



A DARK FANTASY  
ROMANCE  
NOVEL

THE  
SACRIFICE

DONT YOU KNOW BETTER  
THAN TO PLAY WITH MONSTERS?

EMILY SHORE

# THE SACRIFICE

A DARK DRAGON FANTASY ROMANCE

EMILY SHORE

**Book One of *Her Monstrous Boys***

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Cover and Interior Design by

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COMING TO KU OCTOBER 1ST

Acknowledgments

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*For the ones who'd rather play with the monsters under their bed. And make friends with the demons inside of their heads.*

*And my mother better never read this book. Never. Like ever.*

# OTHER WORKS BY EMILY SHORE

## POST 2020 AUTHOR JOURNEY:

### *The Twisted Myths Series*

*Bride of the Corpse King* – Book One (Kindle Vella Bestseller  
– Now on KU)

### *Hell's Angel Series*

*Bride of Lucifer: Hell on Earth* – Book One (Kindle Vella  
Bestseller – Now on KU)

*Bride of Lucifer: The Bride Trials* – Book Two (Kindle Vella  
Bestseller – Now on KU)

*Bride of the Shifter King* – (Kindle Vella Bestseller)

*The Sacrifice and the Surrender* (Kindle Vella Bestseller –  
Coming to KU August/September)

*The Grymm Beauty* (Kindle Vella Bestseller)

Find all of Emily's Kindle Vella works where she rebranded  
after finding her voice

*COURTING DEATH AND DESTRUCTION* (Crossover *Bride  
of Lucifer* Series) \*You MUST read this series before the end  
of *Bride of Lucifer Book FOUR*\*

\* \* \*

## PRE 2020 AUTHOR JOURNEY:

*The Uncaged Series – temporarily unavailable*

*The Aviary* – Book One



*The Garden* – Book Two  
*The Temple* – Book Three  
*The Temple Twins* – Book Four  
*The Aquarium* – Book Five

***The Roseblood Series***

*Roseblood* – Book One  
*Silhouette* – Book Two  
*Requiem* – Book Three  
*Sanctuary* – Book Four  
*Roseborn* – Book Five (WIP)

***The Flesh and Ash Series***

***Flesher*** – Book One  
*Flesher: Resurrection* – Book Two (WIP)

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you're like me, maybe you use trigger warnings as a shopping list. If so, you're gonna love mine. This is a dark book with dark elements and themes. Things get intense and spicy. Please see *The Sacrifice* page on my website for more info. And I'm not responsible for any *extreme* emotions that should arise. I suggest you keep a partner or *toy* nearby.



**Want the UNCENSORED version? See details below!**

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I originally released *The Sacrifice* onto [Kindle Vella](#) where it became my most popular book next to *Bride of Lucifer*.

**What is it?** Amazon's new serialized fiction platform.

**Why?** It helped me rebrand myself and kept our family afloat through 2021 and 2022 with my husband's cancer and all my chronic health issues.

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Learn more at "*Emily's Vella Verse*" on Facebook: a public group where I share fun memes, teasers, games, and giveaways.

Please follow my TikTok: @authoremilybshore and my IG: @emilybshore.

I

TONIGHT IS THE SACRIFICE. THE  
MONSTERS WILL COME OUT  
TO PLAY

## QUINTESSA

WITH MY HANDS GRIPPING THE CEMETERY HEADSTONE SO hard, my nails crack, and my skirts bunched around my waist while my sister's betrothed ruts into me from behind, I'd say I've officially hit rock bottom. Especially with the dead staggering toward us.

Darya despises the flouncy fool. Almost as much as she despises me, which she's done since I was born—unrelated to the present. After all, it's not like I planned an early morning walk around the cemetery bordering our house just so I could run into him.

Van Wetterton's hot breath that smells of bacon grease and onions curls toward my ear. He pounds harder, but I only get a vague sense of pressure as he says, "You feel this, don't you, Quinn? You'll come for me, won't you, little gray bitch?"

A bitterness burns the back of my throat. Gray bitch, gray whore, gray girl, they call me. My smoky gray hair flings down my chest, ricochets on my cheeks, and fractures my vision. One nail breaks. And bleeds. I wish I could feel the pain. Not even letting my sister's fiancé fuck me in a cemetery on Hollow Day can make me feel something. My body doesn't silence pain, but it hushes it, along with all other touch. Even the worst pain is numbed. That is the price to pay when you're half-ghost, half-blessed, half-cursed.

And numb inside.

I fake a long moan, smirking at the thought of Van bragging to his Brotherhood about how he was the first to

make a ghost climax. Regardless, he and the other Brothers who've fucked me will have a good row over it. I've had them going in circles since I was sixteen and gave my "maidenhood" to Fynne Hawksburne in the woods behind my family's home. The abandoned shed was as good a place as any.

The stalkers advance toward us, their guttural rasps growing louder. Some fall over headstones and into open graves from where others have risen. It's Hollow Night. More will rise by nightfall.

"Nothing beats this rush in your blood, does it?" asks Van with a deep groan. I wouldn't know. My blood is an icy, slow river.

As he jerks one last time, the momentum propels me forward.

I hardly feel Van's cum trickling down my thighs when he pulls out and shoves his unimpressive dick back into his breeches. Guess I can mark him off the list. I've kept a ledger of names, both male and female, hoping someone in these blasted Borderlands might help me feel something.

He slams his palms together, commanding a wind to gust and push the dead back. Everyone in the god-eater's five realms has some kind of binding magic. If only I had a normal one.

"Give my best to your sister," Wetterton snickers cruelly after the stalkers have toppled into a pile of rotting corpses. "I'd say we look forward to having you at the wedding tomorrow, but everyone knows you won't be there."

"My deepest congratulations on your impending lifetime of marital bliss," I sweetly proclaim and pick up my skirts, turning to hurry away before he can see my grin.

Tonight is the Sacrifice. The monsters will come out to play.

Maybe one will oblige me with a fuck I can actually feel before it slaughters me. I laugh at the notion and sneak into the

manor through the servant's entrance. They're too busy preparing for the wedding and the Sacrifice to notice me.

So, I retreat to my room for an hour's peace at best before my sisters prepare me. But as soon as the dark, clawed fingers coil around my throat, I know peace won't come.

Ugh. This time, she straddles me, pins me to the bed with all the weight she bears, and sends ice-cold horror shivering up my spine. Claws sink in. She draws blood.

Fear slashes through me as always, familiar but no less terrifying whenever my Shadow tries to kill me once a year. Always on Hollow Night. She is a silhouette above me — my queer, quixotic nightmare of black and blue like an ever-moving bruise. No mouth, nose, or eyes, only that silhouette, a mirror to mine. No facial features for me to read, but I feel her hatred and savagery. And the mournful rage and trauma behind them. I could never hurt her.

Qora.

I struggle and thrash against her, hoping to get momentum to reverse our positions until my wrists register they can't move. Eyes flying to their ceilings, I discover the ropes she's bound around my wrists and tied to the headboard. She's bound my ankles, too. Unlike her rabid heaving pants, my lungs ache from shallow breaths while nausea clots my stomach.

"If you'd wanted to play," I wheeze out as my vision turns blurry, "you...could...have...asked," I strain to get the words out.

I'd give her credit for creativity, but I'm pretty certain I'm about to pass out. And still, I do the only thing I can think to do. With her hands compressing my jugular and wrecking my air, I arch my neck as high as possible and touch my lips to her cheek. A smile curves the corners of my mouth because she's the one being I truly *feel*. A cold mist on the surface and withering flesh underneath. The irony.

My Shadow freezes at the kiss.



I stop fighting and close my eyes, surrendering to her. Her claws soften, fingers slacken, and her labored breaths wane to grow long and steady. Opening my eyes to her staring down at me—or what I imagine is staring since she has nothing to peer through—I can't help but giggle. What comes from her silhouette next is somewhere between a growl and a shriek, followed by a prompt shove on my chest and her rolling off me.

“Aww, Qora, come on, that was one of the best attempts you've done,” I half-tease my Shadow, who hisses at me in return and pulses her dark shadows to curl from her silhouette. They remind me of the ink scrawled upon my body. Easing a sigh, I tug at the bindings again and glance at her, “I'd give this a solid seven out of ten.” When Qora lunges at me with a snarling hiss, I flinch but grin and say, “All right, an eight, an eight!” I squeal in correction. It seems to satisfy her, but her shoulders slump in pitiful defeat.

Pursing my lips, I linger within the ripples of relief because I doubt she's going to untie me soon. “Maybe a monster will kill me tonight, and you won't need to try anymore. Remember that time you pushed me down the empty well, and I twisted my ankle? That was a good one,” I murmur, recalling the Hollow Night when I was fifteen. For my sixteenth birthday, she'd gone all out with a noose knotted around one of my ceiling's birch beams. I still wish I could hug her for propping up the chair she'd originally toppled.

When Qora doesn't respond with the few gestures she can, I lean toward her and coo, “Oh, come now, you know you love me.”

Another hiss and my Shadow turns her back. No one but my family and closest friend knows about Qora. And the Brother-priest our father had called forth for an exorcism, much to my lament. When she'd vanished into thin air, I'd hurried to my room as fast as possible, slammed the door, and cried on my bed for an hour. Then, I woke to Qora trying to smother me with my pillow, and I embraced her as best I could before my victory dance around the room.

Ever since, we've kept her a secret as best we can. My heart warms at the memories that date all the way back to my crawling years, and a light and fluffy sensation like stardust fills my head. Most would think me mad, but mad would be a step up from cursed. Monster-touched since birth.

Tonight, I'll return to the monsters where I belong, according to Pater.

I hadn't realized I'd closed my eyes until Qora's cool mist drifts above me. She's tilted her head. Blinking, I tilt mine to mirror her, but she moves her shadowy hand to my throat. My heartbeat quickens from apprehension, but Qora points her finger to my neck, then lowers her head. Confused, I knit my brows together. Her hands thrust to mine, tug on the bindings, and unravel them in one silky motion.

After she follows with my ankles, I climb out of bed on wobbly legs and move to the stand-up mirror in the corner of the room. So, this is what she was referring to.

"Qora," I sigh and touch my fingertips to the ligature marks dripping with fresh blood. I wag a bloody finger at her. "I thought we'd agreed no more marks."

She grunts and sways to the window, pretending to be occupied. Half-tempted to blow her a kiss, I shake my head with a smile before turning back to the mirror. As long as they're not staring too close, no one will notice the marks. Not with all the other ones on my body I do my best to cover with ink. I don't want to use my vym—not when I'll need as much as possible tonight. A scarf will do fine.

Pale eyes haunt my reflection. Ashen skin ever since birth with not even a blush to warm my cheeks. I look as if I'd crawled out of the Waste itself. Like an ethereal, wandering spirit haunted by shadows.

And Qora is my dark twin.

"It's late afternoon," I murmur from the view outside the window, judging by the shadows and the sun's position. "Dusk will arrive soon. I need to prepare for the Sacrifice." At Qora's silence and her shifting darkness remaining near the window, I

shrug and add, “I promise I’ll play with you as soon as I’ve healed all I can. We could do that one game you love: shade charades.”

Qora turns and pulses a shadow splatter at me: her form of blowing a raspberry. We both know I may not make it home tonight, but dark thoughts don’t last long in my head. Much to my father’s chagrin, I pop them like black bubbles.

Chuckling to myself, I tug the nightgown off my body. I am all sharp or delicate angles with no in-between.

I trace the long, curling lines of chaotic calligraphy upon my skin. A few silver scars peek from beyond their edges, but I’ve managed to reclaim most. Needling ink into my flesh helps me rewrite the history of my *gift*.

I’m pulling my ankle boots of strong leather over my leggings when a frantic hand slaps at my window over and over again. A familiar but panicked voice follows, and I scramble to the window as quickly as possible, thankful my room is on the lower floor of our monstrous manor. Outside, Sarai is a wild mess of mahogany curls, cheeks reddened from the wintry cold, and eyes creased in pain. By now, Qora has drifted toward the bed, her shadow toying with the frayed rope threads, lost in her own world.

Opening the window to my friend, I blurt out, “Sarai, what in the—”

“Quinn...” she says out of breath and looks down. My gaze follows, and fear almost cripples me from the blood soaking into her skirts between her thighs as she holds the small swell of her belly. Too small for birth. This is pre-birth. “I need your help,” she pants, her breasts heaving far too much thanks to her rush over here and wearing little more than her corset and underskirt. *Not* standard convent attire.

Swallowing the panic spiking through me, I reach for her hand to haul her inside my room, hoping no one in the halls or rooms beyond hear.

Sarai tugs back, shaking her head wildly. “I can’t come in, Quinn. Something happened.”

Eyes wide with alarm and breath growing more labored, she thrusts her head behind her to the grounds of our manor, to the graves straddling our property where a ragged line of slow-moving white figures groan from the scent of blood on the air.

“I’m sorry, Quinn. They’re coming. I don’t know what to do. I need—”

My stomach lurches. Grabbing my long wool coat on the wall hook and spare dress, I haul myself out of the window, get my arm around Sarai, and steel my spine as I say, “We have to make it to the Wailing Woods.”



THE MONSTERS ARE COMING

## QUINTESSA

“THE GHOSTS ARE FOLLOWING US.” I GLANCE BEHIND US where gray breath hushes across the aged cemetery stones as we hurry to the Wailing Woods. As gray as my hair. Breath that smells of wormwood and overripe fruit.

Reaching for Sarai’s hand, always warmer than mine, I tug her along. Her footsteps are slow and heavy from where she holds the swell of her laboring stomach. More blood seeps through the bundle of rags between her thighs to stain her brown wool dress. Droplets tumble onto the snow, luring the dead all the more.

Wind gusts through the trees, picking up bits of dry, crumpled leaves and snowflakes. And wails. Not even the ghosts heaving shrieks and groans silence them. By nightfall, the trees will scream. We hurry toward the line. With their brittle branches and gnarled, twisted white bodies, they remind me of searching corpses, their long, thin branches like strings of intestines.

“Don’t stop until you get to the trees,” I urge Sarai, who weighs down the earth with her tired legs while I lower to scoop up a jagged rock.

“Good,” she huffs and presses on, calling behind her, “Because I was planning to stop before I reach the sister trees that scare the stuffings out of your ghosts.”

*Ghosts are hollow*, I don’t bother saying. Except on the longest and darkest night of the year. It doesn’t escape me how she said “your” either.

Rolling my eyes, I hurl the rock at the nearest specter. Flecks of skin and black blood spurt from its shoulder. Bones haven't formed yet. A shame ghost stuffing can't be ground sugar. More herd around the one I hit, gathering, staggering like a ragged line of broken, naked dolls. Black-veined skin, fractured porcelain flesh, tiny chasms between teeth. There are so many—more than the small hundred or so in our cemetery. The Veil between us and the Waste must have thinned early to sprinkle them into our realm. And our city is the sacrificial altar upon its border.

At least this gap of the Wailing Woods spans a mile. With the Veil thinning, it's dangerous to enter the woods, but it would be more dangerous anywhere else.

The dead try to follow, but the sister trees will protect us far more than any walls or swords.

All the ghosts smell is blood. Sarai's blood. Never mine.

I slip on a sheet of ice. It cracks, soaking the ends of my frost-dampened skirts. I bunch up the towels, thankful they don't meet the bitter groundwater.

Scrambling over the snows, I set my gaze on the sister trees and force my legs to move. A bone-deep chill seeps through my dress and burrows into my skin. As if the ghosts are licking my spine to nip at my nerves.

Several feet ahead of me, Sarai crosses the tree line into the woods, marked by the bone fences. And swinging strings of teeth clattering like organic musical notes. My shoulders sag in relief because the dead shuffle away from the trees, away from the souls of the Sacrificed.

Once I arrive in the woods, I swallow a knot in my throat and step over roots tangled with bones. Whole corpses have fused into the larger trees. Like sacred corpse collectors, the trees bear the skulls of the Sacrificed, growing them into their mighty bodies to stare back at us with unseeing eyes. Blood weeps from the tree bark like sap.

But I'm more concerned about the blood between Sarai's thighs. It already calls to my vym.



“Had to be on Hollow Night,” she moans and curls onto the ground, spreading for me. Sarai is a word binder. The irony that she never forgets what people say, but she still chose me as a friend.

“It’s not night yet,” I remind her, kneeling down before her, ignoring how my knees sink into the waterlogged earth, forming imprints in the frost and mud. “Just hold on. Be strong like I know you are, Sarai.”

My friend’s breath turns shallow as her eyes glaze over from pain. Wasting no time, I retrieve the small razor blade sewn into my cloak, alongside others. She shouldn’t have to be strong here. Sarai should be in a warm bed, a fire crackling in the hearth, and the Sisters gathered around her with hot towels and boiling water. If it were any other night...

More wails echo from the trees as if the Sacrificed are preparing for a new arrival.

“I tried to get back to the Convent, but the Brothers are all over the Borderlands tonight. I hid in the cemetery until I could get to your house, but the corpses—”

“I promise I won’t say anything about your thighs,” I interrupt, distracting my friend, my smile curving to the right as I distract her while bunching her skirts up to her hips.

“Like you have any room to talk,” she retorts, throwing her head back with a groan.

Too much room since my thighs never touch due to my spindly limbs and bony arms.

After stripping Sarai’s stockings down to her knees, I peel back the rags to discover more blood. She’s expelling more than most do. Another groan. Sarai’s thighs clench. Her hands are clammy with cold sweat. Fear shivers down my spine at the thought of losing my one friend.

Picking up the razor blade, I slash two clean stripes down my right arm, overlapping the fine silver lines of old scars birthed over my lifetime of blood-binding. No tremors rattle my hand as the blood spills into my other palm.

I chant no words and use no herbs. The first time, the binding had skittered out of me. Now, the *vym* as I prefer to call it, flows from my veins, tingling like static at the tips of my fingers.

Ever gray as soft, seeking smoke, my *vym* creeps to Sarai's deep, pre-labor wound. Scrawled upon my skin and inscribed in my scars, my ink turns to chaotic, swirling calligraphy as I bind the blood into her veins, cleaving her body of the tiny corpse as frail and undeveloped as a boneless sparrow.

The *vym* binds my blood once it's served its purpose. For the first time since we entered, the wails fade to soft echoes, ebbing to whispers, followed by a reverent silence.

Something hard twists beneath my legs. Sarai flicks her eyes to the space between her legs, trembling when the tree roots surround the preserved sac with the pallid little corpse. The Corpse Collectors gather it into their long, knotted fingers and pull the lifeless form to join the Sacrificed. Old corpses act as protectors over the smallest ones just as the woods protect us from the ghosts and monsters every night and day. Everything on this side of the Waste is guarded by the god-eater's great wall. I shiver when I imagine my blood dripping from that bark, my bones fused into the tree roots to become a protector spirit.

Tonight, I must protect myself.

While I lean on my heels and study the trees around us, a healed and restored Sarai wastes no time. Swiping the mud off her hands and flinging her hair back, wild waves—a rich mahogany compared to my driftwood gray.

“Get up, Quinn,” she commands, reaching down to tug my elbow. Practical as always. Miscarriages are as common as the snowfalls here in the Borderlands. “We need to go before more dead rise.”

An ear-splitting, mournful scream pierces the night, curdling my blood. Sarai shoots her head up, her spine snapping straight.

“Was that—”

I nod. “A banshee.”

“If the banshees are close, then...” Sarai trails off, gooseflesh forming on her arms. My chest tightens.

Sisters give up their souls at death and become banshees to protect the Borderlands. *For where a banshee wails, a monster has pierced the Veil*, we’ve all grown up learning the child’s rhyme.

Numb to the core, I stare down at my hands, coated in blood. Sarai’s blood, a pre-born babe’s blood. Blood of mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. Enough blood over my brief twenty years to fill a lake. My eyes settle on the tangle of willows nearby with their bark weeping more blood tears and their roots cradling the sac. Other than Qora, blood on my hands is the one time I feel anything. If only it didn’t feel like burning thorns under my skin.

“If the Brothers catch us here...”

Sarai doesn’t finish. We both know what will happen if the Brothers discover what happened. The pregnancy alone was dangerous. If they learn about the miscarriage, Sarai will be bound for the Sacrifice. As it is, Rylinne and Darya must wonder where I am.

A little out of breath, I wipe my hands on the ice until the blood sluices off the skin and stumble to my feet. Before Sarai can escape, I hand her the black wool dress, content with my long coat.

She eyes the dress and sighs. “Thank you, Quinn. You always know what to do.”

“Of course, I do!” I lilt and sweep the back of my hand beneath my chin in a carefree gesture. “Don’t you know I have the wisdom of the god-eater?”

Sarai rolls her eyes as we make our way down the hill, keeping to the far side of the cemetery. Most of the corpses have returned to staggering around the nearby fields, but some

linger near the treeline. Their groans linger like smog thickening the air.

“But not wise enough to stop playing with malevolent ghosts.”

Yes, Sarai is not fond of my Shadow. My eyes lower to the ground as if a gray weight has fallen on my shoulders. It lasts all of a few seconds before I catch the familiar silhouette sweeping across the area, pausing now and then before the ambling corpses.

Qora is always curious about other ghosts on Hollow Night.

“She’ll never hurt me. Not really,” I brush off the notion. “Qora is harmless.”

“You have strangle marks on your neck, Quintessa,” my friend chastises me and prods me in the chest.

Qora drifts before an older corpse, more skeletal than the others. When she tilts her head and curls her shadows toward the lifeless creature, I have to believe she can see some things.

With the gray weight lifting, I touch the fresh wounds on my throat and shrug. “She stopped before I passed out. That’s progress!”

Sarai drops her jaw and shakes her head. “You’re mad.”

I loop my thin arm around her plump one, sidling against her warmth as we bypass the ghosts, uninterested in us with no blood spilling. “Raving mad,” I tilt my cheek onto her shoulder, my gray hair mingling with her rich and spicy brown. “Whatever will you do with me?”

Qora wisps toward us, hissing a little at Sarai. I blow her a kiss as if to say she has no reason to be jealous.

“How long, Quinn?” wonders Sarai as I stroke my thumb across her knuckles.

“The escort comes at sunset,” I say softly.

“You say escort like armed Brothers are not coming to take you away.”

“I’ll have Qora to protect me,” I tease her and glance back at my Shadow.

“What a comfort.”

Just as we arrive at the little strip of woods bordering my family’s property, Sarai and I duck behind the nearest tree. Muscles strain in her neck, shoulders tight from the procession of white-hooded figures on their making their way to the Wailing Woods border. A thrill chases up my spine at the sight of the Brothers with their bone-breaker swords on their backs while they ride their capayllia mounts: stronger horses bred from an ancestry of Waste and Borderlands equines. Twice the size of the average horse, capayllia may only be ridden by the Brothers by command of the Borderlands Governor under the direct law of the god-eater.

On regular horseback, a gathering of Sisters follows them. Judging by the pack wagons they are carting and the stench of rot and iron blood drifting closer, they are bringing the slaughtered livestock to lure the lower monsters and corpses to the west side of the border, so the girls of Sacrifice may be escorted to the east of the Wailing Woods. Chills engulf my nerves at the thought.

I will soon join them.

When Sarai stiffens next to me, narrowing her eyes upon a mounted Brother with hair like silver and sunlight, a rugged jawline, a proud nose, and high cheekbones, I touch my friend’s arm and ask, “Is that him?”

Sarai swallows but nods. Brother Lyam Gunt. I glower at the man, a little too familiar with him. Memories of him pounding me outside the convent against their far sanctuary wall. He’d caught me after I’d visited the Sisters to help with the birth of twins. A safe passage toll from the convent to my home that he forced on me.

“Want me to send Qora to his room tonight and scare the sacrilege out of him?” I ask since Qora will be visible by nightfall.

Sarai shakes her head and lowers her head. “I just want to go home.”

“Take the little dirt path that leads down the east side of our manor,” I direct her with a growing smirk. “I’ll distract the Brothers. They’ll never see you.”

“I owe you everything, Quinn.”

“Pish.” I wave a hand at her. “If you weren’t my friend, who else would I talk to?”

We have a little chuckle at that before I scurry into the woods in the opposite direction of Sarai. No words of farewell. No mention of prayers or good fortune or ‘spirits be with you’. Sarai and I are beyond such declarations. When you live closest to the Veil where death and rot are more common than life and growth, you learn to cope. And never say goodbye.

“Want to have some fun?” I giggle to Qora who breathes frost down the back of my neck, prickling the hairs as I hide behind a bush a hundred yards off from the procession.

As if she knows what I mean, Qora pulses her shadows in staccato ripples that I’ve always interpreted as laughter. Any opportunity for Qora to misbehave, she will take.

With a single nod from me, Qora bolts, surging through the trees and shifting right in the path of the procession. No, the Sisters and Brothers can’t see her, but the horses sense her. Several stomp the ground, cracking ice and stone with their powerful hooves, dipping their heads and aiming the powerful horns on each side of their heads at my Shadow. One rears up, howling. It doesn’t take much for the Sisters to calm them, and when I turn, Sarai has fled her hiding spot. I catch the ends of her black dress flicking around the corner of our house and smile.

As soon as I swing my head back, a horn roars throughout the valley. Deafening and bone-chilling, it resounds like a hundred claps of thunder to warn all within the Borderlands.

The Veil has severed early. The monsters are coming.

And I’m late.



WE ARE GODS OF THE WASTE  
FOREVER



## DRAGO

I SLAM MY FIST INTO THE OFFENDING MIRROR, SHATTERING IT with my scaled fist. A rumbling growl, born of a familiar but horrific hunger, stalks my body.

“God-damnit, Drago,” Mayce lectures me from the opposite side of the hall. “Will you wreak your havoc upon the castle as horridly as you did last Hollow Night?”

I snarl, baring my growing teeth and mocking, “Suck. My. Cock. Brother.” The Fae may not be my blood brother, but since we’re bound by a force beyond blood, we retain the title. And he’s sucked my cock plenty of times.

Signs of the Hunger prey upon his body as it does mine. His ears have grown longer as well as his claws while black spirit bleeds through his wings, breaking bones, burning sinew, and distorting them.

The more rational one among us, Mayce approaches me, infernal arms stoic at his sides, back straight as an arrow. Not a thread out of place on his robe. Fucking Fae. If the Hunger wasn’t wreaking havoc on my body and threatening fire to feed on my insides, I’d have the gorgeous specimen on all fours with his ass in the air already.

“We will have more than enough time to lick our wounds and recover from this night as we have done for centuries. But I would prefer not to spend a month restoring the castle following one of your tantrums.”

“*My* castle,” I bark. “I can do whatever the fuck I want with it.”

“There is no reason we must lose all sense of propriety and give in to our primal natures, brother.”

A snort echoes from down the hall, and I roll my eyes to where Kyan has propped himself up on the desk, arms crossed over his chest, shadowy wings overlapping the wall. Always sneaking up on us, appearing from thin *air*.

“You wish to say something, little brother?” Mayce turns to the fallen angel, his long hair swinging like golden lichen down the sides of his neck as he invites Kyan to interject.

His angel eyes have grown larger, shining like glowing flames. Fur sprouts upon his incandescent skin. “Who was responsible for the most kills last year?”

“*Merikh*,” Mayce and I say in unison. On cue, Merikh’s lone voice howls and roars from the furthest wing of the castle. I roll my eyes. Suffering in isolation as usual, the brooding, *bloody* bastard. The Fae might be the epitome of propriety, but I’ll take his grounded ass any day over the vampire.

Kyan waves a hand, lifts off the desk, hovering in mid-air before landing with his boots barely brushing the floor. “Other than him, I believe it was Mayce who had the most kills.”

“Doesn’t fucking matter.” I clench my scaled hand into a fist and crack my neck from side to side at the familiar pain of bones breaking, realigning to form my wings. “The Sacrifice has happened for a thousand years, and it will last for another thousand at this rate. A girl would have to be mad and invisible to follow us into the Waste. We’re never leaving, brothers. Nothing but exile for our future.”

“When did you turn into Merikh, Drago?” Kyan asks, jutting out his chin to me. “He’s the dark pessimist after all. You should be blowing smoke from your ears as our official hothead.”

I flex all my muscles, the veins straining in my arms, and leer at my brother, “Better a hothead than a featherbrain.”

The punch comes when I blink. Shouldn’t have been shocked when Kyan’s blow knocks me off my feet, rattling my

teeth, and sending me hurling into the shattered mirror. He might be the youngest of us, but the fallen angel still packs a mean punch.

“Bloody hell,” curses Mayce, kneading his brow as I get to my feet, picking shards of glass from my flesh and brushing others off my scales while eyeing Kyan with a death glare. Not that we can be killed, not here at least. Nor can we kill each other.

“You’re looking quite tasty today, Ky,” I stalk toward him, licking my lips, and hardening my eyes. “I’ll show you who’s the alpha dragon of us.” My blood turns hot, the fire heating my veins and all my nerves. More scales burst through the surface of my flesh, overlapping to form a gleaming armor no blade may penetrate.

Kyan taunts me by shifting his weight and beckoning me toward him with wagging fingers. “Bring it, you big-headed lizard.”

I become nothing but seething brawn and simmering rage. Baser, carnal instincts the curse draws from me more ferocious than ever. Powers suppressed all other days until the Hunger overtakes us, compensating for the suppression on Hollow Night. Madness consumes me. I’m shuddering, vibrating with the need to unleash the fire and fury roaring inside me. By nightfall, we will take our cursed monster forms, breach the Veil, and invade the Wailing Woods.

“I’m surrounded by children,” scoffs Mayce, combing his fingers through his pretty strands. Perhaps I’ll burn them off tonight and watch him squeal. But he’d torture me for it, and I’d rather not have bloody scales from his claws. Or gods forbid, he pulls his illusionist act and turns me into his puppet. After I’d ruined his best robe one Hollow Night, he turned me into his puppet for a week, forcing me to serve him until I’d broken free from his magic. Fucking Fae trickster. If he wasn’t so delicious—

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” a familiar voice intrudes, clicking his teeth and baring his lengthening teeth. “A little row in the hall, brothers? Why wasn’t I invited?” Merikh tilts his head to one

side, his eyes shimmering like cauldrons upon us. Black veins pulse through his pale skin, the raw Hunger enhancing his power.

I roll my eyes, straightening. Kyan backs away, eyes widening upon Merikh before he turns tail and runs, leaping into the air, shedding feathers and fur, and disappearing down the opposite hallway. “Chicken,” I mutter after him. Not that I blame our youngest brother. Shortly before the Hunger, the fallen angel holds off the monster for as long as possible. Means more torment, but the demon in him can withstand it.

“Thought you were off howling at the moon,” I mock Merikh even though it’s not the wisest idea.

He curves one corner of his mouth into a sinister smirk, chuckles darkly, and drags his claws across the wall, slashing across the stone until the sound chafes mine and Mayce’s ears. The tension shows in our necks and locked jaws. With his singular ability, Merikh could be alpha if he desired, but I retain the title of eldest and give him a good challenge now and then. He moves toward us with the grace of a feline. Everything is a *blood* game to him.

“I was explaining to Drago the benefits of maintaining what little control we have until the Sacrifice,” declares Mayce, squaring his shoulders.

“Drago has very little control. All he does is destroy.”

“Speak for yourself,” I throw back at Merikh.

“Oh, it wasn’t an insult, brother. You know how much I admire your skill, especially in its raw, undiluted, and *naked* form,” he eludes with crazed, bloodshot pupils on display. We all swap appetites with one another, but Mayce and I have bonded the most while Merikh prefers Kyan. Their demons understand one another more.

Bones snap in his arm, elongating them while his ribcage pushes through his graying skin. Shadows gather around his eyes like dark thunderclouds brewing a storm. Merikh is the only one who can thwart me when I shift into my monstrous dragon form. He sways past me with the deadly grace befitting

his race and pats my cheek. “Good to see you’re coming to my side of things, brother.”

I rumble a low growl. “I am on no one’s side but my own.”

“You’ve all been in denial for the worst part of a thousand years, my beautiful males,” he lilts, slashing claws across the table, the sound reminding me of a shrill shriek. “There is nothing for us but an eternity of Hollow Nights. We are gods of the Waste forever. Gods of ghosts and monsters. Heartless beasts. Bound to our bane. Undead blood and flesh may not be as satisfying as the sweet spoils of Hollow Night, but it is sustenance regardless.”

If my beast is forged in fire and iron, Merikh’s is blood and darkness. He gave in to his feral nature long ago. A nature meant for seduction and a face chiseled from the finest marble with those blade-sharp cheekbones, mouth sculpted as if by the angels, low-hooded eyes framed by long lashes, and molten pupils glinting like silver stars in the velvet darkness of his irises. Wearing nothing but the expression of a predator while I am the brutal and rugged warrior, raising hellfire and destroying everything around me, save for my brothers.

Matching my height, the vampire pauses before me and brushes his sinuous, curved mouth across mine, careless of my beard. More scales penetrate my skin, hardening and tightening the flesh. I open my mouth, and with one low growl from my throat, we lay claim to one another. Mouths crashing hard through the pain of our bones breaking, teeth piercing each other’s mouths as our blood gushes the Hunger through our veins, and hands and claws tearing at clothes and flesh and scales until we transform to our bloodied, monstrous forms.

And Mayce has become his. Robes shed, the Fae wears the skin of the stars—an effervescent hue of gold meant to allure and entrap with his beauty. No less lethal as our last Hollow Night proved. Hair of silver cascades, slitted eyes like a winter’s night—black and lustrous. Blindingly beautiful, his wings shine with the light of a thousand flaming diamonds, brighter than all my dragon scales. The Sacrificed never run from Mayce unless he forces them since his monster thrills from the hunt as much as ours.

Even with Merikh's mouth upon mine, I growl for the Fae, demanding his grounding presence to my fire and Merikh's blood. White horns grow from Mayce's head, protruding in three directions like keen branches. Silver thorns weave around the apex of his head into a jagged and worthy crown.

The Hunger possesses us. Merikh feeds it, I revel in it, Mayce embraces it, and Kyan surrenders to it.

The four monsters devour our god forms, and we set forth on Hollow Night to enter the Wailing Woods, where we become nothing but ruin and slaughter—fire scorching flesh, earth crushing bones, blood rupturing skin, and air stolen from lungs.



I AM LIMBO IN A BODY



## QUINTESSA

AS I HURRY DOWN THE ALLEY BY THE SIDE OF THE HOUSE, I stop dead in my tracks from the couple nearly hidden by shadows in the far corner. A couple rutting in the alley.

It's not the first time I've spied on others fucking, or wished my fingers dipping into my pussy would produce some feeling other than an echo of longing. No heat. No fluids. And more importantly, no blood has ever graced that barren chamber.

But it's the first time I've ever seen someone fucking my sister. And it's not Van.

Her head is tipped back against the gate, mouth open, eyes closed, breasts swaying from how hard he pounds into her, his breeches hanging halfway down his buttocks. She tightens her long, creamy legs around his waist and rolls her hips. She knows just what to do.

Of course, she does. Darya is a thought-binder.

A deep groan rumbles from his voice as he reaches up to knead her breast before lowering his mouth to the peaked tip. I step back, only for my sister to open her eyes, knit her brows together, and frown at me. No doubt, she's already read my brief train of thought. Thankfully, Qora helps shadow my mind, so Darya can't steal too much. And I've worked infinitely harder over the years because there's nothing Darya loves more than to spy. Our father has put her to proper use.

He wanted sons, but our mother gave him three girls instead. I pity her. Not as much as Rylinne, but I know Darya

became the sword Pater wanted her to be in order to thrive. I just survive.

As if sensing her tension, the man swings his head back and chortles a rasp.

“Let the gray girl watch,” he says without stopping his rutting. “It’s not like she will be alive after tonight to say anything.” Darya giggles in response and thrusts her large breasts out, the rosy nipples swelling from every lick of the man’s tongue.

Oh, he’s a flesh-binder, I notice when he changes the shape of that tongue.

My heart thunders. I know I should run past them, beyond the gate, and return to the manor. But I can’t seem to stop watching, fascinated by the sight.

I’ve read too many books about a dark, dangerous masculine warrior designed to tear breath from a woman’s lungs while strong, callused fingers rip her bodice down the middle. Throughout my twenty years, I’ve fantasized about such dark lust, a desire for the carnal and primal. That someone would crave me to the point of erotic assault and sinful hunger, until he drove himself so hard into me, I’d finally feel something other than numb. Countless nights, I’ve rubbed my small but high breasts and little knot between my thighs, chasing an illusion.

I am limbo in a body. I feel nothing.

*You are nothing*, my father’s voice batters into my consciousness.

There is nothing dark or dangerous about the man fucking my sister. He chases his pleasure the entire time. Far too crude, he can’t even pass for filthy. No seduction or charm either. Darya is doing this to spite our father. But more than that, her eyes narrow upon mine, burning me with her gaze as she moans and the fence posts behind her rattle. My chest caves in on itself, my breath hitching.

First-born daughters are always married off to a Brother while a second-born daughter chooses her husband. But

Rylinne will never marry. The responsibility passes to Darya. And she hates me more for it as Rylinne hates me for why she can't marry.

Weighed down from an unseen force, my heart sinks low in my chest as the man finishes inside Darya with a final thrust, groaning deeply against her bosom. She cries out, but I roll my eyes, knowing the sound of my sister's true cry.

I can't hope it will ever happen to me, but if it does, I want it to be feral and violent. After letting countless men in the Borderlands use my dead pussy, I'll need something heated and so unholy, the saints will blush. Savage and forbidden, deep and hard enough to feel it down to my core. Heart-crushing, soul-obliterating, suicide by sex.

What a delirious way to go!

I'm still trembling when Darya rights her skirts, throws her blouse on, and stomps over to me to grip my wrist and tug me toward the house. "Come along, gray girl, time to prepare you for the Sacrifice."



NO AMOUNT OF LACE EMBELLISHING MY BODY COULD POSSIBLY conceal the scars. I cringe as if I can already smell the bitter aroma of blood, hear the crunch of bones under mighty paws, and smell their sulfuric breath curling on the back of my neck.

While Rylinne weaves more of my bone-straight, gray hair into braids, I rip off the lace gloves, pulling at tiny threads. Darya tightens the whalebone corset, but it could never plump my small breasts enough to matter much. As the eldest, Rylinne is given the most food, followed by Darya, and then me. And with how my half-ghost body digests food, a fuller figure is impossible.

Darya pulls harder, siphoning my breath as if to punish me for stumbling upon her earlier interlude. If she were to crack a rib, I doubt I'd register it.

Our house ghost, Townsend, shuffles back and forth through the boudoir, nearly in full flesh form. At least he's harmless enough, more of a busybody than anything. And anxious. I've had to remind Qora countless times to leave him to his frets. I sigh because she swings back and forth in front of him, forcing him to change directions until he reminds me of a mouse in a maze.

Rylinne finishes with the strands. Silence and heartache between me and my oldest sister fill the deep hollow in my chest. Whenever she turns the left side of her face in my direction, bitter poison slithers down my throat. I may have countless more scars than Rylinne, but mine are from my hands, my blades. Her scars are evidence of my failure to heal her after she survived the Sacrifice. The deep slash marks marring her otherwise lovely face trail all the way to her neck and mangle one corner of her mouth into a perma-frown. My sister hasn't smiled since that night.

As she binds the braids with a long white ribbon, Rylinne tells me, "Remember, Quinn, you cannot fight them, so don't even try. Stay as close to the trees as possible, and if you hear a banshee, run to them. They are your best allies tonight."

"Unless the monsters pluck her and take her back to the Waste where she belongs," interjects Darya, knotting the base of my corset before shoving the overlaying, ruffled dress at me.

Ignoring her, I turn to Rylinne and offer her a weak smile. "Don't forget rubbing myself down with dirt and manure to conceal my scent."

She nods, her warm, whiskey-colored eyes meeting mine for a fraction of a second before they lower. Beautiful to me as always despite the scars riddling her face. Especially when she turns to the houseplant in the corner of the room and touches a fingertip to the soil, enriching it and encouraging the plant to grow. Rylinne inherited our father's earth-binding, but thanks to her scars, she can do little more than gardening.

With her abundant, birthing hips, raven-dark hair flowing to her waist, fair skin, and generous bosom, Rylinne would

still make a fine bride for an Elder-Brother. But she is monster-scarred, her blood and body corrupted and impure according to the Brothers. My blood simmers at the knowledge because it's not fair. Survivors of the Sacrifice should always be celebrated and rewarded, not shunned. So many nights I gave her false hope whenever I assured her my vym could remove the scars, but whatever monster clawed her, its venom is powerful enough to circulate in her blood to this day. Beyond my skill to heal.

After I secure the white Sacrifice dress over my corset, Rylinne tenderly takes a few laurel flowers from the plant and tucks them into my hair, finishing with a touch-me-not nettle circlet upon my head for protection.

Qora flits closer, her shadows curling toward me, fingers longing to touch my hair and the flowers. On Hollow Night when she's not preoccupied with killing me, she enjoys petting me. To this day, I wonder if she can feel anything, or if her nerves are hushed like mine.

Once we step into the hall, our father is waiting, hands clenched behind his back, lips pressed into a firm smile as he regards me. My entire being shudders before him.

"Rylinne, Darya," he greets each of them and welcomes their kisses upon his cheeks. The ache inside me grows whenever he thumbs Rylinne's scars and places a delicate kiss upon them. None of my scars matter even if my blood is writ into every object in this house. Even the walls bear my blood-binder signature, considering he's used me all these years.

"Sire..." I lower my head, tucking my chin to my chest, ever the obedient daughter even if I grit my teeth behind my smile.

To my sisters, he is Pater or Papa. To me, he is my sire who produced the required seed for my mother to conceive. Nothing less, nothing more. Qora shifts back and forth behind him as he addresses me, and I clamp my teeth on my tongue to prevent my smile from growing as she imitates him with a wagging finger.

“Tonight, you present yourself for the Sacrifice,” he gestures firmly before tucking his hands beneath his underarms since he believes it makes him more intimidating in his Elder robe. “Tonight, I wash my hands of you.”

I don't mention how I will never be able to wash the blood off my hands. Not after too many failures growing up and training of my vym resulted in the loss of life and coin and repute for my sire. It was only the past couple of years where I managed to save an Elder-Brother. Pater chose his same position as payment for services.

“Is her mark visible?” he asks my sisters.

Darya nods while Rylinne sweeps my braided hair onto my chest to bare the scar. The one where a higher monster clawed into the back of my neck just after I was born—after I died in my mother's birth canal for two minutes before coming back to life.

Pater nods firmly, his voice gruff as he continues, “Good. Can't have any lower monsters trying to stake their claim on her and give her the possibility of survival. After tonight, your presence will not cast a shadow over our household. If I'd had my way, I would have strangled the half-life out of you at your birth. But you belong to the monsters, to the god-beasts. To blood and bone, you return.”

So he's reminded me once every day of my existence. Especially when he used his binding ability on me. I swallow the knot in my throat and memorize the grains in the wood floor.

Sarai is the one person who hopes I'll survive the Sacrifice. Even if I do, I'll spend the rest of my days in the Convent, forever resigned to dark dresses sealing over my skin and concealing the scars and ink I've earned with every drop of blood. Confined to stone walls or the grounds and gardens. I'd rather take my last breaths in the Wailing Woods and join the souls of the Sacrificed, however meager and skeletal a prize my bones will be for the trees.

If the Borderlands had found another blood-binder sooner, I wouldn't have reached the ripe age of twenty before entering

the Sacrifice.

As Pater escorts me with the Elder-Brothers to the Wailing Woods' eastern side, where dozens of other girls shiver on this blustery winter night, my curiosity consumes me. Borderlands children are taught how to hide, trap, and kill lower monsters more than any other education. My insides wriggle when I think of the god-eater and how he destroyed the gods who tormented humankind for centuries.

All but four. They were too powerful for him to kill, so he cursed them instead.

Hollow Night is the one time they may pierce the Veil protecting us from the Waste, along with all other monsters and undead creatures. Driven so mad with hunger after a full year of living on the blood and meat of the dead, sweet and tender flesh is what they covet most.

I shiver with the other girls. A few stand straight and tall, proud of their Sacrifice. Screams echo in the distance, prompting several girls to flinch. Screams of the banshees signify the presence of monsters, whether lower, higher, or gods, but they often come last. My pulse thrashes in my ears, galloping louder than a herd of wild bulls.

Out of the corner of my eye, my Shadow has begun to take more form than usual, though I am still the only one who sees her. I love her hair like long dark ropes of shifting shades, her fingers curling with tendrils of smoke, and her almond-shaped eye slits glowing like hot coals. Thanks to her, I've had many brushes with death. Dread should pull at my stomach lining, but flutters come instead.

I truly hope my death lasts hours. Perhaps some monster will drag me all throughout the Wailing Woods, until my blood and flesh touch hundreds of tree roots. Or one could play with me. A winged beast could haul my body high into the air and drop me to crack me open like an egg. What a thrill it would be to fly before the end! By now, I've conjured all sorts of fantasies. For twenty years, I've prepared for this.

So, I clench my stomach and straighten my back, hiding a smile behind my teeth as the Elder-Brother-Prime begins the

ceremony to usher in the Sacrifice.





THIS CREATURE IS LAUGHING  
AT ME!

## QUINTESSA

WHILE THE ELDER-BROTHER CHANTS THE WORDS TO THE ceremonial verses I've known all my life, I recite the children's rhyme in my head. If I don't dissociate from the ceremony, I'll second guess myself, which is never good.

A cold sweat breaks out upon my skin, turning my palms clammy. I can't feel them, but goosebumps pebble my flesh while the Elder-Brother finishes by expressing gratitude to the god-eater for forming the Veil and exiling the monster gods he couldn't defeat to the Waste. When I was younger, I asked Pater why they may cross the Veil on Hollow Night, but he reminded me not to question the Brothers by locking me in the root cellar for three days. He always sealed it with a layer of rock, so I could never escape.

Ever since, I've reserved such questions for Qora, though she can't respond.

More banshee screams. A sob and a whimper escape from two girls behind me. One grips the hilt of her blade so hard, her knuckles turn white. Too small, no longer than the length of my palm to the tip of my middle finger, these are the weapons the Brothers gift us. Meant for the lower monsters.

"Surrender to the god-monsters," the Elder-Brother reminds us for the third time and blows out the ceremonial candle, signifying it's almost time. "Your Sacrifice will be honored. Your blood and flesh will satisfy the cursed gods and provide a shield for the Borderlands until next Hollow Night."

Another girl grinds her bare foot into the frost. At least soft gray moss covers this section of the Wailing Woods. As if the spirits have warmed the ground for us.

More words are chanted, and the Sisters and Sisters-in-training move throughout the group of girls to bind white wool cloaks around our throats. A familiar face arrives before me, and I smile, hoping to lift the corners of Sarai's sorrowful mouth. Her warm eyes twinkle for a faint moment before she wraps the cloak around my frame, leans in, and whispers in my ear, "Thank you for everything, Quintessa."

Her words punch through my chest, tugging at my heartstrings, paralyzing the beat. Pulse quickening, I kiss her cheek as she pulls away in a gesture of gratitude. No time for anything else.

The sharp, clamorous bell chimes. Every girl flinches, including me. Shoulders tense. Breaths falter. Another chime. Pupils dilate. Spines lock straight. Hearts melt as we wait for the third and final chime. When its peal pierces the air and echoes across the forest, not one girl hesitates.

Like a rush of white doves, we plunge into the Wailing Woods. White doves.

And one Shadow.



QORA PRACTICALLY CUDDLES MY BACK. CLOSER THAN EVER before, as if we're reversed, and I'm the shadow. But I don't mind. Not when it feels like icy fingers creeping up my spine. I shiver, adoring the chill. Some of the girls form groups—strength in numbers. But it will only attract more monsters with so many beating hearts bundled around one another, so many blood scents.

By now, I've rubbed soil all over my body, including the dress and cloak. For good measure, I dip my fingers into the blood sap of the trees, hold my breath, and wrinkle my nose

while smearing it on my face and hair. With any luck, the beasts will scent the wailing trees and corpse blood, nothing more.

A shrill scream, followed by a gurgle, cuts through the night. A tremor racks my limbs. Close to me. I duck low, hugging the roots of the tree behind me, sidling against bones and threads of hair, and a skull.

Off to my right, I see it. Too crippled by fear to slam my eyes shut, all I can do is stare while the lower monster gores its claws into the belly of the girl, burying its jaws into her flesh and intestines. It's a Waste wolf. The bones protruding along the roll of its back and the black blood dripping from its eyes give it away. Her screams engulf the air. My vym itches to leave my blood. I can't save her. I could end her pain, but it would mean giving away my position.

When the wolf jerks its bloodied muzzle up, and I snap my head in the direction it's looking, my heart screams to leave my chest. Not a few hundred yards away, a girl has stopped dead in her tracks, staring at the dread wolf with wide, horror-stricken eyes.

I recognize her. Ayda, one of the girls from our village. I served a week in the root cellar after healing her brother because their wood-carver father couldn't pay the coin, which I knew prior. Punishment for giving away my vym without profit.

The wolf crouches. I don't think. I lunge.

Dragging the blade across my arm, I shed a line of blood to divert the wolf and ready my knife just as it turns, licking its bloodied canines, silver eyes gleaming and hungry for me. My stomach lining twists. I taste acid in my throat the moment the wolf charges for me.

Before its shadow may close around me, Qora shifts unexpectedly. My Shadow dives in front of me, shrieks shriller than a weeping bird, and throws out her shadows to shoot into the wolf. It opens its jaws, yelping and whining from the black smoke gushing from its fur, eye sockets, nostrils, and mouth.

Finally, the Waste wolf drops like a stone to the ground. Qora spins to me with a hiss.

Dumbfounded, I stare at Qora, a million questions scrambling through my brain. But I cover my mouth with a giggle and say, “See, I knew you liked me!”

One swipe from her hand, and she’s slashed clear through my dress and the corset bodice. I stick out my tongue. “That was just rude.”

At least Ayda is nowhere in sight. Must have bolted away as soon as the wolf targeted another prey.

Sharp wind rakes claws across my body, and I wrap the cloak around myself, debating what to do. If I make it to the cemetery grounds beyond the tree line, I’ll have survived. At the most, the Sisters will offer me sanctum at the convent. At the least...I lower my head, chewing on the inside of my cheek, wondering if I could leave the Borderlands. Perhaps scratch out some sort of living as a blood binder in one of the larger cities closer to the god-eater’s prime city. My mind reels with images of his realm with their conveniences far more advanced than our primitive lifestyle. The most we have in the Borderlands is the modern electric lights—reserved for the Elder-Brothers and the Governor.

First, I must survive.

A banshee scream spears the air, bleeding my ears from its strident pitch. Qora tenses, crouches, turning her head. There is the banshee, not a hundred feet from me. Her dark hair branches off in all directions hovering in the air. Rib bones protrude through her emaciated body and sagging skin, arms disproportionate with overlarge hands and fingers as keen as naked, spindly tree branches. Her tattered dress sweeps to the ground but wisps back and forth, never still. A former Sister, she gave her soul to become one of these protectors.

When she throws her head back to scream again, icy fear cuts through my blood. It’s an omen. She’s warning me. Something worse than a Waste wolf is coming.

Stomach lurching, I tear into a run, careless of how my bare feet scramble over bones and skulls from the sprawling tree roots. A third scream from the banshee signals an attack. It curdles my blood, but I don't stop flying past the trees, hoping for some hiding spot.

Something hard knocks the wind out of me. And sends my body hurtling against the side of a tree, crushing my hopes. The knife slips from my fingers. Blood drips down the side of my face, and I reach up to find a gash on my head, but I can't tell if anything is broken. Not when I can't feel pain. Never felt pain, until a few seconds ago. All I know is it felt like a boulder crashing against my figure.

A moan escapes my throat at the same time that a massive shadow stalks toward me. I blink, expecting something like a blood demon, but the figure is the size of at least two grown men with a stacked muscled chest and arms. But it's not his monstrous size or even the taloned paws, layers of emerald-hued, black scales covering his body, and enormous tail. It's not the muzzle or the horns or his vast wings. It's the fire wreathing every inch of his body that betrays what and who he is.

The fire god, the most powerful of the Waste rulers. A dragon in mid-transformation.

Every inch of me is trembling, but I dare to lift my head and look him in the eyes with their flaming, dilated pupils. With a low growl emanating from his chest to rumble in the air, the dragon god beats his wings in a sudden strike that casts my gray hair about my cheeks. When his head dips to my lower half, only then do I register what's happened. That little whirlwind has fed the flames smoldering the ends of my dress.

Yelping, I roll and stem the flames as best I can, but it's burnt to blackened tatters at my knees. I wince from the stench of scorched flesh. While I feel no pain, the surface of my skin has seared to a blistering red.

As the monster crouches with his wings hemming me in on both sides, I press my back against the tree and glower, incensed. Blood simmering, I jut out my chin to say, "Why

don't you cook all of me before you eat me, then?" My hands fumble, searching for the fallen blade. "I'd say I'm a medium rare."

Something dark and rippled escapes the dragon's mouth. Smoke rings surge from his nostrils. This creature is laughing at me!

The dragon god tilts his head to the side, studying me. More flames tickle the sides of my body, but when I don't shrink, unfazed by the fire caressing my hushed, half-ghost nerves, those fiery pupils dilate to eclipse his dark irises. No laughter this time. Another deep growl rolls through the air. The dragon bares its teeth—teeth that are twice the size of my dagger blade. It opens its mouth, the flames swelling from the depths of its belly to glow its rising warning in its throat.

My breath stills. Lungs shut down. Eyes wide and struck with the horror that he's fulfilling my impulsive dare. But when something dark and familiar flies toward the monster from behind, hope surges in my chest. And my hand closes around the cold, metallic blade. Qora drives her shadows down, and I thrust the blade up and up and up—where the scales soften at the base of the dragon's throat.

He roars! But I freeze. And press my fingers against the scales. It only lasts a moment, but it's all I need to understand this novelty: the friction of skin, however fleeting. One touch.

The fire from the dragon's throat perishes to nothing more than crackles biting at my dress and cloak. I roll to one side as the beast thrashes with the air, roaring more.

Without looking back, I roll and scramble to my feet and break into a run. Tears trail down my cheeks. When you can't feel tears, you rarely ever cry, so I know they aren't sweat.

Against every rule and testimony, every bit of wisdom and advice from the Sisters, Brothers, and survivors of the Sacrifice, I stop running. I duck behind another gnarly, wailing tree, thicker and with full-bodied, tangled limbs. Then use its branches to haul myself higher and higher, until those branches hide my figure.



The dragon crashes to the earth, blood dripping from its throat. I wince from the sensation of burning claws ripping into my chest. My vym wars to get out, battling with my blood. Quaking and shaking more than ever, I hug my arms tight to my chest and try to deny, but I can't, I can't, I can't.

Even now, all I remember are those scales. Their soft armor and energy tingling against the tips of my fingers. My skin aches. Tremors overwhelm my limbs. I'd swear rich honey—warm and pure from the comb—drips down my spine.

And for the first time in my life, heated pleasure skitters into my core. All my body thrums. As the three other god monsters come, alerted by their leader's mania, a madness takes over my heart with the understanding.

I could *feel* him.

And I might just die for another touch.

6

IS IT POSSIBLE TO KILL A GOD?

## QUINTESSA

I CAGE MY HANDS OVER MY MOUTH TO HIDE MY GASPS. THE other monsters should still have the enhanced senses to smell me, especially the vampire beast. Bitter cold fear spears my belly like icicles at the sight of the god with bits of flesh dangling from his teeth and fangs, and mouth dripping with blood. Eyes pale and milky but not blind by any means. His long ears prick up as if straining to hear over the roaring howls of the dragon god.

When cold shadows embrace my form, I breathe a little sigh of relief. Qora is blanketing me with her shades, concealing my sight and scent.

Still, I can't help but tense when the vampire jerks his head in my direction, curving his long, bony hands with their razor-sharp claws. He is grayer than me and bears countless scars. And despite the protruding ribs, the rest of him is solid, packed muscle. The god with the most torturous power.

The Fae is a different story with excruciatingly beautiful features: long hair like threads of crystal, skin of pure spun gold, and starless black eyes. Unlike the vampire's deep gray and ripped demon wings, the Fae's remind me of luna moths—iridescent golden brown with a pale green hue and an eye in the center of each base wing. Wings that face me with eyes seeming to spear right through Qora's shadowy veil. When the ground shudders beneath his power, my skin crawls.

Last to arrive is the fallen angel on his tattered wings. Multiple black horns curve like thorny scimitars from the sides of the fallen angel's face. He cocks his head, so similar to an

owl, with his translucent, white orbs studying the wounded dragon. Canid limbs but with a neck and head more befitting a raptor.

Like me, the monsters are so raw but unfinished in their forms.

More blood trickles from the wound in the dragon's throat. Growling and groaning, the other three surround him and raise him up, monstrous wings beating to carry him deeper into the forest—back to the Waste. Qora pulls her shades from me once they're out of sight.

Confusion and excitement tangle within me. Adrenaline still pumps my blood from the memory of my fingers pressing upon those scales. I pause, glancing down at my fingertips because they're still tingling.

Qora shifts to the south, shadows swelling as if urging me to hurry. I glance in her direction. From here, it's probably no more than a half mile or so to the cemetery. In the other direction, miles of forests sprawl with more Waste creatures. Who knows what other horrors fill those woods? Narrowing my eyes, I stride forward, happening across splotches of blood. From the dragon.

Lowering myself to my knees, I dip my fingers into the blood and gasp at the wet warmth and the energy sparking to life, intensifying the tingles.

Qora drifts in front of me with a familiar hiss as if suspecting my thoughts. Regardless, I step forward, deeper into the Wailing Woods. Her claws capture my hair and halt me, causing me to nearly stumble back. "Ugh, Qora!" I groan, then stab a finger toward the trail of blood. "I'm going this way."

When she advances, her dark substance bleeding red at the edges, I sigh and drop my arms to the side to explain, "If I go back, there's nothing for me except the Convent. Nothing but cold, stone walls, and the only warmth I'll ever have is whenever someone needs a blood binder. But if I go this way..."

I purse my lips and rub my fingers together before setting my jaw. “I can’t live like this anymore, Qora. In the Borderlands, I’m a ghost. But when I stabbed the dragon, it was the first time I truly felt *real*.” I won’t live numb any longer. “I’d rather die feeling something wondrous and sharp—even if it’s the points of claws and teeth—than go back and spend the rest of my life feeling nothing. Always used but untouched, unloved, un-bedded. Unalive. I’m going. With or without you.”

I march onward. A shrill shriek smites the air behind me, and icy fingers creep across the back of my neck, but I grin because Qora chooses to follow. Not that she’d get far on her own. In the past, we’ve tested how much she may stray, but I got as far as our town border before she appeared at my side.

“Who knows, Qora? Maybe this is the way for you to come to life!” I squeal, thread my fingers together, and do a little twirl, wincing when my feet step on a femur, cracking it. While Qora blows a raspberry at me, the tree roots tug at the bone as if protecting it from my careless treading. I can’t help it. Not with excitement bubbling in my veins at the thought of stepping through the Veil. No human has ever entered the Veil and returned. If I become the first, my name will be written in the history books! My mind buzzes at the possibilities.

Thankfully, Qora remains close at my side...as if she knows I’d most likely die without her. Whenever a lower monster prowls the area, Qora conceals me in her silky cold shadows. The irony isn’t lost on me. For an hour of straying through the woods, I keep my lips sealed tight, but the words are practically storming my teeth as if they’re fortress gates for the doorway of my mouth.

Finally, I pause, set my hands on my hips, and turn to my Shadow with a knowing simper. “Do you realize that in the past hour, you’ve saved my life more times than you ever tried to kill me? Aww, Qora, are we becoming friends?”

Shadows spit at my face. I raise my brows because I’ve never heard her make this particular noise. Something like a cross between a hiss and a gnashing of teeth mixed with a high-pitched snarl. For the first time, I’d swear more of her

features peek through the dark figure before me. Two faint pricks of amber light wink at me from her head, reminding me of glowing eyes. It strengthens my resolve to keep going.

After another hour of wandering with the blood trail never fading, the vym in my veins rears again. The only way I have to describe it is an irresistible yearning. As if some creature is scratching at my chest, striving to get out. Blood calls to blood. The rawest and purest force on earth. Whatever else these monsters have done, it doesn't matter. My vym is not jury, judge, or executioner. We are a healer.

I stroke a fingertip across my naked arm, where my calligraphy-like ink clothes the scars of my birthright. The spirits gave me my gift as they've blessed so many others. But the monster who pulled me from my mother's birth canal is the one who cursed me.

Shaking my head, I shove away the thoughts and the story my parents shared on a daily basis. A reminder of why they never bought me dresses, gifted me with my mother's jewels, or braided my hair like my mother's done for Darya and Rylinne. Or why she never stopped Pater from hurling me into darkness for days or weeks at times as punishment.

I am the mistake who never should have been born.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I chip away at the hollow in my chest. Although I embraced my anomalousness at a young age, preferring the company of ghosts and Borderlands outcasts more than my family, something has always felt missing.

But stabbing that dragon felt like I'd *found* something.

For hours, I walk. Making my way through the Wailing Woods until my limbs ache, my breath wheezes, and my naked feet have turned red and puffy from the frost. All this time, Qora has protected me, along with the banshees, of course. My heart has plunged to my stomach a few times at finding more dragon blood. How much can he lose? Did I—did *I* actually kill the monster? Is it possible to kill a god?

I suppose I'll find out sooner or later. At least, I hope I will. Because the Wailing Woods have thinned, sliced off mid-trunk with the miles-long, swirling haze of the Veil sweeping the landscape before me. Thin, ribbon-like wisps undulate throughout the Veil.

The closer I get, the more my chest vibrates with a strange sense of energy prickling my hair to static. A tiny fraction of that energy exists in the Borderlands, the mortal world of my home, known to a rare few like me. With the humming in my chest growing, I understand what forms the Veil. The undulating wisps are no mere echoes of magic. Horror creeps into my being like needle ice to grow crystals beneath my skin.

They are ghosts. The entire Veil is made of slaughtered souls.



7

# A FIRESTORM OF VENGEANCE.

## DRAGO

MY FIRE SHATTERS TO NOTHING BUT CINDERS BURNING THE ruined portion of my lower throat. Pain sears my flesh from the inside, and I roar—choking and clawing at the air again.

“Bloody boulders, brother!” Mayce’s voice cuts through the pounding in my head. “You ripped through the seal again. Merikh, Kyan!” he yells for the others.

“Blow-hard can just fuck off,” I growl at Kyan, then snarl at Mayce as he narrows his eyes in concentration and reinforces the bindings on my wrists, transforming the oak roots to hard steel that fuses into the iron headboard. “Shit a brick, Mayce.”

He rolls his eyes. “Come up with some new lines. You’re really *burning* me up here.”

“I’ll scorch all the hairs off your pretty head when this is over,” I rasp, blowing smoke and embers from my throat while Merikh leers down at me and commands my essence to swell. With his power to multiply my blood cells and increase my life force, the vampire is our most powerful asset. Except for how the Waste weakens our powers.

“Sticks and stones, Drago,” responds Mayce, gesturing to Kyan, who’s kept his distance in the doorway. “Ky, put him to sleep.”

“Wait...” Merikh’s deep voice echoes in the tower, his milky orbs surveying the wound. “The blood does not listen to my command. It slows. It hides in shadow.”

“What are you blathering about?” I rage at the vampire. When he’s not giving in to his madness, he speaks in cryptic riddles and images. The contrast to Mayce and his exasperating, logical monologues. Or like Kyan who’s either quiet as a monk on a vow of silence or a raging storm.

Merikh’s eyes gouge mine, sending my breath fuming from my lungs. “The shadow strangles your blood, brother. I cannot create new blood, nor cleanse the shadowed blood.”

“Stop speaking in damned riddles, Merikh, and tell me what the bloody fuck you mean!” I demand, my alpha voice thundering off the walls as my fire lashes my lungs, aching to get out.

First, the vampire surveys Kyan, who glides forward from the doorway, before his eyes meet Mayce’s. An abyss of concern etches in the Fae’s orbs.

Baring his long fangs, whole body shuddering, Merikh releases a predatory hiss and lowers his voice to an unfathomably deep octave to reveal, “If his blood continues to slow, Drago will be dead by morning.”

Mayce gazes down at me, his brow furrowed in fear. Then, my partner shifts his head to Merikh and snarls, “I don’t give a fuck if we have to circumnavigate the Waste. We must find a healer.”

Merikh lowers his voice, “No healers exist in the Waste, Fae. You know this. No folk here but rot and ruin.”

The arguing voices of my brothers begin to fade as darkness closes in. That darkness tows me into the spirit world where the dead chant all my sins of the past thousands of years. Of course, I’ve been injured during the damned Sacrifice. Extremely rare, but it’s happened a few times over the past few centuries. No wound has ever been fatal. Nothing my alpha dragon blood couldn’t heal.

I remember the girl who plunged her blade into me. It wasn’t how slight and thin she was. And her breasts were high. I could see the rosy nipples pebbling through her white shift.

I'd taken girls slighter than her, or plumper. All died singing my praises as I fucked them and set them on fire.

But her eyes haunt me, pale as cold silver, so icy and iridescent, they remind me of the spirits of my homeland. Ones rumored to entrap and lead grown men astray until they meet their deaths. So, it seems I have fallen into her web. The sheer audacity that a girl as tiny as this one would be my undoing. In ten thousand years, not one has ever bested me.

Now, the god-eater will finally get his ultimate wish. With my death, my brothers will be lost from their realms for all time, bound forever to the Waste as Merikh predicted.

In that moment, I vow a firestorm of vengeance upon the gray slip of a girl who thrust that damned blade in my throat.



“BRING HER TO THE ASH  
COURT!”

## QUINTESSA

WITHOUT GIVING QORA A CHANCE TO STOP ME, I PLUNGE INTO the Veil.

Spirit ice branches into my flesh, spearing me with the echo of something sharp. Not quite strong enough to overcome the ghostly hush defining my nerves. The wisps weave around and before me like ever-moving, ever-wandering webs, tangling together. My footsteps are heavier. My whole body is heavier, so it takes more effort, but I press onward, passing through their barrier. I imagine the ghosts keep mortals at bay, forbidding them from entering the Waste, but they are not strong enough to stop the monsters on Hollow Night.

If it were any other night, if the Veil was thicker, I imagine it would be more difficult to breathe. As it is, the air feels thinner. My lungs must work harder to push the air up my throat and to pull it inside. A sudden, cold force slams against my back, and I smile, recognizing Qora's violent touch. Pressuring me to keep going. *Don't stop, Quinn*, I repeat to myself as if I can hear her.

Thousands of whispers trespass upon one another. I don't try to dissect the language of these ghosts, but I listen and appreciate them, nonetheless. After all, it must be dreadfully boring to be a ghost confined to haunt this Veil, your spirit imprisoned for eternity. I can think of nothing worse than a cage for the soul.

A sudden horror seeps into my bones and congeals my heart. Could that—will that happen to me? To us?



I pick up my feet, driving myself forward. Through the ghosts, through the veil, through the thousands of whispers and essences swarming around me. More ravel before me, forming new webs for me to battle. Like cold brushes of death, those wispy ribbons caress my body with their omens. Next to me, Qora hisses. It's the first time the web of ghosts snaps, giving me a clear path.

Again, my Shadow surrounds me, protects me. Hot tears well up in my throat at the thought of what would happen without her. I wouldn't have even made it this far. I would've been meat in a dragon shifter's belly with the monsters no doubt picking at my delicate bones.

After what seems like hours, the air thickens, simple to breathe into my lungs. The ghosts thin, until one or two webs remain. A few more steps of walking, and my figure passes through the barrier between worlds. But I fall to my knees, overcome with a wild sense of dread and yet wonder.

"Get up!" commands a smoky voice next to me.

I snap my tear-stricken eyes to my Shadow and gasp the words, "Qora, did you just...*talk*?"



"OF COURSE, I CAN TALK, YOU SIMPERING, MAD LITTLE FOOL!" retorts Qora, those amber pricks growing to a fervent glow.

Stumbling to my feet, I practically pounce, squealing with delight, my rabid pulse galloping from her first words to me.

"Oh, confound it all, you crackbrained cuckoo!" She shoves me off her, and I land with an awkward tumble with my bottom in the dirt. "Your ass looks better below me, Quintessa."

I shake my head with a pained laugh, my voice cracking from emotion. "I've been waiting twenty years for you to talk! Your voice is so beautiful, just like I imagined."

A huff leaves Qora's mouth, and she paces before me. "Oh, yes, I'm certain I exceed all expectations."

"You do!" I pop up and peck her cheek before she may turn.

She thrashes with the air, but I've moved away by then. "Out of all the mortals I get stuck with, it had to be one as daft and silly as a booby flying upside down."

"You say the loveliest things, Qora."

She blows a raspberry at me, and I'm certain if she could roll her eyes, she would. "If I'd known we could talk in the Waste, I might have tried this sooner."

"You may come to regret that." She gestures to the landscape before us.

Dread drags itself down my throat to tumble in my stomach. Only a true fool would laugh at the sight before him. Black ivy, woven with petrified corpses, creeps over houses as ruined as rotting carcasses. Thousands swarm the scorched hillsides, roaming and spiraling to a bedrock foundation upon which sits a dark castle. From this distance, I can't make out what substance it's made of, but it reminds me of iron.

Nothing grows here. Not one flower, plant, tree, or so much as a thorn.

Limbs trembling, I take a step forward. My naked feet brush the ash and cinders sweeping across the ground. Layers of black dust mantle the ground. Shadow flier birds circle the dark haze of sky above my head, their shrill cries curdling my blood. I freeze at the baying of Waste wolves in the distance. Qora mutters incomprehensible words under her breath.

Taking a deep breath to steel my nerves, I step forward again. Something spindly and hard closes around my ankle, and I yelp, jumping out of the way. Whatever it is doesn't relinquish its hold, so I end up sprawled on the ground again, sending little whirlwinds of ash and dust swirling around me. Once I narrow my eyes and get a closer look, I clamp my hands on my mouth to swallow the sounds of my shriek. Qora growls at the bony, skeleton hand gripping my ankle while I

pry it off my skin as quickly as I can, scrambling backward. More corpse hands claw through the ash, straining for me as if drawn to my blood.

Rushing to my feet, I hurl my body forward, scanning the ground and leaping over any protruding hands. They swipe at my feet and claw at my calves, scraping and cutting and drawing lines of blood. I barely make it beyond these blighted fields of ash and onto the rocky but burnt ground near a petrified corpse house when a new horror threatens me. And surrounds me.

My heart shrivels and plummets to my stomach.

Folk of the Waste, in their twisted forms, form ranks around me, armed with bone rods with fused fangs and teeth at their ends. Some wear animus bone masks from stags to wolves to birds. Others stare at me from bloodless pupils. But I can make out the underlying lizard-like features of them all from the tattered scales to the skeletal tails. Black veins spiderweb through their emaciated bodies that are clad in nothing more than ribcage armor and the fine strands of hair woven to form crude threads for their privates. Skin flayed off to show whole rows of teeth. Some have rotted on one side of their bodies.

A few closest to me snap their teeth in eerie, staccato noises that remind me of clicking. Qora crouches before me to hiss and growl a warning at the dead.

One corpse wearing a stag mask jerks his toothy spear end to my legs where the bony hands clawed into my skin. “She bleeeeeeeeds red,” he utters, voice guttural from withered vocal cords.

Instantly, the corpses pull back their spears and aim for the sky. Hollow or ruined eyes gaze at one another before the stag-masked corpse jabs a bony finger at me and proclaims, “Bring her to the Ash Court! The gods will want to meet her.”

Lightning jolts my system. At once, skeletal hands, talons, or scaly fingers land on my arms, my waist, my neck, and other parts of my body. Awestruck again because I don’t feel these Waste hands, unlike the dragon, I don’t struggle as the

twisted ones drag me, then carry me to the crest of the city, to that dark castle upon that bedrock. Not a bedrock. It's the enormous rib cage of a dragon. I shudder.

Upon our approach, the gray light of dawn lances the sky, but it's not sunlight that radiates through this world. It's a weeping moon. And the castle isn't iron at all. It's obsidian swirling with chaotic patterns of white.

"Ash," Qora informs me, referencing the white patterns as if reading my thoughts. I wonder fleetingly if she can. How deep does our bond go?

Knots form in my throat, and I gulp them down as the Waste-folk escort me across a bridge of petrified corpses. But it's not them that strikes thunder into my chest. Sealed upon each side of the castle and at its crest of turreted towers are three great dragon skeletons with their mouths open mid-roar. And I swear as the dead lead me into this Ash Court, all three dragon heads turn their cavity eyes to gaze upon me.



“DON’T YOU KNOW BETTER  
THAN TO PLAY WITH  
MONSTERS?”

## QUINTESSA

THEY WEAR MASKS.

Bone-chilling, flesh-crawling, spine-tingling, hair-raising, blood-curdling masks. Formed of the facial skin and teeth of demons, the skull masks fix to each of the three gods' faces. Sunken-in black oval bones where the nose should be. Spaces hollowed to show their eyes—menacing even without their monster forms. Now that Hollow Night has passed, so have their cursed forms.

A Court of Ash as the Waste-folk had indicated, except corpses swing from chains suspended within the domed ceiling. Some still twitch, their snapped necks tilted with blind eyes nearly popping from their sockets. More masks cover the walls of the Court. Some are similar to the ones they wear while others are bone skulls of various animals—some I recognize, others I don't.

I shiver in the center of the Court, but at another glance at the god-kings on their thrones, three in all with the far-left throne vacant, I shrink and rub the gooseflesh pebbling on my arms.

When the second to the last, the third one, tilts his head to me, I squeeze my arms closer together, tempted to cover my chest. His eyes are black as pitch, but trickling down the bone mask from those sockets are drops of blood. The vampire. I freeze, trapped in that tilted stare, unmoving even after he angles his head in the opposite direction. At the movement of his chest, I know he's taking a deep breath, inhaling my scent.

It's the second one who rises. The Fae with the excruciating beauty, great horns, and moon-spun hair. His demon mask is just as eerie, but thorns grow from the edges of the eye sockets. They cannot hope to compete with the rich hue of his eyes. A twilight golden brown. The trees of fairy tales.

"I would invite you to explain yourselves," he directs his words to the corpses, and I chew on my lower lip, praying I'm not blushing since his voice is the most enthralling tenor I've ever heard—the kind that could make angels and saints and demons weep to hear him speak—, "...but there is little point. For once in your pathetic lives, you've made yourselves useful. Now, leave us," he commands, his voice lifting an octave and echoing off the walls.

If the god-kings notice Qora, none of them say. At the far-right end is the fallen angel. His eyes are softer than the others. The palest blue I've ever witnessed—a bitter blue like frostbitten flesh. Blue as lips kissed by death. Indigo veins twirl tiny whirlpools around his eyes, but they do not signify water but rather air.

"Where is the dragon?"

I hardly realize I've said the words until they leave my throat. All the kings stiffen in their thrones, but it's the vampire who rises. One moment, he's there at his throne. The next, he's standing before me. A shriek catches in my throat, and my breath hitches at how close he is. Close enough for his chilled breath to drift across my face. Close enough for his dark gray vest to brush my chin since he's far taller.

Between the dripping blood and that vest over a white tunic, its collar and top buttons open to his upper chest, and the labyrinth of scars upon his flesh, he is the most macabre and handsome being I've ever seen. A sharp contrast to the ethereal beauty of the Fae. What I love most perhaps is the cap donning his head. It's what the boys in the Borderlands wear when they have the news scrolls to share from the god-eater's capital.



Again, he tilts his head to inspect me, and I still from those eyes roaming across my scrawny figure, more than usual thanks to the tattered dress showing my spindly limbs and knobby knees.

I spread my lips into a sweet smile and mimic his actions but tilt my head to the opposite side. “Oooh! Let me guess. You’re the nice one.”

The other kings merely chuckle while the vampire regards me, eyes dark and hungry. Just as I open my mouth again, the vampire’s pale hand seizes my throat. Endorphins shoot through my blood, and I almost pass out. Not because he’s squeezing so tight and limiting my air but because I *feel* every infinitesimal bit of him. Oh, worshipful Waste, my knees turn weak! His hand is warmer than I expected. Silver veins throb on the side of his neck and his forearms from where his sleeves are rolled to the elbows. Lightning crackles in my blood as he leans toward me. His breath practically howls a windstorm upon my face.

“Merikh!” the Fae king bellows behind him.

He growls low in my ear, setting all the hairs on the back of my neck to tingle. More goosebumps multiply on my skin.

“As gray as a little dove. So breakable. Her throat is too tiny. I imagine it will bleed when I shove my cock inside it.”

Oh, glorious gods! Something warm pulses in my belly. And gravitates lower. Every trace of my skin hums. Is this what it feels like? Like I’m ready to combust, implode, and melt all at the same time? Why his words, the image of him stuffing his cock down my throat to suffocate me, arouses me, I can’t fathom.

I’ve seen it before. I’ve done it before. The sunken in cheeks, the flaring nostrils, the sweat-slicked hair coating my cheeks as I sucked off a man’s member. I felt nothing. Nothing stoked my blood then, but I still enjoyed the twisted sense of power, admiring how the man’s breath grew labored, how he closed his eyes and groaned so deeply. Will this vampire dig his claws into my hair and force his way deeper until I gag? Will he rock his hips and growl as I suck him until he

explodes? Will he paint his hot seed all over my face? If so, it might just be worth suffocation. And blood.

When I grapple with his arm, desperate for more touch, I wish I could do more than wheeze my appreciation of the rippling sinew of his arm. A perfect amount of muscle for a vampire.

“Fuck, Merikh, let her go before the poor girl passes out!” the Fae orders, and my eyes widen when he goes so far as to close the distance to the vampire and grip the back of his long, dark waves.

Merikh thrusts me to the floor, and I cough on my knees, clutching my pained throat. Out of the corner of my eye, Qora drifts toward me. It’s a night for firsts because lids and lashes have formed for her amber eyes. Pupils, too. I love how she rolls them at the sight of me rubbing my fingertips along the inflamed strangulation marks and mouthing the words, ‘What a rush!’ They don’t see her, and I don’t know if that’s a comfort or not.

Tender hands cup my shoulders from behind, and I flinch, almost falling to the floor. It’s the first time I’ve ever flinched when someone’s touched me. The first time I ever felt it. I swing my head, where the fallen angel kneels before me, mask thrust onto his head to bare those serene blue eyes. So sincere with the skin around them creased in concern. Tears form in my eyes, and I guess they will become normal from now on. The closest I’ve come to that level of care is Sarai.

“Are you hurt?” he asks, voice quiet and soft while the other two kings debate in tones too low for me to hear.

I can’t help but smile and respond, “I’ll live.”

He lowers his head with an airy chuckle. “That’s good. It’s quite boring with only corpses for company.”

“And them?” I nod to the other kings.

The fallen angel rolls his eyes with a side smirk. “I don’t have a choice but to put up with them.”

“Oh, so *you’re* the nice one!” I bite my lip and feel my cheeks heat, too preoccupied with the king’s hands on my

shoulders to notice it's the first time I know I'm blushing.

He shrugs and removes one hand to touch his chest in an introduction. I try not to seem too disappointed by its absence as he says, "Kyan, King of the East Wind of the Waste. Please call me Ky." His lips aren't full, but they are a perfectly shaped cupid's bow. Long and sweet to show his gracious smile.

"Ky..." I repeat and use the excuse to touch his hand, stunned by how soft a man's skin can be. Somehow, I know Ky would never be the choking sort. "I'm Quintessa."

"A beautiful name."

My brows lift. It's the first time anyone has ever used the word to describe any part of me. My name included. At first, I don't believe it, but his eyes are too genuine, too trustworthy not to. Heat rolls through me again, and I don't know what to do with it. Unlike the vampire, he wears clothing I've only heard of from the god-eater's realm. Fashion considered uncouth in the more traditional and stuffy Borderlands, but I love the dark jeans and wonder if he shredded certain parts to white threads.

"Little dove, little dove..."

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle at the sound of Merikh's voice. Masculine and dangerous. Now, my thighs quiver. I swear his voice curls into the barest reaches of my soul. Oh, marvelous monsters! Something trickles down my spine, and I realize...it's a cold sweat.

"Don't you know better than to play with monsters?"

The Fae king remains close, but he removes his mask and flings it to the floor, chucking it at Merikh's boots. I gaze up at feline beauty accentuated even more by the black velvet robe embellished by constellations of crystals and open to his bare chest of silken skin and subtle, rippling muscles. His dark lashes are long enough to caress his sickle-sharp cheekbones. Thin with small shadow wells below those cheekbones. So becoming of a Fae but no less otherworldly, spectral, and beautiful.

He extends a hand to me, and I lunge at the chance to take it, careless if it makes me look like a desperate doe. My skin burns beneath his insistent touch, and my blush grows. A rich, erotic chuckle graces his closed mouth, and the king's next action is to cup my chin. Oh, wondrous Waste, another adrenaline rush stokes my blood. I might die from another touch. Or die for one.

“You must be the gray slip of a girl Drago mentioned.”

My stomach lurches. My vym rears in my blood, aching at the memory of the dragon's blood. The Fae lowers his hand to touch a splotch of blood on the side of the dress I hadn't noticed before. He sniffs, but the vampire confirms before, “It's Drago's.”

The Fae clicks his teeth, his face drowning mine in its shadow. “Well now, what shall we do with you? Our high king has vowed vengeance against the one who stabbed him.”

“Please...” I lean toward him, lean toward the hand still cupping my chin, arching my neck. “I am a blood binder. I can heal him.”

Behind me, the vampire snarls, curling every hair on my body when he says, “Strip.”

All the blood drains from my face. The Fae king's eyes darken upon the vampire behind me. “Merikh—”

“We will know if this little dove speaks the truth. And if she has brought any weapons.”

“She's just a girl, Merikh,” the fallen angel softly interjects.

“Shut your mouth, Kyan. Unless you'd care for me to shove my cock inside it.”

Despite how the Fae king kneads his eyes, his posture already indicates he's not about to thwart the vampire. I shiver when he presses his thumb upon the indent in my chin, looks down at me with those glimmering twilight brown eyes to say, “I am Mayce, Lord of the Southern Waste, Fae King and second only to Drago. What is your name, child?”

Lost in those eyes but keenly aware of Merikh's hot breath disturbing my gray hair, I lick my lips and raise my chin to respond, "Quintessa. Everyone calls me Quinn."

"Very well, then. We have all been introduced. As one with no title, I trust you understand the importance of following the orders of a sovereign."

I swallow but refuse to look away even with Merikh purring the lecherous command in my ear, "Remove your dress now, girl. Or I will claw it from your little, gray body."

My heart sputters, skipping beats. I wish I could sharpen my wits. The sight of Qora should ground me. A small part of me has it in mind to protest, resist somehow. The idea of the vampire clawing the outfit to shreds has me trembling down to my soul with blood rushing to my face.

My mind goes numb, but my fingers fumble with the ends of the already ruined gown, its lower half scorched by the High King, Drago. I fling it to the floor, clothed in the white corset, transparent chemise, and undergarments. My small breasts heave with every breath I take. At least they're mostly bare. Only the uppermost parts of the mounds have any scars, along with the whorls of ink roaming along my collarbone and shoulders.

The vampire snivels, "And the rest, little dove."

I bite my lower lip and touch the strings at the back. "My sister—she laced them so tight, I—"

One swipe of his claws. That's all it takes for the corset to loosen and fall. Air gushes into my lungs, and I fall from the shock of the whalebone piece confining my skin removed in an instant. The transparent shift is so low and loose, I know the Fae king can see my breasts.

"Come, little dove, we may have all day, but our King does not. Prove yourself!"

Insides ready to cave in, blood thrumming, and my nipples pebbling—oh, marvelous monsters—I rise to a stand, thrust out my chin, and slide the shift off my shoulders to pool at my feet. A moan breaks free from my mouth, a sound I've only

ever heard from others. But I can't help it. Deep between my thighs, my inner muscles spasm for the first time. A raw, newborn heat pillages my pussy.

And something...warm and wet drips down my thigh.

IO

“YOU’RE GOING TO KILL  
YOURSELF!”



## QUINTESSA

“SUCH SMALL DOVE TITS,” CROONS THE VAMPIRE, HIS PALE hand stretching to hover over one breast. I resist the urge to cover them and clench my hands at my sides, staring him down as he cackles. “Little bumps I could pinch between my thumb and finger.”

I shrug and set my hands on my narrow hips. “Least I have tits. And other noteworthy assets.”

He simpers, leaning closer. “A wet, little pussy?”

I deadpan with a side smirk. “And a pulse.”

Merikh glowers, clearly at a loss for words. Kyan’s breathy laugh warms every trace of my nude skin. For the second time today, I flinch because he’s removed his denim jacket to drape it around my shoulders. All my nerve endings sizzle when he buttons it closed, his knuckles brushing across the small swells of my breasts. I blush and smile again when he tucks a strand of my gray hair behind my ear. Thankfully, the jacket falls to my thighs.

“No one but a blood binder would have as many scars as she does,” points out Kyan, his hand not forsaking my hair, toying with its ends. “Perhaps she has more than even Merikh.”

At the vampire’s growl, I turn to him, careless of how I’m poking him with an invisible sword. “I’d bet on it. I collect blood drops like they’re medals. I’ve turned my scars into friends.”

Merikh crouches, but Mayce steps between us, palm coming down hard to shove the other king back. “Go cool off. I’ll take the girl to Drago’s chamber. If she heals him, he will decide what to do with her. If he dies, I’ll gladly watch while you bleed her dry.”

Bile swirls in my belly at the steady promise in Mayce’s silken words and the gleam in Merikh’s eye. A heavy sigh escapes Kyan’s mouth, but I know he’s the peacekeeper of the group. He won’t thwart the other kings.

“If he dies, I’ll be there to sink my fangs into her blood the second his heart stops,” vows Merikh.

My heart quakes. As poetic as it would be to perish at the fangs of a vampire, as if he could bleed my soul thread by thread, I have no plans to die today. Not when I’ve finally experienced the artistry of touch. I’ll have its mastery if it’s the last thing I do. But I’d love for it to be the *second*...after I’ve healed the dragon.



HEAVY BREATHS PUSH THROUGH MY DRY, WITHERED THROAT AT the sight of the nude dragon god. His hair is the color of slaughter, red as flaming poppies. Shaved on each side, the waves flick back and forth, tangling with his gnashing teeth from his struggles.

The sheets fall lower.

It’s not the first time I’ve seen a cock—just the first time I’ve seen one so thick and...extensive. A deep, dark vein the color of nightshade pulses down the center. But I only take a cursory glance. The rest of his skin has me far more concerned.

My vym rages in my veins, on the verge of storming past my ribcage at the writhing king. His eyes are closed, but he thrashes, struggling so much, the steel bindings have ripped the skin open at his wrists. Blood trickles from those wounds.

But it's the shadow veins swarming his skin, the sweat streaming down his body, and the dark mumblings from his mouth that give away the signs of a fever, of infection.

"How long has he been like this?" I wonder, appraising the other kings while approaching the bed on the dragon's left side.

"Since we carried him through the Veil," offers Mayce.

I've never healed a god. Memories of my failure at healing fevers like this haunt my mind. Infection is much more difficult because it plagues the blood. Nor can I surge my vym into the body as I would with an open wound or bind it like a splint around a broken bone. Infection requires a slow immersion. It requires me to go deep to break down the toxins and cleanse the infected blood.

"Well, little dove? If you are such a master blood-binder, then what are you waiting for?" taunts Merikh, crossing his arms over his chest at his side.

Threading my brows low, I respond, "I need a knife. Or a blade of some sort."

"Considering what you did to our King, giving you a blade is not in our best interest," Mayce resolves while moving to the opposite side of the bed.

"Show me where to cut, little dove, and I'll gladly provide the *blade*," adds Merikh while flashing his fangs.

"A claw will do fine," Mayce prompts and snaps his fingers to Kyan, who advances to me, nodding at the second in command. Merikh clenches his jaw but acquiesces, much to my relief. I don't know what to make of the vampire, other than knowing he hates me. And his hatred goes beyond my wounding the dragon.

After rolling the sleeves of his jacket to my elbows, the fallen angel pauses, assessing all the white striations and marks of my blood-binding scars. The deeper ones I've concealed with ink. "It's fine," I assuage his concerns. "Just cut a superficial even line from the center of my palm to my elbow."

“So long?”

I glance at the thrashing, mumbling dragon, and nod, knowing this will require more of my vym, my essence, my spirit gift. “Yes.”

It’s the first time the pain isn’t hushed. I hiss from the sharp pain, sharper than ever, and it takes all my effort not to flinch. Unfathomable how blood-binders do this day in and day out, but I remember how many use herbs to numb the pain. My body was simply immunized until I met the Kings of the Waste.

Once the blood oozes from the wound, I advance to the dragon king, choosing to curl my vym to the open wounds of his wrist instead of the gaping one at the base of his throat. “I’m going to practice on a smaller wound first.” I direct my words to Mayce, flicking my eyes to him. His are hard and unblinking—a warning of what will happen if I fail, but a warning nonetheless because he doesn’t wish me to fail. His King’s welfare may be first and foremost, but it’s clear the Fae doesn’t wish me to be on the receiving end of Merikh’s torture. Of course, sweet Kyan doesn’t wish me to be.

When the vym charges from my veins, I pinch my eyes in concentration to reel it in. Like holding the reins on a wild horse. Or more like a herd of wild horses with how much I need to tug on it. If I’m not careful, too much vym will engulf the dragon’s blood. It could rupture vessels and strip veins.

Slowing my vym, I work to braid the tresses of energy, until it’s easier to grip. My skin aches and throbs from the open wound, and I blink past the pain. The vym doesn’t tingle when it escapes my body. It stings and burns like hot iron poker. Beads of sweat drip down the sides of my face. On the opposite side of the bed, Mayce remains as still as a statue, arms as stiff as rods as he surmises me. Hot as acid, Merikh’s breath needles into the back of my neck, raising the hairs to prickle.

Pressing my lips to a hard seam, I focus on my vym, on weaving the tasseled ends of the gray braid to tickle the wounds at the dragon’s wrist. Healing superficial wounds and

closing the skin is child's play for me. But I sink deeper, wincing from the extreme contrast of molten lava—the dragon's fiery blood—and the icy black infection plaguing his body and stirring the fever. It's going to take more vym. It may take everything in me.

Qora crouches before me. "This is insanity, Quinn. You're going to kill yourself!"

"Maybe," I murmur under my breath, eyeing my Shadow, careless if I look like a crazy clod to the Kings. "But I'd rather die healing the dragon than at the fangs of a vampire following my failure."

"Who is she speaking with?" asks Kyan from the corner of the room as he scans the area.

Merikh's growl echoes behind me while Mayce lowers his brows, eyes fixated at me. The rest of him is inhumanly still. The kind of still only accomplished by a Fae.

"It was *my* shadow power that poisoned him. You've never countered *my* vym."

I pause and chew on my inner cheek, remembering a million moments with my Shadow since I was little. For a brief time, I opposed her. She always caught me when I tried to escape. Then, I tried avoiding her, but it only resulted in more torment. Once I finally accepted her, things grew better. Of course, she still tried to kill me once a year, but on all other days, it was just her and me. I always had someone to talk to, someone who could listen, someone who stayed at my side when Pater locked me in the dark root cellar. She became more than my Shadow. She became my friend.

This time, when I sink my vym into the blood, I don't attack the shadow infection. I don't push, prod, needle, or try to cleanse the power. Instead, I tickle the feathery ends of my vym across Qora's. And just as her cold vym rises like a wuthering gust to bite mine, I pounce and blanket hers. Without sinking, without plunging, I spread my vym like a mantle, swelling it to drape longer and longer. My vym is gray but warm and soft like a shroud of smoke or wilted flowers. Steam hisses from where I've hugged Qora's shadow vym

with my gray one, but it's not long before the power settles, soothed by my embrace.

The dragon god growls, but his body stops thrashing. His chest still heaves, but I take that as a good sign. His body heat envelopes the front side of my body, and I try to ignore how I'm kneeling on the bed, wearing nothing but Kyan's jacket that has scooted to my upper thighs.

I squeeze my eyes, shake my dizzy head out to find Qora's dark hand settling upon my bloody arm, her fingers curving into the wound. After blinking back tears from her actions, I lean closer to the dragon and pour more of my smoky gray vym into the wounds. Blood thuds wild and hard in my ears, but I grow my vym, projecting it like a network of branches to twist around Qora's shadow plague. Fine threads of ink thicken like a soft and slow twilight creeping upon a thunderous sky. Blood drips onto my thigh from the open wound in my arm.

I coax my vym from inside the dragon's arms and into his throat where I'd stabbed. I see what my vym sees. Feel what it feels.

Flesh has scorched and melted from where his fire lodged after its multiple escape attempts. Here, Qora's shadow-vym is dimmer. I curl my vym, flowing it upon the ruined flesh, heal the burns and seal the flesh. His scales and skin will need to grow back on their own. As it is, my stomach heaves. Nausea clots the insides while my strained intestines squirm. My tattoos become a maelstrom of spiraling ink on my arms and legs. Every scar cries out in agony. Darkness presses in at the edges.

"More!" I raise my other arm, begging no one in particular.

"This is mad," Kyan protests on my left. "She'll pass out."

Despite my blurry vision, I can make out Mayce's silver and gold figure next to me. Startle at the sharp Fae claw that drags down my arm to spill more blood. Again, Qora latches on, coupling her vym to mine as we embark into the power center. There's no time for anything else. If we purge the heart

of the infection, the rest of the blood network will listen and follow.

I drift in and out of awareness. More blood trickles onto my thighs. My breath hitches, then comes in waves. A series of snarls engulf the tower, and I recognize them as Merikh's. The sound of bodies pounding against stone, claws raking wood, and objects thrown across the room invade my ears, but it's not long before the dragon's heartbeat hammers inside them. I can't think about whatever battle is going down in the tower. Pain gnaws on me. My body feels heavier than an anvil.

"Quinn," Qora summons me, and I stare up at her through the fog of pain clouding my body.

She gestures to the bed, and I whimper from the sight of the god resting motionless, a layer of my gray vym draped over his body. Something coils tight deep inside me. So close to the dragon, my vym touches his tawny gold skin glowing from the lantern light along with gilded scales. The vym spreads to stroke the strong pillar of his throat, caresses the marble-hard chest, and brushes thick rock-like shoulders.

Marvelous monsters, he's gorgeous! The kind of physique that would be carved into sky-high statues to guard an infamous temple, worshiped as an idol. Especially with his rugged jaw and intense, sharp cheekbones. Not as sharp as the vampire's or as high and hypnotizing as the Fae's, but for a dragon king, they're flawless.

I inhale the scents of his body from my vym: an earthy, smoky fragrance mixed with a masculine musk and sweat. And the iron hint of blood. The heat from the dragon's body is damn near close enough to scold. The scales on his hips scrape my leg. Warmth gushes in my naked pussy. Nothing but power muscles in his brawny thighs...meant for—oh! Hunger twists deep within me.

"Quinn!" hisses Qora before collaring my throat with her shadows. "Get a fucking grip!" She groans, regretting her words after they leave. With our minds seemingly connected, she knows *exactly* where I was considering such a grip. "His heart, Quinn. We need to do this together."

Nodding frantically, I get a hold of my vym again, binding my mind around the braided cords, grateful to Qora for holding it steady within the dragon's bloodstream while I was busy ogling him.

Lungs burning, breath fleeing in shallow gasps, I unite with Qora and follow her lead. After all, she's been watching me all my life. Always seeing what I see, feeling what I feel. She pushes her shadow-vym inside the heart, and I hold onto her coattails, sewing mine into the heart until it becomes seeds splitting open and nourishing the significant muscle. Its beat slows and steadies. From the thundering, violent warhammer of pounding to a strong, yet hot heartbeat of a primal dragon king.

Positions reversed, it's my turn to thrash. Convulsions seize my body. My heart spasms. In less than a couple of seconds, I'm on the floor, struggling for breath. My muscles weaken, chest squeezing from the pain. Too much blood. Too much blood. I've never felt such intensity. It's sharp and blinding. Hands press in on all sides of me, but voices are muffled. One, alone, resounds in my mind.

Qora's silk and smoke voice. *Rest, you simpering little fool. Maybe the dragon will fuck the idiocy right out of you.*

*Love you, too, Qora.*

My mind shuts down, and I pass out into strong arms.



II

“GET YOUR SHINY, PRISSY  
ROBES OFF NOW!”

## DRAGO

I WAKE TO MY MUSCLES GROANING IN PAIN AND THE SIGHT OF Mayce sitting in the chair next to my bed with his face buried in his hands.

“Aww, my sweet savant, so worried about me?” I mutter to the Fae.

Mayce shoves out of his chair, upending it, closes the distance between us, and throws his fist into my jaw. Stars blaze in my vision, and I rub my throbbing jaw before my vision clears, so I can stare at my partner, my stunned mouth open. This isn't Mayce. Violence isn't his default unless the situation is extreme enough to call for it.

“Why you cocky, conniving little prick,” I growl.

“Such pretentious words for a dunderheaded dragon bastard.”

Red stains my vision. And I barrel for the Fae. It's not the first time. It won't be the fucking last. He goads me on. I charge him. He evades me. Gets the better of me countless times before I catch the slippery prick. We fight. Trade blows until we've damn near destroyed the tower room.

Finally, Mayce takes both sides of my face in his hands and presses his lips to mine. I don't rightly give a fuck about whatever condition my body is in. Feels like I've been asleep for a century. Muscles erupt in my jaw. Hot emotion bubbles to the surface. Before this, I'd felt nothing but ice in my veins, a fever bridling my mind, hallucinations of my wings turning to dust, of my brothers calling my name through the storm, but

I was trapped, wandering in the prison of an endless nightmare.

Doesn't take long for my relaxed cock to throb to life at the sight of my core partner. A bond we developed as young boys while our parents feasted over peace treaties and prosperous trade routes between the dragons and Fae race. We did our own sort of feasting. And exploring each other's castles and kingdoms. Before we were cast into the Waste.

"God-eater be damned, get your shiny, prissy robes off now, Mayce," I growl at him, close to ripping the glittery velvet coat split to show his firm abdomen and slabbed chest. But the Fae would bury me in a shallow grave if I ruined one of his best clothes.

Fucking gods, I love that wicked smirk of his. Merikh's is evil. Ky's is sweet. And mine is downright feral. But Mayce's is the flawless brand of Fae mischief.

I grit my teeth, swallowing hard from the damned male teasing me with the slow removal of his coat, sliding it off his proud shoulders to show off those rippling muscles a step down from mine. Perfect, porcelain skin to contrast my tawny gold. Sunlight on spun glass for his hair. He tosses those graceful locks to one side while his hand descends to his breeches where the evidence of his arousal strains.

I swallow hard and bare my dragon teeth, but Mayce is never intimidated by my threats. Damned Fae can always talk me down with his sharp wit. As wily as a fox. That cocky spirit rouses the feral dragon inside me. He tests my self-control relentlessly and not just because he takes the time to fold his coat and breeches on the chair next to us, offering me a glimpse of his firm backside. Could hardly wait to turn that gorgeous ass as red as my hair.

As soon as Mayce gets within range, I seize his arm and drag him onto the bed, sliding his thighs open. The mattress sinks deep beneath our collective weight. I'm going to come apart if I'm not in him soon. My balls tighten at the sight of his cock so damn long and hard. A tattooed thing of Fae beauty. Superior breeding, we're all well-endowed, but I've a certain

fondness for Mayce. On our knees, I line our cocks side by side, grip the Fae by those pretty locks, and thrust his head back.

He groans as I stroke my tongue along his jaw and lower down the curve of his throat, circling his substantial Adam's apple. "Since I'm the one who had a brush with death, are you going to be a good fairy and submit to me? Or will I need to punish you first?"

"Who should punish who, considering you scared Merikh and Ky half to death and drove me to its damned door?"

I sink my teeth into the flesh of his collarbone, reveling in the rumble from Mayce's throat. His body quivers, and I know he won't last much longer. "Wrap your hand around our cocks, Mayce. Bring them together."

Wicked smirk growing, muscles contracting in his belly, my second in command puts his hands on our swollen shafts. His fingers are long and able, tipped with the perfect amount of claw. Pleasure washes over me as I open the Fae's mouth beneath mine, crushing my mouth to his, and thrust through that stroking hand. Desire thickens inside me. Blood grows hotter. But I'm still the one who almost died, goddammit. Tonight, Mayce will fucking submit and serve me.

"Get on your fucking knees and put that gorgeous ass in the air," I command him, my voice hard and menacing, bordering on carnal.

Mayce obeys, turning around to brace his claws into the bed, spreading his knees, and presenting his ass to me. At the core of it, we're both a fucking mess of want and need. Mine simply burns differently from his when we're together. Outside, Mayce needs to manipulate others, bend them to his will, and know he outwitted them. Myself included. I may be the leader through sheer sense of strength and authority of my age, but Mayce is the force that grounds us. Merikh is the psycho who does the dark, dirty shit. And Ky...obvious what his fucking role is—goddamned cinnamon roll, except for his crazy side.

Fuck, I love how the Fae's dick is so long and heavy, it hangs low to nestle against his thigh. First, I brush my fingers across it in a tease, cup his balls and palm them, waiting a moment or two. His knees tremble, breath quickens, but he doesn't cave yet. I'll know when he's fully submitted. Squeezing harder, I pull at his balls, tormenting him, rumbling laughter deep in my chest when Mayce groans through gritted teeth. His ass is looking far too white.

Without warning, I swing my scaled tail through the air and whip it hard against the Fae's backside. I need to pound into him, but I crave this first. I crave his welted flesh, his sweat, his blood. My scales chafe his ass with every strike. Mayce curses under his breath. Setting to work on his thighs, I spank him harder, knowing he can take this torment. Few can. Few want. We've all shared beds by this point, but Mayce and I are core while Merikh and Ky work better as main partners.

Mayce is the earth to my firestorm.

Pride heats me, rouses me more because his cock has swollen, lengthened. I rain down harder blows, punishing him with fresh welts atop raw stripes. Every mark requires precision. My thoughts calm from the fiery chaos that so often consumes them. I don't consider the pain of the blade in my throat. Or the icy infection spearing my blood and laying siege to my mind. I don't remember the nightmares. The curse of our exile, of our missing families, does not haunt my thoughts.

All I see is Mayce's reddened skin. All I feel is the strength of my muscles and the calm in my body. I lash the tender curve of Mayce's buttocks, the sensitive creases between his thighs and ass.

When I set my hand upon his backside, he hisses and curses again, but I rub the inflamed skin, the soft heat, then stroke my way up to his back, tapping, tapping, tapping in a feral hint of command. I feel the bones protruding beneath the skin. His whole body trembles with need, but Mayce is not ready to surrender yet. He wants more of my touch. More pain. More breaking him down until he gets a taste of what my body has just endured.

So, I grip him by the hips, lower my mouth to his ass, and sink my teeth into the welts.

“Damnation!” Mayce throws his head back with a snarling curse.

I stroke my tongue over the indent my teeth just created, laving at the wound. “Hmm...you like my marks on your ass, don’t you, Mayce? Like me showing you how much I need you, how much I own you?” I dip a finger between his buttocks, circling the puckered hole.

“Fuck, Drago!”

“Soon, my precious pundit. We both know what *I* want.” I lower my teeth back to his ass and tear into the tender skin.

“Bloody gods!”

If Kyan were here, I’d order him to suck Mayce off but deny him the pleasure of coming. After his little tantrum, he deserves some delayed gratification. Guess that goes for both of us since my shoulders are still tense, and my spine tight. Fuck, I love his rounded globes. I land a hard blow with the palm of my hand, claws extended. Mayce needs to know he’s not the ultimate one who gets to be violent, possessive, and messed up. Sure, Merikh’s the worst of us, the most twisted, but we all get to own our damned demons. Earned the right to them after we were cast into the Waste. They burn us up once a year on Hollow Night.

Fucking the aftermath of the Hunger right out of each other with the rise of the dawn is nothing new. But almost dying...yeah that was a new one.

Our blood is stirring. The more I strike him, the more I bite him, feel his need down to my fucking bones.

Again, my mind calms with the taste of his blood, the velvet sac I curve my fingers around, the strong, muscled thighs clenching to brush my thick forearm. I grind against him, too close to losing control. And I won’t fucking let him get the better of me. Not the first time Mayce has outlasted me with his goddamn control. The Fae fucking over the dragon.

But I am High King. I remind him with another round of hard, burning spanks with my palm until he's quivering, sweating. All his muscles expand and contract to mirror the blows. His balls are as firm and high as mine. Most of all, I love that dark hole of Sodom opening for my wicked finger, then closing tight like a sucking mouth. Soon enough he'll suck my cock.

When his growl mixes with a shriek, when his back arches and the bones in his shoulders thrust through the skin, I spread those hard, flaming globes, admiring the dark, winking hole. As Mayce throws back his head, I flex my hips and thrust hard past that filthy, hot ring, glorying in my partner's howl at his ruinous wings unleashing and splaying wide. By the dawn, they'll be gone.

"Blazing hell!" he says through clenched teeth.

Buried here, with him sucking me in, gripping me so tight and hot, and his beautiful, glazed eyes like a fine whiskey gazing back at me, I forget all about the Curse. Mayce bows his wingtips to the edge of the bed.

In this moment of him submitting to me, he never looks more vulnerable, more beautiful. Only now can I shed the dragon until we are man to man, curse-brother to curse-brother. Nothing but our masculine edges, our hunger, feverish blood, and our bodies coming together in a savage battle. Warriors. Friends. Lovers. A bond stronger than the magic and demons between us.

Now, I slide deeper. Our groans overlap as I push and push until I'm so deep inside, I can go no further. Licking a trail along the Fae's spine, I grip his hips and start to rock. I'm stretching him. Thick enough that it burns, but judging by that impressive organ bulging and glistening with precum and his pretty lips open, Mayce is feeling as much pleasure. I'm fucking the tension and fear right out of both of us.

It requires no less power for him. We're both predators, primal and passionate. I need Mayce as much as he needs me. I might be the fucking protector of our foursome, but he's my goddamned armor. Without Mayce, the three of us would've



been lost to the Waste centuries ago, roaming the endless wilderness of the dead worlds as brittle corpses until we'd faded to dust and ash. My exquisitely masculine, beautiful, lethal monster.

Finally, I release my wings, rock them against the backs of his. Coupled, they mate as we do. His wings shimmer the more I thrust into him. A roar works in my throat, and I know I'm about to blow my load. Fine scales cut through my fucking muscle, hardening my cock with their armor. Sensitive armor, nonetheless. The scales that grow on my cock at the peak of my arousal are full of goddamned nerves.

As I drive my thrusts deeper, power-fucking into my partner and listening to his pulse thundering harder, I twist my fingers around his shaft.

“Fuckfuckfuck!” he yells.

I pant and command, “Now, Mayce.”

Whole body jerking, I slam my hips against his. Our wings shift up, slapping hard against each other. With the Fae pushing his ass against me, spurring me on, I shoot scalding ropes of seed into him while he blows his load on the bed, leaving a milky, white well in the sheets. We collapse against one another, my cock still embedded inside him, giving little pulses. Both our bodies shudder.

“Damn, maybe I should come near death more often,” I snicker and nip the side of his neck.

He rolls his eyes and shoves me off him, shifting onto his side. “Or perhaps I should, and you may so dutifully tend to my aftercare with your impassioned, simmering mouth taking my cock all the way down your goddamned dragon gullet.”

I heave a sigh and mirror his body but prop my arm behind my head, more relaxed while trailing a finger down his cheek. “Such pretty words.”

“Remember our years before the curse when we kept a tally on who could achieve the most court fucks while our parents secured their treaties?”

I chuckle low, but my chest tightens uncomfortably. “How could I forget? You bested me every time. But we never speak of our times before the curse.”

“We wouldn’t trade our bond for anything, brother. But tell me, what else would you trade for a lush, hot pussy? Not the cold, corpse ones of our Waste courts that feel like we’re fucking an ice sculpture.”

“What are you blathering on about, Mayce? And where are Merikh and Ky? They usually turn up by now to assess the damage.” I glance at the door, half-expecting the two of them unless our mating provided them with some inspiration.

“Oh, Kyan refused to leave the girl in Merikh’s malevolent hands.”

I stiffen. All my veins and tendons throb and tighten. My once-simmering fire rears up, until smoke curls from my ears while I snort embers from my nose. “What *girl*?”



“YOU’RE IN THE BELLY OF THE  
BEAST.”

## QUINTESSA

I'M CONVINCED IT WAS ALL A DREAM.

Something meant for those spicy books I stole from Darya and buried in the dirt of the root cellar to keep me company whenever Pater locked me underground. Unfortunately, Pater caught me once trying to stroke my pussy, hoping to rouse some sensation. I couldn't feel the hot wax he'd poured over my "lady garden" in his words, but he'd ensured I couldn't touch my petals or pearl for quite some time, determined to *purify* them. I'd said nothing about how Sarai and I'd already touched each other's pearls, along with everything else. When I turned sixteen, I sought out any boy in the Borderlands who could fuck me. After all, I knew the Sacrifice would eventually be my fate.

No one in their right mind would ever wed the Gray Girl who spoke with ghosts.

So, I am definitely not in a castle belonging to the Kings of the Waste. I most certainly did not heal the Dragon King. Lowered male voices cannot be arguing in the same room as me. I'm absolutely not wearing one of the god king's jackets and rubbing my nude and scarred legs against each other in a foreign bed.

This must be some perversion of purgatory since I imagine I'd feel more in heaven just as burning whips would flay my nerves in hell. The Sister banshees must have trapped my soul between the afterworlds.

I swallow a dry lump in my throat. Open my crusty eyes to Qora, who hovers above me, needling her eyes to flaming slits.

I smile, grateful that she's with me, always with me.

The pounding of hard footsteps has me slamming my eyes shut again, pretending to be asleep. A deep voice, not dark and silky like the Fae's or sweet and calm like the fallen angel's or even wicked and feline-like the vampire's, bellows into the room, "Out! Both of you! In the hall. *NOW!*"

It's gruff, gravely. Dark and sinful, the voice bleeds past my skin to trigger my pulse to thrum. An irresistible alpha command. The Dragon King's command. A growl and a groan follow the order. A door slams, resounding against the walls. As soon as it does, I fling off the covers and stumble out of the bed, grabbing a chair to support my wobbly legs. Qora slips in front of me as I stagger for the door and press my ear against it.

"Be reasonable, Drago. What if—"

Drago cuts Kyan off, snarling, "Ten thousand years of fucking 'what-ifs'! I'm done pussyfooting around. Her blood will or won't satisfy. That's all that matters. I don't give a fuck what she did. My castle, my rules. My *revenge*. You will get your turn *after* me."

Even if I don't feel fear as keenly as most, the sense of urgency is enough to electrify my spine. So, I spin and charge as fast as I can for the window.

"What the devil are you doing?" demands Qora, shifting beside me, curling her dark essence around me, and prickling my hairs.

"As thrilling as it would be to get devoured by a dragon, I'm taking Quinn-pie off the menu tonight," I tell her and grip the base of the window, groaning when it doesn't budge.

"Little fool, you healed the bastard god."

"Didn't you hear him?"

Qora huffs and shadows herself against the wall. "Clearly, you've learned nothing of the undead during all your years

with me. Or men despite all your *experiments*.”

I pause and glance to the side. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She burns those dark fire eyes across mine and snickers. “He has no intention of killing you, little Quinn. Just as I never have. Are you really going to try and escape your one opportunity to get good and rightly fucked? Or in his case, *monstrously* fucked?”

I toss my gray hair over my shoulder and narrow my eyes at the door where the voices have lowered. More wondrous heat nurses my insides, tightening my womb. But a thousand other moments, other voices war against that heat. All my scars join the battle. I dig my nails into the window base, struggling to get it open while gritting my teeth, then biting my tongue till it bleeds.

“Are you finished?” mocks Qora with a yawn. “If you’re smart, you’ll remove that jacket and lay down on the bed with your legs spread wide and your pussy open. Even if he’s got a different sort of revenge in mind, it’s the best way to change a man’s mind by appealing to his fucking cock.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re mad. There is no way in the Waste that devastatingly handsome and dangerous dragon god would ever want to fuck a gray girl with a thousand scars and tiny tits.”

“Your tits are fine.”

“You know I want heated and unholy like in all the books I’ve read. Savage and forbidden. No man will ever want to fuck me so deep and hard, I’ll feel it down to my core. Besides, in the high probability you’re wrong, I’d rather take my chances out there with the corpse horde than become masticated morsels in those monsters’ bellies.”

“Too late, little one.” The velvet darkness of his voice pounds into me from behind. I freeze, careless of the splinter pushing under my nail and the tiny blood drop oozing down my fingertip. The fear should spread an icy chill into my

bones, but all that thickens is that predatory heat. “You’re already in the belly of the beast.”





PRAYING FOR A SUICIDE BY  
SEX

## QUINTESSA

QORA CACKLES NEXT TO ME, REMINDING ME OF A RIPPLE OF smoke. Maybe I should tell her to shut up. Launch into a full conversation and look as crazy as possible to the Dragon King. But I twirl, squeeze my shoulders, and thread my fingers while choking on my own gasp. All the monster god wears is a black robe, but the ridges of all his hot muscle practically barge through that layer of fabric, demanding my attention.

“My brothers tell me you healed me...” Drago crosses his arms over his chest, staring me down, and I gulp since he’s two heads taller than me. At least.

“Brothers?”

“Oh, now, you’re at a loss for words?” Qora taunts from the corner.

The King waves a hand in dismissal. “Brothers bound by dark magic. Not by blood. Answer the question and address me properly, girl.”

I bow my head, remembering I’m in the presence of ancient royalty, however damned he is. “Yes, Your Majesty. I am a blood-binder.”

“Obviously,” he snorts, his eyes roaming over the tapestry of scars mottling my flesh. I stiffen, but a tremor echoes through me. When he steps toward me, his brows lowering over his deeply hooded eyes, I back against the window. One corner of his mouth twists into a leering grin. “Give me your name, girl.”

“It’s Quintessa. But everyone calls me Quinn.”

“I knew a Quinn once. Traitorous knight who betrayed my family and earned his beheading. I feasted on his flesh and picked it from my teeth with his bones.” I still from the revelation and shiver when he adds, “I’ll feast well tonight, too.” His eyes gleam as carnal red as his hair.

Quora throws her shadowy head back and laughs. Ironic how she’s always tried to kill me, but it’s the first night I’ve wanted to kill her. All right, no, not truly kill, but strangle at the least.

“I like Tessie,” he comments while stroking his jaw. “So, *Tessie*, tell me why did you dare to cross the Veil and enter the realm of the Waste? You’d have to be mad to cross over.”

Pursing my lips, I swallow hard, wishing my throat wasn’t so dry. “I—I followed the blood. *Your* blood.”

He closes the distance between us in a way that is not humanly possible. My breath hitches when he grips my throat and shoves me against the wall, grinding against me and growling, “I do not appreciate repeating myself.”

I panic, wheeze, and struggle with his hand. It’s large enough to bind my entire throat, claws curving around the back of my neck. My lips part, and nothing but rasps come out.

“I did not ask *how*. We will get to that later. Tell me *why*.” All the muscles in his neck tense while a muscle bounces in his stony jaw. “Hmm...perhaps you desire to finish the job, so you may carry my head back to your village? Or perhaps you plan to stab my brothers as well and return to claim glory beyond the Veil of Souls?”

I shake my head wildly, scattering tresses of hair over my cheeks. The moment he loosens his grip, I scream, “This!” I squeeze his hand, which he loosens while his deep emerald eyes narrow, scrutinizing me. At first, I’d considered telling him I wanted to heal him, needed to save him. But it was secondary to—, “I came for *this*.” I tap the back of his hand, overwhelmed by the rough skin, the raised scars in the flesh.

He pauses but does not release my throat even if his hand barely feathers my skin. Despite his set jaw and the danger in his narrowing eyes, how they study me as if waiting for one wrong move, I boldly glide my fingers down his arm. Undone by the sensation in my fingertips, I stroke the sleeve of his robe, which reminds me of blood—soft and warm, but this cushions the pads of my fingers. Drago glances down at my hand as I caress my way to his shoulder.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he snarls low, so low, his breath almost conceals it. The breath that quickens, but I imagine it’s far more from outrage, given how his muscles flex beneath my hand.

Not daring to lift my eyes to his, I murmur, “When you’re cursed never to feel more than an echo of touch, when you can’t sense the wind in your air or the tears on your cheeks or the ground beneath your feet, it may just drive you mad.”

My lips twitch into a smile, and I gasp when my palm connects with the bare skin of the dragon king’s upper chest. He stiffens and draws in a sharp breath. Those glinting green eyes capture me even as my fingers tangle with the rough hairs upon his chest. Something sinful throbs in my core, like my heart has invaded my pussy to beat there, rippling more blood and heat between my thighs. The muscle I’m palming is called a pectoral, but his is far firmer, thicker than any other I’ve witnessed. I’d felt the powerful sinew along his forearms, biceps, and bulging shoulders. As if he was carved from the ancient stone of deep magic in the recesses of the earth.

He curls his upper lip to show a long, keen dragon tooth. But I don’t move my hand, gazing up and refusing to shrink as he says, “Untouched ones, neither living nor dead, they are called shades in the Waste.” I swallow hard when he grips my chin and jerks me forward to rumble low, “You are only a *half* shade, little Tessie.”

I part my lips and lower my brows, confused. “They call me the ‘gray girl’. Half dead, half alive. Half ghost.”

“You still feel warm enough to me. Warm blood. Warm skin. Warm cunt. Why were you in the fucking woods,

Tessie?”

“The Sacrifice, I—”

“You sacrificed far greater by coming here. Why would you make such a sacrifice?”

Pursing my lips, I lift my eyes to his, and through tears that blister the corners of my eyes, I confess, “Because I’d rather destroy myself than let another do it.”

“Prepare yourself for destruction, then. Because I will do whatever the fuck it takes to protect myself and my brothers. We’ve lived ten thousand years. Did you believe you could come here and charm or deceive us? Nothing but darkness awaits you. Whatever tragic existence you came from, you were a fool to believe any happiness could exist here.”

My body thrums from the dangerous masculinity of his words, from the heat and fire within them. Even his cheekbones sharpen from his intensity, from the vow in his voice. Those full lips part to showcase more teeth.

I’m not looking for a happily ever after. I’m looking for a dark and dangerous once upon a time. If my once upon a time begins with death itself at his claws and teeth, then I will welcome every sharp cut and shredding of my flesh.

My hand strays to the right until it rests upon the flesh where his heart is. As soon as my fingertips brush the location, I yelp from the flame rearing up to bite my hand. But the same moment that I jerk my hand away, Drago grips it and crushes my palm to his chest. So hard, I worry he’s broken the tiny bones in my hand. But it’s nothing compared to the fire licking my skin, at the lines in my palm. I shriek, but it turns into a whimper followed by a moan because I’ve never felt this sort of pain. Only an echo of a blade cutting my skin to spill my blood.

Fire is different. Fire feeds on the layer of my skin, melts it, chars the flesh, and wrenches tears down my cheeks. He threads his fingers around mine, palm and heel overlapping mine. Smoke curls between those fingers in a hint of a promise.

So, he will destroy me with his fire. It's a fitting end for the girl who is nothing but cold scars. When my vision clears for a slit of time, I gasp, marveling at his chest heaving. The seductive heat of his breath shivers across my face. In one moment, there are inches of air. In the next, he's chained the back of my neck, yanking me to him so hard and high, the muscles in my neck howl from the pain. Until his hot mouth comes down on mine. Oh, savage mercies! Hard and bruising, his lips plunder mine. He's not careful, and I remember how it's what I wanted. Something wild and wanton. Heart-crushing, soul-obliterating.

Here, I am opening, bending, and curving before him, and praying for a suicide by sex.

I4



T'M FALLING INTO HIS HELL

## QUINTESSA

BY THE TIME HE'S DONE, MY LIPS ARE SWOLLEN. MY CHEEKS are hotter than forged iron, a flush suffuses my chest, my nipples have hardened, and my breasts feel *heavy* for the first time.

At his grinning chuckle and how he undoes the ties of his robe, I realize he's not done. Not in the least. I blush from the top of my head to the tip of my toes, convinced I'm combusting from the inside out. The smoldering skin of my palm fades the more he moves away from me, and I glance down, awed by the puckered flesh, the branded skin.

"Heated and unholy, I believe were your words. So deep and hard, you'll feel it down to your core." He offers me a grin, and I drop my jaw because nothing is mocking in his smile. Yes, it's sly and mischievous, but in his smoldering green eyes is a dark, heated promise. "And what, pray tell, little gray girl, could be more savage and forbidden than a monster god?"

Heartbeat hammering against my ribcage, I shield my chest with my arms as he parts his robe and slides it off his shoulders. In. One. Fell. Swoop. Naked and unashamed. My eyes go wide.

Two heads taller than me, perhaps three, he bears not only hard-packed muscle along his slabbed chest but a thin armor of glittering scales—a glistening black, like oil but tipped at the edges by iridescent emerald. Like the countless men I've read about in those carnal books, the aged warriors taking a beautiful maiden. Except, I'm certain none of those maidens

looked like me with a body full of scars and ink. Nor am I well-endowed like them—with hips or tits. At least my face may pass as...*pretty*. Not that a king would care about a pretty face after one look at my body.

The dragon king tilts his head to the side, testing me, those eyes roaming across my figure, carnal and feral in their intent. He radiates pure predatory possession. At first, I try my damned hardest not to ogle him, but he shifts to one side, diverting my attention. His hair falls in wild waves of blood-fire red, apart from the shaved sides.

“Understand, little one, I vowed to take my revenge upon the one who stabbed me in the woods and nearly sent me to my death. But now, I have something far different in mind.” He approaches the side table where a large basin filled with water rests. Flames scorch my cheeks, and I know it’s not from the hearth near me but instead from the firm, taut globes of his buttocks. No scales there, only hearty golden skin. He bends to scoop two handfuls of water and washes his face.

My insides clench, and I swallow the lump in my throat when my eyes swing to his thighs. Such muscle and power in those brawny thighs and hips, I’m certain he’ll split me open like ripe fruit. Probably a passion fruit. Or make it a dragon fruit.

Savage mercies, is he truly serious? My heartbeat pounds like a war drum. Emotions form a labyrinth within me: lust wars with fear, curiosity overcomes any horror, and my thirst for feeling—for pain and pleasure—overrides any sense of propriety. This is the Waste. And the mad girl inside me thrills at the charge to her nerves. Even if it means he’ll snap my throat at the end.

I try to clear my throat to form some sort of response, but he turns, flinging water from his fingers. More droplets sluice down his cheeks and the strong pillar of his neck, lingering on his bulging shoulders. I take a step back, but all that’s there is the fireplace. Embers lick at the backs of my legs, but I don’t feel them. All I feel are those intimidating and beautiful eyes burning against mine. His sexual energy crackles like lightning in the air to hum the hairs on my skin to static. He is a storm

advancing toward me, and I almost wait for him to crouch and roar, growing those wings and lengthy tail until he turns into the monster I met in the woods.

Savage mercies, girls like me don't get kings like him! And all I want to do is rub my needy body against him until he's ready to bury himself inside me like we're two animals in heat. Rationality says I should be afraid. Icy fear should prey on me, but heat rushes through me instead.

My heart spasms from my wild-eyed wonder. When a hard muscle ticks in his cheek, and he spreads his lips into a shit-eating grin, I don't think. I match that grin. And bolt. A dark growling laugh echoes behind me, resonating into my spine with its thunderous meaning. He will enjoy hunting me.

His chuckle is gravelly, and I almost turn to liquid. I get as far as the door handle when his arm grips my bare waist like an iron band. "You may look adorable in my brother's jacket, but for the rest of this night, it will be *my* scent that covers you."

I gasp when he splits the jacket down the center, sending buttons clattering to the floor. My breath hitches when he jerks it off my body, spilling my small breasts and exposing my meager frame to his eye. With his hands distracted by the jacket, I scurry to the other side of the bed and crouch.

"We both know you're gagging for my dragon dick. If you're a good girl and get on the bed now, I'll be gentle." He jerks his finger toward it.

I set my hands on my hips and stick out my chin, courting his fire and destruction. "And here I thought lambs were gentle."

Drago lifts his brows, and I resist the urge to clasp my hands together in pride from how I've surprised him. From my side vision, Qora hovers in the corner of the room, and I almost want to plead for her help. I don't know how to tempt a monster god. Or look seductive. All I know is my fallback. I turn the darkest moments into games. And I love playing with this dragon. I'm dancing with a god, with a monster, and I fucking love it!

The King crouches, fingers curved upon the bed as he appraises me. “So, you want to play with monsters, little one? I’ll show you what happens when you tickle the dragon’s tail.”

I squeal, almost jumping up and down, “Will you chase it for me?”

Growling, he leaps for me, charging through the air and crossing the expanse of the bed in one stride. Regardless of my naked state, I scramble for the door, but the heat of his breath curls the hairs on the back of my neck before I touch the handle. Less than a second later, he coils the ends of my hair around his hand, forming a fist. And yanks me back.

I shriek, but my gasp cuts it off after he’s swung me around, so my front rubs against his. And that hard dragon cock twitches across the valley between my breasts thanks to how tall he is. Burning gods!

“So warm, little gray girl,” he purrs, all his muscles flexing from his powerful, bulging arms to his stony shoulders to the slabbed ridges of his chest and abs. And for the first time, I’m so keenly aware of my nipples pebbling for attention as they rasp against his rigid skin. Heat curls in my womb, roaming lower to flush my pussy. And a primal growl rises from Drago’s throat.

I frown, daring to plead with him, “Please call me something else. Anything else...”

Brows knitted low, he narrows his eyes and follows with, “I like your scent, my pet. It’s a goddamned winter flower shooting through the frost. One with enough strength to last through spring. Dark and floral. Scarred and cold and struggling for breath. So, I’ll give you mine. My breath. My heat. My fire.”

When he grips my hips, plucking me from the floor and into his arms, I squeal. I rake my nails across his chest, but flames crackle in a warning. Embers nip at my cheeks. He’s a firestorm imprisoning me in its inferno. When he crushes his mouth to mine, I breathe through my nose. He smells and tastes like the smoke and incense on Hollow Night.

After he's dumped me on the bed and pinned me there, his malevolent hands roam, unhindered, all over my body that is downright tiny compared to his. His hand is enough to swallow three of my tits, but he squeezes and fondles them like they are more. A hard pinch to my nipple has me bucking beneath him. Clawing at the sheets. Gasping for breath. Everything tingles and tightens, ready to explode. My lips swell from his relentless kiss, how he nips at each one, then spears the seam with his tongue.

I'm falling into his hell.



T'M HIS DIRTY GOOD GIRL



## QUINTESSA

I'M RISING TO THAT HELL.

That bulging dragon member nudges my mound. I cling to his mouth. Cling to him with my nails digging into his shoulders, but he changes paths just as a raging fire would. Unpredictable and all-consuming. Destroying my will and any chance to escape, he kisses, nips, and licks his way down the curve of my throat and lower and lower, until he closes his hot, wet mouth around my peaked nipple. I shriek, undone by the hunger coiling tighter inside me from his tongue mauling the puckered bud that turns as hard as a stone.

By whatever that is unholy possessing me, I grind against him. Heavy and aching with undeniable hunger, I open my thighs to work that tender nub of nerves between them, trembling from the pleasure.

“Tell me, Tessie,” he chuckles low, plucking my hand and wrenching it between my legs. What comes out of my mouth is halfway between a gasp and a whimper when he rubs my fingers along my slick folds. “Do you feel *this*?”

He urges my finger to that swollen nub, and at the first touch of my fingertip with his hand holding mine, I screech and pant several back-to-back breaths. My body is on fire, my veins burn, and I want more. But then, he removes his hand, leaving nothing but hollow air against my vulnerable cunt.

“No,” I sob and grind against him again, reaching for his hand, wrenching it toward my petals again.

“Hmm...fascinating. So responsive. Are you a maid, then, little one?”

I snort laughter, muffling the sounds in the blankets. “No, but it’s the first time I—oh god!” I shriek again when he flicks my clit.

Once his fingertip leaves my pussy and skims my belly, I open my eyes and lick my lips, as fascinated as him. He traces the lines of ink with his smoke teasing from his fingers and roams along the puckered valleys. “Your skin with its scars is like the sky full of stars.”

I can’t help but smirk, followed with a shiver when he circles my areola with one finger. “That was a beastly attempt at poetry. Ow!” I yelp when he pinches my nipple hard, then pulls, elongating the bud.

The moment he licks his way down my body is when his erection throbs against my inner thigh. And I dare to reach down and grip that bulge, wanting to feel his heat and hunger and hardness. Drago growls and without warning, he turns me over. Rolls me onto my stomach. The strike comes like a whip of thunder. Too stunned, I freeze, my whole body locking up. And then, the blow deals its true punishment like a hot lick of blazing lightning on my bottom.

He fists my hair, and a swift grip to yank my head back commands my attention to his eyes. “When you are beneath me, you never touch, little pet. Is that clear?”

Tears blister in my eyes, but I muster a nod. The danger in his eyes surges a thrill right into my blood. And with the air cooling my skin to a luscious burn, I realize how much I enjoyed the scalding blow. I cry out, mewling when his hand slams down on my ass again. Each is like a burst of flame. Pater spanked and struck me so many times as a child, but I’d never felt it. I’d flushed from the humiliation, his hatred, my failure.

This...this is *not* like that.

Despite how Drago deals his smoldering blows, so I can barely breathe with a hard ache stabbing the back of my throat,

he pauses now and then to knead and stroke my bottom. As if he's admiring it. Desire strikes hot and fierce inside me from the pain and pleasure, but most of all, from the *attention*. Undivided, hot, focused attention. Not a means to an end like the punishments of my past.

"Hmm...you're enjoying this, aren't you?" croons the Dragon King while dragging his fingers across my folds, parting my slick lips.

"Oh, sweet monsters!" I cry out from the sensation, from how soft and swollen my labia becomes, responding to his touch.

"So wet for me, aren't you, my dirty good girl?"

More liquid heat trickles from me at the sound of his words. I've never once been called "good girl". And even though he called me "dirty", I love the appreciation in his voice, how the word rolls off his tongue like a term of endearment. I'm *his* dirty good girl.

To Drago, I am not a half-ghost. I am not the gray girl. I am little Tessie. I am as warm to him as a tiny star. More than anything, I am alive. So fucking alive. I could care less if he sees me as the scrawniest bone with barely any meat on it to serve as a morsel of a meal.

As long as he keeps doing what he's doing, I'd commit this suicide again and again. He reduces me to a mewling, quivering mess where I'm lifting my ass and swaying from side to side, begging for more.

His hand pauses. His fingers caress my cheeks, which I know are striped and welted. Still, I tremble and rub against him.

"Well, now, you're a little pain slut, aren't you? My pretty, little touch-starved whore."

I don't protest. I'll be his slut. I'll be his whore. I'll be anything he wants me to be, anything I want to be. He called me *pretty*. A pretty pet...I like that. Another smack lands on my sore bottom. Now, when I rock against the bed, my nipples

hard and chafing against the sheet, something delirious and wet and warm oozes from my cunt.

A rolling, deep chuckle echoes into the air and has me trembling as the king lowers his hand between my thighs. I shudder in the pause, listening to his labored breath. As soon as his feverish fingers shove inside my slit, I throw my head back with a shriek. The sensation is glorious and overwhelming, it steals my breath and all my tears.

“Hmm...so deliciously tight. Hot. Wet. So responsive to my touch. Tell me, pet, were you this responsive to any of your past lovers?”

I squeeze my inner muscles around him. And shake my head.

Another hot iron strike to my inflamed bottom, and Drago snarls, twisting his fingers in deeper. “You will address me properly, girl. Especially when we are about to become so well acquainted.”

“No,” I croak and lick my lips, trying again, hoping my words are firmer. “They weren’t lovers. They just fucked me.”

“No, they didn’t. Fucking is owning. If a single man had ever fucked you, little Tessie, he’d never have let you go. When I fuck you, you will understand I have claimed you. And possessed you. Your body, your mind, your soul... forever changed. I’m going to leave my mark on you and in you, my pet. I’m going to own you. You will forever remember who has used you and treated you like the prized treasure in his hoard.”

Oh, bleeding gods! He chuckles and circles those fingers inside me, and I yelp, understanding he’s grown scales. Their edges pinch and chafe my pussy. “This is the first time you’ve felt fingers fucking you, isn’t it?”

“Oh!” I moan and mewl, shifting my hips from side to side. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?” He pinches my backside.

“Yes...my lord Drago.”

“My lord. I appreciate the title, but we are not in court, little one. We are in my bed. I hold dominion here, all the same. But as you can see, the dynamic is far different. In here, you will call me *Master*.” He grips my hair, thrusts my head back, and covers my mouth with his. So much heat, I heave and gasp into his mouth, trembling into my core. When he presses his thumb to my clit, ferociously rubbing it, I moan into his mouth, which seems to drive him harder. I rub against him, wanting him inside me. “And you are my sweet pet. You’re such a good girl, Tessie. Let’s learn how many of my *dragon* fingers you can take.”

Tears squeeze through my eyes when he stabs three thick, scaled fingers inside me. They chafe my inner flesh a little, but they feel so good. So much better than the wand I stole from Mistress Blanche after healing her following her wedding night. Guilt had thickened inside me since she hadn’t used it yet, and she was sore in more ways than one since her well-endowed groom hadn’t brought her pleasure. I never understood why people always wanted to share their deepest, darkest secrets with blood-binders. Must be some healing thing.

Drago spears me with another finger. My insides tighten, and I shake all around those fingers as a new and wondrous sensation rises within me. But just as it does, Drago pinches my clit hard, denying me.

“No,” I whine.

He brushes his lips along the side of my hair. “Not yet, Tessie. That’s a good girl. Ride those fingers a little longer. You’ll be ready soon.”

I should keep my mouth shut, lips sealed. But I’ve never been good at that. Or wanted to be. “Is it true that dragons have...erm...” I stammer, flushing red as poppies as he rumbles a laugh, then reaches around to fondle my breasts with one hand.

“I will give you the man today, my sweet slut. Tomorrow, you will have both.”

I thrust my hips back, forcing his fingers in deeper and biting my tongue over my whine as I work to prove myself. “I bet I can take it.”

“Them,” he corrects. “And I admire your initiative. But I’ll be the judge of what you can and cannot take.”

“I’ve seen what you look like as a half-dragon. Can you turn *full* dragon?”

“Enough questions!” he snaps, and I shut my mouth, regretting my curiosity...until he stabs his fingers deeper and curves them upward. Forgetting all about his form, I scream. Rivers of hot tears trickle down my cheeks as I explode, shaking violently with the first climax I’ve ever experienced. Powerful enough to shatter me and remake me.

There is no warning. With my frenzied breaths and spasming limbs from the aftermath of the explosion, Drago shoves the fullness of his length inside me. Long, hard, scaled, and impossibly thick. Burning and stretching me to the splitting point, that length penetrates me so deeply, I swear it rubs my cervix.

“Burning gods!” I scream from the invasion, certain he’s ripping me apart. It’s easily the most pain I’ve ever felt in my life. And I love every scorching moment. From numb to a roaring inferno in moments, my body feels ready to burn and combust at the seams. Unashamed, I bring my nails down to rake against the dragon’s thighs that pin my body in place.

He rumbles darkly, kisses the side of my neck, and purrs low in my ear, “Believe that was so monstrous, did you, little Tessie?”

In one moment, he proves me wrong. That massive cock throbs before its scaled edges flare, their tips swelling and raking the soft flesh of my insides. I shriek from the thickening pain of those sharp edges licking my inner walls and scraping like stinging nettles rupturing my pussy.

What surges a fearful thrill into my spine are the flames erupting along his arms and upper chest, licking their way

along the sides of his face, turning his eyes to burning jewels.  
And I weep from how beautiful he is.





SHE IS MINE TO POSSESS AND  
PROTECT...

## DRAGO

“FUCK!” I GROAN DEEPLY AND SINK MY TEETH INTO HER shoulder, tasting her blood. “Unholy is right. Your cunt is so fucking hot and tight squeezing me like a goddamn vice! I feel every bit of your warm, wet pussy.”

She feels like heaven. I’m not careful with her. She came to play with monsters, so I intend to fuck her like the beast I am. Show her who owns her because there’s no way in the Waste I will ever let her leave. Not after what she’s awakened. So, I come out, grip her hips, and whirl her around, forcing her weak legs around my hips, so her little body is pressed to mine. While she may not be a maid, pride still lights a flame inside me, knowing this is the first time she’s ever felt a cock. It is *my* cock her cunt will never forget.

Pain knots within me when I consider her question. How much this curse has stolen from me, from us, my brothers. None of us have felt the freedom of flying in centuries. Bound to the earth, our true forms stripped from us, our rightful magic denied to us. This is the closest I have come to my fire.

So, I enter her again, slowly this time, so she feels every last inch.

When she moans, I grip her shaking thighs, steadying her. “Look down, Tessie,” I command with smoke curling from my mouth and onto her skin. Nowhere near full power, but it’s beyond anything I’ve managed in the past ten thousand years.

Smiling at how she blinks and follows my direction, I kiss the side of her head at the same time she gasps. I love her little

squeak.

“Oh, god!” Her eyes turn wide from my enormous girth filling her.

“That’s right, my pet. You’re so pretty and pink and flush. Taking all my fucking cock. Centuries since I last had a pretty pussy like yours.” She knits her brows in confusion, but she will learn.

Centuries of fucking Waste folk no better than corpses, or my brothers, mostly Mayce. But her pocket of flesh is warm and wet. She doesn’t feel like a shade. She’s fucking raw and real. Nothing like those court women Mayce and I used to fuck with their gowns and gems and sexual fussiness. I kiss her, plundering her mouth while rubbing my body against her ruined one. Hammer my hips into hers, loving her moans and mewls in my mouth. She’s with me in every moment, her nerves on overdrive. The level at which I want to possess and protect this girl is likely to kill me.

When I grip her neck, fingers against her pulse, I grin down at her. Her heart rate quickens with every breath I smother. Her pupils dilate upon mine, and I memorize the fear scrawled there before they soften in surrender. The moment, they do, I free her throat and kiss her, giving her my breath as I’d promised.

Her flesh is a flawless mold for my cock. Fuck, her wet heat grips me so goddamned perfectly, and she sucks in a deep breath, screeching through another orgasm. Little wonder she’s so sensitive and responsive to everything. A lifetime of touch denied to her...until now. It can mean only one thing.

Embers spark between us. A confirmation of my suspicions. She doesn’t seem to notice them—too lost in the pain-induced delirium of a dragon cock gorging into her. But I love how they crackle across her body, reminding me of fireflies. More of me grows hot, growing to a familiar inferno until warm sweat pools down both our bodies.

Eventually, I will show the others, prove it to them. But for now, I want her all to myself.

I drag it out, wanting this to last. Scraping my teeth to her earlobe, I nip it, startling her. “Look at your cute, little tits.” She chokes out a moan when I pinch her nipples.

“They’re not—” she starts, but I slap them hard, enough to rattle her teeth, enough to leave a bruise. But fuck if I love the way those perky, little mounds bounce.

“They’re supple and tender, and these rosy tips are pointy and perfect for my tongue. See how they stiffen from my words and my breath upon your neck. Now, I’m going to fuck you. You’re going to take every single inch. And you’re going to come on my big cock and scream my name.”

“I thought there was no screaming in hell.”

I quirk a brow at her, stunned by her audacity, adorable as it is. Damn, I love this little woman, even if she acts like a spoiled girl and the epitome of “curiosity killed the cat”. Gripping her chin, I lure her mouth closer to mine and breathe a growl against her lips, “You’re not in hell, Tessie. We are much worse.”

She parts her lips to retort, but I smother them with my mouth, lower my hand to rub her sweet, swollen clit. All of her trembles against me. “You’re going to scream my name, girl. You will scream my name as I fuck you hard and beat your pussy shit up. Loud enough for my brothers to hear throughout the castle. Is that clear?”

I stab my hips and slam into her, giving her no opportunity to respond or catch her breath. Her muscles clamp around me tighter than before, triggering a rush of breath. Heat swells inside her pussy, and I grin because she’s dripping all over me, soaking me. She wants punishment, but she also loves praise.

I give it to her, “So fucking good, pet. My cock loves your cunt. I’m going to fuck you harder now because I know you can take it, little one. Whatever happened to you before, it couldn’t destroy your spirit. This won’t either, will it?”

She squeezes around me. Fuck! And drops her head onto my shoulder, shaking her head. “Good girl,” I commend her. “My sweet, dirty pet.” She clenches again, presses her lips to

my skin, and I smirk, understanding she prefers the “pet” nickname I’ve chosen for her more than “girl”.

More flames lick at our flesh. Smoke wafts from my pores, from my nostrils. The ink upon her skin swirls in chaotic patterns. A layer of scales glitters upon my body. Black as a moonless night but with familiar emerald tips—and a gold luster.

I fuck her. Harder. Will more scales. More fire. The thought of using my power against her for her has me pounding so furiously into her, I feel my release thundering upon me. With every thrust, her cute, pert tits bounce against my lower chest. As my vision blackens, I lean down, rub my thumb across one sore nipple, and whisper, “Scream.”

My scales drag along her inner walls, inflaming the wet, heated flesh. Her pussy tightens, she throws her head back. And screams my name as commanded.

“Drago!”

That wail of unchecked ecstasy is what darkens my vision and tears my release right through me. Fire surges from my skin, twirling into a vortex like a gods-damned pillar of flame. This little woman’s essence, her spirit is strong enough to bear it, to act as a trigger and a conduit.

All my muscles jerk and spasm, and I grip her little body to mine, digging my fingers into her back where more scars decorate her skin. “Fuck!” I growl, my lungs unleashing one great, deep breath as I spill my seed into her.

And as she falls against me and my cock pulses in the aftermath of pleasure, her eyes roll to their ceilings. Judging by the way she’s still clenching, that orgasm is still rippling through her. A final squeeze of her hot pussy before it finally gives soft, little sighs around my cock. But Tessie falls against me. Passed out, utterly spent. Taking pride in that, I remain where I am, seated inside her drenched depths.

At some point, we ended up on the floor, where a layer of ash coats the stone. Cinders lap at the walls, the scorched husk of a bed. Nothing but the scent of smoke and flame in the air.

Regardless, I don't care to move. Instead, I grab the wool throw draped over the back frame and cover her with it.

Post-coital cuddles are not normally my thing, but with how adorable she is nestled against my chest, and how she's the first girl in thousands of years, I make an exception. And drift off as soon as I close my eyes.



*DRAGOMIR...*A LONG-DISTANT BUT FAMILIAR VOICE PROWLs into my mind.

At once, I know I must be dreaming because I haven't heard this voice in centuries. Not even during the crazed fever of Hollow Night.

I want to growl at him for disturbing my rest, for invading my dreams, but I'm so fused to him, he doesn't allow me to disrespect or taunt him. Once I try to move, to shift my arms to feel the little woman in my arms, shockwaves burst through me. I howl from pure panic. Terror rips through my intestines. Because I'm fucking paralyzed. And I know exactly why. For centuries, I've chased him, hunted him down in the dark places of the Waste. I've taken blades to my body, burrowing through flesh and bone to ignite him. Thrown myself off mountains in this desolate land, hoping he would spread his wings, so we could fly together as we always have.

To be fused and imprisoned with my dragon is the purest and most unconditional and glorious form of freedom in the known and unknown worlds. Especially when we fly.

*What the hell are you doing?* I bellow and claw my way back to the center of our shared mind, back to the region of touch. Now, I know why he shoved me so far back. I yell at the blackguard but can't help but chuckle because she's pure bliss wrapped around our dragon cock. Squeezing us like a gods-damned vice. But still passed out upon our body. Not simply my body any longer.

*We awoke. Inside her, he purrs, ruffling our scales, and I spread my lips into a grin, nodding.*

*It's been too long, my friend.*

*Indeed.*

He lowers our dragon head with its impregnable bone skull to sniff at Tessie's hair that is like moon silk in this darkness. She's so exhausted that when she stirs, she doesn't even know human arms no longer hold her. Though they are tucked against our body, our wings consume half the tower, rubbing the walls. Our body takes up the other. Bed utterly destroyed by our force.

And this sweet half-ghost girl is but a milky gray flower against our scaled underbelly. As I shared with her, I don't want the pretty bud that blooms all spring—simply to wither from a chilled breath of wind. I want the winter rose with thorns like swords that can push through frost and ice.

She's already pushed her way through my soul. Forged a path through pain and blood and fire. And roused my dragon to life after he was cursed to sleep inside me. Fuck, I love the feel of her skin with all its scars curled up against our scales. The wool throw has fallen to gather around her hips, baring her upper half to us. Pretty little dusky rose tits pressed to our scales. Her body is soft, but her skin is a fucking work of art. I admire how her tattoos curl and twist into intricate whorls all over her form, how she reclaimed her scars in such a way. Sleeping so peacefully, she doesn't register the enormous dragon cock lodged inside her.

*Oh, she will feel it later, we snort in smug triumph. Soon, we will need to return to our human form. It's not the best time for her to wake up and find our dragonhood penetrating her. And I must tell my brothers.*

But for now, I curl my neck around her body. My bone skull alone spans half her form. She shifts, easing a soft sigh from her nose, and we tense. Until she moans and snuggles up closer to our belly, her legs trying to squeeze in vain from the massive, ridged member between them.

She must never leave the Waste. She must never leave us.

So, when I observe the Shadow in the corner of the room, still and silent, I growl as is my right and inform them, “She is mine to possess and protect now. Get the fuck out of my castle.”





“IT’S NOT POLITE TO STALK,  
CREEPY VAMPIRE.”

## QUINTESSA

WHEN I WAKE, QORA IS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND.

I scrunch my brows and rise from the bed until I register the soreness between my thighs. And how I'm in a completely different tower room with fresh sheets under me and a wool blanket draped over me. At first, I spread my legs and carefully lower my fingers to my pussy, wincing from how inflamed, swollen, and red it is. It feels like a log shoved its way inside. Make that a log with scales. I bite my lower lip and rub my eyes in disbelief. Now, it dawns on me how strange the pain is. Perhaps, because it was done by the dragon, I still feel it. All of me flushes from head to toe with the knowledge. Slowly, carefully, I shift onto my side and touch my backside, my lips tugging into a smile when I discover the welts and marks are healing from some oil spread upon my skin.

*Aww...*my breaths come heavier when I think of the dragon king rubbing a balm onto my cheeks while I slept. Tears form in my eyes from the emotion welling up inside me. Pater never healed me after his spankings. Not that I would have felt it regardless. But now, my belly flutters with a warmth I never thought possible. I open my mouth, lurching to tell Qora, remembering she's not here. My skin prickles, but Qora's probably exploring. She's never too far from me.

In any case, I'm positively ravenous. So, I waste no time in climbing out of the bed, a little wobbly, my muscles and limbs more like noodles. I peer around the room. It mirrors the last with a high window overlooking the Waste, but unlike the

other, which showed a view of the corpse village, this one overlooks a sprawling landscape of nothing but a plague of forests. From here, the trees remind me of great, bony hands rising from the ground, spindly fingers clawing for the sky. So thickly clumped together, I can't make out any paths or other landmarks. Shadow-fliers abound, carrion searching for any possible blood. I shake off a shiver. At the far corner of my eye is the barest view of one of the great dragon skeletons. The side of its head nudges the tower wall with its bone snout curving under my window. Up close, it doesn't seem as intimidating. And I can't help but smile since it reminds me of Drago.

I'm not about to roam the castle naked.

Skidding across the room to the massive wardrobe, I fling the doors open and scan the clothes. Nothing feminine whatsoever, but I hardly care. Not when Pater locked me in the root cellar on more than one occasion for sneaking out of the house in boy trousers and tunics. Beaming, I select a pair of dark pants, a crisp gray collared shirt that will compliment my hair, and a black leather bomber jacket that cuts off at my hips since I'm a good deal more petite than the gods. The clothes are loose, bordering on baggy, but they're clean. There are a number of bowties in the wardrobe, but after trying to tie one around the collar, I finally huff and give up, tossing it back in.

Eyeing myself in the mirror, I sigh, thinking I look more like some street urchin. I gather my hair into a messy braid and tiptoe out of the room in search of food. If the dragon king wants to fuck me again, which I highly doubt, then he'll need to feed me first.



AFTER WANDERING DOWN HALLS AND CORRIDORS WITHOUT finding a trace of a kitchen or dining hall—though plenty of masks riddle the walls—I finally discover someone with their back turned to me, dark shawl covering their head.

“Excuse me...” I say, a little breathless from my exploring. Not to mention how sore I am, which is why it’s taken longer to explore. Walking is...difficult.

As soon as the figure turns, I stop in my tracks. While she’s human-like, reminding me of the twisted ones who brought me to the castle, the woman bears distinctive bird features: half a bird skull for one side of her face, feathers cladding her head and sides of her face, one decrepit wing hangs at her side, and her feet are the withered limbs of a bird complete with talons. Her smile, at least what I believe is a smile, is twisted, bordering on gruesome, as she approaches me, lifting the arm on the opposite of her wing. While a couple of talons are where the fingers should be, they curve inward as if to welcome me.

I smile back and purse my lips, hesitant to approach—but fascinated by her appearance, by anyone in the Waste. After observing ghosts all my life, the Waste folk are more interesting.

When she opens her half mouth-half bone beak to speak, what comes out is more of a garbled squawk. “Eyn-Am-aruuu.”

I part my lips, chewing on my inner cheek, unsure of what to say.

“It’s not polite to stare, little dove.”

All the hairs on my skin stand on end while my blood turns to ice. Still, I ball my hands into fists, turn to face the vampire standing in the shadows behind me, and stab out my chin to say, “It’s not polite to stalk, creepy vampire.”

Merikh steps out from the shadows, and I swallow a knot in my throat. Doing my best not to shrink from his form towering over mine, I meet his glare with a mischievous smile. With all the ferocious grace of a god, the vampire bares his fangs, grips my jaw and shoulder, and forces my neck to tilt. “If I was stalking you, little dove, you would never know it,” he growls in a harsh voice, and I shiver as he scrapes his fangs along the curve of my neck. Oh, worshipful Waste, I’m close enough to touch his chest and feel the imprints of his scars. “If

I wasn't convinced your blood would taste more like ink, I'd fucking bite you here and now for your impertinence and disrespect."

"I—"

He yanks on my hair, and pain howls in my scalp, dragging a whimper from me. I won't admit it was a whimper of pleasure, of how much I love his brutality. Pater was a bully. Merikh is a sadist who rouses my fear and ignites adrenaline in my veins. But the last thing I'll do is beg. After all, it's more fun to *play* with him.

"On your knees where you rightly should be," he commands.

I drop to the floor, abiding by this rule of the game—even if I smartly stare up at him with my smirk growing. He's positioned me right between his legs, and as much as he may choose the side of torment, the telltale bulge in his breeches says otherwise. I inhale a sharp breath when I notice the jerking movement midway down his upper leg. Just a few inches above his knee. My eyes widen with the knowledge that he's as massive and hung as Drago. Are they all? What do vampire dicks look like? I give myself an internal slap.

"You will address me with my due title, little dove," he says through gritted teeth. "The next time my name flees your little mouth without my sovereignty attached, I'll fuck that impertinent peasant mouth so hard and deep, I'll wreck your fucking vocal cords. Is that clear?" he finalizes, his eyes like small blood moons.

"My apologies, Lord Merikh," I lay it on thick and lick my lips. "Surely, your highness, you would take mercy on such an impudent and uncivilized Borderlands girl like myself. After all, I'm certain I'm no more important to you than a little dove, so it's a wonder you would acknowledge me whatsoever! Lord Merikh, I am honored to kneel in your presence." I court his darkness, his violence. And grin the whole time.

Merikh gnashes his teeth, gripping my hair even harder. I squeak, alarmed he's going to tear some out by their roots, but

the bird-like servant steps forward and warbles, “Lawwwd Drrrago! Lawwwd Drrrago!” she insists, knocking a breath of wind my way from her attempt at flapping that weathered wing. And I’ve never been so grateful that the alpha of their group chose to fuck me.

With a guttural hiss, Merikh shoves me to the floor, where I’m half-tempted to kiss it, or his boots to drive my self-deprecating humor home. But I’ll save that for later. Instead, I rise and smile at the servant, this Eyn-Amaru, as I assume is her name.

“Thank you.” I nod to her before gesturing to myself. “Quintessa,”

“Tessieeee,” she acknowledges, and I can’t help but blush from the term of endearment she’s learned from Drago.

“I hear your meager belly rumbling from here, little dove,” remarks Merikh from the other end of the hall. “Drago is waiting for you. I’d suggest you pick up your feet and follow now before I decide to feast on the little morsel of your body instead of fattening you up as he desires.”

“I am so pleased you believe you could stomach me, Lord Merikh,” I say sweetly once we reach his side, but I’m still thankful Eyn-Amaru serves as a barrier between the vampire king and me. His eyes turn blacker and deeper than the Veil.

I feel them on me the entire way to the Great Hall.





“SO, SHE’S THE ONE.”

## DRAGO

SWEAT-SOAKED AND SATIATED, MAYCE AND I FALL BACK ONTO the bed, though I am more careful not to break it with my larger form. I coil my tail around Mayce's leg, parting his cheeks, and prodding at his well-used hole. He stiffens, then slaps my tail away with a growl. I smirk and give him relief. Shifting into half-dragon form has never been simpler. Nor unleashing my dragon cocks.

As they soften and deplete, I return them to their slit deep into the base of my tail, folding them into the pocket and sealing them beneath the layer of scales. Once I shift into man form, they will fuse into one greater member.

"Fuck, Dragomir!" Mayce bellows, breathless and beautiful.

"I believe I just fucked *you*, Fae."

He shoves me hard, surprising me again with his strength when he knocks me off the bed. I rumble a laugh and rise, crouching over the bed, scenting him with my snout. Fuck, he's gorgeous. Feline and predatory, flawless and formidable. An effigy chiseled from the stars, so unlike my rugged ridges. I may be alpha, but I've never deserved Mayce, something he's always keen to share. For now, he rubs a smooth hand along my hard muzzle, his fingers treasuring the scaly texture.

"I needed you to be the first to know. To see," I tell him, puffing smoke through my nostrils. After I'd returned to half-dragon form, I'd transferred the sleeping Tessie to Merikh's adjoining room. Just to stick it to the asshole. I'd left my own

little warning to him not to fuck with her. Or fuck her, for that matter. After, I'd wasted no time in finding Mayce, so I could reintroduce him to my cocks, long starved of his attention. The first one to take them all those centuries ago. Now, they are more ravenous than ever.

“Your fire come, Drago?” he wonders, rolling to the side to fetch his clothes—folded neatly on the chair once again. I admire the shape of his firm, round ass as he tugs on his breeches, then proceeds with his black, silk tunic with sinuous ruffles curling into the shape of roses. They form a collar around the back of his neck and collect in a sultry V at his sternum, leaving the porcelain skin of his upper chest exposed—as well as the thin, metallic bands with their thorns meant to imitate brambles. Guilt gnaws at my insides when I consider my mate, how long he's suffered without his magic. And his wings. To this day, I still remember when he could grow trees as tall as palaces within seconds. Or implode a valley into a crater. All for me to fill with liquid fire.

Scorched earth. We made our two realms our bitch. Only air and water could ever contest us.

Throat tightening as I imagine what my little Tessie would look like wrapped around my lover's cock, I nod and gruffly respond, “Should see what happened to the room.”

That sinful smirk of his looks even better from his profile. Enough to cause blood to rush to my cocks again. I adjust them beyond my scaly belt as I call it, thankful the heads don't prod the slit beneath yet. If the slit opens, the scales will retract, and then it's damn near impossible to keep the fuckers inside. Least not without spilling my seed first.

Mayce turns, crosses his arms over his chest, and deadpans with me. “Did he wake up?” His expression is stoic. Nerves of steel, my beautiful Fae. Always the rational one, plotting three steps ahead. He knows me best. He knows all of us best.

I could never lie to him. “He did.”

“He took her?”

“Mmm.”

Jaw set, the Fae raises his chin and licks his lips. “So, she’s the one...”

I snort, and a tremor ruptures through me as I lose scales, shifting back to human form. It’s always painful as hell. From my skin sucking my scales away to the loss of my tail, and most of all—my damned muzzle. The bone skull cracks and fuses into a male skull until the muscles, flesh, and skin rightfully mold to it. As always, some scales gild my chest with a few sprinkling my neck and face.

“She could still be a spy. Kronos’ latest assassin attempt.”

With a roll of his eyes, Mayce turns to reach for his robe while I shove into my trousers. “One has never roused your fire. Or Thayne for that matter. Regardless, how many times has the god-eater spent spies and assassins through the Veil to learn a way that could possibly kill us? All have failed.”

I grit my teeth, considering our ancient rival who ate the gods, conquered our realms, and slaughtered a million souls just to trap us here. One night of the year. One night to have some magic but not nearly enough to reclaim our birthright.

“She has a fucking Shadow, Mayce,” I inform him, and all Mayce’s muscles harden. “I banned the damned presence from our territory, but it’s enough to make me cautious. Not to mention how she stabbed me and nearly sent me to the Shadow Realm,” I snarl under my breath, believing the silhouette had something to do with it.

As he fastens the gold clasp of his velvet robe, Mayce snivels, “I take it you won’t be knotting her anytime soon, then.”

I set my hands on my hips and grin at him. “Why, Mayce, I do believe you’re jealous.”

“If she is a spy, we wouldn’t want her popping out any dragon babies, so the god eater may unleash a new age of wrath upon the world.”

“Thayne will be disappointed,” I reference my dragon, “but I will contain him for the time being. No knotting. No babies.” For now. “Come, or we will be late for dinner.”

“Fashionably late in my case,” quips Mayce, and I shove him this time.



“YOU MORONS DIDN’T GIVE  
ME ANY CLOTHES, SO I GOT  
INVENTIVE.”

## QUINTESSA

DESPITE OUR JOURNEY DOWN SEVERAL MORE HALLS AND staircases, there is still no sign of Qora.

Drago strolls into the dining hall at the same time that Merikh does. However, the vampire leans against the wall, arms crossed over his chest as he eyes the Dragon King. Kyan already sits at the table, and it's clear he's minding his own business.

“Left a little something in my bedroom, did you?” he grunts, jerking a thumb toward me. “It'll take a full week to cleanse it of her stench.”

When I pause mid-step and lower my nose to sniff myself, Drago chuckles and gestures toward him. “Come, Tessie. Ignore, Merikh. He was born with a stake shoved up his ass.”

“As opposed to a limp-winged lizard,” retorts Merikh, furrowing his brow and coming off the wall to seat himself at one side. “She's wearing my favorite leather jacket,” he practically spits out.

I shrug and trace a suggestive finger along the center seam. “You morons didn't give me any clothes, so I got inventive.”

“You are welcome to use any of my clothes while we have some made for you,” interjects Kyan with a smile, and I notice how he quells the tension in the room. As if a fresh breeze has drifted in to cool tempers.

The table is a perfect square with four throne-like chairs of fused ash and bone. I wince at the sight of the bones when I consider my backside, which still burns from Drago's hand



and teeth earlier. He seems to register because he grasps the back of his chair and leers down at me, “I will have the servants fetch you a chair, so you may sit next to me, Tessie.”

I gulp and purse my lips while answering, “I’d rather stand.”

Every King breaks out in a deep chuckle, and my cheeks turn hotter than a furnace. I ball my clammy hands into fists and bite my tongue, though I don’t know why I should be embarrassed. In the Wastelands, there are far worse fates than becoming the mistress of the Dragon King who is also a god.

“Tessie, come here,” commands Drago, eyes centering on mine.

A tremor of hesitation ripples through me until he brandishes those eyes like fiery blades. Chewing on my lower lip, I advance toward him, my gait stiff and slow as it was on the way here. My body temperature seems to rise the closer I get to him. Belly fluttering and pulse rushing, I’m aware of the others’ eyes on me, especially the Fae King, Mayce, who tilts his head and narrows his eyes, observing me and Drago. His neck muscles are tight, the silvery blue veins gleaming through his pearlescent skin. With his long jerkin parted at mid-chest, Drago bears enough golden skin to show his dark curls of hair and a scattering of obsidian black scales tipped with that emerald sheen.

Once I arrive at the Dragon King’s side, he cradles my chin in his hand, raises my face to his. And once his eyes cross to mine, my breath catches in my chest. He promptly steals it by crushing his mouth to mine, thrusting his tongue inside to lick at the inner walls. Heat seeps into my blood. A throat clears nearby. As if triggered, Drago grips the sharp angles of my hips and promptly thuds into the chair...with me on his lap. I choke back a whimper from my buttocks chafing against the jerkin covering his thighs, but it’s far better than the bulbous bones of the chairs.

Servants stagger into the dining hall with trays of all kinds of food. My stomach rumbles, but I take a few moments to marvel at the servants. What I’ve always known of the Waste

is that everyone, who was left here after the Veil, was created became monsters breeding monsters—all ruled by the monster gods. One servant's left side of their body is similar to a fawn—complete with one hoof instead of a foot. Another wears a deer skull until I register the servant doesn't simply wear it. The skull is fused onto their face. As if the bone has grown into the flesh. Now, I wonder if the ones in the village were not wearing masks. A servant, who sets a tray of a roasted boar's head before Drago, so the spiced meat scent curls into my nose, twists his mouth into a smile. His teeth are long and pointed like a rat while dark fur scatters about his face. I lose track of their differences and features ranging from dogs to birds to reptiles and even fish.

“Are you in much pain?” Drago purrs against the side of my head after I shift uncomfortably.

I shiver from my hairs prickling and tell the truth. “Yes, Lord Drago. But—” I pause from the knowledge of the other King's eyes on me. Kyan's especially as the skin around them creases in concern. Mayce merely observes, detached but alert while Merikh continues to regard me with bloodthirsty disdain.

In the King's arms, I feel smaller than ever, but the pain reminds me of last night—of how I took a monster god, a Dragon King. And survived. Whatever I am—mistress or lover or prized pet—I received him. He chose to fuck me. Nor has he thrown me out of the castle and into the corpse village, so he must want me again. At least for now. So, I squeeze my shoulders, smile sweetly, and finish, “—But there is no pleasure in life without pain. And since it's the first time I've felt both, I would go to great *pains* again for either.”

Mayce drops his spoon. A giggle rises inside me, but I manage to hold it back while the King chuckles behind me. The sound reverberates into my spine, along with his warmth.

“I won't delay you too long, sweet girl. But you will eat to your heart's content first.”

“Thank you, Lord Drago. Merikh says you're fattening me up for a slaughter,” I point out and tease, batting my eyes at

the vampire. He glowers at me from across the table.

“Did he now?” croons the Dragon while carving some of the roasted boar. “While I don’t intend to slaughter you, little Tessie, rest assured, I will devour you at my leisure.”

“So, I trust I did not ruin your appetite?” I wonder with heat growing inside my core, prompting me to clench.

“No, but you’re ruining ours,” grumbles Merikh, tipping back a goblet of wine. His plate is empty otherwise, and I’m curious as to what or *who* he must feed upon.

“On the contrary...” Drago continues, unhindered by the other King, and lifts a fork bearing some of the succulent meat dripping with its warm juices. I lift my brows in surprise when he offers it to me. “I’d say you ignited it.”

Pride kindled, I thrust out my chest, however paltry, and open my mouth to accept the King’s meat. For once in my life, I eat my hearty fill. Before, leftovers or third helpings defined my life since the oldest child receives the largest portion according to Borderland customs. So, it’s the first time I don’t find myself hungry. This could end at any time, and I will enjoy every morsel, literal and metaphorical.

Countless masks upon the walls leer at me, prompting my curiosity. “Why all the masks?”

Mayce and Drago shake their heads with a chuckle while Kyan raises one brow as if it should be obvious. Merikh simply rolls his eyes and fills his goblet again. I study the masks, speculating, forming all sorts of theories. Does each skull belong to someone they once killed? A shiver chills my spine, and I remember how dangerous the Kings are. It won’t be long before Drago grows bored with me, so I can’t help but imagine where they would place my skull.

“Quintessa,” Mayce addresses me, and I swing my head to the Fae king, who levels with me, folding his hands on the table. My skin tingles from him citing my name—it sounds as delicate as white violets. “Will you share more about your gift and how it came to be? Such talents are ones blessed by the spirits.”

Glancing down at the tattoos on my palms to conceal the scars, I shift uncomfortably. The King's muscles harden beneath me, and I feel small and weak as a wilted flower. But once I remember how I healed the Dragon, I nod to share, "Ironic that you used the word "blessed". It's a common sentiment that I am far more cursed." I stiffen in Drago's arms, but my insides overheat and soften when he brushes his mouth along the side of my neck and palms my thighs. "I was a twin, but we both died as my mother gave birth to us. But while my heartbeat returned, and I breathed life again, my twin did not. Everyone considered me bad fortune due to my twin's death." I don't add the other part about how I became a half-ghost, about how I am monster-touched. If they learn I am not so different from them, Drago may just as well change his mind and throw me out of the castle.

"For your sake, I sincerely hope you do not bring bad fortune to us." Mayce smiles and raises his goblet to me, but I'd swear there's a hint of mockery in the slight curve to one side of his mouth.

*How much worse could it possibly get for you?* I almost add but clamp my mouth shut to prevent the words from escaping. Not when I know so little of their history and experiences.

All my words and thoughts crumble when Drago grips my hips and pulls me closer, so his erection strains through the fabric of his breeches, stabbing my backside. I hiss wind through my teeth, narrowly avoiding a gasp. His rumbling laugh reverberates into every nerve ending in my body before he says, "Time for dessert." He directs his attention to two of the servants, one with the deer skull and one with features similar to a cat, and commands, "It will be served in the bathhouse."

Something in the way Kyan chuckles from across the table has suspicion prickling through me. I throw Drago a look, but all he offers is a smirk. Such dangerous and dark eyes fixating on me, ardent and concentrated, they steal my breath and spiral heat so deep into me, my core seems ready to combust. Without another word, the King rises, sweeps me into his arms

in a honeymoon hold, and carries me out of the dining hall. I grow damper with each second.



“YOU TASTE LIKE EVERY DARK  
AND SINFUL THOUGHT I’VE  
EVER HAD.”

## QUINTESSA

ONE GLIMPSE AT THE BATHHOUSE, AND I'M SWOONING.  
Gushing from its eerie beauty.

Decorative columns, arched vaults, and painted landscapes of famous dragons on arcs beautify the stone interior. The dragon skeletons fused into the center columns with countless more masks and skulls nailed to the walls loom over the area, bordering on threatening. From what I know of life in the capital, bathhouses are prime locales for business meetings. If the Waste is similar, the intimidating features make more sense. Set in a pentagonal shape, four rectangular pools surround the centermost one, which mirrors the shape but is situated within a gazebo formed of solid ash. Steam rises from all five pools to curl across the vaulted stone ceiling.

And Drago carries me across the tiles, depicted with more dragon scapes, to that gazebo center. Despite the warmth of the bathhouse, with no torches lit, it's dark and ominous. Hot, anxious, and restless, my nerves tighten while beads of sweat form on the back of my neck. More from how the Dragon studies me. It's enough to shake my heart loose from my chest and to set fire to my blood, so it rushes to my face. He smothers all my thoughts, any sense of rational thinking. Not that I'm known for that. I smile at my unashamed hedonism because life is more interesting when you make it up as you go, damn the consequences. I'd rather be brazen and wild, drifting wherever life's current takes me than plotting a course through carved plans, molded expectations, and societal standards. If that current leads me right to hell, then I'll go. I'm already close enough.



He steps onto the gazebo foundation until we are close enough to feel the steam drifting onto my skin, dampening it more than my sweat. Savage mercies, his seductive eyes set a fever within me, and my pussy practically screams for him. When I clench again, I wince because it's still inflamed.

“The pain will fade soon,” he assures me.

I bite my lower lip with a grateful nod. “Practice makes perfect after all.”

“Nothing and no one is perfect, little Tessie. Especially in the Waste.”

Giggling as he sets me on my feet, I touch his slabbed chest and alert him, “Then, I'd suggest you change your track record and prove it.” I flinch from the spark that snaps from my fingers, parting my lips in awe.

What leaves his mouth is halfway between a growl and a purr, and Drago touches his thumb to the center of my chin, staring at me with those fathomless emerald eyes. “If you wish to please me, Tessie, then you will never change your track record.”

My cheeks blaze hotter from his words, and I squeeze my thighs. My breaths turn heavier when the King removes the leather jacket, tugging it down my arms, then unbuttons the tunic. His growl is low and gravelly the more skin he exposes while my breath quickens to steady pants. He makes quick work of the pants, leaving me in nothing but my panties. As he looks upon me, my nipples pebble to attention, and his neck muscles harden, veins bulging. Need stokes flames into his pupils. I hiss in the darkness when he brushes his knuckles across one peaked bud. My inner muscles convulse, and I feel the panties grow wet from my arousal.

“Get in the fucking water now before I lose all control and take you like a damned beast against the column,” the Dragon snarls the command.

Spinning, I scramble into the water, ignoring how its burn lashes my skin, heating it and turning it red. The line of the pool ends above my high breasts, but I take a moment to bend

and curve back in the water to soak my hair. It's been too long since I had a bath. Despite how my blood-binding work paid for our family's mansion, we only had one bath, and Pater said it was a waste of water if I ever used it. Half-ghost girls with monster magic in their veins don't need baths.

When I rise from the water, I marvel at all the torches in the bathhouse flickering to life. A second ago, they were cold and bare. I don't have long to wonder. Drago commandeers my hips, a silent summons for me to turn. I knit my brows low because I can't see his hands, but they feel larger and coarser, and when I slowly turn, I choke on my shocked breath. My pulse skyrockets at the sight of him.

Two heads taller than he was before, shoulders as strong and hard as boulders, his chest, and torso like the columns around us. I study him as fervently as he studied me earlier, and he gives me time to process his dragon-man form. In the Wailing Woods, it was far too dark, and I was more concerned with stabbing him. Black shimmering scales with that emerald sheen cover his body. Long horns, shaped like scimitars, curve from his temples. And he bears a long and thick dragon muzzle—massive as a log and too wide for me to wrap my hands around. Still, I lift my hand, fingers eager to stroke the scales. His large nostrils puff out smoke, but I don't flinch. Instead, I close the gap between my hand and his muzzle before I lose my nerve. I gasp from the contact, surprised by how soft the scales are and yet how rigid and thick the skin is. Like layers of fine leather bound so tight and hard. My morbid mind wonders if all of him is like that.

Before I get a chance to roam my eyes downward, the movement behind him catches my eye. Smiling, I peer beyond his side to find a large, thick tail swinging in the water. No sooner do I eye it than Drago wraps that tail around me to cover my back—large and long enough to drape the flesh from my shoulders to my lower thighs.

“Savage mercies!” I squeal from that tail thrusting me closer, so I'm pressed against Drago's mountainous body. And that's when I feel his arousal against my lower belly. So hung and heavy, cannot possibly rise. I remember his words from

the bedroom, hear his rumbling, dark chuckle, and a hungering ache preys on my body because I can't deny it: Drago has two monstrous cocks. I whimper when they throb against my mound, stirring my heat all the more.

“How do you feel?” he asks, voice deeper and grittier than ever.

I scrunch my brows, only then realizing how well I do feel. Suspicious, I curve my fingers below the water, slide them over my mound, and plunge them into my folds, awed when I discover no pain or swollenness.

“The water is infused with moon-flowers—ones we've smuggled in from the capital,” he explains.

“I didn't know others could pass through the Veil to smuggle anything.”

He gives me a toothy grin. “Of course, the Borderlands' brothers don't wish you to know of this. Now, enough of your confounding curiosity. I fully intend to introduce you to every inch of two friends who are closest to me. But only after I have you filthy wet and screaming my name like the dirty good girl I know you want to be for me.”

My toes don't get the chance to curl. I lurch from Drago snatching me from the water as if I weigh little more than the droplets trickling off me. Before I hardly have a chance to blink, he has my back to the nearest column, my legs dangling over his paramount shoulders, and his muzzle sinking toward my center. I gulp, nails curving onto his arms as he explores my feminine heat. Thanks to his dominating strength, the Dragon can bear me with one hand on my buttocks while the other lowers to my folds, where he carefully and tenderly parts them with his claws.

“Oh!” I mewl when that claw trips against my clit.

“You make the prettiest sounds, little Tessie. Do you know that human females release juices that are so tempting and luscious to my dragon kind?” he muses, breathing a deep and sharp draught, groaning from the action. I lift my hips, desiring more as he torments me by rubbing his thumb across

my pubic lips and teasing my wanton slit. “It’s why our history is marked with carrying off young women, be they maids, wives, or widows. It just so happens they were driven mad when we returned them—such mad cravings, they would throw themselves off clifftops, crying for their dragon lovers.”

My body thrums for him, my clit pulsing like a flower bursting. But then, Drago raises his head and lashes his tongue across my breast. “Sweet, burning gods!” I cry as he traces that tongue around the areola and licks the erect bud over and over. His tongue is long, rough, and thick, and I moan from the force of it pushing the nipple back and forth. So hot and wet! He practically flagellates it with his whip of a tongue until it’s pink and sore before moving to torture the other. By the time he lowers his tongue to slide across my stomach, I’m a mess of heightened nerves, bucking my hips toward his jaws.

“Now, I will taste, Tessie...” he warns me before that tongue swipes at my folds.

“Ohfuckohfuck!” I heave frenzied breaths from his vicious tongue working my heat.

“Good girl,” he purrs his approval, and I feel the vibration so deep, my inner muscles spasm, and my heart skips a beat. “Ride my tongue, sweet pet, and take your pleasure as I take mine. You taste so fucking good, sweet one. You taste like every dark and sinful thought I’ve ever had. And I am going to do such wicked, filthy things to you, my good girl.”

His words set my skin on fire. I roll my hips and ride his tongue as he flattens it against my distended nub. In the blink of an eye, he stabs the tongue through my slit, and I cry out from the action. It’s so thick, it stretches my walls, but it’s so slick and flexible as it lashes my inner flesh. His upper muzzle presses to my stomach as he digs in, so much, I feel his teeth skirting my lower mound while the roof of his mouth nudges my burning clit. My arousal grows from his tongue twisting inside me, and once he curves that tongue up in a sudden stab, I scream.

“Please, don’t stop, oh, bloody, blazing gods, yes! I’m coming, I’m coming!” I throw my head back as my whole

body tightens, my core muscles suck his tongue, and the ecstasy ignites a trail of blazing lightning through my body. I close my eyes from the release of wave after wave of pleasure tremors inside me. I'm flying. No, erupting into a shower of sparks. He tongue-fucks me through constellations of pure bliss until I collapse against the column in a boneless mess. Flushed and liquefied, my limbs shake from the remnants of the orgasm. My pussy pulses with hot, little breaths.

Drago eases his tongue from my center, gives me another rough lash—hard enough to have me moaning and lurching from how sensitive I am. When that tongue probes my lips, I gasp, throwing my eyes open wide. He seizes the moment of my gasp and dives inside my mouth. His jaws could devour my head, and his tongue overwhelms me. Something so erotic about him giving me the taste of my drenched cream.

“How does she taste?” a new voice invades the bathhouse, and I jump, startled by the Fae's presence.

Drago doesn't seem surprised. In fact, he chuckles and turns to Mayce, gesturing him over. “See for yourself.”

I shudder. *What?*



“I’D RATHER PLAY WITH THE  
MONSTERS THAN KILL THEM.”

## QUINTESSA

IN NOTHING MORE THAN HIS BREECHES, THE FAE IS TALL AND bare-chested, his skin shimmering like marble in the torchlight. My skin sizzles from his unparalleled beauty, and I'm rendered speechless as he approaches—gait so feline and graceful, I'd imagine he's being carried upon clouds of pixies. Liquid fire courses through my veins. My heartbeat spirals the closer he gets to me. Those alluring eyes of molten brown, like scorched earth, and rich hazel when they catch the light, hypnotize me, and I wonder what it would feel like to fall under a Fae's magic. If I'm getting a small taste now.

My knees quiver when Mayce smiles and tucks a few tendrils of my soaked hair behind my ear before he leans in to kiss me. Heat answers. Simmers my blood. So, I bend beneath his lips, practically fawning because he kisses so differently from Drago. No, Mayce is masterful. He hypnotizes me with his lips, traces the seam with his tongue. Slow and seductive, he opens my mouth, plunders the inside with his tongue, licking and tasting, teeth nipping, until I'm writhing and aching for him. I moan into his mouth, on the edge of a sob from the fresh arousal he stokes. It drips down the side of my thigh, mixed with the Dragon's saliva.

Without another word, the Fae rubs his fingers along my soaked folds, and I tip my head back against the column from the burning sensation.

“So fresh. So responsive,” Mayce acknowledges, simpering as he sinks his fingers toward my slit and brushes his lips across the curve of my throat.



“Deprived without touch since her birth, it’s little wonder,” declares Drago, and I clamp my eyes shut when he peels back my pubic lips and says, “Mmm, feast your eyes on all that lovely honey. The first warm cunt we’ve had in centuries.”

“I prefer quim,” remarks Mayce, a glint in his eye as he studies my expression.

I lower my brows, confused by their words. Had it truly been so long? I don’t get to wonder long when the Fae king lifts a jeweled, metallic object toward Drago—a feral smile on sultry lips with lethal teeth. “I came prepared.”

I suck a deep breath, aware of the object and its purpose: cone shape, tapered end, and flat, jeweled base.

“As always, my crafty Fae,” compliments the other King.

When the Dragon unleashes that half-purr and half-growl, it leaves me hungry and needy again. With my legs dangling mercilessly over Drago’s shoulders, I acknowledge how exposed my most intimate parts are, including my ass, where Mayce parts the cheeks, collects the cream from my center to rub it along the tight ring. I brace myself, tensing as he lowers the object into that forbidden hole.

“Relax, my good, little Tessie. Open for him. Open for Mayce now. Be my good girl,” he encourages me, licking the side of my neck with the Fae pumping his fingers through the taut hole before dipping the object along the surrounding fluids.

“Mmm...” Tears squeeze from my eyes as I do my best to relax. No simple feat with my back pressing to the hard ash of the column and my legs still quivering on Drago’s shoulders. Once Mayce slides the object inside, I whimper from the stinging pain of it stretching that ring open. I clench my thighs, pumping my hips up and down, wishing I could push out the object.

A sudden heat radiates inside me, and I understand it’s from Mayce’s tongue flicking my clitoris, sucking upon my folds, and circling my wet slit. Erotic pressure forms in my belly, igniting my arousal, and I’m clenching hard around the

object, knowing it's responsible for this delirious sensation building within me.

“Does that feel good, Tessie?” Drago asks me and kneads my breast, thumbing my hard nipple. “Are you our pretty girl who likes having her ass filled? Tell me how it feels, sweetling.”

“Uhm...” I gulp and gaze down at the Fae, who flicks those warm earthen eyes upon mine, mesmerizing me. I nearly come from those orbs alone. “It's strange and new, and it hurts, but the burning, the pressure...oh fuck, I think I'm going to—”

I inhale the deepest and longest breath I've ever taken. The pressure inside me bursts. Electricity tears through me. Flames roar, and my insides convulse. A carnal screech I've never heard before flees my mouth as I hurl over the edge. Soaring in a blazing inferno, burning me up from the inside out. Unraveling me till I'm breathless. With a deep and dark chuckle, Drago lowers my legs from his shoulders, sliding them downward, but I can't possibly stand on my own.

And then, I realize it's not simply Mayce. Kyan and Merikh have entered the bathhouse, roaming their eyes across my naked figure. The vampire sheds his black trenchcoat, discarding it upon one of the benches. Kyan does the same with his jeans and t-shirt.

I stagger, and that's when I feel it, feel *them*. Turning, I choke on a shriek at the sight of the two dragon cocks, immense, ridged, scaled, and thick pointing a direct line for their target. For me.

“Don't be afraid,” coos Drago, and I turn my nose up at him with a frown.

“I'm not. Just...intrigued.” I creep my fingers toward those throbbing shafts, swollen with fresh-charged blood. They're large as clubs, black, and slightly curved at the end. Since Drago doesn't stop me, I close the distance between me and touch the crown of the right cock. The instant I do, all the scales flare, and I shriek, pulling back. Drago roars a laugh,

but Mayce seizes my wrist and moves my hand back to the cock.

“Now, now, Drago,” scolds Mayce while directing me back to the organs. “Don’t tease her.”

Out of the corner of my eye, Kyan stares at us from the southwest pool, his eyes curious and observant with his lips tugging into a smile. Merikh, on the other hand, keeps his back turned, cupping water, and wetting his dark hair. Regardless, it’s clear they are all quite comfortable with one another.

Bold, I take a step forward, close enough for the cocks to nearly rub my upper belly. And go so far as to clutch the head of one, but I can barely wrap my hand around the crown. Much less the girth. “I felt the scales inside me,” I say, mesmerized as the one throbs beneath my hand while the other twitches. Again, the scales flare, offering me a view of the large vein beneath them. When I sink my fingers beneath the scales, where the skin is like hot silk, the dragon king groans, lids lowering, eyes sultry and ravenous.

“Yes, I bear a single male organ when I’m in man form.” He puffs more smoke through his nostrils. “I may grow scales on that cock, but it’s nothing like my twin ones. They’re designed to stimulate the female’s reproductive system,” hints Drago with a wink.

My chest squeezes, and I flinch but don’t stop tracing the scales, the skin. “Does that mean I will...?” The thought of carrying a dragon baby inside my womb captivates me—an egg or half-dragon baby?—but not enough that I want it now.

“No, you will not get pregnant. But rest assured, sweetling, you will take both of me,” growls Drago before he swipes his tongue across each of my breasts, laving the nipples, and sending a surge of heat inside me. Before I may ask any more questions, he stabs a finger to the ledge of the gazebo inches to my left and barks, “Sit.”

I do. No protest. The flames in his emerald eyes reveal how much he’s burning inside, lusting for . Once I’m seated, Drago taps my knee, his eyes on my pussy. “Open.”

Breath quaking, I do as I'm told, spreading my legs to show him my cunt. But all I see are those two cocks, and I can't fathom how they'll both fit, but I lick my lips, eager to try. Drago's teeth show when he smiles.

"Now, curve your knees. And set your feet upon the ledge. Your left foot to the left column, and your right to the other."

It's uncomfortable, especially with my legs still shaky from the orgasms he and Mayce gave me. And the plug applies even more pressure in my backside. It forces my legs so wide, it's a painful stretch with my hips thrusting forward. Balance precarious. But it gives him full, uninhibited access to me. And I tremble at the thought of those cocks invading me, at how deep they will penetrate me in this position. I part my lips, wetting them, and tip my head back, so my hair skirts the marble below me.

My body thrums, so intense, I can imagine thousands of dragonfly wings fluttering across my skin, tantalizing every sense and nerve. Strong enough to pucker my nipples more. Strong enough for my inner muscles to clench, triggering my cunt to squelch.

"Look at you," Drago says with warm approval in his deep voice, and I moan from the claws of his hand scraping down my inner thigh, dragging across the raised flesh of my scars, following the sinuous curves and curls of my tattoos. "So pretty. So open. So willing. And your little bottom stretched around that jeweled plug. You're such a good girl. And you confound me. You bewilder us."

"What are you hiding, Quintessa?" Mayce's velvety voice so close to my ear prickles the hair on the back of my neck.

I lean closer to him, my lips a breath above his, and I scent the smoke and soil drifting from him as I whisper, "Perhaps I'd rather play with the monsters than kill them. Master Mayce." I bravely kiss his cheek.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the sight of the vampire's eyes on me. Merikh's gaze isn't simply spine-chilling, nor bone-chilling. It freezes my very soul. Kyan's is the opposite. Unlike Mayce who warms me, or Drago who

ignites me, Kyan's serene blue eyes tranquilize me. Merikh looks at me like he's about to devour me.

When Drago wets the crowns of his cocks with my fluids, I jolt. But I realize it's not from his cocks a moment later. Awash with pain, my whole body protests, clenching and forcing a barrier to keep him out. A cold sweat attacks the back of my neck while a familiar but far more intense pain rattles my very heart.

It's the same pain I felt the night my father tried to exorcise Qora.

Qora.

Flinching, I shift on the ledge, moving my hips. The urgency sears itself into me until I'm nearly lurching. Qora is in trouble. Panicked breath leaves my throat in a frenzy of tattered gasps. Qora is in danger.

No matter how much my slit is hungry, greedy for those cocks and their challenge, I clench hard and sit up, disobeying the Kings, disobeying these gods, these monsters.

"I have to go..." I tell them, my voice coming in pants.

All four tense, rising to attention. Drago growls, leaning in while deepening those fathomless emerald eyes upon mine. "You have two choices before you, little Tessie. If you remain here and take my cocks like a good, sweet pet, we will reward you beyond your greatest rapture. But if you go, if you choose to leave now, for any reason, we will hunt you. We haven't had the pleasure of hunting our prey in quite a long time. And *when* we catch you, we will punish you. Do you understand?"

I understand, but it doesn't matter. The pain grows worse while he speaks. It claws thick, sharp thorns inside me, feels like Qora is being severed from me.

I want the monsters, but I love Qora. Even if she is more monstrous than they.

Drago chuckles richly as I leave the sanctum of the gazebo. Beneath the waves of pain, my skin still tingles from my desire, but I rush for the clothes forsaken on that bench. Merikh flares his nostrils, his jaw setting as rigid as iron when

I clutch his trench coat. But I don't care about incurring the vampire's wrath. It's the quickest and largest piece of clothing that will cover me.

I need to get to Qora.

So, I throw on the coat and hurry out of the bathhouse with the sound of Drago's hearty laughter barreling through the house and reverberating into my chest to shake my very heart.



“WHAT HAVE WE HERE?” THE  
MONSTER CROONS...



## QUINTESSA

TEARING THROUGH THE CASTLE GARDENS, WHICH ARE NOTHING but brambles and twisted bone sculptures, not to mention corpses, I scream for the hundredth time, “Qora!” My voice leaves in a brittle rasp as I swing my head in all directions. I’ve never done well at slowing down and processing, at thinking through things, but I try harder than ever. Closing my eyes, I lean into that echo of pain in my mind. It grows from needles to spikes to bore into my blood, but it’s the savage screech in the distance that strikes fear into my heart. Too many times, I have heard Qora screech. More in self-loathing or exasperation because she couldn’t bring herself to kill me. This screech is different. It’s horror and darkness, pain and fear.

I break into a run toward the gap between the dragon skeletons fused into stone foundations. Their snouts form an arch, reminding me of a gate. I freeze mid-step in realization. They are a marker. And signify the ends of the castle grounds. Before me lies that plague of forests with gnarled trees fracturing the sky with their claw-like branches. My throat burns when I remember what Drago said about the gods hunting me. Even now, I swear I feel their hot breath licking my spine, promising punishment, but when I turn, no presences stalk the gardens behind me.

As soon as another screech echoes from those dark woods, I run past the gap and cross a narrow patch of ashy ground before plunging into the woods. A labyrinth of thin threadbare branches tangles all around me, trees so thick, they clot any sort of path. More ashes cover the ground beneath my feet.

Despite how tall the trees rise, their bodies and branches betray the marks of fire, of scorched or charred bark. Not one leaf grows upon a single branch. Cinders thicken the air, along with the scent of smoke, and I choke. Gathering the loose tunic, I tuck it around my face, relieving my wailing lungs.

“Qora,” I whisper in a desperate plea to no one in particular because no gods exist here but for monsters. A pale creature the size of a large dog skitters past me on all fours. Its movements remind me of a rat, but no fur covers its body. When it twists its head toward me, I bite back a shriek and stem the fear shooting up my spine. While the limbs are thin and bony, and the face is rat-like with razor-sharp teeth, the eyes staring back at me are undoubtedly human.

Everything is dry and brittle. No breeze stirs in the branches, but I faintly feel my eyes water, smoldering from the air, which grows hotter. The further from the castle I go, the fewer sensations I have. Except for inside my body. Nothing could compare to the hurt howling in my skull and threatening to collapse my chest.

The screeches trip over one another, and I drive myself forward, blindly attacking the branches. At one point, they stab so hard into Merikh’s jacket, I must shrug out of it and leave it behind. Pressure grows in my chest. Small, human-like creatures ramble past me, reminding me of rodent monsters.

When one screech changes into a shrill scream, a few hundred feet from me at the most, I practically dive through a snarl of thin branches that block my way. Careless over how the keen tips rake my skin. Old wounds have opened, but I ignore the blood trickling down my arms. I don’t feel that pain at all. Only Qora’s.

Another scream unleashes into the air, and it drives me harder through the entanglement until I finally break free and fall face-first into a shallow but sludgy pit of mud and ashes. Lifting my head and wiping the mud to clear my vision, a scream lodges in my throat. My chest lurches.

There is my Shadow. Back arched. Head thrown back. And her entire shade body convulsing from the figure attacking her.

Another monster, but the sight of this one is enough to curdle my blood from her spectral orbs suspended in their black sockets to her spindly arms and bone hands that end not in fingers but long, thin claws like tree branches. Her skin is pale and translucent like a fish. With her jaw detached and mouth open to show razor-sharp teeth as she unleashes a constant sound like a deep groan, she doesn't seem aware of me. The sound reminds me of the banshee screams in the Wailing Woods—but in reverse. Regardless, I'm scrambling to my feet because whatever power this creature wields, it's torturing Qora. Her shadow-vym grows dim as if this monster is sucking it right from Qora. That deep groan roars in my eardrums, deafening as a war horn.

The ash and mud hush my footsteps until I'm close enough to lunge for the monster, knocking her off balance, but not to the ground.

“Run, you mad, little fool!” cries Qora as I spring in front of her, but the monster doesn't wait to observe me. She leaps for me. Her claws lash at my clothes, my face, scrawling fine lines. I feel no pain, but my heartbeat pounds violently in my chest. But the moment one drop of blood falls onto the creature, a screech splits the air, blaring in my ears, and ricocheting off the surrounding trees.

Qora drifts toward me, her arms open and desperate, struggling to extend her shadow-vym. It barely touches the creature that shoves me up against a nearby tree. So hard, the bark must chafe my skin. Pinned beneath the weight of her body, I can't move, stunned by how strong she is. Her long black hair pricks my cheeks, and she detaches her jaw. Mouth open wide. Two long, thin tentacles protrude from each side of her mouth, lodged in the cheeks. I cringe as they curl upward and peck at my skin as if she's scenting me.

“What have we here?” the monster croons, and shock rips through me. I expected a voice as screechy as the shadow-fliers of the Waste. Instead, hers is rich, smooth, and sultry.

I stiffen as she drags her long claws down the side of my face. Those tentacles don't stop pecking. Too terrified to speak, caught in the web of those iridescent orbs, I chew on

my inner cheek and wince when those claws roam along my throat, pausing at my pulse. That's when I realize Qora is gone.

“Ooooh, a human. But not quite, are we right?” I can't tell if she wants me to respond, but I shiver as those claws near my heart. “Warm blood, but some cold. And...ooooh! Not Waste-born. Not Waste-. But she—ah!” She recoils with a screech, her upper lip pulled back in a snarl to reveal sharp incisors that chill the blood in my veins. “Binder!”

“A blood binder,” I manage to choke out, lowering my brows in confusion over my common gift. I swing my head all around but still see no trace of Qora.

The tentacles wave violently as the monster paces in the mud, seeming to argue with some invisible being, whether in her head or a presence unknown to me. “Core and light. Womb and death. Fire and earth and blood and air. Breath and bones. Breath!” shrieks the creature, spinning around with her back to me.

I slowly tiptoe past the tree, wondering if I can make it through that small gap in the trees a hundred feet away. The snarl of brambles is closer, but I can't afford the delay. With those spindly, skeletal limbs, there is no way that monster can follow me.

She babbles on as I step past the tree, mindful of any twigs—but thankful for the ash beneath my feet, thankful no leaves crunch below my soles. “Confessor and cure. Too strong, too sweet, could not eat it all. Where the fuck is it?” Another snarl, and I freeze, whipping my head up, but she's still pacing. Another screech, a deep groan followed by a string of curses.

About ten feet from her now.

“Birth and dawn. And light! Flames and roots and wind and veins. Heart and touch. Touch and tears. Shadow and breath. And light, it burns!”

She whips her whole body around in one sleek movement. I turn and flee, tearing into a run. She's much quicker on those rickety limbs than I believed. Before I make it three steps,

those claws tear at my back, ripping through the tunic and into flesh. No pain but an echo of pressure. With enough of a grip on the tunic, the monster hauls me back, throws me to the ground, and climbs on top of me, snarling and growling. Fear surges up my spine as those tentacles stab at my face, and she picks up a large rock. Those spectral orbs narrow in clear intent.

“Suck the Shadow. Break the girl. Come eve Hollow. Save our world!”

One screech. My eyes widen. She brings the rock down. I raise my arms to cover my face.

The blow doesn't come. Her body falls off me. And lands ten feet away in a ditch of ash. A shocked gasp leaves my throat at the sight of the creature with its paws on her chest and its teeth digging into her hair, ripping strands right from their roots, leaving patches of her scalp bare. No bigger than a large cat, scrawny and cadaverous with its ribcage prodding through its flesh, sagging skin, and three bedraggled tails, it's hard to believe it's doing enough to have the she-monster screaming and thrashing. And then, the strike comes. She grabs what little fur she can from the cat-like creature and hurls it into the air. My heart catapults in my chest, and I gasp when its body knocks against a nearby boulder. I swear I hear something crack, and energy surges through me, bursting desperation into my nerves. I could care less that it delays me. I scramble to the little cat, snatch its wounded body, and fly as fast as my feet will carry me.

When I look down, I feel my lips tug into a smile. It's not a cat. It's a fox.

The monster snarls behind me. Too close! I will my legs to run faster even as I hold the wasted fox tight in my arms. Her hot breath and black hair are so near, they tickle the back of my neck. Wait, how is that possib—

I crash through a clearing and right into a hard wall of slabbed muscle. Breath stolen, stars and sparks consuming my vision, I whirl and fall. Drago's familiar arms catch me, explaining my sudden senses. Now, I'm more than thankful for

them hunting me. The other three's faces blur as my vision returns to normal. And there is Qora drifting nearby, and I understand she must have left to find them, to bring them here.

Warmth engulfs my chest as Drago sweeps me into his arms, and I squeeze the fox tighter as he lunges and roars at the monster pursuing me. "Back the fuck off!"



TONIGHT, WE WILL PUNISH  
HER.



## DRAGO

CONFOUND IT ALL! OUT OF ALL THE MONSTERS IN THE fucking Ash Forests, my little brat has to run into the bane of our existence. Make that second bane.

“Back off, Hag!” I reiterate while my brothers form a wall around Tessie. I’m taller and larger than all of them, so I leer down at the wretch, blood bludgeoning my eardrums. Scales rise to the surface, and I fear my half-dragon will unleash itself and betray recent events. Though Kronos knows we gain a leftover sample of power after Hollows Night, he knows I would never turn half-dragon and expend so much of my vitality protecting a mere gray waif.

Tessie shivers in my arms as the Hag curls a rakish claw at us and croons, “The forest belongs to me. And all within it. Finders keepers, Dragomir.”

“And now, she has found her way into my arms and into my territory.” I glance down at Tessie, furrowing my brows and pretending like I don’t know her, hoping the Hag doesn’t pick up on my rushed breath, the rabid beating of my heart. I’ve never had this much pain in my chest when I look at a girl, undead, ghost, half, or whole. “And if you think I’ll pass up the opportunity to fuck a warm blood, then you are thoughtless *and* heartless,” I retort, digging in the blade and reveling in her shrill shriek, those tentacles flapping at her cheeks. Because we know damn well who has her heart and why.

At least, Tessie seems to pick up on my tactic. She may be an impulsive slip of a thing and as wild as a little monster, but

she's no fool. Her jaw drops, and she hisses a deep breath when I capture a few strands of her hair and tuck them behind her ear. Given how torn the tunic is, it bares one small breast to the air, and heat surges into my cock from the sight of that dusky rose nipple puckering from my voice.

"You should keep a better leash on your pets, Dragon," the Hag advises, slumping her shoulders and heaving a wanton moan. "They have a tendency to bolt. Especially from you."

"I am betting this one will enjoy the bone I give her." I wink and pinch the tight, little bud on Tessie's chest. She gasps, covering her mouth with one hand before clutching the fox tighter to shield herself. My brothers chuckle in return as I grin. "Yes..." I eye Tessie again and pat her head. "I'm certain she will want to suck upon it again and again."

The Hag snarls, crouches once, but she knows she cannot cross the border of the Ash woods. It's a stroke of fortune that my little strumpet managed to cross into the clearing. Otherwise, we may have had to battle the Hag. And we lost the last time, and she loved sending us back to the castle with our tails between our legs and licking our wounds.

Almost as soon as she does, I click my teeth and look down at Tessie, who fumbles with the torn tunic, before finally giving up and letting it hang. Instead, she clutches the fox closer, and I wrinkle my nose at the scrawny mongrel shivering in her arms and burying its snout in her arm. More skin and bones than anything, it probably won't last the night, but she cradles it like a precious bundle.

I pat the back of her head, stroking those gray strands. "You were a naughty girl to run from us, my little strumpet," I scold her, paying heed to her body's responses, how the hairs on her arms prickle but how she tucks her chin toward her shoulder, eyeing me from the side. At least her wounds seem shallow, though the blood trickling upon her curling tattoos smells sweet as a weeping rose. Stubborn, too, I consider the only flower that grows in the Waste.

As noted, she thrusts up her chin, her eyes heated. "I won't apologize. I found Qora. She's safe. And now, he is, too..."

she gestures to the fox, which makes a sound halfway between a warble and a growl as she lifts the creature. Enough for me and my brothers to get a good look at its *multiple* tails.

“Damnation!” thunders Mayce with a deep groan while Kyan kneads his eyes. Merikh remains stony as always, though I read the glare in his eyes.

“What?” Tessie wonders, whipping her head around, scanning the four of us.

“That’s a rook fox. They’re tricksters, bad omens, little one. You can’t keep him. I won’t have you bringing that hoodwinker back to the castle,” I warn her, taking her elbow and leading her to a different gate than the one she departed from.

“Oh, burning balls!” she huffs and rolls her eyes, rocking the fox. “He’s a harmless, little runt. Barely bigger than a baby. Look! He’s even smiling at me.” She holds the fox up, her hands under its shoulders, her eyes shimmering with pride as she shows him off.

With his mouth twisted in disgust, Mayce points out, “Its lips are stuck to its teeth.”

Tesse strokes her nails along the fox’s back, holding him to her chest again. “His eyes are so pretty.”

“Are they supposed to look like urine?” wonders Kyan, falling into stride on the other side of her as he observes the fox.

When she curves her fingers beneath the snout, the creature leans into her hand, welcoming her touch. Damn it all! She’s enamored with the hideous, little beast, caressing its mangy patches of fur on its skinny, bald body.

Just as I prepare to escort her into the west walkway through the garden and to the servant’s quarters, I cup her shoulders and squeeze, insistent and admonishing, “We are not about to allow a rook fox, of all things, into our castle. It’s out of the question. Now, do you prefer to release the flea-bitten beast back into the woods from whence it came, or should I give it a merciful death?”

Fuck me! All the blood drains from her face, and she steps back and holds the ghastly animal tighter. I advance toward her, my shadow looming, and growl the command, “Let the little bastard go, Quintessa.”

She scratches its shriveled ears, cups the side of its face, and shakes her head, tucking her chin close to her chest. “*No.*”

Infuriated by her audacity and defiance, Merikh crosses the distance to her, bloodthirst scrawling in his eyes as he snarls, “The King gave you a command, little dove. Do not forget the generosity you have been granted in this land of rot and death. You should be on your knees begging for forgiveness and sucking all our cocks for your right to breathe the same air as the gods before you.”

I almost find it amusing when she goes so far as to stick her nose up in the air and argue with him, “If you’re all big, dangerous gods, then I’m sure you’re not threatened by a bony little fox like him.” She presses her lips to the fox’s head, her eyes burning against Merikh’s. “What are you so afraid of?”

Merikh balls his hands into fists, his neck muscles tensing worse than they were before. No, he wasn’t expecting her to be so shrewd, or to bait him in such a way. Thankfully, Mayce steps toward her with his common sense and rationality.

“In the Waste, certain forces exist that do not in your world, Quintessa. We cannot take the risk of such danger entering our domain.”

“First, it was Qora. Now, it’s Jinx. How long before you decide to throw me out?” she challenges, her eyes snapping to the woods.

Damn it all to hell, she’s already named the mangy thing. Muscles hardening from that challenge and how her eyes shift back to the forest, I advance toward her and seize her arm, pouring as much menace and intimidation into my eyes as possible. It’s laughable how she struggles, how she wriggles, craning her neck to the woods while she nearly squeezes the life out of the feral creature with her other arm.

“I’ll run again,” she warns, pressing her lips tight, though her watery eyes show her fear. “I’d rather take my chances in the woods with them.” She nods to the fox and Qora.

“You should let her keep the fox,” interjects the smoky, rich voice. I and all my brothers snap our gazes at Qora. She drifts from side to side, aimless, seeming dismissive of the situation. Tessie, on the other hand, looks hopeful. And nods frantically in agreement.

“We will not be commanded by a mere gray slip of a whore,” counters Merikh, locking his jaw, eyes hardened and lethal upon Quintessa.

She stabs out her chin at him and tries to tug out of my grip, getting nowhere. “Call me a whore all you like. Call me anything, but let me keep the fox. He saved me. And he needs me.”

“No.” I solidify and jerk my head to Kyan and Mayce. “Mayce, take her other arm. Kyan, grab the fox. Best to give it a quick and painless death now.”

“Nooooo!” she protests, those wild tears unleashed and rippling down her cheeks. I’ll look forward to those when I fuck her later, and she’ll forgive me while screaming my name on my dragon cocks.

As soon as Kyan wrangles the fox out of her arms, Tessie freezes. While I haven’t relinquished my grip, holding her steady as Mayce does, I do cock my head to the side, curious at her expression. She’s like an animal cornered by a predator. Her eyes wide, limbs shuddering but not in fear. No, she’s expressionless. By now, her struggles have caused the tunic to fall lower, clumping at her tiny waist. Those little tits heave, but no breath escapes her throat. Is she actually holding her fucking breath? Redness, raw and hot and mad, rushes into her cheeks.

Qora sighs next to us. “Don’t say I tried to warn you.”

“What the devil?” I bellow and twist her arm, but Tessie doesn’t react whatsoever.

“Pretty close,” Qora adds and begins to drift back toward the gardens.

“Tessie!” I try to summon her, but there’s nothing. Same hollow, unstarling eyes. She doesn’t even respond when I brush my knuckles across both of her tits. And still, no fucking breath! Her cheeks burn as red as flames.

“If she truly wants to suffocate, I’ll give her something she can choke on,” snarls Merikh, marching toward her, but I shove him back.

In that split second with my gaze turned, the blood-curdling scream Tessie unleashes is shrill and ear-splitting enough to echo through the entire damned forest. Blaring enough to reach the Ash Village even from this distance. And it doesn’t fucking stop. Her screams chill the blood in my veins. And every time I try to dissuade her, her screams grow worse. That’s when I notice countless larger predators emerging from the woods, twisted, animalistic faces leering, tongues whetted in hunger, their ears pricked, summoned by Tessie’s ongoing scream.

“Make it stop!” Mayce demands, gnashing his teeth and covering his sensitive Fae ears.

“She’ll summon every monster in the Waste at this rate!” Kyan adds, rushing backward as more monsters close in. Fox still in his hands, shuddering even more from the clamor and his patches of fur sticking up from the greater predators encroaching.

“She won’t stop,” Qora raises her voice over the sound of Tessie’s screams before gesturing to the animal. “Is it really worth it?”

Dumbfounded, I stare at Tessie, whose lungs never seem to tire, whose face grows more flushed from her stubborn wrath. By far, the worst tantrum and case of whining I have ever encountered!

“Give her the fox, Drago! Give her the mother-fucking fox!” screeches Mayce, falling to his knees as scores of

creatures rush out of the woods, growling, eager tongues salivating at the thought of fresh meat.

“Fine!” I roar. Anything to shut her up! I snap my fingers at Kyan, grip the little devil by the scruff, and shove it into her arms.

Immediately, she stops. She smiles. Fucking grins at me. Then cuddles her cheek onto its head. Mayce rises. Without wasting another moment, I grip Tessie by the waist, haul her and the damn fox into my arms, and return to the castle with my brothers trailing us.

Her eyes and smile are sweeter than ever when she pats the fox and then rubs my arm. “Good dragon, such a nice dragon, isn’t he, Jinxy?”

Her eyes hold such tenderness, such affection for the mongrel, it’s difficult to resist her sweet spirit. Not to mention her fortitude at having survived a brush with the Hag. More than a brush, considering the state of her wounds from the Hag’s claws. Regardless, I bristle and steel my spine, locking my jaw in resolve. My brothers and I watch her fill the clawfoot tub in the bedroom I’ve set aside for her with a generous amount of bubbles and warm water to scrub the fox. Utterly careless over her lack of dress, the blood and mud caking her body. It doesn’t matter how adorable she looks with laughing as the fox struggles and splashes her, her little tits jiggling from those giggles. She still ran from us. Put herself in danger. Not to mention that savage tantrum.

I chuckle internally as I linger to watch her slip on the wet floor with the fox scrambling out of the tub, looking far more like a drowned rat. She laughs as it whirls, then pounces on her front. She holds it to her bare chest, cuddling it. Fuck... She was born of fire and ice, blooms and thorns, silver and blood. Perhaps she is more monstrous than all of us.

No, I won’t force her to give up the beast, as ill-advised as it is to keep it. But we will not allow her behavior to go unanswered. More than ever, she must understand she belongs to us. We own her. Every fucking part. She cannot run. She

cannot escape. Moreover, she must accept us as we are.  
Tonight, we will punish her.

And she will meet the monsters all fear.





PUNISHMENTS LIKE THIS ARE  
SIGNIFICANT.

## QUINTESSA

“AT EASE, SHADOW. I SWEAR TO YOU, WE WILL RETURN HER unharmed. Well, mostly. Nothing she will not ultimately desire, I assure you.” Drago’s lowered voice stirs me from my subconscious stupor.

My first instincts are to scramble my hand toward the other side of the bed, relieved when I find the little fox curled up next to my pillow. After I’d bathed him and wrapped a little bow around his neck, which he’d promptly scratched off, Drago had snatched me up by the waist and returned me to the bathhouse. No playing ensued. All business, he’d scrubbed all the mud and ash from my body and hair, washed me down with a generous amount of foamy soap as well as my hair, and then dried me off before massaging a bittersweet, perfumed oil onto my body. Even now, my skin still tingles from its effects, my insides heated and weeping with need.

Too exhausted from the day’s events, I can’t put up any battle when a hand bearing a damp cloth presses to my nose. In no time, blackness engulfs my vision, and my thoughts swirl like a children’s carousel until I collapse, passing out.

I wake to a wet, pleasurable, and tingly heat. And pressure in my buttocks. When I try to move, I discover restraints on my wrists, on my ankles—ankles that have been spread wide into a V-position with my knees bent. Utterly naked. My sensitive pussy is exposed and free to whatever ministrations they desire.

Something has been stuffed into my mouth to prevent me from screaming. I clench my teeth around it. Opening my eyes

to nothing but darkness and understanding I've been gagged and blindfolded, I begin to panic. Especially with that pressure in my ass. Horror curdles my blood. Lungs heaving from frenzied breath and pulse tearing away like a wild herd, I struggle with whatever restrains me. My whole body swings. Oh, savage mercies, they've suspended me in some sort of sling! Panic contrasts with the extreme turn-on from my nudity, from that hot pressure in my ass. And the tightness around my breasts which feel higher and heavier from a sturdy but soft harness. It even binds to my pelvis and the V of my thighs to plump my pussy. Feet and ankles in stirrups, hands and wrists coupled above my head. All of me is on display.

Adrenaline lights up all my nerves. Are they watching me now? My cunt overheats at the thought, wetting itself more. I feel weightless as if I'm hovering in midair. It's nothing like my father locking me in the root cellar or the storage closet. In extreme times, he would close me inside the hope chest, where I learned to loathe the scent of mothballs and tight spaces. This. Is. *Not*. That.

Warm breath curls across the nape of my neck. I sharpen my breath, gasp from the fingers removing my blindfold as the pressure behind me increases, softens, then deepens and increases again. That's when I understand one of them is pushing something into my anal ring. Like Mayce did before. I wonder if it's another butt plug. It stimulates the hypersensitive nerves until tiny pulses ripple through my bottom. My pussy automatically clasps. And makes a humiliating wet sound. Oh! I choke on a moan.

Once the blindfold slides off, I blink, meeting Drago's glittering emerald jeweled orbs. I lower my head. Eyes widening. The position they've put me in gives me an uninhibited view of my body, of my tits plumped up from the harness and ropes upon my body. And Mayce simpers on my left while pushing a cone-shaped plug, larger than the last, in and out of my asshole. Slick from oil. I open my mouth in a silent sob from the pressure that is both painful and delirious. My nipples have already pebbled, and my pussy clenches, making a squelching noise that I've never heard before.

“Look at that pink, little pussy glistening and spread before us. Do you know how pretty you are when you’re helpless, hot, and needy, my sweet pet?” coos Drago, striding forward and sweeping his hand to cup my chin. I breathe a deep sigh of relief when he removes the ball gag. “I asked you a question,” he reiterates with a feral tone. I startle when he strikes me between my thighs, spanking my sensitive nether regions and pulling a groan from deep in my chest.

“I—I don’t know,” I rasp and swing my head around, trying to focus beyond that insane pressure building within me. My body trembles, and I lick my lips and rasp, “Where am I?” I look around, finding nothing but cold, stone walls and metal chains rocking against one another. Once I turn back to Drago, at the intensity of his menacing eyes and the eruption of scales riddled upon his skin, I bow my head and correct myself, “Please, Master Drago.”

Drago nods his approval, places his hands behind his back, and paces before me. “One could state it’s a torture chamber. But I prefer to call it *punishment*.”

I shiver down to my marrow. And yet, predatory heat nurses my insides, and I clench my cunt again. Punishments like this are *significant*. They dictate a level of ownership, of possession, of wanting. Oh, sweet, burning gods! Drago wants me. Perhaps, all of them want me. Mayce drags a finger down my cheek, spreading goosebumps across my skin and a chill up my spine. And Kyan stands behind me, caressing my aching bottom while the Fae fucks it with the plug, moving with such pornographic slowness, I may implode.

The only one not in the iron room is Merikh.

“You were a bad girl for running from us, Quintessa,” the Dragon King chastises me with my full name. He clicks his teeth, and I lower my head, my cheeks and breasts suffused with a fresh blush. “Are you going to be a good girl tonight and accept your punishment?”

“Please, Master Drago, you cannot blame me for—”

I don’t even have time to blink. The riding crop snaps against my pussy flesh. My body jolts from the sting to my

swollen lips. My breasts jiggle.

“You knew you would be punished, little thing. This discipline is necessary to ensure you do not run from us again. In the future, you must understand other options exist.”

Tears squeeze from my eyes, and I clench my anal muscles around the tight object. A powerful hand strikes my ass. I draw a hissing breath from the burn. Too distracted by my scorched ass, I am not prepared for the pain shooting into my nipple from the swing of Drago’s flogger. I shriek as he strikes the other tit, leaving reddened marks. The tips tighten, and I can’t believe the arousal rippling a wave to compete with the pain. Endorphins, the kind I’ve been deprived of my whole life, overflow within me, setting my nerves, my blood, my heart... everything on fire. The contrast between pain and pleasure is extreme, but I am learning quickly how much they overlap, how much they unite to create similar sensations. So, with every strike of that flogger, I rock my body, stabbing my hips high, trying to will the leather end to dip into my pussy. I rub my clit against it.

“Dirty girl enjoying her punishment far too much,” Drago sighs and shakes his head. “I should have known.”

“Merikh did,” Mayce adds in a knowing voice, silky and seductive.

I quiver when he presses his lips to my left breast and kisses the soft mound. He stabs the hard stone of my puckered nipple with his tongue, then opens his warm, wet mouth upon it, suckling, soothing the burn. Between him, the plug in my ass, and the surge of chemicals from the crop-flogging, my insides convulse. Heat pulses through me, bursting up my spine to consume every sense, and I’m tumbling. Soaring over the edge. My clenching body, pants, and rolling hips give me away.

Drago promptly spanks my labia with the riding crop again, and I screech, balling my hands into fists. Too much, too much!

“Naughty girl coming without permission. We have our work cut out for us,” scolds Drago, rubbing the crop against

my belly, smearing my juices upon myself.

I lift my head, my eyes teary as I gaze up at him. “What work must I do, Drago?”

“For now, you exist to serve and obey while we own and protect you. It’s why this is necessary. Once you learn to trust in our power and protection instead of taking dangerous and impulsive risks, then you will be ready for a new role. Although, your training will never truly end. But you have one more punishment for this night. And if you submit like a good girl, you will be rewarded. Is that clear, my little slave?” he nudges the damp crop beneath my chin, raising my eyes to his face.

I gulp. Swallowing hard, I gaze at him and nod. “Yes, Master Drago.”

And weep when he kisses me.





I MUST OWN HER...

## DRAGO

I WILL NEVER TRULY CONSIDER HER A SLAVE. BUT THE RUSE IS necessary for now. With earlier events, this time of testing is vital to understanding if she is aligned with the Hag, with the god-eater who cursed us. Above all, I will keep her close. Possess her. Protect her. To do all this, I must own her, and she must fear and respect us, and most of all, me.

Once she surrenders to this punishment, my brothers will prepare her for me. After I fuck her, I will take responsibility for her care and healing. For the next hour, we take Tessie to the realms of pain and pleasure extremes. I love watching my partner fucking her tight, little asshole, so that tiny ring of puckered skin turns white the more Mayce thrusts in the plug. I love hearing her little whimpers and mewls and gasping breaths and protesting moans whenever we deny her climax. I lick the sweat from her clenching body and taste the wetness from her hot, drippy pussy.

I stimulate her front, flogging her pretty tits, her stomach, and her thighs until she's covered in pink stripes. And once she's screaming for release, I grin and plunge the crop handle into her needy pussy. She throws her head back, screeches, and clenches around the handle with all her strength, rocking her body, desperate for friction, which I give. She must be fully relaxed for the end of her punishment.

Between Mayce and I fucking her with the instruments and Kyan soothing her swollen and throbbing breasts, suckling her rosy nipples, she comes again and again, crying out her back-

to-back orgasms. I log the amount, calling upon them to pause once she climaxes for the thirtieth time. Ten for each of us.

“It’s time,” I tell Mayce soberly, and my partner nods and kisses the side of Tessie’s neck.

“What time, Master Drago?” our curious girl wonders.

No sooner does she speak the words than the chamber door beyond the hall echoes from Merikh’s entrance. It thunders closed, reverberating like ominous drumbeats. Damned vampire and his dark theatrics. But he must be the one to do this, to complete the full circle of her punishment. To show her we are united. If she runs from one of us, she runs from all.

Merikh arrives within the interior chamber, tools in hand, dressed in a white collared shirt, black vest, and slate gray tie. All business, his eyes immediately center on Tessie. They narrow, and while I cannot ascertain his emotion from his ever-stony expression, he betrays himself with the telltale jerk in his breeches. He studies her for two moments too long, his eyes roaming across the ink patterns scrawled over her exquisite pale skin. Skin no less lovely for all its decorative scars and tattoos. Tessie tilts her head to the side, curious as ever, and smiles at the vampire. Unmoved, giving nothing away, Merikh seals his lips into a bone-hard seam and sets about preparing his tools.

Guilt throbs inside my chest when I consider how he would not require any instruments with his full power, but I fucked Tessie first. Bound to me. And such a bond dictates the power transference applies to one god at a time and no more. While this is a form of torture in and of itself for my brother, sadist that he is, he will never deny himself the opportunity to create pain. Or carve his mark into flesh.

Mayce and Kyan soothe the girl’s trembling body with a tender kiss upon each side of her neck, then transfer her to the siege d’amour chair. They secure her arms in the shackles above her head and place her ankles in stirrups, locking the ankle plates into place. She blushes as I turn the crank to spread her legs, so wide, it would be considered vulgar. But the burning stretch of her legs will detract from the pain to

come from her marking. And the plump flesh of her inner thigh is one of few unmarked locations—reserved for Kyan’s mark since we’ve all chosen various locations. Even her lovely little ass hangs over the edge of the padded chair, giving me an erotic view of the plug still embedded in her forbidden hole.

Of course, she recognizes what Merikh is about to do. Nor does she protest. Instead, she takes deep breaths, steadying herself, and I commend her. With her lack of sensation in the past, I have to wonder how much pain she will receive today. The color drains from her face as Merikh undoes the buttons on his sleeves and rolls them up to his elbows, revealing the curving ink lines tattooed over his lean sinew. Next, he removes his vest and the buttons and collar of his shirt, parting the shirt midway down his chest. More ink curls and spirals the flesh. One reason he hasn’t cared for Tessie since Merikh doesn’t like to be upstaged, but once he learned of her past, of her inability to feel, he’s beyond eager to give the girl her first true marking. For the vampire, the act may as well be a drug to him, something we gods only get when we steal Kronos’ leftovers during his rare visits.

Footsteps silent, the vampire king advances toward Tessie. She clenches once in tensioned fear. The muscles are developed in her calves, subtle but there regardless. During her time with us, I will build up her strength and her undernourished body, which makes me long to sink my dragon teeth into her supercilious sire.

Before Merikh begins, Kyan places a leather strip within Tessie’s mouth to protect her teeth, presses a cold cloth to her heated brow, then touches his lips to hers in a breeze-light touch. I warn him with a low growl to tread carefully and acknowledge the surprise in his eyes. After all, it’s not the first time we have brought lovers here for punishment. But it is the first time this odd possessiveness rears up within me—born of fire and fury and a deep-seated need to protect her.

It takes all my reserve not to act once Merikh touches the needle to the fleshy side of her breast and Tessie screeches through the leather, biting down hard. She clenches all the muscles in her body, but the vampire grins, savoring her pain

and continuing, unhindered. One stipulation of mine was the marks remain small enough to prevent any extreme pain and to avoid detection. Merikh carves his mark first into her flesh: an upside-down triangle, though he adds his personal touch of a blood droplet in the center. Nods his approval at the mark gracing the porcelain skin on the side of her breast. I chuckle darkly to myself because his fingers flex at his side. A tit man himself, however small Tessie's may be, Merikh resists the urge to touch her. Her tear-stricken gaze follows him, but her spine arching and nipples pebbling are the most evidence of her longing.

Part of me wishes to roast the bloodsucker for his willfulness in denying her, but we learned long ago to deal with Merikh's sadism. No amount of persuasion, support, pressure, or even battle will change him. She is already learning a dynamic to coexist with the vampire king—a beautiful one at that.

I lock my jaw, feeling a muscle bounce when he moves to the soft flesh of her mound. Tessie's eyes hurl open wide when Merikh smirks and drags the needle through the skin. She seizes, raking her nails so hard into her palms, she leaves crescent moon marks. But once Merikh has finished, he's left a flawless triangle of flames writ into the skin of her mound. Ancient alchemic symbols, not uncommon for markings but significant for us all the same. I grin to myself from Mayce's mark just beneath Tessie's right bottom since my partner is an ass man. Kyan's mark is last, and he presses his brow to the girl's, kissing her cheeks, her watery eyes, and even her breasts until Merikh is finally finished.

The first thing she does is spit out the leather strip, and her pale eyes lock with the vampire's, burn against his. The last thing Merikh expects is for her to express her gratitude.

“Thank you, my Lord Merikh.”

My cocks prod through the layer of scales covering them because he parts his lips, incensed from her soft “thank you”. Nothing tortures him more than the idea of someone loving his pain. And those huge, glistening eyes, her tremulous whimper, and those soft folds wetted with her own fluids confess she

doesn't simply love the assault. She cherishes it. Sure, Merikh's had minor fucks, who get off on the pain, but those were skin-deep. Meant to be used and discarded as so much in the Waste is left to rot.

Like her markings and scars, Tessie sinks beneath the skin. She's already entrenched herself in my blood. It's only a matter of time before she rocks me down to my soul matter.

Seeing this wisp of a gray girl beat the most hardened and tortured of all of us at his own game stirs a deep craving to simmer within me. Like the damned demon I am, all I want to do is fuck her with both my cocks until I damn near ruin her and split her apart. But her eyes don't leave Merikh's yet. They dare to linger, turning to icy iridescence to pierce him. And for the first time in centuries, the vampire's eyes stray, faltering from her unashamed vulnerability. Fuck! The bones in my face fracture, rearrange themselves for my muzzle while my skin bows to the layers of armored scales. Half-dragon form awakened, emboldened, .

*She will ride me soon, Drago,* conveys my dragon, and I smirk at the image since he does not mean his cock for once. But she will ride both of mine now.



I AM THE SLAVE OF MONSTERS.



## QUINTESSA

BLOODY, BURNING GODS!—DRAGO TAKES HIS PLACE BETWEEN my thighs, places his massive, clawed feet upon the steel fixtures, and grasps the handles on each side of my head. My eyes rocket wide open as he directs his muzzle downward, those emerald eyes sharp and piercing beyond the windows of my soul. The intensity of his smoldering gaze is clear as are the hot breaths puffing from his nostrils. And how hard and hung his two cocks are. He's in the perfect position to deliver the most brutal, punishing pressure, to pound my cunt to destruction.

Awed, I part my lips and study the ridges upon his cocks, my mind reeling from questions. Will he thrust both in at once? Or will he fill me so agonizingly slow one at a time? The strap of leather returns to my open mouth. A groaning, heated ache fills my body, and I'm wishing I could rock or grind, something to gain some control over that craving. But it's clear Drago is sovereign here. He is the master, and I am his...pet. The most I'm able to do is jerk my hips. That's the moment he chuckles darkly, licks a rough and wet, back-and-forth trail over my breasts. The entire room holds its breath. Even the chains dangling don't dare to clink in the wake of the Dragon King's power. With Mayce and Kyan on each side of me, and Merikh himself standing behind me to vie with the Dragon King's shadow, Drago slams his hips. And spears me deep to the hilt—of *one* ridged cock. My screeching moan isn't loud enough to smother his deep, guttural groan. Part of me is relieved he only plunged one cock into me.

Until he slides out, rumbling a laugh at my wetness glistening all over those scales. When he grips the base of both his enormous shafts, I realize he was just preparing me.

“O—wy uck—ing s—it!” my curses are garbled from the leather, and I throw my head back, hips writhing as Drago works his way into my pussy. One. Excruciating. Inch. At. A. Time. His girth burns like flames, but those scaled ridges—oh sweet Waste!—all that heated muscle throbbing inside me is incomparable! Liquid fire in my veins. The pleasure of all that hot pressure hardening and swelling to volcanic proportions.

“Yes, you’re such a dirty good girl, little Tessie. Take it, sweet pet. Take all my cocks,” commands Drago, shoving deeper into me. Then he slides out, and I screech through the leather from him rocking in and out.

I hardly know whose finger is working at my swollen clit, whose mouths are suckling at my nipples. They’re still swollen and sore from Drago’s flogging, but teeth still nip and nibble, lips wrap around and suck hard. Sweat and tears blur my vision as I clench all my muscles around those impossible erections. But when a firm pocket of warmth envelopes the outline of my pussy beyond Drago’s cocks, I squint to find Mayce’s silky hand around the roots of those lengths.

And smoke and embers. I gasp as they flicker across my flesh but don’t burn, remembering the first time this happened when the Dragon King was just a man.

“Fucking souls!” Kyan exclaims on my right, but I’m too swept up in Drago’s rapturous violence to care.

He hammers me harder, deep-thrusting into me, power-fucking me. I moan and shudder from the spasms of bliss rippling inside me that are downright scandalous. They are the rumbling warnings. His next thrust pounds so deep, I scream through the leather, clenching from those scales chafing my insides, but those ridges and his soft crowns find my inner knot.

I explode. I shatter into glowing shards like thousands of those embers. And still, I hear his deep groan above my wild wails. “Fuck, Mayce!”

“My turn,” the Fae croons in a deep, velvety voice.

That’s when I realize why Drago ended up deeper inside me than ever. Oh, savage mercies, Mayce is the Fae god, his breeches lowered to his knees as he fucks him from behind. It’s so damned erotic to watch Drago’s jaw hard and grinding, from the pleasure erupting within his eyes. And as he times his poundings to Mayce’s, and as he cranes his neck back to unleash his tongue upon the Fae king, it’s enough to send me over the edge. Spiraling into mad oblivion. Wave after wave of trembling pleasure.

Drago chuckles and shifts his head to the side, eyeing his partner. “Seems she’s enjoying herself, watching us fuck. Her pretty pussy just gushed all over me. That’s it. Drip more. Be my dirty good pet, little Tessie. You’re my perfect pain slut. Our superb slave.” He cups my breast, kneads it, then twists the sore nipple. And I’m quaking and keening from his filthy praise, craving more. Never owned. Never wanted until now. So, I do drip more. I gush for him, my pussy warming itself. “Mmm...good pet. That’s my worthy, wanton whore.”

Warm lips crush on mine, and I taste Kyan’s familiar fresh essence. I wouldn’t need to open my eyes to understand it’s him. Not when his touch begins the most tender, followed by the most insistent. Once he coaxes his tongue into my inner depths, I’m powerless to resist the fallen angel, who kisses me with the dark breath of heaven. The pounding does not cease below me, and I cry out, hungry. Deeper, I need them all to go deeper, until it’s not just our bodies bonding. All this time, it’s been flesh and blood, bone and breath. I moan into Kyan’s mouth, wanting, struggling, burning for more.

As Drago pounds me harder, driving himself deeper, I feel his need uniting with mine. Masculine groans fill my ears from the Fae fucking the dragon. Raw tingles erupt on every trace of my skin at the sound, and I arch as much as possible, receiving Drago, receiving the blissful violence convulsing on my insides from him driving himself into me, fueled by Mayce behind him.

When icy fingertips tread upon the inside of my wrist, no more than a feathering, I roll my eyes to their ceilings to

discover Merikh. I almost choke on a passionate sob. The intensity of his dark eyes as they hold my gaze. Enough power to seize my breath, but the tips of his fingers are like the cold kiss of frost upon my wrist. Another touch. While I don't dare to rip my eyes from Merikh's arresting gaze, I recognize Mayce, his simpering, dark chuckle as he begins to slide the butt plug in and out, fucking me with it, nor does he lose momentum or rhythm of fucking Drago. Kyan...he kisses each of my nipples before roaming his mouth to my center to lick my bloated clit, kissing the hypersensitive nub, and circling it like a prized, swollen pearl.

And the moment Drago growls, the moment he rubs his clawed thumb to his mark upon my mound, possessive and predatory, is when I fall into the longest, strongest, and most torrential orgasm ever. In the midst of those back-to-back waves of pure ecstasy, the truth seals itself into my heart like a raw and forever brand: I am the slave of monsters. The captive of kings. The pet of the gods. How could I ever imagine leaving their prison?

A moment later, Drago roars, joining me, his hips jerking so hard. Flaming seed spills into my channel and floods my womb. It only increases the height of my climax. So powerful, a growing unconsciousness eclipses my vision, and I scream long and high. I pass out with Merikh's eyes locked onto mine, wondering, this is all a mad dream. No. Of course, they aren't my sweetest dream.

They're my beautiful nightmare.



“...WE HAVE A SURPRISE FOR  
YOU.”

## DRAGO

“SUCH A SWEET, LITTLE PET,” I RUMBLE LOW. FUCKING LOVED how she spasmed all around me with all that tight, hot flesh. So wet, she’d gushed all over my cocks.

In the moment she came, I would have sworn her essence, her energy grew fucking tethers with hooks to grapple all of ours. She was here. She was real and raw and alive as blood and spirit. Not only had she accepted all our marks, she’d received all of us in that moment, so gods-damn alive and aware of all our touches. Yes, she’d taken both my dragon cocks with a hellish strength, but she’d surrendered to Mayce’s kinky torment of her ass, she’d welcomed Kyan’s kiss like a falling star lost from heaven, and most of all: she’d suffered Merikh’s diabolical power—his dark, disturbed compulsion. I’d recognized how he’d used it on her, stoking her craving, her need.

Now, she was ours. Ours to protect, to pleasure, to possess. And mine to fuck. The fire in my blood, the hunger in my belly, and the armor of my scales. I’d fight for her, break bones for her, burn the fucking Waste down for her. Hell, I’d bleed for her. Little Tessie has mauled her way into the heart of a dragon. And I’ll never let her escape.



HER EYES BLINK OPEN AS I LOWER HER INTO THE STEAMY, healing waters of the bathhouse. Her appreciative moan tunnels its way beyond my skin, and I chuckle at her rubbing her face upon my chest, a tiny rivulet of drool trickling from the corner of her mouth. Warm and sated. A little warmer than usual, I grin at the echoes of our fucking all over her flesh in the form of little sparks.

“Now, now, little Tessie, there will be no sleeping yet. It will be our Solstice celebration soon, and we have a surprise for you.”

Her sigh is so light and pretty as I and Mayce take time to wash her of my cum after I'd pulled out and painted her pretty tits with my seed. Over the past few weeks, we've come to learn how much she desires touch of any kind, though her erogenous zones are her favorite. Quintessa rarely dresses or bathes herself, preferring other hands. And despite having ordered the construction of her very own ash and gold chair, she chooses to grace each of our laps at mealtimes. Except for Merikh's, of course as the damn devil still refuses to accept her. Fucking hypocrite since I've caught him on more than one occasion haunting her steps on her walks along the palace grounds with the scourge of a rook fox.

And like the creature she's nursed back to health and cared for, turning it into her precious pet, she has blossomed with us. The irony that this red-blooded girl would blossom in an accursed place such as the Waste. Or perhaps not so ironic when considering our bond. Every time I fuck her, she's fed off my essence. Whatever her soul is made of, it's strong enough to resurrect my power. And claim some for herself. Power that has filled her out exquisitely.

Mayce winks, his hand pausing in the middle of washing her, fingers lingering upon her breast. She hisses her unquenchable hunger when I cup one from below as he palms the firm, warm flesh, and we both nod in acknowledgement of how she's gone up a size. Her hips are stronger, muscles more developed while her thighs are thicker, and there's just a hint of plumpness upon her flat stomach. Where her cheeks were



on the verge of sunken-in before, now they are healthy and rosy.

In the brief time she's lived with us, eating second or third helpings, and with how busy we keep her, our little Tessie has rebirthed her womanhood that was stolen through years of neglect and blood-binding duties. Even some of her scars have faded, though we've given her some new temporary marks. I chuckle at the bite marks already fading from her skin due to the healing waters.

"Is this all you do?" she asks softly, leaning into Mayce's warm palm as he fondles her plump breast, squeezing the tender flesh.

"Hmm...why? Are you unhappy, sweet pet?" I tense and press my fingers along her sternum, already tempted to drag them down to the tight, warm channel of her pussy. But even my insatiable slut needs a reprieve now and then.

*You know what will happen if she tries to leave,* warns my Dragon, and I growl internally, body hardening. More of my scales rise to my chest, but I control myself, preferring not to turn into my half-dragon state, however much my little pet enjoys it.

"Of course not, Master Drago," she denies, swinging her head upright and leaning away from Mayce, so she may wrap her legs around my waist. Since I'm sitting on the highest step of the steam pool with only my lower legs immersed, all of her body is bared to me. Such a pretty vision with her pale moonlike skin pressed to my rugged, dark gold. So unfathomably soft even with the tapestry of tattoos.

She squeezes those thighs, and my cock has no choice but to respond and jerk against her pussy. Oh, I've come to recognize that mischievous glint in her eye right before she rubs that pretty cunt over my length, the little vixen.

"Everything is lovely. After all, there are far worse things than being the prized of the monster kings..." she emphasizes the most common name I call her by and arches when Mayce cups her waist from behind and kisses her shoulders. I thread my brows low in a warning to my Fae partner as I've warned

all my brothers. I'm the damnedest devil of all because I know how much they long for her, even if Merikh won't admit it. But only my cock has penetrated all her hot pink flesh. And that's the way it'll stay...for now.

Cupping her face, nearly swallowing it with my large hands, I dig my eyes into hers and inform her, "Whatever you desire, it's yours, Quintessa."

Mayce goes on to tantalize her with his words of finery. "If you wish for a masked ball with every being from the Waste attending solely to dance with you, all you need do is say the word. If you care for a throne in court next to ours, we will order one of the grandest dragon bones fused with gold, where all will worship you."

With an affectionate smile, Tessie blushes. I dart my eyes between hers, studying their depths—so pale and silver, they are icy and iridescent. Like the tears of the moon.

"Mmm..." she presses her lips to mine in a soft kiss and moans as Mayce kisses his way down her spine, worshipping her in his own way. "As tempting as that sounds, my wish would never be for something so grand. But..." she chews on her inner cheek and begins to toy with my red waves, combing her fingers through them. My heart lodges in my throat, and even Mayce has paused in his journey midway down her back. "...there has to be more to your life here in the Waste than simply eating, drinking, fucking, and healing. You have a court, but I never see anything happen besides the four of you sitting with your creepy masks on and watching the villagers dance and...other things," she trails off again, but her tone softens while she blushes—the implication of that blush confirming just what those "other things" are.

Mayce and I share a look. I lift one brow and ask her, "Would you like a mask, little pet?"

She tips her head back and groans. "It's not about the mask, Drago. You mean to tell me you've lived like this for centuries? Who was that hag in the woods? And what about Hollow Night?"

I stiffen, careful when I harden my muscles around her small frame. Mayce draws his brows low in a warning. As if I require a reminder, I bare a few dragon teeth in response.

Rising, I lift Tessie by her waist and set her on her feet, loving the flames flickering across her skin as if frolicking with her tattoos. “Now, now, pet. No time for questions. We have a court to get to in just a few hours. And you are far from ready.”

She lifts a brow, flinching from the robe settling on her shoulders but smiling as soon as she sees Eyn-Amaru standing behind her. “Ready?”

“As adorable as you are wearing our clothes, tonight is the Solstice. And I have high expectations.”

“How high?” she wonders while the bird-like servant ties the sashes of her robe.

I tuck a tendril of hair behind her ear, curve my fingers beneath her chin to lift her eyes to mine, and say, “*Royally* high.”



# QUEEN OF THE ASH COURT

## QUINTESSA

OH, THERE ARE ABSOLUTELY FAR WORSE THINGS THAN BEING the prized pet of the monster kings.

Despite how Eyn-Amaru folded the robe around my body, smothering some of the embers, more have traveled to my hair, lingering like a glowing crown. Drago offered many other servants as my personal attendant, but I insisted on Eyn-Amaru. Smiling, I nod a thank you, glancing at her eyes of a deep, mahogany to contrast the gray half-bird skull. She may not say much, but her features often show that twisted smile.

Drago follows us into the tower room. He doesn't need to lift a finger to light all the lanterns and the chandelier suspended far above us. I've come to understand the fire obeys according to his will. As much a part of him as his scales. I love how some shimmer upon his rock-hard chest, exposed to his sternum from his own robe. If he has a greater dragon form, he hasn't revealed it to me. Yet.

The flames illuminate Qora who hovers near the window. Guilt twinges inside me because I haven't spoken to her much these few days. And she won't leave the castle. Not even to follow me outside where I explore the grounds. We haven't spoken about what happened to her, what she felt.

As he passes by me, the dragon king rubs my bottom, and I clench my thighs on instinct. And throw him a mischievous smile. After all my years of walking through life numb as icy bones, I'm not starved for touch. I'm addicted to it.

A servant bearing a platter of meat and fruit follows Drago to his bed where the king sprawls out, propping his head on one hand. After dipping a cut of ham into berry sauce, he circles his fingers, gesturing the servants to me. I've learned not to be self-conscious. If he wants me naked, I'll be naked.

As soon as Eyn-Amaru urges me toward the massive stand-up mirror, another servant relieves me of the robe. Hundreds of little embers flicker upon my body, seeming to sprout from nowhere. Except, I always know when they shine brightest. Earlier after breakfast, Drago announced he was treating himself to an early morning dessert. My laughter had turned to moans when Mayce and Kyan held me down, so the Dragon King could feast between my thighs until I screamed loud enough to attract all the servants. He took me on the table, and I screamed louder when the flames spiraled high and set one of the tapestries ablaze. Ever since, the embers have acted like tiny passengers riding upon my skin. They'll fade in a few hours.

"Oh, Jinxy," I giggle at the little fox chasing his tails on the other side of the room. He's grown plumper over the past few days thanks to some good meals. Much to the chagrin of the god-kings, I brought him to the healing pool. It didn't take long for his fur to grow back.

I've grown, too.

"Is this really necessary?" I ask Drago as he plucks a few grapes and toys with them between his fingers.

My skin tingles from all the hands touching my naked body. Multiple servants take measurements of everything from my thighs to my breasts, but it's more difficult due to the flaming flecks on my skin. I can hardly tear my eyes from the figure in the mirror. Curves have formed where there were skin and bones. No ribs show anymore. A soft flattened stomach accentuates my smoothly rounded thighs that grow to strong legs thanks to all of Drago's activities. After a few days, it's impossible, but any time I ask, the kings avoid the question and start touching me until I forget.

Drago simply grins at me and winks. “For such an occasion as the solstice, you will not show at court looking like a bedraggled urchin, sweet pet. It won’t do you harm to wear something more...regal for the Solstice.”

“I thought I was a pet. Not a princess,” I bait him, smirking at his reflection in the mirror.

He rumbles a familiar rich chuckle. “You will always be our pet. But tonight, you will look like a princess.”

My smirk curves into a frown. “Your clothes are more comfortable.”

“Oh, sweet pet, you will wear something much *closer* to me.”

Like two small suns have nestled under my skin, my cheeks turn hot from the humiliation. I gush at the gown the servants slide onto my body. Closer to him was an understatement. The bodice is formed of dragon scales, Drago’s scales—black and luminous in the firelight and studded with tiny bones like pearls. Almost backless, except for the thin spinal cord curving a few inches and stopping just above my bottom. From my waist down, long swathes of the thinnest crimson fabric, transparent enough for anyone to see my ink designs, cascade to the floor.

With the black flaming designs decorating my eyelids and swirling outward and my hair gathered into intricate braids to crown my head, I look nothing like the gray girl of the Borderlands. For a few minutes, I’m left alone. Nothing but my reflection and Jinxy who has grown tired of chasing his tail and occupies himself with the firefly embers drifting off my skin. And Qora strays closer to me where I stand on the little pedestal. Awed, I clasp my hands in front of my waist, knotting my fingers, wishing I could steady my breaths. Nothing feels quite real. As if I could wake and find myself back in my meager, attic bedroom, prepared to face another day with Pater commanding me to shed my blood and heal whichever noble would fill his pocket most.

“Don’t, Quintessa,” Qora warns me, and I flick my gaze to her, to those smoldering eyes and her black vapors curling



across me like cold, crawling friends. “Don’t think about it. You don’t do well to dwell on such things or anything for that matter. You belong to the present. Never the past, nor the future. They will only lead you to fear and flight. But here, in this moment, you are happy.”

More than happy, I don’t bother to say because there’s something I want to know, need to know. “Are you...happy, Qora?” I turn to my Shadow, leaning toward her.

She opens her mouth, then promptly closes it. A heaviness settles inside me at the sight of her shades growing darker. Before she may respond, Drago strides into the room with Mayce in tow. My lips part, jaw dropping at the sight of them. The Fae king wears high-waisted gray breeches and a long black robe with silver cuffs and gold epaulets bearing curved edges. Open on each side, the robe cascades to the floor and exhibits his feline frame of sculpted muscles beneath a tunic of pure gold latticework that gives the illusion of tree branches. The high collar only accentuates his predatory beauty from the blade-sharp cheekbones to the long lashes gracing his rich hazel eyes.

On the other hand, Drago is a masterpiece of power and prowess in a robe of black furs and a crimson cape like a blood spill behind him. Gold epaulets, far grander than Mayce’s, and gauntlets for his arms, his chest bared to reveal his armored scales. The black breeches and high boots he wears intimidate due to the gold knee-braces forged into the same dragon demon mask he wears in Court.

At first, I blink, half-tempted to shake my head in a whirl. My cheeks, my ears, my whole body grows hotter than hell. Drago and Mayce share a comical look as my mouth grows warm and damp, my tongue an utterly useless and limp extension. Somehow, I force out the rasp, “Dammit!” And rock on my heels.

Already predicting my urge to flee, Drago reaches out and snatches my hand, tugging me off the pedestal and into his arms. As easily as plucking a petal from its bud. “Now, now, Tessie, we’ll have none of that,” he scolds, but his tone is far too amused.

“You look quite lovely,” agrees Mayce, toying with a few flyaway tendrils while I bury my face in the scales on Drago’s chest.

“Please, Masters, I look ridiculous. I think I’d rather go to court naked than try to pass myself off as some sort of princess in the presence of kings who are gods.”

The two of them chuckle, and my stomach churns, until Drago touches the sides of my jaw and urges my face up, forcing me to meet his eyes. Their intensity and supremacy disarm me before I may blink.

“Perhaps your wish will be granted at some other time, pet. But tonight, the god-kings will escort you to the Court where you will be our guest of honor. Is that clear?”

I nod but chew on my lower lip, tensing when Mayce leans in to kiss my cheek from behind. Not from the touch but from his sight and smell of rich, spiced fruit and undertones of cedar and moss. I heave a sigh and narrow my eyes upon the Fae king. “I could never be as beautiful as you.”

Drago smirks to one side while Mayce chuckles and lifts my hand to kiss the backs of my knuckles. “Sweet pet, no one is as beautiful as me.” He winks at me, a fervent gleam in his eye while a muscle bounces in his flawless cheek.

With an agreeing shrug, the dragon king gestures to his partner and says, “It’s true. I’ve inevitably learned to live with such excruciating perfection.”

“I can’t fathom how you’ve managed, Master!” I guffaw, playing into the banter.

“Come now, Tessie...” urges Drago, coiling my arm around his. “It is time for your Solstice debut.”

Once the kings escort me into the grand court, my breath stutters because I’m certain the entire Waste has gathered as witnesses. On each side of me, Mayce and Drago have donned their masks as usual. At some point, they will give me the story behind them.

I stop in my tracks. Not because of the hundreds of Waste folk, who are comical and macabre and captivating all in one.

A kaleidoscope of colorful gowns and robes and suits decorate their wizened frames, each bearing some animalistic features. It's a mosaic of tattered bird wings, bony tails bereft of fur, wolf skulls, broken stag horns, and more. The Waste may be cursed, but its twisted beauty touches a deep place in my heart that hearkens to my scars and ink.

I don't get a chance to tell the kings what is wrong. Instead, my heart skips a beat when the masses kneel before us. Limbs heavy with the effort, I follow Mayce and Drago to the dais where all four thrones rest, two already filled by Kyan and Merikh. Over the past few days, whenever they've done Court, I've watched from the shadows, lingering in the corners of the outer halls.

Now, all I want is to rush into those shadows and shield my burning face since I am the only one without a mask in the Great Hall. Drago shatters my resolve, shatters my breath in my lungs when he draws me to the center of the dais, places his hands upon my waist to turn me to the onlooking crowd, and proclaims, "Bow before Quintessa, Queen of the Ash Court!"



“WE’RE GOING TO PLAY A  
LITTLE GAME, SWEET PET..”

## DRAGO

HER EXPRESSION WHEN I PLACE THE CROWN OF SOLIDIFIED ASH fused with dragon bones and gold upon her lovely head is priceless. Like a wide-eyed doe caught in a thicket with nowhere to run. If my hands weren't maintaining a firm hold on her waist, I have no doubt she'd try to escape.

Once the Court has finished bowing to her, I sweep my blushing pet into my arms and seat myself on the far-left throne designating my alpha status. From here, I can make out Merikh's dark eyes burning against mine, and I nearly sense my blood congealing in response. Stiffening, I dismiss his concerns. Let the whole of the Waste know for all I give a damn. Sometimes, the best way to hide is in plain sight. What better way to lead Kronos astray? If he believes this is one grand joke, a means to taunt him, she will be safe.

With my powers returning more and more each day I'm buried inside her, with my dragon growing stronger, I dare him to try and claim her. I'll burn the Waste down itself before I let him take her. Or anyone.

I jerk from the sudden invasion of Tessie's runaway rook fox as the creature bats at the ends of my robe. A sweet giggle rises from her throat, and she leans down to pluck him from the floor. He wags his bushy tails and licks her cheek, transforming that giggle into a laugh. A laugh of such purity and life, it ignites a fresh warmth in my chest. To think this tiny, young woman with all her scars and tattoos and her insatiable appetite is so pure, she could damn well resurrect the Waste itself.

Later, I fully intend to take advantage of that appetite by ridding her of this gown and fucking her raw right here on my throne as she wears nothing but that crown. The thought of her blushes and her screaming my name before the entire Court of Waste-folk has both my cocks hardening. For now, I content myself with roaming my hand across the thin skirts of her gown, pleasuring in the ample flesh of her thigh.

“Lord Drago...” she rises to whisper in my ear while scratching the fox’s ears.

“Drago tonight,” I correct her and tap the crown in indication. “You are our Queen.”

She squeezes her shoulders, chewing on her lower lip, more self-conscious, inconceivably more adorable. “Please don’t think me ungrateful. But—”

I tense, and Mayce leans closer, picking up on my body language. “What’s wrong?”

“This Court.” She gestures a hand. “It’s the Solstice. It’s the one time of year I remember my family was together and happy. And my sisters and I spent hours decorating the manor with the staff. The Borderlands are known for their Solstice Festivals, to celebrate life beyond...beyond Hollow Night.” She parts her lips, eyes widening in fearful recognition. My chest caves in at the blood draining from her cheeks, and her panicked, “Oh, never mind, please, just forget about—”

Gripping the back of her neck, I sweep in to claim her mouth, stopping her words. A demanding but brief kiss, after which I brush my knuckles across her cheek and meet those icy incandescent eyes with the power to freeze my heart. “You are absolutely right, my Queen. Forgive me for such a transgression. You desire decorations worthy of the Solstice? You shall have them.”

Without waiting for her response, I pound my gauntleted fist upon my throne in a thunderous gesture that has the whole Court stopping. “Go! All who are of the village and not castle servants. Gather as many weeping roses within the surrounding land as possible,” I command, referencing the only flower that grows within the Waste. None delay “The rest

of you...” I direct my gaze to the staff, preying my eyes, visible through the mask, upon them. “I want every last damned candle you can find and brought to the Courtroom. And you will open the cellar reserves. Bring out our finest bottles of wine and send our fruit reserves to the kitchen for the preparation of wassail,” I add and kiss the side of Tessie’s head, only for her to tug on my sleeve and whisper her related desire. “And every orange that can be spared, bring here, along with mason jars of cloves,” I conclude.

Careless of how much Merikh seethes beneath his mask while all his muscles harden, I return to roaming my fingers across her thigh. She whispers a “thank you” in my ear. Chuckling, I inform her of just how much I intend for her to show her gratitude to me later. My fingers slide another inch, only to freeze upon her pubic lips, which are already slick from arousal. She jerks and tries to hide against my chest, but I tap her lovely pussy just once, insert those fingers into my mouth to taste her, and capture her chin. “You will suffer for a little while longer, my sweet pet. First, you must assess the decorations.” I gesture toward the host of servants entering the Court.

Eager with a wide-eyed wonder and unmatched passion, Tessie springs from my lap, righting the crown that almost falls as she hurries down the dais and to the dozens of staff. For the next hour, I remain on my throne and bask in the sight of her glowing, figuratively and literally. The more she beautifies my Court, the more embers kindle upon her skin and catch in her hair. She’s a goddamn vision, and everyone knows it. Especially my brothers, who cannot tear their gazes from her, including Merikh, though he does his best to feign indifference. No, he still does not believe she is our salvation, but after my dragon awoke, I had no doubt.

Once Tessie and the servants have finished with all the candles, I summon her to my throne and purr low in her ear, “Watch this, my pet.”

With a flick of my hand, every candle and candelabra in the Court catches fire and casts the area into a conflagrant spectacle. All worth it the moment Tessie gushes, sweeping



her eyes to catch the firelight which transforms those icy irises to flaming frost. A violent hunger stokes my blood and feeds on my nerves, but I contain myself and observe as the fox brings her stem after stem of weeping roses. Ever since lighting the display, my powers have begun to fade, bowing to the mightier force of the Curse by which we are bound.

I study Tessie, smirking at how she even places roses in the withered skeletal frames of the corpses suspended in their cages. No fear. Her love of writing a new story over the dark things of the world does not simply pertain to her scars. Fuck, I can scent her from here. However hundreds of weeping roses grace the Court, they could not smother her essence. A dark rose scent to rival the gray blooms with their shriveled petal edges. Except, hints of orange zest and cloves fuse with that essence thanks to her where she's seated herself at one of the large center tables, presses her lips in determination, and stabs tiny holes into oranges to form a design with the cloves. Fucking hell, she's oblivious to the goings ons around her. Oblivious to others who have spilled their fancied clothing to engage in more revelry. Countless animalistic limbs blended with human ones tangle, moans filling the Court. The smells and sounds of lust cloy the air while music plays on. And my Tessie continues with her creations.

My blood is too cold without her touch. No more than thirty feet of distance is still too far. By now, the embers playing with her skin have faded, leaving but a few to frolic with her hair.

"She's astonishing," remarks Mayce while dipping his cut of pork in a fresh berry sauce.

"Never thought I'd see the day when any girl would tame our bigheaded behemoth," jokes Kyan from the throne next to the Fae.

"More than gratified to take you and your pretty wings outside, Kyan, and show you just how I really am," I emphasize through gritted teeth while clenching my jaw, inclining my head to Merikh who remains stoic and hardened. Damned devil can't take his eyes off Tessie.

After sipping from his wine, Mayce swirls the liquid in his goblet and reminds me, “You know what must be done, Drago.”

I growl at my partner, which startles him. Not that I can blame Mayce. Not once in all these centuries have I been so captivated by another being, much less a human. In the few days since she stepped beyond the barrier and into the Waste, in the days since she touched my chest and produced that one spark, this girl has speared through the armor of my scales, through my walls of fire to pierce my heart. She’s everything I’m not. I’m a damned devil, a malevolent monster. She is a gray angel of scars and swirls of ink. I am nothing but fire that seeks to devour and destroy. She is everything pure and only thinks of embracing and creating. Of saving.

And I cannot help but forge this path of destruction and darkness for her. I cannot protect her from the Curse, from myself, or us. Thus far, she hasn’t asked for protection, nor sought it. Turning my eyes upon her, I observe as she scoots out from her chair and holds four individual ribbons upon which dangle clove-decorated oranges. My cocks throb, pushing upon the scaled layers canvassing them as she approaches, moving to Mayce. He tilts his neck, demon mask shifting as she offers him the orange.

“You’re always wearing earthy-themed clothes, and your crown reminds me of branches. So, I decorated yours with little clove trees,” expresses Tessie, offering Mayce the fruit.

I’ve never known Mayce to be at a loss for words, but all he does is accept the fruit, turning it about in his hand. Fuck, my heart hammers against its fleshy prison, and more of my scales rise as the sight of her gifting us with these simple, yet significant creations nearly shreds my control.

“Wings for you...” she tells Kyan and even leans down to kiss his cheek. I cage a low growl because I will take far more than a kiss soon.

But first, she pauses before Merikh. Purses her lips and slowly lowers her hand to give him the orange. “Yours was a little more difficult, but I chose blood and water droplets. And

I carved little fangs into each one even though I've never seen yours."

Goddammit, Merikh hardens all his muscles, claws growing from his fingers. If that broody bastard doesn't control himself, I'll bury him in his coffin so deep underground, he'll grow groundhog parts. Already, my cocks are painfully hard. My blood turns to ice. And my nerves tighten. It's taking everything I have to not force her to her knees right here on the dais, bunch up her skirts around her waist, and thrust deep into her from behind. Flames will melt the ice in my blood. She will assuage my hunger.

"Take the fucking orange, Merikh," I snarl at my brother, issuing an alpha command.

Without another word, the vampire snatches the fruit from her palm, dismissing how his claws have shed a couple lines of blood on her wrist. I don't have time to teach the bloody prick a lesson. Not when Tessie scurries to my throne, smiles, and offers me her orange. Steeling my spine, breath growing heavier, tighter, I glance at the orange, surprised by the clove design. Where I expected curling flames, instead, Tessie has decorated the outline of a dragon. And a female rider.

*Let her see me tonight, Drago,* he urges me, voice deepening.

I growl internally, knowing full well he doesn't simply mean the platonic type of riding. For now, I drop the orange to the floor at my feet and grip her waist, hauling her closer, until she's straddling me.

"Did you not like it? Is something wrong?" she wonders, threading her brows, her eyes lustrous from the firelight.

"Yes," I don't hesitate to state as my organs twitch again, and my veins surge with bloody desire. "Take me out, Tessie," I command in a low voice.

She swings her head from side to side, then gazes at me, wide-eyed, lips parted. "Here? Now?"

"Now, my pet."

Licking her lips and checking around her, Tessie swallows an insecure knot before sinking her dainty hand into my breeches. And pauses with a startled gasp at discovering both my cocks, their tips wetted with need for her. Mayce is keenly aware of what is going on, but he doesn't interfere. Once she's retrieved my throbbing shafts, long and hard enough to nearly reach my knee, and pointing to their sole desire at the apex of her thighs, I lift the front of her skirts. Thanks to my earlier stipulations regarding her clothing, she wears no underthings, leaving no barrier.

“We're going to play a little game, sweet pet,” I tell her while cupping her cheek and smirking when she shudders. “You will sit on my cocks. And I will feed you dinner. If at any time, you try to move on your own or you so much as clench your muscles around my shafts, I will turn you around, rip off this gown, and fuck you before the open Court.”

I resist the urge to chuckle and spread my lips into a grin at how her eyes widen, as large as saucers. “But if you are a good girl, at the end of the meal, I will simply fuck you like this with your skirts and bodice shielding us from view. Is everything quite clear?”

Her stomach issues a little growl right before Tessie grins, rises up, and lowers her hips to impale herself on my cocks.



“NOW, FUCKING RIDE YOUR  
DRAGON...”

## QUINTESSA

I THROW MY HEAD BACK WITH A WHIMPER. THIS IS SO MUCH harder than it seems because I must wiggle from side to side and propel myself down and down, inch by glorious inch. Until all his dangerous and armored lengths have speared me so deeply, I'd swear they're penetrating my internal organs. A grunt leaves his throat. Beneath my hands, his muscles tense while his skin grows hotter. More scales cover his arms, chest, and stomach, I'm almost concerned he will transform into his half-dragon. His cocks pulse inside me, and against every instinct, I force myself *not* to move, *not* to clench. No, it wouldn't be too much of a sacrifice if he followed through with his deal, but I'd rather prove to him that I may win this battle.

Still, he's so large, my throat fills up with tears. Those ridges, like tiny rolling hills upon his cocks, nudge my inner walls, pressing against that inner knot in a motionless torment. His scales flare like little, armored wings. And every inch of him burns and stretches my tender flesh.

As if noticing how rushed my breath is, Drago touches his lips to my cheek and murmurs, "You may shift once to stretch those legs and widen your hips." Oh, merciful Waste! I don't hesitate. I flare my hips and shift in a full 360, finding some way to sit that is more manageable for the pressure. "Good girl, spread that pretty pussy for me."

I gaze down at the small space between us, stunned by how close we are joined. The sense of the forbidden, of

scandal, and public display are enough to spiral more damp heat to my center.

“Sweet, dirty girl,” Drago croons low in my ear, his lips traveling across my jawline. “Dripping all over my cocks. I’ll have you gushing before the night’s over.”

“Drago...mmm,” I whimper and squeeze my eyes, uncertain of how much longer I can do this without clenching. My cunt is damned desperate for friction, for fulfillment.

“Wine, little Tessie...” he coaxes the goblet rim to my lips. “Drink. It will help.”

My parents never allowed me to have wine, of course. Rylinne and Daya received their fair share, but never me. I remember one of the times Pater locked me in the root cellar, he’d left a dusty bottle down there. To this day, I’m convinced it had gone bad since it was so rancid.

“I-uh...” I trail off and bite my lower lip, hesitant to drink.

Drago throbs once inside me, and I almost buck, lurching, but freeze the second he narrows his eyes in a deadly warning, “Do as you’re told, Tessie.”

Lifting the goblet to my lips, I slowly inch out my tongue and try the barest surface drop. Oh, bleeding gods, I hadn’t expected this sweetness! Before I realize it, I’ve tipped the entire contents of the goblet down my throat, luxuriating in the sweet but sharp taste of the drink. And how it warms and dulls my insides. Somehow, despite that sense of numbing, it’s not unwelcome.

“Appears as though you missed a little something...” Drago remarks with a grin and traces his finger near a trickling line of red liquid that disappears below my cleavage. “I believe I should check the insides of this bodice. Hand-stitched from my scales, and I do not appreciate any stains upon what I’ve shed.”

At first, I hold my breath. Is he ser—oh! The second he tugs down the bodice, he scoops up my breasts and proceeds to lick his way across the swells of pale flesh. All of me leans closer. His breath is so hot, his tongue wet and rough as he’s



grown his dragon one. That's when I register what he's doing as he punishes my tits, circling around and around the areola but staying clear of the peaked tips. He wants me to lose.

Instead, I relax all my limbs. Any tension in my body, I work to loosen, until my inner walls embrace, surrender, and caress each and every ridge and scale. My blood sizzles with each lash of his tongue. More embers flicker to the surface to mirror the currents of flames spiraling from his body. Merikh startles me when he shoves off his throne and disappears into the throngs of Waste-folk.

Just as quickly as he'd begun, Drago jerks my bodice up and barks for a servant to bring us a platter.

"Ignore my partner, Tessie," Kyan alerts me from nearby, lifting his fingers to stroke his chin. "He has his reasons for his responses. Not even I know all of them."

The servant arrives, and Drago has the platter propped on a nearby table. Shoulders sinking in both defeat and relief, I smile at the King from what I hope are sultry, lowered lashes. Belly fluttering, I accept every morsel of food he gives me: hearty cutlets of pork and berry sauce, chilled and spiced fruit soup, and sweet ginger cakes. One more goblet of wine. I suspect he hopes I will lose my resolve and make a mistake.

I don't.

With a low rumbling growl, which I feel resonating from his chest, Drago grumbles, "You win, my Queen. Now, ride my cocks to your heart's content while the Court wishes they could watch me take my sweet pet upon my throne."

Finally! I don't hesitate. Biting my lower lip, I mischievously grind against the dragon before sliding up and down. There is little doubt as to what is happening, but my skirts are plentiful enough to hide our intimate regions.

He claims my mouth in a ravishing kiss, his tongue flicking against mine and tasting every trace inside. "You taste of oranges. And smell of cloves," he murmurs against the corner of my mouth. "You'll be the life and death of me, woman. Now, fucking ride your dragon."

I whimper. Though I do my best to rock slowly, my limbs begin to quake, hinting at what is to come. A deep groan rumbles from Drago's chest, which reverberates through my body from how I rub my upper half against him. With an exasperated grunt, Drago grips my hips and urges me on, until I'm tipping my head back and clenching every inner muscle around him. We feed off each other while flames curl in rippling currents from our chests and where we are joined. The King swells and hardens, scales flaring, ridges rousing, neck muscles tensing. He fucks me from below, thrusting in a frenzy of demanding need, deepening the penetration.

"So goddamn tight, Tessie. You're mine. This is mine..." he rubs my pussy, and it gushes more from his touch. "That's it, dirty girl. Drip all over me."

The moment he cups my face, forcing my eyes to meet his, I shatter from their possession. The pressure inside me snaps, and I shriek right there on the throne from the pleasure shimmering through me. Drago fucks me through the orgasm, thrusting inside me until he snarls his release, primal and dominant.

In these moments, my old life grows further and further away. My mind struggles to remember the history of Hollow Nights, of how much blood was shed from their claws and teeth, how many girls met their end. But when he takes me like this and cares for me after, when he held me beyond the woods after I'd escaped the witch in the woods, it's more than possession. It's a powerful drive to protect me, on some innate and carnal level I can't even fathom.

These embers alight on my skin have something to do with it. At first, I'd believed it was a normal power exchange born of their magic as gods. But I can't control the power, unlike Drago. And whenever it fades from his body, he's desperate to fuck me...as if I'm responsible for kindling his flames.

"You will not wipe off my cum, little Tessie," he whispers in my ear, raising the hairs on the back of my neck as I glance back at the Court. "You will dance, and I will pleasure in watching you, knowing everyone will smell my scent upon your pretty thighs."

Part of me considers refusing just so I may reap a punishment later, but I've longed to dance for much of this night. In the Borderlands, I was never permitted to attend any town dances. Pater didn't see much point when I'd never secure a match, and the revelry was wasted on a cursed girl. So, I'm making up for lost time.

Once I twirl chaotically across the expanse, I understand why Drago wanted his scent on me. With how many bodies have tangled with one another on floor couches, enough lust cloy the air to warrant caution. A thrill surges through me because I don't need to be careful thanks to the King's cum drying upon my legs. When I finish whirling across the expanse of the Court, far too dizzy from the wine and the music, I turn so I may blow him a grateful kiss.

Strong hands snatch me by the waist, pluck me from the floor, and haul me into an arched alcove. Panic ices my blood until I make out the familiar face within the shadows. The eyes of pure, stygian black. My nerves spin out of control when he coils his claws around my throat and growls low in my ear.

"Little dove...you may have charmed my brother with your pretty pussy, but he will grow tired of you as he has with all others in the past ten thousand years. You are nothing but a little pet."

Pulse pounding, I tilt my head to the side and beam up at Merikh, playing with darkness and danger as I always do. "Considering I am nothing but a pet whore, Lord Merikh, I am so honored you give any consideration to my pretty pussy."

He huffs, baring his fangs. If I had any sense of self-preservation, I'd exercise more caution with the vampire king. As soon as I try to light my palm on his chest, the vampire seizes my wrist and twists it behind my back, which only brings his chest to bed down upon mine. With his breath warm and spicy upon my face, I part my lips and arch my neck. Never daring to look away.

"You think you can tame us or change us?" he challenges while rubbing his thumb upon my bottom lip. "We will strip

apart everything you are until all that's left are our claws upon your soul.”

“Please be careful, lord Merikh, they are such nice claws,” I coo and tap the ones he's bound around my throat. “I wouldn't want you to dirty them on my poor soul.”

Merikh's pupils turn red with bloodlust, bloating to overwhelm the black irises. When he leans in, my breath stutters in my lungs while heat consumes me. It's the closest he's come in days, but I remember the moment he touched my wrist in the dungeon. From the obsession in his eyes to the care and conquest when he marked me. It hadn't escaped me how he'd gone before Drago.

When his lips feather across mine in the barest of touches, I close my eyes. Remain motionless. Become a shadow with him here in this alcove. The chill of his body consumes mine. Unmoving, I embrace it, welcome it, wondering if a monster can be tamed, or if I even want to.

At the sound of the music dying in mid-song and all the laughter and lust of the Court perishing, I knit my brows low, confused.

“Listen to me now, little dove,” Merikh breathes the command against my lips. “You will return to Drago's room and stay there until he comes for you. And if you so much as consider running, I will hunt you down and bring you back to him in fucking pieces. Do you understand?”

“Are you concerned for me for some reason, Lord Merikh?” I sweetly inquire.

“Don't test me,” he warns, stabbing a claw toward my face. “Do not test us. Go now, or I'll bloody your goddamn ass, so you won't sit down for a month.”

I scurry away down the hall. Not because of his threat but because of the urgency in his voice. But just as I reach the staircase leading to Drago's tower, I overhear the announcer thunder in the Court, “Kneel before the Ruler of the Five Realms, Lord of the Veil, and the Eater of the Gods, Emperor Kronos.”

A shock wave ripples through my chest. Why is the god-eater here?



“HELLO, BOYS! DADDY’S COME  
FOR A VISIT.”

## DRAGO

THE FIRST THING I DO IS SEARCH THE COURT FOR TESSIE. HER face is not among the Waste-folk, and I tense until Merikh shadows toward his throne and nods to me. Relief lowers my shoulders but not to a great degree. The vampire may be a seething bastard, but his sense of possession for Quintessa is just as powerful, perhaps runs deeper than I've ever believed. I give him a subtle nod in return. Hiding in plain sight rarely works. Despite the hundreds of scents permeating the air, the blood of a human born beyond the Veil of Souls is far too distinctive.

I flick my gaze to each corner of the Court, eyeing the flames I conjured not long ago. If Kronos believes the fire burning among the candles and candelabras is anything but normal, we're done for.

Clenching my jaw, I grip the arm of my throne, hard enough to shed bone powder as Kronos strides across the main floor while the peoples of the Waste kneel before him. Mayce exchanges a glance with me, his expression clear, though he never loses those cunning eyes. Of course, the Fae predicted this. All of us did, but the god-eater arriving on the Solstice is unexpected.

None of us move. We are the only ones within the Waste who will never kneel. Nor may we be forced. He may have exiled us, taken our realms, and cursed us, but we've still risen to become Kings of the Waste. Kings of rot and ruin but kings all the same.



Kronos doesn't require an entourage as he advances toward our thrones, his crafty eyes scrutinizing the surroundings from the decorations of weeping roses to the flames casting shadows upon the walls. Of course, he could lift the Veil and enter with a glorious escort of capayllia-mounted soldiers and attendants. But entering alone is a far greater display of his power. And a reminder to us of our "rightful place".

Tremors rack my insides for the first time. I feel the heat simmering in my blood and know I need to get out of this Court. Find somewhere dark and cold before my veins combust, and I unleash my dragon fire. It's primed inside my belly. Like a well of lava festering and bubbling while the rest of me quakes like the precursor rumblings of a volcanic explosion. That is what she has done to me.

Protection runes shimmer upon Kronos' high-collared tunic. A great black cape trails behind him by at least a couple of feet—half of which is made of the white fur of frost dragons since the devil can't resist showing off the spoils of his realms. Potion bottles suspended from his belt knock against one another, tingling and clanking. No ordinary bottles. Whenever he journeys to the Waste, Kronos brings along his *snacks*. His boot steps thunder through the Court upon his approach.

Like Mayce, he is alarmingly, painfully beautiful. Time has done nothing to age him. In fact, he seems more youthful than ever: a result of the power he stole from us. One by one, he removes his fur-lined leather gloves, slaps them across his palm, and offers us a ruthless grin before spreading his arms out to each side.

"Hello, boys! Daddy's come for a visit," he proclaims, voice lilting a little higher in a well-devised taunt. Glibness is Kronos' second language. With us, he prefers the title of "Daddy", because we are still his whipping boys to this day. "Still wearing the masks, I see. A stroke of genius how I took advantage of your four realms' grand masked ball and chose that night to strike. As you know, I love to make an entrance." He smirks, glancing around at the kneeling figures.

“I would offer you a formal greeting, Lord Kronos...” begins Mayce, lifting a hand in a gesture, “...but your arrival is never a welcome one.”

Kronos clicks his teeth in chastisement. “Now, now, is that any way to address your Emperor on the Solstice of all occasions? Especially when I see your Court is far more lavish and festive than usual. Could it be you are celebrating some significant event? Or discovery perhaps?” he probes not so subtly but directs his sharp gaze to mine.

“Or we fed so well on Hollow Night thanks to your generous gift of granting us our beast forms and powers for one night of the year,” offers Mayce, remaining straight-backed and stoic as usual.

“Tut, tut, Mayce,” Kronos responds, raising his hand to sweep back his long, dark hair. It’s not lost on me how he’s embellished the strands with a scarlet hue in another mockery. “Always the clever one and the silver-tongued one to this day. But you know my laws and stipulations, which I transcribed in my own blood and marked upon your backs. Any human girls, not born of the Waste, will be given the choice to come and join me in the fifth realm where they will live in the lap of luxury. My lap more specifically,” he taunts with a grin and slaps his gloves against his other palm.

A low growl vibrates in my chest, and I sense my blood heating more. Especially when Kronos raises one of his potion bottles, twists the knob to uncork it, and inhales the smoky essence drifting from it. Just before he tips it back, a high scream pierces the air, coming from the bottle—faint but enough for me to know it’s a full soul, not a half. Regardless of how the mask conceals my expression, I curl my upper lip in a sneer. *Soul snacks*, the god-eater dubs them. When he struck down the gods and stole our kingdoms, it was rumored that he ate ten thousand souls to take the fullness of power.

Kronos will carry half-souls simply to offer them to us. While we might refuse, Mayce is not only our charismatic spokesperson but also a cunning pickpocket. When the half-souls we consume gift us with a small sample of our powers, as well as a hallucinogenic high, who can blame us?

“As you well know, Kronos, the last human who made it through your Veil of Souls was a blade-binder who made the unfortunate mistake of attacking us on Hollow Night,” indicates Mayce as Kronos enjoys his soul sample.

“And you sent the one before as one of your *games*,” adds Kyan, who tenses, the muscles of his face almost pushing his mask off. A knot of remorse forms within my belly for my brother when I consider Erya who deceived Kyan most, vowing her love and oath of fealty. To this day, Kyan despises Kronos most for Erya since they wedded on Midsummer’s Night. And she tried to slit his throat in their own bridal bed. That knot of remorse grows into a brood of angry vipers as I remember the night we all barreled into the bridal suite to find Kyan clinging to his dead bride and their bed soaked in blood.

After, I vowed to protect my brothers first and foremost.

Closing his eyes, Kronos heaves a deep sigh of pleasure after consuming the soul. My insides tighten and blaze, the inferno working its way into my esophagus. Unlike Kronos, we don’t destroy them. And never full souls. Half-souls require a host. Many of the servants of the castle are due to the half-souls we’ve managed to release, which is why they remain and serve us while the rest of the Waste fears and bows. I can’t imagine how many races throughout the Five Realms have become slaves to Kronos once he’s finished eating half their souls. Most of them willing—too young to remember the ancient times.

Sensing my temper getting the better of me, Mayce turns to Kronos and suggests, “Why don’t we find more suitable surroundings to discuss these matters?”

Kronos glances around at the countless unclothed Waste-folk thanks to the interruption of their coitus interactions. “Indeed,” he agrees and smiles at the three of us. “After all, it is the Solstice, and I brought gifts...” he croons, retrieving a number of smaller, colorful bottles from the other side of his belt. They clink together like a queen’s jewels suspended on ropes of chains.

Fear strains my nerves even as we all rise because every time I swallow the rising flames, more threaten to burn a hole right through my fucking throat. Kronos dismisses the Court to continue their revelry while we make our way to the side staircase, descending into the darkness of the lower levels. Deeper and lower than usual tonight. The darkness and cold, sharp air do little to stem the tide of red-hot fire ignited within me. The more I swallow the burning lumps of embers like live coals, the more I fear Kronos will suspect. It's even more validation that our little Tessie is no spy. No blade-binder, warrior, nor spy could ignite any of our powers.

Once we enter the catacombs where the scent of the dead will shield any other odors, I inhale deeply through my nose. The scent of rotted bones hangs in the air. But not even the ghostly energy creeping over my senses is enough to prevent the conflagration from gathering back into my throat. For the first time in our history, I fear I will accept Kronos' gift and go so far as to drink with him. Anything to protect my sweet pet. I can only hope it will be enough.



“IF AT FIRST YOU DON’T  
SUCCEED...”

## QUINTESSA

“THIS IS WITHOUT A DOUBT THE MOST FOOLISH DECISION YOU have ever made,” Qora scolds me as I steal away down the staircase, enveloped in her shades. Her voice is more perturbed than usual.

“Oh, come now, I’ve made many other foolish decisions,” I tease her softly, careful to speak in lowered tones but remaining within earshot of the Kings’ boots thudding on the stone floor.

“Name one.”

I chew on my inner cheek, considering her challenge. A sudden memory sparks in my brain, and I remind her, “Remember the one time Pater took me to the eastern Borderlands by train, so I could heal the Governor’s concubine?” Qora says nothing, already knowing where I’m going with this, but I smile, picking up on how her amber eyes brighten. “And before we left, I let the Governor’s son fuck me on that balcony with my body hanging over the railing.” Nothing below but hundreds of feet of pure air followed by the sea surf thundering against the jagged rocks. It gave me a bit of an adrenaline surge in my veins but nothing more. Unlike here in the Waste where my time with the Kings has sharpened my senses and intensified my nerve endings.

I arrive at the base of the staircase and press my back against the wall. “Or what about the one porter who fucked me at the back of the moving train?” I point out, raising a hand to cover my lips and stifle the giggles.

“Yes, I’m unfortunately all too aware of your many follies—most of which involved a quick and hard rutting. Too many times I considered strangling the life out of you just to put you out of your misery,” she admits, her amber eyes pinching, her shadows branching out toward me.

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again, they say.”

“The proverbial poem also dictates “once or twice though you should fail”. How many times did you fail, Quintessa?” she whispers the question, her shade figure curling against the side of my body, chilling my skin beyond my gown skirts.

I snort and stick my nose up in the air. “And time still brought my reward.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yes, what a reward you have reaped. Just desserts that you would finally feel at the hands of monsters.”

“Not just their hands,” I joke and don’t wait for Qora to retort since the boots fade to soft echoes.

Where are they going with the god-eater? My chest squeezes at the thought of how Emperor Kronos formed the Veil of Souls over ten thousand years ago, how he devoured the gods who had enslaved the races, but the god-spawn rose against him. Our history books dictate the many battles the god-eater waged against those spawn until four rulers remained. If he trapped them here, is he simply here to ensure his Veil is holding strong? Surely there are representatives who could do that for him. Why would the Emperor of the Five Realms bother doing more than locking them up and throwing away the key?

Blood thunders in my ears the deeper we go. Darkness closes in like black raven wings, but I don’t take comfort in the shadows. Not with the cold, stone walls hemming me in on each side, closing around me. Tremors attack my limbs first, congregating in my hands. I close my eyes and breathe through the dizziness assailing me. My lungs burn, and cold sweat beads upon my brow and the back of my neck. Mouth turning dry as toast, I stumble and catch myself against the wall, gasping for breath.



“Quintessa,” Qora’s amber eyes penetrate mine, but they don’t stop nausea from swirling in my stomach. Or my heartbeat from stuttering. Or my limbs from quaking. “Oh, no, not again, Quinn.”

Tears form in my eyes, wetting my cheeks, and I muster a nod.

On the verge of sliding down to curl up in a ball, I knock the back of my head against the wall, hoping the pain will jerk me out of this attack. The strongest I’ve ever felt because the Kings are so near, and because Drago fucked me not an hour ago.

“Deep breaths, Quinn,” Qora directs me and folds her shadow-vym around me like cool shawl. “Remember where you are. They are just stone walls. You walked down the stairs of your own accord. You were not thrown in here. You are not trapped. Yes, breathe...” she instructs me, and I recall what our town’s mind-binder told me. Breathe in through my nose, breathe out through my mouth. “Focus on your senses, Quinn.”

It’s truly the first time I can. The scent of dust and mold, a hint of smoke from ashy torches. The grit and unevenness of the stones and even the crusty feeling of Drago’s dry cum on my thighs. The leftover taste of oranges and spiced wine. My deepening breaths slowing their battering of my eardrums. Qora’s eyes. With every inhale and exhale, the burning in my lungs subsides. The dizziness doesn’t leave, but it’s more manageable. Like dust bunnies instead of an ocean whirlpool.

“Th-thank you,” I tell Qora, shivering from her presence but finding heat in her steady amber eyes.

By now, the footprint sounds of the Kings have disappeared. No voices carried upon the air or squeezed through the threadbare chinks in the walls.

“Do you wish to go back?”

I shake my head after Qora’s question.

“Good girl.”

I knit my brows in confusion and snap my eyes to hers. “I thought you said this was a foolish idea.”

“It is,” she huffs, her figure slowly seeping away from mine. “But for once, you haven’t scampered away like a frightened, little rabbit as you normally do. And that will come in handy if the god-eater or the Kings decide to lock you up for being such a nosy ninny.”

I smirk to one side and pick up my pace, relieved when it’s not too long before the narrow stone tunnel expands into a series of larger passages. I’m at the converging point.

Qora shrugs, turning away. “Well, you gave it a fair try. Perhaps you may try again sometime and never learn from your failures.”

“They went this way.” I thrust a finger to the left tunnel just next to the center one.

Qora pauses, skirting my body with her shadows. “How do you know?”

My chest warms as I respond, “I can smell Drago.”

With a reluctant sigh, Qora follows me into the left tunnel. At least it’s more open than the last, so I don’t feel closed in. Drago’s masculine musk grows the further down we travel. I notice some dirt shuffled from fresh boots and take that as a good sign, but it’s not long before I learn why the tunnel has expanded. Hollowed into the sides of stone walls, crude alcoves harbor skeletons of varying shapes and sizes. Some with animalistic skulls and others with more human ones. These must be burial grounds for past servants who died in service to the Kings.

Upon a dim light piercing the darkness ahead of me and the sound of familiar voices, I slow my pace, grateful when Qora folds her shadows around me. The tunnel ends, and I part my lips, caging a gasp from the path expanding into what reminds me of an underground courtyard with a row of cracked steps leading to a rotund pavilion. Large stone crypts line the grounds on each side—some carved into the stone itself to fuse their scrollwork with the walls. Moss and ivy lurk

all along the walls and crypts while knee-length grass curtains the center of the courtyard between the rows of steps. The dim light comes from moonlight streaming down upon the pavilion.

Unease tightens my neck at the sight of the Kings sprawled upon crude couches in the center of the pavilion. Before them is a small stone table. Smoke curls into the air, and I wrinkle my nose at the bittersweet scent stirring within the air. A chill stings my insides, and the fear prickles the hairs on my body, forming gooseflesh. There is the god-eater pacing amidst the pavilion, circling the Kings, and tapping some instrument against his palm.

I need to get closer.



T'M PARALYZED MOST BY THE  
GOD-EATER.

## QUINTESSA

QORA SAYS NOTHING. SIMPLY CANVASSES ME IN HER SHADOWS as I tiptoe in a scurry across the edges of the courtyard. Grass brushes my thin skirts, tickling my calves through the thin fabric. The god-eater pauses in mid-stride. At first, I freeze just before a crypt, worried I may have disturbed a pebble or something. But Emperor Kronos simpers at Drago, but I recognize a leer when I see one, considering my father gave me plenty. An odd possessiveness sizzles my bloodstream, and I clench my teeth, resisting the urge to jump between them.

Ducking behind the crypt, I press myself against the slabbed stone, scoot along the back, and repeat with the next crypt and the next. Since the fourth crypt is carved into the wall, I creep around to the front, careful not to brush the ivy swarming the stones. From here, I have a better view—about fifty feet away or so.

Bottles as colorful as stained glass decorate the table. That's when I recognize the Kings all hold the same instrument as the god-eater. It reminds me of a convoluted pipe, but the smoke drifting from the chamber is anything but normal. It forms unnatural shapes, reminding me of swirling tattoos and mirrors the variety of colorful bottles. I swallow hard from the sight of Drago with one arm propped on the back of the couch, his body leaning deep into the cushions with his legs relaxed and parted wide. My insides tighten, growing warmer from his tunic parted to show his scaled muscles while he's released his chaotic long hair from its ponytail, so it drapes like fire over his broad shoulders. More of his stubble has grown into a beard, and with the loss of my

embers trotting along my skin, all I want to do is mount the monster god and become the grandest dragon rider of all time!

Until the flaming currents wandering into the air from his skin compel me most. Dumbstruck, I flick my eyes to the others. It takes my breath away.

Not just Drago, but there is Mayce at the end of the couch with his own pipe. Except, fire doesn't curl from his body. Instead, roots and branches twist and twirl in a dance of his control, growing white flowers with petals tinted in a flush. My jaw drops, and I marvel at how he grows a beautiful tree and right there in the pavilion. Fruit sprouts from the flowers, gleaming golden-red and dripping with luscious juice.

“Remember, never blood berries?” muses Mayce, nudging Drago with his elbow.

Drago cocks his head, gives him a chuckle, and nods. “Named thus since any non-Fae, who taste even one, never want to stop until the berries fill a human's belly to the bursting point. I also remember how you tricked me into eating them the night we met. And I was shitting out burning seeds for the next week.”

I cover my mouth to stifle my laughter. Even Merikh smirks at the two of them sharing the memory. The vampire mesmerizes me most. Spiraling from his form are two currents weaving in and out of each other like intricate DNA strands, except one is the pale, crystal-clear color of water while the other stream is red as blood. At the iron smell tinting the air, I almost choke, understanding: it *is* blood.

And there is Kyan sitting close to Merikh, except he's directing all the smoke into chaotic patterns. It takes him a few moments, but he collects the smoke, transforming the patterns into one great portrait. Of grand angel wings. My whole body softens from the sight of all my monster kings, at how I've trespassed onto something that seems...*sacred*, something from their past that unites them. It makes them even more beautiful and powerful in my eyes.

I'm paralyzed most by the god-eater.

So much legend and magic abound within the stories of Emperor Kronos. Portraits and statues of him swarm every major province within the Five Realms. Peoples of all races will travel far and wide to pay tribute to him and serve him. It's simple to see why. Power radiates from him. He wears it loosely, casually because he knows none may take it from him. Cheekbones sharp as a reaper's blade, he is every bit as beautiful as Mayce and as masculine as Drago but with a darker, deadlier persona. Not the ruggedness of my dragon king with all his rich eat. No, Emperor Kronos would never need to seduce. With one command, he would bring an army to its knees. And a host of lovers to his harem.

“Such an encouragement that you have chosen to accept my gifts for the first time in thousands of years instead of stealing them,” muses Kronos, rubbing his strong, pronounced jaw and the dark beard that only serves to accentuate it. “I hope you are enjoying yourselves. These half-souls may be my leftovers, but Daddy still cares enough for his boys to offer them the finer things.”

Tremors assault my body. Icy horror rattles my insides, and I rub my shaking arms with quivering fingers in an attempt to self-soothe. The monsters, *my* monsters are consuming half-souls. Half-souls...like mine. Could one of them be responsible for devouring Qora's soul and half of mine?





I CAN FEEL EMPEROR KRONOS.

## QUINTESSA

“NOT THE FINEST AS THAT WOULD REQUIRE YOU TO CONSUME full souls,” indicates Kronos while uncorking another bottle from his belt.

“Never,” growls Drago, spitting embers to crackle in the air.

“Unlike you, Kronos, we haven’t lost all sense of propriety. Or scruples,” Mayce adds and curls his hand to rouse more fruit from his tree. By now, its roots have fused deep into the cracked stone, growing to twist around the pavilion arches.

He laughs. Kronos laughs and swirls the wispy soul within his bottle. My blood congeals when I hear a wail of lament from that bottle. After lifting the bottle to inhale the traces of fog curling from beyond, the god-eater sips, taking time to savor the tragic soul. I clutch my throat, wondering if it’s what happened to Qora. Did her spirit suffer at birth? I turn to my Shadow to discover her amber eyes fixated on the Emperor, her figure arched as if...longing.

“Come now, boys. You will never wash the blood from your hands. How many villages did you plunder and pillage in the days of the gods? How many lost widows did you take to your realms to warm your beds and wet your cocks? How many brothels did you young kings frequent for a fast fucking to fill the hollow within your hearts?”

They say nothing. Do nothing. Shadows cross each god king’s eyes as if they are lost in those aged memories.

Squeezing my blurring eyes, I cover my mouth. Bile churns inside my belly, acid rising into my throat. Somehow, I swallow it down, refusing to retch and be caught.

“However distance you may have from your past is irrelevant when considering the state of the Five Realms now. Yes, I spilled blood. Yes, I went to war with the wanton gods, who abused their power and enslaved the people, and struck them down. And yes, I slaughtered ten thousand men to form the Veil of Souls and cage you insolent boys.

“Ever since, not one war has plagued the Five Realms. Boundaries have been well established between the lands, which prevents quarrels and political turmoil. All binders log their abilities into my annual census. The more powerful ones are brought to the Capital for advanced training to offer aid should any natural disasters arrive. People gladly pay taxes to prosper the Realms. Fathers work hard but enjoy a fruitful harvest every year. Mothers are fat and joyful, their children well-fed and protected, and aside from the manageable pub brawl, the races do not seek rebellion.

“Of course, I must consume souls. It’s how I survive. Little different than mortals hunting or breeding their food. My form of tax for bearing the burden of the Five Realms. Your names are forever an abomination in the texts of the high annals. The Waste may be a dark blight upon this side of the Five Realms, but a blight I have contained to the weeds.”

Feeling gutted, I hold my stomach. The truth of those words stabs deep into me. Though I never left the confines of the Borderlands, the god-eater’s name is revered and worshipped for a reason. No war. No unrest. No famine.

“Yes, you established boundaries,” dictates Mayce while growing more roots to crack the stone near Kronos’ boots. “Isolating the races from one another. No crossed territories or shared lands. Interracial relations expressly forbidden.” He grimaces, shoulders tight as Drago eyes him from the side, nodding his agreement.

“Birds of a feather flock together...” dismisses Kronos with a wave of his hand while fetching another bottle and

meandering to the table. “A small price to pay for maintaining peace and order.”

“And Hollow Night?” counters Kyan, stabbing out his chin. Painful knots twist in my stomach, growing claws.

Without turning to the angel, Kronos proceeds to unbind several bottles from his belt and places them on the table, organizing them as if they are both trophies and temptations for the Kings.

“An acceptable sacrifice. One-night casualties of the war between us and a renew the peoples’ faith in me and their fear of you. But I make it succinctly clear every year, all you need do is kneel and pledge your fealty. I will restore everything to you from your lands to your true castles. And more.”

Drago snorts and takes another puff of his pipe.

“We’ll never kneel to you, Kronos,” barks out Merikh, pinning his dark eyes upon the god-eater. “Ten thousand years...I do wonder what the people must believe about their “oh so powerful”, eternal ruler and why he can’t manage to bring four kings into his servitude. Much less eliminate such a threat.”

Kronos sniggers and taps his pipe against his open palm. “Or you serve as an example of slow, grueling exile for any enemies who wish to arise. Pity none exist to offer me a worthy challenge. Not since you precious boys.”

“Bored to death already, Kronos?” quips Kyan, stirring a breeze to ruffle the god-eater’s robes. “Bring down the Veil, and I’m certain the four of us will find a much more exhilarating death for you.”

Tapping the side of his nose, Kronos winks at the fallen angel. “That’s what I’ve always loved about you, Kyan. The quietest of the group. But when you speak, you prove the most amusing. And the most gullible.”

Something crosses the angel’s eyes at that moment. Something that shivers me down to my soul. He tilts his head at a severe angle. His pupils dilate, overwhelming not just the irises but the whites of his eyes. With his spine curving, body

in a predatory crouch, he reminds me of a bird of prey. The kind who soars through the night, concealing himself in shadows. The one of silent flight whom you don't hear coming until his talons have gutted you.

“Kyan!” bellows Merikh, cupping his partner's shoulder and pulling him back. Their eyes deadlock. The vampire tenses, veins straining against his skin as he focuses on the angel. I purse my lips, knowing he's using his blood power to stem whatever crazed tide rages inside Kyan.

“A jolly good time we've had, but I believe we are missing our party,” announces Mayce and rising to a stand. “And while we may be cursed bastards, we are still the Monster Kings of the Waste. Don't want to disappoint the Court, now do we?” he flicks his eyes to their corners, marking Drago.

“I believe I will leave these here, considering your willingness to accept my last ones,” mentions the god-eater, tapping one of the bottles. “Some of them aged poorly on the journey, so it's no loss to me. Do with them what you will. I'll pick up a few more within the Veil on my return home.”

All the Kings flinch at the word. As if it's a hot iron poker stabbing into their spine. But my blood thrills at the thought of freeing those souls, releasing them to find their own homes. I chew on my lower lip, considering the Shadow next to me, wondering if any of the souls could possibly fit her. Or if it could help her regain a flesh and blood form. Other than her curling shadows, Qora hovers, motionless. I part my lips, suspicious because she continues to study the god-eater.

The other three Kings rise, set down their now-empty pipes, and glower at Emperor Kronos, who extends a hand to the main path leading back to the Court. Melancholy nestles in my chest at the sight of Mayce's tree withering in seconds, leaves and fruit shriveling to rot, juice turning dark as cursed blood. Drago's flames have faded to a heated glow upon his flesh.

With one growl at Kronos, Drago swipes at the array of bottles. None break.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, still haven’t cooled that temper in all these centuries, Dragomir,” chastises Kronos as the Dragon King turns, fists braced, and storms off down the path.

Panicked, I tiptoe toward the back of the crypt and press my body into the narrow space between the crypt wall and the rocks behind me.

“He needs to calm down,” sighs Mayce. “I’ll go talk to him.” He follows in Drago’s direction, saying nothing else.

Kronos rights the bottles, tsking to himself while Merikh and Kyan usher out of the cracked courtyard. I hold my breath as they pass, hoping Merikh doesn’t scent me. Midway down the path, he pauses. Too close to the crypt. Qora drapes her shadows around me, but I dare not take a breath or move a muscle.

“Coming?” Kyan urges him a few steps ahead.

After scenting the air, Merikh huffs and stalks toward the fallen angel, following him back to Court. I release a shallow sigh and peer around the corner of the crypt. No trace of the Emperor anywhere. The bottles rest on the table, all of them straight and lined up in flawless rows. Colorful cages, that is what they are. With the daylight streaming down upon them, they gleam, far too gilded for a soul prison.

Choking on my own sadness, I catch my breath, swallow hard, and bolt from my hiding place. “What are you doing?” whispers Qora, trailing me.

“What do you think I’m doing?” I say a little too sharply but could care less about politeness right now.

“Do you even know what you’re doing?”

“Do I ever?”

Qora doesn’t respond. Already, the energy from those souls thrums across my skin like the fluttering of bird wings. Each chants its spirit song, a lyrical essence, calling to me, mesmerizing. My heart lurches in my chest, and I press my determined lips into a tight seam. And gingerly touch the closest bottle of cerulean blue, stunned by the warmth. I’d

expected a soul to be cold as a ghost, bereft of its form. Unless Kronos prefers to heat the bottles for his journeys.

My thoughts swirl, and I hardly know what I'm doing when I tug the cork from the bottle. Peer inside. I make out nothing but an illusory fog. Tresses of mist curling in this glass cage. The moment I creep my fingers inside the bottle, the warmth envelopes my fingers. Followed by a sharp bite. I jerk back, startled.

"It bit me!" I gasp at the sight of my bloody fingers.

"She," corrects Qora. "She's afraid. Not likely to come out of her own accord."

Narrowing my eyes, I look inside again and hear a soft, lilting sound. First, my fingers tingle, signaling my instinctive vym sealing the pinprick wounds. Next, I whisper a hushing noise to the soul inside the glass and slowly, tenderly creep the gray vym, softening it, imagining a braided, wool throw to blanket her. This time, something tickles my fingertips, like the delicate tails of kite strings. The threads wrap around my fingers, almost prickling but warm like stardust. When I retrieve my fingers, I gush in awe. Even Qora's breath becomes more labored as she tilts her head, curious at the sight.

She reminds me of a silver fairy, I ponder the effervescent being who is no bigger than the length of my index finger. No wings, but she possesses strings. As fine and thin as strands of lace. A soft smile finds the corners of my mouth. I feel them lifting as I stare at her, going so far as to curve my fingers, urging her with no words into the palm of my hand. Those tiny ribbons tickle my skin like antennae. They even trace across the swirling lines of ink upon my fingers. Once she's nestled in the palm of my hand, I lean toward Qora with tears glistening in my eyes.

"I'm..." , I don't say the words, fearing the magic of the moment will be gone if I do.

Qora nods and lifts tentative, shadowy fingers toward the little soul. The black of night contrasting with a silver morning. And I am the scarred twilight between them.



No sooner does the fairy-like soul arch her neck toward Qora than the magic is broken. A hand catches my other wrist. Qora retreats, leaving me alone with the god-eater. My breath seizes.

“Well, well, what have we here?” he croons, beckoning my eyes to his.

I can feel Emperor Kronos.



“I WARNED YOU WHAT WOULD  
HAPPEN IF YOU DEFIED ME.”

## QUINTESSA

I STILL CAN'T BREATHE.

Up close, Kronos is even more alluring and deadly. Thickly-lashed eyes like frost and nightmares—icy white irises ringed in a stygian black. Hoods as deep as trenches lend to his disarming prowess. Two heads higher than me with a neck as strong as a sculpted pillar. Moonlight embellishes his skin, glints in his eyes. Eyes that see all and can command realms to bow before him. I nearly double over as if an iron fist has charged into my stomach.

“Aren’t you a sweet, little will-o-the-wisp?” he observes, corners of his lips curving into a smile of approval.

Any words lodge in invisible webs clogging my throat. Without releasing my wrist, the god-eater drags his eyes down my figure, settling upon my heaving chest, but I know it has nothing to do with my pert breasts but the bodice of scales. Drago’s scales. I flinch when he twists my other arm, baring Kyan’s mark concealed on the opposite side. It’s the first time I’ve flinched in revulsion. The first time since I entered the Waste where I want no touch.

“Seems my boys have been quite busy. And naughty,” he mentions and tilts his head to the side, studying my tattooed scars. “What a tapestry you bear. But aside from the raw battlefield of your flesh, why in the Waste would they bother with a shade?”

“I’m no shade,” I object, burning my eyes against his.

Gripping my chin, he pulls me closer and presses his index finger to my lower lip, forcing my mouth open. “So, she does have a tongue. Use it to give me your name, little wisp.”

I use my teeth to bite him instead.

Hardly a grimace forms on his mouth as he shakes his fingers. “Well, I see the boys’ lack of manners has rubbed off on you. Along with other *substances*.” He casts a heated gaze to my thighs, and I tense, remembering Drago’s dried cum caking my legs. “Now, little wisp, release the soul.”

I glance at my palm, jaw dropping because I’d nearly forgotten about the fairy in my hand. Tears clot the back of my throat, but I refuse to whimper. And shake my head.

“Return her to the bottle or you may use those well-marked hands to feed her to me.”

“No.” I grit my teeth and clasp the soul closer. She’s curling into my palm, her form shuddering, clinging to my skin for warmth.

Heaving a deep sigh, the god-eater drops his shoulders and states, “Have it your way. A pity those ruffian monsters have corrupted you. But perhaps you could be saved.” He prints his thumb on my lower lip, and it quivers. My eyes water, filling up with tears. His scent overpowers the air, a dark and sinful musk. “After all, I could use a blood binder in my Capital. Or perhaps in my personal chamber tending to any wounds I may accumulate. While the Kings would treat you as their wanton whore, you will be one of my prized and personal binders. Protected under my laws and ruling. And live in an extended wing of my palace.”

Nausea overwhelms my stomach at the thought of refusing him. He tips his head, offering me a genuine smile as he trails his fingertips across my cheek. My limbs border on buckling from that caress of seduction and power. I imagine what it would be like to live in the god-eater’s palace, to personally attend to him and anyone around him. And Emperor Kronos could help Qora.

Startled when my palm bearing the little soul grows cold, I uncurl my fingers and stare at the fairy close to my chest. Sheer dread sickens me, twisting all my nerves.

“Wha-what is happening?” My teeth chatter as the soul dims, fading from that silvery light like moonstones to a nebulous shadow. Cold in my hand. Her breath grows shallow. She closes her eyes.

Emperor Kronos tucks a few stray strands behind my ear and explains, “Souls do not last long once they are outside of my protective vials.”

“No...” I whimper, lament straining my voice.

“Even if you had returned her when I stated, she would have grown sickly. I would have granted her a swift and meaningful death, painless. She is suffocating.”

“Please...can you—?”

He shakes his head. “It’s too late now.”

He releases my wrist, so I may touch my fingertip to her chest where her heartbeat has slowed to near imperceptible. A throbbing ache plagues my chest. Hot tears smolder my eyes as the rest of her glow darkens, as her breath stills, and her heartbeat stops. I break down.

“There now, little wisp...” the Emperor gathers me into his arms as I clutch the lifeless soul to my chest. He shouldn’t feel so strong, so safe. But he does. He sifts his fingers through my hair as I give into the grief weighing me down. It’s a strange and unwelcome emotion. Not even when Pater locked me in darkness could I grieve.

“If you return with me to the Capital, you may choose whatever soul sepulcher you desire for her final resting place.”

I tense. And try to pull away, but the god-eater doesn’t relinquish his grip. Now, I feel as though I’m suffocating. My throat constricts, but I manage to rasp, “No.”

“The mere notion that you believe you may say “no” to the most powerful being in the Five Realms is quite *adorable*, little wisp. Do not take my generosity for granted. I could

choose the lowliest position of a fuck slave for you. But I would prefer to make you my personal blood binder.”

“No!” I struggle against him, gasping when the lifeless, little soul almost slips from my fingers.

For one moment, I consider how ridiculous I’m being. The one, who struck down the gods and consumed their essences to grant him more power and immortality, the Ruler of the Five Realms himself, has offered me a place in his palace. I should be falling to my knees before him, head pressed to the ground at the opportunity. If I were to bargain, I could potentially arrange for Sarai to come and live with me. Hell, I could invite my own family just to show them how far I’ve come. And despite how Kronos serenades me with seduction to spiral heat to warm my very bones, I only consider how much distance I want between myself and him. How I’d rather be cold and numb rather than stay another moment in his arms!

“And what of your Shadow, little wisp?”

I freeze, choking on a gasp.

With sharp eyes cutting straight to my core, the god-eater gestures to Qora. All this time, she’s hidden behind the crypt, but he knew she was there. Of course, he knew she was there.

“Come now, little phantom,” he bids her.

My heart pounds as Qora drifts around the corner of the crypt and approaches, her nebulous form trembling.

“What an intriguing development,” he remarks, more to himself than either of us. Pressed against him stirs a poison in my blood. His predatory heat hunts my body, and he strokes his knuckles across the side of my neck, but he turns to Qora. “Twenty years. Twenty years, you have existed—hollow and dark, cold and lifeless without a touch beyond your host. You are the embodiment of pure, unadulterated revenge.”

“That’s not true!” I push my hands against his chest, but all it does is bring me closer to him. “She loves me. And I love her.”

“Hmm...” he muses, and I stiffen, quivering when those knuckles descend lower to trace the neckline of the scaled

bodice. “Never have I felt one so consumed with hatred. And envy. Robbed of blood and *flesh*,” he emphasizes and pushes his hand just beneath the curve of my breast, to deepen my cleavage and plump the mound in indication. Horror bleeds into me and steals my breath. “I bear the power to grant you form and life, little phantom. What say you, sweet shade?”

I meet her amber eyes. Blink back tears, my lips parted in denial. Her eyes shift to the Emperor, and she opens her mouth. My heart lodges in my throat.

Before she may respond, a yipping sound below us catches our attention. My lips spread into a smile at the sight of Jinxy on his hind legs, three bushy tails low behind him. Tiny sparks of fox fire erupt from his fur as he paws at the god-eater, his claws ripping the breeches. When one of the sparks catches onto his cape, Emperor Kronos sneers and stems the fire with a single pulse of wind. A low growl rumbles from his throat, and he raises his hand.

Another comes down, strong and pale. I snap my head to the side, shudders seizing me, contrasting with the relief rippling through me from Merikh growling back. A more powerful growl. A brutal, dark war rages in his eyes. His jaw is rigid and unyielding.

“You will *not* harm the pup,” he warns in a deep, severe voice and extends his claws into the other man’s arm. “And you will release our pet,” he commands, eyes not once deviating from the Emperor’s.

That’s when I catch the wince of pain from Kronos. A shockwave barrages the inside of my chest because blood seeps from the corners of the god-eater’s eyes, from his very pores, trickling down his skin as if they’re no more than beads of sweat.

“Yes, Kronos,” Merikh practically spits out with all his muscles hardening in vindictive fury. “I consumed a fucking full soul for this precise moment. Release our pet, or I will boil the blood in your veins and rupture it from your vessels, so it will require a host of blood binders and a full regenerative cycle to restore your form.”



A thrill spins into my nerves, lighting up all the endings. What I'd give to see that action from the vampire king, but a split second later, Kronos drops my wrist. He grinds his jaw in obvious loathing and contempt, but Merikh turns his gaze to me and extends a hand. I don't hesitate, grateful when he hauls me to his chest. Oh, he's so different from Drago. The dragon king is all heat and mountains of muscle. Merikh is far more like a cold, marble effigy—the kind that requires a lifetime for a master artist to sculpt. Beautiful and hypnotic like Mayce, but his eyes capture mine, dark whirlpools threatening to drag me under. Mine only retreat because Jinxy weaves his body between my legs, tails swinging against my skirts.

I hold my breath when the vampire king and the god-eater deadlock in a stalemate of possessive wills. Their tension smothers me. Every part of me is still.

Finally, the Emperor tugs down his tunic, darkens his eyes upon me, then turns to Qora. “Remember what I said, Shadow. And pay heed to my warning: she will betray you. When the time comes, she will leave you and choose them.”

A violent tremor rocks inside me. Indignant, I ball my hands into fists and shake my head, but it's too late. Kronos disappears into midair, vanishing and leaving nothing behind but black particles.

Knees buckling, I collapse against the king and press my cheek to his chilled chest.

He jerks his head to Qora and commands, “Return to her room, Shadow. I require some time alone with her.”

I chew on my lower lip but don't object when he sends her away.

“I scented you,” he says darkly once she's gone. Fear knifes through me from how bloodthirsty his voice sounds. “I could not expose you, but I never imagined you would be so foolish as to expose yourself. And I warned you, pet. I warned you what would happen if you defied me.” Yes, he would hunt me down and bring me back to Drago in pieces, I shudder at the image.

Stepping back, I cower beneath his eyes, and it takes all my strength to stand before him, stab out my chin, and say, “I—”

It’s all I get out. He grips my throat, restricting my breath, yanking me to him, and piercing my skin with his claws. My vision blurs, but it’s not the first time someone has tried to strangle me, or nearly strangle me since he grants me a thin ribbon of breath. And just as I’ve done with Qora all my life, I tilt my neck to the side, spread my lips into a beam, which catches him off guard. And in the moment that he blinks, I close the distance between us...

...and press my lips to his.



# MERIKH'S MAGIC CROSS

## QUINTESSA

OH, SWEET WASTE, HIS LIPS ARE CHILLED, SENSUAL VELVET. He tastes like the deepest and darkest waters with hints of spiced wine from the Solstice. Heat courses into my cheeks even though the kiss lasts no longer than the seconds it takes for him to recover. Fisting my hair, he drags my head back, lashing a delicious pain into my neck.

My mouth waters, but I still must swallow a lump in my throat at the sight of him tensing, glaring down at me. A fleeting moment has my fingers longing to stray into his dark hair, wondering if it's as silky and cold as his mouth. By now, Jinxy has strayed to the other side of the pavilion, pouncing on random piles of dirt, no doubt hunting insects.

Merikh interrupts my fantasy with a demand, "Is there nothing you take seriously? Nothing you fucking value?"

Sighing, I drop my arms to my sides and shrug. "All that matters are the moments we live inside. When the present is the greatest gift, why look to the past or the future? We can't change the past. We can't control the future. And I've never loved the present more. This..." I curl my hand against his upper chest, teetering my fingers on his stony jaw. "Maybe if you didn't live in the past all the time—"

A deep, dark growl thunders from his throat right before Merikh locks his hands on each side of my neck and crushes his lips to mine. Oh, bleeding gods! All my senses swim, my nerves riot, and my thoughts misfire and combust. No matter how cold he is, his kiss ignites a fever within me and spreads liquid fire into my blood. His tongue penetrates my mouth,

overwhelming me. He fucks me with that tongue, proving how much he longs to do the same with his cock. Even now, I feel it. So hard and hung, I swear it must stretch to his knee. I moan into his mouth. Merikh kisses me like he wants to peel me open, rearrange my insides, and grip my heart until it bleeds and beats just for him. My blood catches fire, making me wonder if he's using his power upon me.

Oh, I don't wonder anymore. Not when he raises me up by my hips until my skirts bunch and gather higher, giving me the freedom to wrap my legs around his waist. Arms around my back to hold me firm, he imprisons me, possesses me, enthralls me. My lungs howl for breath, but he doesn't part from my mouth. Savage mercies, his erection bulges against my naked pussy, and I'm grinding against it, longing for penetration and friction beyond his breeches.

Then, my back hits stone. Out of the corner of my eye, he kicks open the crypt door with his boot and hauls me inside. *What? No...* I startle when he slams the door behind us. Darkness smothers us. But I have a feeling his vision is perfectly fine.

"Please," I beg him after managing to break from his mouth. I'm breathless. Lips swollen and tongue aching from trying to meet his. "You don't understand. I can't—"

He growls and attacks my throat. All heat and hunger, he's teeth and fangs scraping and nipping and pricking my skin. I shriek from the brief stings of pain followed by a whimper from the stroke of his cold, wet tongue to ease the hurt.

"I can't see!" I gasp, reaching for him, my fingers missing his neck and clawing at air. Blind. Nothing but darkness and silence.

"I can," he purrs across my lips, chilling me to my bones. Of course, he can. This is what he wants, establishing his territory and ruling as predator vs prey. He disarms me. He owns me.

Involuntary—or maybe not—heat swarms my pussy, dampening the folds. I squeeze my thighs when his mouth lowers to my collarbone like fire and ice. Unprepared, I quake

when he drags my bodice down. He binds the scaled neckline just beneath my breasts to plump them. Another gasp flees my throat when he touches his lips to his mark on the side of my breast. So tender, I'm bewildered.

"Oh!" I cry out when his mouth latches onto my nipple, and he attacks my breast, suckling with a vengeance. A hard pinch and pull to my other have my breath in frenzied tatters. His teeth and fangs are everywhere, biting and marking my breasts.

"Fucking love your tits..." he murmurs against my nipple, and my pussy aches, the pressure in my cunt tightening all the more. I'm certain all he would need to do is flick my clit once to have me coming all over his hand. "Mayce is an ass man, of course. But these are fucking mine." He palms my breasts, kneading the flesh until it hurts, and I whimper from the warmth pooling inside me.

Too lost in the heat of the moment, I almost don't register what he's done till I'm standing in the blinding and deafening pitch black with nothing but my blood thrashing in my eardrums and my breath puffing into the air.

"Where—where are you?" I whisper, stretching my hands to reach for him.

"Remove your gown."

Merikh's hands stripping me bare interrupt the memories. My arms come around me. I'm shivering, trembling, chattering. Somehow, I know he's there watching me.

"Merikh, please," I sob and curl my head to my chest, trying to catch my frenzied breath. "Take me out of here. Make me suck your cock in the middle of the Court while I'm naked if you must. Just get me out of this crypt."

"You'll suck me off in here, pet. While Drago may appreciate exhibitionism and voyeurism, I do not. On your fucking knees."

All my hopes sink. But I bend before him, obeying. It's not the first time I've sucked a cock. My stomach hardens because

I know just what to do to bring him to release. The sooner I get out of here, the better.

I hear the sound of clothing shuffling. A belt removed. Goosebumps cover my naked skin. At the grip of his hand knotting my hair, I suck in a deep breath. And open my mouth.

“Stick out your tongue, Quintessa,” he commands, and I do.

An unbelievably soft crown meets the tip of my tongue, and Merikh directs me, “Lick me, little pet.”

As soon as my tongue circles the crown, I gasp.

And Merikh sniggers. “Yes, it’s a magic cross. My little idea of a joke. Pure silver. Now, open your mouth.”

Once I do, he stabs inside me hard and merciless. Oh, bleeding god! Nothing but heated silk and velveteen penetrate my mouth. And the icy silver of multiple magic crosses. All. The. Way. Down. Holy fuck, I pull back my teeth in just enough time, knowing the back of my throat will bear the swollen evidence of his massive erection. Something inside me registers his shaft is only this hot because he’s controlling the blood flow. He’s already nudging the back of my throat, but when I grip the base of him, I register he’s not even halfway into my mouth. Fucking shit. I rub my hand upon his length, fisting him, marveling at the lack of any veins or ridges. As if his immense and long shaft was carved from pure marble.

He shoots his hips forward, thrusting, plunging deeper. “Fuck, yeah,” he groans as I swallow him so deeply. That groan is enough to send hot fluids to soak my pussy. “Your throat is so tight. Hot. Wet. Goddamn!”

I gag, choke, but I grip his thighs with one hand and use my other to cup his heavy balls. His breath increases, and I take the power of this moment. Sucking cocks is no grand feat, but it’s the first time I’ve felt my breath shatter and my throat close up around one. The largest one for that matter, though I can’t help but wonder if I could take both of Drago’s.



I suck harder as he erotically fucks my throat. The silver bars chafe the roof of my mouth and the inside of my throat. He pulls out once to let me gasp a flurry of breaths.

“I smell your wet little cunt. Touch it for me now.”

Inhaling deeply, I squeeze my eyes and slowly creep my fingers to my pussy. Slow-drape them across the pubic lips and the folds. They’re so slick and slippery. And warm. Everything is raw and real. Aching for more.

“Dirty girl touching her bits. Now, rub your sweet, little bud. And take a deep breath.”

I moan and lurch at the single touch to my clitoris. A second later, I’m rubbing it fiercely and inhaling the greatest gust of air...right before Merikh plunges inside me. I suck him as hard as I can and work my tongue all around his length, tasting the silver bars. Gods, it’s hard to believe he’s longer than Drago. Of course, the dragon king has two cocks, ridges, and scales. Still, I can’t help but wonder if Merikh, as an apex predator, possesses a knot. My wandering thoughts turn to morbid fantasies, which only get me wetter. My blood sings from the sound of his deep growl. His breath turns labored as he pumps into my throat while I circle my clit and drip more from my hungry slit.

“You will not come,” he dictates, eyes sharp enough to lance mine. “If you come, I’ll bend you over that casket and spank your ass, pussy, and tits so hard, they’ll bear my eternal handprints.”

Tears streaming down my eyes, I manage to whimper and nod, giving my clit a hard pinch.

With a satisfied grunt, Merikh increases his rhythm. Pumps so deep and hard and fast and hungry. My throat burns, swelling more from that cock while my lungs become a blazing inferno, screaming for air. With a primal roar, the vampire grips my head to lock me in place, hips slamming forward, release rupturing through him as he shoots hot, violent jets of his cum down my throat. He’s still spilling his seed as he eases out, and it dribbles in to flood my mouth.

Most cum has been tasteless, dull. Not Merikh's. Bitter but with a sweet aftertaste.

"No," he snarls and holds my mouth open, so his cum trickles down my chin. "You swallowed enough. Now, you will wear my seed."

I clench my eyes, arching my back with a moan as he rubs his cum over my nipples, soaking the already-erect buds. A soft pinch to each surprises me. He collects more cum from my mouth, and I pinch my eyes, straining to see in the dark, wondering what he's going to do. I hiss a sharp breath, tipping my head back when he spreads his seed over my wetness, coating my soaked folds.

I feel his cold breath on my cheek as he leans in to whisper in my ear, "You'll come from one fucking pump, Quintessa."

My heart stutters. No more than that skipped beat passes, and Merikh stabs three fingers deep inside me, circles my clit with his thumb, and captures one taut nipple in his mouth. The pressure inside me snaps. Unleashes an unholy tidal wave of ecstasy to gush through my system, striking lightning to every nerve and synapse. Tremors rack my body. Hair-raising tingles, thousands of them, awaken on my skin to drown me in heated pleasure.

"That's it, my good pet. Ride my fingers, dirty, little girl."

His words only serve to extend the waves rocking into me. The rapture is blinding even more than the darkness swallowing my vision. After he's plundered every last reserve of my bliss, he jerks out his fingers. Undone, I fall, not expecting him to catch me. My body meets the cold, gritty stone, and I curl up into a quivering ball and shield my chest with my arms. I hear Merikh snap his belt back into place before he squats before me, chilled breath hovering over my cheek.

I tremble when he brushes a finger across my throat and down to my chest where he grips my arms and parts them. "I won't forget how lovely you look when you're sucking my cock, Quintessa," he slows the speaking of my name as if savoring. And drags his palm down to fondle my breast,

scooping the flesh to test the weight. “Or how painfully beautiful you are naked in the dark, terror-struck as a dove. Yes, a vulnerable, little dove. Broken and beautiful.”

“Hmm...almost as beautiful as you.”

His finger stills at his mark. And I lift my head, regardless of how I can't see him. It's enough to feel him. “Poor, sad scarred vampire. Can't get off without hurting.”

He pushes closer and feathers his lips on the barest edge of mine in an almost kiss. “That's right, little dove. Nothing more real and alive than your surrender, when you fall apart for me, shattering into a million, sharp little pieces. When I *break* you.”

A ripple of warmth bursts inside me. And I laugh. I know it catches him off guard because he starts to pull away, his breath quickening. No, I don't let him escape. I pounce. His body locks up when I squeeze my legs around him and grind my pussy against his clothes like a sex-crazed vixen.

After I find his cheek and manage a quick lash of my tongue before he growls, grabs my hair, and thrusts me back, I tell him, “The only one who gets to break me is *me*.” I throw my head back and laugh as he struggles against me. I rock up and down his pelvis, feeling his cock bulging, growing harder. “You might have pretty crosses in your cock, Merikh. But I have a thousand fucking scars. And the ink I bled into them. And that's why you hate me so much, isn't it? Because I wear them so proudly, and all you can do is hide yours while you try to scar others.”

“Admit it, Quintessa. You love when I fuck your mouth hard and treat you like my pretty prisoner. You *love* my *hatred*. So, what are you going to do about it, little dove?” He drags his fangs down my neck, and I arch, rubbing my warm fluids across his tunic.

Grinning, I tear the cap off his head and tug it over my hair. “Give me all the scars you want to, you sadistic prick. I'll wear them inside and out just as proud. I love all of them. Because the ones with the greatest scars are the ones with the deepest hearts. Good luck finding mine.”

I climb off him, hear his stunned breath, and search the ground for my fallen dress. Another moment passes before it drops onto my back. I'm just pressing it to my front when the crypt door thrusts open. One look at me, at Merikh, and Drago's neck turns tight, his jaw turns to iron, and his eyes blaze with a raging inferno. All my adrenaline nosedives.

Scrambling to my feet, I rush into his arms as quickly as I can and beg him, my voice cracking, "Take me out of here now."

"I'll kick your ass later, Merikh," Drago guarantees before scooping my naked body into his arms. I clutch the dress to my chest and lean into all his raw, rigid heat, barely acknowledging Mayce and Kyan standing outside.

All that matters is the present. And Drago is carrying me to our room.



“IT’S TIME FOR YOU TO MEET  
MY DRAGON.”

## DRAGO

I'M STILL GOING TO KICK HIS ASS.

After I bathed her and massaged oil into every trace of her pretty scarred, snowdrop skin, little Tessie begged me to fuck her. I refused at first, claiming she needed rest and healing after what my bastard brother did. But I lost the battle when she lifted that tight little ass and started rubbing the ample flesh against my cock. So, I gave her a few good spankings until her ass turned a lovely shade of red before gripping her hips and plowing both my cocks hard into her from behind.

Together, we fall onto the bed, properly winded. She looks adorable. Cheeks flushed. Silver gray strands caked to the sweat on her face. Breath coming in frenzied pants. Glazed eyes. Best of all, that goofy, post-coital smile. Despite how I've just come inside her, she's making it too damn difficult for my cocks to calm and retreat into their protective pouch. Flames roam all up and down my body, mirroring the embers that frolic upon hers. The second I trace one finger across her cheek, she startles, hypersensitive to my touch.

"Mmm..." she hums appreciatively, and the sound is like a fucking purr that shoots straight to my cocks. I roll onto my side, adjusting, only to be caught off guard when my little pet pounces on me.

"Woman, what the—" I laugh at the sight of her on top of me. Hell, she's gorgeous like this as she tosses her hair to one side and stares down at me with a mischievous smile. Fuck, I feel my hot cum mixed with her juices dripping onto my belly

from where she's perched. And when she starts touching herself...“Oh, you dirty, naughty, little pet.”

“Shhh, Master...” she whispers and winks before fondling her breasts and pinching her tight nipples to even harder buds. I'm so fucked for this girl! And not just because she wears my fire so gorgeously. Not just because she's the only one who ever has. I don't care how selfish I am to want to keep her here in my bed and never release her. As long as the curse binds our blood and souls, none of my brothers can fuck her. Only if the curse is lifted...

At least they share in my pleasure through our bond. Someday soon, she will ask what we are forbidden to reveal. The nature of our curse, the orchestrator, and how to break it. I fear this won't be enough. We won't be enough. *I* won't be enough. She will run as all others have. And this time, she will take my heart with her.

For now, I'll savor every moment with her.

Grinning, I prop my elbows behind my head and lean back, enjoying the sight. Damn it all to hell, this insatiable girl will be the death of me. I love how her scars peek out from the fine swirls of ink decorating her skin. I love how her breasts, pussy, and ass are bereft of those tattoos to show her fair skin and rosy tits and pink, swollen folds. She wears all our marks, but it's not enough. I want to see my welts and bruises covering every inch of her. I want my bite marks on her breasts. My cocks throb against the back of her thigh when her fingers slide across my mark upon her mound and lower. A low growl works itself in my throat when she parts those swollen, juicy lips, the soft, slick folds. She shows me the deep pink slit, the wet sweetness just waiting for my tongue beyond her fingertip. The hood of her clit is a lovely shade of pink, but I want it fucking red from my teeth.

When her hands move back to her breasts, I clench my jaw, flick my eyes to hers, and narrow them with a command, “I'm starving, pet. Feed your pretty tits to me now.”

A tremor rocks through her, and I grin when she clenches those thighs. But she responds beautifully, lowering herself



until those pert breasts are within reach of my tongue. I don't give a fuck if they're not full, they're not *too* full. They're perfect with rounded undersides and they slope upward. And damn if I don't love the way the firefly embers on her skin twirl around those dainty, rose nipples. Catching one taut bud, I have no reservations when I sink my teeth around the flesh. Tessie hisses sharply, instincts causing her to rise. But that would tear her more, so I center one hand on her back, holding her steady as she gasps. *A few more seconds, that's my good pet*, I commend her silently while digging my teeth in a little harder. Turned on more by the sound of her yelp and adorable whimper.

Finally, I unclench my teeth and pull away with just enough distance to study. And pinch her nipple. Her eyes grow damp, but so does her pussy, confirming how much she gets off on the pain. "Mmm..." I circle my tongue around her erect nipple and murmur, "You look delicious with my bite mark on your tit, little Tessie. Take a deep breath, sweet pet."

I mark her other breast until the flesh is raised, swollen, and puckered from the imprint of my teeth. After, I make sure to suckle her tits, pleased by how she grinds her wet pussy against my cocks. For a moment, I wonder what they would look like swollen and filled with milk to nourish a strong dragon son. But it's wishful thinking with this damned curse.

Finished with her tits, I grip her hips, ready to impale her on my shafts, but she shakes her head and whispers in my ear, "Wait...Master, please. I..." she trails off, but she doesn't need to explain. Everything inside me turns hot and aches as she works her way down to my cocks.

"Fuck!" I curse when her warm, comely mouth slides over one erection, then the other. And finally...over both. Fisting my hands in the sheets with flames raging all over my chest, I bear with it for a few more seconds of crazed control. All that wet, silky heat folding around my dragon cocks. My scales flare, but she dares to go deeper! Unable to withstand any longer, I grip her head, shoving her down, desperate to feel as much of the wet sheathe of her mouth as possible. She chokes and gags, but she holds. Dammit, my balls draw up, firmer and

heavier than boulders. No woman has ever taken both my cocks. But she swallows the heads into her throat. With tears streaming down her face and her cheeks sunken in, she's never looked more vulnerable. Or exquisite.

But when her chest heaves, and her eyes roll to their ceilings, I rip my cocks from her. Almost fainting, she falls into my arms, sucking deep draughts of air.

“Yes, my pet, breathe. That's my good girl.” I hold her close and sift my fingers into her hair as she shivers against me. “Such a beautiful pet pleasing her master and sucking his cocks.”

*Dragomir...he invades our beautiful moment.*

Despite my muscles tightening, I kiss the side of her head and bark a growl to my inner beast, *What do you want?*

*You know what I want.*

*I won't have you destroying our new room.*

Or her for that matter, I imagine the enormous dragon cock we share penetrating her. I imagine how it would split her apart. Not just my well-endowed, scaled cocks born of man and dragon. No, this would be my beast's cock. All dragon. All scaled and ridged, thicker than a trunk, and long enough to penetrate her womb and spill our fucking seed.

*Take her outside. Now, Drago. If you don't give me what I want now, it won't be just the room I'll destroy. Ten thousand years. ten thousand years, I've slumbered and suffered. Other than the first night. And don't try to tell me you didn't enjoy it just as fucking much.*

I can sense that toothy grin of his, and I growl, remembering how he'd taken her when she'd still slept, passed out after what was virtually her time.

I heave a sigh because I can't. Her greedy heat had encased us, so damn unbelievable. So tight and hot, I was convinced I'd spit flames from my eyes. I want that pressure again. I want to feel her stretched around our dragonhood. My pulse thunders with need, the hunger stoking heat into my belly.

“Quintessa.”

She jerks her head up, surprised by my speaking her full name. Meeting her eyes, I brush my knuckles across her cheek, kiss her tenderly, and say a breath above her lips, “It’s time for you to meet my Dragon.”

Minutes later, I’ve carried her outside the castle and to the eastern side where the largest amount of grounds exist. She deserves better than this earth of nothing but ash and waste. At least this is a field covered in weeping roses. I set her on her bare feet in the middle of the blooms. She winces when a thorn slashes at her ankle, but at her lifting her chin and smiling at me, it unhinges me, prompting my chest to nearly implode. I can’t fucking imagine how much darkness this young woman has felt in her life. To own all these scars and the tapestry of tattoos but to never feel, to never touch, to never experience the warmth of a single hand. To never feel fingertips stroking her hair or a hot breath curling the hairs on the back of her neck. Fuck, if she wants it, I’ll stay buried inside her hot, little body and touch her for eternity.

When I circle my thumbs around the bite marks surrounding her nipples, she hisses but rises on her tiptoes, lips parted in longing. But I touch my fingers to her lips, delaying her. “Are you ready, sweet pet?”

She tilts her neck to one side and lifts a brow. “What does this mean? Meeting your Dragon...?”

I sigh and drag a hand through my fiery locks. “We are one. I am bound to him as he is to me. But he is an ancient entity from a bloodline that stretches to the beginning of time itself. To the very Edenic garden of all race origins. Every time one of my race is born, a soul is birthed and fuses to ours. But...” I wince from the pain flaring inside me while more flames crawl upon my nude form, twisting around hers. “It does not mean he is tame. He is wild. He is not safe. And after ten thousand years of slumbering in the dark, ten thousand years without rising, he is hungrier than ever. He is ravenous.”

Alarmed, she steps back and shields her chest. “What the fuck? He wants to eat me?”

I chuckle darkly and step toward her, taking the side of her neck and purr against her ear, “Not that kind of ravenous, little Tessie.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her brows lift high, and her iridescent eyes turn wide as dinner plates. One of the most adorable extremes I love is the shy blush reddening her cheeks contrasted with that mischievous smile crooking one corner of her mouth.

“What do I have to do?” she whispers back, eager tongue licking her lips.

I beam and kiss her brow and step back. “Don’t scream. He hates that.”

Oh, that adorable smile grows and she bites her lower lip to say, “Oh, I’m sure I’ll do much screaming before the end of it.”

I can’t hold him back any longer. The transformation begins. Tessie’s lips part as she watches our bones breaking, rearranging, growing. Once our dragon form grows too much, she scrambles back, and I want to commend her for not turning around. He would take it as a challenge and turn to hunting mode. But Tessie doesn’t take flight. No, our sweet pet is far too curious. The wind from our transformation whips her hair about her face and chest. Not once does she take her eyes off us, her gaze roaming across every inch of our emerald-hued black scales, our massive paws and talons, our vast wings that span one full side of the castle if we spread them, our lengthy tail. And those wandering eyes briefly swing beneath our tail close to our hind legs. Oh, she’s searching for our cock, the lovable pet. We spread our lips into a toothy grin, dig our claws into the ground while our body crushes hundreds of weeping roses. We scent her blood, the blood shed from the thorns her feet have trod upon in her haste to back up.

Our dragon shakes his head, sheds a few scales, and speaks for us after unleashing a thunderous, hungry growl, “Come closer, little pet...” we bid her to approach.

At first, she pauses, chewing on her inner cheek, hesitating. We narrow our eyes to brutal slits, but she tilts her

head to one side, studying more before taking a few small steps forward. Pursing her lips, she smiles softly, coyly, then hugs herself while responding, “Since you’re the most animal of the two of us, wouldn’t that make you pet?”

Oh, that’s why she hesitated so! Our impulsive, little Tessie. Can’t resist opening her mouth and using that audacious tongue of hers. Our dragon flicks his tail back and forth, crosses his paws, and lowers his great bone head toward her. “I’d advise you not to tickle this dragon’s tail, sweet pet. Especially if you want your reward.”

Her shoulders lift. “Reward?”

We puff embers into the air and smoke to curl around her form. “Lay your body upon the roses, pet. Spread your legs. Take a deep breath. And scream as much as you desire.”



“DO IT! DO IT ALL OVER  
AGAIN, DRAGO.”

## DRAGO

MY PULSE RAGES, THUNDERING MY EARDRUMS. MY HEARTBEAT explodes to join that pulse. On my knees, naked and quaking from the post-coital power howling all over my body in waves of hellfire, I grit my teeth and dig my claws into the ground as my brothers burn themselves, trying to resuscitate her. Tessie's blood coating my cock clots the air, sharp, iron, and sweet. The moment I came inside her was when her heartbeat stopped.

*You fucking asshole, you took it too far!* I unleash my wrath on my dragon, already predicting how he will respond.

*You could have stopped us if you'd truly wished, Drago. Don't deny you wanted it as much as I. We. Felt. Everything. The first pussy to receive all of us. the first pet to surrender to us. Fuck, she practically commanded us.*

*Yes, I growl at Thayne and clench my jaw. Because she has the heart and soul of a true queen, not a goddamn pet. and we fucked her like a whore.*

*She is a whore. Our whore. She is our thrall. Our pet. Our princess. And our queen. She. Is. Everything, you crackbrained cockatrice! One cannot kill everything.*

No sooner does he say the words than a familiar, feminine gasp pierces the air followed by a little whimper. And then another gasp once she discovers the flames licking and embers glittering upon every inch of her body. My heart nearly shoots from my chest at the sight of her scrambling back, her eyes filled with concern. Not fear from her skin blazing like a



vesper. Not wrath from how we fucked her to death itself. No, she curls into a little ball and covers her face from the sight of Mayce, Kyan, and Merikh with the numerous brands upon their skin and the scent of scorched flesh from their efforts to bring her back to life.

“Quintessa...” I close the distance between us, the only one who may unite with her, the burning heart to hers. At first, she tries to resist, but I lock my arms around her and pull her into my lap, wincing from the drops of blood falling onto my skin. She curls against me, her little body even smaller, tinier against me. I take a sharp breath from how she buries her head against my scales. Stroking her hair, I reassure her, “They are gods. They will heal soon, sweet girl.”

Her tears don't stop, and I can't begin to fathom how overwhelmed she is. Those tears spill from the pain of us ripping her apart and tearing up that pussy, from how we sent her into the afterlife, and from how she's become a smoldering orb from the essence of my power coursing through her flesh and blood. Wrenching her face from my chest, I cup her cheeks, search her eyes through the glistening tears, and watch her lips part while that tantalizing tongue licks her lips.

“Fuck, Tessie, what have we done?” I drag my claws through my hair, lacerating my skull in punishment.

She knits her brows as if confused. I lift one when she presses herself against me, her body all silk and flame as her hands slide up my chest to settle her fingers upon each side of my neck. My hellfire currents kiss the embers and flames upon her skin, my power coupling to her essence, ever seeking, ever desiring. Too lost in her eyes, the tears like flaming jewels upon her cheeks, I growl from her sudden wet heat impaling itself upon my cock.

“What the fuck, Quintessa?” I snarl in her face and curse when she grinds against me, seeming oblivious to the goddamn blood still dripping from her pussy. “Fuck me!” I say through gritted teeth and push against her hips, forcing her out by a few inches, doing my best not to damage her more.

“Gladly,” she thrills, arches her neck, and presses her lips to mine. Once she shifts forward again, oh, goddamn me, the hot, wet grip of her body unravels me! There’s nothing between us. And everything. She’s exquisite. She’s molten heat and liquid fire surrounding me and sucking me. Fuck, I’m hurting her. No denying that from the blood leaking from her cunt warning me to get her to the steam pool as fast as possible. I try to dislodge again, only for her to grip my ass, yanking me harder, closer, tighter. The power in her arms is not normal. It mirrors mine, matches it, and reduces me to her fucking thrall, especially when she rubs her body against mine and starts to thrust up and down.

“Fuck, Tessie!”

“Yes!” she squeals and rides me harder, deeper. “Fuck Tessie. Fuck me. Do it! Do it all over again, Drago.”

Her fingers leave my ass and claw into my hair instead. With a mad, wild laugh, she rips at my strands, triggering me to growl and grip her throat. Not enough to strangle her, just enough to show her my control. What control? Lust stampedes through my system. My dragon roars his own laugh and urges me to take her, to give the salacious little minx what she desires. Oh, fucking goddammit, even with how our dragon plunged his club of a cock into her, she’s still tight and gripping me beyond the back of her cunt. She’s fucking shining like a diamond in the sunlight. Brighter than my dragon scales. She’s my ultimate treasure—one I’ll hoard forever!

The moment my brothers try to step in, Tessie lashes out at them with an ear-splitting scream. Her possession gets me even harder, excruciatingly hard. Fuck, goddammit fuck, I thrust inside her, and she throws her head back with a thrilled gasp.

“Harder,” she demands and bites the crest of my ear. The sensation ignites my blood. Hunger consumes me, lengthening my cock. Still, I hold back, pursuing her slowly, sensually, filling her softly. “Harder, Drago!” she shouts, and a sharp pain flares through me from her fingers tearing at the scales on my chest. Drawing blood.

“Goddamn!” I growl, but it turns into a groan from her mouth, her lips, her hot tongue stroking my chest, lapping up the blood. Right now, I’m pretty damned sure Tessie has become someone else, something else. At the very least, that something else has fused with her just as my dragon has. Something as monstrous as us.

She took every inch of our beast until we fucked her soul and shot her to the gates of heaven. Now, she’s back and bleeding and begging for the depths of hell! No other woman, no other girl, no other anything has ever taken all of us. Not even Mayce has received my dragon. That knowledge crashes against me with the force of a fucking meteor, and it triggers warfare to rage within me, a hatred to course through me. A few measly days, and this little gray girl has rattled the very framework of our foundation. Fuck, she’s shot it to hell. This little monster is breaking through our centuries-old bond, all so she may sink her claws into my heart and bleed me, destroy me far more than I ever could her.

All those thoughts spiral a carnal heat to my cock until it transforms, splits in two while still inside her. A grin breaches her lips, her eyes glaze over, and she squeezes all around me. Then arches her neck to kiss me. Damn, she smells so sweet, so bewildering. Growling, I grip the back of her head, fist her hair, and stab my tongue into that succulent channel. Groan at the first lick of her tongue and the taste of her.

Vicious and brutal, I drive myself harder inside her, punishing her for what she’s managed to do in such a small period. I ram my dragon tongue down her throat, careless if she can’t breathe. All she does is clamp down harder around my cocks.

Knotting her hair, I yank her head back, pound into her, and glare. “You like that, dirty girl?”

“Mmm...Drago,” she moans and rides me harder, hotter, closing her eyes. The sound of my name on her lips has me flaring all my scales and gripping her throat again, shaking her to force her eyes back to mine. I love how her lips form a swollen “O” and those pretty, round tits jiggle with every thrust of my cocks. “Give it to me, Drago!”

“Take my cocks, my good, filthy little pet. Scream while I’m fucking you hard,” I command and tilt my neck to capture her mouth, savoring the sound of her screams, those silky firm breasts rubbing against the blood on my chest, her sexy softness against all my hard armor. “Ride me, little monster.”

Oh, fuck, she slams her hips down so deep and tight on my cocks while her nails burrow into my shoulders, and she shakes her head in the throes of her pleasure. Screaming my name to the furthest reaches of the Waste. Her cunt chokes my cocks, practically strangles them. Flipping her onto her back while she’s still coming, I slam into her, power-fuck her into the ash and weeping roses. Thorns bite her flesh, slashing, drawing more blood as my cocks bleed her soft pussy. And she gets off on the fucking pain and punishment. She’s sucking me deeper, milking the life out of my cocks while I tear her up like the animal I am. Writhing wildly, she comes again and again. The most beautiful slut, thrall, pet, and queen. A gray girl who followed the blood of a dragon, wandered through the Veil of Souls, and captured four monster gods within a few hundred hours.

Fuck, she’ll pay for this! And I damn myself. Shoot my load into her. Spill all my seed into her. Then jerk out and grip her legs, hauling them over my shoulders, so I may plunge my tongue into her soaked pussy. Her wail pierces the air as I drink all her delicious wetness, that sweet arousal mixed with my cum and the ripe richness of her blood. All three are an erotic, irresistible combination for a primal beast like myself. I lap at all that juicy heat, penetrating deep inside to twist my tongue at her swollen and inflamed walls. Stab at that inner knot, feasting on her long and languid sobs from another orgasm as much as I feast on her blood.

She’s molten lava burning every cell in my body. She’s a goddamn demon nightmare wrapped in a siren daydream. She’s my prison. She’s my salvation. She feeds and fills me. And leaves me empty and starving. She’s my destruction. And an indestructible seal on my heart. She’s nothing. She’s *everything*.

I flick her clit with my tongue. Her screams reverberate into my chest. I suck the swollen nub deep into my mouth. Without mercy, I ravish her, knife my tongue along every threadbare nerve. I devour. I gorge upon her. She shudders upon my mouth. Lost within the sounds of her rasping whimpers from her throat too dry to scream, lost within the aroma of her arousal, lost within the taste of her, I seal my mouth over her heat. Eat out her glorious pussy that took all my dragon. I reward her with every kiss and lick and twirl of my tongue to her clitoris, with every rub and pinch of her pretty nipples. Finally, I sink my fingers into all her satiny, swollen flesh and glory in her falling over the edge and plummeting into my dark hell. She comes again and again, the pleasure skyrocketing her into an impossible delirium. And when her eyes roll to their ceilings and she falls against the ground, I grin, retreat from her pussy, and ease a sigh from the soft rise and fall of her chest. Goosebumps riddle her flesh from the pleasure, so great and intense, she's passed out.

I kiss her supple lips, then lift her sleeping body. With my brothers following in silent reverence for what has happened, I carry my queen to the healing pool.



“YOU ARE THE MONSTRESS IN  
MY BLOOD...ALWAYS.”

## QUINTESSA

“HOW DO YOU FEEL?” DRAGO MURMURS AS HE MASSAGES OIL onto my skin and works the worn muscles in my neck and shoulders.

“Mmm...” I sigh and play with the sashes of my robe. “Warm. Tired. But only a little sore. And I’m so...”

“Happy?”

I shake my head. “That’s far too simple a word. High-spirited. Higher than the clouds, the moon, as high as the heavens. My old life is so low, I can hardly make it out.” I thread my fingers together and tip my head back, leaning into his caresses. I’d woken on the edge of the steam pool from the others kissing me, Mayce and Kyan, while Drago put his tongue to my pussy again. Something I’ve come to love is when they rouse me like that. The dark forbidden nature of them claiming me while I’m still passed out makes everything more intense.

Jinxy surprises me when he springs up and pounces on the edge of the bed before me. Head tilted, lips spread into a goofy grin, tongue lolling out. While I scratch his ears and beneath his chin, Drago leans in and hums low in my ear, “Thayne wants to take you riding.”

“Um...” I chew on my inner cheek while my gut clenches. “I’m pretty certain he already did. And then some!”

“Brat. Not that sort of riding. Now, bend over on my knee, so I may get your adorable ass nice and pink before it welts from his scales.”



With my other cheeks smoldering from the king's command, I sweep my hair to my front and obey, draping my upper half over his relaxed thighs. Breathe in through my nose. Exhale through my mouth. He slowly lifts the ends of my robe to collect at my waist. The cool air cuddles my cheeks. I relax all my muscles. Breathe out. Drago rubs my ass in a precursory warning, his hand warm as if he's stoked a fresh surge of flames into his palms. The burning crack of his hand on my skin nearly has my body seizing, locking up. But it would only bring more pain. Instead, I bite the bedspread and bounce my hips ever so little to lift my ass toward him.

"Such a dirty good girl. You love being my naughty pet, don't you?" He kneads the sore area before bringing his hand down hard on the other cheek.

By the time he's finished, my ass is properly sore and inflamed but not to the point of welts or marks. Next, Drago has me dress in a simple white lace shift. Thin but long sleeves, floral patterns decorating the border, and transparent enough to tell I wear no bra or panties. Facing me, the King toys with the ends of my gray strands just above my belly and utters, "Your hair will look lovely in the moonlight. Silver as a dream."

I part my lips, awed by his words. Tears burn at the back of my throat from the overwhelming emotion. Of course, it always sounds a little silly when he tries to speak romance. Drago may be a master of the bed, but he's not the true poet among the four rulers. Mayce is.

Still, I smile and fold my hand into his, accepting his embrace as he leads me out of the bedroom and then the castle, into the courtyard near the ruined gardens. Shaking his bushy tails, Jinx ambles on ahead of us. Now and then, he sniffs the ground and pounces on invisible prey.

The wily wind blusters, pestering the ends of my nightgown, so they lash the air, exposing my calves. It's not long before the cold turns my nipples erect and straining with the thin lace. But I don't shiver. Not with Drago's arm woven around the side of my body, pulling me close to him. Barely reaching his chest, I nestle into his slabbed body. Even his

scales simmer with warmth. Another thing I love is how his long, flame-red ponytail swings to brush my shoulder at times. Most of all, I love his random touches. How he tenderly squeezes my sore ass or rubs a thumb across a nipple through the fabric to have me hissing my desire or a tender but bewildering kiss that leaves me wanting. Judging by his growing smirk, he's enjoying this buildup.

Just as we approach the field of weeping roses, a rush of lascivious heat rushes to my center—intense enough to leave my head whirling and dizzy. My nipples ache for a warm mouth, the nip of teeth, and pinching fingers. Drago chuckles darkly at my arousal but says nothing to embarrass me. Something else I love about him. And I'm still making up for lost time. All my senses have been rapid-firing on overdrive. While Drago enjoys stimulating me with sexual touch, anything can practically get me there. A simple touch of fingers, a hand cupping my shoulder, warm or cold breath drifting too close...even a whisper in my ear to curl the hairs on the back of my neck.

Will I always be so starved for touch? I smile and clasp my hands in front of me, hoping so. I never want to lose this.

As we step onto the field, Jinx leaps ahead of us and crouches, his hackles raised, teeth bared in a growl. Puzzled by his behavior, I scrunch my brows. Next to me, Drago stiffens, all his muscles turning rigid. A grimace twists his features.

“Something's wrong.”

Fear shivers along my spine, prickling my nerve endings at his statement. Two words, but so deep and dangerous with his brows lowered and shadows darkening his eyes. I flinch when Jinx nudges his body against my leg, ears drawn down as he whines at me. I kneel and cup the kit's furry cheeks to plant a kiss on his snout before scooping him into my arms, hoping to soothe him. But Jinx doesn't stop whining as Drago scans the area, sniffing the air.

A second passes before he grips my arm, “A foul stench in the air. I'm taking you back inside the castle. Now,” he growls,

and I swallow a hard, fearful knot in my throat while clinging tighter to the shivering kit.

Before we even get the chance to turn, stones and mortar fracture and fall from the castle, crumbling to the earth. Waves of pain rack my chest from the sight of multiple walls collapsing. Crippled with horror, I stare with my breath bursting from my throat at the sight of bones rattling and awakening. Drago grips me by the waist, hauling me further into the field. Every muscle in his chest and arms bulges. With his stomach sealed so close to my back, I feel those scales penetrating the surface of his skin. He's growing, armoring himself, preparing, and gathering his strength. He will need it. Because I can focus on nothing else but those bone skulls, as massive as Thayne's, shifting in our direction, leering at us.

The three enormous skeletal dragons shed bone dust, tails battering the castle and knocking more stones loose as they take to the air one at a time. With their gargantuan bone bodies slamming upon the earth, smiting hundreds of weeping roses, I cover my ears from the thunderous clap. The force rocks into my body, reverberating into my very bone matter. Stinging wind rips across my face and yanks tears from my eyes. If it weren't for Drago, the inertia would have knocked me out cold on the ground. As it is, I almost squeezed Jinx too hard. And now, I cling to the fox even more as all the hairs on my body prick with static fear. My whole body trembles.

The bone dragons don't move. They linger, staring us down, but their bodies are too much of a barrier for us to dream of reaching the castle. Not that it would matter since several of its walls have caved in. Panic spirals pain into my chest, and I nearly expect my ribcage to cave in like those walls. At first, all I can think of are the other kings, but I remember what Drago said. How it takes far more to kill them. A sob lodges in my throat when I consider all the servants in the castle, ones like Eyn-Amaru, wondering, suspecting, knowing some must be hurt. Shuddering, I almost double over. My vym hums its yearning in my blood, but Drago is not about to release me. No, between the claws growing while his arm binds around my waist with his dilated eyes, quaking chest, and iron-hard jaw, they suggest he'd go to war with a

thousand of these bone dragons if it meant protecting me. Dread curdles the contents of my stomach. He's known me for a week at most. It doesn't make any sense for him to risk himself, his ancient bond with his brothers for a girl of scars and ink. It defies all rational thought, and I won't let him do that.

"You were right, Dragomir."

My skin crawls from the familiar voice behind us. Holding me tighter, Drago turns with me, and I shiver from those ghostly orbs in the hollow sockets, the bony limbs, long, rakish claws for fingers, and tentacles protruding from each side of her face. Mouth open, teeth razored, and jaw detached. Jinx yelps and whines, nudging my cheek as if in pain.

"You are forbidden from our territory, Hag!" growls Drago, but his words seem paltry compared to the threat of the bone dragons behind us.

The Hag wags a thin claw. "The rook was a bad omen indeed," she informs him in the disturbing voice of rich seduction. "But he made the perfect bait and trap for you."

Horror attacks my insides. Guilt and rage shred my heart lining. This is all my fault! And still...with the fox rubbing his snout against my neck and whining, I can't find any regret within me.

Not a hundred feet away, at the border of the trees, the Hag paces, raising a spectral arm. Threads of her black hair eclipse it like scrawls of ink. "No rook would bind themselves to an assassin or spy. One must be pure of heart. You believe I have no skull spies to alert me if a human crosses the Veil of Souls? Such arrogance in assuming none of your Waste-folk would be loyal to me. Unlike that traitorous rook your precious pet holds," she hisses, and Jinx recoils against me.

I glower at the Hag and cover his little face, stroking his fur to calm the kit.

"At least he served his purpose to carry the spell to unbind the Princes," she croons, a smile twisting her features, too sinister from the jagged teeth. "I don't believe they are too

enthusiastic with how you skinned them and displayed their bones as castle trophies.”

I crane my neck back to see Drago narrow his eyes while more scales rupture along his arms. “They fucking deserved it after their betrayal of aligning with Kronos. You will meet the same end, Hag.”

When she laughs, smoky and beguiling, it sends poison to blister my veins. But Drago captures my chin and forces my eyes to his. “Whatever happens, Quintessa, you run. Find Merikh, Mayce, and Kyan. They will keep you safe.”

The words stab thorns in my heart. I glare, burning my eyes against his, but his gaze only matches mine for fire and flame. The urge to throw my fist into his jaw rears up inside me. I shake my head wildly instead. “I won’t leave you.”

As soon as I speak the words, a familiar presence drifts to my side, and I turn to meet Qora’s smoldering amber eyes, narrowed in a wrathful warning. “Listen to him, Quinn. Run now.”

“No.”

“Goddamit, pet!” Drago grabs the back of my neck and roars hot breath in my face, “This is my final command to you as your King.”

Pulse hammering, I stab out my chin and refute, “Pet in the bedroom. But I’m the Queen of your Ash Court.”

“We’re not in the Ash Court,” he growls, strengthening his grip, but his eyes soften to liquid gold that has me melting. “Tessie, if you go, I will have a chance. But if you stay...” he purses his lips and swallows hard to finish, “I will set myself on fire if anything happens to you.”

I touch his chest. That first touch between us back in the tower. A single curve of my fingers over his heart. A flicker dances between my fingers.

“More than my Queen, Quintessa. The fire of my heart. And its beat. You are my lust and love. They called you gray and cold and numb, little better than the dead. But to me, you

burn bright enough to make all the stars of the heavens envious. You are the monstress in my blood...always.”

A whimper catches in my throat. A sob follows it. Before I know it, Drago captures my mouth, opening my lips, so he may taste me, as if he’s tasting one last time. But I refuse to believe that. Even with the bone dragons approaching, stalking closer at the whim of the Hag, it’s impossible for me to imagine Drago dying.

The moment I arch to receive him more is when Drago escapes my mouth. And shoves me toward Qora. A vast distance already stretches between us. Guilt slashes at my stomach lining, but it’s quickly replaced with awe from Drago’s body shuddering and ripping faster than ever into his full dragon form, into Thayne. Nostrils flaring with smoke and embers and eyes blazing an inferno against mine, Thayne curls his upper lip to expose the sharpened blades of his teeth and utters a soft, low growl in a warning. “Thiago.”

A single word. A name. My blood runs cold from the knowledge of his true name. Not just Thayne or Drago. Something inside me dies when I register its meaning: supplanter. He’s substituting himself for me. Taking my place. He’s *sacrificing* himself...for me.

Emotions clog my throat as Thiago claws at the ground and shifts his eyes to the encroaching assailants. My lungs freeze up. Qora ghosts in and out of me, launching urging chills into me until I finally turn and bolt. The Hag stands at the edge of the tree line, content to watch the approaching battle. Uninterested in me and Qora. As soon as we make it to the withered trees, bodies crash behind me like claps of thunder. Growls and roars bleed my ears while soil, thorns, and roses whirl a storm to shower upon our heads. With every step we take into the woods and every roar of pain behind me from Thiago’s defense, I grow numb and number...

...Until I can’t feel anything anymore.



IT'S MY TIME TO SACRIFICE.



## DRAGO

I'D CUT OFF MY FUCKING BALLS IF IT MEANT I COULD BE inside her one last time, feel her heat. Kissing her will have to be enough. It must be. When this is over, if I'm still alive, I'll be little better than a limping lizard. My blood should boil from the absence of my brothers. They've always stood by my side. But all that washes over me is a dark and sacred serenity as Thayne and I merge into our most united form—something so monstrous and dangerous, it jeopardizes my heart with its power. Something we never could have accomplished without her.

Tessie stares back, frozen by a cold horror.

With our very veins howling flames and the firestorm screaming in our belly, we give her our name. Thiago. That serenity lingers beneath the adrenaline and flaming storm I unleash upon the princes because she is disappearing into the trees with her pet and Shadow. Nothing else matters. My brothers will find her and protect her.

It's my time to sacrifice.

For a moment, I consider spreading my wings and lifting into the air. Despite their wing bones, the princes lack the membrane and muscles to follow me into the air. But I growl. Should've known the Hag would have other plans. Once Tessie plunges into the woods, the first thing the Hag does is set her power into a shield over the field. That force hums and electrifies my scales from here. Impenetrable. Undefeatable.

The first bone prince charges for me. Rage spikes through me. I unleash a furious roar, harden all my muscles, and crash against him. Our bodies thunder together. I growl and snap my jaws, catching the prince by the bones of his throat just as the other two close in, aiming for my belly. I break the bones at its throat, smash them to pieces, and swing my body at the last second to sink my teeth around the second's femur bone. Rip it the hell off! Bone dust shoots into my mouth, and I huff, tempted to use my fire on the third. But I preserve my strength, anticipating this will be a long battle. Dawn rises now, slaughtering the horizon. But before the day is out, blood will stain every rose, and scales will litter these fields.

Even if I live through this, the Hag will take me, torture me as much as she desires, then rip out my heart and feast upon it to consume my power. Centuries of evading that fucking sorceress, of living in utter limbo. Now, after a few days with Tessie, and the castle is in ruins, the dragon princes have awoken, and my brothers have abandoned me.

And I'd fucking do it all over again.

Pure rage pumps through my veins. Goring my teeth into the third prince, I crush its ribcage and tear out its spine. Too long to destroy it. My flesh howls from the pain of the other two ravaging my belly. Enough force to throw me to the ground. The earth fractures from my weight. Whirlwinds of rose petals and dust surge into the air. Out of the corner of my eye, the Hag grins, those damned tentacles curling eagerly in the air.

Before the princes can sink their teeth into my softer underbelly, I snap and swing my powerful head, thrashing at their skulls, knocking them loose. But in the time it takes for me to defend myself, the first prince sinks his teeth onto my throat. An instinctive burst of fire rears from my belly and surges straight for the attacking bone dragon. Hot enough to char the bones and reduce them to fucking ash. All I managed was the radius and carpus bones of its wing. Not enough to destroy the dragon, only enough to slow him down. Pain lashes at my throat. A fleeting penetration, I snarl and consider

it pure luck that he didn't fracture any bones. Blood trickles from where the teeth gored into me, and I've lost a few scales.

For hours, the battle storms on. Every time I trade a blow, crush bones to dust, it does nothing! Those bones rearrange themselves and piece together until they are one again. My hot blood fumes the whole time. Blood pools down my scales from several wounds, clotting the air with its bitter scent.

I harden my jaw, flare my nostrils, and raze the ground with the claws of one mighty paw. All three face me now, hollow socket gazes prowling—resolved to attack me at the same time. Eyes preying on them, I crouch. Snort a taunt of their inferiority, reminding them how I conquered them once, devoured their hearts and thus, their fire.

“I'll grind all your bones to dust this time,” I vow to them, hurling embers from my nostrils. They paw at the ground, and I grin, showcasing my lethal teeth. Wrath may sharpen my senses because I bear its definition. The rage keeps me alive. But if I disturb their balance, even for a moment, I'll have the advantage. I'll use any to target their skulls. “I'll grind them for my flour, bake the biggest fucking dragon cake, and celebrate over your demise!”

As predicted, they all charge at once. Uniting deeper with Thayne, we close our eyes and wait until we feel the inertia of their bodies an inch from our form. And then, we act. We beat our wings and launch into the air. All three crash against one another, skulls dizzy from the blow. Bones rattle. Save for my fire, my wings are my greatest advantage. I descend upon them, claws and teeth primed.

I get my jaws around one skull, break teeth while I fracture it. The other two act, rearing up and snapping at my wings. Pain ricochets into my being, but I don't stop. Bite through the fucking agony splintering through me. I smash the damn skull, wrecking it until it crumbles to the ground. The prince drops with it, all its bones shattering with it. But it's too late for my wings. Multiple bones crack from the two dragons' jaws while their claws slash at my scales.

My chest throbs from the wounds. Convulsions attack my body. Roaring, I unleash the inferno in my belly. No time to hold back. I aim for the skulls. As if aware of the destruction to come, the princes pull out all the stops, careless of any risk to themselves, only concerned with the damage they may deal to me. Jaws grip my throat and chest with abandon. Teeth spear deep to pierce muscle. And drag, cleaving skin and sinew, veins, and tendons. Blood showers the air and rains down my ruined scales. Hardly a trace of emerald or black anymore.

My fire melts one skull. I get my jaws around the final one and push past the pain blurring my vision and prompting Thayne to retreat into my mind. My blood turns to fucking ice. Regardless of how many teeth I'll lose, I plunge them all into the skull, shake the head violently until it snaps loose. With what little fire remains within me, I set my flames upon it, burn it to cinders.

And I fall. My dragon form crashes to the ground in nothing but a bloody, fleshy fucking pulp. My breath thins, and my chest heaves, heart straining to pump blood. The pain is raw, excruciating. Strong enough to blind and deafen me to all other senses. It takes nothing beyond a few seconds for Thayne to return to the sanctum of my mind and leave me in the state of a man to preserve our energy. Pulse thundering, lungs burning, I groan, imagining there's not one bone in my body left unfractured.

Surrounded by bones and lying in a pool of my own blood, my body longs to shake my mind loose, untether myself from the affliction, the devastation twisting my insides.

*Fuck, Dragomir, come to me!* Thayne commands, urging me to fade. But I refuse, double over onto my side, and retch the contents of my stomach onto the ground. *Damn your pride, Drago!*

I close my eyes. *Not pride, old friend.* I feel her more this way. If I give up the pain, I will give up the feeling of her clenching around me, gushing all over my cock, how raw and real and alive she was every time. How she cherished the pain from my hands, my teeth, my claws, and my cocks. The

sweetness in her eyes when she gifted us with oranges. The mischief in her mouth when she'd willfully taunt me so she could reap punishment before drowning in pleasure. The strength of her body but more her will to endure all of our torment and passion. And the great feat of her pretty pussy sucking the fullness of our dragonhood. Hot and burning, bloody. Fuck, the dark and sinful taste of her with such sweet aftermath, it left me ablaze every time.

Without this pain, I'd surrender the fire she ignited in my heart. And the unquenchable desire to possess and protect her. I've shed my blood, broken my bones for her. But she'd fucking shed parts of her soul and gifted them to me. If I could, I'd give her mine in return.

With a deep sigh, I know I won't get that chance when the Hag's claws plunge into my body, and she plunges her foul magic inside me, blacking out all my senses and enslaving me to a slumber of endless nightmares.



“YOU WILL GIVE ME YOUR  
NAME.”

## QUINTESSA

ROARS THUNDER IN THE DISTANCE. MY CHEST ACHES THE further I run from Drago. Branches claw at the flimsy nightgown I wear, attacking it and tearing the fabric. It doesn't matter. Apart from Qora's chilling Shadow, I feel *nothing*.

The numbness pulsing through my heart is even worse. As if I'm losing bits of myself behind. Almost to the far west side of the castle where the only walls are left standing. Through the trees, those splintered walls give me a jolt of energy, of hope at finding the other king. Too many horrid thoughts skitter through my mind. Maybe they're trapped beneath the weight of the castle. Maybe they disappeared into the woods. A bitter taste burns at the back of my throat because I can't imagine they would ever betray Drago like that. The knowledge only rushes more ice into my blood. Somehow, they must be hurt or trapped.

And I've never felt more helpless. Pausing near a tangle of trees that reach little higher than my person, I double over and clutch at my throat, trying to grapple with my breaths. It doesn't matter that I'm not underground. The trees have turned to walls, threatening to close in and devour me.

Qora stops and flits back to my side when she discovers I'm no longer behind her. Somehow, I know her exercise won't help me now. As if she's aware, my Shadow says nothing and lets me hyperventilate until my lungs smolder and strain. Bile churns in my belly.

"This way, Quinn," she urges me to follow her deeper into the forest, away from the castle.



At first, I tense, wondering why we're going this way, but it's not long before I'm following her shadowy trail. It takes more for me to keep up with her since she can pass clear through trees while I must weave around every obstacle. Especially since I'm still holding Jinx. The charred trees thicken the deeper we go, and apprehension prickles my insides. When the fox inside my arms yips, and the fur on his back rises, when his ears flatten, and he makes a whining sound, I freeze mid-step.

"Qora..." My Shadow pauses after I say her name. "What's going on?"

With a deep sigh, she turns to me, but her amber eyes seem dimmer, and her shadows more abundant than ever. I part my lips and knit my brows, confused.

At the sudden touch upon my waist, I understand why Qora didn't speak. My blood curdles in my veins because I have memorized *every* one of my monsters' touches. So, I spin, hand primed to attack, but Kronos catches my wrist and chuckles darkly. What I find in his eyes is enough to halt my insides and launch sharp, icy horror into my marrow. A twisted, sadistic gleam emphasized all the more by his smile. If it was a cocky smile, it wouldn't feel like razor claws boring into me. It's self-assured, unwavering, and possessive. It's how Merikh looked at me when he held my wrist in the dungeon. It's how Drago looks at me when he fucks me.

"I warned you not to take my generosity for granted, little wisp. Thank you, Shadow..." he nods to Qora. They are the last words before my hearing dulls, the last I see before my vision turns to darkness.



ONCE I WAKE, THE FIRST THING I FEEL IS COLD IRON UPON MY wrists and my nipples pebbling from the frigid air shivering across my body. Those senses mean Kronos is close. Too close, I learn when he sweeps my hair onto one shoulder

before his heated breath curls against the nape of my neck. Part of me doesn't want to open my eyes, but I'm determined to know my surroundings.

As soon as I do, I swallow hard, struggling against the tears burning the backs of my eyes. All around me, dark cavern walls prey on my fear. They close in. And I'd swear a millstone is crushing my chest while a python twists its body around my throat, squeezing and smothering all my breath. In the middle of the cavern, I stand with my arms above my head, spread and shackled to the jagged rocks. Shackles don't bind my ankles, but a spreader bar keeps them parted, muscles strained from however long he's kept me here.

Hanging my head, I let the tears fall and my chest heave. Something shimmers off to the side, and when I swing my eyes toward it, I part my lips, choking on a gasp. The narrow gap in the far wall betrays the sight of ghostly flickers wandering like wispy ribbons. Their hushing energy lurks toward me, but Kronos is far too powerful for that energy to touch me. This isn't just any cave. It's a cave the Veil of Souls. Even if I could manage to escape, all that awaits me is that labyrinth of wintry spirits ready to tangle around my half-soul and trap me in their embrace until I become one of them.

Out of the corner of my eye, a familiar figure hovers. I spear my eyes to her amber ones and narrow mine.

"Now, now, little wisp," Kronos breathes along my neck, and my breath hitches from the soft and sensual trail his lips rub along the side of my neck. "I will protect you. To prove my generosity, my offer to become my personal blood binder still stands. And I thought it best that we get to know each other better."

Something soft feathers across my back beyond my nightgown. I recognize the familiar sensation of the leather, the several tails all bound to a sturdy handle of a whip. Here and now, the gravity of what's about to happen triggers waves of tremors to shudder up and down my body. My hands tremble in the shackles. I swing my gaze to Qora and hope my gray eyes are bitter and cold to mirror her betrayal.

“It’s better this way,” she tries to convince me, but it’s the first time she doesn’t drift toward me. “You have always been naïve, little fool. A few days with these kings, and you forget all the blood they’ve shed within the Borderlands. You forget the whole purpose of the Waste is to imprison them.”

I shiver from the god-eater toying with the buttons at the back of my nightgown, but I focus on Qora, brutalizing her with my eyes and my glower. No words. She postures because she knows she’s right. Even as Kronos rips the back of the flimsy nightgown, clattering buttons to the ground, and exposing my back to the bitter wind howling into the cavern, I know how simple it would be to accept his offer. It would be better for Qora, better for me to be a privileged and protected blood binder to the Emperor. But I’d rather be a damned Queen of the Waste and a pet to my monsters than surrender anything to Kronos.

“I cannot have traitors within my Inner Circle, little one,” he informs me, gripping the handle of the whip tighter. “This is a necessary process to break you and bond you by blood to myself. Rest assured, I will know when you are lying.”

I grit my teeth. I loathe his eyelashes, so thick and many and delicate, they could shame a moth. I despise his eyes because they are ghostlier than mine with the power to sharpen like ice spikes or to soften into silvery moonlight. Feral and feline, he has the power to paralyze with that gaze.

Swallowing the rancid taste at the back of my throat, I cage a whimper as he brushes those tails along my back in a precursor of a warning. This whispering of touch to tingle my skin is far worse than any punishing blow he could land. Again, he makes me feel safe. His body is warm enough to chase away the gooseflesh on my skin. His very breath against my cheek when he presses against me spirals an ache deep in my belly. My womb itself tightens, weeps in the face of his seduction and his monstrous beauty.

Swallowing revulsion, I flex my fingers and imagine spreading my vym, projecting it from my body in a desperate attempt to escape the shackles. Kronos thumbing his way down my spine, one vertebra at a time, has me nearly seizing.

“Poor sweet wisp. Forget about your blood-binding. I have devoured it for the time. Rest assured, I may return it at any time. But I have conditions.” My chest sinks in as he brushes those ends across my skin. “We will begin with something simple, little wisp. First, you will give me your name.”

“I hope the Kings slice your balls off, filet them, and feed them to me for breakfast,” I laugh in the wake of the adrenaline charging up my spine. The surge is wild and mad, but I’d rather be mad and survive this than rational and safe and surrender.

After all, the only one who can break me is...me.



“IMAGINE WHAT I COULD  
MAKE YOU FEEL IN MY BED,  
LITTLE WISP.”

## QUINTESSA

THE FIRST LASH STRIKES. AND BURNS. I SEIZE UP. MUSCLES tighten. Wrists strain in the shackles. It's not the pain that undoes me. It's the tranquil predator within his eyes. And the unflinching grip upon the handle of the flail. This, I hate the most. And lurch on instinct, never wanting to escape more, never feeling so trapped. He strikes again. A mere flick of his wrist but with enough force to needle my upper thighs. Two lashes to my bottom pierce the flesh, stinging and heating the skin. I didn't think it was possible for my hatred to grow, but it does when he cups my bottom. I gasp. I quiver. Because he caresses the raw flesh, his cool palm soothing the heat. Jerking in the restraints, I try to escape him, praying and begging my body, but it's too late. That telltale heartbeat pulses between my thighs, and I squeeze my eyes shut, wishing I could deny the wetness coating my pussy.

He flares his nostrils. Of course, he scents my arousal. If only he would chuckle or make some snide comment, but he doesn't. Instead, he rains down blows upon the rounded flesh of my backside with the coldest and greatest control. And he palms my burning skin with the utmost care and attention. Oh, blazing gods! Nothing like Drago or any of the Kings. So full of emotion and need, they gave me every ounce of their desire. Even Merikh did that night in the dungeon when I thanked him. Drago gave me his fire.

Kronos gives me nothing. No emotion. No expression. As if he is a numb ghost. At some point, the pain of several blows blends into one swelling inflammation. A smoldering heat that has my body writhing, squirming, arching. Desperate to get

away from the threat of pleasure, my mind shakes free of the moment.

Until he slams his palm against my bare sex. And grips my jaw to kiss me hard, tongue invading and demanding my attention. “You will not fade, little wisp. You are not a ghost with me.”

I look down to discover myself naked before him. The nightgown lies in tattered scraps on the ground below me. This time, when he strikes my pussy, pain explodes, but a tightness inside me grows, stretching and coiling. Over and over, he hits my cunt. Too calm and calculated, he targets my clitoris, unleashing an inferno on the tender bundle of nerves. My breath comes in crazed pants, but his is still and steady. Not one trace of labor in his chest. Tears squeeze from my eyes. I’m twisting my body, moaning because he won’t let me fade, won’t let my mind take me beyond the endorphins assaulting my blood.

Through it all, Qora says *nothing*. Does nothing. She remains in the corner of the cavern, shadowy back to me.

Kronos pauses, and I clench from the contrast of the wind singing against my seared and swollen flesh. Navigating around to my back, he slides a lone finger down my spine. “You could never understand the serenity of this moment,” he purrs warmth against my blistered skin, and I tremble, jerking in the restraints. “The utter beauty and power that comes with watching my creation. So vulnerable, willing and aching and begging for only what he may provide.”

“I don’t want a damn thing from you. Except your head on a platter,” I seethe.

Not one shred of amusement. Just a stab of his fingers through my slit. I shriek from the onslaught of sensation. “Oh, goddammit!” I cry out as he plunges those fingers inside me and circles them once, collects my slickness, and retrieves them.

“Your tongue says one thing, but your body shows another.” He rubs my arousal across my chest, and I cringe, turning away. “You fear your want most of all. And all that



holds you back, little wisp, is the false bond of four damned monsters.”

“It’s not false!” I yell in denial, struggling with the bonds again despite how much the shackles chafe and sting my wrists.

“Sweet little shade, you truly believe they wanted *you*?” As if to reinforce the impossibility of their desire, of the abandonment that has followed me all my life, Kronos presses his lips to mine, stabbing his tongue inside. My shoulders slacken, muscles weakening from the effort. I lean into his mouth for support, undone by the supremacy of his lips and tongue against mine and the lust he stokes with his kiss. As if he fuses himself to me, all-consuming and binding, but he has the power to rip himself from me and leave me hollow. “Only the monster who made you, touched you at birth, could ever form such a bond.”

My heart staggers. Blood thunders in my ears from the profession, how he smiles and combs his fingers into my hair, shifting strands and tapping the puckered flesh on my scalp. The birth brand. The shame that marked me as half-alive. But Kronos has made me feel alive. Too alive. In this dungeon, I’ve become his slave. Not his equal. He doesn’t need me. And I quake with the knowledge of how I need him.

“They do want me,” I try to say, but my breath stutters, and my voice is weak. “I want them.”

“Poor little wisp. Do you not remember the trapped souls?” He opens his robe to show his belt housing many more bottles filled with the spirit beings. My chest squeezes at the memory of the little one I held as she perished in my hands. “Your lifespan is but a breath to me. On the night of your birth, I devoured your twin’s soul. But I saved yours for a snack. And left my mark upon you.” He pats the back of my head, and I cringe from the knowledge of the scar I’ve concealed from the Kings: the harpe symbol of my monster-touched curse—proof I’d found disfavor with the god-eater. “A pity I never had the chance to taste it since the Kings stole it on one of my visits.”

Something inside me splinters. Rattles me to the core. He's hunted his way into my heart. He's invaded my blood cells and channels his power into them as I've done with my vym. Kronos, the Emperor, Ruler of the Five Realms, transcribes his name and bond within every scar I bear. And every ink mark covering those scars.

"Yes, my will o' the wisp. Every time they kissed you or fucked you, you reclaimed the shreds of the half-soul they consumed. Your essence was a siren call to them. Nothing more."

"His fire came back. His dragon came back!" I shake my head violently, choking on a sob.

"Yes, a flawless power exchange. Half-souls do not fade. They linger and cling to whatever they can to keep from becoming a lost soul. Whenever the High King stuck his cock in you, pieces of his soul escaped with yours. You became a conduit. And I am the orchestrator of your story, of your journey, little one. You have worn my mark long before they gave you theirs. It is why you feel more with me, including fear."

"Mmm..." I thrust my head back when he palms my breasts and pinches my nipples, squeezing and twisting them.

"Imagine what I could make you feel in my bed, little wisp," he hums against my neck and drapes his tongue down to my collarbone.

Heat floods my belly. The pulse between my thighs throbs harder, but I clench my teeth around a snarling, "No..."

My snarl turns to a wail because he pulls on the taut buds. Strong and hard enough to jerk my whole body forward by them. The pain of them stretching has me gasping, but the moment he releases them and stabs his tongue to one of the peaked tips, I thrash worse than ever. The rhythmic pulse in my pussy beats harder, quicker. He licks, nips, and circles his tongue around both pointed peaks before closing the wet heat of his mouth around one. I throw my head back and moan from the invisible thread connecting the tight bud to my clit. It's vibrating with tension. I'm ready to snap.

“No,” I gasp, but my energy is all but spent. My muscles too worn and weak to do much. “You’re not making me do this!” I sob, hanging my head, clamping my eyes shut, so I can’t see his mouth on my breast.

“Give me your name, little wisp. It is not right that the creator does not know what to call his creation,” he eludes while scraping his teeth along my nipple.

I look down through watery eyes, press my lips together at the sight of his eyes. I’m on the receiving end of the softened silver. He kisses my other nipple, palms the flesh of both my breasts, bringing them together. And then...he kneels before me. My eyes widen in alarm. I scream from that first flick of his tongue upon my clit. My body jolts when he lashes the nub. And circles around it. I scream again, fighting my body with every ounce of willpower I have. But his tongue is smoldering destruction. I shake from head to toe, body jolting. With every lick, he surges raw flames into my blood. Pausing, Kronos pulls back the hood, exposing me more. I shake my head, pleading with my eyes full of tears.

“I don’t want this...” I whisper the lie because everything in me wants this, every molecule of my blood, every tense muscle in my body, every raging nerve in my cunt.

One tilt of his head. Kronos studies me. Raw, sexual power consumes his eyes. And he opens his mouth to claim, “I will take your pleasure. And you will give me your name after you scream your rapture. Or we begin again, little wisp.”

No willpower left, all my body heaves, collapses. Except for my hips which thrust forward, craving that release. The action pushes my sex right into his mouth where he wraps his wet lips around my swollen nub with the strength of suction. Kronos rips the world from me, along with my consent. Shrieking through clenched teeth, I erupt into scintillating sensations. Liquid gold surges through my blood. The orgasm is blinding, deafening, annihilating everything—everything but the rapture engulfing me, gushing into all nerve endings, and splashing my skin with a host of starry tingles.

“Stop!” I cry out the second his tongue laves harder at my clit, laps at the fluids trickling from my slit. “Fuck, no more.”

He. Doesn't. Stop.

Not once does he betray a hint of a smirk. Or a flicker of desire in his eye. Or a ticking of his jaw. He dips his tongue into my slit, drinking, tasting me without groaning. Unwavering determination is his one emotion.

“I hate you!” I whisper because I've lost my voice. He doesn't miss a beat when I desperately try to buck. Instead, he pumps three fingers so deep into me at the same time that his tongue circles my distended clit again. “Oh god!” I feel all my inner muscles spasm. And clamp down. Throwing my head back, I unleash sounds that I've never heard before. Not even when Thayne fucked me. Sweat pools down the sides of my face and body and cascades along my spine.

Once Kronos parts my cheeks and licks along the seam until he arrives at my forbidden hole, I hiss the longest, sharpest breath ever. And shake my head wildly, my whole body quaking. He licks a flawless circle around the ring before curving the fingers in my pussy and stabbing a thick one in my back hole. It hurls me over the edge. Too many heartbeats thundering and shattering. Seismic waves shudder through me, splitting cell matter, swelling veins, flushing flames into my blood, and rocking my whole body while my senses fire on overdrive.

“Stopstopstopstop!” I scream hoarsely when he pumps his fingers again and sends mini-tremors, aftershocks of orgasms into me. “Oh, fuck, I'll tell you!” I gasp out, and as he rises, I squeeze my eyes shut and cry, “*Quintessa.*”

My eyes rocket open at his proclamation, spoken in unison with mine. Mortification wells up inside me, infecting me like poison. Of course, he already knew. It's the first time he crooks a smile. Jaw clenched. Eyes gleaming with effervescence. And Kronos kisses me. Commands my mouth and forces my taste inside me. With his mouth crushing mine, he touches me everywhere. I whimper from grief and moan in pleasure as he palms my breasts, tweaks my erect nipples,

clutches each side of my stomach, frames my hips, then finally cups my pussy. Admiring but not like Drago when he treasures me as his pet. No, Kronos devours with his eyes. Haunts me with that gaze. Rapes me with his hands.

“You gave me your submission, little wisp,” he breathes against my lips, kisses the tears upon my cheeks. “Now, all of you belongs to me. And if you’ll forgive me, your three bastard beasts have awoken and are disrupting my Hag’s process of torturing your dragon.”

“Why are you doing this? Just leave them be!” I plead, both shivering and swallowing the bile in my throat when he trails a finger along my soaked pubic lips.

“Perhaps I will share our ancient and complex history with you another time. Like when you are screaming your bliss in my bed while impaled on my cock.”

Wrinkling my nose and grimacing, I narrow my eyes to ask, “If I belong to you, then how are they mine?”

He chuckles and strokes my head, but I recoil, disgusted. “They will always belong to you, Quintessa. They consumed half your soul. But once I take you to the Capital, you will truly become their ghost. You will haunt them forever.”

Kronos leaves me. Shackled here. Naked and alone. No, not fully alone, I remember and lift my head to where Qora has remained in the shadows of the cavern—back turned to me. She turns just her head, one amber eye studying me.

So, I spit the words at her with a devilish smirk. “These chains are much stronger than any you used on me.”



“DO YOU ACCEPT?”

## QUINTESSA

“HMM, I WONDER WHAT THE EMPEROR PLANS TO DO *WITH* your body after he gives one to you.”

Qora rolls her eyes, shifting closer to me while huffing, “Stop with your dramatics, Quinn. I’ve spent my life playing watcher to you. No form. No feeling.”

“Right...because I have no idea what that’s like,” I snort and lurch in the chains, rocking my suspended body forward. Now that Kronos has left, my body returns to numb. No more tingles, flushed cheeks, or swollen flesh. Compared to the god-eater’s torture, sexual and emotional, it’s serenity. Not even the cold wind from the dark cave inside the Veil of Souls prowls upon me.

“And yet, you begrudge me for aligning with him when you practically sold yourself to those monsters,” she spits, her voice darkening more than usual.

“They didn’t take your soul, Qora. *He* did.”

“How many more souls have they devoured? How many more lives have they ruined?”

I press my lips into a tight scowl, falling silent, not wanting to think about the Sacrifice. Instead, I work out the other pieces: how Kronos created the Veil of Souls and therefore the Waste, imprisoned the Kings here, transformed the Five Realms after ages of bloodshed and war. But monsters always need blood...and flesh. One night of the year, Drago, Mayce, Kyan, and Merikh take their spoils. Why? With Drago’s power, along with Thayne, they could easily pierce



the Veil and leave the Waste to pursue Kronos. Is the Hag somehow keeping them here? The Hag...bitter cold fear shivers up my spine at the thought of Drago in that monster's clutches. Drago who sacrificed himself for me. Drago. Thayne. Thiago.

"You should be grateful," adds Qora while I thrust my head high to examine those shackles. "You know those Kings fucked over their realms in the ancient times before Emperor Kronos cast them out. He brought peace to every kingdom. And the god-eater is willing to compromise with you, to welcome you into his innermost circle and make you his blood binder. Perhaps one of his wives, considering what happened here."

Dismissing her, I work my wrists, twisting and bending them, knowing my muscles are screaming from the effort, but I feel no pain. My pulse thunders, batters blood to my eardrums because my body still protests.

"You're not even listening to me, are you?" Qora groans and flits toward me.

I shake my head. "Not really."

I don't stop. I twist harder until the little bones in my hands snap.

"What in savage Waste are you doing?"

Grinning, careless over the throbbing pain I'll feel later, I contort my wrists and wriggle my broken hands through the shackles. Energy rushes into my veins as soon as I free myself. And drop!

"You owe him nothing! You owe none of them," Qora tries to convince me even as I rise and survey the opening of the cavern, preferring that impossible Veil of Souls compared to this dark, constricted space with the jagged walls ready to crush my spirit.

Naked and unashamed, I lift my chin high like the Ash Queen Drago called me, I pinpoint that exit and take my first step. Until Qora swings her shadowy form before me, burning her amber eyes against mine. She goes so far as to project her

shadow-vym and binds her icy hands around my throat without squeezing or strangling. A warning. A hollow threat.

“Don’t, Quinn. If you step outside this cavern, if you leave, you’ll prove him right. You’re leaving me. You’re choosing them.”

Shaking my head, I curl a broken hand toward my Shadow, knowing I’d shed tears if I could. “No, Qora. I’m not choosing them. I’m choosing me. For me. You’re staying behind.” No matter how many nerve endings Kronos may ignite within me, I’ll never feel anything with him but the regret of desire. No spark. No flames. “If I stay, I’ll lose myself to Kronos,” I tell her, stroking my fractured fingers across her shade cheek. “But with them, I find myself every time. I’d rather set myself on fire and feel its heat one last time rather than become their ghost.”

“No, you’ll become mine instead.”

I offer a meager shrug and lower my hand. “It’s about time.” I lean in to touch my lips to her shadowy cheeks, then step right through her drifting figure. I don’t turn back. I don’t tell her about the undeniable ache constricting my chest or the burning in my throat or the bitter taste on my tongue. I deny how my breaths have thinned. With every step I take, it’s like my bare feet stagger across broken glass. Losing a million little pieces of myself to splinter and attach themselves to Qora, penetrating to her very Shadow-roots.

More vulnerable than ever, I stand on the edge of the cavern with a host of souls like shooting stars before me. Already, the sharp and cold energy of their raw hunger licks at my body, longing for my warmth. Imprisoned within this hollow, the lost souls will seek whatever heat and life they may. I’ve never identified with them more.

Creeping my fingers toward the ever-stirring sea of souls, I curl my palm up, my spindly fingers curved toward those souls in understanding. I echo a quiet plea, remembering the last time I crossed the Veil. Now, I am more than a half-soul. It doesn’t take them long to tangle around my cracked hand, which already shows signs of swelling.

Before I can talk myself out of this, I leap into that spirit ice. They sink their sharp teeth into me, their invisible energy tethers me. They spin their webs. My body becomes heavier than a nightmare, heavier than any guilt I bear. I shriek from the pain of them crushing me, but I don't stop. Dragging my feet through the Veil, the souls thicken until I'd swear I'm traveling through water—the kind of water that is icing over with every moment. Too cold. Too cold. My lungs burn, but my skin turns number than aged ash.

This time, Qora's voice is not here to encourage me, to urge me onward. Instead, I picture their faces: Drago, Mayce, Merikh, Kyan. Those images contrast the thousands of whispers collecting around me, hoping to divert me, to slow me down. But I didn't break my fucking bones to end up caged here for eternity unless Kronos releases me. Then, I will be in his debt.

Beyond the shroud of ghostly wisps, I make out the dim border of the Waste. Weeping roses droop their weary gray heads, petals shed. I hold onto that sight. Battle the death swaddling me, hoping to bring me down. When my footsteps slow, so close to that border, when the tethers hook into my spine and tear me back, panic surges through me. Horror curdles my blood. I close my eyes. Use all my strength to simply hold my ground, raise my fingers toward that border. If I could jump, I'd dive through the Veil and land upon those roses.

When a strong hand breaks through the barrier, I open my mouth in a silent scream. Because the skin begins to shrivel, disintegrating into pieces. But I don't stop to wonder. Not when the decaying hand closes around my wrist. One simple tug. He hauls me forward—through countless spirits, through the Veil. But I don't land on the weeping roses. My naked body falls into Kyan's arms, into the warmth of his muscles and those tattered wings that surround me. He holds me as the tremors rock through me, as I breathe to steady them and bite my tongue hard to prevent sobs from breaking through. Instead, I lean into every touch. From his one hand stroking my hair to how my breasts flatten upon his lower belly to his heartbeat thundering beneath my cheek. The stench of rotting

flesh curls in the air, and I jerk my head to the side to discover his hand. And gasp. No more skin. No more muscle. Nothing left but a skeletal corpse hand.

“Kyan...!” I sob, only comforted by the tears lashing at my cheeks, by my sense of touch returning. I creep my broken hands toward his, wishing I had my vym, but I can’t begin to know when it will return.

The next thing the fallen angel does is remove his jacket to drape it around my shoulders before tucking tendrils of my hair behind my ear—with that hand of bones. I suppose that explains why they never could have traveled through the Veil of Souls unless it was Hollow Night.

“Will it heal?” I gesture to his hand.

He shrugs. “I don’t know.”

A jolt of panic electrifies my nerve endings, and I swing my head to each side. “Mayce and Merikh, are they—”

“Goddammit, Quintessa, they’re fine! Looking for you, but they’re fucking fine.”

“And Drago?” I almost lurch while pain throbs at the back of my throat.

“Give me your hands.”

“Tell me!”

“The Hag took him to her hollow. He won’t be coming out.”

I try to pull away, but he snatches my wrists. Pain splinters from the busted bones, distracting me from thoughts of Drago. Unable to stop my whimper from escaping, I wince as he examines my swelling hands and softly thumbs the skin above the fractures.

“I don’t have my vym. Kronos took it.”

He presses his lips into a scowl. “Not the only thing he took. I could reset the bones, but it would be painful. And healing is slow. The bathhouse is buried under castle rubble. And you need your hands, Quinny.”

I lift a brow, surprised by his pet name for me. But I like it, I like how it sounds coming from his voice. While a muscle bounces in his cheek, he flicks those blue eyes to mine, but they don't seem as serene as usual. Darker but more lustrous like shimmering steel. Locks of his dark hair eclipse those eyes in shadows. For the first time, I register fur growing along his lower neck, but it's softer fur, mottled with feathers, like owl tuft. And I wonder if it's his monster side. I resist the urge to shiver, wondering why is he transforming now.

"I have something else," he alerts me and kisses my knuckles one at a time, those flawless cupid's bow lips tender as petals.

My heart scales my throat while he fishes for something under his tunic, and once he retrieves the item, he places it in my swollen palm. Awed by the gilded feather, glittering like gold even in the rot of the Waste, I part my lips and stroke one ruined finger along the stem. It's harder than I believed it would be, more metallic in nature despite its obvious organic energy. It's otherworldly, a feather of the cosmos as if it was created from the teardrops of a star. "Is this...?" I breathe the silent question.

Kyan nods. "It's one of the feathers from my old wings... before I was fallen and cursed. Angel feathers hold healing properties. If you accept, all I need do is cut a line in your skin, and it will do the rest." He nods and leans in to kiss me on my brow.

"What are you waiting for?"

"Do you accept?" He pauses, lowering his forehead onto mine, those eyes burning like blue orbs.

Regardless of the tension, the misplaced reverence of the moment, we don't have time to waste. Wherever this Hag's hollow is, I must find it. I must find Drago and somehow, we'll take down this wizened crone together. With my pulse accelerating into overdrive, I shove all other thoughts down to a bottomless pit, refusing to entertain any possibility that he's beyond saving. Not my dragon. Not Thiago.

“I accept, just fucking do it, Kyan!” I cry and thrust my palm toward him.

He doesn't hesitate. Feather in hand, he drags the edge along the inside of my palm, slicing a clean line. I smile at the sting, appreciative of my sense of touch but narrow my brows when I catch a dark splotch on the opposite side of the feather. Before I can raise a question, the feather crumbles into sparkling scintillas—embers that wink and dance while latching onto my blood and sinking into my bloodstream.

Stars burst behind my eyes. A vibrating wave shakes me to my core, and I jolt, shuddering as heat explores every nook and cranny of my body. It all happens within moments. But by the time I glance down, no swelling engulfs my hands. No fractures, my hands are whole again.

I open my mouth to thank Kyan but don't get the chance. Not when Merikh lunges for him, crashes into the fallen angel, and wraps strong hands around Kyan's throat while growling, “What the fuck have you done?!”



THIS IS THE TORTURE I WILL  
NOT SURVIVE.



## DRAGO

I WOULDN'T WISH THIS ON MY WORST ENEMY. WELL... perhaps Kronos.

The Hag's brand of torture will ultimately be beyond my limits. I grit my teeth and bite the leather she shoves in my mouth.

"Don't want to break any pretty dragon teeth yet," she tells me and drags her claw in a precursory taunt along my naked chest. A straight line down my navel, and a growl works itself into my throat as she doesn't stop. No, those claws toy with the dark nest of curls before they prowl along the thick vein of my flaccid cock. "We will be getting to know each other very well tonight, Drago."

I'd rather plunge headfirst into the Veil, which she damn well knows, but it doesn't matter. She will take every drop of blood she can from me. Once she drains me of my essence, once she feasts upon my heart, Kronos will have the power to devour my soul. Still, the fire in my belly howls when she cuts me with her claws. My nostrils flare from the superficial marks she slashes all over my body as if she's decorating. Nor does she spare my member. This is the simple part.

Everything in me wants to flex my muscles and wrestle with the shackles around my throat, wrists, and ankles. But doing so would also cause the stakes to tear through my feet and hands. Ice-dragon bone spikes—clever crone. Wonder how long she was hoarding them, preparing for this day.

Her next cuts are deeper, but she moves slow enough for me to heal, so she may prolong the torture. The salt of my sweat fuses with the blood, and my breath labors, growing heavier, but I'm not heaving yet. No, instead, I close my eyes and try to sink deep into my mind as Mayce has attempted to teach me. When my physical prowess is far more powerful than my psychological one, it's more of a challenge. But soon, my breath grows calmer, more even. My body forgets the pain as I imagine a mosaic of scars and ink upon lace-white skin.

I fade.

Into the fantasy of her laughing and escaping through a field of honey flowers from my lost homeland. Dragons soar throughout the sky above our heads, but the flower stalks are high and thick enough to hide her. I follow her scent, that dark floral musk of a winter rose that pushes its thorns through ice—a flawless contrast to the honey flowers.

She giggles the moment I catch her waist, her hair a fall of silver in the sunlight. Already, a sheen of sweat has the shift sticking to her skin and exposing those pretty pink nipples, peaked and yearning for my tongue and teeth. My cock throbs while more scales brawl to the surface of my skin, preparing for my half-dragon form. With my blood sizzling, I haul her back to my chest, thrilling in her squeal right before I hook my hand beneath her jaw, capturing all of it, holding her in place.

“Naughty pet,” I growl in her ear, fire simmering in my belly from the hairs prickling on her skin. She lets out a delicious little whimper when I thrust the ends of her shift up, cup her bottom that pushes against my palm. Sweet girl. At first, I knead the flesh, the fairest color of ghost dragons, and the skin softer than the blossoms around us. I can't wait to turn it pink as poppies.

She shrieks when my hand strikes the flesh. Moans when I kneel and bend her over my knee, loving how her hair tumbles over her head and onto the honey flowers. Once she has the audacity to wriggle that adorable, ample ass, I strike her again. Harder. With my bulge growing thicker by the second and my desire to show her who controls her, who owns her, and will always protect her, I punish my pet. I love how her mewls

grow quieter as the pain hits its mark deeper inside her. Love how her body trembles beneath me while all of her grows warmer.

She's so fucking sensitive, responsive—our perfect touch-starved, pain-loving pet. And not from some sick sense of self-shame. Despite all her coy blushes and how much she reveres our forms, my little Tessie doesn't have a shameful cell in her body. As proud of her scars and marks that she earned. She lives for any touch. She loves the pain as much as she adores the pleasure.

I massage the skin that grows pinker. For a few moments, she's still, but when my next blow comes, she rocks her hips into my hand. She needs me, my domination, my command, my ruling over her. All her life, she's only ever wanted someone to possess her, to care for her, to love her. And for the first time in my ten thousand years, I may admit to the last one. Something I believed I would only feel with Mayce.

She shivers. My pulse accelerates. My blood grows hotter. Embers surge from my pores. I'm as much a slave to her as she is to me. I crave every impulse, every whimper, every pleading word upon her lips. When at last, her bottom is the color of a deep, rosy poppy, I lean down and set my mouth upon her cheeks. Her head jerks up as she gasps, but I fist her hair and force her back down as I lick at her heated skin and taste the swollen flesh. Cocks throbbing so hard and high, I know they prod her, I sink my tongue between her cheeks until I circle her puckered ring. Tremors rupture in waves through her, and I growl a commending, "Good pet," because she's done her very best not to writhe.

I tiptoe my fingers lower, traveling them upon her thighs, already chuckling at the wetness coating her skin. There are her pretty pubic lips, those folds wet and wanton with her slit soaked and creaming itself. Hot as a flame to my touch. A smirk crooks the corner of my mouth when that dirty, wet slit sucks my finger in a drippy kiss.

Not delaying her desire any longer, I prop her up on my lap, feast on the sight of her tears and flushed cheeks, then tear her shift, and peel it off her little body. Preparing herself, she

digs her nails into my shoulders as I free my members, grip her hips, and slam her down upon my iron-hard cocks.

Her scream erupts.

But it's not a scream. It's a fucking laugh. Too rich. Too smoky. Too erotic. Not like my sweet Tessie with her laughter as glittery as treasure to be cherished.

"Well, now, Drago..." the Hag teases her breath along my ear, and I tense all my muscles as she rips away the fantasy playing in my head, shredding it to tatters. I cringe, a guttural growl in my throat when she nips my earlobe while her tentacles sink inside the canal. "All you needed to do was ask, my virile dragon."

This is the torture I will not survive. Not when she twists her tentacles like twirling a strand of hair while eyeing me as some snack. Not when she cuts herself with her own claws, swirling her fingers in the blood before spitting into her palm in a predictive motion of what's to come. And no matter how much I war with the shackles, I can't break them. I can do nothing when she wipes that lethal concoction upon my eyes, chants ancient words, and transforms her form into my little pet's. An illusion. But it works its magic regardless.

All my muscles bulge, and I snarl when the Hag tears off her ragged shift to bare herself to me as Tessie. The same rose-tipped buds on small but high and ripe mounds. The same pretty pink pussy glistening with fluids which she peels apart to show me. Inner folds flushed and swollen. Despite the heat tunneling to my groin, I stay down and dry even as she pinches her nipples and thrusts a finger in that drenched slit. But it doesn't matter when she presses her warm, false body against me, slides down my chest, and takes both my cocks in her hands.

I thrash. I roar. I tear my flesh and break bones, spilling more blood for her, careless if I'll sever a fucking limb. With an annoyed groan, all it takes is the Hag waving her hand, commanding more bone spikes to lodge in my body. This time, she secures them to bone and muscle, denying me any

opportunity to escape. The pain of my shredded flesh only heightens my adrenaline. And endorphins.

It doesn't matter what I fucking tell myself. That it's rape when she unhinges her jaw and slides her plump lips over both my cocks. "Hmm...can she do this, Drago?" taunts the Hag.

It doesn't matter how I choke and my muscles harden. Her wet silken heat imprisons my flaccid members, demanding their swollen subjugation. And they yield. They thicken and turn rigid. Shame turns my blood to ice and darkens my heart. It's her face below me, her eyes, her hair, her scars, and tattoos. It's her fingers stroking me. But I am a damned monster for this betrayal. Two betrayals when her finger sinks into my ass, and heat claws at my insides until my cocks pulse, and my hips unwittingly thrust. The veins in my neck strain against my skin with the force it takes me to resist.

Until she rises and binds her naked legs around my hips.

Red rage eats at my vision. Only replaced by sheer bliss when the Hag slides onto my shafts. Slow. Excruciating. Her pussy creeps hot, velvety, and wet over my members. She wiggles. She shifts from side to side. Sliding. Sliding. Sliding. Swallowing and sealing around my cocks until my balls nudge her buttocks.

It doesn't matter how I clench my jaw and press my lips into a hard line as she licks at them, tongue prodding between the seam. None of it matters.

Because she is safe. I sent her away. My brothers will protect her. Once I die, my brothers will lose some of their humanity, but I must believe she is strong enough to bond with the others and break through our curse before they all become beasts. I should have known I wouldn't be the first. Not when my cocks jerk and blow their load inside the Hag.

I'm not the first because I deserve it last.



THEY ARE MINE. I OWN THEM AS  
MUCH AS THEY OWN ME.

## QUINTESSA

THE MOMENT MERIKH RAISES HIS FIST TO KYAN, I LUNGE AND catch his hand. He stops as I wrap mine around it and shake my head, my eyes wide and pleading. His are dark and violent, breeding shadows that seem to penetrate my core. I squeeze my arms, suddenly self-conscious about my nakedness, save for Kyan's jacket.

“She needed healing,” interjects the fallen angel.

“You broke your word, Ky,” Merikh snarls, jerking his head to his partner, teeth gnashing.

Kyan shakes his head. “Only by half. Your blood was on the feather.”

My gaze flits between the two of them, and I thread my brows, confused. But it's not long before Mayce cups my shoulders and brings his calm rationality into the circle.

“This is no time for division, my brothers. Regardless of what may happen, it will be Quintessa's choice in the matter. We owe her that much.”

Shoulders hardening, Merikh rises and bares a lethal fang. “We owe her nothing! She's the reason the Hag took Drago. We couldn't do a damned thing to thwart Kronos. This scar...” he rips his vest, and I choke on a gasp from the sight of the bleeding harpe scrawled onto his chest, “...has *her* name in the wound, little dove. And I don't give a damn if I can't bond with you. At least I can fuck you.” He advances toward me, his dark trench coat more like a yawning grave waiting to



devour me. “What’s to stop me from doing so?” He balls his hand into a fist.

I can’t help it. Fear is such a foreign sensation when it comes to the four kings. Or much of anyone. Too used to Qora all those years I don’t move back but push my body toward him, stand on my tiptoes, arch my neck, and press my lips to Merikh’s. All within the span of a couple of seconds, so he’s caught off guard. He growls into my mouth, and I taste blood and darkness, brutality and ice. I have no idea what they’re talking about. Kyan’s feather and Merikh’s blood. Or the difference between bonding and fucking.

All I know is he’s mine. They are mine. I own them as much as they own me. Except for one.

So, the moment Merikh groans and deepens the kiss, bruising my lips with how hard his crush mine, I pull away and demand of them all, “Where is Drago?”

Mayce kneads his brow while the vampire stalks before me, prowling back and forth as if waiting for an opening, so he may force me to the ground and fuck me hard. “The Hag returned him to her lair where she holds ultimate power and control. In the course of ten thousand years, we have never managed to penetrate her spelled barriers.”

“I don’t care. Take me there.”



“HOW LONG MUST WE SUFFER THROUGH THIS?” I HEAR Merikh groan behind me as I try for the seventeenth time. Or is it 77th? I’ve lost track. By now, one managed to make it back to the castle to find a set of clothes. I could care less how it’s a servant’s simple gray dress. Little more than a shift. I’m still wearing Kyan’s jacket.

Despite the pain racking my body, I throw myself at the walls of labyrinthine thorny vines, too clumped and thick to afford any glimpse of what lies beyond. Not one bends or

breaks beneath my weight. No matter how much I try to squeeze my way in, to the point of nearly breaking my ribcage, the walls part for nothing.

I recognize Mayce's hands on the backs of my shoulders. They are the softest of the Kings. "Quintessa, stop. You're bleeding. This is futile," he admonishes me but cradles my hands and blows cool breath upon them while I break down, buckle, and fall against the Fae king's chest. Sobs tear from my throat as I consider my dragon, *my* dragon!

Clinging to his robes regardless of how bloody they are, I shake my head violently and whimper, "He's your partner, Mayce. We can't..." my voice rasps, turning dry, and I battle the tears struggling to break free. "I can't...there must be some way to get through."

Merikh grips my hair, yanking me back, away from Mayce and burning his black eyes against mine. "Accept your fate, little dove. It's your fucking fault. And now you'll come with us," he barks and nods to Kyan. "And suffer the consequences, the retribution of what you've done."

This time, I don't kiss him. Because I'm not that fucking desperate. Or weak. Or worthless. Instead, I shove him. I shove him so hard, I don't care how it rips strands of my hair right from their roots. It's hard enough to upend him, and before Merikh can have the chance to rise, I lunge and put all my weight on him. Hands around his throat, I straddle him and seethe, "If there's retribution, I'll fucking pay it. But. Not. From. You. Sucker."

His eyes widen so much, they almost free from their sockets. "What the fuck did you just call me?" Merikh's skin grows paler, more bloodless. He unleashes his claws, ready to plunge them inside me.

Now, it's Kyan. Sweet, selfless Kyan who gets his arms around me and lifts me off Merikh before those claws can land. He steps between us as Merikh gets to his feet and unleashes a low growl at the vampire. "Let it go, Mer."

I'm almost ready to kick and thrash and hurl myself at the vampire, but a sudden and familiar yipping bark has us all

pausing. A thrill surges inside me, accompanied by a comforting rush of warmth at the sound of my fox.

“Jinxy!” I squeal, and Kyan releases me, so I may welcome the rook fox who scrambles out of the brush of the woods. His tails wag behind him, and I lower myself to one knee as he pounces, underestimating his weight which knocks me down.

Merikh grumbles behind me. “And she still loves the same damn creature who brought the curse.”

I wrinkle my nose but bury my face in the fox’s scruff. Kronos or the Hag must have told them about how she used a cursed spell upon my little Jinx. But as I take a moment to survey him, to watch him tilt his head to the side and blink, I can’t help but notice the way the seam of his lips turn down and the way his eyes falter, and how his head bows. Is he... apologizing to me? When a sudden thought crosses my mind, a thought so random and wild, it could only come from my crazed mind, I cradle the sides of Jinx’s face and ask him, “Do you know the way, Jinxy?”

He licks his muzzle, then his nose, and cocks his head, but that seam spreads. My nerves ignite at the sight of that seam lifting, those lips curling. I nearly lurch when the fox does, when he scampers out of my arms, twirls into a playful lunge, then twirls again in a prompt for me to follow. And the second he does, the stem of his rump grows a *fourth* tail.



“HOW DID WE MISS THIS?” WONDERS MAYCE, DUMBOUNDED by the tunnel where Jinx has led us.

Kyan shrugs. “It wouldn’t matter. That hole is far too narrow for any of us to fit,” he responds, gesturing to the narrow burrow which seems like a groundhog’s hole. Or one of those bony Waste rats.

Horror seeps into my very bone marrow when the understanding shatters against me: “I can fit,” I softly say, almost hoping they don’t hear me.

Merikh is the first to step toward me. And growls. “No, little dove.”

I advance toward him, stand on my tiptoes, but I’m still too far away, too far from his mouth that I want. “I have to try. And I *will* try.”

“You will come with Kyan. And me. Now.”

I shake my head. Stare down those thunderous black eyes. “No. I’m going down the hole. I’ll find Drago. I’ll bring him back.”

“Go, Quinny,” Kyan tells me while brushing his knuckles across my cheek. The moment his fingers touch me, I jolt, understanding “Quinny” is his name for me.

The other kings meet my eyes and nod in a silent gesture of encouragement, but Merikh’s is lackluster when he lowers his gaze a moment. However, I don’t just climb into that dark hole. With tears heating my eyes, I stare back at my boys, only three, and nod, thankful for what they’ve given me this far.

I jump.

I leap.

I plunge into that black hole. Squeeze my body as narrow and thin as it possibly can fit...

And hope.



I BECOME GRAY.

## QUINTESSA

I WISH THERE WERE SPIDERS. BECAUSE I WOULDN'T BE ALONE.

The tunnel is too small to stand.

Surrounded by nothing but darkness, I hug my arms to shield my chest as tremors reverberate through my body. Goosebumps erupt all over my body, but with every crawling motion, they fade. I whimper, but no tears fall. They can't anymore. Too far from the Kings, too deep underground, I'm losing myself again. And becoming my past...

*I curl up in the fetal position, hold my arms around my knees, and rock my little form back and forth. My body shakes. Not from the cold but from my failure. No matter how hard I pushed myself, no matter how much Pater forced me to cut myself to unleash my vum, it could not heal Rylinne. I lower my head to my chest as my lungs burn and blood roars in my eardrums with the force of thunder. What hurts more than these lines scrawled into my skin is knowing I can't even give her my tears. I can't cry for my oldest sister who has done her best to show me kindness, however detached from emotion. Nothing like Darya.*

*Too dark in this root cellar to see anything, and since I feel nothing but these cuts, I wonder if rats will nibble at the soles of my feet like they did last time. Or maybe the shadows will finally devour me, and I'll be buried inside a dark womb forever. Tremors rupture inside me from the prison of my fear of becoming nothing and no one just as he tells me every day.*

You are nothing. Gray girl. Gray bitch. Gray whore.  
*Nothing but gray.*

I slam my hands over my ears and try to block out the memory of my past. Violently shake my head because I am *not* the gray girl anymore. But the black endless hollow taunts me and licks my spine to pulse icy fear into my nerves. Aware of how my hands tremble, I stretch them to the sides but only get the vaguest sense of pressure. The walls are too close. Pain splinters my lungs like broken glass shards have lodged there, bleeding them and restricting my air. I can't swallow past the tightening of my throat.

All of me is fading. Becoming gray and hollow as an echo. An echo of a ghost. Not even a scrap of a half ghost. I clutch my throat, clawing and knowing I'm breaking skin when my fingers come back bloody. Worse than the icy grip of death or the flaming claws of torture, I'm returning to limbo, wondering if I'll be stuck forever.

*"Gray..."*

I jerk my head to the side in the direction of the whispering voice. And shake my head, squeezing my eyes shut, trying to deny it.

*"Gray,"* repeats the voice, louder this time, rich and smoky and hypnotic. Now, I understand. This is the entrance to the Hag's lair. Her dark magic, her curse is woven into the very air smothering me. Like the labyrinth of thorns, but these are emotional, spiritual.

I choke on a sob as the voice creeps into the fabric of my being and makes a bed in my heart. It doesn't cut. It doesn't bleed me. It doesn't need to. With every word and every image storming my mind, her power rips away at the organ one delicate string at a time.

The Hag's power forms a silhouette to drift before me. *"A crying mother holds a newborn corpse. Blood stains the roots of the Wailing trees around her. The other babe breathes but does not cry."*



“Stop!” I cry out and lash at the figure, but she has all the substance of a figment of my imagination.

*“You were a failure while you still slumbered in your mother’s womb...”*

On my hands and knees, I crawl and close my eyes, but the images invade my vision all the same. My body shudders from the shame.

Twenty years ago, on Hollow Night, I see my mother cradling her swollen womb, fleeing to the Wailing Woods. Blood drips down her legs, attracting more monsters. But Kronos is the monster who sends all others running. He helps her give birth...for a price. He pulls the twin souls from the womb, turns them over, examines them as if they are mere objects. Pleased with Qora’s, he devours her soul, savoring, breathing her essence.

Within minutes, my mother’s tears mix with the blood as she gives birth to a dead babe. And holds my twin’s lifeless body. Ache after ache tortures my throat when Kronos smiles, claiming half my soul to store it in a gray bottle, pocketing it like a bauble.

*“Your soul was too weak to satisfy the god-eater,”* another sultry whisper invades my ears, but it becomes shackles to imprison me. A grave to bury me.

*“You could not heal your sister. Your blood and scars were never enough. You were not strong enough to help your dragon.”*

The words bruise me so deeply, they form scars beyond my bones. A rush of desperate adrenaline drives my body into a panic, and I seize, throwing my body against the dirt and stones of the walls around me. Careless if I break or batter something.

*“Never enough, isn’t that right, Quintessa? Not for your mother when you could never heal her grief, so she blamed you. Not for your father who could never hope to love a child who was neither living nor dead. Not for your sister whose*

*scars you could never heal. You could never be enough for them.”*

One by one, the roots of all that I am snap. Every word she speaks numbs me. I breathe in the force of her power, this nothingness that cripples me until I’m curled into the fetal position. My hands wander across my body, but this hollow is all consuming. No pain to distract me. No pleasure to warm me. No scars I can feel. No ink I can see. No searing muscles, flawless beauty, serene and fallen blue eyes, or dark and depraved touches to my wrist to steady me. I can’t anchor myself with what I can see, smell, taste, hear, or *feel*.

No Shadow to taunt me.

*“Gray bitch. Gray whore. Gray slut. Gray girl. Gray, gray, gray.”*

The words echo like thunder in my ears until my very breath repeats them, memorizes them. Fear is not the cruelest weapon. It’s not pain or horror or loss. It’s time and space forgetting your existence. It’s this dereliction. This abandonment and silence, this gray nothing that eclipses all of me. The hole that fills the other half of my soul.

I become gray.

My scream is swallowed by the gray.

*“You could never be enough. Not when you were unmade from birth. Not when you never should have existed. Suck the Shadow. Break the girl...”* she repeats words she once spoke the first time we met in those woods.

Those last words. They trigger another memory. The same gray feeling but diminished exponentially. Powerful enough to send a jolt through my nerve endings. That’s when I begin to uncurl myself. *Silence. Cold and eerie. Utterly alone with not one ghost to offer me company. How long have I been down here? Hours? Days? My thoughts herd together. My blood pulses. All I can hear are my delicate breaths. And the silent scream in my head.*

*“Gray. Gray. Gray!”* she repeats, voice edging on desperation which pulses more strength through my limbs. I’m

not unraveling. I'm not broken. I exist. While I still draw breath, I live and love and *feel*. Because I may be gray, but there are a million of gray within my spirit. Because I hold this truth closer than a scar. It's a brand upon my heart. And it ignites with enough heat to light a fire within me. With every forward motion, I piece myself back together with flames, dragon scales, ash, and embers.

So, I plant my hands upon the dirt, nails digging in. I lift my head. Whisper their names aloud to give me courage. "Dragomir, Mayce, Kyan, Merikh."

*"They are gods. You are nothing! A gray girl with a broken soul."*

"No," I say with resolve, pressing my lips together and quickening my pace. "The only one who gets to break me is *me*." I repeat the words from the darkness of that crypt, refusing to break like I did then. "So, give me all the scars you want to, you sadistic prick. I'll wear them inside and out—just as proud. I love all of them. Because the ones with the greatest scars are the ones with the deepest hearts."

The Hag screeches, and the silhouetted figure tries to block my way, but I crawl right through her. "Good luck finding mine, you tentacle-cheeked, swampy bitch."

As soon as I speak the words, my body pitches into open air. I scream as I fall.



THAT'S MY FUCKING DRAGON!

## DRAGO

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG THE DAMNED HAG HAS RIDDEN ME in Tessie's form. But the torture is endless. She boils my blood. Forces me to hardness over and over. And fucking rides me until I ejaculate inside her every time. Doesn't matter how much my seed coats her legs and fills her damned cunt. She never tires. She doesn't let me fade.

I don't know how long I'll last like this.

I seethe, blowing fury through my nostrils as she mounts me once more. And the second she slides excruciatingly slow and brutal down my cocks, a familiar little figure clothed in nothing more than a dirty gray shift falls into the Hag's lair. My blood leaps in my veins, and my heart lurches into my throat when my little Tessie, my Quintessa plunges into the scummy water of the swamp territory where the Hag lives.

Instantly, the Hag hisses but refuses to stop her torture, dismissing my sweet pet as if she's no more than a pest. I shake my head with a laugh, though my brow creases and rage simmers in my blood at the thought of her here. That I am some dragon in distress and need a damsel to save me. I go flaccid in the Hag's cursed cunt at the very idea. But as soon as Tessie surfaces, whipping her long gray hair in a sudden arc, my cocks throb with desire. Especially from the sight of that shift clinging to every inch of her skin.

What I love more is when she turns and sees what the Hag is doing. Oh, the livid expression on her face from her lips twisted into a fierce grimace to her seething nostrils to the wrath brimming in her dilated eyes! I never noticed how red

her cheeks turn, but I imagine it's the first time she's felt this type of anger. It all kindles my blood, sets it to rush, and stirs adrenaline within me. Enough to rattle the chains and shackles, but all that does is swell more blood when I rip at skin and flesh thanks to the bone hooks anchoring me.

Tessie slogs through the water, deviating past countless rotting, black trees dripping with thick lichen that claws at her hair. Raging like an unexpected fire, she ignores the algae hanging onto her wet shift, the moss hitchhiking onto her cheeks, and even the flies pestering her. Her eyes are fixated on the Hag who growls and rides me, propelling me toward another inevitable, torturous climax despite how much I wrestle with my muscles bulging.

It's as much a shock to the cursed witch as it is to me when Tessie issues out of the water and charges for the Hag, grips the tentacles so hard, she damn near rips them off, and drags her right off my cocks. I tilt my head with a smirk as my pet shrieks in a shrill, howling voice of possession, "That's *my* fucking dragon, you heartless, fish-eyed, tentacled-twat!"

I lift my brows. My lips spread into a grin, and heat surges right to my cocks from my little Tessie coming to my defense in her adorable way. I can't fathom how she discovered the secret entrance, and I understand it was no trivial task for her to overcome that tunnel, but all those thoughts evade me when she hurls the Hag back and throws her body against mine, and kisses every part of me she can access.

"Pet..." I touch my lips to her head, reassuring her I still want her, still need her, still own her with every fiber of my being. And I've fucking paid for her in blood. Not that I ever believed I'd find one worthy of such a feat. Or that one would pay with her own.

She gazes up at me through tear-blurred eyes. "What has she done to you?"

"To us," I correct, so she understands it's a burden, a curse we both share now.

The Hag advances toward us, and I can't help but smile at how Tessie clings all the tighter to me, pressing her cheek to

my midsection on account of how small she is compared to me.

“You want him, gray girl?” purrs the Hag in that seductive, rich voice far too tempting. “You may try and claim him!”

She flattens a palm to my chest and snarls, “He is *mine!*”

The Hag laughs. She laughs, wagging those tentacles fixed to her cheeks at my Tessie, but the fire blazing in my little pet’s eyes is enough to grant me hope. Enough to give me the strength to growl at the bane before me.

“Only if you find his soul,” the Hag stipulates with a malevolent grin twisting her crazed features, impossible from that damned detached jaw. Tessie freezes, eyes turning wide. I clench my jaw when the Hag taps her claws together, her phantasm eyes marking me before targeting my pet. “A little bargain. A little wager. Yes, yes, play with fire.” Her tentacles curl their taunts in the air as she sways from side to side, approaching Tessie. “For every second you take to find the dragon’s soul, I spill a drop of blood. I will not stop. Not till I reach his heart to touch.” She wags her claw, and I stiffen as she trails it along my cheek.

All the flushed color drains from Tessie’s cheeks. “Or...?” my sweet pet asks, swallowing, her teary eyes shifting to mine.

“Or you leave. Leave and leave me the dragon. Forever. My heart and touch.” The instant the fucking witch taps my bare chest, I snarl and snap my teeth. She hisses, pulling her lips back to show her teeth in a contesting command. Nor does she stop touching my chest, rubbing the heel of her hand against the place above my heart. I soften my eyes upon Tessie whose lips have parted in understanding. Our first touch. Our first spark. If she leaves, the Hag will take everything.

Her tears are the worst brand of torture. I’ve never believed any force could have the power to burn me on the inside...until those tears.

“Oh, poor tears. Touch and tears,” croons the Hag while stroking those fucking claws across my chest. And lower.



My little pet gazes at me. Then at our surroundings. At the expansive lair of the Hag, much of which is nothing but swampish land—waist-deep. And this rocky ground where she's chained me to the cliffs that mark the edge of her territory. Worse are the great piles of bones, each like a small mountain: the Hag's trophies. She could have hidden my soul anywhere. My little Tessie's eyes scramble as if she's counting the infinite number of seconds it could take. And the drops of blood.

She swings those beautiful eyes of silver ghost light streaming with moonstone tears. And whimpers, "Drago, I..." she steps back, but I thrust out my jaw, narrow my eyes, and command in the voice I know she will listen to, "Be my dirty, good girl, my pet." I can't resist crooking a smirk since she will get dirty as I will get bloody. But that's been our dynamic from the beginning. Fire and blood, darkness and sin, wicked and filthy. "You will do this. You won't look back, little one. Because every second wasted is a drop of blood. You will use every moment to find my soul. And once you do, little Tessie, Thayne and I will fuck you until we send you to heaven just so we can bring you back again. Remember, Thiago, my Queen. And find my fucking soul. Now," I finish in a roar that is explosive enough to send my little pet whirling around and scampering toward the nearest little mountain of bones.

This time, when the Hag takes a claw to my flesh, I bite down on the leather strap but relax all my muscles. I keep my eyes on my little Tessie the whole time. Because this brand of torture will be nothing compared to the last.



THIS WILL NOT BE MY SUICIDE.

## QUINTESSA

I DON'T LOOK BACK.

Not even when I hear his breath laboring. Sweat cleaves to every inch of me as I scramble among the bones, digging, digging, digging. Thanks to Kronos, I have an idea of what I need to look for, but with every frenzied breath I take, and the more the Hag hums her glee in the background, the more outrage hammers me, scrambling my senses. I turn the mountain of bones into a crater, grit my teeth, then move on to the next. The Hag laughs again, and it's the first time Drago's pained growl strikes horror into my blood.

I still don't look back.

Wincing from the Hag's laughter that boils my blood, I hunt through countless bones, searching for any signs of his soul, imagining what it must look like. Not a silver fairy like the first one I held. Drago's will be flames and embers. And if he has strings, they won't be fine, nor delicate as a lacy kite. They will be thick and hot like tongues of hellfire. Touching Drago's soul will be like feeling a hot coal.

But everything here is cold. Too cold. Not because I'm numb because Drago is here, he's close but because there is no trace of him here.

His labored breath battles the Hag's taunts for territory. Both are like venom pricking at my spine, wanting to invade, slow my blood, and rattle my heart from its place. On my knees with my whole body trembling, panic splinters through

me. A voice of defeat twists my thoughts, an echo of the Hag and the promise of what she will do.

I still don't look back.

Instead, I shut my eyes and shake my head, determined to block them out. If I fantasize about the past few days with the Kings or dream up some vision of Drago and me somewhere else, it would be worse than taking these few moments to process. No, my heart quakes with the knowledge of what I must do. I need to imagine myself in some dark, silent womb, some tunnel closing in on me.

For the first time, I *choose* to enter that place inside my mind, inside my soul. I enter the gray nothing. Deeper I creep into those chasms of pain, trauma, of blood dripping from new scars, of scabs opened and left never to heal, of the icy shackles of isolation, and the pain of delirium and madness. I don't stop until the sound of the Hag's torture dims and fades.

Tremors rupture through my being, but I don't break down. My pulse thunders with blood loud enough to split my eardrums, but they hold their strength. The seething of my breath funnels a hurricane within my lungs, but I don't inhale or exhale a struggle.

Every nerve ending inside me explodes as I rise from these remains because they are the Hag's discarded tokens, not trophies. And she has too much pride, too much arrogance to hide his soul within such scraps. No, she would place it somewhere she may glory and revel. Nothing like Drago and I where we crashed and burned within a simple tower bedroom, within a dark dungeon, an underground steam room, a Court of Ash, and a field of weeping roses. We bonded through a blade and mud, through blood and fire, and the darkness of beautiful nightmares.

When I open my eyes, the first sight that meets my eyes is the swampy water I tumbled into when I fell from the tunnel. Everything catches fire inside me. Without looking back, I grin. Without hesitating, I harden my eyes, my spine, my whole body. Power and passion blaze through me, and I lurch

into a run. The wrathful hiss seething from the Hag behind me only sparks my adrenaline and sends a thrill shooting into me.

One plunge into that thick, filthy water is all it takes. One plunge into this swamp that engulfs me to my chest with undeniable warmth is confirmation. The dark, dirty, and wet womb closes over my head, and I let it. I surrender to it, take a deep breath, shut my eyes, and enter the gray nothing...

The water is too thick, too viscous. It takes all my muscles to wade through it. Long threads of lichen, scum and mud, rot and brine, decay and methane, and the crippling weight of heavy silence consume me—as heavy as a burial ground. But it would *not* be mine. I push through the labyrinth of swamp, hands testing, fingers feeling. It takes beyond what my lungs may handle, so I stand to capture more air. The third time I do, Drago's growl has transformed into a pained roar. But his words, his command thunders louder in my ears.

*Be my dirty, good girl, my pet.*

Yes, I belong to him, them. Their willing slave, their sweet slut, their pretty pet, and their goddamned Queen of Ash. I am not nothing. I am everything!

*You will do this. You won't look back, little one.*

I don't. I dive beneath the scummy water despite how I know it's not just water. It's blood.

*Because every second wasted is a drop of blood.*

*You will use every moment to find my soul. And once you do, little Tessie, Thayne and I will fuck you until we send you to heaven just so we can bring you back again.*

Oh, gods, I nearly erupt from the memory of those moments. From the unbearable pain that bowed beneath the unstoppable rush of pleasure, no matter how much it shook my soul loose and sent me to heaven. It wasn't the first time I visited the land of spirits.

*Remember, Thiago, my Queen. And find my fucking soul.*

My fingers collide with something hard. Lungs on the verge of bursting beyond their breaking point, I pitch my head

to the surface, flinging my hair back. Another growling roar. Another savage laugh from the Hag. The scent of Drago's blood conquers the stench of swamp.

Instead of giving into the fear to let it ice my blood and bones, I fucking use it! I become violence and vengeance and every shade of rage until I feel hot enough to set this swamp on fire and watch it burn. The hard force meets my hands again, but this time, my fingers tunnel into rotted flesh. Beneath the water, I shriek and yelp, but the blood-curdling horror of the enormous corpse is not enough to quell the heat of the embers flickering upon the edges of the body. Because I'm close. I'm so fucking close!

When I break the surface of the swamp again, Drago's roars and growls have quieted. The Hag's hums torture the air, and I know I must not have long. How much flesh has she shredded? How many bones has she broken? How close is she to his heart?

Battling the thoughts wanting to divert me, I dive. And I rip at the decayed corpse. I tear through decomposed skin and flesh, through shriveled muscles, brittle bones. More than once, I retch, but I don't stop. I don't rise because the embers grow hotter. Not even when my lungs protest and sizzle in my chest. Instead, I go deeper. Blind and deaf, with nothing but touch, nothing but this furor spurring me onward, I fight my way into the massive dragon corpse itself. A fever of madness and delirium ignites my blood, my heart, my soul. Not birthed from the gray girl of my past but *re*birthed from the girl who first touched Drago's chest. I become flames and magical embers ever burning to gild my skin like stardust.

Nothing and no one can take that from me. This is my truest sacrifice.

Thrashing my way through the carnage of rot and ruin, of this dragon cadaver, until the last molecules of air surge from my lungs, I follow that heat, stretch out my fingers, and close my palms around one solid object. It doesn't burn my fingers. Just the opposite, it's cold as death and shadows and a loveless heart. But it's mine.

I break bones, tear flesh and skin, and muscles with my teeth. Roaring and screaming my last breath like a trumpeting anthem, I force my body to rise, to push through the bloody swamp. Clutching the object, this dragon egg, to my chest hard enough to wreck my ribs, I shatter through that veil that separates the world of core and light from the one of womb and death.

I take my deepest of breaths. As what little remains of my strength retreats from my body, I crawl out of the water, stumble on trembling legs, and lurch for Drago. I slip on the pool of simmering blood that wells below his body. Chest slit and peeled away to show that vital vessel barely beating beyond that feeble rib cage protecting it.

He's not breathing.

And with the Hag screeching from my sudden arrival and raising those claws for their final time to claim that vessel, I claim him instead!

I don't care how many bones I break when I slam that egg down on his open chest. The Hag breaks bones in her struggle to claw at his heart. My heart. My soul. My dragon. My god. My monster. My king.

"Mine," I whisper as loud as a cannonade to drown out the Hag's scream. "My Dragomir. My Thayne. My *Thiago*: the God of Fire!"

It cracks. My heart surges from the slit of firelight splintering through.

The Hag pauses. Hisses. Lashes out, "You are nothing! A gray nothing whore!" She claws at the heart, bleeding it, screeching her thrill. I strike harder, careless of how my nails splinter and the knuckle bones break in my hand. The Hag claws my hair, at my back, tearing my wet shift, but I embrace her assault, this pain, and whatever new scars she gives me. Whatever happens, I do not stop breaking the egg housing Drago's soul. It shivers beneath my palm.

This will not be my suicide.



I feel the vym leaving my body, my real vym. Not gray, not gray at all. The scars on my skin awaken. I scream through the pain. All the scars upon my skin pulse and scintillate, transforming from darkness to the light of a blistering dawn.

Core and light. Womb and death. Fire and earth and blood and air. Breath and bones. Breath!

More blood spills down my back. More thin fissures form like veins in the egg. It trembles again. As the Hag claws through me, determined that if she cannot have Drago's heart, no one will, I look up at my God of Fire, smile, and bring that goddamn, fucking egg down.

It shatters!

Fire explodes. Flames detonate. An inferno erupts. The volcanic force is enough to vault me into the air until the hard ground slams against me. It breaks me, but it doesn't matter. The Hag's ear-bleeding screams do nothing to disguise the small, soft, still sound that deafens the air.

Thiago takes a breath!

I lose all of mine. And fall.



SHE IS EVERYTHING.

## DRAGO

I WONDER IF THIS IS WHAT IT FELT LIKE WHEN HER SOUL untethered from her body.

The souls within the Veil consume me, devour me. They crush in on me, smother me, denying me any peace, denying me any union with Thayne. Nor can I blame them. Not when my brothers and I are the reason for Kronos reaping their souls before their time and condemning them to this eternal purgatory. The least I may do is join them and allow them their vengeance. Still, I have no regrets because the Hag's torture would be far worse.

I smile to myself, remembering the sight of her plunging into the swamp. How she had no reservations about diving headfirst into the dragon carcass. If only I'd seen what she looked like upon surfacing. Even covered in blood, flesh, intestines, mud, algae, and bits of bones, my little Tessie would still be the most beautiful Queen. Half-soul, fuck, my soul rages at the notion, and I close my eyes, surrendering myself to the darkness engulfing my vision as the other spirits press in, strangling my consciousness.

Quintessa is worth ten thousand souls. Ten thousand souls for ten thousand years. I'd repeat that time, ten thousand years of a cursed existence, if I could hold her one last time.

When a slit of light pierces the gloom of souls eclipsing me, I don't open my eyes. I don't dare to hope. Instead, I wait in this moment as we taught her, waiting as a ghost would for her first touch. At first, it's no more than a brush of fingers, kindling a spark. Her familiar hand closes around mine,

gripping tight to my wrist and rousing embers. A smirk finds my mouth as she proves her strength, igniting an inferno as her soul breaks through the tide of dead ones. They part before her, understanding this is her claim.

Her vym awakens and forms hooks and tethers, and my smirk grows to a grin when I recognize how she's modeled those hooks after my cock. Clever, wondrous, fucking adorable little pet. If I live through this, I'll punish her later for that small act of defiance, of daring to believe she could mirror my penetration. But not too much.

At that moment, something familiar ruptures my eardrums, and I recognize the familiar beat thundering through my being. The more she pulls on my soul, the more she ignites an inferno, a fiery whirlwind to engulf me. A kaleidoscope of flaming shards devours my being to restore my flesh, my blood, my bones. Not my breath...not yet.

Suspended in a moment of eternity, I rise to face her. Cradle one side of her face. No gray girl. Her hair has transformed to pure silver flames. Her eyes are the gaze of ice and incandescence. Her skin shines like frost and moonlight. And her tears would make a saint beg for forgiveness. She is ethereal as a thousand dreams and prayers spoken in the dead of night.

Just as I lean in to kiss her, to share the purgatory of our spirits, my soul begins to fade even as hers grows clearer, and I understand why.

"No!" I growl, roaring my fire. Fuck, I was wrong. This is the worst torture. She's bringing me back. With all the strength of her soul, she's broken the prison of my soul, but goddammit, she is losing hers to the Veil. Violent tremors ravage my being even as I struggle to hold onto her. Through those tears, she smiles.

And shakes her head.

"Dammit, pet! I'll bloody your fucking arse for this!"

"Love you, too, Thiago."

And that unfathomable, unbelievable muscle begins to beat. In the same moment that I draw breath, in the same moment that the Hag screams an otherworldly scream as her black soul—bound and cursed to die once mine was restored—perishes, the shackles shatter. And I catch Quintessa as she falls.

“Fuck!” I snarl when her blood soaks my hands. Too much blood. She doesn’t open her eyes. No breath. Lungs too shriveled. Her heartbeat is too ragged, too withered. Doesn’t matter how I peel away the muddy strands of hair from her face and press my lips to hers. She doesn’t respond.

All my being holds the power to set the Hag’s miles-long lair on fire. Burn it to fucking ash! Inside my being, a supernatural power rages from the rebirth of my soul. Everything compels me to use it to rip into the Veil of Souls, to blaze a path through that cursed realm, so I may take the war straight to Kronos. But a greater war rages within me. And my spine snaps straighter than a ramrod.

*She is* everything, I proclaim because Thayne’s voice is my own. We are no longer divided by the curse. No more half-dragon. We are man and dragon in one as it should be. But the slower her heartbeat grows, the more I hear my breath time to it while my soul throbs with this inferno, a firestorm to be unleashed.

I told her loving us was a suicide by sacrifice. Fuck, she still chose it!

So, I choose this. I don’t think. I don’t care to think. And to hell with it all, if I’m listening to my cocks more than my fucking mind. It’s not like I’ve bothered to do much more, especially with her.

I’ll never stop being dumbfounded by all the times I’m wrong. The worst, absolute worst, form of torture is the clawing and biting and burning in half of my own soul! I growl and roar and rage through it all. I don’t stop. I use my teeth, claws, and every flame within me to sever my soul in two until I may surrender half my heart’s fire to the girl, the whore, the slut, the pet, the Queen responsible for bringing it

back to life. The unholy pain threatens to shatter me. At this moment, I understand I am relinquishing the power I could have to take my revenge upon Kronos, to reclaim my fucking realm itself! Moreover, I am weakening the bond I have with my dragon. With every pulse of my soul and every thread I tear, he binds himself to a prison within my mind instead of transcending it. Within this ripping of our soul, we become two entities sharing a half soul instead of one entity sharing a whole.

It doesn't matter. Not when we slam the burning half of our soul down on her heart. We growl and jumpstart it, triggering it. And the moment we do, our brothers arrive. Not once do I turn in their direction. Blood rushes to my cocks because I am so fucking hungry for her. A dragon with a severed soul. I need her more than ever. But first, she must accept my half-soul. *My undeserving soul that is a slave to every part of her.*

Each of us unites to touch our marks upon her flesh.

And my heart lunges into my throat as I wait for Quintessa to *breathe*.





“LOOK AT YOUR GOD,  
QUINTESSA.”

## QUINTESSA

AS SOON AS THAT BURST OF FLAME TICKLES ITS WAY TOWARD me, hope surges through me. I grin. And I leap. I don't look back. Because who cares about looking?

The second I touch it, I become rebirth and dawn and light. Flames and roots and wind and veins because it's not just Drago. All four of my monsters, all four gods have surrendered a shard of their souls to restore me, to rebirth me. Heart and touch. Touch and tears. Shadow and breath. And light. It burns!

Breath. I breathe! The tattered pieces of my half-soul attach to the shards of theirs...and stitch themselves into my heart. And the second it begins to beat, I scream into Drago's mouth because he's slammed both his cocks deep into me. He doesn't wait for me to adjust. Doesn't wait for me to clench in response. He just pounds into me as if he's triggering my heart to beat faster.

It does.

It thunders life, and I moan the deepest I ever have into his mouth which only encourages him to batter me with those cocks. He's a ravenous firestorm, and my spirit, alone, is the fuel to fan his flames. His thrusts are ferocious, growls and snarls uninhibited as he takes my mouth. I meet him head-on. Gripping his hair, tearing at the strands, I drag his mouth harder, deeper into mine, so our tongues go to war, fucking each other. His cocks are harder and hotter than iron forged in a fire. Through every pounding motion, I'm burning, exploding from the inside.

He doesn't wait for me. Driving himself onward, he rams those cocks deeper into me, unleashes those barbs and hooks, devours my scream, and fucks me through the pain while the other three gods fuel my pleasure. Hot tongues upon my nipples. A finger probes my bottom. A bite mark upon my breast. And a still, possessive touch upon my wrist.

Drago purrs upon my mouth, "You are mine!"

"Ours," Kyan emphasizes as if reminding me of our blood-sharing while he tweaks my nipples.

"Drago..." I whisper and close my eyes, feeling my body chafe against his chest. "I'm... a mess." I look down at myself, considering my hair, my skin, my body coated in layers of disgusting swamp refuse, rotted dragon flesh, black blood, and more. The stench is overwhelming, but Drago snarls, grips my tits hard enough to bruise and doesn't stop fucking me.

I yelp when he tips me, shoving me down with my back to the moss-covered stone beneath us. My muscles howl a protest when he pulls out, thrusts my knees up to my chest, then sheathes both cocks to the barest hilt. No warning. No mercy. I wail so loud, it echoes off the walls of the Hag's lair.

"I'm going to fuck you until you can't even limp, my dirty, sweet, little slut," Drago purrs the sordid promise in my ear. I convulse beneath his weight and the gravity of that vow, my pussy throbbing and clenching for more. "Perhaps I'll have you crawl your way into the Court of Ash. Naked and with your tight, hot little cunt glistening and dripping with my seed, so all know whom you belong to."

I groan against his mouth as pleasure shimmers past the pressure and pain of his hard-driven thrusts. Oh, savage mercies! So close. "Don't stop, don't fucking stop!"

With two hot mouths taking my nipples and suckling the erect buds, and hand clenching the base of Drago's cocks with one finger playing with my clit, I shatter into the wildest and most riotous orgasm I've had yet. I'm shrieking through clenched teeth, unabashedly throwing my hair back and cracking and bloodying my fingernails on the rocks beneath me. I'm rocking and writhing and trembling as Drago power-

fucks me through that orgasm, giving me mini aftershocks of pleasure until stars blind my vision, blood deafens my eardrums, lightning tingles all over my skin, and it's nothing but the soul of my dragon coupling to mine.

Flames awaken. They erupt all over my body, burning away the mud, blood, and rotted flesh without laying siege to my skin. When I gaze up at Drago and find his proud grin and the glint in his eye, I look down at myself. There, upon my chest, is a mirrored image of Drago's soul. Like a ball of raging blood fire.

And his cocks explode. They spill violent, blazing seed to ignite a course through my pussy and spill an inferno into my shuddering womb. But even as his cocks spasm, he's still growing, still hardening, and I know he's far from done. My pussy throbs and tightens at the knowledge.

With that grin spreading, Drago leans in and growls low in my ear, "I've fucked you like a monster taking his sweet whore. Now, I'm going to fuck you like a god taking his queen."

Drago transforms. His half-dragon takes over until he's three times my size, towering over me. Unbearable, unbreakable, harder than diamonds, he is all scales, ridges, slabs of impossible muscle, massive, dark wings, jagged claws, and that virile tail that coils around my throat to hold me in place.

It will be more painful than ever to mirror the outpouring of bliss that will follow.

So, I spread my thighs as wide as they possibly can go... and raise my hips.

Drago sinks his claws into the barest surface of my hips, puts both crowned heads to my pussy...waits for me to exhale, commands, "Look at your god, Quintessa."

The moment my eyes flick to those still and powerful emeralds, Drago smiles and slams inside me, smiting me with those cocks.

The others don't stop pleasuring me, sending my thoughts into pandemonium until I'm living off the sensation of touch alone. Unmeasurable, the scales upon his chest rub against my nipples to stoke my ecstasy and send me burning and combusting and exploding into the eye of a hurricane of stars. Gushing and crying and screaming my rapture, I lift my arms to the sky and burst a storm of fire from my chest, enraptured when he lurches with the deepest groan...and falls apart before me. Tremors rip through him. Drago's fiery storm couples to mine, spiraling and growing and detonating to set the Hag's lair aflame while he spills ropes of volcanic hot seed deep into my womb.

We collapse against one another as the others bear us up. And carry us out of the lair as it burns to ash.

“I WILL CALL YOU QUINNY.”  
EPILOGUE

## QUINTESSA

WITH THE HAG'S POWER BROKEN, DRAGO'S CASTLE HAS BEEN restored. I don't understand the full scope of the bond between us or how I managed to free his soul back in the lair, but what consumes me more is the brief conversation I overhear in the steam room. After healing me, Drago fucked me between the bath pillars, on the marble floor, up against the wall. It's not difficult now to feign sleep with how exhausted I am.

"You cannot go through the Veil of Souls, Drago," Mayce points out as I lean against the dragon, nestled against his warm body with my cheek tucked into the crook of his arm. I love the sound of his heartbeat, the raised texture of his scales, and all his heated masculinity.

"Doesn't matter," responds Drago gruffly, and I feel Kyan's familiar fingers combing through my hair. The alpha king lets out a low growl of warning. He's become even more possessive since giving me part of his soul.

"You gave up your freedom, brother. You could have returned to your realm, claimed the throne, restored the Land of Dragons, and built an army to take to Kronos' doorstep."

Drago chuckles darkly and presses his lips to my brow. "She's worth more than a million dragon armies. And look around, Mayce. You said we'd need to spend a month restoring the castle after one of my tantrums. Guess you were wrong, Fae."

"The far east side is still in ruins," grumbles Mayce.

"Needed an update anyway."

“Could have updated the entire Waste with all of your soul...and power.”

My chest squeezes from the revelation, and I contain the shiver that wants to ripple up my spine. Drago sacrificed beyond his life for me. He sacrificed part of his soul, his power, and his ability to escape this prison of the Waste. I sigh, melting into him all the more, listening to the peaceful quiet between their conversation, the rippling of the water, and smelling the dragon king’s natural musk, along with the sage burning in the bathhouse.

“Has Thayne spoken with you?”

I feel Drago’s hard shake of his head. “Bastard is brooding and sulking. He agreed to it, of course. But he doesn’t much enjoy the prison of my mind. We will never be fully Thiago again. Only during the rarest and most extremes of times will we have the power to unite as one.”

“Much to give up for a little wisp of a girl you met a few days ago,” Mayce banter, and I can’t help the smile teasing on my lips.

“You know me, brother. Trial by fire. Never do anything half-assed. In life or in love, it would seem.” I whimper when he hitches his claws beneath my bottom and raises me up to kiss my mouth, parting my lips, and I blink my eyes open. “There’s my dirty good girl. I hope you had a decent nap. The people are eager to see their Queen once again.”

With my cheeks turning red, I smile and kiss my dragon back, wondering what else could possibly be in store tonight. But as Drago carries me out of the steamy water, my eyes cross to Kyan’s, to the dark shadows brimming there. And the hint of a smile crooking one side of his mouth does not escape me.





THIS TIME, THE DRAGON-SCALE BODICE CUTS OFF IN A HIGH V with the point barely brushing my navel. The neckline is a low V-shape, so between it, my arms left bare but for silver wrist cuffs, and my skin exposed to my hips, most of my scars and tattoos are visible. Especially considering the belt of gold chain and bones to cover my pussy regions and black, transparent tresses flowing from its edges.

What I love most was the feeling of the servants' fingers as they'd braided portions of my gray hair, adorning it with silver and gold thread and adding an ash and bone crown, complete with dragon horns, to make me look like a true Queen of the Waste. I smile at the thought of Drago commanding the horns from the princes he'd killed to be fused into the crown.

Jinx curls up on the bed, opening his muzzle to yawn. I smile sweetly, knowing his fourth tail is because he led us to the secret entrance.

“Quintessa, the Queen.”

I jump, spinning at the sound of Kyan's voice from where he stands in the corner of the room, hands folded casually behind him. Smiling, I bow my head to him, blushing because I'm not used to him wearing much besides ripped jeans and his leather jacket. Tonight, he looks downright sinful and sexy in the royal blue leather tunic to bring out the pale ice of his indigo eyes. Silver buckles and patterned thread, black leather breeches, and even a sword at his belted waist. With his rich brown waves held back to showcase his tanned skin, chiseled cheekbones, and strong jaw, Kyan could pass for a noble angel of any court. Other than Mayce, he's the tallest of the kings... unless Drago has donned his half-dragon form, of course.

Until he lifts the edges of his wings, tattered and withered corpses of what they once must have been. Remorse creeps into my chest while a painful knot forms in my throat. I can't imagine what it must be like to have lost the sense of flight and wonder if it's worse than turning numb and gray.

Kyan's boldness undoes me when he closes the distance between us, sweeps a hand around the back of my head, and presses his lips to mine.

“Quinny,” he teases, tapping me on the nose, and I knit my brows in confusion. “Drago calls you Tessie. I will call you Quinny. It reminds me of queen.”

I find a faint smile and fold my hands in front of me. “I never got to thank you for healing me...with the feather,” I remind him.

Kyan smirks and brushes his knuckles across my cheek. “Yes, we were rather rudely interrupted, weren’t we?”

For some reason, my breath is shaky. An intensity within Kyan’s deep-set eyes overwhelms me as if dark shadows brew a looming storm, and he’s just waiting to strike. His expression is serene as a still winter breeze in contrast. Full, supple lips soft with a hint of knowingness at one corner, thick lashes drawn low to me, and pride carves into every inch of the corded muscle of his well-built frame. As if he’s been preparing for this day for centuries. My heart rate pulses faster in the knowledge that even this feeble bit of distance between us is too much...and not enough.

“Why was Merikh so angry? What did he mean by taking me with him and you and promising retribution?”

Kyan narrows his eyes before pressing his fingers into my palm. “Come with me, Quinny. I would prefer to tell you in a more appropriate place.”

I lift a brow but don’t protest. Curious more than anything, I follow Kyan down the outer corridor and to an unfamiliar wing of the castle. The edge of his shriveled wing brushes mine, shedding another disheveled feather, but Kyan doesn’t seem to care. He doesn’t stare down at the feather with loss creasing his brow—something I observed him do in the past.

All the fallen angel does is lead me up a series of winding stone steps with the air growing colder upon each flight. For some reason, my chest seems to grow lighter, my blood heating and quickening, so I keep with his quick pace. Excited for whatever he will share, I follow him to the very top of the final staircase and to the highest tower of the castle.

Adrenaline surges in my blood, and I hurry to the tower wall to fawn over the view beyond the turrets. From this high up, I can see miles of the Waste—acres of ashen, withered woods, hosts of shadow fliers and carrion, shanty towns much like the corpse village, and even black mountains in the far distance with lines of crimson red like a blood network rippling through them.

Once Kyan's chest nudges my back, I gasp. Not simply from his nearness but because of the low growl emanating from his throat and reverberating into my spine like an omen. In place of the young man, as sweet and warm as a summer wind, is a fallen angel predator. And I'm suddenly all too aware of the thrill of hundreds of feet of air a few inches before me. I make the mistake of glancing back, discovering Kyan's eyes have turned blue flames, mad and dangerous enough to imprison me within them.

"You are bound to us now, Quinny," he informs me and cups my chin, thumb pressing onto the center. My lungs seize up from that mere touch as my blood thickens and heat ravishes my insides. "You once asked Drago why only he could fuck you while the rest of us merely pleased you. Would you like to know why or would you prefer to be surprised?"

The hairs on the back of my neck prick to static from the lightning tethering my nerve endings. Part of me wants an answer now, though I understand it has to do with Kronos. Just thinking his name reminds me of that time in the cave within the Veil of Souls. An onslaught of grief weighs upon my heart as I remember that darkness and Kronos' prediction coming true when I left Qora behind, when I chose the Kings, no... when I chose *me* before her. Nor can I blame her for staying, for choosing Kronos with what he had to offer.

"Surprise, it is then," Kyan interjects, ripping into my thoughts.

"Wha—"

The wind steals all my breath away. It knocks everything out of me. Whirls my vision. My stomach plummets. Because

Kyan has thrown me over the tower's edge. Back-to-back screams claw at my skull as I fall dozens of feet through the icy air of the Waste. And just as I struggle to get a scream out, a hard, hot force rails into me, followed by a long, thick steel of a cock ramming into my pussy and strangling all my speech and breath, slicing my scream off before it may unleash.

“Fucking heaven, woman!” It's not Kyan's voice and is. But it's deeper, darker, and brutal.

Sheer ice rushes up my spine while fire fills up my veins from the sight of the ground racing toward us, knowing my human bones will shatter. Tears burn past the veil of my eyes. Horror, sharp and raw, guts into me. Just as the ground rises to meet us, I clamp my eyes shut and brace myself for the pain.

It doesn't come.

A ferocious surge of air pitches my whole body in a steep upswell, swirling and overwhelming my belly. Wind thunders and swells all around us like breakers from the force of wings. Out of the corner of my eyes, I catch the sight of the pinions, awed by their beauty, but I can't marvel for more than a glimpse. I'd lose anything in my stomach if it wasn't for that cock pounding into my pussy. And...oh savage mercies! It vibrates. It literally *vibrates* within me, and my eyes roll to their ceilings from the series of cataclysmic orgasms that has me clenching and pulsing and squirting all over Kyan's gorgeous, magical cock. Finally, his lungs release a frenzied whoosh of air, and he stabs the full force of that cock deep into me without losing one beat of those glorious wings.

“Good girl,” he commends me and nips at my earlobe before licking a trail down the side of my neck. “I know you like that, my wicked little wench. I plan to steal your breath away in many, many ways, Quinny.”

I tremble beneath him. No choice but to surrender to his strength and control as he maintains a firm grip on my torso while my pussy holds onto his cock for dear life, shuddering at the thought of it vibrating again. Before he intends to fulfill his promise, I crane my neck up at him and dare to ask, “W-where are you taking me, Kyan?”

“To my castle and kingdom here in the Waste. The Court of Storms.”

The convulsions tearing through me don't matter. Or how my insides churn from both fear of the unknown and the wonder riding inside me. I don't consider the past. I don't look ahead to the future. Nor do I close my eyes. Instead, I embrace the moment. With the assurance of the youngest monster god and King of the Waste holding me fast, I spread my naked arms to each side...

And fly!

THE END

## OF BOOK ONE.

(Keep reading for a Sneak Peek of Book Two)

(Well, did I break you enough? Message me on FB or IG! I don't bite. I let my words do that.)

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# SNEAK PEEK OF BOOK TWO: THE SURRENDER

~1~

## THEIR DARK DREAM FULFILLED...

### QUINTESSA

I never thought anyone could match Drago's two dragon cocks until I experienced Kyan's enormous angelic one *vibrating* inside me. Too many times, I'd lost count until I'd passed out which was his ulterior motive. Not that it's a competition.

Raindrops and the distant clap of thunder are what wake me. Out of my peripheral vision, I'm aware of the sheer drop. Thousands of feet of distance between me and the earth with nothing but wispy, dark clouds to offer their protection send my heart hammering and my adrenaline pulsing violently. Even so, a dark thrill leapt into my nerve endings. Why did some twisted and disturbed part of me want him to drop me? To wonder what it would feel like to fall? Would it be unparalleled, unfathomable freedom in the eternity of a moment? Or would it be the purity of terror?

I look up at Kyan's face, his expression so tranquil and focused on the landscape before us. With the raindrops, as black as diamonds, falling upon his locks that cling to his strong brow and canvass those deep-set eyes, he reminds me of some beautiful and otherworldly creature from the underworld.

Wings. My greatest memory of the journey to this Court of Storms will be Kyan's wings. Before, they were tattered and



gray—much like my soul before I entered the Veil of Souls, decided to play with monsters, and became their willing slave. And eventually, their Queen. Now, Kyan's wings are as iridescent as moonlight on black ice. Not once is he concerned about the blinding rain raging all around us. They do not ravage his feathers. No, those pinions beat steadfast, gleaming like molten glass in the night—unwavering through any weather.

My pussy still throbbed from when he'd pushed into it too many times to count with that vibrating cock. I'd never forget my first time with Kyan like I'd never forget my first time with Drago. But unlike with the dragon, which happened in a lackluster tower bedroom, Kyan had thrown me off a tower. And fucked me in midair!

At first, I open my mouth to ask him how long our journey will be, but beyond those raindrops, I detect a hint of tears. Ethereal tears falling from his eyes. Each one is precious as star. The reverence and honor of these moments undo me, bore into me. Is it truly the first time he's flown in ten thousand years? Instead of disturbing these treasured moments, I pretend to be gray and invisible. Something that is simple for me now as long as one of them is close.

I lick my lips, my thoughts drifting to the others: Drago, Mayce, and Merikh. How long before they track us down? Will they come to this Court of Storms that belongs to Kyan? How will their dynamic function now?

Instead of losing myself in the scrambling of my thoughts, I lean into the moment. I touch my cheek to Kyan's strong chest, feel those muscles harden ever so slightly, listen to the pounding of his heart, smell his essence of mountain wind, damp gravestone, and a hint of snow, and stare at his celestial face. Now, his normally dull brown likes seem to shimmer with gold while his cheekbones seem sharper, sharp as truth and heaven's light.

What sort of angel was Kyan before he was cursed and fallen?

I lick my lips and memorize the strong pillar of his neck with its enhanced muscles and prominent veins. I memorize his full and sensual lips. And most of all, those wings. Hundreds of overlapping feathers with their beat like an ominous war drum as if signaling a doomed fate for myself.

In and out of an hour later with me burying my face in Kyan's chest to offset the sensation of vertigo, the angel lowers his mouth to my ear and whispers, "Look to the east."

It's barely beyond nightfall, but I still gasp my shock at the sight of the dark, celestial castle constructed into the very scape of grandiose cliffsides. Several bridges span from its heart to connect other lesser wings of the castle. Each still boasts of a formidable tower. Carved from the stone itself, staircases rise in grand arcs to lead to that castle. From this distance, I make out sweeping lower mountain valleys swarming with small villages which I can only imagine comprise Kyan's realm.

Lightning fissures the sky, and I startle, but the youngest King of the Waste chuckles and tugs me closer. Right now, he doesn't seem as young as the others. As if his heritage, his ancestry extends far beyond the others.

Unlike last time when a host of bone-masked, corpse-like people escorted me to the Court of Ash, Kyan is the only one to carry me inside his castle after pushing beyond great oak doors. With Drago's scaled bodice and the mere transparent skirt tresses clinging to my soaked skin, I shiver in the cold embrace of the castle entryway.

Kyan doesn't let me go. My chest heaves, my lips tremble with need and fatigue as he sweeps me into a honeymoon hold.

"Shhh...my Quinny. Thank you for your silence on my flight. You deserve a sweet reward for your restraint."

I can't help but perk up, my chest lifting from his declaration. He chuckles again. That laugh reverberates inside me to flutter warmth inside my belly. It's nothing compared to the fire he lights within a great hearth one room over from the entryway. It doesn't escape me how a rush of air comes from

nowhere to feed the tiny flame from the flint he sparks. I'm standing behind him with icy tremors rippling up and down my body.

Until he approaches with those powerful and beautiful wings unfurled to drown me in their shadow. I rub my arms in a soothing manner because he's all predator advancing toward me. Raindrops tumble off the ends of his feathers, and each one echoes the heated lust radiating off the angel. Before he even touches me, he blows all the butterflies in my stomach away, leaving nothing but a swirling typhoon.

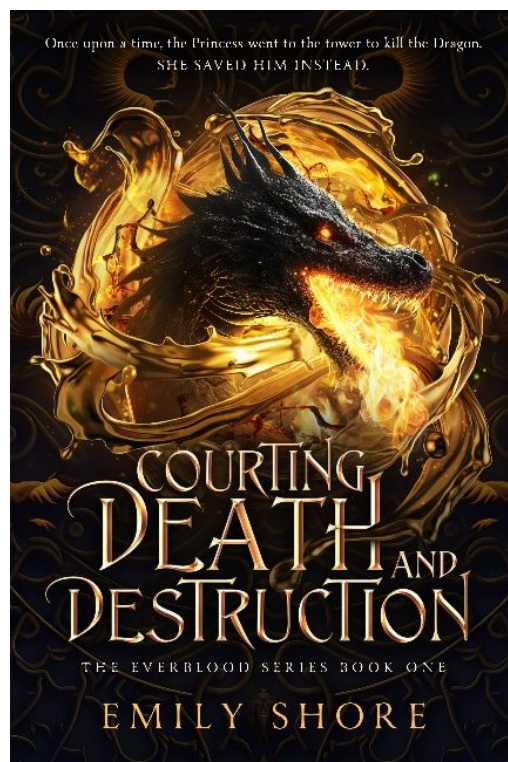
The first thing Kyan does is capture each side of my face, tilt my neck, and urge my lips to his. Unlike Drago, he doesn't demand. I melt. I surrender into the dream that is this fallen angel. I bend and bow without any battle as he presses his lips to mine, folds mine back, probes the seam, and plunders the inside of my mouth. He doesn't tangle his tongue with mine. He explores. He tastes. Slow and seductive and bewildering until I'm moaning again and again.

With his claws, he tears the scaled bodice. It takes a mere moment, and I lurch from the baring of my upper half. Except, when Kyan cups my chin and gazes into my tear-stricken eyes, he reassures me in one simple, altruistic glimpse that I have no shame to wear. Not from my scars. Not from the ink transcribed upon my skin. Certainly not from where the Kings marked me naught a few days ago.

I am the beginning of their dark dream fulfilled.

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SAMPLE of EMILY's BESTSELLING BOOK

*BRIDE OF LUCIFER*



ONE

PENNIES FROM HEAVEN

— A S T R A E A —

**Welcome to Hell on Earth. All are welcome in the City of Sin unless you are an angel, of course. All angels, not fallen, are banned by order of Lucifer Morningstar, King of Hell on Earth, Ruler of the Nine Circles. We trust you have good intentions since the road to hell is paved with them. Welcome again and have a devil of a time in Hell on Earth.**

I roll my eyes at the derogatory holo-sign pulsing above the gates of Hell on Earth and flare my common but keen golden wings as the security demon barks, “Your kind isn’t allowed in here!”

Agitated, I ruffle my feathers, blade-sharp at their tips and edges. The hair on the nape of my neck stiffens from the demon’s refusal. Although he’s three times my size, I imagine the multitude of ways I could decapitate him. Each would take an average of 3.8 seconds.

“I may be a weapon of mass destruction, hellion, but as you can see, I bear no sword,” I point out to the carmine-skinned beast, smirk, and do a twirl for his satisfaction, remembering he’s doing his job.

Unsurprised when the demon’s eyes linger upon my figure, I resist the urge to swallow any revulsion from the costume—a stereotypical get-up befitting a Victoria’s Angel ever since she lost her secrets after Lucifer bought the franchise and released his line of glitter body paint. No hope of hiding a knife in the sheer, white negligee with a lacy bralette that barely covers my full breasts. Or the matching panties with the word “Angel” embroidered on the cheeks. Not like I haven’t attempted a multitude of other ways to get into Hell on Earth.

I inwardly curse Camio for this last resort of a suggestion. He will get a good laugh out of this. Once I make it beyond the gates, he’d better meet me at the Devil’s Due Nightclub.

Rest assured, I will not stay in this for the masked gala. I’m here for one reason. This is my only chance to meet with the ultimate fallen angel face to face.

“Lucifer’s Law: fallen angels only, little cherub,” the security demon grunts. I wonder if he only speaks in grunts and barks.

I resist the urge to bare an angel fang at the mention of those brow-beating bullies forever blowing their horns and smoke out of their alpha-hole asses. Thankfully, they don’t patrol the Outer Circle, or I’d be doomed since they love preying on female angels like me. One of many reasons I’m here.

Behind me, several humans and lower demons show their impatience and frustration from an angel holding up the line. Oh, hell no, I didn’t spend all night flying from the Celestial City, where I was the laughingstock of my countless older brothers, nor did I wait all day with every race drooling over me for this meat-headed hellion to deny me entry.

Come hell or high water, I’ll get Lucifer to the Tribunal so he may face justice for his crimes, public and personal, past and present. If I can’t, I’ll stab a knife through his black heart.

I feel an angel scream coming on, but I plaster on my sweetest-wrapped psycho smile and creep my fingers along the demon's bulging chest to coo, "Surely one of Lucifer's finest demons can bend the rules..."

He flares his nostrils, and I crook my smile into a grin, knowing the pheromone oil Camio gave me is working its magic. "Catnip for demons", he'd said.

The demon falters, and I close in, parting my plump and pouty angelic lips rouged with the same oil. I flutter my wings until I hover at his level, casting the demon catnip around his bulging atmosphere.

"Now, where's that devil-may-care attitude?" I sweet-talk and toss my silky curls to the side.

He blinks and parts his lips. Guess he never had a chance. I'd say poor soul, but demons have none.

By the time I've lowered myself back to earth, the security demon has swiped the button on his holographic console to grant me access. I blow him a kiss and dance inside before he can get wise to my machinations. I've traveled into the Outer Circle before through other routes thanks to smugglers, but Camio assured me I'd make it beyond the main gates this time. Until his pass failed after the parking lot.

I fully intend on giving him shit for it. I don't have time to fuck around. Not tonight.

Tension invades my stomach as I take my place on the high-speed tram which transports tourists from the main gates to the Vestibule of Hell on Earth: the Outer Circle with its nightclubs and restaurants. Provided Camio comes through, I'll enter the Nine Circles soon. Sure, we warrior angels have placed bets on who can sneak into the Nine Circles, but Lucifer's security is too powerful.

Fake passes to access the Devil's Nine Circles are reserved for spy angels—but never his Underworld. And I failed spy training.

Spine prickling, I pinch my lips and ignore the echoes of my older brothers guffawing at my plan. They'd slapped their

backs and cackled countless cheesy jokes while ruffling my hair and jerking on my feathers: “Aww, look at our adorable, little scrapper wanting to earn her wings,” or “Remember, Trinny, if you can’t take the heat, get out of Hell’s Kitchen!”, and “Don’t forget your fire-retardant suit.”

Tossing my blood-red curls over my shoulder, I snap my wings shut behind me. I may have common wings, especially compared to archangels and seraphs, but mine are sharp enough to slice.

With a fluffy lightness fluttering in my chest, I lift my proud chin. Halo currents rush through my blood, gilding my skin’s early dawn gold to a rich sunset hue. Head-hovering halos are for cupid or cherubim angels while mine resides in my chest.

Out of habit, I creep my fingers to my side but find bare skin. Ugh, I feel so naked without a weapon.

At eighty-six, I may be a novice warrior, practically mid-twenties by angel standards, but I’ve experienced my fair share of skirmishes and brought in a few bounties with my hunter rank. Unfortunately, as far as my brothers go, I’ll always be their baby sister. And the scrapper, the runt of the angel litter.

Off to my right, a demon and his family sit in the first five rows. I nod and offer a faint smile. The mother shields her baby with his adorable, tiny horns curling from his head. Not that I blame her, considering most angels don’t associate with demons apart from hunting or spying purposes. Guess I’m the exception since I prefer them to fallen angels. Demons, I can handle, especially when most are Hell on Earth security. They act according to their nature compared to those black-winged, fallen parasites who want to drag every angel down with them, especially any with ovaries.

Not like I can claim any moral ground over demons anyway.

While waiting for the tram to push off from the station, I tap the iNK-Link embedded in my wrist and cue up my Hellify-No Playlist, another one of Lucifer’s contributions. I



can't rightly complain since it's ad-free. Seconds later, I hum to the old song, "Demons".

Moments after, the tram lurches. I steel my spine, bracing myself for the views—heaven-shattering ones according to the ads: Lucifer's joke.

Beyond the window, flicker cars and hover bubbles filled with elite tourists zoom past the tram on their way to the Nine Circles. The Outer Circle, aka the Vestibule, is made up of mostly shopping and nightclub districts for cheap, hell-themed souvenirs and thrills. Lucifer's way of reeling in the "common folk".

I glance at those lower-pass holders. Toward the back of the tram, a group of humans chats about their cosplay costumes—probably for a convention—and I commend them for doing their homework since the professional craftsmanship of their faux elf and Fae ears proves they bought them from native artisans. In the center are a few half-elves since elves are the most willing to reproduce with humans. A nearby dwarf couple wears matching "Hell for Honeymoon" t-shirts that brings a smile to my lips. One or two daemons of the cat variety. Two harpies dressed for nightclub-hopping.

Like any other tourist trap, Hell on Earth is a melting pot of diversity. Hundreds of millions visit every year. Few wish to leave. So, Lucifer expands, much to the chagrin of our races. I sniff. And a few others. My spine prickles at the thought of the Fae and elf territories to the north and east.

Brand new tourists gush when the barriers clear to showcase the Nine Circles in all their glory. Understandable. My first reactions were similar.

Sighing with conflicting emotions, I prop my elbow against the window. I can't exactly give the Devil his due for the originality of basing his tourist trap on Dante's Circles. But redesigning hell and opening the fiery gates to the public, now that took grade-A flaming balls. Two middle fingers right up heaven's golden ass!

It's five times the size of New York City—no longer considered the City that Never Sleeps—which has been

dormant since Lucifer opened Hell on Earth. I snicker because he outright put Las Vegas out of business.

Gives a whole new meaning to “have the devil to pay” since Lucifer is the world’s richest man. Richer than God, I smile at my joke. Hell on Earth, as decadent and sinful as it may be, pales compared to Lucifer’s true crimes.

I swallow the ache in the back of my throat and crush the pang in my chest, not wanting to think about my real motive for sneaking into Hell on Earth. If hell has no wrath like a woman scorned, this pissed-off angel has officially met her boiling point.

Evangelina. The name haunts my mind like a specter. I close my eyes, scrape one claw down the curvature of my throat, giving myself enough of a sting, and concentrate on breathing deeply. I banish the nightmare resurfacing.

The tram pitches to a stop. Thankfully, the Devil’s Due Nightclub is right inside the main Vestibule sector, the nightclub sector.

Once I step off the tram, the warm night air ruffles my sinful garnet curls. Currents of glitter-laced steam drift through the street vents to speckle my sheer dress. I weave around them to avoid the shimmery smithereens.

My breath hitches from the glimmering nine mega-towers so close, their spires fracturing the moon and prodding the stars. Lucifer paid the highest fee for astronomical-defying towers with their space transports to Hubble City constructed upon the moon last century.

But Hubble City can’t compare to the Celestial City bordering the expanse of Hell on Earth. The height of irony: Lucifer raised hell, and my brothers sunk heaven. Well, at least a chunk of it.

I blink from the moonlight reflecting off my home’s gold spiral towers cresting the floating mountains in the distance. To the untrained eye, the pinpricks of light twinkling around the heavenly realm could be stars, but I know what they are: flying angels. My family...well, 360,000 of them, give or take.

The rest reside within the seven levels of heaven, accessible via portals on the Celestial City.

I stream my fingers through one of many multi-colored water jets shooting from the ground to prance, dance, and leap into enormous fountains. Like kaleidoscopes of liquid ribbons, they capture the attention of any children still awake after a busy day at the amusement parks. Countless tourists of various races from the Djinn to elves to changelings, and humans, cast halluci-coins into the fountain.

I smile at one little elf boy whose eyes catch the light of the streamers until they fill with gold from gazing at...me. I wink. He blushes and buries his pale face in his mother's shoulder. Shrugging, I move on.

I failed the breeding program by choice.

Scarlet neon holo-lights parade the title of the Devil's Due a short distance away. Lust cloys the air as couples, throuples, or more kiss from the romantic elements of the nightclub sector.

Thanks to the digital shield-domes, the night sky is right out of a fantasy. Not even I object to gasping. The height of irony considering the majestic views of my home. My lips part. Wonder thickens my throat from the constellations and shooting stars smothering the royal violet skies.

To think, I'm so close—one more tram ride to the Nine Circles. Lucifer resides deep inside the earth within the Ninth Circle closest to the Pits of Hell. Except for tonight: he will make his appearance for the first time in one hundred years at the grand anniversary masked gala.

Outside the mile-long line of young tourists waiting to get in the Devil's Due, I scan my iNK-Link under a carrier bot. Two seconds later, its robotic, feminine voice alerts me, "Astraea Eternity, please accompany me to the Devil's Due." I shake my head in disbelief, my chest tight. A carrier bot, seriously?

"Don't be mad, bitch," Camio's melodramatic voice cuts in, far too whiny. "You know I love you, but if you woke up

right next to the sexiest demon serpent—”

I swipe the “pass” icon and roll my eyes. Camio’s the only one who’s allowed to call me bitch. But it doesn’t give him a free pass to share all his dirty bedroom details.

Squaring my shoulders and avoiding the lustful gazes of nightlife demons and other races salivating over my wings and my angelic glow, I follow the escort bot to the Devil’s Due Nightclub.

In the meantime, I envision all the ways I will unleash heavenly wrath upon Camio.

**Want to read more about the ULTIMATE villain gets the girl?**

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Jamie Rennie: You came for Lucifer, you stayed for Sammy, and then you walked with me on what began as a rocky road of story beginnings—only for it to sprout wings like Drago and soar. Aren't you glad I went with my steamy opening vs. the original when Quinn woke up to Qora??? Thank you for being my partner in crime on this. And all the late-night brainstorming sessions.

Silke: Thank you for becoming my biggest *Her Monstrous Boys* fan! You hooked up with Jamie not long after to join our brainstorming sessions. Thank you for being an alpha reader and squealing any time I gave you art. Thank you for making Quintessa part of your phone background!

To my newest big fan, Lauren, I'm thrilled by how much your husband loved you reading this book to him. Sorry not sorry that you kept getting interrupted during the process. I'm not responsible for any *intense* emotions.

Big thank you to all my super fans/Vellatrons for top-faving me every week and giving me TWO crowns and sometimes three for the past TWO years! It's surreal but incredible to see. And it means the world to me, truly.

Thank you, Artscondare, I'm in love with the cover, and so is everyone else! And extra note of thanks to Kate Seger for the outstanding formatting when I simply do NOT have the time to do it myself.

Thank you to all my beta readers and my early ARC readers. You kept flooding in with review after review that I just could not possibly fathom. You're telling me how you stayed up all night devouring? How you almost burned dinner and would have if your husband hadn't caught the timer, shaking his head because he knew you were reading smut? How you read while you walked around the house with kids

clamoring for your attention? Seriously, you brought tears to my eyes.

Special thanks to the one ARC reviewer who referenced how Quintessa starts as numb, but she truly comes into her own and finds herself. How she is strong and stands up for herself. I hadn't processed how much this is a metaphor for my own trauma and how I found my author voice and new identity.

As always, I must thank my ever-patient husband, who can't keep up with all my new books, but he still adds them to Amazon for me every time. An extra note of gratitude since he helped me process how this book was not simply a smutty reverse harem—but a dark and intimate reflection of my life coming out of the religious cult where I felt numb and gray. Now, I'm feeling and writing more than ever—and in all the beautiful colors of the rainbow, including the darker ones.

We've been through the ringer the past two years with your cancer/surgery/chemo and my blood clots/pulmonary embolism/ER/hospital stays. Not to mention a year of financial hardship in 2022. Like Quinn, I believe there's a light at the end of the tunnel—even if we have to claw and crawl to get there. It's always us against the world!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emily lives in Saint Paul with her husband and two daughters. She loves to write at her local coffee shop where all the baristas know she's an author and have memorized her order. Emily is thankful she's far-sighted and can write her spicy scenes in small print while hiding her screen.

Emily used to be the good little church-going girl who snuck peeks of smutty romance books at the store. Now, she proudly writes smut into fantasy. She still loves Jesus but has forsaken the religious cult of her past.

An abuse survivor and trained advocate, Emily has worked as an awareness speaker all over Minnesota. Identifying as bisexual and feminist, she loves to showcase sex and kink positivity, trauma-overcoming themes beyond stereotypes, and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity.

When not writing enemies to lovers, Emily is addicted to the Enneagram, rewatching Schitts Creek, cuddling with her kitty, and spending time with her online sisterhood where she can exercise her big empath heart.