



IMMORTAL VICES  
AND VIRTUES

# SLAY ME

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
JESSICA WAYNE

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# CONTENTS

1. [Liv](#)
2. [Liv](#)
3. [Liv](#)
4. [Liv](#)
5. [Dante](#)
6. [Liv](#)
7. [Dante](#)
8. [Liv](#)
9. [Liv](#)
10. [Liv](#)
11. [Liv](#)
12. [Dante](#)
13. [Liv](#)
14. [Dante](#)
15. [Liv](#)
16. [Dante](#)
17. [Liv](#)
18. [Dante](#)
19. [Liv](#)
20. [Liv](#)
21. [Liv](#)
22. [Liv](#)
23. [Dante](#)
24. [Dante](#)
25. [Liv](#)
26. [Dante](#)
27. [Liv](#)
28. [Dante](#)
29. [Liv](#)
30. [Liv](#)

[Also By Jessica Wayne](#)

[About Jessica Wayne](#)



# **B.A.D.** PUBLISHING

**SLAY ME**

An Immortal Vices and Virtues World Novel

By Jessica Wayne

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# BLURB

**In No Man's Circus, the Ringmaster controls everything—even me.**

Every evening, I'm forced to perform. High above a crowd of supernaturals, I fly on my lyra. Never high enough to escape my captor.

And when the lights go down and the audience goes home, it's just him and me.

I shouldn't enjoy it.

This obsession he has with me.

But as a hybrid in a world where power is king, I'm nothing special.

Except when his eyes are on my body.

He's a beast whose strength is unparalleled, a creature who demands my obedience, but even as the twisted parts of me are drawn to him, I refuse to be broken.

He'll have to kill me first.

*To all those willing to step outside the norm. Welcome to the  
Circus.*



## CHAPTER I

## IIV

A bright spotlight shines down upon me, following my every step as I make my way into the center of the ring.

The mat is soft beneath my bare feet, though the metal plates of my costume jingle as I move, a soft wind-chime-like noise that lulls the silent crowd filling the stands.

They're here to watch us perform. To feel something. Which is ironic given that the majority of us here at No Man's Circus no longer possess the emotional capacity required to feel anything more than hatred for the Ringmaster.

My gaze drifts across the space to a man wearing a red coat and black top hat. He stands at the edge of the ring, copper eyes on me. He's always watching. Staring. The others believe he waits for us to make a mistake so he can punish us.

I think it's more than that. What? I'm not sure. I've spent the last twelve years trying to figure it out because I'm certainly not stupid enough to ask. Not even when we're alone. Knowing he's an unnecessary distraction, I turn my attention back to my performance.

Screwing up is not an option at No Man's Circus because our leader has killed for far less.

My hand closes on the steel ring suspended above me. I move in a circle, taking calculated steps as I await the music. One beat. Two. And then—the melody starts off like a lullaby, building just like a budding romance, so I slowly spin myself, taking the ring with me.

Still clinging to it, I'm lifted slowly until I'm suspended well above the ground. Up here, I lose myself in the sound, in the performance, because I can pretend that my world is far more than the gilded cage that is my reality.

I lift a leg and loop it through the lyra then pull myself up. With one leg dangling through the air, I continue to spin, arching my back to show off the skin revealed by a costume that portrays me as a goddess of war.

Of heartbreak.

Fitting, I suppose, given my past. Honestly, sometimes I wonder if the Ringmaster knows more about me than he lets on.

Magic sizzles along my skin, a dance of sparks thanks to the witch standing on a balcony hidden beneath the lights. Below, the crowd gasps and claps in delight while I continue to dance. They're watching, but all I can feel are *his* eyes on me.

Eyes that I long to look into even as self-preservation tells me it's a horrible idea.

I drop down, letting one leg remain through the hoop, one hand on it. The lyra spins to the beat of the music, thanks to what little magic I do have. The breeze created by my power gently pushes strands of my near-white hair from my face.

As the tempo increases, so do my moves. Faster, faster, more erratic. If I had any feeling at all, I would ache for the woman in the song. A woman who lost everything because she chose to love the wrong man.

Right on cue, I release the ring.

And plummet.

The crowd gasps. Someone cries out below. But I'm not worried.

One more heartbeat and the firm body of my partner is beneath me. The gryffin's feathers are soft beneath the flesh left exposed by my costume as I remain draped over his back, playing the part of a damsel. The crowd cheers as he brings me

to the ground and lands before taking off again, disappearing into the shadows.

I wait, lying on the ground. My breathing is shallow, the entire ring suspended in complete silence as I lie. Even with my eyes closed, I can sense the Ringmaster. It makes no sense, of course. Although, seeing as how I have a penchant for attracting danger, I've come to consider it an additional sense. Some have great hearing, some sight. I *know* when someone possesses the ability to break me.

My heart pounds as a man kneels beside me. Even though I'm unable to see him, I know it's my gryffin—now shifted into the handsome man he is—pulling my limp body into his arms.

The music continues to play, building a faster beat as he strokes the side of my face. I open my eyes and look up into his yellow gaze.

Our performance is one of love. Of passion. And it's those emotions we try to elicit from our viewers. Something we're damn good at even if the very idea of a man putting his hands on me is something I can only tolerate while in this ring.

Golden hair falls to Apollo's broad shoulders. His muscled arms gather me closer, and he holds me against his strong chest for a brief moment. Then, the lyra is lowered again, and he reaches up to grab it. I wrap my arms around him, and he pulls me to my feet as the lyra is lifted.

He releases it, massive hands going to my hips as he presses my back to his front. I loop an arm around his neck, and we sway softly as the tempo slows once more.

The movements are all second nature to me now. But I still focus, unwilling to give a subpar performance because this is my freedom. Here, in this ring, I feel special in a world that has deemed me ordinary.

His hands drop, and I pull away, spinning around behind him until I'm right beside the lyra. I climb in, sitting on the steel like a swing, and my partner grips it with his hands as it flies into the air, disappearing from view.

The crowd's cheers are almost deafening as the lyra is moved toward the balcony where the witch waits for us.

"Great show, guys," Uma greets. Her black hair is in a braided crown above her head, the black cloak she wears adorned with shimmery stars and moons. She's as kind as she is gorgeous and is one of the few people here I trust to not stab me in the back.

I pull down the half-skull mask I wear over my nose and mouth to take a deep, uninhibited breath. "Thanks."

"You are always magnificent, Liv," Apollo offers. His charming smile would have been disarming if I weren't distrusting of anyone with a pulse. His tanned skin is stretched taut over solid muscle, making him a delectable sight to behold, nonetheless. A true hero in the eyes of all who see him.

All but me. Because I don't believe in heroes. Villains? Abso-fucking-lutely. They're all I believe in.

"You, too." I clap my hands together. "I am desperate for a drink."

Uma moves out of the way, remaining where she is to help with the next show. Apollo, however, follows me down the metal balcony and toward stairs leading to the performer-only section of the tent.

Bright lights shine above as everyone hustles around. Some prepare for their upcoming shows. Others are putting items away and getting ready for the final bow. The moment I think it, my stomach churns. It's the closest I ever am to the Ringmaster.

Even in private, he keeps his distance. Only watching me from his desk.

"Water?" Apollo hands me a cup.

I take it with a smile then drink the cool liquid. But as usual, it doesn't touch the heat burning inside of me. His hand goes to my lower back, and I inwardly cringe as I allow him to guide me over to a rundown couch in the corner. I don't mind

being touched during our performance, but here in private, it feels more intimate.

Personal.

Using a drink to mask my hesitation, I let him take his seat first before joining him. Otherwise, he'll end up so close our thighs will be brushing. And, well, I have no intention of allowing him to think there is ever a chance of us engaging in anything more than what happens in that ring.

Still, he slings an arm over the back of the couch, the tips of his fingers grazing my bare shoulder. I fight a shiver, not wanting to cause conflict with the creature I hope will one day fly me the hell out of this place for good. Leaving without help—that's just not going to happen. Even if I escape the Ringmaster, Ernesto's men are still looking for me. Waiting for any opportunity to grab me. This time for good.

So, I play nice. Biding my time until I trust him enough to ask him to flee. Asking him sooner than that will be a death sentence.

“Felt good to be out there today. Even after what happened with Pima.”

I grunt in agreement, the images of our murdered friend too much to deal with. Not that he's the first who's tried to run. It's always the same outcome. The Ringmaster's security detail drags them back in, and the three lion shifters make an example out of the one who attempted to run.

You get no second chances. No do-overs. One weak moment and you pay for it with your life. After all, that is what we signed over when the Ringmaster brought us in. At least, those of us who were lucky enough to have even half a choice.

Apollo was sold to the Ringmaster by his old house leader. While I never met Mathis, the gryffin has told us all plenty about the shifter who ran Fire and Fluorite. How his selfishness was only outweighed by his brutality.

Once word of his death reached us here, I'm fairly certain Apollo expected someone to show up and barter for his

release. When that day didn't come, he grew more agitated until two months ago when a fight with the Ringmaster nearly led to his death.

He'd been barely breathing by the time I found him.

Would have been dead had I not.

All because he questioned the Ringmaster.

"I'd get your arm away from the favored pet," Valentina all but sings. Her sparkly pink wings flutter quickly behind her as she floats above the floor. The pixie despises me, something she has never tried to hide. She's been here longer than me and, from what I understand, was in the process of seeking favor with the Ringmaster so she could buy her freedom back with the one thing she has to offer: her body.

When I was brought in, though, that changed. The private performances began, and the pixie was pushed aside. Honestly, I'm fairly certain she spent the first year I was here trying to kill me. After all, one can only have their lyra fall from its suspensions so many times in the first week before suspicions are raised.

"Shut the fuck up, Val," Apollo snaps back at her.

"Fuck off," she replies, sticking her middle finger up in the air.

"Is that an invitation?" he asks. "Because I have to warn you, my beast does not take kindly to prissy bitches. I'll fucking ruin you."

"Funny since you are one," she replies sweetly.

Shaking my head, I tune them out and close my eyes. The constant bickering is too much to deal with, especially when I know there is so much worse out there. Creatures far more terrifying than the man who runs this twisted-ass circus.

"Get your thong out of your ass crack, Val."

I open my eyes as Fiona drops onto the chair across from me. Her ice blue eyes level on the pixie. White hair braided away from her face, she looks nothing like the savage I know

she is. One of the only known female berserkers, she's rare. Important. And a hell of a lot stronger than anyone here.

Well, almost anyone. The Ringmaster takes the cake on that one. None of us knows how she actually came to belong to him, and it's not a story she will tell. My guess is it's similar to mine. She was cast out for being different.

"Stay the hell out of it, animal," Valentina quips.

Fiona grins at her. "Keep pushing on me, and I'll rip your wings off."

The pixie rolls her eyes but glides away quickly. *Smart move.*

"Great show tonight." Fiona pulls a blade off of her hip and begins to cut slices from a green apple. She pops them into her mouth and chews, the crunching sound making my stomach rumble. When was the last time I ate?

I'm fairly certain I had breakfast. But not lunch, right?

"Incoming," Fiona whispers as heavy footsteps echo in my mind.

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, and a shiver runs up my spine, ghostly fingertips that elicit far more heat within me than there should be.

Unwanted as it is, I've still come to expect this response to the man who pulled me from that alley a dozen years ago. The Ringmaster makes his way into the room, commanding a presence without ordering one. His copper eyes find me almost instantly, and a low growl leaves his lips. "I hate to interrupt your nap," he growls. "But your job is not over."

"We're just catching our breath before the final performance," Apollo replies.

The Ringmaster takes a step closer, and I sit up, fear spurring my movements. "We were just getting up to prepare," I say quickly. His gaze rakes over my body as it does every time we're in the same room. His appraisal makes my blood run cold, my chest constrict.



“Then get the fuck on,” he snaps before turning and heading for the curtain again.

Fiona lets out a breath. “You’re going to get your nuts cut off, Apollo.”

“He can try,” my partner replies. The bravado is false. Apollo knows our owner will not hesitate to kill him. We’re disposable to the Ringmaster, each and every one of us merely toys in his game. Performers in his circus.

And if my time here has taught me anything, it’s that there is no shortage in supernaturals needing a place to go.

“Let’s get this over with.” Apollo stands and presses his hand to my lower back. The contact is innocent, but I move away from him quickly. It took me a year before I could perform with anyone without vomiting. It hurts— to know that I will likely never get to experience physical intimacy again.

Ernesto saw to that when he broke me. Something I will not allow to happen again.

Mind on the performance ahead, I make my way up the stairs and through the curtain. The lights are bright as they shine down at Thomas and Jenny. Thomas, a wolf shifter, chases Jenny, a kitsune, around the ring. She manages to sneak past him then proceeds to leap from button to button, sending an array of glitter shooting at him until he stands before her, covered head to toe in bright red.

The crowd erupts with laughter.

We continue ascending the metal stairs until we reach the top where Uma offers a wave and smile. Once I reach the edge of the railing where my lyra awaits, tied to a pole, I look down to watch the remainder of the ‘cat and mouse’ type performance.

Jenny and Thomas jump down behind boxes. When they emerge again, they’re both wearing bright red jumpsuits. With a bow, they flip back behind the boxes and disappear through a trapdoor shielded behind them.

The big top is plunged into darkness save a handful of dim lights aimed at the ceiling.

I grip my lyra.

“Good luck, partner. I’ll be right behind you.” Apollo winks and then waits for me to climb inside. I sit on it as though it’s a chair, and he releases me.

*Time to shine.*



THE END of our show passes quickly, and soon, I’m moving as fast as I can toward the exit. People are chatting as they leave the stands, though their words all blur together as background noise.

Until— “Liv!”

I stiffen at an unfamiliar female voice calling my name. Slowly, I turn, fear crashing down on me. The only people who would know my name are those who knew me through him. My past, my monster, my nightmare.

The woman positions herself in the stands just beside my exit. Her hair is long, the dark brown strands loose around her face. She wears all black—jeans, T-shirt, and even a black lace choker adorns her neck.

A tall, raven-haired man looms behind her, his slate-gray eyes not missing anything as he guards her.

The woman opens her hand, and a copper penny dangles from a chain she holds.

My heart stops, emotion churning in my gut. I thought I’d lost it that day in the alley. That I’d never see the trinket again. I glance over at the Ringmaster, who is watching me intently. With his eyes on me, I’m confident enough to cross the distance and stop just on this side of the barrier separating us from them.

“Where did you find that?” I question, eyeing the necklace in her hand.

She gives me a mysterious smile. “It belongs to you, does it not?”

Her voice is soft, but the power radiating from her tingles across my skin, making me even more wary. Someone with this much power should be off leading a House, not here in No Man’s Land.

Her focus shifts to the Ringmaster. “Just as you currently belong to him.”

The man at her side is now focused purely on the Ringmaster, but I don’t miss the way his hand hovers beside the woman’s arm as if he’d step between her and danger in a heartbeat. What love must one feel to be willing to trade their life for someone else’s?

The Ringmaster’s glare hardens, his face morphing to an expression just short of deadly. I know that wrapping this conversation up quickly is in my best interest, but I cannot even begin to fathom how she came across my necklace, nor how she knew it was mine. And I am desperate to know the answers to both of those questions.

I turn back to find her leaning toward me, her eyes boring into me, the power I feel around her only growing stronger. “Don’t be afraid,” she says, her voice even softer as she holds the necklace out to me. “Take back what you lost.”

The weight of her words settles on my shoulders as though she’s telling me to take back more than just the necklace. But I shake off the thought. Nothing more belongs to me. My freedom is gone, my life owned. This heirloom is all I have to take. To possess.

Reaching out, I close my hand around the penny.

She releases it, a smile touching her lips as she gently exhales, and I’m surprised to realize she was holding her breath. Then, she glances up at the man beside her, the trust in her eyes far too pure to belong in a place like No Man’s Land.

The pair quickly turns away, heading into the crowd. Within seconds, they'll disappear, so I take a chance to call out softly, uncertain if she'll hear me. "Who are you?"

The woman pauses. She glances back across her shoulder. "I'm Emmaline."

With one final smile, she and the man with her disappear into the crowd. I stare down at the penny in my hand, joy surging through me.

"Who was that?"

I stiffen, the Ringmaster's presence behind me both unwelcome and secure. I'm at war with myself when I'm around him. A battle raging within my mind, knowing I should be terrified of him even if my body is more than willing to trust him with the last remaining pieces of my soul.

## CHAPTER 2

## IIV

“I think you might have actually gotten some of my hair,” Jenny complains as she plops down in the chair beside Thomas. She sets her plate down and groans. The bright orange strands are braided down her back, her almond-shaped eyes narrowing as she pouts. Though it doesn’t last long. The moment Thomas looks at her, she lights up, her pout turning into a smile.

“I’m sorry, love,” Thomas replies then presses a kiss to her temple. He’s basically the exact opposite of her—his hair a dark black, eyes bright yellow. “It’s not my fault your ass is delectable even in animal form.”

“First of all, ewww.” Fiona shivers. “Second, you two are so adorable it makes me sick.”

“Isn’t that just a repeat of your earlier declaration?”

Fiona glares over at Harriss, a djinn sitting at the table beside us. His bald head shines beneath the bright lights, and the look he gives the berserker is so heated I’m surprised it doesn’t melt the table between them.

“How about you mind your business?” she snaps.

Harriss rolls his pale eyes. “You are so predictable.”

She flings her dagger, and it buries into the table right by his hand. “See that coming?”

Wordlessly, he plucks it from the wood and tosses it back onto our table. “I don’t have to see it to know how you’re going to respond.”

When he first arrived, I'd been surprised to see the two of them hitting it off. Especially given Fiona's dislike of—well—anyone but me. They'd become a thing pretty quickly, but then that thing turned into her chasing a naked Harriss through the third floor of our apartment building after catching him in bed with Valentina.

He swears that he doesn't recall anything happening, but Fiona is not one to get burned again. And honestly? Had Apollo not stepped in and broken up the fight, Fi would have caught the Djinn and cut his dick off. Of that, I'm damn near certain.

Jenny leans into Thomas, and he wraps an arm around her shoulders. "I am so exhausted," she says softly. "Not that I don't enjoy you chasing me around, but I am really looking forward to the day we can leave this place behind us."

"Same," he replies.

They've been adorably inseparable for the better part of eight years. Something they play into during their performance. And it works; the crowds absolutely eat them up. They get to work together and then spend their nights much in the same way, though I'm more than certain Jenny doesn't make Thomas work too hard to catch her when behind closed doors.

Not that we hear anything, thanks to the wards that make our otherwise paper-thin walls soundproof. Honestly, as twisted as it is, I almost wish I could hear something. It's been far too long since I've enjoyed—and been enjoyed—that way.

Shifting in my seat, I clear my throat. "What are you going to do?" I ask, wanting to forget the fact that I haven't been touched by a man—in all the ways that count, at least—in nearly thirteen years.

"Find a house that'll take us," Jenny replies. "Then have kids. Lots of kids."

"Three, tops," Thomas replies.

She smacks him lightly on the chest. "Six."

"Five," he retorts.

She beams at him in a way that makes me feel like an intruder even though I'm the one who asked the question in the first place. "We'll talk about it later," she replies. "I think I can be rather persuasive."

I smile absently, not offering the fact that I haven't made any plans past an actual escape. Something I plan to do well before my time runs out. I've no doubt Ernesto knows the exact moment my contract will expire. And when it does, he'll come for me, and there will be no Ringmaster to stand in his way.

Even though I've been here for over a decade, I've caught his henchmen in the crowd. They show up here and there, recognizable faces to remind me that I won't be protected forever.

Honestly, it's one of the main reasons I don't argue with the Ringmaster when he requests private performances. Remaining in his good graces is what keeps me here. What keeps me alive. Until the day I can convince Apollo to escape with me.

Gaining his trust is key. As a gryffin, he's one of the more powerful creatures here. And, given the nature of his kind, he's highly protective of those he considers 'his'. While I can't bring myself to trade my body for protection, I've done all I can to cultivate a friendship that demands loyalty. Even when there's something about him that has never quite sat right with me.

"Who's up for drinks tonight?" Apollo asks. "Figured we could hit up The Salty Siren. Get some drinks, move our bodies a bit."

No one bothers looking at me because they already know my answer. There's no way in hell I will leave this circus. Even if I could blow off my late-night performance, doing so would put me in danger of being caught outside the security of this place. For whatever reason, Ernesto respects the Ringmaster enough not to challenge him. And I'm sure as hell not going to do anything that will land me back in stone.



Never again. “You guys have fun.” I smile and stand. Apollo’s hand wraps around my wrist, and I stare down at it for a moment before turning my attention to him.

“You don’t have to do this,” he says. “Come with us tonight. I’ll keep you safe, Liv. You know that.”

“I have a job to do,” I say softly. “But I appreciate the invitation.”

“Liv, come on. Confront him. Tell him you want to stop these outrageous solo acts. You work hard enough as it is. You’re the only one here expected to perform *after* the main performance.”

I swallow hard, hating the way his hand feels wrapped around my wrist. “Please let me go. We all have our parts to play, Apollo, and this is one of mine.”

He holds onto me a moment longer then releases my wrist. “Let me know if you change your mind. I’m always here for you.”

I know better than to trust him. After all, misplaced loyalty is what landed me here in the first place, but I force a soft smile anyway. Have to keep up pretenses if I ever hope to convince him I’m worth risking his life over. “I appreciate that, Apollo. But I promise I’m fine.”

“Yeah, he’s not going to hurt her. The master wouldn’t want to injure his favorite pet.”

I glare at Valentina. “Jealous much?”

“Of you?” The pixie snorts, her blonde hair swinging as she shakes her head. “Hardly. Difficult to be jealous of someone so ordinary.”

Her words sting. But there’s no way in hell I’ll let her see it. “The Ringmaster doesn’t seem to think I’m ordinary, now, does he?” I turn away quickly and move toward the door, doing all I can not to let her words sink in. Unfortunately, they ring all too real for me. Being practically powerless in a world full of powerful creatures is a massive hit to the ego. Especially when my parents were something of legends back in our home world.

A harpy and a fae who were more than a little disappointed when they discovered their only daughter's abilities didn't exceed conjuring a small breeze. When my grandmother died, they left me to follow her into the afterlife by abandoning me in No Man's Land as a teenager. They'd basically signed my death warrant that day, leaving me to the wolves without so much as a glance back.

My memory drifts to the necklace tucked safely beneath my mattress. It's all I have left of my grandmother, a token that she made when we first came to this world. She'd died mere days after giving it to me. It was the only personal belonging I had with me aside from the clothes on my back, and it was the only thing I managed to take with me when I escaped Ernesto.

I trusted him with all I had. I'd given him my mind, soul, my body, and my heart. I shiver. Never again will I make the mistake of believing anyone besides myself has my best interests in mind.

With nerves in my belly and anger in my heart, I make my way out of the communal room and up the stairs of our grungy apartment building. The performance tent sits in the very center of the courtyard with the old buildings surrounding it. Granted, most of the structure is in ruins.

When Portland fell fifty years ago, most of the humans who'd lived here were killed. That or they abandoned the city for safer pastures. Most of the world has been divided between the Houses—governing bodies of supernaturals—but No Man's Land remains neutral due to its close proximity to one of the portals linking it to the world of Arcadia.

Which is where I *should* have run. Despite the rumors that those who enter that particular portal never return.

The chipped paint of my red door bares some of the light wood beneath it, but I ignore it as I push the door open and shut it behind me. Then, I flip the lock and move inside. My space isn't much: a bed just big enough for me, a single dresser, a small kitchenette with appliances that have long

passed their working dates—but it's home. And the only one I've really ever known.

I cross the room toward my dresser.

Stopping in front of the mirror, I run my fingers through my braided hair, releasing the pale strands so they're loose around my face. Then, I check my armored bodysuit and remove the face mask dangling around my neck. His space is the only place I'm allowed to perform without it.

A dark part of me, a voice I choose to ignore, yearns to believe the nightly performance is far more personal.

More intimate. Which is what it feels like when I'm moving for him. I pout my lips and slide on bright red lipstick. Then, I add more mascara to my eyelashes. After that, I strip out of my bodysuit and hang it up before pulling out a brand-new outfit.

I stare down at the fabric, a smile playing at the ends of my lips. This is its debut. And even as I shouldn't care, I cannot wait to see his face. I step into the red bodysuit and slide it up over my hips before slipping my arms into the thin straps. The deep V plunges all the way down to my belly button, revealing a hell of a lot more skin than I'm used to.

But this is what my nights have turned into, attempting to elicit any type of attention from a man who otherwise appears to only have one mood: pissed off.

Once I'm dressed, I study the outfit in the mirror. The crimson fabric is adorned with small golden ruffles over each of the leg holes and golden swirls that took for-fucking-ever to sew. It's been a labor of obsession and one that took me far longer than I care to admit.

As soon as I'm sure I look like something straight out of a fantasy, I head out into the hall and make my way toward the stairs. The Ringmaster resides on the top floor—the penthouse as it's called. His entire place is warded with powerful magic, making it impossible for anyone not approved to enter.

In fact, on the first of our performances, he'd sliced open the vein on my wrist and had a witch I've never seen again add

my blood to the wards, making me one of three others allowed to venture inside his private space.

I raise my fist and knock twice then wait.

It's less than two heartbeats before he's pulling the door open. Dressed in his black pants, knee-high boots, and a white t-shirt, he's ridiculously handsome. A man who is just as gorgeous as he is monstrous. A walking contradiction.

"Ringmaster," I greet, bowing my head. Referring to him as such had once seemed so ridiculous. But now, twelve years later, it's habit. Not a single soul in this circus knows what his true name is. Honestly, I'd be surprised if it were anything but what he demands we call him. His entire life, his persona, revolves around his role here.

"What the fuck is that?" he demands, gesturing to what I'm wearing.

"A new costume I made. What do you think?" I step into the room and turn to face him as he shuts the door.

His throat bobs as he swallows, letting his gaze drift down over my body. It lingers on the glitter-covered flesh between my breasts, which is now shimmering beneath the bright lights of his apartment. "That is not what you are supposed to wear in the ring."

"We're not in the ring," I remind him.

He takes a step closer, staring down at me with emotion I cannot quite recognize. Anger? Lust? It's clear he enjoys looking at me. Otherwise, why would I be here? "You think to argue with me?"

"It's not an argument," I reply. "Because it's the truth." I'm rarely this brazen, but the more time I spend in his presence, the more I long for some type of interaction that pushes past the anger he wears almost constantly. Surely there is more to him.

And even though I have no intention of sticking around, I want to know who the Ringmaster truly is. If only to know what to expect should I get the opportunity to escape.

I move out of the foyer and step into the first room, which consists of a plush couch, a wall of bookshelves boasting various titles, and a massive cherrywood desk in the far corner. That's where he heads now, toward a record player in the corner.

Releasing it, I guide the hoop to the center of the ring and face him again. With his attention on the record player, I do what I always do and study his features. His dark hair is longer on top of his head, though he wears it slicked back. His jaw is sharp and clean-shaven, his copper gaze focused as he places the needle atop the disc.

When he turns to face me, my body reacts. Breath catching, our gazes hold for a few moments as the melody fills the room around us. It's a haunting sound, a song about love and loss. Falling and heartbreak. Very similar to the one I perform to in the Big Top. This one, however, is darker.

More sinister.

The Ringmaster takes his seat and leans back, watching as I'm swept away to another time completely. And to a place where my nightmares aren't hiding around every corner.

Slipping into the lyra, I lean back, arching so most of my body is on display. Keeping one hand on the metal ring, I grip my throat with the other and allow it to trail down my body, imagining hands I should never picture touching me.

I imagine those hands on me now, using that knowledge to empower me as I put on a display I would never consider in the big top. The sexual performance is for his eyes only. Not because he asked for it—though it would have been easier if he had—but because it's what I want. The only time I've ever felt powerful in my entire life is when the Ringmaster is unable to tear his gaze away from me.

I hook both legs around the fabric holding my lyra in the air and flip up, straddling it as I arch up and grip the fabric above my head.

After a beat, I flip down, releasing it and landing on my feet just in front of the lyra. Just the fact that he watches me

turns me on more than any man ever did before I came here. Not that there were many men...just Ernesto.

“Stop.”

The order is barked, so I freeze, one hand on the lyra, the other at my side. I breathe deeply, inhaling his heady scent as he moves closer. I can feel him, a push and pull that shoots straight through my body. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, alerting me to his presence.

“What did I do wrong?” Panic pushes my lust aside. I’ve seen this man kill with his bare hands. He torments, taking pleasure in watching his victim writhe beneath the pressure. This is why what I do here is so dangerous. Having the Ringmaster’s full attention on me is never a good thing. Even if it feels too fucking powerful for my own good.

“What were you thinking about?” he demands.

“My performance.”

“Lie,” he replies, whispering in my ear. A shiver runs down my spine. “Who were you thinking about? And don’t fucking lie to me. You know better than that.”

*Fuck.* “You.”

“Another fucking lie.” He rips the lyra from my grasp, and I spin, turning toward him. He looms over me, a wall of muscle that intimidates even as it fascinates. “What happened the last time you lied to me, Liv?” Eyes narrowed on my face, he stares down.

The cage comes into memory. Golden iron bars I spent a night trapped behind.

Lying is no use. I know better. And yet, here I am.

He reaches up, gloved hand wrapping around my throat. He squeezes, just enough to cause my heart to race, but not enough to cut off my oxygen. I reach up and grip his forearm through the sleeve of his shirt, trying to ignore the way this physical connection is making me feel.

I breathe him in, and heat pools in my belly. It’s so twisted to want someone who terrifies me, but there’s something about

him that calls to me. Probably because all I've ever known are twisted, tainted men.

Apollo is normal. And he doesn't elicit even the smallest spark of attraction. Which likely means my twisted fucking soul is blackened to the point any shred of light makes me shy away. Darkness is an addiction, and I've been living with it for so long it might as well be my oxygen.

"Ernesto crossed my mind." The admission pains me because I know all too well what happens every time I've thought of him in the Ringmaster's presence.

His eyes flash with anger, but he releases me and takes a step back. "What the fuck have I told you explicitly *not* to do?"

Bowing my head, I'm the picture of submission. The only way I could be more so is if I dropped to my knees. Which is something I will *never* do for anyone. Ever again. "I apologize. It was brief."

"And what were you thinking of in regard to that fucking worm?" How the bastard knows I'm lying, I cannot even begin to understand. But I've learned that the trick is to steer as close to the truth as possible.

So, taking a deep breath, I tip my face up toward him and reply, "I was thinking back on what led me here."

The Ringmaster's nostrils flare. His eyes turn molten as he glares down at me. "You know what happens when you think of that fucking cocksucker in my presence, don't you?"

I swallow hard but don't respond. He leans in, close enough his breath is hot against my cheek though our bodies remain separated.

"Do you know how I can tell?" he asks, lower now. "How I know when you're lying to me?"

"How?"

"Your scent changes, pet."

*My scent?* It's the first clue he's ever given me as to what type of supernatural he actually is. No one here seems to have

a single clue. Only that he's immensely powerful and equally savage. He is feared by nearly everyone here in No Man's Land. A boogeyman lurking in the shadows, prepared to barter for your soul. But if he can pick up on my scent, that must mean shifter of some kind.

A bear, perhaps? Would certainly explain a few things.

"It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't," he growls and releases me. "Ernesto has no place in your mind. He serves as a distraction, and distractions will get you killed." He leaves me where I stand, moving to sit back behind his desk. He leans back in his chair, arms crossed once more.

I meet his gaze now that there's space between us, not at all surprised to see agitation etched in every masculine line.

"May I continue?" I question.

He nods.



## CHAPTER 3

## IIV

I'm just finishing up my stretches when someone knocks on my door. Getting to my feet, I make my way over and pull it open, expecting Fiona or Apollo on the other side.

Certainly not the man I spent last night dreaming about. The Ringmaster cocks his head to the side and studies my attire. Which, at the current moment, is not much. Tattered shorts barely cover my ass, and the tank top I'm wearing shows far more of my breasts than it should.

"Change," he orders.

"Why? Perform—"

"You're coming somewhere with me. Change, and meet me downstairs in five minutes."

My heartbeat quickens. "Where are we going?"

"Out," he snaps.

"As in *outside*?" I question. "I can't leave the circus."

"You will do as I ask," he snaps. "Or have you forgotten who you belong to?"

"Of course not," I retort. "But Er—" He narrows his gaze, so I stop speaking.

"Is the very fucking reason you need to get out," he snarls. "Safely. So you can see that that motherfucker cannot touch you ever again. Not while you belong to me. Five minutes, Liv," he demands then turns and stalks away.

I slam my door and lean back against it, my chest seizing in panic. Sliding down to the floor, I practice my breathing. In and out. In and out.

Logically, I know that I am safe with the Ringmaster. But the illogical part of my brain? The areas of my mind still trapped in fear? I cannot help but believe that Ernesto is capable of so much more than the Ringmaster gives him credit for.

My breathing becomes easier with every passing moment, and since I don't want to risk his wrath, I force myself up and change into black leggings and an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt that I toss over my tank. After slipping into my flats, I step out into the hall and shut my door.

The walk downstairs takes mere minutes, but it feels like hours on unstable legs. Still, I've gotten really good at maintaining composure even when I feel like falling apart, so I do that now as I face the Ringmaster, who stands just inside the doors that lead outside.

"Is this punishment?" I question, voice shaking. "You know I don't want to leave. That I don't ever leave."

"I have an errand to run, and you're coming with me," he replies. "You've been here twelve years, and you've never stepped foot past the boundary line."

"You should be grateful," I reply. "Doing so would put me in danger, which means you'd lose a performer."

He leans in, so close I can smell the faintest hint of his cologne. I shiver, heat radiating through my body.

"I don't lose things that belong to me, Liv." The Ringmaster holds my gaze for a moment, the weight of his words settling on my shoulders. But before I can say anything in response, he moves past me and heads outside.

The weather is overcast, which makes me grateful I chose to wear long sleeves versus the t-shirt I nearly went with. To my surprise, no one joins us. Not even his security team. We walk side-by-side toward the boundary line.

I stop just on this side of it, feeling it pulsating as though it were a ward. In reality, it's little more than a crack in the black asphalt.

The Ringmaster moves across it and doesn't bother stopping to see if I've followed. Which I do, even as everything inside of me is screaming for me to turn and run back to the apartments.

"Where are we going?" I question, having to jog to catch up with his strides.

"The market."

"But there are hundreds of people there!"

"Yes," he replies. "And most of them will likely not try to abduct you."

I stop in my tracks. "You're mocking me."

He turns to face me. "I assure you, I am not."

"I'm not a project."

He laughs now, though there is no humor in it. "I assure you, Fury, I've no interest in fixing you."

*Fury.* Very few people have ever referred to me by the type of supernatural I am. Most refuse to mention it since my powers are practically non-existent. "Then why the hell are you making me come with you?"

The Ringmaster moves in closer. "I rather enjoyed your costume the other day. And since you never leave, I cannot imagine you have many other fabric options. I'm not even entirely sure how you got your hands on what was needed to make that one."

"Curtains. And Fiona."

He grins. "Just how much curtain do you have left?"

"Not enough."

"Precisely why we are going out."

I continue to stare at him. "You want me to make another costume?"

“For our evenings, yes.”

He turns to continue walking, but I continue staring at the back of his head as he moves farther away. The bastard could have told me he was taking me on a coffee date, and it would have shocked me far less. I never expected him to like it enough that he'd want me to repeat the project on something else.

It took me weeks to sew that. Evenings when I labored over the needle and fabric, agonizing over the design and whether or not I was making a huge mistake.

“Catch up,” he calls back. “I cannot easily protect you if I cannot reach you.”



THE MARKET IS BUSTLING. AS busy as I remember it was the last time I was here—which was almost fifteen years ago.

Before Ernesto—I force the thought out of my mind. Given that the current company can tell when I'm thinking of him, it's likely not in my best interests to repeat what happened last night.

So, I step in closer, the sleeve of my sweatshirt brushing against his arm.

“D!” Someone calls out.

I turn as an older woman rushes forward, carrying an armful of colorful fabric in her hand. Who the hell is D?

She stops right in front of us.

“Frida, just the woman I was coming to find.”

“D?” I question, looking up to the Ringmaster. “That's your name?”

“For those I consider friends, yes. You have not yet earned that title.” The warning is clear as he shifts his attention back to the older woman.

“You come for fabrics, yes?”

“I do. Care to show me what you have?”

“This way.” She turns and rushes back through the crowd. I move directly behind the Ringmaster, remaining in the wake he creates as people move out of his way. Most everyone we pass looks his way. Some whisper and point. Others stare in silent fascination of the man they see each and every night in the center of the ring.

So far, though, no one pays me any attention.

We approach a small building, and Frida slips inside. The Ringmaster grips the door and holds it open for me, his gaze traveling over the crowd behind us. My stomach churns with nerves, my heart beating far faster than it should be.

But the moment I step past the foyer of the small brick building, I am struck with beauty in the chaos. There are fabrics *everywhere*—draped over the backs of chairs and couches, hung on the walls as tapestries, pinned to the tops of clothing bars...there isn't a single inch of wall or ceiling space that doesn't have fabric on it.

My fingers twitch at my sides, the desire to bury my hands in the cart full of fabrics directly to my left so strong I can barely stand it.

“So, darling, tell me what I can do for you. Why do you not bring Adaya with you?”

*Adaya?*

“She's busy,” he replies.

“Who is Adaya?” A twinge of jealousy that has no business being anywhere near the Ringmaster slips to the surface.

“A friend,” he replies curtly. “Liv enjoys crafting clothing.”

Frida's attention shifts to me, her small hazel eyes widening the second they land on me. "Is that right?"

"Yes." I clear my throat and stare back as she continues to watch me carefully.

"Interesting. Well, look around, and I will grab some of the things I have in the back." She smiles softly then turns and hustles through the fabric racks, disappearing through a door in the back.

"Choose your fabrics," the Ringmaster tells me.

"I didn't bring any magic." No magic means no currency. Had he told me—

"You don't need it," he replies simply then begins to run his gloved fingers over the soft fabrics as though he can feel anything through the barrier. I'm hypnotized by the action, my mind imagining that it's my flesh he strokes so tenderly.

I'm caught so off guard that I cannot help myself. "Why do you wear gloves outside of the ring?"

His copper eyes shift to me, and I can swear they brighten. "That is none of your business. You're here to pick fabrics, not ask questions."

My pride pops like a massive balloon, so I turn and begin perusing through the material, all while attempting to block out the Ringmaster slowly lurking behind me. I grip a navy-blue material with the tips of my fingers, enjoying the way it shimmers beneath the lights overhead.

"That would look quite stunning against your skin tone."

I jump, whirling to face Frida, who is grinning at me, clearly overjoyed that she frightened me. "Sorry, I didn't hear you come over."

"No need to apologize. You just boosted my ego quite a lot. Not often I'm swift enough to make you supernaturals jump."

*You supernaturals.* "You're human?"

“Might as well be the last as far as I know.” She beams at me. “Though, if it weren’t for D, I wouldn’t be here.” She offers me an armful of fabrics in various shades of crimson, purples, and golds. And as she pulls away, I notice the faint hint of black ink on her wrinkled wrist. *Interesting.*

“If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be here either,” I confide.

The woman smiles softly at me, her grey eyes full of knowledge. “We are not defined by our pasts, Liv. Best you remember that if you want to have a future not plagued by it.”

“I’m working on believing that,” I reply honestly.

“Work harder,” she says then winks and turns back toward D. “What can I get for you? More gloves? If I know you, you’re down to your final pair.”

He mutters something that makes Frida laugh, and when she bustles away, he turns to face me.

“I’m trying to decide,” I say quickly.

His copper gaze travels down to the fabric and then back up to my face. “Get it all.”

Less than an hour later, with a bag full of fabric, we’re stepping back out into the sun. The Ringmaster has yet to say anything else to me, and while self-preservation dictates I keep my mouth shut, I choose the more dangerous route.

“Frida has a tattoo like mine.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“So no one fucks with her,” he replies as we make our way through the crowd.

“She’s human.”

He stops walking and faces me, crossing his muscled arms. “Do you wish to continue pointing out the obvious, or is there a point to this conversation?”

“I’m just trying to understand why someone who is clearly as powerful as you would protect a human woman?”



The Ringmaster clenches his jaw before he grips my arm with a gloved hand and yanks me into the nearest alley. “Frida is under my protection,” he snarls. “Because, even without magic, she manages to be the only person who possesses fabrics sturdy enough to satisfy my needs.”

“For the performances, you mean?”

“You continue asking me questions.”

“Because you refuse to answer any of them,” I reply.

He studies me closely now, his stare pinning me where I stand. Even if I wanted to look away, the tension between us holds my gaze firmly in place. “Do not think for a second I favor you, Fury. I merely tolerate you because the crowd pays heavily for your performances.”

“Then why the private ones?” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, and I fight the urge to smack myself. Complacency is going to get me killed. And that’s precisely what I’ve become around him: complacent.

“You have a great ass on you,” he replies. “But you’re hardly the only one who does. Keep peppering me with questions that are none of your fucking business, and I’ll replace you.”



“HOLD UP.” Fiona holds up her hand from where she sits cross-legged on my bed. “He took you shopping? We all thought you’d tried to escape and he was going to kill you for it.”

“Shopping implies he took me to more than one location,” I tell her. “We went to one store, and the second I tried to be social, he shut my ass right down.” I lie back beside her, closing my eyes. By the time I open them again, she’s staring down at me. “And, besides, if I were going to escape, don’t

you think I'd let you know?" A lie, of course, because even though I adore Fiona, there is no way I would drag her into my plan.

Doing so could end with her dead.

"Liv. You ventured out into the world with The Ringmaster."

"Yes. That's what I said."

"Who bought you shiny new fabric so you can make a sexy outfit."

"Yes," I repeat.

"Are you sleeping with him? You'd tell me if you were, right?"

"For fuck's sake, Fiona. I am not sleeping with the ringmaster."

She waits a beat, crystal gaze boring into me. "And you'd tell me if you were."

*Would I?* "Yes. Probably. More than likely." Groaning, I run my hands over my face. "I don't understand what's going on. He watches me perform then sends me on my way. But he likes when I wear unique outfits and takes me to meet his friend Frida, who sells him fabric and keeps him stocked with gloves."

"Frida. Interesting. Young? Pretty?"

"Adorable," I tell her. "Though she looks to be nearing ninety and is a human."

"Hold up." Fiona crosses her legs, so I sit up to face her. "He's friends with a *human*?"

"So it would seem."

"How? I thought they'd all left. Either fled or were killed. Serve no purpose and all that."

"Clearly, this one does. And she's absolutely adorable."

"Damn. The Ringmaster is layered."

I arch a brow. "And here I thought you hated him."

She glares at me. “I do. But I can appreciate that there is more to him than the tricky bastard who forced me into a contract.”

“You know, I told you something about my past. You could share a bit of yours.”

“No chance.” She rolls back off my bed. “You two going out again?”

“Absolutely not.” I scoot up and lean back against the headboard. “Adorable fabric lady aside, that is not something I ever want to do again. I damn near passed out from anxiety the second we moved past the barrier.”

“But he stayed with you, kept you safe.”

“He did,” I tell her honestly. “And you want to know what the weirdest part was?” She stares back at me expectantly.

“Weirder than the Ringmaster being best buds with an elderly human woman?”

“Even weirder.” It feels almost wrong to betray a piece of the Ringmaster to someone else, but since he didn’t ask me to keep it a secret— “The tailor called him D.”

Fiona arches a white brow. “As in the letter?”

“Exactly like the letter.”

“Weird. Well, I guess we at least know what his name starts with now.”

“You don’t think his name is actually D?”

“Unless she’s referring to his massive dick, I’d say so.”

My cheeks heat. “I very much doubt she’s referring to his dick.”

“Who knows? Guy could be into the whole age gap thing.”

I choke on a laugh. “Somehow I don’t think that’s it.”

We fall into companionable silence, and I continue to stare straight ahead even though my mind is somewhere else entirely. The Ringmaster—D—has always felt so surreal. A

monster that lurks in the building, popping up during performances or when he needs something.

But this morning, I was forced to see him in a different light. As more than the Ringmaster who possesses us. Instead, I saw a man who the people out here respect—if the reaction of the crowd is any indication. Not to mention the adorable, petite woman named Frida who is wrapped around his finger.

Which I can't even honestly say is one-sided. While I didn't see the man smile, he seemed relaxed while he was around her. Spellbound by her charm just as she was his.

It really was fascinating to witness and something I probably wouldn't have believed if I hadn't seen it firsthand.

“So what are you going to make?” she asks.

My gaze drifts to the bag on my small table. A brown bag overflowing with colorful fabrics. “Honestly, I'm not sure yet.”

“Liv. If there is something going on between you two—” She trails off, eyes shining bright as diamonds.

Of all of us, she's been here the longest. Which makes me wonder if perhaps she's seen that other side. The part of him he hides from the rest of us. “There's not,” I reply quickly. “You've known him the longest—”

Fiona snorts. “I wouldn't say I know him. We've never had private performances if that's what you're wondering. And even I had no idea about his fling with Frida.”

I laugh. “No, I know that. Just, is there more to him? Or is he just an angry bastard?”

Crossing her arms, Fiona leans back against my headboard and studies me. “You do have a hard-on for the Ringmaster! I fucking knew it. Liv, you're playing with fire.”

“I don't! No! Of course not. I'm just spending a shit-ton of time with him these days, and I'm curious.”

“You've been spending a shit-ton of time with him for the past twelve years. Why ask me all the questions now?” Gaze narrowed, I know she's studying my expression for any tell

that I'm lying. A faint change in my breathing, perspiration on my brow, the predator in her will pick it up easily enough.

“He intrigues me,” I reply. Partial honesty is better than an outright lie and a hell of a lot better than the truth.

Her expression morphs, turning dark, and she leans in, dropping her tone. “Intrigue leads to feelings, Liv. And while I may not know him well, I do know that feeling anything for that man is going to lead to a hell of a lot more pain than you deserve.”

## CHAPTER 4

## LIV

“Come on, Liv. It’s just coffee,” Fiona urges me, hand on my arm. “You left yesterday. Today should be a breeze.”

*Yesterday, I had the Ringmaster with me.* Of course, I don’t voice that reason out loud. Doing so would not only offend my friend but admit to her that the predator out here terrifies me far more than the Ringmaster.

A predator I’ve no doubt I won’t escape a second time. “I really don’t think this is a good idea.” I feel weak, pathetic, to be battling with such a seemingly brainless decision such as going out for a cup of coffee, but here I am. Damn near ready to curl in on myself over it.

“Look.” Releasing me, Fiona yanks up the sleeve of her jacket and shows me the tattoo on her wrist. It matches the one on mine, three flames dancing around a ring. The ink is black, though it shimmers beneath the sun above us as though it’s alive from the inside. Our brand, a mark that tells the world who we belong to. “This might as well be our House ring,” she says. “It tells everyone not to fuck with us.”

“I don’t know,” I say. My stomach aches, clenching with the idea of being recognized by one of Ernesto’s men. They’re everywhere. Or, at least, they used to be. And they won’t hesitate just because someone else has inked my flesh. Truthfully, Ernesto will likely take great pleasure in slicing it from my body.

“I’m with you, too,” she says. “Apollo will be there, Harriss—you won’t be alone. There’s more of us today than you had yesterday.”

After yet another sleepless night plagued with memories I’d rather bury and attraction that borders on self-torment, I’d decided to take the leap and at least try to get comfortable with leaving. After all, if I plan to escape, I’d better figure out how to handle the crippling anxiety that accompanies the outside world. However, now that it’s actually time, I eye the gate at the edge of the circus with uncertainty. “I’ll just wait here. Bring me back something?”

“No. Seriously, Liv. You need to leave this fucking place, or else you’re going to end up with Stockholm’s Syndrome or some shit.”

Swallowing hard, I glance back at the circus as the Ringmaster steps out of the big top. Flanked by massive red and white stripes, he looks small in comparison to the performance tent. But then his gaze finds mine. Eyes swimming with something I cannot even begin to understand, his mere presence at my back pushes me out the proverbial door. I turn to face her, leaving him to stare at my back. “Then let’s do this.”

“Yes!” Fiona cheers and loops her arm through mine as we take the leap.

But the moment my boot hits the ground outside of the safety of the circus, my anxiety turns near crippling. It slams into me, far worse than yesterday. Honestly, if it weren’t for Fiona’s arm on mine, I might have collapsed. Or sprinted back and locked myself in my apartment.

Palms sweating, muscles shaking, stomach churning, I continue to hold her arm as she guides me down the alley and toward one of the main arteries in No Man’s Land. Every noise might as well be a drumline in my ear, every movement an enemy I’ve yet to face. It surprises me how different I feel now, without the Ringmaster at my side

Shit, Fiona is right. I might be suffering from Stockholm’s Syndrome.



Fiona is silent as we walk, likely taking in the surroundings with the senses of a predator while I search for any possible exit should we be cornered. The street is busy today, filled with people moving up and down in search of work or headed toward the marketplace to search for their next favorite bauble.

I spent years on the streets here. So much so that I know them like the back of my hand. Before Ernesto turned on me, I'd even attended the circus as an onlooker. More than once, actually. The Ringmaster had captivated me then, too. The man in red and black. A man who'd always seemed larger than life.

Something that had not escaped Ernesto's attention.

I shiver.

"You good?"

I glance over at Fiona, surprised to see her ice-blue eyes trained on me even as we continue walking. "Yeah, why?"

"You shivered, and it's not cold."

"This place and I have some history. And it's not pleasant."

"Gathered as much. The coffee place is just ahead." Letting her guide me through the trash-littered streets, I breathe a sigh of relief when the massive coffee bean comes into view. As soon as we step inside, my panic shrinks away to little more than background noise.

"Hey! You got her out!" Apollo cheers, throwing both hands in the air.

Harriss shakes his head and mutters something that I can't quite make out. Since he doesn't much care for me, though, I imagine not knowing is likely a good thing.

"Oh look, Master let his pet off the chain," Valentina comments dryly.

"Ignore her." Apollo stands and offers me his chair then grabs another and pulls it over to sit beside me.

“I’ll order for you.” Fiona squeezes my arm gently then leaves and disappears into the crowd of people around the counter.

I bounce my knees while I scan the room, searching for any possible exits should I end up stuck in here with someone who recognizes me. The back door will do some good, though that will likely stick me in the alley behind where I could be trapped.

The front door is only an option if I can sneak out without being spotted. A chair scoots across the floor, and I jump.

“You okay?” Apollo’s lips are right beside my ear. I try like hell not to pull away, but the need to put distance between us is overwhelming. There are *so many* people here. Why are there so many people?

“Fine.” My response is short.

Right now, I’m closer to free than I have been since I sought shelter at the Circus, yet I’ve never felt more vulnerable. How twisted is it that I feel safer in the belly of the beast than on the streets of the place that used to be my home?

“Here you go.” Fiona sets my coffee down in front of me then slides across from me, beside Harriss.

“Thanks.” Lifting the paper cup, I press it to my lips and take a drink. The hot liquid slips down my throat, bitter but so damn delicious.

“How was last night?” Apollo questions.

The entire table falls silent, and Valentina turns her full attention to me. Making it a point to hold her gaze, I smile. “It was perfect. He loves my performances.”

“I’ll bet he does.” Fiona winks, and Valentina glares at her.

“Hopefully, he’ll find someone new and stop this ridiculous expectation.” Apollo’s words are laced with anger. Honestly, the idea that one day I won’t have to perform anymore leaves me feeling emptier than I care to admit. Is that how Valentina feels? Used then tossed aside? If she wasn’t such a bitch, I might feel bad for her.

“It’s only a matter of time,” she sneers and stands. “Time to go.”

Apollo groans. “Already?”

“Yes.”

“But I just got here.” My free hand tightens into a fist.

Valentina grins at me. “Little pet so used to her chain she’s terrified to be off of it?”

“Fuck off, Val,” Fiona snaps. When she turns to me, her expression is softer. “You going to be okay?”

*Not really.* But I don’t want to prove Valentina wrong, so I nod and stand.

My chest tightens as I face the door. *Let’s do this.* The five of us step out onto the street, and immediately, the vulnerability sets in. Both palms begin to sweat, so I wipe my free hand on my tattered jeans then swap the coffee to the other and repeat the gesture.

The walk should take only about five minutes.

But I know, from personal experience, a lot can happen in five minutes. Every hair on the back of my neck stands on end. Stopping in my tracks, I turn and search our surroundings for whoever is watching me.

There’s no one there. No one watching.

“You okay?”

Forcing a smile, I turn back to Apollo. “Of course.”

He wraps an arm around my shoulders, and we continue walking.

The moment the circus comes into view, everyone’s moods darken. Their frustration is my hope, though. Because while the circus might have its own problems, I’m safe here. At least, until the Ringmaster tires of me or my contract wears out. Whichever comes first.

But before we can step out of the alley and into the full view of the buildings, a dozen supernaturals rush in front of

us, blocking our way.

My heart pounds. I don't recognize them, but that doesn't mean anything. Ernesto is always bringing in fresh meat as he calls it.

"Look here, boys, the pretty performers are out and about."

"Get out of our way, or I'll cut your cock off and feed it to you."

The man's grin spreads, showing off blackened teeth that have been filed to points. "Go ahead and try, pretty thing."

Fiona pulls out a dagger and tosses it in the air, her warning. Meanwhile, Apollo clenches his fists, likely preparing to shift.

Valentina, however, takes to the sky and zips off toward the circus, leaving Harriss and me standing just behind the only two of us who stand a chance at fighting back.

But even Fiona and Apollo cannot take on a dozen men.

The gaze of the blonde man in front of us shifts to me. "I don't recognize you, pretty thing," he says, licking his lips. "Are you the little bird that flies up in the air?"

I stiffen, my blood running cold. *Little bird.*

"Take her," he orders.

They lunge forward. Harriss grabs me and throws me behind him, backing all the way up until I'm cornered. He withdraws a small blade from his robes and holds it out in front of him as Apollo shifts into a massive burst of feathers and fur.

He roars and fights, though the three men surrounding him are faster than I expected.

"Easy, Liv," Harriss says. He glances back at me, eyes swirling with power. "All will be well."

Before I can even begin to unpack what it is he means, a man lunges for him. "Harriss! Look out!" He brings the blade up and stops him, but the distraction is enough that a woman I

hadn't seen before grabs my arm and yanks me from behind the djinn.

“Let's go, pretty. Someone wants to see you.”

I reach for my magic, but once again, it's completely and utterly useless. So, I move to plan B. I slam my fist into her face, and she releases me for a split second. Using it to my advantage, I turn and sprint down the alley.

I glance behind me once then slam into a hard body and fall backward. My head hits the pavement with a crack, and pain explodes behind my eyes.

“Easy.” The voice is familiar, safe, so I open my eyes and stare up at the Ringmaster.

Something roars behind me, so he shifts his gaze and nods. Then he reaches down with a gloved hand and pulls me to my feet. I turn just in time to see three lion shifters finish off the group.

By the time they've finished, everyone is covered in blood—Harriss included.

And once again, I was useless.



THE RINGMASTER USHERS me into his apartment and slams the door before turning to face me. His cheeks are flush with anger, his glare one that would have frightened me if I weren't already terrified.

I *knew* it was stupid to venture out without him. And I fucking did it anyway. My muscles quiver, though I try to remain standing. Try to appear as though I'm not completely and utterly petrified of the nightmare that very nearly came true.

“Are you all right?” he questions, tone unreadable.

“Yes,” I reply.

“Lie.”

Swallowing hard, I cross my arms. “Fine. No. I’m not all right. I go out yesterday, and everything is fine. Then, I try to step outside of my comfort zone today. Try to live just a little, and he’s there. He’s always there.” Tears spill down my cheeks.

“Yesterday, you had me,” he reminds me. “Where did you go?”

“Coffee,” I reply. “We went for coffee.”

“Coffee.”

He’s already wearing his black performance pants and boots though his white shirt is partially unbuttoned. Which means he left in a hurry. Did Valentina send him? Did he hear the fight?

“Yes, since our outing went so well, I decided to go for coffee this morning.”

He doesn’t respond right away. Gaze unreadable, he continues to watch me until I want to squirm beneath the weight of it. “Yesterday, you left with *me*,” he repeats then takes a step closer. “So I could protect you.”

“I wasn’t alone today,” I insist. “I had Fiona and Apoll—”

“They are not me!” he bellows, his anger palpable. After a moment, he closes his eyes and then opens them again. “You are not to leave again.”

Something inside of me snaps. Whether it’s the pounding in my head that causes it or the crusted blood on my scalp, I’m not sure. Hell, maybe it’s the adrenaline still coursing through my veins. Whatever it is makes me stalk forward and jab my finger against the fabric of his shirt. “Do you think I want to be captured again? Do you have any fucking idea what Ernesto did to me last time?”

A muscle in his jaw twitches, but he doesn’t respond.

“Well, let me assure you that is quite literally the last thing I want. He tormented me, *D*. Made me feel worthless. And that’s when the fucker didn’t encase me in stone.” I snuffle and jab him again, trying not to enjoy the way his hard chest feels beneath my finger. “Do not think for even a second that I want to suffer through that pain again? But I also do not want to live my life terrified of everything. I’ve already done that long enough.”

The bastard cocks his head to the side and studies me. “You are not to leave without me again. Do I make myself clear? You want to go out? Fine, you come get me. Not the berserker, not the djinn, and certainly not the fucking gryffin. Do I make myself clear?”

“Why? Why the hell does it matter so much to you?”

He steps in so close I can feel the power that radiates off him despite us not having any real idea what he is. I stare up at his copper eyes, noting the flecks of green within their depths. Warmth pools in my body, something akin to lust dancing in my stomach.

“Because you belong to *me*. Or have you so quickly forgotten what I did for you?”

“How could I?” I sneer. “You never fail to remind me.”

He grins. The smile is blinding, showing off perfectly straight white teeth. I’m struck speechless. I’ve never seen him show any emotion aside from anger. “Then it should be easy to remember. You will remain on these grounds unless I am with you. Am I clear?”

“And the others?”

“Can come and go as they please. As long as they always return.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Can’t I? Ernesto runs most of our corner of No Man’s Land. He also happens to still be hunting for a way to get you back—as you were reminded of today. And if he does that, I have lost my property.” He leans in. “No one steals from me, Fury. And you’re not going to give him the opportunity to

break that streak.” With one final sneer, he gestures toward the door.

“You can’t hold me hostage,” I nearly whisper it as I stare at him, remaining exactly where I am.

His glare turns molten. “I can do whatever the fuck I want with you.”



## CHAPTER 5

# DANTE

The moment her scent fades from my lungs, I can think rationally again. Liv brings out the beast in me, makes me want to tear this entire fucking place apart if only to ease the weight of the pain she carries.

She's a weakness I can't afford.

A light I cannot live without.

Seeing her walk out this morning beside the berserker... will never happen again. That fucking cocksucker Ernesto has been trying to get his hands on her ever since I brought her in. As of today, my men and I have killed nearly four dozen men he's sent in after her. Whether they lurk in the crowd or just outside of the ring, waiting for the right moment.

Fuckers. I slam my fist into the nearest wall, and sheetrock dusts down onto my arm. I barely feel the bite of pain.

Confining her to areas where I am is for her own good, or at least, that's what I tell myself. The rational side of my brain knows that the safest place for her is in a House where she will be untouchable by the fucker and anyone he sends after her. Setting her free is out of the question, though. I'm a selfish fucker, and Liv is *mine*. Even if she hates me for the captivity.

Someone knocks on my door. I rip it open, not at all surprised to see Duncan on the other side. However, the two bounty hunters just behind him are an unwelcome shock to my system.

"What the fuck do you want?" I demand, looking straight at them.

The woman, a vampire with crimson hair slicked back into a ponytail, nods her head at me. Eyes shielded behind dark sunglasses, her expression is cool. Calculated. “Ringmaster, I presume?” she greets, tone flat.

“Obviously. Who the fuck are you?” I reply.

“Paloma,” she replies.

I turn to the second hunter, a man who has the scent of a shifter. “And you?”

“Ollie.” He grins at me, showing two front teeth that have long since vacated his mouth.

“Great. Now that pleasantries are out of the way, how about you tell me why the fuck you’re here?”

“They set off the alarms when they came through,” Duncan tells me.

“Just a toe over the line,” Ollie grins.

“We knew it would bring your team in,” Paloma tells me. “And we need to speak with you.”

“If it’s in regards to a show request, you can kindly shove that right up your ass.”

Paloma smiles, showing off bright white teeth. “I assure you, I’ve no interest in your show.”

“Speak for yourself,” Ollie grunts. “That aerobic bitch is something to se—” He doesn’t even get the rest of the word out before my hand closes around his throat and I’m slamming him into the wall.

“Watch your fucking tongue,” I snarl.

“My companion has no decorum,” Paloma states. “But please release him.”

I consider crushing his throat right here, making an example of him. But doing so will only bring more bounty hunters to my door, and that’s the last damn thing I need. So, reluctantly, I release him.

Slightly more pale, Ollie keeps his mouth shut as Paloma continues. “We’re here because we’ve been tracking some supernaturals who’ve taken up hiding here in No Man’s Land. But every time we get close, they seem to disappear. Go completely off our radar. Any idea as to why?”

“We hear you like to enslave supernaturals into your show,” Olli says, clearly finding his voice again.

“If they’re here, it’s because they have a contract with me,” I tell them. “And I’ve taken in no new supernaturals.” Not that I would fucking tell them if I did. Others may deem me a bastard for contracting people the way I do, but at least, I don’t fucking turn them over to be put to death. Once they’re here, they’re protected.

“Okay,” she replies. “We’ll be keeping an ear to the ground just in case you end up with someone of interest to us.”

I grunt in response. “Then it seems we’re done here,” I tell her. “Unless, of course, your friend wants to piss himself all over again.”

Ollie lets out a growl, though I imagine everyone else here can also smell the piss stench radiating off of him.

She pulls out a card along with a vial of shifter blood and hands it to me. “If you come across anyone, please let me know.”

I eye it warily but nod to Duncan. He takes it from her. Then she turns her shielded gaze to me. “You’re as much of a dick as they say you are.”

“Glad word has spread.” The two bounty hunters turn and head down the stairs, so I look to Duncan. “Make sure they fucking leave,” I order him.

“You got it, boss.” He turns to follow, so I slam the door and plant both palms on the wall beside it as I try to steady my breathing.

Pain radiates out from my back, bones crunching as my beast attempts to force me into a shift. I grind my teeth as my knees buckle, fingertips digging into the soft carpet beneath me. It’s been years since I shifted. Twelve to be exact.

Twelve long years of barely keeping my beast at bay, and he's had enough. Hell, the only reason I'd been able to contain him before was because of my connection with—I shake my head. Not going there.

My gaze lands on the door that leads to my bedroom. Pushing myself to my feet, I manage to keep one hand on the wall and slowly make my way inside. A wardrobe I had converted for moments like this stands tall directly across from me.

Another wave of pain nearly takes me to my knees.

I move as fast as I can, knowing, if I were to shift now, this entire fucking building would go down around me. Which means the woman who lives directly below my penthouse will likely not survive.

It's that thought that gives me the energy I need to close the distance. I rip the door open, not bothering to take my clothes off, and step inside. Back to the two-inch spikes mounted from the height of my shoulders down, I slam the door.

My body is punctured in a hundred different places, the blinding pain nearly unbearable. But, as usual, the beast subsides, retreating long enough for my injuries to heal. Breathing in here is excruciating, but I'll take damn near anything if it means keeping my identity a secret.

If word got out—I'd be hunted. Mercilessly. And even I don't know if I have the strength to fight off the innumerable supernaturals who would be coming for me and everything I've built. No one in my presence would be safe.

Which means *she* would no longer be safe. And that's just a risk I am unwilling to take.



TWO HOURS in the wardrobe and my beast is manageable once again. I can still feel him, though, lurking just beneath the surface. Rage is a trigger for me, so when Valentina steps out of her room and into the hallway, it takes all my strength to maintain a steady presence.

The pixie pouts, sticking her bottom lip out far enough that I can see the dark pink. The woman is relentless, spending every waking moment trying to manipulate her way into my bed. Something that, no matter her efforts, will never happen.

If I need a fuck, I get it away from here. Someone who doesn't know me, who I don't know, and who won't give two shits about me in the morning.

"What is it?" I don't break stride as I move past her.

"You never come see me."

"I'm uninterested, Valentina."

"You didn't used to be."

I stifle a growl. I'd nearly given in, *once*. "Because you were interesting then."

She lets out a gasp that makes me want to drive fucking daggers into my ears. "I'm not interesting to you anymore?"

*No. You're fucking pathetic.* "Is there a purpose to this interaction?" I demand, coming to a stop to face her.

"What the hell do you see in her?" She crosses her arms. "Liv is weak. Pathetic. Barely even a supernatural."

Her words burn me from the inside out. I've always known Valentina was awful. The very reason she's here is because she tried to kill her sister over a fae who was sleeping with them both. She's entitled, selfish, and her crazy streak is a hell of a lot deeper than it appears. Yet another reason to avoid getting close to Liv even though doing so would surely make controlling myself a hell of a lot easier.

I can't risk the crazy-ass pixie losing her shit and attacking the fury. With that in mind, I step closer and lean in. "Stay the fuck away from her, Valentina. What I do with the fury is not

your concern. You would have been a mistake. Time to move on.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“You’re just now figuring that out?” I call back as I make my way toward the big top. It sits in the center of what used to be a social courtyard for the apartments that make up a horseshoe around it. The tent takes up nearly every square foot of what I imagine used to be bright green grass.

I shove open the flap to the tent, unsurprised to see Killian, Duncan, and Bracken standing just inside. The three lion shifters I use as security are the only ones I trust in this entire fucked up world.

“She’s going to cut your cock off and feed it to you one of these days,” Killian comments as they move in behind me and toward the back of the tent where my private office resides. His gauged ears are rocking black circles now, his nose hoop a matching shade. Where Bracken is covered in ink, Killian has more holes in his body than a pin cushion.

I plop down in the chair behind my desk and groan. “If she did that, there would be no chance she could have it, which is counterintuitive to what she seems to be after.”

“Is there a chance?” Duncan arches a light eyebrow and studies me curiously.

“No.” I shift my gaze to Bracken and the file in his hands. “What do you have for me?”

Bracken offers it to me and then crosses his arms. “Rogue shapeshifter. Hiding here in No Man’s Land.”

“Abilities?” I question as I open the file and scan the information we have on the fucker. There’s no picture, which isn’t exactly surprising since they look like obsidian humanoid shapes. In their natural state, they have no faces, no distinguishing features.

“Apparently, he is a hybrid who cannot control what animal he shifts into,” Killian offers. “Poor bastard just shifts whenever he’s nervous, and there’s no telling what form he’ll take.”

“Price?”

“Dude has nowhere to go.” Killian shakes his head. “I’d be willing to bet you can get a couple decades out of him at least.”

Bringing in a shapeshifter could be a decent addition. Especially if his emotions are tied to what he shifts into. Might be a good way to put the Ghrunt to work as well. Little gnome fucker would get off on scaring the animal out of the shapeshifter. “Go get him,” I tell them then offer the file back to Bracken.

“You got it, boss.”

I shift my gaze to Duncan. “Any word from Ernesto’s men?”

“Nope. They’ve been rather quiet lately, concerning if you ask me.” Killian crosses his arms. “The guy we have watching them says he hasn’t seen the slimy fucker in over a month.”

“Unusual.” Which is alarming in a world of predictable criminals.

“Those assholes from this morning?”

“New blood for Ernesto,” he explains.

“Fuck. Which means he’s still lurking somewhere and has eyes on her.”

“We knew he would.” Duncan crosses his arms. “Might be time to just take him out.”

It’s been an idea lurking on my mind since I first brought Liv in. Taking Ernesto out would make things a hell of a lot safer for her, but the actual attack will not be easy. Especially since counting my team, we’re four of us compared to dozens of them.

Shifting is not an option, not with the way information spreads in No Man’s Land. By morning, everyone with ears would know there is a dragon shifter here.

“Possibly,” I reply, swallowing hard, and run both hands over my face. “We’re keeping her within the boundary, for the



time being, either way.”

“She know that?” Duncan arches a brow.

“Yes. And she doesn’t have a fucking choice.”

“Understood.” Though his half-ass grin tells me he’s rather amused. “That gryffin is getting rather fucking handsy.”

A low growl vibrates up from my chest. Apollo is a fucking massive pain in my ass. Arrogant, conceited, and always touching what is not his.

He puts up both hands in mock surrender. “Not my business, just think you might want to make a move or let that fury fly. They are not known for their level tempers.”

Another reason why she needs to remain here. She’s too fucking soft for her own good. Too weak to survive in a world of users. “I’ll handle her.” Pushing to my feet, I face my team. “Be sure you keep an eye out for those fucking bounty hunters. Last thing I want is any of those assholes sneaking around.”

Bracken grins, his smile as savage as he is. He’s more bloodthirsty than I am, though he doesn’t possess even half the temper restraint. The man gets off on breaking bones and cracking skulls. Which is only one of the reasons I hired him. “We’ll keep an eye out.”

Killian claps his hands together. “We’ll go get your guy and bring him back.”

“He gives you any trouble—”

“Here’s hoping he does,” Bracken replies.

The three of them turn and leave, so I settle back in my seat and stare through the partially open flap at the silver lyra dangling from the center of the big top. I can almost see her there, dancing like the magnificent creature she is. Milky skin so fucking smooth I want to ruin it.

My hands tighten into fists as my cock hardens near painfully. The thought of burying myself in her as she dangles from that ring—the thought of fucking pounding into her

while those glorious tits bounce is too fucking much to deal with.

Especially when I have a whole day of dealing with high supernaturals and pissy performers.

Knowing I am in desperate need of a release, I stand and secure the tent flap before returning to my desk. I close my eyes and lean back before I reach down and undo the button of my pants. Sliding my hand down, I imagine my fury on her knees, mouth on my cock, as I pump myself.

Would she moan?

Cry out when she comes?

Would her hands tighten in my hair as I fucked her with my mouth? My tongue?

I move my hand even faster as my release builds inside of me. It's easy to imagine, fucking her, because it's all I've been doing since the moment I saw her bloodied in that alleyway.

Sick bastard that I am, I jerked off that very night. And every fucking night since.

I cover the head of my cock with my free hand and come hard, the warm spray hitting my palm. Breathing raggedly, I let my head fall back and stare up at the ceiling.

Imagination is all I have because Liv is out of the question.

Even a single touch would undo everything I've worked my ass off to build. And if I let myself believe she might be worth that, I've already lost.

## CHAPTER 6

## IIV

Screams rip me from sleep. I open my eyes at the same moment my door is thrown open. Harriss bursts in, shirtless. “Get up, girl! Can you not smell the smoke?”

Still dazed, I throw my comforter off and roll out of bed. On my first deep breath, the smoke hits me. “What is happening?”

Harriss grips my arm and rips me toward the empty hall. Our bare feet pad softly against the thin carpeting. He rips the door open, and smoke billows out into our faces. “Here.” He reaches into his pocket and hands me a cloth, pulling a second out and pressing it to his nose.

Still holding my hand with his free one, he drags me down the stairs. It’s so thick down here, so potent I can barely see.

We make it to the bottom and emerge into complete and total chaos.

The Ringmaster, chest bare, is holding his hands out, palms forward. Magic pours from him and surrounds the flames as though he’s trying to control them.

Apollo is above, dropping water from a bucket as he flies by. Valentina is doing the same, her skin gleaming with sweat. Fiona, the three members of the Ringmaster’s security team, Thomas, Silva, and Ghrunt all have hoses. A woman I’ve never seen before has both palms aimed at the flames, water pouring from them. *Water fae.*

Harriss rips me closer to the exit and pulls me out into the courtyard. As soon as we’re free of the Big Top, we both drop

our cloths and take deep breaths.

“What the hell happened?”

“Liv! Thank goodness!” Jenny rushes over and wraps both arms around me in a quick hug. “We don’t know what happened. The Ringmaster sent Harriss to get us.” She turns to the djinn, who is standing, hands on his hips, staring back at the fire. His pale eyes are narrowed, his broad chest bare and lightly dusted with hair.

I get it now, what Fiona said, even if this moment is not the best time to be appreciating the way her ex looks beneath his robes.

“Did you see anything?” I question Harriss.

He turns toward me and shakes his head. “Nothing of substance.” Since the djinn’s visions rarely come when they are needed, it’s not a surprise.

Someone screams...I rush toward the entrance, but Harriss moves in front of me.

“Where the hell are you going? I was told to get you out.”

“I can help.”

“How?”

I glare at him. “My magic is not useless. I can help hold the flames in place.”

He opens his mouth to argue, but I move past him anyway, and this time, he doesn’t make a move to stop me. I burst inside, and the Ringmaster glances over at me. Our gazes meet as I sprint toward him, eyes burning from the smoke.

His skin is slick with sweat, face covered in ash.

Calling forth my magic, I turn toward the flames and envision the wind wrapping around them. I feel it pouring from me, energy leaving my body as it envelops the flames. It’s not nearly strong enough to completely put them out, but combined with the Ringmaster’s control of flames, the fire begins to shrink, growing smaller and smaller with each passing moment.

The drain is considerable, though, and it's not long before I'm swaying on my feet. Determined, I force myself to maintain the magic until, finally—it goes out.

I drop my hands and bend at the waist, drawing in deep breaths, all while I can feel the Ringmaster's gaze on me.

“Damn, Liv! Way to go!” Apollo reaches down and lifts me up. He's nude, every inch of his tan skin coated in puffs of ash.

“It wasn't all me,” I reply as I glance over my shoulder at the Ringmaster, but he's already gone and discussing whatever the hell he discusses with his team. Likely, the source of this fire.

“Do we know who started it?” Harriss questions.

I turn, surprised he was able to sneak up on me.

Apollo shakes his head. “No idea. I was walking back up from the gym and saw the flames.”

“Hmm.” Harriss narrows his gaze then turns away and marches straight for Fiona. I watch, surprised and amused as he grips her by the back of the neck, spins her, and slams his mouth down on hers.

I expect the berserker to fight, to shove him away. Instead, her arms snake up around his neck until it feels oddly like spying to continue watching.

Apparently, fires don't only destroy. My gaze lands on the Ringmaster again. I study every inch of his bare back, and despite being surrounded by destruction, I am unable to think of anything but running my fingers over the tan skin.

“Damn, this is going to take a while to fix,” Apollo comments.

The water fae walks over to the Ringmaster and wraps an arm around his waist. He presses a gentle kiss to the top of her head then waves as she turns to leave through the back exit. Jealousy surges through me even as it has no damn place. “Who is she?” I demand, pointing as she slips out of view.

“No clue. Some water fae who showed up the second the Ringmaster came down here. They seem close.” He snorts. “Never thought I’d see him with a woman. Seems to keep to himself most of the time.”

The Ringmaster turns and heads toward the apartments with his team, not paying me another glance. Why does it bother me so much? To see him embrace another woman with such casual companionship?

Hell, just yesterday, I was furious as he demanded I remain on the grounds at all times. And yet—“I’ll see you in a bit.” I jog over toward the stairwell, managing to make it to the top right before the Ringmaster closes his door. “Wait!”

He opens it. “What do you want?” Not a question he wants answered. It’s a statement. And an agitated one at that.

“Do you know who started the fire?”

“I will find out,” he replies. “Is that all?”

“What if it was—” I trail off. Blaming Ernesto to get a response out of the man in front of me seems low, but for whatever reason, I cannot help myself. “Ernesto,” I finish. “What if he started it?”

“Do you not think I considered that already?” the Ringmaster demands. “As I said, I will find out who started the fire, and they will pay...dearly.” He slams the door in my face, so I turn and head back down the stairs.

I should be glad that, after our little shopping trip, nothing has changed. After all, the only thing I want is to be free of No Man’s Land. Right?



DRESSED in my typical performance outfit, I’m stepping up to the Ringmaster’s door. He’d canceled the show tonight to make time for the repairs necessary, but via note taped to my

door, I was alerted that my private performance was still a go for this evening.

Honestly, I'm not entirely sure what I'd do if he canceled it. Anything outside of my normal routine is not welcome, at least, not until I break the cycle and make my own choice to throw a hot grenade into my day-to-day by leaving.

I knock twice, pausing before I knock a third. Less than a heartbeat later, he's pulling open the door and stepping aside.

"You're not wearing a new one."

"I haven't had a chance to finish one. They take time," I tell him truthfully. "If you're fine with no talking, I'd like to get started."

The Ringmaster eyes me curiously. "You're annoyed."

"Very." I turn and march toward the lyra hooked against the far wall. Then, I release it and slowly walk toward the center.

Still, the Ringmaster does not make a move to start the music. "Why are you annoyed?"

"I'm tired," I snap back, my fingers wrapped around the cool metal of my ring. "Since you made it quite clear I'm only here because of my great ass, I'd like to get started."

"Did something set you off today?"

"No. Can we not get started? If you'd rather find someone with a better ass than mine, I'm sure Valentina—"

"I don't enjoy watching Valentina," he interrupts. "Her performances are not as—calming as yours." He takes a step toward me, and my chest tightens. More so when he reaches out and trails a gloved finger down the side of my ring.

"Calming."

"Yes."

"I've never seen you calm."

"No?" he asks as he turns and walks toward the record player. "Have you ever seen me angry during one of our



nightly meetings?”

I narrow my gaze. “No. But why would you be? I only ever obey.”

The Ringmaster grins. “You are a good girl, Liv.”

Lust pummels me. *Damn this man.* “Who was that woman earlier?” The irony that now I’m the one postponing is not lost on me.

“Woman?” But he grins. The asshole is enjoying the fact that I’m clearly bothered.

“Never mind. I don’t actually care.” I cross the room to start the damn music myself, but the Ringmaster is faster than I give him credit for. He closes in on me, forcing me to back away until I’m trapped between his hard body and the wall.

“It certainly seems like you care, Liv,” he whispers as he presses both palms above my head. His shirt is partially open, baring a dusting of hair on his chest. I long to reach out and touch it. To run my fingers over his hard body.

“I’m just curious. That’s all.”

“You sure about that? I will happily tell you if you’re curious.” He reaches up and threads a strand of my hair around his finger. “Fuck, I bet it’s so soft.”

I swallow hard. Unsure if I should be turned on or terrified. Truthfully, I’m both. This is completely different than he was before. When I’d questioned him, he’d grown angry. Now, he’s urging me to ask questions he’ll answer.

What the hell is going on? “You’re crowding me.”

“Am I? Do you want me to back off?” He taunts me with his words. “Then tell me to do so.”

“Let me go,” I say, my voice shaking.

“Be assertive, Liv. Harness that fury blood in your veins.”

“Move,” I say, a bit stronger now.

“Not strong enough. Aren’t you tired of having people use you the way they want?” he questions. “Tell me to back the

fuck up.”

My blood heats, anger rising. I try not to think of him as the sexy man who took me shopping, who saved me in an alley—not once but twice—and focus only on the fact that he’s the same man who has killed other performers for trying to seek a better life. He’s the man who has practically imprisoned me in lands where I’m hunted. And with all of that in mind, I clear my throat and glare up at him. “Back the fuck up.”

He grins. “There’s my good girl. Now get the fuck out of my office.” He pushes off and heads back toward his desk.

Meanwhile, I remain where I am, blinking rapidly. “Did you just tell me to leave?”

“I did. Your attendance is no longer necessary. I am uninterested in watching you this evening.”

Fear claws its way past my lust. He told me to be assertive, didn’t he? Told me to tell him off. So why the fuck is he angry with me? “Did I do something wrong? You told me—”

“Leave while you have some self-respect, Liv. No one likes those who grovel.” He takes his seat back behind his desk.

“Self-respect?” I choke out.

“Yes. Novel concept for you, I know.”

He’s so cold, so dismissive, it burns me from the inside out. “You can fuck right off, then.” Furious, my power surges through the room, sending the papers on his desk flying onto the floor.

The Ringmaster stands and places both hands on his desk. “Pick those up.”

“Fuck off,” I repeat.

His nostrils flare. “No one else would dare speak to me the way you do. Do you truly believe you are that important to me? That special that I will not punish you for disrespecting me?”

“Go ahead.” I wipe an angry tear from my cheek. “You can’t hurt me anymore than I’ve already suffered.”

“You have no idea what I am capable of,” he says calmly as he moves around his desk. “I could make you feel more pain than you’ve ever felt, put you through things that would make your nightmares a dream. Shall you continue pushing me and find out just what a man like me is capable of?”

Tears burn my eyes as they slip down my cheeks. Fear makes my hands shake; it makes my stomach churn. But I shove through his door and slam it behind me.

I screwed up. Because even after our confrontation back in that alley after he’d bought me beautiful fabrics, I allowed myself to feel important to the Ringmaster. To believe that there might be something in me he sees that I don’t.

But I’m nothing to him.

Nothing special to anyone.

And above that fear, above that embarrassment, I’m *mortified* for allowing everyone to push me around. For being weak. Apollo clings to me, and I don’t have the balls to tell him to back off. The Ringmaster requires me to work twice as much as everyone else...I stomp down the stairs and into the hall.

Ernesto bullied me until I was reduced to nothing. Until I was literal stone.

My parents forced me out of my home because I was worthless—because they feared what others would think of my lack of power.

I reach my door and then pause as cool realization hits me. I’m being weak right now.

Why the hell am I letting him bully me? Why the hell am I letting *anyone* order me around? If I’m truly nothing more than a performer, if I’m nothing special, shouldn’t I be allowed to do as the others do? Turning on my heel, I march down the hall and bang on Fiona’s door before I have a chance to change my mind.

There's a long pause, and I nearly turn away. But before I can, she's pulling her door open. Hair a mess on top of her head, she's wrapped in a sheet.

Her blue eyes widen. "Oh shit, Liv. What's up?"

"What are you—"

Harriss appears in the doorway beside her and rests his hand on her shoulder. Fiona's cheeks flush, and she drops her head.

"Hey, Harriss."

"Liv. I'll give you two a moment." He disappears, and Fiona slips into the hall, shutting the door behind her.

"I know what you're thinking."

"No, you don't."

"He cheated on me with Valentina. But when I saw him after the fire—I don't know. Something just clicked."

"Did he approach you?" I ask, recalling the way he'd predicted she'd give him a second chance.

She shakes her head. "All me. I just, I don't know. I needed release."

I throw up both hands. "Listen, as someone who has not been sexually touched by a man in twelve years, I get it. Just guard yourself."

"I will. He didn't go back to her after we ended."

"But he did it once."

She nods. "This is just casual, a fling."

Reaching out, I squeeze her shoulder. "You know where I am if you need me."

"Speaking of..." She glances up and down the hall. "What are you doing? Is everything okay?"

"Totally fine. I'll see you in the morning? Breakfast and stories," I say.

"Deal. And Liv? Please don't tell anyone."

“You’re the only one I talk to on a regular basis,” I remind her. “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.” She grins and steps back into her room.

I’m turning when Apollo steps into the hall. “Hey, Liv.” He beams at me, shirtless, a towel slung over his shoulder.

“You up for a late-night practice? I have an idea for a new routine.” It’s risky because it goes completely against what the Ringmaster wants. His routines are everything to him. As is the fact that we have rehearsed them over and over again.

But leaving would put me at too much risk right now. So this is the only way I have to push back.

Apollo arches a brow. “Oh?”

“And I want to debut it at tomorrow’s show.” I step in closer. “But it’s going to piss off the Ringmaster.”

A blinding grin stretches over his face. “What I live to do. Let’s do this.”

## CHAPTER 7

# DANTE

The lights are bright as I step out into the ring. The watchers fall completely silent. “Good evening,” I greet as I scan the crowd, searching the sea of faces for anyone who should not be here. Those on the other side of the ring undoubtedly believe I cannot see them, that the lights blind me to their presence.

But, given my heritage, that is not even close to the truth. So, every night, I watch for anyone who poses a threat to what I’ve built and the few people here I actually give a damn about.

As soon as I’m confident we’re clear, I continue. “I am so glad you have decided to join us,” I say, plastering a smile on my face. “Tonight is going to be a treat. A performance that will have you on the edge of your seat.” Standing straighter, I hold up the hand with my cane then point the wooden stick to the sky. On cue, a bolt of light shoots from the top and hits my cane. Flames explode from the top, turning to sparks. The lights go out, and I reach up, grabbing the metal lyra as it soars past.

Lights illuminate the ring once more, but in my place are the cane and my hat.

The crowd gasps.

But my attention is on the woman above. She sits in her lyra, staring down at me, eyes so fucking captivating I nearly miss my cue to release my grip. I land on the metal balcony

with a soft thud, and the lyra soars away from me, but Liv's gaze continues to hold mine for another heartbeat.

Once she reaches the middle, the lyra continues to sway softly as she arches up off the hoop, lights glittering on the metal plates of her costume. Then, she lets go and drops, catching herself on the bottom of the ring where my hand was mere moments ago. My heart drops every single fucking time she does that, but the people in the stands eat it up.

So I let her risk her life every night because they love it. They love her.

And then I treat her like shit every single time I let her get too close. I take a deep breath. Last night was too fucking close. Every moment I spend with her drives me closer and closer to plunging off a ledge I know I won't come back from.

She and I would be a mistake.

A deadly, sexy-as-fuck mistake.

Still captivated, I watch her move. The ring plummets to the ground, swinging as she leans through it and retrieves my hat and cane.

After throwing it to the shadows, she returns to the center, and the ring is raised. She dances, moving to the beat of the music in such an erotic fucking way my cock is already straining against my pants.

That's what she does to me.

Undoes every bit of restraint I have.

That lust is ripped from me, though, when she releases the lyra and plummets to the ground. The gryffin flies toward her, and she lands on his back, straddling him. Her hands fist his feathers as he climbs higher into the air and then drops her.

My heart stops.

The beast in me begins to rattle its chains, and I let the partial shift take place. I'd rather expose myself than suffer the loss of—the gryffin swoops down and grabs her in his arms at the last minute, rolling to the ground in a puff of dust.



Every inch of my body has gone rigid, my hands clenched into fists at my sides as I wait for the dust to clear. I lean forward at the same time they both get to their feet, grinning widely at the crowd.

*I'm going to fucking slaughter him for nearly killing her.* Mistakes are not something I tolerate. Especially not when they risk *her* life. Turning away, I stomp down the stairs, passing Uma wordlessly as she heads up to take her place.

By the time I reach the bottom, they're already walking out of the main part of the tent and into the performer area.

"That was insane!" the gryffin says as he throws his arm around her.

Liv smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "Yeah. Interesting twist."

"What in the actual fuck were you thinking?" I charge forward, hand closing around Apollo's throat before I can even fully comprehend what I'm doing. My white glove is a contrast against his tan skin, but all I can picture is it covered in blood.

His blood. Because I've ripped his fucking head off.

"Ringmaster, wait!" Liv screeches. Her delicate fingers close over my forearm, and even through the fabric of my shirt, my skin burns for her.

I release Apollo so she'll stop touching me. Then, I whirl on her. "He nearly fucking killed you," I growl.

"We planned it that way," she replies, cheeks pink. "It was my idea!"

Anger closes around my sanity like a vice. "You did *what?*"

"We wanted to breathe new life into the routine," Apollo replies. He looks to Liv then straightens as though he's a cock trying to puff out his feathers to impress her.

Fucking boy doesn't even realize there is no competition here. I will win. Every single time.

“You have no right to change my routine. Especially not when the changes are so careless. One second. One wrong move and she would have died. Uma wasn’t even up there to slow her fall.”

“I slowed my own fall.” Liv crosses her arms, shoving those perfect fucking tits up. “I’m not powerless, you know. I used my abilities to keep myself from falling too quickly.”

“It. Was. Foolish.” I growl the words, still unsure Apollo will be walking away this time.

“But it got a rise out of them,” Apollo replies, a grin on his face. “Didn’t you hear how shocked they were? Bet you sell out tomorrow.”

“None of that matters if she dies, you fucking moron.”

Liv continues to stare at me, wordlessly, as though she’s trying to interpret every word that comes out of my mouth.

“If she dies, you lose a partner. I lose my prime-time performer.”

“Plus your favorite toy,” the gryffin spits out. “Tell me, *Ringmaster*, do you even care what happens to her? Or is it that, without her, you’d have no one to rub one off to.”

That does it. I come undone. Lunging forward, I close my hand around his throat once more and slam him down to the ground. “Do you truly believe you can speak to me that way? You are replaceable,” I growl.

Liv reaches out, but I glare at her. “Ringmaster, please! Stop!”

A crowd has gathered. I look up and meet the gaze of Valentina, who’s watching me with a sadistic smile on her face. The skirt she wears barely covers her ass, and she’s placed pink petals over her nipples. When she catches me watching her, that grin spreads, and she bends forward.

Fiona stands just beside her, crossing her arms, blue gaze sharp. The berserker is no match for me, but I wonder if she’d step in to save him. Based on the way she’s watching, arms crossed? Likely not.

“Please,” Liv whispers.

It’s that plea that has me releasing him. “Disrespect me like that again and I will rip every fucking feather off of your body before I tear you apart.” I stand and march away, desperately needing space between me and the one woman who doesn’t even realize she’s been slowly undoing me since the moment we met.

## CHAPTER 8

## IV

Apollo coughs as he sits up. I reach down and help pull him to his feet before slamming my palm into his chest.

“What the hell were you thinking? You should have just told him it was my idea!”

“And miss that reaction? Why would I do that?” He laughs, which pisses me off even more. It’s no secret that Apollo is one of the Ringmaster’s least favorite. While he doesn’t seem to particularly like any of us, he goes out of his way to show Apollo how much he can’t stand him. One wrong move and my partner will be dead.

“You’re a fucking moron.”

“Why? Because I don’t cower to him?”

“He’s going to kill you one of these days, Apollo!” I slam my fist into his shoulder, and he sobers.

His golden gaze darkens. “You shouldn’t be expected to perform that way. You’re not a toy.”

“I know I’m not a toy,” I growl. “But it is not your place to defend me. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.” I’d known the Ringmaster was going to be agitated, but borderline homicidal? That was not something I’d been counting on.

I’ve fallen like that before, granted, never from that high up, but it’s not as though the routine was completely unusual for us. Shifting my gaze, I look past Fiona to where he’d disappeared. The man never leaves the big top before the night is over, but he’d marched clear out of the tent this time.

“I told you to watch your mouth.” Fiona shakes her head. “You also know better than to change routines in the middle of a season. That was foolish. Of both of you,” she adds, her gaze shifting to me.

“Everyone here is so fucking uptight.” Apollo wraps an arm around my shoulders and tries to pull me away.

“I’m going to stay and watch the show.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.” Forcing a smile, I try to remain neutral even though I’m furious at myself for the mistakes made tonight. Fiona is right. We do know better. I’d purposely tried to piss off the Ringmaster, and Apollo paid for it. “I’m sorry,” I say to him. “I never should have suggested it.”

“No biggie.” He grins and then leaves.

“He’s going to get you killed one of these days,” Fiona warns. “The Ringmaster won’t tolerate his behavior much longer, and you’re going to get caught in the crossfire.”

“Apollo’s my partner,” I remind her. “Assigned by the Ringmaster. It’s not like I have much of an option.”

“I, for one, don’t see a problem with her death.” Valentina grins and takes flight, her wings fluttering far too quickly for my eyes to track. She takes off toward the tent flap that will take her to the big top, and the crowd cheers loudly when she erupts into the circle.

“Seriously, Liv.”

“It was my idea to change the routine. I won’t do it again.”

“That may be true, but you need to get Apollo to realize what a mistake he’s making by challenging him.” Fiona follows Valentina out into the center of the ring, daggers in hand.

While my thoughts remain on the Ringmaster’s furious expression, I step closer and peer through the flap. Valentina zips in front of Fiona as she flings her daggers. The performance is, without a doubt, the most dangerous any of us

do, and yet I don't see him here, getting angry that Valentina flew the wrong way or at the wrong speed.

In fact, I never see him watch anyone but me.

Is he seriously so worried I'm going to screw something up? Or is it Apollo he's concerned with?

"You're thinking so loudly I cannot hear my own thoughts."

I turn to Harriss. He taps a black fingernail to his temple. "So you're a mind reader now?"

"Of sorts," he replies as he steps up closer to me. The tan robe he wears brushes the ground. Even outside of the ring, I never see him in anything but his robes, though Fiona assured me—much to my dismay—that what's hidden beneath is well worth the anger she still carries. "They are both magnificent, are they not?"

"You would know."

His expression shifts, brows furrowing as though he's concentrating on something just out of reach. "Fiona took me back, but she has not forgiven me."

"Can you blame her?"

"No," he replies. "I know what I did even if I cannot recall what led me into Valentina's bed."

"Either way, there was no excuse for it. Do it again and I'll make sure no one intervenes as she cuts your dick off."

I turn to start across the tent when Harriss clears his throat.

"You're going to be faced with a choice soon, Liv. And I, for one, hope you choose the right one."

I whirl on him. "What choice?"

He shrugs as though he just told me what his favorite cookie is. "That will reveal itself soon enough." After offering me a wave, he turns away from the main performance ring and heads down the narrow hall that will take him toward the exit where he'll slip outside and set up in the carnival as the people come out.

*“You’re going to be faced with a choice soon.”* What the hell does that even mean? Fucking djinn.

Maybe the same thing Fiona just warned me about? As to whether or not I’ll step in to save Apollo when he inevitably takes things too far with the Ringmaster? My freedom is the only thing I care about, but Apollo is a key to gaining it. Honestly, if he wasn’t, I wouldn’t have stepped in. Getting involved in other people’s bad decisions is not something I need to be doing. My luck is shit enough as it is.

Without him, though, I can’t escape because he’s the only one with the ability to literally fly us both away from here. In fact, if I was sure he’d say yes, I’d go and ask him now.

But that’s something I only get one shot at, and if he turns me down...he could very easily turn on me and confess my entire plan to the Ringmaster. Which means I either need to keep him alive or find a new way to escape.

Since that could take another decade or more, I gather my courage and march toward the edge of the courtyard where I can slip into the apartments. I still have an hour before final curtain call, and if I’m not back in time—well—they won’t exactly miss me.

I’m nearly out when someone clears his throat and says, “Where are you going?”

I stiffen and turn to face Killian. He crosses his muscled arms and studies me curiously. The man is massive, one of three who follow the Ringmaster around nearly constantly. Of the trio, he’s the only one with visible piercings, though I’ve heard rumors the snake bite hoops on his lower lip are hardly his only ones.

Forcing myself to stand a little straighter, I say, “I need to see the Ringmaster.”

“Oh?” A smile toys at the edge of his lips. “As far as I know, your performance with him isn’t scheduled until this evening.”

*Arrogant bastard.* “I’m done for the night. At least until final curtain call. Please, I need to talk to him.”



He cocks his head to the side. “Fine. Go.”

“Thank you. He’s in his apartment?”

Killian nods once, so I turn and jog into the building. The air is warm here, stale even though we open the windows every chance we get. I take the stairs two at a time, running until I’m near breathless when I reach his door.

I half expect Bracken or the other one—Duncan, I believe—to be standing guard outside, but they’re nowhere to be seen. I raise my hand to knock, rapping three times.

Something clatters to the ground, and a man mutters a curse.

Taking that as he might need my help, I shove the door open. The Ringmaster sits on the ground across from me, chest bare, his breathing heavy. I’m struck mute for a moment, unable to tear my gaze from muscles I’ve spent the last twelve years trying *not* to think about. But, shit, even my imagination wouldn’t have done him justice.

The Ringmaster’s body is *magnificent*. As in, carved from fucking stone. And I can only see his upper torso. What might the rest look like?

“What the fuck do you want?” he snarls, ripping me from ‘Imagination Station’ and back to the reality of ‘I’m supposed to hate him’.

I slam the door behind me and rush forward. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Do. Not. Fucking. Touch. Me.”

“Fine.” I stop in my tracks and cross my arms. His face is flushed, eyes shimmering with energy, unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. As though there’s a storm brewing within him and he’s prepared to bring the entire building down around us. “What’s wrong with you?”

“What the fuck does it look like? The gryffin pissed me off.”

“So you’re having a temper tantrum?” I shouldn’t have said it, but the words leave my lips before I can stop myself.

*I'm going to pay for that one later.*

He glares up at me. “You have no idea what you’re taunting right now.”

*What.* Not who. Before I can allow myself to think too closely on that, I uncross my arms and try to look mildly apologetic. This man might have pissed me off, but he owns me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean any disrespect.” I crouch down. “I only came here to tell you that I’m sorry we didn’t run the change by you. We knew better and did it anyway.”

The Ringmaster cocks his head to the side, and the light shines on his neck, revealing thickened skin—scales—in a deep purple before slipping down his arm and shifting to a deep mahogany.

They glisten in the light, the beauty stealing my breath. “Your neck—” My eyes widen, and I stand as he does, taking two full steps backward, still focused entirely on his changing flesh. “You’re a shifter.”

He completely ignores me. “I wanted to rip his fucking throat out for dropping you,” he growls.

“What—” I trail off when my gaze shifts back to his. The copper of his eyes is shining like twin spotlights. They’re so bright it almost hurts to look directly at them, but I can’t tear my gaze away. “What are you?” I finish.

“A shifter,” he replies. “Is that not what you surmised?”

And then it hits me. Honestly, I’m not sure how I missed it before. His rage, strength...combine those with these scales, and he really can only be one thing. “You’re a dragon shifter.”

The Ringmaster moves so quickly that I don’t have time to get out of the way before his gloved hand encases my throat. He slams me into the far wall and leans in. “You taunt me.”

“I-I don’t mean to.” For the first time since I met him, I’m honestly frightened. Because if he is, in fact, a dragon shifter, he’s something of legend. A creature that—up until this point—shouldn’t exist in this world. “Are you?” I whisper. “A dragon?”

“Yes,” he whispers, leaning in so close I can feel the heat of his breath on my cheek. “You now know something only three others here do, and I know they will not out me. Anyone finds out what I am and the fact that I crave you won’t matter. I will rip your heart out even if it kills me to do so.” He releases me and backs away in three large steps.

I gape at him, the threat resonating. I’m not surprised he’s keeping it a secret. Ernesto would often speak of dragons. Of a world full of creatures that were faster, stronger, and far more powerful than any other shifter.

He’d been obsessed with getting his hands on a scale because, as rumor has it, if it’s ground to a dust and snorted, the user will gain the strength of the creature it was taken from. And not just that, but the user would become impervious to injury. They would become damn near indestructible.

Of course, it’s not permanent, but for a man like Ernesto—temporary is good enough. In a world where magic is currency, a dragon scale would be priceless. “I won’t say anything,” I promise. It’s an easy one to make because, while I do not particularly like the Ringmaster, intentionally bringing harm to him is something I can’t make myself do.

*“I will rip your heart out even if it kills me.”* His words replay through my mind, and while the rational part of my brain tells me he likely doesn’t want to lose his prime-time performer, there’s another side, a darker side, that hopes my death would cause him pain for another reason entirely.

“Why would it kill you to rip my heart out?”

His shoulders heave with a heavy breath. Pupils dilated, he looks at me as though I’m the single most gorgeous thing he’s ever seen. Not too different from the way he watches me perform. Is it possession or obsession? Perhaps something more?

Lust warms my blood, pooling in my belly and making my heart race.

This is why I love performing for him. This is why the rush of being here in his space is so alluring. Why, even as I

am desperate to escape, I've waited so long to make my move. Truth is I believe, without a doubt, that if I offered Apollo even a hint of a future together, he would leave with me in a heartbeat.

But the Ringmaster makes me feel important. Even as I think it, I flex my fingers. What will his skin feel like? His scales? Are they smooth? Cool to the touch? Or as hot as this fire burning within me?

Before I can stop myself, I'm reaching forward. The Ringmaster jumps backward, moving so quickly he nearly falls over. "Do not touch me," he snarls once again.

My cheeks heat, and I drop my hand, turning toward the door. "Fine. I'll go—"

"Stop."

I do as I'm told because, if I don't, he'll likely punish me for it later. "I don't like being touched, either," I say softly. "I'm so sorry—"

"What did I tell you about the constant apologizing?" he demands, closer now. His breath fans over the back of my neck, and I shiver.

I don't answer. Just close my eyes and breathe him in. He's so close now, right behind me, and I have to actively fight the urge to lean back and press against him.

"You have no idea how fucking badly I want to touch you," he says. "My bare fingertips sliding over your milky flesh." A gloved finger touches the back of my neck and then slides down my spine.

My lips part, and I let out a breath as the throbbing between my legs intensifies.

"How badly I want to run my hands over your body while you're bent over my desk. It's all I fucking think about," he growls. "The way you would sound when you come on my cock."

The heat between my legs turns to an inferno, so I clench my thighs together in an attempt to ease some of the ache. A

problem I have only in his presence.

“Do you have any idea, Liv, how many times I’ve jerked off to that mental image? How many times I’ve pumped my cock into my hand, wishing I was buried in your pussy instead? Your mouth? That tight ass?” His finger slides down to my tailbone then stops. All while I silently plead for him to keep going.

My breath hitches. “I don’t—”

“You don’t what?” he interrupts. “I can smell it, you know, your arousal. It’s fucking delicious.”

More turned on than I’ve ever been in my entire life, I turn to face him. “If that’s the case, then why don’t you want me to touch you?”

His grin spreads, a carnal smile that makes the throbbing between my legs unbearable. One touch and I’ll be undone. Shit, a light breeze would do it at this point. “Because I’m a monster, Liv. If I were to have you, no one else would be allowed to. And I won’t condemn us both for a night buried inside of you. No matter how fucking badly I want it.”

## CHAPTER 9

## IIV

**C** *ondemn us both.* I really shouldn't think too strongly on the meaning of those words, but I can't help it. "Condemn us both? Because you'd get tired of me?"

He snarls. "You will become a weakness for me. And I do not tolerate weakness of any kind. A threat to you will release the beast I've managed to keep caged."

"All because I touch you?"

"My skin is sensitive," he replies, though he doesn't elaborate.

I should take what he says and walk away. After all, if all goes well, my time here will be over soon. But my traitorous hands want to touch him so badly they're shaking. My pulse is pounding in my ears despite the voice in my head telling me to run. That this is not the future I want, the future I have spent years preparing for. "You've touched me before." I reach up and brush my fingers to my throat. "You just did."

"With a barrier," he replies, lifting his gloved hand. "Touching your skin with mine—it would be a mistake. I am not a man who makes mistakes."

"I won't touch your skin," I reply. "Give me your gloves."

He shakes his head. "You're making a mistake."

"Then let's find out." I hold out my hand.

His piercing gaze never leaves mine. "You can't do this."

“I can leave,” I tell him, taking a step closer. “Or you can let me touch you.”

Brows furrowed, he glares down at me. “Why?”

I run my tongue over my bottom lip. “Because I’m curious.” I tell myself it’s a way to gain his trust, which will give me an opportunity to escape. I try to convince myself that doing this means using him to free myself. Telling myself these things makes it easier because it’s the only thought process that justifies my desire in my mind. Simply wanting to touch him, despite the fact that I hate being touched outside of the ring, is irrational. Emotional. Two things that landed me here in the first place.

“Give me your gloves. Unless you have a spare pair?”

He doesn’t make a move. Doesn’t say a word. Just continues to stare at me, clearly battling with himself over what the right move is. Finally, he grips the tip of a finger and pulls a glove off then offers it to me.

My fingers brush his still-gloved hand as I take the free one, and he lets his uncovered hand fall to the side. The glove is huge compared to my hand, but that doesn’t matter. Not now.

Hand shaking, I press my palm to his chest. His lips part, and he drops his chin down and lets out a tortured sigh. The power I feel now, knowing my touch quiets him this way, is far more potent than anything I ever felt while on the lyra.

But I don’t stop there. Running my hand over his broad chest, sliding it down over the ribbed muscle of his abdomen, I explore every inch of his torso. My gaze moves to the scales, so I move my hand to the left and then over the scales.

They shimmer beneath my touch, causing a low growl to rumble through his chest. Still, I want more. Telling myself it’s all about distraction, I turn and lean back against him. The bodysuit I wear puts a barrier between us, but it’s not much. The heat of his body burns me, searing the flesh beneath my costume.

And somehow, it’s still not enough.



He snakes his only still-gloved hand around and presses against my belly. The Ringmaster holds me tightly, pinning me to his body. A soft moan slips past my lips.

Having him this close eases my anxiety. It erases the dark memories always lurking in my mind. Until all I can think about is him. I arch my back, pressing my ass against his hard length. “Oh,” I whisper as I close my eyes, careful to keep my head forward even though I want nothing more than to arch back against him completely.

It’s been *years* since I was touched by a man outside of the ring. Years since I wanted to be touched.

But this—this is not enough. I want more. All of it. I want flesh on my flesh, hands on my body, tongue on my skin. Licking, touching, tasting. I am desperate to know what it would feel like to have this man worship my body.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Fury,” he whispers.

“It’ll be worth every moment.”

He walks me forward, keeping me pinned against his body until my front is pressed against the wall, his hard body caging me in. The Ringmaster thrusts against me—harder now—his length rubbing against my ass and turning the throbbing between my legs into complete and total agony. “Your very existence is fucking torture. You have no idea how difficult it is to control myself in your presence.”

“I’ve never had anyone look at me the way you do,” the words leave my mouth before I have a chance to stop myself. Something that is becoming a continuous problem in his presence. Everything about this is a mistake. One I will likely regret come morning. But right now, all I can focus on is my need to be closer to him.

“How do I look at you?” he asks.

“Like I’m worth something.”

He pulls back, so I turn to face him. “Everyone else is a fool,” he says. “You are priceless.”

“And yet, others have put a price on me.”

The Ringmaster places both hands on the wall and drops his head. After a few deep breaths, he looks up at me, eyes blazing. “I wish I could erase everyone else from your fucking mind.”

If he only knew the sleep I lose over what I want from him. Over all the ways I want him to touch me despite my desire to flee this place and everyone here

And if I weren't such a coward, I would tell him now. Confess that I've thought about this moment as well. “Why me?” I question. “Valentin—”

“Is not a blip on my fucking radar compared to you. Ever since I found you in that alley—” He trails off and closes his eyes. “I've been unable to think of anyone else. No one compares to the way you call to my beast.”

Between my legs is drenched, so wet the friction of my body suit is nearly too much to bear. I clench my thighs together, craving yet another touch from him. All the touches. Everything.

This man is ruthless.

A monster.

My captor.

Still, I'd be nearly willing to trade my soul for a single night with him.

“I can smell your arousal,” he whispers, leaning in close enough his hot breath fans over my cheek. “I want to bury my face between your legs and taste you when you come.”

I want that, too. More than I could ever put into words. But somehow, admitting that seems impossible. So, I clear my throat. “We're going to be late to curtain call.”

He doesn't move. “Nothing that was spoken of tonight can be repeated. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Even if he hadn't told me to keep quiet, I still would have. Telling the other performers I want to screw the man holding us here would only put a massive target on my head. Especially if they think they can use me to barter for

their own freedom. Something I'm beginning to believe would be an option.

The Ringmaster pulls away, releasing me, so I take my leave, walking as quickly as I can without running down the stairs and out into the courtyard. Killian grins at me as if he knows exactly what just happened, but I don't bother stopping to chat.

By the time I make it into the performers' area of the tent, Apollo is already waiting. "There you are! Where the hell did you go?"

"Had to run back up to my apartment."

His nostrils flare, and his eyes narrow on my face. *Shit, please don't say you can smell my attraction, too.*

"You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah." I plaster a smile on my face. "Just in time for curtain call, right?"

My partner nods, his shoulder-length golden hair swaying as he does. "You sure you're fine, Liv?"

*No. I'm so turned on that the friction of walking might set me off.* "Absolutely. Let's do this." Together, we rush up to the metal balcony. Uma offers me a smile and a wave as I climb onto my lyra, sitting on it like it's a swing. Apollo holds my lyra then shoves me out. I fly, the lyra slowly being lowered toward the ground.

Apollo's gryffin flies in circles until he lands in the center of the ring. Valentina flutters in front of me, blocking me from the crowd's view, but I can't be bothered to care. Because my gaze is trained firmly on one person.

And he's standing in the center, staring up at me.

As soon as I'm close enough to the ground, I leap off and land on the gryffin's back. He drops his head, and I jump off, taking my place between him and the Ringmaster.

"We hope you have enjoyed your time here," the Ringmaster announces, holding out both hands. "And that you

choose to return. Until next time.” He winks, and the entire tent goes black.

As we have done thousands of times, we rush out of the center of the room before Uma brings the lights back on. The crowd cheers loudly, and the performers all scatter. Valentina disappears without a mocking word, something unusual for her.

“Dinner?” Apollo questions.

I swallow hard. “Actually, I think I’m going to head up to my room. I might join you in a bit, but I want to change.”

He smiles. “I’ll save you a spot. Great show tonight.”

I don’t respond, just offer a wave and jog toward the exit. My entire body is still on edge, begging for release. Moving as quickly as I can without appearing suspicious, I head for the stairs.

Once inside my apartment, I strip out of my costume and climb into the shower, not bothering to wait until it warms. The cold stings my skin, seeping into my bones, but it does nothing to douse the fire in me.

The Ringmaster is a dragon shifter.

A dragon shifter I desperately want to go to bed with.

Since that is not particularly helpful to my end goal, I focus only on the facts that might lead me into trouble. For example, Dragons are notoriously protective, more so than gryffins.

And, since he can fly—that makes my mode of escape far more problematic than I would have otherwise considered because, even though I doubt he’d want anyone to see him, he’s not a man accustomed to having his property run away and not be caught.

Which is precisely what I am to him: property.

## CHAPTER 10

## IV

“Liv!” Jenny greets me with a wide smile as soon as I step into the common room we’ve turned into a dining hall.

I offer her a smile in return then make my way toward the breakfast line. Tray in hand, I step up to the bowls of fruit, loading up on those and a protein bar before heading over to her table. To my absolute delight, Valentina sits at a different table, cozying up to a man I’ve never seen before.

Dark hair, dark eyes, though his skin is incredibly pale. It’s not unlikely for the Ringmaster to bring in new performers, though, so I pay him little to no mind as I slide onto the chair beside Fiona.

“We missed you at dinner last night,” Ghrunt growls.

I offer the bakru a soft smile. He’s a foot taller than I am, his skin thick and hard as tree bark. With a dark gaze that misses nothing, he keeps watch around the room. He’s bald, the top of his head the same soft brown color as the rest of his body. “I missed you guys, too. I was exhausted though.” Can’t exactly tell them I spent the entire night masturbating to fantasies of the Ringmaster touching me. That would absolutely not go over well.

“I wasn’t aware you even liked any of us, Ghrunt.” Fiona bats her eyes.

“I like Liv just fine. And Jenny. The rest of you are assholes.”

Jenny beams at him. “Glad to hear that, Ghrunt, because I adore you, too.”

His cheeks deepen, and Thomas chuckles. “Jenny is pretty damn likable.”

A tray is slammed to the table beside me. “Yes, yes, we get it. You two are in love.” Silva plops down. His pale skin is accentuated by the deep mahogany of his vest and matching pants. A Basilisk shifter, he’s fairly rare even for a hybrid. And, the man’s saliva is one of the most toxic poisons on the planet. Outdone only by his horrible personality.

“Love, love, sweet love,” Jenny coos as she leans into Thomas.

“What’s on the docket for today?” I question as I pop a grape into my mouth.

“We’re working on a new routine,” Jenny offers. “Then we’re supposed to all be in the Big Top this afternoon to be introduced to our newbie.” She jabs a thumb at the man.

“What is he?” I question, lowering my voice. Though I’m not sure what good that’ll do if he’s a shifter. They all have crazy good hearing.

“I heard he’s a shapeshifter but his magic doesn’t work like it’s supposed to,” Thomas offers.

“A shapeshifter?” Brad shakes his head, the fae clearly annoyed. “I’ve seen those creatures before. They’ve no face, and their bodies might as well be shadows.”

“I’m only saying what I heard,” Thomas retorts sharply.

Can’t really blame him for the attitude, though. The only two pure fae here, Brad and Kleo typically keep to themselves because no one here can stand the arrogant bastards. “I’m sure the Ringmaster will fill us in this afternoon.”

Jenny leans in, eyes glittering with mischief. “And how about the Ringmaster?”

I stiffen in my seat, alarm bells ringing in my head. “What about him?”

“He almost killed Apollo! Over you! Please tell us; is there something going on between you two?”

“You crave a love story so fucking much you’re willing to throw Liv to the wolves, huh?” Fiona demands.

I swallow hard. Dangerous territory we’re approaching here.

Jenny holds her hands up in mock surrender. “I firmly believe the man is simply misunderstood.”

“Misunderstood?” Silva gapes at her. “Have you lost your damned mind? We’re all trapped here because of him!”

“If I’m not mistaken, you were about to be beheaded when he found and rescued you.”

Silva shakes his head. “Yeah, well, I might have preferred the beheading.”

“You don’t mean that,” Jenny replies with a shake of her head. Her orange hair swings slowly in her ponytail. “Besides, contract will be up for you in what—fifteen years? That’s not too bad.”

The basilisk looks to Thomas. “How do you deal with such optimism all the time?”

Thomas beams at Jenny. “She’s my ray of sunshine.”

“Eww,” Fiona groans, and I laugh.

“You guys are all ridiculous.” I polish off the rest of my fruit but palm my granola bar for later. “I guess I need to find Apollo and make sure he survived the night.”

“I actually saw him in the gym earlier. Might check there.”

“Will do, thanks.”

After dumping my tray in with the dishes, I head down the hall, back toward the stairs. I’m just reaching for the door handle when it swings open and catches me right in the forehead. Pain explodes behind my eyes. “Son of a bitch!” I fall backward, right onto my ass.

“Shit, Liv. Are you okay?”



The Ringmaster's voice washes over me, setting my nerves on fire. Head feeling like—well—I just got pummeled by a metal door, I look up at him. He's kneeling in front of me, copper eyes full of concern.

“Fine. Thanks.” I try to stand but sway on my feet. The Ringmaster steps forward, but I manage to steady myself with a hand on the wall. With my other hand, I touch a finger to my forehead and wince. My fingers come back with crimson on them. “Well, that's just perfect.”

“What the fuck were you doing?”

“Seriously, though.” I wince, ignoring his question. “Don't you have good hearing or something?”

His gaze narrows at me as though I've just spilled his secret. Which, of course, I haven't. Plenty of supernaturals have great hearing. It's not that difficult to assume he would, too. “Come with me.” The arrogant bastard doesn't even give me the opportunity to deny his order before he's turning on his heel and marching back up the stairs.

Granted, with the massive migraine prepping to split my head in two, I wouldn't have put up much of a fight anyway. I follow, keeping one hand on the baluster as I follow him all the way to the top.

By the time we reach his door, I'm so winded I can barely stand, and my head has begun pulsating with a mind of its own.

“Sit,” he orders, gesturing to the chair across from his desk.

I sink down, keeping the heel of my palm pressed against the wound.

Within seconds, the Ringmaster is back. “May I?” With a gloved hand, he holds a wet washcloth the color of an emerald.

Swallowing hard, I drop my hand and tilt my face.

Tender is not a word I ever would have used to describe this brutal man. Yet, that's exactly what he is as he dabs the cloth to my injured head. The contact stings, but with each

touch, I find myself more enchanted, studying his sharp features.

His jaw is strong and square, his nose pointed, though a bump in the middle is evidence that it has likely been broken more than once. Surprising, really, especially now that I know what he is.

“Who broke your nose?”

The Ringmaster stops and glares down at me. “Excuse me?”

“Your nose has been broken before, right?” I question, instantly wishing I’d kept my mouth shut.

He eyes me suspiciously then leans back against his desk, cloth in hand. “My younger brother.”

“You have a brother?”

“Had a brother,” he corrects before pushing off his desk.

Guilt settles heavily on my shoulders. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up painful memories.”

“Not painful,” The Ringmaster replies. “Because I choose to not let them be.” He disappears through a door, returning less than a minute later with a vial of something in his hand. “This will heal it before tonight’s performance.”

“Good idea. Can’t have me looking like Apollo dropped me,” I joke.

The Ringmaster stills. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

“It was,” I reply. “Though I see it fell flat.”

The Ringmaster leans in with a cotton ball in his hand, applies some of the contents of the vial to it, and presses it against my forehead. Once again, he’s tender. “Does it feel better?”

I look up at him, and he doesn’t pull away. The air between us thickens, and suddenly, I can feel nothing but the heat pooling in my belly. “Much.”

Still, he remains where he is, frozen in place by whatever strange connection we seem to have found. It makes no sense. I've been here for twelve years now, and aside from thinking he was attractive from a physical standpoint, I've never harbored anything but anger toward the man.

How ironic is it that, on the cusp of me seeking escape, I find—whatever the hell this is.

“Have you spoken to anyone about last night?” he questions.

That snaps me back. “Of course not.”

The Ringmaster puts some space between us and takes a seat behind his desk. “And you won't.”

“I told you last night that I wouldn't. That's not who I am.”

The Ringmaster leans in closer. “I find myself intrigued by your personality. You keep to yourself, for the most part, avoid most of the group outside of the ring and mealtime, and yet you have the courage to come up here and challenge me because I stuck up for you in regards to your partner.”

“Stuck up for me?” I glare at him. “Are you serious? Apollo and I were just trying to make things more interesting—with a routine *I* insisted on, by the way—and you assaulted him.” The very energy around him is completely different from the man I touched last night. He's angrier now, harder, and apparently wants to pretend like he didn't just tell me less than twelve hours ago that he wanted to bend me over his desk and screw my brains out.

The corners of the Ringmaster's lips twitch. “Assaulted him?”

“Yes. He didn't do anything we hadn't previously agreed on.”

“No?” He straightens. “Should it have been your throat I wrapped my hand around, then? You I threatened? Because I do not take kindly to others attempting to steal my control. And had last night gone wrong, his actions would have ripped it right out of my hands when it comes to you.”

“What the hell is it with me?” I demand, losing what little control over my anger I had. Energy from my fury blood snakes through my body, and a gust of wind sends the carefully organized papers on his desk scattering to the floor. I’m instantly mortified. Embarrassed even. Because my power is literally nothing more than a temper tantrum when compared with his. “Shit, I’m sorry.” Jumping up from my chair, I kneel and start gathering them. The Ringmaster does not move.

“You are my top performer,” he replies. “I enjoy watching you. The patrons enjoy watching you. If something were to happen, I would lose business, and that is not something I can tolerate. Not now. Not ever.” He moves away from me, so I take a moment to look up at him.

“So everything you said last night was a lie?” I hate the emotion in my voice. Hate the way I feel so fucking used.

“I was frustrated, and my control bent. What I said last night was a mistake,” he tells me. “And one we will not be making again.”

I stand, abandoning the papers on the ground. “I will see you tonight for my private performance,” I snap as I march toward the door. “Thanks for the headache.” After slamming the door behind me, I descend the stairs and emerge into the main hall where my room is.

Unfortunately, I’m not alone.

Valentina narrows her gaze on me. “What the hell are you doing up there?”

“Not in the mood, Val.” I try to move past her, but she steps in front of me.

“I asked you a question,” she snaps, her gaze darting from me to the door behind me. The one that leads to *his* stairs. “You shouldn’t be bothering him like that.”

“Bothering him?” I gape at her. “You have no damn idea what you’re talking about.”

Valentina steps forward, bright eyes shimmering with anger. “I know *exactly* what I’m talking about. *Exactly* what

you're trying to do, and it won't work."

Crossing my arms, I glare back at her. "And just what is it you think I'm doing, Val? Sleeping my way to the top? Letting him fuck me in exchange for freedom? Oh, wait," I trail off, chuckling. "That was your plan." Shoving past her, I reach my room and slam the door before crossing the room and reaching under my mattress for the box containing all the magic I've earned while working here.

It's not much, really. A handful of vials of Vampire venom and two vials of shifter blood, but it's just enough to help me get settled somewhere else. Somewhere far away from this place that holds the dragon who forces me to feel things that make me hate myself.

## CHAPTER II

## LIV

“**W**hat’s going on with you?”

I glance over as Apollo removes his shirt and stretches. Tonight, he’s not shifting—punishment for our act the other night—which means he’ll be flying on a lyra with me. “Nothing, why?”

He pulls his golden hair back away from his face, securing it in a band at the base of his neck. “Something’s off. We’ve known each other long enough for me to tell, Liv.” The gryffin crosses both arms and studies me, brow raised.

*I’m having conflicting feelings for a man we all hate.* “Honestly? I’m just tired. Val won’t stop giving me crap, and the double performances are starting to get to me.” The second part is a lie. Truthfully, the private moments with the Ringmaster are something I look forward to far more than I should. But his consistent back and forth has me questioning my own sanity. Add to that the stomach ache and exhaustion I’ve been unable to shake since I woke up this morning, and I’m pretty fucking over life at the moment.

Apollo’s gaze narrows. “You shouldn’t be forced to do those, Liv. You need to stand up to him.”

“And do what?” I dust my hands and then grip the lyra. “End up on my back with his hand around my throat?” Why does that mental image make me want to do just that? *Damn hormones.*

Lowering his voice, Apollo steps closer. “We can leave,” he tells me. “Find a way to escape.”

“That *never* goes well,” I reply even as my heart begins to pound. This is what I wanted, right? To have him take me away from here. And having Apollo offer it rather than me having to ask is a massive bonus because it means I won’t have to worry about him reporting me to the Ringmaster. So why does the very idea of me leaving make me want to hurl?

As if on cue, my stomach twists. Sweat beads on my forehead.

“But we’re different, right? I can fly, and with you able to control the wind, you can shield our scent so his team cannot track us,” Apollo insists.

*Except he can fly, too. And likely far faster than we can.* I step closer, keeping my expression neutral. “Apollo, you know what will happen if he finds us?”

“What’s going to happen with us staying here? We have decades left on our contracts, Liv. By the time we’re free, both of us are going to be too damned tired to do anything else. But if we go now, if we leave, we can make it to Fire and Fluorite. They’ll protect us.”

“The house that sold you to the Ringmaster in the first place?”

He shakes his head, eyes flashing with anger. “Mathis is dead now, remember? He was threatened by me, but the rest of the house will take us. And they can protect us from the Ringmaster. Once we’re a part of the house, nothing else will matter. We just have to make it to the border.”

Footsteps headed our way silence my response.

Apollo leans in and grips my forearm and whispers, “Think about it, okay?”

When he pulls away, I nod.

Uma comes into view, wearing her typical black cloak. “You two ready for tonight?”

Apollo beams at her. “Always.”

She returns his smile, clearly enchanted by his charm. They all are. Honestly, if I weren’t so twisted by my past, I



might feel the same. But in my years of life, I have learned that the biggest monsters aren't those who wear the danger on their sleeves.

No, it's the ones who charm. Those who appear completely enamored by you. They are the true betrayers.

"This is the first night you won't be shifting in a few years, right?" she questions, and he nods with a glance back at me.

"My life is in Liv's hands tonight." With a wink, he dusts his hands and claps the excess off. Below, the crowd roars, and I glance down as the Ringmaster steps into the spotlight.

My muscles begin to quiver. Taking a deep breath, I do my best to focus. *One hour, and then I'll be able to step out for fresh air.*

*Sixty minutes.*

*I can do this.*

Still, my stomach seizes once again.

"Good evening!" he calls out, deep voice booming. The bastard is grinning, likely the only genuine smile he ever displays. "Are you ready for three brand new shows?"

The crowd erupts.

"Tonight, we have a very special treat for you. But only if you dare to face the unknown, stare danger in the face, and—" He trails off and tips his face up toward me. I swear our gazes lock, his copper eyes brightening so I can see them clearly. He continues, "Be willing to take the leap even if it means dancing in the flames."

I swallow hard as the cramps let up for just a moment. Why the hell does that feel so heavily weighted toward me?

The Ringmaster holds up his palm then snaps. Flames burst to life, and I gasp, gripping my lyra even more tightly as the sparks flutter up into the air above him.

"Fucking-A. I've never seen him use magic before. Guess shifter's off the table."

I turn to Apollo. "What?"

“We were betting he’s a shifter of some kind, but if he’s using fire magic, he must be a fae. Maybe a phoenix.”

*Or a dragon.* “Oh, yeah, he must be.” I turn back toward the ring just in time to see Valentina fly down and land beside him.

The audience cheers as she wraps an arm around his waist. My hand tightens on the lyra as blinding jealousy overtakes my rational senses and pisses me the hell off. *Why* do I care? Why should I care?

The Ringmaster raises one hand and continues, “Just remember, stay in your seat. I’m not responsible for what happens should you choose to step into the ring.”

The lights go out, plummeting the tent into darkness. When they come back on. The ring is empty, and Valentina is depositing the Ringmaster onto the metal balcony across from us. His gaze finds mine. Then he dips his head in a nod and turns to leave.

“All right, partner, you ready for this?” Apollo questions as he comes to stand on the edge of the railing.

*No.* My vision swims. “Yes.” Knowing how important it is to remain focused, I force my thoughts to clear, picturing the performance ahead of us so I don’t get either of us hurt—or worse. Gripping my lyra with both hands, I step off the balcony and plummet below.

The wind rushes past me, all while I flip up and place both legs into the hoop. Then I release the lyra with my hands so I dangle down. Everything happens in a matter of seconds, and by the time I’m swinging back toward Apollo, I’m ready to catch him.

He leaps.

I grip his forearms, and he grins up at me as we soar across the top of the Big Top. Below, the crowd cheers. I deposit him on the other side in the same place Valentina left the Ringmaster. Then I swing back and grip my own balcony.

Breathing still level, I rush up another set of stairs until I reach the very top. Here, a metal balcony much like the one I

just vacated hangs, though this one runs the complete distance of the tent.

Apollo meets me in the middle where he grabs a long silk in obsidian, and I wrap my hands in a bright red one.

The same shade as blood.

“Here’s hoping I don’t die,” Apollo jokes.

“At least, you can shift on the way down,” I joke. Spots dance in my vision, and I clamp an arm around my waist.

“What’s wrong? Liv—”

“Fine,” I interrupt. “Nerves. Don’t die.”

He grins at me as the lights below go completely dark. A heartbeat later, a spotlight shines. Apollo steps out to the ledge and off, letting his hands glide him down the silks. As I watch his solo performance, waiting for my own cue, I try to ignore the man coming toward me from the other side.

“What are you doing up here?” I ask as the Ringmaster stops beside me.

“Ensuring you don’t fall.” His reply is spoken without emotion. *Not surprising.*

“How chivalrous of you.” I keep my gaze on Apollo, watching as he climbs the silks and wraps his body with them. Then he releases and spins closer to the ground. The crowd is absolutely eating it up, their cheers proof that the gryffin’s talents exceed merely swooping in and saving me.

“The gryffin is handling the silks quite well,” the Ringmaster whispers near my ear. His hot breath has goosebumps flaring to life all along my skin.

I shiver. “We practiced,” I snap. “The crowd seems to be enjoying him, too.”

“Not as much as they enjoy you,” he replies.

I turn to face him. “I’m sure Valentina appreciates him more-ugh,” I groan, bending at the waist.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Ate something weird. I’m fine.”

“Liv. Let’s go.” He reaches for me, but I shake my head. “Leave me be, Ringmaster. I’ve performed through far worse.”

“Lie,” he growls. “Your scent is off. What the fuck did you eat?”

“Noth—” I trail off as I sway, my entire body going limp. The edge comes up far too soon, and I fall.

“Liv!” The Ringmaster roars. He jumps, grabbing the silk with one hand and sliding down until his arm wraps around me. We jerk to a stop inches before we hit the ground.

The crowd is dead silent for a beat. Vision wavering, I manage to make out Apollo as he crosses toward us. As soon as he reaches us, the Ringmaster shakes his head.

“Smile and bow,” he growls.

Apollo does, and the Ringmaster cradles me against his jacketed chest as he rushes out of the ring.

“What the hell is wrong with her?” Apollo demands.

The Ringmaster deposits me on the couch. “Get me cool water,” he orders.

“I don’t feel so great.” My stomach rolls.

“Fuck.” He lifts me again and rushes toward the door.

“Wait! What the hell is wrong with her?”

“Have the berserker bring me a cloth and cool water to her room.” He doesn’t wait for a response as he continues to rush up the stairs and toward my apartment.

As soon as we’re inside, he sets me down on my bed and removes my face mask from where it sits on my throat.

“What did you eat today?”

“Breakfast,” I slur. My limbs are far too heavy, my vision swirling with black spots. It’s as though I’m alert but have zero control over any motor movements.

“What the fuck did you eat, Liv. As in what food, not the meal.”

I try to recall, but my thoughts are jumbled. “Fruit?”

“Is that a fucking question?”

The door opens, but the newcomer is too far away for me to make out any features.

“What is wrong with her?” *Fiona*.

“I think she was poisoned.” He takes a cloth that she offers him as soon as she’s close enough that I can see her. Blue eyes blazing, she looks down at me as though she’s ready to kill someone.

“Who did it?”

“If I knew, their blood would be adorning the walls.”

“Only if you get to them first,” she snarls back.

Bile burns my throat. I gag as it comes up, but I’m unable to roll to my side to keep from choking on it. The contents of my stomach spew out of my mouth, and in a slew of curses, the Ringmaster rolls me onto my side and yanks the hair out of my face. “Get me Duncan, and have him bring Adaya here.”

“I’m sorry,” I manage, though the words are barely audible—even to me.

## CHAPTER 12

# DANTE

“**S**he’ll survive.” Adaya zips up her backpack and then slings it back over her shoulder.

“What happened to her?” The berserker has refused to leave. When Duncan tried to make her, she threw him through the door. I could have forced her to go, but given how much she cares for Liv, having her around is smart.

Especially when I believe someone is trying to kill her.

While the fire was not directed at her specifically, it happened. And I still have yet to discover who started it.

“She was poisoned,” the water fae replies. “With a fairly potent toxin, too. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Any idea who might have been able to get their hands on something like that?” I ask Fiona.

“Yeah. Any of us could have gotten it. We go out as a group, but occasionally, we’ll separate to shop in the market.”

“This is not something that could have been purchased in the market,” Adaya says as she crosses her arms. “This would have been made specifically to target her fury blood.”

“Whoever did this has been planning it?” Fiona snarls.

“Yes.”

The berserker turns to me. “Valentina. It has to be her. She hates Liv.”

“Enough to poison her?”

“Absolutely.”

Anger singses my veins, but I force myself to remain neutral—for now. “I will find out if she had anything to do with this.”

“Fuck that. We know it had to have been her! Everyone else here adores Liv. No one would try to hurt her.”

“I can’t rule out someone sneaking toxin into the food. If it was meant to interact with Liv’s blood, they could have put it in the food when it was originally purchased, correct?”

Adaya nods in agreement. “Based on what I sense, no one else but a fury would have been susceptible.”

“This is fucking bullshit,” Fiona snaps.

“Leave Valentina to me,” I warn her. “Or you will be punished.”

“Fuck off.”

The berserker whirls and stomps out of the apartment.

“Surprised you let her live.”

“She serves a purpose,” I tell Adaya.

“And what purpose is that?”

“She cares enough to keep Liv alive.” I look down at the fury, who is now sleeping peacefully. Her hair is still matted with sweat, but her breathing is no longer ragged. I take a deep breath and then turn toward the door. “Stay here until the berserker is back.”

“You got it, boss.”

I slam the door behind me, not at all surprised to see Duncan waiting for me outside. “Killian has gathered everyone in the center of the Big Top,” he says.

“Great.” Without breaking stride, I make my way down the stairs and into the performance area of the tent.

“She going to live?”

“Yes.” I shove the flaps aside, moving into the ring. All eyes turn to me, and everyone ceases speaking. “Someone



poisoned Liv,” I announce, my gaze traveling over the crowd. “I have reason to believe it was one of you fuckers. Which I find quite interesting since I’ve made it clear from day one that there is to be no fighting amongst you.”

“Is she going to live?”

“Yes,” I say without looking at the gryffin. Given his kind’s obsession with things—and people—they consider theirs, I cannot imagine he’d have harmed her. No, my attention remains wholly focused on the pixie currently avoiding any and all eye contact with me.

“I’m so glad she’s going to be okay,” Jenny says. “Does she need anything? I can help—”

“We have it handled,” I interrupt. “I will find out who poisoned her, and when I do, that person will pay for it with their life. You have my fucking word on that.” Turning away, I march out into the hall, bait for someone I know will follow.

It takes less than a minute before she catches up to me.

“Such a shame about Liv.”

I whirl, hand closing around Valentina’s throat as I slam her against the wall of the stairwell. “Did you fucking poison her?”

Valentina’s gaze remains on mine, completely calm despite the risk to her life. “Why would I do that?”

“I don’t fucking know, but of everyone here, you have the greater reason to want her out of the way.”

Valentina’s gaze never shifts from mine. “I don’t care for Liv, that’s no secret, but I enjoy tormenting her far too much to kill her.” She grins. “And if I wanted to, I would want her to see me deal the final blow.”

The dragon within twists and turns, fighting to break free. My arms partially shift beneath the fabric of my shirt, and it’s all I can do to fight the beast back down. He wants the pixie dead. Wants them all dead so no one can come for Liv ever again.

I tighten my grip, and Valentina grips my forearm, her face turning color thanks to the lack of oxygen. “I will kill you if you so much as breathe wrongly in her direction, pixie. You and I were *never* a thing. I wouldn’t touch that rotten pussy of yours with a fucking pole let alone my dick. Get that through your fucking head, or I will paint the walls with your blood as a reminder to anyone who thinks twice about coming for what’s mine.” I release her, and she slumps backward against the wall, sucking in breath after breath.

Without waiting for her to catch it, I march upstairs to my apartment and head straight for my wardrobe.

Otherwise, there’s no telling what I might do.



LIGHTS from the carnival below shine brightly, but unlike most nights, I feel no pride when I stare down at them. The whiskey in my hand does nothing but burn as it slips down my throat. Still, it’s a hell of a lot better than fucking water.

At least, right now.

Behind me, Liv continues to sleep soundly in her bed. With all the others down entertaining the patrons, there was no one left to watch over her.

So, here I am.

Breathing the same air as a woman I should have sent on her way the moment I first found her in that alley. Hell, I should have let them fucking kill her. Saved myself the trouble.

Even as I think it, my hand tightens around the glass.

Her death would be a living nightmare.

“I guess, since you’re here, it means I’m alive. Unless, of course, this is hell.” Her voice is hoarse.

Turning, I watch as she manages to scoot herself up and lean back against the headboard. I take my seat on the windowsill before downing what's left in my glass. "How are you feeling?"

"Gross."

"Fiona and Adaya cleaned you up after you vomited."

"So that happened." She groans. "Everything is a bit of a blur." She pinches the bridge of her nose. "My head is pounding."

"You were poisoned."

Her eyes open. "Poisoned." It's not spoken as a question, and there's little surprise.

"Yes. Fiona believes it was Valentina, but she swears it was not. Are you certain you ate nothing but the fruit?"

"Yes. Honestly, I forgot to eat the rest of the day."

"Adaya believes the poison was specifically brewed to target your fury blood."

"Which means—"

"Someone went through a significant amount of trouble to try to kill you." I watch her expression closely, searching for any flicker that might mean she has an idea of who would have done it, but aside from blatant confusion, I sense nothing. "Is it possible Ernesto might have—"

"He wouldn't poison me," she says quickly. The air around her shifts, her scent morphing into one I've recognized means she's afraid. "He'd want me to know it was him. The bastard revels in torturing his victims, so trust me when I say, if he wanted to kill me, he would do so face-to-face." A tear slips down her cheek as she closes her eyes again.

Unable to help myself, I stand and cross the room toward her to take a seat on the edge of her bed. I rest a hand on her leg, the comforter our barrier. "You will be eating with me from now on. And only eating the food that is prepared for me."

“You can’t be serious. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Yes. You do.”

Her cheeks turn a fiery pink. “People already think there’s something going on between us.”

“Let them think it, then. I’d rather there be a rumor than have to bury you because something else slipped by. Whoever did this is going to try again, and I’d rather be able to catch them before they succeed.”

## CHAPTER 13

## IIV

One week ago, someone tried to kill me.  
Seven breakfasts.

Seven lunches.

And tonight makes seven dinners sitting across from the Ringmaster while his security detail brings us food hand-prepared by a chef while they were supervised by Duncan. I've eaten more in the past week than I typically do in a month, but I'm certainly not going to complain.

I haven't been allowed to perform just yet, but after tonight, I'm hoping I'll get to return to the ring. As much as I'm surprised to admit it, I miss my old routine. The good news about not being allowed to perform?

I've had plenty of time on my hands, which means I've finished not one but two new outfits. Standing in front of my mirror, I study the way the blue fabric shimmers against my skin and smile.

If he enjoyed the last one I made, this one is going to knock him dead.

After slipping into a black cloak, I make my way down the hall and up the stairs to his apartment. The door is cracked, so I push it open a bit more and stick my head in. "Hello?"

"Come in."

The Ringmaster stands with his back to me, facing a roaring fire in the hearth. His broad shoulders completely fill

out the white shirt he wears, and even as I want to despise how he makes me feel, I have to admit he looks fucking amazing.

Dinner is already on the table, though, based on the steam wafting off of what looks to be lasagna, it hasn't been there long. "Sit," he orders.

I slip out of the jacket, hang it on the back of my chair, and sit down.

He stops—and freezes when he sees me. Gaze turning molten, he studies the bodice of my singlet, starting at the top of my shoulders and dropping down to the sheer netting that covers the swell of my breasts before making his way to the shimmering blue fabric that continues down my waist. "You're not performing tonight," he chokes out.

I try not to smile at his clear discomfort. "No, but it seemed a waste to let this remain in my wardrobe. Don't you agree?"

"I—" He clears his throat. "Yes. You do good work."

A stack of papers sits beside his plate as they do most nights. He takes his seat and begins to eat as he reads.

It's been like this every single meal. Honestly, I'm starting to believe he's doing it simply to avoid conversation.

"It's been a week," I tell him. "I can start eating with the other performers."

"No." His reply is curt, and he doesn't even bother looking at me.

"Seriously, I seem to be little more than a distraction to you while you're trying to work."

"Until we find out who poisoned you, you're going to continue eating with me."

Frustration has me pushing my plate away. "It obviously wasn't anyone here, right? I'm guessing you talked to everyone."

"I did."

“And since, as far as I know, everyone is still breathing, that means I should be safe. You said your security is supervising the shopping now, correct?”

“They are.”

Frustration burns me from the inside. “Then there is no way for anyone to get anything into my food.”

The Ringmaster lifts his gaze to me now. “Do I bore you?”

“Yes. Frankly, you’re shit at conversation.”

A crooked grin spreads over his face, and warmth pools between my legs. Even from here, I can smell him, that heady scent that belongs to only him. “And just what would you like to talk about, Liv? The weather?”

“Sure. It was sunny today. Warm. Even though I could only enjoy it from my window.”

That fucking smile grows. “It was quite warm. Eat.”

“No.”

Chuckling, the Ringmaster stands and makes his way over to me. The gloves he always wears adorn his hands, and they contrast beautifully with the black steel of the utensil on my plate as he lifts it. A forkful of cheese, marinara, and pasta in his hand, he lifts it and presses it gently to my lips. “Open for me, Liv.”

I swallow hard but refuse. My lust grows, desire lighting my center on fire.

“Open your mouth, Liv, or I’ll open it for you.” His eyes glimmer at the challenge, which is why I obey. Or, at least, that’s what I’m going to tell myself.

Flavor seeps through my mouth, though I’m focused on anything but the food.

“Good girl,” he whispers. The Ringmaster sets the fork back on my plate and turns my chair so I’m facing him. Then he crouches down and scoops another forkful. “Again.”

I swallow the food in my mouth. “I can feed myself.”



“Certainly didn’t look that way from where I was sitting. Open your mouth, or must I threaten to do it for you again?”

Once again, I open, and he slips the fork between my lips. A piece of marinara slides off of the tines and lands on my bottom lip, so as soon as I finish chewing and swallowing, I run my tongue out and sweep it up.

The Ringmaster’s gaze tracks every movement. And when I look down, it’s impossible not to notice the massive bulge in his pants. I swallow hard.

“Can you feed yourself now?” he demands.

I lift my eyes back to his, noting that his gaze has cooled now. Almost to the point of anger. “Yes. I am more than capable of sticking my own fork in my mouth.”

With a grunt, he leaves my fork and returns to his seat.

All the while, I’m trying my best to contain the throbbing between my legs. I cross them, squeezing gently in any attempt at all to get some relief. Unfortunately, I have a sneaking suspicion there is only one thing that’s going to help with that. And he’s clearly unwilling to act on it.

As though nothing happened, the Ringmaster picks up his paper again and begins reading as he eats. I take a few bites, noting that, while delicious, the food is a shit distraction.

“What are you reading?”

“A paper.”

“Is that what that is?” I ask, sarcasm dripping from the words. Apparently, I’ve decided pissing him off is my new favorite pastime. Quite a long way from plotting my escape.

“I am scanning a new contract,” he says.

“Do you typically work during dinner?”

“No.”

“You’re doing it because I’m here.”

“Yes.”

“Then why not let me go back downstairs?” I question.

The Ringmaster sighs and sets his paper down. “Have we not already gone through this?”

“We have.”

“Yet you were unsatisfied by the results.”

“Clearly.” I cross my arms. “Perhaps Valentina would be better company.” I mean to taunt him, to poke the dragon, but I’m not prepared for the grin that graces his face in response.

The Ringmaster’s eyes shimmer with power. I swear I can even make out flames in the deep color. “Jealous?”

“One would have to have a connection to feel jealous,” I reply. “And for you, I feel nothing.”

He leans back and crosses his arms, all while the warmth between my legs threatens to consume me. “Then why can I smell your arousal?” he questions. “Why can I imagine what you’d taste like as you come on my face?”

*Oh, fuck.* I swallow hard. “You’ll never find out.”

The Ringmaster chuckles. “You seem so sure of yourself, Fury, and yet I cannot help but detect a bit of uncertainty when you speak of such things.”

“Perhaps I simply prefer men who do not cower behind gloves when they touch me.”

His smile fades. “I’ve told you what would happen should I touch you.”

“No. You didn’t. Condemning us both seems impossible to do with a single touch.”

“And yet it is inevitable.”

“So you say.” I take another bite of my lasagna then get to my feet. “Am I cleared to go? I’ve lost my appetite.”

The Ringmaster watches me closely, his gaze raking over my body in a way I know will haunt my dreams tonight. Finally, he nods. “Sleep well, fury. You will return to the ring tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER 14

# DANTE

I'm a fucking fool. A moron. A man who clearly does not possess a single ounce of any type of survival instinct.

Because if I did, I would have snapped Liv's neck the moment she realized what I am.

Aside from Bracken, Duncan, and Killian, she's the only breathing person in this world who knows my true nature. The only one who carries the power to ruin me. And I'd just let her fucking walk out. Worse yet, I've spent far too much time watching her from across a table, yearning for something I can never have.

I slam my fist into the wall, and sheetrock dust falls to the floor. Breathing ragged, I rest my forearm against it and do my best to regain control. I've never lost it again this quickly after a treatment. Never struggled to keep the beast at bay within hours of having my back punctured. Yet, the moment she left, I treated myself. For two hours I remained in that wardrobe, and the beast is still rattling its chains.

Perhaps I should have done it while she was here. Forced her to stand and bear witness to the brutality I put my body through. After all, if I can hurt myself like that, imagine what I can do to her—but even as I think it, those thoughts get shoved back down.

Even the monster within wants her to survive.

And with that, I march toward my door and all but rip it off the hinges. Everyone should be down at the carnival,

entertaining the patrons for at least another hour, but Liv is in her room. Alone.

Before I can fully process what I'm doing, my gloved knuckles are rapping against her door.

"Who is it?" Liv calls out, her sweet, delicate voice like music to my fucking ears.

"Open up."

I hear the chain lock slide out of place, and she's pulling the door open. My mouth goes dry as I take in the sight of her in nothing but a towel. Hair up in a bun, her shoulders are completely bare. Milky skin on full display.

Without fully considering the consequences, I wrap an arm around the back of her neck and bury my gloved hand in her hair. She gasps, pink lips parting as I shove her inside her apartment and slide the lock back into place.

"I wasn't expecting you," she whispers.

Careful to keep my skin from brushing hers, I lean down and inhale her scent. Lemon and cinnamon—a unique combination that I only sense when she's turned on. I bet I could slide right into her. Bet she'd be so fucking warm she'd thaw the ice around my heart. "Then who were you expecting, dressed like that?"

"No one," she whispers.

I tighten my hold, keeping her face tilted up to see me. "No?"

"I just got out of the shower."

Despite Liv being obedient, there's a fire in her eyes that threatens to consume. A fire I desperately want to burn in. "Why did you need to shower?" I inhale again, the beast within slithering beneath my skin.

"It was a cold one," she replies, meeting my gaze.

Releasing her, I take a step back. "Did it work?"

"No." Her throat bobs as she swallows hard.

My cock hardens. “And how were you planning to rectify that?”

Her gaze briefly flicks to her bed, so quickly if I’d been a lesser creature I would have missed it.

“Don’t let me interrupt.”

Liv’s cheeks flush with color. I wonder if I’ve perhaps gone too far this time. Shown too much of my hand. She has to know by now that, despite the power I claim to hold, it is she who controls me.

Instead of kicking my ass out, though, she reaches up and pulls the tie out of her hair. It falls past her shoulders, and she turns away from me, heading toward the bed where she finally faces me again.

I hold my breath as I watch, cock rock hard.

Liv drops her towel, and I suck in a breath. Her naked body is fucking magnificent. Perfect. I want to fall to my knees and weep at her feet, thanking the stars that she exists at all. Her pink nipples are already pebbled, practically begging for my mouth. For my hands to grip them as she rides me. *Fuck, this was a bad idea.*

Her slender waist makes way for curvy hips and thighs I want wrapped around my head as I bury my face in that sweet fucking pussy.

“I’d planned on a solo performance,” she says as she climbs onto the bed, lying on top of the covers.

She’s unashamed in my presence.

Not at all bothered at the fact that she’s completely bared to me—a dragon. A man feared by all others. I’m unable to speak, to respond, terrified that the words coming out of my mouth will betray far more than I’m willing to give up.

After crossing toward her, I take a seat in a plush chair far enough from the bed that I should be able to catch myself before I do something stupid but close enough that I can see her.

Sense her arousal as it fills the room.

Liv's hands stroke her nipples, and she spreads her legs, giving me a full view of her wet center. Even from here, I can see how fucking turned on she is. I growl low and deep in my chest, desperation to claim her overwhelming. I can see myself standing, stripping out of my clothes, burying my cock in her tight pussy, and fucking her till she comes.

I can see the way she'd look up at me, eyes wide, kneeling as I pump into her fucking mouth. See her eyes widen as she swallows my release down.

"I need to leave." I stand quickly, prepared to make a mad dash for the door.

Liv sits up. "No."

"You have no fucking clue what this is doing to me," I growl. "It was a mistake."

She glances down at my crotch and licks her bottom lip. "I had a pretty good idea at dinner and an even better one now."

"You don't understand. I cannot touch you, Liv. I will come undone, and I'm unwilling to gamble with that. Not when I stand to lose everything I've worked for."

She considers me for a minute, gaze staying on my face. Then, she gets to her feet and crosses the room toward her dresser. There, she retrieves a crimson scarf and turns to face me. "Let me tie you up."

The idea is laughable, but the seriousness on her face has me shoving it back down. "You're serious?"

"Why not?" She crosses the room toward me, still completely naked, which makes it really fucking difficult to not watch her tits sway as she moves. "I want you here."

Those four words nearly bring me to my knees. Instead of completely collapsing at her feet, though, I simply hold out my wrists.

Liv shakes her head. "Behind your back."

I turn and hold both arms back. The silk is soft against my wrists, and Liv takes great care not to directly touch the exposed flesh at the cuffs of my shirt. She ties it snugly and

then pulls me back toward the chair. After I've sat back down on it, she moves away and toward the bed once more.

Now more than ever, I wish I was the type of bastard who would claim her. Who'd say fuck it to the weakness, to the bond, and just claim what I want. But doing so would tie Liv to me—irrevocably. And I know she wants nothing more than to be free.

They all do.

Heart in my throat, I watch as she lies back down on the bed and then reaches into her bedside table where she withdraws a small pink vibrator. Placing it between her legs, she turns it on, and the soft buzzing fills my ears.

She gasps as she touches it to her core.

“That feel good?” I grind out, somehow managing to not bite my tongue off in the process.

“Yes. So good.”

“What are you picturing,” I question as I imagine it's my fingers stroking her. My flesh covered in her arousal.

“You. I always picture you.”

*Fuck me.* “Spread your legs further, Liv. I want a full view.” She does, spreading them far apart, and I imagine gripping her thighs with my hands, kneading the muscle as I rub my cock against her. “Tell me your fantasy.”

“You're between my legs, your mouth on me.”

“Does it feel good?” I ask. “For my tongue to be stroking your clit?”

“Yes,” she whimpers. “Fuck. That feels so good.”

“Keep going, Liv.”

She does, stroking herself with the vibrator. Her free hand fists in the covers, and she arches up, breath quickening. “I picture your hands on my body.”

“Show me.”



Her free hand releases the comforter, and she slides it up over her body to cup her breast. Finger and thumb pinching her nipple, she rolls it and gasps. “Like that.”

“And then what.”

“You’d drive into me.”

“Fuck yes.” I pull against the restraints, desperate to do just as she describes. “You have no idea how badly I want to fuck you. How badly I want to hear you scream my name as I bury myself inside you.”

“Ringmaster,” she starts.

“No.”

“D.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not.”

Her gaze lifts to me, and she freezes. “What do I call you then?”

The power of my name is far stronger than anyone realizes. Any who know it own a piece of me. My loyalty. But I refuse to hear her call me anything else when she comes. A decision I will likely regret when this is over. “My name,” I start, “is Dante.”

Her lips part, eyes widen as she begins to move her hand again. “Dante,” she whispers.

My beast surges in response to the magic she now wields over me. But I’m far too turned on to care. “Yes, baby. Come for me. Please fucking come for me.”

Her breathing quickens, free hand dropping back to the blankets as she fists them, the hand holding the vibrator between her legs steady. “Dante!” she cries out, body arching off the bed as she comes—hard. “Yes!” Her hips buck, sliding up and down as her release drenches the vibrator.

I jump up from the chair and move as quickly as I can toward her. Then, I fall to my knees and stare up at her. She sits up and stares down at me, crystal blue eyes stealing my breath.

My gaze drops to the vibrator in her hand and then lifts back up to her. “Rub it on my lips,” I order. “I *need* to taste you.”

For a moment, she hesitates, and I wonder if this is the straw that has her running from me. But then, she reaches out and draws the pink toy across my lips. I close my eyes as the taste of her overtakes every sense I have. I come undone, an addict, her sweet tang my drug. Running my tongue over my lips, I take in all of her that I can, an addicted man already desperate for his next hit.

She’s my beauty.

I’m her monster.

And there’s not a damn thing I won’t do for her—except let her go.

She climbs off the bed and heads into the bathroom without a word, vibrator still in her hand. I stand then, crossing the room to take my seat in the chair once again. Cock straining my pants, my arousal is nearly unbearable. Especially given the fact that I can still taste her on my tongue.

When she comes back out, she’s wearing a robe. After drying her vibrator with a washcloth, she places it back in her drawer and closes it, finally turning to face me. “Want me to untie you?”

“Not yet,” I reply. Partially because I’m not ready to leave. But mostly, it’s because I don’t trust myself.

“So your name is Dante,” she says. She says it, and another bond is formed between us. A layer of trust that wasn’t there before and one she likely doesn’t even realize.

“I need you to understand how important it is that you don’t tell anyone my name.”

“Why?”

“You are the only person in this world who knows it, Liv.”

“Your security team?”

I shake my head. “In my world, names hold power.”

“What kind of power?”

“The kind that will get me killed.”

“If I tell you to kneel, will you?” she questions, brow arching. She’s toying with me, taunting me, and fuck me if I’m not enjoying it.

Which is why I don’t hesitate. And I don’t lie. “For you... yes.”

## CHAPTER 15

## IIV

**D**ante sits across from me, his expression deadly serious. “*For you...yes.*” Part of me wants to test that theory. To order him to kneel at my feet. But that type of power is seductive, so I push it aside...for now. My body is still flush with color from what can only be described as an orgasm to end all orgasms.

Even without him touching me, I reached heights I’d only ever dreamt of. Wonder what it would be like if he was the one making me come?

“Why me?”

His rust-colored gaze holds mine. “What do you mean?”

“I’m hardly the most attractive woman here,” I say honestly. It’s not me seeking compliments. What I’m stating is a fact. Fiona is stunning in her strength, and I may despise Valentina, but she is gorgeous. Drop-dead stunning even. “And I’m certainly not the most powerful. Yet, here you are, offering to kneel at my feet and telling me your real name.”

Dante smirks, and my insides burn for him. The need to feel his hands on my body is nearly as overwhelming as my desire to escape...nearly. But, if the two could go hand in hand — “You underestimate your value,” he finally says.

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

He lets out a low growl. “There is something about you. Something you will not understand.”

“Is it because you’re a dragon?” I fold my legs up beneath me and face him. “Legends say your kind is incredibly territorial.”

Dante snorts. “Understatement.”

“Is that why your skin is so sensitive?” I question. “Because of your heightened senses?”

Something passes over his expression, it’s unreadable and gone before I can so much as take a more focused look at it. “Yes.”

“No one knows what you are.”

“And no one can,” he reminds me. “My name either. That is only to be used in private. Do you understand me?”

*In private.* Does that mean there will be more of these? I nod. “Promise.” Leverage. For the first time in twelve years, I have leverage over a man feared by most. Over a beast capable of destroying cities and setting the world on fire.

“I’ve given you information about me. Seems only fair you tell me something about you.” Dante leans back in his chair, looking nearly relaxed despite his bound hands.

“I don’t even know where to start.”

“Have you ever been with Apollo?”

I arch a brow and glare at him. “I fail to see how that’s any of your business.”

He leans forward. “It is absolutely my business because no one on this entire fucking planet is allowed to touch you, Liv. Not while you’re in my possession.”

The ownership his words grant him stokes the fire burning in my soul. Flames that fuel my anger at this captivity. “Until my contract runs out, right, *Dante*?”

His gaze holds mine, and the energy between us shifts, charging with something that cannot be considered passion but is far from hatred. “Of course,” he replies then stands. “Untie me.” When the dragon turns his back to me, I get up and cross the room.

Hands bound behind his back, he's completely at my mercy this way. Unless, of course, he shifts and brings the entire building down around us. "What would happen if I touched your skin?"

"Not something you want to find out," he replies.

The temptation to test him is strong, but I'm careful not to as I untie the scarf binding him. If his skin is, in fact, sensitive, the last thing I want to do is hurt him. Surprising given all I've wanted was to escape this place. Now, my needs have vastly changed.

"You do realize that Apollo will need to touch me during our performances."

Slowly, Dante turns to face me. I look up at his dark expression, wondering why I never saw the man everyone else fears. Is it truly because I've seen evil and this is not it? Or because I no longer fear the monsters that lurk inside of powerful men? "Only during your performances," he says softly, "Outside of that ring, he'd better keep his hands to himself, or I'll cut them off."

I swallow hard, hating the way his demanding arrogance turns me on.

A slow smile spreads over Dante's face. "You'd better hold onto that until tomorrow, pet. No coming without me present."

"Then the same should go for you," I retort.

Dante leans in, and I freeze. He's close enough I can smell his aftershave and feel the warmth of his breath as it fans my face. "You want to see me come?" he asks.

Swallowing hard, I look up to meet his gaze. "Seems only fair."

Dante chuckles. "I want you on your knees when I do. So I can pretend it's that smartass mouth I'm fucking."

"I want to have breakfast with my friends tomorrow."

He stiffens but nods. "Fine. But Killian will bring your plate to you." Then, he moves around me and out into the hall.

It's not until my door fully closes behind him that I'm able to take a full breath. I fall back onto my mattress and breathe in his lingering scent. Fuck me, things just got infinitely more complicated.

I've been planning to escape. To buy time until I can slip out. But now? That seems even more a fairytale than me riding off into the sunset on a dragon. Dante is going to be watching my every move. An idea that shouldn't be as seductive as it is given that it's a massive hindrance in my desperate attempt at gaining my freedom.

And what's worse is that I don't even know if that freedom is something I want anymore. Not when Dante just gave me more power than I've ever had in my life.



“BEING SERVED NOW?” Fiona jokes as Killian sets a plate on the table, and I take my seat beside her. She's wearing her usual workout clothes: shorts and a crop top that bares her toned abs. White hair pulled up out of her face, she regards me with an ice-blue gaze chock full of concern.

“Apparently,” I reply. “Thanks.”

“Anytime, gorgeous.” The lion shifter winks then moves across the room to take his post by the door.

“How you feeling, babe?” Apollo brushes a strand of my hair behind my shoulder. “You okay now? I can rub your back.”

“No. Thanks.” Out of concern for both his life—and mine—I scoot away from him and start eating the plate full of pancakes in front of me. It's a rare treat here, given that most of our meals come from a can, but every Saturday, the cook treats us.



Buttermilk pancakes and maple syrup. Is there really anything better?

At the table beside ours, I watch the newest addition—Lex—poke at the food on his plate. It's impossible to not feel bad for him. As with most of us, I doubt he knew what he was getting into when he signed that contract.

"Morning," Valentina greets as she drops down onto the bench seat. "Wow. Look who's decided to grace us with her presence." She grins. "How nice to see you alive, Liv."

"Fuck off, Val," I reply in just as sweet of a tone.

She rolls her eyes. "Anyone seen Thomas this morning? I wanted to run something by him."

"Jenny will rip your throat out if you try and screw with her man," Fiona warns.

Valentina is completely unthreatened. "As if I'd want to smell like wet dog all the time?" She faux shivers. "Not a chance."

"Then why do you need to see him?" Harriss questions and then plucks up a bite of pancake and shoves it into his mouth.

"Because I have an idea for a new performance." Her gaze levels on mine. "One that will surely steal the show."

"Go for it," I reply. Then, appetite lost, I shove up from my table. "I'd be more than happy to have the attention on you, Valentina." With a forced smile, I turn away and carry my plate to the dish rack. After depositing it there, I head off back toward my apartment to get dressed for the day.

"Hey, wait up!"

I turn as Fiona jogs up beside me, her lucky dagger in her hand. "You have no idea how badly I want to puncture a hole in her wings," I say as we begin walking again.

"Trust me, girl, I do. Because I feel the same exact way." We're silent as we head up the stairs, both of us clearly lost in our own thoughts.

Mine drift back to Dante, to the way he demanded I not allow anyone else to touch me. Should I have done the same? Would it have mattered if I had?

Fiona's hand closes around my arm, and I freeze in place. "What is it?"

"I sense something—" She trails off, and her eyes blaze brighter. A piercing blue that would illuminate even the darkest corners. "This way." She heads toward the landing of the floor below mine and rushes into the hall.

The carpet here is duller. More of a faded brown as we jog toward the apartments. The lights here flicker on and off, loose wiring in an old building and all that, but it's not until we reach the end that I realize anything is off.

The door to Thomas and Jenny's apartment is ajar. Dread coils in my belly as I try to listen for anything out of the ordinary. Thanks to my normal senses, though, I can't hear or smell anything other than the mildew growing on the walls of this floor.

Fiona yanks her secondary blade free from the back of her pants and stalks forward, keeping her body to the side to make herself a smaller target. She reaches out and touches the door with her blade, shoving it open further.

Then, she moves inside. "No," I hear her whisper.

I rush inside and scream.

Thomas and Jenny lie on the floor, blood soaking the front of their clothes. Jenny is reaching for him, her hand outstretched. His face has been badly battered, the bruising extensive. Grief tears me apart, and I back up as far as I can to put distance between us.

They were our friends.

They had plans.

And now they're gone.

Thundering footsteps echo down the hall. I turn as Dante and his three security guards come rushing toward us.

“What is it?” Dante demands.

“Jenny and Thomas—” I start, but my voice cracks, shattering beneath the weight of my pain.

His eyes go wide even as a muscle in his jaw tightens. Looking at his men, he nods. Then the four of them rush into the room.

“Fuck!” I hear one of his security guards roar.

“We just found them,” Fiona says.

I gather my courage and take a step closer to the door. Carnage I’ve seen. But never when I can picture the victims laughing and flirting mere days ago. They were so full of life, so happy. Out of all of us, I believed they actually stood a chance at living a normal life.

And now they’re dead.

Fiona emerges first, expression hard. She comes to stand beside me as Dante steps from the room.

“I want everyone gathered in the big top. Now,” he growls. “The hits just keep on fucking coming, don’t they?”

We both turn to leave.

“No. Fiona, you go. Liv, you stay.”

“With all due respect, Ringmaster, she doesn’t know anything aside from what I already told you.”

“I didn’t ask your opinion, berserker,” he snarls. “You go and gather everyone. Liv will remain behind. With me.” He shifts his gaze to me, almost challenging me to argue. But I don’t. Mainly because I truly don’t believe he killed them, and since I too seem to be a target lately, the safest place I can be is at his side.

Fiona shifts her gaze to me then nods and turns to sprint down the hall. I lean back against the wall again and take a deep breath. Then another.

“Are you all right?” Dante’s tone is low, and for the first time since we met, I detect a hint of emotion other than anger or lust behind the baritone.

“No,” I reply honestly. “They were good people.” Tears blur my vision, so I blink them away rapidly. “Sorry. I just—”

“Don’t apologize,” he says, planting a hand on the wall beside me as he looks down into my eyes. “I will find who did this, and they will pay.”

“They had a future planned,” I whisper, more for myself than him. “They wanted kids, a family.” Closing my eyes, I do my best to steady my emotion. Unfortunately, all it does is give me the opportunity to recall all the moments we spent together.

They say when you near death, your life flashes before your eyes. What they don’t tell you, however, is that, when you lose someone close to you, you see theirs.

“I am sorry,” Dante says softly.

“Boss.”

He turns away, and I shift my gaze to the door where Duncan stands, face grim. “What is it?” Dante questions.

“You’re going to want to see this.”

Dante pushes off the wall and crosses the hall, disappearing into their apartment. I slide down the wall, taking my seat on the floor and doing my best to steady my racing heart. Grief aside, no one but performers and staff are allowed in this building.

Dante is clearly not guilty, and I’d be willing to bet his security team wouldn’t have carried out these murders. I know Fiona and I are innocent, which leaves every other person in that circus as prime suspects.

Apollo.

Valentina.

Harriss.

Brad.

Kleo.

Ghrunt.

Silva.

Uma...though she wouldn't be even close to the top of the list.

And Lex...the new shapeshifter who was just brought in. That thought has me standing. He is the newest of all of us. And with his abilities, he could have shapeshifted into anything, right? A beast of some kind, perhaps?

Without giving it the thought I should have, I rush toward the apartment. Dante's massive frame blocks the dead from my view, but at my arrival, he turns. "What is it?"

"The shapeshifter."

"You saw him?" Bracken demands.

I shake my head. "But he's the newest member of the circus. And with his abilities, he'd have a way to sneak in undetected and kill them before they could shift back."

Dante turns to Bracken. "Where is he now?"

"In the dining hall," I tell them. "Or, he was when Fiona and I left."

Bracken offers Dante a nod then moves past me and out of the apartment. I remain rooted where I stand, my gaze dropping to a band of gold glittering on the floor at Dante's feet. Tears blur my vision again, and I choke on a sob. "Is that a—"

"Ring?" Duncan questions. "Yes. Looks like he was in the process of proposing when whoever the hell did this got in."

My heart shatters for two people who'd been incredibly close to their happily ever after, only to have it ripped away. And even as I grieve them, unease churns in my belly. I've always thought I was safer here at the circus.

But what if the danger has always been closer than I ever imagined?

## CHAPTER 16

# DANTE

Liv's expression is unreadable. It's taking everything in me to keep my attention on the group before me rather than focusing on her. Her grief is palpable even if she does refuse to let it show on her face.

She cared for the shifters. Greatly. And the fact that she's hurting pisses me the fuck off even more. I glance over at the only outsider here and then one of my only allies outside of my security team. Grayson is a hybrid, and his ability to tell when someone is lying will be more than useful in flushing out whatever cocksucker killed my performers. As it happens, I'd asked him to come after Liv was poisoned.

I bided my time until he arrived. Now that he's here, I can knock two potential killers off the face of this fucking world.

He offers me a slight nod from where he stands in the corner beside his mate. The head of Fire and Fluorite. I definitely don't miss the way the gryffin practically salivates at the opportunity to potentially plead his case.

Not that she'll be taking him up on it.

Refocusing, I study their expressions. "As I'm sure most of you know by now, Thomas and Jenny were murdered last night."

Valentina lets out a sharp wail, and Fiona shoots a glare in her direction.

I continue, "What I find most intriguing about this attack, though, is that no one aside from performers can get in and out of that apartment building." I study their faces, seeking any

indication that someone here knows what might have happened. The shapeshifter remains calm, his expression unreadable. He looks nothing like the others of his kind. While their bodies are obsidian, their faces lacking all features, this one looks like a human unless he's shifted. Likely due to his hybrid blood.

Harriss clears his throat. "I didn't sense anything was amiss," he says. The Djinn is a massive asshole, but now I'm surprised to see a hint of emotion on his face. Perhaps regret? Guilt? Granted, I never would have pegged him for a murderer.

"You seriously think any of us would have killed them?" Apollo demands. "They were our friends."

"Friends who were slaughtered by someone who managed to sneak in and not alert any of the wards," Duncan retorts. "Tell me, Apollo, how would that be possible?"

The gryffin's face reddens, and he glares back at Duncan. "Seeing as how I know nothing of the magic used, I can't exactly say."

"Then keep your fucking mouth shut unless you have anything of use to offer," Killian snaps.

The gryffin closes his mouth tight, though he rolls his eyes and leans back, wrapping an arm around the back of Liv's chair. My beast rattles its chains, and I take a step forward, ready to snap his fucking arm clean off.

But Liv pushes to her feet and moves off to the side, giving me the opportunity to curb my territorial nature...for now.

"I need an answer from each of you," I say. "Liv. Did you kill Thomas and Jenny?"

She glares at me, eyes hardening. "Of course not."

"Fiona?" I ask, shifting my attention and trying like hell not to feel guilty for the accusation. But this is business, and things with Liv have turned into anything but.

"No."

"Did you poison Liv last week?"



If her glare could kill, I'd be dead. "Of fucking course not."

"Harriss? Did you kill Thomas and Jenny or poison Liv?"

He glares at me. "Do you truly—"

"Yes or no will suffice," I interrupt.

His near-white eyes narrow on me. "No. I did not kill the shifters, nor did I poison the fury."

One by one, I go down the line of performers. Each and every one of them is absolutely horrified that I would accuse them of something so heinous, of course. And every single answer—to both questions—is a resounding no.

"You can all go. Get ready for the show."

"You're seriously still putting it on?" Liv demands.

The room falls silent. I turn to her, masking my anger with annoyance. "Yes. Your job is to perform. I'm not shutting down my operation because someone died. Not when I have others perfectly capable of filling the vacancy. Lex," I say, turning my attention to the shapeshifter. "You and Fiona will be taking the new spot. Come up with something entertaining."

"You're serious."

I shift my attention back to Liv, gaze locking with hers. "Everyone else can leave now," I say.

"I'll wait for you," Apollo says as he stands and closes the distance, putting himself directly beside Liv and puffing his chest out. *Fucking pathetic. As if you could ever satisfy a flame such as hers.*

"You'll get the fuck out," Bracken corrects. "Now."

The gryffin doesn't move. Not until I hear Grayson mutter a, "Let's go," to Kinsley. Then, likely seeing his opportunity, he turns to Liv.

"I'll check in with you in a few."

She doesn't respond. Arms crossed, she faces off with me as if she's the one holding the power. As if it's my blood signed in ink at the bottom of an ownership contract. Though, given the fact that she alone knows my true name, I suppose she does.

Time to see how she wields it.

The moment we're alone, I cross the room toward her. "You've become rather bold, Fury."

"You cannot expect us to go on tonight. Jenny and Thomas were our friends. Our people. We deserve a night off to grieve."

"You've had all afternoon to grieve," I reply. "And now you have a job to do."

Her jaw hardens. "You're an asshole."

"Did you truly think that was going to change?" I shield my expression, hoping to hide just how much her words bother me. Why? Who the fuck knows. I've literally built my empire on fear. On being considered the biggest, baddest motherfucker in all of No Man's Land. So why the hell do I care what one fury thinks of me?

*Because she's my mate.* The voice in my head is so loud it's nearly deafening. Yet I still push it aside. Destiny may have deemed her my other half, but she's a weakness I cannot—I *will not* afford.

"Maybe I thought I saw something almost kind in you."

I step closer. "You thought wrong. There is not a fucking inch of me that is soft, Fury. Best to remember that in the future." My fingers flex, desperation to touch her damn near agonizing. Even if it can only be done with a fabric barrier between our flesh.

If I were to ever feel her skin against mine—the consequences would be devastating for the both of us. Me because I would no longer be able to deny the connection, and her because there would never be freedom.

She would be stuck here forever because there is no fucking way I'd let her go.

“Fuck off.” She shoves past me, shoulder brushing mine through the sleeve of my jacket, then stomps out of the tent.

The voice in my head is screaming for me to follow. For me to keep her right beside me until I solve this mystery. But it's that fucking voice that led me to where I am now. And I'm only one instant away from claiming what has never been rightfully mine.



“I LIKE YOUR FURY,” Grayson offers as he sits down in the chair across from my desk.

Kinsley, who's been sitting since I walked in, nods in agreement. “She's feisty.” White hair loose around her shoulders, she exudes the strength of an Alpha Supreme.

“The griffin try and plead his case?” I question as I take my seat. “I do have a contract if you wish to see it.”

“I don't need to see it,” she replies. “While I don't necessarily agree with your methods, I recognize you had a binding agreement with Mathis, and I have no intention of breaking that. Besides, the griffin's an asshole.”

“A massive one,” I agree. Turning my attention to Grayson, I lean back in my chair. “Who did it?”

“You're not going to like my answer.”

I stiffen. Surely not Li—

“None of them,” he adds. “They were all telling the truth. About both attacks.”

Even as I'm relieved there isn't a killer in my midst, his answer still pisses me off. I'm not a man accustomed to

missing things. So how the fuck has someone managed to do so much damage under my roof? “How is that possible?”

“I don’t know, D. But it is.”

“Fuck.”

“Is it possible someone got around the wards? What about the witch who laid them?”

“She was there,” I reply. “Uma set the magic.”

“Then someone had to have found a way around it,” Grayson says. “If I were you, I’d find a way to reinforce them. You’re sure no one lingered behind after killing them?”

I nod. “We combed the buildings after we found the bodies.”

“And your security didn’t sense anything was off?” Kinsley questions.

“No. They shifted so they had full access to their abilities, but they say there was no hint of anyone else in that room.”

The Alpha Supreme’s brows draw together. “Not even a lingering scent from the other performers?”

“Not unusual,” I tell her. “Thomas and Jenny kept to themselves when not in the social hall or the ring. Most of the performers keep to themselves. Personal time is sacred around here.”

“Hmm. I can take a look if you’d like,” Kinsley offers. “Maybe an outside nose will lead to something.”

“I’d appreciate that.” Getting to my feet, I gesture toward the door. “I can take you there now.”

They get to their feet, and we move together out into the hall, down the stairs, and onto the floor where death still lingers. It hangs in the air, the copper tang of blood still prominent.

“They were in here.” I push open the door so Kinsley can make her way inside. She shifts quickly, bones popping, fur sprouting, until she’s standing before me on four legs rather than two. Her wolf moves about the space, sniffing and

searching for anything amiss. While the bodies have been removed, crimson still saturates the mattress and floor. It makes me sick, knowing what happened in here right beneath my nose. I pride myself on protecting what belongs to me. Thomas and Jenny? They were mine. And they were slaughtered.

Ten minutes tick by as Kinsley continues scanning the room. Then, she comes over and stops just in front of Grayson. She shifts within seconds, standing before me, wearing clothing that looks just as pristine as it did before she changed.

“Charms are handy.” She says with a smile when she catches me watching her curiously. Then, she turns and faces the room. “Their scents are all over the room, but aside from theirs, your security teams, yours, the berserker you said was here, and the fury, I’m not picking up on anything either.” Grayson touches my shoulder, so I turn around again and cross my arms.

“I’m so sorry I don’t have better news.” She offers me a kind smile.

“I appreciate you both making the trip out here.”

“Of course. We owed you,” Grayson slaps me on the back. The only person who I’d allow to put their hands on me. He’s always been my closest ally outside of this damned place.

“You didn’t owe me shit,” I reply as the three of us step back out into the hall. The shapeshifter is just ducking into his room. “You’re sure he was telling the truth?”

Grayson nods. “Honestly, he was the least emotional out of all of them, which made him even easier to read.”

*Fuck.* So, today brought me nothing, and now I have a show to prepare for when my beast is on edge. Even as I think it, he presses against the recesses of my mind, struggling to free himself.

And if he ever manages to do that, I could lose everything.

## CHAPTER 17

## IIV

**F**ucking prick. I make my way into the hallway up to Dante's apartment, anger simmering in my veins. Having to perform tonight was miserable. And not just for me; *everyone* was off their game tonight.

And what's worse? The Ringmaster made his appearance at the beginning of the show per usual but disappeared after that, completely skipping curtain call. Orgasmic bastard or not, it pisses me the hell off. Especially given all the time we've spent together over the last week.

Seems he gets to take a partial night off, but the rest of us are not so lucky. Even though the rest of us are grieving our friends. Not our property, our moneymakers, but our *friends*. Real people who had futures and now will be buried six feet beneath the ground.

I round the landing and meet the gaze of Killian, who's positioned himself in front of Dante's apartment.

"No performance tonight, Fury," he tells me.

My heart falls even with as pissed as I am. "Where is he? Taking the night off?"

"Out," Killian replies.

"Out. So he gets the entire evening off?"

"He's the boss," Killian replies.

I roll my eyes. "What the fuck ever."

The shifter smirks. “You seem disappointed, Fury. You growing a bit attached?”

“Hardly,” I deadpan, hoping to appear far less interested than I am. “Just curious what could have kept him away from curtain call and what keeps him away now.” Truthfully, if he’s gone, this might be the opportunity I’ve been waiting for. And after what happened with Thomas and Jenny, I don’t want to risk staying here any longer than I have to.

Not even for a dragon shifter who makes me feel things I shouldn’t.

“When will he be back?” I question.

“You’re not at liberty to know,” he replies. “Have a nice night, Liv.”

“Fine. Fuck you, too.” Not wasting any more time, I turn and walk down the stairs as normal as possible. The last thing I need is for the shifter to catch any hint that something is off. The moment I reach the hall, however, I sprint toward Apollo’s room.

I knock on the door, hammering my fists and hoping he’s back from dinner.

“Who the fuck—” He rips the door open but trails off when he sees me. “Liv.” Grinning, he leans against his doorframe, broad chest bare. “What can I do for you?”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.” Apollo moves to the side and then shuts the door behind me.

“Did you mean what you said?” I question. “Last week. Did you mean it?”

His brow furrows. “What are you talking about?”

“Leaving this place. Going to Fire and Fluorite. You said you would take me away.”

His expression shifts from relaxed to confused. Then, his cheeks redden. “The Alpha Supreme was less than willing to



take me back, given her close relationship with the Ringmaster.”

“We can go anywhere, though, right? Any of the houses might take us.”

“We may stand a chance at Blood and Beryl,” he says as he runs a hand through his hair. “But it’s risky.”

“The Ringmaster is busy tonight,” I tell him. “He’s gone. Which means this might be our only shot.” I speak so damn fast that even I’m having trouble keeping up with it. My chest aches at the thought of never seeing him again, but I’m already in too deep. Staying much longer means completely losing myself to whatever the hell is between us.

Apollo’s gaze narrows. “You’re sure you want to do this? It’s risky, Liv. If he finds us—”

“He won’t because we won’t let him.” Hope burns brightly even as a sliver of guilt settles in my chest. I’ll be breaking my word to someone who entrusted me with information he’s never told anyone.

But then I remind myself of the massive asshole Dante is, and that guilt nearly vanishes. “*Did you truly believe that would change?*” He said so himself; nothing between us has changed. So why should my plans?

“You’re serious,” he surmises. “As in, ready to leave.”

*No.* “Were you not?” I take a step closer and reach out to take his hands. It’s a low blow, using his affection against him, but one I’m willing to make. “If you don’t want to go with me, I understand.” Putting distance between me and the Ringmaster will free me from whatever this attraction is.

It has to. Because being obsessed with the man who put me here? That’s too dark even for me.

“No. I always want to be with you,” he replies with a grin. “I just want to make sure we’re being smart. Careful.”

“Tonight is the night. Not once in twelve years has he canceled a performance with me. Which means whatever is keeping him is going to last a while.”

Apollo considers my words for a few moments, all while my heart pounds. Is this really happening? Finally, he nods. “Great. Go grab whatever you need from your room, and let’s get the fuck out of this place. Five minutes, Liv.”

Beaming, I lift up onto my tiptoes and press my lips to his cheek before turning and sprinting down the hall to my room.

I shut the door behind me and head straight for my bed. I retrieve my grandmother’s necklace and then grab the vials I’ve collected over the years. They’re the only valuables I have. The only things I need.

“Hi, Ringmaster’s pet.”

Freezing in place, I give myself a moment to mask my expression before turning to face Valentina.

She’s changed from her performance outfit and now wears grey shorts and a white tank top. Her blonde hair is loose around her face, her wings glamoured and out of sight.

“I’m busy, Valentina,” I say, not at all in the mood to deal with her shit tonight. If all goes well, I’ll never have to see her again.

“Always dismissing me like you’re so much better.”

I turn to face her. “What the hell do you want?”

She moves farther into my apartment, closing the door behind her and flipping the lock. My stomach churns. “Just wanted some girl talk,” she replies. “I feel like you and I have never really gotten to know each other.”

Alarm bells ringing in my ears, I summon what little magic I have. It remains at the ready, but I know all too well that it will only buy me a few seconds. “Get out of my apartment. I won’t say it again.”

She continues to close the distance between us. Stalking toward me as a predator might stalk their prey. “And what are you going to do about it? Mess my hair up?”

I swallow hard. Our apartments are completely soundproof. Warded so no one can hear what’s going on inside. That particular security feature failed Thomas and

Jenny last night, and now it looks like it might be failing me, too. “Did you kill Thomas and Jenny?”

She snorts. “As if. I didn’t give two shits about those two, so why would I kill them?”

“You seem rather suspect at the moment, considering you won’t leave my apartment.” Knowing I have very little time, I move forward and shove past her. “If you’ll excuse me, I have shit to do.”

“Fuck off.”

I turn to face her and end up catching her fist to my jaw. Pain explodes along the side of my face, and I stumble backward, barely managing to catch myself on the frame of my bed. “What the fuck, Valentina!”

“Quiet little Liv. Strong enough to survive my poison but you sure as hell can’t take a punch though, can you?”

I tighten my hands into fists and charge. Her wings spring out, and she flies away from me, laughing uncontrollably. I clench my hands into fists and let the rest of my power bubble to the surface. “You poisoned me?”

“I did.” She hisses through her teeth. “Had to use a handy little charm to keep that particular secret to myself. Turns out you *can* buy honesty.”

I throw my hands up and send her slamming against the wall. She tumbles down, hitting the floor with a hard *thud*. “Little more than messing your hair up, isn’t it, bitch?” I wipe the blood from my lip with the back of my hand.

Valentina gets to her feet, cheeks crimson. “You’re going to regret that.”

“Bring it, fairy dust.”

She moves so fast that I have no time to prepare. Her body slams into me, wings taking us both up to my ceiling before she slams me to the ground—repeatedly. Every inch of my body burns, my vision blurring.

Finally, the assault stops, and Valentina pushes to her feet, leaving me on the floor. I roll over and start to crawl toward

the door. If I can open it, I break the seal of the magic.

Apollo will hear me.

He has to hear me.

Her slender fingers wrap around my ankle, and she rips me backward, wrapping her hand around my throat. “Little Liv. Little fucking whore!” Her free hand cracks against my cheek.

Then, she turns away and stalks toward my bed, retrieving the baseball bat I keep there. “You stole him from me.”

“I didn’t steal anyone,” I choke out as I manage to sit up against the wall.

“You did,” she replies. “And now I’m going to take him back.” She charges. Her pixie blood has her moving so fast I don’t have time to stop. The bat sings through the air and hits my shoulder. Pain burns in my arm, shooting straight to my fingers and up into my neck.

But she doesn’t stop there. She swings again, and it cracks across the side of my head. My magic dissipates. She grips me, and I feel the ground disappear beneath my feet though my vision is so blurry I can’t see a damn thing.

“Up and up we go. Such a shame you can’t fly like your mother. Such. A. Shame.” She releases me, and I scream as I plummet to the floor.

I slam into it, bones cracking.

The pain is overwhelming now.

“Valentina, stop!” I cry out as I try to pull myself toward the door once more.

She grips my ankle again and flips me over. I blink away the tears, the brain-splitting pain making it nearly impossible to see anything but blurred shapes. “Help!” I scream, but with the magic still in place, no one can hear me.

Black spots invade my vision as the knowledge of what’s about to happen sinks in. She’s going to kill me. Not Ernesto or his henchmen. Valentina. All because the Ringmaster chose

me. “He doesn’t want me,” I whimper. “Please. You have to believe me.”

“Lies.” She grins at me. “And not even he is going to save you, bitch. He’s busy, remember? Probably has his cock buried in someone else. Burns, doesn’t it? To be dismissed.”

She swings and brings the bat down on my knee. It shatters, bones crunching, and I scream until my throat runs hoarse.

“He was *mine*,” she growls. “Any last words?”

The pain is enough to render me mute as I slump back, vision fading in and out. My body turns numb, starting at my toes and climbing up through my limbs.

I prepared for the final blow.

A deafening roar splits the sky as Valentina screams. I manage to open my eyes enough to see a shirtless man holding her head in his hand. Eyes nearly completely red, he glares at me, breathing deeply, blood splattering his chest.

I fall to the side.

“Liv!” He screams my name as I drift away.

One heartbeat.

Two.

And then warmth spreads through my body as I’m lifted and carried away.

## CHAPTER 18

# DANTE

**T**he moment my hands touch her flesh, the beast within me wages war. Heat spreads through my body as he claims her, marks her as his. There's no going back now, not for either of us. But I refuse to think too closely on that as I cradle her limp body in my arms and sprint down the hall.

“What happened?” Bracken demands, rushing forward.

“Valentina attacked her,” I spit the words out, wishing I could go back and kill the fucking pixie before she ever got her hands on my mate.

At that wrong moment, the gryffin steps out, a bag over his shoulder. He sees her, drops the bag, and rushes toward me. “What did you do?” he roars then tries to rip her from my arms.

“Release her, or you're going to join the last person who put their hands on her,” I snarl.

Bracken steps in and pushes Apollo back. “Valentina attacked her. We need to get her upstairs and tend to her wounds. Wake the berserker, and start removing the pixie's body. I'll send Killian in soon.” When Apollo doesn't move, Bracken slams his fist into the man's chest. “That's an order, Gryffin.”

After a long pause, Apollo tears his gaze from Liv and stomps down the hall. I continue rushing upstairs, Bracken on my heels. “Call Adaya,” I order.

“Already sent her a text,” he replies, rushing around me to rip the door open.

I carry Liv's limp body inside and set her on my bed as I attempt to find out just how broken she is. Both legs are snapped; that much is easy enough to see given the crushed bones. Her cheek has been sliced open, and a bone in her shoulder is jutting out of her pale flesh.

And those are only the wounds I can see.

I run my hands over her abdomen, feeling for more injuries. My stomach plummets. Her sternum is caved in, her ribs jutting out where they should not be.

"Fuck," I choke out. "Fuck!"

"Move," Adaya's order is spoken with a completely calm tone, a direct contrast to the storm within me. Still, I move out of her way. The water fae is the only one who can help her. While Adaya is not a healer by nature, it's something she picked up relatively quickly in order to survive here in No Man's Land.

And one of the reasons I keep her so close.

"I need hot water and clean towels," she says while she reaches into her jacket pocket and withdraws a handful of vials holding pale liquid. She sets them on the bedside table and then turns to me as I continue to stare, dumbfounded, at Liv.

My dragon whimpers inwardly. Her pain is his pain.

It's my pain.

"Towels, D," she orders.

I turn and rush into the bathroom to gather what she needs, setting the towels and the bowl of steaming water on the table beside the vials. Adaya has stripped Liv's clothing off but left my sheet pulled up over her breasts.

"Can you help her?" I manage.

"Of course I can," Adaya replies matter-of-factly. "Though the healing tonic is what is really going to do the work. She's going to be lucky if there is no permanent damage." After gripping one of the vials, she starts to give it to Liv, but I step forward.



“No. Let me.”

Adaya offers me the vial and then moves to the side. I take a seat on the mattress. My hands shake as I slide one behind the back of her head. Her hair is smooth, silky, even with the blood caked to it. Her flesh is warm as I lift her head up and press the vial to her plump lips.

It slips between them, and the liquid disappears. As soon as the vial is empty, I set it to the side, though I do not release her.

“She means a lot to you,” Adaya comments. “This woman.”

“Understatement,” I reply. Adaya may know me well, but even she doesn’t know what I am, nor what Liv is to me.

“It’s about damned time,” she replies.

I glance over at her, surprised to see her smiling. “What the hell does that mean?”

“You’ve been alone a long time, D. It’s about time you found someone to make you happy. Now, get the fuck out so I can wash her.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“You are,” she replies. “Because I’m going to clean the blood from her body, and since I don’t have her consent to let you see her naked, I’m going to assume it’s a no-go until otherwise stated.”

I don’t tell her that I’ve already memorized every inch of Liv’s body because doing so seems an argument I will lose. So, reluctantly and with great effort, I release Liv and leave Adaya to clean her.

Bracken, Duncan, and Killian are all waiting for me in the living room as soon as I’ve shut the bedroom door behind me.

“She going to survive?” Killian questions.

“Adaya thinks so. Did you clean up Valentina’s body?”

“We got it out of there. The berserker was quite pleased as she tossed the pixie from the window.”

“If you tell me her body is outside—”

“Not anymore,” Duncan interrupts. “We took care of it from there.”

“The blood in her apartment?”

“Being cleaned as we speak. Do you think Valentina killed Thomas and Jenny?”

I swallow hard. “It’s a possibility. But I don’t know how the fuck she managed to lie to my face.” Or beat my shifter lie detector. I let out a growl. “Unless she confessed something to Liv, we won’t know for sure.”

“How the hell did you know something was off?” Killian demands. “I heard nothing. When you blew past me—”

“Liv is my mate,” I tell them.

All three men cease speaking. Duncan looks the least surprised of the three, his brow arched.

Bracken’s expression hardens while Killian gapes at me.

“Your mate? We knew she was important to you—”

“Yes. My mate. Which is information that needs to not go beyond the four of us. Not even Liv knows. Do I make myself clear?”

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell us that before?” Bracken growls. “We could have protected her better. Put a detail on her—”

“Because it didn’t matter before,” I snarl, interrupting yet again. “I hadn’t touched her, which meant that, given the need, I could have moved on.”

“Oh, fuck.” He pales slightly. “You touched her when you lifted her from the ground.”

“Yes.”

“And that means—” Killian trails off.

“That his dragon now has her scent. Dragon scales are highly sensitive to magic, and there is little power stronger

than a mate bond.” Duncan shakes his head. “You should have told us.”

“What would it have changed?”

“Possibly nothing,” Bracken replies. “But you’ve trusted us with everything else, and we’ve yet to betray you. This is a pretty big fucking secret you’ve been keeping.”

Closing my eyes, I suck in a breath and then pinch the bridge of my nose. “Now you know.” Looking back up to them, I clear my throat. “Find out what the gryffin was doing with that bag.”

“Already searched it. Was full of equipment and his costume. Seems he was heading down to the gym.”

Which means he wasn’t trying to escape, so there’s that. “Fine.”

“Anything else?” Duncan questions.

“Any other big secrets?” Killian half-jokes.

I shake my head. “I need you to put out the word that, until further notice, all performances and activities have been canceled.”

“Oh shit, really? You’re closing the circus?”

I look to Bracken, feeling the weight of the words I’m about to speak. The fire was the first and only time I closed the doors. I’d sworn it would be the last, but with Liv nearly dying—twice, and two murdered shifters, it seems I have no choice. Not until I find out whether or not the threat has been dealt with. “Close up. The circus will remain shut down until I decide otherwise.”

## CHAPTER 19

## LIIV

Something warm presses against my lips. Liquid fills my mouth, and I cough, sputtering, but a hand covering my lips keeps them closed. *Panic*. I try to sit up, but a strong hand holds me down. I thrash, desperate to get free.

Did Ernesto find me? Is he going to drown me? In the span of a single heartbeat, my anxious mind conjures a dozen twisted realities in which he torments me. In which it was he who found me in my apartment. Broken. Weak.

“Stop fighting it.”

I still. That voice—it’s familiar. It washes over me, a deep grumbly baritone that sends my heart racing for another reason entirely. *Dante*.

“Swallow.”

I do.

“Good girl.” The hand releases me, and I open my eyes to find Dante sitting beside me on the bed. He’s shirtless, shadows dancing off his bare chest from the light cast by the fireplace in the corner. He sets an empty vial in one of his bare hands while the other touches my cheek. Soft, warm flesh stroking me.

“You touched me,” I croak. It seems ridiculous to notice that when every inch of my body aches, but everywhere his fingers touch, my body reacts. As though my blood is surging to that exact location.

A muscle in his strong jaw twitches, and he stands.

I try to sit up, to watch him, but each movement is pure agony.

“Don’t try to move,” he orders as he sits in a chair beside me. “How do you feel?”

“It hurts,” I manage.

“You’re lucky you didn’t fucking die,” he growls.

“I didn’t start it—” Surely he’s not blaming me.

Dante shakes his head angrily. “Valentina is dead.”

Tears blur my vision, not out of grief for the pixie. But as the memories return in a rush, I realize—yet again—that I’m so weak I found myself at a predator’s mercy. I’m a fucking fury, and I’m constantly being owned by others. “How much more time do I owe you for saving my life?”

His brows draw together, and he leans in closer. “You owe me nothing. Why did she attack you?”

“Because she thought I stole you.”

His eyes fill with pure hatred. They begin to glow as scales shimmer into view down both of his arms. “I fucking knew it.”

The potion he fed me begins to soothe the pain in my body, enough that I can sit up against the headboard. “Did I?” I question. “Steal you?”

His nostrils flare, and he shakes his head. “It was never a fucking competition,” he snarls. “And she never had a chance. It was always you.”

“That’s not what she thought,” I reply, taking a deep breath.

“Did she confess anything to you?” he asks.

“As in Thomas and Jenny?”

He nods.

“She said she didn’t kill them. I asked,” I add. “But, she did admit to poisoning me. So, one mystery solved.”

Dante’s jaw tightens, and he gets to his feet. “Do not leave this room. You will stay here until you are healed. I am

sending someone in to help you bathe.” He leaves before I have the chance to respond, disappearing out into the main room.

I turn my head to the left and right, studying the room I’ve found myself in. Inhaling deeply, I breathe in the scent of leather and citrus. I’m in his room. It has to be his room, doesn’t it? Blood-red sheets made of silk. A dresser with an ornate mirror attached—

“Hello, Liv.”

I turn my head to the left as a woman steps into the room. She’s dainty and wears dark jeans and a tight black t-shirt. Her hair is dark, her eyes bright and kind. *The water fae*. “I saw you here the other day. You’re the water fae who helped put out the fire.”

“Adaya.” She smiles. “It’s nice to meet you.” She crosses the room toward me and stops beside the bed. “I understand you had quite a day yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” I choke out. “What—how long have I been in here?”

“The Ringmaster brought you in yesterday evening. He has been feeding you healing potions every couple of hours. Thanks to your fury blood, you burned them off pretty quickly, so it took longer than normal for them to work.”

“Great. So my power is useless, but my metabolism is excellent.”

Adaya laughs. “You are also part fae, correct?”

I nod. “My father was a fae. Mother a harpy.”

“Quite the combination.”

“They certainly thought so. Which was super disappointing when their only daughter can barely conjure a light breeze.”

“Power works in strange ways,” she replies. “Sometimes, there is more than can be seen.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She shrugs. “Nothing yet. Now, he closed the circus for the time being, but we need to get you back on your feet—”

“He closed it? For the night or—”

“Until further notice,” Adaya replies.

“Seriously?”

She grins. “That or there’s a lot of pissed-off supernaturals who misunderstood the posted signs.”

*Until further notice.* Closing down is something that has only ever happened once—when the place nearly burned to the ground. He didn’t even close the doors when Thomas and Jenny were killed. “How...how bad was I?”

She arches a brow then crosses her arms. “About three minutes from bleeding out internally.”

Valentina nearly killed me. Would have if Dante hadn’t shown up when he did, all because she was so fucking jealous even when there was nothing to be jealous over. Is this what obsession does to people? Then again, why the hell do I need an answer to that question? It was Ernesto’s obsession with me that led to Dante finding me in that alleyway twelve years ago.

“Let’s get you up and in the bath,” Adaya cuts off my thoughts, ripping me from a past better left buried.

When the cool air hits my skin, I realize with complete and utter horror that I am butt-ass naked. I reach for the covers again, the jarring movement sending fresh pain through my body.

“Easy. You are hardly the first naked woman I’ve seen,” she says as she helps me sit up.

“Who else saw me naked?”

“I made D leave before I pulled your clothes all the way off,” she tells me.

For fuck’s sake. I know it’s foolish to feel embarrassed. After all, he’s seen me naked, thanks to the private show I gave him only a couple of days ago. But seeing me bare when



I'm feeling powerful is a hell of a lot different than witnessing me bruised and broken.

"Let's get you to the tub, all right? Then you can ask me all the questions you want."

I wrap an arm around her shoulders, and she holds me against her as we move—painfully slowly—into the bathroom and toward a huge porcelain, freestanding tub. I'm quite disappointed to find it completely empty. Until my new caregiver snaps her fingers, and liquid shimmers into existence right inside.

"How did you—"

"Water fae," she reminds me with a grin. Then, she helps me move a leg over the side. My foot touches the water, and I nearly weep with relief. While I'm surprised to see my body relatively clean, considering the amount of blood I recall seeing before I passed out, sinking into the aromatic water is enough to have me one step closer to feeling like myself again.

Adaya sets a washcloth on the side. "I'm going to go change the sheets. Call out if you need anything."

"Thanks." Closing my eyes, I lean back against the tub and enjoy the warm water soaking the grime from my body. It's now, though, that I let myself reflect on the way Dante looked standing in my room, covered in Valentina's blood.

His bare chest had been broad; that much I can remember clearly enough. His eyes were wild, hair a mess as though he'd just woken from sleep.

I'd never seen him so disheveled before. Like he'd crawled through tunnels to get to me. *Get it together, Liv*. His fear makes sense given his star performer was nearly dead on the floor. I'm the only aerobic left, aside from Apollo. That would be bad for business.

*Oh shit! Apollo!* Did he run? Leave me behind when he realized I couldn't go with him? Or worse, did the Ringmaster find him? "My partner?" I call out. "Has anyone told him what happened?"

Adaya peeks into the bathroom. “He knows you were injured and that you survived. He was working with the others to clean up your room.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” She grins and steps out of view again.

Relieved at knowing Apollo is fine, I let my mind wander over the feel of Dante’s hand on my cheek. He’d touched me, his fingers warm, comforting. What the hell happens now?

“How do you know the Ringmaster?” I call out.

“I clean up after the messy bastard,” she replies as she steps into the bathroom. “And occasionally help with a wounded performer.”

“I hadn’t seen you before the fire.”

“I’m not needed very often,” she replies with a smile. “Though I did help when you were poisoned.”

Realization dawns, and I feel like a bitch for not putting two and two together. Then again, I was pretty damn out of it. “Thank you for saving my life. Twice now.”

She smiles again. “You’re welcome. And don’t worry, I don’t keep tabs like D does.”

Somehow, I suspect there’s more to their story, a side I’m not hearing, but I put it aside for now. Closing my eyes, I lean back against the tub.

Yesterday was the third time I’ve been that close to death. Three times in my thirty-four years of life that I’ve genuinely believed I was not going to live to see another sunrise.

Tears burn in my eyes, so I close them, taking deep, steadying breaths.

The first time was when Ernesto traded my body in a business dealing. I’d fought back, refusing to let his friends have me. He’d beaten me so badly they hadn’t been able to use me after all.

Before I healed, he sealed me in stone. Leaving me to fester in my pain. I’d longed to feel death’s chilling fingers for

the three weeks he left me there. My wounds healed just enough for me to live, but not nearly enough to ease my pain.

Three weeks of bordering on insanity.

It wasn't until someone bumped into the stone that I fell, and it broke, releasing me. I'd run. Despite the pain in my ribs, the ache in my head, I ran as far and fast as I could, but it wasn't enough.

They caught me in that alley, and had Dante not shown up, I've no doubt Ernesto would have finished me off the second he got the chance.

And now—this never should have happened. I let my guard down, believed her misplaced jealousy was just an annoyance. Never would I have pegged Valentina for a killer. The fact that she was makes me wonder just what everyone else here is capable of. It has me wondering if perhaps the person who murdered Thomas and Jenny isn't closer than I could have ever imagined.

“You ready to wash?”

Adaya's voice pulls me back to the present, and I nod, opening my eyes to meet her gaze. She bends over behind me. “Scoot forward and lean your head back.”

“I can wash myself—”

“Nope. I am under strict instructions to see to your every need. So, scoot forward and lean back unless you want to get me into trouble.”

Since I know what getting into trouble with Dante looks like, I do as I'm told. Adaya's fingers knead my scalp, lulling me into a relaxed state I haven't been in since—well—I don't know if I've ever felt this relaxed.

As soon as she's done, she rinses my hair using a sprayer attached to the tub then helps me wash. When I'm finally clean, she helps me stand and wraps a towel around my bruised body. I let her guide me out of the tub and toward the freshly made bed where she's lain out a large white shirt.

*His shirt.*

“I can’t wear that.”

“Why not?”

“That’s his.”

She rolls her eyes. “He’s not going to miss it.”

Still, I eye it cautiously. It feels like a violation of his privacy. Wearing a man’s clothes—it’s personal, right? Sensual.

“Unless you’d rather stay naked,” Adaya quips.

That gets me. I nod. Chuckling, she slips it over my head. Unable to help myself when she briefly turns away, I lift the soft fabric to my nose and inhale the Ringmaster’s scent. It’s heady and warms me from the inside out. It’s wrong to be so ridiculously attracted to a monster. And yet, here I am, wearing his shirt.

“Into bed now.”

“I really am fine to go back to my apartment.”

“I’ll leave that up to him.”

“He doesn’t get to dictate where I sleep.”

Adaya smiles widely at me. “I like you.” Her expression darkens. “Which is why I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that and urge you to listen to him. He may be an ass, but he wants to keep you safe. Is that not what you want, too?”

Swallowing hard, I eye his bed again. My entire body aches, and while the pain is manageable, the idea of walking all the way back to my apartment doesn’t sound appealing in the least. So, I tell myself that it’s logic that has me slipping between his sheets. Logic that has me turning my face into his pillow and breathing deeply as I relax in a bed I have selfishly dreamt of being in since the first night I performed for him.

Dante makes me feel powerful in a world that has deemed me powerless.

He makes me feel beautiful when I spent years being told I was little more than average.

Adaya pulls the blankets up and sets a glass of water beside the bed. “Take this. You should be right as rain in about two hours.”

I down the bitter liquid then hand her back an empty vial. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She claps her hands together. “All right, you get some sleep.”

“What about him? Where’s he going to sleep?”

She shrugs. “I’m sure he’ll figure it out.” Then, she turns and leaves me sitting in the apartment alone with my own thoughts.

## CHAPTER 20

## IIV

I'm awoken by the sound of a door creaking. My heart pounds, adrenaline already surging through my system before I'm even fully awake. Grasping the covers, I rip them up to my chest and sit up, scooting as far back as I can. Thankfully, my body does not retaliate with pain.

The room is pitch black, and I peer into the darkness, searching for the source of the sound. "Who's there?"

No one answers.

Slowly, I reach beside me and turn on the lamp. Light floods the room, but I'm alone.

Another scratch. I jump out of bed and reach for the heaviest thing I can find—a book that was sitting on the nightstand. "You better answer, or so help me, I will clobber you!" I call out.

Still, no answer.

On tiptoes, I move through the space, pulse pounding in my ears. The rug is soft beneath my feet as I make my way toward the bathroom. The door is shut, but there are no sounds coming from inside.

*You can do this.*

"Hello?" I call out.

Still nothing.

"I'm coming in!" Reaching out, I grip the handle and shove the door forward.

Light floods the hall, and I suck in a breath at the *massive* wall of muscle standing in front of the sink—completely naked. “Oh, fuck,” I whisper as I let my gaze travel unashamedly from his powerful legs to his perfectly sculpted ass.

I take in his biceps, and when he turns toward me, I am unable to keep my gaze from dropping to his unnaturally large dick. It hangs between his legs, and my mouth actually waters. As if I’m looking at a steak and not a dragon’s man-meat.

*Man-meat. Seriously?* I shake my head, trying to come up with any rational thought. Unfortunately, it’s stuck on penis brain.

“Do I really need to remind you that my eyes are up here?”

*Shit.* I tear my gaze from something I would *really* love to get my hands on—and I do mean both hands—and pay close attention to his broad chest as I rake my gaze up to his face. He’s watching me with an expression that nearly borders on amusement.

“Sorry. You caught me off guard.” But even I hear how weak that expression is. “I called out to see who was here.”

He reaches up, muscles flexing as he pulls an earbud out of his ear then drops it in the hand already holding one. “And you thought that, since I didn’t answer, you should barge in?”

“I didn’t know who you were. You could have been an intruder.”

His gaze drops to the book in my hand. “And you were going to what—bludgeon me with my nightly read?”

“If I had to,” I reply, straightening my shoulders.

Not at all bothered by the fact that he’s naked, the Ringmaster steps closer to me, so close that I can see the flecks of green in his irises. “You are safe here.”

“I thought I was safe in my apartment. And the fact that I am here is evidence enough that I am not.”

“No one comes into my space, Liv.”



My name on his lips shouldn't sound so alluring. The heat in my belly grows, the throbbing between my legs so damn intense it nearly drops me to my knees. I tighten my free hand into a fist and then back away. "I apologize for barging in on you."

"Don't," he replies, facing the sink again. He places both earbuds on the counter and begins rubbing lotion on his powerful arms. "Did Adaya care for you well enough?"

"Yes. Thank you." The fact that he is clearly so unashamed by his nakedness gives me another opportunity to study his body. Honestly, this man clothed, even knowing what a bastard he can be, should be considered a crime. "I am going back to my apartment tomorrow."

"You will go back when I believe you are ready."

"No one else is a threat to me."

He turns to me now. "If you believe that, then you are far more ignorant than I gave you credit for."

My cheeks heat. "Valentina is dead, right? Isn't that what you told me?"

A muscle in his jaw clenches, and he looks away from me for a moment. Then, he reaches to the counter and grabs a pair of shorts. Casually, he pulls them on then crosses both arms over his chest. "They are *all* threats to you. And have you forgotten so quickly about what happened to Thomas and Jenny?"

The image of my dead friends assaults me. "Of course not." And even though I don't fully believe the words, I speak them anyway, "If anyone else was going to hurt me, they would have tried already. They're threats to you, not me."

He grins, though there is no humor in it. The expression is a challenge at best. At worst—well—I don't want to think about that. "They are not threats to me," Dante replies. "I own them."

"Exactly. You own them. You own me. Valentina was a problem because she believes you and I were sleeping together."

“Technically, we have been, have we not?”

The heat spreads, thoughts I have no business thinking popping into my head. What would sex feel like with this man? Rough? Painful? Fucking exhilarating? Like toeing the line with death and dancing with darkness? I shake my head to clear it then return my gaze to his face. “Not the same thing.”

“Oh,” he says. “You mean she believed we were fucking.”

My mouth falls open slightly. That word leaving his lips? Fuck me if it doesn't make me want to bend over right here. Which makes me a horrible person, given who I'm talking to. “Yes. She did. And that we are not doing.”

“No,” he replies. “We are not.”

“Then let me go home so I can get back to my life.”

“And if I do not grant your wish? What will you do then?”

“Go anyway. You may own my time, but you cannot force me to remain here.” I tip my face up to him as he steps forward. Close enough that if I were to reach out, I could touch his chest.

The tension between us has always been thick, but right now, it's nearly unbearable.

“Fine. Tomorrow you can return to your life.” Dante leans in. “But you will not tell anyone where you've been. Do I make myself clear? You tell them you were with a healer. That I took you to one as soon as we knew you could travel safely.”

“Wouldn't dream of tarnishing your monstrous reputation,” I sneer and turn away.

He grips my arm, and I'm yanked back toward him. The feeling of his bare hand on my skin is sizzling, the heat in his gaze, intoxicating.

My magic roars to life, stronger than I've ever felt it. And when Dante leans down, I long to close the distance and press my lips to his. Even as he whispers, “Telling them won't tarnish a fucking thing for me. But it will ruin you.”

“You’re touching me again,” I whisper, searching his gaze for pain. He told me his flesh was tender, didn’t he? “You touched me to bring me here.”

“I had no choice.” He releases me. “If I had waited for help, you would have died.”

“I don’t understand. You told me you couldn’t touch me.” When he doesn’t respond, I press on. “That the consequences would be great if you did.”

“I’m dealing with them,” he snaps, resting both hands on the sink and dropping his head. He takes a deep breath, then another. “You have no idea the danger you’re in now, Liv. And I truly wish I could make you understand.”

This man is my captor.

My enemy.

Forgetting those two things will only end one way: with me dead... “I’ve never survived outside of danger,” I tell him honestly. Then, because he’s still very, very naked and I’m desperate to know what he feels like, I reach up and trail a finger down his spine.

Dante shivers.

“Does it hurt?”

He turns his head to me as his arm partially shifts, a multitude of colorful scales shimmering into view. “It hurts worse when you don’t touch me.”

I gasp, his words a punch of desire to my gut.

Need churns within me, and heat rushes between my legs.

Dante closes his eyes and inhales. “I can smell your arousal,” he growls. “I can taste it on my fucking tongue.”

I should pull away. Should put distance between us, because what’s happening right now is going to destroy the both of us. But even as logic dictates I run, I raise my hand again and touch his scales. They’re smooth and warm beneath my fingertips.

And—because, apparently, I’m a glutton for punishment—I lean down and press my lips to them.

Dante growls and rips me toward him. He claims my mouth, his lips feverish on mine. Every single doubt vacates my mind in a blur of passion. He lifts me and sets me on the countertop and then buries his hands in my hair, his tongue in my mouth.

Everything I’ve ever wanted.

Everything I’ve ever needed.

Has been right here all along.

And I no longer care if taking it kills me.

The kiss is fire. Torment. Delicious fucking poison that seeps into my bones and alters the way I see the world.

I grip his arms, my fingers kneading the muscles of his biceps as he pulls me toward the edge of the counter and presses me against his hard dick. I moan and wrap both legs around his ass to pull him closer.

Dante lifts me, and I wrap both arms around his neck. The mattress is plush beneath me as Dante positions himself between my legs, never breaking the kiss. His mouth continues to claim mine. Bruising, feverish, his tongue plunges into my mouth, possessing me as his hands slip up my thigh and beneath his shirt.

And it’s still not enough.

Gripping his biceps, I roll him over onto his back and climb on top of him. I move my hands up, gripping his hair as his hands slide back up and grip my hips. I grind against him, the barrier of my panties too damn much.

Dante flips me over and onto my back and presses up between my legs. I moan, friction burning me from the inside. I want more. All of it. All of him. And if it’s wrong? I don’t fucking care.

His large hand encases both of my wrists, and he yanks them up, pinning them above my head as he trails his lips down my neck. He presses kisses to my collarbone, shoves the

shirt up with his spare hand, and captures my nipple in his mouth.

I hiss, arching up into the warm, wet heat. “More,” I whisper. “Please, more.”

He gently nips the bud then uses his free hand to tease the other one. Waves of pleasure shoot through my body until I’m sure I can’t take anymore. Then, he’s gone. And I’m cold.

I sit up, breathing ragged, as I track his movements. He crosses the room and withdraws a silk tie before turning back. My heart stumbles within my chest, my stomach churning with excitement.

His broad chest on full display in the dim light cast from the bathroom. He’s a damned sight to behold. Eye candy at its finest. And I’m ready to have my fill.

“Seems only fair since you tied me up,” he says as he crosses back toward the bed.

“We should even the playing field,” I reply. Letting him tie me up is *not* smart. That much I know, and yet I’m offering him both of my wrists as he kneels on the bed. He wraps the soft silk around them and tightens it. Then he stretches my arms up over my head and secures them to the bedframe.

I’m completely helpless.

At his mercy.

My heart hammers, my blood pumping. And when his hands grip the neck of the shirt I wear and he shreds the fabric, revealing my body, the danger I’m in no longer matters.

Because he’s looking at me like I’m the most delicious thing he’s ever seen. And I am *beyond ready* to be devoured.

“So fucking gorgeous,” Dante growls as his lips go to the flesh between my breasts. He trails kisses down, traveling farther and farther down my body until he reaches where I ache for him.

“Do you have any idea how long I’ve been thinking about your sweet pussy?” he questions as he runs his tongue over the

inside of my thigh. “How many nights I pumped my cock while I imagined the taste of you?”

“How many?” I ask, already breathless.

“Too fucking many to count,” he replies. “And when you let me taste you—” He closes his eyes and growls low and deep. “It undid me. You undo me, Liv.” He slides his large hands up my body and covers my breasts, his thumbs scraping deliciously over my hardened nipples. Pleasure shoots through my body.

Then he smiles.

I swallow hard, holding his gaze as he slowly sticks his tongue out and runs it over my clit. “Oh, shit!” I arch up, pulling at the tie so I can reach him and feel his hair between my fingers. So I can pin him against me. So I can keep him from ever stopping.

But, like the man who tied it, the knot too strong for me to escape.

“I’m going to fucking own your body after this,” he whispers against me as he gently pinches both of my nipples. “So the only one you’ll ever think of when you come is me.”

I don’t bother telling him it’s that way now. That, ever since we met, it’s been him who has brought me release. His massive hands leave my breasts and grip my thighs. He spreads me apart. Baring me like I’m a buffet and he’s a man starved.

“Mine,” he growls then runs his tongue over me. He pulls my clit into his mouth and I try to arch up but his grip on my thighs holds firm. “Who do you belong to?” he questions, hot breath fanning over the wet heat between my legs.

“You.”

“That’s fucking right.” Dante leans in and slips his tongue inside of me, plunging into my body as I’m helpless to do anything but take it. Not that I would do anything else. This is fucking magic. Power beyond our comprehension. My body comes to life when I’m with him, every nerve firing, magic

blazing through my blood—he’s the gasoline and the match to the flames of my desire.

He releases one of my thighs and withdraws his tongue, only to slip a finger in while his lips close around my clit again. Power licks at my skin, a breeze toying with the ends of his dark hair.

“Yes, fuck *yes*,” I groan.

Dante chuckles and pulls back, finger leaving my body. “Not yet, Fury,” he says. “The only place you come is on my cock. Are we clear?” Swallowing hard, I nod. He gets to his knees and stares down at me. “What to do with you now?” he asks, trailing his fingers up my thighs.

“You’d damn well better get inside of me,” I snap. “Because I’ve been waiting way too fucking long for this.”

He laughs again, absolute joy reflected on his striking face. How such a hard man can look so damned beautiful when he smiles is beyond me. But he is. Those copper eyes are swirling with power.

With strength.

Dante climbs off of me, kneeling beside where I’m tied to the bed. Then, he grips my hips and flips me over onto my belly. My arms cross at the wrists, and adrenaline pulsates through my body, excitement jarring my nerves.

Massive hands knead my ass cheeks as he re-positions himself behind me. “I’ve dreamed of taking you this way,” he says. “Of burying myself into this tight fucking pussy from behind.”

I slide my knees up and arch my back. “Then do it already.” My core is on fire, my breathing ragged. My swollen clit is desperate for friction, so much so that I’m pretty damned sure I’ll die if he doesn’t fill me now. “Please,” I whisper. “I need you.”

Dante growls, a low, deep baritone that sends a delicious shiver of desire up my spine. He’s an animal. A primal beast. He runs a hand over my wet heat then slips a finger inside of me.

“Please,” I beg.

He removes his hand and flips me back over onto my back. “I want to see your eyes when I bury myself inside of you for the first time,” he says, tone deadly serious. Then, he climbs between my legs, and I stare up at him, unwilling to look away for even a moment. His hard length presses against my entrance.

And when he pushes inside of me, I see fucking stars.

He fills me, my body stretching to accommodate his massive length to the brink of pain. As soon as he fills me, he stills and drops his head down.

Dante sucks in a breath. “You’re so tight,” he groans. “Like a fucking vice.”

After a few heartbeats, he slides out and then back in again. “That feels so good,” I whisper, wrapping my legs up and around his waist so he can get deeper. I want every inch of him, every glorious fucking inch of his dick inside of me.

For the first time in my life, I *want* to be owned.

Possessed.

But only if it’s by *him*.

He pulls out slowly, withdrawing near completely before slamming back into me. Then he reaches down and rubs my clit with his finger. I come undone, the orgasm tearing through me. I throw my head back and cry out, every muscle in my body uncoiling with the force of my release.

Power explodes out of me—a gust of wind that sends my hair flying.

Papers scatter from his dresser onto the floor.

The chair in the corner falls over as does everything that had been on his nightstands.

“Dante!” I cry out, yanking at the bindings holding me so I can feel his flesh beneath my fingertips.

“Fuck yes, Liv,” he groans. “Come all over me, baby.”



He moves faster now, thrusting into me while my body readies for another release. I can't take it anymore, the way he makes me feel. Powerful, sexy, I never want to leave this damned room.

Can we spend all of our time screwing each other into utter oblivion?

Dante's hands cover my breasts as he continues to pound into me. I come undone a second time, still pulling at the restraints on my wrists, to no avail. Dante pulls out and pumps his dick once before warm spray covers my belly.

I don't tear my gaze from his face as he comes, wanting to see his expression at the moment of release. Eyes closed, he's arched back, chest gleaming with sweat, hand wrapped around his dick.

When he drops his gaze to me, his eyes are burning like twin flames. Power glints along his flesh. Scales shimmer into place along both of his massive biceps, but they're only visible for a fraction of a second before they're gone.

His gaze drops to my belly. "Fuck, sorry."

Before I can respond, he leaves the room and rushes toward the bathroom. How do I tell him that I don't care? That him coming on me might as well have been a brand that I gratefully accept?

Washcloth in hand, he cleans my belly then returns it to the bathroom and re-emerges with a fresh one. "Spread your legs," he orders.

I do as he asks, keeping my gaze on him as he finishes cleaning me up. Once he's done, he takes the cloth back to the bathroom and returns to untie me. Hand on the restraints, he leans down and captures my lips.

I lift my face, tilting up into the tender kiss. My wrists are freed while his lips are still on mine, so I thread my fingers through his hair and pull him closer. The bed dips with his weight as he climbs onto the mattress, not breaking the kiss.

Strong fingers trace my jaw with a tenderness I never would have attributed to a man I've always known as a

murderer.

A murderer who I just let fuck me into tomorrow.

And already, I want to do it again.

“That was incredible,” I say as soon as he pulls away and nestles onto the mattress beside me. “As in, life-changing, altering, fucking magic. And I destroyed your apartment. I’ve never felt magic like that.” I laugh nervously. “I’ll help fix it, I —”

Dante stills beside me, so I roll to face him. He’s staring up at the ceiling, his breathing sharp.

“What is it?” I sit up. Was it not what he’d been hoping for? Am I not enough? All of my old insecurities slam into me one after the other until all I can hear is Ernesto laughing as he ‘showed me’ what he wanted in a woman. “Maybe I should —” I start to roll off the bed, and Dante pins me to the mattress so quickly he’s little more than a blur of movement.

“Don’t leave,” he chokes out, tone strained.

“What’s going on with you?”

He closes his eyes, and a shiver runs through his body. “I’m struggling to keep—you need to know something.” Releasing me, he climbs off the bed. Dante doesn’t meet my gaze, doesn’t even bother looking straight at me.

“What the hell is going on?” I demand.

“When I touch you—” he starts and then trails off and shakes his head. “My dragon yearns to possess you.”

“Um, I’m not—”

“Not like that,” he snaps. Then, he drops to his knees beside the bed and stares up at me. “I don’t think you realize what you mean to me.”

I swallow hard. “I—” But I don’t finish the thought. Telling the man on his knees in front of me that I like him seems like a massive understatement. But I don’t know the words. It’s not love. Affection is far too tame a word. What I feel for Dante is pure, carnal, and as exciting as it is terrifying.

“You don’t need to say anything,” he replies. “But you need to understand that what’s between us, I don’t take it lightly. And while we’re together, you’re with no one else. Am I clear?”

“Crystal. And I expect the same from you.”

Dante smiles up at me. “No other could ever come close to you, Liv. Not now. Not ever.”

## CHAPTER 21

## IV

**I** 'm a dead woman.

*Blood drips from my busted lip and a gash on my forehead. I'm pretty damn sure my wrist is broken, though I don't stop. The adrenaline pulsating through my veins keeps the pain manageable, but I know that it's only temporary. Eventually, the pain will catch up to me. And if I haven't found safety—refuge—by then, my attackers will catch up, and then it'll be lights out for me.*

*Blood trickles into my eyes, momentarily blocking my vision. I rapidly wipe it away with the back of my uninjured hand and continue limping through the alley, cradling my busted arm against my chest as I do. Each move is agony. Each breath a chore.*

*Ernesto will never stop hunting me. If he even catches wind that I have remained in No Man's Land, there will be no building he doesn't search, no alley he doesn't scour in his quest to bring me back.*

*My only chance to survive long term is to try to get to the nearest House boundary. It doesn't even matter which one at this point. Once I manage to make it across, I will have to prove my worth and beg for a position...something that I will gladly set my pride aside to do. Because once I'm accepted, Ernesto will never be able to touch me again.*

*My skin is still coated in the powder of my prison cell. Evidence that clings to my sweat-beaded flesh as a reminder of the best-case scenario if they should catch me. My magic is of*

*no use to me now, not that it ever really was. A light breeze isn't going to suddenly change my life—or let me keep it. Not when the men I'm up against are conditioned killers.*

*I keep my attention ahead rather than on the men chasing me because they are hardly the worst thing that I could find in No Man's Land. Here, there are no laws. No governing houses. I've no ring to protect me, no leader to come looking and deliver vengeance on my behalf.*

*I am alone.*

*And if I cannot keep up this pace, I am going to die.*

*My foot catches on the uneven asphalt, and I trip, tumbling to the ground. It bites into my knees, elbows, and the side of my face as I come to a skidding stop. Before I can stifle it, a whimper leaves my lips. Every inch of my body might as well be made of lead as I try to push myself up.*

*I fall back down, my vision blurring as more blood drips into my eyes. "Not here. Please, not here," I whisper to myself as I try to stand. Once again, it's no use. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Maybe if I just take a minute, just one second—my stomach rolls as the overwhelming stench of piss and rotting garbage fills my lungs.*

*Which only adds insult to injury. Not only will they kill me, but I'm also likely going to be murdered in an alley like the trash they claim I am.*

*"There you are, pretty thing." The cool voice sends fire blazing in my heart.*

*I try to push up—to get to my feet—but I'm not fast enough. A tentacle closes around my ankle and rips me back. Pain explodes in the side of my face as my head cracks against the asphalt. But it's nothing compared to the scraping of pebbles as they tear at my skin.*

*The chain around my neck catches on a sharp chunk of asphalt, but it gives within seconds. It's ripped from my neck, and I reach for it, desperate to hang onto the one good part of my childhood. The one thing I have left of a life I barely remember. But it remains just out of reach.*

*I try to cling to the ground, to hold onto anything that will buy me more time. But the asphalt tears my fingernails, ripping some of them completely off. I'm brought to a stop and flipped over onto my back where I meet the gaze of my attackers. Every muscle in my body quivers, but they will not break me.*

*My body. Sure.*

*My heart. Absolutely.*

*But my soul? Never.*

*Three men glare down at me. If they can even be called that. They are monsters in the cruelest sense of the word. Creatures bent on tormenting any species they deem weaker. And as a hybrid with very little power, that is exactly what I am. Weaker.*

*Ivan, the Octopi shifter whose tentacle is currently wrapped around my ankle, is the first to sneer down at me. "Little bird flew from her cage."*

*"Doesn't seem right, does it?" Bryce—a fae who has taken great pride in tormenting me over the last two years—adds.*

*The final attacker, a vampire named Shavers, leans down. "I say we play with her before we take her back. Boss won't notice a few extra bruises, will he?"*

*"Fuck off." I spit, the bloody saliva splattering his face.*

*He grins. "Baby, you know I love the taste of your blood." He reaches for me, and I scream.*

*"Go ahead and keep screaming, little bird!" Ivan calls. "No one will hear—" He's cut off when a shadow drops down into the alley behind us.*

*Dread unfurls in my belly, a venomous creature prepared to devour me alive. This is it. The man I'd really hoped would never find me again. From here, he is nothing but a shadow, a nightmare haunting my every moment.*

*"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Bryce demands as the man moves closer.*

*It's not until the stranger steps into the dim light of the moon above that I see it's not Ernesto at all but rather a complete stranger. A man who is basically a wall of damned muscle compared to the three in front of me. Still, I don't dare hope for a rescue. There is nothing refined about the stranger; nothing that screams hero; more than likely, he's going to leave me here to die.*

*Most men would not get involved in business such as this unless, of course, they wanted what was being fought over. Which, in this case, is me.*

*His angry glare shifts from me to Ivan. "Weren't you ever taught not to play with your food?" the stranger questions, tone low and deep. There is no emotion in it. No feelings whatsoever. And I get the sudden impression that this man is far worse than even those who've held me captive for the last seven years. And isn't that my luck?*

*"This is Ernesto's turf. So get fucked," Ivan replies.*

*The stranger looks past them to me again. A muscle in his sharp jaw tightens as he takes in the sight of my battered body. What clothes I had are nearly completely shredded now, baring a good portion of my bloodied flesh for all to see.*

*But as his gaze holds mine, the murderous rage within the copper depths momentarily steals my breath. This man is a predator; that much is evident in the distance between us. "Do you wish for aid?" he asks.*

*"Shut your fucking whore mouth, little bird," Ivan snarls. His tentacle tightens on my ankle, and the bone snaps. I scream, pain shooting up my leg. Arching up off the pavement, I reach for my magic again, but still, nothing comes. Not even a blip of what little power I once held. What the hell did they do to me?*

*My vision swims, the pain finally pulling me under. At least, I'll be dead before they do whatever it is they want with me.*

*"Answer me, woman. Do you wish for aid?" the stranger demands again, his tone more strained.*



*“Yes!” I whisper.*

*“What the fuck did I tell you!” Bryce starts for me, but he doesn’t make it two steps before he freezes in place. A thin streak of blood forms on his throat, but it’s not until his head slides to the side that I see the stranger has withdrawn a blade.*

*Ivan releases me and lets out a roar. Four of his tentacles shoot from his partially shifted body, but the stranger moves with the grace of a warrior. He spins to his left and right, slicing out until the grey flesh is wiggling on the pavement—no longer attached. Ivan falls forward, and the man drives his blade into the back of his skull.*

*I try to scoot backward, to escape, but my body might as well have been fused with the ground.*

*“You are going to regret that, asshole.” Shavers flexes his arms, and blades slide out of the sleeves of his leather jacket. I’ve seen him fight in the ring, put up against supernaturals until he became Ernest’s favorite pet. If any of these three is going to give the stranger a run, it’s him.*

*But the stranger doesn’t seem the least bit fazed.*

*Shavers attacks.*

*The stranger pivots, moving impossibly fast even for a supernatural, and drives his blade into Shavers’ spine. Ernesto’s pet throws his head back and roars, but the stranger doesn’t stop here. He grips the top of Shavers’ head and snaps his neck as though he were breaking a tiny twig in half, and not a grown man.*

*Shavers’ body drops to the ground, and the stranger turns toward me. Tears in my eyes, I try once again to access my magic, to move, but both actions prove fruitless.*

*Dressed in black jeans, a matching shirt, and crimson leather jacket, he looks every bit the savage he just proved himself to be. The question remains, though, am I better off now? Or should I have let Ernesto’s men drag me back to his prison of stone?*

*“Thank you,” I whisper. Tears stain my cheeks, mixing with the blood.*

*“Do not thank me,” he replies, moving closer and sheathing the short blade at his waist. “I do nothing for free.”*

*I swallow hard. No one does. Especially not in No Man’s Land. “I have no magic to offer.”*

*“I don’t need your magic,” he says as he kneels beside me. Closer now, I can see him clearly.*

*“It’s you,” I whisper, recognizing him now. How I had missed it before, I cannot understand. But he is unmistakable because I’ve spent the last two years dreaming of him to keep myself from going insane.*

*His face is sharp, features distinguished. He has no scars, no tattoos on his face or neck. Dark hair is short and styled so it’s longer on top of his head. There is no House ring adorning his finger, at least, not that I can see, given the blood-stained gloves covering his hands. Not that I would expect there to be.*

*The Ringmaster needs no House for protection because he is the leader of his own House. One that is not governed by any outside rules.*

*Even as I recognize him, even as I know he has nothing to do with Ernesto, the voices in my head scream that I need to get away. That I need to run from this predator. But I can do neither.*

*In my damaged state, I cannot imagine he could want my body, but given our location and his skillset, I cannot put it past him. So, swallowing my pride, I straighten. “My body is broken. But given time—”*

*“I do not want your body,” he growls, irritation crossing his handsome features.*

*I’m at a loss. I have no house. No family. No magic to offer as currency or trade. “Then what could you possibly want?”*

*A slow smile spreads over his face. “Your life.”*



I SHOOT up out of bed, heart racing, sweat beading on my body. The night I escaped Ernesto and wound up in Dante's Circus is one I've never forgotten. But this is the first time I've ever dreamt of it.

Punishment for sleeping with the very man holding me captive?

"Nightmare?"

My head whips to the side. In the faintest light cast from the hall, I can make out Dante sitting in a chair, reading. He wears the same shorts he put on last night, his hair a mess. "Did you not sleep?"

"I never sleep for very long." He pushes to his feet and crosses the room, then climbs into bed. I curl up beside him, resting my head on his broad chest. "What was your nightmare about?"

"Not a nightmare—or at least not a typical one. It was the night I escaped. The night you found me in that alley."

Dante stills.

"I've never dreamt of it before. Honestly, I've tried hard to forget. Hell, you probably don't even remember."

"You'd been covered in your own blood," he says, voice strained. "Your clothes lying in tattered shreds on your body. They'd broken your ankle, your wrist, and just before I showed up, they'd threatened to rape you."

I pull away and sit cross-legged on the bed to face him. "You remember."

"There is not a single thing about you I've forgotten, Liv. I can recall the rage that burned through me, the way you'd looked so terrified, so broken."

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring it up—”

“You apologize too damn much.”

I know he’s not wrong. I spent years being forced to seek forgiveness for even the faintest slight against Ernesto or his men. If they touched my ass, I had to let them or face his wrath. If they wanted to watch us in bed—he let them. And if I showed even the faintest hesitation, I was punished.

Punished by being beaten then cast in stone to let my injuries marinate.

“Fine. I take it back,” I reply as I lean back against the headboard. It’s strange, how completely at ease I feel right now. Perhaps I’m simply too tired to care that I’m alone with a man everyone else fears. That I’ve had his hands on my body. His mouth. That he’s brought me more pleasure than I’ve ever felt in my entire existence.

Or, more likely, I’m far more familiar with what evil looks like. And it’s an earth fae with the ability to turn people to stone.

The air around us shifts. “Why do you think about that asshole?”

“Who?”

“Ernesto,” he snaps. “I told you before; your scent changes when you’re thinking about that fucker.”

“Occasionally, he crosses my mind. Though, I didn’t even realize.”

“Why? The cocksucker tried to have you killed.”

“He did so much worse than that,” I say, the words leaving my mouth before my filter can stop them.

“Tell me.” It’s not a request. The Ringmaster is demanding to know what was done to me.

“It’s not a pretty story, and I very much doubt you want to hear it.”

“Try me,” he replies then props up on the headboard and crosses his arms.

Every moment with him is dancing with danger. Climbing up to the crest of a mountain I know I'm going to fall from. Telling the Ringmaster my secrets is playing with fire. A man like him seeks power, and there is a shit-ton of that in knowledge.

Am I ready for that? To hand over even more of my soul? To bare more than my body to him?

Why the hell not? "Ernesto was the first person I met once my parents abandoned me here in No Man's Land," I begin. "After being cast from my house at the age of fifteen, I seriously doubted I would survive longer than a few days—at best. But then Ernesto showed up." I smooth the blankets in front of me, looking everywhere but at the man beside me. "He was handsome, smiled a lot. And he promised me security." I sigh as the memories assault me. "I'd been young and naïve, or else I would have seen straight through to the evil monster lurking inside."

A tear slips from my eye, so I quickly wipe it away.

"What happened after he found you?"

Still, I don't look at Dante. Instead, I focus on the hallway and the light barely illuminating it. "He promised me the world. Talked me into bed and used me for my body from the time I was sixteen until he sealed me in stone and forced me to watch as he fucked and killed women who'd trade their bodies for magic they would never see." The truth burns as I speak words I've never said aloud. To anyone.

The Ringmaster's rage is palpable as he stands and puts distance between us. He takes deep, steadying breaths, but I can see the barely leashed restraint as his shoulders tense and he straightens. "I could kill him," he growls. "Track him down and wipe him out like the fucking pest he is."

"He has a small army, Dante. And those are the ones that remain in the compound with him."

"It would be worth the risk."

"Not to me, it won't be."

He turns toward me. “I will protect you,” he says. “With every breath in my chest.” Dante crosses toward me and sits on the bed, reaching out to take my hands into his. “What happened with Valentina won’t happen again. I didn’t believe she was a legitimate threat, but I’ve learned.”

“I’m alive, and she’s gone.” I try to speak the words matter-of-factly, but the truth is her attack made me feel weak. Vulnerable. And after everything I’ve been through, feeling anything but strength is terrifying.

If I can’t protect myself against a pixie, what’s going to happen when I leave here?

When I’m no longer protected by the dragon I’ve shared a bed with?

The feel of that bat crashing into my shoulder. My head. My knee. It all comes rushing back. Tears blur my vision as the emotions from that memory collide with those of my nightmare.

The bed tips, and Dante pulls me against him. His lips press tenderly against my shoulder.

“Why won’t you tell me what happened when you touched me?” I whisper into the darkness.

“Tomorrow,” he whispers then presses his lips to my shoulder. I shiver though warmth spreads through me until my mind grows foggy, my eyes heavy, and I drift off to sleep in the arms of a dragon.

## CHAPTER 22

## IIV

**B**y the time I make it back to my apartment, I'm prepared for a massive mess to clean up. Blood splatter, broken items—I was so out of it when they took me to Dante's apartment that I don't even have a clear memory of what is left. I know Adaya said they were working to clean up my apartment, but I'm assuming they were merely removing Valentina's body parts.

I shiver.

Thankfully, it's lunchtime, so I run into no one as I move through the decrepit hall and stop right before my door. The red paint is peeling, the gap below the floor large enough for a small rodent to slip in. But it's home.

I turn the knob and shove the door open. The place is *immaculate*. My bed has been made using clean linens. The few dishes I do remember having in the sink have been washed, and there's not a speck of blood anywhere.

No evidence of a struggle.

“What the—” I move further inside and shut my door. The only remnants of anything having happened is the lingering scent of Dante. An aroma I will never forget. Some people see things, and memories are triggered.

For me, it's scent. I can smell something that will remind me of another time, another place, and it's as though I'm there all over again.

So now, breathing his scent in, I might as well be standing in his room again, feeling his hands sliding over my body. “*I*



*don't think you realize what you mean to me."*

Why me? Of all the women he likely has had and could have, why the hell did he choose me?

"Liv?"

I turn toward my now open door. Apollo's expression relaxes immediately, and he rushes inside and crushes me against his hard body. "It is you! I am so damn happy you're back!"

"Hey," I manage despite the air being shoved from my lungs with the force of his embrace. I try to pull away, to put distance between us, but he just holds on tighter. "I can't breathe, Apollo," I tell him.

Finally, he releases me but keeps his hands on my arms. "Where have you been? Are you all right? Valentina—"

"Is dead," I tell him. "She attacked me."

His gaze hardens. "I know."

"I'm sorry if you had to help clean up—"

"Don't apologize. If the Ringmaster hadn't killed her, I would have done it myself," he growls. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yes."

"Why did she attack you?" he questions.

"Because she thought I was sleeping with the Ringmaster."  
*Which I absolutely am now.*

"Fucking jealous bitch." He tightens both hands into fists, his skin momentarily sprouting feathers as his magic surges alongside his anger. "Where have you been?" His gaze narrows on my face almost as though he expects me to lie. "With a healer?"

"She broke two of my ribs, shattered my kneecap, and I very nearly bled out internally," I repeat what Adaya told me.

He pales. "You nearly died?" Apollo chokes on that last word as though uttering it bothers him—immensely.

“I did. So, that being said, I’m fine, but I’m exhausted.”

He reaches behind him and shuts the door. “When I saw him carrying you down the hall, I thought he’d discovered our plan,” he whispers. “That he’d taken it out on you. Honestly, until I saw Valentina’s body, I thought he was lying.” Apollo shivers. “For a minute there, I really thought you’d taken the blame and he’d killed you for it.”

I don’t know why, but Apollo is pissing me off. It’s illogical, of course. After all, I’d gone to him and asked him to leave with me. Not the other way around. “No, he rescued me.”

Apollo nods. “Then, since you’re back, we can leave tonight. Go anywhere you want.”

Fear makes my heart race. Leave? Now? “Actually, I’m not ready to leave,” I reply quickly.

Apollo narrows his gaze. “What? Why the hell not? You nearly died.”

“Yes, but Valentina is gone now, and I’m safe. I want to stay. For now,” I add quickly, not wanting him to suspect that anything between Dante and me has changed. The last thing I need are rumors spreading.

What’s between Dante and me is great, but it’s not for the others. Not until he decides to open that door.

“Why?” he questions.

“Because I’m scared,” I say. It’s a half-truth but one he bites.

Apollo’s expression softens. “Okay. Well, do you need anything? I can sit and watch over you while you rest.”

“No. I’m fine, really.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone,” he says sternly.

“You are,” I reply, harsher this time. “Seriously, I don’t need you, and frankly, I don’t want anyone here.”

Ignoring me completely, Apollo crosses the room and sits down in my chair. Then, he grins and closes his eyes. “Like

I'm not even here.”

“Apo—” My door opens, and Killian the guard steps in.

He grins at me. “Nice to see you alive.”

“I—”

His gaze shifts from me to Apollo. I follow it, surprised to see the gryffin glaring at our newcomer. “You are not supposed to be in here, Gryffin,” Killian says, venom in his tone.

“And I don't think my friendship with Liv is any of your fucking business, grunt.”

Killian grins at him. “Big ‘ol balls on you, huh? I'll make you a deal. She says you can stay and I'll leave. But if you refuse, I'll cut your cock off and feed it to you. Sound good? After all, birds like little worms, don't they?”

Apollo's cheeks turn crimson, and he gets to his feet.

“For fucks sake. Just go, Apollo,” I tell him.

“Since when do you need private security?” he demands.

“Since someone tried to kill her,” Killian replies, clearly unintimidated despite the fact that Apollo is trying like hell to appear more of a man. That's something I've learned though: The more they try, the less secure they are.

And Killian clearly knows Apollo is no threat to him.

“I don't like you being alone with him,” Apollo tells me as he stops beside me. Reaching out, he brushes my hair from my shoulder, and I want to cringe. “You're my friend. My partner. I worry about you.” He's behaving so damn possessively right now that the urge to kick him in the nuts is strong.

“If I really was your partner, you'd respect my wishes and get out of my apartment when asked.”

His expression softens. “You know where I am if you need me.” He brushes past me, and Killian smiles widely as he walks by.

As soon as he's gone, the shifter grins at me. "I'll be out here if you need me."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"Not a babysitter," he replies. "Think of me as your older brother. I'll lurk in the shadows and make sure all the motherfuckers steer clear."

"How did you even know he was in here?"

"The charm on your room has been removed for the Ringmaster, Duncan, Bracken, and myself. So we can keep an eye on you."

"The Ringmaster's doing?"

"Do you even have to ask?" he questions. Then, he takes a step farther into my apartment. "Listen, Liv, no one is trying to hover, but you have to understand that D cannot have anything happen to you. Therefore, neither can we."

"Why is that?" I demand, crossing my arms. "He says I'm important, but not why."

Killian smiles. "That's not for me to relay," he says simply. Then he turns and heads toward the door. After pulling it closed behind him, I breathe deeply and make my way toward my twin bed.

Without even bothering to take off my shoes, I fling myself forward onto the mattress and close my eyes. I can still feel his hands on my body, his mouth on mine.

My body warms with the memory, and I let myself drift off to sleep.



"ARE you sure you're ready for this?" Fiona questions from my bed as I finish applying my makeup. She'd shown up two

hours before the curtain is raised, demanding details on what happened. Details I'd given her. Well, mostly.

Some things are safer for us both if she doesn't know.

Dressed in my usual costume, I turn to face her. "Yes. More than."

"You're still healing."

"Not anymore. The rest of the bruises have faded, and all internal injuries are healed." In demonstration, I stand and lift a leg. Then I repeat with the other. "Both of my legs were broken. But see? Good as new."

"Hmm." Fiona doesn't look convinced. "Apollo been by since—"

"Since Killian verbally fed him his balls? No."

She grins. "I wish I could have been here to see that."

"It was pretty glorious. I mean, I know Apollo means well. But he's so damn overbearing sometimes."

"Sometimes?" She arches a white brow. "He's obsessed with you. In a way that is completely unhealthy."

"Is there any kind of obsession that is healthy?" I reply even as I feel guilty for the fact that I stoked that obsession because I'd needed him. Because I'd been willing to use him to escape. Which I have no intention of doing now.

She shrugs. "Mutual, perhaps?"

With a soft laugh, I check myself over in the mirror one final time. My light hair is loose around my face, the thick makeup I applied making me look like the pale, grief-stricken woman I am in my performance. "He definitely believes he has claim over me. And after Valentina, I don't want to take any chances."

"That he'll go full psycho and try to beat you with a bat?"

I know she's not trying to be crass, but the words are spoken far too soon. I wince. "Something like that."

Fiona sighs and stands, only to move in behind me so I can see her reflection. “I’m just sorry the Ringmaster got to her first. I would have loved to rip her fucking head from her shoulders and play soccer with it.” Her eyes flash blue, visible evidence of the berserker lurking within her.

“As much as I appreciate that visual, I’m glad it was him and not you. Had you killed her, there’s no telling how much trouble you would have been in.”

“True. But it would have been worth it.”

I stand and cross my apartment toward the door, Fiona on my heels. Killian falls into step behind us as the three of us make our way to the stairs. As we walk, my mind drifts, lingering on the one man I hope to see tonight.

A man I spent all day thinking of.

And a man I cannot wait to see tonight.

## CHAPTER 23

# DANTE

**M**y dragon slithers beneath my skin the moment I sense her presence. Liv enters the common area with Fiona, Killian lurking just behind her. I'm sure she didn't care much to have security on her, but after what happened with Jenny and Thomas, combined with Valentina's attack, I'm taking no chances.

Not with my fury.

Never with my mate.

Her gaze finds mine as she slides onto one of the benches.

My heart hammers like a pathetic fucking adolescent who just fucked for the first time, but I shove it down—for now. Though, try as I might, I cannot fight back the mental images of all the ways I cannot wait to take her.

Over my desk.

Kneeling on the floor.

Against a wall.

I clear my throat. "Tonight needs to be flawless," I tell them. "After shutting down for a few days, we need to return with one hell of a performance."

Murmurs rise but nothing substantial. Liv's gaze never leaves my face even as I force mine away from her and do my best to maintain my composure. I can taste her on my tongue, my fingers flexing at my sides all while the beast inside of me rattles against my control.



He wants her beside him at all times, which is impossible. Especially since I omitted the fact that she's my mate. But telling her that she literally owns me is not power I plan on handing over on a silver fucking platter.

I'm already pathetic enough.

"Any questions?"

Kleo raises her hand.

"Yes."

"Where's Valentina? We've heard rumors but—"

"Valentina is dead," I snap. "I ripped her fucking head off because I caught her trying to kill Liv."

Kleo's eyes widen as she looks to her fae partner, Brad. He shrugs, clearly not surprised.

"Let that be a lesson to everyone here. Fuck with what belongs to me and you'll be dead before you can deal the final blow."

"Does that just apply to Liv, or is it for all of us?" Apollo demands.

I grin at him. "That applies to all those I find worthy of keeping. Which, at present time, is not you."

The gryffin glowers at me but falls silent.

"Any other questions?"

Kleo raises her hand.

"Yes?"

"Do you know what happened to Thomas and Jenny yet? Was it Valentina?"

"I have no reason to believe it was the pixie, but we're still looking into it."

She nods and falls silent.

"Great. Then let's have a night of flawless performances," I say, clapping my hands together as everyone disperses, and turn toward Duncan, who stands behind me.

“You good, boss?” he questions.

“Yeah. Just struggling a bit.” I shrug my shoulders. They itch, a side effect of my scales trying to emerge. The dragon is desperate to get out, even more so now that he’s claimed Liv. My time of containing him is coming to a close, and tonight might be the time to sneak away and let him out for a few hours.

Behind me, someone clears her throat.

I turn and meet Liv’s piercing gaze. The room is empty save for us, Killian, and Duncan. My gaze drops to the swell of her breasts where they stick out of the top of her costume. Her mask is loose around her throat, her hair wild around her face.

My cock turns diamond-hard.

“We’ll be just outside.” Duncan excuses himself, grabbing Killian on the way out. The door no sooner shuts than I’m on her. Hands in her hair, lips claiming hers, I bruise her mouth with mine while I lift her slender body and cross the room. I slip behind the door of the kitchen and pin her to the wall, driving my hard cock up to push between her legs.

Her perfect fucking shapely ass in my hands, it’s no wonder my beast longs for her. She was made for me.

“This is dangerous,” she whispers. “Someone could catch us.”

“Fucking let them.” I slide her down my body and undo the button of my pants. But Liv doesn’t move. “If you like those shorts, take them off.”

“No.” Liv drops to her knees in front of me, her hands gripping my ass as she stares up. “You seem stressed. How about we try to fix that?” she questions.

“Fuck yes.” The sight of her on her knees, of her hand reaching out to stroke my cock, it’s too much. Leaning forward, she runs her tongue over my head and moans.

“You taste good,” she whispers.

“Then show me,” I order.

She grins up at me, mischief in her pale gaze. “I think you should tell me what you want, Ringmaster. I’m here to serve you.”

This game she’s playing, it’s got me more turned on than I’ve ever been in my entire fucking life. Reaching down, I grip her chin and hold her face so I can see her eyes. “I want you to take my hard cock and put it between those pretty lips of yours. I want to fuck that mouth I’ve been dreaming of since the moment we met.” Her arousal is potent. “Go on, baby.” I pull her face toward my length, and she opens her mouth.

I release her chin as she closes her lips around my cock. The wet heat of her mouth nearly undoes me. Tightening her grip on my ass, she pulls me in. I grip her hair and pump into her as she sucks.

“Fuck yes.”

But it’s not enough. I want more. I pull her off my cock. “Take off your shorts. Now.” She obeys, and I kick out of my pants, tossing them onto the ground. Then, I grip the back of her neck and rip her forward, slamming my mouth to hers. My tongue plunges, taking what I want, and leaving her breathless before I’m pushing her away and lying on the floor.

“Mouth on my cock,” I order. “Pussy in my face.”

She kneels and climbs over me, straddling my face as her tongue swirls around the head of my cock. I slide my tongue over her pussy, and she moans, sinking down onto my cock.

I suck her clit into my mouth and devour her, driving my tongue over her slick pussy while my cock fills her mouth. She’s so damned sweet on my tongue. And when she moans, the vibrations of her throat against my dick send me higher.

My hands grip her ass, and I knead the muscle as I slip my tongue into her pussy. Constant fucking pleasure—that’s what she brings me. I draw out and run my tongue from her clit toward her ass.

She sucks my cock in, nearly choking on me.

“I’m going to fuck you here, Liv. Soon.” Then, I capture her clit again.

Her answering moan damn near undoes me. My release builds as she slides her mouth down on my dick at the same rhythm I fuck her with my mouth.

She comes, *hard*, and I drink her in, sucking her release down as though it's the only thing keeping me alive. The moment I feel my own ready, I release her. "I'm going to come," I warn her. "If you don't—"

Liv tightens her hold on my legs and moves faster, faster, until my release overtakes me.

"Fuck yes," I growl as she swallows. "Fuck yes, Liv."

She slips off of me, then climbs off and faces me. Her face is flush, her pink lips slightly swollen. "That was amazing," she says softly.

"You're going to be the death of me."

Liv chuckles and turns away, but I move faster, wrapping an arm around her waist and bringing her back toward me. I grip her ass with one of my hands and squeeze. I slide a finger over her clit, and she sucks in a breath. She feels so damned good. The missing piece of my soul. A woman I want to continue claiming for the rest of my life.

Not just claiming, though. Not anymore. Now, I yearn to earn her love.

Her affection.

We clean up and dress quickly. Fully clothed, Liv turns to me and grins. "We have to stop meeting like this, Ringmaster."

Snaking a hand around the back of her neck, I pull her toward me and crush my mouth to hers. "Never," I whisper against her lips. "I'm going to fuck you every chance I get."

Liv smiles. "Challenge accepted."



THE LIGHTS GO dark in the Big Top, and the echoes of clapping are the only proof of life inside. I turn toward the exit, and the rest of the performers follow, slipping into the private wing of the tent. As soon as we're hidden from view, Uma brings the lights back, and the audience files out toward the exit and out into the grassy area where they will spend the next few hours playing games, mingling with the side-show performers, and riding the Ferris wheel.

“Excellent performances, everyone,” I comment before heading for the exit that will take me to my apartment. I'll have to wait until the circus is officially closed before letting the dragon out, but already, I'm itching to feel the wind against my scales.

To free the beast I've kept caged and then return to slip between the legs of my mate.

Behind me, I hear the usual murmuring, coupled with a, “He's in a good mood. Must have gotten laid,” from Brad.

I grin. If only they knew.

The air is warm against my face as I step outside and make my way toward the entrance to the apartment buildings. When I first started this circus, it was a way to make a name for myself. An opportunity to do something more creative than what everyone else was doing. Since I never much cared to have anyone ruling over me, No Man's Land called me, a beacon beckoning me toward a future where I would be owned by no one. Here, I do the owning, and the control is one hundred percent mine.

I'm just pulling open the door for the stairs when Bracken's scent fills my lungs. “What is it?” I demand, turning to face him.

“We've got a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“A couple of fuckers who tried to slip in tonight.”

“Did you deal with them?”

“We figured you might want to be the one to handle them this time, boss.”

Letting the door close, I turn to fully face him. “And why would you think that?”

Bracken’s savage grin answers me before he speaks the words. “They have Ernesto’s mark,” he replies. “And they were trying to sneak into the apartments.”

## CHAPTER 24

# DANTE

“Who’s going to talk first?” I question, stopping in front of a young shifter who is quite clearly the newest recruit. Based on his appearance, I’d gauge he’s around the age of twenty. It’s easy enough to surmise that this is the first time he’s been out on Ernesto’s orders. At least, I would think so, given the amount of piss that leaked out of him when I’d first entered the room.

“No one’s saying shit,” the older supernatural snaps. His silver hair is cut to the scalp, a large snake shaved into the side of his head. He’s been a bit harder to peg down. Not a shifter of some kind, not a fae—

“And just what are you?” I demand as I cross to him. Bracken helped him out by removing all of his facial piercings. The hard way.

Blood leaks from his nose, gauged cheek, and both ear lobes. “Your fucking daddy,” he snarls with a laugh.

I rear my fist back and slam it into his cheek. “Try again.”

“He’s a chameleon,” the young shifter yells.

“You fucking asshole!” the man in front of me snaps, spit flying out of his mouth. “Keep your damn mouth closed!”

“A Chameleon, huh?” I glance back at Bracken. “Can’t they shift into whatever creatures their parents were?”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

I return to the man who is now watching me warily, yellow eyes wide. “Your kind is quite rare. Which, given what I know



about that cocksucker boss of yours, doesn't surprise me. So, since you look like a human now, which of your parents was one of the weaker species? Your bastard father?" No emotion. "So it must have been your mother who whored herself out for a taste of supernatural cock."

He rams his forehead into mine, splitting it wide open. I am, however, uninjured, thanks to the fact that I partially shifted when I saw the blow coming.

His eyes widen at the sight of my scales. What are you?" he questions. "Not that it matters." He grins as crimson drips down his chin. "Boss is going to enjoy adding you to his collection."

"Except no one is making it out of here alive, are they?"

The young shifter whimpers. I move toward him. "Why were you trying to get into the apartments? And don't lie to me. I have a feeling I already know the answer."

"Keep. Your. Fucking. Mouth. Shut," The Chameleon snaps.

The young shifter's grey eyes dart from him to me. "This isn't my fight," he insists. "Farv said we were only coming to look."

"Farv? That would be this dickhead?"

The young shifter nods.

"Ernesto is going to kill you for opening your motherfucking mouth!"

"Bracken, can you deal with this asshole?"

"With pleasure." The man shifts into his lion and stalks forward. Farv screams—then goes silent.

All while I watch the horrified expression of the young shifter.

"He killed him!"

"Yes, Farv was clearly of no use to me. How about you try to prove that you are? What's your name?"

“Conal,” he whimpers. “I swear, I didn’t even know that we were coming here to grab nobody. I don’t want any part in that. My sister was kidnapped and killed here in No Man’s Land. I’m not trying to put that on anyone else.” A tear slips from his cheek as his bottom lip quivers.

He’s telling me the truth.

“Farv was going to kill her?”

The boy nods.

“What else was he planning?”

Conal closes his eyes and shakes his head.

“Come on, Conal, don’t break your favorable streak with me now.”

“He...he said he was gonna see what Ernesto’s obsession was all about by taking her for a spin before returning her. Said Ernesto wouldn’t know the difference,” Conal chokes out. “But I swear, as soon as he said that, I tried to leave! I would never have hurt—”

“Shut your fucking mouth.” I straighten and turn to Duncan. Bracken’s lion stands beside him, the top of his head up to Duncan’s chest.

“We caught them because that one tried to run, and that fucker yelled.” Duncan points to the dead guy on the floor.

I turn toward Conal. “You did good,” I say. “For that, your death will be quick.” I grip his head and snap his neck.

The shifter slumps into his chair, and I straighten. “Ernesto is going to keep coming for her.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

“Not we,” I reply, my anger barely restrained. “Me. Get them to the roof. It’s time Ernesto knows who he’s dealing with.”

“D, this is a bad idea,” Duncan warns.

Bracken shifts, the sound of his bones popping the only evidence since my gaze is still on Duncan. “Not a bad idea,”

he interjects. “A fucking horrible one. You show this fucker what you are and that’s it. Everyone will know.”

“They’ll come for you,” Duncan warns.

“Then let them fucking come,” I snarl.



WINGS STRETCHED out to the sides, I drop the bodies on the ground in front of Ernesto’s house. Then, I land, remaining in my dragon form until the front door is ripped open and two dozen men with guns trained on me rush outside.

A man wearing stark white pants and a matching shirt steps out, sunglasses shielding his eyes despite it being well after ten in the evening. *Ernesto*.

I shift, shrinking down until I’m on two feet. “Ernesto,” I greet.

“You’re the Ringmaster,” he replies. “Guess I lost fifty vials of vamp blood. I thought you were a warlock.”

“You keep coming for what’s mine.”

Ernesto’s grin spreads, and he steps closer to me. “I think you mean what you *stole* from me.”

“Stealing infers you ever possessed her. Liv left. Ran from you the second she realized what a limp dick motherfucker you were.”

Ernesto’s expression shifts from amusement to anger, his mouth flattening in a tight line. “That what she told you? Funny, when my dick was buried in her mouth, she wasn’t complaining.”

My dragon surges beneath my skin, urging me to show this fucker who’s the most powerful. “And yet she ran. The second she broke free. Though you forcing her onto her knees shows what a fucking bastard you are.”

“She was begging for my cock,” he growls. “As I imagine the little whore is begging for yours now. Has she let anyone watch you two fuck yet?” He gestures to the men standing on either side of him. “They’ve all had a taste of what she looks like when I’m pounding into that tight pussy of hers.”

I clench my hands into fists. “This is your one warning. Cross me again and I’ll burn this entire empire of yours to the fucking ground.”

“If that were the case, you would have done it already, wouldn’t you, Ringmaster?”

Truthfully, if I thought I could survive killing him and the small army he has, I’d have burnt it down already. Magic may have no effect on me, but bullets sure as fuck do. “Final warning,” I repeat. “Do not make me come back.”

Ernesto reaches up and rips his glasses off. His eyes brighten, and I grin when I feel his magic attempt to breach my scales. When he realizes it won’t, his eyes widen. “You are not more powerful than I am,” he says, though his tone is far from the casual one it was when I first arrived.

“See you soon,” I say. Then I jump up and shift, taking off into the sky.

## CHAPTER 25

## IIV

I sit in my window and look down at the people mingling below. They all look to be having so much fun, the patrons and the performers alike. Even from this distance, I can make out Fiona as she lifts people in the air and Apollo as he stalks around in his gryffin form.

The Ferris wheel is lit brightly as it usually is, lovers sharing the seats as they careen closer and closer to the stars. I've never gone down there. Always too afraid I'd end up captured by one of Ernesto's men.

I've spent my entire adult life living in fear of a man I would have died to protect.

A charge of static electricity runs over my body, making the fine hairs on my arms stand on end. Someone knocks on my door. I don't know how I know, but it's Dante. Like there's a part of my soul that is now entwined with his. I pull it open and step to the side, letting him come into my apartment.

Then, I shut it quietly and face him. He's freshly showered, dark hair still damp on his head. The scent of his body wash permeates the air around us, but when I look at his expression, it's not lust I feel. "What's wrong?"

Dante doesn't answer me. He crosses to my open window and takes a seat on the bench. I follow, sitting down across from him. His gaze lands on my face, and he reaches forward to brush his fingers over my cheek. "Two of Ernesto's men came to find you tonight."

I stiffen, the blood draining from my face. My stomach fills with dread as terror sends my pulse skyrocketing. “What?”

“They didn’t make it past Bracken and Duncan.”

I get to my feet and back away, shaking my head. “He—he’s still coming after me?” Panic claws at my chest, anxiety taking me to my knees as my head fills with worst-case scenarios.

Two men? That’s only the beginning. His scouts. They’re all going to come for me, and then Dante’s men will be outnumbered. I’ll spend the rest of my life encased in stone, only thawed when I can be used.

Spots invade my vision, and I suck in a ragged breath.

“Breathe, Liv.” Dante’s hand goes to my back.

“I. Can’t.” I choke on the words, lungs seizing. I can all but feel Ernesto’s hand wrapping around my throat, his blade biting into my skin.

“Liv.” Dante pulls me into his lap and wraps both arms around me. My head pressed to his chest, I do my best to focus only on the steady beating of his heart. *Thump-thump, thump-thump*. Until, finally, I can breathe.

I take one breath, then another, though the fear never fully leaves me. I know all too well what Ernesto is capable of. And when he wants something, it’s only a matter of time before he gets it. Being here twelve years? That just means my time is nearly up.

“He’s not going to get you, Liv. I’ve already taken care of that.”

“He won’t stop coming for me, Dante. Never.”

Dante pushes me away enough so he can see my face. He cups my cheek, thumb stroking my skin. “Do you have any idea what I would do for you?”

“You may not be able to do anything,” I tell him. “Ernesto —”

“I would burn this entire world to fucking ash for you, Liv. Something I am quite capable of doing, I assure you.”

I fall silent as he strokes my cheek.

“I will rip his entire fucking gang to shreds, leaving pieces of their bodies all over No Man’s Land as a warning to any who dare put their hands on you. Do you understand?”

I nod, wondering if he realizes just how much his declaration means to me. My only concern is that, eventually, his affection for me will fade, and I won’t be enough. “Why me?” The question tumbles out of my mouth before I can stop it. “You never answered.”

Dante swallows hard and sets me off his lap. He stands, and I follow suit, watching as he begins to pace. “What do you know of dragons?”

“Not much,” I reply honestly. “That you are territorial, strong, and that your scales possess those same qualities, so people smuggle them through the portal and sell them for top dollar.”

He nods. “Dragons are territorial,” he confirms. “But what I feel for you? It’s more than that.” Dante turns to fully face me, his eyes bright, burning copper. “My beast has claimed you as its other half. That’s why I was so afraid to touch you. Because doing so gives you far more power over me than you can even begin to comprehend.” He crosses toward me. “More power than you knowing my name does. I crave you, Liv. Breathe you. Exist solely for *you*. And should anything happen to you—” Trailing off, he shakes his head. “Nothing will happen to you.”

My heart flutters as my chest tightens. *He claimed me?* “Claimed me? As in—”

“You are my mate, Liv.”

I stiffen, emotions at war inside of me. Fear? Panic? Joy? Relief? I’m not even entirely sure what the hell I’m supposed to feel because, up until last week, I wanted nothing but to escape this place.



To leave and never return. Though, I suppose, if I'm honest with myself, that had a lot to do with fear versus actual desire to be free.

“Do you have any comprehension of the danger that puts you in? I have enemies, and should they find out just what you mean to me, they will have everything they need to bring me to my knees.”

“What enemies?” I question. “Ernesto—”

“Is a fucking pest in need of squashing,” he replies. “I have bigger problems should anyone from my clan ever find me.”

“So you have enemies where you're from. Is that why you don't want anyone to know what you are?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

He shakes his head and closes his eyes as if withdrawing into himself.

“Dante, tell me.”

“My father,” he replies. “I am the eldest heir of my clan, and because of that, he seeks to terminate my life so that I will not challenge him.”

I gasp, covering my mouth with both hands. I know all about asshole parents, but I never would have expected that. “He wants to kill you? But why? Do you want it?”

“I don't. But in our culture, the head of the clan must battle the heirs to keep his rightful place. I left because doing so meant saving the lives of my brothers. If he cannot kill me, he won't harm them.”

Mind reeling, I try to cling to what he's saying. “Because he needs to fight you first?”

He nods. “It must be done as tradition states it, which means the eldest goes down first.”

“So you're hiding from him in hopes it keeps your brothers safe.”

“Yes.”

“That’s fucking awful.” Honestly, makes my parents look like award winners. “What world are you from?”

“Arcadia,” he replies.

“No one ever comes from there,” I remind him. “Do you really think he is a threat?”

Dante doesn’t hesitate to nod. “If anyone can find a way here, it’s him.”

My heart aches for the man before me. A man forced to leave his home to save his siblings. While our circumstances are quite different, I know what it’s like to be alienated from family. To feel completely shut out by those who should have been there for you.

“How long have you known? What I was to you.”

A muscle in his strong jaw twitches. “I felt it before I ever found you in that alley. The first night you came to my circus. You were with *him* then.” He growls the word *him* as though the sheer mention of Ernesto pisses him off.

The memory is one I remember easily enough. Then again, I can recall all of my time with Ernesto like it was yesterday. Haunting memories have a way of clinging to you that way. Sneaking out of the dark when your mind is calm to torment you all over again. “So when you found me—”

“When you were attacked, you were close enough that I could feel your fear. You’d been so fucking terrified, and I wanted to slaughter them.”

“Yet you asked for my permission.”

He offers me a nod. “I needed it.”

“Why?” A tear slips down my cheek. All this time he lied to me. Kept the truth hidden behind a velvet curtain and a pair of white fucking gloves.

“So that I could keep you,” he whispers.

Realization dawns on me. He needed my permission to contract me to him. “Were you ever going to let me go? When

my time was up? And don't lie to me, Dante."

He sighs, giving me all the answer I need. "I would have found a way to keep you with me, Liv. Even if it meant making you hate me to do so."

I feel like the butt of a joke that everyone else was in on even though I know that's foolish and should be the least of my concerns. Ernesto sent men after me, here. And while Bracken caught them—what if, next time, he doesn't?

"Please forgive me, Liv. I never meant to hurt you." Dante falls to his knees in front of me, hands gripping my hips. "I tried so hard to fight it, to deny what I felt for you because I knew it would only serve to put you in more danger. Lying to you was necessary because, had you known—"

"I would have run," I interrupt. "As fast and as far as I could because the idea of belonging to another man after what Ernesto put me through would have terrified me to no end." I swallow hard and stare down at him.

This powerful man who kneels for me.

Who apologizes for lying to me even though he steals lives unapologetically.

"If you want to leave, I will take you to the House of Fire and Fluorite myself. I have friends there. They will see to it you are safe while you figure out where you want to go next."

To say his words shock me is an understatement. I gape down at him though his gaze is firmly on the floor. Shoulders slumped, he looks utterly and completely defeated.

The flesh of his arms shimmers with power, shining scales that appear and disappear within the span of a heartbeat. He shudders.

"You're letting me go?"

"I will not keep you against your will." The words cause him great pain to speak, evidenced by the way he spits them out, his dragon pushing against him.

"What about my contract?"

“Terminated the moment I touched your skin,” he replies. “If you choose to be free, I will do my damndest to let you go.” He tips his face up to mine. “But if you stay, I will love you with everything that I am. I will set fire to your enemies and slaughter anyone who dares touch you. Until the day I draw my last breath.”

In his eyes, I see a future where all I saw before was a cage. I see a life of happiness, of being loved in a way I only ever dreamed of before.

And even as angry as I am, as much as I want to hate him for lying to me, I feel nothing but hope when I stare down at him. Is it possible that every horrible thing I have suffered through was necessary because it brought me here?

Swallowing hard, I kneel in front of him. “Do not ever lie to me again, Dante. If I stay, it’s to be your equal. And that means you do not shield me from the truth, do you understand?”

His answering smile is blinding. “Anything for you, mate.”

## CHAPTER 26

# DANTE

Watching Liv perform hits differently tonight, knowing that she is mine. I'm unable to tear my gaze from her as she soars above the crowd, dancing to a song that is little more than background noise to my beating heart.

She's so fucking elegant.

So pure.

"Boss."

I glance over my shoulder as Bracken approaches, mouth set in a tight line. "What is it?"

"You're going to need to see this."

The gryffin soars in and catches Liv before carrying her to the floor where the basilisk slithers, waiting to attack. It's a performance I've seen dozens of times since they first performed it, and yet I still hate the way the creature eyes her. Which is what makes this a perfect time to leave.

I turn and follow him down the metal stairs and through the performers' portion of the tent. Fiona glances in my direction but quickly averts her eyes and continues sharpening the blades in her hands.

Killian stands at the entrance to the apartments. Adrenaline sings in my veins. "What happened?"

"Someone tossed Liv's apartment."

My dragon surges to the surface. I bend over at the waist, the pain of a change burning my body as my fingertips extend

into black claws.

Someone slams a fist into my side, and I hit the wall. It does the trick though, enough of a shock to give me a chance to overtake control. “Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Bracken grumbles.

“We don’t know that they took anything,” Killian continues as though I didn’t nearly shift and take this entire place down with me. He heads up the stairs, and I follow, hands clenched into fists.

“It was that fucker, Ernesto,” I growl. “It had to have been. Apparently, my message was not bloody enough.”

“We think so. Duncan’s going to bring her up after her performance so she can tell us if anything was taken.”

I nod even as I hate the idea of her knowing someone violated her private space. “Any idea how they got past the wards?”

“None,” Killian replies. “We should have been alerted the moment anyone even tried. Somehow, they bypassed them. Unless, of course—”

“It was an inside job,” I finish.

“Which is unlikely since everyone’s been performing tonight,” Bracken adds.

“An outside job,” I growl the words, fury igniting the power in my veins. Whoever did this—I take a step inside her apartment and survey the damage. Her bed has been sliced open, the innards scattered on the floor. Both pillows are shredded, her clothes completely destroyed.

There isn’t an inch of her space that hasn’t been touched by this fucker. I’m going to kill him for it.

“Can you sense them?” I ask.

Bracken shakes his head. “Whoever did this got in and out without leaving a single trace. Even when I shifted, I couldn’t sense them.”

“Just like with Thomas and Jenny.”

“Exactly.”

A low growl leaves my throat. “Which means whoever killed them likely did this, too.”

“What are you saying?” Liv’s voice fills my ears moments before she steps into her apartment. “What happened!” she yells and rushes forward, face paling. Eyes wide and shimmering with tears, she rushes straight over to her dresser and rips the drawers open. “No, please no,” she whispers.

“What is it?” I race to her, searching despite not knowing what it is we’re looking for.

“They took it.”

“Took what,” I ask, reaching for her. My hand closes around her forearm, and I turn her toward me.

“My grandmother’s necklace,” she whispers. “It was the only thing I had. The only part of my childhood.” Her voice wavers, tears spilling from her eyes. “It had to be Ernesto,” she snarls. “He’s the only one who would have known to take it.”

“Is it worth anything?”

I glare at Killian.

“Trying to figure out if there was any other reason to steal it, boss. You don’t pay me to be gentle.”

He’s not wrong, but the brokenness on Liv’s face is enough to send me into a murderous rage over the slightest thing.

“It wasn’t worth any money,” she replies softly. “It’s just a silver chain with a copper penny my grandmother found when she first came to this world. She died the same month my parents brought me here.” Liv crosses her arms.

Through our bond, I can feel her anguish. Her fear that Ernesto is going to get to her.

“I thought he couldn’t get in here?”

“We’re not sure how he managed it,” I tell her. “But you’ll stay with me until we know.” Truthfully, I was planning on



moving her in anyway, but this just moved the timeline up and gives me even more of a reason to keep her close.

If Bracken, Duncan, and Killian are surprised, none of them show it.

“We checked the other rooms,” Duncan tells me. “None of them were tossed.”

“Find me a witch,” I order them. “One who can fix these fucking wards.”



“THANKS FOR THIS,” Liv takes a sip of her chamomile tea and continues to stare out the window at the circus party below.

“Have you ever been down there?” I ask, coming to sit on the patio beside her.

She shakes her head. “I’ve always been so afraid of getting caught up in the crowd.”

“Once you’re feeling up to it, I can take you.”

“Seriously?” she turns to me.

“If you trust me to keep you safe.”

“You’re the only one I trust,” she replies. After a moment, she barks out a laugh. “Wow. Never thought I’d say those words to you.” She takes another drink of her tea and then sets it on the small café table between us. “No offense.”

“None taken. I’m an asshole.”

She smiles at me. “Not so much anymore. At least, not to me.”

I push up from my chair and kneel before her. My hands grip her bare thighs where I leave them—for now. Lights from below shine up and dance in her eyes. Reaching up, I brush a strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re beautiful.”

Liv sucks in a breath, the sound so faint I can barely hear it. Already craving another gasp, I put my right hand between her thighs and spread them enough that I can move between them. Lust fills the air around us.

“I want to taste you,” I tell her.

“Out here?”

“Fuck yes.”

“They can see us,” she whispers. “We’re not that far—”

“No they can’t,” I assure her. “There’s a ward around the apartments. No one can see in.” My hands slide up to the apex of her thighs, my thumbs brushing the lace of her panties. “I could bend you over that balcony and fuck you wild, and no one would be the wiser.” Scooting back, I bend forward and press my lips to the top of her knee. Her flesh is smooth beneath my lips, the scent of her arousal spurring my own. “Would you like that?” I question. “To ride my cock out here in the open?”

“Yes,” she whispers. I shove the shirt up and grip the sides of her underwear, sliding them down. She arches her back, lifting her ass so I can slide them down over and off of her legs. Then, I rip her forward so her ass is at the edge of the seat.

I spread her open for me, taking in the sight of her pussy slick with arousal. I draw my bottom lip into my mouth and smile at her. “So fucking perfect.” Unable to wait any longer, I lean down and run my tongue over her slick heat.

She moans and arches against me as the taste of her dances on my tongue.

“Take the shirt off, Liv,” I order her as I linger just above her flesh. “If you want me to make you come, you’ll obey me.”

With trembling fingers, she reaches down and pulls it over her head, putting those perfect fucking tits on full display.

As promised, I lean down and suck her clit into my mouth. Her flavor is potent and so fucking addicting that it gets me

high. Eyes on her, I slide my tongue back over her, licking, tasting. Her hands go to her hair and she pulls, mouth open on a moan.

I pull back. “Show me how you like your tits touched,” I order.

Liv doesn't hesitate. Her hands go to her breasts, and she squeezes lightly then rolls her nipples between her fingers. It's a lust punch to my gut. My cock strains against the fly of my pants, but this is too fucking enjoyable.

As I fuck her with my tongue, I watch her touch her breasts, her neck. As she gets closer, her cries get louder. Her hands slip into my hair, and she pulls, holding me against her pussy as her release builds.

When she comes, she cries out and arches her hips against my face. I grip her thighs and continue tasting her. My balls fucking hurt, my cock so damned hard it's nearly ripped free of my pants. Still, I don't stop until she releases my hair.

She watches me, gaze hungry, as I stand. A light breeze washes over us, but the heat on this balcony is like a fucking sauna.

Liv's still spread out before me, every inch of her body on display.

How I kept my hands off of her this long, I'll never fucking understand. I unbutton my pants and shove them down before stepping out and closing the distance.

“Turn around and get to your knees on the chair.”

Liv swallows hard but does as I ask. I grip her ass, squeezing gently, then slide my hands up over her back and push her over so she's bent over the top of the chair. I've never been so fucking glad I went with low-backed patio furniture as I am right now.

I step forward and position myself at her entrance though I continue to torment us both by remaining still. Sliding my hands over her ass, I run my finger through her perfect fucking cheeks, slipping it over the top of an area I've yet to claim but am desperate for. She gasps. “I told you before that I want to

fuck you here,” I say. “Will you let me, Liv? Will you let me possess every inch of you?”

“I’ll let you do anything you want,” she replies, voice hoarse. “Just please get inside of me.”

I let out a dark chuckle as I grip my cock and rub it against her clit.

She cries out, “Dante, please.”

“Please what?”

“Get inside of me.”

A gust of wind presses against my back, shoving me in just a bit. “Impatient much?”

“If you don’t want it to knock us over, you’d better do as I ask,” she threatens.

I push inside of her. Tight, wet heat surrounds my cock, and I groan, the delicious fucking friction too much to bear. Stilling inside of her, I run my finger over her clit then bring it back and press it against her ass. As much as I want to fill her tight hole with my cock, I know it has to be taken in stages in order to be pleasurable for her.

But fuck, I want to feel her.

“Do it,” she orders. “I want to know what it feels like.”

She just handed me the entire fucking world and doesn’t even know it. Slowly, I slide my finger into her ass then pause and slowly pull my cock out before pushing back into her.

“Oh my—shit, Dante. That feels good,” she whispers. “Don’t stop.”

I pull back and then thrust into her, all while slowly moving my finger in and out of her ass. She comes—hard—crying out as her pussy tightens around my cock. Withdrawing my finger, I grip her hips and slam into her, thrusting as hard as the chair will allow.

“I want to come inside of you,” I growl. “I want to fucking claim you.”

“Then do it,” she tells me.

“I—” My release overtakes all senses, and I come, dick throbbing inside as I pour myself into her. I’ve *never* marked a woman this way. Always using protection or pulling out, but with Liv, the desire to own every part of her...

To be her last everything is so overwhelming it’s nearly impossible to deny.

I pull out slowly, and she climbs off the chair. I lift her into my arms and carry her inside before depositing her in my bathroom and turning on the water. After washing my hands, I turn and cup her face then slam my mouth down onto hers.

## CHAPTER 27

## IIV

**D**ante and I have fallen into such a routine over the past couple of weeks that it's hard to recall a time when I wasn't in his arms.

His bed.

Our lives consist of breakfast in bed, practice, performance, then nights spent wrapped up in each other. Honestly, I haven't stepped foot in my apartment since the night it was tossed. The only thing that mattered to me was stolen, and I'm not stupid enough to go to Ernesto to get it back.

Which is precisely what he's expecting. It's honestly what I would have done had Dante and I not gotten together. But now, I have a reason to survive aside from my own life. I have him. My lover. My mate. I smile to myself, enjoying the way that word feels.

Being with him has been a dream in the best kind of way, and even though I've had to keep it a secret from everyone—including Fiona—I've never been happier.

I finish dusting my hands and then reach up to grab my lyra. I'm the only person in the Big Top this morning, so I've opted for no music. Dante is off doing whatever it is he does during the day with Bracken and Duncan while Killian waits just outside, my constant shadow.

According to Dante, there have been no more attempts to get in, but he's unwilling to take a risk when it comes to me. I smile absently. *So this is what love feels like.* For so long I

thought of love as a myth. I'd believed obsession was more the correct term, and obsession is what I had with Ernesto.

More so what he had with me.

Someone opens the door, and I glance over as Apollo strolls in. "I didn't realize we were practicing today," he says, tone cool.

"We're not," I reply. He's been distant the past couple of weeks, ever since I asked him to leave with me and then chose not to go. I can't blame him. I'd be pissed too, but there's not a force in this world that could remove me from Dante now.

He's a part of me. The air I breathe, the blood in my veins.

Apollo comes to a stop beside the lyra and crosses his arms. "You haven't been in your apartment."

"I've been crashing with Fi," I lie. Something she will undoubtedly agree with should he ask her. "Ever since my apartment was ransacked. When I'm not with her, I'm practicing or trying to decompress."

"Hmm." Apollo moves further into the room, so I take a seat on my lyra.

I cock my head to the side to study him. He's always been overly friendly. To the point of it making me uncomfortable. "You okay?"

"Fine."

But he seems distracted. Off, and every hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

"Are you okay?" he questions.

"Better than," I answer honestly even as the pit in my stomach grows.

"Still not wanting a change of scenery?"

"No." I force a smile. "Do you want to get some practice in? I was just going to work on my technique, but since you're here—"



“Sounds great.” He smiles, but it looks forced. Apollo claps his hands together then rubs his palms against one another. “I actually had a new routine in mind if you’d be up for it. Our last one went so well.”

“I don’t know,” I reply honestly. “The Ringmaster wasn’t too keen on the last one we—”

“The Ringmaster will approve of this one since it doesn’t require you to plunge to your death,” Apollo replies with a laugh. “Trust me. He’s going to eat it up. So will the crowd.”

I look toward the door Apollo just came through.

“Don’t worry,” my partner laughs. “Your security detail is right outside if something goes wrong.”

*Killian is just outside.* So, I force a smile. After all, Apollo is my partner. Keeping the peace with him is just smart. “Sure. Sounds good.”

“Great.” He grins and grips the lyra, spinning it slowly. “Stay right where you are.” He moves behind me, and I obey.

Something covers my mouth and nose, a potent stench that has my head swimming before I can even raise an arm to fight him off. I squirm, trying desperately to cling to consciousness as my body goes completely rigid, my vision fading to black.



THE CRACK of a palm against my cheek brings me back. I blink rapidly at a bright light shining in my face. I try to move my hands, but they’re bound behind my back. The ropes bite into the flesh of my wrists, but I don’t stop.

I have to get free. Have to get back to—

A man laughs, and I freeze.

“You always did like to sleep in, Liv.”

Ernesto steps around the bright light and stops in front of it, giving me a clear view of him. His black hair is longer now, falling to his ears, and while he used to be clean-shaven, now his jaw is stubbled.

But his eyes. Those cold, dark eyes, are still exactly the same. The moment I see them, I look away, fear making me cast my gaze downward so he cannot turn me to stone. Too many times I've been encased, trapped. I'll die before it happens again.

"Where am I?" I choke out through a throat constricted with fear.

"Home, Liv. Don't you recognize it?" From his shadow, I can see that he holds up both arms. The lights overhead flood on. The spotlight in front of me shuts off. Ice-cold terror chills me, turning my blood to ice.

We're in the middle of a room full of statues—supernaturals trapped and forced to watch the countless horrific acts Ernesto carries out for his own enjoyment. This is the room I watched him and his brother rape and slaughter two women.

It's where I've seen him torture those he no longer wants to keep.

*No, no, no, please no.* Chest seizing, I fight the spots invading my vision as the all too familiar panic begins to set in. I draw in a half-breath, then another. "Where's Apollo?" I demand. Fear roots the panic. "If you hurt him, I swear I'll—"

"I'm right here."

I turn my head, and Apollo steps into view. Arms crossed, gaze hard, there is little remaining of the man I've known for the past five years. "You brought me here?" I choke on the words, betrayal stinging far worse than the ropes biting into my wrists.

"I did," he replies coolly. "You really left me no choice."

My mind reels, all the events over the past couple of months playing out one by one. The fire. The killings. My

apartment. Had the monster been just under my nose? Playing friend all along?

Ernesto laughs then reaches into his pocket and pulls out my grandmother's penny. "You were always so attached to this useless fucking thing." He walks toward me, and I flinch as he leans forward to set it over my head. The chain settles around my neck. "Consider it a welcome home gift."

"Why? Why did you bring me here?" I ask Apollo as tears stream down my face. "I trusted you!"

"Trusted me?" He snorts. "You're fucking the man who enslaved us!"

I stiffen. "You could have come to me. I could have explained—"

"There's nothing to explain," he replies. "You betrayed me. Though I suppose, in the end, you bought me my freedom. Maybe that counts for something."

I choke on a sob. "You hate me so much you'd turn me over to the man who tormented me?"

"I don't hate you, Liv," Apollo says, stalking forward. "In fact, I would have given you the entire world if you'd only looked in my direction for longer than an hour. When Ernesto first approached me about granting me my freedom, I turned him down. Told him I wouldn't do that to you. But when he told me that you were already sleeping with him—" Apollo trails off, his eyes wild. "I had no choice but to agree. If you weren't willing to leave, then I knew I was on my own."

"How long ago?" I choke out. "How long ago did he find you?"

"A few weeks before I let his man in and tested the charm that would shield the Ringmaster's pets from being able to sense me."

"Let them in?"

He grins. "Thomas and Jenny were test number one," he says. "I heard all about how Thomas cried like a little cunt as

his bitch was killed.” He spits the words out, vomiting them like they’re toxic.

My stomach rolls. Bile burning my throat. “They were a test?”

“I had to know if the charm would work. Couldn’t risk getting caught.”

“So you let them die!” I scream, yanking at the restraints. Power burns in my veins, but the wind does nothing but knock Apollo back a few steps.

“It’s all your fault, Liv. All you had to do was leave with me. You could have been mine, and we could have been happy.”

I close my eyes as a fist tightens around my heart. Thomas and Jenny had been some of the kindest people I’d ever met, so in love, so ready for a future, and he’d had them fucking slaughtered as a test.

“And the fire?”

Apollo smiles. “Do you even have to ask? Though watching that fucker’s face when he thought his precious circus was going to be reduced to ash was nearly as enjoyable as the basilisk venom I stole from Silva’s room when no one was watching.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls it out. “Bastard still doesn’t know it’s missing. Which is going to make it that much better when I force-feed it to your Ringmaster tonight.”

“You’re going to kill him?” I choke out, that betrayal somehow worse than any others. “You can’t. Please, Apollo. Just go. You have your freedom now. You don’t need him!”

Apollo grins and strokes a hand over my cheek. “Sweet Liv. It won’t kill him, Ernesto has far bigger plans for him than that. However, it’s going to hurt like a motherfucker once it’s in his body.”

“We’re getting off-topic,” Ernesto says then kneels in front of me. His hands go to my knees, and he smiles up at me. “I hear you have been keeping a dragon all to yourself.”

My blood pounds in my ears as I fight off the urge to argue with him, to insist that he's wrong because, in doing so, I will only prove his point. So, I take a deep breath and continue to stare blankly at him.

“Come on, Liv, you never were a good liar.”

“A dragon? Seriously?” I look to Apollo then back to him. “There are no dragons in this world.”

He grins at me. “No? You sure about that? Because I can promise that you can spare yourself a lot of pain if you agree to help me capture your precious Ringmaster.”

I snort, all false bravado, but it's my only chance at protecting Dante. I might be royally fucked, but he's safe. For now. And that counts for something. “The Ringmaster? You think he's a dragon?”

Apollo crosses his arms. “He's strong, has power over fire. We both know he is.”

Shaking my head, I force out a laugh even as I'm consumed by terror. If they confirm what he is, if they manage to catch him, Dante will never be free again. He'll be taken apart, scale by scale, until there is nothing left. “He's a warlock, you jackass. A warlock hopped up on magic.”

Ernesto slaps me—hard. My teeth rattle, but even as blood drips from my lip, I look him straight in the face.

“You lie to me? Your dragon showed himself to me the night he delivered my men back to me—in pieces.”

My blood runs cold. Dante told me he'd taken care of it. That they'd been dealt with. He never said he'd revealed himself to the one man who could actually encase him.

Ernesto chuckles. “Tell me, Liv, have you enjoyed your time with him? Maybe I'll let you have one more go before I rip every last scale from his body.”

“Leave him alone!” I scream, thrashing against the bindings keeping my arms behind my back. “I will never help you!” I spit in his face, and Ernesto's grin fades.

He stands and crosses the room to a towel-covered tray. With a flourish only a sociopath like him can manage, he raises the towel and showcases a tray boasting a blade and stainless-steel tools. Tools I've seen him use more times than I care to count on people far stronger than I.

“You always fascinated me. Gorgeous, but in an understated way. Yet, your power—I've always been able to taste it, just out of reach. So fucking much of it. Our powers are both over nature. Me, earth, you, wind. We could have been the most powerful couple this entire world has seen yet you hid it from me.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I insist as my gaze widens. He selects a letter opener from the tray and stalks back toward me. “I've never had a lot of power. You know that!”

“Do I?” He kneels before me then runs the blade over the top of my knee. Copper fills my mouth as I bite down on my cheek to keep from screaming. “Then why can I sense it, Liv? Why can I sense your power as though it's right in front of me?” He slices the top of my other knee open, and I whimper.

“You're wrong.”

“All you had to do was show it to me, and this could have all been avoided. I never would have encased you in stone, and you would have stood beside me as my queen.”

“Fuck you,” I choke out. Pain eats away at my resolve, and tears stream down my cheeks. “You're crazy.”

He grins. “Oh, Liv. I haven't shown you crazy. Not yet.”

## CHAPTER 28

# DANTE

Something is wrong.

Fear squirms in my gut—not mine—but Liv’s. She’s terrified, I can feel it, but I don’t fucking know why. I rip the door off the hinges and throw it to the side before stalking into the common room.

The berserker looks up first, icy blue eyes leveling on me as though she’s assessing a threat. If only she fucking knew. “Where is Liv?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t seen her all day.” She gets to her feet, palming the blade she always has with her. “What’s wrong?”

“If I fucking knew, I wouldn’t be here, would I?” I growl the words as the dragon within surges to the surface. A shift is near—and that will only bring more problems.

“She’s not here.” Killian stalks in, cheeks red.

Whirling, I grip him by the throat and slam him back against the wall. “Then where the fuck is she? You were supposed to be guarding her!”

“I was! She was practicing in the ring!”

“Then how the fuck did she get away from you?”

“It had to have been the gryffin,” Killian manages.

I release him.

“He’d gone in to practice their routine, but he’s gone, too.”



*Fucker.* I'm going to enjoy ripping him to pieces. "Can you track him?"

"No," Bracken says as he steps into the room. "And we can't catch a scent for Liv either."

Blood pounds in my veins, a heavy drumming that obliterates all other sounds. Somewhere in this room, they're speaking, saying words that I cannot even begin to focus on because, somewhere, Liv is scared.

She's in pain.

And I know how to find her.

I turn and march for the door, but something on my face must have alerted Duncan because he steps in my path. "Get out of my way," I warn him, magic sizzling along my skin.

The beast is calling to me, begging for me to let him out.

"You can't do this," he warns me. "The first time was risky enough."

"The fuck I can't. Now get out of my way, or I'm going to take this entire fucking place down with me."

Someone new enters the building, a scent I know all too well.

Duncan turns as well. Then Killian and Bracken step up to my sides as Apollo moves into view. The fucker grins at me.

Grins like he wants me to rip his motherfucking head off and re-decorate the cream walls in crimson. "You look worried," he says.

"Where. The. Fuck. Is. She?" I demand, the snarl that leaves my lips barely even human.

"Out of your reach," the fucker replies.

I lunge for him, but Bracken and Killian grip my arms.

"In case you haven't noticed, you have about two seconds before he kills you," Duncan tells the gryffin. "Where is the fury?"

“Back where she belongs, and if you play your cards right, you’ll get to see her real soon.” Apollo crosses his arms. Arms I want to snap like fucking twigs. “Killing me will only end with her dead. They’ll cut her pretty throat if I don’t report back within the next thirty minutes.” He reaches into his pocket and withdraws a vial. “Drink this, and I’ll take you to her.”

He expects me to fucking bow to him.

To take his deal.

Fucker clearly has no idea who he’s dealing with.

Bracken and Killian release me. I lunge forward, grab him by the throat, and squeeze. The gryffin’s eyes widen, and he stares up at me, clearly shocked. He brings his arm up, prepared to smash the vial on me. So I grip that arm with my free hand and snap his fucking wrist.

He screams.

The vial falls to the ground and shatters, the unmistakable aroma of basilisk venom filling my lungs. “You massively underestimate my desire to kill you.” I let the beast out just enough that my teeth elongate into fangs, my eyes turning a blazing orange.

He squirms in my grasp, but I reach up and grip his hair, then rip. Blood splatters the walls and my chest. I throw his body down and turn to see all three of my security team and the berserker watching me carefully.

“Why the hell would you do that?” Fiona demands, eyes burning bright. “We needed him to take us to Liv!”

“No the fuck we don’t,” I growl. Turning to my team, I say, “Shift, and follow me.”

“Boss—”

“Not a fucking suggestion,” I snap and then march out the door.

As soon as my boots hit the ground outside, I hold out my arms and let the beast free. Bones snap, ligaments pop, and pain surges through every inch of my body as it expands to

free my second skin. I grow, expanding higher and higher until I'm three times the size I was before.

“Fucking shit!” The female voice pulls my attention, so I glare down as the berserker stands between my guards. “He’s a dragon!”

“Say a word about this and we’ll kill you,” they warn.

She simply nods, all the while looking up at me. I turn toward the night sky and push off, stretching out my wings and taking to the sky. Up here, the beast is typically at its happiest, free from the confines of my flesh, but right now, he’s far more anxious than I’ve ever felt him. Wind whips at my wings though my scales make it nearly impossible to feel as I soar through the sky, senses on high.

I can feel supernaturals below, lurking in the alleyways, but they are not my concern. Liv’s emotions are all over the place, terrified, angry, in pain—she’s unstable at best, and with what I know about Ernesto—a low growl escapes my throat.

Minutes tick by as I follow the bond between us. Since it has not been fully solidified, it’s a partial connection, strong enough to sense when she’s near, but not stout enough to pinpoint her location from long distances.

Still, I get within two blocks and I know exactly where I’m going. I land, shifting as I do and not breaking stride as soon as I’m on two legs. I conjure a ball of flame and blow the doors right the fuck open.

Then, I allow a partial shift, my scales giving me just enough protection from the sea of supernaturals inside. “Liv!” I bellow, my way of letting her know that I am coming for her.

That I am coming for *him*.

A jaguar shifter charges, but I grab him around the throat and snap his neck, throwing his limp body at a fae rushing toward me with a blade in his hand. As soon as he’s down, I rip the blade free and bring it down on his throat.

The sickening crunch might as well have been mute as I spin and jab the blade into the throat of another fae.

They fucking flock to each other.

Bracken, Killian, and Duncan rush in behind me, Fiona right behind them. The four of them immediately launch into an attack until the tile is slick with blood, the walls splattered with it.

Someone screams.

I whirl toward the front door, sprinting out onto the lawn until I see her. She's at least fifteen stories up, though, thanks to my enhanced sight, she might as well be dangling directly in front of me.

His hand on her throat, Ernesto holds her over the edge of the roof.

She thrashes.

My dragon explodes out of me, and I take for the sky.

I hover above, terror icing my veins. He rips her back but keeps her close enough that she's teetering on the edge of the building. Her hands are bound, blood crusted on her face and what I can see of her arms.

A dozen supernaturals with firearms stand on the roof behind them, their weapons trained on me.

"Kill them!" she screams.

"Shift back, or I drop her!" Ernesto calls out. He holds her further over the edge, and her pulse spikes. I can sense the terror as though it were my own.

Positioning myself over the roof, I drop down and shift mid-fall. Balancing on the balls of my bare feet, I land in a crouch and stand slowly.

"Are you okay?" I ask Liv. Eyes wide and shimmering with tears, she nods.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"Don't be." I shift my gaze to Ernesto. "Let her go."

"Agree to my terms, and I will."

His men are clearly waiting for a signal from their boss before they move my way. Fucking fools, I'll kill them all before they even come close. My only fucking regret is I didn't at least try to level this damn place when I'd been here before. "I gave you a chance to live, and you repay me by attempting to barter with my mate."

"Mate?" Ernesto arches an eyebrow. "That makes her far more valuable than I considered." He leans in and runs a tongue along the side of her face. "Still so fucking delicious."

"So you understand the weight of that word," I say slowly. "Let her go, and I'll kill you quickly."

He throws his head back and laughs. "My bullets will pierce your scales with no fucking problem. We'll drop you before you fully shift. Unless, of course, you agree to my terms."

"Which are?" I need time. Time for Duncan, Killian, Bracken, and Fiona to tear through their fucking ranks.

"You are the only dragon shifter in these parts." Ernesto shoves Liv to her knees near the ledge. Magic shimmers around her as the wind likely conjured thanks to her emotions pulls at her hair, sending it flying in all directions. "Give me your scales, and we can all go our separate ways."

"No!" Liv pulls against him, but he grips the back of her neck harder. "He's lying! He's only half-fae!"

"Shut up, bitch. Men are talking."

I snarl. "I warned you. Didn't I? To stop coming for what is mine."

"And as I told you, your warning means shit to me. We both know if you could have killed me, you'd have done it already. I have too much manpower. Too many people at my back." He runs his tongue over Liv's cheek once again then inhales deeply. She shivers. "I could bend her over and fuck her right here, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"I'm going to enjoy killing you."

Ernesto arches a brow. Then the arrogant fucker actually laughs. “I have Liv. One wrong move from you and I’ll throw her off this building. Can’t imagine she’ll be able to conjure a breeze strong enough to save herself.”

“I’m going to rip your head off and drink your blood,” I tell him as I take a step closer.

“No, you can’t come any closer! He’ll turn you to stone!” Liv screams. A gust of wind slams into my chest, shoving me back a step, and I know she’s trying to hold me back.

Save me by sacrificing herself. What she doesn’t know, though, is that losing her will kill me.

Ernesto locks gazes with me, eyes swirling a steel color as they brighten.

I feel his magic coating my flesh, feel it rolling over me, searching for a way to penetrate my flesh, but nothing happens, and I grin at him. “Did you forget after our last encounter that dragon scales make me impervious to magic?”

The door behind Ernesto’s men opens, and three blood-covered lions standing beside a pissed-off berserker burst onto the rooftop. They waste no time. Killian, Duncan, and Bracken lunge forward with a roar while Fiona races into battle, eyes so fucking bright they might as well be lights.

I charge Ernesto, but he does as promised and throws Liv from the building.

She screams.

My heart stops. I race forward and leap off of the building, plummeting to the street below right behind her.

## CHAPTER 29

## IIV

I scream as I fall, trying like hell to pull at my magic enough just to slow me down. Anything to save my life because, for the first time, I have something to live for.

And he just dove off of the roof after me. Dante's arms at his sides, he shoots toward me. Why the hell isn't he shifting? "Shift!" I scream, but he ignores me.

My heart races while images of us together rush through my mind. We had such little time together. Hell, my life has been nothing but pain, so why did I expect it to end any other way?

Dante's strong arms come around me, and he rolls, putting himself between me and the ground.

"I love you," I whisper, though I doubt he hears it because, in the next instant, he pushes away from me and shifts. Scales shimmer down his arms and along his body as the dragon bursts free. Then he grabs me with his massive claws, pulling me against his chest and wrapping both wings around me as we slam into the ground.

My body jerks, but Dante absorbs most of the blow.

Wings cradle me, and I have to push past them in order to sit up. He doesn't move, his massive head lolled to the side. "No!" I scream, my gut churning with fear. "Please, no. Wake up! Wake the fuck up!" I scream at him as I climb down and kneel beside his head. I run my hands over his iridescent purple and blue scales as they glint beneath the moon. So beautiful.



My soul shatters right alongside his broken body.

“Wake up,” I whisper. “Please wake up.”

His body jerks. Then he begins to shift. Hope burns in my chest while I wait for him to wake up, but when his human form appears, that hope disappears near instantly. Blood soaks the ground beneath him.

It clings to my fingertips when I lift his head and place it in my lap.

Tears stream down my cheeks, my chest aching like someone just dropped a fucking dragon-sized anvil on it. I turn my attention back to Dante. “Please wake up.” I stroke his cheek. Blood trickles from the corner of his mouth, his chest barely rising and falling.

“Serves you right, you fucking whore.”

I look up, surprised to see that Fiona has dragged Ernesto down the stairs and out onto the street. She has him on his knees, a blade pressed to his eye. Duncan, Killian, and Bracken—now naked men with blood-streaked chests—stand directly behind her, their expressions ones of rage, grief, and disbelief.

“Speak again,” she growls, “And I’ll cut your fucking eye from the socket.”

I shift my gaze back to Ernesto. He grins at me, a sadistic smile I’ve seen on his face far too many times.

He took *everything* from me.

Broke my heart.

Crushed my soul.

Made me feel weak.

Useless.

Something within me snaps, and a darkness spreads. Magic burns in me. Fury power, unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. This bastard has tortured without mercy, killed without hesitation, and spent an entire lifetime collecting supernaturals for his statue room.

Why should he be allowed to breathe when Dante will likely not draw another breath?

Slowly, I set Dante's head to the ground and stand. Sniffing, I stop in front of my own personal nightmare. "Stand," I order.

"You heard her, fuckstick," Fiona snarls, ripping him up from the ground.

Ernesto's flesh pales. "For the last twelve years, you've been my boogeyman. The monster under my bed. The shadow in my nightmares. But I'm done," I spit the last words out.

"Glad to hear I made an impression," he sneers.

Magic roars through my veins, calling to me in a way. A gust of wind pulls at my body, so I fucking embrace it. "Let him go."

"Are you—"

"Yes," I interrupt.

"Try anything and I'll carve out your eyes then feed them to you," Fiona threatens as she lets Ernesto go.

He glares at me, puffing up his chest in an attempt to intimidate me. "What the hell do you think you're going to do?" He taunts. "You've proven that your magic is just as useless as you are!"

A slow smile spreads over my face, and I let my magic free. It slams into him, throwing him back into the ground. He thrashes, trying to break free, but the power holds firm. I'm stronger than I've ever been, my resolve steady.

Ernesto will die tonight.

And it will be me who kills him.

Me who frees myself from the hold he has over me.

"Any last words?" I ask him.

"You don't have what it takes to kill me, and you know it," he yells.

But I'm lost to the rage.

Drunk on the power.

The wind grows stronger, whipping at him until his clothes are shredded from his body.

“How does it feel to be exposed to the world?” I question as I cross over to the grassy patch at the base of the building and pull a handful of small, green blades, before stalking back over to where he lies.

My gaze lands on Dante, still unconscious, Killian kneeling beside him.

“Fucking wind bitch. I should have finished you off years ago,” he snarls. “You weren’t worth it.”

I turn to face him. “Your mistake.” My magic surrounds me as I release the blades of grass. They float in the air, turning in a slow circle before I send them flying toward him—tiny daggers, and still, they’ll only inflict a portion of the pain he’s caused me.

He thrashes and screams as they rip at him, embedding beneath his skin.

“Not enough magic to conjure a breeze?” I scream, raising my hands as wind whips at me. It wraps around his body, raising him up before I slam him back down. Bones snap, and he screams louder.

“Stop! Liv! Fucking stop!” he screams.

My power grows, stoked by my pain. His skin is slick with crimson, so saturated with it that I can no longer make out the natural pigment.

His body is raised again, then I rip him the fuck apart.

Limbs litter the sidewalk where we stood. It coats the grass at the base of the building.

“Fuck. You,” I snarl at what’s left.

“Damn, Liv.” Fiona rests her hand on my shoulder. “You’ve been holding out on us.”

“I don’t—” I trail off as the front door opens, and a sea of supernaturals come pouring out. Their bodies are coated in

thin white powder I recognize all too well. Remnants of a prison they've been trapped in.

They gather around me, staring down at what's left of their captor.

Some smile.

Cry.

Embrace each other.

And if I weren't so fucking gut-wrenchingly broken, I might feel joy at their freedom. After all, no one knew what that captivity felt like better than me. But while they gained their lives, I lost my very reason for breathing.

Someone brushes a hand over my lower back. I turn, expecting it to be Fiona.

Instead, my gaze meets a copper one, and my heart stops.

"Fury magic, huh? I always knew you had it in you."

A sob rips from my chest, and I throw my arms around Dante's neck. He crushes me against him, and I wrap both legs around his waist as he claims my mouth. I take what he offers then give my own heat right back.

"I thought you were dead," I whisper against his lips.

He kisses me again. "Dragons don't go down that easily, love. We're quite resilient."



"HERE." Fiona offers me a cup of hot tea then plops down on the mattress beside me. Dante, Killian, Duncan, and Bracken had to deal with cleanup, and as much as I wanted to stay at Dante's side after nearly losing him, he'd insisted I return with Fiona and let Adaya tend to my injuries.

Some healing salve and a few hours later, though, and I might as well be good as new.

“So the Ringmaster is a dragon, huh?”

“He is. But you can’t—”

She holds up her hand. “I know, I know. Can’t say anything. They’ll kill me. I get it.” She grins and shakes her head. “Though I will keep it a secret, I’d welcome them to try.” Her eyes flash blue.

“Haven’t you had enough fighting to last you a lifetime?”

“Hardly.” She crosses her arms. “How long have you two been sleeping together?”

Her tone makes me wince, the frustration in it is easy enough to read. “Nearly a month. Though, if I’m honest, the tension between us has been going on a lot longer.”

Fiona gasps sarcastically. “You don’t say!”

“Shut up.”

“The tension between the two of you was strong enough to be a tightrope. Everyone felt it, even if they read it as hatred.”

“You didn’t?”

She shrugs. “Look at me and Harris. If anyone knows how thin the line is between love and hate, it’s me.”

“Are you mad that I didn’t tell you?”

“Yeah. But I’ll get over it. I get why you couldn’t.”

“I love him.”

“So I’ve seen.” She wraps an arm around my shoulders and squeezes. “You deserve happiness, Liv. And a dragon that will eat people for you.”

I chuckle. “A dragon that will eat people for me.”

At that exact moment, the door opens, and Dante strolls in. His hair is a mess, his body still crusted in dried blood. His copper gaze finds mine, and the entire world slips into place.

“I’ll be going then.” Fiona slides off the bed.

“Thank you,” Dante says as she passes him.

“Welcome. But Ringmaster or not, dragon or not, hurt her and I’ll cut your scaly dick off.” Then, she shuts the door.

Dante crosses toward me, and I climb off the bed to stand before him. I wrap both arms around his waist and he presses a kiss to the top of my head. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better.”

“I wish I could kill him all over again for you. However, I don’t think it would have been nearly as satisfying as your power ripping him apart.”

I tilt my face up to look at him. “I don’t understand how I did it. Ernesto told me he could sense my power; it’s why he was so focused on me, I guess. He tried to break me, Dante. Tried to release it by hurting me.” I shake my head, the memory seared into my brain. “I’ve never had that much power.”

Dante leans down and kisses me. “Sometimes, we merely need the right motivation to unlock it.” He kisses me again. “While I don’t want to take all the credit, I like to think our bond was what changed it.”

“You dying was pretty strong motivation,” I say. “So, pain did bring it out. Ernesto just had the wrong type in mind.”

“Nearly dying,” he corrects as he snakes both hands down my body and grips my ass to lift me. “And let’s never talk about that fucker again.”

“Deal,” I promise as he sets me down and turns on the spray.

Dante turns back and cups my cheek. “Since you’re feeling better, let me show you how not dead I am.”

## CHAPTER 30

## IIV

Dante's hands hold mine as we stand in the center of the ring. Fiona stands in the front row beside Bracken, Duncan, and Killian. We're surrounded by performers and supernaturals who've gathered here to watch the ceremony.

Performers, who are now here of their own free will. Dante tore up the contracts, and to both our surprises, everyone who was already here has remained.

Harriss says he stayed for Fiona, who claims to enjoy her life here.

Brad and Kleo both say they have nothing better to do.

Uma, Ghrunt, Silva, and Lex all wished to stay until they find somewhere else to go. But I believe they will stay because, somehow, we've all become our own twisted-as-fuck House. Maybe we don't have the power that the others do, but we have each other and a Ringmaster who will fight for us.

Adaya stands in front of us, a smile on her face. "Hold out your wrists."

We do as she's asked, both of us offering them up without hesitation. She raises a blade and presses it against my skin. The cut stings, but even the pain cannot touch the joy in my heart. Taking the same blade, she runs it over Dante's wrist. Then she turns mine over and presses it to his.

"Blood to blood, so you are bound as one."



Magic surges through my body, a warmth I've never experienced filling me from my toes up to my head. Emotions that are not mine hit me with such force I cannot even begin to sort through them, though there's one that stands out above all others.

Love.

"You may kiss your mate, D."

He reaches around and grips the back of my neck, yanking me forward and claiming my mouth. Lust pummels me, seeping into my veins and heating my blood until I'm sure I'll combust right now.

I can feel Dante's joy, the peace he feels with our connection, and it's everything to me. Never did I think I'd feel such love and be loved in return. And certainly not with this man.

My captor. A man who owns so much more than my life now.

He claimed my body first.

My heart second.

And now he holds my very soul in his hands.

Cheers erupt around us as he releases me. Turning, we face all those in attendance. Dante's friends from Fire and Fluorite and a whole slew of supernaturals we barely know but were released from Ernesto's stone prison.

"Everyone get to your feet and meet us outside for one hell of a reception!" Fiona yells.

They begin to clear out, so I shift my gaze back to my husband. My mate. My dragon. "I love you," I whisper.

"Not nearly as much as I love you," he replies, pressing his lips to mine. "Can we skip the reception? I want to bury myself in my bride."



LIGHTS DAZZLE OVERHEAD as I make my way through the carnival. People are everywhere, laughing, playing games, and seeking fortunes. Their joy is palpable, and I am here to soak up every moment of it.

Beside me, Dante walks, his fingers threaded through mine. We move through the crowd, beyond overjoyed by our afternoon spent wrapped up in each other. *Marriage*. Never, in a million years, did I think I'd end up married.

And certainly not to a dragon shifter.

The Ferris wheel turns just ahead, spinning slowly while supernaturals mingle in the seats. It's by far the largest of the attractions here, even taller than the Big Top and apartment buildings that surround it.

As we move through, all I can think about is how much better this is than I ever could have imagined as I watched it from afar. I spent so many nights, sitting in that window, too afraid to come down and live my life.

Now, here I am, happier than ever, strolling hand in hand with my husband, completely unafraid of the world.

"Thoughts, love?"

I tip my face up to look at him. "Just wondering if you're going to win me any prizes."

He grins, his joy coming far more often now. Honestly, he seems a hell of a lot less volatile than before. Fiona says it's the sex, but I think it's more. "Am I not prize enough?"

"You're no stuffed teddy," I retort.

He throws his head back and laughs.

"But I suppose a rock-hard dragon will have to do."

Dante's hand releases mine and he reaches down to grab my ass. I let out a breath, lust shooting through me at even that basic contact. I wonder if I'll ever stop wanting him the way I do. If I'll ever cease craving him every moment of every day.

I sure as hell hope not.

"I'll show you hard," he whispers in my ear.

"Already? We skipped our reception earlier, and I think people noticed. Killian winked at me when we finally did show up."

"Love, *everyone* noticed."

"What's next for us?" I ask as I wrap my arm around his waist.

"What do you want to be next?"

I pull him toward a small alley between two games and arch up to kiss him noisily. Then, I step back. "Have you ever wanted a family?"

"A family—as in kids?"

I nod.

Dante stares at me as though he's afraid to say the wrong thing. "I suppose I haven't given it a lot of thought."

Taking his hand, I press it to my belly and study his expression.

He narrows his gaze, and I know he's listening for the tiny blips of a heartbeat. His eyes widen, and he lifts his attention back to me.

"I know we haven't talked about it. That there's still the worry about your father finding us, and I'm not even sure how you feel about kids, but—"

I'm cut off when Dante's mouth claims mine. His tongue scorches me, his hands fisting in my hair as he claims me thoroughly. "This is wonderful news," he says. "But you're no longer allowed to perform."

"D, It's still early enough that I'll be fine."

“No.” He takes my hand and pulls me farther into the dark. Then, he kisses me again before resting his forehead against mine. “You are precious to me, Liv. The most important person in the world to me. And our baby? Our baby will be loved beyond measure in a world where they will be able to grow up free of the constraints my kind would have placed on them.”

“You’re not scared?” I question. “Of losing everything?”

“No one will ever harm either of you,” he says softly. “Of that I vow.” His large hands cup my cheeks, and he tilts my face up to his. “I love you, Liv. And I love our baby.”

“I love you, too.” I kiss him again then pull away. “Now, go win me that teddy bear.”



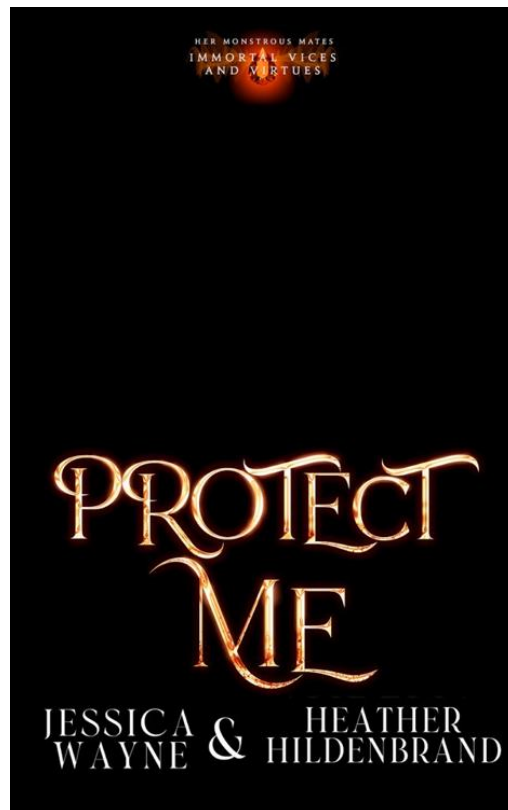
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And they nearly get their way.

Would have if *he* didn't show up.

He's hundreds of years old.

My enemy.

I tell myself it's the excess adrenaline running through my veins that heats my blood.

That makes my heart pound.

But my gut tells me I'll be getting a lot more from this vampire before I put him down.

That is, if he doesn't kill me first.

—

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*SHE SACRIFICED HER SOUL TO SAVE THOSE SHE LOVES. NOW, HE MUST FIGHT TO HELP HER GET IT BACK, OR RISK LOSING HER FOREVER.*

[BLOOD MAGIC](#)

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## SIREN'S BLOOD CHRONICLES

*HE'S A FAE PRINCE IN LOVE WITH A SIREN.*

*BUT THEY'RE BOTH TOO BROKEN TO SEE WHAT'S RIGHT IN FRONT OF THEM.*

[RESCUED BY THE FAE](#)

[HEALED BY THE FAE](#)

[MATED BY MIDNIGHT](#)

*BARBARIAN. BEAST. MURDERER? ONE THING'S FOR SURE, NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS  
IN THIS CRAZY TOWN.*

MIDNIGHT CURSED

MIDNIGHT HUNTED

MIDNIGHT BOUND

**ACCIDENTAL ALCHEMY**

*MY JOB IS TO KEEP THE THINGS INSIDE THESE SUPERNATURAL BOOKS FROM COMING  
OUT...UNFORTUNATELY, I SUCK AT IT.*

DRAGON UNLEASHED

**SHADOW CURSED**

*HE CAN HAVE HER BODY. BUT NEVER HER HEART.*

SAVAGE WOLF

FRACTURED MAGIC

STOLEN MATE

**BLADE OF ICE**

RISE OF A WARRIOR

*FALL OF AN EMPIRE*

*BIRTH OF A QUEEN*

**CAMBREXIAN REALM**

*THE REALM'S DEADLIEST ASSASSIN HAS MET HER MATCH.*

THE LAST WARD: FREE READ

WARRIOR OF MAGICK

GUARDIAN OF MAGICK

SHADES OF MAGICK

**RISE OF THE PHOENIX**

*ANA HAS SPENT HER ENTIRE LIFE AT THE CLUTCHES OF HER ENEMY. NOW, IT'S TIME  
FOR WAR.*

BIRTH OF THE PHOENIX

DEATH OF THE PHOENIX

VENGEANCE OF THE PHOENIX

TEARS OF THE PHOENIX

RISE OF THE PHOENIX

**TETHERED**

*SOMETIMES, OUR DREAMS DO COME TRUE. THE TROUBLE IS, OUR NIGHTMARES CAN  
AS WELL.*

TETHERED SOULS

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

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# ABOUT JESSICA WAYNE

*USA Today* bestselling author Jessica Wayne was only seventeen when she wrote her first full-length novel. Titled *One Lovers Ill Will* (A book that never saw the light of day.), it was at that moment she realized she wanted to be a full-time author.

Life had other plans, though. After spending seven years in the Army, Jessica finally had the time to push forward with that dream.

Now, a wife and mother of three, Jessica spends her days crafting worlds in which anything is possible.

She runs on coffee, and if you ever catch her wearing matching socks, it's probably because she grabbed them in the dark.

She is a believer of dragons, unicorns, and the power of love, so each of her stories contain one of those elements (and in some cases all three).

You can usually find her in her Facebook group, Jessica's Whiskey Thieves, or keep in touch by subscribing to her newsletter via her website: [www.jessicawayne.com](http://www.jessicawayne.com).

