



THE
KINGMAKER
SAGA

Love is not a weakness.
It lends its strength.

alpha omega

author of the Den of Mercenaries series

LONDON MILLER

ALPHA OMEGA

THE KINGMAKER SAGA

BOOK SIX

LONDON MILLER

LM BOOKS LLC

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For H + Bean

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PROLOGUE

Kava

Bucharest, Romania

SOMETHING WAS ... off.

Kava couldn't quite pinpoint why she felt that way, but years of experience and learning how to carry herself had kept her alive this long, so it wasn't an impulse she was inclined to ignore.

Because from the minute she had left the rented room down the road, she couldn't shake the feeling she was being followed.

The fear didn't make sense, she knew, since she was more than a thousand miles away from most people who wished her harm due to her work with Karina, but as far as she knew, there was only one person who even knew that she and Sebastian had traveled here to Romania in hopes of finding answers about who he was and where he'd come from. And if there was one thing she knew about Karina, she seriously doubted the woman would ever share that information with someone that would mean to harm them ...

But the fine hairs on the back of her neck had stood on end, and though she wanted to believe none of the strangers were paying her even a bit of attention, she still slyly looked around as she adjusted the mustard colored scarf around her neck.

“Your usual today?” Marcu asked, already reaching for one of the hanging net baskets once she was near.

“Yes, please. Thank you.”

Though they’d only been in town for a little more than a week as they made their way across the country, she’d found a small market and butcher shop to purchase from.

And now, with the cold front sweeping in, she knew it was only a matter of time before they were packing up and leaving once more.

He hadn’t said, but she’d noticed as the temperatures started to drop, Sebastian got a little restless, his already broken sleep schedule becoming worse as he paced for what felt like hours at a time.

Marcu had almost finished bagging her food when birds scattered into the air as a gang of kids rushed through them, the tallest of the bunch clutching a hat in his hand, taunting another as he dangled it in the air.

Marcu sucked his teeth disapprovingly, looking after them as they disappeared around the corner. “*Naibii de copii—damned kids.*”

Kava smiled all the same, thinking of the days when the worst thing she’d had to deal with was a boy pulling her hair in school.

Marcu sighed as he added, “Everything changed when they closed the orphanage.”

She was still smiling, her brain sluggish to translate what he was saying, but one word stuck out to her more than the others.

It’d been a word she’d heard Sebastian muttering to himself, and one she’d even heard in some audio files regarding the Wild Bunch.

Orfelinat—orphange.

The cold creeping down her back had very little to do with the gust of wind that kicked up a second later.

As she collected his money from her purse, she considered how to ask the question she had. “*Unde era orfelinatul—where was the orphanage?*”

Her Romanian was still a little rusty, but he seemed to understand what she was saying well enough as he nodded

“Oh yes,” he said with a nod. “There was one just outside of the city—“

She tried to picture what he described—an old building in the middle of the forest where children were sent to live in hopes of having a warm bed and food in their bellies.

“Some were better than others,” he went on, “but—” He gave a grave shake of his head as if that were answer enough.

She listened intently as he told her the stories of some of the horrors the orphans had faced—of the rumors that had circulated around these parts of a wealthy man that came down from the outskirts of town, collecting children living in squalor and even those who’d been given up because of their inability to take care of them.

A devil disguised as an angel.

But rumors were rumors, and she knew they’d have to dig further to find out if there was any truth to it.

Or if it was relevant to Sebastian at all.

Yet the more he described it, the more she thought of the Wild Bunch and what she and Karina had found during their initial research stage of Nix’s assets.

They’d been orphans too, and despite how well connected their sources were, there was very little to be found about where they had come from.

The only thing they knew for sure was that Nix had come here years ago on an assignment for the Lotus Society—the org of contract killers he’d once been a part of—and when he’d left again, he’d had the four of them with him.

And if they considered Sebastian a brother to them ... it meant he had to have been there around the same time, but for reasons she didn’t know yet, he’d been left behind.

Why?

She couldn't be sure this was the same orphanage, but it was a start ...

MAKING her way back to the apartment, she pondered over what Marcu had shared and the, albeit small, chance that the orphanage he'd referred to outside of the city was the one they were looking for.

It wasn't much, and Sebastian would probably say as much, but it was a start.

Their building wasn't much to look at, temporary as might have been. It was old and crumbling around the edges—though she also thought despite its age, it still remained standing—with graffiti on the walls outside, and more than a few stray dogs loitering around the steps hoping for scraps and gentle pets she always gave in abundance.

Her conversation with Marcu still lingered in her mind, and as she headed up the creaking stairs, she wondered if he had been here before.

She tried to imagine a younger version of him—one with the same eyes and a gentler expression.

Without the weight of another's will overshadowing his own.

Juggling her bags, she pulled the key from her inner pocket and let herself inside where she was immediately hit with the scent of roasted meat.

And having gotten to know more about him in the past few weeks they'd been traveling together, his stew would also consist of roughly chopped potatoes, carrots, and peas.

He might not have talked very much still, but he absolutely knew how to make only a few ingredients into something amazing.

But there was very little she complained about when it came to Sebastian—a fact she tried not to think about.

She spotted him in the kitchen, dressed in a black, long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, his shoes tucked neatly in the corner of the room right next to the window. She'd only just gotten him to loosen up enough to not look like he was prepared to battle every minute of the day.

Which only resulted in him taking his shoes off but ... a win was a win.

Though they'd lived in the same place off and on for years, she surprisingly knew very little about him—even less than he knew about himself.

Which was why they'd flown here after the dust had settled.

To find answers.

Hopefully.

The only problem was, instead of making it easier on himself he'd decided to start from scratch rather than asking the people they *both* knew would have answers for him.

But everyone had their own processes, who was she to judge.

Walking into the kitchen to sit her bags down, she peeked over, realizing while the stew was simmering, he was pulling a loaf of bread from the oven.

Sebastian wasn't what one would consider a master chef, and after spending the last week with him, she realized very quickly that he tended to make the same two meals throughout their stay.

Not that she minded. As hearty as the stews might have been, she found them comforting.

But then again, there was very little she disliked about Sebastian and the things he did, and she was self aware enough to know that was because she liked him.

And she tried not to think about that fact much.

“I’m back,” she announced as she walked into the kitchen, though logically she knew he’d probably heard her come in.

But she had a tendency to announce herself when she was coming up behind him, just as a precaution.

One lesson was all she’d needed with that.

They’d fallen into something of a routine in the last couple of weeks they’d been here in Budapest.

Sebastian ventured out—though she didn’t always know where—and when he came back, he made dinner.

Truthfully, she hadn’t known he could cook, but once she actually thought about it, she realized she didn’t know very much about him despite the fact that they’d lived in the same house for quite some time now.

But then again, it wasn’t as if they’d been spending all that time together—quite the opposite most days.

It wasn’t until the last seven months or so that they’d occupied the same space for longer than seventy-two hours at a time.

It confirmed a few things she knew—he was exceptionally clean, rarely spoke unless spoken to—and made her question things she didn’t.

Like where he disappeared off to in the middle of the night when he thought she was sleeping.

He was never gone for more than a couple of hours, but that didn’t stop her from wondering all the same. Yet, no matter how many times she’d thought of asking, she never had.

Because everyone was allowed their secrets even as she yearned to know his.

And what his connection was to the Wild Bunch.

“They were orphans,” Karina had explained while staring at the four men’s pictures on the wall as they discussed strategy one night a long time ago. *“No one’s exactly sure where they came from.”*

Kava had looked from their picture, back to her. *“Can’t we look them up the way we’ve done the others?”*

Karina had looked a bit baffled. *“Unfortunately, there’s nothing to find. They might work in the same capacity as Uilleam’s mercenaries, but that’s not where they started ...”*

She hadn’t cared to know more about them at the time as they had been, before then, a nonexistent threat. And since it wasn’t as if the Kingmaker was easy to work with, Kava hadn’t thought anything of their not delving deeper into the Wild Bunch.

Kava set her bag on the counter, then removed her gloves and scarf and put them away.

She thought of her conversation with Marcu and the nugget of information she’d found out. It wasn’t so much that she didn’t want to share it with him, it just felt so ... personal.

Which didn’t make sense considering everything about what they were doing was personal—his life they were trying to dig into—but with every little bit they learned, she had to watch him disappear into himself for days at a time.

He looked tortured by what he didn’t know, even as he looked eager to know more.

Over dinner was the best choice, she decided, as she went about setting the table as she’d been taught—both before Mother’s prep school, and after—while making sure every fork, spoon, and knife were perfectly straightened.

When he finished, Bishop carried the giant pot over, setting it on a mat on the table.

It didn’t matter if she knew for a fact he hadn’t eaten all day, he always filled her plate first, as he did now while spooning stew into her bowl.

The first time he’d done it, she’d been quick to shake her head and remind him he didn’t have to worry about it, and she was perfectly capable.

The second time she’d only given him a gentle reminder.

After the third, she just accepted it for what it was, and made sure to thank him every time. It was another one of those little things about him that made her feel such unrest when she was around him.

Once he was seated, and had poured his own food, she picked up her spoon, still contemplating how she would explain, but she didn't have to think about it for long.

“What happened?”

“Hm?”

“Down at the market,” he said, his voice soft as he looked up from the table to meet her gaze.

He never held eye contact, not for as long as she could remember.

But that didn't mean he didn't *look* at you. It might have only been a handful of seconds that their eyes met but when they did, there was such an intensity to his gaze that he had a way of sucking you in without trying.

Then, in an instant, his gaze was somewhere else and the moment was broken.

“Nothing, really.”

“Something happened,” he countered.

“I don't know why you—“

“You're staring.”

Heat suffused her cheeks. “What?”

“You've been staring at me since you got back.”

Electing *not* to be embarrassed by that, she told him about her conversation with Marcu and what little he had told her about the orphanage that was only a couple of hours from here deep into the Romanian forest.

Every time she gave a description, he reacted.

His hand twitched, his gaze moved from the wall to the floor and back before reaching her face again, and the look in

his eye ... that lingered with her the most. He might not have remembered much of anything.

But *some* part of him did.

“I could ask Nix—“

“No.”

“His connections are—“

“He wouldn’t want to help me—no one would. It would be pointless to ask.”

“*I* wanted to help,” she reminded him.

But he also wasn’t completely wrong.

Everyone else saw the killer when they looked at him—seeing a monster capable of doing terrible things to worse people.

But he was so much more than that.

And it didn’t change the way she felt. “You’re not a bad person, Sebastian,” she whispered, wishing he could believe that the way she did.

He was so close now, she could see the green flecks in his eyes and even the small scar that bisected his left eyebrow.

More than anything, she wished she could invoke a smile in him.

“Why aren’t you afraid?” he asked when he knew he had her attention.

But it was also the last question she expected from him.

“Why would I need to be?”

He glanced down at his hands for a second before tucking them into his pockets, an unconsciously human act—one Orion had told him would make him seem less threatening if he fidgeted once in a while.

“You can *be* terrifying, Sebastian, but that doesn’t mean *you’re* terrifying.”

He frowned. “I don’t understand the difference.”

“You’re not a monster, is what I’m saying. You—“

“Hurt people,” he said before she could finish.

“*I’ve* hurt people—so have a bunch of other people.”

“Not like I have.”

“You’ve hurt people, sure, but those were also people who hurt *other* people.”

This time, when he met her gaze, he didn’t look away, not for a long time. She saw his response reflected in his eyes though he never voiced it.

Guilt.

A bit of shame ...

Not all of them were guilty, he didn’t say.

She reached up, always mindful of how quickly she moved around him to give him a chance to adjust so as not to startle him and gradually placed her hand on his chest, feeling his inhale before she registered the steady thump of his heartbeat between them.

He paused. “Good people don’t hurt others the way I do.”

“I don’t think there’s anyone in the world whose good *or* bad—it’s a spectrum, and everyone falls somewhere along the line.”

He picked that moment to finally look at her, eyes unblinking in that unnerving way of his. She had to resist the urge not to fidget under the intensity of his stare .

“You know,” she suggested gently, “you could always go to the Wild Bunch for answers.”

His expression slipped a little, almost making her regret the remark, but she wanted to say it anyway.

She hadn’t been there the day Karina had been extracted from the Kingmaker’s compound, but she’d heard quite a bit about it—and the ensuing fight between him and the Wild Bunch.

And it was because of them—of everything still left unspoken between them—that they had come here in the first place.

But instead of going to them directly, Sebastian had wanted to find his own answers about who he was and where he had come from.

“What are you afraid of?”

“The truth,” he whispered, raw honesty coloring every word.

“A friend once told me, there’s beauty in truth—like looking in the mirror.”

That friend had also been the only one who’d stuck by her side after ... well, everything. And though it had been quite a few years since she’d last seen her, Kava did think about her sometimes and wondered what she was doing now.

“Even if I wanted to,” he added, breaking into her thoughts. “I don’t think they’d have me.”

“Why not?” she asked, genuinely confused.

“I’ve tried to kill them—on multiple occasions.”

Kava waved that away. “And how many times have Karina and the Kingmaker tried to kill each other?”

He didn’t look like he appreciated the analogy.

“I only mean to say, the people who love you will never give up on you. They still ask about you,” she said softly, treading carefully. “Even their handler, Nix, went to Karina and asked her the same.”

He didn’t respond immediately.

She stood and walked her bowl over to the sink, giving it a quick rinse before placing it with the others she’d fully wash later.

She readied to ask *him* if he’d made progress, and turned to do just that when she came up short as he’d stood and walked over to her.

He usually kept a safe distance between them, but tonight he'd seemed to have forgotten that rule of his.

Sebastian could, if he wanted to, make himself appear less threatening—the way he'd roll his shoulders in or clasped his hands behind his back in a way that made him appear more open, but it was hard to ignore the size of him when he was up close like this.

“They want something that I'm not,” he said, offering clarity into his thoughts for the first time. “I can't be what they want.”

“I don't think that's true,” she said gently. “I think they want the same thing you do—the truth.”

About who he was and where he'd come from. And how, if they'd all been together, had he ended up in *Gheenă* in the first place.

“And what happens,” he asked, “if you don't like what you find?”

“I think there's very little about you that can't be liked,” she replied, even surprising herself with her own honesty, trying to offset how that must have sounded with a pat on his shoulder.

But somehow, instead of his shoulder, she'd only bothered to go right below which was arguably more chest than shoulder.

As she moved to pull away, he caught her hand, his fingers practically swallowing her own. She expected him to let go just as quickly, but he held it there against his chest as she counted the even thump of his heart eating.

And she was struck, in that moment, with the sudden knowledge that not a single person, for as long as they'd been together, had ever been able to get this close to him without there being some sort of threat.

She didn't want to believe she was the first person who'd touched him without intending to cause him harm—the thought made her want to cry.

As unkind as the world had been to him, he was more concerned with his impact on *it*.

“Seb—“

He tensed, his fingers tightening around hers in an almost painful way as he slowly turned his head in the direction of the door.

Not speaking.

Hardly *breathing* as he stared at it as if he were waiting for something. “What’s—“

Like a shot, his other hand came up and covered her mouth, smothering the question she’d meant to ask.

He slowly turned back to look at her, and yet without saying a word, he let his eyes talk for him.

Something was wrong.

She’d seen this sort of change in him before—the subtle but sudden shift from mild ease to alert.

Like a predator suddenly aware there might be a bigger one nearby.

She hadn’t heard anything at all, but he’d been trained, Karina had told her, in being the best weapon money could buy.

He could memorize walking patterns, and though they’d only been here a short time, he would know if there was someone new in their building just from the way the floorboards creaked.

She didn’t question him.

In the next second, he pulled her close, so close that his lips were at her ear and every bit of her was pressed against the hard front of him.

His hold was almost painful, but she didn’t want him to let go.

They remained that way for a long time, longer than she would have thought necessary, but she heard his inhale before

his breath tickled her flesh as he exhaled.

She almost thought he'd smelled, but couldn't bring herself to believe it.

Then just like that, the moment was broken and he whispered, "Go out the window and get as far as you can—don't wait for me."

His hand was still over her mouth, preventing her from responding, but she gave a firm shake of her head, making her answer clear.

"But—"

"It's not a discussion."

She pulled at his hand to free her mouth. "I'm not going to leave you here alone with—"

He splayed his fingers across her face staring down at her with an expression that brokered silence. "They're not here for you."

She wanted to argue with him further, but he shook his head once, the hand cupping her face tightening.

His grip on her tightened a bit as he said, "I won't be able to concentrate if you're here."

And she saw it then—the thing he didn't want to say.

He didn't want her to see what he would need to become in order to get out of this room alive.

He didn't want her to be afraid of him again.

He had to tap into the part of himself, he'd confessed once, that he hated the most.

Kava couldn't swallow past the lump in her throat, but she also knew there was no time to dissect everything he'd just in that one sentence ... and everything he didn't.

Because he was right.

She'd only be a distraction, and if that resulted in him being able to get away from this after giving her a head start, she had no choice but to listen.

Kava met his gaze, searching their depths for answers to questions she had never asked. And a desperate part of her wanted to believe that she saw it reflected back at her as he held her stare.

Another time, maybe.

If things hadn't been as they were ...

“At the next station, wait for me,” he said, voice low. “I’ll find you.”

“Sebastian—“

He shook his head before she could finish. “I promise.”

Only when she gave him a nod did he finally disengage.

He grabbed the two guns he kept stashed away, the metal gleaming in the fire-lit room.

He pointed to the window, his meaning clear.

She was lucky they were only on the second floor so the drop wouldn't be awful, but that didn't mean her heart wasn't stuttering in her chest.

But instead of focusing on her fear, she grabbed the same bag she'd gone to the market with and threw it over her shoulder, moving as quickly as possible back over to the window, waiting for Sebastian's signal.

It couldn't have been more than a minute, two max from the moment he'd noticed something was wrong, yet it felt like a lifetime as the seconds kicked by, and almost to the second her hands touched the windowsill, the door was blown off its hinges, broken shards of wood and metal bits flying through the air.

Kava instinctively dropped to the ground, curling her arms over her head to shield herself as best she could from the flying debris.

But unlike her, Sebastian didn't flinch—instead, he launched forward with the brutal force of a man capable of unspeakable violence.

She knew better—could almost hear Karina in her telling her to get out of there—but she turned at the last minute to see Sebastian aiming and firing, shooting one in the head with gruesome precision.

He dropped back like lead on the floor, eyes open and vacant as blood leaked from the bullet hole in the middle of his forehead.

He nor the others wore masks, and from what she could see, hadn't tried to conceal their identities by any stretch of the imagination.

Which was never good.

Turning back to the window, she twisted the locks and tried to open it, struggling as she realized the ice and snow had caused it to freeze.

But with a little more effort, she finally banged it open, a gust of cold night air flowing in.

She didn't think about how she was going to get to the ground, or how scary a jump like this was—her only concern was getting out of there and making it to the train station a little over a kilometer away.

There, even before she met back up with Sebastian, she needed to call Karina and tell her what was happening.

No matter what happened, she would know what to do.

Determined, Kava threw one leg over, gripping the sill to steady herself. She just needed to get the other leg over, and lower herself as much as she could before letting go.

The cold stung her cheeks as she readied to bring her other leg over, but a scream ripped free from her throat as rough hands grabbed her with considerable force and dragged her back into the apartment.

Whoever it was dropped her, jerking out of reaching distance as she immediately kicked and flailed, trying to scramble to her feet to get away.

He grinned when he realized she was afraid, readying to come after her again, but a knife whistled through the air,

landing with deadly precision to the left of the man's face before embedding in the wall.

Blood welled along his cheek where a cut started to show itself.

He cursed a harsh sound, but Kava whipped around, realizing Sebastian had been the one to throw the knife, his expression a mask of bloody rage as he raised his gun to fire—

Only to be struck across the face before he could with a heavy looking weapon.

She shouldn't have hesitated.

She should have gone out the window like he'd said without waiting to see what would happen to him.

But her hesitation cost them.

A split second of distraction was all they'd needed.

Sebastian was struck again, forced down to his knees as a cattle prod was produced by another of the men and jammed into his ribs.

Kava knew she was screaming—could almost *feel* the words coming out of her mouth, but her voice was drowned out by the blood whooshing around her ears.

Words gave way to pleas as she watched him crumble, his eyes rolling to the back of his head before he hit the ground like a dead weight.

Sebastian was down.

And she knew exactly who'd come for them ...

But she didn't get to finish that thought before pain exploded in her head, then blackness stole her.

CHAPTER ONE

UILLEAM RUNEHART LIKED to consider himself a changed man.

Surely, that was the proper course of things when one had to recover from nearly being sentenced to rot in an American prison for the rest of his natural born life.

Self reflection was an admirable thing.

Which was why, as he regarded the man currently zip tied to a chair in his new warehouse, he found himself feeling rather ... reflective.

“Your sheer will to live is commendable, I have to admit.”

For hours the man had sat there, suffering pain the likes of which most would have succumbed to long before now.

One hundred and twenty minutes of pure, unadulterated torture that had made even Uilleam’s skin feel tight on his bones.

Had *he* been in the man’s position—hands turning a sickly shade of blue while his wrists were abraded by the hard plastic currently binding him to an even harder chair, he surely would have resigned himself to his fate because there was no way in hell he’d ever put himself through this.

Secrets couldn’t be worth this level of pain.

Then again, Uilleam rarely found himself in these positions.

The poor man tried to look at him, but with the way he moved, one would have thought his head was too heavy to lift.

“It wasn’t me,” the man sputtered out, blood dripping from his swollen mouth. “I *swear*.”

The fact that he was still able to lie and the words weren’t grating on the last nerve Uilleam possessed was evidence of his change, clearly.

Normally, he’d have had the man shot in the face and dumped where no one would ever be able to find him again.

Instead, he was attempting to be rational—a feat he was shockingly capable of.

Though, it could have also been because he didn’t have the same amount of mercenaries he’d had before, but that was a thought he was electing to ignore for the time being.

“We’ve worked together for six years, Patrick. I like to think we had a great partnership over the years, no? Certainly lucrative for us both considering your summer home in Argentina with that lovely mistress of yours. What was her name again?”

Patrick made a wheezing sort of sound, but didn’t immediately offer her name.

Not that he needed to.

Uilleam knew everything there was to know about him, her, and anyone else in his life because that was what he did.

Collected little bits of information, stowing them away until the moment he needed them.

It was what he excelled at.

“You seem more affected now than you did when I threatened to have your wife—”

“Come on! You know me. I’ve always been a team player, you *know* that!”

His words were punctuated by a grunt as a fist slammed into the man’s face with enough force that even Uilleam could feel an echo of pain in his own jaw.

One of the twins—neither of which’s name he had bothered to learn—wincing as he drew his arm back, looking

down as he flexed his hand, discoloration already spreading across the breadth of his knuckles from the broken blood vessels beneath his skin.

“Mercenaries,” Uilleam said with a shrug. “What can I say?”

Patrick nodded weakly, the bit of pupil Uilleam could see through the slit of the man’s swollen eye focused intently on him.

But Uilleam wasn’t finished yet. “I could’ve made twice as much on that Belarus contract we negotiated had I gone with a different investor, and yet, I chose to work with you. Generous of me, I know.”

Had he been closer, he would have patted the top of the man’s head.

“Considering how wealthy I’ve made *you* during our time together, how could you possibly think betraying me would work in your favor?”

The man stumbled over his words, managing to say absolutely nothing of importance.

As if going in circles would get him out of this.

Uilleam’s temper spiked at the thought.

“I—”

Before he could muster out another denial, Uilleam waved his hand—the only gesture one of the twins needed before he made his words turn into wails.

“You see, someone gave the American authorities the location of two of my safe houses, putting a very lucrative contract in jeopardy.”

And had he not heard about the raid before it began, the client who’d paid him an obscene amount of money to make him disappear would have been found out.

And the last thing he needed right now was another loss.

With a concentrated effort—and an astronomical amount of luck—he’d managed to escape ruin three months ago.

And though he had proven victorious in an impossible situation most would not have, the damage to his name had still been done.

The fall of his Den had been irreparable. Damage to his empire, and while he'd managed to skate on charges brought forth by the US government, it only softened the blow.

He still had to fix the cracks in the foundation.

The first step?

Luring out the rats.

That was how it was supposed to be, he imagined, after everything had upended itself and now he was trying to make sense of everything around him.

But putting everything in order wasn't nearly as easy of a task as it should have been.

And as he stood in the middle of the floor, his arms behind his back as he leaned forward to better see the man hanging from the meat hook in the ceiling, he realized just how true that was.

Which was why he'd sent Bishop and his band of misfits on this expedition in the first place.

He didn't care how slight the betrayal, if *anyone* had acted against him and hadn't stood the line, he planned to make an example out of every one of them?

Because if the world knew nothing else about him, they would know:

The Kingmaker always landed on his feet.

"You know me," Peter said again, something he'd been repeating for the last hour. "You know I wouldn't go against you."

Uilleam shook his head. It was *because* he knew the man that he didn't believe a single word out of the man's mouth.

"I'd love to make a liar out of you."

He hadn't always been the pathetic sight he was now.

In fact, he'd once been instrumental in Uilleam's overtaking of a Portuguese syndicate, but like many men who'd come before him, greed had overshadowed his common sense.

"I *never* worked with them," he said again, tears straining his voice. "I wouldn't."

"*That*, I believe," Uilleam offered with a nod, the look of surprise on the man's swollen face turning to relief.

He walked forward, closing the distance between them until he could smell the coppery scent of the blood soaking his clothes. "I don't believe you gave anything to the authorities."

Peter sighed. "Thank you. *Thank you*, I know—"

"No, Katherine Ashworth relaid that information to them. I want to know how *she* got it."

It might have been the blood loss, or perhaps the mention of the woman's name that caused the already sickly pale man to look as if he'd been offered a death sentence.

"Tell me, Peter. What did the beautiful Katherine Ashworth offer you in exchange for your cooperation?"

"I don't—"

"*The Mother*," Uilleam shot back before he could finish, his agitation getting the best of him.

He'd refused to call her by such a name.

Not because he couldn't respect a title, whatever it might be, but because it was another reminder of who she was to Karina.

And the reminder was like acid down his throat.

But worse than that was the fact that while Peter was trembling, he still hadn't given him what he wanted.

"In case I haven't made this clear, the only person you need to fear right now is *me*."

And oh did he have every intention of making sure the man understood *exactly* the gravity of his wrongdoing.

Because it wasn't just about him. If it had, he'd have had a bullet put in the man's head and been done with it long before now.

But times had changed and whether he liked to admit it or not, lessons had to be taught to *anyone* who thought to cross him.

The fight seemed to drain out of Peter in his next breath, and as his shoulders sagged, he looked defeated as he finally gave Uilleam what he wanted.

"It wasn't her," he said, his voice low, though in the silence of the room, everyone could hear him.

"Go on."

"Belladonna."

Uilleam frowned at the name, as annoyed to hear it now as he had been the very first time he'd heard it.

Of course then, he hadn't known who it belonged to—and had, for a long time, believed his adversary was a man.

But as the name slipped out of Peter's mouth, a mental image of Karina flashed in his mind.

First of her as the Lady in White—as deadly as she was beautiful with a penchant for violence where he was concerned.

Then, on the heels of it, came the vision of her when she'd come to his hotel room in the middle of the night because she'd been afraid to lose him.

Because the same all consuming love that coursed through him, even to this day, still coursed through her as well.

But no matter how he might have willed it, love couldn't erase the mistakes of the past.

And no one knew that better than him.

"How much?" Uilleam asked now, ignoring what the man had said. Tucking that piece of information away in the vault in his mind. "How much was your life worth?"

Thing One pulled the gun from his belt as Uilleam took a step back, aiming it at the man's head.

Peter looked up with watery eyes, pleading for mercy he wouldn't receive. "There has to be another way I can make things right. There has to be another way."

Uilleam almost laughed. "Belladonna once told me that."

That there was another way.

That violence didn't always have to be the answer.

He'd believed her then because he'd wanted to—because he wanted *her*, and wanted to be what he thought she needed.

But that was before he'd lost ten years with her—before he'd lost Poppy.

Sometimes, violence was the *only* answer.

Uilleam shook his head, making sure he held the man's gaze before he died. "But the thing is, the devil in love is still the devil—and you don't cross me and live to tell the tale."

Peter didn't get a chance to respond.

And a few seconds later, he would no longer be able to *say* anything at all again.

THERE HAD BEEN a time when he would have found the sight of his brother waiting for him annoying. Animosity had always lingered between them for so many years, he found it harder to remember a time when he didn't feel such contempt for his older brother

But as of late, his ire had been replaced with a grudging respect for his dearest brother, and something akin to forgiveness had bloomed inside of him though he had yet to admit as much.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, brother?" Uilleam asked as he entered the room. "I thought you had a pregnant wife to spoil?"

He wasn't the only one to have gone through a metamorphosis of sorts.

A change had come over Kit as well the day he'd learned Luna was pregnant with their child.

He couldn't think of a time when he'd ever seen his brother quite as animated as he'd been the night he'd come over to share the news, his nerves getting the better of him as he confessed his worries about becoming a father.

Uilleam had waved those concerns away, but that was before Elsie had found what he hadn't thought existed.

And then, he was suddenly thrust into fatherhood himself and had absolutely no idea what he was doing.

"I am," Kit said as he leaned against the cloth covered desk. "She's worried about you."

She was the only one of his former mercenaries who held that sentiment, he imagined. "There's no need. I have everything under control."

Kit didn't look so sure. "I'm inclined to agree with her on this. You already know what you should do," Kit said patiently.

"Do I?" he asked, because for once, he wasn't absolutely certain of the path he needed to take.

He'd only just gotten Karina back, and managed to resurrect a child he never thought he would have the opportunity to meet.

There was so much at risk now that he needed to be absolutely sure of what he would do next.

Because one single misstep ... it could mean his family's ruin.

"Call your mercenaries," Kit said, as if that were the most obvious answer in the world.

As if that were even remotely a possibility. "*What?*"

Kit didn't seem to take note of his sarcasm. "Of course, the best option would be to simply *ask* Karina, herself, where you

can find her mother—surely, her own daughter would know her well enough—but you haven’t done that thus far because you don’t want her to know you’re hunting her mother.”

Uilleam didn’t admit he was right.

Nor did he admit that he had the few mercenaries he had left and the others he was currently recruiting searching all around the world for the woman, and as of yet, she had yet to be found.

Hell, he hadn’t even managed to get a general location despite the many weeks that had passed by.

The woman had been a pain in his arsehole for years before the events over the last year—had even shown her face more than once—and yet now that he was actually looking for *her* and not Karina, she was nowhere to be found.

But it wasn’t as if he could share any of this with Karina.

It wasn’t a conversation he was looking forward to having with her because despite all that had happened, he wasn’t sure what her position was when it came to Katherine Ashworth.

Families were complicated—mothers more so.

He knew that firsthand.

“My new mercenaries will find her eventually.”

“Sure, *eventually*,” Kit agreed with some derision. “But we both know that for as long as you’d had them searching for Karina, they were the ones who inevitably found her. If there was anyone equipped to find Katherine, I’d bet on them.”

Uilleam scowled to himself, running agitated fingers through his hair. “Absolutely, brother. I don’t know why I didn’t possibly think of asking the lot who, if you’ve forgotten, threatened to kill me and would have if not for the contracts I had with them.”

Mercenaries were a fickle bunch by nature—mistrusting, violent, and altogether surly.

He knew they’d eventually turn against him if they ever found out the truth of how they’d come to be in his service—

he just hadn't anticipated it would happen as quickly as it did.

Or that he would have had to reveal his last Ace, especially when he wasn't yet ready to call in the one favor the man owed him.

"Just ... consider it," Kit said.

Uilleam nodded, knowing he had no intention of following that through, but while he expected Kit to leave, he didn't.

He hesitated.

"What is it?"

"I—"

He paused again.

"You're not one to stumble over your words usually."

At that, Kit smirked. "I only wanted to ask if she knows."

Karina, he presumed. "Know what, exactly?"

His expression didn't change at all as he said, "That you plan to kill her mother."

Bishop and his lot had been thinking the same thing, though they hadn't voiced it while he'd been interrogating Patrick.

But neither Kit nor Bishop seemed surprised at all that he was considering it.

Uilleam glanced down a moment. "I don't imagine that's a conversation we need to have considering I can't even *find* her mother."

"But we both know when you're determined, you always find a way to get what you want. It isn't a question of whether you two will cross paths, but *when*."

"And those who dared harm *your* wife, Kit? How are they? I specifically remember one of them learning firsthand what *lingchi* means."

His brother elected to ignore that. "I only mean to say, secrets never stay hidden for long. I would know."

No ... they usually didn't.

All the same. "While I thank you for your words of caution, I have everything under control. You don't need to worry yourself."

Kit looked as if he wanted to say more, but ultimately decided against it before nodding and moving to his feet. "If you need anything, you know where to find me."

Alone in his office again, he considered what that would look like if he did seek out his brother for aid.

Kit had always been good at finding people—Elsie too.

But this one ... he didn't want them for this part of it.

It was too *personal*.

And he would be damned if Katherine answered to anyone other than him.

Not after what she'd taken from them.

A vision of Poppy suddenly filled his mind—the way she had run as soon as she'd seen Karina standing there. How their tears had thawed the coldness inside of him until he couldn't ignore the sharp ache that remained.

No, this was something he needed to handle himself. And when he asked for his pound of flesh?

Uilleam had every intention of collecting every single gram.

BISHOP FROZE ON THE SIDEWALK, his attention on the idling Escalade a block away. Had he not stopped so suddenly, Uilleam doubted he would have given it a second thought.

But, that was also the reason he'd wanted mercenaries in the first place.

And though he might have felt on top of the world after the turn of events inside of this warehouse, he remembered all too

well what it felt like for a bullet to rip through his flesh, and if he could help it, that once would be all there was.

But as quickly as Bishop had rested his hand on his gun, ready to do whatever the night called for, his stance relaxed as the Escalade pulled away and rode directly toward them.

Uilleam realized a moment too late who it belonged to as the headlights dimmed and the only thing he could see was his own reflection in the tinted windows.

Slowly, the back window rolled down, revealing a man in a tan suit. “I’ve come to make you an offer.”

It wasn’t necessarily that Carmelo was predictable, Uilleam had always thought, it was his fierce loyalty that would ultimately—he imagined—be the reason for the man’s downfall.

But the Italian man was as stubborn as they came, and no matter how Uilleam tried to explain it, it was like trying to move Mount Everest.

“You’ve come to make me an offer that requires this stealth?” he asked.

The other thing about Carmelo?

He was arrogant enough to have his meetings right in the middle of the day because with the power and influence he possessed, who could possibly tell him otherwise?

Which was another reason he didn’t think anything good could bode from this conversation.

“I’ll be right back,” Uilleam muttered to Bishop as he stepped forward and up into the truck, closing the door behind him.

All too quickly, his mind was cast back to a time when *he’d* been the one to track down one of his mercenaries in the middle of the night for a conversation, even knowing the man he’d eventually meet would wonder how he knew he’d be there.

Now, he was standing on the other side of it, and that thought troubled him more than he would like to admit.

A wistful sort of smile crossed Carmelo's face, the only show of amusement before his expression returned to its neutral position. "This is important."

"By all means," Uilleam said with a wide gesture of his arms. "Continue."

But he had a sneaking suspicion, he wasn't going to like what the man said next.

CHAPTER TWO

“MUMMY, WATCH ME!” Karina shouted, racing out the back door, Iz looking on with noticeable concern while their mother, Katherine, walked out the villa last.

But she was too excited to care that they weren't as thrilled as she was. Being home from school was like a breath of fresh air.

Being home meant she wasn't forced to play nice with girls she was quite certain didn't like her, and loved even more when they left to go on holiday because it was always just the three of them.

Of course, when Mother had announced they'd be traveling to Ibiza, she hadn't known where that was or what they'd be doing, but as she'd happily stared out the window of the car they'd rode in more than a day ago now, she'd needed only to see the coast and the lapping waves for excitement to thrum inside of her.

But none of that mattered now because they were finally here.

Katherine didn't look nearly as amused by Karina's running, but as she raced across the beach as quickly as her legs could carry her, she could only think about the excitement humming inside of her.

The absolute joy she felt at the very sight of the sparkling water up ahead.

From the time winter spread its spindly arms across the world, she'd been dreaming about warmer weather—about

cannonballs and having her favorite float in the water.

“Look, Iz!”

As she ran, she threw her arms up before throwing herself forward, catching her weight on her hands, then using the momentum to propel herself over again until she landed back on her feet, looking back at her sister with a smile—finally mastering the cartwheel she’d been trying to teach her for nearly a year now.

Iz clapped proudly, doing one of her own right after.

Katherine looked on, a frown now tugging at her lips as she gazed at her oldest. “Let’s not do that, Iz, darling. You’re not as graceful as your sister.”

Karina’s smile dropped, looking back from where she stood at the edge of the shore, the waves lapping up over her feet.

She could see Iz from where she stood, a hand shielding her eyes as she looked off down the coast. One could almost think she hadn’t heard Katherine’s remark if not for how flushed her face looked.

Sometimes, she wondered if Mother realized how often she hurt Iz’s feelings. Her older sister might not have ever complained, but she could see it, and she didn’t like it though she didn’t know what to say.

Plus, Iz had always been better at doing cartwheels than her—she’d been the one to teach Karina in fact.

But ... maybe she just didn’t know that, a small voice supplied, giving the benefit of the doubt.

“Mum, Iz—“

Iz picked that moment to turn and take three steps forward before trying another cartwheel, but didn’t quite land it as she stumbled and landed on her bum on the ground.

She laughed, the sound a little off as she looked at Karina rather intensely.

“I’m a little rusty, Kari, could you show me how to do it?”

Though Karina didn't see how that was possible, she prepared to do just that, finding Katherine smiling at the pair of them now.

"Go on, then," she said encouragingly. "Let's see."

Her hands above her head, she flipped herself over and did exactly that.

And before long, she forgot all about what had upset her and remembered why she enjoyed going on holiday.

After a while, Iz took off down the beach to collect seashells, leaving Karina sitting on a beach towel next to Katherine who almost immediately began to fuss with her hair.

"Iz is really good at stuff too," Karina said while looking over at her mother.

"Of course she is, dear."

"But you always tell me when I'm doing a good job," she pointed out, feeling confused. "Why don't you tell her?"

There was a flash of something in Mother's eyes before she sighed in a way that said she found what Karina was saying cute. "A mother always knows what their child needs, even when they think they might know better."

Karina didn't know how to respond, but knew, deep down, she didn't agree, even as she didn't completely understand what she was trying to say.

Katherine rubbed the top of her head, looking down at her fondly. "You'll understand when you're a mother one day. A mother will always do what's necessary for the betterment of her child."

What she thought was loving ... didn't make her feel any better.

If anything, as she looked back at the water, she felt more confused than ever.

SOMETIMES, memories of the past had a way of sneaking up on her when she least expected them too.

And from the moment she had walked into that house and found Poppy there waiting, and a careful explanation from Uilleam, they'd come in one after the other, no matter how hard she tried to push them down to the recesses of her mind.

There was beauty in pretending everything was all right.

If she believed it enough, then she didn't have to answer the question that had plagued her for weeks now.

A question, she was afraid she would never get the answer to.

Why?

Any person could craft their own reality when they had the means to do so—and *that* was certainly easier than trying to acknowledge a truth that cut so deeply, it felt like a wound that wouldn't heal.

Which was why, despite the dream that lingered despite her consciousness, Karina Ashworth walked into the bathroom and got herself ready for the day, and refused to acknowledge the mental image of her mother and the words she couldn't escape.

You'll understand when you're a mother one day ...

Understand? She didn't. Not even a little.

Pulling a brush through her hair, she swept the strands up into a ponytail, braiding the ends and wrapping them around until she formed some semblance of a bun and pinned it into place.

Carefully blended concealer, a few dabs of blush, and precisely lined mauve lipstick made her look presentable—and not at all like a woman who'd tossed and turned for the better part of the morning.

She didn't give much thought to what she was wearing today—an old, but favorite, pair of jeans with a rip in the knee and a cropped sweater.

She turned off the light as she left the bathroom, her gaze shifting to the unmade bed and the bedside table beside it where her phone rested.

Almost to the second, a symphony of bells sounded as her alarm went off as the clock struck seven.

Like most mornings, it wasn't needed since she was usually awake before it went off, but she set it every night before bed all the same because she hoped, secretly, that one day—even if far off in the future—she would need it.

It also didn't help that despite how careful he'd been the night before, she'd known the instant Uilleam had slipped out from beside her, his lips ghosting her cheek before he did so, and left for somewhere she didn't know.

And trying to sleep after that had proven impossible, but as the hours waned on, she'd listened to the wind whistle outside the penthouse suite of the Obsidian Hotel where they were staying until at some point, she'd finally drifted off again.

Stepping out of the bedroom, hushed voices had her brows knitting together, but the expression cleared when she came around the corner.

Poppy and Iz were side by side on the floor, a trio of dolls perched in front of them.

Poppy looked up at Iz expectantly as the latter observed them with a critical eye, seeming to make a decision.

“The middle one should be the Supreme—look at her shoes.”

Iz nodded with a certain look of finality that had Poppy squinting at her, trying to understand. “But *her* shoes are green?” she said, though it sounded more like a question, her voice adorably confused as she pointed at the last doll in the row.

“And when have green shoes ever gone well with a purple dress, darling?”

Poppy was the first to notice her, flashing a toothy grin as she hopped off the floor and immediately ran to her.

Nothing in her life could have prepared her for the feeling that bloomed when she hugged her.

It felt like the first time all over—the wispieness of her hair, or the downy softness of her skin, and the way she clung to her so tightly as if it were the very last time they'd share this moment.

It made her heart melt.

Iz wasn't usually one for sentiment, but her smile was a bit wistful as she looked on before she stood, picking at a piece of invisible lint off her cigarette trousers.

“Gone for back up, have we?” she gave a dramatic roll of her eyes. “What does your mother know? She's been wearing white monochrome for years now. And I'll have you know, I taught her everything she knows.”

Well ... she wasn't completely wrong. “Good morning, my love. How are we feeling?”

Poppy looked so much like Uilleam when she smiled. “Good. Aunt Iz said we'd go shopping.”

A pang of panic hit her as she looked at her sister, feeling unsure. “Another day, maybe. We—”

“Promises are promises. We can't very well stay here for the rest of time, can we?” Iz asked, her smile not hiding what she really wanted to know.

Her expression said: *How long do you expect to stay trapped in here?*

“We've been making our way through a collection of Disney films,” Karina said carefully. “You're always welcome to join us.”

“And there'll be plenty of time for that *later*. Besides, Poppy wants a dress to match her new Supreme doll,” Iz added, holding it up with a little shake. “What kind of aunt would I be if I didn't indulge my favorite niece?”

Poppy, oblivious to the *real* conversation they were having, smiled with a giggle. “I'm your only niece.”

“Yet, the best all the same.”

It was clear this wasn't a fight she was going to win, even as she, too, wanted to go *somewhere*.

Ever since they'd found Poppy, she'd refused to let her out of her sight, spending much needed time together.

Not that it had been hard.

Every second together was a gift she'd never grow tired of. There was so much lost time to make up for—so many things she hadn't been able to experience and ... well, it might have been a little selfish, but she'd also been happy to keep her here inside the penthouse to herself.

Uilleam never seemed to mind. He was rebuilding, she knew, rectifying the damage she'd done.

“Then shopping it is,” Karina said, glad that she did when she saw Poppy's eyes light up. “But first, breakfast.”

Which would come up, courtesy of a few pressed buttons on the intricate phone system installed in the room.

Poppy unwrapped her arms and raced off with a, ‘*be right back!*’ as Karina watched her go, smiling to herself as she turned to face Iz, only to find her sister watching her.

She could already see the questions brewing ...

So before she could ask them, Karina made a quick dash to the kitchen where she found Iz's shadow quietly working near the stove.

Zoran had his back to her, and from the looks of things, had only just finished making. Chai tea.

Despite his relatively large size—and the way the sleeves of his shirt strained around the muscles in his biceps—he was surprisingly deft as he poured two cups. And when he spotted Karina, he went ahead and grabbed another.

He might have been silent and deadly most days, but he was considerate in a way that always felt unconscious.

“Are you and Iz staying for breakfast?” she asked as she happily accepted her own cup, blowing across the top before

taking a sip.

“Wouldn’t dream of missing it,” Iz announced as she came into the kitchen.

“I could eat,” Zoran said with a shrug.

But instead of sliding Iz’s cup across the island as he had Karina’s, he held it out like an offering, and as her eyes darted between the two of them, she had a feeling there was more to this than she knew.

Iz tried her very best not to look at him, but it was almost impossible as he pressed the drink into her hands, forcing her gaze up to his. And it was the *way* he looked at her as he did it that made it all feel so intimate, Karina, herself, looked away.

“Is there a reason you insist on remaining alone when he’s just ... *there*?” Karina asked when he stepped out of earshot and it was just the two of them.

She’d watched her sister broker more than one international arms deal, and had even traded barbs with a Saudi prince without batting an eyelash, but when it came to Zoran ... she turned into a flustered mess.

It would have been more amusing if she didn’t find it so confusing.

“He’s my bodyguard,” Iz said beneath her breath, using both hands to hold her cup of tea. “I’ve never liked when things get messy—they never end well.”

“How long do you plan to use that as an excuse?”

Because for as long as Karina could remember, that had always been her reason.

“They worked together.”

“The lines would get too blurry.”

One excuse after another that she was never convinced Iz even believed herself.

Words were one thing—actions quite another.

Like now, when she pretended to observe the space around her when she was actually looking for him whenever he was out of her sight.

This was what she must look like, Karina imagined, whenever Uilleam wasn't around.

Did she look as lovesick whenever his name was brought up?

“But my lack of a love life isn't nearly as important as present matters.”

“Oh no,” she said, attempting to sound light hearted, knowing exactly where this conversation was headed. “You've got that look.”

Iz was nothing if not honest. “Have you asked her about Katherine?”

She was thankful for the coffee in her hands as she turned the cup around before bringing it up to her lips—it bought her some time

“I don't see why that's important right now.”

Iz gave her a look that would have rivaled Uilleam's. “You don't think it's worth noting that Mother has not only been silent, but hasn't reacted at all to ...”

She trailed off meaningfully, her gaze drifting over to Poppy who came skipping back into the room with freshly washed hands and her hair tied back.

A custom of hers whenever they were going to sit and eat—a lesson they, too, had been taught.

She was further saved from answering that question when the bell chimed with the arrival of the lift onto their floor, the doors opening to reveal room service arriving with two trolleys filled with food.

One benefit of their current stay in the Obsidian Hotel—their entire floor comped via its owner, known only as the Chancellor—was not only the twenty-four hour concierge and room service.

But the protection that came with staying in a hotel like this one.

The Chancellor, though she had never done business with him prior to Uilleam, ran a chain of hotels known for their hospitality—and their rule of never allowing violence within its walls.

It was part of the Obsidian’s guarantee when you were a guest.

Karina wasn’t sure if there was anyone who’d ever broken that rule, but considering no one had even attempted ... she imagined that was because of the Chancellor’s notorious reputation.

He wasn’t a man one wanted to anger.

“Until the threat is neutralized,” Uilleam had said when they talked of where they would take Poppy.

Neither needed to say who the threat was.

Even now, it felt like her presence loomed over them.

Whereas some people could make their presence felt, and *that* was when you knew to worry, the opposite was true for Katherine.

It was when Mother disappeared that one truly had to worry.

But that was a problem she wasn’t quite sure how to tackle yet, and the more she tried to form a quick solution, the more she wanted to stay right here in this temporary sanctuary for as long as she possibly could.

“I’ll take care of it,” she said, pulling dishes down from the cabinet above.

“Karina—”

“Not now,” she said firmly, her voice an octave higher than she meant it to be.

Poppy looked over at them, concern etched in her face as she picked that moment to ask, “D’you think Nana will come and visit soon?”

Iz met her gaze, all gentleness gone. “You can take the knife out your back and put a bandaid on it, but the wound is still there. And what bleeds, festers.”

CHAPTER THREE

Bishop

HE WAS AWAKE LONG before the arguing kicked up next door and his alarm went off, but Bishop found that it didn't bother him as much as it would have in the days before *Gheenă*.

Back then, he would have walked right over, knocked right on the door, and told whoever was on the other side to keep it down and be on his way, but the constant noise felt familiar now.

It reminded him of where he'd been held and the conditions of being there—how the wails of the hurt had carried through the catacomb of prison cells that had made up the basement of the *Gheenă* compound.

And as he rolled to his back, the light sheet covering him pooling at his waist, he realized how differently he viewed things.

Everything, even the most mundane, was divided into two categories.

Before and after.

Reaching out blindly, he felt around on the floor for the pack of cigarettes he'd dropped hours before, then his matches.

The flame glowed bright in the darkness of the room, as he dragged in that first inhale that brought an almost instant hit of euphoria.

It wasn't enough to wipe away all the stress and tension he felt, but it was enough to keep him from feeling like he was seconds from climbing the walls in his apartment.

After the second hit, he sat up, cracking his neck on both sides before standing and heading into the bathroom to relieve himself.

Done, he shed his clothes, left them in a pile on the floor and hopped in the shower, letting the first stages of cold water finish waking him up before the scalding water soothed the worst of his sore muscles.

And as the final bits of fatigue and melancholy washed away, he was feeling a bit like his old self again.

The cold hit him as soon as he walked out of his apartment building.

He pulled his hood up, tucked his hands into his pockets and instead of taking his car, he started walking, not sure where he was heading since it was still so early and he had a bit of time before his appointment.

Despite the cold, he liked feeling the air on his skin—of seeing the sun so high in the sky after spending nearly a decade surrounded by stone walls and concrete floors with rust colored stains.

Nearly forty-five minutes later, he realized his aimless walking hadn't been so aimless after all.

His apartment, though not much to write home about, wasn't far from the old Den headquarters—a place that had once been like a second home to him.

It looked different now having been abandoned after it fell.

A shade of its former glory.

Like himself.

He'd ventured here in the days after he'd come back, or rather, the ruins of what it had once been. Still in *Gheenă* at the time, he hadn't been there the day Belladonna had been extracted from within.

He hadn't seen the bombs detonated or the walls fall in ruin when they'd been breached.

The last time *he'd* been here, he'd been amongst friends—those he'd been more than willing to put his life on the line for and who'd gladly do the same for him.

Back when they'd agreed to become a part of the Den and were all, at one time, ready to do the bidding for the man most now considered Public Enemy Number One.

That was the job.

But now, that felt like a lifetime ago—back when he'd agreed to work for the Kingmaker when he'd come in on the heels of his anger and rage and *rebellion* against what he'd known because of everything he'd lost.

There wasn't a second, minute, or *hour*, even during his confinement, when he didn't think about his sister, Florence.

How long had she been gone now?

More than half the years she'd been alive?

He'd known life before her, loved life with her, but had never imagined living in a world where she didn't exist.

When he was alone, like now, with only his thoughts to occupy him, it almost felt like he was waiting for her to come up behind him and duck underneath his arm to stare out at the city—to ask him something that he would tell her was stupid, but he'd always been happy to indulge whatever questions she'd had.

She'd smile up at him—always an endless source of optimism—and try to convince him that the world was beautiful and opportunity was ripe because she believed, *truly* believed, that the world wasn't a fucking shit show that chewed you up and spit you out and expected you to deal with it.

But he didn't ever share those thoughts with her. Because it had only been the two of them, and being cynical was his job.

And now, he was alone because her life had been snuffed out by a motherfucker who, unfortunately, could only die once ...

Things were supposed to be different.

She was supposed to be here—living. Breathing.

But this life was cruel ... and he knew that too well.

“BISHOP?”

Blinking, he focused on the woman sitting across from him, making it a point not to show he hadn't heard a word she'd been saying. “What was the question?”

The woman's smile was patient, empathetic even. “How are you adjusting to being home?”

Shrinks had never been his thing.

The whole idea of someone digging around inside his head to try to get him to confess the deep dark shit that was better left buried had never resonated with him—even before he'd joined the Den and became a mercenary.

Even if his father hadn't been a dick, Bishop had never been one to talk about his feelings. He liked to work through whatever inside his own head first, *then* process it however he needed to.

But after waking up one too many times feeling like he was on the edge and the idea of putting a gun to his head and ending it all just so his mind could stop working for five minutes, being inside his own head didn't seem like the safest place for him to be at the moment.

Which was why for the past couple of weeks, he'd found himself here inside this office, staring at generic artwork on the walls of a shrink who *really* liked vanilla scented candles.

She was nice enough—older by a couple of decades, and acquainted with enough people in his trade that she was never

shocked by anything that might come out of his mouth.

And would never share said secrets with anyone else.

He shrugged.

Sometimes his bed was too soft and the feel of it was enough to keep him awake at night.

There'd once been a time when the only thing he could even *dream* about was the pillowy softness of a king-sized bed that cost too much money, and the way he would kill to be back in one.

Hell, he'd even spent more than one tour sleeping on packed earth in the middle of the jungle, and had still counted down the days until he would make it back home for a good night's sleep.

But *Gheenă* had broken that in him. Maybe it was something about laying on the concrete floors of that black site for years with the cold of the stone seeping into his sore, broken body, and imagining what it would be like to rest without the wails of agonized pain, mixed with the smell of sweat and fear to keep him awake ...

But now that he was home, it all felt ... wrong.

Everything was off.

The bed.

The apartment he'd found in the city.

Shit, sometimes even the food tasted off though it was leagues better than what he'd been served.

He just felt ... restless.

The insomnia was driving him up the fucking wall and he needed a damn break.

"Same shit," he settled on saying. "You know how that goes."

"I don't," she said with all seriousness, scribbling something down so quickly on the notepad, he couldn't gauge what she'd written.

She'd become good at that once she'd realized what he'd been doing during their first two sessions together.

His lack of response seemed to be enough now.

“What are you afraid of?” she asked with a little tilt of her head. “We're all afraid of something.”

He blew out a heavy breath, thinking of the cell that had been his home for nearly a decade ...

When he closed his eyes, he found himself back there more often than he liked—felt the skittering of spiders crawling all over his skin, and no matter how fast he thought he was, they always proved faster ...

He'd spent what felt like a lifetime learning to hate the darkness because of the things that came out of it. Even now, he kept everything clean and meticulous around him for fear of bugs.

He hated those fucking things.

“When you've seen what I have, Doc, there ain't much to fear, let me tell you.”

The mask she kept up during their sessions might have been as good as any mercenary's, he could tell she didn't fully believe that, but she didn't press him.

Clearing his throat, he glanced down at his watch, surprised still by how much time he could spend in this room without realizing it.

But he had work to do it.

“Looks like our hour is about up, Doc.”

She looked at him quizzically, tapping her pen against the notebook.

After a minute of that stare ... “Spit it out, Doc,” Bishop said, rubbing his eyes, feeling like someone had poured sand in them. “I can practically hear the gears turning in your head.”

When he peeked an eye open to squint over in her direction, she did just that.

“Have you ever considered that perhaps *you* didn’t come back for the right reasons?”

Bishop sighed, remembering really quickly why he hated fucking therapy—there were always those damn hypotheticals that, not only had he never considered, he didn’t *want* to.

“Explain.”

She set her notebook and pen aside, folding her hands in her lap as she looked at him over top of the tortoise shell glasses she wore. “The very thing that left you imprisoned, as you say, for the past many years is now also the thing you’ve come back to. But perhaps you didn’t come back because you wanted to, but because it was the only thing that felt familiar to you—even if that familiar thing still hurts you.”

Bishop didn’t respond.

Couldn’t.

Not for a long time.

CHAPTER FOUR

DURING THE QUIET moments of her day, she tried not to think of Katherine at all, and yet, thoughts and memories still plagued her.

Her mother had a way of sneaking in though, even when she wasn't thinking about anything to do with anything.

Like now, while Karina was in the kitchen finishing dinner. It conjured memories of the only house that had felt like home—if only for a short while.

During the few weeks she was home from boarding school, she vividly remembered the nights Katherine would be standing in front of the stove, wearing a silk dress and a half apron that was more for the look than for proper use.

Sometimes she wondered how much her mother had actually enjoyed those nights now that she thought about it. While *she* might have been fond of them, that wasn't necessarily the case of Katherine.

What she'd enjoyed, her mother could have resented ...

Because after her step father died and they'd moved away, she'd never done it again, but usually nothing was *ever* what it seemed with Katherine.

Trying to understand her now was nearly impossible.

But questionable desires aside, Karina *had* loved those nights of sitting around a dining room table and eating with family until their bellies were full and they'd talked themselves out all night.

When everything just felt blissfully *normal*.

Which was why, despite how easy it would have been to call down and have dinner sent up like she had this morning, Karina had instead stood at the island, chopping a medley of vegetables to add to the simmering pan of onions, garlic, and herbs.

Poppy was sat over on the floor, alternating between doodling in a journal she was very protective over, and staring up at the large flat screen TV on the wall watching a show Karina didn't know the name of.

And that easily, she could almost create an alternate reality in her head.

One where she was just a woman making dinner for her family—a daughter oblivious to the world and a lover on his way home from work.

What was so wrong with wanting her life to be as she wished it that Katherine had done something so unspeakable?

Sure, she hadn't expected to be living out of a hotel—and now that Poppy was here, they'd have to find a more permanent solution that didn't involve sanctuary in a place designed for those in their trade.

But she also knew for there not to be a threat, they would have to eliminate it.

Until then, she would focus on what she could control—what was right in front of her—and shaping it into what she wanted.

This was what she had imagined for herself when she'd left home all those years ago, intending to make it on her own here in New York without any of her mother's connections.

Well, it wasn't *exactly* what she imagined since she was currently residing in a hotel run by a notorious criminal with an even shadier past, and she'd only just been reunited with the daughter that had been stolen from her.

And then there was Uilleam, of course ...

But despite the circumstances, she was determined to make the best of it, and if she could, she wanted to push the rest of it to the back of her mind.

What she didn't think about, she didn't have to acknowledge.

She had only just taken the roast chicken out of the oven and set it on top of a cooling mat on the counter when the bell of the coming elevator made her look up.

The doors opened and Uilleam walked in, wireless headphones in his ears as he spoke rapid German to whoever was on the other end.

Karina made it a point to hum a melody to herself, not wanting to eavesdrop.

There was something off about his expression she noticed, though he did his best to shutter it, especially when he looked at Poppy.

Words couldn't describe the way it felt when he looked at her. Katherine had always questioned what sort of father would he be when she'd been pregnant, never one to keep her opinion to herself.

Karina was a bit ashamed to admit she had wondered back in those days too. He'd been so focused on being the Kingmaker and securing his seat with the Table, she'd barely thought there was enough room in his vision of his future, let alone a child.

But now, she was happy to admit she'd been wrong.

His eyes were always soft when he looked at her—loving in a way that was stark and honest. But right on the heels of it was something a little darker that made her wonder what other thoughts there were behind his eyes.

Because like right now, when he didn't realize she was watching, she saw longing there as well.

He was still continuing his conversation when his gaze swung over to her, and a heart melting smile made her feel incredibly warm inside.

Mere hours they'd been apart and he'd missed her just as much as she'd missed him in that time.

She hoped the feeling never went away.

He shot a wink in her direction before he told the man he would call him back later, and after only a moment's hesitation, he ended the call, tossed his phone aside and made his way over to where Poppy was lost in her own world.

Uilleam was always careful when he approached her, and no matter how much he might have cared for her, he was also a bit ... formal.

Karina could understand why. Though a few weeks had passed, they were still learning more and more about Poppy each day.

In a way, she and Uilleam had always kept up with each other over the many years they'd been fighting—it had proven advantageous on more than one occasion—but Poppy was virtually a stranger to them both.

She had lived a life outside of them—one she seemed all too willing to share with Karina. Spilling all sorts of stories about the friends she'd made at school, the garden she played in at her Nanny's home, and the occasional trips Katherine took her on.

But when it came to what she shared with Uilleam ... it took a little more effort.

Sometimes, she wondered if it would be easier if she didn't notice the way they were around each other—that they both were a little more awkward with each other than they were with her.

But she also knew why ...

She might not have said as much, but Karina had a sneaking suspicion that it had something to do with Katherine.

The day they'd been reunited, she'd been too overcome with emotion to care that Poppy had known, without anyone having to say, who she was to her.

And from what Uilleam had described of his interaction with her, the same could be said about him.

But with that knowledge came the question of *how* she'd known even as the answer whispered itself in the back of her mind.

Mother ...

Uilleam crouched beside her, her gaze immediately lifting to his. Karina couldn't hear the hushed conversation they shared, but she could guess what he asked as Poppy pointed at the television.

He lingered there a moment longer, and only when her attention returned to the notebook she was drawing in did he rest his hand between her shoulders and kissed the top of her head.

The moment might have been brief, but as Uilleam straightened and turned for the kitchen, Poppy looked up, her gaze following him all the way across the room.

It gave her hope that this hesitation between the two of them would eventually pass and it would be as if they'd never been apart.

They just needed more time.

His attention on her now, Uilleam's smile was reverent as he eyed the bird she was basting. "Have I done something to please you? If so, please share so I can continue doing it."

And as he'd done every night since they'd been reunited, he reached for her face, pulling her in by the nape of her neck and kissed the very breath from her lungs.

She'd never loved him more.

"How was ... work?" she asked in return, trying not to smile when she saw the amusement in his face.

But she'd also known him long enough to know when he was stalling.

"It had its moments."

"Mm?"

His smile was a little too bright. “No innocents were harmed, I promise. And I’ve managed to make it back in time for a delicious dinner. Win-win.” Then, he snapped his fingers as if he’d forgotten something. “And Grimm, as well, considering the hour.”

She’d been turning, intending to turn off the stove when the man in question came around the corner.

He was bigger than the last time she’d seen him just last week—healthier, she was willing to admit. But the complicated feelings she still hadn’t untangled still surfaced whenever he came around.

Instinct made her step back, her hand unconsciously going to her middle. He didn’t miss the movement—she saw it in the way the muscle under his eye twitched.

Things were ... as they were.

They’d come to a certain understanding—one that hadn’t actually been *vocally* discussed—but one they understood all the same.

He was a mercenary, one of the original members in fact, and with the current state of things, she also knew Uilleam couldn’t turn away someone he could trust.

And she knew rather intimately how loyal the man was to Uilleam.

“Hi Grimm!”

They all turned to Poppy first, a huge grin on her face as she waved at Uilleam’s mercenary.

Because for reasons known only to her, she found Grimm interesting—more so, Karina thought, than she did her own father.

The universe always got the last laugh, after all.

STEAM BILLOWED out from behind frosted glass, bathing the bathroom in warm steam.

Karina stripped out of her clothes, then pulled the pins from her hair before she stepped into the stall, the multiple shower heads spraying from every direction.

She washed the day away, letting the conditioner sit in her hair for a bit while she finished before rinsing it out and turning the shower off.

Stepping out onto the plush rug, she wrapped herself in a towel before heading over to her vanity to finish the last of her skincare.

After, she slipped on her favorite silk nightdress, as she left the bathroom, with the slits up the sides that helped expose the length of her thighs—a sight Uilleam seemed to appreciate once she found him sitting on the edge of the bed, already working on the buttons of his shirt.

He looked up briefly, as if he'd only intended to speak, but he did a double-take when he noticed what she was wearing.

They'd only been back together for a short while now, and only a little more than a week of that time having been after they'd found Poppy, but he still looked at her as if he needed to make up for lost time.

And even she had to admit she usually dressed with him in mind.

“Busy night?” she asked.

“Nothing I couldn't handle,” he replied.

“Mm, and that's why you have Grimm with you?”

“If it makes you feel better,” Uilleam said with a grin, “the man was still breathing when I left.”

She scoffed even as he laughed. “No, that doesn't make me feel any better at all, actually.”

“I have something for you,” he said, switching the subject.

She didn't mind it.

“Oh?”

He reached toward her then, finding the slit of her nightdress and slipping his fingers beneath the edge. His gaze lifted to her face as his hand disappeared underneath as he circled her thigh.

And as she reached out to hold his shoulder to steady herself as he lifted her leg and set her foot on the bed beside him.

“A gift,” he continued, though he seemed a bit distracted now.

Smiling, she said, “I do very much love your gifts. What is it?”

But he was more interested in the scrap of fabric beneath her nightdress to actually answer the question.

In answer, she grabbed the hem of her dress, tugged it up and to the side to reveal the emerald green lace.

“Satisfied?”

“Not even close.”

“I’m starting to think there wasn’t a surprise at all.”

He feigned hurt as he placed his hand over his heart. “You wound me, poppet. Have you always thought so little of me?”

“If you—“

He stood before she could finish, still holding her as he switched their positions.

Worse, she didn’t put up even the slightest resistance—all but sank onto the bed as he rested his finger against her lips.

“I have a pilot on standby for tomorrow morning.”

She frowned. “You’re leaving?”

“*We’re* leaving. Consider it a vacation.”

He trailed his finger from her lips, down her chin, and lightly over her throat, prompting her to swallow, making his smile a little more devious.

A fire ignited low in her belly, her fingers curling around the edge of the bed she sat on.

Uilleam knew very well what he was doing—*how* he affected her.

“Poppy—“

“Is going with us,” he said with a nod. “I don’t trust her away from us with things still ... unsettled.”

Mother.

She shook that thought away. “So the three of us?”

“And a mercenary or two.” He brushed the strap of her nightdress off her shoulder. His tone became rather somber. “Do you trust me?”

The question surprised her because in an instant, *something* had shifted inside of him she couldn’t read.

“Yes,” she answered after a brief hesitation.

But if he noticed, he didn’t say.

And when he moved to the other side to brush that strap away as well, and the top fell to expose her breasts, he seemed to forget about it entirely.

Instead, he seemed wholly focused on her.

“I remember when you would let me do unspeakable things to you,” he whispered thoughtfully, his knuckles grazing over her nipple.

He met her gaze then—a challenge in them that made her heart race because as cavalier as he was being now, that control of his was already frayed. It wouldn’t be long before he snapped and gave in to his own desires.

She stood, letting the silk drop down to her ankles before she kicked it aside.

“Did I?”

That was probably the last thing she needed to ask—he took the words as a challenge.

His hands palming her waist, he twisted her around and urged her forward. She caught herself on her hands as she fell onto the bed, the duvet now clutched in her hands.

He made a low, satisfied sound in the back of his throat as he skimmed his hands down her sides until his hands descended lower and lower.

She could have at least put up a bit of resistance, but instead she was practically offering herself up to him with the way she was arched and bent at the waist.

At his angle, he could see all the private, achy bits of her.

“You were shy then,” he whispered, almost sounding amused, “but not so much now, hmm?”

The idea seemed to please him—she could feel it in the erection his trousers were failing to hide and the rough quality of his voice.

Then, as if he knew, his knuckles brushed her swollen clit over the panties she wore, making her hips jerk forward at the contact.

“You’d practically *beg* me to make you come.”

“Uilleam, *please*.”

She almost wasn’t sure what he was begging for herself ...

Relief from his taunting touches?

More of it?

He hooked his fingers into her panties and tugged them to one side, cool air kissing bare lips.

It wasn’t long, seconds maybe, before heat covered her pussy and the flat of his tongue covered her clit.

Her head fell forward as sensation assaulted her, intense pleasure burning through her nerve endings.

And when his moan reverberated through every inch of her, she could already feel the orgasm mounting.

She rocked her hips back against his mouth, begging in between broken, unintelligible gibberish.

But he knew exactly what she needed.

He knew how to get her right to the brink—to having her whispering pleas as she gave a tentative swivel of her hips, chasing the feelings, until he replaced his mouth with his hand and eased two fingers into her dripping sex.

She wasn't going to last.

“Say it,” he ordered, the command almost guttural as he all but ripped at the fly of his trousers to get them undone.

She watched every second of him shoving them down his muscular thighs until he had his cock in his hand, stroking it from root to tip, the tendons in his arms sticking out.

It was harsh and fast and made her mouth water as she watched him fight his own compulsion to come.

“I'm yours,” she answered him, a sob leaving her as he fucked her faster, adding three fingers to stretch her further.

“Say it again,” he said, his eyes now sliding shut as his teeth sank into his bottom lip when she started rocking back against his fingers, fucking herself.

Before long, she wasn't capable of speech, her mind a slave to the pleasure he was wrenching from her body.

But it wasn't until he gave a grunt and she heard a long, drawled, “*Fuck!*” that the first wave of it hit her.

It coiled up inside of her, concentrating where his fingers were fucking her hard and fast and then—*euphoria*.

His name spilled from her lips, tremors wracking her body as she came with a force that had a keen whine ripping from her throat as she gave herself over to it.

It went on and on, stealing her breath, and making her jerk before she had to reach to grab his arm.

Uilleam stopped, but kept his fingers buried inside of her, even as the evidence of her orgasm saturated his hand.

And as she felt the evidence of Uilleam's on release along her back and thighs, she looked back in time to see a

triumphant smile on his face, but there was a certain darkness to it that made her heart skip a beat.

“I’ll never let you go,” he said, meeting her gaze.

A promise, she thought.

And a threat.

CHAPTER FIVE

KARINA WASN'T USUALLY one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but if there was one thing she knew for certain about Uilleam, nothing was ever what it seemed.

And as she watched them over the edge of the magazine she'd been mindlessly flipping through for the last ten minutes of their hours-long plane ride across the ocean, she couldn't shake the feeling Uilleam was hiding something.

Nothing was ever what it seemed with him.

What appeared one way could become something else entirely where he was involved and she was making considerable effort *not* to dig for his secrets, as easy as it might have been.

And while he might have said this was meant to be a vacation, she didn't miss the chessboard set out to the side. There was always one in any room Uilleam found himself to be.

He found it relaxing though it was one of his quirks she didn't fully understand. But whatever he saw when he played the game against himself had brought him this far ... so maybe it only mattered if *he* understood it.

She'd begun to use it as a means to gauge his current state of being. The more pieces moved around the board, the more scattered his thoughts with madness looming.

Today, his board was set up neatly with merely a single pawn moved two spaces forward.

It was curious considering only yesterday there hadn't been any pieces moved at all—something must have triggered the change.

And this impromptu trip.

She also hadn't missed the way Uilleam and Grimm had ventured off to the back of the plane, talking amongst themselves for nearly half an hour before returning.

She also knew, no matter how eager she was to go along with this surprise vacation of his, about his ability to mix business and pleasure when he wanted without anyone being the wiser.

Not that that would have stopped her from agreeing to his trip. Secrets or not, she was glad to be out of the Obsidian, if only for a short while, and forget about the troubles of their lives while they spent days lazing under a canopy of green leaves on tall coconut trees with warm sunlight keeping the sand at the feet warm.

She was *more* than excited.

But a little voice in the back of her head could never lose herself completely.

That little voice also told her she knew very well the crux of his secrets—and she wouldn't like the answer.

She wasn't clueless to the fact that they rarely, if ever, discussed her mother anymore after Poppy's return, and the impending threat they both knew her to be.

But she was still struggling on how, exactly, to answer.

The anger she felt surpassed anything remotely similar to how she felt about Uilleam over the years, yet there was also a piece of her that ached with a hurt so profound, she needed to know *why*.

And she didn't think she would be able to even tackle the question of what would happen to her mother until after that.

For now ...

She just wanted to get her family together.

Starting with Uilleam and Poppy.

Uilleam didn't notice the way Poppy would peek over at him every so often, especially when he started to fiddle with the coin he'd had tucked away in his pocket.

Karina had found it curious considering he didn't usually carry cash unless a job called for it, but he'd had it for a few days now.

At first, Poppy would look at him, but as soon as he looked up, she'd look at something else.

Karina smiled behind her magazine, enjoying the look of contemplation that appeared once he noticed.

But it wasn't until he started turning the coin, side over side, between his fingers without dropping it did Poppy finally not look away.

"How do you do that?" she asked, seeming to momentarily forget all the reasons why she stayed so distant from him.

Uilleam did it once more before he gave his hand a twist and a shake, and suddenly, the coin was gone altogether. "It's a magic trick."

She squinted at him. "I'm too old for magic tricks."

Karina lost a bit of her smile at that remark—a cruel reminder of all the time they'd lost.

But Uilleam didn't fret about it. "I imagine if it's so simple, you can do it as well?"

Poppy nodded, very sure of herself as she stood and walked over to him. Uilleam's gaze moved to Karina for a split second before he offered a wink and focused back on their daughter.

He did it once more—turning the coin side over side, closing his fist, doing a twist and a shake before he opened his hand and the coin was no longer there.

And after reaching out to tuck her hair behind her ear, he came back holding the coin between his fingers.

Poppy's eyes lit up.

“The skill isn’t the trick,” he said. “The skill is knowing how it’s done.”

He offered it to her. “If you can figure out how it’s done, I’ll give you anything in the world.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

Karina cleared her throat. “Uilleam, you—“

“*Anything?*” Poppy asked again, gaze narrowed.

“*Anything,*” he repeated, matching her expression.

Karina shook her head at the pair of them. She wasn’t yet sure who would be wrapped around who by the end of this.

BECAUSE THIS WAS STILL MEANT to be a surprise, she hadn’t asked any questions about where they were going, let alone where they’d be staying.

A car awaited them at the hangar, but instead of heading toward one of the resorts that lined up along the beach’s shore, it took them deeper into the dense forest until she was slightly nervous they’d made a wrong turn somewhere.

But as she readied to ask just that, a clearing appeared, and despite all she had seen over the last many years as she’d traveled the world, she hadn’t come across a place like this.

The hotel—no, the *resort*—might have been nestled within the forest, but the architecture was astounding, both vast and stretching as tall as the trees above.

She should have known when Uilleam said they would be staying in a hotel, it wouldn’t have been one of the bungalows by the beach.

And to her surprise, they seemed to be the only ones there.

Three of the staff were waiting for them—one carrying a tray of drinks, another with a cart for their luggage resting

beside him, and the other wearing a crisp white uniform and a brushed gold name tag.

Karina was still staring at the sheet of water falling seamlessly into the koi pond at the front of the resort when Uilleam brushed his hand along her spine as he passed.

“Surprised?” he asked with a triumphant grin she couldn’t fault him for.

If she’d thought he was bad before ... he was going to be so much worse.

CHAPTER SIX

THE HINT of cold around his ankles and feet told Uilleam he was dreaming.

He used to be able to force himself awake when he realized he was dreaming—sometimes the thought alone was enough to rouse him—but as of late, even as he knew he wasn't in a state of consciousness, he remained.

Here.

Wherever here was.

The only thing he saw was the shrouding mist circling his ankles, and a vast emptiness that seemed to go on forever—a cloaking emptiness he could almost feel as he lifted a foot to step forward.

Yet, as he stood at the very edge, teetering there and feeling as if he would fall into the gloom if he wasn't careful, he found he wasn't ready yet.

Nothingness wasn't what he strived for.

There had to be more than this—he needed to get to the other side, wherever that was.

Yet, a little voice, soft as a whisper, brushed his ear.

Jump.

UILLEAM JOLTED AWAKE, awareness creeping in slowly as Poppy's peals of laughter were punctuated by the sound of water splashing.

At least he'd fallen asleep beneath the shaded umbrella instead of the blaring sunlight, but as he settled back, adjusting the sunglasses on his face, he was distracted by the last fleeting feelings of unease that came from sleep.

For the past three nights, he dreamed the same dream and hated every second of it.

From the moment he fell under, the dream awaited him.

Always he stood at the very edge of the cliff—though even that he wasn't completely sure of since he couldn't actually *see* anything beyond the foggy smoke around his feet.

But he could almost feel the vast emptiness of whatever lay in front of him. The first night, he'd dangled his foot right there, finding nothing but air and making him realize he was all but stuck.

He'd dismissed it during his waking hours because dreams had never served him as anything more than brain chemistry creating scenarios.

But the second night, he'd thought it odd.

The third night, he was starting to think his dreams were trying to tell him something—or that he was working too hard, and he needed to finally rest.

It could have been either.

But he accepted the challenge all the same as he now considered the puzzle in his head a game to be won.

The dreams never lasted long—felt like seconds even as a handful of hours had passed in real time—but he understood what was being asked of him all the same.

He just didn't know what to do yet.

Yawning, he turned in time to see Poppy hovering in the air a moment, a wide grin on her delicate face right before she

fell into the pool, disappearing beneath the glittering surface of the water.

Karina wasn't far behind, though her splash wasn't nearly as grand, but her smile was just as big.

More so, he thought.

Joy looked beautiful on her, so much so that he rather enjoyed remaining on the sidelines and watching them together.

The way they would light up as soon as they caught sight of the other.

A marvelous sight to behold.

She was *alive*.

Poppy.

His daughter.

Their daughter.

One he hadn't known existed, or even that she was alive until quite recently. Sometimes, it didn't feel as if he'd truly gotten a chance to mourn her before he learned he had no reason to.

The idea of that felt so unbelievable, and yet there she was, with all the grace and beauty of her mother. And to his surprise, he saw himself in the soft, feminine features of her face.

Sometimes, he found it hard looking at her—reminded of all the ways he'd failed them both in his quest for power so many years ago.

And there was no greater wound than failure.

A lesson he was tired of learning. It also reminded him why he still, no matter how much older he was now compared to his adolescence, slept only a handful of hours at a time.

Because he had one singular goal to accomplish—to get back everything he deserved.

With the world as his oyster, Uilleam hadn't realized how unfulfilled he really was.

He might not have wanted for anything—especially not when he was born into a legacy of a man wielding far too much power in the criminal underworld. He'd been taught that anything was accessible and *nothing* was off limits should he simply reach for it.

And reached he had.

What he wanted, he took.

What he coveted, he stole.

Sometimes with ease, other times by force, but in the end, nothing ever stood in the way of that.

Until he'd met Karina.

She hadn't just been a force to be reckoned with—she'd planted herself in front of him with roots deep into the ground that it was laughable that he thought he could move her in the first place.

She'd shown him there were some things force couldn't give him.

Before her, his quest to be on top had been his only concern. Fucking his way through an array of women was one thing, it didn't require much focus.

His father wouldn't have disapproved of that.

But falling for *one* woman, allowing her to change him—allowing her to *bend* him in ways no other person on this earth could ...

In Alexander's eyes, that would have shown weakness.

And there was nothing his father despised more than that.

So it was a good thing his brother, Kit, had slit the man's throat long ago so he wouldn't have to drone on about his perceived failings.

Because price or not, as he looked across the distance at the smiling woman who'd been a painful thorn in his side, he

couldn't possibly imagine anyone else he would rather have spent the last number of years wanting and hating and *longing* for.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Karina looked over at him, a quizzical look on her face that disappeared all too quickly when Poppy splashed her.

In all their years together, Uilleam didn't think he had ever seen such an expression on her face. It transcended happiness—it defied proper words.

Sure, she'd looked at him with a fondness he didn't deserve when their relationship had been less complicated, but nothing like this.

This was an unconditional love that came when you bore a child.

A child she'd thought had died before she'd been able to draw her first breath.

He was a selfish man, and was self aware enough to admit as much, but he didn't envy the love she felt for Poppy.

He *wanted* this for her. The closer they became, the more peace he felt.

Not because he didn't love her too, but because he felt responsible for them being apart in the first place.

He hadn't mourned Poppy for nearly a decade.

He hadn't woken up barren and empty after nurturing the growing life inside of him.

He hadn't carried that loss for so many years.

He certainly hadn't had to think the love of his life was the one responsible for that loss.

But, if there was only one final act he committed in this life, he would make sure the person responsible for ripping that happiness away from Karina for so long would pay the ultimate price.

Ramifications be damned.

He wanted—no, *craved*—that pound of flesh and by fucking God he was going to have it.

Footsteps drew his gaze to Bishop as he joined him, a cup of tea in one of his hands.

Bishop remained silent a minute, his gaze only straying to Karina for a few seconds—never to Poppy, Uilleam noted—before looking back at him. “Why aren’t you over there with them?”

The truth sat on the tip of his tongue, but he kept it to himself. “We only have so much time here. I think it’s best if I let them enjoy what they can.”

Because despite them being here in the heart of the jungle, there was only so long they could remain hidden.

It was one of the few places in the world remote enough that he didn’t have to worry about someone stumbling upon them without him knowing in advance.

And though he loathed to admit it, he needed more time to formulate his plan of attack for what would come after.

He knew the moment they boarded another plane to leave, the ease of life would be gone once more.

A threat still remained.

War.

And while he loved a good battle as much as the next person, he had more to lose now.

Too much.

This fight with Katherine Ashworth was inevitable—it was the *endgame*.

Uilleam spared the pool one last glance before turning to Bishop.

“Let’s begin, shall we?”

THE BLADES of the ceiling fan that lined what was usually a gaming room—the pool table had been covered in various bits of information and photographs—spun vigorously, doing little to combat the humid breeze blowing in from the open doors.

He hadn't chosen this particular island for Karina and Poppy to enjoy just because of the ocean a short drive away, or the fact that he'd been able to secure the entire thing for themselves, but also because it was one of the most secluded in the world.

Should someone come looking for him.

And they would ...

But it wasn't something he'd wanted to mention to Karina just yet. Not until he had a handle on the matter.

But also, because for the time being, he couldn't.

So a family vacation was a more ... *palatable* way of putting why they were leaving New York for a short while though it wasn't completely untrue.

He *did* want to spend more time with her and Poppy—especially after he'd spent the last two months chasing down every possible lead to Katherine Ashworth and time and again coming up empty-handed.

And while the process of rebuilding was coming along rather well despite the unpleasantness of the other night with the Arbitrator, he was eager to put his plan into motion.

The sooner he had a new army of mercenaries, the sooner he could implement his plan of laying waste to that *woman*, and ultimately, everything would be right again.

He would reclaim his position, this time with Karina at his side, and their family whole.

He just needed to remain focused on the endgame.

“Unless you get your hands on an inside source for her infrastructure,” Bishop said, folding his arms across his chest, “Hell, even if you just figure out where the hell she is, we can only go off rumors and secondhand information.”

A more frustrating development where Katherine was concerned.

Uilleam had already decided that he would involve Karina in as little as he possibly could, knowing that this wouldn't be easy for her to do—*if* she would.

Because while she was entitled to feel however she might have wanted, he didn't, in the end, want her to feel responsible for her mother's demise.

He knew eventually that ire would turn to him, but even as the thought painted him, he still only had one course of action.

“When the time is right,” he settled on saying, even as he had no intention of him ever needing to use Karina to challenge her mother. “Now, again, what do we know?”

Bishop didn't believe a word of that from the look on his face, but he didn't argue that point with him. “Katherine Ashworth—born in London, raised by a single mother after her father abandoned them—if what she told General Hunt is true. Her first husband was some sort of hedge fund manager—left his estate to her when he passed. Then there was the second ...”

Usually, Uilleam wasn't one to care about the unnecessary details, but he found himself making an exception where Katherine Ashworth was concerned.

For her, there was no detail or bit of information that would be inconsequential.

Knowledge was power, and he needed a wealth of it.

As Bishop continued on, he wondered how much Karina knew about her mother's past—whether it had been a carefully guarded secret Katherine kept to herself, or common knowledge between them.

Sometimes, it made him think about how much it felt as if he knew every inch of her, and yet still knew nothing at all.

“At the least,” Bishop said, propping his shoulder against the wall, “you're going to need Winter. She can get access where we can't.”

“I can find a hacker,” he mumbled, though in the end he knew it didn’t matter.

Winter was the best and if there was ever a time when he was in need of her skill, it would be now.

“Not one better than—”

“Well, unfortunately, Winter is proving a bit difficult at the moment and securing her hasn’t proven easy ... Or, have you managed to talk reason into her?”

Ever since the fall of the Den, and the regrettable sequence of events that day—inevitable as they might have been—his resident hacker had clearly chosen a side. Not that he had foolishly believed she would side with *anyone* other than Synek, other than her husband, but he had hoped that she wouldn’t have gone as far as to not even *speak* to him.

He’d thought it would take a bit of convincing, a few gifts or so, and he’d even prepared himself to grovel a bit, but so far, she’d not responded to anything he did.

And the only reason he still knew she was in the city was because of Bishop.

If *he* called, she answered.

Because while he might have worked for Uilleam still, he was one of the mercenaries, and to them she was always loyal.

But that also told him that she wasn’t completely opposed to helping him if she’d still do a favor for Bishop every now and then.

He just hadn’t found her price yet.

“She told me to tell you that what she wants can’t be bought.”

So he’d been told ... “And the new price she gave you?”

“Quarter million.”

Uilleam grappled for patience.

He’d sent fifty-thousand the first time, no questions asked, as a token of his gratitude for all of her work ... and to soften

her up.

When that had gone unanswered, he'd asked for a number for her services, she'd responded by cutting his access to every electronic device he owned with only a message on the screen.

I CAN'T BE BOUGHT.

The longest four hours of his life, and had almost cost him a fortune.

That was when he sent Bishop, and since then, he'd only gotten the same response in return.

What she wanted couldn't be bought, and yet she also included a price along with it.

A price that went up every time Bishop came to her about working for him.

But he now had a more daunting problem on his hands to add to his growing list of frustrations.

And worse, it wasn't something he could discuss with Karina. Not because he didn't trust her—or even that he didn't want her to know.

He couldn't.

Technically, even *he* wasn't meant to know and it was only because of his long standing friendship with Carmelo that he'd even gotten a heads up.

“Who the hell is the Arbitrator?”

One of the twins scoffed where he stood by the door. “*What* the hell is an arbitrator?”

“On a rare chance that the Table is at an ... impasse, the arbitrator is called to come in and find a solution agreeable to all parties.”

“If it were that simple, you wouldn't have made another move,” Bishop said without looking up.

Though he often looked as if he took nothing seriously, it was sometimes easy to forget the man, as all the mercenaries had been, was highly observant.

No one else would have even thought to pay attention to the chess board on the other side of the room—or the fact that when he'd had that very board set up back at the Obsidian Hotel, the white knight on the board hadn't been out of its starting position.

“In most cases of arbitration, you find in favor of one party over the other. In *this* case, the arbitrator can side with neither and make a decision of its own.”

“How often has he done that?” Twin one asked.

Uilleam thought back to the records he'd read through once he'd gained his seat and learned more of the history.

“There's only been one instance in which he's *not* made his own ruling.”

“I don't get it. Why can't you just say fuck that guy and do what you want?”

Uilleam looked over at Bishop a moment, reflecting. “A contract is a contract.”

And whether he liked it or not, the minute he'd been given the seat and he'd paid his dues, he had agreed to the terms it came with.

Including the second to last line which stated, should arbitration not be agreed to, the dissenter would be terminated.

Effective immediately.

Having been shot once before, he never wanted to repeat the experience.

Bishop blew out a breath with a shake of his head. “Sounds like one hell of a problem to fix.”

He had no idea ...

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE RAIN MISTED THE GLASS, distorting his reflection, but that didn't stop Uilleam from staring out at the endless trees outside the windows.

Until there was no mistaking the feminine figure that appeared in the glass.

Karina stood in the mouth of the door, holding a bottle of champagne loosely in one hand, but he was less concerned with it, but rather the dress she'd been wearing over her bikini earlier.

Only now, she wasn't wearing a bikini.

His need for her had turned from a passive thought that lingered somewhere in the back of his mind, to being at the forefront of his every waking thought.

It was incessant and unrelenting.

And fuck if he wouldn't indulge himself every chance he got because he *could*.

He turned in time to watch her cross the floor to him, his gaze drawn down to the sway of her hips—

And the fact that she was all but naked.

Karina didn't hesitate in coming over to straddle his hip, offering him the bottle of champagne she'd brought along with her.

He drank what he poured into his mouth before plucking the bottle from her hand.

He offered it to her now, his gaze fixated on her lips as she opened her mouth. Bubbly golden liquid spilled out, some of it spilling down her cheek and neck.

She giggled, then gasped when he licked the excess off.

“Were you looking for me?” he asked, taking another sip.

“You disappeared for a while.”

Two nights they’d already been on the island—two days and nights of nothing more than laughter, amazing food, and an opportunity to simply *be*.

He hadn’t been lying when he’d told her he wanted to take them on holiday to get away from the city.

When they were here, it was almost easy to forget about the outside world and the rest of his obligations.

He enjoyed it more than he realized . . .

But he also knew that indulging in a fairytale too long would only result in disaster for the simple fact that it wasn’t real.

That was why he needed to make this dream—one he also knew Karina shared—into a reality.

The rest was semantics.

Semantics he wasn’t quite ready to share with Karina just yet, and though he’d been doing his best to hide that fact, of course she had picked up on it.

“What are you hiding, Uilleam Runehart?” she asked softly as she settled over his lap.

He knew the minute she felt his reaction—saw the way her lips parted—and when she moved, he gripped her hip and adjusted them both until he was situated right between her thighs.

“Is that really the question you want answered right now?”

“As opposed to?”

“How quickly I can make you come while you’re tipsy . . .”

The same woman who'd launched a full out assault against him was now blushing.

But that shyness didn't last for very long. "Let's see."

He didn't need to be told twice.

"How attached are you to this?" he asked, tracing the sheer neckline, thinking of how easy it would be to tear.

But he didn't need to as she passed him her bottle and used both hands to remove it.

He watched its descent, from toned thighs, to the curve of her hips and dip in her waist, to the swell of her breasts until finally she was naked above him, tossing the slip to the side.

She smiled down at him. "Not even a little."

He sucked one nipple into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue as he squeezed the other before doing the same.

Naked, he could see every flushed inch of her as she used him to get herself off. His want for her burned hotter as his gaze shot down to his lap where he could see a wet spot forming where her pussy rubbed against him.

His name was starting to echo around them, making a triumphant but dark smile curl his lips.

"Let me take care of you," he said, even as he reached between them to get his thumb against her clit.

In answer, he spread her knees *wider*, making him sit back so he could have an unobstructed view of where his cock was throbbing to get inside of.

For a moment, he was a slave to the desire, his lust ratcheting up a degree as she rode him, but very quickly his patience snapped and he could no longer deny himself what he wanted.

He gripped her waist as he shot to his feet, moving until her back was against the double-paned glass windows.

They both practically ripped at his zipper, freeing his cock and within seconds of doing so, he angled himself at the notch of her pussy and eased his way inside her.

Stars seemed to explode as he closed his eyes, resting his forehead against the nape of her neck as he held himself still inside of her, the wet heat nearly robbing him of his breath.

But as content as he was in this blissful misery, Karina wasn't.

Her moan of need was punctuated by a press of her hips back against him, of her head falling onto his shoulder, exposing the vulnerable length of her throat.

He knew every inch of her body and how she liked to be fucked. He'd learned every spot that made her sigh and scream and beg.

And he was all too happy to learn again if he needed to.

Her moans became his symphony. He chased every note, adjusting until he found the rhythm that had her stammering and creaming around him.

It was too much.

It wasn't *enough*.

He felt like a man possessed as he slowed just long enough to tap her thigh, prompting her to spread her legs even further—arch her back until her arse was in the air.

In the position he wanted, he grabbed hold of his dick, stroking it once, twice, and even a third time to take the edge off before he was lining himself up at her entrance and then buried himself inside her.

There was no warm up this time.

He fucked her like he'd wanted to prove everything to her.

That they fit.

That this messy, glorious thing they shared was only possible with each other.

He kept his finger on her swollen clit, letting her set the pace as she rocked back against him. The faster she rode him, the faster he rubbed her clit until she was a stammering, shaking mess.

“I need to come,” she whispered, shamelessly undulating her hips, seeming almost desperate.

And only then did he give her what she needed.

He moved his arm between them, cushioning her against the wall of glass as he fucked her with abandon.

A growl built in his throat as he felt the walls of pussy clamp down around him—at the words she couldn’t get out properly as her nails dug into his forearm.

“*Fuck me.*”

The words felt ripped from his throat as her pussy spasmed and a mixture of his name and a plea fell from shaking lips as she dissolved into an orgasm so strong, he didn’t stand a fucking chance against it.

His own release felt almost violent as he thrust into her once, twice, and on the third, he buried himself as deep as he could go and finally let go.

Pleasure swept through him so violently, the ringing in his ears grew louder.

And as the rest of the world filtered back in, Uilleam felt like the luckiest bastard in the world.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AS A CHILD, he'd watched a man be disemboweled via a slow, torturous process that he hadn't been able to look away from.

Uilleam had watched the blade sink into the man's skin with zero effort, watched as it then tore free and left a gaping hole, and how the man had shouted blood curdling screams that had continued until he'd grown hoarse.

He'd been no more than eleven at the time—a child though his father had thought him practically a man—and yet, compared to *this*, it had only been a mere passing discomfort.

Then, in some way, he hadn't felt any fear, but as he shifted in his chair, bringing his tea to his lips, he tried to focus on anything *other* than his own discomfort.

Because as ashamed as he was to admit it, he was afraid of his own daughter.

He could *feel* her staring at him in that unabashed, surprisingly unchildlike way of hers. It made him want to sit up a little straighter to see if he'd pass inspection.

He shouldn't have even *been* nervous. She was his daughter, after all, and he didn't need to be afraid, yet he was still fidgeting.

But he'd expected fatherhood to change him. Her existence should have changed everything within him to reflect the new responsibility he held.

Except he had no bloody idea what he was doing and was out of time in figuring out how to manage.

Karina had a way of making it look effortless, and even Bishop, indifferent as he was about most things, always managed to get a smile out of Poppy.

He, on the other hand, only managed inquisitive glances and thoughtful confusion.

Like now.

“Why are you wearing a suit?” she asked, sounding baffled.

Bishop, the unhelpful bastard, snorted, keeping his gaze down on his mobile.

Uilleam felt heat crawling up the back of his neck that had little to do with the sun as he looked down at himself—as if he needed a reminder of what he’d dressed himself in before coming out.

And it wasn’t a *suit*, per se. He’d left the tie and jacket ... but he was certainly overdressed compared to Bishop in his T-shirt and board shorts, and Thing One and Two in just shorts.

“I, um ... Well, it’s a preference, I suppose,” he responded, having never felt more self-conscious in his life.

Bishop coughed behind a closed fist, not bothering to even try to hide his smile.

And he was too valuable to kill ... which he, unfortunately, knew.

Poppy shook her head, dark hair swishing around her shoulders. “Mummy says we’re on holiday, and when you’re on holiday, you have to wear your fun clothes. That’s the rules.”

Uilleam nodded. “But I am having fun, darling. I promise.”

She frowned, her little nose scrunching up. “I don’t think so. How can you swim wearing that?”

He hadn’t considered she would ask that. “Very, very, slowly.”

That managed a confused sort of smile from her, but he counted it as a win anyway.

“But see, that’s why you’re not having fun! Because you can’t swim.”

She said it so matter-of-factly, he would have almost believed it himself, but he didn’t get to tell her otherwise before she went on.

“Or maybe you don’t *know* how to swim,” she said with a gasp, looking at him intently. “Do you?”

“I never said I—“

“I could teach you,” she offered, as if it were the most casual thing in the world.

He’d taken swimming lessons from the time he’d turned three, and had even swam on his former boarding school’s team for a year or two before he’d grown bored of it.

But nothing in the world could have stopped him from saying, “I’d be very happy to learn from you.”

At his response, her smile brightened even more, as if he’d finally given her exactly what she wanted.

She looked like her mother when she smiled.

For the first time since the other night when Carmelo had paid him a visit, the crushing weight of his responsibilities and what loomed ahead didn’t seem quite so heavy.

Procuring swim shorts was easy enough, and though he hadn’t known what to anticipate as he stepped into the cold water, letting his legs acclimate before he sunk further.

From the side of the pool, Poppy adjusted her goggles, giving him a thumbs up to let him know she was ready before she stepped right up to the edge and dove in without hesitating.

He wasn’t sure how long they were in the water and Poppy had explained, with comical half-accuracy, the proper way to swim.

It started with arms, which involved a bit of flailing on her part, then came something akin to a waddle that had Bishop laughing harder than he should have.

“You can’t panic when you’re in the water!” she said while bobbing up and down, having insisted they move to the deeper end of the pool. “Panicking makes you sink!”

At over six feet, he was standing quite comfortably, and doing his best not to laugh before silently, reaching an arm out for her to hold to balance herself more easily.

“And you have to remember to kick,” she added, kicking her legs as hard as she could as he now walked them around the pool.

“And what’s this?” he asked when she was just hanging on as he walked them through. “Have we forgotten to kick?”

She offered him a toothy grin. “I *am* kicking!”

When he looked behind them, he realized she *was*—just very, *very* slowly.

His laugh prompted her own, and across the courtyard, Karina was walking by, but stopped when she spotted them.

Even at his distance, he could see the look on her face—a mix of pride and happiness.

And in that moment, it made all the days that had come before this one well worth it.

“WE WON’T BE GONE VERY LONG,” Uilleam assured Karina as he grabbed his mobile from the table, and briefly scanned the number of missed texts he’d been ignoring.

“Because we’re still on vacation, aren’t we?” she reminded him with narrowed eyes.

“Would you prefer to leave without even *one* souvenir?” he asked.

“Mm.”

“I’d like to go.”

They'd only just come out of the water a bit ago, and though she was now dressed, her dark hair was still damp.

Karina looked unsure at first as she looked at him, but he smiled her concern away.

“You can, if you want.”

Another soft smile like before, and he was oddly proud of the fact he was quickly winning her favor.

“Well—“

“I'll have the mercenaries with us,” he whispered for Karina to hear as he leaned in to kiss her cheek. “You don't need to worry yourself.”

He could see the protest in her eyes, her desire to protect Poppy overriding everything else, but eventually she nodded and saw them off.

Poppy had seemed nervous at first being out with him without Karina, but as they visited the many shops and he bought everything she even glanced at, he was at least starting to win her over.

“Where have you attended school?” he asked, as they waited for the baker behind the counter to finish wrapping the custard-filled donut she'd wanted.

He hadn't meant to bombard her with questions so quickly upon their entering the city, but he wanted to take advantage of her openness since she wasn't always like this with him.

“Eleanor Academy,” she said, then frowned before chewing on her lip and looking down at the display case.

“Something the matter?” he asked.

“I'm not sure if I was supposed to tell you.”

“No?” he asked. “Why not?”

“Well, Nana said I shouldn't tell anyone—that if I told someone it might get to a bad person.”

Bad person ... meaning himself.

“I’m certain if you weren’t meant to say, she would have made that a clear rule for you to follow.”

She looked uncertain for a moment before agreeing. “Yeah, that sounds right.”

Then, very quickly, Poppy was all too happy to share little bits that he listened to—tucking those little morsels of information away.

And the more she spoke, the more he saw pieces of himself in her.

It didn’t sound like something that could have been possible—he’d not had any part in her life until now—but just from the way she told stories; how deceptively smart.

He didn’t care about practicalities.

“I can’t say I enjoyed boarding school either,” Uilleam said when she explained about a particular woman at the school he would soon be learning the family history of. “My headmistress decided to make an example out of me after I *might* have organized a food fight that resulted in the library’s left wing to be completely renovated.”

Ah.

Back when times were simpler.

The bell chimed as a new customer walked into the small shop, the sound prompting Uilleam to look over his shoulder.

The man who walked in wasn’t familiar to him—nor was he someone particularly noteworthy enough that he would normally pay attention to.

But Uilleam couldn’t miss him —not when his gaze had been locked on him from the moment he’d come in.

He didn’t have to say a word before Bishop emerged like a shadow, intercepting the man before he could get any closer as locals seated near them scattered.

He didn’t know the man’s intentions, didn’t care to, and the only thing currently on his mind was how to remove Poppy

from this situation as quickly as possible without alerting her to any perceived threat.

But she'd already noticed Bishop as confusion marred her features.

"I'm here to deliver a message," the man said, his words growing louder at the end as if he needed to project his voice to build the courage to speak.

"I'm sorry," Uilleam told him, maintaining his composure for Poppy's sake who'd gone stiff as a board beside him. "You must have mistaken me for someone else."

Because surely if he knew who he was approaching, the man would err on the side of caution instead of all but bearing his neck.

He tried to steer Poppy around him, using his body as a shield—mindful of the way she flinched slightly—but while Bishop's presence prevented him from moving, it didn't stop him from talking.

"I—"

Every shred of patience he possessed evaporated as Uilleam cut his eyes to the man who shrank back a step, but it was much too late for that now. "Whoever sent you here has a callous disregard for your life," Uilleam warned. "Pity."

He didn't seem wise enough to realize Uilleam had offered him a gift in sparing his life in the first place. Yet, there he continued to stand, his throat bobbing as he swallowed.

His gaze darted from Uilleam to Poppy for a split second, only managing to piss Uilleam off further.

Because there was a walking vulnerability with him, and the idea that she might be harmed because of him ... it horrified him in a way he'd never experienced before.

When Uilleam stepped toward him, he stumbled back a step, sweat dampening the front of his shirt as he quickly realized the mercenaries were seconds from grabbing him.

"I'm just t-the messenger, I swear. Nothing m-more than a m-message was what h-he said. Please don't—"

He'd heard that plea before—more often than he could count—but never had he heard it uttered so softly and filled with such fear.

His focus shifted from the man he'd been threatening to Poppy. Her eyes, always so large and innocent, looked at him as if ... he were a stranger.

As if she hadn't been smiling at him a mere few hours ago
...

As if all the progress he'd been making in getting her to warm toward him had been depleted all that quickly.

And when he reached for her, she flinched, so violently Bishop reached out to steady her, his own gaze apologetically

It wasn't the messenger who terrified her

She was afraid of *him*.

CHAPTER NINE

KARINA KNEW the moment they returned, something was wrong.

The twins were the first through the door, looking as if they'd rather be anywhere but there, but that didn't trouble her as much as the look on both Uilleam and Poppy's faces as they followed.

And the fact that Poppy was walking slightly behind Grim and would barely look at Uilleam.

They made the smile on her fade as she set down the glass of lemonade she'd been drinking.

She came around the corner. "What's—"

Poppy didn't speak as she hurriedly rushed past and the door to her room shut soundly after a few moments.

With wide eyes, Karina looked to Uilleam. "Does anyone want to tell me what's going on?" she asked, not really caring *who* the answer came from as long as she got one.

Uilleam walked over to the cart on the opposite side of the room and snatched a glass up as he yanked the top off and tossed it aside, pouring a healthy amount into his glass and tossed it back.

It wasn't until he held the glass in his hand and stared at the empty bottom for several seconds that he finally answered. "I'm the boogeyman."

He wasn't making sense, but when she started to question him, Grimm cleared his throat behind her.

“I’ll have a talk with him.”

She glanced back, only hesitating a second before she nodded and walked away.

Outside the closed bedroom door, she raised her fist to knock, hesitating for the briefest of seconds.

Though she didn’t know what was happening, or what had caused whatever this was, she had a sneaking suspicion of what it might be.

And no matter how uncomfortable it might have been, it needed to happen, and delaying it further would only widen the divide.

Knocking lightly, she waited a moment before cracking it open.

Poppy wasn’t in her bed when she came in, but was over by the windows, staring out at the rain that had been falling steadily now for the past few minutes.

With her hair hanging down her back, it was almost like looking in a mirror back when she’d been this age and she’d come home from boarding school and Katherine and Steve had been fighting.

Back then, she’d just wanted them all to get along, to smile and have fun and do things together as a family would.

She’d ached for any feeling *other* than anxiety.

To be normal.

But nothing about this life was anything simple or *normal*—not then, or now.

“Poppy?”

She hugged her knees to her chest, resting her chin on top of them, seeming smaller than she already was.

Karina sat on the bench beside her without speaking. This wasn’t a conversation she could rush into, nor did she want to make Poppy uncomfortable knowing what she would have to ask.

“Poppy, did something happen?”

She was quiet a long while before saying, “No.”

“Was it—“

“He was going to hurt him!” she suddenly exclaimed. “He was!”

“Hurt who?” she asked, more confused than ever. “And who would have hurt him?”

“My father! He was going to hurt him because he made a threat, that’s what he said!”

Karina was more confused than ever, but one thing she understood very clearly—Poppy was afraid of Uilleam.

“He hurts those who cross him,” she said, as if repeating something told to her.

“Who told you that, Poppy?”

“Nana,” she said confidently, with all the blind trust Karina herself had felt when it came to her mother. “She said if I did something he didn’t like, he would punish me.”

“Poppy, he wouldn’t do that,” she said immediately, forgetting momentarily about all the reasons she’d given about treating this delicately. “Despite what Katherine might have told you, he loves you and would never do anything to hurt you.”

“But he did,” she said, tears welling. “He took you away.”

Had that not been her own reason for hating him?

Because he’d taken *her* away.

She’d let that emotion fester and rot until it was all she was. She’d unleashed that rage onto him with a vengeance she hadn’t thought herself capable of, and yet ...

He wasn’t the reason.

He hadn’t been the one to take Poppy away from her. In this, he’d been just as much of a victim as she had.

Ignoring the problem won’t make it go away, Iz had said.

Because whether she liked it or not, Katherine *was* a problem. One she should have acknowledged a long time ago.

“Uilleam—your father didn’t keep me away from you,” Karina said, softly. Gently. She thought of how to phrase her next question. “What has your nana told you about my absence?”

“She said you were distracted.”

Of course that *would* be the way she phrased it. “That’s not quite true, love. I—“

She tried to think of the right words to say—how to explain—but much to her disappointment, she *had* been distracted.

She’d been so caught up in her grief, she’d never considered or even thought to question anything Katherine had told her about that day.

“I ... I *was* distracted, but not because of your dad. It’s a bit more complicated than that.”

Poppy’s brows drew together in that way Uilleam’s did when he didn’t quite trust what he was hearing.

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” she whispered, squeezing her hands. “No matter what.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes, of course.”

“But you never responded to my letters,” Poppy accused, looking equal parts sad and angry. “I wrote so many of them and you never answered, not once!”

“I never got your letters,” Karina whispered past the lump in her throat, afraid that if she raised her voice any higher, the tears she’d been trying to hold back would fall anyway.

“But Nana put them in the post, I *saw* her.”

And she probably did, Karina believed—because that was what Katherine would do.

Show you a truth you wanted to believe rather than what was in front of her.

She'd had Karina believe that her baby had died. Had even cried herself as she'd been nothing short of hysterical.

It wouldn't be remiss for her to walk with Poppy outside, consoling her own grandchild as she placed heartfelt letters into the box and probably had gone back out not moments later to collect them again.

Letters.

Plural.

She'd once thought the only cruelty her mother was capable of was to the people who'd crossed her, but that wasn't true.

“They could have been lost, sweetheart, and—“

“But how do you know *he* didn't take them so that you couldn't answer them?” Poppy asked, the question coming out so quickly it was clear that had been her thought from the beginning.

Her first idea was to blame Katherine outright, but in that moment, it wasn't about her, it was about Uilleam and how she saw him. “Why do you think he'd do that?” she asked softly.

“Because Nana said he could make people do whatever he wanted, and if he told the people not to bring you the letters, they wouldn't!”

Karina forced a cheery smile, even as she felt anything but. “Now, that sounds a bit silly, doesn't it?”

“But, but Nana says that's why people call him that name—the Kingmaker—because he hurts people and makes them do what he wants.” Poppy looked at her with wide, watery eyes. “She said he hurt you.”

She took a moment, wrapping her hand in both of hers. “Sometimes, people can hurt other people and not mean to. Your father ... he made me sad once, but he didn't mean to.”

And that was a truth that had taken her a long time to accept.

Because he *hadn't* meant to. Despite everything, she knew well enough that had he known that was her sitting at the table, he wouldn't have ordered Bishop to shoot.

And even before then, when she'd been pregnant, had she just told him in the beginning instead of holding on to her hurt feelings, perhaps things wouldn't have progressed to this point.

They might have been able to work on whatever things had stood between them then and everything would have been fine.

“But I'm certain I've made him sad as well, and you too, from the sounds of it. Sometimes, you can hurt somebody and not mean to.”

Mistakes were human.

“But why do they call him the Kingmaker then? That's what that man called him.”

“That's a question, I think he would be better at answering. I'm sure if you asked, he would tell you anything you wanted to know.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because he loves you,” she answered. “And he's honest with the people he loves.”

She looked a bit skeptical, but Karina shook her head, taking her hands firmly.

“While I was ... away,” she said, struggling to find the right words, “I was very sad. I ... didn't have you and I felt lost. In a way, *you* had been lost to me—to both of us.”

Poppy didn't interrupt again; she seemed so focused on her face that she didn't blink.

“But do you know what your father did? He found you and brought you right to me, that was his promise to you, wasn't

it?" she asked, remembering what Uilleam had told her of what happened that day.

"Yes."

"And if you don't doubt anything else that I say, he won't ever break his promises to you, okay?"

It was a long time before she repeated, "Okay."

Feeling as if she'd pushed her far enough for the night, Karina waited for her to change into her pajamas and both lay on the bed.

She embraced her, brushing the length of her hair. For a while, she embraced the silence, feeling Poppy's tension ease before she settled completely.

She held her close for a long time, smelling the vanilla of her hair and wishing this moment of peace could last a lifetime.

"We won't be apart again, sweetheart," she whispered, not sure if she was still awake to hear her.

She'd already missed so much, and she had no intention of missing anything else.

POPPY HAD FINALLY FALLEN into a fretful sleep, even before Karina had slipped away, only to leave her room, close the door and lean back against it.

This moment, in many ways, had felt inevitable. She knew at some point they would have to explain their absence to her—that *she* would have to explain the truth and lies behind whatever Katherine had told her.

But, perhaps selfishly, she had wanted more time. To just enjoy and learn and *exist* together without the weight of what had brought him here.

If she'd been honest with herself, she would have known that as perfect as it had all been, the illusion would eventually

shatter because it had never been real in the first place.

But she wasn't the only one Karina needed to talk to.

Uilleam was back in their room, and judging from the way his thumbs flew over the screen of his phone, he was also shooting off a number of texts.

She knew he knew she'd walked in from the way he adjusted his posture, but he didn't look up from what he was doing, nor did he actually look in her direction.

She thought he would break the mounting silence, but as it stretched on, Karina felt compelled to say, "Poppy is sleeping."

He still didn't look up. "Good."

Nothing more was offered.

Not a word or a glance in her direction.

None of the grief she'd seen in his eyes when they'd come back hours earlier.

It was as if, in a matter of a couple of hours, something dark had left a shroud over him.

"Poppy said there was a man looking for you."

He gave a minute shrug that might have been an unconscious gesture. "There's always a man looking for me."

And it seemed, his mood was only deteriorating further. "Who was he?"

"No one I wouldn't have thought twice about killing a few years ago."

Well ... okay. "And what did he want?"

"Nothing. He was no one of importance—just a man sent to deliver a warning."

A shiver rushed up her back. "A warning?"

He looked wistfully over at the decanter on the other side of the room. "His presence was the warning."

She was more confused now than ever. “I don’t understand. What did he say?”

To that, Uilleam smiled. “My name.”

“You’re speaking in riddles. Why—“

Uilleam rested his head against the back of his chair with a heavy thump, staring up at the spinning ceiling fan instead of looking at her. “I’ve been the Kingmaker since before she was born, and yet I’ve never felt ashamed by it until I heard her say it.”

Karina was momentarily rendered speechless, not sure how to respond to that. “Uilleam—“

“What stories do you think your mother told her before bed?” he asked, finally deigning to look at her. “The same that you do?”

That stung more than she thought it would, and her first instinct was to defend herself, but she caught herself before she responded.

Because even she had to admit there was a difference between the relationship she shared with Poppy and the one Uilleam did. She’d already been cautious around him before, Karina didn’t want her to be afraid.

“I understand you’re upset—” she started, but he didn’t give her a chance to finish.

“Upset wouldn’t be the word I’d use, poppet.”

He pushed out of his chair, standing to his full height as he walked in her direction, so close now that she could see the fatigue in his eyes and the wrath that kept him going.

“Your mother has stolen much from me—the name and reputation I’d bloody *earned*, my own child thinks of me as a monster, and you, my dearly beloved, continue to make excuses for a woman that I want to see *rid of this earth*.”

She hadn’t been the only one pretending.

Two week they’d been together again, another week of having Poppy, and he’d never once hinted he was even mildly

discontent.

But then again ... she'd also seen what she wanted to see.

Because it made it easier on her, as well.

"I didn't say we shouldn't explain—" She searched for a word that could encompass what the last number of years had been for both of them, "*—this*. I only suggested we *gradually* explain to her that Katherine isn't who she thinks she is."

"Gradually? Is that how you think it should be done? For a woman that ripped the baby from *your* womb, and—"

"I don't need to be reminded of that!" she snapped, losing her own temper.

"Because the only person you seemed contrite with about that is me," he continued, his gaze boring into her own.

She thought of his smile from earlier—how elated he'd been to swim with Poppy. She didn't think she'd ever seen him smile like that.

As if everything, if only for a moment, was right in the world.

Already, it felt like a lifetime ago as unfurling anger swirled inside of her.

Katherine couldn't be further away from them than she was now, and yet, she still had her hands wrapped in the strings of her life.

"I don't know what she told Poppy," Karina whispered, the only way she could manage to say what she needed without letting the tears she felt enter her words, "but I know her well enough to know that her manipulation wouldn't just stop at me. She could have not mentioned you at all—it wouldn't be hard at all to make a monster out of a stranger—but she did. She made sure Poppy knew who you and I both were. She did that for a reason."

"So that I can be the monster in this story?" Uilleam asked in a way that said he both did and didn't want the answer that.

Some of the heat had gone out of his voice—the anger subsiding.

But she didn't think it was gone completely, but rather tucked it away for the time being.

Something else that would trouble her ...

“So that *you* could be the monster in her story. She wants the version of you that wouldn't care what obstacle stood in your way if it meant, in the end, you would get what you wanted.”

His smile was biting. “Then she's giving me a choice—fatherhood or being the Kingmaker?”

“Would it be a hard choice to make?” she asked before she meant to.

The question had formed as soon as he'd presented the question, but she had only meant to think it.

Instead, it had slipped out of her mouth, now hanging between them.

A throat cleared rather loudly behind them, preventing him from answering.

If he'd wanted to ...

Bishop stood in the doorway, looking mildly uncomfortable before giving them his back to give them privacy. “Voices carry,” he said in partial explanation, before saying to Uilleam, “And you've got a phone call.”

Without a word, Uilleam walked out of the room without looking back. Bishop only hesitated a moment longer before he too disappeared around the corner.

As she stood there, every last bit of elation she'd felt in the days they'd been here, it was as if she'd crashed back into reality.

And with it, the rose tinted glasses shattered.

CHAPTER TEN

THE GOLD SIGNET rings on Carmelo's fingers glinted in the darkened interior of the SUV—the lion's head seeming to snarl as he readjusted his grip on the cane he carried.

It hadn't been long enough to warrant a change since Uilleam had last seen him, but looking at him now, he looked a touch older than normal—more salt on that head of his.

Most of all, Carmelo looked tired.

"Hate him or not," Carmelo started, sounding amused, his accented voice filling the air, "your father would have been damn proud of what you've made of yourself."

The compliment wasn't one he hadn't heard before, but just as it had all the times he'd heard it before, he couldn't decide whether it was an insult or a compliment.

Alexander hadn't expressed pride in anything other than himself. From the time Uilleam could remember wanting to impress his father with anything that would have the man see him in a positive light, he couldn't recall him ever expressing anything close to a compliment.

His work as the Kingmaker would have been seen as something expected.

If anything, the man would have hated the way he so easily bent to Karina's will on more than one occasion—it would have been a weakness in his eyes.

But Uilleam didn't give much thought to what his father would or wouldn't have liked.

A dead man's opinion held no weight.

"I doubt you came this far west in the dead of night to talk about Alexander."

Carmelo had never been an easy man to read. It had taken quite a bit of time, patience, and acute observation to read him as he did others.

And with that extensive history came the knowledge that this was no ordinary visit, no matter how Carmelo tried to act casual.

"No easy thin skipping out on a bid like the one you were about to get," Carmelo added conversationally, determined to drag this on further for reasons known only to him. "We need to celebrate."

Uilleam sat back. "Should we? Absolutely. But we both knew I would. Which still doesn't explain why you're here."

"Never doubted you for a second," Carmelo continued on, "but that doesn't mean others didn't."

They were going in circles ... "Your point?"

"The poor schmuck you've been kicking the shit out of wasn't the only one who believed in what Belladonna was doing." Carmelo's smile was a little more cutting now. "Or are we electing to ignore she was the one to put you on trial in the first place?"

No.

He didn't need that reminder.

"You're not here for yourself," Uilleam guessed. "You would have had me come to you for that. I assume this is the Table's doing?"

Carmelo nodded. "I managed to talk them into waiting until the outcome of the trial to ... go over everything."

Though he tried to make it sound as if it were some impossible feat, Carmelo hadn't attained his position of power, both within the mafia organization he headed, but with the Table as well.

“I don’t see why there’s a need to discuss anything at all. The Table wasn’t at risk of being exposed.”

“Belladonna managed to convince them otherwise.”

Uilleam could feel the muscle in his eye twitch, his agitation mounting. But letting his frustration get the best of him now wouldn’t do him any favors.

“What are they asking for?”

“Your seat’s gone, I already told you that.”

Yes.

He had.

And it was one of few things as of late he was electing to ignore because it did little else but enrage him.

And this was their chance to start anew—letting the past be the past.

It was only a matter of fixing all the bits she’d broken and it would go back to how it was and it would be as if this ... misunderstanding never happened.

“I’m aware,” he said in response.

It was simply one more problem to add to his list to rectify.

“Well, considering the circumstances surrounded how your seat was usurped—the position has come into question.”

His gaze had been on Bishop outside the car window, gesturing for one of his men to walk in the opposite direction of where they were, but when Carmelo finished, Uilleam seized on only one thing.

“Who raised the question?”

“I’m not privy to that information,” Carmelo said with a pointed stare. “I was only informed the Arbitrator would be commissioned.”

He might have held his seat for nearly a decade before Karina had stolen it from him, but there was still much that Uilleam didn’t know.

There were the standard set of rules and conditions that he'd been given a summary of when he'd officially been seated, but what was written on paper couldn't always be translated well.

And since there'd never been a matter brought to the Table they couldn't all agree upon, Uilleam didn't have any experience with the man in question.

But he'd heard the stories of the instances when the Arbitrator was activated—chaos usually followed.

“So what does it mean for my seat to come into question?”

“That's for the Arbitrator to discuss.”

“And I should worry about that because ...”

“Because if you don't, your seat is forfeit and both you, that woman you hold so dear, and anyone even remotely close to you will pay the price.”

Uilleam almost wanted to laugh. “Let's add it to my list of ongoing threats.”

“He's coming for you,” Carmelo said with a sense of urgency that had Uilleam looking up from the plush floor of the car to Carmelo's face and the grace warning he saw in the man's eyes.

The Italian man wasn't one for theatrics, or even fear.

So if he said the matter was serious, Uilleam listened.

“Whether you like it or not, there are rules. Rules you and Belladonna both agreed to,” he continued. “One day, and one day soon, he'll just be there and you'll have to answer. Prepare yourself.”

CARMELO'S WARNING had lingered in the back of his mind ever since that night outside the warehouse.

Finding anything of value about the man had proven nearly impossible, and even after scouring the book of rules and customs that made up the Table, he still hadn't been able to find anything that would help him.

By design, he imagined.

He'd hated the idea of not knowing when or where the Arbitrator would find him was what had troubled him most.

While the role of the Arbitrator wasn't usually a secret, *who* acted in the role was what he couldn't find.

It also didn't help that he was short a hacker and hadn't yet found an adequate replacement, which was proving more irksome than he anticipated.

Until now.

During the Table's creation, the first gathering of men had proven a bit ... bloody. Alliances were tested, feuds were ended with unnamed bullets in uniform fashion. They'd garnered so much attention that Guido Montego, the owner of Carmelo's seat three decades ago, had instituted a new rule:

All matters for which the Table cannot agree, the Arbitrator will be commissioned.

And if his seat was in question, Carmelo's loyalty was to Uilleam, and the others, while all having agreed to have Uilleam join them, didn't feel such unwavering commitment.

Every few years, a new arbitrator was commissioned—selected from a short list of three names that all had to be agreed upon.

The last had acted for over a decade, and from the few stories Carmelo had shared, he sounded less annoying than whoever had sent a messenger.

But he would rectify that.

It was no longer a question of *when* Uilleam would be meeting with the man, but rather how quickly his mercenaries could find him on an island of this size.

The moon made a slow descent across the sky as the sun began its ascent, deep blues giving way to ripe oranges and pinks.

As the hours had passed, Uilleam had watched the change with general disinterest, but instead of focusing on the

renewed rejection he felt now that he'd lost all goodwill he'd gained with Poppy, he focused his attention on that which he could control.

As a door opened quietly behind him, he didn't look back as he asked, "Have they found him?"

The twins had left the resort within ten minutes of them all coming back the night before, given clear instructions on *who* they should be looking for and what to do when they found him.

"Make your presence known," Uilleam had ordered, *"but do not engage him under any circumstances. He'll know who you are, I'm sure."*

Because it was his job to.

He could have sent someone to Uilleam directly if he wanted, or had even come himself since all the men who performed the role of Arbitrator were under a strict 'No-Kill' policy.

But he hadn't.

And Uilleam had every intention of making it abundantly clear how big of a mistake that was.

"Said he's having breakfast in a cafe half an hour away."

Uilleam nodded as he stood. "And Flagg is ..."

"Staying sharp."

He looked back, not liking the idea that only one man would be remaining here with Karina and Poppy, especially when he hadn't been trained by Den standards.

But considering the current state of things, it wasn't as if he had much choice in the matter— a problem he'd be solving soon.

They traveled back into the town's center where few places were open, and even less were out walking around. Most shopkeepers seemed to be setting up for the tourist rush later in the day, but Bishop led them a small hole-in-the-wall that Uilleam would have skipped over any other time.

While Uilleam made it a point to conceal his identity as best he could at every turn, the Arbitrator didn't adhere to the same set of rules.

But they'd never had the pleasure of meeting, and now that he was making his way back the way they'd come the night before until they reached the shops, he planned to rectify that.

The Arbitrator was considered Switzerland—the neutral party that allowed for decision making between those of the Table. Uilleam had heard occasional stories about the previous man who'd held the position back when Alexander had had his sights set on joining the cabal.

It was supposed to be a prestigious role that paid considerably well from what he understood. But surely it was *because* of the ample pay that the new arbitrator had decided to all but demand Uilleam take him out, starting with his knees and working his way up.

Uilleam had known from the minute that man approached him who had sent him and why.

Carmelo had warned him the arbitrator had been looking to speak with him—which was one of the reasons he'd wanted to distract Karina with a beautiful vacation so she wouldn't have to worry about this.

He considered it a minor problem at the moment—one of which she didn't need to know.

He hadn't expected the man to be able to track him *here* of all places after he'd put considerate road blocks in case someone *had* tried.

But since he had, Uilleam had every intention of showing him just how big of a mistake that had been.

Upon arriving, he didn't have to question which of the men he was there to see—he had a certain air about him.

The Arbitrator sat at a table alone, cutting into a red snapper, seeming at ease despite the fact that he was surrounded by Uilleam's mercenaries.

No one drew a weapon, or even shouted any instruction, but they *were* impossible to ignore.

One by one, the other guests—few as there might have been—paid their tab and left without a word, the workers making themselves scarce.

Only once they were alone, or because he could no longer pretend he wasn't there, the arbitrator looked up, dark eyes comically wide. "Kingmaker, I presume?"

Uilleam helped himself to the chair opposite him. "I'd be happy to remind you why they call me that should you like a demonstration." He picked up the lone steak knife. "I've never killed a man with a knife—too messy, honestly—but I would gladly make an exception for you should you ever send *anyone* near my family again."

The man couldn't be more than five and a half feet tall and just as slight. It wouldn't take much effort at all to kill him if he set Bishop onto him. Probably wouldn't even fight back.

And yet, he was probably one of three people in the entire world Uilleam wasn't allowed to kill.

Fortunately for him.

"No harm intended," he said with a gentle smile, as if they were old friends and this was merely a misunderstanding. "I only wished to speak with you as you've avoiding my calls. My name is Corbin Filch and—"

"I wasn't aware I needed to be taking your calls."

"That's exactly what I'm here to discuss," he offered invitingly. "It's come to the attention of the Table that there might have been some unpleasantness around Karina Ashworth acquiring your seat."

His frown deepened as he shifted in his seat. "And that's an issue for you to concern yourself because ..."

"As you're aware from the bylaws, '*A seat may open if its owner, while living, presents as a threat to the collective and is in danger of revealing its secrets.*'"

Uilleam continued to stare without responding, knowing he was being watched and studied.

He didn't need to be reminded of the rules—he'd read and agreed to them.

He just hadn't thought this particular clause would ever effect him.

“Again, I still hear no reason why you're involvement is necessary.”

“Then I won't bore you further with details. Your chair was not forfeited, nor did Karina Ashworth succeed in her attempt to have you imprisoned. According to the rules, you are still the rightful owner of the seat.”

“And I'm expected to retaliate,” he said, his voice, thankfully, sounding calmer to his own ears than he felt.

Beady eyes narrowed on him, his smile growing. “ In exactly thirty days' time, you and Karina Ashworth will be brought before the table and you'll have a choice to make— forfeit your seat and stick a gun in your mouth, or you will put that very bullet into Belladonna's beautiful face.”

Uilleam stabbed the knife down so violently, the blade sank into the table as the handle vibrated before stilling.

He could feel Bishop's gaze on him, but he didn't have any answers.

Not yet.

Fuck.

But Uilleam wasn't finished just yet. “Should you want a meeting in the future, I would suggest you find a better method of communication, because if you or anyone you send come near my family again, I'm going to have your jaw broken permanently.”

There'd been a certain ease to their conversation before now—just two men having a conversation over breakfast—but as Uilleam continued, Corbin's smile faded.

“Threatening the arbi—“

“No, I’m threatening *you*,” Uilleam said plainly. “Hear me clearly when I say that should you ever send *anyone* near my daughter, I will make it my life’s mission to make sure your bloodline stops with you.”

As far as Uilleam was concerned, the conversation was over. His back was turned before Corbin spoke again.

“Oh, and Kingmaker?”

He met the man’s gaze, his stare unrepentant.

“Should you elect to ignore my summons in the future, or if our conversations are shared with anyone, I’ll make sure there’s a bullet put into both of your heads. Let’s not make that darling girl an orphan, yes?”

Uilleam didn’t respond as he turned, prompting the others to do the same.

This was just the start, and he would be out of time before he knew it.

But one day, and that day would surely not come fast enough, he had every intention of making that man suffer in ways that hadn’t been invented yet.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SOMETIMES, even the most intricate, well crafted paintings that had been loved and cherished; handled with gloves and expert precision could still have cracks in it.

Some weren't as noticeable, others were.

But it was one thing to not notice ... another to be willfully obtuse and ignorant to what was right in front of you.

Running from her problems had never solved anything for her—it usually made things a little more difficult.

Their days vacationing had gone by in the blink of an eye, and what had felt like a new beginning for them had crashed so quickly, she wondered if it had even been there to begin with.

Inside that bubble, the world had seemed a little less bleak. And had she known then what she knew now, she would have basked in those days of summer heat, pool water, and the sounds of Poppy and Uilleam's laughter.

The journey home had been a quiet one.

Uilleam distanced himself to the front of the plane, his mercenaries close by as they occasionally spoke in hushed tones about whatever new assignment awaited them back in New York.

He seemed more troubled than usual, that notch between his brows seemed deeper than usual, and he'd made another move on his board.

And in the two days they'd been back at the Obsidian, she hadn't seen much of him, not even for dinner.

Those few days of bliss had been everything she hadn't known she needed, and then in an instant—when they couldn't shut out the real world quick enough, it had all come crashing down.

As if the weight of everything they'd left behind had come flooding right back in, and sat a little heavier on her shoulders now.

Now, back in New York, Karina was faced with a new problem—the reality of who they were and how, in the end, it would affect Poppy.

And the fact that she'd been neglecting her own work.

Poppy had been her sole focus these last couple of weeks, and she hadn't thought about going back into the office after she'd left the women to collect any messages for when she did return.

There was also the fact that she'd called Kava the other day and still had yet to receive a call back.

Even now, as she finished stepping into the less painful version of her favorite heels, she tried calling again, frowning when it went to voicemail.

Another thing to add to her list.

For now, there was the other matter of going into the office today.

Iz had popped by, even offered to take Poppy for a day of facials and shopping while Karina went by the office to check in.

Grabbing her bag, Karina left the bedroom, and left behind her worries about everything else and focused on the everything she'd been neglecting.

Not only had she not taken a single call despite the various pings and alerts, she also hadn't been to her office or spoken with her staff.

And while she still wasn't sure of what happened with Uilleam and Poppy, she knew, at the very least, she needed to prepare for whatever was coming.

And she wouldn't be able to do that alone.

Taking the elevator downstairs, she found the valet waiting in front of the hotel, his suit dark and unblemished, but he looked surprised when she approached.

“Madam?”

“Oh, right, the ticket. I'm sure I have it—“

“Oh, no, Mrs. Your driver is already waiting for you?”

Driver? Frowning, she asked, “What driver?”

But she'd hardly gotten the question out before she spotted a guy—who couldn't have been more than a shade over eighteen—waving her down as he jogged toward her.

More than a little confused, she glanced behind herself, figuring he must have been trying to alert someone else, but his gaze was steady on her as he smiled.

“Sorry, I'm late!”

“I didn't realize I was expecting you,” she said, more confused than ever.

He nodded and smiled, not seeming bothered at all that she hadn't the foggiest idea who he was.

“I'm your driver and personal security,” he said, standing a little straighter as he did, seeming quite proud. “Kingmaker hired me.”

At the mention of Uilleam, the valet mumbled something beneath his breath before quickly excusing himself and disappearing.

But her new driver wasn't bothered at all as he stuck out his hand. “I'm Grunt.”

“*Grunt?*”

He nodded, chin out a fraction. “Grimm says we all get names.”

Of course he had.

But she wasn't thinking about Grimm's hazing, but rather the fact that she could definitively say Grunt was the smallest, and possibly the youngest, of all the mercenaries Uilleam had ever worked with.

And there was a certain *earnestness* to him—maybe it was the large brown eyes in the boyish face that made him seem so innocent—but whatever it was had her calling Uilleam.

“Seriously?” she asked when the call connected. “You allowed your mercenaries to name him *Grunt*?”

There was plenty of commotion wherever he was as it bled through the phone speaker, but she could still hear the amusement in his voice as he said, “I thought it was rather fitting since he's new.”

“He's practically a child,” she said softly, though he was only about a decade of so her junior.

“Would you have preferred one of my mercenaries? They might be few in number at the moment, but I'm sure I could spare one, if you'd prefer. I know how ... *fond* you are of them.”

Oh how she wished he could see the glare on her face because he wasn't wrong as much as she wished he was.

And there was only one thing worse than Uilleam being right—him *knowing* he was right.

Because they both knew she wouldn't prefer one of them—not because she didn't think them capable—of course they were.

But she also knew that while they might be tasked with doing whatever she asked of them, they still only answered to one person.

And that was Uilleam.

“I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself,” she reminded him.

“I’d be more inclined to agree if your pet were here, but he isn’t.”

“*Uilleam.*”

“What? He doesn’t speak, shadows you wherever you go, and even has an attack command.”

“He’s not a *dog.*”

“Certainly not,” he responded too easily.

“Are you finished yet?”

“So until your loyal companion is back by your side, I’d prefer you have someone with you for the time being. You mentioned he and the girl who works for you will be back in a matter of days? Grunt stays with you until then.”

While she still didn’t like it, she also knew there was no point in arguing further—Uilleam wouldn’t bend in this.

“Then he can stay until then.”

“Excellent.”

As she ended the call, she found Grunt waiting dutifully. “What’s your name?”

“Gr—“

“*Your* name,” she insisted.

He looked a bit bashful as he rubbed the back of his neck and smiled. “Andrew.”

“Nice to meet you then, Andrew. I’m Karina.”

And with all the grace of someone who hadn’t actually been a driver before, he opened the door and gestured for her to climb in.

She liked him already.

AFTER UILLEAM LEARNED of her other location—and Nix reminding her how good he was at finding things when it had

come to her underground safe house—she'd had to move.

This new building in the heart of downtown Manhattan had gone on the market several months ago, and she'd quickly bought the top three floors and converted the space over to suit her needs.

Now, she was back in business.

“Morning, Miss,” the morning shift guard, Winston, greeted with his customary grin and head nod.

She returned his smile, genuinely happy to see him as she paused beside his desk on the way to the bank of elevators. “Always nice to see a friendly face. How's Mrs. Hunter?”

She might have only met his wife once—a one-off incident where the woman had brought in his lunch after he'd forgotten it at home—she'd grown rather fond of the couple. In part because they were old enough to be her grandparents, but also because their love for each other was impossible to ignore.

“She's been asking about you,” he replied warmly. “Told her you were on vacation and she accepted that for a while, but she's got a batch of cookie with your name it.”

The other thing to love about his wife? She loved to bake. And Agatha could make an absolutely phenomenal red velvet cake.

“I'd be happy to have them, and if she wants to make me another of her strawberry rhubarb pies, I would gladly pay whatever she wants.”

His grin curled a little higher, always proud for his wife. “I'll make sure to pass that along, but you know she's not going to charge you a thing.”

Karina bid him farewell before heading up to her office.

And when the doors opened again, she was greeted by the sight of a woman with chestnut brown hair swept up into a bun.

Monica, Kava's temporary replacement.

She was capable enough, nice even, and had worked for Karina in some capacity over the last five years after leaving Katherine's finishing school.

She wasn't completely bad at her job ... she just wasn't Kava.

But unfortunately, she was still in Romania with Sebastian. Which, that thought reminded her that she was overdue to check in with them.

Especially when she'd told Nix how to find Sebastian for the Wild Bunch.

There was a chance they hadn't made contact, and maybe that was why she hadn't heard from them, but she still wanted to check for herself.

"What do you have for me?"

Monica didn't immediately respond, just stared for a long while with a quizzical look on her face. Only when Karina cleared her throat did she finally blink.

"Sorry. Um, yes, of course. A few contracts have come back that need your signature—I've left those on your desk for review. And Junior Lopez called—said the Scarfell deal will be dead in the water if it goes a penny over ten million."

Karina rolled her eyes.

Men like Junior always bartered like petulant children yet thought they knew best when it came to making deals.

They were as annoying as they were ineffectual.

"Remind him the Russians wouldn't have entertained him thus far had I not stepped in. The price is twenty-five, and my fee has gone up ten percent for wasting my time."

"I'll relay the message."

As they rounded the corner, Karina became distinctly aware of heads popping up as her staff looked in her direction, but instead of turning to whatever they'd been doing before she arrived, they continued to stare as Monica had.

Weird.

But, she didn't have time to delve into that at the moment. "If I could have everyone's attention for a moment, please."

Tabitha brought her a fresh latte before taking her purse to her office. Only once she had returned and the ladies had gathered to the front of the room did Karina finally begin.

"Good morning, everyone."

They all gave similar greetings, but she couldn't help but notice they all seemed rather ... uneasy.

And now that she thought about it, she wasn't sure if she had actually truly *seen* all of them before today, at least not properly. She knew their names, of course—she wasn't that much of a monster—but she couldn't say she had ever noticed much more about them than say their hair or eye color.

Actually, they were rarely in her presence for more than a handful of minutes at a time. Here in her office, she took the occasional phone call, but she merely issued orders without really paying attention to who would be following it through.

Her focus had always been on finding Uilleam.

Hurting him.

Using every bit of means at her disposal to get to him.

Him.

He'd always been her focus—from the moment she'd learned his name.

"When I asked you all here, it was initially for the sole purpose of announcing my return and my intention to get back to where we were before I took my leave, but ... There's something I'd like to say first.

"I know we've spent the last many years targeting the Kingmaker and his associates and in that time, I'm sure my focus was rather singular and because of this, I could be a bit ... temperamental, for a lack of a better word."

She almost wished they would have looked more surprised by her admission, at least then she could believe she hadn't been *so* bad as a boss.

Now, she wasn't so sure.

"I want to thank you for everything you've done for me here. Your allegiance and loyalty is, and has been, very much appreciated. If there is anything I can do to show my gratitude, please don't hesitate to ask."

When the room remained silent, she cleared her throat. "Seriously. You could ask for just about anything and I'll be accommodating."

Silence stretched on for a bit longer before one girl sitting across the room glanced around before speaking up hesitantly. "I have about seventy-thousand dollars in student debt that I —"

"Done. Send me your account information and I'll take care of it."

That, thankfully, seemed to spur them all on as they all spoke at once.

"Consider this a late bonus," she said over them. "If you're interested, have your requests in to me before the end of the day and I'll have it taken care of."

That seemed to put them all in a better mood, but they were still staring in a way that almost made her self-conscious. "Is there something I should know?"

Florence cleared her throat. "It's just ... your outfit."

Karina looked down at herself. "What? What's wrong with it?" She'd gone business casual for the day—wide-leg trousers, a lace top that could have doubled as lingerie, and her favorite heels.

Someone else said, "It's red."

"Maroon," someone else corrected.

"But not white," a final voice added softly.

For a moment, she didn't know how to respond.

To most people, she was simply known as the woman in white. They didn't know the reasons behind why the color had

been so important to her for years—why she'd *needed* to wear it.

She'd been in mourning, wanting to turn back the hands of time before she'd lost the life growing inside of her. How could she *not* mourn?

But, Poppy was alive and well and living and breathing and ... she didn't have to mourn anymore.

She didn't have to feel as if it was a chore to breathe every time she woke up in the morning.

Life was not perfect by any means, but it was as close as she thought she could get for the time being.

“Times are changing,” she settled on saying, keeping the truth to herself for the time being.

From now on, there was the time before, and then there was now.

It was time to embrace the now.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HIS FEET KICKED up on the solid oak desk, Uilleam watched the grainy images unfolding on the screen one by one, watching it play from beginning to end, and then again.

Somehow, despite all the advances in technology, surveillance cameras around the city were all bloody awful.

But poor photographs or not, Uilleam recognized Katherine Ashworth as she stepped out of a chauffeured car, an attendant waiting to take her hand as she stepped up onto the sidewalk.

This was recent, he imagined, considering her hair was shorter in this one, and she wore a black suit that bore a striking resemblance to one Karina had worn before.

He had the distinct impression this was done with purpose—he just didn't have the reason yet.

She looked back momentarily, just for a *split* second, and looked right at the camera.

As if she knew he would be watching.

The slight smirk curling her lips only reaffirmed that thought.

He'd faced many men during his lengthy career—had been threatened in some grisly manner or another by virtually every person he'd come into contact with—but none of them had ever grated over his every nerve the way she did.

His hatred was usually reserved solely for his father. He'd entertained the idea that he hated Karina back when he'd first

understood the scope of what she had done, but the thought didn't last very long.

Katherine Ashworth?

There wasn't a day that went by when he didn't wish harm upon her.

He'd even given her acts against himself a pass—par for the course in their line of work—but for the life of him, he couldn't see what Karina saw in her own mother.

He didn't think there was a true maternal instinct inside the woman at all—she only saw Karina as another source to leech off of.

Only after did she don her sunglasses, oversized opaque black frames, then walked into the unmarked building.

“Start it over,” Uilleam said out loud, then rewatched the same footage again.

But this time, he wasn't just looking at her—he looked at everything around her too.

What cars were around.

If anyone was watching her, because although she'd arrived alone, that could have been by design. And considering she knew he was looking for her, she would have taken some precaution.

But as soon as she turned in the direction of something—or someone—offscreen, the footage stopped.

Uilleam frowned. “Where's the rest?” he asked, finally looking over at the wide eyed man who looked as if he were seconds from shrinking into himself.

“I, uh—“

Patience was a virtue he simply didn't possess, or that was the excuse Uilleam had given himself considering his temperament. But he'd been trying to work on that as of late.

Truly.

And it was for that reason he didn't immediately snap his fingers to prompt the man to finally spit it out.

Progress.

“By all means, I have all day,” he said dryly.

“I don't h-have it yet.”

Dropping his feet to the floor from where they'd been propped up on his desk, he interlaced his fingers together on top of his desk as he stared at the man. “It's been three *days*.”

“I'm doing everything I-I can. It's just—it takes a while to get everything and—“

He was still stammering as Uilleam stared at him.

That was the thing about hackers—there were plenty of them, but that didn't mean they were very good.

Certainly not as good as the one who'd been working for him for years.

He'd *tried* over the years to remember that not everyone strived to be the best at their craft. Some were simply happy in their mediocrity and there was no need for him to worry himself about the choices of others.

But as he pinched the bridge of his nose as he inhaled, searching for even a crumb of restraint as he addressed the man sitting in the corner.

The hacker—who was older than the protege he'd been working with for years—had come highly recommended from an associate who'd needed his own work done online, but Uilleam was quickly realizing that this was only because no one had had the pleasure of working with Winter.

“What else do you have?”

The man looked as if he wished the floor would swallow him whole.

But his silence was answer enough. “So nothing ...”

“It's not that simple,” the hacker said in a soft voice, prompting Uilleam to look at him. “There's enough cameras,

public or private, around the city that it's hard to go any day without being seen. At this point I've looked at all possibilities and none are her. It's not about not being able to find her, I don't think she's been here at all really."

Uilleam made considerable effort not to do violence.

It was possible that she wasn't in the state.

He'd gotten the logs of every flight leaving within a four-hundred mile radius and no one arriving or departing had matched her image.

"Are you saying you believe she's in hiding?" he asked the most obvious question.

"I'd say so. I can't find what's not there."

He couldn't ...

"You know, I think there's someone who might be able to help," Bishop said casually, arms folded across his chest. "If anyone can find it, Winter can."

"Excellent idea," Uilleam called. "I hadn't once considered trying to hire Winter before this very moment. Why, it never crossed my mind at all that I would *possibly* be in need of her services and thus wouldn't have to rely on—what's your name again?"

"Johnny."

"Right ... I wouldn't have to rely on *Johnny* to be even minutely capable, if only she could put her hurt feelings aside and—"

A ping on his mobile distracted him long enough for the hacker to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Fortunately for you, I have a meeting. Do get me that footage as soon as you can before I no longer find you useful."

It wasn't until the man had made a beeline out the door did Bishop look in Uilleam's direction.

"A meeting?"

Uilleam smiled. “Nothing to be worried about. They have no intention of killing me ... today. I need you to find someone who can get the rest of that footage so we can find out who Katherine was talking to.”

Bishop nodded once. “Let you know when I do.”

CONSIDERING she’d been away for much of their childhood, Uilleam wasn’t all that surprised his sister preferred her solitude.

When she was here in the country, she never chose to stay in the city despite his insistence—she complained about the noise incessantly, in fact.

Instead, she’d bought what one would have considered a glorified shack that she’d called a hunting cabin.

Fortunately, she’d spent a small fortune making it into the place it was now—an A-frame cabin that faced the lake, that side featuring double-paned soundproof glass.

Elsie’s pair of Dobermans perked up as he pulled to a stop at the end of the gravel driveway next to her Range Rover. But while their ears might have twitched as he walked past them, and one even gave a halfhearted thump of its short tail, neither attempted to stop him from entering.

He wanted to believe it was because they didn’t view him as a threat, but it was most likely because Elsie hadn’t instructed them to.

He was fine never knowing.

Letting himself inside, he called, “Elsie?”

It was only a few seconds later that she came in through the open back doors, wearing dirty gloves and carrying a bowl of zucchini and squash.

“On time for once?” she said as she placed that bowl on the counter. “Perhaps you *are* turning over a new leaf.”

“I don’t—“

“You show up when you want, Uilleam, never when you’re expected.”

He elected to take that as a compliment. “The same could be said about you, you know,” Uilleam remarked as he took a seat on one of the tall bar stools. “How often did you disappear without a word and come back as if you’d never left?”

“How often did you notice?” she asked, her smile saying she was indulging him rather than truly looking for an answer.

Often, he found it so easy to forget how differently they’d all experienced their parents. And how, because they’d often been lumped, he and Kit had both gone through the same things at the same time, but from two very different perspectives.

But for most of those times, Elsie hadn’t been there at all.

“I always noticed,” he responded finally, offering her what he didn’t often give others—the unvarnished truth. “I don’t believe I said it enough then, but I didn’t notice, Elsie, and I missed you.”

She’d been washing off her vegetables, leaving them on a towel to dry when she paused, her expression so vulnerable, he knew exactly where her thoughts had gone.

“Did he—“ She swallowed, sounding unlike herself. “Did he ever tell you why?”

Uilleam and his siblings might not have agreed on much, but they had always agreed to be truthful about Alexander and what it meant to grow up at the Runehart Estate.

Their mother might have excused all the abuse and atrocities he’d committed against each of them, but never each other.

And that validation, with time, had been enough.

“No,” he answered, softly. Mindful of her feelings. “He never did. I ... didn’t know he was going to—“

“How would you?” she asked, cutting his explanation short. “You were only a child then. I know it wasn’t your fault, Uilleam.”

“If I could have stopped it I would have.”

Because the day Alin died, Elsie was never the same. And the days leading up to it? They’d been the last time he could remember his sister ever being *happy*.

“Well, that’s a conversation for another day, isn’t it? I’m sure you’re here to discuss more pressing matters.”

It was as if all that emotion had been snuffed.

Sometimes, it felt as if he could only now see a fraction of the girl she’d once been who believed in dreams and fairytales.

The rest of the time she seemed merely a shade.

Like now.

“So spill it,” she said. “Whatever it is.”

Even if he wanted to talk about Alin and what had happened to him more, he also knew she wouldn’t. It was just the way she was.

“What do you know about the Arbitrator?”

“A few rumors, but not a man I’m well versed on.”

Uilleam summarized the last series of events—as much as he could within the constraints of the agreement he’d made—as she pulled a knife and thinly chopped the apples until the bowl was full again.

As she rolled out the pastry dough, she asked, “Have you spoken to Karina about any of this?”

Uilleam adjusted on his chair, rubbing a hand over his face. “Not yet.”

“Sounds counterintuitive,” she responded, staring at him.

“I already know what she’ll say and I don’t need her under any added stress.”

“Because she’s a new mother, or because you plan on killing hers?”

She wasn't far off, but there was more to what was happening than he could explain. "I've decided to go in a different direction, actually," he responded. "That's why I'm here."

Elsie was a born strategist—so good at what she did, she only offered her services on a quarterly basis.

And always at her discretion.

But it was worth it, Uilleam knew.

While he was known as the Kingmaker, she'd become the Usurper.

Fortunately for everyone, they'd never had the misfortune of going against the other. And sometimes he liked to strategize about just *how* he would get himself out of that.

"I don't think I'm understanding ..."

"I need another plan."

Elsie blinked, once. Slowly.

Usually one didn't argue with whatever her plan was—her reputation spoke for itself.

And when she'd suggested getting rid of Katherine Ashworth as quickly as possible, he fully agreed.

Now, he was having second thoughts because of one person ...

"Eager as I might have been to see an end to this problem, *your* brother believes it wouldn't be in my best interest to murder Katherine Ashworth."

Elsie scoffed with a laugh. "Don't pass ownership to me when disagreeing."

"Besides," a new voice said, "that's not exactly what I said."

"I wasn't aware you were invited to this little soiree of ours," Uilleam said, looking back at his brother as he walked into the cabin.

But unlike when he'd arrived, Elsie's Dobermans didn't remain on the deck, but happily trotted behind Kit. Seeming all too pleased to do so.

It was apparent her dogs had horrible taste.

"What *did* you say?" Elsie asked him as Uilleam asked simultaneously, "What are you doing here?"

Unlike his last look at his own reflection, Kit didn't seem bogged down the stresses of everyday life.

Perhaps because he'd already entered into his version of retirement after a decade long career with the Lotus Society. And now that Luna was pregnant, he'd be pulling back even more.

Kit paused where he stood, looking at the two of them in turn before helping himself to the chilled bottle of Rum Elsie kept in a bar fridge within the island.

"Well, it's the first time we've all been in the same place at the same time. I thought I'd visit, say hello. Is that not what family does?"

"You once attempted to burn down three of my holding facilities because of a disagreement," Uilleam supplied wryly.

"Training exercise for the Wild Bunch," he explained away, failing to hide his emerging smile behind his drink. "And if I'd wanted them to fall, they would have."

Point proven. "So, remind me what family does again?"

"Is it truly so hard to believe that I missed you?" he asked, sounding exasperated as he looked from one to the other. "*Both* of you?"

To that, Uilleam and Elsie both answered the same. "Yes."

"I shouldn't have asked ... "

"No pregnant wife to spoil?"

"She's nesting, as I understand it."

Now, Elsie was the one smiling as she finished a layer of egg wash on her tarts. "She kicked you out then."

Kit studied his drink a moment before answering. “I’m allowing her the freedom to do as she wished without my interference.”

“So she did,” Uilleam restarting, now smiling himself, “kick you out.”

“Moving on. It seems I’ve come at the right time if you’re finally listening to reason.”

“We have a bit of a problem though,” Elsie explained for him, telling Kit everything he’d told her.

But when she finished, he looked puzzled. “Why’s the arbitrator important currently?”

“Because Uilleam now believes it was his mother-in-law who called his seat at the Table into question. Or do I have that wrong?” she asked, her tone clear she already knew the answer.

But he wasn’t surprised she’d caught onto what he hadn’t actually explained yet.

“Since you know why I’m here,” he said with a gesture of his hand. “Give me your best strategy.”

“It’s simple really, you’ll have to choose.”

“Pardon?”

Elsie dusted the flour off her hands as she finished with the last of the dough and had carefully lined her baking tray with it.

“Between the *Kingmaker* and Karina.”

“One has nothing to do with the other.”

“Oh contraire, brother. I think this years-long couples’ spat you’ve had with her makes it abundantly clear that *that’s* not true.”

It seemed almost poetic that he would be receiving that warning now after what’d happened with Poppy in that market.

“And what of Poppy?” Elsie asked, smiling brilliantly for the first time since Uilleam arrived. “How’s my darling

niece?”

A pang hit his chest at the mention of her, conjuring memories from the market.

Uilleam had been called a great many things over the length of his life and career—some words harsher than others—but while he’d been glad for the fear it struck in his enemies, it caused a sharp pain now when he thought of the way Poppy had looked at him.

As if *he* were the monster.

“She doesn’t care for me,” Uilleam said, the confession grating.

It wasn’t one easily admitted, and had this been anyone else, he wouldn’t have shared it.

But this was Kit, and despite their differences—perhaps *because* of their differences—he didn’t fear his judgment.

He expected a joke at his own expense, but Kit actually turned to better look at him, his expression mildly surprised. “Has she told you that?”

Uilleam shook his head with a frown. “She’s only a child ... and she doesn’t have to say it for me to know.”

“Yet,” he said holding up a hand, “you also believe this child, ‘*doesn’t care for you,*’ as you say.”

“If I enter a room, she avoids me.”

“As does majority of the world, I’m afraid.”

“Is this meant to be helping me?” Uilleam asked, growing agitated.

“Well, when you ask stupid questions—“

“Kit,” Elsie admonished. “I think what he means to say is, how could you possibly know any of this if you don’t actually *talk* to her?”

“It’s not that simple.”

He’d never imagined what it would mean to *be* a father, at least not in any true sense of the word. He only ever hoped,

should he become one, he would be better than his own father had been to him.

He didn't want to be cruel and full of hatred—conditioning his own offspring to look at him as competition rather than what he should have been.

Loving.

Doting.

Caring.

“It's more simple than you realize,” Elsie said. “Girls, by their very nature, adore their fathers ... until they give them a reason not to. You're not like our father.”

Uilleam looked at her, expecting to find some evidence in her face that she didn't mean what she said, but from what he could see, she meant it.

She believed it.

And maybe, if someone else believed it, maybe there was hope for him.

“But if you allow this vendetta of yours to cloud your every thought and action, you're not just risking your relationship, but everything you hold dear.” Elsie's stare was grave as she met his gaze. “You might be able to kill Katherine Ashworth and be rid of her, but what will it cost?”

That was the question he'd been asking himself for a very long time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bishop

“I FEEL like I’m missing something,” Hawley said from the passenger seat.

From behind the wheel, Bishop glanced at him as he navigated through the crowded city streets on their way to the other side of the city. “What do you mean?”

“What the hell is this job exactly? *What* are these people?”

Sometimes, since he’d been in the inner circles of it all, even before his time in *Sheena*, it was easy to forget that not everyone was privy to the same information.

And there was the little fact of, despite how long they’d spent in *Gheenă*, they’d never gone into detail about the reason why they’d both found themselves imprisoned there.

It had always been an unspoken rule between them that their pasts, and all the harsh details, weren’t up for discussion.

But if he was here now—willing to take on this job and all the messy details that didn’t involve him—he at least deserved the truth.

He, and the twins both, deserved to know what they were putting their life on the line for.

So that was what he did—explaining everything he knew, and some he could only speculate.

“This Katherine woman—what’s her beef with the Kingmaker? Can’t just be because he has a thing for her kid?”

Bishop laughed, in part because he didn't have an answer for his question, and because Bishop looked absolutely baffled by the all of it.

“And because she hates him,” he said.

He might not have heard her say it directly, but it was easy to see as much.

“But why? Questionable ethics aside, seems like a decent enough guy.”

Bishop turned down the road, spotting the brownstone he was looking for. “He hired a mercenary to go take out a business rival with no witnesses left behind. That mercenary went out and did the job without asking any questions—shot the guy right in the middle of the forehead. The woman in the back, but he didn't know at the time that she was pregnant.”

Hawley's face lost all animation, turning contemplative.

Putting it altogether.

“The woman?”

“Karina,” Bishop confirmed, that memory right there at the forefront. “But no one knew it at the time because her back was turned.”

“And the baby?” he asked.

“Far as she knew, the baby died because she'd gotten shot. Kingmaker? He didn't know she was pregnant then.”

“Well shit,” Hawley said, looking as if it were all making sense now. “How did—“

“She survived ... faked her death a little while later. Unfortunately, I was the first person to learn she wasn't dead.”

Even now, he still remembered the day she'd stood in front of him to say he would be held in *Gheenă*.

That he would replace the Jackal and would never know freedom again.

It still sent a rush of chills down his spine.

“Why was she after you?” he asked, looking confused a moment before it cleared and he started to look at Bishop.

But he beat him to it. “Because I was the mercenary she thought had murdered her unborn child.”

It was why, despite the years he’d lost, and how angry he’d been in the beginning, he couldn’t blame her.

A life for a life.

His penance.

Parking outside the brownstone, he killed the engine and started to climb out before freezing.

“Just so you know, he’s a little prickly around strangers.”

“*Who?*”

Bishop caught the briefest glimpse of a woman walking by through the uncovered front window, but the man he’d come to see took that moment to walk out the front door.

Retirement made Red look younger, healthier, and the least surprising—calmer.

From his very first days in the Den, he’d always been the one with something to prove.

Not to the other mercenaries, but to himself.

Bishop didn’t know how Uilleam had come to be at the Den, but he’d seen what had come after once he’d finished conditioning.

And the fact that *that* man who’d been so beaten and broken had managed to find his way out to the other side with just a few more scars to show for it ... maybe there really was something after all this.

His therapist was going to have a field day with that.

Bishop waved a hand in the air, almost laughing when he saw the way Red squinted.

“You’re friends with someone in the Russian mob?” Hawley asked, probably recognizing the tattoos all over his torso.

Bishop fought a smile. “He can be a bit ... temperamental when it comes to that.”

Just the reminder of it used to send him in a rage.

There’d been a reason he ended up with his name.

Red frowned as he looked around. “What the hell do I look like, the mercenary whisperer? Why the hell are all of you showing up at my house?”

“That why you’re moving?”

“Have to. Mercenaries keep showing up.”

“Someone else pay you a visit?” he asked.

Red eyed him suspiciously. “Probably for the same reason you’re here. *He* send you?”

He, being the Kingmaker.

“He doesn’t know I’m here.”

The man hadn’t said *how* he wanted him to find results, only that he wanted them.

Red didn’t look like he believed that at all. “Do you know Sleven?”

He frowned. “Who the hell is that?”

“She came after you,” Red explained. “She came a couple of years after the thing—I was over her training. Hadn’t seen her in a while, but after all the shit went down, she came back to the city for a job—said the pay couldn’t be beat.”

Bishop nodded, that was fair enough.

He knew what it was like to be out in the cold after a steady gig and in those days, you took what you could get.

“What’s it have to do with you?”

“What the buyer didn’t tell her was that it was an open-bid contract?”

Meaning, anyone could come in and work the job which never boded well for anyone because not only did you have to

worry about the target, you also had to contend with someone putting a target on *you* if the job paid well enough.

“I’m assuming you wrapped that up?”

Red looked troubled. “Working on it, but the thing is, the other guy on the contract? It was Lucky.”

Now *that* was a name he did know.

The thing about Lucky?

He didn’t think himself capable of losing—in any sense. It had made him formidable during his time with the Den ... but it also made him a liability.

Because it was one thing to work a job for the money, it was something else when you felt as if you had nothing to lose.

It wasn’t about the money for him.

He coveted the chaos and didn’t care who he took down with him.

It made him dangerous.

And if he was aligning himself with Katherine Ashworth—*and* had the Jackal, though he didn’t want to think about that point—then this was job that wouldn’t be as easy as he’d hoped.

They had the same training after all—they knew how the other thought.

“And he’s not the only one coming back to the city,” Red went on. “Now that the Den has gone to shit, people are out looking for jobs wherever they can find them—even if the people they’re working for aren’t vetted.”

Yeah, that was definitely going to be a problem.

Red glanced over at Hawley, his expression not *unfriendly*. “Who’s he?”

“Hawley Flagg, Red, formerly of the Den.”

They shook hands, Flagg looking a shade more comfortable.

Bishop gave him a quick explanation of everything that had happened, or lack thereof, and their lack of information.

“And Winter hasn’t come around.”

“Not that surprising.”

“I’m recruiting anyone I can,” he said meaningfully.

Not at all surprised when Red gave him a flat stare before looking back at the brownstone behind him when he heard the scream of a child inside.

He was stock still, listening, but when a shriek of laughter sounded, he relaxed again.

“I’d let him crash and burn before I ever agreed to work for him again.”

Yeah, Bishop had figured.

It had been the same answer he’d gotten from the others with Calavera being the only exception.

But she was in no condition to be on the front lines of this.

“People do desperate things when backed into a corner,” Red said, staring out at the open street, his mind seeming elsewhere. “Who’s got your back out there?”

“I’ve always been able to handle my own.”

“Without a doubt,” he agreed immediately. “But someone’s gotta be looking out for you while you’re looking out for *him*. ‘Cause if someone’s shooting at him, they’ll *definitely* be shooting at you too.”

“I’ve got a few guys,” he said, gesturing toward Hawley.

War Dogs, he called them—the ones left to clean up the mess in other people’s fights.

“Take care of yourself,” Red said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Do me a favor? Put in a good word to Winter for me.”

Red smiled wide. “Don’t want to call Synek yourself?”

“*No one* wants to call Synek.”

Not if they were smart.

“Anyway, there seems to be jobs going up around the city, and if I had to guess who’d be financing that, it’d probably be Belladonna’s mother. I’d start with the mercenaries that’d be most likely to flip—that’s who you need to look out for.”

“You know I always appreciate you.”

“Uh huh. Consider that a favor to you and not the other guy,” Red called as he headed back for his door. “And next time you want to stop by? Give me a heads up.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PAIN CAME WITH AWARENESS, a throb starting in the back of her head and quickly bringing tears to her eyes, but as the smell of rot and packed earth permeated her senses, the headache was the last thing on her mind.

Panic made her hands tremble, but she forced herself to sit up all the same to take in her surroundings.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, remembering not what she'd been taught at Ashworth Hall under the tutelage of a woman she'd grown to hate, but rather everything she had learned from Karina while being at her side over the years.

It didn't matter that Katherine and Karina were mother and daughter—that, for so long, there hadn't been one without the other.

They were *different*.

Karina might have been harsh at times, but she was also *kind* when she most needed to be.

She cared about people.

She championed victims at the hands of oppressors, whoever they might be.

And most of all, she'd taught her how not to be afraid—to hold her head high and stand tall even in the face of the most impossible odds.

Fear is welcome, she'd said once, *but don't let it consume you*.

In the end, that was what would make the distinction between the weak and the strong.

Which was why, no matter how afraid she might have been, Kava ignored all the reasons why she should be terrified and focused on the problem at hand.

Figuring out how to get the hell out of wherever she was.

She cast her mind back, trying to remember how she'd gotten here, remembering the men who'd broken into the apartment—who'd attacked her and ...

Sebastian.

She whirled around, turning away from the bars that lined the front of the cell she was in, her heart sinking when she realized she wasn't alone.

Sebastian was here, but he hadn't been left on the floor the way she had. Instead, he was strapped to a chair, heavy metal binding his wrists and ankles to the arms and legs.

A muzzle covered his mouth, but he was awake, his gaze on the ceiling.

But there was a blankness to his stare, as if some part of him was no longer there.

"Sebastian."

He didn't respond to his name.

He didn't even blink.

Not even a *twitch*—it was as if she hadn't spoken at all.

She moved to stand, intending to go over to him, but came up short when she became aware of the metal cuff around her ankle and the heavier metal chain it was connected to.

But she didn't let it stop her and still carefully crossed the floor until the chain stretched as far as it could.

Just short of him.

In all that time, Sebastian still hadn't moved, almost as if he were catatonic.

And there was only one place that at the mere mention of it, turned him into stone.

Gheenă.

“I’m gonna get us out of here,” she said, even as she didn’t know how she would do that.

But she meant every word of it all the same.

First she tried pulling at the chain, but when it held, she sat and examined the cuff around her ankle and the hole where the key was to be inserted.

No hairpin would be able to unlock that one.

Not to be defeated so easily, she scanned the length of the cell, finding only debris, but nothing of substantial enough weight to use to break the chain or cuff.

Her pulse quickened, panic starting to set in, but as she heard footsteps, she stopped her fidgeting and hastened to her feet, moving so that she stood, as much as she could, in front of Sebastian.

The men who’d taken them from the apartment had been skilled—as skilled as some of the Kingmaker’s mercenaries, she’d thought at the time—but she hadn’t thought for a second they’d acted alone.

They’d worked for Uilleam, she realized, from the tattoo they both had, though she couldn’t recall their names.

The one on the left, with dark hair that gleamed with oil, looked from her to Sebastian, his lips turning down.

He walked further into the cell, snapping his fingers in front of Sebastian’s face, ignoring her completely when she protested.

“Does it speak?”

“He’s not an *it*,” she shot back, even as she knew it would do her little good.

“*Can* it speak?”

Kava refused to acknowledge the question at all, realizing the point was moot. They only meant to ridicule and demean him, and she had no intention of helping them do it.

It didn't matter that Sebastian had yet to respond to them—or her—despite their antagonizing, they kept on.

Like children with sticks.

And Sebastian was just ... *still*.

The other one, with a modicum more of self control, grabbed her arm to move her away.

“She wants to—“

But he fell short, because chains rattled and had he been an inch closer to his right, Sebastian hand would have been wrapped around his throat.

But the dark-haired one was quick to pull out a cattle prod and shoved it into Sebastian's side. His body seized, his teeth gritting together as the veins in his neck stood out.

She reached for him, only to come up short when the mercenary pointed it at her.

“Like I said—she wants to have a word with you.”

Kava knew, even before Mother—as she'd instructed so many to call her—appeared joined them in the cell that she was the reason for this.

Katherine was beautiful in a cold, regal way. Perfect bone structure, icy blonde hair, and blue eyes with long lashes that missed nothing.

It wasn't a wonder how she'd been able to get so many people to do her bidding.

Even Kava had once been under her spell, believing her to be the exact opposite of what she was.

But that illusion was shattered when the woman had ordered she be sent back to the very people who'd abused her all her life.

She didn't recognize the two men trailing behind her—Katherine wasn't usually known to keep muscle with her. She'd always said she had no use for it.

But then again, she'd also had Karina with Sebastian in tow, so there hadn't really been a need for anyone else.

“What do you want with us?” she asked before any of them could speak.

Katherine smile was amused as her head tilted ever so slightly as she regarded her. “Poor Kava. If you were half as important as you think you are, you'd be twice as important as you are, foolish girl. You're not here because I have any true use for you.”

With that said, she turned her focus to Sebastian who still hadn't looked away from the ceiling.

But while she couldn't move any closer to him, Kava didn't back down, holding her head up higher as she stared the woman down. “I'm not going to let you hurt him.”

“It's amusing that you think you have any choice in the matter.”

The guard to her right smirked, the scar across his face pulling tight.

And it only took a single nod from Katherine for him to move toward her. His arm came out like a flash, using his hand to shove her back with enough force that she stumbled over her own feet and the chain to remain standing.

Pain lanced up her side, but she gritted her teeth and refused to cry out, but as she made to stand again, the guard's attention wasn't on her.

Nor was Katherine.

They were looking at Sebastian—and the cold fury in his eyes.

But it didn't seem to move Mother. “It seems we might have a use for you yet, Kava Alexion.”

She knew the very real threat Katherine posed, but she still refused to budge.

“Ah, I recognize that look.”

Katherine crossed the short distance, reaching forward to pinch her chin before Kava yanked herself free. “As indignant as my daughter once was, but I haven’t forgotten the meek little mouse begging for my charity.”

“I’m not that girl anymore.”

She refused to be *anyone’s* victim again.

“Your first mistake was believing your loyalty belonged to anyone other than me.”

Kava met her gaze—she’d respect her more for it. “*She* deserves it.”

For just a second, what looked like contempt flashed in Katherine’s eyes. “Let’s see how long you feel that way, shall we?”

But Kava wasn’t finished. “This isn’t a fight you’re going to win,” she warned, believing every word. “They’re formidable apart, but together—“

Together, Karina and the Kingmaker would be unmatched.”

“The Kingmaker *will* come for you,” Kava continued, “and when he does, Karina won’t stop him—not this time.”

Katherine turned, readying to leave. “I’m counting on it. Make yourself comfortable, Kava. Because your friend there should have told you, there’s no escaping *Gheenă*.”

Kava watched as Katherine and the two men she’d come with walk back out, the heavy clang of the metal door closing making her flinch.

But she couldn’t cry.

Not yet.

This was only the beginning.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BECAUSE OF THE NEW OFFICE, she no longer had what had become known as her ‘wall.’ It used to be filled with images of Uilleam, the mercenaries who worked for him, or anyone that could get her close to him.

For the first time in a long time, her slate was clean.

Empty.

As if she hadn’t spent nearly a decade covering it with different bits of information from every source she could possibly get her hands on.

She was staring at her new blank canvas to fill—one very similar to the one she’d been staring at for years with Uilleam’s face taped all over it—when the sound of a cup shattering made her turn around.

Since her office was sectioned off via glass panels that offered privacy with a flip of a switch, Karina could easily see the entire floor and what had grabbed everyone’s attention.

Uilleam always did know how to make an entrance.

But *he* wasn’t alone.

The twins were with him, dressed in the same regalia as the mercenaries that had come before them, and when she looked beyond them, there was another still standing by the elevators.

Him, she didn’t recognize.

She stepped out of her office in time to hear Uilleam greet, “Afternoon, ladies,” managing to make the two word sound helplessly charming.

Some looked confused at his appearance here—others stared in open enthralment.

Not that she could blame them.

He had that effect on everyone.

He had to know these women were responsible, in some part, for his inevitable fall—that they had been instrumental in her plots.

There was a collective pause amongst them all—as if they weren’t sure what she would do.

After all, she’d spent the last many years cursing him for anyone to hear.

In rooms very similar to this one, he’d been public enemy number one.

Yet, his expression never wavered.

Because he hadn’t been destroyed completely, a little voice supplied.

It was like *seeing* the Kingmaker. He walked with the confidence of a man who knew how to command a room.

But when his eyes landed on her, a change seemed to come over him.

Then, she only saw the other side of him.

Now, he was simply ... hers.

This wasn’t a day she thought she would ever see. The way she always imagined it, when they’d inevitably come face to face, she had expected they would destroy each other.

Instead, they were here now.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” she said by way of greeting, feeling only a touch awkward having him here in her space.

The only time he’d ever come by her office, it had been back when she worked for the Post during his attempt to

intimidate her.

This wasn't that.

"I've brought lunch," he said in answer, holding up a plastic bag filled with containers.

"With mercenaries?" she asked with a gesture of her head.

"Couldn't be entirely sure how I'd be greeted."

She held his gaze for a moment longer before walking back into her office as he followed, his mercenaries staying at the door.

A question on the tip of her tongue, she turned to ask him, but came up short when he set the food down and came toward her, his arm slipping around her waist as he pulled her into the fold of his body.

What started as a brief kiss turned into a much longer one, his hand coming up to cradle her face, his thumb stroking her face.

She always loved the way he kissed her. It started off slow—innocent. *Intoxicating* in a way that the only thought that clouded her mind was how good his lips felt against hers.

But this was something more.

And she couldn't be sure, not until he pulled away and she got a look at his face, and the intensity she saw there.

Her brow furrowed as his hand descended from her face, briefly held at her throat before he let her go entirely.

"Uilleam?"

"I like having a reminder now and then."

"A reminder? Of what?"

"That having you is well worth the hell those women out there helped you put me through."

He said it so casually that his words didn't penetrate immediately. Not until he was opening the bag of food.

Worse, she didn't quite know how to respond.

Walking over to close her office door, she looked back at him and asked, “So am I? Worth the trouble, I mean?”

“Without question,” he answered almost immediately, surprising her.

Even now.

Even after everything that had happened then, and what was surely to come.

Uilleam made quick work of removing the trays of sushi from inside the bags, setting it all up without a word.

Even when she’d been working for the paper and hadn’t revealed the truth of who she was to him, they’d never had lunch like this. But, she couldn’t say she minded entirely.

Quite the opposite, actually.

“I think this is the part where I ask how your day has gone, love,” she told him with a smile before picking up a California spring roll.

“Everything is going according to plan,” he said without further explanation.

Okay? “Have you started recruiting again?” she asked, in reference to the mercenary she’d seen before.

Something funny crossed his face, but she couldn’t get a good read on it before he was answering.

“Most, as you know, have gone into hiding; others have disappeared entirely; and there might be whispers of others who’ve elected to turn against me in favor of your mother.”

Problems, she knew, that were mostly her fault.

But the latter surprised her a bit.

Katherine, while always willing to hire muscle for any job, usually hired from one man near the Baltic Sea—they didn’t care about collateral or what the job entailed as long as it paid well.

But, with her help, she’d managed to cripple Uilleam’s supply of mercenaries. The publicity of him being arrested had

been enough to scare some away—which had been her intention—but she also hadn't considered that their alliance would shift from Uilleam.

“What’s—“

“How are you and Grunt getting on?”

Surprised by the change of subject, she forgot what she'd been about to ask. “I like him.”

Even more than she thought she would considering her history with his other mercenaries.

For a moment, Uilleam seemed distracted as he looked around, but it wasn't anger she saw in his expression as she expected considering what this office had meant to both of them, but rather one of admiration.

It was another unspoken thing between them.

What she did.

How she did it.

And the thought that he hadn't asked, at all, niggled at the part of her brain that was naturally curious. “What made you want to have lunch?”

“You wouldn't believe it's because I wanted to see your face?” he asked, standing, eyeing her curiously.

“I do,” she said. That much she believed. “But you've been a little off after ... well, you know.”

He tucked his hands into his pockets. “I'll earn her trust,” he said, with the same level of confidence he possessed when it came to his work.

“You will,” she agreed, because she'd never doubted he would. “But I don't think that was your only reason to stop by.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Why—“

“Because of Mother,” she said, confident in her response. “You came to see if she’s paid me a visit.”

“And has she?” he asked.

The question bothered her more than it should have. “No. Had she, I would have told you.”

His gaze was intense as he looked at her. “Would you?”

It was as if he didn’t trust her at all, and though she wanted to ask the question of him, she couldn’t bring herself to do it.

Because a part of her was afraid of his answer.

“If I wanted to talk with her first, would you allow that?”

He paused before reaching the door, looking back at her, but when he did, the first thing she saw was the flash of mistrust. “I think it’d be cruel not to allow you a chance to say goodbye.”

“Uilleam—“

“I don’t think you truly understand the extent in which I plan to make that woman suffer for all that she has cost me. I might be weak where you’re concerned, Poppet, but I’m no fool. Whether you’re ready to admit this to yourself or not, your mother will never allow us to live freely.”

“I understand that, but—“

“If you understand, we wouldn’t be having this conversation,” he said a bit cruelly.

“Is that what you offered Kit?” she asked, her emotions getting the better of her. “Or rather, did he offer it to you when it was *your* mother? How is she, by the way? I don’t think I’ve asked in a while.”

Uilleam didn’t respond, nor did she.

And as he turned to leave without saying a word seconds later, it felt as if with every step forward they took, they moved three steps back.

GRUNT WAS WAITING for her downstairs, snapping to attention when he caught sight of her leaving the building.

Though he hadn't done anything wrong—quite the opposite—his presence was another reminder that she still hadn't heard from Kava and Sebastian.

But instead of another call, she'd gone ahead and sent a message to Monica to have a look into their location.

“Have you been waiting out here this entire time?” she asked.

“Wasn't that long of a wait.”

She felt horrified. “*All* this time? You can always come upstairs, if you'd like—or go off to get something to eat, if you'd prefer. I can always call you when I'm ready.”

He shook his head when he slipped into the front seat. “No can do. Boss' orders—my break's only fifteen minutes.”

“Well considering you seem to be working with *me* at the moment, I say take an hour for lunch. I'll survive that long, I promise.”

His mouth twitched with a smile. “Understood.”

“And if you're to be personal security, perhaps it would be better if you were *with* me instead of hanging out in the car,” she said, hoping that was enough.

“It wasn't so bad,” he said with a shrug, then whispered. “It really is a nice car.”

“All the same.”

“Plus, the Kingmaker's kinda scary, but you're a little scary too actually.”

She didn't bother to fight a smile—she was quickly learning Grunt had a habit of speaking the first thing that came to mind.

And she took his words as a compliment.

“Then, it’s settled. Now, do you know Chastain Bank?”

He nodded, though she thought she saw a hint of a smile.
“Coming right up.”

OVER THE YEARS, her fortune had amassed to the point that she’d never want for anything, even outside of Uilleam.

Most of it. Had come at the expense of what she’d done to Uilleam.

His enemies, and some allies alike, had come to her side as she’d chipped away at the Den until it finally collapsed.

And though she tried not to think about it, the sum of money she’d received the day he was arrested ... it still sat in an account untouched.

But there was one thing she’d kept during her war with Uilleam that was far more powerful than money.

She stepped out of the Rolls Royce in front of the bank, the doorman standing a little straighter as she approached. She didn’t miss the way his eyes moved past her, expecting the shadow that usually accompanied her, then confusion when he realized she’d be going in alone.”

“Just me today, Henry,” she said with a smile as he opened the door.

“Always a pleasure, Miss. Ashworth.”

The bank’s director, a balding man with a commercial smile and the innate ability to suck up, was waiting to greet her—always willing to go above and beyond if it meant her business stayed with his establishment.

That was the thing about wealth. No matter how one came to possess it, or how red it might have been stained, it didn’t matter when it still spent the same.

“Miss. Ashworth, how can I be of service to you this evening?”

“I’ll be visiting the vaults today, Henry.”

“Of course.”

He led her over to the private elevator bank only accessible for certain clientele. It was the only set in the entire building that went down two floor where a private vault was available for a four-figure fee.

It took two keys—both hers and Harry’s—as well as an override code to make it down and inside the vault, and even once they reached the floor, there were two men in suits—former ops, she’d been told—waiting to greet them and complete retinal scans.

“Please let me know if there’s anything further I can do to assist you,” Henry said once they were inside, lingering by the entrance.

Karina nodded, waiting until he’d left and she was alone for a solid minute before walking over to her box.

She pressed her finger against the digital keypad, waited until she heard the lock disengage, and the door popped open.

From inside, she pulled a heavy metal box, setting it on the table, but she didn’t open it immediately.

For a while, she just stared at it, her fingers brushing over the cold metal.

Since the day she’d come here for the very first time, she’d only ever come back once—the day she’d become *Belladonna*.

The day she’d shed her former life and who she’d first envisioned herself to be.

In a way, that day had felt ceremonious, as it did now in a way.

But back then, she’d been resolute in her decision because anger had fueled her.

Now, her emotions were all over the place and she couldn’t begin to make sense of them.

After a moment, she finally opened the felt lined box, staring down at the two items resting inside of it.

Two phones.

To the unsuspecting, they were merely old devices, but to those of interest and knowledge, they were the physical embodiment of data that was priceless.

One belonged to another life—one she'd shared with Uilleam.

Before Belladonna.

Before mistruths and agonizing consequences had ripped them apart.

On the other held all of the secrets she'd ever kept.

About Uilleam.

Mother and the legacy she was meant to uphold.

It was the *blueprint* that had made her into what she was.

It was also the bargaining chip that kept her alive.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FROM THE MOMENT she'd chosen Uilleam, Karina had known it was only a matter of time before she had to answer for it.

Not to mention Poppy.

If anything, she'd been a bit surprised that her mother hadn't responded in some way before now.

And as the days ticked by one by one, she wondered if her response would come at all.

Until her phone lit up with an unread message.

"And there was the time Robin was having a *huge* party for her birthday last year, but Nana said we couldn't go because of the rain," Poppy was saying though now she was distracted by her phone.

And the address staring back at her.

The number wasn't one she recognized, and nothing else was sent beyond the address that looked vaguely familiar, but she knew all the same.

This was Katherine.

"And who is Robin?" Karina asked, still a bit distracted.

"She's my best friend." Poppy's eyes widened as she looked at her. "Does this mean you'll get to meet her?"

Katherine's face popped into her mind—a stark reminder why, despite how long Poppy and Robin had been friends, Karina was a stranger to them both.

And with that thought came another realization that there were probably a score of people who knew more about her own daughter than she did.

Worst of all, with her mother still out there determined to make her life as difficult as possible, she wasn't entirely sure when she'd even be able to meet the girl.

"I'd love nothing more than to meet your friend—all your friends."

It was why, after they'd come home and she recounted her day with Iz, they'd lay together and talk about everything.

Most nights, even before they'd gone off on their short stay out of the country, they'd follow the same sort of routine.

They'd put on their comfiest pajamas and Poppy regaled her with anything she could possibly think of.

Neither cared how often she repeated herself, or if she thought something was too silly, Karina encouraged her to share as much as she could remember.

Because, sometimes, she could almost imagine it.

If she closed her eyes, she could *just* make out what Poppy might have looked like as she took her first steps; what her smile would have looked like as it spread across her face.

She could almost smell the daisies as she sat in the garden behind the cottage, weaving them together, stem over stem, until she'd made something of a necklace.

For a moment, it almost felt as if she'd been there.

Instead of hundreds of miles away, fighting when she didn't need to be.

Poppy sighed with a look of contentment on her face. "I told her all about you! She said you sounded really cool."

She smiled a little sadly. "I hope I live up to it."

Karina sat up, her hair falling over her shoulder as she started to stand, tucking the sheets and blankets around her.

Her phone felt warm in her hands as she kissed Poppy goodnight and walked back to her own room.

Tonight was another late one for Uilleam, but the twins were here, Grunt as well, and should she leave, Poppy would still be safe ...

She paced the floor, unsure what to do.

Would you tell me if she did?

That was the question he'd asked her, and at the time, she'd been sure she would, because she didn't want to keep any big secrets from him.

Because that had been what came between them before.

But ... this was probably the only chance she would get to talk to her before Uilleam found her. Because he would, of that she had no doubt.

In the end, despite how long it might have taken, he'd found her too.

And if he was already recruiting more mercenaries, and if she was right that this was her mother making her first appearance ... it was only a matter of time before the two clashed.

Changing from her pajamas, she slipped into her shoes before venturing out to the living area.

Graham, the twin with the shorter hair, was the only one of the duo still awake as he sat straight up, arms folded across his muscled chest as he stared at the sports game playing on the television.

"Popping out for a bit," she said casually, knowing how to not raise suspicion. "Poppy is sleeping, but I'll be back long before she wakes."

After a moment's hesitation, he gave her a chin nod before turning back to his game.

She was almost to the elevator when Grunt stopped her. "I'll go with you."

"Oh, that's not—"

But he'd already grabbed his jacket and slipped it on, dutiful as always.

The smart decision would have been to insist that he stay, but she also knew if she protested too much, that would only raise suspicion.

It looked like he was going with her.

KATHERINE HADN'T ALWAYS BEEN a bad mother.

And during one summer very long ago, Karina thought she'd even been *happy*, but something had changed, and whatever that something was had brought them to this moment.

Standing outside the closed restaurant, wind whipping through the loose strands of her hair, she wished she knew.

Because if she had an answer that explained why her mother couldn't just let her *be*, then maybe she would understand what all of this was for.

Nearly ten years ago now, she'd come to this very restaurant on Katherine's behalf, how everything would change within a matter of minutes.

"You really don't think we should call Grimm?" Grunt asked beneath his breath, his usual confidence bleeding away a little in the face of the two men standing up by the doors.

They were mercenaries—that much Karina knew, though she couldn't say for sure whether they had once been Uilleam's men, or not.

Though knowing her mother, they probably were.

"Nothing's going to happen here," she assured him. "If you'd like, you can wait in the car."

"Yeah, 'cause if I do that, the Kingmaker will *definitely* kill me if he finds out."

He held his head up, squared his shoulders, and let the reservations he felt fade away as he walked her up the stairs.

She admired him for it.

Because there was a chance this was a mistake—that despite her wanting to believe this was something of a parley after receiving the note from Katherine.

Especially since she had wanted to meet alone.

But if this was her only chance of talking any sense into her mother, she wanted to take it.

At least then she could say she tried.

The restaurant was empty save for a table in the middle of the floor where Katherine sat alone, leg crossed at the ankles, hands resting demurely in her lap.

She was the picture of elegance and grace in a cerulean blue knee-length dress, nude heels, and her favorite pearl earrings.

Not at all like a woman who'd steal a baby and hide it for years.

And seeing her in that moment—the almost *smug* look on her mother's face—anger started to replace the feelings of unease she'd had.

It was easy to live in a delusion when the reality was forgotten. She'd been so lost for so many years that she hadn't seen what was right in front of her.

And now, standing in the face of it and the fact that she didn't look to feel any remorse ...

But as she stared at her mother and the truth finally settled in, angry tears made her vision blur. "How could you?"

Katherine sighed as she blinked slowly, her expression never changing. "What have I told you about sentiment, Karina? It hinders you."

"Love isn't always a weakness, Mother," she shot back, mindful of the way Grunt looked at her, worried.

But she couldn't focus on him. "How could that possibly justify you *stealing our child!*"

"Imagine all that I've worked for, almost ruined by a fumbling man and my own daughter who believes *love* is more important than duty. It's too shaming to be—"

"I've always made excuses for you for as long as I can remember."

Katherine scoffed. "I'm *your* mother, Karina. I don't need you to make excuses for me."

"You kept her from me and made me believe Uilleam would—"

"Yes, please. By all means, continue. What, exactly, did I make you believe about Uilleam Runehart. That he would send a mercenary to kill a man and the woman he was with? Because I didn't make him do that, did I? He's the man he always was and you're too *foolish* to see that. D'you think he wouldn't rid himself of you if it meant he could have his crumbling empire back? Then I've taught you nothing."

"You don't know him," she whispered, a tear falling before she hastily wiped it away. "You never did. You never gave him a chance."

She didn't know the way he made her smile and laugh.

How he was always there when she needed him and even when she didn't.

The way he would tear the world to pieces if it meant staying with her.

"I know everything I need to know, and I knew the sort of father he would be. Could you imagine my precious Poppy being raised by that—"

"Insult him again and I'll remind you why I chose the name Belladonna."

Katherine's mouth shut, but only so that her red-painted lips could curl into a smile. "Ah, that's the woman I raised."

"I'm nothing like you."

An arched brow curved further. “Aren’t you?”

She couldn’t do it anymore.

Some part of her had foolishly hoped that perhaps there was some resolution that could be reached—that *maybe* there’d been some sort of misunderstanding.

But the idea that she had misconstrued Katherine’s actions and that, in her own misguided way, she’d been trying to protect her, was gone.

There was no lesson in this.

No redemption.

“You’re never going to leave us alone, are you?” she asked, her voice soft for once.

Katherine wasn’t deterred. “Can a relationship built on lies truly remain standing?”

Iz came to mind—their words eerily similar, but Katherine didn’t sound concerned for her.

As if she were stating a fact.

No, her expression now said she knew something Karina didn’t.

“I came here as a warning,” Karina finally said, resigning herself to this. “End this and disappear somewhere on the other side of the world where Uilleam can’t reach you. It’s the only grace I’m willing to offer Poppy’s grandmother. Think of her and how she would feel.”

It was the only sympathy she would offer the woman.

Karina nodded at Grunt, not missing the relief on his face, but as he turned for her, Katherine’s gaze locked on him.

Ready to leave, Karina turned for the door, but Katherine tapped the table.

“You’ve yet to hear my counteroffer.”

Looking at her now, for the first time in her life, it felt as if she didn’t recognize her own mother.

“There’s nothing left to discuss.”

Her expression wasn't cold—she still smiled, her eyes the same as they'd been when she'd taught her how to ride a bicycle—but something about it wasn't *right*.

And the sight of it made a chill run down her spine.

“If you walk out that door, Karina, you will not like how I respond.”

She wasn't foolish enough to believe Mother would make idle threats now—she fully intended on keeping this promise—but she'd never bent to another's threats.

She wouldn't start now.

“What was the saying you taught me so long ago?” Karina asked, watching her brow quirk. “*Si vis pacem, para bellum.*”

Her expression grew hard. “Bring Poppy home, get rid of Uilleam Runehart, and in time, I'm sure you'll have my favor again. That is the only way we're moving forward.”

“Or?” Karina challenged.

“*Or* I will chip away at everything you hold dear until you learn that *Mother Knows Best.*”

Karina held her gaze, realizing they would never find common ground.

This moment ... this was it.

The negotiations were over.

“If you walk out that door,” Katherine called as she turned her back, “you won't like how I respond.”

She ignored Mother's words, but she didn't miss the way the mercenary at the door winked at her as they walked out.

“Oh, and Karina?” Katherine called after her one last time. “Kava and the Jackal send their regards.”

TWO DAYS LATER, she was starting to feel a bit paranoid.

Time passed excruciatingly slowly as she sat at her desk, watching the minutes tick by, but she'd found over the course of the day, she couldn't escape her mother's words as much as she wished she could.

But as the hours passed from day to day, her anxiety hadn't lessened, but now that the sun had descended and night had stretched across the city, she blew out a breath, releasing the tension in her shoulders.

Katherine had been trying to scare her—that was all.

“Something wrong?” Monica asked, popping her head in, looking less tired than she had the last few days.

Karina laughed beneath her breath, feeling a bit silly now that she'd all but wasted her day. “Oh, it's nothing.”

She wasn't sure what'd she'd been expecting exactly.

Sometimes it was easy to forget Katherine wasn't just some boogeyman hiding beneath her bed, and was still, after all, her mother.

And that thought, no matter how small a belief it was at this point, hoped that they would be able to settle this.

Leaving the office, she walked out the back door, pulling the pin from her hair. The headache that had been waiting starting to push to the forefront as she rubbed the pads of her fingers over her scalp to soothe the last bits of tension.

Spotting her, Grunt hopped to attention, spilling a handful of the sunflower seeds he'd been eating on the asphalt in front of him.

“I can't imagine how you can eat those everyday,” she said with a smile, knowing it wouldn't matter what she said, he'd still eat them anyway.

“Listen, I'm convinced they dose these with something, ya know?” He said as he tossed shells aside before pouring an ungodly amount into his mouth, saying around a mouthful, “Consider me an addict.”

At least, that was what she *thought* he said.

He hopped to his feet, dutifully opening the door for her.

“Where’re we off too today?” He asked once he was behind the wheel and pulling the seatbelt across his chest.

Uilleam was waiting for her, but one quick stop wouldn’t hurt ... “D’you know the gallery on 27th?”

“Absolutely.”

He waited until she was buckled in—a pesky rule of his—but it wasn’t long before she noticed him peeking back at her through the rearview mirror.

Subtle ... “Something on your mind, Andrew.”

“Well ...” he hedged, his tone making her forget about checking her messages for the moment. “You and the Kingmaker, huh? How’s that work?”

Sometimes, it was easy to forget there were still some who didn’t know the complicated history they shared—or, how so many others had been caught in the middle of it. “I’m not sure I understand the question.”

“Ya know, people ... talk.”

She couldn’t begin to imagine what he’d heard. “What’re you really asking?”

“I might need a little relationship advice.”

She hid a smile behind her hand. “I’m not sure I’m the right person to ask, honestly.”

“No, but see, I think you’re the perfect person—or the Kingmaker, but he talks in riddles and shit and I don’t have time to try to figure that out.”

“Okay, sure, how can I help?” She asked after laughing.

That was the only opening he needed before he launched into a story about the girl he was seeing and how amazing she was, and even if she couldn’t see how animated he became when he talked about her, she would have known how much he loved her just by the way he. Talked about her.

“And see I was supposed to take her to this concert she’s been wanting to go to,” he continued, “and I fucked around and made all these big promises about it and going all out, but then I got this gig and ... well you know how the Kingmaker can be.”

Her smile slipped a bit.

Because she did know.

Uilleam tolerated nothing but perfection from those that worked for him, and even if Grunt was a bit unorthodox, he’d never been late, nor had he ever complained about anything asked of him as far as she knew.

“So you’re a woman—how do I earn her forgiveness? What made you forgive the big guy?”

The answer to that question was so long, they didn’t have nearly enough time to unpack it. “An apology would go a long way, I’m sure ... and new tickets to whoever it is she wants to see. Are they still touring?”

“Well, yeah, but they’re about to start the international leg and,” he whistled low, slowing to a stop at the red light, “with those prices—“

“The sooner you give me the details, the sooner I can properly thank you for all you’ve done with a week off.”

“Shit, this has been the easiest gig I’ve been on,” he said with a wave of his hand.

“Even so, the least I can do is get you those tickets and pay for the trip. It’s no trouble, really.”

“You really don’t—“

“D’you want her forgiveness or not?”

His smile was now visible through the rearview mirror as he reached for his mobile, his excitement palpable.

He was thinking about the concert and surprising his girlfriend, she knew, which was why he didn’t notice the SUV rolling to a stop next to them, the window rolling down, and by the time she did ...

It was too late.

The only thing she saw was the barrel of a gun before glass exploded and the sound of gunshots echoed so loudly, her ears rang.

She scrambled to undo her seatbelt, giving up entirely before ducking down as best she could with the belt restricting her movements.

Shot after shot after shot, and even as she slapped her hands over her ears, terror squeezing the breath from her lungs, it never stopped.

Glass shards rained down on her, nicking her skin as she trembled and shook.

Then, as quickly as the onslaught had begun, it stopped.

Silence punctuated by the screech of tires on wet asphalt and the smell of burning rubber.

And finally, nothing ...

Just a *stillness* that was as unnerving as the shooting had been.

Opening her eyes, she immediately wished she hadn't.

Because she soon realized *why* it was so silent.

Grunt was slumped over, his torso visible— what was left of it—and all the red that stained the tattered remains of his shirt.

The ringing in her ears became louder, drowning out her own voice, she realized, because she could feel her mouth moving—she could *feel* herself saying his name over and over and over again, but she couldn't hear anything.

She couldn't feel the glass digging into her palms as she finally freed herself and reached for him, not knowing what to do but *needing* to do *something*.

“You should never have a soft heart, Karina,” Mother said with a shake of her head, as if the tears in her eyes for the wounded deer were misplaced. “Not in this world.”

A soft heart, she'd continued with no empathy for the wounded creature, *made one weak*.

This life had hardened her in some ways—she'd done plenty of things she wasn't proud of in the name of vengeance, but as she reached for the face of the man who seemed so very young now, a wound opened inside of her she didn't think would ever heal itself.

“Andrew,” she whispered hating the way her voice shook—hating more the way the sound of his name prompted him to take a shallow, gasping breath.

For just a second, his eyes lifted to hers, a flicker of emotion in them.

Fear.

Of the unknown, maybe.

Of all the promises he hadn't been able to keep.

But in a moment, it was all gone.

That flicker.

That *life*.

His chest stilled and he stared sightlessly beyond her.

He was gone ... and it was all her fault.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LEARNING to compartmentalize helped keep her sane.

If she could make sense of the problem in front of her, then she would be able to solve it. And for those she couldn't, she tucked them away for later until she could.

They were gone from the scene before any authorities arrived.

One dial of the emergency number Uilleam had given her had resulted in two cars showing up with screeching tires, pulling both her and Grunt from the car ... or rather, the wreckage that remained.

The rest had been a blur.

Karina didn't know where they were taking her, she could only think about the fact that Grunt was dead in the other car.

And it was all her fault.

The ringing in her ears hadn't stopped, and didn't.

Not twenty minutes later.

Not even when they arrived at a warehouse outside of the city.

It gave her something to focus on rather than the heavy feeling in her chest and the fact that she was no longer alone as so many people milled around her now like a swarm of concerned, annoying bees.

They whispered amongst each other, careful to keep their voices low so as not to be overheard. But no one spoke to her

directly, oddly enough.

She could only imagine the sight she made. Grunt's blood was all over her and soaked into her clothes.

But these were Uilleam's people—they only did what they were paid to do.

Unlike the other mercenary he'd brought to her office, however, she knew these people though—their faces familiar although she'd never met any of them in all the time they'd worked for Uilleam.

She'd studied them for so long, she hadn't *needed* to meet them.

Only needed to watch—like she did now.

It used to baffle her seeing them trying to balance the life they lived everyday and the one they were forced into whenever Uilleam called on them.

The nurse who'd carefully plucked glass from her hands before bandaging them? Nellie had graduated nearly two years ago from nursing school, and under the mountain of debt she'd incurred obtaining her degree, it wasn't entirely surprising she'd turned to alternate means of making money.

The other one, Monica, liked to go running on Thursday mornings because that was the lone day of the week when her neighbor had an overnight trip take every week and wouldn't be around to harass her.

Her dog's name was Captain, a Corgi mix, and he'd only recently recovered from a few episodes of seizures, and had to take medication for it twice a day for the rest of his life.

Over two-thousand dollars in vet bills within a matter of days.

Was that why she was here in a warehouse in the middle of the night?

Was her companion worth the risk of not living to see him again?

Did any of them *truly* know what was at stake? Because if they did, she couldn't imagine they would still choose this.

Grunt's smiling face popped into her mind then, like a dagger to her chest. *Easy money*, he'd said.

Money he would never have the opportunity to spend now.

The doors flew open with a bang, Uilleam marching in, his gaze immediately finding her.

Sometime, especially as of late, it was easy to forget how tangible his rage could be—how it could feel as if it *bled* out of every inch of him and made chills break out across her skin.

She could feel it even now as he crossed the floor toward her.

Grimm was noticeably absent, but others were here now—mercenaries she didn't know and couldn't attach a name to.

Everyone moved out of his path as he made a beeline for her, and once he was close, she could see his hand shaking as he reached to cup her face—not nearly as unaffected as he first appeared.

He looked over every inch of her, confirming for himself that the blood on her wasn't her own, but he paused at the bandages wrapped around her hands.

She wanted to tell him they were nothing—small cuts that would eventually heal themselves and probably wouldn't leave a scar.

But there was no point in telling him so, the fact that she was wearing them at all seemed to be enough to cause a crack in him.

“Five-hundred thousand dollars for any one who brings me the person responsible for this,” he announced, loud enough for everyone to hear, his gaze on her. “A million if you manage it within the next twenty-four hour.”

He might as well have rung a bell in the room with the way the mercenaries took off—soldiers of fortune willing to do whatever they needed to ensure they were paid.

Tonight, she didn't mind that idea so much.

Incentives always produced results.

And she wanted those answers too.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, voice softer now as he focused back on her. "More than I can see, I mean."

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

At some point in the last several hour, Uilleam had changed from the black suit he'd been wearing when she'd last see him.

"Is Poppy—"

"With Grimm," he answered quickly, calming her before she could even get upset.

Her relief was palpable, even if it was Grimm, but with it came the reminder that it was only Grunt over in the bodybag across the room.

Uilleam turned, noticing where her gaze had gone, but he turned her back to face him and God, it took everything in her to meet his gaze—to not turn away and cry as she wanted to.

"This wasn't your—"

"Don't," she interrupted before he could finish. "Don't say that."

"Karina—"

"It *is* my fault. He was there because of me—because Sebastian is still away and I was foolish enough to believe that my mother wouldn't—"

She swallowed the lump in her throat, everything overwhelming her at once.

She'd wanted to believe that despite Katherine's worst tendencies, she hadn't always been a bad mother. She'd been caring and loving in her own way.

She'd been in denial—refusing to see what was right in front of her.

And her defiance had cost this man his life.

Uilleam shook his head. “He knew the job he signed up for.”

“Did he?” she asked. “Did he *truly*? Because if he did, I couldn’t imagine he would agree to this.”

He couldn’t have believed his life was worth hers.

He was supposed to be a driver—a short term gig for quick money and he should have been going back to his girlfriend and enjoying his life.

But Uilleam didn’t respond, but she saw it in his face all the same.

This *was* the job.

Death was a possibility.

Always had been. Always would be.

The only difference was Katherine had made the first move.

“She’s not going to stop,” Karina whispered, more to herself as she swiped tears away. “She’ll take out all of them until there’s no one left standing.”

“You don’t.”

“It’s what I did,” she said candidly, watching that flicker of *something* reappear in his eyes.

But this time, she saw it before he could hide it.

Resentment.

The only difference between her and her mother was the fact that she’d let his mercenaries live.

Katherine wouldn’t be as kind.

A commotion on the other side of the room, drew their attention to that side in time to see Kit walking in, the Wild Bunch complete with masks right behind him.

“It’s good to see you’re alright,” he said once he was close, his voice so earnest.

Although they'd never been the closest, Kit examined her much in the same way Uilleam had to check for injuries, nodding to himself when he was satisfied she was fine.

"I had them check the location," Kit said to Uilleam, "but they found nothing."

Before Uilleam could respond, Karina spoke up. "You won't."

They both looked at her.

"Uilleam's protocol told you have safe houses within certain parameters from wherever you're competing a job. Ours was the opposite. They wouldn't have dumped anything within city limits."

It wasn't foolproof, of course.

And she knew with the incentive Uilleam had given before he'd sent his mercenaries hunting, they'd eventually find who they were looking for.

"Convenient."

The voice was robotic, but Karina knew who spoke despite the masks they wore.

Fang.

"Excuse me."

"One would think you'd mention that before now."

"I would suggest you put a muzzle on your dog before I bring him to heel," Uilleam warned.

Fang turned in Uilleam's direction, his eyes hidden behind his mask though she could guess what his expression looked like.

"I promise I'd love to see you try."

"Enough," Kit commanded them both. "There's only one enemy. There's no time for division."

"I don't care what happens to her *or* him," Fang shot back. "Why do you think we volunteered on that little mission to

retrieve Grimm's ass? For shits and giggles? We wanted to know what happened there and the operation she helped fund."

Karina had faced off with dictators and men of anyone's nightmares without batting an eye.

They gave her nothing to fear.

But Fang ... he made her feel something they didn't—shame.

"You've no idea what you're talking about."

"No?" he asked sarcastically.

"No. I saved him from that life."

"Ah, right. The *savior* card. Promised him you would take him out of there in exchange for *what?* A lifetime serving your ass?"

"I never forced him to stay with me!" she shot back, so angry, her hands were shaking. "I know *exactly* what happened in *Gheenă* and I pulled him from it."

"Oh, bullshit. You think you're any better than them? You used him as a weapon too."

She stood, feeling Uilleam at her side, but she raised her hand before he could respond to Fang. "You know *nothing*."

She'd studied the Wild Bunch as she had the mercenaries, though there wasn't very much she could glean from the sources she had, but one thing she *did* know—they never took off their masks.

Not ever.

But now, Fang all but ripped his off, exposing the fury on his face as he glared at her.

"Is that right? Because I know while the two of you have been fucking about destroying everything in your wake, *Gheenă* was still standing. So if it's so bad, why didn't you get rid of it."

"Because Grimm was still there!" she shouted, her voice echoing. "And had I acted against *any* of them, they would

have Sebastian killed, or do you not know about the chips they have implanted in their necks!”

That managed to surprise him.

But Karina wasn't finished.

“*I* made the deal to ensure Sebastian's freedom in exchange for Grimm, but in doing so, I had to agree to a contract. *I* couldn't act against them, but *he* could,” she said, gesturing at Uilleam while still staring at Fang, “Which means, when he sent *you* and the mercenaries on that extraction mission, I knew he would destroy the very foundation *Gheenă* stood on, along with everyone and everything within its walls.”

To that, Fang didn't seem to have a response.

And when she felt angry, treacherous tears forming, Karina stepped back.

“Karina—“

“I need to check on Poppy.”

Uilleam looked as if he wanted to say more, but eventually nodded, gesturing for a pair of mercenaries who remained. “Get her to the Obsidian Hotel. Kill anyone that stands in the way of that.”

When she headed for the exit, Karina couldn't help but look over at the black bag on the other side of the room, her regret threatening to swallow her whole.

FOR ONCE, she didn't complain about the mercenaries escorting her back, though she'd found herself gripping the back door handle, her gaze out the window and watching any car that puled up alongside them.

But she couldn't bring herself to speak either—not even when they offered their condolences, or even when she arrived back at the hotel and took the elevator upstairs.

It felt as if she didn't—*couldn't* take a breath until she was inside the suite and the elevator doors had firmly shut behind her.

Only then did she feel the vice like grip on her heart loosen just a bit.

Even when she noticed Grim sitting on the couch.

There were no jeans tonight, but rather the attire of the mercenary she'd once known and hated. Yet tonight, seeing him like this brought relief.

Because if there was one thing to be said about Grim, he was exceptionally good at his job, and no one knew that better than her.

He stood when she walked in, and for once he didn't immediately head off in a bid to get away from her.

"She's sleeping," he said without her having to ask.

Good.

She was glad.

But the only thing she could muster was a nod and a muttered, "Thank you."

To her surprise, he wasn't finished, however. "You don't have to thank me—not for this."

It wasn't tension that always hung between them, but rather something left unspoken.

She knew *what* wasn't said, but it also wasn't something she had the first idea how to broach the topic with him.

Sometimes, she wasn't sure she even *wanted* to.

Because pretending was easier ...

"Thank you anyway," she said, earnestly. Meaning it. "I see the way you are with her and ... I'm glad you're here."

It wasn't about her, or the past, or even whatever duty he felt toward Uilleam.

Grim wasn't just '*the mercenary*,' when he was around Poppy saw a different side to him then.

A side Karina thought hadn't existed so many years ago.

“Did—“

Karina paused and looked back at Grim, almost thinking she'd been hearing things before he finished the question.

“Did he suffer?”

She realized at that moment that his ramblings hadn't truly been about her, but had rather been an attempt to work himself up to asking that question.

It would have been impossible not to notice the blood coating her, but he asked it anyway.

Hopeful in a way that compelled her to lie.

“No,” she answered, swallowing. “He never saw it coming.”

That was partially true, but it had been anything but painless.

But it felt cruel to share that with him knowing he'd been the one to bring Grunt into this position. Adding to his guilt wouldn't change the fact that he was gone and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

She had a feeling he didn't actually believe her.

His gaze roamed over her face before he nodded once, and as he turned away and said, “I'll be here.”

She started to turn, but stopped. “Could you do me a favor?”

His head jerked up.

“Gr—Andrew's family, or even his girlfriend, could you get me their information.”

They, unfortunately, would never know the truth about what happened to him, but she also didn't want his sacrifice to go to waste.

Just as she'd done for Iris and her father.

Grimm nodded.

Starting back down the hall, she didn't want to risk waking Poppy looking the way she did, so she passed the closed door of her bedroom, feeling a pang as she did so before heading straight for the en suite bathroom in her room.

She didn't look at herself in the mirror as she shed the rough, stained clothing, leaving it all in a pile on the floor to burn later.

Gaze still trained firmly away from the mirror, she stepped into the shower and turned the tap, gritting her teeth against the cold before it warmed.

How many others had she watched die in her lifetime?

How many lifeless eyes had she looked into without feeling anything?

Where was her armor now? Where was the shield to use against the onslaught of emotion she'd been able to hold at bay until now?

Because as she watched red tinged water swirling down the drain, she finally allowed herself to cry.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SHE DIDN'T REMEMBER MUCH from the early days after losing Poppy.

One day bled into the next, the hours seeming endless and all-consuming, and her body hadn't felt like her own though she'd had to be, in some capacity, been functioning enough to keep herself alive.

That familiar grief rose like skeletal fingers from the deep recesses of her body, squeezing her heart.

She saw Grunt's face when she closed her eyes; felt his blood on her skin when the first drops of water hit her face in the mornings when she took a shower.

But it was the guilt that had settled into her bones that hurt the most. And though she knew it could have been anyone, at any time, the fault still felt like her own.

Because Katherine had warned her.

As she'd sat at that table, Uilleam's former mercenaries smiling around her, she'd *warned* her of what she would do and Karina hadn't listened.

But she had every intention of returning the favor.

She just needed to be patient.

For exactly twelve hours.

Her phone rang, Uilleam's name staring back at her. She'd hardly swiped to answer it and put it to her ear before she heard him say, "We have him."

Karina responded, she was sure she did, but his voice faded away as she walked back into the bedroom and deep within the closet until she found the trunk she'd left there.

After she'd left her home outside of the city, she hadn't been able to take much with her—just a few bits and bobs here and there.

Kneeling on the floor, she flipped the latch, pulling it open, and pulled a small, red velvet ring box from inside.

The ring itself was old—older than her even—and probably her most prized possession.

And as she plucked it from its holder and slipped it onto her finger, a wave of calm hit her.

She remained there for a couple of minutes, maybe more, twisting it around and around on her finger before she finally stood and dressed.

It was time.

Walking back out again, she walked into the kitchen and made a pot of tea.

ARRIVING AT THE WAREHOUSE, the only thing Karina could hear as she walked through the doors was the agonized wails of a man in excruciating pain.

She didn't have to question who the man was, nor did she care who was doing the torturing. The room seemed to go still as she walked in—Uilleam seated on the other side of the room, not remotely bothered by the sight of the man currently hanging by his wrists as she took her time setting the pot of tea she'd made as well as a pair of saucers next to it.

“Could we find him a chair, please?” Karina asked, watching as the mercenaries turned to look at Uilleam.

Curious what she intended, no doubt, he nodded once, prompting the men to do her bidding.

Uilleam stood, offering her his seat, and once she took it, he stood behind her.

She didn't recognize the man—though it could have been because his face was so swollen and bruised, he was hardly recognizable—but one eye was still open, and she could see the moment *he* recognized *her*.

He didn't speak as one of the MacGregor twins hoisted him off the hook and dropped him to the floor, not caring about the man's cry of pain as he tried, and failed, to curl into a ball on the concrete floor.

The other twin dragged him up by the collar of his shirt and shoved him into the folding chair, catching the back of it before it could tip backwards.

Karina put on her best smile. "Tea?" she offered.

She watched confusion cloud his features, his gaze shifting to Uilleam first, then the mercenaries who ensured he wouldn't be leaving the chair he sat in.

"No—"

Uilleam shifted ever so slightly, she could feel his movement behind her, but it was enough for the man to notice and clear his throat.

"Yeah, uh, thanks."

Karina smiled as she looked over at the eldest MacGregor twin. "Two cups, if you would."

Once again, his gaze cut to Uilleam, waiting for permission before doing as she asked. He poured both cups, dark liquid sloshing out the side of the cup as he brought them over.

He handed one to Karina first, and then the other to the man, not caring that one of his fingers was twisted at an unnatural angle, but with his injuries and the way he was cuffed, he couldn't lift it to his mouth.

MacGregor looked at her, his eyes narrowing, but she nodded all the same, answering his unspoken question.

Grunt's killer, despite the bruising to his face and the very blatant display of violence he'd suffered, couldn't contain his smirk because even as slight as it might have been, he felt he had some semblance of power over him.

His first mistake.

MacGregor begrudgingly held the cup steady as he took a sip, winced, then went back for seconds. However long they'd been torturing here, he probably hadn't had a drop of water.

"Mother sent you, did she not?" Karina asked, turning her cup around on its saucer.

He hesitated.

"I'd hate for them to take your silence as a sign of insolence. If you answer my questions I promise that no one here will lay another finger on you."

He perked up a bit.

"Let's not make promises we can't keep, Poppet," Uilleam interjected.

Karina ignored him, gesturing for MacGregor to give the man more. "My word is my bond. Besides, I'm sure Mother warned you about me, didn't she?"

When Uilleam didn't move to object again, the man sat up a little straighter, still wincing but appearing more encouraged. "She might've."

"Such as ..."

He raised his chin a fraction, looking down at her with his one good eye. "She said you wouldn't kill me."

Karina offered him a placating smile. "Why would she tell you that?"

But she already knew the reason—she just wanted to hear him say it.

"She said you would have mercy."

Uilleam started to speak, but her soft laugh made him pause, concern on his face.

“I’m certain Mother’s description of me was a touch more ... insulting.” She picked up her own cup of tea, tapping her nail along the porcelain. “I’ll let you in on a little secret though. She taught me that love is a weakness—that it’s the surest way to find yourself dead—but I’ve learned that it lends its strength when needed.”

His brows drew together, but still gestured for MacGregor to bring the cup back to his lips. “I don’t know anything about that.”

“No, you wouldn’t, because that’s not why Mother hired you. Your job was to send me a message, was it not?”

He shrugged, not offering any further response.

“But *you* should know that Mother doesn’t make mistakes. If you think the Kingmaker and his mercenaries found you by chance, you’re mistaken.”

Uilleam tensed behind her, but she was focused on the man in question and the skepticism on his face.

This time, she did look at Uilleam as she spoke to him. “Because her end goal is bringing me to heel, by any means necessary. She doesn’t care about any collateral damage or who has to be hurt in the process, so long as she gets what she wants in the end—and that’s my return to her fold and being the obedient daughter she raised me to be.”

He scoffed. “Are you trying to say she set me up?”

She smiled as she looked back at him. “I think you’re starting to get the picture.”

“But you said you wouldn’t kill me.”

“I specifically said if you answered my questions, I wouldn’t allow anyone here to lay hands on you.”

He coughed, a harsh sound that seemed to take him by surprise. “Whatever. Same thing.”

“No, actually, it isn’t. And more importantly, it seems Mother failed to mention one very important, *specific* detail when she sent you out on this suicide mission.”

He coughed again, watching as she set her untouched cup of tea on the floor, understanding dawning as horror made his mouth gape.

“There’s a reason my name is Belladonna,” she said carefully, losing all pretense of ease, allowing all the hatred she felt toward him for what he’d done to bubble to the surface. “I spent years cultivating a thriving garden of beautiful flowers—in a way, they were like my children—but I had to leave it behind. Well ... some of it.”

He shivered a moment before uncontrollable shakes wracked his body. He lifted his shackled, mangled hand to his throat, the burning sensation she knew he felt robbing him of speech.

“But from death blooms life and I plan to grow my garden again.” Karina stood, moving close—so close she could smell the sweat on him. “Of course, I’ll need to turn your body to compost first, but fortunately, I already have someone for that. And do you know what?”

He fell out of his chair, his mouth opening on a silent scream as he began bleeding from his eyes. “It wasn’t because you hurt me—I would have accepted that for what it was—but because you robbed an innocent man of his life and *he* didn’t deserve that.”

No, he wouldn’t have the MacGregor twins inflicting grievous bodily harm upon him, but as the poison she’d mixed into the tea coursed through him, it would feel as if he were being consumed by an unimaginable fiery heat as his body tried to unsuccessfully rid itself of it.

Instead, he began to uselessly claw at his own chest, the worst pain he’d probably ever felt.

“I don’t know your name,” Karina said to him, “nor do I care to. And when you die on this floor, I want you to know your life meant *nothing*.”

And what came far too quickly for her—but probably felt like a lifetime to him—he finally stilled, bloody eyes still open as blood leaked from nearly every hole in his body.

The mercenaries all stared at her in varying degrees of shock and horror.

But when she looked at Uilleam, he looked mesmerized.

She only looked at the man's body a moment longer before turning away.

Her work wasn't done yet.

KILLING a man wasn't supposed to be easy—it was too much like playing God.

But as Karina sat in a bubble bath hours later, she couldn't bring herself to feel guilty about the choice she'd made.

The man she'd killed certainly hadn't been upset that he'd taken Grunt's life. She knew the sorts of men her mother chose to hire for these sorts of job.

Reckless. Bloodthirsty. *Ruthless*.

There would be more just like him ... and that concerned her most.

A few minutes later, she heard footsteps before Uilleam walked in, his clothes from earlier discarded in favor of something more comfortable.

He grabbed the nearby wooden bench where her towel rested and pulled it over to sit by her side.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

She tried to muster some great emotion within herself, but she only felt ... numb. “I don't think I feel anything at all.”

He leaned forward, hair falling over his forehead before he swept it back, to rest his forearms along the rim of the tub. “That's understandable.”

She looked over at him, expecting him to be hiding his feelings as he usually did, but she found no evidence of it. “You don't find anything wrong with what I did?”

“Well ... after seeing the effects of the poison, I’m quite glad you didn’t go through with your plot against me, Poppet.”

It was almost enough to muster a smile from her.

“If you acknowledge the pain,” he said, fingers drifting over the surface of the water next to her leg, “it makes it easier to heal.”

Maybe that was what she’d been avoiding.

Pain was infinite—it was always remembered like the ache of an old wound.

“And do you?” she asked, genuinely curious. “Do you feel anything when you do it?”

She expected him to make light of it, instead he surprised her with honesty. “Some, yes. Most? No. Will I have to answer for the things I’ve done? One day, I’m sure. But until then, I won’t concern myself with ridding the world of terrible people.”

He plucked her facecloth from the water, drizzling a generous amount of scented soap onto it before slowly brushing it along her shoulders and collarbone, stopping when he was just over her heart. “You have to turn it off, Poppet.”

She understood exactly what he meant. “I don’t know if I can.”

He dropped the cloth, curling his soapy hand around the nape of her neck as he forced her to focus on him. “If you don’t, she wins. It’s what she’s counting on. Grunt might have been the first, but he won’t be the last. You have to turn it *off*.”

So she did.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AT SOME POINT over the last forty-eight hours, Uilleam had lost his patience.

It could have been because Karina had been attacked so blatantly, and while it didn't matter to him that she hadn't been harmed, there wasn't a single piece of him that didn't want Katherine Ashworth's head in a box because of it.

And by God he would fucking *have* it.

Grimm was waiting for him at the new warehouse. And as Uilleam approached, *he* seemed to be the one studying *him*.

“What?”

Grimm shook his head. “Nothing.”

Right. “Give me an update.”

“Your new recruits are here.”

His Den wasn't what it used to be. At the height of his success, he'd had hundreds—if not thousands, though he wasn't entirely sure of the number. But after Karina's attack against him, his numbers had dwindled to just about nothing.

As he'd rebuilt, some of the former had returned, ready to be of service. And as the news spread of his return, new faces came, ready to offer themselves to him in exchange for payment.

The only problem was, he didn't have the time to have them trained.

They were on their own.

“How are they?” he asked.

Bishop scoffed. “If they make it out of this, I think they’ll be alright. Otherwise ...”

Otherwise, they’d be dead before the week was out.

“What else is new?”

“Calavera’s giving birth any day now.”

Uilleam paused, some of his anger bleeding away at the news. “Send flowers,” he said.

“I don’t remember becoming your damn secretary.”

“And a Range Rover.”

Bishop only arched a brow at the request.

Inside, he came up short when he spotted a familiar pair of white combat boots.

He blinked, almost certain he’d been mistaken.

But no, up ahead, Winter was standing in the middle of the hall, seemingly waiting.

His heart thumped harder. “Have you come to offer your services?”

She turned, gaze narrowing on him. “What gave you that idea?”

“Because you’re here.”

“Yeah, well ...” she shrugged. “That wasn’t exactly my idea.”

“No? Then whose idea was it?”

He watched as she tried to think of a lie. “I ... might have heard a friend of mine was here working for you. I thought I’d see for myself.”

She’d never been a very good liar. “Satisfied?”

Tight-lipped, she shrugged again.

Tăcut was the first to come around the corner, spotting him and Bishop, his gaze then moving to Winter, studying her

reaction.

As if *he* were a threat to her when they had come to *his* place of business.

“If you’re not here to assist me, then you can go,” he said coldly.

“See, that’s your problem,” Winter shot back, a challenge in her voice.

It just so happened that at that moment, the others came around the corner as well.

And now, he was forced to look at *his* hacker and the men who were just as capable as his mercenaries, but who were unwilling to help because of their own selfish desires.

“Go on then,” he said. “Tell me what my problem is.”

“I’m not some *thing* you bring out and toss aside when you’re ready—none of us are. If you weren’t such a fucking asshole, maybe you wouldn’t make enemies of everyone you crossed paths with!”

“Was I your enemy when I saved your life?” he shot back.

“*Synek* saved my life.”

“And how, exactly, d’you think he was able to do that?”

She glared at him. “I don’t know why I came here.”

“I don’t know either. I don’t *need* you,” he said cruelly, more than done with the conversation.

“How about we walk away,” Bishop suggested, intending to guide Uilleam in the opposite direction.

But he shook his head off. “You don’t get to come here and act as if I’ve offended you. Whatever services I asked of you—of *all* of them—I paid a pretty penny for. No one complained about my methods when you all got rich off of them.”

“They’re my friends!” Winter shouted, her anger like a brand across his face. “But of course, you wouldn’t know

anything about that, would you? Because you piss everybody off, you *dick!*”

“And they were my employees,” Uilleam snapped in return, his frustration bleeding out. “As were *you*. I offered all of you a job, which was gladly accepted along with the payment that came with it. Had it not been for me, Red would have been killed; Celt wouldn’t have made it to his eighteenth birthday! And Luna—”

He didn’t finish that statement.

He hated even thinking about it.

He didn’t know all the details about what happened to her in that brothel, and he didn’t care to either. His theories were enough.

“Grimm had just lost his sister when we met, and I *gave* him the man who murdered his sister, as I did Skorpion. Tell me, what more could I have done for the lot of you?” Uilleam asked, as frustrated as he was confused. “What more could I give other than the vengeance you craved and the abundant *wealth* you have now?”

Whether because they trusted she could take care of herself—or because they knew Uilleam was no threat to her, the Wild Bunch didn’t block his path this time, but rather stepped aside, allowing him to be face to face with Winter for the first time in quite some time.

She was no longer the kid he used to know. “You didn’t do the one thing you *should* have.”

“Please. Do tell.”

“If I have to tell you, it wouldn’t mean anything.”

Tăcut, briefly touched her side, something unspoken passing between them.

She frowned at him, looking as if she wanted to say more, but instead, she merely turned on her heel and left without another word.

He could all but feel Bishop’s age on him—knew, even, what the man would say if given the opportunity to speak—

but Uilleam no longer wanted to hear it.

Instead, he merely walked over to his board, grabbed a piece and set it to the side.

“If you’re not offering your assistance, I have no need for you to be here.”

Winter looked, surprisingly, wounded by that. And without another word, she whirled around and left.

TWO DAYS, seven hours, a quarter of a million dollars later, and thirteen hackers later, Uilleam found her.

And this time, he had no intentions of playing her games—he brought every mercenary he had.

Outside of the building, he allowed himself only a moment of satisfaction before he snapped his fingers, prompting the men to get into formation.

Only then did he shove the doors open and found the woman he hated more than his own father.

The similarities between her and Karina were striking—even the way she looked up at him, as if she’d known he was coming, as Karina had the day he’d sent his mercenaries to that house.

That thought gave him pause.

“Nowhere left to run, I’m afraid,” he said, his gaze daring any one of the traitorous mercenaries standing behind her to make a move.

There was one he recognized—Lucky.

Bishop had warned him about that one—that he was the ring leader in this little plot of Katherine’s and had been carrying out her bidding.

But his time would come.

For now, his focus was on Katherine. “Who said anything about running? I *am* the one sitting after all.”

“Not for long.”

She gave an airy laugh, sounding far too amused for his liking. “Oh? But haven’t you realized, Uilleam, you’re not the only one with mercenaries anymore.”

“Don’t worry yourself,” he said, glancing at each of them in turn, committing their faces to memory. “They’ll be held accountable as well. Besides, hazards of the trade, I’m afraid. As I’ve always said, mercenaries are a finicky bunch.”

Somewhere along the way, the Den had stopped recruiting those of merit, and had accepted anyone willing to offer themselves for the job.

His former team might have hated the very air he breathed currently, but they also wouldn’t go off to work for a woman like Katherine Ashworth. Of that, he was sure.

“You have something I want,” Katherine said closing her menu and setting it aside, her gaze lifting to his.

“And what might that be?”

He hated the smug look on her face—the way she didn’t appear threatened at all by his presence when she should have been quaking. While he admired it in Karina—the way she stood up to him without flinching—it absolutely *annoyed* him in her mother.

If only because he had no idea what she was planning.

“My daughter,” she answered. “Stubborn as she might be, I’m quite proud of what I’ve made of her and I want her back. My granddaughter as well.”

Uilleam just reacted.

One moment he was standing there, composed as anyone could be under the circumstances, then in the next moment, he was flipping the table over, sending it flying across the room.

Glass shattered as it hit the hardwood floors, food splattering and drawing everyone’s attention in their direction.

No one yelled or cried out—they were too focused on him and the men that had gotten to their feet when he'd reacted.

But as quickly as rage had consumed his every thought and nerve ending, he forced himself to remain calm—to remember who he was and why he had come here.

“You believe I took Karina from you, yet as a mother yourself, you thought to do the same to your own daughter, why?”

“My reasons aren't for you to understand.”

“Perhaps not,” Uilleam said with a shrug. “But I want you to understand, had you only done this to me, I would have called it a game well played—perhaps after setting fire to everything you hold dear—but it wasn't me you harmed.”

“Karina—”

“Is *mine*,” he said through gritted teeth, watching the way her face changed when he said that word. “And for what you took from her, I swear to you, I'm going to get my pound of flesh—whether given or ripped from your goddamn—”

She laughed, the sound light and arrogant. “D'you think more powerful men than you haven't threatened me before, or perhaps you're as mad as your father.”

Her words made him pause, not because he had never heard them before, but because she said them with such familiarity, it made him wonder if she had known him at one point.

“What do you know of my father?”

“Nothing I'm sure you don't already know.”

“Enough. I'm done with your games. This ends now. Call off your dogs, agree to walk away, and I just might let you breathe for another twenty-four hours.”

After that, all bets were off.

“You're not going to kill me,” she said confidently.

“No?”

“No. If you were—if either of you truly hated me, I’m certain Karina would have done the job herself when we met days ago.”

It was as if the breath had been knocked from his lungs.

“Oh?” she said, her eyes comically wide. “Did she not tell you? I imagined with a relationship as *strong* as yours, you wouldn’t keep secrets from each other. Oh no, what’s that look for?”

She looked entirely too amused as she stood. “You’re wondering if I’m lying, aren’t you? But that part of your brain that recognizes the truth is telling you that I’m not.”

As rage filled him, it wasn’t all for Katherine.

“This is such fun, Uilleam. I’ll make you the same offer I made her.” She tossed a scrap of paper at him. “You can meet me at that address in two day’s time—wave the white flag, if you will. If you do, I’ll let Karina and Poppy remain together despite her insolence.”

“You’d have to put a bullet in my head.”

She nodded. “As I intend to. But at least they’ll be together, won’t they? You wouldn’t want to be responsible for tearing them apart *again*, would you?”

Hatred seethed inside of him. “And if I don’t.”

“I’ll burn your world to the ground,” she said with finality. “Or, did you think I didn’t know that you all were staying at the Obsidian Hotel? The Chancellor may have his rules, but you can’t stay hidden away in there for long. And you never know, I might have more of your mercenaries working for me than you realize. See you then.”

She turned, walking slowly past him, laughing to herself when he didn’t reach out to stop her.

In this game of chess they were playing, he was losing.

Karina

HIS MOOD HAD ONLY WORSENERED hours after he'd arrived back—his frown becoming more pronounced with each minute that passed. And when he'd caught sight of her, the look he gave her could have killed.

And yet ... she had a feeling she knew why

He knew, she thought.

She wasn't sure how, or for how long, but at some point today, he had found out about her and Katherine. She knew an explanation wouldn't smooth things over, but avoiding him wouldn't help either.

She had to take responsibility for her own actions—for the choices she'd made that had brought them to this point, because in the end, it was *those* decisions that even brought them here.

She couldn't keep running away from the truths she didn't want to acknowledge, not if they had any way of seeing the other side of this.

So instead of avoiding, Karina steeled her spine, allowing herself only a moment of doubt before she opened the office doors and walked inside.

Considering she'd listened to him create the chaos in this room for the better part of half an hour, it still surprised her the level of destruction he'd managed to wrought in that time.

Uilleam was sitting on the only piece of furniture in the room that hadn't been toppled, a drink dangling from his hand, the decanter of whiskey still open on the table beside him. He'd never been one for dark alcohols—he'd always said they didn't agree with him and she'd never questioned it.

But seeing the way he was looking at her now, she wondered if she'd misunderstood what he'd meant by that.

“Uilleam—“

“Now's not the best time, poppet. I need some time to think.”

She'd boldly stared him in the eye once when she'd threatened in more ways than one to harm him, yet she almost felt too nervous to speak now. "We need to talk."

He tapped his finger against his drink, his ring clinking against the glass, but he didn't respond for a while before he sighed. "I need a *moment*."

The sensible thing to do would have been to leave him alone—give him time to process whatever he needed to before attempting to speak to him—but she couldn't bring herself to do that.

"You're angry with me."

"Am I?" he asked, though it was clear from the way his eyes bored into her that that wasn't a question he actually wanted her to answer. "What on earth could I possibly be angry with you about? It seems you're doing what you've always done—keeping your secrets. *Lying to me*."

The last bit was shouted, making her jump where she stood. "If you give me a chance to explain—"

"What could you possibly have to say?" he asked, sounding genuinely perplexed as he moved to his feet, still maintaining his distance. "Because unless you can stand there and fix that beautiful mouth of yours to say you haven't been speaking to that woman, I don't *care* what you have to say."

"I was attempting to do the same thing you were," she said, ignoring the pitter patter of her heart as he now drew closer.

"Oh no, don't insult me enough to suggest we were on the same side of this."

"Perhaps not the end result, but—"

"Ah, so is *that* where you and her differed?" he asked, his tone biting. "One wanted to kill me, and the other, what? Destroy the very foundation of who and what I am, *then* kill me? Because we both know I wouldn't have rotted in an American prison."

She recoiled from his words, even as she wanted to deny them. “I never wanted you to die, Uilleam. You can’t possibly believe otherwise.”

He grabbed his shirt with both hands, ripping it open as buttons flew across the room.

She knew what he intended to show her—she always tried to avoid them when he *did* take off his shirt.

The scars had faded with time, but they were still there—relics of a pain they’d both felt.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Because I’m not anymore.”

“I didn’t send Jackal after you. I wouldn’t have.”

“Why not?” he asked, fury still at the forefront. “Why would I ever believe that?”

“Because I *love* you! I always have! Everything I ever did was because I *love* you and you hurt me!”

“It was an accident!” he shouted at her. “An accident I deeply regretted since before I’d known it was *you*, but I assure you, you’ve returned that pain tenfold because every single thing you’ve done has been *to me*. I *mourned* you as you attacked and slaughtered everything I’d built!”

She swiped furiously at a wayward tear, wishing more than anything that it hadn’t fallen. “I did it because my child had died.”

That made him fall silent.

“My *child*. Could you even begin to understand how it must have felt waking up and being *empty*?” she asked, her voice catching at the end. “I never even got to see her face or touch her little hands. She was just ... *gone*, as if I hadn’t carried her inside of me for all those months.”

“Karina—“

“I know that you love her,” she whispered, failing at keeping the tears at bay. “But she was taken from me and I was told you were responsible. It didn’t matter that you were the man I loved—not when I’d tried to tell you about her and

you were too busy being the *Kingmaker* to see me. You told Bishop to leave no witnesses. And to then learn I might not ever be able to have children again, I—”

“What?

She hadn’t meant to say that.

Not yet.

Not like this.

He deserved to know, but when they were in a better place.

No. I had

No, he needed to know now.

No more secrets. No more waiting.

“There were complications with the C-section—trauma from the shooting. I lost one of my ovaries and ... over the years, my doctor hasn’t been optimistic about me being able to conceive again.” She dragged in a shaky breath, pulling the phone she’d grabbed from the bank from her pocket and tossed it to him. “So yes, I was hurt and angry and I lashed out. I hurt you in ways that I deeply regret. I wish ... there are a million things I wish I would have done differently. This life ... this *vendetta*, I don’t want it anymore. I’m tired of being angry. I’m tired of it all. I never wanted to become what I am.”

She’d just wanted to be a journalist.

To right wrongs on a small level.

To be a voice for the defenseless.

To *help* people.

“Everything I took from you is on that device,” she said. “Every contact I’ve ever made, every deal. *All* of it. If you want it, it’s yours.”

She was done with it.

Instead of unlocking the screen and hunting through it, Uilleam tossed it aside as if it meant nothing at all and came to her.

Her throat felt as if it were swelling shut. “I just want *us*. That’s all I want.”

Just the three of them.

Together and happy.

She just didn’t realize how hard it would be to achieve that.

His touch was gentle as he wiped her tears away. All the anger seemed to have bled out of him now. But it wasn’t until he rested his hand low on her stomach that made her snuffle.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered against her temple. “So sorry.”

She clung to him, letting the emotions she’d been holding at bay free—allowing herself to *truly* feel everything she’d been suppressing over the years out.

“I’m going to make this right,” he said. “I promise I will.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

SOME TIME LATER, Karina looked up at the sound of the door opening, expecting to find Uilleam, but instead, to her surprise, she found Iz.

She shot up, forgetting all about her argument with Uilleam as she readied to ask about Poppy.

“She’s fine,” Iz said, reading her mind, the usual bravado in her voice missing.

Tonight ... she sounded more like the sister who’d sneak into her room at night so they could talk about her days at school and the gossip she all too happily shared.

“Don’t tell me Uilleam sent you here?” she asked, feeling dejected at the thought.

As if she needed another guilt trip ...

“No. Actually, Zoran was the one who sent me.”

Her brows drew together. “Why?”

For the first time in a long time, Iz hesitated.

And when she did, Karina noticed other little things.

Like the fact that her hair wasn’t perfect and instead, strands hung loose from the ponytail she wore.

And instead of her usually perfectly tailored outfits that were meant to draw attention, she was in a pair of jeans and an old college sweatshirt that must have belonged to Zoran at one point.

“He thought it was time I told you the truth.”

“The truth about what?”

Iz’s gaze was on the wall as she cleared her throat, not once, but twice, as if she were already fighting back emotion Karina couldn’t see.

It made her own anxiety worse as she prepared herself for whatever she was about to say.

“About what happened when I turned seventeen.”

Her heart started to pound in her chest as she crossed the room to her sister.

It felt like such a long time ago now, but the secret behind it had always troubled her.

Not because she didn’t know it, but because whatever it was had changed Iz.

One minute, she’d been joyful and happy and having seen Karina off for another semester in Switzerland, and the next ... it was as if she couldn’t recognize her own sister anymore.

The few times she’d seen her after her birthday, Iz had always looked ... *haunted*, but no one had been willing to give her a reason, no matter how many times she’d asked.

And when she’d finally deigned to ask her own sister about it, it was as if a switch had been flipped inside of her and just like that, the Iz she knew now stared back at her.

Confident and self-assured and willing to take on the world.

A mask Karina had never tried to take off of her.

“There was supposed to be a ceremony after I completed finishing school,” Iz said, her gaze going from the wall to the floor.

But never to Karina.

“At least, that was what Mother told me it was supposed to be.” A ghost of a smile crossed her face as she seemed lost in a

memory for a moment. “It was a party to celebrate everything I had accomplished—and all that I would do in the future.”

The words were so carefully said, Karina didn’t doubt those had been the exact words Mother had used.

“They called him The Count,” she said, the words almost whispered as if just by saying them aloud, it would conjure the man she spoke of.

She opened her mouth, intending to say more, but the words seemed to have lodged themselves in her throat.

“The first night he ra—”

Karina flinched so violently, Iz paused. And on her face was an expression she had never seen before.

Shame.

“Iz—”

“With time,” she continued, her voice hollow and distant. “You learn to smile and bear it.”

It was as if a part of her brain was fracturing, the fragmented pieces warring with one another as she tried to piece together an image of the mother she’d always known ...

And the one Iz had had.

The version of her she’d always made excuses for because that was how she’d been taught to be.

How she’d been *allowed* to be.

“But why would she *do* that?” she asked, not truly expecting Iz to actually answer that question.

The very idea that her mother—a mother, would willingly and *knowingly* turn their daughter over to a monster ... it was reprehensible.

“Because power begets power,” Iz said softly, wiping a tear away before it could truly fall. “And the moment that two carat diamond was placed on my finger, I became Countess Isla Corbyn-Wright. And since I never bore his children,

thankfully, I'm also the heiress to the Corbyn-Wright fortune and the secret businesses he ran."

But she didn't stop there.

She continued—the words spilling out of her as if they'd only been waiting for her to give voice to them.

But Karina didn't flinch again, not even as she detailed the horrific reality she'd been forced to endure.

Not even when Iz squeezed her hands so tightly to the point of pain as she finally confessed the heavy burden of truth she'd carried for so very long.

To protect her, she knew.

Because that was who Iz had always been.

And just like that, it all made sense.

All of it.

All the missing pieces she'd never understood.

The *reason* they were all here now.

Because Uilleam Runehart was an easy man to love, but with the right motivation ... he was an easier man to hate.

And Katherine had made sure to coax the flames of her hatred until the embers ignited and she'd turned into the very thing her Mother had always wanted her to be.

Her.

Iz hadn't fallen in love with the Count, and by the end of it, that wide-eyed, optimistic girl who believed in romance and fairytales had no longer existed.

Karina was never supposed to fall in love with Uilleam.

Seduce. Manipulate. Destroy.

That had been the objective.

Until she'd strayed and Katherine had had no choice but to implement her plan another way.

And unbeknownst to him, Uilleam had aided her via his own quest for power.

It had been the perfect storm.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” she asked on a whisper.

Her smile was sad. “Because that’s my job as the eldest—to *bear* it. I never wanted this for you. When you told Mother you wanted to move to New York and have a different life, I championed it.”

She had, Karina thought.

At the time, she hadn’t understood why she’d been so accepting of it considering Iz had been working for their mother for quite some time at that point, but now ... Now, she understood.

“He’s not going to stop,” Iz said, holding her gaze. “Not with you, and not with Poppy. For all we know, she’s already laid the groundwork with her.”

It was the last thing she wanted for Poppy.

She was supposed to be different.

Her life was meant to be fun and carefree and filled with all the things she’d never had. The idea of her one day walking into Katherine’s finishing school—of learning this *trade* ...

Over her dead body.

“In the end,” Iz said, squeezing her hand. “You’re going to have to choose—Mother or yourself.”

It wasn’t a hard decision to make.

It was time.

ONCE SHE SAID HELLO, she never imagined they would have to say goodbye.

It didn’t matter that it was only temporary—that they were only a plane ride or a mere phone call away, Poppy looked as utterly destroyed as Karina felt.

“You’re going with Aunt Iz on a little trip. It’ll be fun.”

Poppy didn't look so easily convinced. "Are you not going?" she asked.

Karina bent to her level, brushing her hair behind her ear. "Not this time."

That only made it worse.

"But for how long?" she asked, her voice cracking at the end as she looked at Karina first, then to Uilleam—it was him she looked betrayed by. "You *promised!*"

Words couldn't express how much she wanted to explain what was happening—that it wasn't a *choice*, but a necessity. If Poppy stayed, not only would she be in danger—it was very obvious now that Katherine wasn't above using innocents to get what she wanted—but Karina would be distracted.

She would worry whether Poppy was alright, or if there were some unknown enemy lurking—waiting for the moment she dropped her guard and took her before she had the chance to do anything about it.

While she was more than willing to risk her own life to put an end to all of this, she wasn't willing to risk their daughter's.

And if there was any chance of them having some sort of normalcy in the future, this had to be done—no matter how much it might have hurt to do it.

"Not for very long," she said, hoping she sounded reassuring. "Mummy and Daddy have a few business things to finish up and once that's done, it'll just be the three of us."

Those words felt heavy in her chest, if only because she never thought she would use them.

But despite them, Poppy didn't look convinced. Some of the light seemed to have gone out of her eyes as she turned back to her suitcase, moving a shirt from one side to the next under the guise of packing, but Karina saw through that.

She didn't want to leave.

No matter her early apprehension with Uilleam and her shy eagerness with Karina, she had come around.

Karina sighed to herself, swallowing back her own emotion as she gently touched her shoulders to turn Poppy around to face her.

“Poppy—”

“But you said you wouldn’t be leaving again,” she said in a small voice.

There was so much she wished she could explain, but she didn’t have the first idea where to begin. Any other time, she might have started with the truth—that Katherine was the reason why she hadn’t been in her life so long, not to mention that she hadn’t actually known Poppy existed.

It would have been easier to just say it aloud—to give an explanation where she hadn’t before but ... she couldn’t bring herself to do it.

Katherine hadn’t really hid anything from her from what Karina could see—had even told her about her father—so a part of her felt wrong at the idea of poisoning that bond.

And hadn’t she, herself, hurt enough people who weren’t involved with her feud with Uilleam?

How many more lives would they forever alter because they dared love each other?

“It won’t be for very long, Poppy,” Uilleam said.

“But if you disappear, I won’t see you again! *Please* don’t send me away,” Poppy said, her frown becoming more pronounced even as her brows drew together.

Was this what it felt like to have your heart breaking in real time?

Because that’s what it felt like.

“We—“

“Three days,” Uilleam cut in, moving to kneel on one knee in front of her. “If you give me three days, this ... problem will be over. D’you remember the first promise I ever made to you?”

She nodded, hair swishing. “You said you’d take me to my Mum.”

Karina dug her own nails into her fist, focusing on the physical pain rather than the one in her heart.

“Yes. And now, I’m making you another. If you give me just a *little* more time, I’ll make sure you never have to be apart from your mother again.”

Poppy seemed to think this over. “What about you?”

The question seemed to surprise him, but he recovered quickly. “I’ll always be here, should you want me to be.”

She sniffled. “I didn’t finish learning the trick yet.”

Uilleam’s smile was a bit shaky. “Tick tock then, little dove. You only have three days to learn it then. Perhaps your Aunt could be of assistance in helping you learn it.”

Poppy looked back at Iz. “But, she said cash and coins are for poor people. That’s why she carries—”

Iz cleared her throat. “There’s a sacred bond between aunts and nieces, love. What happens when we’re together stays between us.”

Zoran shook his head.

“Three days,” Uilleam repeated. “I promise.”

Finally, Poppy nodded. “Three days.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SHE SHOULD HAVE BEEN on her way to the hangar behind Grimm to properly see Poppy off with her sister and make sure she understood, though she'd said it once already, that this was only temporary.

That soon, *very* soon, they would be back together again and nothing would tear them apart.

But as she drove through the city, she spotted the hospital she'd overheard Nix telling Uilleam Luna was recovering after her surprise birth at home, and before she could talk herself out of it, she pulled into the parking garage.

The building, made of tinted glass and steel, was one of the newer birthing centers in the city—one that cost more than the average person's salary for one night.

Walking through the lobby, Karina stopped at one the kiosks, purchasing a bundle of flowers before taking the elevator up to the labor and delivery floor.

She and Luna hadn't spoken for quite some time, and after everything that had happened prior—both with her and mercenaries she was closest with—it was understandable if she didn't want to see her.

And perhaps wouldn't want her there ...

But, she found herself going room to room anyway, finding the only door with initials instead of a name.

LR.

Taking a breath, she knocked on the door before walking in.

To her surprise, however, Kit wasn't inside, but both Fang—who was stretched out on the too short loveseat—and Tăcut—who stood near the window with a pensive expression—were both present.

They both looked at Karina as she came further into the room, the former's expression shifting to something that wouldn't at all be considered friendly. Tăcut, on the other hand, looked at Luna to see her reaction.

And even Karina knew, should Luna demand it, they would both happily make sure she was removed.

But when *she* looked at her, he only found a slightly dazed Luna smiling as she held a swaddled little bundle to her chest, her eyes a little tired.

Though she felt a bit awkward now that she was here, she soldiered on.

"I wanted to see how you were doing," Karina explained though no one had asked her a question yet, "and say congratulations, of course. I probably should have called Kit first before—"

"Why would you need to do that?" Luna asked, sounding genuinely perplexed.

"I ... well—"

"Your his aunt. Of course, you should be here."

Aunt.

Iz had never seemed interested in being a mother—or children in general, for that matter, even as she got on rather well with Poppy. So, she hadn't seen this in her future at all.

And yet, Luna offered it so easily.

"Congratulations," she whispered, meaning it. "I'm so happy for you."

Everyone in this room knew where Luna had come from and the trials she'd suffered. And now? She had a man she

adored, who loved her in return, and now they'd welcomed a baby into the world.

A precious little baby boy with his pale blue hat that mostly covered the dark hair she could see peeking out from beneath.

A look of understanding seemed to cross Luna's face as she sat up a bit. "Do you want to hold him?"

Karina took a step back almost reflexively, shaking her head. "Oh, I couldn't possibly—"

But Luna wasn't taking no for an answer. And as she started to lift him to her, she quickly set the bouquet of flowers down and found herself reaching for him.

He was small, so small, that she was afraid if she didn't hold him just right, he would break. He didn't stir as she rocked him gently, his eyes with their long little lashes remaining blissfully closed.

For just a moment, she imagined what it would have been like—if life had been kinder to them.

If Uilleam had been standing beside her with her hand in his as the doctor brought Poppy to them after she'd been swaddled.

If they'd gotten to have this moment of peace and serenity.

But as she took in a sobering breath, her smile fixed on her face as she passed him back to Luna, the weightlessness she felt now was as visceral and gut wrenching now as it had been so many years ago.

"I'm surprised Kit would let you out of his sight," Karina said, hoping to distract herself.

"Uilleam called with an emergency," Luna offered casually, too smitten with her newborn to notice the way Karina's brow creased.

A knock sounded at the door before it opened and two nurses walked in.

Karina quietly excused herself, slipping into the en suite bathroom to compose herself and shake off memories of the past. But after a moment, she pulled her mobile from her purse, checking for any missed calls from Uilleam but finding none.

Uilleam could be demanding, sure, but if there had truly been some sort of emergency, she couldn't imagine he would demand Kit leave his wife and newborn, no matter how much he might have needed him.

And if there *were* an emergency, why hadn't he mentioned it to her?

She called him, or at least attempted to, but the call never rang. Swiping the screen away, she sent him a text, but the progress bar loaded, but it never sent.

Odd ...

Soft snuffles before a cry sounded, breaking her out of her thoughts.

A pang of envy hit her before she could quell the emotion, her mind now lost in the *what ifs*.

If life had been kinder to them, she imagined this could have been her.

"Excuse me," she said softly, quickly escaping into the connected bathroom before anyone could see the panic on her face.

The last thing she wanted was for it to be misinterpreted.

With her hands on either side of the sink, she dragged in a deep breath, reminding herself this wasn't about her or what she'd lost. Plus, she'd only meant to be here for a short while.

She needed to get going anyway.

A rap sounded at the door, making her look up before she realized it was someone coming into the room. The squeak of wheels told her it was probably the nurse coming to check in.

Taking one final moment to herself, Karina started to exit the bathroom, intending to tell them she was going to be on

her way, but a voice stopped her.

“I just need to take a look at the baby and we’ll be all finished here.”

Karina frowned at her reflection in the mirror, the voice triggering a memory buried so deep in the recesses of her mind, it came rushing back faster than she could catch her next breath.

She *knew* that voice.

Knew the woman it belonged to because she’d heard it once before.

Just in passing—a singular moment in time during the worst day of her life. And she was almost certain, had she not heard the woman’s voice, she wouldn’t have remembered waking up in the middle of the night, every inch of her feeling incredibly heavy.

She could almost see herself lying there, her reflection staring back at her through the windows that overlooked the city.

She could see the hospital equipment behind her—numerous wires and cords keeping her connected to the machines, monitoring her.

There was only emptiness, she thought.

No pain.

No fatigue.

No debilitating grief that she had lost her baby.

Just ... heaviness.

But that didn’t mean the pain wasn’t there. Tears still formed and fell, but that was all.

“There, there, dear,” a voice—the voice—said with sympathy as she readied a syringe. “*Just a little something for the pain.*”

Karina didn’t remember much of anything after that—the edges of her vision had gone dark before the next thing she

knew, she was waking up and getting ready to be discharged days later.

She didn't know what the woman had given her—nor had she cared then when the only thing she'd wanted to be was unconscious—but she *was* certain that the woman then, and the woman currently on the other side of this bathroom door was the same.

Mother.

Karina stepped out of her heels and coat, leaving both on the restroom floor, but not before she made sure to grab her mobile from the inner pocket. There were no coincidences in this life—only warnings.

Without thinking, she quietly exited the bathroom, her gaze immediately searching out the nurses, finding one next to the baby's bassinet, the other fiddling with the bag attached to Luna's IV.

Fang looked at her as she came into the room, but she couldn't speak, not yet.

She couldn't afford to be wrong.

Not now.

Not like this.

But Tăcut had moved away from the window while she'd been gone, now standing closer to the door—observing the nurse, she imagined. But his new position allowed her to spot the weapon he had tucked away beneath his shirt.

One thing she could trust—killers had a way of getting weapons into any facility without getting caught.

But as the nurse emptied the syringe of its contents into Luna's IV, Karina snatched Tăcut's gun and pointed it at the nurse's head before she could turn.

The room erupted.

The other nurse, one Karina didn't recognize, shouted, but Fang slammed his hand down over her mouth before shoving her until her back was against the wall and held her there.

The heart monitor beeped frantically as Luna looked at Karina. “What’s—”

“What was in it?” Karina asked, the question prompting Luna to immediately reach for the needle stuck in her arm, but before she could rip it free, Tăcut was there, his hand closing over hers.

“She wouldn’t want you to kill her,” Karina continued, her eyes only on the nurse now looking at her, her face pale.

As if she were looking into the face of a ghost.

“She’s not foolish enough for that.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Understand me when I said it would be a *mercy* for me to kill you right here and now compared to what the father of that baby will do to you if anything happens to her or that baby. I’ll only ask once more—*what did you give her?*”

Her eyes were wide and scared, tears already falling as the other nurse pleaded behind the heavy hand currently pressed over her mouth.

“It was just a s-sedative.”

Karina considered that. “So she would sleep when you took the baby,” Karina guessed out loud, refusing to allow herself to fully process what she was saying.

That her mother would do *this*.

“*What?*”

The usually resilient mercenary was breathing so heavily now, it was a wonder Luna hadn’t passed out as she scrambled for the still sleeping baby.

“Y-yes,” the nurse admitted quietly.

Which meant *someone* was coming for the baby.

“How many?”

“I don’t—”

“We weren’t properly introduced last time,” Karina said, holding eye contact, “but allow me to remedy that.”

She removed the snake pin from her hair, the seemingly innocent accessory surprisingly sharp, and as she pressed the end of it against the woman's neck, she nicked her flesh.

"You're going to learn in the worst of ways why they call me Belladonna."

"I didn't know what she was going to ask me to do until today," the woman said, her cheeks now streaked with mascara. "She said no one would get hurt."

"And tell me," Karina asked as she slipped the hairpin back into place. "Does she *look* unharmed?"

It didn't matter that Luna hadn't been physically hurt as Tăcut helped her dress—it was the implication of what could have happened.

What could *still* happen had Karina not been here.

"Where are the other two of you?" Karina now asked Fang.

"Grabbing food," he said.

But considering everything, it was by design that the only two remaining were Fang and Tăcut.

"What's that look about?" Fang asked.

The distrust on his face wasn't personal, she knew.

Or maybe it was.

After all, he'd lost someone because of Katherine as well, and perhaps the blame for that should lay at her feet as well because had it not been for her vendetta, there might not have been as many casualties as there were.

But the truth was, they were in trouble.

She steeled herself as she said, "Katherine set this all into motion—I don't know how long she's been planning this, but if she managed to get this woman employed here, she'd always had intentions on either taking the baby, Luna, or both."

"We're not going to let that happen," Fang snapped.

A threat to everyone else in the room.

A promise, she thought, for Luna.

And Karina knew that he would do everything in his power to keep his word, but she wouldn't be doing them any favors by lying to them.

She knew Katherine and the destruction she could leave in her wake.

Sugarcoating the very real problem on their hands would only result in this situation going from bad to worse.

She had to make him understand the threat they were facing.

Today, she had to be the villain they believed her to be.

“Kit sent you here because there is no one else he would trust more than the four of you to keep her safe,” she said bluntly, “but Katherine counted on that. Wherever Kit and the others are right now, that's exactly where she wants them to be. You two were left here for a reason.”

Fang shoved the woman away as he grabbed for his bag and pulled his mask from inside. “Hate to break it to you, babe, but I'm not afraid of your mother.”

No, he wouldn't know to be.

Nor would Katherine.

And the truth of the matter was, Katherine wouldn't be the one who came for the baby.

She would send someone else.

Someone she knew wouldn't fail ...

“You might not be afraid of her,” Karina said as she stared into the eyes of a woman who realized she was going to die, “but Kit wouldn't hesitate in killing anyone who's a threat to Luna.”

Not that it would matter.

It was already in her system now.

The nurse lurched back as Fang took a step toward her, but Karina held her arm out. “Katherine knows Nix wouldn’t keep her alone. She would have planned for it in case anything went wrong.”

Because that was exactly what she would have done.

Her breath shook as she exhaled. “Everyone. She’s sending everyone.”

Fang exploded in rapid Romanian, sending them all in opposite directions, but what was once a serene room had turned into something else.

“What the hell is this?” Thanatos announced as he entered the room, but it only took a glance at the other two for understanding to dawn on his face and both he, and Invictus, snapped into action.

“Thanatos, you need to take the baby,” Karina said, shaking her head when Luna started to protest. “If my mother used any of the sedatives she’s known for, you’re going to pass out at any moment. Someone will need to look after you and someone else the baby.”

And if there was one thing Karina knew about the four men in this room—they’d die before they ever allowed any harm to come to her or her baby.

“Don’t worry,” Karina said. “I’m going to get you out of this, I promise.”

A promise she had every intention on keeping.

“What are you thinking?” Fang asked from behind his mask.

“We need to get out of this place as quickly as possible.”

“We can take on whoever they send.”

“And risk Luna and the baby in the process?” she asked. “It’s not that you aren’t capable—that’s not what I’m worried about.”

“What are—“ Understanding dawned on him. You don’t know for sure that she’d send him here. Not for a baby ...”

Luna was crying earnestly now, the sound tearing at every fiber of her heart because she *knew* the terror she felt.

The *fear*.

Karina squeezed her hand into a fist, trying to keep the emotion out of her voice as she said, “It’s what I would do.”

Because what could possibly hurt the Runehart family more than this?

Kit would never recover and Uilleam ...

“But every plan has its weaknesses.”

In a matter of minutes, vests were strapped into place, limited weapons they’d managed to sneak into this facility holstered to their bodies.

And only once Fang’s mask was in place did he speak, his voice warped. “What’s that?”

“Human error.”

It was the one thing no one could ever truly prepare for.

Sure, one could predict from pattern what a person might do—it was how both she and Uilleam had gotten to where they were—but it had also been the crux.

Plans changed. Alliances shifted.

And despite her intention to board a jet and head off on another errand, she had decided at the last possible moment to visit Luna.

Because she hadn’t been able to stay away despite her feelings of being here.

Katherine wouldn’t have accounted for that.

Though their masks were all in place now, she could feel their eyes on her. They might not have trusted her, or believed in her motives where Sebastian was concerned, but right now, in this moment, they knew she wasn’t a part of Katherine’s plot.

And if any of them had any hope of getting Luna and the baby out of here, they needed her.

Finally, Karina faced Luna, her cries growing softer now—the sedative taking effect.

“Don’t let her take my baby,” she whispered, tears falling. “P-please. If not us both, save *him*. No matter what.”

“I—”

“Christophe, Răz, Nicu, Val,” she said, looking at each of them in turn. “You have to promise me you won’t let that woman take him.”

None of the four wanted to respond, Karina knew—it was an impossible ask of them because she knew they didn’t *want* to have to choose.

Her eyes appeared to be getting heavier, her speech slowed and movements languid.

Before long, she fell unconscious.

And as Karina stared at her, she knew one thing for certain:

She wouldn’t allow any harm to come to either of them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THOUGH THEY HAD RIDDEN in silence for the better part of the forty-five minutes they'd been in the car, the mercenary driving him looked back at him and asked, "Why Queens?"

Uilleam didn't look up from his mobile as he said, "I didn't realize we were having a Q-and-A."

Wisely, he closed his mouth and focused back on the road.

After almost an hour, they finally arrived at the address he'd had one of his hackers find for him. He headed up to the sixth floor, mercenary in tow. Once they reached the door of the apartment, Uilleam gestured for the man to open the door, pleasantly surprised when he used a lock pick to get them in.

He would have been happy to have him kick it in, but his way was certainly less damaging.

It was very obvious upon entry that the place belonged to a man. While he'd always paid someone to make his place appealing, he still liked to think he wouldn't live like *this*.

Casually walking toward the back of the apartment, he reached the door to the back bedroom where the unmistakable sound of two people arguing could be heard.

Uilleam pushed the door open. "Sorry to interrupt."

Two sets of eyes swung in his direction—the woman's whose voice he heard scattering to pick up her clothes that were scattered all over the floor. "What the actual fuck?"

"Well, it's nice to see you alive and well," Uilleam said with a smile, not moved at all by the anger on the man's face.

“And it’s good to see you enjoying female company. They always say the quickest way to get over a woman is to get on top of another one—or under, if that’s your preference.”

If looks could kill, Uilleam would be soot on the floor with the way the man was looking at him.

But Orion had always been the prickly sort.

“What the hell do you want?”

“Straight to business then? I’m here to save your life.”

“So you break into my goddamn apartment? You ever heard of a phone? And the way I see it, the only threat to my life these days is *you*.”

“For once, I’d say our interests are aligned,” Uilleam countered.

“Yeah? How so?”

“We both want what’s best for Karina.”

The woman he was with frowned ever so slightly, her brown gaze cutting to Orion before she dressed as quickly as she could before leaving the room without a word.

“Eros, wait!” Orion called after her.

But while Uilleam’s mercenary allowed her to walk out, he stopped Orion with his hand out.

Orion glared. “I’m not above breaking your fucking arm. I’d suggest you move.”

“This is *serious*,” Uilleam reiterated.

They faced off for several seconds, Orion looking as if he didn’t want to back down, but ultimately, he gave in with a raise of his hands. “Just tell me why you’re here already.”

“Certainly. I need you to come with me.”

“I can’t. I’ve got a drop to do, and if I’m late, that crazy fucking psychopath I’m working for will have my ass.”

“Then consider it repayment for the debt you owe me.”

“The fuck? I’ve never made a deal with you,” he answered shortly.

“No, but Karina made one on your behalf when she had me free you from jail.”

Orion frowned, squinting his eyes as he thought back to the day in question. “You were the one who put me in there in the first place!”

Ah, just so. “If it makes you feel any better, consider this a favor for Karina rather than myself.”

Which was why he’d come here in the first place.

Because he didn’t want Karina to suffer more than he already had. Losing Grunt had devastated her, and he couldn’t imagine the way she’d feel if Katherine managed to get to Orion too.

“Alright, I’m listening. What’s all this about?”

“Katherine Ashworth.”

“Yeah, she’s a bitch, so what?”

“Finally. Someone who understands my sentiments.”

“Again, what about her?”

“I think she’s planning something big to hurt Karina, and if I’m right, you might be on her hit list.”

He’d thought it at the time of Grunt’s death though he hadn’t voiced his opinion.

While she’d wanted to hurt Karina, it didn’t appear, at least right now, that she wanted to do any physical harm.

She’d taken Poppy.

Murdered Grunt in cold blood.

He wouldn’t put it past her to do the same to Orion as well.

Which was why, Uilleam had taken it upon himself to come here and make sure the man got the hell out of the city while he still could.

“I have a jet, ready and waiting to take you wherever you want to go. You need only get on it.”

“You’re serious, then,” he said, staring at him.

“D’you think I’m here because I find your company pleasing?”

“I genuinely don’t believe I’ve met a bigger asshole than you.”

“Thank you for the compliment. Now, take my offer and get out of here. The last thing I want is for Karina to mourn over your dead body.”

A knock at the door silenced them both.

Uilleam looked at his mercenary, giving him a nod as he crossed the floor to peek through the peephole. When his stance relaxed, Uilleam frowned.

At least until he opened the door to reveal Kit standing on the other side.

Now, it was Uilleam’s turn to frown. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Kit, who looked as if he hadn’t slept in days, and hadn’t shaved for longer, glared at him. “Is that a joke?”

Uilleam looked down at his watch. “I’m not the wisest when it comes to this, but I can’t imagine your wife would want you to leave her side after she’s given birth to your baby.”

“Unfortunately, she’s much too understanding when it comes to you. What do you want anyway?”

His frown only deepened. “What are you on about?”

“You phoned and said you needed me,” he explained, his confusion turning into frustration. “That it was urgent and couldn’t wait.”

Uilleam was shaking his head before he even finished. “I’m selfish, admittedly, but I wouldn’t call you here—not today.”

It was as if all the emotion drained out of Kit as he first looked at Uilleam, then at Orion, and back again. “If you didn’t call, then—“

“Someone wanted you here,” Uilleam finished, realization dawning on them both.

For years, their mother had tormented him in ways Uilleam didn’t like to remember, but Kit had always been a survivor.

He could look danger in the face without blinking an eye.

He *never* backed down, and refused to show fear.

But as he looked down at his own mobile as if it had betrayed him, he paled in a way Uilleam would never forget.

“Luna—“

Glass exploded as gunshots rang out, making them all drop to the floor.

But his mercenary wasn’t quick enough.

Uilleam saw the minute the bullet struck him in the middle of his forehead, his head jerking back with the impact before he hit the ground.

They were out of time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Bishop

“Do you think I’ll ever see them again?”

Bishop glanced over at Poppy where she was seated beside him in the back of the SUV, not missing the way she clutched her bag until her knuckles blanched.

Ever since they’d left the hotel, and with each mile they gained, it was as if little pieces of her were chipping away.

If he’d been given this assignment before he’d been trapped in *Gheenă*, he didn’t think he would have been as understanding.

It wasn’t so much that he didn’t like kids ... he just didn’t consider himself as personable.

Hell, he didn’t think he was all that understanding now, but he found he had a bit of a soft spot where Poppy was concerned.

Maybe it was the guilt because of what he’d done to her mother, or even what he’d almost done to her.

He wasn’t sure.

“Don’t worry yourself,” he said, looking over at her. “They’ll be back before you know it.”

She nodded, hair swishing, but she didn’t look as if she believed him.

And as he looked back at the road, driving toward the hangar where she’d be getting on a jet and far away from here,

he realized he was growing too soft.

When he'd been in that hole for months, he'd thought he would lose his mind in the dark—convinced he would die with nothing and no one.

His captors wouldn't have given a shit that he'd finally died. They would have tossed dirt over him and left him to rot wherever he was.

For a while, *that* thought hadn't bothered him.

And yet now, as he tried to ignore the sad kid next to him to focus on what he was meant to be doing, he found he couldn't.

She was tough, he thought—more so than any kid needed to be. But even the tough ones had limits.

Like his sister.

“We're about five minutes out,” Hawley said from the front seat, checking the side mirror to make sure the twins were still following.

This was meant to be a simple trade off, and after everything Katherine Ashworth had pulled already, Bishop was actually glad for it.

The Kingmaker might have thought he was formidable, and for a while, he had been. No one was able to touch him.

But that all changed with Karina and Poppy.

Now, he had two soft spots in otherwise impenetrable armor.

Bishop had seen what he was capable of when he'd lost Karina, and he'd also seen the result of Karina losing Poppy ... if they both lost her?

The world would collapse into ruin.

Driving through the gate, Hawley swung the SUV around the corner of the building, the jet already waiting, though he didn't see Isla's car anywhere.

Looked like she was late.

“Alright,” Bishop said, snapping off his seatbelt. “Let’s get this done.”

He almost had his hand on the door handle when the frantic sound of a car horn sounded and had his head jerking in that direction.

There was no time to prepare, or stop what was coming as he looked up in time to see a truck barreling right for them.

“*Get down!*”

The words were barely out of his mouth before he was reached for Poppy, pushing her down as he tried his best to cover her with his own body as they truck rammed right into the side of the SUV.

The crunch of glass and metal was almost enough to drown out the sounds of her screams as they jerked violently, weightlessness making his stomach lurch as they started to tip over.

Blood rushed in his ear, glass raining down all around him as they made impact.

He flew forward then hit the ground with enough force, he was almost certain at least one bone in his body was broken.

Slowly rolling to his stomach, he focused on his breathing, ignoring the ringing in his ears as he battled the disorientation threatening to keep him down.

“Poppy,” he called, struggling to pick himself up. “Talk to me. You alright?”

But she was crying too hard to answer him.

That was good though—it at least meant she was alive.

“Flagg?”

No response.

Not even a grunt or a groan or anything.

“*Flagg!*”

Still nothing.

Looking up, he realized Hawley couldn't respond—he was slumped over, his seatbelt the only thing keeping him in place. The glass of the window had splintered where his head had made impact.

Fuck.

Pulling the knife from his pocket, Bishop shuffled over to Poppy, cutting the belt away with quick sawing motions, catching her as best she could once it gave way.

“Watch the glass,” he warned, his hand on her back as he peered around her.

A gunshot rang out.

His grip tightened reflexively as he adjusted them as best he could so that she was mostly tucked behind him.

“Come on out, you old, grim bastard!” A familiar voice yelled “Give us the girl and ... I'd be lying if I said I'd let you live.”

The problems with motherfuckers like Lucky? They talked too much.

But he also was smart enough to know that while he'd never risen high enough in the ranks of the Den to be worth shit, he still knew how to do his job.

And he'd seen more than one man fall for the antics and wind up with a bullet in their heads.

“Yeah, that's not going to happen,” he called back, mindful of the way Poppy flinched.

But at least she wasn't crying any more though it was a miracle she hadn't cut herself on the glass with the way she was shaking.

A rapid exchange of gunfire sounded—shouts from the twins, more taunting from Lucky.

“I need you to do something for me,” Bishop whispered urgently, forcing Poppy to look at him. “I'm gonna go out this window and when I do, I need you to go that way—“ he

pointed in the opposite direction, “—and run as fast as you can away from here.”

Her lip trembled, more tears flooding her eyes. “But what about you?”

He would die protecting her if it came to that.

There was no doubt in his mind.

Not because it was the job.

Not because Uilleam would expect it of him.

But because he owed her a blood debt.

She didn't know he'd almost ended her life before she'd ever taken a breath. She didn't know that had his aim been half an inch in the opposite direction, neither she or Karina would be here right now.

In *Gheenă*, he'd spilled more blood there than he ever had as a mercenary or a Marine. That debt had been paid.

For Poppy ... it was still waiting to be fulfilled.

“I'll find you, wherever you are,” he said, hoping the words were a promise, but feeling as if they were a lie.

They were out of time.

He touched the top of her head, praying for the second time in his life that the bad luck that plagued him wouldn't effect someone else.

“When I say go, you book it the hell out of here, you understand me?”

Only once he got her shaky nod did he shove through the open door, moving to his feet as his ribs screamed in pain.

At a distance, he found the man he was looking for.

Lucky grinned. “Been a while, hasn't it, Grimm?” he asked conversationally, a high-powered rifle resting against his shoulder. “I heard they didn't find much of you out there in the wilderness.”

For a moment, he flashed back to the night the others came.

Not a day had gone by that he hadn't hoped they would find him—they'd been his teammates.

His brothers—and sister.

But ... that didn't mean he hadn't had fears. That he hadn't laid awake at night wondering if hell was all he would have left in this world.

Pain.

Torture.

He'd known it for long, he wasn't sure how anything *Gheenă* did to him was anything worse than losing his sister and hadn't been able to bury her and grieve properly.

He'd given up more than once, but every time he'd hoped he'd simply not wake up in the morning, his eyes always opened again.

And disappointment settled over him.

But then one night, everything changed.

He was freed from one prison and was now ... free.

Or as free as someone like him could be.

"It's not too late to walk away from this," Bishop called, scanning the tarmac to make sense of what had happened.

The doors to the truck that slammed into them was open, smoke billowing from the hood, but no one was inside.

Instead, a bald man wearing a bulletproof vest was facedown on the ground with a hole in his head, blood seeping from the wound.

Across the way, he could see the other SUV the twins had been in, bullet holes riddling the windshield and the hood. But at this distance, he couldn't see if they were still inside or not.

"Why would I do that?" he asked, grin growing. "I'm on the winning side of this—or do you still think he's actually going to see the other side of this? I didn't take you for a fucking fool, Grimm. You're smarter than that."

“Maybe, maybe not, but you and I both know the man has nine lives.”

Uilleam was notoriously hard to fucking kill, and after a while, his enemies stopped trying with any earnest—especially since he had them.

They were like a wall of armor around him, but after Karina applied just the right amount of pressure to create a crack in the foundation and force a portion of that wall to fall ... it was only a matter of time now.

“And when I get done with you,” Grimm warned, “You’re gonna wish it was the Kingmaker you were dealing with.”

“That right?”

Another shot rang out and Bishop had no time to prepare himself as it hit him, forcing him back a step as it slammed into his shoulder.

Lucky had never lifted a finger—someone else was here.

Gritting his teeth, he covered the now bleeding wound with one hand. “Go!” he shouted, though he kept his eyes on Lucky, “before I change my mind,” he finished, not wanting to give himself away.”

“Stop trying to be the hero and give us the girl. I might let you walk away.”

Bishop grunted out a laugh. “Yeah? So you can shoot me in the back, right?”

Lucky was about to grin, but something behind him caught the man’s attention and the expression quickly faded.

Poppy was running.

Done with the games, he lifted his good arm, firing off round after round, forcing Lucky to curse and duck back for cover.

Bishop walked forward, knowing he’d very soon run out of bullets and there’d be nothing more he could do.

Hawley was down, the twins were missing, and he’d already been winged.

There was no walking away from this.

But as he thought back over the life he'd lived, he made his peace with that decision.

If the last thing he did breathing was save that girl's life, it had all been worth it.

And when he heard the click, his gun spent, he kept pulling the trigger.

Lucky tsked as he stepped out from behind his own car, raising his rifle. "Looks like you're out of luck."

And to think, after all he'd been through, he was going to die at the hands of this corny mother—

A bullet ricocheted off the barrel of his rifle, making him drop it.

Lucky cursed, his gaze jerking over in the direction the bullet had come from, and whoever he saw there made his gaze narrow as he cursed anew.

Bishop saw the moment Lucky decided this job, or whatever he'd been sent here to do, wasn't worth his life.

And instead of staying and fighting as any other mercenary would have, he tucked tail and jumped into his jeep, shattered windshield and all, and sped away.

His relief only lasted a split second before Bishop was turning and running, his adrenaline keeping the pain at bay as he scanned the tarmac, looking for any hint of—

Poppy.

Instead of running, like he'd ordered, he could see her peeking out from around the corner of the building, her eyes wide with fear.

But she was okay.

And even as he was pissed she hadn't followed his instructions, she was *alive*, and at the moment, that was all he cared about.

Yet, there was still the question of who'd managed to scare Lucky off ...

To his surprise, however, it hadn't been one of the twins.

Instead, a woman, who looked like she was on the younger side, approached wearing all black.

He didn't recognize her.

"Don't worry," she said as she approached, "I'm on your side."

"Yeah?" he asked, accepting it for what it was. "Well thanks."

Screeching tires had him looking over in time to see Karina's sister's car jerking to an abrupt stop, her eyes wide and murderous as she flung the door open and climbed out.

Her bodyguard was right behind her, not looking pleased that she'd run off, but when he surveyed the scene—and seemed satisfied that it had been taken care of, he relaxed a bit.

"There was a fucking tree in the road," he explained. "We had to make a detour."

Lucky's doing, he imagined.

Because had they been here, they would have been in the air already.

Iz was running for Poppy, moving surprisingly fast considering the heels she wore, and as Poppy came out from around the building, her relief was just as palpable.

The girl threw the strap of her rifle over her shoulder. "He said you might need someone to watch your back."

Bishop collapsed onto the ground, feeling as if his body was seconds from giving out on him. "Yeah? Who's *he*?"

"Red."

Unbidden, a relieved smile crossed his face. "Right." Surly as he might have been, Red had always been dependable. "Who are you anyway?"

She smiled. “Call me Sleven.”

“What’s—“

“Grimm!”

He jerked around at the sound of his name, finding one of the twins pale and shaky. His heart sank in his chest.

Some part of him knew what he’d find as he started toward him.

“One of my guys is out in that SUV over there,” he said to Sleven, not having to explain any further for her to know what he was asking.

He limped over to Cameron, the oldest of the twins—the one who usually had a smile and never took anything too seriously. Now, he looked as if a ghost had appeared right in front of him.

Bishop had lost men before, more times than he would care to admit, but when he came around and saw Graham on the ground, his shirt bloodied, it didn’t make it any easier.

“You can’t die on me today, shithead,” Bishop ordered as he dropped down beside him, trying to assess his injuries.

Graham chuckled, his teeth stained red. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

But he was bleeding out, and seeing him now, Bishop realized where those first gunshots had gone, and why Cameron had been missing.

And with a belly injury, it wouldn’t matter how much they packed the wound, he was too far away from any hospital to get treated in time.

“You have a smoke?”

That old feeling of sadness rushed to the forefront, but he choked it down as he pulled the pack of cigarettes from his back pocket and a lighter.

He placed one between Graham’s lips, lighting it for him.

“Thanks for getting us out of there,” Graham said, his voice sounding softer now, resolute as he blew out a stream of smoke. “I was afraid he’d die in there.”

Cameron was several feet away, pacing in a circle—more scared about losing his brother than he ever had been when they’d been stuck in a place made of nightmares.

He’d faced every opponent with staggering confidence—daring any one of them to take him or his brother on.

“Take care of him for me, will ya?” he asked, voice barely above a whisper.

Bishop looked up at the sky, his heart heavy as he nodded. “I will.”

But he wasn’t sure if Graham had heard him because when he looked back, the cigarette had fallen from his fingers, the end burning bright for only a few more seconds before the blood seeping from his wounds extinguished the flame.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“NIX’LL KNOW SOMETHING’S WRONG,” Fang said, forgetting his own protocol of not talking when he wore the mask.

But Karina didn’t respond.

Not because she didn’t agree—she *did*.

Nix was one of the smartest men she knew with keen observation, but he wasn’t without weakness.

He wasn’t as infallible as he’d once been.

Before Luna.

Before this precious baby boy who’d been born in the middle of a war between families.

And despite what others might think, he also loved his brother dearly.

It was why he’d rushed away from here to aid Uilleam though he couldn’t have known it wasn’t his brother who’d called.

And considering the threat they were currently under, she couldn’t consider how, exactly, Katherine had been able to pull that off.

“Until then,” she said instead, “we’re on our own.”

And as much as she wanted to believe in the ability of the men who’d trained under Nix directly, there was no ignoring they were at a considerable disadvantage with Luna unconscious and the baby.

Thanatos strapped the sleeping newborn into his carseat, buckling the too large straps across his chest and tightening them at Karina's instruction.

In the last five minutes, Luna had lost consciousness, but her face was still pensive. And as gently as one would a feather, Invictus lifted her from the bed, carefully placing her into a wheelchair he'd procured from another room.

They were as ready as they could be.

"You came on your bikes, didn't you?" she asked, even as she pulled her keys from her pocket. "Take my car."

Karina looked at Fang, blowing out a breath to expel some of her anxiety. "We need to buy them some time."

She knew they usually didn't split up—that they worked better as a group—but if there was any hope of getting out of this situation in one piece, her plan had to work.

It *had* to.

"Invictus and Thanatos—take the service elevator down to the parking garage. They'll be looking for your motorcycles rather than my car. We'll hold them off up here."

They both turned to Fang, waiting for his confirmation before they agreed.

"As far as anyone knows, I'm not supposed to be here," Karina said. "When they come, and I'm sure it won't be long, they're only looking for a woman in this room. Once they're in the elevator, Tăcut, you hit the fire alarm. They'll think it was someone else and come running here."

They wouldn't think it was by design, and she was counting on that fact.

"On my count."

Three ...

Tăcut moved out of sight, so still against the wall, she wouldn't have thought he was there at all if she couldn't see him.

Two ...

Fang slipped into the bathroom, keeping the light off.

One ...

Tăcut pulled the alarm.

A shrill bell sounded, echoing all throughout the center.

So long as they bought them time, they'd be able to get away unnoticed.

"I have a safe house not far from here that I never officially used, so Mother doesn't know about it. I'll text you the address and meet you there after. Let's move."

They sprung into action, doing as she'd commanded, leaving her alone with Fang and Tăcut who stood guard at the door.

"We've only got one shot at this," she said to Fang.

He nodded. "It's the best we got."

Nodding, Karina moved around him, climbing onto the hospital bed, covering herself in the sheets and thin blanket.

Now, the only thing they could do now was wait.

One minute.

Two ...

Three ...

"This is the room!"

She readied herself, her finger moving from the slide to the trigger. As soon as the mercenary turned the corner, she aimed and fired.

He never saw it coming.

But he also wasn't alone.

Another came right after, launching himself at her, seeming confused once he got a good look at her. "*You.*"

He snatched her off the bed, flinging her across the room where she landed on her side.

"Where the hell is that baby?"

“You’ll never get your hands on Calavera *or* the baby.”

That enraged him as he let out a cry, running toward her, but he was so focused on her, he didn’t see Tăcut.

The man wasn’t just big—he was *strong*—and with his element of surprise, he snapped the man’s neck.

“Let’s go!”

She made it out of the room, only to stop short when she realized there was another.

He was a bit different than the others. He didn’t launch himself with brute force. Instead, as he stared at her, he canted his head to one side.

“What do you give a shit about her, huh?” the man asked. “You think she’d do the same for you after everything you’ve done?”

Confusion bloomed inside of her until she realized this wasn’t a question *he* was asking.

She couldn’t know for sure with the distance between them, but if she had to wager a guess, there was probably an ear piece in his ear.

Mother was listening.

“And what of *your* doing?” she asked, no longer addressing him. “You *stole* my daughter from me and now you think to do the same to someone who has nothing to do with this?”

He paused. “Some lessons hurt. I warned you what would come if you didn’t obey—”

“I’m not your *possession*. I’m not some *pet* that you can command and punish when it doesn’t do something you like!”

Hysteria was bubbling inside of her, threatening to be her own undoing.

How could any mother do this to their own child?

It crushed the last bit of hope she’d felt that Katherine could be reasoned with. She was done.

“You know how you can end this.”

Karina gave up, because they both knew the truth.

Uilleam would never give her up.

Not ever.

He would die trying to keep her.

“If you—”

He didn't get to finish whatever Katherine said to him.

Fang had shot him. “He talks too fucking much. Looks like you're all out of mercenaries,” Fang said, loud enough to be heard over the bluetooth the man was wearing. “Better luck next time.”

But it wasn't over yet.

Because as Karina turned, she realized they weren't alone.

“Sebastian ...”

The overhead lights flickered around him, making him appear more menacing, especially when he looked at her as if he didn't recognize her.

“They told me you had been taken,” she whispered, losing her nerve as her aim faltered.

Except, he didn't take advantage of her distraction.

“I have to take her,” he said instead, his expression unreadable.

He wasn't sorry, she knew.

It was what it was.

He was only doing what he'd been trained to do—complete the job, no matter the costs.

“She's not here,” Karina said. “It's the truth.”

By now, they had to have made it to the garage, and would hopefully be miles away by now.

He remained standing there, immobile.

She lifted the gun, her aim shaky even as she tried to resolve herself for what she would have to do. “Please don’t make me do this.”

He started forward, but didn’t make it a foot before Fang appeared, tackling him with enough force, the pair of them fell over the bed, and crashed to the floor.

Fang recovered first, launching his fist into the other man’s face, keeping him off balance, but Sebastian hadn’t made a name for himself by going down easily.

He fought back, his fist slamming into the side of Fang’s face, knocking his mask askew.

“I don’t want to fight you!” Fang said as he righted himself, ducking another hit. “We can *help* you!”

But Sebastian didn’t back down.

He couldn’t.

Whatever his orders, he had to follow them through.

And if anyone stood in his way? He had to eliminate any threat to the mission.

Very quickly, Sebastian started getting the upper hand, forcing Fang into a corner, but it was clear from the way he ducked and moved that that was exactly what he’d wanted.

“*Now, Tac!*”

Tăcut appeared, holding what looked like a shotgun, but unlike Karina, he didn’t hesitate in pulling the trigger, the blast so loud, it had her ears ringing.

Bean bag rounds.

They might not have been bullets, but they were enough to bring Sebastian to his knees.

First shot to his chest.

Another to his thigh, dropping him.

Then, Fang cocked his arm back and put as much weight behind his next hit as he possibly could and slammed his fist into the corner of his jaw.

His eyes rolling to the back of his head, Sebastian fell.

Only the sound of the alarm and Fang's heavy breathing could be heard.

But it was over.

It was finally *over*.

THE BRUISING WOULD GET WORSE in the coming days, but it was better to be bruised and sore than dead.

She wasn't sure how long they'd been at the safe house before Uilleam and Kit burst in. Fang immediately moved to his feet, gesturing for Kit to follow him.

Karina went to Uilleam, falling into his arms, losing herself, if only for a moment, in this warm embrace.

It didn't matter that they had been fighting before—that he'd been angrier than she'd ever seen him.

None of it mattered.

“Where—“

“Orion,” he explained, making her frown up at him, adding, “I thought he might be a target to be used against you, so I went to warn him. Someone—a mercenary, I assume—was waiting.”

He explained everything, starting from the moment they arrived, until the shooting suddenly stopped and they'd been able to make their leave.

Fortunately, it didn't seem as if Orion had argued any further after that.

“Grimm and the others were ambushed as well.”

Her heart sank in her chest.

“One of the twins was killed,” he said regrettably. “Iz managed to finally get there and Poppy is in the air now—Katherine won't be able to get to her.”

Poppy was safe, so was Luna and the baby—the day hadn't been a complete failure, even as her heart hurt at having lost someone else.

Kit emerged from the back room, the Wild Bunch in tow. Luna was still unconscious, slumped in Tăcut's arms, but she was *safe*.

Kit looked like a man possessed as his gaze focused on Karina, bloodshot eyes so intensely focused on her own, a tendril of fear shot down her spine.

“I'm sor—“

Before she could finish, he was suddenly *there* in front of her, pulling her from Uilleam and hugging her so tight, it hurt.

But she didn't complain.

Not when the fear leeches out of her, or when she felt the shudder that raced through him.

In all their years of knowing each other, she didn't think they had ever even touched, let alone hugged.

She'd never even thought he was particularly fond of her.

But terror could do that to a person—the threat of *loss*.

She understood all too well what that could do to a person, and she was only happy she'd been able to do *something* to stop him from feeling it too.

After a moment's hesitation, she hugged him back.

For the briefest of seconds, he kissed the top of her head and whispered, “Thank you. I am in your debt.”

Then, he was gone with a finality that said she wouldn't be seeing him again any time soon.

He had to protect his own family.

“We've got Sebastian,” Fang said, as he came up to her next. “We'll take care of him.”

She nodded, even as she felt trepidation watching them leave. Because while she was glad to have Sebastian back, Kava was still missing.

And once it was just her and Uilleam, she looked at him.
“What happens now?”

Grimm was too injured to fight, Kit couldn't risk anything more, and with Katherine picked them off one by one, it was only a matter of time before she struck again.

Uilleam collapsed onto the couch, his face in his hands. “I don't know,” he said, sounding defeated.

They'd reached the end of the line.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE WEIGHT of his decisions had settled so heavily onto his shoulders, Uilleam thought he might actually be crushed beneath it this time.

For once, the answers weren't coming so easily, and every time he thought he had it all figured out, Katherine Ashworth one upped him again.

And now, he had no choice but to acknowledge that he'd never faced a challenge quite like her.

With the current state of things, he couldn't see a way out of this.

And that scared him most.

Flipping the light switch on in his office, he almost had a heart attack when he spotted the silver-haired girl curled up on the windowsill, looking as gloomy as the sky outside.

"Winter?"

"They're fighting," she said after a moment of silence, still not looking at him. "The boys, I mean. Like some sort of internal civil war."

She sighed as she turned, hair spilling over her shoulders as she looked at him.

There was no elaborate makeup—her face scrubbed clean actually, making her appear years younger.

As innocent as he'd always thought her to be.

“And you know what sucks about that?” she asked, though it was clear she wasn’t expecting him to answer. “I can see both sides of it. At one point they all wanted to save him, but now? After all he’s done? Fang and Vic are ready to raise heaven and hell to get him back, but Rāz and Than ...”

She shrugged, unable to voice what she didn’t have to.

“Fang talks about Sebastian—about who he was and what he meant to them? But you know who he is to me? Jackal. The same Jackal that took Grim away for years—the one the team has been hunting for longer than I probably know. The man who nearly *killed* you.”

There was no hiding tonight.

No masks to shield what she was feeling.

It was all so starkly evident on her face that Uilleam wasn’t immune.

“I—“

“I’m not done,” she cut him off, her gaze narrowing as she stood, crossing the floor toward him. “You had one damn job and somehow, you’re failing at that. Somehow you can predict the moves of everyone around you, yet you can’t see the answer that’s right in front of you.”

“It’s more complicated than you understand. I—“

“You’re not listening.”

“You’re speaking in riddles!” he said, his frustration mounting.

“Oh, don’t like that? Because that’s all you do. *‘Ach, I’m the Kingmaker. I can do whatever I want to whomever I want and there’s nothing you can do to stop me. Meh meh meh!’*” she shot back, making a mockery of his accent.

Winter, who always smiled and was always happy—eager for everyone to get along because that was just who she was—it was as if that side of her was gone.

And a part of him regretted that he’d brought her to this point.

“What—“

“Who else has to get hurt for this to stop, huh?” she asked, the fight seeming to drain out of her.

It wasn’t a question asked out of anger—not this time.

She genuinely wanted an answer.

“No one,” he said, “if you would just help me with this.”

“That’s what you’re not getting. I *have* been helping you. You think those crack shot hackers actually got you everything they did? I all but fed it to them. It’s not me,” she said, swiping a lone tear away. “I’m not the one that can help you fix this.”

He wanted to argue—to explain the complicated measures he believed would help him come out victorious at the end of this, but as he watched Winter turn her back to him, he knew there was no use.

He might not have known any bounds, but stooping so low as to threaten her was beyond even him.

So as he watched her go, dread coiling in his chest, so did the hope of having her skills in taking on Katherine.

SIXTEEN HOURS, three Tylenol, and far too little sleep later, Uilleam wasn’t any closer to solving his Katherine Ashworth problem than he had been before.

“I think you’re looking for an answer that’s already right in front of you,” Karina told him from where she sat across the table.

His lack of sleep made him more blunt than he intended to be. “Please. Enlighten me.”

“If I could just—“

“I will *not* let you go to that woman, Karina. D’you understand? It’s a nonnegotiable.”

She didn't blink in the face of his anger—she never had. “At least it would buy us time.”

“Time for what, exactly? We're not even being honest with ourselves about how this ends.”

“I'm saying—“

A sudden crash at the door had her jumping out of her seat, her gaze moving to the closed door of his office where they both could hear his mercenaries on the other side yelling at someone.

Uilleam grabbed her wrist, pulling her behind him.

Whatever the threat—*whoever* was standing on the other side—they would have to go through him first.

But as they watched the hinges give way, the door all but splintering as pieces flew and the rest slammed into the wall with enough force that it left a hole, he realized very quickly, someone had *kicked* it in.

Tăcut.

Uilleam frowned at the sight of him as he marched in with murder lighting up his eyes as the Wild Bunch trailed him, their expressions mirroring his.

All aimed at Uilleam.

“What's—“

The words were quite literally cut off as Tăcut grabbed him by the throat and yanked him forward, only to slam him back against the wall with enough force that Uilleam saw stars.

He could handle his own, even without his mercenaries, but Tăcut was a big bastard with an even bigger temper.

“What the hell is he doing?” Karina asked, Uilleam unable to get a word out to tell her to stay where she was as she started toward them.

But Fang intercepted her. “I wouldn't get in the middle of that.” That same feral gleam was in his eyes that Tăcut had.

Except, he was enjoying this more.

Only once Tăcut realized he wouldn't be able to speak with the way he was choking him did he finally release his grip as Uilleam dragged in great lungfuls of air, black spots winking in his vision.

“Let's use our words, yes?” Uilleam struggled to say, his voice hoarse.

Karina whirled around to face Fang. “Would *one of you* care to share *why* he's turned into a complete—“

“Winter was taken.”

“*What?*” It was as if the floor gave way, and Uilleam was about to fall. “That's not possible.”

Tăcut, wordlessly, pulled his mobile from his pocket, cycling through screens until finally, he shoved the thing into Uilleam's hands.

He watched the surveillance footage that showed the outside of his building as Winter walked down the street, the hood of her jacket doing very little to shield the silver of her hair, but the white Doc Martens on her feet always gave her away.

It was as clear as day.

Winter was almost to the corner when two SUVs shot forward from opposite directions and men in masks hopped out and grabbed her before she could even think to run.

The last he saw was her kicking and flailing before the doors shut.

One of the kidnappers—Lucky, he presumed—looked up at the camera before climbing back into the car and gave a mocking salute before they sped off.

“We know Winter came to see you last night,” Fang said, turning his attention to Uilleam. “Now *I* want to know why the *fuck* you let her leave alone.”

“I ...”

He didn't have an answer.

At least not one they would accept, because even as he thought the answer to himself, it didn't sound like a good enough reason. "I'd assumed you were here with her."

This, he said to Tăcut.

Because none of them, especially him, would ever allow her out of their sight.

But that reminder only seemed to enrage the man further and before Uilleam could think to duck, he slammed a meaty fist right into his jaw.

"Hurting him isn't going to help get her back!" Karina shouted.

"Maybe not," Fang said with a shrug. "But it sure as shit makes me feel better."

Out the corner of his eye, he saw the mercenaries enter the room—even saw when they prepared to take them all on because it was their job to—but Uilleam held up his hand, stopping them as he moved to stand again.

He couldn't fault him for his anger.

Because he should have known better.

He should have made sure.

He knew the threat against him.

He knew Katherine Ashworth was out there, plotting and scheming for the chance to make him suffer.

He *knew*, and hadn't done a thing to protect her.

This *was* his fault.

"I'm going to get her back," he promised, meaning every word.

Fang shook his head as he walked over, speaking for all of them. "Thing is, we're all gonna have a bigger fucking problem on our hands in I'll say, what? Eighteen hours?" He looked down at his watch to check the time. "'Cause if you think what Tăcut did to you was bad, it's gonna pale in

comparison to what Syn is going to do to you for getting Winter taken.”

Fuck.

Karina

“WHERE IS HE?”

Though she knew Uilleam wanted to be left alone—he’d locked himself away for the last hour inside the guest suite since they’d left his warehouse shortly after the Wild Bunch had gone—she also knew he didn’t *need* to be alone with his thoughts right now.

He would blame himself for what happened to Winter even though it wasn’t his fault.

He couldn’t have known she would be taken, and she knew without a shadow of a doubt had he even *suspected* her mother or the men who worked for her had gotten close, he would have never risked Winter’s safety.

And not because he feared revenge from Syn or Tăcut.

But because he cared for her.

The mercenary leaning a shoulder against the wall looked at her. “He’s sitting.”

“What?”

Her brow knit together as she followed his gesture, looking past him to the room across the hall where she could see Uilleam sitting with his back to the door.

As far as she could see, he didn’t appear to be moving at all.

The soft glow of the lamp illuminated the table in front of him and as she entered the room, she saw what he was doing.

Chess.

She didn't want to interrupt his process. She remembered finding him like this on more than one occasion, poring over a game of chess that only he could understand.

It had never made sense to her how he could play against himself, but Uilleam had such a unique way of looking at things and trying to figure out the mechanics of playing against one's own mind? She'd long since stopped trying to make sense of it.

But as she walked in, the board wasn't set up in front of him as it usually was. The pieces weren't lined up neatly—always an inch apart along the edges as he preferred it.

Instead, the board and all its pieces were scattered along the floor, as if in a fit of rage, he'd wept it all away, not caring where it landed.

“Uilleam—“

“Her father was an alcoholic. Her mother—“ He shrugged, as if the answer didn't matter. “When things got ... difficult for him, he passed her off to his brother. Decent enough man with a bit of a gambling problem—we all have our vices. Did the best he could, I imagine, taking care of a child he didn't ask for, nor was obligated to. But ... well, you've met Winter. You know what she's like.”

Vivacious and caring.

Had her own moral code that made sense only to her.

And for whatever reason, had a soft spot for those most usually didn't.

Like Tăcut.

And Syn.

“I only wanted Syn,” Uilleam said, staring down at the floor, seeming lost in a memory. “I'd heard, of course, what he was capable of with his blind rage and penchant for violence, and with a little honing, I'd been sure I could mold him into the perfect weapon. And I did.”

Karina sank into the chair across from him, not sure how to respond—if there was even a response to give.

“But he agreed to be my weapon under the condition that I ensure her safety.”

He looked up at her then and the absolute anguish in his eyes made her heart break.

“She saw the good in all of us—even me. Even you. She’d been the one to tell me you wore white because you mourned.” He scrubbed a hand down his face, the fatigue all the more clear. “Put her in front of a screen and she’d be formidable, but outside of that ... she’s just Winter. And if something happens to her, I’ll never be able to forgive myself for letting it happen.”

Karina leaned forward, resting her hands on top of his, breathing in as he turned his hands over and clasped hers.

“There’s another way,” she said, mustering courage she didn’t fully feel. “There’s always another way, but staying in this room won’t bring her back any faster.”

Because there *had* to be.

There had to be a way this all ended without her mother winning.

She couldn’t afford to think otherwise.

“Uill—“

“Don’t,” he whispered, almost harshly.

She blinked in surprise, mustering the strength not to cry.

Crying wouldn’t help them now.

“I have to—“

“I know,” he cut her off again, in a way that made her think he *did* know what she was about to say.

And why did that make it so much harder?

Because he didn’t want to hear her say the truth they both knew.

If they wanted to see Winter alive again, she would have to go back.

It was the only way.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, not even sure anymore what she was actually apologizing for.

Because she loved him.

Because her mother had made both their lives a living hell.

And now ... she wasn’t sure if there would be anything left.

“Sometimes,” she said, dread in her heart, “we can’t always win. We have to lose and—“

“*Wait.*” He finally turned bloodshot eyes to her. “What did you say?”

“I don’t—“

“No, just repeat what you said. We can’t always win.”

“Someone has to lose,” she said, not sure why he’d want to hear that again.

But he seemed frozen now.

Except, even as he was staring at her, he didn’t seem to actually see *her*. His thoughts seemed elsewhere.

As if the wheels of his mind were turning.

Then, with one hand, he reached down and picked up the chess piece closest to him.

The Knight piece.

He stared at it so long, she started to ask him what was wrong when he suddenly stood. “Have the mercenaries see you back.”

He didn’t give her a chance to respond before he was disappearing out the door, making her wonder what she’d said wrong.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HE FINALLY UNDERSTOOD what he needed to do.

And while he wasn't sure if it were possible for one's own *bones* to hurt from fatigue, Uilleam was sure he would be close to collapsing.

But not yet.

His work wasn't finished yet.

"Staying in this room won't bring her back any faster," Karina had told him sympathetically, her hands on his shoulders the only thing he remembered from the hours previous.

And she was right, ashamed as he was to admit it.

There was nothing more he could do until they heard from Katherine—if they heard from her.

Rubbing his tired eyes, he walked into his office, praying for a fucking miracle he knew would never come, only to come up short when he noticed a man sitting in his chair.

Fear wrapped around his heart.

"Relax," he said, sounding every bit as annoyed as he used to. "If I wanted to kill you, we both know you'd be dead already."

Uilleam couldn't argue that. "I thought it's be a cold day in hell before you'd step foot in my office again."

Red stood, walking out from behind his desk. "From where I'm standing, it's looking like hell has frozen over. And even

though it's *you*, I'll give you more credit, because the Kingmaker *I* knew wouldn't have let Winter be taken."

"She wasn't supposed to be here," he responded, letting the wryness drop from his tone.

On this, they would always agree.

He might have done many deplorable things over the length of his life, but he would never gamble on Winter's life. Not ever.

"If they wanted you, why would they take her?" Red asked, folding his arms across his chest.

He might not have been wearing his gear, but Uilleam knew all too well what he was capable of—he'd been trained in the Den after all.

He was the weapon, not what he carried.

His question, however, had been one Uilleam had asked himself from the moment he'd known she'd been taken, but the only reason he'd been able to come up with was exactly what he shared with Red now.

"Winter's been helping behind the scenes," he said, though that news had come as a surprise to him. "I can only assume Katherine Ashworth found out and took her for leverage."

"To what end?"

"She wants Karina," he said, keeping his voice level, "and our daughter, Poppy."

Surprise had the other man's brows shooting up, confusion following. Uilleam would have left him to his speculation, but for once he found himself being honest.

Because he was a different man now? He still wasn't sure about that, but if there was anyone he would share this secret with, it would be Red.

"So that job with Grimm," Red said, his voice even. "The woman he killed ..."

"*Thought* he killed—Karina lived, and so did the baby she was pregnant with at the time. Her mother had them remove

the baby prematurely, whether because it was actually needed or not, I'm not sure. But, the only thing we do know is that she took Poppy, raised her where we couldn't find her, and ... well, you know the rest."

Not that it would have been hard.

It was easiest to hide something, or someone, no one was looking for.

He'd never known of Poppy's existence and Karina had trusted her mother.

They'd never stood a chance.

"Sounds like a real piece of work, that woman. Do we know where she'd holding Winter?"

"Not as of yet. Those details are to come."

"Mm. Yeah, well we'll try to find her before then. Last thing anyone needs is Syn running rampant through the city."

If allowed, the streets would practically *bleed* red.

"I need your—"

"I know you're not about to say you need my help," Red said before he could finish. "Because you'd be out your fucking mind if you thought I'd do that."

Gritting his teeth, he found it wasn't as hard to say what he was about to. "I *need* your help."

"Yeah? And what's in it for me? More threats? More secret mercenaries hiding somewhere that you'll activate to try to kill me if I refuse?"

He thought of the last time they'd seen each other and the warning he'd given.

While he *did* have a clause in case the mercenaries of old had tried to take his life, he'd never actually intended to use the man against them.

He'd grown, despite everything, rather fond of them.

"No, no threats. I'm asking," he said, holding his head up as he met the man's gaze. "Please. I ... I can't lose them

again.”

For a long while, Red just stared at him, unblinking.

Then, he nodded, a ghost of a smile on his face. “Let’s take a drive.”

As he approached, Red clapped a hand on his shoulder, ushering him out the door.

This wasn’t optional.

UILLEAM REMAINED silent as they rode through the city, unsure where, at first, Red was taking him, but as they wove through the streets, he became distinctly aware of where they were.

And where they were going.

He kept his hand wrapped around the door handle, squeezing it tight to keep his nerves from getting the best of him.

Once they arrived, Red looked over at him, holding out his hand. “Phone.”

For the first time, he found himself on the opposite side of the wall—that *he* was the one in need of aid and had to do what was asked of him if it meant he could get what he wanted.

What his mercenaries did in their spare time was their business—he hadn’t cared so long as they were available—or made themselves available—when he needed them.

But that didn’t mean he didn’t *know* what they did.

Like the fact Celt had an underground fighting ring where men and women alike came to release their frustrations on whoever stood across from them.

Uilleam further didn’t question it as Red led him through the doors and into the lift where he had to insert a key code that made the car lurch before starting its descent.

And when those doors opened, all he saw was pandemonium.

Screams echoed, the smell of blood and sweat permeating the air, but as they exited the lift, Red only needed to whistle to bring the room to a standstill, even the fighters in the middle of the floor.

But they weren't who Uilleam was focused on.

It was the mercenaries.

Celt.

Skorpion.

Syn.

He was who Uilleam kept his focus on. It didn't matter that he was sat in a chair, wrists bound to the chair with rope and more around his torso—he looked like a man possessed.

And when his gaze cut across the room and realized Uilleam was there, his expression turned positively demonic.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been in the city, but considering he hadn't gotten a visit from him just yet, it couldn't have been for very long.

“Is there something I should know?” Uilleam asked.

“Oh that?” Red said, looking over at Syn, “that's for *your* protection.”

Right ...

Celt whistled, the sound of it clearing the room without him having to say a word. And once they were alone, he lost all pretense of familiarity as he stared at Uilleam.

They all did.

All with varying expressions of distaste, but it was Syn who looked at him as if he was already imagining flaying the skin from his body.

“I say we shoot him right in the fucking face and be done with it, mate. And when I find that fucking cunt holding Winter, I'm going to shove my fucking fist right up her—“

“We might need to muzzle him,” Skorpion said, with his arms folded across his chest.

“Any of you lot fucking come near me, yeah? I’ll bite your fucking fingers off!”

“Give me a reason,” Red told Uilleam, the voice of reason. “Why would we ever agree to help you?”

A thousand arguments ran through his mind. He could have voiced any one of them in hopes that they would be good enough to prompt them into agreeing to aid him against Katherine, but as he stood there, looking at them each in turn, he found he couldn’t.

“You shouldn’t,” he said finally, his shoulders sagging.

Red only looked mildly surprised. “First true thing you’ve said all night ... maybe the second.”

He knew he meant their conversation in his office, but he didn’t acknowledge that. “If I were you, I wouldn’t help me either. I used you—used all of you. It’s what I do best.”

It was who he’d been taught to be.

Before Karina, he wasn’t sure where he would be now if he hadn’t met her—if she hadn’t *softened* him over time because had he not, Uilleam was almost certain he would be just like his father had been.

A bloody tyrant, using anyone he came into contact with to further his own gain and not caring a single bit about who he hurt in the process.

He’d still been just as ruthless, admittedly, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t *cared*, per se.

Because he had.

But that care had only extended to Karina for a while.

“I used you all as pawns because it’s what I do best.” He saw the way those words hit them—how their anger was bubbling right to the surface. “I didn’t understand what it meant to truly care for another without harming others in the process. I ... I’m sorry. For everything.”

He knew there was no money he could offer them. They didn't want for anything after working for him for years.

He couldn't bribe them, nor threaten.

And for once in his life, he didn't want to.

Karina had once told him there was always another way.

He only hoped she was right.

"I don't think I've ever heard you apologize for anything," Skorpion said, his voice flat.

"I'm asking—*pleading*. Will you help me?"

None of them said a word, and for a moment, he thought they wouldn't until Red stepped forward.

"What would you give to have what you want?"

His answer was immediate. "Anything."

And in that moment, he understood what it meant to be standing on the other side.

To be offered the same choice he'd offered others.

Red's expression didn't change. "You sure about that?"

Nerves had Uilleam swallowing, but he stood tall, not cowering. "I'd pay any price."

They all stared at him before Red looked at Celt, the Irishman offering the briefest of nods.

Only then did Red reveal he hadn't been unarmed at all, but rather removed a wickedly sharp blade he'd been hiding.

"Do not fear death," he said, his voice echoing around them as trepidation filled every inch of Uilleam's body as Red approached. "*Embrace* it. Pain is inevitable—you'll learn to love it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A SLICE of chocolate cake covered in a dollop of whipped cream with chocolate shavings had sounded like the best thing in the world when she'd made it back to the Obsidian after Uilleam had disappeared.

The first bite had been better than she could have ever anticipated, and the second? She was certain she'd finish the rather generous slice in a matter of minutes.

But as she finished, the spoon in her mouth to get the last few bits of chocolate icing off, her stomach immediately made her regret the choice.

It wasn't so much that Karina wanted to throw up after eating it, she just felt a bit queasy—as if her stomach was tying itself into knots. She sat for a minute, thinking something must have been off with the cake.

That was the first logical conclusion, but as her mouth watered and another wave of nausea hit her, a mental image of the day she'd learned she was pregnant with Poppy popped into her mind.

It wasn't possible ...

She could still remember the look on her doctor's face after examining her—the way she'd tried to hide her sadness soon after as if Karina couldn't see the truth shining in her eyes.

After losing an ovary and tube, the odds of her being able to get pregnant again hadn't looked great and she'd made her peace with that.

It had to be the cake then. Yet ...

Before she could talk herself out of it, she grabbed the room's phone and called down to the lobby, a bit surprised when Bunny answered on the first ring.

"How can I be of service?" the woman asked, sounding as if she'd never had a bad day in her life.

"I'm not sure if you do, but would you all happen to have pregnancy tests?" she asked, voice soft now as she glanced over at the mercenary who'd come around the corner from the bathroom.

"*Ooh*, is there a little bean in the oven?" Bunny whispered back, sounding excited. "Coming right up!"

The phone disconnected, leaving Karina staring down at it as she tried to make sense of the way she was feeling.

She didn't want to get excited—refused to even consider the possibility that she was right. But as she waited, she did a quick mental calculation of when she'd last had her period and how many weeks it had been since then ...

And when she looked at the calendar on her old phone and counted them down, it felt as if her heart pitched itself into her stomach.

According to it, she was almost a week late.

With everything else going on, she hadn't even thought about the fact she hadn't gotten it yet—she'd chalked it up to stress—but now, there was a possibility she could be pregnant and the thought terrified her.

Several minutes later, a knock sounded and she beat the mercenary to the door, saying, "It's for me," as he looked at her in confusion.

But she didn't give him any more thought as she opened the door, quickly thanked the man standing on the other side for the box he handed over, and took off to her room without a backwards glance.

Inside the bathroom, she closed and locked the door, pressing her back against it as she stared down at the box of

two tests in her hands.

Even if it did come back negative, that was okay.

That was what she expected, and she'd long since made her peace with it. This would just be confirmation of what she already knew.

It was *fine*, no matter what.

Blowing out a breath, she peeled the plastic off, pulled open the cardboard box, and removed one of the pink wrapped tests within.

She didn't let herself think about what she was doing as she hummed a song to herself even as she went over to the toilet and peed on the stick.

It was fine, no matter what.

Capping the end, she placed the test face down on the counter, going over to wash her hands, fiddle with her hair, and simply stare at her reflection to buy herself time.

She looked tired, she thought, with the bags beneath her eyes and the sallow pallor to her skin. It felt like a lifetime ago that she'd felt happiness unlike anything she'd felt before.

When they'd been off together, smiling and happy as a family instead of all but fighting for their lives now.

Two people close to them had already lost their lives.

How many more would come after?

Winter ...

Of all the times to get pregnant, this felt like the most inopportune.

And yet ...

Dammit. She couldn't wait another minute before she snatched the test off the counter and turned it over, expecting to find one line staring back at her.

Instead, her knees nearly buckled when she saw two.

Pregnant.

She was pregnant.

Something that shouldn't have been possible. She'd been *told* it wasn't, yet now she stared at the very real evidence that it was.

The lines started to blur as tears flooded her eyes, her hands shaking.

She was *pregnant*.

“What the *fuck!*”

Karina jerked her head up at the sound of the mercenary's exclamation, tucking the test away as she went to go see what the commotion was about and almost wished she hadn't.

As she rounded the corner, she found Skorpion walking into the suite, his expression unreadable, but it was the fact he was carrying a very limp Uilleam over his shoulder that made it feel as if her heart stopped.

“What happened!” she demanded, rushing over, but as she got a better look at him, happy tears turned to sad ones at the state of him. “What's *happened?*”

When he'd left her earlier, she hadn't known where he was going or why, only knew that the determination on his face had meant *something*.

Skorpion ignored her question. “Where's the bed?”

She pointed, unable to speak because now she could see the trail of blood that had followed them across the floor.

But as he passed her to follow where she pointed, she couldn't make sense of where the blood was coming from.

Or even why Skorpion was there at all.

As far as she knew, he was still in Hawaii, but it would make sense if Syn was coming for Winter that he would as well. Perhaps the other mercenaries as well.

Trailing him into the bedroom, she watched as he shifted Uilleam's weight with far too much ease, doing his best to lay him flat on his stomach, but in the process, he brushed the coat

that had been draped over Uilleam and he all but flinched, a cry of pain that broke her heart spilling from him.

And when that coat fell off, and she got a clear look at him finally, bile rose so quickly in her throat, she had to press the back of her hand against her mouth to stop it from coming up.

The blood was coming from him.

Long, jagged, *ugly* slices had been made—as if someone had taken a knife and cut the flesh of his back open with meticulous precision. But it didn't end there.

It also looked as if some of them had been cauterized with fire.

And even his face was badly bruised.

He looked as if someone—or multiple—had tortured the hell out of him.

“Was this *you*?” she demanded, shoving Skorpion though it did very little to actually move him.

The mercenary in question looked over at Uilleam's prone form, a flash of sympathy in his eyes, before he focused on Karina and handed her the bag he was carrying.

“Two pills every five hours,” he instructed. “Keep the wounds clean and bandage him up once you do.”

She'd never felt more helpless than in that moment as he turned to leave—walking out as if the state of him meant nothing at all.

Leaving the bag at the end of the bed, she went around the side until she could look at his face, confirm he was breathing.

Her hand was shaking as she gently touched his cheek.

He roused, just for a moment, barely able to open his swollen eyes.

“Why?” she asked.

She could only assume he'd gone to his former mercenaries for help and this was what they'd done to him.

And a part of her felt as if this was her fault.

She'd exposed him to them—revealed the things he'd done and hidden. This *was* her fault.

“Someone ...” he whispered, coughing so violently, she had to reach out and settle him as her tears fell and hit his shoulders.

“I don't understand,” she said, her voice shaking as she cried earnestly now. “Why did this happen?”

“Someone has to lose,” he finally gritted out before going limp again.

And whatever hope that existed inside of her that this would end with them being happy died.

It was over.

THE ONLY THING left now was to make everything right.

Uilleam didn't wake up again, but she followed Skorpion's instructions all the same—cleaning his wounds as best she could with the help of the mercenary, then very carefully wrapped bandages across him until his back was nearly entirely covered.

She checked him for fever, knowing that if he started to run one, there was a chance an infection was present, but as far as she could tell, there wasn't one.

If it wasn't for the steady rise and fall of his chest, she was almost afraid when she went back to check on him, he'd be gone.

Which was why she'd gone out to get paper and a pen and started to write.

Dearest Poppy,

I had hoped I wouldn't have to share such awful truths with you, but should anything happen to me or your father, I want you to know we love you more than anything in this world.

We always have.

I didn't know how to tell you before about what happened and why. You're much too young to understand this now, but hopefully in the future, if we are not here and you come across this letter, it's important to me that you understand everything that brought us to this point.

She wasn't sure how long she sat on the floor writing—spilling everything she could until there was nothing left.

The truth wasn't pretty, it very rarely was, but there was freedom in it.

It was absolute.

And if there came a day in the distant future when it was needed, at least she would have it.

Finished, she tucked it away into an envelope and sealed it, leaving Uilleam's side for the first time to find his mercenary.

“Could you do me a favor, please?”

“Of course,” he said without hesitation.

“Could you take this to Chastain Bank and give it to the director *personally*. Tell him, it's for Karina Ashworth. He'll know what to do with it.”

Though he looked a bit skeptical, he eventually nodded and turned to leave, but as he opened the door, Fang was standing on the other side.

He walked in without an invitation, his mask missing for once.

“If you've come to insult me some more, I really don't—“

“I didn't,” he said, surprising her. “I ... need to talk to you.”

Something about his expression—or because he'd come alone—made her think this wasn't just an ordinary visit.

“Uilleam is recovering and—“

“No, I need to talk to *you*.”

She frowned, folding her arms across her middle as she regarded him. “Okay. What is it?”

For the first time since she’d known him, there was no thinly veiled contempt. No hatred shining in his eyes. If anything, he looked *tortured*.

“Is it Sebastian?” she asked, because that had to be the only reason he was here.

“He was trained at *Gheenă*,” he said out of the blue, tucking his hands into his pockets as he paced the floor, seeming restless.

Not sure where this was going—especially considering the last time the black site had been mentioned, she cautiously said, “Yes, I know.”

“If he’d been alive all this time—and let’s say he was taken when Nix took us from the orphanage—that would mean he was there for what? Years, right?”

Confused, she shook her head. “Yes, I guess that sounds right. What’s your—“

“I found out what they do to them in there,” he said, turning bloodshot eyes to her. “Makes what your man here does to his mercenaries seem like a cakewalk. Half the bastards in there die before the process is over from all the fights.”

He started pacing, his movements as restless as his mind seemed to be. “If he survived all that—it means he became what they wanted him to be. Hell, working under you, there’s not a job he didn’t complete, no?”

No, she thought, he hadn’t.

“Who’d get rid of that?” Fang asked, making her frown.

“I don’t—“

“He got close to killing the Kingmaker, didn’t he? Would have, right?”

Karina never liked to remember that day and how she’d felt when she found out. And even thought she’d known he

wouldn't have done it had he not been ordered to by Katherine ... the reminder still haunted her.

But what stood out to her the most when it came to this, was how she hadn't known he would do it back then.

That his actions hadn't changed in the days leading up.

He'd eaten dinner with them, even smiled occasionally.

And the next day, he'd gone out to maim Uilleam in a way that had almost cost him his life.

"Yes," she answered finally.

"He's the only hitter out there who's gotten remotely close," Fang continued. "Fuck, he handed *us* our asses and didn't break a fucking sweat—he just about threw Than out a fucking window."

The more he spoke, the more tortured he looked, and as the wheels started turning in her mind, she finally grasped what he was hinting at.

"You don't think ..."

"It wasn't a coincidence that he was the one Katherine sent. I thought it was because she wanted him to take the baby, but—"

"Now you think that wasn't his mission."

"He's not back because he wants to be," he said in a rush. "And if I'm right ... if me sparing his life that day was part of the plan, there's something he's not telling us, and I'm afraid Winter has everything to do with it."

"What do you need from me?" she asked.

"He might be our brother, but he doesn't trust us. He does, however, trust you."

And if there was anyone who could get the truth out of him, it would be her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

IN THE LAND OF DREAMS, pain didn't exist.

As he stood at the precipice once more, Uilleam hesitated. He still couldn't see beyond the thick fog around his ankles—could only *just* perceive the edge of the cliff.

For so long, he'd tried not to fall over the edge.

To find a way to the other side and be done with it all.

But he was tired.

So very tired.

And this time, he was done.

Instead, he held his arms out on either side of him and stepped off.

Falling ...

Falling ...

UILLEAM WOKE UP.

His body didn't feel like his own. His head pounded, his mouth drier than it had ever been, and when he attempted to move, the swift pain that followed stopped him in his tracks.

Hissing out a breath, he paused, giving himself a moment to get his bearings before trying again, but as he rolled, he didn't realize just how close to the edge he actually was, and before he could stop it, he fell to the floor.

The pain was immediate, enough to make him cry out as agony, unlike anything he'd ever felt before, robbed him of breath.

“You’re not supposed to be moving!” Karina admonished as she rushed into the room, followed quickly by—of all people—Fang.

They both helped him stand, though he batted them both away when they continued to hold onto him. “I’m fine.”

“Uilleam, you’ve been asleep for almost thirty-six hours.”

Yeah, it felt like it.

Carefully, to make sure he could keep his feet under him, he crossed the floor to the mini fridge, reaching inside for one of the miniature bottles of water and cracked it open, guzzling down half its contents before coming up for air.

“Jesus, what the hell happened to you?” Fang asked, giving him a look that was mildly shocked.

He ignored the question entirely as he walked around them both and entered the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

For a while, he stood there.

Thinking.

Reflecting.

Remembering.

He wasn’t sure how long it had lasted—a part of him was glad for that. Even the pain, as horrendous as it had been, had grown a bit foggy.

But he *did* remember being forced to sit, his arms bound, his shirt all but ripped from his body. And when Red had come forward, he’d known what would be done to him.

As they had suffered, so had he.

A lesson in pain and blood.

Shutting his eyes, he braced himself against the sink’s edge, knowing now, despite everything, his demise was imminent. Because despite how his blood had soaked into the

cement floor and his cries of anguish fell on deaf ears, none of it had mattered.

In the end, before he'd passed out, not a single one of them had agreed to help him.

They got their revenge in the end and now ... now, he was out of options.

He'd reached the end of the line.

But if he was going to die, he would do it on his own terms.

Cleaning himself up as best he could with limited movements, he picked out his suit—a black on black Armani that Karina had always loved on him—then finally exited, finding the pair of them still waiting.

But his gaze went to Karina.

The love of his life.

The only person he'd ever truly wanted.

He walked over to her, reaching out to cup her face—his gaze darting over her features one last time.

Hoping—*praying*—the memory of them would follow him into the afterlife, wherever he ended up.

“I love you,” he said, not caring that they weren't alone. “And if there's anything I regret, it's that I didn't spend nearly enough time showing you how much.”

In a way, he'd become the thing he hated about his father.

Obsessed with power.

Immune to the pain he caused others.

She frowned, seeming surprised to hear him say as much.

“Why—“

“What are you doing here anyway?” Uilleam asked Fang before Karina could ask him that question.

Because if she did, he wouldn't be able to give her the answer she wanted.

“I have a hunch,” he answered, staring at Uilleam in a way that made him think he could see right through him. “If I’m right, I think I know where Winter is being held.”

Relief had his shoulders sagging. “Then go.”

“I need her,” he said with a nod of his head in Karina’s direction.

Even better.

“Go,” he said. “I’ll be fine.”

“But—“

“I’m capable of changing my own bandages, poppet,” he said casually, trying to mask his feelings.

She’d see right through him then.

With one last look at him, she turned for the bathroom. “You’ll be here when we get back?”

“Of course,” he lied.

This one not hurting as much to say.

“If you’re sure ...”

“I am.”

She hesitated only a moment longer before leaving them alone.

Uilleam vaguely remembered the bag Skorpion had carried with him—the rattle of pills that had made him numb all over. He dug through it and found the bottle, shaking two into his hand.

With one last look in Fang’s direction, he turned to go.

“Yo.”

He turned. “Yes?”

“You better be here when we get Winter back,” he said, a warning in his voice.

When, he said. Not if.

Uilleam knew there was *something* to be liked about him, but he nodded all the same.

Another lie.

But this time, the lie was more comfortable than the truth.

PAIN MIGHT HAVE WRACKED his body, and the morphine he'd taken was surely wearing off at this point, but Uilleam still dragged his broken body through the door, arriving at the location Katherine had given him.

A mercenary wearing a black mask that concealed his identity met him at the door, not moving.

“Let’s go on with it, then,” he said.

He’d come here for a reason, and the time for running and plots and schemes was over.

He was ready to face her.

Moving to the side, the mercenary gestured for him to go in.

He was led up a flight of stairs, the mercenary’s gun at his back.

And to think, she’d been here in this old office building the entire time, right under his nose.

Led into a room with tall windows and ceilings, Katherine was waiting for him.

Wearing a white dress, her icy blonde hair immaculately styled, it was as if he was staring at Karina—or the version of her she could have been if she’d allowed herself to be what Katherine had wanted.

“It seems you’re not as foolish as I believed you to be,” she said, turning to face him, a smile blooming when she noticed his face. “Accident?”

“Karma,” he answered.

The room was filled with mercenaries. Some he knew, some he didn't.

But now, they were all standing opposite to him.

He finally saw what others did when they'd come to him.

"I have to ask," he said, unable to help himself. "Why? Why me?"

Katherine folded her hands in front of her, heels clicking as she walked over to him, two mercenaries and the one who'd brought him up to this room moving to stand at her back. "Is this the part where I tell you about how you've wronged someone I loved and there's this deep meaningful reason why I wanted to see you ended?"

She clicked her tongue against her teeth. "You're not that special. You *should* be asking yourself why *not*. Of course, I'll admit that it took longer than I anticipated to watch this empire of yours fall, but I'm a patient woman."

"For *greed* then," he asked, genuinely aghast at what she said. "You're willing to destroy the lives of your own daughter and grandchild because you wanted my empire."

"You're not *special*, Uilleam Runehart—just another name on my list. You're not the first, and certainly won't be the last."

It seemed almost unbelievable that that was the reason.

He'd expected to hear about a time he'd crossed her—made a deal that cost her everything and she wanted him to pay for it.

At least Karina had had a reason to hate him the way she did.

This woman ... she was unbelievable.

"And Karina? Poppy? What did they do to deserve *you*?"

The question made the smile drop from her face. "I forget you don't have manners."

She snapped her fingers, one of the mercenaries at her back coming around and punched him hard enough that his

pain reignited and he stumbled, losing his footing.

But as he moved to stand again, a gun was pointed at him, keeping him exactly where he was.

“I am her *Mother*, not her friend. I don’t care what she believes she wants, or *thinks*, she deserves.”

“It’s only about what *you* want and thinks she deserves.”

Red painted lips parted. “Mother knows best. Now, let’s be done with this, shall we? You did come here for a reason, didn’t you?”

Yes.

He’d come here to die.

“How does it feel?” Katherine asked staring down at him. “To *lose*.”

He was on his knees, staring death in the face—more than ready to accept his fate—but as he swallowed, a wink of light in the distance outside the window caught his attention.

It was so quick, he was almost certain he’d imagined it, but as his brain caught up with the rest of him, he laughed.

The sound made her frown, the gun she held to his forehead lowering slightly. “Have you gone mad?”

“You made one mistake,” he aid, feeling the brush of metal against his face, but he didn’t flinch. Not this time.

“Did I?” Katherine asked, amused by him.

She’d thought she’d won after all.

“Only one?”

“Yes, just the one.”

“Please, *enlighten* me.”

“You shouldn’t have touched Winter.”

Because if she hadn’t, he wouldn’t have found the answer that had been staring him in the face all along.

And now, *she* would pay the price.

“What—“

“The first rule about mercenaries?” he said with a shake of his head, “they’ll do anything for the right price. Including, working for the man they hate. I only needed to give them someone to hate more.”

Across the floor, the glass exploded as the bullet from a high powered sniper rifle burst through and struck the man currently aiming at him.

The man was dead before he hit the ground.

Blood splattered his face and pandemonium erupted.

Katherine shouted instructions, but one of the three masked mercenaries at her back removed two knives, shoving them into the necks of the men on opposite sides of him.

One by one, every single man in the room was dropped, and for those that tried to run, as soon as they hit the door, it blew inward, debris flying everywhere.

Celt and Skorpion entered, dressed in tactical gear, felling anyone who remained standing.

It was a bloodbath.

The coppery scent clung to his nose as he moved to stand, the pain of his injuries fading to the back of his mind.

And then, after no more than seven minutes of chaos, the room fell silent, except for one man who was attempting to crawl away.

And unfortunately for him, the tattoo on his wrist gave him away—he’d been the one to grab Winter.

The masked mercenary Katherine had thought was with her removed his mask, revealing the feral eyes of Syn whose sole focus was the man attempting to crawl away.

From the back of his belt, he pulled a butcher’s hook, swinging it down with enough force to penetrate the man’s leg. His scream was so loud, even Uilleam’s ears rang.

But if he thought his pleas for mercy would be met with any kindness ... he was wrong.

Syn dragged him bleeding from the room, and as Uilleam stared Katherine down, he could see the moment she realized the man was dying a harsh, brutal death.

And now, with his mercenaries standing at his back once more, he faced off with the woman who'd become the bane of his existence.

But she didn't cower.

No, she was too proud for that.

He understood—he'd been the same way.

But she wasn't done yet. "D'you think I'm going to beg you for my life?"

"It wouldn't matter if you did."

Her rage was mounting—he could see it written all over her face, but she also knew there was nothing she could do, and that seemed to frustrate her more. "She could have been so much more than—"

"Did you ever take a second to consider what *she* wanted?" Uilleam asked, genuinely baffled by the woman's audacity.

Because it wasn't about what *she* wanted, or even what *he* did.

It was about Karina.

About what she wanted for herself.

And he would spend every single moment going forward making sure she had it.

"Children don't know any better," she continued, still living in her delusion. "I know what's best for her."

"If you did, you would know that the worst thing you could do to any woman is steal her *fucking* child."

Katherine closed her mouth, refusing to explain herself to him. But he didn't care to hear it anyway.

He was done with this. "I made a promise to Karina, and whether you believe it or not, I've always kept my promises to

her.”

He promised he wouldn't kill her mother.

He promised *he* wouldn't kill his mother.

Katherine seemed to realize that. “Oh, so you'll just have your mercenaries do it, then? Only *you* would find a loophole like that.”

“Actually, no,” another voice said.

Iz sauntered into the room, not remotely bothered by the bodies littering the floor. She simply stepped over them, the red of their blood matching the bottom of her heels.

“*You.*”

“*Me,*” she said in return.

“You would choose *him* over your own mother?”

“No, I choose my *sister,*” she said in return, staring at Katherine.

“I gave you everything! Sacrificed *everything!* And this is how you repay me.”

Celt passed her a gun, a silencer firmly fixed to the end of it.

“I won't beg you either.”

“Understood.”

“Who will look after you girls if I'm no longer here?” she asked, desperation starting to leak through her words. “Poppy adores me!”

“I have a good feeling she'll be quite alright without you,” Iz said, resolute. “We all will.”

Now, it was Katherine being brought to her knees, forced to stare up at her own daughter.

But she didn't beg.

Didn't cry.

It wouldn't have mattered if she did.

“Have you any last words?” Iz asked.

“You’ll regret this one day,” she said, teeth gritted.

Iz looked ... disappointed. “Wrong answer.”

Steeling herself, she aimed at the woman’s forehead and pulled the trigger.

And as her body crumbled to the ground, unmoving, Uilleam exhaled.

It was over.

“I expect you to take *very* good care of my sister and niece, Uilleam Runehart,” Iz said, turning to face him, turning the gun over to him. “Let’s not make an enemy of me too.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

She gave him a meaningful look, one he understood all too well, before turning to leave the way she’d come in, her bodyguard waiting for her.

Syn reentered minutes later, Red not far behind him—though the latter was staring at Syn as if he didn’t recognize him.

Perhaps because every inch of him was coated in blood.

“Where’s that fucking other one?” he asked, swiping his arm across his face, though that only managed to smear it more. “Nothing left of this one.”

No one’s blood thirst could match his.

“Not yet,” Uilleam said as he looked at them each in turn. “The job isn’t done yet.”

There was one last thing he needed to take care of.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Fang

HE DIDN'T HAVE many regrets in his life—Fang liked it that way.

It made him appreciate living more when he thought about it that way. No matter what he had suffered at the orphanage—or the many trials he'd gone through to get where he was now—it had all been worth it in the end because for a while there, he'd been happy.

He had his brothers, he had his wife, and he had more money than he knew what to do with most days.

There was little to want.

That was until he learned Sebastian was alive.

Not once in all the years since they'd been gone had he ever considered he was out there somewhere—especially not trapped in a place like *Gheenă* where nightmares were made real.

He'd been angry with Karina when he'd learned the truth, but most of all, he'd been angry with himself.

Because he had code: *Never leave a man behind.*

The day Nix had pulled them from that place, leaving it burning to ashes in his wake, he'd assumed they'd lost Sebastian forever, but as he tried to case his mind back to that day, the details were so cloudy, he wasn't sure *why* he'd ever thought Sebastian had died in the first place.

That was the question he'd been asking himself for so long now, it kept him awake at night.

And in the end, it hadn't mattered to him that he had become the Jackal—that he'd killed plenty of mercenaries and others in that time.

That he'd hurt *them*.

He'd left him behind once—he had no intentions of doing it again.

Which was what brought them here.

From the moment Sebastian had said his name—a whisper in the wind that'd made him lower his fist—it hadn't been a question of where he would go.

He hadn't cared that it hadn't been that long ago when Sebastian had faced off with them and he'd fought them with everything he was worth.

But it had only taken a flicker of recognition to stay his hand then and now.

But ... as much as he wanted to believe their reunion was real ... he'd been trained by Nix for more than two years.

He could spot a deception when he looked for it.

And from the minute Sebastian arrived at the loft, something was off.

Entering the lift, he waited for Karina to join him before shutting the gate and pressing the button to take them up to the main floor.

Upstairs, Than was in his usual spot on the couch, feet kicked up, a gaming controller in his hands. Vic, probably, was in the gym upstairs, beating the hell out of one of the sandbags until he was too spent to do anything else.

Neither had been particularly moved by the fact that Sebastian was back—probably because of the whole tossing Than out the window thing where he would have plunged to his death.

And Tăcut ... the man wasn't himself.

He might not have been able to speak verbally, but the man had a way of making his presence known, and after so long with him, some days it *didn't* feel like he couldn't speak.

But now, since Winter was gone?

It was as if he'd gone silent.

He'd disappeared for hours searching for her, not leaving a single stone unturned, but when he'd come back ... he hadn't been the same.

Like now.

He sat in a corner of the room, and despite his massive size, he seemed so incredibly small.

And like him, Sebastian was seated, quiet as a mouse. His clothes had been changed from the battle gear he usually wore to borrowed jeans and a T-shirt. But unlike when Fang left, he looked up when he saw Karina walk in.

As did the others.

“What the hell is she doing here?”

—*Winter?*— Tăcut asked, a flash of hope in his eyes.

But when Fang shook his head, it was as if another piece of him died and he sank back into himself.

“If she's not here about Winter,” Than said, “why the hell is she here?”

“Because I wanted to see how Sebastian was doing,” she said before Fang could respond. “Or rather, how he's adjusting.”

“He's *fine*.”

“Than.”

“What?” he shot back. “Am I missing something here?”

Both Fang and Karina ignored him as she crossed the floor over to Sebastian, and as Fang had thought, he didn't look nearly as uncomfortable with her moving into his space as he was when they did.

Instead, he stood when she got close.

She wrapped him in a hug as Fang looked pointedly at Than. He might have acted as if he didn't care about most things, but he *did* notice when something was off.

And he was certain he got the picture when he pulled out his phone, his fingers flying over the screen as he, assumably, sent a text to Invictus.

"How are you?" Karina asked Sebastian as they sat back at the table.

"Fine."

Fang's brows shot up, even as the others all looked at Sebastian. From the moment he'd been back with them, he hadn't uttered a single word.

Not even a syllable.

But he'd thought it was because he was still adjusting to them—which seemed partially true considering the familiarity he and Karina shared.

"I've had people looking everywhere for Kava," she said. "Nothing so far."

He nodded, not offering a response.

"Sebastian."

Only once she said his name did he look at her. "What did Mother do to you?"

Than paused his game, Tăcut seemed to snap out of the trance he was under and looked at them both, just as Invictus came down from the gym.

Sebastian looked down again. "Nothing."

The man didn't have many tells—Fang had been looking for them—but something about the way he said that one word seemed ... off.

"Sebastian, please."

Tăcut stood. —*Does he know something about Winter?*—he asked Fang.

But he couldn't provide him an answer.

Not yet.

“She wouldn’t have let you go,” Karina said softly, ignoring them all as she focused solely on him.

“What?” The question came from Than.

Sebastian remained silent.

“What did she tell you to do?”

If he didn’t answer soon, Tăcut was going to make him.

He launched himself at him, Fang intercepting as he held him back as best he could. “I need you to trust me,” he whispered.

Because he had to trust *her*.

“*Spune-mi ordinele tale—Tell me your orders.*”

The command was sharp, but it had the desired effect.

“Keep them busy,” he said, in reference to them. “Until the deadline.”

“What deadline?” Fang asked.

“Sebastian, *please!*”

“They have Kava,” he said, meeting her gaze. Answering only to her.

“Why does—“ She trailed off, seeming to realize what he was saying before the rest of them. “She offered you a trade, didn’t she? Winter’s life for Kava’s.”

He didn’t have to answer.

His silence was answer enough.

Tăcut renewed his struggles as Than asked, “Who the hell is Kava?”

“You know that isn’t how she works. She’d let them both die. You *know* that,” Karina stressed. “We can get her back—*I will* get her back—but you have to trust me.”

Silence.

“I’ll shoot this motherfucker myself if he doesn’t tell us where Winter is right now.”

More threats were volleyed, but Karina raised her hand, silencing them before she placed both of hers on top of his. “You know where she’s holding Winter, yes? It’s probably the same place she’s keeping Kava—where she kept *you*. You’re not alone. We can save her—save *them*—but you have to tell me where they are.”

From the moment Fang knew he was alive, he’d been doing everything in his power to save Sebastian.

To bring him back and offer the freedom he’d thought he’d been denied.

“That bitch is using you and you’re going to let her—“

“Than—“

“Fuck that!” he shouted, glaring at Fang as if this were his doing. “Are you really going to let Winter *die* for *him*?”

For the first time, since he was a boy, Fang felt helpless.

Paralyzed in the face of a decision he didn’t want to make, but there was only one correct answer.

“He tells us where she is, or we end this right here and now,” Fang warned, his patience gone.

They were out of time.

Because when it came down to it, it wasn’t a question about who he needed to choose.

“Well—“

“I don’t know where they are exactly, but there’s a lake,” Sebastian said, looking at Fang this time. “One of the men holding us had mentioned the water. He smelled like pine. That’s all I know.”

Karina lurched to her feet. “I know where they are!”

No one questioned her—they all just sprung into action.

THEY PUSHED ninety on the interstate, heading out of the city.

Fang didn't allow himself to think about anything other than following Karina as she drove recklessly, weaving through traffic.

He didn't know where they were going, or what they'd be facing.

He didn't care.

Whatever stood between them and Winter wouldn't be standing for much longer.

Tall buildings gave way to trees and long, twisting roads, and after nearly half an hour, he could smell the lake water.

It would make sense that Karina would know where they were being held—it had probably been designed that way—but he didn't feel any relief knowing that.

Up ahead, Karina made a sharp left turn down a dirt road he would never have noticed otherwise.

At the clearing, a man was leaning against a mud spattered car, a cigarette in his hand, but when he spotted them, he lurched upright, shouting a warning.

A warning that was quickly snuffed as Invictus aimed while driving with one hand and shot him in the neck.

“We've got one job here today!” Fang shouted as he hopped off his motorcycle, pulling his weapon. “Find Winter.”

Nothing else mattered.

Both Karina and Jackal met them at the door.

Fang faced Jackal. “You find your girl, that's your business. Stay out of our way.”

He didn't wait to see how he responded before he turned to Karina and pressed a gun into her hand. “Hope you know how to use that.”

At the door, he paused, letting his thoughts clear; his training taking over.

Raising his hand, he counted down from five.

They knew the stakes.

It was time to work.

When he got to one, Tăcut kicked the door in.

The men inside scattered, screams sounding, but they fire indiscriminately, not leaving anyone standing, but their element of surprise only lasted so long before the mercenaries recovered and started fighting back.

One aimed directly for Karina, but Sebastian kicked him with enough force, he slammed back against the island, his spine seeming to crack with the impact before crumbling to the ground, screaming.

But Sebastian didn't linger, cutting through the room with the efficiency he knew the man was capable of.

“Stay with him!” Fang ordered Thanatos and Invictus.

They headed in one direction, him in the other.

Blood rushed in his ears, his heart pumping so fast, it almost felt as if he couldn't catch his breath.

Panic was the last thing he needed to be feeling, but it was there all the same, choking him. A memory flashed in the back of his mind—a faint image that still ached.

He wasn't letting that happen again.

“Where is—“

Karina and Tăcut were still with him, surprisingly quick on her feet as they searched every room until—

A pair of Doc Martens were left on the floor, chairs overturned.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

Karina was saying something to him, but he wasn't listening. Not completely.

They couldn't have gotten far.

He shot out of the room, searching ... *searching* until he found the open back door.

"Fang!"

Both he and Karina whirled around, and through the open back door of the house, they spotted Winter being dragged toward the lake, rope binding her ankles and hands, but in her struggles, she'd ripped the cloth from her mouth.

Her eyes were wide and panicked—*hopeful* as she saw him.

Pleading with him to save her.

He didn't think.

He just ran for her, heart hammering in his chest.

Winter was screaming in earnest now as she was dragged, kicking toward the edge of a small pier where a heavy weight was waiting.

Fang paused, taking aim, but with the way the man was moving, he couldn't get a clear shot.

Fuck.

And he saw it then—his vision shifting, and for just a moment, he was transported back to the day he'd watched his girlfriend drown in a clear, bulletproof tank.

As they meant to drown Winter now.

The mercenary hooked the weight to the rope at her ankles and shoved her into the water, her screams dying away as she disappeared beneath the surface.

"I got her!"

Fang didn't hesitate.

He ran as fast as his legs could carry him, snatching off his gear along the way, ripping his mask off his face.

The mercenary looked up, spotting him coming, a smile growing as he pulled his weapon. If he engaged him, Winter would drown ...

If he didn't, he had him at pointblank range ...

“You're not going to—“

Whatever insult he thought to lobby, the mercenary didn't get to finish it before a gunshot sounded and his body jerked with the impact.

He'd never been happier to give that woman a gun in his life.

Fang ran *faster* and as he hit the edge of the pier, he dove in. For a moment, he was weightless—suspended in time before the darkened, freezing cold water engulfed him.

He swam, kicking his legs, making his way deeper as his heart pounded, the sound echoing in his own ears.

But it allowed him something to focus on—to *guide* him so the panic wouldn't set in.

Because it was Tăcut who'd been there during the days when he couldn't function without a bottle in his hand.

When they'd just been a pair of orphans in the middle of that Romanian forest fighting to survive a hell no child should be exposed to.

The one he'd made a blood pact with.

Brothers for life, through sickness and in health.

A promise he had every intention of keeping.

Because if he lost Winter ... Tăcut wouldn't recover.

His lungs screamed, but he swam deeper, searching blindly for ...

There!

His fingers brushed cold, clammy skin and he grabbed for her, his panic setting in when he didn't feel her move in response.

Quickly, he felt for the rope that bound her wrists to the cement blocks, using his knife to cut it free. He kicked his legs, his lungs screaming, as he swam for the surface.

Almost ...

Almost ...

The minute he breached, he dragged in a lungful of air, but Winter was still limp.

And when they finally reached the shore, and he flipped her to her back, he didn't think about the fact that she was paler than he'd ever seen her and so *still*.

He couldn't afford to think about that when time was of the essence.

Instead, he stacked his hands on top of her chest and counted the beats.

At ten, he pinched her nose and opened her mouth, *breathing*.

Then started again.

And again.

And *again*.

“Come on, Winter. You don't get to die on me today.”

He heard the beat of feet on the shore, knew he was no longer alone, but he didn't look up—couldn't.

Because he couldn't face Tăcut, not yet.

But that didn't stop the panic from clawing its way through his chest, forcing him to temper his need to go harder and faster lest he break her ribs.

“Fang—“

He gave a harsh shake of his head, “Not yet.”

But she wasn't moving.

Her eyes were still closed.

“Fang ...”

“I said not fucking *yet!*”

He started the compressions back, adding too much pressure, his desperation making him afraid he would crack her ribs in the process, but as emotion started to clog his throat, she finally lurched, turning her head to vomit lake water all over the ground.

He registered the cheers coming from behind them, but he helped Winter still, patting her back as she heaved, and finally, once there was nothing left, she all but collapsed.

“Ow.”

A laugh burst from him, relief like nothing he’d ever felt before making him feel lighter than air. “If you’re hurting, it means you’re alive.”

“Easy for you to say,” she uttered, attempting to sit up. “Where’s—“

She didn’t have to finish the question before Tăcut was there, dropping to his knees beside her.

The man looked *tortured*—as if it had been his own life flashing before his eyes.

Winter was trembling, and even as she was soaked, he could see the tears in her eyes. “I’m okay.”

Fang turned away, giving them their privacy, stumbling up to his feet.

The others were watching—even Sebastian, though he stood further away, the girl he’d been wanting to save standing beside him.

Karina too.

She offered him a nod, the gun still in her hand.

He nodded back.

An acknowledgment.

A *truce*.

The sun wasn’t setting on them today.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“WE HAVE HER!” Karina said in a rush, sounding out of breath. “We have Winter and Kava back. They’re okay.”

Uilleam exhaled so forcefully, the mercenaries all looked back at him as they headed for the address he’d given them. “I’ll see you soon,” he said in return.

He didn’t have time to explain the rest.

There was one final problem to take care of.

When he’d first set his eyes on the Table, it was the only thing Uilleam wanted.

It was what he’d worked and strived for.

He couldn’t count the number of *years* he’d invested into getting a meeting with them—biding his time until a seat opened and he could claim it for himself.

He’d dedicated his life to it.

And now, after everything that had happened, he now had to answer to them.

“Where the hell are we?” Red asked.

“The New York Headquarters.”

While his first meeting with the Table had been in Paris, they met globally when a time called for it—like now for Arbitration.

The building had high tech security, advanced enough that he had to provide both a retinal scan along with his

fingerprints before he was allowed to enter.

When the security at the gate eyed his mercenaries, he said, “Leave your weapons.”

With only a skeptical glance in his direction, they did as he commanded—though he was sure, without having to see that Syn had ignored the command—and followed him inside.

Seven flights up, he entered the private room, accessible only to members of the Table.

“Jesus,” Carmelo muttered, eyeing him from head to toe—the only one to acknowledge the bloodied state of him.

The others didn’t comment.

Uilleam knew the sight he made. By now, his bruises had darkened even further, and truthfully, with the pain he was in, he thought it a miracle he was even still standing.

“You asked for this meeting, Uilleam Runehart,” Carmelo said as he lounged in his seat, focused on him. “Let’s proceed.”

As Uilleam opened his mouth, the door across the room opened, the Arbitrator walking in. The sight of him was merely a casual annoyance—and he refused to give the man the satisfaction of reacting.

“It’s come to my attention that my seat has come into question.”

They all looked at the Arbitrator. “Yes.”

“Well first things first, it begs the question, who raised concerns in the first place.”

“Is there a reason you need to be privy to that information?” the man asked, needing to be difficult just because he could.

“Surely, even you should understand why that would be important? I didn’t take you for a fool, Arbitrator.”

Some of his amusement bled away. “You know the rules, Kingmaker.”

“Katherine Ashworth, I presume?” he asked, though he already knew the answer.

It was the only one that made sense.

Her final checkmate.

In case she hadn't been able to beat him, she'd done this as her way of having the last laugh.

“If you already have the answer, then I don't understand what your question is. It doesn't negate the fact that the rules are clear. If a chair is stolen in the manner in which yours was, it has to be answered in blood.”

“No, actually, it doesn't.” Uilleam tossed down the mobile Karina had given him. “Belladonna is finished. She's relinquishing the chair.”

“One can't simply *relinquish* it,” the Arbitrator said, speaking for the Table. “That's not how this works.”

“That's exactly how it works, or have you not noticed what's happened? I have my mercenaries,” Uilleam said, gesturing to them. “My Den is rebuilt and it's only a matter of time before my stronghold is finished. Besides, Katherine Ashworth is dead.”

Surprise colored Carmelo's face, but he didn't ask for details—not yet.

“Her empire dies with her, and with her fall, so does Belladonna's reign—or are we pretending as if she wasn't given the seat *because* of her mother?”

Karina had been formidable in her own right, but he knew the men at this table.

They would have done their research on her.

It hadn't just been because of her taking him off the board—it had also been because of all the connections Katherine Ashworth had that they'd hoped to exploit.

“I'm certain I don't need to explain myself further, or do I?” he asked, not above threatening any one of them if it came down to it.

Because at the end of the day, he'd found a loophole.

Just as Katherine had said he was good at.

“And the blood payment?” the Arbitrator asked. “Belladonna must answer for her attack—it's the rules.”

“She's to be my wife,” he declared, meaning every word. “If there's a debt for her to pay, it is also mine. So, let's get on with it. Syn.”

Uilleam laid his hand flat on the table, spreading his fingers.

Curious, Syn stepped up, regarding the others as if they didn't matter before focusing on Uilleam.

“The pinky, if you would.”

Delight, unfortunately, lit up the man's eyes.

He did owe him, after all, for what he allowed to happen to Winter.

After a beat, he removed a blade he had hidden away, commotion erupted as the members of the Table looked on.

“Brace yourself,” Syn warned.

And in the next breath, Uilleam had to clench his jaw to keep from shouting as the man severed his digit, blood spurting from the wound before Syn wrapped it.

It rolled to the center of the table.

“Will that suffice?” he asked.

They all stared, even the Arbitrator, unable to do anything but stare.

And nod.

“Excellent. It's great to be back boys. Until next time.”

He turned to leave, but turned at the last minute. “Oh, and Arbitrator? If I ever see your face again, I'm going to have my mercenary here carve your heart out of your chest.”

Then, he left.

And as he walked back out of the building, he almost felt as if the sun was a little brighter.

“Only you’d have your own fucking finger cut off,” Red said with a shake of his head.

“Yes, well.” He shrugged. “The prices you’re willing to pay for the ones you love.”

“Well, I’m not done yet,” Syn spoke up. “Where’s—“

“Karina called and said they have Winter. I’m sure if you go looking for the Wild Bunch, you’ll find her.”

He took off without another word.

Skorpion clapped Uilleam on the shoulder, the weight of his arm nearly making him stumble. “Let’s not do this again any time soon.” Then, he too, walked off.

Leaving Uilleam standing there with Red.

“Looks like this is the end of the line for us,” he said, looking up at the sky, in the same way Uilleam had.

“Just so.”

“Take care of yourself, Kingmaker.” He offered him a nod, the closest thing to his respect he’d get.

“Call me Uilleam.”

Because as they parted, they didn’t do so as employer and employee.

But as equals.

Two days later ...

“BUT IT WAS YOUR *FINGER*?” Karina said in a shrill voice, still complaining about his injury though he’d finally gotten in professionally treated.

“A small price to pay for our future,” Uilleam said in return.

She'd given him a rundown of everything that had happened—from going to confront the Jackal to Fang pulling Winter from the lake.

He couldn't have asked for a better resolution.

“They're leaving,” Karina said. “Kava and Sebastian. Not together, I don't think, but ... I don't know, it's complicated.”

He hadn't realized they were a thing.

But that was their matter.

He wouldn't concern himself with it.

Because it was done.

All of it.

No more fighting.

No more feuds that lasted a decade.

No more running from each other.

They were together *finally*.

“There's one other thing,” Karina said softly.

“What's—“

She held up a plastic stick with a plastic cap covering the end. He knew what it was without her having to say, but he still stared at it as if it were the most foreign thing in the world.

But he couldn't deny it as he held it in his hands and read the one word written on the tiny screen in black letters.

PREGNANT.

“You're pregnant,” he said, stating the most obvious thing in the world, sounding breathless to his own ears.

“I am,” she said, unable to hold back her smile. “It's still early—and we have to confirm it with a doctor, of course, but I didn't want to wait to tell you again. If you're—“

Her words cut off with a squeal of laughter as he swept her up and spun her around.

Some part of him had always known, if there was anyone who'd be able to give him a second chance, it was her.

This time, he wouldn't repeat the mistakes of his past.

It was time to make it right.

For her.

For *them*.

There was only one *little* piece missing.

Several minutes later, a Maserati rolled to a stop, the back door opening with Iz stepping out. She reached a hand back to, a smaller one taking it.

Poppy looked around expectantly as she climbed out of the backseat, her expression pensive.

Until her gaze landed on them.

Joy looked beautiful on her as she raced across toward them, throwing herself at Karina first, then came to Uilleam.

"You kept your promise!" she said against his chest, making his heart swell with pride.

And he always would.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Uilleam

UILLEAM SIGHED. “I’m not the man I used to be.”

At first, he hadn’t thought of that as a compliment. He’d been driven by a desire to become, not just more than himself, but more than his father had been.

It had never crossed his mind that he’d managed to do what his father hadn’t—that he’d created a criminal empire and *army* that had never been done before.

He’d wanted more.

Needed more.

Blinded by his own desires of greatness that he hadn’t realized at some point, he’d no longer been living for himself.

And it took losing it all to realize he didn’t need any of it.

Not anymore.

He was the *Kingmaker*, and always would be.

His name came with respect and envy and honor to the point that having his mercenaries had been only an added benefit rather than a necessity.

And now that he had his seat at the Table once more, he was all but untouchable.

Lucky laughed, intruding on his thoughts. “Is this the part where you start laying out your threats?”

Usually, Uilleam would have been all too happy to accept that bait—explaining, in great detail, exactly what he planned to do to him with blunt honesty.

He would have glorified in the man's final moments and the terror he'd wrought from him.

But he didn't.

Not this time.

Not anymore.

"Unfortunately, I don't know what's going to happen to you. I didn't ask."

Lucky's brows drew together for a fraction of a second before he cleared his expression. "You've gone soft. The Kingmaker *I* knew would have had these assholes already dumping my body somewhere."

He'd thought he could get out of the city before anyone could catch him.

He was sorely mistaken.

Uilleam nodded, agreeing. "I'm a changed man."

To that, Lucky laughed. "That bitch has you by the balls, doesn't she?"

He elected to ignore that. "You were smart to abandon ship before I got my hands on Katherine Ashworth. Probably the only smart thing you've done since leaving the Den."

"Yeah, well ... the Den was a sinking ship."

"And mercenaries," Uilleam said, "offer their services to the highest bidder."

Lucky shrugged. "You know how it is."

"I do," he agreed. "That's usually why mercenaries have so many enemies."

"You wouldn't be—"

"Do you know what it's like to be poisoned? Because I've seen it. Bleeding from every orifice—clawing at your own skin because it feels as if you're burning from the inside out."

Uilleam shivered himself as he remembered the gruesome scene. “Dead within minutes.”

Lucky sat back, staring ahead. “Get on with it then.”

“But you see, poisoning you would be too easy. If anything, it’d be something of a mercy killing. I have something else in mind for you. You’re not going to die here tonight.”

“Then what the hell is all this?”

“Oh, please don’t misunderstand. You *will* die,” he said, making sure he held the man’s gaze. “Because unfortunately for you, there’s no one left to answer for what happened to Winter. For *her*, you’ll have to answer to Syn.”

At the mention of the Brit, his face leached of color. ”Wait —“

His gaze focused on something—or rather *someone* behind Uilleam.

“You see, with your help, I lost my Den, and now I have no control over the mercenaries or what they choose to do.”

“You can call him off,” Lucky said frantically. “I’ll give you whatever you want—pay whatever price.”

“I have nothing for you,” Uilleam told him as he stood. “So while Syn is busy taking his pound of flesh, I want you to think about whether or not whatever Katherine Ashworth paid you was enough for the pain you’re about to suffer.”

He turned away at the sound of Lucky’s pleas—at the way he jerked at his bindings trying to get free.

Uilleam only needed to see the machete Syn held to know he’d seen enough.

As the door closed behind him, he only heard the whistle of the weapon slicing through the air before Lucky’s screams echoed.

HOURS LATER, Uilleam came home, the fatigue of the last few weeks finally starting to catch up with him.

He found Karina laying on the couch, a smile blooming once she saw him. “Did he suffer?”

Karina might not have been as bloodthirsty as he was, but when someone crossed her ... they certainly inspired her to be.

“Without question.”

Torture was where Syn excelled.

“Oh, Poppy—“

“You’re back!”

Uilleam turned with a smile as Poppy came running toward him, barreling right into him. Surprise kept him immobile, but he quickly recovered, wrapping her in his arms.

“I have something to show you,” she said, her words mumbled as she spoke them into his shirt.

He released her, curious as to what it was.

She stood straight, failing to hide her grin as she proudly displayed the coin he’d given her. She rolled it between her fingers, perhaps a little more clumsily than he had, but she managed it in the end.

And then, as he watched, she flipped her hands this way and that, making the coin disappear.

“I *win*,” she said mischievously.

“I never doubted you for a second. Now, what would you like as your reward?”

“You said I can have anything?”

“Anything.”

“*Anything?*” she asked, squinting at him.

“Anything,” he repeated.

If she asked for chocolates, he would have found her all the best in the world. A doll? He’d have one custom made.

She could have named anything in the entire world and he would have found a way to get it for her.

But instead, she said, “I want us to stay together. You, me, and Mum.”

He crouched until they were eye level, then held out his pinky. “I promise.”

She hooked her little finger around his. “You mean it?”

“With all my heart.”

She let his finger go, only to throw her arms around him and hug him as tight as she could. “I love you, Papa.”

In an instant, he found peace, because as he looked over her shoulder and found Karina smiling wistfully at them with tears in her eyes, he had everything he had ever wanted right here in this room.

“I love you too, my little dove.”

Four months later ...

Karina

WHEN UILLEAM MENTIONED A SURPRISE, she wasn't expecting to meet him on the Upper Eastside at two in the afternoon, but Karina still found herself driving up alongside a row of manicured shrubs.

A strong sense of déjà vu struck her as she looked over at the line of brownstones that made up the street as she stepped out of her car, spotting Uilleam's Mercedes parked toward the end of the block.

She took the stone pathway up to the grand double doors that made up the entryway. They were tall—even taller than her with the heels she was wearing—but before she could knock, however, a woman wearing a black pantsuit opened the door with a wide smile.

“You must be Mrs. Runehart. I’m Tonya Michaels—I’ll be showing you all the property today.”

She was led through the foyer with tall ceilings and a modest black chandelier hanging from the ceiling before they made it into the heart of the space with its tall windows and even taller ceilings.

Uilleam walked in from the back door, a grin spreading on his face as he spotted her, his gaze immediately dropping to her belly her dress did very little to hide.

“You do like your surprises, don’t you?” she asked, stepping into his embrace, warmth spreading through her as he rested a hand right over the hard lump where their baby girl was resting.

“What do you think?” he gestured around them.

Starting with the living room and its gated fireplace, and then went on to the open kitchen with its marble countertops, a gas range, and its olive green cabinetry with gold hardware.

“It’s nice?” she said, cautiously.

“If it’s meant to be one of the homes we grow old in, I surely hope you’d find it better than *nice*.”

Somehow, despite how evident it was now, she hadn’t considered that was why’d he’d asked her to meet him here. He was prone to meeting in odd locations if it served his purposes, so she’d thought nothing of it.

Now, she looked at everything differently.

Tonya, the realtor, cleared her throat delicately, looking back and forth between them before saying, “I’ll let you have a look around. Please let me know if you have any questions.”

As she left them, Uilleam gently guided her toward the door he’d come in before. “You haven’t seen the best part yet.”

He kept his arm around her as they stepped outside, bracing her for the cold air that hit them almost immediately. But once they were there, she knew exactly why he’d chosen this one.

“Can you see it?” he asked next to her ear.

The ground was covered in frost, the promise of snow not far off, but she could still see the bones of where she could have a greenhouse for her flowers. And as the weather warmed and the trees bloomed with new leaves, it would be the perfect place for her new dark garden she missed so dearly.

“I can see it,” she whispered, squeezing his hand.

“Of course the thought of poisons would excite you,” he said wryly, “but there’s one more thing I need to show you.”

He led her back inside and up the stairs, narrating as they went. “It has five bedrooms and seven bathrooms—I will never understand why they have to have so many bathrooms.”

Her laugh echoed in the empty house. She remembered quite well that she’d asked the same question of him so very long ago when they’d toured their first home together. And the fact that he would remember such an inconsequential detail was an indescribable feeling.

They reached the upper floor, Uilleam treating her as if she were made of glass with the way he was so attentive, but as they walked toward the room with the cracked door at the end of the hall, her mind ventured back to the past, only for a moment, until they were there.

He smiled ever so softly as he pushed the door open and once she got a look inside, it felt like her heart had stopped.

Sitting on the bay window, looking out at the passing cars was Poppy holding a small, stuffed white rabbit. She turned to look at them when they came in, her eyes wide and excited as she immediately stood and ran over.

“Surprise!” she shouted, holding up the stuffed animal with all the joy in the world.

But she wasn’t the only surprise in the room.

Sitting in the middle of the floor was a crib made of natural colored wood, a soft blanket resting on the mattress inside, along with a baby elephant.

Karina couldn’t hold back the tears if she tried.

And in that moment, as she hugged Poppy to herself, Uilleam right there alongside them, she had everything she had ever wanted.

Every sacrifice, every moment of doubt, and every shred of pain they'd suffered because they were finally *here*.

Together.

And she would have it no other way.

FIN

C O D A

C O D A

Winter

Bruises faded as if they never were, but sometimes all it took was a glance at the spot where they had once been to feel the pain all over again.

A fact Winter was getting more familiar with.

Behind a screen, she had always been protected in a way—something, she was willing to admit, she'd taken for granted more times than she could count. There was also the well known fact that she'd had Syn to protect her for a number of years before Răz had come along.

And though weeks had passed, sometimes she still found herself shaking her head as she imagined the pain in which the mercenaries had suffered.

The pain *Răz* had gone through—she couldn't wrap her head around it.

Hauling her suitcase out of the closet, she pulled the zipper down, propping it open as she carefully placed the stacks of clothes she'd already folded in side, then reached for her shoes.

A vacation was exactly what she'd needed, and when Răz had made even the mere suggestion of it, she'd hopped on it, not caring where they went, how they got there, or how long they'd be gone.

Being alone with the love of her life was exactly what she needed.

Familiar footsteps sounded, and she didn't have to turn to know Răz had finally returned from his run after being gone for more than half an hour.

"If we're going to have a private bungalow, I say we skip bathing suits altogether," she said thoughtfully, holding up the two piece bikini she was already rethinking. "What do you think?"

She turned, smiling when she saw the way his gaze had dropped to the scraps of fabric in her hands.

But that smile waned a bit when he didn't immediately launch himself at her as he usually would have done. "What's wrong?"

His expression was oddly serious, she thought, considering they were talking about vacationing naked on the beach. She frowned as she asked again, "What's wrong?"

—Something's been bothering me.—

"Okay?"

He paused a moment, his gaze searching her face, and for a moment she was nervous about what he was going to say.

—You're an amazing hacker.—

She looked from his hands up to his face, brows drawn together in confusion. "Uh, thanks?"

—The best.—

"Laying it on a little thick there, big guy ..."

—I've heard the stories about how you kept the Kingmaker's identity hidden when most others couldn't.—

"Oh," she said with a wave of her hand. "That was easy. You just have to build a facial-recognition algorithm that would essentially erase any likeness of him off the web."

—You've done something similar for us, no?—

"Well, yeah. Of course."

Because while he and the others wore their masks when they committed their robberies, one could never be too careful. And while their plan of action was good, it wasn't always foolproof. The last thing they needed was another target on their backs.

—So how is it that Katherine Ashworth was able to find you the night you went to talk to the Kingmaker?—

Winter didn't have a ready response for that—and not because she didn't actually *have* an answer.

Răz wasn't done, however, his gaze still rapt on her, that other set of training he'd been under coming to the forefront. *—I've been wracking my brain about what happened that night because it didn't make sense to me. How could they have known you'd be there, especially since you'd already deleted the details about that warehouse's ownership from public records.—*

“Well ... I mean, I know I said I wouldn't agree to be his hacker again, but that was just ... a little favor.”

—But if Katherine Ashworth didn't know it, or his, location, how did she manage to find you walking alone that night in the opposite direction from where you told me to meet you, forty-five minutes before I was supposed to arrive.—

The thing about being around a bunch of mercenaries, she'd heard all the tips and tricks about what they did and how they did it, but when you weren't formally trained the way they were, it was much harder to actually *do* what they did.

So while she tried to hide the truth from her face the way she'd seen so many others do, she saw the moment Răz saw it on *her*.

And if his darkening expression was anything to go by, he *wasn't* happy.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered.

—Are you out of your fucking mind?—

“I didn't have a choice,” she said, her voice still soft as she explained.

But even still, she could feel the anger radiating off of him even as the disbelief on his face said very clearly that she'd been caught.

“They wouldn't have helped otherwise,” she said in a rush, as if the secret was burning to get out of her chest.

And in a way, it was. Some days were easier than others when she didn't think about the impossible, impractical, and frankly *psychotic* choice she'd made, but then other days, it was all she could think about.

—*Winter.*—

She finally looked away from him and the accusation in his eyes knowing that she couldn't hide the truth any longer.

At least not from him.

—*How could you do something so ...*—

“It wasn't stupid,” she said defensively before he could finish. “It was logical. They—you—love me more than you hate him.”

And had Katherine's attempt at kidnapping Calavera and the baby been successful, they, without a doubt, would have come back for her too.

But there hadn't been a need thanks to Răz and the others, a fact she didn't need to remind him of.

—*So you allowed yourself to be taken?*—

It wasn't just that she allowed herself to be taken—

She'd arranged all of it.

It wasn't hard at all to figure out which “skilled” hacker Katherine was using and get into their system without being detected.

Hell, even the one Uilleam had was decent enough ... with a little unknown help from her.

And armed with a can of red bull and snickers popcorn, she formulated a plan that even the Kingmaker would have been proud of had he known about it.

It was as simple as laying the bread crumbs ...

Visiting her favorite coffee shop a little more than usual.

Playing with her hair when she was standing outside in view of the city cameras—leaving as much of a digital footprint as she possibly could and not deleting the evidence after.

All of which she explained to Răz in a rush, fiddling with her hair as she spoke. “Then it was just a matter of waiting. I knew after the failed grab for Calavera, they were going to be a little more desperate so ... I gave them what they wanted—leverage. And in return, they gave me what I needed.”

—*A reason for the mercenaries to come back.*—

“He still had to do the hard part,” Winter said with a shudder, remembering the state Red and Celt had left him in, “but there needed to be a catalyst.”

A reason for both of them.

For the Kingmaker to put his pride aside.

For the mercenaries to be willing to even hear what they had to say.

Răz didn’t speak for a long while, making her fidget as she shifted on her feet.

“Annoying and self righteous as he might be, without him, I wouldn’t have you, and ... well, he’s family too. And you never leave family behind, no matter how much they might piss you off.”

She almost believed he was too angry with her to respond, but after a second he cupped her face, forcing her to look up at him, and gone was the anger from earlier, replaced with understanding.

—*You could’ve gotten yourself killed.*—

“I knew you’d find me.”

And she had.

Of course a part of her had still been terrified and she wouldn't ever forget the pain in those days of captivity, but she *had* known, without a shadow of a doubt, that Răz would come for her.

And he'd bring hell with him when he did.

—If you ever think of doing something like that again, I will put you over my knee.—

She smiled now, and asked, “Is that a promise?” But laughed when he glared at her. “I’m joking ... mostly.”

—You almost killed Syn.—

“Let’s hope he doesn’t put two and two together.”

—I’m telling him.—

“Snitches get stitches, Răz. I mean that.”

A knock sounded on the opened door before Thanatos popped his head in, looking confused. “Kingmaker’s here?”

Words, neither he, or Răz, were probably used to saying.

Outside, Winter walked ahead of the others, finding Uilleam standing next to a van. He was back looking like himself—dark suit and tie, looking every bit the dangerous, unpredictable fixer he’d always been.

“Shouldn’t you be off somewhere enjoying your family?” she asked, though glad to see he looked well.

“I’m not staying long,” he said while pushing off the van and striding toward her. “And besides, I’m a man of my word, and I always pay my debts.”

The look he gave her was meaningful and in an instant, it all clicked.

He knew what she had done too.

Was it really that obvious? But, she also had a sneaking suspicion that while Răzvan might have only just figured it out, Uilleam had known for some time.

“I’m afraid to even ask what’s in the van.”

“A gift ... if you want it.”

The side door opened and a bound and gagged man was shoved out the back of it.

Fang frowned down at the sight of him, asking the question they were all thinking. “Who the hell is the old guy?”

“Grigore, the Butcher of the East,” the Kingmaker announced proudly, smiling down at the man who was trying to talk behind the gag in his mouth. “A bit difficult to find, I’m afraid, with the extensive plastic surgery he’s had. And we’re on our third identity, aren’t we, Grigore?” he asked the man as he patted his shoulder.

They were all confused.

“But see, when you’re looking for a surgeon, especially one skilled enough to remove vocal cords, and heinous enough to mutilate a child, well ... no new identity can hide *that* for too long.”

It didn’t matter that they were standing outside—it was as if all the air in the world had gone away.

Răz had gone stiff beside her, and he didn’t react to her when she slipped her hand in his, offering what little comfort she could in the face of the man who caused his night terrors.

To this day.

The Kingmaker forced the man to stand, a wolf’s smile on his face. “It’s best to kill that which might come back to haunt you, I always say. But it’s a little late for that, isn’t it, Grigore Erner?”

Now, *that* was a name the Wild Bunch knew.

And she watched as both they, and the man in question understood exactly who each other were.

“I suggest,” Uilleam continued as both Thanatos and Invictus grabbed the man and started dragging him toward the *other* side of the loft that she was not permitted to enter, “you pray to whomever it is you pray to that your death be swift.”

Because these four wouldn’t.

Even Winter knew that.

Răz turned to follow the others, but hesitated, looking first at her then at Uilleam.

Something unspoken passed between them—an understanding, of sorts, she imagined, before he left the two of them.

“How did you find him?” Winter asked, thinking of the many nights she’d spent searching and failing.

He smiled fondly at her before kissing the top of her head as Syn would have.

“I’m the Kingmaker—it’s what I do.”

She probably didn’t want to know anyway. “Thank you.”

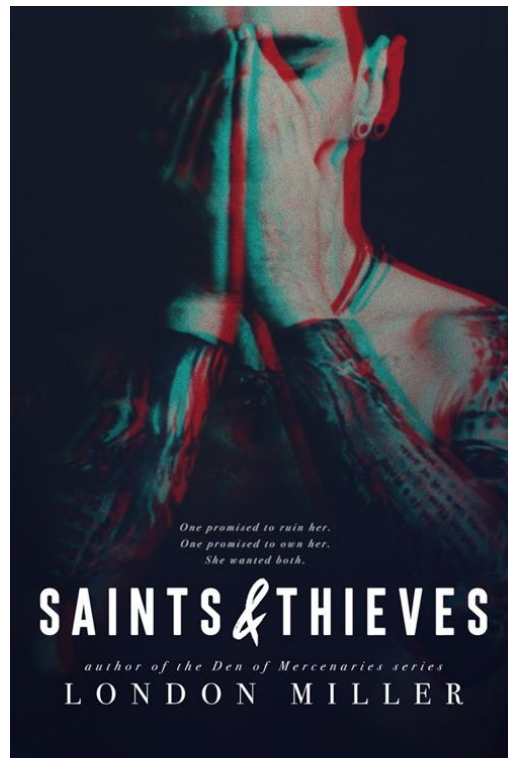
“Should you ever need anything in the future, you only have to ask.”

And with that parting remark, he turned to leave, his new mercenaries in tow, reminding her in the end:

The Kingmaker could make any dream come true ... for a price.

THE WILD BUNCH RETURNS

MARCH 2023



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was a labor of love and a long time in the making. Being on this journey with Uilleam and Karina has been one of the most amazing experiences as a writer, and though I'm sad to see their story come to an end, I'm equally as excited for all the stories yet to come.

Thank you so much for coming on this journey with me, and I want to give a special shoutout to the readers that have been here from the very beginning when Uilleam Runehart was just a side character in the Volkov Bratva Series.

I hope his story was everything you wanted, and I can't wait to share more stories with you—including Sebastian and Kava's!

xx LM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



London Miller is the author of the Volkov Bratva series, as well as Red., the first book in the Den of Mercenaries series. After graduating college, she turned pen to paper, creating riveting fictional worlds where the bad guys are sometimes the good guys.

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