



TORRI HEAT

THE  
LABYRINTH

WHEN SLEEPING WITH MONSTERS,  
ONLY THE STRONGEST WILL SURVIVE.

TENTH CIRCLE

BOOK ONE

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TENTH CIRCLE SERIES

BOOK ONE

TORRI HEAT

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*A monster lives under my bed.*

*They call when I sleep at night, desperate for me to stay  
awake.*

*They beg when the sun shines, demanding darkness.*

*They scream when I laugh, craving my tears.*

*They command me to tell their tale, word for word.*

*In my blood, I carve their stories.*

*Letter by letter.*

*Page by page.*

*Word. For. Word.*

*A monster lives under my bed, except for when I look in the  
mirror.*



# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Beware...

If you choose to go down this path, it's not brightly lit. The Labyrinth is full of tales riddled with shadows and pain.

This is a story about how our broken bits can be beautiful.

But those broken bits are still sharp. They still cut deep. They still draw blood.

So beware, and make your choice.

If you go down this path, you'll encounter:

Kidnapping

Sexual Slavery

Forced Captivity

Assault

Dub Con/Non Con

Knife Play

Blood Play

Violence

He kills for her

She kills for him

Breeding

Monsters

Famine

Torture

Depression

Sadism

Degradation

Please note, while there is a Master/sub relationship within The Labyrinth, this is not how every such relationship works, and should not be used for educational purposes.



the Labyrinth

# PROLOGUE

People like to say the Fall began with the appearance of the monsters, but those of us who survived it know better. We know the beginning of the end started before we even realized their existence.

Our world was overworked. Oversaturated with people. It was struggling, and while we all knew it, we refused to acknowledge it. Instead, we kept overfarming.

Overpopulating. Over-everything. It was bound to bite us in the ass at some point. Because eventually, the world was going to fight back.

Sometime around the first fires, the monsters appeared. No one knew where they came from. One day they were just *there*. At first, we were able to co-exist peacefully. Until we weren't.

People began to use them for their own personal gain. Making them battle against each other for money. Using them to fight their own personal wars.

Eventually, the monsters fought back.

And while we were fighting each other, the world burned.

Our fields turned to ash, our once green lands becoming deserts of dust. The rain was toxic, destroying anything the fires left behind. Extreme weather raged. Tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes bigger than any we had ever seen before. Meteors fell from the sky, leaving a trail of ruin in their wake.

People fled the wastelands, seeking refuge in the cities. But the cities weren't big enough to house all of us. In a time of life and death, the strongest will always rise to the top. And unfortunately for us, we weren't the strongest anymore.

*They were.*

The monsters took our ravaged cities for themselves, leaving what was left of the human population outside their newly erected gates.

And so, the new world evolved. We were no longer the apex predators, the ones with little to fear. We had nothing but the dust.

*From the recovered journal of Iris May Alden, Year 13 AF  
(After the Fall)*

## CHAPTER I

# RISSA



For the most part, the dust didn't bother people anymore. Especially if it was all you had ever known.

Running water of any kind was a luxury, reserved for those inside the Labyrinth. The rest of us scraped by with whatever we could use to clean ourselves. Eventually, though, you just got used to the dirt. It stained our skin and blurred our vision with blotchy clouds. Our bodies, our nails, our hair was all the same—brown.

My mother said it hadn't always been this way. She told us stories that in her lifetime, baths were a household commodity. Water ran from taps, clear and cold. Drinkable, even. We laughed at her when she'd tell us her daydreams with a faraway look in her eyes. Because surely they were daydreams, not memories. Who had ever heard of a bathtub in a person's house? Our small shack wasn't big enough for more than the large bed and the open fire we cooked dinners on, let alone such a rarity. Of course, my mother had also lived before *they* took over, so things might have been completely different then. Still, I doubted it.

Like the dust, I had only ever known a life outside the Labyrinth walls. Whispers around our small village, Ironforge, said it wasn't any better on the inside. That the monsters were fighting amongst themselves, a civil war breaking out between factions, leaving us caught in the middle.

"The monsters are at it again," they'd whisper when the sounds of a small skirmish would echo through the streets. They'd never speak too loudly though. Just in case. You could

never be sure what creatures were hiding, wolves in sheep's clothing.

I got out of the bed, leaving only my younger sister, Ettie, behind. Everyone else had already begun their day, including my mother and my three older brothers. We all had to work since my father passed. It was the only way for us to survive. Ettie was too young to truly understand the hardships of our life just yet, and I wanted her to stay naïve of it for as long as possible. I stroked her dirty hair away from her face. She was still enough of a baby that hints of the natural golden gleamed through the dust. She was my one precious thing in this life that had been thrust upon me, my treasure amongst the tin, and I would do everything in my power to protect her.

I bent and brushed a kiss against her forehead, her skin leaving a light grit across my lips. She blinked up at me, her large blue eyes wide. "Rissa? Is it time to get up?"

I smiled down at her. "Not yet, sweetheart. I'm going to start the fire, and then you can get up. I don't want you to catch a cold."

The weather had shifted over the past couple weeks, and the mornings held a sharpness that chilled you to the bone. We couldn't afford a doctor, so if Ettie didn't have to get up before I warmed up the shack, then I wouldn't make her.

My brothers left before the sun broke, off to the mines that shipped minerals and gems to the monsters that ruled the Labyrinth. My mother hadn't returned from her work yet. I tried not to think too hard about what my mother did, because at the end of the day she did it for us. Every day she put her own needs aside for Ettie, my brothers, and me. But selling her body to the men of the mine...I just wasn't sure it was something I would ever be able to stomach myself. She had tried to convince me once or twice, telling me the work was less difficult than my current job, and the money was better. I knew she was right, but I just couldn't wrap my head around it.

No. I'd stick to scrap metal collecting, selling the tin and aluminum I could find just outside the village. Lately, I had to



go closer and closer to the gates to find material to sell, but as long as it kept Ettie in school, it was worth it. She was smart, maybe smart enough to even become a doctor one day, but school cost money, and also meant a mouth in the house to feed who wasn't working. I didn't mind, and neither did my mother. But Lars, my oldest brother, had been running his mouth lately. Talking about pulling Ettie out of school, and having her run errands for a few dollars a task. I couldn't allow that.

I pulled my sweater tighter around me, my elbows cold in the holes. I'd sell as much scrap metal as it took. Fuck Lars. He wasn't a replacement for Dad, no matter how much he tried to be. Besides, Sam, my middle brother, took after Dad more than Lars ever would. Looking around the shack, I took it all in as a reminder of why I did what I did. The two mattresses, stuffed with whatever clean fabric we could find took up most of the room. Our small "kitchen" filled the rest. One day, I'd get her out of here.

Ettie would have a better life. I'd make sure of it.

I bent over the embers, feeding small bits of kindling into the remains of yesterday's fire until the flame caught. With a grim smile of pride, I hauled over the large copper pot that would hold the morning's porridge.

"Porridge, again?" Ettie whined from bed, watching me as I got things ready. I dumped the lumpy oatmeal mixture into the pot. I hated porridge too, but it was all we had.

"Yes, again." I hid my smile behind the wooden spoon. "You know Mr. Hendrik's chickens haven't laid an egg in weeks. Porridge is good for you, and it'll keep you full until dinner. It makes your brain grow big and strong, and..."

Ettie rolled her eyes. "Rissaaa. Don't be dumb."

I stuck my tongue out at her. "Don't use dumb words like dumb. You're too smart. It's warm enough for you to get up now."

She climbed out of bed, painfully thin beneath her worn nightgown. I winced as I realized I could count each individual

rib. I spooned out her portion of porridge, and then added some of my own to make up the slack. The poor girl needed protein. Hopefully today would be a good scrap day, and I could come home with a scrawny rabbit for dinner.

Hopefully. Hopefully. Hopefully. It felt like all I ever did was hope.

Ettie, now dressed, sat on the edge of the bed. I brought both of our bowls over. “Thanks,” she mumbled.

I took a bite of my porridge, trying to ignore the bland taste as I shoved it down my throat. It was food, and it was nutrition, and taste didn’t matter. *Taste didn’t matter. But I bet those assholes in the Labyrinth ate fucking cake for breakfast. Pound cake slathered with thick, creamy icing. Not just one slice either, but the whole damn thing.* If I pretended enough, I could almost imagine the gross porridge was cake. I had only tasted cake once, many years ago, but it didn’t stop me from remembering every moment of it.

“You’re moaning,” Ettie piped up. “Why are you moaning over *porridge*?” She pulled a face, and I laughed.

“If you must know, I was imagining it was a piece of cake.”

A frown creased her smooth forehead. “What’s cake?”

The cake must have been before Ettie was born, or when she was too young to remember it. I wondered if we still had the ingredients in the village to make a cake. Maybe, if I... “Cake is a dessert. It’s very sweet, and light. You’d love it.”

“Mmm.” Ettie’s noncommittal answer told me she had no idea what I was talking about, and that broke my heart. It wasn’t fair for a child not to know what cake was. But if I were honest with myself, none of this life was fair.

Wood scraped wood, and I realized we had both finished our breakfasts. A quick glance out the window at the rising sun told me we were running late for school, so I snatched the empty bowl out of her hand and added it to mine in the empty basket we used to collect dirty dishes. “Alright, inspection time.” I took Ettie’s face in my hand, licking my thumb to

wipe off as much dust as I could. An impossibility, but one I attempted every morning just the same.

At that moment, my mother walked in the door, half asleep. Her brown hair, so like my own, was a tangled mess. Shit. We really were running late if she was home. I tugged Ettie's hand out the door, tossing my mom a smile over my shoulder. "Hi, Mom. Bye, Mom. How was the night?"

My mother offered me a half-hearted wave before collapsing into bed. "Another day in paradise."

Yeah. Not exactly the kind of glowing review that would make me take up her night job.

Pulling Ettie behind me, we rushed the short distance to school. Our village was small—a few dirt alleyways arranged in a circle, lined on either side with shacks built of any materials we could lay our hands on. A few of the houses were constructed with mud bricks, while others formed their walls with tattered sheets. The one thing they had in common was that they were all brown. In the center of the circle was the market, where people set up for trading or sale on small, dirty blankets. Some sold game, like where I'd hopefully buy a rabbit later today, and others sold tools. Some, like my mother, sold themselves.

"School" took place in an empty shack, no different than our home. Children from four to twelve all learned in the same room, although lately that age had been creeping younger and younger on both ends. Everyone else was already inside, so I gave Ettie a quick kiss and pushed her toward the door.

At eight, she was too cool for her older sister to kiss, and she brushed it off with a groan. "Rissa!"

After a quick glance around to make sure no one had noticed, she strode into the school with her head held high. My little treasure was looking a lot more grown up than yesterday. At the last minute, she turned around and barreled into me, wrapping me in a tight hug. "Love you, Rissa. Be safe today."

I smiled, embracing her back. "I love you, too. And I'm always safe. Now go on, and get a good education so you can

take care of me while I laze around and take baths all day.”

Immediately, the eye roll was back. “This isn’t the Labyrinth.” She pulled away and smiled.

I watched her walk through the door before I pulled my bandana out of my pack and tied it around my mouth. I tightened the straps of my satchel and set off for the far end of the village. It was the closest to the gates of the Labyrinth, but the best place to look for discarded treasures the monsters no longer cared for. If I wanted rabbit tonight, it was going to be my best bet.

Another fucking day in paradise, indeed.



IT WAS both terrifying being outside of the village, and not. Merely being alive these days was dangerous. The village held some sort of protection—safety in numbers I supposed—but if the monsters wanted you, they’d have you regardless of where you were.

I pulled my bandana up higher, and considered my next move. I knew where I wanted to scavenge, a small ditch just outside of the gates. I usually only searched that ditch when Bear, the youngest of my older brothers, was with me. He was the only one who still supported me in scavenging, and protected Ettie like it was no one’s business. His name was rather fitting that way. Whenever Bear had a day off from the mines, which wasn’t often, he would take me to the more dangerous spots and we’d come home high off our finds. We weren’t supposed to scavenge too close to the walls, but sometimes we were desperate enough to risk the consequences when we were together.

Today, I was alone. The image of Ettie’s ribs was seared into my mind, taunting me. She needed protein. Which meant I needed to find a good haul. The ditch closest to the walls it was. I turned left, thankfully putting my back to the blowing dust, and began the hike over to the large, carved gates.

No one really knew what was on the inside. Mother said that whatever remained of our forest lived inside, and the monsters were keeping it all to themselves while we faded away to nothing just outside. Of course, they couldn't afford for us all to die. Who would keep the mines running if no humans were left? So every once in a while, the monsters would throw out a carcass of a larger animal or two, and leave it for us to fight over.

I wouldn't be surprised if they watched us as we ran for it, some of us desperate and starved enough to eat our serving raw.

The smaller animals still survived in the desert, mostly keeping to themselves. But the best hunters knew where to find them. I wasn't a hunter, but I usually could find enough scrap to trade the lucky few who were. I propped my hands on my hips, looking out toward the massive dump that rimmed the gates. Just beyond it stood the walls of the Labyrinth—tall, majestic, carved with a story no one knew for sure. They were as beautiful as they were terrifying. As long as I kept my head down, and worked quickly, I'd be home in no time with my pockets full. The large sign on the foreboding walls taunted me, reminding me I shouldn't be picking this close to their lair. *No trespassing, it said. Offenders will be punished.*

Today I risked the punishment. For Ettie. No one ever patrolled out here, anyway. I would get in and get out before anyone realized I was looking through their precious trash.

I bent over and began picking through the piles of garbage. I was lucky, as most of it was clean. Furniture with holes and tears in it, stuffing spilling out. Clothing of the humans who worked inside the walls. I didn't want to think about what had happened to them, and why they no longer needed the clothes. Within an hour or two, I had filled my satchel with a variety of tin cans, labels worn away. Another hour or so and I could head back, enough scrap to trade for dinner tonight. I stood up straight, stretching my back.

As I twisted from side to side, a glint of silver caught my eye. I smiled to myself. I knew coming out this way was a good idea. It was small, but the way it shone in the light told

me it was bound to be heavy. The more weight it had, the more I could trade it for. If it was really heavy, I'd be able to sell it for some actual money.

I waded through the piles of garbage, realizing as I got closer that there was barely any dirt on the large ring. I could tell it was a ring by the large jewel resting on its prongs, the clearest thing I had ever seen in my life. Excitement bubbled up in my chest, making it hard for me to breathe. I looked over my shoulders. A treasure like this shouldn't be out here. Someone must have tossed it by mistake. It would feed my family for weeks. I grabbed the silver, clutching it to my chest. I was certain it was a ring for a monster, but on me it was large enough to be a bracelet. As expected, it was heavy as anything.

I closed my eyes, tipping my face toward the dusty sun. "Thank you. Thank you." I grabbed a scrap of cloth from the garbage pile, and carefully wrapped my treasure inside. I wouldn't sell it today. Even without the ring, it had been a successful day, and I'd be able to purchase a scrawny rabbit from one of the local vendors. I needed to be careful with such a find, and make sure I got the most amount of money for it. I definitely didn't want someone to steal it from me first. I tucked it into my satchel, and with a sudden burst of energy, I turned and began my trek back to the village.

Not even the dust bothered me as it stung my eyes and blew into my face. A quick calculation of the midday shadows told me I had a bit of time before I had to pick up Ettie from school, which meant I had time before the market would be set up. I smiled to myself beneath the bandana. I was going to go home and celebrate my find with a nap.

Mother was still in bed snoring softly when I arrived home. She usually didn't get up until after Ettie and I had eaten dinner and the boys returned from the mine, bones exhausted and faces dirty. She'd eat a bit, and then quietly step out the door.

I couldn't imagine what went through her mind as she ventured out to sell her body night after night. Did she enjoy it? Did she think of my father, long gone now? Or did she just

turn her brain off, and do what she needed to do for her children, to keep us alive? One thing was certain, she was far braver than I ever would be. I didn't think I had the stomach to do what she did. And despite what she said, it was the furthest thing from "easy money." I saw the bruises that grazed her cheeks from the men with too much anger bursting out of their pores. The red marks that lingered on her skin for days, visible even through the dust.

I crawled into bed behind her, curling my larger body around her petite one. She stirred, a soft smile spreading across her face as she dreamily patted my hand. "Rissa. My girl. I'm so proud of you, you know," she mumbled.

I laughed quietly, so as not to disturb her. There was no response from my mother, already dozing again. I let my eyes close, my mind drifting as I quickly fell asleep.

A thud woke me up. The sound of the door slamming open, hitting the weak wall of our shack. My eyes flew open, expecting Lars. But it was still too bright outside for Lars to be home. The air in our shack was suddenly stagnant, a smell like I had never experienced before assaulting my senses. It wasn't bad. It was just *different*.

I knew what I was going to see before I even turned over. I knew it from the rapid pulse of my heart, and the way all the air in my lungs disappeared.

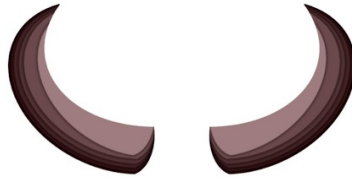
I rolled over to meet my nightmare face to face.

*Monster.*

## CHAPTER 2



# TEN



**M**y father taught me two things in this world, and two things only. The first was to never let another see your weakness. And the second was that if someone was afraid of you, then you automatically had the upper hand. I used the latter to my advantage quite often.

It helped to be scary when I was taking women for the camps. It made my job endlessly easier. It made any feelings I might have for them dissipate in the blink of an eye, vanishing as I witnessed their weakness, their fragility offered up to me on a silver platter as they begged for their freedom. For their lives.

But this woman who sat staring at me with the greenest eyes I had ever seen in a human, she didn't look afraid of me. I couldn't smell her fear in the air. If anything, her entire aura spoke to a feeling of curiosity.

Not fear.

Not terror.

Not horror as she took me in, the deep purple skin that covered me like a bruise, the way I had to duck to fit inside her shack, folding my arms close to my body.

No. Just interest. I watched her cock her head to the side, her dark hair spilling across her shoulders. At least I thought it was dark. It could have just been dirty. It was hard to tell with these humans, and the perpetual dust that covered them.

If she knew any better, she'd be scared. She should be terrified of me. Maybe something was wrong with her. After

all, I was her worst fucking nightmare. A monster in the flesh, standing in her home. Was I not everyone's worst nightmare?

But the way she stared up at me, those piercing eyes slicing through me as if she could see past the skin and the horns, the size, and the way I towered in her house uninvited, it was like she could see me. The me I kept hidden deep down, where no one could see. I didn't like it. I wanted the begging, the pleading, and the tears. I knew what to do with those. They told me I was doing a good job. But this...curiosity? Fuck.

I took another step inside, gathered my breath, and roared as loudly as my lungs would allow. My bellow shook the interior of the ancient shack, the frail walls trembling beneath my fury. And still, the woman just stared. Another, older woman next to her sat upright with the sound, turning in my direction, screaming when she saw me. That, *that* was what I was used to.

The girl with green eyes immediately stirred with an urgency I hadn't yet seen, turning to the justifiably terrified woman and immediately cradling an arm around her. I waited for the younger woman to turn back to me with fear in her eyes when the shock wore off, realizing what was now at stake. But instead, when she whipped her mop of dark brown waves in my direction, I was stunned at the emotion staring at me.

Anger. She was *pissed*.

I wanted to laugh. I wasn't sure I had ever met someone who wasn't immediately frightened of me. Monsters because of my name, humans because of my appearance. But it was no matter. I would make her fear me. It was what I was best at, after all.

While my father had taught me those two important things in life, I had picked up on others along the way. Taking pleasure in inflicting pain was another. The sweet sound of a scream set my blood on fire in a way nothing else ever could. Because, you see, that was half of what made me so terrifying in the camps. While the others spent their time there counting the clock, and waiting until their shift was over, I *enjoyed* it.

Emotional pain was as delicious to me as physical pain, and the camps gave me endless opportunities to exact my gratification. The best part was watching them cave to the pain. Witnessing them go from one feeling to the next in the blink of an eye—pain to pleasure before they even realized what was happening.

I already knew how the next hour would play out. I would explain the situation to this poor, sad family, and provide them their options. The green-eyed girl who was so set on not showing an ounce of fear would sacrifice herself for the family, and I would take her to the camps.

There, I would make her fear me. And I would take extreme pleasure in it, watching the strength behind her eyes crumble as I chipped away at her, piece by piece. I would make her scared of the sound of my footsteps coming closer. I would make her terrified of the sound of my voice. Worse yet, I would make her worship the ground I walked on. I would make her crave the touch of my hand, desperate for anything I would give her.

I bet she was beautiful when she was terrified. Stunning when she screamed. I could imagine what her fear would taste like on my tongue, the way I would lap at it, eager for more.

But I was tired of the silence, and the way the girl seemed to stare right through me in a most unsettling manner.

“Who is the lord of this house?” I rumbled. My voice sounded strange to even me, rough from disuse. I had spent too much time hidden away recently, and in my house there was no need to speak aloud.

Her voice was nothing like I expected. I anticipated a voice that suited the strong aura she gave off, something gruff and powerful. Instead, I got honey. The sweetest syrup, dripping over my senses as her eyes rolled down my body. “There is no lord in this house. There’s only us.”

“Ris—” The older woman began to speak, but the girl squeezed her arm quickly, likely anticipating I wouldn’t notice.

“There’s only us,” she repeated. “Who are you?”

I paused, not used to being spoken to in such a direct manner. Did she not realize *who* she was speaking to? These humans knew nothing. Asking a name of your superior was incredibly disrespectful. I shook my head. “You’re asking the wrong question, human.”

Her eyes narrowed as she took me in. “I don’t want to play games with you. You’re standing in *my* house. I’m owed answers.”

This time, I did laugh. “I owe you nothing. But you, you owe me everything.”

“I have no idea who you are,” she snapped. “How could I possibly owe you anything, let alone everything?”

Oh, I would enjoy breaking this one. I would enjoy it all too much. Making her submit to me, using her as I wished. I smirked. “You have something that belongs to me. I want it back.”

Her hand snuck to her side, subconsciously patting, and I knew she knew exactly what I was talking about. She wouldn’t have been able to hide it even if she hadn’t given it away. She had no idea I had seen her, tracked her here, the green-eyed beauty glaring at me. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she murmured.

I sighed. “Let’s not do this. We both know it’s here.” Under normal circumstances, I would have never allowed cleaners I didn’t know into my home. But Griffin, my right-hand man, was sick of my shit and had hired them without my knowledge. By the time I realized what was happening, they were nearly done. It was their fault I was in this fucking mess in the first place, touching things that didn’t belong to them. We had the signs posted outside the walls, but we all knew it didn’t keep the boldest of them away. I held my hand out toward the girl. “Give it back, and maybe I won’t kill your mother.”

It was a guess that the older woman was her mother—they looked nothing alike except for their dust-covered skin—but

judging by her reaction, I had guessed correctly. Good. Maybe she'd start realizing she was in trouble, and get that pissy fucking look off her face. I'd love to wipe it off myself, watching her gag around my cock...

“Rissa, what the hell is going on?”

The deep voice from behind startled me. I should've sensed him. *Them*. Three men stood in the doorway, dusty as hell, and looking absolutely confused. I couldn't pretend to care, because I was too distracted by the name they had spoken. *Rissa*. Was that the green-eyed girl's name? It suited her. *Rissa*. I rolled it around on my tongue, imagining how it would feel ordering her onto her knees in front of me. *Rissa*. The girl who wasn't afraid.

The men in front of me knew better. Their eyes were wide, hands gripping the pick-axes they carried in their grimy hands. Something cold slithered through my chest as I realized one of these men might be Rissa's husband. They might know what it felt like to make her strength bow down. I didn't want to look too closely into why I cared, but then I realized it didn't matter. None of these men were her husband. The familial resemblance was too strong. Two were dirty blond like the older woman in bed, and one had dark hair, nearly identical to Rissa's. It was this one who stepped forward, the word passing his lips before he could think better of it. “*Monster*.”

An instinctual growl grew deep within my chest. I hated the word, maybe even more than my last name. They both carried a weight within my world, a chain and ball I dragged behind me wherever I went. What did this human know of me? The dark-haired man stepped back, but didn't loosen his grip on his weapon.

Rissa had lied to me. She had told me there was no one else in the home, but what reason would she have to lie to me if it was men coming home? Shouldn't she have used them as a shield, protecting herself with the knowledge that men with weapons would arrive home at any moment? I couldn't understand her mindset, and for some reason, it made me want to dig deeper.

Which was dangerous. Too dangerous.

“Rissa? Rissa, what’s going on? I can’t see anything! Why didn’t you pick me up from school? Lars had to get me.” A tiny voice called behind the three men, and suddenly everything fell into place. A small, golden-haired child pushed through, and nearly collapsed when she looked up at me. “Mo-mo-monster!” she shrieked. She sprinted across the room, fleeing into Rissa’s arms. Rissa hadn’t been protecting the men. She had been protecting this tiny human.

Rissa stroked the child’s head and glared up at me as if to say, *now look what you did*. “Shush, Ettie. It’s okay. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

This was utterly ridiculous. I had never been in such a situation before, where a woman showed no fear of me. What made it worse was that she had *every* reason *to* be afraid of me. Rissa had stolen from me. I was here to reclaim what was mine and exact my interest due as well. I tossed my head back and roared, my bellow shaking the walls of the shack once more. The small space felt even more claustrophobic with the new additions, and I couldn’t imagine how they lived here together. How did they not want to kill each other every day of their sad, pathetic lives?

I glanced around the room, to the men who looked ready to attack at any given moment, as foolish as that might be, to Rissa’s unflinching gaze, to the burrowed head of the child—Ettie, Rissa had called her—and the woman who still hid behind her. “You have taken something from me. Something quite precious. And I want it back. *Now*.”

“How could we have taken anything from you? None of us have ever been inside the Labyrinth.” The dark-haired man stepped forward, a frown on his face. He was either the bravest or the dumbest of the bunch. “You’re scaring my sisters. Leave, before I—”

“Before you what? Kill me?” I closed the distance between us until I loomed over him. Tall for a human, he still only came up to my shoulder. “I could snap you in half, boy.”

He gripped his pick-axe, his knuckles turning white. “I could take you.”

I shook my head, smirking. “Let’s see what you’ve got then. I’ll tell you what. If you survive more than five minutes, I’ll let the rest of your family live.”

To my shock, he didn’t back down. This family was full of surprises. I wasn’t sure I liked any of them.

“Bear!” Rissa snapped. “Don’t. You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“He is accusing us of something we didn’t do. I can’t let him dishonor our family like that. We don’t have much, but we do have honor. I won’t let a monster’s lie disgrace us.” Bear pressed his lips into a tight line, accepting his fate. He was willing to die for his family, but unfortunately his confidence was ill-put. Oh well. It was of no consequence to me. If he wanted to die for what he believed was right, who was I to tell him otherwise?

“He isn’t lying.” Rissa’s quiet voice pulled my gaze away from Bear. I watched as she scooped the child up and placed her on the bed, reaching between them for a satchel I hadn’t noticed before. Carefully she pulled out my silver ring, holding it out in her hands like one would offer a sacrifice.

A gasp echoed behind me, one of her brothers realizing what she had done, but otherwise there was silence. The room was quiet as a grave—which it almost had been. But even as she offered me her prize, her gaze didn’t change. She looked at me with a challenge in her eyes. I wanted nothing more than to accept the bait.

*But not yet.* There would be ample time later. I crossed the room, snatching my ring out of her hands, and slipping it back onto my finger with a quiet sigh. I felt whole once more, my mother’s talisman safely returned home, and out of the hands of humans who couldn’t possibly understand the importance of such treasure.

I was close to Rissa now, close enough to make out the smattering of freckles that stretched across her nose. From a

distance, they had been hidden by the dust, but now, from this close, I could nearly make out each individual spot. I found myself captivated by these freckles, wanting to spend a moment tracing them, outlining each one, trailing my finger from one to the next. I wondered if I could make constellations out of them, the history of the stars written on the planes of Rissa's skin.

I shook my head. What the fuck was I thinking? I didn't want to touch this girl like that. Use her? Of course. Break her? Absolutely. But spend time analyzing her face? No. That wasn't me.

The child cowered, and scooted up the bed until she was safely encircled in Rissa's arms once more. Rissa met my eyes, staring at me as if she could see all the thoughts that had just raced through my mind, my secrets bared to her expectant gaze. "You got what you came for. You can leave now."

As if it were that simple. As if the transaction were that easy. I laughed, looking down at Rissa who sat in front of me. If I was lucky, she would be in this exact position soon enough, just with my cock in her mouth. I held her gaze, staring into those eyes that held no mercy. "No, Rissa. You see, you took something from me. And for that, there's a payment."

"What kind of payment?" Bear asked.

I didn't turn away from Rissa to answer him. I already knew he wouldn't be the one coming with me. I knew the one who would be paying the price the moment I walked into their tiny shack. "One of you will come with me to the camps. If you come peacefully, the rest of you will be allowed to continue your lives. If you don't..."

"I didn't know it was an object of such importance! If I had, I would've never touched it, I sw—"

"Don't lie to me," I murmured. "I have no patience for liars. You knew the perimeter rules and you chose to ignore them. You saw the signs. Then you used up your free pass by lying to me about other people living here. So let's try this again, shall we?" I took a deep breath, watching the world



swirl behind her eyes. Her mother remained silent, and even her brothers were quiet behind us, waiting for whatever would happen next. “You took something of value that belonged to me. For that, you need to pay a price. The price will be one of your lives. One of you will come to the camps inside the Labyrinth where you will spend the rest of your days working for those inside the walls. Now, I do not care which one of you comes with me, but I do care that it’s decided quickly.”

“It doesn’t matter which one of us you take,” Rissa snarled, a ferocity I hadn’t been expecting exploding out of her. “Take one of us, and we’re all dead anyway.”

I shrugged, reaching out for Ettie, cradled in her arms. “I’ll take this one then, seeing as it’s no difference to you.”

It was a cold move, and I knew it, but I needed to call her bluff. “No!” Rissa screamed, getting to her feet. “You will *not* lay a hand on her. I’ll go with you, but I need your word the rest of my family will go unharmed.”

I fought the urge to smirk, knowing I had gotten what I wanted. “You have my word.”

“Rissa, you can’t do this.” For the first time, her mother spoke up, shaking her head. “You can’t go with him. To the camps? Who knows what will happen to you there?”

Rissa turned to look at her mother. “And what do you suggest? Let him take Ettie?”

“No. He can take me.”

Sacrifice was a strange human concept I didn’t really understand, but I understood enough to know that this touched Rissa deeply. She gathered her mother’s hands into her lap. “You can’t. Ettie needs her mother. She needs you. And none of the boys can go, because without their wages, you won’t have enough to eat. It has to be me.”

Rissa embraced her mother, and squeezed Ettie tightly, before getting to her feet. I didn’t miss the unshed tears pooling in her eyes as she looked up at me, fearless as ever. “When do we leave?”

“Immediately. I need to get you to the camps before nightfall.”

“Rissa! You can’t go!” Ettie shot to her feet, sobbing wildly. “You can’t leave!”

Rissa knelt and wrapped her arms around her crying sister. “Hush, Ettie. We need to be strong. I promise you’ll see me again.” A big promise she likely wouldn’t keep. But the way Rissa looked up at me from over her sister’s shoulder silenced me. “I need you to promise me you’ll be a big girl and help mother. You’ll eat your porridge, and get to school on time, okay?”

Ettie sniffled, and Rissa wiped her eyes with the ragged ends of her sleeve. “I promise,” she whispered.

Rissa rose, and without looking back made her way to the door. I followed, watching her interactions with a curiosity I couldn’t explain. Bear was the first to embrace her, squeezing her tight. “Are you sure about this?” he muttered, looking up at me.

She nodded. “It has to be done. Watch out for them, okay?”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Always.”

She hugged the next brother with decidedly less enthusiasm. “Be good, Sam,” she whispered.

She hugged the oldest with even less excitement. I didn’t miss the sharp gaze she gave him as they pulled back. “Ettie *will* go to school, Lars. If I hear anything otherwise...”

I couldn’t make out what Lars’ grumbled response was, but I could imagine. As for what Rissa thought she would do about Ettie’s schooling while locked away in the camps, I couldn’t be sure. I watched as she pulled away from Lars, and without a backward glance, stepped outside. She left the shack’s feeble tin walls, the lone bed where her mother still lay, and the fire on the verge of going out—long since forgotten in the turmoil I had caused. I followed suit, stepping out into the late afternoon air. We should be able to make it to

the camps with more than enough time. Because that was what mattered, wasn't it?

I shut the door, listening to Ettie's screams on the other side, along with the soft sobs of Bear. Rissa was already ahead of me, walking away from her family, likely the only home she had ever known. And yet it was me who stayed behind, listening to the sounds of a family torn apart while she trudged on, one foot in front of the other.

Something uneasy grew inside of me. I had gotten what I wanted. *Exactly* what I wanted. So I couldn't understand why I felt like I had made a tragic error.

## CHAPTER 3

# RISSA



I couldn't look back, as much as I wanted to. If I did, I would've cracked, broken under the weight of leaving them behind. There was no time to mourn for my life, ripped away from me in the blink of an eye. I needed to stay strong for Ettie, her tiny face so torn up as I hugged her goodbye. For my mother, who would never be able to stand up to Lars, as much as I wished otherwise. And for my brothers, who'd have the emotional weight of the family to carry now, equal in its mass to the financial burden they already struggled with. I needed to stay strong for all of them, and hope like hell I had made the right decision.

Then again, what other decision could I have made? It was me, or it was them. When it came down to it, it was always going to be me. It would *always* be me. That was the way of life, and that was the way it was always going to be. I'd let the ashes of my old life fall where they may. The sun would always rise in the East, and I would never allow my family to pay for my sins. I had ignored the sign, taken the ring, and now I would keep putting one foot in front of the other as I paid the price.

Besides, I couldn't let the monster silently stalking behind me sense any form of weakness. I could tell by the look on his face he expected me to be frightened of him. I should've been, really. Terrified, if I were sane. But, I wasn't sane. Maybe I never had been, or maybe all my time in the sun and dust had slowly eroded whatever sense of reason I'd been born with. So when I looked up into his face, the deep purple skin stretched taut across muscles the size of my head, no fear trickled

through my veins. Instead, only a sick sense of fascination. Yes, he was a different color than I was used to seeing. Yes, he was massive, barely fitting into the shack that was tall enough to house my lanky brothers. Yes, every inch of his body screamed murder, fury boiling beneath that rich skin.

But I could only see beauty.

Of course, all of this was before he opened his mouth to speak. Before he condemned me to a life in the *camps*. I had no idea what the camps were, but I had a feeling they wouldn't be a great place to spend the rest of my days. They were meant to punish me, take away my freedoms and my family's chance at a life, a real life, because I had taken something I had stupidly assumed wasn't wanted anymore. I should've just left the damn ring where it was.

The thought sliced through my heart with a quick blade. Because now, who would make sure Ettie got protein every now and again? Bear loved her to death, but he wasn't always home to check up on her. Shit. Would she just waste away to nothing, her last moments spent resenting me for abandoning her to a cruel world?

A stray tear found its way down my cheek, and I angrily swiped it away with my dirty hand. No weakness. I couldn't let this...*monster* see any chinks in my armor. I whirled around to glare at the beast trekking behind me. "You're a fucking jerk, you know that?"

He looked at me, his eyes like the night sky filled with stars as he raised one brow. "She speaks."

I stopped dead in the sand, the dust clouding around me. It was a humid day, the air sticky around me, and the dirt was absolutely going to cling to my skin. Whatever. Wasn't like I had anyone to pretend to look nice for anymore. "Of course I speak. You heard me speak in my house. You know, my *home* that you forced me out of for taking your ring that I didn't even know was yours. It was in the garbage."

The monster stopped, too. "It's the first time you've spoken since we left. Thought you might stop talking altogether as an act of rebellion or something."

I sneered. “Believe me, if I wanted to rebel, you’d know.”

He shrugged. “You don’t need to speak to work in the camps. Makes no difference to me.”

That made me pause. *Asshole*. He really didn’t care if I spoke or not? Fuck him. “You took me away from my *family* over a ring. A miscommunication, at best. Do you have no remorse?”

I studied him. His clothes were typical for the desert, long and protective from the sun’s scorching rays. But they were finer than mine. Much finer. The horns that rose out of his forehead were almost elegant, dark and ridged in a way that captivated me. I wanted to touch them, to see how they would feel beneath my fingers. He was oddly beautiful.

“Remorse for what? Actions have consequences. You stole something from me, and so I took something in return. Makes perfect sense.” His plum skin was far less beautiful when he was being a dick. And those fucking eyes kept staring at me, emotionless as they watched my anger from a safe distance.

“I took your ring out of the goddamn garbage. You took away my life. How are those two things even slightly the same?” I snapped. “You disgust me. You’re a jerk. No, you’re worse. You really are the very definition of *monster*.”

He closed the distance between us, and all at once I became very aware of his size. His palm was the size of my face as it wrapped around my neck. He could quite easily crush my skull with a single hand, but for right now, his grip tightened around my neck—tiny and frail in his massive hold. “You will not speak that word in my presence. *Do you hear me?* Never again. You can spew your hateful words all you wish. I know that is a given for your kind. But you will never again say that word.”

*Monster*, I thought. As if he could hear my thoughts, his gaze narrowed, and his fingers tightened. My airways restricted, and I gasped and spluttered for breath, clawing at his hand. *Monster, monster, monster*. “Or...what?”

His fingers gripped tighter. The edges of my vision began to fade to black. He wasn't playing around, and I had a feeling this was only a fraction of the strength he possessed. "I'll kill you," he growled.

*So what?* I thought. Wasn't I as good as dead anyway? I certainly wasn't any good to my family anymore. What was left for me in these camps? I didn't doubt for a second he wouldn't kill me, either. The look in his eyes told me he was only a moment, a single word away from it.

His gaze tightened, and his voice dropped to a low murmur I had to struggle to hear against my fading senses. "I'll kill you, and your family will get none of the money they'd get for your work in the camps."

"Wha...t?" I croaked out.

He dropped his hand and turned away from me, looking to the fading afternoon, the oranges and reds that streaked across the sky. It was beautiful, if you had time to admire it. I usually didn't. I dropped to my knees, gasping in the hot, sticky air as if it was the most delicious thing I'd ever tasted. I had pushed my limits too far, and had been way too close to passing out. But what he said...it couldn't be true.

"My...family? They get...money?" I gasped, letting the sand beneath my knees support me as I wrapped my head around the concept.

"You will be compensated for your time in the camps. Of course, you will have no ability to spend this payment, so we relocate the funds back to the next of kin. In this case, it would be your mother."

His back was still turned to me, muscles stretched across his broad shoulders, visible even through the thin cotton clothes he wore. I so badly wanted to stand on my tiptoes and force him to look me in the eyes and tell me this was the truth. I needed it to be the truth. "Do you...swear?"

Finally, he turned around to look at me, a world of stars still twinkling in his cool, dark eyes. "I told you before. I do not approve of lying. That includes for myself as well. If I say



it, it's the truth. Your family will be compensated for your time in the camps. Therefore, I would think it would be in your best interest to stay alive. Don't you?"

I took a deep breath. I had a choice? I could trust what he was saying and pass my time in the camps, hop my family was paid for my time doing God knows what. Or I could fight back, in which case I would likely be killed, and there would not even be a chance of my family receiving any payment. *Ever*. My decision was easy. "Yes."

"Good. Now rise. You don't want to be on the streets of the Labyrinth after nightfall." He still stared at me, looking at me as if I were a puzzle he couldn't quite figure out.

"What's on the streets after dark?" I couldn't help but ask as I rose, brushing my knees off. My lungs were cooperating again after the lack of air, but I still couldn't forget the image of his hand in comparison to my head, ready to kill me over a single word.

"Bad people," he muttered, passing me to take the lead as we walked.

I followed him, knowing now I had no other choice. "Bad, as in worse than you?"

He laughed, a sound that held little humor. "The things that prowl the streets at night would make me look like a dream, *deliciae*." The soft vowels rolled off his tongue in a way that made my core tighten. I wondered what the word meant, so delicate in his harsh mouth.

"Mmm..." I mumbled some incoherent mess, not really believing the creature leading me to my imprisonment could be *better* than whatever I'd meet after dark. Call me a skeptic, but I struggled to wrap my head around the concept.

We walked in silence for several minutes, me keeping my eyes on his broad shoulders. There was no point in running away. He was stronger than I was, quicker, and all around the better predator. I wouldn't stand a chance. And if what he was saying was true...what was a little hard work if it meant my family got money—real money? Maybe this was how they

kept all their humans docile. Offer them the ability to feed their starving families, just by giving up their freedom. I had a feeling it was a deal most in my village would gladly take. Years of hungry bellies and weak bones left a lot of us desperate for any kind of change. Only one thing bothered me now.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Does it matter?”

I shrugged, picking up my pace to walk in time with his long strides. Now that I knew he had no intention of killing me, and my family would *hopefully* be provided for, my curiosity surged. Who else could say they had been this close to a monster and lived to tell the tale? “Don’t you want to know my name?”

“No. Your name doesn’t matter in the camps.” He kept his head forward, to where the gates of the city loomed, drawing nearer.

He was an absolute dick. But I wasn’t supposed to call him a monster, so what was left? “So am I just supposed to call you ‘jerk,’ then? Seeing as I’m not allowed to say the other word...”

That got his attention. He snapped his head around to glare at me, his black eyes pulsing with annoyance. “Do I have any hope in you dropping this?”

“No. You kidnapped me. The least you could offer me is your name. Unless you want me to call you mo—”

“For fuck’s sake,” he snapped, whirling around, hands clenched in tight fists at his side. He wanted to choke me again. I could see it clear as day, the desire to reach out and wrap his massive hands around my throat. Every line in his body spelled it out for me. This time, though, I didn’t think he would stop. No, this time, he would squeeze until my body went limp in his arms. Something stopped him from acting on his urges, though. Something I couldn’t understand for the life of me. “Ten.”

I was confused. “Are you counting down?”

He gritted his teeth together, closing his eyes in annoyance. The urge to snap his hands out again filtered through his body as I watched. It was a curious thing, being able to read someone's body like a map. But his emotions stretched across his skin like a tight-fitting shirt, readily available for any who cared to look. "My name is Ten."

"Ten. How weird." I ran my tongue across my dry lips, tasting the dirt that lingered there. "Is that a normal name for...your kind?" I stopped myself from saying anything I would have regretted.

"No," Ten grumbled. "Is it normal for your kind to be this annoying?"

I rolled my eyes. "It wouldn't be necessary to be this *annoying* as you put it, if you hadn't just ripped me from my home without even telling me your name. And in case you were wondering, my name is Rissa."

"I already know what your name is. And again, it doesn't matter." He turned and walked again, so I followed suit.

"Are you like my owner now?" I didn't know how the camps worked. The people who entered the walls of the Labyrinth didn't come back out. There was no standard for me to reference. There was just Ten and whatever he deigned to give me. I looked up at him as we walked, trying to keep my mind off the gates drawing closer and closer by the minute.

Ten sighed, a muscle twitching in his neck. I wasn't sure he realized he had quite as many tells as he did, but maybe it wasn't as much of an issue inside the Labyrinth. Maybe inside the gates, they didn't care if they gave themselves away because they were all strong enough to fight. Outside, in the dirt, all we had was our word, and we were careful to not give any of it away. "Technically you are my human, yes. But inside the camps you will do as anyone says, *not* just me."

"Do I call you by your name then? Or like, Mr. Ten?" The muscle in his neck ticked again. I was pushing my luck, and I knew it. But something in me wanted to see him snap. I wanted to see how far he would go, or even if I could push him enough that he'd let *me* go. Then again, did I really want

to go back? Going with Ten meant an opportunity, no matter how small, that my family might be better taken care of than they were right now.

“I don’t care what you call me. As long as it’s not *that* word.”

This time I did roll my eyes. “Master, then. Since you’re my owner, and I’m no better than a pet to you.”

His entire body tightened, every muscle going taut. I wanted to poke some more, discover what made him react to my words, but I was immediately distracted. Because right there in front of us, loomed the wall.

A flicker of excitement shot through my belly. I was going to walk through the gates that had haunted my dreams since I was a child. For the first time, I was going to see what lay beyond the walls. Would it be everything I had imagined? Somehow, not even being forced out of my home and beyond the gates tainted the sweet taste in my mouth, the moment of a dream being fulfilled. My curiosity would be sated soon. I stopped, taking a moment to admire its smooth, ivory finish. I had never been so close as I was currently. And now they were opening, the oversized doors parting to invite me inside.

Ten finally realized I wasn’t following, turning around to raise an eyebrow in my direction. “Haven’t we already had this conversation? You work, and your family gets money. I’ll carry you if I have to, but I’d rather this was more... dignified.”

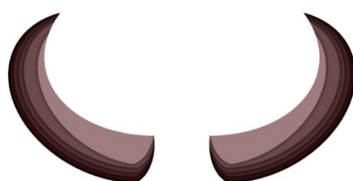
He thought I had stopped out of fear. Out of defiance. He thought I had stopped because I didn’t want to go inside, when that couldn’t be further from the truth. Because once I stepped inside, everything would change. Everything that had constructed the life I thought I knew would be gone, and something entirely new would be in its place. Was I terrified? Absolutely. I didn’t exactly expect the camps to be a joyful place. But a bigger part of me couldn’t help but be excited for something new. Something outside of the mundane I trudged through day in and day out.

For the first time in my life, I was responsible for no one but myself. Yes, hopefully funds would be sent back to my family, but on a daily basis, I would be responsible for myself and myself alone. The concept was new. What would it even be like? So yes, I was scared about the newness of the life awaiting me on the other side. But not scared enough to turn around. I shook my head and put one foot in front of the other, passing Ten as I crossed the gates into my new reality—into a world I had never experienced before.

It was funny, really. I was a prisoner, and somehow, I had never felt so free.

## CHAPTER 4

# TEN



**N**ever before had I wanted to touch someone as badly as I wanted to put my hands on Rissa. Not necessarily because I wanted to fuck her, even though I did. Putting my biases aside, Rissa was quite beautiful. She was covered in dirt, every inch of her, and somehow her natural beauty shone through. Her dark hair tumbled in waves beneath the bandana she had wrapped around her head. Her lips were a full, deep red amongst her tanned skin. Her nose was absolutely perfect.

Delicate. That's what she was. Although I had a feeling she wouldn't like it if I called her that. But to me, it suited her. Fragile in my grip, like if I held too tightly she would crumble in my hands. Her attitude tried to scream anything otherwise, an attempt to prove her strength to the world, but I had felt the truth when I choked her soft neck. I had captured countless girls, but I had never been so excited to make them submit as I was for the dichotomy that was Rissa. Strong and fearless, yet oh so delicate. I found myself captivated by her as much as I was annoyed by her presence, the way she seemed desperate to know *more*. Couldn't she understand that sometimes it was better not to know everything? For example, if she knew where she was headed—despite the offer of paying her family—she would run in the opposite direction as fast as she could.

Which would really be terrible, because I owned her now. I would be obliged to hunt her down and bring her back to the camps kicking and screaming. While sometimes fun to do, it was exhausting. It was so much easier this way, by leaving out important pieces of information. Now Rissa was coming with

me willingly, a lamb to the slaughter. If only she knew what awaited her.

For the second time since taking her, an odd emotion flashed through my veins. I knew what the end game was. Had since the moment I realized my ring was missing. But now the ring was back on my finger, and Rissa was stepping inside the gates of the Labyrinth—likely the first and only time she would ever cross that barrier. I wasn't sure what to think. It was the right thing to do, wasn't it? It was payment for her wrongdoing.

But doubt lingered in my belly, cool and slick. I didn't like this feeling. I didn't like second guessing my choices. Even though I was the leader of the Labyrinth, I lived life by my moral code, and even if it wasn't the kind of code everyone else abided by, it worked for me. Even now she stared at me, raising her brow as if to say "you coming?" I couldn't categorize this woman like I normally could with humans, slotting them neatly into their labeled boxes. This one was fearful and timid. This one was broken. This one would do anything for a morsel of praise. But Rissa? I had only spent an afternoon in her presence and already I was stumped. She was everything, and yet none of it. She was more than any other human had been, and yet not enough.

I wanted to lay my hands on her shoulders and press her to her knees, forcing her to submit in front of me. I wanted to bring her to heel with nothing more than a word. I wanted to fuck her until she understood her place in this world. Except... where was her place? I was taking her to the camps, and once there she would no longer be "mine" per se. I knew how it worked. And up until this point, sharing my humans was more than okay. But the flicker of doubt resurfaced, taking root within my heart, blossoming into something I wanted to dig out. This emotion wasn't growing like a rose, a beauty to admire and praise. No, this feeling was a poisonous weed, invasive, and latching on to every spare bit of ground it could. I needed to stop it before it spread further.

Rissa would go to the camps. I would leave her there, and not think another minute about the strong-willed girl who was



more curious than fearful. The one who looked like she wanted to laugh when my hands were wrapped around her throat, but immediately conceded when she realized there was something to be gained for her family. Maybe this was all a part of her plan, to leave me questioning who she really was, giving me just a taste, enough to leave me curious. It didn't matter.

She would go to the camps, and there, together, we would break her spirit.

We would break *her*.

I couldn't help but smile. How delicious it would be, breaking Rissa. I hadn't yet gotten the opportunity to shatter one so strong. It would be a challenge, and one I eagerly looked forward to. I continued to walk, joining her just inside the gates as they closed behind us, shutting us into the city.

Rissa frowned, a small wrinkle appearing between her dark brows. "Are you that happy to be home?"

*Was I happy to be home?* She was the most peculiar captive I had ever taken, for sure. "No." It was the honest answer, and like I had told her earlier, I didn't condone lying. The Labyrinth brought a certain kind of comfort to me. I hated being in the village, risking being stared at, ogled, like I was nothing more than a piece of meat. Funnily enough though, it didn't bother me when Rissa did this. It didn't feel like her curious stares came with malice. But being home? No. The Labyrinth was where my house was. It was comfortable, but not exactly happy.

I regarded her out of the corner of my eye. She shrugged. "You just had a really big smile on your face, so I assumed it was because you were happy to be home."

I nearly choked. If only she knew the smile was due to me imagining her worshiping me from her knees, begging for my mercy. If only I had some to give.

But her attention was already elsewhere, her head swinging back and forth as she took in the city around us. "Holy shit. It's beautiful," she whispered.

“Hmm?” Without thinking, I followed her gaze. But I only saw the same buildings I had seen for most of my life. The half-destroyed towers in the distance, crumbling from the top down. The smaller brick and stucco buildings in front of us, where most of us lived and worked. Everything was draped in ivy and moss. Messy, but there was nothing we could do about it unless we wanted to be working at it day in and day out. Where roads once separated the blocks, was now grass, rich and green thanks to the irrigation installed decades ago. Rissa had stopped again, staring at the grass beneath her feet. I guess I could see how some might find it pretty. But I had seen much more beautiful things in my life, and the city I had spent so much time living in wasn't high on my list. “It's going to be dark soon. We don't have time for this.”

“I've never seen grass before.” Her voice was almost reverent as she stared down. “It's so green.”

I didn't know how to respond. I had taken her away from her family, told her she would work in a camp for the rest of her life. I had choked her nearly to the point of passing out. But the only thing shaking her was the grass I had always expected to be there. It had no reason not to be. But the way Rissa stared at it made me feel like I had taken it for granted.

Before I could reach out to stop her, she was kneeling, unlacing her worn boots from her feet.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I snapped. “We have to go.” I reached down to grab her arm, but she shook herself free from me with an angry glare.

“I'm taking off my shoes. I want to feel the grass. You've taken everything away from me. You can give me this moment.”

I wanted to tear her away, and drag her off to the camps. How dare she try to tell *me* what I needed to do? She had forgotten her place. But the nasty weed taking root within me whispered sweet nothings into my ear, the quiet seeds of doubt growing quickly. What did it hurt to give her this moment before a lifetime of misery? If we got to the camps late, it was only her ass that would be hurt, not mine.

I gave her a brusque nod. “Be quick about it.”

She didn't bother to look at me again, just continued to unlace her boots. The streets were quiet, empty because it was supper time. Even if it hadn't been, the roads had grown more and more quiet with all the unrest of late. It wasn't safe to be out anymore unless you had protection, which not everyone did. But if anyone had seen me, with the dirt-covered girl taking her shoes off in the middle of the street, they would've thought I had lost my damn mind. Which to be fair, maybe I had. Maybe something in my brain broke the moment I had locked eyes with Rissa, her bright gaze boring into my soul, daring me. Challenging me. If only she knew what I was capable of. She would learn soon enough.

Her boots were unlaced now, and with a careful elegance, she placed her foot onto the grass. Captivated, I watched as her eyes closed. She smiled and sighed. The other foot followed, finding its way to the grass, and her smile spread. Was she... was she actually smiling right now? Did she realize she had been kidnapped? I knew she was clueless as to what was coming, but maybe she was even more dense than I thought. Or maybe she just didn't care. As I watched her enjoy something she had never experienced before, that poison spread through my veins, finding purchase in bits of my body I had never before realized existed. It wasn't safe having her around. I needed to get her to the camps and be done with her, until she was dealt with and ready for me. But this woman, Rissa, the way she didn't care and cared all too much, she wasn't safe for me to be around. She was a venom, injected directly to my bloodstream.

I needed to intervene before it was fatal. I grabbed her arm, pulling her to her feet. “Okay, you had your moment.” I dragged her down the street, toward the stadium that housed our camps.

Rissa twisted in my grip, swatting at my hand. Fortunately for me, it was no different than a fly, or a gnat, something easily brushed away. “Fucking jerk! What did it cost you to give me that? I need my boots. We have to go back.”

She was worried about those nasty things? Her boots were held together with rope and hope. It wasn't exactly the biggest loss. "The camp will have what you need. I gave you time with the grass. And now that time is over."

I kept a tight grip on her shoulder, dragging her as she fought and twisted, a feral cat in my grasp. She slapped my wrist, glaring up at me with a ferocity I wanted to abuse right then and there. I wanted to drop her to the ground, spread her legs, and see how long that glare would last. How long it would take for her anger to turn to screams to fade into moans. Because there was no doubt in my mind, she would moan for me. And those moans, mixed with her fearful screams...that was a combination I found absolutely tempting. "Let me go!"

"No. We're almost there." I tightened my hand around her shoulder, her flesh soft and supple beneath my touch. A sudden wave of wanting to bite her tender skin washed over me, lightning quick before I realized what I was thinking. *She wasn't safe to be around.* Something about her was toxic to me, a sweet poison, drawing me in and infecting me. At least I still had a clear enough mind to realize what was happening.

"Let me walk! I'm not going to go anywhere! You're hurting me."

I looked down at Rissa's twisted face, and a sick sense of pleasure flooded me. *I'll hurt much more than just your arm, deliciae.* No. I needed space. Room to breathe. "You get one chance, otherwise I'm picking you up and carrying you the rest of the way."

"Fine," she snapped.

Appeased, I dropped her shoulder, admiring the redness I had left there. Everything about me was huge compared to her, and I derived a certain amount of satisfaction from that. I could hurt her in a moment. Crush her without thinking twice.

Rissa rubbed her shoulder, not looking up at me. "How far is this place? It's going to be dark soon. According to someone, I shouldn't be out after dark here."

I pointed ahead of us, where the stadium was fast approaching. Thankfully, it was silent. It would've been difficult to get Rissa inside without a fuss if she had heard the screams normally echoing from its halls.

We walked in silence as the sun set behind us, and I tried not to think about how badly I wanted to make Rissa scream. I needed to put as much distance between us as possible, as soon as possible. Finally though, we reached the doors. I knocked.

"Who's there?" came the muffled call.

"Ten," I replied. "I have a new one."

Latches and locks clicked as they were undone, and the door swung open in front of us. "It's been a while since we had a new one."

Rissa gasped as she took in who stood in front of us. Griffin was a deeper purple than I was, and years of fighting had taken one eye and half his horns from him. Sometimes he wore a patch to cover his empty socket, but right now it was uncovered, leaving the hole where his eye had once been, exposed.

He ran his lone eye over Rissa. "She's pretty. She'll do well."

I didn't like the way Griffin looked at her, admiring her like he might look at a meal. I didn't like that he called her pretty. And if he wasn't careful, friend or not, I was going to snap his wrist as he reached out to touch her.

Except I couldn't, because she wasn't mine.

She wasn't *mine*.

Griffin was a friend. But I didn't want him to lay a finger on her.

Thankfully, I didn't have to. Rissa recoiled. "Don't fucking touch me."

Relief was sweet as Griffin stepped back with a laugh. "Feisty, too. Wonder how long that will last."

I forced myself to join in his laughter, not wanting him to think something was wrong. “Hopefully long enough for us all to enjoy.”

A lie. *I had lied.* It was bitter and sharp on my tongue, an immediate reaction. I wanted to take the words back, and spit out the desperate truth, the one clawing its way to the surface, but I knew that wasn’t a good idea for myself *or* Rissa. What was this woman doing to me? “Come along.” I pulled Rissa behind me, and Griffin closed and locked the doors.

It was dark in the hall until Griffin flicked on the light. “I always forget these humans can’t see like us. Fucking inconvenient if you ask me. Come on. I just left Clara, so she should still be awake. She can help get you settled in, and explain the ropes.” We walked down the hall behind Griffin, Rissa cooperating until we reached the first of the rooms.

The cells were set up with two beds each, comfortably appointed really. Behind the bars a woman slept or sat on each bed, staring at us blankly as we passed. One after the other, the women stared at us, caged and waiting. I knew what they thought as we walked by. I knew what they were waiting for. I wasn’t proud to admit I had used my fair share of these women, but desperate times came with desperate measures.

Rissa was slowly realizing something was off about this place. She tensed beneath my hand, coming to a stop. “What... what kind of camp is this?”

Griffin stopped as well and turned around, surprise written clearly across his face. “Did you not explain any of this to her on the walk?”

“It would have been easier if she came willingly,” I grumbled. I hoped of all people, Griffin would understand that. “Figured we could tell her once she was here and couldn’t run away. I really didn’t feel like chasing her.” Another bitter lie, a surprise to me this time. Would I have enjoyed chasing Rissa? Maybe I would’ve liked the part where I caught her.

Griffin rolled his eyes and tugged on his short horn, a nervous habit from childhood. “You’ve been told this is a camp, yes?”

Rissa nodded, looking anywhere other than at Griffin. She eyed the women in the cages, probably what had made her alarm bells go off. They were all female. We had men, too, though. They were just in a different wing. We didn't need to deal with any human babies.

"It's a work camp of sorts, but probably not what you're expecting." He glared at me, annoyed he had to be the one to tell her. I just shrugged my shoulders. I had brought her to the camp, and that was what mattered, wasn't it?

Rissa stared up at him. For the first time, I could sense her fear. It was absolutely succulent. "So I'm not going to be smashing rocks?"

"No." Griffin laughed. He looked at me, cocking a challenging eyebrow. "Go on, Ten. You can tell your sweet little captive where she is."

Of course he wanted me to tell her. *Dick*. Rissa turned to stare at me, her perfect eyes peering up at me as if I could save her. But I couldn't rescue her, because I had already condemned her. I opened my mouth, knowing the words that followed would change her life forever. The horrid little weed growing inside of me protested with every breath I took. "This is a breeding camp, Rissa."

## CHAPTER 5



# RISSA



I had misheard him. Right? Right. I must have misheard him. That was the only option. I was brought here for some hard manual labor, maybe cleaning some houses and scrubbing some toilets if I was lucky. Not breeding. Anything but breeding. “A *what* camp?”

“A breeding camp,” he repeated slowly, not breaking my gaze. “You’ll be fucked and bred here, until you’re capable of carrying a half-human child.”

*No. No. No.* “No.” It was the only logical answer.

Ten tilted his head to stare at me. “You’ll be bred, or you’ll die. Your choice.”

I couldn’t wrap my head around this newfound development. Ten was well over two feet taller than I was, and the other one who had greeted us at the door was nearly as big. Surely their...appendages would be just as huge? Was this why all the women in here seemed shell-shocked? Fuck. No.

*But your family.* Was my family worth being raped day in and day out, to be impregnated? *You can’t escape anyway.* Not yet. But maybe eventually there would be a chance. I just needed them to let their guard down. Could I wait them out? Maybe. And one question still remained. “Why?”

“The half-humans are better for infiltrating the other gangs. We need more of them than we have currently,” Ten responded, giving me exactly what he thought I needed to know, and nothing more. I was beginning to realize this was how he explained everything. “Besides, our number of female

citizens are decreasing at an alarming rate. Human women are how we can keep our birth rate steady.”

I spun around, scanning the women behind bars around me. Some looked dead-eyed, some stared at me with a quiet curiosity. Some looked feral, like they would snap given the slightest chance. What would I look like after a week here? A month? A year? Would they even look at a half-human child the same way they saw a monster child? I had so many questions, and not a chance of getting any of them answered.

“Like I told you before, your family will be compensated. So you can make this easy on yourself, come and meet Clara, and go along with everything. Or you can do this the hard way, still end up fucked, and die at the end of it. Which would you rather?”

Ten didn't need to ask. He already knew my choice. “Clara,” I whispered.

He and his monster friend both dragged me behind them as we continued walking. Eventually the cages became bigger, with only one bed inside each cage instead of two. The girls became less shell-shocked, more quietly resigned to their fate. Soon we stopped in front of the largest cage yet, the bed draped in thick blankets, and a small window carved into the back wall.

“Back so soon, Griffin?” a smooth voice called out of the cell.

“You wish, Clara,” the one standing with Ten replied. Griffin. Strangely fitting. “I have a new girl for you to teach the ropes.”

“Oh, really?” Curiosity laced the female voice as she stepped into the light. She was beautiful, and even more shocking, she was clean. Her blonde hair shone, draped over one shoulder, her ample curves cloaked by a silky dressing gown. She looked me up and down, giving me an easy smile. I already liked her. “My name's Clara. What's yours?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but before I could, Griffin jumped in. “Her name is Rissa.”

Clara snapped her head toward Griffin, her full pink lips turning down in a frown. “I asked *her*, not you.”

Oh, I definitely liked her. I didn’t know why she had the better room, or was so comfortable with Griffin, but since she wasn’t afraid to stand up to him, I knew I needed to stick with her.

“Watch yourself,” Griffin warned, but even that was a halfhearted threat.

Clara focused her attention back on me. “What’s your name?”

“Rissa,” I offered. I had resigned myself to the fact I would have to play along, for a little while at least, if I had any hopes of getting out of here.

Griffin unlocked the cage, and without much ceremony, shoved me inside. Oddly enough, the loss of Ten was palpable. Even though he was dangerous, and violence seeped out of his every pore, I felt safe around him. I looked up at him, staring into those deep galaxies of eyes, and saw him returning my gaze with a strange expression on his face. “I’ll be back once you’re briefed,” Ten said.

I twisted my lips. I could’ve sworn something in his body called to me. Something in his blood whispered a challenge and a craving alike. But maybe I was just imagining things, and this was the end of whatever had passed between us. At the end of the day, he was a kidnapper, and I was his captive. There were other labels, too. Thief and victim. Monster and human. Nothing more.

As Griffin locked me inside, Ten’s hand wrapped around the bar, his knuckles fading to the palest of lilacs as he squeezed the metal so hard it squeaked. What wasn’t he saying? What was he keeping inside, secret from the rest? I wanted to dissect his brain and see what he hid on the inside, because I had a feeling that vivid purple skin hid a whole host of secrets.

Finally, Ten spoke. “While you’re here, you’ll be shared, but you’re still my property. That means your actions reflect

on me. Don't disappoint me. Don't make me punish you. I promise I will enjoy that all too much, and you will not."

*Punish me?* The image of his hand around my throat flashed through my brain. I was curious about Ten, more curious than I ever had been about something before, about the creature who seemed conflicted about the darkness radiating from his flesh. *I wasn't sure I would regret being punished if it meant he would put his hands on me again...*

My eyes widened, and I could've sworn Ten smirked as if he could read my thoughts. Or maybe my face was just that transparent.

Clara tugged my hand, pulling me away from the bars and Ten's quiet smirk. "Come on. I'll give you the lowdown before they give you your first shift."

As I turned away, I didn't miss the sudden thunderous gaze that passed over Ten's face. I half expected him to say something to me, but he was silent and left without another word. Griffin trailed behind, with one last glance over his shoulder, leaving me and Clara in her cell.

She dropped my hand and flopped onto the bed with an ease I envied. She seemed so at peace with herself, despite her circumstances, despite the fact she was in a goddamn cell. I hoped one day I would find that kind of contentment in my life too. "So," she began, a sly smile crossing her face. "What landed you here?"

I shifted from foot to foot. "Does there need to be a reason?"

Clara rolled her full bottom lip between her teeth. "I've been here for five years. Ten doesn't bring in nearly as many women as the others do. It had to be something serious to land you in here."

*Not as many...so still some.* There were others like me who he brought in from the villages surrounding the Labyrinth. Maybe I was completely misreading the way he looked at me. Maybe I was just a foolish girl, caught up in the curiosity of a monster in my life. "Five years?"

She nodded, and must have noticed my face because she immediately gave me a reassuring smile. “It’s not as bad as it seems, really. It’s not a terrible life to lead. They give us everything we need, and some of them are downright nice. It could definitely be worse. I have more food than when I was out in the villages, for sure. A better bed. Hell, sometimes they even turn the showers on for us.”

*Showers?* I was so confused, about multiple things. I held my hand up in front of my face, trying to process. “So you’re saying you really don’t mind being...*bred* by them? No offense, but are you insane?”

Clara laughed, a full sound that filled the cell and echoed down the halls. I could understand why men would like her. She was so *alive*. But giving herself up to *them*? Creatures who weren’t human? How could she do that with a smile on her face? “Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it. Seriously. Quite a few of them knock any human guy I’ve had out of the water. Some of their cocks are bar—”

I slapped my hands over my ears. “Nope. No. Not happening. I do not want to hear whatever words were going to come out of your mouth.” I was horrified, imagining the size of the monsters clawing at Clara, at all the women in the camps, pumping them full of their seed, desperate to fill them with their child. I looked up at a smirking Clara. “I don’t even understand how a half-human would be better for their war anyway.”

“Half-humans look mostly human, even though they have the strength of ten men. Unless you look closely, or you’re one of the rare ones who takes after daddy, to the naked eye you’ll seem human. And humans aren’t exactly a threat to the monsters.” She whispered this last word and looked around as if Ten and Griffin were going to pop their heads around the corner. “Sorry. Some of them are really sensitive about the word.”

“I’ve noticed.” I crossed the small distance between us and sat down on Clara’s bed, pulling my knees up to my chest. “What do they want to be called then?”

She shrugged. "I'm too afraid to ask the ones that don't like it. Not everyone here is nice. You'll learn. Some like to talk, and bring you presents. And some...don't." She looked away from me now, tugging her silky robe tighter around her body.

"The women I passed coming in here. In the smaller cells. They didn't have all this nice stuff you do, and they looked..." I couldn't put a word to what they looked like. Soulless, maybe. Empty.

Clara nodded like she already knew, frowning again. "They're ones who got on the wrong side of a breeder. Said the wrong thing. Fought back a little too hard. They like it when you fight, you know, but not too much. Or the ones who couldn't handle being here. Lost their minds." She was quiet for a moment, and I didn't push her. I could only imagine the horrors she had seen being locked up in here for so long, despite her insistence that it wasn't *that* bad. Better than the villages or not, it was still a loss of freedom. Captivity would weigh even on the strongest of minds after a while. Added to this the fact they were expected to carry and birth these children...my mind couldn't even wrap around it.

"What keeps you going?" I whispered. "What makes all of this okay?"

She met my gaze, her bright blue eyes staring back at me. They were clear, cloudless, like she had long ago resigned herself to the life she led. "When you don't have a choice, you have to make it feel like you do. If I tell myself I chose this life enough times, maybe one day I'll actually believe it."

"And if you get pregnant?" I knew I shouldn't have been asking such questions of someone I barely knew. But we were in this together now, Clara and I, and something in the energy between us told me she didn't mind.

"Then I get pregnant. And I love my baby with every ounce of my being, in hopes he turns out to be one of the good ones. That's all we can do in this life, right? Make sure the next generation is better than we were. Leave a legacy that will make an impact. And hope like hell it changes the world

the next time around.” She fluffed her pillow and pointed to the space next to her in the large bed. “You can sleep there tonight. They’ll probably get you your own cell tomorrow.”

Clara’s bed was bigger than the bed I shared with my mom and Ettie, a luxury I wouldn’t have imagined only a day ago—even if I was in captivity. “Thanks. When will they, uh…”

“Breed you?” Clara’s smile was wry. “You don’t have to be self-conscious here. Believe me, we’ve seen—and heard—it all. You’ll get used to it. And to answer your question, tomorrow night, most likely. Unless the one who brought you in here was desperate for a turn, they usually give the new girls a day to learn the ropes.”

I was quiet as I wiggled my way up the bed, crawling under Clara’s soft bedding. It was the most incredible thing I had felt in my life. But I wanted to laugh at the idea of Ten being desperate to fuck me. He seemed like he couldn’t get far enough away from me once that cell door closed. A sudden thought blasted through my brain, an idea that twisted and turned in my mind until I couldn’t think of anything else. Ten might not have been desperate to fuck me, but maybe he *was* desperate to fuck other women.

I wasn’t sure how the revelation made me feel. I didn’t want him. *Or did I?*

What was it swirling through my veins? Disdain, or desire?

*He had kidnapped me, tossed me in a breeding camp. But, my family would also be paid for my time here. He had ripped me away from the only life I had ever known. But, if I played my cards right like Clara, it might be the best life I had ever known. Fuck, I was all mixed up. And my brain was so goddamn loud. I needed to turn it off. There was only one way to do that.*

“Has Ten ever bred you?” I breathed out, my words jumbling together before I could stop them from escaping.

Clara laughed next to me. “Whoa. Slow down, and try again. What’s on your mind?”

I took a deep breath, and tried to convince myself that asking her didn't mean anything. It didn't mean I wanted him. *But I might.* "Has Ten ever bred you?"

She flipped on her side, propping herself up on a hand, her hair tumbling over her shoulder. It was so shiny. What would it be like to have clean hair? I couldn't remember the last time I had bothered filling our tin bathtub. Maybe I could ask her in the morning where I could bathe. I watched as something flickered across her face, something I wasn't sure I liked. "No. He hasn't. Would it bother you if he had?"

"No!" I snapped. Too quickly. Too harshly. And she knew it.

"There's no judgment here. I promise." She tilted her head, running her tongue across her lips. "It's a curiosity thing, you know? Something different. And like I said, some of them are better fucks than I've ever had with a human. There's nothing to be ashamed about if you've thought about it."

The way she spoke made me suspicious she was leaving something out. "Have you...have you ever thought about one of them like that?"

Clara chewed on the inside of her cheek. "Like I said. No judgment. The only advice I can give you is to not get attached. Having crushes is fine. Wanting them to fuck you, whatever. But they don't keep you. They never do. So expecting them to sweep you away from here and keep you all to themselves...it's a pipe dream."

I was quiet, not knowing how to respond. Why would I ever want them to keep me to themselves? It sounded like even more of an imprisonment than being in here. But Clara had been here longer, and knew more than I did. I had to let it go.

"We should get some sleep. I'll show you where everything is in the morning, and before you know it, you'll officially be one of us." She rolled over, and turned down the lamp that sat on the small table.



I knew what she meant without saying it. Before I knew it, I'd be fucked by a monster. I couldn't help the small bloom of hope in my chest, that Ten would be the one to come for me. At least I knew him, right? Better the devil you knew than the devil you didn't. That's what I tried to convince myself of. That was the only reason he was on my mind, his rich purple skin filling my brain, and his broad shoulders searing an image on the backs of my eyes.

It wasn't dark, but it was dark enough to sleep. Through the bars, I could see the flickers of lamps from other cells, and from the lamps on the hallway walls. I had a feeling this place didn't ever really sleep.

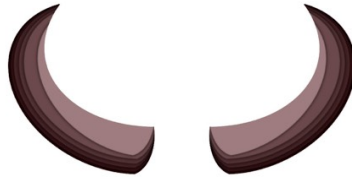
I lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Eventually, next to me Clara's breathing turned into soft snores. And still, I was awake. I knew I needed to escape. I couldn't live my entire life here, content like Clara. I also refused to be one of the brainless women who haunted the entrance. So my only option left was escape. The problem was, I wasn't sure I could get out of here without fucking at least one of them.

Maybe I just needed to resign myself, learn all I could, and use the opportunity to get the hell out of here. *Was sleeping with a monster really such a bad thing?* I groaned and flopped over to my side, uneasy with so much space in the bed. Where was Ettie pinned to my side? My mother, curled up in a ball? My heart ached and I missed them. I even missed the boys. But they were miles away, and I was here in a soft bed, preparing myself to be fucked by a monster. While I was upset, I couldn't work myself up to be entirely devastated by the idea.

I wasn't sure what tomorrow would hold, but I was certain of one thing. My curiosity about how to both fuck a monster and escape from one might just get me killed.

## CHAPTER 6

# TEN



I didn't know what was wrong with me. But as Griffin talked, blabbing on and on about the other women in the camps, all I could think about was fucking *Rissa*.

Rissa with eyes as green as the grass she had so carefully stepped on, a smile spreading across her face. Rissa who was unafraid of me, even as I had shaken the walls of her shack, and nearly choked her to the point of passing out. Rissa who was so curious, wanting to know my *name*. I had kidnapped her, and she wanted to know my name.

I wanted to know more about what made her tick. I wanted to peel back her skin, layer by layer, until I discovered the jewels that lay beneath her skin. I wanted *her*. And these feelings, this unbidden, unwanted desperation, was downright dangerous.

We didn't keep humans here just because we *wanted* them. They had purposes. What I told Rissa was the truth. Our female population was low. Once we realized our DNA could mix with the humans, it seemed to be a simple fix to keep our numbers up. The women and men in the camps were there to be bred, or just fucked, depending on your mood and tastes.

Those who didn't end up in the camps had other roles. The fighters ended up in the Cage, where the city's bloodlust was satisfied. Cleaners and cooks took care of our households, the human families passed down through generations, serving us decade after decade. There were no humans who existed simply because we wanted them to.

Taking Rissa out of the camps would mean exactly what it shouldn't. That I wanted her just because I could have her. It could only end in one of two ways. First, she would get sent to the Cage and die while everyone watched. Or I would be killed, my kind waiting for me to slip up even the smallest amount so they could punish me for being soft. A failure of a leader, not fit to be among the elite. I couldn't let either of those things happen.

Not like Rissa would ever want to be *kept* by me. She was better than that. *Not like it mattered, I'd have her anyways. It wouldn't stop me from taking her, from controlling her sweet, strong mind. From pushing her to her limits, to making her scream my name, begging me for more.*

“Are you even fucking listening to me?” Griffin moaned.

I snapped out of my reverie, imagining Rissa tied to the posts of my bed, her curves on display for me, and me alone.

I was a wreck. “Of course I'm listening,” I snapped. “Now tell me what we've done about it.”

Griffin rolled his eyes as he held open the door, and we both stepped out into the night air. “You know you get first dibs at her, right? You might as well take advantage. Who knows what the first one to get their hands on her will do. She's pretty.”

“I don't want her,” I snarled, even as my heart beat a quicker tempo, thundering a rhythm to drown out the lies spilling off my tongue. “What have we done about them?”

He pointed up to the rooftops as we passed. “We've set up patrols on the major intersections for the time being. They'll run in twelve hour shifts overnight. The rest of the men know to listen for the signal, and understand they might be called at any moment.”

My attention drifted from the patrols on the rooftops, to the well-maintained grass that covered the roads we walked through. I couldn't stop thinking about Rissa, throwing me a glare when I tried to stop her from feeling it beneath her feet. I wondered what made me as happy as the grass made her. Had

anything *ever* made me that happy? I shook my head. Rissa was in the camps now, and I had important things to stay focused on. “And we’re sure it’s the Ravens?”

Griffin nodded. “Positive. They left their calling card.” He tipped his head toward the building we walked past, where in the dim light I could just make out the rough painting of a feather scrawled across the windows.

“Fuck’s sake,” I grumbled. “I thought they learned their lesson the last time.”

“Guess not. But after the skirmish with the Hell Skulls, we’re really not ready to take them on full force. They know it, too. They’re toying with us.”

It was a tale as old as time. The city was well developed, teeming with animal and plant life. It was green, it was rich, and it was abundant. For years everyone was content, but eventually resentment grew. They wanted different things. Different priorities. Some wanted to enslave *all* the humans. Some wanted to eat them. Some of us still had morals. So eventually, the different groups broke off, scattering across the city in different gangs.

We still held the city in its entirety. But the further you got from the city proper—what we called Solaris—the rougher it got. It was harder and harder to maintain control when the gangs were growing bigger and more confident with each passing day. The Eternals were the least of our problems. They just wanted to be left alone without outside influence, and kept to the shadows of the mountains. The Hell Skulls just wanted to fight, were disorganized and spread out. The Ravens were the worst of all. They felt like their place on this earth was divinely ordained, and every other creature was put here to serve them. Including others of their kind.

Under them, the city wouldn’t last a week. But they were growing bolder, and our own people were growing weary. It had been nonstop for the last few years, and I knew my people were desperate for a break. I wished I could’ve given it to them.

“Keep the patrols up, and send a scouting party of the half-humans out to see if we can find where they’re holed up. Maybe we can bring the fight to them, and scare them back to whatever corner they crawled out of.” The last time the Ravens attacked, they targeted our camps. We lost a lot of our human men and women that night, and the ones that remained were traumatized by what they had seen—even more so than their normal levels. The Ravens were something else.

Griffin nodded. “I’ll get them on that in the morning.”

But now Rissa was in the camp. What if they attacked while she was in there? Shit. My tongue felt thick in my mouth as I tried to distract myself. She would be fine. She could take care of herself. Besides, did I even care? *Of course I did.* Because the poisonous flower that had taken root in my heart had spread, infecting parts of my brain I did my best to ignore. I had a city to take care of. I couldn’t afford to be distracted. *But what if...*

“Do it tonight. We can’t afford to lose a minute.”

“Yes, sir.” Griffin looked startled at my reaction, and I realized it was too late. I was already distracted. “I can head back alone if you want to go back and work some of this out of your system...”

“I’m *fine*,” I gritted out between clenched teeth. *Lie. Lie. Lie.* How many lies could I tell before it became natural, second nature? Because I had told more lies since meeting Rissa than I had in my entire life. And if Griffin wasn’t careful, I was going to bite his fucking head off.

He took a step backward, giving me space. “Sorry. Sorry. I’ll stop. I just thought...”

“You thought wrong. Drop it.” My chest was a piano string, ready to snap under the slightest pressure.

Afterward, we walked in silence. But just because we were quiet didn’t mean my mind was. My footsteps kept time with the thoughts racing through my brain. *Had she ever had one of us before? Had she ever thought about it?* I wanted to be the first, and if I were truly honest, the only. *She better not have*

*had one of us before.* I was going to destroy her tight little cunt.

*Was she thinking of me?*

I was being ridiculous. Rissa was beautiful, and I was... me.

*You're Losing. Your Mind.* No fucking shit.

Griffin and I approached an intersection, the grass between the buildings dotted with daisies. "I'll head to the barracks. You still good to run the show tomorrow?" he asked.

"Never better." Fuck Griffin and the meeting tomorrow. Fuck the Ravens. Fuck everything keeping my brain from thinking what it wanted to think about. *Rissa.* I turned and, without another word, headed down the street toward my house that I knew would be blissfully silent, waiting for me.

It didn't take long before I arrived, unlocked the door and slammed it shut behind me. Finally. Peace.

Except apparently my mind hadn't gotten the memo.

Rissa was alive, clinging to every inch of my brain. I craved to make her submit. I was desperate to make her scream. I needed to clear my head of her, to get rid of her once and for all. I stormed across the hall, my feet smashing against the cool marble. I ignored the bare walls, the ornate details of the railings as I thundered up the stairs. I wasn't fast enough to evade my thoughts though.

What was wrong with me? I had spent decades taking women and men to the camps. I had done my time breeding them, showing my people how things should be done. I had done what I was supposed to. I had lived up to expectations. And now, all of it seemed worthless because of one woman with piercing eyes, and an attitude begging to be tamed.

I threw my bedroom door open, the antique wood cracking and shattering as it smashed against the wall. Fuck it. I hated that door anyway. It was time for a change. I sought shelter in my bathroom, the dark walls comforting, the oversized shower calling my name.

I twisted the knob all the way around, silently grateful our rivals hadn't attacked the water sources yet. I was sure they would find a way eventually, but for today, I could have this time to myself. I waited until steam fogged the glass walls, until the water was hot enough to burn my skin. But of course, it wouldn't. I had tried before.

I stepped into the spray, closing my eyes as I let the events of the day slip away. There was nothing but me, and the hot water. Me and the shower. Me and...*Rissa*? I opened my eyes with a groan, because of course she was there, my mind conjuring up an image of her standing in the corner of my shower, water dripping over her bare breasts, trailing lower, to the sweet valley between her legs.

"You already knew you couldn't stop thinking of me that easily," dream *Rissa* said, a smile stretching across her ruby mouth. I wanted to bite her bottom lip, consume every ounce of her, starting with her lips and working my way down, taking my time along the way. I wondered if she'd stop me, once I bit into her neck, tugging at the tender flesh there. Or maybe once I twisted her perfectly rosy nipples, past the point of playfulness. Would she stop me? Or would she look at me with wanting eyes, giving me the okay to go further?

I didn't need the okay. Not really. Not with everything I had done in the past. But something about *Rissa* made me want her to want *me* as much as I wanted *her*. I needed her to want this, real or fiction.

And right now, fiction was winning. My cock grew heavy between my legs, hard at the mere idea of *Rissa* sharing my shower, staring at me with lust and desire, desperate for me to touch her. But oh, how I'd do so much more than just touch her. She took a step toward me, and another, unafraid in my presence, and unashamed of her nakedness. I wanted to take my time admiring every bare inch of her skin. I wanted to devour her until there was nothing left of her but her soul, mine to claim.

I reached between my legs with a groan, stroking my wet cock, slick from the shower. "A good little slut knows to speak only when spoken to, *deliciae*." I had messed up the first time



calling her that out loud, but the word fell from my lips so easily. If only she had known how she affected me, calling me *Master* as we walked into town. God, I wanted to hear that word leave her tongue while I was buried balls deep inside her.

Rissa only smirked. “Good thing I’m not a good little slut, then.”

*Fuck me.* I pumped my fist over my cock, running my hand along the ridges, careful to avoid the thick barbs that lined the head. Sweet little Rissa was in for a treat when I finally sank my cock inside her. I was going to ruin her, and she was going to love it, and beg for more. “Get on your knees,” I muttered. “Show me how sorry you are for your insolence.”

“Is it insolence, or honesty?” The words didn’t stop Rissa from stepping closer, and I could only imagine what real Rissa’s desire would smell like. Fake Rissa from my brain smelled like nothing but my shower, and I suddenly found myself desperate for the real thing. “Because you wouldn’t enjoy me half as much if I was *good*.”

“I’ll enjoy breaking you. Watching you succumb to me. My desires. My wants. My *will*. I’ll enjoy teaching you how to be good.” She was close enough for me to touch now, and I reached out to grab her by her neck and pull her toward me. “On your fucking knees.”

Dream Rissa was so obedient, sinking to her knees on the slick tile in front of me. She wrapped her hand around my cock, so soft and delicate, replacing my own touch. Up and down her hand slid, and I watched it with an odd fascination. It couldn’t reach all the way around, and for some reason this turned me on even more. My brain was foggy, set on one goal, and one goal only.

“Your mouth, *deliciae*,” I whispered. “Wrap your mouth around my cock, and suck hard. Suck me until I believe you want to be here. Until I believe you want me.”

Rissa glanced up at me from under her dark lashes, a flash of need crossing her gaze before she took the thick head of my cock into her mouth. She opened wide, taking as much of me

in as she could. I tossed my head back. The sensation of her sweet mouth was almost too much to handle, and I could only imagine what her pussy would feel like when I finally claimed it.

She bobbed up and down as I thrust my hips into her, fucking her mouth in a frenzy. I needed her. Needed this. Fuck all the lies that had left my lips today. There was only my need, and I was going to sate it, morals be damned. She moaned around my thick length, her eyes widening briefly, but I didn't stop. I was going to use her perfect mouth. I gripped her wet hair as I thrust harder. My release was building low in my belly, tightening with each bob of Rissa's mouth. "Suck me harder," I groaned. "Like you've never tasted anything better than my cock."

Like a good girl, she did. Fuck, was there anything better than this? I wasn't sure. All I knew was I was going to lose myself in Rissa's mouth, gripping her hair like it was the only thing keeping me on this earth as I fucked her lips. I was going to come down her throat, pumping her full of cum, and if she knew what was good for her, she'd drink down every last drop.

I roared out my release, the glass walls around me trembling with the sound. An echo of Rissa's name left me. Dream Rissa disappeared, and I was left with just my cock in my hands, my jet black cum dripping over my fingers. My head rested against the tiles, the hot water beating against my back as I let it wash my weakness away from me. It was like it had never been here. Like I had never succumbed to my sins.

I wasn't sure what was wrong with me. Maybe there was some deficiency in my blood, a terrible flaw of my genes leaving me susceptible to fallacies. I had never before been so affected by someone, let alone a singular human woman, and one I had spent barely any time with. But the reasons didn't matter. Logic was tossed out the window. I needed to let Rissa go, to let the camps have her. I needed to get her off my bloody mind, and out of my goddamn dreams. But letting go was hard when I was a man possessed.

## CHAPTER 7

# RISSA



I didn't sleep much that first night. My brain was on overdrive, barely processing everything that had happened. Surely it had been longer than one day since I was taken from my house. I had lived a thousand lives since morning, and my emotions were only just now catching up.

Once Clara was asleep, and I was finally, blissfully alone with my thoughts, I allowed myself to break. Not all the way. Not enough that I wouldn't be able to stitch myself back together again. But enough that some of the pressure building in my veins could be released. I cried for my family, who I'd likely never see again. For Ettie, who I knew would be forced to work far too young without me there—with or without the supposed wage I'd earn. I cried for a future I would no longer have, ripped from my hands faster than I could realize what happened. Escape was still on my mind, because how could it not be? But deep down I knew it was a useless act, something I kept imagining just to keep me going. I was never getting out of here, and I needed to accept my fate sooner rather than later, otherwise I'd end up like those soulless women in the entrance. A soft sob escaped me, and next to me, Clara twitched with the noise. I slapped my hand over my mouth, not wanting to disturb her. I was enough of a mess without having to force my emotions on someone else.

It was stupid, really. I didn't have much of a future in the village regardless. Maybe I'd get married to a man who worked in the mines with my brothers. We'd both work, making the most of our meager living. We might even move into a shack of our own, something to be proud of. Kids might

come along, maybe, maybe not. But if there were kids, they, too, would be forced to work far too young. I saw it happening with kids Ettie's age. The age of children who attended school dropped younger and younger, until all we asked of them was that they could read and write. Do a few sums, enough to not get scammed at the market. Then, it was off to the mines.

Was I really crying for a life I never wanted for myself? I swiped angrily at the tears that still lingered on my cheeks. These tears were useless. Crying was a futile act, devoid of relief. I had never envisioned that life for myself because I didn't want it. Why should I mourn it now?

I sniffled, and nodded to myself. I had to pull myself together before someone heard me. Besides, maybe Clara had the right idea all along. Make the most out of your situation, and eventually it turns into a half-decent life. She looked happy, for the most part. Content. She had a nicer bed than anyone I had ever seen in the village—even our mayor. She looked a hell of a lot cleaner than I did, and she told me herself there was more than enough food. Would it really be so bad to sell my soul for a life almost worth living? My mother did it for us. I hadn't wanted to turn out like her, but my hand was played for me. Now that I was here, maybe it wasn't the worst thing in the world. At least the benefits far outweighed the little bit of cash my mother brought home after a night of work.

I wouldn't go quite so far as to call myself experienced, but I wasn't a virgin, either. But a monster cock? Now that was definitely something new. Seeing as Ten was the first monster I had ever seen with my own eyes, I couldn't say I'd ever had the pleasure of seeing one of their dicks in person. It wasn't like I was about to just walk up to a monster and ask to take a peek. That seemed like an excellent way to get my neck snapped. But I could imagine.

Of course, Ten's cock was the only one on my mind. He wouldn't be the one fucking me. He had made that much clear when he dumped me here and took off with nothing more than a stupid warning. I wondered if it would be purple, or closer to

black, like the splotches that covered his wrists and hands. I wondered how big it would be, if it would even fit.

I was an absolute mess, graduating from crying to imagining a monster's dick in less than ten minutes. Strange things happened when you were trying to stay sane. We all did what we had to do, right? Right now, Clara's way of coping seemed to look better and better. And Ten's massive dick was a *great* distraction. A dick-straction, one could say.

I snorted, shaking my head at myself. It was going to be harder than I thought to keep my sanity inside this place. In reality, it was easier to make jokes than it was to be honest with myself. Honesty peeled back my armor, leaving me raw to the world. I wasn't sure if I could take that kind of vulnerability right now.

Because, honesty would mean admitting I had never felt more free than now, locked away inside a cage. I would have to come clean, admitting my reasons for going with Ten had been just as much for myself as they were to protect my family. And worst of all, I'd have to admit I wanted Ten. I wanted him to touch me again like he had in the desert, to wrap his hands around my flesh and squeeze as hard as he could. Only this time, I wanted him to be fucking me while he did so.

But I could never tell him that. Telling him would leave me weak, too open to a whole host of emotions I wanted to pretend didn't exist. Emotions for *him*. So instead I'd tuck them away into a neat little box, label them and look at them from afar. A box of things that would never happen. *Could* never happen. I'd resign myself to the events of tomorrow—later today, more likely. There was no clock in the cell, and surely I had lain awake most of the night. Or was it only five minutes? Hours or seconds? It was hard to tell in the dim light.

I knew Clara was right. I needed to get some sleep. But I wasn't in my crowded bed, and my mind wouldn't stop racing. I closed my eyes, and tried to turn my brain off, but there was little luck there either. Ten's pitch-black eyes filled the empty space, and the way they swapped between curiosity and anger so quickly. What had he been so curious about? I was a

human. To him, I must be a dime a dozen. There were countless human women inside this camp. If he wanted one, he could just take one. What made me so special?

*Stop*, I thought. *Just stop*. I needed to stop right where I was. Ten didn't care about me, so I shouldn't give him any more space in my brain than necessary. He deserved zero space. None. I needed to devote my brainpower to staying alive. Focus on the task at hand.

Goodbye, Ten. Hello, survival. Instead, I thought about my family. About my mother, and Ettie's sweet little face. What I was doing for *them*. For their survival. I could handle anything thrown at me if it meant they were okay. I just had to convince myself even if it meant repeating it over and over until it was true.

Somewhere during my monotonous chant, the sun began to rise. The light of a new day streaked through the hall, brightening up first the cell across the hall, and then ours. Quiet chatter began to echo, soft whispers of gossip that didn't quite carry all the way to my ears, no matter how hard I strained to hear.

I expected Clara to be the kind of person who slept in, but to my surprise, she rolled over and grinned at me not too long after the sun peeked its way through. "Good morning, gorgeous," she chirped. "Sleep well?"

"Ehh..." I muttered.

She smiled at me knowingly. "It's weird the first few nights. Being away from everything you've ever known. But it'll get easier. I promise."

I nodded. My heart was tight, thinking of my family getting up for the day. I hoped Ettie would eat her porridge without complaint. Fuck, there was so much to do without me there and—

"Besides," Clara continued, "after breakfast, I'll show you where the showers are! You're going to love it."

There was that word again. *Shower*. Context told me it was a kind of bath, but I couldn't wrap my head around anything

other than the tub we had at home. Unless they had been telling the truth, and the Labyrinth did in fact have running water. I almost didn't know what to think, too confused to ask for clarification. I didn't want Clara to think I was dumb. So I smiled and nodded, acting like I knew exactly what she was talking about.

She chattered away, talking about girls she wanted me to meet at breakfast. I grew more and more overwhelmed thinking about building a life here like so many of them had. Clara had friendships here. A routine. A whole goddamn life. I was at the beginning, looking at a crossroads. One way was the old way, everything I had known and anticipated for the rest of my days. And the other way was the unknown. I just wasn't sure yet if the unknown was a disaster or an opportunity yet.

Clara stepped out of her robe, leaving herself bare to me, unbothered by her nudity. Like she had said last night, they had all seen and heard it all. Me, on the other hand, I looked away, immediately shy. "I can hear them unlocking cells now. We should be out soon." A quiet laugh followed. "I'm dressed now. It's safe to look."

Clara was "dressed" in a skimpy slip of silk trimmed in a dainty fabric with cutouts sewn in. It was more skin than I ever showed except when I was bathing, and it was a shock to my system.

"I don't have anything to offer you right now, because a brute I was with a couple nights ago ripped my spare. Griffin said he'd get me a new one, but he hasn't had any luck yet." She looked me up and down, at the dusty pants and top I still wore, tattered in places, sheer in others. "I guess that will have to do for today. If they don't like it, they can find you new clothes."

I tugged at the frayed hem of my shirt as the sounds of unlocking doors grew closer. I wasn't sure how I felt about exposing my body so freely to people who were going to take what they wanted anyway.



“Good morning, Fletch!” Clara called over my shoulder. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

My curiosity had me whirling around, wanting to see what *Fletch* looked like. He was completely different than Ten and Griffin, with pale orange skin that reminded me of a sunrise. He had no horns, and a tapestry of tattoos covered his shoulders and arms. But the thing that made him stand out most of all, were the two thick tentacles on either side of his legs.

*Don’t stare. Don’t stare. Don’t stare.*

Thankfully, his attention wasn’t on me. He grunted, not bothering to look at either of us, slammed the cage door open, and moved on to the next cell without a word. Clara grabbed my arm and pulled me to join the quiet line of girls headed back the way Griffin had led us last night. She pointed out everyone as we walked, waving and telling me about each of them.

“That’s Jessa,” she whispered, nodding her head at a tall girl with dark hair. “She’s been pregnant *three* times since I’ve been here.”

“Three?” I was shocked. “And she’s still here?” In my mind, I didn’t think the girls would actually get pregnant. Maybe I was just naïve and clueless.

“Duh. They want as many half-humans as they can get. At first, they weren’t sure if they would even be able to get humans pregnant. But something about their genetics being more advanced than ours means it works pretty easily. On their side at least. So if a woman is producing, they might as well keep her around.”

*Producing.* My mouth opened, and I started to say something, but Clara was already whispering about another girl who she was almost certain was going to get killed for having a relationship with one of the monsters. She was still talking about her as she pulled me into a massive room lined with tables. Something smelled absolutely amazing.

Women were everywhere. They were sitting down, standing around, talking. Some were getting food from long tables at the front of the room. Most of them were dressed like Clara. And they all seemed...content? Maybe I was misreading the entire situation.

Milling around the women were several monsters. One looked like Ten, purple with horns. Another few looked like Fletch. Another in the corner looked like he was made entirely of stone, massive, and angry. I made a mental note to stay clear of him.

But the smell...I couldn't remember the last time I had smelled anything this good. For the first time, I pulled on Clara, desperate to get closer to the source of the smell.

Clara laughed. "Relax. I promise there's more than enough food to go around."

My eyes widened as soon as we reached the breakfast tables. I couldn't believe what I saw. Fried eggs, sitting in a dish that kept them warm. Juicy slices of bacon, still dripping with fat. Thick slices of bread, with a bowl of butter next to them. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had butter. My mouth was watering, but were those—

"Strawberries?"

Clara nodded, grabbing a plate for each of us. "They have a lot of fruit here. I don't know where or how they grow it, but they do. But go easy today. Your stomach won't be used to this much food, and you'll make yourself sick."

I wasn't listening, already heaping my plate higher than I could ever hope to eat. A flicker of guilt crossed my heart, knowing my family wouldn't eat half this good this morning. Or, ever. But I would expect them to make the most of it if they had the opportunity, so I should do the same. I was so busy grabbing food, I nearly missed Clara's sharp intake of breath.

"Rissa," she muttered.

I ignored her. I took a step, wanting to grab some of the strawberries, and immediately walked into a stone wall.

Except, there hadn't been a wall there a minute ago. I realized as I looked up it wasn't a wall at all. It was the hulking stone man who had been watching over the women. The way he stared at me made me want to curl into a ball.

"You're new," he rasped. His voice sounded exactly like I would expect it, low, rough, and gravelly.

I couldn't respond. It was as if the entire room had fallen silent, watching our interaction. It terrified me more than the monster himself. What about him made the other girls so afraid?

"You're coming with me," he commanded.

"What?" I squeaked out. "But—"

He reached out. I winced as he grabbed my wrist with a snap. I dropped my plate, bacon and eggs spilling everywhere. "I said, you're coming with me. Best you learn your place here now, girl. What we say, goes."

My heart was hammering through my chest, but his grip on my wrist told me there was no getting away. The women remained silent as the stone man dragged me down the aisle of tables, out the door into the now-silent hallway. They weren't stupid. They all knew what was happening. But in a place like this, you had to protect yourself first. I understood that.

I twisted in the stone man's grip, but it was useless. I punched at his arm with my free hand, and he looked down at me with a sneer. "I like it better when they fight."

*Not like this. Please not like this.* Something in my head had convinced me my first time would be on my terms, as much as they could be. Maintaining some of my dignity. This wasn't dignified at all. He was pulling me toward an empty cell, where he pushed me inside, slamming the gate shut behind us.

"I like the pretty, new ones. Before they're wrecked by my brothers." He was reaching into his pants, tugging out a cock I was terrified to see. I couldn't look. This was happening, but it didn't mean I had to watch it. "Bend over the bed."

"N...no," I stuttered. *Maintain some dignity.*

He shoved me so my stomach hit the edge of the mattress, knocking the wind out of me. “Bend over the fucking bed, bitch.”

One of his hands landed on my neck, holding me in place, while his other tore at my clothes, shredding what was left of my home from my body. But I wouldn't beg. I couldn't beg. I needed to stay strong, for myself if nothing else. If he wanted to rape me, fine. But I wasn't going to let him know how scared I was.

His cock pressed between my legs. This was it. It would be over quickly, and then I could mourn. But I wouldn't crack in front of this asshole. “Scream for me, bitch.”

I took a deep breath, and clung to the bedding for dear life. “In your fucking dreams.”

Now I had done it. He squeezed my neck harder, until I was certain it would be bruised for weeks. But when I expected the pain to tear into me, it never came. There was nothing, but a hesitation between us.

“Get the *fuck* away from her.” One vicious snarl and my attacker froze, his cock an inch away from me. “*Now.*”

He didn't move.

“I said, *now!*” the voice roared, shaking the bed I was sprawled across. My legs trembled with the tone. But my attacker moved off of me.

I turned around, shocked to see Ten's furious face as he stood in the cell with us. Why the hell was he here? And why did the stone monster listen to him?

The stone monster fumbled with his pants. “It's just some dumb human bitch, Ten. I was breaking her in for you.”

“Leave now, if you don't want me to break *you*,” was Ten's cool response.

My attacker composed himself and hurried out of the room. “You'll pay for this, whore. Believe me.”

And then he was gone. I closed my eyes for a moment and just breathed in and out. I was safe. I was safe because of Ten.

What the hell had just happened? I was terrified and grateful. Horrified and relieved.

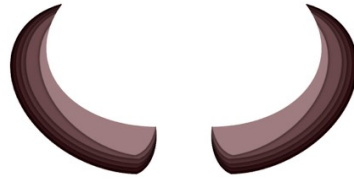
I looked up and glared at Ten, his eyes pitch black pools of nothingness. What was going through his head? I tried to pretend like my sudden nudity didn't bother me, when really it was all I could think about. I had almost been raped, and now I was basically naked in front of Ten. My heart pounded, thudding a rhythm through my chest. I didn't know what was going to come out of my mouth until I spoke. "You just put my ass on the chopping block. You really think he's going to forget that?" *So not what I was expecting to say...*

"I don't give a shit," Ten thundered. He was furious, and I wondered if his anger was what made his eyes look like there was no light in them. He stepped closer until there was no space between us. We could've shared a breath. Stolen a heartbeat. None of that mattered because what he said next made my heart stop. The air left my lungs.

"You're mine."

## CHAPTER 8

# TEN



I couldn't believe I had just spoken those words. I wasn't sure how I had even gotten here. I thought I had just been at my house, drumming my fingers on my knees, trying to focus on anything *other* than Rissa, and now here she was in front of me, her clothes in tatters around her.

Except, I knew that wasn't the truth at all. I had been sitting at home, thinking about Rissa. Imagining her getting ready for the day. Honing in on what I remembered of her scent. Thinking about all the eyes that would be on her at breakfast. My blood began to boil when I thought about my men deciding who would get her first, placing bets on how long she'd last. Who could make her scream the loudest. My vision grew dark around the edges when I imagined them taking her to a cell of her own tonight, laying her on the bed, spreading her legs. Before I knew it, I was dressed and out the door, storming down the streets of the Labyrinth. *To check on her*, I told myself. *Just to make sure she's okay.*

Because I had known it the minute Rissa laid those sharp eyes on me, whether or not I had wanted to admit it to myself—Rissa was *mine* to break. She was lucky I had come when I did, because Grey was about to use her in ways I was sure she hadn't imagined. I liked to hurt, too, but I was *refined*. I had a *method*. I had *taste*. Grey would fuck her until she died and continue to fuck her corpse after that. But the way she was looking at me didn't tell me she was grateful for the help. Rissa leaned against the bed, wrapping her arm across her chest to give her some semblance of modesty. She glared at me.

“I’m not yours,” she snapped.

“You are. I own you, or did you forget that?” Obviously Rissa had selective memory, because how could she have forgotten the whole part where she stole from me? “You’re mine, whether you like it or not.”

I couldn’t be certain, but I could’ve sworn Rissa *did* in fact like being mine. I could smell her arousal in the air, overwhelming my senses. Rissa could lie to me with her words all she wanted, but her body gave her away.

“You probably just made my life here a hell of a lot harder, you know that right?” She struggled to get to her feet without exposing more of her body, but it was a futile attempt. She stumbled, showing herself fully for the first time. My breath caught in my throat.

Rissa was even more stunning in front of me than she had been in my shower dream. Her tanned skin was smooth, lightly freckled all over. The swell of her hips tapered down to the perfect *v* between her legs...the sweet pussy I couldn’t wait to taste. She was everything I hadn’t known I wanted—because she was everything I knew I shouldn’t want.

But I did. I wanted her. I *needed* her. I craved her in ways bound to destroy me, body and soul. “I. Don’t. *Care.*” I took a step closer, the air between us charged, electric, *alive*.

She could feel it, too, couldn’t she? This energy between us, a push and pull desperately warring with each other. Or maybe I was just mad, my brain lost somewhere in the desert.

Rissa rolled her lip between her teeth. “I don’t want life here to be harder than it needs to be.”

A breath of honesty, which was a rarity I would gladly take. Subconsciously I was storing these truths about Rissa, keeping them close as if I could build an image out of the puzzle that was her soul. I took another step closer. “Don’t you understand? I don’t care because you’re mine, *deliciae*. Mine to punish. Mine to reward. Mine to *destroy*.”

I was close enough now to reach out and stroke her sharp jaw with the back of my hand. She was all angles and broken



edges. If I wasn't careful, I'd cut myself and bleed out. Her voice was little more than a whisper when she spoke. "You want to destroy me?"

I laughed, dragging my fingers down to her throat, squeezing gently. "I want to do so much more than that." My other hand found its way down her skin, her body responding to my touch. My hands were so big on her, covering up so much space. It was a fun contrast for me to see—delicate little Rissa with the strong personality. I liked it. More than I should.

Her eyes widened briefly, realizing what was coming next as my fingers brushed over her belly button on the way down to her clit. Her hips stuttered. "No," she squeaked out. And then a bit louder, as loud as her squashed throat would allow, "No."

I stopped, looking down at her. The arousal in the air didn't lie. Her body's reaction to me couldn't lie. But what could lie? Words. Silly little human girls who thought they had more control than they did. "Yes."

She glared at me, pawing at my hand on her throat. I eased my grip to allow her to speak. "I was just almost...I was almost..." She couldn't say the word, but I wasn't about to offer it up for her. "And now you want to do the same thing?"

"No." She was pretty like this, fighting me. Thinking she had *power*. I'd show her what real power looked like. "This is nothing like that. Because you're mine. And I think you like being *mine*." I cupped her pussy with my massive hand, feeling its warmth in my grasp as I slipped one long finger into her drenched opening. I knew she was lying. "Is this all for me, *deliciae*? Or should I call Grey back to finish the job?"

Rissa continued to level me with an angry stare, digging her fingernails into the skin of my arm.

I couldn't stop myself from sliding another one of my thick fingers inside her tight pussy, and Rissa rewarded me with a resentful moan. "No. I don't want to do this. Not here."

She was gripping my fingers so tightly, I could barely move. I pulsed my finger slowly, taking my time stroking inside her. “What did I tell you, Rissa? Don’t fucking lie to me. I’ve let you get away with it until now. But not anymore. No more fucking lies.”

Her fingertips scratching at my forearm turned into her squeezing me for balance, desperately clinging to me to stay upright. “Fuck,” she groaned.

“Oh, sweet Rissa, if you’re this tight around my finger, imagine what my cock is going to do to you.” It was already hard and heavy between my legs, desperate to sink into Rissa’s wet heat. I wanted to have some control over my actions, to pace myself, but I was beginning to see this was a futile attempt. I pumped my fingers into her again, harder this time. “Do you want my cock, *deliciae*?”

“No.” But her fingertips dug in deeper, and her back arched, and a breathy moan escaped her lips. “I don’t want you.”

I leaned in close, close enough to steal her breath, her moans, every ounce of her essence. “Don’t lie.”

She tipped her head back, eyes flashing with defiance. “I don’t want you.” A blatant lie, so easily seen through with how her body responded to me.

“You’ll pay for lying,” I whispered. I shoved yet another thick finger inside her, enjoying the way her pussy stretched against me. Rissa shrieked, but another gush of wetness told me she enjoyed the stretch, too. “What a good girl,” I cooed. “A good little slut taking my fingers so she can take my cock.”

“You...your cock?” she stammered.

I pumped my fingers inside her slickness again and again, eager to make her desperate for me. “Oh, yes, Rissa. I’m going to fuck you hard on that bed.”

Fingers still firmly inside her as she twisted and moaned below me, I moved forward, forcing her to take a step backward, and another, until the backs of her knees hit the edge of the mattress. Her breath came in tiny gasps, nearly

inaudible moans slipping out here and there. I finally took my fingers from her, not missing the way she sighed when I did so. Both arms free, I lifted her onto the bed, allowing her shapely calves to dangle over the edge.

“Spread your legs for me.”

Rissa stared at me, defiance back in every muscle in her body.

“Sorry. I must have misspoken. Spread your legs, *now*,” I demanded.

I didn't know if it was Rissa or her body obeying my words, but her legs widened. I stepped between them. But I wanted a better view of my pussy.

“Wider.” I gripped her thighs, pushing her legs apart until her pretty pink pussy was fully exposed to me. *Perfect*. “Oh, I'm going to fucking destroy you.”

When I looked up at Rissa, a flicker of curiosity crossed her eyes, before it was replaced with that strength once more. *Discipline*. She needed discipline. But not right now. I backed up slightly, enough so I could tear my shirt over my head, and step out of my pants. Rissa gasped.

“What the fuck is *that*?”

I followed her gaze to my cock, and I smirked. For our kind, I wasn't massive. But I knew compared to a human, I was in a different league altogether. I ran my hand along my purple length, thick in my grip, feeling the ridges beneath my palm. I stroked my finger around the head, feeling the thick black barbs just below it. “You don't like it?”

“That's not fitting,” she breathed.

“I'll make it fit.” I slid my fingers through her wetness, taking some and spreading it across my cock. I pumped my hand up and down, making sure I was lubed up for her.

“Will those hurt? The spikes?”

“Yes. But you'll like it.” *You'll like being hurt*. Besides, I knew they were rounded on the end, not sharp. They would hurt, not maim. *Although*...there was an idea.

I focused my attention back on Rissa, fitting my cock right at her tight opening, spreading her legs as wide as I could get them.

“Eyes on me,” I said. “The whole time.” Without another word, I pushed myself inside.

She screamed as I entered her, her entire body arching back as she gripped the sheets beneath her. I gave her a moment. Waited for her breathing to come back down. And another moment to be sure. Then I pulled back, and slammed into her again. This time, her scream was music to my ears, sending electricity down my spine. Fuck, I loved this feeling. One day, I was going to do dirty things to her. But today, I just wanted to feel her. To be buried inside her. Those things...they could come later.

Beneath me, Rissa didn't move her eyes from me, staring up at me with that same challenge I had seen from the beginning. I wondered for a moment what she saw in me—what I wanted her to see in me. And then I breathed out, and kept fucking her. Eventually her screams turned to moans, and her hands gripped fistfuls of the bedding like it could save her.

“Oh, fuck, oh, Ten, oh my God,” she cried, her hips meeting me, her body controlling her brain now instead of the other way around. She was mine. All fucking mine. My toy. My plaything. My *deliciae*.

I gripped her hips, digging my fingers into the warm flesh as I thrust into her. I knew she would be feeling my thickness, my ridges, and the barbs, hitting every spot inside her. “Are you going to come for me like the little slut you are?” I growled. One of my hands drifted higher, and I swirled my thumb against her swollen clit.

“Please, oh, please,” she begged. “I need more.”

*There it was.* What I had been waiting for all along. I pressed my thumb against her clit, and thrust even deeper inside her. “Come, Rissa.”

She shattered around me, crying and moaning as her body turned into a trembling mess around my cock. God, it was a

beautiful sight. I pumped inside, feeling my release growing low, and knowing my finish was right there. With a cry of my own, I spilled out into Rissa, pouring out my sin and corruption into her body.

Unless, maybe, she had never been pure to start with. Maybe, we had just corrupted each other, poison flooding both of our veins.

She fell back onto the bed, breathing heavily. I pulled out of her with a groan, watching my rich black seed drip out of her swollen pussy. With a finger, I scooped up some of the drip, and gently pushed it back inside her. It belonged inside.

I shook my head. What was wrong with me? I grabbed my shirt from the floor and tossed it to her. “This should be big enough for you to wear like a dress.”

Rissa gave me a strange look, but took the shirt. “Thanks.”

Oh, how I wished I could crack open her head and see exactly how her brain worked. I wanted to see what that look meant. I wanted to know exactly what she was thinking at all times, but especially now. She was quiet as she pulled the shirt on and got out of the bed. I couldn’t stop myself from asking. The words tumbled out before I could stop them. “What’s on your mind?”

Rissa played with the hem of the shirt that fell to her knees, hiding her sweet little figure from me, but no matter because I knew what lay underneath. I knew how she screamed even when she said she wouldn’t. “Will you come back?”

“No.” I had already made my mind up the moment I sank into Rissa’s wet heat. I knew there would be a price to pay for it, but so be it. “I won’t.”

“Oh.” Did her face fall just then, before she quickly rearranged it? Did she not want me to leave, even after what I had just forced her to do? Maybe this girl was just as twisted as I was.

I shook my head, swinging around to put my feet on the floor. “I won’t come back, because you’re coming with me.

There's no reason for me to come here again."

"I...what?" Rissa's mouth dropped open in a perfect "o" and I so badly wanted to shove my cock inside, and fill that hole to the brim. *Later. Later, I would do just that.*

I put my shoes back on, trying to act nonchalant all the while my heart threatened to escape my chest. I met her bright gaze, commanding her with every word I spoke. "I'm bringing you back to my house, where you'll be my personal pet. When I want to fuck you, you'll let me fuck you. When I tell you to do something, you'll do it. If I tell you to not do something, you'll never look in that direction again. Understood?"

"I...um...yes." A crease furrowed in Rissa's forehead. If only she knew what she was agreeing to.

"Good. In exchange you have my word that no one else will lay a hand on you." *Over my dead body...* I walked past Rissa, turning at the entrance to the cell. "Are you ready?"

I wasn't sure what I was asking for. Was she ready to leave? To live a lifetime as my pet? To be fucked, broken, shattered into a million pieces? There were many questions inside that one, and I didn't know which one I was looking for an answer to. But all the same, Rissa nodded, never once flinching away from my direct gaze.

I had to turn away so she wouldn't see the unbidden smile cross my face. There were a thousand and one things I wanted to do to Rissa, and she had inadvertently just agreed to all of them.

## CHAPTER 9

# RISSA



I was mad at Ten, but I couldn't bring myself to be as furious as I knew I should be. Did I want him? Yes, absolutely. Even though I knew I shouldn't. But I didn't want it to be like that. Although now that it was over, I couldn't bring myself to be upset about any of it except for the fact Ten hadn't listened to me when I said "no."

Because even he knew I meant *yes*.

*But his cock...* I had never felt anything like it. I felt every ridge, every barb, and they stung and hurt in the most delicious ways.

*But the way he fucked you...* Like he possessed me, body and soul. Like he knew exactly what I wanted and wasn't afraid of giving it to me. Like he wanted to break every bone in my body and stitch me back together in the space of minutes.

*I wanted him again.* I didn't want him to touch me. *I needed his cock like I couldn't believe.* He was despicable, and I'd rather stay in the camps than go home with him. I couldn't differentiate between truth and lies. All I knew was that Ten's life and mine were inextricably tangled together, and I wasn't sure I *wanted* to understand. Maybe it was safer to just accept it for what it was. Ten had just assaulted me in a way I thoroughly enjoyed. He was taking me back to his house, likely to be a sex slave. And for the first time in my life, I preferred the devil I didn't know to the one I did.

"Are you coming?"



I snapped my head up, lost in the wheel of thoughts spinning around in my brain. “Huh?”

A shirtless Ten stopped ahead of me in the hallway. *He really did cut a fine figure without his shirt on...* His abs rippled across the planes of his stomach, and a thick black tattoo wound its way across his chest, snaking up his neck and down his shoulder. I kind of wanted to explore it further, to ask him what the designs meant. But it didn't seem like the wisest choice. Especially now, as he shook his head at me.

“I asked if you were coming. You're slow. I'd rather get out of here without too many questions. You dragging your feet is *not* aiding the situation.”

I rolled my eyes. “What doesn't *aid the situation* is the fact you're two feet taller than I am, and basically running down the hall. Do you really expect me to be able to keep up with you?”

“Don't talk back to me, Rissa,” he warned. “That'll only end in one way.”

“Mmph...” I muttered, starting to walk again. “It's not like it's the first time I've given you attitude.”

Ten stayed still, and when I walked into his solid body, he stuck his knuckle under my chin, and forced me to look up at him. I stared into the deep dark pools of his eyes, wondering what emotions he hid behind those shadows. Every time I thought I had figured a piece of him out, he did something to make my head spin in a completely different direction. Like saving me from Grey, then immediately claiming me as his own. Telling me I was going home with him to do exactly what he asked, when he asked, but offering me his shirt. I couldn't get a solid read on him. He was a mystery, and I found myself desperate to know more.

“This isn't the first time you've given me sass, no. But it's the first time you've done so while you've been *mine*. I expect certain things from my toys, *deliciae*. Respect is one of them. So you *will* respect me, and you will *not* speak back to me. Are we understood?”

I tugged at his fingers on my chin, trying to pull away.

Ten's gaze narrowed and his grip tightened. "I said, are we understood?"

"Yes," I spat out.

He smiled. I couldn't tell if the twist of his dark lips was happy or satisfied or something different altogether. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, I understood you?" I huffed. What the fuck was he looking for from me?

"You're forgetting your place, *deliciae*," he whispered, stroking my chin with his finger. The fingers that had just been inside me, twisting and pulsing, pushing me toward release. "*Yes, Master* is the response you're looking for."

My eyes widened. "You can't be serious."

"Completely. I meant it when I said I demanded respect. The title is an important aspect. You will refer to me as Master at all times. If you forget, you'll be punished and reminded. But I'm sure you're going to be a good girl for me and use my title correctly, aren't you?"

I was silent, unsure of what to say. He wanted me to bend to his will in a way I had never done for a man before, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to. For a brief moment, I wondered if Clara did this for the other men in the camps, or if this was Ten's thing alone. Maybe this is what Clara knew would happen all along and she just didn't want to bring it up.

His hand stroking my jaw dropped to my neck, squeezing lightly. I gasped, but could still suck in some breath. He knew what he was doing, limiting my airflow—not cutting it off completely. "Say it, Rissa. Say it, or I'll drag your sorry ass back to that disgusting cell and make you suck my cock until you choke."

I sucked in another shallow breath. I really didn't want to go back to that cell. "Yes, Master."

Ten dropped my throat, his hand stroking the skin he had squeezed only moments before. "Good girl," he cooed. "I

knew you could do it. Now let's go. I want to get the hell out of here."

He grabbed my hand and dragged me behind him. I wasn't sure why he was so insistent on us leaving quickly and quietly, but for whatever reason he seemed almost...nervous. Like someone might catch us. Was he not supposed to be taking me from the camp? I had assumed the girls here were fair game, and the monsters could do whatever they wanted to them, including taking them home. But maybe I had thought wrong, and Ten would wind up in big trouble if anyone knew he was taking me out of there. I struggled to feel sorry for the hulking beast lugging me through the empty halls. He seemed to get and take what he wanted.

Ten pulled me along, his grip on my wrist tight, until we burst through the doors to the outside world of the Labyrinth. I hadn't realized just how dark it was inside the camps until the sunlight burned my eyes. I blinked, trying to adjust from the blinding brightness. I clung a bit harder to Ten's hand, trusting him not to let me fall.

*I trusted him?* I didn't know what was up with me. I didn't know how I could trust the creature who had done everything he had done to me, but there we were. I trusted him. But not for too long, because my sight returned and I sighed in relief.

We were walking down those strange grass-covered streets again. As much as I wanted to stop and feel the soft blades under my feet, sweep my palms over them, Ten was on a mission, and I didn't want him to decide I was too much work and haul me back to the camps.

The city was perfect. More beautiful than I had ever expected. The buildings were draped in so much green it blew my mind. How did they manage to keep everything so *alive*? The grass that grew on the streets between the buildings was vibrant and fluffy, so much different than the few, dry blades I would find here and there in the village. The shops were tidy, well-maintained with colorful signs hanging over their wooden doors. As a whole, it seemed cheerful and idyllic. Comfortable. It didn't seem like a city of monsters lived here.

Something was missing though. Something was off, not sitting right in my brain. I blinked, realizing exactly what it was.

“Where are all the people?” I asked. “It’s morning. Shouldn’t there be people out? Other...ones like you?”

Ten tossed me a glance over his shoulder. “It’s not safe right now.”

I rolled my eyes with a quiet groan, not quite loud enough for him to hear and claim disrespect. But I hated the vague half-answers. I wanted the truth, and to understand exactly what kind of life I had been tossed into. “It’s not safe right now,” didn’t exactly make me feel super comfortable.

“What do you mean?” I pushed.

Ten didn’t stop walking, but he didn’t look over his shoulder at me again, either. I took it as a good sign that maybe he didn’t think I was being impertinent. “It’s not safe to be out on the streets right now. There are some things happening and we’ve asked people to stay home as much as possible. Hopefully it will go back to normal soon. Use *Master* when you address me.”

Another half-answer, and a half-reprimand. He was so fucking annoying. I couldn’t believe he was serious about the *Master* shit. I’d *Master* his ass alright, and he’d be sorry he ever asked. I pouted as we walked, turning corners on the silent streets as the shops grew further and further apart, and the buildings grew into larger homes, with steps leading up to double doors. Just one of these houses would fit the entirety of my village.

“I can feel your eyes glaring into my back, *deliciae*,” Ten murmured. “It would be more effective for you to speak your mind instead of trying to kill me with your gaze.”

*For me to get another damn half-answer.* “What does *deliciae* mean?”

Ten paused, looking back at me again. He was about to say something, when someone appeared from around the corner and called his name. “Ten! I heard you were back home.”

“Fuck,” Ten muttered. “Play along, Rissa, or I swear...”

*Play along with what?* The monster was smiling as he approached us, slick blue skin covered with what looked to be scales. He was bigger than Ten, but not by much. His smile dropped when he looked to me, and then back at Ten. “Is she...is she now your pet?”

“Yes, Blaze,” Ten answered smoothly. “I took her into my service this morning. Would’ve been a waste at the camps.”

*I’m not a fucking pet*, I thought. Ten’s grip on my wrist tightened, as if he could hear my rebellious thoughts, and I realized that despite everything Ten was, he had saved my ass more than once. Maybe it was best to keep quiet...for now.

The blue creature looked baffled, and I couldn’t figure out why. “But you haven’t had a pet since—”

“I know.” Ten’s voice was tight, strained. *Another pet? What happened to her?* As if I’d get any answers if I inquired.

Then blue man’s mouth spread in a wide smile. “Well, good for you, man. Happy to see you get back on the horse. I expect we’ll see her in the Cage after you’ve had your fill of her, then.” He looked down at me. “I can’t wait to see what they do to you in the Cage.”

Ten nodded his head, gave the other man a tight smile. We continued on our way, a little bit quicker than before. When we turned the corner, he hissed, cursing to himself under his breath.

“What’s the Cage?” I asked. I had a thousand questions, but that was the first one that came to mind.

“Somewhere you’ll never go, if you’re lucky,” he snapped. “I knew it was a stupid idea to take you out of there. Now Blaze knows, and if he knows, everyone in this whole fucking city will know.”

“I’m sorry?” I offered. I wasn’t sure what the appropriate response was for this situation, when your monster captor seemed upset that someone else knew he had kidnapped you from the place he had originally kidnapped you to.

Ten dropped my hand, and stormed up the steps closest to us, unlocking the thick black doors. I stood at the base of the

stairs, looking up. “Are you coming? Or did you want to wait until someone else walks by?”

I couldn't get over the size of the building we stood in front of. Tall peaks rose from each corner, with looming roofs stretching toward the sky. Windows covered every square surface of the front, *real glass*, not just the see-through paper we used in our lone opening. The house stretched from one grassy street to the other, and Ten stood impatiently in the doorway, waiting for me to step inside as if this were *normal*. As if this happened every day. I couldn't process a home of this size, and he expected me to just stroll inside with him and pretend like it was ordinary. “Um.”

“We don't have time for this.” Ten stomped down the stairs, scooping me up into his arms, and carrying me up the stairs two at a time. He deposited me inside the door, and slammed it behind us with a loud thunk.

*Was all of this...his?* My mouth dropped open as I took in the room I stood in. A shiny white stone covered every surface, polished until it gleamed. Black veins threaded through it, darker than even Ten's eyes. Never mind the sheer size of the room. Actual stairs led down to a smaller, separate space. Tall pillars stretched from floor to ceiling, thick and foreboding. It was absolutely massive, and cleaner than anything I had ever seen.

And yet damn near empty. Bits of furniture here and there, almost negligible. A random small table. A long couch that looked less comfortable than my bed back in the village stretched across the smaller room. At the far end, there was a fireplace contained inside a piece of glass. I was confused. How could he cook on the fire if it was contained by glass? Maybe he had a second fireplace in another room, one used for cooking. The house was certainly big enough for it.

“Come with me. I'll show you the kitchen,” Ten said, brushing past me down the hallway through a door at the other end of the white room. “I'm going to guess you're hungry.”

I trotted behind him. I knew what a kitchen was because that's what we called the small area in my shack where we

prepared food. But that was an area. And right now we were walking into an entire room.

I gasped as I stepped inside. This wasn't a kitchen. This was...this was...I didn't know what this was, but my mind was struggling to process it. Ten walked over to a massive grey box with a door. He opened it. A light pinged on inside, revealing shelves lined with food. "This is the refrigerator," he offered. "You are to help yourself. I will not always be home, and I need to trust you'll be able to feed yourself when I'm gone."

I scoffed. "Of course I can feed myself." I stepped closer to the *refrigerator*, eyes wide as I studied the foods I had never seen before. Colors, everywhere. I reached in to touch a shiny red sphere, and retracted my hand when I realized it was cool inside. "It's cold."

Ten rolled his eyes. "Of course it's cold. It's the refrigerator. Did you think it would be hot? Pick what you'd like."

I was silent, afraid to reach my hand inside again. So I simply stared longingly at the food within.

Something must have clicked inside Ten, because he cursed under his breath. "You've never seen a refrigerator before, have you?"

I shook my head. "No. I mean, we wouldn't have enough food to keep in it anyway. But why is it cold?"

"It keeps the food preserved for longer." Ten's voice was the gentlest I had ever heard it. "So it doesn't go bad right away. Cold things stay fresh longer. Like meat. We don't need to salt or smoke our meat here to keep it cured."

I had thought a bathtub with running water was the utmost luxury I could possibly think of. But this? A *refrigerator* filled with food that wouldn't go bad in the heat? It seemed like too much for one person. It seemed like too much for me. I was too overwhelmed to pick anything, my eyes bouncing between the bright green leaves, and the red and orange orbs.

Ten huffed, and spun me around. In the middle of the expansive space was a large table with chairs. He pointed to one. "Sit. I'll get you food."

I did as he ordered, moving to the chair as if I were sleepwalking. Was this real life? Was this really happening, or would I wake up tomorrow and it all be a dream, inspired by my hungry stomach. I sat across the table, and watched Ten's broad back as he rummaged inside the large cold box.

He pulled out one of the red circles, along with a block of what looked like cheese, and other things I couldn't figure out. He grabbed a plate that looked far too fancy for my hands, and began to arrange it.

Ten whirled around, presenting me with a mountain of food. "Eat."

I looked down at the plate. There was so much there. So many options. I didn't know where to begin. I was too dirty to touch this food. I was too uncivilized to be offered this much luxury. I belonged on the other side of the wall, in my dirty village, with my dirty brown food. Spiraling, I looked up at Ten, propped up on his forearms on the opposite side of the table. I watched him watch me.

Something flashed in his eyes, and he leaned over the table. "Here," he murmured. Ten scooped up some of the cheese, placing it on the crusty-looking bread. He topped it with a small green vegetable. When he held it up to my mouth, I leaned back as if the food was going to bite me. He smirked. "It's just food, Rissa. It's bread, cheese, and an olive."

*An olive.* That's what the strange green thing was. I'd had bread and cheese before. Just not such fine quality. And the olive on top...I salivated. But when Ten held the food up to my mouth again, I opened my lips and took a bite.

"Mmm..." I moaned, letting my eyes close, savoring the mouthful. There was something so sensual about the way Ten held the food to my lips, the way I had eaten it out of his hand. On top of that, I had never tasted food like this before. It was salty, tangy, and the bread was so fluffy. "Holy fuck, that's good."



Ten laughed quietly. When I opened my eyes, he was looking at me with a strange expression. I grabbed the rest of the bite he was holding still, stuffing the whole thing into my mouth. *So fucking good.* I quickly ate the rest of the cheese on the plate, inhaled the bread, and popped the olives into my mouth one by one. Shit, Ettie would have loved that bread.

My heart broke for a moment, thinking about my sweet sister. It was unlikely she would ever get to taste something as rich as this. Living my life in the past would only cause me pain though. I had to hope my family was doing well, would do better in my absence, and continue to put one foot in front of the other. The only thing left on the plate Ten made for me was the small red orb thing. I touched it lightly. “What is this?”

“An apple.” He held it out to me, engulfing the small thing in his massive palm. “It’s a fruit. Sweet. You’ll like it.”

I took it, our hands brushing lightly against one another. The same noticeable flicker of electricity shot through my body with his touch. Could he feel it, too? Or was it all just in my head? *Get a grip, Rissa. Get a hold of yourself.*

I clutched the apple as if it were nothing more than dust, like it would drift out of my touch with the lightest breeze. When I brought it to my lips, it was hard. With Ten’s stern gaze locked onto me, I bit into the apple with a sharp crunch.

Sweet juice immediately filled my mouth, sweeter than anything I had ever tasted before. Sweeter than the cake I reminisced to Ettie about. I realized that Ten giving this to me meant something. Something I couldn’t comprehend, even by the way he watched me gobble the rest of the fruit, never once looking away. I was sure I was an embarrassment, with dirt, dust, and apple all over my face, but he still just watched. When I finished, I wished there was more apple, but remembered Clara’s words about not eating too much. I also realized I should give him something in return.

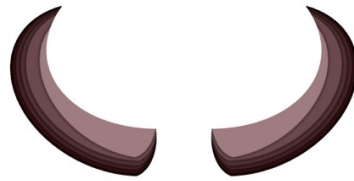
“Thank you,” I whispered, wiping the apple juice from my lips with the back of my hand. It was sticky, sweetening my words with its residue. My thanks were an offering. A bridge

between our two worlds. An understanding we weren't the same on the outside, but maybe I understood him on the inside.

When he looked away from me with a quick nod of his head, I saw his acceptance for what it was—an acknowledgement that maybe we weren't all that different.

## CHAPTER 10

# TEN



There was something about Rissa that made me feel like I was experiencing everything for the first time all over again. The way she felt the grass under her feet. The way she looked at me in the cell when I kicked Grey out, and again when I stood between her legs. And now, the way she had eaten the food I had offered, taking it from my fingertips so gently, even though I knew she was starving.

She didn't even realize how beautiful she was. She didn't realize the spell she was slowly weaving over me, entrancing me further with every moment we spent together. Which, when I thought about it, was probably best. It was safer she didn't know. Rissa would be taken from me by the others for the smallest offense, and I needed to protect myself from losing her. Wall myself from whatever feelings were growing, poisoning my blood.

It was better to just take what I needed from her, and put the rest to one side. Even if she was the sexiest thing I had ever seen, enjoying every morsel of food I had put in front of her. Even if she was looking up at me now, a question written in her unblinking gaze. I sighed. "Whatever you want to say, you might as well say it before you burst."

She fiddled with her fingers on the tabletop. "Are you ever going to tell me what Ten is short for?"

I schooled my expression to a blank look. I hadn't expected her to continue her line of questioning into my name. But all the same, she deserved an answer. "It's short for my real name. So yes, a nickname of sorts."

“What’s your full name, then?” she asked.

“Is Rissa your full name?” I leaned over the counter. I couldn’t stop myself from asking the question. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to know just a little bit more.

Rissa nodded. “Yes. It’s the only name I’ve ever known at least.”

I sighed. She was so open and honest with me, whether that was her nature or by choice after my threat, I couldn’t be sure. “Ten is short for Tennyson.”

“Tennyson,” she repeated. I watched as she said it again in a whisper, her tongue sweeping over her teeth. “That’s a strange name.”

“You’re forgetting something, Rissa,” I warned. I looked down at her, hoping she would remember before I had to remind her. Annoyance bubbled in my chest, warring with the heat that began to burn. I wanted to punish her. But I also wanted her to be my good girl. I wanted so many conflicting things with her, and my mind was a jumble. “Try again.”

She looked up at me, confused. “Should I not have said it was a strange name? Because it is.”

I gritted my teeth together. “And what are you supposed to address me as?”

Realization flashed through her eyes, before a furrow grew between her brows. “Is that like an all-the-time thing? I assumed it was a while-you-were-fucking-me kind of thing.”

I was going to snap. My patience was wearing thin, almost down to nothing by this woman, who I wanted to possess more than anything. “It’s an all-the-time thing, yes. Whenever you address me directly, you should refer to me as Master.”

She rolled her eyes, and my blood temperature reached an all-time high, scorching through my skin. “I’m not really sure it’s necessary *all* the time.”

I shot to my feet, wanting to lean over the counter and throttle the daylights out of her. But I had *restraint*. I had *control*. I also had fucking needs, and I was going to lose my

goddamn mind. “We’re going upstairs. *Now.*” I pointed through the doorway, back the way we had come where the stairs led up to the bedrooms. “Follow me.”

Rissa paled, even through her tanned skin, and the dust still lingering on it. I should really draw her a bath. But bathing could happen later, after she learned some fucking respect. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry! I swear. I’ll call you whatever you want.”

“I’m sorry, *Master,*” I hissed. “Follow me, unless you want me to tan your ass over this kitchen counter. Because, make no mistake, you *are* going to be punished. And I could care less where it happens. But you might.”

She jumped to her feet. Satisfied, I stomped out of the kitchen. I was beginning to realize that if I ever wanted her to do what I wanted, I simply needed to make her feel like she was making the decision herself. Her footsteps trailed mine as I stormed up the cool stairs, passing my bedroom to the guest room just beyond it. I held the door open for her, and she met my eyes as she passed, nervous, but not quite afraid enough to back down. “This is your room,” I offered briefly, my focus still on what would come.

I wasn’t sure how I would punish her. I wanted to make her scream, I knew that much. But I wasn’t sure what way would make her scream the most. Which way would be the sweetest? The loudest? My cock grew hard between my legs, aching with the idea of sinking into Rissa’s sweet cunt once more, but I needed to wait. I had taken what I wanted without thinking at the camps, and I needed to be more logical about how I fucked her this time. One thing was for sure, though. I couldn’t let her have free reign of the house until she learnt to be obedient.

Would the knife be best for her? Gliding across her freckled flesh, the ruby red blood that would trail the silver of my blade...delicious. Or maybe tying her up and gagging her. I had a selection of flogs I could use. Or the candle on her mantle. Would she enjoy the heat of the flame, scorching her delicate skin? There were too many options, and I fully

intended on trying each of them out on Rissa, seeing what she enjoyed the most. Because she *would* enjoy it.

But right now, I didn't want her to enjoy it. I wanted her to learn some respect. I wanted her to grovel for my approval, beg for my forgiveness. I wanted to hurt her, and I wanted to enjoy doing it.

I stroked my chin as I looked down at Rissa, still standing in just my shirt. "Kneel for me," I said. "Kneel for your Master."

I expected a complaint. A protest. But Rissa sank to her knees, looking up at me expectantly. I grew impossibly harder, watching her obey without hesitation. This was what it should be like all the time. Rissa, listening to my every word, wanting to be so goddamn good for me. It was almost more than I could bear. I needed to release some of this pressure building in me, just a little bit of the steam before I exploded. She could suck my cock, get it wet, and then we could play. A little bit of release, and then a lot of pain. It was the perfect combination.

I undid the button on my pants, shifting them down over my hips. Out of the bottom of my gaze, I caught Rissa licking her lips as she watched me expose my thick cock, dripping its dark cum, all for her. She would take every last drop of it. I'd push it back inside her if I had to, like I did last time, but we weren't wasting a single ounce.

"Fuck, *deliciae*, you have no idea how absolutely feral you make me," I whispered, pumping my hand up and down my erection. "You want to take all this? You want to suck me dry, and then let me hurt you? Tell me, is that what you want?"

A loud rapping at my front door startled us both. From down the stairs I could hear a familiar voice call for me. "Ten! You're fucking late, man!"

*The shit-fucking council meeting.* How could I have forgotten? Probably because I was too preoccupied with getting a certain someone out of the camps, and dragging her back to my house. Fucking hell. This was *not* what I needed.

I grabbed Rissa's chin, and pulled her face up sharply to look directly into my eyes. "Listen to me, and listen to me carefully. If you want to live, you will not make a single sound. Do you fucking hear me? *Not. A. Fucking. Sound.*"

Rissa glared at me. "Are you going to be the one doing the killing, *Master?*"

"Watch yourself," I responded coolly, letting her chin drop. I pulled up my pants, buttoning them. "I've let you get away with too much already. One day, you'll go too far, test the limits of my patience, and you'll regret it. *Shirt.*"

She looked blankly at me. I snapped my fingers. "I need my shirt, Rissa. Take it off and give it to me."

"But...but I don't have anything else to wear."

I shrugged. "If you're lucky, and do as you're told, no one other than me will see your nudity." Rissa was slowly turning me into a liar. Because if anyone cast their gaze upon Rissa's naked frame again, I would pluck their eyes from their skulls with no remorse.

With one last glare, she pulled the shirt over her head and tossed it to me. I tried to not openly stare at her naked figure, so perfect in the early light of the morning. I feared that if I stared too hard, it would be seared into my memory forever, and I wouldn't be able to focus on anything else. Including the council standing on my front porch. I tugged my shirt over my head, smiling to myself because it was warm. Heated from Rissa's skin. And while I was downstairs, Rissa would be up here, naked, waiting for me. I just hoped nobody else could smell her scent on me. Another reason to keep her contained in one room, so no unexpected visitors could happen upon her.

*Fuck.* No. "Be good," I warned. "Or else."

I turned on my heel and shut the door behind me. I pulled the skeleton key I kept in my pocket out, and locked the bedroom door. As soon as Rissa heard the click, she came thundering toward the door, banging as hard as her tiny fists would allow. "Did you seriously just lock me in here?" she yelled through the door. "Fuck you, *Master.*"



This time I allowed a small smile to grace my lips. At least she was learning. I heard Rissa slump to the floor, but I was confident she would listen to my warning. She didn't know what was waiting on the other side of the door. She wouldn't take the risk, even if she was confused. I *had* originally told her she would have freedom of the house. But that was before I realized the *risks*. I took the stairs two at a time, throwing open the door to find Griffin standing on my doorstep, with the rest of the small council.

"Sorry. I slept in," I offered lamely as I held the door open. "Come in."

Griffin gave me an odd look as he passed, but didn't say a word, finding his way to where he always sat on the long couch. The rest trailed in behind, three more in total. Behind Griffin was Fletch, then Hades, the odd black smoke that followed him trailing close behind, and finally, Draven. Once they were all inside, I shut and locked the door. At one point, I never bothered to lock the door. But now...now, one could never be too careful.

I kept my ear out for Rissa, hoping she would stick to my warning and keep quiet.

The small council usually met once a week. Lately, with everything going on, we met whenever needed. I strode past all of them, standing in front of my fireplace. "So. Tell me where we're at. We don't have all day."

Hades grimaced. "The Ravens are definitely planning on making a move. We don't know anything about their plan yet, but we're doing our best to find out more. All we know is that they're more organized than we've ever seen them. Usually we can find one or two stragglers kicking around to torture and get some information out of. But lately? Nothing but their calling card on buildings." Hades looked sad at this news. He enjoyed torturing his victims—a quality we wanted in our enforcer—so the lack of finding any live ones disappointed him.

I sighed. "Did we send out any of the half-humans? We need eyes on the inside, now."

Griffin nodded. “We sent out about a dozen last night, in teams of two. Hopefully a few make it to the target, and are able to come back with some information. We also have a team out looking for where the Ravens set up camp. We’re guessing they’re in Beggar’s Hole, but no one really wants to venture that far. I’m hopeful our team returns at some point today, and we can go from there.”

I turned and sat down in the oversized leather chair next to the fireplace. Beggar’s Hole was the furthest edge of the city, where there was no escape. No gates. Nothing. I steepled my fingertips on my forehead. This really wasn’t what I needed right now. Not with Rissa upstairs, naked, waiting for me to punish her with merciless hands. I didn’t bother looking up when I addressed the room. “Fletch, what’s the status on the camps?”

Fletch had no interest in the women, and so, by default he was in charge of the camps. I needed someone unbiased to run things in there. Griffin would’ve been my first choice, had he not a ravenous taste for human women, so he remained my Sergeant at Arms.

Fletch looked up at me, but past me, like he always did. “We lost about a dozen women last time the Ravens hit us. But since then, we’ve brought in about five more. We also have three who should be giving birth any day.”

This was good news. We needed as many half-humans as possible if we were to remain strong and in control. Likely, as I had no offspring of my own—I could feel my father rolling in his grave at that—the city would be in upheaval if I were to die. I needed to make sure our position was solid at all times, so we could keep power. I had no interest in turning my city over to a bunch of heathens who wanted whipping posts on every corner, and for the city to slowly envelop the villages on the outside, turning the human towns into farms for their own needs.

Yes, we stole humans. Yes, we sometimes used them for our own needs. But we also understood what we were doing. We didn’t just expect every human to worship us, to bow to our will. In fact, most of us enjoyed the fact that they didn’t.

Like Rissa...God, was she still curled up against the door, waiting for me? Or was she sprawled on the bed, her naked skin touching the smooth sheets...I wanted to be those sheets. I wanted to be the one touching her. My cock grew hard between my legs again, desperate to claim Rissa as mine.

“Ten?”

I shook my head, embarrassed at being called out for being distracted. “Yes. What is it?” I looked around the room, not missing how Griffin gave me yet another strange look.

Draven was talking, and I was completely tuned out. He was in charge of our community, and had a softer heart than the rest of us. It was something we needed, and a liability at the same time. I tried to catch up to speed. “...the people, they’re afraid. They don’t want to come out of their homes. But they don’t have stockpiles of supplies, or food, and eventually, they’re going to get hungry.”

The streets had seemed emptier than normal when Rissa and I walked through them. I hadn’t been lying when I said the people were safer at home. But even to me, they seemed too empty. “Can we set up a market somewhere, and summon them to come block by block to get what they need? That way they’re able to stock up in a safe place, with other people, but not enough people to make them uncomfortable.”

Draven nodded. “Pop-up marketplaces. Good idea. I’ll start setting them up when we leave here. I’m sure the shops are probably hurting without anyone buying. I’ll see who wants to help out.”

“Good. Take care of it. The last thing we need is a city full of weak people when the Ravens attack. It would be all too easy for them to take over if we aren’t all prepared. That means every single one of us.” I looked over to Fletch again. “I need you to make sure the women are prepared in case of a break in. You don’t need to arm them, but make sure they know what the Raven’s war face paint looks like, so they know who to fight.”

“I’ll get on it when I get back,” he muttered. “God knows some of those creatures would be all too happy to be given

permission to throw a punch.”

I rested my hands on my pants, scratching my nails across the cotton material. The room felt too small. There wasn't enough air. Was Rissa okay upstairs? Or should I make an excuse and go check on her? “Are we good then? We can meet again in two days time to see where we're at.”

Jobs assigned, the men rose, and headed toward the door. All of them, except for Griffin. He lingered, taking a step closer to me. I watched him carefully, wondering why. The others were waiting at the door for him. I tipped my head in their direction.

“I'll see you guys in two days,” he called over his shoulder. “I just have to clear up some half-human stuff with Ten, first.”

The door closed behind them, and Griffin returned to me. He seemed almost nervous. “Look...” he started. “Fuck. I don't want to be having this conversation.”

“So don't,” I offered. I wasn't sure what he had to say, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know, either. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

He snorted. “Thanks for that. But, look, I don't know what you're doing with...her...but you need to be careful, okay?”

My heart froze. “I don't know what you're talking about.” He couldn't possibly know about Rissa already, could he? No. It was impossible. Unless...

“Cut the shit, Ten. We've been friends too long.” Griffin shrugged his shoulder. “I couldn't care less who you stick it in, but other people might. The city is looking for any reason to take you down. She might be that reason.” He slapped his hand on my shoulder, something only he could get away with. Anyone else would have their appendage chopped off. “Just make sure she's worth it.”

Before I could muster up a retort strong enough to reflect how I felt, he was gone. *Fuck*. For fuck's sake. I knew I hadn't exactly been subtle about getting Rissa out of there like I had

originally planned, but for Griffin to already know? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fucking Blaze and his big mouth.

I peeked out the living room window to make sure they were gone before racing upstairs toward Rissa.

Maybe I had screwed us both with my selfish intentions, bringing her here. Maybe I had sentenced us both to death. Maybe nothing would come of it, and Griffin was talking nonsense about shit he didn't know. Or maybe, he knew exactly what he was talking about, and I had fucked it all up.

*Just make sure she's worth it.*

As I stood on the other side of the door, hearing Rissa stumble to her feet, knowing she had been waiting for me that whole time, Griffin's words cycled around in my head. I couldn't be certain. Not yet. But I had a feeling she was "*worth it.*"

There were ways "*worth it*" could be put to the test. I intended to try all of them.

## CHAPTER II

# RISSA



Had it been an hour since Ten left me, or only a few minutes? Time seemed to work funny outside of the village. It was as if I had been here for years, yet only just arrived. Ten and I seemed to have known each other for a lifetime, but it was only yesterday he walked into my life. I leaned against the door, the wood cool against my back. Later I would give him an earful for leaving me here. For now, I knew it wasn't worth the risk.

Eventually, I grew bored and began to explore my surroundings. The room he'd left me in was quietly elegant. Stark white bedding, whiter than anything I had ever seen, covered the ornate bed. The windows were covered in heavy drapes, but when I peeked through them, I found a view onto the quiet streets of the Labyrinth, surprised they weren't barred like my cell.

Soft conversation filtered up the stairs, men's voices. And while Ten wasn't exactly the safest person to be around, my experience with Grey made me nervous to interact with anyone *other* than him.

And really, didn't we all have a dark side? Maybe Ten's was just a bit deeper than most, a shade typically hidden in the shadows of the world. But he had also offered me food, fed me from his fingertips. Would a bad person do that?

*If they were trying to sucker you in...*No. It wasn't like that. Or maybe my hopeful thoughts were bubbling to the surface, wanting Ten to be *good*. Wanting my imaginary

scenario to be real. I needed to keep my head on straight if I was going to survive this new world.

The front door opened and closed a few times, and after a couple silent moments, footsteps sounded on the stairs. I stumbled to my feet, legs stiff after sitting in one place for so long. If someone other than Ten was going to enter this room, I wanted to be ready.

The door wasn't kicked open. A key slid into the lock, and I backed away. Ten stood on the other side, taking me all in. I shivered as he ran his gaze from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. It was electric, this feeling, knowing his attention was all on me. Knowing he wanted me. I knew I wasn't imagining that. That was real. It was almost tangible, alive between us. He was beautiful, too. All rich purples and broad muscles, the lines of his face sharp like the stone that lined the house, and those wonderful dark horns twirling up to the ceiling.

He took a step closer. "I believe we were interrupted before, *deliciae*."

I wanted to stay still, to press my body closer to his, but my instincts made me take a step backward. "Were we?"

"Yes." Another step. A smirk pulled across his dark lips, and I could've sworn his eyes twinkled. He was enjoying this. The chase. The capture. "I believe you have some apologizing to do. What was that you screamed at me as I locked the door? Something along the lines of, *fuck you, Master*."

Fuck. I was screwed. "I mean. I called you Master, though." I tipped my head, and as an added measure threw on an extra, "Master."

Ten shook his head. "I told you, Rissa. Respect is important to me. Cursing at me makes me think you don't respect me."

"I respect you, Master." I did respect him. Maybe not in the way he wanted or expected, but I did. "I do."

"So this is what we're going to do," he continued as if I hadn't spoken. "I'm going to hurt you, *deliciae*. I'm going to



hurt you, and I'm going to enjoy it. I'm what they call a... sadist, you see. But once we're done, *if* you're good and learn your lesson, then I'll make you feel good. How does that sound?"

"You're a what?" I couldn't deny the fact that my body responded to the idea he wanted to hurt me. I was curious. And I would probably let him do whatever he wanted.

"A sadist," he repeated quietly. "I like to hurt. I'll probably hurt you more than you've ever experienced. But I'll also show you the beauty in pain, if you let me. Because pain can truly be a wonderful thing, if you let it happen."

I swallowed hard. Did I want to let it happen? Maybe I did. For whatever reason, I found myself unable to say no. I wasn't sure what that made me. He wanted to hurt me, and I was curious about the idea of being hurt. He was stronger than I was, and we both knew it. He was the predator and I was the prey. I could either fight being the prey, or I could find the pleasure in it. The pleasure he was offering so sweetly through sharp teeth and a wicked smile.

He took another step closer.

"Would you like to try it, *deliciae*? Would you like me to hurt you?" Ten whispered. He was touching me now, his massive hand stroking my forearm. "Do you know how beautiful you are when you're naked? Let me hurt you. Let me break you. Let me make you bleed. Then let me put you back together."

I met his gaze, staring into those galaxies like they held all the answers I had ever sought. He must have been looking for the same in my eyes, and whatever he was searching for, he found. His gaze sharpened, and the gentle stroking hand on my wrist squeezed tighter. And then it was whisper-soft again, the lightest of breezes against my wrist.

Another squeeze. Tighter this time. I winced.

"Come and sit." Gripping me still, he led me to the bed, and sat me down on the edge. Squatting, he looked up at me with an understanding in his eyes. "I'm going to use my hand

like a vice on your arm. We're going to see how much pressure your human bones can take before they snap."

My eyes widened. "You're going to break my arm?" My heart thundered in my chest, and my fight or flight reactions were kicking in, whether I wanted them to or not.

He shook his head, resting his hands on either of my forearms. "No. You're going to tell me before that happens. I'm just going to apply intense pressure, and it *will* hurt. But before they break, I want you to use a specific word. I want you to call out *apple*."

"Apple," I repeated. Was I really going to do this? I knew my curiosity was going to get me killed at some point. I just didn't expect it to be today.

Kneeling still, Ten stripped off his shirt. I ogled his chest and his impressive abs before he caught me. "Are you ready to play, *deliciae*?"

I nodded, my throat tight. I hoped I was ready.

He rested his hand on my forearm again, wrapping his fingers beneath, his thumb pressing on the fleshy part of my skin. I watched with a morbid fascination. He squeezed, similar to what he'd done to my wrist, but different. I could feel this throughout my entire arm. Not pain, necessarily, but a tightness. A twinge, felt everywhere. I looked up at him and nodded again, letting him know I was okay.

He gripped my forearm tighter, the pressure increasing. There was a bit of pain now, his vice-like grip constraining my arm. *Holy shit*. When I searched his face though, I saw no sign of strain. Instead, his eyes came alive as they watched me, and as I darted my eyes down, his cock was bulging against his pants.

I wasn't surprised. His intense grip on my arm, the way he was staring at me and all the build up from before was messing with me, too. The wetness grew between my legs, my desire soaking the bedding beneath me.

Ten squeezed harder, and I moaned without meaning to. He looked at me with a flicker of surprise, but I couldn't

explain it. Something about him wanting to hurt me, him being in control... it was doing things for me. *To me.*

Another squeeze. The pain had arrived, thudding through one side of my head and out the other. It was a constant thrum, a throb echoing through every inch of my body. He was only touching my arm, and yet it felt like he was controlling me everywhere. I groaned, unsure if it was in pleasure or agony. But I knew it wasn't all I could handle.

He tightened his grip yet again, and light flashed behind my eyes. Pain. That's all there was. *Pain.* There was no bed, no Ten. Just an exquisite rush of pain. My bones creaked beneath the vice of Ten's hands. Had there been anything else? I couldn't remember. It was overwhelming. It was everywhere.

Had I ever felt this alive? Every nerve in my body stood at attention, electrocuted by Ten's touch. I was everywhere. My bones ground again, and I knew there was only a moment before they snapped beneath his touch.

"Apple," I croaked out. It was as if I had never spoken in my life. I couldn't find other words. All I knew was, "Apple."

All at once the pressure was gone, the pain dissipating around me. The room slowly rematerialized in front of my eyes, the throbbing of my arm dimming to a quiet pulse. But every cell in my body reminded me that I was here. I was alive. And I had just experienced something beyond my wildest imagination.

"Holy fuck," I whispered, caving back on the bed. I wasn't sure where my head was at, but it wasn't in this room, or even in this world. "Is it like that every time?"

Ten crawled over me, gripping me around my waist. "You haven't seen anything yet, *deliciae.*" He pulled me so I rolled on top of him, my legs straddling on either side of him. I wiggled my boneless body up, and he helped me until his cock found my pussy, dripping wet just for him and his *pain.* "I told you it would be delicious."

He slid the head of his cock inside me, the thick barbs pricking me, but not quite the same level of pain as I had just

experienced. This was downright pleasurable. I moaned, pushing back onto him.

“Just like that, Rissa,” he cooed. “Take all of me, just like that. Stretch that pretty pussy out for me.”

Ten pushed his thick cock in a little bit more. “Fuck me,” I groaned. “Oh, fuck.”

“That’s the idea.” He used his hands to widen my legs, spreading my wetness all over my eager pussy and his waiting cock. “You’re such a greedy slut. You want more, don’t you? You want all of my cock, and all of my cum.”

“Mmm...” His words did something to me, disconnecting me from this planet altogether. It was just him and me, his cock slowly sinking inside, and the distant ache of my forearm, reminding me of exactly what he was capable of.

My eyes drifted closed as he sank inside me fully, until Ten squeezed on my still-tender arm. My gaze snapped to him.

“Don’t close your eyes. I want to see you.” He held my hips, rocking me against his cock until my desperation took over, need building low in my belly, and I began to ride him.

I ground my hips against him, circling with a groan every time I came down on his cock. He watched, breathing heavily, cursing every so often. His cock felt so fucking good inside me, ridges hitting every point I needed them to without trying, those delicious barbs pricking me, a reminder of just how good pain could feel. Every so often Ten would squeeze my wrist, and a flicker of pain would run up my arm. I was overstimulated, pain and pleasure warring for every cell in my body. I wanted more. I needed it to stop. I was going to come so goddamn hard.

Ten pressed one of his hands against my lower back, pushing himself impossibly deep. I was so full, stuffed with Ten’s massive cock. I rocked my hips back into his hand, meeting his movements with every shift. “You’re the most stunning creature I’ve ever laid my eyes on, Rissa,” he murmured. “And you’re all fucking *mine*.”

His words sent me over the top. I shattered around him, crying his name as I continued to ride. I began to sag, to topple over, and Ten held my hips, pushing me through another orgasm, and the aftershocks of yet another. My brain melted. I was barely aware of Ten gripping me, pounding into me with a frenzied roar—I knew I would be bruised and sore tomorrow. But fuck, it was worth it.

His hands dropped off my skin, and I drifted into the wonderful space between life and death. Reality and fiction. I liked it here, in the ethereal world I wasn't sure actually existed. I liked the quiet of my brain, the silence that surrounded me.

Out of the recesses of my awareness, I felt someone scoop me up. They were carrying me somewhere. I wasn't sure where, and somehow I knew it was Ten.

Above all else, I knew I was safe.

I flicked open my eyes to confirm it was Ten. He pushed open a door to take me inside an all-black room. It was too dark. I didn't like it. It didn't suit his soul. Not the soul he showed the world, but the soul he hid, burying it between layers of ash and guilt.

I could hear running water, which was absurd because we were inside. I sat up eagerly, and Ten wrapped his arms around me. "Whoa. Be careful. You were pretty out of it there."

Not anymore. I was too captivated, watching the water pour from a silver spout inside the house. Inside. The. House.

"You have running water?" I gasped. "I thought that was a legend. I didn't think it was real."

He laughed. "Yes. You did well. I thought you might enjoy a bath."

A bath. Hot from running water. And this tub...it was so big I could probably swim in it. I couldn't stop staring at the water. This wasn't real. This was still a dream, a safe space I found myself in. "I've never seen running water," I whispered. I hated how fragile I sounded. Naïve. Never seen a refrigerator or an apple, and now, running water. And all of this seemed so

natural to him. Something he had always had, never been without. I was clueless, dumb to the ways of his world. I looked up, and he met my gaze.

I expected more laughter at my expense. A roll of the eyes. Instead, Ten bent his head closer to my ear. "I'll show you a whole world of things, if you let me."

At his words, a shiver ran down my body. I wanted him to tell me more. I wanted to know more about this strange world I had found myself thrust into. What else was there for me to discover?

Ten shifted my weight on his lap, and stuck his hand in the nearly full tub. "That should be good. Climb in."

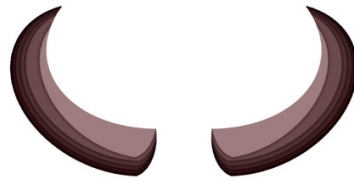
He turned the silver knob, and the water stopped on demand. It was basically a miracle, having water at the turn of a dial, and he didn't even seem impressed. Would I be the same one day? Unimpressed by magic? I hoped not.

On the other hand, that implied I would be here for a while. Yesterday, this would've seemed like the worst thing in the world. But today, with Ten offering me his hand, guiding me into the steaming water, maybe it wasn't the worst thing after all.

Maybe I was right where I was supposed to be.

## CHAPTER 12

# TEN



I watched Rissa step into the tub, wondering what I had ever done to deserve this incredible creature. She was ethereal. She was steel. She was an early spring bloom, the wispiest of petals with an iron stem. I had hurt her, and she had looked up at me with such a gaze of trust. It only made me want to hurt her more.

The way moans slipped out of her mouth...it was downright delectable. I wanted more. I wanted to consume each sound that fell from her lips, because each noise of pleasure was mine to take.

Rissa was mine. Her elegant body slipping into the water was mine to hurt. To pleasure. Her sweet pussy was mine to use. The sounds she made were mine to take, to bottle and store. And her soul was mine to taint, to poison with the trappings of my life. *Mine.*

She laid her head back against the side of the tub, her eyes drifting closed as she let the water carry the weight of her body. I had put her through a lot, and I would put her through more still. She deserved this moment of peace. She wasn't fully aware yet, still drifting in that dreamlike state, and I wanted to preserve that for as long as possible.

I left Rissa for only a moment, to grab the soap and a washcloth. I gently pushed her forward, getting her to sit up so I could slide in behind her. The tub was more than big enough for both of us, but with my added bulk, water sloshed over the edges, spilling onto the floor. She didn't protest much as I



pulled her back between my legs and rested her head onto my chest.

Rissa was strangely comfortable with me, and I with her. I wasn't sure how that made me feel. What I did know was her head on my chest felt *right*. I tried not to disturb her as I rubbed some soap on the soft cloth, and reached down in the water.

Luckily, the height discrepancy between us had some advantages. Namely, I didn't have to work too hard to reach any part of Rissa, even with the awkward position we were currently in. I started with her feet, scrubbing her skin gently with the soapy cloth. She moaned quietly, but kept her eyes closed.

Next were her long, shapely legs. They were more muscular than I'd thought at first, perhaps strong from the work she had done in the village. I tried to ignore the pulsing between my legs, my cock growing hard with a naked Rissa so close, and my hands touching her everywhere. But I had just used her hard. Right now, I needed to give something back to her, before I took her again.

Her arms. Her back. Her supple shoulders, freckled from the sun. The dust washed away from her, leaving her tanned, honey skin in its wake. She had been beautiful through the dust, but now? Now she was a different girl to the one who had dared to look me in the eyes.

I ran some soap through her tangled hair, scooping up water in my palm to rinse it out. I'd have to find her some shampoo. Some of the stores carried it for the human woman. I'd get some for her next time. *Next time?*

Rissa turned around in my lap, desire blatant in her gaze. She wanted me. I could tell from her scent alone, even if she wasn't grinding herself on my growing cock. But I knew I was bigger than she would have been used to. She had to be sore. But maybe...I reached between her legs, gently swiping my finger along her pussy. A grimace spread across Rissa's face.

"You're in pain," I muttered. "You need rest."

I couldn't deny a part of me was pleased. I had fucked her to the point of exhaustion, and she still wanted me. She was in pain, and she still craved my cock. But if I wanted her to do all the dirty things I was imagining, she at least needed a bit of rest.

"I'm fine," she protested. "Really. It's nothing."

I shifted beneath her, my cock brushing against her pussy. A flash of pain crossed her features again. I sat her up, and climbed out of the tub. Dripping, I walked across the cool floor for a towel while she watched. "I told you before I don't like liars. So I'll ask you once for the truth. Are you in pain?"

Rissa looked up at me and nodded.

I tipped my head in acknowledgement. I wanted nothing more than to fuck this girl until we both passed out, but she had been through a lot in the last day, and I wasn't going to push her harder than necessary. Instead, I held the towel out for her. "Come on. I'll take you back to your room."

She emerged from the tub, water dripping off her perfectly pink nipples, and down the wonderful *v* between her legs, and I wanted to eat every last bit of her. But I would be good. For now. Wrapping the massive towel around her, I grabbed her hand, and pulled her back through my room.

I wasn't sure why I didn't want Rissa to sleep in my room. A part of me thought it was too personal. Too private. Like she would be seeing a side of me I wasn't sure I wanted her to see yet. So I brought her back to the guest room, her room now. The curtains were still drawn, leaving the room dim. But she'd be comfortable enough in here. The bed was well made, and more than big enough for a human.

I turned back to her. She had wrapped herself up in the towel so just her face was poking out. "I don't have any clothes to offer you," I said. "I'll have to find you some later. I can get you one of my shirts again though?"

I didn't really understand the whole human "needing to be clothed" at all times thing. While we dressed inside the Labyrinth, we also didn't stray away from nudity either. It was

simpler to not be concerned about it. And where Rissa was concerned, I was more than happy to watch her naked form. Thankfully, she shook her head. “Honestly, I barely slept last night, and I’m really tired. I’m fine just sleeping like this.”

“Very well.” I was suddenly awkward, unsure of what to do. Did I pull back the blankets and tuck her in? Did I leave her to her own devices? Did I kiss her forehead? What was the appropriate protocol? I walked to the door to give her some privacy. “I’ll leave you to it, then. Come get me if you need anything.”

“Wait.” Rissa’s voice stopped me in the doorway. I turned around to see her still wrapped up in the towel. She was chewing on her bottom lip. “Will you stay? I’m not used to an empty bed. I don’t think I’d be able to sleep.”

“Oh.” I had assumed she’d sleep alone, and my instinct was to tell her just that. To tell her I had things to do, and to leave her in the room until I was ready for her once more. But something peculiar crept up my spine, asking me what the harm was if I stayed for just a few minutes while she fell asleep. If it meant she was better rested for me later, wouldn’t that be worth it?

“I suppose I could do that. For a few minutes at least.”

She nodded eagerly, dropped the towel, and climbed beneath the covers. I lay down next to her on top of the blanket, wondering how long it would take for her to succumb. “You can come under the blankets, you know. If you’re cold,” she offered, pulling the edge of the blanket up around her shoulder. “I don’t mind sharing.”

I grunted. “I don’t mind sharing, *Master*.”

Rissa laughed softly. “I don’t mind sharing, *Master*.”

It didn’t really mean anything for me to climb beneath the covers with her, did it? I slipped underneath the blankets, Rissa’s cool feet grazing the skin of my calves. I could do this without implying any sort of intimacy, a sweetness lacing our relationship that she might hope for when there was no possibility of such. At the end of the day, I would reward her

for her good behavior, but there was no sweetness. There was no syrup, no sugar. There was only me, my wants, and my needs. And Rissa, who would eagerly attend to all of them. If she did well, I'd reward her like I had done with the bath. And if she didn't...well. She would find out soon enough.

"It's nice to feel like I'm not alone in the bed." Rissa turned on her side, pressing her perfect ass into my cock, and her cold feet against my shins. How were her feet so fucking cold already? Maybe she was *too* comfortable with me. There was a possibility I had treated her with too much kindness, and she would grow accustomed to such. I couldn't have that.

It would be best to warn her. To make sure she was aware that just because I treated her with respect, didn't mean there was something else there. "Rissa," I began. Silence greeted me. "Rissa?"

I grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back toward me so I could see her face. She was out cold, quiet snores slipping from her lips. She really had been exhausted. I sighed and shook my head, letting her body roll back to where it was comfortable. Our conversation would have to wait for another time.

I knew I should get out of bed. I had things to do, especially with the Ravens encroaching on our territory. I had to put feelers out into the world, to make sure no one else knew about Rissa. I had a stack of paperwork on my desk waiting for me to go through and initial. But my body was filled with sand and stone, weighed down with the comfort of being curled up around Rissa.

It felt like I was protecting her this way. Not that she needed protection. She seemed pretty capable of taking care of herself. But she carried the weight of that on her shoulders. I could see it in the proud stance of her shoulders, and the heaviness that occasionally drifted behind her eyes. It was noticeable in the way she seemed nervous to tell me she didn't know what a fridge was, and again with the tap. And part of me, the part I hid deep inside away from everyone and everything, wanted to take some of the weight off her shoulders. To let her relax for a moment or two.

It wasn't safe for humans—or us, anymore—in this world. We always had to watch our backs, both actual and metaphorical. Someone was always out to get us. But every so often a stolen moment came around, and we could let our guards down, and simply just *be*. The way Rissa had sunk into the bed, giving herself over to sleep, her full lips open as she shamelessly snored...maybe this was one of those moments for her. The fact that I was the one to give it to her, after everything I had done *to* her, well...I wasn't sure what to make of that. I just knew I wanted to be here, next to her, watching her sleep.

My hand lifted of its own accord, trembling as it reached for her damp hair. It was even darker when it was wet, and I ran my hands through the strands. I didn't want to wake her up. I just wanted to touch her, to reassure myself she was here and this was happening.

She shifted, and I froze, but she didn't wake up. She moaned quietly, snuggling deeper into me and into the pillow far too large for her head. I smiled to myself, before playing with her clean hair once more.

Rissa brought feelings up to the surface of me I had long thought were dormant. Maybe even dead. She was a contradiction who made me feel conflicting things. I wanted to hurt her pretty body more than I wanted anything else in the world, but I also wanted to touch her, to watch her sleep. I wanted her to feel comfortable around me. To trust me. To want me to do those dirty things to her. I would do them either way, but for her to want them? To want *me*? I wasn't sure I would even know what to do with myself if such a thing were true.

I wanted to control her. But I wanted her to curl up against me, giving herself up completely to me.

I wanted her to obey me. But I also enjoyed the way she challenged me, her eyes lighting up in defiance.

I wanted to consume her, a wildfire to a tree. I wanted to watch her burn, coming alive by the flames.

I thought I had felt this before. Once. But it didn't work out. Whatever I had felt then, was nothing compared to the sickness growing inside me now. It had taken root and was blooming uncontrollably, whether I liked it or not. I wasn't sure I had a say in the matter any longer. Rissa was a part of me, and I needed to accept it and thrive, or cut her out and rot.

I could probably survive the rot. I had done so before. But did I really want to?

*What did I want?*

I would be smarter this time. Keep her hidden away. Not expose myself so proudly like I had done before, parading about in front of the city like I had nothing to fear. I would do it right this time, and maybe I would be able to keep her.

Not that the other hadn't been worth keeping. She had been. But she also hadn't made me feel this feral. This alive. This much like *myself*. It had hurt when she was taken away from me—it had hurt *badly*. But maybe it was supposed to happen.

*Or maybe you were just a terrible person, grasping at straws.* I had never denied being a terrible person. But just because I did bad things didn't mean I wasn't worthy of something good every now and again. Something that brought light into my life, and made me feel like it was okay to be myself.

Rissa stirred beside me, her eyelids flickering. Without thinking twice, I wrapped my arm around her waist. "Shh..." I whispered, something innate coming over me. A piece of myself I didn't know existed. "Shh. It's okay. I'm here."

She curled back into herself again and settled, a protective shell against the world. I kept my arm around her, feeling her stomach rise and fall with her gentle breaths. I wondered what had woken her, if she'd had a bad dream. Was it a bad dream about me? Was I the source of her nightmares, of ripping her away from her life, and depositing her inside a world of real-life nightmares? I couldn't deny I felt the teeniest bit guilty, conflicted with the idea that I, her potential nightmare, might turn her on. Maybe she wanted to fuck a nightmare. But

maybe, maybe I could do something to give her good dreams, too. To think about me in a positive light.

I watched her sleep, contemplating my choices. I wanted to do something for her that would bring her happy thoughts, if only for a moment.

I brushed her hair away from her face. The midday sun turned into the afternoon, and still I didn't move. I would have endless work waiting for me when I finally got out of bed, but it would be worth it. She was worth it. I wanted to share this moment with her. I wanted to do something that would stick with her for the rest of her life. As the last of the light brushing against the thick curtains finally gave way to the potent night sky, I knew what I could do for her.

I knew where I would bring her. And if I was lucky, there I could be both a nightmare and a dream.

## CHAPTER 13



# RISSA



When I woke up, it was dark outside. I had slept through most of the day without realizing it. Ten's warm body was next to me, curled against my back, his knees tucked under my own. I was surprised. Even though I asked him to stay, I expected him to say no, or to leave the second I fell asleep. But I had been out for hours, and he was still here. Something caught in my chest, something jagged slicing through my heart. The only thing on the tip of my tongue was, "You're still here."

Ten didn't bother acknowledging my statement, in his usual manner. "Good. You're up. I was just about to wake you." He uncurled himself from me, moving around the room like a dancer. As big as Ten was, he was lithe and delicate on his feet. He tossed me another one of his shirts. "Get dressed."

"Are we going somewhere, Master?" I shrugged into his shirt. The title slipped so easily from my tongue, like I had been saying it all along.

"Wait here." Ten exited the room, leaving me curious as to why the hell I was getting dressed so late at night. He came back into the room holding a funny pair of shoes. They weren't made out of leather, and were short. "They're running shoes. I don't know if they'll fit perfectly, but they'll be close enough."

I took the odd shoes from him, trying to ignore the screaming inside my head that demanded to know why he had human-sized shoes in his house. Maybe I was one of many. Maybe he had a basement full of us. It hit me all at once that I

really didn't know Ten at all, and I was putting a lot of blind trust in him. Ten left the room again, returning fully dressed. He pulled me through the door.

"It's shift change, so there shouldn't be any patrols out. But if we come across anyone, you keep your mouth shut, and let me do the talking. Understand?" He took the stairs two at a time, leaving me stumbling behind him.

"I understand. But where are we going?" I couldn't help but push again, wanting to know where the hell we were going.

I shouldn't have bothered. Ten pressed his lips together and without a word, led us out into the still night air.

Luckily, we passed no one on the streets. We walked silently down the grassy laneways, night dew tickling my ankles. The running shoes were more comfortable than my boots, but offered far less protection.

We didn't walk for long. Around the last corner, Ten pulled me toward a massive stone building, crumbling from the top down. He let me go as we entered through the huge wooden doors, and I took in the moonlit strewn room.

"It's called a church," he murmured as he closed the doors behind us, taking one last peek at the street outside.

I had never been inside the Labyrinth before, but I had heard stories. Tales of booby-trapped buildings, rigged with danger to catch unsuspecting humans who dared to step inside the lair of monsters. Structures little more than rubble, barely held together after life decayed. Which was partially true for the *church* we were in now. Glass littered the floors, made up of smashed tiles. Piles of wood were heaped at the front, half burned. Ragged remains of fabric fell from the ceiling, strips of cloth that were little more than thread.

I hadn't expected the beauty. Everywhere I looked there was something that struck a tune in my heart, a story told before my time, and one that would exist for long after. Green vines dripped from the chipped stone, a waterfall of vegetation. How they managed to grow in such poor

conditions astounded me. But something else caught my eye, a different kind of allure. Moonlight streamed through the broken windows, stained in every color of the rainbow. I took a step closer, wanting to make out the image arranged in the remaining panes.

“Watch out!” Ten grabbed my wrist and yanked me back.

I fell back against his broad chest, eyes wide. My heart beat wildly in my chest, looking for danger my eyes couldn't see. “What the hell?”

He pointed right in front of my feet, right where I had been about to step. The floor had given way, and the crumbling building housed a perfect-sized hole for me to fall through to the basement. “I know it's difficult for you, but you need to be careful here. It's condemned, and for good reason.”

I ignored the comment and shook myself out of his grasp. But this time, I made my way to the shattered window with my eyes on the floor. I could only make out half of the picture, but I could see a long cape, and an infant cradled in someone's arms. A mother holding a child. I looked around at the expansive room. Each window held a different picture, a different story.

I could feel rather than hear Ten behind me. I didn't know why my body was so attuned to his. I told myself it was a protective response of my mind, making sure I knew where the danger was at all times, but the explanation tasted sour on my tongue. A lie I couldn't figure out.

“It tells the story of the chosen one's life. The man people used to worship, before the Fall,” he explained. “This was his mother, holding him as an infant.”

“They used to worship a man? Like just an ordinary man?” Ten's body drew closer to mine. Every cell on my skin reached out to touch his, a whisper of breath separating us. I hated the way my body betrayed me, calling out to his. I hated how weak I was. “Doesn't seem very smart to me.”

Ten laughed, the quiet sound echoing in the cavernous room. “He was more than a man, but yes, I'm not sure it was

the wisest choice.” His elbow brushed against my shoulder, and for the first time, I didn’t pull away from the sudden touch. “When the world began to burn, many people took refuge in places like this. They hoped he would come back and save them all, the true believers.”

“What happened?” I whispered.

“They burned. But they burned together. They burned with hope, until their very last moments.” A quiet sigh punctuated the words. “Sometimes I think there’s a special type of beauty in that kind of hope. The kind that keeps people believing, even when everything they’ve ever known is rubble and ash.”

I whirled around, tipping my chin to look up at Ten. He was staring out the window, but he looked down at me, eyes soft. “Why did you bring me here?”

He shrugged, an utterly disarming move for the massive beast. “I think...I think I wanted to show you how beautiful all the broken pieces can be.”

Ten wasn’t just talking about the windows, the shattered bits of glass making up the pretty pictures. He was talking about the broken hope held by those who’d come before. The decrepit building, where new life rebuilt itself every day over the bones of the old. The bits of our lives, jagged and sharp to the touch.

“I’m not a good man, Rissa.” He didn’t take his eyes off me.

I couldn’t breathe. If I did, I would shatter into a million pieces like the windows in front of us. The only difference would be it wouldn’t be as pretty to look at.

“I’m not sure what good means,” I breathed. “Are any of us *good* anymore? Or are we just trying to survive?”

Ten shook his head. “You’re good. I know you are.”

“What makes you think I am?” I wanted to close the gap between us. One step, and our bodies would be pressed against each other, his massive frame engulfing mine. “I’ve done things to survive. If we’re looking at things through such a black and white lens, they’d tip the scales to bad.”

“Because, Rissa. I see *you*. This place is a ruin, little more than a bunch of rocks held together with string. But you don’t see that, do you? You see what it used to be. The beauty hidden inside the decay. Only good people can do that—look past the monster on the outside.” A secret was hiding amongst his words, a story just for me.

My body moved without a second thought, my hand pressing against the rough skin of his face. He leaned into my touch, his eyes compelling me to understand him. To dig through the mystery that was Ten.

“Do you want me to see you?” I whispered.

A soft shake of the head, but his eyes didn’t leave my face. “No,” he murmured. “I want you to understand there are two sides of me. The monster who wants to utterly consume you, and the part that wants to worship at your feet. They both can’t exist at the same time, but they’re there just the same.”

A warning. That’s what this was. My last chance to turn and run. But where would I go? I wasn’t sure what kind of life was left for me outside the walls of the Labyrinth, and what would happen to Ten if I left? I had a feeling I would return to find him a reflection of this church, broken down pieces of something that was once beautiful. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be.” He wrapped his hand around my wrist, squeezing tightly. His mouth was a whisper away from mine, the air between us shared. “If you knew the things I wanted to do to you, Rissa, you’d run far, far away from me. And you’d be right to do so. I want to hurt you, to bruise you with my hands. To mark you with my nails. I want to fuck you until you cry, tears streaming down your face. I want to make you beg for salvation, like those people did in here waiting for their death all those years ago. I want you to beg, and scream, and cry, and know there’s nothing you can do because you’re mine, and I’m never fucking letting you go.”

He was right. I should’ve run, and run far. I should’ve done a thousand things. Instead I did the one thing I shouldn’t. I closed the gap between us, leaned up on my tiptoes, and pressed my lips against Ten’s mouth.

For a moment, there was nothing else in the room. There was just his mouth kissing me back, and the silence of all the souls who lingered here watching us. Judging me, for what I was sacrificing. What I was surrendering willingly.

Ten pulled back, wrapping his hands in my hair with a groan. “You’re the sweetest fucking temptation, *deliciae*. You’ll lead me right to my doom.” He slid his hands to my shoulders, pressing me down into the ground. “Kneel for me, Rissa.”

This place, this *church*, it felt sacred. And yet being on my knees for Ten had never felt so right. He undid his pants, freeing his massive, hard cock. It was beautiful, in its own way. A dark kind of beauty, just like Ten. Deep purple, with ridges I felt when he was inside me. And those barbs warning me to stay away. I licked my lips, already anticipating what he was going to do with it. I wanted more. I wanted everything. I wanted to lap at his cock, taking whatever he was willing to give me. I ran my hands down my throat with a quiet groan.

“Show me how badly you want to be holy for me, *deliciae*,” he murmured. “Take my cock into that luscious mouth of yours. Suck me dry. Worship me.”

I leaned forward, wrapping my lips around the broad head of his cock, barely fitting all of it inside my mouth at once. Ten groaned above me, tightening his grip in my hair, pushing me down deeper onto him. The barbs scraped past my mouth, not hurting me. Just a light tickle as they scratched their way inside. I had a feeling they would only hurt if he wanted them to. I pressed my hands on either side of his thighs, taking as much of his thick length as I could. More and more, until my mouth was full and Ten’s quiet curses above me turned into pleasure. I paused for a moment, allowing my mouth to adjust to his size.

Ten pressed my head lower, making me gag. “I didn’t say stop, Rissa.”

I pulled back, dragging my tongue over each of his ridges as I sucked him. I bobbed, swirling my tongue around his thick length, using his noises above me as my indicators of what he

enjoyed. I wanted to please him. I wanted him to know no one could ever make him feel the way I could. I took him all the way back in my throat, his thick head making me gag around him. He made a strangled sound in the back of his throat.

He twisted his hands in my hair, slamming me hard down onto him. He did it again, harder. And again. And again. He was fucking my mouth, using me for his own pleasure, and I couldn't say I minded. A part of me felt free. Exhilarated. My eyes began to water, and I wrapped my hands around his thick thighs, trying to stay upright as he fucked me harder. My pussy ached from the sheer power, the dominance he exuded. My desire dripped out of me, sliding down my legs. Feeling him take me like this was absolutely delicious.

“That’s right, Rissa. Take my cock. Choke on it like a good little slut.” He groaned, his thrusts quicker, more frantic. “Oh, fuck. Don’t you dare spill a fucking drop of this cum, *deliciae*. Take your goddamn communion like the good girl you are. *Fuck!*”

Ten lost control. His hips stuttered into my mouth, spilling his release into the back of my throat. I gulped at it eagerly, not wanting to disappoint him and lose any of it. It was salty, and sweet, and distinctly Ten. His hands still gripped my hair, his nails scratching my scalp. He pulled back, his cock dripping one lone drop of his black cum. I wanted to lick it up, finish the job he had given me, but before I could lean forward to catch it on my tongue, he pushed me down on my hands and knees. Ten knelt behind me.

“I’m going to fuck you now, Rissa,” he said, sliding his hands up my back as he dragged his oversized shirt up my shoulders. His hands swept underneath me, cupping my breasts as they passed. He twisted my nipples, and I cried out without thinking, thrusting back against him. “It’s not going to be gentle. It’s not going to be nice. It’s going to be hard and it’s going to make you remember that you’re alive. That you’re alive and you’re *mine*.”

He slipped his finger into my pussy, dipping it in the slick wetness gathered there. I groaned, pushing back into him.

“Is this all for me, deliciae? Did you like the way I fucked your mouth? The way I made you remember who your Master was?”

I moaned, desperate for his touch. But his finger disappeared, and in its place his tongue swiped between my legs. I trembled as his tongue explored and tasted, just enough to make me crazy for him.

“You’re sweeter than I deserve,” he said as he pulled back, his cock pressing against my aching pussy. “Now I’ll fuck you the way you don’t deserve.”

He pushed his fat cock inside me, and I cursed as my pussy stretched around him, taking him all. The barbs scratched and twisted, the most perfect kind of pain imaginable. But he had said it wasn’t going to be gentle or nice and he meant it. He had barely slammed into me the first time when he pulled back and thrust into me again. The barbs twisted against something inside me, making me want to explode, and his thrusts were hard and unforgiving. My arms shook as they tried to hold up against his onslaught, and I screamed as my head dropped to the ground, pleasure taking over my body. I was going to detonate right here, right now, with Ten’s vicious cock destroying me from the inside out.

My respite was short-lived, because Ten twisted his hand in my hair, forcing my face to the ceiling once more, his other hand gripping my hip. His cock never slowed, never showed any mercy.

“Eyes to the sky, deliciae,” he roared. “Look up and beg for salvation like all those people who burned did, waiting for someone who never came. Look up and be grateful you’re alive, while they all died in this same spot where I’m fucking your pussy raw.”

“Please, Ten,” I sobbed. I was so desperate for release, needy for everything he could give me. “Please, let me come.”

“Beg *better*.”

“Please, Master! Oh, fuck, *please*! I’ll do whatever you want, please.”



I must have done the right thing, because Ten's hand found its way to my swollen clit, his thumb swirling desperate circles around it. "Come, Rissa. Let me see how pretty you are when you're worshipping my cock."

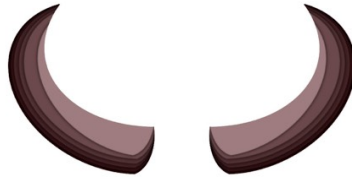
I didn't need to be told twice. I came with a cry, cursing Ten's name as I shattered around him. His barbs and ridges rode me through the aftershocks, extending each wave of my orgasm until I couldn't see or think. All that was left was Ten. Ten holding me up with one strong arm. Ten thrusting inside me until he spilled his seed deep into my pussy. Ten lowering me onto the ground, lying next to me.

Was this real life? Or was this an alternate world, a reality I never pictured for myself. Maybe this was all a dream, or this beautiful fog I found myself in was nothing more than death. Because what I was feeling didn't seem that far off from the peaceful quiet I imagined death to be. And all of it was thanks to Ten, breathing heavily next to me. Something had passed between us in the time we had arrived here, in this church that Ten held so close to his heart. Maybe there was more good in him than I first realized. Or maybe I knew it all along, and seeing it this close to the surface changed things.

He was broken, beautifully flawed. But he was also right. We couldn't see how beautiful those cracks and imperfections were until we took a step back, and how could we do such a thing when we were tethered to our own earthly body? But here, seeing the art these people made out of their broken pieces, these stained-glass windows that lasted far longer than the creator ever had—wasn't this what it was all about? All along we were just waiting for someone to show us how brightly we shone—really shone—and to be unapologetic for the darkness the light existed within.

## CHAPTER 14

# TEN



I found myself sleeping in Rissa's bed again after we visited the church. When she asked, I couldn't say no. So again, I curled against her back, and listened to her breathing slowing down, steadying out into a soothing rhythm. I found myself drifting off, the easy way she slept next to me lulling me to close my eyes.

I couldn't imagine what left her feeling comfortable enough to sleep so deeply beside me. I wasn't safe. In fact, I was fairly certain I had brought her more danger than she had ever experienced before. Still she pressed her body against me, and her heartbeat slowed. I wondered what she dreamed about. If she was thinking about us, about what we had done in that church, or if she was dreaming of her freedom. Dreaming of fleeing, leaving me behind to return to the dust.

My chest tightened imagining Rissa escaping, attempting to find her way back home. Because I knew going home was no longer an option for her. She would be captured before she could find the gates of the Labyrinth, of this I was certain. Monsters never forgot a face, so when they caught her, they wouldn't take as kindly to her...spirit.

But, she wasn't theirs. She was mine. She was mine to break. Mine to corrupt. Mine. And I didn't like to share.

Rissa shifted in her sleep, my shirt slipping up over one tanned thigh. She was so perfect. Flawless in every sense of the word. My hand found its way to her bare skin, trailing my fingers up her flesh. It looked wrong to see them together. My massive hand sliding along her tanned beauty. I could crush

her bones without trying too hard, if I wanted. I could do a lot of things to her.

If I wanted.

But that was half the trouble. I wasn't sure what I wanted anymore. I wanted Rissa. More than I had ever wanted anything before, even though we didn't belong together. The beauty and the beast, unmatched in every way. It didn't stop me from craving her. From desperately wanting to possess every part of her. I wanted to lock her away in a gilded cage where only I could look upon her, where I knew she'd be safe. She sighed, twisting in my arms.

My shirt swallowed her whole. I really needed to get her clothes of her own, things that would fit her. For a brief moment, I imagined her in a silk dress, the smooth fabric drifting over the curves of her body, emphasizing every place I wanted to rest my hands. The problem was procuring the clothes. I wasn't exactly buying human women's clothes on a daily basis. For me to head to the market, or one of the shops to get said clothing was bound to draw attention. Griffin's warning echoed in the back of my mind. I needed to be cautious. I couldn't trust anyone. Not with Rissa. It wasn't safe for her.

I'd have to figure out some other way to get her clothes, and until then I'd have to put up with seeing her wearing mine. Not that it was a hardship exactly. Her scent was shifting the longer she stayed, her smell merging into something midway between her own and mine.

I liked it. It declared her as mine.

I shook my head. I was obsessed with Rissa, in more ways than one. It wasn't healthy. It wasn't even *sane*. And yet, I couldn't stop it. I knew it clear as anything. I was obsessed with her, and the idea of losing her to someone else inside the Labyrinth was enough to drive me crazy.

I *was* crazy. Fuck. Who was I anymore?

A fist thundered against my front door, and Rissa stirred beneath me. "Master?"

Fuck. The way that word left her mouth. I didn't want to go answer the door. I wanted to lie in bed with her, and make her understand exactly why I was her *Master*. My cock hardened against her ass, and I ground it against her before the fist beat against the door again. "Fuck. Stay here. I'll be right back."

I got out of bed, tugging on the pants I had cast aside. Rissa sat up, eyes wide. "What is it?"

"Someone is at the door. I need you to stay here," I muttered, my fingers fumbling with the button. Only a few people would dare knock on my door this late—or early—and only with a damn good reason.

"Are you going to lock me in again?"

I gritted my teeth. "Yes." I didn't want her running away on me. The thudding continued downstairs, driving a nail between my eyes with every knock. For fuck's sake, I was *coming*.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she snapped. The front door knocked. Rissa looked at me with an expression of disbelief.

*Fuck*. That was my final straw. I glared at her. "You're forgetting your place, *deliciae*. You will be locked inside this room. You will be silent. And you will think about how best to show me you're sorry when I get back. Understood?" It was for her safety. Everything was for her safety. I hoped somewhere deep inside she understood that.

Rissa was silent, chest heaving as she stared at me.

"Am I *understood*?" My voice was low and quiet, but absolutely deadly, and Rissa knew it.

Her expression didn't change a bit. But under her breath she whispered, "Yes, Master."

I turned on my heel and stormed out of the room, locking the door behind me. I leaned against the frame for a minute, closing my eyes and breathing deeply. *Should I go back in and apologize? Was I too harsh?* Fuck, Rissa had me all mixed up. But there was that God-awful knocking at the door again, and

an apology was going to have to wait until I dealt with whoever it was. I was going to kill whoever was at the door. I was going to nail them to the gates and flay their skin from their body while they were still alive. I was going to pluck their eyeballs from their skulls and feed them to their wife. I was going to—

“Ten. We have to go.” Griffin stood on my doorstep, soaking wet from the rain that poured all around him. “The Ravens have infiltrated an apartment building on the West Side. We don’t think it’s all of them, but it’s enough to cause problems. We need to go *now*.”

Fuck. I looked back over my shoulder. Rissa would be waiting for me to return. Double fuck.

“Everything okay? You got company or something?” Griffin’s voice told me exactly what kind of *company* he thought I had. He was waiting for me to slip up, but I couldn’t afford to do that right now. Not with Rissa’s safety on the line.

I shook my head. “Just wondering if it’s worth putting a shirt on,” I lied. Badly.

Griffin knew it. He cocked his head to the side, looking at me like he wanted to say something. He knew I didn’t lie, and he wanted to call me on it. I held my breath, wondering what would come next. But he opened his mouth, and all he said was, “You’re fine. Let’s go.”

I stepped outside, casting one last glance to the bedroom I knew concealed Rissa. She was safe, and that had to be enough for right now. She would have to forgive me later. *Hopefully she would forgive me later.*

I followed Griffin toward the edges of Solaris, and into Panshaw. Technically, we governed the entirety of The Labyrinth. In a city as large as ours, split up by conflicting gangs and ideologies, some neighborhoods were under different rule. Solaris was the safest, with Panshaw still under our guidance as well. Some, like Mirstone at the base of the mountains, went untouched for years. Others, like Graycott, were no-man’s-land, fair game for anyone who dared venture out that far. The longer the gangs ran unchecked, the smaller

our safe territory seemed to get. The furthest edges were the most dangerous, tumultuous with gangs like the Hell Skulls vying for control. I knew it was only a matter of time before we were forced to take action on those dark corners of the Labyrinth. While I wasn't ready to force my people into a war, it seemed my hand was being played whether I liked it or not.

Griffin led us to the outskirts where the apartment buildings stood closer together, and the residents often lived with their extended families.

I knew what the villagers thought. That we all lived in luxury and glamor. While even the poorest of my people had access to food, and running water, not everyone lived the way I did. I was privileged, and I knew this. I wondered what Rissa thought of it all. If she judged me for living the way I did, what I had while her family had nothing. Did she think poorly of me? Did she hate me for everything she didn't have?

"Ten," Griffin muttered. "Get your head together, man."

"What's that?" I asked. I snuck a glance at him out of the corner of my eye.

He adjusted the patch he wore over his missing eye. "I was telling you about the intel I received, and I could've been reading you my grocery list for fuck's sake. Where's your head at?"

"Here." I nodded, as if the small motion could make the word more truthful.

Griffin scoffed, and muttered something under his breath I couldn't quite catch. He was the only person who could get away with stuff like that. "Listen. We don't have time to get into it right now. But we need to have an *honest* conversation about this sometime soon."

"An honest conversation about what?"

"Don't play dumb, Ten. It's never suited you. I know..." He trailed off, and I waited for him to continue, but he obviously thought better about whatever he wanted to say. "Let's just deal with this, alright?"

“Okay.” There was no way for him to know, right? There couldn’t be a way for him to know about Rissa. Could there? I just needed to keep him distracted with something else. Besides, I could multitask. “What’s the intel on these Ravens?”

“So my search party counted at least three of them in an abandoned apartment on the edge of Mirstone. They’re definitely making moves to get closer to our territory. The last thing we need is for them to leech their way in. There could’ve been more, but our men were forced to retreat to avoid being caught. I told them to hold position until we could get out there. I have another team meeting us there, too, in case there are more of them they can’t see.”

*If she was hidden, I could keep her still, and keep her safe at the same time.*

“I don’t like that they’re getting so comfortable. They’re getting awfully bold encroaching on our space like this,” I mused. “I’ve let them be, let them live how they wanted to live on our outskirts as long as they didn’t disrupt our people.”

*I didn’t even need her to agree, really. I took her once. I could take her again. Sneak her out in the dead of night to Mirstone, where no one would find her ever again. She would be only mine then.*

Griffin made a noise of discontent in the back of his throat. “You’ve been too easy on them. We should’ve knocked them down a peg ages ago. But now they’re confident, and stronger than what makes me comfortable.”

*The things I could do to her if she was out of this city. If I never had to share her with anyone else...*

“Watch yourself,” I warned.

“Sorry, Sir,” Griffin muttered. “We’re here.”

We stood outside of a brick apartment building that had seen better days. I really needed to get some crews out here to fix up these buildings. “What floor?”

“Second. Apparently they’ve built a bridge across balconies, connecting them to another apartment. Probably



how they've been sneaking their way in.”

I grunted. “Try and be quiet.” I just wanted to get this over with and get back to Rissa. Knock some sense into these Ravens, get home to her, and deal with this mess in the morning. Except something toyed with my mind as we took the stairs to the second floor—as slow as possible to not make any noise—something I wasn't sure I enjoyed.

Because these Ravens were in my territory now. My space. My *home*. And you know who else was in my home? Rissa. Rissa was locked away in my home. But if they were to come across her? I couldn't fathom what would happen. All I knew for certain was there would be a lot of dead Ravens if any of them ever laid a fucking *finger* on Rissa. She was mine, and mine alone.

Fury bubbled under my skin, thick and hot, as we rounded the corner. On the landing stood four of Griffin's men. Two looked a little worse for the wear than the other two, so I assumed these were the ones who had come across the Ravens. I didn't waste any time, ready to destroy anything that dared to threaten my little *deliciae*. “Are we sure how many are in there?” I whispered.

One of the men shook his head. “No. We caught sight of three from the outside, but we can't be certain that's all there are. They were already headed inside when we noticed them.”

“They appear to have built a series of bridges that connect the balconies between buildings. They don't look like much, and definitely don't look like they would hold the weight of more than one person, but it's been enough for them to get closer without being spotted,” another piped up.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. Anger. All I felt was anger. They dared to step foot closer to my home, to launch their attacks? Never again. Never fucking again. “Let's get this over with then.”

“Ten, wait—” Griffin's protest was cut off by the sound of me violently kicking the door open.

Three Ravens looked up at me from the dirty living room, surprised to see someone in their space. None of them had their standard camouflage face paint on, obviously not expecting an intrusion. It looked like it had been lived in by some dirty fuckers for a while, but not a family. Through the open bedroom door, I could see the bridge Griffin's men had spoken about, crooked and teetering.

“What the fuck?” The largest one was already getting to his feet, stumbling toward me.

I launched my arm back, and smashed my fist straight into his fleshy stomach before he had a second to move. Fuck. He stumbled backward. “Now that we've gotten that out of the way, I'll give you five seconds to tell me why you're here, and no one will die tonight. Ready?”

“For fuck's sake, Ten,” Griffin muttered behind me. “We have a protocol!”

I knew all about the protocol. But the protocol meant fuck all to me when Rissa's safety was on the line. They were in my neighborhood now. My space. I would do whatever it took to make sure none of these fuckers ever touched her. “One. Two. Three.” None of them spoke, but all three were on their feet now, lumbering closer. “Four. Five. Too bad.”

I took a step closer, and rocketed my fist into the big one's face. His jaw shook with the force of impact, but before I could get away, one of the smaller Raven's snuck an uppercut into my ribs. “Fuck!”

I spun around, ready to take on both of them at once, but before I needed to, Griffin was at my side. I held my fists to my face. “Anyone ready to give me answers yet? Why are you setting up a base on my territory? No?” I had waited long enough for an answer. I clapped my hands on either of the beast's ears in front of me, and when he sank to his knees, cupping his blown eardrums with a wail, I gripped his head and gave it a vicious twist until his neck snapped. I looked around me at the other men as their comrade dropped to the floor, dead. “You sure?”

“Jesus, Ten,” Griffin muttered. “I have men for this.”

I knew he did. But there was something about taking my anger out on these men with my own hands, making sure they knew I was the one doling out the punishment. I turned my attention back to the big guy, and he made a couple quick jabs my way, before giving up and trying to put me in a headlock. I ducked out of the way, looking around for a weapon of some sort. I was strong, but strong wasn't going to be enough against a beast like this. There was a lamp in the corner. I could use that. I darted around Griffin's men who were taking on the last remaining Raven, and snatched the lamp. In one smooth motion, I snapped it in two, leaving me with a sharp spear-like weapon.

Something through the window caught my eye. Another Raven was sneaking out the balcony in the bedroom, inching his way onto the bridge.

"Bedroom! Now!" I called. "There's a fourth one escaping!"

Griffin and two of his men raced off to the bedroom, two of them being more than enough to deal with the third Raven. I heard his neck snap as I faced my opponent again. He looked at me with a sneer, cracking his knuckles. I really didn't have time for this. There was another one escaping who might actually give me information. With a wild cry, I sprinted across the room, driving my makeshift spear directly into the big guy's heart. He looked down with a disappointed groan before sinking to his knees. I gave him one solid kick to the head as he collapsed, before leaving him to bleed out onto the wooden floor.

I followed Griffin and his men into the bedroom, where all three were standing around. "What the fuck are you waiting for? Go after him!" I roared.

"We can't!" Griffin snapped. "The bridge won't hold more than one person!"

I pushed past them all to the balcony. "Don't be fucking ridiculous."

The other guy was almost across when I reached the wobbling platform. I took a step up, putting one foot onto the

ragtag bridge. The first creak was almost immediate, and when I put my other foot onto it, a splintering crack split through the night air. The Raven looked back at me nervously. I looked down. It wasn't a far fall, but it was still high enough to kill you. And if I was dead, there would be no one to protect Rissa. Another footstep, and the bridge started to give way in the middle. Griffin pulled me back, yanking me back onto the balcony just as the bridge split in two, shattering where my feet had just been. The Raven made a wild leap, clinging to the balcony on the other side, but pulled himself up to the roof of the short building.

*Fuck.* I was livid. Not only had a potential source of information escaped, but now a threat to Rissa still existed in my world. My home. *Fuck.*

Griffin turned away from me, muttering something about what a fucking idiot I was, but I stayed on the balcony, watching the escapee run. I hoped he could run fast, because I was going to get him if it was the last thing I did. I gripped the railing, listening to it creak beneath my grip.

“Ten!” Griffin’s call had me whipping my head around, and I caught the young guy rushing me at the last second. I crouched, and he didn’t have time to course-correct before he sprinted right over my shoulder. I stood up, and he smoothly flew over the balcony with a wild scream, his fall ending with a crunch as he hit the pavement.

I leaned over the railing, looking at his crumpled body. It was a shame, really. He seemed so young. “I thought you said there were only three. That was five, including the one that got away.”

“We said we *thought* there were three. And then you stormed into here like you had a personal vendetta against them,” Griffin grumbled.

I turned away from the balcony with one last glance at the body below. Maybe I hadn’t needed to be so vicious against these Ravens. But fuck if it didn’t get my blood pumping in the most incredible way. The only time I had ever felt better than this was being inside Rissa’s tight pussy.

“Do one last sweep of the apartment,” I ordered Griffin and his men.

They took off, leaving me alone in the bedroom. I peered out the doors onto the balcony. I could see the one young one that had gotten away at the edge of the next apartment. One Raven wasn't going to be our downfall. In fact, I hoped he went home and told them all that we were waiting for them. Because we were. I wished I could've sent one of Griffin's men after them, but with the bridge broken from this balcony, there was no way we'd be able to catch up on the streets. I'd send Griffin's men out afterward, to see if there were any trails they could track down.

I studied the room I was in. An old bedroom by the looks of it. One that hadn't been occupied in years. Something silvery caught my eye. There was a closet, still stuffed with clothes. Clothes that looked like they would fit Rissa. A young female monster, or a pet someone didn't want living in their home must have lived here before. I pawed through the hangers of dresses and shirts, clothing that would look so much better on her than my oversized shirts. In the next room over I heard Griffin snap something to one of his men, and I knew I needed to be quick. I needed to figure out how to get these home without Griffin questioning it.

At the bottom of the closet was a backpack, dusty and worn. But it would do the trick. I unzipped the large pouch, stuffing as much of the clothing in as I could. I could already imagine Rissa wearing the clothes, the lines of her body that would be emphasized. Would she be grateful for them? Would she smile? I hoped so.

“Ten?” Griffin called.

“Uh...yes!” I zipped up the backpack, struggling frantically with the last inch until the zipper cooperated. “All set. You guys good to go?”

I poked out of the closet. Griffin stood in the doorway and nodded. “The entire floor is clear. I already sent my men out to follow the one who got away. Hopefully that gets us closer.” He nodded to my hands. “What's that?”

“Oh, uh.” I looked down at the backpack in my hands, willing my brain to work. “It was full of paperwork. I grabbed it in case any of it was left from the Ravens. Thought it might be useful.”

Griffin’s expression told me he didn’t believe me at all. But who was he to call me out on anything? “Okay. Well. Let’s go then.”

I followed him out the door, the backpack safely strapped to me, my treasures for Rissa stowed inside. I wasn’t sure who I was anymore. Rissa was turning me into a stranger. A stranger who lied, whose mind was constantly on something else. I was an outsider in my own body, an alien willing to do whatever it took to keep Rissa safe. And the worst part was that I didn’t mind this new person I was becoming.

## CHAPTER 15

# RISSA



I stared at the door after Ten left, words lost. How dare he. How fucking *dare* he? When I heard the front door slam shut, I snuck a peek out the window to see him leaving with Griffin, while I was here. Stuck. Trapped. Locked in. *Fuck this shit. Who did he think he was, locking me in here?*

I already knew the answer to my own question, though. He thought he was my Master. He thought he owned me. Controlled me. Could do what he wanted to me. And maybe he could. I had let him hurt me. I had let him taint a sacred space with our fucking. Maybe he did own me.

Except he didn't want to *just* own me. He wanted to possess me, totally and completely. But I wasn't about to let that happen if I was going to be stuck inside all the time. I stomped over to my bed, still fuming. Right now it seemed like a terrible thing as I sat trapped inside my luxurious jail cell. It was a pretty prison. A comfortable place for him to keep me locked inside, and look upon when it pleased him.

The ceiling's swirled plaster resembled clouds in the dim light. Maybe I had hoped for too much, in the church. Maybe I had expected things to be different between us, a sense of trust constructed that we could lean on. But Ten locking me in spoke volumes about what he thought of me. I was nothing but a possession to him.

Well, fuck him.

I rolled myself back up in my blanket, annoyed that the sheets smelled like Ten. He smelled like smoke and rain, a



funny contrast. One consumed. One saved. When I thought about it, maybe it was fitting for him. Because in all honesty, I couldn't figure out if Ten was trying to help me or hurt me. Maybe both.

He was taking an awfully long time to come back. Could he have gotten hurt somewhere, attacked on the streets he told me were dangerous? What if he was gravely hurt, bleeding out on the bright green grass that separated the buildings? What if...I caught my breath. What if he was so badly hurt he would never return to the house? I would never look upon his face again. Never see that flicker of emotion pass through his gaze. I would rot in this room, my flesh decaying, and my bones gathering dust while I waited for a man who I wasn't sure even liked me to return.

There was no way for me to know how much time had passed except by getting up and looking out the thick curtains to see where the moon was in the sky. But I didn't want to admit to myself I was worried about Ten, so instead I lay in bed and worried. And thought. And stressed.

*What if...*

*What if...*

*What if...*

I was driving myself crazy with these questions I couldn't answer. My chest tightened, my breathing shallower. It had been an awfully long time. Too long. I could imagine Ten's body in all sorts of twisted positions, his last breaths leaving his body as I rotted in my too-soft bed.

*Where was he? He should be back by now.* It felt like years had passed since Ten left. Maybe I just needed to resign myself to the inevitable. I flopped over, turning away from the curtains begging me to open them and see how long he had truly been gone.

Downstairs, a door opened and shut.

I sat upright. *Ten?* It occurred to me someone else could have entered the house. Someone else could be creeping up the

stairs toward my room. Someone who wanted to hurt me could be unlocking and twisting the knob.

I sprang to my feet, looking around for a weapon. Of course, there weren't any. But whoever was on the other side of that door, I wasn't letting them take me alive. I assumed an attack stance like Bear had taught me, ready for whatever was waiting for me. The door swung open, and on the other side of the door stood Ten, looking absolutely furious. His expression shifted to one of surprise, before it changed back. "What the hell are you doing?"

"*Me?*" I snapped. "What the hell are *you* doing? You lock me in here and leave me for fuck knows how long, and I thought you were fucking dead. I thought I was going to die alone locked in this room! Where the fuck were you?" I thought I would be more angry he had left me here. Instead I was more relieved that he stood before me, no worse for the wear.

I expected him to yell at me. To tell me I was being disrespectful, punish me for daring to question him. Instead he crossed the space between us in a few quick steps, gripping my throat with one of his large hands. He brought me to his mouth as I gasped for air, kissing me deeply. I was fairly certain my feet weren't touching the floor. The edges of my vision faded to black as Ten kissed me hard, slipping his tongue between my lips. Finally, right as I thought I was going to pass out, he pulled back, releasing my throat enough that I could suck in a quiet gasp.

"You're mine, you know that, right?" he murmured, his free hand sliding down my face. "Mine and only mine. Yes, *deliciae?*"

"Ye...yes," I choked out. "Yours."

Ten released me, stepping closer until I stumbled, the backs of my legs hitting the bed. "I need to know you're mine, Rissa. I need there to be no doubt in my mind."

I sat back on the bed, and Ten leaned over me, encompassing me, swallowing me whole with his bulk. I

shuffled back, and he crawled on top of me. “I’m yours,” I said. “I promise.”

Because I was, wasn’t I? I had been since the moment we locked eyes inside my shack. I had known I would go with him, and I would do whatever he asked. He wanted to possess me, and possess me he had. He wanted me, and me alone. There was something downright delectable about the idea of being chosen. Being *special*.

Ten hovered over me, something cool and sharp tickling my thigh. I tried to look down, and see what he was playing with, but he shook his head, pushing my head back onto the bed. He looked into my eyes, that funny emotion flashing past again. “Are you mine, Rissa?” he repeated.

“Yes, Master,” I whispered.

“Mine to do with as I please?” The tickling moved higher up my thigh.

“Yes, Master.” Higher now, brushing along the inside of my flesh, closest to my pussy. My heart thumped, ricocheting off my rib cage like it was desperate to escape.

“Mine to use? To play with? To...mark?” His voice was a breathless command, and on the last word the tickle turned sharp. I knew immediately he was holding a knife.

There was only one response, though. I would let him do whatever he wanted to me. “Yes.”

“I’m going to brand you, *deliciae*. I’m going to mark you with my initials, right here, on your pretty little leg.” The poking was there again, the tip of the knife digging into my flesh. “I’m going to put my initials on you so no one will ever touch you except for me. It’s going to hurt. Are you ready?”

I squirmed beneath his touch, and he gripped my leg tightly. “Yes, Master.”

The first slice of the knife was quick, piercing my skin with a delicate beauty I hadn’t expected. Then came the pain. It blinded everything, making my world go small. I screamed, tensing my body as Ten held me tightly, slicing me open with

his other hand. I imagined him spilling my insides, cutting me up into tiny pieces with his knife. I would let him.

Something warm was running down my leg, and still Ten cut. My scream died out, and I disassociated from what was happening. Somewhere, in another life, Ten was branding me, owning me. But here, there was no pain.

“You’re doing such a good job, *deliciae*. You bleed so prettily for me,” Ten murmured. “Fuck, your blood is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I wish you could see it.”

I shifted, and Ten pulled back.

“I’m done. Sit up and admire yourself.”

I struggled into a seated position. Ten noticed and wrapped his arm around me, shuffling me up until my back hit the headboard. I took a breath. Then another. And then I looked down at my leg.

The first thing I saw was blood. A lot of blood, dripping onto the bedding. My perfect, beautiful white bedding was ruined. Ten didn’t seem to be bothered, brushing some of the blood away. “See? TF. Tennyson Furie.”

And there I saw, delicately carved on the inside of my thigh, the most perfect T and F, branding me forever. My breath caught. A part of me expected to be disgusted at the sight, wondering what I had done. Instead, I only felt peace. Like this was how it was always supposed to be. There was something special in giving yourself up to another person, offering them your trust in everything. Your willingness. Your compliance. A complete salvation, consecration found within the darkest of shadows. An ache grew between my legs, staring down at the markings.

Ten rubbed his hand around my thigh, his face close to my pussy. “We will have to open it up a few times to make sure it scars. But you did so well taking the pain. So fucking well...” he trailed off, breathing deeply. “I can smell your arousal, *deliciae*. Did feeling me cut you turn you on?”

The words couldn’t escape my throat. I muttered something unintelligible, sighing when his fingertips swept

over my pussy.

“Your words, Rissa. Use your words.” I felt another gentle brush of his fingers against my now pulsing clit. I wanted him. Needed him. I was going to die without him.

“Yes, Master.” I moaned when his thumb pressed down, eliciting electricity throughout my entire body. “Yes, please!”

“Good girl,” he cooed. “Such a dirty fucking girl getting turned on from pain. You like it, don’t you? You like the pain.” He pressed down harder with his thumb, and I cried out, my body tensing. It was too much. I was too sensitive. My thigh began to ache, the pain mixing with the overstimulating pleasure Ten was exacting.

“Oh, fuck,” I gasped. “Fuck. I can’t.”

“You can,” Ten whispered, his cold hands sliding along my waiting pussy. I couldn’t be certain if the wetness between my legs was blood from his cuts, or my desire. I didn’t care. “You can take everything I give you, and more. You can take it all, like a good little slut. Watch me fuck you through the pain, *deliciae*.”

I propped myself up against the headboard as best I could. Except it wasn’t Ten’s hand teasing the entrance to my pussy. It was the handle of the knife he had used to cut me demanding entrance. “Wha...what?”

Ten barely lifted his head up, smirking. “You like the pain, no? Now, let’s see how much you like the danger.”

I was too turned on to protest, seeing Ten look at me like there was nothing else in the world except for me, and me alone. Blood was everywhere, decorating my thighs, the bed, and the handle of the blade. He raised a brow, sliding the cool handle along my pussy again. It was smaller than him, but... what if he slipped?

He popped the end of the handle in just a touch deeper, and I moaned. “If you don’t want me to make you come, just say so. I’ll stop...I swear it.” He pulled the handle out, sliding it back in with a deliberate slowness. “Just. Say. The. Word.” Each word was punctuated with a gentle thrust of the knife,

until my legs were trembling around him. He had me where he wanted me, and he knew it.

“Please, Master,” I whispered. “Please—” My sentence cut off as he sank the handle in deeper, a moan replacing the words. My eyes fluttered closed as pleasure overtook me.

“Mmm...you do like the danger, don't you, Rissa?” he murmured. Another thrust of the smooth, cold handle. I imagined his hands gripping the sharp blade, the knife cutting into his palm as he fucked me. “Keep your eyes open and watch this happen.”

I did as he commanded, and opened my eyes again, watching Ten slide the knife in and out of my pussy. This shouldn't have been as attractive as it was, but there was something about watching Ten work between my legs, his hands and the handle covered in his blood and mine. It was feral, animalistic. I liked it more than I should have. I wasn't sure what that made me, and I wasn't sure I cared.

Ten forced the handle up, hitting a spot inside me that made me arch my back and cry out. “There's a good little slut,” he said. “A good little slut letting me fuck her with the knife I just cut her with. You're dripping on my hands, *deliciae*, and I can't tell if it's your desire or your blood.”

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the scene in front me. Ten looked up at me with a vicious smirk. His dark gaze connected with mine, and he began to thrust harder, quicker, and I could feel my release building. I was going to come around the knife, and I wasn't the least bit ashamed. I just wanted more. More Ten. More pleasure. More of everything.

The handle plunged in and out, and I gasped, rocking my body up into Ten's hands. His free hand cupped me, swirling against my clit as he fucked me with the handle. “That's it. Just like that. Come around your death, Rissa.”

His words were like magic, dark magic, seductive and hypnotic. I couldn't disobey, no matter how badly I wanted to. I was his. His to do with as he pleased. His to mark. His to hurt. His to pleasure. And I never wanted to be anything else. I shattered, coming around the handle and his touch, trembling

in his hands as wave after wave of orgasm overtook my body. My arms dropped out from underneath me, and I flopped onto my back, letting the dark pleasure carry me away to wherever came next.

Ten rested his head on my leg, the knife dropping to his side as I struggled to come down from my high. I expected him to fuck me, to get his own release. I could see his erection straining against his pants. But he didn't make a move, and somewhere I knew this was a test of my limits, and even without coming sexually, he still got gratification from it. I closed my eyes, just enjoying floating between this space and the next.

“Do you miss them?”

My eyes opened, and I struggled to gain consciousness. “What?”

“Do you miss them? Your family.”

I was quiet for a minute, my hand reaching down for something solid, finding one of Ten's horns. I stroked it, and he let out a quiet sigh. His horn was soft like leather beneath my touch, but textured. The two sides of Ten on display. “I do. They're all I've ever known. But...”

Ten rocked his horn in my hand, so that my hand was sliding around it. It was something that should've felt sexual, but didn't. “But?”

I took a deep breath in. “I would do anything for my family. *Anything*. I would sacrifice anything. Give them a part of my body or my soul if that was what it took. But being away from them...it finally feels like I'm doing something for me.”

Ten was quiet for a moment, before he spoke again. “Would you want to go back?”

I chewed on my lip. “That's hard. My instinct says yes. Because who wouldn't want to be with their family? And don't get me wrong, if I knew they were in danger, and there was something I could do to help, then absolutely I would want to go back. But right now? No. I don't want to go back.”

And I didn't. This room that had only just recently felt like a prison was beginning to feel safe. Like home. Somewhere I could be myself without fear of repercussions. Somewhere I could thrive, instead of just surviving.

Ten bent his head, pressing a kiss to my leg. "Good. I wouldn't let you leave anyways."

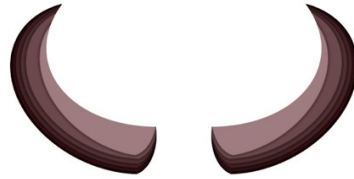
And as we lay there, I couldn't help feeling like I had just betrayed my family in some way. Maybe we weren't ever a "normal" family, like the stories my mom told me from before, too focused on survival to really love. But when I thought about Bear's sweet face, coming home from the mines with a special treat for Ettie tucked in his back pocket, or the smile on Ettie's face when I picked her up from school...maybe we weren't perfect, but we were still a family. I wanted to ask Ten if they were still being supported, even though I wasn't in the camps, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. I couldn't just give up on them. What I told Ten was true. I didn't want to go back. Not permanently at least. But maybe I could talk him into letting me visit.

Maybe. After this moment drifted away. For now, I was here. And that needed to be enough.



## CHAPTER 16

# TEN



Had I ever experienced delirium? Felt the poison seep into my bones, clouding my vision and bleeding into my brain. Had I ever tasted obsession? The bitter wine that stained my teeth, lingering on my tongue until I could taste nothing else. My foundations had been shaken, my morals, cracked. I couldn't be certain of much anymore, but I knew this one fact to be true. I was madly and deliriously obsessed with Rissa, and it was going to damn us both to Hell.

I couldn't be certain when the change had taken over my body. The sudden switch where my brain was only capable of thinking of Rissa. I was a man possessed. I wanted to be with her at all times. Fucking her. Hurting her. Rebuilding her. I wanted to know more about her. What made her tick. What made her, *her*. There was something special about my *deliciae*, something so utterly pure that I wanted to corrupt. I wanted to bottle her essence whole, and to consume it with every chance I got. Instead, I often found myself with my council, listening to them drone on about city business that I knew I should care about when my mind was drifting toward the woman who sat inside the locked bedroom upstairs, waiting for me to return.

I told myself I kept her locked in for her safety. In case the house was attacked, it would offer some sense of protection. In reality, I knew it was because I was terrified of her running away. I also knew that if she did so, I'd search the world a thousand times over to find her and bring her home. I'd burn down anything in my way, pawing through the ashes and rubble to find her body. Even if I hadn't memorized the curves of her body, she was marked now with my initials. My claim

lay on her body, clear as day. I had opened it up twice since the initial time, and each time was just as sweet as watching that first slice of Rissa's perfect skin.

She enjoyed the pain in a way I hadn't expected when I took her from the villages. I knew she was strong. I knew there was something that lay beneath the surface. I hadn't expected this, hadn't expected *her*.

And now I was delirious in my obsession. Everything I did, I did for her. Everything I took steps toward, attempted, was for her. The Ravens encroaching on my territory threatened her safety. The council that met every day in my living room did the same. They were here now, as we discussed a stronger perimeter we could enforce to keep the Ravens out of the city center. The problem being where did we draw the line? Which parts of the city did we choose to keep safe, and which did we allow to be consumed by the Ravens' greed? It was a delicate topic.

"If we set the perimeter up around Solaris, I think that should be fine. We could move anyone who wants to be closer inside the perimeter. Any area larger than that, and we'll struggle to maintain the boundary." Hades shrugged, offering up his opinion as fact, as he so often did.

Draven was already shaking his head. "And what about Panshaw? We can't just let them suffer because they're on the outskirts of what we deem to be the city true. They're our people, too."

I sighed, pressing fingertips into my eyes as if doing so could stop the blossoming headache. "Does anyone have a suggestion that doesn't require protecting only half of the population?" Draven was sensitive, but he was right. The people of the Panshaw outskirts were our people, too. They deserved to be protected from the Raven's reach.

Griffin rocked his head side to side. "We could make it less of a complete circle. So there will be breaks in the perimeter. But we'd be able to stretch out the men further that way. Encompass Panshaw, too."

I nodded. "How much of a gap are we talking?"

“Couple blocks, maybe. But it’s the only alternative, really.”

*Fuck.* A couple blocks was a big opening. Big enough for a bunch of Ravens to get through. But the alternative was leaving an entire population of people unprotected, which would be an uprising in itself. Allowing the Ravens to get through would risk Rissa’s safety though. The mere idea of one of their meaty palms on her delicate skin...

There she was again. Invading my every thought, my every decision. “Do it. But alternate where the gap is every shift change. If we keep switching up where the gaps are, it might be enough to dissuade the Ravens from trying to enter.”

“Consider it done.” Griffin got to his feet, and the rest followed. “Same time tomorrow?”

I stood. “Same time tomorrow. I want a report back on exactly where those gaps will be, and at what time. Fletch, I want you to double the amount of patrols at the Camps. We can’t afford to leave the women unprotected.”

Fletch grunted in response, but I could rely on him to get the job done. I watched them leave one by one, Griffin the last. He gave me the same funny look he always seemed to shoot me when we were alone—like he wanted to say something and thought better of it. He closed the door behind him.

I waited until I was certain they were down the street before I locked the door with a sigh. *Finally.* They were gone. I could be with Rissa once more. I took the stairs two at a time, smoothly inserting the key into her doorknob.

She reclined on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, as if there was something there I was missing. As soon as I entered the room, she sat up with a smile. “Master.”

My cock pulsed with the title. The word slipped smoother and smoother from her lips, and every time it shot a rush of adrenaline through my body. She was mine, every last bit of her. But she shouldn’t be just staring at the ceiling waiting for me to return. It was too dangerous for me to let her out without

me there, but maybe there was a way to fix her boredom. I just wasn't sure if she would like it or not. "Come with me."

Rissa curled her knees to her chest, the light dress she wore covering most of her delicious body. "Do I need shoes?"

I shook my head. "No. We're staying in the house. Come on."

She jumped out of bed with an eagerness so youthful and childlike, so unlike any emotion I'd seen from her so far. It was almost like her strong exterior was a protective shield, only exposing the most vulnerable parts of her when it felt safe. We both wore armor, it seemed, to protect ourselves from each other.

I took her hand without thinking, and led her out the bedroom door. She hadn't left the house since I had taken her to the church, and I had come to think of the house as our castle, keeping us safe from people who might not understand our relationship. People who might not understand *us*. We walked down the hall, deeper than she had been before, where the doorways were further apart. We passed my room, the door tightly shut, a sanctuary still. I worried that if I allowed her to penetrate my armor fully, she might not like what she found underneath. While Rissa's skin defended a wonderful innocence, a purity I wanted to ravish, mine hid nothing but darkness.

Finally I stopped in front of a set of double doors, and reluctantly let go of her small hand. She was so delicate in my touch, yet stronger than iron when she needed to be. "Come," I whispered, opening the doors. "Welcome to the library."

We stood inside a room grander than her bedroom, for it was my father's pride and joy. Wall to wall oak shelves lined the exterior of the room, while a fine oak desk sat in the center. Worn leather chairs hugged the walls, two per corner. My father liked to retire to his library at night when he entertained, and it was often that he and his company would stay up late here, discussing things I was never privy to. Everywhere you looked, there were books of all shapes and sizes.

Rissa took a tentative step inside. Then another. I wasn't sure what was going on inside her mind, but I so badly wanted to know. She spun in a circle, taking it all in. Eventually, when I was certain she was going to remain silent, she spoke. "We had a library in the village," she whispered. "But it was a shelf of books in the school. I didn't...I didn't think this many books existed."

"I thought..." I trailed off, wondering what it was I thought. "I thought you might like something to do. There are all kinds of books here. My father kept every book he could find after the Fall. Fiction, history, even some romance, if that's what you'd like."

Rissa walked away from me, toward one of the walls. She reached out her hand, brushing her fingertips across their spines. "I can't believe this is real. That all these books are here." She turned to face me, a wry smile across her face. "We had one fiction book in Ironforge. The rest were biographies, or science books about the land. It was a pirate story, about people who used to sail on giant things called ships on big bodies of waters called oceans. Can you imagine? Having enough water that a ship could float on it?" She shook her head, the waves of her hair swishing every which way. "I dreamed about being a pirate. Sailing around on a ship on all that water, having all of that freedom. It must have been incredible."

I nodded, watching her with a quiet curiosity, a wonder spreading through my chest. "It must have been."

I wanted to say more, to ask her a question, but she had already turned her attention back to the books, reading the spines of purples and reds, blues and greens. My father didn't discriminate when he collected books. Anything was worthy of his collection. He loved his collection more than anything—even me. I let her explore, staying silent as she picked up this book and that book, thumbing through the pages.

"Did you know this one has your name on it?"

I cocked my head to the side. "What do you mean?" I knew some of the books had my father's name inscribed on

them, Danson Furie, carefully lettered in his fine script. But she wouldn't recognize that as my father.

"This book. *Tennyson's Poetry*." She held it out to me, a small, worn black cover with gold lettering.

I fought back a smile, even as my heart cracked. Of course she had found that one. "Alfred Tennyson was my father's favorite poet. He named me after him."

Rissa poked her head up from the book with wide eyes. "You're named after a poet?"

I nodded. "I am."

I expected her to ask another question, to question more why such a terrible man had the name of a poet who created beauty. She simply turned back to the book, and started to read. She held the book to her face, wandering to the closest chair and sinking down, curling her legs up beneath her. Like a moth to the flame, I followed. "What he writes of...it's a world I don't know," she whispered. "The world I know isn't beautiful like this. It's dark, and bad things happen to good people, and it's not filled with pretty words like this."

I bent, taking the book gently from her hands. "His words are pretty, yes, but he isn't just writing about beautiful things, *deliciae*. Listen." I flipped the pages to a poem I knew well, one my father made me memorize when I was too young.

*O SORROW, cruel fellowship,  
O Priestess in the vaults of Death,  
O sweet and bitter in a breath,  
What whispers from thy lying lip?*

*'THE STARS,' she whispers, 'blindly run;  
A web is wov'n across the sky;  
From out waste places comes a cry,  
And murmurs from the dying sun;*

*'AND ALL THE PHANTOM, Nature, stands—  
With all the music in her tone,  
A hollow echo of my own,—  
A hollow form with empty hands.'*

*AND SHALL I take a thing so blind,  
Embrace her as my natural good;  
Or crush her, like a vice of blood,  
Upon the threshold of the mind?*

I LOOKED DOWN to see her staring up at me with the roundest eyes. I couldn't decipher the emotion in them, because it seemed to be a combination of them all. I saw affection and sorrow, sadness and understanding. It was a complete conflict I understood all too well because I experienced them on a daily basis. And now, here was the most perfect, stunning, wondrous creature sitting before me, reflecting the deepest of my emotions back to me, like a mirror I didn't wish to look upon. Rissa was so good, too good, far better than what I deserved, and yet she was here, waiting for me to speak, to acknowledge this moment passing between us. No words would come. No reassurances passed my lips.

Instead, it was Rissa who spoke. "Sometimes, I think the most beautiful things in the world are also the darkest."

I couldn't look away from her gaze, captivating me with such raw power that I was held in place, trapped by her aura. "What do you mean?"

She smiled, a sad smile that had seen too much. "I think it's hard for pretty things to be truly beautiful because they only know half of the world. For things to be beautiful, really beautiful, they need to have seen the shadows as well. They



need to have experienced those depths we're so terrified of to embrace the totality of what they really are."

I knelt at her feet, still towering over her even on my knees. A Master kneeling at the feet of his pet, how the roles had changed. But this wasn't submission. This was respect, and Rissa had earned that tenfold. I wanted to know more. I wanted to hear that she thought I was beautiful, darkness and all. "Do you want to know why I hate the word...*monster*?" Even the taste of it in my mouth felt wrong, soured on my tongue. I didn't like it.

Rissa ran a hand down my horn, and I shivered against the sensitive touch. "Yes."

I rested my head on her lap as she rubbed my horn, unable to look her in the eyes as I spoke, the words falling from my lips like a flood I couldn't stop. "There's a certain connotation that comes with the word. The grotesque creatures that go bump in the night, terrorizing children, and eating their flesh. We're horror stories. Never meant to be beautiful. Never meant for anything outside of nightmares and tales meant to haunt. But it also ostracizes. It dictates people as good, and us as bad. There's a distinction, a line in the sand. I've met good people like me, and I've met bad people like you. What I am isn't what makes me a bad person. My title, the horns on my head, the size of my hands...none of those make me a bad person. The rot growing inside me, *that* makes me a bad person. But not the word *monster*. That's just a bunch of letters strung together with a meaning that's long outgrown its usefulness. It's an insult to my people. The good ones. The ones who deserve better." My heart was tight, putting more on the line for Rissa than I had ever expected to. I couldn't be certain how she would react.

"Ten?" Rissa whispered. She brought her hands to either side of my face, pulling me to look up.

Finally, I did so, staring into those eyes that had captivated me the first time we met. "Yes?" This was it. The moment of truth. She could sentence me to my doom or fly me to the heavens with a single word from those lush lips.

But the words she spoke weren't the words I expected to hear. "You're good, Ten. You're a good person."

Every ounce of tightness released from my chest all at once, shocked at her quiet admission. What I had anticipated to be a sentencing judgment on my people, was instead an acceptance of me. All of me. The darkness and the light. The broken and the whole. The decay that bloomed inside me, sickening sweet. I buried my head in her lap, listening to the gentle thump of her good heart as it beat against my ear.

Rissa thought I was *good*. Even though I knew in my black heart I was far from good, Rissa thought otherwise. And I was beginning to realize hers was the only opinion that mattered.

## CHAPTER 17

# RISSA



There was a strength in submission I didn't think we fully understood. A special kind of power in obeying. When I yielded to Ten, I wasn't just agreeing blindly. I was offering him my trust. In exchange, I was given respect. It wasn't taken. It was willingly gifted, a present. And in my offering, I found my soul strengthening. Of course, you didn't grow up with three brothers in the village without learning how to fight, physically *and* emotionally. But the way I was growing with Ten was different. I was learning to push back boundaries I thought existed, to stretch limits I had never attempted to stretch before. I knew my own strength before Ten had come into my life. Ten made me brave. Submission made me powerful.

Of course, it wasn't like that with everything. Ten was still leery, wanting to keep me locked in my room whenever he met with the council. He told me it was for my safety. While I wanted to believe him, sometimes I had my doubts.

In no surprise, the library became my sanctuary. A reprieve from the monotony of my room. Deep down, I knew I couldn't safely walk the streets. I understood Ten's fears and concerns. He was keeping me when he shouldn't be. If I was discovered...fuck. I didn't want to think about how bad it would be if I were found by anyone else.

Even still, sometimes I wondered if there wasn't more going on that I didn't quite grasp. His fear seemed to verge on paranoia. If I even brushed past a curtain, I was promptly scolded, led away like a misbehaving child. While he allowed

me my choice of the library or my room, either door was still locked despite my protests. Sometimes it just wasn't worth the fight. More often than not, I chose the library.

I was here today while the council met, their once-sporadic meetings now sometimes twice a day. Ten said the Ravens were making moves, but nothing they could pin down. I knew he was stressed about it. He would come into the room, tense and furious, needing a release. I wandered the stacks, trying to decide on a book. Not poetry. I had read that yesterday. Not an action, either. There seemed to be too much action in my life for my liking lately. I needed something to take my mind off it all.

A tiny blue book caught my eye. In black lettering on the spine it bore the word "Diary."

*Huh.* I didn't take Ten for the diary-keeping sort. Curiosity made me pull it out, and I told myself I would only peek at the inside to see if it was, in fact, Ten's diary from when he was younger. But the carefully written name on the inside wasn't Ten's.

*This diary is the property of Iris May Alden, 13 AF.*

Year 13 after the Fall, so almost ten years ago. I knew I shouldn't be reading someone else's private thoughts, but the first line pulled me in.

*People like to say the Fall began with the appearance of the monsters, but those of us who survived it know better.*

I read through the first page, and then the second, captivated by Iris's tale. My mother had survived the Fall as well, but the only time she ever spoke of it was to tell us all the things she missed from before. Iris had no problem detailing the storms that destroyed home after home, washing away the world everyone thought was concrete. I didn't stop reading as I brought the diary over to the chair, taking a seat, completely engrossed.

Iris was young during the Fall, but old enough to remember. Her mother died in one of the first waves of infection in the villages, leaving her in the care of her step-

father who was low on funds. He had no problem selling her off to the Labyrinth. Iris didn't say how old she was when she entered the Labyrinth, but some simple math left my mouth open. She was far, far, younger than me. But she wasn't brought to the breeding camps. She was sold at auction to one of the fine families in the city.

I flipped the page, and the name I saw there made me stop. *Furie*. She was purchased by the Furie family. Ten. Monsters aged differently than humans, I knew, so there was a possibility he was far older than I was. It was possible he was the Furie she was talking about. My heart sank at the idea. Maybe I wasn't special to him. I was just another girl on the roster, the next in Ten's lineup. I tucked my finger in the book, closing my eyes and taking a breath. There was no point in being upset until I had the whole story. Right now, all I had was a last name, which wasn't enough to go on. I nodded to myself, ready to continue.

A few pages detailed Iris's day-to-day life. Serving the unknown man of the house, amongst other duties like laundry and cleaning. It wasn't overly exciting, but I found myself glued to the page, desperate to know more about this mysterious man who purchased her.

When I saw the name, I wished I hadn't been so desperate. Because there it was, in faded black ink.

*Tennyson came to see me today. He was in a good mood, it seemed. It was nice to see him happy.*

I covered my mouth with my hand, unable to stop the emotions rising to the surface. Ten had bought this girl. *Iris*. He had bought her at the auction, and he had made her his slave, like he had made me. The only difference between us was that Iris was allowed to go outside. She was allowed to be seen. I found myself jealous of a woman I had never known, and my heart breaking for a man I didn't realize I cared so deeply about.

I flipped through the pages willing it not to be true. But there it was on every page.

*Tennyson brought me to the library today. I think he knew how happy it would make me.*

*Tennyson made me dinner tonight. I would've starved without him.*

*Tennyson...*

*Tennyson...*

*Tennyson...*

I wasn't unique. I wasn't special. All I was was a fool. Ten had been using me from the start, and I had been stupid enough to go along with it. A tear slipped down my cheek, and I wiped at it angrily. Ten was a weakness. I thought he made me stronger, but all he did was put holes in my hard-constructed defenses.

I wanted to chuck the diary across the room and scream at the top of my lungs. But all that would do would be to draw more attention toward me. They'd find me, and kill me. I skimmed the rest of the pages, not wanting to read the rest and hear about how Ten fell in love with her, and all that jazz. I wanted to know the end. I wanted to know how and when Iris ended, and I began.

There were a lot of blank pages at the back of the journal, but the last written page began with a sentence that cracked my heart even wider.

*Tennyson says we will run away tonight.*

The book dropped from my hand, and a quiet sob escaped from my throat. I didn't want to cry over Ten. He didn't deserve it, really. But I couldn't contain my emotions. They spilled over the top, encompassing me whole. I wanted to be special. More than that, I wanted to be special to *him*. I wanted there to be something different about me, something that made him not want to let go, to keep me locked up inside my room. Because I was *special*. Not because I was just another game to him, another slave he could lock away and play with like a cat toyed with a mouse. I was real, and Iris was real, and I didn't want to think about what happened to her because whatever

happened to her was likely to be my end as well...which brought on another round of silent tears.

I needed to leave. I knew that now. I just wasn't sure how.

It would take planning, and a bit of luck.

I was so busy crying and plotting I didn't hear Ten walk in the room. I didn't notice him until he stood in front of me, crouching, tucking a massive finger under my chin and pulling my face up to look at him. "What's all this about?"

I narrowed my eyes, angry even through my tears. "How could you?" I demanded. "Is this all a fucking game to you? Is that all I am? A fucking *game*?" I pulled my hand back, ready to slap him clear across his face.

He snatched my wrist before I could. "Rissa. What the fuck is going on?"

Ten looked truly confused, and if I hadn't just read the words I had, I would've believed him. Now, I just knew what a good liar he was. "Don't treat me like I'm stupid," I spat out. "I know. I know I'm not the first. I'm not special. I know about *her*." I pointed to the book on the floor as if it were a poisonous snake, filled with venom and ready to strike.

He followed my gaze to the floor, releasing me to pick up the small diary. He began flipping through the pages. I watched his expression carefully, curling into myself to stay as far away from him as possible. I didn't want him to touch me. If he touched me, I would cave, and it would be over. His touch was addictive, and I needed to remain strong until I found out the truth. If I wasn't so desperate to catch him in a lie, I wouldn't look at him either.

His expression dropped to one of shock before he recovered quickly, turning to something I could've sworn was sadness, before shifting to anger. Was he angry I had found him out? Discovered the truth he was trying to keep from me? Good. I hoped he was just as angry as I was. "Deliciae... Rissa...I..."

"If you're going to feed me another bullshit lie, save it. I don't want to hear anymore falsehoods. I want the truth,



dammit.”

Ten’s eyes flashed down at me, still angry. “Are you sure you want the truth?”

“Yes!” I scrambled to my knees on the chair, so we could nearly see eye to eye. “Why would you make me feel like I was special? Why would you pretend I was different, if I was just another girl to add to your list of...of...*slaves*?”

“*Rissa*,” Ten hissed. “The truth isn’t always the pretty thing you want to believe it is. Sometimes it’s ugly and bruised, and better kept hidden.”

“Fuck, Ten!” I cried. “I thought I meant something to you!”

His eyes flashed again, rippling with sincerity. “You *do* mean something to me!”

I shook my head, pointing to the damning book in his hand. “Not like that. Not like *her*. She got to go places. Out in public. You weren’t ashamed of her like you are of me. She had chores, jobs. She cleaned. She was a member of this household. What am I? A pretty object to display on your mantle?” My voice broke, emotions strained. “Did you love her?”

*Jealous*. I was jealous over a girl I was certain was dead. The room was crackling, the air between us charged and alive.

“Yes!” he roared. “I did love her!”

I fell back onto my heels, shocked with the weight of his admission. He loved her. He didn’t love me. The words hadn’t been spoken, but they were there, stretched taut between us. Ten leaned over me, crowding my space with his bulk and his dominance, controlling the conversation.

“You loved her,” I repeated dumbly. What did I care really? At the end of the day, Ten was a monster who had kidnapped me. Maybe it was better to know my place now.

“Yes, *Rissa*.” His voice was calmer now, quieter. He placed a large hand on my thigh, and I was so numb I allowed the

touch. “I loved her. But not in the way you’re thinking. Iris and I...we were friends.”

A spark of hope lit up in my heart, and I hated myself for it. I didn’t want to be hopeful. I wanted to remain numb, to not care what he did one way or another. But I couldn’t stop myself from protecting the tiny flame blossoming inside me, demanding I listen to what he had to say. “Friends?” I whispered. “I...I don’t understand.”

He squatted in front of me so his eyes were directly in front of me again, a reflection of how we sat when he confessed his feelings about the word *monster*, the word my brain had so callously tossed back in his face. “I told you. The truth isn’t pretty. Are you sure you want to know? I don’t want to hurt you. Not this way, at least.”

I nodded, processing. “Please.” I wanted to understand. I wanted to keep this tiny flame of hope alive, burning so brightly inside my chest.

He sighed. “Very well. When I was younger, my father bought a young human girl. Her name was Iris. I couldn’t understand why he had bought her—my father had never before shown an interest in owning pets. But when she came home, I realized what had overcome him. Iris was beautiful, fair and golden.” His voice drifted off, lost in a memory I couldn’t see. “She was beautiful, and delicate, and a thousand things that made her not fit for a life inside the Labyrinth. But my father didn’t want to use her for fighting in the Cage. He had her do chores. And at night, he would bring her to his bedroom. My mother was already long gone at this point.”

I nodded, feeling for Iris, thrust into a world she knew nothing about. I knew that feeling all too well. But Ten still said he *loved* her.

Ten took a deep breath and continued. He twisted his ring on his finger, the one I had found that started this whole thing. “I wasn’t able to meet her until she had been at the house for quite some time. My father did his best to keep us apart. I think...I think deep down he knew what he was doing was wrong. Or at least I like to hope so. But I could hear her crying

in her room at night, so I started to visit her. Believe me when I tell you, it was completely innocent. Yes, I loved her. But I loved her like a sister. I just wanted to give her a chance at a real life. A better life.”

“So you were going to help her escape,” I whispered, seeing the story fall into place.

He nodded. “I was going to go with her, too. I wasn’t sure where we would go. Maybe up to the mountains, where the Eternals live. I just knew I couldn’t live under my father’s roof anymore. Not with the way he treated me. And her...”

Ten had never spoken about his father before, and while I wanted to know more, I didn’t want to break the spell between us, or make him feel like he couldn’t speak freely. So I let his words flow.

“My father always hated me. He blamed me for my mother’s death, even though she died in labor with my brother, not me. He hated looking at me. So he ignored me most of the time, and beat me when he couldn’t ignore me. I grew up thinking that was what love was. Abuse, hatred, and isolation. Until Iris came along and showed me what love really was.” He fell silent again, his mouth opening and closing like he couldn’t bear to continue the story. I wanted to reach out, to touch him, to reassure him it would all be okay. But I wasn’t sure if he even really knew I was here, or if he was speaking his story for himself.

I had to try. “It’s okay, Ten. It’s just me, and I’m not going to hurt you. If you don’t want to continue this story, then we don’t.”

He shook his head. “No. It’s okay. It needs to be said. Like I was saying, we were both going to run away. But somehow my father found out. He sentenced us both to the Cage.”

My eyes were wide. Ten had mentioned the Cage before, but he hadn’t gone into detail. Whatever it was, I knew it wasn’t good, and it definitely wasn’t the kind of place a father should send his son to. So much of Ten made sense now. Why he was the way he was. Why he associated pain with pleasure, and love with darkness.

“You fight to the death in the Cage. Officials put their human pets in the ring, hardened creatures who lost their humanity long ago, and some have winning streaks years long. We...we also put convicted felons in there. It wasn't a place for the son of a dignitary. It was basically a death sentence for both of us.” I reached out, stroking his horn like I had discovered he enjoyed, doing my best to soothe the aching beast inside. “But I was little more than a teenager, and my father ruled this city. There was nothing I could do for either of us. And Iris was so delicate...so fragile. They made me watch her fight first. I watched her die, alone, in the Cage, with nobody around her. And then they put me in there with her body. And they laughed. They laughed when they brought out a twice-convicted murderer, more than twice my size. They thought it was *funny*.”

I closed my eyes, picturing a younger Ten. One less hardened, less touched by the tragedies of life. I wondered what he was like then.

“What they didn't realize was that I had been fighting with my father since I could stand. And I was angry. Angrier than anything they had ever seen. So I killed him, and I won my freedom. I went home, angry. I hated the world. I hated everything beautiful. I just wanted to hurt everyone who looked at me. I wanted to kill the people who crossed my path.” He nodded, remembering his cruel walk home. Oh, how I wished I could wipe the hurt away from him.

“I was going to return home, collect my things, and head for the Eternals. But I returned home to my father's council sitting in my living room. My father had a heart attack while I was in the cage watching the one beautiful thing in my life die. I was the man of the house now. The man of the *city*.” Ten looked up at me, beautifully broken. “I couldn't leave the city the way my father had left it. So as much as I wanted to run, I stayed. I stayed, and I tried to make the Labyrinth a better place.”

“Oh, Ten,” I whispered. “I'm so sorry.”

He was coming back to himself now, looking more and more coherent as he gained speed. “So imagine my surprise

when you of all people fell into my lap. The prettiest thing I had seen in years, looking like you wanted me to break you. It was just my luck you had stolen the only thing my mother had ever left me. But I think I would've taken you anyways. Because you were too beautiful and too strong for this world. I had to have you. I needed you. I..." Ten cut himself off, pressing his lips together.

I found myself unable to speak. I was happy he seemed more like himself, but what was he saying? That he had wanted me all along? So many thoughts were racing through my brain, and I wasn't sure how to make sense of any of them. Poor Ten. Poor Iris. My heart ached, imagining them just trying to get by in a world that wanted to strike them down. It wasn't fair. None of this was fair. I looked up at Ten, trying to read the truth that lay beneath his colorful skin. Mysteries still hid beneath his eyes, and I wanted to take my time discovering them all. I had a feeling that for every secret that lingered in his soul, an identical one was hiding within me. I reached out my hand, brushing it against his smooth skin, just needing to touch him.

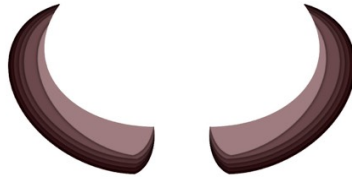
Ten wrapped his hand around mine, and pulled me to my feet. "Let's go."

I wiped a stray tear away from my face. I was still mad at how easily I had crumbled in his hands, my heart still aching. "Where are you taking me?"

"You said you were jealous of Iris. I assumed you meant you wanted to clean for me. So, if cleaning will prove to you how much you mean to me, then I'm going to make you clean."

## CHAPTER 18

# TEN



**E** motions swirled around in my brain, unable to stop or settle. I had never spoken those words aloud to anyone. *Never.* Not even to Griffin, who knew more than anyone. When I had come back from the Cage, and been told I was now in charge, I promptly fired my father's council. Then, I called Griffin.

He knew I had been sentenced to the Cage, but was powerless to do anything about it. At the end of the day, there was nothing either of us could do. But he had come when I called, and though I could tell he wanted to ask questions, all he asked was, "What can I do?"

And so, we got to work. We were far from perfect, I knew that. But we were determined to be better than the generation before us. The breeding camps still ran, but the women inside them were treated like people instead of cattle—most of the time, anyway. The Cage was still open, but it was one of those things I couldn't get rid of, no matter how badly I wanted to burn it to the ground. And how I wanted to watch it burn.

I wasn't a good person. I knew this about myself and accepted it. I did things good people didn't do. I enjoyed things normal people didn't. I liked the darkness, thrived within the shadows. But I was better than my father, and for that, I was grateful.

Rissa, somehow, seemed to see past all of that. She didn't care about the dirty things I enjoyed, how I liked watching her cry, making her hurt. I thought looking into a mirror would make me hate myself more. Make me feel tainted and twisted.

Instead, it made me feel whole. Like I was seeing the full version of myself for the first time. Maybe all along it wasn't that pieces of me were rotten and decayed. Maybe they had just been missing, waiting to appear when I needed them most.

Maybe that's what Rissa was. My missing pieces. The mirror I never wanted to look into. Now it was here, in front of me. I couldn't help but clear away the smudges, desperate to see everything clearly for the first time. I pulled her behind me now, leading her down the stairs, past the kitchen, to one of the many rooms I never went into. I swung open the double doors, leading Rissa into the ornate dining room. The one I hadn't entered since that fateful night so many years ago.

The one where I told Iris to meet me.

The one where my father found us, tossing me against the wall while he shook her body, roaring in her face.

The room I never quite recovered from.

Maybe it was time for a new set of memories here. Ones Rissa could help me with, wiping away the stains of the past. She seemed quite concerned that Iris had gotten to clean and cook for my father, as if this was a gift Rissa herself hadn't received. But if she seemed so desperate to clean for me, then she could clean for me. I just didn't think she was going to enjoy it as much as she thought she would.

She wrenched her wrist out of my grasp. "Why did you bring me here?"

"You wanted to clean," I explained as calmly as I could. "I brought you to a room that needs cleaning."

"You want me to clean all this?" Rissa looked around the room, spinning to take it all in. The pale walls reflected the shimmery light of the chandeliers. It was a large room, and like most of the house, it was cold. A massive dining table encompassed most of the pale marble floor, with oversized wooden chairs surrounding it. My father used to wine and dine his guests here, stuffing them full of lavish food and plying them with rich drinks so he could get his way. If I had *my* way, I'd burn it all.



“Yes.” I left her momentarily, striding over to the closet I knew housed the rarely used cleaning products, bringing back a bucket, mop, dust rags, and a whole host of cleaning paraphernalia. “Don’t let me stop you from starting. I know how much you were looking forward to this.”

Her eyes grew wide as she stood in front of the supplies. “You’re fucking serious.”

“I am.” I grabbed a chair and dragged it across the room, the wood scratching against the floor as I walked it over to the wall. I took a seat, crossing one of my legs across my knee. “Please. Begin.”

“And you’re just going to watch me?”

“Yes.” I smiled, confusion clouding her face. This was the twisted part of me I didn’t get to stretch all too often. The one who enjoyed playing with minds as much as I liked tormenting bodies. “But, Rissa. I’ll need your dress.”

The information sank into Rissa’s face. I expected a fight, or for her to snap at me. But she merely narrowed her eyes at me, and pulled her dress over her head, tossing it at my feet. “Happy?”

My smile grew. “Aren’t you happy? Isn’t this what you wanted?”

Rissa picked up the bucket, and left the room. A moment later she was back, steaming water nearly sloshing out the top. She picked up the mop, taking to her task slowly at first. But then she gained rhythm, and I realized that whether she liked it or not, she found the job soothing to her soul.

I sat in my chair, and watched. I enjoyed the way her breasts swayed as she pushed the mop. Grew hard eyeing her perfect ass as she knelt on her hands and knees with the scrub brush. I watched, knowing she could feel my gaze. She could feel it searing her, splitting her in two. Every so often she would look over her shoulder, or peek out of the corner of her eye. It was unsettling to have someone watch you. I knew this. I knew it well. For someone to watch you, and not speak, it was a torture all in its own. I didn’t let my eyes drift off her

slender form, and made sure to lock gazes with her whenever I got the chance. I wanted to touch her, to fuck her, to make her scream. But that wasn't what this was about right now.

So, I watched. She didn't like it, of that I was certain. But she wanted to clean, and I wanted her to realize she had nothing to worry about. What better way would prove that than not taking my eyes off her? She would snap soon enough. It was just a question of if she would get angry, or if she would try and get her way. I couldn't be certain which way Rissa would go, but I had to admit it was nice to build new memories in this once-cold room. *Good* memories. Memories that deserved to linger, to carve out space in the recesses of my brain.

I didn't have to wait too much longer for my answer. Rissa was beginning to slow, the scrub brush stilling in her hand. She was thinking about something. How badly I wished I could see inside that perfect head of hers. Eventually, she sat back on her heels, a smile crossing her mouth. Her breasts were perfect globes, and I wanted to wrap my hands around them something fierce. "Don't you think it's clean enough, Master?"

I shrugged, dragging my fingertip down the arm of my oversized chair. It seemed she had gone with trying to get out of it. I knew it would get to her eventually. My eyes must have been hot on the smooth flesh of her back, boring holes right through her soul. "Do you really think you're done?"

Rissa shook her head back and forth, tossing her hair across her bare shoulders. She looked up at me from under her dark lashes, a sweet temptress attempting to control her powers for the first time. I was curious to see how far she would take this, how desperate she was for me to claim her as mine once more. "I just thought, maybe there were other things you'd want to do."

I didn't look away from her bright gaze. "You wanted to clean, *deliciae*. And I want you to be happy. What else could I possibly want?"

She licked her lips, her tongue caressing the sweet swell of her full mouth. “Me.”

I bit my lip, imagining it was hers. She knew me too well. She knew the cravings that controlled my body. But I wasn't sure she had really learned her lesson. I leaned forward, hands on my knees, my body compelled to draw closer to hers, even as my mind bade me to stay in control. “The only way I want you is crawling on your pretty little hands and knees, begging for me.”

Rissa's eyes darkened. Something inside me called to her, to the darkness she kept so well hidden. She liked being told what to do, despite her wild need for independence. She liked the contrast it gave her, the false sense of safety. She wanted me to be harsh, as much as she enjoyed defying me. Rissa put the scrub brush down, and crawled toward me. I wanted to bottle the look in her eyes, to consume it whenever I needed. Rissa, crawling naked on the pale marble floors was enough to overwhelm a simpler man.

Luckily for us both, I was in no way simple. Rissa didn't break eye contact the entire way, moving languidly as if she had all the time in the world. Somewhere, she knew the curse she was casting over me, the way my obsession twirled around my bones. I was poisoned by her, growing sicker by the day, but the toxin was also the cure, and how did one survive then?

She knelt between my legs, looking up at me with wide eyes. “Did I do a good job, Master?”

I knew what she wanted. She wanted me to tell her she was a good girl, and she had listened so well. She wanted praise. She wanted affection to warm her heart. But I wasn't in that kind of mood today. I was in the mood to make her suffer for her love, so she never again doubted how much she meant to me. I lifted my booted foot, lowering down on her shoulder to push her lower to the ground. “I told you to beg.”

I didn't miss the smirk that crossed her face as she sank to the floor, falling to her hands once more. “I'm sorry, Master. Please.”

I raised my foot and leaned back in the chair, steeping my fingers. "Please, what? What is it you want?"

She lifted her pretty eyes off the floor, need and desperation warring for control. "You."

I pressed my lips together to stop the smile from twisting across them. My cock stiffened in my pants. This human girl in front of me was everything I had ever wanted, and whether she knew it or not, she had me wrapped around her tiny finger. I grunted, unsure who was really in control of this situation anymore. "Get up here."

Rissa scrambled to her feet, and I pulled her onto my lap by her arms. She straddled me, and I slipped my hands around her head, tangling them into her hair. I tugged her closer, and kissed her deeply.

Her mouth was soft and sweet, and everything I wasn't. I pressed my lips against her harder, demanding her to open, sweeping my tongue inside. She moaned into my mouth, and I let her head go, letting my hands wander. Rissa's back was smooth as silk as I slid my hands down, circling them around her waist.

I pulled back. We stared at each other for a moment, catching our breath. "I do want you, *deliciae*," I murmured. "I want you more than I should. I've wanted you since the moment I laid eyes on you. Fuck, how I want you."

"I want you," she whispered, her hands resting on my shoulders. "Fuck me, Master. Please."

Her hands pawed at my shirt, and I helped her tug it over my head. Some finangling, and my pants were tossed to the side, too. There was nothing between us now, just Rissa's hot cunt resting on top of my aching cock. I was so desperate to be inside her, and yet there was something in this moment I was afraid to break. It was glass, a sheer blip in time, an understanding that we wanted each other, despite everything telling us we shouldn't. I wanted to drag out the seconds, to make this anticipation last a decade. But Rissa was circling her pussy on top of my cock, her slick desire slipping me inside inch by inch.

“Oh,” she cried, tossing her head back as the broad head of my dick pushed inside her. “Oh!”

“Just like that, Rissa,” I whispered, resting my head into the crook of her neck. “Let me stretch out your sweet pussy just like that.”

As feral as I was, I knew the barbs would be scraping her now, an added bit of pain mixing with the pleasure. I knew it from the way she ground her hips against me, and the way her back arched. She was perfect, the way she took me, and all the pain I offered. Fucking perfect.

“You’re so damn tight, *deliciae*. Spread your legs for me. Spread your legs so I can fuck you until pretty tears stream down your face,” I muttered against Rissa’s neck. She moaned, and her legs widened around me, until I filled her completely. She must have been stuffed full with me inside her. Her pussy wasn’t built to take a monster cock, but she did such a good job taking it all. I sat up, bringing her with me, letting her enjoy the stretch as we moved. I pushed her hair over her shoulders, pressing a light kiss there. “Do you know why I call you that? *Deliciae*?”

I pulled her up, sliding her back down my cock with an exquisite slowness. She shook her head, waves going every which way. “No...oh!”

I was certain nothing felt better than being wrapped in Rissa’s tight little cunt, and taking my time with her like this was fucking delicious. “Iris, who you were so *jealous* of, was my father’s pet.” Again, I picked her up and forced her down onto my cock, watching her eyes flutter closed, and the way she forced them to stay open. “Pets do what they’re told. Inside the Labyrinth, a pet is little more than a slave.”

“Oh?” she said, rocking her hips into me with a groan.

“You are more than my pet, Rissa.” I pulled her down with more force this time, my cock pushing deeper and further into her. On my lap she writhed and moaned. “*Deliciae* is Latin, one of the lost languages. A beautiful language, really.”

She struggled to keep her eyes open, her body wanting to cave to the pleasure. I knew the feeling, my own release desperately clawing at me. I wrapped my hand around her throat, forcing her to look at me once more. “Wha...what does it mean?” she coughed out.

I smiled. I loved the way she sounded when I restricted her breath. “Deliciae means a pleasure. A luxury few deserve.” I thrust my hips up, knowing I was too big, that I was going too deep. But I wanted Rissa to remember who she belonged to. I wanted her to never again forget that she was mine, and she wasn’t disposable. It would have been a lot easier if she were replaceable. But she wasn’t, and if it took me fucking her until she bled and bruised to remember, then it was what I’d do.

There was a softness in Rissa’s eyes, as she realized what I was saying was the truth. She opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it again. “But...but...”

I dropped my hand from her throat and stuffed two of my fingers in her mouth instead. “Don’t talk. Just listen. You are a luxury. You’re a treasure I shouldn’t have, but here you are just the same.” Rissa watched me with wide eyes, sucking around my fingers as she took in everything I said. I thrust my hips up again, and again, slamming into her until she moaned, grinding her clit against me with every stroke of my cock. “But let me make this clear, deliciae. Just because I don’t deserve you, doesn’t mean I’m not going to keep you. You’re fucking mine. And if you pull some shit like you just did, and doubt what’s happening here, I’ll fuck you again until you remember. I’ll fuck you a thousand times until you never forget it again. This. Is. Real.”

Rissa’s eyes watered, and she was gasping for air. I thrust into her again and again, until she trembled around me, her body aching for what only I could give.

“Come for your fucking Master, deliciae. Come for me, and never fucking forget how much you mean to me.” I groaned as her eyes flashed and her pussy tightened. Rissa sobbed as I released my fingers from her mouth, and her orgasm shook through her. But I hadn’t found my release yet, so despite the way she collapsed on my chest and shook, I

fucked her still. I fucked her tender pussy as she cried through her release, until I found my own, screaming out her name as I pumped her full.

Rissa cried silently on my chest. I took a deep breath, stroking my hand along her hair. “Don’t you see how much you mean to me? This, what we have, it shouldn’t be there. But it’s there just the same.”

She raised her head, giving me a smile that said everything I needed to know. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?” I laughed, pushing the loose hair off her face. I’d draw her a bath after this, soak her aching muscles, and attend to her in the way she so deserved. “I feel like I should be thanking you. For putting up with a beast like me.”

Rissa shook her head, leaning forward to press a whisper of a kiss to my lips. “Thank you for making me realize it’s okay to be myself.”

Something in my heart shattered just then, the illusion of space I had been so desperate to preserve since the moment I had met Rissa. I wrapped my arms around her, bringing her to rest on my chest. There were no words left to speak. There were only emotions, threading our souls together in a way that should’ve never happened.

## CHAPTER 19



# RISSA



I leaned back in the tub, resting against Ten's solid bulk. The water was scalding. I wanted to sink down even lower, and stay in here forever until my skin burnt off, leaving me as raw as when I first entered this world. Maybe I could start over then. Maybe all my sins could be washed away in this water, scrubbing me clean, a fresh slate. Or maybe they resided even deeper, ingrained into my muscle and blood, a stain that would never leave no matter how hard I tried.

Ten saw something in me, something I wasn't even sure I saw myself. I had spent so long worrying and caring for my family, I had forgotten what it was like to have needs of my own. That it was okay to be my own person. To remember who I was, every once in a while. Because before the dust had gotten worse, and before my father had died, and before Ettie, I'd had dreams, too. I'd had dreams of getting out of the village. Of dust not being the only thing I ever saw. I knew there had to be somewhere out there in the world that wasn't dust.

The funny thing was I had found it in Ten. I had left the village. I had found a home that wasn't dust, a life where I could remember what it was like to be myself. The only thing missing now was my family. A pang of longing shot through my chest. I had everything I'd ever wanted, except for them. I even missed Lars. Ten seemed to be in a good mood tonight, content even. Now was a good of time as ever.

“I want to visit my family.” The words choked in my throat, coming out quieter than I intended. I tried again. “I want to visit my family.”

“Hmm...” Ten hummed, running his hands across my shoulders, dripping the hot water down my arms, a reminder of the sins that lingered there. I had left my family to the dust, after all. I didn’t know what Ten would say. “Okay.”

I immediately jumped on the defensive. “I wouldn’t go back to stay, of course. I just miss them. And I—wait. What did you just say?” I spun around in the bathtub, water sloshing over the sides.

Ten smiled at me. “Okay. But, I go with you. And we go at night.”

I nodded eagerly. “Okay. I just...I can’t believe you said yes. I was ready for a fight.”

“I told you I wanted you to be happy, and I meant it.”

I leaned forward to kiss him, but stopped midway when there was a loud knock at the front door. “Are you expecting Griffin?”

“No.” He lifted me off him, getting out of the tub. The banging at the front door was loud and insistent, rattling my core with every knock. Something wasn’t right. Maybe the Ravens were in the city again, and he would have to leave and go fight. Ten wrapped a towel around himself. “Stay here.”

But before he could leave the room, we both heard the front door fly open, smashing against the wall. Someone was inside the house. Blood rushed to my head, filling my ears with a vibration I couldn’t control.

“Fuck,” Ten muttered. He grabbed me and hauled me out of the tub dripping wet, dragging me to the bedroom. “I need you to stay quiet, okay? Whatever you hear, don’t make a fucking sound.”

I nodded, shivering. Ten shoved me into the wardrobe. All at once it was dark. I could hear though, and there was a tiny sliver of light that peeked through the doors. My eyes adjusted to the shadowy wardrobe as footsteps thundered up the stairs.

More than one, for sure. My heart was pounding almost as loudly as the footsteps. All I knew about the Ravens was that Ten hated them, and didn't want them anywhere near me.

The door to my bedroom flew open with a crack. There was silence for a moment, and then Ten growled deep in his throat. "What the fuck are *you* doing here?"

"Ten, I..." I knew that voice. I just couldn't place it. I tried to wiggle closer to the crack in the door to see if I could make out who it was.

"Where is she?" I didn't recognize that voice, but I didn't think someone Ten knew would be with the Ravens.

"Where is *who*?" Ten snapped. His voice was deadly quiet, a low pitch even I hadn't heard from him before. "You better have a damn good reason to be breaking into my fucking house."

"Ten, they know, okay? They know about *her*." The voice snapped into place as soon as I heard it again, an attempt at reassurance. *Griffin*.

"We've heard reports you're keeping one of the breedable girls in your home. Of course, that just wouldn't do. The only reason to keep a human in your house is as a pet. Your father would've taught you that, no?"

The smack of fist against flesh cracked through the air. "She isn't here. Now get the fuck out of my house."

"Restrain him." I couldn't make anything out through the crack in the door, but the sounds of more punches were clear. Some kind of fight was going on out there, and my heart was two sizes too big for my chest as I waited to hear the outcome. *Please let Ten be okay*. Ten grunted, and something loud hit the floor. "Search the room."

*Fuck*. I pressed up against the back of the wardrobe, trying to make myself as small as possible.

"You won't fucking touch her!" Ten bellowed. "You won't lay a fucking hand on her, because she's not here anymore. She ran away. But even if she was here, you wouldn't touch her. Not one fucking finger."

Smaller. I needed to get smaller. I tucked myself behind a dress, trying to ignore the stomping around the room. Ten was still talking, which was good. He wasn't unconscious.

Footsteps grew closer to the wardrobe, but a sudden scuffling cut them off. Someone heavy dropped to the floor. "I thought I told you to fucking restrain him?" A deep sigh, filled with disappointment. "I really expected more from a Furie."

Both wardrobe doors were flung open, and the ugliest beast I had ever seen stared at me through the clothing. I pressed myself further away.

"Found her," the beast called. He reached for me, and I swung a punch right to his meaty nose.

"Get the fuck away from me!" I snarled, kicking at his arms as they stretched closer and closer again. "Don't fucking touch me!"

He wrapped his hands around my arms anyway, pulling me out of the wardrobe with relative ease, even though I bucked and twisted in his arms. In my room, there were four men I didn't recognize. Griffin stood off in the corner, looking worried. Ten was on his knees, a knife held to his throat. These men weren't Ravens, of that I was certain. Ten struggled to get to his feet once he saw me, and the knife dug deeper into his neck until a drop of blood ran down his shoulders. I paused when I saw the blood. "Get your fucking hands off her unless you want to die," Ten snapped.

"Ten," I murmured. He needed to stop moving before they hurt him worse. I didn't want him to get himself killed. "Ten, it's okay."

His eyes flashed to mine, a storm raging inside them. "I will kill every single one of them who touches you, Rissa. I will slice off their fingers one by one and feed them to them while you watch."

One was dressed nicer than the rest. He laughed at Ten's words. "Take her away to the holding cells. We'll deal with him after."

“No!” Ten leapt to his feet, throwing his elbow back into the man’s face who held him. “You’re not fucking taking her anywhere.”

“Ten!” I screamed. I saw the one barreling from behind ready to take him down, but Ten didn’t see him until it was too late.

On the floor with his hands behind his back, Ten looked up at the man who had spoken, and took a breath. “Mal, listen. Listen. Let’s be sensible about this. Do you really want to take a human girl? Wouldn’t it be better to take the leader of the Labyrinth? That would make for a much better show.”

Mal ran a hand down his jaw, and held a finger up to the man who restrained me. A stray tear dripped down my face as I watched Ten struggle. “I’m listening.”

“I don’t care what you do to me. Chop me up into little pieces and feed me to your dogs. Keep me as your own pet. I. Don’t. Care. Just leave Rissa alone. Let her go. She’s done nothing wrong other than being associated with me.”

The man nodded, then snapped his fingers. “Let’s go. Take her. Griffin, you stay and watch Ten.”

“No!” I screamed, kicking at the man who was coming up to help carry me. “No! Ten!”

“What the fuck?” Ten bellowed. “I thought you were listening?”

“I did listen. And I didn’t agree.”

The men were carrying me out of the room as I twisted and screamed. Behind me I could hear Ten cursing, and the sounds of more fighting. He was pissed.

Down the stairs we went as I kicked and tried to get some purchase with my attackers. But they were twice my size, and there were two of them. It didn’t mean I wasn’t going to try.

“Rissa! Rissa, I swear I’m coming for you. I’m coming for you Rissa, and they’ll all fucking pay.” Ten’s screams followed us out the door, and into the still night air. No one

was on the streets, as if this wasn't happening. None of this was real.

I fought against their grips, whipping wildly from side to side. "Where the fuck are you taking me? What are you doing?"

The big one holding my right arm shook me. "Shut the fuck up. I don't know how Ten put up with your yapping for so long. Your kind are much more enjoyable when your mouths have something in them."

The man on my left laughed. "She won't be talking for long when she gets to the Cage. I give her five minutes, tops."

"Five minutes? I give her thirty seconds."

"I'll take those odds."

*The Cage.* They were taking me to the Cage. My heart sank, and I fought even harder. "You can't take me to the Cage. No! Fuck. No! I won't go! I won't."

"Luckily for us, you don't have a say."

"Here, I'll take care of the talking." A hand slapped across my face, wrapping a rag filled with a sweet-smelling scent over my nose and mouth. I twisted and turned in their arms, but the edges of my vision grew blurry, and my limbs fell heavy. Somewhere I could hear Ten screaming for me, but I wasn't sure if that was in this life or somewhere else.

Then there was silence.



MY MOUTH WAS DRY. I desperately needed a drink. I reached out for the table next to my bed, where I always kept a cup of water, but all I hit was air. Cold air, and then cold stone.

The events came back to me in a rush, and my eyes flew open. The men taking me from Ten's house. Ten screaming. The rag. *The Cage.* Fuck. Was I there now? I took in my surroundings, getting to my knees even as my head protested.

I was in what looked to be a cell, but it didn't look big enough to be the Cage. I was on the floor, and bars covered the one open wall. Something I didn't want to think too hard about was pooled in the corner, and something else dripped down the walls. No. This wasn't the Cage. Not yet at least. I looked down at myself, the loose-fitting pants and shirt someone had dressed me in. At least they hadn't forced me to remain naked. Small miracles, you know, before I died. *Fuck*. I gasped in a breath, trying to fill my lungs before panic overtook me. I couldn't panic. Not now.

I closed my eyes, trying to catch my breath.

*Think logically, Rissa. Logically. Fear won't get you anywhere. Logic will keep you alive.*

This is what I knew. I was in a cell, and I was waiting for the Cage. I was here because they had found out about my relationship with Ten, but I didn't know if it was meant to punish me or Ten. Maybe both. In the Cage, I would be required to fight to the death against someone else. And according to the two monsters who transported me, I was likely going to die. *Fuck*. I slapped my forehead, trying to get those thoughts to leave. I couldn't die. I couldn't leave my family, never knowing what had happened to me. I couldn't leave Ten. His screams in the night before everything went dark still echoed in my brain, the sounds of him landing punches on solid flesh, his face as he tried to get to me. These were moments scarred into my skin. I couldn't let all that be for nothing. I couldn't. I needed to try to survive, at the very least. I needed to gather my strength, and everything life had taught me. I wasn't a pushover. I could put up a fight. I wouldn't go out peacefully, if that was what it came to. I wouldn't whisper. I would scream and I would rage until my final breaths, because that was what these monsters deserved. A memory that would linger.

“I didn't want this to happen this way.”

I opened my eyes to see Griffin, hands wrapped around the bars to my cell. He didn't look good. In fact, he looked like he had been up for most of the night. His cheek was swollen, and

if I had to bet, he had been Ten's punching bag. I got to my feet. "Where's Ten? Is he okay?"

"He's fine. Pissed, but fine. He's on house arrest until the fight." He sighed. "I think they think seeing you die in the cage will be punishment enough for him. You have to understand, I did everything I could so he wouldn't get found out, but he was too goddamn stubborn to just be honest with me..."

That statement solidified it for me. I wouldn't die. Couldn't die. I couldn't die in a cage, a reflection of Iris all those years ago. Ten had barely survived it the first time. He wouldn't make it a second time. "Who's they?"

"His father's old council." Griffin ran a hand over his stump of a horn. "They've hated him since he fired them years ago. They've basically been biding their time, waiting for some reason to kick him out, and with the Raven's uprising they only needed the smallest thing. And then you..."

I nodded. "Then they found out I was in his house."

"Exactly." He rested his head against the bars. "I tried to warn him. But there was only so much I could say without getting all of us in shit."

I was quiet for a moment, imagining Ten at home, how he would react to me not being there. Somehow, I couldn't imagine it was very quiet. "You don't seem too bothered that I'm a human."

Griffin shrugged. "Why should I? You make Ten happy. I haven't seen him like this, ever. If anyone can make Ten this happy, that counts for more than anything in my books."

I couldn't help the smile that crossed my face, even in my dire circumstances. But it dropped just as quickly. I crossed over to the bars, squeezing the metal tightly between my hands. "What's going to happen to me?"

"You'll be put in the Cage for one fight. It's a fight to the death. Not to put pressure on you, but the outcome of the fight will determine both yours and Ten's fate. If you die, Ten will be held as guilty and removed from power. If you win,



according to the Council, you'll both be free to go." Griffin grimaced. "How free, I can't tell you."

I digested the information as calmly as I could. *One fight. To the death. Guilty.* There was a lot riding on this. On me. I looked up into Griffin's one eye, expecting it to be black like Ten's, but it was a rich brown color. It made him softer somehow, despite his scars. "How is he doing? Really?"

He pressed his lips together and shook his head. "Not good. He's pretending to take his punishment, when in reality he's just trying to figure out a way to break you out of here."

"He can't break me out of here. Where would we go? We'd be fugitives." I rubbed my hand across my forehead. I needed Ten to stay calm right now. "I'm going to have to fight. You need to tell him I'm going to fight."

"I'll tell him, but I don't know how much good it will do. I'm not exactly his favorite person right now." Griffin rapped his knuckles on the bar, a quiet echo sounding through my cell. "I should go. I'm not supposed to even be here. I just needed to make sure you were alright."

I smiled sadly. "I'm okay. It's not your fault, Griffin. Ten will come around." *I hoped.*

He cocked his head, his lone eye not quite looking like he believed me. "I might not have put you in here, but maybe I should've done a better job of covering up Ten's trail. He's so stupidly in love he didn't realize all the mistakes he was making."

*Ten. In love with me?* No. I laughed softly. "Ten's not in love with me."

This time it was Griffin's turn to laugh. "If you truly believe that, you're both utterly clueless. But I should be going." He pulled away from the bars, casting one last look at me. "Hey, Rissa?"

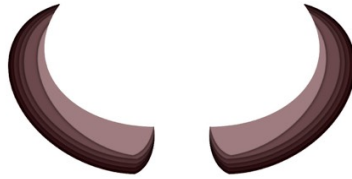
"Yeah?"

He smiled, and the expression completely changed his face from one of a battle-scarred warrior to a sweet soul. "Don't die. I'll never live it down."

I laughed harder than I should have, but I knew it was a joke laced in truth. Ten wouldn't ever let him live it down. But luckily for him, I had no intention of dying.

## CHAPTER 20

# TEN



I threw the vase over my head. It smashed against the wall into a thousand fucking pieces. I didn't remember how old it was, or how much it was worth, but I knew it was valuable. And now it was in a million shards on the floor of my living room, and I couldn't care less.

“Fuck. Fuck!” I screamed. I grabbed the stand the vase had rested on, and tossed that, too. It careened across the room, smashing into the wall before it remained lodged there, half in and half out. I grabbed the couch, flipping it up on its side. I had never been this angry before. Ever. All I could see was red. All I could feel was sheer rage, bubbling thick inside my veins. My heart thumped erratically. My ears were filled with a violent buzzing. I needed something to release this anger, growing inside me like a tumor, but I had no release other than destroying my house.

Because the one thing that kept me tethered to this planet wasn't here. She was gone, taken to the one place I hated more than anything in this city. And yet, if they would've let me, I would've swapped places with her in a heartbeat. I would've killed a thousand people in the Cage if it meant Rissa was safe. Instead, she sat in a holding cell, waiting for her fate, and there was nothing I could fucking do about it.

I glared at the two men outside my front door, making sure I didn't leave. I could take them both, especially with the fury lacing my soul. I could burn the city down for Rissa. And I would. I would do whatever she asked me. But I had to think about the place I was leaving her to come back to. I could kill

everyone in my way between here and the Cage, but someone would hear about my rampage and kill her before I got there. I was trapped, and they knew it.

I should've known Mal and the rest of my father's council were only biding their time, waiting for me to slip up. I should've been more careful with Rissa, covered my tracks more. I should've leaned on Griffin, told him the truth from the start, even though I was pissed at him. I was angry with him, sure, but the old council was only using him to mess with me. He hadn't been the one to leak my secret. Someone else must have caught wind, or saw us the night we went to the church. *Or fucking Blaze...*

For fuck's sake. I kicked the base of my couch, and then smashed my foot into it again. And again, and again, until the underside of the couch was shredded, demolished to nothing. "Fuck it all!" I bellowed. "Fuck you! Fuck all of you!"

"Jesus, Ten, what the Hell blew up in here?"

I spun around to see Griffin standing in the hall, mouth open as he took in my destruction. His cheek was still swollen where I had punched him the night before, but I was too far gone to feel sorry about it. "I...I..." I sank to the floor, cradling my head in my hands. "I don't know what to do without her. She's gone, Grif. She's fucking gone, and she's in the Cage and it's all my fucking fault." I was crying, and I couldn't remember the last time I had cried. The tears were hot on my face, and I swiped at them.

Griffin crossed the room, crouching in front of me. "Don't fucking let them see you cry," he snapped. "Don't let them see they've gotten to you. They'll use it against you."

I nodded, knowing he was right. They knew they had something that belonged to me, something I would do anything for. And they had been desperate to get back into power since I had fired them all those years ago. I couldn't let them hurt her. "I need to get her back. I need to make them pay for what they did."

"She's in the holding cell. They're going to make her fight tomorrow night. I don't know where they all are, but at least

two of them are at the holding cells. They're expecting you to do something, Ten. They're waiting for you." Griffin looked at me, an unspoken conversation passing between us. I knew what he was trying to tell me. Whatever I was going to do, I needed to do it quietly.

"Can you help me take care of the two at the front door?"

"Already on it." He stood, walking to the front door, and I followed without a sound. He swung open the door. "Hey, we've got a situation here!"

One of the guards peeked in. "What's going on?"

I smashed his head against the doorframe with a solid crack, heaving his body inside my house. The other guard stumbled at the commotion, racing inside, but Griffin had my back, headbutting the guard right in the stomach until he flipped over his back and landed with a groan on the marble floor. I smashed the guard's head in my hand against the frame once more with a sickening sound, and he slumped to the floor. While Griffin closed the door, I walked over to the other guard, placing a well-aimed kick to the side of his head. Neither of these men had helped to take Rissa. I just needed them out of the way.

"Right." I dusted my hands off on my pants, the slick fury still pounding through my body. I was ready to take Rissa back. "What holding cell is she in?"

"Four. But Ten...listen." He paused, chewing his lip. "Even if you kill them all, she's going to have to fight. Your father's council still has a lot of sway in the city. Rissa is going to have to fight if she ever wants a place here."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I knew he was right. If I freed her now, it was likely the people would toss her right back in for not paying her dues. Why did she get to be any different than the rest of the people who were thrown into the Cage? *Because she was fucking different, dammit.* "Fuck. Grif. I can't lose her."

"Then you're going to have to have faith that she can win. Because if you take her out now, no one will ever accept her,

and she'll be in even more danger than she is right now." Griffin rested his forehead on mine, something we had done before every battle and fight we had ever fought together. A reminder that we were in this together, no matter what it was. "She's tougher than she looks, Ten. She can do this. But you need to tell her what she means to you. Go. I've got this."

I nodded, and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "I owe you."

He shook his head. "No. I owed you. We're even. Now, go!"

I took off, walking as quickly as I could through the streets of the Labyrinth without attracting suspicion. I needed to make it to the holding cells of the Cage without someone flagging down my father's council and tipping them off. Who knew what spies they had on the streets. Word traveled quickly inside the Labyrinth. Everyone and their aunt would know about Rissa and me, and where Rissa was now.

I knew the path to the Cage like the back of my hand. It was seared into my memory as if it were just yesterday I had walked these streets to my death. I hadn't been back since. But I wasn't going to leave Rissa there without her not knowing I was coming for her. I told her I was coming for her, and I intended to keep my promise. I intended to keep every promise I had ever made her.

The field that housed the Cage rose up in front of me. A squat building where the holding cells sat in front of the ring lined with seating. Tomorrow, the ring would be full. It had been awhile since we'd had a fight, and people were itching for violence, especially with the anxiety the Ravens were inducing. It would be Rissa inside that cage, facing up someone who was likely twice her size, looking up at them with that same look of defiance I had seen on her countless times before. I hated thinking about it. It should've been me in that fucking cage. How I wanted to take her far away from this world, this violence. But I knew the same as everyone else did, the very essence of life was violence, and it was up to us if we met it head on or shied away from it.

I listened outside the front door, but I couldn't hear anyone inside. It didn't mean it was empty. The door was unlocked, and I swung it open as quietly as I could, slinking inside.

So far so good. The hallway was empty. Maybe Griffin had been wrong and no one was here after all, or perhaps they had all left. I just needed to get to Rissa now. I took a step inside, and then another. A thick arm grabbed my wrist and wrenched me to the side. "What do you think *you're* doing here?"

I looked up into the grinning face of one of the old councilmen. I recognized him as one of the men who carried Rissa out of the house last night, so he was on the top of my list. He didn't look surprised I was here. If anything, he seemed rather pleased. I wanted to punch the smile off his face. "I'm here for Rissa." I tugged my arm out his grip, and his smile dropped.

"You're not supposed to be here." He licked his lips.

I raised a brow. "Are you planning on stopping me? Because as far as I can see, you're alone here. You're going to have trouble taking me down on your own."

I was bluffing, hoping he was actually alone, but I knew even if someone else was here I would take them both down to get to Rissa. It would just be easier if there was only one.

The man in front of me gritted his teeth. "I'm twice your age, boy. Didn't your father teach you any respect?"

I coughed out a laugh. "I learned to respect people who earned my respect. Not people who come into my house at night and take innocent women to the Cage."

He balled his hands into fists. "Neither of you are innocent. Humans have a place in this world, and it's not at our side. You knew this, and you still decided to bring her home. She's a womb at best, to help us further the cause. She's a fucking pet, Ten—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence before my fist connected with his face, a satisfying smash of bone and flesh. "You will *not* speak of her again."



The man grinned up at me, wiping blood away from his nose. “You don’t like me talking about your *pet* that way? Maybe I should tell you what I have planned for her before she goes into the Cage, then. I’ll give you a hint. It involves my cock, and her lush little ass.”

I lunged, wrapped my hands around his neck. “You won’t lay another fucking hand on her, do you hear me? Never again.” I squeezed harder as his eyes bulged and he clawed at my wrists, determined to get me off. “She’s not yours to touch.”

His eyes were buggy, and he gasped for air, but I didn’t want him to die. Not yet. I released him, taking a step back as he gasped and got to his feet. “You fucking traitor,” he hissed. “You’re a human lover. A disgrace to your own kind.”

I scoffed. “Maybe that isn’t the worst thing to be. Right now, I’d rather be lumped in with them than with you.”

He scrambled toward me, swinging wild punches. I dodged them easily, pushing him back with swings of my own. My foot caught on a loose tile, and as I caught myself before I fell he managed to land one solid hook right on my ribs. Somewhere, I heard something crack. All the air released out of me in one breath, and I grasped my side. He grinned. “How’d that feel? You want more?”

I thought of Rissa. I thought of leaving her alone in this place, never knowing what had happened to me, or worse, thinking I had abandoned her. I couldn’t have that. I straightened myself out and closed the distance between us. I swung, landing blow after blow in his ribs and his stomach, in his face. He wouldn’t lay another hand on her. Not ever. I would make fucking sure of it. I pulled back, kicking him directly in the stomach, and he went down with a heavy grunt.

He stared up at me, unable to catch his breath. My ribs ached, and I knew something was broken, but for whatever he had done, I had done tenfold to him. He clutched at his side, glaring at me. “Your father would be ashamed.” He spat on the floor in front of me.

I reached to my side, unsheathing my knife, the one that had so elegantly carved my initials in Rissa's skin. "I hope he is ashamed of me. Because I never wanted to be like him. But, he did teach me one lesson that I found rather important."

He eyed the knife, trying to get up, but he groaned when he shifted. "Fuck you."

"You see, my father taught me one needed to be a man of their word. A promise was a promise. And I promised you I would cut off your fingers one by one and feed them to you."

I crouched next to him, reaching for his hand, but he snatched it away. "You wouldn't."

I laughed, grabbing his wrist and holding it tight. "Oh, but I would. The only thing stopping me is that Rissa isn't here to watch justice being served." I ran the tip of my knife along his knuckles, pausing. "But I guess she has four more chances to see it happen, right?"

I sliced the sharp knife through the knuckle on his pinky. He screamed, louder than I expected him to. "Fuck you! Fuck you! You just cut off my finger!"

"I did." I held the offending pinky in my hand, then stuffed it in his mouth. "And now you're going to swallow it."

His eyes widened momentarily, and then he glared at me, shaking his head.

I clapped my hand over his nose. "Listen, I have somewhere I need to be, and you have seven more fingers. So fucking *swallow*."

He shook his head wildly, but eventually the urge to breathe, to scream took over him, and he swallowed heavily. I released his nose and mouth, and he immediately started retching.

"If you were so worried about your fucking fingers, then you should've kept them off my fucking *woman*," I snarled. I sliced through the next finger, ignoring his screams, and repeated the process once more. Again we did this. Slice. Scream. Cover his mouth and nose. Swallow. Again, until

tears were streaming down his face, and he was retching over and over. His hands were nothing more than stubs.

I shook my head, kicking at his ribs. “If anyone here is the disgrace to our kind, it’s you and the rest of the council. The ones who refuse to change. The ones who sit by and watch violence happen. The ones who do fucking *nothing*.” His eyes were drooping, closing from the pain. I shook his head, forcing him to keep looking at me. “Now listen closely. As terrible as all of that is, I was content to let you die quietly in the shadows with the rest of your generation. But because you fucking laid your dirty fingers on Rissa’s skin...” I shuddered, the thought vivid in my head. “That is why you had to suffer. You brought this on yourself. And one by one, you’ll all pay for your sins.” I brought my bloody knife to his neck, and neatly sliced through the artery. He slumped to the floor, and I pulled him back into the office he had snuck out of. It wasn’t a great hiding place, but hopefully people would be too preoccupied with the fight to care too much.

I had bigger things to deal with than worrying about hiding a body that didn’t deserve to be hidden. I wanted everyone to see what happened when you messed with me, and the people I cared about. I wanted them to *know*. But now, I needed to find Rissa.

Griffin said she was in Four. I raced past the first few empty cells, my mind set on finding Rissa. *One...two...three...four*. There she was, sitting on the floor, her arms wrapped around her shins, and her head resting on knees. “Rissa,” I breathed. “Oh thank fuck.”

“Ten!” She stumbled to her feet, racing toward the gated door. “I was so fucking worried about you.”

“I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m more worried about you.” I looked over her face, and up and down her body but she didn’t seem to be any worse for the wear. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I’m fine. Except for being here. Tell me you’re here to bust me out.”

My heart broke, shattering in all the wrong place. “Rissa... I can’t. If I break you out of here, they’ll just throw you right

back in.” I was horrible. Awful. I was a terrible person for bringing her to this place, and putting her in this position. I hated myself. “If you ever want to be free, you’ll have to fight for it.”

I expected her to cry. To be torn up. But somehow she looked like she already knew. She fixed her gaze past me, as if there were something on the wall I couldn’t see, and then met my eyes once more. “I’m not sure I’ve ever really been free. I’ve always been beholden to someone. Someone has always needed a piece of me. Taken parts of my soul, of what I had to offer. But freedom...what’s that even like?”

“I’ll show you, after this is over. I’ll show you how beautiful freedom can really be.” I wanted to brush her hair away from her face. I wanted to show her all the sides of freedom people never thought about. “You just have to fight, Rissa. You have to fight, and you have to win.”

She nodded, taking it all in. Her expression was resolved, strong. Griffin was right. She was tougher than she looked. “You were willing to come back here for me. To be in the Cage again instead of me. You would really do that for me?” Her voice was so incredulous, so filled with emotion it mended the gaps in my heart, filling them in stronger than ever.

“I would. And I’d do it again. I’d do it all again for you, if there was a chance I’d be in there instead of you.” I wrapped my hands around the bars, desperately trying to get as close to her as I possibly could. I wanted nothing more than to wrench these bars apart and hold her against me. This was the best I could get right now. But she needed to know. She needed to understand exactly what she meant to me. “Listen to me, Rissa. Fucking listen to the words I’m saying. I don’t care about anything else in this world. I don’t care if they take the Labyrinth away from me, and leave me stranded in the desert. I don’t care, as long as I have you. I’ll happily look death in the eye and smile at the Grim Reaper if it means I can have you by my side for a moment more. You mean everything to me. You are my sustenance, my water. I can survive a desert if

I have you. You are my sun, and my air, and everything in between. You. Fuck, Rissa, I...love you.”

I couldn't tear my eyes away from her, staring into those green pools like they would swallow me whole. I hoped they would. Because then we'd be together forever, no Cage, no fight, just the two of us entwined forever in a way our souls already were. “I love you, Ten,” she murmured back, grabbing my hands with hers. “I love you so damn much.”

“Oh, Rissa.” I needed to touch her skin, to feel her against me, to fuck her sweet pussy, to know she was mine. I needed it all, and I needed nothing else as long as I knew she was here in front of me. “You've been mine since the minute I laid eyes on you, you know that? The second I saw you in that shack, staring back at me, I knew I needed to have you. I didn't know why. I just knew. The whole way back to the Labyrinth I wondered if I was doing the right thing. If I shouldn't have just left you where you were, because you were already taking root inside my heart. You were a poison, but one I was happily consuming. I couldn't stop. Maybe it was a mistake, if only because look where you are now. You wouldn't be in this position if I hadn't been selfish and needed you for myself.”

“No.” Rissa shook her head, reaching her arm through the bars to stroke my face. “None of this is a mistake. All of this happened the way it was supposed to. If this is what I need to do to earn my place in this world, to earn the life I want, then this is what I'll do. But don't for a second ever think what you did was a mistake. Because this is where I was supposed to be all along. And I'm going to fight tomorrow. I'm going to fight for myself, but also for *you*.”

I clasped her hand to my cheek, her perfect hand touching my beastly skin. It didn't make sense to me. Maybe it never would. “You're perfect. Far more perfect than I could ever imagine or ever deserve.”

Somewhere down the hall, a door creaked open and slammed shut. I needed to get out of here. They would find the body soon enough, but hopefully long after I was gone. But if they caught me at Rissa's cell, it wouldn't be good for either of us. “You should go,” she whispered.

I nodded. “You can do this, though. You can take on whoever is in that cage. You can do it because you have to. I’m not accepting anything else. Use your size to your advantage. Be small, be quick, and don’t make any stupid moves, okay? Play it smart, take your time, let them tire themselves out. Keep moving. Whatever you do, keep fucking moving.” I grabbed her hands, pulling her as close to the bars as I could get her. “I love you, Rissa. I meant what I said. Whoever lays hands on you will pay the price. Just this time, you’re doling out the punishment. Make them pay, *deliciae*.”

“I will. I promise I will.” Her eyes were alight with a fire I had never seen before. Whatever I had said resonated with something in her. I just needed to keep it burning until tomorrow.

The footsteps drew closer, and if I didn’t leave now, I never would. I couldn’t think that this might be the last time I saw her alive. I wouldn’t let myself think that. She could do this. She was so fucking strong, and more powerful than even she knew. I reluctantly let go of her hands, leaving her to the cell, a place she shouldn’t be. She should be home, in my bed, with me. But maybe after tomorrow, she would be.

Or maybe after tomorrow I’d be bathing in a tub filled with their blood.

## CHAPTER 21

# RISSA



S ometime in the night, fear took over. The legitimate, overwhelming, very real idea that I was going to die the next day. That I would never see my family again. That the last time I would ever see Ten would be through bars separating us. My body trembled, rattling my teeth, and no matter what I did, I couldn't stop the shaking.

If I didn't get a handle on it, the fear would consume me whole. I would walk into that cage tomorrow already at a disadvantage because everyone would be able to taste the fear radiating off me. No matter how badly I wanted to give in to the feelings taking over my brain, I couldn't. If I was going to go down, I couldn't go down without fighting. I was going to fight for this life I had only just begun to see the beauty in. Instead of thinking of the things I wasn't capable of, I began to list the things I *could* do.

I could fight. My brothers had taught me how, not wanting me to be unprotected in the village.

I could use my size to my advantage. Small meant maneuverable, right?

I could use my brain to outwit my competitor. I could fight smarter, not harder.

I could do this. *I could do this*. I just had to keep reminding myself of the facts, instead of the emotion the fear wanted me to remember.

I was strong. I was capable. I wasn't going to let these be my final moments, huddled away in a cell that smelled too



strongly of the captive before me.

I thought of my family, the smiles we'd shared on nights I was able to trade for a rabbit. I thought of Ettie, of the role model I wanted to be for her. I didn't want her thinking we just gave up when things got hard, and life seemed impossible. I wanted her to know we dug our heels in, and tried even harder.

I thought of Ten, of the shy smile that crossed his face when he thought I wasn't looking. I thought of the way he cared for me, the small things he did, like marking my pages in books when I fell asleep reading. The way he had made me stronger. The way he had made me feel *alive*. I wasn't ready to give up that feeling yet.

I was so deep in my mantra I wasn't aware night had given way to day until the cell door rattled. Griffin stood at the door, a grim expression on his face. Alongside him stood another man I recognized from the other night. He didn't look all too happy, either. "Let's go," he snapped. "I don't have all day."

I scrambled to my feet, my heart pounding in my chest. The energy radiating off my body could've lit a match. I was alive. And I was ready.

Griffin grabbed my arm as I passed, hauling me ahead of the other man. "I've got her," he announced. Then in a quieter voice, only to me he said, "You're fighting the only woman they have right now in the cells. Melinda is, uh..."

"Twice my height?" I whispered. I snuck a glance over my shoulder, but our companion seemed so miserable he wasn't paying us any attention.

Griffin rocked his head from side to side. "That, too. But she's a convicted murderer. Somehow, she got in with the Ravens. They used her as an inside source to take out women in the Camp."

*The Camp? But that meant...* "Are you telling me she killed other humans she was imprisoned with...because the Ravens told her to?"

He nodded. "That's exactly what I mean."

Being with Ten made me realize there weren't sides anymore. There was just a bunch of people in a really shitty world trying to survive. The more we fought amongst each other, the less strength we had to fight the elements. For Melinda to kill other humans, other prisoners, that was lower than low. She of all people should know how vulnerable captivity made you. And instead of trying to help her fellow captives, she exploited their weakness. For the first time, a spark of anger took over the fear still simmering in my stomach.

We were walking down the hall, and I could hear the low murmur of a crowd build to a dull roar the closer we got. I opened my mouth to say something, but fell quiet when the hard hand of the other man grabbed my shoulder. "Awfully quiet now, aren't you? A night in the cells usually does that."

I tensed my shoulders, wanting him to remove his hand from my body—*now*. But I needed to keep a level head if I was going to survive this, and being annoyed with this asshole wasn't going to help things. I shrugged away, and we all fell back into step.

Griffin pushed open a set of double doors, and I squinted against the bright spotlights beaming through. There had been no natural light in the cell, so it was a stark contrast. The cries of the crowd were deafening, escalating when they saw the door had opened.

The other man pushed me through the door, and I stumbled outside. It took me a minute for my eyes to adjust to what I was seeing. I was in a massive ring, lined by staggered seats that rose high into the air. Every seat was filled by a screaming patron, demanding blood—they didn't care whose. In front of me was the Cage. It was smaller than I was expecting, maybe the size of Ironforge's market. It was tall and domed, an imposing structure made of wire. There were two doors on either side. Scattered around on the concrete floor were random tools and weapons. A hammer. A rusty scythe. A shovel. These people had come for a show, and they were going to get one.

Across from us, at the other door stood a tall woman, glaring at me. Her face was stone, and from what Griffin said, she had done this countless times before. What was one more? My chest tightened, and my fingertips tingled. I wasn't sure I could feel my feet anymore. But here we were. The time had come, and I needed to be ready whether I liked it or not. The other man started to unlock the door, and the crowd cheered. Griffin grabbed my shoulder, taking the chance to pull me close again.

“Listen, Rissa. These people, they're here to be entertained. They don't care if you live or die, as long as they get a good show. But you're here to *live*. Play it smart, and don't get caught up in the emotions of the Cage.” With that last bit of advice, he pushed me toward the now open door. I tripped through, catching myself before I landed flat on my face and the crowd laughed. I understood what Griffin meant now. The crowd was almost like a third person, the people acting as one brain, overwhelming your senses with their lust for blood.

The door slammed shut behind me, and a disembodied voice boomed an announcement. “This is a fight to the death. The round will begin when the countdown ends. May the best man win.”

The voice began to count down from ten, and the crowd joined in. My heart raced, ricocheting through my chest. Across the cage, Melinda looked at ease, completely calm in her surroundings. *Seven*. Meanwhile I tried to take everything in. The shovel to my left was a good weapon to keep Melinda back, but I would quickly tire wielding it. The hammer would be a good ally, but it was closer to Melinda than to me. Ten's words came back to me. I needed to tire her out. Let her chase me around for a bit. *Five*. Wear her down, and then maybe I would be able to gain the advantage. I didn't want Melinda getting near the scythe, or the shovel—anything with length. I needed to keep my distance. *Three*. My brain was on overdrive.

*I just needed to stay away from her long enough to survive.*

*One.* A buzzer sounded, a line directly to my heart. Melinda jumped forward. I waited half a second to see which way she moved before I darted to the right. I didn't want to be completely on the defensive, but right now I had no choice. I had to stay away. I sprinted to the other side of the cage, ignoring all the weapons. I didn't have time to stop and pick one up right now. I needed to evaluate.

Melinda stopped, hands on her hips as we watched each other. "You're an awfully pretty pet." She took a step forward, and I took one to the side. "Awful shame that's all you are to him. A pet. A plaything for him to use and dispose of when he gets tired of you."

She was trying to get to me, trying to break me down mentally. I couldn't let her. "Don't talk about things you know nothing about. Maybe, just don't talk at all," I hissed. I jumped to the other side of the cage, grabbing the wire to steady myself. Whatever the Cage was made out of was strong, and had very little give to it. But right now, I was tired of talking. I needed Melinda to do more running if I ever wanted to be on the offensive.

I darted across the cage, and she followed. And again. I wondered how long I'd have to do this before she began to tire. She definitely wasn't as quick as I was, nor as light on her feet. She was probably used to winning from sheer size, and most people in the cage probably didn't care if they lived or died. I cared. I wanted to live. And I wasn't letting Melinda kill me. "Come on pretty pet. Let's play. The crowd is getting bored of your games. They want blood."

She was right. The crowd's cheers had died down to a quiet rumble, dissatisfaction filling the air. They weren't happy with my game of keep-away. Too bad for them. I was going to play it smart. I was taking note of things, like how Melinda seemed to favor her right side, and how her left foot dragged slightly as she walked. These were weaknesses I could capitalize on.

I ran to the other side of the cage again, but this time I was caught off guard by Melinda picking up the rusty scythe. The wind whistled as she swung it, and I knew she had just gained

an advantage. I was so distracted by Melinda's new tool, I looked over my shoulder at the wrong time, and tripped over the hammer. I went down hard on my knees, and the crowd roared, certain this misstep would be my downfall. Melinda seemed to think so, too, and she dragged the scythe on the ground as she made her way over to me. I struggled to my feet, backing away just as she swung the scythe in my direction with a vicious smile. I pulled back as much as I could, but the tip of the rusty blade still caught my shirt, grazing along the flesh of my stomach.

"Fuck!" I screamed. I clutched at my stomach, my shirt already damp with blood. It was only a surface wound, but it fucking hurt. I hobbled away as fast as I could, trying to stay on top of Melinda and her scythe. Keeping away from her while she had a weapon didn't seem to be as smart of a plan, so I needed a plan B. I gripped the frame behind me as I circled the cage, keeping my back away from Melinda. She followed me, swinging the scythe from side to side. "Pretty pet," she sing-songed. "Such a pretty pet. I bet you bleed even more prettily. Let's find out."

Her words took me back to a different time, a different pain. Ten's gentle words, telling me how pretty my blood was, as he carved the inside of my leg. I had dealt with worse pain than this and turned it into pleasure, hadn't I? I could do the same right now. I could ignore the burning in my stomach, and the ache in my ankle. I just needed to gain the advantage. If only I could climb the cage. I clung to the frame as we circled, and Melinda took another step forward.

*That was it.* Climb the cage. If I could get high enough, I could get on Melinda's back. Maybe I could choke her out from there. But she wouldn't be able to touch me. Ignoring the pain shooting through my ankle, I jogged across the cage, closer to Melinda than I had been, and the crowd cheered. This crowd was bloodthirsty, hungry for violence. I knew somewhere in there Ten was watching. But the noise and the swell of people were overwhelming, and I would've never been able to find him. I just had to know he was there, and that I couldn't let him down.

Melinda's scythe scraped along the floor. I shook the cage to make sure it would hold my weight, and then I climbed, sticking my feet and hands into the holes created by the frame. I couldn't hear the crowd over my heart anymore. I felt rather than heard the scythe swinging through the air. But I was high enough now, and right when Melinda turned to close the distance between us, I leapt, wrapping my arms around her neck, and swinging onto her back. Melinda was so stunned by my sudden movement, she nearly dropped the scythe, staggering backward. For a moment I thought we were both going to go over and that would be the end of it. But she regained her balance, and I swung my weight so I could wrap my forearms around her neck more thoroughly.

"You fucking bitch," she snapped, swinging her scythe wildly. "Get off my fucking back, you whore!"

I clung to her body even as my stomach burned, fresh blood pooling from my cut. I gripped my forearms the way Bear had shown me, pulling back and cutting off Melinda's air supply the best I could. She choked and gasped, flipping her scythe backward. She landed a few piercing blows to my forearms, but she couldn't get anything to stick unless she wanted to slice her own neck. One more wild swing sliced through my shoulder. I screamed, enough pain piercing me that I nearly lost my grip. The crowd screeched, wild with the scent of blood. I tightened my grip, and Melinda dropped her scythe, clawing at my arms with her nails.

Realizing this was taking her nowhere, she staggered us both over to the cage wall. Turning away from it, she slammed backward. The firm cage didn't offer any leeway, and my head smashed against the hard metal. "Fuck!" I cried. My grip on her neck loosened, but Melinda realized her advantage now. She forced me backward into the cage again, my entire body shuddering with pain. Again, she smashed me into the metal. Something cracked in my side. I clung to her neck for all I was worth. I knew that if I loosened my grip, and fell off her back that would be it, and I would be done.

But as she smashed me against the cage wall again, my head bouncing off the metal with a painful shake, I realized

maybe I was done either way. Maybe this was it for me. I had fought hard, and I had given it my best, but maybe it wasn't enough. The crowd chanted, ready for her to be done with me. They already knew who had won and who had lost. *I'm sorry*, I thought. *I'm so sorry I failed*.

My vision blurred around the edges. My heart stuttered once. Twice.

*But I wasn't ready to fail. I wanted to live.* I took a deep breath in, preparing myself for the blow that would shake me off her back entirely. She didn't have her scythe anymore, but she wouldn't need it to kill me once I fell off.

I wasn't done living. I wasn't done seeing all life had to offer, because I knew it had to be more than what I had seen. I wasn't fucking *done*. I ignored every bit of pain radiating through my body, and with a wild cry, I turned feral, leaning forward before Melinda could smash me into the cage again. Using every bit of strength I possessed, I sunk my teeth into her neck, and ripped out as much flesh as I could.

I caught something. I knew as soon as my teeth went into it. There was so much blood everywhere, spilling and spluttering from Melinda's flesh. It filled my mouth, a thick iron taste that made me want to retch. But I couldn't think about that now. Melinda sank to her knees with a keening cry, more animal than human.

I stumbled off her back as she clung to her neck, trying to keep body parts that shouldn't see the light of day inside her skin. It was like she was trying to hold herself together while the blood spewed out between her fingers. I wiped my face, a sticky residue remaining. She was down on all fours, but she wasn't done yet. If I wanted to live, I needed to finish the job. And fast.

The crowd was chanting again, this time for me. I hated it. I wanted them to stop. Just the same, I couldn't stop the urge growing inside me, the one that demanded I claim my life, and declare it as mine. Only one thing stood in my way. *Melinda*.

As Melinda held herself together, I surveyed the weapons. The shovel was too far away, and the scythe lay broken

underneath her. The only thing left was the hammer. I picked it up, turning back toward her. Desperation and sadness fought inside my body and soul as I watched this woman who had done so many bad things, prepare herself to die at my hand. I had done this. And despite how bad a person was, did they really deserve to die for sport? For the craze of a crowd that screamed and hollered around her? Was that a decent death for anyone?

But. It was her or me. And I wasn't fucking done living. I lifted the hammer above my head, and looked into Melinda's crazed eyes. She had lost so much blood I wasn't sure she was aware of what was happening. Somehow that made it even harder.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

At the last moment, something shifted in Melinda's eyes. Something that acknowledged acceptance and respect, an understanding that this life made us do terrible things just to survive. "It's okay."

The hammer swung as if it were someone else's arm. Someone else's body. Someone else's mind. It had to be, because it wasn't mine. I wasn't here. I wasn't watching the hammer pierce Melinda's flesh, burying itself past bone and sinew, lodging into her brain. I didn't see her fall, collapsing to the floor in a puddle of death and sin.

The world went blurry and black around the edges. The roar of the crowd escalated to a violent pitch until it was silent. Dark and quiet, with only the realization of what I had just done to keep me company.

*What had I done?* What had I fucking *done*? I dropped to my knees, staring at my bloodied hands. The tears I expected didn't come, just sad gasping breaths, my brain struggling to make sense of the events that just happened. This was a sin that could never be wiped from my soul, no matter how hard I scrubbed. I had done what I had to do to survive, but I never expected it to feel so dirty.

A strong set of arms wrapped around me, rough hands brushing away the hair from my face. They kept me from



looking at the body I knew was there. Instead, I looked up into Ten's face. He shook his head. "Look at me. Look at me, Rissa!" I looked into his deep eyes, trying to find something to center myself in, something to moor myself down before I floated away. His hands gripped my face, his thumb stroking my cheek. "You are good. Do you hear me? You're good. You did what you had to do."

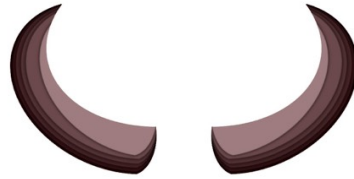
The tears came now, streaming down my face. I sobbed, crying for whatever was left of my morals.

Ten just held me, wrapping his arms around my body until there was nothing but the two of us. "Shush, my sweet girl. You are good. You are still good."

I clung to him and I cried, falling to pieces in his arms while he held all the shattered bits of my soul together.

## CHAPTER 22

# TEN



Rissa was slipping through my fingers, and all I could do was watch. All along I had expected to lose her. But I had anticipated her running away. Realizing what a monster I really was, and leaving me in the night.

I didn't expect her to leave me behind while lying in my bed. I didn't expect her to run away while being cradled in my arms. But here we were, Rissa's soul slipping through my fingers, bit by bit.

After the Cage, I had carried her home, gathering her into my arms, shielding her from the taunts and cheers of my people. She was limp, sobbing softly. I knew the feeling the Cage brought out in you. The knowing that it came down to them or you, and how badly you wanted to be alive. So you turned off your morals, your better judgment. You shut yourself off from reality, and did what you needed to do to survive. But nothing with a price that high went unpaid, and eventually the debt would be collected. The toll for killing another person, even to save yourself, was your soul.

The only difference between Rissa and myself was that I had been bred for this. I had experienced violence daily since I was young. The darkness Rissa had inside her was a different kind. But killing people for sport didn't happen in the villages, no matter how bad it got.

I ignored everyone on the street, the open stares and calls. I kicked open my front door, and carried her up the stairs, past her room. She had seen what lay beneath my skin, and I saw

the weight her bones carried. Inviting her into my bedroom was the least I could do.

I bundled her into bed. She rolled on her side, away from me. I was at a loss. All I could do was reassure her, but how far would my words really go? At the end of the day, they were empty if her heart couldn't hear me.

I stretched out behind her, cradling her to my chest. She collapsed back into me, and I wasn't sure if she was even aware she did so. But she did, and that was a step. "Deliciae," I whispered, running my hands down her arms. "Deliciae. You did what you had to do, my sweet girl. I wish this life were a better place, a place where we didn't have to make such decisions. And I am so sorry I put you in that position. So if you're going to blame someone, blame me. Put the weight on me. I'll carry it."

She shook her head, her hair tickling my shoulders. "It wasn't you. You're right. It's this life. It takes away our ability to be good. It was bound to come to this at some point. I'm just... I'm just... I'm just glad Ettie didn't have to see that." She broke into tears again, and all I could do was hold her.

So I held her. I told her she was good, just like she had told me in the library. I held all her broken pieces while she grieved a life she never had. For days, she lay in bed. I couldn't get her out for anything. Her flesh wounds healed quickly. The emotional ones were slower. I offered the finest foods, trying to tempt her with treats I had bought from the market. When I left, I no longer locked her in, instead leaving an anxious Griffin in the living room in case she needed anything. I ran her baths, watching them grow cold as she tossed and turned in bed. I offered her my love. I offered her everything I thought she needed, everything I had to fix that missing piece her soul was craving—the piece that told her she was *good*.

I began to doubt if any of us really knew what *good* was. Because all I knew was this woman with the messy hair and the heavy soul was so fucking good, and she cried herself to sleep at night thinking she was anything but. Maybe our definition was archaic, and needed to be changed. Our souls were a scale, a spectrum of darkness and light. To think that

Rissa held herself in the same spectrum as my father, who was truly evil, just felt completely wrong.

I just didn't know what I could do to make her see that. If I needed to breathe for her, I would. I would be her lungs until hers chose to work. I'd be her heart, her soul, I would do whatever I needed to do until she came back to me, because above anything else I knew I wouldn't survive if she didn't.

I carried a tray of food up to my bedroom, deciding that if Rissa wouldn't come to the kitchen, I would bring the kitchen to her. So far, the only things I had managed to get her to eat were small bowls of soup, or bread with butter. But today would be different. A large piece of chocolate cake towered on the tray, alongside a bowl of fresh strawberries, so red and ripe I couldn't help but pop a few into my mouth. Rissa would love them. I could only imagine her face when she tasted how sweet they were. I would support her for as long as she needed, and carry the burden of her guilt even longer than that, but if I could tempt her to come back to me with sweetness and sugar, I would do that, too.

I was more bitter than sweet, I knew that. But right now, Rissa didn't need bitter. She needed someone to remind her why she had fought so hard in the Cage, why she had wanted to stay alive so badly. When I returned, she was in the same position I had left her in.

“Rissa, it's time to get up. I'm going to open the curtains. It's a beautiful day.”

She muttered something unintelligible, and I set the tray on the small bedside table. I walked over to the curtains, opening them wider than I ever had, letting the light encompass the room. In the streets below, people milled about, more active than normal since the Cage. Something about the fight brought a sense of normalcy back to the city, and made people feel safe once more. But Rissa merely covered her head with the blanket, burrowing deeper into the bed. With a sigh, I sat next to her, the bed sinking beneath my added weight.

“Rissa. I love you. I will be here for you as long as you need. But we should get you out of bed.” When I pulled back

the blanket covering her head, she curled into herself, until I pulled it back completely. She looked up at me, her eyes broken and filled with a heartache I wanted to wipe away. “Oh, my sweet girl.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears. “It’s never going to go back to the way it was, is it?”

I shook my head. “No. It won’t. But sometimes that’s the beauty in life. It never stays the same. It gives us endless chances to reinvent ourselves. It’s an endless cycle of evolution. Maybe, just maybe, you’ll like the new Rissa even more than the last one.”

“What if I don’t?”

I ran my hands over the tangles in her hair. I really needed to get her in the tub, to wash and brush all these knots. Small steps. “I’ll like you enough for both of us then. I promise I’ll like every single version of you, in every single life. Good, bad, or a dozen kinds in between. I’ll love you forever, Rissa.”

“You shouldn’t,” she whispered. “You deserve someone who is strong enough to fight for their life, and not crumble to pieces afterward. Someone who has confidence in their decisions.”

“You’re right on one thing. I don’t deserve you. But you’re mine just the same, and I’m keeping you whether you like it or not.” I was quiet, stroking her hair, and she settled her head on my lap. This was progress. She was coming to me, instead of me going to her. Small, microscopic baby steps were still steps. “You’ll come back to yourself, *deliciae*. It’s not going to happen overnight. But little by little, the fire will grow inside you again.”

A thought occurred to me. Maybe I had been going about this all along. Maybe Rissa didn’t need quiet comfort, and gentle reassurance. Maybe she needed something to remind her why she fought so hard in the first place. Why she was still alive, and how the fire was still burning inside her. I lifted her head off my lap, sliding off the bed. I had everything I needed in my room. I just needed to collect it all. Once I had gathered it, I returned back to Rissa’s side.

“Sit up.” I pulled on Rissa’s arms.

“Ten, no...” she complained, twisting in my grasp. “Let me sleep.”

“You’ve slept enough. And it’s *Master*.”

That caught her attention. I hadn’t forced the title since before the Cage, and my use of it now was enough to shock her. Good. I wanted her to be shocked. I wanted her to feel something other than numb. I jerked her harder, until she was sitting up, leaning against the wooden headboard.

“What are we doing?” she asked quietly. There was hesitation in her voice, but if I wasn’t mistaken, there was also a glimmer of excitement in her eyes. It was dim. But it was there.

“I’m reminding you what it means to be alive,” I snapped. I grabbed one of her wrists, binding it in the rope, until it was snug around her. The other end of the rope, I secured against the headboard. I repeated the process on her other arm, until Rissa was stretched out, crucified on my bed before me. “If you’re good, and you listen, I won’t bind your ankles as well. Understood?”

With wide eyes, she nodded. I knew she wanted to ask what was coming next, but she was holding herself back. She wanted to be *good* for me. All this talk of good made me sick. We should just *be*.

I knelt in front of Rissa, taking her in for a moment. She was dressed in one of my shirts that was massive on her, but for the life of me I couldn’t get her to change. Her hair was an absolute wreck, yet she was still the most stunning thing I had ever laid eyes on. I wanted to slowly strip my shirt off her and lick every inch of her skin. I wanted to bite the soft flesh on the inside of her thighs, kissing my mark her skin bore. I wanted to fuck her mouth, stuffing it so full of my cock she didn’t need to worry about talking. I wanted to use her for my benefit, and my benefit alone.

But this wasn’t about what I wanted. This was about bringing Rissa back to me. I collected my other things I had

brought over, and set them in front of me, Rissa's careful gaze watching me the entire time. I struck the match, lighting the candle. "Have you ever felt the heat of a flame, *deliciae*?" I murmured, running my hand backward and forward across the top of the flicking wick. "Have you ever wanted to reach your hand into the fire, just to see how much you could handle?"

I blinked up at her, and she stared back at me. Pieces of her danced in the flames reflected in her eyes, pieces she was trying to bring back together. I could just make out the hint of confidence, the flicker of defiance. She wanted to strike back. She wanted to fight. "Are you going to set me on fire?"

I smiled, shaking my head. "No. But I'm going to see how much you like playing with it." I shuffled closer to Rissa's outstretched arms, being careful not to drop my candle. "You need to remain completely still, Rissa. If you move at all, I could burn you more than I want to."

Her arms tensed, and if she could've pulled away from me, she would've. But she was tied in place, completely stuck at my disposal. "So you aren't going to burn me?"

"Oh, I'm going to burn you. Just not enough to leave a mark. Watch." With a painful slowness, I lifted the candle higher, until the heat was barely brushing the skin of Rissa's arm. "Don't. Move."

For what it was worth, she held as still as she could. I ran the flickering flame along the underside of her arm, against the soft, vulnerable flesh. I kept a safe distance away, moving slowly along her body. She would feel the heat creeping closer, but it wouldn't be enough to scar her. The only scar I wanted her to ever wear was my initials on her thigh. I pushed the flame closer, and above me, Rissa moaned. "It's hot, Master."

"It's supposed to be. Is it too much for you? Do you want me to stop?" Her skin was beautiful so close to the flame, golden and brown. I pushed the flame closer, slowly increasing the intensity of what she was feeling.

"No," she whispered.



“No, what?”

“No, Master, it isn’t too much for me. I...oh...” Her words trailed off as the flame licked against her wrist. I looked up to see her eyes drifting shut, her body taking over as she felt everything I offered.

Pain. Pleasure. Freedom.

“Do you want more?” I asked. I dragged my free hand up her thigh, circling it around her leg and squeezing tightly.

“Yes, please, Master.” Her legs were trembling beneath my touch, but she kept her arms completely still against the flame.

I held the flame closer, the air in the room pushing until it tickled her arm. She moaned again, and I smiled. This was the closest I had come to the real Rissa since before the Cage. Maybe all along I had been trying the wrong things. “Do you feel that, Rissa?”

“The flame?” she asked.

With heavy eyes she met my gaze, and I shook my head. “No. Do you feel alive?” The flame was dangerously close now, and Rissa cried out from the heat. I pulled back, but only slightly, before moving my flame to another location. There was a lot of trust and vulnerability in this position, how she was bared to me. I was going to take advantage of it. “Does the pain make you feel alive, Rissa?”

“Yes, Master,” she gasped. “Oh, yes.”

I slipped my hand up her thigh, sliding her panties to the side, and stroking her slick pussy. She was wet, nearly dripping for me, for the flame, for the *pain*. “You’re such a dirty girl, *deliciae*. Such a dirty fucking girl, needing me to fuck her because she hurts.” I pushed the flame closer again before pulling back. “Do you remember what it feels like to be alive?”

“Yes!” she cried, as I slipped one finger into her tight little pussy. I slid it out again, before thrusting back into her once more. Her hips rocked against me, her eyes closing.

“Look at me,” I demanded. Her gaze shot to me once more. I held the flame against her skin, fucking her sweet cunt with my massive finger. “Being alive isn’t all pleasure. It’s pleasure wrapped in pain. It’s sweetness cloaked in sin. You can’t have one without the other. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master,” she whimpered, fucking herself on my finger.

“You will burn for me,” I commanded, staring into her eyes, letting her know I saw every piece of her. I saw the broken and the whole, the dark and the light. I wanted it all, and it all was mine. “You will burn for me, because that is how we know we are fucking alive.”

I held the flame too close to her skin, for only a second, just a moment to hear the sweet scream of pain she offered, mixed with the cry of pleasure as I curled my finger deep inside her. Then, with a swift movement I pulled my finger out of her, and extinguished the flame before tossing the candle to the side.

“Please fuck me,” she cried. “Please, Master, I need you inside me.”

I had no words to offer her. I had only me. I ripped her panties off, tossing the shreds, before pulling my pants off and letting them join the mess on the floor. I didn’t bother untying her. I kind of liked her like this, exposed in a way for me and me alone. I rose to my knees, fitted my thick cock right against her dripping pussy, and pushed my way inside.

I wasn’t gentle stuffing her full of my cock. She needed to remember how to feel. I wanted her to feel everything—the good, the bad and everything in between. She cried out as my barbs and my ridges hit everything they were supposed to, and she squirmed in her bindings. I held onto her waist, steadying her against the headboard, and leaned back.

“Oh!” she shrieked, my cock going deeper inside her than she had experienced before. “Oh, fuck.”

“I want you to burn for me, *deliciae*. I want you to burn for me in more ways than one.” I thrust in and out of her, her tight

pussy built for taking my cock. “I want you to feel everything. Do you feel my cock fucking you right now?”

“Yes!” she cried. “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

I leaned forward, biting the soft swell of her shoulder, nearly piercing the flesh. She cried out again, rocking her hips into me. She was starting to tense, to tremble beneath my touch. “Do you feel the pain, Rissa? They coexist. You can’t have one without the other. Just like us.” I drove my cock in harder, wrapping my hand in her hair and pulling her head around so she was looking me in the eyes. “Come for me. Look me in the eyes, and come for me.”

Her eyes begged for the release I offered. I fucked her harder, until I felt her pussy tighten around me, and she screamed out her reminder that she was alive.

I held her tightly by the waist once more, driving my cock into her deeper, harder, fucking her through every aftershock of her orgasm until she was a moaning mess in my arms. I roared out my own release, pumping her full of my thick, black cum.

Still inside her, I brushed the hair away from her face, looking deeply into the eyes I loved so much. “I’ll remind you as often as you need,” I murmured.

She smiled at me. I pulled out, watching my cum drip out of her and down her legs. Fuck, it was sexy seeing her so full with my release that it was spilling out of her. I took some of the cum that had dripped down, using my finger to push it back inside her pussy. One day, I would pump every one of her holes full of my cum, and make her walk around the city, knowing she was marked by me in every way possible.

I sighed, and untied Rissa’s hands, kissing her wrists, ruby red from the bindings. She collapsed into my arms, and I kissed the top of her head before laying her down in the bed, pulling the blankets up around her.

I wrapped my arms around Rissa’s waist, and for the first time in ages she spun in my embrace so we faced each other.

She rested a hand on my face with a softness I had missed. A softness I only associated with her.

“I’m here,” she whispered.

I settled my forehead against hers, listening to her breathing slow and deepen. *I’m here*. Two words that held so much more meaning than they should. I’m not letting go. I’m not losing hope. I’m not hiding. I’m staying. I’m fighting. I’m alive.

*I’m here.*

## CHAPTER 23

# RISSA



Coming back to life was a slow process. One day, you realize you've been asleep. You've missed out. You haven't been going through the motions. But somehow, you're still alive. You're still here. You blink awake. Once. Twice. Three times. Let your eyes adjust to the bright light streaming through your bedroom window, and wonder how the fuck you got there.

Eventually your feet begin to work again. They twitch, wanting to move, to walk, to run. Your hands follow suit, your fingers ready to hold on once more.

You notice your breaths. You can make sense of the thoughts in your head again. But the last thing to come alive is your heart. Your reminder of why you fought so hard in the first place, muddling through the fog and shadows.

I woke up one day and realized I had been missing out. I got out of bed, and walked downstairs to the kitchen, where Ten stood over the counter preparing some food. When he spun around and saw me, he immediately dropped the bowl of eggs he was holding. The dish with eggs shattered, pieces flying every which way.

"Hi," I murmured. I smiled, the sensation feeling more natural than I expected it to.

"Hi, yourself." He looked at a loss for words. "I was just making you some breakfast."

"Can I..." My words caught, my voice not used to stringing so many words together. "Can I eat it down here?"

Ten nodded. "Of course you can."

I sat down at the large island and watched him work. He was cooking eggs over the fancy thing he had called a stove. It cooked things like our fire did at home. Every so often he would look over his shoulder at me, as if he couldn't believe I was here.

Still, coming back to life was weird. Just because my body decided it was time to start again, my mind still had a ways to catch up. I was hopeful, though, and hope was an emotion I hadn't experienced in a while. I would take what I could get.

Ten set a plate down in front of me, piled with eggs and thick bread slathered with butter, and sliced tomatoes, ripe and red. My stomach growled, and I looked down in surprise. I was *hungry*. Ten handed me a fork with a small smile.

"Eat," he commanded.

I didn't need to be told twice. I dug into the food, scarfing down as much as I could before he even sat down with his own plate. He didn't make a move to touch his food, just watched me with contentment clear in his eyes. "What?" I asked through a mouthful of egg.

He shook his head. "You're beautiful."

I dropped my fork, reaching up for the bird's nest I was sure my hair looked like. I had egg and tomato all over my face, and I couldn't imagine I smelled nice either. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Truly." He took a bite of his egg, smiling at me, then pointed with his fork. "Eat. Finish your plate."

I scooped up another bite of food, moaning when it touched my lips. How could I have forgotten how good food tasted? I must have lost my mind. I looked up at Ten, suddenly feeling very grateful for where I was. "Thank you," I murmured.

"For your eggs?" He raised a brow. "You don't need to thank me for breakfast."

“For all of it.” I toyed with a piece of tomato on my plate, spearing it with my fork until it split. “For not giving up on me.”

“You don’t need to thank me for that, either.” He set down his fork, staring at me as if he could see past all my defenses. “I told you. You’re mine. That means I’m not going anywhere. Ever. If you need someone to hold you, and tell you it’s all going to be okay, I’ll be that person. If you need me to burn you, and make you feel alive, I’ll be that person. I will be whoever you need me to be for the rest of your life.”

I spun the tomato around on my fork, unable to look away from his piercing gaze. “I want you to be you.”

“Good.” Ten pushed his plate away, letting his half-eaten breakfast take the place of my nearly demolished one. “Now, eat. You need it.”

I grabbed his plate, happily stealing the rest of his food.

“Now, I don’t want to push you...” Ten started.

I looked up at him, suddenly worried, fork frozen halfway to my mouth. “But?”

“Nothing bad.” He chuckled quietly. “I just thought you might want to take a walk to the market with me. Get some fresh air. Some daylight on your skin. But if you’re not up for it, that’s okay, too.”

Outside. To the market. With other people. People who had seen what I did. “Does everyone know?” I whispered.

Ten reached across the table, grabbing my hands in his. “Listen to me. You have nothing to be ashamed of. There is an unspoken rule here that we don’t discuss previous Cage fights citizens might have been involved in. Even if someone was there, they wouldn’t speak of it to you.”

I nodded. That made me feel a little better. “I can really go to the market, though? It’s okay?”

He looked at me, an intensity I hadn’t seen for a while sparking through his eyes. “You earned your place, *deliciae*. If anyone has a problem with you, they can take it up with me.”



His possessive nature, and the way he wanted to protect me, lit something alive inside of me. That craving I had for him and his body never went away. If anything, it was stronger than ever, telling me just how badly I needed him, and needed him to claim me as his. But right now, I just wanted to make him proud. “Let’s go to the market.”

“Finish eating, and get dressed. I’ll meet you at the front door.” The smile on his face told me I had made the right call.

I was suddenly excited about the prospect of leaving the house in the daylight, even if it was just to go to the market. I shoveled the rest of Ten’s plate into my mouth, and hurried up the stairs to my closet. I had been living in the same shirt of Ten’s since I got home, so the idea of putting on something that was mine felt strange. But I put on a dress I thought Ten would like, dragged the brush through my hair, and jogged back down the stairs before any doubt could creep into my mind, reminding me I didn’t actually belong here. That maybe I would be safer back in my bed, with the curtains drawn.

Ten stood at the door, looking as sexy as ever. He ran his eyes over my outfit, lingering on my face. “What? Do I have food on my face or something?” I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

He shook his head. “No. It’s just the most incredible thing to see your eyes so alive again. I didn’t realize how much I missed it.”

I walked the few steps between us, wrapping my arms around his broad waist the best I could. He hugged me back, and I would’ve been happy to stay like that forever. A reminder I had something worth fighting for, time and time again.

“Come on,” he murmured, pulling apart and tugging on my hand. “Let’s go.”

We walked out hand in hand into the blue sky. It was a beautiful day, without a cloud in sight, the sun warm but not overly hot.

For some reason, I expected people to stare at us the second we walked out the doors. But people hurried past, keeping their heads low to the ground, not giving us a second look. As much as it made me feel more comfortable, knowing I wasn't the center of attention, it was weird, wasn't it? "Are the people normally this...jumpy?" I asked under my breath as yet another person pushed past, not acknowledging us in the slightest. "Or is it me?"

Ten shook his head. "No. They're off. They had a few days reprieve after the fight, where they felt untouchable again, but I think it's faded. People are nervous about the Ravens. They want to do what they have to do in public, and hurry home."

I watched the people rush around us, not speaking to anyone else, completely set on whatever mission they were on. It was strange to me, to think that a monster would be afraid of anyone else. But there were hierarchies in every culture, and according to Ten, the Ravens were up there in terms of viciousness. "Why do the Ravens think anyone wants them in control?"

He shrugged. "I don't think they care. And I'm fairly certain there are some people inside Solaris who support the Ravens' claim. They think I'm too lax, that I've let the city slide since I've been in power."

I looked around at the lush grass lining the streets, and the rich vines that draped every building. I thought about the food Ten fed me, and the bath I would likely take when I got home. It didn't feel like the city was suffering in the slightest. In fact, it felt like they had more than enough to share with the villages on the outside of the wall, the villages like Ironforge who were truly suffering. "I don't think you're doing too badly for yourself in here."

"No. We aren't. But some of the older generation still remembers a different time, when we were feared by name alone, and we ruled with an iron fist. I've tried to teach many of them we can be powerful through other methods." He squeezed my hand, and raised a brow. "Not that an iron fist isn't fun every now and again."

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head. “I’m just not sure the people in here know what it’s really like to suffer. They might have a different viewpoint on everything you’ve done for them if they experienced true hunger. Real fear.”

Ten nodded. “I agree, completely. But how do you teach that to someone who has always had everything? The citizens inside Panshaw don’t have all the luxuries we have inside Solaris, but they’re still comfortable. But the people of Solaris have never known anything but what it feels like to have it all. So when I took over for my father, and decided we were going to be more sensible about things, some people didn’t take it too well.”

“Like your father’s council.” We were walking into the market now, similar to the market back in Ironforge, just bigger. And nicer. And cleaner. The stalls were well-made, selling fresh fruit and meat, unlike the raggedy stalls back at home that had thin rabbits hanging from the rafters. For a moment, I was angry. Livid even. How dare they think their society was slipping, when people outside the walls were literally starving? My own sister, so smart and beautiful, was living off porridge for days on end. They had an abundance here, and probably wasted so much. But instead of giving it to the people outside the walls of their rule, they let it rot, just like they had left us to do. Ten squeezed my hand again.

“Exactly. When the Ravens are offering to put our kind back on top, to make them all important once more, some people see that as a benefit. They aren’t seeing all the trouble that comes with it. The Ravens in power wouldn’t be good for anyone.”

He pulled me up to a stall filled with fresh vegetables, most of which I had no idea the names of. I ran my hungry eyes over the bright colors, my stomach growling once more, despite having fed it minutes ago. Something about seeing all this food at my fingertips made me constantly hungry. It also made me miss Ettie. How she would love to see this, all the new things for her to experience. She could learn so much more here than she ever could outside of the wall. Ten’s library alone would be filled with knowledge for her. I looked

up at the stall keeper, a smaller, red monster with tentacles dangling from the side of their face. I smiled, but they wouldn't meet my gaze. Sadness was beginning to take root inside my heart once more, quickly spreading inside the holes that still lingered there. If I wasn't careful, it would swallow me whole without too much effort.

Thankfully, Ten noticed, and growled quietly. "Rissa has earned her place inside the Labyrinth, which is more than I can say for some. You will treat her with the respect she deserves."

The monster immediately met my gaze, looking at me with curiosity. "I apologize. I've never actually interacted with a human before." Their voice was soft and feminine.

I reached my hand out. "Well, then. I'm Rissa. It's nice to meet you."

"Glinda. A pleasure." Their hand was larger than mine by half, and covered in tiny suckers that clung to my hand even after I let go. "Now, what can I help you with?"

I knew everyone wouldn't be as easily won over as Glinda. Some were bound to judge me without speaking to me, despite Ten's reassurances. I just needed to remember the only person's judgment that mattered was Ten's, and he felt like I belonged here. I knew I belonged at Ten's side, and eventually, hopefully, I'd feel like I belonged inside the Labyrinth, too. My eyes drifted to the other stalls. The one next to us was covered in baked goods, and I had my eye on something round and covered in sugar. After Ten got his vegetables, I'd make him take me there. I looked around at the other stalls, taking in the quiet happenings of the market. Then I froze.

Across the grassy street from us was a man I only recognized as if from a dream. A nightmare, really. He was the other man who had carried me out of Ten's house, the one who brought me to the Cage. His body was completely gray, rough in texture. His face was more human than most inside the Labyrinth, which was why he was so easy to spot. Anxiety tightened my chest, lacing through my lungs. A pit grew in the bottom of my stomach.

“Ten,” I whispered, tugging at his arm. I didn’t want the man to realize I spotted him. “Ten, look.” I gestured over my shoulder, and Ten followed my gaze.

“Doyle. That fucking asshole. Who does he fucking think he is, showing his face out here again after what he did?” Ten turned back, nodding to Glinda. “I’ll be back. Thank you for your time.” He looked down at me. “Stay here with Glinda. Don’t move.” Then he took off down the street, sneaking the best he could.

Like fuck I was going to stay there, though. I followed Ten through the throng of people, dodging anyone who came too close. Luckily, no one gave me a second look. Including Ten, who didn’t realize I had followed him. His face was absolute thunder as he cornered the man I now knew as Doyle next to a stall. They stood half in the alley, as Ten loomed over him. I tried to listen best I could. “...dare you show your fucking face again?”

The man didn’t seem bothered. He noticed me before Ten did. He nodded his head toward me. “Your little pet doesn’t listen well, does she?”

Ten reached out his hand, slamming it into the man’s throat, and holding him up against the brick wall behind him. He turned around to look at me, exasperation clear in his gaze. “Rissa, you don’t need to see this. You should’ve stayed with Glinda.”

I tipped my chin up, meeting his gaze. “I wasn’t going to let you do this on your own.”

Doyle laughed, a choked sound from around Ten’s hand. Ten rolled his eyes, turned back Doyle, and dropped his hand. “Speak.”

“Oh, I expected you to just kill me where I stood, like you did with my comrade. Nasty business, that. The whole cutting his fingers off and all.” My face must have showed my surprise, because Doyle grinned, a nasty smile I wanted to wipe off his mouth. “He didn’t tell you about that, did he? Yes, your boyfriend here cut off the fingers of one of his elders, and

made him eat them. The coroners nearly lost their lunch when they realized.”

I closed my mouth, trying to pretend I wasn't shocked. Ten didn't look back at me when he addressed me. “He touched you, *deliciae*, and I told them they would pay for touching you. I could've done a lot worse.” His voice dropped an octave. “A lot fucking worse.”

“Ten,” I whispered. “You did that for me?”

“I told you, I would do whatever it took to keep you safe,” he muttered. “Including dealing with my father's lowlife council who still seems to think they have importance in my life.”

“We have more control than you think,” Doyle chirped, grinning at Ten. “You're wrong to underestimate us.”

Ten's hand snatched out again, but this time he was dragging Doyle into the alley, pulling him down the darkened corridor away from the noise. I followed, unable to look away from this scene playing out in front of me. A man who would kill for me didn't seem like the kind of thing I should want in my life, but there was something kind of sweet about it.

No one else followed us into the alley, too caught up in their own business, so it was just me, Ten, and Doyle, who stared at us with wide eyes. “I told you all, you would regret laying a hand on her.” Ten's voice was low and serious. “And I always keep my promises.”

“What's your plan? To just take us all out one by one, all the people who worked so hard to build this city you want to seemingly destroy?” Doyle spat at my feet. “Your father deserved better than you. This city deserves better than you.”

“Rissa, I'm giving you one last chance to leave. You don't need to see what comes next,” Ten gritted out.

I shook my head, despite him being unable to see it. “I'm not letting you deal with this alone.” We were a team, weren't we? We shared the burden. And if he felt like they needed to be dealt with, then I would be there for him.

“What, you don’t want her to see you kill me? I just watched her kill another human with a hammer. I think she can handle a little violence.” Doyle waggled his eyebrows at me, and I suddenly felt very sick. I couldn’t let him see it though. I couldn’t let him know he had struck a nerve, played on the guilt that still lingered in my belly. I would be strong, untouchable.

Ten shrugged, an easy, carefree gesture so at odds with the situation. “I thought I would hurt you until you told me where the rest of the council is. I could pull your intestines out, inch by inch. I could very carefully open each vein in your arm until you bleed out over this alley, completely alone. I heard that’s an agonizingly slow way to die.”

“Mal left the city, and Neo is hiding out at home.” The words came out in a rush, all at once. “Just let me go. I gave you what you wanted.”

Ten scoffed. “That’s the thing about your council. You’re all about a better Labyrinth, a better world for monsters. But when push comes to shove, you turn on each other in an instant to save your own skin. It’s disgusting, really.” He reached out, and with a quick and efficient twist, snapped Doyle’s neck. He dropped with a heavy thud, and Ten kicked at the body. “You... you are the ones who make me ashamed to be what I am.”

He quickly turned to face me, placing his hands on my shoulders. “Are you okay? I’m so sorry you had to see that.”

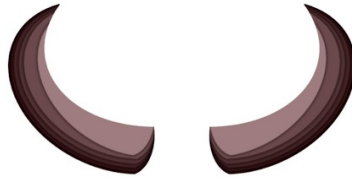
I rested my hands on top of his. Surprisingly, I was okay. I felt nothing looking at Doyle’s crumpled body. Nothing except acceptance, and a quiet sense of reassurance that he wouldn’t bother me again. “I’m fine, Ten. That needed to happen.” I looked up into his eyes. “Now what?”

He looked down at me, taking me all in, making sure I was actually okay. “Now, we get Hades to deal with this mess, and go get you that donut you were looking at.” He stroked my cheek with his thumb. “Then we go and find the last two members of my father’s council and make sure none of them can touch you ever again.”

## CHAPTER 24



# TEN



Rissa's excitement over a donut so soon after she had watched me kill someone kind of made me laugh. I really should've made her leave the alley, especially considering it was her first day back on her feet, but she was insistent, and he had made me so mad. My father's council disgusted me. They encouraged each other's twisted worldviews, and then turned on each other when the going got tough. I might have changed things inside the Labyrinth that had been the same for years, but at least we had loyalty inside my council. At least we had each other's backs.

I snagged one of the kids at the market, and had him run off to find Hades to deal with the body. It was noon, so he was probably at the bar. He wouldn't be too hard to find. And me killing a man in the streets would be enough excitement to pull him away from whatever he was doing.

Rissa walked next to me, happily munching on her sugared donut. "I thought cake was the best thing I had ever eaten," she mumbled through a full mouth, "but why didn't you ever tell me about donuts?"

It was incredible to see her coming back into herself. I knew she still ached, still grieved, and that feeling would likely never go away. Killing someone changed you. But you adapted. You learned how to acknowledge it, accept it, and move through it. I shook my head. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me for not introducing you to donuts sooner."

We strolled through Solaris, past my house. I was set on finding Neo today, and Rissa was quite insistent that I wasn't

leaving her back at home. So together we walked, one of us planning on killing for the second time today, one of us happily eating a donut. It was an odd juxtaposition, but I wasn't about to complain and jinx anything.

Neo was the one who had drugged Rissa as Doyle carried her downstairs. As Griffin held me back, I watched him drop the chloroformed rag over Rissa's mouth and nose, and watched her stop struggling. He would pay for that.

I felt bad for the last death. I really should have dragged it out a bit, for Rissa's sake. Doyle deserved to suffer for touching her. His death was too quick, too painless. I wouldn't make the same mistake again. "I'm sorry," I muttered, not expecting the words to leave my mouth.

"For killing Doyle? Don't be. It honestly makes me feel safer. Like he won't be coming to look for me, and throw me back into the Cage."

I grabbed her hand, pulling her close. "He won't. None of them will. No one else will ever lay a hand on you again, that I promise you. But no, I'm sorry for killing him so quickly when he deserved to suffer for what he did to you."

Rissa laughed quietly, leaning into me. "I don't have to worry about him anymore. For that, I'm grateful, no matter how it happened." She was quiet for a moment, popping the final bit of donut in her mouth. "Ettie would love these."

"You should bring her some." The words escaped me before I could stop them. I had told her we would visit her family, but that was before the Cage. I wasn't sure how safe it would be for us both to leave the Labyrinth now. There was so much unrest. "I mean..."

She stopped, smiling sadly at me. "It's okay. I'm not sure I'm ready to see them yet either. I'm not the same person I was when I left. What if they don't accept me?"

My heart tightened, grieving for her. The thoughts racing through her mind must be destroying her. "They will. They're your family, Rissa. They'll love you no matter what. And if they don't, then you still have me. You will always have a

place here. Always. I don't care how many people I have to kill to make you see that."

"Will people accept *us*, though?" she asked. She had a bit of sugar on her lips, and I wanted to lick it off, kiss her deeply.

"I don't care if people do or don't. They can accept us, or they can leave." I pulled her in front of me, staring deep into her eyes. "I mean that with every ounce of my being, Rissa. You and I, we're meant to be. Now, come on. Let's deal with this piece of shit so we can go home."

I tugged on her wrist, and she followed me down the street, until I pulled her further forward. Despite the dynamic we had inside the house, and within the bedroom, she belonged at my side in everything else. I wanted to make sure everyone else was aware. I stopped in front of Neo's house. It was similar to mine, built in a time of opulence and luxury. And if Doyle was to be believed, he was hiding away inside. I looked down at Rissa. "Do you want to wait outside?"

She shook her head, messy waves tossing from side to side. "No. Whatever is waiting for us inside is both of our problems."

I fought to hide the smile spreading across my face, and headed up the stairs. I rapped on the door once, and an elderly butler answered the door. "Hello?" His face dropped into a mask of shock when he saw who was on his boss' front stoop.

"Is your employer home?" I snapped. My anger grew inside me once more, having only dissipated mildly watching Rissa eat her donut. But it was there, waiting for Neo. I wouldn't make the same mistake this time. Neo would suffer.

The butler nodded, looking wide-eyed between myself and Rissa. "He's...um...he's in the drawing room."

"Leave." I stepped to the side, letting the butler scurry past, racing down the steps without a second look back. "Come on." I pulled on Rissa's hand, stepping into Neo's house.

It was decorated similarly to mine as well, cold marbles and minimal furniture. Of course, for being one of my father's

closest friends, it didn't surprise me.

“Greeves, who was it?” Neo stepped out of a door off to the side, looking entirely too put together for hiding at home. As soon as he saw me, he stumbled. “Tennyson, what are you doing here?”

I smirked, dropping Rissa's hand to take a step closer. Unlike Doyle, there was no false confidence to be found. Neo was immediately nervous by my presence. As he should have been. He should have been absolutely terrified of me. I was an angel of death, coming to collect my payment. “We have unfinished business, Neo. You see, you wronged both of us when you touched Rissa. That's a crime I can't let go unpunished. You put your *filthy fucking hands* on her. You really thought you would get away with it?”

“How...how did you know I was home?” Neo stammered, taking a step backward, tripping and catching himself on the doorway. He looked behind him, trying to find an escape. But there was no escape now. His house was as good as a cage, keeping him trapped inside until I was done with him, and he knew it.

I looked over at Rissa, who stood with her arms crossed, watching him carefully. She still had a sprinkle of sugar around her lips, and even though her eyes were filled with fury, her body was unassuming. Too bad for them they didn't realize what a fighter she was. “Your *friend* told me where to find you. I didn't even have to hurt him. All I had to do was threaten pain, and he folded. Told me where you and Mal both were.”

“I...I don't know where Mal is. But I can give you anything you want. Anything. I have money, lots of it. I'll leave the Labyrinth, if that's what you want. I'll leave. I swear, and you'll never see me again.” Neo clutched the door frame like it was his savior.

I smiled. I found it funny how different people reacted when death loomed. In my mind, you had two options. You could face it head on, and fight it, or you could throw bribery at it, cowering in its presence. My father's council was the

latter. All of them. When it came down to it, they were more afraid of death than they were of losing themselves. I wondered what about dying made them so fearful. Were they nervous they would have to own up to all of their sins in the afterlife? Face all of their wrongdoings?

If that were the case, if I were them, I'd be afraid to die, too.

But Rissa, on the other hand...they had thrown Rissa to the wolves, and expected her to cower around her death. But she'd straightened her shoulders, and met it head-on. She had owned her power. She wasn't afraid of death. She was afraid of never truly *living*.

I ran my finger along the glass table next to me, where a row of trinkets lined the edge. I picked up the first one, a statue of a monster holding the sun. I turned it over in my hands.

"Ten, I swear. Anything you want."

I lobbed the statue overhand, watching it smash above Neo's head as he shrank away. "I don't want your money, Neo. I want you to pay with your soul."

"I don't know where Mal is!" he shrieked, pressing himself against the wall.

"I don't care where fucking Mal is," I snarled. I picked up the next trinket, a looking glass, throwing it toward Neo. This time it smashed closer, hitting inches away from his face. "I want you to understand you messed with the wrong fucking person. I want you to suffer."

"She was supposed to die! She was supposed to die in the Cage, and you were supposed be banished, and none of this was supposed to fucking happen!" He was sobbing now, a weak sack of a man, a sorry excuse for a being.

"But she's not fucking dead, is she?" I grabbed the next object on the table and pulled my arm back, ready to throw it at Neo. He cowered away, shrinking inside himself. "She's not fucking dead because she's a fucking fighter. And she deserves to be here. You all thought wrong, didn't you?"

He shook his head, pressing back against the wall. “She’ll never belong here. Never. She can kill as many people as she wants, as brutally as she wants, it doesn’t make a difference. She’ll never be accepted. Never have a place. You’re a fucking fool if you think otherwise. A fool!”

*Fuck.* I glanced over my shoulder, at Rissa, who was still standing, but was shutting down. Neo’s words had struck her deeply. I lowered my arm, taking the few steps between us with a slowness I didn’t truly feel. I wanted to smash his head in. I wanted to slice him from top to bottom in one fell swoop. I wanted to do these things, but I wouldn’t because he deserved to suffer. The woman standing behind me deserved better for the hardships she had suffered. The statue in my hand was long and thin, an abstract piece of gold. Because why wouldn’t you have a long golden stick on display in your house while the worthless humans outside the gates starved? I twirled it around in my hands, closing the distance between myself and Neo.

“Don’t touch me. Don’t fucking touch me,” he hissed, pushing away from the wall.

“Shh...” I murmured. “Shh. We don’t want to show weakness in front of a human, do we? And a woman, no less.” I snuck another glance at Rissa. She was fading fast, falling back into herself. “Rissa. Stay with me, *deliciae*.”

“I’m here,” she whispered. “I’m here.”

“Good girl.” I snapped out my wrist, piercing Neo’s side expertly between two of his ribs. He gasped, with a quiet shriek, like a balloon losing all its air. “I’ve just pierced your lung,” I explained calmly to Neo. “As much as I would like to just kill you quickly, I promised Rissa you would suffer. And we all know I always keep my promises. You won’t die quickly. Your lung will fill up, and you’ll drown in your own blood. Seems fitting, no? Drowning on your own bullshit. You can pull it out, of course, but then you’ll just die quicker. It would probably be awfully painful. Your choice, though.”

“You’re...a...fucking...” Neo’s breathing was heavy, and he stuttered, barely able to get the words out.

“A monster? Yes. I am. But I’m a monster doing the right thing.” I smiled, bending as I picked up a shard of glass. “Rissa, you still with me?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “I’m here.”

“You hear what I said, *deliciae*? He’s going to drown in his own blood.”

“Good.”

I twirled the sharp bit of glass in my fingers, poking it into the tip of my finger. A tiny drop of blood welled up. Perfect.

Neo couldn’t move, holding his side as if that would stop the plan I had put into motion. Too bad for him. I took my shard of glass, and with an exquisite slowness, dragged it down his forearm. Blood followed my trail, veins opening at my request. “You won’t bleed out from me opening your veins either. It’ll just hurt. It’ll hurt like a bitch. But don’t worry, you’ll be awake and aware while I open all the veins on your arms.”

I turned to his other arm, glass in hand, but Neo tried to pull away. With a quick snap of my hand, I yanked his arm straight, glaring at him. “Stay still, or I’ll make it hurt worse.”

“Fuck you,” he muttered, trying to pull away. But my grip was tight, and he was stuck.

I opened the vein on his other arm, enjoying the way his dark blood pooled against my touch. *Suffer*, I thought. *Suffer for your sins*.

I thought of Rissa as I opened another vein, Neo gasping in pain in front of me. I thought of the way she fought. I thought of the way she smiled. I thought of the way she called to the demons inside me, not thinking any differently of me because of them.

I opened another vein. I thought of the way she was a better person than most of the people inside the Labyrinth. How she was right. Maybe we needed to learn to live without, so others didn’t suffer as much. Maybe it was time for a change.

I thought of Rissa again and again, making the inside of Neo's skin come to the surface with my glass until he was crying and moaning in pain, unable to speak. His lungs would be struggling, I knew, trying to keep up with that awful statue shoved in his side. I thought of Rissa, until I knew what I needed to do.

As much as I wanted to drag this out, Rissa needed me. She needed me to tell her it was all going to be okay. That she was okay. I smiled up at Neo to see his face sagged in pain. "See you in Hell." With a quick swipe, I sliced my glass across both of his wrists, opening his arteries.

He collapsed to the floor with a strangled gasp, blood pooling from all the cuts I had inflicted. I left him choking to turn to Rissa. She was standing still as a statue, her eyes fading. She was going to that place again, that place where her mind protected her. *His* words had put her there. I raced to her side, pulling her to me. I didn't care that I was covered in Neo's blood. I only cared about her.

I pressed my hands to either side of her face, smearing blood across her freckled skin. "Listen to me, *deliciae*. You listen to *me*, not him. He is not your Master. *I* am. Do you hear me?"

She nodded, her eyes still distant, but I knew somewhere she was listening to what I was saying. I just had to make her believe it enough to pull her out of wherever her mind was taking her. It was protecting her, saving her from this awful part of life she had no business seeing. But my Rissa, my girl, she was far stronger than most. She could do this.

"You belong here. You belong at my side. Next to me, the whole way through this fucked up life. I'll protect you as much as you need, but I won't shield you. You're mine, Rissa, but this is yours. All of this can be yours if you want it to be. The city. The people in it. You deserve to be a queen. *My* queen."

She met my gaze for the first time, her eyes coming alive with a sharp fire. She looked around the room, at the body



collapsed on the floor next to us, and the blood covering the floor. “Queen of what exactly? Queen of the ruins?”

I pulled her face to look back at me, not giving her the space to stare anywhere but into my eyes. “It depends on what you do with those ruins, *deliciae*. Build something new out of them. Something worthwhile. All I can tell you is that you belong here. If you don’t like the way something is done, we’ll change it. If you want to burn down the Cage, I’ll stand back and watch you do it. Belonging doesn’t mean a place is automatically perfect. It just means it’s worth the effort to turn it into something beautiful.”

I watched as the green of her eyes shifted, coming alive once more, bringing her back to me. I told her I would bring her back as many times as I needed to, and I meant it. I would do whatever it took to keep her by my side, and keep her safe. I watched as comprehension flooded her gaze, realizing I meant what I said.

“I belong here,” she repeated. “I’ve earned my space inside the Labyrinth.”

“You’ve earned it, *deliciae*. You’ve earned it through blood. You clawed your way through the darkness, and no one can take it from you. I won’t let them.” I squeezed her cheeks, staining them with the blood of our transgressions, the sins that bonded us. “I love you. You are my *deliciae*. My whore. My treasure. My everything. You are mine, forever, and I’m yours.”

“I’m yours,” she murmured, placing her hands on top of mine. “I’m yours, and you are mine. Forever.”

“Forever,” I repeated. I could stare into her soul for all eternity. I bent to kiss her, to give her everything I had to offer. I would protect her until my dying day, of that I was certain. I began to deepen the kiss, but a knock at the front door startled us both. We pulled apart, looking at each other, and then at the body next to us. There was no time to hide the mess. *Fuck*.

“Knock, knock.” The front door swung open, and Hades jogged inside the house, looking around at the destruction with a glimmer in his eyes. His smoke was filling the room. “So, as

much as I would love to discuss what just happened here, we have a problem. We just got intel from Grif's guys. The Ravens are close, and they're moving in on Solaris, fast."

I scrubbed my hand over my face. "How many of them?"

Hades twisted his lips to the side, trying to decide how to answer my question. "All of them."

## CHAPTER 25

# RISSA



Next thing I knew, we were racing through the streets following Hades, the odd gray smoke that trailed him guiding our way. Somewhere in the city I could hear shrieks and screams. My heart sank. War had come to us. Ten knew it was going to happen. I just didn't think either of us expected it to be today, with Neo's blood still staining our skin.

I wasn't sure what help I was going to be, but I was willing to do whatever it took to defend my new home. *Our* home.

Except we weren't headed toward the sounds of the screams. This block was too familiar. I knew where we were.

We were back at Ten's house, standing outside the massive double doors.

I shook my head. "Absolutely not. I'm coming with you."

"This one isn't up for debate. You're staying here." Ten pointed toward the house. "Don't make this more difficult than it needs to be."

"I'm not going back into that fucking house without you," I hissed.

"You are. You'll go into that *fucking house* where you'll be safe. I don't have time to debate this," he snapped. His eyes narrowed, and he reached out and grabbed my wrist. "I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe, Rissa. Including locking you in the house in the middle of a war you have no business being a part of."

I tried to pull away from his grasp, but he held on tightly. “I’m not going in there just so you can lock me inside again. If you don’t have time to debate this, then take me with you.”

“Be sensible. Do you really think I’m going to be able to fight the Ravens if I’m worried about your safety?” Ten took a deep breath, pulling me toward the stairs again. “Get in the house. It’s the safest place for you.”

“No.” Tears were ready to spill over at the thought of being locked inside the house again. At the thought of Ten going out to fight while I remained locked inside, not knowing whether he was okay or not. “Don’t make me. Don’t lock me inside. I thought we were past this. I can help you. I can fight.”

“Rissa.” Ten’s voice was tight, tense with unspoken nerves. “Your tears will not help your situation here. I will only be able to fight if I know you’re safe.”

“No.” I shook my head, looking to Hades for support but he only shrugged his shoulders. He had no more sway over Ten than I did. “No.” The rogue tear slipped out of my eye, but before I could swipe it away Ten did for me.

He looked down at me, holding my tear on his finger. “Are you angry, *deliciae*, or sad?”

“Angry. I’m pissed.” I tried to pull away from him again, but he held me tightly, reaching down to pin my free wrist with his other hand. “Let me go, Ten. Let me fucking go.”

“I like it when you’re angry, *deliciae*,” he murmured. “I like it a lot.” His thumb stroked the inside of my wrist, and when I looked up at his gaze, I found him aching for me in a way I didn’t expect.

“We’re in public. Hades is right there,” I whispered. Another tear slipped out, rebelling against my emotional control. But maybe I could use this to my advantage. If he was distracted sexually, too turned on to think straight, maybe he wouldn’t lock me inside again.

Ten pulled me closer, his lips a whisper away from my own. “Does it look like I give a shit? I’ve seen him do ten

times worse. Besides, it would do well for him to remember who you belong to.”

Another tear. Ten’s tongue slipped out between his lips and he lapped at my fury. I trembled in his touch, his cock hard against me, even through the clothing we wore. “And who exactly do I belong to?”

His hands tangled in my hair, pulling my face back to look at him. “Me. Me and only me. I can give you a lesson, if you’ve forgotten.”

“Here?” I looked over to Hades, who had suddenly disappeared from the vicinity. It still didn’t change the fact we were on the streets though, out in the middle where anyone could walk by and see us. There was a war starting only a few blocks away, we were fighting, and somehow Ten seemed hellbent on fucking me. “Now?”

“They can get by without me for a couple of minutes. I need you, Rissa. I need this.” His hands released my wrists, pawing at my dress. “I need to know you’re mine.”

My body had always reacted to Ten in a way I couldn’t control. I was desperate for him, even though I shouldn’t be, craving his cock and his body, and the dark things only he would give to me. “Of course I’m yours...*Master*.” I leaned up on my tiptoes, pressing my lips to his in an insistent kiss.

He tugged at my dress, his hands sliding beneath the skirt, finding their way to my aching pussy. He knew what I needed without having to ask. With a thick finger sliding along my pussy, he smirked at me. “I didn’t realize you being angry was such a turn on for me...but all things considered, it makes sense.”

“Does it?” I murmured, slipping my hands under his shirt, caressing the hardened body beneath. In these moments, when our bodies took over, there was no difference between us. There were only two people, trying to satisfy their desperate cravings.

“When you’re angry, you’re alive.” He pulled my hair hard, wrenching my head back at the same time he sank two

fingers inside me. I cried out, and he clamped his lips to my neck, kissing me hard. “I want you to always remember what it’s like to be this alive.” He spoke against my neck, the words vibrating against my skin. His fingers thrust inside me, stretching me out in a way only he could.

My hands flared out, in search of something to hold onto, but there was nothing within reach. I was at Ten’s mercy, held up by his grip, and his grip alone. His fingers stilled inside me, but in my current position, I couldn’t do anything about it.

He stood me upright, running his finger along my cheek. “I want you to feel everything, *deliciae*. Hate. Love. Anger. Joy. I want you to feel it all to the absolute extreme.”

Ten pulled my hair harder. I winced with the pain, another tear escaping to join the others.

He smiled, not releasing his grip. “Cry for me. Cry in pain. I want you to get angry. I want you to hate me. I want you to *feel*.”

His grip was painfully hard, pulling the tender skin of my scalp. I was sure he was pulling my hair right out of my head, his fingers still filling me but not moving. “Ten, please...” I whispered. I wasn’t sure what I was begging for.

“What do you want, *deliciae*? Do you want more pain?” He snapped the wrist that held my hair in place, and I whimpered. “Or more pleasure?” His fingers slipped out, before thrusting back inside me once more. “Or do you crave both?”

“Both.” I met his gaze, hungry and longing. His eyes were as dark as the night sky, and filled with just as much possibility. “Give me everything, Master.”

“As you wish.” He brought his lips down in a bruising kiss on my flesh, his hand pulling my hair hard enough that I couldn’t stop myself from crying. But above it all were his fingers, teasing and pulsing, fucking me until I couldn’t think straight. I was stretched, full, in absolute agony, and yet it wasn’t enough.

“Please, Master, I need more,” I whimpered. People could see us on the streets, I knew, but I didn’t care. I just *needed*.

Ten dropped my hair and pulled his fingers from me at the same time, holding me upright before I collapsed to the ground. He pushed me to the stairs. “Hands on the top step, *deliciae*.”

I turned and did as he asked without question, placing my hands on the top step of his front stoop. Behind me, Ten unfastened his buckle, his pants dropping. “I want to feel everything.”

The cool air hit my ass as Ten swept my dress above my hips, caressing my skin with a large hand. “You will. You’ll feel every last bit of my cock inside you. Every ridge. Every barb. I’m going to fuck you until you bleed, *deliciae*, until your blood is dripping down your thighs, mixed with my cum so everyone knows you’re mine.”

My pussy clenched with his words, so demanding, and yet so sensual. The broad head of his cock was right at my slick opening. He didn’t force his way in just yet. He teased me, inching inside little by little. I gripped the stair for all I was worth, trying to hold onto something—anything.

“Mmm...do you feel that?” he whispered. “Do you feel my barbs dragging along your delicate flesh? I want you to feel every single one of them.”

And I could. The barbs dug into me deep inside, dragging my pussy, the sweetest pain I could ever imagine. I gasped, my back arching into Ten. He grabbed my hips before I could push myself onto him.

“Not so quick. I told you, I want you to feel everything.” He pulled back, the barbs clinging and grabbing me. I hissed out a breath, my clit aching for more. He pushed in again with a grunt, the barbs sliding in deeper. “Fuck, *deliciae*, you’re taking me so well.”

I groaned, dropping my head to the stair, the sensations taking over me. I was overwhelmed, my scalp still aching



from where he pulled my hair, my hips bruised from his heavy grip, my pussy on fire from his thick, dangerous cock.

“Now the ridges. You like those don’t you? You like feeling all my edges when I’m deep inside you. Do I reach places no one else ever has? Do I make you feel things you thought were impossible?” He pushed in slowly, the ridges teasing every nerve imaginable. My legs trembled, and he gripped my hips harder. “You’re doing such a good job for me.”

“Please, Master, please, I need...” I trailed off, another ridge pulsing deep inside my pussy with a slowness that was going to drive me crazy.

“More? Do you need more?” With a violent thrust, Ten bottomed out inside me, his thick cock stretching me out every which way. I could feel every barb and every ridge, and I cried out as I adjusted to him. “Good girl. Now tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” I whispered. “All yours.”

He pulled back, and thrust inside me again, both of us moaning as he sank inside. “Louder, *deliciae*. I want this whole goddamn city to know who owns your pretty little soul.”

“I’m...I’m yours...” I stuttered, my mouth unable to keep up with his hard assault on my aching pussy. He slammed into me again and again, the sharp edges of his cock inflicting as much pain as his thickness gave me in pleasure. Desperately, I grabbed onto the stair. It was too much. It wasn’t enough.

“Louder,” he commanded. “Fucking scream my name.” Another thrust, deeper this time, and I was certain I could feel him in my womb. He was going to destroy me from the inside out, and I’d ask for more.

“Holy fuck.” I sucked in as much breath as I could, trying to keep up with his pounding when all I wanted to do was press down on my aching clit. “I’m *yours*, Ten! Fuck, I’m yours.”

His cock didn't stop, his barbs digging into me, his ridges smoothing out the pain. I was riding the line, and I didn't know what I wanted more of. Desire dripped down my legs, and I was certain Ten had gotten his way and there would be blood mixed in. One of his hands left my hip, grabbing my hair again, pulling my still-sensitive scalp. The pain was exquisite, so sharp my vision blurred around the edges, until all I could focus on were my hands holding on for dear life. "Do you feel it all?"

"I do," I cried. And I did. Pleasure. Pain. Sadness. Fear. Excitement. I was alive, and it was a nerve-wracking feeling.

"Cry for me, *deliciae*. Cry for me, and I'll make you come." His hand tightened in my hair, and I shrieked. "Show me those pretty emotions, Rissa. Let me see that beautiful anger. Show me."

With immense effort, I looked over my shoulder, meeting Ten's gaze as he fucked me wildly. His eyes were dark and alive, compelling me to give him more. In exchange, mine were wet with tears, a mixture of pleasure and anger keeping me going. I needed a release *now*.

"You're so pretty when you cry," he whispered. The hand holding my hair dropped, sweeping low underneath me until he found my swollen clit, brushing over it. Just the single swipe of a fingertip was enough to make me shatter, coming around Ten's cock with a scream. "There you go. I've got you. Come."

I thrust my hips back against his cock, shaking, my orgasm rocking through me. Wave after wave of bliss enveloped me, until I dropped my head to the step, the cool stone keeping me grounded when all I wanted to do was drift away. Behind me, Ten was still grunting, still whispering how beautiful I was, until my name was a vicious roar on his lips, and his hot cum was spilling into me.

He clung to me for a minute longer, our combined releases dripping down my legs. He pulled out of me with a groan, running his cock down the mix on my thighs. "Everyone will know you're mine now, *deliciae*."

I straightened my dress while Ten pulled his pants back up. I wasn't sure who had seen all of that, and I really couldn't care less. Ten, while still tense, seemed to be in a much better mood. I hoped it meant he wouldn't protest when I tagged along to wherever the Ravens were.

Except Ten turned to me without a word, picked me up and swung me over his shoulder. I kicked, pushing at his bulk. "Put me the fuck down. Ten! Right fucking now."

Hades who had magically reappeared now that he was needed, swung open the front door. *Traitor*. I'd have his fucking ass. Ten carried me up the stairs while I kicked and screamed and pushed, trying to get out of his tight grip.

He deposited me in my bedroom, closing the door behind me as I raced, jiggling the doorknob with all my might. It was too late, the click of the key sealing my fate.

I banged my fists on the door. "Ten! This isn't fucking fair. Let me out!"

"Rissa," Ten's voice broke on the word, and he was quiet for a moment on the other side of the door before he tried again. "Rissa, I can't lose you. I can't. This is for your own good. I promise you, I will be right back. But I can't lose you."

"No. No. No! Ten. Don't do this." Bubbles of panic were rising to the surface of my stomach, knowing I was trapped in this room once more. I thought we were past this. "Ten, *please!*"

I rested my head against the door, hearing the soft thunk as Ten did the same on the other side. "It's for your own good," he murmured, his words muffled by the heavy wood. "I'm just trying to keep you safe. One day...one day you'll understand." Footsteps trailed away from the door, echoing down the stairs.

"Ten!" I screamed. "Ten, don't do this. Don't do this, *please!*" I couldn't sit by and just wait for him to come home. Not again. Ten was already down the stairs, the front door closing with a heavy thud. I ran to the window, watching him and Hades race through the streets together.

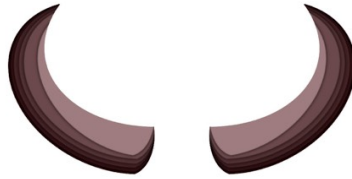
I didn't cry. Not this time. Not now. I was pissed. I was pissed, and I was trapped.

But not for long.

If I had anything to say about it, I wouldn't be trapped ever again.

## CHAPTER 26

# TEN



I ran through the streets of the Labyrinth with Hades, a pit in my stomach and a hole in my heart. I knew I had to keep Rissa safe. I knew it with every fiber of my being, but I still wasn't sure if I had done the right thing. When I shut the door behind me, my heart cracked. When I turned the key, my hands shook. It felt wrong after everything we had been through, to keep her locked inside my house. I should have offered her more trust. Maybe I could've kept her in the house without locking her inside her room.

She wouldn't have stayed though. She would've followed me, trailing me through the city like she had when we went to find Neo. And if she followed me into battle, I wouldn't be able to focus on the fight at hand. What if she saw something that shocked her brain into retreat again, and I couldn't get to her in time? I couldn't risk it. I couldn't lose her.

As much as I supported her while she found her footing again, remembering what it was like to be whole once more, Rissa did the same for me without realizing it. Just by being there, being herself, accepting me for who I was, my flaws and all...she brought me back to life in a way I'd never be able to repay her for. The thought of losing her because she was too fucking stubborn to stay behind was too much for me to imagine. I couldn't do it. I couldn't.

Still, my feet froze, pulling me to a stop on the street. Hades paused as well, cocking his head to the side as he looked at me. "What's up, bossman?"

I closed my eyes, thinking for a moment or two. I knew I needed to keep her safe. I knew I couldn't lose her. Not again. But the bigger part of me was screaming that I would lose her anyway if I didn't set her free. Fuck's sake. "I have to go back home and unlock Rissa's door. I can't leave her like that. It's eating me alive."

Hades gave me a brief nod. "Can you do it quickly? I'm not sure how much time we have."

"Yeah. I'll be back before you know it." I turned, ready to jog back to my house, when something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. I watched in horror as one of the taller buildings only a few blocks away sank to the ground. A moment later, the air was knocked out of my chest, and the sounds of an explosion rattled my ears. I felt it in my core. In the distance, I could tell it was one of the buildings in Panshaw, an apartment building filled with families. The Ravens had just bombed an apartment filled with countless lives just to make a point. My heart sank with the building crumbling in on itself. "Fuck. Come on."

Rissa would have to wait. She would have to forgive me. I'd explain everything to her, and make her understand. I'd tell her I was on my way back to fix things and make amends, but this needed to be dealt with now. She'd understand.

Our feet couldn't carry us fast enough to the wreckage, the streets filled with a thick black smoke that made it hard to breathe. My chest hurt, aching for my people who had been inside—people who didn't deserve any of this. Could I have stopped this? Could I have done something different to prevent the deaths of innocent lives? I pushed myself faster, running harder. Everywhere, people were screaming, crying for their loved ones. Bedlam broke out in the streets, and Griffin and his troops were nowhere to be found. All I could see were dusty citizens, confused and scared.

We needed to get past the explosion. The Ravens wouldn't be too close, so as not to risk their own men. They had probably set the explosives up and were now ready to move in, to take advantage of our weakness. I faced Hades, screaming to be heard over the chaos. "I'm going to find Grif. Find

Draven, tell him to get these people under control. They're in danger out on the streets like this. It's what the Ravens want."

He nodded. "I'm on it." With a quick turn, he disappeared into the crowd, only the smoke that followed him lingering. I had no doubt he would find Draven. Hades had a knack for things like that, which made him an invaluable member of my council. But right now, I needed to find Griffin.

I pushed through the throngs of people, everyone too caught up in the destruction to pay me much attention. They shouldn't be out on the streets. I'd bet money on the fact this was what the Ravens hoped for. But Draven would be better at organizing them, getting them to listen and get them somewhere safe.

Over the crowds of people, I saw Griffin's lone horn, and took off in his direction. "Grif!" I called. "Griffin!"

He turned, catching my eye. "Thank fuck you're here."

I caught up to him, and the troops surrounding him. There was a mix of monsters and half-monsters, everyone looking concerned, but prepared. "What are we looking at?"

"The Ravens moved into Panshaw earlier this morning. We thought we had caught them, pushed them back far enough, but it was a diversion. They snuck the rest of their men through our openings when we weren't ready. And there's a lot of them—a lot more than I realized. Either we've had a shit ton of diverters, or they've been planning this for longer than any of us knew."

"Fuck," I muttered. "And the explosion?"

"Their handiwork." His face was grim. "I was evacuating these buildings when it dropped."

My heart. Those people, thinking they were so close to escape, only for it to be torn away from them. "How many did we lose?"

Griffin shook his head. "There's no way of knowing until the smoke clears. How do you want to play this?"



I pressed my lips together, running my eyes over Griffin's troops. "We take them down. We can't let them get away with this. If they want to play pretend in Beggar's Hole, that's fine. But they brought their shit into my neighborhood now. They killed my people. That can't stand."

"Agreed. I'll send half the troops through Panshaw, get them to circle back around so we can try and trap them in. They have a lot, but we still outnumber them."

Griffin went to speak to a group of men, and with quick nods, they headed out, disappearing through the black smoke. I hoped Griffin was right, and splitting up the troops was the right call. Because if it wasn't, and the full force of the Ravens knocked us on our ass, we were fucked. If they got through Solaris just as effortlessly, then they had a chance of getting to Rissa without resistance. That couldn't fucking happen. I clenched my fists at my sides, knowing exactly what I wanted to do to all of them. It was similar to what had just happened to Neo, just on a larger, more public scale. Neo was personal. This...this affected my city. *Fuck*. I hoped Rissa was okay. If she ever forgave me.

A sharp bird call cut through the air, piercing the wails of the people looking for their loved ones. I knew that call. It was the call of the Ravens. They were here. And they were ready to fight.

I grabbed two of the closest men, pulling them by their shirts. "Get as many of these people off the streets as you can. Now. *Go*." Civilians on the streets would only confuse us, and they were putting themselves at risk being there. They hurried off, and I turned to face the wall of smoke in front of us, Griffin's remaining men doing the same. No one trembled, although they must have been scared. They stood straight and tall, facing their fate with confidence. For that, I was proud of my people.

The first Raven stepped through the smoke, as if appearing out of nowhere. Their face was entirely chalked in gray and brown, camouflage even in the smoke. It was their calling card after all. The next stepped through next to him. And then a

third. And a fourth. Soon, there were too many to count, appearing through the smoke one right after the other.

A low whistle next to me caught my attention. Hades stood at my side, hands on his hips. “They really think they’re the chosen ones, don’t they?”

“Hades,” I snapped. “Please.”

He shrugged. “I’m just saying.”

Griffin stood with his men, everyone with their hands on their weapons, but no one moved forward. The Ravens stayed where they were, and so did we. I took a step closer through the crowd. It was impossible to tell how many of them there really were with the smoke. Could’ve been a hundred or a thousand. I hoped the men we had sent around would be here soon.

I walked closer, holding my hands in the air. Fury was pulsing through my veins, the same anger that drove me every single day. But I would bite it down, if it was best for my people. I would spare my citizen’s lives, even if I wanted nothing more than to rip the Ravens’ heads off, one by one. “There doesn’t need to be a battle here today. We can go back to our own spaces. Our own homes. We can keep our separate lives, and do what we need to do. This doesn’t need to come to war.”

A smaller Raven stepped forward, the crowd parting around them. The Ravens valued strength, so the fact that the one they had chosen to speak for them was smaller spoke volumes. “Are you willing to relinquish control of the Labyrinth to us?”

“No.” My voice was short and firm. “But I will not harm you if you choose to go back to Beggar’s Hole and remain there. This is a one-time offer. You have killed many of my people, innocent people. If you choose to remain here and fight, we will slaughter you until none remain.”

The Raven shook his head, gripping the machete tightly in his hands. “We are the *chosen ones*. The ones given the power when the world began again. We deserve to wield our power.

And you are over here running the Labyrinth with what, exactly? *Love?*” He scoffed, and the Ravens behind him began to murmur in agreement. “We heard you even live with a human. A human, meant to serve you and your needs. It lives with you as an *equal*.”

My blood boiled, pissed that he dared to speak about Rissa as an *it*. But I needed to stay calm and collected. Avoiding a war was best for my people. I needed to keep them at the forefront of my mind. “The Labyrinth will not be yours. You may return to Beggar’s Hole.”

“We are chosen. Chosen. Chosen.” A quiet chant began to echo through their numbers, eerie in the low visibility. Countless voices chanting, without bodies in sight. *Chosen. Chosen. Chosen.* Somewhere in the crowd, the bird call sounded again.

All Hell broke loose. The Ravens charged our ranks, men fighting with whatever weapons they had in hand. One of ours decapitated a Raven with a shovel, and at the same time a Raven blinded one of ours with his thumbs.

War was vicious and bloody, and I wished it could’ve been avoided, for my people’s sake. But given the choice between sacrificing some of my people, and them living underneath the Ravens’ rule, I knew what I would choose time and time again. I threw myself into the fray, smashing any camouflaged faces I could get my hands on. I grabbed the shoulders of a Raven who strayed too close, throwing my knee into his stomach until he keeled over. I grabbed the blade he gripped tightly, and ran it cleanly through his stomach. He dropped to the ground, and I whirled around to the next one, blade in hand.

Again, I sliced through the Raven, and the one after him. The blade was sharp, and for that I was grateful. But it seemed for every Raven I killed, there were two more in its place. The smoke rolled in like the tide, waves of visibility rising and falling. Sometimes you could see the entire battlefield, stretched out in the streets between the destroyed buildings. Sometimes you could only see your hand in front of your face. Men from both sides were falling everywhere, and still more

ran through the thick fog. It was unnerving to only be able to see a couple feet in front of you. Even when you thought you were alone, there was someone there. I found myself in one of those pockets of aloneness, the thick black smoke surrounding me. But I knew I wasn't by myself. I could hear the sounds of battle, even if I couldn't see them.

“You should've just given in, Ten.”

I spun around, trying to see where the voice came from. Finally, I spotted it. A camouflaged face rose out of the smoke, the smaller Raven holding the machete. “We aren't afraid to start from scratch to claim our rightful place. Even if that means killing everyone in Solaris to do so.”

He strolled through the fog as if we were on a walk together, casual and easy. I gripped the small knife in my hands, tiny and useless compared to his blade. “I will not give the Labyrinth over. Not in a million years.”

He shook his head. “You don't see how good life could really be for you. To be worshiped and revered for simply being yourself. All of your people.”

For a moment I thought of Rissa, on her knees before me. But then I thought of the way I had sank to my knees in front of her, and the way she had offered me her benediction even through my sins. I wouldn't threaten that. Not now. Not ever. “No.”

He shrugged. “You'll die, then. Maybe not today. But push us back, and we'll come back stronger tomorrow. We'll attack when you least expect it. We'll take that pretty little human from your bed and—”

His words stopped as I brandished my knife in his direction. “Say one more word, and I'll cut your fucking throat out.”

He smirked. “Did I touch a nerve? Mal did say you were sensitive. I didn't realize quite how much though.”

I froze. The sounds of the battle raged on around me, but my ears rang with the realization. “Mal?”

“Oh, yes.” The Raven nodded, smiling gleefully. “He’s back in Beggar’s Hole, telling us *all* your secrets. We couldn’t have done this without him. He told us the best time to attack, and when you’d likely be distracted and weak. We’re forever grateful for him.”

Mal had done this. My father had done this. *I had done this.*

With a lone, wild roar, I leapt, tackling the smaller man to the ground. He lifted his machete, but I snapped his wrist before he struck. His hand fell limp against his wrist, the machete dropping lamely to the ground. He screamed, but I didn’t care. I had done this. I had forsaken my people.

If I hadn’t pissed Mal off, if I hadn’t done a thousand things, maybe all those people would still be alive. I would pay for my wrongdoings eventually. But right now, right now, I needed to win this fight and get home to Rissa. I needed to hold her in my arms, and know she was safe. I tore at the Raven’s flesh with my hands, my nails, ripping him to shreds until he was little more than a smiling face and a wide set of eyes. His flesh hung in tatters around him, blood dripping from every orifice.

“Kill me if you want. Another will take my place. We aren’t a person. We’re a cause. A mission. We’re chosen, Ten. *Chosen.* And one day, we will rule the Labyrinth.” The smoke lifted, the battlefield revealed to me in its entirety. Men lay everywhere, others still fought. With their dirty faces, it was hard to tell the difference between us and the Ravens. “Look how many of us there still are. Can you really kill an enemy that can never die?”

He was right. There were still countless Ravens flooding the field, sneaking into apartment buildings. We were outnumbered. Our men were tired, coughing through the smoke. I saw Griffin fighting two Ravens at once, and in between him and myself was Hades, his grin apparent even from this distance. My heart sank, even as I knelt over my foe’s dying body.

Rissa. She was, as ever, my most prominent thought. My most important thought. All of this was for her. For her safety. Her protection. I couldn't let it be all for nothing. I had to do something. I would slay a thousand Ravens myself if it meant she was safe. I got up from the mutilated body coughing his last breaths, and turned to the battlefield. I would keep her safe, if it was the last thing I did. I would sacrifice my body for her life. She deserved a second chance. She deserved the opportunity to be who she wanted to be without fear of repercussions, or life tying her down. I would do everything in my power to give her that chance. I threw back my shoulders, and turned, ready to throw myself into the fray once more. For her. For Rissa. "I love you," I whispered, hoping the wind would carry my words through the streets, and into her ears. "I'll love you forever, *deliciae*."

Through the smoke, I could hear a cry. Thundering feet, racing through the streets. Up from behind the battle, through Panshaw, the rest of Griffin's troops appeared. They stormed the back of the battlefield, slicing through Ravens like they were boneless. With the smoke choking out my senses, I had forgotten about them, thinking they were already on the field, or worse, that they'd been taken. But with these new numbers, we could be on top again. We could take them out completely.

But the Raven's words echoed in my ear, even as I turned to join my men in protecting our city, our people. *Can you really kill an enemy that can never die?*

I didn't know the answer. All I knew was I was willing to try.

I would do whatever it took to get home to Rissa.

## CHAPTER 27

# RISSA



If Ten thought I was just going to sit back and let him lock me inside this room again, while he went out and risked his life, he was wrong. Besides, not only was he risking his life, an awful realization occurred to me while I watched him race down the streets out of view. The Ravens were here, desperate to take over. And Ten had said, if they did, they would enslave all of the humans in the surrounding villages.

Which meant Ironforge.

Which meant my family.

I needed to warn them, at the very least. Prepare them to take off at a moment's notice. While I had been kidnapped, and it worked out okay for me, according to Ten, the Ravens were different. I couldn't let my family fall into their hands, my mother, *Ettie*. No. I couldn't let that happen.

I tied my bedsheets together, knotting them as tightly as I could. I wouldn't have quite enough to reach the ground from the second story window, but I'd get close enough to jump to the bushes that lined the steps. From there, it was only a few blocks to the gates. I could find my way home easily enough from there. I had done it enough times in the past, right? Everyone would be too focused on the battle to notice me sneaking out. I'd scale down the wall with my makeshift rope, hurry through the streets, warn my family, and return home before Ten even realized I was missing. I might have to figure out a way back inside the gates, but where there was a will, there was a way. Easy.



I froze, my hands in the middle of knotting the sheets. Did I even want to come back here? Ten had locked me in here again, even though I thought things were different. I thought we were beyond him holding me captive. I thought...I thought I meant something more to him than just a trophy he could display, look upon every now and again, and fuck whenever he chose. But yet, I couldn't stomach leaving him. He really was just trying to protect me, wasn't he? Since the first day I met him, even though everything screamed the complete opposite. He had been there for me every step of the way, and allowed me to come into my own as a person. He pushed my limits, pushed *me*, and for that I was endlessly grateful. This whole locking me inside thing needed to stop though. Immediately. I twisted another blanket to the bottom of my rope, making sure it was secure. I would get out and warn my family. What I did after that... I'd have to see. I'd make my decision later, when I had the information I needed. After all, my family might need me. They might be struggling without my added income, without my help around the house. I couldn't abandon them again if they were suffering. I wouldn't.

I pressed my lips together, trying to think of happy things. The way Ettie would smile when I walked through the door. The hug my mother would give me. Even the boys would be excited to see me again after so long. And despite the luxury I had lived in here, it would be nice to be home again. It was comfortable there. Safe. I knew it like the back of my hand.

A loud crash thundered through the house, rattling the windows. I looked up to see a building falling in on itself, one of the apartment buildings near where Ten and Hades had been headed. Thick black dust billowed outward. I hoped Ten was okay. He would be, wouldn't he? He always was. The implosion just solidified how much I needed to warn my family. Ten could handle himself. My family couldn't.

I turned the handle of the window, half expecting it to be locked as well, but it gave with only a mild sticking. The windows were old, and Ten probably hadn't ever opened them in his lifetime, so why would he lock them? I carefully knotted my rope around the post of the bed frame, and tossed the rest out the window. It dangled, barely brushing the top of the

bushes. It would have to do. I ripped a pillowcase open, and wound it around my head, covering my face as much as I could, dangling another over my shoulders to protect from the dust. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and swung my legs over the window ledge. The rope groaned beneath my weight, but it held. I pressed my feet against the wall, shuffling down, grateful Ten hadn't thought to take my shoes away from me. This would be ten times more difficult barefoot, especially once I got out to the desert. I came to the end of my rope, the ground still a couple feet below me. I stretched my arms out as much as I could, my toes just scraping the top of the ground and let go. I stumbled to the ground, but caught myself before I fell completely, and smiled up at my work. It wasn't much to look at, but it had done the job. If it wasn't being used to run away from Ten, I thought he would've been pretty proud of my ingenuity.

I turned, and took off through the streets. I didn't know how much time I had, so there wasn't a minute to waste.

The streets were oddly silent, everyone occupied with the thick black smoke in the center of town. It made it easier for me, but my heart still thumped when I hoped Ten was okay. I ran to the gates, surprised to find one lone man guarding the exit when I got there, looking pissed he had been left behind. He turned, towering over me. "Hey! You! What do you think you're doing out on the streets?"

For the first time, I was grateful for my notoriety. I threw my shoulders back. "I'm Rissa Furie. My husband, Tennyson, has sent me to the villages to seek medical assistance for the battle. I need you to open the gates immediately!" I hoped I sounded convincing enough.

The guard frowned, but luckily for me, didn't question my new last name. "Ten really wants doctors from beyond the gates? And he sent you?"

I held up my hands. "Listen. If you want your head on a silver platter, I'll interrupt his battle to explain how you're unable to help. I'm sure he'll understand."

“No!” The guard jumped, even though his eyes were still wary. “No need! What did you say your name was again?” He pressed the button, the gates creaking open.

“Rissa Furie,” I repeated, the lie not sounding too terrible to my ears. “Thank you for your assistance.”

“I’ve heard of you. Don’t...uh...don’t tell Ten I questioned you, okay?” He shuffled his feet from side to side, but I was already darting away.

“I wouldn’t think of it.”

The gates creaked closed behind me, but I was already running. I was *free*. Somehow, I didn’t feel quite as free as I felt inside the gates. Out here, with only the dust as my companion, it felt different. Like I had left my real life, and was headed back to a dream. I shook my head, and ran toward Ironforge.

Had it always been so dusty? It seemed like even more dust had accumulated since my time in the Labyrinth. It was everywhere, and I was incredibly grateful for my pillowcase wraps to keep my skin from the blazing sun. It felt a hundred degrees hotter out here than inside the gates, and I wondered how I had ever survived out here. How did any of us?

We made do, I guessed. We’d never known any different, so we got by the way we always had. Even the people who knew what it had been like before the Fall, before everything changed...it was like a different life for them. When my mother spoke about it, it was as if she was recalling a dream. A quiet memory, gossamer, something she could barely grasp with gentle fingers. And when that generation was gone, the last of those who could remember the world before, what would we be left with? The dust, and the stories our parents had told us. The dust would outlive us all, and the stories would become fables that our children would laugh at.

The journey back seemed infinitely shorter than when Ten had taken me to the Labyrinth, and I wasn’t sure if it was fear dragging out the initial trip, or if concern for my family sped up time. The sooner I made sure my family was okay, the sooner I could return home to Ten.

*Home.* What a funny concept. I had spent most of this time thinking of my home as where my family was, but it really didn't feel like that anymore. It was a place I had lived. But my soul didn't live there anymore. It lived with Ten. I belonged with him. In *our* house inside the Labyrinth. Inside *our* bedroom. In *our* bed. In the life we'd carved out for the two of us amongst the dust and decay. I smiled to myself. Ten would be okay in the battle. He wasn't indestructible, but he would come home to me. He would *always* come home to me. And once my family was safe, I would be there for him to come home to.

I entered the village, the first few shacks seeming smaller than I remembered. More ramshackle. There was the school, dirtier than I remembered. The market was open, the small stalls filled with the people I had known my entire life. They laughed and joked with each other, haggling for the little they had in their pockets. But still they smiled, through the dirt and the grime. They probably smiled more than the people inside the Labyrinth. They knew how to be happy about the smaller things. When you had nothing, you were grateful for everything.

There was the neighbor's shack, a bright purple drape replacing their door. And there, next to it in the same place it had always been, was my family's shack. Nothing had changed, and yet everything had. How had six of us lived in such a small space? It seemed impossible now that I knew the size of the homes others lived in. I pushed open the door, my heart stuck in my throat. Would they still love me? Would they see something was different about me, written all over my skin?

"Hello?" I called.

"Rissa!" Ettie's bright little voice greeted me first. I grinned as she leapt off the bed, racing to my arms. "You're home! You're back!"

"Hey, Ettie girl," I murmured, wrapping my arms around her as I spun her around the room. "Gosh, you've gotten so big!"

I pulled back to sweep her hair away from her face, still blonde, still golden, still shining, like the hidden treasure she was. “I’ve grown two inches! Mama says I’m having a growth spurt.”

“I believe it. You’re so tall! It must be all that porridge.” I smiled, pressing a kiss to her forehead. Ettie seemed even less of a child than she had when I last saw her, growing out of her stubby childhood limbs. She looked healthy, too. I couldn’t feel any of her ribs.

“Porridge, and eggs, oh, and chicken once a week!” she piped up excitedly, squeezing her arms around my neck. “I have so much to tell you!”

I laughed, putting her down on the floor. “Eggs, and chicken? Are you pulling my leg?”

“She’s not.” My mother’s voice, music to my soul, rang out from behind the door. “Oh, Rissa. It’s so good to see you.” She pulled me into her embrace, holding me close. My cheek was damp with her tears as she cried quietly. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

“I’m here now.” I ached for a moment. I had been away for too long. I knew I should’ve come back sooner. I had been so afraid, so fearful they wouldn’t understand my new life. But being here now, I realized that had been a foolish concern. It was like I had never left. The pot bubbled over the low fire. There was the bed, messily made. I could still cross the room in fifteen paces, ten if I was feeling energetic. “Chicken?”

My mother nodded. “Since you’ve gone, we’ve gotten money every week. It’s enough for us to buy the extra food. Enough for us to get a tutor for Ettie. It’s why she’s home right now. Tennyson...that’s his name, isn’t it? He’s not one for words, but he wrote with the first envelope of money. Said you were safe, and being taken care of, and wanted to make sure we were taken care of as well.” She held her hand to my face, and I leaned into her touch. “You look well. Different. But well.”

I was filled with different emotions. Gratitude for Ten, for taking care of my family like he said he would. Letting them

know I was safe. Sadness I had missed so much. Heartbreak for everything I had experienced to get to this point. “Mom... I...I...I’ve done bad things, mom.” My voice broke, and for the first time in years, I just needed my mother’s reassurance. I needed her to hold me, stroke my hair and tell me everything would be okay.

She looked up at me, smiling sadly. “Haven’t we all? We do things that break our hearts, and make us tear at our skin. We make decisions that weigh down our bones. What matters though, is this.” She cupped her hand over my heart. “It’s still beating, isn’t it? It brought you home to me again.”

It was still beating, a constant reminder I was still alive. This life wasn’t an easy one, but I was still here. I was still going. Still clawing my way out of the grave, one hand over the other. I might not be able to see the top of the hole yet, but I was getting there. And every time I fell, slipping down a little lower into the dirt, someone’s hand was there to pull me back out again. Ten was right, just like he always was. My family didn’t care about anything besides the fact I was still standing. How could I have ever doubted them? I clasped my hand over my mother’s, unable to speak the words caught in my throat.

“It’s okay, Rissa. You’re here now. You’re here, and that’s what matters.” She pulled back to look at me again, and Ettie came to clutch my waist. “Now, are you back just because, or is this a more important visit?”

I grimaced, so caught up in seeing my family again I had forgotten the real reason I’d returned. “I don’t come bearing good news, if that’s what you’re hoping for.”

“No, I didn’t think you did. Your face says it all.” My mother focused her attention on the pot bubbling on the fire.

“There’s a war inside the Labyrinth. A bad one. The people they’re fighting...they aren’t good, Mom. You need to be ready to leave at any moment. We should get your stuff together, just in case.” I hugged Ettie back, pressing a kiss to the top of her golden forehead. “The guys can help organize the big stuff when they get home. And I’ll come out here the

second I hear anything, or send someone who can bring word to you.”

“We’re leaving?” Ettie asked, peeking her head up. “Where are we going?”

My mother turned back to me, hands on her hips. “Yes. Just where do you think we can go?” She wiped her hands on her hips.

“To a different village, maybe. One further away from the Labyrinth. Away from the gates. This group, they want to enslave all the humans. *All* of them.” I cupped my hands over Ettie’s ears, not wanting her to hear. I didn’t want to give her nightmares. “Mom, they breed the girls on the inside. Right now, Ten’s council still has some morals. But if this new group takes control, who’s to say they wouldn’t take Ettie?”

Ettie brushed my hands off her ears. “Don’t keep secrets from me. I hate it.”

My mother just shook her head. “This has been our home since the Fall, Rissa. There’s nowhere else to go. The desert is deadly. We both know this. I can’t uproot everyone over a possibility.”

She was so fucking stubborn sometimes, it was incredible. It suddenly made sense where I got it from. Ironically, I had always thought I got it from my father. But seeing her stand up to me, debating logistics—she hadn’t seen what I had seen. She didn’t know how brutal the Ravens were.

I needed to try a different tactic. Understanding and logic would work on me, so I needed to make it work for her. I was going to make sure my family was safe if it killed me.

“Listen to me. Ten is good. Probably better than I deserve, all things considered. But not everyone inside the Labyrinth is. These guys make them look like amateurs. I’m not saying you have to up and leave right now. I’m not asking you to move out this very second. I’m just asking you to be prepared. Get some stuff together. Have some preserved food ready. Just in case. Maybe it’ll come to nothing. Maybe I’m worrying over

absolutely nothing. But on the off chance I'm not, you need to be prepared. I need to know you're safe."

She wiped her palms across her pants, chewing on her lip. "We will get some things together. But, Rissa, this doesn't automatically mean I'm leaving. Why would I leave a Hell I know for a Hell I don't?"

The idea of leaving them here killed me. As much as I wanted to return to Ten, the idea of leaving them in limbo made me uncomfortable. They were so happy over a chicken, and eggs, and a tutor for Ettie while I was eating donuts and sleeping with enough blankets I could make a rope out of them. I was asking them to change everything, when everything they had was so little. I should've brought them more from inside the gates. If I knew it was safe inside the Labyrinth, I would bring them home with me. But I didn't, and leaving them here, inside the shack I had grown up in, felt wrong. This place wasn't my home anymore, but the people inside it still were. Our house in the Labyrinth didn't feel like a home, either, but Ten did. And having the people you loved split by a gate, and a different life entirely made *me* feel split down the middle. My heart was tearing in opposite directions, in tatters as I tried to make sense of it.

The door swung open, revealing all three of my brothers. They were dirty, and covered in dust, but all three of their faces lit up when they saw me—even Lars'. "Rissa!" Bear was the first to reach me, grabbing me and swinging me around like I had done to Ettie.

Sam hugged me hard when Bear put me down, and then Lars did the same. "It's good to see you, Rissa," he murmured as we pulled apart. "Now, are you home for good, or just a visit?"

I frowned. The word "home" made me feel slightly adrift. Unmoored. I wasn't sure how to acknowledge it. "I actually came to bring you news from inside the Labyrinth."

A crease appeared in Lars' forehead, and even Bear's normally carefree face looked worried. "What kind of news?"



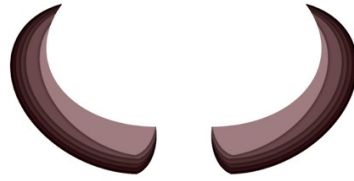
“There’s a war breaking out amongst the factions inside the Labyrinth.” I paused. “The group vying for power thinks they’re the chosen ones.”

Lars and Sam looked between each other. “What does that mean for us?” Lars asked.

I glanced at my mother, still chewing her lip as she watched her bubbling pot. “It means we all might soon face a Hell we don’t know.”

## CHAPTER 28

# TEN



I smashed my fist into another Raven's face, making sure he was out cold. I didn't want to kill this one. I just wanted him unconscious. If he was dead, I couldn't get any information out of him. "Another one here!" I called.

A recruit—half human by the looks of him—jogged over to where I stood. "Where do you want this one?" he asked.

"Put him in the holding cells with the others."

He nodded, lifting the body over his back, and carried him away. I wiped my hand over my face, staring at the destruction around me. Griffin's men had shown up when we needed them most, and with their help we had managed to put down most of the Ravens. Some had scurried away like the slime they were, and if their leader's words were anything to take seriously, there were a lot more of them hiding out there. They wouldn't stand a chance against us though. I wouldn't let them. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever.

"So. What's next?"

Griffin walked over to me, his face entirely covered in ash. "Next, you cover for me on captive duty so I can get home to check on Rissa. I've left her for long enough."

He rolled his eyes. "That's why I was coming over here. But I meant what's next for this." He gestured out wide, across the expansive destruction. The building in front of us was little more than rubble, small fires burning everywhere on bits of wood. Already the troops were carrying pieces of the building away, trying to find any survivors who might be hidden

underneath. It wasn't looking good, but we weren't ready to give up hope yet. Bodies lay in the street, smoke still thick in the air in places. Ash piled up on the once green streets, turning what was once a paradise into more of a wasteland. A graveyard.

I sighed, rubbing my fingers over my eyes. What was next was hard work. A lot of hard work. "The Ravens are obviously working with someone. They're getting support from somewhere, and it's not from us. Mal alone wouldn't be enough to sustain them. So who is it from?"

Griffin shrugged. "I'm not sure. But I'm guessing we're going to find out."

"We're absolutely going to find out. We pushed them back hard today. They'll be licking their wounds and recuperating for a while after this. But they aren't gone. Not by a long shot." I looked around us, knowing I shouldn't be leaving, but also knowing I had to go. "Will you be okay?"

"You're driving me crazy." I glared at him, and he laughed. "You obviously need to make sure she's alright, so just go. I can handle this until you get back."

"Thanks." With one final glance at the mess, I took off through the streets. I hoped Rissa wasn't too worried, or too mad. She would've heard the explosion, maybe seen the smoke from the bedroom window. She had to know I wouldn't let anyone keep us apart though. Next time, if there was a next time, I wouldn't lock her inside her room. I'd make her understand I needed her to stay home, but I wouldn't lock her inside. I trusted her. I had given her a piece of my heart, and she had taken it with gentle hands. She wouldn't throw all of that away.

Our street was empty and quiet. People were being smart, staying inside until we told them it was safe. Once we had a clear idea of where the rest of the Ravens were, Draven would let them know it was okay. We'd probably have to do an official announcement of sorts, to reassure them. I wasn't really sure what I could even say. We had won today, but at what cost? We had lost soldiers and innocents alike. We had

won, but who knew when they would be back? All I knew is that we would be ready for anything. We had stood this long, it would take a lot more than the Ravens to tear us down, even if they did have a traitor in their midst.

But changes also needed to happen. We needed to incorporate the humans outside the wall in our lives more. My time with Rissa had shown me that letting them suffer while we lived in luxury was wrong. I couldn't overthrow a hierarchy on my own. But I could make small changes, and show my people the right way to live. Eventually, they'd follow suit. They'd see it my way. And those that didn't... well. They could join Neo.

The house was just up ahead, and my fingertips were tingling. My body was still tense from the fight, from the thought of never seeing Rissa again. But now I was here, and she was waiting, and I'd make her see why I had to leave, and all would be right. I'd lose myself in her body, and I'd show her exactly what she meant to me. I would make it up to her. I would.

My heart stopped when I arrived home to find Rissa's bedroom window thrown open, a mismatched rope strung out of the window. I raced over to it, my lungs in my throat, and my brain screaming. *Had the Ravens gotten to her? No. No, they couldn't have. I was so careful. So fucking careful. I pulled at the rope, trying to calm my overactive mind and think things through logically. The rope, while well-made, wasn't strong enough to hold a monster. It would be enough to hold the weight of a human, maybe. So possibly a half-human? Did the Ravens even have those?*

I pulled on the rope until it snapped, the fabric unraveling in my hands. If anyone laid a hand on her, a single fucking finger, I would have them flayed within an inch of their lives. But as I pulled apart the makeshift rope, I realized what I was looking at. Bedsheets. Blankets. The odd pillowcase here and there. This wasn't a rope someone had made to climb up. This was something someone had made in the bedroom and tossed down.

*Rissa.*

I tossed the rope aside with an angry cry, and stormed up the porch, pushing the door open. I took the stairs two at a time, tugging at Rissa's doorknob. It was still locked. Which either meant someone had been in there with her, forcing Rissa to flee out her bedroom window, or she had been running from *me*. My chest was tight, and my ears buzzed like a thousand bugs. She wouldn't run from me. Would she?

What if something was wrong with her? What if she was injured, forced to get help, and I had left her trapped inside her room, unable to leave from the front door? A thousand things could've gone wrong, and I had abandoned her, trapped her inside with no escape. I was cruel, an evil master, and maybe she was right to run. With shaking hands, I undid the lock, finding the bedroom stripped bare of any kind of bedding, but no sign of a struggle taking place. Rissa had been alone when she left. I ran to the window, and roared into the empty space below, where she had made her escape. I roared for the mistakes I had made, and the missteps that had led me here. I roared for my missing woman, who might be injured, or so angry at me that she hated me. I roared for the love that was swelling my heart up so full it was going to burst. I was going to break if I didn't have Rissa to fill in the cracks of my soul.

I had to find her. If she was hurt, she needed me. If she was running away from me...I couldn't let that happen. I tore myself away from the window, and raced down the stairs. She was quick, and smart, and could be nearly anywhere. My feet pounded the sidewalk as I ran through the grass filled streets, trying to find anything out of the ordinary that might tell me where she was. Where had she gone? The smoke still hung in the air above the battle, but I doubted she would've gone that way. And if she had, one of my councilmen would've seen her and brought her home to me. Would she have gone to the camps? I could see her doing that, seeing the explosion go off, and wanting to make sure the women were safe. It was also one of the few places outside of my house she knew about, and of anyone, Clara would be the most willing to hide her. It was worth a shot, wasn't it?

I turned and began to run in the direction of the camps, the streets beginning to fill up once more as people realized it was

safe to leave their house, and ventured out to look for loved ones. People clapped me on the back, congratulating me on a well-won victory, but I pushed past them, my focus on getting to Rissa, and bringing her home.

I passed by the gates, the camps within my sight, when a waving guard caught my attention. He looked distressed.

“Ten!” he called.

I paused, stopping even as my feet twitched. Maybe he had seen Rissa on the way to the camps. Instead, the words out of his mouth surprised me. “Ten, I, uh, your wife was just here. She told me you sent her on a mission, and I, uh, just wanted to tell you I opened the gates like you asked. No trouble from me.”

The young guard was looking for my approval, but his words weren’t computing. “My...wife?”

He nodded, eyes wide. “Yes, I didn’t want you to think I disrespected her in any way. She told me what you said, and I obeyed.”

*My wife.* I smirked to myself, my heart beginning to slow for the first time today. She was such a fucking brat. I was going to tan her ass once I brought her home. “Did my wife happen to tell you her name?”

“Uh, Rissa, sir. Rissa Furie.” He looked confused. “We are supposed to listen to her, aren’t we? She told me she was on official business.”

The poor guy. He had let Rissa out into the desert, but it also wasn’t his fault Rissa had played him. That was all my *wife’s* fault. Besides, now I knew where she had gone. Back to Ironforge. “You didn’t do anything wrong, soldier. Thank you for respecting Rissa. You have my gratitude. But I will need you to open these gates for me now, so that I can collect her.”

“Yes, sir.” He jumped to attention, opening the gates wide for me.

I gave him a grateful nod, then took off into the desert.

Rissa had gone back to her village. She had left me to return to her family. Was she that desperate to get away from me that she had fled the first chance she got? Had she not seen all the signs that we were meant to be together, that our souls were two halves of the same coin? She could run away from me all she wanted, but her heart would still beat for me. It would call out to me when she slept at night, her body craving what only I could give her. She would ache in unexplainable ways, her mind calling out for a missing piece of herself she couldn't describe. She could run away from me. She could run away from me, and try to start anew, but it wouldn't mean anything.

It wouldn't mean anything because how does your heart beat when your blood runs in another body? How do you breathe, when the air you crave is being expelled from another's mouth? I would make her see that. I didn't care if it took a week or ten years. She was mine, and I was hers, and we carried bits of each other under our skin, and that kind of transference of souls couldn't be undone. We were forever, her and I. Two bodies, made completely different, with two different lives, and yet together we were the same person.

I ran through the sand as fast as I could, quicker without Rissa chattering away behind me. Even still, I missed it. I wanted her there with me, beside me, asking me questions. I wanted her curiosity, her passion. I wanted her love, and her grace. I wanted her strength, and her sin. I wanted it all.

It was beyond scorching out in the desert, and I hoped she had her shoes. Her feet would burn otherwise. And what clothing was she wearing? Was she safe?

I passed the first few shacks to the village, not caring that I was storming through their small community at a time when everyone was on the streets. I had only come before when they were empty, as most of us did, so as not to create a scene. But now, in the hot sun, I was in the middle of their world, completely exposed. A woman running a stall in their market screamed, and another dropped his basket of corn, the ears tumbling every which way. A little boy stumbled, his ball scattering, his mouth open wide. I didn't care who saw me. I



only cared about the woman I was going to bring home. The woman waiting in the small shack, too small for so many people. The woman who defied me, with strength lining each of her bones. The woman with the bright green eyes, who reminded me what it felt like to love.

I couldn't feel my fingers, but my heart was alive. I wasn't sure what I was walking into. I pushed open the door to her small shack, trying to catch my breath. I was certain everyone in the entire village was staring at me, wondering what was happening, but I couldn't worry about that right now.

Her whole family was home. They stopped to turn, to stare at me. We had been here before, once, and now we were here again. This time, though, it felt different. There, sitting on the bed, looking just as stubborn as she had the first time, was Rissa. She looked up at me with surprise clear on her face, but otherwise looked absolutely fine. "Ten?"

"Rissa," I breathed. I pushed past her brothers, gathering her into my arms. I expected her to push me away but instead she collapsed into my embrace, her body caving to my touch like it always did. I wanted to scream at her, to demand to know why she disobeyed me, why she left, but the only words that left my mouth were, "I'm so glad you're okay."

She pushed away from me, stroking my face with her hand. "Of course I'm okay. Are you okay?"

I nodded. "I'm fine. But when I got home, and I saw the window, and the rope you made, I...I thought the worst." *Tell me why you left. Tell me you won't leave again. I'll kidnap you again, and take you home with me if I have to. But I don't want to.*

Rissa was quiet for a moment. "I needed to warn my family about the Ravens. And I was mad. I was so mad. I thought we were different, Ten. I thought I meant something to you. And then you locked me away again like I was nothing more than your pet."

"You escaped out a window?" Ettie gasped.

"He locked you in your room?" Bear snarled.

I didn't care what they thought. I only cared about the woman in front me, and what she thought. "I'm sorry. I was trying to keep you safe the only way I knew how. But I realized it was wrong, and I actually turned around because I changed my mind. And then the apartment building blew up. And then by the time I got home..."

"I was gone," she murmured. She tipped her head to the side, considering her next words. "For what it's worth, I was going to come home."

"You were?" My heart was in my throat, hammering away, making it difficult for me to form any words. *Home*. She was going to come *home*. She wasn't running away from me.

She nodded. "You're my home, Ten. I realized it as soon as I left."

She was too good to me. I didn't deserve any of this. I deserved brutality, and anger, not the quiet benediction Rissa was offering me now. But I wasn't one to turn away a gift like the one she was giving me. I would earn her, every day for the rest of my life if I had to. I brushed my lips across her forehead. "I love you. I'll do better. I promise."

"I don't want better. I want *you*." Rissa paused, a funny expression on her face. "But..."

"Anything." It felt like the room was holding its breath, waiting to hear what she was going to say.

Rissa looked around the room, at her brothers' dusty faces, and her mother's tired one. She reached out of my embrace and grabbed Ettie's hand, squeezing it tightly. "You're my home. But I can't leave them either."

My mind had already been made up the moment I stepped through the gates, realizing where she had gone. I smiled at her, brushing the wild strands away from her face. "Bring them."

After all, it was time for a change.

## CHAPTER 29

# RISSA



And so my family came back to the Labyrinth with us. We packed up as much of their meager belongings as were needed, and we walked through the desert together, one last time.

I wasn't stupid. It wasn't going to be easy, making a change like this. But Ten was set in his decision, and determined that if the Labyrinth was going to get better, then it needed to start with him. People stared as we walked through the village, all together, the family they had known for decades with the monster. And they stared when we passed through the gates, entering into the Labyrinth. People here weren't yet used to me, and now there were more of us, walking through the streets as if we belonged.

But at the end of the day, what really was a word? A few letters strung together to differentiate between one thing and another. Could they really know what a person was, though? Could they understand what happened beneath a person's skin, what lived within their hearts? Or could it only tell you what they looked like, what things appeared to be?

I clung to Ten's hand, watching my family take it all in, the way I had when I first entered. Ettie's face lit up when she saw the grass, dropping to her knees to run her hands over it. "Is this grass? Is it real?"

I nodded, letting go of Ten's hand to fall to my knees with her. "It is. It's real. And wait until you see their market. And Ten's library."

“Ten has a library?” Ettie whispered.

I pulled her up with me. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

It felt right, having them here, to know they weren’t suffering while I thrived. There were other people who were stuck still, people out in the villages that surrounded the Labyrinth, and the people inside the camps. My heart ached for them. But I would be a fool to think change would happen all at once. It was going to take time. It was going to be difficult. But we’d get there. We’d get there together.

The days since our arrival had been filled with excitement and anxiety. Some people reacted well, accepting my family without much complaint once Ten explained who they were. Others treated us like we were little better than the dust that covered the world, something to be tolerated but otherwise ignored. Ten’s council was on board with the changes he was enacting, no matter how slow and tedious they might be. None of us expected to fix a city overnight.

We’d get there. Step by step.

Sunlight filtered through the curtains as I blinked awake. It was a new day. A fresh start. Ten and I were going to walk down to the camps today, so I could visit with Clara, and we could bring new clothes to some of the other women who were in desperate need. Small steps. We couldn’t take the camps apart yet, but we could make sure the women were treated better than they had been.

I really needed to get out of bed. Instead, I rolled over, stroking Ten’s horn thoughtfully as my eyes drifted shut again. “What are you doing, wife?”

My eyes flew open. “What did you just call me?”

Ten opened his eyes, watching me with a smirk. “I called you my wife. Isn’t that what you told the guard at the gates? Called yourself my wife, told him your name was Rissa Furie.”

“That traitor.” I shook my head, my cheeks flushed. “I can’t believe he told you.”

Ten ran his finger down the side of my face. “You can’t believe he told me the truth? Or you can’t believe you called yourself my wife?”

I didn’t think it was possible for my cheeks to grow even redder, but they did. “Either,” I muttered. I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

Ten’s finger stilled on my chin, and he grabbed it, pulling my face to look at him again. He leaned forward enough that we were sharing the same air. “I like it.”

“You do?” I breathed. My embarrassment was blooming into something more.

“Mhmm...” His fingers tightened on my chin, pinching, the pain ricocheting through my body straight to my clit. “Tell me something, *deliciae*. If you’re my wife, does that mean you’re mine to do with as I please? Mine to hurt? To use?”

My breath caught in my throat, blood rushing to every part of my body. “I thought I already was.”

Ten’s hand slipped off my chin, coming to rest on my throat, applying the lightest amount of pressure there, a reminder of who was in charge. “Don’t be sassy.”

“Wife or not, I’m yours, Master,” I whispered. His eyes were bright, much brighter than normal as he watched me, asserting a quiet power in the dimly lit room.

Another ounce of pressure on my throat, and he rolled on top of me, propping up his weight on his elbows. His hard cock pressed against my pussy, and the thought alone drove me wild. I could feel myself growing wet just from his proximity, dripping on the inside of my thighs. Ten felt it, too, and began to push himself inside me ever so slightly. “You like my hands on you, don’t you?” he murmured. “You like when I take away your power. Your ability to breathe. You like when I fuck you to the point of pain.”

I nodded, whimpering around his hand. He stroked my lip with his thumb, pushing the broad head of his cock inside me. His barbs scraped my pussy, combining with the gentle push of his hand on my throat.

“I like knowing I make you ache, *deliciae*. I like knowing you want to bruise yourself for me. Bleed for me. I like knowing I can do whatever I want to you, and you’ll sit up prettily and ask me for more. I like knowing this will make you come.” He drove into me with one forceful push, and I cried out, my pussy struggling to accommodate his width all at once. Everything was everywhere, his barbs cutting into me, and his ridges stretching me. His grip tightened on my throat, and I gasped for air. “I want you to scream for me, Rissa. I want you to scream and not know if you’re in pain or pleasure.”

He began to thrust into me, his cock driving hard and fast, forcing me to take every last bit of him.

For all the changes in our lives, I never once expected Ten to change. I didn’t expect him to be someone different than who he was. His soul was still cloaked in dusk, and his needs were still something that everyone wouldn’t understand. But everyone didn’t need to. Just me. And the darkness of his heart called out to mine.

He wanted to hurt, and I wanted to be hurt. He wanted to punish, and I wanted to be punished. You couldn’t have pleasure without pain, and Ten understood. He knew what I needed to feel true satisfaction. He knew I needed to be reminded of the ugliness of the world, even as I cried out in rapture.

He fucked me harder, pleasure coiling deep in my core, building to a peak I wouldn’t be able to stop. But it wasn’t enough. I needed more.

Ten knew. “Scream for me, *wife*.” His hand gripped the sides of my throat tighter, constricting the blood flow. My head was growing heavy, the edges of my vision darkening. “Scream for me, *deliciae*. Fucking scream for *me*.”

I could feel every last bit of him as he stretched me and choked me. There was nothing left for me to do but to let go. He forced his hips up, his cock driving into me again and again until there was nothing I could do but come around him. My voice caught in my throat, restricted by his hand, my

scream coming out more like a strangled gasp as I came. My orgasm shot through me, swallowing my body in bliss as I let it take me over. “Ten...Ten! Fu...fuck!” I choked out.

“Good girl.” His hand dropped off my throat, and I greedily sucked in air again as he fucked me through the aftershocks. My mind was gone, disappearing off to that quiet place it went when Ten and I fucked. It was as if my brain knew I was safe in his arms, despite everything he would put me through, and all that was left for me was to feel pleasure. “You’re mine, no matter what you call yourself. That’s the only title that matters in this world, Rissa—*mine*.”

I cried out as he fucked my aching pussy, a string of smaller orgasms taking over me until eventually, through my foggy head, I heard Ten cry out my name, his hips thrusting into me one last time. He pulled out of me with a groan, falling onto the bed next to me.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” he murmured, his hand trailing a gentle path down my arm. “And one day, you *will* be my wife, *deliciae*. I promise you that.”

*Wife*. I wasn’t sure it was ever something I had considered, but now, it sounded like everything I’d ever wanted. I rolled over, curling against his side. This was what had been missing from my life before. It wasn’t a person, or a place. It was a feeling. An understanding that I would be accepted for who I was no matter what. Ten didn’t care what darkness lingered inside my soul. He didn’t care about the doubt that whispered in my mind as I fell asleep. He didn’t care that I craved the shadows that clung to his skin, the pain and the beauty wrapped up in one. He just wanted *me*. And despite the ruins we clung to, the desert we tried so hard to make a home again, it was enough for me.

Across his chest, Ten reached out for my hand, and I grabbed it. His hand was my gravity, my center, keeping my feet on the ground. At the same time, he pushed me, letting me explore the boundaries of what made me, me.

I still wasn’t sure who I was. Not really. Part of me wondered if I was made up of different pieces, glued back



together, a ragdoll of a person. That was okay, though. I was figuring it out as I went. Some parts were easier with Ten by my side. Some parts I had to do on my own. That was okay too, because at the end of the day, I was still here. Despite it all, my heart was still beating, and my soul was still growing. I couldn't explain how grateful I was for him, for not giving up, for being cruel when I needed it, and gentle when I wanted it. I knew he still worried, insecurities buried deeply within him, but I wasn't going anywhere. I owed it to myself, too.

*I'm here*, I thought, squeezing Ten's hand tightly.

*I'm here.*

# EPILOGUE

Tennyson says we're going to run away tonight. He says I'm to meet him in the dining room after everyone has gone to sleep. We will sneak out under the cloak of darkness, and head for the mountains at the back of the city.

I don't know if his plan will work. I don't say this to him, of course. But sometimes I feel like my soul is tied to the Labyrinth. This is where I'll live out the rest of my days, for better or for worse.

I don't tell him this, because I want him to have hope. He deserves that, after everything he's been through. He deserves a bit of hope. A thread of a dream that he can cling to, to see maybe it's not all unraveled yet.

I know what he thinks. I know he thinks he's like his father. That he's cold, and cruel. But that isn't the case. He can't see it, because he keeps it buried so deeply inside, far away from anyone that might damage his tender soul. But I can see it in him, in the moments he thinks I'm not watching.

He's good.

*From the recovered journal of Iris May Alden, Year 13 AF  
(After the Fall)*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Torri Heat has control over everything in her life, except for the plot. Her characters demand centre stage, and she just goes along with whatever they want and hopes for the best. You never know whether you'll end up with a dragon tail or on a submarine, but you will always get a taste of darkness with your romance. Her fierce women will inspire you to be sassy, and her dominant men will teach you how to be a good girl. When she isn't creating alternate realities, you can find her working her other job as a nacho connoisseur.

Find all of Torri's books and sign up for her newsletter at her website [www.torriheat.com](http://www.torriheat.com), or follow her on social media @torriheat!

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