



CRUEL SHADOWS

KINGDOM OF MONSTERS BOOK ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HARPER A. BROOKS

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H.A.B. Publications LLC

Cover Design: Claire Holt with Luminescence Covers

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Interior & Formatting: Formatting by Jennifer Laslie

Editor: Words of Advice Editing

Proofreading: Krista Cook

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CRUEL SHADOWS

I'm caught in the shadows...

...and the shadows want to play.

I thought I'd dreamed up the shadow realm and the place I
called Dark Castle.

But it's very real. And he's still here.

My prince, my savior, *my captor*...

The monster in my bed.

But this time, he's not alone.

I must escape, but first, my prince and his shadow men want
me to fulfill their demands.

All of them.

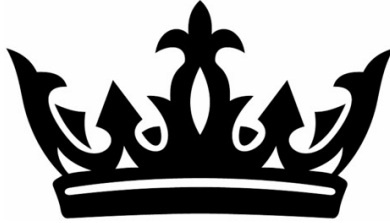
The longer I stay, the harder it is to resist their dark promises,
their insatiable hunger. Because, while these monsters' smiles
are cruel, their touches are the most delicious torture.

But they aren't the only threat in this world. The darkness that
wanted me before has found me again, and like my Shadow
Prince, it's ready to claim me as its own...forever.

For Krista

Cue the vibrating monster peen

CHAPTER
ONE



Stella

Pamala Sawyer can go choke on a giant dick. Preferably one of those glass ones so it can shatter in her trachea and she can bleed out slowly.

Too harsh?

Nah. Not even a little.

The bitch and I have been at each other's throats since the day she started working in this Olive Garden meets back-road dive bar a year ago. Who knew Hell was actually covered in gaudy Italian décor, wood paneled walls, and reeked of cigarettes and grease?

“Stella, are you even listening to me?” a voice asks, effectively pulling me from my homicidal thoughts. It belongs to my boss, Logan Crane, and he's staring at me with narrowed eyes and a hand on his hip as if this isn't the first time he's tried getting an answer from me. He could have been droning on for two minutes or thirty—I haven't been paying attention. I hate this job so much that zoning out has become a daily necessity at this point.

I smile sweetly and push up from the counter I've been leaning on. “Yes, sir. Customers are our number one priority. I understand loud and clear.”

He sighs and shakes his head. I probably should be more worried about losing my job at this point—it's how I pay the bills, after all—but I didn't do anything wrong. All I did was stand up for myself when a rude-ass college boy tried to pinch

my ass as I walked by his table yesterday. He certainly didn't expect me to drop an entire pitcher of soda in his lap. But it just *slipped*.

Pam's sneer from behind Logan's shoulder tells me all I need to know. *She's* the one who ratted me out.

The bitch. She's going to regret that one.

Tilting my head back, I shoot Pam a *fuck-you-very-much* look.

Already over us and our feud, Logan turns to one of the high school new hires and shows her the 'proper' way to set an online order on the pickup rack. As if these food delivery people give a crap. They just want to grab the orders and make their money by dropping it off somewhere. They really don't care if the bag has the "made with love, sealed with care" sticker in exactly the right place.

He's way too caught up in the arrangement of the straws to notice the war of eye daggers going on behind him. Or maybe he doesn't give a shit. Either way, I'm not gonna worry about it. I've got exactly three more hours to survive work before I can get out of here and away from Pam's brownnosing.

Rolling my eyes, I speed walk to the restaurant's kitchen to get my last table's order. The faster I get this over with, the sooner I can get the hell out of here. I have a lot to do today and forcing myself not to throw boiling water on Pam is one of them. An assault charge is the last thing I need in my life right now.

I grab another tray, pile it high with breadsticks, and scoop up a generous amount of cheese sauce. I toss a few straws and a couple extra napkins into my apron and head back out to the counter to start making my customers' lives mildly more comfortable. However, when I get to my section at the front of the restaurant and see Pam already taking an order at one of my tables, I stop in my tracks.

What the hell? I look around the room, praying there's been some sort of error and she's been sent to the wrong spot. This is my section. These are my tables.

When I see that everyone else is already paired up for the rush, I know I'm shit out of luck. I'm stuck with this bitch for the next half of my shift.

“What the f—”

Someone clearing their throat behind me interrupts the rest of my curse-filled sentence, and when I peek over my shoulder, Logan is there.

“It's time you two got over your differences,” he says. “Kiss and make up.”

I ignore how uneasy the words make me. Definitely not something you want your boss saying to you, even if he didn't mean anything by it.

“I'm tired of the constant catfighting between you two.”

I huff. “So you gave her my tables? How does that make sense?”

“Half of them. You'll be working *together* to handle the rush.”

My eyes widen. “You're kidding me.”

“Do I look like I'm kidding?” His expression hardens to really drive his message home. “Go. Be nice. I don't want to have to fire you.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Just me, huh?”

“Both of you.” With that, he walks back through the swinging doors and into the kitchen, leaving me stunned and aggravated.

He wants me to, what? Forget all the nasty things she's ever said to me and play nice? Just like that?

The next three hours are going to be hell.

Swiping a hand over my apron, I hold my chin high and head over to the ordering podium, where Pam's clicking her long nails against the screen to type in her most recent order.

I clench my teeth into a forced smile as I put down my tray in front of her.

“Don’t talk to me,” she says without glancing my way.

“Listen, I want to survive these next few hours as much as you do,” I reply. “I say we tough this out so we can keep our jobs.”

“*Our* jobs?” She chuckles. “I think you’re the one who has to worry, sweetheart.”

Click, click, click go her nails on the tablet screen. It grates on my nerves. And I’m convinced she knows that because she starts doing it faster and more obnoxiously.

Apparently, even pretending that we like each other for one day is too much to ask.

Sighing, I grab my tray, spin around, and head to drop the breadsticks off at a waiting table. If she wants to keep this up, then fine. I can avoid her and just focus on work. I’ve done it before, and I’m not going to be pushed around.

Two more tables are soon sat in my section, a couple with three children and a couple of high school aged girls, and my spirits perk up. Tables mean tips, and tips mean I can pay bills. Everything is going smoothly and according to plan until Pam disappears half an hour later.

One second she’s there, taking orders and being her usual huffy, asshole self, and the next, she’s gone. Poof. It’s like she evaporated into thin air.

Customers are left halfway through their meal, with me having no idea what they ordered or what drinks they have, and I’m left scrambling to pick up the pieces. And, of course, I have no idea if they’ve even paid yet.

Awesome. *Just fucking great.*

I grab some old bald guy’s cup and head to the soda fountain to fill it back up. Jenna, another waitress, comes up and leans against the counter beside me.

“So,” she says, drawing out the word. “Is it true?”

I huff irritably and look at her out of the corner of my eye. Being only eighteen with a real habit of eavesdropping, I know Jenna’s about to drop some kind of gossip that she’s heard

during her shift. And honestly, I'm not sure I'm in the mood to hear it. Not when my feet are killing me, and my tips are lacking from Pam's disappearance.

Still, I give in and ask, "Is *what* true?"

"Have you and Logan... You know... Have you guys been doing the nasty on breaks and stuff?"

I almost drop the full drink in my hand, choking on my next words. "Ex-Excuse me?"

Surely I heard her wrong.

She leans in closer, glancing around to see if anyone else is close enough to hear, and then says, "You and Logan—have you guys been fucking?"

Acid spins in my gut at the vile idea of Logan's hands anywhere near me.

"Holy shit, no! No! Not in a million years. I would never. All he's good for is signing my paycheck."

She looks at me in disbelief.

"That's complete and utter bullshit, Jenna, and you know it," I push, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. I already know without a shadow of a doubt who started this shit—*Pam*. She's done some shady shit to try and get me fired before, but spreading disgusting rumors about me is a new low even for her. This goes beyond not liking me. This is just downright cruel.

Jenna looks at me for a long moment before responding. "You didn't hear it from me, but Pam told me she saw you two coming out of his office looking all disheveled and stuff. That you only got this job because you're pretty."

What the fuck. Really?

Fury whirls within me so fast and furious, I begin to sweat from it.

"Where the fuck is she?" I growl, my gaze whipping around the restaurant. I'm going to strangle her. "Where did she go?"

Jenna shrugs. “You may want to nip this one in the bud because if it gets back to Logan...” She sucks in a sharp breath, and I get the message loud and clear. Definitely don’t want our boss hearing about this. He’d fire me just to save us both from the awkwardness of working near each other every day.

I hand Jenna the full cup and point to the man it belongs to. “Drop this off, will you?” And then I head off to the kitchen to hunt down Pam.

When I pass the cooks and busboys, I notice their eyes lingering a little longer than usual on me. Or maybe it’s just in my head? Hard to tell. But if they’ve heard Jenna’s whispers of the rumor, then I can only imagine what they’re thinking of me right now.

The fact that Pam has resorted to spreading lies makes my blood boil.

How much longer until my shift ends? I glance up at the clock above the sink—an hour and a half left. Still too long in my opinion, but I need to find Pam and set her shit straight because this is getting ridiculous.

A quick look around the kitchen shows me she isn’t back here either.

Where the fuck did she go?

“Has anyone seen Pam?” I ask out loud, eyeing the cooks, who are suddenly too busy in their meal prep to look at me. All except the last one in the line. He nods down the back hallway that leads to our lockers and Logan’s office.

I smile my thanks and trudge that way, already prepping the ass chewing she’s going to get when I find her.

I know I should ignore Pam’s bullshit, but it’s getting harder and harder to do that. Every time we run into each other, she has to find a way to make me feel like shit. Spreading a rumor like this is on a different level of shitty. And if she thinks I’m just going to let it go, then she doesn’t know me very well, does she?

Logan's door sits crooked in the doorway, hanging on to a single hinge for dear life. Like most broken things in this place, my boss can't be bothered to fix it. I lift my hand to knock, but I pause when the sound of hollowed bangs echo behind the door, followed by the scrape of furniture across the floor.

Strange... Is he building something in there? I doubt it, because this door's been off the hinges since I walked in for my interview years ago. Logan doesn't know how to fix shit if it doesn't involve duct tape or super glue.

A low, husky moan comes next, and it has my stomach flipping. Not a moan of pain—oh, no. Quite the opposite. It's a sound of pure pleasure.

What the—

“Ohhh yeah. Wrap those legs around me. Ah, fuck. Yeah. You little slut.” Logan's voice is undeniable, and his words make me sick. But for some reason, my hand is on the doorknob before I can stop myself, and I'm throwing my shoulder into the wood to dislodge it from the frame.

It jerks open, and I stumble inside.

What's before me has me freezing on the spot—Pam, sitting on the edge of Logan's desk, her long, bare legs wrapped around our boss's waist while he plows into her, grunting and panting like some wild hog. His slacks are around his ankles, his pale white ass on full display, and his face is buried in her cleavage as he makes disgusting slurping noises.

Oh shit.

Oh shit!

My brain short circuits. I should run away. Scream. Throw up. Something.

But instead, my feet are glued in place, and all I can do is stare and blink like a damn fool.

At my intrusion, Pam's gaze snaps up, meeting mine, and utter horror crosses her face. “Fuck, Stella!”

She frantically slaps Logan until he looks over his shoulder and finds me.

Pam might be panicking that I've caught them in the middle of the act she accused me of, but Logan's wearing a lecherous grin, like he's thrilled they've been found out this way. Acid burns its way up my throat.

"What are you staring at?" he asks, his hands still gripping Pam's hips enthusiastically and his dick still balls deep between her legs. His sickly-sweet tone has goose bumps crawling across my skin. "You wanna join or something?"

His stupid, cocky expression tells me that's *exactly* what he's hoping for, but it just makes my stomach turn.

As if a switch is flicked inside me, my voice turns back on, along with my nerve. Remembering a dark past full of inappropriate touches and much older men, I'm flooded with anger and disgust.

Heat rises up my neck as I rip my apron off and chuck it across the room. It lands limply on one of Pam's heeled feet and hangs there ironically.

"You're a piece of shit, Logan," I say, unleashing years of built-up resentment. "I'm done. I'm clocking the fuck out permanently." Glancing at Pam, I tack on for good measure, "Bitch."

As I whirl around, I hear the jingle of his belt as he struggles to pick up his pants. "Wait, Stella! I didn't mean—"

Yeah, sure. He's come to his senses suddenly.

Or is he afraid I'm going to reveal his dirty little secret to everyone? Better yet—sue his ass for sexual harassment in the workplace?

Maybe I fucking will. The pig.

I hurry out of there, swinging by the employee storage area to grab my coat and purse, and throwing open the back emergency door. He doesn't follow me past his office, which I'm thankful for. I want to scrub the memory of him and Pam

and this entire fucking restaurant from my brain like it never happened.

It's just another bad dream, like so many I've had before. Like the ones I'm still haunted by. I'll add it to my mental vault with all my other issues to be sorted out another time. I can't deal with it right now and what it really means—my job, the only way I can support myself, is gone. I'll lose my apartment. I'm already behind on rent. I can't ask Aunt Marilyn to bail me out again. She's barely surviving herself and—

No.

My entire body trembling, I race to my car and shake my head to clear it.

I'll deal with it later. All of it.

Another time.

Not now.

Like always.



When I get back to my apartment at the opposite end of town, I collapse onto the couch and stare at the popcorn ceiling. Still in my work uniform, my head is thumping from the weight of what's happened, but I'm still not ready to deal with any of it yet.

I could go to bed, but I'm too awake for that. I'm too frazzled about all of this to be able to sleep. To distract myself from the unsettling thoughts dancing at the edge of my mind, I grab the remote off the low-sitting coffee table and flip on the TV. I flip through a myriad of shows without really seeing most of them, hoping that one of them—*any* of them—will grab my attention.

When nothing does, I turn on *The Office* for the millionth time and zone out, watching the familiar faces without really seeing and listening to the dry humor without hearing. I'm not even conscious of the fact that I've closed my eyes when the

quaint image of my living room is replaced by a landscape of darkness that's all too familiar. It's the imaginary world of my childhood.

The shadows and muted gray tones tug at the strings of nostalgia in my chest, and the Dark Castle stands in the distance, its tall spires breaking up the monotony of the ashen sky.

I've been here so many times before that it feels like coming home, but it's been so long. So many years. However, this place wasn't frozen in time when I left it, like imaginary places should be. *It's changed.*

The sand is pitted and scuffed, and there's more of it on the ground than there was the last time I was here. The wind howls and the clouds race overhead toward the Dark Castle. The deeper shadows in the corners and beneath the parapets and towers are deeper, darker, and the massive construction itself looks more foreboding and imposing.

The castle's tall spires appear to touch the clouds, even though they only stretch a hundred feet above the ground. Its towering stone walls are weathered with age, and spots of dirt and moss are growing on its surface. But despite its dark appearance, I can't help but feel a sense of serenity when I'm here.

The ocean waves roll in behind me, crashing against the shore, retreating and then crashing against the shore again. The rhythmic waves calm my nerves and bring peace to my rapidly beating heart.

This place was my solace as a child, a place to retreat to after my mother died. It was my escape. To some, it may look dark and dreary, but for me, it's a place of adventure and friendship.

The memories of this place are still so clear in my mind. The smell of the damp sand, the sound of the leaves of the nearby forest rustling in the wind, the way the sunlight filters through the trees. This was the place where I felt most free, where I could be myself without judgment. This was the place

where my imagination ran wild, and I could be anyone I wanted to be. This was my happy place.

The keyword being *was*.

I'm not sure how I ended up back here after all these years.

Maybe it was because I've been feeling so lost lately and needed to find a sense of peace again. Or maybe it was because, deep down, I knew this place would always be waiting for me, no matter how much time has passed.

Whatever the reason, I'm glad I came back.

It feels good to be surrounded by all these familiar sights and smells again. It feels good to be home. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, taking in the scent of the wet earth and the salt-filled air once more, relishing these feelings and letting them wash over me like warm water over a tired muscle.

Sitting down in the sand, I peer down at my clothes. Gone is the stained and worn-out uniform shirt, and instead, I'm dressed in a gorgeous sparkly blue gown that cuts low, all the way to my naval, and exposes more cleavage than I'm used to.

I stare up at the sky. It's covered in thick, dark storm clouds. There's a prickle of electricity in the air, the static energy of a storm about to happen.

The dark ruler of this place, Prince Airic, made himself very clear last time I was here. I was to leave and never return. But I didn't ask to come here. People can't control their dreams, right?

The sky rumbles above me, and the first drops of rain fall onto my skin. It's not a cold rain, but it's not a pleasant summer rain either. It's that harsh, dense kind that hits the roof and sounds like it's going to peel it off. I continue to look at the castle, knowing it's pointless to approach.

The rain picks up, becoming a downpour, and I scramble to my feet. I welcome the warmth as it pelts my body and the drops roll down my skin.

The first bolt of lightning slices through the sky, illuminating the castle like a beacon and making the hairs on

my arms stand on end. There's no other shelter in sight, and I don't want to risk being struck by lightning. Even in a dream, I doubt that will be an enjoyable experience.

My feet seem to move of their own volition, carrying me to the one part of this place I shouldn't go, before my mind catches up to my body.

No. This isn't real.

Airic isn't there.

He's not in that castle. He's not a real person. This is just a dream, and I've got to wake up before I let myself indulge in the fantasy again. I'm in my twenties now. I can't just let myself play pretend in a fairytale world. I have to do adult things, like working and going to the grocery store.

But it's hard to resist. The draw of that world is so strong. It's like a siren's call, luring me back to a time when life was simpler and I didn't have to worry about things like bills and rent. I can still smell the roses that lined the path to the castle. I can still feel the silk of Airic's shirt as he brushed past me in the hall.

It's all in my head. That's what they told me—my aunt, the shrinks, the other kids. I made it all up.

And I'm doing it again.

The downpour continues and the thunder grows louder, but I keep hurrying toward the castle. My feet feel like they're made of lead, but I can't resist the urge to move them. The closer I get to the castle, the more real it feels. I'm so close I can hear the music floating down from the high castle windows.

I'm almost to the drawbridge when the vision blurs over. I blink rapidly, but the comforting sights and smells fade.

Not yet. I don't want to leave yet.

Despite my pleas, a cold darkness surrounds me. When I realize it's because my eyes are actually closed, I open them and I am instantly slapped with the crushing sights of my studio apartment—my small thrifted television, my crooked

dresser, and folding dining table. I'm drenched in sweat, and my heart is pounding in my chest.

I'm back on the couch.

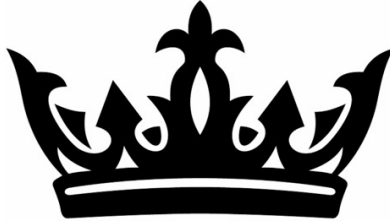
No Dark Castle.

No music.

And certainly no Airic.

It was just a dream.

CHAPTER
TWO



Stella

I want the Dark Castle and the imaginary world of my childhood to be real, desperately. Not just some fantasy I made up to entertain myself or deal with trauma, as diagnosed by my therapist.

I want it so bad, it hurts.

After all these years, I almost forgot how vivid my imagination was. I can still feel the spray of the sea on my skin. I even remember the smell of the air. It's like I was really there, and right now, as I sit here contemplating where I'm going to submit job applications to tomorrow, I long for the comfort the fictional place brings me.

Is that fucked up? That I want to close my eyes and pretend a little while longer that I didn't just walk in on my boss shoving his tiny dick into my archnemesis and lose my job all in the same day? Yeah, probably.

No, definitely, but whatever. I crave the escape. The delusion.

The rest of the evening is a monotonous blur. I shower to try and wash the stress of the day away, but I can't get out of my own head. No matter what I try to distract myself with, whether it's a book, or tv show, or even trying to get myself off. Nothing works.

Has my life really been consumed two things—work and silly nightmarish daydreams?

How pathetic.

I lie in bed and watch the numbers on the clock march on. Sleep won't come.

The more I try to fall asleep, the more I find myself thinking about the dream, about the castle and the beach. About the way the storm rumbled across the sky and the crystal-foam washed in from the ocean. About the way the sand felt between my toes and the breeze felt like a velvet curtain, caressing my skin. About the mysterious prince who lives beyond the black-stone walls.

It all felt so real.

It always feels real.

That's the problem. It's why I used to have such a hard time distinguishing what was true and what wasn't when I was younger.

I shake my head and roll over, burying my face into the pillow. The tears are hot against my cheeks. It's so stupid. Here I am, an adult, crying about a fantasy land I made up when I was a kid.

With a sigh, I turn off the light on my nightstand. The moonlight streams in through the window, painting a stripe across the floor and up the wall, almost like a sliver of silver. My eyes grow heavy, but I don't remember ever slipping into sleep. I must have though because one moment I'm lying there, staring across my small bedroom at nothing in particular, and the next, I'm gasping for air, my forehead damp with sweat. I look over at the clock and see that an hour has passed somehow, and I feel like I've just run a marathon.

An ominous, sickly feeling stirs in my stomach. This isn't the first time I've lost time or felt like I'm standing still while the world rushes by me. Like I'm hovering between life and death, or this plane and another.

My head is swimming, and there's a strange heat moving through me. I'm still trying to calm myself down when heat pools in my core, like a warm hand has settled between my thighs.

I keep telling myself that it's just a dream, but my entire body responds to the touch, like it's being pulled down, away from reality and into the strange world of my dreams.

The shadows on my wall stretch out and lengthen, and fear winds up my spine. The darkness grows and slithers until they're like snakes, hissing and writhing. The light fades until the only thing I can see is the inky blackness closing in on me.

Out of the shadows, a figure starts to appear. Someone tall, with broad shoulders and muscular thighs. His eyes pierce through me like daggers, and I start to recognize him.

Airic.

But not.

He's grown up now. Tall—so much so that he's towering over me—and, fuck, is he sexy. His eyes are still the same deep, stormy blue, but they seem to shimmer in the darkness. He's wearing all black, like he always does. Even when we were kids, it was his staple, but unlike all those years ago, it makes him look dangerous now.

But there's something else in his gaze now too. Something hot and hungry that makes my stomach tighten in anticipation.

He steps closer to me, and I can feel the sizzling heat emanating from his body. I'm paralyzed with fear and desire as he reaches out to touch me. His hand moves along my cheek, down my neck, and to my shock, I *feel* it, the warmth of it, the roughness of his palms. I don't know why, but it makes me shiver all over. It feels so good.

I know I must be dreaming, because my body has never responded like this to a man. I've had enough encounters in my past to know that normally I'm better off with my own hands than anyone else's.

But this dream is different.

The harshness of my breaths echoes around me, and my pulse pounds in my throat. I can smell the musk of his sweat and feel his fingers grazing over my skin. They slide underneath my shirt, and the heat of his fingertips warms the small of my back.

“Airic,” I breathe as his hands move up to cup my breasts. I feel like a fool for even saying his name out loud, sure that whatever is happening right now must be in my head, but part of me is screaming for me not to question it. If this is all a dream, I might as well enjoy it.

“Airic... Is that you?”

He doesn't say anything. He just keeps touching me, moving his hands over my thighs and down my calves. He pushes my legs apart, and I wonder at what point I'll wake myself up.

Hopefully not before the really good part.

When I look up, I stare into the most brilliant blue eyes. They seem to emit a light of their own as they bore into me, and although most of his face is covered in shadows, I can see the hint of a smirk curling his lips. He's in control, and he's enjoying it.

He shifts my sleep shorts and panties to the side to gain full access to the most private part of me. I flush with embarrassment and try to squeeze my legs shut, but growling, he rips my knees apart, wider this time.

I gasp from how rough his touch has suddenly become, but I don't dare stop him.

He stays silent, but his gaze roams over me, over my exposed pussy, and starvation glints in his eyes.

Oh, fuck. This definitely isn't the same Airic I remember.

My mind has aged him up, made him into some kind of sex god that's hungry only for me.

Maybe I've been looking at this all wrong—maybe I need to give my imagination more credit.

He dips one finger inside me, and my body buzzes all over. I don't even realize I'm saying his name until I hear it echoing off the walls of my bedroom. I hear the hunger in my own voice and it surprises me.

I haven't been touched like this, so boldly, so intimately, by a man in a long time. Too long, frankly.

But this isn't just any man. It's Airic.

My Airic.

The man of my dreams—literally. As he slowly pumps his finger into me, I realize I've never wanted anything more than for him to be real and with me like this. Right now.

His gaze refuses to let go of mine as he slides a second finger in and moves them back and forth in a way that makes me so wet, it's dripping down my thighs.

Gaze hungry, he watches my reaction as he pulls his fingers out. He glances down at my slick folds and his eyes widen. Damn, he likes what he sees. He likes knowing that he made me like this.

The room is so dark that I can barely make out the shape of his shoulders and the outline of his head. I feel the roughness of the sheets against my legs and the cool air from the air conditioner on my exposed skin. Is there anything better? More exquisite?

He lowers himself to his knees at the foot of my bed before he drags my hips down to him and dips his head to spread light, fluttering kisses over the outside of my shorts. I let my legs fall open, and I feel how wet I am. I feel how swollen I am as he moves his hands up my stomach and pushes my shirt up to my breasts.

He still hasn't said anything, but I hear a low rumble in his chest. It sounds almost like a growl. He grabs my shorts and wrenches them off, exposing my pussy to him.

When he slides his tongue up along my slit, I think I might die. There's no other way to describe the sensation. It's like I'm coming apart at the seams. It's so intense that every inch of my body comes alive; I'm being touched in a way I've never been touched before.

Just as I'm getting used to the feeling, he shifts his hands underneath my ass to lift me up and spreads my legs apart, just enough to get his mouth at my entrance. His tongue glides in and out, flicking against my swollen clit.

I buck my hips toward him. I need more. I need everything.

He presses his tongue flat against my pussy, and my knees start to shake. I throw my head back and moan loudly as the waves of pleasure crash down on me. I keep rocking my hips up. The wet, slurping sound as he licks me sends me spiraling toward release, every part of me hot and aching and tense.

“Oh, Airic!” I moan, digging my fingers into the sheets. “Fuck, fuck! Oh, god!”

A low chuckle grinds in his throat as he watches me get closer and closer to my orgasm. But before I can climax, he stands up and steps back. I reach for him, wanting to pull him down on top of me and finish this ride into bliss, but I find nothing but air.

My body deflates, and I shake my head to clear away the fog. Airic. He’s not really here. As much as I want him to be, he’s not here. I’m losing my mind. Even my body can’t distinguish between reality and dreams anymore. The fire burning in my middle and the wetness between my legs is very real, even if Airic wasn’t.

Kicking my shorts to the side, I reach between my legs and slide my fingers over my clit, the nub so swollen it almost hurts. I might come from barely touching myself.

I’m so wet that my juices are dripping. I close my eyes and picture his intense, lustful gaze. I want him to be here with me. I want him to fuck me. I want him to keep licking me until I can’t take it anymore.

Rocking my hips up and down, I circle my clit and slide two digits inside. The pain is so good. My stomach tightens as I get closer.

I groan and throw my head back. I’m almost there. I move faster, my hand and hips moving in a rhythm that’s almost too much to take.

“Airic,” I moan, ready to tip over the edge, but a movement out of the corner of my eye stops me in my tracks. I sit up, pulling away from my aching core.

The shadows are growing again, forming a large black circle against one wall of my room. The darkness seeps in out the edges of the circle like oil spilling from a container. Like... a gate. A portal to another world. A world of darkness and shadows. Fear and desire war inside of me and I wonder which one will win out in the end.

Have I... Have I finally lost it?

Whatever I just experienced, the phantom lover who feels as real as anything in this world, has my head in shambles. I shouldn't even consider walking into a large black hole that just randomly appeared in my room.

In fact, that is the opposite of what I should do. If the hole is real.

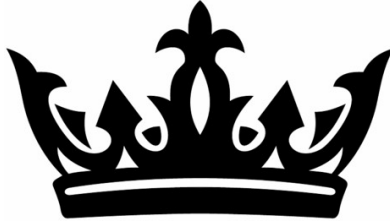
But even so, if more of *that* is inside there, I can't bring myself to walk away from the temptation. My find my shorts on the bed beside me. I hurry to pull them back up to my hips. Then, I stand and cautiously tip toe closer to the expanding black hole before me.

As I peer inside, it looks like it goes on forever, and panic strikes me. I can't see the bottom, and I can't see what's inside, but I can feel something pulling me toward it, like it's calling to me.

I know I should walk away. I know I should run. But I can't. I need to know what's inside. I need to know if this is real. If Airic was really just here or if I'm losing my mind.

So I take a step forward, and then another, until I'm standing at the edge of the hole. Then I take a deep breath and I jump.

CHAPTER
THREE



Stella

The portal engulfs me, its inky blackness sliding over my skin like oil. It seeps into my pores, crawls up my spine. The darkness is alive; it's a living thing that wants to consume me. I can feel it pulling me in, like a black hole.

I squeeze my eyes shut and send a silent prayer out into the universe that I haven't made the worst mistake of my life. When I open them again, I'm in the forest of the Shadow Realm, the portal still spread out in front of me. On the other side is my bedroom.

I could step back through. Forget all this nonsense and go back to my normal life. It's right there. But what good would that do me? I'd just be transporting myself back to a life I can't stand. Where everyone seems to tolerate my existence, at best, and despise it at worst. The thought of the unknown on this side of the portal may be terrifying, but at least here, there's some hope. Which is a hell of a lot compared to the safe, miserable life I lead on the other side.

I take a deep breath. I'm in this now. There's no going back. I'm about to venture into the unknown, and I'm about to do everything in my power to hold on to what I felt with Airic. Whatever that was.

I'm surrounded by tall, dark trees. It's so quiet I can hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears. I even hear my breath as it fills my lungs, and the gravity of what I've just done settles into my bones. *It's done.*

I stretch my fingers out in front of me until they touch the bark of a tree. It's real and strong under my palm. I press my hand into the rough bark, trying to remind myself that I'm really here, that this is really happening.

I twist to the side and run my fingers up the length of the tree to ground myself, each knot in the wood detailed, knobby, and beautiful, just like everything else in this world.

Ahead in the sky, I can just make out the spires of the castle. It isn't far. Not as far away as it was from the beach.

I know it's a terrible idea to keep going, but there's a pull I can't resist. If there's even a remote possibility that Airic is really out there, I have to go.

I take off at a full run through the trees. I don't look behind me, and I don't look at anything to my sides. I focus on the castle in the distance, only slowing down when I'm too tired to run anymore.

I collapse against a tree, my back sliding down the trunk as I try to pull on old memories about this place. I press the back of my hand against my forehead, trying to catch my breath. I can remember that the castle stands in the middle of the forest, surrounded on all sides by towering trees. The leaves rustle and whisper in the wind, like they're sharing secrets. To the south is the gray beach, where the waves come to crash, the sand is made of ash, and the sun sets in a light show of the only color to this world. To the north is a mountain range, capped with snow and home to strange nightmarish birds.

We nearly got caught by them once when we were little, Airic and I. We'd been dumb and stumbled upon a huge nest full of eggs. The mother had come back, and Airic had to distract her while I ran away. I can still remember the terror I felt as I heard the mother, and Airic's screams as she caught him. I thought for sure I was going to die. But I didn't, and we both got away. We were lucky that day.

The memory has me smiling although some of the fear still remains. I push myself up and start moving again. I'm so close. If I can reach the castle, maybe I can find Airic. Maybe he's there, waiting for me.

As I approach the outer courtyard of the castle walls, I freeze when I hear footsteps coming around a corner. I don't know why I'm so terrified, but something tells me I'm not going to be welcome here. Not after Airic banned me from ever returning.

I duck behind the bushes and wait for whomever it is to walk by. My heart stops and my breath catches as they get closer and then stop on the other side of the shrubbery. I clench my hands into fists, trying to refrain from screaming. If I can just get through this, I'll be fine. I can find Airic. *Everything is going to be okay.*

Suddenly, I'm grabbed from behind and thrown over someone's shoulder. I yelp in surprise and start kicking, but it's no use. Whoever has me is strong, and they're not letting go.

"Hush now," a voice says calmly, as if they're trying to soothe a scared animal.

I struggle against the grip, but it only tightens. There's nothing I can do but wait for whatever fate has in store for me.

The person carrying me seems to be in no hurry, as they walk calmly through the castle grounds. I can hear other people walking around, but they all seem to be avoiding us. Whoever this is, they must be someone important.

Finally, we reach a small alcove in the castle walls. My captor ducks inside, still carrying me over their shoulder. They deposit me unceremoniously inside the dark crevice, and I scramble away, putting as much distance between us as possible.

The person moves closer to me, and I flinch. They kneel down so that we're at eye level and touch my face. I try to jerk away, but they catch my chin and hold me in place.

"Let me go!" I cry, struggling against their grip.

"Oh, sweet human. That's not going to happen."

I tilt my head back and take in the sight of him. His jaw is covered in a light dusting of stubble, and his eyes are a deep, dark brown with flecks of gold and green. His lips are full and

parted, and I can see the hint of a dimple in his right cheek. His strong arms are covered in crudely drawn tattoos. *Is everyone from this land sexy as sin?*

“Let me go!” I repeat, trying to wiggle free of his grip.

He laughs and shakes his head, letting go of my face to grab my hair. He pulls me against him, holding me so that our noses are almost touching. His breath flutters over my face, and I can see every pore on his skin. He’s even more handsome close up, if that’s possible.

He raises his face toward the ceiling and takes in a long, slow breath through his nose. “Such a sweet smell of pleasure.”

My stomach sinks. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say as I try to shift away from him.

“You do,” he says. “I can smell it on you just as clearly as I can see it in your eyes.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He takes my chin in his hand again and looks at me, his eyes boring into mine. “Oh, you do,” he says, his voice low and throaty. “Did you do that to yourself, darling? A woman like you should never have to lift a finger, or two, for her own pleasure. There are much better, more fulfilling ways.”

He rubs his thumb back and forth over my bottom lip, and my body starts to respond to his touch. I’m getting wetter and wetter, and I squirm. He leans in closer, his mouth inches from mine.

“I can show you, if you’d like,” he whispers. “I can show you how much better it can be.”

He presses his lips against mine in a soft, gentle kiss, and my body immediately melts into him. Who is this man? His hand moves up to cup my breast, and my nipple hardens under his touch. He teases it with his thumb, rolling it back and forth until I’m moaning softly into his mouth. His other hand moves down to my thigh, pulling up the thin material of my sleep shorts so that he can stroke the bare skin of my leg. His touch

is electric, sending shivers throughout my body as he explores my skin.

His breathing gets faster and his tongue finds its way between my lips. He tastes sweet and smoky, like one of those fancy smoked bourbons at the bar next to my work. This is fantasy come to life, and I want it too badly to worry about right or wrong. Stranger or no stranger.

He slips his fingers underneath the waistband of my shorts and dips into my wetness before teasing my clitoris softly. I moan in response, arching my back as he continues to play with me. He knows just how to touch me, how to bring me to the edge of explosive pleasure and then back away again. Closer and closer and just when I'm about to reach orgasm... he stops and pulls his hand away. Just like my dream earlier.

What the hell?

My eyes pop open and I growl in frustration. He grins at me, his gaze filled with lustful intent.

“Not yet, darling,” he says, his voice taking on a husky quality. “I have been sent here for a job, one I must fulfill first. But when he finishes with you, maybe he'll let me have a taste.” He steals another kiss, deeper this time. His tongue slips into my mouth, caressing and exploring, and I tilt my head back, letting him do whatever he wants with me. He pulls back and stands up, leaving me confused and unsatisfied.

“Who? What is going on?”

“All in good time, my dear,” he says. “All in good time.”

I'm barely listening. As soon as he stopped touching me, I started touching myself. Release is so close. My body aches from being brought to its breaking point too many times and then left wanting. If I don't relieve this ache bubbling up inside of me—

Thinking of what he might do to me stokes my desire even more. If he would just touch me again. My fingers slip and slide through my wetness, circles and then flicks as I try to bring myself the orgasm I so desperately need.

I'm lost in my own mind, focused on the building energy inside me. When I open my eyes, my vision is filled with the image of him, towering over me with a hungry look. I focus on his gaze and the way his attention seems to lock onto me, his sole focus. The rest of the world falls away, and I'm lost.

The deep, primal wanting inside those eyes drives me to the peak, and I crash into my orgasm like a cannonball. Every nerve and muscle in my body tightens and then releases as I come, shuddering and crying out. The intensity of it steals my breath.

He watches me as I come, his attention never leaving my face, the heat searing into my skin. The intensity of it makes me feel exposed and vulnerable, but I can't look away. I'm lost in the pleasure that's coursing throughout my body.

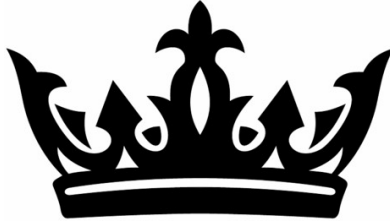
My orgasm seems to go on forever, wave after wave of pleasure crashing over me until I'm left trembling and weak. Finally, I collapse onto the ground, spent and sated.

Slowly, like molasses in winter, he licks his lips. He says the word "later" in a gruff voice, almost as if he's talking to himself. He moves slowly toward me, his expression now cold as ice.

I expect him to touch me again, but he doesn't. Instead, he leans down and picks up my clothing, handing it to me.

"Get dressed. We have places to be."

CHAPTER
FOUR



Stella

As stupid as it sounds, I can't help but feel disappointed that he didn't put his hands on me again. I want more of his touch, more of his pleasure. But when he reaches out for me, it's not to please me, it's to throw me over his damn shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"What the fuck?" I yelp. "I can walk, you know."

"Mm-hmm," he grunts, but he doesn't release his hold. "I'm sure the Dark Prince will be thrilled to hear it."

I huff in response and resign myself to my fate. At least this time I know where we're going.

We pass empty room after empty room, until we come to a set of large double doors. He kicks them open and steps inside. The room is huge and dark, with only a few candles burning. The flickering light casts strange shadows on the walls, and I can just make out the figure of a man sitting on a throne at the center of the room.

He's huge, even sitting down. His shoulders are broad, and his arms are like tree trunks. The muscles bulge as he leans forward. His skin is pale, nearly translucent, but his eyes are as deep blue as the sapphires on his crown, both glittering in the candlelight.

As I look at him, I feel an instant connection, a sense of awareness. My body ignites, responding to his nearness, and I have to suppress a moan.

A memory tickles the back of my mind, just out of reach. Something about this man's hardened expression that rings familiar.

I know him.

Suddenly, it hits me like a ton of bricks. Could this really be my Airic? My childhood imaginary friend who I used to have tea parties with, and the object of last night's wet dream? The idea that he could be real, and standing in front of me now, is both exhilarating and terrifying. I stare at him, taking in every detail from his messy hair to his bright blue eyes. He looks exactly as I imagined he would, except somehow more hardened and cruel.

But even my Airic wasn't without cruelty. After all, last time I was here, he'd banished me and sent me back to an aunt he knew would never love me. I was just a child, and I didn't understand why he was doing it. And even as an adult, I still can't comprehend.

"Airy?" I call out, as the man holding me lowers me to my feet.

Even as regal and grown as he looks, I can't help from calling him the nickname I had for him for so long. He'll always be Airy to me.

He flinches as if I hit him with a physical force, but he quickly recovers. Right now, he is the king of intimidation, and slowly, he rises to his feet, seeming to tower over everything in the room. His hands curl into fists as his gaze flicks over me with extreme disinterest. Maybe even disgust, and my heart twists in my chest.

He...*hates* me? But why?

"Take her to the dungeons," he orders gruffly.

"What! No! Airic, no!"

But he doesn't say anything else.

The man, a knight apparently, slings me back onto his shoulder. I try to kick and punch at him, but my blows don't

do anything to slow him down. Actually, he snorts a laugh at my feeble attempts, which only frustrates me more.

Airic doesn't look at me as I'm carried out, and for some reason, his nonchalance toward me is like a dagger spearing into me. All this time I've wanted to see him again, wanted to revisit this place, and he doesn't want me here.

The pain of his rejection makes me give up with my struggling and sag against the knight. He walks me through the massive doors and down a long tunnel. Damp, musty air presses against my skin. There are rats scurrying around in the darkness. The sound of their small, squeaky claws echoes through the tunnel. My pulse thunders, the blood rushing harshly through my veins. The dungeon is a dank place smelling of death and decay, like the inside of a tomb.

When we get to what I assume will be my cell, he throws me down on a hard, threadbare mattress before turning to lock the door.

The door clicks shut, and I'm alone in the darkness. Anger rises as tears well up in my eyes. Why is he doing this to me? I don't understand what I did wrong, but this is not how things were supposed to end.

I take a deep breath and try to calm myself. The concrete floor is so cold it burns and rats crawl around on the blankets.

I don't know how much longer I'll be here. I bury my face in the pillow and try to block out the sound of the rats. I try to remember the feel of the soft, warm blankets from the last time I was in Dark Castle. I try to remember the smell of the flowers. I try to remember the sound of the stringed instruments and horns. I try to remember the way the sunlight felt on my skin. I try to forget the way that the concrete feels chilled and unyielding. I try to forget that I'm going to be here for a long, long time.

For the first time, maybe ever, I find myself actually hoping that none of this is real. I squeeze my eyes shut tightly, but it doesn't stop the tears from falling. I cry until my eyes are raw and my throat is sore, but even when I'm too tired to continue the fear never leaves me. Why? Why had Airic

reacted this way? Straight to the dungeon without so much as a second thought... If this is real, then what does that mean for the rest of my time here?

Even as I cry and beg to the universe for this to be some sort of terrible dream, I know I'm on my own. Just like I have always been. If I'm going to get out of this cell, it isn't going to be by crying my way out.

I sit on the floor for hours, trying to come up with a plan. The thick padlock on my cell door taunts me. If only I was the kind of girl that wore bobby pins in her hair. But, I'm not. The only thing I have in my possession is one flimsy tank top and a pair of shorts. I'm not even wearing shoes for fuck's sake. I could have been at least a little more prepared to become a prisoner.

Everything here looks centuries old and worn down. Just like the way the forest looks half-dead and the beach is a sea of gray instead of color.

Maybe I'll get lucky and the lock is just as rickety. I stick my hand through the rusting bars of the cell door and reach for it, but a jagged piece of metal slices through the flesh on my hand. The pain is unbearable, and I scream until my throat is raw. Blood pours down my hand and drips through the bars, painting the floor red.

I stop screaming as I realize what that means.

I'm really trapped here—wherever *here* is.

The Dark Castle, my dreams, they weren't imaginary at all. I wasn't crazy.

This world is real. And I'm stuck here.

I sink to the floor and wrap my hand in a torn blanket, trying to slow the bleeding. I sit here for hours, too afraid to do anything but wait to die. Who knows how long I've been locked in here. It could be minutes or hours. I can't even tell what time it is. In this new, frightening reality, I don't know which is worse: being stuck in a cell with no idea of what will happen to me, or the knowledge that I could be here for weeks or years.

It seems like hours before I hear the scuffing of boots. I flinch at the screeching of metal against metal.

Airic opens the door to my cell and walks in seconds later. I shrink back against the bars, trying to disappear into the shadows. This man I once played childhood games with is now the one keeping me in this terrible place. He closes the door behind him and takes a step toward me. I can see the anger in his eyes, and it scares me more than anything else.

“Get up.” His voice is harsh and demanding. I rise to my feet without hesitation.

He grabs me roughly by the wrist and yanks me from my cell before dragging me down a long, dusty hallway. It’s eerily quiet, the only sound the clicking of his heels against the floor and my bare feet shuffling behind him. We come to a room I can only assume is his. It’s large and ornate, with a high ceiling and soft, luxurious furnishings. The walls are covered in tapestries and paintings of noblemen in battle. A large fire burns in the fireplace, casting a warm glow over the room.

Airic pushes me toward a chair that has been set in front of the fire. It’s made out of the same dark, aged wood as the doorway I stepped through earlier. Airic grabs the armrest and forces me down into it. Somehow, strangely, the chair doesn’t seem to be as creaky and decrepit as the others. He sits next to me and grabs me by the chin. I shriek and try to pull away, but his grip is too strong. I can’t move. I can’t get away.

He drags me toward him and I flinch, closer than I want to be while he stares at me through rage-filled eyes. “I told you never to come back here.”

My eyes dart away, toward the beautiful tapestries and paintings of men in battle. They look like they’re going to war, at least. Maybe they are, I don’t know. It doesn’t matter now. Right now, I need to keep my wits about me and try to use them to escape.

“I’m sorry. I had to come. I had to know if all of this was real.”

He takes a deep breath, and I can see his hands shaking. His lips twist into a snarl.

“I told you never to come back here,” he repeats. “No matter what. That doesn’t change just because you got curious.”

I yank harder against him, but it’s like his hand is made of steel. He pulls me back until I’m forced to look at him.

“What are you doing?” I ask him, my voice trembling.

He puts his hands on either side of my head and leans in closer to me. His face is millimeters away, so close that I can see the small freckles on his cheeks and feel the heat coming off his skin. Tears threaten to escape, and I turn my head to avoid his gaze.

The more I try to get away from him, the more forceful he gets, even shaking me. Until he reaches down to my injured hand. He presses his thumb against the red soaking through the torn sheet and into my wound.

The pain racks through me immediately, but I try to ignore it and pretend I’m fine. He’s still watching me, staring into my soul and seeing everything wrong with me while he tries to analyze my reaction.

As his hand presses harder into my wound and the warmth spreads throughout my body, the pain is still there, but it’s not...unbearable. I feel the pressure of his thumb, but it doesn’t hurt now that the adrenaline has kicked in.

What would his hands feel like if they were on my skin for pleasure rather than pain?

His breath warms my neck and his scent fills my lungs, drawing a small moan from my lips. I’ve never felt anything like this before, and I’m not sure if I’m more turned on or more afraid. I’ve never been one to get off on pain, but the mix of sensations through my body are bringing me to the edge.

I try to push him away, but his grip is too strong, his demeanor made up of a strange amalgam of lust and anger. What does he want from me?

“You never listen,” he says. “Would you like me to remind you what happens to little girls who don’t listen?”

I swallow hard and open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. It’s like my mouth isn’t listening to my brain anymore.

“That’s what I thought,” he says when I don’t respond.

Before I can even register what’s happening, he’s pulling me out of the chair and away to another room. My heart is racing, and I’m not sure what’s going on. One moment he’s having me thrown into a dungeon and the next he’s acting like he wants to fuck my brains out.

This time, he pulls me into a room that is lit by flickering firelight. The elegant room was obviously made for royal guests at some point. It’s elaborately painted, and the walls are covered in more beautiful tapestries, the same as the one in his room. The floor is made of polished marble and covered with large, luxurious rugs. Set into the far wall is a magnificent bay window that looks out over the forest and the beach beyond.

I gasp as I take in the beauty and splendor of the room, but as I go to turn around to Airic, he’s gone. The door closes behind him, and the lock clicks into place.

It’s just another prison. A prison gilded in gold, but a prison nonetheless.

I scramble for the window and pull it open, hoping maybe I can jump out. If it’s low enough to the ground, I could escape. And if it’s tall enough... Well, that will just be another type of escape. It would be better than being held captive and subjected to the cruel Dark Prince’s mood swings. Next time he might just decide to be completely done with me and have me killed. If I’m going out, at least I want to be in control of it.

Outside the window, the shadows of the trees and the spires of the castle seem to swirl and take on a life of their own. They turn toward me, reaching for me like inky fingers. I look down and try to gauge the distance. Definitely survivable. Or at least, not entirely deadly. But the way the shadows move and dance in my direction gives me the creeps. I’m not totally

sure that they are just shadows at this point, and jumping out into their control seems like a terrible idea.

Two days pass, and I spend every waking moment trying to think of ways to escape. The window is my only hope, but I'm also not sure if I could make it through the forest without that damn knight coming after me if I tried to escape that way.

I haven't seen a soul except for the servants that get to bring me food, and I'm not entirely sure they are human. They're more like some sort of shadow-human hybrid. Human enough to have two legs, two arms, and what I can only assume is a face. But not human enough for me to be able to tell anything about their exact characteristics. It's as if my brain doesn't want my eyes to focus on them.

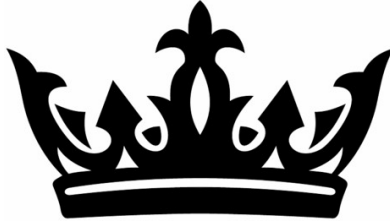
The shadows enter through the crack under the door and crawl across the floor, their black forms blotting out the light. They seem to come from nowhere, there and gone in a blink. Sometimes I see them when I'm least expecting them, and my heart nearly skips a beat.

They set a tray of food on the small table near the fireplace and then take their leave again, as if they were never there. After I'm done with whatever they brought, the plate stays there until I look away. As soon as my attention is diverted, it somehow disappears. I can't help but wonder if they're really there at all. If it's all just a hallucination.

It's not like I'm starving. The food they bring is full of meat and fruits and vegetables and other delicious things. But I am starving for some sort of interaction. I've never felt more alone, and that's saying something after the childhood I had.

This may not be the prison cell they put me in to begin with, but it doesn't feel any better, and I'm more than aware that if I don't get out of here soon, I'm going to lose my mind. I have to find a way out before it's too late.

CHAPTER
FIVE



Airic

“Airic,” someone says at the door before it flies open and Wels charges into the room without so much as a knock. He snatches up a chair as if it were his own and plops down, arranging himself in a way that lets him stretch out a leg and put his arm behind his head.

Then he grins at me.

His smile isn't warm; there's some unspoken malice behind it. Something devious lurks behind those eyes. He never smiles at me unless there's some sort of torrid scheme in play. I shiver but keep the movement to myself, knowing better than to let him see it.

“Is that any way to enter the chambers of your prince?” I ask sarcastically, raising an eyebrow. I'm sitting in a chair lined with cushions and velvety dark fabric by the fire, trying to relax, but he obviously has different plans for the evening.

His long, wavy blonde hair falls over his face, and he blows strands of it out of the way. “A little birdie told me you have a secret,” he teases.

Though I know there's no way he could possibly know about Stella, panic pools in the back of my throat. “I have no idea what you're talking about,” I lie, forcing my body to show no sign of alarm.

His eyes narrow, and he locks me in a stare. He isn't threatening, but he has the look of someone who knows exactly what he's doing and is doing it to his advantage. “Oh,

come on, Airic. You are a terrible liar.” He crosses his arms over his chest.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” This time, I’m stronger, and I don’t let my lies sound too severe. I don’t want him to know that he’s affecting me.

His expression softens. He looks faintly amused, like I’ve said something funny. “You can’t hide from me, you know. It doesn’t take much for me to see right through you.” He shrugs as he smirks.

“I’m not hiding. You’re just imagining things.”

He laughs. “When have I ever imagined things?”

“I don’t know.” I’m being vague to give myself a chance to think. To let a human stay here, in this world, in this castle, is dangerous. Deadly, even. But I couldn’t help myself. From the moment I laid eyes on her, back in the throne room, I knew I couldn’t let her go again.

She’s my weakness.

She always has been.

“Are you going to tell me about whatever it is?” he asks as he glares at me. I have to wonder what’s going through his head. He wants something, I’m sure of it. Wels loves to pretend he’s this light-hearted, fun guy, but underneath all of it there’s a sick, sinister side of him vying for my power.

“There is nothing to tell.” I match his glare. “And I don’t appreciate being pushed. If you don’t drop this—”

“You know...you’re really bad at playing dumb.”

“I’m not,” I insist. Though even to me, it sounds more like I’m trying to convince myself. I’m not sure why I feel the need to answer to him. “And besides, you forget yourself. I am your prince. You dare to interrogate your ruler? I could have you put to death.”

“Another time, perhaps.” He stares at me with an interested and expectant look. He knows there’s something wrong; he’s always been able to read between the lines even when I would rather he keep his curiosity to himself.

“Anyway,” he says with a dismissive wave of his hand when I fail to respond, “What’s the secret? What are you hiding in the guest chambers?” My threats are nothing but a joke to him. He knows I need him on our side. His shapeshifting abilities rival my own, and he’s good in a fight. For now, he plays the part of a comrade, be it an insufferable one.

“Just tell me what you want, Wels.”

“I want to know what’s behind the locked door. I know you have secrets, but this is something new. Something big. The shadows have been whispering.”

I try to calm my breathing, but I’m anything but calm inside. I can’t let him know that he’s gotten under my skin. There’s an underlying tension in the air, one I can’t explain, like a rhythm I can’t seem to break.

I can’t trust this guy—his eyes are as mercurial as the sea, and as full of secrets, too. But I was so careful. Only Reis and the shadow servants know she’s here. Reis would never tell; he’s been my loyal knight for so long that I’d trust him with my life. In fact, I have on several occasions.

Power ripples under Wels’s skin as his frustration builds with the silence.

“Fine,” he says finally. “I’ll just have to find out what’s behind the door on my own.”

And with that, he rises up from the table and strides toward the door. I leap out of my seat and stand in his way.

“No, Wels. You won’t.”

He stops and lifts a brow in question. “Why not?”

“For once in your insubordinate life, will you please just trust me on this? Do not go trying to uncover secrets. You could harm more people than just me.”

I can’t rely on him to keep me safe; he’d overthrow me in a moment if he thought he had a chance. But, maybe, hopefully, I can appeal to his better nature to protect others.

He stares at me for long moments, studying me, and then finally nods. He's not going to push me, but I know he's going to be back. "Whatever you say, my prince."

I can't tell if he's being sarcastic or not. It sounds sincere, but there's something about Wels that makes me uneasy, and I can't quite put my finger on it. He has always been a pain in the ass and, frankly, a little too interested in what goes on around me.

Knowing nothing else to do, I sit back down on the chair and watch as he leaves the room. I lean forward and rest my arms on the table. I made a mistake. I should have sent her back to the human realm the very instant she was found. She should have never come back, but it almost seems as though the moment I let her go, something has always been pulling us back together.

It may be that pull that I'm feeling right now, or it might be that the conversation with Wels has left me on edge. Either way, every cell in my body is telling me to go check on her, dragging me closer with each thump of my heart.

I rise out of the chair and walk calmly out the door. My feet feel like they are moving of their own accord. I have this nearly irresistible desire to bolt, to get there as fast as possible, but I can't let anyone who may be in the castle halls grow suspicious. I must play it cool, so I keep my pace slow and steady as I make my way from my room toward the guest chambers.

My chest constricts as I approach the door. I hesitate before pushing it open, suddenly terrified that I'll find her dead.

What if—

I move quickly inside, shutting the door behind me and locking it. I'm in the room, and she's still alive. I inhale a breath and exhale deeply before turning around and walking toward her.

My heart is racing. All the thoughts running through my head are a mix of relief and fear. Though I know being here

puts her in more danger than she can imagine, part of me can't help but feel like this was inevitable. She's here, in my castle, and I can't fight the pull any more than a boat could fight a rising tide.

She's standing just a few feet away from me, her back against the wall, her eyes wide and fearful. For a moment, I'm frozen in place. It feels like everything inside me has stopped spinning, and all I can see is her. I want to reach out to her, but instead, I stay where I am, afraid that if I move close enough, she'll disappear again. Like a dream.

"Airic." Tears well in her eyes. "Please don't send me back to the dungeon." Her voice is small and shaky, the fear evident in every syllable. "I wanted to see you again. I *needed* to see you again."

The admission tears through me like a blade. All these years I've been missing her, denying my feelings for her, trying to push the thought of her away because I was afraid of what might happen if she came back.

But it's too late for any of that now.

A thought occurs to me, and I shove down all the weakness, putting on a strong façade, doing the only thing I've ever known to do—rule by fear.

"You're not going back to your world," I say firmly, walking closer to her. She shrinks against the wall and stares up at me with wide eyes. I don't want her to hate me, but what choice do I have? "You've made a mistake." My voice is chillingly cold, even to my own ears.

She breaks eye contact, her body noticeably trembling, and I feel even worse. "What do you want from me?" she asks softly.

It's all I can do not to approach her and take her in my arms, to reassure her that everything is going to be alright. That she has nothing to worry about. But I can't tell her any of those things because I don't know if it will be true.

Things may never be right again.

“Oh, so many things.” It is the only truth I’ll allow to slip out. I finally close the distance between us and run a finger down her soft, sculpted cheek. I smile down at her, my heart hammering away in my chest. I’ve never been so sure of my ability to deceive anyone in my entire life and I’m not worried at all that she can see through it. “Like those beautiful lips around my cock as I push myself deep inside your throat...”

Her breathing hitches at my words, and a smirk slides across my face. She likes it when I talk bluntly like this. I had a feeling she would.

“I want to fuck that wicked mouth of yours, make you gag as you swallow me down.”

Her eyes light up, and my dick jumps at the thought of fulfilling this fantasy of mine.

I want to—oh *shit*, do I want to—but with the danger of her being here at the forefront, I need to concentrate on keeping her safe before anything else. As tempting as it may be to take her now.

“But the first thing I need is for you to stop trying to figure out a way to escape.”

Her eyes widen even further. Wels isn’t the only one the servants have been whispering to, and I’m more than aware of how she’s spent her time in this room. I know I should be taken aback at her blatant defiance, but I’m not. I’ve seen her this way before, when we were children, and I know she’s scared. Really scared. And right now, she’s about as scared as my heart is of the truth I’ve been trying so hard to hide from the world.

I snap my fingers to force her attention back to me and all traces of her desire are gone now. I can almost feel the cold, icy fear radiating from her, but she doesn’t dare show it on her face.

“Listen to me. You stop trying to escape, and we focus on going forward. I have my own plans for you, you know,” I say, my voice smooth and steady. “There is much you can do within the walls of the Dark Castle to earn your keep.”

I press my lips to hers, and for only a moment, I feel something I had been desperate to feel for so long. I don't know what it is exactly, but fuck, I've craved the sensations she's always brought out of me since the day we stumbled into each other's lives.

"Airic," she says as I pull away. "I've dreamed about that kiss, longed for it, needed it for so long. You were the only good part of my childhood. You were my solace, my best friend. And then you were gone."

She has no idea that being away from her has driven me to the edge of insanity, how each day seemed more and more empty without her smile. "And then I found my way back, but you're all grown up and different. I thought... I thought maybe you'd forgotten about me."

"I'm sorry," I say softly, hoping that will be enough. But she's not done yet, and she takes a step closer to me, her eyes searching mine for some kind of answer I never could give her.

"Why?" she asks. She sounds pained. "Why did you send me away? What happened?"

I have no answers for her. At least, none that will not put her more in danger.

When I don't respond, she continues, taking a different approach. "Do you remember how it used to be? We would spend hours playing tag or hide-and-seek or pretending to be the other characters from our favorite stories. We would laugh until our stomachs ached, and there was nothing in the world that could bring us down. Those were the best moments of my life, Airic."

And I do. Even now, after all this time, I can still feel the warmth of her smile against my skin. I remember the times we would spend together fondly. It was always a joy to see her happy, and she was one of the few people who made me feel comfortable in my own skin. There was something about her innocence that just drew me in, like there was nothing I couldn't handle as long as I had her by my side.

But that was before. As a child, I knew she was different, but I couldn't understand why it mattered so much. It wasn't until we started to mature that I finally figured it out. She was different because she was human, and humans were never meant to exist in our realm.

"We're both different now," I say as I gaze down at her. She runs a finger lightly along the edge of my lips, and I smile at the intimate gesture. She bites her lip as she meets my eyes, and I can't help but reach out and caress her cheek once more, relishing in the soft silk of her skin.

Closing her eyes, she leans into my touch, her body pressing against mine. I can feel the heat radiating between her legs, and her slight moan as I wrap my arms around her nearly undoes me.

I shake my head as I clear away the lust where it's formed cobwebs in my mind before I roughly pick her up and move her to the bed. There's too much at stake now, and I need to get her back under control as soon as possible.

"Now," I say as she falls back against the pillows. "You will stay here in my castle, with no way to escape. You will do as I say, and you will do as you're told."

She nods slowly, her eyes filled with fear.

"Nobody will ever know that you've been here. But if you try to escape, or if you disobey any of my commands, I will not be forgiving."

She looks at me with uncertainty for a moment, and I curse myself for my choice of wording. This isn't the way it was supposed to go. She's not supposed to fear me now; she's supposed to trust me, to be willing to do anything I tell her to.

"Do you promise?" she asks tauntingly.

I smile at how she still wants me to be the hero, not the villain. She still has a lot to learn about who I've become if she thinks I won't fulfill that threat.

"I promise," I say before leaning in and capturing her lips in a searing kiss. It's a stark contrast to the gentle touch that

moments ago had been so loving, but I can't afford to think about that right now.

She wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me onto the bed with her. Instantly, our bodies melt together, giving into the fire burning between us. As I kiss her hungrily, my hands move down her body to grasp her hips. She feels so good, and I can't resist the temptation of touching her. Everywhere.

How is it that this woman could always make me lose control so quickly? It's one of the reasons I tried pushing her away. She's dangerous for me.

Her body writhes beneath me as if seeking more of my touch. My cock throbs hard against her thigh, begging for attention, and I laugh.

"This is what you're here for," I say in a husky voice. "Isn't it?"

She nods eagerly, her eyes searching mine. There's hunger there, and confusion, and all I think about is the two of us together. Wanting her, taking her, claiming her as mine. I lean in closer, pushing aside any thoughts of why this is happening or what the consequences might be.

"Do you remember," she asks between heaving breaths, "how you promised me I would one day be your queen?"

She means it to be amusing, but my body stills as I pin her in place with an icy glare. It's an innocent question, but its implications are clearer to me than she knows.

"You are here for my pleasure, Stella. Not as my queen. Do not let yourself be disillusioned. I will use your body as I wish, but that does not give you the right to the throne."

She looks wounded, but only for a moment. As quickly as the vulnerability appeared, it was wiped away by a shrug of her shoulders.

"Fine," she says simply. "I'll just go back into my elaborate prison and waste away like you want."

"You will respect me," I growl.

She sighs, pulling away. “I will respect you only as long as you respect me.”

“You will do as I say,” I order.

“I will do as I please,” she counters.

I don’t remember her being this bold when we were younger. But as much as I want to snuff out that fire, dominate her, I love the fieriness in her at the same time. When my cock twitches in my pants, it’s clear my body does too.

I push off the bed to create more space between us, and in the distance, my mind clears more. Towering over her small, slender frame, I square my shoulders. She’s a human, and she’s trying to face off with me—a monster.

Does that make her stupid? Or brave?

“Do not act as if you’re in control here. You are not,” I bite, finally deciding that I must take control of her now, before she gets too cocky.

She laughs and moves to the edge of the bed. “You’re right,” she says, chin lifted. This time, she meets my eyes without fear. “Things have changed since the last time I was here. *I’ve* changed. I’m not the same lost little girl I was before. I’ve lived with demons my entire life, so you don’t scare me.”

Crossing the room, she heads for the door.

Two thoughts spear into me at once.

The first being, how fucking dare she. I need to make her pay for mocking me like this.

And the second being that I don’t want her to leave.

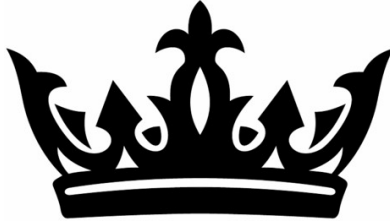
I want to go back to where we just were, with her in my arms.

What is wrong with me?

Stella’s only been in my world for a short time, and she’s already started to uproot my life.

CHAPTER

SIX



Stella

“You seemed to like it when you weren’t in control in your bedroom the other night. You loved my control then.”

Airic’s words make me stop in my tracks and whip around to face him again.

Wait...

If what he says is true, then it really *was* him that night. Not just some dream or premonition. He was really in my room, his hands all over me. His mouth...

Oh. My. God.

My stomach flips and heat spreads through me. When I turn around, I find that he’s smirking at me, like he can read my mind. Embarrassment scalds my cheeks, and I struggle to even meet his gaze. Especially when a slow smile curls across his face.

“That’s right,” he says. “I was there, and you did love it. I could feel how much you wanted me inside you, how wet you were. Now, you treat me like a nightmare. But that night, I was your deepest fantasy. Things do change, don’t they?”

He laughs and shakes his head as he walks over to me. He traces his fingers gently down my arm, causing a wave of goose bumps over my flesh.

“I was everything you dreamed I’d be. Wasn’t I?” He slides his hand around my waist, pulling me close. His other

hand comes up to cup my face, stroking my bottom lip with his thumb.

“Yes.”

“I loved how you responded to me,” he whispers. “You were so eager, so ready for anything I wanted to do to you.”

I shiver, my body heating with his words.

He leans in, his mouth brushing against mine. “I can’t wait to do it again,” he murmurs, “to have you at my mercy, begging for more.”

When his arousal presses against me, desire pools at my core. “Please,” I whisper. “I need you like that again.” *Everything*. That’s what I really want.

Luckily for me, he doesn’t need to be asked twice. He lifts me up and carries me further into my bedroom, locking the door behind him. He lays me down on the bed and starts to undress me, his hands worshipping my body, touching the secret places that send me spiraling toward the heavens.

He brings his lips to my collarbone, dropping featherlight kisses that make my skin tingle. The warmth of his face against my skin makes me want more. His kisses go lower, trailing down between my breasts and across my stomach until he gets to the edge of my shorts.

I squirm against him as he grabs the waistband and hooks his fingers around each side, tugging them off with a soft knee-weakening whoosh. The anticipation is driving me crazy. He shifts his attention to my inner thighs and I jump a little as he reaches the patch of dark hair. I arch my back to push up against him as he finally draws a finger across my folds, touching lightly before slipping inside and moving in a circle.

Holy hell! My hips buck. A loud moan escapes, burning my throat on its way out, and Airic adds a second digit, pushing further into me. I cry out as he hits a sensitive spot deep within me that I hadn’t known existed.

The things this man does to me...

He doesn’t even need to try.

He quickens his touch and my breath explodes out of me.

“You like that, don’t you?”

He withdraws his fingers and replaces them with his tongue, lapping at my wetness. I grip at his hair as he brings me closer and closer to the edge. Just when I’m about to fall over, he pulls away, leaving me trembling and longing for more.

He lies down next to me, his touch light once again as he caresses my skin. I murmur his name, wanting so badly to touch him, to grab his cock in my palms and work him until he explodes. I run my hands through his hair but he catches my wrists and pins them above my head. Fire whips through my core and my pussy clenches in anticipation.

He puts his lips to my ear. “Unh, unh, unh. You were a naughty girl, touching me without my permission,” he whispers. “What do you think we should do about that?”

I moan softly, my breath catching at the thought of what he had planned.

“Please.” The word leaves my lips in a gasp as I wiggle. Already anxious to feel his body against mine, inside of mine. Wherever he wanted to put himself as long as he’s with me. “Please.”

He leans back and looks me straight in the eyes, still holding my wrists tight. “What will you give me in return?”

I don’t even have to think about it. “Anything,” I whisper.

“Anything I want?” His blue eyes darken a shade.

I nod my head. “Yes. Anything.”

He smiles wickedly at me before letting go of one of my hands. He brings it to his mouth and wraps his lips around my finger, sucking on it.

“Anything?” he asks, pulling back as though making sure I’d made up my mind. The many buttons glisten on his double breasted and beautifully embroidered vest, reminding me of his royal status. What I really want is to strip him out of his expensive clothes and see what lies underneath.

The way my body aches for his probably isn't healthy, but I can't help it. "Yes..."

He leans over me and kisses me deeply, his tongue sliding over my lips and into my mouth. I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him into me. He slips a hand beneath my hips and pulls me off the bed before flipping me over. His free hand plays lightly over my hip bone until goosebumps erupt across my skin.

As if he's trying to memorize my curves, he gently rubs my lower back before moving over my butt and squeezing, grazing over the sensitive skin there. His hands trace back up my spine and he flips me over onto my back again.

"Good." He presses himself against me, the hard length of him near my heat. Even through his pants, I can feel all of him. Every inch. And there's a lot under the fabric, waiting for me. I arch my hips up to meet him.

Fiddling with his belt, he quickly frees his cock and rubs it against my wetness, humming with satisfaction. "Oh, yes. I've waited far too long for this."

Me too.

He slides into me slowly, inch by inch, until he's buried deep, my body adjusting to the size of him. He's...larger than I expected. There's an aching pain at first, but after an instant of discomfort, there's sweet, sweet bliss. I clench around him with need, and my legs wrap around his hips to keep him in place.

Before he begins to move, I feel a sensation I'm completely familiar with and not expecting at all. Just like my favorite toy at home, his erection begins to vibrate inside me. Okay. Better than any sex toy and definitely better than any dream.

His hips thrust in a perfect rhythm with mine, the vibration of his cock driving me wild, and I can feel myself nearing the edge quickly. I never thought it possible to shake with pleasure until now.

He increases the intensity of the vibration, and I scream.

He doesn't stop, his hips thrusting deep. My cries only seem to egg him on. His pace relentless as he drives into me. The constant vibration of his rock hard cock sends me spiraling off into a shocking orgasm, one that has my muscles quivering and colors exploding behind my eyelids.

"That's right, Stella. I own your pleasure. You're mine." His voice rumbles across my skin. His demanding words make my head fuzzy.

Being his...? Owned by him...? I want to whimper just at the idea.

He slows down the vibration as he pulls out of me, and I immediately miss the sensation. He flips me over so I'm on my hands and knees, and he enters me from behind. The vibration is even greater this way, and he hits all the right spots. I come quickly, but he doesn't stop.

He grabs my hair and pulls me back, arching me until the top of my spine is against his chest. He grabs my neck, digging into my skin, as his free hand moves down, sliding between my legs. He rubs my clit, his fingers pressing in circles. I'm so close to another mind-numbing orgasm, but this time, he pauses at the exact time to stop me from going over the edge.

"Not yet," he whispers.

Airic times his touch with the thrusts of his cock and the pressure builds inside of me. I still want more.

"Please," I cry out. "Please let me come."

"You need to know your place, Stella," he whispers. "You'll do as I say, and you'll come when I give you permission." His tone leaves no room for argument.

Frustration builds along with sensation in my core. I've never wanted anything so badly in my life. I'm getting light-headed as I beg for him to let me hit that blissful high.

"Now," he says as thrusts into me, tilting his hips and burying himself deep. He increases the pressure of his thumb on my clit, and my body responds to his command. I come

again, my world shattering all around me, my head thrown back in pleasure.

He continues to move, his hips thrusting punishingly. He tenses, his own climax close, and I move my hips back to meet his. His cock throbs deep within me, and the vibrations are more intense than ever. When his orgasm hits, it hits hard. His hips buck wildly, his cock twitching.

He pulls out of me, and it's all I can do not to beg for him to put himself back inside me. I'm still shaking from the force of his orgasm, and my body is still craving his touch. He lies down on the bed beside me, pulling me close against him, and I curl up in his arms.

"Good girl," he whispers. "See what happens when you follow my orders? You get rewarded."

Hearing him call me a 'good girl' has my libido spiking again, but I'm so sore, so achy, in the best kind of way. My pussy is throbbing with its own pulse right now, and exhaustion presses me deeper into the mattress.

We stay quiet for a while as the aftershocks of the sex settle over us. The air in the room is cold against my sweat-slicked skin, but with Airic holding me, I feel safe, comfortable, like this is where I should be.

After years of doubting my own sanity and other people telling me this world wasn't real, I'm back. With him, my Shadow Prince.

"Airic?" I call out to him lazily.

"Hmm?" he answers behind me. His warm breath fans out across the back of my neck, tickling me.

"Why did you send me away all those years ago? Why didn't you want me here, with you?"

A few seconds pass and he doesn't answer.

"Airic?"

"You're tired," he says, clearly ignoring my question. "It's time to get some sleep."

“But—”

“Sleep.” The word slices through the air, sharp and deadly, and I press my lips together.

Fine. Obviously, he isn’t ready to talk about it yet. I still want to know the answer—I’ve wanted to know for years—but it looks like I’ll have to tread lightly on this subject. Or suffer his wrath.

Instead of fighting and pushing him away, I let my eyes drift close and relish in the fact that I have him again. Within moments, sleep takes me away.



When I wake the next morning, I’m alone. I immediately try the door, only to find it’s locked, just like it was before. I’m stuck in this room again, as if last night never even happened. Apparently, sleeping with the prince doesn’t give me the freedom to roam the castle.

How long will it be until he visits me again? Or until I have any kind of interaction with another living creature?

For now, I’m stuck.

I’m sure as hell not giving up. I’ll get out of here somehow. I just need to wait for my chance. I settle back into bed and an easy rest, and when I wake a second time, I’m still alone.

There’s nothing to do but eat, sleep, and explore my bedroom. I find one of the many doors leads to a large bathroom with a clawed bathtub, double sink, and white marble floors. There are closets and *more* closets, all fully stocked with gowns of every color of the rainbow. Beads, lace, silk, corsets... It’s like I’m going to be playing princess dress up but as an adult.

I grab one of the more modest dresses I can find—a black number with a beaded bodice and ruffled skirt. When I peer at myself in the standing mirror, I blink at the way my new pale blue hair color stands out even more with the dark fabric.

It's such a drastic change from my usual mousy brown waves. Even though it would always happen whenever I crossed into this realm, it's going to take some getting used to again. As a kid, it was almost like a superpower I had. Now that I'm older, it makes me look more...like a vixen. A bombshell.

A new me.

Time passes, but I'm not sure if it's been days, weeks, or months. Eventually I stop keeping track of the days. I've tried to find ways to pass the time, but what else is there? I've memorized every inch of this room. I know exactly how many steps it is from one side to the other.

I pace when I'm restless and do sit-ups and push-ups when I'm bored. But there's only so much you can do in an empty room.

I'm starting to go stir-crazy. The lack of human interaction is really getting to me. I try to talk to myself, but it's not the same as having a conversation with someone else.

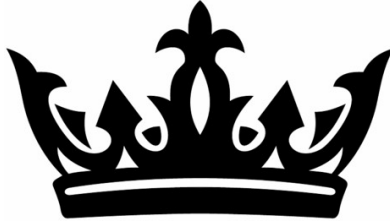
Finally, it happens. Instead of just sliding in through the crack between the floor and the door, one of the shadow servants opens the door a crack to bring in my tray. I see my opportunity and I take it.

The servant is just setting the tray down on the table when I make my move. I lunge for the door, push it open, and dart out into the hallway. I need to get out of here.

I run as fast as I can, not knowing where I'm going or what I'm going to do when I get there. All that matters is getting away from this place.

I round a corner and slam into someone, bouncing off them and falling to the ground. My heart sinks as I look up to see who it is. I don't know him, but from the wicked glint in his eye, I can tell he's trouble.

CHAPTER
SEVEN



Wels

Her fear is palpable even before I see her. Her flesh is slick with sweat, and the scent of her hair permeates the air around her. Human sweat. Human hair. Foreign to this realm. *Forbidden.*

She barrels toward me. The whites of her eyes are as large as moons and her pupils as tiny as pinholes. As our bodies collide, the blowback knocks her to the ground. She slams her rear into the stone and stares up at me with her mouth open. Surprise tenses her muscles as I reach down, grab her, and brace her against my chest to feel the thud of her heartbeat against mine.

“Woah there,” I say with a laugh. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you to watch where you’re running?”

Her lungs heave, panicked, and her breasts press deliciously to me. Her face is exotic, with high cheekbones and shock-bluish hair. She fucking stinks of fear. I love it.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I say.

Like she’ll actually believe me.

She mumbles something, but I can’t make out the words, her voice trembling along with the rest of her body. Then she surprises the fuck out of me when she pushes back, hard, her elbow catching me in the ribs and digging deep.

I nearly lose my grip on her but tighten my hold.

“Where are you going so fast?” I say as she struggles to break free. “You’re not supposed to be out here.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Sure. I’m not doing that.”

She growls and leans back, putting all of her weight into the movement. I fucking love that, too. She is so forceful, so goddamn primal. She looks down at my hand around her waist with her cheeks going pink.

“What are you doing?” she spits. “Let me go. Take your hands off of me.”

“I’m trying to calm you down. You’re going to kill yourself or someone else running around like this.” She can try, at least.

She’s determined to escape me, but I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder so that she might quit struggling and we can have an actual conversation instead of just grunts. It’s my favorite position for her. So far.

Her little fists beat against my back and although I can’t hear her open her mouth to scream, I do hear the audible inhalation as she prepares to bellow in my ear. I reach back and clamp a hand over her mouth, squeezing her cheeks instead.

Well, that didn’t work.

She whimpers against my hand, struggling against me although I hold her tight.

In every place our bodies touch, my power buzzes through me. When I first grabbed her it was a small tingle, but the longer we touch, the longer I hold her, the more intense it gets until I’m almost drunk with the stuff.

“My name is Wels,” I tell her slowly, trying another tactic. “And I assume you’re Airic’s little secret. Hmm? The one he doesn’t want to talk about.”

She stills and I know I’m right. That sneaky bastard. He’s been hiding a whole-ass human in the castle and then tried to

lie to me and say that nothing was going on. This is a whole lot of sexy nothing.

“Don’t worry,” I assure her. “I won’t tell anyone.”

The words come out before I can stop them. I have no clue what I’m going to do, really, but I do know there’s something about her. My power is responding to her in ways I’ve never felt before. Like it’s right under my skin, pressing toward the surface, growing and shifting and ready to be used.

She’s still and silent against my shoulder, so I assume she’s calming down. I decide to chance a question.

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she whispers when I remove my hand from her mouth.

“You’re here, in this castle. How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t know, or don’t want to tell me?” I ask her gently.

“I don’t know,” she says again, and I believe her. Airic is precisely the type of asshole to kidnap such a beautiful creature and leave her to rot. “It’s been...days, maybe? Or longer. It’s hard to tell.”

“Okay, then tell me this, what is your name?”

“Stella. I’m Stella.”

Ah, Prince Airic’s little star. He’s made a wish, and here you are.

How poetic.

“Well, Stella, let’s get you back to your room before someone who is not as nice as me finds you wandering these hallways.”

She sobs lightly against me but doesn’t protest. “I don’t want to go back. Please.”

“Look, it’s safer for you here than anywhere else,” I tell her. “The forest will kill you. This is for your own safety. If I

set you down, do you promise not to run?”

She nods and makes an agreeable sound. Even though I’m skeptical that she’s telling the truth, I set her onto her own two feet. The moment I do, my power goes fucking crazy, itching and burning under my skin, demanding that I hold her tight and keep her close. It’s not something I’ve ever felt before. I push against it, unwilling to show her any sign of what’s going on with me below the surface.

She shivers and it takes every ounce of my willpower not to pull her into my arms to get the sensation to abate. But I do let my hand rest against her lower back to guide her down the hall. She walks beside me quietly, her arms crossed over her chest and her eyes cast down to the ground. Her chest is heaving, and her hard nipples poke through her thin shirt.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Of everything to notice about this woman, that’s where my brain goes?

The effect she’s having on my power must be influencing my sex drive as well, because I can’t seem to quit thinking about her body and how I want to claim it. How I want to slide my dick right into the creamy crevasse between her breasts and watch her sigh, groan, beg me for more.

I try to think of something to say so that I don’t have to focus on the way she nibbles on her lips or how she looks at me with an odd expression when she thinks I’m not paying attention. The little quirks and movements are so...human.

“Tell me about yourself,” I blurt out to distract myself from my increasingly dirty thoughts.

She shrugs. “There’s not much to tell.”

“Well, then, tell me where you’re from.”

She glances at me from the corner of her eye, then away again. Her hands are buried in her pockets, and she’s scuffing her feet along the marble floors as we walk, hesitant to go back to her room, I’d imagine. She shakes her head. She doesn’t reveal anything about herself, so I switch gears.

“Human lands, then?” I ask.

She nods but doesn't say anything.

"How did you get here? How did you manage it, boring little human?"

It's a valid question for a variety of reasons. She shouldn't be able to enter this place, but somehow Airic found a way around that. Will that pose a potential security threat to our lands? Is there a breach somewhere? Should we be worrying about others being able to infiltrate our castle?

"You ask a lot of questions," she counters suddenly.

"You've piqued my curiosity. Can you blame me?"

The way she looks at me sends a shock of desire throughout my body.

Airic will probably have me killed if I touch her, but fuck him. He's been a selfish prick for as long as I've known him. If he's already abandoned her and doesn't plan on claiming her, then it's not a threat to me. I don't know why I care, but I found her, and now she's mine to protect. It's been a long fucking time since I've made a commitment to anything, but that's what this feels like.

My power churns under my skin, and I know I've made the right decision. The more time I spend with her, the more my power reacts, and the more I know I have to have her. Maybe not now, maybe not even soon, but one day.

The only reason I haven't challenged Airic before is because I know he could overpower me, but with this strange amplifying effect she has on my magic, that might be a thing of the past. She might be my key to the throne. And I won't give that up easily.

But first things first, I'll return her to her room and keep our interaction a secret until I know how to leverage this new twist of fate.

I stop in front of her door and take her chin in my hand, turning her to face me. Her eyes dart to the side and then down, refusing to look at me directly.

She's got a strong will and a fine sense of self-preservation, but I could break her if I wanted to. I just have to figure out how. How to break her, mold her to my will, make her mine.

"You shouldn't be wandering around by yourself. Not everyone will react as kindly as I did. Especially not the prince. I won't tell him about tonight, but you better not try this again. Do you understand?"

She nods and I continue. "I'm serious, Stella. I don't want anything to happen to you, but you have to listen to me, okay?"

I open the door for her, and she steps inside, then turns around to look at me. She's biting her bottom lip, and she's fucking adorable with her reddened cheeks and wide eyes.

Not today. I cannot allow myself to get distracted by my desire for her and end up ruining my chance to take the throne from Airic.

"I..." She pauses and glances down at the ground.

I shift to capture her gaze again. "What is it? What do you need to say?"

Her gaze lingers on my face as she thinks.

"Tell me," I encourage her. "Don't be shy."

"I...don't want to be alone anymore."

Poor little human. She's been going stir crazy in this place, hasn't she?

A smirk curls my lips. "Oh, Stella. Prince Airic hasn't been a very good host, is he?"

Her silence answers my question, and I'm not sure why, but sympathy tugs at my chest. She doesn't belong in this cold, cruel world of ours. She's radiant, like the name she was given—Stella. A brilliant star among the darkness. And selfish Airic has been hiding her away, trying to snuff her out.

But why?

It doesn't quite make sense to me yet, but I'm going to do what I can to find out.

"I'll come back to visit you, so that you won't be so lonely," I say, running my knuckles down the side of her cheek. "Would you like that?"

She nods meekly. "You promise?"

"I do."

When her mouth lifts into a soft smile, my pulse kicks up, and I realize my fingers are lingering a little too long on her skin. Quickly, I drop my arm and clear my throat. "Well then, until next time."

Too afraid I'll stay if I don't leave now, I walk back to my room and shed my clothes before climbing into bed. I try to sleep, but sleep doesn't come. My thoughts are consumed with the girl, and how easily she invaded my senses. My power is agitated from our meeting, and everything is driving me to go back to her room to make good on my promise early.

I can't though. Not yet.

Even with Airic keeping his distance from her, there's no doubt in my mind he's having his shadowy minions keeping a close eye on her. He's a cruel and possessive bastard, and now that he's got her in his clutches, there's no way he's going to let her go. Let alone share her. And I can't afford getting on his bad side right now.

When I finally fall asleep, I don't dream of the throne or the power I crave, like I usually do. I dream of her, of running my hands all over her perfect curves, through her long, silky hair, and of my cock sliding into her moist heat.

Of just another thing I'm not allowed to have.

CHAPTER
EIGHT



Stella

I don't know how much I trust that Wels guy. I watched him leave, memorizing the planes of his face and the strength in those broad shoulders. Then the door closed and sealed me away in this prison again.

Sure, at first it seemed like he was on my side, but he also locked me right back into the room I was escaping from, so he's not exactly on the top of my list of favorite people.

Even though Wels promised to visit, he doesn't come back for days. Part of me yearned for the company, and the other part is disappointed in myself for even thinking for a second that one of these monsters wouldn't lie to me.

Stupid, that's what I am. Stupid.

It's probably better that way. This is all teaching me a very critical lesson, one I should heed and learn from. The creatures of this realm aren't like humans. I'm not sure if they even feel any emotions at all besides lust and jealousy and anger. Airic has all three of those in the bag.

I need to just keep my head on straight and not trust anyone. Worry about myself and what's best for me, like my therapist told me to.

That brings up different memories of home and my job at the restaurant and my aunt. What if I really am stuck here forever? What if I can't get back? Yeah, my life wasn't perfect—hell, it wasn't even *good*—but it surely was better than whatever the fuck I'm living here.

I was foolish enough to think seeing Airic again would be fairytale-like.

Boy, was I wrong.

Instead, all he's done is fuck me and leave me out to dry. What does that make me now? A shadow monster's concubine?

I shudder at the thought.

When I finally hear heavy footsteps approaching my door, I leap from the chaise lounge and rush over, but the sounds stop abruptly as if the person on the other side is debating whether or not to pay me a visit.

Is it Wels? Or maybe Airic?

Pressing my ear against the dense wood, I listen for any more noises. To my surprise, the door swings open, causing me to fall straight into the waiting strong arms of the stranger on the other side.

When I peer up, I find that it's the massive dark knight who brought me into the castle that first time.

Not who I expected to see at all.

My stomach immediately flips as I openly gawk at him. Even more shocking is when he peers down at me, there's with a mixture of pity and confusion on his handsome face. Wow. Now that I'm not thrown over his shoulder and can get a good look at him, I can see that he's sexy. In a rugged, brutish kind of way. He's covered in scaly armor, as if the material was made out of the charred plates of a dragon's skin, but the exposed flesh on his neck is covered in scars and ink markings. Similar to tattoos but none of the symbols or letters are recognizable to me. It makes me wonder if the parts of him I can't see are marked too.

"Hello there," he says, his voice so deep and rough, it makes me shiver on the spot. The knight helps me to my feet. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

I almost laugh out loud. "Yeah, just my slow, torturous spiral into insanity."

He snorts, and I don't know if it's because he thinks my joke was funny or pathetic.

"Please," I beg him. "Either let me out of here or give me something to do. I'm losing my mind. You have to help me."

"I'm sorry," he replies, "but I've been ordered by the prince to keep you safe. I cannot let you wander around on your own."

Ah, shit. I gotta think of something fast or he's going to leave me here again like Wels did.

"Well, what if I wasn't on my own? What if you were with me?" At this point, I'll say anything to have a little relief from this constant nothingness. The constant boredom.

Anything for company.

The knight's brows furrow lower the longer he stares at me. "Are you suggesting I abandon my post?"

Rather than backing off and playing it safe, I continue with, "No. I'm just asking you to keep me company."

"That's not usually my job."

"I know," I tell him. "But you're quite literally my only option before I start scaling the walls."

Another snort of a laugh, and then the knight lets out a long, defeated sigh. "Fine. I'll keep you company for a short while. But there is another place I am meant to be after checking on you."

Did Airic send him or did he come on his own?

Does it matter? No.

"Great, I'll just tag along then," I say and step further into the hall. Shockingly, he doesn't stop me, only eyes me skeptically.

I give him a harried smile. "So, where are we off to?"

His jaw clenches, but it only emphasizes the hard, masculine lines of his face. "I have to make a stop at the armory. You can follow me there, *if* you stay close and stay

quiet. If you even think of starting some kind of trouble, you're coming right back to this room, understand?"

I'm pretending to not hear the last part of his threat, and instead, I focus on the more fun bit. "Ooo, could you teach me to use a weapon? To help protect myself? Maybe something like that?" I point to the sword strapped to his back.

"Absolutely not," he says instantly. "You would do more harm than good. These aren't toys."

"I'm not a child," I retort. "And besides, I've been locked in that room for days. I need to get some kind of exercise. It could even help me fight off whatever Airic seems to think—"

"*Prince Airic,*" the knight corrects me.

I roll my eyes. "Right. Prince Airic. He seems to think I'm in danger here. I don't know why or how, but if that really is the case, then I need to be able to protect myself."

"What you need to do is stay where you'll be safe, and right now, that is in this room," he continues. "Untrained humans need to run and hide, not fight back."

"That's not how I would do things." *If given the chance.*

"I'm not judging you. I'm just giving you the wisest advice I can. Everything in this world can kill you and won't hesitate to do so."

"Have you ever been to the city of Caldwell, Indiana? The crime rate is through the roof."

He only blinks at me, not understanding my bad joke about my hometown at all.

"Look," I tell him in hopes of getting this conversation back on track, "I'm not helpless. Did that before, won't do it again. I want to do something to protect myself. Something sharp can help with that. Don't you think?"

One of his thick brows rise, amusement taking over his expression. "You're sure about this? You really want to learn how to fight?"

“Yeah, why not? It’s not like my days are busy doing anything else.”

“All right,” he says and then lowers his voice, “but the prince can never know. This must be our secret.”

“Fair enough.” I try to hide my bubbling excitement, but inside, I’m jumping for joy. I don’t understand why there are so many secrets lately, but whatever. What Airic doesn’t know won’t hurt him, right?

He straightens. “Follow me.”

With gusto.

The armory is in a different part of the castle than my chambers. With the door thudding shut behind us, and me on the right side of it this time, I follow the knight through the winding hallways. His hands continue to twitch at his sides and his spine is iron straight. He glances in every direction like he poises on the edge of panic, ready for hell to rain down on us.

I don’t know what he thinks is going to happen, but I’m pretty sure he’s overreacting. That everyone is overreacting to the dangers here. When I would come here as a child, the biggest bad guy I encountered was Airic, and he may be temperamental, but I can manage him. In my lifetime, I’ve dealt with worse.

The armory is a big, open room that looks almost like a miniature castle in and of itself. The ceiling soars higher than a cathedral. There are armors of all shapes and sizes, a menagerie of weapons, and a few pieces of furniture here and there.

In the back, a woman is rubbing a piece of cloth over a sword. She’s absolutely beautiful, in a rugged and kickass way. Her hair is braided and encased in a leather cap. She has a long, thick cloak hanging from her shoulders, and a light chain mail armor underneath. Her forearms are covered in a leather gauntlet that extends halfway up her bicep. Her boots are thick and heavy, treaded and dirtied from all the

adventuring she's done, and her pants look like they've been mended dozens of times.

"Lilith," the knight calls out as we approach.

She grumbles a sound in acknowledgment, though she doesn't look up.

"I'm going to have to impose on you for a moment," he says. "I've brought a visitor."

"Got it," she says, then she puts her cloth away and looks at me with interest. Her eyes are piercing, like they can look directly into your soul and see everything you're trying to hide. I step back, suddenly uneasy. "What's your name?"

"Stella," I manage to respond, though she makes me nervous in the best way, and I find it hard to form words.

"Well, Stella," she begins, rolling my name around her mouth, "I'm Lilith, head of the guard, chief weapons maker, and the woman who taught this one everything he knows."

Lilith gives me a wink before jutting her chin toward the knight. When her eyes swing in his direction, something sparks deep in their purplish color. A deep-seated attraction sizzles between them, one I can feel just standing nearby. It's electric, and a twinge of jealousy nips at my insides. I try to push it away, but it's a nagging presence that doesn't want to let go. I barely know these two people. Not to mention that there's nothing between me and the knight. I don't even know him past the fact that he works for Airic and can flip me around like I weigh nothing. I shouldn't be feeling anything at all.

"*Most* of what I know, at least," the knight responds, and a smile finally cracks his hardened facade. He struggles with the gesture, his lips pinching like he's unfamiliar with it, but it brightens his entire face. "Plus, I know a few tricks you don't, so that gives me an edge."

Blatantly ignoring him, Lilith turns back to me. "So what do you need from me, Stella? What brings you to the armory?"

I open my mouth to reply, but the knight ends up speaking for me. "Stella wants to learn how to defend herself. I told her

it was a ludicrous idea, and that she'd do more harm than good, but she was having none of it."

Lilith looks at me with a sympathetic smile. "Don't let that big oaf fool you. He can be a real softy, especially when it comes to pretty girls."

"I'm not soft. I just thought Prince Airic wouldn't approve —"

"Eh, that moody twat has to be difficult with everything. A real stick in the mud, if you ask me."

I laugh, but the knight's eyes widen in horror by her words.

"Shut your fucking mouth," he bites out.

Lilith picks up one of the many swords she has laying across one of her work tables and spins it in her grasp. "Or what? He's going to glare at me to death?"

"He can order to have your head stuck on a pike," the knight replies hotly, but she waves it away.

"So the girl wants to stick up for herself. There's no harm in that." She turns to me. "Come with me. I've got a little extra time right now so I'll show you the basics."

At the same time, our gazes shift to the knight, who is standing there watching us.

"You know you can leave us, right?" Lilith teases. "You don't need to be up our asses."

"It's my duty to—"

"Do as the prince instructs, blah, blah," she mocks as if she's heard this phrase a million times before. "We'll be fine. And I'm sure you're meant to be checking in at another post somewhere soon."

He shifts on his feet, telling me she's absolutely right about that guess. But still, he's unsure if he should leave me. I can see his internal war on his face.

"Go." She shoos him by waving the point of the sword his way. "Go on. Get."

He huffs. “I’ll be back here in a half hour,” he says begrudgingly. “Not a second longer.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure she’s able to kick your ass in less than twenty minutes.”

The knight takes that as his cue to leave, and when Lilith nods for me to follow her behind the stone structure, I do. There are more long wooden tables back here with tools and metal scraps thrown about, along with several practice dummies set up in a semi-circle. Most of them are beat up to hell, punctured, and missing limbs.

I swallow roughly. Did Lilith do all that?

Being alone with her makes me nervous. She’s covered in dirt and grime, and has muscles on her arms that could rival any man’s. I look like a puny wimp next to her, especially when she holds that sword. She’s intimidating as fuck, and now, I’m starting to second guess this whole idea.

I want to hate her. Mostly because of whatever strange sexual tension she has with my knight—although when I started considering him *mine*, I’m not sure—but she’s so... kind, and charming, and so fucking pretty. It’s too hard to dislike her.

Lilith pulls another sword out of a pile of weapons and puts it into my hands. It’s heavy, but not too heavy. She shows me how to grip it and how to stand and how to swing it, and then she has me practice a few times.

“So, that’s your basic stance,” she says, demonstrating it for me. “We’re gonna have to speed through this teaching since I’m sure Mr. Doom and Gloom won’t let you come back after this one.”

When she chuckles, I do too, mostly because I don’t know if she’s talking about the knight or Airic. Maybe both.

“Most sword fighters prefer to use two hands. It gives them more control. One of the reasons the soldiers here only use one is because we usually carry our shields in the other hand. We can attack with the one hand and still defend with the shield if we need to. And once you get good enough, a

one-hand grip is more acrobatic. You can swing in ways you wouldn't be able to with two hands," she goes on.

I try to mimic her stance, but it's strange. It's not like I've ever held a sword before. It's not like I've ever held a weapon before. I'm used to carrying trays and overcooked food to customers who were normally too hungry to care. But I need to be able to defend myself, and that's what I keep saying in my head, repeatedly.

If Airic is right, and there really is danger, then I'm determined to make holding a sword just the start of my education. I'll sneak out to Lilith behind the knight's back for more guidance if I have to.

"Good, good," Lilith says, surveying me. "You're a natural. I can already see you have good instincts. Now, let me show you some basic attacks."

She has me practice swinging over and over. She has me practice thrusting. I'm not sure I'm getting it right, but she tells me I'm doing okay and her encouragement has me excited to keep going.

Maybe it's because I've never been really good at anything in my life. Mediocre at a few things at best, but if I could gain this skill, I could finally have something in my wheelhouse that I could be proud of. Maybe I could even beat the knight one day.

My muscles ache and my limbs shake from using parts of me I've never used before, but that doesn't slow me down. Lilith has me try a few different ways of swinging, and then she says, "Okay, so let's try some combinations. Let's start with a simple block and counter."

She has me hold the sword out in front of me, perpendicular to my body, with my right hand on the handle and my left hand holding the blade. She then moves in and attacks me with a vertical slice. The sword comes down toward my shoulder, and I bring my sword up to meet hers and stop her from striking me. Lilith quickly brings her sword back and to the side, lunging past my sword to try a strike at my

side. She bats my sword with her own and gets hers low enough to strike me. I bring my sword back and block her.

We continue to practice for a while, and I start to get the hang of it. Lilith is a great teacher, and she's very patient with me. Contrary to her verbal jabs at the knight, she compliments me when I do something right, and she gently corrects me when I make a mistake. I find myself enjoying our time together.

"You're a smart girl," she says when it's time to put the weapons away. "This place is dangerous. This kingdom alone is full of monsters, and you're...well... You're not."

I freeze on the spot, realizing that she must know I don't belong here, that she can tell somehow.

But Lilith only shakes her head. "Don't worry, girlie. I'm loyal to my kingdom and to the prince, as much as I think he needs a good smack to the head every now and again. If he wants you here, it has to be for a reason. But I can also see where his concerns lie. He was right to keep your presence here a secret, at least for now. Until things calm down."

"Calm down?" I repeat, not sure what she means.

She leans in closer and drops her voice to a whisper. "Things are changing here, and not for the better. The prince—he'll be the least of your worries."

"I've been told how bad the forest can get," I say. "That's why I wanted to be prepared, just in case."

"It's not just the forest, Stella. Something big is coming, and we'll need all the fighters we can get."

Uneasiness sinks in my gut at her ominous words, but since I don't know how to respond, I only nod. I want to ask more about it, but her head snaps up just as the knight's massive form appears around the building.

"And here he is," Lilith says. "Right on time."

The knight's gaze dances over me, searching for cuts or battle wounds, no doubt, but when he sees I'm just sweaty, his chin dips in approval.

“Thank you,” he tells her, which she waves away.

“She’s a fast learner. And she did it all in a dress too.” Lilith smiles my way. “I’d like to see you do that.”

“I bet you would,” he grumbles and then looks at me. “Come on. We have to get you back.”

“Come visit me again, Stella. You know where I’ll be,” she says with a small wave. “Oh, and practice your stance and the motions any chance you get. Like I showed you.”

Before I can say thank you, the knight’s round grip is on my upper arm and he’s tugging me back towards the castle. I guess my freedom has come to an end, but it was sure fun while it lasted.

As I struggle to keep up with the knights long and quick steps, Lilith’s vague warning about a hidden danger replays in my mind. She had said something big was coming, but big like what? What could be scarier than a kingdom ruled by monsters?

A shiver rattles down my spine. I’m not sure I want to know the answer to that question.

Maybe it’s the paranoia setting in, but my skin crawls with the sensation of being watched. I glance over my shoulder as the armory and the castle wall becomes farther and farther away. There’s no one there—even Lilith has gone back inside—but the feeling of someone watching me, studying me, never eases.

As if the danger has somehow been spoken into existence.

CHAPTER
NINE



Stella

The heebie jeebies. That's all it is.

I shake my head, trying to clear it of any more dark thoughts. I'm still hopped up on adrenaline. That's all.

As the knight and I make our way back to my room, the corridors are eerily quiet and empty. So much so, that our footsteps echo off the walls.

The anxious feeling starts to ramp up, and even the knight seems to sense it because he picks up his pace, swinging me around corners and tightening his hold on my arm.

I'm about to tell him to let go or he's going to snap my bones in two when rapid jarring bangs sound from a darkened stairwell to our left. The knight halts abruptly, wrenching me to his side, and I gasp as more pain ricochets up from my elbow to my shoulder.

"Fuck!" I cry out, jerking away from him. With his gaze locked on the stairs and his muscles rigid, he shushes me but lets me go.

"Go back to your room immediately," he tells me in a rushed whisper. "Run and don't stop for anything. Barricade the door, draw any curtains, and hide."

My heart thunders as the panic rises. "Why? What's going on."

"Go," he demands and shoves me to get going. "Either I or Prince Airic will come and get you."

“How will I—”

“*Go!*” Then he flies down the winding stone staircase until the darkness swallows him whole to follow the sound.

Knowing the smartest thing to do is to follow his directions, I spin on my heel and sprint down the hall. I’m being watched again. I can feel it—the prickling of someone else’s gaze on the nape of my neck.

I still don’t know much about this realm, but hopefully there isn’t such a thing as a creature that likes to wait for its victims in the walls, only to jump out and gobble them up whole.

If only Lilith had let me keep one of those swords.

My heart is pounding wildly in my chest. Despite the aches and pains from the training session with Lilith, I’m racing like mad for the next hallway that’ll bring me to my room. As I round a corner, I’m stopped dead in my tracks when I come face to face with a large, hulking creature. It’s twice my size and covered in thick fur. Its eyes glow yellow in the sconces’ flickering light and its mouth is filled with sharp teeth.

Terror seizes me, and I let out a scream, stumbling backward and tripping over my own feet. I hit the ground hard, the wind knocking out of me.

I expect my life to end, for the flash of pain and then the numbing relief of death as the creature tears into me, but nothing happens. It just stands there, watching me with curious, eerily shining eyes and a tilted head.

Without warning, the skin across its muzzle and chest ripples, the fur receding, and the limbs shortening. Bones crack and its spine straightens as it changes shape before my eyes. Within seconds, the beast is gone and instead, in front of me, stands... a person. No, a man.

Wels.

A naked Wels.

Holy shit, Wels just transformed. He was a monster, right there, and then—

My thoughts are a jumbled mess as my brain struggles to catch up with what's happened. But after I'm able to calm my rapid breathing some, my gaze drops, following the blond trail of hair from his navel to his cock. It's an impressive size, even when not at attention, and I gasp as heat begins to crawl up my neck.

As if knowing my thoughts, his dick stiffens, beginning to rise, and my throat tightens.

This man was just a monstrous beast, ready to rip my heart out, and now I'm fawning over him? What the fuck is wrong with me?

I can't help it though. He is quite the specimen. He's leaner than Airic but wide at the shoulders, with a chest and arms that are sculpted with muscles. And when that twisted little smirk captures his mouth, my heartbeat ramps up.

He's full of secrets, I know, and that makes him even more dangerous.

Holding his hand out, I foolishly give him mine and let him lift me to my feet.

"You okay?" he asks, but with a mischievous look that says he may have enjoyed scaring me too. "I told you it isn't safe to be out and about alone."

"I-I know." My voice shakes despite my best efforts to control it, and when I stare into his eyes, the shocking yellow color is gone. Actually, there aren't any signs of the monster within him that I can see—except his hair being a little mussed.

"I can't believe I just so *happened* to run into you here," he says and brings my hand up to his lips for a soft kiss across the knuckles. "Quite the coincidence, don't you think?"

I pause, realizing what he's implying and yank my hand away. "You drew the knight away? To get me alone?"

He nods and lifts his chin, proud of himself. "It wasn't hard. Even I can admit the big guy is good at what he does—there's a reason the prince made him the head of the guard, after all—but sometimes his duty blinds him from the obvious.

Just a simple thrown rock down the stairwell, and off he went. Chasing it like a dog to a bone.”

I don't understand. Why go through all that to get me alone?

“He'll realize it's a trick soon though, so we should get moving,” he continues and places his hand on the small of my back to lead me down the hall. His touch is insanely warm, and the heat of it spreads over my skin within milliseconds.

A familiar ache begins to grow between my legs, and I clear my throat to distract myself. “Um, where are we going?”

He gives me a rueful smile. “Why, back to your room of course.”

The thought of him in my bedroom with me, naked, has my head swimming with possibilities. All ones too naughty to speak out loud.

My gaze starts to drift towards his package again, but I stop myself. Airic would be furious if he knew I was alone with Wels, let alone thinking about him pushing me up against one of these stone walls and fucking me into oblivion. Maybe even in his monster form—

Woah, don't go there.

I shake my head to clear it.

Nope.

Don't you fucking dare.

I shouldn't be thinking these things.

“Is everything...alright?” Wels asks, the question tinged with concern.

“Yeah, yeah. I'm just thinking...” I scramble to think of my next words. “Are you like a werewolf or something? You had a muzzle and the teeth...fur...”

He cringes, as if I've just insulted him. “Luckily, no. Not all the time, at least.”

“What does what mean?”

He chuckles. "I'm a shape-shifter. I can change into many forms."

A shape-shifter? It's hard for me to even wrap my head around that. "So you can change into anyone, anything, at anytime?"

"Yes and no," he replies. "Several of us in this world have magic, but there are limits. Rules. Mine is restricted to physical touch. If I've touched the creature before, I can take it's form, but the more time that's passed, the harder it is." He glances at me, mischief dancing in his eyes. "At least...until you came along."

"Me?"

"You've seemed to awaken something new inside me, something I've been trying to figure out for myself." When we reach my bedroom door, he brushes a strand of hair away from my face, his touch gentle.

"Oh." That's all I can say.

"Don't be scared. I'm not going to hurt you," he says softly.

"I'm not afraid," I say.

Laughter rumbles in his chest. "That's right. You should be able to defend yourself after all that training you did with Lilith."

I stiffen. He was *watching* me. "You saw that?"

"I was there, yes. I mean, who wouldn't have wanted to see the two of you, all hot and sweaty, duking it out? I'm surprised you didn't get a crowd."

I can't help but laugh. He's being playful, flirting with me. So much different than Airic's and the knight's strong, serious demeanors, but it's a nice change from my experience in this castle so far.

It feels strange to laugh again, to find something or someone worth laughing at, especially when my time here hasn't exactly been a vacation.

When he opens the door, I brush past him to walk inside. For the first time, I'm not dreading returning to my room, not when there's a chance to be with him. My attraction to him is wildfire in my veins, and when I glance back to see him hovering in the doorway, waiting, my pulse picks up speed with anticipation.

"May I come inside?" he asks, his voice low and husky.

Yes!

Better yet, fuck yes!

But instead, the words that come out say the opposite, "Do you think it is a good idea?"

"Why? Because of my cousin?"

I blink in confusion. "Cousin?"

"Airic," he answers.

My stomach flips. "Airic is *your cousin*?"

Closing the door behind him, he strolls inside, no longer caring about politeness. "The temperamental shadow prince? Unfortunately, yes."

This is getting more complicated by the second.

"That doesn't matter though," he goes on. "Blood is really the only thing between us. We tolerate each other. That's it."

Suddenly, he takes my hand and draws me toward the four-poster bed. We sit down side by side. Being this close to him while on my bed makes me antsy. All I can think about is having his lips on mine, how hard his cock would feel in my hands as I work him up and down, how he'd taste...

"So," he says abruptly, his eyes searching my face. "Let me begin by saying, I'm sorry for not visiting you sooner. Things have been a mess, and your darling prince hasn't made getting to you exactly easy."

"He isn't *my* prince," I say instinctually.

He arches a brow at that. "Oh? He sure thinks you're his."

I swallow over a lump in my throat. It's getting more difficult to focus on anything other than his nakedness and how near he is.

"Why do you say that?" I ask.

"Well, assigning his right-hand man and closest friend to guard you for one. And two, the shadows..." He gestures around the room. "They talk."

That's vague enough to make me wonder if he's speaking figuratively or not.

"But what I really want to know is about you. Tell me about Stella, the human," he bids, knocking me with his shoulder.

The touch sends sparks of electricity through my blood.

"My life is not nearly as exciting as yours," I start. "You'll be bored to tears in the span of five minutes."

"You think I'll make it that long?"

"Two minutes, then."

He barks out a laugh. "Try me."

I sigh heavily. "Honestly, this place was always the most exciting part of my life growing up. But it was something I had to keep a secret because I made the mistake once of telling my aunt, and she, like most people would, thought I had lost my mind. That what happened to me had triggered some kind of weird trauma response."

He's fully invested now, turning more on the bed to face me. "You've been here before?"

"Yeah, as a child. I used to visit Airic a lot," I reply.

He runs a hand along his jaw in thought. "Interesting..."

"Is that...wrong?"

"All portals into the human realm were destroyed long ago—at least, that's what we thought because here you are. Back then, new laws were put into place and interacting with your

kind was forbidden, so it's curious..." he says. "What does Prince Airic know that no one else does?"

"And why would he break the law—his family's law—for me?" I finish the thought for him with a frown.

I'm not that special.

Wel's finger curls under my chin, drawing my face his way. "Because he's a selfish bastard. When he finds something he wants, he'll do whatever it takes to have it." Gaze dropping to my lips, he smiles. "It must run in the family because we have that in common."

Heat rises to my cheeks.

He begins to lean forward, his head tilting, and his lips parting, and my breath freezes in my lungs.

Oh shit, he's about to kiss me.

Anticipation trickling through me, I'm about to close the distance between us when movement catches my eye. I glance down to see the skin across his bare chest bubbling again, the muscles twitching, as they did when he was shifting from monster to man.

I pause and pull back, a thought spearing through the magic of the moment we've spent all this time setting up.

Didn't Wels say that he can shift into anyone through touch? Is that why he's been touching me so much? To try and use his power on me?

My stomach souring, I shake my head, forcing him to withdraw his lingering touch from my face.

His brows pinch at the center. "What's wrong?" he asks.

"I...I..." I stumble through my answer, unsure if I should even tell him. The realization has me second guessing everything. His kindness. His intentions.

Has it all been a lie?

I push off the bed, shifting farther away from him. Feeling vulnerable and hating that feeling, I wrap my arms around myself.

“Stella?” He stands too, reaching out for me. “Did I do something wrong?”

The last day I saw Airic, when he told me he never wanted to see me again, I had promised myself that I wouldn’t trust another living soul fully from then on out. Years of therapy had taught me to lean on myself, become self-reliant, and work towards a more stable future.

This feels too close to that moment—I’d almost broken my promise to myself, and too easily. I’d become lost in the emotion, in my desires, and forgot that when that happens, heartache is always guaranteed to follow.

I should’ve known better.

“Stella?” he calls to me again and steps closer. When he grabs my arms, he gives me a light shake so that I peer up at him. “Please tell me what’s happened. What have I done to make you so upset?”

With his hands on me, the pull toward him is just as strong as it was before, except I see him for what he truly is now.

I open my mouth to speak, but just then, the door flies open so fast that it slams against the stone wall with an explosive boom. The wood splinters, and Airic storms inside, his piercing gaze taking in the scene of Wels naked, with his hands gripping my arms, and me unable to move.

Fuck.

Absolute fury captures every inch of Airic’s body, turning him into a statue of rigid muscle. Whisps of smoke curls out from his back, surrounding him, and I’m sucker punched by fear. Even though I know we didn’t do anything, guilt stirs within me just the same. It’s stupid—I know—I’m not his property, after all, but I can’t help it. The blazing rage in his eyes says he’ll kill Wels for this. And maybe me too.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he demands, his voice a thundering bellow. “What’s going on here?”

“We-we were just talking,” I say as I step away from Wels.

Airic's eyes flick to the bed and then to me. "Is that what you were doing? Talking? You were talking in your bedroom with him naked?"

Wels moves to stand in front of me, creating a barrier between me and the Shadow Prince. "Yes, exactly that," he says without intimidating. Even behind him, I can see the skin moving across his back as his power rises. It almost seems like he's having a hard time controlling it.

Airic marches up to him, nostrils flaring. Maybe it's all the shadows swirling around him, making his form appear bigger, but he towers over me and Wels, filling most of the space in the room.

"I should kill you for this," he growls.

"Then do it, cousin. Kill me." Wels holds his arms open wide. "But the girl is right. I found her in the hall alone, abandoned by your knight. So, I simply brought her back here where I thought she'd be the safest. Since I'm *sure* you don't want people knowing you've got a human here. Is that right?"

They stand off for a long moment, glaring at each other in the tense silence. Airic's wound so tight, it looks like he'll reach out and snap Wels in two at any moment, but Wels only smirks at him, unafraid. He's got Airic cornered here, now that he knows I'm his secret, and Airic knows it too because all his bravado deflates out of him, and his power settles down. He shrinks in front of us until he's matching Wels in height.

Then, with a swipe of his arm, he shoves his cousin to the side and whirls on me.

"You are mine," he growls ferociously. "You belong to me. Remember that."

"I don't belong to anyone," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Either you are mine, or you mean nothing to me. There is no in between, Stella." He grabs me roughly by the chin and pushed his finger hard against my bottom lip. "I have been watching over you. Protecting you. Caring for you. And this is how you repay me?"

Anger shoots through me at his cruelty, and I jerk his hand away. “If it’s between being treated as disposable property or being nothing, then I want to be nothing. Send me home,” I snap.

His eyes widen in surprise. “What?”

“I’m tired of being locked up in this room, unable to have any sort of communication with anyone, dying of loneliness. I’m tired of not being allowed to make my own choices. I’m tired of not being treated like a person.” Tears well up in my eyes, but I blink them back. “Send me home, Airic. I’m done. I can’t live like this, and it isn’t fair to me.”

He stares at me, confusion and pain flashing across his expression. It’s brief though, quickly replaced by the coldness I’ve seen from him since arriving.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he says finally. “Even if I could send you home, I wouldn’t.”

“But why?” I ask. “You’ve treated me like shit since the moment I got here. I’ve done nothing to deserve that kind of treatment. I’ve put up with the way you cut me off from the rest of the world. And what have I gotten in return? Nothing. I’m sick of it. I’m sick of you. I’m sick of this. Send me home.”

He is silent, his face expressionless, but there’s a war playing behind his hardened gaze. Spinning on his heel, he stomps out of the room without a word more to either of us.

When Wels and I are alone again, I realize I’m trembling. Whether it’s from fear or the adrenaline rushing through my veins, I don’t know, but when Wels puts a hand on my shoulder, I flinch out of instinct.

He pulls back automatically and softens his tone. “Like I said before, he’s temperamental. But, let’s get you some sleep. Come on.”

I nod, still too numb and shocked to respond with anything else. I let Wels guide me to the bed and pull the covers up over me.

“Try to get some rest,” he says gently before moving to the door. When I close my eyes, I hear the wood groan and whine loudly as he closes the broken thing.

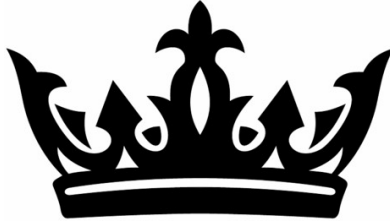
Then, I’m alone again.

I let the tears flow freely now, muffling my sobs with one of the pillows.

I’m tired. Tired of being in this castle. Tired of not having anyone who understands, of being used for one reason or another. Tired of the monotony and not having a say in what happens to me.

Tired of all of this.

CHAPTER
TEN



Stella

When sleep finally does come, it doesn't bring much rest. The knight is waiting for me in my dreams, ready to make good on our unfinished business from my first day here. And for some reason, none of this feels like a dream. It's real and tangible. *He's* tangible.

"What took you so long?" he asks, his voice low and husky in the dark gloom of this in-between dream realm.

I shrug, not really sure how to answer that, or if there is anything to say at all. Then again, these are my fantasies to control. There's no need for speech.

He closes the distance between us. "I missed you."

He runs his hands down my arms, sending shivers dancing through me. His touch is electric and ignites a fire within me that burns hotter with each passing second. Mmm, a dream indeed. And I'll take all the heat he has to offer. All the ways I can use this experience and his body to escape my reality.

"I missed you too," I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

He clears his throat to grab my attention, and I stare up into his eyes. They're smoldering with desire; I can feel myself getting lost in them.

"Make love to me," I say. I know that's what he wants. That's what I need right now—someone to care about me.

He doesn't say anything, but the quality of his touch changes, grows harder and more possessive.

He pushes me back onto the bed and moves over me until I wrap my arms around him, pulling him closer to me. There's no need for words now and we both understand it. He wants me, and I want him.

I press my lips to his and our tongues dance together. He unties my nightgown and lets it fall away, exposing my naked body radiating heat beneath him, a groan rumbling in the back of his throat.

His rock-hard erection presses between my legs as his hands move over my body, exploring me, caressing me. I feel the length and my own desire grows and pools. Heat coils deep inside my abdomen, desperately seeking release. I wrap my fingers around him, stroking him in long, firm strokes. There's so much of him and he's ready for me. Precum dots the tip of his dick and I slick it down the shaft of that pulsing erection.

He's throbbing. I can't take it any longer. I want him. *Now.*

I move my hand away and thrust my hips up to meet his, letting our bodies collide in a clear demand. He groans as he slides into me, filling me completely in one long thrust until he is buried to the hilt.

He rolls his body over so that he's lying on the bed on his back. I move on top of him, straddling his hips as I slide up and down his shaft, my hips grinding against him as I ride him.

He drives himself deep inside me as the fire grows within me. It's burning, threatening to engulf me. I press my lips against his neck, kissing him as I ride him faster. He grips my breasts, moving down to my hips and grabbing my ass.

He lets out a growl as he pounds into me, and the pressure inside me builds to an almost painful level. I groan as he pulses inside me, letting the feeling consume me. Yes, yes. This is what I want, what I need, everything I've been waiting for—

I wake with a start. Outside the windows, darkness reigns, and I wonder how close it is to morning. I'm alone in the bed, and I can't help but feel a little disappointed by that. I can't help but wish the knight was here, that he was lying next to me.

I close my eyes and try to get back to sleep, but every time I do, I see my dark knight. His hands are on me. His lips on my neck. His hot breath on my ear. His body against mine.

My heart flutters in my chest. I try to focus on the fact that it was just a dream. Another tantalizing dream so much better than anything happening once I open my eyes. Why can't it be real?

Hours later, I must have fallen back to sleep because I wake to the sound of the door opening. I sit up in bed, wiping the haziness from my eyes. My head is throbbing, and I have a terrible taste in my mouth.

Even rubbing my temples won't make the headache go away. Then I jump, my heart leaping in my throat, as the knight of my fantasies walks into the room and stops at the foot of the bed. For the longest moment we stare at each other, neither one of us willing to speak first.

"Rise and shine," he eventually says. "You have a big day today."

I look at him, head cocked to the side in confusion. A big day of what? And why does he just get to let himself inside the room like I have no privacy?

"What's the matter?" he asks. "Did you think I was going to let you sleep in?"

"Yeah, maybe." I shrug. I don't know what I thought. After the fight with Airic last night, I assumed I'd be locked in here to wither away for the rest of my life without even the luxury of a good conversation.

"Get up. There's a dinner tonight," the knight bids. Not unkindly, at least. "Everyone in the court will be attending, and Prince Airic is insisting you go."

I blink at him. “I get to leave this room? And go...to a dinner?”

After Airic had stormed out, I figured he’s never want to speak to me again. Let alone share a dinner with me.

“You’ll be heavily glamoured so that no one can tell you are a human, and you’ll need to appear as if you are my companion, but yes. You’ll be allowed to attend as long as you mind your manners.”

I’ve barely been allowed to leave my room. And now? Something changed. I can’t believe I get to do something like this. It’s so out of character for Airic, but I’m not complaining.

“But, why now? Why do I get to go to this if no one is supposed to know I’m here?” I ask out loud.

He shifts awkwardly. He clearly was hoping I wouldn’t ask questions and just take his message as is.

“There have been...rumors circulating amongst those in the castle,” he explains. “The prince would rather not have people questioning if he has taken a consort or not. So, you will play the part as mine.”

My head is swimming. A consort? He thinks I’m a consort now?

The knight brings up a hand to scratch through the gruff stubble on his chin. “You know, a sort of concubine, if you will.”

Anger flares awake. I know what a fucking consort is.

“They think I’m a whore?” The words come out in a shrill squeak. I can’t believe this. Is that what Airic meant when he said I would do what he asked, when he asked it?

“They do,” he says, as if it’s not a big deal. “Which is why we’re going to have to put on quite a show today. You’ll need to be at my side at all times, and you’ll need to give them a reason to believe that you’re with me, not with him. You mustn’t let anyone find out you are human. It would mean your life. Do you understand?”

I nod. I want to say something more, but I don't. I don't know what to say to any of this.

For the first time since he entered, I realize he's holding a garment bag in his arms. He sets it on the bed. "Bathe and do what you must to be ready for tonight. This is the gown Prince Airic chose for you. He insisted you wear it."

I'm sure he was. That's all he knows.

"I need to get ready for the dinner myself, but I will be back to fetch you when it's time to leave. Be ready."

I watch him as he turns and leaves the room. The crooked door closes behind him. Leaning back into the plushness of the bed, my mind races as it tries to sort through all of this.

A dinner? Like a fancy royal feast?

I think of grand spreads I've seen in period movies, of men and women dressed up in lavish attire and exchanging small talk. It's all new and exciting, and I can't believe I get to be a part of something again, instead of banished and locked away.

Only problem is that I'll have to play a part through it all.

If I'm found out, like the knight warned, it'll be deadly for me.

And not even Prince Airic will be able to save me.



I stand in front of the mirror and let out a deep breath as I take in the gorgeous gown the knight brought me. It's made of a pale yellow material, and it's soft as silk. It drapes over my curves and hangs down to my ankles. This isn't the kind of outfit I would have worn in my normal life; way too fancy, too expensive, too glamorous, just like everything else in my bedroom's closet, but at least it fits right.

I probably should be a little concerned that Airic was able to guess my size so easily, but I try not to think about it. Instead, I twist my hair up into a loose bun and then pull a few strands down around my face, hoping it'll do.

Taking a step back from the mirror, I look myself over. I move my hips from side to side and smile to myself. This is a beautiful gown. The *most* beautiful gown I've ever seen, and I feel powerful wearing it.

The woman in the mirror is strong and confident and pretty.

I refuse to let the fight with Airic ruin this night for me. Instead, I set my sights on something else.

Tonight will be the night that my dark knight and I will finally handle that unfinished business from my dream. Not that I've said anything to him, but I've decided to take the next step and nothing and no one will stop me. If I am to appear as his companion tonight, then I might as well have fun with it, and try to break through his serious, dutiful demeanor.

It's a game.

I'm going to seduce myself a knight in not-so-shiny armor.

The corners of my lips curl into a smile.

Someone knocks at the door.

"Come in," I call out. I stare at my reflection one final time before I turn to the newcomer and my breath catches in my throat.

My knight is dressed in a deep orange long-sleeve tunic, fitted at the waist and flaring out at the bottom. He's paired it with a pair of black pants and a long, dark cloak that covers his arms and hangs down to his feet. There's a dark and dangerous look in his eyes as he takes me in, causing my heart to flutter in my chest.

"You look...wow. Stunning," he says, his voice low and husky.

I bite my lip. I'm ashamed to say there haven't been many times in my life that I've been called things like pretty or stunning. I'm still unsure how to react to compliments, but there's something about this man's mere presence that has me blushing like a schoolgirl.

I clear my throat and step forward, placing my hand in the crook of his arm. “Thank you. Shall we go?” I ask.

He nods and I can feel all the tension leaving his body. He’s obviously as nervous about this as I am. “After you, my lady.”

My lady. I’ll take it. It’s much better than consort, anyway.

Like a true gentleman, he escorts me out of the room and down the halls.

We make our way through the castle, heading toward the great room. The castle itself is absolutely beautiful. It’s dark, but there’s something about the dark stone and the dark furnishings that make it feel cozy, inviting, and warm. It’s like a relic that’s been frozen in time—once a magnificent piece of architecture that was cursed by a sorceress and gripped by despair. And no one knows what needs to be done to break it and free the castle and its people from the darkness.

I chuckle internally at the ridiculous thought. Sure, I’d much rather think Airic has changed so much towards me because of some wicked witch’s magic, instead of the fact that he’s just a dick. It’s an easier pill to swallow.

A gentle tug on my arm reminds me of what I’m supposed to be doing, and that I’m the opposite of free.

There are guards stationed at every corner. Each of them bows their head to the knight as we pass by. I’m in awe of how powerful he must be to command so much respect.

The dining room is set up with a long banquet table in the center. There are long benches on either side of it, but there is only one high-back chair at the very front. For the prince, I’m assuming. Multiple large fireplaces line the walls, and small lanterns hang from the rafters, filling the room with a soft orange glow.

The knight leads me to the two chairs directly to the left of Airic’s, and while he sits beside his friend and commander, I take the place next to him as his guest. The room fills up with more people, all dressed to the nines, and looking mostly human, despite an extra spike or tail here and there. It makes

me wonder how people in this realm would even be able to tell I'm human. Is it a sixth sense kind of thing? I'm not sure.

As the patrons make their rounds, chatting with friends and taking their seats, I notice that their stares linger on me a little longer than anyone else. Unease prickles up and down my spine, and it's then that I remember what the knight had said this morning when he'd brought me the dress.

I lean closer to him and whisper, "Wasn't I supposed to be glamoured or something to make sure no one knows?"

"Oh, you are," he replies. "Your dress has been modified to conceal you. But it'll only last a few hours."

Ah, a Cinderella type deal.

"You do look lovely," he whispers close to my ear. "Try to relax. Prince Airic will be here soon."

I try to smile back at him, but it fades at the thought of seeing Airic again so soon after last night. I'm not sure I want to see him after the terrible things he said to me.

"Maybe you can try to have some fun, too?" He chuckles and the warmth of his laugh pours over me.

"Shit, sorry. I'm just nervous," I say. "You look handsome, by the way. Quite handsome. It's nice not seeing you in all that armor."

When my words hit my ears, I cringe at the awkward second meaning behind what I said. I scramble to clarify myself, "I mean, dressed normally. In clothes. Regular clothes."

It's getting worse by the second.

Jesus Christ, Stella. Shut your mouth!

"I know what you mean," he saves me. "And thank you."

When everyone has taken their seats, a servant with green scales across his face and neck strolls in and addresses the room. Silence quickly follows.

"Prince Airic James Alcaster II..." he announces, a forked tongue sliding out of his mouth with every s sound.

The guests around the table jump to their feet, including the knight, and I push onto mine just as Airic strides into the dining room. Dressed in a white double-breasted jacket with silver buttons and dark blue trousers, he is the epitome of regal power from every angle.

Every detail of him, from his strong jawline and full lips to the wideness of his shoulders and arms, adds to his commanding presence. It's as if he was made for this role, to be prince, but it makes me wonder what happened to the King and Queen—his parents. Are they still around?

It'll be one of the things I ask him next time we're alone. *If* that every happens again.

Speaking of family, Wels comes to mind. When we all take our seats again, I glance down the table in hopes of finding his familiar face and shoulder-length sandy hair.

I realize fairly quickly that he's not here, and disappointment sinks in my gut.

Shouldn't a cousin be invited to a dinner party like this? Unless Airic didn't invite him as a form of punishment. Seems like a petty move to me, but it's clear their relationship has been strained since long before I came around.

Airic takes his seat at the head of the table, and his gaze instantly falls onto me. A predator lurks beneath the handsome, civilized veneer. And the predator turns fully possessive the longer he stares at me, causing heat to curl deep in my core.

I force my gaze to drop to my empty place setting. I'm supposed to be here with the knight. And besides, I'm still pissed at Airic for what he did.

The clearing of someone's throat sounds, and I peek up to see the knight has been trying to get my attention.

"You're still nervous even though I warned you not to be," he whispers as the clink of silverware and the hum of conversation begins. He takes my hand under the table and gives it a gentle squeeze. "I'm here with you."

“Yes, you’re right.” I nod and take a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

“Don’t forget,” he goes on. “We must play the part.”

Yes. That’s right. We’re supposed to be together. A *couple*, in a sense.

He seems to sense my unease because he makes the first move and puts his arm around me to pull me close. My gaze flicks to Airic to see him watching us intently as he takes a long sip from his wine glass.

I don’t think I can do this...

“It’s okay,” the knight assures me, his breath fanning out across the side of my face. “It should only be for tonight.”

Ripping my attention from Airic, I lean into the knight, and his touch does seem to ease some of my worries.

I’m reminded of my vow I made to myself alone in my room earlier. Tonight is supposed to be the night. But, there’s one slight problem. I’ve never seduced anyone in my life, ever. I have no clue even where to begin.

I know I can’t leap on top of him and rip his clothes off in front of everyone. But I also know I can’t just sit here like a wallflower. I need to do something. I need to make sure he’s interested, while playing the part of his lover. You know, make the act really convincing.

Playing with the ends of the two strands of hair I left out of the bun, I take a deep breath in so that my cleavage is emphasized. As expected, his eyes are on me, his gaze leaving a trail of heat in its wake.

Pressing into his side even more, I draw in another intake of breath, and his muscles stiffen against me, as if I’m affecting him already.

Okay, this is a lot more fun than I thought it would be.

I know Airic is watching us. And as fucked up as it may sound, the idea of having an audience excites me for two different reasons. I want to make him suffer a little for everything he’s done to me, make him jealous. The knight is

his best friend after all, if what Wels said is true. Surely seeing us together, and being unable to do anything about it, would be torturous for him.

And the other reason being it stirs up fantasies of having these two powerful men together. At the same time, and the thought alone makes my thighs clench.

With my heart thumping a little faster, I scoot closer to the knight until my leg is pressing against his.

His jawline clenches, and I love that I'm having an effect on him.

When my hand glides over his upper leg, hidden underneath the table, he jumps in his seat, knocking into the table and making things rattle.

Airic throws him a glare.

The knight clears his throat and apologizes, but as I run my fingertips closer to his groin, his fist clenches near his plate and his lips press together.

"I'm just a consort, remember?" I mutter to him as I brush against the growing bulge in his pants. A playful smile teases across my lips as I feel his dick twitch.

This is fun.

I feel more like a woman worthy of wearing this dress now.

With this new wave of confidence rushing through me, I'm curious to see how bold I can be.

I lean forward, reaching for the bread basket toward the center of the table, and as I pull back, I put my mouth to his ear and whisper, "How would you like for my lips to be around your cock?"

He trembles, his body tight with tension. He's trying to hold back, but I can see the lust in his eyes, even from where I'm sitting.

More servants flood the room, bringing in the main dishes and positioning them along the center of the enormous table.

When the covers are pulled away, I'm confronted with roasted duck, grilled vegetables, garlic potatoes, and some kind of berry jam. The delicious smells of the feast fill the room, but at the moment, I'm hungry for...something else.

I trace the outline of the knight's cock underneath the table, but when I get to the swollen head, his hand shoots out and seizes mine. Our eyes lock, my breathing halting, and by the conflicted, lustful look in his eyes, I'm not sure what he's about to do.

But then, his head whips to the left, as if he's sensed something, and he leaps to his feet. Airic shoves himself back from the table at the same time, panic scribbled across his face, just as the dining hall's doors burst open and a dark figure comes flying inside.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN



Stella

An eruption of panicked screams fills the space and guests rush around, looking for safety and knocking over food and chairs in their wake. A man in a black mask with smokey tentacles for arms lands in the center of the table hard, rattling the glasses. His sharp eyes land on me.

I'm frozen in place, everything happening too fast around me to process.

Someone's fingers wrap around my wrist, and when I whirl around, I find the knight standing there, his long sword already in hand. "We have to get you out of here," he gasps. "*Run.*"

The fear in his eyes is real, and that only makes my heart beat wilder in my chest.

At least a dozen guards kick down another door and flood inside, weapons drawn. In the chaos, I lose sight of Airic, and terror claws up my throat.

"Where's Airic?" I call out. "We can't leave him here."

"He will be fine. You are my priority right now."

Yeah, on Airic's order.

The knight hurls himself at the intruder on the table, swinging his blade, but whenever he seems to make contact, the swords only flies through smoke and air. No actual damage is done.

Roaring with frustration, he leaps up to join him, and as his muscles flex, long curved spikes push through the fabric on his shoulders and down his back.

Holy shit. What kind of monster is he?

But I don't have time to think about it because two more dark shapes sail into the room. They drop down in front of the large doors, blocking the main exit.

“Go!” the knight bellows, and his deep voice shakes me to the core. I spin and head for the back of the room, to the doors the servants came out of before.

Pushing through the crowd is damn near impossible with everyone shoving to find a way out too. It's like trying to dig my way through mud. Someone pushes me so hard, I stumble, hitting the floor with my knees. More bodies press in, stepping on my dress and narrowly missing my feet. If I don't get out of here soon, I'll be trampled.

A hand seizes my upper arm and wrenches me upward. I cry out, the pain sharp and bruising, but when I see the familiar long braid and sharp eyes of Lilith, I swallow down my next scream. Helping me to my feet, she presses something hard into my palm.

It's a short sword. Shorter than the one I practiced with, but deadly sharp.

“Be smart,” she says, voice rising over the noise, “and do what you must to survive.”

That's always been my motto in life, hasn't it? But I nod, as she swipes out her own blade, creating a slender path for me to squeeze through to the servant's door.

I turn to say thank you, but she's already gone, thrown into the thick of the fight with another wave of shadow men in velvet masks.

“Stella!”

Whirling toward my name, I find the knight there in the doorway, hand outstretched and spines retracted. I don't know

how he got there so fast, but I'm so relieved to see him, I practically leap for him.

The moment his fingers tangle with mine, he drags me through the crowd and deeper into the kitchen. Everything here is polished silver and sparkling, but it's ungodly hot and smells like all the food we never got to enjoy.

As we run, the knight's grip tightens on me, his pace quickening. We enter into a curved, dark corridor, but the knight doesn't seem fazed by the lack of light here. He's still tugging me along, while I'm left to do nothing but trust he won't let me trip over my own feet.

When the soft glow of one of the main halls peeks out from the end, we sprint for it like it's our salvation.

Just before we reach it, two of the masked ghostly figures step out from their hiding places, blotting out the light and making my blood run cold. The knight halts, pushing me behind him, and holds out his sword, his entire body rigid.

Who are these guys? A warring kingdom? Or the danger everyone's been talking about?

"Get ready. We'll have to fight our way out of this," the knight whispers harshly.

Dread curls at the base of my spine. "*We?*"

The masked intruders attack, charging at us in a blur of smoke, but the knight is faster, stronger, and more skilled with his sword. The spikes push from his skin, turning him into a monstrous presence of both appearance and skill, and as he whirls the weapon in his hand, the masked men have no other choice but to shift back.

I grip my sword, too afraid to move. This isn't like my training with Lilith. These are creatures of shifting smoke. How do you fight air?

The knight seems to be doing a fine job, though. Even when their wispy limbs begin to solidify and turn into sharpened spears, reminding me of things I've seen in horror movies. The light glints off their razor edges, and I hold my breath.

Fuck, this isn't good.

The knight shifts left, dodging one of their spindly arms, just as another juts out at him. The tip slices across his arm, cutting across his shirt's fabric and skin, and blood bubbles up immediately.

I gasp.

Throwing his head back, the knight spins and throws his spiked shoulder into one of the men's chests. Then, like a football linebacker, he drives him backward until he's pinned—quite literally—into the wall. The knight jerks, the spike snapping from his body, and I flinch at the terrible bone cracking sound.

Tar-like blood bubbles from the chest wound, and the masked man sags, dead.

I'm frozen, unable to move.

With only one opponent left, the knight grips his sword tighter and swings. It clashes with one of the weapon-like arms, the powerful reverberation shaking my bones.

He's so focused on the one in front of them that he doesn't notice the other sneaking around the corner. Like the others, his wispy limbs transform into deadly weapons, and he raises them high. Ready to strike.

“Watch out!”

All thoughts of self-preservation leave my brain as I rush forward, right into danger. I crouch down and swing out a leg to trip the man before he has a chance to land his hit. He falls to the ground next to me, and grabs for me, but I roll out of his way and onto my knees. A burst of energy rushes through me as I clutch the sword's hilt.

“Stella!” the knight yells in warning between blows.

I don't listen. As the man scrambles to his feet, so do I, tomahawk chopping down at the same time.

I hear the thud before I realize what's happened—partly because I stupidly closed my eyes for that second. But when I open them, I see my sword had made contact and ended up

cutting through one of his spiked arms. It lays lifeless on the ground by our feet, and the black, foul-smelling blood pours from his severed stump.

Oh shit! Shit, shit, shit!

My body trembles, and the sword drops from my hands.

I did that? Oh my god.

I'm too startled to move, my legs locked in place. So, when my attacker's shock quickly turns to anger and he lashes out, I'm a sitting duck.

I feel the biting pain in my hip before it registers that he's pierced me with his other spear-like arm. His black blood mingles with my crimson, quickly soaking into my dress. As I peer down, I see the sharp tendril embedded in my side, and pain intensifies ten-fold, stealing all other thoughts from my mind.

It's so intense it steals my voice too, and I collapse onto my knees.

He withdraws, making me cry out.

"No!" the knight shouts somewhere close by. My vision blurs, but through the haze, I can make out forms. The largest one being my knight, and he quickly swings his sword, cutting the head of his attacker clean off. Then, he runs for me.

Trembling, I press my hand to my wound. It's too hard to focus on anything other than the pain grasping me, but there's a whoosh of air beside me and something heavy falls. Blinking, I'm able to clear my sight enough to make out the masked man with the missing arm, the one who'd impaled me.

Then suddenly, the knight is hauling me to my feet, and his hands are on my face, trying to meet my gaze.

"Can you walk?" he asks in a panicked rush.

Lying, I nod. He grabs my hand and begins to pull me down the corridor. My heart races, the pain so intense, tears well in my eyes, but I can't slow us down. I have to hold out, at least until we can get somewhere safe.

Knowing I don't have any other choice, I let the knight guide me through the winding halls. Just before he reaches an intersection, he pulls me roughly through a door. We're at the top of a staircase, and there are thunderous footsteps above us.

More masked men?

"There!" The knight tugs me toward a swirling staircase. He takes two steps at a time, and I try to keep up, but my legs give out from under me. Blood coats my palm and soaks my dress, and my head is swimming. I can't keep going like this.

He stops, his face grim. "You must get up. Please, Stella."

I shake my head, my voice lost to me. Only my thoughts can respond. *I'm so sorry. I tried.*

The last thing I see before the darkness sweeps me up in its embrace is him crouching in front of me, dark eyes full of concern. Then strong arms lift me off the floor.



I'm not sure how long I'm out, and coming back to reality is just as painful as when I'd left it behind. My eyelids slowly flutter open, the pain receding to a dull roar. Tree limbs dance overhead, a darker shade of black than the night itself.

Okay, so we're in the forest.

I can't see anything and I close my eyes, the wind howling through the trees and my heartbeat thudding slow and weak.

"You're awake," the knight says. "Good. Stay quiet. Don't move too much."

We have to be much deeper into the woods than I thought for the light of the castle not to reach us here. I want to ask him about the masked men and how he got us out of there alive, but as much as I hate to admit it, I'm still a bit woozy from the entire ordeal.

Later.

Right now, I just needed to relish in the fact that we're both alive.

“You...you finally took me somewhere we could be alone,” I joke, though the pain in my side makes laughing nearly unbearable. “Too bad I had to go and get myself stabbed first. I ruined the moment. Didn’t I?”

The knight laughs, a gravelly sound I haven’t heard before, and I instantly love it.

His serious demeanor returns with a vengeance as he hovers over me. “I’ll need to undress you to treat the wound. I tried to get it to stop without doing so and it’s impossible. I’m glad you’re awake.”

“I’m fine,” I insist. “I just need a moment to...” The words fade out as the pain of the wound and the light-headedness of the blood loss take me.

“You need to stay quiet,” he says firmly. “I’m going to take your clothes off. I want you to lie still. Don’t move.”

“I won’t.” I grit my jaw, preparing for the worst.

He nods, drawing in a deep breath. Leaning forward, he gently begins to peel the clothes from my body.

Once I’m naked before him, his gaze roams over me, and there’s a flash of something primal across his face that I saw before, during our first meeting. He clears his throat to snuff it out, though, and part of me wishes he’d touch me like he did then. As stupid as it would be right now.

Laying naked on the cold, wet ground with a hole through your hip isn’t exactly romantic, is it?

Regardless, I catch his gaze flicking from my face to my breasts as he tears strips of the gown and begins to pull off his belt. If I hadn’t lost so much blood, I’d probably be blushing right now.

“I’m sorry in advance,” he whispers as he shifts me to wrap the pieces of fabric around me. He’s done this before, I can tell, but even with his gentle touches, it hurts like a bitch.

I hiss in a breath, holding it in my lungs against the pain of being jostled. With the remaining parts of my clothing now in

shreds, I'm left with no choice but to leave my chest completely bare.

When he secures the belt around the makeshift bandages, the pressure does help with the pain. A little. It still sucks, but at least I don't feel like I'm going to pass out at any moment from it.

"There," he murmurs once he finishes the job. "You're all set."

"What am I going to do for clothes?" I ask, wrapping my arms across my bare chest. On the bottom, I'm only in panties, and the chill in the air has me shivering already.

"Hmm...Not sure. I kind of like you like this." A smile cracks his façade.

"Why don't you give me your shirt?"

"It's torn," he replies simply.

"It's better than the nothing that I have on."

He glances at the sky, pretending to think about it. In the silence, the air between us crackles with sexual tension, even though we've found ourselves here by unfortunate means.

"Come on," I tease, hand out. "Hand it over."

Obedying, he pulls the shirt, vest and all, over his head, and my mouth dries at the thick muscles covering his wide shoulders and torso. Where each of those deadly spines had popped out, tiny bloody holes mark his skin, and the gash across his arm is caked in blood. But all his wounds are hard to see with all the tattoos covering his body. Maybe that was the point of them—who knows?

When I reach for the shirt, he smiles and tosses it into the brush, too far for me to get to.

"What the fuck?" I gasp. "What was that for?"

"Now we're even," he says with a shrug, and desire stirs awake within me.

Maybe I can still seduce my dark knight after all.

CHAPTER
TWELVE



Reis

This is a risk, I know it. There are so many factors telling me not to follow through and fuck her, but from the moment I found her on the other side of the portal, she's been a plague on my mind. I've longed to touch her again, to bury my cock deep inside her sweet pussy, but I have orders.

If Prince Airic finds out...

I refuse to even think about the consequences of my betrayal. But knowing how close I got last time—so close to bringing her to climax—and how I got away with it, makes the temptation to push the limits again even greater.

Just once. I'll take her just this once, and then it'll be out of my system. I won't have to worry about it again.

But part of me knows that's a lie too. She's a siren, the way her body calls to me. I doubt one time will be enough.

Hell, I could probably fuck her a hundred times and still not be satisfied.

How did this human woman get me questioning everything—my duty, my morals, my needs? It doesn't make sense. But the way she got me all riled up at dinner tells me she's dying for this, and that only amplifies my drive to make her mine.

She risked so much to protect me, got pierced by one of Malachi's masked soldiers, and I hate that I wasn't able to protect her fully. She has no idea what danger is waiting for her, yet she was willing to put her life on the line. *For me.*

Now that I have her on her back, basically naked and exposed to me, I'm finding it impossible to say no. Her beautiful perky breasts are calling to me, begging me to taste them. And those curves...my mouth salivates just thinking about pressing my face between her legs and exploring her heat with my tongue.

My jaw clenches.

I shouldn't do this. Not now, not ever, but I can't fucking help myself.

Slowly, I crawl over to her, my body fully hovering over hers. She gasps, the sound music to my ears, but she doesn't move or push me away. She only waits, and my heart thunders knowing she wants this as much as I do.

"Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting for this moment?" I breathe, dipping my head so that my lips brush against one of her cherry-tipped nipples. Lust clouds her gaze, and even my own aches and pains seem to disappear, replaced only by the anticipation of what's to come.

"I have a pretty good idea," she whispers.

My tongue swirls around the peddled tip, loving the salty, sweetness of her skin. Drawing the nub into my mouth, I suck on it until her back arches and she groans. Then I move to the other.

My breath quickens. Like before, seeing her lost in her pleasure affects me as much as it does her. My cock is so hard, my balls hurt, and it's taking all my self-control not to ram myself into her right now. As much as I want to fuck her, I've waited too long to have her like this. At my mercy. I need to draw it out.

Her nails rake through my hair, pulling me closer and encouraging me to do more. I suck harder, pinching her nipple lightly with my teeth until she cries out.

"I don't even know your name," she mutters between licks. "You've never told it to me."

I pause. Of course she doesn't know my name. It's a point of contention for me. The name holds a lot of guilt, a lot of

shame, and I rarely let people close enough to share it.

But still, for some reason, I lift my head and say, “Reis. My name is Reis.”

Her hips push up, her heat meeting with my cock, and I suppress a moan.

“Reis,” she repeats, rolling the name on her tongue. “Now I know whose name to scream when you fuck me.”

Fuck, I’m going to enjoy this.

“That’s right.”

She reaches down, finding the button to my trousers, and wrenching them apart. The second she releases me, her fingers brush my swollen tip and I almost leap out of my skin from the simple contact.

As she pushes up on her elbows, I shift back onto knees, shocked she’s even able to move with her stab wound. But I guess the heat of the moment is numbing the pain for both of us.

“Reis.” My name is a moan on her lips. “I want to taste you. Will you let me?”

Oh, yes.

She doesn’t wait for me to speak the answer out loud, though. She sits up, gesturing for me to stand, and when I do, her hands find my shaft again, pumping me up and down. Then, she lifts my cock and runs her tongue along the underside.

Electricity buzzes down my spine.

She wraps her lips around me, her tongue swirling, tasting, before taking the entire length into her mouth. I groan, dropping my hand to the back of her head and shaking the pins free. As her beautiful locks tumble past her shoulders, I grab a fistful and guide her back out before pushing her down to the base. Her mouth is so hot and wet, and the way she’s working me, sucking me down, has my mind reeling.

“Fuck,” I growl and pull her head down even harder. “Your mouth feels so good. It makes me wonder how good your cunt will be.”

Her head bobs, and I tilt my hips, making her take even more of me. That makes her gag, and I wrench her off me, saliva dripping from the side of her mouth. Her fingers lightly squeeze my balls, and my erection throbs before her. When she licks her lips as if she’s desperate for more, it takes everything in me not to fuck her throat until she can’t speak for a week.

She’s so beautiful, I can barely stand it, but if we keep this up, we’re going to be finished before we even get to the good, good part. And I just can’t let that happen, not when I’ve waited this long to have her.

“What?” she says, blinking those long lashes at me. “You weren’t liking that?”

I chuckle. “As you can see, I’m liking it a little too much.”

She leans forward and licks more precum from the tip.

“*But* I have other things on my mind,” I say.

“Good because I need you to fuck me, Reis. Now.”

I respond to her pleas by taking her under her arms and hauling her delectable little body to mine. She’s so small compared to me in every way. If I wanted to, I could throw her around and plunge my cock into her whenever I felt like it, but while the idea of being forceful with her does makes my heartbeat skip, she’s still injured. And hurting her is the last thing I want to do.

“You have no idea how much I want you,” I say, lifting her feet off the ground. Instantly, her legs come around me so that my erection rubs against her wetness.

“Then shut up and take me,” she pants.

I walk forward until her back meets the trunk of the tree and pin her there. Her arms wrap around my neck as I hold her in place by her thighs. “This may tear up your back some...” I warn her.

“I’ve been stabbed. Does it look like I fucking care?” she snaps. “Just fuck me.”

With one forceful thrust of my hips, I’m inside her, and she sucks in a sharp breath.

Damn, she’s tight and so perfect. Her pussy clenches around me as her body adjusts to my size.

So good.

My head falls forward, and the pain and pleasure threaten to drown me. But the sound of her moans, the feel of her against me, fuels me. It’s a peek into what I could have, if I let myself have it. Of everything I want.

I shift my hips in a circle before pulling out so that only the first inch of my cock remains inside her—a tease—before thrusting the whole length back in.

“I can’t get enough of you.” My voice barely sounds like my own. It’s so breathy and full of need.

“Reis...”

Maybe my name isn’t as terrible as I thought. When it comes from her lips, it only invigorates me.

Her body stiffens, the back of her head tilting back. “I... I...”

Then her pussy clamps down on my dick, pure ecstasy crashing into her as her orgasm hits. Watching her intently and not wanting her climax to end, I fuck her through it until the wild sensations inside me are pushed to a harsh point.

I’m teetering on the edge of an orgasm myself. Every piece of me begging for release, but I want more.

I pump into her, my thrusts getting harder and faster as the pleasure builds.

“I want you to come all over my cock when I do,” I say. “Do you understand?”

Whimpering she nods, her entire body rocking against the tree now. Her eyes roll back. “Yes, yes, yes.”

The familiar tingling skitters up my spine, and this time, I'm powerless to stop it. A slight adjustment of my hips, and her thighs begin to quiver as another orgasm takes hold. I convulse, the waves of bliss crashing into me.

"Fuck," I growl. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

Her pussy holds on to me tightly through it all, milking me and causing my rhythm to falter under the intensity of it all. I pump my seed into her, filling her up, and when I can't hold us both up anymore, I ease us both onto the ground again with her nestled on top of my chest.

I'm too out of breath to speak, and we just lie there in silence, waiting for our heartbeats to settle back to a normal pace.

After a long while, she finds her voice again and says, "That was incredible."

"It was more than incredible." Then I feel a sticky wetness on my stomach. I touch it tentatively, my fingers coming back shining red. Her bandage is stained with fresh blood. My stomach drops. "Oh no you're bleeding. I'm sorry, we may have reopened the wound. I tried to go easy on you."

"Don't be sorry," she says as she lays her head under my chin. "In a strange way, I think the pain made the orgasm even better somehow."

I laugh. *This woman*—she's something else.

I wrap my arms around her, loving the way she fits against me like this. Perfect.

My eyes drift close. I can't help it. After the attack, fight, and then mind-blowing sex, exhaustion tugs at my muscles. but when something brushes against my lips, I look down to see Stella's face hovering over mine, her mouth just breaths away.

When she closes the short distance again, I run my hand up her back and return the kiss, sweeping my tongue into her mouth. Much like the sex, the kiss is gentle and full of passion and the exact opposite of what I'm used to. My typical

conquests are more about reaching the end, about my own fulfillment, and that's it.

This...with her...is different.

I can't really explain it any other way than that.

And unfortunately, it has to end.

Reality is waiting for us back in the castle.

"We have to go back," I say. "I have to make sure the guard has finished off the intruders and that it's safe, but the prince will be looking for you soon." The weight of my betrayal starts to close in on me. Prince Airic is going to be furious with me. "He...won't be happy about any of this."

"Yeah, right," she says sarcastically. "Airic couldn't care less what happens to me. I bet he doesn't even give two shits if I died in that attack. It would probably be a relief to him. One more thing off his back to worry about."

"That's not true," I snap. She couldn't be more wrong. "I don't pretend to always understand the prince's motives, but I know he cares about you. He wouldn't have gone out of his way to keep you safe if he didn't."

"You can't be serious." She laughs. "You absolutely do not have to tell him about this."

"I do. He is my prince, and it's my duty."

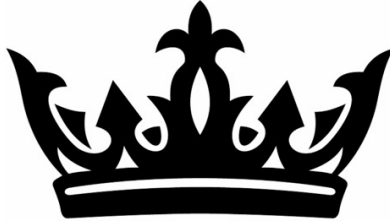
"He'll kill you."

She may be right. I've been part of Prince Airic's royal guard for a long time, and I've known him for even longer. All I can do is hope my years of servitude and friendship are enough to spare me.

Silently, Stella climbs off me and slowly rises to stand. Her wince doesn't go unnoticed by me either. She's in pain still, as much as she's trying to hide it. It's best if we get back to the castle where we can properly care for her wound and get her the rest she needs.

And then...then I'll speak to Airic and accept my fate.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN



Airic

I've stared at these scrolls until my eyes blur and I still can't make fucking sense of any of these reports from our field commanders. Standing, I rub my eyes until they blur and start toward the kitchens. Maybe the houseshadows won't notice if I steal a bit of food before supper.

I've got to get something inside of me before I lose it. Hungry and mad is not a good look on anyone. Especially not someone in my position.

You'd think, being the prince, I could eat or drink anything I wanted anytime I wanted it. But the shadow creatures in charge of the kitchen aren't lenient, and having your wrist slapped by a shadow for sneaking cookies before they're cool isn't a pleasant experience.

As I make my way there, I pass all the destruction caused by Malachi's men. Another attack to test our defenses, I'm sure. Luckily this time, no one was killed. On my side, anyway. But even I know he's getting bolder, and now that he knows Stella's here...

We have to be more careful.

I'm halfway to the kitchens when I run into Reis. His eyes are wild and he's missing his shirt, but besides some scrapes and bruises he looks the same as he did last night before we were attacked. I don't expect anything else—he's a skilled fighter and ruthless bastard when it comes to a fight. There's a reason I picked him to stand by my side.

But his frantic appearance causes my chest to clench with worry, and my thoughts instantly fly to Stella.

“Where is she?” I ask.

He gasps for breath as if he’s been running. “In her room resting,” he replies. “She took a spine to the hip and bled quite a bit, but she’s been tended to and patched up.”

A flood of relief washes over me and mixes with confusion. I saw him leave with her just as the fight exploded in the dining hall. I assumed he brought her back to her bedroom, but looking at him now, it seems it wasn’t quite that simple.

“What in the nine hells happened?”

He zips his lips and gestures back toward my chambers. This must not be a story for prying ears. An ache grows in my chest. Was Stella hurt?

Even when we are behind closed doors, Reis paces around the room a few times before he breaks his silence.

“Stella and I escaped the great room, but we were cornered in the hallway,” he starts in a terse tone. “I tried to fight them off myself, but there were too many. She grabbed a sword and started fighting.” I grumble a warning but he puts his hands up to keep me from speaking until he’s finished. “I told her not to. I told her to just run. She doesn’t listen worth a damn. Surely, you’ve seen that.”

I don’t like it, but I know he’s right. There was very little he could do while fighting off attackers to keep her out of the way of danger if she decided she wanted to be in it. She’s always been a stubborn one. Stella prefers to inject herself wherever she feels is necessary rather than listen to anyone else’s logic or reason.

It’s a simple fact.

“She was injured.” Reis must have seen the look on my face for he hurried to say, “It could have been much worse, but I had to get her out of there. I took her to the forest. It was the only way.”

“The forest is just as dangerous for her as the attackers,” I interject hotly.

“I am quite aware, but I did what was necessary. She’s fine now.”

“Then why are you coming in here acting like you’re headed for the gallows?”

He scrubs a hand across the back of his neck and looks up to the ceiling. “While we were in the forest, something happened. Between Stella and I. Something... sexual. I felt it best to tell you although this is no easy feat.”

My stomach drops although I hold my face blank. Reis has always been my greatest friend and right-hand man. I cannot destroy that relationship because of a momentary surge of rage and jealousy even when I want to.

But my gut reactions can’t be helped. Anger burns in my chest, and I’m filled with a desire to not only hit him but to shake him until his teeth rattle.

“What? What happened?” I ask slowly as rage seethes beneath the surface.

He looks me in the eye, and I see the truth in his expression. Reis glances to the floor, starting to speak and yet holding himself back. Am I so horrible a monster that this man, my friend, feels the need tiptoe around a sensitive subject?

“Tell me,” I press.

His lips thin into a straight line and he squares his shoulders, turning to give me the whole of his attention. It’s in his nature. This loyalty of his to whomever he counts as someone he cares for. He might have just said nothing to me.

Reis is too honorable for that.

“We... We... were together and... I... We...”

“Reis. You fucked Stella? Last night?”

He nods somberly. “This is one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to say, I’ll have you know.”

Which speaks volumes, as he's had to tell many a mother or wife that their beloved wasn't coming home after they'd died in service.

"Then what are you waiting for? Be a good friend and say yes. Out loud. Tell me the truth and put me out of my misery here," I demand.

He shakes his head and opens his mouth but snaps his lips shut again before he goes further.

I growl, spinning away from him when my own anger bubbles out of control. Better for me to keep quiet before I rush to say something I'll later regret.

Deep down, I know; I have no right to blame him for anything that happened between him and Stella. Not when I've left her alone for weeks. Not when I told her that she was mine and— I need to go to her. To see that she's fine and to address her wounds myself.

Torn in two different directions, I pace, too much energy in my limbs to keep still.

It's not as though Reis and I haven't shared women before, either. It has happened several times over. Stella...I always assumed Stella was different. Mine in a way none other has been. Mine since we were kids, until I let my terror over her safety keep us apart.

Until I started acting like a confused jackass. Taking a deep breath, I turn back toward him. "I don't fault you. She's quite beautiful. She's a rare gift," I somehow manage to get out without stuttering or breaking off.

Reis nods slowly. "She is." He leans on the wall and presses his hand to the side of his head. "I had to tell you. I hope you understand that I never meant to betray you. I know you feel a connection to her but...I do as well."

"I just don't know what to say," I confess, sounding as lame and guilty and pissed off as I should feel, all of those sensations directed at myself.

"I know."

The longer the two of us stand there in silence, the more an opportunity I have to let the emotions flow through me until my anger cools. I'm still at a loss for words and none of my circular thoughts help me find them again.

"It wasn't a betrayal," I finally tell Reis. "Stella is like a light in the darkness. She's been trapped in her room going crazy and she still hasn't tried to escape. You protected her. And as much as I would love to have her all to myself..."

I don't deserve her. Not with the way I've been acting.

At least Reis might have helped to calm her. It can't be easy for her, being trapped in this strange realm, probably going over and over things in her head. This realm isn't hers to claim. Reis was there for her when I was not.

"Perhaps being with *you* has also helped calm her urge to leave," I say.

He lifts off the wall and stares at me hard. "Her what?"

"I found Wels in her room when I went to see her the other night. I was angry and we fought. She demanded to go home." I fall back into one of the chairs with a woosh, the regret from that night filling me. "I've not exactly helped her feel welcome here. She expressed a desperation to be rid of us."

"That's not possible. She's not able to go home."

"I know that, but she doesn't," I huff out.

"When are you going to tell her about why you sent her away? She deserves to know you aren't just being cruel and locking her up for no reason." His voice hardens. "She deserves to know the whole truth so that she doesn't think this is all a horrible game."

I scoff at his suggestion. I don't have time for her to know everything. I've got to keep her safe. If she knew, she'd do something risky, just like she did last night when she went and got herself wounded.

"I'll tell her when she's ready to hear it. What I'm doing isn't cruel. It's the only way."

“She’s in more danger if she doesn’t know. She already expressed a desire to learn how to protect herself. What offers more of a protection than the truth?”

He spends one night fucking her, and now Reis thinks he’s in charge? He’s pushing his damn luck right now.

I grind my teeth down to nubs. “And how would you go about telling her that creatures within this realm could use her to get into the human world and destroy it? That she’s the key to protecting her world from ours? That I had to send her away to protect her entire race of people? Do you really think she’d take that well?”

I’m tired of arguing and I’m still starving. I open the door again in a silent demand for him to follow me. If Reis wants to continue to talk about this, he’ll trail me down to the kitchen.

The moment the door opens, my world spins. Stella is right outside with a thin nightdress draped over her body and a look that tells me she’s heard everything I just said. Shock wars with fury and her eyes have gone dark, round. Her lips pursed.

“Stella,” I say, trying to maintain my composure. “What are you doing out of your room?” *Are you all right?*

Where had she been injured and where are the bandages?

“Seems I can do that when someone isn’t consistently locking it behind me!”

I glance over at Reis. He shrugs and looks to the floor.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have to make my way to the kitchen. I’m sure Reis would be more than happy to keep you company. *Again.*” It’s a childish retort, but I don’t fucking care.

I have no excuses. Everything is raw right now. I’m sure I’ll feel better after a snack, and maybe a nap, but for now the green of jealousy is filtering everything in my view.

“After what I just heard, you can’t possibly be mad at me,” she responds. “I get to be mad at you. That’s how this works. You’re being an asshole and throwing a tantrum and yet I’m the bad guy? No sir.”

“Mad at me for what? For trying to protect you? For keeping you safe? Good luck with that. It’s not like it will ruin my day.” Now I *really* sound like an asshole.

She opens her mouth and then closes it, hesitation clouding her expression. She’s either too stunned or too exasperated to speak, so I just push past her. Sometimes being the asshole is much easier than being vulnerable.

No, not sometimes. Every time.

“You are infuriating,” she calls after me.

I spin around and blow her a kiss in return. Her cheeks have flushed, her mouth parted. Her eyes narrowed but not in frustration.

She can pretend to hate arguing with me all she wants, but her body gives her away every time.

Without a word, I walk to the kitchen. A snack and something hard to drink, I decide. The last thing I want to do is argue with Stella about something that doesn’t matter, but it does matter. I’m trying to protect her and her entire race from annihilation. I don’t get credit for it, but I’m doing the best I can. And she acts like she gets to be mad at me. The nerve. One day, she’ll understand. *If we survive long enough.*

The kitchen is deserted, with only a couple of houseshadows lingering about. I grab a bottle of wine and a glass from the long cabinet and blow on it to remove the built-up dust. I take a swig and then look around for something to nibble on. I spot some bread and pick it up. It’s stale, but I’ll eat it anyhow. I lift the glass to my lips and down a full swallow in one go, the cool liquid immediately calming my nerves.

The more wine I consume, the more my thoughts circle around to Stella once more.

She has every right to be angry.

Still, she came back to me.

So beautiful.

So delicate and tender and breakable, yet with a fiery passion lurking beneath her skin, the same kind of fire she had as a child. It's not just her looks that draw me, either. It's her strength. Her inner beauty.

Her intelligence.

I've never met a human as smart as she is, although she does not flaunt it either. She is perceptive beyond measure. I see it even now.

I want her to understand. I want her to know what I'm doing for her, for the protection of all of us. I want her to know that I will never turn my back on her.

I don't know how I'm going to get her to understand, but after tonight, I feel like I'm losing her. My chest aches, and I'm sure I look foolish, but I can't help it. I've started to fall for her again.

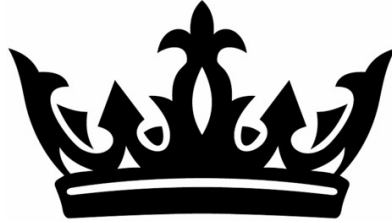
I care for her. As I stare down at the glass of wine in my hand, the thought sends my heart racing, and I have to swallow down a bit of wine in order to keep from choking.

If I am being honest with myself, I've been in love with her since we were children. But I can't let her know that. Not until we're out of danger. Not until I can track down our enemies and make sure they can never hurt her.

The kingdom is under my rule now. I may have been unable to help her before, but it's long past time to make up for that.

That is, if I can find them before they find her.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN



Stella

As Airic gives me his back and walks away like the piggish fuck he is, I spin back to Reis. He lifts his gaze from the floor for only a brief second before returning it there. I don't need to read minds to know that he's torn between the two of us, me and Airic, and rightly so.

What just happened isn't right. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

And for the *prince* to walk off after throwing a tantrum like a baby...

"What in the absolute hell was that?" I snap at Reis. My mind is swirling with everything I just heard. Everything I wasn't supposed to hear.

I came to the room tonight to make sure Airic wasn't going to kill Reis, or worse, torture him and prolong his agony. Instead, I find them talking about the secrets they've obviously been hiding from me all along. Secrets that are so important they are life threatening and yet I don't deserve to know any of them.

"Stella," he says. His voice is low, pleading. Tired. "You'll find out everything in due time, but I need you to trust that Airic and I have your best interests at heart. It is not my place to give you the answers you're looking for."

No, it's Airic's place, and he's doing a terrible job of things.

“Trust?” I ask, trying to access the words within my vocabulary that best suit my reaction to this. “What’s your fucking definition of trust? I’ve been kidnapped, locked up, and treated like someone’s possession. I’ve been driven to the brink of insanity in isolation, with only shadows to keep me company. I’ve nearly been killed by invaders and not given any information about what is going on. How in the hell am I supposed to trust that?”

The self-righteous anger feels good. So much better than the pity party I’ve been throwing myself for far too long.

Reis is having a much better time studying the floor with his hands clasped in a prayerlike pose than speaking to me. Disgusted, I turn away, my hands shaking.

“I’m sorry,” he says, as if he can’t bear to hear the anger in my voice. “I know this must all be very confusing to you, but there is no other way.”

I scrub my fingers through my knotted hair. “So what happens now, Reis? I get locked up in my room again? You take me off the shelf for one night to serve your purpose and then put me back? Is that it?”

“No, Stella. It’s not like that. You don’t understand.”

“Then make me understand,” I yell harshly.

“Your room is the safest place for you. You need to be protected from our world. It’s not a prison. It’s your refuge. Don’t you see? There are dangers here we cannot risk you facing.”

I feel myself losing my foothold on the situation, and a part of me wonders if I’m slowly slipping into some kind of madness.

“Reis, you have been hiding things from me for weeks, and I have to say I’m beyond frustrated. You can’t keep me in the dark indefinitely.”

As he raises his hand in the air to stop me, I know I’ve lost this battle. “Again, it is not my place. If Airic feels that you must be kept in the dark, I am duty bound to oblige. I don’t

want you hurt, and I sure as hell don't want to be the one that gives you information that leads to you being hurt."

"I get it, I do," I say through my teeth. "So, what now? I just have to sit here day after day, waiting for you to come down and tell me what's going on?"

"Yes, that's about it."

I stare at him, my mind a mess. He's still staring at the floor, nodding slowly and apologetically. "I can't believe this," I say, shaking my head. "I don't know how you did it, but you managed to get me right over the edge." There's no easy way back from this edge, either.

"I'm sorry, Stella. I really am. But all of this is so complex, and you must try to see the bigger picture. You need to understand the gravity of the decisions we are making here. It isn't safe for you to know the truth."

It's like he's pleading with me to see his side even though no one has explained said side to me.

"I don't understand why you're doing this to me. What did I possibly do to deserve being treated like this?" I ask.

He walks toward me, his eyes meeting mine for the first time as he places a hand on the side of my face. "It's not as simple as anyone would believe."

"Try, then. Try to make it simple."

Tension grows in the pit of my stomach, a warm reminder of the time we spent together just hours before. It's hard to be mad at him with the effects of the orgasms he caused still running rampant in my system. My vagina is *absolutely* betraying me. I want to be mad. I want answers. But the sensation of his skin against mine is enough to make my legs feel a bit weak.

He runs his hand down the length of my bare arm, and the heat of his fingers trail behind them.

"You are worth more to me than I can possibly describe," he says, standing so close to me that his breath warms my cheeks. "All I can tell you is that you are in the safest place

you can be right now. All of this will make sense soon. Until then, I just need you to please listen. If we say you need to stay in your room, it's for a reason. Be patient with us. We're all trying to figure out the best way forward. Even Airic."

Without another word, he leans in and presses his mouth against mine, his lips like a flame closing in on me. My control is slipping away. I want him. But I can't trust him. I don't know what's going on, with them or with my emotions. I can't even trust myself right now.

I pull back, breaking his soft kiss. "Reis, please tell me what is going on. Now. Give me a little something to go on so that some of this makes sense."

"You are in a safe place. That is what is going on right now. You are protected." Then he leans in again, his mouth putting out a raging inferno I can't contain.

I grab ahold of his forearm and gently push him away from me, breaking the kiss. I want to feel his skin against mine, but I'm still so angry and confused. I want to give him the benefit of the doubt and I can't shake the feeling that it's all a lie. That even the physical affection and orgasms are some sort of evil plot to keep me from asking questions or trying to escape.

Orgasms. I've let the area between my legs do all the thinking for me and her brand of thinking isn't one that will get me where I want to go.

"If you can't give me something, then we don't need to do this," I say, my voice stern.

He looks at me for a long time, his eyes searching for something, and neither one of us is willing to budge on the topic.

"I'm sorry, Stella," he says in a gentle tone. "But I just can't."

"You're sorry?" I ask. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I'm sorry I'm unable to give you the answers you need right now."

“You can. You just won’t,” I say, crossing my arms and lifting my chin. “I am not going to be manipulated and fooled for the rest of my life. I want answers. I want them now.”

“You will have them soon. I swear it.”

Before I can say anything else, he turns and walks away. I stand in place, watching him disappear down the corridor.



It’s days before Reis comes back to my room and things have changed a bit. I’ve been brought an entire wardrobe worth of more comfortable clothes alongside food and fresh drink and the shadows have drawn me warm baths and brought me books from the library. It feels less like being a prisoner at this point; though I haven’t forgotten that I’m being kept against my will.

I don’t know what to believe anymore. I don’t know who to trust. Questions circle in my mind no matter how much I try to focus on anything else, driving me to near madness. I know now that leaving isn’t an option. Reis and Airic said as much in the conversation I overheard. It’s entirely possible that I’ll never see home again.

It is the one solid piece of truth I’ve been given and only then inadvertently, something I hadn’t been meant to hear at all.

I am not going home.

Something, someone, is trying to get into the human world, and traveling between the two would put my world at risk. Though I still don’t understand how I got here or why it happened, I know that much now.

For all I know, it’s the reason Airic sent me away to begin with, back when we were still just children. But something tells me there’s much more to it; more that’s being hidden from me.

But what? What is it that Reis and Airic know that’s so dangerous, so volatile, that it has to be kept from me?

Nothing makes sense anymore. I'm stuck here, left with no real choice but to wait for answers I don't know if I can handle.

When Reis does finally visit, he sneaks in quietly and closes the door behind him as though trying to remain unseen. Yeah, right. Those kinds of things are impossible in a castle where there are eyes everywhere.

But he's here.

I'm still sitting on the bed, reading a book by the light of a small candle, when I look up and see him standing in the doorway. He looks exhausted.

"What's wrong?" I ask. The crackling energy between us flares to life with his nearness. There's something about him tonight, about the terse expression on his face and the way his arms hang stiffly at his sides.

"Stella," he says, looking down to the floor. "I know you've been waiting for me to come talk to you. I just haven't been able to do so." He brushes his fingers over my face. "I'm sorry I can't be more present here, but I have to keep my distance. It's what's best for both of us."

He trails his fingers along the side of my face, the coolness of his touch sending a chill down my back.

"What?" I blurt out. "What's going on?"

He shakes his head. He's already made up his mind. I see it on his face.

"Reis. Don't do this. I need you. I need you to tell me what's going on."

He pulls his hand away from my face. "I'm not able to give you any more information. I have to protect you, even if you hate me for it."

His voice is so smooth and gentle, the effect almost enough to make my stomach flutter. But I still don't know why. I don't know why I should trust him in his words or in his touch. I want to know why he's doing this to me. I want to

know why I'm still here. I want to know why I'm being kept locked in this room. I want to know what's going on.

"Reis, please," I say, staring up at him with pleading eyes. "You've got to tell me what's happening."

He shakes his head slowly before spearing me with a look, seeing right through me with those passionate eyes. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you anything. It's not safe."

"I'm so tired of that word. *Safe*. What does safety even mean if I'm being kept prisoner for the sake of it?" I ask, my voice rising in volume.

"Stella. Please control yourself."

I wrap my hands into fists and push them against his chest, causing him to stumble backward. His hands fly up as he looks at me with wide eyes.

"All you want to do is protect me," I say, letting my arms fall to my sides. "But I can't live like this. I can't spend my life waiting for you to come spare a moment of your time and fill me with more platitudes to keep me complacent."

He shakes his head. "You don't understand. I can't tell you anything. Please... don't ask me to break my oath to my prince. I can't do that."

The mention of Airic still sends shivers down my skin, though the last I've seen of him was when I caught him and Reis talking about me. I have no idea if he's still angry, if he ever had been truly angry, or if he's forgotten about me all together.

"So you're just going to lock me away here until you decide you want to play again?" I've said it before and now I recognize the absolute truth of the statement. I'm a toy.

I'm here to be used and discarded under the guise of my own protection and for what?

For nothing.

He looks down, his eyes filled with a sadness I don't quite understand. "I wish it were different." He clenches his fist, as

if the situation could be even remotely as painful for him as it is for me.

I know I'm pushing him away. He won't come back if I pursue this line of questioning and accusations every time he walks into the room. But, at this moment, I don't care. He's just as much to blame for my current situation as Airic. He knows the answers I'm looking for but refuses to tell me. He knows how being alone is killing me, yet keeps me in here anyway.

I take a breath, sick to hell and back of all this fighting tooth and nail. I'm tired of running in the same circle over and over again. I beg for answers, and he pleads for me to understand that he can't give them. Around and around we go, never getting anywhere. Eventually, one of us will break, and I just have to hope it isn't me.

"Fine, Reis. If you won't give me any answers, why did you even bother coming in here?"

His expression softens from the guarded and tortured look he was forced into from my line of questioning. "I wanted to check on you. To see if there was anything I could bring you or have the houseshadows bring."

I bite my tongue to keep from making a smartass comment about how it would be nice to just be able to leave the room to get whatever I needed. "The shadows take care of me. Unlike the people in this castle, they seem to care about my needs and wants."

A hint of a smile breaks through his solemn expression. "I have noticed they seem to linger here more than anywhere else. They must be fond you."

Until that moment, I really hadn't cared whether or not the shadow creatures liked me. It didn't occur to me that they might have feelings or emotions, because they didn't exactly have facial expressions or any way to communicate.

But now, a strange sense of pride rises up to the surface. All of the mundane one-sided conversations I'd had to keep

myself from going insane must have had some sort of effect. Part of me wanted to brush my shoulders off.

Damn right they like me. I'm likeable. But of course, after the past few weeks, I've started to believe that less and less. There isn't anything special about me. I'm just a pawn trapped in a chess game I never wanted to play.

"They have been good to me," I say quietly. But my revelation that the shadows might have more of a consciousness than I was previously led to believe puts a sour pit in the bottom of my stomach. "But, if they have emotions, then shouldn't they be free to come and go as they please? Or are they prisoners like me?"

Reis shakes his head as he closes his eyes and reopens them slowly. "Much like you, they came here of their own free will. Unlike you, they realize that the protection of the castle is in their best interest. Their power can be tapped into by those that have little regard for their lives. They were hunted and nearly wiped out before they sought refuge here."

A sick feeling rises up in my stomach as the implication of what he's saying sets in. There must be something about the castle that attracts the darker-natured beings. A pull the darkness exerts just as it does the others. I know this from experience. The castle called to me, and I answered without hesitation. But I never once stopped to think about what had drawn me there. I never once realized that such a young and innocent child had been pulled into somewhere so dangerous.

"Reis, why can't I go home? What is so dangerous? Can you at least tell me that?"

He chews at his bottom lip, appearing to debate if answering would go against his vow to Airic. I know what he's decided before he even opens his mouth. His shoulders square and his brow furrows.

"All will be explained soon. My presence here was a mistake. It gives you more questions than answers. I shouldn't have come." He backs up to the door, and my heart squeezes at the thought of being left alone again.

“Please don’t go,” I say, my voice a hoarse whisper.

He turns back to me and gives me that sad look he’s been wearing since he came back. “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Then he’s gone. The door clicks shut behind him, and my hope is lost. I’m alone again, and all I have is unanswered questions driven by fears I can’t even begin to explain.

I collapse onto the bed and stare up at the ceiling. The same questions and fears I’ve had for the past month flow through my head, but it’s different this time. It’s like I’ve come to a realization that I haven’t been able to give myself until that very moment. It’s not just an endless sea of questions and fears. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. I’m a prisoner. I’m going insane. And I’m never getting out of this room.

I rock back and forth on the bed, my knees held to my chest as the tears roll down my cheeks. The fear and sadness grip me with an impossible hold as I allow myself to feel the pain of everything that’s happened since I left my bedroom.

A voice cuts through my self-loathing pity party, and I’m surprised to realize it’s not just in my head.

“Curious to find you back in here,” Wels says, leaning against the doorway with his arms folded over his chest. When I snap my head up to look at him, he smiles.

“That’s what happens when you’re a prisoner,” I reply. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand and try to get my sniffing under control. “What do you want, Wels? And how did you get in here? Isn’t the door locked?”

“Of course it is. But I never let a locked door get between me and a pretty girl. Besides, I saw the knight leave out of here as if he’d just been to a funeral and thought I better check in on you.”

His forwardness doesn’t even faze me. Under the circumstances, I’m just happy to interact with anyone. Even if they are coming on to me in the process.

“Well, I’m fine,” I lie through my teeth. “But thank you for checking.”

“Yeah,” he says, and the tone of his voice tells me he is anything but convinced. “You really look fine.”

He looks past me to the mirror sitting on the desk. “And I’m guessing you haven’t gotten any answers to the too many questions that are written all over your face. You’re not fine, Stella. You look like hell.”

I shrug. “I’ll *be* fine. Does hearing that make you feel better?”

“So, you’re going to just let Airic do whatever the hell he wants with you? Lock you in this room and throw away the key?”

A spark ignites inside of me at the outrage in his tone. He doesn’t like the arrangement? He’d be the first person I met, then, besides myself.

“What else am I supposed to do?” I ask.

He crosses the room in a few long strides before holding his hand out to me. “Come with me. Let’s have an adventure. Let’s get the fuck out of here and do something sinful.”

A smile stretches across my face. Finally, someone who is offering an escape from my prison, even if it is just a temporary one. I know Wels doesn’t have the power to defy Airic altogether, but he’s proven before that he’s powerful enough to at least stand up to him.

I take his hand and let him pull me off the bed. Wels doesn’t waste any time. He walks us directly to the door and opens it. I cringe for a moment, waiting for the click of the lock. To my surprise, it’s unlocked. I look back at Wels, and he winks at me. “Locked doors are just a suggestion when you’re with me.”

And just like that, my heart beats wildly inside my chest. I’m not sure if it’s the implications of his words or the excitement of being able to leave the room without the fear of being caught. Either way, I can’t help but feel like a kid on Christmas morning.

Wels leads me down the hallway to the staircase. So far, we’re undetected and the sense of freedom is exhilarating. But

the little nagging niggle in the back of my head reminds me that it's far from over. People will notice we're missing eventually.

And despite his piss poor behavior, I have a gut feeling that Airic will rain hell down on me if he finds me out of his room. He's turned into the type of man to throw a tantrum when things don't go his way.

My stomach knots at the thought of being locked away somewhere even worse than my room, like the jail I was kept in when I first arrived. All of the small comforts I've taken for granted the past few weeks tick in my mind. The shadows who fulfill my every request, a soft bed, comfortable clothing, even just the simple luxury of running water in my own private bathroom. I pause at the top of the staircase, my feet rooted to the floor.

Wels turns to look at me, the question in his eyes reflecting my own thoughts. "Princess, are you okay?"

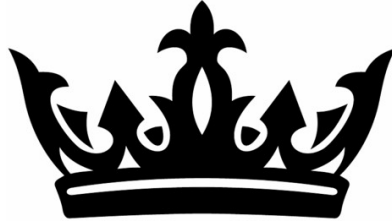
Princess?

I'm anything but.

I want to tell him the nickname is absurd, but I let it go. Instead, I consider going back, telling him I've changed my mind. The safety of my room is still an option, but I don't want to be alone. Alone scares me more than anything. The fact that I'm even having this debate inside my head means I'm desperate. Desperate enough to take this risk with Wels even though I know I'm not ready to face the consequences.

All I know is that I don't want to think about anything anymore. I just want to feel good. Feel alive. I want to dance and sing and enjoy myself. I want to laugh and be silly. And even though these childish desires are just wishful thinking, I know that Wels is just the person to help me make that wish come true.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN



Stella

“I want to be okay,” I tell him at last. Trying to make him understand.

He nods, understanding everything I’m thinking without me having to say a word and for that I’m grateful. His eyes are like flames in the fading light of the sunset coming through the gigantic windows.

Another bond I don’t understand, I think to myself as he takes my hand and leads me down the stairs, gliding down the smooth stone steps. Another bond between a man in this realm where the threat of losing myself looms overhead.

He moves with the graceful, muscular ease of a lion and I find myself watching him, admiring his fluidity. The stone walls of the castle are hung with the same heavy tapestries as the rest of the place, which allow little light through the cracks in between. The stone is cold to the touch and has been worn smooth by the fingers of those who have come before us.

I trail my own fingertips along the surface and add my presence to those in the past.

We make our way through the castle doing our best to avoid the main hallways and sticking to the gloomy corners. The cries of what sounds like peacocks rise from somewhere private along with the ringing of swords in the distance.

This is a place of royalty, guarded by men and kept silent by luxuries. Our footsteps are muffled by plush carpets that

will do a good job of keeping the cold at bay during the harsh winter months.

We move as though we're walking in a dream, quiet and slow. The air smells of money, and the ceilings are so high, we can't see where the stone walls end and the painted ones begin.

Wels puts a finger to his lips as he lifts one of the tapestries to reveal a dark hallway beyond. Foreboding tickles the back of my neck but he keeps his hold on me. With one finger, he motions for me to follow him. Tension grows at the base of my neck, uncertainty building, but I shrug it away. This is an adventure, no time for hesitation.

Once I push past my fear and follow him in, I see a narrow set of stone stairs. They are badly worn and carved with deep gouges from centuries of use. The stone under the thin soles of my shoes is cool and smooth to the touch.

"Is this a secret passage?" I ask, failing to keep the whimsical hope from my voice. "A real one?"

Wels turns and looks down from a few steps above me. "As opposed to what, exactly? An unreal secret passage?"

A blush rises to my cheeks as I realize how silly I must sound. "Well, I've read about them in fairy tales and saw them in video games, but I never thought I'd actually get to be in one," I say, hoping he understands and doesn't think I've lost my marbles. Though, maybe I have. The words rush out of my mouth in a single nervous breath. "It's a little weird."

"Oh? Well, consider this your lucky day, Princess." He gives me a wide grin, his white teeth shining against the dark of the hallway.

The words could sound patronizing if it weren't for the way he says them. There's an honesty in his voice that makes me feel like I'm the only girl in the world he has ever called by the cute nickname.

And I'll take it. I can use a little more confidence, the way I feel when I hear him say such things. I'll take every bit of good feeling I can get.

Though, I know that's probably not true, the only girl in the world part. Wels seems like the kind of guy who could have his pick of anyone here and probably has. Girls, guys, doesn't matter. He's handsome, and charming, and super fucking powerful from what I've come to understand.

He probably goes to sleep under a pile of bodies who are all willing to satiate his every need whenever he makes a move.

I can't help but to be drawn to him. Maybe it's because he seems to be one of the few people in this world who actually give a shit about what happens to me.

My heart skips a beat as we round a corner in the stairway and Wels pushes aside a small door. Beyond it is the most beautiful room I've ever seen.

The setting sun pours through the etched glass windows and illuminates the chandelier that hangs from the center of the high, domed ceiling. It casts thousands of tiny rainbows against the black-and-white marble floors and reflects off the silver- and gold-framed paintings that adorn the walls. Books of all shapes and colors line the shelves on the far walls and oversized gilded chairs and sofas sit in a semicircle around the enormous fireplace that roars and crackles with red flames.

A smile spreads across my face as I take it all in. This is the kind of room I've always dreamed of. It's perfection.

"This is beautiful," I whisper into the silence.

"I'm glad you think so," Wels says, moving to my side. "I know you think of the castle as a prison, but it's rooms like this that make it home for me. There are always good parts of life, even if they're hidden."

I turn to look at him, watching his face as he takes in the room. A look of longing crosses his features as he stares up at the domed ceilings. There's a sadness in his eyes that makes my heart ache.

I put a hand on his arm, my fingers chilled against the fabric of his tunic.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” I ask, not really sure if I want to hear the answer.

He glances down at the spot where my hand touches him, and for a moment, it feels like he’s forgotten where he is and who I am.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

He shakes his head and runs a hand through his hair. “It’s okay,” he whispers, his voice thick with emotion. He closes his eyes for a moment and takes a breath. Opening them again, he turns to face me.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Princess.” He takes my hands in his and brings them up to his lips before pressing a kiss to the backs of my knuckles. “This is my home, but it’s not where I belong. I’m an outsider. I know I’m not a good person, and I can’t promise I’ll ever be, but I swear I will never hurt you on purpose. That’s the best I can do.”

My heart twinges in my chest, knowing he’s keeping things from me and fearing what those things might be. But, I can’t bring myself to ask any more. I don’t want another thing to worry about. I just want to enjoy being here with him. I know it’s only a matter of time before I have to go back to my room, and I don’t want to miss any of this.

I’m suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to make this moment last as long as possible. I want to make this night a memory to comfort me when I’m back in that room. I know it’s silly to romanticize it, but I can’t help it. There’s a certain kind of magic in the night around here. And I want to capture as much of it as I can before it’s gone.

There’s no fear in me now, no paranoia. I’m not afraid of what happens tomorrow or what the consequences of my actions might be. I’ve spent years of my life feeling out of control of my own life. And right now, I’m doing something for me. It’s okay if it makes me happy.

I take Wels’s hand in mine and pull him behind me, turning my back on the library and heading toward the gold-framed mirror in the corner. The firelight glimmers off his golden hair

and the fabric of his clothes, making him look like a god from a fairy tale. I step up to the mirror and look at my reflection.

And, for a fleeting moment, it's as though I actually am the royalty he keeps referring to me as. My silver hair is piled high in a messy bun, and I don't have access to any makeup here, though I am sure the shadows would find me some sort of replacement if I asked. The clothes they've given me and the room around me are enough to complete the illusion in my mind.

I take a step away from the mirror, turning toward Wels.

"You are, you know," he tells me softly. "Beautiful. You're regal. If that's what you were just thinking.

"You're saying that because I'm trapped here and you're trying to put me at ease."

"No, Stella, I'm not. I'll do my best not to lie to you. Trust me when I tell you that you are something special. Beautiful and incandescent."

All I know is that I feel better than I have in years. And that's something I'm going to hold on to with both hands.

"Thank you." My cheeks heat and my pulse quickens. I reach behind my head and undo the ribbon that's holding my hair up, letting it tumble around my shoulders.

Wels's eyes soften, and his lips part as he takes a step toward me. I wrap my arms around his neck and breathe in his scent as his hands slide down my back, coming to rest at my waist. He pulls me close to him, holding me against his body.

His face is inches from mine, his gaze intense. The way he looks at me makes me feel like I'm the most beautiful person in the world. And I know that's crazy, but I can't bring myself to care.

And then, I feel his cock through his trousers, hard against me as it presses into my stomach, making my pussy tingle.

I gasp and pull away. He has a half-smile and seems to be holding back laughter.

"What is it?" he whispers, his eyes glinting with mischief.

I try to scowl at him, but it's hard not to smile.

"You're an asshole," I say, looking down at the bulge in his pants. "That's what it is."

"And you like it," he says, moving closer to me. "You like me being an asshole the same way you like my cock growing thick for you."

I laugh and try to swat him away, but he grabs my hand, pulling me close and wrapping his arms around my body.

"I hate it," I lie, my breath heavy as his lips move down my neck.

"No, you don't," he whispers.

I move up on my tippy-toes and run my fingers through his hair, pulling his head toward my neck. He trails kisses across my collarbone, sending shivers down my spine.

"I hate this," I repeat.

His lips find my neck again, his teeth grazing my sensitive skin, and I'm sure I'd be on the floor if it weren't for his strong arms supporting me.

"No." He shakes his head. "You don't."

His lips travel down the front of my neck, his soft hair brushing against my skin. He pulls down the collar of my dress, and his lips brush against my shoulder.

I bite my lip, trying to think of something to say. This wasn't how I saw this day going. Although, let's be serious; I've never pictured any of this in my future. Not one bit of it.

"We shouldn't," I whisper.

He laughs, a low rumble in his chest, and his lips travel up my neck again.

I shiver at his touch.

"Don't worry. Nothing's happening," he whispers in return. "Absolutely nothing."

I open my mouth to protest, and he takes the opportunity to slip his tongue inside, wrestling with mine as I struggle to

think straight. His kiss burns through any and all of my inhibitions and turns me into this wanton woman who is controlled by her body instead of the other way around.

Yet...

It's so good to kiss him. I try to push him away, but he uses my hand to pull me closer.

A bolt of pleasure shoots through me, and my eyes flutter closed. My body melts into his, aching for more contact.

I dig my fingers into his shirt as I struggle to stay on my feet. Wels bands an arm around my waist to keep me in place and uses the other to touch me. My pussy is wet, and my nipples harden against the fabric of my dress.

He slides his hand down my back and grips my hip, digging into my skin possessively.

I barely know Wels, and Airic and Reis will be furious if they find out. I know that it's wrong, and I know I shouldn't do this with him, but I also know I want it. I want it more than anything else right now. It's a need, a deep-rooted desire that's taking over my body. I want him to fuck me. I want him to take me right here and now.

He swipes his tongue across my lower lip to get me to open for him, which I do willingly, and my heart races as he continues to burn a trail along my skin, my back, my hips. He rests his hands on my ass, squeezing, and a jolt of electricity shoots throughout my body. An uncontrollable moan flies out of me as my back arches.

"You want this," he whispers in my ear. "Don't try to lie and tell me any differently. I can tell when a woman wants me."

"No, I don't," I insist, though my body has a different answer.

I press my hands against his chest, trying to push him away, but every time I do, his hands tighten on my body, and I'm less and less motivated to escape.

"You want me to fuck you, don't you?"

“No.”

“You don’t want me to strip that dress off you and make you come until your legs shake and your eyes roll back into your skull?” His voice washes over me like crushed velvet.

“No,” I say once again.

He moves his hands down my back, coming to rest on my ass. He squeezes and spanks and I whimper, pushing closer yet to bring my breasts high for his inspection.

This is wrong. I know it is. I shouldn’t be doing this, but I don’t care. I want this. I want him.

He presses his lips against mine again, kissing me and making my head spin. His fingers slide up my leg, underneath my dress, and I gasp as they rub my bare skin. My pussy throbs, and I moan into his mouth.

“Tell me you want me to touch you. Say it.”

“I want you to touch me,” I whisper, my heart racing.

He brushes against my panties and I shudder. I know I should stop him, push him away, but I can’t. I want him more than anything else in the world.

The material of my panties is thin enough that I’m sure he can feel the heat radiating there. It certainly can’t hide the wetness seeping from my pussy, and from the way his fingers rub around my opening, he seems to be enjoying what he’s doing to me. His slow, deliberate smirk confirms it, and I’m lost, completely at his mercy.

My legs shake as the tip of his finger rubs my clit. I draw in a sharp breath, and my knees almost buckle. I don’t know what has become of me since I arrived back here, but I know this overwhelming desire for release has been a near constant. It’s a desperate, uncontrollable need I’d never felt before.

I can feel my pulse racing in my head, my heart thumping in my chest. I can’t think straight, but I know I don’t want him to stop. I want him to touch me. I want him to make me come.

I moan as he pushes the fabric of my panties to the side, brushing against my burning entrance. My knees buckle, and

my hands fly to his shoulders to help keep my balance. I dig my fingers into his shoulder, and he chuckles.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he says. His voice is low and husky as he lifts me up and moves me to one of the sofas, his eyes burning into mine. “I’m gonna make you come. Right here. Right now.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, and he grins at me.

“Don’t worry, Princess. I’ll be gentle.”

My chest tightens as a jolt of electricity shoots deep inside me. He reaches up and pulls my dress down over my shoulders, and I gasp as the fabric falls to my waist. He licks his lips as my bare breasts are exposed to him for the first time.

He stands up and quickly rips his shirt off, his eyes never leaving mine. He lowers himself between my legs, kneeling on the floor in front of me before leaning forward and takes my nipple into his mouth. I moan, arching my hips toward him.

“That’s a good girl,” he whispers, his breath hot against my skin.

I whimper as he licks the nipple, his tongue flicking over it. My head falls back and I gasp, a bolt of pleasure shooting through me. His fingers slide up my thighs again, then come back slick with my juices.

He grins, pulling his fingers from my pussy and stuffing them into my mouth. I suck on the two fingers, tasting my own juices as the tip of his tongue dances around my nipple.

I moan, my hands gripping his hair tightly. His fingers glide over my mound, and I shudder as they move over my clit. I bite my lip, my body shaking as he flicks it with his thumb. I want to tell him that I want more, that I need more, but I can’t find the words.

He must be able to tell, because he coaxes it out of me. “Tell me what you want, Princess. Do you want to come on my tongue?”

I nod and he chuckles. “Say it, then. Tell me how badly you want it.”

“I want you to make me come,” I whisper, my body trembling.

“Where do you want me to make you come?”

I look at him and blush. “On your tongue.”

“Good girl,” he whispers. “I can’t wait to taste this sweet little pussy of yours.”

“Fuck,” I whimper as his lips drag across my nipple, swirling around the tip, and his fingers swirl around my clit. I shudder, my hands tightening in his hair.

My hips buck as his fingers slide into my pussy, in and out a few times, making me whimper, before he pulls them out and licks them clean.

“Mmm,” he says with a grin. “You’re absolutely delicious, princess.”

He leans down and drags his tongue up my slit and then flicks it against my clit. He licks me a few more times and I gasp, my back arching.

His tongue slides in and out in slow, steady strokes, making my pussy quiver. His lips wrap around my clit, sucking on it and making me gasp. I can’t control myself, my hips bucking up to his mouth, my body moving against his in a frenzy.

My hands tighten in his hair, pulling at it and holding him in place. I can’t take it anymore.

He presses his fingers against my pussy, sliding them into me and making me shudder, the tip of one brushing against my g-spot. My mind goes blank as my orgasm builds. It’s like I’m moving outside of my body, watching as I arch and writhe against him.

He flattens his tongue against my clit, and a loud moan rips from my throat. He holds me in place with one hand, his mouth hungry on my pussy, and his fingers thrusting in and

out of me. My pussy clenches as he moves faster, hitting my G-spot again and again.

“Fuck,” I whimper, my eyes opening and closing. “Don’t stop. Oh god, don’t stop.”

“I won’t,” he growls.

The orgasm hits me like a freight train, and I moan as my body convulses. I arch my back, moving my hands from his hair to grip the couch cushion. I can feel my juices spilling into his mouth. He continues his assault, sending shockwaves of pleasure throughout me.

Finally, I collapse against the sofa, my body shaking and my head spinning. I can’t think straight.

“Holy shit,” I whimper as I come back down.

He grins and wipes my juices from his lips before he kisses me. I kiss him back, tasting myself as my arms wrap around his neck. He smiles against my lips and I shiver.

When he pulls away, I lick my lips. With a mischievous grin, I lean forward and kiss his cheek, tasting my juices there. He groans and grabs me, pulling me onto his lap.

His lips crash against mine, and I whimper as my pussy grinds against his cock inside his trousers. My hands slide up his arms, his skin hot beneath my fingertips.

“I want you,” I whisper. “Please, take me.”

He growls and grabs my ass with one hand, hefting me up. I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck as he lifts me up enough to move from underneath me.

When he stands, the fabric of his pants strains against the massive bulge below it. I can’t fend off the desire to lean forward and kiss him, my lips lingering for a bit too long.

His hand tightens in my hair, forcing my head back. I open my eyes and look into his.

“You want that, don’t you?” he growls. “Do you want me to fuck your pretty little mouth, Princess?”

I nod and lick my lips, my pussy clenching at the thought of him between them.

He makes quick work of his trousers, his cock ripping free as it stands out from his body in an impressive display of manhood.

I blush as I realize how big it is—bigger than anything I’ve ever had before, even plastic.

I lean forward and wrap my fingers around his shaft. I keep my eyes fixed on his as I press my mouth to him. His hardness twitches as I open my mouth.

I close my eyes and take him in, knowing there’s no way I can fit it all. Instead, the corners of my mouth burn as his cock stretches it, making me whimper. He tightens his grip in my hair and bucks his hips, sliding more of him into my mouth than I thought was possible to take.

The pressure cuts off my windpipe, and I pull back, gasping for air.

“That’s it, Princess. Take it all of it,” he says as he grabs the top of my hair and pulls my mouth back onto him. I swirl my tongue over his dick and into the back of my throat, jamming against it and making me gag. Even with every inch of my throat full, I still can only take in about half of his length.

“I... I can’t,” I stutter as I pull back.

Without missing a beat, he gives me a wink, and his penis decreases in size. Not that it gets soft. No. He’s still fully erect, just now it’s more the size of cock I’m used to. “Is this better?”

“How?” I manage to ask before he starts fucking my face again.

“Don’t ask questions. Just enjoy it.”

I open my mouth and take him in, my throat relaxing as I do. He pulls me into him, his cock making a popping sound as it slides back into my throat. I moan and he thrusts forward, the entire length of him pushing farther down my throat.

I gag again and pull back.

“You’re so fucking sexy like this,” he hums.

I feel sexy. Vulnerable but sexy, especially knowing that I’m the one giving him the pleasure he seeks. I take a moment to catch my breath before I look up at him with a smile. I open my mouth and start taking hard dick in again. I run my tongue along the underside of his shaft, just as he presses his fingers into me.

My pussy is still wet from my orgasm, and I’m eager to see what he’ll do when I’m filled with his cock. If he can change the size of it without barely even thinking about it, what will it be like when he’s inside me? Will I get a surprise then just like with Airic and his vibrations? Just the thought makes my body go into overload.

I push the thought away and focus on what’s going on in my mouth. I bob forward, in and out, taking it to the base. He groans, the hand that isn’t holding my hair gripping my ass instead.

I move faster, my head bobbing up and down as I suck on his shaft. My tongue swirls around the head every time it goes into my mouth, tasting his precum as it drips out.

Then looks down at me, his eyes blazing. “Tell me to fuck you. Tell me you want it.”

His dirty words light a fire in me, and I do exactly as he says. “Please, fuck me. I need you inside me.”

He smiles and his grip tightens on my hair and ass. He pulls himself out of my mouth but doesn’t let me go. He turns me around and in one motion, bends me over the back of the couch.

He rubs his tip along my clit and I moan. As he moves himself between my lips, I squirm and reach back to wrap my fingers around his dick eagerly. Not wanting to wait a second longer, I guide it to my pussy. He slides in with ease.

“Oh, god,” I gasp as he fills me.

He grabs my hips and jerks himself deeper into me.

“That’s it, Princess. Take it all. Take every inch of my cock inside your tight little pussy,” he growls.

“Fuck. It’s so big.”

He thrusts forward, and I can feel his cock growing even more, stretching me and making me dizzy with lust.

“It’s not enough? Do you want more?” he teases. He slams into me again, making me cry out as he hits even deeper than before.

“Yes, more.” I bite my lip, though I know it’s probably a mistake. He’s already got me stretched out farther than I’ve ever been before, and he could probably double in size again. I’m not sure I’d still be able to take him.

He smirks and I feel his cock growing again, stretching me even more to a point that rides the line between pleasure and pain. He thrusts forward, and I scream—I can’t help it—my pussy tightening as I do. I grab my breasts and squeeze them, pinching on my nipples to heighten the sensations rocketing through me.

“That’s it. Take it like a good little girl.”

I moan and buck my hips, grinding my ass against him as he fucks me. Another orgasm builds deep within me with each thrust.

He leans forward and kisses my neck, sending shivers down my spine. He grabs my hair and yanks, forcing me to look at him. “Your fucking gorgeous. So pretty, bent over, ass in the air, taking my cock.”

As he speeds up, my toes curl and the muscles in my pussy tighten.

“You gonna come for me, Princess?” he growls.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I whimper.

He reaches down to find my sensitive clit and circles it. I can’t take it anymore, and as I catapult into bliss, his muscles tighten against me. But even as he climaxes and fills me with his seed, grunting, he continues to pump into me ferociously.

My legs shake and I shut my eyes, letting the waves of pleasure roll over me.

When he finally releases me, we're both sweating and out of breath. With gentle hands, he guides me over to sit on the couch beside him and grins like he's proud of what we've just done. And maybe he is. I have a feeling my body will be sore from it for a few days.

"Come here," he says and drapes my legs over his lap.

What I really want to do is clean myself up. His cum is dripping down my thighs, warm and sticky, but he doesn't seem bothered by it at all. Quite the opposite. His gaze roams over my legs with a prideful gleam in his eyes.

"I like you this way," he says, "covered in me. Marked as mine."

He grabs my chin and draws me in for a kiss. His hands find my hair again, and he holds me tight, his tongue dancing with mine.

When we break apart, he hums. "That was amazing."

"You're good. I probably just got lucky." I shrug.

He chuckles. "Maybe you did. I'll have to do it again to test my hypothesis."

I smack his chest. "You're such a pig."

"I know. It's a character flaw that I have no plans of working on." He pulls me down and kisses my neck. My heart bangs against my ribs at the idea of another round with this man. "How about some food to refuel? It's getting late. We've probably missed dinner at this point."

My stomach growls at the mention of food, reminding me that I haven't really eaten all day. Part of me wants to stay in this secret hidden room forever, but I know I'll have to go back to my own locked room soon, lest I risk the wrath of Airic when he finds out where I've been.

With a sigh, I stand up and find the remaining pieces of my clothing. Wels uses a handkerchief he had stuffed in his pants pocket to wipe me up before helping me get dressed. I don't

know why, but the kind gesture means more to me than he probably knows. Especially after all the coldness and cruelty I've faced while in this realm.

Taking my hand, he leads me to the secret staircase.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN



Stella

After a brief meal of fish and rice in the kitchen, Wels offers to walk me back to my room, but I decline. I want one last moment of freedom, a brief instance to feel like I'm in control of my own destiny, even if that destiny is just walking myself into my gilded cage of my own freewill. The sky outside the windows is so thick with stars it looks as if a blanket of diamonds has been thrown over the sky. The air is cool, and it nips at my skin, making me hold my arms around my middle for warmth.

I know I should go straight to my room, but I don't want the feeling of freedom to end. Instead, I take a turn I haven't before and end up near a window that looks out over what seems like the whole of the kingdom.

The small village that surrounds the castle is quiet in this late hour, its residents retreated back to their quarters for the evening. It slumbers in the cool darkness, the only light coming from a few scattered candles in second-story windows and the flickering fireplaces.

Beyond the cluster of houses, the forest lies foreboding, shadows dancing between the branches. I can almost make out the waves lapping onto the ashen beach from here, almost hear them.

The chill from the leaky windows turns the already brisk air nearly unbearable, and I'm about to walk away and head back to my room when I hear voices.

“I don’t like it. Something isn’t right. If they were going to attack, why wait so long? They know she’s here now.”

The commanding voice sound like it was coming from just a few feet down the hall, and I flatten myself against the wall as if I can sink into it. I don’t have time to escape or find a better hiding place. I just hope I’m hidden enough to not be caught out in the open. The rough, gravelly voice without a doubt belongs to Reis, and he’s one of the last people I need to see right now.

“Reis, you’re being paranoid. Stella is safe here.”

Shit. If I thought getting caught by Reis was bad, getting caught by Reis and Airic together is apocalyptic. I’ll never see the light of day again, if I don’t get out of here quickly.

But they’re too close. I can see their figures quite well now as they walk toward me. I just have to stay put and stay quiet. Maybe they’ll move on without noticing me.

After all, moving shadows are common in this castle.

“None of that matters. You know he will come for her, and we have to be ready when he does. If he gets his hands on her, her life and the lives of everyone in her world will end. You know this. This isn’t a game we want to lose.” Reis is probably the only person in this realm who could get away with talking to Airic like that, but Airic doesn’t seem to mind. In fact, he nods his head in agreement.

“Then it’s good that I don’t plan on losing.”

“His minions and conjurings have been seen as close as the forest line, Airic. It won’t be long until he makes some sort of play. I’m baffled that he hasn’t already, but my bet is he’s gathering forces and strength. He knows you’re a worthy opponent. We have to be ready, and locking her away isn’t helping her prepare.”

“Don’t talk about her like she isn’t here,” Airic says, turning his head toward me. His eyes lock on mine, and I gasp in shock. How did he see me?

“How did you know I was here?” I ask, unable to hide the fear in my voice.

“Why do you always underestimate me?” he says, clicking his tongue as he walks closer. Airic lifts my chin up, a strange expression on his face. He looks kind of sad, but he’s also smiling. “I will always be able to sense you, Stella.”

My brow furrows. “You can just sense people’s presence? Since when?”

“I can do anything I want.”

The way he says this sends a shiver down my spine, but I don’t have time to think about it before Reis speaks.

“What do you want me to do with her?”

The words are cold. A knight speaking to his prince, not the man who made love to me multiple times on a forest floor. I know I fucked up and so does he. My only hope is that Airic still has some mercy tucked under that royal cape of his.

I stare between the two of them as I wait for an answer, my mouth hanging open and baited breath held.

Airic finally turns to me and smiles as he raises a finger to slide down the side of my face. “Take her to my chambers.”

The two men share a look I don’t understand as my eyebrows raise in shock. “What?”

Reis’s eyes hold mine, boring into me until they make me lower my own. He doesn’t even answer me. He just turns on his heel and starts walking toward Airic’s room, knowing I have no choice but to follow.

I stand there in stunned silence. I can’t believe this is happening. I must have fucked up way more than I thought.

I bite my lip and nod before turning on my heel and following Reis down the hall. I don’t look back to see if Airic is watching. I just continue to walk behind Reis. My heart is racing, and I can’t think of what possible punishment awaits me. It’s clear he isn’t just going to lock me back into my room, so this must be something much worse.

I walk through the halls, and they seem to echo with my footsteps, my heart pounding hard. Each step brings me closer and closer to being punished for my actions, punished for not

obeying. For sneaking out of my room and roaming the castle alone. At least they don't know about Wels's part in all of this. After Airic's freak-out when he caught Wels in my room, I wouldn't want to find out what he would do if he knew how I'd spent my evening.

"What is he going to do to me, Reis?" I ask, my voice coming out small and frightened.

"Don't talk," Reis says flatly, devoid of emotion.

I don't know what to say so I keep my mouth shut and just follow him.

He opens a door and strides inside, holding it open for me. I step inside, too. It's dark, but I can see that it's Airic's room. Airic's bed. Airic's space. The walls are dark wood with white drapes hung from the windows.

My eyes land on the bed, it's sumptuousness drawing me in. It's huge, far bigger than any bed I've ever seen. It's so high off the ground—I'm sure it's a foot higher than my bed at home—and is so long it could probably fit two people comfortably and two more people with some squishing.

I've never seen anything like it before, but I feel like something deep inside me is telling me to climb in. My feet start moving, and I walk over to it and run my hand across the smooth carved wood of the bedpost.

Reis catches my hand, and I look up at him. He's staring down at me, pain sparking in his eyes. It's there for only a second and then it's gone, replaced by inscrutable stone.

"Strip for me."

My eyes widen. "Wait, you want me to do what?"

"Strip for me." Airic's voice comes from behind me, and I turn to see him standing in the doorway.

"You want me to do what?" I ask again, my voice rising in anger. "You can't be serious. This is crazy."

Airic steps forward and grabs a fistful of my dress, pulling me toward him. I stumble and he catches me before I can fall, tightening his hold on my gown and forcing me to press

against him. “You do not question me, Stella. You do not tell me what you are or are not going to do. You will do as you are told. You will do *exactly* as you are told.”

I’m panting, my chest heaving as Airic and Reis exchange looks. I’m filled with anger, but it does little to change the maddening sexual excitement that floods me. Something about this situation is making me wet. Airic’s words are seared into my brain, his voice an authoritative growl.

I want to resist. I want to refuse. But as Reis reaches for me next, touching my shoulders, all my fears melts away, the warmth of his skin soothing me the way it always does. I’m paralyzed.

Reis pulls my gown up and over my head, leaving me standing in nothing but my underwear and shoes. “Strip,” he says.

I hesitate, but Airic reaches up and grabs my chin, his fingers wrapping around my jaw and squeezing it tight.

“You will do as you’re told, Stella,” Airic says in a low whisper. “Or you will be punished.”

A shiver runs through me as Airic leans down and kisses me. He sucks my lip into his mouth before releasing it with a pop. He leans back but doesn’t let go.

“Strip,” he says again, his grip on my chin tightening. The squeeze forces my mouth open, and Airic leans down and kisses me once more. Our lips are pressed tight, and his tongue slides between my lips, reaching deep into my mouth.

He pulls back and I gasp, my knees weak and shaky. I feel like I’m falling, like Airic is doing something to me, but I can’t tell what.

“Strip,” he says again, and his voice is cold and serious.

Reis circles me, my heart beating so hard I feel like it’s going to burst out of me.

“Panties.”

I step out of my shoes so I’m standing in nothing but my underwear and turn to see Airic staring at me, his eyes roving

up and down my body.

“You look beautiful,” he says huskily. “But what did I tell you?”

“Uh, I’m going to... I mean, uh, I’m going to, um... strip.” I can’t think. I can’t focus. I can’t do a thing but stand there, my knees shaking.

“Good.”

I slide my hands down the front of my underwear and grip the fabric before pulling it down my thighs. I step out of it and kick it to the side. My body burning with embarrassment, I look down at the floor, unable to look Airic in the eyes.

“Look at me,” he says.

I obey.

“Good girl.” A smile spreads across his face.

My heart pitter-patters in my chest. I’m not sure what’s going on or what I’m doing, but it feels good.

“Come here.”

I walk toward Airic, my body swaying back and forth. I feel sexy as hell, and as confused as I am about what’s going on, I can’t help the excitement buzzing through me.

I move my hands up to rest on Airic’s hard chest, feeling his muscles twitching under my touch. The hard muscles of his abdomen tighten as he takes a deep breath and then exhales slowly.

He grabs my wrists and pulls me into him before wrapping his arms around me tightly. He presses his lips to mine, and I open my mouth, moaning deep in my throat as he slides his tongue inside.

His erection is hard and ready. I can feel the tension in his body, the need to grab me and throw me down on the bed and fuck me.

“Reis.”

Reis steps forward and slides his hands up my legs until they reach my inner thighs. I lean back, letting him know that I want him to take me, that I'm filled with lust for him.

His hard cock presses against me, rubbing my ass, and I grind my hips back into him.

My naked body between the two strong men is almost too much to bear as their hands travel across my skin and their lips slide over mine.

I want them both, I realize. I want them both to pleasure me. I want them both to use my body and make me theirs. I want to be fucked by my captors, told what to do, and made to obey them. Maybe I am fucked in the head, but I don't care at this point.

I'm filled with need. I'm filled with a driving desire I can't control. I don't want to, either.

Reis pushes me down to my knees, and I gladly sink to the floor. He spreads my knees apart and steps between them, his hands running across my skin. I feel him leaning down, feel his breath and lips on my neck.

When Reis's cock presses against my lips, I whimper and take him in, sucking his head. I slide up and down his shaft, and his hips rock forward, shoving deeper. I gag as his cock fills my mouth, and it's still not enough. I want him. I want him to fill me. I want him to use me. I want to be his toy.

Reis grips my hair, pulling my head back, and his cock is quickly replaced by Airic's. I look up at him, my eyes watering from the assault to my throat, only to find the two of them locked in a passionate kiss as he thrusts his hips back and forth.

I wrap my hands around Reis's stiff cock and pump it up and down while I suck Airic.

Reis moves behind me, caressing my skin. He pulls my ass cheeks apart and presses the head of his cock against the tight hole between them.

I moan around Airic's cock, my body craving more of their brutish touches.

Airic's heated gaze devours my body, and with my heart pounding loudly in my ears, I look back at Reis. He's staring at me as well, watching me with his dark eyes full of desire.

"That pussy is mine," Airic growls possessively.

"Of course, my prince. Her ass is scrumptious too," Reis says and grasps a cheek.

Airic nods at Reis, and my stomach flip-flops with anticipation. Oh my god... They're going to both fuck me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I watch as Reis spits on his hand like a savage and palms his dick, lubing himself up. Any other time, I may have thought it was a gross gesturing, but now, I'm trembling with arousal.

When he presses the head of his dick against my tight little hole again, I hiss. "Sssshit..."

He pushes all the way in, and the biting pain of it shocks me at first, but it isn't long before that pain gives way to the sweetest pleasure.

He's slow at first, soft and patient, but soon his thrusts are harder, faster, and deeper. His hunger grows with every thrust. He yanks my hair, wrapping his hand around it and pulling my head back. I shake with pleasure, watching as Airic moves to the bed and sits on the edge, watching me intently as I'm used by his knight.

I grip the bed in front of me, my mouth hanging open. Airic leans back and then stands. He discards what's left of his clothing, his eyes locked on mine.

"Come here and fuck me, Airic," I demand, trying to catch my breath. I know I sound desperate, but it doesn't stop me from telling him what I need. He walks toward me, his hard cock glistening with desire.

"Fuck me, damnit!" My voice is deep with lust.

With Reis still inside me, Airic stands in front of us as he lifts my legs and lowers me onto his cock. The feeling of both of them inside me, filling me to the brim, nearly drives me to orgasm immediately.

I moan loudly, my body shaking. Airic's cock slides deep into me, pressing against my tight walls, made even tighter by Reis's hard cock filling my ass. I am barely aware that I'm moaning and groaning, begging them to take me, begging them to fuck me.

Airic touches me everywhere, his fingertips running down my skin. He grabs my hand and brings it to his lips, kissing it gently.

"Fuck," I gasp. Needing even harder and faster, I move my body, bouncing myself up and down on their hard cocks.

I writhe as I ride them, my body filled with more and more pleasure with each thrust.

Airic grips my ass, and he pulls me forward, his cock sliding as far into me as it will go. I moan, deep, lustful, and demanding, as my body continues to shake. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, throbbing with need.

Airic's hands are replaced by Reis's as they slide up my body, his fingers teasing my nipples. I gasp, pressing my body backward against him.

When I open my eyes and look down at the two men I'm straddling, I realize what I want to do. I need to feel them both coming inside me. I need to feel them both hungry for me. But not yet. I want this moment to last.

I lift myself up, sliding back and then forward to dismount and fall to my knees. I kneel on the ground, taking their cocks in each hand and pumping them.

I twist my hands and pump them hard, my lips gliding up and down their shafts. Airic tangles his fingers in my hair, holding my head tightly. He thrusts his hips forward, shoving his cock deep into my mouth. I moan as my body quivers with desire.

Their cocks are hard, ready to explode. Their eyes are locked on me, on my body and my lips.

One at a time, I take turns taking them deep into my throat, sucking and stroking them.

Reis pulls back, out of my reach, and I give him a small pout before he scoops me up and puts me on the bed.

Before I can even adjust to my new location, he lowers himself between my legs and slides his tongue against the wetness between them.

I lift my legs and wrap them around his head. His tongue slides against my clit, sucking and running circles around it. I moan.

Airic's walking around the bed, his hard cock pointed at me. I lick my lips, my body consumed by need. He climbs up onto the bed and then lowers himself across my chest, his cock pressing against my stomach. He kisses me as Reis's tongue continues to slide against me.

The two of them lock eyes. Reis pulls away from me, his tongue sliding across my clit and down my pussy. He grabs my ass and parts my legs, opening me to them.

Airic presses his lips against mine, and I lick his bottom lip and suck on it gently. Hunger blazes in his eyes as he watches me, his gaze moving down to my pussy, where Reis is teasing me with his tongue.

As I take him into my mouth, Airic pushes my knees apart, giving Reis even better access. The way they're working in tandem drives me crazy. Airic and Reis seem to have become more in sync with each other with every passing moment. They're moving perfectly in unison, giving me exactly what I want, exactly what I need.

Reis's tongue slides against my pussy, teasing my clit as his finger rubs my ass. I'm quivering, my heart pounding in my chest, my body craving the release I know is about to happen.

Airic breaks the kiss and leans back. Reis drags his tongue across my clit one last time before his lips wrap around it and he sucks it into his mouth.

My body jolts as every nerve explodes in pleasure, but Reis doesn't let up. The waves of pleasure crash against me, and I moan loudly, shaking as I lie on the bed.

Reis moves his hands under my ass and holds me tightly. My body is still shaking as Airic slides his tongue along my neck. He grabs my breasts and squeezes them, my nipples pressed between his fingers.

I roll my hips, exploding in pleasure again and again, each moan echoing between the walls. Reis's tongue continues moving against me as I go through wave after wave of pleasure.

Everything is happening so fast. My mind is spinning, my body is shaking, but I still feel like I'm floating. I look up at Airic and then Reis, and they're both watching me as they stroke their cocks.

There's a strange sense of calm that falls over me as they caress my body, stroking me, teasing me. I'm lost in the feeling of their touch, lost in the way they can bring me to heights of pleasure that I never imagined possible.

Airic's hands are on me again, his fingertips resting against my ass. He moves me and then pushes me down onto the bed, getting underneath me.

Reis slides his hands up my body, gently but firmly. He kisses me softly and then pulls away, positioning himself behind me, gripping my ass and then adjusting up to my waist. My heart races as I look up at Airic, pleading for him to continue with this. He knows what I want.

I want him to fuck me, to slide his cock deep inside me and fill me with his cum.

And he does just that. My body moves down onto his as Reis slides his cock deep into my ass.

The two of them move in and out of me. They're slow at first, but then they build momentum. They're thrusting their hips back and forth, deeper and deeper into my body.

Airic touches my breasts, pushing them together. He leans up and takes my nipple into his mouth, flicking his tongue against it as Reis thrusts his hips harder and harder.

I push my hips back into Reis as he drives himself into my ass, squeezing my eyes shut, my head spinning. I moan loudly,

writhing, my muscles tensing as the two of them continue to take me.

I can feel them both, in sync, taking me together, possessing me together. Pleasure builds inside me, slowly and deeply, and when the glorious vibration of Airic's dick echoes through me, I feel like I'm going to explode.

"I'm going to come again," I say.

"Me too," Reis says.

Airic breaks the kiss with my nipple and looks into my eyes. Reis grabs my hips and pulls me back against him, harder and faster.

"Come for me," Airic says.

"I want you to come too," I tell him.

"Come for *us*," Reis whispers.

It's all I need to push me over the edge. My body begins to shake, their cocks deep inside me, throbbing as they wrap their arms around me. I let out a moan that fills the room, convulsing with pleasure as they both fill me with their cum. I shiver as the force of their cocks reverberates throughout my body.

Airic and Reis hold me tightly as I come, both of them kissing me gently. I grip their hard bodies, feeling their muscles as I'm consumed by pleasure.

We stay like that, their cocks inside me, until their bodies finally stop shuddering. Their muscles relax and they pull away, sliding out of me. They lie down on the bed, and I cuddle with them both, exhausted but completely satisfied.

The three of us drift off to sleep, our bodies wrapped in one another's arms. Tomorrow, I'm sure everything will go back to how it was. I'll get locked away, and they'll continue to keep secrets from me. But tonight, I'll sleep in the royal chambers without a care in the world. I'm too exhausted, too spent to fight it.

For now, I'm content in their arms, knowing that, for at least this one night, I was able to experience something truly

special.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN



Stella

I wake up to an empty bed. For a moment, I'm confused and reach out for them, thinking they were just messing with me. But my hand only touches the empty sheets, the slight chill of the expensive threads like a phantom touch. I sit up, looking around the room for them, but they're gone.

Disappointment washes over me, followed by a sense of dread. Just that quickly, they've abandoned me. They've left me in *this* room to rot instead of my own. The only thing that's different is the view. I hadn't even noticed them get out of the bed or leave the room.

I push myself out of bed, and my feet hit the cold stone. I should be angry and defiant, but I'm not. I'm calm, resigned to my fate. I pull on my dress and don't bother to pin up my hair. I have a very sneaking suspicion that if I was to try the door, I'd find it locked.

Could this have all been a trick? It didn't feel that way, but I can't help but fear that this was some way for them to punish me.

I walk to the window and look out over the town.

It's not that bad of a view. From up here, I can see the people milling about in the streets, going about their day. They have no idea what's happening in the castle, no idea that there's a girl being held prisoner.

I wonder if anyone will ever know. If anyone will ever find out what happened to me.

It's then that I realize the scene outside doesn't quite look right.

When I look harder, it's clear I'd been wrong at first. The people walking about in the streets are soldiers, not other citizens or monsters. I can tell by the armor they wear that's similar to Reis's. They're not wandering but patrolling. Searching. Getting ready for something. But what?

I swallow hard and back away from the window and go to the door. I've got to find Reis and Airic.

Something is going on.

All my previous anger about them leaving is replaced by an overwhelming need to make sure they are okay.

I try the door, again expecting it to be locked, but it opens with ease. I walk out of the door and look around the empty hall. No guards, no servants, no Airic, no Reis... no nothing. It's completely empty.

"Hello?" I call out into the empty hallway.

No one answers.

I walk down the hallway, my heels clicking against the cold stone. I'm trying to stay calm, but this is getting more and more terrifying by the second. It's obvious something has gone terribly wrong. But I don't know how I know. It's just this gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach, something telling me that if I don't find them soon, it won't be good.

With how rarely I've been allowed to walk these halls on my own volition, without being shepherded into one room or another, it's easy to get lost in the twisty maze of stone and marble. Every painting looks the same; the tapestries all meld together until I can't make heads or tails of where I am.

"Hello? Anyone?" I call out again. Nothing.

I get more frantic. I keep having the feeling that I'm going in circles. Last night I found my way back to these rooms easily enough, but that was with two men leading the way, their strong arms guiding me in the right direction. I'm completely lost without them.

I turn a corner and find myself in front of a large door. It's ajar, and beyond it, I can see light pouring into the hallway. I push the door open and find myself in the throne room.

I can't help but gasp. I know I've seen it before, on my first day, but everything moved so quickly. I'd barely just entered before Airic sent me to the dungeons. Now, empty of all distractions, it's easy to see that the throne room is the most opulent, grand room I've ever set foot in.

The throne itself is larger than life, twice as tall as I am, a seat of honor and power. The walls are all done in gold, from thick wooden beams running the length of the ceiling to the pillars of marble filling the room. Heavy red tapestries cover the walls. A large chandelier hangs above the throne, its thick crystals casting the room in a soft glow. The sun shines through large stained-glass windows in the rear of the room, a majestic view of the kingdom outside.

The floor is a patterned mosaic of white marble squares covered in gold leaves, their placement perfectly symmetrical. The lines of the pattern twist and overlap, forming a massive image of the castle itself.

The heavy clomping of boots down the hallway outside averts my attention, and I run back to the door just in time to see two guards running toward the stairs. Their swords clatter at their waists, and their fists are clenched at their sides. Their eyes stare straight ahead, jaws set, their stern expressions shifting as they run past me.

"Wait," I call out to them. "Can someone please, for the love of all that is holy, tell me what is going on?"

Neither of them turns or even slows, but one calls out over his shoulder in my general direction. "Find a room and lock yourself in it. Do not leave until you're told it's safe to do so."

The urgency in his voice grabs my attention, and I watch them run down the hall, their boots thumping against the stairs.

I step back into the throne room, taking it all in. There's something strange about the whole thing, but I can't quite put

my finger on it. The throne room is empty; there's no one here but me. My heart is starting to pound in my ears, louder than the clomping of the guards' boots. The whole castle is silent, I haven't heard anyone else's voice for what feels like minutes, but I know it couldn't have been more than a few seconds.

The urgency in the guard's voice still fills my ears, but with it is an uneasiness, a feeling that something is wrong. I stand there in the middle of the throne room, trying to figure out what to do.

There's a small door off to one side of the throne. It's the least interesting thing in here—no ornamental decoration or gilded edges, as if someone wanted it to be overlooked.

My adventure with Wels bubbles to the forefront of my memory, and I wonder if it might be another secret tunnel.

But do I dare even risk it? I'm lost enough in the regular hallways, so if I go down some secret stairway, I might never find my way back. And would anyone come look for me? Would Reis and Airic burn the castle to the ground until they found me? Or would they just assume I escaped in all the commotion?

It's my own fault, really. I spent so long trying to get out of here, to escape the bonds they had me in, that I'd never let on how much those two really did mean to me. How, even if I found a way to go back home, my life would never be the same.

For so long, I struggled against them, but now I find myself wanting nothing more than to be near them again. I want to curl up in a ball at their feet and let them wrap their arms around me. To drink in that uncomfortable feeling of being cared for, no matter how much I hated it at the time. I just want to be held by them, to know that they're okay.

The decision is made before I'm fully aware of it. I'm not going to sit idly by and wait for whatever is happening to play out. If there's even a chance that I can help them, I will take it. I dart across the room and push open the door, hoping I haven't waited too long and I won't be too late.

The light above flickers, and the doorway turns into a solid black mass so opaque it's as if a wall has risen up in front of me.

The blackness swells once, twice, and then shrinks back down. A small shadow stands before me, one whose shape I sort of recognize. There isn't much that distinguishes houseshadows from one another, but I've noticed that one particular shadow had taken to coming into my room more often than the others. It was short, like a child, just like this one.

The shadow doesn't move. It just stands there before me, or rather, somewhat hovers. I reach forward to touch it. Some weird part of me just wants to know if there's any substance to them. But before I can reach it, it begins to fade, almost like it's a drawing being erased with whiteout. It flickers for a moment before it completely disappears.

What the actual fuck was that?

I throw my hands up in the air and look around for any sort of clue about what just happened, but I'm still completely alone. Nothing in this room has changed.

Was the shadow trying to tell me something? Should I not go down the passage?

If so, why would it just disappear?

Someone shouts outside of the stained-glass window, and I run over to peer through a blue-tinted pane. Through the opaque glass, I can make out a line of guards battling with masked assailants. But my eyes are drawn behind the line of conflict to the edge of the woods, where a massive black storm funnel whirls down toward the ground.

The sky above is like a bruise, and the clouds seem to come from the castle itself—which seems to bleed all of its darkness to fuel the twister.

As the funnel closes in on the castle, I can see a figure standing at its base, his arms raised to the sky. The clouds around him swirl and churn, and they seem to draw up to him

like a siphon, sucking the darkness out of the sky and into the funnel.

I look around, suddenly more aware of the quiet in the castle and the intense sense of being alone.

Even on my hardest days here, I had never truly been alone. The shadows were always there.

But now?

I've never felt more isolated.

I look back out the window, but the guards are gone, blotted out by the darkness. The sun has become so covered that it looks as if night has already fallen.

I can no longer see the funnel, but I can hear it. In fact, I can hear it tearing at the castle's walls, pulling and prying like a monster trying to gain entry. There's a deep rumbling sound, like the soft footsteps of a giant creature. The howling winds from the funnel whip around with a banshee cry.

Somewhere nearby, wood begins to shred, the sound terrifying and destructive.

And that's when the glass window in front of me shatters, sending sharp pieces of blue glass everywhere. I leap back just in time to avoid being struck by any of it, letting out a yelp of surprise as I dive for the floor. I lift my head up for just a moment and get the briefest glimpse of the funnel.

I'm struck with the sudden and ironic thought that I should have just stayed in my room.

Then the funnel hits.

The entire room lurches forward, and I grab onto the edge of the throne. The funnel batters at the castle, pulling at every wall, trying to rip it apart. I can feel the wooden throne groaning under the immense pressure. I crawl on all fours, trying to make my way to the other door.

As I scramble for dear life, a hand grabs my arm. I scream and pull away, certain that whoever has come for the shadows has now set their sights on me.

But when I look up, it's Wels. His blonde hair and sun-kissed skin are a welcome sight in the midst of the chaos.

He pulls me to my feet and throws himself over me, sheltering me with his body. He shouts something; I'm not sure what, but it sounds like he's telling me to run. He points to the door, and I have no reason not to trust him. I grab his hand and take off into the unknown.

We weave in and out of the shadows as they stretch and lengthen into streams of darkness. It's all so disorienting, but Wels seems to know exactly where to go and where to avoid. We run down hall after hall, and every time I breathe, I feel like I'm going to cough up a lung. My legs burn under the stress, but I keep running.

I don't know what's going on or who was siphoning the power from the shadows, but I have the nagging feeling that all of this somehow ties into why Reis and Airic kept me locked away. Why I wasn't ever supposed to come back to this realm so many years ago.

I don't even think to ask Wels where we're going. I'm too busy trying to keep up with him as he pulls me along.

We stop in front of a door. This one is made of wood, like the rest of the castle doors, but it's covered in intricate carvings. There are leaves and flowers, wreaths and vines. There are roses and daisies, and small animals woven into the design.

Wels seems to know exactly what he's looking for in these carvings. He carefully traces his fingers over the petals of a rose, over the leaves of an ivy plant. He doesn't linger for too long on any one thing, but he scans the entire door as if to make sure we've covered it all.

He finds what he's looking for on the right side of the door, just to the side of the handle. He pushes against the wood, and the door creaks open, revealing a long, dark corridor.

I follow after him, the door shutting behind me with a loud click. I have to lean in to make out any of the details in the

dim, flickering light. But it's enough to see that there are paintings on the walls. They depict images of lush, verdant forests, of rolling hills and tall mountains. The delicate brushstrokes and intricate detail in these paintings is nothing short of amazing. Whoever painted them has incredible talent.

There is another set of doors at the opposite end of the hallway, and it's there that Wels is leading me. I follow after him, the doors getting closer and closer. I can feel a cool breeze on the back of my neck, and I shiver in the damp underground passage.

It's when we reach the second set of doors that Wels finally stops. He moves his hand over the wood, tracing it with his fingers and whispering something I can't hear. After a moment, a pair of eyes appear in the wood. They glow a faint blue, and they blink and stare at me.

“Wels?”

“Yes?”

“What the actual hell is going on?”

The eyes disappear into the wood, and the doors swing open. We're met with the most incredible sight. Lush green fields stretch out before us, as far as the eye can see. In the distance, there are mountains, their peaks lost in the clouds. A river winds its way through the scene, and I can see animals grazing in the meadows.

Everything is so bright and vibrant. It's like nothing I've ever seen before. It takes my breath away.

Wels grabs my hand, and we start running again. We run toward the mountains, toward the river. The grass brushes against our legs, and the fresh air fills our lungs. It feels wonderful to be outside again, to be free, but I can't help but wonder what this place is and why he's brought me here.

A dark thought passes through, and I try to shove it away but fail miserably, instead giving into it and coming to an abrupt halt in our run.

What if he's going to kill me? What if this is all some sort of sick game and he's leading me into a trap?

I turn to look at Wels, who has stopped a few feet ahead of me. He turns back, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I hesitate for a moment before answering. “Why did you bring me here?” I finally say, my voice shaking slightly. “Why did you bring me to this place? What are your motives?”

Wels looks taken aback by my sudden outburst, but he quickly recovers and takes a step toward me. “I brought you here because the protection of the castle has fallen. If they find you, they’ll have much worse motives than me, Princess.”

I take a step back, unsure of what to do. “Who’s ‘they?’”

Wels shakes his head. “I can’t tell you that. I’m not sure I know.”

“Then why should I trust you?”

“Because I’m the only one who can protect you.”

“From what?”

Wels sighs and looks away. “There’s a very powerful creature on the loose,” he says. “One that is capable of devouring the souls of every being in this realm. And I’m pretty sure they will stop at nothing until they find you. Airic may have thought he was good at keeping you secret, but it was so obvious. The way he hid you away from all of us. He was a scared little boy acting like his favorite toy was in danger of being stolen. Love makes kings into fools.”

I can’t help but laugh at his last statement. It smells of bitter anger and regret, but it’s the laughter that breaks through.

Wels turns back to me, his lips curling into a smile. “What’s so funny?” he asks.

“It’s nothing,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s just... I was just thinking that it doesn’t make much sense. I mean, if this ‘being’ is so powerful, a being that can devour the souls of everyone in this realm, why would it care about me? Why would it want to hurt me?”

“Airic wasn’t very clear about that. You forget, the prince doesn’t trust me any more than he is duty bound to. He knows I could easily overthrow his reign if I was so inclined and had just a tiny bit more power. That’s why he was so afraid of us spending time together, Princess. He could sense the effect you have on my own power. The way I seem to grow stronger when you are near.”

“But I don’t understand,” I say, shaking my head. “Why would I have any sort of effect on your power?”

“I’m not entirely sure.” He takes my hand and places it over his heart. “But when you touch me, strength surges forward like a torrent.”

I’m overcome with heat, and I take a step back.

“Wels,” I say, my voice shaking.

He’s suddenly right in front of me, and his lips are on mine. I want to fight it, but it feels so good. It feels so good to kiss him again. He deepens the kiss, pushing me against the tree behind me. I feel his hands slide up my shirt and then over my bare breasts.

I want to get lost in this sensation, to ignore everything that has happened today and just fall into his embrace, but my adrenaline is still surging, and the fear that has become a persistent companion doesn’t go away even though it is mixing with a growing desire deep in my middle.

I pull away, my breath coming in quick gasps. “Wels, I can’t. I can’t do this right now.”

“I know,” he says, his lips on my neck. “I know. Just let me hold you.”

I nod, and he pulls me against his chest. His arms wrap around me, and I sigh as I lay my head on his shoulder, my ear to his warm chest.

We stand like that for a few moments, content to simply hold each other.

Somewhere nearby a bird crows and rustles the trees as it takes flight. “What is this place, Wels?”

He breaks away from me long enough to look around affectionately at the nature surrounding us.

“Home,” he says simply, but there is so much emotion in the single word that my chest tightens.

I search his face for any sign of deceit, but there is none to be found. “I thought you said you grew up far away from the castle.”

“This place is far away. It was the most remote corner of the land I could take you to. That’s why we’re here. So that they couldn’t get to you.”

It doesn’t make sense, and I shake my head to try and clear the cobwebs and adrenaline from my brain. “But we just walked through a door. How is that possible?”

He turns back to me, pulling a lock of hair through his fingers. “Portals to different parts of the realm are easy to form. Unlike portals to other worlds, like yours.”

I want to ask about the portal to my world. I know it’s dangerous; I’d caught on to that. But I feel like I’m in so much danger here that there isn’t much difference. I get the feeling that asking right now isn’t a great idea, though. “If there was a portal to your home, why would you choose to stay cooped up in the castle like you have?”

“Because my home isn’t a safe place for me. Even my fellow shifters feared my power. They were afraid that one day I would turn against them, take their power for my own. I left my home to avoid a war. They could never understand that I would never hurt them. It was better to leave without them trying to kill me.”

I find myself leaning against him again, my heart breaking for him. How long has he been alone, wandering the castle halls with only people who are scared he is a threat to their power? To go from a home where you were feared to a place where you are loathed seems like more than anyone should have to endure.

I wrap my arms around him again, and he kisses the top of my head. “I wish I knew how to comfort you.”

I laugh softly, the irony of our thoughts in such alignment, not for a moment missing me. “I’m not sure there is any way to comfort me. All I want is to be safe.”

“And that, I can give you,” he says, his voice low and promising. “At least for now.”

I nod, realizing that the fear is creeping back into every corner of my soul. “What do we do now? You’ve pulled me to this corner of the world, but where do we go from here?”

“You need to rest,” he says as he smooths his hand across my back. “We aren’t too far from the river. I have an old friend who might give us shelter.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?”

“No, but there’s little choice. I’m not taking any chances.”

I nod in agreement and try to force myself to relax. I’m not sure I can ever relax again, but I settle myself against his chest and let my eyes drift closed.

There is a loud crack of thunder overhead and I jump, instinctively squeezing Wels’s arm. In the deep pit of my stomach, I’m terrified that the shadow twister has followed us here somehow.

“It’s okay,” he says, but he doesn’t sound convinced.

Thunder pops again, just as I start to catch my breath. Half a second later, rain begins to fall. I take a deep breath, scolding myself for my overactive imagination. It’s just rain. Normal-ass rain.

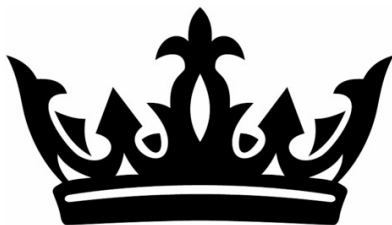
“Let’s go,” he says over the sound of rain falling against the trees as he takes my hand and pulls me forward. “It isn’t much further.”

Even though logic tells me that the rain has nothing to do with what I experienced back at the castle, I can’t still my pounding heart. The lightning flashes and thunder cracks, like a bomb exploding in the sky. Crisp droplets of rain splatter and splash against my skin. The beautiful weather has become a tempest in a matter of minutes, and no matter how fast we run, we can’t escape the downpour.

It's like no matter where I go, disaster finds me. If it isn't my mundane life at home, it's being locked up in a castle, or getting drenched in the middle of the forest.

I'm just cursed.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN



Stella

“This way,” Wels says as he tugs me to the left. We slosh through puddles and around trees, following a path that I’m sure only he can see. The wind whips the rain into my face, making it hard to see.

There’s a loud rumble and then a huge crack. I look up just in time to see a massive tree falling toward us. “Wels!” I scream as I grab onto him and duck.

He wraps his arms around me, and we hit the ground just as the tree crashes down, narrowly missing us. Wels rolls on top of me, shielding me from the worst of the impact.

We lie there for a moment, both of us trying to catch our breath. It feels like all the air has been knocked out of my lungs.

“Are you okay?” he asks as he pushes himself up slightly, looking down at me with concern.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak just yet. That was too close. Way too close.

“Come on,” he says as he helps me to my feet. “We need to keep moving.”

I can only nod again as we start running toward the river once more.

The rain pours down relentlessly, soaking us to the bone. The sound of the wind and thunder is deafening, like a million drums beating in unison.

We reach the river just as another flash of lightning strikes, illuminating the dark sky with blinding white light. I stumble and Wels catches my arm, holding me steady as he leads me forward.

I can see the outline of a small cottage on the other side of the river, and I pick up my pace, desperate to get out of this storm.

We splash through the shallow water, not caring that our clothes are getting soaked. We reach the other side, and Wels bangs on the door of the cottage, yelling for someone to let us in.

The door swings open, and an old woman stands there, her eyes wide with surprise. “Wels?” she says as she looks at him. “Is that really you?”

“Yes, it’s me,” he says with a tired smile. “I’m sorry to show up unannounced like this, but we need your help.”

“Of course. Come in, come in,” she says as she steps aside to let us in.

We step into the warm cottage, and I immediately start shivering. I’m cold, wet, and exhausted, and I can’t seem to stop shaking.

The old woman smiles at me and offers me a blanket, wrapping it around me.

“Come sit by the fire,” she says as she leads me to a large chair. “I’ll be right back.”

I sit down gratefully as she disappears through a door on the far side of the cottage. I’m sure she’s going to get me some dry clothes or something.

I look around the room, not really seeing anything except the fire. The chair is large, made of rich brown wood with soft cushions. It’s so warm. I lift my feet up, trying to get them even closer to the heat. I turn to look at Wels as he talks to the woman, their voices low enough that I can’t hear them. I’m sure they’re just catching up. He seems calm, his face still the pleasant mask he wears so often around Airic.

I watch the flames dancing in the fire, the logs cracking and popping as they burn. Then I close my eyes, giving into the warmth and letting myself drift off to sleep.

I don't know how long I sleep, but I wake to the sound of the woman's voice.

"All of this to save some girl you hardly know," she says and I realize she's talking about me.

"She has potential," Wels says, his voice calm and controlled. "She's like some sort of amplifier for powers. I can feel it when I'm near her. For the longest time, I thought that was why Airic has been trying to keep her existence a secret. Why he's locked her away from everyone."

"What's changed your mind?" she asks.

I can't see him, but I hear Wels's hair rustle as he shakes his head. "I'm not sure, but it's almost like...like he's was protecting her. Because he cares for her."

"And you're sure of that?" She huffs. "You've been gone from this place how long now? Ten years? How well have you truly gotten to know the prince in that time, Wels? Or are you blind to what he is capable of?"

"He may be an infuriating ruler, but he's a good ruler. The people seem to think so," Wels says, but his voice is strained, as if he's trying to convince himself.

She sighs, a long, practiced, exasperated sound.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," Wels says as he walks forward, nearly standing at my side. "Can you help us? We need a place to rest for a few days until I can figure out how to better protect her."

She's quiet for a long moment, taking in Wels's words before she opens her mouth to speak again. "Of course I'll help you. It will be good to have you back for a few days. It'll be just like old times."

I hear the smile in her voice, even though I can't see it. I wonder if he does.

I pretend to stir awake then, and when I open my eyes, the woman is looking at me with a bright smile.

“I’m sorry I fell asleep... I must’ve been more tired than I thought.”

“Oh, no need to apologize,” she says as she pulls another blanket from the back of the chair and lays it over my legs. “Do you need anything else?”

I shake my head. “No, thank you. This is perfect.”

I snuggle back into the chair, letting the warmth of the fire wash over me. Wels settles into his own chair and motions between me and the woman.

“I guess I should formally introduce you two. Stella, this is Emmalin, my mother.”

His mother. I should’ve known. Her hair, though white now, has a similar sandy undertone to it, and her nose is just as sharp. She’s small. Shorter than me, but that isn’t hard. My height has always set me apart from other women, and for so long, I’ve tried to slump my shoulders and crouch so I didn’t draw so much attention.

I smile nervously as I reach to shake her hand. She takes it, and I can see just how delicate her hands really are, and withered too. Her skin is so thin, I worry she’ll break if I squeeze too hard.

She takes in my face, looking at my chin and my cheekbones, concentration in her eyes like she’s trying to solve a puzzle. But she doesn’t say anything, just nods and lets go of my hand.

“I’m sorry we had to barge in on you like this,” Wels says. “We won’t stay long. Just a few days to rest, grab some supplies, and then we’ll be on our way.”

“Of course,” she says. “You look exhausted. Do you think you can sleep some more, or do you need something to eat now?”

I nod. I’m still starving. “I could eat.”

“Good.” She gets up and starts gathering food from the small kitchen. I watch her in silence as she moves around. She seems to know exactly what she’s doing, and she keeps talking to Wels as she does it, like she does this every day.

“Are you sure you don’t want to see the others?” she asks as she sets down a plate of cheese and apples in front of me.

Wels smiles and shakes his head. “I’m not sure they’d be happy to see me, Mom.”

She sighs, looking almost sad. “I know. The past is the past. It can’t be changed.”

Wels nods and takes a bite of cheese. “How is everyone doing?”

“I’m sure you know how your sister is doing.” She takes a bite of her own apple, a thoughtful frown on her face. “She’s still upset that you just left without saying goodbye. She hasn’t forgiven you for it yet.”

I feel terrible for him, for how he left his family, but he doesn’t seem to mind, just looking at her with a small smile on his face.

“I don’t think she will. How is she really?”

She shrugs, but I can tell there’s something she’s not telling him. “She’s getting better,” she says, her voice oddly distracted. “She’s been having nightmares recently, but she’s still doing well. She’s getting married soon.”

Wels nods and takes another bite of apple. “Good.”

He may not want to talk more about it, but I do. “Who is she marrying?”

His mother looks like she’s surprised to hear me speak, but she answers me anyway. “Oh, his name is Melak. He’s a shifter like us, so he will make a good match for her.”

Wels groans. “I hope he knows what he’s getting himself into. I don’t think he’ll be able to handle her for long.”

“He’s very strong,” his mother says before biting her lip. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

I nod, but I find myself frowning. I don't know why exactly. It's not like I care who she marries. I don't even know this woman. But for some reason, their distaste for her strength and power sets me on edge. As if a woman can't be the stronger person in a marriage.

Wels and his mother continue talking, though it seems to be more about his sister than anything else. I chew on my food slowly, trying to think of something to ask him, to start up a conversation. He glances over at me with a flash of worry in his eyes but then looks away as if he hopes I hadn't noticed.

Am I a burden? It sure feels that way. If it wasn't for me, he wouldn't have had to come back here. He wouldn't have to be worrying about how to keep me safe.

I just want to know him. I want to know why he made the choices he did, what his plans are now. But I can't ask him any of these questions in front of his mother.

"Why don't you two go get some sleep? It's getting late," his mother says while she stands up. "I'll clean up here."

I look up at Wels. "Is it safe for me to sleep?"

"Of course it is," his mother says in a scolding voice. "I'm not letting you stay up if you're sleepy, so go rest, Stella."

I stand up and walk over to Wels, then grab his hand and pull him to his feet. "Come on."

We walk upstairs to the bedroom he once shared with his sister. A large bed sits against the far wall, six pillows piled on top of it, three on each side of the bed. He sets down his sword, letting it rest against the wall before he edges forward and climbs into the bed. I take off my boots and climb in next to him. He pulls me close, wrapping an arm around me.

I lie in his arms for a few minutes, enjoying the heat of his skin against mine. When he kisses my forehead, I'm surprised at the tenderness of it. It makes me smile, and I grab his head and pull him down to kiss me fully. He nips at my bottom lip, pulling it free from my teeth before he kisses me again. Suddenly, his lips are moving down, kissing the soft skin of my neck while his hands roam over my back.

I tug at his shirt and pull it over his head. He cups under my breasts, squeezing me, sending a shudder throughout my body. I smile and kiss his neck, enjoying the feel of his smooth skin on my lips. His muscles quiver beneath my touch.

He moves his hands to my shirt and yanks it over my head. He glides his hands down my sides, stopping at my hips and pulling me close to his body.

“I’ve missed this,” he whispers, his lips brushing against my ear.

“Me too,” I whisper back, my hands trailing down his chest.

I eagerly kiss him, our mouths hungrily seeking each other out, and he presses his palm against my sex.

He pushes me down into the bed and looms over me. His hands are on my ankles, tugging my pants off before he tosses them aside. He kisses my calf, working his way up my thigh as I tremble in anticipation.

When he finally reaches the apex between my legs, I moan quietly, making sure not to disturb his mother in the other room but throwing my head back and gripping the sheets. He licks me, his tongue expertly finding all my most sensitive spots. I cry out, unable to keep quiet.

He drops light kisses as he moves up my body. His hard cock presses against me, and I reach down, guiding him inside. He sinks into me, thrusting deep and fast as we both moan in pleasure. I wrap my legs around his waist, digging my heels into his back as he rocks me even harder.

Leaning down, his lips find my neck. He sucks and bites gently, and my orgasm builds.

I cry out, gripping his shoulders as I come undone around him. He follows shortly afterward, his body trembling against mine. We collapse together, gasping for breath.

“That was amazing,” he whispers, his lips on my temple. “But I think my mother may have heard everything.”

Embarrassment claws up my neck, making my temper flare. “Oh shit, you think so?” I whisper back, still trying to catch my breath.

Laughing, he kiss me again. “She likes you. Knowing her, she was probably cheering us on.”

As much as my cheeks flame, I can’t help but laugh right along with him. It’s too easy to let go with Wels, but the freedom his presence gives me is everything I need.

Rolling off me, he pulls me into his side. I rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady thumping of his heart as we drift off to sleep.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN



Stella

The storm outside roars, the wind and rain lashing at the windows. I snuggle closer to Wels, feeling his body heat against mine as we wake. “Does it normally rain this much here?”

He yawns and starts to stretch but then goes completely still, rigid next to me.

“Wels?” I say, reaching up to brush some hair from his face.

His muscles are tense, and he turns his head to look at me with wide green eyes. I can see the fear there, but I don’t know why. “What’s wrong?” I ask, my voice shaking.

He doesn’t answer me, just stands up and rushes over to the window.

“What do you see?” I ask, crawling out of the bed. I walk over to him and look out of the window. Nothing looks out of the ordinary, but I can feel his fear. It seems to be radiating off him.

A loud crack of thunder echoes throughout the house, and I jump, gripping Wels’s arm to steady myself. I take another look out the window and search the horizon. We can’t see much from here, just the river and trees, but in the distance, a dark fog settles between the branches.

We stare at the fog for a few seconds, and I’m not sure what to do. A knot of dread is forming in my stomach, but I

force it down. It's too late to run now, and we have nowhere else to go.

"Get dressed," Wels says quietly, his voice tight. "Put your boots on."

I nod, quickly pulling my clothes back on before I tug on my boots. Wels grabs his sword off the floor before slipping it into the belt at his waist. He glances back to the window and takes one more look before he turns and darts out of the room. I run after him.

He's already halfway down the stairs, his feet thundering against the wood. When I reach the bottom, I run into his mother. She's in a nightgown, her hair loose around her face. Her dark eyes are wide with fear.

I grab her by the arm and pull her back up the stairs.

"What's going on?" she asks, her voice cracked and slurred.

"Just stay here," I say, feeling tears threatening to spill down my cheeks. "Don't come out of the room. I'll come get you when it's safe." It's not lost on me how close the words are to what the guards told me the day before.

She nods, hugging me tightly before I tear myself out of her arms and run after Wels. He's already outside, and the fog is creeping closer. It's like a slow river, moving ever closer to the house.

Wels turns to me, his eyes wild and frantic. "We need to go. Now."

"What's out there?" I ask, gesturing toward the fog.

He shakes his head. "Something much worse than those few intruders you fought with Reis. I can assure you of that."

"But your mother," I start to say as the growing wind whips the words from my mouth.

"She's safer here without us. Go." He points in the opposite direction of the fog, and I start to run. I struggle against the wind, my boots heavy on the grass as it sends leaves and debris flying all around us. The fog is growing

closer by the second, the thick, dark mists rolling across the ground.

Wels yanks me to the right, pulling me into the forest. The falling rain has soaked the ground into a muddy mess, and my boots sink into the earth as I run. The wind is pouring through the trees, and Wels struggles to keep us upright. I grip my arm around his shoulders, trying to keep my balance as the rain pelts my face.

But it's useless. Soon the fog envelops us, and I can barely see a foot in front of me. The world has been swallowed up, blacked out by the thick mist. My heart pounds in my chest, the blood rushing in my ears.

"Wels?" My voice is loud in the silence. If the fog doesn't kill us, then the sound of our own cries will.

He stops so suddenly that I stumble forward. He presses his hand against my chest, holding me at arm's length as he looks into my eyes. He grabs a dagger off his belt and hands it to me. His eyes are frantically searching mine as he holds my hand. He's silent for a moment, but I can see the question hovering in his eyes.

"I don't know if I'll be any help in this fight." I swallow down the feeling of dread that rolls through me.

He nods and starts to pull away from me, but I grab his hand before he can move. His lips press together, and I can see the air leaving his chest in a rush. I lean forward and press my lips to his, and for a moment we're back in bed, wrapped up in each other. His whole body relaxes before he grabs me and pulls me into a tight embrace.

He lifts me off the ground, and my legs wrap around his waist as he presses me against a tree. I keep my fingers tight, gripping his hair as he kisses me again and again. I can feel his heart pounding against my chest, and I realize it's because he's terrified. I won't let him do anything stupid. I'm the one who's going to be foolish, the one who's going to stay next to him and fight. I'm the one who's probably going to die.

He pulls away from me after a moment, and I press my forehead against his and take a deep breath.

“You can do this,” he says, his hands resting on my cheeks. I nod and he turns without another word. I grip my dagger and follow him into the fog.

The thick mist swirls around us, coming in from all sides. I have to lean into Wels to be able to see him, his head just barely visible above the clouds. He’s holding his sword in his hand, trying to face every direction at once.

The sky turns dark, and I can’t tell if the sun has set or if it’s just the fog. The warm glow of the afternoon has been replaced by an eerie twilight. I can’t see farther than a few feet in front of me, just the outline of trees and bushes as they fade into the dark mist. I try to follow him, but I keep losing him in the shadows of the trees.

I lose my footing and fall to the ground, landing hard on my hands and knees. The ground around me is soft, and the muck soaks through my clothes. “Wels?”

“I’m here,” he answers, his voice coming from behind me.

I turn in the direction of his voice, but I still can’t see him. The world has been completely swallowed up by the fog. The back of my neck tingles, and I reach up and run my fingertips against the skin. Something moves by me, and I turn, but I see nothing. I close my eyes, trying to force the feeling of dread down.

“Wels,” I whisper.

“I’m here,” he replies. His voice sounds closer to me.

“This is bullshit.”

“I know.”

Strong hands grab my arms, pinning them behind my back. I gasp and try to scream, but a hand covers my mouth.

I struggle against the grip, kicking my feet against the dark figure. I can’t see anything beyond the fog, but I can feel the warmth of their breath against my neck. I hear something in

the distance, but I can't tell if it's a scream or the wind. I can't tell if it's Wels.

I try to turn my head, to look at the figure behind me, but I can't. I feel a blade at my throat, and I hold my breath as I try to listen for anything else.

A loud growl shakes my body, reverberating through the hand over my mouth. I struggle, my whole body shaking with fear.

My ears perk up at the sound of footsteps moving closer. No, not footsteps—animal steps. Four sets of paws, not two feet. Something big is walking toward us.

I can feel my attacker's hands trembling as they hold me, and I realize they're scared of whatever is heading our way.

Suddenly, the hands release me and the fog dissipates. Wels, in his beastly form, charges straight at the attacker behind me, and I dive to the side to get out of his way. I hit the ground and roll, coming up with my dagger in hand just as Wels barrels into the dark figure. But he doesn't make contact.

The figure disappears, leaving behind just the barest hint of shadow in his wake. I spin around and see the shadow start to form, the fog pooling around it and taking the form of a man. As I watch, the figure becomes more defined, his figure more clear. When I see his face, however, I flinch backward.

“Airic?”

He laughs, but his voice is hollow and empty. It's not like the Airic I knew two nights before.

“That's not Airic,” Wels says as he stumbles up behind me. I turn to look at him, back in human form. His tattered, bloodied clothes are still somewhat intact. A giant gash across his chest has torn away the fabric and revealed the delicate bronze skin beneath.

“Then who the hell is it?” I snap as I turn to look the Airic look-alike in the eyes.

“You don't know?” he says, lifting his eyebrow. It's Airic. I can see his eyes, his smile, his posture. It's all there, like a

twisted, broken version of him. He titters and twists his face in mock disappointment. “I am a little sad my cousin never cared to tell you about me.”

“Your cousin?” My blood goes cold as I take a step back, bumping into Wels. I glance back to find him completely lost in the shadows of the cloud that swirls above him. It’s penetrated his body, and he’s frozen in place.

“Hmm. Well, I guess that’s what happens when you’re the black sheep of the family,” he says, his eyes flashing. His skin is pale, almost translucent, and his hair falls around him like dark water.

“What are you?”

He smiles, cold emanating from him.

“I’m your worst nightmare, girl,” he says, his voice echoing in my ears. The words burn themselves into my mind, and my body shakes.

“What do you want?” I say, my voice trembling as I point my dagger at him.

“You.”

This time, I can feel my knees go weak and I stumble back.

“I’ve been waiting for a long time to meet you, dear,” he says and his lips stretch into a smile.

“What do you mean?”

“You.” His blue eyes bore into mine. The world melts away, leaving us floating in a void. A cloud of magic swirls around us. I hold my dagger tighter.

“Your powers.” He grabs my wrist, tearing the dagger from my grasp and tossing it to the ground. “You, the last daughter of a dying race. The one with the ability to tear down the barrier between worlds and set our people free.”

“What?” I say, shaking my head. This can’t be happening.

“You are the key,” he says with a grin. “Removing the barrier between worlds is not an easy task. It has been done

before, but the creatures of our world have never found a way to do it again. I need you. I need your power.”

“Why?” I choke out as he moves closer.

“I need to free my people.” His voice is louder now and rings through the void with a deep, dark bellow that shakes me to my core. “I need to free the shadows from our world, to let them have the world they have been denied for so long. There is so much power in your realm,” he says, his warm breath on my skin. “Power ripe and ready for us to take.”

“No.” I back up and slam into a tree. “You’ve got me all wrong. I’m just a human. I don’t have powers. I don’t know what you heard, but it isn’t true.”

“Stop it,” he growls, grabbing my shoulders and pushing me up backward. I try to twist myself away from him, but my hips are pinned between the bark and his body. “You are not powerless. You are not human. You are a half blood. Half human, yes. But also, half shadow. Your hair, your ability to pop between realms on a whim, it’s all because of what you are.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, trying to keep the tears from my eyes. His blue eyes dance with shadows, and I can feel his magic pressing down on me. I gasp for air, but I can’t find any. My vision starts to go dark around the edges, and I’m losing my grip on reality.

He leans in, lips inches from my neck. “I’ve heard the rumors for many years of Airic’s little human friend. Growing up in the castle, gossip was our main form of entertainment. I remember when the council found out about you. They’d given him the orders to capture you. They wanted to turn you into an experiment and see how you were accessing this realm, but he was never good at following orders.”

He chuckles and he’s so close to me that the vibrations echo through the pit of my stomach.

“Instead, he told them all you’d been swallowed up by a wraith. And everyone believed him. Even I believed him. Airic convinced us all.”

“No,” I say. The magic in the air is getting thicker, more powerful. My skin prickles as my magic stirs inside me.

He turns his head from side to side, evaluating me. “But then, you came back. Like a moth to a burning torch, unafraid of the consequences. Don’t you see?” he whispers, his lips hovering over mine. “You are meant for this task. You have the power to save our people and set us free.”

I struggle against his hold, tensing as I try to fight the dark pull of his magic. But it’s too strong, stronger than anything I’ve ever felt before.

“It’s a shame,” he says, releasing me. I slide down the tree and hit the ground hard. “We could have done great things together. All that power, all that magic.” He shakes his head. “You could have done so much, and yet, you chose to fight me. One way or another, I will get my wish. Your only free will here is whether you *want* to help and reap the benefits, or if you’ll make me turn you into my puppet.”

He holds up his hand, and a gray haze hovers around his fingertips. “I’m going to bind you to me, and you will help me resurrect my people. No matter what you choose, I will have your power.”

He snaps his fingers and the haze flies toward me. As soon as it touches my skin, I can feel my magic being sucked out of me. The feeling is overwhelming, and I can’t control myself as my body spasms. The silent voices in the back of my head start screaming, and the darkness I’ve tried to keep locked inside comes rushing out. I scream out in pain, and my body slumps to the ground. I can feel my consciousness slipping away as this strange feeling of peace takes over.

In the haze, two figures appear. As they close in, I realize it’s Airic and Reis, their swords drawn as they rush into battle.

“Release her, Malachi.” Airic’s command booms throughout the forest.

“You’re too late, cousin. She’s mine now.”

“No,” he growls as he brings the sword down. Malachi flippantly waves his hand, and a barrage of shadows deflects

the attack.

“When will you learn you are no match for me?” Malachi asks, and the shadows surge forward, surrounding Airic.

“You can’t have her,” Reis shouts, bringing his sword down from behind them. Malachi ducks under the blow and lands disembodied, shadowy punches on Reis’s face and stomach.

I’m fighting to keep my eyes open, to keep from drifting off into the darkness. Airic rushes forward, trying to break through the shadows, but they wrap tighter around him, pulling him away.

Reis rises from the ground, blood trickling down his face as he positions himself for another attack.

“She’s ours,” he says with more force.

I struggle, but the hold of the shadows grows stronger and stronger. I can’t breathe, and my heart feels like it’s going to explode, but I can’t let it be. I can’t let them win. I grit my teeth, pulling my strength together for one last burst of energy.

Like a tide, the shadows wash over Reis’s charging form, until there is nothing left of him. No proof that he was ever here aside from the disturbed leaves on the ground.

“Reis!” I scream, staring at the place he just stood. I have to do something. I have to stop them.

Reis is gone, which just leaves Airic surrounded by the shadows, and he can’t seem to escape them. They pull at his arms, his legs, his clothing. They snatch the sword from his grasp and spin it in the air to face him.

There’s nothing I can do but watch as terror fills him. The blade falls, fast and sure, straight down into his heart. He doesn’t even have enough time to scream before his body crumples forward and hits the ground.

“No!” I struggle against the darkness holding me back from cradling his mortally injured form. Adrenaline rushes through me, and I scream, letting every single emotion I’ve

felt over these past weeks flow through me like an electrical surge.

The air shimmers before me, and then my view rips down the middle, like a zipper being undone in a hurry. The trees and shadows are still there at the outer corners of my vision, but directly in the middle is the more familiar sight of my small bedroom. The pull is even stronger than Malachi's magic, and I'm sucked away like a seashell caught in a riptide.

I can't stop screaming as I sit up in bed. The sheets are twisted around my legs, and my covers are stained with the imprint of my body. I look around the room and try to make sense of my frightened mind. It's still dark out. The time is still yet to be determined, and I have no idea what day it is.

My head is pounding, and I can feel the remnants of a sore throat from my violent crying.

The castle, my men. It's all gone.

I start sobbing again, the tears spilling out like a bursting dam. Using my arms, I push myself up and off the bed, and I stumble toward the bathroom.

My hands find the doorknob, and I throw it open. The light is on, pouring into the room from the skylight above. My reflection in the mirror is pale and stunned, my hair a tangled mess. My eyes are puffy and red. My skin is blotchy, and my hair is a dull brown color again, not bluish white. But what shocks me the most is the hickey on my neck from where Wels's lips had just been the night before.

I stare at it as I bring my fingers up to carefully and longingly graze over it. It's proof that what I went through was real. I'm not crazy.

Airic, Reis, Wels—they're real. And they're in danger.

I sit down on the toilet, running my fingers through my hair and brushing it off my face. I try to think. I clutch my head, trying to make my brain cooperate, but it doesn't want to. The memories are fading quicker than I can process them. I can't think straight.

I need to focus. I need to think about Airic and Reis and Wels. Think about what I went through. Think about the magic, about Malachi. I close my eyes and focus on the foggy image of his thin face. The scowl, the cruel smile.

I need to get back there. I need to save them. I can't just abandon them. I need to go back, but I don't know how. Malachi said I could travel between worlds, but I've never been able to do so on purpose.

Helplessness overwhelms me. My loves are out there somewhere, tortured and at Malachi's mercy. They need me and I'm useless.

"Fuck," I yell as I stomp my foot on the floor. Where do I start? Even if I could open a portal, I can't go back alone; I'd never survive. Malachi is too powerful. No amount of sword training would be enough to stop him.

And Airic. His lifeless form haunts me from the backs of my eyelids. He can't really be gone. I refuse to believe it. The small, sweet boy I used to play with. The strong, commanding prince that took me into his bed. He's out there somewhere. I know it. *He has to be.*

If what Malachi said was true, then Airic never wanted to push me away. He was trying to keep me safe when all this time I thought...

I lean against the wall of the bathroom and let the reality of everything wash over me. My mind is struggling to accept the reality of Airic's death. The tears make my eyes sting. They run down my face and drip off my chin.

My skin prickles with the memory of the warmth of their touch all over my body. I'm slowly losing control, losing my grip on my emotions.

The only thing I can do is fall apart. I want to scream at the top of my lungs, but no sound comes out. My mind is a sieve; it's splintering and crumbling at the seams. And there is no one to turn to. No one in this realm would believe me if I even tried to explain what was wrong.

I am utterly and completely alone in my fear and misery.

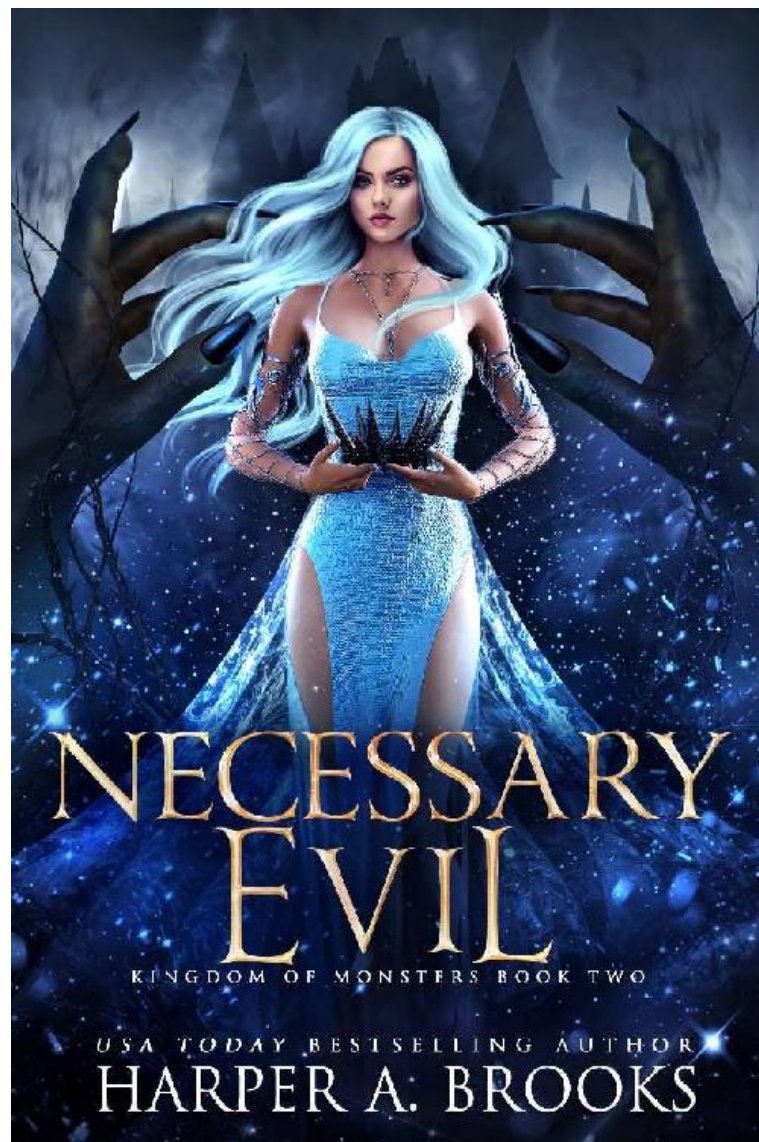
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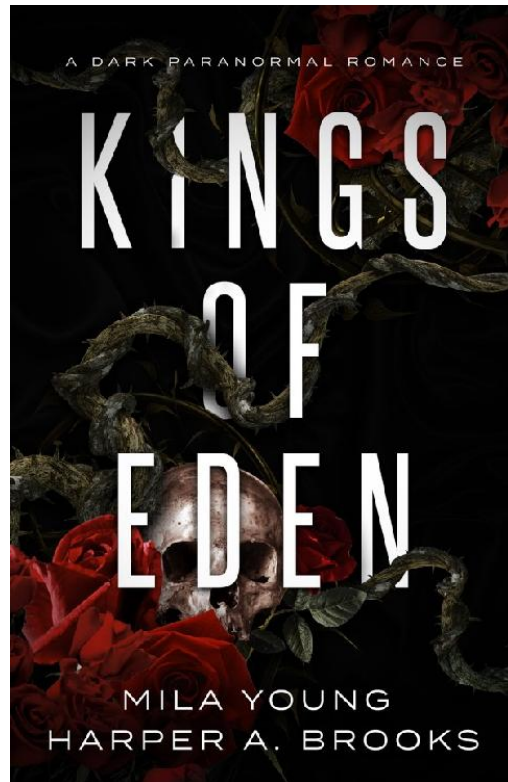
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KINGS OF EDEN



I'll never fall to my knees... even if that's exactly where they want me.

My life's never exactly been the easiest. Or the most godly. I've danced for powerful men. *Deadly* men. And when one wants to take things too far, I barely escape with my life. What I didn't know was that someone else was watching me from the shadows.

Someone deadlier... Someone scarier.

Now the Kings of Eden are after me.

They say I have something they want, and because of it, they've made me their captive.

Now, I'm swept up into their deadly world of gang wars and destructive magic. Dracon, Cassius, Knox - they're criminals, murderers, monsters... But I can't resist.

The chaotic power inside me craves the chaos they give.

But even with so much at stake, losing my heart scares me the most.

18+ Romance. Kings of Eden is a full length, paranormal romance with enemies to lovers themes, featuring three psychotic, tormented alphaholes and a sassy heroine. Contains some darker themes and panty-melting steam and is a story where the heroine will end up with more than one love interest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Harper A. Brooks may be a Jersey girl at heart, but now she likes to hideout in the mountains of Virginia with bigfoot and all his little woodland friends. Even though classic authors have always filled her bookshelves, she finds her writing muse drawn to the dark, magical, and romantic. When she isn't creating entire worlds with sexy shifters or legendary love stories, you can find her either with a good cup of coffee in hand or at home snuggling with her furry, four-legged son, Sammy.

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