



the  
**VAMPIRE  
DEFENSE AGENCY**

**LAST  
BREATH**

**KATHERINE DIANE**

## **THE VAMPIRE DEFENSE AGENCY**

Blood Lust

Dark Hunger

Night Shade

Day Break

Last Breath

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ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

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NINE

TEN

ELEVEN

TWELVE

THIRTEEN

FOURTEEN

FIFTEEN

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# ONE

Even with their weapons shaded from sight, Ronan and Nox caught plenty of side-eye as they boarded the subway car. Nothing new in that. Ronan was bigger than most human males and Nox was a fucking tank.

In a space like this, their clothes stood out as well, the heavy boots and tactical black sitting somewhere between merc and criminal. Though Ronan's motorcycle jacket covered most of his slashing tattoos, a few of them hooked up his neck. A lot of humans wore ink these days, but something about Ronan's sent a warning.

Then again, it might have been the fact that he and Nox were hunting. Somehow even a species like humans, deep in the city and living mostly in their phones, could still sense it.

At 2 a.m., the subway car carried mostly drunks and a few late-shifters slouching in the grimy plastic seats. In a city like Portage, New Hampshire, people knew to drop the side-eye if they didn't want trouble. Usually, even the punks fucked off at the sight of the Hush.

Tonight, however, one leather-clad asshole, rattling with chains and reeking of weed, stepped in front of Ronan as he headed toward the empty end of the subway car.

Several violent images flashed through Ronan's mind as he halted at the skunky roadblock, but all he said was, "Nope."

Yet when Ronan, with a great show of maturity and self-control, shouldered past the punk instead of throat punching him, the asshole grabbed his arm.

"This car belongs to—"

Someone putting hands on Ronan, especially a goddamn human, shot a signal straight past his prefrontal cortex and into his subconscious. He grabbed the fucker by the throat and slammed him into the side of the subway car.

Ronan didn't even realize he was snarling and baring his fangs until the punk's eyes widened, his tough-guy act melting

quickly into terror. The knife pricking Ronan's abdomen trembled.

"Ronan."

Nox's voice skimmed through Ronan's awareness. All he really registered was the fragile human throat in his grip. For a second, Ronan saw a white lab coat instead of a cheap leather jacket. He saw a sterile white room instead of a filthy subway car.

*"Ronan."*

Ronan tore his hand away. "Fucking humans," he muttered and stalked onward.

By the time Ronan's ass hit the plastic bench near the other set of doors, the would-be badass was clinging weakly to the car's center pole. He looked down at his hand, seemingly puzzled by the knife he was holding like he didn't remember drawing it. The punk stowed his blade and gave his head a shake.

"You shaded his memory," Ronan complained as Nox dropped onto the bench beside him.

"It's SOP."

"Fuck that. Fucking humans think they can—"

"Our kind are no better," Nox reminded him in that deep, quiet way of his. Nox had his own switches, but when they weren't being flipped, he was as calm and still as ... well, as someone who'd spent a shit-ton of years in a cell.

Maybe Ronan's decade of captivity hadn't been quite long enough.

Or maybe Nox, so deeply bonded to Claire, was stabilizing—while Ronan was spinning off his fucking axis.

Everyone was used to him being a prickly asshole, so no one seemed to think too much of his increasing volatility. Or maybe they assumed it was because he was dying.

But that was nothing new.

He'd been fucked up on the cellular level ever since he'd escaped Genesys. During his years as a test subject at the human lab, he'd been injected with so much shit that his body was a goddamn mess.

Jonus An, head of medicine at the VDA, had been trying to sort out that mess for years, but the treatments weren't working anymore, not really. The cellular mutation that Genesys had set off was happening too fast.

Mostly it was just pain. Exhaustion. Skull-splitting headaches. Ronan had a pretty high tolerance for all that, but it was starting to affect his reflexes. One of these nights, he'd be too slow to block a knife, clear a gunshot, make a jump.

In truth? That was probably just as well.

Because the *real* reason Ronan was losing his shit was that there was something wrong inside him—and it had nothing to do with how the lab had fucked him up.

Once, he'd enjoyed the comfortable delusion that this particular wrongness had been caused by the lab. It had made sense. Mind-altering drugs, electroshock, sensory deprivation. All of that had been geared toward triggering his mind-body separation. Ronan had believed, until recently, that that shit had *caused* his mind-body separation.

At least, that's how he'd once thought of what sometimes happened to him.

It used to happen only on rare occasions, like when he was totally exhausted. He'd pass out ... and find himself out of body, walking around like a goddamn ghost. It was freaky as shit.

But as his body now deteriorated, it was happening more often. And now he knew the official name for it: mind walking.

The reason it had a name? Because the only other known mind walker in vampire history had been Kadaros, son of the dark god Vimonos, the self-styled Dark Prince.

Fucking fantastic.

If Ronan had ever known his father, or if his mother hadn't been institutionalized soon after his birth, dying by the time he was five, he would've had a few goddamn questions, that was for sure. (He still had a few goddamn questions but no one to ask.)

Cue the identity crisis.

Actually, it had been more like a major fucking meltdown—as soon as he'd had time for one. He'd learned the truth about the mind walking shit when the Hush had been in the middle of a full-blown emergency. A shady-as-shit, weird-ass cult had been working with a demon lord to steal the inert (but alive) body of Kadaros from Queen Amarada's vault. There had been no time for Ronan to freak the fuck out while the Hush had been racing to locate the cult before they could awaken the Dark Prince.

Though the awakening had failed and the cult had been eliminated, the demon lord had teleported away with Kadaros's desiccated body. What had followed was two months of the Hush hunting for the demon lord, with everyone on high alert like the world was about to end.

The hunt had, if nothing else, kept the attention off Ronan. During the first few nights of it, he'd pulled an I'm-sick card for the first time in his life—so he could freak the fuck out in private.

It hadn't been pretty, but that was in the past now. When Ronan had realized that he was exactly the same as he'd been before and wasn't about to turn into an evil version of himself, he'd gone back to acting like everything was fine.

And eventually, with no leads on the demon lord and no sign of Kadaros, who hopefully could never be awakened, the Hush had gone back to business as usual.

And if Ronan had a shorter fuse than before? No one seemed to notice. One of the perks of everyone accepting that you were an asshole.

Although ... Nox was giving him side-eye kind of like the humans had done when the two of them had stepped into this



subway car.

“What.” Ronan used a tone that didn’t suggest an actual question because he didn’t want an answer. What he wanted was for Nox to shrug like it was nothing and mind his own damn business.

Nox, however, observed, “You’re squinting.”

Yeah, he probably was. The flashing subway lights were practically slicing into his brain. He could deal with it.

“If I’m not okay, I’ll say so. You don’t have to check on me like a goddamn babysitter.”

Nox sighed and crossed his huge arms over his huge chest, his tactical jacket straining.

Christ, it wasn’t like Ronan was going to let himself become a liability. He would not endanger the team.

Did they not fucking trust him?

The next stop was theirs. Nox rose from the bench and moved toward the door, a 6’6” mountain of muscle that made the aggressive punk still clinging to the pole look like a scrawny teenager.

What had that moron been thinking, squaring up with Ronan and Nox?

Of course, it was specifically Ronan’s space he’d invaded. Because Ronan looked like an easy mark? Ronan wasn’t a giant like Nox, but even way leaned out as he was now, Ronan’s 6’2” frame topped 200 pounds.

At Ronan’s glance, the punk eyeballed him all over again, his aggression resurfacing.

Ah, so that was it. He wanted to fight—and somehow sensed that Ronan did too.

The asshole wasn’t wrong.

A human, though, would offer very little satisfaction. One-on-one, without drugs and restraints? No human could take him. Even in Ronan’s current condition, a human wouldn’t even *wind* him.

Good thing the Hush had gotten a report of suspected demon activity at the upcoming stop. Ronan needed the pressure release.

The car slowed and the doors slid open. Nox and Ronan stepped from the car into the grimy station. Harsh light flooded the narrow strip of concrete and tile.

A few young human males, heads down in a not-looking-for-trouble way, headed for the stairway exit. Amid the stink of grease and grime and trash, the sulphuric tinge of demons could be masked, but twitchy movement was always a giveaway. None of the exiting pedestrians, however, moved like anything other than humans.

Nox and Ronan looked around.

“Huh,” Nox said.

“Yeah,” Ronan agreed.

With no benches or booths, no restroom or custodial closet, there was nowhere obvious for a demon to hole up. And yet, two vampires had been reported missing in the past three nights, both of them known to use this station.

“Up top maybe,” Nox suggested.

“On Johnson Avenue?”

The human-heavy area contained bodegas and coffee shops, studios, and a hotel that was somewhere between boutique and cheap. One of the missing vampires had worked nights at the hotel.

Some vampires scorned those who made a living in the human world—because some vampires were privileged dickheads with money and connections. They took for granted the kinds of options that others, like the males and females of the group home where Ronan had grown up, simply didn't have. Some had gone into martial service, like Ronan, but a lot of them had found work in human hotels and hospitals, anywhere that offered night shifts.

As the subway train glided away, Ronan peered into the dim tunnel. He jumped down onto the tracks, landing on his toes to

stay quiet. Nox landed behind him with a heavy thud.

At Ronan's raised eyebrow, Nox shrugged his big shoulders. "I'm not a ninja."

Ronan snorted. Drawing his .45, he trekked along the tracks into the tunnel. His vampire-keen eyes surveyed the gloom. Recessed lights delivered periodic, bleak illumination.

"We've got less than five minutes before the next train," Nox warned.

"Plenty of time."

Nox grunted.

Demons couldn't ghost, so any that were holed up in the tunnel would have to be nearby, especially if the demons were dragging victims along with them. Demon cells tended to root themselves in locations with more resources and better access to vampire-heavy populations, but there were always singles and small groups with no lord to organize them. Drifting scum like that could be anywhere in Portage, and the alcoves cut into the tunnel walls would offer the sort of shelter that the spawn of the Abyss might find nice and cozy.

Ronan and Nox's boots thudded lightly along the concrete tunnel as they scoped out the shadowy alcoves. The cold seeped through Ronan's tactical pants and motorcycle jacket. The underground chill didn't change from January to July, but at least it wasn't drizzling like the April night up top.

As they approached a bend in the tunnel, Nox whispered, "Two minutes."

Yeah, yeah.

Catching a scent, Ronan halted. "Smell it?" he asked.

Silence. Then Nox muttered, "Fuck."

Blood. And the distinctive, rotten-egg stench of demons.

Ronan ghosted to the bend. With his energy reserves so low these days, he didn't ghost unless he had to. But sometimes he had to.

He slowed at the curve—and barely dodged the crowbar swinging for his head. Ronan kicked the demon square in the chest, sending it staggering back enough that he could get his gun up. He drilled two bullets into the demon’s face, currently bared of human illusion. Stubby horns broke the tough skin near its hairline. Bottom tusks thrust upward, distorting the mouth.

A chittering sound came from the other side of the tunnel, along with a whoosh of air. Ronan and Nox wheeled as a heavy chain came spinning their way.

Nox intercepted the chain, catching part of it in his hand. The other end whipped around the big guy and smacked him in the back. Ouch.

Ronan meanwhile ghosted across the tunnel to where the chain-throwing demon, also sporting its horns and tusks, had emerged from another alcove. Like its companion, this one was clothed in filthy rags like a rotting zombie.

Definitely no demon lord managing this scum.

Whipping his fourteen-inch recurved *shiva* from its thigh sheath, Ronan slashed clear through the demon’s neck. As the head toppled, the fires of the Abyss flared to take back one of its own.

Spinning to look for other assailants, Ronan spotted a third demon racing away. He raised his gun, but Nox was already firing. Three shots took the demon down.

Nox peered into the alcove while Ronan scanned the tunnel for any more demons.

“Bodies?” Ronan asked.

Nox shook his head. “Just blood.”

“Fuck.”

Without bodies, there wasn’t closure for the families of the victims. Life, however, was often like that.

As the tunnel rumbled with warning, Ronan jogged toward the third demon, the one that had fled.

“Ronan—”

“I hear it.” And it didn’t matter. He couldn’t leave the body on the tracks.

Even if the body didn’t derail the train and kill people, it would mean news and an investigation. It would also mean there was a chance the demon, no matter how fucked up, could eventually regenerate. Ronan had to take the head.

While Nox decapitated the one Ronan had shot, Ronan pushed himself to ghost to his mark. The demon was trying to crawl over the rails.

“Get the fuck out!” Ronan shouted to Nox as he came out of his ghost and planted a boot between the demon’s shoulder blades.

Nox didn’t. He waited in the growing light of the approaching train.

“Goddamn it, Nox!”

Ronan swept his *shiva* downward, severing the demon’s head just as the train’s lights blinded him. He staggered at the onslaught of skull-splitting pain.

Then he got his shit together. He ghosted down the tunnel, feeling the whoosh of air that was Nox on his heels.

They both surged up onto the station platform, ghosting further up the stairway to the exit. Better not to be seen in the station, just in case the driver had spotted them. Let the human think it a trick of the light or a late-night delusion or one joint too many.

The second they hit the cold April drizzle, Ronan spun, using the momentum of his ghosting to grab Nox by the jacket and fling his 260-pound body against the brick wall of a shuttered bodega.

Getting aggressive with Nox was never a good idea, but Ronan had a point to make. So when that slam into the brick flipped Nox’s switch, Ronan was ready for the roar and the brutal shove. He let it happen. He let his boots skid across the wet pavement, leaving a streak of rubber. He let his fingertips

sweep the ground to catch his balance. He came up in a fighting stance.

It wasn't necessary.

Nox had gotten the point. If Ronan could slam him into a wall, he wasn't that damn weak. Fingers interlocking, hands on his head, Nox paced the sidewalk, trying to calm down.

"Don't wait for me," Ronan said, needing to be understood.

"Fuck you, Ronan."

"I know what I can handle." *And what I'm willing to risk—which doesn't include you.*

*"Fuck you."*

Since he obviously wasn't getting through to Nox, Ronan went for the kill shot: "Claire needs you."

Nox's hands dropped. He looked at Ronan, hearing what Ronan didn't add. Ronan didn't add it because he wouldn't let Nox argue it.

So Nox just shook his head and walked off into the night, leaving Ronan with his unspoken words:

*Nobody needs me.*



## TWO

Kyr raised his knuckles to knock on Mira's office door. He was sure she was alone, but he'd learned to respect her space. Here at VDA headquarters, she had other concerns and responsibilities, just like he did. Before he could rap on the door, however, she opened it.

Would he ever get used to the connection of their bond, the way they could practically sense each other? He hoped not. He didn't want to ever not feel what he felt now: the way his heart swelled at the sight of her meeting him halfway.

She was wearing her teal silk dress and had her hair in that little swirly ball that always looked so casually elegant on her. For the millionth time, Kyr wished his mother were still alive to meet her, especially when she smiled at him like that.

Tonight, though, there was a touch of sadness in it. "How did you know I needed you?"

Kyr would have liked to have said that he'd simply known, but he didn't lie to his mate. "I saw Rhys leave."

"Ah."

She turned away before he could see her expression. Kyr followed her into the homey office. The plush couch, coffee table, soft lighting, and framed watercolor paintings of Parisian streets could *almost* make a person forget to be uncomfortable here.

Mira went to straighten up the couch's pillows, still not looking at him.

"Mira."

She took a deep breath and hugged a navy pillow to her chest. Kyr went to her and gently tugged the pillow from her grip. Tossing it onto the couch, he pulled her into his arms.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She wrapped her arms around his torso, squeezing tight. "Yes."

Kyr held her for a long, long while, until her answer was true. God, it was so hard to let her do this kind of thing.

*Let her?*

It wasn't for him to deny or allow—he knew that. But it was hard to see her in pain, even if he knew she could handle it. And even though he knew she was helping someone he really, really, really wanted her to help.

He asked, because he couldn't help it, “Is he okay?”

Mira drew back. “You know I can't discuss it.” Her eyes were bleak, and that was answer enough.

“Do I need to take him off street duty?”

“No.”

Kyr nodded, trusting her judgment.

He was relieved, too, because he didn't for one second believe that the shit with Kadaros was over. Even if the Dark Prince couldn't be awakened, the demon lord in possession of his body was undoubtedly trying. Idaios knew what kind of havoc he might wreak in the process. Kyr couldn't afford to lose Rhys—or any of the Hush.

And Ronan ...

Fuck. He couldn't lose Ronan. He wouldn't.

Even on that night, seven years ago, when Ronan had lost his shit with Amarada, Kyr had seen the honor under all that anger. Kyr had recognized exactly what Ronan was: a good male. Damaged, harsh, tough as shit—but good.

Kyr had laid claim to Ronan before Amarada could order his death, but how many years had that actually added to Ronan's timeline?

Because whatever the hell had been done to Ronan in that fucking lab ...

Kyr was starting to lose hope that it could be undone.

And what the hell was that going to mean?

\* \* \*

Ronan scowled at the feed from his security camera. On his phone's screen, Rhys's eyes flicked up to the well-hidden camera on the exterior of the converted wharf warehouse that Ronan called home. Naturally, Rhys knew where the camera was. He'd put it there himself last summer after telling Ronan his security was shit.

Rhys hadn't been here since. A lot had been happening. Besides, everyone knew that Ronan liked his space.

Which meant Rhys was probably here on the *comudari's* orders. Did Kyr not trust him at all?

Rhys didn't bother knocking on the steel door. He knew he'd been seen. He just stood there in the 4 a.m. drizzle, hands in his jacket pockets.

Ronan trekked across the hardwood floor in his bare feet. He unbolted and opened the door.

“What?”

“Um ...” Rhys's eyes flicked to Ronan and away. “I don't know, I just ...”

Ah, shit.

Rhys wasn't here to recon him for Kyr. He was here because he was fucked up. His body language was agitated, his eyes looking out across the moonlit bay.

Rhys was always buzzing at a high frequency, but when he got like this, it wasn't good. It usually meant he wanted to ghost. But he was here instead, trying not to.

Ronan stepped back, pulling the door wide. “Get your ass in here.”

“You sure? Cuz I can go somewhere el—”

“Get the fuck inside, Rhys.”

Hands still in his jacket pockets, Rhys stepped into the spacious warehouse-turned-apartment. It wasn't really an apartment though, given that Ronan was the sole occupant. Heavily shaded at the north end of the wharf, the former textile warehouse was his semi-secret hideaway. A pretty

sweet one too, with its walls of worn old brick and oak rafters high overhead. A cast-iron staircase rose to the platform loft where Ronan slept. Tried to sleep anyway.

Ronan needed all this space. The sleepless days tended to run long, forcing hours of confinement until the sun went down. Ronan couldn't handle that in a small space. Whenever he got stuck overday at the abbey or HQ, he got as twitchy as a damn demon. Pacing, finger tapping, muttering like a fucking psycho. He hated when those habits came back, like he was still in his cell at the lab.

Ronan needed the privacy too. Because if anyone found out about the mind walking shit? They'd lock him the hell up. He'd be in a cell again.

So, yeah, he had a reason for his paranoia about not being trusted. He didn't *deserve* to be trusted.

But there was one thing he trusted in himself: he would end shit before he endangered anyone. He'd thought through it. He'd practiced for muscle memory. He was ready.

Ronan shut and bolted the door behind Rhys then led the way through the apartment's huge central space to the galley kitchen. Pendant lights hung above the eat-in island, casting a muted glow over the wood countertop.

Ronan went to the fridge. As he opened it, he blocked Rhys's view with his body. No one needed to know there was nothing in there but beer and bottled blood. He did force himself to eat sometimes, but he had a pretty low tolerance for food these days. There was no point in keeping anything with an expiration date.

Hardy-har.

Snagging two porters from his good stash, Ronan shut the fridge and grabbed the magnetic bottle opener from the side of it. He returned to the island to find that Rhys had taken the chair at the far end of the island. He still didn't like for people to walk behind him.

It wasn't like Ronan hadn't always had suspicions about what that meant. It had always been obvious that Rhys had

been through some seriously fucked-up shit. But after what had happened two months ago? Ronan understood on a whole different level.

Before that, no one had known about Rhys's stepfather. Not only had that male abused Rhys for years in ways that Ronan could still only guess at, the fucker had been deep in the Brotherhood of the Dark Prince—and he'd made Rhys, too damn young to fight it, one of their playthings.

Two months ago, Rhys had been forced to interact with his stepfather as part of Amarada's investigation into the male. Then, in order to find the Brotherhood after they'd stolen Kadaros's body to try to awaken the evil shit, Rhys has been forced to dig into some pretty fucked-up memories.

Ronan had no idea how Rhys had gotten through all that without going off the goddamn deep end.

Later, the Hush had torn that fucker to pieces, but that didn't change what had happened to Rhys. It didn't change the fact that shit that had been in the background for years had just gotten shoved in his face.

Rhys shrugged off his damp jacket, exposing the black compression shirt that skimmed his athletic torso. Where Ronan had changed into warmups and a ratty old steel-blue t-shirt that said *Save the Whales*, a wardrobe item he didn't usually let people see, Rhys was still dressed for the streets. He hadn't been home.

Ronan tossed Rhys a kitchen towel, which he scrubbed over his drizzle-sheened face and through his fade-cut dark blond hair. Even damp, his hair sprang back into its usual wavy mess like it couldn't help itself.

Ronan popped the bottle caps and slid one of the beers to Rhys.

"I won't stay long," Rhys promised.

"I have a couch. You can stay as long as you want."

"Thanks, man."

Still standing in the kitchen, Ronan took a drink of the cold beer. Rhys did the same. His eyes flitted around, never quite settling on Ronan.

“What happened?” Ronan finally asked. “Did Wes do something?”

At that, Rhys’s eyes focused on him. He gave a little huff of laughter. “You still don’t trust him.”

With Rhys? Hell no. Rhys was ... good. In a way that Ronan would generally be inclined to say didn’t exist in the world. But with Rhys, it was just a fact. And Ronan wouldn’t let anything happen to him, not again.

Besides, Ronan didn’t go around handing out his trust after two months of working with someone. Yeah, he knew that Rhys and Wes had bonded, but that didn’t mean a whole lot to Ronan.

Rhys’s phone buzzed from a pocket of his discarded jacket. Rhys twisted to retrieve the device. He looked at the screen with an expression Ronan couldn’t quite read, took a deep breath, and answered.

“Hey. Yeah, I’m okay. I’m at Ronan’s. I just needed—” Rhys listened then swallowed hard. “Thanks.” He sighed then said, “Yeah, yeah, I know, but I *do* appreciate it. I will. I love you too.”

Rhys ended the call and set his phone on the counter.

Ronan knew he shouldn’t press. He hated when people pressed him. But he found himself asking again, “What happened?”

Rhys studied the bottle in his hands. “I just needed a minute before going home.”

“Did Wes—”

“No, Ronan, for fuck’s sake. It has nothing to do with him, and the point is that I don’t *want* it to have anything to do with him. I want to be able to go home for once without my head being fucked up. I hate it.”

Ah.



Rhys had been talking to Mira. No wonder his head was fucked up.

Ronan couldn't pretend to really understand what Rhys was having to deal with, but he certainly knew he wouldn't want to be digging into his own past. He did his best to ignore it.

Before Wes, Rhys had taken a similar approach.

Rhys looked away again. "I'm trying to fix shit, and it's hard."

Ronan couldn't help thinking that the kind of shit Rhys had been through couldn't be fixed. Then he thought back to what Rhys had been like years ago, how much better he already was. He thought back to how he himself had been years ago, when he'd almost put a letter opener through Amarada's eye.

All right, so maybe people could get better. It was the talking about it part that Ronan was actually skeptical about.

"Do you think it helps?" Ronan asked. "The stuff with ..."

Rhys's eyes flicked to him again as he tried to read the end of Ronan's question off his face. Ronan wasn't sure why he didn't want to say it out loud. He also wasn't sure what had possessed him to ask about something that was not only none of his fucking business but was also something he'd normally do anything to avoid discussing.

Rhys answered the partially voiced question with uncharacteristic bitterness. "Nothing's fixed yet."

"It's only been two months, man," Ronan pointed out, unsure why he was arguing against his own skepticism. "You're way impatient."

"Yeah, Mira said that, too. She says that things will get better, but sometimes it feels like they're just getting worse. It makes me think about shit I don't like to think about."

Ronan had no idea what the fuck was wrong with him that he was dragging Rhys and himself through the sort of conversation he normally avoided. Maybe the fact that he was dying? Or maybe the fact that, though Ronan would never

admit this to anyone, it meant a lot to him that Rhys had come to *his* place.

Then Ronan realized how significant that was on another level. He said, “But you came here. You didn’t ghost. Even though I could tell you wanted to.”

Rhys looked surprised. “Yeah. I guess that’s true.”

Then, because apparently Ronan was in a bizarre mood tonight, he said, “I’m glad you did.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, Rhys.”

“Thanks, man. I’m trying not to be weird. I know you hate it.”

Ronan chose not to point out that he himself was the one being weird tonight. Besides, he was at his hard limit for this kind of shit. So instead he shifted the tone of the conversation.

“Weirdness is a thing I accept about you. I kind of have to.”

Rhys raised an eyebrow in a way that said he was tracking the shift and was one hundred percent on board with it.

“You’re the one wearing a *Save the Whales* t-shirt. Not that I object to the sentiment.”

“It fits just right,” Ronan explained.

“It looks good on you.”

“Now you’re just being an ass. You wanna play *Diablo*?”

“Fuck yes. But just for an hour. I want to get home before dawn.”

Yeah, because Rhys had somewhere to be, a reason to be there. He had someone to be with.

And suddenly the idea of Rhys leaving to be with Wes, and Ronan being here all day by himself, stuck in his own head with his own fucked-up shit, was a lot less appealing.

But he wasn’t about to admit that.

# THREE

In the Bunker's kitchen, Wes hit the switch on the percolator. He put his back to the counter to wait for the coffee to brew. And so he could look at Rhys.

Wes couldn't get enough of the sight of him. It wasn't just that Rhys was the most beautiful male Wes had ever seen, though he certainly was that. It was the way Rhys moved, even if he was simply reaching into the refrigerator. It was the sound of his voice, even as he let out a delighted, "ooh!"

It was the way he looked at Wes as he pulled out the jug of chocolate milk, his expression partly teasing—because Wes had said just last night that chocolate milk wasn't very healthy—and partly ... awed. Like he was as surprised as Wes, still, to feel the bond tugging between them. Like he needed it as much as Wes did.

But all the pleasure of that didn't change the fact that Wes was worried. About Rhys in general because of everything he was struggling to come to terms with, regardless of the grin on his face as he lugged the chocolate milk to the counter. But also about ... them.

Wes was trying to give Rhys the time and space he needed to work on everything. And Rhys *was* working on it. He was working damned hard on shit that Wes still couldn't fully imagine. Shit that still sometimes had Wes shaking with so much anger that he had to hide it from Rhys.

And Rhys was hiding too. Like last night.

Wes was relieved, so damn relieved, that Rhys hadn't ghosted. He was so damn glad that Rhys had gone to Ronan's.

But it troubled Wes on a deep, deep level that Rhys had gone to see Ronan instead of coming to him. Rhys had been upset. Wes had heard it in his voice. So why, in that moment, had Rhys not wanted to be with him?

When Rhys had gotten home, he'd seemed okay. He'd been in a good mood, like he usually was. He'd wanted to fuck, like

he usually did. Whatever it was that he'd been going through after his session with Mira, he'd gotten through it.

But Wes was still worried about him. And he was, if he was being totally honest with himself, a little hurt. That wasn't fair—Wes *knew* that. But it was still how he felt.

He made himself put it aside. That was easy enough to do when Rhys, reaching into the cupboard beside Wes's head for a glass, let his free hand drift down to Wes's crossed arms.

Rhys was so intuitive. Wes couldn't get away with anything. But the touch drove away Wes's doubts and fears, for the moment. It stirred a reminder of the pleasure they had given each other less than an hour ago.

Wes uncrossed his arms and let his fingers brush Rhys's. "You two didn't have time for breakfast?" Talia inquired innocently.

She looked over her shoulder at them from where she was sitting on the half wall between the Bunker's lounge/kitchen and the training space. Her tight chestnut braid lay bright against her fitted tactical clothing, which she wore tonight instead of her cat suit.

Fortunately, everyone else was on the Bunker's other side. Nox and Luca were busy lifting weights, and the whack-clack-clack of staffs punctuated Ronan and Kyr's sparring. Even so, Wes fought a flush of embarrassment. A lifetime of being a very private person had not prepared him for the dynamic of a close-knit team like the Hush.

Rhys, however, grinned. And seeing that? Suddenly, Wes wasn't embarrassed at all.

"Talia," Rhys chided, "if *you* had time for breakfast, I do have to wonder—"

"It's called time management, my friend. You just have to get up a little earlier to fit everything in." Without a pause, she switched gears. "Don't drink all the chocolate milk."

"See?" Rhys directed at Wes. "Other people like it too."

"Hell yes," Talia agreed.

“Indeed. The two of you and several million children,” Wes replied. “But, hey, I’m sure there’s some calcium under all that corn syrup.”

Pouring himself a glass, Rhys asked Talia, “You see what I have to deal with?”

Talia shook her head woefully. “Oh, my dear one, you have no idea. I scrounge about like a desperate urchin in a kitchen full of oat milk, flax meal, and organic chicken. Sometimes, a girl just wants a burrito, you know?”

“I do, Talia, I do.”

“Listen, you two,” Wes began, but Luca called from the weight-training area, clearly having heard the exchange, “Aretalia Vos, I already promised you the artery-clogging pizza of your dreams.”

“That’s true, my love!” she called back. “But one pizza hardly makes up for a week of bran muffins.”

“That is a lie, you terrible brat!” Luca hollered, and Talia laughed.

“All of you,” Ronan shouted from the sparring ring, “need to get your gross mushy-gushy the fuck under control!”

Talia laughed again and declared proudly, “We just made *Ronan* use the phrase mushy-gushy. The night has already peaked.”

The percolator gurgled through the last of its brewing cycle. Rhys, still standing in front of the cupboard as he drank his chocolate milk, reached into the cupboard and snagged a coffee cup for Wes.

God, it was the little things like that, wasn’t it?

Before Wes could take the mug, a phone—Kyr’s, judging by the cracked screen—buzzed on the counter.

“Bossman, your phone!” Rhys called out. “Unidentified local number.”

“It’s probably just another fucking spam call!” Kyr shouted back. “Ignore it!”

The phone eventually went still but started buzzing again almost at once.

“Bossman, someone really wants to sell you an extended warranty! You want me to answer it?”

“Let Wes deal with it!” Kyr shouted.

“Ouch,” Rhys muttered.

When Talia chuckled evilly, Rhys threw the milk jug cap at her.

Wes picked up the scuffed and cracked phone and accepted the call. “Whatever you’re selling—”

“Oh, my dear,” a female voice purred, “I only ever buy.”

At the familiar, cultured tone, anger rushed through Wes’s veins. “Amarada.”

Beside Wes, Rhys froze.

Wes drew away from the counter and walked to the doorway between the lounge and training space. He didn’t want Rhys to see his anger.

Wes could not understand why Rhys didn’t hate her for forcing him into proximity with his piece-of-shit stepfather. She had knowingly put him through hell. Worse than that was the fact that Amarada had known about Bron’s habits even when Rhys had been a child. She could have intervened, like a decent person. She could have helped.

But she hadn’t. And his mother hadn’t. Rhys had had to save himself in the only way he could—by running away. Rhys’s mother was dead, which spared Wes the impulse to kill her. But Amarada ...

“It’s *Your Highness* to you, Westoran Kosu.”

Wes supposed he should feel alarmed that she recognized his voice, but with Amarada, eventually you just stopped being surprised.

Standing at the edge of the Bunker’s training space, Wes couldn’t help but think that unless she had a lead on the demon lord that had taken Kadaros’s body, the Hush had more



important things to do than whatever she was calling about. The Bunker's training space spoke loudly enough of that.

In the sparring ring, Kyr and Ronan ranged across the circle of hard rubber mats, their bare torsos sheened with sweat under the distant glow of the high ceiling's recessed lights. Their staffs cracked out a brisk cadence as Kyr drove Ronan back. But it was a trick, a lure—because Ronan ducked suddenly under Kyr's staff and nailed the *comudari* in the gut with a sneaky punch. He then whipped his staff up to clip Kyr under the chin, snapping the *comudari*'s head back.

Beyond that violent little dance, track lighting cast a diffused glow through the workshop/weapons storage and the weight training area. Nox was lying on a bench and chest pressing a barbell so heavily laden the bar curved, and Luca was working the free weights in an exhausting circuit.

With all that in his sights, it was easy to demand of the queen, “What the hell do you want?”

Busy sparring, Kyr likely hadn't heard Wes identify Amarada as the caller a moment ago, but the question, or maybe Wes's tone, caught Kyr's attention. The *comudari* signaled a timeout. Ronan whipped his staff away with a practiced spin and grounded it against the mat.

“If I wanted something from you, Westoran, I would have called *your* phone. Get Kyrdavian—now.”

Wes pulled the phone away from his ear. His thumb hovered over the disconnect button, but Kyr came striding his way, staff abandoned in the sparring ring, and snatched the phone from his hand.

“New number?” Kyr snarled. His lip curled back from his fangs as he listened to Amarada's reply. “I'll block it if I damn well want to. What the hell do you want?” he demanded, just as Wes had. The queen had no admirers among the Hush.

While Kyr listened, his expression going from hostile to something less readable, Ronan stayed where he was in the sparring ring, the butt of his staff grounded. The fact that he was leaning on it was barely perceptible. And the fact that he

was tired was largely irrelevant—as evidenced by the blood dripping onto Kyr’s chest from where that staff had caught him under the chin. Even at less than his best, Ronan was damned dangerous. Everything about him communicated that.

Harsh black tattoos slashed and hooked their way along his lean but muscled torso, spiking across his chest, down his arms, and even up his neck. His dark, fade-cut hair was scraped into a spiky sort of fauxhawk. All of it said, *Fuck off*.

Ronan didn’t like people—and he was always ready to fight.

Wes didn’t blame him. He didn’t know much of what had happened to Ronan, but Rhys had told him the bare facts. Some secrets couldn’t be kept, not on a team like this one, where everyone’s survival depended on everyone else’s fitness. Ronan’s fitness had been in question for months, but as he’d just made clear in the sparring ring, he could still cut it.

All Wes knew was that Ronan had spent a whole lot of years as a captive of a human research group, subjected to inhumane experiments. He knew that whatever had been done to Ronan had essentially poisoned him. He knew that Dr. Jonus An regularly gave Ronan some kind of counteragent that kept the damage at bay, but the treatment made Ronan sick as shit.

Those bare facts were all Wes had. He suspected they were all anyone had. Because if anything about Ronan was clear, it was the fact that he didn’t trust anybody.

Again, Wes didn’t blame him, even though he caught the full blast of that distrust. It was partly because he was new to the team. And it was also because Ronan, despite his appearance of not giving a fuck about anyone, actually cared a lot about his people. Though it torqued Wes to be distrusted with his own mate, Ronan’s protectiveness of Rhys was, admittedly, sweet in its own weird (and annoying) way.

Kyr sighed as he listened to Amarada. Then he said, “Yeah, okay, I’ll take care of it.”

Wes wasn’t the only one shocked by the shift in tone. He wasn’t the only one scowling as the team, formerly scattered throughout the Bunker’s vast space, closed in, Rhys and Talia

from the lounge, Nox and Luca from the weights. Wes was actually quite sure that, as fierce as his own scowl felt, it had nothing on Ronan's.

But then, when *wasn't* Ronan scowling?

Like he was aware that a bit too much of Wes's attention was on him, Ronan sent that scowl in Wes's direction. Their eyes locked briefly.

Christ, those eyes were aggressive as hell, and they had a dark certainty to them that said, *There's nothing you can do to me—but I can fuck you up.*

The little staring match puffed into smoke when Kyr ended the call with Amarada. He looked stern, maybe angry. He stowed his phone in a cargo pocket and started handing out assignments, all of them very standard, none of them explaining Amarada's call.

Then Kyr said, "Ronan, you're with me."

Ronan's hand went white-knuckled on his staff. "Not if you're going to the fucking Residence."

"You're with me regardless of where I'm going, but I'm not going to the Residence. I'm going to track down my sister, and you're going to do it with me."

With that, Kyr stalked off, striding away through the kitchen. Ronan glared after him.

"You're gonna need a clean shirt," Kyr called back as he headed into the hallway leading to the Bunker's private rooms, presumably to grab a clean shirt of his own.

"Fuck," Ronan muttered.

# FOUR

A wave of déjà vu washed over Ronan as he and Kyr cut through the hyped-up nightclub crowd. Last fall, the two of them had tracked Syren down at Heat, where she'd been drunk and bratty, partying in defiance of her mother. Her little act of rebellion had lost its steam the instant Amarada had shown up, and the Heir had gone slinking back to her mother. And her privileges.

Syren had shown a bit more spine in the months since the Heat incident. She had left the Residence, though that action had resulted in Kyr being forced to fight to the death in a ritual *cerenteri* to secure legal guardianship of her. Despite the fact that Syren was well past the age of legal independence, her status as the Heir meant she could not escape the requirement of having a guardian. Though Kyr remained that for her, she'd been back and forth between the abbey and the Residence since the *cerenteri*. Supposedly, she was keeping an eye on her mother's activities.

Sure, she had passed a few little pieces of information to the Hush, but none of it had amounted to much. And clearly, the activity hadn't held her interest. So, surprise, here they were again, tracking down a spoiled princess in a nightclub.

It was Blue Diamond this time instead of Heat, but these places were all the same. Neon lights slashing across a dance floor writhing with bodies, most of them human, a few of them vampires. Males and females sprawling in pleather banquettes, their clothes somewhere between sexy and cool, all of them reeking of perfume and desperation. Overpriced drinks sloshing in glasses.

Ronan wasn't impressed.

They couldn't spot Syren among the dance floor's crowd, so Kyr headed for the stairway to the restricted mezzanine level to get a better view. Kyr shaded the potbellied bouncer guarding the stairs. The human didn't even glance at Kyr and Ronan, blind not only to the weapons strapped to their bodies

but also to their tactical clothing, their size, and their non-humanness.

At the top of the stairs, Kyr's step hitched. Then he angled toward the mezzanine bar instead of the railing—because the princess was perched on a corner barstool, laughing with another female like she hadn't a care in the world.

Syren's thick dark hair hung in glossy waves down her back, contrasting the brilliant white of her tight tank top. The color scheme returned to black at her hips, where tight leather pants hugged her shapely lower half. A matching leather jacket draped the stool under her ass.

Syren's full lips, painted red like her mother's, offered a playful pout in response to something her red-haired drinking buddy said. Then Syren's way-too-perfect, heart-shaped face lit up with delight as she slapped the glossy bar top and bounced on her stool.

What a spoiled brat.

The worst part of it all was that Kyr was disappointed. He had really believed that Syren was past this sort of self-indulgence. Someone with the *comudari's* experience ought to know better, but Kyr had a soft spot for his half-sister.

At least they'd found her easily. They could get this over with and get the hell out of here. At his best, Ronan had a low tolerance for human fuckers crowding around him. Tonight, he was not at his best, not with the heavy bass thumping obnoxiously from downstairs and the slashing lights searing his brain.

There was also the fact that he'd burned through a good portion of his energy reserves to make his point with Kyr in the sparring ring. It had been worth it.

When Syren caught sight of them approaching, she did a double take. For one second, she looked entirely sober—and pissed as hell. Her big blue eyes, ringed with mascara, narrowed. For that one second, her resemblance to Kyr went beyond the dark hair. For that one second, she looked like she could be in command. She looked like she should be.

Then she leaned drunkenly into the red-haired female beside her. Syren whispered something, smacked a kiss onto the female's cheek, then slid off her stool.

She grabbed her drink, a glass tumbler half full of something pink. The bartender started to say something. At places like this, glass stayed at the bar. The dance crowd was too rough (and drunk) for anything but plastic. But Syren's shading glance at the human male had him looking briefly confused. Then he went back to polishing a glass like nothing had happened.

Snagging her jacket from the barstool, Syren swung into a hip-swaying, high-heeled walk, coming straight at them.

“Syren—”

“Brother,” she said through gritted teeth, hooking her jacket-laden arm through Kyr's and tugging him away from the bar.

Ronan could never decide whether it was amusing or disturbing to see the *comudari* interact with his sister. Kyr's no-bullshit manner always took on a different tone. But then, Kyr was kind of like that with all females. (Amarada being the exception of course.) Then again, all of the Hush behaved differently around females.

Ronan took a simpler approach by largely avoiding them. He had a number of fuck buddies, partners who understood what he was like, who invited his harshness and roughness. He'd been ignoring texts from them for months.

Staying a few steps behind, Ronan got a better look at Syren as she strode along. Muscle flexed in her arm where it hooked Kyr's. She'd always been fit—part of her royal maintenance, no doubt—but she'd been really hitting the weights lately, further firmer her hourglass figure.

Ronan's eyes drifted lower. He told himself that he *wasn't* looking at her ass, that he was judging her level of intoxication. And, yeah, that mostly steady walk said she wasn't quite as drunk as she looked. Then his eyes caught what they'd missed before at the small of her back.

Syren was armed.

The shaded pistol holstered at her belt was no lady's peashooter but a hole-punching .45. Additionally, a knife was sheathed at her right hip.

The thing about shading, whether of an object or a memory, was that it was a suggestion, a redirection of attention—and it worked based on assumption. It was about making people see (or not see) what fit with their expectations.

Ronan hadn't expected weapons on Syren, so it had been all too easy to not see them. But they were sure as hell there.

So. Slightly drunk and heavily armed. Great.

Syren led Kyr to a quiet corner by the restrooms. Ronan considered ducking away from the little family drama that was about to unfold, but the location got him out of the noise and lights and human crowd.

Kyr and Syren faced off in front of a lounge couch beyond the restrooms. Ronan put his back to the wall between the two restroom doors, keeping watch and staring at anyone who thought about venturing in this direction.

"What are you doing here?" Syren and Kyr asked at the same time.

Ronan's eyes flicked to the corner. Kyr did his crossed arms and icy stare combo. If he'd really meant business, it would have been hands on hips or loose at his sides, ready to slam someone into a wall.

Kyr wouldn't be doing anything like that with Syren, and it wasn't necessary. The stare got her talking, though all she said was, "It's none of your business."

"It is absolutely my business. I'm your guardian."

Syren crossed her arms, mirroring her brother. Sort of. She, of course, had her jacket folded in her arms and was still holding her pink-filled tumbler. Moreover, where Kyr was a huge male, built for combat, experienced, and focused on his duty, Syren was a curvy female, built for beauty, naïve, and oblivious to the world beyond herself.

“That’s such bullshit,” Syren protested, almost as though replying to Ronan’s thoughts. “I’m not a child.”

Instead of telling her that she was acting like one, Kyr said, “You’re the Heir.”

Syren’s red-painted lips momentarily thinned, then they returned to their usual plumpness as she eyeballed him in full-on brat mode. Ronan looked away.

“It’s dangerous for you to be out like this,” Kyr added, tension in his voice.

“I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, I can see you think so with all that tough shit hanging off your belt, but you have no idea—”

“I *have* to get out sometimes, Kyr. You can think whatever nasty thoughts you like, you and your watchdog. I didn’t ask you to come here. How did you even *know* I was here?”

“Amarada.”

“What, is there a fucking tracker on my car or something?”

“There are many ways to find a person. Which is a thing you might think about.”

Ronan didn’t look at the princess again, but he heard her sigh of annoyance.

Kyr informed her, “You have two choices, Syren. You can go home—”

“I’ll go ahead and veto that one right now.”

“Fine. Then you’ve chosen the watchdog option.”

Syren processed that faster than Ronan did. But then, he was still looking out at the crowd, only half listening to the brother-sister argument.

Then it hit him.

*You and your watchdog.* Syren’s words. Referring to Kyr and ... him.

*The watchdog option.*



Oh fuck—

“No!” Syren exclaimed. “Absolutely not!”

Ronan sent a dark look in Kyr and Syren’s direction. “Yeah, I’m gonna agree with the princess on this one.”

Ignoring Ronan, Kyr asked Syren, “Would you rather have one of your mother’s—”

“Yes, actually! Anyone but him!”

“Well, too bad,” Kyr pivoted. He’d backed himself into a corner and had to bulldoze out of it. “This is how it’s going to be.”

Ronan pushed away from the wall and glared at Kyr. “I need to talk to you.”

The *comudari*’s light blue eyes flicked to Ronan, unreadable, then back to his sister. “Wait here.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” she sneered.

“Don’t start with me, Syren, and don’t move.”

Syren glared daggers at Kyr’s back as he strode toward Ronan. Ronan set into a walk as well, drawing Kyr toward the railing where he wouldn’t be overheard. Kyr glanced back, making sure he had a clear view of Syren.

Ronan gritted out, “I know what you’re doing.”

“Do you now.”

“This is your way of benching me. You’ve been riding my ass, testing me non-fucking-stop, for months. And I know you were pulling your punches in the sparring ring, so I hope your face hurts enough that you fucking learned not to.”

Kyr looked annoying calm, split chin and all. “That’s not what this is about.”

“The hell it isn’t! You brought me instead of someone else on purpose because—”

“Because I fucking trust you, Ronan, you goddamn paranoid asshole. Christ!” Kyr scraped a hand through his hair and looked out into the open space above the dance floor, where

the multi-colored disco lights beamed around. Ronan was pleased that Kyr wasn't annoyingly calm anymore, but he wasn't tracking the *comudari's* meaning until he added, "I trust you to keep up with her, to get control of her if necessary."

Ronan's heart sank ever so slightly because, yeah, he could do that. He would. But he pointed out stubbornly, "Luca's better at surveillance."

"I don't want someone to surveil her. I want someone with her. I want *you* with her."

Ronan crossed his arms, vaguely aware that he probably looked as bratty as Syren had, but he didn't care at the moment. He was pissed. Kyr had trapped him.

Kyr went on, making shit worse, "If I didn't think you could cut it, I wouldn't trust you to protect my sister. For fuck's sake, stop being so goddamn paranoid—or I'm gonna think you don't trust *me*."

That was a point Ronan did not want to discuss. Because it was a yes and a no. Besides, he had clearly lost the argument and was ready to be done with it.

"Fine," he said through gritted teeth. "I'll fucking babysit her."

"She'll probably have this out of her system in a few nights."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, a few—"

"Call me if you need me."

With that, not even glancing back, Kyr strode off through the relatively quiet crowd on the mezzanine, heading for the stairs, the chaos below, and the exit. Lucky bastard.

As Ronan glared at Kyr's retreating back, once again aware that Syren had done the same thing a moment ago, movement caught his eye. Syren was hurrying in Kyr's wake. At first, Ronan thought she was trying to catch up with him. Then he realized she was trying to escape.

Ronan fought the temptation to let her. Then he pushed away from the railing.

Ronan caught her elbow as she made the turn for the stairs. “I don’t think so, princess.”

She yanked her arm free, causing the pink contents of her glass to slosh over the rim onto her hand. Her red-painted lip peeled back from her fangs.

Ronan said, “My only consolation is that you will hate this as much as I will.”

Syren’s eyes squeezed shut. “This is *such* a pain in the ass.”

“You brought it on yourself.”

Her eyes popped open and she glared at him. “Oh, did I? Minding my own business, asking no one for anything?”

She had a point. But it wasn’t that simple. “You’re the Heir.”

“Oh, please, like you give a shit about that.”

Again, she had a point. Ronan decided to concede this one. “True. I don’t. You’re still stuck with me though.”

“Fantastic.”

Syren transferred the tumbler to her other hand and licked the spill from her fingers. She looked more distractedly annoyed than deliberately teasing, but Ronan still looked away from the sight of her tongue lathing her fingers.

As she started to walk off, he demanded, “Where are you going?”

“To the bar, watchdog, that’s why I’m here.”

Ronan sighed. This was going to be a long night.

At the bar, Syren looked around, but whomever she was looking for—the redhead?—was apparently gone. She slung her leather jacket over an empty stool and perched atop it.

Ronan took the stool beside her. He already had a good catalog of the people on this level of the club, but he gave the bartender and nearby patrons a closer look.

The bartender took Syren’s vodka and cranberry order with a cool nod and disposed of her existing drink. What, had the

ice melted? No doubt that kind of waste was typical around here.

Syren rolled her head toward Ronan. “Beer, I assume?”

“No, princess, I won’t be drinking.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Rhys calls you that all the time.”

“Rhys doesn’t sneer it.”

All right, so she had *another* point. Ronan decided he would just keep his mouth shut.

The bartender delivered Syren’s fresh pink drink, accepting her no-change twenty with the same cool nod he’d used before. Syren sipped and looked around, apparently trying to pretend that Ronan wasn’t there.

After about a minute, she sighed in defeat.

“God, you are *killing* my vibe. Not to mention you’re scaring away anyone I might actually want to talk to.”

Unfazed, Ronan held his vow of silence. Syren sighed again and sipped her drink.

A minute later, Ronan watched from the corner of his eye as a leggy brunette in a tight black dress approached, angling toward him and Syren.

“Then again, maybe not,” Syren whispered hopefully. “Just don’t—”

Ronan looked at the female. He considered his expression to be fairly neutral, but the brunette faltered, one high heel wobbling.

“—glare at her,” Syren sighed as the female made a ninety-degree turn. “You really are the worst.”

Ronan was about fifteen seconds into his next scan of the mezzanine level when Syren leaned into him, much as he’d seen her do earlier with the redheaded female. She ran her fingers down his arm. Ronan couldn’t feel much through his leather motorcycle jacket, but he still stiffened.

What the fuck was she doing?

“You’d be so damn gorgeous, you know, if you’d stop glaring at people.”

Ronan glared at Syren, but she only smiled sweetly.

He still didn’t see any point in speaking to her, so he didn’t. He just kept glaring. It would work. It always did.

This time, however, it didn’t.

Syren trailed her fingers back up his arm then his neck. She tapped his jaw with a manicured, black-painted nail. “Don’t you know that?”

Ronan’s lips drew back from his fangs.

Syren sucked in a breath, like she knew she was pushing it. But she didn’t give up.

“It’s the fallen angel look, so refined yet so ... dark. The tattoos.” Her finger drifted down his neck across the slashing ink. “The growl,” she added as it vibrated aggressively in his throat, against her finger.

That finger kept skimming south, snagging on the neck of his compression shirt. For some fucking reason, he didn’t stop it. He let that finger trail down his chest between the open halves of his jacket, let it spark all kinds of should-not-be-happening heat as it bumped its way over his abs. Only when she reached his belt did Ronan snatch her hand.

She smiled wickedly. At her tug for freedom, Ronan let her go, a move that he regretted when she used that freedom to rest her hand on his thigh.

Ronan didn’t let his eyes close like they wanted to. It didn’t matter if he was getting hard. He would not let her win this. Whatever *this* was. Whatever winning meant in this situation.

“Do you find me attractive?” she purred.

Maybe she won after all, because Ronan broke his vow of silence to ask, “You think it’s a special accomplishment, making dicks hard?”

Her hand whipped away from his thigh. “*God*. You’re *such* an asshole.”

Syren’s expression was positively hateful. That was just fine—because that was how he felt too. Ronan *hated* the fact that he found Syren so damn attractive. But then, she *was* attractive. Who, male or female, *wouldn’t* find her attractive?

But it still pissed Ronan off to get hard for her. She was *Amarada’s daughter*, for fuck’s sake.

Still, he’d grant her point about his being an asshole. “Yep,” he agreed comfortably.

“Ugh.”

Syren hopped off her barstool and snatched up her jacket, slinging it on. Ronan enjoyed a brief moment of thinking that signaled an end to the torture, but she disabused him of that happy thought with her next words.

“I’m going to dance. I get that you’re going to hover somewhere like my brother told you to, but stay out of my space.”

With that, Syren tossed her hair from where it had gotten trapped under her jacket and stalked off, leaving her barely touched drink behind. Must be nice to have that kind of money to throw away. Ronan had known way too many vampires who didn’t. Not that he wasn’t paid well for his work at the VDA, but he did actually *work*.

Assuming, of course, that babysitting a bratty princess could be called work. But, like it or not, it *was* his assignment, as Syren had so sneeringly pointed out.

Ronan had no choice but to follow her down to the lower level.

There, he spent the next three hours catching the full blast of the thumping trap beat and the nauseating swing of the multi-colored lights. He had to keep moving along the walls to track Syren as she glided flirtatiously through the crowd.

She danced mostly with other females, some vampire, some human. She knew how to move to a rhythm. Her body was

perfect for it, curvy but strong, her steps agile and uninhibited.

Her glossy dark hair caught the flash of lights. It caught straying fingers as well. Everyone wanted her attention—and she gave it. Smiling. Laughing. Sharing a moment before dancing smoothly away.

The awful thing was ... it was pretty beautiful to watch. If Ronan could ignore every bit of context—who he was, who she was, where they were, and why they were each here—he might feel differently about all this. This being ... her, he supposed.

If it had been the sight alone, Ronan might have lasted all night ranging along the edges of the dance floor. But there was that endless fucking bass and the relentless strobe and swing of lights.

Needing a break, Ronan went back up to the mezzanine level. He leaned against the railing, trying to breathe through the nausea, trying to stay calm so his pounding headache would ease the hell up.

He was getting that dizzy, floating, disconnected feeling. The last thing he needed was to pass out and start mind walking in the middle of this damn nightclub.

If he got too close to that, he'd have to call Kyr. That would suck after he'd worked so damn hard to prove he could cut it.

Another hour passed, with Ronan going back and forth from the mezzanine to the ground floor and back. He tracked Syren to the lower level bar, the restroom, and back to the dance floor. The princess had some boundless fucking energy, that was for sure.

While Ronan was up on the mezzanine again, leaning on the railing, Syren started dancing with a vampire male, seeming to talk to him. She looked loose and a little drunk, even though she'd spent the last forty-five minutes sipping from the same plastic cup.

Her dance partner pointed toward someone. Syren smiled and danced with the male for another minute. Then she tried to draw away.

The male grabbed her arm and hauled her back. She laughed like it was a very charming move then tried to pull away again. The male tugged her back. Aggressively.

Ronan launched himself over the railing, dropping a good fourteen feet to the floor below. He shaded himself by force of habit, so his landing didn't really register with anyone except a couple of drunks he bumped into.

Ronan moved fast through the writhing crowd. The dancers peeled away from him like he was a fucking shark in the water, clearing his path to Syren. Rather, his path to the male. Who didn't need to be putting his goddamn hands on her like that. Who was, judging by the bipolar shift in his body language, high.

Probably on Haze.

That shit had been circulating on the streets for months. It lowered inhibitions, stripped away reasoning, reduced the brain to its most basic instincts. Generally, that meant sex and violence.

To Ronan, who hated the idea of not being in control of his own mind and body, the idea was repellant. There was also the fact that Haze had been used last fall to torture Nox in an attempt to turn him into a weapon against the VDA.

The shit was toxic.

But apparently, some people thought Haze was tons of goddamn fun.

Registering Ronan's approach, Syren whipped toward him, her happy-go-lucky expression instantly vanishing.

"What the hell are you—"

Ronan grabbed the male by his mesh tank top and hauled him away from Syren. "Can't you tell he's high?"

In the moment Ronan was glaring at Syren, both because he was annoyed with her and because he had to see that she was okay, the high vampire came in swinging—with a knife.

Ronan twisted clear of the slash, grabbing the male's wrist as he did. He wrenched at just the right angle, breaking that



wrist and taking the knife.

High on Haze, the male barely felt the fracture. He lunged for Ronan's neck with his fangs. Ronan spun the knife in his hand and used the butt to club the male in the head, nailing his lights-out switch. The male crumpled to the floor.

Ronan swept up the unconscious moron and barked at Syren, "Let's go!"

Wide-eyed, Syren followed Ronan through the dance-floor crowd to the alley exit. Ronan's shading kept the attention off their passage. At the exit, Ronan shaded the bouncer and shoved his way through into the alley.

He dumped the unconscious male against the brick wall and tossed the knife onto his lap.

"Oh, real nice," Syren complained.

"Did you seriously not notice he was high? He *grabbed* you. And he had a *knife*. This is why you shouldn't—"

"I have a knife, and I have a gun. I even have a DD on standby, not that anyone bothered to ask me! I can handle myself."

Syren's hands were on her hips, her fangs partially descended. Moonlight speared into the alley and gleamed on her black leather jacket and cocked hip. Ronan did not allow his brain to really process how Syren looked standing like that, indignant and fierce and gorgeous.

On a certain level, however, he couldn't help but notice.

Hating how he so instinctively responded to her, Ronan snarled, "Having a knife or a gun doesn't mean shit if you don't know how to use them."

"You are *such* an asshole, Ronan."

"Yes, we've established that, and you're a spoiled brat who doesn't give a shit about anyone or anything but herself and her good-fucking time."

For a second, Ronan thought Syren flinched, but then she spun on her heel and said in her usual bratty tone, "Ugh. I'm

going home. You've already ruined my night."

With that, she set into her hip-swaying, high-heeled walk down the alley.

Ronan caught up with her easily. He held out his hand.  
"Keys."

"I'm fine."

"Keys or I call Kyr."

"Idaios save me!" Syren yanked her keys from her pocket, slammed them into his chest, and stalked onward.

# FIVE

On the way to the abbey, Syren seriously considered torturing Ronan with some girl-power pop or something else he might hate, but she found herself staring out the passenger window of her Mercedes instead.

The night had been an epic disaster.

Considering she was using a prepaid phone that she had kept a careful secret, there must a tracker on her car. Tomorrow, she'd have to ditch it. She could not have her mother, her brother, or the damn watchdog ruining everything.

She could not believe that her brother had saddled her with the biggest jackass on his team. Ronan was shitty with just about everybody, even Kyr, but he clearly despised her on a special level. It always brought out the worst in her, like she wanted to prove he was right to scorn her.

In a way, at the moment, that worked to her advantage. He clearly hadn't seen anything but a bratty party girl tonight.

The prepaid phone buzzed in her jacket pocket. She pulled it out.

**J-Dawg: Well?**

Syren glanced at Ronan, but he was staring resolutely through the windshield as he drove through downtown Portage. Apparently, he wanted to pretend she wasn't there.

*Stop caring what he thinks*, she scolded herself.

She typed back, **Getting closer. Maybe tomorrow.**

**J-Dawg: We have an agreement. Don't make me regret this.**

Syren huffed with annoyance. Males.

Sometimes she thought she'd be better off with just females. They were so much nicer. Then she thought about her mother and remembered that wasn't always true.

Not bothering to reply to the patronizing text, she stowed the phone.

“Everything okay?” Ronan asked.

“If it wasn’t, would you care?”

The growl she’d heard more than once tonight rumbled in his tattooed throat. The aggressive sound seemed to travel through her body, vibrating downward. Syren squeezed her thighs together. Damn it. Why did she have to respond to him like this?

Her only consolation was that he’d suffered the same way when she’d teased him at the bar. But he’d made her pay for it.

*You think it’s a special accomplishment, making dicks hard?*

It had been a touch too close to things her mother had said over the years.

*Making males lust for you is your gift, my dear. Use it. What else do you have?*

Nothing, of course. Nothing.

“Just my DD checking in,” Syren explained, though she wasn’t sure why she bothered. Maybe to stop Ronan from going back to pretending she wasn’t there? Was she really that pathetic?

Yes. Yes, she was.

“A DD has to be with you,” Ronan said.

“He trusted me to call him if needed.”

Ronan huffed. “Then he’s an idiot.”

“For trusting me? Wow, thanks a lot.”

“That’s not what I meant. A DD has to be there. He’s there to make decisions. That’s how it works.”

“Ah. Thank you for explaining that to me. My tiny little princess brain has trouble with these things.”

“For fuck’s sake, don’t pretend I’m even more of an asshole than I actually am. I’m just saying that it’s dangerous to—”

“Ohhhh, your jackassery has lines and limits. I didn’t know that.”

The steering wheel creaked under Ronan’s hand as he stared furiously down the road. The dash lights glowed dully against his leather motorcycle jacket and limned his throat, bleaching the tattoos that hooked upward from the collar of his jacket.

Streetlights flashed periodically across the lower half of his striking face: the chiseled jaw, the firm lips. Occasionally the light caught the edges of his cheekbones. Why on earth did Idaios have to make him so attractive?

He resumed his lecture. “The point is that someone should have been with you. You think Nox would be okay with Claire out alone? Or that Kyr would let Mira do that?”

“Yes, I’m well aware of how controlling you males can be.”

“It’s not about that, Syren! It’s dangerous! Even human females don’t go places like that alone.”

“I’m a lot stronger than a human female.”

“And a lot more of a target.”

“So what?”

“So *what?* Are you fucking *serious?*”

“Haven’t we already established that you don’t give a shit about the whole Heir thing?”

Finally, he looked at her. Briefly. Searingly.

“That’s not the only thing you are, for fuck’s sake. You’re also my *comudari*’s sister *and*—”

“Oh, that’s right. I’m an assignment.”

Belatedly, Syren wondered what would have come after Ronan’s *and*. Her mouth was always running too far ahead.

“Never mind,” Ronan grumbled. “Just ... never fucking mind.”

Syren closed her eyes. She couldn’t decide whether she was more annoyed with him or with herself. This was probably the longest conversation she’d ever had with Ronan, but it was

pretty much what she would have expected: a drawn-out version of their usual back-and-forth jabbing.

Was it his fault? Hers? Or were they simply that incompatible, an oil and water thing? Really, though, it wasn't that they *didn't* mix—it was that they mixed explosively. They were more along the lines of combustible.

The trouble was ... she kind of liked it. Preferred it, anyway, to the way most males acted with her. Most were stiffly polite with calculating eyes, or they were subtle in their judgments of her. Veiled. Passive aggressive.

Ronan was outright aggressive. She'd take that any night.

It was an unsettling thought, but she didn't have long to dwell on it. Ronan was hitting the brakes.

“Shit,” he muttered, pulling over abruptly.

“What? What is it?”

“Demons.” He threw the Mercedes into park and opened his door. “Stay in the car. If I go down, get the hell out of here.”

“Ronan—”

But he was already gone, closing the driver's door and leaving the vehicle running so she could escape, before she had even spotted the conflict.

They were passing through a corner of the Red District, the vampire-heavy portion of Portage. Where the human-run Blue Diamond had been nearing its closing time, businesses in the Red District would be hopping for a few more hours. Not that you could tell on most of the Red District's streets. Vampires tended to not linger in the open.

Ronan had had a point about her being more of a target than a human female—and not because she was the Heir. Not even because she was female.

Demons would target any vampire that looked like easy prey.

Their current target was a young male racing madly down the sidewalk past the shaded businesses. He was either too

young or too scared to ghost away from the four demons on his heels. One had a gun raised.

Syren was halfway out of the car when the gun fired—but Ronan was already there. He caught the demon's arm, yanking it high as the shot exploded. Spinning around behind the demon, Ronan delivered a brutal slash with his *shiva*. The demon's head flew clean off.

The fires of the Abyss flared as the head hit the ground, consuming both it and the body, briefly lighting up the scene. Flame-lit, Ronan pivoted, yanking his gun from its holster. He fired at the lead demon, which fell and skidded along the sidewalk.

Syren had never seen Ronan in action before. He was ... breathtaking. Fast. Powerful. Utterly ruthless and totally unfazed by the violence. That was obvious in his body as he spun clear of a telekinetically thrown knife and returned the aggression with gunfire. It was obvious in the brief, distant glimpse of his gorgeous face, deadly with focus, as he turned his attention to his next target.

Syren didn't see the rest of Ronan's work. She went racing after the fleeing male, ghosting into his path. She thought she'd moved far enough ahead of him to signal a halt, but he was faster than he looked—or her high heels were making slower than she thought. He plowed straight into her, taking them both to the ground.

"Oof!" she exclaimed as she hit the concrete, her impact worsened by the hundred and thirty pounds of flailing young vampire on top of her.

The young male scrambled up, ready to bolt, but Syren shouted, "It's okay!"

He spun, looking back at his pursuers. Syren climbed to her own feet, hands up in a pacifying gesture.

"It's okay," she said again. "He'll take care of it. He's VDA. You're safe."

The young male's face crumpled. He couldn't be older than fifteen. "Oh my god!"

“You’re safe, hon, it’s—”

“My father! I have to—!”

The male wheeled back in the direction he’d come and took off. Syren raced after him, cursing her stupid footwear.

Ronan was taking the last of the demons’ heads as the young male raced by, giving the activity such a wide berth that he hit a brick wall and bounced off before continuing on his way. Ronan shouted for him to stop. Then Ronan’s head whipped in Syren’s direction and he yelled the same thing at her.

“His father!” Syren shouted in explanation as she blew past Ronan.

Then she felt the whoosh of air as he ghosted by her after the young male.

Syren pushed herself to ghost as Ronan and the young male vanished around the corner—

“Shit!” she exclaimed as she skidded to a halt, arms pinwheeling for balance as her shoes tried to pitch her.

A vampire male, presumably the father, was sitting on the ground, legs out, leaning against a wall. He was clutching his bleeding abdomen and gasping out sounds of pain. The boy slammed to his knees beside him.

“Help!” he cried. “Help him, please!”

Ronan shoved the boy out of the way and knelt beside the older male. He yanked up the male’s jacket and dress shirt to expose what looked like a gunshot wound in his abdomen.

“Call the VDA!” Ronan barked at Syren.

Syren scrambled for her phone. It slipped from her shaky hands, but she caught it before it hit the concrete. She speed dialed.

Jodari picked up on the first ring. “Syren? What the—are you okay?”

“I’m fine! I’m with Ronan—”



“With *Ronan*? What—why—”

“Listen to me! We—Ronan, I mean—stopped a demon attack, but a male is hurt. We need help. We’re at the corner of ...” She spun to see the street sign. “Kettel and 47<sup>th</sup>. Please!”

“Okay, okay. I’ll send Medical. Are you safe?”

“Yes! I think so. Ronan’s here, I’m fine! Just—now!”

“On it.”

The call disconnected.

The next fifteen minutes passed in a weird, tense mix of hurry and endless waiting. Ronan sent Syren back for the car. When she brought it around the corner, he ordered the young male to sit inside with her. The boy didn’t like this but did as Ronan said when Ronan promised to call him back if his father’s condition changed.

With her gun resting on the dash just in case more demons arrived, Syren asked the boy, whose name was Corden, what had happened. Corden cried about having left his father, and Syren worked hard to convince him that he’d done the right thing in obeying his father’s command to run. If he hadn’t, both he and his father would be dead.

When Dr. Jonus An arrived with the VDA ambulance, Syren and Corden joined Ronan and Corden’s father on the sidewalk.

Syren stayed back, out of the way. Ronan glanced at her once or twice but was busy with the injured male. Then he was busy with the VDA’s curly-haired doctor because as soon as Dr. An stepped away from the patient, he refocused on Ronan.

They spoke quietly while the paramedics strapped down and loaded the injured male into the ambulance. Over the noise of the gurney being loaded, Syren couldn’t hear what they said, but she saw Dr. An aim his penlight into Ronan’s eye. Ronan yanked back, looking furious.

Dr. An looked upset too. Syren didn’t know the doctor well, but he always seemed amazingly coolheaded to her. Now, he grabbed Ronan’s wrist and studied his watch, clearly taking a pulse. Ronan jerked away again.

“Just fucking deal with him!” Ronan shouted and gestured at the open back of the ambulance.

The injured male was loaded, his son beside him. The paramedics were waiting.

Dr. An said something low and intent and pointed at the ambulance, but Ronan turned away in disgust, striding toward Syren.

“Ronan!” Dr. An called after him.

“I’ll deal with it, for fuck’s sake!” he shouted over his shoulder as he stormed toward Syren’s Mercedes.

She hurried to the passenger door as Ronan opened the driver’s door. He got in then grunted at the tight fit from Syren having adjusted the seat to drive. He jabbed the adjustment button then sighed as the seat hummed its leisurely way backwards.

“Are you okay?” Syren asked. “Dr. An seemed—”

“Paranoid and annoying. I’m fine.”

Ronan shifted aggressively into drive and pulled away from the curb, making a tight U-turn. The low-slung luxury car let out a slight squeal, but, really, the vehicle had been through worse.

Eyes locked on the road, Ronan snapped, “And you should have stayed in the car like I said. If something had happened to you—”

“I know, I know, my brother would’ve been on your ass like —”

“It’s nothing to do with him! How would I have felt if something had—”

“How would *I* have felt if I’d stayed in the car while that boy ran past, out of his mind with fear? What if he hadn’t realized he was safe? What if he hadn’t stopped? With me just *sitting* in the car? Gross.”

Ronan glared at her. Then he exhaled noisily through his nose and stared through the windshield again.

Was he yielding the argument? One point to Syren.

“I smell blood,” she said. “Are you hurt?”

“It’s the victim’s.”

“Dr. An wanted you to go with him.”

“He’s just riding my ass about protocol. Don’t worry about it.”

Syren sighed and gave up. One point to Ronan.

When they reached the abbey and its underground parking garage, Syren saw Ronan’s black Shelby parked in one of the spaces beside Nox’s rusty old Jeep Wrangler. Ronan grunted like his car being here surprised him. Someone, presumably Nox or Claire, had brought it here for him.

Ronan parked beside it and handed Syren her keys. Then without a word, Ronan got out of the Mercedes. Syren got out too. She expected Ronan to get in his car and leave, but he surprised her by heading for the door to the abbey’s lowest level. He keyed in then vanished into the basement.

Weird.

Maybe he needed something from there? She gave herself a shake. It didn’t matter. She didn’t care.

She rode the elevator to the abbey’s main floor. The doors opened onto a hardwood foyer. To the left, the hallway led to the front door, which faced Danforth Avenue, and a set of stairs that rose to the rarely used second floor.

To the right, the hallway led to the heart of the abbey. Syren passed the homey sitting room, currently dark, then arrived in the large kitchen. Here, the abbey’s old bones—arched ceilings, stone walls, and beautiful old windows—met sleek, modern convenience.

Beyond the eat-in island, a soup pot was bubbling enticingly on the stovetop, and bread was heating fragrantly in the oven.

Flanking the kitchen to the right was the music room and the hallway leading to some of the private rooms, including Nox and Claire’s. To the left lay the large dining table, then the

hallway leading to another stretch of private rooms, her own luxurious suite included.

Syren had so many beautiful spaces that she got to exist in. Here. At the Residence. And yet, none of them were really her own. Still, she would choose this place over her mother's any night of the week.

In her suite, Syren showered and changed into leggings and an oversized sweater that she wouldn't dare wear at the Residence. Then she returned to the kitchen to find Claire slicing bread at the island. Nox was setting the table.

God, they were cute. Nox with his severe crew cut, wearing a hunter green Henley and black tactical pants, so big and careful with his movements. Claire with her blonde pixie cut, in jeans and a lavender t-shirt, so petite and pretty.

"Big guy! Favorite girl!" Syren exclaimed, snatching a slice of warm bread from Claire's cutting board.

Claire offered a shy smile at the nicknames. "Hi, Syren."

Nox's eyes flicked to Syren then back to his work.

"You know she's the best, right?" Syren teased Nox because he was so dang reserved.

"Yes," he said seriously. "I know."

Syren sighed in bliss. She loved dinner time here. She loved these two. They were so different yet, in some respects, so similar. Kyr and Mira, she realized, were like that too, in their own way.

It struck her suddenly, how important that was. Similarity gave them connection. Difference gave them balance.

But how did you find that? The right similarity, the right difference? How did you recognize it?

Maybe it didn't exist for everyone.

Catching sight of the books stacked on the marble countertop, Syren went to take a look. This was a happy time. She wouldn't dwell on dark thoughts.

"Girl, what are you reading?"

“Oh!” Claire said, obviously delighted by Syren’s interest. She hurried over, dusting off her hands. “Look! This is a *comprehensive dictionary*. I mean, it’s the Epos Kalli and *Greek*, so that’s been a bit complicated, since I don’t know Greek, but still! Cool, huh?”

Syren let out a burst of laughter. She couldn’t help it.

“This one’s about Kadaros.” Claire pointed to the bottom of the stack. “He’s scary so ... he stays down there.”

Syren took a bite of the warm, fragrant bread. “There’s no one like you, Claire,” she said around a mouthful, feeling giddy with freedom because no one here would criticize her for it. “Truly, there isn’t.”

“I know. I’m a—”

“Dorable,” Syren finished for her before she could say nerd or something like that.

The elevator dinged. Mira’s distinctive, soft-footed tread came down the hallway. She sighed as she stepped into the kitchen like she felt a weight lift from her shoulders.

“Syren,” Mira said. “You’re okay. Jonus said you were, but ... thank God.”

“What happened?” Claire asked, clearly alarmed.

Syren offered a brief explanation of the incident with the demons.

Claire frowned in confusion. “I wondered when Nox brought Ronan’s car here, but we do that kind of thing sometimes, so I didn’t think much of it. But why was Ronan with you instead of with the others? Are you okay, Sy? Did something happen?”

Syren’s heart twisted at Claire’s concern. It was sweet. It was so, so Claire. But Syren had to crush that concern—and she had to be convincing.

“Weeellll ...” Syren snagged a wine glass from the cluster on the counter and gave the stem a careless little twiddle. “Party girl got in trouble and got herself landed with a parole officer.”

Claire's frown deepened. "You weren't out by yourself, were you?"

"Oh, don't you start, pumpkin. I promise I've been soundly reprimanded."

"Well," Claire said, transferring the bread slices to a basket and clearly trying to look stern. "Good. You deserved it."

Syren stuck out her tongue.

Claire smiled a little, giving up on her (unconvincing) stern act. "I'm glad you're okay."

Syren turned to Mira. "Are *they* okay? Corden and his father?"

"They will be. Whatever the circumstances that had you two there, thank God you were. You saved two lives."

"Ronan did. I was just, you know, along for the ride. Since he took my keys away from me."

"That's what he was supposed to do," Kyr grumbled as he emerged from the left-hand hallway. Both of the private wings had stairway access to the abbey's lowest level. He must have come up from there.

Stepping into the kitchen, Kyr's crystalline blue eyes were locked on her. His disappointment was a punch in the gut.

He'd fought for her, had risked his life for her in her mother's deadly *cerenteri*. He'd believed in her long after everyone else had written her off.

Syren almost couldn't bear his disappointed gaze. She *almost* looked away. But that would have tipped him off that she was hiding something.

He would start digging and he would find out—and that couldn't happen. He would stop her. Syren couldn't have that. She *couldn't* stop. She couldn't go back to how things had been before. She didn't want to. What she was doing was dangerous, yes, but for the first time in her life, it felt like she was doing something that mattered.

So she rolled her eyes and said, “Ronan is a total pain in the ass.”

“He’s a good male,” Kyr said firmly and looked away from her.

Even though it was what Syren had hoped for, had aimed for, it hurt to see Kyr do that. Like he couldn’t bear to look at her anymore.

Syren poured herself a glass of wine and, for the first time all night, she didn’t just pretend to sip.

They sat down to eat. By the time they were halfway through dinner, Kyr had finally stopped scowling. That was probably because Mira kicked him under the table, but still. Things got better.

Claire told them about her research, sharing what she called “the juicy bits,” which, needless to say, Syren did not find very juicy. The highlight, apparently, was a sort of yin-yang symbol that Claire had found in an ancient Atarian text.

“Isn’t that interesting?” Claire asked the table at large. “To think that even in an entirely different world there was this same idea of balancing forces?”

“So interesting, babe,” Syren said dryly.

Claire stuck out her tongue, and Syren smiled. God, she loved this. This place. These people. She had to do everything she could to protect it, to help. Even if it wasn’t much, it was something, and she *had* to do something.

She couldn’t stand being useless and pointless anymore, even if everyone still saw her that way.

## SIX

Rhys tried so damn hard to go back to sleep. Wes never gave him a bad time about getting up during the day, but Rhys knew it bothered him.

He lay on his back in Wes's bed—their bed—and took long, slow breaths. Under the sheets, Wes's leg was pressed against his and it was *good*. Everything with Wes was good.

Everything except for Rhys.

He knew he'd disappointed Wes last night. It had seemed like the right thing to do at the time, going to see Ronan. He'd felt better after, and Ronan hadn't seemed to mind. But Wes had.

He'd let it go, of course. Wes always let things go. He made things easy for Rhys but ... Rhys couldn't stop fucking it up.

On a certain level, Rhys knew that his thoughts were not true. He and Mira had talked about this. But they felt true.

His breathing swallowed. His leg twitched against Wes's. He needed to get up before he woke his mate.

Rhys made a practiced slide out of bed, barely disturbing the covers. He grabbed his warmups off the floor and tugged them on.

Rhys paused to gaze down at Wes. His mate was so damn beautiful. Not just his powerful body outlined by the covers. Not just his handsome face, lost in the shadows. Rhys didn't need light. He knew every inch of that face. Wes was also beautiful because he was *good*. Wes had done some things that haunted him, but there was still a purity to him that couldn't be touched by those things.

But Rhys ...

Fuck, he felt dirty sometimes.

When he could hear his own ragged breathing, Rhys made himself leave the room.



He walked down the dark hallway to the kitchen and turned on the light above the stove. From there he walked past the eat-in island into the living room area, where the leather couch faced the TV. He walked all the way to the shuttered floor-to-ceiling windows.

Usually, he could make himself watch TV or work out at times like this, but he found himself turning at the shuttered windows and pacing back to the kitchen. He wasn't sure how long he'd been doing that when he reached the island on one of his laps and heard, "Rhys."

He jumped and turned toward the mouth of the hallway, where Wes was standing, his gray sweats riding low on his hips and his hands loose at his sides. Wes had packed on more muscle in the past two months with the Hush. The muscle, that stance—his body had a readiness that always turned Rhys on, but right now all Rhys could see was his mate's expression. He looked unhappy.

Fuck.

Wes said, "Stop looking like I caught you doing something bad."

Rhys let his fingers settle on the island, anchoring himself so he didn't start pacing again. "You did."

Wes frowned. For an awful, terrifying second, Rhys thought Wes would turn and walk away, but Wes walked into the kitchen instead. He went to a cupboard and got out a glass.

As Wes filled the glass at the sink, Rhys said, "I know you're unhappy with me."

Anger flashed across Wes's face. He set the glass down with a hard thump. "That's not true."

It was true. Rhys knew it. Because otherwise Wes wouldn't be on the opposite side of the island.

Hands planted on the counter, Wes scowled at the glass. Finally, he said, "I just ..."

"What?"

Wes took a deep breath like he was preparing himself.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

Wes's hazel eyes came up. He looked at Rhys across the island and said, "I don't understand why you're hiding from me."

Rhys's heart skipped. "You mean because I went to Ronan's last night."

"I'm not upset that you went to Ronan's."

"I ..." Rhys closed his eyes briefly. *Just say it.* "I don't know if I believe you."

Wes's head tilted back and he stared up at the ceiling, exposing the throat that Rhys had touched, kissed, fed from just a few hours ago. All that closeness—and now Rhys felt like the distance between them was impossible to cross.

Wes's head tilted back down. He straightened from the counter.

Wes said, "I guess maybe I am, but not like you think. Like this, now, what you're doing? You need something—I can see that you need something, Rhys—and you won't let me give it to you. And that ... it fucking kills me. You're doing it more and more, times when I know you're hurting and you don't want me to see. *I don't understand.*"

Rhys's throat tightened. "It's because ... I want things to be good. For us. I don't want everything for us to be about my fucked-up head! And I'm *trying*. But it's so fucking *hard* and sometimes I feel like I'm getting worse instead of better, and I don't want to ruin everything, but I *am* ruining everything anyway and I fucking *hate* that I'm doing that and I don't know what to do!"

In his unexpected flood of words, Rhys had somehow lost track of Wes, hadn't seen him move. But suddenly Wes was there on Rhys's side of the island. His arms were around Rhys, his body flush against Rhys's, the space between them gone. The relief was so huge that Rhys was dizzied, but Wes steadied him, holding on tight. Rhys wrapped his arms around Wes and buried his face in the crook of Wes's neck.

*I don't deserve you.*

He knew better than to say it, but it was almost like Wes heard it anyway because he muttered, “Goddamn it, Rhys,” and stroked the back of his head.

Then Wes said, “We need to talk about this.”

Rhys pulled away from him and turned to the counter. He leaned his elbows on it and buried his face in his hands. He'd confessed. Why couldn't they just leave it at that?

Wes's fingers settled on the back of Rhys's neck. “You're not ruining anything. You've got to stop thinking like that. I'm not going anywhere.”

“But I want it to be good!” Rhys said into his hands. “This—you—is the best thing that's ever happened in my life, and I just want it to be *good!*”

“Rhys,” Wes started tugging at him, trying to push his hands from his face, “it *is* good, and the only thing that makes it not good for me is when I feel like I'm not allowed to be part of what you're dealing with.”

Rhys wrenched away, stepping back and putting a stride of distance between them again. His fists clenched at his sides.

“But it's *ugly*, Wes! It's *dirty*. It makes me feel like the most *polluted* and *disgusting* piece of shit.” As tears spilled down Wes's cheeks, Rhys's heart twisted. “And I don't want to do *that* to you. Because you don't deserve it, and I hate that that's what I am in your life.”

Wes's hands came up in front of his face almost like he was praying. “God, Rhys, you don't understand. I am *sad* and *angry* about the things that happened to you. But I would rather feel this, *with you*, than the emptiness of being shut out. That doesn't protect me, Rhys. That *terrifies* me. That makes me feel like you want and need anything *but* me.”

“Fuck, Wes, that's not true,” Rhys gasped as tears spilled down his own face. “I need you, I fucking need you so much.”

“Then goddamn it, Rhys,” Wes said as he closed that distance again and pulled Rhys into him, “let me be here.”

Rhys's breath hitched as he tried not to lose it completely. And he didn't. Because Wes was there, holding on, giving him a place for his body and his fear and everything that he couldn't quite handle on his own.

Wes gripped the back of his neck. "You are *not* polluted or disgusting."

Rhys squeezed his eyes shut against Wes's shoulder.

"I *love* you, Rhys. And I *need* you. I need you in my life in a way I don't think you can imagine. And I need to feel that you trust me to be with you, no matter what you're working through. That doesn't mean I want you to stay away from other people. I'm glad that you have other people who love you. I just don't want you to stay away from me. I want to be with you when these moments come. I want to be with you as they fade away."

"Fuck, Wes, I love you too."

Normally, Wes would have let it go at that. But there was a lot, it seemed, that Rhys hadn't given him the space to say until now.

"Rhys, do you understand that this feels good to me, right now? This is the best I've felt in ... God, I don't even know. Quite a while."

Rhys let out a shuddering breath, relaxing against his mate, and admitted, "Yeah. Me too."

## SEVEN

From his seat at the abbey's kitchen island, Ronan glanced at the clock above the stove. 10:14 p.m. The Hush would be on the streets by now, hunting. But here he was sitting on his ass and reading a book about elephants, waiting.

A few nights, Kyr had said. The *comudari* had made a point of reminding Ronan of that before he'd left for HQ a few hours ago. Then the *comudari* had made himself even more annoying by offering what Ronan had suggested last night: that Luca be assigned to babysitting (though Kyr had used the term *guarding*) the princess.

Ronan had answered that with a silent glare, daring Kyr to say something about the counteragent booster he'd injected last night, three nights after his last one. Daring him to say something about how sick Ronan had been in the abbey's medical suite a few hours ago as the drug had spilled toxically through his veins, one poison to kill another. He'd waited for Kyr to say something about the medical leave shit Jonus had tried to pull last night.

But Kyr hadn't said anything, and that had almost been worse.

Ronan heard Syren's door open. His seat at the island allowed him to monitor both of the private-room hallways that flanked the kitchen. Even if Syren took the stairs to the basement, he would hear it. So if she tried to sneak out—

She walked straight into the kitchen.

The only light Ronan had on was the low, indirect one above the stove, but that was plenty to read her surprise. Then, for a second, her face did the strangest little scrunch, almost like she might cry. For that second, Ronan felt a keen, uncomfortable sense of intruding on her. It seared him with understanding. What she was feeling, finding him here, was exactly how he felt, all the fucking time. With Kyr checking on him. With Jonus on his ass.

What Ronan chose to do with his life, with his time, with his body, was his own fucking decision. And here he was, denying Syren the same freedom that he was always fighting so goddamn hard for.

So he almost said, *I'm sorry*.

Then Syren hit the light switch. Brutal, blinding overhead light flooded the kitchen. Ronan might have yelped. He definitely slammed his eyes shut. His eyelids burned briefly red from the light searing through, then it went dark.

Ronan opened his eyes, still squinting slightly, feeling like a knife had just gone through his brain. His stomach churned with nausea. Syren walked to the island. She stayed on the other side of it, keeping it between them.

She said, frowning, "You were here overday."

"So?"

"So what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm still on watchdog duty." That duty wasn't the reason he'd stayed overday, but it was the reason he was sitting on his ass in the abbey kitchen right now, so it wasn't exactly a lie. "Looks like we're clubbing again."

Syren was dressed as before in her leather pants, but tonight her top was long-sleeved and tight, made of stretchy, semi-sheer lace. It showed off the outline of her black bra and left no doubts as to the perfect curves of her figure. With her long dark hair and porcelain skin, the black-painted nails, bare lips (that was a change), and heavy mascara, it was, needless to say, hot as fuck.

Syren didn't respond to his comment. She was studying him. Ronan was used to being studied like this, people hunting for clues in his face, in his body language. But it was different coming from Syren. It was ... softer. Warmer.

Ronan knew that Syren was a friendly and affectionate person. He'd seen it in the way she interacted with Claire and Mira, even with Kyr. But he'd always kind of dismissed that part of her. It had never been relevant in their interactions.

He waited for her to say something so he could shut this down, so she would sigh and roll her eyes and let them resume their usual verbal sparring.

But she didn't say anything. Normally in a situation like this, Ronan would growl, *What*. He'd make it harsh. Prohibitive. An ending. Not a question at all. But for some reason, the word got stuck in his throat.

Syren finally dropped her gaze. She went to the cupboard and pulled out a bag of plain bagels. She sliced one at the cutting board and dropped it into the toaster.

"Did you eat?" she asked without looking back at him.

"I'm good."

She stilled, parsing out his non-answer. Then, while the bagel toasted, she went to the fridge. She started putting toppings on the island: butter, cream cheese, peanut butter, three different jams. While Ronan puzzled over this broad assortment, Syren sliced another bagel. When the toaster popped, she swapped the toasted bagel for the fresh one. Then she got out two plates and two knives.

Ah, shit. He should have seen that coming.

Syren didn't look at him as she turned to the island with the plates, each holding half a bagel. She slid one of the plates his way.

While Syren loaded up her half with cream cheese and blackberry jam, Ronan stared at the plate in front of him. She hadn't been bossy or intrusive. She'd just ... given it to him. Like somehow she'd realized he wasn't taking very good care of himself. For some stupid reason, it kind of fucked him up.

Here he was, invading her space—not by choice, but still—and she was ... what? What did this mean?

Oh, for fuck's sake, it was just a bagel. It didn't mean anything.

But somehow, to Ronan, it kind of did.

It was usually easy to get away with not eating, but he *was* supposed to eat. So Ronan closed Claire's book on elephants

and moved it away and resigned himself to the task before him.

As he crunched his way through the warm, dry bagel, he didn't look at Syren, though he was keenly aware of her as she stood on the other side of the island eating her own half. When the second bagel popped, she returned to the toaster for it.

This time, she walked around the island and sat beside him. She dropped half of the second bagel on his plate then started loading up her own half with cream cheese and blackberry jam again. All that other stuff she'd gotten out was ... for him. Because she hadn't known what he might like.

But he couldn't handle all that other stuff, and it sucked. He loved spicy food and all kinds of crazy flavors, but with the counteragent still burning through him, anything but the plain bagel might make him sick. When he started on his second half, he expected Syren to give him shit about leaving it bare, but she didn't.

“What are you reading?” she asked.

“Just something Claire left.”

“Oh God, are you a grammar nerd too?”

“What? No. It's about elephants. Why do you say she's a grammar nerd?”

“My girl was reading a dictionary yesterday.”

Ronan let out a huff of laughter.

Syren looked startled, like she hadn't expected such a sound from him. He hadn't expected it either—and he suddenly realized he was feeling a hell of a lot better. Less intense. Less nauseated. He really needed to eat more often.

Syren eyed his empty plate and started to get up, but Ronan levered himself from his chair before she could. He appreciated what she'd done, but he wasn't going to let her serve him. Fuck no.

He skirted the island and went to where Syren had left the bag of bagels on the counter. He sliced another one and dropped it into the toaster.



Putting his back to the counter while the toaster worked its magic, he watched Syren use part of her bagel to sweep up a blob of jam that had fallen onto her plate. He had a weird sense of seeing her for the first time. Seeing her as her own person instead of seeing her as Kyr's sister or Amarada's daughter or the Heir.

"Dang it," she muttered as the jam fell a second time.

"Why are you doing it?" he asked.

Her head whipped up. "Doing what?"

If Ronan had used his usual scornful tone, no doubt she would have realized he was asking about the clubbing. But he'd asked neutrally, actually asking, so she wasn't sure what he meant. She looked ... almost panicked.

"The clubbing," he said, wondering what she thought he'd meant.

"Oh." She laughed a little, sounding relieved.

Why was that a relief?

Syren focused on her plate, sweeping up the jam with her finger this time. She sucked it from her finger then shrugged and gave a little head toss that sent her dark hair spilling over her shoulder.

"What else is there to do? For me?"

Her body language and tone had reverted to what Ronan was used to from her, but it struck him as a bit ... forced. Like an act.

He said, fishing, "I thought you were keeping tabs on your mother."

Syren shrugged again. Careless. Dismissive. A little pouty. "I tried, okay? She's too smart for me. I didn't learn anything useful, so what was the point?"

Hm. If she'd said these words last night at Blue Diamond, he would have swallowed them whole. But since then, he'd seen her response to the young male who'd needed her after

the demon attack. He'd seen her response to him, just now. Both times, she'd given when nothing was asked of her.

And the body language he was seeing, the bratty tone he was hearing ... he didn't believe any of it. It *was* an act. He was sure of it. Had it always been?

But he had nothing to call her out on, so he asked as though he bought the whole thing, "Is there a point to what you're doing now?"

"Does there need to be? Dancing is the only thing I'm good at. It's the only time I'm not aware of what everyone thinks of me. So you can judge me all you like, but I won't be able to hear you over the music. I guess that's the point."

Something had shifted again in her tone, something honest coming through it. And yet, Ronan was sure, she was using that honesty to hide something else.

# EIGHT

Syren had two choices. She could lay low for a few nights until everyone went back to ignoring her, or she could trust that Ronan's assumptions about her would buy her the time and space she needed to follow up on her lead.

The first option would mean giving up her progress. She couldn't do that, not when she was finally getting somewhere. While dancing with the Haze-high male last night, she'd IDed a dealer. She had to make use of that.

So, really, the first option wasn't actually an option.

As for the second option ... Syren knew what everyone thought of her. For once, it was working to her advantage. Ronan had no reason to think she was doing anything other than being her usual, useless self. His questions at the abbey had certainly confirmed that.

Besides, she was pretty sure he didn't feel well. He must have been hurt last night after all. Couldn't her brother tell? Kyr must have seen Ronan before he'd headed to the VDA with Mira. Why not give him the night off?

Syren kind of felt bad about him being stuck at a noisy club right now. After the way he'd reacted to the kitchen light, she couldn't imagine what the disco lights were doing to him. Had he gotten a concussion in the fight?

She tried to focus on the fact that it worked to her advantage if Ronan wasn't at his best, but ... ugh. She didn't like it.

*He's a good male*, her brother had said.

Yeah. She knew that.

Even though she and Ronan usually jabbed at each other—and even though she always told herself she couldn't stand him—she did know he was a good male. Otherwise, Kyr wouldn't have chosen him for the Hush. And he wouldn't have trusted Ronan with her.

Although *why* Kyr still cared about her, Syren didn't know. All she ever did was disappoint him.

Syren shook these thoughts from her head and tried to find the beat again on Blue Diamond's dance floor. She'd told Ronan that she wouldn't be able to hear his judgment over the music, but she could still hear her own. She could always hear her own, no matter what she did to try and drown it out.

But she smiled and raised her arms above her head and let the music into her body. This wasn't real dancing, not like salsa or tango or ballroom, but it still felt good to move. Besides, there was no better place to vanish than on a crowded dance floor.

Ronan's hasty intervention with the aggressive, Haze-high male last night had cost Syren the chance to make contact with his dealer. But that dealer was here again tonight, thank Idaios. She had thought he might be. It was easier to get away with selling drugs like Haze in a human-run business than in the Red District. A vampire among humans could generally avoid unwanted attention.

But the Haze dealer had caught *her* attention.

He'd gone down to Blue Diamond's lowest level a few minutes ago. It was time to follow. With any luck, Ronan had lost her in the crowd. She had certainly lost him.

As Syren worked her way to the edge of the dance floor, she shaded herself for good measure. No doubt Ronan would eventually find her, but she should have a little time. No one, not even one of the Hush, could track a shaded vampire in this crowd.

Having made herself unnoticeable, Syren had to slide and duck through the shifting mass of people. It was a different kind of dance. It was also, in a way, a chase. Syren chasing the dealer, Ronan chasing her.

Adrenaline shot into her bloodstream. She'd never done anything like this. And something about the idea of Ronan chasing her ...

She shivered—and not with fear.

The bouncers at the lounge stairwell didn't even blink at her passage. In these clothes and with the right smile, they would have let her down anyway, but she didn't need the delay of their inspection.

Syren released her shading as she entered the classy lounge. This was a place for top-shelf liquor and little couches. There was even a piano, though it wasn't in use. This was a place for a little swagger.

The dealer, seated at the far end of the bar, looked as club-chic as he had last night. He wore a slim-cut button down in dark blue, and his blond hair was coifed as high as she'd seen it before. He was tall and trim. He had a decent face. He didn't look like scum.

But then, looks were often deceiving.

His eyes tracked her approach. She had to assume he knew who she was. She had to use that. So she worked her high-heeled stride and gave him something to look at.

*Making males lust for you is your gift, my dear. Use it. What else do you have?*

But she did have something else. She had a plan. She had a purpose.

At a comfortable talking distance from the dealer, Syren cozied up to the bar. She leaned against it with a subtle arch, glad she'd had the foresight to leave her jacket in Ronan's Shelby. (And since she hadn't needed to bring her own tracker-bearing car, she hadn't needed to walk two miles in the April chill after ditching it.)

The dealer's eyes weren't the only ones that flicked to her breasts. One of the human males at the bar stared briefly then thought better of it and looked away. She got that a lot from human males. They knew, somehow, that she wasn't the easy prey she appeared to be—at least not for them.

Syren ordered a vodka and cranberry. If she were actually going to drink something, she would order a Cosmo, but a vodka and cranberry was her go-to prop. It took less time to prepare and was easier to pretend with.

Syren gave the dealer a slight smile as she waited for her drink. He'd never stopped watching her.

"Having a good night?" he asked.

"So-so. A little dull."

"You have a taste for fun."

He didn't voice it as a question. He definitely recognized her. And knew her reputation.

"But it's so hard to find. Sometimes the night needs a little boost to reach a ... satisfying high." The dealer went on instant alert, so she gave him her best pout. "Oh, don't be like that—and, God, don't tell my mother."

The dealer cracked a smile. "I like you. I go by Quinze."

Syren tried not to let her relief show. She knew she was rushing this, but she wasn't sure how much time she'd have before—

"He with you?" The dealer's eyes had flicked up over her shoulder. His tone was guarded.

Even though there was no question of who "he" was, Syren couldn't help but look.

Sure enough, Ronan was striding her way. How on earth had he caught up with her so fast?

He looked pissed as hell.

He also looked hot as hell.

It was the way he moved, the suppleness and power of his body. The confidence. The danger. It was that face, so bad-boy gorgeous.

And with those tattoos and all that black? He also looked like he could fit right into this scheme. If she played it right. And if he played along.

It was worth a try, a last ditch effort. She had no prayer of hiding what she was doing, not without losing her freshly made contact, but maybe she could salvage something.

"He's, uh, my boyfriend."

“Ah.” The dealer—Quinze—started to get up. “I’ll let you two sort things out. It’s nothing to do with me.”

“Oh, it’s not like that. This is a game we play, a little cat and mouse. It’s fun! Don’t go, *please*. I need you.”

Magic words, those. Quinze remained on edge, his eyes mostly on Ronan, but he didn’t bolt.

Putting on her sexiest, most playful smile, Syren spun, putting her back to Quinze and facing Ronan. She pushed away from the bar, moving briskly toward him. Clearly not expecting this, Ronan checked his furious stride. A good thing too, or they might have slammed into each other.

Instead, it was an embrace. Involuntary on Ronan’s part, and his body went rigid as Syren slid her arms under his open motorcycle jacket and wrapped them around his solid torso.

“There you are, baby,” Syren purred and nipped Ronan’s muscled chest through his compression shirt.

He jumped like it was an electric shock. He would have rocketed back from her if she hadn’t dug her nails into his back.

He hissed in a breath then gritted out, “What the fuck are you—”

“Oh, you know me, always playing,” Syren teased then aimed a pleading look up at him and mouthed, *Trust me*.

Ronan scowled ferociously down at her, like trusting her was the last thing on earth he wanted to do. But it was now or never, so Syren slipped her hands down to his ass. Gripping two delightful handfuls of muscle through his tactical pants, she tugged Ronan against her.

He let out a sound that was somewhere between a grunt and a vague, *Fuck*.

Syren, for her part, sucked in a breath at the heat that flooded her body when she felt the hard ridge of his cock pressed against her.

For a second, she forgot all about the dealer and her plans. For a second, she forgot this was a ruse. She tilted her head

back, lips parting—

Ronan bent to take her offered lips in a hungry, aggressive kiss. It was exactly what she would have expected from him. She'd imagined it like this, fierce and demanding, more than once.

His tongue swept hotly into her mouth as her fangs made their aching descent. His growl rumbled through her, traveling all the way from her lips to her sex. Her legs went wobbly, but Ronan, finally, was returning the embrace, his arms circling her, holding her up—almost like this was real.

He broke the kiss and nipped lightly at her throat. Her shiver of pleasure became a gasp as he nibbled her earlobe. He growled low in her ear, low enough for only her to hear, “What are you doing?”

Syren turned her face into his and nipped him under the chin. He sucked in a breath and tugged her harder against him. The press of his erection almost made her lose what remained of her focus, but she chuckled against his throat, her mouth so teasingly near his vein, and resumed her role.

“You’ll see,” she teased and turned in his arms.

To her surprise, Syren found that she was at the bar. Ronan had driven her back without her realizing it. An image flashed through her mind: Ronan pinning her here against the bar, grinding into her. If this was real, she would turn and hook her legs around him. She would haul him into her, tighter, harder. She would pull his hair, bite his throat. He would be rough and intense. He would fuck like she had fantasized about.

The image was difficult to shake with Ronan right behind her, his cock hard against her ass, her sex hot and throbbing in response. Ronan had one arm propped on the bar, the other around her waist, caging her against him. He nuzzled her neck. Possessive. Protective. Playing along.

*Just a ruse*, she reminded herself.

Quinze eyed them warily, though his cheeks were flushed. The bartender stayed carefully distant. Him, she shaded. To Quinze she offered a teasing, flirtatious smile.



“Sorry about that,” Syren crooned. “I sometimes forget what we’re like together after a few minutes apart.”

Quinze raised a sculpted eyebrow. “It doesn’t look like you two need any ... extra stimulation.”

“Ohhhhh, but I don’t always have him, and he understands that I have to entertain myself when he’s not around. Don’t you, baby?”

“Nnnn,” Ronan murmured then growled, “as long as it’s not with someone else.”

Syren shivered in the cage of his powerful body. Jesus. She snagged her vodka and cranberry from the bar. For once, her sip wasn’t pretend.

“Look, I’ve got one vial—”

“Oh, that’s not nearly enough,” Syren pouted. “You have no idea how hard it is for me to get away like this. I have to stock up. Please, Quinze. Help a girl out. Everything you’ve got. I’ll pay double.”

These words were also magic, apparently, because a greedy light flashed in Quinze’s eyes. But then, of course he was greedy. Only a greedy scumbag would peddle Haze, no matter how posh he looked on the outside.

Syren tried not to be hurt that he believed her act, that her reputation really was that bad.

Silly, useless princess.

Ronan’s arm tightened around her waist like he’d sensed something bad in her body language. Syren made herself relax and smile.

“Well?” she purred.

“Outside,” Quinze said, all business now.

As the three of them made their way across the lounge, up the stairs, and through the noisy chaos of Blue Diamond’s main level, Ronan hovered at Syren’s side like ... what? Like he thought she might try to escape?

Oh, God. Syren squeezed her eyes shut. He must think she was actually buying drugs. Then why was he playing along? To keep track of her? To seize them as evidence? What if he didn't believe the truth?

Later. She would worry about that later.

They left the club and walked half a block to the parking garage. Quinze's yellow Porsche, clearly brand new, was parked in a VIP spot on the bottom level. Apparently, business was booming.

The dealer eyed Ronan several times, clearly wondering if this was a bad idea but unable to resist the lure of Syren's cash. But Ronan played his part flawlessly. His hands never left Syren. There was always a slight pressure at her elbow or the small of her back. Then Ronan curled his fingers into her hair and tugged her head back, exposing her throat.

When he kissed along her vein and murmured, "Well, baby? Will this make you happy?" Syren realized she'd gone too still, that she wasn't playing her part.

Remembering it, she chuckled and turned into him, wrapping her arms around his torso as she had before. She grinned up at him. In the parking garage's harsh light, she saw his surprise, the way he drew back for a moment—then he crushed his mouth to hers again.

Syren melted, as though the whole thing wasn't a lie, like she'd forgotten that Ronan despised her.

Quinze cleared his throat. "Sooo ..."

Ronan growled at the interruption. Syren felt it vibrate through her body. Her sex clenched, torturously, on nothing. She let her eyes squeeze briefly shut. Then she wrenched away from the kiss and spun.

She did a girlish little jump in her high heels, clapping her hands with delight at the sight of the vials in Quinze's hand.

"Yay! My savior!"

When Quinze named his outrageous price, Syren dug into the hidden, interior pocket of her leather pants, fishing out a

stack of bills that were warm and damp from her sweaty body.

Quinze made a slight face as he took them, but he did take them. Then he said, “Enjoy your night. You know where to find me if you need another good time.”

Syren clutched the vials to her chest and kept the party-girl smile on her face as Quinze got in his yellow Porsche and backed out of his spot.

The instant the Porsche pulled through the stiles of the exit, Ronan snarled, “You’ve got some fucking explaining—”

“Later! We need to follow him! I’ll meet you at your—”

“Don’t fucking vanish, Syren. Goddamn it, don’t—”

“Just *trust* me!” Syren snapped and ghosted out of the parking garage, whipping past the yellow Porsche as it turned left. Then Ronan whipped past her.

Ronan’s black Shelby was two blocks back on the street. He was standing beside the open driver’s door by the time she arrived. Upon seeing her appear, he sagged slightly with relief. He’d really thought she might vanish.

On a certain level, she was insulted, but why should he believe her? Her reputation had just been thoroughly demonstrated. It was a bit unfair, though. She had never done drugs.

Syren yanked open the passenger door and dove in. Ronan slid into the driver’s seat.

“Holy fuck!” He slammed the driver’s door. “What the fuck is going on!”

“Stop flipping out! Just go!”

“I’m fucking going!”

The Shelby roared to life, and Ronan pulled out onto the street. His glare swung from the road to her and back to the road. As furious as he was, he drove carefully, locating the yellow Porsche then keeping back enough to remain unnoticed. He clearly knew how to tail someone.

“What the fuck, Syren, what the fuck?”

“I’m not doing drugs, okay?”

“I fucking get that!”

It took her aback. “You do?”

“Oh my God.” Ronan scrubbed at his face like he couldn’t take much more. “Just ... why am I following this piece of shit?”

“It’s early in the night and I bought him out. He’ll go get more, I’m sure of it. Then I can see where it’s coming from. And if he doesn’t ... well, it’s still useful to see where he goes. He’s my only real lead!”

“Jesus, Syren, what the fuck are you playing at?”

“I’m trying to find out where this shit is coming from, Ronan!”

He stared at her, dumbfounded, then returned his attention to the road. The dash lights limned his tense jaw and the cords of his neck.

In the silence, Syren became aware of things that had briefly shifted to the back of her mind. The scent of her arousal. The scent of his: earthy, spicy, distinctly male. Syren closed her eyes as that scent seemed to fill her, as her descended fangs throbbed in response to it.

But she didn’t say anything about it. Neither did he.

“This is what you’ve been doing,” Ronan finally said, sounding calmer as he followed the Porsche onto another street. “With the clubbing. As if the clubbing wasn’t bad enough?”

“Oh, this is worse, is it? I can’t win! If I do nothing, I’m useless. And if I try to do something, I’m stupid.”

“I didn’t fucking say that.”

“Maybe not directly, but it’s what you meant. Trust me, no one understands unspoken insults better than I do.”

“That is *not* what I meant, for fuck’s sake. I meant this is even more dangerous—which it *is*. *Why* are you doing this?”

“Why do you think? Because I *hate* being stupid and useless, because I *hate* being pointless, because I have to do *something* or I might as well stop existing! And I *know* that everyone thinks I don’t care about anything but myself, but I *do*. I’ve just never seen a way to do anything real about it until now and—”

“Syren—”

“—and I want to help my brother. I want to help the Hush. Because what you guys do is important and it’s *so* dangerous, but I don’t know how to help with that right now. But this is something I *can* help with. And this shit—this goddamn Haze—it’s a problem!”

She opened the glovebox, where there was a gun and several knives, shoved the vials of Haze inside with the weapons, and slammed the glovebox shut.

Ronan let out a long, heavy exhalation.

“Say something,” Syren prompted, crossing her arms tightly over her stomach.

He didn’t.

“*Say* something, Ronan.”

“Just let me think for a goddamn second!”

But there wasn’t a second—because the yellow Porsche, which had led them to the edge of the city, had pulled into the parking lot of an out-of-business gym.

Ronan stopped the Shelby a block back, killing the engine and the lights. The dealer, Quinze, got out of his car and walked to the gym’s steel door. He knocked. A minute later, the door opened and Quinze went inside.

While they waited for him to emerge, Syren glanced at Ronan. He was staring intently ahead, as though this surveillance required all of his focus. The truth, however, was pretty obvious. He was avoiding speaking to her.

She swallowed hard and crossed her legs. Belatedly, the embarrassment was hitting her. What they had done ... it had

been a ruse. A cover. But her response to him had been very real. And, sure, Ronan had gotten hard but ...

*You think it's a special accomplishment, making dicks hard?*

God, she hated her life sometimes. She wished she could vanish from it and reappear a million miles away where no one knew her. Somewhere she could start over, where she could be something else, *someone* else.

When the dealer emerged with a small bag in hand and returned to his car, Ronan let the yellow Porsche pull out of the parking lot and onto a side street before he started the Shelby and followed.

Quinze returned to Blue Diamond.

“You were right,” Ronan said as they cruised by the parking garage, not stopping. “That was smart, buying him out.”

Syren swallowed hard, unsure how to respond to a compliment like that. She busied herself instead, pulling out her prepaid phone to send an update.

Sensing Ronan's attention on her activity, she said, “We should go back to the gym and get a better look.”

“We're going to HQ.”

Syren's heart skipped. “What? Why?”

“This has to be reported.”

“I've got that covered! I'm already working with ... someone there. Let me handle this myself.”

“This is beyond what you or I can handle, Syren. And you can't ask me to lie about it.”

To Kyr, he meant.

Shit.

Syren squeezed her eyes shut, preparing herself for the coming storm. Then she opened her phone's only message thread and sent a warning.

# NINE

Syren and Ronan had barely set foot in Jodari's office before a familiar set of footsteps could be heard storming along the hallway of the Admin floor.

Syren shot Jodari a betrayed look. "You told him?"

She had wanted to do that herself in her own time, in her own way.

The director of the VDA leaned back in his office chair and clasped his hands over his torso. His gray designer suit with a red pocket square looked fit for the cover of *GQ*, but his retired-warrior build belonged on the cover of *Men's Health*. He gave her an obnoxious, fatherly look.

"It's best to get it over with."

"For *you* maybe."

At that, Jodari flashed a grin.

Uh-huh. Thought so.

The grin vanished as Kyr stormed through the doorway, striding right past her to the director's desk. Ronan had clearly expected this because he was standing by the wall near Jodari's mini fridge and tea-laden side table. Ronan's arms were crossed, his expression neutral.

Kyr's hands slammed down on the desk. "I ought to drag you out of that chair."

"Kyr," Syren said.

Jodari's eyes flicked to her. "I can handle him."

"Oh, you can *handle* me, can you? You think you can use my sister in some kind of fucked-up undercover bullshit scheme to deal with a problem that *clearly* falls under Amarada and *hide it* from me? She is not an agent. She is not trained for—"

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here!"

Kyr straightened from the desk and turned his thunderous look on her. “You lied to me.”

“We can talk about that later.”

“We can talk about it right now!”

“No! Right now the point is that this was my idea. I approached Jodari. I wanted to do this, and I made very clear that I would do it with or without his support. Because, yes, this falls under the crown. But *she* wouldn’t do anything about it. I will. With help, of course. Jodari’s help.”

“Why didn’t you approach *me*?”

“After the way you stormed in here, and with every argument you just made, you think there’s any mystery about that?”

Kyr made a sound of aggravation and started pacing across Jodari’s expensive rug. There really wasn’t enough room for someone his size to pace in here, especially with the room’s other occupants, so he stopped. He crossed his arms and glared at Syren then Jodari.

Ronan said unexpectedly, “She’s trying to help.”

Kyr swung his glare to Ronan. “You think this is okay?”

“She’s trying to help,” Ronan repeated, forcing that to be the point, then added, “Give her some fucking credit.”

“*Credit?*”

“Yes, Kyr, credit. She’s been smart and careful and she gathered useful intel.”

Syren’s heart felt like it tripled in size. She could not believe what she was hearing. Her eyes prickled alarmingly. She blinked the feeling away. She *would not* cry. Not here. Not now. Not when someone was finally taking her seriously.

*Ronan* was taking her seriously. Was this real?

“You were assigned to watch her,” Kyr snapped at Ronan. “And instead you aided and abetted—”



“Aided and abetted?” Ronan shot back. “She’s not a fucking criminal!”

“So you think it’s okay for her to do shit like this? You think it’s okay if something happens to her?”

Ronan was in Kyr’s face so fast he must have ghosted. “I won’t let any-fucking-thing happen to her, you goddamn asshole!”

Both wearing tactical black and strapped with weapons, both aggressive and highly trained for combat, it was hard to say which of them looked scarier. Kyr’s temper was burning hot, but Ronan was furious now too. And there was something else that gave Ronan an edge, that made him somehow more dangerous. Syren couldn’t pinpoint it.

Kyr snarled, “Ronan, I fucking *swear*, if you had let *anything*—”

“Stop yelling at him!” Syren shouted, standing to the side of the two furious males. “He helped me and protected me and you’re being horrible to him! And you’re being horrible to me! And also to—”

“Don’t you dare defend *that* one.” Kyr thrust a finger in Jodari’s direction.

Syren almost felt bad about involving Jodari, but the director looked amazingly unruffled. In fact, he looked highly entertained.

“What on earth is going on?” asked Mira’s calm voice from the doorway.

“Conspiracy,” Kyr declared.

“Oh *please*,” Syren scoffed. “You are being *such* a jerk.”

“Syren, what you did was so goddamn dangerous—”

“Kyr, I need to speak with you in the hallway,” Mira said with calm firmness.

“You can speak with me in here,” Kyr retorted.

“Fine,” Mira replied icily. “You are having a strong emotional reaction that is making you say things you don’t

mean. I think it's best—”

“I have meant every single word I've said.”

“But you're giving the wrong impression of your meanings because you're scared and you don't want anyone to see that.”

Syren had never seen Kyr freeze like he did at Mira's words. He went absolutely, completely still. But he did not glare at Mira like Syren might have expected, like he might have done with someone else. He looked down. He took a breath.

Then he said calmly and intently, “This needs to be taken to Amarada. It falls under her.”

Syren shook her head. “I already tried to talk to her about this weeks ago. She blew it off.”

“Try again. Ronan will go with you.”

Ronan stiffened but said nothing.

Kyr turned to face Syren. “No more contact with dealers. No more sneaking around. If you want me to trust you, you have to be honest.”

“If you want me to be honest, you have to respect my decisions.”

Kyr scrubbed frustratedly at his face. “I just don't want anything to happen to you.”

“I don't want anything to happen to you either. Or to any of the Hush.”

“That's different, Syren.”

“It's not. Not to me.”

Kyr's chest rose on a deep inhalation. He tugged at the back of his neck. Then he walked toward the door.

On his way, he snapped at Jodari, “This isn't over.”

He said nothing to Ronan, but they shared a look, one of understanding that Syren couldn't read. Then Kyr was gone and Mira with him.

Syren blew out her cheeks. Now for the hard part.

Her mother.

\* \* \*

Ronan glanced at Syren as they walked down one of the Residence's hallways. Nude marble statues stood at intervals along the walls, the stone figures carved into ironically supple positions. Backbend. Standing splits. Puppy dog. The pale marble stood out sharply against the dark mahogany floor and the red- and gold-patterned wallpaper.

The style was typical of the Residence, but this particular hallway, Ronan recognized.

Syren had a file folder clutched to her chest. Her posture was perfect, her face set with determination. Except for the fact that she was still dressed for the club in semi-sheer stretch lace and leather, she looked like she was on her way to a job interview.

She was nervous.

In the last few hours, this female had done dangerous undercover work and had held her ground with Kyr at his most irate. Through all that, she'd been steady and tough. Hell, she'd been brave.

But here, in her own home, she was uncomfortable.

Ronan was uncomfortable too. He hated being here. He hated having anything to do with Amarada. Yeah, he hated Amarada herself, but he also hated the memory of how he'd lost his shit with her, as though it had mattered what she thought and whether she believed him. About his team. About Genesys.

*Deserter*, she'd called him.

*Liar*.

*Junkie*.

So, yeah, the Residence was about the last place on earth Ronan wanted to be. But this was Syren's home. And Amarada was a nasty bitch, sure, but she was Syren's mother. Syren was her heir. The spoiled princess, right? So why was she nervous?

Or maybe a better question was: why had Ronan never noticed it before?

The hallway ended with a set of double doors. Dark wood, brass handles. When they reached them, Syren halted and further squared her already-square shoulders. She took a deep breath.

Staring ahead at the closed doors, she said, “Wait here, okay?”

“What? No way. I’m coming with you.”

Syren looked at him. A slight smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. “You’re a lot sweeter than I thought you were.”

At Ronan’s appalled expression, Syren’s smile deepened. It did something to Ronan, that smile. It made the ground seem to shift beneath him. And it wasn’t the first time tonight.

He knew she’d been acting at Blue Diamond, when they’d pretended to be ... together. She didn’t actually like him, and why would she? But for a minute, it had all felt a little too real—and a little too right.

He was having a hard time stepping back from that.

“Please,” she said, “I need to do this on my own.”

Ronan didn’t like it, but he had to respect that. “Fine, but leave the door open.”

She nodded then faced forward again, getting her focus back. She knocked.

“Yes, yes, Syrenaria, I know you’re there,” Amarada drawled from inside.

Syren opened the door and went in. She left the door more cracked than actually open, but at least Ronan wasn’t cut off completely. In case she needed him.

From within Amarada’s study, Syren began, “Mother, I’ve been looking into the Haze problem—”

“Idaios, not this again.”

“I ... I think it’s important. Haze is dangerous. Even if you don’t care about people ODing, it’s an exposure risk. A Haze-high vampire isn’t careful. I think we have to take it seriously.”

“This? From *you*? When have you ever taken anything seriously?”

“I’m ... I’m trying. To do something.”

“And meanwhile I’m hunting for the body of Kadaros and running the government. Which of us is actually *doing* something?”

“Of course that’s important, but—”

“Oh, thank you for that assessment, dear. You know how I value your input.”

For fuck’s sake, could Amarada not even hear what her daughter was saying? Was it that hard to listen and take her seriously?

*How long did it take you?* Ronan asked himself.

*She’s more than you think she is, Kyr had told him once. She’s better and stronger than anyone realizes, including her.*

Yeah. Ronan was starting to see that. So even though he wanted to storm in there and tell Amarada what a cunt she was, he held back and gave Syren a chance.

“—but this is important too,” Syren was plowing on, clearly accustomed to her mother’s condescension. “I identified a Haze dealer and followed him to an abandoned gym, which is perhaps a warehouse or even a lab. I’ll need a better look—”

“Really, my dear, your stupidity continues to astonish, even after all these years.”

All right, that was enough. Ronan went to push open the door, but then he heard Syren speaking and waited, just one more moment, to let her finish.

“Don’t you find it suspicious that there’s no real network? It shouldn’t be a dealer going to a source. There should be levels

of distribution. I think something's going on, something strange. Maybe something big."

Amarada sighed. "My dear, stop trying to think, it's not your gift. Paint your nails *properly*, trim those disgusting split ends, and resume your position—"

Oh, fuck no. Ronan thrust open the door and stepped into Amarada's study.

The queen, seated behind an elegant mahogany desk, wearing black silk and a necklace of blood-drop rubies, smiled wolfishly up at him. A window framed the night at her back.

Her platinum blonde hair held its signature 1940s wave, styled back from a face almost as beautiful as her daughter's—if Ronan could force himself to be that objective. To him, she was the most hideous female on earth.

And that opinion was one he'd held *before* listening to her belittle Syren, who *wasn't* stupid and *wasn't* useless, though Syren herself had used those words. It was obvious now, as it should have been from the start, exactly where that was coming from: her feral bitch of a mother.

Amarada's red-painted lips had peeled back from her pearly fangs. Her red-lacquered nails rested on the desk like claws.

Neither she nor the room had changed one bit since Ronan had last set foot in here seven years ago. Maybe Amarada was recalling that moment as she sent him that wolfish smile. She had smiled then, too, as she'd called him a deserter.

As if he would ever have abandoned his team—Lea and Eian, Nash, Zane, and Pax. He could still clearly picture every one of them, shredded by bullets, lying under the brutal Atarian sun as their blood soaked the hard, lifeless ground. He could picture it because he'd lain there with them, his blood mingling with theirs—only he hadn't been dead.

A masked figure had come to stand over him, blocking the sun. Then the butt of a gun had crashed down on Ronan's head, taking all the horror away.

But he'd woken to a new horror. White walls. Restraints. Cameras. Poison in the air, poison in syringes. Darkness.

Drowning. Electroshock. Endless fucking questions about what he was.

It had taken him five years to die inside.

It had taken him five more to come back to life. To fight. To escape.

And then he'd come here.

Not directly. He'd gone to the barracks first. They'd detained him, had locked him up again. When he'd calmed down enough, he'd been granted his audience. Here, in this very room.

*Liar.*

*Deserter.*

*Junkie.*

Was that letter opener lying near Amarada's red-lacquered nails the same one he'd tried to put through her eye? Those were certainly the same nails that had tried to rip out his throat when he'd pinned her to that very desk—as three guns took aim at his head. Those guns wouldn't have stopped him.

But Kyr had.

Ronan had never met Kyr before that moment, but even with his trust so fucking broken, Ronan had trusted him. Somehow, Kyr had untangled the mess. Somehow, he'd gotten the guns lowered, had gotten the letter opener away from Ronan, had gotten him out of this room without an order of execution.

So Ronan being back here tonight was a little bit of punishment from the *comudari*—but it was also a hell of a lot of trust.

Amarada's red nails drummed on the dark-stained mahogany. Though she addressed Syren, her eyes remained locked on Ronan as she spoke.

“When I called Kyrdavian, he was to get you under control, Syrenaria, but I see that, instead, he handed you the leash of one of his semi-rehabilitated pit bulls. Be cautious with this

one, my dear. He's unstable—and more likely to maul you than protect you.”

Syren slapped the file folder down on her mother's desk and flipped it open. “At least *look* at the number of ODs and near-exposures. Look at all the places I've encountered Haze.”

Amarada didn't look. Her eyes continued to shoot straight past Syren to Ronan. The queen had always ignored him to the point that he'd wondered if she had forgotten him.

Apparently not.

“Syren, let's go,” Ronan said. “You were right. There's no point in talking to her.”

“But no one will help me!”

“I will.”

Syren looked back at him with a glimmer of hope in her huge blue eyes. Ronan held out his hand. Amarada's red-painted lips peeled further back as her fangs descended visibly, but Ronan kept his hand out as Syren gathered up her file and turned away from her mother.

Amarada finally looked at her daughter. She said, “Not all dogs can be saved. That one should have been put down years ago.”

Syren opened her mouth to reply, but Ronan flexed his fingers, asking her not to. It wasn't worth it.

Syren took a deep breath, squared her shoulders again, and walked with him out of the queen's study.



# TEN

Syren crouched beside Ronan on the rooftop of a daycare center near the out-of-business gym. Humans and vampires might keep different hours, but it still creeped her out to think of a drug lab operating next door to a daycare center.

And it *was* a drug lab. Ronan had confirmed that last night—a fact that Syren had learned less than an hour ago.

After the embarrassing shutdown from her mother, Ronan had driven her to the abbey. He'd tried to say something about not listening to her mother's shit, but she hadn't been in the headspace to hear it. He'd seen that and had respected her silence.

When he'd left the abbey's parking garage, she had assumed he would go home. Apparently, he had come here instead to recon the gym. Four vampires had been hard at work cooking up Haze inside.

Now, Ronan and Syren were camped out in the April chill on the daycare center rooftop, watching to see who came and went from the lab. So far, nothing. The four vampire chemists, it seemed, had spent the day inside.

Through a pair of night vision binoculars, Ronan swept the perimeter of the gym. He looked focused and combat ready, like he always did. But his mouth was tight. It was subtle, and a few nights ago Syren would have dismissed it as part of his usual intensity. Now she wasn't so sure.

Last night, she had thought he didn't feel well. But it hadn't affected his job performance. It hadn't affected his ... response. When they'd pretended.

They still hadn't talked about that.

So maybe she was wrong about him not feeling well. Maybe she just wanted an excuse to put her hand on his or to bring him food or to ask *are you okay?* so they could start talking.

Ronan lowered the binoculars. He said, sounding almost apologetic, "Stakeouts are always boring."

“At least it’s not raining.”

Ronan’s eyes widened. “Don’t say that. You’ll jinx us.”

Syren snorted. “I wouldn’t have guessed you were superstitious.”

“I’m not, generally. But when it comes to rain in April, it’s best to play it safe.”

Syren smiled. “Fair.”

Ronan’s breath seemed to catch in his throat, then he turned his gaze toward the gym again.

*Say something*, she pleaded in her mind, though she wasn’t sure whether she meant him or herself. Something had shifted between them. Now that they weren’t jabbing at each other, Syren wasn’t sure how to interact with him.

Kissing wasn’t that big of a deal. Even getting turned on wasn’t that big of a deal. They were *vampires*. It would have been weird if they *hadn’t* gotten turned on under the circumstances. It was simple biology, part of a strong, base drive to feed and fuck. For their kind, that was survival: sustenance and release. It didn’t mean anything.

Still. Things felt different now—and not just because, for a moment, they’d both wanted to fuck. Something bigger and more fundamental had shifted when Ronan had supported her, both with Kyr and with her mother.

No, it had shifted before that. When she’d seen that, for whatever reason, Ronan wasn’t taking care of himself, when she’d seen that he needed food and wasn’t doing anything about it. When she’d reached out with that small offering of the bagel. When he’d accepted it.

They hadn’t jabbed at each other since.

The thing was, they had never really hurt each other with their jabs in the past. It had been almost a game. But now? She suspected that they *could* hurt each other. At least, she knew he could hurt her, and not in the way her mother had said.

*He’s unstable—and more likely to maul you than protect you.*

Syren didn't believe that. Kyr wouldn't have Ronan on his team if that were true. Kyr trusted him, and that was good enough for Syren, even if she didn't know Ronan well. Which she didn't. She didn't really know him at all.

It was hard to know anyone as prickly as Ronan.

But he wasn't prickly now. He was quiet. And the way his fingers kept tapping on his bent knee said it wasn't just the quietness of focus.

Was he uncomfortable too, now that they didn't know how to interact with each other?

He let out a deep breath and said, still looking toward the gym, "Um, I just wanted to say that ... I'm sorry. You know, for my assumptions? I was really shitty to you, and I wish that I hadn't been."

"You thought what I deliberately made you to think. I can't really be mad at you for thinking it."

"Yeah, you can. I should have seen through your act."

"Why, because you have an act of your own?"

He looked at her. With her eyes adjusted to the night, Syren could see the surprise on his face. Idaios, he was gorgeous with those cheekbones and that chiseled jaw. Take away the harsh tattoos visible at the collar of his jacket, take away the tactical gear and spiky fauxhawk mess of his dark hair? He'd be so purely beautiful.

Not that Syren would take any of that away. Those things darkened his beauty but didn't diminish it. Besides, they were part of who he was.

*Part* being the operative word. There was more to him, but she felt like he didn't let people see it.

"What?" she asked as he stared at her. "Was I not supposed to notice?"

He huffed. "Nah, I really am an asshole."

"Sometimes, yes, but none of us are just one thing. You weren't an asshole when you stood up for me. It ... it really

meant a lot to me.” Then, because that felt like a bit too much to say, she changed tone. “Can I see those binoculars?”

He held them out. Syren closed her hand on them, but Ronan didn’t let go.

He said, “She shouldn’t talk to you like that. The things she said, they’re not true. I don’t know why your mother would want to hurt you, but there was no other reason for what she said. It’s just meanness. None of it’s true.”

“Some of it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

Eyes stinging, Syren tugged at the binoculars, wanting them now for an entirely different reason. She needed them to hide behind. “Will you let go?”

“No.”

Ronan’s other hand settled over hers where it gripped the binoculars. Syren’s fingers tightened. One more second of this and she was going to—

Damn it.

Syren yanked her hand free to swipe at the tear that slipped out. What the hell was wrong with her?

“Syren. None of it’s true.”

More tears spilled. “Stop saying that!”

“Why?” Ronan tugged at her elbow, but she yanked away.

“I don’t know! It just hurts, okay? God!”

And she’d been worried about them jabbing at each other? This was way worse.

Since he wouldn’t give her the binoculars, Syren hid behind her hands instead. She heard Ronan’s boots shift. Then she felt his hands, his arms, his body. He pulled her into him, wrapping his arms around her. She pressed her covered face into his chest, not quite ready to remove the barrier of her hands.

Syren mumbled, “I don’t know why it’s so hard for me to stand up to her.”

“Because she’s a scary bitch.”

Syren choked out a laugh.

“I really think you should get away from her.”

Syren pulled away, swiping at her eyes. “I tried that. But it made me completely useless and—”

“Syren—”

“Just let me finish. She holds all the cards. My only path to any power to do anything is through her.”

“Or against her. There are a lot of people who would support you against her.”

“I know that, but they would get hurt. Look what happened to Kyr! That stupid *cerenteri*? He could have been killed. I don’t know what to do. That’s why I started this whole thing with Haze. Because I could do it separately, not risking anyone but myself.”

Ronan let out a heavy exhalation and looked out into the night.

“Do you understand?” Syren asked.

“I’m thinking.”

Syren bit her lip, struggling to be patient, wanting a reaction. But he was thinking ... about what she’d said.

She’d never had a conversation like this before, not even with Kyr. It was strange how she felt like she could have it with Ronan. And he had listened. Really listened.

He looked at her, his expression dead serious. “This is just my opinion, okay?”

Syren’s heart skipped. “Okay.”

“You’re in a really shitty position. I see that now. But the thing is, Syren, leaders usually are.”

Syren’s heart sank. “You mean my mother.”

Ronan jerked back. “No. Fuck no, I don’t mean her. God, she is way too prominent in your thoughts. I don’t mean her because she’s not a leader. She’s a tyrant and manipulator. I was thinking of Kyr.”

Syren blinked. She hadn’t expected that. No one had ever compared her to Kyr before.

Ronan said, “He’s in a shitty position all the time. He has to make hard decisions and he has to put people at risk. It takes a really tough person to do that.”

“You argue with him all the time,” Syren pointed out. “More than anyone else does.”

“Yeah, I do. And a leader has to be able to listen. And he’s not always right, and he knows that. But he *usually* is, and I listen to him more than I listen to anyone else. And even though he pisses me off sometimes, I’m really fucking glad he’s in charge.”

“I don’t think I can be like that. I’m not that person.”

“Yes, you are. I didn’t see it before, but I see it now. Kyr’s always seen it.”

Syren pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t see how you can think that.”

“I’ll tell you how. Your mother is a nasty bitch. But you, despite living with her claws in you for way too fucking long, are not. And that means you’re stronger than her.”

Syren felt a smile tug at the corner of her mouth. “I certainly never expected to have a conversation like this with you, Ronan Fyr.”

He huffed a laugh. “I’m as surprised as you, and this kind of happened to me the other night with Rhys too. I must be getting sentimental now that I’m—well, for whatever reason.”

“Now that you’re what?”

“Ah, nothing.” Ronan looked away.

“Well, I don’t think you’re being sentimental,” Syren said, wanting him back in the conversation. “You’re just listening.”

And I needed that, so ... thanks.”

He looked at her again, his beautiful mouth twisting into a smile. “You’re not what I thought.”

“You’re not what I thought either.”

His smile faded, his expression growing serious again. “About last night. When we—” Ronan cut himself off and looked to the gym-turned-drug lab.

Oh, hell no, he wasn’t getting away with that. “When we ...?”

But he signaled for silence and crept to the edge of the daycare center roof. Syren followed his gaze to the lab—where four demons, their twitchy movement unmistakable, entered through the steel door.

“What the hell?” Syren whispered. “Why would *demons* be involved with Haze?”

“I don’t know, but we’re gonna find out.”

He snagged his phone from inside his jacket and started tapping out a message.

# ELEVEN

Ronan and Syren kept watch on the drug lab while the Hush drew in from scattered locations across the city. Demons being involved with Haze changed everything. It meant the problem was a hell of a lot bigger than vampires making dumb decisions about what they put in their own bodies.

It also meant Syren's instincts about the seriousness of the situation had been spot-on. And this female thought she wasn't smart?

What a waste for her to have been so damn stifled all these years.

Fucking Amarada. She'd made an invisible prison for Syren, one of words and consequences, both to herself and to the people around her. Amarada had raised Syren in the role of the spoiled, useless princess because that made Syren into something Amarada could control, something that didn't threaten her.

But that wasn't right for Syren, wasn't natural to her—and the cracks were starting to show.

Syren was scared to break out of her mother's prison. Ronan could see that. But she was excited too. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. She had taken the binoculars and was scanning the exterior of the gym-turned-drug lab. Dressed in black, heavy boots and all, with her dark hair in a thick, tight braid, she looked combat ready.

Her strong build and dancer's agility took on a different meaning. She wasn't made to be anyone's sex fantasy. She was made to fight.

It awed Ronan, seeing this female whom he'd known for years without knowing her at all—and it scared the shit out of him.

She would put herself in danger. She already had, repeatedly.



Always, he would have protected her out of duty. Duty to her as Kyr's sister. Duty to her as a female.

But it was different now. Now, he would protect her because the idea of anything happening to her was completely unacceptable.

When she lowered the binoculars and looked at him, clearly startled, he realized he was growling. He cut it off.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

*Oh, nothing. Just a barely controlled vampire male crouched beside you who got one fake kiss—which he, for one, was not faking—and now he's losing his fucking mind.*

He said through gritted teeth, uncomfortably aware that his fangs had descended, “The second they're here, we're gone.”

That was what he'd arranged with Kyr. He and Syren would continue to surveil the building while the Hush converged, then Ronan would get Syren to safety while all present demons were occupied with the Hush.

Once, it might have torqued Ronan to step away from the fight for guard duty. Not now. He had the single most important task of any of them. Only when Syren was secure would he return to join the fight, if it was still going.

On the street below, six black-clad figures moved toward the drug lab. The Hush ghosted point-to-point in formation, leapfrogging each other.

“They're here,” Syren whispered.

“Down the fire escape,” Ronan reminded her, “two blocks to my car. We don't ghost unless we have to because you are not to be out of my sight. No sidetracks or hesitations, got it?”

She looked away, not answering.

“*Syren—*”

“Ronan!”

Focused on her, he'd already lost five seconds of combat time before he saw them. How the hell had two demons gotten up on the roof behind them without his noticing?

There was no time to draw his weapons. He ghosted straight for the demons, grabbing one by the throat and body slamming it onto the flat rooftop.

Ronan twisted on his way up, narrowly avoiding the crowbar that would have cracked his head open. His fist slammed into the demon's face, crushing bone. He was reaching for the *shiva* in its thigh sheath when he heard a gunshot from Syren's direction.

Ronan's head whipped her way. Silhouetted against the moon, Syren stood in perfect form, steady and unafraid, unloading her gun into a charging demon.

How the hell had more demons gotten up here?

Ronan ghosted, diving low to stay under Syren's gunfire, and tackled the demon around the knees. Ronan and his target hit the concrete and skidded right off the edge of the roof. The demon fell, screaming, but Ronan caught the edge.

Swinging himself up, he tackled Syren—because another fucking demon had a gun leveled at her. Shots fired but missed.

Ronan rolled up, crouching briefly over Syren to judge the danger. Then he ghosted to the demon.

He grabbed it, ripped its head back, and ripped out its throat with his fangs. He spat out a disgusting, rotten-tasting mouthful and dropped the body, hunting for other dangers to his female. Lost in the primal drive to fight and protect, Ronan didn't question the thought. It was absolute.

Syren was scrambling to her feet. Her gaze swung wildly around. It caught briefly on him then whipped down to the street below, seeing something beyond his line of sight.

"Shit!" she shouted—then she was gone.

Ronan's heart stopped momentarily before leaping into overdrive. He ghosted in Syren's direction, down the fire escape to the street.

Ronan had one second to register that a vampire male was fleeing the lab before Syren came out of her ghost to tackle the

male to the ground.

Goddamn it!

Ronan ghosted after her, yanking the vampire male clear of her before either of them could grapple with the other. Ronan slammed the male to the ground. The male's head smacked the concrete. He flopped and went still.

Grabbing Syren, Ronan forced her against the wall of a building, where nothing could get behind her.

“Stay!” he snapped and moved into the street to scan left, right, and above.

The demon that had fallen off the roof was staggering to its feet. Ronan drew his gun and fired. The demon dropped.

Another of the demons from the daycare center roof appeared at the edge of it—and a Post Office box came flying straight at Ronan. He could have dodged it, but he could not calculate, with one hundred percent certainty, its trajectory in relation to Syren. He ghosted in front of her, caging her in, making his body a shield.

The huge metal projectile crashed into the brick inches from his hand. As soon as it hit, Ronan spun, raised his gun, and fired.

The demon toppled from the daycare center roof and thudded dully onto the sidewalk below.

“Stay!” Ronan barked at Syren again and moved out into the street, scanning for movement.

Distantly, he was aware that he'd burned through every bit of his energy. He was getting that light, floaty feeling—a sure sign of what was coming. But he would hold it off if it took everything he had, even if it fucking killed him, until he was absolutely certain that Syren was safe.

He scanned the street in both directions, scanned above. Then he saw the Hush emerging from the gym-turned-lab. They moved in careful formation, still on alert but apparently unharmed. They clearly saw him and saw Syren. They headed their way.

Safe. Syren was safe.

Ronan went down like someone had pulled his fucking power cord.

To everyone watching his body crumple to the asphalt, it looked like he was lights out. Ronan knew that because a shadow version of himself remained standing there, ghostlike, present but outside of physical reality. He watched Syren and the six members of his team bolt in his direction.

The human scientists at Genesys had spent years refining their triggers for this phenomenon. Astral projection, they had called it. They would overstimulate his body with electroshock, or drown him, or freeze him until he couldn't feel a thing. They would pump him full of every drug and toxin imaginable. And sometimes he would spend hours, maybe days, in their sensory deprivation chamber.

Eventually, his body would shut down and his mind would separate from it.

Ronan hated that he had played their game, had given in to their system of reward and punishment.

*What's in Room 204?*

*Here's a blanket.*

*Where is the yellow ballon?*

*Have some blood.*

If they would have let him die, he would have chosen that, but that was never an option. Isolation. Sleep deprivation. Food deprivation. Those were options. Death was not.

Later, after he'd wised up and had used the mind-body experiments to study the layout and security of Genesys, after he'd managed to kill seven people and escape, Ronan had convinced himself that the out-of-body shit hadn't really happened.

Everything with Genesys was surreal, so fucked up and confusing, that it had been easy enough to pack it all away in a box that said, *Weird and scary, don't touch.*

Until it had started again. When he was too tired. When his brain was overloaded with too much pain.

In the time between his escape from Genesys and Jonus helping him, he had gotten tired a lot. He'd been in pain a lot. He'd mostly gotten through it—until his heart had gotten in the habit of stopping.

Ronan was well aware that he was the main reason Kyr had brought the Hush into the VDA. If he hadn't, if Jonus hadn't worked out a counteragent to mitigate the cellular damage of whatever the fuck Genesys had done, Ronan would be dead by now.

Maybe that would have been for the best.

Because now, as the cellular damage outpaced the counteragent, Ronan's mind-body separation was happening more and more often. And now he knew the truth of it.

He was mind walking.

Like fucking Kadaros.

Ronan might be dying because of Genesys, but the mind walking was all him. Genesys had simply unlocked that part of him.

It had happened enough lately that Ronan didn't even panic this time as he stood, ghostlike, on the street.

Most of the Hush swept wide to form a protective ring around his body, Kyr, and Syren. Kyr rolled him onto his back and jammed two fingers into his jugular to see if his heart had stopped. Syren's hands fluttered above him. Her eyes were panicked. She didn't know what to do.

He could have told her: nothing. There was nothing to do.

When Kyr started unzipping Ronan's jacket, hunting for injuries, Ronan turned away. It was just too weird to watch.

Sometimes he could get back into his body if he closed his eyes and relaxed and imagined himself lying there, but tonight something caught his attention. It had happened once before, on the night the Hush had crashed the Brotherhood's little party as they attempted to awaken the Dark Prince.

That night, Ronan had slipped out of his exhausted body while the Hush fought the Brotherhood. He had stood over the desiccated form of Kadaros. The Dark Prince had lain inert in his iron sarcophagus, his skin thin and dry over atrophied muscle and bone.

Inert but not dead.

And that night, in that moment, a dry, rustling wind had seemed to rise in the not-real space that was mind walking. The wind had seemed to threaten, but Ronan hadn't understood it. It hadn't happened again—until now.

That wind rasped around him like dry leaves, like chattering demons, like an evil presence.

Without a body, Ronan felt no pain. He felt nothing at all. Yet, somehow, he still had a sense of his skin crawling.

As he followed the rasping wind, another sensation intruded on him, one of being unbalanced. This, too, he had felt before. Like his center of gravity had shifted. Like there was a weight at his back, between his shoulder blades.

The whispering swirled above him, spiraling upward to crest the top of the brick building before Ronan. Not even thinking about what he was doing, he crouched like a cat before it sprang—and leaped into the air.

He had a sense of being tugged upward, something pulling him, rhythmically, into the sky. He landed on the rooftop.

And there, waiting, watching the scene below, was a demon lord. Eight feet tall and scaly skinned. Bat-like wings folded at its back and horns curving back from its temples. Claws curling at its sides.

They all looked about the same to Ronan, but this one, a little larger than some, he knew—just *knew*—was the one that had taken Kadaros's body. It was the one they had been hunting for so long. The teleporter.

And it was *here*. Watching them.

Terror shot so coldly through Ronan that, even without a body, he felt it. The Hush was on the street below. *Syren* was

on the street below. And a fucking demon lord was watching from above.

It never saw him, didn't even blink as Ronan leaped off the roof and soared down to where Kyr had stood from his body. Syren was still on her knees, shaky hands trying to zip his jacket back up.

Usually, Ronan had to relax to get back into his body, but this time, he exploded into it. His state of panic shocked his formerly inert body with so much adrenaline that he bowed up from the asphalt like he'd been hit with a defibrillator.

Syren screamed.

Ronan rolled onto his side and shoved himself to his feet. There was a whole lot of "whoa, whoa, whoa" and "oh my God, what the fuck," but Ronan didn't have time for any of that.

He dug deep for whatever energy he had and ghosted up the building to where he'd seen the demon lord. Depleted, totally exhausted, he barely made it to the rooftop. He caught the lip within inches, with a finger's grip.

But he made it because he had to. He burst to the top, drawing his *shiva*, hunting for—

Nothing.

The demon lord was gone.

# TWELVE

The next half hour was pretty fucking tense. Ronan had no choice but to alert his team to the possible presence of a demon lord. (And, yeah, they had wanted to know why the hell he'd ghosted up that building.) Kyr's narrow-eyed gaze had told Ronan that they'd be discussing his vague explanation *real* soon.

But the street was not the place for it, and cleanup was not the time. Especially with Syren there, exposed.

None of that, however, had stopped Kyr from yelling at Ronan to sit his ass on the fucking curb and *not fucking move*. Apparently, the fact that he had barely made it to the top of the building had not been missed. No wonder Luca had arrived seconds later to one) see what the hell Ronan was doing, and two) escort him down the fire escape.

As the VDA arrived to sweep the drug lab, Ronan was perfectly happy to sit his ass on the fucking curb and not fucking move. It meant everyone left him the hell alone.

It did not, however, mean he didn't get a shit-ton of looks. From Kyr. From the rest of the team. From Syren.

Hers were different from the others'. She had her arms crossed. Her eyebrows were pinched. She kept biting her lip. She also kept drifting his way like she wanted to talk to him.

But he did not want to talk to her. Not right now. He didn't want to talk to anybody. He wanted to go home and be in his own space and try to sort through his shit alone.

That, unfortunately, wasn't an option.

After Rhys and Talia had taken the heads of the demons Ronan had incapacitated but had not had time to destroy, it was time for the Hush to move out.

Finally. Ronan could get in his car and have a few minutes to himself while he drove to HQ—



“Keys,” Kyr said, holding out his hand as Ronan stood from the curb.

“I can drive my own damn car.”

“You lost consciousness. You’re not driving. Keys, now.”

Ronan glared at the *comudari*. But the icy gaze that met his glare said that if Ronan wanted to argue, Kyr would, here and now, start asking some very uncomfortable questions.

Ronan dug into his pocket and handed over his keys. Kyr tossed them to Nox. Then the Hush loaded up in one of the VDA vans, everyone sliding onto the benches that lined the otherwise-empty interior.

The ride to HQ was painfully quiet.

Ronan leaned forward, forearms resting on his quads, and made a thorough study of the floor. He still caught more than he wanted to from the corner of his eye. Rhys bouncing his knee. Luca impersonating a statue. Kyr in a state of careful neutrality.

Syren, he wasn’t sure about. He was extremely careful to not look at her.

He wasn’t sure when it had started to matter what she thought about him. It had happened with his noticing.

He didn’t like that he’d passed out in front of her. He didn’t like that he had looked like a fucking nut job when he’d ghosted up that building to hunt for a demon lord that hadn’t been there.

He didn’t like his new awareness of how much he wanted her.

In the past, he had hated that he was so attracted to her. He had always told himself the problem was her attitude, but that was a lie. The problem, really, had always been that she was Amarada’s daughter. He had associated her with her mother. He had focused only on the things that helped him repress his attraction.

But he saw it all very differently now. He saw Syren differently now. He saw the truth. And the truth was that she

was a damned good female. Too good for him.

He was broken on every level. He came from nothing. He *was* nothing.

No, he was worse than nothing. He was a bad seed. He was a liability, a danger.

He needed to be contained—he knew that—but he couldn't accept it. Death, yes. Containment, no.

When they arrived at HQ, everyone unloaded from the van and headed into the spacious foyer, which looked like that of any office building in downtown Portage. Tiled floor and white walls. Horseshoe reception desk that was actually a guard station. Elevator off to the right and a stairwell door at the back. Ronan was about halfway to that stairwell door when Kyr called his name.

All right, so they were going to do this here. Why the hell not.

Ronan stopped and turned. “Look—”

“You're going to Medical. Jonus is expecting you.”

Nope.

Ronan said, “Let's just skip that part and deal with shit right now.”

Even though everyone was standing here. Even though Syren was here. Especially because of all that.

Ronan couldn't keep hiding something that could affect the team. The first time he had mind walked during fieldwork he'd dismissed it as a one-off, had told himself he could control it, that it wouldn't happen in the field again. But tonight, it had.

As for Syren being here? He might as well get it all over with at once. He didn't want to think about why, not right now, but he felt she needed to know.

The front door swung open and Nox joined the crowd. The front desk guard, however, was beating a hasty retreat. Apparently, something about the whole situation suggested that shit might get ugly.

Yep. It might.

Kyr said, “The only thing that needs dealt with right now is you getting a concussion eval.”

“I don’t have a concussion.”

“Ronan, you were obviously confused—”

“I was not confused. There was a demon lord there. It was the teleporter. That must be how demons got on the roof with me and Syren. It’s the demon lord we’ve been looking for, though what the hell that winged asshole has to do with Haze, I don’t know. But he was there.”

Ronan did not allow himself to look around the foyer, where the combat ready team (plus Syren) stood in harsh contrast to the white-walled office space. He didn’t want to see everything he was about to blow the hell up.

He looked only at Kyr, who stood with his hands loose and ready at his sides. The *comudari*’s crystalline blue eyes lasered across the fifteen-foot distance between them.

Kyr said with calm seriousness, “You were unconscious for several minutes. You woke up like someone just shot your heart full of epinephrine and ghosted up that building—which you barely made, by the way—like you had just seen something seconds ago. But you had been *unconscious*.”

“I wasn’t unconscious.”

Kyr took a step forward like he didn’t see any point in talking and was about to take physical control of the situation. That would not go well.

Ronan said, “I was mind walking.”

Kyr slammed to a halt. He wasn’t the only one who froze. The whole room looked like Ronan had hit the pause button.

A solid five seconds passed before Kyr got his tongue working. “What did you say?”

“I was mind walking,” Ronan said again, even though everyone had obviously heard him with perfect clarity. “Like Kadaros.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Ronan had spent months avoiding this conversation. He had thought he would struggle with it. Now that it was happening, he found it all pretty damn simple. He felt calm as he spoke, almost wooden.

“It started at Genesys. The first time, it was an accident. I’d gone into cardiac arrest from some shit they did—I don’t even remember what—but I must have said something when I came out of it. They must have realized what had happened, though they didn’t call it mind walking. After that, they started experimenting to deliberately trigger it.

“After I escaped from Genesys, it kept happening. I thought the shit they’d done to me had caused it—until I learned about Kadaros doing it. Now I know the truth.”

Kyr stared at him for several seconds then squeezed his eyes shut like he needed a neutral space to process that. “So this ... whatever it is that you’re experiencing—”

“Mind walking,” Ronan insisted. If they were going to have this fucking conversation, he was going to be understood.

“You’ve done it since Genesys?”

“It went away when I started getting the counteragent.”

“So Jonus knows about it?”

“No.”

Kyr’s jaw clenched. His eyes lasered into Ronan again. The *comudari* was getting his bearings back. Good. That meant they were on the same page.

“Why didn’t you tell him?” Kyr demanded. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It stopped, and I was just glad that it did. But, as you know, the counteragent isn’t really working anymore.”

“But when this started happening again, why didn’t you fucking tell me?”

“Because I won’t let you lock me up.”

“For fuck’s sake, Ronan!”

Kyr’s furious shout didn’t so much as blip Ronan’s heartrate. His hand stayed loose and ready at his side.

Kyr’s eyes dropped to that with clear recognition. “Give me that gun.”

“No.”

“Ronan—”

“I will not harm any of you.”

“I know that, Ronan. Give me that gun.”

Ten feet behind Ronan, the stairwell door opened. Ronan didn’t glance back. He couldn’t take his eyes off Kyr. Ronan knew exactly how fast he could get tackled.

“I won’t let you lock me up.”

Kyr’s eyes flashed. “I’m not going to lock you up. Now either you give me that gun, or you get your hand the fuck away from it.”

“Don’t you understand what I said?”

“No, I don’t understand it and neither do you. You have *one piece* of information, which you don’t even know that you’ve interpreted correctly, but you’ve used it to scare the shit out of yourself. So you’re going to *give me that fucking gun*, and we’re going to figure it out.”

It was the fact that Kyr was right that put a chink in Ronan’s armor. He *was* scared. He was scared out of his fucking mind. And somehow, Kyr had seen that through Ronan’s calm readiness. Even *Ronan* hadn’t seen it. But it was true.

He was scared, and he didn’t know what to do. The only answer he’d been able to see was the one he’d so desperately wanted for years with Genesys, the escape that they had denied him.

“We’ll figure it out,” Kyr promised, clearly seeing the chink he’d made.

“But what if I’m ...” What? Related to Kadaros? Some kind of evil spawn of the dark god?

Kyr surely saw those questions in Ronan’s eyes, but he didn’t try to answer them. He only said, “I trust you, Ronan. Please trust me.”

Ronan drew in a shaky breath. Then he reached for the belt clip of his weapons rig and released it. He undid the thigh clips and pulled the whole thing away from his body, yielding his gun and his *shiva*.

He half expected to get tackled, but Kyr only tromped across the fifteen-foot stretch of tile between them and calmly took the whole rig from Ronan’s hand.

The *comudari* said, “You’re with Jonus right now. We’ll debrief later.”

The words were familiar. The routine was familiar. As though this was no different from any other night. As though Ronan hadn’t just blown his life to hell.

Because it hadn’t been only Kyr to whom he’d told his dirty secret. He’d told the whole team. He’d told Syren.

Nothing would ever be the same again. Ronan was absolutely certain of that.

But he did what Kyr said, turning away from the Hush and Syren. Jonus was waiting for him at the stairwell door. The doctor, used to high-intensity situations, betrayed no sign of relief or of worry. He just opened the door and let Ronan walk through.

Jonus didn’t say anything as they went down one flight of stairs to B1, the medical floor. Ronan knew this floor all too well. So when Jonus simply said, “Four,” Ronan didn’t falter. He walked straight to the familiar door.

He opened the door and walked into the treatment room. He halted in the middle of it, staying there even after Jonus hit the switch and flooded the cube-like space with harsh light. Gray floor, white walls. A bed with rails surrounded by medical equipment.

Ronan started shaking like the first time he'd walked into this room six years ago. He felt like he was back in that moment, realizing that his life, once again, was tied to a space like this. A space like Genesys.

It didn't matter that the bed here was more comfortable than his cot there had been, or that the needles and drugs and monitoring were meant to help him. It was too fucking similar.

In the years since that first step into this room, Ronan had repressed the memory of how he'd started screaming in here. All the equipment he'd destroyed. How Kyr and Nox had had to subdue him.

It came back to him now.

Jonus hadn't judged him then, and he didn't judge him now. He simply walked past Ronan to the chair where he usually took readings or drew blood. Jonus tapped the seat then walked into the adjoining bathroom.

Ronan closed his eyes. He heard the water run. He heard Jonus return to the chair and set a cup on the table beside it.

"Ronan."

"Did you hear ..."

"Yes. I was in the stairwell. Come on. Take a seat."

Ronan had expected a choice between containment and death. That choice had been simple for him. This one was more complicated. But there was still a simple truth.

"I don't want to die in this room."

He heard Jonus suck in a breath. Then the doctor said, "I know that."

"The counteragent's not working. What's the point?"

Jonus said firmly, "Don't you quit on me, Ronan."

Ronan scrubbed a hand across his face. "I'm tired."

"I know."

"I mean I'm tired of trying."

“No, you’re not. You’re just tired. And you’re having a bad night. Come on.” Jonus tapped the chair again. “Let’s get to work.”

Ronan took a deep breath and got his feet moving.



# THIRTEEN

As the Hush filed into the stairwell, Syren snagged Kyr's jacket sleeve. He stopped, letting the others through. Syren's eyes caught on the weapons rig dangling from his grip. Ronan's weapons. Which Kyr had taken because Ronan had intended ...had been prepared to ...

Use them. On himself.

Ronan had been so *calm*. He'd been truly ready to do it.

Syren thought back to his confrontation with Kyr in Jodari's office last night. She had perceived a deadliness to him that she hadn't been able to pinpoint at the time. Now, she knew what it was.

All of the Hush risked their lives all the time. They all accepted danger and the possibility of death. But Ronan's acceptance had been on a different level. He'd thought about it a lot. He'd been ready to choose it over ... what?

Being locked up?

He'd really thought that Kyr would do that to him. But Kyr hadn't. He wouldn't. Syren knew that. Why didn't Ronan?

When the door thumped shut behind Wes, Kyr turned to face her. "I'm sure you have questions, Syren, but—"

"What the hell was he talking about?"

Kyr's free hand scrubbed over his weary face. "I don't know enough about mind walking to have any answers right now."

"I don't mean the mind walking, Kyr! That, I sort of followed. What the hell is Genesys? What did he mean about experiments and *escaping*? He said he was in cardiac arrest! And what did he mean about the counteragent and it not working? What *is* that?"

Kyr let out a heavy exhalation. "I'm not sure what he would want me to tell you."

"He talked about it in front of me."

“Yeah, he did,” Kyr acknowledged wearily.

“So of course I’m going to ask. What is Genesys?”

Kyr sighed, resigning himself. “Genesys is gone now, but it was a research lab. Run by humans. They captured Ronan in Atar—”

“Wait, *what*? Why would *humans* be in Atar? Why was *Ronan* in Atar?”

“I don’t know how or why there were humans in Atar, but it is not outside the realm of possibility that they would discover a portal. It is also not outside the realm of possibility that some of them know of us. In fact, given Ronan’s time as a captive of Genesys, it’s clear that they do.

“Ronan was in Atar on a mission with the guard. His team was killed. He was hurt. He got bagged and spent the next ten years getting fucked up in a human laboratory. Whatever they did to him, Jonus has been trying, for years, to undo. The counteragent that Jonus developed mitigates some of the cellular damage, but ... it’s not working like it used to.”

Syren closed her eyes, trying to process all that, not really wanting to. It was too awful. Kyr’s bullet-point explanation was a brief, blunt gloss of what must have been years and years of torture.

God, she’d had no idea. She would never, ever have guessed. You never knew, when you interacted with someone, what their reality was.

She needed a lot more time to think through what Kyr had said, to understand it, but right now she had other questions.

“Is he ... dying?”

“I don’t know, Syren. I think he thinks so.”

She squeezed her eyes shut again, but it didn’t stop the tears from leaking out.

Kyr said tightly, “I shouldn’t have assigned him to you. I didn’t think about you ...”

“What? Caring?” Arms crossing tightly, Syren started pacing across the foyer, the thud of her boots so different from the more familiar tap of her high heels. “Well, I do, Kyr, I absolutely do.”

“You two always seemed like you couldn’t stand—” Kyr cut himself off then muttered, “Oh, fuck.”

“It’s not like that. Nothing happened.” That wasn’t exactly true, but Syren didn’t feel like explaining. “At least, I don’t think he wants—never mind, that’s not important right now. You said he was in Atar on a mission. He worked for my mother.”

“Not directly. You would never have seen him when he was in the guard. Then his unit was killed and he was AWOL. I knew nothing of it at the time. I wasn’t associated with the guard anymore. Anyway, when he escaped Genesys, he tried to report its existence to Amarada. She didn’t believe him. She called him a deserter. He ... didn’t take it well.”

“God, she’s such a bitch,” Syren gritted out, staring blindly at the tiles in front of her moving feet. “Surely it was easy enough to prove her wrong?”

“The lab had been destroyed by the time I went to look.”

Syren halted as the truth slammed into her.

“What?” Kyr asked. “What are you thinking?”

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open. Jodari walked out into the foyer.

Kyr growled, “You couldn’t wait?”

“I’ve been waiting,” the director replied. “What the hell is going on?”

Kyr launched into a blunt, focused report that astonished Syren. How on earth he could switch focus so seamlessly, she had no idea.

“There were four vampires working in the Haze lab, as Ronan had already discovered. When the Hush went in after demonic involvement had been confirmed, the demons started killing the vampires, presumably to keep them from talking to

us. One escaped but was apprehended by Syren and Ronan. That vampire is undoubtedly here by now, via the underground entrance. Once I interrogate him, I'll debrief."

"That's all fine and dandy, Ru, but what the hell is going on with Ronan?"

"He's with Jonus."

Jodari let that non-answer hang in the air for a moment then said, "You disarmed him."

"He gave me his weapons before going with Jonus."

Jodari's eyes flicked to the security camera. "That's not exactly what it looked like."

Kyr said with an edge of threat, "I manage my team, Os."

"Are you two always like this?" Syren cut in, fed up with them both. "Honestly, it's ridiculous. You're on the same side."

"It's not that simple," Kyr gritted out.

"It is actually. You know what the problem is?" Syren looked between the two of them, outwardly so different, but ... "You're too much alike."

Kyr made a sound of such deep disgust that, under different circumstances, Syren would have found it amusing and would have given him a lot of shit about it. Jodari only raised an eyebrow.

Syren shook her head—how did Mira put up with this?—then turned to her brother. "I want to see Ronan."

"Absolutely not. He needs to deal with his shit with Jonus, and you are not going to distract him from it."

"I have no intention of distracting him. I just want to check \_\_\_"

"You *will* distract him, intentionally or not. No. You cannot see him right now."

Syren seethed. "Fine. Then I need your car."

His eyes narrowed. “You need to debrief just like everybody else. That’s how fieldwork works.”

“Oh, is it, Ru?” Jodari cut in. “I was unaware that you realized that.”

“Fuck you, Os.”

“You’re not helping,” Syren informed the director then said to Kyr, “I have something more important to do. I need to talk to Amarada.”

Kyr’s eyebrows jumped. Syren hadn’t called her mother Amarada for decades. She used to. By the time Syren was five, she had called her mother by her first name. But Amarada had eventually decided she didn’t like that and had forced Syren to call her Mother.

But Syren was done with that. She had played her mother’s games to protect herself and to protect the people she loved. But as Kyr had relayed more of Ronan’s history, one thing had become crystal clear: playing her mother’s games hadn’t protected anyone.

Syren hadn’t known Ronan at the time, but she knew him now. And what about Rhys? Syren didn’t have a lot of details about what had happened to him, but she knew enough to realize that Amarada had looked away from some nasty shit.

If Syren had already taken a stand against her mother back then, she might have been in a position to help. She might have been someone they could have come to instead of the queen, someone who would have actually listened.

Syren couldn’t undo that, but she didn’t have to repeat the past. Amarada hadn’t changed since then. Who was she currently hurting that Syren might someday know? Who could Syren be helping right now?

As Kyr handed over his keys, he said intently, “Be careful.”

But Syren had been careful all her life. She was done with that. So she didn’t promise that she would be.

She merely said, “Thanks.”

\* \* \*

Kyr did not like watching Syren walk out that door with fire in her eyes. He did not want her to confront Amarada. Amarada might not hurt Syren physically and directly, but that didn't mean the queen wouldn't harm her in other ways. Amarada had been doing it already for years.

But then, wasn't that the very reason Kyr had handed Syren his keys?

Sometimes, you had to let people fight. Who should know that better than him, sending his team into danger every damn night?

He had to treat Syren with the same respect. He saw that now. He hadn't, not at first. Then Ronan had gotten in his face about it. And Mira had called him out. And Syren had stood her ground.

So he'd had to step back and reevaluate. He'd fucking hated having to do that, but ... they'd been right.

Jodari pressed the down button on the elevator. The doors slid open and the director stepped inside. He held the door.

Kyr looked Jodari up and down. They had thrown down before, so Kyr was well aware that Jodari could handle himself, even if the director wasn't as lean and mean as the Hush. That black pin-striped suit had still required tailoring to accommodate his retired-warrior build. Maybe it was the pocket square Kyr had a problem with. Or Jodari's always-unfazed expression. Or that annoying, knowing look in his eyes.

"We are nothing alike," Kyr said.

Jodari's lips quirked. "Give it two hundred years, son. You'll see."

Kyr's fangs punched down. He took a step forward. Jodari, clearly amused, released the doors. They slid shut, and Kyr got a brushed-steel view of his own snarling reflection.

Fucking Jodari.

Kyr took the stairs down to Interrogation and Detention. He tried to cool his head on the jaunt but still found himself

flinging open the B2 door. The Hush, minus Ronan, was gathered outside Room 2. Jodari was casually striding toward them.

The director didn't look Kyr's way when the door crashed open, but everyone else did.

Rhys shook his head. "Minister, you have got to stop winding up the bossman. It's not healthy for anyone."

Jodari sighed. "You do know that *I'm* actually the boss, right, Rhys?"

"Oh, no. No, no. The bossman is the boss. You're the Minister."

Jodari slid his hands into his pockets, looking as obnoxiously unfazed as ever. "I'm not really religious, you know."

"Oh, it's not a religious thing."

"I give up, Rhys. Explain it to me."

Rhys flashed his signature, too-perfect smile. "Never."

"Can we fucking get to work please?" Kyr asked. "It's already been a long goddamn night, and it's only 1:30."

"Want me to get you a coffee, bossman?"

"No."

"You need me?"

"For interrogation? No."

"Then can I go see Ronan?"

It hit Kyr then. It must have hit Wes too—because Wes straightened from where he'd been leaning against the white-painted cinder-block wall. He turned slightly toward his mate. Who had scars on his wrists that still scared the shit out of Kyr. They undoubtedly scared the shit out of Wes too.

And what had just gone down with Ronan ... Rhys probably understood that—had probably *felt* that—on a different level than the rest of them. No wonder the Rhys smile had come out.

Fuck, his guys needed rest.

But he couldn't give it to them. So he only said, "If Jonus okays it and Ronan wants it."

It was a different answer than he'd given Syren—because he'd lied to her. It wasn't that she would distract Ronan. It was that he wouldn't want her to see him like he probably was right now. Struggling. Maybe sick.

Ronan probably wouldn't want to see Rhys either, but at least with Rhys Ronan would feel comfortable saying no.

As Rhys headed to the stairwell door, Wes's eyes followed him. Thank Idaios they had Wes, that Rhys had Wes—and that Wes had Rhys. They stabilized each other.

But that was a bond, wasn't it?

Kyr handed out his other orders, most of which were, *Go clean up and get some food*. Except—

"Luca. You're with me."

While the others peeled off, Jodari said, "SI identified our perp as Ashel Deen. He was in the system as a suspected associate of Gideon's. We have photos of them talking, but nothing was confirmed. He fell off the radar."

Kyr nodded. One thing he'd say for Jodari: he could sure put shit behind him.

The director said, "I'll be watching from Observation," and headed toward the observation room door.

Kyr and Luca went to the D2 door. Kyr paused there. "You good?"

He asked a lot of Luca. All the time. It was easy to ask a lot of Luca—because Luca could give a lot. But it was easy to ask *too* much of Luca—because his eyes looked cold, like nothing got to him. But that wasn't true. Luca's outward coldness was as much a lie as the Rhys smile.

Luca understood the question, understood what Kyr might need from him during the interrogation. They didn't have time to be civilized.



The former assassin took a deep breath. He nodded.

“Okay,” Kyr said and opened the door.

The Haze chemist, Ashel, was sitting in a metal chair, hands cuffed to the steel table. He wore dirty green scrubs, and his lank hair was bound in a ponytail at his nape. His head whipped up when Kyr and Luca entered.

Kyr went to sit in the chair across from the male. Luca stood off to the side.

Kyr said, “You can answer my questions and enjoy the peace and quiet of a cell, along with food and water. Or you can have a bad night.”

Ashel laughed hollowly. “You have no idea what you’re dealing with.”

Luca was so fast and so accurate that the cuffed male barely blinked. But he did flinch as the blade nicked his throat. Luca was back to standing quietly before the blood even began to flow.

“Fuck!” Ashel shouted and tried to reach for his bleeding neck. The cuffs snapped tight. “What the fuck!”

“I guarantee you,” Kyr said, “it can be much worse.”

Ashel stared, wide-eyed and shaken. But still arrogant. Kyr could work with that.

“We know you worked under Gideon to develop Haze and that demons were involved in its creation—”

Ashel laughed again, more sharply this time, delighted to feel superior. “You think you know so much? Demons were *test subjects* in the beginning. They couldn’t make something like Haze. *I* made Haze. It’s mine. Not theirs. Not even Gideon’s.”

Rule number one of interrogation: never underestimate people’s desire to correct you. It always made them volunteer more information than they would otherwise yield. The more arrogant they were, the easier to manipulate.

Maybe Luca wouldn’t have to do much cutting after all.

Kyr had, of course, already known that Gideon had been experimenting on demons with Haze, and Ashel's confirmation of that made clear the male's own long-term involvement. What Kyr hadn't known, until now, was at what point demons had become involved as partners. Not until after Gideon's death it seemed.

Last fall, after Gideon had captured Nox and fucked him up with Haze in an effort to trigger him into shooting up the VDA, they had found Gideon's body shredded by a demon lord.

That demon lord had never been IDed. And they had never found Gideon's lab, so it had been obvious that he'd hidden his assets well. Apparently, the demon lord that had killed him had discovered those assets.

What Kyr still needed to know was whether the demon lord that had killed Gideon and taken over Haze was the same one that had Kadaros's body. The teleporter. Kyr needed to know how it all fit together.

"I'm sure you don't understand Haze's purpose since Gideon wouldn't have told you—"

"Haze only has one possible purpose," Ashel argued. "To destabilize. You think your fancy building here and all your tough shit mean anything? Cretas will destroy it all."

"Cretas being the vampire in charge of you now."

"He's a fucking demon lord, you moron! A fucking teleporter! You have *no idea* what's coming. You have no idea the *hell* he will bring!"

"With Haze."

When Ashel didn't correct him with a mention of Kadaros, Kyr knew that Ashel was aware only of his own supposed role in the demon lord's plan. Cretas's plan. Haze was likely a side venture. A distraction for the Hush and/or Amarada. One way to start destabilizing vampires.

Given that exposure was a risk for demons as well as vampires, Cretas must feel confident in his ability to awaken Kadaros. Why? What did Cretas know that the Hush didn't?

The demon lord must know something. Cretas wasn't stupid and wasn't hasty. He had been observing and testing the Hush since last fall. He had held Haze in reserve. He had used the Brotherhood.

Cretas was a thinker. A planner. He was the most dangerous demon lord the Hush had ever faced.

And the asshole on the other side of this steel table had been helping that demon lord.

“You enjoy working for demon scum, is that it?”

The answer didn't really matter, but Kyr couldn't help asking.

“I don't care who I work for as long as I'm on the winning side.”

Kyr let his eyes drop to the male's cuffed wrists. “Hm.”

“When Cretas wins—”

“The demons will kill you too, as they would have done tonight.”

“They let me go so I could run. I'm important.”

Ashel screeched as a fresh cut appeared on his neck. “Fuck! Fucking psycho!”

But Luca was already back in position, eyes cool and impassive. Kyr raised an eyebrow. Luca gave a slight shrug.

Yeah. The asshole had deserved that one. In fact, he deserved a lot worse—and would get it.

But at least he'd been helpful.

# FOURTEEN

Syren found Amarada conducting a search. Of Syren's rooms.

Her outrageously opulent suite basically constituted an entire house within the vast complex of the Residence. Bedroom, sitting room, dining room, even a private kitchen where someone would cook for her. Someone cleaned for her, too.

Always just “someone” because Amarada had never allowed any of the staff to attend Syren for more than a few months. Amarada claimed it was to keep relationships appropriately formal, since Syren had a bad habit of getting attached to people. In truth, it was to keep Syren isolated. Without friends. Without allies.

She was like a pampered Pekinese, carried around in a Chanel purse then handed off to a servant when it needed to shit.

When Syren stepped through the open door into her foyer, one of the maids looked up guiltily from where she'd pulled up the foyer's rug. But it wasn't her fault and Syren didn't even care.

In a way, it was a relief to see the truth so clearly: this wasn't Syren's home and nothing here was really hers. This had been a gilded cage—and now it was a circus. Maids leaped and spun to perform their tasks while the ringmaster directed them from the middle of the overly formal dining room.

As Syren passed from the foyer into the dining room, Amarada's eyes seemed to sparkle with anticipation, almost like she'd been expecting Syren. The queen was standing beside the long, high-gloss table that Syren never used. That table was in use now, however, holding all of Syren's notebooks and her computer.

Amarada's shiny red nails flipped through the pages of one of Syren's notebooks. It didn't matter. She wouldn't find anything there, or anywhere in this apartment, that meant anything. Syren had learned by the age of thirteen not to allow her real thoughts outside of her head. By the age of thirty, she had tried to stop having any.

It had been easier that way. Whatever she said would be reported. Whatever she wrote would be read. This might be Amarada's most aggressive violation of Syren's space, but it was hardly the first.

Except for the predatory look in her eyes, Amarada looked fit for a magazine spread. Perfect blonde hair, perfect makeup. Blue silk dress with elegant long sleeves draping her sensuously curved figure. Her high heels lent her that chicly feminine contortion that Syren knew so well.

Syren's boots thumped across the parquet floor.

Amarada chuckled as she looked Syren up and down, taking in the black leather pants and jacket, the tight braid and bare face. "Are you here to rob the place, my dear?"

"There's nothing here I'd want," Syren said, "except the truth."

Amarada somehow managed to give the impression of rolling her eyes without actually doing it.

"My dear, if these notebooks are any indication, you can't even handle the truth about your waist size. Stop bulking up like a male. Frankly, it's grotesque. I doubt the Dior I just selected for you can be altered quite *that* much."

Syren fought a flush of shame. She hated that that hurt her when she knew it shouldn't matter, not on any level. More than that, she hated that, for a second, seeing herself through her mother's eyes distracted her from why she was here. That was unacceptable.

So much was unacceptable.

"I want the truth about Genesys."

For one glorious moment, Amarada looked startled. Then she laughed.

“Of all your brother’s rescue dogs, *that one* caught your eye? Ronan Fyr is a deserter who, to cover a decade of lying in some hovel and wrecking his body with designer drugs, concocted a wild story—”

“I can tell a wild story too. You knew where Ronan was all along—because you arranged his capture. You funded Genesys. And then, before that fact could be discovered, you destroyed it.”

Amarada went as still as Syren had ever seen her. And yet, amid that very stillness, a seismic shift occurred. It started in the queen’s eyes and cracked through the space between them, a long-dormant fault line rumbling at last.

Syren’s heart hammered. She was still afraid of her mother—she couldn’t help that—but it didn’t matter if she was afraid. Syren would not yield. She would not slink back into her gilded cage.

Amarada snapped, high and sharp, “Out!”

Syren’s nape prickled with warning, but she stood unmoving as the maids scurried from the room. The outer door shut with a polite click.

Amarada set down Syren’s notebook and folded her arms, red nails drumming on a blue sleeve. “Even your brother never suspected that.”

“He doesn’t know you like I do.”

As Amarada’s lips peeled back from her fangs, Syren felt herself go calm. She felt herself grow certain. This was the right thing to do.

In that moment, she understood why Ronan had been so calm as he had faced Kyr in the VDA foyer. Ronan had been certain of his choice. That didn’t mean, Syren realized as she made a choice of her own, that he liked it. It didn’t mean it was what he had actually wanted.

Sometimes what you wanted—to be free, to be healthy, to be proud of your mother—wasn't an option.

Amarada said, “Genesys was a tool that fell into my lap. I made use of it.”

“To study Ronan. Why?”

Amarada smiled wickedly. “Did he tell you that he and I have fucked?”

Syren reeled, unable to suppress her shock, no doubt wearing it all over her face.

*Idaios, let that be a lie, please let that be a lie.*

The cruel smile deepened. “I'll take that as a no. He was quite attractive then, nothing like now with those hideous tattoos. He was all clean cut for the guard. When I tasted his blood, I knew there was something ... off about him. I needed to know what it was.”

Syren took the horrifying revelation about her mother and Ronan and shelved it. She would deal with that later.

“So you let Genesys torture him. For *ten years*. To find out what, exactly?”

“That he's very dangerous, my dear. To all of us.”

“I don't believe you. If that were true, you would've had him killed.”

Amarada gave a familiar, condescending little chuckle, like Syren was amusingly stupid. “Sometimes, it's best to let sleeping dogs lie.”

“If you're afraid of him, tell me why.”

“I don't have to tell you anything, Syrenaria. Information is for me to hold, not you. That is why I command and you obey. So listen closely: you will have nothing further to do with Ronan Fyr.

“If you do not obey,” Amarada continued in a louder voice as Syren started to speak, “the consequences will be unpleasant, and there's no need for all that. It would accomplish nothing. Do you understand, Syrenaria?”

“What I understand, Amarada, is that our people deserve better than a tyrant like you.”

Amarada chuckled humorlessly. “What, then? Are you going to usurp me, little kitten?”

That was what Amarada had called Syren years ago, back when she had tried to stand up for herself. Little kitten.

“You want that fight? You want your brother and all his rescue dogs in that fight? No. Of course you don’t.” Amarada pulled out one of the elegant, high-backed dining chairs and seated herself with practiced grace. “What brought all of this up, my dear? Did something happen? With Ronan?”

“Like what?” Syren asked. “What do you think might happen with Ronan?”

Red nails drummed on the stack of Syren’s notebooks. “I see. Is this where we stand? You won’t like my next move, little kitten.”

There were a dozen hot and hostile things Syren wanted to say. There would be no point. Amarada would laugh at them all. So Syren told her the truth instead.

“I’m sure I won’t. I’ve never liked anything you’ve done.”

And, strangely enough, Amarada had nothing to say to that as Syren turned and walked out of her lush prison.

As she set foot outside of it, she knew, with a beautiful and terrifying certainty, that she would never go back.

Her boots tromped down the Residence’s elegant hallways, thudded down the sweeping staircase, and clapped across the foyer to the front door. Then Syren stepped out into the cool night and took the first truly free breath of her life.

It dizzied her, that breath. It lightened her so much that she felt like she might rise into the air and float away.

But she didn’t want to float away, didn’t want to vanish from here and appear somewhere else, in some other life. Not anymore. She needed to get back to the VDA. She needed to see Ronan, and she wouldn’t let Kyr stop her this time.



She needed to see that Ronan was okay. He wasn't, of course. He couldn't possibly be. Given everything that she'd just learned about his history, the truth was that he had never been okay in the entire time that she had known him. It made her heart ache to realize that.

Even though Ronan had yielded his weapons to Kyr, even though he had gone with Jonus like Kyr had ordered, none of that changed the fact that Ronan had just shown clear willingness to ...

God, she couldn't even think the words in her head. Would he really have done it?

It scared her so deeply that she couldn't chase the question and try to answer it. She couldn't face the possibility that the answer might be yes.

So she put the question aside for now. She would deal with that later. Right now, she just needed to see him.

## FIFTEEN

Ronan clamped the IV tube and slid the needle out of his arm. Jonus had wanted him to do another hour, but he couldn't lie in this hospital bed any longer. Too many thoughts were doing laps in his head.

He should have let Rhys in. He should have let Kyr in. He hadn't been ready to talk to anyone, but now he was left wondering where he stood with the team.

Everything was out in the open.

Kyr hadn't locked him up, but that didn't mean shit couldn't still go that direction. Kyr had taken his weapons. Would he give them back? More importantly, would Ronan actually be allowed to leave here?

Ronan told himself that he was being paranoid but ... he *was* paranoid. He was terrified of having his right to choose taken away from him, like it had been at Genesys. He needed to know if he was still truly free.

When Ronan's bare feet hit the cold tile, he shivered. At least he'd gotten to keep his clothes on. Nothing put him in a worse mood than a hospital gown, so Jonus tended to save that for really bad, you-might-die nights.

Tonight, he was fine. None of this bullshit was necessary. He'd gotten run down, that was all. It happened sometimes.

He was actually really damn pleased that when he'd dug deep for the energy he'd needed to make it through the crisis, it had been there. He'd had none to spare, hence the collapse, but he'd made it to the end of the fight. That meant he'd been right in his belief that he wasn't putting anyone at risk.

It meant, thank fucking God, that he hadn't put Syren at risk. He had been capable of protecting her.

He'd meant what he'd said to Kyr the other night in Jodari's office: he wouldn't let anything happen to her.

The very idea had a growl rumbling in his throat. It had him standing by his discarded boots with his hands curling into fists, not moving to put them on, not even seeing his surroundings.

Anyone experienced in combat knew the feeling of being reduced to instinct, where the world washed away, where thought washed away, where there was only primal energy. It was certainly familiar to Ronan—but not like this.

Sure, he'd protected many females over the years, but this was different. In every fiber of his being, it was fundamentally different.

He pushed it back, drove it deep into himself. On a certain level, he knew what it meant: that he wanted her—and not just physically. He'd been attracted to her for years and had always been able to dismiss it. But this kind of wanting? It wasn't just about sex (not that he wasn't having plenty of fantasies about that). It was about so much more. It was about *her*. As a person.

Her laugh. Her smile. Her mind and heart. He could still picture her silhouetted against the moon, tough and steady and so fucking beautiful. He could still see her tackling that vampire asshole, fearless and a little wild. She had scared the shit out of him, but he'd still fucking loved it.

He wanted all of that, all of her, everything he'd been too stupid and blind to see before.

But it wasn't going to happen.

Even if he could put aside all the heavy reasons it was a bad idea—the fact that he was mind walking like Kadaros, the fact that he was dying—there was also the fact that she would likely never come within forty feet of him again.

Not after tonight's revelations.

Maybe that was why he'd let that drama unfold in front of her. So she'd know the truth. So she'd realize how fucked up he was and would stay the hell away from him. So he wouldn't have to fight himself on what he wanted—because that was a fight he didn't think he could win.

It was for the best, then, that he'd scared her off. He would just put his damn boots on and get on with shit like it didn't rip his heart in half. He'd go home (again, assuming he was actually allowed to leave here) and ... what? Spend some quality time with himself?

He used to prefer being alone. Why did the thought depress him now?

*Get over it*, he told himself as he snagged his boots, socks stuffed inside them, from under the table. *You already drove everyone off, as usual. Nobody's coming to—*

“Ronan?”

He froze at the sound of Syren's voice at the door. There'd been no knock. Had he imagined her voice? Was he that fucking lonely?

“Are you awake?”

He had *not* imagined that. Her voice was low, like she didn't want to wake him if he was asleep, which was probably why she hadn't knocked.

Why the hell would she be here? Was something wrong?

The possibility had him moving fast, boots in hands, to the door. He opened it, ready for her to skitter back like he was a rabid dog. She didn't skitter back, but she did jump.

“Whoa! I did not expect you to be up. Why aren't you resting? I was told you were resting. That's what you're supposed to be doing.”

Her reaction was so far removed from what he'd expected that he scowled, assessing.

She was still wearing her black leather from the stakeout, still had her hair tightly braided, still had her gun. He didn't allow himself to focus on the fact that it was hot as fuck but instead focused on the fact that she was still in go mode. Which meant—

“Something happened, didn't it?” Because why else would she be here? “Are you okay?”

“Oh my God.” She closed her eyes. “You cannot be serious.”

“I’m dead fucking serious. Are you okay?”

Her eyes were still closed. “I really want to be nice to you right now, but—”

“What? Ew, no. Why would you do that? That’s not what we do. We have never, ever done that.”

Her eyes popped open. She glared. “I am nice sometimes, you know.”

“Well, yeah, but not nice as in fake-nice. If you were fake-nice to me, I would be so fucking mad. I’d be *really* mean to you until you stopped. Go ahead and try it, see what happens.”

She continued glaring at him. He glared right back, already forgetting to be careful in case she was scared of him. He couldn’t be careful around Syren. For some reason, with her, he could only be himself.

And that glare of hers said she wasn’t scared of him. Then her face twisted up.

Oh, shit, had he read that wrong? Was she afraid after all? Was she about to scream—or cry?

A weird snorting sound burst out of her, making Ronan’s heart jump, then ...

Oh, she was *laughing*.

Syren struggled through the trying-not-to-let-it-out stage then broke into a full-on laugh. Ronan watched her for a second, slightly annoyed as her shoulders started to shake. She covered her mouth, but that did not help. She looked at him over her hand, eyes scrunching and starting to stream.

Ronan glared harder, but it only made things worse. Syren’s other hand clutched her belly and she staggered back from him across the hallway until her back hit the opposite wall. She slid down and sat on the floor with her knees drawn up, still laughing.

“You’re ridiculous,” he told her, but he felt his own face twisting into a smile.

“I’m sorry!” she gasped between laughs, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

When a laugh broke from Ronan, startling him, he cut it off as fast as he could and ordered her, “Stop it.”

“I can’t!”

Laughter started shaking in his chest and he didn’t really know why except that *she* was laughing and he couldn’t help it. It felt weird and unfamiliar, so he fought it. But he lost the battle, just as Syren had. And when he started laughing, actually laughing, it felt ...

Fuck, it felt good. Like a shit-ton of tension shook loose from him.

Ronan dropped his boots and walked across the hallway to his beautifully ridiculous female and knelt at her feet.

“What is wrong with you?” he asked, still chuckling a little.

She swiped at her eyes, her hilarity subsiding. “I told you I don’t know. I’m just”—a fresh burst of laughter escaped her, though it was quieter than before—“really happy to see you.”

She was swiping at her eyes again as Ronan moved in between her raised knees. Her hands switched instantly from her own face to his, pulling him in as he kissed her.

He hadn’t planned to do it, hadn’t meant to, but when she hooked her hands around the back of his neck and met him with equal hunger and need, Ronan swept his tongue into her mouth and let everything else vanish.

This time, there was no question of the kiss being fake. There was no pretense to blame, no need to put on an act. It was just him and her and whatever the hell was going on between them.

Ronan slipped his hands around her, tugging her waist, pulling her away from the wall. She lifted into him, straddling his hips, wedging her body against his. She rocked against his

swiftly hardening cock, and they both shuddered at the much-needed contact.

Like the laughter, it just happened. Ronan groaned into her mouth, deepening the kiss as Syren rocked against him. With the barriers of cloth, it was just pressure and friction, but it felt so damn good.

But it was too much, too fast, and in the wrong place. So when Syren broke the kiss and buried her face against his neck and wrapped her arms tightly around him, Ronan tightened his own grip, holding her close, holding himself still.

It didn't matter that he was hard and aching for her. It didn't matter that his fangs were throbbing. He wanted this more, just holding her. He didn't allow himself to question whether he should. He needed it too much. He needed her.

Syren was breathing hard, still holding tight. "You scared me," she gasped against his neck, shaking now. "You really scared me."

Ronan buried his face against her. He was shaking now too, all the too-much feelings displacing into his nerves. Syren clung to him, demanding nothing but his embrace, letting him keep his silence. He was so fucking grateful for that. He was so fucking grateful for her.

Slowly, her shaking subsided and so did his. The embrace softened into something more tender. He stroked the back of her head and down her long braid. She sighed and turned her face the other way, getting more comfortable.

"I'm sorry that I scared you," Ronan said when he was able to speak. He wasn't sure which part she meant, but it didn't really matter. He hated that he'd scared her.

She took a deep breath, her chest expanding against him. She let it out slowly.

She said, "I wanted to come see you earlier. Kyr wouldn't let me."

With that, a little bit of the outside world intruded. Ronan's gut knotted at the idea of her seeing him like he'd been a few

hours ago, with Jonus taking all those readings, drawing blood to test, hooking him up to an IV.

Ronan squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't want to think about all that, not right now. It felt like a separate reality from this one.

"It's okay," Syren whispered, her grip tightening like she'd somehow felt those thoughts moving through him.

But Ronan didn't feel comfortable having her try to soothe him. He didn't know how to respond to something like that. He was afraid of how he might react if he let himself.

So he shifted the focus. "You scared me tonight too. When you went after that male."

"Oh. Yeah." She pulled back a little, still sitting on his lap but drawing away so she could see him. "Kyr interrogated him. Did you know?"

"No. I haven't seen anyone but Jonus since ..."

Yep. Hello, reality. Welcome back, you motherfucker.

Even without Ronan speaking the words, they hung in the air. He felt the returning weight of everything attached to those unspoken words: what he'd expected Kyr to do, and what he had been prepared to do in response. Why all of that had come to a head in the first place.

Ronan had gotten used to feeling cold and resolved in response to that reality. He wasn't used to what he felt now, suddenly, with Syren's body entwined with his. He felt angry.

He wanted *this*. He wanted Syren. He wanted a chance. He wanted *time*.

But he wasn't going to get any of that.

He had only a duty to prevent himself from harming anyone before the axe that had been suspended over him since Genesys finally fell.

He had nothing to offer Syren. No future. No security. Hell, he couldn't even offer his blood. Because it was fucked up. Contaminated. And didn't that just say it all?



Ronan didn't think that he moved. He didn't think he let anything show on his face. But somehow Syren knew that he wanted up, that he couldn't pretend this with her anymore.

She disentangled herself from him and rose, drawing away. As though she'd felt his deep, unspoken, *No*.

Ronan got up. He was still hard, but he deserved that for being such a fucking moron who couldn't seem to remember that he had no business starting anything with anyone. He had no business doing this, whatever this was, with Syren.

As if he needed another reminder, at that moment Ronan felt the stupid medical tape on the inside of his elbow. He ripped it off and shoved it in his pocket.

"So what did Kyr find out?" he asked Syren, aware that his tone was blunt, almost harsh. It was how he usually spoke, and it left no room for any of the kind of thing that had just happened between them.

She didn't answer at first. She looked at him, uncertain. He knew that he should explain why he was going from hot to cold, should acknowledge that it was a shitty thing to do, but he was afraid that if he did that, he might not be able to hold this line—and he had to.

But she took his cue and switched gears. And even though it was his own damn fault, even though it was what he needed to have happen, he hated seeing her draw away. Arms folded, Syren paced the hallway as she relayed what Kyr had told her before she'd arrived at Ronan's door.

It all made a certain kind of horrible sense, the Haze chemists working for the demon lord that had killed their original employer, Gideon, last fall. That demon lord being the one that had been causing trouble for the Hush ever since.

"So it was the teleporter," Ronan said, not sure whether to be relieved or not. On the one hand, that meant everyone had to believe him now about the mind walking. On the other hand, it meant that the teeny, tiny hope that maybe, just maybe, he'd misinterpreted what was happening to him died an abrupt death.

“There are some other things I need to talk to you about,” Syren said, staring at the floor.

“Yeah?”

Her blue eyes flicked up to him. Fuck, she was beautiful.

“Yeah,” she said seriously. “But not here.”

Ronan didn’t like the sound of that, but there was no chance to question her on it—because the elevator dinged in the distance and a set of boots started tromping along the main hallway of the medical floor.

Instinctively, Ronan moved in front of Syren as those footsteps neared the turn into their hallway. The stride was brusque, hurried. So Ronan knew something was wrong even before Rhys rounded the corner carrying a black duffel bag. A go bag.

And sure enough, Rhys said, “You two gotta go. Now. Before Amarada finds you.”

## SIXTEEN

Syren didn't need Rhys's brief, blunt explanation that Amarada had arrived with eight of her guard to escort Syren and Ronan back to the Residence "to talk."

She had guessed it the moment Rhys had uttered her mother's name. She should have guessed it earlier. She should have known that Amarada would act the moment Syren defied her. She should have planned her defiance, staged it as Amarada would have done. She should have thought ahead.

*You won't like my next move, little kitten.*

What had she been thinking confronting her mother directly, showing her hand? An empty hand, no less.

Of course Amarada was coming after Ronan. Maybe to contain him—*he's very dangerous, my dear*—maybe to punish Syren. Whatever the case, it wasn't good, and Syren should have expected it. She shouldn't have wasted a moment on her feelings, on her desire. On something that Ronan had shut down anyway.

He'd gone completely cold, drawing away abruptly, and for no obvious reason. He'd still been aroused, but Syren had only known that from the long, thick ridge pressing visibly against the front of his pants. Nothing else about his demeanor had betrayed it.

Why? What had she done? What had she said?

His arousal was gone now, as was Syren's. No one could kill a mood quite like Amarada. Although ...

*Did he tell you that he and I have fucked?*

Syren tried to tell herself that it would have been years ago, well over a decade. But Amarada hadn't changed in that time. She had been just as cruel and conniving back then. And while plenty of ambitious males had slithered their way into Amarada's bed over the years, Ronan had never struck Syren as being like that. Had he been, back then? Or had he been genuinely attracted to Amarada?

Syren drove those thoughts away. None of that mattered, not right now.

“This is my fault,” she said as Ronan quickly put on the boots that he’d dropped in the doorway of his room. A hospital room. Was he okay?

There were dark smudges under his eyes. He’d had medical tape inside his elbow. Earlier tonight, he’d fought and ghosted until he’d collapsed.

Yes, he’d gotten hard, but it wasn’t the first time he’d been hard despite signs that he didn’t feel well. Syren hadn’t forgotten how Ronan had winced at the light that night in the abbey kitchen, or how he’d acted kind of weird about food.

She didn’t understand what had been done to him at Genesys, mentally or physically, but it was clear that something was very wrong.

“I’m sure this isn’t your fault,” Rhys told Syren as Ronan darted into the room, where he grabbed his black motorcycle jacket off the back of a chair.

At least he was moving okay. But then, he had been all along. He’d fought hard and effectively tonight. He’d been fast, accurate, powerful. He’d been amazing.

“It *is* my fault,” Syren insisted as Ronan came back, slinging on his jacket. “It’s because—”

“You two are leaving via the tunnel,” Rhys informed them, setting into a fast walk. “Then you’re gonna lay low at the cabin for a few nights, until we know what the hell is going on.”

“I know what’s going on, I’m trying to tell you!” Syren all but shouted. “She knows about Ronan! Or something about him. Maybe not the mind walking, I don’t know, I didn’t say anything about that. But Genesys! She knows all about what they did. She knew all along—”

Syren cut off as she realized that Ronan was no longer beside her. She stopped and turned. He was standing a few paces back.

He didn't look angry. He looked blank. Empty.

God, this was a disaster. She had wanted to tell him in a different way, at a different time. Amarada, of course, had made that impossible.

“Ronan, I'm sorry, I didn't want—”

Rhys snagged her elbow, halting her step. Dropping the duffel bag, Rhys strode past her, right into Ronan's space.

Ronan went from blank to snarling in an instant. Syren jumped. She couldn't help it. The males of the Hush were so different from the ones in the social circles that Amarada had drawn around her. Those males fought with words and money. They were manipulative, indirect.

Ronan and the rest of the Hush were dangerous on such a different level. They were so physical, so aggressive, so intense.

And even though it was totally inappropriate given the circumstances—Ronan had already gone cold on her and now his anger was likely partially toward her, not to mention the fact that they were in the middle of a fresh crisis—Ronan's snarl and the baring of his fangs, all the harsh power of his body, sent heat spilling through Syren. Her sex throbbed and clenched, remembering the hard ridge of his cock pressing against the outside of her, so close to what she needed.

Rhys demanded, “You wanna fight Amarada? Or you wanna get Syren away from her and somewhere safe? Pick one, you don't get both.”

At that, Ronan sucked in a breath like he was coming up from underwater.

“That's what I thought,” Rhys said. He backtracked to the black duffel bag, snatched it up, and slung it into Ronan.

Ronan hiked the bag over his shoulder and followed Rhys. Even then, as Syren swung into step with the two males, taking two strides to their one, Ronan didn't look at her.

He'd chosen her, but he didn't look at her.

There was no time to worry about it or wonder what it meant. The three of them went through the steel door into the stairwell and hustled down to the next level. There, Rhys motioned them to wait while he peered out into the hallway. Then he pushed open the B2 door.

The three of them hurried down a corridor that took them past what looked to be locked rooms, maybe cells, to another steel door at the end.

Rhys stopped there. “Jonus will drive you to the storage unit where you can pick up the spare Jeep. Cabin’s stocked. Check in at seven and seven via the satellite phone.”

“Got it,” Ronan replied and shouldered open the heavy door.

Syren followed him out into what seemed to be a huge dark tunnel. Low lights glowed at intervals, revealing concrete walls and a few vehicles parked along one side. Jonus An was waiting for them by a running ambulance. The back doors were open.

“What the hell are we taking this stupid thing for?” Ronan wanted to know.

The VDA’s curly-haired doctor shrugged. “It was this or the trunk of my Camry. She won’t suspect the ambulance, even if she’s watching.”

Syren wasn’t so sure, given whom they were talking about, but she didn’t say so. Her words had caused enough trouble already.

Ronan waited for her to climb in first then followed her into the ambulance interior. Jonus closed the doors.

Syren plunked herself down on the padded bench across from the empty gurney. Ronan dropped the duffel bag and sat beside her. As the ambulance rolled forward, pieces of medical equipment swung on their hooks.

Ronan unzipped the black duffel and made a sound of surprise. He pulled out what Syren took to be the weapons rig that Kyr had taken from him. He stood as much as he could in the confined space, half bent under the low ceiling, and buckled the weapons rig on.

Syren didn't realize, until Ronan's weapons were back in place, how different he had looked without them. Back in the hallway outside his room, he had still been wearing his tactical pants and compression shirt, but he'd been barefoot, stripped of his accessories. It had made him, somehow, more vulnerable. More accessible.

But, no. It wasn't that at all. It had nothing to do with his boots or his jacket or his weapons.

It was his expression. Shuttered. Distant. Cold. Like an invisible armor that was now simply being displayed by these external pieces.

"Your gun's fully loaded?" he asked as he sat back down.

"Yeah."

And that was it. The sum total of their conversation over the next ten minutes as Jonus drove them across the sleepy city.

During that painfully silent ten minutes, Syren watched Ronan's knee from the corner of her eye. It bumped against hers once, early on. He shifted it away and for the rest of the ride held that knee completely still, not letting it move with the motion of the vehicle, not letting it touch her again.

It seemed impossible that a few minutes ago she had been straddling his hips, rocking against his cock, which had been hard and ready for her, holding tight to him like he was the only thing in her world.

She had thought the feeling was mutual, and now she felt like an idiot.

Though Syren had longed for the drive to be over, when the ambulance came to a stop, her heart skipped. What now? What was this cabin that Rhys had mentioned? How long would they stay there ... together? She should have asked.

When the engine stopped, Syren popped up from the bench, desperate to get out of this tense space, but Ronan tugged her back behind him.

"I go first."

He drew his gun and hit the release on the door. It opened to reveal a quiet storage unit complex. Except for an orangey light glowing at the end of the row of boxy units, the place was dark.

Footsteps treaded along the side of the ambulance.

“It’s all good,” came Jonus’s voice.

Ronan hopped down from the vehicle, stowing his gun. He reached back for the duffel, jerking a little in surprise when Syren handed it to him.

“Thanks,” he said, still not quite looking at her.

As she hopped down, Ronan drew a spare gun from the bag, checked the magazine, and handed it to Jonus.

“No one followed us,” Jonus said, but he accepted the gun.

“Just stay alert while I get the Jeep.”

He looked only at Jonus as he said it, as though nothing applied to Syren. As though she was only another piece of baggage like that duffel.

Ronan went to key into one of the storage units. When the lock clicked, he shoved up the metal door, which rolled noisily into the ceiling, revealing the black grill of a Jeep Wrangler. He vanished into the darkened unit. Syren heard a door of the vehicle open and close. There were rummaging sounds, then another open and close of a door. The Jeep rumbled to life, its headlights slashing out into the night.

The boxy black vehicle pulled forward and stopped. While Ronan got out and went to close the storage unit, Syren jogged to the passenger door and got in before she could be given some awkwardly indirect instruction.

Jonus, meanwhile, had walked around behind the Jeep to meet Ronan. They spoke for a minute, though Syren could hear nothing over the engine. A glance into the rearview mirror showed Jonus handing Ronan some kind of small case, which Ronan slid into an interior pocket of his jacket. Then Ronan returned to the driver’s door.



He opened it and got in. Putting the Jeep in gear, Ronan drove them along the rows of storage units. The orange light swept over them, then they pulled out onto the road.

“So where is this cabin?” Syren finally asked as Ronan navigated the quiet streets of what Syren recognized as the north end of Portage.

“Couple hours north.”

Her heart sank at the idea of a silent two-hour ride.

“Pushing it,” she said, noting the time on the radio clock. 4:26.

“Yeah, but we’ll make it. There’s water.” He indicated a bottle in the center cup holder.

“Okay, cool.”

She looked out the passenger window as the streets of Portage gave way to its suburban sprawl. It would be 2-5 acre lots for miles and miles. But two hours travel to the north would take them out of that. Into the mountains. The woods. Somewhere remote, probably isolated.

“It’s a big cabin,” Ronan said. “It’s not like you’ll be stuck in one room with me.”

*Or you with me*, she thought, which seemed more relevant. God, how had things gotten so awkward, so fast?

Because of what she’d revealed about Amarada and Genesys? Why didn’t he ask her about that? Surely he wanted more details? Syren would. Wouldn’t anyone?

But, no. He’d withdrawn before that. She kept trying to forget that fact, to blame the tension between them on things that had actually happened instead of accepting the truth: he’d changed his mind.

It reminded her that he had never liked her in the past. They’d had some good moments recently, but had she misread them? Maybe the good feelings had all been on her end?

He’d gotten hard, yes, more than once, but ...

*You think it’s a special accomplishment, making dicks hard?*

Syren crossed her arms over her stomach. As though noting that, Ronan turned on the heat. But that wasn't going to drive off the chill in her heart.

# SEVENTEEN

The silence that engulfed Syren as she lay in the plush king-size bed was almost as torturous as the silence in the Jeep had been. She snagged her phone from the bedside table. There was no signal here, not with all the rocky hills surrounding the cabin, but the phone helpfully told her she had a good five hours to go until nightfall.

She must have fallen asleep for a while. She hadn't expected to, not with all the thoughts running through her mind, but the long, stressful night must have caught up with her.

She couldn't even decide which part had been most stressful. The stakeout and fight? Ronan and Kyr's standoff in the VDA lobby? The confrontation with her mother? Or the rollercoaster of emotions with Ronan?

The last part. Definitely the last part.

By the time the cabin had come into view as the sky had begun to lighten, she'd been nearly sick to her stomach from the tension. Of course, that could have been the winding road and the way the Jeep had been bouncing along a rough track for several miles.

The cabin was even more remote than Syren had expected. No phone or radio, completely off grid, its power (ironically for a vampire-owned house) all solar.

Despite that, the cabin was luxurious and was really only a cabin in style: heavy log siding on the outside, smooth wood paneling on the inside. (No antler chandeliers, thank God.) In fact, the place was very much her brother's sort of thing. He might be tough as hell, but he did have refined taste. Even when it came to his remote hideaway, apparently.

Syren wasn't sure how many bedrooms there were. Definitely enough for Ronan to hide far away from her.

She hadn't seen him since he'd given her a quick, businesslike tour of the main floor before leading her to this room. After showering in the attached bathroom—this

appeared to be the master bedroom—and changing into a thermal shirt and pair of sweats she'd found in the closet, Syren had returned to the kitchen. Where she had eaten alone.

Rhys had said the cabin was stocked, and that had certainly been apparent in the kitchen. While there hadn't been any super perishable stuff in the fridge, there had been some fruits and vegetables, plus half-and-half. Someone was keeping this place up.

There had been no chance to ask Ronan for an explanation because he had never appeared during her time downstairs. With nothing else to do, she'd gone to bed.

And here she was, staring at the ceiling.

Maybe she could watch a movie. There would be no streaming services here, but she had seen a TV, so presumably there would be some DVDs or something. She'd also spotted a bookcase.

Syren threw the covers aside and slid from the bed. Anything was better than lying here, thinking. She tugged on the gray sweats and green thermal shirt then trekked across the room to the door.

The hallway that it opened onto had other doors, but they were all closed, so there was no guessing which room Ronan was in. Nowhere near hers, judging by the silence.

Then again, he knew how to be silent, didn't he?

To the left, a flight of stairs descended to a landing that looked out over the living room before making a switchback turn and leading to the main floor. Syren saw that a light was on before she hit the landing, but she didn't think anything of it. The intensity was low, probably the cooking range light, something that might have been left on.

So she got a surprise when she reached the main floor.

To the right lay another hallway that ran under the upstairs hallway, currently dark. To the left lay the huge, high-ceilinged living room with its stone fireplace and comfortable chairs. Straight ahead was the kitchen. Where Ronan was turning on the tap to fill a glass at the sink.

He did not look up, so either he was *really* ignoring her or he hadn't heard her barefooted descent. The island counter blocked part of her view, but he was tall enough that she could glimpse, below the edge of his white t-shirt, that he was wearing black warmups.

She had never seen him in lounge clothes. Even though she was feeling insecure and upset, she could not stop herself from enjoying the sight. The thin white t-shirt clung to the contoured muscles of his chest and shoulders and fit tightly around his biceps. Where the light from the cooking range hit his white shirt, his tattoos showed vaguely through the cloth, then slashed darkly down his powerful arms and up his neck. His short dark hair spiked up into its usual fauxhawkish mess, and, God, he was just so gorgeous.

She had meant what she'd told him that first night at Blue Diamond, that he had a fallen angel look, beautiful but dark, refined but a little broken. Even angry with him, hurt by him, confused by him, she was captivated.

She always had been, but it was harder now that she had admitted it to herself.

Syren was still standing frozen at the foot of the stairs, one hand on the railing, when Ronan looked up. He jumped like she was the frickin' boogeyman.

On the one hand, at least that meant he had not been ignoring her. On the other hand ... ouch. Because she had seen this male in action, and he was *not* jumpy. The problem, clearly, was her.

So she turned around, intending to head straight back upstairs.

“Syren, wait.”

She froze again, this time with her back to him, one foot on the steps.

“Don't go.”

“Why not?” she asked, still with her back to him. “You clearly don't want to be around me. You're probably

screaming inside at being stuck in this house with me for who knows how long.”

“It’s not like that.”

She turned to face him across the distance. “Then how is it?”

He took a breath like it hurt his chest. But he didn’t answer her question. He only said again, “Don’t go.” Then added, “Please.”

She didn’t want to go. She didn’t want to return her dark, silent bedroom. She didn’t want to be alone with her thoughts.

So she started walking toward the kitchen, watching him closely, ready to change her mind. Ronan tracked her progress. He was still standing at the sink, his glass of water on the counter untouched. He didn’t move a muscle. Until she set foot in the kitchen. Then he let out a breath that sounded like relief.

God, she did not understand him.

And because he didn’t explain himself and because she didn’t know how to ask, she looked for something to do.

That meant going to the cupboards and opening them one after another, exploring until something suggested itself, as though she wasn’t hyperaware of (and super uncomfortable with) Ronan’s silent presence four feet behind her.

Hot chocolate mix. That would do.

She set the container on the counter and went to the stovetop to snag the kettle. She walked toward the sink, expecting Ronan to get out of her way like a normal person. He didn’t budge. So she stopped and stared at him.

She could not read his expression. It wasn’t cold or remote like it had been, but it was, somehow, still a closed door.

He had asked her to stay. He had seemed relieved when she did. And now? She had no idea what he was thinking. Or feeling. Or wanted.

He took the kettle from her and turned to the sink to fill it. Hands empty, Syren crossed her arms—and became suddenly aware of her bralessness. In a tight shirt. Oops.

Normally, she wouldn't worry about something like that, but right now it made her feel exposed.

“So who keeps this place up?” she asked to break the silence as Ronan walked past her to put the kettle on the stove.

“Penni,” Ronan said, naming Kyr's part-time housekeeper as he turned on the electric burner. “She's been driving up every couple of weeks since the shit started with—”

“Crusty Pants?”

That was Syren's preferred name for the Dark Prince. She had not seen the body that her family, apparently, had been keeping in storage for centuries, but it couldn't be looking too fresh, even if it was still alive. So gross.

Ronan huffed a laugh. “Yeah. Him.”

See? It was better than letting the creep get too real.

Not that Kadaros wasn't real and wasn't a threat. If the demon lord somehow managed to awaken him, they were in big trouble. But they couldn't do anything about the demon lord or Kadaros at this moment, in this kitchen. Just like Syren couldn't do anything about Amarada right now.

Somehow, though, that problem was a little harder to laugh off.

As though the queen's specter was indeed haunting the room, Ronan said, “When I used the sat phone for check in, Kyr told me that Amarada wanted to detain you as much as me, but she wouldn't tell him why.”

“Probably because I basically told her to go fuck herself—”

“Wait, what?”

“—which was really dumb in hindsight, but one thing led to another and it just kind of happened.”

Ronan held up a hand. “Hold on, slow down. So you guys had an argument—”

“No, Ronan, we had an ending.”

Even though it annoyed Syren that he was so belatedly asking about what had happened—the two hour car ride had offered *plenty* of opportunity—she needed to talk about this. So she let the words spill out.

“I’m done with her. I won’t go back. And I *know* that I should have planned it. I should have prepared, strategized. I should have seen what resources I could pull together, probably should have stolen her hard drive or something, I don’t know.”

Syren shook her head, already seeing the problems with that. “But she would have known. Something would have tipped her off and she would’ve outmaneuvered me. She always does. I can’t think like her.”

“Good,” Ronan said harshly. His arms were crossed now, the muscles shifting visibly under his tattooed skin. “I’m glad you can’t.”

“But if I had learned to beat her at her games—”

“Then you’d be no better than her. But you *are* better. It blows my fucking mind that you two are even related. You really walked out on her?”

“I don’t want to be queen.”

Syren’s heart started hammering. The admission had burst out, unplanned, out of place, yet, somehow, the only thing that really mattered.

She expected Ronan to dismiss her words. Most people would. *Oh, you’ll change your mind. Oh, you don’t mean that.*

Ronan said no such thing. Instead he stilled, seeming to take her words in. Then he asked with quiet seriousness, “So what do you want?”

When Syren hesitated, afraid to give voice to the ideas that had been taking shape inside her, Ronan pressed, “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I want ... to unmake everything that she’s made. I want undo everything that she’s done. I want to unwrite her from



my life and everyone else's. I do realize that a crash and burn destruction doesn't help anyone, so I won't do that. But if I can, if I have the power? I'll take the whole damn system apart a piece at a time. I will not be queen."

As she finally released those words, all the crushing pressure that had been surrounding Syren all night—no, all her *life*—underwent a sort of chemical change. It seemed to seep into her, passing through her skin, her blood, moving into her heart, where it transformed into something small and tight and certain. It was still pressure. It still hurt and still scared her. But it felt different now, like it was something she could use, like it belonged to her.

It was ... purpose.

"Fuck, Syren, I—" Ronan cut himself off. He looked away and swallowed hard. Then he looked back at her and said, "You fucking amaze me."

For one second, it felt good, so good, to have him look at her like that. As though he really saw her. As though he was *with* her. In this. In general.

For that one second, she wanted to ride this rollercoaster of emotions back to the top. But she locked the brakes on that and glared at him, abruptly furious.

"I wonder how long it will last this time. Before you remember that you don't like me."

He stiffened. "It's not like that."

He'd said that earlier too, but Syren didn't know what the hell it meant. She gave him two seconds to volunteer an explanation. He did not.

She said, "I don't know how else I'm supposed to interpret your hot-cold bullshit. There are moments when I feel like you're the only person in the world who has ever really listened to me. There are moments when I feel like you see me, like you want me, like you—I don't know—" She threw up her hands. "—like you could be something with me. And then it's like, *bam*, you can't stand the sight of me."

He closed his eyes, looking pained. “I’m sorry that I’m doing that to you.”

Syren’s hands went to her hips. “So you know that you’re doing it? You’re not gonna try to tell me that I’m imagining it?”

She was used that sort of you’re-misinterpreting-this, gaslighting crap from her mother, but Ronan shook his head.

“No. Of course not.” His breathing shallowed and he seemed to be struggling with words. “I’m ... fuck, I’m really sorry.”

Syren could tell he was sincere, but it wasn’t enough. “But I still don’t understand, Ronan! It still confuses me, it still hurts me that one second you want me and the next you don’t.”

“Goddamn it, I *always* want you! The real fucking truth is that I always have. But I never let myself really see you before because—well, because of my own stupid shit. But now I *do* see you, and I want you like I’ve never wanted anything in my whole goddamn life!”

Syren’s eyes stung. “Then *why*—”

“Because it’s *wrong* for me to start anything with you. I’m dying, Syren—I am *dying*. Not to mention the fact that I don’t even know what the fuck I actually am. And you know what? Neither does anyone else. So, yes, I’m going hot and cold because I *want* you but I can’t *have* you, and I’m having a really hard fucking time with that, and it’s making me act shitty to you, and I am really, really sorry.”

Syren’s throat was so tight she couldn’t speak. Her chest was tight too. The last wispy thread of her anger vanished into smoke. She ached at every word he’d said. She ached at the torment in his eyes.

He raked shaky fingers through his hair. Then he dropped his hand and said exhaustedly, “I can’t even be fed from, not with all the shit in my veins. I can’t be what you deserve. Syren, you deserve ... everything.”

Tears spilled from her eyes. “I don’t want everything, whatever the hell that even means. I want *you*.”

Ronan closed his eyes, like he couldn't bear to look at her, though she understood it differently now. "I want you too, but don't you understand that I—"

"Have no time to waste. Yes," Syren said forcefully, even though her heart clenched at the idea, "I understand that. Do you?"

"It's not that simple!"

The kettle started to shrill. Ronan turned to the stove and flicked the burner off.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said, low and intent, his back still to her.

"Do you know what really hurts me?"

He was silent for a moment. Then he asked in that way of his, where she knew he was really, really listening: "What?"

"Not being allowed to make my own decisions. Being so afraid to step over the lines that someone else has drawn for me that I just stay in my little box. It's not safe there, Ronan, it's empty. You, of all people, surely know that."

# EIGHTEEN

Ronan didn't know how long ago Syren had left the kitchen. He didn't know how long he'd been standing there, hollowed out.

*It's not safe there, Ronan, it's empty. You, of all people, surely know that.*

Yeah. He did.

But he didn't know what to do about it.

He had worked so damn hard, all through that agonizing drive, to keep a cold, hard grip on himself. He had known he was acting like an asshole. He had known it would be confusing to her. But he hadn't expected it to hurt her, not really.

He'd expected her to think, *God, what a dick, what was I thinking?* And, *I can't believe I'm stuck with this jackass.*

He had not expected that wounded look in her eyes as she'd stood at the foot of the stairs, stalled at finding him in the kitchen. He had not been prepared for the knife that wounded look would drive into his heart. So even though he should have just let her go, he'd called out.

Because, goddamn it, he couldn't stand to see her hurt.

And because, goddamn it, he couldn't stand another moment without her.

But what the hell was he supposed to do? Why the hell wasn't there a right answer?

Keeping his distance had felt like the right answer a few hours ago, and now it didn't. But the facts hadn't changed—and the facts sucked.

In the past, it hadn't bothered him too much that he couldn't be fed from due to the toxic counteragent in his blood, but it was different with Syren. He hated that he wouldn't be able to provide for her in that fundamental way.

He hated that he couldn't offer her anything but the moment—because he didn't know which moment would be his last. He'd been ready to die tonight. He was always ready. Or he had been. Until her.

Now ...

The flood of rage hit so hard and fast that Ronan barely registered it happening. He didn't command his body to move. He didn't even realize he'd ghosted into the living room and had snatched up a lamp until, finally, some of that rage came roaring out as he hurled the lamp across the room.

The lamp exploded upon impact with the fireplace, wood and glass shattering loudly against the stones.

Ronan stood there, much as he had in the kitchen, but he was no longer empty. He was full of anger, frustration, and a brutal wanting that had him hard for her even in her absence.

Maybe if he was human he could have loved her from afar. Maybe he could have separated mind and body.

But he was not human.

And neither was she.

So when she appeared on the landing, hands on the railing, scowling out at him, he growled. He bared his fangs at her.

If she had been human, or even a different female, she might have been afraid of him. But she was his wild and free Syren, and she was just as furious and frustrated as he was, so she bared her fangs right back at him. And when he ghosted up to the railing, perching on it for a moment, snarling in her face, warning her about what she was getting into, she grabbed a handful of his t-shirt.

Possessive.

Demanding.

Ronan jumped down from the railing. He crowded into her and drove her across the landing until her back hit the wall. He caged her there, hands splaying on either side of her. Lowering his head, he nudged her chin up until he had access to her

throat. He gently closed his fangs on that vulnerable part of her.

Syren shivered—but not with fear. He scented the honey-sweetness of her arousal and was keenly aware of his own: the heat coursing through his body, the ache and heaviness of his cock. The need, barely in check, to drive himself against her. Into her.

He carefully raked his fangs down her throat then dabbed his tongue into the hollow of it. He licked up to her chin and nipped.

“I’m not a nice lover,” he warned.

“I thought we had an understanding. That neither of us”—she reached down and gripped his erection through his warmups—“want *nice*.”

He roared at the stimulation, at the challenge. Grabbing her, he yanked her away from the wall and spun her across the landing again. He pushed her down against the railing and yanked her hips toward him, sealing her ass against his hard cock.

He wanted, absolutely, to fuck her like this. The urge to claim her body in this primal way raged through him. But he was still in control. He was still warning her, testing her, waiting for her realize that she didn’t want this, didn’t want him.

Because this was all he could offer her.

But she gasped and shuddered and pressed back against him. So he yanked down her sweats to just below her ass, and he yanked down his own just enough to free himself. He glided his cock along her folds, still testing her. She moaned and coated him with her slickness.

Rumbling with pleasure, he set the broad head of his cock to her hot, slick entrance and thrust deep, shouting at the sudden hot grip of her sex on his. She cried out and bucked against him, driving wild sensation through his cock, spilling pleasure though his whole body.

If she hadn't believed him about not being nice, she was about to.

He held her down against the railing and fucked her with all the primal need of his body. She took it all and demanded more, pushing back against him and letting out sounds of hungry pleasure at every hard thrust.

Ronan's ass flexed, driving his cock into her harder and deeper and faster until there was no possible thing for her to feel or think about but him inside her. When she came, she came hard, screaming, her channel seizing on him as he kept thrusting.

Ronan rode the wave of sensation. His cock pulsed and throbbed and his balls tightened, but he could take it. It wouldn't make him come, not yet. So he fucked her through it, intensifying it for her with his rapid pumping.

As soon as she went limp, he withdrew his stiff cock. He yanked both their waistbands up and pulled her up from the railing. He spun her to face him.

"That enough for you?" he asked, studying her face in the dim, distant light from the kitchen. Her lips were parted, her fangs down.

"No one ever made me come that fast," she gasped.

"Do you want to come again?"

"Yes. God, yes. Fuck me, Ronan, don't stop."

With a harsh, pleased sound, Ronan reached down and gripped Syren's ass. Like she read his mind, she leaped up and hooked her legs around him. Her arms circled his neck, and she rocked into his body, grinding against his unrelieved arousal through the layers of cloth.

Her fangs scraped along his vein. A powerful longing rose from deep inside him, but he shoved it down.

"No," he said, reminding her. "No blood."

She pressed her face hard against his vein. Ronan squeezed his eyes shut, hating that he had to deny her, hating himself for that—then furious about it.

Gripping her tightly against him, growling out his frustration, he mounted the stairs to the upper level and carried her to the master bedroom. The bathroom light was on but nothing else. The bed's covers had been thrown back, the sheets exposed. Ronan laid Syren down on the mattress. He pinned her there, a hand on her belly.

With his free hand, he tugged down her sweats and pulled them away, baring her wide hips and shapely, toned legs, baring her swollen, glistening sex.

“Fuck,” he breathed at the sight, his mouth watering.  
“Fuck.”

Keeping one hand on her belly, still pinning her, he used his other to nudge her legs apart. Then he lowered his mouth to her and dragged his tongue along her hot, open sex.

“Fuck, Ronan!” she cried and pushed against his mouth.

He hummed in appreciation and tasted her again, curling his tongue against her entrance before flicking across her clit, making her buck.

He continued until she was whimpering at the stimulation, writhing with need. Then he nipped her inner thigh and rose, standing between her parted thighs. Tugging off his shirt, he tossed it onto the ground.

Breathing hard and shivering slightly, Syren sat up on the bed. Her eyes tracked over his tattoos, following the slashing marks across his chest and shoulders before her gaze drifted down along his abs to where the black ink vanished under his waistband.

When Syren reached for his waistband, Ronan pushed her hand away. The little growl that rumbled from her sent a hard throb through Ronan's dick.

The corner of his mouth tugged. “We're gonna do things my way.”

“Oh, we are?”

“Yes.” He grinned, enjoying her.



She sucked in a breath, stilling. Ronan took quick advantage of that by kneeling between her legs. He reached for the hem of her shirt, gliding it up her waist and ribs until his thumbs brushed her full breasts. Her nipples were hard little nubs under his grazing thumbs. She shivered deliciously.

She took over with the shirt, yanking it over her head and tossing it away. Ronan hummed appreciatively at the sight before him: creamy skin gilded here and there by the distant light, dark hair spilling over her shoulder. She was the most perfect thing he had ever seen.

He lowered his mouth to one of her full breasts. She arched into it, gasping. Her fingers threaded into his hair, pulling him harder against her as he nipped and nuzzled the firm mound, careful of his fangs, before switching to the other.

Tugging Syren closer to the edge of mattress, Ronan plunged his fingers into her. She gasped and threw her head back. He stroked her inside until her already swollen channel was clenching on his fingers. Then he lifted her, fingers still inside her, and moved her up the bed, laying her on her back. She arched beautifully, her body painted by the light, perfect in her passion.

Ronan used his free hand to shove off his warmups. Then he withdrew his fingers and flipped Syren onto her belly. She made of sound of surprise and started to squirm, but Ronan gave her no chance to reposition herself. Hooking a hand under her right knee, he shoved it upward, opening her, and plunged his throbbing, neglected cock into her slick heat.

They both cried out at the sudden joining. Her sex clenched on his shaft. Ronan groaned, his abdomen tightening, his hips curling forward in that instinctive rhythm.

The throbbing of his cock was echoed in the throbbing of his fangs. He wanted to bite her, taste her, draw her into himself, but he wouldn't take from her when she couldn't take from him.

So he fucked her instead.

When she was panting and writhing under him, close but needing contact with her clit, Ronan withdrew, rolled her onto her back, and sheathed himself again.

“Ronan!” she screeched, bucking up against him.

He slid a hand under her ass, angling her to take the pressure and grind fully against her clit. Almost at once, her channel seized on him and she came, thrashing.

Growling in both pleasure and frustration, Ronan continued to thrust into her clenching sex, letting her scream and writhe through every moment of her release.

As she came down from this second, even more intense orgasm, Ronan made himself pause. He made himself give her a moment to breathe.

During that moment, he worried, just a bit. He’d tried to warn her, but they hadn’t actually talked about what sex would be like. Ronan hadn’t told her how much it took for him to find his own release.

Even with his body so messed up, even with the throbbing pain behind his right eye and the soreness of his muscles, he could fuck for a long, long time.

He didn’t know why it was so hard for him to come, but he never found release easily.

Even though he was loving every second with Syren, every sound and sensation, he would need a lot more of it to before he could come. She might wear out before that happened. If that was the case, he would stop, but she wasn’t at that point, not yet. So Ronan would give her time to rest, but he fully intended to start again as soon as she was ready.

But Syren surprised him—because she always surprised him.

She lurched up and barreled into him. He was much bigger than she was and highly trained in grappling, but he wasn’t ready for the move—and he liked it. So, shouting at the sudden release of his cock from her channel, Ronan let himself fall back onto the bed. Syren was on him in an instant,

straddling his lower belly. His cock stood stiff behind her against the cleft of her ass.

“You think you get everything your way?” she asked. “You think I don’t want to see you and touch you too?”

Ronan gasped, robbed of words, so fucking turned on he couldn’t think.

“Don’t move,” she ordered, planting a hand on his belly, as he had done to her.

She lifted off him, letting his cock drag along the crack of her ass. Ronan was so lost in that sensation that he wasn’t ready for her clear his tip, wasn’t ready for the way his cock slapped hard against his belly. He jerked and grunted.

“Don’t move,” she said again. “I didn’t get to see you.”

Ronan surprised himself by staying silent, by letting her kneel outside his leg and drag her fingers along his tattoos from his abs to his hip and thigh. It wasn’t that Ronan didn’t like being touched. He did like it. But he wasn’t used to this, the way she touched him with desire and appreciation. It was too raw and primal to be tender, but something about her caress reached into him. Like it touched part of him that he usually kept locked away.

Syren grazed the inside of his leg to his groin, where she cupped his swollen balls. Ronan moaned, letting himself really feel it, every delicious sensation. When Syren curled her hand around his shaft, Ronan pressed into her grip. She stroked him, exploring his length, brushing the flared ridge of his cockhead.

“You’re so damn gorgeous,” she said, then she swung a leg over him, lifted over his cock, and plunged down.

Ronan bowed up with a shout. “Uggn!”

Syren moaned and ground against him. Her fingers dug into his chest. Her sex clenched on his cock, gripping and stroking.

“*Fuuuck*,” Ronan moaned, pressing his head back into the mattress, arching into her tight heat, gasping every time his sensitive tip hit deep.

Ronan experienced a brief moment of panic when he realized how open and vulnerable he felt. Not that he'd never been ridden before, but never like this, where he'd given himself to it. His hands rested on her thighs, following her movement.

“God, you feel good,” Syren breathed as her sex gripped and tugged him. “I love how you feel inside me.”

Her body, her rhythm, her words—all of it lifted Ronan out of himself. He could not believe it, but he was about to come.

His balls ached for release and his cock throbbed with warning. A sound of need escaped him, and the instant Syren's channel seized on him and she screamed, his orgasm exploded through him. He bowed up with a shout, hips jerking as he released hard inside her.

She wrung every drop from him as her channel clenched convulsively. Ronan gasped and lifted under her, chasing that perfect, fleeting sensation.

When she bowed forward, collapsing into him, he wrapped his arms around her, holding her against his chest. He was trembling. He couldn't help it. He was too overwhelmed, too astonished. He had never felt himself open like he had with her. He had never let go that easily.

Why the hell was everything with her so different?

## NINETEEN

It was well past nightfall. The cabin's shutters had opened, and moonlight was spilling across the bed. Syren had scooted up to lean against the wall, pillows behind her, but she had no desire to leave this spot. She felt perfectly right, right where she was, with Ronan sound asleep beside her, his hand resting on her naked thigh. In fact, she didn't think she'd ever felt this right before.

Not that the sex hadn't felt right. She had loved it. Sex with Ronan was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. She had never been with someone as raw and primal and intense. Someone who demanded so much of her body—and gave so much to it.

She didn't even know many times they had fucked overday. She didn't know how many times she had come. She had never been in so many different positions. Ronan was clearly experienced at giving orgasms.

He seemed a little less accustomed, however, to having them himself. She would like to ask him about that sometime, but ... not tonight.

There was a lot she would like to ask him. She knew so little about him.

He was lying on his right side, partially curling into her. Her body blocked the moonlight from his face, but the light lay coolly over his shoulder, bleaching his tattoos. His hand had found her thigh in sleep the moment she had returned to the bed a few hours ago.

She had left to hunt down the satellite phone, which she'd found in the kitchen. She had called her brother at seven for the check in, not wanting to wake Ronan for it.

Hearing her voice instead of Ronan's, Kyr had immediately asked if Ronan was okay. When she'd said that he was sleeping, Kyr had fallen silent then had said, "Oh. Good. That's good."

So she gathered that this was unusual, the way he was sleeping now.

Syren's fingers played with his hair, gently raking along his scalp at the back of his head. He kept murmuring as she did it, and occasionally he would sigh and settle more deeply.

She loved this. She loved getting the chance to be tender with him. If he were awake, he might not accept it, but he was responding to it in sleep.

Maybe someday he would let her do this with him while he was awake.

But there might not be that someday.

Syren had acted as though the present was all that mattered. In the heat of the argument, she had dismissed what he'd said about ... dying.

She had not changed her mind about seizing the present if that was all she could get. She would not trade their sex or this current bliss for anything.

But that didn't mean she was okay with him dying.

Was *he* okay with it? Surely not. And yet, he'd seemed prepared for it last night, had been ready to choose it over Kyr locking him up.

At the time, Syren had been surprised to think that Ronan didn't know Kyr better, surprised that he would actually believe that Kyr would do such a thing. But Syren had had more time to think now, to put things together. Ronan clearly had a deep, deep fear of confinement, a fear that didn't listen to reason.

She couldn't blame him for that. She knew only the barest facts about his history, but it didn't take much imagination to envision his likely living conditions during his ten years of captivity at a research facility. Something like that would have left him with a lot of trauma, and not just the physical trauma that was slowly destroying his body. His trauma was also mental. Emotional.

It was a common theme among the Hush. Rescue dogs, Amarada had called them. Like so many things with her, it wasn't true but had a grain of truth. All of them were a little broken. Maybe a little lost. Definitely out of place, even in vampire society. But all of them were good.

Ronan was often harsh. He was stubborn. He was untrusting and sometimes distant. He struggled, Syren now understood, to express most emotions. But he was, most definitely, good—and Syren wanted him.

And not just for tonight.

How sick was he? Last night while fighting demons, he'd been fast and powerful, accurate with his aim, ruthless in his destruction of them. Watching him before his collapse, no one would ever have guessed that anything was wrong with him.

And the sex ... Nothing had been lacking in that. Syren smiled a little at the thought.

But his collapse and the way he was sleeping now spoke of exhaustion. He had shown sensitivity to light on more than one occasion. Was he in pain?

He was definitely lean, leaner than she remembered him being in the past. He was still heavily muscled, still absolutely gorgeous. But he was lean enough that veins threaded his arms and chest, even his lower abdomen. She had seen that clearly enough when they'd showered together, when she had finally gotten to really take in the sight of his body.

Despite the number of times they'd had sex, he'd still been half hard all through the shower and fully erect by the end of it. Of course, that might have had something to do with the fact that she hadn't been able to keep her hands off him, but who could blame her?

She couldn't get enough of his body. She loved its power and command, the way he moved, the way he'd fucked her with such dominance—though never with disrespect. She loved how, even in sleep, he was laying claim to her.

She was certainly laying claim to him.

She ran her fingers through his hair again. This time when he drew a deep breath in response to that, he let it back out with a waking-up sort of groan. His hand flexed on her thigh. Then, as though realizing where he was, he stilled.

Syren stilled too, suddenly afraid that he would draw away, revert to his coldness, maybe even say that this was a mistake.

He did none of those things. And when his body relaxed a little and his hand stayed where it was, Syren resumed threading her fingers through his hair. He didn't sigh comfortably as he had done in sleep, but he didn't pull away either.

"What time is it?" he asked in a sexy, sleep-roughened voice.

"About ten."

His whole body jerked. "Fuck, I missed the check-in."

Crap, she should have thought of that when she'd told him the time. "I already did it," she hurried to say as his body tightened like he was going to launch himself from the bed. "I found the phone in the kitchen and called Kyr."

"You did?"

"It wasn't that hard," she said dryly in response to his obvious surprise.

"That's not what I ... I just mean ... thanks."

"Oh. You're welcome."

He rolled onto his back. Hands going behind his head, displacing her fingers, he arched into a grunting stretch that had his chest and abs straining. Syren couldn't decide whether it was hot as hell, or just kind of adorable.

Hot, she decided as her gaze settled on his hips, where his cock stood huge and hard, tenting the sheet. Her sex clenched at the sight, her body remembering how that heavy cock had felt inside her.

"Am I in your way?" she teased as his right elbow pressed into her hip.



“Nah,” he grunted, easing back down. “I’ll work around you.” His right hand moved from the back of his head to under her leg, gripping her hamstring.

“Very gentlemanly of—”

Ronan’s other hand threw back the sheet and he rolled over the leg he was gripping, settling on his front between her thighs. He tugged her down and set his mouth to her sex.

“Ahh!” Syren burst out as his tongue stroked along her folds, flooding her with arousal.

Her hips lifted, and Ronan’s hands slid under her ass. He gripped her there, angling her to better receive the attention of his mouth. His tongue dipped inside her.

“God, Ronan,” Syren gasped out, her hands moving to clutch at his head, her fingers knotting in his hair as her sex clenched and fluttered. Her fangs slid achingly down.

“Mm,” Ronan murmured in obvious pleasure, lapping now, tasting her.

Syren rocked against his mouth.

One of his hands moved from her leg to her entrance, fingers dipping in briefly before gliding to her hole. One slick finger teased her rim, prodding lightly, complicating all the sensations as his mouth relentlessly pleased her.

“Ronan, that’s gonna make me—oh my God.”

Syren couldn’t think enough to finish her statement. There was no space in her for anything but the sensations that Ronan awakened in her body, the pleasure coiling tighter and tighter.

His mouth moved to the inside of her thigh, where his fangs lightly grazed her sensitive flesh. “You can come as much as you want,” he rumbled against her skin before returning his mouth to her sex, sucking at her clit.

He plunged three fingers deep into her channel and curled them against her inner walls until she was moaning and pressing against his mouth at her clit.

It was too much. Her orgasm exploded through her. She screamed and thrashed against his mouth as he kept working his fingers inside her, forcing her body to give her every possible ounce of pleasure.

As Syren collapsed down, going limp, Ronan caught her and tugged her down the bed. Before she even quite realized what was happening, she was lying on her back underneath him. He had himself propped on his left elbow at her shoulder. His right arm was under her lower back. The broad head of his cock prodded teasingly at her entrance.

Moaning, she opened for him, aching to feel that huge shaft inside her. Ronan let out a rough groan at her clear invitation and entered her with a powerful thrust.

Syren shouted, lifting into him as he set into a fierce rhythm. The ridge of his flared crown rubbed deliciously against her inner walls as his thick length moved through her channel.

The arm Ronan had been using to prop himself up slid under her shoulders. His other arm was still gripping her lower back. She was held completely in place, caged against his body as his cock pistoned inside her.

Syren had her arms wrapped around him too. She pressed her face into his neck. Her mouth was watering, her fangs throbbing. But she couldn't bite him, couldn't feed from him, so she buried her face against him.

She tried not to come because she could tell he wasn't going to, but she couldn't help it. His movement, the sound of his roughened breathing, the way he filled her—she shouted and started to thrash against him. He gripped her more tightly, thrusting harder and faster until she was screaming at the intensity of her orgasm.

As it finally ebbed, she gasped and twitched through the aftershocks, almost afraid she would cry from the sheer intensity. Ronan was still rock hard inside her. He lowered his forehead to rest it on her shoulder. She stroked the back of his head. Her fingers tightened reflexively with every involuntary clench of her channel on his heavy cock.

When he moved like he was going to pull out, she clutched at him. “Stay inside me.”

“I ...” He broke off to take a steadying breath as her sex tightened on him again. “I don’t think I can come, and I don’t think you want an hour of this.”

She had been right then. It wasn’t easy for him to find release.

She stroked his hair. “Just stay for a minute. Please.”

He drew a deep, shuddering breath. Then he hauled her up. The muscles all over his body flexed as he lifted them both into a sitting position, front to front, somehow managing to keep them joined. Syren moaned as the movement shifted his cock inside her. She adjusted her grip on him, hugging tight. He buried his face against her shoulder.

She began to stroke the back of his head and neck with all the tenderness she was feeling. He shivered at first, like he wasn’t used to it, but he eventually started to relax. His cock remained rock hard inside her, but something eased in him, opened in him. And when Syren started to roll her hips, grinding her clit against his lower abdomen, feeling his cock move inside her, he let out a sound that was equal parts pleasure and relief.

She got her feet under herself so she could lift and glide up and down his shaft, feeling once more the bump of his cockhead deep inside her, the delicious stroking of that flared ridge along her inner walls. Ronan gripped her hips, angling her for more intensity.

Hands on his shoulders, she watched his face as she glided up and down his cock. What she saw there, mixed in with his pleasure, was surprise. And vulnerability. A little fear too perhaps, because he clearly wasn’t used to what he was feeling. And yet it still had his hips lifting under her, matching her rhythm. It still had his lips parting, the tips of his descended fangs showing.

She had tried to get him to feed from her last night, but he had refused, and she didn’t want to restart that battle right

now, not when he was finally opening for her. Somehow that, as much as the sensation of his cock inside her, had her reaching her peak again.

“Syren,” he gasped, “*fuck*—I’m gonna ...”

“Come,” she breathed as her body lit. “Oh God, Ronan—ahhhh!”

As her orgasm tore through her, Ronan shouted. His hips jacked up into her, pumping hard and deep as she seized on his spurting cock.

“Holy fuck,” he muttered, shuddering against her as she did against him, the aftershocks still rocking them both. “*Shit.*”

Syren clung to him and stroked his hair until the storm finally passed and they both calmed. His eyes squeezed shut against her shoulder. Like he needed this. Like he needed her.

She curled around him and didn’t let go.

## TWENTY

Ronan opened the fridge and looked inside. His usual way of eating (or not eating) was not going to work tonight. He had Syren to think about, and he needed to feed her. The thought soured his gut, since he *couldn't* feed her, not properly, but he could at least make her some scrambled eggs.

“Mm, did you find something?” Syren asked as he reached for the carton of eggs. Her hand settled on his lower back.

He sucked in a breath. That, she didn't notice, or maybe simply didn't worry about. But when he stood there, frozen, long enough to be obvious, she drew back.

He turned away from the fridge, eggs forgotten, letting the door close, and snagged her retreating hand. Her big, gorgeous eyes looked up at him, worried.

“I'm a very, uh, handsy person,” she explained. “I forget sometimes that not everyone likes it.”

“I do like it. I like it a lot.” He pulled her hand to his abdomen. “I'm just ... not used to it.”

She splayed her fingers over his abs through the thin material of his gray t-shirt. Her thumb started stroking. It turned him on. Everything with her turned him on. But he didn't want sex, not right now. He wanted this. Being here with her and making breakfast, doing something normal, something without conflict and stress.

Syren's hand slid from his abs around to his back. Her other arm circled him too and she ... hugged him.

Ronan put his arms around her in return. He wasn't a hugger. But this, he liked.

“You don't mind?” she asked.

“Fuck no.”

“It's been a hard few nights,” she confessed, tucking her face against his sternum. “I just need this for a minute. With you.”

It did something to Ronan, hearing those words. It shifted something inside him. Opened something.

He had felt this during sex too. When he came almost like a normal person instead of someone who needed to fuck roughly for an hour or more before his body would let go.

He didn't understand why he felt different with her. He wished he could simply accept it as right and good without a small part of him freaking out, but ... he wasn't there yet. It was too unfamiliar. And another part of him was still saying he shouldn't do this.

Nothing had changed. He was still dying.

Fuck, he wasn't going to think about that. For one moment, he was going to just have this with her and not think about the future.

He stroked the smooth softness of her long hair lying against her flannel shirt and let himself relax. And funnily enough, that panicky feeling went away. For one second, he felt, fully, the sense of rightness that kept flickering to life at the edge of his awareness.

Until her stomach rumbled. Then he remembered he was supposed to be doing something.

"Breakfast," he said.

"Oh. Right."

She squeezed his ass through his warmups, sparking a flash of arousal. Then she disentangled herself from him and basically elbowed him out the way as she went to open the fridge.

"Listen here," he said, only half amused, "you can't just start shit—"

"So what's for breakfast? Kinda brunch at this point."

It was more like *lunch* at this point, considering how long he'd slept. He could not get over that. He'd like to say it was the sex, but it wasn't, not exactly. It was her.

But he was still making breakfast instead of lunch because it was the only thing he really knew how to make.

He grabbed the waistband of her sweats and pulled her out of the way as he went to grab the carton of eggs.

“Hey!” she protested.

He smirked over his shoulder. “You’re small. Deal with it.”

She put her hands on her hips and tried to look annoyed, but she didn’t even come close, not with that smile. Fuck, he loved that smile.

She was so much *fun*. Ronan wasn’t sure he’d ever really had fun before, not like this.

He put the carton of eggs and the half-and-half on the island then went to look for a bowl. When he found one and returned to the island with it, Syren had opened the egg carton and was regarding the eggs uncertainly.

She said, “Penni taught me how to make bread, kind of, but I’m afraid I don’t actually know anything about cooking.”

“Scrambled eggs is the only thing I can make with a good chance of success, so I’m only about half a step ahead of you. I can cook this if you wanna go—”

“No. I’m doing this with you.”

Ronan stopped in his tracks.

“What?” Syren asked warily.

“How are you so ... I don’t know—*warm*, when you grew up with that nasty, frigid fucking cunt?”

Syren snorted. “It didn’t do me any favors, believe me. Except maybe by showing her that I was weak and pathetic and therefore no threat to her.”

Ronan scowled. “I hope what you’re saying is that *she* sees you that way, not that you think it’s true.”

A pained look came into her eyes. “Everyone knows it’s true.”

“Then everyone is dead-fucking wrong.”

“Oh, yeah? What about the fact that you—”

“Were also dead-fucking wrong, yes. I was an idiot and ...”

“And what?”

Ronan set the bowl on the island counter. He took a deep breath. “And I didn’t want to see you for what you are. I was stupid and angry, and none of it was your fault.”

“But you must have ... felt differently once. About her.”

“You mean because I was in the guard? I was never part of her personal detail. She wasn’t involved with my unit. Except for one weird occasion when she had us work security for a party at the Residence.”

Syren frowned, almost like she didn’t believe him, but that event was the only time Ronan had interacted with Amarada.

Until his confrontation with her years later. After Genesys.

He barely even remembered the event at the Residence. The whole thing was strangely hazy. An uncomfortable memory tried to rise up through the fog, but he drove it away.

“Can we get on with breakfast please?” Ronan asked. “Even *I’m* getting hungry.”

Syren looked like she wasn’t ready to let go of the topic, but then she snapped a salute like a total goofball. “Give me an order. Because otherwise I will have no idea what to do.”

“You do know you’re ridiculous, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ronan huffed, “Hell no, we’re not playing that weird game. I’m definitely not into that.”

Syren burst into a laugh. “That is not where I was going with that.”

“Well, you grabbed my ass, so,” Ronan shrugged, “that one’s on you.”

Her eyes sparkled with humor. “Should I get a pan or something?”

“Yes, lieutenant, good thinking.”



“Lieutenant?” Her hands went to her hips. “I am *at least* a captain.”

“You can be whatever you want, Major Pain. Just find a damn pan.”

Making eggs and toast with Syren probably took longer than it would have taken without her, but it was a million times more fun. Ronan felt slightly absurd for laughing so much. It wasn't like him. But he loved it. Every fucking second.

Except for the moment when Syren made a joke about needing the protein for her “man muscles” and Ronan caught an ugly undertone. When he pushed her on it, a whole lot of fucked-up shit came pouring out of her mouth, all of it clearly coming from her cunt of a mother, whose goal in life, apparently, was to destroy every fragment of her daughter's self-esteem.

Ronan might have gotten a little worked up. He might even have gotten a little harsh. But he was pretty sure that his (admittedly dirty) description of exactly how attractive he found Syren, and his words about her fucking awesome physical abilities, which had been aptly demonstrated when she ghosted after and tackled that asshole chemist, finally got through to her.

In any case, she smiled and got a little teary and told him to shut up already because the eggs were getting cold.

So he huffed and shook his head and stabbed a forkful of eggs, determined to make his stomach accept it, and said, “You're fucking beautiful.”

Syren's hand settled on his thigh, resting there while she picked up her toast and crunched into it. Ronan's hand found hers and he threaded their fingers together, wishing this could last forever.

## TWENTY-ONE

The Hush worked their leapfrog pattern of approach toward the old grist mill. Twelve miles outside of Portage, the mill should have been a protected historical site, but Gideon had managed to keep it out of county records, much as Kyr had done with the abbey.

A lot of vampire properties were like that, and the only reason they had learned of this one was because Kyr had let Luca take over the interrogation of Gideon's (then Cretas's) chemist. Kyr had reached the end of what Ashel's arrogance could spur him to reveal. So Luca had told Kyr to leave the room, had blocked the camera, and had spent the next six hours extracting every possible shred of information.

So Ashel was now dead and Kyr was worried as shit because, except for reporting what he'd learned, Luca hadn't said a word to anyone since last night. He hadn't even gone home. He'd slept at HQ overday—or at least he'd shut himself in one of the Bunker's rooms. He'd even locked Talia out. So she'd slept on the couch in the Bunker lounge.

Considering that neither Luca nor Talia should be in the field right now and Ronan was out of action, Kyr prayed the mill was as empty as it looked.

The bridge spanning the river forced the Hush into a bottleneck passage, so Kyr ghosted over first and took position to one side of the heavy oak door. A second later, Nox arrived on the door's other side.

Rhys appeared briefly atop the nonfunctional waterwheel, making sure Kyr saw him, before ghosting up to a second floor window.

“Goddamn it,” Kyr gritted under his breath. That wasn't the plan.

The plan was for Nox to take down this goddamn door. Then Wes and Rhys were supposed to ghost inside, followed by Kyr and Nox, with Talia and Luca on sweep.

“Still want me to break it down?” Nox whispered.

The male was an absolute tank and could definitely do it, but it might fuck up his shoulder for the rest of the night. And since Rhys, that total pain the ass, was already inside ...

“Rhys has *five* seconds to—”

A heavy bolt slid into its housing on the other side of the door. Kyr and Nox stayed in position on either side, guns raised, just in case.

As the door swung open, Kyr and Nox pivoted—and Rhys raised his hands in mock surrender.

“It’s empty,” he said.

“Are you absolutely fucking sure?” Kyr demanded.

“Absolutely fucking sure,” Rhys confirmed, “but there’s a \_\_\_”

“Good. Then you and I will have ample time to discuss your inability to follow orders while Nox and Wes take a look.”

“Bossman—”

“Luca and Talia, I need you two on perimeter. Rhys, get your ass out of the way.”

Rhys glanced briefly at Wes as though hoping for help, but Wes’s glare was even more severe than Kyr’s had been. So Rhys sighed and stepped out of the doorway. His back thudded against the weathered brick wall and he crossed his arms.

“Mind the basement,” he warned Nox and Wes as the two males moved into the old mill.

“What the fuck was that about?” Kyr demanded as soon as the others were working their assignments.

Rhys shrugged.

“You haven’t pulled this kind of loose-canon shit in months. Why now? What’s going on?”

Rhys shifted uncomfortably. His black tactical clothing made his body into a shadow against the brick wall, but his

face and blond hair caught the moonlight. He looked away, the tendons of his neck standing out.

“Nothing’s going on.”

“I don’t believe you,” Kyr said.

“There’s just too much shit to think about right now, okay? I can’t get my head to stop fucking spinning—and that door was gonna fuck Nox up! You know it was, and there was no need for it.”

“He can take it, which is my decision to make. Why are you so unfocused?”

Rhys’s head thumped back. “There’s just a lot going on. Ronan. Luca.”

“There’s always a lot going on. I need you, Rhys, I have to be able to count on you to do what I say.”

Rhys sighed. Then, “I don’t want to talk to Mira anymore.”

Kyr stilled.

“I can’t have all of ... that shit ... on my mind every fucking second, not when there’s bigger shit going on. Now can we please just go inside? Because you really need to see—”

Wes appeared at the open door. “Kyr, you need to see this.”

“What?”

“There’s a fucking portal in the basement,” Wes reported.

“*What?*”

“I kept trying to tell you,” Rhys said.

When both Kyr and Wes shot him a severe look, he grinned, looking more like himself. Kyr would have to talk to Mira about this later, but right now, there was indeed bigger shit going on.

Clicking on their flashlights, Kyr and Rhys followed Wes into the dusty interior of the mill. Their flashlights swept over massive iron gears and pulleys, heavy oak beams and levers, and two huge circular grinding stones standing idle by one wall.

The wooden floor creaked under their boots as they made their way to the stairs. The beam of Nox's flashlight could be seen cutting through the darkness below.

The basement level appeared to be an old workshop, judging by the antique tools. They hadn't seen use in a long time, but the portal sure as hell had.

It looked much like the one Kyr had used during his time serving in the guard, the same one that Ronan no doubt had used. That portal, in Portage's oldest cemetery, was under constant surveillance. This was a rogue portal, likely a new one created by their teleporting demon lord.

It clung like a huge shadow against the wall, but no shadow could be that black, that absolute, swallowing the beams of their flashlights. No shadow could seem to suck the air from the room like the portal did.

And no shadow on earth would have the reddish dust of Atar scattered across the floor in front of it.

"Shit," Kyr said.

## TWENTY-TWO

Cretas had been following the false queen for two nights. He did not like leaving the Dark Lord in the keeping of his brainless grunts for so long, but the risk was minimal. No one, not even the Hush, would find his hideout in Atar.

Cretas had made a new portal to a new, unknown point in the wasted land. No demon lord in centuries had possessed the power to teleport, much less to anchor teleportation points to create a stable portal. It had exhausted him for a time, but it had been necessary.

Other portals were monitored by vampires or known to other demon lords. Cretas wanted no interlopers. The Dark Lord would see Cretas, and only Cretas, upon awakening. The Dark Lord would know who had served him.

The failed awakening by the Brotherhood had been a disappointment, but Cretas had been pleased, really, to see that pathetic cult expunged. Such weak and worthless beings had no place in the future kingdom of Kadaros. Demons did not need vampires at all.

Vampires had turned against Kadaros, to whom they should have bowed, prayed, shown homage. They were not allies. They were enemies. Prey.

Once the Dark Lord was awakened, demons could hunt openly and work the will of godly Vimonos, father of both Kadaros and of demons—openly. There would be no need to fear discovery by humans. Even eight billion could not stand against the Dark Lord.

Even before discovering the answer to Kadaros's long sleep, Cretas had been confident he would find it. Thus his endeavors with Haze.

The vampire Gideon had intended to use Haze to start a war against his own kind. To destabilize vampires. To expose them. It was almost like Vimonos had inspired that work—because it had been there, a tool, for Cretas to pick up and use.

Yes, all of this was fated.

Cretas, most powerful demon lord in existence, here in this moment of time to seize Haze, to snatch the Dark Lord away from the false queen, to learn the secret of his long sleep.

That Kadaros had been exsanguinated had been obvious from his desiccated state. What had not been obvious was why fresh blood did not restore him. Dozens of sacrifices Cretas had drained for his master, all to no avail.

Cretas had despaired, briefly, at the rambling explanation of the mad priest, the kind of blood that was needed, but Cretas's faith had been too strong for despair—and faith was always rewarded.

So was patience.

Cretas, then, would wait patiently for a while longer as the false queen and her soldiers closed in on their target.

## TWENTY-THREE

It's a goddamn minefield. There is literally no safe move for me."

Syren grinned over her mug of hot chocolate as she watched Ronan scowl at the Monopoly board peppered with her little plastic houses. She and Ronan were sitting cross-legged on the floor in the cabin's living room, the board resting on the footstool between them.

Syren could get used to being this comfortable. Ronan didn't seem to mind one bit that she was on night two of sweatpants. She was back in the tight green thermal and blissfully braless. He *certainly* didn't seem to mind that.

For her part, Syren loved seeing him comfortable. He was hot as hell in his tactical clothes and gear, but the warmups and t-shirt just did something to her.

"And to think you made fun of me in the beginning for all the money I was spending on improvements to my properties."

"Yeah, yeah. No need to rub it in."

Syren sipped the sweet warm drink. "I'd be happy to make you a loan at a reasonable interest rate."

"I'd rather end up in jail."

"Pride goeth before a fall," she quipped.

Ronan snatched up the dice. "You're a pain."

He shook the dice in a loose grip. That wasn't going to help him, but Syren still enjoyed watching him do it. He had beautiful hands. She had first noticed it when they were cooking together. How strong and well-shaped they were, how nimble his fingers were. Maybe she had noticed because those nimble fingers had been inside her so recently, and to such pleasurable effect.

He tossed the dice onto the board and counted squares. "Fuck."



Syren eyed his small stack of paper money. “Hm. Doesn’t look like you can afford this month’s rent.”

“Goddamn slum lord tactics.”

Syren snorted. “I learned from the best.”

“This game sucks. Let’s play—”

“I am *not* playing Battleship again, you can forget it. Maybe your trouble was not being able to see the board well enough? A bit of light might have helped. Like if there was a lamp? Maybe on that table behind you?”

She pointed to the spot where the lamp he’d smashed had once stood.

In truth, the kitchen light was on and offered plenty of illumination without blazing into Ronan’s eyes. But it was fun to tease him, to give him shit about the mess he’d spent half an hour cleaning up.

He raised an eyebrow. “You think you’re funny?”

“Mm-hmm. I do.”

Ronan reached over the Monopoly board and snatched her half-finished mug of hot chocolate from her hands.

“Hey! I wasn’t done with that.”

Ronan didn’t bother replying as he leaned back to set the mug on the empty side table. Then he rose partway and reached again over the board. This time, he snatched her.

She laughed and flailed as he lifted her up and over the footstool. One of her feet caught the board and sent it spilling to the floor. Little plastic houses bounced and pinged in every direction, and paper money fluttered through the air.

Ronan settled onto the leather couch that had been at his back while they played. He settled Syren onto his lap.

Peering around her at the scattered pieces, he smirked. “Looks like all your hard work was for nothing.”

“Are you always this messy?” she laughed.

“I’m actually a very tidy person. But something about you makes me—”

“Oh, so it’s my fault?” she teased.

He tugged her closer until her crotch met the hard ridge of his cock inside his warmups. “Yes,” he said in a gruff, we’re-going-to-fuck voice, “it’s your fault.”

Syren drew a deep breath. As she started to rock against him, she reached up to comb her fingers through his hair, following it upward to its fauxhawkish mess. She eyed the tattoos spiking up his neck.

“You don’t look like a tidy person.”

“Oh?” he replied, but she could tell he was distracted. His eyes had darkened. His lips had parted, showing the tips of his fangs.

Syren seized the chance to stare at him openly. God, she loved his face. She loved that she got to see it like this, the harshness softening, some of the strain fading.

Not for the first time, she thought, *He’s not going to die. I won’t let him.*

Besides, when she had asked Kyr if Ronan was dying, Kyr had replied, *I think he thinks so.* Which didn’t necessarily mean it was true.

Last night, Syren had asked him about the counteragent. He’d explained that whatever Genesys had done had started a mutation in his cells. The counteragent essentially killed off the mutating cells, but they were starting to mutate faster and faster.

She had asked him if it was counteragent that Jonus had handed him at the storage unit. He’d said yes, but in a hesitant way. When pressed, he’d admitted that it was counteragent and morphine.

*How much pain are you in?* she had asked, but he’d only replied, *I’m fine. I’m used to it.*

When she had asked whether they should stop having sex, he’d said, *Not on my account. That’s the only time I completely*

*forget about it.*

He was forgetting about it now, she could tell. His head tilted back slightly. Syren's mouth watered at the sight of his vein threading along his neck. She bent toward him and kissed him there.

Groaning lightly, he lifted under her, pressing that hard length against her abdomen. She ground against him.

Then he froze. Completely.

“What is it?” she asked, also stilling.

“Something.”

Ronan was out from under her in an instant. By the time Syren had recovered from her startled plop onto the couch and gotten up, Ronan had already snagged a gun from under the couch (there were guns all over the cabin, with Ronan never more than ten feet from one) and had ghosted to the front door.

The alarm hadn't sounded. “Ronan what makes you think \_\_\_”

The door came crashing open. Syren screamed.

Ronan fired four times before several large, black-clad figures barreled into him. Syren didn't get the chance to track the movements of the fight because more black-clad figures burst in through the windows.

Syren bolted for the kitchen, too startled to ghost. There was another gun on the counter. She lunged for it only to be tackled to the ground.

She got a few punches in, even managed to knee the male in the groin, but he was too strong. All too quickly, Syren found herself with her face on the ground, her hands caught behind her, a knee in her back—and the muzzle of a gun pressed to the back of her head.

Her mother's familiar laugh peeled through the room. “Oh, get her up so she can at least see the consequences of her actions.”

Syren was hauled roughly to her feet, her wrists still caught in a firm grip, the gun still nudging her skull. Another of Amarada's guards stood three feet away, his gun also aiming at her.

Ronan had been forced back into the living room near the couch. He had his gun leveled at Amarada. His dark eyes burned with hatred.

"You wouldn't," he snarled.

Amarada, looking as flawless as ever, blonde hair perfectly coifed, makeup impeccable, a white fur draping her shoulders over a skintight red dress, smiled wickedly from where she stood in the shattered doorway.

Her eyes flicked to Syren then back to Ronan. "Oh, wouldn't I?"

Syren sucked in a breath, shocked that, really and truly, Amarada was threatening to kill her. Syren had thought herself past being surprised or hurt by her mother. Apparently, she'd been wrong.

Amarada strode into the cabin with her usual, high-heeled walk. She swaggered her way to Ronan and delicately reached for the gun he was aiming at her. She plucked it from his grip. Then she crowded into him. She reached around him and gripped his ass.

She smiled. "Still hard for me, lover?"

## TWENTY-FOUR

Ronan froze. Not because he was afraid of Amarada (which he wasn't). Not even because she disgusted him (though she did). He froze because, with her crowding into him like that, a twisted, fucked-up memory clawed its way out of a dark, hazy place in his brain.

*"I've been watching you, soldier."*

*Amarada crowded into him, her knee wedging between his thighs. He was holding the glass she'd handed him. Holding it away. He didn't want it.*

*"Drink." Her red lips curled into a cold smile. "Your queen commands it."*

What had he replied? Had he protested, argued with her, tried to escape?

*She reached for the gun holstered at his back and pulled it free. She set it on a spindly-legged table. "You won't need this. It's a different duty that I require of you now."*

With a shout of rage, Ronan shoved the queen away so hard that she flew across the room to slam into the staircase railing. She crumpled to the floor in a heap of red and white and platinum blonde.

Ronan's head whipped toward Syren. She had used the moment of chaos to duck clear of the guns pointed at her and twist free of the grip on her wrists. Ronan ghosted her way, but the instant of having checked that she was out of immediate danger cost him—because in that instant, two shots fired.

Ronan didn't feel the punching impacts until he came out of his ghost in the kitchen. He had intended to grab Syren and ghost her to safety. Instead, his body jerked belatedly from the lead slugs that had hit his abdomen. He hit the floor, crashing into one of the chairs.

He only made it to his knees before three guns were pointed at him, two from Amarada's guards, one from the female

herself. His gun. Which she had used to shoot him. Even that might not have stopped Ronan—but Syren’s cry did.

One of Amarada’s largest goons had grabbed her from behind, sealing Syren’s back against his front. Her legs flailed as she tried to break free.

“Do control yourself, child,” Amarada snapped at her daughter. “A descendant of Kadaros can take more than two shots, and I’m not opposed to delivering.”

It took a moment for those words to reach Ronan.

His attention was on Syren and on trying to breathe through the pain blazing in his abdomen. So those words traveled as though down a long hallway and reached him with a surreal, dreamlike quality.

*A descendant of Kadaros ...*

It wasn’t that he hadn’t already half thought that, but ...

“What are you talking about?” Syren’s question was breathy, shocked. She had gone still in her captor’s hold.

Amarada chuckled. She had lost her white fur wrap, baring the red dress that skimmed her hourglass figure. Her high heels clicked across the hardwood floor with their usual swagger. But finally, for once, that platinum perfection had been marred. Strands of blonde hair frizzed out from the sculpted wave. Her smile was still cold, but it lacked some of its usual control. It looked a little mad. Or maybe she was just excited.

“Oh, yes.” Amarada seemed to savor her words. Gun still aiming at Ronan, she stopped as though to fully enjoy the scene. “Quite the secret that Genesys found lurking inside you.”

“You’re lying,” Syren accused. “If that were true you would’ve—”

“My dear, you keep trying to argue what *I would do if*. All you reveal is the painful simplicity of your own thinking, your inability to comprehend a complex situation.

“Genesys did not simply uncover the truth—they awakened it. Much like a sleeper is awakened after living among humans for years, ignorant of their own dormant vampire genes. Had Genesys not prodded the truth awake, perhaps it would have lain sleeping for decades longer. Or perhaps not. One never knows.”

Amarada went on, still addressing Syren, though her eyes never left Ronan’s face, “But they did awaken the truth inside him: he is a descent of Kadaros, thus a descendant of the dark god Vimonos. No wonder his mother went mad after his birth. They had to lock her up, for her own good. But she didn’t last long. What female would, having grown such a thing inside herself?”

“Your words mean nothing,” Syren snarled. “All you do is lie.”

“He believes me.”

Ronan stared at Amarada. The pain was receding from his awareness. Everything was receding. Everything except for her words.

They blended truths that he had already known with all his fears. They made a new, terrible reality.

Amarada addressed him now. “Why do you think I investigated you in the first place? You were always on my radar, from the moment they locked up your crazy mother and put you in the youth home. But I didn’t know whether there was any truth in your mother’s claims until Genesys revealed it. I can’t tell you how it’s amused me to see you willingly accepting poison into your veins, trying to kill off that truth.”

Ronan switched gears sluggishly. Wait. How did she know about the counteragent?

Amarada smiled as though delighted when she saw the question in his eyes. “Did you imagine the VDA’s system impregnable? I’ve been keeping tabs on you for years, Ronan Fyr. Dr. An’s notes indicate a belief that your cellular evolution was actually caused by Genesys. In a way, that’s true because they kickstarted it—but it was always there inside

you. Genesys did not make you sick. Dr. An did. The fact that he did it unknowingly, with the purest of intentions, only makes it more delightfully ironic, don't you think?

"I was content to leave well enough alone, to let him continue poisoning you for as long as possible, but this little love affair with my daughter has brought things to a pass. I need you both under my control, and you are perfect leverage against each other. I'll allow visitations, of course. We must keep the passion alive to keep it useful, my dears. But, Syrenaria, you will return to your proper place, and, Ronan, you will return to a cell—where you belong.

"So I hope you enjoyed your moment of freedom here. It took me longer than expected to find you in these hills, after I flushed you out of the VDA. Thank you *so much* for isolating yourselves, so impossibly far from the help of your friends."

"You might as well kill me," Syren told Amarada. "I won't do what you say. I won't—"

Amarada closed her eyes as though struggling for patience. "I have been so gentle with you, Syrenaria, so kind, in a way my mother never was with me. I suppose, then, that this is my own fault, for being soft with you. My mother killed my first lover, you know. Though Ronan is *hardly* your first lover, he's the first one I've seen you look at that way. But I don't intend to kill him. I'm not sure it's even possible. But he can feel pain."

Another shot exploded, another punch hit Ronan, this time in the chest. He slammed back into the island, cracking his head against solid wood.

For a moment, he couldn't see or hear, and when he could, nothing made sense—because a demon lord had grabbed Amarada, claws ripping deep into her flesh as he picked her up.

The queen screamed as the demon lord lifted her nine feet in the air—and hurled her across the room. She slammed into the fireplace. She didn't shatter like the lamp had done. She didn't make nearly as much noise. She thudded heavily against the stones, thudded again to the floor, and fell silent.



Shots started firing all over the room. Bullets hit the demon, sparking flares of the Abyss, but the demon lord barely seemed to notice, at least until a slug tore through one of his leathery wings. Then he roared, thin lips stretching wide to further expose his jutting bottom tusks.

The demon lord vanished only to reappear in front of the black-clothed soldier who had fired the offending shot. The demon grabbed the vampire's head in both huge, clawed hands and twisted, ripping it off.

The sound was sickening, but Ronan barely heard it. He couldn't ghost, not in his current state, but he launched himself up, moving fast.

Syren's captor had removed one hand from his hold on her to shoot at the demon lord. Ronan grabbed that outstretched arm, shoving it out of the way, and slammed his other fist into the meaty face. Bone crunched. The big male staggered, releasing Syren.

"Ghost!" he shouted.

She stumbled as Ronan pushed her. She looked at him with her gorgeous blue eyes, huge and full of fear. Fear of the demon? Of him? He had no time to consider it.

"Ghost!" he shouted again, and she turned as though to flee like he'd commanded.

She had time to do it, time to get away. She absolutely did.

Even if she had simply stayed where she was, she might have been fine.

But when the demon lord's claws sank into Ronan's shoulder, when he shouted as one of those claws dug into the bullet lodged in his chest, Syren whipped back his way.

Ronan's hearing had gone out again, but he saw Syren's mouth stretch wide on a shout, saw how furious she looked. He saw her leap straight at the demon lord gripping him from behind.

Ronan tried to put up a hand to stop her, but it wasn't enough. Syren grabbed onto the demon lord—right as the air

squeezed tight.

It lasted only a moment, the absolute blackness and pressure, the suffocating squeeze—then Ronan gasped air into his lungs as the pressure vanished.

For an instant, the darkness softened into mere shadow.

Then he was swallowed by fresh blackness, this time without the sense of compression, this time with a familiar sense of nothingness. There was no time for fear. There never was, with a portal.

That always came later.

## TWENTY-FIVE

Luca.”

At the sound of his *comudari's* voice, Luca glanced up from his work, knife in one hand, whetstone in the other. He had all his weapons out on a table in the workshop area of the Bunker. The guns were finished and reassembled. Now he was working his way through his blades.

When Kyr stopped on the opposite side of the table, crystalline blue eyes intense, Luca lowered his gaze and resumed swiping his knife along the whetstone.

“Don’t you ever get tired of us?” Luca asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m fine. I assume that’s why you’re here?”

Luca was well aware that he had brought this scrutiny on himself by getting weird after the interrogation. He had tried to pretend that he wasn’t shaken, but the dirty work had dredged up a few too many memories. And the work itself . . .

Was it right to do something evil in the name of good?

Luca had never been able to answer that question. Always, he hoped it wouldn’t come up again, that he could stay cleanly on the right side of things.

It never lasted long.

After the work had been done, after Luca had extracted every possible piece of information, he had needed to be alone so he could pack that question away, along with the familiar stirrings of self-hatred.

His father, leader of the Order of the Blood, had called it weakness. The organization of assassins was built upon utter coldness. Distance from emotion, distance from others—even within the collective itself. Loyalty, according the Order, did not require love.

And that was why Luca's father had orchestrated Luca and Talia's separation, forcing them both into empty existences for twenty years. But the bond had never broken. The love had never faded.

Was that weakness?

Luca knew that it wasn't—but it was vulnerability. His father wasn't wrong about that.

The Order had successfully taught him how to be cold and ruthless in his actions ... but not in his feelings.

So he'd gotten a little fucked up after his dirty work. Frankly, he had felt he deserved it. And he'd felt he should deal with it alone.

Talia hadn't liked that. Neither, apparently, had Kyr.

Kyr huffed at Luca's guess. "What gave it away?"

"If you actually needed something from me, you would have yelled from across the Bunker."

"Ah."

Luca managed a small smile. Kyr was much less subtle than he liked to imagine himself.

"So do you?" Luca asked. "Get tired of us?"

Luca did not envy the *comudari* one bit. Nothing on earth could persuade Luca to fill such a role, managing a team like the Hush, being responsible for so much shit.

The rest of them got to have their occasional meltdowns. Kyr never had that luxury.

The *comudari* snorted. "I picked you. I think I have to deal with you."

Luca flashed a smile. "That's true."

"And I'm the one who puts all of you through the wringer all the fucking time. Don't imagine that I'm blind to that."

"We choose to be here. All of us want to be."

Kyr took a deep breath, his chest rising, like maybe he'd needed to hear that. "Yeah. Okay."

“Hey, bossman!” Rhys called from beyond the half wall that separated the training space from the lounge area. Rhys was standing at the bank of computers, leaning down like something there had caught his attention.

Kyr turned and stalked across the sparring ring to the doorway into the lounge. Nox and Talia were in the kitchen, and both of them went to see what was going on. Wes, emerging from the hallway that led to the private rooms also joined them.

Luca stayed where he was, wanting to finish the knife he was sharpening—until he heard Kyr say, “What the fuck was that?” Then Luca ghosted to the half wall and perched on top of it.

Rhys had dropped into the computer chair. Kyr was leaning over him, and everyone else was crowding around Kyr.

“Go back,” the *comudari* ordered.

Luca studied Rhys, his face bathed in the light of the computer monitor. His expression was serious as he worked. He was tense too, though that might have been due to all the crowding behind him. There was a time when Rhys wouldn’t have been able to handle that at all.

He was doing better.

“What are you looking at?” Luca asked.

“Footage from the cameras I set up at the mill,” Rhys replied. “Our teleporter returned. He went through the portal. There.” Rhys wheeled his chair out of the way.

“Is that ...” Kyr trailed off. His face had gone white.

“I think so,” Rhys said tightly. “I’ll try to clean it up, but ... I think it’s what it looks like.”

“Fuck.”

Kyr pivoted away from the computer. Talia nimbly hopped out of his way while Wes and Nox scrambled—as much as big vampire males could scramble—from his path. Kyr whipped his phone from his pocket.

“I’m trying the satellite phone,” the *comudari* declared.

Luca launched himself over the computer table to land beside Rhys. The night vision video was paused on a blurry image of demonic wings, viewed from behind. The demon lord must have been moving fast to be so out of focus, the head barely discernable, but the wings were distinctive enough.

Below the edge of those wings appeared to be a pair of bare feet.

And above the demon’s shoulder was a face. Female. Dark hair.

Unless that female was eight feet tall, that was two people. And that female ...

“They’re not answering,” Kyr reported.

The cabin was meant to be remote. It was meant to have no system that could be hacked or traced. That kept it unnoticeable, completely off grid. But, unfortunately, that meant its security was all internal. There were no cameras for the Hush to check in on from here.

And that female ...

“Gear up,” the *comudari* barked. “We’re going through that portal.”

## TWENTY-SIX

Ronan stared blearily at the cave's rough stone ceiling above him. Heavy chains were bolted into it. They ran down to the ends of the x-shaped iron cross to which he'd been shackled. He was suspended in the dry, dusty air. Needles had been plunged into his veins, and the attached tubes ran down to the iron sarcophagus below him.

Ronan had thought he had come to terms with his own death. He'd certainly thought about it enough. Never with longing, but certainly with acceptance of its inevitability. He had been ready.

Until Syren.

Then things had changed. Though his death had remained inevitable, he had no longer been able to accept it. For himself, he had begun to feel angry. Angry about the things he wanted and could not have. And for Syren, he'd felt worried. He'd even thought, *I'll have to cut this off as soon as we leave the cabin. This was selfish of me. It can't continue.*

But even then he had still imagined death on his own terms. Ideally in a fight. Possibly by his own hand.

He could never have imagined this: being bled to death for the enemy of his people.

It must be true, then, what he had feared, what Amarada had said. He was descended of Kadaros. The desiccated husk in the sarcophagus below him. The son of the dark god Vimonos.

No wonder his mother had gone mad. No wonder she had not been able to handle the thought of his existence.

Ronan knew that he should worry most about the possibility of his blood awakening Kadaros. But what was actually foremost in his thoughts was Syren. She was here somewhere.

Wherever *here* was.

Ronan had lost consciousness soon after the demon lord had brought them through the portal into Atar. Most likely, the

demon had teleported again to this stronghold.

How far were they from the portal? And where was the portal anchored on earth? It hadn't seemed to be the one Ronan's unit had used in the past.

When Ronan missed the next check in, the Hush would go to check the cabin. But all they would learn was that there had been a fight and that Syren and Ronan were not there.

They would never find this place. Which meant they would never find Syren.

For the hundredth time, Ronan pulled against his shackles. All he managed to do was make the cross swing on its chains, make the needles burn in his veins, and make the bullets grind in his wounds.

He let his head thump back. He squeezed his eyes shut and felt the tears leak from them, rolling down his temples.

His mind started to loosen, to unravel. He hoped he would pass out completely. He didn't want to mind walk, moving around, observing in useless frustration. He certainly didn't want to know if Syren was already dead.

Why hadn't she run at the cabin?

If only she'd run ...

A clawed grip seized his jaw. "A good thing, it seems," grated a deep voice, "that we brought another. Otherwise, you might not last long enough to restore the balance."

\* \* \*

Syren huddled against the rough stone wall. She couldn't decide what she feared more, the sunlight beaming down into what seemed like a deep, dry well ... or her fellow prisoner.

Syren hadn't understood at first that the demon lord had brought her and Ronan—God, *Ronan*, where was he?—through a portal into Atar. She had been too disoriented, too high on adrenaline to think through the brief, bizarre squeeze of teleporting or the subsequent, equally bizarre nothingness of the portal.



When the sunlight had blazed suddenly into her eyes, there had been no thought, no logic. She had thrashed and writhed to get free of the demon's hold, desperate to find shelter from the killing sun.

But the sun hadn't killed her, hadn't even made her ill—because it wasn't the same sun that she had learned to fear. It was another sun, that of Atar, her home world, and it could do her no harm. All the same, she still didn't like having it touch her. It was too strange to feel its warmth. Too strange to see the color of her own skin in its light.

So for a while, she had kept moving away from it, edging along the rough stony wall of her deep, cylindrical prison to keep to the shadows as the sun shifted overhead.

She had stopped chasing the shade, however, when it fell over her fellow prisoner.

A vampire, she was sure. Male, she thought, though it was hard to tell with the rags, mere shreds of material, that the vampire wore over a decrepit frame.

At first, she had thought it was Kadaros, awakened but weak. But when she had screamed, one thin hand and one stump of a wrist had reached up from the bundle of rags to cover the vampire's ears as he shrank away from the sound.

Syren had choked back her scream and stared. Eventually, dark eyes in a thin, old face had peered at her over knobby, drawn-up knees. She would have felt pity if she had seen pain, but she had seen only madness.

The prisoner had muttered unintelligibly—or so she had thought. Until she'd realized he was speaking the Epos Kalli, the ancient tongue of Atar.

Syren knew very little of the language, but she had made out the words “son” and “blood” and “balance.”

The vampire was muttering still, unknown words rattling out, most of them muffled by the wrist stump that kept covering his mouth.

Syren rose slowly and stiffly, eyes on the male, and considered making another attempt to climb the steep wall. No

grate covered the opening. None needed to if the wall couldn't be climbed.

With a last wary glance at the huddled figure, Syren turned to face the wall. Her scraped fingers found the handholds she had used last time. Her bruised toes found narrow purchase.

She had watched Ronan ghost up a higher wall a few nights ago, but she lacked that strength, and the wall offered no window ledges to launch herself between. She would have to climb.

A few hours ago—that was a guess, she had no idea how much time had actually passed—Syren had been so happy in her sweats and thermal shirt. Now, she was scraped and bruised from both climbing and falling and wished, desperately, for her leather pants and jacket. And, as her breasts scraped against the rough wall as she climbed, a bra seemed like a very practical item after all.

Syren worked her way up the wall to where she had made it last time, about ten feet up. Trembling from the exertion, she groped for another, higher hold—

And found it.

A sense of success, of possibility, renewed her energy. Her toes groped for fresh purchase and found a small hump of stone. Just enough. Syren pulled herself another foot up the wall. She could do this.

Then something appeared below her. She heard nothing and couldn't possibly look, but she knew, instinctively. She felt it.

She froze.

A voice rumbled, "You'll only kill yourself. Then what use would you be?"

Startled, Syren jerked—and lost her tenuous hold.

Her stomach soared into her throat as she fell, the wall rushing past her. She braced for the pain of impact with the ground, but instead found herself caught in a pair of massive, scaly-skinned arms.

There wasn't time even to thrash against that grip before blackness closed tight around her, suffocating and crushing. Then light and air burst back into existence. Syren jerked against the demon's hold—and tumbled free, hitting the ground with a thud far gentler than she would have experienced in the dry well.

Scrambling back from the towering, scaly-skinned demon lord, Syren's back thumped into what seemed to be a stone wall. As she got to her feet, hands scrabbling at that vertical stone surface behind her, two feet up, her hands met with something metal.

When she spun to see what she had touched, the scene that met her eyes was both horribly clear and impossible to comprehend.

On a stone platform lay an open iron sarcophagus streaked with rust. Within lay a shriveled body.

Though she had never laid eyes on the inert form of Kadaros, she did not question, even for an instant, that it was the Dark Prince arranged within that iron container.

He wore ancient armor, dented but seemingly freshly polished, unlike the rusty casket. That armor showed the size of his body at full health, but the figure was diminished, desiccated. Thin, pale skin lay dry and papery over shrunken muscle and prominent bone.

Disturbing as the body might be, the face was worse. The eyelids had thinned and lay grotesquely over protuberant eyeballs. The cheekbones jutted out above sunken cheeks. The thin, pale lips had shrunk back from the sharp fangs, and a tube had been fitted between them, filled with dark red blood that flowed down into that mouth.

The tube fed blood from a bag that was hung above the Dark Prince and below a metal x-shaped cross suspended from the roof by chains. That bag collected blood from four other tubes that ran down from where they were attached to needles. Those needles were taped in place to hold them deep in Ronan's veins, two at the insides of his elbows, the other two on either side of his groin where his warmups had been pulled

low. He'd been stripped of his shirt, exposing his claw-slashed and bullet-riddled torso as he lay unconscious and bloody, shackled to the cross.

Syren's brain snapshotted the whole scene in seconds, but she could not immediately accept the reality of it. She was frozen, staring in horror.

She had seen Ronan's body many times now, had smoothed her hands over his tattooed skin, feeling the warmth and power of his muscles, the passion of his body as he met her desire with his own. She had watched him sleep, enjoying the sight of his body relaxed and safe.

This sight, she hated. To see him unconscious, exposed and vulnerable. To see the untreated bullet wounds and claw marks in his torso and the theft of his blood from his veins. She hated seeing him shackled to that damn cross.

Somehow, that hatred overrode her fear of the grotesque and dangerous thing in the sarcophagus. It overrode her sense and reason. And it wasn't the first time that danger to Ronan had turned her into a fool. It wasn't the first time that she launched herself at the towering, winged creature responsible for it all.

She leaped for his throat, intending to sink her fangs in and rip at whatever she could. But it was her own throat in danger—the demon lord caught her by it. Syren's hand flew to the impossibly strong grip, scrabbling at the clawed fingers. Her legs flailed above the ground. Her throat burned. Panic seized her at the inability to breathe.

The huge demonic face regarded her with puzzlement and mild disgust. When the demon spoke, his mouth moved strangely to speak around the jutting bottom tusks.

“You are here to replenish him. I had thought you might be compliant. I can always put you back with the priest. Or I could give you to my grunts. They're quite bored after all these months without fresh ... entertainment.”

As soon as Syren stopped fighting, the demon lord lowered her to the ground, where her bare feet meet rough stone. They were in a rocky cavern. Daylight spilled through rough shafts

cut here and there into the ceiling. To her left lay a cave mouth, offering a glimpse of the desolate landscape beyond.

The demon's clawed grip released. Syren gasped air into her lungs and fell back against the stone platform and the iron sarcophagus. Her head bumped Ronan's hip. It snapped her upright, and she spun to face him. Her shoulders jerked with a sob of horror and helplessness.

"Feed him," the demon lord rumbled, "or watch him die."

Syren reached up and touched Ronan's cheek. His skin was cool despite the heat. He didn't budge. Dark rings showed under his eyes, and his skin was pale, sharply contrasting the slashing black ink that marked his body like a hedge of thorns.

Always, Syren had seen those sharp hooks and slashes as aggressive. And they were—but they were protective too, as though Ronan could keep himself safe inside them. Because this was not the first time that his space, his body, had been violated. And not even in violence. Just in cold disregard of him as a person.

Everything about Ronan shouted *fuck off, leave me alone*. And no wonder.

Tears spilled down Syren's cheeks as her fingers stroked his beautiful face. She didn't even care if he was descended of Kadaros. What did it matter what lay in his blood, the blood that was being stolen from him? All that mattered were the choices he made, the person he was—and all of that, right now, was being taken from him.

As it had been taken from him before.

"Do it now," the demon lord warned in a low voice.

Syren snarled at him over her shoulder, then she lifted her wrist to her mouth and used her fangs to slash at her vein. She moved around the stone platform to stand at Ronan's head, which lay at the height of her sternum. She lifted her arm and set her bleeding wrist to Ronan's mouth, using the fingers of her free hand to gently part his lips. Then, ignoring all the evil and horror around them, she stroked his hair as she had done while he slept.

Tears continued to spill down her cheeks. She kept blinking them away so she could see him.

“Come on, baby,” she whispered. “Stay with me.”

Ronan made a light grunting sound in his throat, then he swallowed. Syren swayed against him in relief.

“That’s it, baby, come on, don’t you dare die on me.”

He swallowed again. Then his eyelids fluttered open. She sucked in a breath, so glad to see those dark eyes, even if they were glazed with confusion and exhaustion and pain. He was alive. He was with her. Even caught in this nightmare scene, for a moment, that was all that mattered.

Then Ronan seemed to realize what was happening. His body jerked. His eyes pleaded, but she didn’t know what he was asking for.

When he started to choke, Syren drew her wrist away from his lips. Her blood spilled from his mouth as he coughed.

He said something, but she couldn’t discern the word amid his coughing. Then he gathered a huge breath into his lungs and yelled, “Run!”

He yanked and twisted against his shackles, lifting his body and slamming it back down. One of the needles slipped free, spilling blood.

“Run! Run now! Run!” Ronan shouted again, still thrashing as the demon lord stormed toward him.

Syren backed away, heart suddenly racing, torn. She did not want to leave him. Even though it was the only hope of getting help, she froze, agonized at the thought of abandoning him here.

Ronan tore one of the shackles free of the cross and flung himself at the demon lord as much as the other bindings would allow.

“*GO!*” Ronan screamed as he grabbed one the thick, swept-back horns on the demon lord’s head.

Syren bolted for the cave mouth. More than fear, it was anger that gave her speed—anger at her herself for leaving him, for being unable to do anything for him. But she would get help—or die trying.

She raced barefoot through the cavern and out into the sunlight, finding herself in a long, dry gorge. As she ran along the gorge, the sound of the fight and Ronan's shout of pain followed her, echoing in her mind long past the time she could actually hear them.

Maybe that was why she didn't hear the demons.

Lesser demons, nothing like their lord, each roughly humanoid but hideous with their stubby horns and heavy jaws, the small tusks jutting from their mouths, spilled down the side of the gorge like stones in a rockslide, sweeping in to meet her.

# TWENTY-SEVEN

Nox had never expected to walk through the sunlight. Behind the sunglasses, his eyes had adjusted within fifteen minutes, but he kept fighting back his instinctive panic at the sense of exposure. Of course, some of that panicky feeling likely had to do with the open, barren landscape, so different from the structured cityscape he was used to.

Atar had once been a rich and beautiful place, or so it was said, but now it looked like images of Utah, or maybe Mars. Arid. Desolate. Maybe it would have a certain harsh beauty if it weren't so dead.

He was glad to have the sunglasses hiding his unease. (*Sunglasses*. So fucking bizarre.) He suspected he wasn't the only one. None of the Hush except Kyr and Ronan had been to Atar before.

Nox shifted with impatience as he scanned the desolation from his assigned spot on the plateau. The others stood in their own prominent positions while Rhys and Kyr knelt at the edge working the drone. The Hush wasn't trying to hide. They needed to be noticed.

If they were seen, if demons came for them, they might get an indication of direction. The only other options were careful, time-consuming reconnaissance with the drone, or luck.

And all the while, who the hell knew what was happening to Ronan and Syren. Once Rhys has cleaned up the image from the camera at the grist mill, there had been no doubt.

How the fuck had they been found at the cabin?

Why the fuck had they been brought here?

Nox clenched his fists. He didn't like people being taken against their will. It was wrong to take someone's choices away from them. And Ronan ... that had happened to him too often.

Ronan and Nox had never talked about their experiences of captivity, but it was one thing they had in common. Nox had



understood, all too well, why Ronan had reacted like he did in the VDA lobby a few nights ago when he'd feared that Kyr would try to contain him.

Nox glanced at Kyr and Rhys, hoping to see something other than the fierce concentration they had both been displaying for the past hour. They needed more than one drone so they could search in more than one direction. They needed more than six people.

They needed ...

Fuck, they just needed to find Ronan and Syren.

With a frustrated sigh, Nox looked out again across his assigned stretch of nothingness. Then he stilled.

He squinted.

He took off the dark-tinted sunglasses and stared.

"There's ... something," he said.

In a heartbeat, Luca was beside him, eyes following Nox's pointing finger.

"Demon?" Nox asked.

The sharp-eyed assassin frowned. "I don't think so."

Rhys said, "Let me get the drone over there."

Working the controls, Rhys walked over to join Nox and Luca. Kyr, peering over Rhys's shoulder, followed. Wes and Talia held their positions to keep watch in other directions.

Suddenly, Kyr let out a ragged sound that betrayed just how worried the stoic *comudari* had been. "It's Syren!"

For the first time in the decades that Nox had worked with Kyr, the male completely abandoned protocol or any semblance of command—and ghosted.

There followed a brief, uncertain moment where it wasn't clear, of those remaining, who should be in charge.

Then Nox, for some fucking reason, said, "Um. So. Rhys, keep the drone up. Talia, stay with him. Luca, you and I will make a perimeter. Wes, you check on Syren and Kyr since you

have the First Aid kit. Rhys and Talia, follow when you've scoped the area."

And, for some fucking reason, everyone did what he said.

Ghosting was not Nox's strong suit, but he made it past Syren and Kyr only ten seconds or so after Luca. Ghosting didn't allow for more than gathering an impression, but Syren had been on her feet. That was something.

Nox came out of his ghost twenty feet from Luca, each of them facing opposite directions. Nox caught a few garbled words but couldn't really make out what Syren was saying to Kyr.

Nox heard the drone fly overhead. A few minutes later, Kyr called for him and Luca to join up.

"I'm going with you, Kyr!" Syren shouted angrily, her eyebrows drawn low. She yanked her arm away from Wes as he tried to bandage it.

Blood soaked one green sleeve of her thermal shirt. Her jaw was bruised, one cheekbone scraped. Blood spotted her sweatpants as well, and her bare feet were a bloody mess.

"I don't have spare boots, Syren, and you won't be fast enough. Nox will take you back—"

"Absolutely not! You are not giving up one of your fighters to babysit me. You need Nox, Ronan needs Nox. I'll stay here, if you fucking insist! Give me the drone. I'll monitor."

Kyr gritted his teeth. His eyes blazed with frustration. But Syren was right, and Kyr knew it.

"If you spot trouble, you get to the portal. Half a mile past the plateau, by an arch of stone."

"I heard you the first time! Stop worrying about me! Just get my—*please* just get my—" She burst into terrified, anxious tears. "Please, Kyr!"

"I will," he promised, handing her a gun and an extra magazine. "We will."

The *comudari* quickly relayed Syren's description of the land formations around the demon lord's hideout. Syren, it seemed, had managed to escape a cavern where the teleporter, Cretas, had the body of Kadaros—and Ronan. She had fled past a small army of demons, ghosting past them with minor injuries, though ripping up her feet.

There was a lot missing from the report but no time for any nonessential details. So Kyr, back in control, laid out the plan—and the Hush ghosted.

Nox dug deep for the energy to ghost the two-mile stretch, to maintain his speed along the gorge to bypass the waiting demons. If they attempted to engage the demons, the teleporter, forewarned, might vanish again, taking Ronan with him.

They would deal with the demons on the way out. If they made it out.

Compared to most vampires, Nox was pretty damn fast. The Hush, however, was not most vampires, and Nox was, by far, the slowest of the group. But what he lacked in speed, he made up for in brute fucking strength.

So when he got to the cavern and saw Luca and Talia frantically working to free Ronan from some kind of hanging contraption and the rest of the team fighting the monstrous demon lord, Nox went charging straight through the chaos of slashing blades. He barreled right into the demon lord and grabbed him around the middle. The winged bastard was about fifty percent bigger than Nox, but Nox had both momentum and a powerful motivation on his side.

Roaring, Nox slammed the demon lord into the rocky wall of the cavern. Nox yanked his *shiva* from its sheath, intending to stab it into the underside of the demon's jaw and up into his brain.

Nox didn't get that far.

The demon lord flung him back. Nox slammed into the chains of the hanging contraption, and the whole thing ripped free of the ceiling with Ronan still shackled to it.

One of the chains whipped into Nox as he and Ronan crashed to the ground.

Nox had no time to even attempt parsing out the chaos around him as he grabbed one of Ronan's wrist shackles and ripped it upward. He probably dislocated Ronan's shoulder doing it, but Ronan's arm was free. Ronan's other arm was already free, the hand bloody like he'd ripped the shackle loose himself, damaging his wrist.

Semi-conscious, Ronan tried to sit up but didn't make it. His body was a fucking mess. Bullet wounds, claw punctures, the one hand red with blood, needles in his veins. One needle had ripped free of its place in his arm. Another was still lodged, and there were two at his groin where his pants had been pulled partway down.

"Fuck," Nox rasped as he pulled the needles out and tugged Ronan's pants up to his waist.

He went to work on Ronan's left ankle. Luca appeared on Ronan's other side. The former assassin studied the shackle briefly, then he whipped out a lock pick set and fiddled with the latch for a second. The shackle popped open. Nox scrambled out of Luca's way as Luca elbowed into him to access the remaining lock.

Nox rose to return to the fight—and turned just in time see the most horrific sight of his life.

The Dark Prince Kadaros rose like a zombie from the iron sarcophagus.

Not having been among those that stormed the Brotherhood's ritual, Nox hadn't seen the body before. He'd heard the descriptions though, and they hadn't done the horror justice.

Kadaros, cadaverously thin, crawled from the inside of the casket. Antique armor rattled on his shrunken form. He slid from the platform, corpselike hands coming up in front of his face like he was taking in the horrific sight of them.

Then several things happened at once.

Kadaros screamed the most chilling scream that Nox had ever heard. That sound, Nox thought as his blood froze, would be the last he heard before he died.

But Kadaros also crumpled to the ground as he screamed—and there was a boom in the rock ceiling high above.

Jolting, Nox grabbed Ronan, now free of the x-shaped cross, in a fireman's carry and ghosted out of the cavern, praying the others had understood the sound, praying they would do the same.

Stone came crashing down inside the cavern, exploding against the ground and spraying debris through the cave mouth. As huge clouds of dust poured out in the wake of the collapse, Nox had to scan the faces of everyone gathered around him more than once before he could believe what his eyes saw—that everyone was there.

But they weren't out of danger. Within seconds, demons came pouring down the sides of the dry gorge.

With Ronan slung over his shoulder, Nox yanked his .45 from its holster—he'd lost his *shiva*, damn it, not to mention his sunglasses—and started firing.

The Hush ghosted all over the place, slashing and shooting, cutting down dozens of demons as telekinetically thrown rocks zipped through the air. There was no time to worry about taking heads. The demons would all regenerate eventually, but the Hush just had to incapacitate them enough to get safely clear of the gorge. They could not take the chance of being followed as they returned to where Syren was waiting and made their retreat through the portal. Better to deal with the demons here.

As for the demon lord and the Dark Prince ... the Hush would deal with that if it came to it. With any damn luck, the two had been pulverized in the rock fall.

One demon charged through Nox's fire, clearly intent on tackling him. Nox kicked the asshole in the chest, crunching bone and sending the demon flying.

Then Ronan woke up—and thrashed so damn hard that Nox got pulled off balance and fell.

As Nox scrambled up, Ronan got to his own feet, staring around like he was trying to figure out where the hell he was. Nox grabbed at Ronan's shoulder, intending to force him to the ground and out of the likeliest line of fire—but Ronan was gone.

Nox blinked. What the—

Ronan had ghosted.

Shit!

Nox spun, scanning the dry gorge. The Hush had cut through most of the demons, but shots were still firing and rocks were still flying. Nox spotted Kyr at the top of one side of the gorge and ghosted up to him.

Kyr, sensing an approach, whipped his way, gun raised. Registering Nox, Kyr pivoted to shoot a demon.

“Where the fuck is Ronan?” the *comudari* shouted.

Nox gave a brief, frantic report.

“Shit,” Kyr said, then he shoved Nox out of the way and fired another shot.

Snapping his fingers sharply in front of Nox's face, the *comudari* snapped, “It's not your goddamn fault! We'll get back to Syren and find him with the drone. Now fucking focus before you get yourself killed!”

Nox swallowed down his panic and turned to finish the fight. He might have just fucked up in a way he'd never forgive himself for, but if he knew nothing else, he knew how to fight.

The next demon that came at him, he grabbed and lifted with a roar of rage—at himself, at this whole fucking situation—and brought the piece of shit down on his upraised knee so hard that the spine snapped and stabbed upward through the stomach.

# TWENTY-EIGHT

It was agony. Sitting on her ass, waiting. Worrying. Alert for any sight or sound. But there was nothing but silence and the vast stretch of the empty landscape.

Syren flew the drone around a half-mile perimeter, staring at the control screen, constantly fighting the temptation to fly the thing in the direction of the demons.

Where the Hush had gone.

Where she'd left Ronan.

It had been necessary, leaving him. She had known it even at the time and saw it even more clearly now. For so many reasons, it had been the right thing. Not only could she not have saved him, it would have been a terrible disregard of his wishes and his sacrifice to remain in the cavern while he fought so hard to buy her a chance to escape. And if she hadn't fled, she would not have encountered the Hush. She would not have been able to tell them where to go.

So it had been necessary and it had been right, but ...

It still felt wrong.

Her hands shook and her eyes blurred until she could barely see the controller's screen. She looked up, blinking tears from her eyes, trying to clear them. Something flashed into sight in the distance. It vanished then appeared again, a mere flicker of movement.

Heart skipping, Syren tried to fly the drone over to whoever, or *whatever*, was moving her way. She couldn't catch it with the drone's camera, not with the figure approaching in spurts.

As the figure drew near, Syren abandoned the drone controller and picked up the gun that Kyr had left for her. She rose to her painful feet. Taking a marksman's stance, she forced herself to breathe, to prepare.

Nothing, though, could have prepared her for the sight of Ronan, forty feet away, stumbling out of his ghosting, unable

to sustain it. He lurched forward as though to ghost the rest of the way to Syren, but he staggered and fell to his hands and knees.

With a shout of mixed relief and alarm, Syren bolted across the rough ground, limping and stumbling on her torn feet. Ronan managed to get up and ghost the rest of the way, reappearing in front of her. Blood painted splashes of gleaming red over the black tattoos slashing his bare torso and arms. Metal cuffs encircled his wrists.

“Thank Idaios,” he gasped, reaching out to her with an expression of profound relief as he took one final, staggering step and collapsed.

Syren partially caught him, but his weight and their collective unsteadiness took her to the ground. She fell on her butt, hauling him against her.

Syren was vaguely aware that she was crying and saying something, maybe his name, she wasn't sure. Ronan pushed himself up enough to flop onto his back.

Syren frantically touched his face and neck. Her hands fluttered shakily over his gunshot wounds. His left hand was red with blood, though the shackle covered the damage to his wrist from where he had yanked that arm free to grapple with the demon lord and win her freedom.

He was frighteningly pale from blood loss and exhaustion. His breathing was shallow and halting, like he couldn't fill his lungs. Syren clung to him, crying, helpless against his pain. She could hear that pain in the small, awful sounds he made. She could feel it in the tightness and twitching of his body.

“It's okay,” Syren gasped, even though it wasn't. Nothing was okay. But at least he was here. With her.

Part of her brain was panicking about where the rest of the Hush was, but she couldn't focus on that. There was only her and Ronan.

He was trying to speak, so she made herself still, made herself go quiet. She stroked his face, hating how it blurred



before her. She wanted to see him. She dashed a sleeve across her eyes.

“I ...” Ronan broke off, choking.

“It’s okay, baby, it’s okay.”

“I ... love you.”

Syren burst into tears. Before she could reply, before she could draw those same words from her heart to her tongue, Ronan made a sound of terrible pain and arched off the ground—but he was still trying to speak.

“At least ... I get to take ... my last breath ... with you.”

Syren sobbed and clutched at him as he cried out, twisting and arching in agony. His eyes were wide for one last moment, then they rolled back in his head.

“Thank God!”

The shout came from maybe ten feet away and Syren was vaguely aware of people arriving, vaguely aware that it was the Hush. But she could feel no relief, not now, not as a terrible spasm shot through Ronan’s body.

“Christ!” Syren heard, dimly registering her brother’s voice. Kyr dropped to his knees at Ronan’s side as another spasm gripped him. “He’s having a seizure, hold onto him!”

Syren was already doing that, and there was no chance of her letting go, not for anything.

Kyr grabbed Ronan’s arms, and Rhys appeared and grabbed Ronan’s legs, but even all three of them could not fully combat the increasingly violent shuddering and twisting of Ronan’s body.

Syren lost track of herself, lost track of reality. Her existence had contracted around the terrible, hopeless battle against the agony tearing Ronan apart from inside.

With an awful shout, Ronan arched off the ground, his back bowing up—then he collapsed and went still.

Completely still.

Completely silent.

It was so sudden and so surreal after the violent seizure that for a second Syren only stared, uncomprehending. The only sound now was the ragged breathing of the people surrounding Ronan.

It wasn't until Kyr pressed two fingers against Ronan's jugular and said, "Shit," then started jabbing around to hunt desperately for a pulse that Syren snapped out of her shocked stillness.

"Wha—oh my *God!*" Syren shook Ronan's still shoulders.

"Get out of the way!" Kyr barked.

As Syren scrambled, a pair of strong arms hooked around her from behind. She shrieked, flailing automatically, but the huge male holding onto her didn't let go. She vaguely registered that it was Nox as he hauled her back.

The scene was even more surreal than Ronan's seizure had been. Because she stood back from it. Because it was impossible. Unacceptable.

Some of the Hush stood in the distance, holding a perimeter. Rhys was on his feet, gasping like Syren was, hands on his head. Syren was straining forward against Nox's hold as Kyr performed CPR.

Ronan's body jerked slightly with the chest compressions but stilled every time Kyr stopped pumping to blow air into Ronan's lungs. It went on forever: Kyr on his knees, driving with both palms against Ronan's chest, bending to breathe into his mouth.

It seemed like it would never end.

Then Luca appeared beside Kyr and touched his shoulder and said, "Enough."

Kyr twisted and shoved Luca back then returned to his work.

Forever. Again forever.

Until Luca shouted, "Enough! Leave it, Kyr! He's gone!"

That was when Syren screamed. That was when Nox let her go, when Kyr shoved to his feet, when the others abandoned their posts to converge on the impossible.

Syren flung herself at Ronan, slamming to her knees. She grabbed him with a strength she had not known herself to possess and hauled him up against her.

“Nononononono, Iloveyoutoo, pleasenonononono,” Syren sobbed, spilling her tears all over him as she rocked. He was so horribly still, so utterly still.

Forever. Again forever.

The moment stretched like time had stopped, like there could not possibly be anything beyond this moment, ever again.

Until several things happened at once, all incomprehensible.

Ronan’s eyes flew open. His body bowed up again but this time with a huge, gasping breath. And a pulse boomed out from him, traveling through Syren’s body, traveling through the ground like a detonation, and with it a flash of light.

It blinded Syren, robbed her of thought—until Ronan collapsed back onto her thighs, choking for breath. Syren wasn’t entirely sure what she was saying or doing, only that she was clutching at him as he was at her, frantically touching him all over, too shocked for anything but soul-deep relief.

He was shaking against her. Or maybe she was shaking? Her hands certainly were as they touched every reachable bit of his skin, desperate to reassure herself that he was, in fact, alive.

Then he grabbed onto her arm, the injured one, above the bloodstain. He shoved the sleeve up her arm and made a sound of distress at her slashed wrist, which she had done herself in careless desperation.

Ronan pushed himself up, drawing himself onto his knees. Sobbing, Syren reached for his face, needing to see his eyes. They met hers and he reached out toward her scraped cheek. His eyes were glazed, his focus not quite there.

Then Kyr was beside him, tugging at Ronan's shoulder, trying to see his wounds.

"Let Kyr look," Syren said shakily to Ronan. "Let him help."

"What the fuck," Kyr muttered. "Ronan ... Syren, the ..."

Syren looked. The bullet wound in Ronan's chest was gone. So were the two in his abdomen. As were the deep gouges from the demon lord's claws.

"What the ..." Syren breathed, too stunned even for relief. "How can ..."

Luca said, "Kyr, we need to—"

"I know. Fuck. *Christ*. Syren, we have to go. Ronan ... *fuck* ..."

When Syren moved to get up, Ronan climbed to his feet. But he didn't meet her eyes again. He was looking down. He made a sound of distress at the sight of her feet.

"I'm fine, baby, I'm fine, we have to get out of here, okay?"

"Syren, he's in shock. Let me carry you back to the portal. Nox will—"

But Ronan grabbed Syren, sweeping an arm under her legs and hauling her up against his chest.

Syren tried to protest, but Kyr said, "Just let him, Syren, it's not worth the fight. All right, let's move!"

## TWENTY-NINE

Syren's sense of the surreal continued for a long, long while. Because ... how could any of this be real?

Not just her time in Atar but also returning to earth through the portal, being carried, still by Ronan, through a creepy old mill and out into the cool April night. Being carried to the Hush's black van. Sitting on Ronan's lap in the back of the van with the rest of the Hush as Wes drove them to VDA headquarters.

Syren had tried to slide off Ronan's lap to sit on the bench beside him, but he'd tightened his hold, not wanting to let her go. He still hadn't said anything. He still had the broken shackles on his wrists because no one dared interfere with his hold on Syren. His eyes were still glazed. And Syren was still so damn worried, even amid her slightly disbelieving relief, that she couldn't really process anything.

Maybe no one could. No one said anything.

The scent of blood in the van was strong. It was mostly Ronan's. Some of it was Syren's. Some of it was Luca's. She hadn't seen before that he was hurt.

Luca was the only one with his eyes closed, his head resting against the side of the van, lolling slightly with the vehicle's movement. Talia kept looking worriedly at him, but he'd pushed away her ministrations, and Talia mostly left him alone. Except for the hand she kept clamped on his thigh.

All other eyes kept flicking to Ronan. Of course they did. He had been ...

God, he had been *dead*. And now he wasn't. Syren knew such things could happen, that someone could return from brief death against seemingly impossible odds. Even among humans, it could happen.

What did not make sense was that Ronan had returned from death *healed*. Even the bullets had worked free of his flesh and fallen to the ground, leaving no marks. The dark circles were

gone from his under his eyes. The pallor was gone from his skin, despite the dried blood all over it. Almost, he seemed to glow.

But surely not. It was the moonlight flashing through the van's rear window. It was the bizarreness of everything that had happened.

Syren huddled in Ronan's arms, her ear pressed against his sternum, listening to the beat of his heart. It wasn't quite steady, but it was *there*. He was *alive*.

Was this real?

Why wouldn't he speak?

Shock, Kyr had said, and no wonder. But it still scared her. Because he might be alive and his wounds might be gone, but he wasn't okay.

Maybe she wasn't either because she could not get the tears to stop leaking from her eyes. So she closed them and tucked herself against Ronan.

The van finally stopped. Ronan, still carrying Syren, got out. Everyone got out. Jonus was there and so was another doctor, a blonde female, as well as a female that Syren took for a nurse.

There was a lot of noise, a lot of words, but Syren huddled against Ronan's body and let the chaos swirl around her. She was tired. So tired.

Ronan carried her into the VDA lobby then the elevator. Luca and the medical staff got in with them. But now Ronan was shaking, and he sank down to the floor.

The elevator stopped. The doors opened with a ding. Luca and the female doctor exited, but the nurse stayed, hitting a button on the control panel to keep the doors open.

"I'll get a chair," the nurse said and left.

Dr. An crouched beside Syren and Ronan. He lodged two fingers against Ronan's jugular. Ronan didn't react to that, but when the nurse returned with a wheelchair and Dr. An tried to pull Syren out of Ronan's grip, Ronan growled.

Glancing at Ronan as though watching for a reaction, Dr. An pulled a syringe from his pocket. Ronan didn't react, not even when the doctor inserted the needle into his neck. Syren made a sound of protest.

Dr. An, with a gentle hand on Ronan's shoulder, looked at her and said, "I'll take care of him. Let Edan take care of you. You're safe, Syren."

*Safe.*

Syren let her eyes close. She let the wave of exhaustion that had been lapping at her since getting in the van wash over her entirely. She let it bring blissful, peaceful darkness.

Syren woke lying in a bed in a white room. White and gray, she saw as her vision cleared. Dimly lit. A blanket was draped over her.

She groped at something attached to her arm, but a large hand covered hers. "Leave it," said a familiar voice. Kyr's voice.

She turned her head on the pillow to see her brother sitting in a chair beside her bed. He still wore his red-dusted tactical clothing. His expression was stern, but she saw through that to the truth. She knew him well.

"I'm okay," she reassured him.

Some of the sternness melted away to reveal his worry. "You scared me, Syren. Fuck, you scared me."

"Where's Ronan?"

"With Jonus."

"Can I see him?"

"Soon. I need to talk to you first."

"I want to see Ronan."

"I know. Please talk to me first. Please, Syren."

With anyone but Kyr she would have refused. She would even have been angry. But she saw the lingering fear in his eyes. She saw how he loved her. She loved him too.

So she sat up and flung her arms around him. Kyr sucked in a sharp breath and hugged her fiercely back.

“Thank you,” she said. “For saving me. Us. *Thank you.*”

“I love you, Syren,” Kyr said in a strangled voice.

God, how was she so lucky to have these males in her life?

“I love you too,” she said and started crying into his shoulder. She didn’t even know why the tears came. They just did.

Then she told Kyr what had happened. How Amarada had arrived to seize her and Ronan. How the demon lord had appeared and thrown Amarada across the room. She even told Kyr what Amarada had claimed about Ronan. She told him because she trusted her brother to see through the queen’s lies.

Syren told him also about the well and the mad vampire. A priest, the demon lord had called him. Until talking to Kyr, she had entirely forgotten about her fellow prisoner.

And finally, she told her brother about being brought to Ronan to feed him, how he’d been unconscious and had woken, choking on her blood, how he’d wrenched partway free of his bindings to fight with the demon lord so she could run.

Silence descended in the wake of her story. Syren’s mind was oddly blank, not ready to analyze any of the events, but she could see her brother thinking through it all.

After a while, he asked, “What do you think it means that Ronan recovered like he did?”

“I don’t know.”

Kyr scrubbed at his jaw. He said nothing of Amarada’s claims and how they could explain Ronan’s recovery. He said only, “It means something.”

Syren’s chest felt tight. “I know.”

“Even if—”

“Don’t say it, Kyr.”



“Even *if*,” he insisted. “Not everything is about blood.”

Syren let out a shuddering breath. “I need to see him,” she said, feeling desperate now, feeling impatient.

The door to the room opened and Dr. An peered inside. He looked slightly harried.

“How are you feeling, Syren?” the doctor asked.

“I want to see Ronan.”

His relief was palpable. “Good. I’ll take you. He wants to see you.”

“He said so?”

“Not with words. But I can tell.”

Kyr asked tightly, “He still hasn’t spoken?”

“He’s still in shock.”

A sudden thought occurred to Syren. She asked Dr. An, “You didn’t give him the counteragent, did you?”

“No. Why?”

She told him what Amarada had said about Genesys awakening a sleeping part of Ronan, about the counteragent essentially poisoning him. The doctor listened closely, though he frowned.

Syren said, “I don’t know if it’s true. She’s a liar. But ... after what happened ... I don’t know. I thought you should know.”

“Yes,” Dr. An replied, sounding a little winded. “I’ll ... look at the new blood samples I took with that in mind. I’ll ... Christ, I don’t know what to ... it never occurred to me that ...”

“Can I see him?”

“Yes. Honestly, even though I hate to have either of you out of my sight right now, I think he needs to leave here. He appears to be physically healthy. Unusually healthy. But this isn’t a good place for him right now. Mentally. He can’t go

home, though, not to his place where there are no resources, and definitely not alone. Someone needs to be nearby.”

“I will be nearby,” Syren insisted.

“Nearby both of you,” Dr. An clarified.

Kyr said, “I’ll take them to the abbey.”

\* \* \*

Ronan felt like he was locked in a box inside himself. He felt like his body wasn’t really his own, like he wasn’t controlling it even as it—he—paced around the white room.

Then Syren was there. He didn’t like seeing her in the chair, didn’t like that she was hurt. He dimly heard her say that it was just her feet, that they were only sore.

As soon as she was in his arms again, he felt better.

His body went where it was told to go. They got in a car. They drove somewhere. Dimly, he knew where they were, but he was too deep inside himself to connect with it. Outside that internal space were things he didn’t want to think about. So he stayed inside the box within himself.

Like a cell.

He hated it and was terrified of where he was, locked in there, but he was even more terrified of coming out.

So he went where he was told, to a room he’d never been in. It was a sitting room then a dining room, then a bedroom. He crawled in the bed with Syren. He curled up with her. He let her stroke his hair. He let his eyes close. He let himself pretend that he was safe, and he let the blackness come.

\* \* \*

Syren limped into the abbey kitchen. She hated leaving Ronan, but he was sound asleep and she was so damn hungry she felt sick.

Luca looked up from an open pizza box. Despite having one arm in a sling, his dark hair was combed neatly back but his flannel shirt had all the buttons correctly done. With his good

hand, he was putting a slice of what looked like supreme on a plate. He held it out to her.

“God, thank you,” she said, accepting the offer.

He put a new slice on a new plate. “Ronan’s asleep?”

“Yeah.”

Syren hobbled to the table with her plate. Her feet were already much better and should be healed in a few hours. She did not know how humans dealt with their long, slow recoveries. She did not know how Ronan had dealt with feeling like crap for years and years.

He’d had *morphine* with him at the cabin.

*How much pain are you in?* she had asked.

*I’m fine*, he’d replied. *I’m used to it.*

And now ...

What did it mean that his body had healed itself?

Luca brought the pizza box over to the table then went back for his plate.

“How are you?” Luca asked as he sat down.

“I’m fine.”

Luca stilled, not touching his food. He didn’t appear to be looking at her, not directly, but Syren could feel his attention as he asked quietly, “Are you?”

“Don’t ask me that or I’ll start crying.”

“You can cry,” Luca said. “I understand.”

Syren’s throat constricted. “I don’t want to cry.”

“Okay. I understand that too.” Luca studied his pizza slice like he wasn’t sure how to manage it one handed.

“Are you okay?” Syren asked, picking up her own with a practiced center fold.

Luca studied her technique and copied it. “Yes,” he replied simply.

Syren chomped into her slice, glancing at Luca as she ate. She didn't really know him. She should. She should know all of the Hush better than she did. Except for Rhys, she had always felt insecure around them in the past. Partly because they were intimidating. Partly because they did important, dangerous work that had always made her feel doubly useless by comparison.

She had to get over that feeling. She wanted to know the Hush. All of them. Actually know them. As people.

*Rescue dogs*, Amarada had called them. It was hard to imagine that with Luca. He looked so pulled together, so controlled. But you could never really tell what someone was truly like based on appearances.

"Has he said anything?" Luca asked, holding his folded slice of pizza on his plate, still not eating.

"No. And I'm scared." Syren dashed her eyes against one shoulder then other. "I don't know what to do."

Luca frowned at the middle of the table, but his gaze seemed to be mostly internal. "Sometimes ... it takes a little while to arrange things inside yourself. Before you can talk to people. Try not to worry."

Tears spilled down Syren's cheeks. She tucked her hands into her lap, losing all interest in her food.

Then Claire walked into the kitchen, let out a little cry, and rushed over to Syren. The petite female flung her arms around Syren, giving her a huge and desperate hug that had Syren crying in earnest.

"It's okay, it's okay, everything will be okay," Claire murmured, and even if it wasn't true, it soothed Syren to hear it and to feel Claire's love and to be safe for the moment.

As the tears ebbed, Syren started to feel a little embarrassed, but Claire was crying too ... and rubbing her eyes dry on Syren's shirt. It made Syren chuckle.

Claire drew back, sniffing, and used her own sleeve to dab at Syren's cheeks. Syren pushed her away, laughing, and felt again how hungry she was. So when Claire grabbed a plate

and a slice of pizza and sat beside Syren to eat, Syren picked up her own center-folded slice and listened to Claire tease Luca about eating junk food.

What followed was a big, ridiculous debate about the definition of junk food. Syren suggested that Claire consult one of her dictionaries. That earned her what she decided to call “the Claire glare,” which was way too damn cute to take seriously.

Soon after, Talia arrived with wet, freshly washed hair, and she gave her mate so much shit about the pizza that he finally pointed to his arm in the sling and said, “What the hell was I supposed to do?”

“I can make you something else,” Talia said so gently that it was clear the teasing was over. She was worried about her mate. She loved him.

Luca sighed, “It’s been a really fucking stressful night. Can I just eat this goddamn pizza without having to justify—”

“Yes.” Talia put another slice on his plate, looking apologetic. “Of course.”

“Give me your olives,” Luca bargained as though negotiating peace.

Talia sighed and started to pluck them from her slice. “The things I do for love.”

# THIRTY

Ronan felt like he traveled a long, long way back to his body, and when he returned, his body didn't feel at all the same as before.

What brought him back was Syren.

Even from that deep, locked away place in himself, Ronan sensed her. He couldn't stay where he was, shut away, apart from her.

Apart from his mate.

So he followed the path of the bond, as he had followed it before in Atar, when she had been alone and unprotected in that hostile landscape. When he had known no other purpose but to get to her.

He knew no other purpose now. For this moment, he was returning not to any of the horrors he didn't want to face, but to her. Only to her.

They were lying on their sides in a comfortable bed. She was snuggled against his body, her back to his front, with him curling slightly around her. One of his legs was between hers, and both his arms were hooked around her. He didn't remember pulling her against him.

As he returned to himself, he felt strange in his body. The absence of pain was so foreign to him that he almost felt like he hadn't actually made it back to his body at all. He felt too light, like nothing was weighing him down. Like he could fly straight out of himself.

He felt, too, a sort of current in his blood. Something that almost ... hummed.

It felt like power.

Maybe this was what it felt like to not be sick? It had been so long since he had been healthy that he couldn't remember.

Ronan didn't think he moved, but something must have alerted Syren to his wakefulness. Her fingers began to stroke

gently back and forth along one of his forearms.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk to me yet.”

Her patience and tenderness made him ashamed. That was his role, as her mate, to protect and shelter her, and not just with his body. He was supposed to guard her from all terrors and threats, not abandon her amid them while he hid in himself.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Syren twitched against him in surprise at his words, but she didn’t try to turn in his arms.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” she said.

There were a hundred things to be sorry for, and all of them hovered at the shadowy edges of his mind, truths he wasn’t ready, quite yet, to shine a light on.

She had accepted his silence before, but she didn’t accept it now. She rolled onto her other side, dislodging his leg, to face him. A nightlight glowed above the headboard, casting faint, warm light onto them, but the room was otherwise dark in the way that only steel shutters could render it. It was day.

She slid her leg between his, sending a rush of heat through his body. Her fingers came up to his face, gently stroking his jaw. In the glow of the nightlight, he could see her eyebrows pinching together.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” she repeated.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Ronan promised. “Not again. I won’t let you be in danger.”

Images rose up inside him. Syren, leaping into the grasp of the demon lord. Syren, mere inches from that monster (and the other, more terrible monster) in the Atarian cavern. And himself, shackled, unable to help her.

He did not know what it would take to keep her out of future danger, but whatever it took, he would do it. He would find the strength in himself. No other possibility was acceptable.

Syren didn't respond to his words. She just kept stroking his face. He lifted his arm from around her and caught her hand. He pulled it into the sheltered space between their bodies, holding it against his heart.

She whispered, "I don't believe the things my mother said."

Fear strummed through Ronan's blood. All the dark thoughts hovering at the edges of his mind tried to creep in. He pushed back against them. He wasn't ready to think about any of that.

But there was one thing Amarada had said that Ronan needed to explain. As best he could anyway.

"She said ... I don't know if you understood what she implied ... that she and I—" Ronan broke off as a wave of anger washed through him.

"She had already told me."

"What?"

"That night I confronted her? She told me that you two had been ... together."

Ronan frowned, thinking back. "You tried to ask me about it, didn't you? That night you asked me if I had once felt differently about her."

"At first I thought you were ... not exactly lying but, well ... not telling me. But then at the cabin when she crowded into you, I saw your face. You were confused, like you didn't know what she meant. Then you were so angry. I know her, Ronan. Whatever she did, it was without your consent. I could tell."

Ronan's chest tightened. His throat closed. But he forced out the truth. "It's fuzzy."

"Will you tell me? Do you want to?"

"It was the night my unit worked security at the Residence. She told me she needed a room checked. I went with her, thinking it would be a drawing room or something. It was a bedroom. She handed me a glass." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't know why the fuck I drank from it."



“She can manipulate anyone. Whatever she said or did, threatened you, threatened others, it would have been designed to offer you only one possible route: hers.”

Ronan frowned, trying to remember, hating that he couldn't. “After the drink, it's all ... I don't know. I can't really remember anything after that, not clearly. I think she fed from me.”

“She drugged you.”

“I guess so. I don't know why else I wouldn't remember it.”

“I think what she really wanted was to taste your blood. It's very possible that you two didn't ... do anything. She's a liar.”

Ronan's heart thudded as the dark thoughts stirred at the shadowy edges of his mind. Amarada had wanted to taste his blood in the first place because of the things she had already known about him. About his mother.

And that had confirmed, more than anything else, what Ronan had known, deep down, all his life. How could he not have known it, growing up alone and unwanted, the son of the mad female?

He'd been only six years old when he'd learned about her. One of the caretakers had told him, though he couldn't remember why. Whatever the reason for the revelation, his mother had been dead by then because she had refused to eat.

Somehow, Ronan had always known that it was his fault, and now there was no denying it. There was something not right inside him.

Syren's fingers slipped free of his hold and splayed over his chest, rubbing gently, like she felt his pounding heart.

“Ronan, you have to understand: Amarada grabs a fact or two and twists them into a lie that serves her. It's funny how I can see that so clearly when she's doing it to someone else, but I could never see it when she was doing it to me.”

Ronan got stalled by that. He knew that Amarada had done that to Syren, repeatedly, horribly, but how could he acknowledge that in this moment without acknowledging that

maybe Amarada had done the same to him? It didn't feel that way. Everything she'd said had felt true.

Syren sighed, like she knew what he was thinking. But she didn't try to argue with him. She said, "None of that matters right now. Just be here with me, Ronan. Just you and me."

Syren wedged herself more firmly against him, her leg sliding further between his until her hip notched into his groin. Then she kissed him.

No one had ever kissed him before, not like this. Tenderly. Lovingly. With passion but without demand. It reached deep into him, right into his heart, pushing his fears back to the shadowy edges of his mind. He let them fade from his awareness. There was only Syren.

He let her explore his mouth, answering her kiss but letting her lead it. She nibbled lightly at his lip then stroked her tongue against his, making him moan. She rocked against him, pressing into his swiftly hardening cock until nothing else existed, until his body remembered that its very purpose was to serve hers.

He rolled over her, putting her on her back. He took over the kiss, deepening it until she was gasping and clutching at him. He ground his cock against her mound, loving how she strained up against him.

"I need you," she gasped. "I need you inside me."

He would always give his mate what she needed.

Ronan set the head of his cock against her slick entrance and slid into her body's heated grip. Syren moaned and clung to him. He drew back, letting his crown stroke her inner walls, pleasuring them both, before thrusting deep.

"Ohhhh," she breathed, "yes."

Her fingers scrabbled at him, at his back, at his ass, like she needed him closer. Groaning, Ronan rolled his hips, giving her the intensity she needed, fucking harder and deeper until she was clawing at him and whimpering for release.

Sliding a hand under her hips, Ronan angled her to take his cock deeper. It forced her legs further apart, gave him room to really move. He massaged her belly and breasts, loving how she arched into the touch, how she lost herself in the pleasure. Ronan lost himself there too, and gladly.

Everything else disappeared. He thrust harder and faster, letting his mate enjoy his body and her own.

He longed to feed her, but he didn't let the thought fully in. It would bring other things with it. At least he could give her this.

When Syren screamed and seized against him, her channel fisting his cock, he didn't expect to come. He never came so quickly, so easily, but everything in him opened completely at the sight and sound and sensation of his mate's passion. Light seemed to flash. Electricity seemed to zip through his veins. And when he came, roaring and emptying inside her, all the power that had been humming quietly, mostly unacknowledged, inside him rushed through his body.

He felt like he was split open. In his chest. Between his shoulder blades. Along every limb and through the crown of his head.

For a moment, in the first unthinking surge of his orgasm, it felt beautiful. It felt like *life*.

But as his body continued to seize against his beautiful female, inside his beautiful female, the unfamiliar sensations in his body—the power, the otherness—brought all the shadowy shit rushing in from the edges of his mind. As he orgasmed, he felt how he wasn't in control of himself. He was open, too open—and he was suddenly terrified of what might slip out.

He was supposed to protect his mate. Shield her. Even from himself.

But here he was, losing control of himself, becoming something else, something that he didn't understand and that couldn't possibly be good.

As Syren collapsed back onto the bed as though unaware of the horror looming over her, Ronan scrambled back. His cock pulled free, still hard, still spilling. Syren bolted upright as he fell off the end of the bed and scrambled to his feet.

Syren's eyes widened like she suddenly saw the truth of him.

Ronan didn't need to see it. He *felt* it. The wrongness inside him. The strange, lit-up power that made him a dangerous and bad thing. The searing along his back.

Suddenly, he knew what that searing was, what that strange, unfamiliar weight was, and, in absolute horror and terror, he screamed.

# THIRTY-ONE

Kyr raced down the hallway toward Syren and Ronan's room. Toward the scream.

It wasn't Syren screaming. By the time Kyr had flung open the door of his and Mira's room, he'd been sure of that. The scream was male.

Even though he knew it had to be Ronan, Kyr's brain couldn't quite accept that. Despite all the horrors the Hush had seen, despite all the physical pain that Ronan had dealt with during the years Kyr had known him, he had never, ever heard Ronan scream. Shout, yes. Scream, no.

Like something was tearing him apart.

Kyr threw open the door of Syren's suite and raced through the sitting and dining areas, bursting into the bedroom.

He could not, at first, comprehend what he felt or what he saw.

A boom reverberated through the ground, shaking Kyr nearly off his feet. Ronan was huddled against a wall, his back to it, crouching low, his hands up as though to ward something off—and he was faintly glowing. Light splashed briefly up the wall behind him, flaring out on either side—and Syren was flying through the air as though flung backwards.

She fell onto the bed and skidded into the headboard with a thump.

Someone barreled into Kyr from behind. Instinctively, he spun to meet the attack, but it was only Nox, staggering to recover his footing. The rest of the Hush, all gathered at the abbey overday, poured into the outer room.

Kyr barked at Nox, "Deal with Ronan!" as he raced to his sister. She was scrambling up on the bed. He caught her arm when she tried to scramble off the foot of it, intent on approaching Ronan.

"Let go!" she shrieked.

“Stop!” Kyr snapped.

When she stopped thrashing to get free, Kyr snatched up the robe draped over a nearby chair and thrust it toward her. It didn't bother him that she was naked, but he thought it might bother her once she realized. Kyr had already been dressed, working on a review of the drone footage, planning the Hush's next move.

Ronan had stopped screaming. In fact, he'd gone silent.

“What happened?” Kyr asked his sister, turning on the bedside lamp as her arms shot through the sleeves of the robe.

“I don't know!”

Kyr's sharp senses couldn't miss the fact that they'd been fucking. Which meant, if nothing else, that Ronan had not woken from a nightmare. So what the fuck had happened?

“Kyr!” Nox shouted.

Ronan had gotten up. If he was still glowing, it wasn't possible to see it in the lamplight. He was, however, still freaking the fuck out. Kyr could see it in his eyes. He was going to bolt.

“Stop him!” Kyr shouted at Nox.

Nox tackled Ronan as the tattooed male started to take off. Nox took him to the ground, pinning Ronan facedown with his 260-pound body.

What happened next, like so much of what had been happening with Ronan, was hard to understand.

Ronan somehow shoved up against Nox's greater bodyweight. Then, it must have been a trick of the light or just the bizarreness of the moment—because it looked like something flashed out from Ronan's back and Nox was flung back across the room.

Unlike Syren, Nox didn't land on the bed. He crashed into a chair.

Ronan bolted. And, some-fucking-how, he made it past all of the Hush gathered in the sitting room.

Chaos ensued as the entire team raced after Ronan. Luca or Rhys should have been able to catch him, but the chase led out into the hallway, down the stairs to the lower level, and halfway down the basement hallway before it ended.

It ended not because anyone had caught Ronan, but because he'd bolted into the containment room instead of the parking garage like Kyr had expected. And he'd slammed the door shut.

Everyone hovered uncertainly, half dressed, outside the containment room. Anyone could walk right in because it couldn't be locked from the inside, only from the outside.

The track lights were on in the hallway, offering some illumination, but the containment room was dark. There was no mysterious glow this time.

Kyr flipped its main light switch and looked through the narrow window of reinforced glass. Ronan was sitting in the corner with his back to the wall, his knees drawn up, his forehead down on his knees.

"Someone get him some clothes," Kyr said.

Moments later, Rhys appeared at Kyr's side, clearly having ghosted up to the suite, and handed Kyr a pair of Ronan's warmups.

Syren appeared on Kyr's other side and tried to push him out of the way. "Let me talk to him."

"No. I'm going to talk to him."

"Kyr, *please*."

Kyr looked down at his sister's frightened face. She loved Ronan, maybe was bonding to him. It had been obvious before, but Kyr could really see it now. Her fear was for Ronan, not for herself.

But Ronan had thrown her. No matter how worried Kyr was about his brother, he could not pretend that hadn't happened. He needed to know what was going on before he allowed the two of them anywhere near each other.

“I’m going to talk to him,” Kyr repeated. “The team can stay here. I need everybody else out of this hallway. Mira?”

His mate emerged from the throng and walked toward him and Syren. Mira put an arm around Syren’s shoulders and offered her a warm smile.

“Let’s go up to the kitchen.”

“Mira, no, I don’t want—”

“Please trust me, Syren,” Kyr said. “I just need to talk to him.”

“He didn’t mean to throw me!” Syren protested, knowing Kyr too well to miss the fact that that was why she was being shut out. “He was scared of something!”

“Of you?”

“I don’t think so. Everything was fine, then he started ...”

“Glowing,” Kyr supplied, aware of how weird it sounded.

“He was trying to get away from me. I wouldn’t leave him alone and he panicked. Please, Kyr, *please* don’t take it out on him!”

Kyr took a deep breath, realizing that, yes, maybe he’d wanted to do that. But he wouldn’t. Whatever had happened had been Ronan trying to get away from everyone. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be in the containment room right now.

It had only been a few nights ago that Ronan had faced off with him in the VDA lobby, prepared to draw a gun on himself if Kyr showed any intention of locking Ronan up.

Containment was Ronan’s worst fear. What the hell had scared him so damn much that he would choose it?

Recognizing that fact ... no, Kyr was not going to take his fear for his sister out on Ronan. He just needed to understand what was going on.

Because something sure as shit was.

Something had happened when Ronan went flat line in Atar. Technically, he had died. And when he’d come back, he’d



come back different.

Jonus had been at a loss. Ronan's cells had been mutating for years, since Genesys, and that mutation, according to the doctor, had overwritten what had been there before.

According to Syren's report of Amarada's claims, that mutation had been triggered by Genesys but had been lying dormant in Ronan's genes all along, not unlike the dormant vampire genes in a sleeper. In a human-vampire hybrid, a similar transformation could be triggered by exposure to vampirekind, with the dormant vampire genes awakening to overwrite the human ones.

So what, exactly, had awakened in Ronan?

"I'm going to try to help him, Syren. Go with Mira. Claire too."

"Kyr, please—"

"That's my final word."

With that, Kyr opened the door of the containment room and walked inside, closing the door behind him.

Ronan's head whipped up.

"What's going on?" Kyr asked.

Ronan's eyes were wide and haunted. "There's something wrong with me."

"What do you think it is?"

"I think it's pretty fucking obvious! It's been obvious from the start!"

"You think you're—"

"Like *him*! One of Vimonos's fucking evil spawn! For fuck's sake, why don't you just fucking kill me?"

Ronan was gasping like he couldn't breathe, like there was an iron grip on his lungs.

Fuck.

Kyr walked over to him and crouched. Ronan drew his legs up tighter. Kyr held out the pair of warmups. When Ronan

didn't take them, Kyr set the pants on the ground.

He waited until Ronan's breathing eased, though the male was still shivering. Then he said calmly, "Ronan, even if that were true—"

"It is! I felt it, something inside me, something wrong, trying to break free."

Kyr's skin prickled with goosebumps. He repressed his shudder. He didn't want Ronan to see how much that freaked him the hell out. Because, seriously, what the fuck was going on?

He couldn't demand answers of Ronan, however, because Ronan clearly didn't have any. Ronan had assumptions—and he assumed the worst. About himself.

Ronan was a very private person. He'd been through a lot of shit, and he preferred to deal with it on his own. So Kyr hadn't realized this about him, how easily Ronan would believe there was something bad and wrong inside him. Was there? Could Ronan actually feel that something was bad? Or was that just Ronan's fear? Because one thing was clear, and Ronan was obviously missing it.

"Whatever is going on, Ronan, you still have choices. You chose to get away from everyone. You chose to come in here, of all fucking places—"

"I'm staying in here. Lock me in. For fuck's sake, Kyr, you can't let me out. I was with Syren and I almost—I don't even know! But I'd rather stay in here than find out."

Ronan cared about her. He loved her. He was, Kyr was certain, bonding to her.

That was why he was in here. Because the primary drive of any bonded male was to protect his mate—and Ronan was trying to protect Syren from himself. Christ, he must be in agony.

Kyr said, understanding Syren's point now, "She wants to see you."

The terror that passed through Ronan's eyes was something Kyr had never seen there before.

"No, Kyr! Don't let her in. If you care about your sister, if you care about me, for fuck's sake, don't let her in."

"I care about both of you, Ronan."

"Then leave me in here."

Kyr didn't like it. "This isn't a good place for you. Ronan, you just went through a lot of shit, and I think you need—"

"This." Ronan closed his eyes. Tears leaked from behind his closed lids. "Just fucking leave me alone. Please."

Goddamn it. Unfortunately, Kyr was going to have to do just that. Because he had even bigger things to worry about than Ronan.

Kadaros had been revived. For the first time, Kyr let those words take shape in his brain. Reality was fucking imploding.

The Hush had to get back to Atar to hunt for him and the demon lord, Cretas. Whatever the hell was going on with Ronan would have to wait. Because if there was to be any hope of success, the Hush had to act now—before Kadaros got any stronger.

# THIRTY-TWO

Lies.

This was all lies. Her mother's lies. Syren knew the feel of them. She knew the *smell*.

But no one would listen to her. So she would have to find proof. And she was going to borrow her brother's car to do it. He wasn't there to say no or to argue with her. He was literally a world away, and Syren hated that she was angry with him when she should only be worried about him. What Kyr and the Hush were doing was dangerous. They might not ... God, they might not even come back. She might never see her brother again.

Syren choked back the fear that threatened to obliterate her sense and reason. She would not let it. She had work to do. And she was still angry. She couldn't help that, so she had to use it, and it was better, really, than fear.

Kyr had emerged from the basement to tell her that Ronan was going to stay in isolation.

*Is that what you call helping him?* Syren had demanded.

*It's what he wants. He needs time to calm down, and we need time to figure out what the hell is going on.*

*What he needs is me!* Syren had shouted.

But no one would listen. Not Kyr. Not Ronan.

Ronan wouldn't even look at her.

After jabbing at every possible button on the containment room door, she had given up and had just stared through the narrow window. Ronan had been sitting in a corner of the cell, knees to his chest. He wouldn't even raise his head.

It broke her heart to see him like that. Shattered. Terrified. But it made her angry too.

Why could no one see that something else was going on? The very fact that *Amarada* had voiced the possibility that was

scaring the shit out of everyone, especially Ronan, meant that it was the one thing that wasn't true.

So Syren was going to find the truth. And she knew just where to start looking.

\* \* \*

Cretas did not care for their new stronghold. He found it ... distasteful. But he understood the symbolism, and such decisions were no longer his to make.

The false queen had not been seen since Cretas had hurled her away like trash. She was, one could hope, dead. She had certainly not appeared to defend her home.

At least with the size of the place, they could house the scores of demons that Cretas had been summoning from every nook and cranny of the city.

Besides, the false queen's mansion had its defensive advantages. One of those was the security system, which dinged an alert that had Cretas tapping at the computer screen with his claws.

Cretas strode along one of the appallingly luxurious hallways to where his lord and master would be, where he'd spent most of his time since they'd arrived here.

Kadaros swam through the pool with leisurely strokes, his thin body almost insect-like as it moved through the water.

"Yes?" the Dark Lord prompted in the Epos Kalli as Cretas stepped into the poolroom.

Cretas dropped to a knee, still awed to be spoken to directly by the dark god's son. "My lord, the daughter of the false queen approaches. She is alone. Shall I deliver her to you?"

Kadaros reached the edge of the pool. His bony fingers drummed on the stone, rough nails clicking. His skin remained pale and thin but less papery than during his long sleep. The blood of the other had restored him to a sort of living death. Still cadaverously thin. The black pits of his eyes still dull. His dark hair still wispy.

And this state despite having drained the blood from every vampire they had found in this house. None of it was strong enough. Vampires had been breeding with humans for centuries, diluting their blood. Kadaros had spat out the last mouthful, drawn from a slender female in a nightgown, saying it tasted like water.

The Dark Prince had switched, then, to wine. A bottle stood by his drumming fingers.

“She approaches openly?” The words rasped like a dry wind.

“Not exactly. She left her vehicle and slipped through the gates on foot. She is approaching a side entrance.”

“Then she’s after something. Stay out of sight. Keep your minions out of sight. I will observe her.”

“The ... other ... risked much for her. She could be useful.”

Kadaros chuckled darkly, his fangs flashing against his thin lips. “She is already being useful.”

# THIRTY-THREE

Luca ghosted to his assigned position on the ridge of the dry gully and crouched. Though the drone hadn't picked up any movement, the area clearly had caverns. Demons could be anywhere. Kadaros could be anywhere.

Luca could not wrap his mind around that fact, despite having seen with his own eyes how the cadaverous form had crawled, ancient armor rattling, from the iron sarcophagus.

Even as it had been happening, even though the Hush had been braced for the possibility for months, it had seemed impossible. If Talia had not shouted his name, jolting Luca from his stupor, he would have emerged from the collapsing cavern with worse than a broken collarbone. He might not have emerged at all.

The fracture wasn't healed yet. Under normal circumstances, Luca wouldn't be in the field right now. But the circumstances were decidedly not normal. Everyone was needed, regardless of fitness. Especially given the fact that they were already down by one.

In truth, they had been preparing for that for some time. But nothing had happened like they'd expected. And while Luca was so damn relieved that Ronan had made a miraculous recovery, there were too many impossible things happening right now for Luca to feel comfortable with it. Ronan, clearly, had shared that sentiment.

And it made Luca feel like a total asshole but ... part of him was relieved to have Ronan locked away. Just for now. Just until they could figure out what the hell was going on with him.

They already had one big fucking unknown to deal with. The last thing they needed was another.

Especially given the fact that Ronan's blood had awakened Kadaros. They couldn't ignore that.

Kyr would never have put Ronan in confinement without just cause, but the *comudari* had seemed, maybe, a little relieved, too.

Especially with Ronan bonding to Syren.

Did Ronan realize that was happening? Males often didn't at first, but it had sure as hell been obvious to everyone else.

But Luca couldn't worry about all that right now. Everything back home was secure and under control. Luca had to focus on the Hush's mission: locate Kadaros and the demon lord, do everything possible to destroy or contain them.

The Hush worked its leapfrog pattern along the ridges of the dry gully where the demons had swarmed them, each black figure appearing fifty feet beyond the last, until they met at the peak of the rocky mound forming the cavern.

There was a certain irony to their dark clothes here, where they stood out against the bright, barren landscape of their home world. There had been no time to source different gear. Besides, while they didn't want to get ambushed, they did want to be seen. Better to draw Kadaros out here and now, far away from vulnerable people.

Kyr aimed his laser-sharp gaze at Luca. "You sure you're up to scouting?"

"Of course." He certainly wasn't going to let Talia do it alone.

"Then you two check out the points of interest we identified. Nox, check the cave-in site. Rhys, get that drone in the air."

Luca glanced at his mate to confirm that she was ready. Of course she was, his incredible, fearless female. That didn't mean it was easy to see her do this dangerous work. Luca still struggled with it, even after all this time, even though they had been bonded for decades. He had to constantly suppress his instinct to get her out of harm's way.

Luca ghosted to the first point of interest they had identified with the drone. Talia appeared beside him. What had looked to be a possible entrance, however, was only a depression in the rock.



The next was the same.

The third point was more significant. A short tunnel led to a large empty cavern, where discarded clothing and the sulphuric stink indicated recent demonic occupation, but the space was empty. There were no other exits. The demons had gathered here, perhaps, clustering like the infernal creatures they were. But they were clearly gone.

When Talia and Luca returned to the Hush's position, Luca was relieved to see everyone present and unharmed. Unfortunately, he was starting to think it was because—

“There's no one here,” Rhys said, eyes glued to the screen on the drone's controller.

“We knew this was a possibility,” Kyr said. “This location was exposed. We just need to figure out where the hell they've gone.”

No one said it, but they all had to be thinking that they'd spent two months hunting, without success, for Kadaros after the theft of his body. No one really knew how big Atar was. He could be anywhere, especially given that Cretas was a teleporter.

And there was always the chance that their quarry was no longer in Atar at all.

A bleak sense of helplessness washed through Luca. How the hell were they going to win this? They were so badly outgunned. They had no significant advantages.

“Hold on,” Rhys said, frowning at the screen.

Kyr leaned near to look. He also frowned. “That must be the well Syren mentioned. She said she was held captive with someone. She wasn't very clear on that. Where is that?”

“It's 1.4 miles that way.” Rhys pointed left. “Whatever direction that is here in this godforsaken place.”

“All right. I don't want us in the open that long. We ghost. Straight there, no stopping.”

Nox groaned loudly.

Rhys grinned over his shoulder at him. “You gonna make it, big guy?”

“This fucking sucks.”

Kyr gave Nox an assessing look. “Guess what you’re starting next week?”

Rhys winced on Nox’s behalf. “Ooh, he’s gonna make you run city laps.”

With all the shit going, the idea that next week would be business as usual was, quite frankly, absurd. But it broke the tension. It helped put their current problem into the context of just another battle to fight. Because wasn’t that what they did every night?

For one moment, they got to forget that the stakes were sky high.

Nox shoved his .45 into his thigh holster. “You know what? Fuck you, fuck everyone, I need a head start.”

And with that, Nox was gone.

Everyone still beat him to the destination. Nox did his best to pretend like that hadn’t kicked his ass. And Luca did his best to pretend that his shoulder wasn’t on fire.

They all peered down into the well, where a dusty figure huddled against the curved wall. The captive didn’t respond to Kyr’s shouts.

“Nox, you’re anchoring,” Kyr said, tossing him the climbing rope looped at his belt. “Rhys, you’re collecting. He may be dead, or he may be faking. Be cautious.”

Rhys protested, “Bossman, I am *always* cautious.”

“If sunstroke is giving you delusions, Rhys, I can send someone else.”

“Jesus, fine, I’m going.”

Nox threw the rope into the well. It barely tautened on Rhys’s descent as the athletic male leaped down, but Nox had to brace hard as Rhys climbed up, with a figure like a bundle of sticks and rags thrown over his shoulder.

Rhys laid the ancient-looking male on the ground. The day was full of irony because even though the decrepit figure looked disturbingly similar to the newly awakened Dark Prince, he was actually—

“A priest of the Order,” Luca said in surprise, eyeing the once-white robes and the even more distinctive stump of his right wrist.

“What?” everyone asked, even Talia.

Despite Talia’s years in the Order, she would never have heard of the Priesthood of the Order of the Blood. But Luca was the Master’s son, and he been educated in the history of the cult of assassins.

Luca hated that even though he rejected the Order wholeheartedly, he still found himself cringing inside at revealing what he had been raised to regard as a secret.

It was so damn hard to free yourself from the past, from how you’d learned to think.

“Um ... the Order, as you know, was once a zealous religious cult, but in later years it turned to more material concerns. There were those who objected to the shift. It was actually a huge, bloody fight, but one group did manage to separate itself. This was at least six hundred years ago,” Luca informed everyone.

“The Priesthood, as they called themselves, withdrew from the world. They cut off their right hands as a show of utter rejection of violence. They vanished, but it was thought they had withdrawn to Atar. To live in contemplation.”

Luca cut off as the withered figure started to mumble. Crouching beside the priest, Luca took the male’s thin left hand.

“What is it, father?” Luca asked in the Epos Kalli.

“*Balance*,” the priest rasped. “*It is time ... for the balance of the blood.*”

“What does that mean, father?”

“*Death*,” gasped the priest. His thin hand tightened briefly on Luca’s then relaxed. In death.

## THIRTY-FOUR

Syren wasn't surprised that the Residence was so quiet. If Amarada was even alive, she was undoubtedly in hiding at one of her many other locations. She had several in Portage and dozens around the world. A skeleton staff was likely still working on the lower levels, but Syren had avoided any areas where she was likely to encounter anyone. She stuck to her mother's routes, the only paths through the Residence that were guaranteed to not be in use.

That included the private hallway leading to Amarada's study. It was locked, of course, but Syren had not completely wasted the time she had spent at the Residence after returning to it from the abbey a few months ago.

Kyr had told her not to take risks under her mother's eye, but thank God she had. And thank God Amarada had not thought Syren had it in her to be so daring as to locate the spare key to Amarada's study.

Syren fitted the key into the lock. As it clicked open, her heart thumped with ingrained fear. She hoped that someday she wouldn't feel that fear at the idea of defying her mother.

Slipping into the study, Syren went straight to the desk, plunking herself into the queen's chair and reaching for the drawer that held her laptop.

She froze at the sense of someone watching her.

*Stop being paranoid*, she told herself and opened the drawer.  
*She's not here.*

\* \* \*

Except for putting on the warmups that Kyr had brought him, Ronan hadn't budged. He kept waiting for something terrible to happen.

But nothing did.

He simply sat in the corner of the cell as he had sat in other cells and tried to not exist. Strange how he had feared this so

much but found it so easy to adapt to. Strange, too, how this felt like the only reality that could possibly exist, like every moment of his life outside of a cell was little more than a dream.

This was his life. Four white walls. Emptiness.

At least the harsh overhead light was off, replaced by the softer glow of track lighting. He closed his eyes and relaxed into a thoughtless state. There was nothing else to do.

He didn't know at what point he started mind walking. In the past, it had been easy to tell by the absence of pain. But he wasn't in pain anymore, hadn't been since ... whatever had happened in Atar. His head didn't hurt. His body didn't ache. He felt strong. Powerful.

But he wasn't cold anymore—and he had felt cold in the cell, in his body. He'd been hungry too. And ... there was a pressure at his back, a weight. Between his shoulder blades.

By that, he knew he was mind walking.

He became aware of something else too. He'd been aware of it in his body as well, but there had been so many other feelings to preoccupy him that he hadn't isolated this one. Mind walking, with all the other noise gone, he sensed the bond. He had already known it was there, but now he truly felt it.

It anchored in his heart. It flowed from there to ... somewhere far away.

It took him a moment to realize what that meant: Syren wasn't in the abbey. Where had she gone?

*Away from you.*

But to where? Was she safe?

Ronan didn't make a conscious decision to check on her. He simply got up in his non-physical form and walked through the locked door like a ghost. By habit, he walked along the hallway and through the door into the parking garage.

He walked to the steel doors and through them, out into the night and the sprawling meadow behind the abbey. From there,

he could tell the general direction of his mate—and he didn't like it.

Unthinking, simply needing to get to her, Ronan leaped into the air and flew toward the Residence. He was not aware of the beat of wings. Maybe he simply wouldn't let himself be aware of it. He seemed to fly more like a projectile, like a bullet, over the city and beyond, to where his mate had gone.

To the Residence.

He knew before he got there that it was full of demons. He could *feel* them. Their darkness. Their wrongness.

And the other.

Ronan could feel him as well, like a counterweight pulling against him. Ronan could hear him, too, as the dark whisper he had come know, here in this place that was somehow both inside and outside of reality.

Kadaros was mind walking—and the pull of him was coming from the same place that Ronan felt the very different pull of his bond to Syren.

Ronan flew straight through the walls of the Residence to the queen's study, where Syren was sitting at Amarada's desk, rummaging through the drawers.

Behind her, with his cadaverous fingers resting on the back of the chair Syren was sitting in, was Kadaros, demonic wings folded at his back, the window framing the night behind him.

The Dark Prince smiled when he saw Ronan, thin lips drawing away from his fangs, thin skin crinkling. Though Ronan's couldn't see most of his body because of the desk and chair, he could tell that Kadaros was naked.

*Syren!* Ronan shouted, terrified.

She didn't look up. She couldn't see him any more than she could see Kadaros behind her.

Ronan had never been able to hear anything while mind walking, at least nothing other than the dry wind he had sometimes perceived, a thing he now knew had been Kadaros, trapped in the mind walking space.

Ronan heard him more clearly now as the Dark Prince spoke in the tones of the Epos Kalli, but still Ronan did not understand him. For the first time in his life, Ronan wished he had learned the ancient language of his people.

But the words didn't matter, of course, not really.

Ronan flew across the room to tackle the Dark Prince—and flew straight through him. And now, past the desk, Ronan could see all of his skeletal, naked body. Wasted flesh over thin muscle and bone—a grotesque thing that should be dead.

*Don't touch her!* Ronan shouted.

Kadaros then spoke so that Ronan could understand: *Then don't delay.*



# THIRTY-FIVE

Ronan gasped awake in his body in the containment room. He did not know how he had traveled so fast on his return. In a blink, he was here, sitting uselessly in the corner of a cell.

He burst to his feet. He could not be in here, not for one second longer. His mate was in danger. She needed him. And he had shut himself away where he couldn't help her, couldn't protect her.

He ran at the door, furious with Kadaros, furious with himself. He was vaguely aware of the building of something within his body, the sense that his physical form could not contain him. He slammed both his hands into the steel door. It was like a bomb went off, booming from Ronan into the door. With that blast came a flash of light that momentarily blinded him.

The steel door blew off its hinges and crashed into the wall on the other side of the hallway. Plaster rained down from the shaken ceiling as Ronan bolted out of the cell and raced down the hallway to the door into the parking garage.

The only vehicle with keys in it was Kyr's white and black Ford Raptor, which Penni had been driving up the cabin. Ronan jumped into the driver's seat, gunned the engine, and took off. He almost ran the truck straight into the steel doors before they had time to sense the vehicle's approach and open. He took the truck roaring down the abbey's private drive to the gates. Out of patience and out of time, Ronan slammed right through them—and drove like a fucking maniac through the night-quiet streets of Portage then along the county highway leading to the Residence.

The Residence gates were open.

He understood that it was a trap. It didn't matter.

Ronan made a hard turn onto the Residence's long drive, the truck tires spewing gravel into the grass. The truck roared toward the massive building with its wings and peaked roofs

and grand stone front. He slammed on the brakes. The truck slid sideways, chewing up the driveway, spraying rock, and almost overturned before it slid to a stop.

Ronan wasn't even out of the driver's seat before the demons swarmed him. They came from everywhere. Like a pack of rabid wolves, they piled onto him, forgoing weapons and even their telekinetic powers to claw and bite. They wore their true demonic aspects: vaguely humanoid with the heavy, ugly faces of their kind, distorted further by their horns and tusks.

The pile-on took Ronan to the ground. Pain flashed all over his body as they thrashed him. He had no room to move, much less to fight back. Surrounded, contained inside the writhing mass, he could do nothing for his mate.

Rage and desperation lit a fuse inside him. Power surged through his body—and exploded outward.

Again, it felt like a bomb had gone off. Demons flew in every direction. They fell with heavy thuds on the gravel drive, on the truck, even on the Residence steps. Some smacked into the building's stone walls. But Ronan was already racing past the falling bodies to the door.

It exploded open at the slam of his fist. Demons spilled into the grand foyer, some leaping at him, some firing guns or throwing telekinetically charged furniture.

Ronan ghosted through it all, up the grand staircase to the first-floor hallway, dimly aware of the bullets whizzing past him, some tearing at him with streaks of white-hot pain. Above, the crystal chandelier tinkled and swayed as stray bullets pizzed through its branches.

Ronan ghosted up several more staircases and down the long, statue-studded hallway to his destination, taking the route that he and Syren had taken not long ago, the route that he had taken years before as well, when he had gone to confront the queen.

He burst through the double doors into Amarada's study. Syren, standing behind the desk with a laptop clutched to her

chest as though about to leave, screamed and turned away as splintered wood flew in every direction.

Ronan felt the dark and terrible presence lurking in the room's shadows, but he did not pause for it. He had one purpose, and every cell of his being was focused on it.

As he leaped over the desk, planting one foot on it, Ronan launched himself at Syren, grabbing her around the middle and exploding through the window into the night air.

## THIRTY-SIX

Syren screamed at finding herself suddenly airborne, but the scream dissolved as she registered the powerful hold of her mate's arms around her body. It made no sense that he was here, but there was no time for thought. There was only the brief, blissful rightness of being with him in this moment before they would crash to earth. It would shatter them, this fall, but at least they would die together.

All that flashed through Syren in less than a second, but the feeling of impending death did not have time to take root—because something impossible, miraculous, and utterly beautiful came into being.

Wings flared out above them, fanning wide. Shadowed beneath their expanse, Syren had an impression of darkness—but the wings were not dark. At the edges, where the moonlight caught them, they glowed blindingly white. The night air rustled through their feathers.

The moment suspended itself, much as the wings suspended them in the air. It was a moment of such sharp and perfect reality that nothing else could exist.

But the moment shattered as another pair of wings flared above them, these thin and dark and leathery, tipped with claws.

Syren saw nothing but the two opposing pairs of wings before it was darkness and chaos as she and Ronan were caught.

Shouting, Ronan tried to wrench away, but the demonic wings tucked, and all three of them spun and dropped.

A fresh scream formed in Syren's throat. This one did not dissolve but instead lodged, choking her as they plummeted—another moment that lasted longer than its handful of seconds. She waited for pain, for her body to shatter under the weight of the two above her.

It did not happen. Moonlight flashed briefly into her eyes as she was turned to face the sky instead of the ground before the white wings closed around her. And when they crashed to the ground, she thudded hard against Ronan's body instead of the earth before rolling in the cocoon of his wings. They tumbled over and over and over. Then the wings opened and Syren found herself rolling free.

She bumped and tumbled straight into a bush. For a moment, she lay there, completely stunned, unable to think. The small leaves clustered thickly around her, blocking most of the moonlight above, blocking most of her surroundings.

The sounds of a fight—thuds, huffs, spraying gravel, an eerie shriek—had Syren rolling out of the bush. It was a topiary bush in the Residence garden behind the greenhouse. Pea gravel crunched as she gathered herself into a crouch—and stared.

Two winged figures wrestled and thrashed in the moonlit garden, crashing through the bushes, slamming into stone benches and statues. Ronan's white wings seemed to glow in the moonlight. All of him seemed to glow. But Syren didn't get to really take in the sight of him. He was moving too fast, and the other figure kept blocking her view.

She had thought the leathery wings must have belonged to the demon lord, but that was not so. Though the wings were demonic, the nude figure was thin and wasted. Cadaverous.

Moonlight flashed now and then over the shriveled form, all the more terrible for its appearance of deadness despite its unnatural strength.

A boom between their grappling bodies sent Ronan flying backward clear across the garden. His wings curved around him, streaming in the wake of his movement, his whole body like a projectile as he hit the greenhouse, crashing straight through the glass and vanishing within.

The cry that escaped Syren had the Dark Prince's head whipping her way.

Kadaros turned and stalked toward her across the garden. His demonic wings fanned wide. His eyes were dark pits even as the moonlight hit his thin and terrible face. His shriveled sex swung grotesquely between his desiccated legs as he approached.

Caught in the moment's horror, it took Syren a second to remember that she had a gun. Still crouched, still clutching the computer, she reached to the small of her back and drew the .45.

It kicked hard in her hand as she fired shot after shot, emptying the magazine. Kadaros's shrunken body jerked slightly at the impacts. He said something in the Epos Kalli that she could not understand.

Then he laughed. That, she understood perfectly.

Her scalp prickled. Goosebumps tightened the skin all over her body. She was about to die.

Kadaros gathered himself to launch at her—

Ronan, white wings tucked for speed, barreled into the Dark Prince, and the two of them went tumbling again.

More thrashing. More chaos. Dark and light tangling in the moonlit garden.

A roar of rage. A shriek of pain. Then a rush of wind as Ronan vanished from sight.

Ronan came out of his ghost a bare second before reaching Syren. He grabbed her into his arms once more. The momentum of his ghosting carried them a good three yards before Ronan got a foot under himself and launched into the air.

The white wings pumped, lifting them higher and higher until they could soar through the night sky. Thought, once again, vanished. There was only sensation. The beat of powerful wings. The heat of Ronan's body. The strength of his arms around her. The rich and spicy scent of his skin.

Syren's fangs made their aching descent. Her mouth watered. Her body hummed with wanting. With need. It didn't

matter that it wasn't the right time or place. She could not repress her desire with her mate filling every facet of her awareness. He took over her very being.

By the time Ronan's wings flared wide, rustling with the wind as he slowed them and tipped their feet toward the ground, Syren was mewling against him, mindless with her need to connect in every possible way with her mate.

Her feet touched the ground. But it wasn't the ground. It was a rooftop. The lights of Portage dotted the night around them. Syren didn't care where they were. She didn't care about anything but the beautiful male behind her.

Her emptied gun and the computer clattered to the rooftop. She spun in Ronan's arms. They were both breathing hard, gazing at each other without words.

There were no words for this moment.

Ronan bent and took her lips in a deep, passionate kiss. Syren moaned and kissed him back with equal need and love and awe.

They grabbed at each other, hauling their bodies close. When Syren's fingers met the slickness of blood, she drew back, breaking the kiss, needing to see him and know that he was all right. Ronan let her step back, though his chest was heaving, his body straining toward her.

The moonlight fell against him, but it was hard to say how much of the faint glow came from that distant light and how much came from within Ronan.

His skin was faintly lit to display all his beauty. He had always been beautiful, but now, with the full truth of him there to see, nothing could mask it. Even the dark tattoos slashing up and down his arms, his chest and neck, his abdomen, disappearing at the waistband of his black warmups, marked the truth: of suffering, of struggle, of all the things that made Ronan who and what he was.

Syren's fingers brushed over his wounds, but his body was already healing itself, so she let her fingers lift to the wings rising above his shoulders. He shivered as she brushed the

silky smooth feathers. He moaned softly as she traced them upward.

Beautiful. He was absolutely beautiful.

When he bent to kiss her again, Syren wrapped her arms around his neck, gasping as his fingers worked at the button of her jeans. A few moments of frantic work had Syren out of her zippered boots and her pants. Ronan slipped more easily out of his warmups, baring his cock for her, that beautiful, powerful part of him that would join their bodies and make them into one.

As he picked her up, she wrapped her legs around his hips, moaning at the press of his hard cock against her weeping sex. He carried her to the brick tower that contained a stairwell door. He held her against the wall of it, his arms shielding her from the rough surface.

His cock nudged at her hot, greedy entrance. She gasped at the flood of arousal, the anticipation—and shouted in ecstasy as he entered her with a powerful thrust. There was nothing but this: the movement of his body within her, the feel of his skin, the sight of those wings sheltering her. And his scent. So rich. So heady.

“Bite me,” he growled. “Idaios, I need it—”

He let out a small cry of pleased pain as Syren struck his vein, then moaned as she sealed her lips to his pierced neck to feed.

His blood flooded her mouth. His being flooded her body, her senses, her mind. He was power and beauty and light, and she drew him deeply into herself, swallowing the rich perfection of his potent blood as his cock drove rhythmically into her.

She came in a blinding, unexpected surge, clutching at him as he thrust again and again into her tightening channel. She silently begged him not to stop. She did not want to rest, did not want this to end.

He moaned as she continued to draw at his vein. He pistoned into her, giving her everything she wanted,



everything she needed. Giving her every bit of himself.

As her body tightened again, coiling inside for release, Ronan thrust deeper and faster. Syren came so hard that her mouth released his neck as she shouted against his skin—and he shouted against hers, his cock spurting hard and hot inside her.

Syren shuddered through the aftershocks, gasping against Ronan's neck, her senses still overwhelmed by him. By his body. By his blood. By his very being.

She lapped at that rich blood, catching what had spilled from his vein as they both came. He moaned against her, shuddering, his cock still thick inside her, as she sealed the wounds. Then she settled blissfully against him, relaxing in his hold, stroking the back of his neck, and listened to his breathing as it slowed.

Syren let out a sound of protest as Ronan drew his cock free of her. He shushed her and held her close as her feet, bare now, met the cool concrete of the rooftop. He stroked her hair.

For a moment, everything was right.

Even when he said, “You cannot do that again,” everything was still right, because his tone said that he loved her. His tone still connected them.

Then he stiffened a little and said more forcefully, “Do you understand?”

She did not understand. He was speaking differently now. He was speaking in a tone that put distance between them, a tone that built a wall around her. It was meant, she knew in some deep part of her mind, to be a wall that protected her, but

...

Ronan must have felt her stiffen. He drew back a little, as though to see her.

“Syren.” He sounded even sterner. “You could have been killed. And this wasn't the first time.”

“I needed something from there. I didn't realize ...”

“That demons were crawling all over the fucking house?”

Syren shuddered at the thought.

“You didn’t smell them? You didn’t—”

“Of course not, or I wouldn’t have been in there! I entered through a side door and took my mother’s route—”

“Kadaros was *in the room with you!*”

Syren pulled away from Ronan and went to retrieve her clothes. She was not having this conversation (which felt a lot more like an argument) with her naked ass hanging in the wind.

Ronan let her get her underwear and pants on, but as soon as she sat to tug on her socks and boots, he loomed over her, folded wings arching above his shoulders. The moon was behind him, but his body still had that faint glow, intercut by his slashing tattoos.

She shivered at the sight of him. Not with fear that he would harm her. He never would. Even when he himself had been most terrified of that possibility, she had known, absolutely, that he would never harm her.

But she did fear his power—his power over her.

How quickly everything that had been warm and comfortable turned cold and frightening.

Syren had only just escaped the intangible (but very real) cage her mother had kept her in for decades. She had barely had a chance to think and comprehend her freedom. And here, immediately, was another cage.

“*Syren.*”

“I won’t let you control me.” She looked away from him. She had to. Otherwise, she might cave, might crumble, might promise to obey him—and lose herself entirely once again. She would be, as she had been for most of her life, a nothingness.

“You could have been killed!”

Syren zipped up one boot. “I would rather die than go back to not existing.”

Ronan's hands clenched at his sides. She saw it from the corner of her eye. "What are you talking about?"

"All my life, I've been a pampered little dog on a leash that my mother held. I'm not handing that leash to you or anyone else. I can't."

"That's bullshit! I'm not your mother and I'm not trying to —"

Syren burst to her feet, one boot still missing. "You might not think that's what's happening, but it is! I know what a leash feels like. I know what an invisible prison feels like. And that's just what you're making for me, whether you know it or not. I cannot allow—"

"It's not at all the same! I just want you to be safe! I would fucking *die* if anything happened to you! And you're so goddamn reckless, throwing yourself into every possible danger like your life is nothing!"

"How is that any different from *you*?"

"You're—"

"Female?"

"No, goddamn it! You're twisting everything! Just because I don't want you to put yourself in danger—"

"Life is dangerous! This world is dangerous! This war is dangerous! How can I be part of any of it without being in danger? What should the scope of my life be, outside of all that?"

"Goddamn it!" Ronan shouted then staggered forward as his wings vanished, the sudden absence of their weight unbalancing him. A look of surprise crossed his face, but he refocused quickly.

"Ronan, you might love me—"

"I *do*, Syren."

Her heart seized and she closed her eyes. *I love you too*, she thought, but she didn't let herself say it. If she uttered those words right now, if she allowed herself to acknowledge that

she was bonding to him, she would not be able to set this boundary. She would throw away her freedom for him. She couldn't let herself do that.

It wasn't his fault, what was happening right now. Syren was well aware that his reaction was normal, natural, even necessary for a bonding male—because, yes, she sensed that too. He wasn't doing anything wrong.

Was she?

Maybe. She didn't know. But she did know that if she bowed to his authority now, she would never stop doing it. And though she would love him through it all, she would feel suffocated. Eventually, she would die inside. She could not allow that. Not even for his love. Not even for her own.

So she made herself finish her statement. “You might love me, but it wouldn't matter, not in the end. I would rather die than be safe and comfortable and confined. You, of all people, should understand that.”

Ronan's chest was heaving. His fists were still clenched at his sides. Even without his wings, his body was beautiful, powerful, perfect.

Syren wished for an escape. She had nothing else to say, not right now, and she feared being worn down by his arguments. She feared hearing *I love you* again.

So she was relieved when the steel stairwell door screeched. She would rather fight anyone than Ronan.

Ronan, equally ready to fight, spun as the door opened—

Jodari stepped out, straightening his tie. “There's a lot I wish I hadn't seen tonight, Ronan, but your dick is high on my list. Can you please put some damn pants on?”

## THIRTY-SEVEN

It took a moment for Syren's mind to stop reeling at Jodari's out-of-nowhere appearance and comprehend the fact that the building they were on top of was VDA headquarters. It took her another moment to register the fact that there was almost certainly a camera up here.

*Oh God.*

Of course, her and Ronan fucking was hardly as shocking as the other revelations that camera would have picked up.

At least Jodari had had the grace to let them finish their argument—and to let Syren get her pants on. He had not extended the same courtesy to Ronan. But then, there was some possibility that one of them might soon have vanished, given the course of their argument. In fact, it was almost a guarantee.

“So,” said the 300-year-old vampire, hands plunging into the pockets of his suit pants as Ronan practically jumped into his discarded warmups. Syren tugged on her other boot and zipped it. “I wasn’t expecting that. The whole”—one of Jodari’s hands emerged from a pocket to make a vague waving gesture that Syren took to be him tracing invisible wings—“whatever that was. It’s very sexy, I’m sure, but ... what the fuck, Ronan?”

“I have no idea,” Ronan snapped. “It just happened.”

“Okay.”

“*Okay?*” Ronan echoed incredulously. Syren shared that incredulity.

Jodari shrugged. “You learn to get over things at my age. Otherwise, I could never do this job. Look, the Hush is in the Bunker—”

“All of them?” Syren and Ronan asked at the same time.

“Yes, all of them, and there’s a lot of shit to sort out. So if you two could wrap up your crisis, that would be great.”

“*Fuck*,” Ronan huffed out, but the word was muffled by his hands, which were pressed over his face.

Oh, it was hard, so damn hard, not to crumble, not to tell him that she was sorry, but Syren made herself snatch up the laptop she had dropped, hoping it wasn't broken, plus her emptied gun, and walk to the stairwell door. Jodari held it open for her.

As she walked by him, the director leaned near to whisper, “You okay, kid?” At Ronan's growl behind them, Jodari drawled, “Easy, boy.”

Syren wheeled to glare at the director. “Don't talk to him like that.”

Jodari's lips quirked. “All right then.” He held the door wider, ushering Ronan through.

Syren huffed and focused on her descent, trying to not be hyperaware of Ronan's presence behind her. She failed miserably. How could she not be hyperaware of him, especially with her sex aching at every step, the slickness of his release still inside her? She closed her eyes briefly, tormented, and missed a step. Heart flying into her throat, she flailed. Ronan, of course, caught her.

He stopped, holding onto her. She could practically feel his agony. Or maybe it was her own. They stood there for a heartbeat, together but apart.

Then she pulled away and continued her descent.

Eight endless flights of stairs took them down to the Bunker. When Syren hauled open the door and saw the Hush, plus Mira and Claire, gathered at the edge of the circle of black rubber mats near what they called the lounge, she let out a cry of relief at the sight of them. Especially her brother. He stood with the team he had built, his arms crossed and his expression grim.

She raced across the Bunker.

How many times, years ago, had she waited for him to return from Atar, always terrified that he wouldn't? Why did these males not understand that it was every bit as hard for the

females who loved them to see them in danger as it was for them to see the same thing? Why did they not understand that their females accepted the terror of potential loss because accepting that was accepting the decisions that their males made?

Kyr turned at her approach. He let her throw one arm around him, her other still clutching the computer.

“Thank God,” she breathed.

“Nothing happened,” Kyr told her. “He wasn’t there. Except for your fellow prisoner, no one was.”

“That’s because he’s at the Residence,” Ronan said, walking barefooted across the rubber mats, Jodari on his heels.

When Kyr stiffened, Syren pulled away.

Kyr demanded, “What the fuck happened, Ronan? Mira said there was an explosion and when she went downstairs to look, the door had been blown off the containment room and you were gone. So what the fuck?”

Ronan looked from Kyr to Syren, seeming to not like that she was beside her brother instead of beside him. His expression was harsh in the way she had so often seen it. He was rebuilding his walls, protecting himself. Syren ached to see it, to know that she had hurt him enough to make him withdraw behind that prickly façade.

Had she done the right thing?

Yes.

No.

She wasn’t sure. She couldn’t decide right now, didn’t have the luxury of time to think about it and work through her feelings. Or were they simply fears? Were they principles? God, why was everything such a tangle?

“Syren was in danger,” Ronan said.

Kyr stepped forward. “What are you talking about?”

“She had gone to the Residence—”

“What? Why? What happened?”

“I needed—” Syren tried to explain, but the two males were too busy with each other to listen to her.

“I mind walked from the containment room and found her there. And I saw that Kadaros was there too, in the same room as her, so—”

“What?” Kyr shouted and wheeled on Syren. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I didn’t know he was there!” Syren protested. “I hardly expected—”

“You were supposed to stay at the abbey! Not gallivant around the fucking town like you hadn’t a care in the fucking world!”

“Don’t talk to her like that!” Ronan roared, ghosting into Kyr’s space and shoving him in the chest.

Syren skittered back. Everyone did. Tensions were too damn high, and everyone could feel how that little spark lit a very short fuse.

Kyr staggered back a step then came at Ronan with a roar of his own. Maybe, maybe Kyr would only have yelled—if Ronan hadn’t hit him. But Ronan, quite clearly, was spoiling for a fight.

“Oh my God,” Syren muttered, backing further out of the way as Kyr drove a fist into Ronan’s gut.

“Just let them sort it out,” Mira said tiredly then asked, “Are you okay?” as though a vicious fight was not taking place ten feet away.

“Uh, yeah, fine,” Syren replied distractedly as Kyr executed a flawless shoulder toss that slammed Ronan onto his back.

Oh God—

Ronan surged to his feet as Kyr reached for him, though whether to help him up or hit him again was unclear. Whatever the case, Ronan came up with a shout and a flash of light. As a pulse boomed out from him, two things happened at once:



Ronan's wings flared into sight, fanning wide from his back, and Kyr went flying backwards.

Kyr tucked into a roll, coming up in a crouch—and froze.

Everybody froze.

Ronan's chest and shoulders were heaving, his wings rising and falling with the movement.

“The balance,” said a soft, gentle voice. Claire's voice. “Like the priest said? Like I was trying to tell you guys! But I didn't know it meant Ronan.”

Syren stared at her petite friend. Claire's hands were inside her sweater sleeves and crossed over her chest. She was standing against Nox, her back to him, one of his huge arms curling protectively around her. Like his shielding of her was a right and natural thing for him to do. And it *was*.

So what was wrong with Syren? Why couldn't she yield to that?

But Claire hadn't either, Syren recalled, not in the beginning. She had pushed back against Nox. She had pushed, too, for her job here at the VDA, working in the Records and Artefacts Department.

They had had to find their own way to give each other the freedom and space they needed. But they had done it. They had figured it out.

Syren shook the thought away. There was no time for it right now.

“Claire, what are you talking about?” Syren asked, but no one paid any attention.

To be fair, none of them, except Jodari, had yet seen the wings. Their attention was fixed, understandably, on Ronan.

“Ronan ...” Kyr breathed.

“I don't fucking know!” Ronan shouted, starting to pace. “I don't know how to get rid of them! They just ... do this!”

“Ronan, you have ... Ronan, you're ... what the ...”

“I don’t fucking know!”

“He’s the balance,” Claire said more forcefully.

Nox seemed to shake free from his stupor. “What are you talking about, sweetheart?”

Claire looked up and over her shoulder at her mate. “Like I told you I was reading about, that stuff I found in Records and Artefacts. There has to be balance. Remember I told you how I found that sort of yin-yang symbol? It’s the balance, the dark and the light.”

Claire drew away from Nox and walked toward Ronan, who was still pacing back and forth across the sparring ring. Claire reached out from her bulky sweater sleeve, offering her hand. Syren’s heart broke when Ronan stopped, when his shoulders rose and fell on a deep breath, when he took Claire’s hand.

It should have been Syren who went to him. It should have been Syren who saw that he wasn’t all right and reached out to say, *It’s okay*.

Syren should have done it, and the moment had passed her by. Because she was stubborn. Because she was afraid.

Not of Ronan, but of herself. Of losing herself in him, of not knowing how to be strong enough for someone as strong as him.

That was the real problem.

That was why she was standing here, standing back, watching as her mate suffered through his confusion, watching someone else reach out.

Ronan took a shuddering breath. His wings folded and tucked in towards his body, then vanished. Claire led him back to join the others.

Kyr, finally rising from his crouch, joined them as well, eyes flicking to Ronan.

When Claire released Ronan’s hand, he folded his arms over his bare abdomen. He still wore only his warmups, the warmups that Kyr had taken to him in the containment cell when he’d shut himself away out of fear of harming Syren.

And still she was frozen on the other side of the circle.

She needed to talk to him.

But she'd already had her chance to talk to him—and she'd used it to tell him no. It wasn't what she'd meant. She'd been caught up in her fears, had acted and spoken for those fears. And though she'd meant what she'd said, she hadn't meant it as an ending. Why had she made it sound like that?

“So,” Kyr began, a note of uncharacteristic uncertainty in his voice. “If Kadaros is holed up at the Residence, we'll need to plan an attack. We need time to organize and prepare, but we can't wait too long. It needs to be tonight. We've got,” he checked his watch, “four hours of darkness left. Ronan, is the demon lord there as well?”

“I didn't see him, but I assume so,” Ronan answered woodenly. “The place was crawling with lesser demons.”

Kyr said, recovering his usual, commanding tone, “The demon lord won't be easy to kill, but he's a known entity. What we need to know is how to kill or incapacitate Kadaros. Claire, you were saying something about why Kadaros was originally put into his state of ... coma or whatever it was?”

“I think he was exsanguinated,” Claire reported. “I found a mention of the Seduction of Kadaros. I think ... um, I think when he was mind walking and spying on his enemies, the ones who attacked him did it without violence. I think they fed from him under the guise of pleasure, so that he would not be alerted to his danger. I think they drained him until he had no strength left. Every drop. They tried to cut off his head after, but weapons couldn't harm him.”

“Well,” said Rhys as the silence stretched, “I am *not* kissing him, so don't look at me.”

A few surprised chuckles broke the tension.

“I need to think,” Ronan said suddenly and broke away from the group, walking past everyone into the lounge and through it to the hallway. He vanished from sight. A moment later, a door could be heard opening then closing.

The remaining members of the Hush stood gathered in the silent knowledge that whatever happened, a lot was going to depend on the male who had just disappeared.

Syren didn't like that. She didn't want Ronan in this fight. She didn't want him in any fight.

But she'd meant what she'd said about life and the world and this war being dangerous, and she knew she could not keep him from it. She couldn't keep any of them from it.

As the group broke apart to clean up and refocus, Syren went to sit in the lounge with Mira and Claire. Even though it flooded her with guilt, she wasn't ready to talk to Ronan. She had meant what she'd said on the rooftop. Even if it had come from fear, it was still the truth. How, then, was she supposed to fix this?

The other two females looked through some of Claire's dusty old books. Needing something to do, Syren opened the laptop and scowled at the unyielding log in screen.

"You need some help with that?" Rhys asked as he opened a bag of tortilla chips.

"Think you can unlock this?"

"You lock yourself out?" Rhys teased as he crunched into a mouthful of chips.

"It's Amarada's."

"Ah, so that's what you went there for."

"I wanted to find whatever she had from Genesys. To prove to Ronan that he wasn't going to become like Kadaros."

"He's the opposite," Claire said. "The balance. He's not descended of Vimonos but of—"

"Idaios," Syren breathed, realizing the full significance of Claire's discovery.

"Holy shit," Rhys said, like that fact had just come home to him too. "I guess I shouldn't steal his food anymore."

When Rhys snagged the laptop out of Syren's hands, she said, "It was pointless, apparently, what I did."

Rhys went to sit at the computer station and plugged something into the laptop. He started tapping away at the keys.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Claire put in, turning a thick page. “If you hadn’t gone there and Ronan hadn’t broken out to save you, he would still be in that cell thinking he was bad instead of being here, thinking about how to fix things.”

“So he needed his damsel in distress?” Syren asked.

Claire shook her head. “He needed his fearless and reckless Syren to wake him from his nightmare.”

Syren’s eyes stung. Of course Claire would find a way to see things like that. Syren wished that she could too.

“Here you go,” Rhys said, wheeling the computer chair toward her and holding out the laptop.

“Wow,” Syren said as she took it, glad to have something else to focus on. “What are you, some kind of genius?”

“Nah, just a geek.”

“A wizard,” Claire said.

“Damn straight, witch,” Rhys replied and plunged his hand back into the bag of tortilla chips.

## THIRTY-EIGHT

Ronan bowed his head under the spray of hot water, letting it sluice down his sore back. He was used to pain, was used to ignoring it, but this ...

It was too foreign. Muscles he wasn't used to using, or that maybe hadn't been there before.

He should feel relieved. Apparently, he wasn't the spawn of the dark god after all. All his fears—of himself, of what he might become or might do—had been unfounded.

Everyone else had dismissed the possibility so easily, as though it was obvious that Ronan wouldn't do something terrible and beyond his own control. But Ronan had spent too many years without choices, too many years unable to control his body's responses. To Genesys's stimuli. To the counteragent. And that was just surface level lack of choice. His fears had gone deeper. Into his childhood, into the knowledge of his mother's fate.

It had been very easy for him to believe that there was something fundamentally bad inside him.

So, yeah, he should feel relieved by the discovery that he wasn't some kind of bad seed after all. He should feel relieved that the terror that had had him pretty much curled up into a ball had vanished.

But he didn't feel relieved.

He felt numb.

He didn't know how to understand what was happening to him. He didn't have space in himself to even begin wrestling with it. What he was. Where he'd come from. What it meant.

The only thing inside him right now was a cavity, an empty, aching place where Syren's rejection had hollowed him.

*You might love me, but it wouldn't matter, not in the end. I would rather die than be safe and comfortable and confined. You, of all people, should understand that.*

And he did. Goddamn it, but he did.

And she wasn't wrong, not really. He wanted to keep her safe—and that did mean restricting her. That did indeed mean saying, *Don't do this or that. Don't go here or there*. He could not deny that he wanted to do that, that he *needed to* on a deep, primal level. She was his female, and it was his life's very purpose to protect her.

But he also wanted her to live fully and be free and find her true strength. She was just beginning to do that after a lifetime of suffocation. Her search for that was the very thing that had brought their paths together. It was the very thing that had made him fall in love with her.

It made him sick inside to think of taking that from her.

He didn't know how to reconcile those opposing needs: to shield her and to let her be free.

And now ... he didn't know how to be without her. He needed her. With every fiber of his being, *he needed her*. Her voice. Her smile. Her scent. Her touch.

She was his mate, and he needed her with him. He needed her at his vein, feeding. His neck throbbed at the memory of her piercing him, drawing from him, moaning as he provided for her. Finally, he had been able to do that.

His cock hardened. He didn't touch it, even though it ached, even though his balls swelled full and hard.

There was no point, without her. His cock was for pleasuring her. And claiming her. Because, fuck, fuck, fuck, there it was again, two opposing needs. As much as he wanted to give to her, he wanted to possess her too.

She wasn't wrong to have pushed back against that. Hell, even while it was fucking killing him, he respected it.

He needed time to figure this out. But there was no time.

His chest started heaving. His belly started contracting. Anger had his hand curling into a fist—anger at himself for not knowing what to do, for fucking everything up—and he punched the tile wall. Pain blazed white-hot in his hand as the

tile shattered loudly around the impact. His hand went through the wall. He pulled it out, cutting his wrist on the jagged tile in the process.

He let his hand hang at his side, blood dripping. He watched it swirl through the water on the floor of the shower stall and vanish down the drain. The intense red thinned until only a few drops fell. The pain eased to almost nothing.

So much pain for so many years, and now it faded too fast.

He turned off the water and stepped out, snagging a towel from the hook. He dried himself roughly. He was still hard and couldn't hold back his needful grunt when the towel brushed his aching cock. But he still didn't do anything about it.

That was for his female, and he had driven her off. He deserved to suffer. Especially with his hand already healed. He stared at it. Vampires healed fast, but that should have taken at least a few hours.

He was a vampire still but ... not. Not anymore.

And he would have become this years ago if he had allowed his body to complete the transformation that Genesys had triggered. If he had never asked Jonus for help. If he had never had the counteragent poisoning him.

It was pretty impressive actually, to think that Jonus had created a drug powerful enough to suppress genes even more powerful than vampiric ones. A drug powerful enough to make him horribly sick after each administration, as it raced through his bloodstream.

Had it sickened Kadaros too, when Kadaros had consumed his blood? Was that why the Dark Prince had not yet been fully restored?

Ronan went to the closet to grab the spare tactical clothing that he kept here. A few minutes later, dressed, he left the room.

The lounge was empty. The computer that Syren had taken from the queen's study was sitting on the coffee table, but she was nowhere in sight. He caught a whiff of her scent, however. She had been here on the couch. Recently.



He closed his eyes, trying to block that out. He was still hard, with his cock secured uncomfortably behind his waistband. It was still pretty fucking obvious. There was nothing he could do about it, however, especially now, catching that scent.

Luca and Rhys were in the workshop/weapons storage area. Ronan walked over to them. His personal weapons were still at the cabin.

“I need—oh. Thanks,” Ronan said as Luca slid a weapons rig across the worktable toward him.

“I’m still working on the ammo,” Luca said and went back to thumbing bullets into a magazine.

“You want any knives?” Rhys asked as he looked through a cabinet.

“Just a *shiva*,” Ronan replied woodenly.

Rhys nodded.

Both of them were carefully not looking at his very obvious erection, trying to pretend they didn’t notice.

“I can’t do anything about it,” Ronan said shortly, not liking the pretense.

They both looked at him then. Luca said, “It’s okay, Ronan. We get it.”

*We get it.*

They knew. That he was bonding to Syren. That she had rejected him. Because he didn’t know how to be what he needed to be for her.

His throat tightened and his eyes stung. Fuck.

Rhys said, “It’ll work out.”

No. It wouldn’t.

He couldn’t do anything right. He’d fucked up his bond. He’d brought the goddamn Dark Prince back to life. Honestly, he didn’t even know which one was worse.

Ronan looked away until he got his emotions under control. Then he buckled on the weapons rig, sliding the spare gun, spare magazines, and spare *shiva* into place.

“You want some food?” Rhys asked.

“Nah,” Ronan replied. He was hungry, but he was used to that, and he didn’t have time. “I gotta go. I need to talk to Jonus.”

He had no fucking clue what to do about Syren, but he could at least, maybe, fix the other problem he’d caused. He had an idea anyway.

After a bit of uncomfortable asking around, Ronan found Jonus in the forensics lab with Jemma, the VDA’s self-described “mad scientist.” Ronan didn’t like the forensics lab any more than he liked the medical exam and recovery rooms, so he stopped in the doorway.

Jonus, wearing his usual blue scrubs, was sitting on a stool, one eye pressed to a microscope as he studied a slide. Jemma was standing beside him, looking excited. But then, when didn’t she look excited?

The tiny forensics expert had her blonde hair in a high ponytail. A pair of blue-framed glasses was perched on top of her head while another pair, red-framed, was settled on her petite face, magnifying her brown eyes. She wore a white t-shirt featuring a cartoonish vampire drinking from a comically large coffee cup, the image surrounded by the words GONNA BE UP ALL NIGHT. The t-shirt was knotted at the waistband of a short skirt of maroon velvet.

Jemma bounced on her toes. “Well?”

Jonus straightened on the stool. “I agree, it’s—Ronan. We were just—”

“Doing something that would disturb me, I’m sure.”

Jemma shoved her glasses up with a sparkly blue fingernail. “We were looking at your blood.”

“Like I said,” Ronan replied dryly. If nothing else, at least the idea of his blood under a microscope got his hard-on to go

the hell away.

“But—” Jemma waggled her eyebrows.

“Let me handle this, Jemma,” Jonus interrupted, getting up from the stool.

“Ohhhhh, does this require social skills?” Jemma asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

“That’ll be you then,” Jemma said, patting the doctor on the back with her small hand before settling onto the newly vacated stool.

As Jonus approached the door, Jemma swapped glasses and peered through the microscope at the slide. Then she looked at her oversized watch and jotted a note on the pad of pink paper beside the microscope.

Ronan withdrew into the hallway with Jonus. Before the doctor could start reporting on whatever horrible thing they’d discovered about his blood now, Ronan said, “I had an idea about the counteragent. About using it. Against Kadaros.”

Jonus’s eyebrows jumped. “Oh. Yeah. That’s, um, actually what Jemma and I have been working on.”

“Oh,” Ronan said in surprise. “Since when?”

“Since you got back from Atar. I needed something to focus on.”

“Oh. I just thought of it, like five minutes ago.”

Jonus snorted. “You’ve had a few other things on your mind, I suspect.”

Ronan didn’t want to discuss any of that, so he focused on the issue at hand. “Well, what do you think? Could it be used against him?”

“Theoretically, yes. It is a ... poison.” The doctor’s face blanched as he uttered that last word. He looked away, guilt written plainly across his face.

Ronan said quietly, “You were trying to help me.”

Jonus closed his eyes. “I made you sick, Ronan, really sick. For *years*.”

“That’s not your fault.”

“Oh, it’s not?” Jonus snapped. “I’m not the doctor? I’m not the one who’s supposed to figure shit out, to *help* instead of hurt?”

“You didn’t know. How could you have?”

“I knew there was something different about your blood, but I thought it was because of what those horrible, *evil* people did, perverting science, perverting medicine—and then I went and did *worse*. I should have figured it out.”

“You’re not responsible for this!”

“Then who is, Ronan? Huh?”

“Fucking Genesys, for starting it! Obviously! Fucking Amarada, who *knew*—all along, she *knew* the truth. The fucking gods, for creating this goddamn mess in the first place! You helped me, Jonus, when I needed help—stop shaking your fucking head! You did your best with the information you had. That’s all any of us can do. And if I hadn’t been so fucking terrified, maybe I would’ve looked at things differently. Maybe I would’ve told you the truth about what happened with Genesys. The mind walking. Other shit too. And you know what?”

Jonus raked shaky fingers through his curly, springy hair. “What, Ronan?”

“If you hadn’t developed the counteragent for me, we wouldn’t have it to use now.”

Jonus was still looking away, his expression bleak. “Theoretically.”

Ronan narrowed his eyes. “You keep using that word.”

Jonus gave a humorless laugh. “Yeah, because someone is going to have to inject it.”

“Let me worry about that. Just get the syringe ready.”

“I’ve got it, hold on.” Jonus turned to go back into the lab.

“Jonus?”

The doctor paused. Ronan’s heartrate sped up. He wasn’t comfortable with shit like this, but he needed Jonus to understand him. They had spent a lot of hours together over the years. Bad hours, but they could have been so much worse. Ronan had not been in a good place when Jonus had started trying to help him.

In Ronan’s mind, there was no question that Jonus *had* helped him. Jonus had restored a lot of his trust in people. Sometimes, Ronan felt like his distrust was still as strong as it had been after Genensys, but that wasn’t true. When he looked back and really thought about how angry and reactive he’d been years ago, he knew, absolutely, that it wasn’t true.

“I needed you,” Ronan said, “and you were there, and if you hadn’t been . . . I don’t know if I’d be here now.”

“Fuck, Ronan, I—”

“Just go get the goddamn syringe.”

Jonus huffed a laugh. Shaking his head like he wasn’t the least surprised by Ronan cutting off any further discussion, Jonus walked back into the lab.

Five minutes later, Ronan went to find Kyr. The *comudari* was in Jodari’s office discussing what backup the VDA could provide when the Hush attacked the Residence. Kyr was standing in his usual spot in the middle of the room. Jodari, rather than sitting in his customary place behind his desk, was resting against the front of it. Both males had their arms crossed, but, for once, there was no hostility between them, only shared purpose.

They both looked up when Ronan appeared in the doorway. When he told them what he wanted to do, Kyr frowned.

“Won’t that alert them?”

“They’ll know the second we approach anyway. I might as well gather intel, get a sense of numbers and locations.”

Kyr kept frowning like he didn’t like it.

“It’s this or I go alone,” Ronan told him.

“Absolutely fucking not. We will all be with you, Ronan, no matter what.”

Fuck. Ronan really needed to stop having these intense conversations right now or he was gonna fucking lose it. Which was why he didn't ask Kyr about Syren. He couldn't. He had work to do. The syringe in his pocket was reminder enough of that.

He didn't think of his duty as anything more than work, certainly not as divine purpose. He didn't feel like he was filled with Idaios's will. He only felt like himself, as always. He only felt like the fight ahead mattered, as always.

“You can use Mira's couch,” Kyr said.

“Oh,” Ronan responded uncomfortably, “I don't know about that.”

“Oh, get over it,” Kyr grumbled and led the way down the hallway, heading to his mate's office.

Naturally, she popped up from her desk and ushered Ronan straight inside. When she handed him a folded blanket and a pillow, he accepted them awkwardly.

“You're like a flight attendant,” he said before he could consider whether the comment was rude.

Mira, however, chuckled. Looking slightly embarrassed, she said, “I just don't want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Oh,” he said, catching her meaning. “I don't mean to be ... Well ...”

Fuck, why was he having so much trouble maintaining his usual prickly exterior? He felt raw and open, like every defense had been stripped away, right when he needed his defenses the most.

“You don't owe me anything, Ronan. I'll be outside if you need me.”

Ronan blew out his cheeks as the door closed. He set the blanket and pillow on the coffee table then sat on the couch. He turned off the lamp. He lay down. He sat back up, grabbed

the pillow, then lay down again with it behind his head. He closed his eyes and tried to relax.

The plan was good. Clean. Efficient. All he had to do was scout ahead. It wasn't even dangerous.

He made himself breathe deeply and relax. It was getting easier for him to do this, to find the place in his mind that could exist in the world outside of his body.

It was getting easier, too, to forget the laws of reality in this real-but-not-real place. So when he stepped outside of himself, he didn't try to walk to his destination. He held it in his mind. It helped, maybe, that he had just been there. In a blink, he was standing outside the Residence.

Unlike the last time he was here, no demons lurked around the exterior.

Strange.

He walked up the steps and through the closed door. He walked along the hallways with a prickling, eerie sensation even in his non-physical being, a sensation that had nothing to do with what *was* here and everything to do with what *wasn't*.

Starting to panic, he flew through the mansion, room after room, bottom to top, then hovered over the roof to scope the surroundings.

Empty.

Everything was empty. No lesser demons. No demon lord. No Kadaros.

*Oh no. Idaios ... no.*

Ronan willed himself back to HQ, where he looked down from above the building—

## THIRTY-NINE

Ronan launched himself off Mira's couch and raced to the door, yanking it open so hard that it slammed into the wall. The crash had Kyr ghosting over to nearly collide with him.

"They're all around the fucking building!" Ronan shouted.

"Fuck!"

Racing for the stairwell door, Ronan shouted back, "I didn't see Kadaros, but I'm going after that fucking teleporter!"

Ronan had no time to wait for a reply or to hear any orders. He had his own mission. He burst into the stairwell and ghosted to the door to the roof. He reached for the handle—and had one millisecond of instinctive warning.

He ducked—right as the brick and steel stairwell tower exploded. His wings burst from his back to shield his body. Shattered brick and shredded metal sliced over him, splitting skin and cutting deep into muscle where his wings could not protect him. He shouted at the pain but sprang up the second the blast ended. His shirt, ripped to shreds by the debris or by the sudden emergence of his wings, fell away. But he could still feel the weight of his weapons and the metal syringe prodding him from within his pants' cargo pocket.

The demon lord swept toward him, leathery wings flaring wide. Ronan whipped his *shiva* from its sheath and slashed at the reaching claws, hacking part of the hand away, igniting the fires of the Abyss.

The demon screamed and tumbled to the rooftop. Ronan ghosted to him for an attack before the demon lord could gather himself to fight back or teleport away.

Maybe he should have known from the way the demon lord stood, open, to receive the impalement of Ronan's *shiva*. Even if he had known, it was too late to slow himself, too late to stop. With a roar, he drove his blade deep into the demon's gut —



A terrible, squeezing blackness surrounded him. The pressure was suffocating—as was the horror of knowing he had fallen straight into a trap.

Ronan gasped as air rushed back into his lungs. Sight and sound and feel returned abruptly, and Ronan found himself face to face with the snarling demon lord.

He wrenched his *shiva* free. Flames spewed from the demon's wound. The demon kicked Ronan in the chest with a clawed foot, sending him flying back to skid through the sand.

Sand?

Ronan leaped to his feet, dimly registering the roll and crash of waves. They were on a beach.

Ronan leaped, feathered wings sweeping to carrying him to his enemy—

The demon lord vanished. Ronan fell to the sand and staggered up, spinning to see where the demon lord would reappear.

But he didn't reappear.

The waves rolled against the beach, crashing rhythmically. The moonlight beamed down coldly.

Nothing. The demon lord was gone.

Why?

A terrible suspicion crept chillingly through Ronan's blood. What beach was this? How far was he from HQ?

He ghosted to the road to see where he was, hunting for a familiar landmark. He didn't find one, but he did find a road sign.

*Portage, 18 miles.*

Fuck.

# FORTY

Rhys was in the breakroom of the Surveillance and Investigation floor when all hell broke loose. He had tracked Wes to the coffeepot there. With too many long nights and no time for errands, they had run out of coffee in the Bunker kitchen.

Rhys always enjoyed visiting the SI Department. It was so ... normal. Almost human in its vaguely police department layout, with all the VDA employees dressed in business casual and typing away at the their keyboards. A printer hummed in the background.

A whole lot of eyes flicked up as Rhys walked by. He was used to that. People sometimes told him it was his face catching eyes, but he suspected it had more to do with his tactical black and weapons looking so out of place in an office setting.

Rhys stopped at the breakroom entrance and took a moment to admire his mate as Wes reached into the cupboard for a mug. The No Feeding, No Fucking sign affixed to the wall by the breakroom doorway caught Rhys's eye. He carefully peeled it from the wall, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it over his shoulder.

Wes glanced his way. "Did you just—"

"Yep."

Wes tried to look mature and disapproving, but his eyes sparked with interest. "There are a lot of people here."

"Yep. But there's also you."

Wes smiled and, fuck, he was beautiful. Rhys went to his mate, pulled him close, and kissed him. Wes groaned into Rhys's mouth. The sound vibrated all through Rhys's body. He loved this male with every fiber of his being. Did Wes realize that?

Rhys broke the kiss to nibble along Wes's jaw to his neck, raking his fangs lightly along his vein, not breaking the skin.

“I love you, Wes, more than anything.”

“Christ, I love you too, Rhys.”

And suddenly, Rhys didn't want to feed or fuck. He just wanted to hold onto Wes and realize how lucky he was to have this strong and patient and good male. Wes adapted to the shift in Rhys's body language and held onto him in turn.

Wes began, “When this is over—” At Rhys's shudder, Wes squeezed tighter and insisted, “*When this is over*, I want you to work with Mira again.”

Rhys swallowed hard.

Wes stroked the back of his neck. “Please, Rhys. I understand you needing a break when shit's this hot, but later, when things calm back down. I want you to work with her again. I know it's hard, but I think it's a good thing.”

“Yeah. I know.”

After a moment, Wes asked hesitantly, “Would you ... like me to be there?”

Rhys froze against his mate. “You would ... do that? For me?”

“Of course,” Wes said instantly and intently. His hold tightened again. “I would have offered before, but I was afraid you wouldn't like the idea.”

“I ... don't know. I ... maybe. Can I think about it?”

“Of course, Rhys, Christ, of course. Just consider it an open offer. Okay?”

Rhys drew a shuddering breath and said something that meant almost as much as *I love you*. He said, from the deepest part of himself, “*Thank you.*”

Wes kissed his temple and stroked the back of his neck again. “You want any coffee?”

“When don't I want coffee?”

“Good point. Let me get you a—”

The explosion that blew off the rooftop's stairwell tower sent only a minor quake down to the SI level, just enough to make everyone pause. Then the alarm rang.

Rhys and Wes walked out into the workspace as people started scrambling up from their chairs and racing for the SI floor's secure room.

Rhys shouted over the blaring alarm, "What the fuck is going—"

A dozen demons, dressed like humans but sporting their stubby horns and jutting tusks, burst through the stairwell door. As Wes yanked his gun from its holster and started firing, Rhys ghosted to cut off the demons' access to the fleeing crowd.

Rhys whipped his *shiva* from its sheath and slashed the throat of the lead demon. As he did, another demon raced past. Rhys ghosted after it, grabbed it by the wrist, and flung it across the open workspace. The demon crashed into a long table lined with computers and fell to the floor, rising only to be shot by Wes.

Spinning to slash at another demon, Rhys sliced another throat then severed a hand.

"Rhys!" Wes shouted in panic as a telekinetically charged desk came sailing through the air toward Rhys.

Rhys couldn't duck the huge projectile without the risk of it slamming into the female at the back of the fleeing crowd.

So he turned his shoulder to it—and braced for impact.

\* \* \*

By the time demons swarmed through the stairwell door into the Bunker, the alarm had already given Luca and Talia a few seconds of warning, given that they were on the lowest level. Long enough for Talia to ghost over to the weapons rack, snatch up a bladed staff with a grin, and toss it to Luca.

Luca caught the weapon, equal parts amused, awed, and exasperated. What else could he feel when his brilliant, beautiful Talia did these things?

She selected a bladed staff of her own, gave it a few experimental twirls—and ghosted to the side of the stairwell door. When the door flew open and demons spilled through, Talia sliced the first head clean off, igniting the decapitated body with the fires of the Abyss.

The second demon made it a few steps inside before losing its head in the same way. By that time, Luca had taken position in the sparring ring, where he would have room to duck and dodge—because he knew what was coming as soon as those demons broke through.

Sure enough, when the surge was too much and four demons got past Talia's deadly staff, shit started flying from the weight training area. Bladed staff in his left hand, gun in his right, Luca fired at two demons before he had to dodge a 100-pound plate that came at him like a Frisbee. Next he leaped over a spinning barbell.

When a demon reached Luca through the chaos, he whipped the bladed staff at its neck and sent the head flying. It really was too bad the Hush couldn't use polearms every night in the city because, shit, they were handy.

But so were guns.

He fired at another demon before the whole damn salmon ladder came screeching his way. Luca sprang into a back flip to clear the fifteen-foot obstacle and get himself high enough to avoid other projectiles that he might not be tracking. In his moment of suspension, he registered the single greatest danger of this room.

Luca shouted at Talia. She looked back—just as a dozen sharp and shiny weapons launched from the weapons rack and went soaring across the Bunker in her direction.

She tried to ghost, but her staff had just lodged in a demon's neck. She let go, but it cost her a precious second. Luca heard her scream as she vanished into her ghost, just as his feet touched the ground.

With a lifetime of conditioning himself to shadowlike movement, Luca was usually a silent fighter. Not now, with his

mate hurt, with no time to track her in the melee, with no way to know if everything inside him was about shatter.

Because if he lost Talia ...

With a shout of rage, Luca ghosted into the crush of demons, abandoning his staff for his *shiva*, hacking at close range in a wild and desperate fury.

\* \* \*

When the stairwell tower blew off the roof, Nox was on the top floor of the building in the Records and Artefacts Department with Claire. There was nowhere else he could possibly be on a night like this, when there was no knowing how it would end.

While that could be said of any night on the streets, with Kadaros in play, with the teleporting demon lord and a larger, more focused force of lesser demons, the fight would be on a whole different level, one that seemed impossible.

So Nox needed to be with his Claire first.

He loved seeing her here, in the VDA's sprawling library. He loved the way she lost herself in the books and scrolls and files. She awed him with her quiet, eager intelligence, her delight and self-teaching. Claire's early life had not been easy. It had never allowed any space for her to explore her own incredible mind, and it was the deepest and keenest joy Nox had ever known to see her becoming what she had always been meant to be.

He hoped he would be there to see what more she would become, to hear what excited her next, to hear, too, as she played one more beautiful piece of music. He hoped he would be there to feel her settle against him, curled up in his lap with such trust and love as she was doing now. Nox could never get enough of this kind of time with her.

They said nothing to each other, and Nox loved that they both knew how to communicate without words. Sometimes, words were too hard. Sometimes they made things less clear. But this, their touch, breathing together, was a perfect union that needed nothing more.

Then the stairwell tower blew. It shook the ceiling.

Nox ghosted the fastest he ever had in his life, so fast that Claire, caught in his arms, didn't even manage a screech of surprise before they arrived at the door to the RA Department's vault, where objects and documents too rare and fragile for display were kept.

"Don't come out for anything," Nox said as the alarm blared a belated warning. He hauled open the vault's heavy steel door. "Understand?"

Claire sucked in a frightened breath. "Come in with me."

"I can't, sweetheart, you know I can't."

She fisted his shirt. "Then come back to me."

"I will," Nox promised, bending to kiss her. Living or dead, he would always find a way back to his Claire.

Then the stairwell door flew open, and Nox had to leave her. He had to trust that she would lock herself in that room, that she would stay safe there. Ellis, the tweed-wearing head of the RA Department, arrived breathlessly beside Claire as Nox ghosted to meet the surge of demons.

\* \* \*

Though Kyr had slightly more warning than anyone else, having been in the Admin hallway when Ronan had burst from Mira's office, the floor had no secure room. So, as the stairwell tower blew, Kyr ushered Mira to the only possible place removed from the impending fight. The elevator.

He took one final look at his mate, but he didn't need it to memorize her face. He knew every inch of it, especially her beautiful jade eyes, so full of warmth and gentle strength. He knew every expression, so he saw her fear and her faith and her love, and he had to trust that she saw the same in his expression as the doors slid shut.

For once, he couldn't hear the elevator's cheery ding, lost as it was amid the shrilling of the alarm.

Jodari emerged from his office with a Desert Eagle in one hand and a *shiva* in the other. Kyr had one moment to take in

the incongruous sight of the director in his bespoke gray suit and blue silk tie raising that cavity-punching gun before he had to turn and raise his own.

The stairwell door burst open. Kyr and Jodari triangulated, firing into the swarm of mad, ravening demons, all of them sporting their true demonic faces.

They took down half a dozen, but the wave of them was too massive, and they spilled into the hallway. Kyr retreated to Jodari's position, both of them firing until they were out of ammo. Kyr dropped his empty magazine and slammed a fresh one in, but he holstered the reloaded gun and reached for his *shiva*.

He and Jodari launched into the horde, slashing with their recurved blades, slicing and hacking and stabbing in the confined space, taking heads where they could.

Jodari's Desert Eagle boomed.

Kyr's head whipped to track the fall of a demon behind him, one with a gun set to fire at his back. Another demon barreled into the director, taking him to the ground before Jodari could meet it with his weapons.

Kyr shouted and hacked through the crush of bodies, trying to get to Jodari. Lost in the throng, Kyr barely registered the second crash of the stairwell door, caught only a brief impression of demonic wings before they vanished.

Then a set of huge, curving claws latched onto Kyr's shoulder, sinking into flesh. Pain blazed as Kyr was yanked off his feet and thrown down the hallway out of the tangle of reeking bodies. He slammed into the wall at the end of the hallway.

Grunting, Kyr pushed himself to his feet as the demon lord came stalking his way. Part of the demon's hand was missing, glowing bright with its internal fire, and flames licked out from a hole in its gut.

Despite those wounds to its scaly flesh, the demon lord chuffed in anticipation of a kill. Its eyes glowed bright and its thin lips stretched wide over the jutting bottom tusks.



At least its wings, folded at its back, clawed tips scraping the ceiling, were no advantage here in the tight space of the hallway. And though it could teleport, the scope here was limited. The demon lord was as trapped as Kyr, and even if Kyr didn't make it out of here, he would make sure that neither did this fucking monster.

Kyr launched himself at the demon lord, aiming for the exposed groin instead of going for the throat like the bastard would expect. He drove his *shiva* deep into the scaly flesh. The pain brought the demon's body curving down. But before Kyr could execute the rest of his plan, which was to deliver a second blow, this one to the neck, the demon lord grabbed him by the throat.

Kyr had just gotten his blade free, spilling hellfire from the demon's groin, when he found himself slammed into one wall then another, whipped back and forth across the hallway several times before the demon lord yanked him upward, smashing his head into the ceiling. Kyr's head hit the metal frame holding the thin ceiling panels, but at least it wasn't solid drywall. Even so, light flashed through his vision and he was momentarily disoriented, barely keeping his grip on his *shiva*. The demon lord lowered him to face level, the crushing grip on Kyr's throat robbing him of breath.

"Your kind," the demon lord rumbled, "will finally know hell."

Kyr struggled to focus as blackness crowded the edges of his vision, but he didn't need to see, not really. He knew there was only one final resting place for his *shiva*, if this was to be its last blow. He stabbed straight into the throat of the demon lord. At the same moment, the tip of another blade stabbed through from behind.

Kyr ripped his *shiva* through tendon and muscle and bone as the second blade ripped the other way. Hellfire spewed from both sides. The demon lord's eyes barely had time to register surprise or pain before the horned head toppled.

Kyr was dropped to the ground, collapsing, gasping air back into his lungs, as the fires of the Abyss flamed hot and bright

through the eight-foot frame. The huge body crumpled and hit the ground as a pile of ash, which burst upward in a black cloud.

As the ash thinned and drifted, Kyr squinted the director into focus. Jodari's tailored jacket was shredded and his white dress shirt was stained in several places with blood, but his *shiva* hung at his side in a firm grip.

The sprinklers popped down from the ceiling and started to spray. Jodari sighed and walked through the ash that was quickly becoming muck. He stopped in front of Kyr and bent, extending a hand. Kyr took it and let Jodari pull him to his feet.

"Look at this fucking mess," the director grumbled, turning to observe the hallway mournfully.

"Let's hope this is the worst of it," Kyr said, doubting very much that that was the case.

# FORTY-ONE

Syren missed the initial chaos because of what she had learned from her mother's computer after Rhys had unlocked it for her. She had not been in the Bunker lounge when Ronan passed through it because she had been in one of the treatment rooms on the medical floor.

Jonus had been nowhere in sight and Syren had not been in any state of mind to hunt for him or any of the other medical staff. She had needed this ... *thing* out of her arm immediately.

When had Amarada done this? Years ago? Or maybe ...

A memory took hazy shape in Syren's mind. One day, not long after she had returned to the Residence from the abbey, intent on learning the queen's tricks and truths, Syren had stirred in her plush bed, woken by a sense of wrongness. She'd been dizzy and nauseated. She'd slid out of bed and crumpled on the floor, where everything had gone black.

When she had finally woken, tucked safely in bed, two nights had passed.

Amarada had told her she was mistaken, that she'd lost track of time and had forgotten what day it was. These things happened, the queen had claimed, when you lived such a comfortable life. Nights lost their shape, she said, when there was nothing to define their hours.

Had it been then? Had she been drugged and kept insensible until her arm healed so that she wouldn't guess what her mother had done?

It didn't really matter, though, *when* it had happened. It only mattered that it had. It only mattered that Syren get this fucking tracker out of her arm *right now*.

A tray by the exam table held packets of sealed instruments. Syren whipped off her leather jacket and slung it furiously across the room as she stormed toward the tray. She snatched up a scalpel and ripped it free of the sterile plastic.

From the file she had discovered, Syren knew the approximate size and location of the tracking device, but she still found herself slicing again and again into the meat of her left forearm as she hunted for it.

With a frustrated shout, she slapped the bloody scalpel onto the tray and snatched up a pair of forceps. Her left arm blazed with pain, so she used her teeth to tear open the sterile packet. She got her shaking fingers into the circles of the forceps' handle and went back to work.

She gasped and choked as she dug around in her arm, nauseated by both the grotesque sight and the pain. Her vision blurred, but she went on ruthlessly until the metal tip of the forceps clicked against the tracker.

She dug until she got a grip on the device—then she ripped it out. Gasping, she stared at the tiny, unforgivable invasion of her body and privacy. And, as she stared at the tracker, Syren found that she could still, even now, be surprised and hurt by her mother.

A sob escaped Syren, a horrible, broken sound. She cut it off. She would not give Amarada the victory of her horror. She opened the forceps and let the tracker fall to the floor.

Her eyes blurred, but her tears were angry now as she set the heel of her heavy boot to the tiny piece of her mother's cruelty and crushed it.

She must have stood there for some time, staring at the floor as blood dripped from her arm and her anger faded to a numb emptiness—because she was still standing there when the alarm sounded.

The blare jolted Syren from her stupor. She snatched up the bloody scalpel and dashed out of the room. The blonde female doctor and several nurses emerged from other rooms as Syren raced past them to the waiting area by the elevator and stairwell door.

Movement in the stairwell, seen through the narrow slit of reinforced glass, caught her eye. She ran to the door, imagining that it was vampires on the stairs.

The door flew open. Once, Syren would have screamed at the sudden, terrible sight of demons surging toward her, but she had seen too much these last few nights. So she only raised the scalpel and stabbed it into the closest demon's eye.

Skittering back while the demon screamed, Syren drew her gun from where it was holstered at the small of her back. She fired into the surging wave of demons. Behind her, the medical staff screamed and ran.

When Syren was out of bullets, she turned to seek desperately for a new weapon. She snatched up a lamp from one of the waiting area's side tables. As she threw it at the demon horde, her mind flashed to Ronan, remembering the lamp he had thrown in the cabin and all that had led to. The thought stabbed her with terror because she didn't know where he was in the midst of this chaos. She didn't know where anyone was.

Syren turned and raced to the fire extinguisher, thinking to make use of the heavy object, when her eyes landed on the glass case beside it that held an emergency axe. She yanked open the case, shattering the glass against the wall, and grabbed the axe.

She swung as demons surged around her. The axe thunked into flesh, lighting the fires of the Abyss. She swung again and again, hacking desperately. But there were too many. The swarm of demons took her to the ground.

Syren tried to draw in on herself as they tore at her with claws and tusks, as their sulphuric stink invaded her senses, as she simply endured, knowing this would be the end.

But it wasn't the end.

The demons, chittering and hissing, suddenly withdrew. The weight lifted. The pain throbbed without fresh assault. The sounds of demonic agitation grew further away—as a set of footsteps, clanking like metal, slowly approached.

The footsteps stopped. A dry, rasping voice spoke in the Epos Kalli. Syren shuddered and peered out from the protective covering of her arms over her face and head.

Kadaros stood in the waiting area, leathery wings folded at his back. His face remained as ravaged as ever, withered and cadaverous. His dark hair was still wispy and thin, and his eyes were the same soulless black pits. His body, though, she couldn't see, encased as it was in the ornate, ancient armor he had worn in the sarcophagus.

His thin lips stretched in a smile, exposing gleaming fangs—the only part of him untouched by time.

What happened next happened impossibly fast, and yet there was a slow-motion quality to it that had Syren's brain pausing and skipping and trying to comprehend.

Kyr came out of his ghost as he leaped on Kadaros from behind. He slashed his *shiva* across the Dark Prince's neck. Kadaros screamed as his dry throat split open—but the wound began closing before the slash was even complete.

Kadaros flung Kyr over his shoulder and straight through the swinging doors of the operating room. The lesser demons waiting at the edges scampered after him. The Dark Prince returned his gaze to Syren, but he had only a moment to regard her before Nox slammed into him from behind—and sent him flying down the hallway.

“Run! Get out!” Nox shouted as the Dark Prince tumbled to a stop and let out an unholy shriek of rage.

Syren burst to her feet. Snatching up the axe, she raced for the stairwell door. As she ghosted up to the ground floor, flinging open the lobby door, she felt the whoosh of others ghosting past her, heading down to the fight.

Ronan was not among them. She would have known, would have sensed him.

So where was he?

## FORTY-TWO

Ronan nearly collapsed at the mouth of the VDA's tunnel, gasping air into his lungs. His whole body was shaking, his energy totally spent by the eighteen-mile ghost he had just done. Not long ago, such a feat would not even have been possible for him. But now, that long stretch had ridden the line of what he could handle—and it was no mystery why.

The teleporter could have taken him farther, to a distance utterly impossible for Ronan to traverse in time. Ronan had been meant to manage it, and he had been meant to arrive depleted.

Once again, a trap.

Once again, it didn't matter.

Briefly, he considered trying to mind walk so he could recon the building before entering, but there was no way he could settle into the mental space needed for that. And he had a feeling that as soon as he entered the building, it would be obvious where he was needed.

He wanted—of course he wanted—to find Syren first. But the only way to really save her, protect her, offer any hope to her, was to kill Kadaros.

And if it was already too late, if the delay forced on him had already meant he hadn't been there to save her ...

Ronan couldn't afford to know that right now.

And that wasn't the case. He knew it. He felt it. She was alive.

So he had to kill Kadaros and make sure that she—and everyone he loved—stayed that way.

Digging deep for some further reserve of energy, Ronan ghosted along the dark tunnel to the steel door.

Locked.

Ronan barreled into with all the desperation that had been buzzing through him for the past eighteen miles. The door exploded off its hinges as the containment room door had done. It slammed into the opposite side of the Interrogation and Detention hallway, shattering the cinder-block wall.

With a jolt of panic, Ronan checked the syringe of counteragent in his pocket—still intact, thank Idaios—then he ghosted down the hallway to the stairwell door, wrenching it open and darting inside.

From there, it was easy enough to lock in on the direction of the biggest fight. He raced down to Medical—and burst through the door to the sight of the Hush tag teaming the decrepit monstrosity that was Kadaros.

While Kyr and Wes unloaded their guns into Kadaros's armored torso, distracting more than damaging him, Luca ghosted behind the Dark Prince and swiped at the back of his neck with a polearm. It was unclear whether the blade made contact, and it wouldn't do any good anyway. No blade could inflict lasting damage on even that wasted form.

A boom exploded from Kadaros, the force of it flinging everyone away from him and shaking the walls and ceiling.

Ronan ghosted through the reverberations to their source. He had to act fast, had to separate Kadaros from the Hush—because the Hush had no chance of defeating him. And Ronan wasn't going to lose another team.

He had lost one in Atar, when Amarada had betrayed them to Genesys and everyone that Ronan had cared about had been slaughtered.

Ronan didn't realize until he saw the Hush in danger how much he had come back from that loss. He had not meant to care about the Hush, had not wanted to after losing his first team. Sometimes, he had half convinced himself that he didn't care about them, not on any deep, personal level. But that was a lie, and it had been for a long, long time.

Ronan could not bear to lose any of them.



So he grabbed Kadaros around the middle and ghosted back into the stairwell. He made it up three flights of stairs before Kadaros threw Ronan off so hard that he slammed straight through the wall and went tumbling across the Surveillance and Investigation floor. He crashed through the rows of desks before skidding to a stop.

Demons skittered out from somewhere, hissing and chittering at the periphery, devolving into their most natural states, all human guise utterly abandoned. But they did not interfere as Kadaros stalked Ronan's way.

Ronan climbed to his feet, eyes on the enemy. How could he ever have thought he would become that? Everything in him rebelled against it. That thing was death and pain and cruelty. And while Ronan was no stranger to those things, he realized in that moment, for the first time in his life, that none of those had a place in his soul.

This time, when he felt the expansion within himself, he didn't resist it. This time, he felt no fear of its power—because that power was warmth and life.

He felt the glow more than saw it. He felt, too, the unfurling of his wings at his back—and they felt right.

Like they had always been meant to be there.

Like they completed something in him.

He had been so used to his half-life that he hadn't even recognized it as such. But he did now as he let himself be what he truly was.

“Ios tu Idaios,” Kadaros said.

*Son of Idaios.*

In answer, Ronan drew his gun and drilled a bullet into Kadaros's head. The force snapped his head back. Ronan's other hand dove into his pocket for the syringe of counteragent, which he clamped between his teeth as he ghosted across the mess of overturned desks to tackle the Dark Prince.

At least, that was his plan.

Kadaros's leathery wings beat with a whoosh of air, lifting him several feet so he could twist above Ronan's back and rake long, sharp nails along his left wing. Ronan shouted at the unfamiliar pain, and his wings snapped tight against his back.

Fuck!

His shout had lost him the syringe. It rolled to a stop under one of the desks. He dove for it, only to have Kadaros grab him by the ankle and hurl him across the room. He slammed into a wall. Kadaros was there in an instant, pummeling Ronan's exposed torso before gravity could even take him to the ground.

Ronan's body caved around the blows, but he burst up with one of his own, ramming his fist into Kadaros's armored gut, hitting so hard that his hand punched through the metal breastplate. Kadaros was slammed up into the high ceiling. Ronan wrenched his hand free, ignoring the shredding it got from the sharp edges of metal. As the Dark Prince fell, Ronan grabbed one of his leathery wings and wrenched, snapping the bone.

Kadaros screamed.

With a shout, Ronan hit him in his ravaged face. Kadaros's head snapped back, but he recovered quickly and nailed Ronan in the gut. Ronan grappled for a hold, got his footing right, and shoulder tossed Kadaros into the desks.

Then Ronan went after the lost syringe.

Kadaros caught up with him halfway across the room. He grabbed Ronan by the back of the head and slammed his face into a desk. Ronan spun as Kadaros hauled him up for a second slam.

Ronan didn't know where the blasts of energy came from. They seemed to happen on their own, or perhaps when he was most charged with emotion. He was charged now with utter desperation. He had to get that goddamn syringe, or he would not be able to destroy this evil thing. They were too evenly matched. Ronan was in better health but utterly exhausted, his blows not hard enough, his pace not fast enough.

So Ronan hit the Dark Prince with all the force of his desperation, and the pulse that exploded against Kadaros's chest sent him flying.

Ronan dove for the syringe.

As their master flew across the room, the lesser demons swarmed Ronan, scrabbling with their claws, raking with their tusks. Ronan ignored them in his desperate bid to recover the syringe. His hand closed on it.

At that same moment, Kadaros's hand grabbed Ronan's ankle again and yanked him free of the writhing mass. Ronan was slammed into the ceiling then down onto a desk. It stunned him momentarily, long enough for Kadaros to wrap a hand around his throat.

Chuckling softly, the Dark Prince stroked a long nail down Ronan's cheek. His black eyes looked into Ronan's like their darkness would swallow him whole. His face was a mask of death. Ronan let it draw near. And when Karados bent, bringing his long fangs down toward Ronan's neck, Ronan let him.

Ronan even let those fangs start to prick his vein as he flicked the cap from the syringe with his thumb—and plunged the needle into Kadaros's jugular, shooting the counteragent into his bloodstream.

Kadaros wrenched away, one hand clamping onto his neck where he'd been injected. His black eyes dropped uncomprehendingly to the syringe in Ronan's hand. Ronan let it go and reached for his *shiva*.

The grip of Kadaros's other hand tightened on Ronan's throat. Ronan hacked at the wrist. Though the blade dealt a wound, it healed too quickly for the hand to be severed.

Kadaros snarled with a hint of amusement, then his grip weakened. The dark eyes widened in shock. His hand released Ronan's throat. He staggered back.

As Ronan levered himself up, Kadaros bolted across the room. Ronan sprang from the desk, racing after him, realizing belatedly that Kadaros would try to escape before he was fully

weakened. Ronan chased him into the breakroom, where Kadaros launched himself at the window.

Ronan launched himself after the Dark Prince, latching on as they exploded into the night sky.

They grappled, both pairs of wings—one leathery, one feathered—laboring to keep them aloft as they wrestled in the air.

Kadaros spun around behind Ronan, shredding at Ronan's wings, raking at his back, eliciting a shout of pain. Ronan grabbed Kadaros over his shoulder. He shouldered Kadaros in the air but didn't let go. Keeping his hold, Ronan hooked his legs around Kadaros's armored torso. Then he grabbed the Dark Prince's head in both hands—and wrenched with every ounce of his strength and will.

Light flashed and the deep, throbbing power boomed through his body. Bone snapped. Muscle ripped. Skin split.

Kadaros's head came free in Ronan's hands. The body went limp in the grip of Ronan's legs.

Then it all crumbled into ash.

As the remains of the Dark Prince drifted away on the night breeze, as the fight, at last, was over, exhaustion caught up with Ronan abruptly and his shredded wings failed him at last.

He plummeted to the ground.

# FORTY-THREE

Syren stood on the sidewalk in front of VDA headquarters, the axe quiet at her side after having been put to use once again as demons fleeing the building had flooded past her. She had killed what she could, chasing after one to finish her work just as Ronan and Kadaros had burst through the window to battle high above the street.

She had stopped then, unable to look away, beyond thinking, almost beyond feeling. The battle had transcended all that. There had been no room for nuance, only simple hope and simple fear—and a choice between them.

As she watched, that battle seemed to echo inside her, simplifying everything, washing away all the confusion and noise.

She had turned away from Ronan, withdrawn from him, out of fear that she was not strong enough to match him. Fear that he would overpower her, overrule her, subsume her.

She had chosen fear.

She could have chosen hope instead. She could have chosen faith in herself, and in him.

As she watched, then, she wept. In regret and sorrow. In the absolute knowledge that she had been wrong in her choice.

She made a different one as she watched her mate, glowing like a star, beautiful in his body, in his power, in his courage. She loved him, and nothing else mattered. She had absolute faith in him, and nothing else mattered.

And when he grappled with his enemy and tore the head from Kadaros's body, when darkness turned to ash and drifted away, Syren's heart swelled with awe, the moment suspending itself as Ronan hung, briefly, in the air.

But then he fell. Like a shooting star, he plummeted, his face to the sky, his back curving toward the ground. His tattered wings streamed above him like the tail of a comet.

Fear flooded back into Syren, but it was a different fear than before, a simpler and more terrible one: she might lose him. She might already have thrown away her chance to choose him, to tell him that she loved him.

Dropping the axe, she ran toward him, as though she could outrun the cold terror racing through her veins.

When Ronan struck the earth, the impact shook the ground under Syren, throwing her off her feet. She lurched back into motion, scrambling through the rubble ringing out from Ronan's body, throwing herself into the depression in the shattered asphalt where he lay upon his tattered wings. His eyes were closed. The glow was fading from his body.

“Ronan!”

*Idaios, no! No, no, no, no, no!*

Syren's hands fluttered over Ronan's battered body. Blood spilled from dozens of wounds, running over the slashing marks of his tattoos.

Syren bent to kiss him. “*Please,*” she breathed as her lips met his. “*I love you,*” she whispered into him.

He drew a stuttering breath, like those words hurt him to take in. Why had she not said them before? Why was she such a coward?

“I'm sorry,” she said, but the apology pushed back against her—because he had spoken the same words.

Syren drew back enough to see his face. She laid her hand along his cheek. “There's nothing for you to be sorry for.”

“There is,” he gasped.

“No,” she said. “There isn't.” But none of that mattered right now. All that mattered was the deepest truth. “I love you, Ronan. Please stay with me. *I love you.*”

He reached up to touch her face with trembling fingers. Tears spilled from his eyes. “I love you too.”

“Stay with me,” Syren pleaded again.

A familiar voice spoke from behind. “Get out of the way, Syrenaria.”

Syren’s blood ran cold at the sound of her mother’s voice. Then it ran abruptly hot, surging through her veins. She growled and looked up at the female who had caused so much pain.

As though she had only now managed to crawl out of the remote woods, Amarada still wore her red dress from that night at the cabin. It was ripped and bloodstained. Her perfect hair was tangled and wild, her lipstick smeared across her chin.

Syren rose to meet her, standing between her mother and her mate.

“Get out of the way,” Amarada ordered again. “He must die. Now. He is a threat to the crown, to *us*. Don’t you see that, you foolish child? Don’t you understand how easily he could take our position?”

“There is no *us*, Amarada. There never was. There was only ever you. And you are done.”

Amarada’s lip curled. “Hardly. He’s weak from the fight. I have watched and I have waited and I will kill him now. You will take your place beside me,” Amarada shifted the gun toward Syren, “or beside him.”

Behind Syren, Ronan climbed, grunting, to his feet. He made to step around Syren, but she held out her hand, asking him to stop, asking him to let her fight her own battle. She heard the roughness of his breathing, felt his tension. But his fingers touched the small of her back, trusting her.

“You will abdicate,” Syren informed the queen. At Amarada’s humorless laugh, Syren told her, “You will. Or I will expose all your secrets.”

Amarada’s lips, robbed of their usual paint, drew back from her fangs. “You don’t know my secrets, dear.”

“Oh, but I do. How do you think I learned about this?” Syren held up her bloodied left arm. “Hm? How would I have learned of the tracker you put inside me? Is that how you

found us at the cabin? But you lost the signal, didn't you, in the rocks? You had to hunt."

Ronan lurched forward, but Syren planted her right hand on his stomach, asking him again to stop, to let her fight her battle. Ronan growled, clearly ready to fight for Syren—and willing to stand down for her as well.

This was what Syren had missed, somehow, in her fear. That they could compromise. That they could learn to let each other do their own work—and this work was Syren's.

Amarada sneered, "That's hardly meaningful—"

"Your laptop is in VDA headquarters, with enough evidence on it to have half the noble class gunning for you—and the other half handing them ammo."

Amarada's darted toward the building. "You wouldn't."

"I would. Your time is over. You will abdicate then you will go away. Or I will kill you."

"I'm your—"

"No. You're not my anything."

"This isn't over," Amarada hissed.

"I think you know it is. You built your power in isolation. You felt secure there, in isolation. But it has left you *isolated*. You have no friends, no allies, and no power left to you—or you wouldn't be here right now, like this. You are no danger to me, not anymore. You are no danger to any of us. And I think you should leave before my mate loses his temper."

With a snarl, Amarada turned away. And ghosted.

Then Syren turned to her mate and threw her arms around him and made her choice. And she thanked Idaios for blessing her with the chance, the second chance, to do it.

Ronan wrapped his arms around her in return. His battered wings folded and vanished. They stood there for a long while with no words needed to understand each other.

Then, together, they turned to the VDA building, where the rest of the Hush had emerged, bleeding and battered and



waiting to help.

Syren's heart swelled at the sight of her family. Not just Kyr but all of them. Her family. Her friends. Her people. And she would do everything she could to help them.

# FORTY-FOUR

I love this place,” Syren said as she and Ronan put their Thai takeout on the kitchen island of his warehouse apartment.

“Yeah?” he asked, clearly unsure, maybe a little worried.

Syren slipped her arm around him. A sharp breath went in and out of him, like he had really needed that contact.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Cuz we can always look for something else that you might like better.”

“Right now, this is perfect. And all I want to think about right now is, well, right now. You know?”

“I do.”

There had been enough chaos and enough questions over the last few nights. For a moment, Syren just wanted peace and food and her mate.

After VDA headquarters had been secured a few hours ago, the chaos had barely abated. There had been a few casualties and too many injuries. Of the Hush, Talia had been hurt the worst. She had concealed how bad the knife wound to her abdomen had been until the end, after she and Luca had done what they could to help in the fight with Kadaros. Then, she had collapsed.

Jonus had emerged to help her. The other medical staff, who had gotten to a secure room while Syren had held off the demons, had also emerged to treat the wounded.

None of the Hush had gotten through the fight unscathed. Rhys’s shoulder had been badly broken, and Nox had narrowly missed a fatal slash to his femoral artery.

But, thank Idaios, all of them had survived. And all of them were recovering now with their mates, finding a little of the peace that Syren and Ronan were getting to enjoy.

Ronan, though badly wounded, had recovered quickly. It awed Syren to see him now: healthy and healed ... and looking at her with the same sort of awe.

It would take them both a while, she thought, to relax and really believe that they were getting this second chance.

It would take a while, too, for Ronan to wrestle with everything he'd learned about himself and to begin searching for answers to all his lingering questions. But that was for another night.

Syren opened one of the takeout boxes to check the contents. Seeing the outrageous amount of pepper flakes, she slid the box toward Ronan.

“That one is yours. I can't believe you ordered it that hot.”

He went to open a drawer. “That's because you don't understand how much I've missed eating stuff like this.”

When he returned, handing her a set of silverware, she asked, “So you always eat like this? High intensity?”

“Yes.” He stabbed into the spicy beef then took a bite that made her wince at the idea of how his tongue must be burning.

“I can't imagine what your blood is going to taste like after this,” she teased. Then she stalled, worrying suddenly about the shape of their relationship, unsure of it and hating that she was unsure. It was her own fault. She had shaken it, had damaged it. And they were here together, but what if—

“Well, you'll have to get used to that,” he said. “I'll do a lot for you, Syren, but I won't give up Thai food.”

She smiled, relieved, as he stabbed into the box again. “Can we at least sit down?” she asked.

“Just one more bite. I'm so fucking hungry.”

“You did ghost eighteen miles,” she reminded him, still shocked that he'd managed that so fast.

“And don't forget the whole battle with evil. I mean, that was tiring too.”

Syren smiled again, but with less amusement. She would never forget that. Not as long as she lived.

They eventually moved to the stools on the other side of the island and dug into their takeout feast. And it was almost perfect.

Almost.

Because the bond between them was so new and Syren still felt guilty and a little worried. She didn't realize that Ronan did too until he spoke.

"I don't want to cage you, Syren. I don't want to take your freedom. I'm ... afraid though. Because I also want—I *need*—to keep you safe. And ... I'm afraid I won't always know how to do both of those things at once."

Syren's eyes stung at this reminder of everything that had happened, of all the fear that was still in the process of fading.

"I'm scared too. Of reacting badly again. I don't want to, but what if I do? What if I make the same mistake?"

Ronan laid his hand, palm upward, on the counter between them. "I think we can figure it out. Together. Don't you?"

Syren smiled through her tears and took his offered hand and said, meaning everything, "Yes. I do."

"I need you," he said then in a deep, rough tone.

"I need you too," she answered and turned to fling her arms around him. He caught her up, lifting her. She wrapped her legs around his hips, wrapped her arms around his neck, and buried her face against him as he carried her to the stairs and up to the open loft.

\* \* \*

Ronan sat on the edge of the bed and held his mate against him, relishing the warmth and nearness of her body, grateful that he got to experience this again.

He tilted his head. "Feed from me. Please."

He hadn't been able to protect Syren like he had wanted to at HQ. He had been too far away, racing back, unable to shield

her. And she hadn't needed him to, not then and not with her mother.

Ronan admired his mate for that, for her strength and courage. But he still needed to care for her.

When her fangs sank into his neck, he gasped at the pleasure that spilled through his body. He groaned and shuddered at the erotic draw on his vein. His cock throbbed against his zipper. Syren rocked lightly against him as she fed. It felt so good to have her enjoy him. It felt so right to give this part of himself to her. His mate.

When she was sated, she licked his vein to seal the wounds, making him shiver with pleasure.

They undressed each other slowly, savoring the freedom to look and touch and bare each other. Their boots thudded to the floor then they stood and undid each other's pants. Ronan sucked in a breath as Syren slid down his zipper. He made a sound of pleasure as she slid his pants and boxer briefs down his hips, as the material grazed his stiff cock. He slid her jeans down as well, marveling as she stepped out of them.

"You're so beautiful," he said.

She smiled. "So are you."

Her fingers trailed down his chest to his belly then his cock. She traced the length of it. He wanted to lay her down, to take over and give her pleasure, but he could see that this was pleasure for her. And it was for him too. To be touched by her. To be wanted by her.

He had never really felt wanted before, not until Syren.

"Mm," she murmured and cupped his swollen balls.

Ronan closed his eyes at the waves of pleasure, then he sucked in a breath as she curled her hand around his cock and stroked.

"Fuck, Syren. I love how you touch me."

"I love to touch you. I love *you*, Ronan."

Ronan laid his hand along the side of her face. “I love you too.”

She raised her eyes from his cock to his face. He bent and kissed her. They crawled into the bed together, kissing and touching, exploring each other’s bodies, taking the time for every possible pleasure.

It was the most tender and loving touch Ronan had ever known, and he loved every second of it. And when he entered her at last, he was so filled with the pleasure and awe of being with her that his body warmed and opened and he felt his wings unfurl behind him. The faint glow of his body bathed her, revealing all her beauty.

Syren smiled as she gazed up at him. She reached above his shoulder and lightly brushed the top of one wing. He shivered in pleasure as he rocked into her.

Ronan would never have thought he would come from such gentle and loving sex, but his balls tightened as he thrust into his mate, as he watched and felt her pleasure. He began to moan, losing himself in her as he watched her lose herself in him. And when her sex seized on his and she cried out with pleasure, Ronan cried out with her and came hard inside her, his wings shuddering, his body giving her everything he had.

## FORTY-FIVE

There were so many side dishes on the abbey's kitchen island that Ronan didn't know what to pick, so he loaded up two plates with his best guesses: red beans and rice, courtesy of Talia, Claire's pico de gallo, Wes's sweet potato fries (though Rhys claimed he had helped). It didn't matter that there was no theme to this meal. It all smelled fucking fantastic. Ronan could not get over the pleasure of getting to enjoy food again.

"Leave room for burgers," Luca advised as he loaded up a plate of his own. Beside Luca, Talia was loading her own plate, apparently not trusting her mate with the job. "Wes is cooking."

"The burger can sit on top," Ronan pointed out. "Or I'll hold in my hand. Or I'll eat all of this first."

"See?" Talia said. "Every problem can be solved."

Luca eyed the mountain of tortilla chips on her plate. "You're as bad as Rhys."

"He and I have a lot of things in common. Chips being our favorite food group is one of those things."

"Chips are not a food group."

Talia patted Luca's arm. "Yes, my love, they are."

Luca shook his head, pretending to be exasperated, but his eyes followed his mate as she walked through the double doors into the music room, which let out onto a seldom-used patio. The fear had not yet faded from Luca's eyes. He had almost lost his mate last month.

Life, as Syren had told Ronan, was dangerous.

It couldn't be wasted, then, not a moment of it.

Noticing Ronan's attention, Luca glanced at him. Maybe Luca saw some of the fear still fading from Ronan's eyes as well because he said, "It's worth it."

Ronan answered, “I know.”

The corner of Luca’s mouth tugged, then he followed his mate.

Ronan took a moment to look around the familiar space of the abbey kitchen. He had never appreciated it before, neither the space itself nor what it represented. Home. Security. Family.

He had spent so much of his life trying not to need those things that he hadn’t ever let himself see that they were right in front of him. He hadn’t let himself admit that he *did* need them. And ... he had them.

Maybe, with all that to anchor him, with his mate to anchor him, he could start looking into the past. Into what had happened to his mother and whether what he’d been told was even true. Into what he actually was.

Mira walked in through the music room with an empty wine glass. She went to the cluster of open bottles and picked one of the reds.

“You okay?” she asked, eyes flicking to Ronan as she poured.

There was a time when such a question would have made him uncomfortable, but now he was able to nod and say, “Yeah. I am. Are you?”

Mira recorked the wine and blew out her cheeks. “Mostly. Almost there. I’m not as tough as you guys. I wish I was.”

“No, Mira. We need you just like you are.” Ronan was surprised to hear himself say such a thing, surprised to feel how it was true. Mira was kind. She cared about people.

“Sometimes I feel ... oh, never mind.”

“What?” Ronan prompted.

Mira took a deep breath. “I just ... sometimes I’m not sure if I’m really helping.”

“You are. We need you. A lot. You just always have to deal with the shittiest parts of us. It takes a strong person to do that.



I didn't understand that. Before."

"Thanks, Ronan." Mira smiled a little and cocked her head toward the door, like she knew that Ronan had reached his limit with this kind of conversation. "Shall we?"

Ronan followed Mira through the music room. Voices and the delicious scent of grilling meat drifted in through the open patio doors. Around the edge of the patio, tiki torches offered soft light, their glow fading into the meadow sprawling behind the abbey.

Ronan stalled briefly at the sight of his mate, leaning back in her Adirondack chair and grinning at something Talia was saying. The rest of the Hush were gathered around the patio in a variety of chairs. Only Wes, manning the grill, was on his feet.

Syren's eyes lifted to his, and her smile softened. She watched with keen attention as he crossed the patio to her, like suddenly there was nothing else in the world that she wanted to see. Just him.

Then she laughed as he held out a heavily laden plate to her. "Oh my God!"

He shrugged. "It all looked good."

He snagged a fork from his back pocket and handed it to her before sitting in the chair beside her. Kyr handed him an opened beer.

As though Syren could see Ronan's struggle as he regarded both the beer and his food, she teased, "There's ample time for all of it."

Ronan huffed a laugh at himself, set the beer aside, and dug into the red beans and rice. "Talia, shit, this is good."

"Yes, well," Talia sighed, crunching a chip loaded with pico. "I have many skills."

As Wes opened the grill and flipped a few burgers, Rhys, who was sitting in the chair closest to his mate, watched the male like he was the best thing in the world. Ronan understood

that now, and he understood too—no, he *felt*—that Wes was also part of his family now.

Ronan felt light, almost dizzied, as the last fragments of his habitual distrust dissolved. These were good people. This was a good night.

Then ...

Ronan narrowed his eyes at Rhys. The male was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, which was moving disturbingly over his stomach and chest. Like this was about to be a scene from *Alien*.

“Rhys, what the—”

A small furry head popped up at the neck of Rhys’s sweatshirt. The tabby kitten mewed in a tiny voice. Rhys grinned as everyone exclaimed in surprise.

“Has that been in your sweatshirt the whole time?” Nox asked in shock.

“She was sleeping,” Rhys said.

“I thought you were looking a little ...” Talia patted her stomach teasingly.

Rhys’s grin deepened. “Wes and I went to see the Duchess,” he explained, referring to his former, elderly landlady who had moved to the northern part of the state to live on her daughter’s farm. “And there were *kittens*.”

“I could barely get him out of the barn,” Wes complained. “It was ridiculous.”

“You loved it,” Rhys said.

“I loved it,” Wes agreed.

“What’s her name?” Claire asked.

“I don’t know,” Rhys replied. “I’m not good at names.”

“You’re overthinking it,” Wes said.

“I know! I just need more time to decide. For now, she’s Margarita.”

“It’s too long,” Wes argued. “You’ll start calling her Marge.”

“*You* said I was overthinking it, but every time I come up with something, you don’t like it. And what’s wrong with Marge?”

Wes sighed. “Whatever you like.”

“Clearly,” Rhys replied dryly, and he and Wes shared an amused look that said they were both enjoying the argument.

“Well, *I* like it,” Claire put in. “Can I . . . see her?”

Rhys waved her over with a grin, but before Claire could launch out of her camp chair, Nox asked in surprise, “Do you want a cat, sweetheart?”

Claire’s eyes got huge. “*Could* I have a cat?”

“Of course! I mean . . . if Kyr . . .”

The *comudari* shrugged. “It’s your house too. All of you. You guys know that, right?”

“Yeah, bossman,” Rhys said, “we know. Claire, I’ll call the Duchess overday, okay? Then you can come up to the farm?”

As Claire went to see the kitten and chatter filled the patio space, Ronan sighed and settled back in his chair, enjoying the hell out of this night. Syren’s hand found his. They threaded their fingers together, eyes meeting briefly with a shared understanding of how damn lucky they were to be here with their family.

# About the Author

Katherine Diane loves intense, complex heroes and fascinating worlds. She likes her romances a little dark, a little raw, and suffused with erotic realism.

To hear about future releases, please sign up for her [newsletter](#).

\* \* \*

THANK YOU for reading! If you enjoyed this title, reviews and recommendations are very much appreciated.

Read on for a sneak peek at *Silk & Sand*, the first book in a smoking hot MM fantasy romance duology releasing Spring 2024. Get ready for desert winds, exotic places, magic, and monsters. The action, humor, and contentious attraction will suck you into Seth and Raider's world, but what will hold you there is the emotional and sexual intensity—all the dark, raw beauty of these two complicated men discovering just how much they need each other.

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# Sneak Peek at

## *Silk & Sand*

### Chapter 1

Three hundred miles of roads and rutted tracks. Weeks of hunting markets and inns. Seth was used to all that. He didn't mind blinding sun and lumpy beds and a dozen dead ends—because they never really were dead ends. There would be a crack, a hole, a hidden door. There would be a clue, and Seth would find it. As a Curator for the Arcanum, that was his job.

But what Seth usually hunted was artifacts. Arcane ones. Objects of interest to the scholars of the Arcanum College, things of power and danger and often incredible beauty. He followed trails that whispered from the fading ink of crumbling scrolls and the lore of fireside tales, into forests and far-flung cities, down back alleys and tomb shafts.

He did not, usually, hunt people.

But here he was in the dusty, desert-edge town of Shalaa, tromping into the bazaar with questions about a man instead of questions about a mystery. Of course, *why* an arcanist wanted for murder would have come to this little spot of nowhere was a mystery all on its own.

Mudbrick buildings squatted on either side of the not-quite-straight alley, their faded awnings drooping in the heat and the red govaa fruit at one merchant's stall visibly shriveling. A town as remote as Shalaa couldn't hope to enjoy the arcane advancements of a city-state like Masir, where the Arcanum birthed so many wonders.

No cooling boxes preserved the fruit. No arcane fans lifted the blanket of heat. In fact, Seth was likely *wearing* more arcane technology than existed in the entire town.

Without the cooling properties of the arcane fabric, his rugged black pants and sleeveless shirt would have been unbearable in this heat. And that was before considering the added burden of his forearm bracers, utility belt, and thigh sheath.

And *then* there was the heavy sword strapped at his back, its pommel jutting above his right shoulder.

The vendor with the shriveled govaa fruit woke with a snort, toppling from his cushion as Seth passed his stall.

Maybe he should have thrown on his kaftan after all, but it had seemed pointless. In a town like Shalaa, it wasn't just Seth's clothes that screamed foreigner, nor his clean-shaven face. He was too tall, too muscled, and too fair with his short brown hair and green eyes.

Even in Masir, his size and coloring marked him as *other*, and Seth preferred to think that those traits were responsible for the stares he got everywhere he went.

There was, however, another possibility.

He had been told (on many irritating occasions) that he walked like he was on his way to deliver a beating.

Seth found this unfair. He walked like he had something important to do. Which he *did*. And that important thing was finding out where in this gods-forsaken land a certain fugitive arcanist had vanished after murdering a fellow scholar.

Outside the Arcanum, such an event would hardly shock Seth, but arcanists tended to fight with words, not bludgeon each other with stone busts of the Arcanum's founding father.

But Julian had done just that, and Catalus, head of the Department of Alchemy, was understandably upset. He had insisted that Julian be returned to the College for questioning and justice.

And so Seth had been yanked away from his much more interesting pursuit of a golden bird rumored to foretell the future and had been assigned to this dusty, thirsty, frustrating manhunt.

When Seth had protested the assignment, Catalus had only scowled at him from across his desk and said, “You’re the only Curator sufficiently tenacious and brutal for the job.”

Seth resented that. He was not *brutal*. He was skilled with his weapons, yes, and willing to use them, yes. And ... yes, fine, he had a history of losing his temper.

But he did not enjoy violence, and he had learned years ago to control his temper. (Truly, he had no idea why he still ended up in so many fights.)

Feeling the startled gaze of the govaa vendor on his back, Seth moderated his pace with an effort. He even stopped to admire the finely woven baskets hanging from the awning of the next stall.

Set back from this fringe of baskets, the weaver sat in the mudbrick doorway of his house/shop. Beside him, a woman fanned herself with a palm leaf. The weaver’s nimble fingers worked the brightly dyed cheffah grass through a sturdy frame, making the humble item into a work of art.

Seth chided himself for his earlier thoughts about Shalaa. Even in this remote location, people worked wonders with the materials they had, even if those materials were simple grass.

Besides, the town wasn’t *that* small. He’d see a bathhouse riding in, and though this might be the last town before the Kesh Desert, it was also the first town outside of it. People traded here.

When Seth stepped under the awning, the woman set aside her fan and levered herself up with a walking stick. She stumped forward, bent over the stick.



“You want to buy?” she asked in the trade tongue, the default speech of trade towns like this one. “My honored husband is the finest basket weaver in Shalaa.”

“His work is beautiful,” Seth agreed. The woman raised a gray eyebrow at his Masiri accent. “But I’m actually looking for someone.”

The woman planted the stick in front herself and craned her neck to look up at Seth’s face.

“Ah. So you want to buy information.”

Seth’s mouth twitched. Everywhere he traveled, people were the same.

But he couldn’t blame her, standing before him in her kaftan of faded purple cotton with its mended cuffs. He fished a drahm from one of his many pockets and passed it to the woman. The copper coin vanished into her wide blue sash with astonishing speed.

Seth said, “I’m looking for a trader named Jamil.”

“That jumped-up young desert dog? Who thinks he is suddenly too good for us folk of the bazaar? As if I didn’t once swat his bottom for stealing figs from my tree.”

“And what makes him think so highly of himself all of a sudden?”

“One lucky trade and he is strutting about like a sultan.”

Seth breathed a sigh of relief. This didn’t confirm that Julian had been in Shalaa, but it gave Seth hope that his guess was correct. The arcane scope cinched into Seth’s utility belt had caught his eye in Demir’s bustling market four days ago. It was a rare and valuable item, something that had likely been owned by a prince—or an arcanist.

The Demiri merchant had commanded a high price for the scope and the story of its acquisition. It was a good thing the

Arcanum had given Seth a letter of credit, or this manhunt would have dead-ended in Demir. But the scope had been one of those cracks in the dead end. The merchant had bought it from a Shalaani trader name Jamil. No prince would have sold an arcane scope to a trader in Shalaa, but an arcanist on the run might have.

“So where might I find Jamil?”

“Go past Agra’s flatbreads then past the striped awning of Yusef’s shop. There you will find the stall of Jamil. If he is there, I cannot say. *Some* of us have work to do.”

With that, the woman stumped back to her cushion. Instead of resuming her fanning, she made a point of taking up a piece of crimson braiding. Squinting ferociously, she set to work beside her husband, who had never looked up from the crisscrossed strips of his basket.

Seth found Agra’s stall, where the delicious scent of warm flatbread made Seth’s stomach growl out a reminder of missed meals.

*Later. He would eat later.*

*After* he got some answers.

Next came the shop with the striping awning. Beyond it, Seth found an empty stall. The awning was up, but the door was closed. No one answered Seth’s repeated knocking.

He backtracked to the previous shop with the striped awning. Under its shade, an assortment of cheap goods—flimsy brass lamps, amulets of paste and paint—cluttered a table. The open door, however, offered a glimpse of better wares inside.

Seth stepped into the cluttered shop, where a middle-aged man in dark robes belted with a white sash was seated before a low table. He was drinking what smelled like kahve from a glass cup.

“Yusef?” Seth inquired, recalling the name the basket weaver’s wife had mentioned.

“I am Yusef. You have goods to sell, or you seek to buy?”

On the surrounding shelves, household goods mingled with antiques. Among them, Seth spotted a few works of artifice, including an arcane hotplate and what looked like part of a water pump.

“I’m seeking information on the whereabouts of the man named Jamil.”

Yusef steepled his fingers. Sending Seth a bland look over the tops of them, he claimed, “I do not know this Jamil.”

Seth had a nose for lies, but he certainly didn’t need that talent to sniff out this particular one.

“And how much for you to know him?” Unlike the basket weaver’s wife, this man would yield nothing for a mere drahm.

“I am but a humble and honest merchant, harib. If you seek to purchase goods, I can help you.”

Harib. Stranger. Meaning: Seth would have to abide by the social rules that the basket weaver’s wife had dispensed with in the interests of economy.

Here, Seth would have to pretend that he was a customer. Depending on what goods Seth was willing to buy, Jamil’s location might come up in the course of their conversation.

Prevarication tried Seth’s patience at the best of times. His being hungry, thirsty, and frustrated did not make for the best of times. But he would have to play along.

“Since I am here,” Seth gritted out, “I might as well look at your offerings.”

Yusef positively beamed as he rose from his cushion. Beckoning for Seth to follow, he led the way through a curtain

of colorful glass beads and into a back room. Yusef gestured to the rolled carpets standing against the mudbrick wall.

“All the way from Aqarat, beyond the Kesh. Beautiful, are they not? And these.” Yusef indicated a shelf of porcelain vases and bowls. “You will find nothing better in Shalaa.”

“And nothing more expensive, I imagine,” Seth noted dryly, but Yusef only blinked as though uncomprehending.

Seth was on the verge of telling him to take both his rugs and his information to Hasa, goddess of the Underworld, and feed it to her crocodiles, when a man’s voice called from the front.

“Where are you, Yusef, you old son of a goat?”

A sudden, greedy light sparked in Yusef’s eyes. Without a further glance at Seth, he practically dove through the curtain, setting the colorful glass beads tinkling.

“Raider, my honored friend!” Yusef greeted the man. “The sun rises in your footsteps. Come, drink kahve with me.”

“Kahve! Raaki would go down better.”

“Alas, I do not partake of spirits.”

“Uh-huh,” came the doubtful reply in a smooth, rolling voice. “Pour the kahve, then, and take a look at the treasures I brought back from il-Kemsa.”

Seth peered through the bead curtain into the shop’s front room. A man was thumping down a stack of cloth with the same telltale luster of silk as the red kaftan he wore, though his own garment was dusty and travel stained. A kaffiyeh of darker red had been thrown back from his head to rest on his broad shoulders, baring a striking bronze face with hollow cheeks, a fine, straight nose, and startling amber eyes. A scruffy dark beard marred the otherwise-handsome face. Wavy dark hair, roughly scraped back, came to the man’s nape.

Picking through the stack of silks, Yusef hedged, “I do not know that I would call these *treasures*.”

The man in the red kaftan—Raider?—grinned at the game, white teeth flashing and amber eyes dancing with humor.

With a fluid motion, he swept his dusty red kaftan open, making its gold trim gleam in the light. The move exposed a leanly muscled torso and loose shalvar pants of dark blue silk. A violet sash encircled his waist. From this he drew a curved dagger in a jeweled sheath.

“That is either fake or stolen,” judged Yusef, an assessment with which Seth entirely agreed.

Raider’s flashy looks and flamboyant manner marked him as an opportunist and rogue. Seth knew the type.

Raider gave a careless shrug. “If you’re not interested, I’ll talk to Jamil.”

“Jamil is a cheat, sand seeker,” protested Yusef, laying a possessive hand over the silks. “How else could he have so profited from one trade? Sit. The kahve cools as we speak.”

Throwing his red kaftan out behind him, Raider settled on a cushion as Yusef poured steaming kahve into a glass cup.

“All right then,” Raider said, “eighty denari for the silk.”

“You jest, my honored friend.”

As Yusef and Raider haggled with obvious enjoyment across the low table, it took Seth longer than it should have to draw himself away from the bead curtain. He didn’t know what held him there, watching the desert trader smile as he flicked away Yusef’s counteroffer, listening to his smooth, rolling voice recount the trouble he’d had bringing that silk from il-Kemsa.

Raider showed off a slash in his kaftan sleeve, which he claimed had been made by a bandit’s scimitar. He took Yusef’s

skepticism in stride, the humor never leaving his eyes as he laughed, “It’s true!”

“Then Roth must smile upon you that there should be no blood.”

The light seemed to catch Raider’s right eye, making it flash. The laughter in his face briefly took on a sharp edge. Then, his easy manner returning so quickly that Seth wondered if he’d imagined the shift in mood, Raider casually pointed to what Seth supposed must be a small bloodstain on his kaftan. Yusef rolled his eyes.

Mastering himself, Seth withdrew to look for a back door. The dusty trader, handsome or not, was of no consequence, and Seth would not pay Yusef an obscene price for information on Jamil, a man clearly notorious in the town. Someone else would tell him.

No exit presented itself, only Yusef’s living quarters and workroom, where a scroll was in the process of being artificially aged and a statuette awaited its final coat of gold paint. No wonder Yusef had been so quick to suspect the dagger was fake, given that he himself was clearly a counterfeiter.

Humble and honest merchant indeed.

Seth returned to Yusef’s back room of valuables. (Assuming the term “valuables” even applied after the revelations of the workroom.) He scanned the wall beside the shelf of vases and bowls. A back door was likely hidden to prevent people from slipping out.

Seth had just decided to give it up and tromp out the front when the bead curtain rattled and a smooth voice inquired, “You’re considering a vase?”

The roguish man, Raider—yes, the name spoke *volumes*—slid past the bead curtain, his amber eyes running up and down

Seth in undisguised appraisal. Seth was used to being sized up, but this felt like something else entirely. It felt ... well, it felt *sexual*, and it had Seth bristling even before the man stepped rudely close. They were nearly the same height, which meant Seth could see the exact shape of Raider's lips as he smirked.

"Such ... receptacles don't look like your style," Raider said in that rolling voice of his.

He held out the sheathed dagger that he'd tried to sell. He held it not *quite* at his groin but pretty damned close, which meant that it *almost* brushed Seth's groin. "Don't you think this might be more to your liking?"

"No. It looks flashy and useless."

With an arrogant quirk of his lips, Raider lifted the dagger to chest height and ran his thumb along the curve of its jeweled sheath.

"Oh, not at all," Raider purred in a way that Seth, annoyingly, felt in his cock. "It's silky smooth, perfectly honed for sliding deep—"

"Step the fuck back." No one toyed with Seth, not like this. He didn't care if his dick was into the game. In fact, that only made it worse.

Raider didn't yield right away, and it pissed Seth off that the challenge in those amber eyes had his body lighting up in a way that made painfully clear why he'd hovered so long at that curtain.

It didn't matter. The man was attractive—so, what? He was also, patently, not Seth's type.

Besides, Seth had work to do.

Finally, smiling a little, Raider stepped back. He swept his kaftan aside, flashing his bronze-skinned abdomen. He made a show of sliding the dagger into his violet sash.

“You’re not from here,” he observed.

“Clearly,” was all Seth offered. He wanted to shoulder past the man and storm out, but his work came first, so he forced himself to say, “I heard you mention Jamil. Know where I can find him?”

Raider’s amber eyes danced with amusement. “Is that what you came here to ask Yusef? No wonder he put you in the back room.”

“He is going to buy a rug!” Yusef shouted from the front.

Raider called over his shoulder, “I do not think so, my friend. He was looking for your back door.”

“I signaled you to stop him!”

“And I did, but he doesn’t want to be held”—did Raider linger on the word like Seth thought he did?—“and he’s not stealing anything, so I think I have to let him go. As for Jamil”—that rakish grin flashed again—“I’d try Ahmet’s tavern.”

[Buy \*Silk & Sand\*](#)