



RUTHLESS 2 ENEMY

WICKED ENEMY

MARION BLACKWOOD

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BOOK TWO

MARION BLACKWOOD

CONTENTS

[Content warnings](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[The last part](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

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CONTENT WARNINGS

The *Ruthless Enemy* series is intended for mature readers. It contains graphic violence and sexual content. If you have specific triggers, you can find the full list of content warnings at: www.marionblackwood.com/content-warnings

*For everyone who has been doing what other people think is
right for far too long*

CHAPTER 1



One day was all it took. One day for my entire world to change. My Court of Metal used to be the most powerful House in Malgrave. I had loads of dark mages working for me. Skilled men and women who protected my territories and struck fear into the hearts of others. And I had Eve.

Now, all of that was gone.

Eve was back on the north side with those fucking constables. And almost all of my dark mages, practically my entire fighting force, was gone. Captured. Dragged to the north side and locked up in their damn prison while I ran back to my Court like a fucking coward.

Raking my hands through my hair, I forced out a long breath in order to calm the storm of emotions in my chest. It didn't work. I tilted my head back down and swept my gaze over the people gathered in my throne room.

Dread flooded my chest like ice water.

This was all that was left.

Since I had considered stealing those wood-infused weapons and armor to be a mission of the highest priority, I had brought almost all of my top people. I had left Shinji and a bunch of low-level fighters to protect my Court while the rest of us handled the shipment. And now, they were the only ones left.

I let my eyes linger on the dark-haired fire mage at the front. After Callan betrayed me, Shinji, Tyler, and Chris rose to become the three highest-ranking people in my Court. That was the reason why I had left Shinji in charge of protecting the building. He was skilled, there was no doubt about it, but I would never be able to defend my territory with just him and a small group of low-level fighters.

Fuck. How could I have been so stupid? I had been completely blindsided by that fucking ambush, and now, everything was ruined.

“What would you like us to do, sir?” Shinji asked.

“Word about what happened will spread like wildfire, which means that the other Houses will use this opportunity to attack,” I said, trying to force a measure of calm composure into my voice. “So right now, we need to do two things. We need to shore up our defenses *fast* and we need to figure out how to get the others out of—”

The doors to my throne room were yanked open. I whirled around and slapped my palms together, only to be met by one of my own runners. Anna slammed the doors shut behind her again and threw the massive bolt down across them before whipping around and sprinting towards me.

Alarm pulsed through me at the panic flickering in her green eyes.

“What is it?” I demanded before she had even crossed half of the room.

“Aaron Reyes and the House of Onyx are coming!”

“Fuck.” The word tore out of my throat with enough force to send a ripple of worry through my people. Spinning around, I leveled hard eyes on them. “Everyone who’s part of the domestic or administrative staff, get upstairs and stay there.”

No one moved.

Sophie, who handled my money, looked between me and Shinji as if she was ready to stand and fight even though she had no magical powers whatsoever.

“Now!” I barked.

They lurched into motion. Shoes thudded against the metal floor as all of my cooks and cleaners and runners and other civilians with no actual fighting capabilities ran towards the side doors. Sophie’s worried brown eyes lingered on Shinji for an extra second before she also disappeared into another corridor.

“We need to hit them hard and fast,” I declared as I turned back to the small group of mages left inside the cavernous throne room. “If we can kill a lot of them fast enough, Aaron will pull his people back. It will also send a message to the other Houses that they will lose if they try to attack this building directly. And we need them to think that, at least until we can get the rest of our people out of prison. So kill as many as you can, as fast as you can. Your life, and the lives of everyone in this Court, depends on it. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” they answered in unison.

“Good. Now, form up.”

Tension rippled through the room as we positioned ourselves halfway between my throne and the doors.

A second later, a smug voice cut through the crackling silence.

“Oh Levi, this truly is pathetic,” Aaron Reyes called from the other side of my blood-red front doors. “Not a single guard outside to protect your precious Court. It really must be true then. You were outmaneuvered by the white boots and got all of your people caught.” A vicious laugh tore from his throat. “Oh how the mighty have fallen.”

Instead of taking the bait, I just brushed my palms together while continuing to watch the doors. I knew that the House of Onyx had a couple of really skilled fire mages, which meant that they would be able to melt my metal doors relatively quickly.

As if my thoughts alone had summoned them, the red-painted metal began to heat from the other side.

“Get ready,” I told my people.

A brief flash of worry blew across the faces of my lower-level fighters. Shinji, who was standing on my right, only touched his hands together while continuing to study the quickly melting doors with perceptive dark brown eyes.

One experienced battle mage. *One*. That was all I had. How the fuck were we supposed to win this?

The doors disappeared in a rain of molten metal.

I yanked up a massive wall halfway to us right before a storm of magic shot through the room. Loud booms split the air as lightning, wind, and fire slammed into my metal shield hard enough to make the surface buckle. On the left, the gray metal was beginning to turn red and orange from the torrent of fire on the other side, so I released my grip on it and shoved it forwards instead.

It sped across the floor, drawing shouts from the dark mages on the other side, before half of it melted and the other half was shoved aside by a massive wind blast. A bang echoed through the high-ceilinged hall as it slammed into the wall on my right, making the chains draped down it rattle and swing.

For a moment, everything was still.

A mass of people now filled the space in front of the doors. Water and fire and lightning and a handful of other magical powers crackled around their hands. And at the back was Aaron Reyes. His black hair curled slightly at the ends, and it shifted around his face as he jerked his chin to toss it back. He was a bit on the shorter side but had a lean and muscular body. From across the room, his dark brown eyes were locked on mine as his face split into a smile full of anticipation.

I hurled a sheet of metal at him.

It whizzed through the air, the speed fast enough to sever both flesh and bones. But before it could strike, Aaron raised a massive wall of shadows to block it. The twisting mass of black absorbed the metal, making it bounce to a halt, so I released the attack and instead yanked another one from the wall on their left.

Next to me, Shinji hurled a wave of dark orange flames straight at the shadows. It burned them off, creating a large hole in the middle of it.

Aaron dropped the shield.

And then the battle was on again.

Winds crashed into my metal wall, stopping it before it could slam into their ranks from the side. Shinji let out a low curse as two torrents of water smacked into his flames with enough force to turn the attack into hissing white mist. On both sides, my barely trained fighters fumbled to cast magic attacks at the other side.

“Focus on blocking their attacks,” I snapped at them since their random shots were starting to get in the way of my and Shinji’s attacks.

The torches and oil lamps in the ceiling above swung wildly on their chains as wind magic whirled through the room. I blocked it from both sides with walls of metal before throwing another sleek sheet towards the House of Onyx. Yet again, Aaron blocked it with his shadows before I could take the heads off his people.

Worry gnawed at my bones.

He was only defending. Why wasn’t he using his shadows to attack? What was he waiting for?

Raising my arms, I pulled two simultaneous attacks from the metal walls behind them at the same time as Shinji blasted them from the front with flames.

Screams echoed throughout the room as my sneak attacks killed two dark mages who were caught by surprise. But before I could drive the attack deeper, an explosion tore through the air.

The wall halfway down the room disappeared in a flash of orange and purple.

I whipped towards it, dropping my attacks as shock clanged through my skull, right as a host of dark mages poured through the hole.

When the hell had the House of Onyx gotten an explosion mage?

Magic cut through the room on all sides.

And now, the battle was turning.

With another force appearing from our side, we were suddenly at a severe disadvantage. Aaron, who had probably been waiting for that, slapped his palms together and began attacking with full force.

Black shadows shot across the room like serpents.

Shinji threw waves of fire at them, trying to burn them off, while my less skilled mages fought desperately to block the hail of attacks from his other people.

I raised wall after wall, shielding us from the second group as well as the attacks from Aaron that slipped past Shinji. But we were losing ground. Fast.

Those old familiar feelings of panic and dread surged up inside me as my mind began to understand that I was being cornered. That I was about to be trapped. Trapped.

That word ricocheted inside my skull over and over again.

Trapped.

They were going to trap us in here.

The panic inside me flared into unbearable levels.

Fuck.

Screams ripped from a few of my people as two lightning attacks slunk through, but the sound was quickly cut off as they toppled backwards and crashed down dead on the floor.

I raised another wall as the explosion mage shot an attack at us while Aaron hurled a nest of shadows. They were closing in from all sides.

My mind was pounding.

My soul screaming.

Then it went quiet.

Deadly quiet.

A slick cold feeling seeped through my bones, washing through my whole body, as I felt that familiar insanity stir inside me. It muffled all the terrible feelings like a thick blanket, and I could finally breathe properly again. But my mind was slipping. And it was slipping fast now.

“Shinji,” I said, my voice coming out terrifyingly emotionless. “Get everyone out. Now.”

All it took was one quick glance, and Shinji knew exactly how serious I was about that order. Knew exactly what was about to happen. But I barely heard him as he began ordering everyone else to pull back into the corridors because the silence inside my skull was reaching deafening levels.

The House of Onyx bombarded us with attacks, but I raised metal wall after metal wall while my people beat a hasty retreat. I was expending enormous amounts of energy in order to do it, but in this state, I could barely feel it.

Once the area behind me was clear, I let the metal wall drop.

Uncertainty blew across Aaron’s face as he met my gaze from across the now unnaturally still throne room.

My lips curled in a wicked grin tinted with absolute madness.

And whatever he saw in my face made him flinch. “Pull ba
—”

Before he could finish the sentence, I slapped my palms together and then threw my arms out before yanking them back together again.

Metal spikes shot out of every surface inside the room. The walls, the floor, the ceiling, everything inside this entire room was made of metal. And every single part of it obeyed me and my power.

Screams ripped through the room as people were impaled on the spot. Aaron hurled a massive cloud of shadows towards

me to block my view. But it didn't matter. My consciousness was slipping anyway.

The last thing I saw was the fear and panic pulsing on my enemies' features as I let the spikes drop back down before yanking up another wave of them from every surface.

Then my mind retreated into that safe place deep inside where I felt nothing at all.

It was impossible to tell if seconds or minutes had passed when that fog of insanity at last lifted and I was brought back into my body.

Coming back after it happened always felt like breaking the surface and sucking in a breath after a deep dive into a dark ocean.

I blinked and shook my head as I tried to reorient myself.

The whole area around me smelled like blood.

Once my vision was clear, I realized why.

At least a quarter of the people that Aaron had brought were now lying dead on my metal floor. The shadow mage himself was not among them, but I recognized one of the fire mages who had melted the doors.

Slowly, I looked up at those doors.

There was still only a gaping hole right in the middle of them. I turned towards the wall where the explosion mage had created another entrance. Red sunlight from the setting sun filtered in through it.

Touching my hands together, I pulled metal from the walls around it to seal up the hole and then fix the doors as well.

But the moment that two metal doors once more blocked the way into my throne room, my knees buckled as the last bit of my strength fled.

I crashed down hard on the floor in the middle of the carnage.

Bracing my palms on the ground, feeling the comforting sensation of cold metal underneath my skin, I dragged in

strained breaths while my mind spun and my body screamed with exhaustion.

With this many dead, Aaron wouldn't try to attack again right away. And word about this slaughter would spread to the House of Stone and the House of Lightning too, which meant that I should be safe from dark mage attacks. At least for the next few days.

My ears rang as I sucked in another couple of deep breaths.

Fuck, I needed to get this madness inside me under control. It always resurfaced when I was experiencing strong emotions. Right now, the flash of insanity had saved me. But if Aaron hadn't run, if he had still been here when the madness disappeared, I would've been dead. Normally, I would use my power sparingly so that I could fight for long periods of time. But when I was in that state, it was as if my mind didn't care about long-term plans anymore. It always used all of my power, leaving me completely drained and vulnerable afterwards. I had to get that under control.

It would take too much effort to raise my head and look over my shoulder, so I wasn't able to determine how many of my own people had died. But it didn't matter. The answer would always be: too many.

Another pulse of panic shot through my limbs.

I had to find a way to get my people out of prison.

Sitting back on my heels, I raked a blood-covered hand through my hair and forced in another deep breath.

To get my people out, I had to get in touch with my spy at the constables' headquarters. And to do that, I needed to go to the north side.

CHAPTER 2



The anger and disappointment inside the room was so palpable that I could almost feel it vibrating against my skin. Probably because all of it was directed straight at me. Standing on the other side of the desk, with my hands clasped behind my back, I tried my best not to squirm underneath Chief Anderson's damning stare.

But it was difficult. Very difficult. After all, one did not become Chief Constable of Malgrave by being meek and lenient. I resisted the urge to swallow as Chief continued staring me down.

Eric Anderson was now in his fifties, and he had worked for the Constables Department for over thirty years. His once brown hair was now gray, but his blue eyes had lost none of their sharpness. There was a scar along his jaw, inflicted by none other than Levi Arden himself when he attacked and destroyed the Blade of Equilibrium years ago, and it made Chief Anderson look even more battle-hardened than his impressive physique already did.

"I'm still waiting for an explanation, Constable Sterling," Chief said, his voice like rough gravel.

I held my straight-backed posture but kept my chin slightly lowered as I answered, "I'm sorry, sir. I was waiting in that room to ambush Arden, but he managed to knock me out before I could arrest him. I'm sorry."

"I don't want your apologies! I want an explanation."

Next to me, I could feel Captain Smith getting ready to speak, so I hurriedly cut him off. “I’m sorry, sir. I have no excuses. It’s entirely my fault. I underestimated Arden.”

Chief Anderson slammed his hand against his desk, making the cups and pens on it jump in alarm and sending a stack of reports sliding sideways. “Nine months! Nine months of planning and careful infiltration down the drain. Gone. Because you *underestimated* Levi Arden. Did you learn nothing about him during all those weeks you pretended to work for him?”

My heart skipped a beat. Learn nothing? No, quite the opposite. I learned *too much* about Levi Arden.

“I thought I could handle him, sir.” I risked a quick glance up at Chief’s face, which was a mistake because the disappointment and anger still pulsing across his features made a cold weight settle in my stomach. “I thought I could ambush him, but he was just too quick. Too skilled with his magic.”

“Once again with the excuses, Constable. I don’t—”

“Sir, if I may...” Captain Smith interrupted.

My gaze snapped to him, shock flashing through me that he dared to interrupt Chief Anderson on my behalf. But it also made a warm feeling spread through my chest.

Captain Ulric Smith was the leader of our South Side Department, and he had been my mentor ever since I joined the constable force eight years ago. In fact, he was the one who had encouraged me to apply in the first place. He was one of the constables who had been at our tavern the day that dark mages killed my father, and he had acted like a sort of uncle to me while I grew up. Checking on me at the orphanage. Encouraging my studies. Being there for me when I completed the ceremony and connected myself to the Great Current. Cheering me on as I tried out for the constable force. Helping to mentor me once I was accepted. If there was one person I had always had in my corner, it was him.

“Constable Sterling was not the only one at that ambush,” Ulric continued. Morning sunlight fell in through the windows behind Chief’s back and illuminated Ulric’s kind brown eyes as he pleaded on my behalf. “We were supposed to capture Arden in the warehouse. Sterling was only supposed to be a last safeguard to make sure he really didn’t slip away. The fact that Arden even made it upstairs is our fault. Not Constable Sterling’s.”

“I am well aware of your shortcomings too, Captain Smith,” Chief said, his voice as hard as his stare. “But it still doesn’t change the fact that this was Sterling’s operation. She volunteered for it. Said she could handle it. We sank nine months and countless resources into this. And she still failed when it mattered.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeated again even though I could hear just how pathetic those words sounded in the face of all that.

“Sorry doesn’t even begin to cover it! Do you know what will happen now?”

Since I knew him well enough to understand that it wasn’t really a question, I just continued keeping my eyes lowered while waiting for his next admonishment. All around me, the mass of gleaming medals and awards that Chief had received over the years stared down at me from the spotless shelves. I shifted my weight slightly on the pale wooden floor.

“We’ve taken most of Arden’s people into custody,” Chief Anderson continued. “Do you think he will let that slide?”

“No, sir.”

“*No, sir*, indeed. Arden is an arrogant bastard with an ego bigger than this entire city. He won’t stand for such a blow to his reputation. The first chance he gets, he will lash out at the north side. And we all know what happened last time he did that.”

My eyes were once again involuntarily drawn back to the vicious scar across Chief Anderson’s jaw.

Guilt and shame slithered through my stomach like cold snakes because I knew that every word he had just spoken was

true. After those weeks with Levi, I knew him better than anyone here, and there was no way that he would ever let this go. He was going to come for ruthless bloody revenge.

“Arden is going to attack the north side to get revenge. Blood will flow and innocent civilians will die.” Chief’s words cut through the room like a blade, carving deeper into my already bleeding heart. “And all because of your failure.”

I felt as though I was about to throw up all over my impeccable gold-trimmed white boots. What had I done? Chief was right. I had betrayed Levi. I had hurt him badly enough that he hadn’t even been able to hide the pain in his eyes. And I had gotten his people captured. There was no way that he would let that go. He was going to attack the north side the first chance he got, and innocent people would get caught in the crossfire. Levi might have paid for damages and sent people to his healer on the south side, but he would never do that here on the north side. Especially not if he was lost in that terrifying rage and madness that had been swirling in his eyes when he knocked me out.

War was coming.

And it was all my fault.

“You will be demoted to Junior Constable and your salary is forfeit for the next three months.”

I snapped my gaze up to Chief’s face while my mouth dropped open in shock. But the unflinching expression on his face as he stared back at me, as if daring me to challenge him, quickly made me drop my eyes again. “Yes, sir.”

“Chief, please, this is a bit extreme—” Ulric began before being cut off.

“One more word out of your mouth, Smith, and you will join her.”

Slowly closing his mouth again, he shot me an apologetic look and then bowed his head as well.

“Because of this failure, the entire South Side Department has fallen out of favor with the parliament,” Chief Anderson ground out. “And if the parliament is unhappy, they will cut

our funding, which you both know that we sorely need. Do not fail me again.”

“Yes, sir,” we replied in unison.

“Dismissed.”

We bowed before turning around and walking back out of Chief’s office. The hallway outside was deserted, which I was secretly glad about since that meant that no one had overheard the damning words that had been hurled at me.

The bright morning sunlight felt far too cheerful as it illuminated the pale wooden corridor around us while we made our way towards the stairs. Chief’s office was on the top floor of the constable force’s building, so I opened the door to the stairwell and held it open for Ulric before following him as well.

As soon as it had closed behind us, he bumped my shoulder with his in a comforting gesture and said, “Cheer up, kiddo. It’ll be fine.”

“How?” I cast him a disbelieving look as we started down the steps. “Chief was right. Because of me, Arden is going to attack the north side to get revenge.”

“We’ll handle it.” Reaching out, he gave my arm a little squeeze. “It’s alright. We all make mistakes.”

Guilt twisted my insides hard enough that I had to look away. Staring at the pale wall in front of me as we continued descending the steps, I tried desperately to block out the terrible feelings of shame and regret that were clawing through my chest.

We all make mistakes.

Sure. But the problem was that I hadn’t made a mistake.

Levi was now free to attack the north side not because I had made a mistake. No. The King of Metal, the most ruthless dark mage this city had seen in decades, had escaped our fool proof ambush because I had made a *choice*.

Because I had *let him* escape.

CHAPTER 3



S tarlight reflected against the water, making it look like the night sky was both above and below the boat. Or perhaps *boat* was a bit too generous a description. It was more like a tiny dinghy that was barely big enough for two people. But it made it harder for the white boots who were no doubt posted up and down the Bridge of Life to spot us, so I didn't complain.

Normally, I never ventured to the north side myself. Since I was Public Enemy Number One, my face had been plastered across wanted posters for years now, which meant that people on the north side would recognize me on sight. But with the loss of Tyler and the rest of my most capable dark mages, I had to risk it myself in order to meet with my spy.

I slid my gaze to the skinny woman opposite me. Her keen eyes kept scanning the dark water around us while she continued moving the rowboat across the river using her water magic. I was confident that she wouldn't sell me out. Not only did I pay her extremely well for her services tonight, but she was also from the south side, which meant that she knew exactly what I did to people who betrayed me.

Unbidden, Eve's face flashed before my vision.

I quickly pushed it aside. I couldn't think about that right now. I had to get my people out of jail and secure my empire before everything I had built was irrevocably destroyed.

Bright lights shone from the houses farther away. Not the multicolored lights that always illuminated the Entertainment

District, but rather the clean white ones that signaled how morally virtuous the north side was. If I hadn't been so furious and worried, I would've scoffed. They considered themselves to be better than us, but given Eve's infiltration and the ambush they lured me into, they were apparently not above using dark mage tactics to get what they wanted.

Water sloshed around us, but once we reached the shore, it was replaced by the scraping of sand against the wooden hull. The slim dark-eyed woman, who simply went by the nickname Ferry, shifted her attention to me.

"We're here," she said, rather superfluously.

"Depending on how things go," I began while climbing out of the boat, "I might not be able to return to this exact spot."

"I figured as much. I'll keep an eye on the shore from out on the river and then come pick you up from wherever you end up."

"Good. I shouldn't be more than an hour or two."

"You've paid me for the entire night, so take whatever time you need."

After a nod, I turned around and jogged away from the shore and towards the houses up ahead. The gentle lapping of waves was soon replaced by the silence of a city at night. Candlelight still shone in some of the windows, but there was no one out on the street. At least not this far out on the edge of the city. But unfortunately, my spy lived closer to the city center, so I would eventually start running into other people.

I kept my head down as I quickly snuck through the deserted streets.

Before long, the sounds of people talking faintly drifted to my ears.

Slowing to a walk, I adopted a carefree gait right as a couple of men rounded the corner up ahead. They were engaged in a discussion about their boss, and they didn't even glance in my direction as they passed.

I released a soft breath before hurrying towards the next street.

There was an area with restaurants up ahead, but thankfully, I didn't need to cross it since my spy lived on the road just before it. After checking that the street was empty, I rounded the corner and hurried up to his door.

The slab of plain white wood vibrated underneath my fist as I knocked hard.

No answer.

Worry seeped through my veins. Had the white boots caught him too? Fuck, they couldn't have. If he was in jail too, there was no way in hell that I would ever be able to spring the rest of my people.

I rapped my knuckles against the door once more. "Ben."

Something clattered from inside, as if someone had been standing right on the other side of the door, listening, and then jerked back quickly.

Then the lock clicked and the door was pushed open.

A pair of stunned green eyes met me. "Mr. Arden."

Relief flooded my chest. "Ben."

Ben quickly shoved the door open farther while motioning for me to come inside. Sticking his head out, he checked up and down the street before pulling the door shut behind me and locking it again.

From the outside, his small one-story house looked incredibly plain. But inside, it was anything but. Because of the enormous amounts of money that I paid him, his house was now filled with rich paintings and beautifully carved furniture. Crystal bottles containing expensive liquor lined the shelves in the living room that he showed me into. I scanned it while taking a seat on the spotless dark green couch. An incredible oil lamp that probably cost more than the constables paid him in a month hung in the ceiling and cast the whole room in a warm glow.

“By the Current, I thought you were from the South Side Department,” Ben said in something that sounded more like a relieved sigh. Raising a hand, he raked it through his brown hair while plopping down in the armchair opposite mine. “I thought they had at last figured out that I’m the one who has been leaking all the information.”

“Leaking *false* information,” I said, leveling a hard stare on him.

Fear blew across his thin features. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t know that it was a setup.”

The one who had been duped the most was me, not him, but I still kept him squirming in his seat for another few seconds just because it made me feel better. Made it feel as though I wasn’t the one who had screwed up so completely that I had gotten my own people captured by the fucking white boots.

Once I had satisfied my petty need, I flicked my wrist dismissively. “I know. Otherwise, I would’ve killed you the moment you opened the door.”

His swallow was audible in the tense silence.

“Tell me about my people,” I demanded before he could offer more useless apologies.

“They’re being held in the Underground.”

“Shit.”

Leaning back on the couch, I drew a hand across my face. The Underground was what we called the prison located underneath the constable force’s building. Usually, prisoners were kept in the barracks across the courtyard from that building. But sometimes, when they wanted to make sure that their captives *really* couldn’t escape, they used the cells below the headquarters instead.

I raked my fingers through my hair before letting my hand drop back down again. Ben flinched when I met his gaze, as if he was worried that I might take out my displeasure on him. To be fair, I was tempted.

But I smothered the impulse and instead asked the other question that I desperately needed an answer to. “And Eve Sterling?”

“She was demoted to Junior Constable and stripped of pay for the next three months.”

Pain surged up inside me at the mere thought of Eve, so I quickly decided to change the topic. “The Underground. All of them?”

For a few seconds, Ben just looked back at me as if he was trying to frantically pick up the threads of the conversation. Then a light went on behind his eyes as he finally figured out what I wanted to know.

“Yes,” he replied. “All of your people are being held in the same place.”

I nodded.

Well, there was that, at least. If they had been spread out between the Underground and the regular prisons, it would’ve been much more difficult to get them all out.

“We need to find a way to free them,” I declared. “And fast.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I might be able to make up some kind of excuse to go down there and then... I don’t know. Find a way to free them?”

Ben worked as one of the administrative clerks inside the building, which meant that practically all information passed through him or one of his colleagues. Unfortunately, though, being a clerk meant that he didn’t have access to things like the jail cells. But if we were going to get my people out, we would have to figure out a way for him to get there anyway.

“What do you need in order to make that happen?” I asked.

He scratched the back of his neck while considering in silence for a while. “A distraction, probably. Preferably a big one that draws out most of the constables and captains. Then I could probably steal a set of keys and slip down to the

Underground to release your people.” Uncertainty drifted across his face. “It’s just...”

“What?”

“Even if this works, it will probably blow my cover.”

“If you can get my people out, I will set you up with a fucking mansion on the south side, Ben. You won’t have to work another day in your life. I swear it.”

His eyes widened. Ben knew that I always upheld my end of a bargain, no matter what. After all, it was why I had been able to turn him in the first place.

“Thank you, Mr. Arden,” he at last managed to press out.

“Just get my people out.”

He nodded. “I’ll sneak around the building tomorrow and make a plan. How will I contact you, now that Tyler is...” Trailing off somewhat awkwardly, he cleared his throat and then instead continued with, “Will you come here again tomorrow?”

“Can’t risk it. I’ll send a man called Shinji. He’s a fire mage. Black hair, dark brown eyes, short and lean. He’ll tell you that the Black Rose is open for business. And you’ll reply that your mother already knows. That’s how you’ll both know that you have the right person.”

Ben nodded again.

I glanced at the gilded clock on one of the shelves as a bout of nervous apprehension whirled through me. I had to get back to my Court. What I did to the House of Onyx yesterday should make the other gang leaders hesitant to attack me. But the operative word in that sentence was of course *should*. There was no way to guarantee that they wouldn’t attack, and if they did that while I was somewhere else, my people would be slaughtered.

The couch creaked as I pushed myself to my feet. Across the low table, Ben scrambled to get to his feet as well.

“Make that plan quickly, Ben,” I said as I started towards his front door. “And make it good. I don’t tolerate

incompetence.”

“Yes, sir. No, sir. I’ll have a plan by the time your man Shinji gets here tomorrow night.”

“Good.”

Without waiting for a reply, I pushed the door open and strode back into the night. Sounds of people talking came from the streets around me, but this one was thankfully still deserted. I picked up the pace as I started towards the next corner.

Restless energy bounced around inside me.

I hated feeling like this. It had been years since last time I felt this exposed. This... vulnerable. It made those old emotions swirl closer to the surface again, reminding me of a past that I had been trying to forget for over a decade now. Reminding me of how powerless I used to be. I swore that I would never feel that way again. But now here I was, with my empire dangerously diminished and enemies circling me on all sides.

Shaking my head, I rounded the next corner.

And came face to face with a woman who made my heart stop.

CHAPTER 4



Warm and cheerful chatter enveloped me on all sides, but all I felt was the cold slimy guilt in my stomach as my thoughtful colleagues tried to cheer me up. Everyone believed that I had just been outmatched against Levi. They had no idea that I'd had him helpless at sword-point and that I had chosen to let him go. They had no idea that I had betrayed them all. That I had betrayed the whole constable force. Everything we stood for.

“Don’t worry, Eve,” Jamila said, smiling at me from across the table. “Chief will come around. He’s just mad right now, but give him a week or two and he’ll see sense and withdraw his punishment.”

I tried my best to force a smile. “Yeah. Let’s hope so.”

The restaurant we had gone to after our shift was almost full, but it still didn’t have the same feel as the taverns and bars on the south side. Everyone in here behaved, spoke, and dressed properly. No drunken laughter. No shameless flirting. Just casual conversation over food and drink where everyone kept the noise to a minimum. It should have been comforting, knowing that I was far away from the south side and the damning influence of Levi Arden, but all it did was to make me feel even more like I no longer belonged here.

“It must have been terrible,” Frank said, abruptly pulling my attention back to the people around me.

I blinked, momentarily disoriented by the sudden onslaught of memories from my time with Levi. “What?”

“Working for Levi Arden. When we heard about the situation with the locks, we all felt so bad for you.” Everyone at the table nodded and hummed their agreement while Frank watched me with intense blue eyes. “Being undercover and spending so much time with someone like him must’ve been so awful. What did he make you do? What was he like? Really like, I mean?”

My heart stuttered in my chest. What was Levi Arden like? He was arrogant and domineering and utterly sure of his own supremacy. But he was also unexpectedly kind to strangers who could do absolutely nothing for him. And he was genuine in a way I hadn’t expected. Vulnerable at times even. He made me want to bang my head against the wall, or even better, *his* head against the wall. But he also made me laugh. And he never made me feel as though there was something wrong with me. He saw me. Even the dark sides. And didn’t recoil. What was Levi Arden like?

Emotions surged up inside me, blocking my throat and making me feel like I was choking.

“Yes, it was awful,” I managed to croak while pushing up from the table. “I’m sorry. I need to get some air.”

Several of my colleagues attempted to stand up as well, but I waved them back in their seats with a forced reassuring smile before I all but ran towards the door.

That terrible guilt tore through my chest like a pack of wolves.

By the Current, what had I done? I had fallen for the enemy. I had fallen for Levi fucking Arden. And I had let my feelings towards him cloud my judgement and throw my nine-month mission out the window. My colleagues and all the civilians on the north side were going to get hurt once he decided to exact his vengeance. And all because I couldn’t control my feelings for a dark mage. Fucking hell, if my father could see me now, he would’ve been so ashamed of me.

Cool night air washed over me as I shoved the door open and escaped out onto the street. A few people were standing right outside, talking to each other, so I instead hurried

towards the nearest corner. I just needed a moment to myself. Just to breathe for a bit and get my head back on straight. Then I could rejoin the others and pretend that I had hated every moment of working for Levi and that I was just a victim of Chief Anderson's fury and not a traitor to our whole profession.

Rounding the corner, I dragged in a deep breath.

And then stopped dead in my tracks as I came face to face with the man who had ruined my heart.

"Levi," I blurted out.

His normally so sharp grey eyes went wide with shock as his gaze found mine. "You."

I opened my mouth to say... something. But I never found out what, because right then, Frank, Jamila, and Ulric rounded the corner behind me.

"I'm sorry, Eve," Frank was saying. "I didn't mean to—"

He abruptly stopped speaking as he no doubt noticed Levi, but I didn't know for sure because my eyes remained locked on the King of Metal.

Levi's gaze snapped to the people behind me. Then his eyes hardened and darkness descended on his features. It was so intense that I think I might have gasped.

And that's when I realized what this must have looked like from his perspective. An ambush. *Another* ambush.

"It's not what it looks like," I blurted out without thinking.

But thankfully, my voice was drowned out by Captain Smith yelling, "Sound the alarm! Levi Arden has been spotted!"

"You fucking traitor!" Levi snapped at me with enough force to make me stagger a step back. Hurling a sheet of metal straight towards us, he growled, "I can't believe that I let you into my Court. That I trusted you. Before this is over, I will kill you, you worthless piece of shit."

Metal shot towards us, and my colleagues threw up wind and water walls to block it. But all I could do was to stand there, staring at the dark mage across the street. Each of his words landed like a physical blow.

Booms echoed across the city.

“After him!” someone screamed. Frank, I think.

Yanked out of my stupor, I realized that Levi had bolted while the others were busy blocking his attack. Frank and Jamila, followed by the rest of my colleagues who had now poured out of the restaurant, took off after him. But I couldn’t make my feet move. It felt as if I had been nailed to the street.

In my chest, my confused heart was cracking and bleeding.

Hands appeared on my shoulders.

I gasped as Captain Smith spun me around to face him. His kind brown eyes locked on mine with such compassion that I wanted to burst into tears. “It’s alright, Eve.”

“I...”

“I’ll get the rest of our department. Send up a signal when you have him cornered and I’ll race there with everyone else.” He gave my arms a squeeze. “Don’t worry. You don’t have to be afraid of him for much longer, kiddo. We’ll take him down tonight.”

Before I could figure out how to respond, Ulric released me and sprinted back towards our headquarters to get back-up.

For a few seconds, all I could do was stare at the empty street where Levi had been standing less than a minute ago.

Levi was here.

And now my colleagues, my woefully outmatched colleagues, were chasing after him.

I only hesitated a second before darting after them as well.

CHAPTER 5



Shouts rose behind me as my metal wall shot towards my pursuers. It was followed by a loud bang as they blocked it with wind and water magic. While skidding around the next corner, I cast a quick glance over my shoulder.

I could probably have killed them all in a couple of minutes if I had stood and fought. But the problem was that I didn't know how far out back-up was. I was on the north side now. The entire constable force was here. And I was alone. I couldn't let them corner me. Because if they managed to surround me on this side of the river, I would be in some serious trouble.

A young man yelped and leaped out of the way as I barreled down the next street. Boots thudded on the stones behind me, informing me that the constables were on my heels. Part of me couldn't help but wonder if Eve was one of them.

The memory of what she had looked like in that alley back there sent a stab of pain through my heart. Blocking out any thoughts of Eve, I instead concentrated fully on plotting an exit strategy.

I couldn't head back to the same spot where I left Ferry. Not with the white boots this close behind. Since all of them were normal mages, they could all manipulate water. So crossing the river would be impossible if they could see me do it. What I needed to do was to make them lose sight of me. But how?

White stone buildings flashed past on both sides as I hurtled across the city.

There was no way I would be able to outrun them. But if I stopped and attacked them, I would risk their reinforcements surrounding me before I could finish them off. If I—

Lightning zapped through the air. On instinct, I jerked sideways right before a white bolt could hit me in the back. It cracked into the house in front of me, sending chips of white stone flying and leaving a blackened mark in its wake. I risked a glance over my shoulder as I swung myself down the next side street.

All five white boots behind me were touching their palms together and getting ready to shoot another attack at me. Why the hell did they have to be so fast?

At least the quick glance had revealed one thing. Eve was not with them. I wasn't sure whether I was relieved or disappointed by that.

A combined attack of wind and water magic whooshed down the road. Without breaking stride, I slapped my palms together and raised a metal wall behind me.

The sound of shattering glass split the night as their attacks crashed into my shield and blew out every window on the street as the magic instead was redirected towards the buildings on each side. Shouts rang out from my pursuers, but they kept running.

If only I could lure them into an ambush that I could finish quickly. But for that I would need...

I trailed off as my gaze landed on a tall building up ahead.

The watchtower.

Of course.

With a grin on my face, I changed direction and darted down another street that would take me towards the old watchtower by the shore. It had been built centuries ago when Malgrave's north and south side had been at war with each other. Since there was no need for the north to keep watch on

the south shoreline anymore, it had been abandoned for decades now. There was nothing in it. No supplies or anything worth stealing. But there was one important thing about it. It was built almost entirely of metal.

By the time I at last reached the tall structure, the white boots had almost caught up with me. I yanked the door open and darted straight towards the stairwell.

“He’s going into the building!” a man called. “Send up a flare for reinforcements.”

Crap. Annoyance crackled through me as I leaped up the first four steps. I had been hoping that they would follow me first, before signaling their reinforcements. Now I would have even less time.

Footsteps pounded against the steps behind me when I reached the large circular room above. I sprinted over to the other wall and whirled around so that I was facing the opening to the stairs. Whipping my head from side to side, I took stock of what resources I had to work with. Since I only had seconds before they would make it up the stairs, I decided on a plan quickly. I would’ve preferred to trap them in one quick attack, but since there were five of them, I would never be able to time it right.

One second later, a mass of water shot towards me from the entrance to the stairwell. Touching my palms together, I called up a wall of metal from the floor right before it could hit me. Splashing noises echoed through the room as it struck, sending water spraying sideways instead. I immediately dropped the wall and then touched my hands together again.

Three people had made it into the room. Two of them were sprinting towards me side by side. Sending my magic into the metal floor, I pulled the material aside and opened up a hole right below their feet.

Their eyes widened and screams ripped from their throats as they began to plummet downwards. But the final two white boots had now made it up the stairs, and all three who were not currently falling through the floor began hurling attacks at

me, so I had to stop widening the hole and instead raise another wall to block.

Lightning crackled through the air and crashed into my metal shield with a boom that reverberated through the air. Dropping the wall again, I brushed my palms together and sent my magic into the metal ceiling instead. Spike shot downwards.

Yells of alarm rang out, and overlapping shields immediately rose above them to block my attack. The two people I had tried to send through the floor had managed to grab the edge when I was forced to stop widening the hole, and both of them were halfway back up onto the floor now.

I touched my hands together and got ready to open another hole below the others as well when a sixth person appeared at the top of the stairs.

My heart stalled in my chest as Eve leaped out of the stairwell and skidded to a halt next to her colleagues.

CHAPTER 6



I ndecision tore through my soul as I sprinted up the steps. Frank had already sent up the flare to signal Captain Smith and our reinforcements by the time I had reached the door, which meant this place would be swarming with constables in less than ten minutes.

I should have been relieved by that, because it meant that my colleagues wouldn't be slaughtered. But it also meant that Levi would be captured.

Pain seared through my heart. It had only been a few days since I betrayed my oath as a constable by letting Levi escape that warehouse. And my feelings towards that damn dark mage still hadn't changed. I didn't want him to get captured. He had been so terrified that he had thrown up and almost passed out when he had to stay inside a small lift for less than a minute. I couldn't even imagine what being locked up in a cell would be like for him. He would lose his mind. And I didn't want to subject him to that torture.

But at the same time, I couldn't get Chief Anderson's words out of my head. Levi was going to come for revenge. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind about that. And when he did, people would inevitably get hurt. Both my fellow constables and also innocent civilians who just happened to get caught in the crossfire. Levi was dangerous on the best of days. But now, when he was also feeling hurt and betrayed yet again, he was downright lethal.

My boots thudded against the steps as I darted the final distance up to the opening.

Magic crackled and flashed above where my colleagues were no doubt fighting.

Guilt sliced through my insides. They were fighting for their lives against a ruthless dark mage, and here I was, trying to decide whether I was yet again going to *help* him.

While leaping up the final steps, I steeled myself and blocked out all of my inconvenient feelings as I made a decision. I had to bring Levi in. Before he hurt someone.

I skidded to a halt next to Frank in the circular room that had become a battlefield.

The moment I became visible, Levi's sharp gray eyes snapped to me.

At first, he almost looked surprised to see me. Then a calculating expression descended on his features as he flicked his gaze between the six of us.

Dread washed over me like a cold wave.

But before I could shout a warning, the ceiling above us came alive. Metal spikes formed on the previously smooth surface and shot down towards us. Acting on instinct, I threw up a wind shield above me.

Next to me, Frank screamed as one of the spikes grazed his arm when he didn't manage to jump aside fast enough.

"This whole building is made of metal," I snapped at my colleagues. "He led you into a trap."

Magic whooshed around me as everyone desperately tried to shove the new wave of spikes aside before they could strike. I reached for my sword, only to find my hip empty. We had been off duty, so none of us was carrying a sword. And we couldn't win in a ranged fight against Levi in a room full of metal.

I sprinted forward, intending to force Levi into close combat. But as soon as I moved, he started concentrating his attacks on me.

Sheets of metal flashed through the empty room as Levi hurled them at me from an angle. It forced me to back

sideways across the room and away from the support of my colleagues. I slapped my hands together over and over again, barely able to raise walls of wind and water fast enough to push the metal aside.

“Retreat!” Frank called from somewhere close to the stairwell. “Do it now while he’s distracted.”

Part of me wanted to growl that the only reason Levi was distracted was because he was currently busy battering me with relentless attacks.

“Eve!” Frank yelled while the rest of them scrambled towards the stairs. “Pull back. We need to wait for reinforcements.”

“I’m trying,” I ground out between gritted teeth while I raised shield after shield that barely made it in time.

Boots thudded against the steps somewhere behind me and to the left. I couldn’t spare the attention to look, but hopefully the sound meant that my colleagues had already escaped and gotten to safety. It was my fault that Levi was free to attack us, so I should bear the cost of that anyway.

Levi’s attacks were forcing me to keep backing away until the whole room, and the King of Metal himself, was between me and the stairwell, but there was nothing I could do about that since I could barely manage to block his metal walls in time.

Cool night air smelling of the river that flowed right below the open windows washed over me as I tried desperately to stop Levi’s onslaught. But he just turned slowly so that he was facing me the whole time while he forced me around the room. There was no anger on his face anymore. Only an impassive blank mask that somehow hurt more than his vicious words from earlier.

I raised my hands, getting ready to touch my palms together again to summon another water shield, but before I could, something cold and hard wrapped around my wrist.

A yelp slipped from my lips as a band of metal snaked around my wrist, quick as a viper, and then yanked my arm

upwards. I whipped my head up and found that Levi had pulled down metal from the ceiling above me.

That quick look was a mistake.

The moment I took my attention off Levi, he struck from all sides.

Metal shot up from the floor and wrapped around my ankles as well, trapping them to the ground, while another band slithered from the ceiling and snaked around my free hand. Panic pulsed through my body as my other arm was yanked upwards as well. Then the metal hardened, leaving me standing spreadeagled and completely immobilized with the King of Metal before me.

Steel sang into the suddenly eerily silent room as Levi slowly drew the massive sword he kept strapped along his spine.

Another night wind whirled in through the open window, the dark water two stories below making it feel colder than usual. Or perhaps the shiver that raced through me had nothing to do with the wind at all. I yanked against my restraints as Levi began to advance on me, but they didn't give an inch.

My heart pounded in my chest as Levi stopped two strides away and raised his sword. His gray eyes were as unyielding as the metal he commanded when he locked them on mine. I drew in a shuddering breath. Cold steel met my skin as Levi shifted his sword and rested the point at the base of my throat.

"If you're going to kill me," I snapped, suddenly feeling more angry than afraid, "just get it over with."

He flicked his wrist, using the flat of the blade to push my chin up and force my mouth closed again. I glared back at him. For a few seconds, he only watched me with that expressionless mask still on his face.

"Do you really think these people deserve your loyalty?" he asked at last.

It was not at all what I had expected him to say, so all I managed to press out was, "What?"

Removing the sword from my throat, he used it to point towards the now empty stairwell. “They ran.” He motioned up and down my trapped body with the blade. “And let you hang.”

“I don’t care. It’s my fault that you’re even here in the first place, so I should face the consequences for that.”

He said nothing. Only cocked his head and studied me with eyes that burned into my very soul. I once more tried to pull my wrists and ankles free of my restraints, but Levi had reshaped the ceiling and floor before letting them harden again so there was no escaping this unless he allowed it.

“Do they know?” he asked eventually.

He didn’t need to specify what he meant. I already knew what he was asking. Did my colleagues know that I had willingly let Levi escape back in that warehouse?

“No,” I admitted.

“What would happen if they found out?”

“Most likely? I would be court-martialed and then executed for high treason.”

He scoffed. I couldn’t tell if he was amused or if he just found it ridiculous.

In my chest, my heart felt like it was being torn to shreds. Part of me wanted to ask Levi if he was okay. We had gotten reports that another House had attacked his Court, but we didn’t know more than that. But the other part of me wanted to scream at him in frustration. Scream at him and curse him for making me fall for him. For making me weak. For making me listen to my feelings and help him instead of doing what I knew was right.

But I could do neither of those, so instead I snapped, “What are you waiting for? You won! Kill me already and be done with it.”

He raised his sword again. My heart slammed against my ribs as he drew the point of the blade down my throat and then

positioned it right at the base of it again. All it would take was one push, and he would sever my windpipe.

Then he raised his other hand.

My stomach lurched as the metal bands around my limbs abruptly vanished. I was not at all prepared for it, and I didn't have time to brace my weight again, so I just crashed to my knees on the floor.

“Get up,” Levi ordered.

Shock clanged inside my skull like giant bells, but I managed to scramble back to my feet. With confusion whirling through my chest, I looked back at the King of Metal uncertainly while he sheathed his sword across his back again. “You're not going to kill me?”

“You let me walk back in that warehouse. Even though you were responsible for the ambush too, you did save me. And I always pay my debts. So, a life for a life.”

My mouth dropped open.

“We're even now.” His eyes betrayed no emotion as he held my gaze. “You know how to swim, right?”

“What?”

“Answer the question.”

“Yes, I know how to swim.”

“Good. You and I are done now, Eve. From this moment on, you're nothing to me. The next time I see you, you will try to capture me because I'm a dark mage and I will try to kill you because you're a white boot. You can tell them that you jumped.”

Every word he spoke felt like a stab through the chest with a rusty blade. After everything we had been through, we were now supposed to just be done? Be nothing to each other? Just like that? For me, it felt as if my soul was being cut apart all the time by my conflicting feelings for him and for myself and for my duty to the constables and the city. But he could just rip my entire existence out of his life like that? Without any problem at all?

Then his last sentence trickled through my mind.

Frowning, I pressed out, “Wait, what? What do you mean, you can tell them that you jumped?”

Before I could so much as raise my hands, Levi shoved me out the window.

My stomach lurched, and wind rushed in my ears as I plummeted through the air and towards the river below, but I swore I could hear him speak two more words.

“Goodbye, spitfire.”

Then I hit the surface with a splash and disappeared into the cold dark water.

CHAPTER 7



“Incoming!”

Dropping the letter mid-sentence, I whipped around and sprinted out of my study and across the hallway. Anna, who usually worked as one of my runners but now functioned as a lookout, waved for me to hurry from where she stood next to my bedroom window.

“There,” she said as I skidded to a halt next to her.

Squinting, I looked towards where she was pointing.

At the end of the street, two people were sneaking closer to my Court. While studying their faces, I brushed my palms together and sent my magic flowing into the outer wall next to me.

I had no idea who the slim man on the left was, but the athletic woman on the right I recognized as one of Connor Bale’s top people. I was pretty sure that her name was Kamala.

Irritation rippled through me. So, the House of Lightning had at last decided to try their luck.

It had been a week since I slaughtered Aaron’s people when the House of Onyx tried to attack. I had hoped that the other Houses would wait a little longer before making a move. Though I supposed that I should be grateful that Connor had only sent two scouts and not his entire army.

“What would you like us to do, sir?” Shinji asked from behind me.

I hadn't even heard him follow me into the room. While keeping my eyes on the two scouts creeping closer, I replied, "Nothing. There are only two of them. I'll handle it."

Gray light from the overcast sky painted the street in gloomy colors, but Kamala and her companion were still clearly visible. When I built my headquarters here, I had made sure that the only way to reach the front doors was by walking down a street with no hiding places. If someone tried to attack, I would always see them coming.

Anna cast worried glances between me and the approaching dark mages when I just allowed them to sneak right up to the building, but she wisely said nothing. Since I had already sent my magic into the wall, my attack was already prepared. Now, all I needed to do was to wait for them to reach the perfect spot.

Once they were halfway between the doors and the edge of the building, I struck.

Metal spikes shot out of the wall.

Kamala reacted immediately. While jumping backwards and to the side, she slammed her palms together and yanked up a water shield in front of her. It pushed aside the spike enough that it only grazed her thigh.

Her companion wasn't as lucky.

Shock pulsed across his features as a thick metal spike speared through his chest. He coughed once, spraying blood into the air before him. Then his head slumped forward.

I retracted the spike, letting it return to the wall. The man's limp body toppled to the ground. There was now a large hole where his heart should have been.

"Shit," Kamala swore so loudly that I could hear it through the window.

Just to make sure that she really took the hint, I sent another wave of spikes shooting out of the wall. She leaped backwards again while raising another shield. Then she spared only one more look at her friend before she sprinted back down the street.

“That should buy us another few days,” I muttered to myself while releasing the grip on my magic. Turning to Anna, I added, “Keep watching the street. Let me know if someone else approaches.”

She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Shinji.” I jerked my chin while starting towards the door. “With me.”

He followed me across the corridor and back to my study where we had been planning our next move when Anna sounded the alarm.

Oil lamps burned brightly in the ceiling, illuminating the otherwise darkened room and making the gold veins in the black walls and floor and ceiling glimmer. I passed by the bookshelves and set course straight for the map replica of Malgrave in the center of the room. The letter I had been reading when Anna called was now lying draped across the miniature Bridge of Life. I picked it up and finished scanning the page while Shinji took up position opposite me.

“It’s time,” I said as I finished reading. Setting down the letter on the side of the map, I met Shinji’s gaze. “Ben is finally ready. The jailbreak happens tomorrow.”

Shinji dipped his chin in acknowledgement.

“You’re clear on what to do?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It needs to be big enough to draw out most of the white boots.”

“I understand.”

“You’ll create the distraction and then I’ll make sure the others get to the bridge.”

He nodded again. A thoughtful expression blew across his features, and for a moment, it looked like he was going to ask me something. But then he simply straightened his spine slightly.

“What?” I asked.

Uncertainty flickered in his dark eyes. Then he cleared his throat. “I was just wondering, sir. What happens next?”

“What do you mean?”

“After we get our people out of jail.” Shifting his weight, he cast me another hesitant look. “It’s just... The white boots blindsided us and took our people captive. And the House of Onyx, and Lightning, have both tried to attack us. I don’t want to... I mean...”

“You don’t want to let those insults go unpunished.”

“No, sir.”

I nodded.

“But at the same time,” he continued. “We’re in a terrible position right now. The other Houses will continue attacking us. We still haven’t fully finished taking over the territories left open when you wiped out the House of Shadow, Fire, and Thousand Eagles. And the white boots won’t let this go either. They’ll launch another attack sooner or later. So, I just... What do we do? Sir.”

It took every ounce of my willpower not to heave a deep sigh. Because he was right, of course. We were in a terrible position right now. Enemies were circling on all sides, just waiting for the right opportunity to attack. And my whole organization was a mess.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I stared down at my map of Malgrave while considering my options. And the more I looked at it, the more fury began to push out the weariness. I had worked too fucking hard to build this empire. I had gotten too fucking close to getting it all. And by all hell, I was going to fucking get it all.

“We’re going to get revenge,” I declared.

“On who?”

“On everyone.” Lifting my gaze, I locked hard eyes on Shinji. “Before this month is over, I am going to take out the House of Lightning, Onyx, and Stone, and become the sole ruler of the entire south side.”

His normally so calm eyes widened. “How? You’ve been trying to do that for the last five years. How are you going to make that happen in just a few short weeks?”

“I don’t know yet. But we’re out of options. I need to control the entire south side *before* the white boots launch their next attack. Fighting them while also fighting each other will only play in their favor, just like it always has.” Squeezing my hand into a fist, I felt my resolve harden as I tried to bend the very universe to my will. “I am going to wipe out the other Houses in the next few weeks. And then I am going to force the Parliament of Malgrave to cede the south side to me.”

Across the table, Shinji watched me with a knowing smile on his face, as if he believed every word with his whole soul. “Yes, sir.”

I glanced back down at the letter from Ben.

“But first, we’re going to get our people back.”

CHAPTER 8



It had been six days since Levi pushed me out of the window and then disappeared somewhere into the darkness. But my mind still kept drifting back to that night. To when he had told me that we were even now and that we were nothing to each other.

That should have been a good thing, something to be relieved about, since I had also decided to rectify my previous mistake and actually capture him this time. But I still couldn't help the pain that twisted in my chest every time I repeated his words in my head. And that both made me feel pathetic and infuriated me.

I didn't used to be this whiny and uncertain. I used to know exactly what was right and wrong. I used to make up my mind and then stick to it. But now, after meeting that damn dark mage who turned my whole world upside down, I had started to second-guess myself and worry and doubt and change my mind every two seconds. It was unsustainable. I had to find a way to—

“Sterling!” Chief Anderson snapped. “Are you even paying attention?”

Clothes rustled and leather creaked as the whole meeting room turned to glance at me where I stood by the wall along with the other Junior Constables. Heat seared my cheeks, but I hoped that it wasn't too visible in the bright sunlight that filled the room.

“Yes, sir,” I lied.

“Then what were we talking about?”

Alarm crackled through my veins since I had absolutely no idea. Just like every time my mind drifted back to Levi fucking Arden, I completely lost track of everything around me because his presence consumed my every thought.

The last thing I remembered them talking about was the reports on the ongoing gang war on the south side. But Jamila was in this meeting, and she always talked. A lot. And often just said the same things over and over again using different words. So chances were that we were still discussing that same subject.

“We’re going through the reports on the gang war on the south side,” I said, trying to sound as confident as possible.

For a few seconds, Chief only stared at me from beneath lowered brows. Then he grunted in acknowledgement. Relief flooded my chest.

“Well, if you *are* in fact paying attention,” he muttered, “then at least try to look like it too.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“As I was saying...” he began, turning back to the others.

I let my gaze drift across the people seated around the pale wooden table. Chief was sitting at the head of the table, with Captain Smith on the other end. Between them were all the Senior Constables in the South Side Department. Every seat was taken except one. Since no one else had been promoted to Senior Constable yet, the chair that used to be mine was still empty. I tried not to think about how long it had taken me to earn that chair, and how quickly I had lost it. And more importantly, *why* I had lost it.

“That concludes the reports,” Chief said as he pushed together the papers scattered in front of him and placed them in a neat pile. Then he paused for a few seconds while looking each one of us in the eye. “Now, I need everyone to keep their head on straight for what I’m about to tell you next.”

Apprehension swept through the room like a cold fall wind.

I glanced towards Ulric to see if he already knew about this, but he just remained sitting there at the end of the table, looking at Chief, so it was impossible to tell.

Then a spike of fear shot up my spine. Was this about me? Had they somehow found out that I had willingly let Levi go at that warehouse? My heart rate kicked up. Was I about to be arrested by all of my colleagues?

With my pulse fluttering nervously, I slid my gaze back to Chief. His scarred face was serious as he knitted his fingers and placed his hands on top of the small stack of papers.

“I have received word from one of my contacts up north,” he began.

Everyone held their breath.

“A worldwalker is targeting Malgrave.”

Gasps echoed throughout the white-painted room. The relief I felt at realizing that this wasn't about my betrayal was quickly drowned out by shock. A worldwalker? There had been rumors that a worldwalker existed somewhere up north, but never in my wildest nightmares had I thought that one would be coming here. To Malgrave.

“What?” Frank blurted out.

“I said keep your head, Constable,” Chief Anderson snapped.

Frank blushed and quickly dipped his chin.

From a few seats away, Ulric clasped his hands and studied Chief with furrowed brows. “How credible is this intel, sir?”

“Very. He's apparently quite the menace who has caused lots of trouble in the city next to where my contact lives.”

“But...” Jamila began, her black curls rippling as she shook her head in confusion. “What could he possibly want in Malgrave?”

Chief's sharp blue eyes shifted to her. “A healer.”

For a moment, I couldn't process his words. A healer? Where would he even find a healer in our city? Then coldness

spread through my chest like poison.

Gemma.

“We need to warn her,” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

Everyone whipped around to stare at me. Junior Constables didn’t usually speak during these kinds of meetings. But I had been a Senior up until last week, so I still wasn’t used to keeping my mouth shut. And besides, I was too stunned by this news to think straight.

“No, we don’t,” Chief Anderson said, a hard edge to his voice.

I jerked back. “What?”

“We need to stay out of this.”

“What are you—”

“Sterling,” Captain Smith began, his voice gentle. But there was a warning in his eyes as he shook his head at me. “Remember your—”

“No,” I interrupted. Taking a step away from the wall, I threw my arms out in frustration. “What are you talking about, Chief? Of course we need to warn her about this.”

“We will be doing no such thing.”

“But she’s a healer!”

“She’s *Levi Arden’s* healer.” His voice took on a sharp note, and impatience flashed in his eyes as he leveled a commanding stare on me. “And if this worldwalker kidnaps her from Arden, it will mean war between the two of them. And then all we need to do is to sit back and watch as the worldwalker destroys him. No one goes up against a worldwalker and wins. Not even the King of Metal.”

He was right about that. Worldwalking was an incredibly rare magical ability that let a person move between two different places in a matter of seconds. Since worldwalkers could just appear and disappear at any time and any place,

they were incredibly lethal both on a battlefield and as assassins.

“But the healer doesn’t—” I began.

“Don’t you get it, Sterling? This is our chance to rectify your failures.” His words hit me like a blade. “So no, we will not intervene in this.”

“But—”

“That’s an order!”

Everyone in the room flinched at the harshness of his voice. Everyone except me. I felt only anger. Opening my mouth, I got ready to continue arguing. But then I caught sight of Ulric once again shaking his head at me in warning.

From across the room, Chief Anderson stared me down while his whole muscular body pulsed with authority.

I closed my mouth again and, with great effort, lowered my chin in submission. “Yes, sir.”

He continued staring me down for another few seconds, as if waiting to see if I dared to raise my head again. When he was satisfied that I wouldn’t, he turned back to the others.

“So, if you get reports of a worldwalker being spotted,” he began, “do not send out any patrols. Once he has kidnapped Arden’s healer, he should most likely leave Malgrave again without causing any other problems. And then Arden will hunt him down to get his precious healer back, and inevitably get killed. Win-win on all fronts. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” everyone echoed.

“Good. Dismissed.”

Chairs scraped against the floor as all the Senior Constables rose to their feet. The rest of us waited until they had left before we filed out of the room as well.

As soon as we were outside in the hallway, I squeezed past the crowd and hurried to catch up to my mentor.

“Ulri—” I began to call before realizing that we were of course surrounded by people. Cutting myself off, I quickly

changed it to, “Captain.”

He trailed to a halt and turned to face me while I jogged up to him.

“Could I have a word?” I finished.

Frank and Jamila and the others cast uncertain glances in my direction. They had started doing that ever since they left me to die in that watchtower while they escaped. It felt as if they wanted to apologize but at the same time couldn’t bring themselves to do it because they secretly blamed me for letting Levi escape not once, but twice now.

“Of course,” Ulric said.

Raising a hand, he motioned towards a room down the hall.

While the others scattered and returned to their own desks, I followed Ulric into the deserted room and closed the door behind us.

The moment we were out of earshot, I demanded, “You can’t agree with this, right?”

There was a helpless look in his kind brown eyes as he released a heavy sigh. “Look, kiddo, I know what you’re thinking...”

“Really?” I shook my head at him. “Because if you did, you would agree with me.”

“I’m not happy about leaving a healer in trouble like this either, but Chief is right. She’s a healer, yes. But... And I know this is a shitty thing to say, but she’s not contributing to Malgrave anyway. She’s Arden’s healer, so it’s not like she’s using her powers to help the civilians in Malgrave. She only heals Arden and the rest of his dark mages. Our enemies.”

That wasn’t true. But I couldn’t tell him that without revealing too much about my time with Levi, so I forced myself not to contradict him.

“But—”

“Look, kiddo.” He heaved another deep sigh and drew a hand through his brown hair. “I know you, okay? I know that you care about people. It’s why you’re here, after all. And in all honesty, I do have some qualms about this too. But at the end of the day, Chief is right about this. Arden is the biggest threat this city has seen in decades. And especially now that he’s pissed at you and at us because we outsmarted him and captured his people. So getting this worldwalker to kill Arden for us is the best possible solution. And a solution that won’t cost the lives of any civilians or fellow constables. You see that right?”

Indecision ripped at my chest. Yes, I did see his point. But there were two massive problems with it.

Number one. I didn’t want Levi dead.

I knew that he was going to kill me the first chance he got, and I was well aware that I had just decided to capture him, but I couldn’t just tear out my feelings for him like it was nothing. Because regardless of his cutting words to me back in that watchtower, our time together, everything we had shared, meant something to me. Yes, I wanted him in handcuffs so that he couldn’t hurt any innocent civilians in his bloody quest for vengeance. But I didn’t want him dead.

And number two. *Gemma* was a civilian. The whole reason I had joined the constable force in the first place was so that I could make sure that no other civilians would get hurt or killed in a dark mage war that had nothing to do with them, just like my father had been. And in the face of that, there really was only one choice I could make. A choice I would have made every day of the week.

Forcing a small smile onto my face, I gave my mentor and captain a nod. “Yes, I understand.”

“Good.” He reached out and patted me on the shoulder. “This will be over in no time. You’ll see.”

I nodded again.

The corridor was empty when we walked back out. After another couple of comforting words, Ulric excused himself

and started towards his office. I watched him until he had disappeared from view.

Then I turned and sprinted towards the front doors.

CHAPTER 9



Glancing up, I cast an annoyed glare at the irritatingly cheerful sun above. Yesterday, the sky had been covered by thick dark gray clouds and sheets of rain had pelted the streets, making visibility incredibly low. But today, just because we needed to sneak an entire company of dark mages across the law-abiding side of Malgrave, that damn sun had to shine its brightest. I scowled at the sun for another second while brushing my palms together and pressing my hand against the lock on the back door.

The metal bolt melted within seconds. Since I didn't have to cover my tracks, I didn't bother hardening it again and instead just let it drip down the side of the pale wooden door. After once again checking to make sure that the street was empty, I edged the door open and snuck inside.

Clinking sounds came from the kitchen down the hall, and the scent of fried pork and potatoes hung in the air. I moved quietly in that direction.

"This is delicious, honey," a man's voice said. "I just wish my lunch break was longer so that I could stay until that pie is ready too."

A woman laughed. "Well, at least you'll have something to look forward to when you come home."

"I always have something to look forward to. You."

"Aww."

The sounds of kissing drifted into the corridor. I had to resist the urge to vomit. Or to slaughter them both just for the crime of being too happy and too in love when I...

I cut that thought off before I could finish it. There was no point in dwelling on the past. Eve and I were done.

Drawing myself up by the edge of the doorway, I peered into the room. It was a simple but neatly furnished kitchen. Pale wooden chairs stood arranged around a table made from the same material, and there were white drapes framing the windows.

I touched my palms together and began sending a stream of metal underneath the spotless floorboards while I watched the couple who were seated at the table. I didn't know the woman's name, but the man's name was Kevin, and both of them were in their mid-thirties. He was tall and muscular while she was short and curvy, but both of them had pale eyes that glittered with happiness.

I suppressed the urge to grumble and instead settled for a scowl.

Happy. Who the fuck was happy in this day and age?

Cheerful chatter and clinking utensils continued filling the room as they ate and talked while I finished setting up my attack.

Once it was in place, I pushed off from the wall and stepped right into the kitchen.

It took another three seconds for them to notice me. But once they did, they shot up from their seats and got ready to smack their hands together and call up magic. Unfortunately for them, the battle was already over.

Metal bands shot up from the floor and wrapped around their wrists and ankles. Shock flashed across their features as they suddenly found themselves immobilized when I hardened the metal.

Before they could scream and draw unwanted attention, I spoke in a dark voice dripping with threats. "If you open your mouths without permission, I'll slit your throats. Understood?"

Fear flooded their faces, and they shared a panicked stare before turning back to me with wide eyes.

I sauntered up to the pale wooden counter and picked up the kitchen knife lying there on the cutting board. After spinning it in my hand, I pressed it underneath Kevin's chin.

"I said, understood?" I demanded.

He opened his mouth and then closed it again while panic flashed like lightning strikes in his eyes. I had told them I would slit their throats if they spoke without permission, and I hadn't technically given them permission to speak but I was also demanding an answer, so right now they were damned if they did and damned if they didn't. It was of course intentional.

To be honest, I hadn't planned to be this cruel when I broke in. But I had hated how happy and in love they were, so that vicious part of me that usually won had decided to punish them for it.

When Kevin looked like he was on the verge of tears, I at last showed them mercy and said, "You may speak."

Both of them gasped in a breath.

"Yes, we understand," they pressed out in unison.

"Good." I lazily traced the blade down Kevin's throat. "You know who I am?"

"Yes," he breathed.

Next to him, his wife whimpered at the way I scraped the knife lightly over his artery. Sunlight streamed in through the window, making her wet eyes gleam in the bright light.

I cocked my head while resting the point of the blade at the base of his throat. "You'd do well to remember your manners."

"Yes, sir," he quickly amended it to.

I let out a cold huff of laughter. "Better."

"Please, don't hurt him," his wife pleaded. Alarm flickered in her pale eyes, and then she hurriedly added, "Sir. Please, don't hurt him, *sir*."

“If you do what I want, you will both be back at this kitchen table, eating that pie before dinner time.”

“We’ll do what you want,” Kevin said. “Anything you want.”

“I know. Because if you don’t...” I shifted the knife and pointed it towards the woman, who sucked in a shuddering breath. “Your wife will die in her bed tonight.” While holding her terrified stare, I swung the blade back towards Kevin. “And if you breathe a single word about this while we’re gone, your husband won’t make it back.”

Another whimper spilled from her lips.

“Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

I sauntered back to the counter and put the knife back on the cutting board. Across the floor, Kevin and his wife remained standing still as statues while they stared at me.

If I’d had anything other than a cold black lump of metal where my heart should have been, I would’ve felt bad for them. After all, they were civilians, and I didn’t usually involve civilians if I could help it. But I simply couldn’t bring myself to care anymore.

I was constantly under attack. I had lost all the power I had spent years building for myself. I had gotten my elite dark mages captured by the white boots because of my own fucking incompetence. And Eve—

No.

After what I went through after my family sold me, I didn’t have much of a heart to begin with. But now, whatever small scrap of empathy I had left was gone completely.

And all of it was those damn white boots’ fault.

Fury roared through my soul, and the madness inside me cracked open an eye.

Fuck, I wanted to burn the whole north side to the ground. I wanted to slaughter them all for what they took from me when they—

With great effort, I dragged in a breath and forced the insanity back behind those iron walls inside me. Releasing a long exhale, I took another second to get my mind back on track. I needed to be clearheaded for this.

Once I had my emotions back under control, I turned towards the terrified couple across the kitchen. With a brush of my palms, I made the metal bands evaporate.

Jerking my chin, I started towards the door. “Come along, Kevin.”

Wood clattered behind me as one of them must have knocked over a chair while either steadying themselves or scrambling after me. I didn’t care enough to turn around and look.

“I’ll be back soon, honey,” Kevin promised in a soft voice. “It will be fine.”

“Be careful,” his wife answered.

“If I have to tell you again, I’ll cut off one hand as punishment,” I warned while striding into the corridor.

“Do as he says,” Kevin hurriedly pressed out. “Stay here and don’t tell anyone.”

Then his footsteps thudded against the floor as he ran to catch up with me. I shoved the back door open and strode out into the still annoyingly cheerful sunlight. Kevin closed the door behind him before darting back to my side again. But he kept a half step behind me as we started down the street.

“You run a delivery company,” I said. I already knew the answer, of course, but I asked anyway.

“Yes, sir,” he replied.

“Today, you will bring ten covered wagons to Justice Street.”

“I don’t have ten wagons, sir.”

I cut him a look from the corner of my eye. He flinched.

Sliding my gaze back to the street ahead, I asked, “Then how many do you have?”

“Eight.”

“Then you will bring eight covered wagons to Justice Street today. At exactly thirteen minutes past two, your lead wagon will suddenly experience problems with a wheel so that you have to stop the whole convoy.”

“Okay.”

“After a few minutes, a bunch of people will appear. They will get inside the wagons so that they can’t be seen from outside, and then you will drive those eight wagons across the Bridge of Life. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you foresee any problems with that?”

“No. I have permits to cross the Bridge of Life at any time.”

“Excellent. Once those people have gotten out of the wagons on the other side of the river, you can drive home and eat that pie with your wife.”

“Okay.”

“Aren’t you going to thank me for letting you live?”

“Thank you, sir.”

I let out a huff of amusement that I didn’t really feel.

There were far too many parts of this plan that could go to hell, and I could only control one small section of it. Shinji was responsible for the distraction. Ben was responsible for the extraction. And I was responsible for the getaway. I might be confident that Kevin would do as commanded and get my people to the south side, but first, they had to actually get to the wagons.

My heart thrummed in my chest as I left Kevin and set course for the constable force’s building.

CHAPTER 10



Nervous apprehension flitted through my soul as I reached the final corner. Once I rounded it, there would be nothing to hide behind anymore. Only a long straight road that led to the Court of Metal. Gemma's place was located on the other side, so I would have to walk past Levi's blood-red front doors and then down to the building after it.

My heart hammered in my chest as I peeked around the corner.

Not only was I disobeying a direct order from Chief Eric Anderson himself by being here, I was also about to walk up to the home of a dark mage who had told me that he would try to kill me the next time he saw me. But I wasn't doing this for Levi. I was doing it for Gemma.

The street before me was empty. Usually, there were guards standing outside the doors. But now, the bright sunlight revealed a deserted road and buildings with all the doors and windows firmly closed. Though, given that we had most of Levi's people locked up in the prison below our headquarters, it wasn't too much of a surprise.

After drawing in a bracing breath, I slunk around the corner and started down the street with quick steps. I stayed on the opposite side of the road, as far as I could get from the building that housed Levi's Court, and kept my gaze flicking back and forth in search of threats.

Hopefully, Levi wouldn't shoot to kill on sight. If he gave me a chance to explain before he tried to end me, he would

understand that I was here to help him right now.

My pulse thrummed in my ears as I drew closer to the front doors.

If he had spotted me, he would attack any second now.

I kept moving.

Confusion rippled through me as I glanced at the massive doors while I hurried past. They were no longer blood red. Or rather, only parts of them were. Along the outside of both doors, they looked like they usually did. But in the middle was a large circle of plain gray metal. It almost looked as if someone had burned a massive hole through it, and then Levi had used parts of the wall to seal it up again.

The confusion was replaced by worry. Had this happened when one of the other dark mage Houses attacked earlier? Or was this the worldwalker's doing?

I picked up the pace until I was almost running.

It couldn't be the worldwalker's doing. He would've just appeared inside the throne room instead of trying to burn the doors down. So I wasn't too late. Gemma was still here and everything was fine.

I kept repeating those words over and over again as I closed the final distance to Gemma's house.

Everything looked untouched, but I didn't dare to let any relief wash over me. Not yet.

Pulling open the door, I stepped into the reception room that I knew Gemma used while healing people. The room she had used when she was healing *me* after the House of the Thousand Eagles had tried to kill me in that warehouse. The night that Levi had come for me and sprinted across half of the city with me bleeding in his arms so that he could save me. Pain stabbed at my heart. And I had repaid them all by—

No. Shaking my head, I forced myself to cut off that thought before I could finish it. Levi was a dark mage and I was a constable. I had already repaid him for that night by letting him walk during the ambush. And he had repaid me by

letting me live last week. We were nothing to each other now. I owed him nothing and he owed me nothing. He was now going to try to kill me and I was now going to try to capture him. Just like it should be. The only reason I was here was because of Gemma. She was a civilian, just like my father had been, and she didn't deserve to get caught up in power struggles between dark mages.

Yes. That was it. That was the only reason I was here.

With my infuriating thoughts finally back under control, I swept my gaze over the deserted room while moving farther into the building.

It looked exactly like it had the last time I was there. The floor and walls were made of metal, but as opposed to Levi's building, Gemma's place was full of wooden furniture. Bookshelves lined the walls, and there were chairs and a table in that same material. In the windows was an army of potted plants that gave the whole place life. And there were even a couple of armchairs and a couch in soft green colors in one corner. It was all so very different from Levi's harsh Court of Metal.

And thankfully, all of it looked completely undisturbed. No signs of a struggle.

A seed of worry sprouted in my chest.

We were dealing with a worldwalker. Just because there were no signs of a struggle didn't mean that he hadn't been here. My heart rate kicked up.

"Gemma?" I called.

No answer.

Weaving through the room, I set course for the door at the back, which I assumed led to her private quarters.

The corridor beyond was lined with beautiful paintings of forests and other nature scenes. I followed it to a kitchen that was decorated in much the same way as the reception room. Wooden furniture and vibrant green plants on the windowsill. There was nothing to indicate that someone had left in a hurry,

but the anxiousness in my chest still kept growing like a thorny weed.

The whole building was unnaturally silent.

When I had lived in the Court, Levi had told me that Gemma always kept her front door unlocked, in case someone needed healing urgently. After all, no one in Malgrave would ever be stupid or suicidal enough to try to attack Gemma. The other dark mages had apparently tried to convince her to leave and work for them instead, but for some reason, she had always turned them down. And even with Levi this weakened, no one would be dumb enough to try to take her by force.

But a worldwalker from the north would know nothing about the political situation in Malgrave and care nothing about the power scales and customs here. He could just walk right in through the open front door and abduct Gemma.

With worry twisting through my insides, I made my way back towards the stairwell. If Gemma was here, she would have heard me by now. But maybe she was sleeping? Maybe she had spent the entire night healing Levi and his people after yet another attack, and was now too exhausted to even hear me call out.

Pain sliced into my heart at the thought, but I pushed it aside. Levi's problems were no longer my concern. I was only going to warn Gemma and then I was going to leave.

Reaching the landing upstairs, I was met by yet another corridor made of metal that Gemma had tried to soften by putting up paintings of woodlands. There were two doors in it. I made my way towards the closest one.

It revealed what looked like a study. Wooden bookcases were crammed against every wall, and rows upon rows of books and scrolls filled the shelves. I quickly closed the door again and hurried towards the next one.

A spacious bedroom, with large windows that let in the bright sunlight, met me on the other side. I immediately snapped my gaze to the bed along the far wall.

Panic shot up my spine as my eyes landed on an empty bed with smooth cream-colored sheets. She wasn't sleeping. She wasn't *here*.

With one hand still gripping the handle, I stared into the deserted bedroom while alarm clanged louder and louder inside my mind. Was I too late? Had the worldwalker already been here and kidnapped her?

And where the hell was Levi?

He hadn't come out to kill me when I passed his Court, and I knew that he could see the whole street from his bedroom window. He must have seen me walk up to Gemma's place. Unless he wasn't even here.

Releasing the handle, I raised my hands and instead dragged my fingers through my hair while heaving a deep sigh. "Fuck."

"An accurate assessment of your current situation."

Shock crackled through me like a lightning strike.

Yanking my hands back down, I got ready to slap them together while I whipped around to face the source of the voice.

But before I had even finished spinning around, two strong hands were on me.

A thud echoed into the silent hallway as I was slammed back first into the wall next to the door. And I would have gasped in surprise and pain if I could, but the hand around my throat was cutting off all my air. Probably in an attempt to prevent me from screaming for help. The other hand kept my right wrist pinned against the wall next to my head.

My instincts kicked in, and I yanked up my leg, intending to knee my attacker in the balls. But he deftly shifted aside. And as my eyes finally focused on his face, I found a flash of annoyance blowing across those harsh features.

Dread sluiced through my veins, but before I could do anything else, he used his grip on my throat to force me up until I was barely balancing on my toes. And then he tightened

his fingers even more. A choked gurgling noise tore from me as I struggled underneath his iron grip.

“I would suggest refraining from such activities, if I were you,” he said, his voice deceptively smooth.

Using my free hand, I tried desperately to get his hand off my throat, but it was no use. The man before me was built like a damn fortress. He was terrifyingly muscular, and even taller than Levi. Almost as tall as that other mage I had seen with Callan Blackwell earlier. He was holding up practically my entire body weight with just one arm, but he didn't even seem to be feeling the strain at all.

I hadn't been able to grab my sword before darting away from our headquarters, since I couldn't risk attracting the attention of my colleagues, so I had nothing to stab the bastard with either.

My toes scraped against the metal floor as I fought to get free for another few seconds before realizing that I would never succeed. Going slack in his grip, I instead just stared back at the man holding me.

His blue eyes were so pale that they almost looked white, and the color seemed to have bled out of his blond hair as well.

He studied me intently, as if looking for something.

Then a smile curled his lips, and he lowered me back fully to the floor. My lungs were burning from the lack of air, but I remained motionless so that I wouldn't give him an excuse to pull me up again.

Black spots began swimming in my vision.

At last, his grip on my throat loosened. Not enough for me to escape, but enough to allow me to breathe again. I sucked in desperate breaths to refill my lungs while the man before me kept watching me with keen eyes.

I had never seen him before, which meant that he probably wasn't one of Levi's people. He could of course be a new recruit, but the warning bells clanging in my head told me that this man was someone else entirely.

He had just appeared out of nowhere right in the corridor. I hadn't heard him open the front door. Or walk up the steps. Which meant that there was only one possibility left.

This was the worldwalker.

As if the universe truly wanted to seal my fate, the pale-eyed man smiled like an absolute villain before speaking a single sentence that made fear rake its icy fingers down my spine.

“I've been looking for you for a long time.”

CHAPTER 11



Impatience flickered through my soul as I brushed my palms together and created a long metal plank between the buildings. I just wanted this to be over. I just wanted my people out of that damn prison and across the river so that I could finally start focusing on my true goal. Wiping out the other Houses and becoming the sole ruler of the entire south side.

But there were too many things that could go wrong. Too many things that were outside of my control. And I truly despised not being in control.

Cool winds tugged at my hair as I ran across the plank and then the next rooftop. Since I couldn't exactly walk up to Justice Street and the constable force's headquarters, I'd had to come up with another solution. This one put me at a disadvantage since I couldn't intervene as much if things went to hell on the ground, but at least it allowed me to move across the city almost undetected.

Though I would have preferred it if the weather had been a bit gloomier. It was early fall, after all. I shot another scowl up at the still cheerfully bright sun above as I reached the other end of the roof.

Touching my hands together, I summoned yet another stream of metal that I shaped into a plank between the buildings. Once it was in place, I hardened it and then started across it.

This was the same method I had used to escape the horde of white boots at the watchtower last week. They had thought they'd had me surrounded, so they had taken their time waiting for the rest of their reinforcements and setting up a proper assault. Little did they know that I could just *create* another way out.

After I had pushed Eve out the window, I had darted up to the roof and formed a plank between the watchtower and the next building. Since it was the middle of the night, they hadn't been able to spot me against the dark sky when I snuck across. Then all I'd had to do was hop over another few roofs before climbing down and making my way to the shore where Ferry came and picked me up.

I glanced back at the plank as I reached the final roof. Then I released my grip on the magic and let the metal fade into nothingness. Crouching down, I made my way towards the opposite edge.

Even through my clothes, I could feel the warmth radiating off the sunbaked stones as I lay down on my stomach and peered over the edge.

Justice Street, the grand road that ran outside the constables' headquarters, was more or less empty. But that was soon about to change.

I glanced towards the clock tower a few streets over. Two minutes to two. Any time now.

That terrible restlessness tore through my soul, and I had to suppress the urge to drum my fingers against the edge of the roof. Forcing out a long breath, I adjusted my position, making the large sword along my spine shift slightly. Hopefully, I wouldn't need it today.

Metallic clanging split the silence.

I snapped my gaze towards the east as the clock at last struck two.

Come on, Shinji.

Dark orange flames burst into the sky.

A satisfied smirk spread across my mouth. *Good man.*

“FIRE!” someone bellowed so loudly that I could hear it from several streets over.

“Dark mages! We’re under attack!”

Shouts of alarm and calls for help mingled with terrified screams as another massive wave of fire tore between the buildings, high enough to lick the sky.

I raised my eyebrows. It had been a while since last time I saw Shinji fight at full power. I had almost forgotten just how destructive his magic could be when he went all out. But this just reconfirmed why he was one of my top people.

Doors banged open on the street below.

Tearing my gaze from the inferno in the east, I watched as row upon row of white boots welled out of the front doors.

Right on time.

Their white and gold leather armor shone in the bright sunlight as they quickly formed up in squads and took off towards the scene of the crime. Just like we had predicted, it looked to be most of their forces. They probably thought that I was there too, exacting revenge for what they had done in that warehouse. To be fair, it was a reasonable assumption. I *was* planning to take revenge. Just not today.

Their gold-trimmed boots thudded against the cobblestones as they ran between the pristine white buildings before disappearing around the corner. From up here, and in that mass of people, it was impossible to tell, but I couldn’t help but wonder if Eve was among them. Or if she had been forced to stay behind since she had already failed to capture me twice now.

Screams still echoed from where Shinji was torching random buildings, but they were now joined by the white boots’ orders for civilians to get out of the way and stay inside. I flicked my gaze between Justice Street and the building while my pulse thrummed in my ears.

Right now, Ben would be sneaking into one of the captains' offices and stealing the keys to the cells below. Then he would run down and free my people, and take them out through the side entrance where Kevin should be waiting with his wagons.

I drummed my fingers against the warm stone roof as I impatiently checked the street and then the clock tower.

Flames roared up between the buildings to the east where Shinji was drawing the white boots even farther from their headquarters.

At exactly twelve minutes past two, a caravan of covered wagons rattled down the street. And one minute later, the first wagon stopped. Kevin jumped down from it and then proceeded to study the wheel as if inspecting it for damage. Just like I had told him to.

A small wave of relief blew through me. The distraction worked, and the getaway was on track. Now, we just needed the extraction to proceed as planned too.

My heart pattered against my ribs as I stared at the front doors. They were massive, and made of wood, so it was impossible to see inside. And since the bright sunlight was reflected in the windows, I couldn't see anything through those either.

Come on. Come on.

The door was shoved open.

I jerked up as a man's face at last became visible. Ben.

He whipped his head from side to side before spotting the caravan. Then he waved his hand and started forward. Chris and Tyler appeared behind his shoulder.

Intense relief washed over me.

It worked. It fucking worked.

They were still handcuffed since we couldn't waste time on unlocking each pair of manacles while still inside the building, so I called up my magic and got ready to melt their restraints from up here the second I had a clear view.

Ben was one step out of the door, and Chris and Tyler were just about to cross the threshold, when calls of alarm split the air.

Panic crackled across their faces as they whipped around right before a mass of arms wearing white leather wrapped around them from behind and began yanking them back into the building.

“The prisoners are escaping!” someone screamed. “Sound the alarm!”

Giant bells clanged from inside the building.

Fucking hell.

Leaping up from the roof, I summoned a massive sheet of metal and hurled it straight at the windows below.

It crashed into them, making glass explode through the air and screams echo between the white stone walls. Ben snapped his gaze up to me. Then he flicked a glance behind him where the white boots had already dragged Chris and Tyler out of sight. Sounds of struggle and a terribly uneven battle came from the still open doors while I sent another sheet of metal into the windows in order to create a distraction.

Ben just stood there on the street. Frozen. Snapping his gaze between the street and the door. As if he couldn't decide whether he should be going back inside to help the others or run as far away as he could.

“Don't just stand there!” I yelled. “Run!”

Ben wasn't a fighter. There was nothing he could do to help my people now. But if he managed to get away, maybe we could still somehow salvage this.

He whipped his head in my direction. But before he could so much as take a single step, a blast of wind smacked straight into his chest, sending him flying backwards across the street and crashing into the wall on the other side.

White boots poured out of the doors while Ben slumped down on the ground.

From inside the building, I could only see the occasional arm and leg, but the noise of battle still echoed from in there.

Calling up another wall of metal, I hurled it at the white boots as they sprinted towards my now unconscious spy.

Booms reverberated through the air as it slammed into overlapping shields of wind and water.

“Arden is here!” a woman called from below. “Get up there *now!*”

Lightning zapped through the air. I yanked up a metal shield and shoved the white bolt aside right before a blast of water shot towards me. Shifting the shield, I barely managed to redirect it before a combined attack of wind and fire tore through the air.

“Fucking hell,” I growled as the white boots began bombarding me with attacks from the ground while a whole squad of them ran towards the door to the building I was standing on.

By the wall right below me, two men grabbed Ben’s limp arms and started dragging him back across the streets. I only managed to shoot one spear of metal towards one of them, which the woman who had yelled earlier easily redirected, before I had to return all of my attention to blocking their barrage of attacks.

From the open windows of the house, I could hear people pounding up the stairs.

I swept my gaze around the area.

The fight inside the constables’ headquarters was no longer audible. And since none of my people had miraculously appeared on the street, that meant that they had lost the battle and been recaptured.

Ben was unconscious and now captured as well.

Eight white boots were hurling attacks at me from down on the street, and eight more were racing up the stairs to force me into a close-range battle.

Fury and desperation and utter disappointment roared through my soul.

So close. We had been so fucking close!

I shot metal walls at the constables below with increased speed. Magic hissed and crackled through the air as they blocked them while firing back. The pounding footsteps from inside the building drew closer.

And at that moment, I knew that there was nothing I could do.

I had already failed.

Again.

I had once again lost against the fucking white boots.

Calling up a massive wall, I hurled it at the people on the street below. It was large and fast enough that I knew they would need everyone's power to block it.

The moment they were distracted, I whirled around. And then I did the only thing I could do.

I ran.

CHAPTER 12



My stomach flipped as the corridor around me became blurry. It felt as if I was being yanked forward and spun around and pushed downwards all at the same time. Then the world around me came back into focus.

Nausea rolled through me again. Bending over, I vomited into the lush green grass.

“By all hell,” the man next to me growled while still keeping my arm in an iron grip.

I just stared down at the grass below my feet while throwing up again.

Confusion trickled in at the edge of my mind. Grass? How could there be grass here? We had been standing in Gemma’s corridor only seconds ago, so...

I trailed off as the last of the dizziness evaporated and my mind finally caught up with the situation. Slowly straightening again, I swept my gaze around the area.

We were standing somewhere out in the middle of the grasslands. The ground sloped upwards on all sides, and straight ahead was a small cabin with a few trees around it.

Shit.

I turned to the man holding on to my arm. Now I had my proof. This was indeed the worldwalker.

Since we were down in a valley, it prevented me from figuring out how close to Malgrave we were.

Icy dread slid down my spine.

Maybe we weren't even in Malgrave anymore. I had never been to the north of Valda, so I didn't know what it looked like up there.

I shifted my gaze back to the worldwalker. "This is a mistake. I'm not—"

Pain pulsed through my cheek.

The blow took me so off guard that I didn't even have a chance to react. My head snapped to the side and I crashed down on the grass, barely missing the small puddle of vomit.

"Didn't I tell you that I would knock your teeth out if you opened your mouth without permission?" my captor demanded.

Yes, he had. After he had let me breathe for a few seconds back in that corridor, he had tightened his grip on my throat again and spit all kinds of threats at me. If I made any noise, he would rearrange my teeth. If I tried to run, he would break my legs. If I tried to fight, he would knock me out. And I had believed him, so I had just stood there against the wall while he handcuffed me and then grabbed my arm to worldwalk us out of there.

There was a ruthless glint in his eyes that I recognized all too well. I had seen it in the gaze of many dark mages. It was the look that people got when they were powerful enough to do whatever they wanted. When they expected people to obey or die. Levi had that same glint in his eyes too. But as opposed to the King of Metal, this worldwalker seemed to have no issues with hurting civilians. Though technically, I wasn't a civilian. But he didn't know that.

Since I had rushed out of our offices without stopping to grab anything, I didn't have my sword. And since I had been indoors all day, I also wasn't wearing my white and gold leather jacket. That left me with the white leather pants and boots, which admittedly might look a bit odd to an outsider, and the simple black long-sleeved shirt that I wore underneath

my armor. There was absolutely nothing to indicate that I was anything but a strangely dressed civilian.

“Answer,” he snapped.

My head was still ringing, so for a second, I had trouble remembering the question. Then his threat came trickling back in.

“Yes,” I pressed out while using my shackled hands to push myself up into a sitting position.

“Yes, what?”

Anger flashed through me, and I shot a glare up at him. “I don’t know. In case you’ve forgotten, you didn’t exactly stop to introduce yourself before you assaulted me.”

Crack.

Black spots swam before my eyes as he backhanded me again. Hard. I didn’t even have time to lift my hands and brace myself before I hit the ground once more. Pain pulsed through my cheek and shoulder.

Lying there with my cheek pressed against the soft grass, I dragged in a breath smelling of wet soil while I tried to gather my scattered wits again.

Okay so maybe provoking the ruthless and heavily muscled dark mage while I was handcuffed, unarmed, and alone with him in the middle of nowhere was a bad move.

“My name is Christian White,” he said from above me.

I almost laughed. Of course his name was White. Given how pale his hair and eyes and everything about him were, how could it be anything else?

Blinking, I pushed aside the insane flash of amusement. How hard had I hit my head?

Before I could shift back into a sitting position, a large hand grabbed the collar of my shirt and yanked me to my knees. I shook my head to clear it and then looked up to find Christian White grinning down at me.

“But you can call me *master*,” he finished with that cold smile on his face.

It took everything I had not to snort. Keeping my sharp tongue firmly behind my teeth, I just held his gaze with unflinching eyes instead.

He released my collar and instead pointed down at his brown leather boot. “You got vomit on it. Wipe it off.”

I glared up at him in stubborn silence for a second. But I needed all of my brain cells if I was going to figure out a way out of this damn mess, so I couldn’t afford another blow to the head.

While stifling a snarl, I broke eye contact and glowered down at his boot. I had indeed gotten a few specks of vomit on it when I threw up earlier. Shifting the heavy manacles around my wrist, I pulled my sleeve up over my hand as best as I could and then wiped off the bits of vomit.

White let out a smug chuckle.

If I’d had a knife, I would’ve stabbed it in his foot. But I didn’t, so I settled for an angry scowl.

“Get up,” he commanded.

But before I could even begin to follow his order, he grabbed me by the arm and hauled me to my feet. I stumbled over the grass as he dragged me towards the cabin.

The wooden door creaked in protest as he shoved it open and then threw me inside. Since I still hadn’t managed to get my feet firmly underneath me, I just flew into the room and smacked into the closest piece of furniture, which happened to be a sturdy wooden table. Pain flared from my hip and down my thigh. Blocking it out, I used the tabletop to at last push myself upright.

Dread washed over me.

Three muscular men with the exact same ruthless glint in their eyes turned to face me from where they had been standing in the middle of the living room. Then their gazes shifted to White, and they all bowed as one.

“Master,” they said.

He just slammed the door shut behind his back and strode towards me. “Before we leave, you’re going to heal him.” He pointed towards the guy on the left, who had a nasty cut down his arm, which had bled through the bandages. “So we know that you really are as good as they say.”

“I can’t,” I said, whirling around to face him.

He stopped advancing, and his voice turned lethally soft as he said, “I will give you one chance to provide me with another answer.”

Fear flickered through my soul as I backed away. This was not going to be a pleasant conversation. “No, I mean I literally can’t. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. I’m not a healer.”

“Do not test my patience. You have no idea the lengths I’ve gone to in order to find someone like you.”

“But I’m not a healer!”

He lunged towards me. I leaped sideways, snatching up a chair and holding it in my shackled hands like a weapon. A cruel smile stretched his lips as he moved towards me. Backing away, I kept the table between me and him.

“I’m telling you,” I began again while we circled the table. “You have the wrong person.”

One moment, White was grinning at me from the other side of the table. The next, he was gone. Just gone. I jerked back in shock. But barely a second later, a hand locked around my throat from behind while another ripped the chair from my grip.

My heart stopped as a flash of pure panic crackled down my spine.

This was why people ran at the mere mention of a worldwalker. It was impossible to fight one and win.

I dragged in a strangled breath before he cut off my air completely. With the firm grip on my throat, he pinned me against his massive chest as he leaned down to growl in my

ear, “I know that you’ve been taught to say that. I know that healers are told from a young age to pretend that they’re just magicless nobodies so that no one will target them. But I know what you are.”

Spinning me around, he threw me straight at the man with the cut on his arm. I sucked in a desperate breath before slamming into his chest. He immediately grabbed my shoulders, digging his fingers in hard.

“Heal him,” White commanded again.

“I can’t! I’m—”

Air exploded from my lungs as the injured man rammed his fist into my stomach. My knees buckled and I crashed down on the dusty floorboards hard enough to rattle my teeth. Pain yet again ricocheted through my body as I doubled over and braced my palms on the floor while trying to drag air back into my lungs.

“Heal him.”

“I—”

A boot connected with the side of my ribs. It was hard enough to flip my whole body over. I gasped as I hit the floor back first. Dark spots flickered before my eyes, and it felt as though my whole chest was vibrating with pain.

“Hold her,” White snapped.

In my mind, I knew that I should be fighting back. Should be doing something. Anything. But the agony pulsing through my every bone made my thoughts dangerously slow.

The injured man grabbed the thick metal rod that ran between my manacles and prevented me from touching my palms together. With a firm grip on it, he yanked my hands up and pinned them to the ground above my head.

At last, my survival instincts cut through the haze of pain, and I thrashed wildly on the ground. But I was too late.

White lowered his massive frame until he was straddling my chest. I struggled to force a breath into my lungs

underneath his weight, but he didn't even seem to notice as he pulled out a knife and leaned forward.

Burning agony seared through my skin as he drew a long cut down the side of my forearm.

A scream shattered from my throat.

Kicking my legs, I tried desperately to get him off me while pain pulsed through my arm.

"If you heal him, I'll let you heal yourself too," he said.

"I'm not a healer!" I pleaded, hating how panicked my voice sounded. "Please, I'm telling you the truth."

He blew out an exasperated sigh, and then raised the knife again.

"I can prove it!" I yelled while fear wreaked havoc inside me. "Please, I can prove it."

From where he still sat on top of my chest, he narrowed his pale eyes at me as if trying to read the lies on my face. But he stopped moving the knife closer to my skin.

"I can prove it. Please. I swear."

That vicious gleam returned to his eyes. "Please, what?"

Throwing all of my pride to the wind, I swallowed and then pressed out, "Please, master."

He huffed out an amused breath. But he lowered his knife slightly as he asked, "Prove it how?"

"I'm not a healer, but I'm not magicless either. I'm a normal mage. If you unlock my handcuffs, I can show you."

For a few seconds, he just considered in silence. Then he clicked his tongue. "Fine."

Relief washed over me.

Climbing off me, he jerked his chin at his men. "Get her on her knees and put a sword to her throat." His hard eyes locked on mine. "If you try anything, I will make you beg me for death."

I was about to nod in acknowledgement, but it turned into a violent jerk of my head when two of the guys behind me yanked me off the floor and deposited me on my knees before the third one pressed a blade against my throat from behind.

Since I wasn't planning on trying anything, I just sat there motionless while White bent down and unlocked my handcuffs. They opened with a soft click. Removing the manacles and holding them in one hand, he straightened and then leveled a commanding stare on me.

“Get to it then.”

I resisted the urge to rub my wrists and instead just slowly lifted my hands. While holding his gaze, I carefully brushed my palms together.

The sword was pressed harder against my throat in warning.

Ignoring it, I simply summoned a small flame in my right palm. The fire crackled for a few seconds before I released my grip on it and then touched my hands together again. A ball of water sloshed in the air. I let that fade out as well and then summoned a tiny gust of wind that whooshed around my fingers before dying out.

White ground his teeth.

I lowered my hands again, placing them palms up on my thighs to make it clear that I wasn't going to attack. Blood trickled down from the cut in my forearm, staining my white leather pants red.

“Fuck,” White growled. Forcing out a harsh breath, he raked his fingers through his pale blond hair before locking furious eyes on me again. Rage and impatience bled into his tone as he snapped, “How can you *not* be the healer? You were in the right place. And I know that a healer lives there, so don't try to fucking bullshit me.” He flicked a hand up and down my body. “You even fit the physical description. Wavy light brown hair and brown eyes. So how can it not be you?”

A brief hint of stunned surprise flickered through my soul. I hadn't even realized how physically similar Gemma and I

were. He was right. We did share quite a few physical attributes.

“I heard that you were coming for her,” I began carefully. “So I went there to warn her.”

His gaze sharpened. “So you know her?”

“She has healed me in the past. I just wanted to return the favor.”

Dread shot through me at the way the wheels began turning behind his eyes. “What’s your relationship to Levi Arden?”

“Nothing.”

“Lie.”

The guy behind me pushed the sword higher up underneath my chin, forcing me to tilt my head back.

White leveled a commanding stare on me. “If you lie to me again, I will take it out on your flesh. Understood?”

“Yes,” I forced out.

“Good. My sources tell me that this Levi Arden rules the south side of Malgrave and that the healer is his. They also tell me that Arden rules with an iron fist, which means that he would never let just anyone use his healer. So, let’s try this again. What’s your relationship to Levi Arden?”

“It’s...” I didn’t even know how to categorize it myself, so how the hell was I supposed to explain it to this maniac? In the end, the best I could come up with was, “Complicated.”

A slow smile spread across his lips. Then he raked his gaze up and down my body in a way that made my skin crawl. “You’re fucking him, aren’t you?”

I refused to be embarrassed, so I just retorted, “Not anymore.”

“But you have?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” He slid another gaze over my curves. “Well, looks like I still got some leverage then.”

The men behind me chuckled. I wanted to punch their teeth down their fucking throats, but I forced myself to just remain sitting there. The blood on my forearm was starting to dry at the edges of the wound now.

Outside the windows, bright sunlight filled the lush green landscape and birds chirped merrily. And as I sat there on my knees with a sword at my throat and a fucking worldwalker as my captor, I couldn't help but feel as if nature itself was mocking me with its annoying cheerfulness.

Metal clinked as White tossed the handcuffs to one of his men. “Lock her to the bed for now. I've gotta make another trip to Malgrave.”

“Yes, master,” replied the guy who caught the manacles. “May I ask what you're going to do?”

“I'm going to leave a note.”

Confusion marred my brows, but I said nothing as I was hauled to the bed and thrown down on it. The injured man moved my hands up to the wooden bars that ran the length of the headboard, and then the guy with the handcuffs snapped them shut around my wrists, trapping my hands above my head.

From across the floor, White watched me with scheming eyes. “If Arden wants his precious fuck buddy back alive, he's gonna have to trade his healer for her.”

Fear exploded through my chest like poison.

Levi was never going to agree to that trade. Even before I had betrayed him, he would never have traded Gemma, the only healer in the entire city, for someone like me. And now, after I hurt him worse than anyone had done since Callan Blackwell faked his death, there was not a chance in a million years that he would ever come for me. In fact, I was pretty sure he would even raise a toast in White's honor if he did kill me.

Letting my head drop back down against the lumpy mattress, I stared up at the dark wooden ceiling while a heavy numbness spread through my limbs.

White was going to kill me unless Levi made the trade. And Levi would never agree to it. Which meant that no matter what I did, I was going to die here in this cabin sometime in the next few days.

CHAPTER 13



A bang echoed throughout my throne room as I slammed the doors shut behind me hard enough to rattle the chains in the ceiling. Exhaustion and rage and frustration swirled around me like storm clouds. Slapping my palms together, I summoned a sheet of metal and hurled it straight into the wall.

Another loud crash reverberated through the air.

“FUCK!” I screamed.

I knew that I should have kept my cool, because exploding like this made me look weak and out of control, but I just couldn’t take it anymore. Everything was slipping through my fingers. In the span of a week, I had lost almost everything I had spent years building up from scratch. My power. My Court. My elite dark mages. My spy in the constables’ headquarters. And now all of it was going up in flames.

Within seconds of my embarrassing meltdown, Shinji was hurrying across the floor. His dark eyes quickly swept across the empty room behind me, noting the absence of our people. But thankfully, he didn’t comment on it or ask what had happened. Because if he had, I was pretty sure that I would have beaten him within an inch of his life, even though none of this was remotely his fault.

Instead, he stopped a few strides away and clasped his hands behind his back before saying, “What would you like me to do, sir?”

Weariness crashed over me. It was so heavy that it threatened to pull me under and never let me resurface again. Using every ounce of willpower I had, I dragged in a deep breath and forced the exhaustion aside as I replied, “I don’t know. They were caught before they even made it out of the building. And now Ben’s been captured too.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

A side door was opened from farther into the throne room. I slid my gaze to it to find Gemma striding across the threshold and straight towards me. Her wavy light brown hair had been pulled up in a ponytail, and her kind brown eyes moved anxiously around the room.

“Tyler?” she asked as she closed the distance to us. But before I could answer, she added, “And the others?”

I just shook my head.

Worry swirled in her eyes, but she managed a nod. “We’ll get them out next time.”

I wasn’t sure whether I was annoyed or pleased by her confidence. But before I could figure it out, she let that emotionless expression descend on her features that she usually wore when she was blocking out her feelings and concentrating on her work.

“Can I go back to my own home now?” she demanded.

“I really would prefer it if you would stay here. Just until we can get this mess sorted.”

“I know you would.” She leveled a no-nonsense stare at me. “But you know how I feel about hiding inside your Court. What if someone needs help? I need to be in my own home so that I can help the ones who actually need it. This was a one-time concession.”

And a damn hard-won concession at that. Since both Shinji and I were heading to the north side, I hadn’t wanted Gemma to remain in her house unprotected, in case one of the other gangs was stupid enough to attack. I didn’t trust my household

staff and low-level fighters to keep her safe, so I had convinced her to stay hidden inside my Court while we carried out the rescue attempt. And by *convinced* I meant, I practically had to beg her to do it just this once.

“Fine.” I heaved a deep sigh. “You can go back home.”

She gave me a nod. Then her eyes softened as she scanned my body. “Are you hurt?”

“No.”

For a moment, it looked like she was going to say something else. But then she just turned around and walked towards the front doors.

I tipped my head back and blew out another long breath. In the ceiling above, the oil lamps still swung slightly on their chains from when I had hurled the sheet of metal into the wall. It made the firelight dance over the gray walls.

“Not to add to an already shitty situation, but...” Shinji began.

Tilting my head back down, I met his apologetic eyes. “What?”

“Anna told me that she and the other runners have been hearing rumors that the House of Stone is planning an attack too.”

I wanted to scream. Or bang my head against the wall. Or kill someone and watch the blood splatter my metal walls like paint while the light died from their eyes. But I couldn’t do any of those things, so instead I forced myself to just ask, “On the Court?”

“No. They seemed to have learned their lesson after you impaled those guys from both the House of Onyx and Lightning, so they’re apparently not in a hurry to try the same tactic. Instead, it sounds like they’re planning to attack you when you’re out in the street. Less metal. Fewer defenses.”

“Fucking hell.”

“So please be careful, sir.”

“Yeah. I—”

The front doors were yanked open. I whipped around towards them while slapping my palms together, but then stopped when I realized that it was just Gemma.

Confusion whirled through me at the sight of her wide eyes.

“Levi!” she yelled. A sheet of paper flapped in her hand as she ran towards me. There was a knife in her other one. “Levi, they took her.”

“Took who? What’s going on?”

While sprinting the final distance, she shook the paper and the knife in the air. “This was lodged in the table in my reception room when I got back.”

“Okay?”

She skidded to a halt in front of me. My heart stopped for a second at the dread pooling in her eyes as she pushed the paper into my hands. “Read it.”

I glanced down at the words written in messy handwriting on the otherwise spotless piece of paper that must have been taken from Gemma’s private stash.

My lungs stopped working as I read the letter.

I came for your healer but got another prize. Wavy light brown hair, brown eyes, gorgeous face and a very hot body. Ring a bell? She says her name is Eve Sterling. If I don't get your healer, I will worldwalk her to my castle in the north and torture her to death. Got it? Good. Since I don't know when you'll see this note, I'll show you a little mercy and give you two days. Bring your healer to that flat stretch of grass outside the gate the day after tomorrow, at exactly eight in the morning. I get the healer and worldwalk her out. Then I'll come back with your precious Eve Sterling. Sounds good? Good. See you soon. Christian White.

Once I had finished reading, I just stood there, staring at the paper for another minute while my mind tried to process everything. It felt like a massive ball of twine that had been cut

into tiny little pieces, and now I had to somehow piece them all together to make sense of the full picture.

A worldwalker had come to kidnap Gemma. A *worldwalker*.

And he had found Eve instead. What the hell had she even been doing at Gemma's house in the first place?

Then this worldwalker had abducted Eve and taken her... somewhere. Why had he taken her? And where?

And he was going to kill Eve unless I gave him Gemma.

At long last, the final piece of information settled into place. The final, most important, piece of information.

Someone was going to kill Eve.

CHAPTER 14



My head was pounding and my mouth was so dry that it felt as if someone had poured sand down my throat. I glanced towards the pitcher of water on the table. It had been two days since I was brought here, and my captors had given me precious little to drink and even less to eat. My stomach was twisting with hunger, but the terrible thirst was by far the worst.

“Ey, stop cheating!” Pollux snapped, and slammed his massive hand down on the wooden table. He was smaller than White, but still built like a block of stone. Since he was also blond and blue-eyed, I had started to wonder if they might be related by blood. “I saw you pocket that card.”

Joshua, the guy with the injured arm, snorted. “You didn’t see shit.”

“If you’re gonna cheat, at least be good at it,” Karim said as he flashed him a mocking smile.

I glanced longingly towards the water pitcher again but kept my mouth shut because I didn’t want to draw their attention. These three were a vicious bunch, and especially when their master wasn’t around to keep them in line. My whole left side still ached from the beating they had given me yesterday when I pointed out that they couldn’t trade me if I died of dehydration.

“What the hell are you looking at, bitch?” Pollux said, his blue eyes suddenly locked on me.

I quickly snapped my gaze away from the water.

“She’s staring at the water pitcher, you idiot,” Karim said. Pausing, he studied me for a few seconds while scratching the dark stubble on his chin. “Hey, when *was* the last time we gave her some water?”

“Yesterday, I think,” Joshua replied, his tone bored as he shuffled his cards around in his hand.

Karim’s dark eyes gleamed as he watched me in silence for a while. I kept my expression blank, but my heart hammered in my chest. Outside the windows, branches rustled as a strong wind whirled through the landscape, dragging the thick gray clouds faster across the heavens.

“Do you want some water?” he asked at last.

Deep down, I knew that I was being set up somehow. That this was a trap. They were sadists, the lot of them. But I desperately needed water so there really was only one answer to his question.

“Yes,” I croaked, barely getting the word out. Clearing my throat, I tried again. “Yes.”

Wood grated against wood as he slowly pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. I shifted my weight on the bed while my pulse thrummed nervously. I was sitting with my back to the wall. My hands were still shackled, and the handcuffs had been threaded through the wooden bars in the headboard, locking me to it.

I resisted the urge to lick my dry lips as Karim picked up the water pitcher and started towards me. The other two dark mages turned slightly in their seats so that they could watch the events that were about to unfold. Their matching grins told me that I wasn’t going to like whatever was about to happen.

Karim stopped in front of the bed and twitched his fingers at me. “Come closer.”

Once again, I knew this was some kind of trap, but I still shifted onto my knees and moved as close to the edge of the bed as the manacles would allow.

“Open your mouth,” he said.

With my heart pounding in my chest, I drew in a bracing breath and then did as he said.

Surprise pulsed through me as Karim just poured a slow stream of water into my mouth. I gulped it down greedily. Maybe I had been too pessimistic when I thought they would —

Before I could finish that thought, his other hand shot out and grabbed my jaw. Keeping it forced open, he abruptly tipped the pitcher forward and began pouring a massive torrent straight into my throat.

Panic crackled through me as I choked on it. I tried to yank my head away, but his grip on my jaw only tightened. Gurgling noises ripped from me as the water splashed down my throat. I yanked hard against the handcuffs and thrashed wildly, trying to throw my whole body sideways, while my mind screamed that I was going to drown.

Then the water at last stopped.

I doubled over, coughing and spitting water, as Karim finally released my jaw. The now empty pitcher dangled from his fingers as he stood there watching me retch and gasp on the bed.

“Look at me,” he demanded.

Since it still felt as though I had an entire ocean sloshing around inside my lungs, I just continued coughing and dragging in more breaths.

A hand locked around my throat.

With his fingers digging into my skin, he forced my head up so that I met his cold eyes. “I said, look at me.”

Not bothering to reply, I just glared back up at him.

“The next time you want something, you beg for it.” His eyes bored into me. “You say, *yes, please, sir*. Got it?”

I scoffed. “I wouldn’t beg you for anything even if my life depended on it.”

“If Arden doesn’t show up with his healer, I will follow through on my promise and worldwalk you back to my castle and torture you to death.”

All three thugs whipped around towards where Christian White had suddenly appeared out of thin air in the middle of the cabin. Karim released my jaw immediately as the three of them bowed and murmured a greeting to their master. But White’s eyes remained locked on mine.

“So you might want to rethink that statement,” he finished.

A wave of terrible hopelessness suddenly crashed over me, ripping the previous bravado out of my soul. Dropping my gaze, I simply scooted back against the wall again and pulled my knees up to my chest.

White let out a satisfied chuckle, as if he was pleased by the submissive gesture. But I didn’t care.

If Arden doesn’t show up with his healer...

The trade was scheduled to happen soon. And there was no way that Levi would ever do it.

Lifting my shackled hands towards my chest, I wrapped my fingers around the small ruby necklace I wore underneath my shirt, and squeezed the precious stone hard through the fabric.

Fear clawed its way up my throat, so intense that I thought I was going to choke on it.

No one, not Chief Anderson, not Ulric, not a single one of my colleagues, knew where I was. I had snuck out of the building to warn Gemma without telling anyone where I was going or what I was doing. They had no idea that I had been kidnapped and that the clock was now ticking mercilessly down towards my death.

A sudden wave of bitterness flashed through me.

Even if they had known where I was, none of them would have come for me. Not when they would be facing a worldwalker. Ulric would probably have tried to convince them to go after me, but in the end, he would never have come

here alone to try to rescue me. Because he *would* have been alone.

None of the others would ever have dared to do it. For Current's sake, my colleagues had cut and run when it had just been Levi in that watchtower. They would never have risked going up against a fucking worldwalker just to save me. They would have chalked me up as an unfortunate casualty in a dark mage war. Ulric would have cried at my funeral. But then life would go on. I was a constable, after all. And constables died all the time.

Closing my eyes, I rested my forehead against my knees.

Levi's words from back when he was washing off the blood of the people who had hurt me flooded my mind unbidden. The words he had spoken when I had asked him why he had come for me when I was attacked at the warehouse.

Because you're mine now. And I protect my own.

I squeezed the necklace tighter through the fabric of my shirt.

If I hadn't betrayed him, Levi would have come for me. Even against a worldwalker, Levi would have come straight here, magic blazing and swords slashing, to get me out.

A bitter laugh threatened to spill from my lips, so I clenched my jaw to stop it.

Maybe I should have picked the dark side after all. Levi might be a dark mage who took whatever he wanted without stopping to consider the law, but at least there was a solid sense of loyalty in his Court. Perhaps *because* there were no rules. No limits. He didn't have to worry about following regulations during hostage situations or getting permission to do something as simple as saving one of his own. He just did whatever he wanted.

My father's face flashed before my eyes. It made a flood of guilt crash over me. He had been *killed* by dark mages who just did whatever they wanted. And here I was, almost wishing

that I was one of them. What kind of awful daughter was I even?

The searing guilt was followed by a terrible loneliness. I had no one. Not even Ulric, who was the closest thing I had to family, would risk it all to save me. Sure, I had friends and acquaintances and people who liked me, but at the end of the day, I still walked home alone to my empty house. I had no one who truly had my back. That had never really bothered me before, since I had been alone from such a young age, but now the realization felt like a punch to the gut.

“Alright, I’m heading to the meeting location,” White said, snapping me out of my bleak thoughts. “I need to make sure that Arden doesn’t come early and try to set up some kind of ambush.”

“Yes, master,” his goons replied.

Raising my head from my knees, I slid my gaze towards their voices. A jolt shot through me when I found all four of them watching me.

“She needs to at least be *conscious* when I come to get her,” White said.

Ice skittered down my spine.

“Understood,” the other three replied with malicious grins on their faces.

“Don’t disappoint me,” he added.

But before they could reply, he worldwalked out. My mouth went unnaturally dry as I stared back at the three dark mages who were now watching me as if I was prey that they wanted to play with one last time before they were forced to give it up.

“Come with me,” Pollux said to his companions while jerking his chin towards the door. “I have an idea.”

Terror crashed over me. Whatever this was, I was not going to like it. I flicked my gaze desperately around the room while the three of them walked out the door.

No one was coming to save me. So I would just have to save myself.

Once the door was closed behind them, I immediately shifted my attention to the round pole in the headboard that my manacles were locked to. When Karim had been pouring water down my throat, I had thrashed so wildly that the wood had cracked. But because of the noise from his assault, none of them had heard it.

Moving my hands sideways, I managed to grab the rod with one hand. And then I yanked. Hard. Another groan sounded.

Then the wood cracked.

My heart leaped into my throat at the loud sound. Hopefully, they hadn't been able to hear it from outside. But I still wasn't taking any chances.

Yanking my still shackled hands free from the headboard, I scrambled off the bed and sprinted towards the nearest window.

The morning sun had barely climbed over the horizon, and the thick dark gray clouds made the hills outside look even gloomier. But at least it made visibility a little bit lower.

Not even bothering to try to climb through the window with my clunky handcuffs, I simply leaped up and dove through it instead. Tucking my head in, I landed hard on my shoulder but managed to roll with the motion. Wet grass stuck to my clothes as I leaped up from the ground. And then I ran.

For the first time in two days, I at last felt a tiny sliver of hope. If I could just get up the slope and over the ridge before they spotted me, I should be able to find somewhere to hide. Then I could try to figure out where I was and how to get back to Malgrave from here.

The lack of food and water made my movements slower than normal, and the grassy hillside swam a little before me as I sprinted towards it, but I sucked in ragged breaths and kept going.

I had almost made it to where the ground started sloping upwards when the first furious roar split the morning air.

“The hill! She’s going for the hill!”

Panic shot through me. Pushing myself, I tried to pick up more speed even though my legs were already wobbling dangerously. My breath sawed through my chest as I sprinted desperately upwards.

“Karim!” Pollux snapped.

“I’m on it!”

A sizzling sound cut through the loud pounding of my heart. I jerked my body sideways right before a white bolt of lightning could slam into my back. It zapped into the wet grass right next to my feet. Stumbling sideways, I gasped in both relief and panic as I tried to get my balance back again.

But before I could, that awful sound came again. And this time, I wasn’t fast enough to dodge it.

Pain speared through my shoulder blades. But it only lasted a second. Then it was replaced by a crackling, vibrating sensation that shot through my limbs. My throat closed up and I couldn’t even scream as lightning ricocheted through my whole body.

I crashed down on the ground and rolled back down the hill as every single one of my muscles refused to obey me. The world spun around me. Green grass. Gray sky. Green grass. Gray sky. Over and over again until I finally slammed to a halt at the bottom of the slope.

Lying on my back, all I could do was to stare up at the thick clouds while my limbs shook from the massive current that that lightning bolt had forced into my body. Any stronger than that, and the lunatic would have stopped my fucking heart with his attack.

Three hulking figures appeared above me.

Dread snaked through my chest as the three dark mages look down at me with unbridled rage in their eyes.

“You’ll pay for that stunt,” Joshua said, his voice terrifyingly casual.

Since my muscles were still cramping, I couldn’t even try to fight back as Pollux reached down and grabbed me with his large hands. My teeth rattled with the force as he yanked me up from the grass and slung me over his shoulder as if I was nothing but a lifeless doll.

A desperate noise slipped from my lips as they carried me back into the cabin and away from the freedom I had almost reached.

Wood creaked in alarm as Pollux kicked the door shut behind us and then dumped me on the floor. At that point, the lightning had finally stopped flashing through my body, so I had once again regained control of my muscles.

This was it. The moment they locked me up, I would never be able to escape again. White would eventually realize that Levi wasn’t coming, and then he would worldwalk back here and take that out on me. I had less than twenty minutes before that maniac was going to start fulfilling his promise and torture me to death. I had to do something.

The second my feet were on the ground again, I yanked my knee up to kick Pollux in the balls. But before I could, his fist slammed into my jaw.

My head snapped to the side, and I crashed down on the ground from the sheer force of the strike. Blinking, I tried desperately to clear my vision but it was no use. A boot crashed into the side of my ribs, knocking the breath out of me.

“Do you know what Master White would’ve done to us if you’d escaped?” Another kick to the ribs. “Do you?” Another kick. “Huh?”

What little air I had managed to recover exploded from my lungs again when yet another savage kick landed at my back instead.

I retreated into myself as fists and boots connected with my body. I had no idea how much time passed, because all I

focused on was forcing one breath after the other into my lungs while pain bloomed all over my body.

After a while, someone grabbed me by the collar and hauled me up. Blood ran down my chin from my split lip, and one of the hits must have broken the skin somewhere around my eyebrow, because blood trickled down around my eye, almost blurring my vision.

Every breath sent flares of agony through my abused ribcage, but I sucked in a shuddering inhale just as I finally found myself upright. But the relief was short-lived.

Fear blew through me as Pollux pushed my hips against the edge of the table and then bent me over it, using his grip on my neck to shove me face down. I struggled weakly but could do nothing as someone, I think Joshua, grabbed my shackled wrists and stretched my arms out in front of me before securing the handcuffs to the other end of the table with a chain. It rattled metallically as I yanked against it, but it didn't budge.

The hand around the back of my neck disappeared, but it didn't matter. The table was too wide to move around, so I was still trapped bent over it like that.

Terrible dread flashed through my every vein as I felt fingers curling around the edge of my pants. A cry tore from my throat as I fought uselessly while Pollux yanked my white leather pants down to my knees.

My heart pounded so hard against my ribs that the already bruised bone almost shattered completely.

“No, no, no,” I begged. “Please. Please, don't.”

I was so sure that he was going to rape me that my brain couldn't even process the sound when I heard him unsheathe a knife instead.

“Since you cannot be trusted with functioning legs,” Pollux began, “I suppose you'll just have to crawl from now on.”

My mind was still trying to sort through what was actually happening when I felt the cold touch of steel against the back

of my thighs. And by then, it was already too late.

A scream shattered from my throat as Pollux cut my hamstrings with one long slice.

Pain seared through my skin like burning waves, and my legs just collapsed underneath me.

I screamed again, so loudly that my vocal cords almost fractured. Blood ran down the back of my thighs and my legs just hung uselessly in the air. The only thing keeping me up was the manacles secured to the other side of the table that still left me helplessly bent over it.

Tears welled up and mingled with the blood on my face as I sobbed while another wave of agony washed over me.

Around me, the three dark mages laughed.

Karim poked me in the side with the broken rod from the bedframe. “That’s what you get for trying to—”

Wood cracked and a bang tore through the room as the front door was kicked open.

I jerked my head up as another tidal wave of fear slammed into me.

Christian White had returned to torture me to death after realizing that Levi wasn’t coming.

But my heart stopped as my gaze landed on someone else entirely.

Fury and insanity roared like hellfire in a pair of sharp gray eyes as they locked on me.

For a moment, everything was unnaturally still. As if time itself had stopped moving.

Then every shred of humanity evaporated from Levi Arden’s eyes, and he slammed his hands together.

CHAPTER 15



When I snuck up to the cabin, I'd had a plan. I had planned to set up a massive stream of metal underneath the floor before I even attempted to get inside. But then a scream tore through the air, shattering the world around me like brittle glass. And then another. Those horrifying, blood-curdling screams that I knew belonged to Eve ripped at my very soul and stirred the monster inside.

Sprinting up to the door, I kicked the whole thing down instead. It crashed against the wall inside with a bang that made all four people in the cabin whip towards me. But all I could see was Eve.

She was bent over a table and trapped there by a pair of stiff handcuffs. Her beautiful face was covered in both old and new bruises, her lip was split, and blood ran down around her eye from a wound to her forehead. From this angle, I could only see her shins and knees from under the table, but it was enough to reveal one other fact. The man standing behind her had pulled her pants down, and they were bunched around her knees.

Everything in my head went silent. Unnaturally, eerily silent.

The terrible storm of emotions inside my soul disappeared, and this time, I didn't even try to fight it. Instead, I gave myself to it. Threw my whole mind and heart and soul into that utter madness that surged up inside me.

The last thing I saw was Eve's shocked eyes as she stared at me.

Then the insanity swallowed me whole.

Blood. The first thought that trickled through my mind was that everything around me smelled like blood. Again.

I blinked.

As my vision at last cleared, I once again understood why.

All the walls around me were splattered with blood, and there were pools of it on the floor. I glanced down at my hands. At some point, I must have drawn my sword, because I was holding it in my right palm. My hands, and arms all the way up to my elbows, looked like they had been dipped in red. And I could feel sticky warm liquid running down my face too.

"Levi?"

The sound of Eve's voice shattered the last of my trance, and I came crashing back into reality. Flicking my gaze down to the floor, I found all three dark mages lying dead on the bloodstained floorboards. Though, *dead* was a bit too peaceful a word. They looked like they had been hacked apart.

Exhaustion crashed over me like a tidal wave, and I had to throw out a hand to brace myself on the wall so that I wouldn't fall.

"Levi?" Eve said again.

And the exhaustion was quickly replaced by dread. Awful, crushing dread.

Eve had witnessed this. She had watched everything that I had just done to these people.

Normally, I didn't mind people seeing what I was capable of when I slipped into the insanity in my soul. It just made them fear me more. Respect me more. It added to my already

impressive reputation and painted me as someone that people didn't fuck around with. But this was Eve. And I hadn't wanted her to see this. I hadn't wanted her to know the true depths of the depravity that I was capable of.

Because I didn't want to see the horrified expression on her face when she looked at me. I didn't want to see the revulsion that would be written all over her features every time she looked at me from now on.

But we were out of time. We had to get the hell out of here before the worldwalker came back, so I couldn't put this off any longer.

Dragging in a shuddering breath, I steeled myself and at last turned to face her.

Time stopped moving as I met her gaze.

Because there was no revulsion there. No fear. No horror.

Instead, she looked relieved. And... grateful.

My mind was still trying to process what I was seeing when she flicked a glance towards the hand I was still bracing on the wall, and concern washed over her features instead.

Concern. I didn't know whether I wanted to laugh or cry or scream. She was concerned. About me. After all that she had just endured, all that she had just seen, she was concerned about me.

The sheer absurdity of that snapped me out of my stupor. Shoving my sword back in its sheath, I quickly brushed my hands together and liquefied the handcuffs around Eve's wrists before tossing the metal aside.

I winced as she just slid over the edge of the table and crashed down on the floor. A hiss of pain ripped from her throat. *Crap.* I should probably have given her a heads-up first.

All I wanted to do was to rush over and scoop her up in my arms, but after what these savages had done to her, I wasn't sure if she wanted another dark mage's hands on her right now.

So all I said was, “Come on. We need to get the hell out of here before the worldwalker figures out that I’ve stood him up.”

“Levi.”

My blood froze at the way she said my name. At the way she was looking at me from where she had just barely pushed herself up on her elbows. I had never heard her like that, seen her like that, before.

“I can’t walk.” Vulnerability shone in her eyes as she looked back at me. And the pleading note in her voice almost cracked my heart. “They cut my hamstrings.”

Rage and pain and insanity surged up inside me again. And it took everything I had to suppress it. Everyone here was already dead, and I had already spent too much of my energy. If I descended into that madness again, I would black out for hours afterwards.

While desperately keeping a grip on my consciousness, I rushed around the table while Eve struggled to pull her pants back up. Cries of pain tore from her throat, and the sound of them was like blades scraping across my bones.

Crouching down next to her, I gently slid my arms underneath her battered body. She cried out again and gripped my leather armor in her fists as I lifted her up.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

She was gritting her teeth hard, so only a mumbled noise made it out of her throat in response.

“I’ve got you, spitfire,” I whispered as I cradled her to my chest. “I’ve got you.”

Then I spun us around and sprinted out of the cabin.

The trade was due to happen any minute now, which meant that we probably had less than five minutes to put as much distance between us and this cabin as possible. I had brought two horses, but if they had cut the back of Eve’s thighs, then how the hell was she supposed to survive sitting in a saddle?

“Eve...” I began as I closed the distance to our mounts.

“Just get me on the horse,” she ground out. “I’ll make it.”

Doing as she asked, I lifted her up and positioned her feet in the stirrups. Tears dripped down her cheeks, and she was clenching her jaw so hard I feared her teeth might shatter. But she gripped the reins while I swung myself up on my horse.

As soon as I was up, I gave her mount a smack on the rump since I knew that Eve couldn’t move her feet properly right now. The horse took off up the slope. I kicked mine into motion as well.

Winds smelling of wet grass and rain ripped at our clothes and hair as we thundered away from the cabin and across the grasslands. I kept one eye on the path and one on Eve at all times.

After about ten minutes, she began swaying precariously.

“Spitfire,” I said.

She just swayed to the left.

“Eve!”

“Levi...” Her normally so glittering brown eyes were glassy with pain as she at last turned to look at me. And her words were slurred as she spoke. “I’m gonna need you to... lock my legs to the saddle... with metal.”

“Are you—”

“Now.”

While we continued racing across the grass, I brushed my palms together and summoned a long band of metal that I wrapped around her legs before attaching it to the saddle.

“Tha...nks,” she slurred.

Then she passed out from what had to be enormous pain in the back of her thighs as they kept bumping against the saddle with every step of her horse.

I threw myself sideways and barely managed to grab her horse’s reins before she just slumped backwards.

“Fucking hell, spitfire,” I blurted out.

Slowing our horses to a walk, I touched my hands together again and extended the metal so that it was bracing her whole body. Then I spurred the animals on again. We had to get to my safe house before the worldwalker found us.

As our horses galloped across the grass, I glanced at Eve again. I could have carried her in my arms while we shared one horse, so that her thighs didn't have to touch anything. But she was so fucking stubborn and independent and...

Pain tore at my heart as I looked at her where she sat, passed out from the sheer agony of trying to get through it on her own.

"Fucking hell, spitfire," I said again, much softer this time.

When we at last reached the cottage, I jumped down from my horse and let the metal evaporate. Eve slid sideways, but I caught her in my arms before she could fall far.

The door to the cottage was thrown open.

"What are her injuries?" Gemma demanded as I ran towards her.

My lookout, a man in his fifties who lived in this cottage, immediately hurried in the other direction to take care of the horses. He was the reason why I had even found Eve in the first place. Usually, he was just responsible for reporting on trade movements. But as soon as I had read the letter from the worldwalker, I had contacted him and ordered him to find out where the guy was hiding. Thankfully, he had found their hideout just a few hours before the deadline, so I had been able to make it there in time.

"Her hamstrings have been severed," I replied as I jogged after Gemma with Eve still in my arms. "The rest I don't know for certain, but it looks like she has taken one hell of a beating."

"Put her on the table."

Scraping noises echoed between the walls as Gemma shoved aside all the chairs that had been surrounding the sturdy wooden table in the middle of the cottage. I quickly

closed the distance to it and gently placed Eve's still unconscious body on it.

"Help me undress her," Gemma commanded.

Following her order, I grabbed the hem of Eve's shirt and pulled it over her head. My heart stalled as it revealed a thin golden necklace with a small ruby at the end. The necklace I had given her before we crashed the alliance celebration. She was still wearing it.

It stirred up even more emotions that I couldn't process right now, so I just blocked out that thought and instead tossed the shirt aside before helping Gemma ease Eve's pants down her legs.

My hands were shaking by the time we had gotten them off. When she was lying there on the table in nothing but her underwear, there was no longer anything to hide that her usually so strong body was now a patchwork of discolored skin. Her entire left side was peppered with bruises, all the way from her neck and down to her foot. As if she had been lying on her right side, trying to protect at least half of her body, while they beat her.

"If you're going to be sick, do it somewhere else," Gemma said in the no-nonsense tone that informed me that she had blocked off all of her emotions and slipped into her work zone.

Shimmering turquoise blue light filled the room as she summoned her magic and got to work on repairing Eve's hamstrings first.

I staggered over to one of the chairs and collapsed onto it. Exhaustion from the madness-induced fight in that cabin rolled over me like waves, and it was all I could do to remain upright on the chair. Leaning forward, I curled my fingers around Eve's limp hand and held it, even though she couldn't feel it.

Time lost all meaning as I just continued staring at Eve's bruised face.

Slowly but surely, those bruises disappeared as Gemma kept pouring her healing magic into Eve's body. I think I

might have been holding my breath, because once the last bruise had faded from her skin and the final cut had knitted itself together, I sucked in a massive breath as if I hadn't done that for minutes.

Tiredness blew across Gemma's features as she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and dropped down on the chair next to me.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, casting a sideways glance at me.

I looked down at my body to check, since I hadn't really been paying any attention to that. But I didn't see any cuts, so all of the blood covering me appeared to belong to the now dead dark mages. "No."

She nodded. "Good. Then put her to bed."

Pushing up from my seat, I wobbled slightly and had to brace myself on the table before I could manage to stand without falling over. Then I took off my blood-soaked armor and hung it on the back of the chair.

Gemma just watched me as I reached into the bucket of water next to the table and picked up the small cloth hanging on the side of it. After dipping it into the water, I cleaned off the blood that had run down the back of Eve's legs and down her face. Then I lifted her up and carried her into the bedroom.

My lookout was sleeping in the stable tonight, so there would be no one here to disturb Eve while she rested.

After gently placing her body on the mattress, I pulled up the covers over her and then brushed back a few locks of hair from her forehead. My chest constricted painfully, and I had to force myself to turn around quickly and walk back into the combined kitchen and living room.

Gemma was still sitting on the chair where I left her. Her brown eyes were serious as they found mine. "I wish you would reconsider."

"We've already had this conversation, Gemma."

“This is the whole reason why I’m here.” She nodded towards the bedroom door. “To do things like that. And I can’t do that if I’m hiding in a house halfway to Castlebourne.”

“I know.” I dragged a hand through my hair. “But we’ve never dealt with a worldwalker before. He knows where you live, and he can just appear in the middle of the room at any time. We can’t risk it. If he kidnaps you...”

She blew out a defeated sigh. “I know. I know. I just... hate it. Especially when Tyler and the others still aren’t... I just hate it.”

“The moment the worldwalker is out of the equation, I’ll send for you.”

“You’d better.”

“I swear it.”

She held my gaze for a few seconds. But just like most people in Malgrave, she knew that I always kept my promises, so in the end, she only nodded and then pushed to her feet.

Without another word, she walked over to where her bag was already packed, and hoisted it onto her shoulders. I followed her as she started towards the door.

Gray morning light painted the grass outside in bleak colors as Gemma stepped out and drew in a deep breath. For a few seconds, we just watched each other in silence.

“When I get back, you’d better still be alive,” she declared in her no-nonsense voice. “Because if I have to spend the rest of my life working for one of the other dark mages, or even worse, those fucking constables, I am going to get myself sent to hell on purpose just so that I can find you and kill you again myself. Got it?”

A surprised laugh tore from my chest. Then I gave her a nod. “Got it.”

“Good. And get my boy out of prison. He has been wanting to ask me out for the past three years and still hasn’t worked up the courage. I think we’ve wasted enough time now.”

“I will get Tyler out, I will get them all out, if it’s the last thing I do.”

“The last thing? Oh no, it won’t be the last thing.” She started towards the third horse that my lookout had already saddled for her. “Because you’re going to take over the entire south side so that we can finally stop fighting amongst ourselves and start living.” Swinging herself up into the saddle, she fixed me with a commanding stare and jerked her chin towards the door behind me. “Now, go get some sleep. I can feel your exhaustion from here.”

“Be safe, Gemma,” I said as she turned her horse around and took off towards the safe house I had set up for her far away from here.

Once she had disappeared from view, I closed the door and then moved towards the bathroom. After washing the blood off my skin and all of our clothes, I walked back to the bedroom.

Right outside, the floorboards let out a loud squeak as I stepped on a loose plank.

Eve shot upright in the bed. Panic flashed across her beautiful features as she slapped her hands together and summoned a water shield while trying to scramble out of bed. I hurried into the room.

“It’s alright,” I said, keeping my hands raised as I slowly moved towards her. “It’s alright, spitfire. Gemma healed you. You’re safe.”

Her eyes flicked wildly around the room for a few seconds. Then her gaze settled on mine. For a while, it looked as if she was trying to remember what had happened and whether I was a threat or not. Then realization flooded her features, and she let her magic fade out. I lowered my hands again as she collapsed back onto the cushions.

While watching her reaction, I carefully moved around the bed and then lay down on the other side. Tiredness crashed over me again, and I barely made it onto the mattress before my vision began to swim.

Without thinking, I rolled over on my side and wrapped my arms around Eve. After what had happened today, I just needed to know that she was okay. That she was here. Alive. Safe. Pulling her close, I held her to my chest and rested my chin on the top of her head. Then I drew in a long breath, and finally felt that awful tightness in my chest loosen slightly.

“Levi,” Eve said, her voice soft.

I snapped back to reality. Alarm crackled through my veins as I realized that she might not want me to touch her like this. I was just about to yank my arms back and roll away when she spoke again.

“Don’t let me go.”

My heart cracked inside my chest. It was so painful that I couldn’t make my lungs work or get a single word out of my mouth. It felt as if needles were being rammed into my chest, but I at last managed to fight down a breath.

“Never,” I whispered against the top of her head before I could stop myself.

But luckily, she had already fallen back asleep by then.

CHAPTER 16



Darkness pressed in on me from all sides when I woke up, and for a second, a flash of lingering panic shot through me. Was I still shackled inside that cabin with the clock ticking down on my life? Had Levi coming to my rescue only been a dream?

But then I felt the strong arms around me, holding me tightly against a warm muscular chest. My tense body relaxed again, and my mind calmed.

As my eyes began to adjust to the dark, I slid my gaze towards the window. The first time I had woken up in this bed, the light had been similar to when we escaped the cabin, so probably still morning or noon. But now, night had fallen over the landscape outside. I watched the stars twinkle in the dark blue heavens for a while.

I must have slept the entire day. Shifting slightly, I glanced up at Levi. I wondered if he had slept the whole day too. He had looked utterly exhausted after that battle in the cabin when he had slaughtered my three tormentors.

Memories of that absolutely insane fight floated back to me. I had never seen anything like it. It had been the most incredible display of battle magic I had ever witnessed. The sheer skill and power Levi possessed was beyond anything I could have imagined. But I wondered where it came from. Or rather, where that madness came from.

His skills and power had obviously been developed painstakingly with lots of practice over many years, but that

inhuman expression that had descended on his features was something else. Where had that come from? And what had triggered it back in that cabin?

I studied his face again. Now, his features were smoothed with sleep, and there was no insanity left. He almost looked peaceful. Content.

Warmth spread through my chest, and I couldn't stop the soft smile on my lips as I continued watching him.

He came for me.

Even after everything I had done, everything he had said, he still came for me.

On a whim, I reached up and brushed a few strands of hair away from his face.

He jerked upright and already had a blade in his hand by the time I had managed to summon a small flame and light the candle on the nightstand. Orange firelight flickered across his alert face when he swept his gaze around the room as if he was looking for enemies.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out. "It was just me. I..."

His intense gray eyes snapped to me. "Are we under attack?"

"No. I'm sorry, I just, uhm..."

The tension melted from his body, and he let the dagger he had summoned fade into nothingness. Dragging a hand through his hair, he cleared his throat somewhat self-consciously and then leaned back against the headboard. Worry blew across his features as his gaze flicked up and down my body.

"Are you okay?" he asked carefully.

Since I was also resting my back against the headboard, I drew up my knees to my chest and then slid my hands over the back of my thighs. I could feel the smooth scars there, like two long lines.

"Yeah," I replied, letting my gaze drift back to his face.

He watched me as if he could see straight through my soul. “You don’t have to be strong all the time, you know. It’s okay to let other people take care of you sometimes.”

That one hit so close to home that it felt like a knife through the gut. But if I didn’t take care of me, who would? Ever since my father was killed, I had done everything on my own.

“I’m fine,” I said, trying to put conviction into my voice.

For a few seconds, Levi only watched me in silence. But he didn’t call me on the lie. Instead, he asked, “How many of those injuries were Christian White responsible for?”

The way he asked that, with that lethal edge to his voice, sent a shiver down my spine. I could almost feel the threat of violence thrumming in the air. Once I told Levi, he was going to hunt White down and inflict every one of those wounds threefold on him. I couldn’t let that happen.

Levi was good, but White was still a worldwalker. Someone who could just appear and disappear at any time and any place. If Levi went up against him blinded by revenge, he was going to get slaughtered.

So I did what I had been doing from the moment we met. I lied to him. “None.”

Confusion marred his brows as he frowned at me. “What?”

“White didn’t touch me. He even specifically told his goons not to hurt me since he was planning to trade me. Damaged goods and all that. But they beat me anyway when their precious master was away so that he wouldn’t know.”

Levi studied me with narrowed eyes, as if he was trying to see through my lies. But if there was one thing I was good at, it was this. I had spent months lying while establishing my cover. And weeks lying straight to Levi’s face without being caught. I might not be as magically powerful as him or as skilled with a blade as him, but I was a much better liar.

Satisfaction flickered through me as he at last gave me a nod, accepting my answer. “I see.”

“Thank you for killing those three assholes, though.”

The words were out of my mouth before I even knew what I was saying.

Shock pulsed across Levi’s face.

And guilt washed over mine as I realized that I had just thanked a dark mage for killing people. By the Current, what was wrong with me? Wasn’t I supposed to be a constable?

But before the guilt and awkwardness could truly set in, Levi said, “They deserved it. After what they did to you.”

I glanced down at my body while sliding my hands away from my thighs and up to my arms. Rubbing the skin around my wrists, I studied my forearms. There was not a single bruise or cut left. Only a few smooth scars. Every single injury I’d had was gone. Healed. My body both felt and functioned like new again.

Except... I could still feel their hands on me.

Could still feel their fingers around my wrists as they held my shackled hands above my head while using my body as a punching bag. Could still feel their hands around my throat and jaw as they forced water down my lungs. Still feel their fingers curling over my pants and shoving them down my legs so that they could sever my hamstrings.

A shudder coursed through my body.

I didn’t want to go back to sleep with those memories in my head. Because if I did, they would settle. I didn’t want to remember their brutal hands on my skin. I wanted it replaced with something else. Something better. Something that *I* wanted. Something that made me feel and forget and remember all at the same time.

Before I could change my mind, I rolled over and slung one leg over Levi’s thighs so that I was straddling his lap. Then I locked my fingers behind his neck and pulled his lips down to mine.

He stiffened like a board and jerked his head back.

Panic and regret seared through me as I realized that this might be the last thing he wanted after everything that had happened between us. Just because he had come for me and saved me didn't mean that everything between us was back to the way it used to be.

I began to scramble off his lap, but before I could so much as lift my weight, Levi's hands landed on my hips, stopping me.

Uncertainty swirled in his eyes as he searched my face. "Are you sure? After what they..."

Understanding clicked into place. *Oh.*

"They didn't rape me," I answered to his unspoken question. "If that's what you were worried about."

His eyes shuttered as a long breath of relief escaped his throat.

"They didn't do anything like that when they pulled my pants down. They just severed my hamstrings."

"Just?" It looked like he didn't know whether to snort or shake his head at me as he echoed, "*Just* severed your hamstrings?"

I shrugged. "I've been through worse."

"Have you?"

"No," I admitted. "Which is why I don't want to remember what their hands on my skin felt like. I want to replace it. With the hands of someone I trust."

Shock and pain and something like regret flashed in his eyes for a fraction of a second. It was there and then gone again so quickly that I wasn't even sure if I had seen it at all. But before I could figure out if I had really seen it, let alone what had caused it, Levi slid his warm hands up my bare sides.

A pleasant shudder rippled through me.

Apparently, both Levi and I had fallen asleep in only our underwear, so I drew my hands over his broad shoulders before resting my palms against his naked chest while he

slowly let his fingers drift upwards. Throwing my head back, I closed my eyes and sucked in a shuddering breath as I relished the feeling of his hands on my skin.

Levi brushed his lips over my collarbones while murmuring, “When I am done with you, you will only ever remember one set of hands on you for the rest of your life. Mine.”

My heart skipped a beat. But before I could reply, Levi undid the fastenings on my brassiere and tossed it to the side. Cool air rushed over my naked breasts, making my nipples harden.

Still bracing my hands on his firm chest, I closed my eyes and tilted my head back again as he traced soft fingers down my back and around the side of my ribs. Sparkles danced over my skin in their wake.

My heart thrummed in my chest as Levi drew his hands up towards my breasts. A moan slipped from my lips as he covered them with his palms and kneaded them before using his fingers to play with my nipples instead.

Lightning crackled through my veins, and I squirmed on his lap. The change in position landed me right on top of his cock. I rolled my hips, feeling his hard length rub against my pussy through the fabric of our underwear.

A groan ripped from his throat at the same time as a shudder of pleasure coursed through me. I opened my eyes and locked them on his.

For a moment, we only watched each other. Neither of us moving an inch.

Then we both shifted at the same time, stripping out of our underwear with an urgency that made my pulse flutter.

The moment our garments had hit the floor, I locked my hands behind the back of Levi’s neck and kissed him deeply while I positioned myself above his cock. He kissed me back with such fierce passion that I lost track of what I was doing for a second. Then his hands gripped my hips, moving me into position, and my mind pieced itself back together.

While claiming his mouth, I lowered myself onto his hard length.

A dark moan rumbled from his throat and into my mouth when I moved so that his cock was buried inside me all the way to the hilt. Shifting my hands down to his toned shoulders, I broke the kiss and instead dug my fingers into his muscles as I rose and then slid down on his cock again.

Another deep sound came from his chest.

His hands drifted up from my hips and towards my tits again. A shiver of pleasure rippled through me as he teased my nipples while I moved up and down on his cock, creating the most delicious friction. I picked up the pace.

Levi ran his hands all over my body while I rode his cock, as if he truly wanted every inch of me to only remember *his* touch. And it worked. By the Current, it worked.

My heart was slamming in my chest as Levi traced his fingers along my ribs and then circled my breasts before rolling my nipples between his fingers. Then he continued upwards, trailing them over my collarbones and then brushing them over my throat before drawing them down along my spine.

Every part of me tingled with pleasure at his gentle and at the same time highly possessive touch. I sucked in shuddering breaths as the tension inside me grew. While moving up and down, I shifted my hips so that my clit was grinding against his cock with every stroke. My pulse fluttered erratically as I soared towards the edge.

I threw my head back and gasped as release crashed over me.

Levi slid his hands down to my hips, holding me firmly on top of him while pleasure shot through my limbs with enough force to make my ears ring. He didn't try to chase his own release. He just studied my face, as if he was content to just watch me come apart on his lap.

Once the final flashes of pleasure had died down, I just remained where I was, sitting there on top of him with his hard

cock still buried inside me. My chest heaved. I drew in deep breaths until it slowed. And all the while, Levi just watched me. It felt as though he was searing this memory into his brain.

“What do you want, spitfire?” he asked at last.

And he said it in such a strange voice that I couldn't tell what the true scope of the question really was. Did he mean what I wanted from him? Or what I wanted from life? Or what I wanted there to be between us?

But all of those questions were dangerous. Far, far too dangerous. So I decided to interpret it as, what did I want right now?

“More,” I said.

Something flickered in his eyes. Surprise, maybe? But before he could misinterpret my words, I pressed on.

“I want you to fuck me again,” I said. “Hard. Dominantly. I want to remember what it feels like to have *your* hand pinning my wrists to the mattress and *your* hand wrapped around my throat.”

I must have imagined that brief hint of surprise earlier, because his lips immediately curled into a sly smile. Grabbing me by the hips, he lifted me off him and then flipped us around so that I was lying on my back on the mattress with him straddling me instead.

With that smirk still on his face, he leaned down and stole a possessive kiss from my lips. “Good choice.”

A thrill raced down my spine as he grabbed my hands and moved them up over my head. After crossing my wrists, he locked one hand over both of them, holding my arms trapped like that. Then he drew back slightly. His gray eyes glinted like steel in the flickering light from the candle as he wrapped his other hand around my throat.

My heart did a backflip in my chest.

With his weight on me, and his hands locked around my wrists and throat, I was completely at his mercy. My core throbbed in response. *This* was what I wanted my brain to

remember. Being dominated because *I* chose it. By someone that *I* had chosen.

The mattress swayed underneath me as Levi shifted his position until his cock brushed against my entrance. A jolt shot through me. He teased his tip over my wet pussy over and over again until I was squirming underneath him.

“Please,” I pressed out, my heart slamming so hard against my ribs that he must have surely heard it. Bucking my hips, I tried to get his cock where I wanted it. “Levi...”

He thrust into me.

I gasped as his cock slid all the way in. But before I could draw in another breath, he pulled out and then slammed back into me again. Pleasure washed over me. A moan dripped from my lips as I yanked against Levi’s hold on my wrists, suddenly desperate to feel his skin underneath my palms.

He tightened his grip on both my wrists and my throat while continuing to shove his cock into me.

“My hands,” he said, his voice low and dark as he started up a fast pace that had my body jerking against the mattress. “Only ever *my* hands.”

“Yes,” I gasped out like a promise.

Pent-up release thrummed inside me as Levi fucked me hard enough to make the headboard slam against the wall. I sucked in desperate breaths while my pulse fluttered under his fingers. My heart pounded against my ribs.

I squirmed underneath him again as the tension inside me reached unbearable levels, but he kept me mercilessly pinned as he pushed me closer and closer to the edge of another orgasm.

Just when I thought I was going to die from the tension trapped inside me, Levi hit that perfect spot that made the world around me explode with white light.

Garbled moans rolled off my tongue as my inner walls fluttered and pleasure crackled through my limbs. This time, Levi kept fucking me through the orgasm. Prolonging it.

Riding it with me. Until my trembling pussy drew that sweet release from him as well.

His fingers tightened around my wrists as he came, and his groan ripped through the air, swallowing my own moaning as our very souls seemed to vibrate with pleasure.

Both hope and fear surged up inside me.

We'd had this. Before. Before everything went to hell.

And as I looked up at Levi's lethally handsome face and the unguarded emotions in his eyes, I couldn't help but wonder where this left us now.

CHAPTER 17



I was already dressed and ready to leave by the time Eve finally woke up. Tossing her the now dry pants and shirt that I had hastily washed yesterday, I snapped, “Get dressed. We’re leaving in five.”

She blinked at me, stunned for a few seconds, but caught her clothes before they could smack into her face. Then she glanced around the room.

Early morning sunlight trickled in through the window, and everything in the cottage had been put back to how it had looked when Gemma and I arrived.

A brief hint of confusion and uncertainty blew across Eve’s face as she slid her gaze back to me, but all she said was, “Okay.”

Thick silence descended on the room as I stood there waiting with my arms crossed while she put her clothes back on. Once she had laced up her boots as well, she straightened and cleared her throat.

“About last night...” she began.

“Last night was a mistake,” I cut her off before she could say anything else. “It meant nothing and it changes nothing. It was just meaningless stress release.”

She jerked back as if I had slapped her.

“Now, let’s go.”

Before she could answer, I spun on my heel and stalked out the door. Our horses were already saddled and waiting, so I swung myself up on mine and grabbed the reins.

When Eve emerged from the cottage, there was no longer any evidence of hurt on her face. She just looked back at me with cool detachment. As if I was worth less than the dirt beneath her feet.

Without a word, she climbed up into the saddle and grabbed her reins as well. It looked as if she wanted to just ride away without me, but she of course couldn't do that since she had no idea where we were. Tightening her grip on the reins, she clenched her jaw and cut me a sideways glare.

I raised a hand in thanks to my lookout before turning my horse around and starting up the slope. Eve fell in beside me.

The ride back to Malgrave was a deadly silent one. I could almost feel the thick tension vibrating in the air between us. But Eve only kept her eyes on the path ahead. I did too.

When we at last walked through the gate, she lengthened her stride as if she was planning to stalk away from me without another word. She only made it two steps before I grabbed the front of her shirt and yanked her into the nearest alley. A huff escaped her throat as I slammed her up against the wall.

“What the fuck are you—”

“Shut up,” I snapped.

Anger flashed in her eyes. With my fist still buried in the collar of her shirt, I forced her back harder against the wall as I stepped closer into her space.

“You owe me your life now,” I said slowly, letting my voice drop to a dark threat. “Which means that you do whatever the hell I say.”

The buildings around us were so tall that the morning sunlight slanting over the horizon didn't reach in here. Only a gloomy alley, completely empty of both people and light, watched us as I stared Eve down with hard eyes. She glared up at me, defiance burning in those brown eyes. I could feel her

wanting to spit a retort back into my face. Keeping my grip on her collar, I waited for it.

But it never came.

Instead, she forced out a long breath and let her hands drop back down by her sides. Then she lowered her eyes in a very uncharacteristic show of submission. “What do you want?”

What do you want? There was that question again. The question that she had barely answered when I asked her last night. But as opposed to her short-term answer back then, I knew exactly what to say.

“I want you to stay the hell away from me,” I growled.

She snapped her gaze back up to mine, and hurt flickered in her eyes. *Good.*

“You heard from your white boot buddies that a worldwalker was coming for Gemma and you went to warn her, didn’t you?” I demanded.

She held my gaze. “Yes.”

“That’s why you were stupid enough to come back to my Court after I told you I would kill you the next time I saw you.” When she only glared back at me in silence, I tightened my grip on her shirt. “Answer.”

“Yes.”

I scoffed. “Well, I don’t need your fucking help. So if you want to square the life debt you owe me, you stay the hell away from me from now on.”

“I still work for the South Side Department. They are going to send us out to try to capture you again.”

“Good luck with that.” I let out a mocking laugh. “Hasn’t worked for the past decade.”

“They will still make me go on those missions.”

“And you are more than welcome to do what they want. Try to capture me. Fight me. Hate me. I don’t give a shit. But apart from that, you stay the hell away from me. No more

sneaking into my Court to warn my people. No more talking to me as if I'm anything but your wicked enemy."

Her chest heaved, as if she wanted to argue.

"Do your job to your heart's content, but at all other times, you stay out of my fucking sight. Am I making myself clear?"

It still looked like she wanted to snap at me, to fight me, but the life debt I now had hanging over her head made her grind her teeth and swallow down her defiance. "Yes."

"Good. Then as long as you follow that order, your debt is paid. You owe me nothing. I owe you nothing."

At last, her restraint snapped and anger flashed across her face as she threw her arms out. "Why the hell did you even save me then? If you hate me so fucking much?"

"Because you were making me look weak."

Yet again, she looked as if I had slapped her across the face.

So I repeated it, even slower this time, just to really drive it home. "Because you were making me look weak. White took you and tried to trade you because he thought that you meant something to me. It doesn't matter that he was dead wrong about that. He still *thought* that he was right. That he had been able to just waltz in and kidnap someone who mattered to me. And that would've ruined my reputation. I didn't give a shit if he killed you or not. I cared about how it would make *me* look. Don't you get it? You were a liability."

Her chest had been heaving with anger before. Now, it was completely still. As if she wasn't breathing at all.

"The next time I see you, we will be enemies again." Using my grip on her shirt, I jerked her forward and then gave her another shove up against the wall before finally releasing her collar. "Now, go back to your side of Malgrave before I change my mind."

Without waiting for a reply, I simply turned around and stalked down the alley. I half expected her to shoot me in the back with a lightning bolt. But she didn't.

My mind churned all the way across the Entertainment District. In fact, I was so distracted by my own thoughts that I didn't even realize that something was wrong until I had almost rounded the final corner that led to the street right in front of my Court. But the moment that my mind returned fully to the present, I couldn't for the life of me figure out how I could have missed it.

Dread raked down my spine like shards of ice.

Something was wrong. I could feel it in the thick tension that hung over the street. Smell it in the air.

I brushed my palms together and called up my magic as I rounded the final corner.

For a few seconds, I couldn't process what I was seeing.

There were bodies lying on the stone street in front of my Court.

Were they enemies? Had there been another attack? Didn't Shinji tell me that the House of Stone was planning an attack too? Had that happened while I was gone? But then who had managed to kill these people? None of them were burned to ash, which meant that Shinji wasn't responsible for their deaths. And if there had been an attack, why had my people just left these corpses here in the street?

Hundreds of questions spun through my mind like a whirlwind. It felt as though the walk from the end of the street took hours when I knew that it couldn't have been more than a minute.

As I got closer, the faces of the people lying dead on the bloodstained stones at last became clear.

I stopped dead in the middle of the road.

My people. These were *my* people.

I scanned their faces.

Eight of them belonged to my group of lower-level fighters. The other two were runners. They weren't even mages. Just people who were quick on their feet and brought

me information and messages and warnings from all over the city.

There was a dull pounding inside my skull as I tried to make sense of this. Had my Court truly been attacked? I glanced towards the now red and gray front doors. They looked completely untouched. Shifting my gaze back to my people, I realized that all of them had died of knife wounds. Most of them had had their throat slit. Or their carotid artery punctured. These were not injuries that were normally found on corpses after a dark mage battle.

What the hell had happened here?

Then my gaze snagged on one of my dead fighters. Tom. He was a stocky guy with dirty blond hair. A water mage. Decently skilled but not powerful enough to be a true battle mage.

Both rage and wariness flooded my veins as I stared at the knife that had been buried in his chest in order to secure a piece of paper to his body. Stepping over two dead wind mages, I moved up to him and yanked the paper off the blade.

I instantly recognized the messy handwriting.

You killed my people, so I killed yours. And I will keep killing them until you give me your healer. This was only a demonstration to show you just how serious I am. Tomorrow, I will begin a more systematic slaughter. Three people. Every day. Until you hand over your healer.

The doors to my Court were thrown open. I snapped my gaze towards them, ready for a fight with the fucking worldwalker who thought that he could just come in here, to my city, and slaughter my people.

But it wasn't Christian White.

I released the grip on my magic as Shinji and Anna instead hurried through the door.

"I'm sorry, sir," Shinji began.

"What happened?" I ground out before he could even finish speaking.

“I was on the other side of the building when Anna called, and by the time I got there, it was already over.”

I slid my gaze to my runner-turned-lookout. Dread and sorrow shone in her green eyes as she met my gaze while wringing her hands.

“He just... came out of nowhere,” she said, flicking her gaze over the dead men and women who now littered the street. “Last night. They were returning from doing a sweep around the area, and that man just... appeared out of thin air. He slit their throats, one after the other, by just disappearing and then appearing behind them. They didn’t even stand a chance.”

Rage tore through me. Squeezing my hand into a fist, I ground my teeth together to stop myself from erupting into a fit of violence. It wasn’t Anna’s fault. Or Shinji’s. This was what fighting a worldwalker was like. Fucking impossible.

“Why are they still lying here on the street if the attack happened hours ago?” I forced out instead.

“Because that man, the worldwalker...” Anna began, her voice shaking slightly. “Before he disappeared, he yelled up at the windows that if we moved the bodies before you got back, he would return and slaughter even more people.”

“And I’m not powerful enough to protect everyone in here against a worldwalker if he were to return,” Shinji said, his dark eyes calm. “So I made the decision to follow his orders and leave them there. It was my choice, and I take full responsibility for it, sir.”

Fear flickered across Anna’s face as her gaze darted between me and Shinji. Next to her, Shinji only raised his chin while letting his arms fall back down by his sides, ready for whatever punishment I saw fit to give him.

Part of me wanted to beat him within an inch of his life, but that was just because I desperately needed to take out my frustrations on someone. But the truth was that he was right. And he had made the right choice.

So instead of succumbing to my violent impulses and the madness that always seemed to swirl much closer to the surface these days, I dragged in a long breath and crushed the piece of paper in my hand.

Christian White had come back here last night while I was with Eve, and slaughtered my people. I was already under attack from the white boots and the other three Houses. And now, I had a fucking worldwalker to deal with too.

And he was going to keep killing my people until I gave him Gemma, which I would never do. Three people. Every day. Which meant that he would be back again tomorrow.

I had to figure something out before then.

CHAPTER 18



It was already noon by the time I reached our offices after I had made a quick stop at home to shower, eat, and change clothes. Some of my colleagues gave me strange looks when I walked through the door and into our corridor, but before anyone could say anything, Captain Smith came striding towards me.

“Sterling,” he said with a smile on his face, as if I hadn’t just been gone without explanation or permission for the past three days. “I’m so glad you’ve finally recovered from your food poisoning.”

Confusion blew through me. Food poisoning? But then he shot me a pointed look, so I managed to press out, “Thanks, Captain. Yeah, it was a rough one.”

He nodded. “Come with me. I have some things you need to take a look at.”

“Of course.”

A few eyes tracked us as we moved down the white-painted hallway and towards the captain’s office, but most of my colleagues seemed to have gone back to their own work. I snuck a glance at Ulric while we walked.

He was wearing his white leather pants and boots but, as we all did while indoors, had taken off his jacket so that he was only wearing the long-sleeved shirt that went underneath the armor. His brown eyes were fixed on the corridor ahead, and his face was a neutral mask, which made it very difficult to read his mood.

The door to his office swung open silently as he held it up for me and motioned for me to step inside. I gave him a nod as I moved across the threshold.

Sunlight streamed in through the windows on the other side of the room, bathing his pale wooden desk in bright light. As usual, it was a complete mess of folders and pens and reports and stacks of documents with various papers sticking out at odd angles. I turned away from it and instead faced the captain as he closed the door behind him.

“I can’t keep covering for you, kiddo,” he said, looking at me with sad eyes.

The words took me so off guard that, for a moment, all I could do was stare at him. Cover for me? What did he mean, cover for me?

Raking a hand through his hair, he blew out a long sigh. “Look, I know what Chief said doesn’t sit right with you. And to be honest, I do still have some reservations about it too. But you can’t just disappear like that.”

My mind spun as I tried to make sense of his words. What Chief said? What did Chief say? So much had happened in the past three days that I couldn’t for the life of me remember what office politics had been circling before all that.

Then realization hit me like a punch in the face.

Chief’s order not to warn Gemma.

It took everything I had to stop my jaw from dropping to the floor.

Ulric thought that I had disappeared for three days because Chief Anderson had shut me down at that meeting and ordered me not to warn Levi’s healer.

“Yeah, no,” I began, still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that *that* was what he thought had happened. “That’s not...”

“Remember when you failed the preliminary tests?” He gave me a small smile. A smile full of old memories. “Because

you couldn't get your wind magic to move in the right direction?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"You were so angry. You stomped out of the testing area and swore that you would never try it again. That you would never even bother to apply to the constable forces. And then you just took off and disappeared for an entire week."

My insides twisted with both pain and sadness. I had spent that week in our old tavern. It was someone else's tavern at that point, obviously, but I had broken into their attic and spent the entire week crying in there because I felt like I was failing my father.

"I was seventeen back then," I said, trying to swallow past the sudden lump in my throat. "I'm not a teenager anymore."

Ulric blew out a long sigh. Closing the distance between us, he placed his hands on my shoulders and gave them a squeeze. "I know, kiddo. But you're still you. And you still react the same way to situations when you feel like you're failing. I know that being demoted hurt. And that it hurt even more when Chief laid into you at that meeting in front of everyone. But you can't just disappear when things get rough."

I had the absolutely insane urge to laugh in his face. Yes, being demoted and then berated in front of everyone hurt like hell, but I hadn't run away like some kind of moody teenager. I had been kidnapped by a worldwalker and then tortured by his goons.

Just standing there on the floor, I studied Ulric's face as he gave me a patient smile.

It pained me more than I wanted to admit that he thought so little of me. That he really thought that I had just run away from my duties like some kind of spoiled brat just because the chief told me no. And all I wanted to do was to tell him what had really happened. Tell him about the hell that I had really been through these past three days. But I couldn't.

That tale contained far too many incriminating parts. For one, I had gone against Chief's direct order and run to Levi's

Court to warn Gemma. Then I had been held in that cabin because the worldwalker had assumed that I meant something to Levi. And then Levi, the King of Metal and our enemy number one, had actually come to save me. Even if he had only done it for his own selfish reasons, so that he wouldn't look weak, the fact still remained that he had saved me. Me. A constable. How was I even supposed to explain that to Ulric? Let alone to Chief Anderson?

So instead of informing him that I had been kidnapped and tortured, and not run away like a child, I cleared my throat and gave him an apologetic smile. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I promise."

"Good." He gave my shoulders another squeeze before releasing me and nodding towards the door. "Now, go to your desk and get your colleagues to fill you in on everything that has happened here while you've had *food poisoning*."

"Yes, Captain."

Even though it wasn't my fault that I had been absent for three days, I for some reason still felt guilty as I left his office and walked back to the large open room where my colleagues had been working without me for the past few days.

"You didn't have food poisoning, did you?" Jamila said the moment I walked across the threshold.

Continuing towards my desk, I adopted the perfectly innocent and confused expression that I had honed for months while I worked undercover to screw over Levi. "Yes, I did." I frowned at her, as if she was being deliberately slow. "We had seafood for lunch that day, remember?"

Uncertainty blew across their faces as they glanced from one to the other.

Then Frank ran a hand over his jaw, a considering look on his face, while saying, "Yeah, you're right. We did."

I shrugged as I plopped down in my chair. "Mine must have been undercooked or something. I threw up twice that afternoon."

Which was true. Except I had done it because White had unexpectedly worldwalked me out into the hills and not because of bad seafood.

“Lunch today was the first thing I’ve eaten in days,” I finished.

Also true. But again, not for the reasons they might think.

They must have been able to hear the truth in my carefully selected words because they all nodded, now thoroughly convinced.

“Sorry,” Jamila said with a grimace. “That must’ve been awful.”

“Yeah, it was.” Adjusting my chair so that I could meet their gazes properly, I gave them my best smile and said, “So, what have I missed while I was gone?”

A strange sense of tension mixed with conspiratorial excitement washed over their features as they all exchanged a look.

“You know that clerk who works on the ground floor?” Jamila began. “Ben Watson?”

I had dealt with him quite a lot. As had we all, since he was one of the closest clerks to our department.

Frowning, I replied, “Yeah?”

“He was the spy.”

My eyebrows shot up.

“I know, right?” Jamila said, her voice now full of excitement. “Who could’ve thought? But apparently, he’s the one who has been working for Arden all this time.”

“How did you find that out?”

“Arden tried to break his people out of prison three days ago.”

Shock pulsed through me. “What?”

Three days ago. That was the same day that I had gone to his Court to warn Gemma. Was that why he hadn’t been there?

Because he had been on my side of town, breaking into my place of work, to free his people?

“Yeah,” Frank filled in with a nod. “They torched a few buildings to make it look like an attack while Watson stole some keys and freed them from their cells.”

“Did it work?” My heart pounded in my chest, and I wasn’t sure what I wanted the answer to that question to be. “Did they get out?”

Smug laughter spread through the room while Frank waved a large hand in front of his face. “Of course not. We caught them before they could set one foot out the door.”

Disappointment settled in my stomach like a stone. So, Levi was still more or less without protection. And now, he not only had the other dark mage Houses to deal with, but also a worldwalker.

The feeling was immediately followed by irritation. Why was I disappointed that we had caught them? I was a constable, for Current’s sake! Catching dark mages was my job.

“Of course you did,” I said, forcing a smile onto my face. “You’re all far too skilled to let the likes of them get the better of you.”

Another wave of satisfied chuckles swept through the room. I kept the smile firmly on my features as I listened and nodded while they explained what had happened, but on the inside, my soul was being shredded by guilt.

My colleagues had been risking their lives trying to put out that fire and trying to recapture the escaping dark mages.

And what had I done in the meantime?

I had fucked Levi Arden.

Again.

CHAPTER 19



Magic flashed all around me. I raised a metal wall right before a mass of shadows could slam into us. They crashed against my shield with a boom that reverberated through the air and made the windows on the buildings all along the street rattle in their frames. Gritting my teeth, I gave my metal a hard shove forward.

A grinding noise filled the street as my wall slid down the road, forcing the twisting mass of darkness back.

“Dropping left,” I pressed out, not taking my eyes off my shield. “Now!”

The left side of my metal wall sank back into the ground, and the unexpected lack of resistance made Aaron’s shadows shoot forward. But Shinji was ready for it. The moment my metal disappeared, he sent a torrent of dark orange flames roaring down the street and tearing through the mass of darkness like hungry beasts.

Behind us, my five low-level fighters shot attacks at the other members of the House of Onyx who had tried to corner us on the road.

The shadows disappeared in a flash, and I almost stumbled as there was suddenly nothing pressing on the other side of my shield. Releasing my grip on it, I instead summoned a sharp sheet and shot it towards Aaron Reyes.

It whooshed through the air, creating a whistling sound.

The woman next to him summoned a wind blast and shoved it off course, but I had already shot another one. And then another.

On my right, Shinji blasted the people on Aaron's other side with waves of fire.

My head spun from exhaustion, but I kept up the brutal pace of my attacks. If they knew just how close I was to collapsing, they would keep the fight going. And I couldn't afford that. I had to make them back off. Right now.

Since I'd only had Shinji and five of my lower-level mages with me when the ambush happened, Shinji and I had had to bear the brunt of it. And me more than him, since I was more powerful, more skilled, and also the damn leader of this gang that was falling apart before my very eyes. So I'd had to fight like I had infinite energy reserves. But I didn't. And I was about to run out very soon.

Metal shot through the temperate afternoon air as I alternated between hurling sharp sheets and long spikes. My heart was hammering in my chest, and the buildings on both sides swam in my vision.

"Pull back!" Aaron Reyes at last yelled to his people.

I kept pelting them with metal while they beat a hasty retreat, just so that they wouldn't know how close they had been to winning.

Once they were gone, my five inexperienced fighters collapsed to the ground while sucking in desperate breaths. And by all hell, all I wanted to do was to join them. I just wanted to sit down in the middle of the fucking street and breathe for a while.

But I was the King of Metal, and perception was everything in our world, so I stopped my trembling legs from buckling by sheer force of will as I turned towards my people.

"Let's go," I said. "We need to get back to the Court before someone else decides to try their luck."

"Yes, sir," the guys on the ground gasped out while struggling back to their feet.

Shinji nodded, his dark eyes scanning me for an extra second, but he thankfully didn't say anything.

It had barely been more than a few hours since I came back to the city with Eve and found eight of my people slaughtered, and I was already under attack again. It was starting to take a toll on me. And not just physically.

Lately, the insanity that I normally kept a tight leash on had begun to surface more often. It wasn't a surprise, given that everything around me was a gigantic fucking mess right now. And whenever strong emotions like that, strong emotions that I didn't want to feel, washed over me, the beast always stirred.

Relief crashed into me as the red and gray doors to my Court at last became visible. Just a few more steps. Then I could disappear into an empty room and collapse where no one could see.

“Sir,” Shinji said when we had almost reached the doors. “I was thinking about—”

A wet gurgling noise erupted from behind us.

Whipping around, I slapped my palms together and summoned my magic only to be met by an impossible sight. Two of my people, Tess and Harold, stared at me with wide eyes while they desperately tried to press their hands against their necks. Blood ran down from identical puncture wounds on the side of their necks.

Something flashed in the corner of my eye.

I threw a spear of metal straight towards it, but in the time it had taken me to turn and loose the attack, it was too late.

A massive man with blue eyes so pale that they almost looked white, and blond hair of almost the same color, appeared behind Mei and slit her throat with a knife before disappearing into thin air.

Full-blown panic mixed with the rage inside me as Mei, Tess, and Harold all crashed down on the ground. Their bodies spasmed while their life leaked out of them and turned the stones red.

The worldwalker was here.

Fuck.

Turning in a circle, I snapped my gaze from side to side, trying to figure out where he would appear next.

Movement appeared on my left. I whipped around and threw a sheet of metal in that direction.

For a second, Christian White stood there in the middle of the road, watching as my attack barreled towards him. Then he disappeared again.

Dread curled around my spine.

A tutting sound came from my other side. I whirled towards it to find White standing there, shaking his head as if he was admonishing a child.

“None of that,” he said.

“You,” I growled.

“Yes, me.” He gave me a mocking once-over before flashing me a cold smile. “After everything I’d heard about you, King of Metal, I expected the undisputed dark mage ruler of Malgrave to be a bit... taller.”

Surprise flickered through me. He thought that I was the sole ruler of this side of Malgrave? But since I didn’t want him to know that I was in the middle of a gang war that I was currently losing, I decided not to correct him.

“You killed my people,” I said instead, my voice low and dark.

“Yes.”

I stabbed a hand towards the three mages who had now bled out on the stones around me. “You said I had until tomorrow before you came back and killed more. Not a man of your word, huh?”

“No, I said that I would kill three a day.” He cocked his head and flashed me another vicious smile. “Oh, did I forget to mention that the eight I killed last night were dead before

midnight? Which means that they were yesterday's kill." He nodded towards my dead fighters. "These are today's."

"I will kill you, you lying piece of shit."

"No, you won't. Because—"

I slammed my hands together and yanked at the metal in the wall next to him. A spike shot towards his body with lethal speed.

But before it could impale him, he was already gone again.

"Fuck," I swore under my breath.

"Sneaky," White called from farther up the street. "But not sneaky enough."

Then he disappeared again.

My heart leaped into my throat as he reappeared right behind Shinji and pressed a blade across his throat. My fire mage stiffened, panic flashing in his eyes.

"Give me what I want, Arden." He pushed the blade harder against Shinji's throat, making a thin line of red appear. While keeping the knife there, he raised his other arm and pointed towards my Court. "Or I will worldwalk right into your home tomorrow and kill everyone I can find. Understood?"

Before I could move a single muscle, he yanked the blade away from Shinji's throat and then disappeared.

Shinji sucked in a deep breath. Around us, my two other surviving mages dropped to their knees next to their dead comrades. Sobs ripped from their throats.

I wanted to scream.

I wanted to just scream my fucking lungs out in exhaustion and rage and frustration. How was I supposed to keep my people alive against someone like this? While also battling the other dark mage Houses and trying to keep the fucking white boots at bay and while also trying to free my battle mages from prison?

Fury and hatred and desperation and guilt tore through my soul, and I could feel myself slipping again. Could feel that

cold and smooth insanity rise towards the surface to shield my mind from all of it.

This time, I fought desperately against it. I couldn't let it consume me right now. I needed a plan. I needed—

“Incoming!” Shinji snapped.

Dark orange flames sprung to life in his hands as he whirled to face the top of the street. I did the same.

A mass of people was rounding the corner, heading straight towards us.

And for one absolutely insane moment, I considered just giving up. I couldn't win another dark mage battle right now. I was beyond exhausted. It was a miracle that I was even still standing.

But I didn't give up. I *couldn't* give up. I had spent my life fighting for this. For power. Security. Authority. And I was going to die before I ever gave any of it up willingly. So I brushed my palms together and summoned my magic yet again.

But the people up ahead were behaving strangely. They weren't attacking. They weren't even forming up for some kind of sneak hit or defensive position. They just kept walking.

Then, the man at the front of the group came close enough for me to see his face properly.

My eyes widened.

“Stand down,” I said to Shinji and the other two.

At first, Shinji frowned at me in confusion. But then he must have realized who these people were because he let his flames die out.

I just stood there on the street, watching the group close the final distance, while confusion whirled inside my skull. Why were they here? Didn't they know that I was in the middle of a gang war? And under attack from a worldwalker too? Why would they risk coming here?

“Mr. Arden,” the man at the front said as they all came to a halt a few steps away.

“Ralph,” I replied, studying him as if I could read the reason for his presence here in his gray eyes. “Why are you here?”

Ralph was the owner of that fancy restaurant in the Entertainment District where I had taken Eve weeks ago when I was trying to get her on my side. It was the restaurant that had gotten destroyed when the House of Fire had shown up and attacked us in the middle of our dinner. Since Sophie handled the money I had paid him for reparations, I hadn’t seen him myself since that evening when the battle took place.

“We heard that a worldwalker is targeting you.” He flicked a nervous glance down at the three dead mages on the ground, and swallowed as if fighting down nausea. “And that he is going to kill a few of your people every day until you give him Gemma.”

Damn, word traveled fast in this city. But there was no point in denying it, so I just said, “That’s right. But then if you know that, what are *you* doing here? Don’t you realize that he might mistake you for one of mine and kill *you* instead?”

A nervous ripple went through the crowd.

But Ralph, where he stood at the front, only squared his shoulders and raised his chin. “We know.”

“So why would you risk it?”

“Look, most of us here would probably piss our pants if you showed up unannounced on our doorstep.”

It took every ounce of my willpower to stop the baffled laugh that tried to erupt from my throat at his very unexpected statement. Instead, I just raised my eyebrows in silent question.

“You’re violent and insane and downright terrifying,” Ralph went on. Keeping his chin raised, he held my gaze with surprisingly confident eyes. “We will never work for you. We will never kill for you or steal for you or hurt anyone for you.”

I just cocked my head and watched him curiously, wondering where he was going with this.

“But we will bow to you,” he said with the same force and confidence I could read in his eyes. “We pay you for protection, and as opposed to all the other dark mages, *you* actually protect us. You pay for damages when your war destroys our homes or businesses, even when it wasn’t technically your fault, and you give us access to your healer when we get hurt. You demand obedience, but you actually keep your end of the bargain too.”

Surprise, and something else, something warm and unexpected, spread through my chest.

“You’re a villain,” Ralph declared, still holding my gaze. “But you’re *our* villain. And we need you to survive and win this gang war, because out of all the dark mages we’ve had the misfortune to come across, you are the one we trust the most and the one we would rather have rule us.” Spreading his arms, he indicated the mass of shop owners and other random civilians behind him. “So *we* will hide your people from the worldwalker.”

Shock and utter incredulity clanged through my soul.

CHAPTER 20



Steel whooshed through the air. I leaped back, barely dodging the swipe at my ribs, while bringing my sword around for a counterstrike. Metal clanged as the blades clashed. I tried to disengage them, but mine had already been shoved sideways. I stiffened as I felt the edge of a sword press against the side of my neck.

“What’s wrong?”

I stared at Ulric from the other side of the blade. His kind brown eyes were so full of concern that I wanted to scream. Or cry. Or spill all of my secrets to him. Or all of the above. But I couldn’t, so instead I said, “What do you mean?”

He removed his sword from my throat. All around us, our half of the South Side Department was sparring as well. The sounds of clashing steel and grunts of effort echoed between the stone walls that boxed in the courtyard. A cool wind whirled through the buildings, making the already overcast day feel even colder.

“Your head’s not in the game, kiddo.” His bushy brows were creased in confusion as he watched me. “You’ve been making amateur mistakes and losing sparring matches that you usually crush. What’s going on?”

I drew a hand over my hair and then shifted the sword in my hand so that I could fix my ponytail again. Sweat trickled down my spine and temples.

Ulric was right. I was distracted. For a multitude of reasons. For one, I still felt guilty for sleeping with Levi while

my colleagues had been putting their lives at risk to stop an escape attempt. And at the same time, I was also a bit annoyed that none of them had come looking for me when I had been kidnapped. That they had all just assumed that I had stormed off like a brat because Chief scolded me. And I was pissed at Levi too. Pissed that he had told me to stay the hell away from him as payment for saving his life. No one told me what I could and couldn't do or where I could and couldn't go. But I was also deeply grateful to him that he had come to save me, even after everything that had happened between us.

However, I could never say any of that to Ulric, so instead I went with another issue that had also been bothering me. "Well, it's just..." I drew in a breath and wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. "We've been getting reports that the worldwalker is attacking and slaughtering the people who work for Arden."

"Yes."

I stared at him. What did he mean, yes? Didn't he see a problem with that? Holding his gaze, I shook my head and spelled it out for him. "Shouldn't we do something about that?"

"No." He frowned, looking as confused as I felt. "Why would we?"

"I..." Staring at him, I didn't even know how to finish the sentence.

"They're dark mages."

"Not all of them."

"No, but they work for dark mages, which is just as bad."

"But they're still people!"

His eyes softened. "Look, kiddo, I know that going undercover and working for Arden was difficult for you. I know that you probably got to know some of the people working for him, and that's why this suddenly feels personal to you. But those people chose to work for a dark mage. They could have done anything, literally anything else, that would have contributed to society. But instead, they decided to help

the people who corrupt and destroy our beautiful city. They're not civilians anymore. They're dark mage accomplices now."

"But—"

"Think of it this way," he interrupted. "If we were to step in and try to protect those people against a worldwalker, who will get hurt instead? We will." Spreading his arms, he motioned at the people still sparring in the white stone courtyard. "Your colleagues will. Your friends. Do you really want to risk their lives just to protect dark mages and their accomplices?"

That terrible guilt carved through my chest again. "Well, no..."

"And that's why we don't get involved."

"But just sitting here on our hands, doing nothing, feels wrong. Shouldn't we at least try to take down the other dark mage Houses? While they're distracted?"

"No. It's better if we let them deal with Arden first, since he is the greatest threat. Then, once he's dead, we can swoop in and clean up the rest."

My heart twisted painfully. *Once Levi is dead...*

"What's wrong?" Ulric asked, probably having seen the pain and dread in my eyes.

"It's just..." I began, fumbling for an answer that didn't involve me admitting that I had fallen for the King of Metal. "I don't want innocent civilians to get hurt or killed in a dark mage war that has nothing to do with them." Holding his gaze, I added, "I just don't want anyone else to end up like my father."

Pity flooded his eyes as he looked back at me. "I know, kiddo. I know."

Once again, I felt like screaming my lungs out in frustration. But I couldn't do that, so instead, I just raised my sword and went back to sparring with Ulric.

Why did life have to be so damn complicated? I used to always know what the right thing was in any given situation.

But now, I had started to see the world the way that Levi did. In shades of gray. And it was destroying me. How was I supposed to be a good constable if I understood a dark mage's perspective too? If I thanked him for killing the people who had hurt me? If I wanted to help him even when I was angry with him? If I craved the way his naked body felt against mine? If I... loved him?

Fuck. I was so doomed.

CHAPTER 21



Light from the oil lamps flickered over the small buildings crafted from metal. I studied the new markings I had made in my massive metal map, markings that only I could see, since they showed the locations of where all of my people were currently hiding.

I still couldn't believe that the civilians had come through for me like that. I was not a kind man. I wasn't patient or compassionate or benevolent. I ruled with an iron fist and gave people only one choice: bow down or get destroyed. But once they bowed down, I did hold up my end of the bargain. If they paid me for protection and followed my orders, I was going to make sure that no one messed with them.

Leaders who were feared had a lot of power. But leaders who were feared *and* respected were practically untouchable. That had always been my philosophy. But I had still never expected Ralph and the other civilians to back me this completely and help my people even at great risk.

“What do we do now, sir?”

I looked up from the map to meet Shinji's eyes. He was the only one who had stayed behind. Right now, my administrative staff and my lower-level fighters were mostly just liabilities since they couldn't protect themselves against either the worldwalker or the other dark mage Houses. But Shinji was skilled enough to still be an asset, so he alone remained with me in my now eerily silent and empty Court of Metal.

Ever since yesterday, I had waited for White to worldwalk right into my home and follow through on his threat. But he still hadn't shown up. I wasn't sure if that was because he had realized that fighting me inside a building made entirely of metal was a bad fucking move, or if he simply... couldn't. Every magical power had limits. Was there something stopping him from worldwalking right inside my Court? I wasn't sure. And unfortunately, there was no way for me to find out.

"What don't we do," I muttered in response to Shinji's question.

There were just too many things that I needed to do at the same time, and I didn't know how to do any of them.

Shinji furrowed his brows. "Sir?"

Raking a hand through my hair, I shook my head, telling him to disregard that comment. "There are five things I need to do right now. I need to figure out how to kill a fucking worldwalker, get my people out of prison, stay the hell away from Eve, kill the other gang leaders, and take control over the whole south side before the white boots launch an attack."

"Which one takes precedence?"

"All of them."

Shinji knew better than to look at me with pity, but I could feel him trying desperately to think of the right thing to say. Accomplishing everything on that list would have been impossible even if I'd had the full strength of my Court behind me. But with just the two of us? Not a chance in hell. Still, I had to try.

"Tell me what you need me to do, sir," was what he at last settled on.

"I don't know," I admitted.

Firelight continued flickering over the metal map between us as we both just stood there in silence, staring at it. Helplessness whirled inside my soul, which tugged the insanity closer to the surface. Clenching my jaw, I forced it down again.

“What if we give him another healer?”

Shifting my gaze back to Shinji, I scowled at him. “What are you talking about?”

For a second, he hesitated, as if he was worried that I was going to punish him for what he was about to suggest, but then he drew in a breath and pressed on. “Killing a worldwalker is impossible. Even for someone as powerful and skilled as you. Because White could just disappear in the middle of a battle and reappear halfway around the world or right behind your unprotected back. But maybe we don’t need to kill him.”

I raised my eyebrows in silent question.

“I know you prefer to settle your scores, and killing White after what he did to our people is your first instinct,” he went on. “An eye for an eye, and all that. And normally, I agree completely. But we can’t afford to get blinded by the need for revenge. Not when we’re already in such a vulnerable position.”

Dread flickered in his eyes as he paused, as if he was waiting for me to strike him down for even daring to utter such words to me.

But all I said was, “Go on.”

Some of the tension disappeared from his body, and he drew his fingers through his straight black hair before continuing. “What if we made a deal with him instead? Because he doesn’t want Gemma specifically. He just wants *a* healer. So what if we find him another healer and trade that person to him in exchange for him backing off from Gemma?”

I ran a hand over my jaw.

As much as I hated to admit it, Shinji was right. I wanted revenge, but in my current state, I couldn’t take down a worldwalker and still accomplish everything else I needed to do, like getting my people out of jail and taking over the entire south side. But if I made a deal with him, I would at least solve one of my countless problems right now. A problem that would allow me to bring Gemma back to Malgrave so that she could actually use her healing powers for my benefit, which

was something that I would need desperately if I was going to survive everything else I had to do.

“Another healer, huh?” I said.

“Yes. The only problem is of course, how do we find the location of one?”

A sly smile spread across my lips. “Oh, I think I know just who to ask.”

The mouthwatering scent of fried street food drifted through the air as I approached the small wooden stall up ahead and the old woman selling stekta behind it. Colorful light shifted across the whole street as the oil lamps above swung on their wires.

It was a strange feeling, walking through the Entertainment District. Up and down every street I passed, people laughed and drank and enjoyed life as if nothing was wrong. As if my life hadn't been turned upside down and left on the brink of ruin.

Shaking off the uncomfortable emotion, I closed the final distance to the food stall.

The woman behind it looked up and gave me a sweet smile, as if she had no idea who I was. Her gray hair that reached down to her shoulders and curled a bit around her face rippled slightly as she wiped her hands on her apron.

“What can I get you?” she asked, that kind smile still on her face.

“Information,” I replied as I stopped on the other side of the narrow wooden counter.

“Information?” She laughed. It was a light sound, full of disbelief. “I think you might have the wrong booth. I'm just an old lady selling stekta.”

I let a knowing smile curl my lips. “Did you really think that I don't know exactly who and what you are, Maggie?”

A second passed. Then she dropped the sweet little old lady act, and that wickedly intelligent glint appeared in her sharp blue eyes as she chuckled.

“Well, I always knew you were a perceptive one,” she said before adding with a little more emphasis, “King of Metal.”

I glanced around me, but no one was close enough to overhear. Narrowing my eyes, I slid my gaze back to one of the most dangerous people in Malgrave. “Why did you pretend that you didn’t know who I was?”

“Why have you let me continue to sell information, which I make a lot of money from, on your territory without collecting the extra dues?”

“You pay me a percentage of your stekta sales, which is what your business is registered for. What you do in between is up to you.”

She chuckled, and then tipped her head at me. “Good answer.”

In truth, I hadn’t bothered Maggie because I knew just how dangerous, and how useful, she could be. If I had harassed her about the extra money she made from her side hustle, she might have started to sell information about me to my enemies. And if I had just decided to kill her in order to eliminate the threat, I would have lost a valuable source of information that I might need at some point. Like, right now.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out a massive stack of cash and placed it on the counter in front of her. “I need you to find me a healer.”

“A healer?”

“Yes.”

She grabbed the pile of cash, but didn’t put it in the pocket of her apron. Instead, she placed it on the small shelf below the counter, presumably so that it wouldn’t be seen by any curious passersby. But the fact that she hadn’t pocketed the money meant that she still hadn’t accepted the assignment.

“They don’t grow on trees, you know,” she said, fixing me with a penetrating look. “You have the only one in Malgrave.”

“I’m aware. I need the location of another one.”

A knowing glint crept into her eyes. “Well, since you spirited Gemma out of the city and into the hills in the middle of the night, I would assume so.”

Panic shot up my spine. No one was supposed to know where Gemma was. I knew that Maggie was good, but how the hell had she found out that Gemma was no longer in the city? No one knew that. No one except for me and Shinji.

“If you ever tell anyone else where Gemma is,” I began, my voice dripping with threats. “I am going to—”

“I don’t respond well to threats, young man,” she interrupted. “Consider that before you finish that sentence.”

My fingers itched to draw my sword and ram it through her damn throat. But I needed her, so I stifled the impulse and instead worked my jaw in order to loosen the tension in it.

“And I need you to tell me why,” she continued before I could figure out what to say. “Why do you need me to find you another healer?”

Laughter erupted from my left. I slid my gaze to the mixed group of men and women that staggered out of the red door a short distance from me. They shoved each other and giggled again while drifting down the street. I waited until they were out of earshot before turning back to Maggie.

The distraction had at least given me a few seconds to gather myself and to decide how to play this. Since I was pretty sure that Maggie could see through most lies, I decided to go with the truth.

“You’ve heard about the worldwalker, right?” I began.

“I have.”

“He wants a healer, so he is targeting me because he wants Gemma. That’s why I had to get her out of town.”

“I assumed as much.”

“Then you probably also know that he is now coming after the rest of my people instead.”

She nodded.

“Every day that I don’t hand her over, he comes back and slaughters more people. My cooks, my cleaners, my runners, all the ordinary people who work for me. Until I give him Gemma. But I can’t give him Gemma!” Desperation and frustration washed over me, and I curled my hand into a fist. “So get me the location of another healer so that I can trade that information to him in exchange for Gemma’s safety and my people’s lives. Please.”

Silence descended on the food stall. Above our heads, the oil lamps swung gently again, making the colorful light sway across the stones.

Maggie watched me with those perceptive eyes of hers for another few seconds before stating, “You never say *please*.”

A flash of alarm speared through me. The word had just slipped out without me even realizing it.

Still watching me, she cocked her head. “You act like a brutal and heartless villain, but you really do care about your people, don’t you?”

I scoffed while trying to suppress the flare of panic in my chest. Narrowing my eyes, I leveled a hard stare at the old lady. “If you ever repeat such a ridiculous notion to anyone, I’ll—”

“Bah!” She waved a hand in front of her face and then wiggled her eyebrows at me while a knowing grin spread across her mouth. “Your secret is safe with me.”

Before I could protest or threaten her again, she scooped up the pile of cash and slid it into her apron pocket. I raised my eyebrows in silent question.

“I’ll get you the location of another healer,” she said, as if that wouldn’t be an impossible task for practically anyone else. “Now, what kind of *stekta* do you want?”

I was still reeling a bit from the way this conversation had gone, to the extent that all I managed to reply was, “Beef and scallions.”

She chuckled, and I swore that conspiratorial gleam was back in her eyes as she dunked her ladle in the bucket of batter and replied, “Of course it is.”

CHAPTER 22



The mass of oil lamps on the wires above painted the whole street in shifting colors of every hue. Music spilled out from the red door on my left, and the mouthwatering scent of fried street food hung in the air. It mixed with south Malgrave's signature scent of rich perfume, alcohol, and blood. This side of the river was messy and violent and wickedly depraved, and yet it called to my soul in a way the north side never had.

I felt free here. Free to dance, free to drink, and free to fuck whoever and however I wanted. As if I could shed all of the stifling rules of propriety and instead just... be me. Just live.

And I hated myself for that. I hated the way the south side called to my soul. I hated the way I craved the freedom it provided.

This dark mage-infested part of the city was the reason why my father was dead, and I was betraying his memory by secretly enjoying it. What an awful daughter, awful *person*, I was. How could I possibly feel at home here among the very people who had killed him? It was sick.

Guilt seared through my chest like a hot knife. And suddenly, the colorful lights and the pulsing music and the cacophony of scents felt like a thick blanket that was pressing in on all sides, smothering me. I couldn't breathe. It was too much.

Taking a sharp left, I darted into an alley between two buildings. My heart was slamming against my ribs. I needed air. I needed to get out of this oppressive pit full of memories and longings and feelings. And I needed it right now.

I whipped my head from side to side as I reached the next cross street. There was a low one-story building on one side, so I picked up speed and sprinted towards it. Right before I reached it, I jumped up onto a wooden box full of half-dead flowers, and pushed off.

Wind rushed over my face and tugged at my hair as I flew upwards. My fingers curled around the edge of the roof as I reached it, and I used my grip on it to hoist myself up. After rolling to my feet, I jogged over the roof and approached the next building. The roof was higher on that one, but since I was already standing on this one, I could reach it without too much effort.

Relief crashed over me as I straightened on top of the highest roof. Now, all the colors and music and scents were below me. Just a simmering surface of activity far below instead of a boiling pot around me.

Tilting my head back, I stared up at the dark star-dusted sky above and drew in a deep breath. My heart rate began to slow again.

Cool night winds blew across the rooftops, swirling through my hair and clothes, but I welcomed the slight chill. It helped ground me in the present again.

My father was dead. There was nothing I could do about that. But I could honor his memory by continuing to work for the constables and helping the north side to reclaim the lawless south so that no one else's father would be a victim of a dark mage war again.

After blowing out a long sigh, I at last tipped my head back down.

I had come to the south side tonight to... do what? I wasn't even sure why I had come here. I had just felt that irresistible

tug on my soul and answered its call. It had been so stupid. What if someone had recognized me as a constable?

Shaking my head at my own stupidity, I moved over to the edge of the roof and scanned the streets around me for threats.

My heart stuttered in my chest.

Levi was walking along one of the roads, heading in my direction. Indecision flashed through me. Part of me wanted to thank him again, properly, for saving me from White. The other part of me wanted to go down there and tell him that he could take his ridiculous demand of me staying away from him and shove it up his fucking ass. No one told me what I could or couldn't do, or where I could or couldn't go.

He brushed his hands together in the way he always did when he discreetly wanted to summon his magic.

Alarm shot through me. Had he spotted me?

But then movement from both sides of the road drew my attention, and the pulse of alarm was replaced by dread.

Two groups of people were rounding the corner. One behind Levi and one ahead. He trailed to a halt, but made no move to attack as the men and women welled around the corner, blocking his way in both directions. There were two side streets, but they were halfway between Levi's current position and the two groups.

With my pulse thrumming in my ears, I flicked my gaze between the people standing at the very front of each group. Even from this distance, I recognized them instantly. After all, their faces were plastered on wanted posters on every floor where I worked. Aaron Reyes, the leader of the House of Onyx. And Connor Bale, the leader of the House of Lightning.

And Levi was trapped between them. Alone.

Fear sliced through me.

Levi was going to get killed right here before my very eyes.

I didn't even stop to consider the consequences. Or if it was even going to work. I just reacted on instinct.

Using my constable's voice, the strong one that pulsed with authority and made civilians dart out of my way, I bellowed into the night, "Arden has been spotted! I repeat, I have eyes on Arden! Squads one to eight, attack from the south side of the street. Squads nine to sixteen, take the north. Seventeen to twenty-one, use the side streets. Go! Go! Go!"

Levi whipped around and stared up at the roof where I was still yelling for my imaginary squads to hurry up and box him in and to arrest all of the people with him. On both sides of the street, the gangs of dark mages did the same.

Slapping my palms together, I called up a fireball and hurled it at Levi's face to make it even more believable. He yanked up a metal shield. The fire smacked into it, sending yellow flames and embers sailing into the air.

That broke the spell.

Both Reyes and Bale's gangs scattered like smoke in the wind. After all, they thought twenty-one squads of pissed-off constables were about to descend on them. I watched from the rooftop as they darted back the way they had come.

Levi didn't hesitate a second either.

The moment the other gangs were gone, he broke and ran down one of the side streets.

I chuckled, suddenly feeling very pleased with myself. Since both Levi and the others would soon realize that there was no horde of constables coming, I decided that it was time to make myself scarce as well.

Turning around, I snuck back to the low roof I had come from and dropped down on it. I checked to make sure that no dark mages were left before I swung myself over the edge of that roof as well and lowered myself to the street. After yet another quick glance up and down the street, I jogged towards the road that would take me back to the Bridge of Life.

Excitement still bounced around inside me from my reckless plan. If that hadn't worked, if they had called my bluff, I would have been trapped in the middle of a dark mage battle. Or even more likely, I would have been target number

two after they had taken down Levi. What the hell had I been thinking? I knew that it had been stupid, but for some reason, I still had a massive grin on my face as I hurried through the streets.

My stomach lurched as I was suddenly yanked through a doorway. I slapped my hands together, summoning a fireball, right as the door banged shut and I was slammed up against a wall. Air exploded from my lungs as my back hit the smooth wood, but I managed to keep a hold of my magic.

The yellow flames danced in my hands, revealing a very familiar, and very pissed-off face, glaring down at me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Levi growled at me from barely half a step away.

His fists were still buried in my shirt, keeping me trapped against the wall. I flexed my fingers, letting the flames in my right hand grow bigger.

He slid his gaze towards it, and if I didn't know better, I could've sworn that a brief hint of amusement tugged at his lips. “You gonna throw that in my face? Again.”

“I haven't decided yet,” I replied, flashing him a mockingly sweet smile.

For a few seconds, we just stared each other down while the fire continued crackling in my palm. Then I flicked my wrist, sending the flames towards the cluster of candles on the table a short distance from us. They sputtered to life, bathing the room in a warm glow.

We were standing in someone's living room. But based on how silent the building was, I assumed that no one was home at the moment.

“You're welcome,” I drawled.

“For what?” He raised his eyebrows. “Not trying to burn my face off?”

“For saving your life, you arrogant asshole.” I shot a pointed look at the hands still buried in my shirt. “Now, are

you going to take your hands off me or do I need to summon another fireball?"

His grip only tightened, pushing me harder against the wall. "I thought I told you to stay the hell away from me. That I don't need your fucking help. And you owe me a life debt."

"And now, that debt is cleared. Don't even try to pretend as if you would have survived an attack from two dark mage Houses while you were trapped and all alone. Which means that the only reason you're standing here right now is because I intervened. So my life debt to you is now paid."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. We're even now, Levi. And that means that you don't get to tell me where I can go or what I'm allowed to do." I arched an expectant eyebrow at him. "Now, are you going to thank me or keep behaving like an ungrateful child?"

He let out a scoff that almost sounded like a half-stifled chuckle. I continued staring at him with my eyebrows raised, waiting for him to thank me. He didn't. But he did release his grip on my shirt.

I snorted and brushed down the rumpled fabric. Then I waited for him to step back, but he didn't do that either. He remained standing there, barely half a stride in front of me. So close that I could almost feel the heat from his skin against mine. It was so distracting that I didn't even realize that he had reached a hand towards my throat before I could feel his fingers against my skin.

My brain malfunctioned and a ripple of pleasure coursed through me as Levi drew his fingers over my collarbone. For a few seconds, I couldn't for the life of me figure out what he was doing. He hated me. So why was he...?

His fingers curled around the thin gold chain of the necklace I kept underneath my shirt. While holding my gaze, he pulled it out so that the small ruby swung in the air between us. Light from the candles caught in the precious stone, making it glitter dark red.

"Why are you still wearing this?" he asked.

My mind finally caught up with reality. *Oh*. The necklace. The one that Levi had given me. A flicker of embarrassment shot through me.

But I kept that annoying emotion firmly off my face and instead flashed him a sharp smile. “To remind myself that no matter how great the sex is, it’s still just meaningless sex.”

“You thought the sex was that good, huh? No wonder you were all over me in that cottage.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “And apparently great sex comes from the biggest dicks.”

Surprised laughter ripped from his chest. It was such a genuine and baffled sound that it took me a few seconds to realize what had caused it.

Heat seared my cheeks as I blurted out, “The biggest *assholes*. I meant, great sex comes from the biggest assholes. The biggest bastards.”

His gray eyes danced with amusement as he smirked at me. “Sure you did.”

I gave his muscled chest a halfhearted shove that did nothing to actually push him back while I muttered, “Fuck you.”

“You already did, remember? Which is what prompted this very illuminating conversation.”

Crossing my arms, I glared up at him. “You know what I meant.”

He chuckled.

Then a flash of alarm shot across his features.

Abruptly taking a step back, he snatched his hand away and dropped the necklace back onto my chest while all traces of mirth bled from his features until only that ruthless look remained on his face.

“Fine, your life debt to me has now been paid,” he announced, his voice cold and hard. “But it still doesn’t change the fact that you’re a white boot. And next time I see

you, I will treat you like one. So don't let me catch you on this side of the river again."

I scoffed and clicked my tongue. "As if that would happen."

"You don't think I could?"

"I think I lived *inside* your Court for weeks without you catching me. So good luck trying to catch me out in the city."

Before he could reply, I spun around and stalked towards the door. The hinges groaned faintly as I yanked the door open. But then I paused on the threshold.

Glancing back, I met Levi's gaze over my shoulder. "Last bit of advice? If you're thinking of getting your people out of jail, do it soon. They're due to stand trial in three days, and after that, they will be executed."

He furrowed his brows while studying my face intently. "Why are you telling me this?"

Something tugged at my soul. Yes, why was I telling him that? My department was the one who had captured them in the first place, and also the one who was responsible for keeping them locked up until the trial. So why was I telling Levi about the timeline?

"I don't know." Heaving a deep sigh, I shook my head. "Goodbye, Levi."

Then I strode back out into the night.

CHAPTER 23



Panic crackled through my every vein as I sprinted down the street with a mass of white boots behind me. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* Grabbing the edge of a building, I swung myself around it right before a lightning bolt could hit me. It zapped into the wall instead with a crack that echoed between the white stone structures.

“Cut him off!” someone screamed behind me.

Making a split-second decision, I darted down another alley instead.

Rain poured down from the dark gray heavens, making the stone streets slippery. But at least it meant that the roads were mostly empty. If I’d had to push my way through crowds of civilians, I would never have been able to get away.

Eve’s warning had checked out. When I snuck up to the north side earlier this morning, I had been able to confirm that my people would indeed be standing trial in three days. Or rather, two days now.

Trial, they called it, but we all knew that it was just a farce. My people would be executed no matter what happened at that trial. And I only had two days to get them out before that happened.

But I had nothing. No plan. No one on the inside. No way to sneak them out of there. So I had done the only thing I could. I had tried to get them out with sheer brute force.

The element of surprise had almost been enough to actually make my plan succeed. The white boots had been so stunned that I would dare to attack their headquarters directly, that I had gotten almost all the way to the stairwell down into the Underground before the full force descended on me.

Fighting my way back out of the building had been costly. I'd had to use much more magic, much more power, than I could afford, which had left me completely drained.

Part of me had wondered if Eve had told me about the trial so that they could set up another ambush, but the delayed response time when I attacked proved that she had in fact only said it to help me.

But now, she and half of her entire building were chasing me through the rain-slick streets with the intent to capture me once and for all.

Adrenaline pumped through my body as I sprinted down yet another street. Even though it was the middle of the day, the dark clouds and sheets of rain bathed the city in gloomy darkness. I skidded around the corner while flicking my gaze over the buildings around me.

I needed to get off the street and make them lose sight of me.

Yanking open a door, I darted into the hallway and up the stairs. There was no hatch to access the roof from inside the corridor, so I melted the lock on the nearest door and ripped it open.

A woman leaped out of an armchair and shrieked as I ran through her living room. She scrambled backwards and threw herself down behind a large brown couch. But I wasn't aiming for her.

Shoving the window open, I climbed out of it and onto the roof. Then I brushed my hands together and summoned a metal plank as I raced towards the edge.

On the street below, shouts rose from the constables.

Wind magic whooshed behind me as they tried to knock me off the roof. But I leaped onto my plank and sprinted to the

next building.

“After him!” they screamed from below.

But they now had to run around the buildings while I could just cut through the city in a straight line, and with every step, they fell farther and farther behind.

Rain pelted me from above, making the metal slick and almost sending me tumbling down to the stone street below when my boot slipped. Grabbing the metal plank with both hands, I managed to remain on it. Once I had steadied myself, I shot upright and took off again.

At last, I reached the river. I knew that the white boots were still on my heels, but I had bought myself enough of a head start that we should be able to make it far enough across the water before they got here.

Hurling down another staircase, I made my way back to the ground and then sprinted across the shore to where Ferry was waiting.

“Go, go, go!” I snapped as I ran.

My boots sent sprays of sand and stone flying up behind me as I closed the distance to the boat that was already floating in the water.

Ferry brushed her palms together, summoning her water magic, while I leaped into her boat. Waves crashed against the sides as it took off with impressive speed.

Wind and rain ripped through the air, slamming into my face and soaking my clothes. I dragged a hand over my eyes and then through my hair while I turned to look back towards the north side. Between the sheets of rain, I could just barely make out a mass of white-clad people pouring onto the shore.

Lightning streaked across the water. I yanked up a shield to block it, but it fizzled out before it could reach us.

I heaved a deep sigh of relief. We were out of reach even from their lightning strikes, which meant that they couldn't manipulate the water close to the boat either.

“One of these days, you’re going to get me caught,” Ferry said while she continued steering her boat towards the south shore.

“I’ll increase your compensation next time,” I said, cutting her a sideways look. “For the added risks.”

Her mouth shifted into a small but very satisfied smile as she nodded.

Once we reached the shore, I leaped out of the boat and immediately took off towards the buildings up ahead. The white boots would no doubt be racing to cross the Bridge of Life right now, so I had to move deeper into the south side, where they wouldn’t dare to tread, before they could catch up to me.

But I had only made it two streets in before I had to stop and catch my breath. I had been using so much energy, so much magic, continuously these past two weeks without having any time to properly rest in between. I constantly felt as though I was scraping the bottom of the barrel just to get through the next fight and then the next and the next. I was being attacked too often, by too many and too powerful people, while I was always at some kind of disadvantage.

The street swam before my eyes, and not just because of the heavy rain running down my face and blurring my vision. If I didn’t catch a break soon, I was going to collapse from exhaustion.

Dragging in a deep breath, I straightened again and convinced myself that this was the last time. The last time I would ever be this vulnerable.

But before I could take so much as a single step, cold steel pressed against my skin.

I immediately tried to slap my hands together, but the knife that someone was holding across my throat from behind dug in deeper, stopping my movements.

“You’ve hidden all of your people,” Christian White’s voice came from behind me. “Clever.”

“Can’t kill what you can’t find,” I said, keeping my tone arrogant and completely unaffected.

“Indeed. Terribly inconvenient, that.” He pushed the blade harder against my throat, breaking the skin and making a few drops of warm blood run down and mix with the rain dripping down my neck. “Maybe I should just kill you instead, then.”

“Go ahead. But then you’ll never find the healer.”

“I could just torture it out of one of your men once you’re dead.”

“You really think I told anyone where I hid my healer? How stupid do you think I am?”

He said nothing for a few seconds, as if mulling over my words. Then he clicked his tongue. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t. I certainly wouldn’t have done it if it were my healer.”

I didn’t reply. There really was nothing else to say. He could kill me with one flick of his wrist, but if he did, Gemma’s location would be lost to him forever. His only choice was to keep trying to force me to give it up by other means.

“Hiding a single healer is one thing, Arden. Hiding an entire court full of people is quite another.” He drew the knife up higher, pushing the flat of the blade up underneath my chin. “It’s only a matter of time before I find them. And when I do, I will start slaughtering them again. When you can’t take it anymore and you’re ready to give me your healer, I will accept your surrender at that spot outside the gate where we were supposed to meet the first time. See you soon, dark mage king of Malgrave.”

Before I could reply, the knife disappeared from my throat. I whipped around, my magic at the ready, but White had already worldwalked away. Releasing my grip on the magic, I raked a hand through my soaked hair instead, pushing the wet strands out of my face, while I cast a quick glance in the direction of the bridge. I couldn’t see it from here between the

heavy rain and all the buildings in the way, but I knew that the white boots would be here soon.

Sucking in a deep breath, I took off down the street again.

Dark mage king of Malgrave. If he only knew what I really was right now. Just one of four gang leaders fighting for control, except all of my battle mages were currently behind bars and I was one mistake away from being completely annihilated.

Thank hell that he didn't know anything about the political situation in Malgrave. Because if he had teamed up with the other Houses, my corpse would already be floating down the River of Souls.

Pushing the rain out of my eyes, I darted around the next corner.

Pain shot through my body as I slammed right into a block of stone. Or rather, a block of stone slammed right into me.

I stumbled backwards from the force of it, barely able to keep my balance on the wet street. But my instincts were screaming at me to move, so I blindly threw myself sideways.

A second later, lightning crashed into the block of stone where I had just been standing.

Slamming my hands together, I yanked up a metal wall right before a mass of shadows could crash into me. Then they disappeared. As did the block of stone.

I lowered my metal wall and scanned the street around me while instead building up a metal sheet below my feet.

Dread curled around my spine like a cold snake.

Aaron Reyes and battle mages from the House of Onyx were blocking the road on my left. On my right, Connor Bale and his people from the House of Lightning did the same. And through the small opening into the side street halfway between them stood Wilhelm Stenborg, the leader of the House of Stone.

Fuck.

My chest heaved as I tried to formulate some kind of plan. But there was no way in hell that I would survive a combined assault from all three other Houses. Not when I was alone. And not when I was already so exhausted that I could barely stay on my feet.

A boom vibrated through the ground underneath me. I snapped my gaze to Wilhelm. His blue eyes narrowed in annoyance as he flicked a glance down at my boots.

He had tried to use his magic to manipulate the stone ground I was standing on, but because I had already spread a sheet of metal below me, the strike hadn't been able to go through.

Lightning shot through the air.

That broke the spell.

At once, they attacked from all three sides. It was all I could do to keep raising and lowering shields from the metal I had spread across the ground.

White bolts of lightning cracked into the metal and twisting clouds of shadows snaked across the ground while blocks of stone shot through the air towards me. Then the other battle mages behind them started firing too.

My heart pounded in my chest and pain pulsed through my body when some of the attacks hit. There were simply too many of them to block. Bruises bloomed on my arms and jaw as blocks of stone crashed into me, and blood ran down from cuts in my skin. I kept raising wall after wall to shield myself, but I was losing ground with every second.

Losing ground, and losing energy.

Black spots floated across my vision as I fought to stay conscious and alert enough to survive this. But more attacks began slipping through.

A heavy weight settled in my stomach as I realized that I wouldn't walk away from this.

After everything I had done, everything I had endured... I'd almost had it all! And now, I was going to die in a fucking

rain-soaked street as if I was nothing. As if I was still the same helpless piece of trash that I had been when my parents sold me.

I wanted to scream.

Scream at the sky about the unfairness of it all. Curse at the universe for letting me get this close to having everything before snatching it all away.

“Incoming!” someone bellowed from Aaron’s side of the street. “Scram! It’s half the fucking white boot force!”

Shock clanged through my skull. And for a moment, I just stood there, staring like an idiot while all of my attackers sprinted away in separate directions.

The white boots.

Then understanding clicked into place.

The mass of constables who had been chasing me through the north side, the ones who had raced across the Bridge of Life to capture me, had inadvertently saved me.

Panic quickly followed the brief flash of relief.

I had to get out of here. I might have survived the coordinated House attack, but if I didn’t move, I was going to get captured by the white boots instead.

The sound of thudding boots rumbled like thunder between the streets.

I took a step towards the closest alley.

My legs buckled.

Dull pain shot through my bones as my knees slammed into the wet stone street, sending splashes of water flying up around me. My head spun and I couldn’t seem to focus my eyes.

There was no way in hell that I would be able to outrun the white boots now.

Changing tactics, I instead dragged my body back up and staggered towards the nearest door. Rain pelted me and wind

ripped at my clothes.

It took every ounce of strength I had left to summon my magic and melt the lock. My very soul was screaming with exhaustion as I pulled the door open and slipped inside.

Thankfully, there was no one in there.

I glanced back at the door. I knew that I should reshape the lock behind me again, but if I used my magic one more time right now, I was going to pass out. So it was either lock the door and pass out next to it while hoping that no one would look inside the window, or leave it unlocked and hide somewhere inside the building instead. I chose option two.

Letting the metal drip down the side of the door and towards the ground where it would hopefully blend in with the puddles on the street, I left the door unlocked and instead staggered towards the staircase.

It felt as if I was inhaling shards of glass, and every step sent a pulse of pain through my battered and bleeding body, but I managed to make it up the stairs and into one of the bedrooms.

Then my strength ran out.

A jolt shot through my bones as I simply crashed down on the ground. Rolling over on my back, I managed to at least crawl backwards over to the wall and draw myself into a sitting position.

On the street outside, voices and thudding boots mingled with the sound of the crashing rain.

I just remained there, slumped against the wall, with my chest heaving. Blood ran down from a cut above my eyebrow, further obstructing my already blurry vision, but I couldn't even muster the strength to raise my hand and wipe it off.

Ice spread through my veins as the worst possible sound drifted through the air. The sound of the front door opening.

“Check every building!” someone yelled from outside. “He can't have gotten far.”

A pair of footsteps echoed from downstairs.

I knew that I should be doing something. That I should be finding a better hiding spot or getting ready to attack or defend myself. But I couldn't make my muscles obey me anymore.

The white boot must have left the front door open, because through it, or maybe through the windows, I could hear people checking the other houses and then yelling, "All clear!"

If I'd had even an ounce of energy left, I would have been furious at myself and the world. But I was too exhausted to be angry. So I just lay there slumped against the wall and listened to the footsteps run up the stairs. The other doors were opened and closed quickly. Then the footsteps reached my door.

My whole body was pulsing with pain and exhaustion as I watched the door open and a figure in white leather armor appear.

Brown eyes locked directly on me.

I blinked, the only gesture of surprise that my uncooperative body would allow me.

Eve, on the other hand, didn't look surprised at all. She just stood there, watching me from the door as if she had known all along that I would be here.

That's when I remembered the melted metal on the ground outside the door. If anyone could recognize it for what it was, it was her.

In a way, it was fitting. That in the end, she would be the one to bring me in. Full circle, and all that.

"Sterling?" a man called from what sounded like the front door downstairs.

For a second, Eve and I just looked at each other. Since I had no energy left to speak, I said nothing while I waited for her to answer that she had found me.

With her eyes still locked on mine, she opened her mouth and called, "All clear!"

Shock rippled through my tired soul.

Eve's perceptive brown eyes flicked over my injuries while worry blew across her face. Then determination bled into her eyes instead.

But all she did was to give me one last once-over.

Then she closed the door and walked away.

CHAPTER 24



I couldn't get that image out of my mind. The image of Levi lying slumped on the floor in that deserted house. Blood trickling down his face. Bruises covering his skin. Exhaustion pulsing from his entire being. Levi Arden, the most powerful dark mage in the entire city, had been so beaten down that he hadn't even been able to speak when I opened the door, let alone defend himself. Seeing him like that had almost shattered my soul.

It shouldn't have been a surprise, though. He was being attacked relentlessly from all sides. Attacked by a worldwalker, who just on his own would have been a massive threat. But then he was also being attacked by three other Houses at the same time. And then of course also by us. By the entire constable force of Malgrave.

And as if all that wasn't enough, Levi was also alone, because practically all of his battle mages were now our prisoners.

I shook my head as I walked down the hall and towards the next one. If it had been anyone else, anyone but Levi, they would have been dead long ago. But even in the face of all that, the King of Metal was still standing.

However, he was cutting it closer and closer. It was just sheer dumb luck that I had spotted the melted metal outside the door before anyone else picked that building to search. Sooner or later, his luck was going to run out.

A mass of footsteps sounded from the corridor up ahead. I kept moving towards it, my mind still swirling with conflicting emotions.

“Is that smoke?” someone said from up ahead.

“Oh fuck,” another one growled. “There’s a fire! Wait here!”

Picking up the pace, I sprinted the final distance to the next corridor. My heart fluttered nervously in my chest as I rounded the corner.

And ran right into all of Levi’s people.

Tyler and Chris and all of the other battle mages that we had captured were standing in a long line. There were two constables at the head of the procession. But the two who should have been at the back were gone, presumably only for a few moments to put out that fire.

But sometimes, a few moments was all it took.

The mass of dark mages turned to face me where I stood alone at the end of their procession. Fury flashed in their eyes the second they realized who I was.

They already knew that I was a constable, since I had been one of the people who had locked them in their cells that day two weeks ago. That day, when they realized that I had betrayed them and Levi, they had cursed me to hell and threatened to destroy everything and everyone I loved. The usual dark mage stuff. But they had been locked in cells at that point. Unable to follow through on any threats. Now, there were no metal bars standing between me and them.

For a single second, it was as if the moment was suspended in time.

Then a fist cracked into the side of my face.

Pain shot through my cheekbone. I tried to suck in a gasp, but all the air exploded from my lungs as someone landed a hard kick to the side of my ribs, sending me flying through the corridor and crashing into the wall.

Shouts echoed through the hall and magic flashed as the two constables at the head of the procession tried to subdue the mass of dark mages who were now blocking the way between me and them.

“You fucking traitor,” Chris growled.

The blond wind mage slammed his fists into my stomach, making me double over from the pain.

Their hands were still locked in stiff handcuffs, preventing them from summoning magic, but that didn't stop them from just pummeling me instead.

Grabbing the collar of my shirt, he yanked me upright while Tyler appeared next to him. Another wave of pain pulsed through my face as Tyler drove his fist into my jaw while Chris held me against the wall.

“I will fucking kill you for betraying Levi like that,” Tyler snapped, and even though he couldn't summon his power, I could almost see his lightning magic flash in his blue eyes as he drew back his hands for another hit. “You double-crossing piece of shit, I will—”

His eyes widened as I grabbed his wrist before he could strike me again, and pressed something into his palm.

Chris, who had no idea what I had just done, used his grip on my shirt to yank me forward and then slam me against the wall again, hard enough to rattle my teeth.

“Go at exactly—” I began, but then Chris slammed his fist into my jaw, and stars exploded before my eyes.

“Wait,” Tyler hissed, low enough for only the three of us to hear, while he showed his friend what I had pressed into his palm.

Behind their backs, the other dark mages were still fighting to stop the constables from reaching me. It created a deafening noise, and I knew that the two people who had gone to put out the fire would be back any second now.

Dark spots still floated before my eyes, and my ribcage ached from the hits I had taken, but I forced myself to drag in

a breath. “Go at exactly twelve minutes past eleven tonight. Use the left stairwell. I’ll make sure it’s empty.” My gaze darted towards the left, where the other two constables were now sprinting back through the corridor. Then I slid my gaze back to Tyler and Chris, who looked utterly stunned. “Now, hit me like you mean it.”

The two keys that I had pressed into Tyler’s hand immediately disappeared into his clothes. Then they started assaulting me again.

From the outside, it looked the same. Two dark mages trapping me against the wall and raining blows and kicks down on me. But they were pulling their punches now. I could feel their fists connect with my body, but there was no longer any bone-breaking force behind them.

Soon enough, they were wrestled off me by my colleagues and hit with small strikes of lightning to make them drop to their knees on the floor.

“Eve!” my colleagues yelled as soon as all the dark mages were either kneeling or lying on the floor with their limbs twitching from lightning. “Are you okay?”

I sucked in a few deep breaths. The first round of hits had been real, so pain still pulsed through my body, making me wince as I moved. Reaching up, I wiped blood from the corner of my mouth while nodding and assuring them that I was fine.

It all really looked very believable.

While pushing off from the wall and straightening, I had to fight to stop a satisfied smirk from spreading across my lips.

That had gone perfectly.

Well, more or less, anyway.

Since Levi’s people would be standing trial in less than two days, I knew that they would be allowed to clean themselves up today in preparation for that. Civil rights, and all that. And I knew that they would be coming through this particular hallway at this exact time, which was why I had also been here. They had noticed the fire that I had started a little earlier than I expected, but I could explain away the fact that I

had come running around the corridor by saying that it was because I heard them yell about a fire.

Then all I'd had to do was slip the keys to Tyler and tell them when to use them.

They had managed to get in more hits than I had planned, but oh well. The bruises would heal. And they also made sure that no one thought that I had actually done something that would help them escape.

And because they were all professionals, Tyler and Chris and everyone else glared at me and spat threats in my direction with very convincing venom as I walked away. But on the inside, I was sure they were grinning as much as I was.

Mission accomplished.

CHAPTER 25



My footsteps echoed against the black and gold metal walls. I knew that I should be sleeping. Or at least resting.

It had taken almost five hours before I had recovered enough to leave that house. And while I was now able to summon magic again, the deep well that contained my power was still dangerously low. Which was why I was currently pacing through my bedroom like a restless demon instead of taking out all of my anger and frustrations on the metal walls in my throne room.

Drumming my fingers against my thighs, I tried desperately to relieve some of the panic and stress that was swirling inside me like a lightning storm. It didn't work.

I felt trapped, and I still didn't know how to get out of it.

The other three Houses were getting bolder with their attacks. And if the ambush earlier today was any indication, they had also set aside their differences and decided to work together to take me down. And there was no way that I could go up against all three of them together. Not when my own Court was in complete shambles.

And Maggie hadn't gotten in touch yet, which meant that she still hadn't found the location of another healer. Without that, I couldn't make a deal with the worldwalker. So he was going to keep showing up every day, trying to find the rest of my people and slaughter them. And if he did, a lot of civilians were going to die too.

Raking my fingers through my hair, I tilted my head back and forced out a long breath.

And then there was Tyler, and Chris, and my other battle mages. They were due to stand trial in less than two days. After that, they would be executed. *Executed*. And not because they had been stupid and gotten caught. No. It was all because of my own incompetence.

I didn't tolerate incompetence in others, and yet I had gotten my own people arrested because of it. Because I hadn't been able to see that Eve Sterling had been a fucking undercover white boot.

And she was the final stone on my already massive mountain of regret. Eve, who had called the all-clear today. That little spitfire who I once again found myself indebted to.

Movement in the corner of my eye drew my attention. I snapped my gaze towards the window.

Alarm flickered through me, trying to wake my survival instincts back to life again. But what I mostly felt was just a sense of tired resignation.

A mass of people surged into the street and hurried towards my front doors.

One of the other Houses had come back to finish the job. Or maybe all three of them.

Turning away from the window, I strode into the corridor and then down towards my throne room. When I passed Shinji's room, I banged a fist against the door and told him to get the hell out of here because we were about to be overrun. Then I continued walking.

Firelight danced over the metal walls and the massive throne at the back as I strode into the high-ceilinged hall and took up position in the middle of the room. With all the metal around me, this space would always be the best battleground for me.

Though, I already knew that I would lose. I still hadn't recovered enough energy to fight off an entire House. Let alone three.

So I supposed that here, inside the throne room that I had built after years of blood and sweat, was as good a place as any to die.

Soft footsteps sounded from my left.

I glanced over my shoulder to find Shinji taking up position next to me.

“I thought I told you to get the hell out of here,” I said, arching an expectant eyebrow.

“Yes, you did.”

“And?”

“And that is one order I will refuse to obey.” He met my eyes, a small smile lurking at the corner of his lips, as he added, “Sir.”

I let out a disbelieving chuckle before inclining my head. “Alright then, let’s get ready for one last battle.”

Dark orange flames whooshed down his arms as he called up his magic. I summoned mine too, but let it flow through the metal around the room instead. We might die here tonight, but I was going to take as many of those bastards with me as I could.

Blowing out a breath, I fixed my gaze on the front door.

The most irrational regret flashed through me as I realized that they were still a patchwork of red and gray. I should have painted them completely blood red again. Why hadn’t I done that?

I shoved the absolutely ridiculous thought out of my head as one of the doors inched open slightly. Metal sang through my very soul as I got ready to strike the moment my enemies dared to set one foot across the threshold. Next to me, Shinji got into a battle stance as well.

“Sir?” a voice called.

For a few seconds, I couldn’t comprehend what I had just heard. I stared at the door while my mind tried to process the

information. Just when I thought that I had imagined it, the word came again.

“Sir? Are you in here?”

Shinji, his eyes wide with shock, turned to stare at me.

“Just go in,” came another voice from outside. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

The doors were pulled open.

I lost the grip on my magic as utter incredulity washed over me instead. On my right, the flames along Shinji’s arms sputtered out as well.

“Sir, you *are* here!”

I think my jaw might have hung open like a damn fish as I watched Tyler, Chris, and everyone else who should be trapped in cells in the Underground right now, hurry towards me.

Shinji broke away and ran across the floor. Confusion and shock still swirled inside my skull as I watched him pull Chris into a hug and then slap Tyler on the shoulder. Brilliant smiles shone on all of their faces.

A boom echoed through the throne room as someone pulled the doors shut and threw the bolt in place.

The sound snapped me out of my stupor enough to at least close my gaping mouth before they all started towards me.

I swept my gaze over their faces again and again. They were all here. All of my battle mages. Along with Sonia, my forger who had also gotten arrested in that warehouse, and Ben, who’d had his cover blown and gotten caught when I tried to free them all the first time.

“How?” was all I managed to press out as they all stopped in front of me.

Tyler frowned. “What do you mean, sir? Wasn’t this your doing?”

“No.” I shook my head, still trying to process what was happening. “I tried to break you out earlier today, by force, but

it failed. So how are you here? How the hell did you manage to get out?"

Surprise blew across their features. Then it was replaced by understanding on some faces, and utter confusion on others.

"Eve," Tyler said, as if that was supposed to be an answer instead of the cause of a million other questions.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Since we were going to stand trial, they took us up into the building to shower. And then on the way back, there was a fire that drew two of the white boots away and then Eve showed up." He cleared his throat somewhat awkwardly. "And well, we took the chance to beat her up because... well, you know. But she had apparently staged the whole thing because she slipped me the keys to the handcuffs and the door and then told us when and where to escape. And she came through for us. We just snuck right out of the building." His brows creased again as he looked back at me. "We thought you had gotten her to do it...?"

It was half statement, half question, but I couldn't seem to remember how to speak, so I just shook my head.

Several pairs of eyebrows shot up. "Oh."

Oh, indeed. My mind spun with both shock and relief as I looked at the mass of dark mages before me. My people. The ones who had been mere days away from execution. Mere days away from being killed because of my own stupidity.

And now they were here. Free. Safe. And with them back, my Court was now also back to full strength.

All because Eve Sterling had let them go.

CHAPTER 26



The entire day today had been absolute chaos. When my colleagues had gone down to the prison this morning, they had found it completely empty and had immediately sounded the alarm. Every available squad, including mine, had been sent out to hunt them down before they could cross the Bridge of Life and disappear back to the south side.

It was all pointless.

They had escaped a little past eleven last night, which meant that they were already back on the south side. But of course, I couldn't tell anyone that. So I spent the entire day combing through the streets in search of the very people I had let walk right out of our building.

Chief Anderson had been summoned before the parliament, and most of our department leaders had spent the day arguing and interrogating people in order to figure out how this could have happened.

Worry had torn at my chest all day. But I had been very careful to make sure that nothing could be traced back to me. And since I hadn't been arrested yet, I was pretty sure that I had gotten away with it.

But I still couldn't help feeling as though I was being followed, so I stole a glance over my shoulder as I unlocked my front door. There was no one behind me. After shaking my head at my own paranoia, I pulled open the door and went inside.

My home was a medium-sized one-story building with a kitchen, bathroom, living room, bedroom, and one corridor that connected them all. It wasn't anything fancy, but it was clean and warm and located in a quiet neighborhood. I had planned to decorate it, to make it more my own, when I moved in five years ago. But I still hadn't gotten around to doing that, so all I had were the essentials.

A table with four chairs in the kitchen, all made of pale wood, as was the trend on this side of the river. The living room was similarly furnished. A pale wooden bookshelf containing the romance novels I read whenever I had the time, which admittedly wasn't often, but they were there, waiting for the time when my life would be a bit less busy. There was also a low table before the white couch. No paintings or plants yet, but I would get to that at some point.

After locking the door behind me, I pulled off my boots and hung up my jacket. Then I drifted down the empty hallway and towards my bedroom.

I swept my gaze over the neatly made bed with white sheets as I moved towards the set of drawers. When I had lived in Levi's Court, I had remarked on how bare his personal quarters felt. But now as I looked at my own home, really looked at it, I realized that mine wasn't much better.

Blowing out a breath, I grabbed the hem of my shirt and got ready to pull it over my head when a creaking sound came from out in the corridor.

Alarm flickered through me.

I summoned a bolt of lightning before hurrying back to the hallway. It was empty. With my gaze flicking back and forth, I snuck quietly towards the front door. One quick push of the handle confirmed that it was indeed locked, but I still glanced into the kitchen and living room with my lightning bolt at the ready just in case.

When nothing suspicious appeared, I let the magic fade out. Raking my fingers through my hair, I blew out a deep sigh and walked back to my bedroom.

By the Current, I was becoming jumpy.

I had only made it two steps into the room when the cold edge of a knife was pressed against my throat from behind.

“Don’t scream.”

Shock crackled through me. “Levi?”

The blade disappeared from my throat. I immediately spun around to find Levi Arden standing in my bedroom. The sight of him in here was so unexpected that, for a moment, I didn’t know how to react. I just stood there, staring at him, while he let the knife he had summoned fade into nothingness.

“How did you know where I live?” was what I at last managed to blurt out.

“I didn’t.” There was an unreadable expression on his features as he watched me. “I followed you.”

I glanced towards the door, realizing that he had probably melted the lock and snuck in before reshaping the lock bolt again. Shifting my attention back to the King of Metal, I asked, “Why?”

For a while, he didn’t answer. Instead, he just stood there, a few steps away from my bed, watching me with those penetrating gray eyes of his. Then he blew out a long sigh and shook his head. “What did you do, spitfire?”

I crossed my arms, suddenly feeling defensive. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do.”

Since I didn’t know how to answer the question that I knew he was asking, I just kept my mouth shut. Things were too complicated between us now. I had irrevocably fallen for this damn dark mage, but he had made it very clear that he hated me and would never forgive me for betraying him. And I wasn’t pathetic enough to chase after someone who didn’t want me. But I also didn’t want to watch him get killed.

“You freed my people,” Levi pushed. The words seemed to hang in the air between us. “Why?”

I threw my arms out in exasperation. “Because you’re getting slaughtered, Levi!” Heaving a deep sigh, I shook my head at him. “You’d better have a plan. Please tell me you have a plan.”

“I have a plan.”

Silence descended on the room as we just stood there, our eyes locked. The very air around us seemed to crackle with lightning. The longer the silence stretched, the more I could feel the tension press in on me. Just when it was reaching unbearable levels, Levi moved.

My heart skipped a beat as he abruptly took a step forward. Part of me wanted to back away, and the other wanted to lurch forward and meet him, so my confused body didn’t know how to respond and I ended up standing there rooted to the spot as Levi closed the distance between us.

Sparkles danced over my skin as he reached up and drew soft fingers over my forehead, pushing a few strands of hair out of my face. His eyes seared into me with an intensity that made it hard to breathe.

“I was the one who was fooled by you,” he said, still holding my gaze. “I was the one who walked right into your trap.”

Guilt flickered through my soul. But before it could expand, Levi went on.

“And now, my people won’t have to pay the price for my own incompetence.” He slid both hands into my hair and cradled my head before kissing me deeply. Then he drew back slightly. With his fingers still in my hair, he rested his forehead against mine and whispered, “Thank you.”

A tremor coursed through my body. Through my very soul.

I didn’t know if it was because of the vulnerability in his voice or the way his hands felt in my hair or the closeness of his body or the way he had kissed me as if it was the last time he would ever do that, but my restraint snapped like a thread before a battle axe.

Grabbing the back of his neck, I pulled his lips back to mine and kissed him desperately.

His body reacted immediately.

He tightened his grip on my hair as he answered the kiss, deepening it and claiming my mouth with the same desperation that whirled through my own soul. I drew my hands down his back and curled my fingers over the hem of his leather armor. A frustrated noise ripped from my throat when I couldn't figure out how to get the garment off him while he continued kissing me senseless.

A dark chuckle rumbled from his chest, but he drew back and started removing his armor. I stripped out of my own clothes too while Levi finished. My leather armor joined his on the floor as we tossed them aside before closing the distance between us again.

Locking my hands around the back of his neck, I pressed my lips against his as I pulled him with me while I backed towards my bed. Levi claimed my mouth with dominant strokes of his tongue as he let me move us closer to the smooth sheets.

Once the back of my legs hit the wooden bedframe, Levi broke the kiss and instead planted a hand on my chest. With one firm push, he sent me toppling backwards and onto the bed.

The mattress bounced underneath me as I landed, crinkling the previously impeccable white sheets. I scooted backwards to get more firmly onto the bed while Levi brushed his palms together.

Confusion blew through me as he summoned a long metal rope. But before I could ask about it, the ends of the smooth metal wrapped around my ankles. Then it solidified. It left my legs spread wide and trapped like that by a metal rod.

A thrill raced down my spine.

The bed dipped underneath me as Levi climbed onto the mattress. Grabbing the long rod between my ankles, he yanked

on it, pulling me down until I was lying on my back in the middle of the bed. My heart fluttered in my chest.

His gray eyes glinted and a smirk played over his lips as he shifted so that he was straddling one of my thighs.

A jolt shot through me as he brushed his knuckles over my pussy. He shifted his hand, tracing his thumb around my clit instead. I threw my head back and sucked in a breath as another ripple of pleasure rolled through my body.

He continued teasing my clit with expert movements until my pulse was thrumming in my ears. I squirmed against the sheets. His fingers slid over my entrance. I drew in a shuddering breath and tried to raise my legs. But his weight was firmly on my thigh, and the metal bar between my ankles made it impossible to lift my other leg too.

While his thumb tortured my clit, he pushed two fingers inside me.

I arched up from the bed.

My hands shot towards his forearm in a desperate attempt to direct his movements and push his fingers deeper inside me. But before I could, his other hand closed around my throat.

With his arm outstretched, he held me suspended like that in the air. Too far for me to reach his other hand and too high for me to lie back down on the mattress.

Challenge glittered in his eyes as he drew his thumb around my clit and slid his fingers out of my pussy before pushing them back in. A moan escaped my lips.

Levi kept his eyes on me, holding my body up with nothing but his hand around my throat, as he fucked me excruciatingly slowly with his fingers. Since I couldn't reach his other, I wrapped my hands around his left forearm instead. I gripped it hard as pleasure coursed through me. He smirked.

Tension thrummed inside me as he pushed me closer and closer to release. But it wasn't enough. It was just a little too slow. A little too gentle.

I once more tried to move my legs, to squeeze my thighs together so that his thumb would press harder against my clit, but the rod kept me mercilessly trapped with my legs spread wide open for him.

“Levi,” I pressed out between heavy breaths. “Harder.”

He studied every expression on my face, every pleading look in my eyes, for another few seconds as he continued torturing me. I dug my fingers into his muscled forearm. My eyes fluttered as he curled his fingers slightly on the way out before pushing them back in.

I was having trouble thinking straight as terrible tension pulsed inside my whole body.

“Levi,” I gasped again.

A satisfied smile curled his lips as he watched me tried to wiggle my hips.

Then he abruptly pulled his hand back from my pussy. I blinked at the sudden loss, but didn't even have time to protest, because right then, he released his grip on my throat as well.

Since I hadn't been prepared for it, I just fell back down on the bed. The mattress moved underneath me as I hit it back first. But before I could so much as draw in a surprised breath, Levi adjusted his position above me so that his hard cock brushed against my entrance instead.

A deep moan tore from my chest as he thrust inside me.

Bracing his arms on either side of me, he leaned forward and stole a possessive kiss from my lips. With his cock still sheathed deep inside me, he murmured against my mouth, “I love the way my name sounds on that sharp tongue of yours.”

Lightning skittered across my skin, and a warm sparkly feeling erupted inside me.

I drew my fingers through his silky black hair and then knitted them together behind his neck, holding him against me as I kissed him deeply.

He pulled his cock out and then shoved it in again, much more forcefully this time.

I moaned into his mouth.

While kissing his way across my jaw and down my neck, he set a savage pace as he thrust into me again. I released my grip on his neck and instead raked my fingers down his back as he nipped at my earlobe.

Pleasure surged through my soul.

I tried to wrap my legs around his waist, but they were still trapped by that stiff metal rod, so instead I just traced my fingers over Levi's sides, feeling his muscles shift underneath them as he continued fucking me hard enough to make the bed creak.

Tension swirled inside me, making my brain flicker with lights, as he pushed me closer to that sweet release with every thrust and every brush of his lips. I gasped as he kissed that spot between my neck and shoulder while he slammed deep inside me.

And release exploded through my body.

My inner walls tightened around his thick cock as he pounded into me while the orgasm crashed through my limbs. I gripped his biceps hard to steady myself. Moans dripped from my lips and pleasure thrummed through my very soul as I lost myself in the feeling of him. Of us.

A deep groan tore from his chest too as release hit him as well.

Fuck, I had missed this.

I had missed his hands on me. His lips on me. His cock inside me. I had missed the feeling of him taking control and dominating me in the way he knew I craved. Of his powerful body wringing every drop of pleasure from my soul until my heart was pounding so hard against my ribs that it almost shattered them.

I had missed him.

I had missed us.

But after everything that had happened, how could there ever be an *us* again?

CHAPTER 27



Last night had been a mistake. A terrible, terrible mistake. I had only sought Eve out to thank her for saving my people from execution. Nothing else. I was supposed to have just kissed her and told her thank you, so that she understood that I truly meant it, and then I was supposed to have just walked away.

But I hadn't.

Instead of just standing there, she had wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me back with such passion and desperation that every ounce of my self-control had evaporated. Just like that.

Forcing out a long breath, I slunk down the next street while shaking my head at my own stupidity. I should have just left. But one flick of her wrist, and I had thrown all caution to the wind and climbed into bed with her. Again.

It terrified me how much power that little spitfire had over me.

Laughter came from up ahead. I stopped at the edge of the alley, hidden in the shadows, as I swept my gaze over the street.

I hated having to sneak around in my own city. But I had too many enemies right now. Even with all of my battle mages back, I was still at a severe disadvantage. The other three Houses had apparently formed a fucking alliance to take me out, and White was still hell-bent on slaughtering everyone who worked for me. Plus the damn white boots would be out

for blood too now. My people had escaped from their secure prison, making them all look like fools, and they would never let that stand, which meant that they would be launching an attack on the south side sooner rather than later.

Once I had made sure that none of my countless enemies were moving through this particular street right now, I stepped out of the shadows and walked straight up to Maggie's booth.

The mouth-watering scent of fried chicken and spices hung in the air as she handed two *stekta* to the man in front of me. He thanked her and then drifted down the street. I stepped up to the small wooden counter.

Since Maggie had sent word and asked me to meet her, she didn't look the least bit surprised to find me leaning an arm on the counter and looking at her with raised eyebrows.

Her sharp blue eyes took in the street around us for a second. Apparently satisfied that no one was close enough to eavesdrop, she said, "I have the information you're looking for."

Even though I had been expecting, *hoping*, that she would say that, it still made my heart lurch in my chest. "You've found the location of another healer?"

"Yes."

Her gray hair rippled around her face as she reached into her apron and slid out a piece of paper. With a casual look on her face, she expertly handed me the paper in a way that wouldn't be spotted by the people walking the street behind me.

Keeping my back to them, I quickly flipped it open and read the words written on it.

The healer she had found was apparently a man in his forties, and he lived in one of the cities by the coast.

I flicked my gaze back up and met Maggie's eyes. "How reliable is this information?"

"Very." To her credit, she didn't look at all insulted by the question. "I had it verified twice before contacting you."

My eyebrows rose in silent question.

She shrugged. "I like Gemma."

And Gemma's life depended on the accuracy of this information. With a nod, I slipped the paper into one of my pockets. I was just about to open my mouth and thank her for a job well done when she stunned me by pulling out a large stack of money from behind her counter. As she set it down on the wooden surface right in front of me, I realized that it was the exact same amount that I had paid her earlier.

"What's this?" I asked.

There was a serious expression on her face as she replied, "I've decided that I don't want money in exchange for this information."

"Then what *do* you want?"

"I want to be able to continue plying my trade freely."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "I already told you that I won't take any extra dues for what you make from this."

"I know. But that is not the same thing as a promise that I will be allowed to continue to do this."

A smile tugged at my lips. *Smart woman.*

"And I know that you actually do keep your promises," she went on. "So as payment, I would like your word that this part of my business will not be shut down."

"Changing the terms of the deal after it has already been struck?" I arched an eyebrow at her. "Not a very polite way to do business."

"I'm aware. Which is why I gave you the information you wanted first. You can walk away with that now, without accepting my request, and the original deal we made would still be fulfilled." She cocked her head, her blue eyes studying me intently. "But if you were to accept this adjustment of our original deal, I would be most grateful."

Normally I despised people who didn't hold up their end of the bargain, or who tried to renegotiate terms after the deal

had already been struck. If Maggie had tried to change the price *before* giving me the information, I would have broken our deal in two seconds flat and probably killed her too. But she hadn't. She had given me what I wanted and then *asked for*, not demanded, a different type of payment. I appreciated that. It showed that she had honor, and I respected people who kept their word.

"I accept the change of terms," I said.

A brief hint of surprise flickered in her eyes, as if she hadn't really expected that kind of generosity from me. But she recovered quickly, and cleared her throat before saying, "May I ask you to say it out loud?"

"I give you my word that you will be allowed to continue selling information without fear of being shut down by me or anyone who works for me."

Relief blew across her wrinkled face, and a genuine smile appeared on her lips as she gave me a grateful nod. "Thank you."

"But if you ever sell information about *me* to someone else..."

"I never sell information about my own clients." A knowing glint shone in her eyes as she flashed me a grin. "But you already knew that. Otherwise, you would never have approached me in the first place."

I chuckled and tilted my head in an acknowledging nod. She sure was a shrewd one.

Since our business was now complete, I took a step back from the counter and gave her a nod in goodbye.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Maggie asked, and shot a pointed look down at the counter.

I deliberately looked down at the stack of money still sitting there before shifting my attention back to the old lady again and shaking my head. "Nope."

The smile on her lips grew. Reaching out, she scooped up the money and slipped it into her apron pocket. Then she met

my gaze and bowed her head. “I like how you do business, King of Metal. Come back anytime.”

With one last nod, I turned around and disappeared back into the shadows of the nearest alley.

That kind of money was nothing to me. But being on good terms with someone like Maggie might mean the difference between life and death someday.

CHAPTER 28



“This is unacceptable!”

The words tore through the meeting room with enough force to make the other Junior Constables flinch. Around the table, where I should have been sitting too, Captain Smith and the Senior Constables just looked back at Chief Anderson with stoic expression on their faces.

“It has been two days,” Chief continued, his stern voice slicing through the air like a blade. “Two days. And you’re telling me that we still don’t have a clue how they got out of their cells?”

“No, Chief,” Ulric replied.

“Those prisoners were *your* responsibility, Smith.”

“Yes, Chief.”

Guilt twisted inside my stomach like cold snakes. From where I stood by the wall, I studied Chief Anderson and Captain Smith. Chief’s gray hair that normally was always perfectly slicked back now looked disheveled, and his blue eyes were crackling with anger and frustration. The scar on his jaw looked tighter than usual.

Ulric, on the other hand, looked like he always did. Calm. Collected. Humbly taking the blame for everything that had gone wrong. Taking the blame for what *I* had done.

“I was summoned before the parliament,” Chief Anderson growled. “*Summoned*. As if I’m some kind of dog.”

Tension pulsed through the air, but no one dared to say anything. In fact, I wasn't even sure if some of the Junior Constables dared to breathe.

“And I had to explain to them that the prisoners, who were the only people that we had captured after a nine-month-long undercover operation failed, had now escaped as well. How do you think that was received by those paper-pushers in parliament?”

“Not well?” Jamila said, her voice soft and her dark eyes hesitant.

“Not well is the understatement of the decade! They threatened to cut our funding. Because, and I quote, if you cannot even make sure that your prisoners don't escape from right underneath *your own* building, then why should parliament continue to invest in the constable force?”

It took all of my self-control not to close my eyes and cringe. Our whole department was getting punished for a decision that I alone had made. *I* had decided to let Levi walk, multiple times now. And *I* had decided to free his people. If parliament cut funding for the constable force, we would be stretched even thinner than we already were.

“We need a show of force now to save face,” he continued.

Frank furrowed his pale brows. “What does that mean?”

“It means that we will be launching a full-scale attack on the south side.”

Shock flashed across everyone's faces, and several people by the table sat back in their chairs and blinked in stunned confusion.

“A full-scale attack?” Jamila said. “I thought we had agreed that it was too risky. That we couldn't win if—”

“Enough! No buts. No ifs.” Raising his arm, he stabbed a hand towards the door. “Now, get out and start figuring out a plan to make it happen. A plan that will make it succeed.”

“Yes, Chief,” the whole room murmured.

Chairs scraped against the floor as everyone at the table hurried out of their seats and towards the door. Those of us by the wall waited for our seniors to leave first.

“Smith,” Chief Anderson said before Ulric could take so much as a single step towards the door. “Stay.”

Captain Smith nodded. Claspings his hands behind his back, he remained standing next to his chair while everyone else filed out the door.

I cast a worried glance between them. Anger was no longer flashed in Chief’s eyes. Instead, he just looked weary. Whatever was going to be discussed in this room was not something that he wanted to get into. I desperately wanted to stay and find out exactly what that was, but everyone else had already disappeared now, so I forced myself to follow them out the door and close it behind me.

But worry still flitted through my chest like restless butterflies, so I hung back in the corridor outside. Crossing my arms, I leaned against the wall halfway down the hall so I would be able to catch Ulric as soon as he left and ask him about what had happened, while also making sure that it wouldn’t look like I was trying to eavesdrop or anything.

Time stretched on. First one minute. Then two. When we had reached what felt like at least five minutes, the door handle was at last pushed downwards.

I straightened from the wall and let my arms drop back down to my sides right before Ulric stepped out into the corridor.

Panic shot through me.

He hadn’t seen me yet, so he didn’t know that he was being watched, and therefore wasn’t hiding his emotions the way he usually was.

My mind went completely blank as I stared at him.

Sorrow hung over his shoulders like a heavy blanket, making them droop slightly. And his eyes gleamed with unshed tears. *Tears*. In all my time with him, I had never once seen Captain Ulric Smith cry.

Then his brown eyes found mine, and he wiped all traces of emotion off his features. While straightening his posture, he blinked away the tears in his eyes and instead donned a smile.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were waiting for me,” he said as he moved closer.

“What happened?” I asked, still studying him intently.

He shrugged. “Politics.”

“Ulric.” I held his gaze, and when he tried to walk past me, I reached out and grabbed his arm, stopping him and turning him back to face me. “What happened?”

He glanced down the hall, as if trying to decide whether to tell me now or to make me wait until he informed the entire department of whatever it was that had just happened. Then he sighed and raked a hand through his brown hair.

“I’ve been forced into retirement.”

My heart stopped. For a few seconds, all I could do was stare at him. Then the words finally registered, and I rocked back as if he had slapped me. “What?”

“Parliament is pissed about the prisoners escaping, and they wanted someone to be punished for it.” He shrugged again. “Since I’m the head of the South Side Department, this mess was technically my responsibility. Chief did what he could, but in the end, they decided that it was time for me to retire.”

“I...”

Placing his hands on my shoulders, he gave me a comforting smile. “It’s alright, kiddo. I’m starting to get old anyway.”

“But... But they can’t do this! It wasn’t your fault!” I protested. Whipping my head towards Chief’s door, I started to take a step towards it. “I’ll—”

“Eve.” Ulric squeezed my shoulders, holding me firmly in place so that I couldn’t storm down the hall. With his sad brown eyes on me, he shook his head. “There’s nothing you can do. The decision has been made. It’s already done. A new

captain will be transferred here from another department tomorrow morning.”

“But...” The word sounded so pathetic and helpless in my mouth.

“Cheer up, kiddo.” He patted me on the cheek before withdrawing. “It’s not your fault.”

Oh but it was. It was all my fault.

Guilt and regret carved through my chest like hot knives. Searing my flesh and tearing my soul to pieces.

Ulric was being forced into retirement. The man who had acted like an uncle to me ever since my father was killed. The man who had encouraged me to become a constable. The man who had mentored me all throughout the application process and the testing and the training and then every day once I had at last joined the force.

And now, he was being punished because I had chosen a dark mage over him. Over my colleagues. Over my duty. My job. Everything that my father would have wanted me to stand for. I had thrown all of that away, because my stupid heart had fallen for the enemy.

I had betrayed them all before. I had ruined a nine-month-long mission and let Levi escape because my heart had bled at just the thought of watching him get captured and locked in a cell. I had fucked Levi while my colleagues were out risking their lives to protect people from dark mages because my treacherous body had craved his touch. And now, I had freed all of Levi’s people from our prison just because I couldn’t stand to watch him get hurt anymore.

I had made those choices, thinking that they were mine and mine alone. But actions have consequences. And this time, I hadn’t been the one to suffer them.

Ulric, the man who above all others had always been kind to me and looked out for me, had now been forced into retirement.

And it was all my fault.

CHAPTER 29



Afternoon winds swept across the grasslands, bringing with them the scent of wet soil and fallen leaves. I had been standing there for hours already, and my mood was worsening with every passing minute. Coldness seeped into my bones, but I remained where I was. I had no other way to contact White, so all I could do was wait for him to show up at the location he had specified.

At last, a tall man with pale blond hair appeared out of thin air. There was a bored expression on Christian White's face as he swept his gaze over the flat stretch of grass. Then his eyes found mine, and surprise flashed across his features. He hadn't expected to actually find me here.

Then he blinked, and all traces of surprise disappeared from his face. A cocky smirk took its place as he looked me up and down. "So, you've finally come to surrender, King of Metal?"

"No." I held his gaze with hard eyes while fighting down the impulse to hurl a metal spear at his smirking face. "I've come to make a deal."

"I don't make deals. I accept surrender and claim my spoils of war."

Curling my hand into a fist, I suppressed another incredibly strong urge to bash his fucking face in. If he had been anything other than a bloody worldwalker, I would have done it. But if I attacked him now, it would only end with me

bleeding out on the grass. Forcing out a breath, I flexed my fingers.

“I think you’ll want to make *this* deal,” I said instead, keeping my tone level.

For a few seconds, he didn’t reply. He just cocked his head and studied me, as if trying to figure out if this was some kind of trap. Curiosity gleamed in his pale blue eyes.

“Well, let’s hear it then,” he said at last.

“I have found the location of another healer.”

He blinked, the only thing that betrayed his surprise. “Another healer?”

“Yes. And I am willing to trade that information in exchange for you leaving *my* healer alone.”

A thick white cloud blew across the sun, blocking it out and casting the grasslands in gray shadows. Complete silence hung over the area. We were far enough away from the gate that no one could see or hear us, which meant that we couldn’t see or hear anyone bustling in and out of Malgrave either.

“Why would I agree to that trade?” White asked at last, narrowing his eyes at me. “When I can just take *your* healer? I’m here now. So why would I bother chasing down another one?”

“But you can’t just *take* my healer, can you?” A vicious smile curled my lips as I stared him down. “You can’t even find her. So you have to spend every day looking for my other people, and then try to kill them, and all the while hoping that it will be the thing that breaks me and makes me give her up.” I spread my arms wide and raised my chin in a cocky gesture. “Does it look like I’m going to break anytime soon?”

Anger flickered in his eyes. “Tread carefully.”

“People like us don’t tread carefully. It’s one of the reasons why we have been able to accumulate so much power. Another reason is because we make choices that benefit us instead of just charging forward like a dumb rage-filled bull.” I cocked my head. “So, are you going to think about this strategically

and make a deal that benefits us both? Or would you like us to keep wasting both of our time with useless fighting?”

He clenched his jaw. My pulse thrummed in my ears as I watched him, studying every move he made to try to anticipate his response. He flexed his hands, as if fighting the urge to attack me. Then, with what looked like great difficulty, he forced out a breath.

“I’m listening,” he ground out between gritted teeth.

“The deal is this,” I began. “I will give you the location of that other healer right here today. I assume you will need a few days to check it out and make sure that the information is indeed accurate. Once you have verified that I was telling the truth, which I am, you will come back and tell me that the deal is done. Then you will leave. Because your side of this bargain is this... In exchange for this information, you will leave my healer, and the rest of my people, and my *city* alone. Go back to whatever city you came from and do whatever you want, but your business in Malgrave is done once you have verified that the information about the second healer is correct.”

He bared his teeth at me. “Malgrave smells like cheap perfume, spilled alcohol, and piss. I can barely stomach the brief visits I make every day to kill your people. Why would I want to stay here longer than necessary?”

“So, do we have a deal then?”

“Yes, we have a deal.”

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the paper that I had gotten from Maggie and tossed it on the ground in front of White. A sharp glint crept into his eyes, but he crouched down and picked it up. After unfolding it, he scanned the text written there.

“On the coast, huh?” he said. Then he looked up to meet my gaze while sliding the paper into his own pocket. “I thought they were all just uncultured idiots who don’t even know how to develop their magic.”

“So did I. Which is apparently why it was the perfect spot for a healer to hide.”

“Hm.”

I saw him brush his hands together, but I was still too slow.

Cold steel bit into my throat as White disappeared and then reappeared behind me. My hands were just inches away from touching, but White pressed his knife harder against my skin, forcing me to stop moving.

“I’ve heard that you’re a man who always keeps his word and follows through on his side of the bargain,” he said from behind, speaking the words in a dark voice brimming with threats. “And for your sake, I hope that’s true. Because if I find out that this is a trick, that you’ve just sent me on a wild goose chase in order to get me out of the city for a few days, I will bring my entire army down from the north and wipe your whole fucking city off the map. Got it?”

My first instinct was to snort and reply, *come try it*. But I managed to stop myself and instead said, “I’ve already told you that the information is accurate.”

“It had better be.”

Before I could tell him to get his blade the hell away from my throat, he snatched it back and then worldwalked out. I ran a hand over my throat, but luckily for him, the bastard hadn’t pressed deep enough to break the skin.

Blowing out a long breath, I turned around and started back towards the gate.

That had gone as well as could be expected. And now, I had bought my people a few days in which they would not be hunted down and slaughtered by a worldwalker. And once White came back, that would become permanent. He would have another healer to kidnap and I could finally send word to Gemma and get her back to Malgrave.

With my healer back in town, all my battle mages out of prison, and my people safe from the threat White posed, I would finally be able to concentrate on my real mission. Wiping out the House of Onyx, Stone, and Lightning, and taking control of the whole south side.

A smile spread across my face as I strode back towards the city. *My* city.

Things were finally starting to go my way.

CHAPTER 30



Old slimy guilt crawled up my throat until I thought I was going to vomit. It was joined by a searing sense of regret that wrapped around my chest like blazing bands of metal, squeezing my ribcage so tightly that I couldn't breathe. The combined emotions were so terrible that I wanted to shove a hand into my chest and rip my own heart out so that I wouldn't have to feel anything ever again.

But I couldn't do that. So I did the only thing I could. I tried to drown the feelings in copious amounts of alcohol.

Light glinted in the glass as I spun it on the scratched tabletop. Inside, the amber liquid sloshed up the edges. I could feel two guys watching me curiously from the table next to me, but I couldn't muster enough energy to care. Instead, I downed the rest of the whiskey and then signaled for another one.

The alcohol burned on its way down my throat, but it still wasn't enough to numb the pain.

Ulric had been forced out of the job he loved, the job he had dedicated his entire life to, because of me. He had helped me, pushed me, trained me, to become a constable. And this was how I repaid him? By freeing a bunch of dangerous dark mages. By *falling for* a dark mage. Fuck, I was the worst sort of scum on this entire continent.

Pain stabbed through my chest.

What would my father have said? He had been killed by dark mages, and here I was, helping them. And as always,

good people like him and Ulric paid the price.

Burying my face in my hands, I tried to suck in a breath but I could barely get any air past the horrible pressure on my chest. A flash of panic shot through me when I couldn't get enough oxygen. I raked my fingers through my hair and gripped it tightly as I tried again. Only a shallow breath made it into my lungs.

"You alright?" the barkeeper asked as he set down my requested glass of whiskey.

I let my hands drop down from my hair and straightened while pressing out, "Fine."

He hovered there for another second, holding my empty glass in one hand and watching me with concerned eyes, but then he simply nodded and drifted back to the bar. I immediately grabbed my new glass and gulped down half of it. That oily feeling of guilt blocked my throat, but I managed to swallow the burning liquid anyway.

All around me, people talked and laughed and drank in the packed tavern. The noise of it vibrated through the warm air. I flicked a quick glance at the tables closest to me.

I knew that I was being stupid. Coming here, to the south side, was dangerous. I had changed into normal clothes, but after everything that had gone down this past month, there was still a risk that someone might recognize me.

But I couldn't get what I needed on the north side. In the restaurants there, people drank moderately while they chatted in a civilized way. I didn't want to drink moderately. Or be civilized. I wanted to get wasted and forget about the terrible guilt and regret that threatened to crush me.

The two men from the table next to me were still watching me with curious eyes. Uneasiness slithered through my chest. Knocking back the rest of the alcohol, I abruptly pushed to my feet.

That was a mistake. The sudden move made my head spin. Throwing out a hand, I gripped the edge of the table to steady myself while the tavern swayed around me.

“Hey, do you need any help?” one of the guys asked.

I barely managed to stop myself from shaking my head, since I was pretty sure that it would just make the room spin again, and instead pressed out, “No.”

Once the tavern had righted itself around me, I started towards the door without a second look back. As I pushed my way through the throng and out into the street, the warm air was replaced by chilly night winds.

Blue and green light from the colored oil lamps above shifted across the stones as another wind swept through the street. For a while, I just stood there in the middle of the road. My legs felt unsteady, but my mind still wasn't as blank as I wanted it to be.

The memory of Ulric's drooping shoulders and tear-filled eyes flashed across my vision. My throat closed up in response, and I tried to swallow down the lump that was now blocking it too. Guilt pressed down on my chest like a boulder.

Before I even knew what I was doing, I strode straight for the pale blue door on the other side of the street. If alcohol couldn't numb the pain inside me, I needed something else.

Two minutes later, I walked back out into the street with a pipe full of dreamcore in my hand. I should probably have felt even worse about the fact that dreamcore, and all the other drugs sold behind the blue doors, were made by dark mages. But I didn't care. Dreamcore let people dream with their eyes open, and they always dreamed about wonderful things. And I desperately needed that right now.

Stopping outside the shop, I held the pipe to my lips and drew in a deep breath. Smoke that tasted sweet, almost like red apples, filled my lungs.

Once again, I knew that I was being stupid. I wouldn't get paid at all for the next three months, so money was bound to get tight soon, which was why I shouldn't be wasting it on things like dreamcore. But who cared?

For another few seconds, I just stood there by the wall. I didn't usually partake in drugs like this, so I had no idea how

quickly it was supposed to work. Glancing down at the pipe in my hand, I wondered whether I needed more for it to work.

Then a light appeared in the corner of my eye.

I spun towards it. A warm sparkly feeling spread through my chest as I looked at the glittering ball of pink light that hung in the air. Stuffing the pipe into my pocket, I instead reached up to pet it.

“Hi,” I said.

But before my hand could touch the light, it zipped down the street.

“Wait!” I called, and raced after it.

It disappeared down into the alley on the left. My legs were unsteady so I couldn’t run as straight as I had planned, but I eventually managed to reach the corner that the light had disappeared around.

My jaw dropped as I staggered into the same alley.

An entire forest of colorful, glowing trees and plants filled the whole street. Gaping in astonishment, I wandered into it.

Twisting trees in red and purple lined the walls, and below them were countless flowers in shapes and colors that I had never seen before. I ran my hand over a massive yellow flower with a glittering pink center.

“Wow,” I breathed.

The whole alley pulsed with light and warmth. Just being there, amid all the glittering flowers and swaying leaves, filled my whole soul with the same sparkly warmth that the forest exuded. A sense of calm wrapped around me like a cozy blanket.

With a wide smile on my face, I spread my arms and spun around in the incredible land I had stumbled into. I could stay here forever.

Time lost all meaning as I just wandered through the forest, gently stroking the beautiful plants and just basking in

the light. It could have been minutes or days since I found them, but I realized that I didn't really care.

“Eve?”

I blinked, wondering where the unexpected voice had come from. Then I shook my head. It didn't matter. I spread my arms and spun around in the glittering woods again. *This* was all that mattered.

Air escaped my lungs as I slammed into something hard. Stumbling a step back, I blinked and looked up at the thing that I had twirled right into.

Levi Arden stared down at me with a deep frown on his face.

“Levi!” I said, my soul still thrumming with joy. Flapping my arms, I motioned at the breathtaking plant life around us. “Have you seen this? Isn't it incredible?”

His frown deepened as he swept a quick glance around the area. “Seen what?”

I laughed. How silly he was being, pretending that he couldn't see the spectacular forest around us. Swatting his chest with the back of my hand, I giggled and then said, “You're funny.”

He grabbed my wrist. Holding it in a firm grip, he stared down at me with such a serious expression that I laughed again. Then I pulled my hand back. Or tried to. He didn't release my wrist, so it didn't work.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he demanded.

I tried to pull out of his grip again, but the movement made my unsteady legs wobble, and I stumbled sideways instead.

A clattering sound filled the air as something slipped from my pocket and landed on the stones. I glanced down at it. It was a pale pipe. Where had I seen that before?

Finally releasing my wrist, Levi bent down and picked it up. His gray eyes were wide with shock, for some reason, as he stared between the pipe and me.

“Fucking hell, spitfire. You’ve been smoking dreamcore.”

It hadn’t sounded like a question, but it must have been, so I giggled and then answered, “No.”

“Eve,” he said, and reached for me.

I danced back and out of his reach. But the move made me trip, and I stumbled sideways a few steps before my shoulder hit the wall of the building. It didn’t hurt though. Placing a hand on the wall, I began to push myself off it.

Confusion drifted through me as I looked at my arm. There was a purple tree where I was bracing myself on the wall, and my entire forearm had just gone right through it. I blinked. Turning slowly, I looked at the rest of the plants. They flickered erratically.

I blinked again.

Then they were gone.

Reality crashed back into me as the last of the dreamcore disappeared from my system. And with it came the crushing guilt and regret and the copious amounts of alcohol I had consumed.

My legs buckled and I slid down along the wall until I was sitting on the street. All those terrible emotions washed over me again, and they felt even stronger now in comparison to how good it had felt when I was high on dreamcore. I sucked in a strangled breath and was horrified to hear a sob escape my throat.

That broke the dam.

Tears welled up in my eyes and flowed down my cheeks like an unstoppable flood. Pulling my knees up to my chest, I wrapped my arms around my legs and hugged them tightly while I bawled my eyes out.

Levi dropped to his knees in front of me. The worry and concern in his eyes as he searched my face just made me cry harder. Reaching forward, he cupped my cheeks.

“It’s alright, spitfire,” he said, his voice soft. “You’re alright. You’re just drunk and coming down from a high. It

will pass.”

“No, it won’t,” I sobbed, tears still streaming down my face. “It’s all my fault. I ruined everything. I’m a horrible person and I don’t deserve to be happy.”

Pain flickered in his eyes. Dropping his hands from my face, he shifted so that he was sitting with his back to the wall instead, and then reached out and pulled me onto his lap. His strong arms wrapped around my shaking body, holding me close to his chest as he rested his chin on top of my head.

“Yes, you do,” he whispered, so softly that I almost couldn’t hear him. “You deserve all the happiness in the world.”

He just held me like that while I continued crying into his leather armor until there were no more tears left inside me. And then he kept holding me after that too.

Once my chest was no longer heaving, and the tears had dried into salty streaks on my face, Levi at last pushed to his feet. But he kept his arms around me, pulling me up with him. Then he released me.

I had nothing left, not one ounce of strength left in my entire body, and I was still blackout wasted, so my legs just buckled again.

Levi’s hands shot down, grabbing me before I could hit the ground.

“Fucking hell, spitfire,” he said as he pulled me upright. His eyes swept over me, assessing. “How much have you had to drink?”

“About half a bottle of whiskey,” I mumbled. “Or maybe two thirds.”

“By all hell.”

My stomach lurched as Levi bent down and lifted me into his arms. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around his neck. He started down the street.

“Come on,” he said, not sounding strained in the slightest even though he was carrying my entire body weight. “I’ll take

you somewhere safe until you've sobered up enough to go home. Can't have you passing out and lying defenseless in an alley for someone to take advantage."

I rested my cheek against his hard chest. Exhaustion washed over me, threatening to pull me into its dark depths. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

For a few seconds, I didn't answer. Just lay there in his arms as he carried me down the street. Then I managed to whisper, "Everything."

I could feel Levi glancing down at me. But before I could hear his reply, I was dragged into a deep and dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 31



“We need to always have at least one battle mage with the lookouts here,” I pointed towards a building on my metal map, “here, and here,” I finished as I shifted my hand towards two more buildings.

Around the table, Tyler, Chris, and Shinji studied the map intently while nodding. “Yes, sir.”

“What about the area around the Black Rose?” Tyler asked, motioning towards the neighborhood around the cabaret that was under my protection. “If the House of Stone decides to make another move, they will start by trying to take over that area.”

I ran a hand over my jaw while considering. “I know. But we can’t spare the manpower. Since Onyx and Lightning have apparently negotiated a ceasefire, we can no longer count on them keeping each other busy. Both of them will set their sights on me now, which means that we can’t spread ourselves too thin.”

“They’ve really formed an alliance? All three of them?”

“Yes.”

Chris blew out a long sigh and shook his head while looking between me and Shinji. “I can’t believe you’ve managed to keep them back while also dealing with a worldwalker, and while also trying to break us out at the same time.”

“It has... not been easy,” Shinji replied carefully.

“And we’re not in the clear yet,” I said. “Which is why—”

“Sir,” a voice came from the open door to my strategy room.

We all turned around to find Anna standing there on the threshold, gulping down air as if she had sprinted far.

“Ralph and two more of the civilians who were hiding us are on their way to the Court,” she said between breaths.

Since White was no longer a threat, I had been able to bring back all of the people who had been hiding with the civilian volunteers, which meant that my runners were finally able to carry information back and forth across the city again. And thank hell for that, because otherwise I would never have known that Eve was stumbling around an alley last night, drunk and high out of her mind.

My gaze drifted in the direction of the room farther down where she was still sleeping it off.

Then I forced my attention back to Anna and nodded. “Alright. Show them into the throne room.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied before taking off down the corridor again.

Brushing my hands together, I smoothed over the markings on the buildings again so that no one would be able to read the map without my permission. Then I jerked my chin at my three elite mages. “Come on.”

They followed me out the door and into the black and gold corridor beyond without hesitation. As we left my private wing, I glanced at the closed door to Eve’s room. Pain shot through me at the memory of what she had looked like last night.

I had never seen her cry like that. Never seen her look so... devastated. But part of me was furious with her too. First getting wasted and then smoking dreamcore on top of that? What the hell had she been thinking? And all alone too. What if my runners hadn’t spotted her? What if I hadn’t been the one who showed up? She would never have been able to defend herself if it had been anyone else.

But as I stalked down the stairs and through the halls towards my throne room, the anger died again as those broken words she had sobbed echoed through my mind. *I'm a horrible person and I don't deserve to be happy.*

What the hell had happened yesterday that drove her to this? Had they found out that she was the one who had freed my people? Had she been punished for it?

Before I could get lost in that tangled web of thoughts, we reached my throne room. All of my other battle mages turned towards me and bowed their heads in a show of respect. Since I didn't know when the next fight would come, I kept them all here and ready at a moment's notice. After sweeping my gaze over them, I signaled to the ones at the door.

A few seconds later, the doors were opened to reveal Ralph and two more people. They looked around nervously as Anna motioned for them to step inside. I walked forward to meet them while they carefully moved across the threshold. Shinji, Tyler, and Chris flanked me, but stayed a couple of steps behind.

"Ralph," I said, meeting the restaurant owner's nervous gray eyes.

"Mr. Arden," he replied as the three of them closed the final distance and then stopped a few steps in front of us.

"What brings you here?"

He fiddled with the button on his shirt sleeve while his gaze flitted around my throne room again, as if he felt intimidated by the massive throne and the high ceiling and all the chains that hung across it. Which was of course the exact reason why I had designed this room to look like that. I wanted people to be intimidated by my power.

Or perhaps he was simply intimidated by the sheer number of dark mages that filled the room. Regardless, the result was the same.

Then he stopped fiddling and stood up straighter. Blowing out a bracing breath, he met my gaze head on. "We've come to warn you."

Surprise flickered through me, and I raised my eyebrows. “About what?”

He motioned towards one of his companions. It was a man in his thirties, with matted brown hair and brown eyes that pulsed with worry.

“I, uhm,” the man began, meeting my gaze with those uncertain eyes. “I own a tavern on territory that belongs to the House of Lightning. And I overheard some of Mr. Bale’s men talking about... well, about an attack.”

My interest sharpened. “What kind of attack?”

“On you, sir. It sounded like the House of Lightning has joined forces with both the House of Stone and Onyx because they were talking about a joint attack on your Court.”

“When?”

“In the next few days.”

Fuck. It took all of my self-control to stop myself from growling that and instead say, “Thank you for the information.”

He nodded and then moved back half a step before glancing over at Ralph.

The restaurant owner just held my gaze as he said, “That’s not all.”

Breaking eye contact, he motioned towards his second companion. The woman was wearing a well-cut blue dress, and she looked a lot less scared than the other guy had been.

“My husband works on the north side,” she said, meeting my gaze. “And that whole side has been in an uproar since your people...” She glanced at the mass of dark mages all around her before finishing with, “Escaped.”

“Go on.”

“The parliament is furious with the constables for letting the prisoners escape. And now, to save face, they’re planning a full-scale attack on the south side.”

“When?”

If she answered, *in the next few days*, I was going to scream.

But she didn't.

Instead, she replied, "Soon."

Which was just as bad. But I thankfully managed to suppress the urge to hurl a metal sheet at the wall just to hear the satisfying bang it would create.

Instead, I narrowed my eyes at her and then Ralph asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

She blinked in surprise, and then both of them looked towards Ralph. He also stared at me in confusion.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Warning me about the attack from the other Houses, I can understand. Or at least I can now after you've told me that you prefer to be ruled by me rather than the other dark mages." I cocked my head. "But why warn me about an attack from the white boots? You don't like dark mages. Don't you want the constables to sweep in and bring law and order to the south side?"

The three of them exchanged what could only be described as a guilty look.

Ralph cleared his throat a bit self-consciously. "It's true that we are not particularly fond of dark mages." His gray eyes flitted across the four of us. "No offense."

"But...?" I prompted.

"But we kind of don't want the north side to reclaim the south."

I raised my eyebrows.

"We don't want them to impose their... morality on us." He grimaced and then shrugged. "We like the freedom here. The... sinful side of it."

A soft chuckle escaped my throat. "I see. We'll make sure to keep it that way then." I inclined my head. "Thank you for the information."

All three of them bowed their heads before turning and disappearing back out the doors.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Chris commented.

“Not really,” Shinji replied. “You should have seen them when they volunteered to hide everyone from the worldwalker.”

On my other side, Tyler shrugged. “Regardless, it makes our job easier.”

Before anyone else could say something, one of the side doors opened and closed. I turned towards it. As did everyone else. Unnatural silence descended on the room full of dark mages as Eve Sterling walked into the throne room.

Her gaze flitted quickly across the crowd before she started towards me. My battle mages moved too. As one, they began drifting closer to her. To us. But Eve didn't comment on it as she stopped in front of me.

“Thanks for...” She trailed off for a few seconds before finishing with, “Last night.”

“Yeah.” I studied her face, trying to read the emotions in her eyes. But as opposed to last night, her features now betrayed nothing. So I asked, “What happened yesterday?”

She brushed her hands down her now slightly ruffled black and red leather outfit before clearing her throat. “My mentor was forced into retirement because I freed your people.”

Alarm shot through me. “They know it was you?”

“No. But my department was responsible for the prisoners. And my mentor was responsible for our department, so...” She trailed off and shrugged. Hesitation blew across her features for a few seconds. Then she charged on as if trying to get all the words out before she changed her mind. “They're planning a massive attack on the south side soon in retaliation. So just... be careful.”

“We—”

“I should go,” she interrupted. Indecision flickered in those warm brown eyes of hers. Then she straightened her spine and took a step towards the door. “Goodbye, Levi.”

But she only managed two steps before she realized that there was now an impenetrable ring of dark mages around her. Trailing to a halt, she looked around at them while her shoulders tensed.

“Eve,” Tyler said.

She turned towards him in surprise. I did too. This was not something that I had ordered, so I was very curious to see what they were doing.

“You freed us,” he said, his voice echoing between the metal walls. “You saved our lives when we were just days away from execution. And we’ve been told that you’ve also saved Levi’s life. More than once.”

“I, uhm...” She glanced around at them all again, confusion and hesitation on her features. “Well, yes.”

Clothes rustled as all of my previously captured dark mages bowed to her. Actually *bowed* to her.

Shock crackled across Eve’s face, and she stumbled a step back. With wide eyes, she stared at the men and women around her as if she couldn’t believe what was happening. To be fair, I barely could either.

“Thank you,” Tyler said, his head still bowed. Then he straightened and met her gaze again, holding it with serious eyes. “You might be a white boot, but you’re one of us now. And we take care of our own. If you ever need anything, just say the word.”

A smile pulled at my lips, but I forced myself not to show it.

From a few steps away, Eve was staring at Tyler with her mouth hanging open. Then she swept her gaze over the others, taking in the sincerity in their eyes as they gave her a nod to confirm that they meant what Tyler had said.

I kept my eyes on Eve, and I wondered what her friends on the north side were like. Wondered if they had never told Eve that they had her back.

Because as I looked at my usually so confident and collected spitfire, I swore that I could see tears glistening in her eyes.

CHAPTER 32



The silence inside the building was so thick that I could feel it pressing against my skin like cold mist. My colleagues watched me as I stepped across the threshold and moved towards my desk, but no one greeted me. In fact, no one said anything at all.

I knew that I was late. Our workday had started three hours ago, but at that point, I had still been sleeping off the alcohol and drugs in Levi's Court. I had briefly stopped by my house and changed into my white leather uniform, but I knew that I looked a mess. And I probably smelled like I had taken a bath in a tub of whiskey.

"Captain Wright wants to see you in his office," Jamila said in an emotionless voice.

"Sure, I'll just..." I trailed off as her words registered. Narrowing my eyes, I turned to meet her gaze head on. "Captain *Wright*?"

A hint of irritation flickered in her brown eyes as she replied, "Yes, Captain Wright."

Dread washed through my body like ice water. *Shit*. The new captain, the one who was taking over after Ulric, was due to start today. And I was three hours late. And smelled like alcohol.

"Alright," I said while swallowing down the growing trepidation. "I'll head over right now."

Gray light from the overcast sky filtered in through the windows and leached the color out of everything it touched. I stared down at my desk for another few seconds before drawing in a bracing breath and starting towards the captain's office. My colleagues tracked me with their eyes but said nothing, and I couldn't help but feel as if I was walking towards my own execution.

Shaking my head, I dispelled the silly notion. I wasn't a rookie anymore. I had worked for the constables for *years*, and I knew how to handle difficult conversations and smooth over delicate situations.

My hand drifted up to the ruby necklace I always wore, and I absentmindedly rolled the precious stone between my fingers as I closed the final distance to the captain's door. It was closed, so I released my necklace and then knocked.

"Who is it?" came a man's voice from inside.

"Eve Sterling," I replied.

A beat of silence. Then a single word was barked through the door like an order. "Come."

Forcing aside the flash of annoyance that shot through me, I pushed the handle down and opened the door.

Shock pulsed through my body as I stepped into the room.

Captain Wright had only been here three hours, but he had already cleaned out every trace of Ulric. All of his mementoes were gone, of course, but it was more than that. Where Ulric's comfortable mess had been, on the desk and shelves, there was now strict order. Everything, down to the last pen, was organized and straight. The documents on the desk were now stacked in a perfect pile. Not a single paper stuck out of it, as if the poor documents didn't dare to defy the authoritarian order that was now imposed upon them.

Blinking, I tried to recover from my surprise and instead shift my attention to the man seated behind the neat desk. But as soon as my gaze landed on him, another wave of shock washed over me.

He was young. Far too young to be a captain. Even though his features were set in a serious expression, it was clear that he was in his early thirties. At most.

I quickly ran my gaze over what I could see of his body from where he sat behind the desk. He had a lean and wiry build, and he looked to be a bit on the shorter side for a man. His brown hair was cropped close to his scalp, giving him a severe look, and his blue eyes were stern as they locked on me.

After closing the door behind me with a soft click, I straightened my spine and turned to face him. “You asked to see me?”

“You will address me as *Captain* or *sir*,” he snapped.

I wasn’t sure if it was because my head was throbbing from the wicked hangover I was still suffering from, or if my patience for arrogant assholes had simply finally run out, but I was suddenly glad that I wasn’t carrying my sword. Because if I had, I would’ve rammed it through his fucking chest.

Clenching my jaw, I forced down the impulse before amending it to, “You asked to see me, Captain?”

“Why do you think I asked to see you?” He shot a pointed look towards the small clock on one of the shelves. “You’re three hours and twenty-two minutes late.”

Since he had both asked and answered his own question, I saw no need to reply and instead just kept holding his gaze.

“I’m still waiting for an explanation, Sterling,” he bit out after another few seconds.

Instead of pointing out that he hadn’t actually asked for that, I drew in a calming breath that did very little to calm me down and said, “I apologize for my tardiness, Captain. I was devastated when Captain Smith told me that he had been forced into retirement for something that wasn’t his fault.”

“Wasn’t his fault? Of course it was his fault. He was responsible for this department and the prisoners in his cells. And he’s not *Captain* Smith anymore.” His blue eyes

sharpened. “And I’m still waiting for an explanation, Sterling.”

Anger roared inside me at the dismissive way he spoke of Ulric, but all I said was, “That is the explanation, Captain.”

He shot up from his seat. Contempt burned in his eyes as he rounded his impeccable desk and strode forward until he was standing only two strides away from me. Now that he was standing, my suspicions were confirmed. Captain Wright was a bit on the shorter side for a man. And since I was slightly taller than the average woman, it put me an inch above the captain’s height.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Sterling,” he said, his voice hard. “I don’t like you.”

I barely managed to stop myself from replying, *the feeling is mutual*.

He flicked his gaze up and down my body while a sneer twisted his lips. “I’ve heard about you. I know that you had some kind of relationship with Smith and that he gave you special treatment because of it.”

“That’s a lie,” I growled, fury surging up inside me. “I’ve earned my place here.”

“Have you? You screwed up a nine-month-long mission. You come and go as you please while everyone else works their asses off. You’re often late. You disappear for days when someone hurts your feelings. You’re mouthy and insubordinate.” Disgust blew across his face as he shot another pointed look down at my body. “And you stink of alcohol.”

It felt as if he had punched me in the gut. For a second, all I could do was stare back at him in stunned disbelief. Then my restraint snapped.

“Do you want to know why I stink of alcohol right now?” I leveled furious eyes on him. “You’re right. Ulric and I knew each other. He was my mentor. And he was forced into retirement for something that, despite what you say, was not his fault. And now you’re here.” Throwing out my arm, I stabbed a hand towards the sickeningly tidy desk. “Sitting in

his office. At his desk. He has dedicated his life to this department! And you think you can just waltz in here and take his place? You don't deserve to be here. You don't deserve to sit where he sat."

The guilt inside me, the one that kept reminding me that it was my fault that Wright was here instead of Ulric, stirred the flames of fury in my chest until I could barely breathe through the rage.

Anger flashed like lightning in Captain Wright's eyes as well. "You have just forfeited another month's worth of salary."

"Go ahead! It still doesn't change the fact that you will never be worthy of Ulric's seat."

His hands curled into fists, and he took a step closer as if trying to appear threatening. I almost laughed in his face. He was shorter than me, could only access the Great Current just like me, and he wasn't even carrying a blade. Just a few weeks ago, I had pulled a sword on the most dangerous dark mage in this entire city. I had attacked the King of Metal in his own throne room without hesitation just because he insulted my parents. Did Wright really think that anything he did could be the least bit intimidating after everything I had been through with Levi?

"One more word out of your mouth, and you will be demoted to archives duty," Captain Wright pressed out between gritted teeth.

I almost did it. I almost snapped something rude back into his face. But I was short-tempered, not stupid. My career would never recover if I was demoted to the archives. So instead of lashing out at the ridiculous man who was now supposed to be my superior, I closed my mouth with great effort and just glared at him in silence instead.

He held my gaze with hard eyes. "I will give you one chance to apologize for your behavior today. I suggest you take it seriously."

For a second, I couldn't convince myself to do it. To apologize to this rude, insecure, insufferable man. But deep inside, I knew that I had stepped out of line today. I had been angry not just at him, but also at myself. *Mostly* at myself. Because it was my fault that Wright was here and Ulric wasn't. And that guilt made me want to lash out and destroy everything around me.

So I swallowed my pride and took a small step back, showing Wright that I was not only figuratively but also literally backing down. Bowing my head slightly, I dropped my gaze to his boots.

"I'm sorry, Captain." Forcing the words out of my mouth was physically painful, but I kept going. "I sincerely apologize for my behavior today. I apologize for being tardy and rude and insubordinate. I was heartbroken over what happened to Ulric and I took it out on you. I'm sorry. It will never happen again."

"It had better not. I will not be giving you any special treatment the way Smith did. From this day forward, you will be treated just like every other *Junior* Constable."

I didn't trust myself to keep my tongue in check after the way he stressed the demotion I had already gotten, so I just jerked my chin down in a nod instead.

"Soon, we will launch an attack on the south side to once and for all deal with Levi Arden the way he should have been dealt with years ago." A threatening note crept into his voice. "And this time, there will be no mistakes. Is that clear, Sterling?"

Anger and worry and indecision tore through my soul like a raging storm. But in the end, I managed to press out the words that I knew Wright was waiting for.

"Yes, Captain."

CHAPTER 33



When I had returned to my Court after strengthening some buildings in preparation for the coming white boot invasion, my guards at the front door had handed me a note. A note from Christian White telling me to come to an abandoned building at the edge of the Entertainment District.

Rain poured down from the dark sky above, drumming on the roof tiles above and splashing against the cobblestones around my feet, as I made my way towards the indicated building. It was late evening, which meant that the Entertainment District should be filled with people. But because of the heavy rain, no one wanted to be out in the streets longer than necessary. Two women dashed across the road up ahead, their shoes splashing in the puddles as they hurried out of a yellow door and then into the red one across the street.

Sweeping my gaze around the area, I pushed my wet hair out of my face as I strode towards the next corner and then down another road that would take me to the meeting location.

I didn't like being summoned. In fact, if it had been anyone else, I would have killed them for the sheer audacity of trying to summon me. But I needed this business with White to be over and done with.

Dread curled around my spine as I thought about the battles looming on the horizon. Why did the other Houses have to form a fucking alliance? If they had just come at me one at a time, I would probably have been able to defeat them

now that I had my battle mages back. But all three of them together?

Another pulse of panic shot through me as I stalked down the street.

If all three of them attacked at the same time, the odds of me actually walking away from that fight were very low. And that was before we even added the fucking white boot invasion into the mix.

I shook my head. I needed a plan for how I was supposed to wipe out the other Houses without having to fight them head on. But my window of opportunity was closing. According to Ralph and his friends, the other Houses would be attacking any day now. I had considered infiltration and assassination, but there simply wasn't time to set a plan like that in motion.

Flexing my fingers, I turned down the final street while plans still swirled inside my head.

What if I got them alone somewhere? If I could convince Aaron, Connor, and Wilhelm to go somewhere alone with me, I might be able to kill them. Though, that was a huge *maybe*. All of them were extremely skilled, and the chances of winning a fight where they had me alone and outnumbered me three to one were miniscule at best. But still. There was still a chance. If they had their entire armies with them, my people would be slaughtered and I would probably get killed as well. But if I took them on alone, I *might* die but at least my people wouldn't follow me into the grave.

I ran a hand over my jaw as I reached the door and pushed the handle down.

The chances of actually walking away from a fight against three gang leaders were too small for me to consider it a good plan. I had to come up with something else. But for now, at least it was a back-up plan in case all else failed.

Water dripped from my armor and landed on the wooden floorboards as I made my way through the corridor and farther into the building. It was a regular house that had been

abandoned because the civilians in this neighborhood thought it was cursed. Three separate people had died in here, all by freak accidents, so no one dared to live here anymore.

Only empty rooms with a few pieces of broken furniture stared back at me when I glanced into the kitchen and then what I assumed must have been a bedroom.

“You sure took your time,” an annoyed voice cut through the air as I walked into the deserted living room.

I shot Christian White a nonchalant look as I strolled inside and stopped in the middle of the dusty floor. “I could say the same about you. It has been three days since I gave you the healer’s location.”

His pale blue eyes betrayed nothing as he watched me from a few strides away. I swept my gaze over his massive frame. His clothes were dry. Which meant that he had indeed been here a while. Or maybe he had just worldwalked here straight from his new hiding place and therefore never had to set foot outside?

“Didn’t fancy your usual meeting place out in the grasslands?” I said. “I thought you couldn’t stand the way Malgrave smells.”

He jerked his chin towards the windows where the rain kept pouring. “Didn’t feel like standing around in the rain to wait for your lazy ass.”

My fingers itched to draw my sword and ram it down his throat. But I managed to suppress the flash of anger, and instead ground out, “So, have you verified the information?”

“I have.”

“And?”

“And that healer is now waiting obediently for me in my castle up north.”

Relief flooded my entire chest. Finally. White had his healer, so now I could at last call Gemma back and concentrate all of my energy on how the hell I was supposed to survive a

combined attack from all three Houses as well as a white boot invasion. One less problem to worry about, at least.

“Good,” I said. “Then our business here is done.”

A cold smile spread across White’s face. “Not quite.”

The blood froze in my veins.

For a few seconds, the only sound was the rain lashing against the windows and the muted drops that dripped onto the floor from my clothes.

“What did you say?” I demanded at last.

He brushed a piece of imaginary dirt off his jacket. “Our business is not quite done.”

“Oh yes, it is. We made a deal. The location of the healer in exchange for you leaving my people and my city alone.”

“Except... you also killed three of my best warriors.”

“You’ve killed dozens of mine.”

“One of them was my cousin.”

“So?”

“I don’t know how you do things down here, but where I’m from, killing a blood relative requires vengeance.”

I squeezed my hand into a fist. “I don’t give a fuck. We made a deal.”

“And now, we’re making a new one.” His blue eyes were cold as ice as he held my stare. “You killed three of my best fighters, including my cousin. In exchange, you will hand over three of your top people for me to kill. *Then* we will be even.”

The faces of Shinji, Tyler, and Chris flashed before my eyes, and I blurted out, “No.”

“Either give me your three best fighters, or I will continue to slaughter your people indiscriminately.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“Come now, Arden, don’t be stupid. You must understand the situation you’re in, right?” His gaze hardened. “If you go

with option one, only three of your people will die. But if you choose option two, I will hunt down and kill every single person who works for you. Including those three that I asked for. The outcome for those three people won't change. Everyone else will just be dead too.”

Fury roared through my head, along with panic and fear. And with it, the insanity inside me stirred. I could feel it cracking an eye open. A beast waiting to swallow me and hide me in its dark depth while it raged across the land.

Grinding my teeth, I shifted my hands a little closer together.

The moment I moved, White did too. His body blinked out of existence, and a second later, he reappeared behind me. I had only turned halfway around when I felt the sharp edge of a blade against my throat.

“Careful now, dark mage king of Malgrave,” White growled in my ear. “I already have my healer, which means that the information you possessed has now become useless to me.” He pushed his knife harder against my throat. “And that means that only my honor is stopping me from killing you right here.”

“Honor?” I spat. “You have no fucking honor.”

He shoved the flat of the blade up against my chin, trying to tilt my head back. I refused to let him. So instead, he drew the edge of the blade lightly along my throat. A drop of blood trickled down my neck.

“Bring your three top people to this house the day after tomorrow,” he said, his voice low and dark. “Or I start slaughtering everyone. Your choice.”

Before I could curse him to hell, he yanked the blade away and then worldwalked out.

Slamming my palms together, I summoned a sheet of metal and hurled it at the discarded table by the wall. The metal crashed into it with a bang that reverberated through the air. Splinters and broken pieces exploded across the room as the metal cut through it.

“FUCK!” I screamed at the empty walls.

The rage whirling inside me begged me to summon another sheet of metal and hurl it at the windows just so that I could hear them shatter. But I desperately needed to save my strength, now more than ever, so I furiously raked my fingers through my hair instead. Tilting my head back, I stared up at the oil lamp in the ceiling and forced out a long breath.

Anger and panic and fear and desperation and sheer utter fucking exhaustion crashed into me with the force of a tidal wave. Staggering backwards, I hit the wall and then just slid down until I was sitting on the floor.

Bracing my elbows on my knees, I rested my forehead in my palms and stared down at the dirty floor beneath me.

I couldn't do this. I couldn't fight attacks on three fronts at the same time. Just surviving an attack from all three Houses was almost impossible. Doing that while also being hunted by the white boots was *actually* impossible. And add a worldwalker to that? Someone who could just assassinate every one of my people without breaking a sweat?

Curling my fingers in my hair, I pressed out a long breath. I could feel myself slipping farther into the madness, but I couldn't afford to lose myself now. I needed a plan. I needed to somehow find a way out of this death trap.

A thud rang out as I raised my head and instead tipped it back so that I was resting it against the wooden wall behind me.

Outside, the rain kept pelting the windows. Winds howled around the edges of the building like a pack of starving wolves.

Sitting there on the floor with my back against the wall, I tried to sift through the impossible choices I now had before me.

I couldn't send Chris, Tyler, and Shinji to this fucking house and let White slit their throats. I didn't *want to*.

But if I didn't do it, *all* of my people would be slaughtered.

CHAPTER 34



Captain Wright had only been in charge for two days, but he was already running the show like a bloody dictator.

We were reprimanded if we returned one minute late from lunch or if we used more paper than necessary when writing a report. He also made us stay extra late to prepare everything for the coming attack on the south side. Me in particular. In order to make up for all the times I had been tardy before, he said. So it was almost midnight by the time I trudged through the pouring rain and back to my home.

The house was dark and silent when I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. Brushing my palms together, I summoned some fire magic and sent it across the space to light the oil lamps. With a warm glow now making the house feel less desolate, I bent down and pulled off my boots.

Water dripped from the jacket of my white leather armor, so I pulled it off and hung it on the hook above the small carpet after I was done with my boots. Rolling my shoulders back, I yawned and then started towards the kitchen. After the day I'd had, I needed a glass of wine before I went to bed.

I rounded the corner and walked into the kitchen.

And nearly leaped out of my skin.

Lightning crackled around my hands as I jumped backwards, ready for an attack.

But then my eyes focused on the lethally handsome face that belonged to the muscular body sitting on one of my kitchen chairs.

“Fucking hell, Levi!” I blurted out, my heart still thrashing wildly in my chest. “You couldn’t have announced your presence by, I don’t know, clearing your throat or something?”

Amusement lurked at the corner of Levi’s lips as he cleared his throat.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “A bit late now, don’t you think?”

It looked like he wanted to chuckle, but he suppressed it and instead just nodded towards the lightning still crackling around my hands. “You going to shoot that at me?”

“Pour me a glass of wine and I might just let your little break-in slide this time.”

To my surprise, Levi actually got up from his seat and started towards the pale wooden cabinets above the counter behind him. I raised my eyebrows and let the lightning fade out as I watched while he opened two of them before finding some glasses.

Snapping out of my stupor, I walked over to the table and sat down while saying, “Third one on the left.”

Levi moved over to that cabinet and pulled out a bottle of wine. The glasses clinked faintly as he grabbed both of them with one hand while taking the bottle with the other, and then returned to his seat. Setting everything down, he poured the rich red wine into the two glasses before handing one to me. I took it and then watched him curiously while he sat down again.

When I studied him, I realized that both his hair and his clothes were dry, which meant that he must have been here for a while.

“Have you been here long?” I asked, taking a sip of wine.

“About two hours,” he replied. His intense gaze drifted down to my hips, where my white leather pants were visible right by the edge of the table. “Were you at work?”

“Yeah.”

There was an awkwardness around us that normally wasn't present. Something that made the conversation feel stilted. But after everything that had happened these past weeks, I supposed that neither of us truly knew where we stood anymore.

"Your boss is keeping you late," he remarked.

"I have a new boss. And he's a bit of a dictator."

Levi winced, as if suddenly remembering what I told him about Ulric's forced retirement. "Ah."

"We're also preparing for a full-scale attack on the south side, which requires a lot of time and manpower."

"I can imagine."

Awkward silence descended on the room. For a while, Levi and I just watched each other from across the pale wooden table. The oil lamp above cast flickering light over his face, making his gray eyes shine like flame-covered steel. Outside, the wind howled and the rain continued pelting the windows.

I took a long drink of wine before setting down my glass with a thump. Heaving a deep sigh, I shook my head slowly while holding his gaze. "Why are you here, Levi?"

"I, uhm..." he began, but then trailed off.

Raising his glass, he downed almost half of the wine in it before setting it down again. Then he raked a hand through his hair and cleared his throat.

Confusion swirled inside me. The only time I had ever seen him this hesitant, this *insecure*, was when he had taken me out to dinner that first time. So why was he acting that way now?

"Look," he began, letting his hands drop back down. His eyes were full of uncertainty as he searched my face. "I know that I have no right to ask this of you, but if your attack were to be launched in the next two days, could you make sure that it's focused on the east side of the city?"

I arched an eyebrow. “So that you can set up an ambush and slaughter all of my colleagues? No, I can’t do that.”

“No, no.” Raising his hands, he shook his head. “That’s not at all what I meant. None of them would get hurt, I swear.”

And when the King of Metal promised something, he meant it.

I drummed my fingers on the tabletop as I studied him for a few seconds, trying to figure out what he was up to. But I could read nothing on his face, so I asked, “Then why?”

“I just need them out of the way while I make a deal.”

“What kind of deal?”

“One that will save my people.” Desperation blew across his features. “I’m in deep shit, spitfire. Worse than anything I’ve gone up against in years. You’re going to attack in full force in the next few days. And so are all three remaining Houses, who have now formed an alliance to take me down. And I just came from a meeting with White. He’s not satisfied. He wants blood, and if I don’t give him what he wants, he will start slaughtering everyone who works for me. I have too many enemies who are all attacking at the same time. I can’t win this with brute force. The only way to survive this is to make some deals. But I can’t do that if I’m busy trying to fend off a white boot invasion too.”

“So you just need us to be somewhere else while you make these deals?”

“Yes.”

Pushing up from the table, I ran my fingers through my damp hair and shook my head while pacing back and forth in frustration. “I can’t do this, Levi.”

His face fell, but he just nodded and said, “I understand.”

“No, not that. I can’t do *this*.” I motioned between me and him. “Us. I can’t do this weird hot and cold thing between us anymore. One minute you’re calling me a traitor and a worthless piece of shit and telling me that you will kill me if you ever see me again. And the next minute, you’re risking

everything to save me from a worldwalker and taking care of me when I'm drunk and holding me while I bawl my eyes out. And now, you're here asking for my help after repeatedly telling me that you don't want or need my help. What the hell is going on, Levi?"

He opened his mouth as if to reply, but then closed it again.

"Levi," I snapped, irritation flashing through me.

The chair wobbled precariously as Levi shot up from his seat and began pacing as well. When both of us were doing it, the air inside the kitchen almost vibrated with nervous energy, so I forced myself to stop. Crossing my arms, I instead just stood there watching him for a few more seconds.

When he made no move to speak again, I said, "I will consider your request..."

He stopped pacing and whirled around to face me, hope flickering briefly in his eyes.

"If you tell me the truth," I finished.

The look on his face made it clear that he would rather do anything but that. Anger and frustration tore at my soul. Why was he being so fucking difficult about this?

"I don't understand, Levi!" I threw my arms out. "Why have you saved me and taken care of me so many times now? I thought you hated me."

For a moment, it looked as if he was going to continue being a stubborn ass. But then it was as if all the terrible tension inside him just shattered. As if he released the walls that he had been keeping around himself. The sheer intensity of the emotions that flooded his face in their wake was so strong that I sucked in a sharp breath and stumbled a step back.

"Oh, spitfire, I never hated you."

I could tell from the sincerity in his voice that he meant every word. Confusion and disbelief whirled through my chest as I shook my head at him. "But I betrayed you. I tricked you

and led you into an ambush and betrayed you. Just like everyone else that you have ever let get close to you.”

“No, you didn’t.”

I just stared back at him in confusion.

“Don’t you get it?” His eyes were brimming with emotion as he held my gaze. “You picked *me*. You chose *me* over your duty, your colleagues, your job. Instead of prioritizing your own mission, your own needs, you chose to let me go even though you knew that it would mess everything up for you. But you did it anyway.” His voice became thick, and he swallowed before pressing out, “No one has ever picked me before.”

Tears pricked my eyes at the raw emotion in his voice, his words, his eyes. My heart pounded in my chest, and I suddenly couldn’t think of a single thing to say. Swallowing down the thickness in my throat, I at last managed to say, “But you called me a traitor that night here on the north side when my colleagues showed up.”

“I was trying to protect you. I heard that you had been demoted and had been stripped of pay for three months because of what you did for me, and I just... I couldn’t ruin your life even more. So I had to make it look like I hated you. So that they wouldn’t get suspicious.”

My heart throbbed painfully as I shook my head at him. “Why didn’t you just tell *me* that? In private. Instead of letting me think that you hated me? All these times when we’ve been alone, all you’ve said is that you hate me and that we’re done and that you will try to kill me now. Why? Why didn’t you tell me?”

He stepped closer. My heart skipped a beat at his sudden closeness, and I forgot how to breathe when he raised a hand and brushed a loose lock of hair away from my face. His hand lingered on my cheek while he caressed my cheekbone with his thumb.

“Because I didn’t want to drag you back into my world. Every time you did something to help me, you were putting

yourself in danger. I couldn't risk it. I was trying to make you hate me so that you would stay away. I couldn't bear to see you get hurt again."

I shook my head slowly. "Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?" His eyes seared into me as he gently brushed his thumb over my cheek again. "I love you, spitfire."

My heart stopped. Not a single breath made it into my lungs as I stared at the lethally handsome dark mage before me.

"I love you," he said again. A wistful smile blew across his lips. "And I think I have loved you since the moment you pulled a sword on me in my own throne room."

"Levi, I..."

Intense panic flashed across his face. Dropping his hand from my cheek, he abruptly took a step back. The loss of it, and his nearness, was so jarring that I lost track of what I had been about to say.

"I should go." He backed across the floor while casting a quick look at the door behind him, looking like a cornered animal. "If you can't divert your people, I will understand."

"Levi, I..."

But before I could finish, he was already gone.

CHAPTER 35



The door was yanked open.

“They’re here!” Anna yelled as she raced into my throne room.

I whipped around to face her, a spike of alarm shooting up my spine. “Now?”

“Yes. All three Houses are marching on the Court right now.”

“Fuck,” I swore under my breath.

I had thought that I would have more time. More time to get my non-fighters out and more time to set up a proper barricade outside. But there was nothing I could do about that now.

“Spread the word to everyone else still in the building,” I told Anna. “Get to the upper floors and stay away from the windows.”

“Yes, sir.”

I turned towards the battle mages who filled the room. “The rest of you, with me.”

“Yes, sir.”

The sound of boots thudding on the ground echoed between the metal walls as they all followed me towards the front doors. The doors were still a mess of red and gray, and I swore to myself that as soon as this was all over, I was going to repaint them. If I was still alive at that point, that is.

Afternoon sunlight slanted across the rooftops, reflecting against the windows and filling the street with light. The air smelled of wet stones, and puddles from yesterday's heavy rain still littered the street.

I drew in a deep breath of cool air as I stepped out into the street and touched my palms together. Sending my magic into the buildings on either side of the road, I yanked the metal from the walls outwards so that they met in the middle and formed a barrier before us. If we had stayed inside the Court, it would just have made it easier for our enemies to surround us and slaughter us all, so it was better to do this out in the open where my mages could fight properly as well.

Shinji, Chris, and Tyler flanked me as I took up position in the middle of the metal barrier that now spanned the street. It came up to our chests, providing us with protection but not limiting our view. Everyone else spread out along it as well.

This was not at all how I had planned for this to go down. But we didn't always get what we wanted.

My mind drifted back to Eve's face from last night, but I quickly blocked it out. I needed to keep my full attention on what was happening right here, right now. Otherwise, we would never survive this.

A mass of footsteps pounded against the stones from up ahead. It sent a ripple of worry through my troops. I kept my eyes on the edge of the street.

The thumping sound echoed between the buildings, making a flock of birds flap away from the roof in panic. My people shifted nervously on their feet. They were battle mages. Every last man and woman here was a seasoned fighter. But even they knew that this was a battle we couldn't win. That even though we were the strongest House in Malgrave, taking on the might of three gangs at the same time was impossible. Even for us.

None of them knew about the deals I was planning to make with both the other gang leaders and the worldwalker. And I had to keep it that way. They were all loyal to a fault, and

would do as I commanded, but I just couldn't tell them what I was going to do.

A mass of people rounded the corner.

And that's when I realized that the birds hadn't scattered because of the noise.

At the same time as a horde of people poured into the street ahead, two more groups joined them on the rooftops. I flicked my gaze between them while alarm pulsed through me. They were planning to attack us from all sides. Straight ahead, and from the rooftops on both sides of the street.

"Right flank, take out the group on the roof to the right," I said. "I'll handle the one on the left. The rest of you, focus on the street."

"Yes, sir."

I swept my gaze across the mass of people marching down the street. *Fuck*. The gang leaders weren't at the head of the army. They were probably going to get their people to kill off as many of us as possible before they decided to show their faces.

That should have been a good thing. After all, they were the most powerful mages in the entire army. However, this time, I needed them to be at the front because I didn't want to fight. I wanted to make a deal.

"All of you," I told my people, my voice pulsing with command. "Your first priority is to stay alive."

Surprise flickered through the crowd around me.

"Try to kill as many of them as you can," I continued. "But focus most of your energy on trying not to die. I have a plan, but we need to draw out the gang leaders before I can execute it. And I will be very dissatisfied with you if you dare to die before then."

"Yes, sir," they replied as one.

"What's the plan, sir?" Tyler asked from my left.

Keeping my eyes on the advancing armies, I said nothing.

Tyler dipped his chin and amended it to, “Yes, sir.”

I drew in a deep breath of air that still smelled of rain and early fall.

Then magic exploded across the street.

Trusting my people to block the attacks from the front, I turned my attention to the group advancing across the rooftop on my left. They had almost reached the spot I knew they were aiming for, so I summoned my magic and sent it flowing into the metal building.

Orange flames crashed into a wind shield up ahead, sending waves of warm air washing over me. But I kept my eyes on the people atop the roof. Just a little more.

They formed a line at the edge of the roof, and then slammed their palms together.

I yanked with my magic.

The roof was made of metal, just like every single building on this street, so when I pulled with my magic, the spot they had been standing on vanished.

Even from this distance, I could see the looks of shock and confusion and utter disbelief on their faces as the roof underneath them disappeared and they plummeted towards the ground below.

Cries of panic rang out, and some wind mages on the street threw blasts of air to break their fall. But there were too many of them falling at the same time. Some were saved by the gusts of wind, but the majority of them crashed into the stone ground with sickeningly wet crunching sounds.

I whipped my head towards the group on the right, hoping that I could pull the same trick on them. But just as I had suspected, the moment they had seen what happened to their companions, they had spread out so that they were no longer standing all in one spot. And they had also moved away from the edge of the roof. If I moved the metal now, they would fall right into the building where my domestic staff were hiding, and I couldn't risk that.

Growling an annoyed curse, I shifted my attention back to the battle ahead instead. At least one of the threats was neutralized. I scanned the mages hurling magic at us from the front lines. Still no sign of the gang leaders.

Well, I supposed we would just have to kill even more of them then.

But with every minute that passed, I saw that thought for the useless bluster it was. My people fought incredibly well, and I was using every advantage I had from being surrounded by metal buildings, but we were severely outnumbered and the battle reflected that.

It was a miracle that only three of my people were dead so far, because attack after attack kept slipping through our defenses. But there was nothing we could do about it. For every person we had shielding us, they had three more shooting attacks.

Sweat ran down my spine as I yanked up walls to block a combined attack of wind and lightning, only to miss the shadows that streaked past beside it. Shinji burned them off with a torrent of orange flames, but a mere second later, another attack shot towards us.

Lights flashed and booms echoed across the city as magic collided.

And with every second, we were losing ground.

It was only a matter of time before we were overrun.

Panic tore through my chest as I frantically searched for the gang leaders. If they didn't show up soon, it would be too late to make any deals.

At last, three straight-backed figures strode out from the mass of attacking mages.

The strangest sense of relief washed over me as Aaron Reyes, Connor Bale, and Wilhelm Stenborg took up position at the front of their armies and touched their palms together.

Before they could hurl their magic at us, I raised my voice and called, "I want to make a deal."

Everyone, both from my side and theirs, whipped their heads around to stare at me. They all knew that I never made deals in situations like these. I was too proud, too arrogant, for that. But right now, I was out of options.

The noise of battle died down as the opposing armies stopped attacking and instead glanced towards their leaders. From across the wet stone street, the three of them watched me. The silence around us suddenly felt deafening.

“What was that?” Aaron called at last.

“I want to make a deal,” I repeated.

“A deal, huh?” Connor said with a fucking smirk on his face.

I bit down the flash of anger. “Yes. We end this battle right now, and—”

They laughed. And their entire army laughed with them. Beside me, I could feel my people casting confused glances at me, but none of them said anything.

“End this battle, huh?” Connor scoffed. “Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I squeezed my hand into a fist and tried to locate the nonexistent stores of patience that I reserved for snickering fools. Since I was fresh out of that, I flexed my fingers and forced out a long breath through my nose instead.

“So would you,” I retorted, and flicked a hand towards the dead mages who littered the ground around them. “Unless you want to lose even more of your skilled battle mages. When your little alliance ends, you’ll need them in order to fight each other, after all.”

Sharp glints appeared in their eyes as they all flicked a quick glance at each other. Dark mage alliances never lasted long, so they knew that I was right. I pressed on while I still had the advantage.

“Here’s the deal I’m proposing,” I began. “We end this battle right now, and tomorrow, I will meet you alone.”

Several of my people sucked in sharp breaths. Tyler whipped around to stare at me in shock, but I ignored him.

“Where?” Wilhelm said in his grating voice.

“That old building on Fire Street. It’s not on my territory, and it’s not on any of your territories either, so none of you can screw each other over.”

“What does this deal entail, exactly?” Aaron said, and narrowed his eyes at me in suspicion.

“You back off and stop killing my people.” I raised my chin. “And in exchange, I will come alone to meet you in that building tomorrow. And then you can do whatever you want.”

“No!” Chris blurted out from my right. Horror filled his blue eyes as he stared at me. “Sir, you can’t—”

I held up a hand to silence him and called, “So, do we have a deal?”

The expressions on their faces made it clear that they would thoroughly enjoy having me alone and outnumbered inside a building made of wood where they could take their time tormenting me before killing me.

“Why tomorrow?” Aaron asked. Spreading his arms, he indicated the army around him. “Why not right now?”

“Because I need to make one more deal first.”

A beat of silence. Then realization blew across their faces.

“The worldwalker,” Wilhelm said.

“Yes. As you know, he is slaughtering my people in order to get what he wants, and I need to get him to stop. He has set up a meeting tomorrow. I need to meet him and make that deal with him before I meet you, since... well...” I shrugged.

Sharp grins spread across their faces as they no doubt filled in that sentence on their own with whatever fate they had planned for me inside that house.

“How do we know that this isn’t some kind of trap?” Aaron asked, that shrewd glint still in his dark eyes. “I know

that you're famous for always keeping your word, but there's nothing stopping you from lying right now."

Reaching towards the knife in my thigh holster, I pulled out the blade and drew it across my palm. Shocked gasps rang out from my people again, but I ignored them as I squeezed my hand into a fist. Blood dripped from it.

"I swear by my blood and my power that I am the only person who will walk into that building and that none of my people will be even close to it," I declared.

Stunned surprise shone on their faces as they stared at me. Swearing a blood oath was a serious act in our world. No one broke a blood oath.

After sheathing my knife again, I met their gazes once more. "So, do you want me to keep killing every battle mage that I can get my hands on until your forces are dangerously depleted, or do we have a deal?"

The three of them exchanged a look. Then they shifted closer together, speaking quietly so that no one could overhear.

My heart pounded in my chest. This had to work. They had to take this deal. It was the only way that I would even stand a chance of winning this war.

From both my left and my right, I could feel my people watching me. Could feel them wanting to say something. To protest. To argue. But thankfully, they all kept their mouths shut. This really was the only way.

At last, the three gang leaders turned to face me again.

Malice gleamed in Connor's gray eyes as he opened his mouth and called, "We want to hear you say please."

Fury shot up my spine, and I had to grind my teeth together to keep from saying something completely different. Something that would ruin this deal that I had carefully set up. Flexing my fingers, I worked my jaw for a second.

"Please," I forced out at last.

Wicked grins spread across their faces, and the mages in their army laughed again. By all hell, I was going to fucking

kill them all. Around me, my people stared at me with a mix of horror and heartbreak.

“Good boy,” Connor called as he flashed me a smirk. “We accept the deal.”

It took every ounce of willpower that I possessed to just stand there instead of hurling a shard of metal at him. Clenching and unclenching my hands, I gritted my teeth and instead just watched as the three gang leaders and all of their people withdrew.

Once they had disappeared down the street again, I turned towards my own people. They were all watching me as if they actually cared what happened to me. It made it hard to think, so I blocked out all of my emotions and instead pushed on.

One deal was made, but we weren't safe yet.

Ralph's friend had come by this morning to inform us that the white boots would apparently be attacking tomorrow. And Christian White expected his blood payment tomorrow as well.

I swept my gaze over my people.

And then I made a decision.

“Tyler, Shinji, Chris,” I said.

The three of them looked back at me with eyes full of loyalty.

I blew out a long breath, and then finished my sentence.

“Tomorrow, I need the three of you to go to a house.”

CHAPTER 36



Dawn was just breaking over the horizon. Standing by the shore of the River of Souls, I watched the first pale rays of sunlight stretch across the city and gleam in the water before me. Tendrils of mist curled up from the surface, as if the souls of the dead were also stirring now that morning was upon us.

I just kept watching the light playing across the rippling surface and illuminating the wisps of fog for a while, but I needed to leave soon if I was going to make it on time. And I had to make it on time. Not just because I couldn't afford to be late, again, but also because if I decided to get involved, I needed to do it before the order was given.

Bending down, I picked up a stone from the shore and threw it at the water. It skipped once before sinking into the blue depths. I blew out a sigh and raked both hands through my hair while staring up at the clear sky above.

When had my life gotten this complicated? I used to just go to work and spend my days trying to bring dark mages to justice. And now I had gone and fallen for one of them. And he apparently loved me too.

My heart did a backflip in my chest at just the memory of what Levi had told me in my kitchen two days ago.

It should have made everything so much easier. But it hadn't. It had just complicated things even more.

If it was just me harboring those forbidden feelings, I could just chalk it up to a brief spell of insanity that I needed

to get rid of as soon as possible, and that I needed to ignore in the meantime. But now that I knew that the feeling was mutual, it was even harder to just pretend that it didn't exist.

But I couldn't love *a dark mage*. I just couldn't!

Snatching up another stone, I hurled it at the water in frustration. It made a faint plopping sound as it hit the surface. I blew out a forceful breath.

Levi and I could never be together, so why the hell did we have to fall for each other? It made no sense. And it was an incredibly cruel trick of fate.

I sat down on the shore. Drawing my legs up, I rested my forearms on my knees and stared out at the flowing water while taking deep breaths to calm the storm of emotions inside me.

My heart ached.

Every time I let Levi escape or helped him in some way, I was betraying my father. Just like Ulric had told me all those years ago, the best way to both honor my father's memory and to get revenge on those who had killed him was to become an excellent constable who upheld the law at all times and who brought dark mages to justice. And now, I was doing the exact opposite. I was *breaking* the law and helping a dark mage.

Could I really do it one more time?

Levi's request swirled through my mind yet again. *If the constable force attacks in the next two days, make sure that they focus on the east side of town.* We were attacking today, which was certainly within that time frame. But could I really mislead my entire department, and everyone else in the force, so that Levi could finish his deals without interference?

Logically, the answer should be no. Everyone was ready for this attack to take Levi into custody and start reclaiming the south side. To wipe out all the gangs so that no one had to pay protection money again. To bring law and order back so that the city wasn't drowning in alcohol and drugs and scantily clad performers.

I buried my face in my hands. *Fuck*. I shouldn't have gone down that road, because I actually *liked* that side of Malgrave. Deep down, my heart craved the lawless and sinful nature of the south side.

Shoving that thought back down into the depths of my soul where it belonged, I instead forced my mind back to the problem at hand. Helping Levi finish his deals or not.

If I helped him, he would probably be even closer to reaching his goal of becoming the sole dark mage ruler of the south side. And as a constable, that should be something that I should wholeheartedly try to prevent.

But when I had asked what kind of deal he was going to make, his answer had been, *one that will save my people*. And as a constable, saving people should be my top priority. By *my people*, he naturally meant the other dark mages in his Court, but he also had a lot of ordinary people working for him. Could I bend the truth enough to justify my decision?

I drew in another deep breath of chilly air that tasted of mist. Raising my head, I stared out at the river again. The sun was climbing higher over the horizon. I really, really needed to leave now.

But first, I had to make a decision.

Could I put my own selfish feelings for Levi ahead of our mission as constables? We were one of the pillars of Malgrave. The ones who protected people from the likes of him. The ones who would have saved my father if they had been able to get to our tavern faster that day.

Indecision tore through my chest like ferocious wolves.

I shot to my feet. I still hadn't made a decision, but I really needed to leave now.

Stones clattered under my feet as I spun around and sprinted back up to the road and then set course for our headquarters.

The city was just waking up as I ran through the street. Tired-looking men and women staggered out of their doors to make their way towards their own places of work while birds

chirped cheerfully in the eaves above. The scent of baking bread drifted through the air as the bakeries continued getting ready for their first customers.

Cool air filled my lungs as I hurried across the city, but the pale sun had already burned away most of the morning fog.

I reached our headquarters completely out of breath, but one minute before I was supposed to be there. Doubling over, I dragged in deep breaths to calm my thundering heart.

“Glad to see you could join us on time today, Sterling,” Captain Wright said from somewhere close by.

After refilling my lungs, I straightened and met his gaze. My heart was slamming against my ribs. And not just because of the sprint across town. This was it. I had to make a decision right now.

“Captain,” I began, and then gulped down another massive breath. “I was approached by one of our spies from the south side.”

Wright’s stern blue eyes sharpened with interest. “And?”

“There’s a deal going down on the south side today. Levi Arden will be leaving his Court of Metal to make a deal with someone, so he will be out in the open and not protected by his metal walls.”

His eyes widened. All around us, people stopped what they were doing and instead turned to stare at me. This was the opportunity everyone had been waiting for. Attacking Levi’s Court was a suicide mission, but if he was cornered somewhere outside in the city, it would be much easier to take him down.

“Where is the deal happening?” Captain Wright demanded.

For a single second, I just stood there, holding his eager gaze while my whole soul pulsed with impossible decisions. Then I drew in a deep breath and replied.

“Somewhere on the east side.”

CHAPTER 37



My heart pounded against my ribs as I stood inside the empty living room and stared at the building across the street. But it was too late to second-guess myself now. No matter what happened, I would just have to follow this plan through to the end.

“You’re either very brave or very stupid to show up here empty-handed,” came a voice from behind me.

“I’m not,” I said, not even bothering to turn around. “I told them to come to the house across the street, and they will.”

Christian White walked up to stand next to me by the grimy window. “Why didn’t you just bring them with you when *you* came here?”

“Because I...” I trailed off and cleared my throat before pressing out, “Couldn’t. I couldn’t stand the thought of hearing them make small talk while they unwittingly waited here with me for their executions.”

“You didn’t tell them that they’re going to die?”

“Would you have?”

He clicked his tongue and tipped his head to the side, as if conceding the point. “Still, it’s pretty cruel to not let them say goodbye to their loved ones.”

Fury roared through my chest, and I at last turned to face the dishonorable worldwalker. He raised his pale brows, as if he was surprised by my rage. I squeezed my hand into a fist to stop myself from trying to wring his fucking neck.

“Do you know what’s cruel?” I growled at him. “Demanding their lives in the first place.”

He shrugged, as if it wasn’t anything important. “It’s just the cost of doing business.”

“Except the cost had already been established, and we had already finished doing business, when you suddenly decided to change the price.”

His face split into a smile as cold as his ice blue eyes. “That’s one of the perks of being the most powerful person in the room. I get to make and remake the rules to suit my needs. Remember that, King of Metal. And one day, you might actually be able to protect this city from the likes of me.”

Grinding my teeth, I just stared back at him while desperately trying to stop myself from starting a fight that I wouldn’t be able to win. I flexed my hand and worked my jaw a couple of times before trusting myself to speak again.

“This time, I want a blood oath,” I said, holding his gaze with hard eyes. “After you’ve killed them, you are going to swear a blood oath that you will leave my city and my people alone.” My voice sharpened to steel as I added, “So that you can’t decide to *remake the rules to suit your needs* again.”

With that cold grin still on his face, he huffed out a few breaths of amusement. “You’re learning. Maybe you will survive in this world after all.”

“The blood oath,” I ground out.

“Fine, fine. I’ll swear a blood oath.”

“Good, because if—”

“Oh, is that them?” White interrupted.

I whirled around to face the window again. I had been so focused on White that I had forgotten to watch the street.

My heart leaped into my throat as my gaze landed on the three of them. *They’re here.*

“Yes,” I said while they closed the final distance to the door and opened it.

My pulse was thrumming wildly as I watched them disappear into the building without hesitation. While keeping every scrap of emotion firmly off my face, I turned to meet White's gaze again.

"You will give all three of them a quick and painless death," I said.

He arched a white blond eyebrow. "That sounded an awful lot like a demand."

"It's in your best interest too. Dragging this out will only make things messy."

Tilting his head to the side, he shrugged as if he could see the reason in it. But then his eyes sharpened and a malicious smile curled his lips. The expression made my blood freeze in panic.

"I will kill them quickly," he began, that blood-curdling look still on his face. "But first, you need to go in there and prove that they are indeed highly skilled battle mages and not just some random civilians that you decided to sacrifice."

"I would never give you civilians," I snarled. "I'm trying to save the civilians working for me by making this fucking deal."

He lifted his massive shoulders in a nonchalant shrug and then let out a cold laugh. "Alright, fine, that's not the real reason." His pale eyes glinted like shards of ice. "I need you to go in there because I want them to know that *you* are the one who sold them out and delivered them to their execution."

"You fucking bastard, I will—"

"Careful now. Or I might withdraw this offer and start slaughtering everyone instead."

Clenching my jaw, I stared back at him.

He nodded towards the door. "Now, hurry up and get over there."

After another second of suppressing my urge to shove a sword into his throat, I spun around and stalked out the door.

Cool winds whirled down the street, but the pale sky above was clear, making the early fall sun shine its light on the city. I dragged in a deep breath as I quickly closed the distance to the door. My heart thrashed inside my ribcage as I pulled it open and stepped inside.

Three pairs of eyes immediately turned towards me.

“Levi—”

But I didn’t let them say anything else.

Slapping my palms together, I summoned my power and hurled a sheet of metal at them. Stunned surprise flashed across their faces.

But it quickly became invisible as magic exploded across the room instead.

Shifting my metal shield, I blocked the attacks while keeping my jaw clenched hard. I wasn’t here to kill them. I just needed to prove to White that I had followed his orders.

A bang reverberated through the air as a lightning bolt slammed into my metal wall. I yanked up another one as more magic shot across the room to block the sheet I shoved towards them.

I could almost hear White cackling to himself, but I knew that it was just a trick of my mind. There was no way that I could hear him over the noise of battle inside this room.

Dread surged up inside me. What if he had decided to once again break his word? What if he wasn’t going to worldwalk in here and kill them, but instead head to my unprotected Court and slaughter everyone there instead?

Right as the thought crossed my mind, a tall and muscular man with white blond hair materialized on the floor between them.

He was so fucking fast that they didn’t even have time to notice him before he rammed his blades right through their windpipes from behind.

Shock and pain and utter incredulity pulsed across their faces as their magic faded out and they staggered a step

forward. Blood welled up from their necks as they tried to cough.

I kept all traces of emotion firmly locked away as all three of them crashed down on the floor.

Their faces were still full of shock and disbelief when their eyes at last glassed over.

CHAPTER 38



That little voice of uncertainty inside my head refused to shut up. While I snuck through the east part of Malgrave's south side, I heard the same thoughts repeated over and over again inside my skull.

Was this really the right thing to do?

What would happen when Captain Wright and all of my colleagues realized that Levi wasn't here?

Had I helped people today or doomed them to a lifetime of misery underneath a dark mage's thumb?

What would my father have done?

All of those doubts were so loud, so insistent, that I could barely concentrate on what I was supposed to do. Shaking my head, I tried to force the thoughts aside and focus on looking alert as I approached a building along with Frank. I already knew that Levi wouldn't be here, so it was taking some effort to pretend to care.

Frank signaled for me to draw my sword while he summoned wind. Our whole department had been split into pairs. One person to block an attack, and one person to rush forward and force the dark mages into close combat.

I gave him a nod in reply and slid out my sword. It sang faintly into the silence. Across the street, Jamila and her partner were approaching another house. Sunlight shone down from the pale blue sky, glinting in her sword as she drew hers as well.

Shifting my attention back to our building, I slowly pushed down the handle and then moved inside.

It was some kind of textile factory. I glanced over the piles of cloth and the massive wooden machines as I made my way across the room. Frank followed on my heels, wind magic whooshing around his hands.

We swept the ground floor, which was of course empty, before sneaking up the stairs and towards the upper floor. I tried my best to act tense, but I knew that we wouldn't get attacked, so my mind began to wander again.

I wondered what exactly Levi's deals had entailed. And more importantly, if they had worked out. If I was doing all of this, only for it not to even matter, then I would—

“Eve.”

Raising my sword, I whipped around.

Only to realize that it was Frank who had spoken. He held up a hand and grimaced while flashing me a sheepish smile.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.” His wind magic was gone when he waved his hands to indicate the deserted factory around us. “It's just, we've swept the building now, so we don't have to stay quiet anymore.”

“Oh,” I replied, because it was the only thing I could think of to say.

He jerked his chin towards the stairs, motioning for us to start walking back out again, before he continued speaking. “I just wanted to say... I know that we haven't been... Well, I mean... I know that we've been a bit distant lately.”

Distant, huh? Well, that was certainly one word for how he and the rest of our colleagues had behaved towards me these past couple of weeks.

Our boots thudded against the wooden steps as we started downwards.

“It's just,” he continued. “You've made our department look incompetent a couple of times lately, and I guess we all just felt kind of frustrated. You know?”

Stifling a snort, I instead shrugged and said, “Sure.”

“But we heard about you losing your shit in Captain Wright’s office.”

I winced.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that.” He flashed me a tentative smile as we reached the ground floor and started towards the door. “I meant, we all heard about it and we support you. We miss Ulric like crazy too, but none of us have really dared to say anything. So when we heard how you backed him up and told Wright that it wasn’t Ulric’s fault and how Wright would never fill his shoes, we were relieved. And proud of you.”

Since I was pretty sure that it was supposed to be a compliment, I smiled back and replied, “Thanks.”

We reached the door, but instead of opening it straight away, Frank paused with his hand on the handle and turned to meet my gaze head on. “Look, Eve. We all know that you’re loyal to a fault. To Ulric. And to our department.”

Guilt sliced through me.

“There has never been a question about that.” He shot me a look that seemed an awful lot like pity. “But just... try not to screw up again in the next few months. We need to show Captain Wright that we’re a good team, otherwise all of us will be held back from promotions and stuff.”

The guilt was instantly burned away by a flash of rage. Keeping it firmly off my features, I forced another smile onto my mouth and nodded. “I’ll try my best.”

“Good.”

At last, he pushed down the handle and stepped out onto the street. On the other side, Jamila was making her way out the door as well. As I followed Frank across the threshold, she met his gaze and shook her head. She hadn’t found Levi either. Obviously.

I slid my sword back into its sheath and smoothened down a few loose curls that had escaped my ponytail. Sunlight warmed my face as I stopped and drew in a deep breath of

cool air while we waited for the rest of our pairs to finish searching their buildings.

Once everyone was done, Captain Wright signaled for us all to move on to the next street.

I tried not to let Frank's words get to me as we rounded the corner and started towards the next set of buildings. It didn't really work. But before I could think too much about it, an impossible sound echoed between the stone buildings around us.

Wind.

It sounded like a massive gust of wind whirling towards us.

Alarm shot through me, and on instinct, I called up a water shield right before the wind blast slammed into us. Frank had been a second too late, and was picked up by the force and flung several yards backwards before he crashed into another pair who had been coming up behind us.

I braced my weight on the stones below me as the wind smacked into my water shield. It disintegrated from the force, but it had been enough to keep me on my feet. I whipped my head from side to side, finding almost our entire squad desperately trying to get back on their feet.

Lightning crackled through the air, followed by a rush of fire.

Stunned disbelief rang inside my skull. And for a moment, I couldn't process what I was seeing. Then Captain Wright's harsh voice cut through the noise of magic.

"Dark mages!" he bellowed. "Force close combat! Now!"

Snapped out of my stupor, I took off towards the building that the attacks were coming from. Magic flashed through the air. I yanked up another water shield as yet another wind blast barreled down the street. Lightning zapped past my shoulder, almost striking Frank who had finally gotten back to his feet. A yelp of surprise ripped from his throat as he leaped aside, but I just kept sprinting.

On my right, Jamila was racing towards the building as well while summoning water to shove the fireballs aside. They were too powerful to put out completely, which meant that Captain Wright had been right. Magic this powerful couldn't be produced by the Great Current, which meant that these weren't normal people. They were dark mages.

Shouts of alarm rang out as another section was shoved backwards by a torrent of wind.

Confusion whirled inside me. What the hell was going on? Levi had told me, he had *promised* me, that he wouldn't try to kill my colleagues. That this wasn't a trap. So then why the hell were we being attacked by dark mages?

Leaping forward, I avoided another blast of magic, and rolled forward before finally reaching the door. The rest of my colleagues were still too far behind, but I couldn't wait for them. Yanking open the door, I darted into the building while anger coursed through my veins.

If Levi had betrayed me, if he had taken this opportunity to slaughter Malgrave's constable force so that he could make the parliament cede the south side to him, then I was going to fucking kill the bastard myself.

Had it all been a lie to get me to trust him? To get me to bring the others here and right into a fucking trap? Was this payback? Payback for how I had betrayed him earlier?

Rage roared through my soul, but it was mixed with a cold numbness that threatened to swallow me whole.

What a cruel trick it would be if it turned out that Levi had in fact betrayed me. That he had told me that he loved me... *Loved* me, for Current's sake! Only for it to be a part of his ruse to get me to trust him and do what he wanted.

I could almost feel my heart cracking at just the thought of it.

Was this how Levi had felt when I was holding a sword to his throat and he finally realized that I was a constable? No, he couldn't have felt what I was feeling right now. Because I hadn't told him that I *loved him* right before betraying him.

Fuck, was Levi really this cruel? Had he really played the long game to get his revenge as savagely as possible today?

If he had, I was going to fucking kill him and—

My heart lurched into my throat as someone grabbed me from behind and yanked me sideways into a room. I tried to scream, but the hand in front of my mouth muffled it. And even if I had been able to yell for help, my colleagues were still too far away to save me.

Then the door to the room was slammed shut behind me.

CHAPTER 39



The entire room smelled like blood and lingering ozone from the lightning strikes. I stared down at the three corpses before my feet and the red puddles that were quickly spreading across the dusty wooden floorboards.

“How does it feel?” Christian White said, and I could hear the fucking smirk in his voice.

My heart was still pounding, but I kept all traces of emotion firmly off my features as I dragged my gaze up to the worldwalker’s face. “Telling you about my feelings wasn’t part of the deal.”

The smirk on his face widened, and his ice blue eyes glittered in the sunlight falling in through the windows. “That bad, huh?”

“You demanded blood.” Without breaking eye contact, I stabbed a hand towards the slaughter on the ground between us. “Now you have it. And now, it’s time for you to hold up your end of the bargain.” A lethal edge bled into my voice as I added, “Or are you going to back out again?”

“You really are a sore loser.”

“You have a healer, you have the blood sacrifices you demanded, and now you will leave my city and the rest of my people alone.”

“What about that smart-mouthed woman? Eve Sterling, wasn’t it? Maybe I should pay her a visit before I leave.”

Burning rage and icy hatred flashed inside me as I took a threatening step forward.

Holding up his hands, he chuckled while still keeping a mocking grin on his lips. “Oh, I see. Perhaps I should have demanded *her* blood instead.”

“But you didn’t. You demanded the lives of my three highest ranking dark mages.” Holding his gaze with hard eyes, I stabbed a hand towards the floor again. “And I gave them to you.” Threats dripped from every word as I ground out, “Now, swear the blood oath and then get the fuck out of my city.”

A dangerous glint flashed in his eyes for a second. But then he glanced down at the carnage on the ground between us, and a satisfied smile blew across his face instead. Raising his gaze to mine again, he lifted his broad shoulders in a nonchalant shrug.

“Fine,” he said. “I recognize that you did fulfill your end of the bargain. Both times.”

Saying nothing, I just stood there, staring him down until he at last heaved an annoyed sigh and then unsheathed his knife.

With his eyes locked on mine, he drew the blade across his palm. A thin line of red appeared. Squeezing his hand into a fist, he held it out before him, making a drop of blood fall to join the massive puddle before his feet.

“I swear by my blood and my power that I will leave your people and your city alone from now on,” he said. Then he paused for a second before adding, “As long as you don’t do anything to threaten my position.” Raising his eyebrows, he shot me an expectant look. “Happy?”

What he might consider as threatening his position was of course open to interpretation. But it was as good an oath as I would be able to extract from him, so I jerked my chin down in a nod.

“Excellent.” Another mocking smile stretched his lips. “Then I wish you the best of luck with your reign, metal king of Malgrave.” Chuckling, he flicked a hand towards the dead

men on the ground. “Now that your people know what you’re willing to do to your own elite warriors just to get what you want. I smell a mutiny on the horizon, don’t you?”

His stupid laughter echoed between the broken wooden walls as he brushed his palms together. Then he worldwalked out of my city for what was hopefully the last fucking time.

Drawing in a deep breath, I finally released the tight hold I’d kept on my emotions ever since I walked into this building.

For a moment, I just stood there.

Then I looked down at the blood-soaked floor.

And smiled.

The unseeing eyes of Aaron Reyes, Connor Bale, and Wilhelm Stenborg stared back at me. I laughed. It was a disbelieving sound full of relief and smug victory.

Why fight two battles when I could just get my incredibly powerful enemy to kill my three other powerful enemies for me?

Christian White had already broken our deal, so I was under no obligation to keep my word to him. He had asked for three powerful and high-ranking dark mages, and he had gotten it. His problem was of course that he believed that I ruled the entire south side. Since he had spent almost no time at all inside the city walls, he didn’t know that I was at war with other Houses. So he had never even considered that the dark mages I delivered for him to slaughter weren’t actually *my* people.

As for the gang leaders now lying dead on the floor... They knew that I always kept my word, so they hadn’t been worried about this meeting. Three of them against one of me? I was sure that they had some very creative and very painful plans for me. They had never even been worried about being attacked by someone else. After all, not only was I known for always staying true to my promises, but I had also sworn a blood oath on it.

But they had missed one thing.

Because I always kept the promises I made, I had always been very careful with how I worded things.

I had told them that no one except me would walk into the building. And technically no one else had *walked* into it. Christian White had just *appeared* inside the room.

It was a really shitty move, I knew that. But so what? I did have honor and I always held up my end of every bargain, but I was also a dark mage. I did what it took to win, even if it meant twisting the words of a promise so that I wasn't technically breaking it. It wasn't my fault that they weren't sharp enough to realize when they had been outsmarted.

Steel sang into the silent building as I drew the massive sword I kept strapped along my spine.

For a few seconds, I just watched the three of them. Shock still twisted their features. To their credit, they had put up a good fight all these years. Amassing their own power and trying to stop me from taking over more of the city.

But their reign was over now.

Mine, on the other hand, was just beginning.

In a swift strike, I brought my blade down on Connor Bale's neck.

More blood leaked onto the ruined floorboards as I severed Aaron Reyes and Wilhelm Stenborg's heads from their shoulders as well.

After wiping off my sword, I slid it back into its sheath. Then I bent down and picked up their heads by the hair. Aaron's in my right hand. Connor's and Wilhelm's in the other.

Muted dripping of blood joined my thudding footsteps as I strode back towards the door.

They would have no doubt brought their people here. Maybe not their entire armies, but enough backup to surround the building in case I tried to flee.

I was right.

The moment I stepped out into the street, a mass of people swarmed in on me from all sides. Magic crackled in their hands as they got ready to attack. But they stopped, one after the other, as they noticed what I was carrying. Some of them even gasped and staggered backwards.

However, parts of the crowd still kept their magic up as they cast quick glances between each other, uncertain whether they should attack me or not.

I stopped in the middle of the street.

Sunlight shone down from the clear sky above, but it suddenly felt like a massive cloud had spread across the road. The silence was so thick that I could almost feel it.

I tossed the severed heads to the stones before my feet.

They landed with wet thudding sounds that seemed to echo up and down the street, and then rolled halfway around before stopping. Blood painted the stones red.

“Your leaders are dead,” I said, my voice booming across the stunned mass of dark mages. “I have just killed all three of them, singlehandedly, in a three-on-one battle.”

That was a blatant lie, of course, but there was no way for them to know that since they had all seen me walk in alone after their leaders.

Arching an eyebrow, I swept hard eyes across the people around me. “And just a few weeks ago, I singlehandedly killed the leaders of the other three Houses too. After all of that, do you really think attacking me right now is your best course of action?”

The people who still had their magic twisting around their hands flicked uncertain glances at each other again.

“There are no more dark mage Houses.” I stabbed a hand at my own chest. “Only mine.”

I paused, letting the reality of their situation settle deep within their guts. They had supported rival Houses. They had killed my people and helped their leaders try to kill me. And now, they were without leadership. Without protection. If I

decided to take an eye for an eye, half of the people in this crowd would be blind by the end of the day.

A ripple of worry went through the throng.

Some of them edged back slightly while quickly trying to calculate an escape route.

“You only have one choice now.” I swept a hard stare over them all, and when I spoke, I let every ounce of my lethal power pulse from each word. “Obey. Or die.”

Soft winds swirled between the buildings, pulling at clothes and hair. But every single person in the street remained as still as a statue.

“Those of you who submit to me get to live, and you will be allowed to join my Court as I make the parliament cede the entire south side to me.” A vicious smile curled my lips. “Those who don’t, you’d better pray to hell that I don’t find you before you can escape into the hills.”

For a few seconds, only deafening silence answered me.

Then all magic evaporated.

Victory pulsed inside me, bright and gleaming, as the entire crowd of dark mages dropped to a knee and bowed their heads in submission.

A grin spread across my lips.

The south side was mine.

CHAPTER 40



I whipped around the moment the hands holding me relaxed their grip. From two strides away, Tyler, Chris, and Shinji looked back at me with apologetic eyes. Chris opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off.

“What the hell is this?” I demanded. “Did Levi betray me? He swore that no one would get hurt!”

“We haven’t hurt anyone,” Tyler said, holding up his hands. “Levi sent us here to stage a fake attack.”

“Why?”

“To make sure that your claim about a deal going down looked as real as possible, so that you wouldn’t get into any trouble.”

I blinked at him. “Oh.”

Shinji cast a glance towards the windows. “We need to leave. Now.”

He was right. Outside, the noise of thundering footsteps drew closer. It would be less than a minute before the entire constable force came charging through the doors.

After giving Shinji a nod, Chris hurried over to the large red carpet that covered most of the floor. With Shinji’s help, he rolled it back to reveal a trapdoor.

Tyler grabbed my shoulder, turning me towards him while the other two opened the trapdoor. “Levi said to tell you, please come to my Court.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Those exact words? *Please* come to my Court?”

A smile ghosted across Tyler’s lips. “Yes. Those exact words.”

But before I could reply, he gave my shoulder a quick squeeze and then darted over to the trapdoor. I watched as the three of them disappeared into the escape tunnel it no doubt housed, and then pulled it closed again.

A crash sounded as someone threw open the front door.

I lurched forward and yanked the carpet back into place before sprinting into the corridor.

Air exploded from my lungs as Frank’s muscular body crashed right into me. The force of his momentum sent me flying sideways and crashing into a side table. Pain shot up my hip. A vase wobbled and then toppled over the edge as I hit the table hard enough to push it backwards a few inches. The noise of shattering ceramic mingled with pounding footsteps as Jamila and Captain Wright and several other people burst through the door.

“They ran out the back!” I called as I pushed myself up from the table. “West side.”

“Go!” Captain Wright bellowed loudly enough for everyone both inside and outside to hear. “Everyone spread out! Intercept them before they disappear into their strongholds.”

Straightening my rumpled clothes, I took off in a rush to follow his orders. Or part of them anyway.

As we all spread out, I quickly slipped away from the others and instead made my way towards Levi’s Court using the back roads.

When I reached it, Chris was one of the people keeping guard outside. I ran my gaze up and down the massive doors. Surprise flickered through me when I realized that they were once more blood red. Just like they should be.

“He’s in his room,” Chris said as he pulled the door open for me.

I nodded and started to walk past. But before I could cross the threshold, his voice stopped me.

“Eve.”

I turned to face him. Awkwardness flitted across his features as he drew a hand over his blond hair.

“Thanks for coming through for us,” he said at last. A small smile tugged at his lips. “Again.”

Warmth spread through my chest. “You’re welcome.”

The throne room beyond looked exactly like it had the first time I had been here. Massive, imposing, full of metal chains and burning torches and oil lamps. There were more people inside it now, though. A lot more. Many of them were ones I had never seen before.

As I made my way across the floor and towards the door that would take me to Levi’s private wing, I couldn’t help but wonder what exactly had happened on Levi’s side of the city today.

Those people I had never seen before jerked back and summoned magic when they noticed the white and gold leather armor I was wearing. But the dark mages I had freed from our prison quickly stepped between us and snapped at them to stand down. Turning towards me, they inclined their heads in respect as I passed. The others stared in open-mouthed disbelief.

Amusement swirled inside my chest as I left them behind and started down the corridor. I wondered how they were going to explain who and what I was.

The thought sent a stab of panic down my spine.

I didn’t even know who and what I was anymore.

Pushing that thought aside for now, I rounded the final corner and started into the black and gold corridor that marked the beginning of Levi’s wing. My feet led me down the familiar path until I was standing right outside his bedroom

door. It was open. But for some reason, I hesitated on the threshold.

“Eve.”

His voice, that dark and powerful voice that wrapped around me like a warm wind, hit me straight in the chest and made my soul vibrate. Drawing in a shuddering breath, I stepped across the threshold and into Levi’s black and gold bedroom right as he emerged from his bathroom.

My heart did a ridiculous backflip as I flicked my gaze over him.

He was only wearing a pair of dark pants. A few drops of water ran down his muscular chest. It was no doubt because he had just finished washing off the blood of the people he had slaughtered today, but I still had the insane urge to lick those water drops off his skin as they slid down his chiseled abs. My core throbbed at just the thought of it.

But there was a strange awkwardness in the air between us. A hesitation that made the air feel thick and the silence feel unbearably loud. It didn’t surprise me, given how Levi had fled the conversation after dropping that massive bomb on me last time we spoke. And I was still pissed at him, so I had no intention of putting him out of his misery right now.

“You’re alive,” I stated, shattering the tense silence.

His gray eyes still searched my face intently, as if trying to read answers there. But all he said was, “Yes.”

“When you said that you were going to make a deal to save your people, I was worried that you might...” I trailed off, knowing that he would understand what I meant.

“Yeah. It was a dangerous gamble that could have gone to hell with just one stroke of bad luck. But it worked out. Thank you for keeping the white boots away while I did it.”

“I thought you had betrayed me.”

Confusion blew across his face as he blinked in surprise and then raised his eyebrows.

“When we were attacked in the street, I thought you had betrayed me and sent your people to kill the entire constable force.”

He looked genuinely taken aback by that. “No, of course not. I was just trying to—”

“Make it look believable. Yeah, Tyler told me.”

“I was just trying to protect you. Like I have all this time.”

The last thin thread of my already very limited patience snapped. Slapping my palms together, I summoned a blast of wind and hurled it straight at him. It hit him square in the chest, sending him flying backwards and slamming into the wall across the room.

Air exploded from his lungs as he hit the black and gold wall, and he had to brace one hand on it to stop himself from dropping to the floor. While sucking in a deep breath to refill his lungs, he raised his head and stared at me with absolute bafflement.

That just made me even angrier.

Summoning another blast of wind, I hurled it at his chest before he could take a step forward. A thud echoed through the room as his back hit the wall hard again.

“I am so fucking sick of you trying to protect me while keeping me in the dark!” Drawing my sword, I pointed it at him. “I spent weeks thinking you hated me while you were really just faking it so my colleagues wouldn’t find out what I had done. And I thought you had betrayed me today as some kind of cruel revenge for me being an undercover constable. But once again, you were really just faking it.”

“Of course I was—”

“Shut up.” Stalking forward, I leveled the sword at his throat. “The next time you want to help me, you fucking tell me what you’re doing!” I pressed the flat of the blade underneath his chin, forcing him to tilt his head back. “Am I making myself clear?”

A sly smile played over his lips as he raked his gaze up and down my body. “Fuck, you’re hot when you’re armed and angry.”

Heat pooled inside me, and it took incredible willpower to stop a smirk from spreading across my lips. Keeping that mask of fury on my face, I forced his chin up higher with my blade. “I said, am I making myself clear?”

Something moved at the corner of my eye.

My stomach lurched as I was yanked sideways and spun around. A huff escaped my lips. Blinking, I found myself back first against the wall with bands of black and gold trapping my wrists next to my head.

For a moment, I couldn’t figure out how it had happened. Then I remembered that this entire room was made of metal.

I narrowed my eyes at the smirking dark mage as he sauntered up to me and plucked the sword from my trapped hand. It made a whooshing sound as he spun it casually before he positioned the blade underneath my own chin instead.

“Yes, spitfire.” His eyes danced with light as he locked them on me. “I heard you loud and clear.”

“Good. I despise having to repeat myself.”

A soft breath of amusement escaped his lips. I tried pulling against the metal bands keeping my hands trapped against the wall, but they of course didn’t give an inch. Levi sucked his teeth and cocked his head while drawing the point of my sword down my throat. A dark thrill shot up my spine as he trailed the blade down the center of my chest.

“I really hate this uniform on you,” he said, his gaze searing over every curve of my body.

My clit throbbed. Raising my eyebrows, I flashed him a smile full of challenge. “Then maybe you should take it off?”

Desire burned in his eyes as he returned the grin. Steel whizzed through the air as he flicked his wrist, removing the blade from my chest and instead placing it on his desk. I watched the way the muscles in his bare chest and arms

rippled with every precise movement. It made me want to run my hands all over his body. I yanked against my restraints again, but they remained firmly in place.

A shiver of pleasure coursed through me as Levi returned to his position in front of me and placed his hands on my hips. For a few seconds, he just stood like that, his fingers curled around my hips while he studied every flicker of emotion in my eyes. Then he drew his hands up my chest.

I rested the back of my head against the wall and released a long exhale as he began to undo the fastenings on my leather armor.

Once he had gotten the jacket open, I pulled at my restraints again and quirked an eyebrow. “You’re going to have to release my wrists now.”

“Is that so?”

With a sly smile on his face, he traced his fingers along the top of my pants. My skin prickled and a shudder racked my frame in their wake. Before I could recover, Levi quickly brushed his palms together and then made the metal bands around my wrists move upwards along the wall. I flicked a glance at them as they stopped high above my head. The King of Metal just smirked at me.

Sliding his hands under the shirt I wore underneath my jacket, he pushed it up my stomach. Warm air washed over my breasts as he undid my brassiere as well. My pussy throbbed with need as Levi took his time caressing my tits before continuing to move all of my garments upwards.

I twisted my head slightly as the fabric slid over my face. But once it was past my mouth, it stopped even though it was still blocking my eyes. Shaking my head, I tried to get it to fall back down again so that I could see, but Levi must have used more metal from the wall to hold it in place because it didn’t move an inch.

“That’s so not fair,” I protested.

A jolt shot through me as Levi’s fingers wrapped around my throat. It was followed by a dark throbbing inside me as he

claimed my lips with a dominant kiss.

With his hand still around my throat, he whispered against my mouth, “Oh spitfire, when will you learn that I don’t play fair?”

I bit down on his bottom lip. A dark chuckle escaped him before he stole another savage kiss from me.

Drawing back again, he released my throat and instead trailed his fingers down my chest. My heart slammed against my ribs as he circled my tit. Because of the clothes blinding my vision, all of my other senses were heightened, so every brush of his fingers sent lightning flashing through my veins.

A gasp escaped me as he flicked my nipple. He rubbed his thumb over it before sliding his hands farther down my stomach and towards my pants.

I wiggled my hips as Levi traced his finger along the top of the leather fabric before he began unbuttoning it. My thighs clenched as he slid my pants and panties down my legs. After unlacing my boots, he pulled both them and the rest of my clothes off, one foot at a time, until I was standing there completely naked.

Anticipation coursed through me as I waited for Levi to make his next move.

For a while, nothing happened. I twisted my head from side to side, trying to see what he was doing, but it was useless. All I could do was wait.

My clit throbbed and my pussy was already soaked. Handcuffed, blindfolded, and trapped naked against a wall with no control and no idea what was going to happen next... There was just something so sinfully hot about being this exposed and completely at his mercy.

A gasp ripped from my throat and lightning shot up my spine as Levi brushed his knuckles over my pussy. He let out a satisfied chuckle when he found it already wet.

“You really do like it when I dominate you, huh?” he said while teasing his fingers over my clit.

Light flickered in my brain at the whisper-soft touch. I shifted my hips, trying to push down harder against his fingers. He expertly moved them, keeping them barely against my skin but just enough to drive me insane, while he raised his other hand and rolled my nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

“Answer,” he demanded.

Ripples of pleasure rolled through my body, so it took a moment to remember the question. While still trying to press my clit down harder against his hand, I breathed, “Yes.”

His lips skimmed across my jaw. “Say it.”

“I like it when you dominate me.”

He hummed, making his warm breath dance over my skin. His fingers continued teasing my clit and my nipple. I squirmed against the wall as another wave of pleasure coursed through me.

While continuing to torture me, he brushed his lips along my jaw before claiming my mouth with a kiss so possessive that it made my heart flip and my toes curl.

“Beg for it,” he commanded as he pulled back.

My mind was still reeling from that kiss, so I only managed to suck in a shuddering breath. It turned into a gasp halfway through as his hand shot up from my pussy and instead gripped my throat tightly while his other pinched my nipple hard.

“I said, beg me for it,” he growled against my lips.

Dark desire pulsed through my soul, making heat course through my entire body.

“Please dominate me,” I gasped into his mouth. “Please, I’m begging you.”

He smiled against my lips. “Good girl.”

Pain flickered through my nipple as he released his iron grip on it, but he quickly soothed the ache with gentle strokes of his thumb. I drew in a shuddering breath.

Pulling against my restraints, I tried yet again to get my hands free and the fabric away from my eyes so that I could see him and touch him. They stayed firmly in place.

“Levi,” I groaned.

“Yes, spitfire?”

But I forgot what I had been planning to ask when he moved his hand away from my tit and instead wrapped it around my thigh, lifting my leg up. With his other hand still locked around my throat, he positioned his cock against my entrance. Then he paused.

Impatience crackled through my veins. “If you make me beg for it one more time, I swear I’m going to—”

“Oh but you forget... I’m the one calling the shots.” Shifting his grip on my throat, he placed his thumb underneath my chin and forced me to tilt my head back while he drew his hard cock through my wetness. “Say it.”

“Please fuck me.”

He shoved his cock into me. A deep moan tore from my chest at the feeling of him filling me. His grip on my thigh tightened, moving my leg into a better position. Then he drew back before thrusting deeper.

Pleasure washed over me, and another groan spilled from my lips.

His thumb was still pressed firmly underneath my chin, forcing me to keep my head tilted back. But it didn’t matter. I couldn’t see anything anyway.

My heart pounded against my ribs.

Levi started up a steady rhythm.

“Harder,” I growled.

His dark laugh caressed my skin as he leaned down and stole a savage kiss before shifting to a brutal pace. My back slammed against the wall as Levi fucked me hard, making the closet next to us rattle with the force of it.

Tension built inside me.

He hoisted my leg up higher while finally sliding his thumb away from my chin. I let my head drop back down as Levi instead stroked his thumb over the side of my neck. He kept his hand around my throat, a solid weight to remind me who was in control.

I ached to touch him. To run my hands through his hair and rake my fingers over his muscles and feel his warm skin underneath my palms. But I knew that he wouldn't let me. Not yet. First, he was going to make my body surrender to him and my pussy tremble around his cock.

Pent-up release thrummed wildly inside me as he fucked me savagely, creating the most delicious friction. I sucked in shuddering breaths as the tension inside me kept mounting. My heart thundered, and I curled my hands into fists and threw my head from side to side as the orgasm drew closer. So close. It was so close.

A gasp ripped from my lungs as release exploded through my body. My pussy clenched around his hard cock and my clit throbbed as the orgasm swept through my limbs.

Levi kept his hand around my shaking leg, holding it up as he continued pounding into me. I yanked against the metal bands around my wrists, wanting to rip away the clothes before my eyes so that I could see the look in those steel gray eyes as he came undone. But he kept me mercilessly trapped and blindfolded against the wall as he thrust his hips one last time before release found him too.

His dark moans mingled with mine as our bodies trembled together.

My chest heaved. And suddenly, I was thankful for the restraints keeping me upright.

When the last tremors had faded, Levi remained standing there with his cock buried deep inside me for a while. I used the time to catch my breath and try to convince my muscles to obey me again.

Then he stole one last kiss before pulling out and gently lowering my leg to the ground. Once he was certain that I was

standing firmly, he finally released the metal bands that had kept me pinned to the wall.

I didn't waste a second. Ripping the clothes over my head, I tossed them aside so that I could see again. Levi was standing two strides away, a smug smile lurking on his lips.

While my clothes were still falling through the air in a flutter of white leather and dark cloth, I brushed my palms together and summoned a wind blast that I hurled into Levi's chest before he could so much as blink.

The force of it sent him flying backwards across the room before he slammed down back first on the bed. I had nothing if not impeccable aim. Stunned surprise flashed across his features as he landed, making the mattress bounce and rumpling the impeccable black sheets.

Before he could recover, I climbed onto the bed and knelt between his legs.

With a wicked smile on my lips, I wrapped my hand around his thick cock and leaned forward.

Lying on his back, he arched a dark eyebrow at me. "And what exactly do you think you're doing?"

A shudder of pleasure racked his muscular frame as I drew my hand up and down his shaft. I grinned at him.

"Getting revenge."

CHAPTER 41



A steady sense of rightness filled my soul as I lay there in my bed with Eve's toned body flush against mine. I tightened my arm around her, pulling her even closer to me. She rested her cheek and one hand on my chest. Sliding my fingers through her hair, I played with her loose brown curls while I just drank in this moment.

She nestled deeper into my embrace.

I glanced down at her. And for the first time in weeks, I felt only joy when I looked at her.

Ever since that day in the warehouse when she let me go, all I had felt when I so much as thought about her was pain. Pain because I knew that I loved her but had to pretend like I hated her. For her own safety. But that agony was over now, because I didn't have to pretend anymore.

Regret flickered through me as I thought about Eve's admonishment today, and I had to suppress a wince. She was right. I should have told her from the start. I had wanted to protect her, but I had forgotten, or rather purposely ignored, what I learned about her the very first time we met. Eve didn't *need* protecting. She was more than capable of handling herself. She had deserved the right to know what I was really doing, how I really felt, and to make her own decision after that. But I just... I had gotten scared.

Eve traced a circle on my chest before giving it a couple of firm taps. I looked down at her again as she tilted her head back to meet my gaze. In the warm light from the oil lamp

above, her brown eyes glittered like the gold veins in the room around us.

“Bastard,” she said. “You ran like a coward before I could say it back.”

Confusion rippled through me, and I raised my eyebrows at her. “Say what back?”

Pushing herself up on one elbow, she twisted so that she could look me straight in the eye. I almost forgot how to breathe when I noticed the intensity in her gaze as she locked eyes with me. That small ruby I had given her all those weeks ago swung slightly around her bare neck as she moved.

“I love you too, you arrogant domineering asshole.”

My heart stopped.

For a while, all I could do was stare at her with my mouth hanging open while those words ricocheted through my skull.

Then I blurted out, “You do?”

I knew that it was an absolutely ridiculous thing to say, but I still didn’t dare to hope that she had actually said what I thought she had said.

She huffed out a soft laugh and then shot me a pointed look. “Of course I do. Why do you think I let you go back in that warehouse?”

“But you said... You said that it was just because you had realized that the world wasn’t black and white.”

A sly smile curled her lips, and she lifted one shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. “Yes, well, I lied.”

Shaking my head, I let out a disbelieving laugh and then reached out to cup her cheeks. Her lips were soft against mine as I kissed her deeply.

She sighed into my mouth.

Resting my forehead against hers, I closed my eyes and released a long exhale. “My little spitfire.”

After stealing another kiss from me, she twisted around and lay down against my side again. With her hand and cheek once more resting on my bare chest, she wiggled a little closer. I tightened my arm around her.

“You would make an excellent dark mage, you know.”

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. Panic flashed down my spine, and I got ready to take it back. But all she did was to tilt her head back and look up at me with a curious expression on her features.

My heart slammed against my ribs. But I had already started now, so I might as well say this now before I could come to my senses.

“I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but you would be a force to be reckoned with on the south side.” I held her gaze. “You’re strong, smart, and you know how to bend the people and the world around you to fit your needs and do what you want. You’re an excellent liar, a fantastic schemer, and you’re not afraid to get your hands dirty. You really would be an excellent dark mage.”

A whole host of emotions suddenly swirled in her eyes. But before I could decipher them, she let out a light laugh that felt just the tiniest bit forced.

“I can’t be a dark mage,” she said, sitting up and pulling away from me. “I wasn’t born with magic, and I only have it now because of the Great Current.”

The loss of her warm body against mine felt like a blow to the gut, but I forced myself not to show it as I sat up as well. “Being a dark mage is about more than just raw magic.”

Without looking at me, she slid off the bed and went in search of her clothes. For a while, I just sat there on the edge of the bed, watching her get dressed, while regret ripped at my chest. I shouldn’t have said anything. But I wanted to. I *needed* to. Because I needed to ask her—

“I should go,” Eve said, still not looking at me.

Standing up, I walked over to my closet and then put on a pair of pants and a shirt as well while she finished lacing up

her boots. I ran my eyes over her body.

An irrational flash of anger shot through me.

Fuck, I really hated her in that gold-trimmed white leather uniform. When we had first met, and she had been wearing those outfits of black and red leather, she had looked fierce. Free. But every time I saw her in that constables' uniform, I couldn't help but feel like she looked trapped. Stifled. Like it was suppressing her soul.

Panic crackled through my veins. I had to say this. And I had to say it now, before it was too late.

“What if you stayed?” I blurted out before I could change my mind.

She froze. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then she slowly turned around to face me. And when she did, there was a completely expressionless mask on her features.

“Stayed?” she asked.

“What if you stayed here?” I swallowed, my heart thrashing nervously in my chest, as I added, “With me.”

“But you're a dark mage, and I'm a constable.”

“You could switch side. You could join me instead. You could become—”

“Become a dark mage,” she finished.

A storm of emotions whirled behind her eyes again. I wanted to say something, but what was there to say? I knew what I was asking her. I knew that I was asking her not only to uproot her entire life and everything she had ever known, but also to forget her hatred of dark mages. Forget her father's death and become one of the very people who had killed him.

I knew that I was being selfish. Utterly ruthlessly selfish. But a small part of me still dared to hope that maybe, just maybe, she could find a way to justify following her own heart instead of her sense of duty.

Pain blew across her features. And I suddenly hated myself. Hated myself for even asking the question. I never

wanted to cause her pain.

“I...” she began, looking at me with desperate eyes. Then two words tumbled out of her mouth in a rush. “I can’t.”

She blinked, looking stunned by her own words. Then she drew in a breath and composed herself while a determined expression settled on her features.

“I can’t,” she repeated in a more confident voice this time.

And just as quickly as that giddy feeling from before had appeared when she told me that she loved me too, just as fast did a wave of pain crash over me now. It slammed into my chest so hard that I could almost feel my heart cracking underneath its massive weight.

“I can’t,” she said a third time. Helplessness blew across her features for a second. “I’m a constable. I’m supposed to uphold the law, not break it. I’m supposed to be one of the people who would have saved my father, if they had just come a bit sooner, not one of the people who killed him. If I became a dark mage, I would be spitting on my father’s memory. And Ulric...” Her voice cracked a little. “He has done nothing but help me since the day he pulled me out from underneath that table, and he lost his entire career because of me. I have to do right by him. I have to keep the torch that he passed to me burning. Otherwise...”

She trailed off, her eyes now flooded with emotions.

I swallowed while trying to block out the pain pulsing from my shattering heart. It had been a fool’s hope, I knew that. Trying to convince Eve to give up everything for me had been selfish and cruel, but I had to ask. Had to know. If there was ever a chance for us.

And now I knew.

There wasn’t.

From across the room, Eve watched me with brown eyes brimming with emotions. Since I had nothing left to say, I just stood there looking back at her.

“I won’t participate in the efforts to capture you,” she said. Then she paused and swallowed before continuing. “But I can’t leave the constables. I still believe in the justice system, Levi. I still believe that the constables are a force of good. Someone who helps people.”

“I understand,” I managed to answer.

Because I did. I *did* understand. But it still felt like I was being crushed underneath a massive weight.

“We’re from two different worlds, Levi.” Her voice cracked again, and a small sob escaped her lips. Then she cleared her throat. “We can’t... We can’t be together.”

“I understand,” I said again. Forcing a smile onto my face, I added in what was supposed to have been a light tone, “Well, if you ever change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Tears lined her eyes as she strode across the floor towards me. Grabbing the collar of my shirt, she yanked my face down to hers and pressed her lips to mine in a heartbreakingly desperate kiss.

Still holding my shirt, she squeezed her eyes shut and rested her forehead against mine for a second. “I love you. Goodbye.”

Then she abruptly released my shirt and spun around.

I just stood there, shock and pain clanging through my soul, and watched as she strode across the floor and grabbed her sword from my desk. The sword that I had made for her all those weeks ago. And below her shirt and that awful white leather armor, I knew that she still wore that gold and ruby necklace I had given her.

But it didn’t matter.

Because she still walked out the door and took my bleeding heart with her.

CHAPTER 42



Only about half of our department was back by the time I returned to our headquarters, so no one questioned where I had been. They all just assumed that I had been out searching for Levi, like everyone else had done too. No one even suspected that I had just come from his Court, where I had fucked him and then told him that I loved him.

Pain sliced through my heart, sharp and hot, at the mere thought of that final goodbye. Walking away from Levi was one of the hardest things I had ever done. He made me feel free, alive, seen, in a way that no one ever had. And there had been a terrifyingly large part of me that had wanted to stay. To switch sides. To join him. To become a dark mage. But I couldn't. After everything that had happened with my father and with Ulric, I just... couldn't.

My heart bled with every step farther into our office.

By the Current, sometimes I really hated being one of the good guys. Hated that I had to sacrifice my own happiness for the greater good. But I had to honor my father's memory and Ulric's sacrifice, and that meant doing the right thing instead of doing what I really wanted.

"Sterling!"

I snapped my head up and turned to find Captain Wright leaning out into the corridor and locking stern blue eyes on me.

"My office," he snapped.

Heaving a deep sigh, I tied my hair back while starting towards his door. My colleagues, or at least the ones who had returned so far, all watched me as I walked past. But yet again, no one said anything.

Dread curled around my spine.

Did he know? He couldn't possibly know.

Shaking my head, I pulled confidence around me like a shield. No, Captain Wright didn't know that I had just come from Levi's Court. But he was angry about *something*, which meant that I would need to play this carefully.

With my heart pattering in my chest, I stepped into his immaculate office and closed the door behind me. It looked exactly like it did every day. Tidy shelves and neat stacks. Not a single pen out of place.

As I swept my gaze over the room, I realized that Wright had walked back to his desk and sat down behind it while I made my way down the hall. I wanted to roll my eyes at the way he was sitting, with his elbows braced on the clean wooden desk and his fingers pressed together in front of him, but I suppressed the impulse. He expected respect, and right now, I was in no position to challenge that.

Stopping in front of the desk, I clasped my hands behind my back and dipped my chin. "Captain."

For a few seconds, he only tried to stare me down from behind his desk. It worked poorly given that he was sitting down. And even if he hadn't been, he was still shorter than me so he couldn't technically stare down at me.

"Once again, you screwed up our entire operation."

I blinked, genuine shock pulsing through me. "I... what?"

He slammed his palm down on the desk, forcefully enough to make the white ceramic mug jump and the pens inside it rattle in fear. "We walked right into an ambush!"

"It wasn't an ambush," I protested. "We surprised them and they fought back before fleeing. If it had been an ambush,

lots of people would have died. But no one did, which means that—”

“Don’t talk back to me!” Anger flashed in his eyes like violent lightning strikes as he shot up from his chair and stabbed a hand in my direction. “According to my sources, Arden wasn’t even there. He was halfway across the city, slaughtering the other gang leaders.”

I had asked Levi about those deals after we had finished fucking each other’s brains out, so he had already told me what had gone down with the worldwalker and the other gang leaders. But I wasn’t supposed to know that, so I jerked back slightly and blinked at him as if in shock.

“He killed the other gang leaders?” I asked, keeping my eyes wide and my voice full of disbelief. “All of them?”

“Yes. So now, he rules the entire south side. And all because we were searching on the wrong side of the city!” He narrowed his eyes at me. “If I didn’t know better, I would almost think that you worked for him.”

I threw my arms out in a show of frustration. “How is any of this my fault? I got the information from one of our spies. A man who had the password of the day. And I just passed it along to you.”

“Arden must have gotten to our spy and somehow blackmailed or threatened him into giving you false information. You should have noticed that.”

“How the hell am I supposed to have noticed something like that?”

“Silence!” Stalking around the desk, he prowled up to me with anger still crackling across his features. “You do not curse at me and you do not raise your voice at me. Is that clear, Sterling?”

Gritting my teeth, I forced myself to lower my gaze. “Yes, Captain.”

“Good. Now, you should have noticed any irregular behavior from that spy. But you didn’t. And because of that, you led us into an ambush.”

We both knew that that was bullshit. But the parliament was no doubt furious that Levi had been able to become the sole dark mage leader of the south side, so they wanted someone to blame. And Captain Wright had apparently decided that that person was me.

“I warned you, Sterling,” he began in a hard voice, but I swore I could almost hear a hint of smugness in it too. “That I would tolerate no more mistakes from you. And yet, you screwed up again.”

There were several other things I would have liked to say in response, but I still managed to press out the expected, “I’m sorry, Captain.”

“It’s too late for that. From here on, you are demoted to archives duty.”

I snapped my head up. Shock and alarm slammed into me like a tidal wave. With eyes wide, I stared at Wright. “What?”

The hint of a smirk lurked at the corner of his lips as he declared, “You have been demoted. Report to the archives straight away.”

Thick silence descended on the room as I just stared at him, but I barely heard it because my ears were ringing as if I had taken a blow to the head.

Demoted.

Archives duty.

It had taken me years to work my way up the ladder to become a Senior Constable. And now, within the span of just a few short weeks, I had been demoted to *archives duty*.

It felt as if Wright had just pushed me off the side of a building.

How was I supposed to help people, to carry on Ulric’s legacy and honor my father’s memory, if I was stuck behind a desk in the fucking archives?

“You can’t do this,” I blurted out.

A vicious smile blew across his lips. “Watch me.”

Cold numbness spread through my body as Wright dismissed me and ordered me down to the archives. I walked in a daze down the stairs and towards the massive room full of books and folders and case reports.

When the head archivist told me to start sorting files in one of the sections, I barely had enough presence of mind to nod that I had heard her. I wasn't even sure if I *had* heard her.

My footsteps echoed between the shelves as I staggered over to the section she had pointed towards. Blindly, I started pulling out folders and stacking them into a pile to take back to the desk I had been assigned.

Demoted.

Archives duty.

Those thoughts kept bouncing inside my skull over and over again.

I slumped down on the chair behind the desk. It was located in one of the corners, and the light from the closest oil lamp almost didn't reach it, which made it feel even darker and more cramped than it already was. The whole place smelled of dust and old paper. As if the air didn't move at all down here.

For quite a while, I just sat there on the chair and stared numbly at the stack of files before me.

Maybe I should have taken Levi up on his offer?

The thought jolted me out of my stupor.

Shaking my head, I sat up straighter. No. This wasn't the end. Both the parliament and Wright needed someone to blame for this, but it would blow over soon. And then, I could probably grovel my way back into the South Side Department. It wouldn't be pleasant, but it would work. In the brief time I had known Captain Wright, I had come to realize that he loved the feeling of lording his power over others. And he craved their submission.

So, all I needed to do was to wait for the worst of the shitstorm to blow over. Then I would just have to swallow my

pride and crawl back to him, apologizing and groveling and licking his boots as I begged for my job back. He wouldn't be able to resist the power he would have over me if he agreed to reinstate me, so he would let me come back again.

Drawing in a deep breath, I gave myself a decisive nod. I had a plan. A plan that would work. Now, I just needed to make the best of it until I could set it into motion.

With my confidence back, I reached for the first stack and began sorting through it. The head archivist had been right. The folders in that section were a mess. Different years had been shoved together in no particular order.

I put any thoughts of Levi and his offer out of my mind as I began sorting the folders by date.

Surprise shot through me as I lifted a red file that read: *The Black Emerald Incident*.

For a few seconds, I just stared at it and the date written underneath in neat black script. It was the date my father had died. And The Black Emerald had been the name of our tavern.

My mouth dried out. Flexing my fingers, I shook out my hand to stop it from trembling. I was being ridiculous. Ulric had already showed me this file when I first joined the force. I had already read it. But still, just seeing it here again brought back a slew of memories.

I glanced towards where the other people worked. None of them were looking in my direction. In fact, I couldn't even see most of them behind the mountain of bookshelves.

Sliding my gaze back to the red folder, I set it down on the desk before me.

Maybe I would be able to notice something different this time, now that I had more experience. And now that I knew more about the dark mage world. Maybe I could find some kind of clue as to which dark mage had killed him.

After drawing in a bracing breath, I opened the folder and picked up the case report.

Confusion rippled through me. I frowned at the papers inside. There were more of them than I remembered. I flicked a quick glance over the pages. They didn't even look the way I remembered them.

Shaking my head, I decided that I must have gotten confused because I had been so emotional when I read them last time. But I was less emotional now, so I drew in another deep breath and began to read.

We were alerted that a dark mage meeting would take place at The Black Emerald that night, so Senior Constable Frederick Holburn's team joined mine as we went there to handle it.

So far, the report was accurate with what I had read last time, so I really must have just misremembered what it looked like. Shaking my head at my own forgetfulness, I continued reading.

When we arrived, we found four dark mages seated at a table. They immediately spotted us. We called out orders to surrender, but they refused so we attacked instead.

I frowned. The constables attacked? My memories from that night were muddled from the fear and panic, and because I had been hiding under a table, but I had always thought that one dark mage gang had burst through the door and attacked the other dark mages already inside. But according to this report, the people who barged inside and attacked had been the constables. With confusion still marring my brows, I kept reading.

We were able to kill two of the dark mages. Unfortunately, the others managed to flee before we could apprehend them. However, there was also a civilian casualty. Dan Sterling, the owner of The Black Emerald.

I swallowed back the tide of emotions that washed over me at the mention of my father.

He ran across the room towards where his daughter was hiding right as I shot a lightning bolt at one of the dark mages. Regrettably, it struck Dan Sterling instead. He died instantly.

My head went unnaturally silent.

For a while, I just stared uncomprehendingly at those three sentences.

Then I read them again.

And again.

Coldness spread through my chest like poison.

I shot a lightning bolt. It struck Dan Sterling. He died.

The words clanged inside my skull like a harsh steel bell. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I wasn't sure if I could make my lungs work anymore, but I forced myself to keep reading.

When he died, he left behind a ten-year-old daughter, Eve, who had been hiding underneath the table during the incident. Since she hadn't seen anything, we decided to tell her that he had been killed by the dark mages instead. I recognize that this was a questionable decision, but we decided that this tragic accident might be the start of something good. Given that Dan Sterling was a known dark mage sympathizer, we thought that his death might at least turn young Eve away from that wicked path and instead set her on the course of light and justice.

I couldn't breathe.

Given that Dan Sterling was a known dark mage sympathizer.

Dan Sterling.

Dark mage sympathizer.

Turn young Eve away from that wicked path.

Throwing my hand out, I had to grip the edge of the desk hard to keep myself from toppling over as I read the final part of the report.

Since this was my decision, I will take personal responsibility for her and make sure that she chooses the right path in life.

Silence roared through my head as I stared down at the signature of the person who had written this report.

Senior Constable Ulric Smith.

A gasp tore from my throat unbidden.

Desperately holding on to the desk, I tried to suck air into my lungs as my entire world fell apart around me.

My father had been a dark mage sympathizer. And Ulric, my mentor and the man I had thought of as my uncle for the past sixteen years, was the one who had killed him. And then he had lied to me about it. Lied to me about everything.

My head spun as I dragged my gaze up from the report and stared unseeing at the wall of bookshelves before me.

Dark mages hadn't ruined my life.

The constables had.

THE LAST PART

And now, Levi and Eve await you in *Heartless Enemy*, the final book in the Ruthless Enemy trilogy. Find out how their story ends here: books2read.com/ruthlessenemy3

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To everyone who, at the end of *Ruthless Enemy*, messaged me and said something along the lines of “Oh come on, Marion! You can’t leave us hanging like that!”, I just want you to know that I thought about you when I wrote the ending of this book. And I really am sorry. Or am I? Muahaha.

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complicated relationships. If you have any questions or comments about the book, I would love to hear from you. You can find all the different ways of contacting me on my website, www.marionblackwood.com. There you can also sign up for my newsletter to receive updates about coming books. Lastly, if you liked this book and want to help me out so that I can continue writing, please consider leaving a review. It really does help tremendously. I hope you enjoyed the book!