



THING

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Chapter One

THING

I was created to destroy.

My Creator-Father's heart was full of hatred. The only thing he loved was power. For so many stretches of years, centuries, *millennia*, my brothers and I fought to bring him the power he craved.

We competed with one another to see who was the best monster. Our Father was the judge.

I was always found lacking.

Though I am the face of Death—one who swept so many humans from this plane of existence to the next (I lost count of the millions long ago)—I was never enough.

So I tried harder.

War after war, century after century, I swept through the mad darkness of battle and snatched men's souls away. I took them down by the fistful—I who have so many fists. Six, to be exact. It was a mistake in my Creator-Father's calculation to create a six-armed creature, but it is how I came out all the same. Six-armed and so massive, it is often more comfortable for me to lope like an animal on my lower pair of fists and feet.

I always came home to my Creator-Father at the end of each day, drenched in men's blood, only to find him never satisfied. Or worse, to meet the angry end of his whip as punishment for his disappointment in me.

This is a cruel world, and I sometimes think I preferred the centuries when my brother chained me to the wall after my Creator-Father's death. *There* at least, I had some measure of peace, or as much as a miserable monster like me would ever know. At least I could no longer bring ruin and darkness.

But now I am free once more, with the light of the cold sun upon my face.

I stand on the hard-packed snow and turn my face away from that bright star to look back upon the castle in this frozen land where my brothers and I have found our dwelling, far from the places of men.

The crystalline lake lies in the distance, snowy and ice-encrusted.

I prefer it out here, alone, to the new bustle inside the castle now that Abaddon has found a mate. Especially since their young kit, who they have named Raven, was born three months ago. She is such a . . . *happy* little creature. She gurgles and smiles and constantly grabs things with her curious little hands. My conjoined twin brothers Remus and Romulus delight in playing with her—well, Romulus does anyway—but I . . .

I stay back because looking at her sweet, beautiful, perfect little face hurts.

Yes, solitude is preferable. *And only what you deserve.*

I stalk the snowy land and gather wood for the fires or new furniture. There are so many rooms in the castle, and it is quite empty since Abaddon burned most of what our Creator-Father owned after his death.

I like the quiet out here. If not peace in the stillness of the endless snow, I find at least a kind of numbness, like the blunting cold that begins to make the feeling in my fingertips go dull, welcome.

I am relaxing into this numbness when suddenly—

Suddenly, I *feel* something.

A strange tugging from underneath my ribcage. It takes me off guard, and I move several steps backward. Only then do I catch a human's scent on the wind and hear frantic footsteps in the snow.

Immediately, I step into the shadow, becoming invisible to the eyes of men. I crouch forward slowly, on alert, as I watch the narrow spaces between the frozen stalks of trees in the distance. Red flashes among the pristine white. Blood.

Immediately I go on alert and drop down on all fours as I stalk in the shadows. Shadow-walking is the other of my skills, in addition to realm-jumping.

I'm careful to stay quiet as I shadow-walk, crouched and quietly loping closer on my knuckles and feet. Thousands of years of being comfortable amongst the shadows have made me bold. I creep until I am quite close.

To my shock, I see the human is a woman.

She is not dressed for the weather. She has no jacket, instead only wearing pants and a shirt that bares her arms, both of which are covered in the bright stain of blood. The blood has accumulated on the shock of white-blond hair and her face and neck.

She continues to run, eyes as wide and shocked as prey we chase down for food. She looks over her shoulder every few steps and continues her heedless flight forward.

Straight toward our castle. I frown, wondering if I should withdraw and warn Abaddon. He's been so concerned and protective lately.

In addition to coming out for wood, I'm meant to be on patrol for anything out of the ordinary. We are under threat. Someone—an angel, no less—has been watching the castle. Romulus saw it when he scried. We do not know its intentions, but we do not need to know. Any angel-kind who returns to this realm will not look upon us favorably. We are abominations to them because our Creator-Father stole forbidden angel-spark from their plane to create us.

Abaddon flies the skies each morning and night to ensure the forests are clear for a hundred-mile radius around the castle. Only an angel could hide from his sight.

So this bloodied female being here is impossible unless she herself is an

—

I barely finish the thought before she approaches where I stand in shadow, trying to decide if I should do something to stop her or merely follow her and see if she goes toward the castle when the impossible happens: I'm fully in shadow—invisible—but she looks straight at me.

And screams. The next thing I know, she's yanked blades from sheaths I didn't even see in her pants and is screeching like a banshee as she slashes at me.

I throw out my upper pair of arms to block her blades. And roar when the sharp blades slice my skin. Only hell-metal can do any real damage to my hide, but these still dig in a couple of inches to the sinew of my forearms. And she's fast. She immediately pulls back and starts to attack again, with stabbing motions this time.

While she took me momentarily by surprise, I'm not foolish enough to get caught twice. I have many arms to her two. So it's nothing to me to snatch her wrists with one pair of arms and block her next blow with another.

She squeals in shock, either at how many arms I have, my blue skin, or that she's now wrestling with a monster four times her size. But she's the one who attacked *me*.

"Who are you?" I demand. As close as we are now, my nostrils fill with her scent. And she's no angel. She's human.

"Let me go!" she shrieks. "Where is my father?"

I frown in confusion, shaking her wrists until she's forced to drop the weapons in the snow. My bottom pair of hands snatch them up.

Only then do I release my grip on her, dancing several steps back. I vowed a long time ago to never cause harm to another innocent human. Even one who is a wildcat. I don't trust her not to attack me with another hidden knife.

From the glint of a blade that catches the sunlight as it slashes my way, it was the correct instinct to be on guard. "Where is my *father*?" she shouts.

"I do not know your father or how you could possibly be in these woods," I say back, holding her two knives and standing to my full height, all six of my arms out. "But if you fight me, you will lose. Now you will answer *my* questions."

Her eyes widen as her head tilts back to take me in at full height. And then, tucking her blade against the flat of her wrist, she turns and flees through the forest again.

Naturally, I start to chase her. It's an old instinct.

I should have warned her. *Don't run from a monster. We can't help but chase you.*

Especially since I know Abaddon will want answers about this little blood-covered human who somehow found her way into our woods.

She looks over her shoulder and lets out a scream when she sees me. I'm actually hanging back. I could be on her in moments, but that doesn't seem quite sporting. Plus, I am interested to see where she goes. Are there other humans with her? Where did she come from?

She sprints forward in a haphazard path, back the way she first came. Good. Maybe she'll give me some answers.

Except that the next time she looks over her shoulder at me, bloodied blonde hair flying out, she doesn't turn back around in time and is sprinting

into—

I see what is about to happen before she does and reach out a hand to stop her.

“Careful!” I shout. “Stop!”

She turns back too late to stop her momentum and smacks right into the tall, spindly base of a solid pine tree.

She immediately slumps to the ground, fresh blood pouring from a gouge on her forehead.

I feel sick as I crash to my knees in the snow beside her prone, unmoving body. I have caused harm to another frail human after swearing I never would again!

Immediately I gather her small form into my many arms, cradling her to my chest as I lift her from the snow. Then I turn and sprint for the castle.

My brother can heal her and undo this one last sin if I only move fast enough.

Chapter Two

KSENIA

I blink my eyes to the sound of arguing above me and immediately go tense.

“What have you brought to my doorstep? She is obviously the enemy. Look at her! She’s covered in blood.”

“Your nose is bad, brother,” comes another tense voice, “but even you can scent she is no angel.”

Immediately my body tightens further. I try to scramble to a sitting position, but hands force me back down. *Don’t touch me, don’t touch me.* I fight like a wildcat to get away.

Or I would, except that my vision’s blurry, and my dizzy head makes me swoon back to the hard surface below.

“Heal her,” demands the low, harsh voice. The hands release me, and I can breathe again. “I thought her a threat and chased her. She ran into a tree. Use your gift and make her better. Now!”

“Well, then, why not just use *your* gift and carry her to her maker! Then our problem would be gone.”

My vision’s still blurry as I try to blink past something crusty on my eyelids, but I can make out two large, terrifying figures. I must have hit my head harder than I thought because instead of double vision, I’m having triple. One of them looks like he has three pairs of arms. And he’s. . . *blue.*

Wait, big blue monster. . . why is that ringing a bell? I shake my head as my eyes go to the creature he's grappling with and blink again. But no matter how many times I blink, he still has a lion's face, mane, huge *wings*—

None of this makes any sense, but it's obviously a bad scene. If my father taught me anything, it's to use every distraction to your advantage. They're busy with each other? Great. Time to make my escape.

I start crawling across the stone floor toward the door.

Which is when someone else comes in. A normal, human-looking woman. Does this mean I'm coming down from whatever hallucination. . .? I look back at the grappling monsters. . . who still look like monsters.

"What's going on here?" asks the woman, hands on her hips.

Maybe I can just army crawl past her and get the *hell* out of this nightmare—

"Oh my god!" she shrieks, looking down at me.

Or not.

She immediately bends down, looking at me. I avert my eyes and stare at her thick boots. "Are you okay? Oh my god, your head." She reaches out and pulls back at the last second when I flinch away. "We need to get you cleaned up, or—"

She turns and looks toward the two creatures on the other side of the room, who have stopped fighting. "Abaddon. Can you heal her?"

I do not know what's happening, or how I got here, or who—

I try to start crawling toward the door again as the woman argues with one of the hallucinated creatures.

Just need to get somewhere safe. Get away first. Then I'll think through my options. Regroup. And then I'll—

I'll. . . what?

As my mind tries to reach for the next thought beyond my immediate fight and flight response, it all comes rushing back.

Dad and I at the cabin. All our lieutenants. My uncle's betrayal. Realizing too late we were among wolves when we expected the safety of family.

My breathing comes faster as red rage sweeps through me. Automatically, I reach down to my thighs for my knives. . . but they aren't there. I've been disarmed. Sons of bitches! But did they find the—

Crouching, I reach for my ankle sheath as a voice behind me roars, "Fine! I'll heal her. But we will get to the bottom of what she's doing here, even if I have to lock her in the dungeon for answers."

Right. I remember trying to grapple with the six-armed blue one. My smallest blade won't do anything against these science experiments on steroids.

Right now, it's time to *run*.

I drag my exhausted, dizzy body to my feet and book it toward the door. I don't make it three dashes before running into a solid body suddenly filling up the threshold I'm trying to sprint across. My entire body freezes at the touch, and I try to spring backward, almost falling on my ass.

"Who is this?" comes a voice as my arms pinwheel, and I try to twist in the air to brace for impact.

Instead, a *tail* comes lashing out and around my waist to steady me. A tail! At the same time, the man's head spins around on its axis, Exorcist-style, so that an entirely *different* face grins manically at me.

I blink in shock at the new face, focusing on his mouth. I can tell he looks me up and down quickly before declaring, "Finally, one for me. I'm calling dibs on this consort."

Instinctually, I kick my ankle back, my fingers closing around the hilt of the blade tucked there.

I don't let my dizziness stop me as I whip out the knife—*that feels so right in my hand*—and, half a breath later, hold it against the creature's throat.

"Let. Me. Go," I hiss from between my teeth. "Or I'll slit this throat and then the other side."

The creature only laughs. "She's perfect," he whispers, laughing as his—oh god, his *tail*—unwinds from around my waist and retracts.

I shudder, glad to be free of the touch. He holds his hands up, backs away from me, and retreats beyond the door.

I follow him, knife held aloft, menacing him. *Pretty knife, pretty knife, pretty knife, pretty—*

But he's merely led me from one room into a larger stone chamber. "Show me the way out," I demand, glaring at his cheek. He just laughs maniacally.

I spin on the others, keeping the two-faced man in my peripheral vision, my precious, pretty knife held aloft in warning. There are too many people here for my liking, but the knife's sharp blade focuses me. "Take me to the exit!"

"Wait, just tell us who you are," the woman steps forward before one of

the beast creatures—the one with the lion’s face and horns—tugs her behind him. Stubbornly, she pokes her head around him. “You’re hurt. We can help. How did you get here?”

I open my mouth to tell her I don’t need her help. That I’ll be fine on my own, and I’ll leave the same way I came—

Except it hits me in a rush.

I have no idea how I got here. Or where *here* is. Dad blindfolded me when he drove me to the cabin. He said it was some super-secret retreat that only he and Uncle Pavel knew about. And I was impressed when I saw the place. It was more than a hunting lodge in the middle of nowhere. It was almost a chateau.

“I’m Hannah,” the woman says, her voice soft and kind. “What’s your name?”

My eyes widen. Ksenia. I’m Ksenia Volkov, daughter of mafia kingpin Dmitri Volkov, and. . . and the last thing I remember was the chateau getting attacked. I don’t know if my father got out alive.

I just know I glanced back and saw Uncle Pavel in the hallway after I killed as many sons of bitches as possible while I fought my way to the doorway and out into the snow. He shouted furiously at more of them to come after me.

I straighten, blood dripping down my forehead into my eyes, sure of only one thing.

I will get revenge on Pavel, and I will ensure he receives a slow, painful death.

Chapter Three

THING

I turn in rage to Abaddon and, with all six of my arms, grasp him—shoulders, wings, and torso. I do not lift him into the air or shake him as I long to. I simply pin him in place and look him dead in the eye as I speak. “She is terrified and hurt, and it is partially my fault. Now heal her. We both know you owe me, brother.”

Abaddon looks furious, but I do not care.

“Fine,” he barks. “If only so she can answer questions about what she is doing here.”

I let go and turn back to the woman, who is crouched low, moving her blade through the air menacingly as she backs into a room that only leads deeper into the castle, away from the exit. Not that she knows that.

“Take me back to the chateau,” she demands, swinging the blade through the air again as Abaddon approaches.

But he is not intimidated by a mere human weapon. He easily yanks it out of her grasp and crumples it as if it were one of the tin cans Hannah-consort’s food comes in. She makes an upset noise as she watches.

But not nearly as loud as the scream when he touches his palm to her forehead. I hate the sound and wish there was some way to calm her or let her know I’m trying to help her.

Light bursts from the center of Abaddon’s chest, which seems to

momentarily startle her quiet.

She launches back from him the next moment. While she is still encrusted with blood, I'm satisfied to see that the gash in her forehead has closed over smoothly.

"Now tell us how you came to be on our land." Abaddon's barked-out command is spoken when Hannah-consort asks, "So what's your name?"

A baby's distant cry quickly takes her attention.

"Sorry," Hannah says cheerfully. "That's our baby, Raven. She must have woken up from her nap. She'll be fussy if I don't get in there and nurse her." Hannah slips through the door at the opposite end of the room to attend to baby Raven.

The woman stares after her, gaze slightly askew, as if this is the most bewildering turn of events since she awoke in the castle.

But of course it is. She's come to, surrounded by monsters. Abaddon is demanding answers, but we are the true anomaly here.

So again, I step forward. "I am sorry for my rude brother," I say. "He is afraid of. . . outsiders. He worries for the safety of his baby daughter, you understand. There are always threats from the woods."

The blonde woman's bright blue eyes flick to me and then away, but for once, they are not full of terror. Maybe I am getting through to her. "Threats," she echoes. Then her eyes slice back in my direction. "Let me go."

"Go where?" Abaddon demands. "Where did you come from?"

"Away from here!" she shouts at him, her hand reaching down to her thighs. When she realizes her blades are no longer there, frustration flashes across her face. "And give me my weapons back."

To my shock, Abaddon says, "Of course you are free to go. I will show you to the door."

"You can't let my consort go!" Remus objects, stepping out of the shadows. "She is fated for me."

"You don't believe in fate," I growl. "Now get out of the way. As our eldest brother said, she is free to go."

"Oh, so now that you agree with him, it's *eldest brother says so*?" Remus mocks. "Five minutes ago, you were ready to tear his head off."

I advance on my childish, selfish brother, and his tail raises behind him, wings flaring out as if he is readying for a fight.

"Stop it, all of you," Abaddon shouts. "Female human, follow me. I'll show you the way out."

She nods hurriedly, glancing between Remus and me, then moving quickly after Abaddon as he gestures to the door that leads towards the exit.

I follow them to ensure Abaddon leads her to the true door instead of the dungeon for interrogation and to protect her flank from Remus. It is always a mistake to underestimate Remus. And considering Abaddon's sudden willingness to let her go, I cannot say I trust either of my brother's motives.

Why I suddenly feel so protective of this small human, I cannot say. But I will not see any more harm come to her.

As we near the door, I become alarmed as another thought strikes me. "She does not have enough coverings."

Since Hannah-consort gave birth to her daughter, she has become susceptible to the cold again. The temperatures here are quite uncomfortable—even deadly—for weak human bodies. She was only given brief immunity to the cold because of the pregnancy and the hybrid baby inside her.

"I'm sure wherever she is going is close enough," Abaddon says in the low, dangerous tone he sometimes adopts, "that it will not be a problem. She arrived here in perfect condition, after all."

Understanding dawns. He is not setting her free out of the goodness of his heart. Which, if he has any, is quite limited, and generally only extends to his wife and baby daughter.

No, he intends to track this woman back to where she came from. Of course. He believes our angel adversary is involved in her sudden appearance.

It might not be a bad plan. If one is strictly mercenary and also doesn't care if she freezes to death.

Because if the angel is watching, as Romulus's scryings continue to show, will they be so easily fooled? I doubt it. They will see us coming if we try to follow her back to their nest.

Easier to let the bait freeze to death. If indeed she *is* some sort of bait and not just a very, very lost traveler.

"Go get one of Hannah-consort's thickest coats," I rumble, stepping between him and the woman. "Hand-coverings too. Or she does not go. She will not be safe in the cold."

The sideways slits of Abaddon's lion's eyes narrow, but he must sense my stubbornness on the subject because he huffs in annoyance, then turns to search for the objects I've demanded.

I shake my head in frustration at this farce that we are letting her go.

What my foolish brother does not want to admit is that while this castle has been frozen in time, the world has moved on. Sped up.

From what Romulus told me when he traveled with Hannah-consort to a modern city, the humans have become quite ingenious during our two-hundred years locked in the dungeon.

My brothers and the birds are no longer the only creatures that can fly. The humans have found other ways. Curious, I had Romulus bring me back books on the subject. He is the one of us who can move most seamlessly in their world by covering his brother's face with a wig and wearing a large trench coat to hide his wings and tail. I've been shy of trying shadow-walking in that modern world, and considering the ease with which that female saw me today in the woods, I'm glad I haven't. Am I simply out of practice?

Romulus has been getting us the human groceries Hannah-consort so treasures, along with other modern amenities to update the castle. For me, he brings back books. I have learned much these past nine months since I was freed from captivity.

So yes. I know the world has become both much, much larger and also, paradoxically, far smaller. This woman could have easily flown nearby in a small plane or helicopter. No angel involvement required.

I watch her out of my peripheral vision as she stands stoically still, back to the exit, eyes scanning the room.

She might have been startled when she first met me and again when she woke up to find Abaddon crouched over her, but she's taken the situation remarkably in stride. She seems calm and focused, ready to leave but also prepared for deception.

I hope she can return to her helicopter and leave this place, our existence a strange nightmare phantasm she can simply chalk up to a bad bump on the head.

But then I remember that she came to us covered in blood.

It may not be good that she returns to wherever she came from. She was fleeing through the forest in terror.

"Here," I say, alerting her before I step forward.

She's immediately on edge, her entire body going taut. And like that first moment in the forest, I feel a tugging toward her.

I blink and rub my chest, staring at the tiny blonde woman covered in blood who looks ready to tear Remus and me apart if we make even a wrong step in her direction.

I make my offering clear as I hold the weapons I confiscated earlier. “In case you run into any danger out there.”

She looks up at me uncertainly but snatches her weapons back, flipping them expertly in her palms before sheathing them at her thighs again. She doesn’t say anything, just gives me a wary nod.

At the brief interaction, I am overcome by emotion. They are almost foreign, as it has been so long since I allowed myself to feel anything. I’m confused by my fear of her vulnerability and the overwhelming protectiveness I feel for her.

There is some strange connection between this tiny human and myself that I do not understand.

I decide right then and there that I will also follow her when she leaves us, just not for the same reason as my brother. I do not want to follow her to capture some stalking angel. I only want to ensure she is protected from whatever set her running in the first place.

If it was humans who frightened her so badly, they will learn how wrong they were to terrify this small woman, however capable she seems with those blades of hers.

Because I am Death incarnate. And as much as I have determined to change my ways, for this cause—remembering the abject terror on her face as she fled through the woods—I will not mind a little backsliding.

Chapter Four

KSENIA

I am on edge while we wait for the other monster to return. I don't believe for one minute he's gone to get me a "coat." Surely it's some codeword between them? This has to be a trap.

At least I thought so before the big blue one with too many arms gave me my knives back.

Then again, he proved that even with my skill, my big, bad knives weren't much of a threat against an adversary like him.

All my muscles clench, preparing to attack or run. My hands are poised, ready to grasp my blades should I need them at a moment's notice.

Waiting with the six-armed blue guy doesn't feel as scary, somehow, though that's likely foolish. But it's like whenever he looks at me with those deep-red eyes of his—which, hello, should be freaking me out—it does the opposite. I feel a little calmer.

Clearly, my danger meter is broken after everything that happened today. He might not seem so scary right now, but he's probably just playing good cop to the other guy's bad cop, and I'm the idiot who's falling for it.

I stand up straighter, trying to shake off any perceived calm. Paranoia is the only thing I should be feeling right now. I'll just get the hell out of here, back to the land where everyone has two arms, no wings, and, you know, human skin colors. Then I'll make my uncle rue the day he was born.

But first things first. Get the hell out of the creepy castle.

I tense as I hear heavy, clodding footsteps on stone, and then the big lion-goat man comes around the corner holding a huge, puffy, pink women's coat and gloves. It's got to belong to the woman who was here before. The one who had to check on their crying baby *daughter*.

Okay, this is obviously just one bizarre dream. *Take the coat and gloves, get the hell out of here, and then work on waking up.*

Solid plan.

I snatch the coat out of his hands without actually touching him and tug it on. I follow him through one last huge room with a big table and a roaring fire, down a long spiral staircase, and finally through another large room to a door—

That the big lion-goat man throws open for me.

Holy shit. He was being serious about letting me go? I don't second-guess it or wait for any speeches as I sprint out into the absolutely blistering cold beyond, yanking on my gloves as I go.

"Be safe!" calls the blue guy with too many arms.

I don't answer. I just keep going into the white beyond.

I'm free!

I take off toward the woods beyond the castle, only looking over my shoulder once to make sure they aren't pursuing me.

But they're still at the castle keep's door, watching me leave. This time I whip my head back around so I'm watching ahead. I have a vague memory of running straight into a tree trunk. . . Yeah, let's not do that again.

So I run, and I run, and I run.

After about ten minutes, I realize I have absolutely no idea where I am or where I'm going.

They were shooting at me as I ran away from the chateau, so I wasn't exactly clocking my surroundings. Not smart.

Usually, I'm so on guard.

But it was supposed to be a *vacation*. So stupid. More than anyone, I know there aren't weekends off with the kind of life I lead.

And I knew things had been tense lately. That's why Dad was looking forward to the trip. Uncle Pavel promised he had a way back from exile, and Dad trusted him. We both did.

Dad's been running things from outside the country for a decade, but we'd all agreed it was safer that way. Dad had too many enemies back home,

and with Pavel on the inside, we had men on both sides of the border to ensure operations stayed smooth.

Apparently at some point, Pavel became unhappy with that arrangement.

Or maybe he'd been a jealous little bitch the whole time, just waiting and plotting for the moment he could take his brother down and claim the crown for himself.

I feel sick as I slow my steps, bending over to put my hands on my knees in frustration.

I turn in a circle, but there are only the white stalks of pine trees and the blanketed branches of spruce and fir. I stomp my foot, even more frustrated.

I don't know how to get back to the chateau. . . but considering how many bodies I dropped there, Pavel's probably long gone. Flight has always won out over fight for him. Fight was never his first instinct. He always runs.

Just like you did.

I smash the palms of my hands against my eyes. How could I have just run away like that when I knew Dad was still inside?

Dammit, we should have smelled the trap as soon as Pavel disarmed us at the door. He said it was a vacation, and no one except the Pakhan should be carrying. I tried to protest, but Dad patted me on the back and told me to listen. That we couldn't be anywhere safer than in a compound surrounded by family and his own men. And besides, I'm sure he thought as a Pakhan, he'd keep his own weapon. Even after all these years, he was still a dead shot.

I would know. He's the one who trained me, shooting cans almost from the time I could walk. I picked up knives on my own as a teenager because I decided some situations called for a quieter kill.

Did Uncle Pavel do something to Dad's sidearm, I wonder? Or was Dad able to shoot his way out and get away too?

Like Dad, I never anticipated that his men would turn on us because they'd given allegiance to Pavel, of all people. He was a conniving weasel of a man, whereas my father was handsome, tall, and a good, strong leader. Fair to his people, he split profits evenly instead of hoarding all the wealth for himself like some Pakhans do. He was someone men would be proud to follow.

And now he's. . .

Grief clenches my throat. He's got to be out here somewhere. He can't be. . . Not Dad. He's a giant. You can't snuff out a giant with one stupid betrayal.

Although. . . I look around as I walk forward again, if only because it's the only thing *to do*. What do I know about what is and isn't real?

I ran out of that deathtrap and straight into a Brothers Grimm fairytale forest full of monsters.

I shake my head. The further away I get from the castle, the more I convince myself I've just been in shock and hallucinating since I ran into that tree.

I glance down at myself. The big pink coat covers most of the blood from my clothing, but now that I have a moment to myself. . .

I start to shake, and it's not from the cold. Or, well, not only from the cold. "Daddy," I whisper, my warm breath puffing out in a cloud in the freezing air. Tears clog my throat.

Everything that happened today feels absolutely surreal. And that was before I met the monsters.

I look around. I've been standing still too long. I pick a direction, suck in a deep breath, and run again.

Eventually—surely—I'll get *somewhere*, right?

Chapter Five

THING

She is running in circles. She has no idea where she is or where she is going.

Abaddon will be mad, but I am relieved.

He flies above us, using at least a modicum of rune work to shield himself from her sight. My gifts work. . . differently. Instead of calling on the light, I disappear into the shadows of the nether realm that leak into this one. Or perhaps the shadows simply follow me. Calling me to gather more souls to endless rest.

Well, they can't have this one.

I follow and watch her footsteps become more and more frantic as she runs through the forest. She finally slows again, as she does every so often, and puts her gloved hand on a tree to rest.

And then she collapses at its base.

She does not cry in her obvious frustration, as Hannah-consort sometimes does when she cannot do something. She simply stares out into the cold, her face expressionless. But she does look a bit feral, considering her face is still streaked with blood.

Snow falls around her, and the most she does is stomp her foot and let out a grunt before getting back to her feet. I frown and look upward for my brother. How long does he intend to let this continue?

It's clear she has no place to go. Or, if she does, she is too lost to find it.

I see no need to continue this farce, or her suffering. Her limbs have thus far remained intact. But Hannah-consort explained to us that had she not had the internal heat of the hybrid child protecting her, she likely would have died from exposure to the cold temperatures the one time she fled the castle in terror.

Abaddon was so astounded at her confession that he set the fires in the castle to a constant blaze to ensure her warmth at all times. The rest of us were uncomfortably warm, but we'd survived far worse than cozy temperatures. It had been so long since he'd been around humans that he forgot about their fragility.

I will not be so reckless with this human. I remember well the fields of men who did not awaken the morning after a freeze but lay stiff as I carried them off to the nether plane after the last breath escaped their lungs.

Though I know it will displease my brother, so determined to find the stalking angel, I am finished with the chase. As I step from shadow into light, about to call out to her, I scent what I could not in the shadow on the wind.

Another predator is here, and I have been a fool to miss it.

Right as she moves wearily to stand again, I call out, "Watch out!"

But it is too late. She immediately goes on alert, dropping down to a crouch as she reaches for her thighs. Her head whips toward my voice and away from the real threat—the lynx that has also been stalking her.

It leaps for her, forelegs outstretched and maw wide open.

I jump only a moment later.

It is fast, but I am faster. Barely. I collide with the animal, and like lightning, its paw scrapes across my face as it scrambles around my body to launch a fresh attack, sinking its teeth into my neck.

I howl in pain and fury, but my brothers and I were ruthlessly set upon each other by our father for centuries in pit matches. I use all my arms to pry the beast off me, ignoring the pain as a chunk of my neck comes away in its teeth. I stomp it into the snow, pummeling it with my fists until it stops moving.

Then it is my bright red blood that is a shock against the snow as I slump to my knees.

The woman stands in front of me, hand to her mouth in disbelief.

And then, because she is no fool, she turns and flees again.

I fall face-first into the snow.

Chapter Six

KSENIA

I don't get very far before my conscience catches up with me. *That animal would have killed you.* Yes, I'm a trained killer.

I'm my father's favorite assassin in a brutal bratva. And yet. . . The blue guy saved me and got attacked instead. Then I just ran away. *Again.* It's not like I have any better idea where I'm going.

I stop, squeeze my eyes shut, and before I can think better of it, I sprint back to where the giant blue man with too many arms is slumped face-down in the snow.

I grab one of his arms to lift him, then immediately let go, jerking back from the touch. Obviously, it's a useless endeavor anyway, he's so heavy, but he lifts his head at my gesture, blood still gushing from the bite at his neck. I yank off my left glove and shove it over the wound as if that would do anything to stem the gruesome tide.

"You said you wouldn't follow me!" I accuse.

He just shrugs his large shoulders, wincing. "I do not remember saying so. And I know what it is like out here. There is nothing for a hundred miles. It is why my brother was so suspicious. No one is meant to be on these lands. He wanted to see where you would go."

"So you followed me?" I spit, furious for reasons I don't understand. Am I mad because he said there is nothing for a hundred miles? Or that he's now

hurt because he followed me?

He shakes his head. “Those were *his* reasons for following you.” He lifts one of his many hands up and points to the sky.

What the— I look up, and instead of only clouds, I can suddenly see the winged form of the other big man from the castle, the one with horns. I jolt and take several steps back.

“Can you make yourselves invisible?” I gasp, taking another step back and dropping the blood-soaked glove to the snow. “You were both following me?”

“Abaddon can cloak himself from sight and was following you. But I came because humans are fragile. I do not know how many more hours you can be out here without coming to harm.” He seems to not notice the back of his neck gushing blood as he stands up. Does it even hurt him?

“What did you do to me to bring me here? Where *am* I? Is this even. . .” I look around at all the white. So many trees, up and down tree trunks, forever, every direction, on and on— “Still *Earth*?”

The large blue man frowns down at me. As if *I’m* the one who’s lost their mind. “Of course. How did *you* come to be here?”

“Where *is* here?” I shout.

Right then, the other large man lands to our left. I scream and jump back. “If you don’t know, we certainly don’t plan on revealing our location to a potential enemy. As you learned back at the castle, I have interests to protect.”

The woman and baby? Did he. . . kidnap them? She certainly seemed happy enough there, but I can be bad at reading people. Great with a blade, better with a bullet, but terrible at reading people.

I want to stomp my foot again.

Just then, the big guy with wings walks over to the blue guy, sets his palm against the back of his neck, and his chest glows. The same way it did earlier with me.

My mouth drops open, but I don’t run away like I probably should. Instead, I watch in astonishment as—

Holy shit, the deep bite from the lynx is completely healed. There’s just a small scar left. He picks up the lynx’s body and slings it over his shoulder, where it fits neatly between his neck and wings.

“It’s cold out here.” His strange cat’s eyes fall upon me. I avert my gaze. “And you’ve been walking in circles. So unless you have somewhere to go,

the sun will set in an hour. You'll die if you remain out here, coat or not. Come back and have dinner with us. My Hannah-wife will spice this nicely for us."

He indicates the lynx over his shoulder. *Hannah-wife?* And they keep talking about a baby. I heard the baby crying.

I gulp at the thought of eating the wild game and sitting down to eat with the terrifying beast men. Well, and also his wife and baby. . .

I look out at the endless white. Without a plan, a map, and some serious provisions. . . *Shit*. They're right. I wouldn't make it out here even if I *did* know where I was going.

Still, I move closer to the blue one who took on the lynx for me and give in. "Okay. But just for tonight. Tomorrow, I go home."

Chapter Seven

THING

I stay close by the woman's side as we trek back to the castle. I think she is surprised at how close it is. She thought she had gone further. But we did not lie when we told her she ran in circles. The trees here are tall, and the sun is blotted out by a haze of foggy white in winter. It is easy to get turned around if one does not know the land well.

She stands off to the side by the fire as Hannah races up to me, exclaiming loudly about the blood on me as she helps me get cleaned up. Hannah beams at her husband when she hears that he healed me. It still astonishes me that he found someone to love him. Also astonishing are the changes that love had wrought in my brother, who, before her arrival, was still a mirror of our angry, hateful father.

She hands baby Raven off to me as Abaddon follows her downstairs to help prepare the lynx. She might be happy to cook up whatever he brings back, but she still prefers that he does what she calls the "disgusting parts" of preparing the meat. He takes particular pride in stretching and preparing the furs, as well. Something Hannah has decreed he uses one entire floor of the upper castle for. Mainly so it's out of her sight and smell.

Little Raven gurgles and immediately reaches for my fingers. She seems constantly delighted that I have so many of them. I play peek-a-boo—a game Hannah taught me—with one set of hands while tickling her with another set.

She makes more giggle-gurples. Naturally, she drags some of my fingers to her mouth to bite them. I don't mind. She's teething, her little fangs just beginning to burst through, but I have hard, calloused fingertips. Her mother always makes sure my hands are quite clean before giving me Raven since she knows her daughter's curiosity about all my digits.

"She really likes you."

I look up, only to realize that the new woman is curiously watching me. Her gaze is never straight on but always slightly to the side. She's stood off to the side during the domestic reunion since Hannah-wife gathered to greet us at our return, only venturing closer now.

"He's about to become her favorite pin-cushion if her teeth get anywhere near as sharp as her father's," Remus butts in from where he's positioned against the wall. He pushes off and walks to us. "What did you say your name is again, lovely?"

The woman's eyes narrow, not meeting his gaze either. "I didn't."

Remus only grins with what I think is his attempt at being charming. I can't tell. I find him as obnoxious as ever.

"Then, by all means, beautiful lady. Grace us with your name." He offers an elaborate bow.

I roll my eyes. Is she falling for that bullshit?

By the completely unimpressed glare she levels Remus's direction, I'd say not.

"No," is all she says.

I bend over and try to hide my smile in the tuft of black curls exploding from the top of baby Raven's head.

"Well, what are we meant to call you? Unknown female?"

She stays stone-faced. "You don't need to call me anything. I'll be gone by tomorrow."

But Remus just smiles and slinks closer. "Are you so sure? It's not every day you stumble upon a castle full of mythical creatures. And we're handy to have around. We can do favors for you. Our Creator-Father was known to make wishes beyond mortals' wildest dreams come true."

I snort-laugh at that. "Yes, before they met a violent end. Do not trust him." I nod toward my brother. "His twin is a little more honorable but also tactical, so caution is also needed with him."

Remus looks offended. "I would not have one so beautiful as this meet any violent end. Abaddon granted Hannah her greatest wish, and look how

that has turned out.” He nods at the child in my arms, who rears up, apparently bored with my fingers, and bites my nose instead.

Calmly, I pry her off. She smiles wide, her little raven-black wings fluttering excitedly. My brother is going to have his hands full with this one. “Want to go play with Uncle Remus for a while?” I ask the baby.

Then, before Remus can complain, I’ve plopped her in his arms. She makes excited noises, but when Remus does nothing but hold her still, his arms extended from his body as far as possible, she starts to fuss. His head rotates one hundred and eighty degrees, and Romulus appears instead, drawing the child close and smiling at her, ever the doting uncle.

I smile. It’s a trick of mine. Remus has no patience for children, even ones as adorable as Raven. It’s a reliable way to get Romulus back when Remus is being a pain in the ass.

“Sorry about my brother,” Romulus and I say at the same time to the woman.

She waves us away, eyes wide as she stares at Romulus. Her gaze flits around his face, everywhere but at his eyes. Oh, right. I forget how disconcerting it is when he does the head-swap thing around people who aren’t used to it.

Romulus draws Raven close to his chest and carries her to a box of toys and some seating set up beside the blazing hearth. I gesture for the woman to follow, and she hurries in that direction. I think to be closer to the fire than out of any desire for our company.

She warms herself by the fire, front and back, while Romulus sits on the rug with the baby. She grew faster than humans typically do in the womb and seems to still be advancing quicker than human children in her development. She’s only nine months old but is already big enough to sit up and bat at the blocks Romulus patiently and endlessly sets up for her to knock down, making a delighted noise each time she does.

The strange woman has warmed her frozen limbs enough because she eventually takes off the heavy coat, exposing only her blood-soaked shirt. She pauses, looking down at herself as if startled by the sight.

“I’ll go ask Hannah for clothing,” I say.

“No,” she says quickly, eyes lifting towards me. Then she looks in Romulus’s direction before her eyes return to the stone floor. “Can he go get it?”

Ah. I understand. As Romulus rises, I see that he does as well. She is not

comfortable being left alone with him in case his twin should make a reappearance. But she's comfortable being alone with me?

I blink in confusion as I move to take Romulus's place by baby Raven on the rug. The baby's happy because, with my many hands, I can stack three times as many block towers for her swinging arms to destroy.

Romulus quietly slips from the room.

Though we hadn't been talking before, I feel the weight of silence heavier now that it is just the two of us and the baby.

"Where will you go tomorrow?" I ask. "Do you have a plan so you don't end up in circles again?"

"Can I have a map?" Her voice is quiet in the large room. Timid.

I breathe out laboriously. "I can supply a map, but I am not sure it will help. This part of the earth is quite barren. There are not many landmarks." And then a thought occurs to me. "But Abaddon or Romulus could fly you out. It is how Hannah came to us. Abaddon flew her in."

The woman startles at that. "Fly me. . . You mean, they would just grab hold of me and—"

"Fly, yes. They are very strong and can go anywhere in the world quite quickly. They are efficient flyers."

I'm attuned enough to her now to see her shudder, and I do not think it is because she is cold anymore.

"What about you?"

An old, unexpected shame rises. "I do not have wings."

"No, I mean, I can see that. But could you—" Then she shakes her head. "Never mind."

"What?" I ask, now more curious than ever. "What do you mean to ask?"

Just then, Romulus reenters the room, carrying an armful of Hannah's clothing. She brought back much when she returned with Abaddon for the wedding and occasionally sends Romulus to shop for her, so she has plenty. Romulus has brought a good array for the woman to choose from.

Still, she looks a little overwhelmed by so many choices as he lays everything on the couch. She finally snatches a long-sleeved shirt and the closest pair of jeans.

I point her to a bathroom off the dining hall where she can get changed, and she hurries off.

As soon as she slips through the door, Remus is back.

"Did you see all of that blood? She is perfect. She's my ideal consort."

He looks so self-satisfied when I glance his way. Only the baby's presence keeps me from tackling him and smashing his teeth in. A moment later, I sit back, astonished by the violent thought.

I focus on breathing in and then out. In through my nose and out through my mouth, repeating the process several times to bank my rage at my brother. Something I have not had to do in a long while.

Romulus taught me the technique several decades ago, and I practiced meditation during my long imprisonment. I only exhibited monstrous rage when Abaddon came down to feed us because it is what he deserved for locking us up like that. If he wanted to treat me like a monster, then a monster he would get.

But I often slipped to the nether realm, where the souls drift.

It is quiet there, and if not peaceful, well, it is at least . . . still. The stillness eventually crept inside me and quieted the madness.

Or so I thought. Now I am back in this world and find it more difficult than expected to find any equilibrium. Especially when provoked.

I narrow my eyes at my brother. "She is not yours or any others. She belongs to herself alone. And tomorrow, she will be gone."

We would return to peace, and I to my solitude.

Chapter Eight

KSENIA

Looking around the small bathroom, I'm surprised to find modern fixtures everywhere. For a castle in the middle of nowhere, this sink has a nice marble countertop and fancy fixtures. I take the opportunity to use the toilet and wash my hands, then take several handfuls of water from the sink. The water is cold but pure tasting.

We have to be *nearish* to civilization, right?

I try to retrace my steps to the chateau location. Well, the ones Dad didn't ask me to blindfold myself for. All I knew was that I flew from Helsinki to a small Finnish airport, then was driven for about six hours. I have no idea in what direction. Because of the blindfold and Dad's secretiveness, I suspected into Russia.

But still. Northern Russia might be remote, but it's not so remote that a place like this could just go unknown.

Then again, the blue guy mentioned something about invisibility, so if . . . *magic* of some sort was *real*. . . I shake my head. Did they make this whole place invisible? Is that even possible?

Twenty-four hours ago, I would have said that big man-monsters with six arms or lion-goat men with wings were impossible. But what do I know?

No, nothing that happened today feels real. After I go to the bathroom and wash my hands, instead of getting dressed right away, I find myself staring at

my two knives.

Dad gave me the first one, a Bowie knife made with high carbon steel and a fine bone handle, on my tenth birthday.

Yeah, yeah, most people might think it's weird to give your kid a wickedly sharp, deadly weapon, but neither of us ever pretended to be normal. I mean, maybe we were for a little while when I was small, but that was back when we had Mom.

If there's a single truth about my father, it's this: he loved Katia Volkov with every fiber of his being. And when a rival bratva brutally killed her when they broke into our home looking for my father. . . Well, he never got over it.

He went apeshit and murdered the head of the bratva who'd ordered the assassination in one of the most brutal attacks the Russian public had ever seen. He used an axe and killed not only the Pakhan but all his sons who worked for him, sparing only a recently married man's young wife. He considered her an innocent, but she witnessed the attack and immediately went to the authorities.

My father had connections with the police like most Pakhans, but not even they could protect him when the press made news of the brutality of the attack public. My father has been in hiding ever since, running things from behind the scenes with his brother as a front man and, as I came of age, me as a go-between.

Since I was a child, my father had been preparing me to take over for my uncle. Other daughters were Daddy's little princess. I was Daddy's little assassin.

I was my father's princess in some ways. He prepared me ruthlessly to take over his own crown one day. But ever since what happened to my mother, he was determined that neither of us would be caught unawares again.

So he homeschooled me. I preferred this because the one year he'd tried enrolling me in public school when we were in Bulgaria, I only ended up regularly getting in fights with the boys and being sent home when I gave them all bloody noses.

After morning lessons with him at home, doing boring things like reading and math, I began what I considered *real* school.

Weapons training. Knives. Guns. How to kill with objects found in an office. A kitchen. Hand-to-hand combat. Along with studying strategy.

My father never lamented the men he'd killed, only how sloppy he'd been about getting caught.

And still, I think my father only thought all was mostly self-defense training. My . . . *other job* didn't come about until later when another of our enemies found my father when I was visiting him in Kazakhstan for my twenty-first birthday.

They attacked us in the middle of the night.

I froze for fifteen seconds when I heard the noise of glass shattering. Fifteen seconds that might have cost my father his life.

My training kicked in, and without hesitation, I grabbed the knives I kept sheathed under my pillow, opting for them instead of the gun in my nightstand.

I didn't know how many of them there would be, but if I could dispatch as many as possible as quietly as possible, we'd be better off. My father yelled at me later for not grabbing the gun.

I considered it more important that he was alive to yell at me after I'd slit the necks of all four assassins before they could get to his bedroom. And when we needed money to make an important investment a couple years later, I decided to diversify our portfolio by offering additional services. I let it be known among the right people that my father had access to an assassin we would hire out should the parameters be right—no women, no kids, half up front, half on delivery.

For the last five years, that's what I've been doing. I wouldn't say full-time. Maybe four to six jobs a year. Dad wasn't exactly happy about it, but it increased his brand profile and, on several occasions, gave him the kind of favor and pull with the right people. So when he said he had a chance to come out of exile, I was stupid enough to believe him. I thought, wow, maybe I've helped him in a crazy, roundabout way.

Little did I know it would all go sideways when we were betrayed by the one person he completely trusted besides me—

My eyes squeeze shut as fury washes through me.

For so much of my life, I could never understand what my father felt when he killed that Pakhan and his sons in such a rage. Yes, I'd lost my mother in a violent way. In many ways, I thought I had even more rights to rage about it than my father, for . . . reasons. But the effects of his rash actions screwed up so much of the rest of his life. I never said it to his face, but I was mad at him for lashing out in the thoughtless way he had.

I was always dispassionate in my kills. Calculating and cold. I was a mere instrument of death, taking out people who needed removing from the world.

I had no illusions about the shadowy world of crime my father and I operated in. There were few innocents, and I always had enough time to research my subjects before taking their lives to satisfy myself that none were in that category. I had enough blood on my hands at this point; I knew I wasn't an innocent either. But my mother had been, so I respected life and told myself I'd never accept collateral damage.

Still, now, the buzzing red rage burning through my veins thinking about my uncle's betrayal. . . I open my eyes, shaking.

I understand my father more than I ever have.

I want to kill my uncle and everyone he's ever loved. And I don't want to do it quickly. I want to make him suffer. I want him to beg me for mercy. Then I want to deny him it.

I look down at my second knife, which immediately calms me. It's almost as beautiful as the first, though it's a more obvious weapon. Bigger and shorter, though not heavier, it has a sharp, tapered point and a hook crafted into the steel.

It's a knife made for gutting.

I set both knives on the bathroom counter and stare at them, my mind calming. Yes, I will make my uncle suffer before the end. And I will make whoever helped him watch helplessly before I do the same to them.

I pace the small bathroom, then shake my hands out vigorously as I look at the door. Even as my heart thumps for revenge, it's strange to come back to my body and the here and now and remember I'm in a castle surrounded by monster men.

First, I have to escape *here* and get back *there*.

I quickly pull on the other woman's clothes, frowning at the bright colors. There's a turquoise sweater with peach-colored circles, but at least the jeans are dark blue. I'm European. I prefer dark colors. And considering my job, I usually only want to stand out when I use my assets as a distraction. It can be helpful to be a small, pretty blonde woman sometimes. No one ever expects the gutting knife until it's twisting and pulling their intestines out before their very eyes. And usually, by then, they're too choked up on their own blood to express their surprise.

It's too cold in any room without a blazing fire to linger long, so I pull the sweater over my head, intentionally not looking in the mirror.

I look at the knives on the counter instead. Carefully, one side at a time, I stick the unsheathed knives into the pockets so they pierce through the fabric. I smile at the ease with which they slice through the material.

Then I pull them back out, sheathe them, shove the sheathed blades into the pockets, and pull the jeans on. The woman and I are close to the same size, and I don't care if the monsters can see the sheaths through the fabric of the jeans. They can apparently crumple steel with their hands, so there's no point hiding them anyway. Tomorrow, though, I'll be gone from this place, and if I face another creature like that lynx, I want my blades within easy reach.

When I emerge from the bathroom, the big two-faced man with wings and a tail is there. I jerk, about to slam the door in his face, when he's yanked backward by the one with all the arms.

"I am sorry for my brothers," he says, jerking two thumbs toward the other one. I've noticed that sometimes his arms do that—move in tandem with his speech. It's curious. I suppose I don't think about moving my arms, so maybe it's the same for him. Has he always had them, or are they some sort of lab experiment gone wrong?

I'm still not sure I actually believe in magic. People do nutty things with genetic experimentation these days, and I more than most know that people are doing all sorts of things on the black market. . .

"Dinner's ready," says the grinning one of the two-faced guy, popping up behind him. "May I escort you to dinner, beautiful?"

I frown harder in his direction, but it doesn't seem to turn him off. If anything, his maniacal grin only gets brighter. My hand strays towards my pocket and the knife there. Maybe it's only the lion-goat brother who can crumple steel like a tin can. If Two-Face attacks, I know I'll at least try to get in a well-aimed slice or stab first. Those necks look awfully sliceable.

"Oh, I'm so glad you'll be joining us for dinner!" The woman from earlier hurries forward when she sees me, and I withdraw a step. I pull my hands from my knives in my surprise, especially when she comes barreling towards me. "Oh my god, it's so nice having another human around. I'm Hannah. I can't remember if I introduced myself earlier."

I watch her teeth as she smiles big at me. "Come on, I've got the table all set. Abaddon's getting the baby settled. Have you met baby Raven yet? She's an absolute doll! I was so scared when I came back from getting her up from her nap, and Romulus told me they'd just sent you out into that cold. Are you

a hugger? I'm a hugger."

She comes towards me with open arms, and I back into the bathroom door, a noise like a squawk coming out of my throat.

Immediately she drops her arms. "Shit. Not a hugger. My bad. I'm so sorry. I haven't been around other humans in awhile, I forget about personal space. It's so not a thing with these guys."

I stare at her, my shoulder hunched defensively and remember something I don't usually have to think about: I'm not good with. . . people.

The grinning one bursts out laughing, a high, manic laugh that makes me want to reach for my knives again.

"Remus," barks the woman. "Don't be an ass. Look, I'm sorry I'm being too much. I'm embarrassed. I'll tone it down, I swear. Why don't we all go over to the table? I cooked a really delicious meal, and it'll be totally calm. We'll all behave."

"Speak for yourself," says Remus, and Hannah smacks him on the arm.

"Is it literally *possible* for you not to be an ass?"

Then the six-armed one steps between me and them, blocking my sight. I'm grateful. I look up at his chin. "What is," I start hesitantly, "your name?"

"That's Thing," says Remus. "He came out of the forge, and our Father said, 'What is this Thing?' And it stuck."

I frown, not knowing if the mean one's being sarcastic. I'm bad at telling when people are joking. So again, I look at the six-armed one's chin. "Is he joking?"

There is silence and then a gruff, "He is not."

I feel a rush of anger on his behalf. "Your dad seems like an ass."

Remus begins to cackle anew at my assessment. "My consort is smart *and* beautiful."

Thing holds out his arms but stays several feet away as if he's being careful not to touch me and show me that he doesn't intend to. "The dining table is this way."

I blink, not expecting the soft words after the barrage from the others. But it makes it easier to follow where he directs me.

The calm moment doesn't last, though. When I walk across the large, empty room to where the table is set up near the fireplace, the one with horns is there, along with—

"Ba ba ba ba ba!"

I pause, a bit taken aback by the cute little baby with a puff of black curls,

two little horns protruding from her head, and tiny silken black wings sitting in a wooden hook-on high chair attached to the table beside her much more intimidating father. Hannah hurries over to sit in a chair beside her daughter.

In the center of the table is a large roast of steaming meat. There are a lot of other unfamiliar dishes, the intense smells wafting my way and immediately making my shoulders tense.

I blink, feeling a bit overwhelmed.

“Where would you like to sit?” Thing asks.

“Beside me, obviously,” Remus answers, walking to one side of the table and sitting on a bench. He pats the space beside him, and I narrow my eyes. Yeah, he’s definitely shit at personal space.

Thing stomps ahead of me and sits beside Remus, pointing to an open chair at the opposite end of the table. “Don’t be an ass,” he grumbles at his brother.

Remus makes an injured noise. “I’m just trying to get to know my consort.”

“She is *not* your consort,” Thing growls as I start to feel stabby again. “Stop saying that, or I’ll rearrange your face. And I don’t mean just sending you to sleep.”

“Please,” Remus scoffs. “As if you have any control over when I wake and sleep.”

Thing turns to Hannah. “Give me the baby.”

Hannah makes an outraged noise. “You can’t use my baby as an on-off switch for your brother! It’ll give her a complex!”

“Ba ba ba ba ba ba!”

I slowly approach, about to take a seat where Thing pointed.

Thing jerks one of his many thumbs in my direction. “Our guest won’t be comfortable during dinner with him here.”

I pause before I sit. “I could just eat my dinner somewhere else. Maybe in my room, if there’s somewhere I can sleep for the night. I’m actually really tired anyway—”

“Nonsense!” Hannah cries, then swings the baby out of her high seat and hands her to Thing. He stretches out his uppermost pair of arms and takes the baby.

“Hi, sweet Raven,” he says, making his voice sweet and gentle, which seems especially incongruous with how big and intimidating he is the rest of the time.

“Do I have no say in this?” says the large, goat-horned man from the head of the table.

“No,” says Hannah and Thing together as Thing plops baby Raven in Remus’s lap.

“You’re both being ridiculous,” Remus starts to say. “I’m not afraid of my own niece—”

And yet, his words cut off as soon as the baby’s in his lap, and his hands shoot out to steady her. He blinks down at her once, twice, and then his head does that unnerving Exorcist-spin thing.

“Romulus, thank God,” Hannah says to the twin who blinks awake in Remus’s place. He’s much calmer as he smiles at the baby, lifting her in the air like an absolute natural and perching her on his shoulder to rub her little back underneath her wings. She coos and babbles away into his ear, her wings fluttering happily.

“You’re just in time,” Hannah says brightly. “Thing caught a lynx, and I made a feast.”

“I don’t see why a spy for the enemy should get to eat *my* food,” the horned one growls from low in his throat.

Before I can get the words out that are suddenly clogged in my throat, Hannah glares at him. “Don’t you start, Abaddon. We just got rid of Remus, and you are not going to ruin the first opportunity I’ve had for company in *months*.”

Then she pops up and smiles at me. “Want me to dish you up a little of everything?” I can *feel* her hundred-watt smile even though I drop my eyes to the table.

I nod and try to remember how to act like a normal person. Then I remember I’ve never been normal. Then the obvious occurs to me—treat it like a job.

I *pretend* to be normal when I’m hunting a mark. Maybe I can do that long enough to make it through this dinner. I just have to mask all my natural inclinations and habits by behaving the way I observe others behaving.

I close my eyes a moment, take a slow breath in, and when I open my eyes, I’m *Social Ksenia*. She’s an act, but she tends to put others at ease.

“Sure,” I tell Hannah, curving my lips slightly. Pleasantly. Now I’m the pleasantest bitch you ever met. “I’ll take a little of everything. But no peas or mashed potatoes, thanks.” I try not to shudder at the thought of peas or the strange consistency of the potatoes.

Hannah pauses, frowning at me. “So you just want meat and carrots and . . .?”

“And bread,” I supply helpfully.

She shrugs and plates up my food. I try not to squirm at how the juice from the cooked carrots mixes with the meat. I reach for the bread and put some on my napkin before she tries to put it on the same plate.

“Do you want some wine?” she asks as she hands me the plate.

I’m about to say no. I rarely drink, especially when I’m in enemy territory. But then I see her pull out a fresh bottle and a corker and hesitate.

It’s been one hell of a day.

I suddenly remember my fifth kill, when I injected poison through a cork into a really expensive Riesling. One of my smoothest kills. Though I’ll admit, the lack of blood was a little bit of a letdown. Not even a nosebleed. The bastard was just slumped over his plate of caviar.

“Sure, I’ll have a glass,” I say, feeling reckless. I watch with more concentration than is probably appropriate for Social Ksenia to make sure the foil wrap from the top of the wine looks intact and has no holes before she inserts the corkscrew to pull out the cork.

I pull the glass towards me after she pours it, watching carefully as she pours herself a glass. I only take a sip after she does. I’m glad for the bit of relaxation as the men pile their plates high with meat. Hannah’s the only one who eats the peas, and I try not to stare as they keep running away from her fork every time she scoops them up.

Romulus holds the baby with one arm and eats with the other. Abaddon tries to use his fork and knife, but the small, delicate utensils are awkward in his large, clawed hands. After about five minutes, he gets frustrated and tosses them beside the plate, grabbing the large hunk of meat from his plate with his hands and tearing into it with his teeth.

I avert my eyes quickly. I’ve been told people get uncomfortable when you stare. Social Ksenia usually knows better, but these are rather extreme circumstances. I take another swig of wine.

“So, tell us again how you came to be in our forest?” says the horned one—Abaddon.

I choke a little on my wine before setting it down, pretending to look him in the eye by inspecting his unique lion’s-eye irises and reply, “I haven’t, actually.”

He sets down the last of the meat he hasn’t devoured yet. “So tell us the

story. Hannah-wife likes to believe the best of everyone. I am the opposite.”

I narrow my eyes, breaking the gaze I’ve been working so hard to keep as my muscles tense again. Is he trying to say this is some sort of trap?

“I have invited you to my table, so there is peace between us for the moment,” he continues. “But we have been under threat.” This comes out as a rumbling growl from the back of his throat. “So please, tell me how you came to my doorstep.”

“Abaddon,” Hannah chides. “I told you I wanted this to just be a nice dinner.”

He looks at her. “And I want you and our child to remain safe. It does not seem like a coincidence to have an intruder at our door when we know we are being watched by a rogue angel.”

I understand wanting to protect one’s territory, so I hold up one hand. “I’d think it’s obvious I’m no threat to you. I don’t know anything about anyone named Angel. I got lost in the forest this morning, and all I want is to get home.”

“Where is home?” Abaddon asks.

“No offense,” I say, dropping Social Ksenia’s mask and glaring his way. “But I don’t even tell my friends where I live. Much less my enemies.”

“I am your enemy then?” Abaddon says, lifting out of his chair.

I move to stand as well, hands to my knives. “If that’s what you decide.”

“Stop it,” Thing says, getting to his feet. He glares at Abaddon. “Brother, you will keep your thoughts to yourself.” Then he turns to me, his face earnest. “I meant it when I said you are safe here. We are not your enemy.”

I move away from the table, my fists clenched. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t take your word for it. Is there a room where I can spend the night?” I glance in Abaddon’s direction, thinking, *preferably one with a door that locks*. “I’m going to have a long journey tomorrow, so I’d like to rest now.”

Chapter Nine

THING

I glare my brothers down. Hannah looks unhappy but says, “Of course. I’m sorry. I should have allowed you to take dinner in your room.”

Then she turns and glares at Abaddon, too, not that he looks remotely remorseful. I want to do violence upon the fool.

Romulus at least keeps playing with baby Raven in his lap, the only one who knows how to mind his own business. Or is tactically minded enough to avoid the brewing fight.

I look to the woman who seems ready to flee our sight the moment she knows which direction to go and ask, “Would you prefer Hannah or I to show you to your room?”

“You,” she says immediately, surprising me. I would have thought she’d be more comfortable with her own kind, but my chest goes warm. Does that mean she does not see *me* as an enemy? Or just the most familiar enemy?

“Take your plate.” I gesture at the table. “You will need your strength tomorrow.”

She nods reluctantly, then reaches for her plate, holding it close to her stomach. I breathe out in satisfaction, knowing she will be fed.

Then she follows me out of the room.

Once we’re in the hallway toward the staircase, her soft voice says, “I hope your, er, sister-in-law knows I’m grateful for the food.”

I nod, feeling uncomfortable about everything that happened at the table. I fear it only showcased my sometimes unspoken worries for Hannah-wife—ones that Abaddon can either not see or will not acknowledge. She misses her own kind. It is not good for her to be locked away here with only monsters for company. I am glad this woman will be able to escape our dreary existence tomorrow.

“So,” she breaks the quiet as I lead the way up the stairs. I’m glad for the electric lights Romulus installed throughout; I can see through the windows—also newly installed—that it’s pitch-black outside. I shudder to think of her earlier, wandering in circles. If she had continued in the darkness which falls so early in winter. . .

“Is there actually somewhere safe to sleep? By a fire?” Then she repeats, “Safe, with a door? Maybe one that locks?”

My heart clenches in my chest.

It is not fair, or even possible, to make penance for all the sins I have committed against humanity by helping this one human. . .

But still, I will not let harm come to her.

This one, at least, I will protect.

“Yes. A room with a door that locks. Follow me,” I say.

I move up the stairs two at a time, then worry I am moving too fast. But when I pause to look behind me, the woman is at my back. So I turn around and continue to the third floor. My floor.

It is the only place I can think of where she will be safe.

I’d like to think she would be safe with the rest of my family. But I know Abaddon still believes she is working for the enemy, and Remus is a wildcard with his own agenda.

No, it is best if she is here where I know she will be left undisturbed. I’ll keep watch to ensure it.

We finally arrive on the third floor, and I lead her to the first door. I’ve been working to furnish the floor I have claimed for my own. As I enter the room, I point to a long couch. I crafted the base from a tree trunk I planed down, and Romulus brought soft cushions back with his latest supply run. “You can sleep there. The door can be locked, and I’ll take watch outside so you can sleep in peace.”

I watch the bunched tension in her shoulders relax slightly at my words. This makes me very glad. I want her to have a comfortable, restful night’s sleep.

“There is a bathroom through that door, there.” I point, and she nods.

Nothing left to say, I head for the door to take watch in the hallway as promised.

As I am about to step through the doorway, her quiet voice pipes up, “Thank you.”

I pause, a little taken aback. “Um. Well. Okay.”

Then I step through and close it behind me.

The lock flips. Moments later, I hear furniture being dragged into place to block the door. It wouldn’t do much to stop my brothers, but she doesn’t need to know that. That’s why I’m here.

The night passes quickly, as do most things now that I have been freed from the endless eternity of being locked up in the dungeon.

Dawn breaks through the window at the end of the hall before I am quite ready. Because the dawn means she will leave. And this brief blip of beauty and change in my monotonous existence will be gone again.

But that is better for her, so I breathe deeply to calm myself and startle when I catch his or Remus’s scent in the air.

What? Where is he? He kept talking about the woman as if she were his consort. I should have taken his foolish talk more seriously!

I’m about to tear open the door to check on the woman when the door suddenly opens from the other side.

I blink, surprised. She was very quiet about moving the furniture back, but there’s no trace of Remus in the room. I sniff and catch traces of his scent again. When was he in my room? Was I so blinded by her scent last night that I missed his?

“Are you alright?” I ask, stepping through the door and looking around. The room is small, though, and my brother isn’t there.

She blinks, her gaze slightly averted. “I’m ready to go.”

I frown, then nod. “You’ll need provisions.”

I had a lot of time to think throughout the night. I can’t simply send her into the wilds like yesterday. If she’s going to succeed, she’ll need preparation. “It will take you a week to walk back to civilization at the speed of human legs. It’s unlikely you’ll be able to hunt along your way, so you’ll need to take rations with you, but that will get heavy. And you’ll need some sort of structure to sleep in at night to protect you from the cold, so—”

“Will you go with me?”

I stare at her, startled. When she turned down the thought of my brothers

flying her out—

“But I have no wings.”

“You saved me from the lynx. You’re a good hunter. And you have a lot of arms and a strong back. Even the lightest tents are heavy. And I’m small.”

I blink again. “You. . . trust me?”

She shrugs, eyes shooting to the floor. “Well, I got to thinking last night. Even if I had a map, what good would it do me? This is a strange land, mostly trees.” She shakes her head and rubs her thighs. “A week is a lot of time to walk in circles, and then, even if I could carry these provisions you’re talking about, if they run out, I’ll still die. I’m not good at asking for help, but I can see reason.”

I nod again because that decides it. This one will not go down to the deathly plane, not when it is in my power to prevent it. “I will take you.”

Chapter Ten

KSENIA

Thing leads the way down to the kitchen—a large extensive room below the ground floor—but I hang back by the door near the staircase because Hannah is fussing over everything she is sure we need to take with us.

I'm eager to get going, conscious of every moment of daylight, and ready to leave this castle. Yeah, these guys are big and a little freaky-looking, but it's more so their intentions. That Abaddon guy clearly doesn't trust me, and paranoid people are dangerous. Plus, the other one—well, he was happy to make his intentions *quite* clear to me this morning.

I woke to find the maniac twin grinning and *flying* above my head as I slept on the couch. His tail whipped around, and the flat, slightly pointy leather-like flap on the very tip of it covered my mouth to muffle my scream.

“Hello, consort, my consort,” he said.

I immediately leaped off the couch, crouching low and drawing my daggers, which only seemed to delight him. He, too, came to his feet, though his wings still flared out wide behind him. I was ready to scream again to alert my blue protector when he whispered low, as if very aware of his brother outside the door. “This is what I mean.” He grinned. “We are perfect for one another.”

Maybe I didn't scream then because I hated the idea of anyone protecting

me when I'd been protecting myself for a long while now. I just narrowed my eyes at him and brought my blades up.

"I know who you are," Remus hissed.

That got my attention. He did? Then why hadn't he said anything before now?

He must have seen my surprise because he continued, "You're a *killer*. Thing is too soft-hearted to see it." Then he grinned even wider. "But like recognizes like. You were made for me. So stay. Be with me. Together, we could be great."

Everything inside me tightened at his words.

Because though he was obviously a psychopath, what he said was also uncomfortably true. This was who I was beneath the mask.

A killer. Someone who couldn't wait to get home and paint my uncle's walls red with his blood.

This creature knew nothing about me, not even my name, but could sense it all the same.

I looked down at the knives held so comfortably—so expertly—in my hands and was hit with a flash of a memory. There was blood, but it wasn't because I'd just sliced a knife across the throat of some asshole who deserved it.

No, it was my mother's blood covering her chest and pooling beneath her body as I sat beside her for hours, wailing and begging for her to wake up.

I was four. She'd hidden me in the cabinet and made me promise not to make a sound when she heard the men breaking in.

With a small cry, I dropped the gutting knife, where it clattered onto the rug that covered the stone floor.

Remus chuckled softly.

"See, you know it's true. It's okay to be bad. In reality, there's no such thing as good and evil. Only power. And now you won't have to be alone."

Furious at myself, I snatched my knife off the ground and ran for the door, ready to tear the heavy wooden chest of drawers I'd slid in front of it the night before away. Wait, if the chest was still there, how did he even get in— My gaze flew to the open window. Dammit, we were up so many stories I didn't think to lock it, but duh, he could *fly*.

"Let me," Remus whispered, chuckling. He lifted the entire chest as if it weighed nothing, flying the heavy furniture where it originally was and popping back out the window as I tore open the door to find Thing waiting on

the other side.

I think if I was someone who liked touch, I would have thrown myself in his arms.

As it was, I stared at the floor and hurried into the hallway, glad when the door shut behind me. The demon's words rang in my ears: *You're a killer.*

I dug the toe of my boot into the stone floor of the kitchen and frowned, wanting to deny it. I'm not a—

But my eyes clench shut at the memory of another one of my kills. My hand was clenched around my precious knife handle as it met flesh. Then twisting the handle. Hot, thick blood spurting out and covering my hand. There was so much detached horror but also relief in that moment.

This has got to mean, considering what happened to me as a kid, that I'm really fucked up, right? Because every time I kill, I'm taking back power.

And that's been working out so well for you.

I shake my head and open my eyes again, frustrated and disturbed. My hands immediately smooth down my thighs, my heartbeat calming only when I feel the familiar weight of my knives. It disturbs me even as I take comfort in the familiar motion.

I jerk away from the door when I hear footsteps pounding down the stairs behind me. Just in time, too, because the big one with horns comes through the door.

"Abaddon," Hannah sing-songs. "I'm glad you're up. You'll be able to see Thing and our guest off."

Abaddon lets out a low growl. "You can't seriously be thinking about going with her. You'll be walking right into their trap."

"Whose trap?" Hannah asks.

Abaddon throws his hands in the air like it's obvious. "The angel's! It's obviously to separate you from the herd so it can pick us off one by one."

I blink, unsure how to interpret what I'm hearing. Are they speaking in code? Is whatever threat he's referring to real? Do I even want to know who could be a threat to these guys? Is there a whole secret world out there alongside ours that I've been ignorant of my whole life?

"I go out of the castle daily to gather wood, and I am unharmed," Thing responds calmly.

"And that's bad enough!" Abaddon explodes. I back up, hating how loud he is. The next second, Abaddon jabs his forefinger in my direction. "She's a Trojan Horse, and you're a fool to take the bait! We never should have

allowed her inside in the first place. So let us be rid of her once and for all!”

Thing remains impassive during his brother’s tirade, waiting quietly for him to finish. “I’ll see you in a couple weeks, brother.”

He reaches out a hand for his brother to shake, but Abaddon spins toward the stairs, muttering angrily under his breath. But not so quietly that I can’t hear him. “Sometimes I liked it better when you were locked up in the dungeon.”

My eyes fly back towards Thing. What the hell did that mean? Why was Thing locked in a dungeon? And did that asshole mean he’d locked up his own *brother*?

“I’m so sorry for him,” Hannah says from the kitchen, where she’s been cooking and helping Thing prepare provisions. “Everything’s good to go.” Her face is pained as she looks after her husband. Then she looks back at me. “I hope you’ll ignore him long enough to get some breakfast. I made bacon, eggs, and hashbrowns.”

“Thank you, Hannah, that’s so kind,” Thing pipes up. “Would you mind if she and I ate alone?” My eyes shoot to him. Has he picked up that he’s the only one I feel a modicum of comfort around? I don’t even know why. Mine is a solitary life, apart from the rare time I spend with Dad.

But Thing is. . . easy to be with. It’s why I asked him to come along. I think I can stand to be around him. Plus, the kind of hunting I do is in cities, not forests. I know how to navigate back alleys and the black market. Not wild animals and maps of snowy terrain. I was never, how do you call it, a Girl Scout.

“Of course, of course,” Hannah says. She pulls out silverware, sets it beside our steaming food, then, with emotion in her voice, says, “It was so nice meeting you. Safe journey.”

I get the uncomfortable feeling she’s about to ask to hug me again when Thing says, “Thank you, Hannah.”

She nods and turns, hurrying out of the room. I use my fork to quickly separate the scrambled eggs from touching the bacon and toast, then begin to eat. I’m very particular about the texture of my eggs, and these are much softer than I can usually stand. But I need all the protein I can get for our trek, so I shovel them in quickly.

The bacon is enjoyable, and I finish with the crunchy toast. It’s good to have a full stomach.

Thing devours his food even quicker than me, and he had a much larger

portion. Then he points me to a mountain of coats, scarves and gloves Hannah must have provided. I pull them on one at a time, holding onto the counter while I step into the thick snow pants.

He shoulders a *huge* backpack full of what I assume are meant to be our provisions for the journey. There's a much smaller, lighter one for me that I throw some of the extra bags of food in.

"Please tell everyone thank you," I say. I'm a stranger, and Hannah's husband clearly distrusts me. Yet they've provided me with so much, and Thing's willing to go on a long journey to help a stranger home.

Home.

My chest clenches. Because I'm not going home. Not yet. There's no home to go back to, not if my Dad didn't make it out. But I'm not letting myself think about that.

Uncle Pavel is a paranoid bastard and almost always closes himself up at his villa outside St. Petersburg. He's never even allowed me to visit him, making me wonder how long he's been planning this.

I clench my fists. So St. Petersburg is where I'm going.

"Let's go," I say. "I'm ready."

And then, even though I'm the one eager to leave, we're up the stairs and through the large open room to the door, where the horned Abaddon stands ready to open it before I quite feel ready. Oh, goody. And here I was, hoping I'd get to leave without seeing this asshole again.

But I guess it is sweet that despite his harsh words minutes earlier, he's come to hug Thing and wish him well on the journey.

Romulus shows up, too, and I'm grateful it's him while his conjoined twin sleeps. He gives Thing a warm hug and, as he pulls back, instructs him, "Stick close to the rivers as you travel southwest. Use the GPS like I showed you."

"I was there in the old days," Thing rumbles, his voice so deep. "I remember how to travel by the stars as well. They have not changed. We will not get lost."

I'm close enough to hear Abaddon lean in and whisper, "And keep an eye on her. I don't trust her."

I roll my eyes. Thing just growls in warning and turns away, right into Hannah, who all but throws herself into his many arms. He swings her around a little as they embrace, and I frown harder at the floor while they say their goodbyes.

I know she's with Abaddon, but it makes my chest tighten a little in frustration that she's so comfortable touching Thing when he feels like. . . *mine*. It's an absurd passing thought. I'm glad when Abaddon finally opens the door, and a blast of freezing wind hits me in the face.

I pull the ski mask down over my face, then trudge into the snow before anyone can say anything else.

I'm ready to leave this place far, far behind.

I've got revenge to see to.

Chapter Eleven

THING

For the first hour of our trek, we are both silent. And then the second hour also.

It is strange, being with a quiet human. After getting to know Hannah, I assumed they were all. . . talkative.

This human is not talkative.

At first, I thought I liked it. Walking with her was a little like being alone in the woods. Except, I realized that was foolish because I was *constantly* aware of her. I walk slowly to make sure she is able to keep up with me. I wonder if she is getting tired because the pace I'm setting is still too fast, and she simply does not complain.

But whether I slow down or go faster, she matches me exactly.

I frown, wondering what she is thinking. So then I try to listen to her breathing and eventually land on a pace that does not seem to have her breathing too heavily.

I know that if I were with Hannah, she would be very vocal about her discomfort, but I have the feeling this one would continue in silence even if her limbs were burning.

At hour three, I decide to do something entirely novel and ask. "Do you need to rest?"

She seems startled that I'm breaking the silence. "Do you want to rest?"

I blink back at her. "I am asking you. You are the human."

She stiffens. "I'm keeping up just fine."

"I did not say you weren't. But what do you want? Do you want to rest?"

She stays silent for a long moment. "I—" But then she breaks off as soon as she begins and is silent again. Finally, she picks back up. "Well, maybe I should stretch some, then we can continue."

I nod.

She leans over and begins to stretch. Strange positions I haven't seen humans contort their bodies into before. But then, besides Hannah, I have not been around humans in a very long time. She stands on one leg and grabs the other, bending it behind her in a graceful move.

"Your name," she says, surprising me by talking. "Why haven't you changed it?"

I blink, surprised by this question she's asked. "It is my name, given by my Creator-Father."

"He sounds like a dick."

I frown, not following. Sometimes this happens with Hannah when she uses words that mean different things in modern language than before.

"If he wasn't nice when he gave you a name, you should choose your own name."

I frown further. "Can you do that?"

She laughs, and I like the sound. "Of course you can. It's your life. Your *name*. You can be whatever you want to be. Whoever you want to be."

Hmm. "I will think about it. I have been Thing for a very long time."

She nods at that, finally standing up from stretching.

"You have not told me your name."

Her gaze, always averted, moves towards the forest. We are staying beside the frozen river, the forest off to our right. She is so quiet that if I did not have the excellent hearing I do, I might have missed her next words. "My name's Ksenia."

Ksenia. A beautiful name for a beautiful person.

"It is a good name," I say.

She nods but seems distracted.

"That's a Slavic name, yes?" I ask, hoping she'll divulge more about where she is from and how she got here.

But she ignores me and just starts walking again. "Who's Angel?"

I sputter a little as I start walking again, easily catching up with her short

legs. “What do you mean?”

“Your brother kept warning you that I’m a spy for someone named Angel. I want to know who they are.”

“You tell me nothing about yourself and demand I tell you things?”

After a moment’s silence, she nods. “Yes.”

“That seems like something a spy might do.”

“I’m not a spy,” she bites back.

And I believe her. Despite Abaddon’s paranoia, I don’t think she’s working for whatever angel is stalking us. I think she’s an unfortunate human who somehow stumbled into our realm. It was bound to happen after all this time.

So after we walk a few more steps, I finally answer her. “It is not anyone named Angel. It is *an* angel.”

She misses a step in surprise. I reach out two hands to steady her, but she yanks back, steadying herself at the last moment. “I’m fine,” she snaps. I pull my hands back.

“An angel,” she breathes out. “Like a literal angel? You mean from heaven?”

I shake my head. “Not exactly. They are simply from another plane. There are many planes of existence. This is merely one.”

“And you and your brothers. . . you’re from a different one?”

Again I shake my head.

“Our Creator-Father was. He was angel-kind, from a plane we call the Great Hall. Most angels retired there long ago. Our Creator-Father refused to go with them. Well, he went,” I hedge, then admit, “but just to steal enough angel spark to bring back here and create my brothers and me in his forge.”

“You were made. . . in a forge?” she says, her tone disbelieving. “Is that a metaphor? Or are you being sarcastic? I’m not good with sarcasm.”

“No, it was a literal forge,” I say. I suppose I’ve never thought about how strange this might all sound to a human. I was not there when Abaddon explained it to Hannah to know how that went. Or perhaps he was not so blunt.

“Okay,” she says slowly, as if she’s not sure whether to believe my words or not. I suppose that is up to her whether she will believe.

“My brothers can scry with angel runes because of the spark inside them, and they have seen that another angel somehow remains on this plane or perhaps has come back. They are watching us, and Abaddon thinks they

mean us harm. He worries because of his baby daughter.”

“What about your Creator-Dad or whatever? You said he’s an angel—”

“He’s dead,” I say sharply, and the image of him burning on the pyre flashes before my eyes.

She frowns, but her head bobs up and down, nodding. “If anyone told me this, I’d say they’re nuts. But, well. . . I guess after meeting you guys. . .”

Then she asks, “How long have you been in that castle? Why doesn’t anyone know about you?”

It’s good she didn’t ask all these questions last night. Abaddon would have been suspicious. I’m just happy she’s decided to talk instead of being silent. And I’m so curious about her. Maybe if I answer some questions, then she will, too.

“The castle was created around a thousand years ago. I suspect while our Father was alive, he. . .” I shake my head, “Cast some protection runes over the land directly around us so that no mortal could find us. And after his death, well, we had our own means of dissuading anyone from coming near.”

I see her frown, and she doesn’t ask any more about that. I’m glad. Even as I look around at the familiar landscape, my chest tightens. In another two days, we’ll pass by the place of death.

“What did you do for all that time in that castle in the middle of nowhere?” she asks. “For all those thousands of years?”

Now it’s me who looks at the ground.

Because of course we did not keep to the castle all that time. We were out doing what we were born to do. For thousands of years before and almost another thousand years after the castle was built, we were the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse. Murdering and spreading destruction, war, and death everywhere we went.

“The sunlight is difficult for me,” I lie. “You travel for a while. I’ll be in the shadow plane.”

“The what?” she asks, startled. “What does that mean?”

It means I need to be alone. The beast inside me is restless, and I do not trust him when he is restless. I might not have another being splitting me as obviously as Romulus and Remus, but sometimes I also feel two-natured. There is a darkness inside me that’s only calmed by shadows.

“I’m not only a monster with extra arms and blue skin,” I manage, speaking through my teeth as I stretch my neck like I sometimes see Romulus and Remus do when they are trying to hold the other back. I understand it

now because I worry the shadow inside me will be dangerous if I don't keep it leashed.

"I have other abilities, and one of them is to slip into the shadow plane. I need to spend time there each day." Another lie, but a safer one.

This frail human does not know that she has asked Death to travel with her as her companion, and I do not want her to know.

I have never been so ashamed of what I am. It is a foolish dream to change my name. A *thing* I was born, and a thing I will always be.

I see her tense with alarm at the thought of me leaving, but the mid-morning sun is bright and the river a clear guide. She will be fine.

"I will return in a short while," I say.

She turns towards me, and I hear her start to say something, but the gnawing is too great. I cannot stand the light or her kind presence and prodding words.

I breathe out in relief as I slip into the darkness of shadow.

Chapter Twelve

KSENIA

“**W**hat the hell!” I cry, but it doesn’t matter. He’s gone. There one moment, then with a flicker of shadow, gone the next.

I run forward and swipe my arm through the space he was just standing, but nothing.

I blink and wonder if I’ve truly lost my mind.

Either that or everything he said about angels and different planes of existence was. . . true? Well, he could have given me more than a moment’s warning before he abandoned me!

I breathe out into the cold air and hug myself. What if he doesn’t come back? He has all the provisions, and the backpack disappeared with him.

But as I shiver and ultimately decide there’s nothing to do but continue forward, following the river in the same direction we were going. I guess I have to trust he’ll come back. Still, it was a real dick move.

You can’t tell someone you’ll travel with them and then not warn them that, oh yeah, the sunlight bothers me, and occasionally I’ll be popping to another realm! Then again, what do I know of his kind, or what people should or shouldn’t do? Did I upset him with my questions? He was far more willing to open up to me than I was to him. Still, I was a bit relentless.

I feel overwhelmed by emotions and want to scream and cry. Throwing a fit won’t get me anywhere, though, so I continue on stoically.

If it's the light he doesn't like, does that mean he won't leave me alone at night? Because the thought of being alone out here in the middle of frozen nowhere at *night*. . . I shudder. I'll just have to put my foot down about that.

Yeah, right. I was in the middle of trying to put my foot down about him leaving me just now and look how well that went. He's apparently some sort of probably-immortal being who doesn't understand things as mundane as human feelings or fear or insecurity—

I huff out another furious breath and stomp forward some more. It makes me feel a little better. But only marginally.

I look around, but there's so much to take in. The unending white that, even with the sunglasses I'm wearing, still seems so bright. The trees and mountains in the distance. . . Oh my god, are we walking *toward* those? Does that mean we'll have to go over them?

I shake my head and look back to the ground in front of me. *Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out*. My hands go to my thighs, but only one of my knives is there, sheathed in the pocket like I did in the other pair of pants, with a new hole made in the pocket. The other is in my light backpack.

"Pretty knife, pretty knife, pretty knife," I mutter to myself, over and over, until the words have no meaning and the sounds themselves are soothing. I like the bouncy way my tongue makes the Ts. And the fricative feeling of the Fs and how my teeth feel on my bottom lip. "Pre-tty kniffffe." I say it slower. "Pre-tty kniffffe." Then faster again.

I walk in a march step to my words until I've calmed down again.

Besides, it's not like I'm freaked out to be out here all alone in the middle of a frozen wilderness. Nope, not at all. I'm a badass assassin. I can keep calm no matter what situation I'm in. I'm never overwhelmed. I always know what to do.

So what if I have no idea where I am or where I'm going?

I swallow against my tight throat and struggle again for a few breaths. Dammit, I'm gonna have *words* with that man when he pops back into existence.

But there's nothing else to do but walk. And I'm nothing if not pragmatic so that's what I do. I keep trudging forward. For hours.

And still, he doesn't come back. At least I have the small pack where I put a couple bags of trail mix and jerky that Hannah packed for us. The only two bags of food I have with me. I figured I should carry at least a little food. But it had been more for a worst-case scenario situation, in case he somehow

lost his pack. I didn't think I'd need it on the first day because he'd *abandon* me.

I pull out the little bag of granola and start to shovel it into my mouth. God, I'm so hungry. I've been burning calories like crazy, trekking through the snow for hours.

I look toward the waning sun and frown. I guess this is what I thought I'd be doing, heading off on my own before I asked him to come. But he shouldn't have agreed if he was going to ditch me! I shake my head as I sit on a fallen log beside the frozen river to eat.

I'm so mad at him, even though I barely know the guy.

Swallowing the granola and washing it down with some water from my water bottle—which is also getting really low—only makes me feel a little better. I open a bag of jerky, and it smells good.

Even stopping for this little while to eat, I feel the cold seeping in beyond what is comfortable. Not that I've been exactly *comfortable* all day, but when I'm moving, it's a little more bearable. I frown, looking around. I didn't have a watch on yesterday, and my phone got left behind when I fled the attack. So I have no idea what time it is.

I squint towards the already-setting sun. It's winter, obviously, and that means shorter days, but how is it night already?

I look around, and still, Thing isn't back yet. My chest tightens with anger at him. What the hell was he thinking? And then I start to worry. Did something happen to him? What if that. . . angel his brother was so worried about really *is* after them and did something to him?

Why did he have to be so foolish and leave me like that?

I shove another piece of jerky in my mouth and chew furiously.

That's when I hear the first growl.

Instead of worrying about the seven-foot beast who can obviously take care of his own business, I should have been worrying about myself. Did the lynx attack yesterday teach me nothing? I'm in the wild now, which means that instead of the hunter, I'm now the prey.

As I leap to my feet, the bag of jerky falling to the snow, I grab my knife and spin around just in time to see a pack of hungry-looking wolves fan out just as the sun drops behind the mountains.

Fuck.

Chapter Thirteen

THING

I return from the other realm, and my eyes open wide when I see how far the sun has fallen.

I miscalculated, losing myself among the numbing shadows in the netherworld. Whenever I plane-jump, I return exactly where my body was last.

There's nothing to do but begin running. How far ahead of me *is* she? Knuckles to the ground, I sprint in the direction I told Ksenia to go.

Immediately I am swamped with regret, eyes looking between the falling sun and the ground beneath my knuckles and feet. I can travel three to four times faster than her, but instead of the hour or two I meant to leave her alone and a distance I could have covered in no time, it's been—

I cannot think about how long it has been. Far, far longer than I ever intended to leave her alone.

In my selfish escape, I have left her vulnerable. And I know more than most the dangers of the near-arctic, especially in winter when predators become desperate with hunger.

I push myself even faster, flying across the ground, spitting snow in my wake.

The sun falls further, near to dropping behind the mountains now.

It will be fine, I try to tell myself. She is capable. She always keeps those

precious knives of hers close, and from how she handled them with Remus, she knows how to use them.

But what good will they do from another lynx? It'll rip her throat out before she gets in a single swipe. She is small. She smells of prey.

I sprint still. Nothing else matters except getting to her. If I fail her—

No. I will not think of it. I will not.

The white blurs around me. I'm ruthless as I push myself harder.

And then my worst fear—

A feminine scream cuts through the cold quiet.

By the time I finally catch up to her, one wolf is on top of her and the entire pack circles.

I let out a blood roar and extend all thirty claws as I leap to pull the wolf off her and scatter the rest. I land claws first.

Howls and snapping jaws meet me as I pierce the wolf's pelt. Several wolves run, but others attack, leaping on me and biting at the heavy pack on my back. The one on top of Ksenia doesn't move, and I reach down with my bottom pair of arms to wrench it off of her.

She is pale beneath it. Hannah's pale pink coat is drenched with blood, and a large hunting knife sticks out of the wolf's belly. My nose scents that the blood is the wolf's, but it does nothing to calm my rage.

I'm furious at myself, but I will take it out on these predators for daring to attack who I was not here to protect.

With my upper arms, I peel the biting wolves off my back, spinning and hurling them into the forest. A few others make threatening yips at me, baring their teeth. But I roar back and stand to my full height with all my arms out.

These wolves might be hungry, but they know a bigger and more dangerous predator when they see one.

One after another, they retreat, streaks of gray bounding back into the woods as twilight falls.

Ksenia is still on her back in the snow, and we both breathe heavily. I reach out a hand to help her, but she jerks away, scrambling back and eventually getting to her feet herself.

"Where were you?" she shouts, bending over and yanking her knife from the wolf's belly. She cleans it in the snow without looking at me.

"I should have been here," I say. "I should not have left for so long."

"No, you shouldn't have," she says angrily, and I see she is shaking. She's cold. The sun has dropped below the horizon, and she is now covered

in cold, sticky blood. Already, it freezes on her coat.

The temperature is dangerous for her frail human body, and if I do not work quickly, she will be in even more danger.

I sling the pack down from my back, dismayed when I see the wolves have torn it. What if they punctured the tent? But I cannot worry about that now.

Hurriedly, I pitch the small tent. It is meant for negative temperatures, but my chest clenches when I see that the wolves have indeed ripped the tent, too. But there are bags for sleeping, and I will zip her in both of them. The cold does not bother me.

Ksenia paces anxiously, back and forth, back and forth. She does not seem to be doing well, but I cannot even attend to her because I must get a fire started.

If I had been here like I was supposed to, all of this could have been seen to while there was still light in the sky. My head hangs as I race to the forest and tear branches from trees for kindling with all six of my arms, shaking heavy snow from them as I go.

I work quickly, but it is still too long before I have a fire crackling beside the tent with its terrible, flapping tear.

Ksenia doesn't say a word as I work. But what is there to say? I have failed her. She moves close to the fire, and the flames dance off the thick mask covering her face to protect her from the cold. I worry about her exposed, fragile human eyes darting frantically as if she is having difficulty being still.

I race to gather more wood, trying to ignore the wolf's blood on her coat as it melts in the heat of the fire and drips down her front onto the snow.

It takes another half hour before I have everything arranged—bags in the tent and a pot over the roaring fire with enough melted snow to begin stewing some wolf's meat. The entire time, there is only silence from her.

I preferred it when she was yelling at me.

"I should have been here," I say again if only to break the silence.

Her head jerks up at my words, and even though she has been sitting on a log I propped up by the fire for most of the last half hour, boots all but buried in the flames, she has not stopped shaking. "You keep saying that. But that's not a real apology."

I blink. I don't think I've ever—My brothers and I don't apologize.

It's never been in our vocabulary. But she's right. She deserves one. So I

try out the strange words I know *of* even if I've never heard them said to me or ever said them myself. I take a seat in the snow across the fire from her. The cold does not bother me much through my tough hide.

"I am. . . sorry."

Her eyes flash in my direction, even if they don't quite land on me. "And you swear never to leave me like that again?"

I nod. "I give you my oath. I will not leave you again."

"Where did you even go for so long?" she asks, and I can hear the pain of fear in her voice. She rocks back and forth on the log, gloved hands clutching her thighs. After cleaning the knife, she replaced it in the sheath in her pants pocket, and I've noticed one hand is always on the outline of it.

I swallow hard as I turn my eyes to the cooking stew. I don't want to tell her that I abandoned her so that I could go walk amongst the dead in the nether realm. It would only invite more questions. . . But considering I almost consigned her to that dark land through my absence. . .

I sigh. What does my pride matter anymore? And doesn't she at least deserve the truth about who she travels with?

"We did not tell you all that we ought to have," I say, my breath puffing in the cold air. "My brothers and I, we are not just monstrous looking. We have been around for a long time. Long enough that stories have been told about us. We are named among your kind."

She frowns, and her rocking slows some. At least I can distract her from the cold and discomfort with my tale. "What did they call you in the stories?"

I take a deep breath. "I do not want to scare you."

She sits up straighter. "I'm not easily scared."

Considering she tangled with a wolf today and came out the victor, I can attest to that.

"They called us the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse."

She is quiet for a moment, her eyes blinking repeatedly, the only sign of her surprise. "Which one are you?"

I suck in a quick breath. "Death."

"What does that mean?" she asks. "Being death?"

She is taking this far more calmly than I expected. Her question sounds only curious, not fearful.

Still, I try to be careful as I answer. "My father created my brothers and I for a purpose. To be his army. For thousands of years, we were an unstoppable machine of devastation wherever we went. Alongside every

great army, we were there.”

“So, if you were there during the battles, what did you do?”

I suck in a breath. “During the bloodiest of battles, humanity’s lusts to destroy one another were inflamed by my conjoined twin brothers War. My other brothers Famine and Pestilence attacked their physical bodies. I was the one who finished them off, carrying men by the thousands to the otherworld.”

“What does that mean, carrying them to the otherworld?” she asks.

I do not want to continue answering her questions, but in her curiosity, I notice her clenching hands have relaxed.

So I expel a great exhale, the vapor puffing out in a cloud. “I am a plane-crosser. It was my job to take their souls to the realm where they rest for eternity in death.”

Her eyes widen slightly. “So there *is* an afterlife?”

I shrug. “A resting place, yes.”

“What’s it like? Like heaven?”

Again, I shrug. “It is the shadow realm. Peace and warmth for some. Darkness and endless wandering for others.”

“Like *hell*?” she asks, sounding alarmed.

Another shrug. “Not like some of your religions paint. There is no creature with little horns poking souls or great fire pits. Souls wander for eternity if they did not find peace during life in this plane. They carry that restlessness to the next realm.”

“What about people who do? People who were happy here?” she asks.

I pause, thinking. “It is not a place of happy or sad. There is peace and not peace, I think. Rest, and not rest. Some souls live in a spacious place in that realm but are not frantic or searching. They are content forever. Others. . . wander endlessly, searching for a peace they will never find.”

“And you’re like, what? The Grim Reaper who takes everybody on Earth there?”

I laugh at that. “No, no. I’m just a plane-crosser. I took swaths of souls from battlefields on the brink of death there because it seemed like my function among my brothers. Else, what good was I?” My frown deepens. “My father certainly found my powers lacking. He thought me the least of his sons.”

Her eyebrows lift as she stares at the fire, warming her hands. “You can cross over into the realm of the dead, and he wasn’t impressed?”

I shrug. “Eventually, I realized he would have preferred they stayed here

until the last moment, suffering from their wounds until natural death took them.”

She gasps. “But you had pity on them.”

“I don’t know. I felt I had been given a purpose, so I did what I thought I had been born for. I thought it would please my father, even though it never seemed to. But once someone was on the brink from which there was no return, I took them.”

“Well, fuck your dad. I think it’s noble.”

“No,” I bark, shaking my head. “That is not what I am. Not what we were. My brothers and I were mad with fury and the need to spread death. We did not show pity or discriminate. The other plane is full of all who our father set us upon.”

And some he didn’t. Once the madness had fully taken hold. . . That is a shame I cannot speak of. After thousands of years, and one last unspeakable death, this time one of our own brothers. . .

“So what does this have to do with where you were today?”

I breathe out again, another puff of vapor in the darkness. “After so much of my life spent in that other realm, sometimes I find it. . . easier to be among the dead.”

She blinks at the fire. “So you left to go walk with the dead? The ones who wander around searching for what they’ll never find? Or the peaceful ones?”

“The wanderers in the dark,” I respond. I never go to the brighter place where the peaceful ones are. They are not my kind.

“Why?” she asks. “Is it really because you can’t bear the sunlight?”

Ah, she has caught my lie. “No,” I whisper, “it is not because of the sun. It is because. . .” I break off as I stare at the flames. Honestly, it’s not even because I was worried about losing control around her. “I envy even the restless dead because they know a peace I never will. Eternity in this plane is the true hell because there is no escape. No rest. No death.”

“But isn’t that the same as what they’re experiencing?” she asks. “They can’t escape there, and you can’t escape here. Except you can, because you can visit their plane. And if you wanted, you could visit the part of that realm where the peaceful souls live. You *have* choices.”

I start to deny what she is saying. . . except. . . I cannot deny her logic. My frown deepens.

“Is the stew ready?”

She's just exploded the self-pitying logic I've caged myself with for so many years and not lingered in her anger over the abandonment that almost resulted in her death.

I look upon her, shivering still, and a truth is cemented in my soul. I will protect this creature forever, and never, *ever* again will I abandon her.

I fumble in the pack for a bowl to pour the stew into, blinking with the strange new emotions flooding my system. I have never felt these things before. Warm in my chest for another being. My heart feels open and tender where there was only anger and sorrow for so long.

I'm careful as I pour her the largest portion, keeping back only a small bit for myself.

She frowns when I hand her the bowl. "I think you gave me the wrong one."

I just shake my head and urge her to take the steaming bowl. "Be careful not to burn yourself. Let it cool."

"Don't you need more?"

I shake my head again. "I am used to not eating much." It is the truth. Abaddon would leave for long stretches of time, only providing the barest of rations in the dungeon, and I am used to starvation. Sustenance is more important for her. She is the fragile one.

I am stubbornly difficult to kill. There is only one method we have ever found to kill our kind—hell-metal. We melted it all down except for the chains in the forge long ago. Something I have occasionally lamented but today am glad for.

A few minutes later, she begins sipping at the bowl, and I am happy to see color come back into the bit of cheeks I can see from the eye slits of her mask. Her mood, too, seems brighter after she eats.

"You should sleep while it is dark," I say. "It will get colder, and it will be better to zip you up in more layers. I will attend to the fire while you rest."

She frowns. "What about you? Don't you need to sleep?"

I shake my head. "It is not necessary."

She sputters, "So you're just not going to sleep for a whole week?"

"I've gone much longer without sleep. I have promised not to abandon you again."

"Well, yeah, but—" She frowns.

"I will not let the fire go out."

She sighs and clutches at her thighs where her knife is and then nods.

“Okay.”

“You should get into the tent. Into the warm bag.”

She looks uncertain, even though she repeats, “Okay.”

I nod. “Good. That is good.”

She sets down her empty bowl in the snow, then looks in my direction. “Goodnight, Death.” And then, to my great shock, she comes over and presses her warm lips to my forehead before disappearing inside the tent flap and zipping it shut behind her.

Chapter Fourteen

KSENIA

“Papa,” I say.

“Don’t you see, Ksyusha?” Papa grins at me, raising a glass. A fire crackles behind him, but still, I shiver, feeling as if something is wrong. I should warn him, but I can’t remember why.

“Papa,” I start again, but he cuts me off.

“It’s all about to be made right. Just like I always told you. It will all be ours again.”

But then, behind me, comes a low, blistering growl.

I swing around and yank out my knives. “Get behind me, Papa!” I scream as wolves come out of the forest and circle us.

One of them snaps at my father, who shouts and falls to his knees.

“No!” I scream and lunge at the wolf with my knife. But I’m too late. The wolf has my father by the throat. Blood! There’s so much blood.

“Papa!” I scream. “No, Papa!”

A hand on my shoulder shakes me, and I wake up, still screaming.

I blink in confusion to find myself in the dark tent, Thing hovering over me. The wolves are gone, and I’m so, so cold. I can’t stop shaking. Thing immediately pulls back. “Are you all right? You were screaming. And you’re half out of the sleeping bag,” he says.

I’m shaking so hard, and tears burst out of my eyes. “Hold me,” I cry.

“I thought you don’t like to be touched,” he says, but I just shake my head, barely knowing what I’m talking about but knowing I need it all the same. Somehow I know it will help.

“Hold me,” I cry again, “and squeeze.”

Everything is falling apart around me, and my shaking is so deep. I’m going to come apart if he doesn’t—

Already the dream is fading even though I’m trying to hold onto it. I shudder more. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out the symbolism of my dream.

The terror of my uncle’s attack and the wolves all mixed into one terrifying dream. And my subconscious trying to get me to deal with the idea that my father might not have—

No. Papa’s stronger than me. He taught me everything I know. If I made it out, then so did he.

“Hold me!” I scream and there is no hesitation. Thing is right. During my struggling, I’ve come half out of my sleeping bag, likely why I’m so cold.

But then, finally, Thing’s six arms wrap around me.

“Tighter,” I say when he holds me too gently.

He squeezes with the pressure I knew I needed, and my tremors kick down a notch when he cocoons me. Being held in all six of his arms, wrapped up and down my body like the tightest protective shell, begins to calm my panic.

The buzzing in my head finally switches off. All the frantic thoughts settle, and there’s just white noise. And the feeling of being secured within his arms. A weighted blanket of peace. Quiet. Inside my head and out. And the longer he holds me, the more I warm up, too, his body heat transferring to me.

My eyes close, and I lay my head against his chest. How can he be warm when it’s so freezing outside? And he’s not even wearing a coat?

It’s my last stray thought as I drift off again, this time into a blissfully dreamless sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

THING

She falls asleep in my arms. I do not know how she can, especially after what I told her today. Especially when she usually seems to dislike touch. But I sensed there was something different about this touch.

Not casual, but an all-encompassing pressure hug that comforted her panicked, upset state. I was so terrified when I heard her scream in the tent.

My first thought was that another animal had somehow gotten in from the other side. That I had again failed her. I all but ripped my way into the tent, only to find her thrashing and screaming something that sounded like *papa, no!* half out of her bag. Her cheeks were chapped and red with cold, her lips deathly pale.

I was glad but terrified when she screamed for me to hold her. And finally taking her in my arms was like giving into my greatest wish. I wanted to pinch myself to make sure I had not broken my oath and fallen asleep when I had promised not to. Because having her in my arms, her cold cheek nestled against my chest, felt like a dream.

Especially when I quickly felt the tension go out of her limbs in my embrace. As if she actually. . . found comfort in *me*.

Mine was the face and form that terrified men. That made them scream and piss themselves in their last moments before I carried them off to the other world.

This beautiful creature only finds comfort and rest in my arms.

The struggle of emotions stirring in my chest is so unfamiliar I don't know what to do with them. I feel a renewed certainty that I'll never abandon her in cowardly escape. I nestle my chin on her tiny, fragile head and apply the slight pressure she asked for, careful not to squeeze too tightly. It's a delicate dance considering my strength as I hold her throughout the long night.

The fire dies down outside, but I don't worry too much. It turns out that holding her like this allows a sharing of my body heat I never expected. Between us springs up a furnace of warmth. She'll stay safe from the cold at night if I hold her. My very body can offer *protection*, another shocking thought.

I always believed so deeply that my only purpose in existence was to cause death and destruction. . .

But here she is, flipping everything on its head.

I breathe out heavily, struggling not to let my thoughts get ahead of themselves. Her warmth is a brief reprieve in my lonely life, so I will be glad of this gift and not squander another moment of it.

I hold her and do not rest. Instead, I stay intensely awake, meditating on the feel of her in my arms, memorizing her closeness, the scent of her skin and hair, and staying alert in case there should be any threat.

Really, though, I know I'm trying to capture these memories to fill me up for the rest of my long eternity after this short week has passed by, and she's lost to me again.

It seems impossible to me now that a few short days ago, I did not know her. And more even impossible that in another scattering of days, I will never see her again.

Doubly important, then, to live my entire life in these days I will spend with her and waste not an iota of it.

Deeply, I inhale and, for perhaps the first moments of my life, feel the peace I have forever chased. And try not to think how fleeting it will be.

Chapter Sixteen

KSENIA

When I wake, Thing's arms are still securely around me. It doesn't panic me like I thought it would.

Instead, it does what it did last night. It makes everything calm.

All the buzzing thoughts and sensations are quiet. The pressure of his arms squeezing ever so slightly allows me to breathe and not panic. After my mother's death, I couldn't stand for anyone to touch me except my father. Sometimes, if I experienced anything else upsetting or shocking, he would hold me like this. So tightly that it made everything else recede, and I could finally calm down.

I never knew if it was because of my mother's shocking death and the hours I spent at her side or if I was just *like this*. I suppose I'll never have the chance to know since I'll always carry my history with me. I simply am who I am.

I never thought anyone else's touch could calm me like my father's. A thought that, on its own, starts to overwhelm me. Which makes me glad Thing is still holding me so tight.

I must wriggle or do something else that gives away the fact that I'm up because, above me, Thing's deep voice rumbles, "You are awake."

Smooched against him like I am, I can hear the booming echo of his voice through his huge chest. Even that is soothing. A silly part of me wishes we

could travel like this, attached to the front of his warm chest. I'm absolutely toasty, something I haven't felt in. . . well, I can't remember the last time I was completely warm. I couldn't get close enough to the fire back in the castle. Some part of me was always cold. My backside while my front faced the fire, or the opposite if I turned my butt to the fire.

But with Thing wrapped around me like this, I feel completely warm and completely safe.

It feels. . . *new*. Even before the attack, the life I lived. . . Doing what I do and constantly fighting to keep my father's organization alive and relevant in a changing world. . .

Feeling warm and at peace is rare.

Those aren't things I value. I immediately argue with myself as I lean deeper into Thing's chest, not quite ready to have him pull away. It's absurd to find a stranger's embrace so reassuring. But he's not just any stranger, is he?

"We should get moving while there's light," he says in his deep, rumbling voice.

Reluctantly, I nod, stealing one last moment of warmth and security before pulling away. Immediately I'm slammed by cold as his arms retreat.

"Stay in your sleeping bag," he says. "I'll stoke the fire so we can have a hot breakfast before we go."

I nod but stay quiet. I don't trust my voice at the moment with the strange lump rising as I lose his touch. Suddenly the rest of the world rushes back in, and it's so *loud*. The wind is blustery and it's overwhelmingly bright *white* when he opens the tent flap. Then thoughts of my father and my revenge hit, and how far we have left to walk, not to mention the icy pins pricking my nose—

I bury my head in the sleeping bag and wait until he calls me again for breakfast.

When he does, I find he's cooked more of the wolf's meat from last night. It tastes like pork, and I'm surprised I don't mind eating it too much. We're both quiet, but we're hurrying, too.

I think we both feel the urgency to use the sunlight. While I finish eating, Thing quickly breaks down the tent and packs everything back up in the hulking bag he pulls onto his back. Then we start our trek.

Quiet is the theme of the day. It's strange after the intensity of yesterday. I don't know what to say other than to monologue about different types of

knives, and there's so much to take in from the scenery around me. It feels like too much to talk and walk at the same time anyway.

Maybe he feels the same because he doesn't say anything, either.

But then I find that kind of nice, just being together without chatter. It's not something a lot of people are capable of—being together quietly without it feeling bad or strange. It's nice to be quiet with Thing. Although I scrunch my nose every time I think his "name."

It's not a good name, I feel. He's *not* a thing. He's a person, and he deserves a person's name.

So after we've walked a while, the sun halfway through the sky, I say, "What about Mortimer?"

Thing's head swings my way. "What?"

"As a name. You know, because *mort* means—"

"I know what it means."

"And you could shorten it to Morty."

Thing shakes his head, *his* nose scrunching. Which looks cute on the giant man. I smile under my ski mask. "I don't like it. It feels like a hunched-over librarian's name. With glasses down his nose."

I laugh out loud.

"Okay, how about something more stately. Like Thanatos?"

He pauses, looking thoughtful for a long moment before shaking his head. "I'm not the god of death."

"It doesn't have to be literal. You could just be named *after* the god of death."

"Thanatos. . ." He tries but then shakes his head. "Doesn't feel right."

"Okay, you come up with some."

He continues forwards. I notice he takes very short, slow steps to my rapid, long ones. He proved how quickly he could make this journey yesterday when he caught up to me so fast. But he goes slowly, for my sake.

He's so patient. People are rarely patient, in my experience. I frown, staring at the snow as I continue crunching forward.

After another few moments, he says, "I can't think of any."

I expel a breath, the air puffing in front of me in a cloud. "Oh, come on. Out of all the names in the world, you can't think of one that might fit you?"

He shrugs, looking my way. "Can you think of any more?"

I pause, thinking. Really trying to think of something that might fit him. And yes, what he can do, but also who he is. He's not just Death; he's more

than that.

“What about Kharon? He ferried the dead to the Underworld. Isn’t that what you do? You aren’t Death, exactly. I get it. But you help them find passage to that other plane, right?”

Out of my peripheral vision, I see him pause a step while his head nods slightly. “Well, yes. And I like the sound of it. It is a strong name.”

I grin. “Do you want it to be *your* name?”

He’s a little slower for the next few steps, jogging to catch up to me. “I think. . . yes. Yes, I would like it to be my name.”

“Hello then, Kharon. Welcome to the world.”

I watch his mouth as he smiles wide. It’s a little terrifying, considering his big, sharp teeth. But also really wonderful to see. And I feel warm inside despite the cold that I could bring him a better sense of identity than just being a “thing.”

I look in front of me again, a little disconcerted by how good it makes me feel to make him happy. I just understand how lonely it feels without an identity in this world. So much of my life is spent alone, as no one, or as whoever I need to be for my hunting. Rarely am I just Ksenia.

We go a little further before he speaks again. “Thank you for the gift of a name. You are very kind. That is an unusual thing in this world.”

I nod, a little disconcerted with how much I feel like I know Kharon. Do I just feel a bond with him because he was there after I experienced the traumatic situation of my uncle’s betrayal? Really, we know so little of one another. Well, at least I haven’t told him about me. Or is that why it feels possible to get close to him? Because for once, especially with what’s felt like stepping into a fairytale after the worst thing I could ever imagine happened, I’ve been jarred out of my usual, strictly controlled life? I let *no one* in. Ever.

But after you lose everything. . . Well, it all just seems ridiculous. What did all that control really get me? It didn’t protect me in the end. And Kharon knows me in this present moment, without a past.

Are we only a collection of past facts and memories? Or are we the person we are now, as we experience this moment?

It’s confusing and overwhelming to understand or try to untangle. Because for a terrifying moment that’s immediately followed by guilt, I feel *free*.

Then the wind starts whipping up stronger, and all my focus is thankfully

taken by the struggle to walk forward as snow begins pelting us from what feels like all directions at once.

Kharon moves in front of me to provide a wind break so it's easier to walk. After a while, as the wind whips up even more, I can see that even *he's* starting to struggle. And it's not just the wind. The snow is getting heavier, and the wind bites at my face like tiny, freezing bullets.

Kharon finally turns to me, and I see the concern in his features as he looks around at what I realize has quickly become a storm.

"We need shelter!" he shouts to be heard above the wind.

I nod and look around, lifting my hand above my eyes to try to see. But it's useless because it's quickly become whiteout conditions. I can't see anything half a foot away from my own face. Helplessly I look back to Kharon.

"Can you see where?" I yell, barely able to hear my own voice.

His face has quickly gone from concerned to *very* concerned, if the furrow in his brow is any indication. He leans in so he's all but yelling in my ear. "Can I carry you?"

"Yes! Tightly!" I scream back, panicking at the whipping wind that almost knocks me sideways. Being held by him last night wasn't bad at all, and the way I'm starting to spiral, getting a squeeze sounds good about now.

Still, I'm not quite sure I'm ready when he sweeps me off my feet with his two upper pairs of arms. I yelp as the world goes topsy-turvy. Soon, I'm against his chest, locked in securely with two pairs of arms. I squeeze my eyes shut as he starts to run, burrowing my head against his chest to protect against the wind and pelting snow.

I say *run*, but he might as well be *flying*, just without wings and across the ground instead of in the air. We move at incredible speeds, but I don't dare open my eyes. I can't help the scream that comes out of my throat, and he holds me tighter against him. The wind is freezing at my back where his arms aren't warm bands around me.

All around us, the storm howls louder and louder. Does he even know where he's going? Where *is* he going?

Is he trying to outrun the storm? Is that possible? Considering how fast we're moving, maybe it is. I just want it to stop. I have a terrible feeling that the only way out is through, even if I have no idea where we're going through *to*.

Kharon moves with certainty, and I just have to trust him.

Trust is unnatural to me. But it's not like I can stop and ask him if he knows what he's doing. We're barreling forwards at incredible speeds, and there's no getting off this rollercoaster now that I'm on it.

Finally, he slows down, even though the winds around us are still roaring. It feels like we've traveled an incredible distance, but we still haven't outrun the storm. How big *is* it? Or did he get lost in all the white, and we're just running in circles?

"I need to set you down for a moment," he shouts.

I nod, not trusting my voice. He sets me on my feet, but they're rubbery with shock and the sweeping winds. I'm immediately knocked over into the soft, powdery snow. I decide staying down is my best move and watch from the ground as Kharon starts digging in the snow.

What on *earth* is he doing now? Did he decide he couldn't outrun the storm, so he'll just dig us a ditch and wait it out?

Then my eyes widen on my next blink, and amid the gusting snowfall. . . wait, there's a stone building there! I just couldn't see it at first because there's so much snow around it. Does this mean we're closer to civilization than I thought?

Except when I whip my head around to try to see any more buildings, it's still all just white. There aren't any lights. Maybe they were knocked out by the storm? I shield my eyes with my hands and try to look around more, but with the whiteout conditions, it's useless.

I can barely see Kharon, and he's only feet away from me. He's digging with all his arms in a whirl of motion so fast I can barely see his arms windmilling.

He quickly unearths what might be a window? Or what was once a window is now just a hole. Which makes my heart sink a little. Whatever this place is, it's been abandoned for who knows how long.

As I come closer, I can make out walls and a roof, but the whole thing looks old and encrusted with ice and snow. Not a place where anyone has lived for a long time.

Kharon reaches for me, and I get to my feet and scurry forwards, still being knocked around by the whipping winds as I try to cover the short distance.

He pauses to unzip his pack. I look through the window and immediately scramble backward, falling in the snow again, heart in my throat. What the hell?

I can't see much inside because it's pitch dark, and all the other windows are covered with snow, but by the steep drop, it's clear he dug out an *upper* window. I can't see the ground. Just open, empty space before the gray from the window he's unearthed becomes the deepest darkness.

The wind whips at the pack so much that Kharon has to hold it still with four hands while he digs through it with his other two. My eyes widen when I see him pull out a belay rope. He closes the pack and turns towards me.

He pulls me out of the snow with a strong grip around my waist and, with another pair of hands, begins looping the rope around my waist and legs. I'm padded from the rope because of my coat and snow pants.

I want to say *no way are you lowering me down into that freaky chasm*, but the storm, which seems to be getting louder and angrier around us, stops me from protesting.

My heart leaps into my throat when he lifts me, one pair of hands on my waist and another underneath my armpits, and hefts me through the open window. My feet hit open air and start bicycling, and the rope around my legs and waist pulls taut.

He's still holding me, but I know he'll let go any moment, and it'll just be the thin rope keeping me aloft.

It's fine. No problem at all. Just like the Sevastopol job. There was no way into my target's room, so I had to belay in from the roof through his window. I spent a lot of time at the climbing gym preparing and getting comfortable in the gear. It always seemed foolish that I should be afraid of something silly like heights after all I'd been through in my life.

I think Kharon tries to shout something, but the roaring wind makes it impossible to hear. I reach for him, but too late, his hands let go, and I scream, reaching above my head as I drop a few inches before the bouncy rope catches me.

I'm completely suspended in the air for a second, clinging to it with my gloved hands above my head. Then he slowly lets me down into the pitch-black space. My heart beats loudly in my ears. I twist on the rope, which just makes me spin around and around. I'm furious at my lack of control. At my fear. But it's so dark on all sides, and I have no idea when I'll hit the floor or even how far down it is.

It feels like he's lowering me down forever into darkness. And it's creepily quiet after the howling wind. When my kicking feet finally hit stone, I screech again.

Kharon calls down from above. “Ksenia!”

“I’m fine,” I shout back, climbing out of the rope and sitting on the floor, shuddering from the experience. I hate being out of control like that. I’m very ready to be back in *my* world, where I can make meticulous plans, study all the variables, and like chess, prepare many moves ahead for different contingencies.

Instead, all I can do now is wait uselessly, assuming that Kharon will find something to anchor the rope to so he can lower himself down the three-story drop. I keep my eyes glued to the rectangle of light above, eyebrows lifting in shock when I see him crawl through, holding onto the sides of the opening with one pair of arms and jerking the large pack through with another pair.

Then he just *leaps*.

I shriek in alarm, covering my mouth with my hand and stumbling back further into darkness—

And lands smoothly in a crouch.

“Why did you do that?” I yell at him. “You could have gotten hurt.”

He just stands up and shrugs, slinging the pack off his back. “I am hard to kill,” is all he says, calmly digging through the pack and pulling items out.

I huff out a breath and hug my arms around myself. Even though it’s cold down here, it’s far milder than the breath-stealing freezing air outside.

“What is this place?” I look around. We’re in an obviously and ridiculously tall and large room; that much is clear, but not much more. My eyes are adjusting to the dark, but everything’s still just the dimmest outline. “Is there a flashlight in there?”

Kharon doesn’t answer. He just keeps rifling through the bag and pulls out a flashlight, holding it out to me.

“Stay close,” he growls. I snatch up the flashlight. It takes a moment considering my thick gloves, but I finally click it on.

I gasp as soon as I turn the light beam around, backing into him when I see how large the space is.

We’re in an old church. Behind the altar, gold-painted icons of saints stretch to the ceiling, dusty but in miraculously good condition considering the obvious age of the church and that we’re in the middle of nowhere.

“How did you know this was here?” I ask, turning back to him.

He doesn’t answer, his face grim and closed off. “I’ll get the fire going,” is all he gives me, pointing to the big masonry stone stove at the back of the church.

I'm familiar with the heating that older village houses still use. Dad hid out *everywhere*, and we spent one winter in an off-the-beaten-path Romanian village with a similar if much smaller, stove. The house had smooth-packed dirt floors and an outhouse out back. I was nine, and it was one of the best years of my life because Dad and I were actually *together*. The two years prior, he'd sent me to live with his mother, a grouchy, ancient-looking woman (or so I thought at the time) who didn't seem to like children much.

"It might take me a while to clear out the flue," Kharon says, then lopes off towards the stove without another word, reaching for a long metal cleaning brush and climbing into the brick stove.

It effectively cuts off all conversation, and I'm left to my curiosity about him and this place as I sit and watch him clean for about half an hour. He finally emerges from the stove, his blue skin covered in soot.

I burst out laughing, which feels strange and sacrosanct, not because we're in a church, but because of the day we've had. That only makes me laugh harder.

"Can we heat up some extra water?" I ask. "You're all dirty."

He smiles at me lopsidedly, and it suddenly strikes me that he's actually very attractive once you get used to his exaggerated features. Even with soot streaked across his face. I'm a little taken aback by my wildly swinging emotions as he responds, "Water, we have plenty of."

He bounds off on all fours again, startling me with his burst of activity. I can only watch, astonished, as he leaps up the entire three-story drop, arms outstretched as he easily catches hold of the window ledge we descended through. My mouth drops open as I watch him collect armfuls of snow before jumping back down. Again, he makes a smooth landing.

He smiles at me with a boyish grin. I shake my head at him, a little giddy now that we're safe in this strange sanctuary. "That's frozen water."

"Not for long." He lopes back to the stove and reaches underneath, where there's actually still *wood*. I'm beyond surprised, but he looks like he expected it. The wood is extremely dry, and when he lights it with a match from the backpack, it catches immediately and starts to burn well. The stove is huge, and Kharon is obviously used to this type of setup because he expertly grabs a cauldron pot hanging over the open flame and fills it with snow.

It's melting within moments.

I dig through the pack and find a small cloth. Once the water is a little

warmer, I take off my glove and dip it in.

“Turn around,” I tell him. “I’ll help wash off the soot.”

“Oh.” He blinks, and his fast, sure movements slow for the first time. Then the big man pauses and sits down with his back to me.

Even though cleaning him felt like the obvious thing to do moments ago, my hand suddenly trembles as I reach towards his skin with the steaming cloth. It feels silly to pull back now when I’m the one who suggested it.

So I tell myself to be brave. I took out the Mikhailov Bratva’s number two captain, after all. I can certainly handle. . . my breathing gets a little shorter. . . whatever this is. Just helping an associate out. That’s all.

So why does my breathing stay uneven as I rub the cloth down his large, muscled back? There’s a slight hump on the top of his back where the cluster of his arms come together in multiple shoulders. It shouldn’t work, but somehow, it all fits. He doesn’t seem monstrous. He’s actually. . . quite majestic up close like this.

I bite my bottom lip. It’s so satisfying to bring back his blue skin, a clean streak showing through the soot.

The big man in front of me shivers. I didn’t think he would be bothered by the cold. “Is this. . . okay?” I ask, and my quiet voice sounds loud in the echoey room.

“Yes,” he barks out, his voice a little strangled sounding. “Please continue.”

I blink a few times, then reach out again.

Tentatively and very aware of every motion and the drip of the cloth, I start at the top of his large, muscled shoulders. Again, he shivers as soon as I make contact.

I can feel his strong, warm skin beneath the wet fabric as I rub down his shoulder. Once, and then again.

I have to dip the cloth often. I like how the warm water feels on my hands. I like watching the soot get cleaned off and his blue skin reappear with every stroke of the fabric.

And I really, *really* like the feel of his muscled, hot body beneath my hands as I wash every inch of his back, caressing the dimple and sinew of each thick bicep, arm by arm, until I reach his forearms.

He removed the large cauldron from directly over the fire once it started getting too hot, so I wring the cloth out one last time.

I want to continue, but even I have to admit, there’s no more soot.

“I guess you can get your front half,” I say, feeling silly that I washed as much of his arms as I did when he could probably reach a lot of that himself.

So I’m surprised when he says, “If you wanted to continue, I . . . wouldn’t mind. That is to say. . . would you?”

I swallow hard and realize that maybe he’s been enjoying this as much as I have. I look as near to his eyes as I’ve ever dared, directly below them at his cheeks.

I feel my own cheeks flush hot and nod. “Yes, I’d like that.”

I avert my gaze to the ground as he shifts in front of me, turning to face me, still seated. It makes my belly flop to be so close to him without his shirt on. Which makes me blink in shock.

Because it’s not just my belly that’s . . . tingling.

I suck in a breath as I dip the fabric in the steaming pot and step between his legs to bring the cloth to the *front* of his shoulders and then drag it down his chest. . .

Chapter Seventeen

KHARON

I shouldn't have brought her here, but there was no other choice. I couldn't think of any other place to wait out the furious storm. Here there are strong walls and a place to make a fire. So here we came.

And now. . .

Now she is bathing me.

I have been bathed once before, when Abaddon's consort cleansed and cut my hair after two centuries of madness.

But that was nothing like—

I suck in a quick breath as Ksenia drags the cloth down my chest to my lower belly. All my abdominal muscles tense, and I freeze, afraid that any movement or abnormal breathing patterns may scare her away.

Instead, she dips and wrings out the fabric and steps even closer when she returns. Again she drips that damnable sensuous cloth down my chest and to my abdominals, where she scrubs it back and forth, lower and lower.

"Ksenia," I finally growl, everything within me straining. She is kneeling between my legs now. Does she not notice the large, straining hardness in my pants? Pants that are not nearly as thick and padded as hers are. Is she willfully ignoring it? Or is she simply an innocent?

"Yes?" she asks, and I do not know if I am imagining the strain I hear in her voice.

She does not move as she leans over to dip the cloth again, her body stretching over my thigh. I shudder at the extended contact. Since entering the church, she's pulled off her ski mask and the cap covering her explosion of blonde hair. Her scent and the feel of her so close are maddening, enough to overwhelm me.

I should not have asked her to wash my front. I did not know the madness I'd be enticing. I want to grab her. I want—

I breathe out harder. I don't even know the things I want. Things always forbidden to me. Things I only began to think about once I heard the noises emanating from Abaddon's room when he returned with his consort.

Ksenia drags the hot cloth down my sides, scrubbing underneath my lowest pair of arms, one side and the other. Then again, she tortures me by dragging it back and forth low across my belly, right above where my pants close.

"Ksenia!" I hiss her name through my teeth.

"Yes," she asks again. When I look at her now, her eyes are on my lips.

She bends over my thigh again torturously and goes through the whole process again, all but squirming against me. Surely she feels the hardness.

My thoughts torture me. I cannot stand much longer. I must either fling her away from me or, or—

She brings the cloth back, and carefully, lingering, she washes my face.

"There you are," she says.

All I can do is groan low. "I want you," I admit, speaking between my teeth. "Move away if you do not want what I want."

"What do you want?" she asks, and I groan. Is this innocence speaking?

"I want your hands to touch me. I want your hands below my pants, pulling my length out. I want to take off all of your clothing and spread your legs. I want to thrust my tongue between your legs to finally taste the scent that torments me."

She drops the cloth with a gasp, and I'm sure I've said the wrong thing. I've stunned her with my admission. She was only being kind to a beast she pitied, and now I've gone and—

Her hand suddenly reaches down between us. She grasps me, and I struggle not to shout. It is such a relief, such a joy.

"Yes," is all I can pant. "I want this. If you want it, I want this."

She nods. "I want this."

I am overwhelmed by the feeling of joy and need that strikes me. A

woman wants me. *This* woman wants me. She is touching me, and by the way her other hand reaches down to join the first, fumbling at the button of my pants, much more is about to come.

I blink, so startled by the turn of events, I can barely comprehend what is happening.

Her hands release the buttons constraining me, one after another, and then she is doing exactly what I described. She pulls my cock out of my pants, her hot little hands on me.

“You’re so big,” she exclaims. But she does not hold me long, instead climbing onto my lap and pressing herself against my length stiff between us, rubbing herself and making little noises.

“Hold me,” she gasps. “You’re so, so big. It feels really good. Hold me tightly.”

I nod, still dazed by what was happening. I pulse against her soft frame, my hardness sandwiched between our bodies as she wraps her legs around my back.

I wrap all of my arms around her and hold her close. She buries her face in my neck, and her lips suck on my skin as she writhes against me, rocking up and back.

Her scent starts to rise in the air, even with all the clothing she’s wearing. It’s intoxicating, and the pressure of her against my cock. . .

She grunts and makes little noises as she squirms, harder and harder, her legs squeezing me.

“Please,” I groan. As good as this feels— “Will you remove some of your coverings? I want to feel your skin.”

She hesitates and then nods. “Yes, I want that.”

Her legs stay locked around my waist as she pulls back slightly and unzips her thick coat. There’s a slight sheen of sweat on her forehead. I smile, wanting to lick it off her. She has cleansed me, and I want to lick her like felines do. I want to mate with her in every way possible.

The thought is a shock, but yes, it is what I want.

I want her as my consort. A thought too big for the moment. I try to zero back in on everything she reveals as she removes her coat. Then she pulls off her shirt.

She has compact, muscled shoulders. Her curved teats are still covered, and I want to tear the cloth away with my teeth; I’m so eager to get my mouth on her. I reach forward but pull my hands back at the last moment.

“This covering, too?” I ask greedily. I can only see the shape of her, and I want to see the flesh.

My length strains and twitches between us at every bit she reveals. She squeezes her legs as if she feels it, and her eyelids flutter. She nods and finally removes the contraption covering her teats.

“I want to lick you. I need to suckle you. May I?”

She grabs my head and drags me down to her rounded, full breasts. Finally, my mouth is feasting upon heaven. My lips close over her luscious skin, and the flesh hardens and pebbles under my probing tongue. She cries out, and her hands clench in my hair, tugging me closer. “Harder,” she says. “Suck harder.”

So I do, which makes her squirm more in my lap until she finally leaps away from me.

I groan, immediately wanting to ask what I’ve done wrong.

Except I see that she’s just wriggling out of her thick snow pants. My cock pulses at the sight. And then, oh gods, also out of the pants beneath those, exposing acres of beautiful flesh. Her legs. . . I’ve felt the pressure of them around me, but I want my mouth on every bit of skin she exposes to me.

She keeps on the last scrap of covering that hides her sweet-scented sex but comes back to me and climbs into my lap. My cock bobs between us like the mast of a ship. Without the snow pants, I can feel her heat as her legs wrap around me, friction and pressure as she wriggles her hips up and down on my shaft.

Immediately she draws my head back to her teats. “I liked what you were doing,” she says again. “And I want you to take control. It makes it. . . better for me. Tell me when to come. And please, god, don’t be gentle. The firmer the touch, the better.”

My already hard cock leaps in ecstasy at every word out of her mouth. I grab her hips and pull her more firmly onto me, the scented V of her soft thighs pressed securely against the log of my cock.

So little cloth between us. I die at the thought, even though I realize I have never truly lived before this moment.

I lower my head and draw her pebbled teat back into my mouth.

Hands on her hips, I rock her against me. She cries out, flinging her arms around my head and burying her face against my neck. And my cock, oh gods, my cock is there between her thighs. Right up against her sex. I feel half out of my mind with wanting her. With need. With her scent. With the

feel of her plump little ass through the thin fabric of her covering.

I rock her up and down, her hips thrusting wildly against me. She cries out little needy, pleased sounds. I scent the wetness seeping through the thin cloth covering the mysteries of her sex. I want to rip it away but don't. I will take every small measure she gives and be so fucking glad for it. Gladder than I've ever been in my whole useless, worthless life.

Again the realization hits. Life has only begun now. Meeting her. I release one breast and move to the other. Such bounty. My hardness strains as pleasure lights up my spine.

"Oh my god, you're so big," she cries out again, hands still clenched in my hair. Her cheek is pressed against my head, and she has me in such a tight hold. "I can feel you against my clit when you move like that."

So she likes it when I move like this. I continue to thrust up and pull back down, and, oh yes, the pleasure. I have never known such pleasure as being sandwiched between her thighs and belly and sex, wrapped around me so tight, her intoxicating scent rising all around us.

She moves against me when I move, and we seem to develop a rhythm. She starts to cry out, like a scream, except it rocks higher and higher. As if she is close to some pleasure but hasn't yet reached it. Or maybe I get that idea because she starts to cry with this desperate whine. "Oh god, I'm so close. I'm so close, it's so close—"

I want to take her to the destination she is close to, but I don't know how. She is the first woman I've ever touched. So I squeeze her tighter. And my lowest pair of arms, clenched at her back, dares to dip lower. I knead the soft, fleshy globes of her ass, notching her sex even tighter against where my cock is pressed against the outside of the cloth separating us—

She said to tell her when. I'm not sure exactly what she meant, but I want to give her what she needs. So I say, "Not yet."

Her squirming on my lap goes crazy at my command, her noises escalating. Her fingernails claw into my hide, and she bites down on my neck.

My cock strains so hard at her writhing and the squirt of scent that marks the air. Again, I say, "Not yet."

"Oh, *oh*—" she moans. "*Please*. Please, may I come?"

My chest rushes with inflamed heat and feels like it expands three sizes. "That's right. Beg for what you want. Beg, and maybe I'll give it to you."

"Please, Kharon, oh god, *please*, may I fucking come? I need to come so

fucking hard. Please let me come, *please*, I'm begging you—”

“Bite my neck again if you really mean it,” I growl. “*Hard.*”

She sinks her teeth in, wailing with need into my neck.

“Now,” I roar before suckling her teat mercilessly.

She screams, teeth still locked hard on my neck and arms clenched in a vise around my head. And she rocks like a wildcat in my lap. My own pleasure, fuck, I'm barely holding it back. I can feel it there, like a tide behind a dam—

“Kharon!” she cries, and then her body starts to shudder and quake as her wetness, along with her scent, releases in a flood.

I'm consumed and can no longer keep control. I cannot imagine what it would be like to be inside her. Even being squeezed against her drenched center has me at the edge, about to go over.

I have only erupted a handful of times throughout my life, and never like this, never so hard or with such intensity. The pleasure feels like a lightning strike at the base of my spine, and then it is pulsing out of my cock, one pulse, another, and then on and on, and on—

She continues to hold and ride me as my own pleasure releases, her high-pitch scream of release like a train whistle.

Finally, she collapses against me, arms loose around my head. I hold her—a little less frantically now—kissing her sweet teats until she squirms, and I let her go.

I'm met with sweet laughter. “Well, now we'll have to clean you up all over again.”

She points down, and I see that I am now covered in my gush. My cock, gone a little soft after its release, immediately perks back up at the thought. Which, naturally, she sees and laughs at.

“Maybe after dinner,” she says.

But I can only grin because she did not say no to it happening again.

I leap to my feet. “You stay still. I will clean *you* now.”

And I set about doing just that and preparing a dinner fit for a queen. Well, a queen ready to eat what rations we have in our pack.

Chapter Eighteen

KSENIA

Well, that was. . . an unexpected turn of events. I'm shocked and still a little turned on, even though I came. And came *hard*. From essentially dry humping. Though by the end, there was nothing dry about it. He had a lot of cum. Not an unmanageable amount, but a lot. But I guess he's a lot of man.

And I know I like it when the guy takes charge, but I haven't really explored it that much. A little orgasm denial here, a little light choking there. I'd love to get laid more often, but in my line of business, trusting anyone long enough to get naked with them. . . Well, it's usually not a risk I'm willing to take.

But nothing about Kharon is usual, I suppose. And that was the best orgasm I've ever had. Like, in my whole life. There was barely *any* denial, and yet it was the hottest fucking thing. What would it be like if we really got into it? I bite my bottom lip, thinking about all those hands of his. . .

My eyes stray his way. After cleaning us up, he made good on his promise to make dinner. Now, through the rectangle overhead, I can see it's nighttime.

Except I'm, uh, not especially sleepy.

I *should* be tired after our intense day. But I feel like I just made an amazing discovery. I mean, how can it be the best sex of my life when we

didn't even really get to have sex? And oh my god, that cock of his. It's huge.

It would definitely be. . . I bite my lip again. A challenge. And I can be a dreadfully curious girl.

I shake my head. What am I even thinking? It's wrong to be so horny right now. I have a life to get back to. Revenge to plan. Then I look back at the ceiling.

It's not like we're going anywhere tonight. Maybe it's just the intense, death-defying situation that's making me so horny. That's probably all it is. It's just a primal reaction. So, if I get this out of my system now, I'll be able to focus even more when I get back.

Dammit, I know I'm rationalizing. Throughout dinner and Kharon preparing a nice little nest of sleeping bags for the night, all I can think about is jumping him again.

I'm obsessing over what it would be like with my underwear *off* this time. Is that even a possibility? Sex between whatever his kind is and humans? Would he. . . *fit*? My breathing gets choppy every time I think about it. Not with fear but with. . . anticipation.

I've stretched myself before. An internet Dom I had a thing with one summer really liked it when I fisted myself. So I'm horribly curious to try and see if Kharon will fit.

I—I trust him. I don't trust anyone. But I trust him.

Even if it's just the tip of him inside me. . . I squeeze my legs together and watch Kharon's backside as he feeds more wood into the fire.

His pants got all messed up from his cum, so I said he should wash them. He agreed, taking them right off and walking around naked ever since. Which hasn't exactly been helping me *avoid* sexy thoughts.

Especially since whenever he looks at me, I watch his cock stiffen. He turns away whenever that happens, but then I'm treated to the sight of his very tight, shapely ass. I want to squeeze it. Like how he squeezed mine earlier and notched me into position against his—

A little squeak escapes my throat, and he turns from the fire to look at me. "Did you say something?"

I fist my hands, my fingernails biting into my palm with my need for him. I pulled my shirt and cargo pants on after the sex, but his ease with nakedness makes me bolder than I might have been otherwise. So I tug off my shirt again and walk closer to the fire where he arranged the sleeping bags.

"I want to have sex," I say.

His eyes, which have been staring at my breasts since I took my shirt off, jump to my face. I look at his mouth, so I see when he smiles. “Sex? You want to be my consort?”

I shrug, a little confused by his wording. “I want to have sex with you. I don’t know if you’ll fit.” I slip my hand beneath my pants to rub my clit. “But I want to see if you will.”

He starts nodding, his head moving up and down exaggeratedly. “Yes. I want this as well.”

“Okay,” I say, my body relaxing and loosening as I continue touching myself. “But we’ll have to go slow.”

He just keeps nodding. “Yes. You say how fast or how slow.”

I peek down at his cock, and it’s gone fully hard, bobbing against his stomach. I grin, liking how I can affect him just with my words and some visuals.

We just stand there staring at each other for a moment.

“Do you want to lie down?” he asks. “I would like to. . . taste you.”

I lift a hand to my lips, but then I see his eyes are locked on my waist, where my other hand is still buried in my drawers. *Oh.* I blink.

Even the thought makes my heart beat wildly, and I shake my head. “No, thank you. Can we—I want you to sit and me to—” I stop, a little flustered. “Like last time. I liked last time.”

He looks up, seeming surprised but he nods. “Yes. Yes, of course.”

I notice that he’s breathing hard, too, his big chest moving up and down. He hurries to sit on the sleeping bags but pauses and climbs over to the pack, pulling out a small, tightly rolled-up silver crinkling solar blanket. He places it down on the sleeping bag and then sits.

I frown at the crinkly noise, but he quickly explains. “There won’t be time to wash the bedding, and I want you to sleep comfortably.”

Maybe it’s silly that I find his practicality sweet, but I do. And the way his many hands fumbled when he was sorting through the pack, mumbling to himself? Well, it seems like I’m not the only one who’s nervous.

It makes me a little more confident as I sit beside him and pull off my pants again. I don’t look at him, but I like the warmth his body radiates. I’m not wearing any underwear. I washed them, and they’re still drying, so I just put my pants on after the last time. I notice Kharon seems very focused on my every movement. It makes my cheeks heat. “Don’t watch,” I murmur.

“Why not? Your body is so beautiful.”

“It’s just so much,” I say, feeling like my whole body flushes with heat.

“Come to my lap,” he says. “I’ll hold you.”

I nod repeatedly, liking the idea of that. Everything is less overwhelming when he holds me. I fold my pants and set them aside, then I pause.

Communicating with anyone is hard, but considering how good it felt before, I suck in a breath and try. “Like last time. You in control. Saying when. And I liked it. . . when you made me wait.”

“Yes,” his voice rumbles. “I can make you beg.”

I nod, a zing of exhilaration shooting through my stomach and sex at the thought.

His thighs are hugely muscled, and putting my hands on his shoulders, I climb on his lap. He makes me feel so small. Delicate.

But I also like the look of him beneath me. Those massive muscles. His strong, pulsing cock sticking up between us as I slide my legs open wide. My toes flex as all of the hot feelings in my belly ramp back up again. I wrap my legs around his back, but loosely because I want to leave space between us so we can try to. . . put it in.

I reach down and rub the tip of my middle finger against my clit, and a growl comes from low in Kharon’s throat.

“Your scent,” he inhales. “So good.”

Then his head bends beside mine, and I know he’s watching what I’m doing with my finger. “I touch you now,” he says, his voice a low rumble.

I nod, unsure, biting my bottom lip. I just instinctively know where to touch myself. Will he? And his fingers are so big.

“Yes,” I say with an explosion of breath. “Hold me tight while you do it.”

He nods, his chin bobbing against my shoulder as his upper arms come around me, securing me in a reassuring hold. Meanwhile, his right lower arm moves between our bodies, his hand twisting and dipping.

I hiss out the moment his middle finger slips between my slit, and I bury my face in his thick, warm neck. It was exhilarating when he told me to bite him earlier. I’ve never done that with any other lover, and I hope to do it again. Especially when he starts to feel around in my depths, his big, blunt fingers moving against my slick pussy. I shudder and squeeze my legs around his hips. I thought I would have to try to instruct him about where to touch, but—

A high-pitched whine comes from my throat as I reach my hands up to entwine in his golden hair. His finger is curious and exploring, and thick, and

everywhere—

Which is good because I can't manage a single word.

All I can do is twitch around him as he rubs up and down, monitoring my reactions. When he finds my clit and sees how I hump up on him and grab at his hair, he explores until I'm a heaving, sopping mess on top of him.

"Not yet," he rumbles, and I groan. How did he know how close to coming I was? I was trying to be quiet about it.

He makes little grunts of satisfaction, and I feel his cock jump every so often between us.

And then his finger drops down to explore more, sliding down my slit and probing at the soft walls of my entrance.

I'm so primed and crazy by now, I mewl and actually manage words. "Yes. Stick it in. Stick it in."

I mean his cock, but maybe he thinks I mean his fingers—

But he does neither. Just continues to tease around the flesh of my entrance, pressing and massaging and then retreating.

"Please, oh god, please stick it in," I beg, restlessly moving my hips up and down.

"You want that?" he growls. "You want to feel my finger inside? You want to feel me rubbing you here?" He presses down on the lowest flesh of my entrance, where it meets my backside. "Giving you release?"

"God, yes. Please. *Please*," I groan from the back of my throat. "I'm begging you."

"I like the sound of your voice when you beg me," he hisses in my ear. "Now beg me some more."

And the fingers of another hand come to strum and tease my clit while he continues to tease and press all around my entrance, stretching but never entering.

I've never felt so mad wanting someone inside me.

"Please!" I howl. "Please, *please*."

And then, because I can't think of anything else to do and the mounting pleasure feels so tortuously good but like it's on a terrible precipice that won't go any higher or back off, I open my mouth to wail and sink my teeth into his throat.

One of his thick fingers, covered in my juices, finally slips inside the channel of my pussy.

I can't help it. I come on his finger while he strums my clit, and his cock

presses against me, pulsing—

“Did I say you could release?” he growls.

Oh shit. I blink, but before I’ve come down fully, he’s pushing in with a *second* finger. And that’s when any and all thoughts are obliterated by sensation. It’s just the tips of the two fingers at first, and he feels all along my entrance with the second fingertip.

With the knuckles of the fingers inside me, he presses low against the flesh of my entrance, down near my anus, and my eyes roll back in my head with pleasure.

“Your cock,” I rasp, my voice box barely managing sound. Eyes squeezed shut because the sensations are so much, I manage, “Can I please have your cock?”

For a second, he freezes. I don’t know if I’ve shocked him or said something wrong. I shift my hips restlessly against him. “Don’t stop,” I whine, full of aching need.

“Yes,” he says, and the word sounds a bit strangled. His fingers pull out of me, and I want to cry at the loss.

But then I feel something else replace them. Something hard, long, hot, and *big*.

His cock.

Oh my god. We’re actually about to fuck.

“This time,” he growls in my ear, “you come around my cock. I have stretched you to take me.”

I clench my arms tighter around his neck and nod. If he was a normal man, I might worry that I was strangling him, but with Kharon, I doubt the pressure is anything. He’s so strong. Yet gentle at the same time. I want this intimacy. I want this closeness and connection more than I’ve ever wanted anything.

As I cling tighter, I think, oh shit, this will ruin me for anyone else forever. Already, it’s been too good.

I want it so much I pry one of my arms from around his neck so I can reach down and feel him again. I need to put my hand on his unbelievable cock. I can barely fit my arm between us, we’re sandwiched so tightly together. But he sucks in his abdominal muscles when he feels me trying to squeeze my hand down, and then I’m touching him.

I wrap my hand around him or try to. My fingers can’t encircle his huge circumference, but I love the feel as I squeeze him and line him up at my

entrance, feeding him into myself.

He's so thick he fills up my pussy completely, pressing everywhere at once. My eyes are still squeezed shut—the sensory information input is so overwhelming, I'm struggling to handle it all. But it feels so *good*—*Oh!*

I adjust on his lap so he slides the barest bit inside me. We both groan.

“Never felt anything so good. Sweetest honey cunt.”

I shudder around him at his dirty words and nod. I like that. I like it a lot.

“More,” I manage to say, gripping his hair as he moves his hips slightly, notching in another bit.

It's good he stretched me with his fingers, or I can't imagine him fitting even as much as he is. But he also had me so, so wet for him.

I love the feel of him stretching me. He fills me so good, so completely, splitting me open and lighting up my nerve endings everywhere.

I roll my hips up and against him. The length that's still outside grinds against my flushed, swollen clit, and I cry out.

“Your cunt grips my cock so good. Always heard about fucking but never knew how good it would feel—”

My eyes fly open. Oh my god, is he saying. . .? I pull back just far enough to watch his mouth.

“Is this your first time?”

His mouth is tense as his head bobs up and down, and I watch his large Adam's apple as he swallows, the tip of his cock inside me. He's thousands of years old, to hear him tell it, but he's only now, right this moment, losing his virginity?

I squeeze and spasm around him at the knowledge, and he slides in another full inch.

“I will roll you to your back now and fuck you,” he says. I can sense him waiting in case I say I don't want to. But I nod.

This is what I like. Him taking control. Directing things. I exercise such tight control in the other areas of my life. With someone I trust—in bed—it's liberating to give it up.

“I will be gentle,” he says as he wraps two pairs of arms around me, his cock still embedded in me as he shifts us. His bottom hands clench my ass, moving me slightly up and down his shaft even as he moves me to my back on the sleeping bags. I shudder and wrap my legs around his back.

When he finishes moving us, I realize that, yes, I'm on my back, but really, I'm cradled in his arms.

My legs open to him further, and my heel notches against his ass.

“I will fuck slow,” he says. My eyes are squeezed close again, but I nod and clench around his cock.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Move. I want to feel you move in me.”

And he does. Oh god, he does.

That thick cock of his starts to thrust in and out. I shudder beneath him as he makes his way a little deeper with every in-thrust.

He shifts one of his arms higher to cushion my neck, one warm fist right beside my face. I turn into it as my hair falls over my face, overwhelmed.

His body is so huge and powerful over mine, and his cock is so large, thrusting inside me. My spine feels like jelly as I cry and shake with rising pleasure. I’m not even at my peak yet, and already it feels so good, so damn *good*.

“You are so beautifully perfect beneath me,” he says through clenched teeth. “I die with how good your cunt feels gripping my cock.”

I writhe underneath him, my hips finding a rhythm with his.

He squeezes my ass and manages to slip another hand between us to rub at the clit he so cleverly discovered before.

And I go absolutely crazy; the pleasure is too good, too high, too—*Everything*. I feel everything, and it’s. . . *Everything*.

“You will not, what did you call it, arrive? You will not arrive until I say so.”

“Come,” I whine. “I won’t come.”

“Good,” he growls, dragging his cock out while one of his thumbs strums ruthlessly at my clit. “You will not come, beautiful little consort. You will fuck and not come until I say so. You did once, and I’ll allow it, but not again.”

I clench tight as a vise around his cock at the thought. “Will you punish me if I do?”

He pauses, and I realize maybe I’ve caught him by surprise. Then again, this is his first time. Shit. But he’s such a natural. Maybe he won’t. . . mind? So I press further. “Because bad girls need to be punished. Our little asses need to be spanked sometimes.”

A noise comes from his throat, and he leans over me, a pair of hands shooting out to grasp my wrists, pinning them to the sleeping bag. “Ungh!” I groan, my hips meeting his. Oh my god, I fucking love being restrained during sex, and I didn’t even have to tell him.

“Bad girls,” he hisses in my ear, his huge chest rubbing against my peaked nipples, “get punished.”

“Then please, can I come?” I cry.

“Come now as I fuck you.”

It hits almost the same moment he gives his permission. I howl as light explodes throughout my body, but suddenly Kharon pulls out.

I whine at the loss of fullness, but he continues to rub my clit through my climax, riding his hand shamelessly.

I only blink dazedly when I feel him pull away from me and watch as he takes his slick cock in hand and jerks it roughly.

“What. . . are. . .?” I can barely manage words, and my legs shake from aftershocks.

His face is strained as he answers. “Don’t want to get you with kit,” he says, two-fisting his cock.

I watch in excited fascination, not able to help myself from reaching down to my own swollen, overused clit and rubbing myself. The orgasm that finished is still lingering and amps right back up again.

He watches me and strokes himself harder, almost furiously.

Another blinding orgasm hits at the same time cum erupts out of him. My eyes are on his face this time. The agonized look of pleasure there. I’ve never seen anything like it. He’s watching me like he’s pained by how beautiful I am. How good the pleasure is, so precious, so shocking—

I want to memorize this moment.

Part of me wishes I could forget everything I was before and who I’ll be when I leave this place.

I only want to exist with him in this pleasure-drenched forever.

Chapter Nineteen

KHARON

She is the most beautiful, perfect treasure.
I want to keep her.

I can't keep her. She's not mine to have.

I am in agony, and all I want to do is be buried inside her again. I did not know. It is probably better that I didn't know what I was missing all these years. I would've been driven truly mad, indeed.

To have this and then lose it. . .

I stare into the darkness, knowing morning will soon come. We will continue our journey to deliver her back to her world. To her life. A life where I am not welcome.

I will return to my cold prison. I'm not locked to dungeon walls anymore, but it's still a prison all the same.

Hannah is starting to realize it, I think. Yes, she has the child, but what company are the rest of us? We are monsters who have tormented one another for our entire existence. We cannot escape our life or go among the humans because we terrify them.

Abaddon has condemned her to this life because he is selfish.

Even if Ksenia were willing, how could I do the same? How many years before she started to hate me for the isolation being with me would mean?

Romulus is the only one among us who can pass undetected among

humans. He occasionally talks about taking Hannah on day trips to the cities where she can be among her own kind, but Abaddon is so concerned about the angelic threat he has cautioned her against it. And she has listened.

But how long will she be able to bear the remoteness? She calls us family and says we are enough, but I'm afraid it is lip service said out of love for her mate.

And yet, when the rectangle above lightens enough for me to leap and dig out the gathered snow so we might begin our journey again, I am loathed to do so. Growling at my hesitation, I leap and begin to dig, throwing the snow off furiously.

Only the winds outside are still howling, the snow still pelting my hide like angry little pellets.

The storm has not yet passed. Relief and joy slam through me at the realization.

We must stay a little longer.

I grin wide before I catch myself and frown. What am I thinking? I've just reasoned that being with the beautiful, amazing, perfect Ksenia is an impossibility. Any continued closeness with her will only be torture in the long run.

And yet, when I leap back to the church floor, bringing a load of snow with me for water, all I feel is happiness.

"Where did you go?" her voice says from the darkness. I need to add wood to the stove, both for light and warmth, and immediately get to the task.

"The storm has not abated," I say gruffly, trying not to let my joy at this fact show in my words.

"Oh," she says. My heart beats quickly, waiting for what she will say next. Will she express sadness that she cannot get home as quickly as she hoped?

"Then come back to bed. It's cold without you."

My heart sings with happiness as I shove the last of the wood in the stove and hurry back to her side.

I slide into the sleeping bag beside her. We put one beneath us and zipped the second over the top. Well, we could only close it on her side since it had no hope of closing over my large frame. I worried she would not be warm enough without it fully zipped, but she said as long as the fire was going and I was at her side, she would stay warm.

It's quiet as she wraps herself around me, slotting her small arms between

my lower pairs and squeezing against my waist.

“Hold me,” she whispers, and I’m eager to comply.

She is quiet, and I wonder if she is falling back to sleep. But her breathing doesn’t even out the way it does when she slumbers. I slept only a short while during the night. Mostly I stayed awake, listening to the entrancing, melodic sound of her breathing, so I know it well.

But now she is quiet, and her arms around me tense. What is she thinking? Is she upset that we couldn’t continue on toward her home because of the storm?

She is not gone yet.

But soon. . . Like the breath vapors that appear in the cold when we speak, she will be here one moment and disappear the next. I want to grasp that which is ephemeral all the tighter, but she will slip through my fingers.

“What is it like?” I ask, and my voice sounds overly loud in the quiet. “Where you are from.”

She stiffens even more in my arms. “Why are you asking that?” Her voice is slightly muffled from her face pressed against my chest, but I can still hear. “I don’t want to think about anything except being here. With you.”

Her words should make me happy, but they do nothing except make the ache pierce more. She is the sun, and I am the moon. There is no sky we can share together. I cannot be in her world, and I refuse to imprison her in mine.

“Tomorrow, the storm will likely abate,” I say, my voice gruff. “And since we know I can carry you, there’s no need to make you walk slowly on your small legs. So as soon as the storm clears, I can run you swiftly to the city.”

I swallow hard. “You could be back home by as soon as tomorrow night, depending on where in the world you live—”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore!” She withdraws her arms and wriggles out of my grasp, turning around in the small space of the sleeping bag and giving me her back.

I frown and start to wrap my arms around her again, but she sharply says, “Don’t touch me.”

I expel a frustrated breath, laying back, half out of the covers. I haven’t spent much time with humans, so maybe I don’t know how they communicate. My brothers and I are usually only ever direct with each other, so she confuses me.

And then I remember. . . There was the century or so after I came back

from the madness where I still refused to speak with Abaddon.

To be fair, he did have me chained to a dungeon wall at the time. But also, I didn't know how to say... All the complicated things I was feeling. I barely understand them now and still don't know if I can put words to them.

My head turns towards the spill of Ksenia's honey hair. Is that what it is like now for the small human at my side? Is she feeling too many complicated things to put into words?

Or is it just me she prefers not to share her thoughts with? I frown and begin to understand some of my brother's frustration at not being able to know my thoughts without me speaking. After being so intimate with her body, I want to know all of her. Yet so much of her is still a closed-up box. A beautiful mystery.

The grains of sand fall so quickly through the hourglass, and I am greedy to know everything before she disappears. I'll be left grasping for the shape of her memory, and it makes me even more desperate to discover her now while she's here and real in front of me.

Moments later, she's scrambling up and out of the covers. "We should get breakfast."

I nod, quickly moving to help her with some rations from the pack. We work quietly side by side, but I feel as if there is a sea between us. It is painful after the closeness we shared yesterday, but I don't know how to span the gulf to get back to her.

I move to the stove and add more wood so she can stay warm outside the sleeping bag. Then I start more water to boiling.

I listen intently as she crunches down on the trail mix Hannah packed and feel her eyes on me as I move around the large room. But whenever I glance her way, her eyes quickly dance to the ground at her feet.

My strained chest feels a little warmer to know that at least she is as much aware of me as I am constantly focused on her. Though we are not speaking, it nonetheless feels like we are engaged in a dance. Hannah taught me what it means when humans dance, which is what this feels like. I turn, and Ksenia responds. I listen for her breath and movement, then I exhale and shift.

I gnaw on some jerky, and once the water is boiled and cooled, we drink some. It will be a long day if we continue to engage in this silent dance.

That is good, though. I hope it will be the longest day of my life. Because what I said remains true. Tomorrow, likely, she will be gone. So I will memorize these strange moments I have with her. However they pass, I am

grateful for them.

I would prefer to repair whatever I seemed to break earlier. I have learned what it means to apologize by watching Hannah and Abaddon, so I try it. "I am sorry if I said something wrong earlier. I do not know many humans. My words are. . . perhaps bad?"

Her head jerks up from the cup of warm water she's cradling in her hands, her eyes landing on my upper cheek. "No. No, your words are fine."

I frown. "You. . . did not like them."

She looks to the floor and expels a long breath. "It's complicated."

"I understand that words can be difficult. I do not require them."

Her head comes up again. "You don't?"

"I have gone many years without speaking at all. I. . . understand."

"You did?"

I nod.

"Why?"

Without meaning to, my eyes lift to the church around us. When I am with her, I can almost forget where we are. If I believed in ghosts, this place should be choked with them. But I know better. The souls of this place have moved on.

I know because I was the one who took them all to the otherworld.

"Ah," she says. "Some things are best without words."

I nod, my throat thick, grateful.

We are quiet, then, but it is a different quiet from before. I feel together in intimacy with her, not apart in the discord of misunderstanding.

I do not know how long it passes like that before she finally says quietly, "I feel so lost. I don't know what to do."

"What do you want to do?"

Her head gives a quick shake. "What I want doesn't matter."

I frown. "Isn't that all that should matter?"

She shakes her head quickly back and forth, and her hand goes to her thighs. She pulls out one of her knives and a small stone and quickly scrapes it across the surface, sharpening the blade.

"You are very good with your blades."

She nods absent-mindedly.

I want to ask a hundred more questions. How did she come to be so good with knives? What does she do back in her other life? Where does she live? What is her family like? Is there. . . Is there anyone she cares for there?

“Also, I should have said earlier, I will be very sad when it is time to say goodbye,” I finally voice. “These moments with you have been very. . . precious to me. I have lived for a very long time alone. I will treasure the memory of these days with you for all eternity. It will be a great pain to me to part.”

She lets out a little cry and shoves her knife back in its hilt, springing up from where she’s sitting to come over to me. “Hold me.”

I almost throw down the cup in my eagerness to pull her into my arms, wrapping her tightly in the way I know she likes best, all three sets of arms around her small body. My soul only feels at rest again once she is secured against me, her face nested against my neck.

And when she says, “You asked what I want. I want you inside me again,” into my skin, I immediately harden beneath her.

She wriggles, and I release my arms around enough for her to whip her shirt over her head.

And then her gorgeous, bouncing teats are before my face. My breeches are painfully binding my length, and I’m eager to get her bottoms off, too. I lift her in one pair of arms, drag her pants down with another, and my breeches down with another still.

I carry her to the bed cloths, glad I stoked the stove so it radiates heat as I lay her sweet naked body down. Her legs fall open, and for the first time, I get to really see what I have only felt wrapped around me before. Immediately her scent rises to meet me, and I’m intoxicated.

“May I taste and lick you here?”

She squeaks, then nods and covers her eyes with her hands. “Please take control.”

I hesitate, then think about how pressure sometimes seems to calm her. “Can I restrain you?” I ask, moving my upper hands to cover hers.

She freezes a moment, then slowly removes her hands and nods, allowing mine to replace hers over her eyes. With her hands that are now free, she reaches for my middle pair of arms. “Yes. I’d like it if you held me down.”

My shaft hardens at her request as I hold her small wrists down to the soft pallet of the sleeping bag. It’s a stretch to bend my head down her torso to get to her pussy while covering her eyes and holding her wrists down, but I’m motivated, and her body is small enough that it’s not difficult.

I clamp my bottom hands on her inner thighs to anchor her there, then lower my mouth to her cunt.

First, I inhale the sweetest scent of the gods' honey. I extend my tongue and lick up her slit.

Beneath all of my hands, I feel her tremble. Her legs start to shake, but I hold them still.

"More," she begs. "Don't tease."

"You will take what I give," I growl, and she shudders even more. I am beginning to understand what she likes. Another dance.

I think this may be the only place in her life she allows herself to follow another's lead. She says *don't tease*, yet it is what she craves.

It is as much a sweet torment to her as it is to myself to allow only the tip of my tongue to explore her delicious cunt. I'm so eager to get my entire mouth on her, to devour her.

But I just lick up her folds again, enjoying how she twists and writhes underneath my firm grip. Relentlessly I hold her thighs open as my tongue explores that fleshy nubbin at the top of her sex that seemed to drive her so absolutely mad yesterday when I strummed it.

Now, I lick it with my tongue.

If I thought she lost her mind when I gave it attention with my fingers, it is nothing to the way she begins to howl when I lick it repeatedly with the flat of my tongue.

When her moans become higher-pitched and more feverish, I pull away.

"No. You may not come yet."

Beneath my hands covering her eyes, I feel the wetness of tears.

"Oh god, *please*," she hisses. "It feels so good. I want to come."

I smile. I love the sound of her begging. Many humans have begged me over the years. But only in terrified shouts or whimpers, begging not to die. This human begs me for pleasure, paradoxically wanting me to deny her. Because we both know it only amps her pleasure up higher when I do.

So I grin and remove one hand from her thigh to shove down my pants because the strain of my cock confined by the fabric is too much. Immediately her thigh wraps around my neck, and she lifts her pelvis into my face. She is so desperate for friction and release.

I delight in her eagerness even as my hand comes back to pry her thigh from around my neck. My cock hardens more, which I wouldn't have thought possible even a moment ago. But she's just given me an opportunity to explore the dark fantasy of sexual punishment she raised yesterday.

"You're a very bad girl to try to take when I am the only one who may

give,” I say darkly. “And you know what happens to bad girls.”

“They get punished,” she says breathlessly.

“That’s right.” I barely manage the words; my throat is so thick with anticipation. I can hear in her words how much she wants what I’m about to do.

“Will you spank me over your lap?” she asks.

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

She makes an excited choking noise low in her throat, and a wave of her scent hits the air.

Before I do anything else, I have to lick up the honey. With her still spread out like a sacrifice before me, I bend my head and snuffle my nose all in her sex and do what I wanted from the very beginning.

I eat her. I lick and suck on her flesh and maw at her with my lips over my teeth, sucking and sucking. Right until her screams reach a fever pitch.

Then I pull away. She’s crying with want again, and I smile as I pull back and lick my lips.

“Now bad girls get punished,” I say, still licking up her juices. I move swiftly, delighting in disorienting her. Showing her who is in control.

Using all my hands to steady her, I lift and spin her as I sit on my backside and lay her face down over my lap. Right over my hard-as-stone cock poking into her belly.

She moans low. “I want you inside me.”

My nostrils flare. “Are you trying to get out of your punishment?”

She wriggles her bare ass in the air, spreading her legs slightly so that her wet cunt winks at me from between them.

Ah. So it is to be a dance. She wants to give up control and fight for it at the same time. She is teasing me just as much. Seeing how far she can push my control. I want nothing more than to put her on her back, spread her, and push my cock inside her. I want my nose buried so deep in her intoxicating scent.

But I am an infinitely patient man.

Her pleasure will be all the greater if I make her wait. Mine likely, too, because nothing takes me higher than knowing she is on the edge. I want this moment to last forever.

So I delight in holding her shoulders and thighs with my top and bottom hands. With my center hands, I caress down her back to the top of the round globes of her ass. But I don’t caress them. I just run the very tips of my

fingertips across them.

And then I do what she mentioned yesterday.

I spank her.

Not hard. I'm very aware of my own strength, so it's probably no more than a light pat. She certainly thinks so because she only wriggles against my cock.

"Harder," she moans.

My eyebrow lifts.

This is nothing I ever imagined a consort might want. Now that she is in this position, I admit I find it difficult to distract my cock from spilling as I come at her again. I spank upwards from the bottom. So as my palm makes contact with her backside, right where the round meets her thigh, it *jiggles* in a way that makes me want to fuck her right now. Immediately. I can think of nothing else but plunging inside her.

She cries, "Yes."

I can do nothing except spank her again, the other ass cheek this time. And watching the flesh wobble in the aftermath of my strike—

Her hips move up and down on me, her voice breathy and needy as she cries, "*More.*"

We've lost all pretense of this being a punishment, and I do not care. I spank her again and again in quick succession. Then more until her ass cheeks are pink.

I pause only long enough to reach between her thighs and feel how wet she is for me. Fuck. It's dripping down her thighs; she's become so hazed with pleasure.

And I cannot stand waiting any longer. Must fuck.

Yet I hold off for another moment, holding her body down and thrusting my cock into her stomach for friction as I spank her several more times. "Please. *Please,*" she cries. "Please. I need you inside me."

I bend over her, one of my fingers inside her, massaging deep so that she begins to shudder around my hand. "You want my cock?" I whisper in her ear.

"Yes," she cries.

"Then beg me for it."

"Please. Kharon, I need your cock. Fuck me. I want you to fuck me with your massive cock."

Enough. I am done waiting. Gripping her with all my hands, I flip her

around and gently lay her back on the sleeping bags. And then I am on top of her.

Again I restrain her in the same position as earlier. I reach over and grab her shirt she discarded and tie it as a makeshift blindfold around her head, securely covering her eyes. Then with two of my large, rough hands, I restrain her slender wrists. She breathes in heavily, pushing her teats out, as her legs naturally fall open, ready for me.

I grin down at the display she makes of herself. With two more hands I begin to play with the hardened nubs at the end of her peaked teats. I hold myself up with my last pair of hands and line my hips up at her center, my cock leaping toward her cunt.

As soon as the tip of my cock makes contact with her wet heat, I understand why the French call it a little death. I feel I die of pleasure even *before* my gush. The pleasure of having my most intimate place touch her most intimate place. . . Is beyond anything I could have ever conceived. And when I begin to press in—

We both gasp.

I pause to make sure I am not hurting her. She is so small. Almost immediately, she begins wriggling underneath me as if to guide me in further, making little whining noises in her throat. “Kharon,” she finally says. “Please. Please, I beg you. Please fuck me.”

I pull my hips back and push forward again, once and then twice, sliding deeper and spreading her. I split her open, yet she somehow stretches to receive me. I feel her eyelids fluttering underneath my hand.

“Oh god, yes,” she cries. “More.”

Tomorrow she will be gone.

But right now, this beautiful creature is beneath me, begging me for more.

I bend my elbows so my bottom hands grasp her hips and help drag her onto my length. Her legs wrap around my hips, her body laid out before me like a sacrifice as I hold her down and begin to fuck her.

Nerves I never knew were a part of me light up as my cock feels every part of the inside of her cunt, gripping me tight. She’s so small, and I’m so big, and it should be an impossible fit—

“I need to hold your body,” I say. She is beautiful like this, but I need her closer.

She nods.

I lean over and wrap my arms around her, squeezing her to me in a tight

hug like our first contact. Except this time, my cock is embedded deep inside her.

“Kharon,” she gasps into my ear before burying her face in my neck and flinging her arms around me, clutching me to her just as tightly as I’m holding her.

I hold her body gently, but I begin to fuck her with abandon. “You feel so good,” I tell her, my hands ranging up and down her body. My lower hands squeeze and tug her buttocks apart.

“I want to touch you here,” I growl in her ear. “There is no part of your body that is not mine.”

She squeals into my neck. “Yes.” And then I feel her little teeth bite into my hide.

I roar and drop my finger to where her excess juice drips down my fat cock. I collect the wetness and press that finger along the small space between where her cunt is filled with my cock and the tiny opening of her anus.

She bites harder at my neck as I rub circles on the small opening with my finger, rolling us slightly sideways so I have access while I continue fucking her.

My head buzzes with pleasure. It flushes through my entire body with everything we’re doing: the feel of her surrounding me, my cock buried inside her, and the way her little anus contracts around my finger.

“Let me in,” I beg. I want everything. I want to give her everything and take everything, too.

She squeals, and her legs tighten around my waist, which opens her ass more to me. She releases her bite on my neck for a moment, then bites down again.

I love the feeling of it almost as much as I love pulling my cock out of her drenched cunt and thrusting back inside.

My thick fingertip finally *pops* inside her ass. I roar in satisfaction, clutching and fucking her everywhere as she bites down and howls her pleasure.

I pull my finger in her ass toward my cock, marveling at the thin wall of her body and the way she seems to go crazier beneath me. Her high-pitched moans reach a peak when I do that, and her pussy clamps around me in a way that—

Oh fuck—

I should—

I need to pull out—

But after so much teasing, both her and myself, my eyes roll back in my head as the pleasure spikes down my spine. So instead of pulling out, I thrust in, pinning her to the floor.

And then chaos erupts around us.

Just as I feel my gush spill deep inside her channel, the world drops out beneath us in a way that is far too familiar.

Wait. . . No, no, no!

I'm plane-jumping.

But somehow, oh gods! Ksenia is still in my arms, my cock deeply embedded in her as pleasure lights through me, spilling out of me. This world drops away, and we're both—*oh fuck, both?*—deposited in the other plane.

Chapter Twenty

KSENIA

My eyes are shut, and I've barely started coming down from the wildest and most intense pleasure of my life, clinging to Kharon.

His arms suddenly release me, his finger slipping out of my ass and his cock from my pussy. I feel him shifting above me, but I only cling tighter. I'm not ready for the moment to end as aftershocks from my intense orgasm continue to quake through my legs, making my toes flex and point.

"Ksenia," he says, and a tense note in his voice makes me open my eyes.

Which is when I gasp and let go of him.

Because we aren't in the dark church anymore.

No, somehow we're outside, but it's not snowy—

What on earth? Sunshine?

Kharon lifts off me, and I scramble to my feet, looking up in confusion at the bright, sunny, cloudless sky. The green grass is soft as feathers beneath my feet, and a warm breeze blows against the wetness dripping between my legs.

"What is this?" I ask, stunned. I look around, not believing my eyes. It's like some vacation paradise. Where are we? How did we—?

"I plane jumped," he gasps, looking around. "With you."

"Why would you do that?"

"I d-didn't mean to!" he scrambles, his top hands going to his head as he

spins, looking around. “I’ve never traveled with anyone before. I didn’t know I could—”

And then he swings around to look at me, and a horrified look takes over his face. “Oh no.”

“What?” I ask.

“That’s not true,” he whispers, his eyes still wide with horror. “I’ve traveled with many humans. But they do not come back.”

I think I get what he’s saying. “You mean, I— I’m *dead*?”

He shakes his head, a determined look on his face. “No.” And then he storms over, covering the space between us in a moment.

Before I know what’s happening, he wraps all his arms around me, holding me tighter than he ever has. “Close your eyes,” he says.

I squeeze them shut, and my stomach drops to my knees as the ground falls away. It’s like being on the world’s fastest-falling elevator.

And then he’s crying out in joy. “It worked!”

I open my eyes, startled to find us back in the dark church—me on my back with Kharon between my legs, his cock and finger still inside me.

“Sorry,” he scrambles gently off of me, pulling out again. “When you return from the other plane, it is to the exact position in time and space you jumped from.”

“What just happened?” I squeak.

He’s shaking his head. “I’m not sure. I’ve never done that before. I didn’t know I could take anyone with me. . . and return with them.”

I blink, my heart racing as I tug the covers over myself. I typically have a hard time adjusting when a lot of things happen at once, and *that* was just a lot of things at once.

I definitely just got the world’s most intense orgasm. I mean, I thought the one yesterday was mind-blowing, but turns out I didn’t know anything. He’s really getting into the orgasm denial and, oh my god, the spanking. And opening my eyes to find myself in, well, paradise, then being hit with the information that I might be *dead*—

But no, not dead. My hands move from my head to my chest to my— Dear god, I’m a mess. It’s really time to get cleaned up.

There’s a pot of warm water on the stove that I start toward but pause, thinking about the river I saw twinkling in the distance when we were. . . *there*.

I take a deep breath. “If I spend more than just a moment there, does that

mean I'm in more danger of. . . being dead?"

"What?" Kharon all but chokes out. "You want to go back?"

I look around the dark, cold space and glance up at the snow that's already covered the hole Kharon dropped us through. "Well, it was warm there. And you said it's just a different plane of existence or world, right? It's not actually the afterlife. So if we have to wait out the storm, why not do it there?"

"It will not be waiting out the storm. We return to the exact position—"

"Well, at least we'd get a break from the cold, wouldn't we?" I interrupt. "And I could get cleaned up? Or feel like I was clean, anyway." I look down my lap and grab the rag to scrub between my thighs. I'm covered in his cum. I bite my bottom lip and shiver a little, this time in delight. Oh my god, hottest sex of my entire life, hands down. My toes curl at the memory.

But even with the warm water, the rag quickly gets cold. "It feels like forever since I've been clean." Because yeah, apart from the mind-blowing sex, being in this dark, cold church is miserable. I had to pee in an old bucket in the furthest, darkest corner last night.

I clean myself as much as I can and tug on some clothes while Kharon stays quiet. I'm not sure if he thinks it's a terrible idea or—

"All right. I do not know if I'll be able to return with you there because I've never— But we can try. I understand needing an escape when things in this realm become difficult."

I look his way. "I like the company," I say softly. "It's just the setting that's a little lacking."

My eyes are on his mouth, so I see when his lips turn up at my words. "May I hold you?"

I nod, shivering already. I can almost feel the sun on my face. It seems impossible that I was in a place like that just moments ago. It's freezing here, but it was warm there. Beautiful. More beautiful than any place I've ever seen.

If Kharon has access to a place like that, I'm shocked he ever spends time here.

Kharon quickly comes to me, surrounding me with his arms and squeezing. "Hold tightly. I will hold tightly to you." Oh, okay, so we're doing this now—

I barely have time to shut my eyes before the floor drops from beneath us. The thousand-story elevator drop is no less unsettling the second time. Well,

the third, but the first time I was so lost in the ecstasy of a mind-blowing orgasm.

I feel the solid ground underneath us and blink my eyes open. Half of me is sure it's a trick of some kind. Surely we haven't actually traveled to another world. Or realm, plane of existence or whatever you want to call it.

But the sun shines warmly on my face. Warm but not too hot. Perfect, as is the warm breeze on my cold skin. The grass is soft beneath my bare feet. Which is good because I didn't think to put my heavy boots back on, and now I'm glad I didn't. Somehow I know there won't be thorns hiding in this soft grass.

I look around at the lush field surrounding us. A grove of fruit trees in the distance is nestled at the foot of some gently rolling hills. I can only blink, astonished at how beautiful and pleasant it is here. I walk towards the trees and catch a sweet aroma in the air. I don't know if it's from the trees and their heavy, ripe fruits or the bursts of bright, blooming flowers nestled here and there in the grass.

I pause, listening, then turn to Kharon. He's following behind me, a slightly uneasy look on his face. "Is that music?"

He nods.

"Who's playing?"

"Some of the souls seem to enjoy spending their time with instruments."

I blink, turning around again. I don't see anyone, and the music is distant. It sounds like some sort of stringed instrument and a . . . flute? Then I think I catch some voices, too.

"How big is it?"

"The realm?" he asks, then reaches up to scratch his head, shrugging. In the other world, he's always so imposing and in charge of every situation. Here, he looks awkward and unsure of himself. I don't understand it. Doesn't he spend a lot of time here? "Big. Unending as far as I've seen. But I haven't tried to make a map of it, so I cannot be sure."

I can only stare in his direction. If I had access to this place, all I would *do* is explore.

"And I don't spend much time in the golden realm." He looks around uneasily.

"Where do you go, then?"

"The shadowed place."

I shiver and wrap my arms around myself. "Well, let's not go there while

I'm here. Okay?"

He nods. "Yes. I understand. We can return to the church if we want dark and cold."

"Exactly. Good." I nod decisively. Then I look around and feel so. . . *happy*. It's a strange emotion for me. Unfamiliar. In my normal life, even before my uncle's betrayal, I was just busy. . . I kept busy. No one thinks about being happy.

Usually I was too busy planning my next target. Checking in with Dad on how things are going with the larger operation and doing whatever I can to help. All he could focus on for forever was getting his empire back, but in the last few years, he'd started talking about me taking over.

Was that why Uncle Pavel did it? He'd essentially been running the operation in Russia, but if he heard Dad flapping his mouth about *me* taking over. . . Well how better to solve that problem than to invite us to a secluded location, ambush us, and both his problems would be gone all at once.

My head starts to hurt just thinking about it.

Kharon said I could be home as soon as tomorrow night. I frown, unhappy yet feeling guilty at the same time. I have to go home. Dad. I have to find out what happened to Dad. I have to find out if he's—

"Ksenia?"

My back has been turned to Kharon during my long silence, and I look to the blue sky as if it can offer any answers, blowing out a long breath.

Is it so wrong, for just a day, to want to forget it all? To escape to this paradise with a man who can make me feel like Kharon does and in a place that's literally outside of time? I've never taken a vacation in my whole life. Maybe the timing is really screwed up. And maybe I'm just avoiding reality and in denial about Dad.

But what I don't know can't hurt me.

So I breathe in the sweet-smelling air and finally turn to Kharon. Then I lift my hands to the sky and twirl around. Just for a while, I want to pretend my other life isn't real. I want to embrace this brief lightness in my soul. It's only now that I realize I left my knives behind, but I don't even mind.

I look at Kharon with a laugh. "Race you to the river?"

He grins at me, his uneasiness finally dropping, maybe because he sees my obvious happiness at being here. "That will be an unfair race."

My happiness spills out of me. "It's just an expression. And you could always be a gentleman and go slower for my short little human legs." I spin

for the river and take off, calling over my shoulder. “Go!”

Kharon is quickly jogging by my side as I sprint full out. I laugh and push harder. He easily keeps up, obviously, but at least he’s only running on his legs and not all fours. We fly across the field, and it feels like the wind at our back helps us along. As if, in this land, all you have to do is have a desire, and the realm itself quickly wants to fulfill it.

I’ve worked up a sweat by the time we get to the river, and don’t hesitate. I race down the soft, damp sand of the bank and then make a shallow dive in.

The water is cool and delicious over my heated skin. Reeds and river grass swirl with my hair as I turn in the deep, clear waters and swim for the surface. The current is gentle, and I easily swim against it to where I leaped in. Kharon’s still on the bank.

“Come on in,” I say.

He stands there, that uncertain look on his face again.

“Don’t tell me you can’t swim.”

“I can swim. I have many arms.”

I laugh at that. “Then why aren’t you in the water?”

“I never thought of getting in the river.”

“Why not?” Everything feels so easy here. I lay back and lazily backstroke, feeling the warm sun on my face. Having decided to release my burdens for however short a time, I feel dizzy with the relief. “It feels soooo good. Don’t you want to feel good?”

“I want to touch your delectable-looking wet body.”

I bite my lip and smile, feeling a zing shoot low in my belly. In all the excitement, it was easy to overlook the incredible sex that first brought us here. But now, as my body relaxes in the water, I’m quickly remembering.

I’m in a paradise outside of time with a man who, even in a place where it was miserable and freezing, could make my body sing. So what could he do to me *here*?

“Well, my delectable wet body is in the water. So maybe you should stop stalling and come in, too.”

He does that grumbly low thing in his throat that usually means he’s— I peek over at him, and yep, his shaft has gone fully hard. Unlike me, he didn’t bother putting on clothes. I spin around in the water like an otter, flipping and swimming a few strokes toward him and return to my back, swimming away again.

Peeking down at myself, I can see my nipples have gone hard from the

water and, well. . . from looking at his hardness, too. Anticipating what might happen if he ever gets in the damn river.

He edges a toe off the bank and into the river, then immediately pulls it back out. Which startles a huge laugh out of me.

“Are you afraid of the water?” I choke out, swimming toward him again.

“No!” he immediately barks. “It just seems cold.”

“You run through the freezing snow all but naked!” I exclaim. “Come on, I promise it’s wonderful.”

Then, to entice him a little more, after making sure none of the lute-playing souls are around, I pull the drenched top over my head and toss it at him. He easily catches it with one of his hands and squeezes the water while he gulps when I bob out of the water so he can get a clear view of what he’s missing.

I swim back and forth in front of him.

He does the low rumble thing again. “Your bottoms too. And then I will come.”

I grin. “Making bargains now?”

“Just pressing my advantage.”

I shake my head as I reach down and tug my wet pants off. “This is only because I want to skinny-dip in paradise. Lay them out with my shirt so they can dry.” I toss the sodden pants toward him, and he expertly catches them. He does as I ask, laying them on the grass beyond the bank.

Then he returns and sucks in a huge breath. I swim towards the bank but stay in the river grass, where the bank drops off steeply into the deeper river. “Come in, big boy.” I stare outright at his hard shaft. “I want to feel you.”

He groans and steps into the river water. “I see it now. You are no angel. You are a water nymph, tempting me like this.”

I tread water, lifting up just enough so my breasts bob on the surface. “I’m tempting you?”

He groans, reaching down to fist his cock as the water hits his knees, then his waist. He’s among the reeds now, right at the drop-off.

“Careful,” I say, swimming closer but still staying out of his grasp. “That’s where it gets deep.”

“It has always been deep waters with you.”

My heart somersaults in my chest at his words.

And then he steps off and, clumsily, even with all his many arms and only looking slightly panicked, swims the last bit towards me.

I throw myself into his arms and, for the first time, dare to press my lips to his.

Chapter Twenty-One

KHARON

My eyes go wide at the feel of her small delicate lips pressed against mine. And suddenly, all discomfort at my body being weightless in the water is gone. I paddle with one set of arms, hold tight to her with the others, and focus on our mouths mating.

At first, she only presses her lips to mine. Kissing, I recall, in a daze. This is kissing. But then her little tongue presses against my lips, and I can barely remember my own name. In this, I let her take the lead, far too aware of my sharp teeth. I almost pull back. I am too dangerous for this intimacy.

But she kisses me so sweetly, sucking on my thick upper lip in a way that has my cock hardening fully against her belly.

Finally, she pulls away from my mouth, and I can't help gasping.

"Did you like that?" she asks, eyes on my lips. I lick my lips, trying to chase her taste lingering there.

I nod. "I liked it very much."

"Look," she grins, "how well you're swimming."

I groan when I see that we're in the middle of the gently moving river. My feet kick and don't strike a hard surface. But having her in my arms, I can't panic.

Her arms twine around my neck, and she leans up to talk into my ear.

"Now spin me around and fuck me from behind."

My eyes widen again, and my heart thumps in excited anticipation. From behind. . . I never thought of that. And yet, as soon as she mentions it, it's *all* I can think of. I would slide so well into her cunt from behind. I bet it would feel different, and my hands would have access to her entire body—

She giggles, a delightful new noise she's only made since we began fucking. "What are you waiting for?"

Excellent point. Still, before I flip her to explore this enticing new position, I dip my head back toward hers. She moves forward, her lips again meeting mine.

Sometimes our fucking is ferocious, but this is oh so gentle. Her lips are like satin, and when her tongue peeks out, a growl comes from low in my chest. I never would have imagined such a small part of her could drive me so wildly insane, and yet—

"I want to devour you," I growl, pulling back from her, and before she can respond, I easily flip her in the water so her back is to my chest. The water flows around us, and we bob up and down. I'm finally becoming used to the buoyancy. Somewhat.

Her hands tread water a little, joining the pair of arms I've abandoned to the task. I've never been more grateful for so many arms—so many hands.

Two land on her plump little breasts, and with two more, I grasp her waist and pull her ass towards my throbbing cock.

My shaft slides neatly between her legs, and she groans when it meets her pussy lips.

I was just inside her, so she should be stretched, but I like it best when she's panting and begging for me. I slide one hand around her waist to the little button at the top of her sex that's still swollen from our earlier fucking. She starts writhing almost as soon as I touch it, splashing wildly.

"Oh god. *Kharon*."

I smile in satisfaction as she lifts her rump, and my cock slides inside her. She abandons any pretense of treading water, trusting me to do it for the both of us. One hand holds onto my bicep, and the other reaches behind her to hold onto my neck. It thrusts her breasts out even more, and my fingers pinch her nipples.

She cries out and thrashes in my hold. Her inner walls grip my shaft, and I feel her body trembling. She twists, seeking friction, but I hold her there, my water nymph.

"You are mine," I growl in her ear. "You do not come before I say so."

She squeals in response and jerks her hips back and forth, clenching on my shaft.

“Your pleasure is at my command,” I hiss, pressing with the flat of my palm against her swollen bundle of nerves and massaging as I pull back with my hips, then thrust in again.

She lets out an anguished, pleased noise.

“Tell me you understand.”

She nods, then cries, “Please. Please. Give us what we both want.”

When my palm stills, she whimpers.

I leave her like that, my palm a pressure against her button while I slowly thrust in and out. She’s on the edge, shaking with pleasure. And just when I know she expects me to start giving in and allowing her to peak, I withdraw my palm completely, clutching her waist instead.

The disappointed, desperate noises coming from her throat make me grin wide. If she wanted someone else to take control, she needed to be ready for the consequences. She doesn’t always get what she wants when she wants it.

I continue to fuck her slowly, my eyes closing as I revel in the feel of her tightening around me. She releases and clenches, releases and clenches, and my eyes pop open when I realize my little water witch will make herself come this way, from my cock alone.

My cock stiffens and pulsates at the thought, and I squeeze her hips and fuck her faster, even though I know I should be more disciplined.

But the pleasure haze is falling upon me. And there really is something to fucking in the water. We’re both weightless, so there is nothing to distract from the pleasure of her cunt. And her squeezing on my shaft feels so good.

I fuck her more vigorously, and she begins to make the noises that mean she is getting close. I have not told her she can come, but she is near it.

It is evil of me to test her when I am so near to losing control myself. But I also have the feeling that though she has asked me to take control, in some way, it is a farce. She is the one who lured me into the water and who told me the position to fuck her. She does not let go of an iota of control. Only pretends.

So I say, “I do not give you permission to come,” as I continue to fuck her, near the absolute brink, and wait to see what she will do.

At first, I am filled with pride when she stops making noises. I fuck her with abandon, ready to drop my hand back to her cunt and bring us both to a screaming finish.

Right as my gush begins to spurt from my shaft and my hand slides from her waist to her sex so that I might bring her with me—

I encounter her hand there, working furiously at her own sex.

I roar as the last of my gush spills inside her tight cunt and pull out as soon as I am able. Then I lasso an arm around her waist and swim back towards the riverbank. Fast.

She yelps in surprise as I spin her body, flipping her over my shoulder as I walk out of the river.

“Wait, Kharon,” she says in a rush. “I’m sorry! I can explain!”

I do not listen. I’m not mad, exactly. But also, I will not be made a fool of. And I will not continue this bizarre game of control with her. I would not have minded her touching herself if it was the terms we had agreed to beforehand. But why tell me one thing and then sneakily do another?

Carefully I bring her from my shoulder and lay her on the sun-soaked grass.

“Is it because you wanted another punishment?” I ask, my brow furrowed.

She stares at the grass, plucking a blade and playing with it. “No. I mean”—her eyes peek up briefly towards my face—“I wouldn’t mind that.”

“Then why,” I demand. “Why ask for one thing then deceptively do another?”

“I don’t know!” she says, shredding the blade of grass. “I want to not be in control. For fucking *once*. I crave it. But it—” She cuts herself off.

“What? But it, what?”

“It terrifies me,” she finally admits. “Trusting anyone that much. To truly give control over. And there’s still so much we—” Again, maddeningly, she stops her own speech.

“What?” I demand again. “So much we, what?”

“So much we don’t know about each other.” Then she amends, “So much you don’t know about me.”

“Then tell me.” I sit down on the grass beside her, and her eyes flash my way and then back at the grass.

“I can’t,” she says.

“Why?”

“I don’t know how.”

I nod, coming to a decision. “Then we will do two things at the same time. I will punish you until you tell me.”

“Wait.” Her voice jumps an octave. “What?”

“You heard me,” I say darkly.

I watch her swallow, and then, ever so slowly, she nods. “Okay.” Her voice is small.

“You will finally trust me. With everything.”

I see her begin to shake, but she nods. I hate she has any fear with me. Soon, though, I will turn it into pleasure.

“Lay back.”

She hesitates a moment, then she does. She bites her lips, closes her eyes, then whispers, “Please take my fear. Take control. I want you to have everything.”

Naked on the soft, green grass, she is absolutely beautiful. This sun will never burn her skin, so I know I can take my time. I will take as long as I need until she gives up every fear, every secret, every shadow to me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

KSENIA

As soon as I feel his hands clamp down on my wrists and thighs to hold me in place, completely exposed to him, I feel a single moment of fear

—
And then it all dissolves in the freedom of knowing this is what it truly means to abandon control. Not holding onto a secret part for myself to exercise when he can't see. I'm embarrassed by what I did in the river. I didn't mean to do it. But then I thought, well, would it really be so bad if I just reached down and touched myself if he was going to selfishly take his own pleasure without seeing to mine? Because I didn't trust him.

And now I'm spread out again like a sacrifice before him, not knowing what will come next.

"You will not come," he says. "Until you tell me your secrets."

A little squeaking noise comes from my throat. And a foolish, rebellious part inside me howls, *fine, I don't need to come that bad anyway. It's not like I'm some sex fiend.*

I blink up into the sunshine above, so confused at the warring desires within me.

I want to tell him; I don't want to tell him.

I trust him; I don't trust him.

I want him to take control; I can't help trying to wrestle it back from him.

What the hell is *wrong* with me?

I close my eyes as I feel his head descend between my thighs, breathing out long and low as his amazing tongue licks up my center. For all my secret machinations in the water, I didn't get time to climax before he caught me. Even the pleasure I was experiencing when I touched myself felt furtive and guilty and not nearly as explosive as when he gives it to me.

It also means my sex is still swollen and ready to be amped back up as soon as his mouth is on me. My breathing becomes uneven as the pleasure rises, but I try not to vocalize anything because the warring logic in my head reasons: well, if an orgasm just *happens* to erupt before he realizes, then we can all just say, whoops, happy accident!

But he's become annoyingly attuned to my body in such a short time. Even though I try hard not to give away that my rising pleasure is just seconds from peaking in the desperate release I want, he withdraws.

I can't help the disappointed whine that escapes my throat. He chuckles, knowing exactly what he did.

"Tell me the things you keep hidden."

My mouth stays stubbornly shut. In fact, I clamp it extra tight.

"Oh beloved," he says low, and my body shudders, tears threatening. Now that I'm faced so directly with my hypocritical desires, I don't know what to do.

He leans his head back down again, and I breathe out, thinking at least I might get the release of pleasure that, if not climax, is still *very* good and blessedly distracting.

Instead of his tongue, he just blows a warm stream of air across my pussy. I howl and squirm, but his hands hold my thighs steadfastly apart so I can't even rub them together for friction. I look down my body at him hovering right above my sex. Then, as I watch, he extends his tongue and, with the very, very tip of it, gives the most glancing lick to my clit.

I shudder at the touch. And almost come. I swear.

"Please," I beg. "Please let me come. Please, I'll do anything."

"Excellent," he says, making sure to speak so that his breath washes over my sex. "Then tell me what you have been holding back."

I squirm beneath his grip. "Anything except that."

He withdraws his head from between my thighs, and I want to scream. Then he kisses my knee. Up my inner thigh. I shudder beneath his torturous attention, my pussy throbbing.

“Please lick me,” I beg. “Please suck my clit.”

He pauses. “What is clit?”

“The part you were just licking! Please, just give it a little more attention. Please, *please*. I need to come.”

“Wonderful. If you need to come, you know what to do. Open your sweet mouth and tell me all.”

My mouth clamps shut again.

And he continues his torturous ministrations.

Half an hour later, I’m all but vibrating with need. He’s kissed up my stomach and *around* my breasts without giving my nipples any more attention than his warm breath and a single quick swipe of his tongue that has had them hard and puckered ever since.

I finally cried petulantly, “Fine. I don’t even care about coming. I’m not even turned on anymore.”

At which point he dropped back to my sex and ate me out so voraciously I thought it had actually worked. I was two milliseconds away from climax when he retreated.

I did scream that time and thrashed in his hold.

Frustrated tears pour down my eyes.

“We can stop at any time,” comes his solemn voice. “You will not come, and I will not have your secrets.” The hands not holding my thighs and wrists gently caress down my body, pinching my puckered nipples lightly.

I twist in need, so many emotions warring.

“But you do not want me to stop, do you?”

I shake my head. No. No, I don’t want him to stop.

“While you give me control, you were the one who asked for this. Because, deep down, it was what *you* wanted. You want to tell me. In spite of how stubborn you are, you trust me.”

And then I feel his head at my sex again. He blows more warm air across my swollen clit. “Give in to what you want, beloved.”

I cry harder.

And finally, I break.

Hiccupping throughout, my truth finally spills. The whole thing. What I do for work. How my father and I were lured by my uncle to the huge cabin in the middle of nowhere. The ambush.

“I just fled,” I cry. “I abandoned him there, and I don’t even know if he’s alive or dead!”

Kharon's continued caressing me as I talk, his touch grounding me when I feel like I'm coming apart at the seams. It's as if telling it out loud makes it all real.

He bends over me, his forehead pressed gently to mine. "I am so sorry you had to experience these terrible things, my beloved. Thank you for entrusting me with your shadows."

He kisses down my neck, between my breasts, across my belly, and finally to my sex.

"Now give everything over to me. *Release.*"

And, probing one finger inside me to tease my G-spot, he suckles my clit and catapults me immediately into the highest, hardest, most intense orgasm I've ever—

I screech as white explodes across my vision, all thoughts gone and completely free as waves of pleasure wash over me. One, and then another, and then another. Quaking higher as he continues to suckle and finger me, higher still, and still higher.

This shouldn't be possible. How can it feel so good, so right, so—
I weep with shocking pleasure and feel reborn.

Chapter Twenty-Three

KHARON

I look down at the beautiful woman beneath me on the grass, her hair glistening wet from the river water, eyes glazed over with pleasure as her legs quake with aftershocks.

I lick my lip and groan with the flavor of her still lingering.

All I want to do is stay on this riverbank forever and bring her to pleasure over and over again. But I can't ignore what she's just told me. She has finally opened up to me, and she's in pain. She has such confusion in her heart.

For once, it is something I could actually help with.

I gently caress one of my large hands down the sweet curve of her cheeks, just the brush of my fingertips. "There is a way to know for sure," I tell her.

She blinks up at me. "What do you mean?"

I sit up and reach a pair of arms down to help support her back and pull her into my arms to cradle her. I gesture around. "Don't you remember where we are? If your father has passed from the other world into the next, he will be here."

She stiffens in my arms and, the next moment, springs to her feet. She is beautiful in her nakedness, her eyes huge. "We have to look!"

Immediately she swings around, stumbling back several steps as her head twists one way and then another. Her hands come to her forehead, half

covering her eyes. “Why didn’t I think of that? We’ve been here this whole time, and I—”

She looks down at the grass where I’d just been inside her, and her hands slide over her eyes.

I shake my head, though she cannot see me. “You did not know,” I say. “And I did not know what you needed until it was right for you to tell me. Everything happens in its time.”

She nods, her hands falling as she looks towards me. “How do we find him? If. . . if he’s here.”

I understand her urgency. Once, when it was my loved one, I felt the same.

“It may not be easy,” I say, standing and moving to her side. “This is a large realm. Infinite, I sometimes think.”

She turns her face to me, features stricken.

“But,” I say, reaching to steady her back, “Souls do recognize their own. If he is here, you will feel him.”

“What does that mean? I don’t feel him.”

I nod as, again, she looks around, all but spinning in circles. She is overwhelmed, and I am explaining badly.

“We’ll walk around, and you may start to feel a pull of recognition. Then we will follow the pull.”

“A pull?” she cries, almost sounding angry. She is upset, and I understand. Oh, I understand all too well.

“Let’s get clothed, and then we’ll begin. You’ll see.”

She takes off toward where we left her clothing by the bank of the river, only briefly pausing to ask, “How are these already dry?” before yanking her shirt back over her head and shoving her legs one after another into her underthings and pants.

“Time does not work the way you understand in this realm.”

“Hurry,” she says as I shake the river water out of my hair, even though she is still jamming her feet into her boots, not even bothering to tie them before she is standing again.

“What if I don’t feel the tug or whatever?” she asks. “Does that mean he’s not here? That he’s still alive?”

“It is possible,” I say.

She nods rapidly, and I see the hope in her eyes. Then they cloud as she swallows. “And if. . . if he’s here. . . Will I be able to talk to him?”

My stomach clenches with worry for her. Perhaps I have raised false hope. “If he is here, he will not be as you remember him. He will be only essence. All ego will have been stripped away. Only souls in the sun-drenched fields are capable of speech. But even then, they do not speak much. They seem to just. . .” I cast about for the right word, “. . . commune with nature without many words. Even their songs do not usually have words. You’ll see as we get closer.”

Her eyebrows narrow. “And if he’s not here, in the, what did you call this—the sunny place—”

I look at the grass. “Then he is in shadow.”

She shivers. “What does that mean?”

“What is your father like in life?” I ask instead. “Is he a man with peace in his heart?”

She pauses, her brow still furrowed. Breathing out a heavy sigh, she shakes her head. “No. No, I wouldn’t describe him that way.”

I nod. “Then we will begin in the land of shadow. Come. I will take you.”

Ksenia stays quiet beside me as we walk across the field and up one of the gently sloping hills. She pauses and reaches out, grasping one of my biceps when she sees a cluster of souls in a bower of fruit trees.

“Do you feel something?” I ask. Perhaps she’s wrong about her father.

She shakes her head. “No,” she whispers, eyes wide as she watches the people move easily with each other, plucking fruit from the tree. One plays a guitar, and the others harmonize a beautiful spontaneous song. In another field further off, others chase each other, laughter ringing out.

“Come then,” I say. As much as possible, I try not to disturb the inhabitants of this realm.

She watches them the entire time we pass by. I understand that, too. It is a hopeful thing to know that peace and joy and rest like this are possible.

After we crest another hill, I lead her to a small, stony outcropping and wave my hand to reveal a vibrating portal.

“How do you do that?” Ksenia blinks, startled, and lets go of my arm to take several steps back.

“Oh.” I pause. I don’t really think about my abilities anymore; they’re such second nature. “Part of being a plane jumper, I guess. I can move around this realm. When I first came here, I explored and felt drawn to these. . . I don’t know how to describe it. These energy points. And then when I really focused on them and did the same thing when I plane-jump, these doorways

appeared.”

“So are they different planes on the same plane, or what?”

I pause. “I never thought of that. I always thought of them as just portals to different parts of the same realm, but I guess I don’t really know.”

“You don’t *know*?”

I shrug. “My father didn’t intend to give me this ability. He was disappointed with how all of his experiments turned out, but me most of all.”

Her mouth drops open. “But you can do *this*.” She gestures at the pulsing portal of light in front of us. “And you brought us here in the first place. How could he—” Then she shakes her head. “You know what, never mind. He was obviously an asshole. Come on.”

She reaches for my arm, and I extend a middle one to her. I like that she prefers to be attached to me wherever we go. But especially if she is right, and stepping through the portal means plane-jumping again. . . I wrap my arms around her with an extra firm grip as together, we enter the realm of shadow.

Chapter Twenty-Four

KSENIA

I don't know what I expected as we step through. Everything was just so bright and delightful where we were. It was daytime, and, by stepping through that shimmering doorway of what felt just like. . . *air*. . . suddenly it's now night.

Well, not night exactly, but like twilight. Except there's no moon and no stars. It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust, and I freeze on the crunching, dry grass on the other side of the portal, clinging to Kharon's arm and glad he's still holding me.

I blink and look around. I can finally make out shapes as my eyes adjust to the dark. It's mostly flat here, endlessly flat. Except, when what I first thought were shadowy clumps of bushes *move*. . . and I realize they're *people*. Or whatever's left of people by the time they get to this place. I shiver and step closer to Kharon, all but crawling up him at this point.

There's nothing else here, just these tall, shriveled-up, weedy-looking flowers and the people.

"Can they see us?" I whisper, my nails digging into Kharon's skin. I don't mean to, but he doesn't seem to mind. His arm securely around my shoulder tucks me against his side, another arm snuggly around my waist.

"They don't notice much," he says, stepping forward. Reluctantly clinging to his side like I am, I move with him. Immediately I feel bad. If my

Dad's here, I want to find him. But then I shudder because all I want in the world is for him *not* to be here. He had to have made it out of that ambush. He *had to*.

Of course he made it out, I argue to myself. He taught me everything I know, and *I* made it out. So, of course he did, too.

"Do you feel any pull?" Kharon asks.

I shake my head. Then again, I don't really have any clue what he's talking about, so it's easy to say no.

"We'll go a little further."

I hope it gets a little less creepy the longer we're here. But the more we walk, the shadowy people parting to make way for us, the more all my hair stands on end.

"This is where you like to come to get away from things?" I whisper incredulously.

"I find it calming."

I look at him like he's nuts. But it's true. While I feel tensed tight as a coiled spring, I can feel that Kharon's muscles have gone loose beside me. Relaxed. And I realize he was way more tense in the sunny place. I shake my head and think, *Huh. Maybe he's way more screwed up than me if he finds this place a relaxing vacation from life's stresses.*

Just as I think that, I feel this odd tugging sensation in my chest from somewhere to the left.

My head swivels in that direction, and my fingers dig into Kharon's bicep even harder.

"What?" he asks, so attuned to me.

"Nothing," I say immediately.

But he's not fooled. "It was something," he says. "What did you feel?"

Tears come to my eyes as I feel it again. A tug in my chest from the left. Like an invisible string attached beneath my ribcage.

"Nothing," I whisper desperately.

His voice is kind as he asks, "Where is this nothing coming from?"

A tear slides down my cheek as I point.

One of his hands slides down so that his fingers interlace with mine.

"Show me."

I don't say anything or even nod. I just start to walk, my throat choked up as I cling to his hand. The darkness seems to get thicker the deeper we walk into the open field. As if. . . as if we're walking *into* a shadow. The lack of

light here is tangible. It's not frightening, and it's not sad, not exactly.

It's just. . . empty.

And so, so quiet.

There's not even wind here. Sometimes the shadowy people clump together, and I wonder if it's because they knew each other back—back in the physical world, if that's even the right word. This whole place is so trippy. My head swings all around.

Then I finally see him—

“Dad,” I cry out, letting go of Kharon's hand to run toward a lone shadow standing by himself.

His back is to me, but I'd know my Dad anywhere. He stands so tall, his shoulders so broad, I was always sure he could carry all the weight of the world.

He doesn't turn around at my voice, and I have to scurry around him to see his face.

And it's *him*.

“Dad!” I throw my arms around him. Or try to. My arms move right through him like he's mist, and a devastated noise comes from my throat.

His body reforms a moment later, and he barely even looks at me. His mouth moves a little, like he's muttering without sound, and he sort of rocks back and forth.

“What is this?” I turn accusingly at Kharon. “What's wrong with him?”

Kharon stands tall behind my father, and I hate that Dad looks so diminished compared to him. “I'm sorry, I should have explained better. Only the spirit within him remained when he traveled to this world in death.”

I cry out and grab my chest, looking back at my father. “Dad,” I say, moving so I'm right in front of his face. “Dad, can you hear me?” I reach out again but remember what happened last time and pull back before touching him.

His sightless eyes stare right past me.

“Why can't he see me? Why doesn't he know me? I felt the pull to him. Can't he feel me, too?”

“Sometimes, yes,” Kharon says, moving to my side. “But he's only just gotten here. He's confused, and whatever restlessness he felt in life is still deeply imprinted.”

“Does he still have his memories?” I ask desperately. “Can he even remember me?”

Kharon's face is compassionate in a way that makes me furious as he looks down at me. "That's not what this place is really for."

"But you just said it was about his restlessness in life! Doesn't that mean memories?"

"It means that everything that happens to us in our lives and how we respond *affects* us, whether we want it to or not. Grooves are imprinted on our souls, like on the records Romulus likes to listen to. And here in this realm, those records play on repeat."

I hate how logical he's being, how calm he is as he says it, and everything about this place. My chest is tight, and I keep swallowing back tears. I can't stop looking at my father; he's here and real, in front of me, and yet not at the same time.

"He's just a ghost," I whisper brokenly.

"But at least you know what happened now," Kharon says gently.

I turn into his chest, and my sob finally breaks free. "Take me home," I finally manage to hiccup out.

He nods into my hair, and all three pairs of arms wrap around me. I squeeze my eyes shut as the world drops from underneath my feet as we plane-jump back to our world.

Chapter Twenty-Five

KHARON

When we get back to the church, it's night-time. I stoke the fire, then leap to gather more snow to boil for water. I note that the raging storm has finally ended. The skies are so calm, I can see all the stars.

Ksenia is huddled near the fire, her knees pulled to her chest.

I wonder if taking her to her father was the right thing to do. But surely knowing is better than not, even if it is painful.

"The storm has stopped," I say quietly, sitting on the floor several feet away from her. All I want is to gather her into my arms, but it does not seem right to crowd her in her grief.

When she looks my way, the firelight gleams off tear tracks on her cheeks.

"Good," she says, her voice hard. "As soon as it's light out, you can take me to where my uncle lives so I can get my revenge."

I nod slowly. "If you allow it, I would like to assist you."

She blinks in surprise. "You would do that?"

How can she ask that? But then, I suppose, in reality, we are still nothing to one another. Even though she has transformed what it means to be alive for me. I have known true happiness, and it is not just the fucking. That has been—Yes, that has been quite wonderful.

More than that, this creature has shared herself fully with me and wanted

me in return without judgment or condemnation. She has found joy in my presence and my body, and for that, I will be hers forever. Still, though, I know I am the moon to her sun in a sky they will not share except for this brief, rare eclipse.

“Of course,” I say simply.

Then her eyebrows furrow. “Do you think I’m not deadly enough on my own? It’s only because he took me by surprise that I—”

I chuckle. “I’ve seen you in action with your knives. I know you are plenty deadly. But from what you described, your uncle will not be unguarded. I have fought alongside many armies. You will be the commander, and I will follow your lead.”

“Oh,” she says, nodding. “Okay. Usually, I work alone. . . . But it would be nice to have some help.”

“I am happy to be of help.”

She nods. “I’ll tell you about my uncle’s villa compound outside St. Petersburg then. Because you’re right. He’s a paranoid son of a bitch, and we’ll have to be careful if we want to get in unnoticed.”

I grin. “I can walk in shadow. I’m very good at going unnoticed.”

Her eyes narrow. “I remember. You followed me in the woods.”

I nod.

“And you’re a good fighter? I mean, I saw you with the wolves, but what about men?”

“My father often set my brothers and I against each other. I am a good fighter.”

Her eyes widen. “Well, if you grew up fighting them, I guess I can trust you to handle yourself. Plus the whole—” She waves a hand. “Reaper thing you’ve got going on. You can just, what? Send people to that shadowy place by touching them?”

It’s a bit of an oversimplification, but I nod.

She breathes out long and low. “Okay then.”

She moves to the fire and snatches up one of the thinner kindling sticks, then roots around in the ashes near the edge of the fire. “So this is what my uncle’s compound looks like.” Moving far enough away from the fire to be free of the sleeping bag, she begins to sketch on the stone floor with the ash.

“He’ll have his commandos stationed here, here, and here. . . .”

For the next half hour, she discusses her plan. It’s well thought-out. Detailed. She has contingencies.

“We’ll strike at night, so he should be in his bedroom, *here*.” With fresh ash, she circles a portion of the schematics she’s sketched out. “But sometimes he stays up watching movies, so he might be in his home theater down here.” Another circle. “We must keep quiet at all costs so he doesn’t have time to get to his safe room.”

“What happens if he gets to his safe room?”

She huffs out a breath, making a lock of hair that’s fallen in her face flutter. “Then I have to use the explosives, which gets messy. The walls are a foot thick. Concrete with reinforced steel. It will take time we don’t have.”

I nod. “So we need to be fast and quiet.”

“Exactly.”

“It is a good plan.”

“It has to be a perfect plan.”

I tilt my head at her. “There’s no such thing.”

She frowns. “There has to be.”

“I have fought many wars with many commanders who were excellent tacticians. Including Napoleon. There are no perfect plans.”

She frowns and lifts up from her crouch, dropping the ashy stick to the floor. “That’s why I bring the explosives along. There’s always a plan B.”

She stands up, and so I do too, which she notices, eyes narrowing.

“I’m going to go for a walk.”

I frown. “Where?”

She walks towards the pack and grabs the flashlight from the floor. She gestures towards the dark part of the church. “Around. I need some space.”

My chest tightens. “Don’t go far.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” she snaps. “You don’t fucking own me.”

“Of course I do not own you.” Her words confuse me, and she sighs, running a hand down her face.

“I’m sorry I’m being snippy. I just need some space. I’m never around people so much. Even if it’s just one other person.”

“But it is not safe,” I continue, anxious. “The church is old and half buried in a landslide. The walls are unstable.”

“Oh.” I see her blink in the firelight, then she switches on the flashlight. “I’ll be careful. Don’t worry about me.”

I can only stare at her. I will worry about her for the rest of my existence. She is all I will think about.

She gestures with the flashlight. “I won’t feel like I’m alone if you’re

watching me the whole time.”

I nod, releasing a heavy breath, then turn my back to her. I will try to honor her wishes. Even though there is an entire castle to roam, I know the feeling of not being able to escape my brothers in my desire for what she calls *alone time*.

I crouch by the pack to see what I can gather for a meal. And try not to listen to each of her footsteps crunching on the stone floor, even though I know that I am. Even that feels invasive, so I start to lightly whistle to cover it up and give her the privacy she deserves. I have had privacy while she sleeps and I lay awake, but she has had none.

I do not like alone time apart from her because it reminds me that this time with her will soon come to an end, and I'll be alone again. I, who thought not so long ago that to be alone was all I wanted. It was like the gods heard my thoughts and then decided to mock me.

Without meaning to, the tune I'm whistling turns into a lament. If I was a miserable bastard before, I'll be insufferable to live with now. After I help her with the revenge plot. . . what then? My mind tries to work it out. Could I somehow *stay* with her? Haunting the shadows of her life, never able to live out in the open with her? Would that be anything she would even *want*?

Immediately my mind rejects the possibility. No one has ever wanted me except for her. But wanting me in this place, when there is no one else, and she needed comfort, is one thing. Back in the world, she's a beautiful, exceptional woman. . . No, it is foolish of me even to dream it. I am a monster, and a monster I will always be. A name does not change the fact that I was born a *thing*.

My hands move automatically, filling a pot with snow, when Ksenia suddenly screams from behind me.

My heart drops to the floor as I spin and look, not seeing the light of her flashlight anywhere. “Ksenia!” I shout her name and sprint toward where I heard her cry.

Chapter Twenty-Six

KSENIA

I stand, my flashlight frozen and pointed at a pile of—
“Ksenia!” I hear Kharon shout from the other room but don’t move. Can’t quite move. This was here the whole time? Oh my god.

I was just exploring the church and went to the altar area to look at all the ancient-looking iconography. Then I glimpsed this little room off to the side. I remembered what Kharon said, but it looked stable enough.

So I stepped through, and that’s when I saw the mountain of bodies in the corner. They’re just bones in clothing so old and moth-eaten, it barely holds together anymore, but there are at least thirty of them, maybe more. My hand flies to my mouth, and I stand like a statue, unable to move.

“Ksenia.” Kharon finds me and drags me out of the little room. I immediately fight against his grip, swinging around right as he pulls me back into the central church.

“What the fuck is that?” I cry, jerking out of his grip and turning my flashlight on him.

He shies his face away from the light.

“Tell me!” Then I remember what he said about a landslide. “Did they die in the landslide?”

I watch the guilt wash over his face as he shakes his head. “No. It was before.”

“What the fuck?” I ask again.

He turns away from me and starts walking back toward the fireplace. I head after him. “You aren’t going to answer me?”

He keeps walking.

“Hey. I’m talking to you.”

Finally, he spins. “What do you want me to say?” he finally roars, and I take a step back at his ferocity. “I am a monster!”

He turns again and stalks away. I follow him.

“What does that mean? You just came here and killed all these people? This is a *church*. They weren’t soldiers!” Maybe it’s hypocritical of me. I kill people who aren’t soldiers. But there are *rules*.

He grabs his head with his hands. “I know!”

And then he turns back to me and falls to his knees. “I *know*.” There’s such raw pain in his voice that tears spring to my eyes.

“What *happened*?” I crouch down in front of him, needing to understand. I’ve only known him a short time, but with everything we’ve been through together, it feels like so much more. I’ve given him more of myself than I’ve ever given anybody else. No one ever knew me like he does—and I thought I knew him too. But this. . . “What happened?” I ask again.

He shakes his head, face to the ground. So I reach out for one of his hands and grasp it. “Please,” I say. “Tell me.”

Considering how long I kept my secrets from him, I know it’s not fair to bombard him like this, but I still have to know. I have to know if it was safe to give him my trust.

He heaves out a huge, shaking breath yet still does not lift his face as he finally begins to speak. “My brother Layden. He was the only one of my brothers brave enough to stand up to our father. And Father tortured him for it. Horribly, and in front of us. We thought it was just to teach us a lesson, and that would be the end of it. So we did nothing to stop it as he tore Layden’s wings from his back.”

I shrink at the thought of it.

“Our brother screamed and begged for our help, and we did nothing.” Kharon’s voice is anguished as he retells the horrific story. “But that was not enough to satisfy our father. He poured hell-metal over Layden’s back to ensure his wings would never re-grow. Finally, that, we all thought, would surely satisfy our Father’s rage.”

Kharon shakes his head. “But we were wrong.” His voice comes out in

the barest whisper. “He took a sword and drove it through our brother’s chest. Only after Layden fell dead to the ground did Abaddon take up the same sword and slay our Father.”

“Oh my god, Kharon—” I manage, my throat choked up.

“Abaddon tried to revive Layden, but it was too late. He could not heal him. He was gone. So we buried him and set our Father’s body alight. As the pyre burned, I plane-jumped to make sure my brother was at rest in the other realm.”

I squeeze his hand. So that’s how he knew—

Kharon’s head finally lifts, voice ragged as he says, “But he *wasn’t*.”

“What?”

“Our kind does not get eternal rest in the other plane. When we die, we simply cease to exist. And when I realized my Father had snuffed out my brother’s life-flame, his soul—*forever*—and I had simply stood by and done *nothing*—”

His head shakes roughly. “I went mad. I fled the castle and came upon this village. All I could see were humans whose souls were eternal. What did it matter if they left this plane? They had another resting place that my own brother was denied. So like a wild, mad beast, I took every single soul directly there. Thirty-eight souls, delivered to the eternal realm.”

His whole body shakes as he continues. “My brother Abaddon found me raving mad afterwards and locked me in the castle’s dungeon for the next two-hundred years. After a hundred, I came back to my senses, but for my sins, I allowed myself to remain chained.”

“Kharon,” I whisper, reaching out for another of his hands and squeezing with both of mine. He tries to pull away, but I don’t let go.

“I do not deserve forgiveness for a crime so great.”

I shrug. “That’s not for me to say,” I whisper. “But it sounds like you endured a lot of trauma at the hands of your father. That would really mess anyone up. I’m so sorry you went through that.”

He’s still shaking. Holding his hands isn’t enough, so I crawl into his arms, which he quickly throws around me. He squeezes, holding me tightly, but I know I’m the one holding his pain. I wrap my arms around him and let him shake.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, rubbing his back. “It’s going to be okay.”

I hold him a long while, until his shuddering becomes trembling, and finally he’s just rocking back and forth, me all but in his lap.

And all I can say is, “Shhh, it’s gonna be okay,” and squeeze him as tight as possible, but that seems to be enough.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

KHARON

She does not let go of me all night long. She discovered my darkest secret, and still, she clutched me to her and did not look at me as if I were a monster.

I hold her as I see the dawn break overhead.

My eyes close, as if I can call back the night. Because dawn means we must leave. And yes, this place was once home to nightmares, but she has made it. . . my rebirthing.

Because of her, I feel new. I will leave with a new name, as a new man. She looked into the face of my worst shame and embraced me with gentleness and understanding.

I am split open down my center. I do not know who I will be now. Except hers. Even if she will only have me for the length of her revenge, I will serve her with devotion.

My eyes squeeze shut and I try to pretend the sun hasn't risen. Just a little longer in this dream, her fast asleep in my arms. Just a *little* longer.

But only for the space of a few more breaths because being hers means I cannot be selfish. She wanted to wake with the dawn.

My rage at my father for what he did to my brother is old, and Abaddon took vengeance for me. But hers is fresh, and justice remains to be seen. Still, I remember the fury of knowing how it burns in the chest. I would give her

the same comfort she offered me last night.

Ever so gently, I brush the hair back from her forehead. Her eyes immediately blink open as her breathing changes.

“Is it morning?” she asks, alert so quickly. She has a soldier’s training. How did I not notice before? She may not be a soldier in the traditional sense, but she has been a fighter all her life.

I nod. “Dawn has just broken.”

She jerks to a sitting position, pulling out of the cocoon of my arms, then she’s a blur of motion as she gets dressed. There’s nothing else to do but pack everything up, one eye always on her as I say goodbye to our winter sanctuary.

She’s ready to go within five minutes; there’s no reason to linger. I sling the pack on my back.

I hold out my arms. “Climb onto my front and hold on tightly.”

She frowns a little as she glances at the high window but then comes towards me and throws her arms around my neck. With my bottom pair of arms, I heft her thighs around my waist and secure her to me tightly with my other two sets, then I crouch low and *leap*.

The jump is only a little more difficult with her attached to my front, especially since I have to let go of her with one pair of hands to grasp the window’s ledge, which makes her let out a little shriek, but we make it on the first try.

“Climb through,” I tell her as I hold on to the window, the bottom half of my body dangling over the chasm.

It takes her a second to unlatch her grip from around my neck, but, her breathing short, she finally manages to twist around in the narrow space of the window that barely fits my girth and pull herself up and out through. I heft myself up after her.

And then we are free, her sprawled on the snow and me crouched low. I hold out a hand to her. “Are you ready?”

She grabs my hand and pops back up to her feet.

I hold out all my arms. “Climb back on, and I will run us swiftly to the city.”

She makes a disgruntled face but then nods. “I’d say don’t run as fast as last time, but I guess that’s the point, huh?”

I smile at her. “Yes. Do not worry. I will hold tight.”

She wraps her arms around my neck again, and I revel in the close

warmth of her body despite all her layers. “I’ll close my eyes. You tell me when it’s over.”

I chuckle and tuck her against me with two lower pairs of arms. I’ll need my upper pair to help me run. Again I wrap her thighs around my waist so her feet will not drag against the ground. At my top speed, we will be at the city in no time.

“If you want me to stop, knock me on the shoulder three times. Are you ready?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says, and then I take off like a rocket through the snow.

She screams into my ear, and her arms have a stranglehold around my neck. But she makes no move to bang my shoulder, so I continue.

I race us through open fields and then through the forest path. I tear up the side of a mountain and down the other side again. We both become so covered in snow I can barely make out the color of her jacket anymore. But her arms stay tight, and she gives no signal to stop.

So I go. And go and go and go.

When she finally pounds my shoulder, I smile and slow. She’s sputtering as I release her. I lower her to the ground, anticipating her legs to be stiff. Indeed, they are. She tries to stand up and stumbles. I steady her quickly, and she immediately doubles over with her hands on her knees.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” she says.

I rub her back, instantly anxious. “I’m sorry. Perhaps I should have gone slower.”

She puts a hand to her head. “How much farther?”

I shake my head. “We are here.”

“What?” she stands up rapidly, too rapidly by the way she stumbles backward, looking around. I steady her, then point toward the city in the distance.

“Oh my god!” she cries. “You did it!” She turns around and throws her arms back around my neck.

I welcome her touch again, lamenting it as soon as I had to let her go. But she releases me almost as soon as she touches me, frowning. “What do we do now? I have to take a train to St. Petersburg. Do you really think your shadow thing will fool people?”

I smile. “People are good at not seeing what they don’t want to.”

Letting go of her, though I am loathed to, I demonstrate, stepping into shadow.

She continues staring right at me. I frown and wave my hand. She waves back. "Hello?" she says. "I can still see you."

I frown. "You shouldn't be able to."

"Well, I can."

"Hmm," I say, frowning deeper in confusion. "I am in shadow. Perhaps. . . it is because you have been to the other realm?"

She frowns. "Are you sure? What if it's just. . . I don't know, broken or something? What if we walk into the city, and everyone can see you?"

I shrug. "There's only one way to find out."

I start to walk forward. She makes a shocked noise, then runs up to join me after a few steps as I head toward the road leading into the city. "Don't take off without me. Let me lead or else I'm going to look like a crazy person arguing with the air. Assuming people can't actually see you. Then, we'd have bigger problems."

I nod, allowing her to take the lead.

"Do you know where you're going?" I quietly ask.

"The center of town. Train stations are always in the center of town."

It is solid as far as logic goes. And soon, as the road widens and we get closer to the city, I hear her breath hitch when we catch sight of the first human we've seen since we left the castle.

I go still at Ksenia's side even though I'm usually quite confident in my shadow disguise. It's still quite early in the morning, so not many people are up and about. An older man in a thick coat and winter gear only pauses briefly to look Ksenia's way before continuing down the sidewalk.

"Oh wait," she says. "You can ditch the backpack. I'll get us a private car down to St. Petersburg, but it will be a tight fit with the both of us if we try to take that, too."

I don't want to leave us without provisions, so I take out the tent and one of the sleeping bags so the backpack is all but empty on my back. She nods, and we continue into town.

The tallest buildings rise perhaps ten stories, and we see more and more people as we go. Some watch Ksenia curiously, but no glances come my way. Which makes me more curious about why Ksenia can see me when the others can't. Have I done something irreversible to her by taking her to the other realm?

Soon there is no more time for thinking, for we've come to the train station. I stay back near a pillar while Ksenia goes up to order tickets. There

are even more people here, and though I know I'm in shadow, my heart beats quickly around so many humans. They look very different than the last time I knew them.

They are dressed differently for one, and most stare down at devices in their hands. It is good because they are even less liable to investigate shadows. Yet it is disconcerting to be near so many of them at once.

I'm glad when I see Ksenia finish at the ticketing station and nod discreetly to follow her toward the train.

She waits until no one else is boarding before climbing on. I follow her up the stairs, and the entire train dips a little at my weight as I board. Quickly, I hurry up the steps. A few passengers look our way, and Ksenia just shrugs at them as if it was her weight that made the train shake.

I try to walk as lightly and quietly as possible down a narrow passage I barely fit through to our carriage car. The doorway to our compartment is even more impossible. I hand the mostly empty pack to Ksenia. Then I stick my head through first, bend sideways, suck in my breath, and essentially tug myself through with one pair of arms after another before popping out like a cork on the other side.

"Are you okay?" Ksenia whispers.

I nod, feeling claustrophobic as she shuts the doors behind us. I look around the small space. It has a sleeping pallet the length of a human body above a bench seat on each side. Ksenia sits on one bench, and I awkwardly take the bench across from her. I can take a full breath, even though the air feels somehow thinner in the small space. Looking out the window makes it feel better. A little, anyway.

"How long until we arrive?" I ask.

"It's a seventeen-hour trip."

I gulp, and she reaches forward, putting a hand on my knee. "Are you gonna be okay?"

I inhale deeply. "I have fought in the worst trenches for months on end. I can handle a tiny space for a mere seventeen hours." Then I smile and reach down to clasp her hand. "Especially if I am with you."

She shakes her head at me and smiles. "How do you always have such a good attitude?"

I laugh at that. "I've never been accused of being pleasant to be around before."

She smiles wider. "So it's me that makes you pleasant?"

I nod. "Absolutely."

She looks at the door and stands up to draw the shade as the train shifts beneath us, beginning to move. Several of my hands reach down to grasp the bench beneath me in alarm. I've seen trains before but never ridden in one.

Ksenia looks back at me and laughs lightly. "Finally, we're in my world where I'm the confident one."

I arch an eyebrow at her. "Will you be gentle with me?"

She smiles a little wickedly. "Absolutely not."

A knock comes at the door. She puts her finger over her mouth to indicate quiet, and I cling tighter to the bench. She opens the door, speaks to the attendant, hands over her ticket, then shuts the door tight and locks it. She turns back and smiles, leaning over me to pull down the shade on the window.

I frown a little because it makes the car feel even smaller. But my eyes quickly widen, forgetting everything else when she unzips her coat, slithers out of it, and pulls her shirt over her head. Presented with her sweet, round teats, my anxiety about being in the small space is suddenly forgotten.

Especially when she follows by sliding out of her pants and climbing into my lap.

My cock immediately hardens in my pants. She reaches down to unbutton them, her small hand closing around my hard shaft. "I was thinking we might distract ourselves for a while."

She leans down so that her breath is a whisper in my ear. "And I've missed you."

I groan because that's all I can manage with her holding me like that, her hot body on top of me. My hands fly to her waist, her soft, tight little bottom, and another set of hands slide beneath her thighs.

I want inside of her, but I want her ready for me. I slide the hands on her waist down so my thumbs can flutter at the soft flesh there while I drop my lips to her teats and suckle.

Her head falls back with a gasp.

I suckle her hard, teasing my rough tongue back and forth across the dark pink pebbled tip. Her thighs squirm around me.

She missed me, she said. So I will touch her well, make her body pliable and give her all the relaxation and pleasure so that if she is anxious about the revenge she must take, she can forget it for a while.

I kiss her neck. "My beautiful, beautiful one. Do you need release?" I

murmur as my thumbs really begin to massage her, feeling her sex moisten for me.

She nods, her face against my hair. “Yes,” she gasps.

Right as I feel her starting to get amped up, I withdraw my thumbs and slide one of my thick fingers down toward her entrance, massaging along the opening. Her hand on my shaft squeezes.

“I want to put you inside me,” she cries into my neck.

I slow my massage. “Is that what you really want? This will be a long train ride, as you said.” I lift my head to look at her. She’s biting her bottom lip, which just makes me want to be the one doing that. “I think you want me to take my time,” I rumble. “I think you want me in control of your pleasure.”

I dip one finger inside the slightest bit, finding a pleasure button and massaging against it so that her chest arches towards me before withdrawing again. Her mouth opens, and her eyes go hazy with pleasure. “Please,” she gasps.

“Please, what?” I murmur. “Please take charge of your pleasure?”

She nods, gasping a short breath out. “Yes. Take charge of my pleasure.”

I smile in satisfaction and lean in to kiss her as I slowly, achingly slowly, massage my finger back inside her. Her entire body trembles around me, including her hand still clutching my shaft. Gods, this will be as much sensual torture to me as it will be to her. But also, so, *so good*.

I tease my teeth along her bottom lip, and she groans.

For the next twenty minutes, I keep up my slow, torturous touches until she’s absolutely writhing and shaking on top of me. I can no longer handle her hand on my shaft. I tug her hand away from my flesh and press it to my chest, right over my heart.

Her breath hitches at this, and her other arm goes around my neck. “Kharon,” she whispers. And then it’s all she can whisper, over and over. “Kharon. Kharon. *Kharon*.”

“Yes, my love,” I whisper back, “I am here. You have given up control so well. Would you like to come?”

She shudders. “I want you inside me.”

It is all I want, too. I want to be united with her. I want to be consumed by her.

My hands, wet with her essence that has scented the entire cabin, caress her waist. I lift her just enough so that my steel-hard shaft rises between us and shake as the tip of my cock makes contact with her drenched center.

Her legs widen even further to receive me, and I hold her inner thighs, my last pair of hands squeezing her beautiful ass.

And then, I dip inside her.

Both of us groan.

I drag my thumb against her spot, rubbing down against my shaft. As her mouth drops open and I feel her start to shudder with climax, I remove my thumb and slide in another inch.

The arm around the back of my neck cinches tight so that my face is right against her soft neck. Naturally, I take the opportunity to suckle her skin there, which makes her breath hitch as I squeeze her ass again, dragging her up and down my cock that is wet with her slick.

I breathe out raggedly at feeling her clutch around me.

“Do you want to come?” I ask.

She shakes on top of me, the hand around my neck fisting in my hair. “I want to come when you want me to come.”

I smile into her throat and bring my thumb back to her sensitive spot. “Then unleash your spasms, my love. Come.”

I rub my thumbs down against her spot, repeatedly and deeply. She responds, her back arching and a cry so high-pitched I doubt it’s audible to human ears ringing out in the cabin as her pussy squeezes and clenches around me, and she finally allows herself to tumble over that cliff at my command.

And tumble she does, falling and shuddering and shaking until she’s crying and thrusting on top of me, riding me as we—

I’m breathless as my own pleasure sweeps through me, biting down on my cheek to hold onto myself and focus on her pleasure as my legs shake with how good she feels on my shaft.

Because now that I’ve let her loose, she’s an absolute wild woman on top of me, her climax going on and *on*.

I thrust deep inside and massage her and know nothing in my life will eclipse these moments of being with her, of loving her—

And then I cannot hold back anymore. She is still shuddering on top of me, but with all my willpower, I lift her off my aching shaft and set her on the bench beside me. Then I fumble for the pack and, in desperation, yank out one of the wide-mouthed bottles we used for drinking.

I begin to jerk myself, aiming my tip towards the bottle. There’s simply not enough space for the mess I would make were I to explode—

“Let me,” Ksenia says, her voice needy. She reaches over from beside me. A little stunned, I drop my hand away as both of her hands replace mine. And my eyes roll back in my head as she pumps my shaft, strong and firm. Milking me. I can barely hold the bottle in another trembling hand as the pleasure lights up my spine.

Then she reaches down between my legs and squeezes my sack—

I cannot help the small cry as I erupt. Most of it makes it in the bottle.

After I finish, I cap the bottle with shaking hands, and Ksenia immediately climbs back into my lap, collapsing against my chest, her arms thrown around me.

I clutch her to me, both of us breathing hard.

And I know in this moment, it will wrench my heart from my chest to ever let her go.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

KSENIA

We approach Uncle Pavel's compound in the dead of night after our long train ride, stopping at my stash pad to pick up all necessary sundry items. It felt good to change into my sleek black jumpsuit and strap on all my gear. I feel more like myself.

And yet, everything feels different. For one, I'm not alone. Kharon might be invisible to everyone else, but I can see him hulking large beside me as we creep in the shadows toward my uncle's compound. My brain knows no one can see him, but it sets my hair on edge, *feeling* like he's so visible.

I keep having strange thoughts that are nothing like me. What if I grabbed one of his hands, and we ran away from this horrible place and the memories of the man who took everything from me?

Then I remember just how much my uncle took from me. My *father*, who raised me to demand justice for all the wrongs life dealt. He spent his whole life trying to get back what had been taken from him. If that was his goal in life, surely I should honor him in death by doing the same? It was all he ever asked of me. To honor the family name and bring back his stolen glory.

My uncle never allowed me to visit this villa, but that didn't mean I didn't do my homework. Maybe some families wouldn't consider it normal to get blueprints on another person's property, but I always considered it my motto to be prepared.

Granted, I always assumed I might need to know the layout—including security precautions such as where all his cameras were located—in case my father and I ever visited so we felt entirely secure and safe. And honestly, I know now that something always felt off with my uncle and his paranoia. If someone tells me *not* to come someplace, *not* to look, that is exactly where I am going to investigate and poke around next.

I had the recon of this property long before I needed it.

If only I'd acted on my gut instinct and warned my father about his brother long before the snake bit him.

Guilt seizes my chest, and I know there's no turning back now. I must seek revenge. I will have the snake's head. There is no other option if I am ever to have peace.

The compound walls finally come into view, and I put a finger to my lips for silence. Kharon nods, and I crouch low as I creep forward *just* out of the camera's view, below the angle it captures. There are two cameras here—one pointed outward and one pointed toward the inner courtyard.

We already discussed the plans, so Kharon stays tightly at my back as we approach. He lifts me by my waist as I pull a knife from its sheath and quickly slice the cord leading to the back of the camera pointing at the courtyard.

As soon as it cuts the feed, I know I've set the timer on an invisible countdown clock.

Staying low and out of sight, I climb into Kharon's arms against his chest. He wraps me tight and leaps over the twelve-foot fence, easily clearing the barbed wire at the top and landing smoothly on the other side. He leaped so fast that even if we moved in sight of the camera's frame, it likely wouldn't have been visible to the naked human eye.

Plus, I imagine the guards are scrambling in response to the cut camera feed. In fact, I'm counting on it.

I stay in Kharon's arms so he can dash us across the spacious courtyard, knowing every moment counts. Instead of heading straight into the house, he races around to where the pool is. Behind us, I hear a door open, and boots hit the pavement. Soldiers head out to investigate the camera. They have no clue I'm moving at speeds no human can imagine.

I cling tightly to Kharon's neck as he makes another leap—this time to the balcony of my uncle's bedroom.

The walls are glass. I press a glass breaker against the balcony door. It

shatters instantly, and I spring through the door to the bed, gun raised. Ready to end this here and now, less than sixty seconds after it's begun.

Except my uncle isn't in bed. The covers aren't disturbed, like he hasn't been to bed yet even though it's three a.m.

Why can't people just be where they're supposed to be when I want to kill them? So inconsiderate. I huff out a frustrated breath and turn to Kharon. "Time for Plan B."

Kharon frowns but nods. I'm already turning, creeping towards the bedroom door. There's still time to salvage this.

I open the door a bit and listen. It's quiet, almost silent. There's the gentle trickle of an indoor water feature, and there, in the distance, the barest thud of bass. Aha, just what I thought. He's in the theater.

"Basement," I whisper to Kharon and take off down the stairs in that direction. The villa is huge, and the stairs open to the large expanse of a living area. To my left is a huge stone wall with water running from the second floor to the first that drops onto rocks and a little indoor pond.

I shake my head. Such excess, when my father spent his life hiding out in dives, barely scratching out an existence. And this is only *one* of my uncle's homes.

I race down the stairs, hating feeling so exposed. Kharon simply leaps down from the open loft, landing in a crouch near the pond. Soon I'm by his side. Just as we're heading toward the door to the basement, a voice calls out in Russian, "You! Stop!"

Shit. I freeze and hold up my arms, turning towards the door just in time to see Artyom, one of my father's most trusted soldiers, standing just inside the door to the courtyard with a high-powered assault rifle pointed at my chest.

His eyes widen when he sees my face. "He said you would come, but I told him you would not be so foolish."

Behind him, several more soldiers appear, several calling on their radios, and below, I hear the thumping bass cut off as my uncle is informed of my presence.

Double shit.

"Artyom, listen," I start to say, but he just shakes his head, lifting the rifle sights to his eyes.

"I have my orders."

I wish I could say we move to Plan C at that point, but the truth is, all hell

breaks loose as I yank out my weapon, and Artyom pushes the trigger, letting loose a blast of firepower.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

KHARON

I rush the bastard, jerking the fool's gun toward the ceiling as he releases his blast of bullets. Humans have become far more destructive in the last two hundred years. These rifles are much more powerful than the last time I was at war.

It still takes little effort to pluck it out of the man's hands and smash him back into his comrades with another fist. I might have sworn long ago not to take any more humans to the other realm, but he just demonstrated that he's more than happy to harm the one I love. I have no qualms about protecting her.

So as I push him back, I send him to the other realm and stamp toward the other men flooding in the double doors with their weapons of death raised. I don't bother being quiet now but let out a roar as I raise all six of my arms to reach as many of them as possible and leap.

Down we go, their souls sent to the nether-realm before their bodies hit the floor. I see confusion in the eyes of the men still outside, watching their comrades be felled by an unseen force. Only one is wise enough to drop his weapon and turn and flee. The rest come bursting through the door, already shooting.

"Get down," I shout over my shoulder to Ksenia. In my fury that they would hurt her, I thirst for their deaths. That darkness so long dormant inside

me flares back to life with vengeance. I flare all six of my arms wide to make myself the biggest shield and take the next group to the nether-realm as quickly as the others before them.

Satisfaction yawns wide inside me. I spin when there's a pile of unmoving men at my feet to see where my beloved is.

Only to find her nowhere. "Ksenia?" I roar, turning and springing toward where I last saw her.

"Dammit," I hear her voice call from down a set of stairs. Relief hits like a tide. She escaped the bullets here, but more fear strikes at the thought of her going alone into unknown dangers below. I pounce down the stairs only to find her pounding on a door with a fist.

She turns to me, her face red. "The blueprints had it wrong. The saferoom is down *here*, not in the center of the house. The paranoid bastard must have had alternate blueprints filed. Give me the backpack."

"We should leave," I say, chest heaving with adrenaline. "This did not go according to plan."

She jogs over and unzips my backpack, quickly yanking out several explosive blocks. "That's why there's Plan C. Was there more trouble upstairs?"

I want to growl at her. This is not safe. I cannot stand her being where bullets fly. "One ran away."

"And you didn't chase him?" she snaps.

"I was more concerned with finding you."

She breathes out as she places the charges she pulled from the backpack against the door. "That only means he's going to run for help and bring back reinforcements."

I did not think of that in the moment. "Even more reason to leave now. Revenge is not worth your life."

"It just means we don't have much time," she mutters. "I'm off my game." She shakes her head, and her eyes slice in my direction. "Can you go back upstairs and leave me to it? Watch in case others show up?"

My hackles rise. I will not leave her alone. There is danger here. What if she opens the door and another rifle waits, pointed at her on the other side?

"I will not leave you."

"This isn't working," she snaps, her fingers shaking as she fiddles with the blasting caps. "I can't focus with you here!"

I huff out, feeling her frustration in my chest and feeling the press of the

time she spoke of.

“Move out of the way,” I say.

She shakes her head. “What are you talking about? I need to concentrate.” Then she curses, her fingers working expertly at the wires. Outside, I hear the wail of sirens. She is right; I made a mistake letting that man leave. I have imperiled her revenge. And also her life.

So I reach out, grasp her by her waist, and, though she screams at me angrily, I lift her bodily out of the way, placing her in the stairwell. “Stay,” I command.

“I’m not a dog!” she snaps.

“I will remove the door and take this man to the nether realm,” I say roughly. “Stay here so you are not harmed.”

I thrust the backpack at her, pulling out a gas mask and handing it over.

She crosses her arms over her chest, but she must see that we are out of time, so she takes the breathing mask and backpack. “I’m so pissed off at you right now!” She hurries several steps up the stairs, crouching with her arms over her head. Good.

I go back to the door, turn my back to it, and smash the explosive device with my elbow. It feels good to let the fear in my chest outwards into action. The explosion blast knocks me forward, almost but not quite off my feet.

“Kharon!” Ksenia’s voice calls.

“I am unharmed,” I say, turning to look at the door. While a large indent was blasted into the door, it has still not been penetrated. I find one of the other explosive devices on the floor, so I pick it up, hold it against the door with one of my many hands, and smash it again with another elbow.

Again I am knocked forward.

When I turn back this time—

Gunfire explodes out of the small hole that has been blasted through the door. Fury. All I feel is fury. My fears were founded. This gunfire would have been aimed at my beloved’s face had I not been here!

I roar, reach in with my hand, and tear the twisted steel until the door comes away with a horrific metallic squeal, revealing a small, square room.

I wave away the billowing smoke from the blasts, only to be greeted by the flash of more gunfire. Stinging bullets pelt my chest, and I growl, even more infuriated.

“Bring him to me,” Ksenia calls.

I want to end him right now. Through the haze of smoke, I can just make

out the shape of a slim, pathetic man. Roaring so he can know some of the fear he caused my beloved when he attacked her and killed her father in a place they felt safe, I stomp into the small room. I grab the man by his neck, yanking his pathetic weapon easily out of his grasp with one of my hands and tossing it into the corner.

Behind me, a noise sounds—some mechanical song ringing on a loop. I hear Ksenia's voice asking something in response. Words I can hear but don't understand about why I didn't tell her I brought a *sell fone* in the pack.

I don't respond because I'm a little busy finally laying hands on her uncle. He cries out and gurgles in my grasp, eyes wide and terrified as he's lifted into the air by a force he cannot see.

I am pleased by his fear. The animal inside me I have not let out in many years feasts on his terror. My rage builds, waiting to be unleashed in satisfaction like it was upstairs. I will be what I was born to be again and send this creature to—

But just then, a high-pitched scream sounds from the corner of the room. I turn to see a small child in a dressing gown looking terrified as I raise the man I can only assume to be her father high into the air by his throat.

Chapter Thirty

KSENIA

What the *hell*? Is that a *kid*?

I hold the still-ringing cell phone I dug out of a front pocket in the backpack and run down the stairs.

I can only blink in shock when I see Kharon holding my uncle by the throat, staring at a little girl cowering and crying in the corner. She can't be more than five years old if that.

"Who is that?" I cry. The phone keeps going off, blaring in the sudden silence of the room. I can still hear the sirens in the distance, getting closer.

"My daughter," my uncle croaks, hands scrabbling against Kharon's grip around his neck. "*Mercy.*"

He hid the fact that he had a daughter from us. Because he planned to betray us all along.

"Like the mercy you showed me and my father?" I scream at him, then push a button on the side of the phone to silence it. It only starts ringing again moments later. My eyes ping all around the room. We don't have time for any of this.

The girl cries even louder. A cold part of my mind whispers, *so what if she's collateral damage?* The job you do, you always knew this was a risk. And if ever a target was worth it. . .

But then I blink, my whole body starting to shake at the coldness of that

logic.

Am I really going to kill her father in front of her?

Just like they did to my mother in front of me all those years ago? Are we really going to start this cycle of violence all over again?

I walk past Kharon, shoving the phone into one of his hands. “Turn him towards me so she can’t see,” I hiss, barely sure of my decision even as I’m making it.

Kharon spins and does as I ask, flipping my uncle and holding him beneath his armpits so he dangles like a rag-doll in front of me. Kharon’s arm shakes with rage. Uncle Pavel keeps twisting to look behind him, unable to see what or who is holding him up.

“Who are you talking to?” he demands.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, Uncle,” I say, swiftly pulling a knife and holding it to his stomach so his daughter can’t see. “I want you to remember this moment and know how *very much* I want to gut you where you hang. I’ve envisioned this moment a hundred times. You *know* I know how to make it hurt. I’d enjoy watching you squirm, beg, and cry as you died like the rat you are.”

He wets himself, and I smile.

“You saw how easy it was for me to get to you today. The best part is you’ll never even understand how.” To Kharon, I say, “Give him a little shake to remind him of the power I wield. Power he’ll never understand.”

Kharon shakes him like a dog until his teeth rattle and then drops him to the floor.

I lean down. “No matter how many men you surround yourself with or what hole you crawl into, you’re never safe from me. And if you foolishly decide to come for me, you’ll be snatched from the land of the living by forces you could never hope to comprehend. Don’t misunderstand. This is not mercy. This is you using your daughter as a shield, which only works once.”

I turn and sprint from the room and up the stairs. As soon as I reach the top, I all but leap into Kharon’s arms. That damn phone is still going off, but obviously, he can easily hold it and me as he runs and leaps out the door right as the Politsiya arrive. He’s faster than the armed officers spilling out of their cars, thank god. Ending up in a Russian prison is not how I envisioned ending the night.

They lift their guns, and bullets start coming our way. I’m not sure if they can see me magically floating through the air or just because of the damn

ringing cell phone. Either way, Kharon shields me with his back, tucking me closer against his chest as he sprints across the back courtyard, clearing the fence and not stopping.

His motions are so fluid, and I've finally become somewhat used to this mode of travel. As long as I squeeze my eyes shut and cling to him, I'm not too bothered. Especially because he does provide a very efficient method of escape.

He flies down an alleyway that would be narrow for a car, and when I next peek an eye open, I see that we're in downtown St. Petersburg and he's scaling up the side of a high-rise. I slam my eyes shut again and cling even tighter to his neck, my hair whipping around in the wind as we go higher and higher.

He finally stops when we're on the roof.

"You should have let me kill him!" he roars. Then he lifts the phone. "What is this noise-making abomination? It draws attention. I will crush it!"

"It's not mine," I say, landing on wobbly feet as he lets me down and holds out the phone. "It was in the backpack. Your family must have packed it."

He frowns down at the device, which has just started ringing again.

"Just answer it," I say tersely, hands going to my head as I start to pace, not sure what to do now that I've failed in my revenge. "That's the quickest way to stop it making noise." I'm furious and upset, and all I want to do is climb back into Kharon's arms because he's the only thing that makes sense in this stupid world.

"Answer?" He stares down at the thing, befuddled.

I push the green button, then hand it back to him.

"Finally!" I hear a voice shout from the other end. I accidentally put it on speakerphone, but that might be easiest.

"Romulus?" Kharon asks.

"Brother, get back here! Now! We're under attack!"

Chapter Thirty-One

KHARON

My attention is divided. I'm still trying to keep watch over the top of the building to see if we are being followed—Ksenia must be kept safe at all costs—but my brother's words finally sink in. My eyes widen. "What do you mean. Who? How?"

Hannah's voice comes next over the small device. "We don't know who. We just know that all of Romulus's wards started going nuts ten minutes ago. Someone's trying to break in. Someone who can use angel runes and attack Romulus's wards."

"Are you and the baby safe?" I demand.

"We're heading down to the dungeon now."

"Get back here," comes Abaddon's voice. "Now!"

"I'm on my way," I say urgently. "Brother? Brother?"

"I think they hung up," Ksenia says, taking the device back. She's trembling and holding her arms as she paces on the roof. Is she afraid of me now? Of what I became back in the basement with her Uncle and the child?

She saw me for the monster I am. Self-loathing is thick in my throat. I swore to myself long ago I would never become that creature again. I allowed myself to be locked away so that all would be kept safe from a monster such as me.

"You should go," she says, only confirming my worst fears. "If they call

back, you can answer by hitting this button.” She points to a small green picture on the device. “And if you want to call them, push here and here.”

She shows me something incomprehensible. My head is too full. I must go. And yet I cannot leave her.

“What about you?” I ask. In the distance, there are still sirens. “They are looking for you.” How can I leave her? Even if she is afraid of me now, even if I failed her, I cannot let her be harmed. I will die first.

“I’ll be fine,” she says, waving a hand. “I’ve gotten out of tough spots before.”

I shake my head. This is unacceptable. “I will take you out of the city.”

She looks around, biting her bottom lip. “I don’t want to slow you down.”

“You do not slow me.” And then, before she can argue more, I draw her into my arms. If she thinks I can go to help my family while leaving her in peril, she does not understand me at all. I would be useless to them, too frantic with worry over her.

Perhaps it will be the last time I hold her. She clings to me, and I secure her tightly against me as I leap from roof to roof and make my way across the city, further away from the seeking sirens. I head towards the forest I see in the distance, feeling Ksenia’s arms tighten around me as I finally head back down one of the tall buildings, only relaxing once we’re on flat ground again.

Everything has gone wrong, I should not be focusing on the sweetness of her embrace, but I can only inhale her scent. Terrified this will be my last memory.

It’s easier to move quickly once we’re in the forest, heading north. After a time, she bangs my shoulder. It is the prearranged sign we have to stop, but I think she will say to let her go, and we are not far enough from the city yet. That is what I tell myself anyway. In truth, I am not ready to let her go. So I continue to run.

I run her north for perhaps an hour, at the fastest speed I dare with her in my arms. Only when the dawn begins to break do I allow her down.

We’re in one of the thick forests that blurs the lines between nations. Ksenia should be able to get to safety from here, though I hate to leave her in the wilderness again.

“This device,” I say, handing the *sell fone* to her. “It is modern. It will have directions on it?”

“But what if your family calls again?”

“I am going back to them. I can only move as fast as I can move. I will

not leave you directionless.”

She nods even though she’s just gotten back on her own feet, and I can see she’s a bit shaky.

I want to pull her back into my arms, but I’m torn, pulled by my family’s distress.

Either she’s thinking the same thing. . . or she is eager to say goodbye because she takes a step back from me. “I should let you go.” But then her eyes get watery as they lift. “Goodbye.”

She nods repeatedly, her head bobbing up and down quickly, and the tears spill down her cheeks.

I want to say more words. About how she has become the most important thing in the world to me though I have known her so short a time. About how she has shown me, who is so acquainted with death, what it means to truly live. About how I wish I could spend *all* of my life with her, my beloved.

Instead, I bow, all my arms at my side to keep from grabbing her back up again, then turn and sprint away.

* * *

I run for many, many hours without ceasing. I must make up the distance the train brought us plus the two days Ksenia and I walked and ran. It is much faster going on my own, but as quickly as I can move, I am no winged creature.

The sun crests in the sky and falls again. I run up the side of one mountain, down, and up and down another.

I am finally beginning to feel fatigue set in when I recognize the landscape itself, no longer navigating only by the stars. I am close to home. But what will I find after the many hours I’ve been out of contact with my family?

I approach the castle slowly.

Nothing appears amiss. There’s no war of angel runes crashing or battle that I can observe. And yet it all feels very, very *wrong* as well, in a way I cannot put my finger on.

And then I see it—or at least *something*.

There’s a broken window in the dining hall. I step into shadow and lope up to the window for a better view.

All the breath leaves my lungs as soon as I look inside.

My brothers, Abaddon and Remus/Romulus, are bound, hissing and spitting as they fight the chains they are tied with. Hannah, as well, is bound tightly to a chair. I do not see the baby, but now that I'm close, I can hear her crying from a nearby room.

And there, in the center of all of them, is something I can believe even less.

It is Layden, towering over them.

The brother we thought long dead.

Chapter Thirty-Two

KHARON

“Let us go, brother!” Abaddon shouts as I watch in shadow through the window. “We did not know you lived!”

But Layden, the one I remember to be the kindest and tenderest of us, only turns on him with his face set in a mask of fury. “You did not check very hard.”

“We waited a week before burying you!”

“And yet, as our Father tortured me, tearing the wings from my back, what did you do? What did you do as I sat there, *begging* you all for help? Nothing!” Layden shouts right in Abaddon’s face. “When he poured scorching, searing, *burning* liquid hell-metal straight from the forge over my back to ensure my wings would never grow again, *what did you do?*”

“Nothing!” Abaddon shouts back. “We did nothing because he beat us into dogs who obeyed even as he did the worst things to us. You were the only one courageous enough to fight back. I’m sorry, brother, you’ll never know how sorry—”

My hand slams to the window sill as my brother spills the apology I wish was coming from my lips.

But Layden is having none of it.

“So sorry that you then leaped to my rescue? No. Still, you stood by as he lifted the sword and stopped my beating heart.”

“I slayed him moments later in vengeance.”

“And you think that matters?” Layden shouts. “I had already become *this*.” He gestures wildly at his wingless back. “And then you buried me in the cold ground.”

“I tried to revive you. I spent hours at your side pouring my healing into you. We thought you were dead. That the hell metal sword had—”

“It did not. But you were so quick to dispose of me that I spent the next year in the earth, and when my spark finally restarted my heart, I found I’d been buried alive.”

“I’m so sorry, brother—”

“Do not call me that!” Layden cries. “We were never brothers. We were monstrous mistakes, borne of a madman and a thief. And tonight, I will rectify it all. I will fix what has always been broken. Our entire existence.”

Remus cackles from where he’s chained to the chair beside Abaddon as Layden bends down to draw something on the stone floor in chalk.

“What do you mean. Bro—” Abaddon stops himself. “Layden. What does that *mean*?”

Layden lifts his head from where he’s bent in front of them, pausing his drawing for a moment to answer. “It means that we were never meant to be in this realm. I learned much after I finally clawed my way out of the ground. Our ancestors were only one of many parasites that found this plane of existence. Most of them eventually found the grace and conscience to realize their mistake in coming here and return to where they came from. Except for, of course, the one who created us and called himself our father. But I can fix it. I can send us all back there. Back to the Great Hall.”

Remus cackles louder as Abaddon demands, “What of my wife? My daughter?”

“Your wife can remain; she has nothing to do with this. But your daughter must be taken through the circle to the Great Hall too since she bears angel spark.”

“Abaddon,” Hannah cries, looking at him beseechingly.

And I know I must act. I have to stop Layden. He cannot separate Abaddon from his family and his wife from her child. He is as mad as I was and knows not what he does.

But right as I prepare to launch myself through the window, a voice from right behind my ear stops me. “Do not be a fool, son. You’ll just get yourself chained down like your brothers.”

I spin around in shock at the voice that has haunted my nightmares, only to discover that my brother Layden is not the only ghost of the night.

Because there, standing behind me, looking older and more diminished but still plainly the tyrant I always knew, is my also supposedly long-dead *father*.

Chapter Thirty-Three

KHARON

My father looks past me to the sight through the window. He has white hair and a long grizzled beard and wears the clothing of this land. I blink, sure I cannot be seeing what I am seeing.

And yet, when he speaks again, I know he's no apparition. "I should have used an iron fist with that one like I did with the rest of you. Look what happens when you get soft-hearted."

I can only sputter, all my innards turning to jelly at the sight of him.

Finally, he turns his eyes back to me. "Happy to see me, Thing? Don't gawk. We don't have much time before all my hard work disappears into another realm. Pull your jaw off the ground. We have work to do."

My father is alive. Both my father and brother, who were dead, are somehow in front of me absolutely *not* dead.

"We burned your body," I gasp.

My father just tilts his head judgmentally. "I am a god. And you, more than any, know we are made of far sterner stuff than mere blood and bone. All I needed was an ember in the ashes to grow back from, and an ember remained. So I remained. It took many, many years, but I grew again to my former glory, and here I am. Now, if you're done interrogating me, we need to get in there and stop your foolish brother—"

He takes a step forwards. Three of my arms shoot out to stop him.

“You cannot simply return after all you have done!” I spit.

“After all *I* have done,” he says in whispered accusation. “Your brother tried to murder me!”

“After you killed our brother!”

He snorts and gestures toward the window. “Not well enough, apparently. And are you really choosing him over me when he’s trying to send everyone you love into oblivion? Because you really think they’d welcome your kind in the Great Hall? I might not have been able to kill any of you here, but believe me, they have other methods there. And they’re very particular about purity. Think of Abaddon’s consort’s *child*.”

My chest gets tight, and I look back inside. Layden is still crouched down, drawing on the floor.

“Can he even do it? What he claims?”

“He speaks the truth. There are other powers. I watched him fight your brothers, and he had power beyond that of the angelic kind. He has learned other paths in his time away.”

I swear harshly.

“Think of your brother’s family,” he says. “And your own consort. Where is she?” My head snaps up as my father looks around.

“How do you know about her?” My top hand snaps out to grasp his neck.

Even though I’m holding his throat in a vise grip, he only grins. “Did you not like the present I sent running your way, son? Where is the gratitude? Have you gotten her with kit, yet?”

My brain blanks out for a moment as my hand squeezes more, making him sputter as all sorts of horrific connection points fire in my brain.

Of course.

The man in the woods with a cabin who provided aid to Hannah many months ago when she first became pregnant. Abaddon has searched for months without being able to find it.

That along with the large hunting cabin Ksenia spoke of. . . the place where her uncle betrayed her father, which we *also* couldn’t find?

They were either one and the same, or my Father’s been very busy.

He always did love to consider himself something of an architect. Matter manipulation in this realm is one of his gifts. It was he who raised this castle in the middle of nowhere, delighting himself by adding floor after floor we could never hope to fill simply because it suited his fancy.

And he’s been able to cloak what he’s built even from our eyes—the only

one who would be powerful enough to do so. It's what's protected this castle from outsiders, what kept Abaddon from being able to find the shack when he searched so long, and Ksenia from finding the lodge where her father died when she went back to look.

"Why?" I ask with a devastation I shouldn't feel. His cruelty and machinations should have stopped shocking me long ago, but for him to not only suddenly appear like this but then find out it was *him* who had a part in the worst thing that ever happened in Ksenia's life—

"The offspring, of course," Father says as if I'm a fool not to have come to this obvious conclusion.

My stomach roils at his words. And immediately, I think back to the time I was not careful enough to pull out and accidentally gushed inside Ksenia. We plane-jumped almost at that exact moment, I try to calm myself. So it should be fine. And I would have scented if a kit had been implanted, right? Although it might have been too soon to tell.

I wrack my brain. Although it felt like I'd lived a lifetime in the week I'd spent with her, that particular moment had only been. . . two *days* ago. How soon was I able to scent Hannah's pregnancy?

"Your brother's offspring, I'll remind you," my father cuts into my racing thoughts, "is in imminent danger." He points to the window.

I spin back around to look in the window again. Whatever Layton has been drawing on the floor looks almost complete. It's some sort of large, elaborate circle with lines crisscrossing inside. He stands up, and rune fire springs from his fingertips to light several candles on stands around the circle. My brothers fight against their chains, but whatever magic Layden has used to keep them pinned is working.

If my father weren't here, I would have burst in already.

But this is too important to do wrong. And if Layden has some power that bested Romulus's runes and Abaddon's might, what can I alone do?

So I turn to my father and ask through gritted teeth, "What do you suggest?"

I hate the way he grins in satisfaction, as if he's been waiting for me to ask this very question. He's a manipulator to the end.

"You are the only one who can plane jump. A blade may not take your brother to the deathly plane. . ." he leans in, grin widening, "but *you* can. Transport him there and leave him. Finally, you can be of some worth."

All the breath leaves my chest at what my father suggests.

But I nod because there's no more time.

"I will enter and provide a distraction," he says, and I see delight enter his eyes as he steps in front of me.

Then there's no more time. Quickly I drop into shadow as he leaps straight through the glass into the room.

"Your father returns!" he proclaims loudly as all heads in the room swing in his direction.

Chapter Thirty-Four

KHARON

I slip through the shattered window behind him. I move quickly out of the way as Layden's eyes widen in what looks like terror, and he starts firing runes at our Father. He's immediately knocked several steps backward when Father lifts his hands to return his own rune fire.

In shadow, I move around the room behind Layden. It would be easy for me to lay hands on him and take him away, locked in rune battle as he is with our Father. But now that I am close to my little brother who I already betrayed once. . .

I look at my other brothers, chained to chairs not far away. They yank and jerk at their chains so that their muscles bulge. Though the chairs and chains rattle, they do not burst apart. The furniture must have some additional magic because the wood would be nothing to my brother's strength. That's when I note that around each of the chairs are additional, smaller circles.

"Finish it," my father calls, which makes Layden swing around, looking behind him. He looks right past me. But seeing him so close, I know I cannot do what my Father demands. I've spent two centuries grieving the last time I did not stand up for Layden.

So instead, I run towards Abaddon. I smudge the circle around his chair with my foot, and immediately, he bursts free of his bonds. I rush to do the same for Remus, who has begun cackling in delight at the chaos.

“You fool!” my father screams.

Together, as brothers, we all advance on my father. Remus on one side of Layden, Abaddon—after quickly flying Hannah to the other end of the room for safety—at the other. I stay in shadow, for not even my father can see me in this form. I scamper around the back of him.

I watch the surprise in Layden’s eyes as he looks to each side to find his brothers there.

Father stays facing my brothers, firing rune after rune. Abaddon lifts off the floor. Like me, he is weak in rune-magic, only able to call enough to provide a basic shield. But that does not stop him from flying toward our father with two hell-metal chains as our brothers continue exchanging rune fire.

Father lands a hit that Remus isn’t able to block, and he’s blasted off his feet into the wall, making a crater in the stone from the impact.

Abaddon attacks from above, hurling the chains around Father’s neck so they wrap around several times, dragging him down to the ground. On his back, Father lifts a hand and hits Abaddon directly in the chest with a bright blast of white-blue runes. Abaddon explodes backward.

I grab the chains still wrapped around my father’s neck with several arms and run towards the large circle Layden created.

Father gasps and grabs the chains strangling him as I drag him across the floor. He reaches a hand out, blasting runes outwards. He can’t see me, but I’m large, and eventually, a blast hits me in the leg, flinging me forward and knocking me out of shadow as I tumble end over end, landing face-first right outside the circle.

Layden is there, standing in front of me and absorbing the next concentrated blast my father sends my way with a bright shield.

“You disappointing cunt!” Father screams as he climbs back to his feet, throwing off the chains. “Never could do a goddamned thing right, you fucking *thing*! You’ll pay for this. I’ll make you rue the day I ever pulled you misformed disappointments from the fucking forge! All of you!” he screams.

This is right when Abaddon and Romulus come flying at him from behind like a rocket, each catching an arm, lifting him, and dropping him into the center of the circle Layden created.

Layden is ready, both hands extended as he begins to speak words I don’t understand.

The fire from the candles shoots to the ceiling as my father looks around

in confusion, standing and trying to shoot runes at us. But they fall short once they reach the ring of the circle. And then he lifts off the ground. He's shouting, but we can't hear it. The noise of a rushing wind has filled the space. A tornado rushes around within the circle, tearing at our father's clothing and hair.

He whips around, holding out his arms and raising more runes. They're torn from his fingertips the moment he raises them, made impotent.

The wind whips so fast, a bright white light erupting, and I have to shield my eyes, the roar growing even louder. Like a train going past, only mere feet away.

And then, silence.

I drop my hands and look in astonishment to find the center of the circle empty. There's a slight black scorch mark, but that is all that remains.

"Is he—" Romulus asks.

"Gone," Layden answers. "Sent home to the Great Hall."

Romulus's head spins on its axis, and Remus's cackle fills the room. He laughs and laughs and laughs.

"Hannah," Abaddon whispers, then lifts off his feet and flies out of the room, no doubt to check on his wife and daughter.

I look to the brother I thought I'd lost, pull him into my many arms, and say, "Welcome home, baby brother."

He's stiff in my arms for long moments before finally relaxing. "I still do not forgive you."

I chuckle at that and pull back. "As long as you are alive, I welcome a long, long life of your bitterness."

Chapter Thirty-Five

KSENIA

What the hell am I supposed to do now? I look around the small, off-the-books safe house and feel. . . *everything*. Now that I've had a day alone to process shit, it hits me like a rushing waterfall. Not that I've ever been especially good at processing.

Why did I just say *goodbye* like that? Why didn't I tell him—
Tell him what?

I pace back and forth in the small front room of the Helsinki apartment. Usually, all I want is to be alone, but after only hours alone, I've started feeling stir-crazy. For lack of anything else to do, I took apart and cleaned every weapon I brought and sharpened all my knives. Then I began the pacing.

Emotions, that usually feel absent or out of reach, suddenly bombard me. Flashes of full-body rage at my uncle hit me every so often. Heat hits my face, then chokes my throat and tightens my chest.

There's the fury at my uncle. At myself for not killing him when I had the chance. Do I really think a monster like that deserves to live because he spat some semen out that happened to impregnate someone once? How is that fair?

Yet every time I replay the moment and the look in that little girl's face, I know there was no other choice.

Which just makes the rage bubble higher until I want to tear something apart because it feels like— Like—

Like he's won!

And then I feel the gutting feeling of loss when I realize Kharon's gone, and I don't know if I'll ever see him again. I've been alone all my life except for my father, and in such a short time, he felt like—

Family.

He feels like family to me, and I . . . think I *love* him.

I flop back on the bed, my arms covering my eyes. What do I even know about love?

I turn over and cover my head with a pillow. What kind of daughter am I? Instead of mourning my father and getting revenge for him, I was off falling in *love*? And now I don't know if I'm more love-sick or grief-ridden, and that feels so messed up.

I squeeze my eyes shut, but sleep doesn't come. I rarely have problems with insomnia in my calm, ordered life, even when globe-trotting and studiously preparing for my next hit.

But now all I can do is twist and turn on my mattress, ruminating on my many failures and longing for the pressure of six blue arms that had the uncanny ability to make me feel like everything would be okay. Somehow he brought me the comfort I'd never felt anywhere except fleetingly as a child when my mother used to rock me to sleep.

My father wasn't exactly the cuddly type, and by then, I was too touch-sensitive anyway.

I wrap my arms around myself and long for Kharon so hard, feeling so desperately alone. How is that possible when I've been alone for so much of my life? Why do I suddenly *feel* it so acutely? And now I don't even know how to find him again!

His brothers were so paranoid that I not be able to find their castle again that they wouldn't even tell us about the phone with GPS they'd hidden in the backpack for emergencies. Even though it would have been far simpler to have just given it to me instead of allowing their brother to walk me back to civilization. Maybe if I called back, he'd answer?

Then I shake my head against the pillow. He's a mythical creature, a horseman of the apocalypse, an all-powerful being! What would he want with me?

Is he even okay? What was the emergency back at the castle? He's

invincible. He *has* to be okay.

I squeeze my eyes shut even tighter. Far better to put him out of my mind. I am only me, alone in the world again.

Except *truly* alone this time. No more interludes when my father pops up from exile to break the monotony.

And that will be better. Look what horrific chaos these emotions are. I want them gone. I want to be a machine.

No hopes, no dreams. I want to be as cold and functional as the Ronin blade I was sharpening earlier.

Reciting blade types always calms down, and I start running through my favorites. Le Picoer is a favorite pinky ring blade, I love my wickedly curved La Griffe, then you get into your folding knives like the Buck, one of the best known folding knives in the world. My eyes get heavier and heavier, falling shut as I recite them.

Straight razors can make a wicked clean cut, but the Bowie knife's a classic for a reason. Then there's the Ka-bar... and Randal knives...

I sit up, blinking, and lift a hand to shield my eyes from the bright sun. There's soft grass beneath me. I immediately come to attention, jerking to a sitting position and looking around. I'm in paradise.

How the hell am I back here? Am I dreaming? I must be dreaming.

I slap myself hard across the face, but it doesn't wake me up.

"What the hell," I whisper, standing up. Obviously, I'm dreaming. It's just a *really* realistic dream, and my memory did an excellent job of recreating the place.

Right down to the smell wafting from the fruit trees on the nearby hills. Usually, my dreams aren't so vivid. Though, what do I know? Maybe my dreams are always so vivid when I'm in them. I just can't remember them when I wake up.

I look down at myself. You'd have thought my dream self could have been more imaginative in its dream attire than what I went to bed in, but whatever. Camo pants and a black shirt will have to do. I tug off my black socks to feel the soft grass between my toes. Since I'm here, I might as well enjoy it. Anything's better than how crappy I felt before I fell asleep. I tilt my face back and roll up my sleeves to feel the sun on my skin.

And then I feel a—

A *tug*. Low in my guts. Like before, but also not. I turn and look towards the hill. There's a cluster of bright souls, one standing alone, a little apart

from them.

A woman, I think. She's far away, but it seems like she's looking. . . in *my* direction. There's something familiar about her I can't quite put my finger on.

"Mom?" The cry comes from my throat, and I stumble toward her. Then I'm running, sprinting across the grass. She comes toward me, too, a calm, slow walk, but definitely in my direction.

I think it will be horrible, like with Dad, but when I get close, she's full of light, glowing from within, and has such a big, peaceful smile.

"Mom!" I cry. I try to throw my arms around her, but they go right through, and I sob. She extends her hand towards my cheek, and I swear I feel it, a gentle warmth against my skin.

"I've missed you," she says, and her voice is soft and musical.

I cry harder, my chest and throat aching.

"I miss you, too," I sob, barely able to get the words out. "And now Dad's gone, too. Everything's a mess, and I'm so alone. I don't know what I'm doing."

"My beautiful daughter," she whispers, holding her other hand to my cheek so that she's cupping my face. "You were the best of us. If you remain, so does hope."

"I can't do this without you," I cry, wishing she could hold me. "I never could."

She shakes her head, her smile still soft. "Oh, my beloved. You are stronger than you think. And your path has only begun." Then she nods over my shoulder.

"What?" I ask, confused as I turn to look.

I see Kharon running towards me on his knuckles at full blast. It's as if my desire alone has brought him back to me.

"You can visit me again," my mother says. "Now go."

"Mom!" I cry, but she turns and heads back up the hill just as Kharon reaches me.

"How are you here?" he asks.

At first there's only my confused rush of joy at seeing him. Then I think, of course he's here in my dream. I was just thinking of him and my mother before I fell asleep. I throw myself into his many arms.

Like always, all six close around me. But then he immediately sets me back on my feet and releases me. "Ksenia, answer me. What has happened?"

He sounds worried. Really worried.

And he starts looking all over my body, searching like he's a doctor looking for injury.

"I'm fine," I laugh, wiping tears from the impromptu dream manifestation of my mom—it felt so real—as I pull away from him. "This is just a dream."

The worried look comes back to his face. "What do you mean, a dream? Ksenia, how did you get here? Did—" He gulps a huge breath. "Did your uncle find you?" And then he falls to his knees in front of me.

I reach for his shoulders, confused. "No. No! I just fell asleep and—"

But then I blink. He thinks I'm dead. He thinks I'm here because I'm dead. Wait, am I actually— What if my uncle *did* find me and murdered me in my sleep?

"Kharon, I don't know what's going on," I say. "But you're scaring me. I was just going to sleep, and then I was here. I thought it was a dream." I swing around to watch my mother's retreating form. Wait, is he saying—

I look back at him. "Am I really *here*?"

"Where are you?" he demands. "On the other plane. Tell me where you are."

I blink, so confused. "I'm in Helsinki. I'd know if I was dead!" Wouldn't I? I blink, but Kharon just winks out of existence in front of my eyes.

"Hey!" I say, waving my hands where he just was. "What the hell?!" I run forward, then let out a yell of frustration. Which feels good, so I scream really loud.

I turn around, all but jogging in circles for several minutes. I try to look for my mom, but she's nowhere to be found.

And then, as I stare up at the sky, it's suddenly hard to swallow. I frown and put a hand to my throat.

I cough, but that doesn't help. . . I'm choking, unable to breathe or swallow—

Which is when I startle awake—

Only to find myself back in my bedroom in the tiny Helsinki apartment with Uncle Pavel's hand around my throat.

Fuck. I knew it was all just a dream.

I scramble for the gun I keep at my bedside, but another of my uncle's men catches my hand, slamming it painfully against my bedside table.

Uncle Pavel laughs, and I wince when he spits on my cheek. "Not so big and mighty now. I don't know what tricks you had in St. Petersburg, but my

men have been watching you ever since you came into the city, and you are all alone. No one and nothing will save you now.”

His hand around my throat squeezes. “And you will learn that *no one* threatens Pavel and lives.”

Maybe it wasn't a dream—it was a premonition. Because apparently, I'm about to join my mother and father in the afterlife.

Chapter Thirty-Six

KHARON

“**Y**ou must take me to her,” I yell at Abaddon as I bound down the stairs to the dungeon, shoving the door open. “She is in danger; there is no time to spare.”

Abaddon looks up from where he’s sitting in front of Layden, who’s chained to the wall in the space where I spent two centuries. Our brief, happy reunion yesterday was cut short when Abaddon clapped chains on our brother’s wrists and dragged him down to the dungeon. Though he had helped send our father back to the Great Hall, Abaddon wasn’t quick to forget or forgive Layden’s threats to his family.

Hannah and I spent all day trying to convince him differently, but he wouldn’t budge where threats to his wife and daughter were concerned.

Romulus had been absent most of the day, and Remus was no help, delighting in the chaos brought by Layden’s return.

But none of that matters now.

Abaddon turns to look at me, frowning.

“My consort,” I say, even though I don’t know that’s what we are to each other. But it’s language that might resonate with him and get him moving faster. “I need to go to her. I never should have left her.”

He must see the panic on my face; it says something about the change in our relationship that he immediately nods and stands. He can fly me there in

an hour, and I pray to gods that I don't believe in it will be fast enough.

"I can take you there instantly," Layden says from behind us as I'm about to shut the door.

"What?" I shove the door back open and return to my prodigal brother. "How?"

"I told you. I have found many magics in my time away. If you let me up to my bag, I could take you there in the blink of an eye."

I turn to Abaddon and yank the key to Layden's chains from around his neck. Abaddon growls, but I ignore him as I stalk back to the wall.

"Do not!" Abaddon roars in command.

"You will have to learn locking us to walls is no solution anyway," I say back as I release the locks around Layden's wrists. I grasp his hand to pull him up, and once my youngest brother is on his feet, I glare at him straight in the eye. "Her life may be in danger. Do not pull a trick, or I will do worse than chain you to a wall."

Layden's eyes narrow. "And one wonders why I put off this homecoming."

"Trust works both ways," I say in earnest, my words quick. "If you help me protect my consort, you will have mine. Forever. I make an oath to you."

His brows furrow as if he is not sure he can trust my word.

"When have you known me to speak false?" I demand. "There is no time. Decide if you will help me or not. If you will not, I'm wasting time."

He breathes out. "I will. Come."

I turn and sprint up the stairs. Layden comes behind me, Abaddon huffing his displeasure at the scene as he follows in the rear. Likely not wanting to take his eyes off Layden.

At the top of the stairs, I break off into the dining room. Layden's bag is where he dropped it beside the blackened circle our father was sent back through yesterday. Remus is bent over it, poking through the contents.

"Hey," Abaddon calls. "Get away from that."

Remus's head spins, and we're faced with Romulus. "What's happening?"

"I think Ksenia's in trouble. Layden says he can take me to her."

Romulus arches an eyebrow, moving away from the bag on the floor. Layden immediately bends over, rummaging around and pulling out several small burlap bags tied with dark ribbon. He hands one to me. "Stand back," he orders.

“What do I—” I start, but he answers before I finish asking.

“Say the place you are going, picture it in your mind, and then smash that to the floor at your feet. It only works if you have been there before. Have you been?”

“I think so.” The name she said sounded a little different, but I think it was the town I knew as Helsing. I can only hope I can follow her scent I know so well once I am in the city. From what I remember, it was a small town.

I waste no more time. Picturing St. Nicholas’s Cathedral, a big white church that had only barely been built when I’d last been in that city, I speak “Helsing” and smash the small burlap bag against the floor with as much force as I can manage.

I’m not sure what I expect. Half of me thinks it is just a bag of potpourri and my brother is taking revenge against me by getting my hopes up. But as soon as the bag makes contact, white light bursts from the floor, enveloping me. And then it’s sort of like I’m plane-jumping. . . except I’m still in my body as my feet drop out from under me and my stomach spins wildly. I’m falling, white light a blitz around me.

And then I’m *there*, slamming into the cobbles in front of the church.

All around me, screams erupt. Of course they do. I forgot to step into shadow before I left. Even if I had, I’m not sure I could have kept it while stepping through whatever portal I just traveled through. I leap to my feet, immediately cloaking myself as I flee the square and the humans who have startled back like scattering birds.

I cannot worry about them and immediately lift my nose as I begin to run. I may not look as animal as my leonine brother, but I have the nose of a bloodhound. A supernatural bloodhound.

I’m disoriented as I spin this way and that in a city that is far larger and busier than I last remember. Horseless carriages spit black smoke, clogging the streets. St. Nicholas’s Cathedral is still there, but all around it are buildings so tall I can barely see the sky.

How am I to find my Ksenia in all this madness? What if I fail her as I did Layden all those years ago? Impotent to help when she needs me?

I stumble backward, overwhelmed by one smell after another.

Ksenia, my heart cries, my hands lifting to my head as I spin around uselessly again. *Where are you?*

There’s nothing to do but commit to one direction and see if I can catch

her scent. So I do. I start running as fast as I can, inhaling deeply as I go.

The assault on my senses doesn't get better, and I cough, choking on the foul emissions from the human's machines. I understand more clearly why my ancestors deserted this plane. But I cannot let my desperation get the better of me. And it's a little better once I get to a smaller street where it's quieter.

Right as I sprint down the crowded sidewalk, an invisible phantom knocking into humans here and there who I cannot be careful enough to avoid, suddenly I catch not a scent, but a *feeling*, that stops me cold.

I feel a tugging.

A tugging from beneath my ribs, and I stop in my tracks, eyes wide.

Is that—?

I've only ever had this feeling described to me by souls in the bright heavenly plane when I asked once how they knew to congregate with others who had been their family on Earth. They described it as a string that's tied beneath their lowermost rib, tugging them toward their own.

This is what I feel now, in the center of this mad city, pulling me in the opposite direction I have been running. I certainly never imagined one could feel it in this plane, but I don't question.

I turn on my heel and sprint the other direction, trying to close out all else except the sensation of the delicate pull.

If I feel the tugging, does that mean she is still here? That I'm not too late?

I sprint faster, knuckles to the sidewalk as I speed towards my beloved. Not long later, I finally catch her scent in the air, and my heart both lightens and begins to speed up. She is near.

I'm still in the thick of the city, but it is quieter, block after block of uniform buildings with horseless carriages parked out front in neat little lines.

Her scent becomes stronger and stronger until I locate—she must be there! I race up the stairs of an apartment, hearing gunfire explode from within right before I burst through the door.

“Ksenia!” I roar, smashing through the wood and entering a warzone.

I step through just in time to see Ksenia's hair flying as she flips over the edge of the bed, her uncle's lifeless body dropping in her place with one of her favorite knives embedded in his throat. He has several more gunshots in his back as if she used him for a shield while making her escape to the other side of the bed.

Two of her uncle's men are still firing in her direction. With a roar, I stampede them, tearing the guns out of their hands and smashing them with my other fists until they stop moving.

"Ksenia!" I say, turning around once I'm sure they won't be getting back up again. My eyes widen as I see her stand up from the other side of the bed, a fresh blade in hand. She's drenched in blood, like the first time I met her, and never more beautiful.

"You came," she says.

But I'm speechless as I step out of shadow because beneath the overwhelming scent of blood and expelled gunpower is another scent shining through.

My consort is with kit.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

KSENIA

I run over to Kharon, everything still feeling dreamlike. But the blood dripping from my face and staining his blue skin seems real enough. As did my Uncle Pavel's shocked face five minutes earlier when I yanked my favorite knife out from underneath my pillow, shoved it upwards into his throat, and twisted.

Then, running on pure instinct and my life's training, I used his body as a shield while the rest of his men began to shoot, and I dived behind the bed.

Then, like a miracle, Kharon was there.

My beloved Death appearing out of thin air right when I needed him. But not in some unearthly paradise that barely felt real. No, he was here. And now I was in his arms again.

"How?" I gasp, clinging to him all the tighter.

"I felt your call," is all he says.

Sirens sound in the distance. Right. Gunshots going off in the heart of Helsinki aren't something that can go unnoticed.

"We have to get out of here."

"You're coming back with me. I don't care if it's a life of drudgery in a castle in the middle of nowhere."

I shake my head. "There's nowhere else on earth I want to be. Please. You're my only family now."

His top two hands clutch my face gently. “Beloved, that is not true. You are with kit.”

I blink, shaking my head. “What does that—”

Another of his hands lowers to my belly. “Child. There is a child here.”

I choke in astonishment. I never once in a million years ever considered having a child. My life, my line of work— It was unthinkable.

“Get us out of here. Now!”

He nods and holds out his arm. “I will run us out of the city in shadow.”

I nod, yanking my bag with the cell phone out from underneath the bed that’s remained remarkably intact and jump into his arms.

As soon as they wrap around me, I realize there’s nowhere that’s ever felt safer in the world to me.

“I love you,” I say because I can’t stand not saying it for another second.

Kharon freezes, but only for a moment because the sirens are getting louder. “You have given me my name, and now this even more profound gift. I will love you and our kit until the end of eternity.”

His arms close around me, and then I shut my eyes as we bound towards the door and into the glittering frost of the Helsinki night.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

KHARON

It should not be possible for Death to be so. . . *happy*. I am a monster who has committed too many sins to ever be redeemed. And yet. . . as I look across the table full of my family and then over to my side where my beloved Ksenia sits, her belly round with my child, I feel emotion well up thick in my throat.

The trip back to the castle was not as arduous as the earlier one. For one, there was a chance break in the weather, and since she allowed me to run her the entire way, we made exceptional time. She joined me in my rooms and has been getting to know my family more each day as she recovers from her father's death and rests during the pregnancy, which has not been quite as easy as Hannah's. She's been ill some and taking her time to recuperate.

When we can, we spend time in the bright fields, where she sits with her mother in the sunlight.

I do not believe in gods, yet I do not know what else to say except that they have been kind to me. Me who least deserved their kindness. I would crawl on my belly in supplication and thanks if I knew who to thank.

And so I show my thanksgiving every day to the woman who somehow has deigned to love me and swear to do my best to love, serve, and give her all that she needs all the days of her and our child's existence.

I gaze at her with all the love in my heart.

Across from us, Remus shoves his plate away. “Well, this is truly sickening. All these lovey-dovey looks, everyone being so *happy*.”

Hannah laughs. “What else would we be? We’re all reunited. Layden has returned.”

I look at Layden across the table, his plate full. Abaddon is still less than comfortable with him, but Layden fits in more each day. Yes, he is very changed from when we last knew him.

Instead of the bright boy he used to be, white wings flashing, now he is shadowed. Secretive. He still does not tell us all he did during his time away. He knows many spells and keeps them to himself, not telling us how he came to such knowledge. He lives a life on the internet, whatever that is. He has tried to explain it—a world in his computer where everyone in the world is able to connect? It sounds as much like magic as the rest he has somehow acquired during his time away, so I leave him to it and his room full of screens and flashing lights.

“And Kharon has a . . .” Hannah goes on, smiling widely as she pauses a little before finishing, “A *person*.”

We’ve been made aware that the word “consort” is out of date, apparently.

But I frown, not liking the idea that Ksenia is just my *person*. It does not feel like enough for as tied together as I now feel with her. We are *family*. I want to be with her as Abaddon and Hannah are.

I want to be husband and wife.

“How do the most obnoxious of my brothers have females and I do not?” Remus asks in indignation, standing up from the table.

“Remus,” Hannah objects, glaring his way. “You’re being ignorant and chauvinistic again.”

“How?” Remus looks at her as if surprised. “You are a most excellent prize. My brother does not deserve you. I’m by far the most superior brother.”

Hannah’s mouth has dropped open, her cheeks reddened. It’s rare to see her so angry and I must say, a not small part of me is enjoying the show. “I’m not just a prize! Women are more than trophies.”

Remus rolls his eyes and waves a hand. “You miss my point. I would prize any female I captured.”

“No females will be captured,” Abaddon says, standing up too.

Again Remus rolls his eyes. “Who died and made you ruler? Our Father?”

Oh wait, he didn't actually die. Just because I've been chained up in a cellar for two hundred years and you've been on a power trip doesn't mean you're the leader, brother."

"I'm eldest," Abaddon growls. Baby Raven giggles and flies up from her chair, landing on her father's shoulders and grabbing his horns, bouncing up and down like she wants him to take her for a ride.

Remus smirks. "Besides, you've got more pressing duties at the moment. *Daddy.*"

Abaddon softens his voice since his daughter is so close. "Never so pressing that I can't take time out to put you in your place."

"Boys, boys," my Ksenia says, rubbing her temples. "Please keep the hysterics down. Some of us *weak little females* are doing actual work like growing *people* in our wombs. So if you could take your machismo down a notch, you're giving me a headache."

At her words, I immediately leap out of my seat. "I will take you to our rooms, beloved."

She shoots me a grateful glance as I help her to her feet. I'm amazed that though it's only been a few months, already her belly is rounded. As we leave the dining room, I hear Abaddon and Remus continuing to argue about how no one will be *capturing* anyone. Remus then reminds Abaddon of how he himself came to acquire his own consort-wife, which is when Hannah jumps in to defend her husband.

The last thing I catch out the corner of my eye before turning onto the stairs is the baby leaping off her father's shoulders, circling around the table in a whirl and landing on the soup right in front of Remus, spilling it all down his front, giggling wildly the whole time.

I heft my woman into my many arms and carry her up the stairs. "Oof," she exclaims, but doesn't protest as I swiftly leap up the stairs and to our rooms, gently settling her on the bed.

"I am sorry for my brothers," I say, moving to massage her calves and feet.

"Oh they aren't that bad," she sighs and smiles down at me. "They remind me of how my family was once upon a time." Her smile turns a little sad before brightening again. "I don't think I've told you how happy I am to be here." She reaches down to grasp one of my upper hands with hers, squeezing. "With you. It's been very..."

She sucks in a deep breath before releasing it and laying her head back on

the pillow. "... healing."

She has no idea what it means to me to hear her say that. Me, a healer? Death? I bow my head at her feet. And then kiss them. She has changed everything. She has changed my whole existence. I will worship at her feet for all time.

"I'm afraid I'm going to be a terrible mother," she says suddenly, hands low on her belly.

"What?" I ask, surprised, looking up. "You are going to be amazing."

"That's what Mom says every time I visit. Which is," she breathes out, "just absolutely wild that I get to spend so much time with her. But still, she won't be here to help. *She* was a good mother. I'm just... *me*. I'm nothing like Hannah. She's a natural at it. Her pregnancy was easy, you told me so. But my body knows I'm no good at this. I'm too cold inside. I'm a *killer*."

I shake my head. "No. You *give* life now. We both do."

My hand joins hers at her belly.

Tears crest in her eyes. "You really think so?"

"I know so," I whisper. "Now close your eyes and stop worrying. For awhile, I don't want you to think about anything except *pleasure*."

I begin to kiss up her ankle towards her knee. She's wearing a dress and I like that I have access. "So don't come unless I say you can."

Her leg quivers a little, but she closes her eyes obediently as she sucks in a breath of air. I rub the barest of my fingertips around her kneecaps. And I linger there. I've enjoyed spending my time discovering my Ksenia's body. *Slowly* discovering. *Luxuriously* discovering.

One day I will ask her to be my wife, but after the baby is born, I think. She does not need more on her mind to worry about.

Right now all I want is to take her worries away. I massage a spot on the outside of her knees with one pair of hands, her calves with another, and caress my way up her inner pair of thighs with my uppers.

She inhales sharply and then out with a sigh as her hips shift above me and her legs widen.

I smile. Her skin is so soft. Touching her intimately like this brings me such peace even as my shaft hardens.

I caress higher up her thighs, the barest touch of my fingertips. Skimming higher. Higher still until I'm right against the line of her underclothes. I reach a little further, hook my fingertips overtop, and drag them down. She lifts her bottom so I can take them all the way off.

Immediately her scent hits my nostrils. My shaft leaps in response.

“I love you,” I whisper as I crawl between her legs, kissing and lifting the hem of her clothing with me as I go. With the rest of my hands, I continue my torturous massage of her legs. I grasp her legs at the apex of her thighs, teasing my thumbs against the petals of her sex. She shudders beneath me in response and lets out needy little noises from above.

I withdraw my thumbs slightly as I hold her open to me, massaging *just* outside her sex in a way that still pulls her lips open and closed with my motions. Moisture gathers and her bud swells at my attentions. I lean down, blowing warm breath across her exposed sex.

Her needy noises from above grow more intense and she squirms even more beneath the grip of my hands on her legs. “Please,” she finally begs. “Please, Kharon.”

Oh I do so like it when she begs, even still. I don’t think it will ever not please me.

“Please what?” I ask, my voice dark in a way it only gets when I pleasure her. “You want my tongue to lap up your honey?”

She shudders more beneath me.

“Beg me for what you want, baby.”

“Please, Kharon,” she whispers, voice weak with want. “Put your mouth on me. Eat me out.”

My shaft throbs against the bed. “I like it when you beg so pretty.”

Needy noises come from her throat and one of her hands comes to clench in my hair. The other is fisted in the sheets. I grin as I bow down and extend my tongue.

Still, though, I don’t give her what she wants immediately.

I turn my face to the side and lick her inner thigh, lowering my mouth until I’m suckling there. Just for a moment before I turn to the other thigh, closer to her sex but still not giving her what she wants.

Her hand in my hair tugs restlessly but I love to torture her. I’ve seen the releases that result from patience and that’s what I want for her today.

I lift a pair of hands to reach underneath her, grasp her luscious ass cheeks and pull her open wide for me, while I do the same with a pair of hands at the front of her thighs.

She clenches in anticipation.

With just the tip of my tongue, I lick her swollen bud. She keens high, trying to lift her hips off the bed to get more friction with my tongue, but I

hold her in place easily with my strong hands. She whimpers as I come in for another lick, again putting the barest of pressure on her plumped clitoris.

“Kharon,” she cries. “*Please.*”

I still don’t give in. Instead, I lick down her delicious pussy towards her opening that’s wide to me. Then I bury my face in her and extend my strong tongue as far inside her as I can get it. Her body clenches around my tongue, wishing for so much more, I know.

But a tongue is a more delicate instrument than a cock, and mine is longer than mortal man’s. For example, I know from experience that when I curve the very tip of my tongue at the end deep inside her and whip it back and forth in a come hither motion against a particular spot that feels like a smaller version of the outer nubbin—

Her whole body seizes below me. “Please, may I come?” she begs, voice high-pitched, calves wrapping around my torso tight in coiled pleasure ready to unleash.

I withdraw my tongue, licking all along her channel as I go. “When I next tongue inside you, you may come,” I say low, desperate to taste so deeply.

I shift a hand so that my thumb hovers over her glistening, fat swollen bud right below my nose, and then I dive deep, snuffling into her pussy like a pig seeking its favorite truffle. I tongue her deep, closing my mouth down for added pressure, and then I eat her and suckle her and tongue her, the very tip pressing against her bud.

I’m a messy eater once I finally give in to what both of us want. I grab her ass and drag her pussy against my face as I eat her ravenously. Thumb working her clit, I tongue her so deep inside like the sweetest treat—because she is.

Finally I feel her begin to erupt. Even once I finally give her permission it always takes a few moments longer, like either she has to give *herself* permission, or she’s enjoying the at last unleashed pleasure that she refuses to give in for as long as possible.

But once she does, it’s always a magnificent event. Her thighs clench around my head, allowing me even deeper access somehow. My tongue slips a little further inside her so that I can really feel out that spongy inner ridge, and I lap and lap and lap against it, firm strokes with my tongue until she’s howling and screaming above me.

Her essence squirts into my mouth, which sends me over the edge. This only happens occasionally, when she is absolutely mad with the highest

climax.

My cock gushes its release even though its not touching anything, even the bed for friction. Her pleasure is enough and I suckle and buck my face back and forth against her sex as I spurt the last of my gush.

At last I climb up her body, wiping my face on my bicep until I can embrace my beautiful one. For the first time all day, she seems at peace without a worry in the world.

She looks up at me with a lazy smile as she settles into my many arms. “Will you marry me?” she asks.

I laugh a great laugh and tug her close. “I would love nothing more than to be your husband.”

She settles into my many arms and sighs happily. My gift. My life. My future wife and all my happiness.

* * *

Did you miss Abaddon and Hannah’s story? Check it out here in [MONSTER’S BRIDE!](#)

And make sure to look out for Remus & Romulus’s story, coming this winter!

Remus isn’t about to wait around for happiness. It’s time to go steal himself a consort. As for what his conjoined twin brother wants... well Romulus didn’t ask him before locking them up for two hundred years, did he?

No, it’s time to take what should have been his long ago. And if Remus has to go to war with his own twin to get it... well let the games begin.

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About Stasia Black

Stasia is a USA Today Bestselling Author of dark contemporary romance and sci-fi romance novels.

Stasia grew up in Texas, recently spent a freezing five-year stint in Minnesota, and now is happily planted in sunny California, which she will never, ever leave. She loves writing, reading, listening to podcasts, and going to concerts any time she can manage.

Stasia's drawn to romantic stories that don't take the easy way out. She wants to see beneath people's veneer and poke into their dark places, their twisted motives, and their deepest desires. Basically, she wants to create characters that make readers alternately laugh, cry ugly tears, want to toss their kindles across the room, and then declare they have a new FBB (forever book boyfriend).

