when his fist connects with Agro's face.

I turn to face Vicente, leaving Knight to fight his dirty fight. “I don't understand. What has me being a demon got to do with all of this, and the King being dead? If you tell me I'm his sister, I will eat you.”

Vicente's wrinkles around his eyes deepen as he holds in a smile. “You're not. Don't worry. And please—”

“—London. I need to talk with you.”

Vicente's eyes snap to the man behind me, and I bring my hand to his chest to stop him.

“Stop. I can handle this myself.”

Blood splatter touches my lip as I turn to face Odin. I swipe my tongue over it before turning to see what Knight has done. Bright red muscle and meat stare back at me, just as Knight tears off the last of Agro's flesh from his face.

I turn back to Odin unfazed. “I don't trust you or a word you say. You were part of the Ministry, the very same who tried to *kill* people who mean a great deal to me.”

“I wasn't.” He shakes his head, but before he can say anything more, Creed opens a portal behind him and kicks him through, shutting it quickly.

I glare at Creed. “I wasn’t done.”

“You can talk to him later. Right now, we need to control this shit show, and look at your mate...” I turn back to Knight, to see him looking out at the people of Rathe cheering. The roars are loud enough to make my ears bleed. I should have known going in how much the people of Rathe worship the Lords already. The Ministry have run things into the ground for centuries now, desperate to make themselves as important as royals.

They are the reason Haide has lived her entire life on a small, secluded island with a bunch of feral Gifted.

“He’s giving the people what they want.”

Creed chuckles. “You and I both know what Knight is like with bloodshed. We need to talk with the people before it gets out of hand.”

I step backwards, smiling at Creed. I wait until he’s turned his back to me before I inhale all the magic that stirs inside of me, closing my eyes and envisioning a portal opening up in front of me. Cracking my eye open, I gasp. Ice grows around an arch, cracking as it overlaps blood red roses and thorns. The inside swirls with pale white and black colors, and I take one more look behind myself before stepping through.

I didn’t know much about the Ministry, or the people in it. It wasn’t until I became who I was to Knight that I started to take note. Odin was different though, and I can’t explain it in any other way other than I just *know*.

He remains still, seated on the same chair he always sat on during the meetings they held in this room. The portal slamming closed has me turning, when my eyes collide with Haide.

I raise my brows at her. “You following me now?”

She shrugs, flashing me a wide smirk. “What can I say. I’m loyal.”

I shuffle out of my coat, dropping it onto the back of a chair before taking the spot directly opposite Odin. He follows my movements closely. Seconds pass between us, and it’s not until Haide takes the chair beside me, holding a bottle of alcohol and three glasses that he finally breaks.

“I’m not an enemy to you, or the Lords, London.” He tries to smile, but all it does is come out forced. “In fact, I can show you just how I’m *not* a threat.”

My eyes fall to his outstretched hand, before coming back up to his face. Leaning over the table, I reach out to touch his when Haide interrupts.

“Stop!” she calls out from the end of the table.

“What?” I ask, waiting for her to give me a reason why.

She rolls her lips into her mouth nervously. “It’s just—he’s the Ministry and you’re allowing him free-range inside your head. He could do anything!”

I look back to Odin. “She has a point.”

Odin lowers his hand, tapping his finger onto the tabletop. “I know. But I’m not going to. I have nothing to hide and the only thing I lived for, was, well—” he pauses, tilting his head. “—you.” He breathes out a sigh. “Look, they’re going to kill me anyway. Your power is much stronger than mine. You could push me out if I was a true threat.”

“He has a point.” I shrug, reaching for his hand. As soon as ours touch, my eyes roll to the back of my head and the room falls away from beneath me...

I drop the withered bag down onto the table with a thud. Thunder claps loudly behind the floor to ceiling glass windows. Fitting. Since I was one hundred percent sure that whatever happened tonight was going to be something to be reminded of.

“Did you bring it?” he asks, removing his long coat and hanging it on the hanger near the entrance. I keep my eyes locked on the bright lights down below, watching as Ordinaries, Mages, and the odd Werewolf mingle amongst each other, scattered through the busy streets of Rathe. Unknown as to just what was coming. Unfortunately for me, I wasn’t Gifted with the kind of ignorance mere minions have. Not sure whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing.

“On the table.” I bring the glass to my mouth, inhaling the potent smell of aged barrel whiskey. The good kind. If anything, humans sure as hell knew how to brew their liquor. Even without magic.

The rustling of the old canvas bag distracts me as I sink the remainder of my drink, turning to finally face my best friend. Someone I’ve always counted on—even when I couldn’t count on myself. “Is there a reason why you need that?”

“There’s a meaning for everything. But when I leave, I need you to promise me something, Odin. And it needs to go on our friendship.” I pause as he lowers the bag back onto the table, holding my stare. Over the years, age wasn’t kind to him. The more innocence taken, the more the fates would try to enable a balance. It was tiled with him.

“What is it?”

“Villaina, she’s ... important.”

Odin chuckles, glancing toward the door my baby girl sleeps behind. "I am well aware the child is important."

He's not getting it.

I shake my head. "No, she's important to Rathe. The fates, they're upset."

The constant pounding at my temples doubles and my eyes begin to roll, but I clench them closed. Fisting my knuckles, I use the moisture of my skin to form ice, burning my own flesh until I'm frostbitten to ward off the shadow threatening to take over a few moments longer.

"She is destined to restore balance."

Odin eyes me, slowly sitting forward in his seat. "Acheros ... what are you saying?" he whispers, as if the words alone could strike us where we stand.

"You know exactly what I'm saying."

He's silent a long moment before swiping his hands down his face. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am they're coming for me. I'm weakening. My shadow self has nearly taken over. It won't be long until it does for good and I can't be with her when that happens. They will kill me, and they will take her, Odin."

Sadness fills my oldest friend's eyes and he nods. "The council has already begun to whisper about it. They search for you now. If they found out I was here and didn't take you in myself, I'd be slayed for treason."

Silence. "That's why you can't come back, just promise me Villaina will not face the same fate as I. She deserves to live, Odin. She must live. The future of Rathe depends on it."

Odin stands, offering me his hand, both of us knowing this is the last we shall see each other. I slip my fist into his and he lowers his chin. "You have my word."

I snatch my hand back from him, wincing.

I stare at the man before me, an ally with no recognition, the most trustworthy kind in existence.

"You are the one that tried to keep me away. The voice in my head that day, the warning in the letter."

He nods. "Both the King and I, yes."

My throat grows thick. "The King helped save me. Why?"

He gives me a knowing look and I nod.

For his son.

He knew. He knew I was fated to one day become Queen of Rathe, that I was Knight's mate.

Odin shakes his head. "No, Villaina," he says softly. "It wasn't just about Knight unlocking his Ethos. It was about you, the girl he was given, and it was about the Kingdom. See, King Arturo had no choice but to allow the Ministry to form after the death of the Argent royal monarch. His sons had yet to be born, so he had to protect the throne, to save and secure it for the next generation of Stygians and that was the only way. For many centuries, he was the only living Deveraux, and his bride..."

My brows pull. Of course.

Of course.

“Cosima wasn’t his mate. That’s why she didn’t ascend.”

He nods. “She could never be given the gift of darkness. The fires of hell would never rage war in her name. She was imbalanced, rejected her mate for the seat on the crown.”

A chill runs through me and somehow, I know the answer to the question before I ask it. “Who was her mate?”

He’s quiet a moment before he says, “Your father.”

Holy. Fucking. *Shit.*

Twenty-Eight



L ondon

MY DAD.

My dad was fated to Cosima, and she rejected him. She is the reason he went feral and blood thirsty. He turned on his people because his mate turned on him for a title that did not belong to her.

The King's words come back to me, and I close my eyes.

The gift of the dark gods shall not pass on to just any, yet you hold the key in your hands. Remember that, Little Crow, and just when emerald eyes fall upon you, feast until you feel its soul.

I blink. I've yet to see the emerald eyes, but the gift.

The gift was passed to me.

I look down, and the long scars on my arms glitter back at me, the darkness beneath twinkling as if to answer.

The King saved my life.

Wait. Little Crow?

My head snaps up, tears prickling the backs of my eyes. “My uncle...”

Odin gives a soft smile. “He is King Arturo’s bastard brother. He was banished from these lands many moons ago. When the King asked for my help, I went and found him on Exile Island.”

I look to Haide, but she’s busy snooping around the room. “I want to see him.”

Odin nods. “I’m sure once you are crowned, you can bring him home no problem.”

He’s alive. My uncle, or well, the man I know and love as my uncle is alive. I thought for sure Knight killed him too—

I cut my thought off when a small crack forms in my chest, and I push it away. I will deal with my heartache soon, but today is not the day.

“Do you have any questions?” Odin asks, reaching into his pocket and taking out a long cigar. Do I? Didn’t I always want this? To have the chance to ask about my father and both my parents, without setting off war alarms for the mere mention of The Slasher.

I shake my head. “I don’t need to know anything more than what you’ve just shown me, Odin.”

“Your father wasn’t an evil man by choice. It is just what some become when their mate denies their fate.” *Don’t I know it, I was well on my way.* “I think it hit him so hard because his mate wasn’t just a girl on the street he never had to see, but the Queen he had to watch grow a family with another so publicly. When he met your mother, I thought he might be ok, he tried his best to love her, but she had no love to give anyone, and fed herself to the dragons after you were born.”

I wait for sadness about the truth of my mother's death to hit me, but it never comes. I didn't know her, so the only sorrow slipping into my bones is for my father. Sure, he was a twisted, murderous maniac in the end, but it could have been different for him, and it's not like he was human and made the decision to kill. It was deeper than that and beyond his control.

“London, you should know—”

A portal snaps closed, and I jump up from my chair, my eyes flying straight to Knight. Blood stains his face and hair, his eyes dilated black and directly on Odin.

I quickly stand between him and Odin, my hand coming to Knight's chest. I suck in a breath when I feel the anger in his pulse. When he keeps his eyes locked on Odin, I bring my hand up to his chin, forcing his face down to mine.

“Look at me.”

He doesn't budge. Blood is Knight's favorite fucking snack, and he just ate his fill. “Knight.”

He clenches his jaw a few times, before finally dragging his eyes down to mine. Anger, pain, *regret?* Prominent. The corners soften a little, enough for him to reach around my back and pull me in close.

He rests his forehead against mine, closing his eyes briefly. “Sorry, baby.”

“Having too much fun out there, huh?” I tease, with a raised brow.

He chuckles, leaning down and bringing his lips against mine. Liquid metal touches the tip of my tongue and I feel the fire beneath my skin spark to life slightly.

I put it out with a shake of my head, stepping back. “He has been protecting me all along.”

The corner of Knight’s mouth kicks up slightly. “Yeah?” His hand slides down to cup my ass. “Then I gotta say... he’s done a terrible job.” He looks back over my shoulder, turning me in his grip so I’m facing Odin with him at my back.

“Odin was my father’s best friend.”

Knight’s hand moves over my lower belly, and I place mine over his protectively. “Is that right?”

“Knight—”

“Past friendships do not allow you to keep your head.”

Odin leans back in his chair, looking between the both of us. “You guys are very cute together, but I have to ask.” He pushes up from his chair. I don’t have to see the rest of the Lords behind us to know that they’re there. “Are you going to tell her?”

Odin’s words are lost when the crackling sound of electricity breaking through the air snaps and I turn to see another portal opening, this time Legend pushing through, his eyes wild.

“What the fuck is he still doing alive?”

“He’s not a threat,” I answer, keeping my eyes on Odin. “I saw it. He was friends with your father.”

“So fucking what?” Sinner forces past clenched teeth, cocking his head as he rounds the table, ready to pounce.

Vicente enters the room then, stepping between Sinner and Odin. He lifts his chin. “It was King Arturo who trusted Odin to take our future Queen safely to Earth. He is the only reason she made it out of Rathe alive.”

My lips part, and Knight's hold on me tightens as my eyes connect with Odin's. He didn't show me that.

His gaze softens as he stares at me, offering a small smile, but his face goes blank as he faces the brothers once more.

"Still think we should kill him." Sinner shrugs. "Clean sweep of all council members and all that."

"Sin—" A laugh bubbles out of me unexpectedly. I reach for him but before I can, the room around me turns to dust and I'm floating up above, lost in the dense sky of dark swirls and bright stars. "Holy shit."

Knight's hand comes to the front of my throat, turning me back to face him. My lips almost crash against his from the proximity when I reach up to hold myself up by the back of his neck. Veins swell at the surface of his skin as I drag my finger down the muscles in his arms.

"You skinned him alive..."

"I did." His hands drop from my lower back, down to my ass. He pushes me up and I try not to look down.

"We're floating?"

"We are..." He buries his face into the crook of my neck, sending soft whimpers rolling through my body. He must catch them because a growl vibrates against my throat. It wasn't soft, or gentle. It was animalistic and forceful. It was the sound of a hungry wolf starved to death and finally getting the first taste of blood. It was Knight Deveraux... finally getting me back in his arms with no intention of ever letting me go.

"Why?" I ask, my eyes rolling to the back of my head. I can't even fight the way my body responds to him if I wanted

to. Everything is on fire and nothing else exists but us. Him and I and this moment right here.

“Because I’m done with that bullshit for tonight.” He traces little kisses up the side of my neck, catching my earlobe between his teeth and tugging on it gently. “And I want to fuck my mate somewhere where no motherfucker is gonna interrupt us.”

I climb up his long body, wrapping my legs around his waist and massaging my fingers into his hair. Tugging back, I force his eyes up to mine, my lips a ghost away from his. “So fuck me.”

His mouth collides with mine and my tongue slides between his lips. He licks fire against mine as he deepens, walking me backwards until my back hits something hard. I don’t even bother to turn around to see what it is because I don’t care. All I care about is being fucked so hard by Knight that I feel him inside me for years to come. I don’t ever want to not feel him inside of me. My clothes evaporate into thin air and his hand comes to my breast, his thumb slipping over my swollen nipple.

I hiss, grinding against him for a release. Any kind of release at this point. “Why am I naked but you’re not?”

He laughs into my mouth, and fuck if I don’t want to feel that between my legs—before I can finish my thought, he lifts me from my ass and I hook my legs over his shoulders, those same fingers that are buried in his hair now used as a harness for control. Or attempt to control. Warmth covers my pussy and the pastel shades of pink and blue blur together as my eyes water. My toes curl when his tongue presses against my clit, rubbing slick, hot circles around it like he’d designed it himself.

My hips buck forward as I chase more as his mouth moves over me in perfectly pressured thrums. “I need you, Knight...”

His fingers dig into my back, and I arch myself forward to be closer to him. *Can demons breathe in other places other than their mouth?* I hope so. Because I’m about to fucking suffocate him.

He walks us backwards before dropping me down slowly until I’m laying flat against a table. Leaning over my body, he hovers over my face before his hand takes me by the chin, squeezing me tightly. “I fucking love you.”

I pause, but my legs wrap around his waist, pulling him in closer.

He squeezes again, lowering himself until he’s right above me. “That word means jackshit to us, but if there ever was a word to describe how I feel about you, London, it’d be those cheesy fucking three words right there, but I don’t just love you.” I stop breathing, my heart rate staggering to a dangerous level. He presses his tongue to the base of my throat and slowly licks me up to my chin, before hovering above my mouth again. “I want to fucking ruin you.”

He squeezes my cheeks until my lips part, spitting in my mouth just as I feel his cock slam inside of me so hard I’m sure my cervix has snapped. Claw marks are left behind from the scream that tears out of me and my back arches off the table. I try to reach up for him again but his hand is already behind my neck, forcing me up to a sitting position as he continues to drive inside of me in perfectly rhythmmed thrusts. He brings his other arm behind my back, locking me as close as possible to him. I ride myself over him best I can, matching

his flow as his girth continues to stretch me farther and farther until I feel so full of him, I might fucking explode.

“Mine.”

I kiss him hard, sinking my teeth into his bottom lip until blood slides down my throat. Smirking, I roll myself over him as he picks up the pace and the only thing that kills the silence is our slick bodies slapping together, hungry and desperate for each other. After being deprived, I want to fucking destroy him. Fuck him so hard and long that his cock would never recognize another pussy. Would forget it'd ever been inside anyone else—*stop going down that road*. A low growl leaves my mouth as I press harder against him. Hot tingles spread from my core, down to my toes as I find myself closer.

“Gonna start the next royal line...”

His whispers are lost in my moans as my orgasm raptures inside me and leaves scars in its wake. Before I can catch my breath, he shoves me further down over him and I yelp out in pain as hot cum fills me up inside. His breathing mellows out over my chest before he finally lowers me to my feet, our bodies peeling away from each other.

He flashes me a rare smile, one that showcases all of his teeth. Damn. He really should smile like that more often. “Well shit. If that doesn't give you little demon babies, I don't know what will.”

I glare at him, shaking my head but leaning up on my tippy toes to kiss against his lips softly. “If you get me pregnant, Knight,” I bat my lashes up at him sweetly, “I will fuck you up.”

He barks out a laugh at my otherwise human response, waving his hand out lazily. The heaviness of clothes back on

my skin makes me more annoyed than I would have hoped, but I love that he didn't wash himself off me.

“Fuck, this is a disaster...” I whisper, looking down at Rathe as we orbit from up above.

“It's going to be fine. The people have never liked the Ministry, I merely did something that they've all wanted to happen for too long now.”

He hugs me from behind, kissing me on top of my head just as his phone starts ringing in his pocket.

“Well fuck. My brother's timing is getting worse.”

He answers, hitting speaker. I don't know why that comforts me. Maybe because it shows that he isn't hiding any more secrets from me, or maybe it's just all in my head.

“Yo, we've got a problem...” Legend's voice comes through the phone and the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight. “Get to the grounds. Now.”

Winds wrap around us and before my next blink, our feet hit the pavement.

Knight goes stiff against me, and I look up at him, brows furrowing.

“Knight, what's wro—”

“Hello ... *bestie*.”

Ice prickles against my skin and I suck in a sharp breath. Slowly, my head turns over my shoulder, my blue eyes connecting with a very familiar pair.

“Temperance?”

Twenty-Nine



K night

TENSION WRAPS AROUND MY MUSCLES AND MY EYES CUT TO Sin's.

This is our triplet, the blood we shared a connection like no other with ... once upon a time. Yet she stood there beside the council and drove the dagger into our guts with a smile.

The same smile she wears now as she stands in the heart of Rathe, chin held high ... our people kneeling before her with stars in their eyes. To them, their long-lost princess lives. She returns to them.

But they don't know she betrayed us, and we don't know why she did or where she's been. I saw the vision in my father's memories. She lay dead on the floor.

I think back a moment, my brows pull.

No, she lay *unconscious*. There was no blood to be seen, no wound, just the shaken foundation of the thousand-year-old walls and utter destruction of the room.

Mother had said no one could know, but what did that mean exactly?

“Oh my god...” London whispers, pulling free of my hold. “Temperance!”

She darts forward, arms stretched out, and horror slams into me as I realize what she’s doing.

She doesn’t know because I’ve yet to tell her.

She’s running, rushing to hug the girl who was once her best friend. The girl she thought she’d killed for a time when her manipulated memories shifted.

She’s fast, and I was in my head and she’s nearly reached her now.

I jerk at the same time as my brothers, but it’s too late, London has thrown herself into the hands of the enemy.

Before we can snatch her back, Temperance snaps her fingers, smiling over her shoulder and they disappear through a portal.

“No! Fuck!” I roar, whipping around.

The people gasp, whispering, having no idea what is going on.

“Your princess is a traitor to the crown. She helped the council capture your Lords!” Vicente shouts.

“No!” Mother shouts, but Sinner wraps his palm around her mouth yanking her back.

The streets grow loud, shouting and screaming but it’s one person’s I latch onto.

“There! On the terrace!” someone shouts.

I whip around to find London and her at the edge of the Ministry building, the very building I threw her off. Rage beats wildly in my chest.

“My Lord, is that your mate?!” another shouts.

“That is the reject!”

“No!” I boom, and instantly, silence falls. My pulse beats wildly, with anger and fear and pride as I stare up at my white-haired beauty. “She is no reject. She is the future. She is Villaina Lacroix, saved and protected by your fallen King. She saved me and my brothers from the treachery of the council. She is my mate. We call her London... but you will call her Queen. She is more deserving of the title than any before her.”

My eyes slide to my mother’s, and the look she gives me is none I’ve seen.

Later, Mother.

“Our King has chosen his Queen!” a man roars. “Praise Satan!”

Roars and howls fill the air.

“Why are we still down here?” Legend growls.

“Temperance can’t possibly be stronger than London.” Creed watches them closely. “But royal blood does course through her veins.”

Baby...can you hear me?

The bond beats strong in my chest, her acceptance felt and understood though not yet spoken into fruition.

“Yes.” Her whisper rolls across my mind.

Listen to me... it was her. She helped the council.

Silence wills the space linking my thoughts to hers, and then darkness.

The sky revolts, sparking and rumbling and the ring around Saturn goes dark.

In my peripheral, I catch my brothers' heads snapping toward me.

“Ah, fuck,” Creed mutters.

Mother struggles in Sinner's arms. “Vicente! Stay with her, go back to the Royal Estate!”

Mother protests, but they're gone in a split second, Sinner stepping back through the open portal and closing Mother and the commander on the other side.

My eyes are locked on the white hair blowing from high above.

Baby-

“Quiet, lover. The girls are talking.”

Her words are teasing, but the way they leave her are anything but.

They're dark whispers of a demon.

I watch as she smiles brightly at the girl she used to know, and I know the moment her eyes go black.

My sister backs up a step, and then another and then London laughs, a manic sound that lifts into the air, shaking the foundation we stand on. We stumble, watching.

Then London lifts her palm, placing it over her eyes.

“What is she doing?” Legend worries.

“Being a fucking badass.” Haide steps forward, yawning like she’s bored.

“Knight...” Creed edges, ready to leap up and protect our Queen.

London lifts her chin, spinning. She gives her back to Temperance.

No, she offers her back to Temperance, giving her the chance to slide a knife into it.

A growl tears through my throat, and my brothers and I run as one, leaping, but before we can reach the terrace, before the knife that Temperance reveals leaves her fingertips, *he* appears.

His wings spread wide; nose pointed as he soars right for them.

I stop in my tracks because I know he will protect her, though I’m not so sure she needs it anymore.

This? This is a show and everyone in Rathe is watching.

He swoops down, taking our sister between his teeth and tosses her into the air just as several more dragons appear.

My brows jump and Haide claps.

London grins, throwing her hand out to freeze Temperance there in the air, and the dragons circle her.

My Queen looks to me, waiting.

I look to my brothers, who give curt nods.

She’s all yours, baby.

London faces forward, cocks her head and smiles.

All at once, fire bellows from the mouths of each dragon.

The screams of an unworthy royal echo in the air as ash rains down from above.

I reach up, watching as it falls, disappearing into nothing the closer it gets to the ground, the ash of her bone unworthy food to our realm's surface.

Wait.

I look to my brothers and it's as if they realized it at the same time.

“The ashes.”

Creed nods, a small smile hooking his lips. “The fucking ashes.”

London

The dragons lower, their talons hitting the ground with a harsh thud, but not mine. Mine is elegant as he comes back to me, the space in the sky where Temperance was suspended, nothing but a grey cloud of smoke that's disappearing by the second.

I can't believe she's alive.

I can't believe she's gone.

It's a strange headspace to be in, especially being I wanted to tear her head from her body when Knight told me what she did.

How could she?

Why did she?

Where has she been?

Obviously, the flames of a dragon can't kill a royal, but I wasn't trying to kill her. I wanted to torture her a little before the boys got ahold of her. Wherever she portalled to, it wasn't before her clothes were turned to ash and the flesh melted from her bones, and it's not like she can heal herself. She can't get too far.

The dragon comes to me, gently dropping before me.

He lowers his jaw to the surface's floor, his head still so much taller than my entire body.

A small smile covers my lips as I approach, and I don't know why but sadness sweeps over me with each step I take.

I place my hand on the sharp scales, gently brushing the tips of my fingers over his gorgeous form. "Saved me again, huh, little dragon?"

The dragon huffs and I laugh lightly.

"Yeah, Yeah, I was only teasing." I lean close, whispering, "You're the real beast, aren't you?"

The dragon blinks, his giant eyes shining and whirling a deep emerald.

Longing washes over me, and in the back of my mind, the King's words come once again.

When emerald eyes fall upon you, feast until you feel its soul...

I stare at the dragon, eyes narrowing, fingers twitching. The green bursts brighter, spinning, and I fall into their trance.

Whirling and looping until I'm ten years old, swinging in the old park by my home, hands not that much bigger than mine pushing my back.

I laugh, jumping off and then suddenly I'm breaking the surface of water, spinning and splashing at the person who pushes me in. I dive under and suddenly I'm in my bed, buried by blankets as a weight falls on top of me laughing and tickling and I give in. I throw the covers from my face smiling up in a pair of perfect hazel eyes.

Hazel now hidden beneath an enchanted emerald.

I snap out of it, warm streaks running down my cheeks from tears I didn't even feel fall. I step closer to the brilliant beast, pressing my palms to its face.

He turns into my touch, a low, satisfied sigh leaving him just as Knight's warmth flows through the bond in my chest. And I know.

I know what I should have known all along.

This dragon isn't just a dragon.

He's my best fucking friend.

Thirty



K night

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO APPROACH HER. WILL SHE FLIP OUT all over again, or will she be happy that she has her best friend, even if in the form of a dragon.

“Dragon’s get a lot of game, baby. He’ll be a happy one.”

I test out the words as the ground crunches beneath my bloodied boot.

She doesn’t turn, her arms flying around his neck even if they only reach a fraction of it.

I leave them for a moment, respecting the fact that she and he shared a whole life together before I came along. That, and she’s mine infinitely, so I will learn how to share her time. I’ll learn whatever the fuck she wants me to at this point.

London steps back, turning to me while swiping the tears from her eyes. “Can he shift? Like back to human? What does this mean?”

“He’s no longer human, baby ... so no.” I offer a small smile to the both of them. “He’s one of us now, only

different.”

“But he can shift, right?”

Fuck. I’m not so sure that’s in the cards for him.

“If that’s something you want, I’m sure we can find out.”
When the dragon stomps his heavy foot and smoke bellows out his nostrils, I cast a quick glance his way before looking back to London. “Something tells me he’s happy where he is. Right there. To protect you forever.”

London turns back to the dragon and leaves small kisses over his cheek, and I wait for the pain or anger of the action to hit, but it never comes.

My bond thrums strong in my chest, my neck properly claimed with a bite mark deeper than I’d have thought my little mate capable, my Ethos freed and unmatched.

I’m a fucking King and she’s my Queen and no one could ever come between that.

He is her family, which means he is now a part of mine.

He has earned my trust and I will find a way to earn his just the same. For her.

“Go,” she murmurs. “We will talk soon.”

The dragon nods, flapping its wings up loudly until his big body lifts from the ground. When him and his friends have finally left, she turns to face me once more.

“He will live with us.”

I nod.

“Forever.”

I nod again.

“And we’ll find him a hot dragon girlfriend.”

I chuckle, hooking my arm around her neck to pull her in close.

She steps out of my grip, fluttering her lashes up at me sweetly. “Oh and, lover?”

“Hmmm?” I smirk back at her. I should have known what she was thinking, but the more she’s in my head the more I let my guard down.

Her foot comes to my chest with a hard thud and I’m flung backwards, falling down from the cliff I once threw her off.

A laugh rolls out of me as my feet hit the ground with a thunderous thud.

“I love you too!” I call out, shaking my head and turning to look between my brothers.

They stare back at me with proud grins.

“Fuck that was satisfying,” Lege is the first to break.

I flip him off. “Fuck you. Now, where the fuck is our mother?”

Stygians silence as I turn toward them all. “For so long, this colosseum signified many things, as I’m sure you all know.” I feel my brothers at my back, London slowly coming up slightly behind. “I want you all back when the clock strikes twelve.” When the silence stretches, the corner of my mouth kicks up in a grin. “We’ve got a fucking coronation to do...” Roars and chants fill the air, and I turn to face London, pulling her beneath my arm and kissing the top of her head. “You’re gonna pay for that later.”

“Yeah?” she baits, kissing my hand that’s over her shoulder. “We can play that game if you want to.”

I laugh as Creed pulls up a portal. “Oh, I want.”

London is still laughing when our feet touch the ground on the other side, only this time we’re in the Faelific Fortress. My smile falls when I notice my mother standing on the opposite side as if waiting. She probably was, but I know that Creed wouldn’t dump her ass in here and allow her to have her powers. She may be royal, but she, in fact, is not stronger than London. London isn’t only going to be the new Queen, she’s *mated* to a royal, which makes her infinitely stronger than Mother.

“So, I guess you would like me to explain?” She pretends to clean beneath her nails, slowly lowering herself down onto a large boulder that sits right in front of the waterfall.

“You don’t really have to,” I say, holding her stare. “The answer has been there all along, but unfortunately for us, it took a while to catch on.”

London’s hand comes to mine, stopping me, and Mother’s eyes flash to the connection. Agitation etches over her skin, and it’s the first time I’ve noticed how much she has aged. As though fate started draining all that she has the second London ascended.

“She can do her worst...”

“She already has.” I tilt my head and everyone around me falls silent. “Are you going to tell them, or should I?”

Legend is the first to shift, moving slightly in front of me. I don’t miss the little shadow that’s on the other side of him too. Seems London’s little friend is hanging around for the drama too, not just the blood.

“What’s he talking about?” her youngest son demands.

Our mother straightens her shoulders and raises a perfectly plucked eyebrow. The energy around her shifts in that moment, and suddenly the colors in the fortress fall to anemic shades of sepia.

“I hated him,” she says simply.

A growl grows in my chest, anger gripping me around my neck.

She continues, “And he deserved to die.”

Sinner moves so fast that I miss him when his hand is around her throat and he’s lifting her frail body up from the ground.

“She wasn’t mated to the King, she was mated to London’s father, The Slasher. Her need to reign and be Queen was more than her need to be with her mate.” I lower myself down onto one of the rocks, pulling London onto my lap and wrapping my arm around her waist. If I say the wrong thing, or hell, Mother says the wrong thing, I don’t trust that my girl won’t kill her before we get what we want from her.

Which is justice. Revenge. Answers.

Sinner throws her body down, spitting in her face. “You took everything from us!”

“Oh please!” She wipes the spit from her cheek, glaring around at us all. “I handed you the damn kingdom!”

Legend bites down to stop himself from snapping, and we’re all waiting for it. Legend may be soft with London, but he’s lethal when pushed. How he is with her is a rare occurrence that none of us had ever seen before. “We don’t like being given things that we could gladly *take*.”

Legend's anger rolls off him in waves, and I slowly peel London off my lap, knowing he's about to jump. He launches forward but this time I catch him by the wrist.

"Leave it," I growl in his ear. "Save it for the coronation."

My mother's face changes, morphing into a panicked, wide-eyed mess. Her hair, now a nest on top of her head, falls around her shoulders as she slowly stammers to her feet. She steps backwards, putting the log she was sitting on between us. "No! Just kill me now."

"Oh, what's the matter, Mother..." Sinner starts circling her, hungry for her pain. "Don't want a public execution?" If there was one thing that she loved more than her place beside the King, it was her pride.

Now we were going to take that too.

This time is different. The lighting that is set over the colosseum is dim, with the main focus on the stage we stand on. London is beside me, her hand in mine, and Legend and Creed are on the other side of Sinner. Five heavy-set thrones are lined horizontally across the platform, each of us standing in front of one. Mine and my brothers are dipped in black satin, each with different patterns etched into the iron, but it's London's that steals the show. With the same polished black as mine and my brothers', the feet of hers splinter up with ice. Cool blue spikes of ice creep up her throne in twisted vines, hugging the edges.

I lift my hand and the crowd quiets. Taking London's hand with mine, I look up to the stands, out to our people. "You're all here today to watch the coronation of your future King and Queen, but first, my gift to you all..."

I wave out in front of me and another spotlight flares onto Mother. Her skin is soiled, her hair matted to her face, and the cuts on her wrists bleeding. I watch as every droplet falls to the dusty ground, wishing I could give something more to make her hurt.

The people gasp in shock, before my mouth opens. "Queen Cosima has something to announce to the people of Rathe."

Silence splits between us. Seconds turn into minutes, until I start to think she's not going to say a word. Finally, she lifts her head high, tugging at the chains around her wrists and staring right at me.

I smirk. "There she is." I was beginning to be disappointed in her lack of fight. Even at death's doorstep, she challenges me.

"I killed the King."

Another gasp from thousands of people, and no doubt all of those who are at home, watching on their projectors. She squares her shoulders and raises a brow.

"The King was weak—"

She casts a simple look at London, before coming back to us. "But no matter how I felt about the King, I know that my sons will lead stronger." Her next words are for us and us only as she lowers her tone. "You think that because you have the throne, you've won." She takes a moment on each of us, before resting back on London. "But you're wrong. Kill me as you will. Death will be painless, and I'll be sure to come back

in the next lifetime to punish you all over and over again until each of you are cursed. Just remember.... I was not alone through all of this. But I think you know that, don't you? At least one of my spawn was loyal."

Her mouth snaps closed as her head tilts back, her eyes rolling to the back of her head. She begins whispering in a foreign language that none of us recognize as she slowly swings her body around in circles. The flames that line the base of the colosseum explode higher into the sky, and the people who are seated closest to them duck from the raging fire.

"Knight..." Legend warns from beside us. "What the fuck is she doing?"

London curves her hands over each other before forcing a ball of ice around Mother's body. The flames diminish and with a flash of bright light, whatever London just created explodes. The dust settles around us and Mother is gone.

"You killed her?" I ask London.

"She will wish that she was..."

The people roar loudly, clapping and whistling. The heavy chants of *Queen London, may she reign*, start shaking the ground so hard dust drifts up from around our feet.

Odin steps up the stairs that lead to us, a dark cloak covering his head as five black pillows float around him, holding the crowns. On their own, each of them float to the front of us and I feel the surge of magic vibrate through the Royal line.

Odin bows to his feet in front of both London and me. "The King and Queen of Rathe!"

We all take the crowns in our hands and slowly lift them to our head. Gold and black twist around mine and I drop my arms to the side once it's secured. The people all bow as I take London's hand with mine, bringing it up to my lips and kissing the top. She looks up at me through dark lashes, a smile touching the side of her mouth, her crown following the same style as her throne. Rathe has never been better.

Thirty-One



London

I'D SPENT ALL OF MY LIFE NOT BELONGING. FEELING LIKE A kind of outcast around my own people. Little did I know, I was just that. Surrounded by the wrong kind.

Looking out to the people of Rathe, a smile touches my mouth and a sense of pride whistles through my blood. Finally, I feel home. A sense of belonging, with my family.

Ben is included in that, as he's always been and was always meant to be.

Everything that has happened in my life, happened for a reason, and it was the same for Ben. He had no one in life, but a wonderful woman who taught him how to be a good man, and when she left the Earth she was born to, all that was left in his world was me. He never cared to fall in love and now I know why. Because he wasn't meant for Earth either.

Rathe was always supposed to be his home. Even though we ended up in Rathe before the King had intended us to come home, me and my protector, even though Temperance played her games trying to get us here on her timeline, it didn't

matter. We were always meant to end up right here, right now.

My eyes catch someone seated in front of the crowd, and I gasp. “Kaia!”

Kaia’s wide smile beams back at me. She brings two fingers to her lips and kisses them, blowing it straight to me before joining in with clapping.

Knight takes my hand with his, looking down the line to me and his brothers, the other Kings of Rathe, because this is what they are. Rightfully so.

They are the heirs to the kingdom and their loyalty to one another knows no bounds. They will reign together, and Rathe will be stronger because of it.

I may be Queen, and I will be a fucking fantastic one, but we are a Kingdom of Kings.

Until they find their mates anyway.

“We leave,” my mate says.

Legend nods his head, and I smirk. “Allow me.”

I do the same movement I did with Cosima, only this time the globe forms around each of us. In a blink, we’re in the room where we hold meetings, looking down at the stadium below.

I turn to my King with a smile, cause the cat is now halfway out of the bag.

“Wait, that’s what you did?” he says, laughing. “So, where’d you send her?”

Creed goes straight for the bar in the corner and Sinner follows close behind.

“Bring my girl in...” London laughs, automatically finding the chair at the end of the table. “And I’ll tell you all everything you’ve missed.”

Knight pulls his phone from his pocket, sending a message to Silver and not a minute later, he’s stepping into the room, Haide’s right behind him.

Good. Everyone is here. They’re all going to want to hear this.

Knight

Haide and Silver stomp their way into the room, each decked out in their own version of battle gear, but while Silver swapped his for a clean pair after the blood bath today, Haide chose to leave the blood of her victims where it landed.

“That girl’s a slippery little sadist,” she says, unstrapping the harness from her chest and waist.

“Almost as slippery as you,” Silver complains.

“Awe, come on now, baby...” She smirks, and Legend’s head snaps over his shoulder, eyes narrowing on the new girl. “I thought all men liked it a little slick?”

London laughs loudly, lifting her hand up for a high five as Haide walks by, headed right for the bar.

She tosses her weapons to the ground once she gets the last strap undone and hops up right on top. She cocks her head, staring down at Legend with a bored expression, then quickly steals the drink from his hands and lifts it to her lips.

“I take it you didn’t find the traitor?” His words are slow, and I note the way he clenches the bottle of liquor tighter.

My eyes snap to London’s just as hers meet mine and she lifts a brow.

“Nope.” She pops the P. “Like I said, she’s slippery. Every time we caught your dear sister’s trail, she covered it with sage or saffron or some other kind of herb you can find in the wild, so no reason to think she had someone’s help. I scented no one, not even a healer.” She looks across the five of us, speaking with certainty. “She’s alone.”

As I assumed she would be. I can’t pretend to know her anymore, but she’s at least smart enough not to allow someone weaker than her to tag along and get her caught.

Legend isn’t satisfied with the new girl’s answer. “What makes you think we would trust your word?” He yanks the now empty glass back from her, refilling it for himself, and taking a small sip. “Do you even have tracking skills?”

Haide curves her fingers over the edge of the bar, leaning forward until she’s in his face. “I might not be a big bad badass like you, *King Legend*, but I am nothing ... if not a hunter.”

Legend is quiet a moment. “You think you’re a bigger predator than me, crazy girl?”

Haide holds his stare, unblinking, then before he sees it coming, snags the drink right back. She hops down, taking the bottle, too, and moves to join London in her chair rather than sitting in a free one.

“Besides,” she passes London the bottle, and they cheers one another, “the Queen trusts me... so fuck the Kings—”

She cuts off when Legend growls, and when the girls look to each other, they both start laughing.

And fuck me, if I didn't miss the sound of my girl's laughter. It wasn't pointed at me as much as I wish I could claim it was, the start of our story one for the next generation's Book of Nightmares. Mostly it was when she was with Sin or Lege ... or Ben. Hardly ever with me, but that shit's done with now.

I'll earn all her smiles and laughter, even the ones she'll give when I bend her ass over my knee. I can see it now, her long white hair tied tight around my wrist, neck stretched to its max as she peeks at me the little bit I allow. Her lips will curve in a dare, and that laughter she gives when my control snaps will be that of a heady giggle, pointed straight at my cock. I can see the moments right after I'm done taking her how I want her, too. The soft curve of her lips and those big, icy eyes staring into mine with more love than I deserve but will greedily take. And the girl does love me, even if she hasn't spoken the words. She doesn't need to.

Look what my baby did for me. That says it all.

She saved Rathe as we know it.

London gazes at me knowingly, so when I feel her gift poking against mine, I drop the barrier and let her in, both of us aware she doesn't need to use her gift to get inside, she just

needs to tug the bond that beats with life between us, and it will roll the fuck over for her. She doesn't want that though.

She wants me to allow her a look around.

She wants my every guard to drop.

And as her eyes mist over from her place across the room, the others completely oblivious to us, she sees the truth in my memories.

My guard fell away the moment we met and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get it back up. One look in her eyes, and I was fucking done for.

Her smile drops to her lap and my lips curve slightly.

What's the matter, baby, don't like it when I'm sweet? Rather me tell you I'm going to punish your pussy for putting yourself in all the danger you did?

Her eyes pop up, and she responds in my mind. *Duh.*

An unexpected chuckle escapes me, earning me looks from the rest of the room.

“London, you gonna keep picturing all the ways you're gonna fuck the Kings of Rathe or you gonna tell us where Mother Dearest is?”

“Kings?” Haide looks to London in question. “So, it *is* a them situation?”

“No. It's not.” I glare at my idiot twin.

“Little H,” Sinner ignores me. “Did London tell you about the time I sat her on Legend's lap and buried my fingers deep in—”

A growl rips from my throat, one I've never heard and wasn't sure I made until my brothers jump from their seats,

eyes wide and on me.

I look to where London sits and slowly, she rises.

She comes to me, each step slower than the last, and then she's right here, looking up at me in awe.

Her warm palm presses over my shirt where my heart beats, and instantly, my chest begins to rumble, the vibration echoing through my every bone and her icy eyes flare.

“There he is,” she breathes, her mouth lifting into a wide smile. London blinks, and as her eyes reopen, they're blown completely black. “We've been waiting to meet you, our beast, and there you are, ready to play. My demon King.”

Demon.

I look closer in the pit of darkness her eyes have formed, seeing my own for just a moment.

Black, blown orbs stare back at me, and I glance at my brothers, awestruck and imagining the day they're set free like I've been.

I turn back to London. “How?”

She chuckles, a dark edgy sound. “I am Queen of Rathe, my King. Your Queen. How clearer of a message do the fates need than that?”

My Queen. My mate.

My fucking Ethos.

Unlocked.

I dig around in London's mind, devouring every part of me she's kept closed, getting drunk on the images that run through her thoughts, storing every dirty detail, silently promising to

fulfil her every fantasy, starting with the one of us on my throne.

Then I find what I've been missing—everything that happened from the day I came back to the Faelific Fortress to find out she was gone.

Her hate for me was so strong, but under it, her love for me held tighter. She couldn't let me go any more than I could her.

She chose me long ago.

There's so much to sift through, and I want to start from the very first painfully crushing moment, when she entered into that cave and got her memories back, reliving what I had done to her all over again, but London shoves against me in her head, showing me what she wants me to focus on in this instant.

I see it, clear as fucking day.

A loud laugh leaves me, and I shake my head, looking to my brothers. "Our Queen did Mother one worse than death."

Haide jumps to her feet, a smile growing across her face. "No..."

"Oh, yeah." London smirks.

"What are we missing?" Legend glares.

"Mother isn't sitting somewhere waiting for execution. She's been banished." I look to Haide, the puzzle pieces of who she is and where she came from coming together. "She's on Exile Island... with a gang of angry Stygians."

"Oh. *Shit.*"

Thirty-Two



K night

SPINNING THE DAGGER THAT KILLED OUR FATHER IN MY HAND, I step out into the hall, admiring the work that went into these walls.

After the coronation, after *Yemon*, our people needed a purpose deeper than the one they already serve, so when a group of our finest craftsmen came to us with an idea, we were all ears.

They asked for permission to have the honor of constructing the new and improved Royal mansion, one that would represent not a king and his queen, but each King and his future Queen when she comes along.

With Vicente and Odin overseeing and approving, that's exactly what they did.

Now, raised high into the skies of Rathe, at the edge of the Royal Estate, sits our new home.

Each wall among mine and London's wing, the north wing, tells a different story should you pause long enough to watch it. Our story and the paths that lead us to the crowns that sit on

our heads. It's a reminder that every moment was one we fought for.

I will never stop fighting for her, for us, for our brothers, and our people.

It's only been two weeks since we were given our roles and Rathe has never been stronger, our people never more united. Even the Argents.

They needed guidance and they hadn't experienced a hint of it since the death of their leaders and the forming of the Ministry. They see it now, why our father held strong, and fought against them at every turn.

Only those who understand the weight of a crown can carry the weight of their people.

We will hold them as strong as we will Stygians, as equal civilians of magic, so long as their loyalty remains ours. For now, it is. The moment that changes, and one day it will, they will be dealt with swiftly and without mercy.

"I smell fresh churned caramel and the sweet crack of fresh pepper."

I look down the hall to find Haide coming around the corner and raising a dark brow.

"Plotting a massacre so soon, are we?" Her eyes glitter. "Who dies first?"

A low chuckle leaves me, and I shake my head, stepping out onto the levitating platform. Haide pops up by me, hiding something behind her back. "No massacres and no deaths today. Sorry, little psycho."

"I know what I smelt. You were thinking about killing someone."

I look out over the foyer below, royal staff members darting from one direction to another, everyone finalizing their tasks for the night. “You are good, I’ll give you that, but it was more a metaphorical thought than an actual plan.”

She shrugs a shoulder, a smug expression taking over her face. “Knew it.”

The platform reaches the glittery black floor, and we step off, watching as it disappears into the air.

“Why are you in your gear?” I ask, looking down at the same outfit she wore the day we met.

“Don’t want to leave any of my things behind.” My brows pull, but before I can ask, her hands come around revealing what she was keeping behind her back. “Here, I made this for you.”

My attention falls to the item she’s holding. “You made me something?”

“Are you going to take it or are you going to stare at it?” she snaps.

Fighting a smirk, I accept the black folded leather, my eyes lifting to hers when I realize what it is. “You made this for me?”

“I did.”

“With your hands?”

She looks at me funny, but that’s because she doesn’t get it. Gifted use their gifts for manual labor. She didn’t do that with this. This is crafted, every intricate design, every stitch.

“As we already established, yes, I did. I made it for you. I can’t stand another second knowing how unprepared you are by having a dagger sticking inside your pants. One wrong

move, you could cut the goods. My friend wouldn't like that. Hence, the sheath."

I don't bother pointing out the fact that we are Gifted and my best friend's a healer because that's not the point here. I learned everything about my girl's new friend when I was playing in her head a week ago—my new favorite pastime. The girl was born on Exile Island, hunting and fighting is all she knows, and in the eyes of a hunter, a warrior as she is, you sheath your fucking daggers.

"It has a spot you can slide your belt right through, and in case you aren't the belt type, there's also a little flap so you can attach it straight to the loop instead. It should be the exact size you need to hold that baby. You can hide it under your shirt for the element of surprise or wear it proudly for all to see. Your choice."

With that, Haide gives a playful salute, turns around and starts down the hall.

"Haide!" I call out, and she glances over her shoulder with a raised brow. "Thank you."

For the sheath and for all you did to help us get here, freeing London and fighting beside her. For being good to her, a stranger in her world, when even I couldn't manage that.

I say none of this to her, but I don't have to.

She knows. The girl winks and walks away.

Securing the dagger in place, a small smile finds my lips and I head for the pavilion, a giant basement level space with side walls that open to the galaxy and allow for cloud seating along the outer rim of the room.

Fuck me, I've missed a good party.

It's been ages since we threw one ourselves, but with the move into the new pad, it's the perfect fucking occasion.

Tonight, we open the doors to our home for the people of Rathe for the first time.

London

I'm drunk and it's fucking glorious.

The last few months have been the most challenging of my life, and for a moment there I wasn't so sure I would ever be able to just ... be.

Yet, here I stand, at the edge of the room, the toes of my heels literally lining up against the point of the basement where the corner walls should be, but magic is fucking amazing, so there are none. It's nothing but endless clouds and dark skies before me.

Just outside the space, the races are in full swing, and I watch as Ben, who is a fucking ginormous dragon now, moves up to the starting line, a smaller female to his right. Her scales shine a deep purple, her eyes a perfect match.

The pair huff and rumble, crouching their necks and perching in preparation.

A star explodes above them, and they burst, disappearing through the skies, leaving nothing but a trail of smoke in their wake.

A small laugh falls from my lips and I down what's left of the black, glittery liquid Creed poured for me.

It's like an injection straight to the vein, my eyes flickering and muscles going limp in an instant. Fuck, I needed this.

My body is light and free, which is so odd when this realm's greatest gift exists beneath my skin, it's embedded in the deep slices of my forearms—the ashes of the bones of royal ancestors, my gift from the fallen King.

A Deveraux demon.

My demon.

The power that haunts beneath my skin is like nothing I've ever felt before, it is beyond comprehension. It's an utterly unmatched feeling, yet somehow... nothing could compare to the heat of my mate's hands when he slides up behind me, curling his giant body over mine. He buries his head in my neck, his hot tongue flicking over the newest bite mark there, one bigger and deeper and on the opposite side of the original.

What can I say, he's savage in his claiming and I fucking love it.

I love him.

My eyes close and I smile into the darkness of the space, the party loud and booming behind me. "Ben won again."

"Good," Knight murmurs, his palm sliding down my side until his hand is skating around my thigh and disappears into

the slit of my little black dress. He groans when he finds my present to him. “No panties, baby?”

“Hm,” I hum happily, reaching up to slide my hand in his hair, pushing his face deeper into my neck. “Thought I could sit on your lap on your throne tonight, fuck you slow while everyone watches, having no idea what they’re actually seeing.”

“That is absolutely fucking happening.” He growls, his claws digging into the flesh of my hips, and pressing me further against him. “But first, I have a surprise of my own.”

“Should I be terrified or happy about that?”

Knight’s dark chuckle falls over me, but it’s not his voice who says, “I’d hoped you’d be happy, Queen Deveraux.”

My body goes stiff in Knight’s warm hold and slowly, I tug myself free, turning just as cautiously.

A harsh exhale pushes past my lips when my eyes meet the gentle, weathered ones across from me.

“Hey there, Little Crow.”

“Uncle Marcus.” I swallow, tears pooling in my eyes. It only takes me a moment and then I’m throwing myself into his arms, crying into his chest. “You’re here.”

You’re really alive.

“Hey, now,” he whispers softly, smoothing the hair down my head like he always did when I was a child. “You wouldn’t want your people to kill me for making their Queen cry, now, would you?”

I scoff, pulling back to look at him, but when Knight’s hands slide around my middle and he tugs me back into his

embrace, I go willingly, smiling up at my uncle ... glaring a second later.

“You knew I wasn’t normal and you didn’t tell me.”

“I wasn’t allowed to tell you, honey,” he says softly. “I was under orders of our King, to protect and shield you from this place.” He looks around, a deep sense of longing written across his features. He’s missed his home. “From what I’ve been told, it wasn’t you that needed shielding.”

I shrug, unsure of what to say. “You’ll stay, right?”

Something crosses his features, sorrow and regret and a few more emotions I can’t name, and he points a sad smile toward the clouds. “I have something I must do, and it may take time.”

I want to argue, to tell him no, that he has to stay, but my uncle, or Knight’s actual uncle and the man who raised me, had a life before he was “honored” with the task of caring for the future Queen of Rathe. So, while it takes a lot of effort on my part, I nod my understanding. “Come see me when you get back.”

“I know exactly where to find you once I do.” His smile is tender.

Reaching out, I squeeze his hand.

“I love you, Little Crow, as much as any father loves his daughter.”

Moisture builds in my eyes and I nod again.

I’m about to cry when he’s finally out of sight, but before I can, Sinner, Creed, and Legend slide up, limbs loose, smiles wide and eyes low.

“Hello, new baby sis,” Sin slurs.

“The demon Queen of Rathe.” Legend stumbles as he tries to bow.

“The biggest pain in my fucking ass ever,” Creed adds, bumping into his brothers.

Just like that, my mood shifts back and I’m smiling again. All my boys are thoroughly fucked up and enjoying every second of it. Yes, even Creed.

It’s really good to see after the shit streak we’ve had.

“I’m gonna fuck that hot shifter from your courtship tonight.” Sinner grins wickedly, liquor spilling over the edge of his glass. “The Stygian one who came after Little L killed the vamp?” He groans as if picturing it. “I’m gonna yank that long ass hair of hers so fucking hard.”

Knight laughs, taking two of the shot glasses of the glowing purple mixture from the long floating tray that followed Legend and passes one to me. “Tell me if she screams my name instead of yours,” he teases, ducking when I send a shard of ice at his head.

Legend smirks, but as he looks past me, then back to the last shot on the floating tray, a frown builds across his brow. “Where’s crazy girl? Tell her ass to come get her drink before I down it myself.”

I glare at the reminder of Haide’s absence, taking it and knocking it back a split second after I finish my own, slamming it back down.

Knight laughs lightly, and Legend looks from me to him.

“What?” he asks.

Knight wraps his arms around me, tugging me close and bending to kiss the top of my head. “She lost her little friend

and she's pissy about it.”

Legend's hand freezes at his lips, and slowly, he lowers the glass. “Explain,” he spits.

My eyes snap to his, narrowing but his are pointed at his brother.

“The girl took off,” he tells him with a shrug.

“Took off ... where?” Legend's tone is low and lethal.

A monstrous rumble.

Interesting...

“Home, I guess—” Knight cuts off when Legend jolts forward.

“Bro, what the fuck?” Sinner snaps.

We all spin, rushing toward the edge of the building...that Legend just threw himself off of. Two whole seconds go by, and then my favorite pair of wings flap from below, Ben coming up through the clouds ... Legend sitting perched on his back.

“Hey!” I scream. “That's *my* best friend!”

My protest goes on deaf ears, the duo already long gone before the final words leave my lips.

“Man, he is fucking fast,” Creed grumbles, spinning when his name is called and dragging Sinner with him.

Knight spins me, yanking me close. He dips and I jump, wrapping my legs around him and smiling when he moves to the edge of the building, freefalling backward onto a large cloud and lifting us higher into the skies, those blue eyes of his darkening by the second. His demon wants out to play, and lucky for him, mine does too.

His rough palm presses against my cheek, sliding along my skin until it's digging deep into my hair. "I would die a thousand deaths for you, my Queen."

"Good," I whisper pressing my lips to his. "Because I have a feeling I'm going to kill you quite often."

He chuckles at that, then punishes me for my words with a harsh tug to my hair.

I gasp into the air and he takes my mouth with his, biting down on my lower lip. "I need you to do two things for me, baby. Agree to these two things and I'll never ask more of you."

"Anything."

"Never stop fighting me."

"You know I won't."

The blue of his eyes whirl at the edge of his irises, holding on, fighting for a few more moments before our demons demand to lead the way they've come to do when we're skin to skin.

"What's the second thing?" I ask softly, having an idea what he's about to say.

Knight glides his lips across mine, closing his eyes as his sharp claws bite into my ass. "You already know," he warns. "Say it, London. Say it now."

My insides tighten, my stomach whirling and I run my hands up his chest, wrapping them around his neck. I don't know why I've held on to the words when he hasn't.

I feel them, and he knows I do, my actions speaking them for themselves, my mind whispering them to him when he plays inside it, but he deserves this. Shit, I deserve this.

I press my forehead to his, waiting for his eyes to open.

“I will fight you for all eternity ... and I will love you infinitely. For all my days and beyond them. When I’m but the bones in an old urn or the shadows who protect these lands, I will still love you, my King. For always.”

Knight’s eyes go from blue to solid black in an instant and the laugh that tears through me is one of thrill.

He buries us into the protection of demonic smoke and black clouds ... and we don’t come up for air for hours. Maybe days, I can’t be sure, and I don’t fucking care.

Because this is our time.

Our kingdom.

Our choice.

In Rathe we bleed.

Knight and I, we’ll bleed together.

Until the end of fucking time.

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!

Turn the page for a little tease at what’s next for the Kings of Rathe!!

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Mate of a Royal

LEGEND

She senses me before she sees me, her back going stiff and those rough little hands freezing along the blade she's sharpening. Slowly, her head turns, eyes slamming into mine from fifty fucking feet away.

Her brows dip with confusion, but my name leaves her lips like a wicked little prayer that claws at my insides.

“Legend,” she murmurs, spinning in slow motion until her body faces mine. “How did you get here?”

I say nothing, creeping closer to the girl who thought she could run from this. From me.

When I don't answer her ridiculous question she asks another bullshit one. “Why are you here?”

“So that's how you want to play this?”

Haide glares, arms crossing over her chest. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

A dark chuckle escapes me, and I cock my head to the side, feeling that heavy, constant fucking thrum that now beats beneath my chest.

“Now that's a lie if I've ever heard one.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“Is that any way to talk to your King?”

“Sorry, please, *King Deveraux*, if you would kindly ... go fuck yourself.”

A split second after the last word leaves her mouth, she turns on her heels and fucking runs.

“Bitch.”

I take off after her, and I’ve got to admit, she’s fast. Faster than any chick I’ve seen, so I put some actual effort into my strides.

Sorry, baby girl, but no one is faster than me. I will catch you.

And when I do...

—

Legend and Haide are coming in 2024!

Add their duet to your TBR today!

Mate of a Royal → <https://geni.us/MOARGR>

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Note from the Authors,

Thank you so much for reading the conclusion to Knight and London's story! We hope you loved it as much as we loved telling it! Next up in the series is Legend and Haide!

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