

A hand holding a dark red rose against a dark, patterned background with green leaves.

AMBER NICHOL

CURSED PLEASURES

a CURSED PLEASURES novella
Book One

Amber Nichol

Cursed Pleasures

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Dedication

To the readers.

May you enjoy wherever the story takes you.

Chapter One

I hadn't spoken a word in almost ten years, yet one language existed that all men understood.

The silver buckle of his belt dug into my gut as I wrapped my thighs more solidly on top of him. Thinning fabric over the stranger's crotch barely contained the bulge of his cock as it tried to reach me through the layers between us. I smothered a frown and forced a lazy smile to stretch across my face. I couldn't risk him catching sight of my repulsion. I needed him, and I needed what resided in his pants.

In his pocket, to be more exact.

The man leaned into me, spurred on by my invitation, and settled his lips near my ear.

"You smell... good." He hiccupped. The scent of sour ale and old bread wafted over my face. I froze before my nose wrinkled. Instead, I tilted my head to the side, peeked beneath my heavily lined eyelashes, and nodded.

"You know I can make it real good." He tried to focus on my face, but the plethora of drinks shrunk his attention to mere moments. Good, only a few more ales and I'd be able to steal my prize from his pocket and flee this dreadful establishment. "I can make it... the best night of your... life."

Well, he certainly couldn't make it the *worst* night of my life. Fortunately or unfortunately, the worst night I'd ever experienced occurred over a decade ago – the same one that stole my voice and my birthright.

His dirty, calloused hands reached for me again. I snatched the full mug of ale from the table and darted it between us to quell his reach. His aim collided with the mug, splashing amber liquid over the wooden edge. I could have avoided the spilling drink, as my own wits remained since I'd only pretended to indulge, but I let the booze splash against me. The coolness proved shocking, and gooseflesh spread over my chest, but the stranger's gaze followed the pathway the ale took against my skin. My simple brown slip remained thin enough for the perky buds of my nipples to peek through.

I wanted to vomit at the look on his face. Lust turned to obsession in a heartbeat. His mind ejected everything except the desire to sink his cock deep inside me until he retreated to bed, spent, and never cared to see me again.

He thought me a common wench.

His mistake.

I leaned forward and cradled the mug in both hands. The tip of my tongue slipped between my lips and teased at the edges, enough to raise his attention from my bosom to my face. I set the mug against his lips, and he opened his greedy mouth to gulp the ale down.

One. Step. Closer. The plan I'd derived for the better part of five years was almost complete. I would soon hold the final

piece of the spell to lift the damnable curse on me and my family. I could almost feel victory on my flesh. What release would speaking my first word in ten years bring? When my throat finally turned free? I could barely imagine it.

But first, I needed the orb in this man's pocket.

"Tell me, woman." He took the empty mug from my hand with a shaky grip and sat it on the table alongside the others. "Tell me how you want this cock tonight."

He reached for his belt between my legs and I sat back to give him room. His clumsy fingers rattled the buckle, but it didn't budge.

The man grunted and shifted on the chair. He ducked his head, finally breaking his view of my body, and fumbled more with the latch.

Oh, for numens' sake. I pushed his hands out of the way and unlatched the buckle myself. Forgotten was the wench playing her seductive part. My impatience bleed through the act, and when I looked up, his wide eyes held a new expression.

Suspicion.

Damn. I plastered that smile back on my face, the one that said I was drunk too, and very eager to see whatever I'd just unleashed from his pants. Any hint of suspicion could be my downfall and my family's execution.

The stranger's gaze softened again. Tension slipped from my body, and I let out my breath. I would not die tonight. I

refused to get this close and then fail.

The man reached for his crotch again, but that gaze continued to slip from softness to dreaminess. So it took the sixth cup of ale to lull him over the edge of unconsciousness. I'd begun to worry it may take several more, and my limited coins dwindled.

He abandoned his quest for his cock and leaned his head against the rim of the chair.

"I think you can do it," he said, lids sealed shut, words slurring into the next. "I'll sit here and close my eyes."

The stiffness left his body. His head drooped, mouth gapping open. No part of him remembered I perched upon his lap, dripping wet, slipping my hands into his belt only moments before.

Good.

I leaned forward, maintaining the appearance of my role for another few moments. From the corner of my eyes, I scanned the tavern. Patrons leaned against the wooden bar, damp from sweating drinks, or clustered around tables. Everyone had their own agenda. Get drunk or get laid, and I didn't much care. With the tempting scent of fresh food and the ever-flowing rivers of booze, nobody looked my way.

A bulge pressed from the man's side, much too large to be the cock he'd boasted about before. It must be the orb, promised by the prophecy created when the witch cursed my family. The one thing that could break this spell.

*No tales to tell in the dark of night,
For the lie-seeker holds none but self dear.
Two for one, and one for him,
And the Orb of Oruthur glows true.
Break it, dear, and you will know
Of pain and love beyond wildest fear.
And then the tongue shall free,
To scream delight, in only his ear.*

Oruthur, an ancient alchemist of the lore. Legends claim he became so dedicated to forge gold, he preserved his own wife within the precious metal and cast the remains into solid glass to keep her safe. Six orbs released into the world after his death, but I only needed one to end this wretched curse my father had long ago yoked us to.

The stranger's cheap fabric scratched against my hand as I prodded his pocket. Smooth, cold material met my fingers and sweat dampened my palm. I eased it out, holding my breath, afraid the circular object I pulled from the breeches may be anything except what I sought.

I clenched my hand around it. If I had a voice anymore, I'd likely let a raspy moan escape, or perhaps a winded prayer to a lost deity. Instead, the puff of air from my lips remained inaudible as I drew my prize close to my face.

Please, please.

I pried my fingers away, one at a time, resistance like cooling iron attempting to persuade them together.

Finally, the exposed ball rested in my palm. Clear glass surrounded the exterior as thick as a finger span. Caught in the center, a shimmering gold material twisted and turned, appearing to search out the flickering lantern light to dance for the flames.

This could be nothing else. The Orb of Oruthur. The one thing able to free my family from the chains of this curse, and from the King's dedication to destroy all curse-bearing people in the kingdom of Vati. My father, mother, and sister all saved once I broke this orb.

The man beneath me groaned, and I jerked back. I caught myself before I could hastily rise and display any unorthodox behavior. I was so close. Losing this opportunity would break me, mentally and physically. Living in exile and skirting along the edge of civilization was no way to exist. At the very least, my sister deserved more. She deserved to know what her own voice sounded like.

I curled my fingers back over the orb and slipped it into the satchel around my waist. I couldn't risk breaking the item here. The king didn't care if a curse-bearer broke their spell or not. He killed them either way. No, I had to take my prize elsewhere to fulfill the prophecy. The bag felt as though it gained the sudden weight of spring chicken, right before slaughter.

Carefully, I slipped down the stranger's legs, letting my feet take my weight gradually. He shifted a bit, but settled quickly.

Almost there. Only a few more hand spans and I'd be free...

The tavern door smacked open. The metal knob ground into the wall behind it and the building groaned in protest. Cold night air, tinted with honeysuckle and horseshit, slipped around a set of towering men wearing long, black robes.

The stranger shot up at the noise. A protest came from his throat and much too-clear eyes scoured for the new threat, dashing over where I remained frozen on his lap.

But I couldn't pay him much mind. My heart sputtered in my chest. The breath I'd held to avoid waking him suddenly turned to ice for a different reason. Almost as shiny as the gold caught in the orb, the King's Rank sat upon the breast of these men's cloaks.

The king called them his Curse Catchers, but the common folk whispered a different name in the dead of night. The Reapers. A band of men, each holding unknown special abilities, tasked with seeking and destroying all those bearing the effects of a curse. The King claimed to want to rid Vati of the unwanted, but I'd always wondered if he enjoyed seeing the rivers of blood run down his execution block.

A handful of the Reapers stalked through the tavern door, almost dwarfing the opening with their size. Their cloaks

shifted, and a display of fine silver ran across leather armor, ending with ornate hilts atop steel longswords.

They hesitated inside the doorway. None of the patrons dared make a sound, for fear they may unexpectedly discover their own curse and find their heads separated from their bodies.

One Reaper split from the rest, and came to the bar where the barkeeper held a forgotten mug of ale.

“I’ll take that off your hands.” The Reaper gestured to the mug. His deep voice alluded calm and confidence. He knew what effect their presence created and tried, perhaps unsuccessfully, to quell the mood. “And have pitchers poured for the rest of us.”

The Reaper threw a handful of coins down, and the barkeep dashed away, quick to fulfill the orders.

The man leaned against the bar, shoulders softened beneath the weight of his armor, and rested one elbow on the polished surface. Almost with the familiarity of a practiced movement, he cast a glance around the still tavern.

Green eyes danced from patron to patron, settling for a second or two on each. When he looked at me, our gazes connected, and a shot of panic and fear coiled deep in my gut. Long forgotten instincts awakened at his stare. The ones that whispered a predator lingered nearby and the next few breaths may be my last.

He glanced down, where I sat on the stranger's lap, and the Reaper's lips twisted in a shadow smile. His gaze released me, and relief quenched the heat of terror for only a moment.

I had to get out of here.

“Relax.” The Reaper's voice flung through the room with the same reception as a dash of winter's air. “We're only here for night and board. Resume.” He waved one hand bearing a decorated vambrace, then paused the gesture. A half smile wove over full, red lips. “Unless you happen to be the one rumored to have a tongue cursed still.”

Uneasy laughter filtered through the bar. They thought it humorous that a curse-bearer may be in the same tavern as a Reaper.

Thankfully, they could not hear the hammering of my heart against my ribs, even as they tightened with the inability to draw breath.

These men were here for me. I'd been careful for so long. Always sure to slip from town to town and never settle long enough for anyone to ask questions. I knew I'd overstayed in this tiny village, the name of which I couldn't even remember, but to have the Reapers here meant someone had turned in a tip.

The Reaper's announcement allowed an uneasy mood to return to the tavern. Conversations resumed, albeit hushed and timid. Mugs pounded against tables and the servers continued hustling around the dim room.

I raised a leg and slipped off the stranger's lap. He'd awoken much sooner than I'd expected. I needed to leave before he realized I'd stolen his priceless orb – and was about to break it as the prophecy demanded to lift my curse.

He made no complaints as I left his company. Instead, he leaned over the side of the chair to the nearest patron and engaged in whatever rumors would spread about this sighting of the Curse Casters.

I moved slow, casual, avoiding any hint of attention toward me. The shadows near the back of the bar swallowed me whole. I let out a bit of my breath. A glint from a silver knob showed me the servant's exit, all but forgotten in the commotion. I moved toward it.

Almost there.

The front door opened again. Another Reaper stepped inside, and though the silver along his clothes shone just as much, the rusty chain in his hands stood out more. The sight instilled instant dread through me, and as I tracked the links from his hand to coils on the floor then back upward, I feared what I would see on the other end.

A woman. Matted hair and mud-covered, she shivered though the night remained warm. No cloak adorned her shoulders, for she was not a Curse Caster, and the gray chain wrapped her wrists tightly together.

Hot prickles akin to glass shards rained over my skin. Her spine straightened as she experienced the same feeling. She snapped her head up, dark, bloodshot eyes scanning the tavern.

The Reaper holding the chain jerked it tight. He stooped to look into the woman's eyes. "You feel one, don't you?"

"I –" her voice broke before more words slipped through.

"That's okay, love." The Reaper patted her cheek, and she ducked her head in a way that made bile rise in my stomach. "The way your body moves tells you've felt another like you here."

Another like her – damned, hunted, cursed – me. Once one bears the weight of a curse, they could always feel the presence of another. Our similar destinies called to each other, and death raked his claws over our skin.

The first Reaper straightened. His gaze, mocking moments ago, turned hot and wild. The hunt called to him and he responded with eagerness.

"Here?" He scanned the bar again. I froze and hoped the depths of the shadows concealed me for a few more minutes.

The chatter ceased again. Pale faces turned suspicious eyes toward each other. Friends, family, neighbors they'd known for years meant nothing when the alternative was meeting the sharp end of a sword.

"Guard the doors," the man said. "Nobody leaves until we're done questioning them. Shouldn't be too hard. The wench can't say a word."

More Reapers barred the door, while the two began pulling people from tables and demanding information about the curse-bearer hiding in the tavern. I didn't know what would

happen to these people after their makeshift interrogation. The swell of panic that forced me to pause faded away, and I dashed to the back door.

Gravel voices hid my hurried steps. The door sharpened in the shadows as I neared it. I reached out. I could almost feel the cool metal knob against my skin.

But something heavy and hot snatched my hand first.

“Now, what’s this?” The hand grabbing mine spun me around. The first Reaper smiled, his wide chest much too close to mine. A whiff of fire and smoke drifted from his form as he tugged my hand to pull me even closer.

My thoughts faded. White static pulled my mind shut. The world narrowed into two pinpricks.

“Only the guilty need to run,” he whispered, barely loud enough for anyone other than me to hear. Long, dark hair framed his face, enhancing the stubble across his chin. His green eyes cut deeper than the sharpest blade.

I opened my mouth. I wasn’t sure what I expected to come out of it, as I knew words would not, but his stark presence demanded something from me.

The screech of a chair against stone floors echoed through the room.

“Wait now,” the stranger whose lap I’d recently vacated stood from his chair. His knees barely wobbled in the face of the Reapers, either telling of his bravery or his excessive ale consumption. “That can’t be who you’re lookin’ for. She’s

been with me all night.” He raised his brows as though the Reapers may not understand his implications.

“Is that so?” The Reaper, though, never took his eyes from my face. “Tell me, do you know her name?”

“Sure do. She wrote it down on this page, and uh, it’s right here.” A blush fell over his face as he pulled the ratty paper from his pants, where I had indeed slipped the page after scrawling my name across it. Dray raised a brow, and I pressed my lips. I’d need the orb, and men didn’t think twice once you started putting things in their pants.

“Elys.” Dray read my name from the paper. “She wrote it for you.”

The man’s brow creased, as though realizing that didn’t quite clear the accusation. “She was sayin’ other things, and sure as hell was telling me exactly what she wanted from me.” A phantom smile found his lips.

“Tell me, was she whispering sweet nothings in your ear, or was she whispering nothing at all?” the Reaper asked.

My teeth snapped as I shut my mouth. Even if I had words to defend myself, the rest would come crashing soon, anyway. Once the stranger felt his pocket and realized I had robbed him, my facade would fade.

“I think I’d remember the words a pretty lady said, even if she is just a wench like that. Here, let me think now…” He put a hand on his hip, then froze as a new expression crossed his face. He flattened his palm against his pants and frantically

patted the garment. A moment later, he turned wide eyes back to me with a red rim of anger.

“It’s gone,” he said. He pointed at me, but the image blurred beneath the realization of my failure. “She’s took it.”

“What did she take from you?” the Reaper asked. I didn’t think it possible, but his smile grew even wider.

“It’s an orb. I, uh, won it from a traveler on the road a few weeks back,” the man sputtered. I doubted that “won” meant anything more than stolen it himself, but the Reapers cared not for theft. Only for the cursed. “It’s got gold in the middle.”

“You’ve been accused of a crime,” the Reaper told me. “Do you have words to defend yourself? If you can speak at all, this would be the time.”

His eyes danced over my face, flushed with an eagerness all too consuming. He’d found a taste of the hunt and now wished to feel the blood between his teeth.

I jerked my chin up, but pressed my lips tightly closed.

“Let’s see, then.” He snatched my bag from my waist, and the silver clasp surrendered to his strength. I expected him to search the sack – and find the orb immediately – but he grabbed my other wrist, holding both in one hand.

His fingers ran across my shoulders, more of a caress than an investigative search. He paused and kneaded a tender place along my neck until unwelcomed soothing tingles trailed from the spot. The search continued. He flipped his hands and ran

them beneath my breasts, fitting between my skin and where my linen band trapped them tightly to my chest.

My muscles locked at the intimacy. He smiled again, a veiled look offering only a slight peek of white teeth between parted lips. The excitement burned across his face. He enjoyed touching me, and the reaction I gave him.

“A protest is all it would take to persuade my attention to someone else.” The crinkle of his eyes and the dark smirk said he already knew the outcome this search would bring.

He moved on, shifting his wide grip over my waist, digging into the bones at the tops of my hips a bit. I bit my lip as he continued lower and lower, but he only knelt to feel over both my feet.

My cheeks burned once he'd finished his inspection. I'd never wondered what cattle felt like in those moments before the auction block, but I feared I'd just had a similar experience.

“Appears clean,” he said. “Now the bag.”

He scooped the bag from the ground and rose. Still holding both my wrists in one hand, he used the other to dump the contents onto a nearby table.

A few coins, meager rations of jerky and preserved fruits, and the damn orb skirted across the table.

“The wench stole from me!” The stranger dashed for the orb, but the Reaper grabbed it first.

“This is property of the King now, claimed from one of his prisoners as a punishment for breaking the law.” The Reaper smiled, even as my heart tried to stop.

A prisoner of the king, for simply bearing a curse I’d spent years trying to break.

The Curse Catcher pushed the orb into a small satchel around his waist. The stranger’s mouth hung agape, even more round than the sphere he’d just lost.

The Reaper turned back to me, but instead of looking at my face, he studied where he held my wrists and our skin touched. “If you can say any words to clear your name of the crime of theft or curse-bearing, now will be your last chance.”

There were, of course, no words forming in my mouth. I shook my head.

“That’s what I thought.”

The Reaper dropped my wrists and caught the back of my neck in his unyielding grip. His belly shook with laughter as he dragged me across the tavern. Once we reached the bar, he pushed me onto one of the stools, still gripping me tight enough that I expected bruises in the morning.

“Let the rest of them leave, men. Or drink, or fuck. I don’t care. We’ve got what we came for, and it’s not even half till morning yet.”

Shouts of relief and glee merged, but I barely heard them. Only the swift thumping of blood rushed white noise through my ears.

My life was over. Perhaps I had a day or so left, since all executions happened at the Catcher's Keep, which would require riding to. But it felt hopeless, having been close enough to feel victory in my hand, and not had enough time to shatter it.

The Reaper gestured to the barkeep, who briefly glanced at me with sympathy. "Bring bread and ale for the girl."

Once the keeper left earshot, the Reaper turned to me. Contentment drew a smile across his rugged face. He dug his fingers deeper into my neck.

"Enjoy it." He belted the words loud enough for the entire tavern to hear. "For it will be your last."

"Dray," another Reaper came to stand beside us. "Should we stay for the night, though we've located the curse-bearer already? It may be safer to leave for the Keep right away."

The Reaper gripping me – Dray – glanced around the tavern. The others mingled among townsfolk, gesturing great retellings of battles or sexual conquests – it was hard to tell the difference.

Dray shook his head. "They're tired, Emiri. Let them have full bellies and ale-warmed hearts before we leave in the morning."

Emiri nodded, though his expression remained skeptical, and rejoined the others.

The barkeep returned and settled a plate of fresh bread and butter in front of me. He found a black-handled knife and

sliced the bread, leaving the blade to protrude from a slab of butter in a small dish. A moment later, he placed a large mug of ale beside the bread.

Though my stomach twisted with panic and dread, I snatched the booze. Both my hands barely circled the large container. I forced the tepid liquid down my throat, between breaths, until the mug proved empty.

Dray raised a brow and flicked his fingers. “Another, then.”

I wasn’t sure I wished for another, but didn’t protest when the second one arrived. I gripped the base and pretended to stare into its amber contents, when I actually peered over the rim at the bread waiting for me.

The knife dipped carefully into the bowl of butter. Its dark handle ate away any hints of light the tavern offered, an endless pool of darkness and decay. It mirrored my emotions so well.

A very similar blade would be against my neck tomorrow, or the next day. Larger, hopefully, to slice through in a swift strike. And smooth, without the serrated teeth to cut into my skin.

Though being curse-bearing meant death followed me like a lost dog on the road, I’d never thought much about the consequences of being caught. I knew I faced execution, but the nuances of how and where failed to conjure in my imagination. We’d have to travel to the Keep. I’d likely be

tired after riding for so long. If this were my last meal, then I would die with my stomach growling.

And I had to wonder if it would hurt.

The butter didn't seem to protest its fate. Perhaps I would be similar.

I raised the second cup and drained that, too. Dray didn't ask for a third glass, as he'd shifted his attention from me – except the tight grip on the back of my neck – to another of his men engaged in a hearty story.

The ale calmed more of the panic. Acceptance sank in. It really happened. They had caught me. I would never break the curse, and my family would have to continue hiding, until one of them risked death to find another Orb of Oruthur. Only six existed in the world. Their chance of success remained slim.

As the panic peeled away, a new layer thickened beneath it.

Rage.

My life hung on the line because a selfish king wished to cleanse the very people he'd sworn to protect. The curse I bore impacted little of my life compared to many others, but it remained a fate I did not request. Surely carrying such a weight did not merit a death sentence.

And then I thought of my father. The roar of anger thundered through my ears the way it always did when my mind ventured to him. None of us – me, my mother, or my sister – would even have such a burden if he hadn't wronged

the woman in the woods, and my mother, in a single sweep. Instead, he'd taken her as a lover and scorned her when she found she'd have to share him – with his wife.

The cackle of her laughter as she set the curse over my family still rang through my ears when the quiet grew too thin.

None of that remained my fault. I didn't deserve to die.

I refused to be a willing participant in my own execution.

My hand blurred across my vision before I'd consciously decided my next move. The polished handle sank a chill into my flushed skin. The butter offered little resistance in my moment of insanity, and the knife pulled free immediately.

I did not allow it to remain so for long.

I stabbed the blade into the part of the Reaper closest to me. It sank into the tender space below the armpit, and no obstructions paused my strike. It bit deep into the man's flesh, until rich red blood leaked around the cut, and his fingers involuntarily uncurled, while a curse left his lips.

I dashed from the stool. Nobody had noticed Dray's injury yet, and I only needed to escape through the doors and reach a horse. Though I'd ridden as a child, many years had passed since my last mount. But I knew this area better than these men, and it held many hollows for a woman to hide.

Shocked expressions faded behind me as I ran by them. The friendly chatter that tentatively restarted slowed to a murmur in my wake. I wasn't sure if the townsfolk hushed to

witness my flee, or if my ears simply quelled any unnecessary distractions.

A man pulled the door open as I neared. The floral-tinted air kissed my cheeks as it began to slowly close behind him.

So close.

I reached my hand out, looking through the crack to determine which animal would be the easiest to steal.

Commotion broke out behind me. I pushed harder until my lungs screamed for air and my sides burned like a hot poker to the gut.

My fingertips touched the knob.

A rigid line of icy coolness wrapped around my ankle. I didn't waste a moment to glance down, and jerked the door open.

Silver moonlight smiled at me.

The clasp around my ankle jerked my foot from under me. I reached out to break my fall, and my palms smacked against the tavern floor, mere fingertips from the line of dirt outside. I rose to my elbows and tried to crawl, even as a darkness in my chest said it was impossible.

Whatever wrapped around my ankle began to coil up my legs. Unwillingly, I turned from my last possible escape and looked down.

An intricate silver thread wrapped both my legs together and continued to swirl higher and higher. The unbroken metal

spanned across the room, where Dray lounged at the bar with one hand outstretched toward me. The silver wrappings around his leather armor appeared liquified and fluid, reforming to create the metal chain covering my body and binding me to him.

A metal-mover. Dray possessed a rare ability to control a specific type of metal.

The chain snaked up my hips and slipped beneath my shirt. Its icy touch stole my breath in a hiss, and Dray smiled at the sound. The coils came out of my sleeves and bound my wrists together, drew them near my chest, and tightened.

The bindings were more effective than a fish on a hook, and more humiliating. The tavern watched as Dray's lead flexed again. He called the silver back to his body, drawing me toward him.

I couldn't move, but I refused to close my eyes. He didn't deserve that satisfaction. The pace those silver chains drew me across the floor seemed unnecessarily slow. It was likely a punishment of humiliation for causing him pain.

Finally, I stopped beside his black boots, and he used his toe to roll me onto my back. Humor danced in his green gaze, but a more ferocious and angry predator peered from behind.

Dray pulled the blade beneath his arm and let it clatter on the ground beside my head. Blood splattered cool against my face, as the bindings halted my ability to turn away.

“Stupid woman,” he said with a bright smile. “You can’t kill a Reaper.”

Dray bent and wrapped his hand around one of the chains trapping my wrists. He heaved me from the ground as though barely registering my weight. He drew my face close to his, until fire and smoke rolled over me, and set his lips against my ear.

“If you manage to break this curse while you still have breath in your lungs, I’ll make sure my name is the first word from those pretty little lips. And you’ll be screaming it.”

He stuffed a hand into his pocket, then smacked another pile of coins onto the bar.

“Get me a room,” he told the barkeep.

Chapter Two

Dray tossed me onto the bed in the hotel above the tavern. Music and chatter drifted from below.

I dreaded what they were about to hear coming from up here.

The Reaper turned and locked the door. He slipped his cloak off his shoulders, revealing the armor underneath. Silver trimming remained around his torso, but the details that had adorned his breeches were missing.

Because they wrapped around me.

Dray held a hand out from his side and flicked his fingers. The metal binding my legs and torso loosened. It slipped over me, feeling as alive as any scaled creature, and wound back up Dray's body. Most of it reformed into the detailed patterns of the silver chain, but one long stretch slipped beneath the tunic's sleeve and disappeared against Dray's body.

Only two pieces of the metal remained on me, one dainty circle around each wrist, not even attached, leaving my hands free.

I sat up on the bed. Dray kept his back to me. Only the rise and fall of his shoulders identified him as alive and not a man sculpted from stone.

Nervousness made me want to twist my fingers together, but I fisted them into the blanket to avoid the habit. I had very few illusions about what this night with the Reaper held for me. I only wondered why he paused.

Dray finally turned back toward me. All that anger only hinted in his eyes downstairs, now burned hot and wild. The stubble around his chin enhanced the air of danger pouring from the stiffness of his body language.

I didn't want to admit his attractiveness, especially when he handled me so roughly, but it was there nonetheless. Muscled shoulders bit into a hardened waist, leather hugging the toned places. Were he a man in the tavern drunk on too much ale, I'd have been happy to share his bed for the night. But Dray held a warrant for my death.

His gaze left my face and traveled over my body. It almost scratched at my skin while he studied me, as though I'd already shed my clothes and stood naked before him. I tried to swallow – damn this curse that stole so much as a protest – but my mouth felt too dry.

“You must wonder why I have not begun your punishment already.” He spoke slowly, deliberately, each word flushed with rage. Dray lifted his arm to peer at the almost healed wound where I'd stabbed him. More than a metal-mover, he also possessed healing abilities. He turned back to me. “I wanted to be sure I wouldn't kill you instead.”

Something metallic tried to climb up my throat. Perhaps a quick death would have been better than whatever anger

brewed in his mind at this moment.

The room offered little for hiding or escape. A slim bed, a small chest of drawers with a pitcher and glass perched atop it, and a high window barely wide enough for my head to fit through. Nothing able to be used as a weapon. Not even a painting settled on the blank walls.

Dray caught me with his eyes and stalked across the room. Each step carried a twisting mix of anger and temptation. He stopped in front of me, staring down, and layers of heat brushed over my skin.

Instincts inside me screamed to run, but the part that was once prey knew the opportunity for escape past long ago.

He reached down and circled his fingers around my neck. I grabbed at his wrist with both hands, but his arm didn't so much as shake from my effort. I couldn't even yelp as he pulled me to my feet, then onto my tip-toes, until our eyes became level.

“I've thought of something better than your head on my floor.” He pulled me from the bed and I tried to balance my toes on the floor enough to keep air in my lungs. My struggle ignited a spark of enjoyment in his eyes. “My head, inside you.”

My back hit the wall. I expected him to loosen his grip, but he tightened the hold. The air in my chest froze, unable to seep around his hand. A pounding sound began low in my ears – an audible clock counting down the moments I had left.

The silver filaments on his chest quivered. The metal took a liquid quality and melted across the Reaper's skin toward me. Icy coolness contradicted the heat of his hand on my throat as the metal licked up my neck and coiled over my arms. The two bracelets on my wrists flared to life, attracted toward one another as water to downstream. My hands snapped together, bound once more.

Dray's look turned smug. The trailing metal joined the bindings and connected seamlessly, as though having come from the same molten pour. It reached to the wall over my head and dragged my hands along with it.

The silver burrowed into the wall, then stilled. I pulled on my wrists, though darkness claimed my vision as oxygen faded from my brain, but the metal did not slip or quiver. I skirted on my toes and my arms pulled painfully. Attempting to kick the man would jerk them hard, causing immense pain.

The Reaper had me trapped.

"Much better," he murmured, his breath against my cheek suddenly much more ominous. He loosened the grip around my neck and I sucked in air. Sweet relief cleared the spots from my mind, leaving me a sharpened image of my predicament.

Dray stepped back, and a touch of coolness replaced him. The temperature heightened my nerves. Every brush of the silver on my skin felt like a warning, an expectation, for what would come next.

The rest of the silver puddled onto the floor, rivulets of molten metal waiting for the Reaper's command – the same way I did. He unbuttoned the leather armor and tossed it onto the bed, revealing a thin white tunic beneath. The trousers followed, a black undergarment hiding his body from me.

Before throwing the trousers down, Dray reached into the pocket. A sliver of hope that he reached for the orb to return it to me filtered into my mind, then slipped away. The Curse Catchers always completed their tasks, and Dray's was to see me dead.

Eventually.

Instead, he withdrew a silver dagger.

I sucked in a breath. If he planned to torture me, he'd gain little with his quest. Even if I had the information the King desperately wanted, where every curse-bearer in the kingdom hid, I'd be unable to utter a single word.

Still, he neared me. I bit my tongue and wished that a scream would bubble from my locked throat, just this once.

Dray set the blade against my collarbone.

“I will admit, no target has ever drawn my blood.” He flicked the blade, skirting barely over my skin, to slice away the shoulder seam of my dress. It fell, leaving my linen chest band exposed. “There was a fire in your eyes when you stuck the blade into me.” He flicked the other side and my dress caught around my waist. “I liked it.” The dagger dragged

down the fabric at my waist and the dress fell to the floor. “I want to see it again.”

My chest tightened. Only the band around my breasts and short breeches hid my body. Fear pounded my heart faster and faster, and that metallic flavor in my mouth grew more defined.

And yet.

I’d never had a man look at me with such ferocity. Dray’s gaze held the promise of sex, and he didn’t search my expression for agreement, but I found an unexpected warmth curling in my core.

“How about we make a bargain, Elys?” He sliced off the remainder of my clothes. The linen band fell first, and the white breeches settled over them. Dray kicked the garments out of the way, causing my weight to pull on my arms as he forced the dress from under my feet.

The draft of the room cascaded over me. I’d once fallen in a frozen pond while escaping from one village to the next, but that had been warmer than exposing my body to the Reaper.

Dray threw the dagger to the ground and the pointed tip stabbed into the floorboard several feet away. He turned back, consuming my form with a fiery gaze that promised much, much more than I imagined.

He pulled off his undergarments, tossing them over his armor on the bed. The hardness of his body sharpened in the flickering glow of the single lantern. Thin white scars

peppered his shoulders and upper back, remainders of the bite of a whip. He'd said I was the only target to take his blood, but someone else had long ago. Tight bands of muscles joined at his stomach and trailed lower, where a generous cock stood already erect, waiting for me.

I swallowed, a gesture that did nothing to soothe my nerves.

He stepped to me. My nipples touched his chest, the slightest tingles slipping along the buds. The hardness of his cock settled against my stomach, and he tucked one knuckle under my chin to drag my eyes to his.

He tilted his head and a single strand of hair grazed his cheek.

“A bargain then,” he whispered, smoke and lust wafting over us. “If you can ask me to stop, not only will I halt immediately, but I’ll let you go.” He raised his other hand and lingered the fingertips over my cheekbone. The confusing enjoyment of his touch mingled with my lingering fear. “I’ll tell the others you escaped, and I’ll never look for you again. Go on, Elys, tell me you don’t want me.”

Could I speak, I’d be equally surprised at what words would come from my lips.

“Nothing, then?” He trailed his finger down my cheek, sending a spiral of flames across my body. “At any time, Elys, the offer will stand.”

His hand stretched over my throat again, applying just enough pressure to tighten my breath, but not cease it.

“A collar, I think. If you wish to act like an animal, then I will treat you as one.”

The metal at his feet twisted again, and coiled up his naked leg, over his chest and down his arm. It flowed onto my skin and wrapped around my neck. It tightened to the same pressure as his hold, making me aware of each breath I drew and how quickly he could take them from me.

“Better,” he whispered.

Dray grabbed my hair and jerked my head as far as my bindings to the wall allowed. I tried to call out, but the curse kept my voice as silent as a summer breeze. Dray kicked my legs apart, pulling my arms again, and filled the vacated space with his body.

His groin caught against mine, and the head of his cock rubbed at my clit. Unexpected pleasure coiled at the contact. The mix of fear and desire might confuse my mind, but my body knew what it craved.

Dray’s eyes widened, and a twisted smile parted his lips. His other hand slipped between my breasts and trailed lower and lower. He cupped my sex, where his cool palm found warmth. “Perhaps if you had words, it wouldn’t be a protest from that mouth.”

I pressed my lips together. Though my body wished to betray me, I refused to give him the satisfaction of my

thoughts.

He laughed away, low and throaty.

Dray abandoned my groin and released my head. His hands caressed my shoulders, resuming the light massage he'd begun earlier in the tavern. My stressed muscles groaned at the touch, softening with each careful swirl of his fingertips.

I'd been running for so long. Clearly, I'd neglected parts of myself that now revealed in contact. The faceless men I'd spent nights with in exchange for food for shelter paled in comparison.

Dray pressed his textured cheek against mine. His breath lingered in my ear. "It's not a punishment if all you find is pleasure."

I stiffened at the threat. The soft kneading found the mounds of my breasts and he cupped them with both hands. His thumbs slid underneath, propping them higher. My nipples perked in response and drew another smile from the Reaper.

"Let's keep these here," he said. "I like them higher."

The metal coils returned, slipping up my feet, and brushing the places where Dray's hands touched my breasts. They formed a loose underwire beneath them and wrapped over my shoulders to hold them up. The silver solidified into intricate floral straps, leaving a garment similar to a chest plate, with the breasts exposed.

Dray barely had to stoop to reach my nipple with his mouth. My breath hissed as he wrapped his mouth over me

and drew me in deep. An etch of pain stretched around the growing pleasure.

He drew back, only to turn to the other. I let my head fall as desire and pinpricks of discomfort warred.

His mouth disappeared, replaced by the pinch and pull of his fingers. I looked down again, unable to stop myself. He teased at the nude buds until they turned a rosy shade from the contact.

Dray flicked his wrist, and a sliver of metal melted into his hand. A moment later, the metal crafted into a latched contraption with rather wicked prongs pointing inward.

He pushed the latch between his thumb and forefinger, opening the prongs. I realized a moment too late he intended to fit my nipple between the pointed spikes. I sucked in a breath and shook my head, trying to force any noise out of my mouth.

“This is a punishment, Elys,” he said. He centered one clamp over my nipple. “And if you simply ask, I will stop, of course.”

He paused and looked at me with one brow raised, as though expecting an answer from me. When the silence remained, despite my shaking head, he gave a half shrug.

The clamp bit into my nipple. I jerked, tugging on the restraints over my head. The prongs weren't sharp, but the tightness made rivers of pain pull from such a sensitive place.

Dray reached toward me with the next, and I tried to move away.

He put a hand between my breasts and pushed me more solidly into the wall. Coldness caught my ankles as more metal trapped my feet against the wall.

“You’re only making this worse for yourself,” he said, though the sparkle in his eyes said he enjoyed it.

The second clamp claimed me, and I held my breath while waiting for the pain to settle.

Dray stepped back. He looked me up and down, the artwork that had been lacking in the room now fulfilled by my body wrapped in his silver chains and pinned to the wall.

He strode to the chest of drawers, where a pitcher of wine and a single glass waited. Dray poured ruby liquid into the cup and studied me while he took a long sip.

Chapter Three

His gaze left a heavy feeling over me. I shifted beneath the bonds and clamps, trying to move as little as possible. Each motion sent waves of pain through the most sensitive parts of my body, and yet Dray's hungry gaze brushed a tendril of confusion with it. His visual caress should not have made my core warm with anticipation.

Whatever betrayal my body held aside, I wished to draw a breath and scream for help. Though everyone within earshot knew a Reaper held me in his embrace – and none would come.

Dray poured a second glass and tilted his head to drain the wine in a moment. He set the cup on the wooden top with controlled, careful movements, as though he didn't hold me captive against my will and threaten me with his body. As though the straining cock between his legs didn't betray his plans for the night.

I gulped. The Reapers' ruthlessness held true to the rumors. People murmured that fear and terror followed in their wake, but I had never guessed the cause of their ruthlessness.

This man would lead me to my death.

His distance allowed the thought of death to resurface. Perhaps it was a defense mechanism to avoid the realities of my situation.

I wondered if Dray would be my executioner.

Fear drowned away any lingering sparks of pleasure. I didn't want to die. I'd worked so hard to release my family from this curse and finally be free of the king's decree, and all for naught.

I forced my gaze from the man before me and studied the tendrils of the shackles bound into the wall. Thin silver filaments disappeared beneath the hasty paint, hiding any hint of the durability of the bindings.

"I've seen that look before." Dray set a half smile on his face and crossed his arms, enhancing the thickness of his muscled shoulders. "You're thinking to test the strength of my restraints. Do you want to make two bargains tonight?"

He neared me, the sharp scent of red wine mixing with his smokey flavor. "If you manage to free yourself from my chains, I'll give you a warm meal and a head start to run again."

Dray stopped before me, a hand span from the silver clamps digging into my nipples. "But if you fail, I'll make you come for me, over and over, until your wordless lips beg for me to stop."

I focused on his emerald eyes. They held an eagerness I'd never seen before. More than simple desire, Dray looked at me

with a need to consume everything I'd ever been and more, leaving me a simple shell of what I once was.

My throat tightened. If the executioner's blade didn't kill me, this man likely would.

The smart choice would be to do nothing. I would lose my chance for freedom, but I'd face less of Dray's wrath than if I failed.

And yet... I couldn't. If a possibility to return to my family and break this curse existed, I had to try. I already faced my execution. Little remained for me anyway.

"I see it in your face, Elys." Dray put a hand on either side of my head. His gaze roamed over my lips and down across my bound body. "You know you're going to fail, but there's a fire inside you, and you're going to try, anyway."

Damn him, I wish his words didn't ring true.

I looked away from his face, back to the bonds around my wrists. The tendrils disappearing into the wall didn't look all that large. As thin as a buckle slipping into a belt hole.

Drawing a breath, I closed my eyes. I tensed my muscles in my arms, imagining ripping the pegs from the wall. The freedom would feel so good. Any head start Dray provided could mean the difference between escape and death.

Now or never.

I channeled all my strength into the place my wrist met the wall. Muscles burned as I jerked them forward, attempting to break the hold on my body.

Nothing. The metal pulled on my wrists, but didn't even groan with the force of my struggles.

I opened my eyes and ground my teeth. I twisted my hands as much as I could in the restraints, and the edges of the cuffs dug into my skin. Each tug against the cuffs bounced my trapped nipples more painfully in the clamps, spiraling pain through my chest, as my breasts caught tight in the silver bralette.

"That's right." Dray's voice caught me off guard. Though I couldn't forget his presence, I hadn't expected commentary on my escape attempt. "I like it when you fight."

I ceased the struggles and bit my lip. As expected, I'd made things worse. I heaved for breath from both the fight and the swatch of panic tightening my chest. Dray watched until I calmed, a smile slapped on his face.

"That's done, then." He moved against me, cupping my breasts again, and pressing his hardness into my stomach. "Now I'll take my prize."

Dray's silver chains obeyed him as he knocked my feet aside, eliminating the little balance I'd kept the weight off my arms. Pain locked up my shoulders and soft tingles danced through my fingertips as the blood flow slowed.

He stepped into the hollowed space. The curve of his neck brushed my face. Wine, smoke, and flames rolled off his body and consumed me from the inside out. He twisted one finger into the collar he'd woven around my neck and pulled it enough to make me fight for my next breath.

Dray shifted, then the smooth head of his cock probed against me. I held my breath, waiting for him.

“Ah,” he looked down for a moment, where our bodies shared the barest of touches. “You’ve not hated everything about the night.”

A wicked smile curved his lips, then Dray thrust his hips, slipping his cock inside of the wetness of my core, filling me with an unexpected suddenness.

I gasped, an audible gush of air escaping my lips. He didn’t wait, instead drawing back to thrust into me again. The stretching worsened as he found a deeper angle, forcing his entire length into me.

Dray tilted the collar and forced my face up to his.

“That’s right.” His lips brushed the side of my jaw. “Take it all.”

He found a rhythm, pushing in and out of me, holding the collar enough for me to breathe with a little struggle. Each rocking motion swung my breasts against the silver bralette and the clamps pulled at my nipples. My fingers numbed and my mind screamed that this was akin to torture.

But my body didn’t care.

Beneath the pulls of pain and panic at my minimal oxygen, I felt the warmth as I grew wetter for him. Each sharp thrust that stretched me more also pushed my mind and body farther apart, confusing the pain for pleasure.

Dray released the collar and leaned into me, digging the clamps and metal deeper. He dragged his hands beneath my ass and lifted my feet from the floor. The position changed the angle, allowing the swelling of my clit to rub against him with each thrust.

A growing wave of pleasure consumed me.

“Can’t stop it now, can you?” he asked, but logic faded behind the need. Nerves spiraled desire through me, drowning away the minute discomfort, or perhaps building the flames along with the pain.

He thrust harder, claiming me with his cock, until the wave crest and a sweet relief of organism rocked my body.

I shook against him, still trapped tight inside me, and he pressed into me harder.

When the pleasure began to fade, Dray dropped my ass and drew out. He remained rock hard. He hadn’t come yet.

The thought filled me with dread, followed by shame at my enjoyment. He’d promised to make me come over and over again. I’d hoped he’d lacked the self-control to fulfill that promise.

Dray grabbed my wrists. The metal bolting me into the wall – the ones I’d tried to break moments ago – melted as though made from wax. The Reaper turned me to face the wall and drew me back.

He bent me forward, with my ass sticking out toward the sparse room.

The metal filaments around my wrist dug into the wall again, this time at waist height, leaving me bent over. New shackles wrapped around my ankles and secured them against the floor.

“Better, Elys?” he asked, and I didn’t know if my name on his lips promised heaven or hell.

He chuckled at his own words.

Dray’s steps moved through the room. My neck burned as I peered between my legs to watch his movements, but I only saw my own body trapped in such a vulnerable position – waiting for him.

I shifted, but the motion swung my breasts and pulled hard on the clamps. Redness puckered beneath the buds, where the prongs bit at my skin. The collar around my neck and the metal bralette still trapping my breasts rubbed at me as well.

His measured steps returned, and a hot pain smacked across my exposed ass cheeks.

I tried to pull back, but the silver at my ankles locked me in place.

A whirl caught through the air, then more pain splashed against me. Hot tears poked through my eyes and my breath rushed out, even as my heart raced with dread at the next strike.

It didn’t come. Instead, Dray slipped his hand between my legs. I gasped at the touch, so gentle compared to the previous hits, and tried to pull away.

“Nowhere to go,” he said. His fingers searched out my clit and rubbed the sensitive bud. New tingles twisted in my core, bringing back the starting waves of pleasure again.

Dray pulled away, dipping a finger into the wetness at my opening. He slipped another inside me, rubbing against my sensitive inner chamber. He spread his fingers, filling me, and I gasped again.

“Even after this night, you’ll remember who owned you, Elys.”

His hand abandoned me, and something cold replaced it. I tried to peek again, but only caught a flash of silver before he pressed it between my legs.

I tensed as something colder than ice, and almost as wide as Dray’s cock, filled me. The shock sent the pleasure away, and I twisted my hips to fight the intrusion from my body.

“That’s good, very good,” Dray said. He stepped back, and the smack of leather against my ass echoed through the room again. “Fight more.”

The hot pain on my skin and the coldness inside me conflicted. I could barely draw a breath between strikes, and each smack shook my breasts painfully, and dug the cold rod deeper into my body.

Dray proved relentless. He paused only long enough to twist the metal inside me, sending more discomfort, then he returned to the strikes until my trapped voice tried to scream and my breath turned ragged.

Something fell to the floor and the pain on my ass stopped. Dray reached over my hips to find my clit, though he kept the cold metal trapped inside me. His fingers danced against me, drawing a mix of enjoyment into the chill.

I shook my head. I didn't want to enjoy it, but I couldn't stop the betrayal of my body as the desire built higher and higher in my core. My hips rocked involuntarily, searching out his touch. Dray laughed and put his other hand on my ass to steady me.

The orgasm took me, swift and sudden. My head dropped as the energy fled my body and only Dray's shackles kept me upright.

I felt his heat behind me. He pulled the rod from my core and quickly replaced it with his cock. He ground into me, stealing my breath with each thrust. The waves of pleasure hadn't faded and only renewed as he took me from behind.

Waves poured over me, washing away the pain and fullness and any hints of displeasure I'd harbored – for at least a few moments. Dray tensed, and his cock pulsed as he finally came, spilling himself into me.

He paused and dug deep inside me before slowly drawing out.

I dragged in a deep breath. Without the orgasm numbing the pain, my body screamed at me.

The metal around my wrists and ankles lost its solidity. The shackles fell, dropping me into a heap on the wooden

floor.

I didn't move. I wasn't sure I even had the ability. All that remained of the Reaper's bindings were the collar around my neck and a thin bracelet on each wrist.

Dray must have dressed before releasing me, and the metal twisted over his armor again, forming into the decorative strands crisscrossing around his uniform. He looked down at me with a twisted smile before moving to the bed against the wall.

The Reaper plucked the blanket from the mattress and flung it over one shoulder like an ornate royal cape.

"Tonight you'll sleep wearing only my chains," he said. He reached for the door, but looked back and winked at me before shutting it.

I let my head fall against the hard floor, cursing my damn body for betraying more than just my voice.

Chapter Four

The crack of dawn light through the door stumbled me awake. I groaned, remnants of pain littering my body. I'd clawed myself onto the bed during the night, but my ass still stung from Dray's smacks with his belt. The ache made it impossible to sleep any way besides on my stomach, which caused my sore breasts to protest. I longed for rest, but knew I'd find little.

Dray's steps echoed into the room, followed by the screech of the door shutting. "Time to get up. It's a full day's ride now."

Something flew near my head and landed in a heap on the bed. I shifted onto my elbows and blinked until my vision cleared.

A pile of fabric perched on the mattress. The outline of a man's white tunic and dark breeches. The scent of smoke and horses clung to the garments. Dray's clothes.

"You can come out dressed or naked. You'll find I don't care either way." The glimmer in his eye suggested he had a preference, but it wouldn't be the choice I made.

I forced myself up in bed. Dray's gaze flicked down my body, and the hungry predator I'd seen last night peered

through his eyes again. I grabbed the clothes, cheeks turning hot with embarrassment at the memories, and pressed them against my chest. They did little to conceal me, and the Reaper laughed.

He turned back to the door. “You have five minutes.” He left.

I pulled the tunic over my head quickly. It would be foolish to give the Reaper a chance to change his mind, and I had no desire to ride horseback naked. I pressed a finger to my ass cheek and flinched at the hot, sudden pain. I had no desire to ride at all.

I rolled the trousers several times at the feet, and the waist gaped loosely around me. I’d likely have to hold them in place the whole journey to Catcher’s Keep.

I swallowed. Catcher’s Keep – where the King would sanction my execution.

Dray pushed the door open, scaring me from my thoughts. He glanced at me, then scoured the room with a frown.

I followed his gaze and muffled another gasp. Where he’d bound me against the wall last night lingered holes and scrapes into the wood. Paint peeled away, revealing deep punctures into the room’s structure.

“Here, then.” Dray neared me and I forced myself not to flee from his approach. I’d spend the whole day with the man whether or not I wanted to. Keeping him content gave me the best opportunity to survive long enough to escape.

Dray pulled the leather belt from around his waist. A half smile twisted his lips, dark delight dancing across his face.

“Look familiar?” he asked.

I pressed my lips as my face burned again.

Dray pulled the breeches up and wrapped the leather belt around my waist. His hands danced over my hips as he tightened the buckle to keep the breeches in place.

He finally stepped back. “One more thing.”

The shackles on my wrists locked together, binding my hands in front of me. One of the decorative metal strands on Dray’s armor melted away and reformed into a chain in his hands. He locked the chain around my bound wrists and pulled me close to him.

I froze, half a hand span from his chest, my heart pounding in my ears. Dray tucked a finger under my chin and pushed my head up, almost gentle.

“Let’s go, then,” he whispered, before turning to the door and pulling me on the chain behind him.

The tavern door gaped open, affording me a glimpse of the other Reapers readying their mounts. The curse-bearer from last night sat on the ground with a rope fashioned around her wrists similar to mine.

Dray hesitated at the bar. He drew a satchel from beneath his cape and opened the drawstrings. A hint of gold flickered inside as he thrust his hand about.

The Orb of Oruthur.

My fingers twitched at the thought of grabbing the orb. I only needed to break it and the prophecy would be fulfilled, lifting the curse cast upon my family. I'd still meet the death penalty, as breaking a curse did not forgive the king's decree, but the others could finally live free.

I restrained myself. Snatching at the orb now would result in failure and possibly a quicker death. The longer I survived, the more likely I'd have time to escape.

Dray drew out a sealed black pouch and dropped it on the bar.

"For the room repairs," he said, and another wave of heat crawled over my face. The barkeep's mouth opened and shut, though he remained as mute as me. Dray must have caught sight of my blush, and he sent me a wink over one shoulder before pulling me out the door.

Dray directed me to a black steed, standing at shoulder height, and neighing softly at the Reaper's approach.

"Stay here." Dray draped my chain over the same post as the horse remained tied to. He gave him a soft pat and then disappeared into the cluster of other Reapers.

I sighed, relieved to be alone for a few moments.

Another sensation crawled across my skin. As unpleasant as a thousand insects scratching beneath its surface and taking turns burrowing into my flesh.

The feeling that another curse-bearer was near.

“Hi there,” a woman’s voice called behind me. I turned, and the woman from last night lifted her bound hands as much as her rope allowed to gesture a greeting at me. “This is awkward, I assume, but I’d like to give an apology for last night.” She half shrugged. “They only keep me around to find the others, you know.”

She paused, her wide eyes filled with a sprinkle of concern. I recognized the hunch in her shoulders, and the exhausted defeat on her face. She marched toward the same grave as me.

I pointed toward my shut mouth and shrugged.

“Ah, that’s right. Cursed to silence, I’d heard. Might be better that way. Seems my mouth only ever gets me in trouble with them.” She jerked her head to the Reapers. “I’ve been traveling with them for nearly a year. My name’s Zaylee, by the way.”

My eyes widened. A year? It seemed impossible they’d let any curse-bearer live that long.

Zaylee shrugged, and a strand of long, dark hair fluttered over one shoulder. “Well, I haven’t truly lived that whole time, to be fair. Cursed with one thousand deaths and all.”

I raised a brow.

“I’ve died several times, and don’t remember all of them, to be honest. They sent me to the executioner’s block and back twice now, figuring they must reach a thousand deaths soon.”

A hollow look settled over her dark gaze. Her words came out in a whisper. “It seems not.”

She turned to watch the Reapers loading bags over the horses’ backs. They packed dried foods and containers of water into the saddlebags.

“I’m sure they didn’t use to be this way.” She lowered her voice and dropped her eyes as one man walked toward us. She flicked her gaze up to follow him when he’d passed her. “The King takes their families and holds them as ransom for their work. Each trip that fails to bring a curse-bearer ends with another family member killed. It turns them hard.”

Bile climbed up my throat. I’d risked my life to save my family, but I’d never expected the Reapers to carry the same motivation. These were the king’s right-hand men. And apparently also his prisoners.

“The one they call Dray has been in service the longest,” Zaylee continued, unaware of the questions pooling in my mind and the words I longed to speak. “He’s lost all but a sister. They say his sanity slips with each fall of the King’s blade.”

I nodded, a twist of horror running through me. What he’d done to me last night certainly spoke of a man gone insane. The King’s brutality proved horrific, but I refused to give Dray any forgiveness. One man’s sin did not spell permission for another’s.

Dray draped a weighted bag over the black stallions back. He dug into his breeches and that silver knife he’d used to cut

my clothes away glistened in the sunlight. It fell into the saddlebag, which he latched with a metal buckle. Dray reached beneath the animal with a tenderness he'd not shown me last night, and secured the pack. When he stood, those dark eyes caught me, and I flinched as surely as a beast caught in a metal trap.

The Reaper smiled, a knowing expression on his face. He started toward me.

Zaylee leaned near and whispered just for my ears. "Keep your head down and your legs open, and you may survive to see the executioner's blade yet. And let's hope *you* won't survive that."

She jerked as Dray neared and studied the ground.

He barely looked at her. "Get back to Alvah, Zaylee."

She ducked her head and slipped away, as silent as wind through a barren tree. I watched her retreating form, wishing I could follow in her steps.

Dray's hand grabbed my waist. He drew the chain from the post and led me toward the saddle. The thought of the leather against my aching ass made my legs tense with dread.

"Up, then. And don't even think to reach for the blade. I know you saw it. I'd have your head before you ever touched the hilt." He lifted me in a moment, and my sore cheeks beat against the unforgiving leather. I drew a sharp breath and flinched, waiting for the sudden pain to deplete.

“Remembering last night, Elys?” Dray swung up behind me, the intimidating press of his body drawing away the pain to make room for fear. He drew his hand to my neck and tilted my head into his shoulder. The pad of his thumb rubbed against the metal collar secured there.

He laughed and dropped the collar, exchanging it for the reins in front of me. His mounting seemed to signal the other Curse Catchers to climb onto their horses, and the group rode toward the narrow road into the forest.

The steed twisted beneath us, and the remnants of pain drew up my legs. I wanted to scream as tendrils of fire ate my nerves, but I forced my face and breathing to remain steady. I didn't want the Reaper to feed on the fear he doubtlessly sought.

Another Reaper drew beside us. His long auburn hair matched the brown horse he rode on. A strange knot rested on the back of the saddle with a rope that trailed to where Zaylee walked on the other end, hands secured to the man's horse, barely matching his pace. I never expected to envy one on a long walk, but the pain in my rear with each step of the horse made me long for her position.

The man, Dray had called him Alvah, came beside us. “Will you take the lead today?”

Dray shrugged. “No, I'll watch the back. You can have the lead, or Seth, if he'd rather.”

Alvah nodded and pulled on Zaylee's rope. She trotted forward, but sent me a look over her shoulder. I caught her

mouth the words 'I'm sorry' before they disappeared into the crowd of horses.

Leaving me alone with the Reaper.

Chapter Five

Light touched the horizon's edge after a full day and night of riding. Dray lifted me from the horse to eat and piss, and even then only briefly. My legs cramped with each step, and a few moments of a soothing river I'd waded through didn't bring any relief. Soft floral scents released from the flowers as the horses trampled them, adding a lovely element to the warm day, but I couldn't enjoy them.

Instead, I noticed every motion of the Reaper's body behind me. When he breathed too hard, my heart jumped into my throat. A lift of his hand made me tense. The constant rush of adrenaline at his every move had worn me to exhaustion.

My head lulled, and my eyes drifted shut. The top of the steed didn't offer any place to rest my head. When I dozed, it fell forward, only to jerk me upright at the sudden discomfort. Then my eyelids lowered to begin the process again.

After a while, Dray's deep laugh rattled behind me, thrusting me out of my half slumber with a panicked impulse.

"Your attempts to avoid me all day have finally drained you, then?" He dropped the reins, giving his horse a free head, but the animal seemed content to lazily meander the path of the Reapers before him. Dray circled one hand over my

forehead and pressed my head into his shoulder. “You’ll not find rest here, I’m afraid.”

I feared the same. My stomach twisted, complaining of more than the meager ration of dried meat and nuts I’d consumed.

Dray ran his other hand beneath my shirt, skirting the edges of the belt he’d secured around my waist. He slipped his fingertips beneath the band. I caught his wrist with my bound hands, muscles screaming as I attempted to draw his touch from me.

He chuckled, releasing my head.

“Keep struggling, Elys.” A hardness grew more firm against my ass. “I rather enjoy it.”

Dray grabbed my wrists, and the metal bands softened at his desires. He pulled my arms behind me, not even noticing my attempts to tug them from his grasp. The chains solidified, trapping them tightly behind me.

He shifted on the seat and pressed my palm against his bulging cock.

“That’s better,” he whispered in my ear.

I straightened my spine. If he wanted any pleasure from my hands, he’d have to do it himself.

He laughed again and pulled my hair to one side, exposing my ear to his lips.

“You think me a monster,” he whispered, that warm breath hinting of flames and fire, twirling a stubborn part of me that enjoyed his touch to life. “I think you’ll find that life can make a monster out of anyone, whether or not they resist.” Dray went back to my belt and loosened the clasp, allowing the trousers to gape over my hips. “But the monster inside me has chosen you, Elys. And he’s never letting you go.”

He fluttered a light touch across my stomach and caressed the space beneath my breasts. The horse’s motion bounced them softly against his fingertips, and Dray pressed his touch harder into me.

I wished my body hated the feeling as much as my mind. And yet, I grew damp at even that contact.

Dray growled, low and hungry. “You want the monster, too.”

I shook my head. His stubbled chin brushed against my temple. Soft sensations tingled down my skin.

“I know you do.” He rubbed his cock against my hands. He moved to cup my breasts, trapping each budding nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “I’ll make sure I’m the only monster you’ll ever want, Elys.”

His touch drew away the aches and pains of my muscles. An unbeckoned moan wanted to slip through my lips, silenced by the curse cast over me. As Dray teased me more and more, I found my hips rocking to his rhythm, grinding me tighter against him.

My head fell back unwillingly. The exhaustion and building crests of pleasure created a struggle between wants and needs. I wasn't sure which was which anymore, as the Reaper's firm grip on my breasts bordered firm and painful.

His cape fell over his shoulder, and my hair caught in the strands of the clasps along his satchel. At the sharp tug against my scalp, a few tendrils of logic escaped between Dray's relentless kneading.

He'd stuffed the orb into his satchel.

I twisted again, trying to ignore each caress that drew more heat from my core. I leaned into the man, soliciting another throaty noise from him, playing my part for a moment.

The hard, round outline of the orb poked into my back.

My heart thumped louder, turning white noise through my ears. Perhaps if I could draw the satchel away from the man, I'd have a moment to claim – and break – the cursed orb. Plans wound through my mind. Several things existed that could easily persuade men to remove their clothes. Dray seemed particularly fond of one – me.

He stopped pinching my nipples and slipped one hand between my breasts, circling my throat with a tighter grip. The filaments of my plans dissipated as he tightened his fingers into my neck.

“Are you thinking of something else, Elys?” Dray brushed his lips over my jaw. His other hand dipped below the

breeches and sought my clit. He caressed the length of my sensitive bud and tightened his hand on my throat.

I gasped for air, even as my hips rocked into his fingers. Wordlessly, he drew circles over me, withholding oxygen in exchange for more and more pleasure.

Black dots danced over my vision. My hand above his cock twisted, searching for anything that may aid my fruitless attempt to breathe again.

Dray loosened his grip, and air flooded into my lungs. I drew ragged breaths, and the Reaper's tease at my core never ceased.

"You forget your place," he said. "I give you everything. The last food your mouth will ever taste. Each roll of pleasure through your body. The air in your lungs. Next time you think of another while I touch you, remember you'll have to beg for your next breath."

Anger popped inside my chest. He didn't own me, as much as the chains around my wrists suggested otherwise. The King ordered my death, but he didn't control my body before then.

I thrashed in Dray's arms and tried to draw my knees up. My hair whipped over his face, but the Reaper only laughed at me.

He shifted our bodies forward, trapping my weight on my neck in his hands. The angle kept my legs spread wide and my clit atop his fingers. He squeezed my neck again, eliciting that

mixture of fear and pleasure that only heightened the growing need between my legs.

“Never try to close your legs to me. All you have is mine.”

Dray sped his touch against my clit, and any remaining fight slipped away. The anger still coiled inside me, but the bindings on my wrists and his control over my body kept it restrained, impossible to exercise.

He squeezed away my air until my head felt like bursting, then relaxed his grip, over and over again, while the pleasure at my center stretched higher and higher. Eventually, all thoughts faded, and I existed only in a war between surviving and coming.

The crest collapsed, spiraling waves of pleasure through my body, rocking me even harder into the Reaper. He didn't loosen his grip, depriving me of air even as he awarded me the greatest enjoyment.

I wanted to curse myself for liking his touch. But as his merciless fingers continued to rub me, and another burst of fiery orgasm broke through my body, I couldn't form the thoughts.

My body surrendered to his tight embrace. The light faded from my eyes.

Dray relaxed his grip, but unconsciousness already pulled me under. He tenderly leaned my head against his shoulder. The warmth of his palm on my forehead became the last touch I felt as sleep summoned me.

I'll make sure I'm the only monster you'll ever want, Elys.

I feared he may be right.

Chapter Six

Night had settled again for several hours before we finally reached the Keep. Great stone walls towered over us as we neared the settlement. Lanterns flickered along the top, and shadows danced as guards paced overhead. The floral aromas faded, replaced by the sharp scent of mud, horses, and sweat.

Shouts spread, and a gate opened to allow us entrance between the barricades. A courtyard peeked inside, exposing barren dirt ground and racks of weapons pressed along one side.

The Curse Catchers returned the shouts with whoops of victory. We funneled through the gate, no longer at the back of the crowd, but pressed in the middle with the others. Some men dismounted and stableboys took the horses through a different exit at the rear of the fortress.

I studied the walls while we rode. Only two gates in or out, heavily watched by several guards, and controlled from somewhere inside the walls. Escape would prove difficult, assuming I'd even get free of these shackles and the man who watched me.

In the far back, a rounded section of the fortress bubbled outward. A golden throne perched at the top to stare down at

the courtyard. I tracked the throne's viewpoint.

The center of the half circle held a thick chunk of wood with a dip in the center. Long cuts in the material marked several bites of a blade.

Bile crept up my stomach. The executioner's block. My final resting place.

Dray turned to where I looked. He stiffened at the sight, but said nothing.

The softened tread of horse hooves against dirt sounded beside us. Alvah trotted up, Zaylee's rope still fixed to his mount. Dirt and grime covered her flushed face. She'd walked the entire trip.

"Not this way." Dray glanced at the woman attached to the horse. "She's going to Elemur."

Zaylee stiffened at the word, and Alvah's brow creased. "The torture wing again?"

"They brought in an interrogator from over the Pass. A lie-sifter this time," Dray said.

Lie Sifters were rare, able to tell the difference between a truth or an untruth. Rumors said they could draw information from one's lips whether or not they wanted to give it.

Alvah shrugged and shifted his horse toward the eastern wing of the Keep. "I'm not sure she knows anything more than she's already said."

"That's for them to decide."

Dray swung us around the other way. This time, Zaylee didn't look back at me.

The silence cloaked over me as the sense of dread thickened. I doubted my accommodations would be as pleasant as they'd been at the tavern. The castle barely stretched three days' journey from the Keep, and the King likely headed this way already. I expected my stay to be short and miserable.

Dray's solid form moved behind me. He seemed invested in whatever pleasures my body provided for him. I bit my lip. Undeniably, I found him attractive as well. I didn't dare hope he would become my salvation, though. He'd sent many to their deaths before, and would do it again, especially to protect the little family Zaylee said he had left.

"Here." Dray stopped at an arched opening into the Keep's stone wall and slipped from the saddle. A stableboy ducked his head and held out his hands for the reins. Dray passed him the leather ropes, then tugged me from the horse.

"You first," he said, and gestured into the gaping darkness.

My feet felt glued to the ground. Instincts told me I didn't wish to enter this place, much less spend any significant time there. A musty scent of mold and aging paper mixed with a putrid odor, which I feared may be excrement.

Dray didn't seem eager either. He shifted from foot to foot, and didn't demand my obedience. In fact, the crease between his brows and the way his pressed lips turned white made me

wonder if he wanted to confine me at all, at least with something besides his body.

“Go on, then.” He finally set a hand against the back of my neck and drew me into the cavern.

The coolness from outside settled low in the hollowed space in the interior of the keep. Lines of arched iron gates marking individual cells cascaded down the hall, lit by an occasional torch. I shivered and tried to hold my breath as the smell grew steadily worse.

A figure waited near the end of the hallway. Soft curves spelled a feminine shape, with tangled curls draping to the center of her back.

Dray tensed, his hand turning to stone against my neck. Discomfort at his hard touch tightened my shoulders, but I didn't dare speak. The grip gave away his sudden bout of anger.

“What are you doing here?” Dray's words sent a physical stab into my chest, despite being directed at the stranger in the hall.

She turned. The torchlight caught her face, illuminating sharp features. High brows framed large, dark eyes, and her form appeared healthy and toned.

I sucked in a gasp. She looked like a mirror image to the man pushing me toward the cells. Dray's sister.

Her gaze dropped from Dray's face to me, and her nose wrinkled. “Is this your newest victim coming to await her

execution?”

He didn't answer. “How did you know I would be down here?”

“Where else would the king's servant store his prize?”

“Answer me Rylla,” Dray's tone left little room for argument.

Rylla rolled her eyes, but wrapped her arms around herself. “The guard at the gate said you'd be back from a mission soon. I knew where to go. I've been here before, remember?”

The words carried a history I didn't know. They fell between Rylla and Dray with an imaginary thud.

“Why are you here at all?” Dray's voice softened. A vibration trailed down his hand and through my body, as though he already knew the answer and dreaded what she may say.

“Why else?” She bit. “The King summoned me. He has to make sure you see how short your lead is now and then. A personal invitation to the latest execution, his messenger said. I half expected it to be my own.”

Silence. She looked back at me. “Though I see my life is again exchanged for another, dear brother.”

Dray pushed me forward roughly. He led me past Rylla, who barely stepped out of the way. Metal chimed when he jerked the iron gate open and tossed me into the cell. I staggered, my arms still trapped behind my back.

He shut the gate and leaned against it. For a moment, a flash of vulnerability crossed his face. An ocean rolled through those green eyes – worry, doubt, concern. Sympathy swelled unbeckoned in my heart as he appeared almost human.

The look faded, and Dray's face hardened again. He glanced at me, and the chains holding my wrist behind me melted away, leaving me free, but still wearing the silver shackles. He turned back to Rylla.

“You know why I have to do this. It isn't a choice.”

She didn't give him any indication of sympathy. “There are other options. Underground smugglers to get these people out of the kingdom, rumors of an uprising.”

“You speak a traitor's words.”

She stuck her chin out. “Or a hero's.”

“I've tried it your way before, Rylla, or do you forget?” He stepped toward his sister. She shrank at his approach, though she didn't back away from him. “Surely even you cannot forget our father's head falling from the block, or mother's screams as they pushed her down beside his bleeding body. The King's mercy kept you alive, sister, nothing more. Next time you ask this of me, imagine your children's faces as they watch their mother die, knowing they'll soon find their turn.”

Rylla dropped her gaze. Her chest rose and fell, and the hiss of her breath echoed through the chamber.

“Leave the revolution to others.” Dray held out his arm as a knight would offer a lady. “I've lost enough already.”

Rylla's hand shook, but she perched it on Dray's elbow. He led her back the way we'd come, and I scrambled to the bars to watch with a thousand questions I couldn't ask burning my lips.

Rylla turned back and caught my eyes. She shook her head in a universal *I'm sorry* signal. They quickly faded from view.

I looked around the meager cell. A makeshift cot with a threadbare blanket. An iron bucket settled in one corner. No food, no water, no windows. I sank against the cot and closed my eyes, pretending the soft clatter against the stones was rain from outside, and not the tiny scratching of rats' feet.

I couldn't bring myself to despair yet. I knew Dray would be back for me. That final glance told me as much. And when he came, I'd be ready to steal my orb and finally break this damn curse.

Chapter Seven

The constant torchlight refused to identify daytime from the night, but it hadn't felt long before the scratch of familiar footsteps on stone floors woke me from my light slumber. I shot up in the cot and scrambled to my feet.

I knew why he came, and my treacherous body already hummed in anticipation. This time, though, I had a different plan.

I needed Dray to remove the satchel and give me time to find the orb. Bouncing from town to town avoiding the Curse Catchers gave me plenty of experience with men. They may not understand the most witty phrases, but they all understood what a naked woman wanted.

And their clothes tended to quickly follow.

My heart pounded as his steps grew near. A lot hinged on Dray's reaction to my approach. If he became suspicious or arrived angry, my plan may dissolve immediately.

His shadow covered the torch, then he appeared in front of my cell and paused. He looked me up and down, and his brow creased at whatever he saw on my face.

"I expected to have to wake you," he said.

I forced a slow smile over my lips. I let my fingers dance along the edge of the borrowed tunic, and slowly drew the hem up my stomach.

Warmth filled my core. I'd expected this to be a grueling task of necessity to break the curse. Surprised highlighted my cheeks as I realized my body longed for him.

I pulled the tunic over my head. Dray's veiled gaze roamed over my flesh, hungrily consuming the view of my exposed breasts.

He ran one hand over his mouth. "Seduction will not save you from the King's decree."

I dropped my head, feigning embarrassment. I pulled the shirt against my chest, and turned my back, hiding from the Reaper's view. He needed to think he'd caught my scheme, and not suspect I planned another.

The iron gate shrieked open, as I hoped it would. I fought to hide my smug smile.

Dray caught my arms. He pried them from my chest and squeezed my wrists until I dropped the shirt.

"Do not hide yourself from me," he said. His smokey smell wrapped around me.

The metal on his armor turned fluid. A flash of adrenaline seeped into my veins. I needed my hands to remain free, which would be impossible if he bound me.

I turned in his embrace and pressed my breasts against him. His eyebrows raised, but the Reaper said nothing. I

loosened the belt and let the borrowed breeches slip to the ground. Modesty didn't have space between us anymore.

The air slipped over my nude body. He hadn't left me any undergarments to worry about. I tried to convince myself this plan benefited my ability to break the curse, but the lower part of my core tried to say otherwise.

Dray wrapped his hand in my hair and pulled my head back. I didn't fight his hold as he searched my gaze. I tried to paint desire across my face. It came more easily than I cared to admit.

He brushed one finger over my lips. "I'm sure this ease carries an ulterior motive. And yet, I will play through with your plan, Elys."

He released me to tug at the black cape, and it fell from the fixture on his armor. The brown satchel slung over one shoulder, the thick orb protruding a roundness from one side. My heart thundered in my ears, but I drew a breath to urge it to slow. I needed to pick the perfect time to reach for the orb.

Dray drew the satchel over his head and let it drop on top of the cape. He reached for the armor, but I stilled his grip.

Instead, I ran my hands over the leather plates and pulled away the fastenings on the top. Dray's chest plate fell, and his black tunic followed. He let me undo the buttons on his breeches before waving my hands away and pushing them off himself.

My thoughts danced between the satchel on the ground and the glorious man in front of me. Without the pressure of a quick coupling, I took in the pleasantness of his form. Powerful muscles outline his figure, hinting at the strength I'd felt in his grasp. Budded skin perched along scars turned pink with age. His jaw sharpened into full lips, hugged by a rough line of stubble.

He pulled me near with a new gentleness to his touch. His fingers caressed my skin as soft as a groom to a bride. Tingles caught through my body and built at my sex. He felt the same, evidenced by the hard press of his cock on my stomach.

“Elys,” he groaned into my hair.

I closed my eyes. Dray's light touches grew deeper, and he massaged my shoulders and upper back, washing away the knots from yesterday's ride. I would have moaned, if I could have.

I opened my eyes again and glanced at the satchel laying on the floor beside us. Dray looked only at me.

He caught my breast with one hand, but I put my palm against his wrist.

His eyes darkened and his mouth opened, but I didn't give him an opportunity to turn angry. I dropped to my knees before him and stroked the length of his cock with my fingertip.

The Reaper shivered, and his head fell back. Good. I wrapped my hand over him and gave him a firmer stroke,

eliciting a grumble from his chest. He gave no indication of looking my way, and I intended to keep his attention elsewhere for as long as possible.

My other hand reached for the satchel. I caught my breath, but my fingertips barely touched the fabric strap.

“Don’t stop,” Dray said. I snatched my hand back just before he returned his gaze to me.

I smiled. I didn’t plan to stop until I had the orb in my grasp.

“Suck it,” he said.

I froze and bit my lip. That hadn’t been in my plans, but the mere suggestion caused my mouth to water in anticipation.

Dray secured his hand around the back of my head and drew me near him. I parted my lips and took him inside my mouth. For a moment, his size caught me unprepared. He pushed against the back of my tongue and I choked at the feel.

“Breathe,” he said, watching me with a hawk’s expression. Like a rabbit on the strike-path, I needed to evade his sharp gaze. “Through your nose.”

I sucked in air, and the choking sensation faded. He moved his hips back, then pulsed deeper into my mouth. I found the rhythm and added suction. Dray’s eyes rolled back, giving me another opportunity to reach for the orb.

My fingers brushed the cool material again. I struggled to keep the Reaper in my mouth, and ignore the twists of pleasure that his cock inside me drew from my core as I

reached for the satchel. The very tips of my fingers caught the strap, and I eased it a hand spread closer.

“More,” Dray didn’t drop his head to look down again, though my pulse paused in my throat. “Suck me harder.”

Warm drool spilled around him, slipping down my chin. The satchel was finally close enough to grab the strap in one hand, but the other rested on Dray’s hip to steady myself as he continued to thrust into me.

A mix of desire and panic bit through me. My traitorous body turned eager the longer Dray kept his cock in my mouth, but long settled determination to break this curse beat away the building need.

I needed two hands to open the drawstring of the bag. I calculated the time it would take to open the satchel, find the orb, and break it before Dray stopped me.

There was only one way to try.

I pushed my head against his hand and broke the seal from his cock. Before the Reaper had time to restrain me, I flung myself away from him. My stomach landed on the hard stone floor, with the satchel trapped between.

An eerie growl escaped behind me. I ignored the hot tide of rage simmering from the Reaper’s place and pried the bag’s strings open.

An unyielding hand grabbed my ankle, sending shockwaves of pain through me. I gasped, but continued fumbling inside the bag.

My hand brushed a solid, round ball.

I drew the orb from the satchel, and the torchlight caught its molten middle. The gold inside seemed to stretch and fold as though alive, trying to hypnotize me with its very essence.

“So this was your plot, then?” Dray pulled my ankle, dragging me roughly across the floor. I bit my lip as sharp stones stabbed my exposed breasts. “Distract me to fetch your stolen orb? You’ll have to tell me if your prize was worth it, if you survive your punishment, that is.”

Yes, yes, it was.

I refused to be this close and lose my opportunity at the last moment.

Dray’s hand dug into the top of my thigh, holding me in place. His body heat beat against me as he reached for the orb.

I smashed it into the stones. Subtle cracks appeared along the glass surface. Dray’s hand inched closer, and I raised the orb and swung it down again.

A thousand crystalline pieces scattered across the cell floor. Ripples of gold burned bright for a moment, then faded as whatever magic the orb once held slipped back into the night.

A raw, consuming pain burned inside my chest and clawed its way to my throat. Worse than the leather belt against my ass, the fire devoured everything inside me as it grew higher and higher, filling my mouth with the taste of ash.

I drew a breath, and a sharp rattle accompanied the inhale.

A noise – from my throat.

Dray's hand pressed between my shoulder blades and pinned me to the floor like a pig before slaughter.

“Dray–” my words froze in the midst of my begging. I hadn't heard my voice since childhood. It sounded rough, dry, and the vibration in my throat tickled. “Dray, don't -”

Dray covered my mouth with one large palm, halting the first words I'd spoken in over a decade. He leaned down and put his lips against my ear.

“I promised my name would be the first word out of your mouth,” he said. “Now to make you scream it.”

Chapter Eight

The metal from Dray's discarded armor appeared to glow as it liquified and meandered toward me. I squirmed to avoid its touch as it neared, but Dray's weight on my back and his hand on my face held me tight. The silver drew up my body and wrapped it in thin filaments, holding me to Dray's will.

A dark anticipation ignited in my core. An archaic part of me became eager for whatever the Reaper planned to do. Even as I tried to get free from the bonds, my sex warmed in eagerness.

One band of metal slipped under Dray's hand on my mouth and solidified into a gag, pressing my lips closed. The Reaper released me and I thrashed my head to attempt to dislodge it. I'd risked everything to get my voice back, only for him to silence me moments later.

"Tsk, tsk." The bonds reached into the floor, anchoring me on my tummy before Dray. He slapped my exposed ass with a sharp sting. "I'll take the gag off later. Wouldn't want you to say anything that might get you into more trouble."

He moved behind me, and his hands each grabbed one of my ankles. His fingers pushed deep enough into my skin to

send groans up my legs. The metal worked around his orders, softening and hardening again as he drew my legs open wide.

I tried to shift enough to look at him. His wicked gaze caught the movement, and a glint ran through his eyes.

“No, Elys. I don’t think you deserve to look this time.”

The collar around my neck grew silver tendrils that buried into the floor. I struggled against the tightening force, but his power pulled my head to the ground, anyway.

Dray ran his hands over my back, gently, sending chills down my spine and fear of what would come next. He grabbed my shoulders and pulled me backward, loosening the metal to allow me to sit on my knees.

The silver hardened again. My face and outstretched arms pressed against the floor, while my ass and stomach hovered in front of the Reaper. My cheeks burned at the inappropriate position, but the bonds didn’t allow an inch of movement.

Dray ran his hand down my crack, highlighting a trail toward my center. He slipped a finger inside of me and twisted it to massage all the sensitive places. I shook as he went deeper and the pressure turned my core wet.

Dray added a second finger and spread them. He chuckled as I bucked at the sudden fullness and his chains locked me in place. He drew them out, then back in, again and again until my head swum with unfulfilled expectation.

He stopped, catching his two fingers deep inside me. “I think you need more, Elys.”

I wanted to shake my head. The sensations already felt too tender, too sensitive.

Silver coils danced around my breasts. They formed into wicked points that dug into my nipples. The gag over my mouth smothered the scream at the sharp pain. The metal continued spreading into dainty chains descending from the trapped peaks until a small silver ball hung from each chain as well.

“How’s that?” His voice barely registered in my mind as he thrust his fingers in again, driving my body forward with the momentum. The balls swung back, then forward, dragging the prongs in each nipple along with them. Dray increased his pace, torturing me both inside and out, until the pinching suddenly turned to a warmer, almost pleasant feeling. The clamps still hurt, but the pain added to the pleasure, instead of drawing me away from it.

He drew out, leaving me struggling to breathe through my nose and trying not to move as the enjoyment faded again.

“To your elbows, Elys.”

I hesitated as my mind struggled to comprehend his order.

“Move onto your elbows, now.”

I shifted and found the silver had softened at his words. I dragged my arms up until I perched on all fours with my ass in the air and my clamped breasts dangling. The metal solidified again.

Another cold metal brushed over my crack. I recognized it as a similar rod he'd thrust inside me our first night together. More moisture built inside me as I anticipated its entrance.

Instead, he pressed it against my asshole.

I froze, caught between wanting to attempt escape and not wanting to injure myself further.

He pushed a narrow tip into the hole, and something slick guided the plug into me. A burning sensation followed from my most secret place, and a cry escaped around the gag.

Dray proved relentless. He pushed the plug in deeper until a tight, full feeling consumed me. I felt too exposed, too conquered, unable to ever return to who I was.

“That’s all of it,” he said. “That’s good. I’m going to spank you now, so you’ll remember what defying me earns you.”

I tensed while he shifted through my clothes for the belt. My skin still felt raw from the last beating, and my asshole was already burning.

The smack of the belt against my flesh bucked me forward. The plug remained buried tight and the silver balls dug the prongs into my nipples as they swung. I wanted to scream, but only a muffled huff of air escaped the gag.

Dray hit me again and again. My vision turned red, then black as I fought to remember to breathe. When I thought I’d found the edge of unconsciousness, the clack of the belt fell back to the stone floor.

His heat wafted that fire smell over me as he crouched behind me. The softer tip of his cock probed my entrance and then thrust inside. The fullness of him and the rod pulled more struggles from my tiring body.

Dray reached down and rubbed my clit. He set a fast, steady rhythm with his fingers against me, hammering into me in sync.

The draw of pain turned suddenly softer. A mounting wave stretched from my core.

“I think you’re ready now,” Dray said, but I’d stopped processing logic at all.

The metal in my mouth fell to a molten puddle on the ground.

His fingers hesitated a moment.

“Don’t stop,” I said, begged, pleaded.

He laughed. “Tell me who you belong to.”

“You, you,” I gasped. He restarted his motion, flicking my most sensitive place as he filled me completely and his chains teased at my nipples in unending pressure.

“I need better than that, Elys.” He turned the caress faster, bringing me to a heightened orgasm that flooded from my core to the tips of my bound fingers.

“Dray!” His name tore from my mouth. “Dray, don’t stop, don’t stop!”

He headed my words with a soft chuckle. The Reaper teased more and more pleasure from my clit, and my head swam farther and farther from logic and reality. I only knew that I needed him, and I so desperately wanted him.

Finally, I sagged in the chains. Any hint of pleasure in my body had been spent.

Dray withdrew from me and all the coiled metal dropped too. I sagged onto the ground, finally free, and finally satisfied.

Dray grabbed my forearms and pulled me to my knees. He caught a fistful of my hair and pulled my head back. A smile hugged his lips.

“Let’s finish this how you started it, then.”

He pushed his thumb into my mouth to draw it open. I didn’t resist as he thrust his pulsing cock into me and pushed it against the back of my tongue. He didn’t give me a chance to draw away. He took my mouth with a punishing rhythm that trapped the air in my lungs and spilt hot drool across my naked breasts.

He caught my head as he came, forcing my mouth around his cock while my throat worked down his cum.

With a shaking hand, he drew my head away and let me go. I sagged to the ground and caught my breath.

Dray dropped beside me, curled on his side toward me. He reached out. I scooted toward him until my back pressed into

the hollow space of his front, the space made just for me. He gently brushed strands of hair from my face.

“How can I take you to the butcher’s block, Elys, when I can’t even let you go tonight?”

I had words I’d ached to say for years, but exhaustion and satisfaction called me to sleep. If they’d waited so long, another night wouldn’t hurt.

Chapter Nine

The cotton blankets no longer kept me warm. Dray brought as many as he deemed safe without the other Reapers suggesting he held a weakness toward me, but the layers did little to secure my comfort now.

The king would arrive today.

An undercurrent of anticipation buzzed all the way through the cells to my lowly place near the end. Other prisoners slowly filled the cell block for the past two days and rumors of the King's imminent arrival brushed down the chain.

Servants bounced around, sloshing soapy water across the stones in case the king wished to see the cells himself, which I'd heard he had never done. Prisoners set waste buckets outside the door and almost clean ones replace the filth – mine included.

I only felt the icy trickle of death coming closer. I wrapped the blankets tighter around myself and tried not to shake in the chill.

Heavy footsteps sounded down the hall, and the prisoners halted their whispers. They dreaded Dray's arrival down the cellblock, though he'd done nothing to them. I shot from the

cot, discarding the blankets in a pile beside the meager frame, and sprinted to the gate.

“Dray,” I said when he approached. My voice still scratched at my throat with an uncomfortable tickle, but it became less jarring every day.

I doubted he brought good news, but part of me hoped. Perhaps the King perished on his way to the Keep, or had a sudden change of heart at the fate of the curse-bearers. Either way, seeing Dray filled me with a sense of foreboding and longing, which I couldn't quite wrap my mind around.

His face darkened when he saw me, and a wicked half smile tugged at his lips. It mirrored the one I'd seen the times we'd bedded together, but a more sinister flicker danced behind it.

A strike of fear ran through my heart at the expression. I drew away from the bars. Though I didn't know Dray's purpose for today's visit, not even during the most harsh of punishments had he looked at me that way.

“Are you eager to see me, curse-bearer?” The coldness in his tone rippled over my skin like the first frost melt in springtime, just before the second ice returned.

Being mute for so many years instilled unique benefits. I rolled my tongue as I thought through what to say next. I couldn't read the lines of his body the way I had just yesterday. I thought we'd ignited a spark between us – fragile, yes – but able to become an inferno in the future.

“Is there a reason I should not be?” I asked. Having a voice offered more issues than I expected, such as the quiver in my words that betrayed the apprehension coiling in my chest.

Dray laughed, and the sound slipped across my skin like a serpent over cowering prey. This was not the Reaper that called pleasure to my body, whether or not I wanted it. This was the Reaper of the legends, as likely to end my life as to draw his next breath.

The iron gate swung open, and Dray stalked into the cell. A wash of ominous tension followed his steps, and white teeth poked from that half smile. I retreated until my back pressed against the wall.

“I think you’ve grown too accustomed to what you wanted me to be to you.” Dray eliminated the space between us. His great form towered over me. The smoke and fire that previously sprang my nerves to life suddenly smelled like a funeral pyre. “And I’m here to show you what I’ve really been this whole time.”

He grabbed my throat and pulled until my tiptoes scraped against the floor. I circled his wrist with both of my hands, but it offered little perch for my grip. I hovered in his mercy, which seemed to grow thin.

A sound clattered outside, followed by a feminine chirp. From the corner of my eyes, a servant dropped a metal bucket when she saw Dray and then pressed her hands together as she backed away from the sight.

“Damn it, servant,” Dray spat.

“I-I’m sorry,” the woman sputtered, staring hard at the ground. “I’ll come back. I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

“No,” Dray yelled before she could leave. “Clean it now. The condition must be pristine for the king’s arrival.” He swung his gaze back to me. “You’re not interrupting anything.”

He circled his grip harder and smiled as I gasped for breath. “I’m going out on a new mission tonight.”

I forced air through my throat. “You’re leaving?”

“That’s right. More curse-bearers to screw and then dispose of.” Dray ran a finger over my cheek. “Did you think you were special? Something more than a toy to play with until I grew bored?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. Tears wanted to swell in my eyes, but I forced them back. I had, for a day or so, thought the Reaper cared for me, as well as he could at least. After my father’s affair cursed the family, I’d only sought men for comfort or to use them to my advantage. Dray craved me for nothing more than being myself.

Or so I’d thought.

My chest tightened, and not from his grip limiting my oxygen.

“I just wanted to give you a parting gift before that pretty head detaches from your neck.” Dray released his hand and I fell onto my heels. He pushed one hand into my shoulder to prevent me from collapsing to the ground.

“Look at me, Elys,” he said, as though the fragile pieces of the world I’d constructed these few nights weren’t tumbling into shatters around me.

I looked at him. His green eyes burned a hole in my soul.

Dray smacked me across the face. Hot pain, like shards of glass burying into my skin, wound over my cheek. I staggered, and the Reaper let me fall this time.

“A way to remember me, and so even when your head falls to the ground, everyone will know you were mine.”

Dray exited the cell and locked the gate behind me. He sneered at the servant, who backed even farther away, wet rags dripping from her hands.

“Move faster,” Dray said. “The King will be here any time.” He gave a dark chuckle and retreated down the hall.

My arms shook, and I pressed a hand into the fire simmering on my cheek. I drew it back as the touch made the ache more.

The silver around my wrists and at my throat suddenly grew warm. The bands slipped off as the metal turned molten, then liquified, and exited the cell to follow their master’s call.

I’d never felt more naked. Without Dray’s silver around me, I knew he’d spoken the truth. Any indication of care, even in his own twisted way, had always been a lie. He’d used me, then threw me out as easily as the waste bucket I’d cast aside this morning.

Sobs burned the inside of my chest, and I had no reason to hold them back. Tears finally poured over my face, cooling the heat on my cheek, and the noises escaping my mouth with each cry sounded less than human.

Louder clacking exploded farther down the cells. The servant girl stopped her moping and ducked her head, watching with a veiled peek beneath her hair.

I shuttered with deep gasps, but forced my way to the gate. The angle made it difficult to see that far down, but the sounds came through more clearly.

Several voices shouted and teased at the first few prisoners in the block. The man's pleas filtered toward me, along with a groan of iron hinges filing open. The pleading turned to screams, and then the voices faded, but the piercing shouts continued from the courtyard outside.

Silence stretched for a moment, then the whispers resumed.

"What was that?" I asked the servant girl in a hushed tone. Fear cast a new darkness through the place.

She eyed me, glancing down the hall once more, likely to check if it was safe to talk. "The Reapers took the first prisoner to the King. The executions have begun."

Chapter Ten

At sunset, I still breathed. The Curse Catchers came again and again and dragged screaming people from their cells, bound for the butcher's block. Each time the metal gate smashed open, another layer of fear and dread fell over me. Continuing that way proved exhausting, and I curled on the thin cot. I'd cast aside all the blankets Dray had given me. They'd been nothing but a rouse and another game for him.

My face still burned from his slap, though the remnants of my pride hurt worse. Dray's palm would still mar my face when they tossed my body into whatever pit they dug for us. Not even in death could I escape him.

Soft steps came from the corridor. I relaxed. The Curse Catchers sounded like a parade of horses whenever they entered, and the milder sound could not be them.

The servant girl from earlier appeared. She carried an empty bucket.

"Bucket change," she said.

I dragged myself from the bed and heaved my soiled bucket from the corner. Regular clean buckets proved an unexpected benefit of the king's visit. One section of the gate

gaped wider than the rest. I pushed the bucket through the space and she grabbed it from the other side.

She slipped the new bucket through and I caught the handle.

She didn't let go.

I froze, and my brow creased. I tugged on the handle, but she didn't remove her gaze.

"Bucket change," she said again.

"What?" I asked.

The girl shook her head and pressed a finger to her lips. She glanced down, then back at me. I followed her gaze.

A bundle of fabric nestled in the depths of the new bucket she pressed through the gate. I caught her eye, nodded, and she released her side of the handle.

I drew out the fabric, and they unraveled into dark clothing. A simple gray dress with a white apron and flat black shoes. The same outfit the servant wore now.

She held up a rusting key.

"Be quicker about it now," she snapped. "I don't have all day."

Confusion bit at me, but I recognized this as a moment of escape and planned to seize it. I drew my clothes off – the final things Dray had given me – and replaced them with the servant's attire. When the apron finally tied, she plunged the key into the lock and opened it slowly to avoid any sound.

She stepped into the cell and held the gate so I could leave.

Disbelief slipped into my mind. Could this be some kind of trap? Even if it was, I faced death either way. Better to discover what would happen next than sit here like a trapped rat.

I paused beside her on my way out. I forced my words to a bare whisper. “Won’t they take you in my place?”

She shook her head. “I have someone who would not let me be caught. I’ll be free from here before morning.” She jerked her head toward the door and raised her voice. “Bout damn time. You think you’re the only one on this block or something?”

I gave her a half smile and slipped from the cell. She eased the door into the lock and gestured at the bucket beside me. I dragged it up and heaved it carefully to my side.

She wrapped her hands around the bars and peeked through. “Follow the others. They’ll take you where you need to go.”

I turned down the hall, ducking my head in case any prisoners looked at the servant for too long and recognized a change from her face. I expected a shout to follow me, for the guards to appear and drag me back to my cell, but I walked through the arched pathway into the night’s air.

I drew a breath, realizing how tainted the stale air of the cells had been. Sweet scents invigorated my motivation, even

as they mixed with the sharper smells of horse dung and wet dirt.

The bucket shifted with my weight. I must look foolish standing in the courtyard, staring at the stars. I glanced around, searching for the others the servant had mentioned.

A trail of similarly dressed women stumbled from other wings of the castles, lugging their own burdens. Walking only by the light of the boom, they fell into a line as they crossed the courtyard toward an opened gate. I hurried to the trail, and stepped into their pace at the end, still ducking my face from the guards.

The executioner's block stood to my right as I followed the women, but I refused to glance that way. I knew it would be painted in blood from those killed today. If this escape turned unsuccessful, I did not wish for a preview to my fate.

We passed through the gate. As the stone maw swallowed me from the courtyard and spit me into the freedom of the wilderness, I wondered if I dreamt this escape. But the press of air against my skin and the rancid odor from my haul reassured I really was almost free.

Someone set a hand on my arm. My heart pounded in my chest.

“We've moved the waste latrine.” A familiar voice said. I risked exposing my face to glance up at the woman beside me. Rylla's sharp features gave me a half smile and gestured into the woods. “Come this way, I'll show you.”

She wore the same uniform as me. With her hair wound tight against her head, she looked even more like Dray, undeniably a blood relation. I looked away from her face, pain at Dray's last words still sharp as knives into my gut.

Rylla began forward and didn't look back. I bit my lip. Trusting her would be dangerous, but slipping alone into the woods almost guaranteed the Curse Catchers would find me before morning. And Dray was the last person I ever wanted to see again.

I followed her into the darkness.

"How did you plan this?" I asked once we'd gained enough distance from the other women.

Rylla tensed, as though surprised I'd spoken at all. I couldn't blame her. My own voice still shocked me sometimes.

"There's another curse-bearer in the Keep named Zaylee," Rylla said. "She worked with an uprising group in the neighboring kingdom of Mytatyo, and has some contacts within the King's guard."

"I met her briefly," I said. "They sent her to the torture wing."

Rylla nodded. "Elemur, yes. Awful place. But Zaylee's been there before and they haven't cracked her yet. Her information will be good. Let's chuck these nasty buckets now, or they'll be able to follow us by stench alone."

Rylla led us along the riverbank. The trees blocked much of the moonlight and I lost my footing a time or two. The walk revealed how exhausted I felt. A full day and more on horseback, plus Dray's rigorous coupling, made parts of my body ache that I rarely felt.

A longing beat through me at the memories. He'd promised to be everything I needed and had fulfilled his end of the vow. Any man I slept with from now on would pale compared to the pleasure Dray had brought me.

I wondered if it would even be worth it.

Branches scratched at my exposed limbs. Every snapping twig made my heart thump louder. Anticipation became apprehension as we continued to walk through the damp trail without a sign of stopping. Rylla seemed content to lead me in silence.

I opened my mouth, prepared to ask how much farther. Movement caught in the trees, stealing the question from my mouth as a figure sharpened into view.

My legs weakened, and the pounding in my chest hesitated. I'd never forget the shape of that man atop that horse, where he'd brought me to orgasm over and over and promised to be the only monster I ever needed.

The truth of those promises hurt almost as much as the stinging across my face.

Dray turned, letting the moonlight settle across his features. Hot and cold slipped through my chest, twisting

inside me as an uncomfortable toll for these barest moments of freedom.

He studied me, but neither of us spoke.

“Are you here to take me back?” I asked. Pain at what he may answer almost tightened my throat beyond speaking, but I forced the words out. I hadn’t worked so hard to break the damn curse, only to remain silenced by myself.

Dray stiffened. “Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore,” I whispered.

The Reaper dropped from his horse. He stalked toward me, and I longed to move back, but I remembered Rylla’s stubborn stance in the cellblock. I ground my feet into the dirt and raised my chin high.

Dray laughed, low and rich. He paused before me and ran a finger down my neck.

“Turns out I couldn’t see this head fall from your body after all.” He brushed his thumb in the corner of my mouth. “Not when I have so much left to do to it.”

A chill slipped down my spine, dipping into a growing fire set between my legs. Every ache and pain called for the Reaper in front of me, the one that both took my life and saved it.

“He organized the whole escape.” Rylla stood beside me and rested a hand on her brother’s arm. “With Zaylee’s help, he found a way to smuggle you out.”

“The servant in my cell?” Concern resurfaced at the reminder. “What will be her fate?”

“Engra?” Dray chuckled. “I don’t think Alvah will let anything happen to her.”

I distantly remembered Alvah as Zaylee’s handler. Had he been some kind of traitor against the king the whole time?

“We need to go before they look for us.” Rylla glanced back.

“Your children?” Dray asked.

Rylla smiled. “Safe, and well hidden.”

“Let’s go, then.”

Dray’s hand circled my waist, and he lifted me onto the horse. Though I wore no shackles or collar, I felt a sense of belonging toward the man.

He reached around me to grab the reins, and his weight on my back provided a warm comfort. Dray pressed a kiss against my ear.

“I like you wearing my mark on your face.” His whispers tightened a low part of my core.

The horse swung us around, Rylla’s mount right behind, and meandered through the trees.

“Where do we head?” she asked.

“To Mytatyo,” Dray answered. “They’re not rebelling against our king, but they’re not rounding up curse-bearers either.”

“Mytatyo is a long way,” I said.

Dray nodded. “We’d best get started then.”

The softness of a breeze trailed through the trees. Our horses cracked over the terrain, slipping from the river’s edge and into the throngs of the forest. After a few paces, the trees thinned and an expanse of an open field peeked through.

We went toward the field. A million words peppered my thoughts, but I didn’t have the energy to start a discussion. Instead, I let Dray’s steady breath reassure me.

The horses broke through the trees and started down a low hill.

A hint of a voice carried on the wind.

Dray drew the reins back. The horse neighed, its breath huffing in annoyance.

“What’s wrong?” Rylla paused beside us.

“I’m not sure,” Dray answered, peering into the darkness.

Above us on the hills, sparks of torches illuminated the darkness. More and more lit until the crest appeared to be a wave of fire burning right toward us.

I sucked in a gasp. Several people on horseback wore golden armor with the King’s crest pinned to their chests – his Royal Guard.

The soldiers settled three lengths from us. The Guard parted, and another horse trotted from the depths of the

haphazard isle, carrying a man adorned in jeweled armor and a heavy crown on his head.

More than the weight of his appearance, was the sudden surprise as uncomfortable pinpricks cascaded down my skin like the legs of a thousand spiders over my limbs.

Curse-bearers recognized curse-bearers. That telltale feeling only meant one thing: The King was cursed. He was one of the very people he hunted down and killed.

“Hello Dray.” His lips split the way a gator’s mouth gapes before clamping around a meal’s neck. “So nice of you to join us for this prisoner’s execution.”

His gaze landed on me.

Chapter Eleven

Dray drew his sword and held it awkwardly around my body in front of him. I chewed my lip and eyed the blockade. Several of the Curse Catchers gathered with the king's Guard, each wearing a stern expression. At Dray's draw, they released their own weapons and held them up.

The King laughed. "You dare to raise arms against your King? You know the outcome of that venture better than anyone."

"I've seen my family fall beneath your sword," Dray spat. "I'll not see another I care for go the same way." He wrapped an arm tighter around me. "She's mine."

"You forget your place." The king flicked his fingers and two of his Reapers trotted to the front lines. "I'll have her head one way or another."

Dray tensed, the lines of his body stiffening around me. I held a breath, caught between the Reaper at my back and the man ordering my death in front.

Dray sighed. He slipped to the ground.

"Dray?" I asked.

"Stay on the horse." He glanced at Rylla. "Both of you."

I twisted my fingers in the reins and the mount shifted unsteadily beneath me.

The two Curse Catchers rushed Dray. I sucked in a gasp as their swords clashed and torch light danced from the silver blades.

I knew I should fear for Dray's life as the trio turned and twisted to dodge strikes, but a sort of enthralled calm paralyzed me. The Reaper's muscles tensed before he swung the sword, drawing my eye to the strength in his arms and chest. He ducked a high swing as effortlessly as crouching beneath a hanging branch.

The tendrils of silver embellishments vibrated along Dray's chest. I wished his powers affected more than silver, so he'd be able to melt his opponents' swords in a heartbeat. And yet, magic proved a fickle power. A twist in my gut reminded me of everything he'd done with those silver bands. Instead of turning into instruments to torture and pleasure me, they struck at Dray's adversaries. A thin line of blood swelled from one man's cheek.

The man touched a finger to his blood and studied it with a stunned look. He turned to Dray, and the pupils devoured the remainder of his iris.

My horse cried as the ground bucked. He backpedaled from the fight as a gaping hole cracked beneath our feet.

A ground-mover. In the king's quest to rid the kingdom of any curse-bearers, he gathered the most powerful people near him.

Dray's metal tendrils wrapped between each side of the crevice and balanced him on a silver bridge, second in brightness only to the liquid moonlight. His two opponents regrouped. The second didn't appear to use any powers, but many would be invisible to onlookers.

I tracked their movements, half ducking when a blade neared Dray's head, only for it to whoosh over him. My body ached as a blow contacted his arm before he drew away.

Rylla gasped beside me. My attention turned toward her subtle sound, in time to see a hand wrap over her mouth before she disappeared from her saddle.

My brow creased. My mind tried to reconcile the image, half convinced it was a dream instead of reality. Warm fingers suddenly dug into my left arm as a palm clamped over my mouth and nose, trapping my air.

I tried to scream as the assailant pulled me from the horse, but his fist held my mouth tight. I jerked in the grasp, and the Curse Catcher holding me laughed.

“Did you think we'd forget about you? You should have ridden off when you had the chance.” He moved his hand enough to let me suck air through my nose. “When your head's finally on the ground where it belongs, maybe I'll screw your body before it grows too cold.”

He ran his tongue over my temple and his rancid breath made bile draw into my throat.

An automatic cut of fear froze me in place. Fear had long been a companion of mine. I lived afraid that the Curse Catchers would take me or my family for the lot we'd drawn. Terrified of what Dray would do after he caught me, and even more terrified at how much I liked it.

But Dray had shown me more than pleasure since I'd been in his company. He'd made me prove that I didn't have to let fear trap me. I'd taken the Orb of Oruthur from his possession and break my curse.

I wasn't about to let this stranger force me back into the box I'd finally escaped from.

The man's hot breath slipped down my neck.

"Maybe just a taste now," he whispered.

I tensed as his lips ran across the side of my neck. The touch sent bitter chills down my spine. His tongue left an unpleasant wetness on my skin, but I didn't twist or shake in his arms. Patiently, I waited for another opportunity to take hold of my future. He reached my ear, then moved to the other side.

I smashed my head into his face. He grunted as the back of my head rammed into his nose with a wicked crunch. The man staggered, dropping me to use both hands to halt the blood spilling from his face.

Dray's horse's soft hide met my palm as I searched blindly for the saddlebag.

The man peered at me around cupped hands.

I fumbled for the latch of the bag. The man dropped his hands and blood flowed freely down the darkened fabric of his worn tunic.

“You’ll die for that.” He stalked toward me, my death reflecting in his eyes. One hand reached from his body with as much confidence as a soldier holds a sword. “Slowly.”

Come on, come on.

The supple leather turned to cold metal as I finally found the bag’s clasp. His steps echoed as each brought him nearer to me.

The bag opened, and I slipped my hand inside. Panic swelled as he reached that hand toward me. I didn’t know what would happen if he touched me, but I knew it would be bad.

Please be here, please.

My fingers closed around the hilt of the knife I’d watched Dray pack days ago. I’d gambled whether the blade had remained inside, and relief flooded me at the contact.

My endeavor proved a bit too late. The man’s outstretched hand touched me. His expression turned smug.

Pain. Pain like looking into the brightest sun seared through my body. I tried to scream, but my newfound voice turned hard in my throat, trapped by the rush of agony cutting through my nerves.

Distantly, I heard a laugh, but time ceased to exist in the expanse of enduring torture. Only pain.

And the cold metal clutched in my fingers.

I'd only used a blade to slaughter animals to eat when it became too dangerous to venture into the little villages. But the experiences taught me the best way to fit a knife between small ribs.

Fresh screams erupted into my ears. My raw throat said I'd also screamed at some point, but deeper shouts joined mine into a chorus of terror and suffering.

The white hot pain soothed. My vision returned, fuzzy on the edges.

The Curse Catcher looked at the blade protruding from his chest – the one I'd shoved between his ribs to dig deep into his heart. He turned up to me, mouth agape, fresh blood oozing from the lips that stole kisses from my neck.

I ground my teeth and twisted the knife. "Too bad you won't die slowly enough."

He staggered back, and I let him go. He fell to his knees, mouth opening and closing as though reciting a prayer to an unknown god to save his life. His black gaze fell on me.

The deity did not provide an answer. The man slumped to the side. His chest stilled.

My legs gave out, and I landed on my knees. The white noise pounding through my head didn't quite let me believe I'd survived. I sucked in a fresh breath.

Dray's knife protruded from the man's body. I crawled across the ground, ignoring the cuts of sticks and rocks slicing

through my borrowed clothes. I grabbed the hilt, and the weapon made a sucking sound as it released. I twisted to see Dray, and be sure the fight had not claimed his life, but his horse blocked my view.

I stared at the horse. Then, back at the knife in my hand.

I could leave.

The shouts and metallic sounds said that Dray continued to fight, but nobody shouted at me. As much as I couldn't see them, they hadn't seen the man I'd killed. The king assumed I'd been properly incapacitated.

I forced my shaking legs to rise and slipped back toward the animal, careful to muffle my steps. The reins that used to trap me to the Reaper suddenly felt like freedom.

I had my voice. I could finally choose my future.

The horse snored and turned as I tugged him toward the woods. I kept his body between me and the others, a living blockade and my only hope of concealment.

“Stop,” the king's voice boomed through my ears. The sound of fighting paused. I froze, immediately expecting his men to grab me again.

Nothing.

They still hadn't noticed me. Whatever the king ordered to halt had nothing to do with my imminent escape. I took another hesitant step away.

A woman's scream echoed into the night.

“Don’t!” Dray’s voice followed the yell. A thunk of metal on hard dirt suggested the Reaper’s sword fell to the ground. “Don’t hurt her.”

I bit my lip. I ached to run, but his voice called me back. It brought back every ache of my body as he toyed with me. Every stubborn shout that had tried to cross my lips, but couldn’t come out, as he brought me to my knees over and over again.

I’d never heard such desperation.

I crouched beneath the horse and peered under its legs. One Reaper held Rylla around the neck and he dug a sharp knife into her arm. She cried out again.

“You’ve lost the rest of your family, Dray. Would you care to lose another?” the king asked. She turned her scream into a low groan at another slash of the blade. “Don’t think we won’t find her children and take them, too. There are few places to hide under my authority.”

Dray dropped to his knees before the king. “What would you have me do?”

The monarch laughed, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose. His gaze searched the field.

For me.

The reins turned damp from my sweaty palm. The moments to choose between my escape or somehow helping Rylla and Dray narrowed.

The king found me, and his brow creased with narrow humor.

I drove the blade into the pocket of the apron around my waist.

“Men,” the king said flippantly, as casually as one may beckon another drink. “Bring her.”

Too late to leave. My opportunity faded. Instead of running as I’d longed to, I waited for the fate I’d attempted to avoid – an audience before the king – to unfold.

A man and a woman grabbed my arms. They funneled me to the king. My heart beat in cadence with our pace as resolve settled over me, heavier than fear ever had.

They pushed me to my knees before the king. That itchy feeling of a curse ran across my skin again.

“If you want your sister to live, you must kill this wench.” The king gestured vaguely at me.

The two Reapers forced me to bend forward. One grabbed my hair and held my neck exposed and open. I barely saw Dray from the corner of my eye, but tension locked his body.

“What?” he asked quietly.

“It’s simple, Dray,” the king said. “You can kill this curse-bearer, not worth more than a good screw, or I will kill your sister, her children, and anyone you’ve dared called even an acquaintance in this life.”

Dray shifted on his feet. He looked between Rylla, then down at me. His expression remained flat.

“My lord.” The king rolled his eyes. “Do I have to take the hand to prove my point? Let’s try a finger, then.”

The man holding Rylla raised his arm faster than my limited view could follow. Rylla screamed, then blood poured onto the ground. A pale, fleshy item rested on the foliage, but my eyes couldn’t comprehend what my mind already knew.

They’d cut her finger off.

“What’s next, Dray? Your sister’s hand or this whore’s head?”

Silence.

The king opened his mouth again.

“I’ll do it,” Dray said.

The king paused. “What was that?”

Dray straightened his shoulders. “I said, I’ll do it. I’ll kill her.” He gestured at me.

“That’s right.” Tension left the king’s shoulders, and he stood straighter. “Of course you will.”

Dray bent down and plucked his sword from the ground. He twisted it in his fingers, as though contemplating every motion.

“A hint of your magic, and they’ll both be dead.” The king must have seen the same defiance in the Reaper as I did.

“Release her.” Dray paused beside me, all that barely contained rage whirling around me. “At least let her die with her freedom.”

The two holding me glanced at the king. He nodded, and they dropped me. I almost lost my balance, but I didn’t dare draw my hand from my pocket and risk releasing my grip on the knife.

“Well, Elys.” The Reaper squared up for the best strike at my neck. “I told you it would come to this.”

I feared my sweating palm may slip on the hilt yet. I drew a breath, studying the Reaper’s feet, watching for the hint of tension before he raised the blade.

Panic itched at me. My heart pounded.

The tightness in Dray’s stance loosened.

“I can’t,” he whispered.

“You... can’t?” the king asked, his voice barely audible. Disbelief soaked the words. “You’ve chosen a—”

I didn’t let him finish the word. I surged forward. The blade caught on the apron, but it didn’t slow my strike. The meager fabric pulled free of my waist and billowed around the knife like some falsity of surrender streaming toward the king’s chest.

The blade met slight resistance, then sank into his body.

Silence stretched for a moment. The Curse Catchers gaped at their injured king. Dray’s gaze danced between my face and

the blade in my hand. I almost gagged as hot fluid spilt across my palm. The king fell backward, pulling the blade from my hand, and sprawled on the grass.

Gasps as soft as a chick's downy feathers filled the silence for a heartbeat.

"Konnor," the king hissed. Dread drenched me from head to toes. His ability to speak meant I'd missed his heart. "On me."

The Reaper holding Rylla dropped her and dashed to the king. He placed his hands over the wound and warm light oozed around the fallen monarch.

Dray caught my arm, pulling me from the haze. His eyes held a wild look.

"Up, up, both of you." Dray grabbed Rylla's hand, ignoring her gasp of pain as he squeezed her injury. He circled an arm around my waist and dragged me from the king.

The Reapers looked from the king to watch our retreat. Dray backed away, keeping his gaze on them, but none moved toward us.

"On the horse." Dray released me, and I climbed onto the saddle. He tossed Rylla behind me, then climbed on the mount himself.

The Curse Catchers watched silently. The king's head lulled in unconsciousness. Konnor's hands continued to glow in what I assumed was some kind of healing magic.

“Take the reins, Elys.” Dray’s order sounded foreign in my ears. I hesitated, unsure if I’d heard him correctly.

“The reins, Elys. I can’t reach them and I have to hold Rylla. Get us the hell out of here.”

I grabbed at the leather, turned us away from the immobile gazes of the Curse Catchers, and led the horse into the depths of the forest. We weighed too much to run the beast, but no signs of pursuits followed.

“You did good, then.” Dray’s words lit that fire deep in my core, the one so eager to burn for him. “You’ve got a monster inside you too, I see.”

The safety of the woods swallowed us whole.

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