



UNLEASHING
MONSTERS

1

MONSTROUS GAMES

LEXI CAINE

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BOOK ONE

LEXI CAINE

Monstrous Games by Lexi Caine

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



Dear readers,

This book is steamy, violent, and full of graphic sex and cursing.

Topics in this book may be triggering to some readers. I have provided more content warnings below to help you navigate whether this book is a good fit for you.

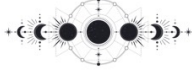
SPOILERS AHEAD

CONTENT WARNINGS

- explicit sex
- violence
- blood
- parental death
- parental abandonment
- light kink
- voyeurism
- exhibitionism

-kidnapping

CHAPTER I



BRI

The ticking of the clock on the wall is less precise with every passing second. Sometimes, they slip by quickly, an allegro setting on the metronome. Other times, the ticks are slower, viscous, a slow adagio.

It's one of the few things powered by magic in the tea shop I work at, and the insistent tug of it, foreign and familiar, is like an itch I can't scratch. We don't have many things powered by magic because they're too expensive.

Or they're cheap, like this one, and they work like shit. Of course that's what my boss bought. A veneer of luxury over an absolute piece of garbage.

It sets my teeth on edge, and I stare at the clock, willing it to work correctly.

The bell over the door tinkles, and I jump at the noise.

I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong. Ever since I woke up this morning, every shadow has seemed threatening, every unexpected noise has sent the hair on the back of my neck reaching for the sky.

"Hi, welcome to Tea Leaves and Tea," I say mechanically once my brain catches up and realizes it's just a customer.

"You don't have coffee, do you?" the customer asks, and I bite back a grimace.

"Nope, just tea. There isn't coffee in this district. Only the magical parts of New Philly." I make myself smile at her. She must be from out of town. I grin harder, and she flinches slightly. Darn. My smile must not have the effect I wanted it to.

"Okay, just a black tea then," she says, and since she doesn't elaborate, I toss our house blend in a cup and pour steaming water over it. It won't stay hot as long as tea from one of the shops in the magical districts because we don't have the spelled cups they do. Just flimsy cardboard.

I hand it to her with another smile, and she murmurs her thanks and slides some money across the counter. I'm putting it in the till when the door tinkles again, startling me all over again as she leaves.

It would be annoying if it weren't freaking me out so much.

I want to get home, lock the door, and cuddle up with my cat.

Unfortunately, I don't have the means to just up and leave work whenever I want, and even though this job pays nearly nothing, it's a job. Unlike most of the magical community after the Great Rift, there is no way I'm getting rich off my powers.

So here I sit, watching the grey clouds low over the grey streets of the non-magical district in New Philly, still only partially rebuilt after the chaos that reigned when magic users—and monsters—decided it was time to come out of the shadows.

Philly responded as Philly always does, with total belligerence.

I snort, eyeing the asshole clock on the far wall like I can urge the minutes to hurry up until my break. Not that I'm tired, or really need one since we're not busy.

We're *never* busy.

My eye twitches as I wipe the counter again, then sort the satchels of loose-leaf into pleasing color order, then sort them again by type.

Considering the shitty sector of New Philly we're in, people don't linger over their caffeinated beverage of choice, but grip it between cold hands, shoulders bent as they hurry back out the jangling door. Tea is the *only* caffeinated beverage of choice here, seeing as coffee is a thing of the past now. For regular people, that is.

The rich? The magical? They can get whatever the fuck they want.

I sigh, pacing behind the counter, wiping it for the fifteenth time this hour, even though it's so well worn it's past the point of ever actually shining again.

Nothing to do, and yet, I can't relax.

There's a feeling of wrongness, and it keeps creeping against my skin, insistent, a phantom itch I can't quite scratch.

My teeth grind against each other, and I exhale slowly.

It's nothing.

Just too much caffeine. A perk of the job, nothing more. My thoughts drift to my father, as they always seem to end up doing. What would he think of this? Of me working here, living in the same one-bedroom apartment he raised me in before he disappeared.

It's been over a decade, and I still can't bring myself to think of what could have become of him. That he's dead, just like my mother.

That something I'll never understand or know about happened to them both.

"Gabrielle," Tim snaps from the back room.

I blink rapidly. I can tell from his tone this isn't the first time he's called my name. Maybe if he remembered that I don't actually go by Gabrielle, I would be quicker to respond.

"Sorry, what?"

"Take the trash out," he yells. "Garner and Sons is coming to pick up soon."

The Garners are one of the major magical families that run everything behind the scenes in New Philly. Sure, trash pickup isn't as glamorous as most of the new professions that popped up after the Rift, but the businesses that swooped in and got things as close to pre-Rift as possible are businesses that now have the people's trust.

Besides, trash pickup no longer means noisy trucks. Nope. It means big, iridescent bubbles that glom onto all the nasty

shit in our garbage cans and then... simply dissolve it. It's weird as fuck.

Yeah, the Garner family has changed Philly. Just like magic has changed the entire world.

For better or for worse.

"Gabrielle! Trash!" Tim shouts. "I don't pay you to be lazy!"

I glare at the door to his crummy office.

"You got it, boss," I finally make myself yell back, my voice full of faux cheeriness.

Well, trash duty is better than scrubbing this damn counter one more time. I pop open the black can, tugging the heavy bag out and trying to breathe through my mouth. Using my butt, I push the back door of the tea shop open and step into the alley that runs along the back of the shop.

The feeling of wrongness intensifies, and a dull throb starts behind my ears. It was like this the day my dad went missing, too. People go missing all the time now, since the Rift, and none of those left behind ever get any answers.

I'm fucking sick of not having answers.

"Don't use your magic," my father said, so often that I can still hear the exact cadence of his voice in my head. *"Don't get attached to people. The world isn't safe for people like you."*

A familiar sadness rolls through me, and I inhale deeply, trying to focus on being present. I've turned over every stone I could here in New Philly, which, frankly, isn't a hell of a lot of stones, and there's nothing. It's like he vanished without a trace.

I know the best place to go for answers is the magical community, but that shit costs money.

I don't have money. Not like that, at least.

I would do nearly anything to know what happened to him. To my mom.

To know what, exactly, I am.

The back door slams shut behind me and I jump, throwing the trash bag on reflex. My breath stops. Rebounding off the brick wall, the bag collapses into a smelly heap on the filthy, cracked cement. I rub my hand over my heart, like somehow that will make it settle the fuck back down.

“Chill out, Bri,” I grumble. Stooping down, I retrieve the garbage bag.

Yuck. Maybe wiping the counters was the better option after all.

Late-morning mist curls around my wrist, serpent-like, and climbs up my arm.

My mother used to call fog like this dread clouds. I squint at the grey sky, thick bands of moisture hanging heavy in the sky. It’s much murkier than it should be at this time of day. Maybe that’s why I’m so on edge—simply because it’s hard to see.

Not because of anything... supernatural.

Couldn’t be. There’s a reason I live in the non-magical district, after all.

I push down the thought, taking a deep breath and squaring my shoulders as I pick my way through the grimy back alley towards the dumpster.

Can’t be magical. I’ve locked that part of myself away, locked it away so that it doesn’t hurt anyone, just like my dad taught me to do. Locked myself away, too.

It’s better this way.

Heaving a sigh, I lug the bag to the rusted blue dumpster. The magical districts don’t use anything as old-school as dumpsters, but out here in this part of New Philly, we use what we have.

Thankfully, it’s chilly enough that I don’t gag on the smell today, but I breathe through my mouth all the same. Deep pockets of mist swirl on either side of the dumpster, and the same sense of *wrongness* prickles across my skin.

I toss the bag into the opening.

It's just my imagination. *It's just my imagination.*

I turn from the dumpster, wiping my palms against each other, a force of habit, my heart skipping in my chest.

"There you are," a voice slithers across my skin. "I wondered if you were just a story. But I feel it on you now."

"The fuck?" I yell, nearly jumping out of my skin. That's me, a master of snappy replies.

I back up from the dumpster in a hurry, my eyes wide and breath coming in fast, impossible pants.

I can't see who's talking, but as their words register, my stomach sinks.

"If you want tea, I'll give it to you for free. I don't have anything else you'd want," I say, trying to keep my voice chipper. *Denial.* That's what my dad decided was the best course of action years ago. Never admit what I can do. Ever.

"Tea? I don't want tea. Or money." A silky laugh follows the words, and a hunched figure emerges from the fog wearing a hood so deep they appear faceless. "You know why I'm here, and it's not for money or tea, woman."

I back up further. At least, I try to—but something stops me cold.

"I'm just trying to take the trash out," I manage. My heart's beating so fast I'm not sure how it's still anchored in my chest. The magic, the power I locked up, swallowed whole—*denied*—writhes under my skin, wanting release, making me sick with the need to use it.

The alley sways, the figure unreal in the fog before me.

"We want you, little summoner. Your talents will make all the difference."

"I knew I should've called in sick today," I mutter. I knew this was a possibility, I always knew this was a possibility, that someone would follow my leaking magic, more untethered by the day, and try to use me.

A sick, twisted part of me is excited by the prospect. Maybe that same part is the reason my magic's been unfurling from me in unexpected spurts.

Maybe I'll finally get some answers about my parents.

Something ugly glints in the dim light. A knife.

I cringe. *Or maybe I'll just be dead, too.*

Magic pulses deep inside me, throbbing, looking for a way out. I *burn* with the need to unleash it.

"You don't want to do that," I say wearily. I always used to be able to shut it down when I was younger, wrestle it into submission. But today, the magic feels wild. Different. Untamable.

"Then come with me, and I won't have to. We will treat you well, like the prize you are. Unlike these idiots you slum around with now."

"You should leave," I grit out. "I'm not a prize. I'm a person."

My hands fist at my sides, fingernails cutting into my palms. This is what my father always said would happen. That if they found out what I was, what I could do... they wouldn't leave me alone until they got what they wanted.

I would be worse than a servant. I would be *leashed*.

Fear grips me as the magic pulses harder, faster, winding thickly through me, coils of it pinning down my resistance and speeding my adrenaline. The hood slips off, revealing a face that could belong to a man of thirty or a man of sixty, ageless but not youthful. Tattoos in a script I can't place, let alone read, trail down the middle of his cheek, from eyelid to jaw.

A mage. A powerful one, too.

I swallow hard, my heart in my throat.

"I'm not leaving without you," the man says, stepping closer. The blade in his hand glimmers darkly.

"You can leave without me, or you can leave with tea." I don't even know what I'm saying.

He lets out a low laugh, his head tilting. A torrent of power whips out of him, and I suck in a breath as it batters me, panic rising. This can't be happening. I won't let this happen.

My jaw twitches, and I step forward, my muscles obeying even though my mind is screaming.

I really don't want to go with this fucker.

Is this what happened to my parents? Were they cornered in a dark alley by some asshole with a knife?

I really just want to finish out my shift, go home, take a shower, and take a damn nap with my cat. Now I'm going to have to leave the only home I can remember having.

Furious doesn't begin to explain it.

My feet take two more steps forward, and I shudder all over.

"Come with me or this will turn unpleasant," he says. Magic batters me, slicing through my skin like a million tiny paper cuts. He raises the hand holding the knife, and fear punches me.

"No," I gasp out, tucking my arms around my stomach. "I won't go with you."

"You don't have a choice." He grins and I recoil, or I would if his magic didn't have a chokehold on me. His teeth are filed into points.

It's the last straw, and something... huge surges through me.

A tidal wave that leaves me gasping.

He stares at me for the briefest of seconds, and I know he's felt it too. Then he licks his pointed teeth and takes another step, closing the gap between us.

A flash of fur catches my eye.

My eyes widen. Then it strikes. A creature from one of the otherrealms, a summoned beast like nothing I've ever seen before.

I summoned it.

I must be more surprised than the mage is.

Well, I'm definitely more surprised, because he probably didn't have time to think anything at all.

The hooded man lets out a low, keening cry, and then the creature cuts off that noise, slicing claws across his throat. Blood slicks the alleyway, puddling below his body as the furred animal, like nothing on Earth, rips through the man's stomach.

Nauseated, I suck in a shaky breath. The knife's fallen to the ground, and in it, the carnage reflects up at me.

I should have called in sick today.

"Now I've done it," I say, eyeing the feasting creature warily. So much for hiding. All it took was some jackass mage in a hood with a knife and the worst smile I've ever seen to force the magic out of me. Fuck!

I step towards the body, irritation and anxiety clawing through me, and I kick him as hard as I can. It doesn't make me feel better, probably because the bastard can't feel it.

Turns out you *can* kick a man when he's down, but when he's dead it's a hell of a lot less satisfying.

"Ugh!" I rake my fingernails through my hair, only succeeding in mussing up my already mussed up bun.

I need to run.

I need to get away from here as fast as I can. The creature prowls over to the dumpster, then sits on its haunches and stares at me, eyes glowing through the fog.

That's going to be a problem.

I don't think I'm allowed to have that thing in the non-magical district.

I definitely am not allowed to murder people in the back alley at work. Plus, I've probably set off a gazillion magic sensors. It's only a matter of time until one of the families that rule New Philly finds me.

The question is what they'll do with me... and if one of them sent this dude.

I kick him again for good measure, and the beast yowls at me. Pink fur fades to a silver ridge down its back, like a mohawk... or a porcupine. Eyes like rubies glisten in the dim light, and silver claws the size of two of my fingers extend from huge paws as the creature stretches, plainly much more comfortable with the dead body than I am.

“What am I supposed to do with you?” I ask, and it blinks.

I am so screwed. I have no idea how I even summoned the thing, no idea how to get rid of it, and the longer it's here, in a dirty back alley in New Philly, the easier it will be for others to find me. As long as it's not the Blood Council. They're the last people I want to tangle with, or be forced to fight in the Blood Rite.

They'll just be one of many called by this explosion of magic in a non-magical district. The ruling families, all corrupt in one way or another, will be homing in on me, too.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

These are the people my father wanted me to steer far, far away from, so I locked my magic down and promised never to use it.

“Go away,” I whisper to the big beastie. “Scat. Go back to where you came from.” To where I called it from, one of the many realms that connect to Earth, though the specifics on how that works are totally vague to me.

It lies down and licks a blood-stained pink paw.

“Ick.” I wrinkle my nose, then kick the corpse in the alley one last time for luck. “Fine. Suit yourself. But I'm out of here.”

I should have grabbed my damn coat before I took the trash out. Huddling into myself, I start walking from the alley.

I'll go to the nicest of the ruling families. Not the Garners. Maybe the O'Daniels? Or the Suarez family. The summoned dog-lion will follow me. I'll enter service and gain protection

on my terms. Maybe I can even get help with finding my dad, and it will be okay—

My ears pop.

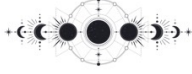
I shake my head, swallowing hard and trying to regain my equilibrium, when it dawns on me why, exactly, my equilibrium is messed up.

“Fuckity fuck,” I murmur. I give the otherrealm beast a baleful glare over one shoulder.

It’s too late. They’ve found me.

They’re here.

CHAPTER 2



KANE

As soon as we got wind of a breach in the magical veil that parts the realms, my brothers-in-arms and I made our way to the stinking cesspool that is New Philly as fast as we could. The half-giant Conall stands behind me, Red and Lucian on either side of me.

I blink into the misty alley, and when my eyes make sense of the sight before me, my heart does something unexpected.

It feels lighter. Like it's grown wings.

Hope.

Maybe we will survive this Blood Rite after all, maybe we can wreak vengeance on those that murdered our fifth. My hands fist at my sides, and I tilt my chin up, regarding the slight woman standing over the corpse in the middle of the alleyway.

She bristles with pure power. She's young, an adult though, maybe no more than five and twenty. The older I get, the harder it is for me to deduce the ages of these mortals. Flame-red hair and defiant green eyes flash even in the dim light. Her power is a siren song, humming all along her creamy skin.

My fangs extend in my mouth. *I want to taste her.*

Surprise roils through me at the thought. I close my mouth with a click. Conall takes a step forward, his massive frame dwarfing mine, even though I stand well over six feet. Lucian shifts on my other side, and smug amusement rolls off the demon.

“Look at you,” Lucian says in a low, silken voice. “So much power in such a nice little package.”

I stiffen immediately, disliking his tone. Presumptuous, as my demon teammate always is. Lascivious, too.

The woman must note it as well. Distrust clouds her emerald eyes.

It was the wrong tack for him to take.

“I didn’t mean to do it,” the woman claims, her hands trembling at her sides until she shoves them into the pockets of her pants. She’s so breathtakingly beautiful, so untrained, that for a moment, I can’t think past the feral need growing inside me.

The need to make her mine.

I tamp it down, disgusted with myself.

“Yes, you did,” Red rumbles. I glance at him, surprised to hear his voice after all this time. He’s been silent for months now, choosing to spend all his energy battling his own demons instead of deigning to speak to any of us. “Magic is will-based.”

Judging from the way energy coils around him, air shimmering around his training gear and skin, I can tell I’m not the only one affected by this woman.

Surprise and wariness bleed into the desire burning through me.

“I’ve never used it,” the redhead continues, her eyes wide and long auburn lashes fluttering. “Please. I don’t want it.”

I open my mouth to speak, to say something that will convince her to stand down, to push aside the power she’s calling to her again. Untrained she may be, but she’s untrained in the way a bomb is, primed to go off at any second.

“We will train you,” Conall rumbles, his deep voice echoing off the brick walls surrounding us. “Don’t worry, pretty one, you will be safe with us.”

“Which family sent you?” Her eyes narrow slightly, darting to the side, where glowing eyes wink into existence.

She’s commanding her summon.

I move before I have a chance to do more than acknowledge a modicum of shock at her ability to lie and tremble to our faces and prepare her summon all in one go.

Perhaps she is not as untrained as she made me believe.

All the better for us, Team Nightworth, if we're to bring her into the Blood Rite when the stakes have never been higher. In the Blood Rite, death is the only way out.

The creature's muscles bunch, the only warning other than the woman's gaze that she's about to attempt to add us to her body count.

My fangs extend further as I draw on my own magic, where it bubbles and boils under my skin. A portal opens, capturing the creature as it jumps for us, swallowing it whole and sending it back to the otherrealms.

She did that clumsily, but my eyebrows raise slightly at her ability. Untrained, yes, most likely. But *powerful*.

"Touch me and I'll fucking kill you too," she snarls, eyes flashing as she glances around wildly, looking for an escape.

I can't help smiling a little at her sheer nerve. She arches an eyebrow at me, as if to say she's up for the challenge.

Yes, she has power, but against the four of us males? My gaze slides right, to Lucian's red-skinned demonic form, his omnipresent horns curling out of black hair. Conall's so large he casts us in his shadow, and Red looks murderous as he watches her carefully, more interested in her than I have seen him in anything in a very, very long time. There is no way she could take Team Nightworth. We wouldn't let her anyhow.

Not now that she's one of us.

Ours.

"Oh, pretty one, you shouldn't have given us that challenge." Lucian steps closer to her, his face animated. "Now you'll be begging us to touch you by the time we're finished with you."

She snarls at his insinuation, and a flock of orange, razor-beaked birds flutter into existence. I wave a hand lazily, not sure I want her to see how impressed I am by her skill, and the birds go the same way as her other summon. Into the portal and back to the otherrealms.

“For that, we’ll do this the hard way,” Lucian adds. “Not the preferred way, but you’ve made it clear you’re not coming easily. Yet.” He winks at her, and she makes another feral noise.

Bindings appear all over her body, gluing her arms and legs together, black cord slicing across her mouth, compliments of my demon teammate, a deft hand at enchantments.

And, it appears, bindings.

Lucian waves a hand and a new portal appears. Through it, I can make out the shimmering arena in the distance, the sky a bright blue, none of the mist obscuring this dump present where we’re taking her.

Conall makes soothing sounds as he gently lifts the struggling woman over his shoulder, and then they’re through the portal. Red follows, not even bothering to glance back at me.

“This should be interesting,” Lucian tells me easily, his eyes glittering, his rough red skin returning to normal as his battle warp recedes, our prize in hand. “Team Nightworth has a fifth again. We won’t be competing in the Blood Rite without a fifth. And it’s a beautiful woman, to boot. Are you ready to interrogate her? We’ll have to break her fast.” He licks his lips, a fanatical light in his eyes.

“We’ll see,” I say gruffly.

Of course I’ll interrogate her.

I’ll hate every second of it, but there’s no way around it. This type of work always threatens to overwhelm me, bloodlust rearing its ugly head every time I have the merest taste.

“We need to know what she knows, and the sooner we do, the safer she’ll be,” Lucian continues, as though I need reminding.

I cut him a glare. I’ll violate her mind, her personal sanctum, and I’ll hate doing it.

“I know what needs to be done,” I tell him.

The woman’s red hair shines in the morning light as Lucian steps through the portal, and I follow, unable to tear my gaze from her.

She’ll hate me when I’m done with her.

It will be better that way.

CHAPTER 3



BRI

My body is heavy. Exhausted. Spent.

“Fucking magic,” I grunt. The giant—the *literal* giant, seeing as how the dude holding me has to be over eight feet—rubs my back with a big hand. Or maybe his hand just spasmed. Hard to tell when his hand spans nearly my entire fucking rib cage.

“Ye’ll get better at managing it, lass,” the giant rumbles, a thick brogue marking his words.

“Or I’ll murder you all in your sleep and go into hiding.” I don’t know why I said that. There’s no way that’s ever going to happen, and from the way the giant laughs, he knows that as well as I do.

I scowl at his back. His back is the safest place to look, because being up this high and dangling over his shoulder is not agreeing with my stomach.

“Do you know where you are?” the demon asks.

I squeeze my eyes shut, reaching for the magic, wanting one of those weird birds I conjured to slice right through his red skin.

He’s a monster.

They all are.

Once, monsters were mere fairytale creatures, thought to exist only in our imaginations. Until the Rift. Then we all found out exactly how real the monsters are. How real magic is.

And how terrible.

It was before I was born, over fifty years ago now, but our world carries the scars as surely as it happened yesterday.

The giant could crush me with a mere thought. The demon has enough power to melt all of Philly. Then there’s the silent vampire. I glance sideways at him.

He looks urbane enough. In fact, he's ridiculously handsome, muscled, with a strong, masculine jaw line and long black eyelashes that make me slightly envious.

He drinks blood.

And he's some kind of mage, judging from how he banished my otherrealm summons with practiced ease. It's not great.

The one they call Red stalks behind the giant and I prop my elbow up on his back, staring at him. A chill crawls up my spine. I have no fucking clue *what* he is, but he gives me a major case of the heebie-jeebies.

"Well? Do you know?" the demon asks.

"What?" I manage, completely confused.

"Did you not hear me? I asked if you knew where you were."

"Leave the lass alone, Lucian. She's terrified," the giant tells him.

The demon's named Lucian. Why not?

"I'm not scared," I say shortly. I'm about half a second away from pissing myself, but they don't need to know that. This is the culmination of all my fears, but sure, yeah, I'm not scared.

"You're trembling against my shoulder." The giant pats my back again, and I cough at the impact.

"You have nothing to fear from us," Lucian informs me, grinning broadly. His red skin melts away, revealing tanned human skin.

I blink. He's... gorgeous. Where the vampire is stunning in a rugged, masculine way, Lucian is pure sex. Lean muscles, dimples and a devilish smile, curly black hair. Of course, it's different knowing what he truly looks like.

He's a monster, same as the rest of them.

I squeeze my eyes shut. My father would be so upset, so disappointed if he knew where I was. Maybe it's a blessing

he's gone.

At least he can't see where I've ended up.

An anxious pang goes through me and my throat closes up. I miss him. I want to know what happened to him.

"You're ours now," Lucian continues. "You're part of our team. Welcome to Team Nightworth." He gestures at the three other males. "Welcome to the Blood Rite. And of course, apologies for both saving your life and ruining it all in one go."

"I didn't mean to kill that man," I say, even though I did. I mean, I don't have a clue how I did it, exactly, but I didn't want to go with him.

"Save it," Red says, his voice low, guttural. "You're a murderer, same as us. You think about running? We'll catch you. Some of us might even enjoy it."

"I'm at the Blood Rite," I snap, fear and anger winning out over self-preservation and common sense. "I'm as good as dead anyway. You should have just killed me back there and gotten it over with."

"We didn't save ye from that mage just to let ye die on our watch," the giant says, and before I can figure out why I'm suddenly moving, he places me on my unsteady feet. The four males make a tight circle around me. I cross my arms over my chest, all too aware of how huge they are compared to me, of how drained I am after accidentally breaking all my damned rules, all my promises to my father, and using magic.

It feels like I ran a marathon and then climbed a mountain. I'm physically spent.

The vampire grins at me, lethal fangs on full display, like he knows what I'm thinking.

I glare at him.

"The four of us, Team Nightworth, we've competed in six decades' worth of Blood Rites. We're still standing," Lucian tells me, flipping his dark curls from his eyes. "You broke the law. Your life is forfeit. We saved you from a worse fate,

should that mage have been able to take you, or should someone else have found you before we did.”

“A worse fate?” I run my hands through my hair, and they step closer to me, caging me in between them. “A worse fate than being forced to fight at the Blood Rite? To be a magical human sacrifice, for what? For some bullshit story about how the blood spilled here protects our world?” My voice rises, and Red immediately lashes out, pulling me against his chest, his huge hand spanning my throat, his other over my mouth.

I go still.

“That was uncalled for, Red,” Lucian drawls, amusement written all over his face.

“You’re scaring her,” the giant says in his thick brogue.

Red’s hand slowly comes off my mouth.

“We don’t want you hurt or killed. The point is to stay alive, just like we have for centuries,” the vampire says.

“Centuries?” I scoff. “The Blood Rite only began after the Rift.”

“Talking like that will get you killed quicker than anything in the ring, you idiot.” Red laughs, clamping his hand back across my lips. There’s no humor in the sound. His chest rumbles against my back, and I shudder.

Anger bursts through me. Red’s smokey scent fills my nostrils.

They want me alive? They want me unhurt?

And this psychopath gets to touch me like this? Keeps me from talking?

Fuck this.

I must be out of my mind. I open my mouth and I bite.

Red’s other hand goes tight against my windpipe, and I bite down harder. Stars wink in front of my eyes as he grips me tighter still, but I don’t let go.

Blood seeps from his hand and a low, unearthly growl tears from his throat, shaking against my back. Shaking the ground beneath my feet.

What in the world is he?

“Let her go,” the vampire says. “I know what I have to do. Take her to the ruin and restrain her while I prepare. We’ll ensure she’s safe before the Blood Bond.”

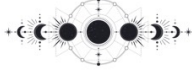
“She fucking bit me,” Red snarls.

“The wee lass has fight in her,” Conall says, voice it’s full of approval.

It’s the last thing I hear before I black out.

It makes me smile.

CHAPTER 4



KANE

The redhead sleeps in the chair. Red tied her tightly to it, until the bonds marred the perfection of her skin. As soon as he left, I loosened them.

I sigh, watching her chest rise and fall.

Red would have choked her into unconsciousness had we left him unchecked. Getting her clear from him was hard enough.

I haven't seen the male this worked up in decades. I'm not sure if it's a good thing yet, but it's slightly preferable to the apathy that settled on him like a cloak.

"We'll have to watch him more closely," Lucian says from where he stands in the shadows, watching me study her. "Red, I mean. He's unhinged."

He says this conversationally, as though Red's mental state is as exciting a topic as what flavor pastry he had for breakfast.

"Do you think she knows what she did? How impossible that should be, I mean?" he continues.

I arch an eyebrow, watching the way her eyelids flutter in her sleep.

"I don't. I think if she knew what she was doing, we wouldn't have all made it out of that cesspool of an alleyway alive."

"So our odds aren't much better than they were before we found her," Lucian muses.

I glance back at him meaningfully.

"Fine. I'll leave you to it."

The door closes behind the demon, leaving me alone with the woman. The newest member of Nightworth.

She appears even younger like this, with her red hair tousled and undone, falling around her pixie-like face in fiery

strands. I see why Red is so affected by her. She's... undeniably magical, the power in her latent but buzzing with promise.

Plus, she's beautiful.

How she flew under the radar, completely undetected, for so long is a mystery. She should have been snapped up by one of the ruling families by now. She should have been fucking trained.

Everything about her is a mystery.

It's my job to solve it.

Gritting my teeth, I bend over her pale wrist. I loathe this part of my magic. Loathe sinking into another being's memories, into their minds.

We can't have the woman with us and not know her past. It's too dangerous.

There's too much at stake. If she's faking her naivete, faking her ignorance... Things are too unstable at the Blood Rite for us to take a chance on bringing her in for the Blood Bond without making sure she won't kill us in our sleep.

I inhale deeply, the scent of her skin working through my senses. The familiar coppery whiff of human blood, tainted with the spicy swirl of her magic... and overall, a sweetness so rich my mouth waters.

I sink my teeth into her wrist, holding her arm, trying to focus past the warmth of her soft skin, the delectable taste of her in my mouth. It's the richest taste, deep and unforgettable.

I know it will haunt me.

It floods my senses, warmth trickling down my throat, and I infuse the bite with magic, pushing gently at first.

Pain blooms behind my eyes and still I push, harder now.

Magic erupts around me.

It's needle-sharp and electric, this woman's magic, prickling all over my skin as I take one last sip, pushing past her natural defenses and into her mind.

Images wheel through my head, and she moans lightly, the sound driving me near insanity. The need to keep drinking, to sate the bloodlust—and real lust—drives through me, a heady elixir.

I hate this.

I hate what this turns me into. A monster. A beast.

Growling low, I pull away, reeling the magic back into myself.

But not before several things are very clear.

This woman is untrained, and the most danger she presents is to herself. She's a near innocent to all things about her world—our world.

There's a great deal of sadness around her memories, and it's clear she's lost everyone she's ever cared about. Though their names and faces are hazy, even with the push of my magic, they must be her family.

And third?

I am not as far from my beastly nature as I would like to be.

Shame and guilt snake through me, and I rock back to my heels, wiping my mouth, despising myself for how much I savored that.

The warm slide of her flesh against my mouth. The taste of her blood.

The taste of her memories.

CHAPTER 5



BRI

My eyes open slowly. Bleary, I glance around the room, things hazy and unfocused. Grey stone walls. A high, arched window with some kind of stained glass. Reds and purples and greens stretch long across the grey stone floor.

A magic heater kicks on, and my brain takes a second to process the sudden sound, familiar enough even though it's a luxury I could never afford.

A dull ache throbs through my forearm. Frowning, I glance down at my arm. Two holes weep a steady trickle of blood, a purple bruise around them.

I sit up straighter, realization kicking through me.

"I wondered how long his sleeping spell would hold." The vampire sits on the floor in front of me, looking slightly dazed.

It doesn't make him any less handsome. When he smiles at me, butterflies explode in my stomach. A new awareness of him creeps through me, and I bite my lower lip, surprised at the warm desire trickling up my spine.

"Well, I'm awake now." For a second, guilt washes through me at my bitchy tone. Then I look back at my throbbing arm and regret nothing.

"You bit me," I accuse him.

"I did," he says, pushing his dark, wavy hair back from his forehead. To my surprise, though, he doesn't sound happy about it. His mouth twists to the side, his dark eyes narrowed as he waits for me to explode.

"You bit Red," he adds conversationally.

"That doesn't mean it's okay to bite me." It sounds stupid.

He grins at me.

"Why did you bite me? To make me like you? Did you mess with my mind? Is that why I look at you and feel super turned on? You did some," I waggle my fingers, "sex magic?"

Changed my brain? I've heard some things about what vampires can do."

Oh god. I snap my mouth shut. I didn't quite mean to say all that much.

An amused smile curves the corners of his mouth up, dimples appearing and making him look even more roguishly handsome. Younger, somehow, too.

My brain skips to a stop, and then I rearrange my expression into a scowl.

"Is that right? You're feeling 'super turned on' right now? When you look at me?"

"Yeah, because you did something to me."

His dimples deepen, his eyes dilating as he studies my face. "That's where you're wrong. I didn't do anything but look through your memories to see how much work you were going to need to get you fight-ready for the ring. To see how much trouble you were going to cause, if you had been trained. We need a fifth, but not so badly we aren't going to do our due diligence before taking an unknown mage to receive the Blood Bond."

Oh. Shit. Heat climbs up from my chest and neck, and I just know my stupid skin is turning splotchy from embarrassment.

"You could have just asked me about that instead of poking around in my head," I spit out. I squirm in the chair, finally settling on crossing my arms over my chest.

"Yes, because you were so very helpful when we brought you in," he says, quirked an eyebrow at me and standing up. Oh, goodness, I wish he hadn't stood up.

I press my legs together.

"You didn't do anything but... look through my memories?" My voice sounds strangled, and a fresh wave of heat rushes through me. "Which, by the way, is super rude of you. You can't just go messing with people's minds."

“I don’t if I don’t have to. But you’re ours now, and I had to be sure of what we were working with. And no, I didn’t do anything else.” He steps closer, his dark eyes sparkling. My gaze darts to the stained-glass window but is immediately drawn back to him. He looms over me, so ridiculously tall and broad that he doesn’t seem real. Doesn’t seem human.

Because he’s not! my brain screams at me.

That’s right. Vampire.

Monster.

The thought should douse me in ice water, but maybe I have more of an adventurous streak than I thought, because I only manage to blush more furiously.

“What’s your name?” he asks, his smile disappearing, a serious look replacing it.

“Didn’t you find out from my memories?” I say tartly, even though I’m irritated more with my stupid response to him than with him. Even though he bit me. That, and violated my memories.

“I did, but it seems polite to ask, Gabrielle.”

My eyes widen at the way he says my name, my entire brain shuddering to a stop at the delicious tone, like melted dark chocolate.

“I go by Bri,” I finally manage.

“Bri,” he repeats, an eyebrow arched and a small smile on his face. His dimple makes a fleeting appearance and I swallow hard. “Why Bri, when Gabrielle is the perfect name for such a beautiful woman?”

If he keeps turning on the charm like this, I’m liable to make all kinds of bad, bad choices. I tilt my head, considering him. Maybe that’s part of what he’s doing, though. How can I trust what he said? Maybe he lied. I don’t know him.

I don’t answer.

“Well, Bri,” he purrs, so beautiful, so unreal that I almost don’t notice his fangs lengthening as he takes another step

towards me. "I'm Kane."

"And you're a mind-violating vampire," I finish for him, fluttering my eyelashes. Ah yes, bitchiness. A great default reaction when you're cooped up with a massive vampire who is inconveniently turning you on, supernaturally or not.

He steps back, and for a split-second, that charming mask disappears, replaced by... regret?

Surely not. I narrow my eyes.

"Do you understand what's happened? To you?" he asks, and some of the congenial nature has slipped away, in favor of a brusque, businesslike tone.

That's better. That's safer. I've already murdered someone today, no need to steal second trying to get my rocks off with a vampire. Or worse, go for the full home run.

I sigh.

"I've been taken to the Blood Rite, where I will likely die, and if not, I'll be sentenced to a lifetime here with you and your team of monsters because I accidentally slipped up and used forbidden magic."

"And murdered someone."

"It was self-defense." I glare at him. The sun's pouring through the stained-glass window, painting his dark hair in reds and greens. He looks like an unholy, fanged angel. "Couldn't you tell that from my memories?"

Again, that flash of *something* flies across his stunning features. "I didn't look at anything that wasn't necessary," he says.

My brow furrows. "You didn't think seeing the circumstances of me summoning an otherrealm creature and watching it eviscerate someone in the back alley of my workplace was... necessary?"

"No." He shrugs one shoulder. Muscles ripple under his shirt. I lick my lips, and his gaze darts to my mouth. "Your life was forfeit as soon as you worked the magic. We got to you first. You might even say we saved you. You know that the

price on your head for using illegal magic in a non-magical district would have brought down every two-bit bounty hunter and magic family in need of a summoner within a ten-state distance. No one could have resisted the siren call you just put out.”

“So you wouldn’t even care if I was a murderer? You wouldn’t care if I was just trying to protect myself and I don’t have a clue what I’m doing and I’m going to die as soon as I hit the arena floor? I don’t belong here!” I’m half whimpering at the end, struggling against the chair, and I hate myself for how pitiful I sound.

To my shock, Kane moves faster than I can track him and crouches at the chair, his hands cupping my cheeks.

I gulp air, my eyes wide, as he stares into my face.

“We won’t let that happen,” he intones, his deep voice sending a shiver between my shoulders. “There’s someone... in your memories.” His tone softens slightly and I recoil, less from the concerned look in his eyes and more from the renewed reality of how much he just violated my very being.

This is one of the reasons I stay away from people.

No one is entitled to my time, my body, or my thoughts.

And he just took them from me. My memories.

“You had no right,” I choke out.

His expression turns mournful, the dimples disappearing and darkness shadowing his eyes. “Your safety, the safety of my team, is everything now. I need to know who it is you’re worried about. I could have taken that from you too, but I want you to tell me.”

“What, to establish some kind of Stockholm Syndrome bond between us? So I trust you?”

His knuckles whiten on the arms of the chair, but I refuse to budge. Sure, nervous sweat dampens my armpits and I’m fighting to keep my voice from shaking, but I’m not going to back down.

Monsters like him only understand strength.

“Because I need to know about any possible collateral damage. Any liabilities that could affect your performance.” His voice is different now. Cold, distant. “Besides, Stockholm Syndrome isn’t actually real. I have a feeling the only way I’m earning your trust is the hard way.” A sharp fang shows, glinting in the filtered light.

There he is. There’s the vampire. The monster.

I blink at him, his words registering. “Collateral damage? A liability? You think I’m still in danger?”

“You and anyone else you’re close to.:

Luna.

Oh my god. My heart stops. The same people who’d sent the mage to the alley might go home to wait for me. They might hurt her.

“I have to get back to her. I have to make sure Luna’s safe!” I struggle to stand up, but his hands clamp over my forearms.

“So she is important to you? This Luna?”

“Obviously. Now let me go take care of her. I’m all she has. She needs me.” Fear and fire start to build in my chest, but no matter how hard I struggle against him, he’s immovable. Of course he is. It’s useless. I’m not doing anything but squirming against him now, which is uncomfortable in more ways than one.

Plus, I’m plumb out of magic, thanks to the fact that I have no frigging idea how to use it.

“We’ll make sure she’s safe. We will rescue her. She will be safe.” His voice is sure and calm.

I go still, blinking up at him, surprise and gratitude welling inside me. Frowning, I try to suppress the feeling. Why should I feel thankful? I wouldn’t even be in this position if it weren’t for *him* snatching me away to the goddamn Blood Rite.

That’s not true though. Pain spikes through me as I bite my lip, and I heave a sigh, my fingernails scraping against the stone arms of the chair.

“Who was it?” I finally ask. “Who was it that was after me? Do you know?”

He stares down at me, unblinking, his expression impenetrable.

“We think it was the same people who murdered our fifth. Our *former* fifth.” His lips form a tight line, and his brow furrows. The force of the sudden pain in his eyes takes me by surprise. It feels too private, too much.

“My mother was murdered, too.” I look away, dragging the toe of my beat-up sneaker through the dust on the floor. “I’m sorry about... your fifth.” It’s hard to say, knowing I’m the new fifth. I’m filling the shoes of someone they recently lost.

“And I’m sorry to hear that about your mother. Was it recent?”

“No.” It’s all I want to say on the matter. I don’t want to talk about my father. Just because I want answers doesn’t mean I need to open up to Kane... or anyone here.

The silence stretches uncomfortably.

“We think someone is trying to throw the Blood Rite.” Kane clears his throat, his gaze boring into mine. “We don’t know why. Maybe the gambling. There’s always a little of that. This feels... This feels different, bigger. Like maybe someone is trying to destabilize the entire ritual. And with it, the realms.”

My mouth opens in silent surprise, like a fish. I close it.

The blood from the contestants who are injured in the Blood Rite is used in a complicated ritual to keep our world separate from the otherrealms. That’s what I’ve always been told. That’s what everyone has been told.

A pang goes through me as a memory surfaces of my father’s voice, his lined forehead and pale blue eyes serious as he taught me about the Rite, about how I must *never* touch my magic if I didn’t want to end up sacrificed to keep chaos at bay. How the ruling families would use me, use my magic to do awful things. How I was safer if I stayed away from other people, from my magic, and kept my head down.

“Gabrielle,” he says in my memory.

A small reptilian creature scampers up my shoulder, no bigger than a stub of pink pencil eraser. My father’s face is red with fury, worry and anger in the set of his jaw.

“I never want to see you use this magic again. Ever. Not ever. Why would you do this? Why would you put yourself in danger?”

Tears sting at my eyes. I nod once, biting my cheeks until they bleed. He scoops the teensy creature off my shoulder, and it squeaks once in protest. I know I’ll never see it again.

Why would I try to keep a pet?

Because living with a man who kept you from everyone and everything made you very, very lonely.

I blink in surprise at the force of the memory. Kane’s staring at me with a suspicious look on his face.

“Sometimes the magic I use can stir up... the past.” It’s as good an explanation as any.

I nod once, refusing to cry. Swallowing up the tears, as my father taught me to do. Don’t show emotions. Don’t be weak. Don’t touch the magic. Don’t have friends.

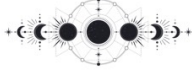
Of course, I kind of fudged that rule when I took Luna in. I didn’t mean to, but she followed me home one night after work and sat on my doorstep until I finally asked if she was hungry.

The rest is history.

And now? Now I’ve truly broken my promise to my missing father. Maybe it’s a blessing he’s gone, that he can’t see where I’ve ended up.

I’m sunk into the bloody mess of the Rite up to my eyeballs.

CHAPTER 6



KANE

My sigh echoes around the stone chamber, one of the few truly private areas at the Blood Rite, so far off the beaten path of the rest of the compound that I'm not sure anyone but our team knows about it. We can leave the compound, as one of the oldest teams here, we've earned that, but the Blood Council monitors us when we're off the grounds.

"Tell me what Luna looks like. I will send Red and Conall after her while I get you settled in." I hate that I had to pull the threads of her memories apart to get her to cooperate. I should have looked harder at the love-tinged strands in her mind that led to this Luna, but I couldn't bring myself to violate her mind any more than I had to.

"She has red hair. She's missing a leg." Gabrielle, Bri, sniffs and I squint at her. "I hate to think that something bad has happened to her. I hate it."

"She's missing a leg?" I repeat, my eyebrows lifting.

"Yes, and she's sensitive about it, so don't be a dick. You know what, just take me with you. Let me go. She trusts me." Her expression switches so quickly from irritation to huge, pleading eyes, I nearly get whiplash. Luminous green eyes stare into mine, long red-brown lashes fluttering.

I clear my throat. "You won't be able to leave the Crimson City until the Council grants you permission."

"Crimson City?" Her gorgeous face twists into a scowl, her light brown freckles wrinkling as she screws up her nose in irritation.

She's amusing. Fickle and fierce and feisty. I shouldn't like that she's trying to manipulate me, but damn if it isn't refreshing.

"It's the name for the compound here. The Blood Rite arena, the houses and village, the Blood Council Headquarters

—” I gesture all around us. “Everything here is the Crimson City.”

“I guess if you’re going to go with a theme, go all in.” She rolls her eyes. “Real original.”

When was the last time a woman looked at me with something besides fear?

My heart speeds up, and I clear my throat. Thick wooden beams hold up a sagging thatched roof and I stare at them, like maybe they can give me some additional support.

I shouldn’t feel anything but protective and friendly towards this little spitfire of a human.

I definitely shouldn’t be feeling the beginning of an interest that’s way past friendly.

No. I want to sink my teeth into the smooth, creamy column of her neck as I claim her for my own. Rut her. Take her in the primal way only vampires can.

This could be a problem.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, clearly sensing my shift in mood. My canines elongate, pressing further into my bottom lip.

Good. Maybe the pain will distract me from my dark desires.

“Nothing. Anything else you can tell me about your ward?” I flinch at the old-fashioned word, but maybe that’s better. I need to remember how ancient I am. I need to remember how young she is, how inexperienced.

I hope it’s a ward... or a friend. Anything but a romantic partner.

“She has orange hair. She’ll put up a fight if you don’t take me with you.” Her tone turns wheedling again.

“Orange hair and one leg. She likes to fight,” I repeat.

She tosses her hair over one shoulder, the blues and greens from the stained-glass window playing across her face.

“I didn’t say she had one leg. I said she was *missing* a leg.” Her lips form a thin line, her expression mutinous once again.

Adorable. I’m hit with a sudden pang of excitement at the thought of training her. At having her on our team.

And it should feel like a betrayal of Diego’s memory, it *should* feel like I’m sullyng his position on the team.

Diego is gone. Dead. Murdered.

This Bri... she is a breath of fresh air, and my pleasure in her attitude and appearance doesn’t feel like a betrayal, not at all.

It feels like... hope.

I run my tongue down my teeth, trying to parse her words and think past my powerful surge of emotions.

“How many... legs does she have?” I finally ask.

“Three.”

“Three legs,” I repeat. “Is Luna... a dog?”

“A cat.”

Incredulous, I blow out a breath, running a hand through my hair. “You want me to send our team out for a cat?”

She glowers at me. Magic builds around her but fizzles out.

“Yes.” It’s said with such authority, brooking no argument, that I wonder at it for a moment—at her bond to this animal.

Maybe I should have rummaged around in her brain a bit more.

“We’ll do it,” I tell her, and she tilts her head at me, as though waiting for more.

“You... will?” Her eyes narrow to slits.

I grin at her, my fangs fully out. “On one condition.”

She sighs, resigned, slumping back against the stone chair. “Of course you have a condition.”

I advance, leaning down so close that my nose nearly grazes her forehead. An herbal fragrance caresses my senses, heady and sweet: rosemary, thyme and honey. My eyes shut for a moment and I inhale deeply, trying to focus before speaking again.

“That’s the name of the game here, Gabrielle.” I say her full name, just to see the fight that flickers through those green eyes. “The Blood Rite isn’t your tiny tea shop back in New Philly. This isn’t the world you’re used to. Everything is built on conditions, on terms, and fairness doesn’t matter here at all. Staying alive is what matters.”

She tilts her chin up, defiant, even though I detect a slight change in her scent.

Fear.

I back up immediately, though the rational part of me knows this is a good thing. She should fear me. It will be easier for me to keep my distance from this tempting morsel of a human if she is afraid of me.

“The condition is that we retrieve your,” I pause, the ridiculousness of it washing over me, “cat, and you stop fighting us. You let us train you, you let us show you how to stay alive here.”

“I’m not an idiot.” There’s bite to the words, and damn me, I respond to it.

I want this little witch.

“I want to stay alive, too,” she finishes, glaring at me.

“Good,” I say quietly.

“My odds were much better where I was, though.”

“You don’t strike me as a fool,” I bite out. “You don’t strike me as the type of woman who would look at a dead body in an alley and claim you were safer where you were. Now you have four males ready to protect you at every turn. You’re one of us now, like it or not.”

She blows out a breath.

For a moment, we lapse into silence, the beat of her heart loud in the quiet stone room. Outside, a bird trills, rustling through the leaves of the trees overhead.

“Fine. Get me settled in, then,” she tosses her hair again, her lush lips pinched thin.

I smile, unable to stop the pleasure flooding through me.

I like the thought of getting her settled in here, with me, with us, much more than I should.

CHAPTER 7



RED

Everything about this is fucked. Every last stupid fucking detail is a goddamn mess. The monster inside me rages, spurred by my own out-of-check emotions.

“A fucking cat,” I mutter under my breath. Smoke singses my nostrils and I growl low in my throat, a warning rumble.

Conall places a heavy hand on my shoulder, and I bare my teeth at him.

“You can’t tell me you think this is a good idea,” I snarl at him.

Stinking refuse dots the disgusting alleyway where the female lived.

“I think anything we can do to help get the lass on our side as fast as possible is a good idea. If it’s bringing her pet back to the Crimson City, then that is the least we can do, my old friend.” The half-giant’s Scottish accent is thicker than normal.

My teeth grind together in frustration.

“It’s too bad that there aren’t more mages out here for you to kill, I think,” Conall says, squeezing my shoulder once before letting me go. “Ye’ve got quite the temper to spend.”

“I’ll spend it in the ring with the newbie,” I manage.

She’s too pretty. Too naïve. Too young and breakable.

Claws split my fingernails, and I fist my hands into balls, blood welling where my claws bite into my palms.

“Ye should be careful with the lass,” Conall chides me, pinning me with a knowing look. The half-giant’s too observant for my liking. In the ring, in the thick of the Blood Rite, it’s a good thing.

Not so much in this dingy alley where we’re on a pet rescue mission for the new, too-soft member of our team.

“You can’t deny she has power,” he continues as we stride down the filthy corridor. It reeks of refuse. “You saw what she summoned.”

“I don’t have to do shit,” I bark, rounding on him. A bottle rolls in front of me, and I smash it with my boot. Power flares around me, and I jerk my head left and right, resisting the change that would ruin the walls around me.

Conall simply watches me, his icy-blue eyes sympathetic.

“We’re going to get her killed. Just like Diego. If he, a highly trained mage, couldn’t protect himself, what chance do we stand with a little thing like this Bri woman?”

I like the way her name tastes on my tongue. My beast likes it, too.

It’s been far too long since I’ve been around a woman. Since I’ve had a woman.

I don’t have time for a weakness like that.

None of us do, and she’s going to be a distraction. A dangerous one, even for the four of us monsters.

“What happened to Diego wasn’t our fault. Or his fault.” Conall’s voice echoes off the walls, rumbling through the alley. “The bastards responsible for his murder will pay.”

I growl in assent.

“In the meantime, we will do our best to protect and nurture our new member,” he continues.

I roll my eyes. “The only thing I’ll nurture is her desire to hit me.”

“We’ll see,” Conall says agreeably.

We stop in front of a dented metal door. Paint flakes off it, revealing remnants of runic writing, and my frown deepens at the sight.

At one point at least, someone here knew enough magic to scribble a barrier spell on the door. Not that a ward like that would do anything to stop *us*. But it would make her much, much harder to find.

“Ye see that too?” Conall asks.

I grunt my assent.

Conall doesn't even bother with the lock. Locks and wards are of no consequence to the half frost giant. The door moans in protest as he pushes on it, then falls inward. I hold my breath as dust rains down from the jamb, the faint scent of vanilla and orange tickling my nostrils. The much stronger aroma of cat whips by me, and that's the only warning we get before an orange ball of hissing fur launches itself at us.

A deep laugh interrupts the spitting creature, and Conall grins down at the three-legged fiend he's managed to catch mid-flight. It growls at him, and despite my irritation at this waste of time, I fight a smile at how royally pissed off it is.

“What an angry wee beastie ye are,” Conall says, chuckling in amusement as it rakes claws across his forearm.

It fixes me with a baleful stare, white-tipped tail flicking back and forth in irritation.

“Let's go,” I say shortly.

“Yer not curious about what sort of lass this Gabrielle is?” He raises a red eyebrow at me. “We could take a look around, you know. See if there's anything else she might want to have back at our quarters.”

The cat registers his anger with a low growl, finishing the sound with a spitting hiss we both ignore.

“What's the point? She's ours now, anyway. Or will be, as soon as she goes through with the Blood Bond. Makes no difference to me.” It's a lie, though. As soon as I've said it, we both recognize it for what it is.

I'm curious about the woman, more curious than I've been in a long time.

Her apartment is cramped but clean, spartan and threadbare all at once. It's clear that she's not used to much, and I push down memories of my own.

There's no time to dwell on the past. A shiver rolls down my spine, familiar pain blossoming in its wake.

“He said she was untrained,” I rumble, my head shaking from side to side, the movement involuntary.

“No need to ask if ye feel it too, then,” Conall says. He eyes me, the cat still held aloft. “Steady on, brother. If ye shift in here, there will be hell to pay.”

“I have control,” I grit out, keeping the monster at bay.

Barely.

“Any ideas about what it is?” Conall’s nostrils flare, like he’s scenting something. The magic, whatever it is, is potent. Old. Ancient. “Is it possible the lass duped Kane?”

“No,” I manage. “To both questions. Kane is the best blood mage I’ve ever seen. No one can trick him.”

“It’s not so much fooling him I’m worried about,” Conall says. A vein ticks on the side of his forehead and he stoops further, his form growing slightly under the pressure the magic’s exerting on both of us.

We share a look.

“You know he hates using that magic.” It comes out a rasp, the words clawing out of my throat, a throat that’s barely staying human. Adrenaline floods my system, and claws threaten to puncture my fingertips again. “He’s too gentle. He’s gone soft in his old age.”

“How close are you to shifting?”

“Close enough,” I growl, the words hard to form.

“Stay here,” Conall commands, thrusting the cat into my arms.

The cat takes one look at my blown, now inhuman pupils and immediately quiets, his own pupils narrowing to slits.

I shiver again, magic riding me hard, trying to force the change.

Conall shoots me a concerned look, his brow larger, more pronounced than it was moments ago, the giant half of him threatening to explode out.

He's always had better control than me, though, and I nod at him once, trying to signal that I'm fine. He gives me a last once-over before stomping off, the floor shuddering under each step.

My teeth grind together, elongating, too big for my mouth.

I am anything but fine.

Breathing. I need to focus on breathing. I need to focus on not ripping the head off the terrified, three-legged feline in my arms simply because the monster inside me is suddenly screaming for blood.

A water stain on the ceiling resembles a fallen tree, and I breathe and stare at it.

"Found it," Conall calls, the words guttural and strained.

A half-second later, Conall's crisp brand of magic breezes through the dingy house, icy and familiar, and all the more calming for it.

"Secured," he grunts, and the small apartment seems to shiver as the magic needling my senses dissipates.

I breathe in deeply, and this time, the monster inside me goes back to sleep, the pain and pressure receding instantly. The cat still stares up at me with terrified eyes, stiff as a board against my chest.

"We're not going to be friends, are we?" I ask it, then immediately feel like an idiot. The cat can't understand me, and I don't give a fuck if it likes me or not.

Now that the magic trying to force the change is gone, I study the small, decrepit apartment the new "addition" to our team's been living in. Floral wallpaper peels from the walls, the perfect companion to the water stain on the ceiling. There's a plastic folding table, clean, the kitchen likewise clean if in sore need of repair. Several cabinet doors hang slightly open, as though the hinges don't quite work.

There's a large stack of books on the floor next to a threadbare chair, and I frown at them as the cat rumbles against me.

I glance down at it in surprise.

Not growling.

Purring.

“Seems the wee beastie’s taken a liking to you, eh, Red?” Conall says, appearing down the hallway. “Her bedroom isn’t much better than the rest of this place.”

“A dump,” I say, ignoring his comment about the damned cat.

He scratches his beard, mouth twisting to the side.

“Cannae argue with that,” he finally announces.

My attention trips on the object in his free hand, and he follows my gaze, holding it up.

“It’s a book.”

“I see that,” I tell him.

He chuckles. “Looks like a history book.”

“It’s spelled?”

“Aye, glamoured to look normal. It’s a good glamour, too. I need some time to peel it back.”

“Lucian can do it when we get back.” The demon’s the best at that kind of spell work. It’ll be child’s play to him.

“Aye.” The giant’s face is troubled though, and I have a feeling I know why.

“Kane’s going soft in his old age,” I repeat.

“Could be.” Conall doesn’t seem convinced, though.

I watch him, waiting for him to elaborate.

He sighs and shifts on his feet, his attention wandering over the squalid apartment. “The question is whether or not the woman knew what this was, and whether or not she is capable of hiding something from our vampire.”

“That’s two questions,” I tell him, letting both ideas roll over me. “Considering the way we found Diego’s body, I think we better find the answers quickly.”

“Aye.” Conall’s crystal-blue gaze finds mine, and he nods. “Things are only going to get more dangerous, and I refuse to lose another brother.”

I try to respond, but the right words won’t come.

So I dip my chin in agreement, and we walk the short way back to the portal at the end of the alley in silence.

CHAPTER 8



LUCIAN

The woman, Gabrielle, is a breath of much needed fresh air. Kane and I are careful to keep her sandwiched between us. Her grass-green gaze soaks in everything, and it's easy to see there's a quick, careful intelligence behind her disarmingly pretty eyes.

It's a long walk from the abandoned stone cabin in the woods to the main training facility, and though her breath grows shorter the faster we push her, she never complains or slows down.

"So, Bri," I begin, letting my tongue linger on her sweet little human nickname, "tell me about yourself."

"No," she says shortly, not even bothering to glance my way.

My grin gets wider. I love a challenge, and I have a feeling this woman is going to be a real fucking challenge.

"Well," I say, bending slightly and sniffing her gorgeous mane of bright, unruly hair. "I can tell you a few things about yourself, if you prefer."

The only sign she's heard me is a slight, annoyed exhalation.

Gods below, I *love* women. I missed this. The conquests I've had here at the Blood Rite over the centuries have been many, and often, but they lost their luster just as quickly as females hopped in and out of my bed. My grin broadens and my skin ripples, shifting red under the human skin I wear.

"You smell like a dessert," I drawl, and she rolls her eyes. "You smell like something I'd like to curl up to and feast on. Taste all your secret parts. Don't worry, moya morkovka, I would make it good for you."

"Gross," she says, and I laugh out loud, delighted.

"Stop." Kane glares at me over her head, his fangs clear against his lower lip.

I cock an eyebrow at him, immediately interested. “Oh, Kane, my vampiric brother, is it possible that you wish to taste our little carrot cake, too?”

His pupils blow, taking over his entire eye, turning them jet-black.

“Well, that is interesting,” I say softly, smiling to myself. “You know, Kane, I never have minded sharing, so if you want to help me truly welcome moya morkovka to the Rite, two can really be better than—”

“Will you shut the fuck up?” Bri says, her hands flying to her hips as she stops. A bird takes flight overhead, large enough to cast a shadow over her pretty little heart-shaped face.

“I can be quiet, as long as you’re moaning,” I tell her, inordinately pleased at her temper. I *love* a woman with a temper.

“Alright, here’s the thing, my dudes.” She casts me a scathing look, and my cock immediately gets hard at the fire in her eyes. “You are not going to sexually harass me. You are not going to talk to me like I’m a fucking blow-up doll.”

“What’s that?” I ask, distracted. “A blow-up doll?”

Kane appears equally perplexed.

“Seriously?” She throws her hands up in the air, a patchy burn scar on her wrist marring her creamy skin. “It’s... you know, it’s a thing that some men have, you know, because they can’t, you know...” She falters, clearly at odds with how to describe it. “Never mind. You know what? Here’s the thing, asshole—”

“Lucian,” I correct her, grinning wide. “You should know my name so you can scream it when you’re under—”

“Asshole,” she continues, her cheeks blooming red with fury. “You stole me away to your stupid Blood Rite, and you’re going to force me to fight with you, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let you treat me like a shiny new sex toy, you fucking weirdo.”

I let my skin shift, turning bright red again, my horns growing out of my hair. The demon I truly am showing now.

She doesn't back down, though, just glares at me.

I fucking love it.

"I like her," I tell Kane. He rolls his eyes. I turn my attention back to her. "I could be *your* sex toy, if you prefer, moya morkovka."

"I am not having sex with you, and if you talk about it again, I'll cut your nuts off."

"They'll grow back," I tell her cheerfully. "That sounds fun."

"What the fuck?" she asks, glancing at Kane.

"Demon," he replies, shrugging one shoulder. "Lucian, don't pester her about sex." His voice takes on a low, soothing quality, infused with magic. The vampire's magic doesn't work on me, but my eyes widen slightly in surprise all the same.

Kane feels protective of the woman.

"Well, well, well," I say as we continue walking. "That is a fascinating development. We have a little morsel of carrot cake and I'm not the only one who wants to take a bite." I laugh at my own joke.

Kane's hand wraps around my throat, so fast I didn't even sense him moving.

I blink, too shocked to react.

"Do not disrespect her," he rasps. "We need her alive and happy," he continues, his black gaze boring into mine. "We need a fifth—her—to win and stay alive. Don't be an idiot."

I grin at him and he releases my throat, my feet touching the ground.

Gabrielle wraps her arms around her chest, hugging herself.

“Apologies, moya morkovka,” I tell her, sweeping into a grand bow. “I promise to try my best to be an absolute gentleman. A true princely ambassador from the realm of hell, above reproach.”

She purses her lips, and I am blown away with the need to touch them, to see if they’re as soft as they look. Instead, I just grin at her.

Now, more than ever, I’m invested in keeping her alive. I’m a demon. I don’t truly care about any of these males who call themselves my brothers. I’m only here because the demon realm owed the Blood Council a debt. I make the Council money, spill my blood when the fight calls for it, and all the while the demons pay their debt and get rid of a spare heir to the throne of the hell realm. Annoyance surfaces at thoughts of the ancient betrayal.

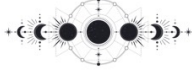
I can hardly work up the energy to be more than annoyed or amused anymore. In fact, I was more annoyed than anything when Diego was murdered. My so-called brothers were bereft... until this morning, when we went to scoop up this female to add to our team. Now, though? Now they seem focused. Ready.

This little spitfire of a woman intrigues me. I watch her walk, her gait long and graceful, her profile striking beneath those red, red locks. She will be a diverting conquest.

Moya morkovka will want me in time.

Females always do.

CHAPTER 9



BRI

My head's practically spinning. I'm hungry and thirsty and my damn feet ache, every step reminding me that working at a slow tea shop on my feet all day does not, in fact, prepare me to hike through the wilderness with a couple of monsters.

There's no way in hell I'm about to let either of these two have the satisfaction of knowing that. A cool breeze sifts through the pine needles, and I lift my hot face to it, letting it wash over my skin. Kane's gaze darts to me, his expression inscrutable. I ignore him and keep moving.

Does he guess I'm exhausted? Does he care?

Is he reading my mind right now?

Rationally, I understand why he did what he did. Still, I'm not sure I believe what he said about my thoughts. No matter what, he violated my mind. How do I know I can believe him? Besides, I can't decide whether to be grateful to him for stopping Lucian from making lewd remarks to me or freaked out about the way he acted. Both? I shake my head. Either way, I'm emotionally and physically drained.

I take another step, wincing as the skin on the back of my heel tears even more. Blisters from hell to go alongside a demon. The perfect pairing.

"Alright there, little human?" the demon currently known as Asshole asks, and I resist the urge to stomp on his foot. Kane is polite, at least. Chivalrous, even, if I can believe anything he says.

Lucian, AKA Asshole? Total turd nugget, which is to be expected of a demon and, if I can believe him, an actual prince from the hell realm.

"I can carry you, if you like," he purrs at me, and I can't hold in a sigh so massive I'm half-surprised a flock of birds doesn't take flight at the sound. He crosses his arms over his

massive chest, forcing the material of his shirt to stretch thin over his pecs.

Focus, Bri.

“I would not like,” I tell him. “I’m fine.”

“I can tell by the way you’re walking that your feet are hurting,” Asshole says.

I glare at him. “Touch me and you’ll regret it. I’ve had a shitty day.”

“No, I won’t.” He smiles down at me, one eyebrow cocked.

Asshole is enjoying this. I turn towards him, my field completely barren of fucks to give. All out! Fresh out of fucks.

“You know what?!” I point my finger at his fake-human handsome face, but I don’t get much further.

“He’s right,” Kane interrupts. “I can tell you’re in pain, too. And if I can tell, everyone at the Crimson City will know too. You can limp in on your own, or I can carry you until we get to the point you need to pretend to be strong. You don’t want to show weakness. We can’t afford for you to make that mistake.”

I open my mouth to reject his offer, taking another step out of sheer stubbornness. And cringe, because damn, stopping was a bad idea. Now the open blisters feel even worse. Every heartbeat sends a shockwave of annoying pain to my feet.

“Well?” Kane presses, his brow creased in a perfect approximation of concern. “Can I help you, or do you want your first impression on the monsters who will want your blood in the arena to be one of weakness?”

I throw my hands up in frustration. “Can’t you heal me or something?”

“That’s Conall’s gift, among others. No, you’re stuck with blood magic and demonic magic. That is, unless you want me to use my spell work to turn you into a little puppet.” Lucian leers over me, his skin rippling from human to demon, red washing over it. “You won’t feel a thing if you let me control

you like that. You'll love it." His eyes flash and I swallow hard, freaked out and disgusted by equal turns.

Lucian means it, too. He would turn me into his little human puppet if I said the word. Maybe even if I don't. What the *fuck* have I gotten myself into?

My dad was right. My dad was so right about these monsters in the Rite, the Blood Rite itself, the Blood Council, and while I always believed him... believing isn't the same as seeing. Not even close.

I turn to Kane abruptly. He's staring down at me with an expression so full of longing that I almost reconsider. Is he hungry? Better being a snack than a puppet, though.

"Carry me," I tell him. "But don't be weird about it."

"I won't be," he promises.

His hands cup the side of my head, and my eyes go wide with shock. "What the hell are you doing—"

He braids my hair out of my face with quick, efficient fingers, letting the loose ends trail over my shoulder.

I close my mouth with a snap as Lucian huffs in irritation behind me.

"It will keep your hair out of my eyes," he murmurs quietly.

A shiver that has nothing to do with fear runs down my spine, and I find I can't quite look away from him, from the sincerity in his gaze. What the hell is wrong with me? Maybe he did fuck with my emotions while he was rummaging through my memories.

Blood magic isn't something to be trifled with. Everyone knows that, even the non-magical humans. Doesn't mean they didn't try though, not after the old order fell, throwing the world into political upheaval as magical society forced its hand all those years ago, before I was born. Those who played around with blood magic after the Rift learned real fast that was a bad idea.

“I’m picking you up now,” Kane says softly, his breath washing over my cheek as he lifts me easily into a bridal carry.

He’s warm. I didn’t expect that. I always thought vampires were cold, like dead things should be. He’s not. He’s warm, nearly hot to the touch. If I had to guess, he’s several degrees warmer than I am. In fact, nothing about him tracks. He’s out in the sun, so whatever that myth has to do with vampires, it isn’t true for him.

“Let’s go,” he tells Lucian, and before I can react, they’re moving.

Way faster than my pitiful plodding in my uncomfortable, cheap work sneakers. Of course they can run fast. They’re fucking monsters, immortal too, if I remember anything about the Blood Rite correctly.

I’ve spent so long staying as far away as I could from the magical world. It seemed like a good idea... until now.

“How long has Team Nightworth been at the Blood Rite?” I blurt out the question before I have a chance to think better of it.

Kane doesn’t look at me, but his chiseled features darken as he continues running through the forest, the game trail so tangled with greenery it’s hardly there at all. A branch whips by, but he catches it before it can hit me.

“Since the beginning,” Lucian answers from behind Kane. “Not all of us, though. Some of us were replacements for the original members.”

Since the beginning... The Blood Rite started, in public, at least, when the world fell to shit and the magical powerhouses claimed there was a massive threat to our world and took over... well, everything. Like everyone else, I watched the news from those years in history class. It was chaos.

Then they instituted the Blood Rite, they said, as a way to keep our world, our realm, one of seven, separate from each other. The worst criminal magic users were thrown into the arena, along with magic users whose power was so great that

they were deemed a threat to both the normal population and the barriers between realms.

Kane's hands tighten on my waist and thigh, and fresh awareness of his body swirls through me.

"Don't you have cars? Does everyone just walk everywhere?" I ask through gritted teeth, annoyed at my body's response to him all over again. *Please, please, please just be some lingering side effect of being bitten. Please, please stop soon.*

"We don't have cars, Gabrielle," he says, his voice soothing. "We use magic to get around. We used magic to get you here."

"Then why can't we just portal to wherever it is we're going?"

"I can carry you, if you prefer, moya morkovka," Lucian calls out from behind us.

I close my mouth and seethe silently from Kane's arms, like an angry bag of potatoes.

"The reason we didn't portal you straight to our quarters is because we wanted privacy. We didn't want to alert everyone that you were here until we felt fully able to control the situation."

"To control me, you mean."

"Is that an offer?" Lucian pipes up. "I would be more than happy to—"

"Eat shit," I tell him primly. "So why don't we just portal in now?"

"He doesn't want to attract attention, like he just said, Carrot Cake."

Carrot Cake? Argh!

"Lucian, that *does* sound like shit in your mouth. Now shut it." Sassing an ancient demon probably isn't the smartest move, but I never claimed to be exceptionally brilliant.

The demon just laughs and laughs. Even Kane seems slightly amused at my bitchiness, flashing a hint of white fang at me as they continue running along the overgrown excuse for a path.

“So you think if you portal me in, some other... team... will be waiting to... do something? To me?” None of this makes much sense, and I sigh in annoyance.

“We decided this was the best way to get you to our quarters—your new home—safely.” Kane’s voice has taken on a growly quality that reverberates through where my chest presses up against his. “We will take you to the Council for the Blood Bond, once you’re cleaned up.”

I start to ask what’s wrong with what I’m wearing, but seeing as how there’s a crusty tea bag stuck to my jeans and my dirty work apron is still tied around my waist, I shut my mouth.

“We could have portaled you in,” Lucian says cheerily. “Kane wanted to make a statement.”

“Hold your tongue, demon prince,” Kane snarls, the urbane mask gone.

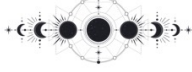
My eyes go wide at the sight, red rings burning around his pupils, his teeth lengthening even further. I press my lips into a thin line, not wanting to say anything to invoke his wrath.

What kind of fucking statement is he trying to make?

If he wanted me to appear strong, I’m not sure carrying me in screams “I’m a badass bitch!” but who am I to judge?

Mist curls around my feet where they hang from Kane’s elbow, and it’s the only warning I get before we’re plunged into darkness.

CHAPTER 10



KANE

Dark mist swirls all around us. Lucian steps closer to me, his arm on my bicep to let me know he's there.

If this were natural, I would be able to see through it, see the trees and brambles that conceal the path to the old stone house on the best of days.

Wariness stings across my skin, my fangs lengthening to their fullest, most lethal point. Gabrielle's honey-sweet scent fills my nostrils, and I refuse to put her down until I know she's safe. Regret saws through me, diamond-tipped razors of it, at the fact that we are the ones who have put her in this position. She's as vulnerable now as a babe in the woods.

We have to protect her.

"My, my, my... What do we have here?" A smug voice rings through the fog, and irritation chases the pit of fear away. "A small human female, so weak that she must be carried? This... this pitiful thing is the new member of Team Nightworth?" He clucks his tongue, and five shapes appear in the slowly dissipating mist.

"You look terrible, Slade," Lucian says easily, his hands in his pockets, his stance casual. He's anything but casual. He's a moment away from violence. Good.

Gabrielle's fear scent clogs my nostrils, making my heart beat faster, a primal urge rising to murder these fools that think to threaten her. Strange. I should be the more even-tempered between the two of us, but here I am, wanting nothing more than to rip the throats from Slade and Team Heaven's Leech. Coat my tongue and teeth with their blood until my thirst is slaked and their power is mine.

I shake my head, trying to clear it.

This isn't like me.

Gabrielle squirms in my arms, and realization punches me in the gut. *She's* what's triggered this feral change.

“Cat got your tongue?” Slade asks, his rat-like face pinched in an ugly sneer. “I can’t wait to meet you in the arena and rip all your pretty little plaything’s fingers off, one by one. I’ll scalp her and hang that hair up behind my bed so I can touch it while I—”

“Yep,” Gabrielle says, sighing. She trembles slightly in my arms, and her fear scent still tickles my nostrils, but she stares at Slade, seemingly unfazed. “That’s what I thought. Overcompensating. Men like you are a dime a dozen.”

Lucian snorts a laugh, stepping slightly in front of where I hold Gabrielle, trying to protect her, too.

“Bitch,” Slade spits, practically foaming at the mouth.

“Original.” Gabrielle sighs, twirling a strand of hair around her finger. She’s got backbone, I’ll give her that. Especially since I can sense how terrified she truly is. “Don’t strain yourself trying to think of something clever to say. We’ll wait.”

Slade snarls, claws extending from his knuckles, blood dripping in their wake.

I squeeze her thigh and waist with my hands, trying to hush her. Heaven’s Leech is a formidable opponent, and while I wouldn’t worry too much about them hurting Lucian or me, Gabrielle throws a wrench in all of that.

The thought of her being hurt by Slade makes my stomach turn.

“What do you want?” I ask, my voice vibrating with barely leashed wrath.

“We wanted to see your new team member. Wanted to see if she’s going to last a minute in the arena, or if she’s just going to paint the sand red.” Slade licks his lips, his eyes flaring blue-green in the dim light. “All that red, red hair, soaked in blood.”

Shadows crawl across her bare arms, but Gabrielle doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t do anything but scowl.

“Good girl,” I tell her softly.

A quiet intake of breath is the only sign she's heard me.

“You want to know why I'm carrying her? It's not because she's weak. Would a vampire primal take a weak mate?” The truth of the words sears my tongue.

I can't take it back now.

Not even if I wanted to.

Gabrielle stiffens in my arms, then goes completely loose, like she's trying to control herself. Desire unfurls through me, blossoming like a poison flower.

I want to make her do that again.

CHAPTER II



BRI

The five men, members of Heaven's Leech, which has to be the stupidest name I've ever heard, take a collective step back. They aren't all as massive and muscled as Team Nightworth, but there's something more chilling about them, with their knife-hewn features and beady eyes.

My throat bobs as I swallow, processing what Kane just said.

Making myself smile at Kane's strange declaration and acting like this is nothing new, I flutter my eyelashes at the other team.

Like whatever being his mate *means* is no big deal.

Maybe this was all part of his plan. Declare me off limits, pretend to be mated while I get caught up on how to... kill in the arena. My stomach churns. How has my life turned into this?

"I doubt she'll last much longer than Diego did, mate or not. And then you'll go mad when you lose her." Slade grins at us, and it's an ugly look. "Losing two blood-bound members in one year? It will be too much."

Kane's hands tighten around me to the point of pain.

I need to say something. I need to keep up whatever this gambit is.

Slade opens his mouth like he's about to say something idiotic yet again, but I cut him off before he gets a chance.

"Got a problem with that?" I cock my head to the side. "Everyone knows you don't get between a primal vampire and his mate." I say it completely matter-of-fact, like my legs aren't shaking like a bowl full of jelly, like I'm not about to throw up all over them.

Maybe that would make them hesitate, though, if I just started projectile vomiting everywhere. The thought makes me laugh, and it comes out high-pitched and feral.

Unhinged. A little bit scary. Slade blinks at me in confusion.

Perfect!

“That’s what we thought,” Lucian drawls, insouciance dripping from every word as he steps towards the other team. “You know as well as we do that a *primal* vampire with a new mate is deadlier than ever. So don’t make him prove it. You know the Blood Council won’t approve of any off-Rite deaths. All sacrifice must take place on consecrated sand, after all.” Lucian twirls a wicked-looking dagger in his hand, and when he glances back at us, he wears a crazed smile, like he wants to stab them all.

He’s a demon. Maybe he does. Hell, maybe he should.

Slade snaps his fingers, clearly out of witty comebacks, and darkness surrounds the five members of Team Heaven’s Leech.

I blink as sunlight streams back in.

They’re gone, gone as if they’d never been there.

My heart’s hammering against my chest, adrenaline flooding my entire body. Primal vampire. His mate?

Surely not. Surely it was just a way to get them to back off.

I open my mouth, but Kane shoots me a look so furious that I clam up.

“Not a word. Not until we get back to our quarters. Nod if you understand.” His fangs press against his lower lip, so large his speech is slightly slurred.

I nod once, my eyes huge. He doesn’t look human at all, not anymore. Burgundy veins, wine-red and bulging, discolor the skin around his eyes, streaking all the way down his throat, where they disappear into the collar of his shirt.

I should have stayed in bed today.



knew the Blood Rite compound was huge—I’ve seen it for years when they stream the games in bars and restaurants around New Philly: the magic footage shot from above, usually by fairies, showing the castle-like compound and surrounding forests, the verdant plains and crystal-clear waterfalls that ring the housing and training facility.

There’s a big difference between seeing something on a small screen at a bar and experiencing it in real life, though.

Awe makes my heart beat faster as we finally make it to the core of the Crimson City. Weathered grey stone and red brick buildings line the cobblestone streets, and festive red garlands stream between lamp posts. The housing area is mostly clear, and I nearly ask why before I realize it’s because everyone who lives here is probably training right now.

So they don’t die in the arena.

Kane’s grip on me is unfaltering. I assumed he would put me down, as he said he would, so I could limp my way to my new home.

I guess he’s gone all-in on the “mates” thing, though, because he shows no inclination to let me walk.

Lucian keeps pace with us, strolling just in front of me, all loose limbs and elegant strides, though the way his gaze keeps darting back to me tells me he’s anything but relaxed.

That makes two of us.

Kane keeps walking, his steps echoing as he strides to a massive, gothic-inspired stone house at the end of the street. A plaque over the heavy wood doors is engraved, and I squint at it for a minute.

HOUSE NIGHTWORTH

“This is where you live?” The words come out too loudly.

Kane merely chuckles, pushing the thick wooden doors open.

My jaw drops, my attention everywhere all at once.

Kane sets me on my aching feet, and Lucian closes the doors behind us.

Toto, we aren't in Kansas anymore. This place is *incredible*. It's a far cry from the slum I live in—for one, there's no graffiti anywhere, and I doubt they have troubles with timely garbage pickup.

A heavy wrought-iron chandelier hangs overhead in the entryway, casting warm light all around us. Flowers in a cut crystal vase stretch towards it in vivid crimsons and deep purples. A soft, thick rug covers the polished wood floors, and I have the strangest urge to take my shoes off and sink my feet in it.

Kane holds up a hand. "Sweep it, Lucian."

Heat trickles across my skin, and I stare at Lucian in fascination as shimmering waves of power flood from his fingertips. The power dances up the double curved staircases, shifting and shimmering as it floats through the landing and seeps into the stone walls.

"I guess you didn't mean with a broom." I wrap my arms around myself, trying to absorb it all.

"Lucian's specialty is spell work and anti-magic," Kane says, like I have a clue what anti-magic means. I am woefully unprepared for this.

"I'm looking for magical spies," Lucian tells me cheerily, winking at me. He snaps his fingers and glittery red dust appears down the hallway that stretches beneath the staircases. "Got one."

I shift on my feet and immediately regret it. Wincing, I suck in a pained breath. Damn blisters. Stupid cheap shoes. They stand out against the grandeur of the home, along with my dirty apron and threadbare pants.

I look out of place.

I *am* out of place.

"Welcome to your new home," Kane says. "As a member of Team Nightworth, you'll be afforded all the luxuries we've

earned from our sponsors over the years.”

That’s right. I’d forgotten the powerful magic families like to sponsor teams. It’s all a bullshit PR move, but right now, I can’t help but be a teensy bit grateful for it, considering what a major upgrade it is from my shitty apartment back in New Philly.

“And as your mate?” Lucian asks lightly, a flicker of something feral darting through his eyes.

Another small explosion sounds from upstairs, but neither of the monsters beside me bother looking up.

As for me, I stand there frozen, completely at a loss for words. Any bravery I felt today has long since been sapped from me, and now that I’m hopefully safe and mostly sound in this new... palace? I’m ready to collapse.

“I said what had to be said,” Kane answers. “Heaven’s Leech wouldn’t have stopped without a good reason.”

I plop to the floor, sinking my head into my hands. “So now, on top of everything else— training, fighting for my life, figuring out my fucking magic—I have to pretend to be mated to you?”

“Will it really be such a hardship?” Lucian says, his tone light and teasing. When I glance up at him, his eyes are anything but teasing. No sooner do I have that thought, though, than he glances down at me, all smiles.

“You will share my quarters,” Kane grits out.

“No way,” I blurt out, tugging one of my shoes off. I sigh in relief, and both males go still.

“What?” I ask, my gaze darting between them, hackles immediately up at their sudden alertness. “I’m not sleeping with anyone but my cat,” I add.

“You didn’t tell us your feet were in such bad shape,” Kane rasps, a muscle in his temple twitching.

“You can’t hide these things from us,” Lucian bites out, as irritated as I’ve seen the demon prince, all vestiges of his good humor gone. “Your safety is paramount.”

I wrinkle my nose, perplexed. “They’re blisters. It’s not a big deal.”

“Every wound on your flesh matters at the Blood Rite,” Kane says, his teeth growing larger again. “Every wound.”

Lucian grips his bicep, but Kane shrugs him off with a slight shake of his head.

“What is the matter with the wee lass?” A familiar brogue interrupts the tense moment, and a crisp, peppermint aroma floods my senses. “She’s nae hurt already, is she?”

“Just blisters from walking here,” I say mildly, turning to face the giant. Despite his rugged appearance, his face is handsome and open, even kind.

Red stalks past me, not even sparing me a glance, but I don’t care because curled up happily around Conall’s thick neck is an orange, three-legged ball of fur.

“Luna,” I yell, scrambling back up to my aching feet. Relief and pleasure mingle as I crow soft nonsense at her, and I don’t even realize I’m chest-to-chest, er, stomach, with the massive Conall until his breath gusts over the top of my head.

“Just a wee thing,” he murmurs, gently detaching the cat from his shoulders and placing her in my arms.

I’m not sure if he’s talking about me or Luna, but his blue eyes are caring and his smile, despite his massive size, is gentle and warm.

Luna bats at a loose hair, then promptly meows until I set her down. Without another look back, she scampers off into the mansion.

Ingrate.

“Care to explain why you, an apparently untrained mage, had an artifact of dark magic in your pitiful excuse for a home?” Red’s voice is a snarl, and it shocks me out of my relief.

Oh yeah. That’s right. I have to live with this fucker now.

Man, my apartment was gross, but at least I didn't have to deal with roommates from literal hell.

I whip around, trying not to wince as my heels scream in protest at the movement.

“An artifact of what?” My lip curls in disgust at his tone, until I see the book in his arms.

My book. The book my father left me.

“That's not an artifact of dark magic,” I snort. “That's a history book about the Rift.”

I roll my eyes, then glance over at Conall, who's stepped beside me, a thoughtful frown on his face.

“That feels...” Lucian shudders, his skin turning red and bright once more, his lovely, deceptive human form shed in favor of the demon beneath. “That feels like home.”

“It's a history book,” I repeat, but this time, I'm not so sure of myself.

I'm not so sure of anything.

“It has a glamour on it, moya morkovka. A good one. You cannot feel it?”

“Is this serious?” I ask, gesturing at the old text. “It's not magic.”

Lucian lifts a taloned finger, and dark, shadowed power surges out of him.

The book rises from Red's grasp, and my eyes widen in surprise. The book glows gold, sparks shooting into the air and then dissolving into the shadows swirling from Lucian's fingers.

“Oh, it's glamoured, and strongly,” Lucian growls. “But it's no match for a prince of hell.”

“Humble as ever,” Conall laughs, his gaze darting from the book to my face. “It is a book of power, wee lass. A repelling kind, for those with magic. For ye not to sense it...” He frowns. “It either means ye laid the spell, or someone else did... and keyed ye to it.”

“Impossible,” I scoff.

But... is it?

I lick my lips as Lucian continues to pour his magic into the book, now muttering something harsh and unintelligible under his breath. My skin crawls as though spiders run rampant over it and I shudder, pain streaking across my skull.

“It’s keyed to the wee lass,” Conall rumbles, then grips my shoulders. “Are ye hurtin’, Bri? Hang on to it. Let it ride ye, and it will be done quick.”

Sweat beads on my forehead, and my eyes start to roll back in my head, the pain intensifying, nearly unbearable.

“She knew about it,” someone rasps. Red.

“She’s hurting,” Kane yells. “You are hurting her.” My gaze darts to the vampire, his black gaze feral and locked on me. “Hurry up, Lucian, I cannot control myself.”

The last phrase makes no sense, and I let out an involuntary groan of pain.

“Look at me, sweet Bri,” Conall says, tucking my chin into his huge hand. “Look at my eyes.”

“I’m trying,” I whisper, not wanting to black out. Not wanting to succumb to the dizziness gripping me again.

“Bri, ye have to control the pain. Dinnae let it control ye, lass.”

I make myself stare at Conall, his blue eyes so clear and sincere I can’t help but listen.

“Breathe,” he commands, and I do as he says.

The pain is still there, but he grips my chin tight and I match his breathing until finally, *finally*, it’s done.

I slump, and someone catches me under the arms.

“Heal her feet, Conall,” a deep voice rasps so close to my ear that goosebumps pebble across my shoulders.

“Has she eaten?” someone asks. Red, I think. “She needs food after how much magic she expended this morning. You

should know that.”

No, it couldn't be Red. He doesn't care about me.

“Dinnae pass out, lass, we have ye.”

That minty, cool scent intensifies, and the aching places on my feet all but disappear, the pain in my head from whatever Lucian did to the book receding too.

I blink, the world less hazy all around.

Strong hands grip my waist, and I can't help leaning back a little, trying to get my bearings.

“Are you hungry, then, moya morkovka?” Lucian asks, looking slightly weary himself.

“We will feed you,” Kane says, and with that, I push up off him, slightly concerned about what a vampire as old as Kane must mean by feeding. I certainly don't want him thinking of me when he thinks of feeding.

A hot rush accompanies the thought, and I make myself stand up straight, clearing my throat.

“I could eat,” I finally pronounce, all too aware of every male's gaze on me.

I start to stride deeper into the house, foolishly trying to act confident, and stop as soon as I find myself in a lavish sitting room. Everything about this house is lavish.

I have no idea where I'm going.

“Don't let us stop you if you want the grand tour,” Lucian snarks from behind me. “But the kitchen is to your left.”

“Don't mind him, sweet Bri,” Conall says, brushing by me gently, his cool essence tripping over my overwrought senses. “And, in case none of these fools have said it yet, welcome to Team Nightworth's home.”

He pauses, and Kane makes a low, threatening noise from somewhere behind me.

His reassuring blue gaze meets mine, and the tips of his fingers flit across the back of my hand.

“Welcome home,” he repeats.

CHAPTER 12



CONALL

The fiery lass plops down at the table, her eyes wide, dark circles marring her bonny face. Slim, pale fingers run over the wooden surface, weathered after a century or more of the five of us brothers—now four—living here.

Four and this Gabrielle creature, who is more than meets the eye.

I narrow mine at her, watching her carefully as she surveys her new surroundings. What must she think of this place?

What must she think of us?

“Are ye hungry, Bri?” I ask her, then shake my head ruefully. “Dinnae answer that. I know ye are.”

The oversized kitchen was designed to account for the fact the males that have historically made up Team Nightworth are some of the largest specimens of our respective species. As a half frost giant, I cannot find fault in that, and cooking has become one of the few distractions from the grind of our life here, in this prison.

“I am hungry,” the lass says, and I glance up from the fridge to give her a bright smile.

The poor thing must be half-starved.

“Running through your magic will do that to ye,” I tell her. “In a few years, ye’ll have to siphon off the extra, like I do.” I gesture to the interior of the fridge, which takes a small charge of my power every day to keep things cool.

“It’s magic,” she says softly, her tired eyes huge in her pale face.

“What else would it be?” I laugh, setting out a hearty stew on the counter. There’s crusty bread in the box, sourdough, and I point at the bowl I’ve prepared for her. “Red?”

His upper lip twitches, but he sends out a frisson of magic, enough to heat the thick stew. Satisfied, I plonk it in front of

her with a spoon, and my heart cracks open at the sight of her hand shaking.

Some of the soup slops out of the bowl, casualty of her unsteady hand.

“Here, bonny lass,” I murmur, setting a soft towel in front of her, stopping just short of holding her hand.

She won’t thank me for coddling her, and neither will it help her in the Blood Rite.

Doesn’t mean I don’t want to, though.

Kane and Red stay quiet, both so on edge it’s a small wonder they aren’t at each other’s throats. My eyebrow twitches as I watch them, the silence thick enough to cut. Something is wrong with Kane, and I half-wonder if Red’s supposition about him going soft has merit.

He doesn’t seem soft, though, just the opposite.

The vampire primal reeks of violence, his veins bulging and dark, his eyes black and fangs swollen under his lips.

As for Red, he’s riding the razor’s edge of control. But of all the shifters I’ve met, Red’s control is the best.

And he’s ten times as dangerous because of it.

Even the demon prince appears uneasy, his smile more manic than usual.

“Alright, then, since no one seems to want to talk, I suppose it’s on me to break the ice,” I finally say, raising an eyebrow and sending a sheet of ice behind me, kick-starting the waning ice crystals in the fridge once more.

Kane’s upper lip twitches, the claws on his hands growing.

That is not good. I narrow my eyes at him.

“Seems to me we have a bit of a mystery on our hands, lass, and ye seem to be right at the heart of it.” I raise my brows, placing my hands across my chest and leaning against the counter opposite her. “Now, Kane says you are untrained —”

“She is,” he affirms, and I’m pleased to see his eyes returning to a more human shade.

I nod and continue. “Right. Impressive for you to summon not one but several creatures from the otherrealm this morning. You took out a trained mage all on your own. From the looks of him, he was battle-worn, too.”

She’s spooning food into her mouth at an alarming rate, as though she hasn’t had a meal in weeks. Living with us will do the woman good. It’s no wonder she’s much too thin. With solid meals and training, she’ll put on muscle at a nice clip. She’ll need it, too.

Her green gaze is wary.

Good. It would be much more dangerous for her were she the trusting sort. Though, to be completely honest, I’m not sure there are many trusting sorts left after the Rift.

“Tell us what the mage said to you before we got there,” I coax.

“He said that they’d been looking for me—” she pauses, clearly ill at ease with telling us anything.

I tilt my head to the left and blow out a breath. “Woman, ye can trust us. Ye need to trust us. I know ye dinnae understand much of what’s happened today, but ye need to understand that now, we are all ye have.”

An orange ball of fur launches onto the table with a yowl, and Bri immediately reaches for the angry beastie, cuddling it close.

Her expression melts into exhaustion and she presses her cheek against the cat’s head, a glimmer of tears in her eyes.

“Ach,” I mutter. I hate to see a bonny lass cry.

“I want to go to sleep,” she says, pushing the bowl away with one hand, her knuckles white where she grasps the cat.

“Ye put on a brave face,” I tell her quietly, and Kane shifts beside her. “But ye need to know we mean ye no harm.”

“I want to go to sleep,” she repeats.

“Go clean up for the Blood Bond,” Red snarls, then prowls away, a door slamming moments later.

“I can clean you up, moya morkovka,” Lucian says, grinning widely at her.

“She’s with me,” Kane growls, eyes full black again.

This time, I look at the vampire. Truly look at him.

I’ll have to do something about Kane.

“What do you mean she’s with ye?” I ask.

“Our friendly neighborhood vampire told Heaven’s Leech that the woman is his mate,” Lucian crows.

I keep my expression as neutral as possible, but my molars grind together, my fingertips turning blue with checked power surging inside me.

“It seemed the safest option, as I was carrying Gabrielle at the time. I did not want them to think her weak. She cannot be a liability.”

“Ye did not think mayhap making the woman look weak would be a better strategy?” I ask gently, but the frost giant half of me is ready to throw ice spikes at his daft head. “Keep her power under wraps, let them underestimate her?”

Kane’s hands flex, and he twitches slightly. “I chose the best course of action. She sleeps with me. In my quarters. She can get ready for the Blood Bond there, too.”

I rub a hand down my face, absolutely bewildered by his calculus.

“I don’t want to,” she says quickly. “I want my own.”

“You’ll have your own,” I tell her. “You’ll have Diego’s old rooms. Problem is, they’re not quite ready for you. So, tonight, sleep with the blood-drinking idiot. He can have the couch, lass, he’s the honorable sort. Tomorrow, we’ll put you in your own quarters and figure out how we’ll deal with the rumors Kane began.”

I try not to roll my eyes, a truly Herculean effort. What on earth was he thinking? Saying the woman was his mate? Kane

has better sense than that. Usually.

“He thought to protect her.” Lucian steps closer, his gaze distant and thoughtful. “He chose to stake his claim on her, to keep them afraid of retribution should they go after her like they went after Diego.”

I nod once, because there’s nothing left to say on the matter. What’s done is done.

“Kane won’t touch you,” I tell her quietly, because her expression has me twisted up inside. “Get cleaned up. We can discuss the book and the rest tomorrow, after training. Because Red’s right. We have much work to do.”

She blanches at that, and the cat yowls in protest at how tight she holds it.

“I’ll go clean up for you too, moya morkovka,” Lucian intones, then slips into the gloom, leaving me with the petrified Bri and the restless vampire.

“Come now, lass, let’s get ye cleaned up. My mam always said things seem easier once yer clean.”

I never really had a mam, but I’m hoping the words might help soothe the lass enough so we can make it through the Blood Bond ceremony.

“I don’t have any clothes,” she says woodenly.

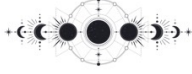
“Aye, well, that’ll be taken care of tomorrow. But for tonight, it doesn’t matter. Ye’ll wear the traditional garb of Team Nightworth.” I frown at her, though, because it’s going to swallow the woman whole.

She raises one eyebrow, amusement flitting across her face. “Let me guess, they’re one-size-fits-all?”

I twist my mouth to the side, shrugging one shoulder. “We may have a bit of a problem with the fit.”

To my delight, she lets out a small laugh, then smiles up at me. “Let’s get this over with.”

CHAPTER 13



BRI

W eird herbal soap, check. Scalding-hot water, check. Bitter herbal tea, check. Humongous silk robe, check.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, glad that I'm clean, at the very least. Conall was right about it making me feel better, and I'm grateful to him for it. Out of my four new roommates, he's the least monstrous.

Luna winds around my ankles, yowling up at me.

"Ye ready yet, Bri?" the giant calls. "We need tae hurry."

My fingers tighten on the basin. Everything in this bathroom is old, well-made but relics of a time gone by. The strangest thing is, it all works, and works damned well.

Because it runs on magic.

I can't quite get over it.

The robe pools around my feet, much too long to make any sense. It's made of a deep blue material, too blue to be navy, some color I don't have a name for. It shimmers in the bathroom lights, pretty and silky and nicer than anything else I've ever had on my body. The tie keeps slipping open, and I managed to rip the t-shirt I'd been wearing and fashion it into underwear so that if the damn thing decides to come open, I'm at least somewhat clothed beneath it.

"I guess," I mutter, pushing open the door.

"Oh," Conall says, his eyes wide as he takes me in. The same midnight-blue robe fits him like a glove, showing off his powerful shoulders.

Self-conscious, I push my hair over one shoulder. It's drying in long, loose waves, and it will likely be frizzy as heck later.

"Let's go then." Conall's throat bobs as he swallows.

“She can’t wear that.” Kane stands against the wall, eyes fixed on me.

“You have to be naked underneath,” Lucian chimes in from where he lounges on a chair. “No modern fabrics, just the robe.”

My gaze slides to Conall, because I don’t trust one word that comes out of the demon’s mouth. “Is he lying?”

Conall shakes his head once. “Sorry, lass. I should have told ye. I forgot how much you don’t know. The magic is more efficient like this. Blood Council rules.”

“I don’t have to get naked in front of them, do I?” My voice is small.

“No,” Kane says, his eyes all black again. Freaky.

“It’s tradition. And a power move by the Council, most likely,” Lucian says.

“Hurry up,” Red snarls, pacing.

Right. I scurry back into the bathroom, breathing heavily. Okay. Naked underneath the robe. Sure. Like a massage, but one in which I get bound to four likewise nearly naked dudes by some kind of ancient tradition.

“Just a normal night out,” I tell Luna. “Normal things.” Like taking a Blood Bond to join a team at the Blood Rite. “Fuck,” I grit out.

I take my underwear off through the robe, like that’s going to afford me any kind of privacy.

“Hurry up,” Red yells from the other side.

I throw the door open and sashay out, annoyed as hell.

“There are buttons,” Conall says quietly, not unkindly.

I blink up at him, not understanding.

“Here,” he says, and with surprisingly deft hands for such a large male, he pulls my robe tight around me, hooking several small togs I hadn’t even seen.

It still doesn't fit great, but there's a whole lot less chance of it simply sliding off me.

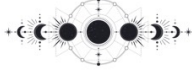
"Thanks." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. His knuckles brush against my collarbone, his cheeks turning slightly red, and then he tightens the sash of the robe and pulls my hood up.

"Now yer ready," he says in a gruff voice.

I'm not. I'm not even close to being ready.

But I follow them out into the cold, dark night all the same.

CHAPTER 14



KANE

A hushed sort of revelry marks the Crimson City this night. During the rest of the year, when the Blood Rite isn't underway, when we all aren't faced with the constant reminder of mortality and the walls of our prison aren't pressing close, the Crimson City is alive with music and drinking.

Tonight, it's full of too-quiet conversations, teams huddled together and talking quietly, laughter quickly cutting off.

I hate it here.

My eyes skim across the cobbled paths. Magic-fueled streetlights hang from the storefronts, washing everything in a warm glow. The large glass windows of the clothiers and tailors and specialty apothecaries reflect the faces of my teammates back at me, all except Bri, who trudges along in her overlarge robe with her face hidden in the depths of the blue-black hood.

I want to prepare her for what's to come. Anxiety rolls off her in palpable waves, and her feet keep tripping over the hem of her robe.

"You're going to be safe," I tell her.

Red cuts me an amused, if not exasperated, look. "We can't tell her what to expect at the ritual." He touches his neck, as if the mere mention of it's going to trigger the magic that gags us, keeping us from speaking about it, keeping us from leaving this place.

Our manacles. Blood Bond indeed.

Part of me wishes I could roll back time, that I could stop the mage she killed from ever finding her. I wish I could have kept her out of this completely, and at the same time... I'm glad she's here.

Our fifth. Finally.

She stumbles over her robes again, and I reach an arm out, steadying her.

“We’re nearly there,” I say. The robe conceals the contours of her body from my touch, but the mere thought of it sets me ablaze.

Gabrielle glances up at me with wide eyes, her lips a thin, worried line.

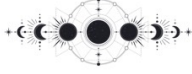
What she’s about to do cannot be undone.

“Lass, we wouldn’t be takin’ ye to do this if we could avoid it,” Conall says, clearly reading the apprehension as easily as I am. “But ye must believe me when I say we are yer best bet at staying alive. Whoever came after ye today won’t stop.”

She breaks eye contact with me, tugging her hood lower over her head.

By the time we reach the gates that lead to the path below the arena, the most magical part of the Crimson City, the heart of the Blood Rite, she hasn’t spoken a word.

CHAPTER 15



BRI

I 'm gonna puke. Cold sweat beads along my forehead, my heart thrumming so fast in my chest that every step makes me dizzier and dizzier. Kane keeps talking to me in soothing tones, and Conall too, but I can't concentrate.

Their words slide off me in a meaningless jumble.

Whatever I'm about to do is going to change everything. Forever.

I'm terrified.

We reach the curved wall that sits in the center of the city, and I don't need to read the plaque written in a language I don't understand to know what it is.

The arena.

I shudder, a sense of foreboding causing all my hair to stand up on the back of my neck.

Countless magic users, monsters, humans, witches, mages... have been slaughtered here, all in the name of powering the walls between worlds. Given a shot at life and freedom by the rules of the tournament itself.

The males don't lead me into the arena, though. There's a small door on the side, and a glowing symbol burns blue into the night air.

I'm so scared that I can hardly think straight.

"I don't want to do this," I finally manage.

A heavy hand rests on my shoulder, and Conall goes to one knee before me so that we're almost eye-to-eye.

"Do ye wanna take yer chances back in Philly? Because they'll find ye, lass, and they will either kill ye or yoke ye tae something even worse than here. And I know that, because here, ye'll have the four of us. Red's an ass and Lucian can be a shit weasel, I'm not perfect and neither is Kane—but we'll

protect ye with everything we've got and then some, lass, because when yer bound to us, you're ours and we're yours."

I swallow hard, blood rushing through my ears.

"If ye want tae go back, say the word and we'll take ye back."

Kane growls low, the sound so inhuman that more fear spikes through me.

"Conall—" Lucian starts, but the giant silences him with a steely stare.

"But ye need tae know that ye'll likely die as soon as we leave ye alone."

"Harsh but true," Lucian adds, pinning me with his gaze. "You did well against the one mage, but what if there are two of them next time? Four? Ten?"

I don't have to answer. We all know what I'd say, anyway. My shoulders sag and Kane shifts, placing one hand on my arm. The cloak pulls awkwardly under the pressure.

"I promise you this, Gabrielle. Your goals, your safety, your happiness will become ours. We aren't trying to trick you into joining our team to watch you suffer. We need you to join us because you are strong, and because we will make you stronger still."

"We need a fifth," Red adds unexpectedly, "but not just anyone will do. You have talent, woman."

I raise an eyebrow at him, surprised he's even bothering to talk. Surprised he cares at all.

"Don't get any ideas," he growls, his eyes like burning embers, glowing red in the dark. "I don't want to die on the arena floor either. The magic is stronger with a fifth. That's just how it works."

"We need ye as much as ye need us, lass. We may not be perfect—"

"Speak for yourself, frost giant," Lucian interrupts.

Kane glares at him, but Conall grins at the demon before continuing. “We aren’t perfect, but we can help each other. It won’t be an easy road, Bri, but ye won’t be traveling on it alone.”

My choice is clear. It’s either take my chances on my own back in New Philly, with magic I don’t understand how to use and someone hunting me, or stay here with these four monsters, let them train me and protect me, and hope like hell I don’t die in the arena.

Neither are great options.

My father would hate this for me.

But he’s not here. Not anymore. Not for a long time.

“I’ll do it,” I say, my voice hoarse, the words sandpaper-coarse on my throat. “If you get me killed, I will come back and haunt your asses.”

“I’ve always wanted a haunted ass,” Lucian says, grinning broadly at me.

I snort. I can’t help myself. I know I shouldn’t encourage the demon prince, but it feels good to laugh a little.

“Then let’s get this over with,” Red says, eyes glinting as he turns to the shimmering blue door. He presses a hand against it, and I raise my chin, feigning confidence.

“Team Nightworth has a fifth,” he announces.

The door melts away, and there’s nothing but darkness within.

CHAPTER 16



BRI

I've never liked the dark.

When I was a child, I wanted a nightlight, like one I saw once in a fancy store my father took me to.

My father refused.

Said it made no difference if my room was dark or light. If the monsters wanted me, they'd take me no matter what.

Now the monsters are all around me, at my sides, an honor guard in the dark, better than any nightlight.

And a hell of a lot more terrifying.

A light blazes in the gloom, and I raise my hand instinctively, blocking it.

"Right on time, Nightworth," a crisply accented voice says. "I hear you've found a fifth?"

"Aye," Conall says.

I peer at the shadowed figure holding aloft a torch. We're in some kind of subterranean cavern, and a half-second after Conall speaks, torches spark to life all around us.

I blink rapidly, the light searing across my eyes. It's strange how quickly they became accustomed to the dark.

"State your name, Nightworth's fifth," the man says. The torchlight casts strange shadows around his face.

"Gabrielle Arbane," I finally manage, trying to keep the quiver out of my voice.

They said I needed to look strong. I'll do my best.

A few gasps pepper the air and I narrow my eyes, trying to figure out the source of the sudden tension.

"Arbane? Is that right?" The figure speaking steps closer, and I scrutinize his face. Maybe this is all part of the ceremony. Who knows? Not me.

“Yes,” I say.

Conall’s hand wraps around mine, holding me in place as the hooded man steps closer still.

“Gabrielle Arbane. Arbane,” he repeats, and I get the distinct feeling I’m supposed to react a certain way. What that is, I have no clue, so I simply stare at him.

“We haven’t heard that name in a long while, have we, Blood Council?”

Instead of speaking, though, the figures all around us rap the floor twice with the butt end of their torches.

Right. Totally normal.

The hooded man tilts his head, studying me, and still, I can’t see his face, can’t make out what the hell the source of his fascination is with me.

Then it clicks. Arbane... my father’s name, too. I suck in a breath, questions cartwheeling through my mind.

Who is he? What does he know? Did he know my father? Does he know what happened to him?

I stare and stare, and try to calm my racing heart.

“Gabrielle Arbane, you will partake in the Blood Bond tonight, thus tying you to the Blood Rite and Team Nightworth. Your sacrificial blood will be used to keep chaos in check, to protect all those who reside in this realm.”

“You are thanked for your sacrifice,” the rest of the room intones as one.

Yeah, cause that’s not creepy as fuck. Conall squeezes my fingers, and Kane’s hand goes to the small of my back, as if they both agree that this is totally over the top.

I glance at Lucian behind me, and he makes a big show of rolling his eyes. I bite my cheeks to keep an unexpected laugh from spilling out and turn back to the hooded figure.

“We thank you for your sacrifice, Gabrielle Arbane, and for contributing to the fight against chaos. Your team will be

stronger as five, and as five you fight not only in the Blood Rite, but in the war against the otherrealms.”

The war against the otherrealms? I’ve never heard it called that before.

“You are thanked for your blood,” the room says, and this time, it sends a full chill down my spine.

“Listen well to the words of order, listen well, and take them into your heart, for your blood will be returned to the earth.”

“We all return to the earth,” the others chorus.

Of all the cultish bullshit I’ve seen, this takes the cake. Probably because I haven’t seen a whole lot of cultish bullshit in the non-magical district, but I sure as hell hear about cults in the news all the time.

“Proceed to the chamber of order,” the man says, swinging his torch wide.

An arched doorway behind him flares blue with magic, and Red pushes past Kane, darkness beyond swallowing him up whole.

I don’t want to do this.

I don’t have a damned reason not to.

I let go of Conall’s hand, which I had apparently been gripping as tight as I could, my knuckles stiff from it.

I follow Red through the archway. Magic sizzles across my body, cool waves of it. The drumming in my ears grows louder, and it’s then I realize it’s not in my ears at all, but some kind of eldritch music.

A hand touches my bare shoulder, and I loose a small yelp. “Where’s the robe?”

“Gone.” Lucian’s voice is behind me, but I can’t see him. “You won’t want it where you’re going, anyway.”

“If any of you touch me, I’ll cut your nuts off.” How I will accomplish this task, I have no idea, but it’s as good a threat as any.

“Calm yerself,” Conall says. “None of us will touch ye.”

“You’re safe now,” Kane agrees.

“Let’s get this the fuck over with,” Red says from somewhere in front of me. “I hate this shit.”

“Step careful now,” Conall tells me, and thick fingers circle my wrist, tugging me forward.

Something warm and wet sloshes around my feet, and I keep walking, my nose wrinkling as I stare at the darkness. I take another step, and another, and the floor is graded, liquid up to my knees now. It smells salty, like the ocean, and magic pours from the pool, thicker and thicker with each step I take.

“Gabrielle Arbane,” a voice whispers in my ear. “You will find the answers you seek. Accept the bond and accept that with no chaos, there is no order. With no order, there is no chaos.”

The hair on the back of my neck is completely on end, and I shudder as the whispers continue, now saying things I don’t understand, but the words are powerful, ringing like bells as they land all around me.

The water shimmers, glowing from within, now up to my hips.

“Keep walking,” Kane urges, and I can barely make him out ahead of me now, his naked back reflecting the red glow of the water.

It’s up to my waist, my hips, licking around me thick and hot.

It’s not until it’s up to my neck that I realize what it is. My hair floats all around in it, and the reddish glow isn’t because of some magic like I thought.

This isn’t water at all.

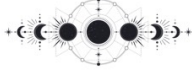
“Oh my god,” I murmur, gagging. I lift a hand, trying to cover my mouth, then immediately throw it back into the pool all around.

I don’t want this on my face.

It's blood.

I'm covered in blood.

CHAPTER 17



CONALL

The wee lass trembles all over, her delicate wrist so small in mine.

“Almost done,” I urge her. “Whatever the magic is tellin’ ye, listen, and let’s get this over with.”

Red’s right to hate this. I hate it, too. It’s feckin’ disgusting. Every time I do this ceremony it’s worse, too, the magic whispering things I try to ignore, things about myself I dinnae want to hear. Every time, the noose around my neck, the shackles around my wrists, cut deeper and deeper, until it seems they cut to the very bone.

I dinnae like to see the lass in this muck, either.

Already, the magic glows around her neck, her wrists, her ankles, illuminating the Blood Bond pool where the bonds glow from within the red liquid.

I tow her along behind me, trying to get us the feck out of here as fast as I can.

“Feck this shit,” I mutter, grabbing her waist as she staggers, trying to keep her face from the liquid.

Where it only comes up to my chest, the blood’s chin-deep on her already, and her eyes are wide, mouth pinched thin as she struggles through.

Red’s already out, thick blood coating him like a second skin where he stands on the opposite bank. Lucian joins him, the magic melting away his human form, leaving only the demon.

Kane’s in full vampire form, eyes black, veins bulging all over his body, claws and fangs lengthened.

“Hang in there, brother,” I tell him. “Dinnae let these feckers force ye to lose control.”

He shakes all over, like a dog, and blood droplets spray across me. The lass turns her face into my side and I try to

shield her from the worst of it.

“What kind of magic is this?” she asks, retching slightly as she continues to trudge forward, her hand tight like a vise on mine.

“This is blood magic,” Kane tells her, and there’s nothing human left about the male. “This is what we do now. We feed the pool as much magic as it needs.”

“Chaos needs order. Order needs chaos,” she whispers, and the golden bond around her neck winds ever tighter.

I frown at her, curious about her strange words.

Blood slips down her collarbone, and I try not to stare as her breasts emerge from the pool, coated and slick.

I swallow hard as she wraps an arm around her chest, covering herself, and tugs her hand from mine to shield the rest of her body.

“Right, then, let’s give the lass some privacy,” I order, my voice rough. I’ve been through a dozen of these ceremonies now. This isn’t exactly a low-mortality career, after all.

But this one, with the woman beside me so naïve to how everything works... it bothers me. I dinnae like it at all.

“What’s this?” she asks, her voice hushed.

“It’s your bonds,” Red tells her. “Now you’re an official prisoner here, just like us. Welcome to hell.” Steam curls from his nostrils, his eyes glowing rubies in the dark cave.

“No, hell is so much worse than this,” Lucian says. “This is just regular old torture.” His tone is light, as usual, but there’s a sympathetic cast to his eyes as he watches Bri that I dinnae reckon I’ve seen before.

To my surprise, she lets out a small, hiccupping laugh, and finally emerges from the blood pool.

“Now four are five, the last to survive.”

Everyone stiffens as the voice curls around us, an unknowable force. Red’s eyes glow even more brightly. He’s

fighting the shift. Frost sheathes my arms, the air turning cold around me, my own magic called by the nameless power here.

As for Bri, she shimmers, her bonds tightening every moment.

“A piece of advice, you shall heed it twice,” the voice continues.

“Why does it have to rhyme?” Lucian mutters. Red elbows him in the ribs, glaring at him. The shine of the magic bonds illuminates each of us, and poor Bri closes her eyes, clearly overwhelmed.

“In this trap, your blood I need. But without me, you’ll cease to bleed.”

Feckin’ riddles, same as always. Lucian snorts, clearly as annoyed as the rest of us.

A bell tolls and a door appears in the rock wall. Fresh Team Nightworth robes hang on hooks beside it, and I take one and hand it to Bri, who shivers next to me, my magic affecting her.

The magic manacles all over her fade slowly, and when I see the sad, scared expression on her face, I want to cry with her.

She doesn’t deserve this.

None of us do.

“Welcome to the team, lass,” I tell her, and I throw my own robe on, shuffling through the door.

CHAPTER 18



BRI

It takes me ages to get the blood off. I try to hold my breath while I scrub at my skin, ensconced in Kane's bathroom. Apparently, Kane has to deal with the Blood Bond soaking his skin in a different way, thanks to being a vampire, and I frankly don't want any more details about it.

The rest of my new team are in their bathrooms, likewise getting clean.

When the water at my feet finally turns clear, when I've finally washed myself so hard it seems like I've taken off my top two layers of skin, I breathe a sigh of relief and towel off. The midnight-blue robe lies where I left it on the stone floor, the interior coated in drying maroon.

I kick at it, holding back a scream of frustration.

Inhale. Exhale. Closing my eyes, I try to focus on my goals.

Survive the arena.

Learn magic.

And find out everything I can about what happened to my father... and maybe even my mother.

Because that man before the ceremony? He recognized my name. He knows something about me or about my parents.

Then I'll figure out how to break this fucking magical bond and get the hell out of here once I know enough to take care of myself.

I always feel better with a plan.

When I open my eyes, the woman looking back at me in the steam-cloaked mirror has a determined expression... and thick purple circles of exhaustion under her eyes.

I slip on the giant-sized shirt hanging on a hook for me, and if that weren't enough of a clue, one sniff tells me it's likely Conall's, his peppermint scent clinging to it.

Rolling my shoulders, I step out of the warm bathroom and glance around.

Kane's room is cavernous. Ridiculously huge, like every single one of these males I'm trapped here with. It smells like him.

There's a stone fireplace in the corner, the grey and white stones climbing all the way up the two-story cathedral-style ceiling. Dark wood beams butt up against the walls, and a modern-looking chandelier hangs in the middle of the room.

Kane and Conall sit opposite each other, and each rise as I make my way into the room. Luna weaves in and out of my feet, and I pick her up.

I'm so glad they got her for me. I bury my face in her soft fur, searching for comfort the only way I know how.

"There's no bed," I finally say, confused. There are comfortable-looking couches, expensive seeming armchairs and rows and rows of books in glass-enclosed cases. No bed.

"The bed is in the other room," a voice says gruffly, and there's no hint of kindness in Kane now, his personality so deeply changed I almost wonder if I imagined it.

"Right, lass, Kane's—your—bed for the night is through that door."

"Oh," I say in a small voice. "I see it now." Sure enough, there's a sumptuous four-poster, and if it weren't for the fact that it's not mine at all but a vampire's, I might actually look forward to climbing in and getting comfy.

"Chin up, lass," Conall says kindly. "We'll have your own quarters prepped for tomorrow, and we'll figure out a solution to Kane's rash claims of mating you."

Kane grunts, clearly annoyed with Conall, then brushes past me.

Luna bounds over to the fireplace, immediately stretching long in front of it, not a care in the world.

"Does the cat like meat?" Conall asks, his mouth twisted to the side. One hand scratches the blonde scruff at his chin, and

he appears totally perplexed by Luna.

And equally perplexed by me.

It's kind of adorable, considering the huge giant could squash me with a thought. Especially since he's been treating me like I'm fragile spun glass. My hand twitches at the memory of his gentle embrace during the ceremony, the way he tried to comfort me the only way he knew how.

"Luna loves meat," I assure him, unable to keep a smile off my face. "Tuna is her favorite."

"I can manage that while you get settled, along with some other things for the wee beastie."

"Thank you," I say softly, and I turn my gaze from where the cat lounges, licking a paw by the fire, and truly look up at the blond male. And up, and up.

There's so much kindness in his face that it chokes me up for a second. I'm not sure when was the last time someone looked at me like that.

Impulsively, I circle my arms around his waist and hug him. He's pure muscle, not an ounce of fat on him, but hugging him is comforting all the same.

Conall stiffens slightly, then pats the top of my head.

"None of that now," he says a bit awkwardly. "Yer goin' tae ruin my reputation if ye keep getting all soft on me."

Back at the fireplace, Luna hisses. Not at me or Conall, but at the vampire, who's staring at the two of us with a predatory gaze. A snarl rips from his lips.

"Are we goin' tae have a problem, Kane?" Conall says softly, his hands on the tops of my shoulders, keeping me close.

The giant's tone no longer sounds gentle and I glance up at him, thrown by the sudden shift. The face that a moment ago held a kind smile is now rock-hard, and the glint in his eyes promises violence.

Kane snarls again, a sound so ferocious it sets my teeth on edge.

“Right, then,” Conall says. “Lass, there’s been a change in plans. Ye won’t be staying here this night, as Kane appears to be indisposed to it. Kane, ye will get control of yerself. Ye will fix this rumor of her being yer mate tomorrow. Bonny Bri, come with me.”

Without another word, the giant steers me back through the heavy door and Luna plaintively meows, then races behind us out the door before it closes.

“What happened?” I finally say, trying to recover my equilibrium.

“I think our pal Kane’s struggling with the loss of Diego more than he’s let on,” Conall says, his eyes blue chips of ice as he continues gently pushing me down the hallway. It’s lined with magic-fueled sconces, all casting a warm glow across the heavy wood paneling and lush jewel-toned carpet that runs across the floor. There’s a large diamond-paned window at the end of the hall, a thick velvet curtain tied back with a sash.

I’ve never seen fabric as nice as that in my entire life, and they use it to cover the window.

“I didn’t expect this place to be so... nice.”

“Aye,” Conall says, squeezing my shoulder gently. “It is comfortable enough, for a centuries-old prison.”

A crashing sound comes from behind us, from the direction of the rooms we just left—Kane’s rooms. I flinch, crossing my arms over my chest and hugging myself.

“I’ll have tae sort that out,” Conall mumbles, rubbing his scruffy chin as he smiles down at me. “Well, wee Bri, I cannae say I was prepared for company this night. I’ll bed down on the couch by the fire, and you can have the mattress.”

I nod because I’m not about to suggest that we share a bed. He’s huge. There’s no way we can fit in one bed comfortably, and the last thing I want is any of these monsters getting any ideas about me.

“And I’ll get the beastie some fish. Mayhap we can talk before you crash for the night.”

Mayhap?

My lips twist to the side as he opens another thick wooden door.

“How old are you? You all keep talking about centuries...” I drift off, my attention caught on the rooms inside.

“Old enough. Older than ye,” he answers, laughing quietly.

It’s similar in layout to Kane’s, but it’s light and airy. A substantial tartan plaid in bright yellows and reds and greens hangs above the fireplace. Below, a fire crackles merrily in the hearth.

I step inside the rooms, instantly feeling more at ease.

“Looks like home,” he says, and the door closes softly behind him.

“It’s really cozy,” I say, but when I turn to smile at him, it’s not the room he’s looking at but me.

I swallow.

“Whiskey to take the edge off,” he says, and it takes me a moment to realize he’s asking if I want it.

“Oh.” I twist my hands. “No. Not if I have to, er, train, tomorrow. I have a feeling it’s going to be bad enough without a hangover.”

“Good lass,” he says, smiling wider than ever now, his teeth white and even. His smile transforms his brutish face into something softer, something more human. “Dinnae worry, I’ll have one for both of us.”

We stare at each other for a moment, and he finally motions to one of the leather couches. “Sit, sit. Make yourself comfortable.”

There’s nothing else for me to do, so I obey, perching on the edge of one of the weathered couches as Luna stalks around the room like she owns the place. Conall busies

himself at a large cabinet and I hug myself tighter, totally out of my element.

Ice clinks in the bottom of a glass, followed by the familiar sound of liquid pouring.

“Your beastie is quite a fighter,” Conall finally remarks, breaking the silence as he turns, yet again leaning against the furniture, which creaks in slight protest.

I can’t say I’m mad he’s keeping his distance.

“Did she hurt you?” I ask, mostly out of politeness. Best not to be rude to a giant drinking scotch.

“Did your cat hurt me? A half frost giant?” As he speaks, an amused curl to his lip, the glass he holds frosts over. “Nae, Bri, the cat dinnae hurt me or the dra—or Red. In fact, yer Luna took quite a liking to Red.”

I snort, unable to contain my amusement at the thought.

“That does bring us back around to our little trip to your home,” he adds quietly, brows raised. “Anything you want to share about the book we found? Powerful magic, it is.”

My throat goes dry at the mere mention of the book, disquiet rolling through me. Maybe I should’ve gotten a drink.

I take one look at the brawny half-giant and immediately decide I chose correctly. The last thing I need is my thinking impaired.

“It was a history book... At least, I really thought that’s what it was. I haven’t looked at it in years.”

There’s a pause, and he sips at his drink. My gaze darts back to Luna, settled once more by the fire, looking like she doesn’t have a care in the world.

“Where did you get it?”

“It was my...” My throat closes up, and I make myself talk around it. “It was my father’s. He taught me from it. Taught me about the Rift, and magic.”

And taught me to never, ever use mine. I squeeze my eyes shut.

He would be so disappointed to find me here.

“Is that right?” the giant says, so quietly I hardly hear it.

When I glance at him, he’s studying the fire, his knuckles white on the frosted glass.

I want to ask him if he recognized my last name. If he’s been here for centuries, and that man knew who I was... does Conall know something too?

What if they all know something, and they’re lying to me?

Can I truly trust any of them?

“I’d like to go to sleep,” I finally say. I want to be alone.

“Of course, lass,” Conall says softly, then points to a door. “Get some rest.”

I doubt I’ll sleep at all tonight, but I’m tired of talking.

I’m tired of thinking.

I’m just tired.

CHAPTER 19



BRI

Early morning sunlight streams golden through the large windows, and as I make my way downstairs, I'm completely overwhelmed at the bustling activity.

There are racks of clothes everywhere. Boxes embossed in gold and silver, each glowing faintly.

"There she is," Lucian claps, in his dashing human skin once more. He's so lovely that I can almost forget the horns curling from his dark hair, the fact that he's a demon prince and as terrible as the realm he hails from.

"Moya morkovka, dobroye utro," he says. "Good morning, my sweet, tempting slice of carrot cake."

I glare at him. Can't forget that under that gorgeous façade, he's also a total fucking ass.

"Ah, there is that delicious fire," he says, the shadows around him deepening, a threatening quality.

Everyone in the room turns to look at me, and I tug Conall's shirt down, feeling totally uncomfortable. I actually got a full night's sleep, something I'm still amazed at.

Looking around, I'm really fucking glad I did.

"What—"

Lucian waves a hand, and the question dies on my lips. "You can't exactly wear the rags you're used to around here," he says, gaze sliding over the massive shirt I stole from Conall's dresser this morning.

"We need to make you presentable. And while the raw material is truly something lovely to look upon, we can't parade you around naked. Unless, of course, you're opposed to clothing? In which case," he shucks his shirt and I stare at him in shock, "I am only too happy to join you in your quest for freedom from the bonds of a well-stocked closet."

My eyebrows raise, and a shocked laugh comes out of my lips.

He grins at me, starting to unbutton his pants. “Is that a yes? Finally, someone who truly understands how to have some fun around here—”

“No,” I shout, raising my hand in protest.

“Oh, Bri, when it comes to fulfilling all your sordid desires, I am but a willing servant. Please, if you wish me to be nude, I will do that for you.” He flutters his long eyelashes at me. “It is the least I can do, to let you bask in my naked glory—”

“Stop.” I scrub a hand down my face.

“Let your mere mortal eyes gaze upon my unheavenly flesh,” he continues, “feast upon the unholy sight of my tempting body.” His hand trails down his chest, and he gives his hips a suggestive waggle so over the top that I can’t help but laugh.

“No,” I finally manage.

Lucian sighs, then gives me a sneaky smile.

“I need tea,” I mutter, and before I can take two more steps into the packed room, a small woman with gossamer wings appears, holding a steaming mug. Of all the things I thought to expect from the Blood Rite, none of these clocked on my radar. Not the racks of clothes or the guy brushing out my hair, combing something that smells herbal through it, another person dotting something on my face, all while I stand here with a demonic prince of hell trying to give me a lap dance. Especially that.

Definitely didn’t imagine the demon strip tease.

I try not to choke on my tea, mumbling my thanks and then chugging it.

“We have less than an hour until she needs to be in the training ring, chop-chop!” The demon claps his hands, and the people who’ve been working move even faster.

A measuring tape floats, winding around me fast and sure.

“She’s a bit thin,” one of the people says, and I scrunch my nose, because rude. Yeah, I am thin. That’s what happens when you can’t afford regular meals. It makes me slightly sick, the more I think about it, the excess here compared to where I came from. No wonder my father hated the magical world.

“I can’t afford any of this,” I tell Lucian, who’s beaming at me like he’s given me the world’s greatest gift.

“Of course you can,” he scoffs. “Not that you’re paying for it. Consider it a treat from me to you.”

“You didn’t bother to ask if she wanted your gifts, strings attached or not.” Kane appears, wading through the tailors and fairies who melt before him, shooting scared looks at each other.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the possessive vampire himself.”

The measuring tape glows, winding around my head, then my bust, and finally winks out of existence as Kane glares at it. Or my breasts.

Unclear.

“Do you want the gifts of the demon prince?” Kane snarls.

I raise an eyebrow at him, completely caught off guard by everything about this morning.

“I don’t have any clothes,” I admit, not too proud to say I want them. The least they can do is give me clothes to wear that don’t belong to a giant. “The only thing I have from my apartment is my cat, and I can’t wear her.”

“See? The woman is fine. She accepts my gifts. Although I wouldn’t mind seeing you wear the cat.”

“She didn’t say that.” Kane steps closer to Lucian, his talons darkening, growing longer.

I swallow. “Er, you said I could afford them,” I pipe up, not having a clue what the hell is going on or how any of this works. “So I can just... buy them.”

Lucian pouts, but one side of Kane’s mouth kicks up in a smile. My own mouth goes dry. God, he’s handsome.

“Good,” he purrs, his eyes flashing as he steps towards me. “You’ll be paid after our first match. The tailors understand.”

“You heard her,” Lucian tells the staff with a bored, disappointed tone. He frowns at me. “Hurry up, she needs everything. Anything she doesn’t need, I’ll buy for her.”

“But—” I start, but Lucian simply walks away, disappearing into another room.

Kane stares at me as people and creatures from mythology bustle all around me, holding up bolts of fabric, tapping me with strange bits of twigs and flowers, and in one case, rubbing a crystal across my wrist.

No idea what that’s about.

“It’s good you didn’t let him buy this for you. We would have made sure you had what you needed sooner or later.”

“Why? What would Lucian have done if I’d accepted it?”

“You would owe him... a favor.” The cold tone he uses for the word leaves no room for interpretation.

I have a pretty good idea of what favor he’d have in mind.

A chill goes through me, and I take another fortifying sip of tea.

Okay, that’s a lie, I chug the rest of it.

“Do you truly prefer tea to coffee?”

“Coffee?” I tilt my head, brushing someone’s hand from my cheek. “I’ve never had it.”

He breaks into a wide grin, his canines almost normal length, and then seizes my hand.

“That’s enough,” he barks, and the people surrounding me disappear, leaving me alone with glowing racks of clothes.

He notices my attention. “They’re adjusting to your size and preferred colors,” he explains.

“But I never said what color I prefer.”

Kane shoots me a quizzical look. “You didn’t have to. What did you think they were doing?”

I don't have an answer for that, so I follow him, completely bemused, as he tugs me into the kitchen.

Red and Conall sit at the table, and they both stop talking as soon as I walk in.

My chest heats.

"I stole your shirt," I say quickly, tugging at the bottom of it, which is at my knees. "Sorry. I didn't want to put my, er, dirty clothes back on."

"It's a pleasure to see you clothed in that," Conall rumbles, and Kane freezes up next to me. "We might be killers, Bri, but we don't expect you to wear the blood of your enemies."

Red lets out a low laugh, though he pointedly avoids looking at me.

That's fine. He still freaks me out, even if he is super-hot. I look around at them all for a second, and it hits me like a piano crashing from the sky. They're all super-hot.

Something orange catches my eye, and I do a double take as I realize Luna's curled up in Red's lap as he and Conall continue their conversation.

Little traitor.

"What do you want to eat?" Kane asks.

"I can get myself food," I start, and then stare at the daunting size of the kitchen.

"I would consider it an honor to feed you," the vampire rasps.

Conall breaks off mid-sentence, giving Kane a hard look. "I already warned ye once about self-control, Kane. Do we have a problem?"

"I'll get it myself," I repeat, then start opening and closing cabinets until I find the pantry. Bread. A red, shining apple.

"Cheese," I mutter, pleased beyond reason when I open up one of the magically cold cupboards. Holy shit, there's so much cheese. I fucking *love* cheese. It's one of the few extravagances I'll allow myself when I can afford it.

Oh my god. There are so many kinds. I don't even know what half these are.

A plate slides across the counter as I consider options, and I thoughtlessly place the bread on it, then pile up as many kinds of cheese as I think I can eat, all too excited.

When I turn back around, they're all staring at me.

Conall grins. "Glad ye found something to yer likin', lass."

I can't help beaming at him. "I love cheese."

"If I knew cheese was the way to your heart..." Lucian drawls, peering over my shoulder. I hadn't even realized he was in the kitchen.

"It's not her heart yer interested in, ye demon," Conall says, rolling his eyes.

I sit gingerly at the table, feeling so damn awkward with all their attention on me. I look at the cheese longingly, though, and decide I'm too hungry to care if they watch me eat.

The weirdos.

Plucking a knife from the table, I swipe one of the soft cheeses, covered in purple, across a hunk of bread, and pop it in my mouth.

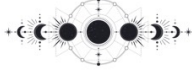
Oh my goodness. It's creamy, and the purple stuff is blueberry.

My eyes roll back and I moan in pleasure.

"Fuckin' hell, lass, I'm not sure yer going to be allowed cheese if you make it sound so sinful." Conall laughs, and I look up, self-conscious, into the faces of four monsters with matching expressions.

Lust.

CHAPTER 20



KANE

I never thought I'd have the hardest cock in my life while watching a mortal woman eat cheese for breakfast, but here I am, painfully hard and wanting her to make that damned noise again.

She reeks of the frost giant, his cold peppermint scent clinging to her skin, his shirt skimming over her body.

My hands should be skimming over her fucking body.

I shake my head, trying to clear it.

Conall watches me carefully, chewing his own breakfast with a thoughtful expression. As if he can see the strange, possessive thoughts that cartwheel through my mind. I've never had anything but love for Conall, but now, with the woman wearing his clothes, his scent... I want to rake my fangs through the giant's hide.

It must be time for me to hunt again. I roll my shoulders, popping my neck. A good fight in the ring usually solves the worst of my bloodlust.

Usually.

Bri moans again, a small whimper of delight, her cheeks bulging like a chipmunk's as she chews.

Red pretends not to notice her, but I wonder if he sees his own past in her, the way she eats like she's starving. He told me last night that she didn't have much. Perhaps she reminds him of what he came from. Where we found him.

"I inspected the book last night," Lucian finally says, breaking the silence. Bri takes a surreptitious bite of food, holding her hand over her mouth, clearly aware of her effect on us and trying to mitigate the effects.

It's charming.

"Are you listening, Kane?" Red asks, his patience short as usual. "Or are you so fixated on the girl that you can do

nothing more than stare?”

Grunting, I nod my head and settle in one of the barstools, far enough from her that it keeps my twitching hand from reaching out to her. From pulling her into my body, from taking her upstairs and—

It must be the bloodlust.

“What did you find in the book? What is it?” I snap, annoyed with myself.

“It is as Carrot Cake said. The book is a textbook, mostly small-minded interpretations of the Rift and the events following it.” Lucian reaches for a strand of Bri’s hair, twirling it through his fingers.

She doesn’t even seem to notice, wolfing down food like it’s been years since she’s eaten. Her intense hunger is a side effect of using her magic, her body needing increased calories to sustain the new energy she’s burning off.

My upper lip twitches, showing fang, and Lucian grins at me, his enjoyment at seeing me... out of sorts clear in his face.

“Leave the lass alone,” Conall says, his voice rumbling.

Bri starts, her green eyes wide, only now registering Lucian’s been toying with her silken locks. Her nose crinkles and she bats his hand away.

A low growl begins in my chest, taking me by surprise.

“The book is exactly what it appears to be,” Lucian says, grinning at me like he knows a secret.

I glare at him.

“Out with it,” Conall says roughly. “I’m done with the games ye play, demon.”

“There’s no need to be rude,” Lucian starts.

Red laughs, a vicious sound. “You have twenty minutes until I pin you to the training arena wall,” he says meaningfully.

“It’s my book, and I’d appreciate knowing whatever it is you found... without the death threats. Just say it,” Bri says tartly, a look of annoyance flickering over her face.

“As the lady wishes,” Lucian says, sweeping into a bow that simply earns him a sigh of frustration from Bri. “The book is exactly that—a history text—but it’s been woven thick with enchantments concealing the owner’s presence. In this case, you. It’s an anti-magic beacon.” Lucian rubs his hands together, grinning devilishly. “My specialty, of course. It’s designed to repel magic users, no, more than that, any magic sensates at all. Anyone sensitive to magic should have felt the urge to turn around when near it.”

“Those kind of spells, especially one keyed to someone,” Conall jerks his head at Bri, “are incredibly complicated.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Lucian says, grinning smugly at Bri. “It would have taken handling over years to have it not affect her at all.”

“Who could have done that?” Bri says, taking another bite, her appetite apparently unaffected by the conversation.

“You already told us who did it,” I say, confused by her lack of understanding. Yes, I knew she was naïve about the way her magic worked, but I didn’t realize the depth of her ignorance.

She stops chewing, her bright eyes fastened on me. “What?”

“You said your father read the book to you. It was likely he was keying the spell to you, even then. Trying to protect you, if he knew what you were.”

“My father despised magic,” she says, shaking her head. “He wouldn’t have used it.”

“Was there someone else that lived with you there? Your mother?” Red asks, brow furrowed.

“No,” she says simply, but a pained expression races across her face. “It was just us.” Her lower lip trembles and she stares at her now empty plate.

I want to tell her she's going to be okay. She's safe.

I have her now.

Conall reaches for her hand across the table, and my lip curls as his hand swallows hers. "Lass, there appear to be some hard truths you need to look at about your father."

"No," she pushes back from the table. "My father wasn't a liar. He wasn't a hypocrite. He wanted the best for me, and he tried to give it to me."

We all remain silent, but Lucian spears me with a look and I know he's thinking the same thing I am.

If her father had magic and he locked her away from the magical world... why? To keep her in squalor?

What did her father know about her that we don't?

CHAPTER 21



BRI

All of the clothes—and there are a lot of them, more clothes than I’ve ever seen in my life, let alone considered *mine*—magically fit me.

It’s excessive. It’s wonderful.

There’s an entire rack of gowns, so expensive-seeming I’m afraid to do more than glance at them. What the hell I’m going to do with gowns here, I have no idea. But I’ve never had anything that was for fun or because it was pretty, and I want to try them all on just for the hell of it.

“They’ll be in your quarters when we return from training,” Kane says, never far from me, but never too close. His hair’s tousled this morning, slightly curling and disheveled, giving his refined features a more appealing, approachable appearance.

His dark gaze never seems to leave mine, like he’s made himself personally responsible for my safety.

Maybe he has.

“This one,” he says shortly, pulling a pair of black pants from where they hang, tossing them to me. “This,” he adds, and throws more black fabric at me. “Boots.” He kicks a box towards me and I hold the clothes to my chest, unable to do more than stare at him.

This whole thing is too much. I’m overwhelmed from the accusations they made about my father, what they would mean... if they were true, which they’re not. Then there are the clothes, the gowns, the fact that they expect me—

“Get dressed,” he says roughly.

“He’s right, little carrot,” Lucian adds, coming round the corner. “Although, I wouldn’t mind watching you train in Conall’s favorite shirt, and I’m sure he wouldn’t either, given one good high kick and we could see all the way to your—”

I glare at him, and buzzing fills my ears, his taunting and the stress they've put me under making magic prick beneath my skin.

“Careful now, lass,” Conall booms, crossing into the room, now wearing dark leather training clothes like the ones in my arms. “Save it for the arena. Would be a shame to ruin all yer fine new things.”

Gritting my teeth, I yank the pants on carefully. Even though I knew they would fit, I'm still surprised when the soft, sturdy leather slides on like butter.

Annoyed, I pull Conall's massive shirt over my head, tossing it on the ground.

Kane's breath stutters and I glare at him, not caring about the fact I'm only wearing a bra and the pants. Not my fault if he can't control himself.

“Get a grip,” I snarl, so fucking over this bullshit I can't contain my annoyance any longer. “You're about to kick my ass in the training ring. The sight of my stomach and shoulders should be the last thing you care about.”

A slow clap rings out as I tug on the tank and a matching leather jacket.

“I, for one, enjoyed the show immensely,” Lucian says, beaming at me. “I could do with more finesse, of course, next time. Perhaps you could remove your bra—”

“Shut up,” I say, crooking my finger at him. Power sizzles beneath my skin and it catches me so off-guard that I freeze up.

“Seems anger is her trigger after all,” Lucian says. “Red will be so thrilled that he's not the only rage monster among us.”

“I wouldn't wish it on anyone, much less her,” Red answers from behind me.

Like the rest, he's wearing black leathers too, except... his chest is bare, showing off a chiseled, lean chest and a small swathe of black hair across it. Why they call him Red when

he's all tan skin and dark hair is beyond me. My gaze lingers on him a bit too long and I look away, back at Kane, who's frowning at the boots by my feet.

They fit nicely too, and before I can put it off any longer, the men are stomping out of the house around me, my monstrous honor guard.

It's a chill enough morning that my breath clouds in front of my face, but it's nothing like the fog curling off Red. There's a cloud of it, all around his bare torso, which, frankly, explains why he's shirtless.

That and with a body like that, why not? Good for him. Even if he is a jerk, at least he's willing to share his goods with the world.

What a treat for me, personally.

"See something you like?" Lucian murmurs in my ear. "Want to ride the beast, do you? I would like to see that."

I roll my eyes, biting my tongue. I have a feeling answering the demon will only make things worse, so I snub him completely.

Want to ride the beast... I glance back at Red, studiously ignoring the few other teams out and about this early, and watch the muscles ripple under the strange tattoos clawed all down his spine. Some kind of glyphs, maybe? It's like nothing I've ever seen.

What the hell is he?

If I paid a lick of attention to the Blood Rite, or at least the parts they televise and broadcast all over the world, then maybe I would know.

Maybe I'll find out when we get to the arena.

Adrenaline surges, and a cold sweat breaks out all over my body.

"I don't want to die," I squeak out, fear turning my tongue heavy in my mouth.

“No one is going to die,” Conall says, his voice steady and gentle.

Red snorts a laugh, and the glance he spares me is full of derision.

“I have you,” Kane says, and he wraps his arm around my waist, pulling my trembling body next to his. “I have you, Gabrielle.”

There’s a faint rush of wind on the top of my head, like he’s sniffing my hair, but I’m grateful to have him to lean on, even though part of me is still scared shitless of him, of all of them.

I think they might mean it. I think they mean it when they say they want to keep me safe.

“Training isn’t to hurt you, Carrot Cake,” Lucian adds. “We’re going to teach you to survive.”

“Don’t sugarcoat it for the girl,” Red says, then turns around to face me, walking backwards. “You’re going to bleed today. You’re going to be sore, and bruised, and wishing you’d never even heard the word magic before in your life.”

“Thank ye for that, ye jackass,” Conall says, then shoves his shoulder.

I blink. Anyone else on the receiving end of that kind of push would go reeling. But Red? Red just smiles, and it’s full of too many teeth, sharp and jagged.

What the fuck is he?

I shiver, and Kane pulls me closer still. “You might be all of those things at the end of our session,” he says calmly, rubbing one arm up and down my bicep. “But you will also be stronger. We are going to do everything in our power to ensure you are safe. Do you understand me, Gabrielle?”

His voice is low and mellifluous, thick and sweet as honey. I nod once, and there’s a slow hiss of approval from his mouth as I make myself look up at him.

“Yes,” I say. “But my name is Bri.”

Lucian barks a laugh. “You’re a funny little thing, moya morkovka. I like you better than our dead member. He was a little too... stiff. Especially at the end.” He waggles dark eyebrows meaningfully.

“By the old gods,” Conall says, frowning at the demon. “Enough.”

The demon’s dark, awful joke makes me grin, even though it could just as easily be me stiff, another fifth teammate down.

Ahead, a curved wall replaces the slowly waking buildings, the small city at the center of the Rite still mostly sleeping. The wall is shoulder-height on me, and the paved stones give way to freshly raked sand in the interior.

The training ring.

I squeeze my eyes shut. Yesterday morning I was sorting tea, and today? Today, I’m stepping into a training ring at the Blood Rite.

Kane pushes me along, and I force myself to open my eyes back into this waking nightmare. Lucian and Red are already halfway into the ring, their footsteps deep in the soft sand.

Lucian’s twirling daggers in his hand, twin blades that trail smoke through the clear air. As for Red, he simply continues to brood, pretending not to watch me.

“Do I get a sword?” I ask, scanning the loaded weapons rack next to the wall.

Conall turns an amused look on me. “Do ye know how to use a sword, Bri?”

“Er... no?”

“Then why would you want a sword, lass?” he asks, blue eyes laughing at me.

My lips curl to the side. “Because we’re in a training ring.”

“If anyone gets close enough to you that you need a sword for protection, then you’re already dead,” Lucian tells me, grinning.

“Thanks,” I mutter darkly.

“You’re welcome, moya morkovka. Oh, don’t look so glum. What do you think the four of us are going to do, stand by and watch you get slaughtered?”

I gape at him.

Kane growls, rolling his shoulders. “You’re not here to learn how to use a sword, Gabrielle.”

“Bri,” I correct automatically, even though my full name on his lips sounds... really nice.

Nice. Bah. It sounds like pure sex.

Stupid vampire.

All in all, despite the amount of cheese I stuffed in my mouth, I’m in a foul mood. “I’d feel better with something to protect myself.”

Kane finally steps away from me, his lip curling in disgust. “You want something to protect yourself? What do you think that summon did back in the alley? It killed a man because you needed protecting.”

“I don’t know how to use my magic,” I argue.

“Here,” Conall says, and my jaw drops as he tugs his shirt off. Whereas steam curls from Red, frost flowers all along Conall’s ribcage. A leather band is buckled across his hips, but I barely note it, preoccupied with the sheer amount of muscle packed on the giant’s frame.

His gaze never leaving my face, he unfastens the strap then holds it out for me, his muscled chest heaving slightly.

My mouth goes dry and I wordlessly take the leather, not sure what to do with it.

“I don’t think she’s ever seen a half-naked frost giant,” Lucian laughs. “A fine sight, isn’t he?”

Conall turns away from me, and I blink in surprise at the sheer amount of raised white scars lashed across his back.

“It’s a dagger,” Kane explains, ignoring Lucian and Conall both. “If it makes you feel better, take it. I can’t say I like it,

but Lucian is right. If it comes to a dagger in the real arena, odds are not in your favor.”

I swallow hard, tugging the handle from the sheath. It’s a simple design, a well-worn handle that appears to be made of bone with a long, sharp-looking blade.

“It’s a *sgian dubh*,” Conall calls out. “You can have it if it will make ye feel better, lass, but I’d prefer if you didn’t fight with it today. I can show ye a few things one-on-one. For today, though, let’s focus on your magic.”

I slide the dagger, *sgian dubh*, back in the sheath, and try to buckle it around my own hips. My cheeks heat as I repeatedly fail, my fingers shaking too hard to manage to tighten the belt.

“Here,” Kane says quietly, then bends his knee, his strong hands making quick work of the belt. His fingertips brush against the sliver of bare skin between my tank and pants, and the mere contact makes my heart beat faster.

Which is insanely stupid.

I do not need to be getting fluttery pants feelings for a bloodthirsty vampire. That’s like, the mother of all bad ideas. The baddest of ideas.

“What are you thinking about?” Kane’s face is tilted up to mine and he stands elegantly, watching me with an inscrutable expression on his face.

“Not dying,” I say, and it’s not quite true. But it’s a lot smarter than saying *fucking you*.

Either way, I don’t have a death wish, and I’m pretty sure fucking a vampire would be flirting with death.

“Enough standing around and looking pretty,” Red calls out, glaring at me.

I put my hands on my hips and glare right back at him.

“Somebody needs to make you fools look good, asshole,” I snap.

To my surprise, Red grins, the curl of his lip so brief that I almost think I imagined it. It doesn't quite make me feel warm and fuzzy inside, but it does nearly shock me out of my irritation.

I take a few steps into the ring, Kane at my side, the other three males watching me silently. It doesn't feel like judgment either, but like... support.

Like maybe they meant it when they said they want me to live.

“From what we've seen, lass, your trigger is anger. Do ye think ye have more ways to crack open that magic inside you?”

I consider the question, trying to latch onto the needle-sharp feeling of my magic, the strange awareness of it inside.

“Anger? I was scared out of my mind when the dude in the hood came at me with the knife.”

“Then I'm really sorry for what I'm about to do.”

It's the only warning I get before Lucian hurls one of his smoking daggers at me.

I drop to the sand, grit crusting my palms and face, but the dagger flies overhead, so fast it makes a slight noise as it passes.

“You could have hurt me,” I shriek, enraged. “What the fuck are you doing?” No sooner have the words left my mouth than Lucian's grabbing me by the throat, lifting me from the sand. His human mask is gone, his skin bright red and pebbled, his face still beautiful but terrifying in this new shade.

“Use your magic,” he rumbles, all pretense of urbanity gone. “Hook your fear and make it work.”

I choke on a breath, kicking my legs as he raises me higher, dots swimming before my eyes. Pain blooms in my side, and I squeak in shock.

“The fuck?” Lucian's eyes grow wide and he drops me.

I sprawl in the sand, gasping for breath and trying to catch my bearings and figure out why my side hurts so bad.

“I see you let your demon play with your little mate, Kane,” a new voice says.

I touch my side, and my hand comes away sticky and wet.

I’m bleeding. Shock turns me numb, and I stand on faltering feet. Lucian steps in front of me, and icy cold whips against my bloody side, peppermint filling my nostrils.

“We have the ring booked during this slot.” Conall’s voice brims with barely restrained rage. “We’re training our new member.”

“And we came to get a look-see at the little sorceress. Looks like she’d be more at home with her legs in the air than in the ring.”

That takes my attention from the blood staining my hands to the speaker, and I whip my head up, fury pounding through me.

A blunt-faced man with a bald head stands on the opposite side of the ring, smoking a long cigarette, his eyes pinpricks in his wide face. Four others flank him, cloaked and quiet.

Another team.

And I don’t have a clue which or why.

“What do you say, Red, is the bitch good in bed? Have you sampled her yet?” the man croons, and anger wells in me, a rising tide that surges higher and higher with every breath I take.

“Sampled me?” I ask, taking a step forward. There’s magic all around me, inside me, and I hold on to it, shaping it, letting it ride me this time instead of trying to push it down.

I can feel the walls between the worlds, and for a second I close my eyes, nearly seeing them. The thin membrane that separates Earth, this dimension, from the otherrealms.

I want something huge. I want something terrifying. I want it to eat this stupid asshole’s face off.

“That’s right, witch, sampled you. Tasted the goods. Fucked you until you were hoarse from his cock in your mouth.”

None of my teammates move, but there’s an undercurrent of nasty violence, and Kane takes a step closer to me.

Pushing Lucian aside, I close the distance between me and the shiny-headed asshole talking smack.

“You sound like someone that doesn’t have a clue how to please a woman,” I purr, still shaping the magic, finding the soft spots, the threadbare spots in the web between our worlds. It needs to be thin enough to pull something big through. I don’t know what, but I want it.

I can feel it, sense it, call to it, something nasty and sharp. So I do, the power making my hair stand on end.

“Boss,” one of the others calls.

“Bri,” someone on my team says at the same time.

“Do you feel what she’s doing?” Lucian asks, but I’m not listening to him. I’m not listening to anything but the siren song of power humming through me.

More, it says. I need more.

“Is that right?” fuckface asks. “You volunteering to teach me how to please you?”

I laugh, and a weird, inhuman sound comes out of me.

The world turns dark for a long moment, and my hair whips around my face. “I already know how you can please me,” I snarl.

Light-headed, I watch in satisfaction as a puddle grows around the man’s feet, his eyes wide and terrified.

“See? That wasn’t so hard. Probably the first time you’ve ever pleased a woman in your life.”

“Send it back, lass,” Conall calls, and I turn towards him as the idiots in front of me scamper off.

When I see what it is I've pulled from the otherrealm, I nearly piss myself too.

There's a glimpse of teeth. Too many, all sharp, all jagged and yellow. Eyes that blink, eyes that don't blink. There are no words for the horror in front of me. No words for the color or shape.

It's horrible.

I did this. Nausea roils in me.

"Send it back," Kane says, and I reach for him, needing him to hold me steady.

The creature jerks, and I feel it tug at the magic I used to pull it here, testing it, looking for a way out.

"No," I whisper. "You don't belong here."

With a mighty effort, I close my eyes, searching for that weak spot again... yes. Just there.

"Go," I say, willing the creature gone. Needing it to be gone.

When I open my eyes again, the only thing left is the pool of piss behind me and the four men that are my new team.

"Well, anger is a trigger, then." Lucian sounds much too smug, and Kane's head whips to him.

"Feckin' hell," Conall says, wiping his face.

"You," I say, almost too tired to be furious with Lucian. Almost, but not quite. "You did this?"

"Of course I did it. It's called training. It's not called a walk in the park. Based on how you reacted to my little jokes yesterday, I figured you would respond well—" he tilts his head back and forth, pursing his lips, "—perhaps badly is a better descriptor of how I thought you would react. Turns out I was correct, as usual." He grins, and I shake off Kane's grip and slap the demon across the face.

He grabs my wrist and plants a noisy kiss on my palm. "I like the foreplay, but we're not done."

“That was foolish, ye selfish feck,” Conall growls.

Red just watches, his dark eyes narrow slits.

“Are you joking?” Lucian says, throwing his hands in the air. “Did you see what she summoned? That was horrifying. Angelic, even. I never would have thought that possible had I not seen it with my own eyes.”

“It was reckless,” Conall continues. “She doesn’t know the least bit about her magic. She could have expended too much and killed herself. By the old gods, Lucian. Use yer brain, or whatever it is you have left of it.”

I sag, depleted, exhausted, and reeling from all of this. I expected to be sore. I expected them to show me how to fight.

“This isn’t working,” Kane snarls, scooping me up into his arms. “She’s done for the day. I’ll train her on the basics, since she clearly needs to know her limits. We can try again tomorrow.”

His arms are so strong, and despite my misgivings about him—about all of them—I can’t deny that the last thing I want right now is to hang out in this ring and have Lucian grab me by the throat or send another stupid Rite team after me.

If I wasn’t so completely exhausted, I’d still be mad.

I don’t even have the energy to hook my arms around Kane’s neck. I’m not about to tell him I can walk.

I’m not sure I can. My new shirt’s a bloody mess, and I feel like I got pummeled by a baseball bat.

“Your neck,” Kane says, his face so hard it could be made from granite.

“What about it?” I ask through dry lips, the ring already behind us.

“It’s bruised from that idiot demon,” he grits out.

“Oh,” I say. “Well, he did hold me up by it.”

“I should have stopped him.”

“I thought it was part of the training.”

Kane doesn't answer, a muscle twitching in his temple.

"Was that thing really an angel?" I ask, disbelieving.

"I don't know what that was," Kane says. "I'm going to patch you up as best I can, get you clean and get some more food in you, and then we're going to go over some magic basics before we get you back in the ring."

"I am starving," I admit, my stomach growling.

"That's because every time you use your magic, you're burning through your energy stores. The way to feed energy stores, for humans at least, is to eat. So we need to get you food, and you need rest to refill them."

Huh. "That seems too simple. Also inconvenient. I don't see how I'm going to be much use if I need a nap and a snack throughout the Rite. Throw me a protein shake while I'm summoning something unholy."

A soft smile grows on his face, and I study him from where he holds me against his broad chest.

"You'll get used to it, the magic spend, that is. It's like a muscle. It will get stronger with use, won't need so much from you. But whatever the hell that creature was you summoned... I'm surprised you're still conscious. That was like nothing I've ever seen before."

There's an edge of awe to his voice, and it sets my teeth on edge.

"I believe you, you know," he continues, taking the steps leading up to the side entrance of the Nightworth House two at a time.

"About what?" I ask, yawning.

"That you didn't know your father was magic. I believe that he convinced you of that. What I want to know, Gabrielle, what we all need to know... is why he hid who you are from you."

"To protect me from being whisked away by a team of monsters to fight to the death, most likely," I say thoughtlessly.

His smile dies.

I wince inwardly. That wasn't tactful. Here he is, being kind to me, truly kind, helping me take care of my ignorant self, and I insult him.

"I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you did," he cuts me off. "And you shouldn't forget what I am, not for one second."

There's so much self-loathing in his tone that an ache blossoms in my chest, so strong that I can't help reaching up to touch his cheekbone, his strong jawline.

"I'm sorry," I say quietly, not sure what, exactly, is spurring me to apologize. Isn't it their fault I'm here at all?

It isn't, though, and he stops, still under my touch, watching me. Holding his breath.

It's the fault of the Blood Rite, this world we live in, that demands we lock ourselves up until we're no longer recognizable. The world will think me a monster, too.

Maybe I am.

"You're being kind to me, and I hurt your feelings. Who does that make the monster?" I ask softly.

He grunts, then starts walking again.

When he finally speaks, my eyes are heavy, my entire body aching like I've run for miles, despite doing nothing but use my stupid summoning magic.

"You don't have to say things you don't mean."

I can't help but huff a laugh. "That just proves you don't know me at all, Kane. I don't ever say what I don't mean. I might say things that are awful in the heat of the moment, but I don't sugarcoat shit. If I really thought you were a monster, I wouldn't apologize for it."

He goes quiet again, and I grimace as he changes his grip to open a door.

“You’re hurt. Conall’s magic didn’t close the wound all the way?”

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “I feel like I went through a meat grinder.”

“Let’s take a look,” Kane says.

Gingerly, he sets me on a firm surface and I blink slowly, making myself look around. There are four beds, cots, really, with white sheets pulled tight around them. An array of glass bottles and jars line a well-kept shelf, and several spark or bubble as I stare, the magic in them emitting a haze around them. Silver syringes lie on a tray, empty and ready to be used.

“Oh,” I say. “I don’t know why I thought you guys wouldn’t have some kind of magical nurse’s office here in Murder Mansion, USA, but I’m surprised all the same.”

“Murder Mansion, USA?” he repeats, the corners of his mouth twitching. “Is that what you think this is?”

“I mean, it’s a big mansion. You’re all...” I choke on the words, because suddenly, I realize I’m not just talking about them. “We’re all murderers.”

Strong hands grip my shoulders. “You did what you had to do to survive. You made a choice to protect yourself.”

“I didn’t mean to kill him.” As scary as his pointed teeth and knife were, I didn’t wake up with the intent to watch someone get eaten. Not my kink. Not that kind of eaten, anyway.

“I know,” Kane says quietly, and I make myself look up at him.

Really look at him.

He holds my gaze, and the urge to confess rises through my throat.

“I did mean to hurt the man in the ring today,” I admit, shame coloring my cheeks. “I wanted to hurt him. I liked when he was scared. I would’ve taken it further.”

I don't know why I'm admitting it, the words tumbling out one after the other like venomous snakes pouring from my throat.

"Lucian should never have set that up," Kane growls, his fingernails tightening uncomfortably on my shoulders.

"I should have been able to control myself," I say right back, disgusted. "That wasn't who my father raised me to be. None of this is who I am."

He steps back, dropping his hands and watching me dispassionately, a muscle in his jaw working. "Maybe that's the problem, Bri. Maybe you don't know who you are yet. Maybe you've been denying who—what—you truly are. Until you accept your magic, until you accept what you're capable of, who you are at your core... You won't have full control."

I laugh, but it's a brittle sound. "And what do I do when I have control? They'll set me loose in the arena, and then I'll be killing for sport." I want to cry.

The tears won't come.

"You'll be doing what you have to do to survive," Kane says simply.

I tilt my head at him, my hair falling over my cheek. "The cost is too high."

Pain flits over his face, a tightening of his jaw. "Never say that again," he says hoarsely.

Warm hands cup my face and he holds my cheeks tight, his breath gusting over my face.

"Don't say that ever again," he growls, black filling his eyes, his teeth elongating.

My gaze drops to his lips, the dimple in his chin, and I'm suddenly hot all over, for reasons that have nothing to do with shame and everything to do with want.

His attention flicks to my mouth, and for a moment, the world stands still, silent save our breathing and the beating of my heart.

“You are worth every drop of blood spilled in that arena to keep you safe,” he continues, his gaze dragging over my face. “You are... *sublime*.”

His lips are a mere breath away from mine, and desire tows me under. Kane might be a monster, but he is *beautiful*. When he looks at me as though I am special, I want to bask in it like sunshine.

He exhales, his lips parting, warm air brushing over my mouth, my heated cheeks, and suddenly, just looking isn't enough.

My hands fist in his shirt and I tug him close.

A feral sound escapes him as my lips crash against his.

His mouth is soft on mine, soft and gentle, and it makes me want more. I tug him closer, his hands still on either side of my face, and dart my tongue out, teasing his bottom lip.

He growls—growls—at the contact, one hand moving to the base of my throat, the other pulling me tight and hard against him.

“Gabrielle,” he murmurs, kissing a line across my cheekbone, down my jaw. “What are you doing to me?”

I shiver, lost in the moment, lost in the sheer feel of him, his expert hands and mouth, losing myself to sensation for once in my life.

His tongue darts out, and I moan as he licks across the column of my neck. Need like nothing I've ever experienced races through me, thunderous and loud.

Sharp fangs slide across my skin, and it should freak me out, it should make my blood run cold.

It doesn't.

My lower body clenches.

Is he going to bite me? Do I *want* him to bite me?

He doesn't, though, just pins me with his hands, licking the place where my pulse beats against my neck over and over again as shivers run through me.

“Cannae say that’s what I imagined would be happening in here,” Conall’s voice booms.

I jerk back like a wet cat, but Kane holds onto me tight, his eyes full black as he stares at Conall. An unearthly noise emanates from the vampire, and a frisson of fear overrides my lust-addled brain.

“It’s a good thing I came to check on ye, Bri,” Conall continues, and Kane lunges at him, hissing, moving so fast he blurs.

Conall raises one hand and ice sheathes the vampire, stopping him from attacking.

“Did he hurt ye, lass?” Conall asks, unshaken by the sudden events.

I blink at him. “No?”

“Interesting,” Conall says amiably. “Did he have a chance to look after yer injury, then, or was he just interested in mauling yer neck?”

“I wasn’t going to hurt her,” Kane finally says, ice receding from him. When he turns back to me, his eyes are wild... wild, but normal.

“I’ll leave you to Conall’s capable hands.” He rakes a hand through his dark hair, and his polite smile is more like a grimace.

The door closes softly behind him, the sound underwhelming after the gravity of the shift in things between me and Kane hits me. The door should have slammed, just like my heart slams into my ribs. It should have made more noise.

I kissed him.

My face pales and I stare up at the frost giant, completely at a loss.

“Off with yer shirt,” he says, turning his back to me. Glass clinks and I do as he says, too bewildered at the fact I kissed Kane to do more than obey the giant.

I hiss as I pull the tank overhead, the mostly dried blood sticking to the wound, pulling at the unhealed edges. It's burning now, pain throbbing across my stomach and ribs.

"It wasn't hurting before."

"Kane dosed ye, it seems," Conall mutters, turning back to me with a length of bandage in one hand and a jar of thick paste in the other. "Doubt he even knew he was doin' it."

"Dosed me?"

"Used vampire magic. Blood magic. If you weren't feelin' pain until now, it's because he was leaking the magic while he was with ye."

"I thought you healed it," I admit, lifting my arm and inspecting the wound. Bruising goes under my bra strap, and I wince.

"I stopped the blood. Iced it up so it wouldn't swell. I can't do much more than that." He lifts the bandage meaningfully, putting the glass jar on the bed beside me. "Not without this, at least. This might hurt."

Sealed air hisses from the jar as he uncorks the top, then shakes a dollop of paste into his palm.

Pain flashes through me as he gingerly rubs it into the skin, and I bite my lip to keep from crying out.

"Yer alright, lass, I've got ye," he murmurs, fingertips trailing all over my side.

Heat floods me, and I'm not sure if it's some kind of weird lust leftover compliments of Kane, or if it's in response to Conall.

I'm a mess. I slept in his giant-sized bed last night, and I woke up with the scent of him all around me, and I can't deny the big guy has a certain appeal.

I close my eyes as he winds the bandage around my waist, pretending to be unaffected.

I hardly ever catch feelings for anyone. I keep my distance, and I stay safe, and I don't let people in. I don't get crushes

and I don't have friends and I certainly don't start getting ideas about two men at once.

I don't even want to imagine the consequences of liking two of the men I now *live* with. What the hell has gotten into me?

Not dick, that's for damn sure.

His fingers brush over my skin, and I swallow hard, trying to think about anything else.

"Do I have my own rooms?" I ask. "I don't want to hop in your bed again tonight."

He stills and I glance up at him, cringing at the way that just came out.

"Why?" he asks softly, one blond eyebrow rising in amusement. "Do you plan to hop in a certain vampire's bed then, bonny Bri? Will he be hopping in yours?"

I blink, caught off guard by his blunt questions. Caught off guard by the edge to them, the cold fire in his eyes. This is why I can't get involved with any of these males more than I already have. It's only going to make an awful situation even messier.

I need to concentrate on staying alive, not on locking lips with any of them. Or other body parts.

"It wasn't what it looked like," I finally say, meeting his eyes.

"What was it then?" Conall asks, his huge hands bracketing my body, palms pressing into the bed, so close I have to lean back. "Because what it looked like was Kane was about to feed from ye, then fuck yer pretty cunt hard. Was that not what was going to happen, Bri?"

I go hot all over, my eyes wide. No one's ever spoken to me like that before.

I'm less mad about it than I would have thought.

"Er, no?" I cringe, because I'm not at all sure I mind the thought of any of that.

What the hell is *wrong* with me?

Conall leans close, his peppermint and frost scent tickling my nostrils, then he releases the cot's frame, picking up the cream and bandages and putting them away with careful hands.

"You need to be careful with the vampire. He's more dangerous than any I've met. A primal. He's always been in control..." He pauses, glancing over his huge shoulder at me. A tattoo peeks out from under his shirt, climbing up his neck. "He's dangerous," he finally finishes.

"I understand." Irritation finally crawls through me, now that Conall's at a safe distance. Although, I guess there's no such thing as a safe distance from a fucking frost giant. I glare at him. "And he might be dangerous, but so am I. This whole place is dangerous."

He laughs, and there's a thread of pity in the sound. "Lass, there's danger, and then there's a primal vampire, one of the oldest of his kind. But if you have a death wish, then yer in the right place. Just don't feck up in the arena."

"How am I supposed to do any of this?" I throw my hands in the air, then immediately regret the movement, my wound screaming in protest. "I don't know how to use my magic. I don't know how to fight. But I'm supposed to do both in the Blood Rite."

"Our first match with ye is next week," Conall says, bracing his hands on the ledge behind himself, his gaze steady on mine. "We have one week to get ye as ready as possible. Which brings me to why I interrupted your darlin' moment with Kane. One-on-one training starts today. We'll get ye fed again, because I'm sure yer starved after that stunt Lucian pulled with Team Fallenstand. And then we get to work, because I'll be fucked in the arse before I let another member of this team die on my watch."

He slams a massive fist onto the counter and I jump, the bottles rattling against each other behind him. "Ye'll try yer best, and ye will learn, and ye will survive, lass. Understood?"

I nod once, swallowing, my eyes wide.

“Good. There are showers through there if you want to clean up at all. Leave the bandage on, though.” He points to a door I didn’t notice, too preoccupied with a certain vampire. “When yer done, they’ll be fresh clothes waitin’ for ye.”

“Thanks,” I say, because I’m not a total asshole. Or, at the very least, I’m a *well-mannered* asshole.

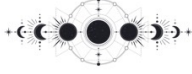
He closes the door behind him, and I rub a hand over my face.

I just had to go and kiss the dangerously fuckable vampire where the delicious frost giant could see me do it, didn’t I?

I must have that death wish... because as I shower, all I can think about is what it would be like to kiss Kane some more, and whether Conall’s dirty mouth works just as well in the bedroom.

I am so *screwed*.

CHAPTER 22



BRI

I have never been so hungry in my life. I'm on my second plate of food, tucking in like I've never eaten before.

"Lass, I'm going to put you with Red for your first lesson today."

My fork pauses halfway to my mouth, and I blink up at where Conall sits at the opposite side of the massive kitchen table. Better than Lucian, I guess. Or Kane. I take a bite, hoping my chewing will hide my sudden flare of desire. Whatever hold that vampire has on me, it's not going away just because he's not around.

"He's the master of control," Conall continues, and if he notices how out of sorts I am, he doesn't say anything. Another point for the frost giant. "He can teach you about how to reign in the amount of magic you're expending. He can teach you about—"

"About how to not get yourself killed by using too much too fast," Red finishes, stalking through the doorway. "I can't do much if you decide not to listen, though, and results aren't guaranteed."

I take another bite, narrowing my eyes at him. The sun's high in the sky now, early afternoon breaking all around us and making the air sparkle with dust motes.

My fingers graze the place on my neck Kane licked less than an hour ago, and a flood of desire rolls through me. Conall said he did some kind of vampire juju on me. I know he messed with my memories... but this doesn't feel like magic. This just feels like plain, old-fashioned lust.

"Are ye listening?" Conall asks and I blink, smiling vaguely at him, the same way I used to at my boss at the tea shop when he told me something stupid.

"I'll take that as a no," he says, and I smile wider. "Finish yer food. Red's goin' tae take ye out to train. Lucky for ye, we

have a week until ye need to be ready.” He rolls his eyes, then stomps off without another look at me.

Fine. I fork another mouthful down, then stand up.

No sooner have I stood up than I jump back, screeching. My chair clatters to the ground, but I’m too busy staring at the table to care.

An array of green fireworks detonates over my plate and in front of Red, who simply looks bored at the explosion. Chartreuse sparks rain down over the remnants of my vegetables, and I stare at them in wonder.

Sure, I just summoned a massive creature from the otherrealm, but that was an accident.

This is pure magic, intentional and awe-inspiring and heartbreakingly beautiful.

“Well, that’s not good,” Red says smoothly, his eyes flaring as he picks up a rolled-up piece of parchment that has just appeared in front of him.

His lips move slightly as he reads whatever’s written there, and I gingerly pick up the parchment that’s now in front of me too, holding it out as though it might bite me.

“Fuck,” Red says, and my stomach churns at the fire in that one word.

When I look up, he’s staring straight at me, a furious expression on his face.

“Looks like we’ll be canceling that training after all,” he says.

“Shite,” Conall says, racing back into the room, the floor shaking under his feet, his own parchment dangling from one hand. “Bri, you have ten minutes to eat as much as you can.”

I glance between them, completely confused. Shrugging, I take another bite, then unroll the parchment.

“Official Blood Rite Communication. Nightworth, all members of your team must report to the arena at 1500 hours. You will fight against The Dark Five.”

My mouth falls open, and the paper drifts out of my hand.

“Our first match wasn’t supposed to be until next week,” Red growls, his agitation rolling off him in giant waves of pressure-filled magic. I wince, my ears ringing. He shakes like a dog, shedding another load of magic.

“Somethin’ must’ve happened,” Conall says. “Listen to me now, and listen to me good, lass. The Dark Five are our only allies in this arena, and us coming up against them now can’t have been a coincidence.”

“Kera’s an atomic bomb,” Red snarls. “It won’t be safe for Bri. She’s not ready.”

I stare at the paper in my hand in dismay, their words washing over me like acid.

I’m not ready. I don’t even need Red to tell me that.

“I don’t want to die,” I whisper.

“As long as there’s breath in my lungs, lass, you won’t,” Conall says. “Eat.” He picks up a piece of bread, shoving it into my mouth. “Eat as much as you can so you can try to draw on your magic again. Once you understand magic better, we won’t need to stuff you like a little piggie, but until then, eat.”

Obediently, I choke down the bread, though it sticks to my throat like it, too, wants to survive.

“I don’t want to shift,” Red snarls. “I don’t want to kill any of them.”

“The Dark Five won’t want to kill us either,” Conall says, scratching his chin. “They’re not stupid. They’ll know something is wrong, too. Whoever is tampering with the games isn’t done. Whoever is behind this knows enough about us to know The Dark Five are our allies. They’re trying to break the alliance.”

I take another bite, my eyes wide. Kane rushes into the room, his gaze immediately locking on mine.

“We take her out of here,” he snarls, his eyes full black, canines elongated. “She’s not ready.”

“She wouldn’t have been ready in a week either, Kane,” Conall spits out, clearly not doing much better with this turn of events than the rest of us. “Ye know as well as any of us that we can’t ignore the summons.”

Kane rakes a hand through his hair, ignoring him completely to kneel at the side of my chair.

My pulse quickens at his proximity.

His hand finds mine, and he grips it hard enough to edge it in pain.

“Come away with me,” he urges.

“Fuckin’ hell,” Conall snarls. “Dinnae do this, ye idiot. Ye know the consequences, and now is not the time to be messin’ around with the Rite’s magic.”

“Kane, listen to Conall. For fuck’s sake,” Red adds, standing and shaking once more. His magic lashes against my skin, hot and wild.

“We can get out of here,” Kane continues, ignoring them completely.

I wince, struggling to break his grip on me. “You’re hurting me,” I say. “Stop.”

Kane begins to mutter something under his breath.

“By the old gods,” Conall says. “What the feck is wrong with you?”

Magic stirs around Kane. Something white burns around his neck, his wrists, a light so bright it lances against my eyes.

“We don’t have time for this,” Red yells at Kane, his eyes rolling in his head.

“Ah, moya morkovka,” Lucian drawls, sauntering over to where Kane holds me tight even as I squirm, trying to get away. “What a strange spell you’ve cast over us. Kane, you fool, you’ll only drain yourself.”

He approaches Kane, the light around his neck and wrists glowing brighter, so bright it hurts to look at.

“We need you coherent, brother,” Lucian says simply. With one efficient swipe, dark talons stab into Kane’s chest, and his eyes go wide. Dark blood seeps from the wounds, and I stare in silent horror at it.

“Don’t worry, lovely,” Lucian says with a grin. “This is for the best.”

Regret courses through me, all the food I stuffed in my mouth threatening to come right back up.

Kane’s eyes slowly return to normal, the black fading from them, his canines shortening as he makes a low, inhuman sound.

“Sorry,” he finally breathes, and Lucian jerks his hand from Kane’s chest, wiping his own sharp claws against his pants. The blood stands out on the fabric, a deep crimson that will never not remind me of this moment.

“I’m so sorry,” Kane says. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“What just happened?”

“He tried to break the bonds to the Rite, the bonds that keep us here,” Conall says shortly. “The idiot.”

I stare down at my wrist, half expecting to see the same light, the same noose, around my limbs.

There’s nothing, though, and I blink quickly, swallowing against my anxiety.

“What’s the plan? We’re going to need one,” Red says, his voice a low rasp.

Conall points a thick finger at me. “The plan is to keep the lass alive, even if she tries to throw herself at The Dark Five. The plan is to take them out quickly, non-fatally, so they stay our allies here and help us get to the bottom of whatever the feck is going on. The plan is to not let Kera pull enough magic to take us all out.” He grins at Red, but there’s nothing happy about it. “The plan is to stay the feck alive.”

Lucian claps his hands. “This is going to be *such* fun. Come on then, Carrot Cake, let’s get you in your fighting

leathers.”

CHAPTER 23



CONALL

The arena smells as it always does: of death and spent magic and the copper penny of blood.

I roll my shoulders, trying to quiet the pervasive sense of wrongness about all this. It's not like the Blood Council to feck things up so spectacularly, or to change the slots and planned matches in the Rite.

"Someone's pulling their strings," Red says quietly beside me, echoing my thoughts. "This isn't right."

To my right, the wee lass trembles, her legs shaking as she takes in the people filling the seats, the drones overhead ready to broadcast our blood to the audiences craving it all over the world. Bloodsport isn't for the faint of heart, and our new woman doesn't seem to have the backbone she needs to truly relish it.

It makes me like her even more.

The Nightworth fighting gear looks delicious on her, showing off the gorgeous contours of her tight little body.

It's no surprise at all that Kane's lost his fecking mind over the delectable lass. I'm halfway there myself, even though there couldn't be a worse way to be. Getting romantically involved with a teammate will only lead to trouble.

But as my gaze travels over her sweet, lightly freckled face, her flame-red hair tied back in a long tail, showing off the smooth column of her neck, I can't help but want to fuck her until the expression of worry melts from her face. Fuck her until all that's left is my name on her lips, my cock buried in her cunt.

I shift, my pants suddenly too tight.

Fecking sorceress, fecking with my focus.

"Tell me again what to do," she murmurs, her voice high and anxious.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment.

God, what would I give to have her say that to me in bed? My feckin' room reeks of the lass's honeyed scent, and I know it's going to have me out of my mind with lust for the woman.

"Stay alive," Red says. "Leave the rest to us."

Kane just growls, beyond reason.

Lucian sighs, spearing me with a look. "This is going to be a shit show," he says, summing up my own thoughts. "The vampire is lost."

A bell begins ringing, the noise deep and heady, replete with ancient magic and signaling the fight's about to begin.

"Neutralize Kera," I say for the fiftieth time. "If I know the males on her team, they won't be striking to kill. But Kera is jumpy. She doesn't have the control of the rest."

"Neutralize Kera," the lass repeats, then stomps her feet, hopping up and down.

Surprise kicks me, and I squint at her. She's not shaking anymore.

"Dinnae pull too much magic to ye," I tell her, gripping her shoulder, wanting to touch her, unable to resist.

Kane snarls, but I ignore him. Feckin' vampire.

"If ye can summon something to keep them occupied, do it. Don't pull the same thing ye did earlier today. Something ye can control, yes? Don't pull too much," I grit out, the bells continuing to toll, long and powerful.

"I'm afraid." Bri bites her lip, the pink turning to white under the force of her teeth. I squeeze her shoulder, unable to look away from her green eyes and pale face.

"Good," I say. "At least ye have that much sense. Being scared might keep ye alive, lass."

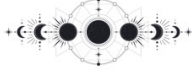
The bells stop and the gate separating us from the arena screams on its hinges, opening slowly.

I take a breath. Hold it. Release.

The Dark Five file into their side of the arena, and I cast one last look at Bri before stepping onto the blood-stained sands.

The match begins.

CHAPTER 24



BRI

I can't breathe. I can't find enough air.

I stumble through the gates, the noise of the crowd in the stands overwhelming and brutal.

"Chin up, woman," Red says, propelling me forward with a straight arm.

Kane hisses at him. I hardly hear it.

My heart's pounding so fast I feel like I might puke.

"Listen to me, Bri," Conall's saying something, but I can't focus. I can't hear past the rushing in my ears, the thrum of hot blood through my body. My magic's already answering the call, building and building beneath my skin.

Five combatants form a vee across the arena, magic likewise blooming around them.

The huge male in the front wavers, hunching over himself. Moments later, his skin splits, and a nightmare appears where he stood.

A massive green snake, larger than any snake has any right to be, larger than should be possible, rears its diamond-shaped head, coiled to strike.

I hear a whimper, and a half-second later I realize it's me.

Kane thrusts me behind him, muttering something under his breath, one hand tight on me.

The arena is chaos already, Conall growing bigger by the heartbeat, Red holding two shining swords aloft. I still don't know what kind of magic he has, but I'm glad he's on my team.

"They won't be trying to kill us," Lucian tells me, his skin red and mottled once more. "Look at me," he says.

His fingers dig into my chin, and I hold his gaze. "They aren't going to try to kill you," he repeats. "Do not try to kill

them.”

“Isn’t that the whole point?” I cry out, terrified.

“The point is blood spilled on consecrated ground,” he says. “Death is simply a typical byproduct. Do you understand me? Don’t do anything idiotic.”

Kane surges forward, a spell building around him, crimson and violent.

“Fucking hell,” Red says.

A blond man appears in front of Kane out of thin air, striking fast with a blade before disappearing again.

My head whips to the left as he pops into existence again, this time looking right at me.

“We mean you no harm,” he says, and at the same time, his blade licks across my wrist, drawing blood, so sharp I hardly feel the cut.

I stagger back into Lucian, who wraps an arm around my waist, anchoring me.

Conall’s huge, his skin a washed-out blue, frost following his thundering footsteps as he races across the arena to the massive snake. The crowd roars, chanting his name. I choke on a sob, trying to look everywhere at once, unable to follow a single thought in my head.

And still, magic builds inside me. Builds, and builds, and builds, until it’s beginning to leak out.

Behind the huge snake, a woman with purple hair rises, floating on an unseen wind. Her eyes glow violet and fear coils around me.

“Neutralize her,” Lucian shouts, and I don’t have a clue who he’s talking to. Black smoke whips out of where Lucian holds me, and someone on the other team cries out moments later. Red’s swords clang and I glance at where he stands, going toe-to-toe with another male.

Kane’s in the thick of it too, red magic surrounding him as he savages one of their men.

“He’s going for blood,” Lucian rasps. “Fucking hell. This is going to be a bloodbath.”

“Call him off,” the blond man from the other team reappears. “Call Kane *off!*”

“As if I know how to do that,” Lucian snarls back, and the two half-heartedly strike at each other.

The magic in me continues to grow, finally slamming into me, leaving me gasping.

I go still.

I see it all.

The fighting changes speed, becoming impossibly slow, flying sand suspended in the air like so much glitter. The walls between the worlds waver, spreading thin, thinner still, until the layer between our dimension and the next is a gossamer-thin membrane.

Otherrealm creatures crowd at my awareness, trying to jostle at the thin weave, trying to come through.

My eyes roll into the back of my head and I start to sink to the ground, overwhelmed.

Lucian’s screaming something and Kane slowly, so, so slowly, jerks his head to look at me, terror on his face.

So many creatures trying to get through.

Neutralize Kera, they said.

Don’t kill anyone, they said.

How else am I supposed to neutralize her?

The blond man slowly materializes in front of me, sword glimmering in the afternoon sun.

A scream rends the silence. Mine.

Which otherrealm creature should I use? If only I knew anything about any of the lifeforms that press against my awareness.

The man raises his sword, and it’s as slow as if he were driving it through winter molasses.

I see it, then, in my mind's eye. A small silver sphere, buzzing with energy, sentient but not wild and willful like so many of the others.

That's it.

I don't know how I know it, but that's the one I need. I call to it, pulling it to me, and it obeys.

The moment bursts like an overlarge bubble.

I scream as my senses overload, the noise of the battle and crowd returning full-force, the heat of the sun and sting of sweat in my eyes overwhelming.

Kane's running back to me, his mouth dripping blood.

The silver sphere shines overhead, and I lock my gaze on it and grit my teeth.

Go, I push at it. Neutralize her.

The sphere winks out of existence, its hum vanishing with it.

Fuck. Did I send it back to the otherrealm? My knees hit the sand.

Kane slides in front of me, Lucian running into the fray, black smoke magic twisting ahead of him.

Kane's teeth sink into my wrist with shocking pain and I cry out, my connection to the silver otherrealm sphere slipping.

A cloud of purple roils behind the huge snake, the one Conall's attempting to rip into pieces with his bare hands, ice coating its green scales. The violet-eyed woman glows, her hair billowing all around her face.

I don't know what she's doing or what she's capable of, but it doesn't look good.

Here I am, the sphere whispers in my mind. It floats just above the woman, whose power continues to crescendo.

Do it. I think at it furiously, fear whipping me. Do it before she unleashes whatever hell she's about to rain down on

Conall and Lucian and Kane and Red and me.

The silver sphere smashes into the woman's back and she screams, the sound swallowed up by her own magic, imploding in on itself. Her back arches and silver streaks arc all around her.

Oh my god. My stomach churns as she goes limp, plummeting to the ground with a sickening crunch.

The crowd screams its approval.

"Nightworth, Nightworth, Nightworth."

Blood soaks the ground beneath the snake, and it falls limply next to the woman, eventually transforming back into a bruised and bleeding man.

The blond man appears yet again, right next to Kane. "Make it look good," he tells him, grinning manically.

Kane snarls and slices his black claws across the man's jugular. His eyes go wide, and then he falls to the ground, too.

A moment later, ice coats his throat, stopping the flow of blood.

Conall.

The bell tolls again, and the crowd begins to boo.

I crumple to the arena floor and throw up, blood from the cut on my wrist flowing freely into the sand.

"Winner: Team Nightworth. Nightworth advances."

A clock on the side of the arena tells me the whole match lasted just shy of seven minutes.

They're seven minutes that have changed me forever.

CHAPTER 25



KANE

Mine.

It's the only thought I cling to, the only thing that makes any sense in the madness gripping me. The woman is mine. Gabrielle is mine.

She bleeds. It leaks from a gash on the inside of her wrist, teasing me, taunting me, begging me to taste it.

So I do, licking along the edge and savoring the sweet bloom of her across my tongue.

Mine. Mine.

The giant approaches, a reprimand rumbling from his lips. He's familiar, and yet, I can't place him at all.

He doesn't matter. She does. Only her.

And she is hurt.

I snarl at the giant because he's too close to her, my prize.

"Mine," I say, and I don't recognize my voice. Sand blemishes her pretty hair and skin, and I want to wipe it away, but I'm loath to hurt her. She blinks up at me, her lush lips forming words that fall on deaf ears.

"Fuck," the shifter says, and I recognize him as a danger to her and swipe my claws through the air, ready to do what needs to be done. Anything to protect her.

I scoop the woman into my arms, half-crazed with the need to finish this thing between us. Nothing matters but her, nothing matters but her safety, and she is not safe with these monsters around us.

I am the only monster that can keep her safe.

She clutches her bleeding arm to her chest, staring up at me with wide, scared eyes, and I lick her wound again, trying to reassure her, trying to tell her that she has nothing to fear.

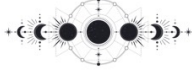
I want to taste her blood, yes, of course I do, but it will feel so good for her too.

“Mine,” I say again, and then the world blurs all around us as I race from the sandy ground where bodies lie littered. This place is not safe for her.

I will take her to a safe place.

I will make her mine, bind her to me, until she is safe.

CHAPTER 26



CONALL

I pace the length of the sickroom, the room Bri called our nurse's office. I should smile at the memory, but all I can find is anxiety.

She should be here. Instead, I'm slapping bandages on Lucian's red skin and watching Red drink heavily.

"It was bound to happen," Lucian finally says.

I growl at him, making the bottles full of salves and medicine rattle against one another.

"You can't deny it. There's no way you didn't see all the signs of it. He immediately bonded to Bri, from the first moment we saw her in the alley." He grins, stroking fingers over the curl of one horn. "She was magnificent then, wasn't she? And today, too. I can't say I blame him. I wouldn't mind a ride on—"

"Shut the fuck up," Red snarls, menace dripping from his words. "She's one of us now. You should respect that, if nothing else."

I would echo Red if I weren't busy castigating myself over having the same thoughts. I'm not only envious that Kane's staked his claim on the woman, no doubt marking her as his vampire mate right now, but I can't stop the surge of desire I feel for her too.

Insanity. That's what it is. Insanity from being trapped here, forced to fight, forced to kill, without the love of a woman, without friends, save for the four of my teammates and our tentative alliance with The Dark Five, whom we still haven't heard from despite sending message after message to their base.

I should be more worried about them, about what the feck is happening to the Blood Rite.

But my thoughts are clouded by visions of a certain heart-shaped face, emerald eyes, and vibrant red hair.

I'm angry with Kane for stealing her away. I'm angry at his loss of control and staking his mating mark on the woman. I'm angry with myself for not stopping it from happening.

But mostly, I'm angry that she'll be his now and not mine, and any hope and desire I felt for the lass is dying as swiftly as it began.

A portal appears in the corner of the room, a careful swirl that signals whoever is about to step through doesn't want to alarm us.

Red hops from one of the cots, flexing his arms and rolling his shoulders. At least Red didn't go into a mating frenzy with the poor lass. There wouldn't be any of her left if he lost control.

Tracer, one of The Dark Five, steps through the portal, his hands raised in the air. "Safe to enter?"

I nod, relief coursing through me. "Is your team safe?"

He grins and I nearly wilt with the sign of goodwill. "Safe as can be. Kera's still sleeping it off, but she's going to be fine. What the hell was that?"

"No idea," I mutter. I'd like to know the same.

"Asp is in bad shape," he continues. "He won't be shifting for a while, the brute. The others are all fine, though. And you?" Tracer runs a hand through his blond hair, mouth twisting to the side as he takes in the three of us.

"Good question," Lucian says, laughing lightly. "We seem to be missing a few members of our team."

"He went into a mating frenzy, didn't he?" Tracer asks, his trademark good humor disappearing. "Do you need help recovering them?"

The weight of responsibility presses down on my shoulders and I bow my head, bracing one hand against the rough stone wall that's been both home and prison for centuries.

No one speaks, waiting for me to decide.

“It’s too much of a risk, for all of us,” I say, finally meeting Tracer’s eyes. “Someone knows about our alliance. That’s the only reason they would have changed the Blood Rite line-up. They wanted us to take each other out. They wanted us to get angry at each other. If we make them think that it worked, then whoever is behind... this chaos might leave us alone.”

Tracer nods, and Red blows out a breath.

“There is something I want to show ye, something I think ye need to know.”

Red slants his eyes at me and I nod at him, answering his unspoken question.

It’s time to show The Dark Five the strange history book infused with dark magic and coded to our fifth. The strange history book that hints that Bri isn’t what she seems, not at all.

CHAPTER 27



BRI

One minute I'm asleep, and the next I'm awake.

I sit bolt upright, my stomach cramping and my head splitting. Gasping, I look around, completely at a loss for where I am.

Memories trickle back through my head.

The tournament. The purple-haired woman falling to the ground, Conall bleeding.

I raise my arm and there's a thick bandage over where the sword sliced through my skin. The pain there's a dull throb, and the gauze is stained red with blood. With each heartbeat, more blood seeps through the white.

Not good. I swallow hard, clutching my arm to my chest. I need to stop the bleeding.

Where the hell am I?

I tuck my knees to my chest, trying to puzzle my way through this. *How the hell did I even get here?*

The floor's sticky with dust, dried brown leaves scattered about, piled in the dark corners. The whole room's made of dirty stone, slightly damp where I press my fingertips against it. Light trickles through a window close to the ceiling, and it clicks.

I'm in a basement.

Ah, fuck. Nothing good ever came of waking up in a dirty basement.

"Mine," a voice says, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

Two gold, glowing eyes wink into existence in the darkest corner of the room, and my heart slams against my chest.

"Kane," I breathe, recognizing his voice and trying to calm down. Trying to remember. *Mine?* I shift, fear and something hot sliding through my veins.

“What does that mean?” I ask tentatively. He doesn’t sound super coherent. This situation is getting worse by the second, and I can’t help hearing Conall’s warnings scream through my mind. “What is... yours?”

He steps into the yellow afternoon light. Warm highlights and deep shadows accentuate every inch of his face, so stunning it might as well be carved out of marble.

I bite my lower lip, and the pain in my arm recedes as he nears me.

“You are,” he finally answers, his gaze heavy where it falls on me. “*You* are mine.”

Air rushes towards me, Kane blurring as he moves so quickly my eyes can’t even track him.

His fingertips grip my chin tightly, just shy of being painful.

“You’ve only known me two days,” I manage, trying not to cringe away from him, trying not to move at all. Something’s wrong with him. This is not normal behavior.

Conall warned me.

He’s dangerous.

A snarl curls the side of his mouth, and his canines flash white in the dim light.

“It doesn’t matter,” he grits out, tilting my chin up. I can’t look away from him, not that I want to. He’s magnificent.

A monster, yes, but male, all male... and he’s looking at me like I’m the answer to everything, like he could devour me whole.

“Time is meaningless to one like me. I’m a primal vampire. I’m centuries old, so old that I thought it impossible that I would ever feel the call of a mate. And then I met you.” His gaze trips from my eyes to my cheeks, to my mouth, and a burning awareness follows in its wake.

“I met you, and everything else ceased to matter. The only thing that makes any sense, gives me any hope, in this prison

of a life,” he strokes a thumb across my cheekbone and I shiver, “is *you*. Keeping you safe, making you mine.”

I blink, trying to counteract the allure of his words, trying to reason through the lust that’s surging through me. Because this doesn’t make sense.

“Kane, don’t get me wrong,” I say on an exhale, collecting my scattered thoughts. “We had a really hot kiss, and you are super sexy.”

Good grief, what a stupid thing to say after a speech like that.

My cheeks turn bright red in embarrassment, and I forge onward. “But I just don’t think, er, me *mating* anyone right now is a smart idea.”

He cants his head forward, amusement playing across his face despite the fact his grip is iron-tight on my chin.

“You are not a vampire. I would not be *your* mate. You would be *mine*,” he snarls the word, “and I will wait as long as it takes for you to accept that. You are already mine, whether you accept it or not.”

I blink, and then his mouth closes over mine, one hand circling my waist and pulling me onto his lap, his dick throbbing and hard where it presses into my ass.

I let out an involuntary moan because oh my god *yes*, his lips feel so good, his tongue parting mine with an expert flick that has me breathless and wanting. The pain in my arm is nearly entirely gone now, only a slight throb remaining.

His hand slips from my chin, his nails scraping across the nape of my neck, up the back of my scalp where they tangle in my hair, pinning me in place.

If I wanted to get away, I wouldn’t be able to, not with him holding me like this.

The problem is, despite my words, I don’t want to get away.

I want to keep kissing him, the pain from the arena, the tired ache replaced by bliss, replaced by lust so strong that

everything else fades away in the press of his hands on my skin, the slick slide of his tongue in my mouth, the sharp prick of his fangs against my lips.

He pulls away just slightly, satisfaction curving his lips. His nose nuzzles against mine and I'm practically panting, all my best laid plans unraveled by a few desperate kisses from this monster's mouth.

"I know that you can't possibly feel the same way I do," he says, his eyes dilated, his nails lightly scraping over my scalp, causing me to shiver. "I know, and it doesn't matter."

The hand on my waist travels up and up, until he's cupping my breast, an expression of intense desire on his face.

When his fingers find my nipple through the fabric, I sag against him, making a keening noise I didn't even know I was capable of.

"All I want is to bring you pleasure. I want you to turn to me when you need release. I want to be the one between your legs during the long, lonely nights here. I want to keep you safe, and pleasure you, and keep you by my side for as long as we have." His mouth dips to the column of my neck, fangs scraping against the skin, just enough of a sharp sensation to cause goosebumps to rise all over my skin. "I want to bring you so much pleasure that you forget everything else, if only for a little while. I want you to think of me and get so wet that my cock or tongue are the only things you can think of."

Oh my god. I can hardly think through the lust clouding my thoughts, through his adept touch at my nipple, the hard bulge of his cock, so close to where I need it.

"I'm hurt," I say awkwardly, trying to think of anything, anything, to resist this temptation. A temptation that will surely backfire.

Plus I can't help but feel a little guilty... because as much as I'm attracted to Kane, which is to say, a whole hell of a lot... I like Conall too.

And fucking either of them is a terrible idea.

“I know you’re hurt,” Kane answers, nibbling on my neck, his breath hot and delicious. “I tended to your wounds. I will always tend to your wounds.”

“Oh,” I manage, my eyes fluttering.

“If it is pain you are worried about, if you think I won’t be gentle enough, I can give you something to help with that,” he murmurs, lips brushing against my neck with every word. “I can heal that wound on your arm in a matter of seconds. It won’t even scar.”

As if I needed the reminder, the cut on my forearm begins to hurt again, a sharp, searing return of pain that explodes through me.

“I can fix it. Just say yes,” he breathes. “Say you want me. I will make it so good for you, Gabrielle.” His hands pull me even closer and he grinds upward, just enough to drive me crazy. Fangs scrape lightly against my throat. “Say you want me to help you. Say you want me.”

“I do,” I moan, all my inhibitions dissolving under his scorching touch.

“Good girl,” he growls, and then pain pierces my neck.

He bit me.

I squirm, pushing against him, my eyes flying open, trying to get away, trying to get free of him... until he sucks on my neck, drawing long and deep.

“Kane,” I moan, the pain changing, transforming, every nerve in my body responding with sudden pleasure. “Oh my—oh... Kane.”

I shudder, spasming, and an orgasm explodes through me with barely any warning.

Crying out, my hands clench around him and he pulls away from my neck, his mouth stained crimson.

He smiles at me and I’m floating on a bliss-filled cloud, too fucking high on the after-effects of the craziest orgasm I’ve ever experienced to do more than exist.

His hold on me shifts slightly, and I simply lean against him. I don't give a flying fuck about the fact he's now biting at his own wrist. I could care less. If I could purr like a cat, I would. Every single fiber of my being is completely relaxed, and a dreamy smile turns the corners of my mouth up.

"Drink," he says, and I bat my eyelashes at him, parting my lips as his forearm sinks against my mouth.

Hot, coppery blood splashes against my tongue, and my eyes go wide in shock.

I sputter, trying to break away, the gravity of what he's doing slamming into me.

"Wait," I say, panic rising, overriding the delicious post-orgasmic bliss. Hot blood trickles from the corner of my mouth.

Kane growls low, clamping his hand behind my head, keeping me still, his blood continuing to trickle into my mouth.

I gag, but I can't help it. His blood flows down my throat until my struggling subsides.

The worst part is... the more I drink, the better it tastes, until I latch onto his arm, swallowing in great, greedy gulps. I don't care what this means. I don't care about the consequences.

All that matters is that it feels good, it feels right.

I feel strong.

Finally, Kane pulls his arm away from my lips with a ragged laugh.

"Now you are truly mine," he says, and I bask in his approving smile, the sharp, possessive edge to it. My hands reach for him, pulling him close, needing more, needing to feel him against me, inside me. Need like I've never known surges through me, and I'm too far gone to do more than wonder at it. "Now I will fuck you until you are mad with it, until you need me as much as I need you."

Alarm bells begin to go off in my head, but he kisses me again, his hands trailing all over my body, wicked and sensual and addictive. He pulls my legs apart until I'm straddling his lap, our pants a barrier I want gone as soon as possible.

My breath hitches as he grabs my hips, grinding them down onto his hard bulge. It's nowhere near enough, but I gasp all the same, flinging my head back as pleasure begins to build again.

"Good fucking girl, my Gabrielle," he growls, pressing a searing kiss against my neck. I let out a small whimper in response. "You are such a good fucking mate already."

He freezes and I moan in desperate need, rocking my hips against him, trying to get him to respond, encouraging him to give me more, give me it all. A second later, I hear footsteps, but I don't care. I'll put on a show. In fact, the idea turns me on more and I whimper again, thrusting my hand down the front of my pants, my brain fogged with lust.

"What the feck have ye done, Kane?" Conall's voice rips through the space, and a teensy, muted part of my brain tells me I should be ashamed. That something's wrong. But I just keep rocking back and forth, near senseless with the fiery vampire blood coursing through me.

"I did what I had to do," Kane snaps. "You're interrupting."

"What the feck did you do to the poor lass?"

"He bonded her." Red's there too and I grin at him, still grinding against Kane's rock-hard cock, still trying to find the release that eludes me.

Lucian's there too, and his gaze heats as he takes me in, attention raking over me.

"Jaysus, Kane, you had to go and make it harder on all of us."

"Oh, it's harder alright," I tell them, then laugh, squeezing between Kane's legs. That tiny, still-rational part of me whispers that this isn't right. I don't care.

“I can’t say I want to complain about the show,” Lucian drawls, and I bat my eyelashes at him. He gets it. Maybe he’s not so bad after all.

I grin wider at him, and if I flutter my eyelashes a little, so what? Maybe he would be fun in bed. Maybe this would be fun with all of them. Then I wouldn’t have to worry about hurting anyone’s feelings.

“Fuck,” Lucian growls, and his human skin dissolves. “Fuck you, Kane.”

Kane laughs, the sound discordant, unlike him, and in the next instant, his teeth sink back into my neck.

I squeak in dismay because the pleasure that marked the first bite is gone now. It hurts.

“Feekin’ hell,” Conall rumbles, and before I even notice he’s moved, Lucian’s there, pressing something against Kane’s neck.

Kane snarls and I gasp as fresh pain blossoms, and then his mouth, the hard press of his body—it’s all gone.

Conall sweeps me off the ground, where dust and dead leaves stick to my skin, and my awareness of the sheer filthiness of the basement creeps over me.

How did I not realize how disgusting this place is?

I press a hand over my neck, the dual puncture wounds sticky and hot with blood.

“Fucking hell.” Red glares at me, Kane draped unmoving over his shoulder.

I blink blearily, completely out of it. “What happened to him? What did you do to him?”

“He was goin’ tae drain ye, lass,” Conall says, and his blue eyes seem full of pity and rage. “He was out of control. His mate, ye would have been, for all of a few hours until he fully lost himself to his primal urges.”

“Mate,” I repeat, the word tasting like ashes on my tongue. “Oh God,” I whisper. “Is he dead?”

“No, no thanks to you,” Red answers, then stomps away, up a cobweb-covered set of stairs I hadn’t even noticed.

“Thanks to me,” I echo.

“Damn, lass, but look at what he did to yer neck,” Conall says gruffly. A moment later, his cool, minty magic sweeps across my neck and I inhale sharply.

“How is this my fault?” I ask, the exhausted weakness returning now that whatever hold Kane had over me is slipping away.

“It’s not, Bri, it’s not. It’s just another problem tae deal with,” Conall says, and he holds me gingerly as he moves up the stairs, following Red and Lucian.

“He can’t have her to himself,” Lucian says. “I don’t think she wants that either.”

“Does this seem like the time to bring that up?” Conall growls.

I try to swallow, but even that small movement makes my neck hurt again. Sunset-colored light streams through dingy windows, and my eyes flutter shut.

What the hell just happened?

A roaring fills my ears as the implications rush through me.

“I drank his blood,” I say in a small voice.

“We know, lass. It’s all too clear what the vampire did to ye,” Conall tells me, his voice strangely comforting.

I lean my cheek against him, too tired to do more than stare as he takes us through the clearly abandoned house and outside.

“Dinnae fash yerself,” he continues, and I blink up at him, his pretty eyes holding mine. “We’ll get it straightened out. The important thing is yer still alive, right, lass?”

I nod slightly.

I hadn't even known the danger I was in. I trusted him. I wanted him to do it.

Hell, I liked it.

It's another sign of just how completely out of my league I am here at the Blood Rite.

CHAPTER 28



CONALL

I've never been so angry in my long life. Not even when my clan and kin sold me to the Blood Rite four centuries ago, payment for being left alone. They knew as well as the Blood Council that a few drops of my blood would help power the wall between worlds.

So they drugged me and I wound up here, in this prison, this cage, forced to fight and sacrifice blood to keep chaos at bay.

I glance down at the small lass in my arms, though, and that familiar anger, that well-worn hurt, fades.

Bri's eyes are round with shock, her face pale as can be against the rich red of her hair. It's that vulnerability, that flame-red hair, that calls to me. She reminds me of the home that turned its back on me. Not in a bad way, though, in an aching way that threatens to split my heart wide open.

She needs me. She needs us all, the same way we needed someone when we were lashed to the Blood Rite, our bonds fresh and all the more painful for it.

My hands twitch, my teeth grinding together as I carry Bri back to our home. Our prison.

Kane lost his damn mind.

"Stay with me, m'eudail," I tell her. Blood seeps slowly from under her hand and I send another spear of power towards her, trying to ice over the delicate skin.

"May tall?" she asks, and I blink down at her, trying to discern what it is she's asking.

"Oh," I say, blinking. "M'eudail." Breath gusts out of me. I hadn't realized I'd called her that.

Sweetheart. My darling.

Lucian holds the door open for us, worry creasing his brow, an uncharacteristic expression for the carefree demon

prince.

I pass by him, nodding my thanks.

“Will she live?” he croaks.

“Aye,” I say with a certainty I don’t feel. “The lass is tough, aren’t you, m’eudail?” The word slips out of me again and I brush it off. It’s just an endearment, the same as I might use on anyone I care for. It’s just easier to say it to her now because the lass is in my arms, as delicate as a newborn babe.

Though this woman is anything but.

I dinnae think I will ever forget the sight of her gorgeous face slack with lust, the scent of her arousal thick as Kane held her down, trying to brand her as his.

Even now, she wears his scent, but it’s hers that calls to me, a siren song I dinnae know how long I can resist.

She deserves more than me in this prison, this hell on Earth.

I charge down the hall, straight to the infirmary the four of us have used more than anyone should in their entire life. Feekin’ Blood Rite.

“Conall,” she says and I kick the door in, not caring that it will need to be replaced. My name from her mouth sounds like a blessing, and I hate how I want her to say it over and over again. I’m no better than the damned vampire.

“Hush now,” I say, laying her carefully down on one of the cots. “Yer going tae be just fine, m’eudail.”

White bandages are at my fingertips, the healing salve in my other hand. I’ve used both so many times that my hands seem to find them on their own, my thoughts too busy with unraveling the problem of Kane and the lass.

“How do ye feel?” I ask her, the question inane in the face of the blood pooling around her shoulder.

“Been better,” she manages. Her eyes close, her lids so pale they’re near translucent, purple veins threading underneath.

“Dinnae fall asleep, lass,” I tell her, fear striking my heart. “I cannot lose another teammate. I cannot lose ye, Bri. Open yer eyes, dammit.”

She does as I ask, her green gaze faraway but latched onto mine nonetheless.

“There she is,” I say in approval, and dump the healing salve over the puncture wounds on her neck. It’s too much, but my need to stop the bleeding outweighs the need to be circumspect with the damned medicine.

Behind me, Lucian begins muttering strange words, a spell of some kind, and the salve glows white, then whiter still. A healing incantation. Not his specialty, none of ours.

We’re made to maim. Killers, every one.

“Good work,” I tell him gruffly.

Below me, her cheeks pinken, and Bri heaves a sigh, relaxing slightly.

“Why did he do that?” she asks, her voice quavering. “Why would he do that?”

“I dinnae know, lass,” I tell her. “We should have kept you safe. We all thought he had control of his urges. We couldn’t have been more wrong.” My own voice is thick with emotion, and I try to swallow around the lump in my throat. “I’m sorry, Bri. We didn’t protect you.”

Her hand finds mine, her fingers soft and so small against my palm. “You did,” she says, and her eyes are grave and so green they make my whole heart hurt. “You helped me when I didn’t even know I needed help.”

Her face turns red and I squeeze her hand.

“What’s wrong? What ails ye now?” My gaze flicks to her neck, where the bleeding’s stopped, and I tear at the bandage on her arm, but that’s mostly healed now, too.

“I’m embarrassed,” she finally says. Her throat bobs as she swallows and then winces at the effort.

“There’s nothing tae be embarrassed about—”

“I, for one, enjoyed the show,” Lucian pipes up, a relieved smile on his face, though his eyes are weary. “Of course, I would have enjoyed it more if you weren’t under his vampire voodoo, and if you were naked and on top of me, but we can save my notes for the next time.”

To my surprise, she coughs a little laugh, grinning up at him, her cheeks still beet-red.

“A smile,” Lucian says, and I don’t miss the note of wonder in his voice. “That’s a nice change.”

“Don’t get used to it,” she says. “We won today, huh?”

“That we did, lass,” I say, and pride nearly bursts my chest. “You did it. I dinnae know how, but you did it.”

Her face crumples, though, and I squeeze her hand. “Why are you sad? We won. We are alive.”

“I hurt that other woman.” Her voice is so quiet I have to strain to hear her.

“Kera?” Lucian asks, stepping closer. “You gave her a shock, sure, but they said she’ll be fine. Said they’d look at that enchanted book of yours, too.”

Bri blinks. “You talked to them? You gave them my book?”

“Dinnae worry yerself over that right now,” I tell her. “Come now, let’s get ye to yer rooms and get ye settled for the night.”

“Can you stand?” Lucian asks her, eyes wide and innocent. “Or should I carry you—”

Growling, I push him out of the way and pick her up, enjoying the way her body slots against mine, her curves deliciously warm.

“I’ll take care of her. Go get some food for the lass,” I tell him gruffly.

“That’s no way to treat a prince of hell,” he sniffs.

“Then it’s a good thing yer just a member of the team here,” I say.

Bri snorts and when I glance down at her, she's biting her cheeks. By the old gods, she smells delicious, even though Kane's scent still hangs heavy around her.

"I'm starving," she tells Lucian. "Food would be amazing."

Sighing, he sweeps a grand bow. "As you wish, oh moya morkovka." With one last comedically longing look, Lucian clicks his heels together and takes off in the direction of the kitchen.

"He's always like that, huh?" Bri asks, her hand light as a feather on my arm. Her touch is driving me wild and I grit my teeth, no better than the vampire Red's surely chaining under the house as we speak. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Lucian? He's a bit different, aye, but he's a good male... for a demon... and I'm pretty sure he's calling you his little carrot."

She sighs, and I'm not sure if the lass is annoyed or not. A selfish part of me wants her to be annoyed at his endearment.

I try not to look at her as I walk her up the stairs, the thick carpet quieting my footfalls as we head to her new quarters. Diego's old quarters.

"How long have you four lived here? Together?"

"I was here first. Centuries ago with Diego. Then the demon prince, then Kane not long after. Red joined us most recently." My lips twist to the side. "Other than you, of course," I amend.

The hallway flickers with the glow of the fae-lit sconces, and it makes her all the more stunning, playing off her ethereal beauty.

I frown.

I shouldn't be thinking of her like that. She must have feelings for Kane, otherwise she wouldn't have been so susceptible to his primal magic. There's no way a lass as pretty as her would want a rough male like me.

“Centuries.” She stares up at me, her eyes huge in her pale face. “How is that possible? I thought... I thought the Rite started after the Rift.”

Sadness washes through me. I shouldn't be thinking of the lass like that for more than just that reason. She knows nothing of this world she's landed in. Nothing at all.

“The Blood Rite is as old as time itself. The magic folk, monsters and otherwise,” I jerk my head, meaning myself, “were sick of hiding in the shadows. They wanted more, and they knew they could take it. So they did. The first Blood Rite wasn't thirty-odd years ago. That was just the first time most humans learned about it.”

Horror clouds her face. “But... they said they needed the blood sacrifice to keep the walls of the worlds apart.”

“They did say that, and mayhap they do.” My lips twist to the side and I set her on her feet, a heavy hand on her shoulders as I open the door to her renovated quarters. “But I suspect that's not the real reason, as do The Dark Five, the team we went up against this morning. I also suspect that's the reason they pitted us against each other. Divide and conquer is a strategy about as old as the fecking arena itself.”

“The Dark Five... that's who you gave the book to, right?” She yawns, her pretty blonde-red eyelashes fluttering.

“Aye, lass.” By the old gods, she's distracting. “Now go inside and get some sleep. We've got a long day ahead tomorrow, considering what ye went through today, and ye still need training.”

She nods once, reaching her slim hand for the door.

I turn to leave her there, wanting nothing more than to tuck her back into my arms and haul her to my quarters. Frost giants aren't nearly as possessive as vampires, though, and it's a silly enough thought that I dismiss it entirely. Why would I be possessive of Bri?

All I feel for her is normal protectiveness.

Right?

Sure, she's beautiful and brave, clever and sharp, but that doesn't mean she would ever want me, and unlike Kane, I dinnae plan to force a change where that's concerned. My hands fist at the mere thought, disgust running through me.

What the hell was the vampire *thinking*?

“Wait!”

I'm no more than a few steps from her door when she calls out.

“What is it, Bri?”

“Will he come for me? Am I safe?”

“No, lass, he won't. We'll keep him away from you until he's under control again. It won't be a problem.” Not unless he truly thinks the lass is his mate. I bite my lower lip, hoping like hell that isn't the case. Things are hard enough with a gorgeous, talented woman on our team, living with us, training with us, fighting with us... without adding her being Kane's mate to the mix.

As much as the idea of seeing Kane happy pleases me, the thought of Bri being his mate, being... spoken for doesn't sit right with me.

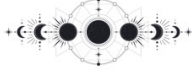
She's still staring up at me with those bonny green eyes, though, as if she's waiting for me to say more.

“Yer safe,” I manage gruffly.

“Alright,” she says quietly. “Goodnight,” she adds, and the door closes quietly behind her.

I stand at it for far too long, trying to sort out my complicated feelings.

CHAPTER 29



KANE

I'm high on her, high on the mating bond. I've never felt so gods-damned alive in my life.

Red is chaining me deep underneath our team mansion, but I can't stop smiling at him. Sure, I'll be down here until the three of them are good and satisfied that my bloodlust has been quelled, but they don't know that it was never bloodlust, never that, not with her.

Did I get a little rough with my sweet Gabrielle?

Undoubtedly.

"I didn't mean to harm her," I tell Red thickly, my words slurred and drunk thanks to the antivenin they injected me with. It's dulled my fangs to the point I'm not sure I could bite through red steak, much less a carotid. It's about the only thing that will work on me, and it's rare and expensive enough that I must have been out of my mind for them to use it.

"I don't give a fuck what you meant to do," Red spits out, glaring at me from dark, red-tinged eyes.

"So the beast's at the surface," I say, then laugh, so fucking high on her delicious blood and the mate bond that I don't even feel it when he lashes out, slapping my face. "We're all feeling it. Aren't you feeling it, Red?"

His eyes flash, and I laugh harder.

"You're right, you know," I say casually, licking the blood dried on my mouth. Gods, it tastes like all my dreams come true. "I did lose control. But not how you think. I wasn't about to savage her. Not like that. She's my mate, Red. What would you give for that? Wouldn't you have kidnapped her to make her yours?"

He growls at me, his bare shoulders twitching, his skin bulging down his spine. He shakes himself like a wet dog, and I can tell he's close to shifting.

The basement I'm chained in is big enough to hold him, the only place in the mansion large enough. The only place he can safely toss his human form to the wind.

"Do it, brother," I say, not giving a fuck. "Lose control. Won't it feel good to—"

"I hate to interrupt this little party," Lucian drawls, appearing at the doorway. "Actually, that's a lie. I don't hate it at all. Kane, what I'm going to do to you will be painful, and I won't enjoy it at all." Lucian grins, stripping off his shirt and instantly shifting to his huge demonic form, his real one, complete with massive black wings, the real marker of his royal status. The wings he hides in the arena.

The wings that mean he's furious.

"Not you too," I groan, and another reckless laugh falls from my mouth. "What has the little sorceress done to us?"

"She is one of us," Red snarls, and smoke curls from his nostrils. "She is a part of this team, and you know what killing her would do to us. We won't stand a chance without a fifth. Unlike you, I don't wish to die, sacrificed to the damned magic here."

"She's ours," Lucian says simply, tilting his head. He raises his wings, beating them once, and hot air reeking of sulfur presses against my senses. Not a good sign.

I don't care.

Nothing matters but the little flame upstairs, pricking against my awareness. My mate. She lives, she's here, only a few floors away from me.

"Well, you know what we have to do now," Lucian says quietly, and despite the hint of a smile on his lips, his eyes are dark and speak of violence. "You lost control. You damaged a member of this team, and we have to do this." His gaze jerks to Red, and the shifter clenches his teeth, the veins in his neck standing out in stark relief.

"Why the formality?" I snarl. "Go on, get it over with. It's not the first time you've needed to clean my blood, but now, with my mate here, it will be the last. I won't lose control

again. She will balance me. You know this as well as I do, shifter,” I spit at Red.

Red’s answering growl is loud enough to shake the foundations of the entire house, and dust clouds the air, the stones around us trembling at the noise.

My grin finally dies and I grit my teeth.

“Get it over with,” I tell Lucian, and I shut my eyes and focus on her walking around upstairs.

My mate. Mine.

CHAPTER 30



BRI

I don't want to leave my new rooms. Ever.

My gaze skates across the light stone, white-washed and prison-like. Arched windows with diamond-pane glass look over the Crimson City, and in the distance, the Blood Rite arena looms, cruel and waiting. Green trees just beginning to yellow in the face of fall dot the horizon, slowly giving into winter's call. Hooded people mingle in the cobbled streets of the city, just beyond reach. I wonder if they're murderers like me.

Creamy velvet curtains brush against my elbow, and I jump at the contact.

Skittish and scared doesn't begin to describe how I feel.

"Bri," a voice says and I wheel around, my heart pounding. "Ye need tae take care of yerself."

My hand flutters over my heart and I draw a deep breath as I take in Conall standing at the door to my rooms. The damn frost giant can move quietly when he wants to, that's for sure.

"Yer white as a ghost," he continues, his brow furrowing in concern.

"Sorry I don't look healthier after getting kidnapped by Kane," I manage, pulling my arms tight around my body. "It's only been one night, but sure, I'll try harder."

"That's not what I meant and ye know it," he says, his mouth tugging up in a half smile.

The light catches his blond hair, turning it golden. He matches everything in this room. My rooms. Luna stretches on an off-white tufted couch, leaving behind orange fur when she jumps off to wind around his ankles.

It might be a hell of a lot nicer than any place I've ever lived, but that doesn't mean it feels like home. The closet is full of clothes, and none of it feels like mine.

My body doesn't even feel like mine, not after what I did in the arena. Not after what Kane did after.

Frowning, I turn back to the window.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" I finally ask when Conall makes no sign of moving.

"Because yer a member of this team now, Bri, and we're worried about ye."

I snort, raising an eyebrow at a fat brown bird sitting outside the window. "What are you worried about? I'm here, ready to get sliced open, ready to bleed. So what, Kane did it a little sooner than the Blood Council would have liked."

"Kane is detoxing," he tells me firmly, and the dip in temperature tells me he's stepped closer. And that he's upset. Frost flowers up the windows, and I turn as the bird wings away.

"He lost control," Conall continues, his blue gaze pinning me. "We are dealing with him. He will be fine. He will hate himself for it, more than likely. I'm not worried about him, though, lass. What I'm worried about is standing in front of me with wide green eyes and the bonniest red hair I've ever seen."

I swallow hard, dropping my gaze to Luna, who's staring up at Conall and swishing her tail back and forth. It's safer to look at her. I'm less likely to start crying.

"He said we were mates, and then he bit me," I say, and I'm not sure who I'm talking to. He knows this. I know this. Luna likely knows it.

"Aye, and we'll deal with the fallout of that as we need to. Dinnae borrow tomorrow's trouble by worrying about it today."

"Right." I paste a fake smile onto my face. "There's so many other things I should be worried about. Not dying in the arena. Why the Blood Council seemed to know my name. What the hell is up with that damned book." I tick each off on my fingers as I talk. "Oh, and lest we forget, the fact that you

all seem convinced someone is trying to throw the Blood Rite.”

“See?” He grins at me, and despite my ire and snark, it’s adorably wholesome. “There are so many more fun things to concern yerself with, lass.”

I sigh.

“What can I do tae make it up tae ye?”

My mouth twists to the side. “What do you have to make up for? It’s not your fault Kane decided to make a snack out of me.”

He blows out a breath, raking his hand through his hair, the muscles in his arms suddenly all-too fascinating. “I could’ve stopped him if I’d known he was that close to snapping.”

“You did stop him,” I say gently. “I’m here. I’m alive.”

“But yer not happy. What will make ye happy? Ye can beat up Lucian in the training ring, if ye want. I’ll get Red to help me hold him down. Hell, he might even enjoy it.”

I huff a laugh in spite of myself. “That’s not nearly as satisfying, then.”

“I tell ye what, lass.” He gives me a long look, and it’s as though he can see inside me. “Kane might be, er, tied up for the next few days, but what say the rest of us take ye into the city? Do ye like shopping?”

“Shopping?” I echo. The streets of the Crimson City unfurl in my mind’s eye, all the pretty boutiques stuffed with magical items and clothes and potions and the large library—

My eyes go wide. The library. What if... what if there’s some mention of my father there? Or of my family?

I should have thought of it already. The libraries in New Philly were one of the few things to mostly survive the Rift, and I remember my father taking me into one, the stone façade cracked and crumbling, the mildewed smell of books and words tickling my nose.

He always said that libraries were the best places to look for people who were long lost.

I swallow against the lump in my throat at the memory and tune back in to what Conall's saying.

"There are restaurants, too, a few good ones, and since it's not a match day, they won't be crowded. What do ye like to eat?" His grin grows broader and he chuckles. "Besides cheese, that is."

"We can spend the day exploring?" I narrow my eyes, trying to contain my rising excitement. Trying not to show Conall why, exactly, his offer to take me into the Crimson City is the only thing I want. "No training?"

"I dinnae say that, lass," Conall laughs, and the sound is so infectious I can't help grinning back at him. "Ye'll still need yer daily dose of magic lesson medicine. But some fun might help it go down easier, right?"

I pick at the hem of the shirt I'm wearing. It's the simplest thing in my closet, a plain, serviceable navy, but the fabric must be ten times nicer than anything I've ever had on before.

"Fun," I repeat.

"Surely a bonny lass like yerself must enjoy shopping. Ye know, taking in the sights and sounds of a new city, aye? Relaxing?"

"Sure," I agree, and I glance up at him, surprised that he keeps calling me bonny. I mean, I don't think I'm gross or anything, but I also haven't really had a lot of men—besides a certain primal vampire—casually lay on the flattery like that. My one-night stands were usually more of a mutual itch scratching than anything else...

I wrinkle my nose at the memory.

He laughs, touching a fingertip to the bridge of my nose. "Why are ye doing that tae yer wee bonny face?"

I could get used to it—the compliments from him. The way he looks at me like he means them. It might just be the best part.

“Ye don’t seem like ye want tae go, Bri. Is there something else I should know?” He squints at me.

Shifting on my feet, I twist my mouth to the side. I want to trust him. I want to tell him that I need to find out more about my father. My name. *Arbane*.

“I never really had a chance to go into a city and just... shop,” I say instead.

“Well, the Crimson City is one of a kind, mostly because of all the tourists that come through for the tournaments. But dinnae fash yerself about them, because no one will dare so much as look at ye sideways with me by yer side.” He cuts me a long look, and then, to my surprise, his cheeks pinken.

I stare at him.

He coughs. “Right then, so I’ll give ye a moment to,” he scratches his golden beard, “to do whatever it is, to freshen up, er—”

“I’ll be right down,” I interrupt him, my own face heating under the intensity of his attention.

“Right then,” he says. “I’ll just... I’ll just go on then.”

Awkwardly, he strides from the room, waving at me before he closes the door.

Luna sits at the door and yowls plaintively, clearly fixated on the huge half-giant.

“That was weird, huh?” I ask her.

It was almost like... he was flirting with me. Almost. Luna the traitor makes her way back to me and I pick her up, cuddling her under my chin. What would it mean if he *was* flirting with me?

Surely not. He’s just being kind. Because they need me to be able to focus in the ring. This is just teammate behavior.

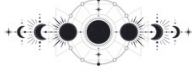
A sharp pang of guilt goes through me, because I plan to be anything but a good teammate today.

No, I’m going to find out anything that I can about my family name today.

No matter what.

I just have to figure out how to give three monsters the slip. Piece of cake.

CHAPTER 31



CONALL

“**W**hat do ye mean ye dinnae want tae come with us?”
I blow out a breath, annoyed as all hell at Red.

“There’s not much to explain,” he says. “I’d rather get some sleep or meditate. I hate the city. Especially *that* one.”

I poke his chest, jutting my chin out in annoyance. “She’s a part of this team, whether ye like it or not, ye damned grumpy arse.”

“I don’t remember you taking me out for lunch and a shopping trip when I was forced here.”

I narrow my eyes at him, annoyed. “Ye weren’t kidnapped by Kane and forced to swap blood for some shite primal vampire mating bond.”

“Oh, is that what it takes for out-of-the-arena team building?” Lucian asks, a sly smile on his face. “If I’d known that, I would’ve made him bite me years ago.”

“Shut the feck up.” I throw up my hands. “I’m tryin’ tae be nice tae the lass, and ye two are a pair of feekin’ arseholes.”

“I don’t know about that, but I do know what I’d like to do to her ass—”

“She’s our teammate, ye shit fer brains,” I interrupt Lucian, glaring at him. “Treat her with respect.”

“Don’t worry, *I* was planning on coming with you two. Show her the big city, show her how to handle something big she’s never seen before—”

“Yer uninvited, ye demon prick.”

“Fine. I’m too busy, anyway. I should work with The Dark Five on the book your little *lass* had.” His tone drips with derision and I glare at him, frost sheathing my hands and arms up to my elbows.

“She’s not my wee lass,” I growl, sick to death of his shite.

“I’m ready,” a hesitant voice says from the doorway, and our three heads whip in unison toward the source.

Bri, lovely as ever, her hair braided back, stands in the doorway to the great room, an apprehensive look on her face. Her hands twisting in front of her, she meets my eyes. “Unless you don’t want to go.”

“It’s only goin’ tae be the two of us,” I tell her, hoping like hell she doesn’t want to cancel.

I want to show her the Crimson City. The only home I’ve had for the last three hundred odd years.

I want to show the bonny lass that even though this place is as good as a prison, we can still have fun here. She can still live.

“Just the two of us,” she repeats and her face brightens, a true smile blooming on her pink lips.

My cock reacts instantly. I push my hand through my hair, trying to shut down my body’s reaction to her words. To her plain excitement at the notion.

Just me and Bri.

“Is that a problem?” I ask, wanting to make sure she’s comfortable. By the old gods, I hope to hell it’s not a problem. It’s absolutely not a problem for me.

It’s the total opposite.

“No,” she says, and she gives me the most stunning, sunny smile I’ve seen yet. My heart damn near stutters. “It’s not a problem. It sounds perfect.”

“Good,” Bri says, tossing her braid behind her back. “Then let’s go.”

She holds out a hand and there’s no doubt about it this time. My heart does skip a beat.

The bonny lass is excited to go with me. Just me. I take her hand and hook it through my arm. Her brow furrows in confusion for a moment before she grins up at me.

I can’t help but smile back.

Her smile makes me feel *seen*, makes me feel like more than just some half-giant killer in the Blood Rite arena.

It makes me happy.

CHAPTER 32



BRI

The Crimson City is different during the day. Past the training rings that dot the outskirts, the streets bustle with activity, but it's a pleasant sort of energy, not too hectic, like the streets of New Philly tend towards. Instead of street vendors hawking their wares, relics of culture from before the Rift and bootlegged magical objects with questionable safety, there are huge glass windows with polished storefronts.

Instead of desperate-looking people darting left and right, trying to get to their destination as quickly as possible, the Crimson City is full of people smiling and laughing, taking their time as they pop in and out of the boutiques.

I cling to Conall's arm, grateful he offered it because no one's looking twice at me with him at my side. Even here, among the dangerously magical and the monstrous, he stands out.

It would be hard for him not to stand out anywhere, with his physique. His arm is rock-hard under my hand, and even though our height difference makes it slightly uncomfortable... it's also nice.

It makes me feel safe.

"Sorry the others aren't here too," Conall says.

I glance up at him, surprised by the blush on his cheeks. There's no mistaking it.

"Oh." I blink. Yeah, real intelligent comeback, Bri. "Honestly, it's probably better like this." I scrunch my nose. I don't want to tell him about the library. I don't want him to stop me.

But I don't want to lie to him either. It's not in me to be sneaky.

I've never been very good at it.

“Let’s eat first, aye?” His recommendation cuts off my line of thinking.

“Sure,” I say awkwardly.

“There’s a good little tapas place right,” he pauses, and I careen into him as he halts, my boobs smashing into his arm. “Here.”

“Sorry,” I say, wincing. “I didn’t realize you were stopping.”

“Did I hurt ye?” He bends down, inspecting my face.

“Nope,” I squeak. I’m not about to tell him my tits are what hurt. I don’t think I’d survive a breast inspection from Conall.

His nostrils flare, his eyes suddenly glowing blue. “Right,” he says quickly, straightening up.

I follow him into the restaurant, and I can’t help the little sigh of excitement that passes my lips. It’s the cutest place I’ve ever seen, and I have to stand still to take it all in. Star-shaped pendants in jewel tones hang from antiqued gold chains, casting a warm, multi-colored glow over the entire interior.

Cushions in all shapes and colors line the low banquettes. Roughhewn wood tables are scattered with candles and, at the occupied tables, food that looks incredible.

It smells great too, spicy and smokey and so fragrant that I nearly forget the whole reason I agreed to do this.

In the next moment, someone is leading us to a table, practically fawning over Conall, and I realize then that he must come here a lot because this table isn’t low to the ground like the rest. Well, not for a normal-sized person, at least. It’s low to the ground for him, though.

“The usual?” the woman says.

“Aye,” he agrees. “And some of yer cheeses for my... for Bri here.”

My chest constricts. He remembered I like cheese enough to make sure I get some.

“Do ye want tae look at a menu?”

“I’m sure whatever you ordered is fine,” I say. Really, I don’t want to linger over this meal. I want to eat and move on to the damned library.

Even the enchanting atmosphere of this place dulls in comparison to how badly I want to see if there is anything on my family here. Anything.

“What’s wrong?”

I make myself smile up at him. “Nothing.”

“One of these days yer going tae realize that lying well tae me is harder than that.”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right,” he says, leaning forward on his forearms. The table groans at his weight and I make myself stay still, refusing to move.

“Why do you think I’m lying?”

“Yer smile,” he says easily, his gaze skewering me. “When you really smile, and mean it, yer whole face lights up like sun shining through the clouds.”

I blink at him.

“But when yer lying, yer smile looks more like you just bit into a lemon.”

I blow out a noisy breath.

“You really want to know?” I squint at him, his easy, open expression, his broad, muscled shoulders, his clear blue eyes. Like this, seated at a table, it almost feels normal. Like maybe we are just friends, out on a date... or whatever this is.

“Aye, lass, I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want tae know.”

“I want to go to the library. Not shopping.”

He tilts his head at me and I cross my arms over my chest, waiting for his reaction.

“There is a bookshop—”

“It’s not the books I’m interested in. Not right now, at least,” I say earnestly. “I need to know if there is something about me... or about my father there. I need to know who he is...” Tears sting my eyes, but I forge onward. “Or who he was.”

He rubs his beard, his open expression shuttering just slightly. “I dinnae know if it’s a good idea, Bri. Asking questions here... it may not turn out the way ye’d like it—”

“Well, well, look who it fucking is,” a voice says.

Conall grabs my chin before I can look to the source of the sound. “Listen tae me and listen tae me well, bonny Bri. Do not give these feckers what they want.”

“For someone who the primal vampire claimed as his mate, you sure are slumming around.”

A terrifying, low noise comes out of Conall and he drops his grip on my face, slowly turning to face them.

Slade and his band of hatchet-faced idiots.

“Well, well, well,” I say acidly. “If it isn’t Heaven’s Pond Scum.”

One of the men snickers. “It’s Heaven’s Leech. Don’t you know anything?”

Conall gives me a look, and I bite my cheeks.

“It wasn’t the best insult,” I finally say, my hands wide in apology.

“Yer ruining the lady’s appetite,” Conall tells them. “And everyone else’s.”

Slade steps close to me. “I know what you are, you bitch.”

“Are you trying to say you know that I’m a bitch?” I ask, my lips pinched in confusion. “I’m genuinely asking.”

“Shut up,” he snarls.

I sigh. Magic flickers across my skin, beneath it, my blood calling it.

“Don’t,” Conall says, and this time he’s talking to me, one hand on my wrist. “What do you want, Slade?”

The magic pulls at me, wanting to be used, an insistent tug. If I just closed my eyes, I know the warp and weft of the walls between the worlds would shimmer into existence all around us.

“They’re right there,” I whisper to myself, high on the magic. Now that I’ve tapped into it, now that I know how to call it... I want to use it all the time. The walls are right there. So close.

“I know what she is,” Slade says. “I know who she is, and the Blood Council does, too.”

My eyes open wide and I stare at him.

“Then who am I, Slade?”

“She’s a member of Team Nightworth, and if you lot dinnae leave us alone, I’ll ask that we face Heaven’s Leech for one of our matches. I would pull every favor I have just to watch you turn the arena sands red.”

“The whore will kill us all,” Slade says, the veins in his neck bulging.

“Whore?” I ask. “That’s rude. Not original, but rude.” I should be afraid of the rabid look in Slade’s eye. I should be anything but flippant, but the magic’s riding me, making me high. Making me feel invincible.

“Talk to her like that again, Slade, and I’ll gut ye myself.”

“I’d like to see you try, you overgrown oaf.”

“I’d like to try,” I say. A teensy part of my brain tells me I should shut up, but I can’t help it. That same tiny part also says that this magic high... it’s not a good thing.

Slade moves closer, a hungry gleam in his eyes that has nothing to do with food. I recognize it; it’s the same look Kane had before he bit me.

Bloodlust.

“Touch her and die,” Conall says. He tilts his head, his neck cracking as he does so.

Slade flinches slightly and my manic grin deepens. The rest of Heaven’s Leech takes a step back.

Yeah, it’s hard to be a badass when a half frost giant is ready to whoop your butt.

“I’ve lost my appetite,” I say suddenly. I need to get out of here. My magic is prickling under my skin, ready to be unleashed. I kick Conall gently under the table, not wanting to hurt him but needing to get his attention.

He glances at me, and then his eyes widen infinitesimally.

“Marla,” he yells out. “Can ye deliver our meal to the Nightworth House?”

She must say something in return, but I can’t focus. I’m lost to the pull of the magic.

“Breathe, lass, breathe. Out of the way, ye shite weasels.”

Slade says something too, but it sounds like he’s underwater. All I can hear is the roaring in my ears, the magic whispering to me to let it out. To do something.

“Get out of the way unless ye want her to turn ye inside out, idiot,” Conall snaps, and then he’s thrusting me behind him, towing me from the pretty lights and the nice smells into the cobbled streets of the Crimson City.

“Snap out of it, Bri, come back to me,” Conall urges, pulling me alongside him, his arm a heavy weight on my shoulders.

I want to. I can hear him, at least. I know I should.

But the walls between worlds press in on me, so close I can touch them. Can taste them, their ozone crackle and electrical charge.

“Gods dammit, Bri,” Conall says. “I dinnae want tae slap ye, but I dinnae know how tae get ye out of this.”

He keeps walking, and I move along with him, glazed over, too focused on the whispering behind the veils of

otherworlds.

“They want to come in,” I say, and I don’t recognize my voice. “They want to come here,” I continue. It would be so easy to just... let them in. To listen and do what they want.

Something hard and hot presses against my mouth, my back slamming up against a wall. My eyes widen, and some of the hold of the magic dissipates with the shock of it.

Conall’s kissing me, his mouth a warm, minty slide against mine. His huge body cages me in, holding me up against a brick wall, his hands tangling in my braid.

I sigh, and he takes advantage of my lips opening, his tongue swiping along the inside of my mouth.

Desire, thick and heady, races through me, more powerful than the wild chaos of my magic, than the call of the otherrealms. The eldritch voices quiet, and then there’s nothing left but him and me.

My fingers curl into the back of his head.

I could lose myself in this moment, in him, and for a brief moment, I want to. I want to forget everything, forget my fears, the Rite, my father... and become pure need instead.

A raucous cheer goes up, though, and I blink, realizing our little public display of affection has drawn a crowd.

Conall pulls away, his blue eyes glazed with lust.

“Get outta here,” he says hoarsely, and that’s all it takes for the few onlookers to disperse.

I can’t even think. My feet touch the ground as Conall gently deposits me back on the ground.

“Sorry, lass,” he says, regret flickering over his face. “That was a last resort, and not a very good one, I’m afraid.”

“It was good,” I say breathily.

Pink colors his cheeks again, and a slow, soft smile spreads across his face. I rub at where his beard’s tickled my chin, staring up at him, my train of thought so firmly derailed that all I can think about is kissing him again.

“Well, I’m sorry all the same, lass. I couldn’t think of anything else to get ye to stop pulling at the magic. I’m not the type tae just go and kiss a bonny lass without permission. Especially after what happened between ye and Kane.”

My chest gets a weird, tight, happy feeling and I stare up at him, unable to form words. It’s just so damn sweet. “Thank you,” I tell him.

He clears his throat, raising one eyebrow.

“For, um, for bringing me back to reality. And for getting Heaven’s Leech out of my face.” I grimace. “What an awful team name.”

He lets out a chuckle, and it sounds slightly reluctant. “It is pretty bad.”

I want to thank him for the kiss, too, but I can’t seem to make my mouth say the words.

“So... why don’t we head to the library?” His gaze slides over my face and I wonder what he sees there. If he sees the fact that I’m not unaffected by his touch, the fact that all I want is more. The fact that I think he might have just saved me from doing something horrible.

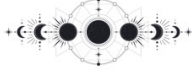
I wonder if he sees it, and I wonder if I want him to.

“The library,” I agree.

He doesn’t offer his arm this time, simply walks towards the end of the alley, waiting for me to join him. When I do, though, I can’t help but notice he flexes his hand at his side.

And I wonder if he wants to touch me again as badly as I want him to.

CHAPTER 33



BRI

The library sits at the end of the main shopping district, the Blood Rite arena uncomfortably close. It makes my heart speed up when I look at it, so I keep my gaze firmly on the soaring building in front of us.

Flagstone steps lead up to the entrance, four oversized double doors beckoning. At least, I think they're oversized, until I see that for once, Conall doesn't have to stoop.

A brass plaque under a statue at the top of the walkway proclaims the library "The Oldest Magical Archive," and the date beneath it makes me do a double take.

"They're really not trying to fool anyone but the non-magical about how long the Rite's been around, are they?" I mutter.

Conall grunts in wordless agreement.

The ornately carved doors each feature a stylized depiction of one of the main magical races: a vampire female, a fae male, some kind of werebeast carved mid-shift, a mage with fire sparking in his palms, a horned demonic entity, and a few others I can't quite see from where I'm standing.

The door nearest us swings open silently, automated by magic.

I blow out a long breath, my adrenaline spiking, this time not because of danger, but because maybe... maybe I'll finally find some answers here.

"Ye might," Conall says, and I realize I've said the last part out loud. "Ye might, but ye might not like them, Bri. Are ye sure ye can handle whatever it is?"

I nod, but I'm not. I'm not sure at all. I look up at him.

"Conall, promise me something," I say quietly, finally reaching for his hand. For comfort, I tell myself.

“Anything,” he murmurs, bending down slightly. “What is it?”

“If I start to lose it again... please don’t let me lose it.” I’m afraid of the power inside me. It’s quiet for now... but it feels reckless and wild.

I don’t want to hurt anyone, though, and I trust Conall.

“Lass...” he grins, then bites his lower lip. “Are ye giving me permission to kiss ye?”

My cheeks heat. “Well, I mean... if that’s what it takes.”

“Understood,” he says gravely, but he’s smiling wide at me, like he likes the idea.

Or maybe he just thinks I’m being ridiculous.

With another deep breath, I step into the dim interior of the Crimson City library. Overhead, skylights let sunshine in, streaming through round apertures like portholes in an underwater ship.

No, not portholes, I realize. Moons. The ceiling overhead is painted a dark, night-sky blue, gilded with stars and constellations, the gold twinkling slightly. Enchanted. My jaw drops and I stare, unable to look away from the gorgeous domed ceiling.

“The stars move in accordance with the position of the Earth and the seasonal changes,” Conall tells me, noticing where my attention’s gone. “It’s dead useful for the spell-casting mages.”

“Wow.” It’s inadequate, but I’m not sure what I could say that would be. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen, and it’s hard to believe something so... beautiful and magical exists in close proximity to the arena.

But maybe it’s *because* of the proximity that it exists at all.

The thought sobers me, and Conall squeezes my hand. “It’s alright, lass. Let’s go see what we can find out.”

I tear my gaze away from the enchanted ceiling, soaking in the library.

It's unlike any library I've ever seen.

There are no books. The entire main floor is composed of desks and chairs, and comfortable couches grouped around low tables. Several fireplaces crackle, spaced an aesthetically pleasing distance from each other. The huge room is mostly empty, though there are a few patrons scattered about.

"Where are the books?" I ask, bewildered. There's not a second story. There's nothing. Just... tables and chairs.

"What do ye mean?" Conall says, walking purposefully over to a more private nook next to a fireplace.

"The books," I repeat. "This is a library, right? Where are they?"

"They dinnae just keep the books where anyone can read them." Conall sits in front of the fire, too large for the chair, which groans in protest under him.

I stop. "What do you mean? That's the whole point of a library."

"Nah," Conall shakes his head. "Ye dinnae want some inexperienced mage with a magic book beyond their level. Ye can trust me on that."

He motions to the seat next to him and I sit down, totally confused about what the fuck we're supposed to do next.

"All records on Arbane," Conall says, staring at the fireplace.

My face scrunches up, and I tilt my head at him. "What?"

He shoots me an amused look. "Ye'll see."

A moment later, there's a flurry of paper, and several large books slam into existence on the table next to his chair. I jump in surprise.

"There." He smiles at me triumphantly, and a small snort comes out of me.

"How was I supposed to know that?" I ask him.

He runs his hand over one of the leather covers, the silver-embossed writing twinkling in the firelight. “These are Council records.”

My stomach twists, all my good humor and relief at seeing the records evaporating as quickly as the books appeared.

“What does that mean?”

“I dinnae know, lass.” He picks up the top book, leafing through it. My hands twitch on my thighs, and I swallow hard.

I should help him look. I don’t know if I can.

As much as I want to find out the truth about my father, about myself... what if it’s bad? What if... what if finding out more only makes everything worse?

“Hmmm,” Conall says, and I can’t tell if it’s a good hmm or a bad hmm. “Feck.”

Bad hmm, then.

“What is it?” I ask, hoarse.

“These records...” He lifts the book, turning it around in his hands. “They look to be original, but,” he inhales, sniffing the book. “They’ve been manipulated.”

“What do you mean?” The question’s high-pitched and awkward, the sound carrying much further than I meant it to.

A pair of mages, one with dark wings, glances over at us. I swallow and sink further into the chair.

Conall’s still turning the book over in his hands, his nostrils flaring. “I scent blood magic on this.”

“You know,” I start, frustrated at the mere thought of another dead end, “you all keep talking about blood magic, but smelling it? What does that even mean?”

Amusement curls the corners of his mouth up. Instead of answering, though, he hefts the large leather-bound book towards me. No sooner have my hands wrapped around the supple brown material than I smell it.

Not just smell it. Though the coppery, acrid scent burns the back of my throat, it's the feel of the blood magic, the lingering residue of the spell, that sets my teeth on edge. It's as though a myriad of many-legged spiders crawl across my flesh.

I shudder and the book falls from my hands, crashing against the floor.

The dark-winged mage skewers me with a look.

I guess noise isn't welcomed in libraries anywhere.

"Sorry," I murmur, not sure if I'm apologizing to the mage or Conall or maybe even the leather-bound book. Bending to pick it up, I stop.

"I don't want to touch it again."

"I don't blame ye," Conall agrees, scooping it up off the floor. "This is what yer book felt like."

"My book?" I echo, and it takes a minute for what he's said to sink in. "You mean the history book? It didn't feel anything like this. It just felt like a book."

"That's because the blood magic knew ye."

"You're talking about it like it's alive. Like it thinks."

"Blood magic's a tricky thing." He's leafing through one of the other books, the sunshine spilling through a skylight a golden beam across his hair. Conall looks as at home here in this quiet, gorgeous library as he does in the arena. "It's not alive, no, not so much as ye and I are. But it's not exactly... stagnant. Not like some spells."

"I don't know enough about any of that to have a clue what the difference is." I try to keep the frustration out of my voice. My life depends on magic now, and I've never felt more ignorant and at a loss than I do now.

"Some spells... ye set them and they're done. They do what ye tell them to do."

"My magic's not like that."

He purses his lips, setting the book in his hands back on the table. “No, it’s not. Yer magic is different. Mine is, too. Lucian, though, he works in spells. Ye don’t cast a spell or enchantment. The magic responds to something else in ye, is shaped by yer will. Same with my frost, or my battle warp. Ye know,” he explains, seeing my confusion, “when I got bigger in the arena. My magic reacted to adrenaline and anger, same as yours. That’s why we’ve been trying to find yer trigger, not teaching ye to recite demonic verse or what have ye. Our magic is inside us, alive, and regular spells are like... arithmetic problems. Maths. Ye set the conditions of the spell, and the spell performs what ye’ve asked it to, if ye’ve done it right.”

“Arithmetic,” I repeat, trying to process it all.

“Right. But blood magic, like what Kane does naturally, is both. It’s spell and will-based. It’s mighty dangerous. Ye saw it first-hand during the Blood Bond, too.”

“They could’ve been more original with the naming,” I mutter.

“Aye, but it does the job. Now, let’s see if there’s anything in these books about yer father.” He hands me another book.

I try to force down the revulsion I feel when my palm skates across the surface, but I gag and drop it again, feeling light-headed.

“I can’t do it,” I gasp, the nausea receding as soon as I drop it.

“What do ye mean?” Conall’s stopped, all his attention laser-focused on me. “Ye can’t because yer afraid what ye’ll find?”

“No,” I shake my head. “I want to know the truth. I can’t because every time I touch those books, I want to throw up. It’s going to make me throw up.” I’m sure of it. If I look too long at them, I’m going to need to run for the bathroom.

His brow furrows and the leather chair creaks as he shifts his weight, running his hand over one of the books.

I lean back in my chair, trying to calm my racing heart, sweat beading across my forehead.

“Odd,” he finally says.

“Is that not normal?” I make myself ask.

“Nothing seems tae be normal where yer concerned, lass.” There’s no censure in the statement. “It seems that as much as the book in yer apartment was keyed to ye, to yer blood... these are repelling ye. I’m not a blood magic expert, but I’ve seen enough of it to hazard a guess.”

Slowly, I sit up, staring into Conall’s face, searching for answers I know he doesn’t have.

“Why would every book with my father’s name in it be spelled to repel me?”

He nods once, like he was expecting the question.

“That is the crux of the problem, isn’t it now, lass?”

I want to scream. My teeth grind together in my mouth and I try to steady myself with deep breathing. I’m not sure how long I sit like that, marinating in frustration and crushing disappointment.

Conall’s cool hand lands on my wrist. “Yer answers are here somewhere, lass, I know it. But they’re no more in these books than they are in me. I think yer best bet—our best bet—is in the book from yer apartment. The Crimson City library may have pulled these for us, but there’s no mention of Arbane, not anywhere I can see. If he was in these books, or if any of yer family was, they aren’t anymore.”

I nod stiffly. “Thank you, Conall.”

“Lass, yer pleasure is mine. I mean, the pleasure is all mine.” His mouth twists to the side, and we stare at each other for a second. “Well, hopefully the food we ordered is back at the Nightworth House. What do ye say about going home and eating it?”

“It sounds good.” It’s a lie. I don’t care about the food.

I want answers.

But the more I search for them, the more dead ends I find.

CHAPTER 34



CONALL

Bri doesn't have to say how disappointed she is. It's in the sloped lines of her shoulders, the downward cast of her eyes. Each step she takes seems heavy, and she pays no heed to the wonders in the windows all around, the magic-powered clockworks and enchanted dresses I thought might catch her interest.

It isn't until we near the row of restaurants we fled from for the library that she displays any interest in the Crimson City at all.

"What's going on?" she asks, and only then do I notice the crowd gathered around an object on the street.

I pull her close to me, out of the way of the people jostling with each other. A fae male with scaled forearms hisses at me when we push past him, but one look shuts him up and he gives us a wide berth.

It's not an object. It is—was—a person.

A body lies in the street.

Hushed whispers rustle all around us, words and accusations flying. I scan the bleeding corpse. Hundreds of years in the arena haven't been wasted on me.

"Magic and a blade," I mutter to Bri. "It wasn't fast, and it wasn't pretty." The knife wounds that pepper the forearms and neck of the body are nothing compared to the jagged edges that can only have been made by some kind of magic trauma.

"Who was he?" she asks.

I squint, scrutinizing the remnants of the clothes, the face. "Looks like one of the Damned Regiment. Their logo's on his left shoulder."

Her face is drawn and pale, and I wrap my arm around her shoulders. It would have been better if we never brought her with us. It would have been better if she refused the Blood Bond and took her chances on her own.

Even if that meant I never got to spend a day with her.

“I’m sorry, lass,” I murmur. “I should have kept ye home this day.”

Across the way, a raucous laugh rings out.

The members of Heaven’s Leech crowd around Slade and he catches my eye, running a thumb across his neck.

“Do you think he did it?” Bri whispers. Her body trembles slightly and it makes my heart hurt to feel it. “Do you think he’s the one behind the murders?”

I frown. Diego wouldn’t have let Slade take him down easily. But against all five of Heaven’s Leech?

It’s not impossible.

“Maybe. Either way, we should get out of here. The Blood Council will be here soon enough to clean this up.”

I pull her along with me, propelling her towards House Nightworth. I wish I could throw her over my shoulder and run with her to safety, but I know Slade’s still watching us, looking for any weakness.

So I hurry her along as best I can.

No sooner have we made it into the house than Red’s there, waiting for us, his eyes flashing.

“There’s been another murder,” he says.

“We saw it,” I tell him shortly, trying to check on Bri.

Her color’s back, at least, and I usher her towards one of the couches in the next room. She needs to be comfortable. The last few days were already a shock. What was supposed to be a fun outing has turned into one more reminder of just how fecked everything is here.

I fluff a pillow, forcing it behind her, then grab a thick blanket, tucking her into it.

“You saw it happen?” Red echoes, following us into the room.

“No, we saw the aftermath,” I say shortly.

“The body was a mess,” Bri supplies.

I narrow my eyes at her. “Ye need tae relax.”

“Why does she need to relax?”

“Because she just saw a viciously murdered corpse with his guts strewn about the Crimson City,” I say, poking Red in the shoulder.

“That does cover some of it,” Bri says drily. “Slade was there. He threatened us.”

“Slade’s an idiot,” Red tells her. “You think Slade did it?”

“I dinnae know, Red.”

“He certainly made a big show of trying to confront us at lunch,” Bri tells him.

“Slade’s not smart enough to pull off this many murders.” Red’s mouth twists to the side. “I have a hard time believing even the entire team of Heaven’s Leech could manage to take down Diego without being seriously injured themselves.” He shakes his head.

“Then who?” Bri asks. “Who would just murder one of the Blood Rite competitors in broad daylight?”

I can think of a whole slew of people here in Crimson City unhinged enough to do just that. There’s something about spending centuries in the same fecked up city, forced to kill, that does strange things to a mind.

I have my own firsthand experience with that.

“The question is not just who would do it,” Red answers slowly, turning to face me. A glimmer of his beast surfaces from beneath his skin. “But why they would do it in the middle of the Crimson City, where anyone could catch them... and how?”

“They wanted the body to be seen.” Bri’s eyes widen slightly.

“Aye,” I agree. “They wanted to send a message.”

“Well, they didn’t do a very good job if you three are sitting around trying to figure out who did it,” Lucian says, walking into the room. “I’m sad I didn’t make it. I love a good disembowelment. Really gets the blood racing, am I right?”

“Ew,” Bri says, her lip curled in disgust.

“I don’t think it’s Heaven’s Leech,” Red insists. “I think someone is trying to make it so there aren’t as many competitors in the Blood Rite.”

“Why would anyone do that? We’re here so our blood can power the magic that keeps our world safe.” Bri looks between Red and me, obviously hoping for confirmation.

I wish I could tell her she’s safe. That we’re safe unless we’re in the ring.

I won’t lie to the lass, though.

“We dinnae go out again unless we’re all together,” I say shortly. “We stick together. I refuse to lose another member of Nightworth, no matter who is behind it.”

“They want to throw the tournament,” Red insists, not paying attention to me. “Whoever is doing this, they are trying to welcome chaos. I guarantee it.”

“Fine by me. You know I dislike being by myself,” Lucian agrees readily, ignoring Red’s conspiracy theory.

I wish I could say the same.

I worry he’s right.

“Works for me,” Bri says, tucking her knees into her chest beneath the blanket I put around her.

“They want to bring down the Council, I guarantee it,” Red snarls, still hell-bent on his theory.

“Or it was Heaven’s Leech, and they’re even stupider than I imagined,” Lucian says.

“No matter who did it, we stay together as a team. Understood?”

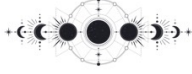
Red finally turns to me, nodding his head in agreement. Lucian pops off a lazy salute, and Bri tilts her head, watching me.

“A team,” she says softly. “I agree.”

I’m glad.

I don’t want any of them to end up like the poor feck we saw today.

CHAPTER 35



BRI

Three days later

“Again,” Conall says.

Every joint aches. Every muscle burns, and yet I listen to him, gritting my teeth as sweat drips into the still healing wounds on my neck. It’s been over three days, and I still haven’t seen a glimpse of Kane.

I can feel him though, and my whole body goes on high alert when I think of him. It’s like the articles I used to read about phantom limbs, how people who have lost arms or legs think they itch because their brains can’t figure out that the missing limb isn’t there anymore.

It’s like that, but nothing like that, because Kane’s never been a part of me.

And yet... I keep thinking he’s right there, just out of view. I keep thinking I’ll turn around and see him, even though I don’t want to... and the feeling has only gotten worse by the day.

Conall thinks it’s because I took his blood.

I don’t want to think about it at all.

“Lower,” Conall says, and Lucian chuckles.

I glare at the demon as I squat lower still, my thighs shaking. Apparently, serving tea at my old job wasn’t great preparation for fighting to the death.

Who could’ve guessed?

I hop in place, rolling through my toes, before slowly lowering into another painful squat.

The same as I have the last few mornings. My days are full of training, trying to avoid talking about Kane, and talking about the mysterious book from my apartment, all with varying degrees of success.

Just training, and eating, and learning to use the dagger with Conall, and how to do some basic enchantments with Lucian, all while Red teaches me how to call the deep magic inside me, how to shape it and control it. I still have no idea what Red is, but he's as freaking scary as he is beautiful.

I squat lower, then rise up slowly, balancing on my tiptoes before hopping and starting the whole movement over again.

I think I'm getting better.

At least, I hope like hell I am.

Either way, I'm going to have a great ass. Whether or not that ass is alive or dead is more of the problem.

"Again," Conall says, and I bite my tongue, glaring up at him. "Five more," he adds, giving me a gentle smile.

The giant grows on me a little more every day. I try not to think about our kiss, and he hasn't tried to touch me or kiss me or anything since our morning in the city. I don't know how I feel about it. I can't seem to stop thinking about it, though, despite my weird connection with Kane.

Or maybe it's because of it. Maybe I'm thinking about Conall to keep the vampire out of my thoughts.

Regardless, out of the three teammates training me, Conall's far and away my favorite. He's easy to talk to, calm, dependable, and he has the cutest freakin' accent. Plus, he always makes sure I have as much cheese as I want.

Cheese, it turns out, might be the way to my heart.

I study him surreptitiously, enjoying the way his training gear fits to his muscled body, the way he grins a little when I make progress.

"Think we can take her to the arena today? It might be good for her to watch a match, get a feel for some of the strategy, you know, see it in action," Lucian says, pausing his slashing at Red with a black-bladed sword.

I don't get the need for the swords, seeing as how the two of them have full control over their magical abilities, but

apparently being able to wield a sharp edge is a skill they don't want to lose.

I've tried a few times, and there's no way it's going to help me. More like weigh me down and make me fall on my face. They make it look easy, but those swords are heavy. And sharp.

Their skill is another mark of how old they are. Ancient.

The knowledge still staggers me.

"Phoenix Dawn is fighting Team Doomguard," Lucian adds. Red grunts, and their swords ring as he parries Lucian's swing.

We've been lying low since our trip into the Crimson City. Mostly because Kane is currently locked in the basement, "detoxing," as Lucian all-too-gleefully told me. But also because of Heaven's Leech's bullshit at the restaurant. Red thinks it's a sign they think we're weak.

I squat again, my legs screaming in protest. Grimacing, I go lower, knowing Conall is ready to yell at me if I don't do it on my own. Sweat trickles down my temple, my calves trembling.

One thing these males pressed into me is that we always must present a united front when we leave our mansion. The last thing we need is for another team to exploit our weaknesses.

And in this case, the weakness is Kane and me, and whatever the hell happened between us after the fight.

I finish my last stupid squat-jump and put my hands on my hips and try to breathe. At this rate, my ribs are going to try and jump straight out of my body. Would it have killed me to work out more before they freaking stole me away here?

Now, it might kill me to be out of shape. Uncalled for. Downright rude.

"Do ye want to go to the arena, lass? Lucian has a point. We can see if Kane's improved." He doesn't sound optimistic about the prospect, and I can't say I blame him.

I don't want to see if Kane's improved. I already feel like he's just a thought away.

I'm not ready to see him.

"No," I say shortly. "I don't want to go."

Red sighs, the only sign he's paying attention to the conversation, and a second later, he has Lucian pinned on the ground.

I blink, confused about how he did that so fast. I still don't have a clue what Red is, besides scarily sexy, but in moments like these he's just plain scary.

"You're going to have to get over what happened eventually," Red grunts, Lucian making a show of trying to get the upper hand.

Oh, fuck this guy!

"It happened three days ago, asshole. You all keep telling me he almost killed me. I've had nightmares about it so bad that I've woken up screaming." I glare at him, absolutely done. "But sure," I shrug a shoulder. "Let me just put 'get over a vampire trying to drain me dry' on my to-do list. Right after 'don't die in the arena' and 'figure out who's trying to fuck up the Blood Rite,'" I snark. "Oh, and lest we all forget, we'll squeeze that in around all this stupid training that's not going to make an ounce of difference, because I can't compete with a bunch of magic users who've been training their whole goddamn lives!" I'm shouting now, my lungs screaming at the effort.

The three males blink at me, and I unstrap the little leather half-gloves they make me use to protect my hands, throwing them on the ground.

"Fuck you, Red. Fuck you for saying I should just get over it. You get over it!" I add awkwardly, totally ruining my already unhinged diatribe.

Oh god, I'm acting like a total ass, but I'm too angry now to stop.

Power rolls across my skin, the weave of the walls between worlds coming into sharp focus, my magic rising as a result of my turbulent emotions.

“Finally, some progress,” Red says.

“Shut the hell up,” I tell him.

The hazy barrier between our realm and the next disappears as I inhale, pushing my power down, where it lies, still roiling, waiting for me to call on it again.

“It took you long enough to figure out how to do it right,” Red continues, the dark irises of his eyes turning crimson, his pupils elongating to slits.

I should stop, but I can't. I'm too goddamn mad.

In three steps, I've crossed to where he has Lucian in a chokehold, and I aim a kick at his bare chest.

That's as far as I get.

The next instant, a vise-like hand grips my ankle and all the air explodes out of my already aching lungs. I scissor my legs, truly furious now, trying to get away from the psychotic shifter. His hand slashes down, and I see talons out of the corner of my eye.

Red's skin bulges, disgusting ripples distorting his sleek and handsome features.

Anger turns to fear and I pull at the deep well of power in me, survival mode kicking on.

A creature from the otherrealm, the closest I can grab, called by my earlier indiscretion, answers my thought and a moment later, hooves pound against the sand in the training yard.

Red grins down at me, raking talons across my face—or trying to.

Lucian yells somewhere behind me, but I'm not listening. No, I need to focus on the fucker pinning me down, trying to hurt me. As if Kane hasn't already done enough of that.

“Call it off,” Conall shouts, and it’s then I look up. The most beautiful creature I’ve ever laid eyes thunders across the sand, bearing down on where Red still pins me to the ground.

White hide, so smooth and velvety it’s near opalescent where the sun lands on it. Silvery hooves, a thick mane, and dark, limpid eyes with long-lashes. A glittering horn juts from its forehead, a long lock of hair falling over it.

My mouth forms an oh of surprise, my eyes wide, and Red’s talons rake across my cheek. Pain follows immediately and I snarl, aiming a kick at his balls.

The unicorn makes an unearthly sound, more like a freight train than a horse, and bears down on Red, head held low, horn primed for maximum impact.

“You don’t want to do that,” he purrs, though his eyes tell a different story. He wants me to do it. He wants to see how far I’ll take it.

Crazy fucker.

“Stop,” I say, calling to the unicorn with my magic. I wince. The verbalization isn’t necessary. The guys all make fun of me whenever I do it, calling it clumsy, but whatever. It works, and right now, I think that matters more than finesse.

The unicorn skids to a halt, sending a wave of sand crashing into the two of us. It paws the ground, snorting, nostrils flaring.

“That’s a new one,” Lucian says, eyeing the unicorn warily.

It’s beautiful. I can’t take my eyes from it. I don’t want to send it back. I want it to stay here. I could use something like that in my corner.

I could use a friend. My throat tightens unexpectedly.

Red’s grip on me loosens, just slightly, and I finally manage to launch a good kick at his nuts. He crunches inward, rolling off me as he clutches his junk. I stand up immediately, prepping for the next hit.

“Fuck you, Red,” I tell him, and to my consternation, tears prick my eyes. “Fuck this place, and the Blood Rite, but mostly, fuck you, Red.”

Kneeling in the sand, cupping his balls, he grins up at me, and there’s a look of intense pride on his face.

“Good girl,” he grunts.

Arggh!

I throw my hands up in the air in disgust, then turn to the unicorn, who patiently waits, docile as a lamb, for me to tell it what to do. I can’t help it. Maybe I’m as weak as Red constantly says, but I bury my face in its soft mane and I bite back tears.

“You need to go home now,” I finally tell it, and it whickers at me gently as I use my magic to nudge it back where it belongs, into a realm full of sunshine and grass and powder-pink wildflowers.

“It would have been nice to have a friend,” I say softly.

The unicorn vanishes. Leaving me alone, yet again, with three monsters who will likely be the death of me.

“I’m taking a break,” I announce, wiping my cheeks with the backs of my sand-crusting hands. Tears streaming from my face, I grab my fingerless gloves from the ground and leave the three males staring after me in surprise.

CHAPTER 36



CONALL

I can tell Red feels like utter shit from the way he pushed our lass Bri today in the ring. We haven't seen hide nor hair of her since she stormed off sobbing after summoning a beast so rare I never thought I would see one in my life.

I can't seem to get her off my mind, and based on the way Red and Lucian are more snappish than usual, her tears seem to be affecting them, too.

We've pushed her hard the last few days, and today was no different, except she finally broke. It makes me sick.

It's nearly dark out now, the day slipping by so slow it's nigh painful.

"It's too quiet," Lucian says, stretching out on the couch, his usually cheerful face grim. "I don't like it."

Red just grunts, then returns to his position in front of the fire in our great room, soaking up the heat. Steam curls from him and I wince.

I much prefer the cold, but then again, Red and I couldn't be more different.

The only thing warm I'd prefer right now is up in her room, as quiet as a red-haired mouse.

Feekin' hell.

I stand suddenly.

She wanted a friend, she said.

Sure, I want to be much more than a friend to the little lass, but if I can't at least be there when she needs me, then maybe I am as monstrous inside as I feel.

Lucian's gaze follows me, and his jaw twitches.

"I'll go check on our vampire," he says shortly.

“I’m checkin’ on the woman,” I say. The woman I can’t stop thinking about. The lips I shouldn’t fall asleep wanting to touch. The woman that shouldn’t be more than a teammate.

The woman who already is.

His eyes narrow like he knows the conflicted nature of my thoughts, but the demon prince leaves it at that, his footsteps quieted by the thick rugs as he makes his way to the basement stairs.

Red stays silent, firelight licking across his scarred back. A log pops, sending up an array of sparks, and he leans into them, closing his eyes in enjoyment as they sear into his skin.

The walk to Bri’s room takes no time at all and before I know it, I’m outside her door, my fist hovering in front of it.

Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe the little lass just needs some sleep.

I’m about to leave when the door swings wide open, revealing Bri herself, her eyes swollen, cheeks pink and patchy, wearing but a slip of a nightgown that does nothing to hide the generous curves underneath.

My mouth goes dry and I swallow hard. My fingers twitch with the need to pull her to me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask instead, my voice gruffer than I intended.

“I had... I had a nightmare,” she says, and her lower lip wobbles. “I’m afraid.”

She throws herself at me, and my entire body goes stiff with unwelcome need. Gods, she smells so good, like honey and herbs and everything warm and human.

“Ah, lass,” I say, patting the top of her head with an awkward hand. All the while, I’m trying to conceal the fact I want nothing more than to rip the silken material from her shoulders and whet my appetite for her by kissing all over her delicious-smelling skin.

I never should have kissed her in the alley, yet I can’t stand the thought of having done anything else.

Her kiss is an addiction I'll never shake.

Still, her body shakes slightly against mine, and the lust raging through me slowly fades.

“Come on, lass, put on a robe and come to my quarters for a nightcap. There's no need to stand in the hall and cry.”

Her head bobs and she snuffles once more before her bright, red-rimmed eyes glance up at me. “You don't mind? I don't want to be a—”

I hold up a hand, a choked laugh burbling from my throat. “Whatever yer about to say, I can assure ye yer not. I wouldn't have invited ye for a nightcap if I didn't want the company.” I smile at her, my chest aching for her pain. “Ye said to the damned horse ye wanted a friend, and I'll be fecked if I can't be a better friend than some horse with a gaudy horn on its head.”

It's her turn to laugh and she does, wiping a tear with the back of her hand before nodding once more. “Alright... give me just a sec.”

By the old gods, I would give her more than a second.

I would give her everything.

The door snicks shut behind her and I shake myself. I cannae think like that. Kane's mated to the damned woman, and I would be selfish to want her too. He's already claimed her.

Besides, the lass only wants a friend. She cannae possibly see me like that.

By the time she returns, she's clad in a creamy white robe, soft as a cloud, her hair piled on top of her head in a messy knot that only heightens the sharp angle of her cheekbones. She's like a little flame fairy, even covered up and ruddy from crying, and I can't help but hate Kane a little for taking her for himself.

The bastard.

“Ready?” she asks, and I make myself nod.

I've been staring at the lass while she waited for me to snap out of it.

I dinnae think there'll be any snapping out of the way I feel about her.

She just needs a friend.

We're silent as we walk to my quarters down the hall, but it's not awkward, not anything but the kind of comforting, amiable silence between two people who don't feel the need to fill it with nonsense.

I think I might like that more than anything else.

The door to my rooms swings open. I hold it open for her, and when she walks inside, I could scream with how right she looks here, in my space. She looks like home, and now that I've had the idiotic thought, I cannae seem to unthink it.

"I know you said nightcap, but I just want some tea." Her hands twist slightly and she frowns at me.

Because I'm still googly-eyed, staring at her dressed like a little cloud, a present waiting to be unwrapped.

"Tea it is," I make myself say, my voice hoarse. "I have Earl Grey and some kinda herbal shit Red likes."

"I'll take the herbal... as long as it's not actually shit." Her nose wrinkles, and then she grins at me, but it's a watery sort of smile that makes my heart hurt.

"Ye dinnae need to be brave right now, bonny lass. Cry if ye must." I stop myself short of stroking her cheek. "I'll make ye the tea. Sit by the fire and try not to cry anymore."

I whisper one of the many house-keeping spells we've seeded here over the years, and the teakettle begins to boil.

She hasn't moved, still wringing her hands.

"I can't help it," she says, her lip trembling again. "I'm sorry if it makes me look weak."

Incredulity fills me. "Ye think that's why I dinnae want ye tae cry? Because it makes you look weak? Makes Team Nightworth look bad? Ah, Bri, m'eudail—" I shake my head

and fill her teacup with the fragrant herbs, then cross over to her.

The couch creaks under my weight, another sign of how mismatched the two of us are. She is tiny and delicate and brimming with power, and I'm a massive half-human, half-frost giant who's too big to be human and too small to be considered a real giant.

Fine match we'd make.

"It has not a thing to do with your weakness and everything to do with my own." I finally say.

The thin porcelain of the teacup looks as frail as she does right now, and she sips it hesitantly, uncertainty writ across her wee bonny face.

"What do you mean?" Her voice is hushed, her cheeks pink and begging to be touched, just like the rest of her.

I spring back up from the couch, making a beeline for the bar and the golden-hued scotch twinkling in its decanter. The firelight sparkles merrily off the cut crystal as I pour myself a few fingers' worth.

Liquid courage, because by the old gods, I want to tell her what weighs on me. How I want her weight on me. A few centuries without a woman and I'm as eager as a young lad, as if it's my first time.

I squeeze my eyes shut, blocking out the way the firelight dances across her hair, her skin, the gorgeous green of her eyes. The scotch burns against my tongue, my throat, and I swallow it all in one gulp, until it's a fire in my chest.

"I dinnae like it when ye cry, lass, because it hurts me to see ye upset."

The empty glass clinks against the counter and I fill it again before making my way back to temptation incarnate, clad in a fluffy bathrobe and perched on my couch.

Her delicate neck still bears the marks of Kane, twin puncture wounds that taunt me, reminding me that what I want has already been claimed. Silently she waits, her eyes huge in

her face, and I sigh, leaning back against the couch before I gather enough courage to say what I must.

“When ye came here, I wasn’t sure what tae make of ye. But, lass, yer a quick study, and yer a hard worker. Ye wanted a friend,” I say, feeling foolish as all hell, “and here I am.” I gesture to myself with the hand holding the glass, nearly sending scotch slopping over the edge.

I take another swig, alright, a chug, and send the rest of the scotch down my throat to meet its brethren in my stomach.

To my utter dismay, the wee lass starts caterwauling again, tears streaming down her freckled face.

But to my pleasure, she scooches down the length of the couch, disregarding the considerate distance I put between us. Bri snuggles into my arm, clutching my chest with hands that are already driving me crazy.

I swallow hard.

There’s not enough scotch in the world to dull the longing I feel for her.

“Thank you,” she sniffles, finally wiping her eyes and lavishing a lovely smile on me. “I’m sorry I started crying again. That was... a little ridiculous. It’s just... it’s going to sound stupid. I never really had a friend, other than my cat, Luna. My dad, he didn’t want me getting attached to anyone. Thought it would be dangerous for me.” She hiccups a laugh, but at least she’s stopped crying. “And now I have to wonder if that’s really why. There’s so much he hid from me. There’s so much he’s still hiding.”

I cannae stand her tears.

“He may have been right to want to protect ye,” I tell her, trying to drink but finding my glass empty. “But he didn’t have to cut ye off from the world.”

“Did you have many friends before—” she twirls a hand in the air “—all this? God, I’m sorry for crying again. How stupid. I promise I won’t again. It must have been that nightmare.”

I only half hear her after the initial question.

Did I have friends before this?

“I thought I did,” I tell her quietly, unable to stop myself from leaning down and inhaling her sweet honey and herb scent. Her eyes widen slightly, her lush lips parting.

“I thought I had friends,” I tell her, and maybe it’s the scotch or maybe it’s her, but I want to tell her everything. I want her to know exactly who she’s getting as a friend. “But my clan, they sold me out. They knew my blood was powerful enough to buy them safety for a few centuries or more. I wasn’t the most powerful of them because I wasn’t really one of them. I was the easy choice, a half-human.” I lift an eyebrow, and though the pain has dulled over the years, it’s still there, still a powerful ache. “They were right. I was strong enough. I haven’t let them take me down yet in the Blood Rite, and every time my blood’s spilled on the consecrated ground, the walls between worlds get stronger. That’s the fun of being half frost giant, ye see? Power. Power, and being trapped in a prison with a bonny lass who’s been claimed by one of my very few friends.”

She frowns at that, clear eyes clouding. “Your people—the giants—sold you out?”

“Most of us here were sold out, a tithe to the Blood Council.” It surprises me still, how little she understands of the world she was born into. “Our families and clans and whatnot shipped us off as payment for protection. Some of us were captured, criminals and the like—”

“That’s what they told us after the Rift,” she says slowly, brushing a coppery lock from her forehead. “That everyone here is a criminal, that they’re too dangerous to be out in the world.”

“Well, that may be true of some,” Red’s magnificent and cruel capture comes to mind, “but not all. Most of us were payment of some kind. Kera, the woman you so elegantly took down during the match, sold herself to the Rite. Her family was poor and she knew the best way to help them was to

sacrifice herself. She has a dangerous and volatile magic, ye see.”

“I think I’d like her,” Bri mutters.

“There ye go,” I say, pleased. “Another friend for ye. We’ll have to invite The Dark Five for dinner.” I scratch my beard, slightly bemused. “Not that we’ve done that before.”

Bri snorts, and her warm breath gusts over my chest as she grins up at me. My cock tightens, hardening uncomfortably in my pants, and I shift, trying to alleviate the pressure.

By the old gods, she wants a friend, not a feck.

I squeeze my eyes shut, her soft hands and warm breath and the gentle press of her body suddenly overwhelming.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, and there is steel in her voice. “What is it? Are you hurt?”

“Nay, lass, not in any way that matters.” My voice comes out hoarse, and I make myself open my eyes.

She’s staring up at me with furrowed brow, concern etching lines into her face. The front of her robe’s fallen open, and I must be the biggest arse in the world because I want to tug it from her shoulder, want to follow the line of smooth flesh where it stops at the silken top of her nightie. I want to erase the frown from her face, see her mouth slack with pleasure.

I don’t want to be her feckin’ friend. I want to thrust my cock into her until what Kane did is a mere memory. I want all of her.

“If you’re hurt, it matters, Conall,” she says.

My cock twitches at the sound of my name on her lips.

She’s not done, though. “Don’t be one of those tough guys who waits until the last minute to say something’s wrong and then it’s too late.”

“Ye want to know what’s wrong with me, lass? What’s wrong with me is that I can hardly think straight because all I want to do is kiss you hard, like I mean it, until you can’t think

straight, either. I don't *just* want to be yer friend, Bri." Gods dammit, that is not what I mean to say.

But it's out now, turning the air heavy and thick between us. She blinks up at me, her frown erased.

At least I managed to do that right.

I scrub a hand down my face, trying to figure out how to fix this. "Listen, Bri, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that," I say on an exhale.

"I'm glad you did," she says slowly, and my eyes fly open.

I must not have heard her right.

"What?"

"I'm glad you said it," she says, and her little white teeth gnaw at her lip. "Conall, I don't want to lie to you. I don't want to tell you that I don't... wish things were different with Kane and I. But... I don't know." She sighs, her hand still on my chest, her cheek still there too as she glances up at me. "I like you, too. I didn't choose to be his mate, or whatever. I didn't choose for him to kidnap me and do whatever it is he did to me. I liked kissing him, but Conall..."

Her throat bobs as she swallows, and I can't help myself.

I place my hand on her cheek, and if the circumstances were different, I might have laughed at the damnable size difference.

But right now, with her upset and vulnerable and so damn beautiful, I relish it. It makes me feel like I can protect her, at least now, at least outside of the ring.

I want that. *Gods, I want that.*

She stares up at me, and I am lost in my need for her.

"Conall, I *liked* kissing you. I want you to kiss me again." Her voice is quiet and solemn, and it damned near breaks my heart. "I want you to make me forget about everything. Forget about the nightmares. I want you to make me feel good."

"Och, lass," I say, and I need no further encouragement. I don't need to hear sweet nothings fall from her gorgeous

mouth. I don't need to hear her say she only wants me forever.

I lift her into my lap, sitting astride me, her robe totally undone now. I want to take my time, I want to memorize her. I want to relish this, make it last forever.

Making her feel good is good enough for me.

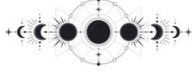
I cover the bite marks Kane left with the palm of my hand, tugging her close by the back of her neck, craning down and covering her mouth with mine.

Gods, she is... everything. Her mouth is soft and full and her little tongue darts into mine, tasting of tea and honey and her, and I swear, I've never felt anything so perfect before in my life.

If it's just making her feel good, I'll take it.

I'll take anything she'll give me, pride be damned.

CHAPTER 37



BRI

Conall's so freaking strong, so massive compared to me, that the mere act of kissing the half frost giant is as overwhelming as I remember... and so fucking good I can hardly stand it.

I half wonder if Kane did do something to me, made me perpetually horny, because when I said I had a nightmare, it was only half the truth. It was also a sex dream... that turned into a nightmare.

I push the thought aside, concentrating on the way he holds me so carefully, like I'm precious, and fragile, and like this means something to him.

Like I mean something to him.

Like I'm not just a mate, like this isn't just some biological imperative that Kane pressed on me.

I don't want to think about Kane.

"Tell me yer with me, lass," Conall growls, breaking off our kiss. "Tell me yer here."

There's something so heart-wrenching about the way he says it, about the way he wants me, the way he holds on to me like I mean something to him, that I'm all in.

I already liked Conall, trusted him, but this...

This means something to me.

I rise up on my knees, still small at that height. He doesn't seem to care. One hand stays at my neck, the other running down my back to cup the curve of my ass.

A slight moan rises in my throat and he devours the sound, kissing me like no one has ever kissed me before. I feel beautiful, and precious, and wanted, and I don't want this to stop.

"Tell me," he urges, and I pull away, confused, already forgetting what he asked.

His thumb strokes across my cheek and I lean into the caress, my eyes half-closed.

“Tell me yer not just here because ye need to be distracted.” He shifts, and I groan as his massive bulge hits between my legs. “Tell me this means something to ye. I thought I could take Kane’s crumbs, lass, but it turns out I was wrong.”

My heart splits and I kiss him again, trying to show him that he might be a frost giant, but he’s melted my heart.

“You’ve been patient,” I say, smiling, giving him a kiss. “You’ve been kind. You’ve been a friend, even if you don’t think you have.”

“Tell me you want me... for me,” he murmurs, his blue eyes fixed on mine.

“Conall,” I breathe and kiss him again, his minty scent filling my nose, his hands possessive but gentle all at once.

He pulls away, though, and his blue eyes are dark, his pupils blown.

“I can do better than tell you I want you,” I say, my mind made up. I stretch upward, curling my hand around the back of his head and brush my lips against his ear. “But I do want you, Conall. Is that so hard to believe?”

His big hands grip my face, and he presses his forehead against mine.

“Yes, m’eutail, it is. My darling.”

It makes my heart nearly burst, the way he talks to me. There’s no doubt in my mind at all when it comes to what I’m about to do.

I want to make him feel good. I want to wipe the doubt away from his eyes.

My hands stretch down for the rock-hard bulge in his pants, and he groans as my fingers caress the length of him.

“Bri,” he moans, his head falling back. “Yer gonna be the death of me.”

I huff a laugh, and a grin stretches the sides of his mouth.

I like him like this, stretched out beneath me, relaxed, all this hard muscle mine to play with. It makes me feel powerful, and wanted, and I think I've felt too little of that lately. His fingers skim across the back of my nightdress, and I shuck the soft white robe, letting it puddle on the floor.

"M'eudail," he groans, capturing my mouth again.

Desire tenses my body and I grip his cock through his pants. "Take off your shirt," I command.

Conall's lips quirk to the side. "I like when yer bossy, ye wee bonny brat," he says.

I raise my eyebrows and wait, trying not to laugh.

He tugs his cream-colored shirt overhead, and I can't help but stare at him.

White scars crisscross and zigzag over nearly every inch of his skin.

"Conall," I breathe, my mouth pinching.

"Aye, I know. I'm not a prize, not by any stretch of imagination."

"Shut up," I say, and I tug his head down to me again, kissing him hard. "You're what I want. Who I want. And you're perfect. It's just a sign of how strong you are. Of how much you wanted to live."

"Bri," he says, and then I'm on top no longer, caged between his arms, my back against the floor. One hand cups the back of my head, and he kisses me like a man possessed. My body responds immediately, and my pussy floods with wet warmth.

I groan, trying to move against him, trying to get friction where my body so desperately needs it.

"Need ye," he says roughly, his scruffy blond beard coarse against my skin.

Reaching between us, I try to find his cock, but he's too big.

I press a quick kiss to his lips, determined to show him I want him, that I think he's sexy as hell.

"Stand up and take your pants off," I demand, pushing at his shoulders.

"Cannae say that's the most romantic thing I've ever heard, but I'd be a fool not to do as ye wish." He laughs, and I grin up at him, coming to my knees.

My grin fades as he tugs his pants off.

"Holy shit," I say, my eyes wide.

His cock is massive. I bite my lip, suddenly nervous.

"Dinnae worry, lass, I'll get you ready." He pumps a hand down his shaft, and precum glistens on the tip.

I rise off my heels, but I'm not going to be able to reach it, not enough to make it worth his while. And boy, do I want to make it worth his while. I want to see him lose control, I want to break that icy but good-natured veneer and see what happens.

Something tells me it's going to be a lot of fun.

The couch. Of course.

I start to turn, and then a growl rips from Conall's mouth, a sound so feral that goosebumps pebble across my skin. Big hands catch the back of my silk nightshirt, and then a rip sounds.

Holy shit, he just tore it off my body.

A shudder rocks me, and I glance over my shoulder at him. The firelight glows around him, setting him off in hues of orange and red.

His eyes, though? They're like blue chips of ice, glowing faintly.

I swallow hard, so aroused I ache all over, and I climb onto the couch. I kneel in front of him, my hair messy and tangled on top of my head.

Yet he looks at me like I'm the best thing he's ever seen. I crave it.

With one hand, I beckon him closer and he comes to me immediately, his huge cock twitching. At this height, on the couch, I can at least reach it comfortably.

I bite my lip, slightly daunted. I haven't had a real relationship, but I've had enough one-night stands to know my way around a blowjob. This, though, is the biggest cock I've ever seen.

I want to make this good for him.

My fingers wrap around his cock and it's surprisingly cool to the touch. The fact that he's a frost giant suddenly makes me tingle with new awareness.

"You dinnae have to do this," he says, misreading my hesitance.

"I want to," I say firmly, and then I lick the tip, the shining bead of precum.

Flavor explodes across my tongue. *No way.* I blink, then lick again. It's not the salty taste I expected. *Holy shit.*

He tastes like minty vanilla ice cream, and I lap at him, surprised and excited all over again.

This is going to be fun.

"By the old gods, Gabrielle," he grunts, one huge hand tangling in my hair, not forcing me to take him deeper but holding me gently, like he's afraid to hurt me.

That won't do. I want him out of his mind.

Smiling slightly, I look up at him from beneath my lashes. With my hands, I work him as best I can, finally daring to fit my lips around the head of his cock.

"Oh gods, Bri," he moans, his head tipping back, eyes still on me, like he can't believe what he's seeing.

That's more like it.

I make a small noise of encouragement and his fingertips dig slightly into my scalp. I take him as deep as I can, and more ice cream flavored cum coats my tongue.

“What a good lass,” he croons, and my body clenches on nothing, wanting more, wanting to be full of him.

His hand finds my breast and I lick up and down his shaft, trying to make it good for him. My toes curl into the carpet and I wrap one arm around his thick, muscled ass, tugging him even closer.

“Feck, Bri,” he moans, and his dick throbs under my mouth. “Goin’ tae come.”

I don’t waste any time but suck at his tip, working him with my hands and mouth, humming my encouragement.

A moment later, a cool jet of cum rockets into my mouth, taking me by surprise despite his warning... because it’s not bad. It really is like minty ice cream, and for the first time in my life, I actually enjoy swallowing it down.

His reaction, though, is what has me wetter than ever.

Stunning blue eyes wide, he simply stares at me in awe. I grin at him, wiping my lips and basically feeling like a total sex goddess.

“Did that answer your quest—”

I can’t even get the sentence out before he’s on top of me again, kissing me furiously, like the world depends on it.

“Now it’s my turn tae make ye come, ye little minx,” he growls, and my breath catches as his fingers slide between my legs. “Nice and wet already, aren’t ye, lass?”

“Yes,” I pant, holding onto his chest for dear life. “For you.”

“M’eudail,” he says, and I cry out as he slips a finger inside me.

“Conall.” His finger’s so thick and I rock against his hand as he crooks it, finding the spot I’m pretty sure every other guy I’ve been with thought was a fairytale.

“Yer not allowed to come for me yet, lass.” A few more strokes and his finger disappears, leaving me empty and wanting. “I’m goin’ tae savor you.”

His mouth clamps over one of my nipples, his slippery fingers finding my clit, making impossibly tight, perfect circles as he sucks.

I’m scrabbling against his back, arching against him, already desperate. “Conall,” I urge him, trying to tell him I want more.

“Such a greedy little thing,” he says. “So beautiful.” He turns his attention to my other breast. With his free hand, he pinches the nipple on the other one.

When he pulls back, blowing a stream of cold air over where his warm mouth was just an instant ago, I nearly crawl out of my skin with sheer lust.

“Please,” I pant.

“No.” He grins, raising his eyebrows. “Yer not coming until I’m good and ready to let ye.”

I make a wordless noise as his mouth travels over my skin, pausing to kiss my belly button.

And then his blond head’s between my legs, his tongue replacing his fingers.

“Oh my—*Conall*,” I half moan, half scream. He licks and licks, tongue thick and heavy against my pussy.

“Such a perfect, bonny lass,” he purrs, then his lips lock around my clit as he sucks. My hands are in his hair, and I’m shamelessly riding his face, my body rocketing towards release. “Good lass,” he says. “Get wet for me. You’ll need to be sopping to take my cock.”

Oh my god, the dirty talk is driving me out of my mind.

He slips a finger inside me, then two, stretching me wide as he works me with his tongue. “Good,” he says again, murmuring praise and support as he fucks me with his fingers, his mouth impossibly perfect, his beard rasping against my thighs, giving me sensation overload.

He crooks his fingers inside me again, adding a third. “Now ye can come for me,” he orders, and begins stroking that mythical spot.

Laving my clit with his tongue, he continues to stroke, and seconds later I fall apart, my orgasm coming so fast and furious that I’m left breathless and panting.

“Now yer ready,” he says in approval. I’m boneless as he lifts me up, repositioning us so I’m straddling him. “I’m goin’ tae watch ye come this time, do ye understand?”

“Okay,” I breathe, as if I’m going to say no to another orgasm.

To my surprise and slight concern, he holds me tight with one arm around the waist, holding his already hard cock up, rubbing it between my slick folds. It’s leaking more cum, and between that and my wetness, it feels amazing. I groan as he teases my entrance, nudging inside me, and I brace myself against his chest.

“Relax, m’eudail, ye can take it. Ye’ll take all of it.” There’s a sultry terseness to the words, and I moan as he sinks deeper inside me, stretching me impossibly. “Take it like a good lass,” he croons.

He reaches for my mouth and I part my lips.

“Get it nice and wet,” he says, and I suck it. It tastes like me, and when he pulls it away from me, he groans, pushing deeper still.

He drags the wet finger across my clit, and I’m powerless to do anything but let him run the show. Happy to give up control to him as he slowly thrusts his hips up, up.

“Oh, Conall,” I moan, my legs shaking as another orgasm starts to build, his thick fingers and impossibly thick cock sending my nerves into overdrive.

“Take it,” he growls, and I try moving, rocking my hips slightly down onto his length. “Good feekin’ lass.” His fingers dance across my clit. He curls up towards me, half-sitting, his ab muscles flexing beneath the tanned skin and reddish-blond hair curling across his chest.

“Look at ye, taking my cock like a gods-damned goddess,” he rasps, and between that and the way he’s fingering my clit, I rock again, so, so close to the edge. “Look at it, look how ye take me.”

I do as he says, and the sight’s obscene. His huge cock is glistening with my moisture, so huge that I can’t believe my body’s made room for it.

But it feels so fucking good.

“So good,” I whimper, finding a rhythm, the orgasm starting to peak, so close.

“Aye, lass, that’s it,” he says, his hand now gripping my ass.

He thrusts hard and my eyes fly open as I realize he’s fully seated inside me. “Good lass,” he says, and that’s all it takes.

The orgasm explodes through me and I’m making senseless noises, Conall thrusting in and out of me until there’s another orgasm coming, straight on the heels of the last.

“Feck, Bri,” he moans, and I can’t take my eyes from him.

“Conall,” I say, reaching a hand out to touch his cheek. Sweat beads on my forehead and he bends closer to me, allowing me to cup his face.

“Can’t wait anymore,” he grits out, and in one swift moment, he’s back on top of me, thrusting so deep and hard that my mind empties.

There’s nothing but this moment, the impossible fullness inside me, the pleasure more intense than any I’ve experienced. I bury my head in his chest, holding on tight, loving the size difference, loving how protected I feel in his arms. How cherished.

“Bri, yes, ye feel so feckin’ wet. So good.”

I open my eyes, smiling dreamily in the wake of this inhuman pleasure, and then I see him.

Kane, standing at the fireplace, a grim sort of smile on his face.

I make eye contact, too stunned to react.

And to my surprise, another orgasm builds, even as I know he's there, seeing it happen.

Maybe that's why, though, maybe it's the thought of him watching as Conall comes inside me that triggers another orgasm, one that leaves me completely wrung out.

"What the feck are ye doing here?" Conall's voice is deeper than I've heard it before. He pulls out of me and cum leaks out, running all across my thighs.

Kane's gaze flicks to it, then my face, his fangs lengthening in his mouth.

My face reddens in something that's not quite shame, but is definitely embarrassment, and I tilt my chin up, challenging him to do something.

Conall abruptly throws the forgotten robe across me, giving me a quick smile, before turning to stand between Kane and me.

It makes my heart flutter.

"I see the mate bond decidedly didn't do you too much harm," Kane says casually.

"How feckin' long have you been there?"

"Long enough to wish I'd seen more," he replies, his gaze sliding from Conall to me. "I'm glad what I did to you hasn't had any real, lasting effects."

I tug the robe up closer to my chin, confused about how... sincere he seems. How unconcerned he is by... well, by the fact I just had the best sex of my life with someone else.

"What the feck do you want, Kane?" Frost begins to skate over Conall's scarred back, and I shiver in its wake.

"I felt her heightened emotions. I thought something was wrong."

"Nothing was wrong," I say quickly, and Kane smiles at me, a slow, sensuous look that makes me shut my mouth.

“That much was clear from the moment I saw you, my mate,” he purrs, the dimple in his cheek flashing.

“Dinnae start that shit again,” Conall says, rolling his shoulders.

“She may not feel the bond, but I do,” Kane tells him. “I’ll leave.”

He does as he says, heading to the door as we watch him in silence.

“But I find it interesting,” he says, not bothering to turn back towards us, “that Gabrielle knew I was here, liked me watching, and didn’t say anything about it at all. Very interesting.”

I swallow hard, and the door shuts quietly behind him.

“Is that true, Bri?” Conall arches an eyebrow at me.

“I only saw him for a second, and then... well, then I had another orgasm, and that was about all I could think about,” I tell him honestly.

“That’s because yer a good feckin’ lass,” he growls in approval, and the next thing I know, he’s swinging me up into his arms. “Now let’s clean ye up.”

I laugh a little, but there’s a curious light to his eyes, and I’m not sure what to think.

When I find out what exactly he means by cleaning me up, though, any possibility of thinking flies out the window.

CHAPTER 38



KANE

The sight of her coming is something that will be burned into my memories for the rest of my very long life. Her pink cheeks, her hair damp with sweat, the helpless slant of her eyes as Conall plowed into her...

I wanted it to be me. I wanted to be the one to make her look like that, to feel like that.

I don't blame her, though, not after what I did.

Shame is all I feel, now that the bloodlust has been leeches from my system. Guilt rides my every step back to my quarters, quarters that I wish I shared with my mate.

Even though she doesn't feel the bond between us, I do. I cringe to think what I might have done if the rest of our team hadn't interrupted me. The shame I feel now would be nothing compared to the self-loathing I'd feel if I truly hurt her.

No, I want to see her happy.

Her pleasure now is my pleasure, thanks to the bond. Though it's not nearly as satisfying as it would be if I were the one fucking her instead of Conall.

Still, I'm glad she is happy. She deserves to be happy, and the frost giant is a good male. He will treat her well.

Somehow, I've made it back to my quarters. I slam the door closed behind me, rattling the art on the walls.

My teeth grind against each other and I rake a hand through my hair. I want her to be happy.

I just want to be the one making her so.

And I fucked that up royally.

I turn the thought over in my head, wondering about her reaction to me when she met my eyes then lost herself to her pleasure. I groan, my dick painfully hard with the need to pleasure my mate.

I pause, watching the moon hide behind clouds outside my window.

Maybe there is another way around this problem. Maybe it's good that she trusts the frost giant..

Maybe it's not a question of Conall or me... but a question of Conall *and* me.

CHAPTER 39



BRI

Conall holds me tight, his massive cock hard against my butt. His breathing is deep and even, though, and I squirm against him a little, squinting against the bright light streaming through his curtains.

“Och, lass, keep that up and we’ll be late for training.” He rolls me over, fingers gently tickling across my ribs, and I grin up at him.

“Hi,” I say softly.

“Good mornin’ tae ye, bonny Bri,” he says, then kisses me sweetly across the lips.

I sigh, happy and still so damn relaxed that I can’t even be too mad about the whole training thing.

“I like tae see ye like this,” he says. A fingertip traces over my lips, and I pretend like I’m going to bite him.

“I like to see her like that too,” a familiar voice says, and Conall covers me with his body, a low growl rumbling in his chest.

I groan in exasperation, peeking past Conall’s bicep. “Do you just leave your door unlocked or what?”

Lucian grins at me, his human form so stunningly perfect it takes my breath away. I bury my face in Conall’s chest, inhaling his comforting fresh scent.

“Only people who can tell a demon prince what tae do seem to be the damned Blood Council.”

“They wish,” Lucian says glibly.

“What the feck do ye want, Lucian?”

“Other than to hop in bed and help you make Carrot Cake scream, you mean?”

“Get out,” I grumble, annoyed beyond belief.

Conall presses a kiss to my temple. “As much as I’d like to watch Bri come apart on my cock again, I dinnae think that’s really why yer here, Lucian.”

“Fine,” Lucian sighs. “I’m here because they just announced the delightful Blood Rite Ball date and time. Love that they can’t decide on a regular time or date. They just love keeping us all unsteady. Lovely reminder of who holds the leash.”

Conall swears under his breath, then rolls to the side, pulling me up to sit in his lap, the sheets tangled tight around me. I snuggle back into him, loving the affection, loving his possessiveness.

“It’s tonight,” Lucian continues. “And they’ll be announcing the wild card teams.”

“Wild card teams?” I frown. “What does that mean?”

“The Blood Council likes to show strength—”

“Is that the entire point of the ball? To make us all dance on their puppet strings?” Now I know why my wardrobe’s stocked with gowns. So I can be paraded around like their little doll. “Gross.”

“Ye’ve no idea, lass,” Conall says.

“The wild card match is a way for the Council to punish teams or fighters who they think pose any kind of threat to them,” Lucian finally finishes. He raises one dark eyebrow at me, his horns barely visible through his tousled curls. “According to The Dark Five, your expedition to the library has made them very nervous. You’re not a very good snoop, it turns out. Though I thought that was adorable until this very moment, I have a feeling Team Nightworth needs to prepare to fight.”

I press my eyes shut, fear prickling along my spine. Conall squeezes my waist and kisses behind my ear.

“Dinnae fash yerself, bonny Bri. Ye’ve done it once, ye can do it again.”

“I’m not ready and we all know it.”

“You may not be ready, Bri, but you have four monsters who are. Besides, they may not even select us to fight.”

I open one eye. “Do you really think that?”

“Nope,” Lucian says, grinning. “I think we’re going to get our best finery nice and bloody tonight. Don’t worry, I like the sight of a woman in red.” He winks at me, and then, as if he left any doubt in my mind about what he meant, he starts thrusting his hips lasciviously.

“You’re an ass,” I tell him, but he’s so ridiculous that I can’t help snorting.

“Yeah, but I’m the ass that made you laugh, so there’s that.” His smile widens. “Don’t worry, Carrot Cake, we don’t want anyone taking a bite of you but us.”

I scrub a hand down my face, sighing in resignation. “I’m sorry.”

“Dinnae be sorry,” Conall tells me quietly. “Ye wanted to find out who ye are. No one can fault ye for that, lass.”

“If I hadn’t gone to the library, none of this would have happened,” I argue, frustration spilling over. My magic crawls under my skin like a tame pet, wanting to help. “I’ve put us all in danger because I couldn’t help myself. And why? We didn’t even find anything about my father.”

“You aren’t good at being sneaky, I’ll agree,” Lucian leans against the doorway.

“Not helpful, prince,” Conall tells him.

“I wasn’t done.” Lucian rolls his eyes. “As I was *trying* to say, things have been royally fucked at the Blood Rite for centuries. Since it began. Whatever it is they’re hiding about your father, they don’t want you to know it. And *that*—the fact that they’re hiding something about you—is knowledge we didn’t have. I’d consider it a win, even though you’ve kicked the hornets’ nest.”

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to make sense of his convoluted speech. “That’s not making me feel better, seeing as how those hornets want to, ya know, sacrifice us tonight.”

“Hornets sting many, many times,” Lucian continues, unfazed by interruption. “They don’t die after they sting, not like bees. But you kicked their nest, and they’re angry. The secret, though, Bri, is that hornets are like any other insect.” His dark eyes bore into mine, all his quick humor replaced by scorching fury. “They die if you crush them hard enough.”

Right. No rational thought home there.

“The entire Council will be at the ball this eve,” Conall says, his voice rumbling against my back. “Every last one. Ye’ve got them good and riled up, lass. They’ll want to watch ye bleed.”

“That’s not helping,” I say quietly.

“It shouldn’t,” Lucian says. “But you know what will? Having a plan.”

“What kind of plan?” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “What kind of plan can get rid of our bonds? They’re the puppeteers, and they hold the strings.”

“The kind of plan that’s meant to sow enough chaos that makes anything possible.” Lucian’s eyes glow like dark coals in his face. “And lucky for you, for all of us, a demon prince from the hell realm knows exactly how to cause chaos.”

He turns on his heel, and I stare at him for half a second. “Where are you going? Are you going to tell us your plan?”

His hand grips the door frame, dark talons digging into the wood. “And spoil my fun? No, moya morkovka. I’m going to see a man about a dragon.”

The sound of his feet grows fainter, and then a door slams shut.

“A dragon?” I echo, totally confused.

“Feck.” Conall’s breath gusts over the top of my head. “Well, lass, I cannae think of a better way to spend the morning than trying to make ye forget about the future.”

His hand slips down my body, between my legs, and I’m wet immediately.

I try to turn, to kiss him, but he pins me down, looping his legs over mine and spreading me wide. I whimper and he teases my nipple with one hand, my clit with the other.

“I want ye tae think of nothing but this, Bri.”

“Feels so good,” I murmur, rocking into his hand, the pleasant soreness a reminder of last night and all the pleasure he wrung from my body.

A finger enters me and I moan as the thick pad of his thumb rubs my clit. His mouth closes on the curve where my shoulder meets my neck and I buck against him, needing more.

He’s relentless. His hands pin me in place and a light sweat breaks out across my bare skin as my body tries to race towards release.

“Good lass. I want ye tae remember this all day. I want ye tae be ready for me tonight, after we win.”

With that, he removes his hand from my wet pussy and I turn my head in time to watch him lick the glistening evidence from his fingers.

“That’s all ye’ll get for now.” A wicked grin curves his lips, and I groan in dissatisfaction. “That’s how confident I am of tonight,” he continues, his voice low and soothing. “Because if I weren’t, I’d be balls deep in that perfect cunt right now, making ye moan my name.”

I don’t have the mental capacity anymore to form a response to that, so I just stare up at him, wordless and taut, until his lips find mine, soothing the ache and driving my need higher all at once.

It’s going to be a hellishly long day.

But he’s right. He did take my mind off tonight... a little bit, at least.

CHAPTER 40



RED

The Dark Five are in our kitchen. My kitchen. The vicious beast caged within me struggles to get out, marking them as a threat and wanting to respond accordingly. I swallow down the notion that it's more than territorial.

That it's about Bri.

As for the Five, they seem to rotate around their purple-haired female as if she's the sun, exerting a gravitational pull all her own. They constantly glance to her, touching her possessively, and Kera seems to bask in it.

The Dark Five appear happy. Content.

It makes my beast rage, and I don't know why.

"Finally," Kane growls from his seat at the table.

Conall and Bri walk into the kitchen, her small size dwarfed by him. My nostrils flare. She reeks of the frost giant, his minty scent all over her.

My beast screams and I inhale slowly, closing my eyes.

No, I tell it.

I'm on edge, more than usual these days, my control razor-thin. And I refuse to lose control. I refuse to do what Kane has done. I want no part of that. Control is what has kept me alive for years. Control will be what continues to keep me alive, keeps us all alive.

So I breathe through my mouth, blocking out their scent. The proof of their mating is all over them, though, from the soft glances he lavishes on her when he thinks no one is watching to the way she's constantly touching him.

It's an annoyance. Conall will be distracted, Kane will be useless, and Lucian couldn't possibly be worse, so that's a wash. The woman beams up at Conall, and their happiness is a palpable thing.

Makes me fucking sick.

“The book,” Crux says. The de facto leader of The Dark Five is an expert at cursework. He holds the aforementioned book aloft in one hand. “The book is the key.”

“The key to what?” Kane asks, leaning heavily against the table.

“It’s a literal key,” Tracer says. The blond man is their teleporter and an expert swordsman. “To everything. To our freedom.”

“What does that mean?” Conall asks, his thumb brushing against the back of Bri’s hand.

“Within the text of the book itself, there was something else.” Crux sets the book down on the counter, flipping it open. He mumbles something under his breath, a spell of some sort. The magic tingles across my skin.

I lean in closer, blinking rapidly. The letters of the book are rearranging themselves as I watch. The creature coiled inside me rears its head, called by the magic.

“But... how?” Bri asks. “How is it a key? How did... I’ve had that book my whole life.”

I roll my eyes. When I glance back at them, Kane’s staring daggers at me.

I resist rolling my eyes again.

“Because,” Crux says, his brows raised. “You’re an Arbane, right? Your father was an Arbane. Your father was on the Blood Council.”

Bri’s face turns ashen and her mouth parts slightly. “That’s not possible.”

“How can you know that?” My hands flex. “How do you know that, when none of us do?”

“Because Arbane,” Crux pauses, glancing back at Bri, “taught me everything I know about magic.”

Bri sags, slumping into a chair, her face in her hands. Kera, the only woman on The Dark Five, goes to her side, her slim

hand on Bri's shoulder.

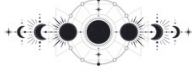
"I don't understand." She shakes her head, staring up at Conall, then Kera, like either of them will have the answers.

The only answer is that we're fucked. Something is wrong, off about her, about all of this.

"Blood Council members don't just disappear to raise a daughter in secret," I rumble. "Even if they wanted to, it should be impossible."

"Your father left a key to the Blood Rite, to the Blood Bond ceremony chamber, we think, in your possession." Kera's vast power unfurls all around her, violet smudging the air. "The question, Gabrielle Arbane, is what the hell did he want you to do with it?"

CHAPTER 41



BRI

My father was a member of the Blood Council.
“It’s not possible,” I whisper.

There are too many people here. It’s too hot. Why is it so hot? I stand on unsteady feet.

Conall grabs my bicep, but I shrug him off.

I need air.

Why didn’t they tell me before? If someone from The Dark Five really knew my father, why didn’t they say something until now? I wouldn’t have drawn attention to myself, hanging out and trying to find things out about my father in the Crimson City library. I wouldn’t have gotten the rest of my team into trouble.

God. They’re going to make us fight tonight. Because of this. Heavy doors close behind me, and I blink at the cloudy sky.

We’re going to die, and it’s my fault.

Cold rain pelts across my face, and my lungs burn.

I’m running, running away from the Nightworth mansion, away from the Crimson City, into the deep woods that surround the compound. My chest heaves, mud splattering against my legs, the leathers stopping the bite of the frigid sludge.

I thought I knew him. I thought I knew my father.

A few years after he... disappeared, I realized he wasn’t a perfect man, or a perfect father. I knew a lot of the things he did in the name of keeping me safe were totally fucked up.

Still, I never would have guessed that the reason he kept me hidden away, that we were both hidden away... was because he was a member of the Blood Council. Rain runs down my face, mingling with salty tears.

He always taught me that the Blood Council was evil. That the Blood Rite and the magical world were dangerous, and full of people who used magic for selfish, awful reasons, gaining power and abusing the weak.

First-hand experience must have formed his opinion.

The top of one of my feet catches on a root and I go down hard. Pain sparks up my wrists as I stop myself on my palms. Mud squishes through my fingers and I punch the ground.

Brilliant. Now my knuckles hurt, too.

“Fuck,” I shout, kicking at the root, sniffing, my shirt plastered to me.

Whimpering, holding my hand to my chest, I curl up in a miserable ball. My ankle aches. I must have sprained it when I went down.

The forest stretches high overhead and I blink against the rain, trying to get my bearings. The silver-white trunks of birches nearly glow under the shadowy red and yellow canopy. A few green holdouts remain, verdant against the autumn colors.

I don't know where I am.

I don't know who I am, either.

CHAPTER 42



KANE

“Where the feck did she go?” Conall shouts, an icy mist rising off him. Veins bulge in his neck, his battle warp threatening to burst out of him in his anxiety.

I know how he feels. Through the mate bond, I can feel her.

“Feck!” Conall yells, and before I can tell him that I’ll be able to find her, that she can’t have gone far because our connection is intact, strong as ever, he storms off through the woods.

I could go after him. My eyes narrow.

Or I could find Bri myself.

Red disappears after Conall, and Lucian glances at me sidelong, rubbing one hand over a horn.

“You’re going to use the mate bond?” he asks casually. “To find her, I mean?”

I raise an eyebrow.

“It’s the obvious thing to do.”

“It’s the least I can do. I forced it on her, I may as well use it to find her now.”

“You could reel her in with it, you know.” The demon’s dark eyes are mere slits in his face as he contemplates me. “You could call down the bond and use compulsion to bring her back.”

I bare my fangs. “I won’t take her will away again,” I say.

“Good.” Lucian puts his hands in his pockets, grinning at me, oblivious to the icy rain falling harder now. “If you did, I’d have to put you back in chains. Do another detox.”

I lash out before I can think better of it, my fist crunching against the side of his face.

He staggers slightly, then spits blood on the ground. It sizzles where it hits, the sulfur creating a pockmark in the stone steps that lead to Nightworth House. The Dark Five slowly trickle from the doors, casting wary glances between the two of us.

“I’ll find her,” I say, talking to all of them, not caring if any of them hear.

Finding her, making sure she’s safe, is the least I can do.

With that, I set off for the woods, following the tug of her tumultuous emotions, her overwhelming sadness and anger.

It cracks my chest wide open to feel it, the depth of her angst. This news about her father, about him being Blood Council, it’s disturbing.

I don’t know what it means for her. I don’t know what it means for all of us.

I have a feeling it isn’t good.

The earth squelches beneath my boots and I pull the hood over my head, a grim expression on my face.

We can figure it out together, as a group.

But we need Bri.

I need her.

CHAPTER 43



BRI

I'm shivering before too long, the rain turning colder by the minute. My teeth clatter together in my mouth, and I know I should get up, I know I should try to go back to the house... but I don't. I just hold myself tighter, the pitter patter of the rain drowned out by the chatter of my teeth.

"Gabrielle," a voice says.

Fear whips through me and I scramble backwards, my feet sticking in the mud. Magic builds inside me, and for a moment, I stick on the thought that I might have been able to summon some kind of creature to keep me warm.

Too late now. Maybe I can just summon something to keep me safe.

"Gabrielle, it's Kane." He appears a second later and I squint at him, sniffing and trying to clench my teeth together to keep them under control.

"W-w-w-w-why d-d-d-did they s-s-s-send you?" It takes me way too long to get the words out.

"Why did you run away?" he responds, giving me a rueful look from beneath his cloak. "It's raining," he adds unnecessarily.

"N-n-n-n-n-no shit."

"You're cold," he observes.

I glare at him. It's the first time I've been alone with him since he... did whatever he did to me.

"And angry," he says softly. In a flash, he unfastens his cloak, tugging it around my shivering body. "I will never forgive myself for what I did to you."

"It's still being done," I manage through clenched teeth. His cloak is blessedly warm, and I tug it around myself.

"I wondered if you felt it too." His voice is barely above a whisper, but is soaked with regret. "The bond, that is."

“Mate b-b-b-b-b-bond,” I echo.

“I’m going to keep you warm now,” Kane says, and before I can so much as blink, he’s tugged me onto his lap. A few low, foreign words, and an iridescent orange bubble blooms all around us.

The rain continues to plod against it, but the interior of the bubble, where Kane has me on his lap? It’s warm.

“What—”

He says something else in a strange tongue and my clothes steam, drying. Surprise cuts off all thoughts, and the sudden lack of discomfort throws his strong arms around me in stark relief.

“I think we should talk,” he mutters, his breath hot against my neck.

Lust surges in me and I push off of him, putting space between us.

“Talk then,” I snap, crossing my arms over my chest. His gaze dips to my breasts, then my lips, my eyes.

My heart speeds up, and not because I’m afraid. I close my eyes, trying to pinpoint what it is I’m feeling.

Anger. At Kane, for what he did. Misery and fear for my father and my team.

And then, racing through it all, a molten river of desire. Turbulent, unchecked, a force of nature.

“Is it real?” I open my eyes, and Kane’s staring at me with a hungry expression. My throat constricts.

“You feel what I feel for you,” he growls. One of his hands twitches, but he doesn’t move any closer, doesn’t move to pull me back to him.

“Good,” I say, but he holds up a hand. I close my mouth. Outside, the rain falls harder still, further erasing the evidence of my footprints... and his. But in here, in the magic bubble with Kane, it’s warm, and dry, and quiet.

“But I also feel what you feel for me.” This time, he closes his eyes, his brow furrowing. “Anger. Resentment. Fear... and yet there’s curiosity there, too. Lust.”

“Liar,” I choke out.

“No, Bri, I am not lying. That’s why it’s so strong right now, the heat between us. I know you feel it, so don’t lie to me. I won’t lie to you.”

“You took from me,” I grit out. “You forced this bond between us.”

“I didn’t force it.” He shakes his handsome head, dark eyes mournful. “It was already there. I only acted on it. I only acted as my nature demanded.” A slow smile spreads across his lips, and his fangs catch the bubble’s orange hue. “You are mine, mine forever, Gabrielle Arbane. I know you care for Conall... but I also know you liked when I watched him fuck you.”

I go still, a deer caught in a trap.

I hate that he’s right.

I hate that right now, the mere mention of last night sends an aching desire deep into my core.

Kane’s nostrils flare. His smile turns satisfied, predatory.

I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of a response, so I simply lift my chin and look down my nose at him.

“What I did was wrong, Bri,” he continues, gaze smoldering, heat blossoming wherever it lands on my skin. “I was wrong to have exchanged blood with you without fully explaining what it meant. I was wrong to have lost control and taken you away from the rest of our team. I was wrong to have done those things. But there was no magic compulsion. I wasn’t going to hurt you. I know the others made you think I was high on bloodlust, but that wasn’t the case. I was high on you. My mate.”

My lower body clenches at the word, and I ball my hands into fists.

What the hell am I supposed to do with this information?

And yet, I can feel the truth in his words. I can feel it humming to me down the mate bond, the one I never wanted. It makes me even hotter for him because I know it's true.

I want him even now, even though I've seen first-hand what he's capable of.

"Conall," I say, his name sticking in my throat. "I care about Conall."

"I do too," Kane says. Slowly, so slowly, he reaches out a hand, his gaze never leaving mine. My breath comes in fast spurts, and then his fingers curl around my thigh. "You might be my mate, but I know I'm not yours. Your kind doesn't have that same compulsion. If you want Conall..." he pauses, and a low growl dies in his throat. "If you want him too, I want you to be happy. I can feel your happiness. I could feel it when you came beneath his body."

"Kane," I choke out. I put a hand on my cheek, and it's exactly as hot as it seemed to feel.

"I would share you with him, if that's what will bring you pleasure, Bri. I want you to be happy. I do not seek to control you, or to make you upset. I do not want you to fear me," he stumbles over the words, and the sincerity of them pours through the strange emotional channel between us, taking my breath away.

"We should go," I finally manage.

For half a second, his fingers tighten on my thigh, and then he lets go.

Quiet desperation hangs around him.

"I'm not... I'm not ready to think about... that." I make myself say it. I can't just leave him thinking I hate him. "I care about Conall, and clearly," I gesture between us, "we have something, too. I need time, though." I rake my hands through my hair, and even though I'm grateful it's dry, it feels ridiculously frizzy. "I don't want you to be unhappy," I add.

A relieved pleasure courses through me, and it's so weird to know it's coming from him.

“Can we... turn that off?” I ask, wrinkling my nose. “The emotions?”

He shakes his head. “No. If it makes you feel better, you’ll only feel the strongest ones, since you’re a human.” He blinks after the word, and then he slants his head, his eyes narrowing as he studies me.

It’s not the same heated look he’s been giving me, but a shrewd one, and I still.

“What?”

“Are you, though?” he asks.

Perplexed, I simply stare at him.

He shakes his head, then grins at me, his dimples making an appearance. “I’m inordinately pleased that you’re considering what I’ve told you.”

“Well,” I shrug. I don’t seem to have much choice, but if I’m going to be mated to a primal vampire, Kane’s not bad looking. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Besides, he’s right. He does it for me, and has since I first saw him. “I’m not ready to forgive you,” I blurt out.

“I understand.” He dips his chin, then stands gracefully. “Come on,” he takes my hand, threading his fingers through mine.

The contact is both guileless and electric, and I suck in a breath as fresh lust sings through me, pulling my body taut.

A moment later, a roar rips through the forest. “Briiii!”

“Is that...?” I ask, and Kane nods.

“Conall is half out of his mind with worry for you,” he says. “We should find him.”

We don’t have to find him, though. Leaves fall from the trees around us, the ground shaking underfoot as Conall appears, nearly as tall as the trees all around us.

“Bri,” he says, his huge giant form starting to fade as he locks eyes with me.

He staggers, then falls to his knees, shrinking back to his normal size. I run to him, through Kane's dry bubble, and take his head in my hands, pulling him down for a rain-soaked kiss.

"I'm here. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run."

"Yer here," he repeats, his hands fanning across the small of my back. "Feck, Bri, I was so damned worried about ye."

"I'm sorry," I repeat, kissing him again, then pulling back and staring into his blue, blue eyes. "I was overwhelmed. It was too much. I'm sorry."

His lips crash against mine and he tucks me close to his body. Standing up, he kisses me thoroughly, holding me like I'm precious, like I mean everything to him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kane dip his chin, and Conall returns the gesture.

We haven't made it too far when Red and Lucian find the three of us, Red looking incredibly irritated and Lucian grinning as always.

"Well, look what the wet cat dragged in," Lucian says.

"Sorry," I tell them all. It comes out small and defeated, and I make myself repeat it. "I'm sorry, it was stupid to run away."

"It was beyond idiotic," Red agrees, snarling. "Especially considering there was another murder."

"What?" Conall asks, his grip tightening on me, as though the murderer is lurking behind a tree, waiting for the half frost giant to let down his guard. "How?"

"After you stormed off, Tracer caught up with us. Said Slade is dead. Heaven's Leech is down to four."

"No... that's impossible." I blink, surprise running through me. "But I thought he—"

"We all hoped he was the one behind it," Lucian finishes for me.

"We've got bigger problems than Heaven's Leech," Red says. "There's someone out there actively trying to throw the

Rite. I was right all along.”

“Do you want an award?” Lucian asks. Red glares at him.

Conall presses a kiss to my temple, and I half-close my eyes, feeling safe despite everything Red’s saying.

“Come, lass, let’s get ye ready for their feckin’ ball. We have enough to worry about. Let’s get through tonight, then we’ll deal with the rest. We will figure it out together. Everything. Yer father, the murders, the Rite...”

“If we get through tonight,” Lucian remarks in a sing-song voice.

Red growls at him, and Kane’s lip pulls back from his teeth, showing fang.

As for me, I snuggle close to Conall, emotionally spent from crying and physically spent from the cold, and I relax into his strong body. His hands feel so good on me, and I savor every sweet touch.

“I won’t run from you again,” I say impulsively. “I’m sorry.”

He bends, touching his forehead to mine.

“M’eudail, my darling, dinnae apologize for the strength of your emotions. It’s one of the many things I love about ye,” he says.

I blink up at him, rain spattering against my head.

“Dinnae look so surprised. I’d have to be half dead to not be in love with ye.”

“I—”

He cuts off whatever I was about to say with a searing kiss. “What ye are, lass, is in need of rest. So rest now, and when ye wake, we’ll strap on yer finest gown like armor.”

It’s easy to relax against him. His heart thuds against his chest, and for all his frost magic, he’s warm right now, though that may be Kane’s powers, too.

He loves me.

The thought pushes everything else out of my head, and I doze against his chest, comforted by it.

CHAPTER 44



RED

I smell the intruder as soon as I walk through the doors of my home. The doors to Nightworth House close quietly behind me, and I'm on high alert. Lucian's murmuring under his breath, so I know he feels whoever is here, too.

The small woman seems half-asleep against Conall's chest, and I'm not sure the frost giant has enough wits left about him to know something is wrong.

The monster inside me rakes talons across the cage I have him in, ready to be let out. I grit my teeth, forcing the beast into submission. *Now's not the time.*

I need him to be ready for whatever the Blood Council throws at us tonight at their stupid fucking party.

Whoever's in Nightworth House won't be as much of a problem as whichever trained team of killers the Blood Council puts us up against tonight. There's no doubt in my mind that we'll be one of the so-called wild card picks.

They're trying to hide something, and there's no doubt in my mind it's connected to our Bri.

"We have a problem," Kane says in a low voice.

"Just now realizing that?" I raise an eyebrow. "You're out of touch in your old age."

Kane turns to me, his eyes full black.

I grin at him. It's all too easy get a rise out of him these days.

Lucian huffs a laugh too, power from whatever spell he set up pushing through the house. I roll my head on my shoulders, the hairs on my neck standing up as the magic charge rolls over me.

Seconds tick by, and now Conall's onto the fact that something's wrong, too. Cold air rises from him in misty clouds.

A crash sounds from one of the upstairs rooms.

Bri jerks awake, making a noise like a startled cat.

A human voice yells something incoherent, the words muffled by distance, or the spell, or both. Based on the feel of the magic, whatever Lucian unleashed was a nasty bit of work.

Good for him.

Kane positions himself in front of Bri and Conall, clearly prepared to defend the woman in case whoever's lurking around our house is able to break free of Lucian's magic.

Unlikely, if I know the demon prince.

Lucian grunts, stretching his hands out in front of him, then balling them into fists. Pure power sloughs from him, and a glowing orange rope winks into life. One strong yank and there's another crash, along with what sounds like a curse.

"What is that?" Bri asks. Her own magic answers the call, pulsing white and iridescent along her skin. I'll never get used to the way her magic makes her glow.

It's incredible.

"Someone's here," Conall answers. "Someone who shouldn't be. Lucian's dragging them down here—"

His words cut off as answering magic ripples through the house. A frame falls from one of the bookcases, glass splintering along the ground.

Lucian shoves more power into his spell, the demon shining red now.

The beast inside me beckons, growing stronger in response to the power thrown around the room. A book careens from a shelf, lying open where it lands.

"Who is it? Who's here?" Bri pushes against Conall, and her strange-smelling magic tickles my nose as he sets her down.

A hooded figure tumbles down the hall. Lucian gives his spell another massive tug, sending the man flying through the air, suspending the intruder in front of us.

The demon's breathing hard, though, the toll of holding the mage clearly more than he bargained for.

I bare my teeth, ready to jump in if the situation calls for it. Talons threaten to slice through my fingernails.

Nearly immediately, Kane springs into action, jerking the stranger's hood off. The silver-haired man he reveals is unremarkable looking, though somehow familiar. I'm trying to put my finger on how I know him, where I know him from, when Bri makes a strangled noise.

She takes a few steps forward and Conall grabs her shoulder to keep her from moving any closer to the mage.

She utters a word that changes everything.

"Dad?"



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