

CIRCLE THE SQUARE BOOK TWO



THE  
ELEMENTAL  
RUINS

SAM BURNS

# *The Elemental Ruins*

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Content Warning: this book is intended for adult audiences only, and contains graphic violence, non-graphic reference to an off-page past rape, descriptions of abusive relationships, assault, death, trauma, attempted violence against a child, and graphic sex.

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*For my husband. Beating our demons together every day.*

## CHAPTER 1



THE MAGIC FILLED every cell of my body to bursting, and the scorching, white-hot pressure made me want to scream. Born a fire mage, I'd never been burned before. I could jump into a bonfire naked, and it wouldn't even feel overly warm.

For the first time in twenty-five years, I truly understood what it meant to burn.

Still, without that energy, I didn't know how I'd have made it through the void between worlds, silent and freezing and horrible. That power was the reason I surged forward even after losing the momentum of my leap into the void. The reason the darkness couldn't grab hold of me and keep me there, spinning endlessly through the dark, just like Halana itself.

But I wasn't built to hold that much magic inside myself. It would destroy me if I tried. So when I felt the icy fingers of the void loosen their grip and the pressure of Halana's atmosphere close around me, I let it go.

The ensuing firebomb didn't burn me, as fire never did, but it was loud enough to make me curl into my knees, head down and hands over my ears.

When the sound and fire died away, I looked up to find myself in the doorway of a large room.

It used to be impressive, I supposed. A parquet wooden floor with a crimson runner down the middle, the wood now charred black and half the carpet nothing but ashes. Tapestries,

or the burned remnants of what I assumed had been tapestries, on the walls. Next to me stood a piece of charcoal that might have been a door. As I watched, it creaked and fell, a charred piece of metal dropping away from it. Thank goodness something in the nature of my power protected my clothes, or that might have been embarrassing.

Finally, I looked up to the undamaged portion of the room. The crimson runner led up to a dais, on which sat a chair shaped like a lion's head. An adorable little blond boy who couldn't have been more than nine or ten was sitting in it, knees pulled up to his chin, his blue eyes wide and shocked, his mouth hanging open as he stared at me.

To his right was the hottest, and also angriest man I'd seen in my entire life. He had long black hair and green eyes, somehow a paler green than Elethen's, and flashing with pure, unadulterated rage. His high cheekbones were accentuated by the way his jaw was clenched. I had a flight of fancy that I could hear his teeth grinding from all the way across the room. His hand was on the hilt of an honest-to-gods longsword belted at his waist, and it wasn't hard to see he very much wanted to cut me into bite-sized pieces of River.

On the other side of the throne was an older man in a long white robe. His medium length red hair was shot through with gray, and his eyes were the same middling, bland gray color. Unlike his counterpart, his face showed no hint of anything resembling an emotion.

Well, not until I smiled at him.

Okay, yeah, smirked.

"Hiya," I said, waving as I straightened myself, brushing my hands down the sides of Blaze's jacket, like I'd just accomplished something impressive and was dusting myself off. Then I looked back up at the asshole. "How's it going, Dad?"

"Dad?" the little boy on the throne asked, eyes narrowing in something like confusion.

“Dad,” I agreed, smiling and letting myself focus on the boy. He was cute and seemed more interested and less murderous than the others. Especially with the way my father was glaring at me now. For, you know, telling the truth. He’d never much liked the truth. “Father, Pater Familias, all that stuff that means he’s the asshole responsible for my existence.”

The boy giggled and hid his face in his knees for a moment before trying to compose himself once again, putting on a serious face. “You are the priest’s child?”

The priest. I could almost hear capital letters attached to those words, like it was a title worthy of respect. Like my father had done anything in his exceedingly long life worthy of respect.

Screw that.

“Well, back home he always went by Travis. Travis Keyes.” I looked at him, decked out in the fanciest robe I’d ever seen in my life—the thing had pearls stitched into the fabric, for fuck’s sake—and shook my head. “He looked a little different then, too. Less pomp and circumstance, more hippie soccer dad. Anyway, sorry about your, um . . .”

Daddy dearest was glaring daggers at me. If I’d been Blaze, it would have hurt my heart. Me? I’d figured out what the asshole was up to when I was eight. Not everything, but enough to know that he was no father in the family sense of the word. He was a demon from another world, and Blaze and I were tools to him, not children. He’d only ever wanted us to make the portal between Earth and Halana. I still wasn’t sure what he’d intended with that, but I did know it was nothing good. Steal Earth’s resources? Somehow use Earth as a portal back into the universe, not the single-starred void Halana had been banished to? It didn’t matter. What mattered was that I’d stopped him. And he was gonna be fucking pissed about it.

Ah well. Best way forward was always through, and my favorite way through was always simple enough: piss off the people I disliked as much as possible. Especially him.

I looked down at the charred door on the floor next to me, and the one still hanging on the hinges opposite, then to the ruined floor.

“Your stuff. Really sorry about your stuff. Didn’t mean to destroy things. Just didn’t have a choice.” I reached out and poked the door with a toe. It crunched under the pressure, wood buckling and crumbling to black dust. Yeah, that wasn’t fixable.

“A choice,” angry hot guy said, his voice . . . fuck, also hot. Gravelly and deep, and trembling ever so slightly with barely repressed rage. “You did not have a choice but to attack His Majesty.”

“Hey, whoa, whoa, whoa, I did not attack anyone. I didn’t even mess up your stuff on purpose. It was an accident.” I stopped, scrubbing my hands down my face in frustration. The beginning. Start at the beginning. Or as close as possible. “Look, some jackasses”—I glanced at my father—“who thought they knew what they were doing but clearly had no clue were trying to do a spell. Trying to take this tiny tether between our worlds and make it stronger. Make it into a permanent portal. Probably so your people could steal our food or something.”

Angry guy actually stopped vibrating for a second at that, and seemed . . . well, I wasn’t sure what emotion it was, but it was something other than angry. Still, he didn’t trust me. His eyes narrowed and he nodded for me to continue.

“Thing is, the spell wasn’t going to work. It was like—like tying two marbles together and then forcibly using the string to yank them closer and closer together until”—I made two fists and smashed them into each other, miming an explosion. Everyone flinched, even daddy dear.

The boy, clever damn kid, was the one who asked the best question. “How did you know that would happen, if it had not already?”

“I’m a seer. Sometimes I get visions of the future. Usually they’re pretty vague and useless, sometimes they’re . . . vivid. If I hadn’t stopped the mages from making the portal

permanent, we'd all be dead now." My fingers itched to reach into my pocket for my cards. Like I needed to check up on what had happened back home. Or what would happen tomorrow. Like if I wasn't being vigilant, we would all still die.

It was possible. It was only thanks to Blaze and his boyfriend that the world still existed. Without their help, when I'd assumed that my brother was going to be the sucker who had to collapse the portal and probably die doing it, I'd have just let the world burn. If I was the sacrifice? Well that was different.

Besides, even though I'd gone through the possibilities over and over after they'd arisen, I hadn't been sure that I would actually live this long. There'd been a good chance I would miss Halana and freeze to death alone in the void when the magic ran out.

Helluva wrong turn in Albuquerque, that.

The kid let his knees drop and put his hands on the arms of his throne, and suddenly, he had the gravitas of someone much bigger, and much older. A young man who would be king someday. "This spell, was it someone on Halana who cast it? Who put us all in danger?"

"Nah." I waved a dismissive hand, tucking my fingers into my pocket and barely stopping myself from pulling my cards out. I did not need them. I was not some kind of addict, jonesing for my next draw. Except that I totally fucking was. The cards were a crutch. A gift from a father who'd never loved me, in hopes that I'd cultivate a skill he found useful.

Unfortunately for him, it had been more useful for me than for his schemes.

"One of yours was involved in the spell, but he'd gone through to my side. I'm pretty sure he killed himself casting the spell too, so there's no one left for you to punish, unless you know who told him to do it." I glanced back over to the boy's left, quirking an eyebrow. "How about it, Dad? Do you know what kind of ignorant jerk would cast an untried spell

that might almost destroy the whole world? Two of them, even?”

The young king looked up at my father, something between curiosity and amusement on his face. “I should also like to know why I was never aware that you had a son, Tojan, no matter what world he lived on.”

The asshole refused to even look at me, let alone look me in the eye as he answered. He also didn’t look at the king, I noted, but stared stonily at the wall across from himself, scorched and bare but for the charred remains of a tapestry. “The interloper is mistaken, Your Majesty. I have never seen him before in my existence.”

“He does look quite like you,” less-angry hot guy pointed out, and fuck him for that being the first not angry thing he said about me.

I glared at him. “Excuse you. I’m way better looking than that old scarecrow.”

His eyes narrowed at the term, like it meant something other than me trying to insult my father but shook it off quick enough. “Red hair, gray eyes. Both unusual, both shared traits.”

“Then whatever spies have sent him did a moment’s investigation before sending him. It doesn’t make this story any less a lie.” My father motioned to two people in armor standing against the wall on his side of the room. “Kill him.”

Without a second of hesitation, they marched forward, drawing weapons as they came. Like they got orders to execute random strangers every day and this was little more than a minor inconvenience. No wonder Elethen hadn’t been heartbroken to stay on Earth.

It was probably a little sad that I hadn’t seen this exact situation in a vision, but I also wasn’t surprised . . . at all. How very in character for my father. Make a tool, use a tool, and when that tool ceases to be useful, destroy it.

I’d told Blaze a thousand times that Travis Keyes hadn’t been worth the heartache he’d caused my baby brother. I had

always known it, since I was eight years old and seen who and what he truly was. If I had anything to say about it, Blaze would never find out just how right I'd been, even if I figured this out and also found a way home.

Of course, if these guards killed me, I definitely wouldn't get home, and Blaze wouldn't find out shit.

Not that I was powerless, with the fire always available to me. My father knew that, though, so surely he had a way to counter it. Maybe he'd forgotten or dismissed it? Or maybe he wanted me to show my magic so he could somehow use it against me.

Yeah, it had been a fun childhood, living with this overwhelming constant awareness that I had to outsmart my father to survive.

It turned out that this time, I didn't have to do a damned thing.

As the guards approached, a fucking *huge* shiny sword blade came down between me and them.

## CHAPTER 2



## *Lasya*

**THIS WAS NOT** where I wanted to be. Between guards of my own people and a complete stranger, my sword drawn to defend not my fellow Halanans, but a man I'd never seen before. A man whose name I didn't even know.

The guards at least had the sense to freeze like prey animals before a hunting cat. As well they should.

Some stranger, however much he looked like Tojan, was nothing to them. As they were Tojan's personal guard, they were quite used to treating life as worthless. He ordered deaths by the thousands daily with flicks of his quill, cutting food rations for entire cities on whims like "it rained when we visited." Why should those who protected his life care any more about others than the old monster himself?

But attacking a pretty, tiny, unarmed thing who claimed to be Tojan's son, and attacking me? Those were different things, even to the priest's most loyal followers.

I glared at them and waved a hand toward their master. "Go back to your lord. None spill blood in this room without the king's order."

They paused, because we all knew it wasn't strictly true.

It was supposed to be true, but Tojan had been breaking those rules for years. He did it in secret, when only these mindless dogs were at his side. Only those who followed his word as though he were infallible.

As though he were king himself.

The lot who worked for him respected him more than they did the king. There was good reason: Artyom was a child. At thirteen, he was decades away from being an adult in anyone's eyes, even mine.

But I'd watched the king's bright blue eyes at his father's enormous state funeral. Watched them as he'd met with Tojan and his council of priests over the near-decade since.

I knew, deep down, that Artyom was Tojan's weakness.

Because Tojan knew that I was a threat to his designs on ruling Halana. He hadn't yet figured out that the king himself was as well. Artyom hated him with every ounce of his being. The boy king was simply more intelligent, more wily, than Tojan was willing to credit him with.

If I did my job well, if I saw to it that the king was safe, that there was still a Halana to rule in fifty years, Artyom would end Tojan himself, and he would be a glorious king.

But it was going to be a long road to get there, and long before that beautiful fantasy came to pass, I had to deal with this mess.

This pretty boy angering Tojan with claims of being his son. Anyone with eyes could see it to be true. He was like a beautiful young mirror image of the evil old bastard, right down to the cruel, crooked smile when he said something particularly cutting.

Cutting like the unmissable part where he'd practically said aloud that Tojan had tried to open a portal between his world and Halana and almost destroyed us all in the attempt. He hadn't made the accusation openly, so I presumed he had no proof and knew he wouldn't be believed without it, but the information was there for anyone who had been listening.

The look in his eye had also told me he hated Tojan every bit as much as the king did. As much as I did. It was possible that he would make a good ally in the fight, but . . . how?

He was behind me where I stood in his defense, but my mind conjured his image, and it reminded me of things I'd long forgotten.

The way I'd had a childish crush on Tojan almost two hundred years earlier. When I'd been the king's age. He was undeniably beautiful, and I enjoyed his . . . for want of a better term, rudeness. The way he sneered at men who thought themselves clever or exceptional but weren't and enjoyed putting them in their places.

That had been so long ago. Before I had discovered that the keen wit and sharp tongue covered something so much worse than that. A man who killed for convenience. For pleasure. And sometimes, for no reason at all.

The man whom, I was almost certain, had killed the king's father for the crime of caring about his people. Artyom's father had been changing things. Giving the people control they hadn't had before. Redistributing wealth and cutting the numbers of tax collectors and city guards and, darkness forbid, priests.

And there I was, not standing where I belonged at the king's side, protecting him from further of Tojan's plots. No, I was standing all the way across the throne room, defending a stranger who had named himself Tojan's son.

The priest's smile told me that he'd noticed it too. Not that he intended to slip a knife between the king's ribs right then and there—he would never do something so ill thought out. But I had made a tactical mistake. He so enjoyed when I did that, taking every opportunity to point out that I was still an ignorant child. Barely over two hundred, hardly out of my crib, and certainly not fit to fill my father's shoes, regardless of how clever I'd become over those years.

Even worse, I'd shown him a weakness.

I had openly defended an innocent. Like when I'd . . . but no. That was over. Elethen Voransa was gone, and good riddance.

And there was another mistake. I'd known about the portals the priests were opening. They hadn't hidden them, at least not well. They'd set up circles all over the palace, trying again and again. I'd only seen two of them manage to open any portal of a decent size, the rest failing completely. I'd had

no notion that the attempt would result in anything, let alone the death of Halana.

How willfully ignorant could I have been? If Tojan had spent so much time on it, how could it be unimportant? But no, I had decided they weren't important because I couldn't foresee his next step, and it turned out his next step had been something even he hadn't seen coming.

That, I realized, was my play here.

“He came and warned us of a plot that nearly destroyed Halana entirely, and you want to kill him?” I bored into him with my hardest gaze—one he'd once told me reminded him of a kitten, what with my ‘sweet green eyes,’—and refused to let him look away without losing something. “I shouldn't like to think you have anything to hide, Tojan, but if he speaks the truth, we need to know more of it.”

“Are you suggesting I'm lying about having no son?” He tried to affect nonchalance, but there was something he didn't know: how much my magic had improved since I was a child, when I'd been weak to his manipulations. Now? Now, from across the room, I could hear his heartbeat. Hear how it was skipping, too fast. Nervous.

“I am not suggesting anything, like some coward confessing in the dark. I am saying it outright.” I turned to meet the king's intelligent, curious gaze. “Your Majesty, this man speaks of a threat to every living thing on Halana. If nothing else, it is worth learning more. Attempting to kill him before knowing it seems unwise at best.” I looked back to Tojan once more, daring him to deny it.

His eyes narrowed at me, and I let silence fall over the throne room. If there was anything he'd taught me, this monster of a man, it was that dramatic timing was important when one wished to turn hearts and minds.

As fast as Tojan's heart was beating in that moment, I wasn't sure he'd be able to hear me over the rushing of blood in his ears anyway. In over two hundred years, I didn't think I'd ever seen him angrier. No one called him unwise, not ever. No one implied him a traitor.

He took a deep breath, sighing it out, and when he breathed in again, looking as though he would speak, I took that moment and smiled at him, then interrupted anything he might have said. “After all, we all want what’s best for Halana, don’t we?”

A tiny choking noise came from behind me, but I couldn’t afford to look. Showing Tojan even the smallest weakness was a mistake. Showing him your back would get it stabbed, always.

“I quite agree,” the king said, smiling at me. “Halana comes first, in all things, at all times. And if this man, this—”

He broke off and looked past me, cocking his head at the man.

“River,” came that too-sweet, too-smooth voice from behind me. “River Keyes. So sorry I appear to have mixed your buddy up with the arrogant douchebag who named me that. I mean, obviously that wouldn’t be him. That guy created my brother and me to be the keys to open his portal between Earth and Halana and was almost responsible for the death of everyone on both planets. Not very smart or effective, my father.”

I had to bite my tongue at the utterly transparent vitriol aimed at Tojan, who couldn’t defend himself, having claimed not to be the man in question. Once more, the priest’s heartbeat sped until it was racing, even as his face remained impassive.

Likewise, I hid my amusement. I didn’t know if Tojan’s magic allowed him to boost his senses as mine did, but it mattered little. He knew I despised him and took joy in every inconvenience he ever faced.

Most of the time, having anyone behind me made my neck itch and gave me the constant urge to turn around. Somehow, this was different. This man, this situation, this moment. This River Keyes. If he was going to throw a dagger into someone’s heart, it wouldn’t be mine.

I wanted to hate him for making me show Tojan weakness, but that wasn't his fault. The weakness had been mine. The ill-considered action had been mine.

If this River were to be believed, it was only through his action that Halana still existed, when Tojan's greed had led it to the brink of ruin. I wasn't sure I believed him, but I found, with some surprise, that I didn't *disbelieve* him. Tojan *was* that greedy, and the power with which River had arrived had been . . . frankly, shocking. I'd nearly thrown myself atop the king to shield him, but for the fact that it had been over as soon as it had started.

The king was smiling at River, swinging his legs and kicking his heels at the bottom of his throne like any other child his age might do in a classroom. "I believe you, River Keyes. And I thank you for your service to Halana, as you are not where your own people can thank you for aiding them." He turned to look at me. "My lord general, would you be so kind as to take responsibility for Lord River? He will be our honored guest."

Take . . . oh darkness. It was a clever idea. It protected River Keyes, enemy of the priest, in a way nothing else could. Not only the word of the king, but the actual physical protection of the best swordsman on Halana, a title I could claim with no arrogance, only fact. There were very few people on Halana I could not best in one way or another, and Tojan was never one to dirty his own hands.

The king was a clever boy.

The problem was the same as the benefit. I would be at the side of River Keyes, protecting him. Not at the side of my king, the most powerful, most vulnerable creature on all Halana. My king, Halana's only hope for a brighter future.

It didn't matter who River Keyes was, what he was, or how pretty he was. It didn't matter what he knew, or who he hated alongside me. He was not Halana's salvation. Only King Artyom could be that, and he was ordering me to leave him vulnerable while I protected someone else.

Tojan's smile said everything that was making a ball of icy dread form in my gut. "Indeed, Lasya. That seems like an excellent use of your time."

I sent a tiny thanks into the universe for my father's upbringing, the chill and absence that allowed me to look into the eye of a man I despised more than nearly any other, and smile. "Perhaps it will be, Tojan. He seems quite clever. Perhaps he can help with the rat infestation in the palace."

Clearly, Tojan could not read my emotions with his senses. He'd have remained smug and infuriating if he could. Instead, his lips pursed, and his eyes narrowed, darting over my back to focus on River.

His son.

It was terrifying, the notion of leaving the king's back less protected, but perhaps . . . perhaps River was not Halana's salvation, but with more luck than I'd had before in my life, he could be something like it. He'd already saved Halana once, if he was telling the truth.

Why not twice?

## CHAPTER 3



## *River*

I . . . I was pretty sure I'd been dropped into an episode of a certain popular television show, and my father was that guy who killed Sean Bean.

The king was that kid from the end that everyone hated, maybe, since he was also the king, right?

And the angry hottie? Hm. Maybe the guy who was boning his own sister?

He waited until daddy dearest smiled like a viper and took his leave, marching out with his murderous guards, then half turned toward me. There was a twitch in his jaw as he continued looking at the king. "I would never question Your Majesty's orders, but your safety, my king . . ."

The kid-king, whom I was starting to realize was way smarter than any character on that whole show, smiled at him. "I appreciate your concern, Lasya, and I'll accept any guard you want to add to my protection. But this is new. This is"—he hopped up off his throne and walked over to us, staring up at me like I was the biggest cupcake he'd seen in his life, and lowered his voice to a whisper—"This is something entirely new. I've never seen him so shocked by anything. So on edge." He turned to look up at Lasya, excitement shining in his eyes like this was fucking Christmas morning. "He's afraid, my general. I've never seen him afraid before. You have to protect this opportunity."

Huh.

It seemed like everyone here hated the old bastard as much as I did. I wasn't sure if that was sad or reassuring. Before that afternoon, I'd never been able to see the future past the portal opening, so I hadn't been able to see past the inevitable end.

Now, I was getting future flashes again, but they were short and bright and out of order. I hadn't had years to try to make sense of them, so they didn't make sense.

Damned visions of the future, refusing to fall in line with my wishes.

The point was, I'd never truly known what my father's goal was in making the portal, but I had assumed it would help his world in some way. It seemed now that was unlikely, since his own people didn't like him any more than I did. He'd hidden the portal from them, too, so his purpose felt even more sinister than before.

Before, he'd just traveled to a strange planet and created two children to act as a key between two worlds. He'd only mistreated my brother because he wasn't as powerful as me, was a "mere" water mage and not a fire one, or even better, a spirit mage like him. Not that he'd admitted the last.

"I don't know how I can help, but if it involves exposing that asshole as a liar and a charlatan, I'm in," I agreed easily. I mean, really, what else did I have here? Not my home, or my club, or my brother and his weird new demon boyfriend with the bottomless pit stomach.

I looked down at the king, with his golden hair, wide blue eyes, and sweet expression, even as he seemed happy about someone else's fear. Given whose fear it was, I could easily forgive that. The point was, the kid didn't seem very demonic to me, even if he almost certainly was one. It only took a glance up at Lasya to decide who in this equation did seem like a demon.

Elethen had been shocked by elemental mages, and said all spirit mages were like him, so if one had magic on Halana, they were . . . that. Was demon the right word? He'd certainly looked the part with his black eyes and horns, but also, I'd

seen him in dozens of visions with my brother, and he was about as dangerous as a kitten under most circumstances.

Lasya, on the other hand . . . I stared up at him, all black hair and flashing angry eyes, even now that he knew I didn't mean his king any harm. I bit my lip. Had to get that TV show worry out of the way, though . . . "Do you have a sister?"

Those pale green eyes narrowed at me. "Why?"

"No reason, no reason." I put my hands up in the universal sign of surrender, taking half a step back and almost landing on the charred remains of the door.

*Yes, excellent, River, remind them how not-harmless you are.*

The king giggled—fucking giggled!—and shook his head. "The general has no siblings. The blessing of a child is rare among mages, especially mages of power. Two children is more than any would ever expect."

Huh. I didn't exactly decide to keep Blaze or our magic secret, especially as I'd already mentioned having a brother, but nothing would be gained in bringing him up just then, even if we were both children of the same mage, and twins at that. Hell, I wasn't even sure we had been conceived naturally. Maybe we were magical constructs or something equally horrifying. I saw the future, not the past, and at no point in my life or my future had I ever gotten so much as a hint of who our mother had been.

At that moment my future consisted of a handful of fragments, which was a whole new sort of disconcerting for me. I was so used to having a notion of everything that would happen, and now all I had was less than a movie trailer. A beautifully appointed bedroom with dark sheets, black eyes glaring at me with promising intensity, and even more hopefully, a glimpse of a blue-black hole in reality. A way home? I could only hope. The universe sure as hell didn't need any more of those portals than entirely necessary.

Some way to stop them completely would be better, even if it trapped me in fantasy land.

The king reached up and patted the still-glaring Lasya on the hand, which was still wrapped around the hilt of his sword, fingers straining and pale with tension.

“I will be well. This is an opportunity, and we must take it. Until it is over—completely over—no one on all Halana will be truly safe.” His face was blank and serious as their eyes met and held, and the whole damn thing made my stomach churn.

A kid that age should be playing ball in the house and pissing his parents off. Not planning for the future of a whole planet with life and death for everyone as the stakes. That wasn't fair to the planet or the kid.

Or, it seemed, fair to the very angry General Lasya, who visibly forced the tension out of his body and gave the king a full bow, from the waist. “As you command, Your Majesty. I will see to your increased security detail immediately.”

Apparently not one to exaggerate, he motioned to a quiet sentry who'd spent the whole interaction standing against the wall. The man had a bandage on his head, and that didn't bode well, did it? If the loyal men were working while injured, it said nothing good about our chances against my father and his flunkies.

“Eral, I want the king constantly accompanied by no less than six soldiers at all times for the foreseeable future. Our truly loyal men. No one you have a single question about. At least half of them mages, and one will always have The Custodia active.” The king winced, and Lasya inclined his head to him again. “I am sorry, Your Majesty, but it's necessary.”

“Even alone in my room?” the boy's voice took on a whiny tone, for the first time sounding his age.

Lasya held his gaze, and the king couldn't meet it for more than a second. “Especially then, Majesty. You know why.”

Without another complaint, the boy nodded.

The soldier, meanwhile, had gone to the door and started speaking to someone, who nodded and rushed off.

When the king started to open his mouth, Lasya cut him off. “I will see him to guest quarters when your extra guard arrives, Your Majesty.”

I’d always known my father was a selfish dick. Maybe Lasya was a paranoid guy who was overreacting, but the king didn’t seem to think so. That guard, Eral, didn’t seem to think so. The six fully armed, fully armored guards who trooped in a few minutes later clearly didn’t think so either. They all bowed deeply to the king and general, and Lasya took one aside to speak to him quietly for a moment.

Somehow, when they got back, the guard looked even more stony and serious. “Your Majesty, it is my great honor to offer my life to protect yours.” He held out a hand, and the king paled and took half a step back. The man glanced up and met the boy’s eye. “Please, Sire. Allow me.”

The king looked up at Lasya with an expression that had to be called accusatory, but after a moment, he took the man’s hand. Something . . . something near indescribable passed between them, like a shiny white light that traveled up the guard’s arm and into the king, making both of their bodies shiver as it broke the connection and their hands were almost . . . shoved apart.

“Every shift change,” Lasya told the man, only to earn another glare from the king.

The guard gave a serene nod. “I will not leave his side until the duty is passed to another, my lord general.”

I had the feeling I had both seen and somehow missed something profound in the exchange.

Finally, Lasya turned to me and motioned toward the horribly burned doorway, with its single door still barely hanging there. As he glanced at the empty space, a frown tightened his lips, but he didn’t say anything about it. When we walked outside, however, he motioned to a young woman, then to the doors, his eyebrows raised. She gave a bow and hurried toward them, motioning to a handful of other people who seemed to melt out of the walls.

They'd been there all along, I realized, but remained so silent and motionless that they'd blended into the tapestries behind them.

Lasya led me through a rabbit warren of hallways that mostly looked the same. The same gilded everything, mass of tapestries on the walls, and ornate carpets on every floor. One hall would have windows and another doors on both sides, but it made little difference. It was impossible to tell where I was, and not only because I hadn't known to start with.

He finally stopped abruptly, turning to the nearest door and marching up to it. He flung it open with all the drama of a man who still very much wanted to kick my ass.

I wanted to be mad at him, since he was kind of being a jerk, but also, wouldn't I be a bigger jerk if someone blasted their way into my home, seemed to threaten my king, put his life in danger, and then I was forced to babysit him?

Hell, I'd have probably killed me if I were him.

Tentatively, I stepped inside. It was the room from my vision with the dark sheets. Dark, polished wood, deep blue upholstery, and a thick gold carpet. It was beautiful. More understated than the rest of the palace I'd seen so far, but no less richly furnished—just not ostentatious.

I turned back to Lasya, still waiting in the doorway looking stoic and stiff. "Want to come in? I mean, I'm sure you've seen it before, but you can inspect it or whatever it is you're dying to do."

Something glinted in his eyes, and I wasn't sure if it was lust or violence. Praying to no one in particular for the former, I swung an arm toward the bed. "I mean, if you've got an hour or two free, we could fuck out some of that tension."

There it was again, that emotion in his eyes. He stepped forward, crossing the threshold and looming right into my space with just the one step. Fuck, I'd somehow forgotten how tall he was. I sucked in a surprised breath, trying to hold it so I wouldn't seem like a ridiculous kid, panting after him.

We weren't even touching, but I could feel the raging heat of his body, less than an inch from mine from chest to toes, and perfectly still. Poised. Ready to lunge forward.

He stared into my eyes, holding them captive with his own. Green, black . . . it didn't matter, I realized. It didn't matter if this man was hiding a demon inside. He already was one right out there for everyone to see. I, who had spent my whole life pissing people off and learning their tells for whether they wanted to fuck me or stab me, couldn't tell which he wanted more.

If he wanted both at once, even.

Oh, he wanted something. But I had no idea whether to brace for a dagger in the belly or to be tossed onto the bed and fucked mercilessly. I could have told him my preference, but for once in my life, words failed me.

Without a word, he turned and walked out, pulling the door closed behind him with the languid click of a lock engaging.

The breath rushed out of me, and I almost collapsed to the floor. What the hell had just happened?

Even more bizarre, every part of me was just waiting, tingling, hoping that it would happen again.

I was so fucked up.

## CHAPTER 4



*Lasya*

THE STREETS of Madranai were quiet at night, and I wished they weren't.

Not that I didn't prefer quiet for myself. The problem was that this silence was the result of a miserable, downtrodden people who didn't have the time, food, or hope to celebrate life by being loud.

The hush and darkness gave me plenty of time to consider how I was at least partially responsible for taking the hope away. It had been selfish of me, but—

None of that mattered. Not now, with this new disaster.

No, now I had to feel guilty because my king had charged me with seeing to the needs and safety of River Keyes, and I had promptly left him alone in the palace to see to something else. Artyom wouldn't approve, for obvious reasons. I didn't approve, since I was directly breaking my word, something I never wanted to do.

But some things were more important than my pride, or even my honor. Some things were more important than anything else.

The warehouse was silent as I slid my key into the lock and twisted. Not even the sound of rats in the walls or a guard breathing cut the air. I tucked the key back into my inside pocket as I closed and locked the door behind me, then held my arms out in front of me, palms up, and waited.

A torch was uncovered, revealing that I was surrounded by figures in dark hooded cloaks. This was expected, and always a good sign.

“The key to a happy Halana?” a creaky voice asked, slow and self-assured in a way few people ever managed. What she lacked in physical strength, the speaker more than made up for with a pure steel spine.

“An abolished priesthood,” I answered instantly. It wasn’t a password as such, but it was relevant in the same way. To suggest that the priesthood was bad was the next best thing to treason among those loyal to Tojan. I suspected that most of his faithful couldn’t bring themselves to say such a thing, even in an attempt at infiltration.

It was performative, regardless. They knew me, knew I was loyal to them. And every one of them knew that if the enemy found their way to the warehouse, all was likely lost.

Still, when I said it, the hoods dropped all around, and an older woman stepped forward. “We weren’t sure you would make it tonight. We heard something’s afoot at the palace.”

I scowled at the reminder. “I’m afraid that ‘afoot’ is perhaps an understatement.”

Her smile was knowing, and I couldn’t help but wonder how many spies she had placed inside the palace. How much she knew that I never would or could. I’d never asked, and we both knew I wouldn’t.

It was her job to coordinate. It was my job to be the general. Both of our lives were in danger every day, but I was the one most likely to be caught and killed, and keeping me in the dark was the sensible thing for everyone.

Tojan couldn’t get information by torturing me if I didn’t have it to begin with. Oh, he could and would torture me. He enjoyed that. But if I didn’t have the information to give him, then these people would be protected. Halana would be protected.

Nothing mattered more.

The oldest woman I knew gave me a motherly smile and came forward to link an arm in mine. Her face was weathered and rough, heavily lined with wrinkles, something that took many centuries for any elf. She was missing her left eye, a black patch lay over the socket, but it didn't do much to hide the slashing scar that ran from the outside corner of her brow to the tip of her nose.

A dagger, she'd told me. A scar earned when she'd tried to protect her second son from the city guard when they'd arrested him for the crime of stealing garbage. He'd been a chef in a lord's home, ordered to throw the remainder of his employer's food away at the end of each meal. Instead, he'd given it to the poor and hungry.

Artyom's grandfather had signed his death warrant without a moment of hesitation. No man's life was worth as much to him as control. It wasn't about the food, after all. It was about not letting the people have it.

"I'd tell you about the crates of dried orange slices we have high hopes for, but it sounds like perhaps your day was more important than ours, Lasya. Come sit with us, have some tea, and we'll talk."

I wanted to talk about crates of dried orange slices. It didn't sound delicious to me, but it did sound like what so many people in Madranai needed to keep their teeth from falling out.

But everyone always put more stock in the happenings at the palace than in crates of food and new contacts that might produce more of it.

You see, our rebellion against the rightful government of our planet might be the only such rebellion in all of history . . . that loved our king completely.

It was common knowledge that Artyom's father had married a commoner and tried to change things for all the people of Halana. Similarly, it was common knowledge that no one spoke of, that he had been killed under mysterious—highly suspicious—circumstances.

I suspected that the majority of Halana thought I'd been complicit in that death, because it hadn't been announced when the position of general had been emptied and refilled nearly immediately after the king's death. Everyone thought I was the same old general, whom they also thought was the previous king's killer.

For eight years I had been the king's left hand. The general. The man in charge of all military action on Halana—not that any was required frequently, and when it was, it was aimed at Halana's own citizens.

It was a position I'd been trained into, groomed for, since the moment of my birth. One of the three most important positions on the planet, making me one of the most pivotal living creatures on Halana.

Far less important, to my mind, than my position as a member of the rebellion.

As the general, I had fame, and power, and wealth beyond the imagining of most people who lived on Halana. Every person on the planet knew of me, if only by job title and not name. Most of them wished they either were me or worked for me. In the rebellion? We were feeding people. Building stockpiles of stolen and re-appropriated food. We were saving lives, not taking or ruining them.

Mellara sat me down in the humble chairs we had in the warehouse, poured me a cup of tea, and listened to the story of River Keyes, who had appeared in the middle of a massive fiery explosion at the head of the throne room, given us all a knowing smirk, and then practically demanded to be forgiven for the mess he'd made. His claim to be Tojan's son, and his clear hatred of the man. The claim that Tojan had nearly destroyed the planet for reasons I hadn't managed to dig up as yet.

My utter failure to realize that the portals were important. Perhaps I'd been too distracted, wrapped up in . . . no, that was just an excuse. I had failed everyone by not focusing on the portals, including myself.

She snorted at that. “These priests were trying to throw magic outside themselves, my friend. I wasn’t trained as a mage like you were, but I know that to be impossible. Yes, they’ve proven it isn’t, but why would you presume otherwise? Were you taught different?”

My grimace told her all she needed to know, and she nodded sagely. It was true. I was a mage, and I’d spent two centuries honing those skills. Never once had I so much as *tried* to throw my magic outside myself. I’d been trained that wasn’t how magic worked. So I had dismissed the usefulness of the portals . . . mostly. I should have known better, though. I’d seen one open, known it was working. I just hadn’t known exactly what they were being used for. Hadn’t known that there was danger.

“Do you think His Majesty is right?” one of the younger men asked, interrupting my internal self-flagellation. “Do you think this River Keyes could help us stop him?”

The most important question in the world, in the short term. Should we continue as we’d been, trying to undermine Tojan slowly and feed the people we could? Or should we switch tracks and use this clear weakness against the old bastard?

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I had to leave the palace soon after he arrived to come here. I think . . . I think he might be willing to try to help us. I don’t have enough information to know if he truly can. And there’s always the possibility that he’s working for Tojan and trying to infiltrate us.”

“Perhaps he’s a mage,” a woman added. She’d been one of our number for nearly as long as I, not that I knew her name. I’d always asked them all not to tell me, so other than Mellara, the first rebel I’d met, I only learned their names after they were dead. So I could mourn them properly when they were lost, but not put their lives in danger while they were alive.

River hadn’t said he was a mage, but he was Tojan’s son, so it was a strong possibility. He’d also said he had stopped the portal from killing us, which implied magical ability, at least to my mind.

“I’m not certain,” I hedged, “but it does seem likely. I’ll speak to him on that when I can.” I turned to Mellara, dipping my head in respect. “What else do you want to know?”

She laughed at me, as she so often had in the century I’d been working with her and her rebellion. “You know strategy better than I, my dear. You’ll know how to use him against the monster best.” She reached out and grabbed my arm, something oddly soft in those hard silver eyes of hers. They reminded me of River for a moment, and her usual seriousness seemed even firmer than it always was. “I’m just an old woman who moves boxes of dried orange slices around. You’re the one who can make things happen. You can save Halana, Lasya. Without you, every person in this room would be dead a hundred times over.”

Murmurs of assent went through the circle, and ducked heads, and even a quick back pat from the person closest to me. It was surreal.

This was the inner circle of the rebellion. Those people who knew everything about the government, arranged everything—risked their lives every day—in the attempt to feed Halana. Many, if not all of them, had instantly rejected my presence when first brought into the circle, seeing me only as the symbol I was. Again and again, Mellara had convinced new inner circle members of my honesty, my genuine desire to see a free Halana. A healthy Halana.

And now, here we were, with them all giving me their vote of confidence. Saying I had saved them.

I swallowed hard and took a deep breath, forcing away the ball of emotion that attempted to push its way up. We had too much to worry about for me to give in to emotions.

We finished our tea, all of them wishing me well in my attempt to bring Tojan’s son into the rebellion, and they started to depart, one by one, so as not to bring attention from the city guard. Not that I’d ever directed the city guard to pay special attention to this area, but sometimes a new member would go above and beyond, whether out of duty or ambition.

Mellara watched me as the last of them departed, her eyes too shrewd and knowing. “How did things go?”

My lips tightened into a flat line, and I gave her a warning look. “Fine.”

“You did what you had to, I’m sure. Your brother—”

“I have no brother, Mellara. I *cannot* have a brother.” I would never raise my voice to the woman I’d come to see as a mother or a grandmother, but I could not leave room for discussion on this. I could not afford the weakness of having family. Loving someone, caring about their wellbeing—it was like asking Tojan to take them away, and he would gladly comply.

The only things I could care about were His Majesty and Halana itself.

She bowed her head, not agreeing with me, but accepting my unwillingness to discuss the subject. “Good luck with this River Keyes. I hope he can be the answer we all need.”

I reached out and squeezed her hand before leaving. “As do I, old friend. As do I.”

## CHAPTER 5



**MOST PEOPLE THOUGHT** of me as experienced. Worldly, even, though I'd never been so much as outside California before leaping through the void and to an entire different freaking world.

I spent years of my life in Lizbeth's mansion, and most people in the organization looked at me as their boss as much as her. And why not? I owned as much interest in the business as she did, and we looked to each other for advice. I'd worked for her father just as she had, and we'd always treated each other as partners more than boss and employee after the old man had died.

She knew damn well that listening to a warning from me about the future was the only reason she hadn't died alongside her father, leaving me the only boss.

All that self-important nonsense to say that now, I was in an actual palace, and it was weird.

The Revelle mansion had been covered with priceless antiques and art, but somehow that had never made me feel like this place did: small and cheap and unimportant.

I wasn't becoming acclimated, either, particularly not when I woke sandwiched between dark silk sheets to a knock on the door, and the moment I mumbled out a, "hello?" a young woman in a homespun dress bundled in past a guard at my door, carrying a tray.

She set the tray on a sideboard, went over and poked at the fire for a moment, bringing the flames back to life, then came

to me with the tray. The thing had arms that folded down and I found myself being served literal breakfast in bed by a stranger. In a palace.

She smiled at me but didn't look me in the eye as she poured me a cup of dark tea that smelled strong and earthy. "Is there anything else I can get you, my lord?"

For a moment, I stared at her, my brain not yet engaged for the morning. When she started fidgeting, though, I was reminded of my role in this social script. "No, no thank you, this is lovely. And thank you for stoking the fire."

I could have done that myself in an instant without leaving the bed, but I wasn't going to tell her that. I knew enough from Elethen and my visions of him that I had no doubt my abilities would be a shock to most of the people here, and I wasn't going to waste the opportunity that represented. It might save my life, or at least be really cool at some point when I needed to impress someone.

She bowed to me, which was weird. Not because I'd stopped expecting her to act like a servant from a medieval movie, but because I'd been half expecting a curtsy.

That was good, though. It reminded me not to make assumptions about their society or how anything worked in it. I wasn't just in a foreign country when I'd rarely traveled outside of Newla in my life, I was on a whole foreign world, and I didn't know anything about their culture.

For all I knew, she'd be required to kill herself if I didn't like the tea.

She backed out of the room and said to tell the guard if I needed anything else, so I nodded and agreed. At the very least, it was harder to do something wrong when there was no one there to witness it.

The tea was unexpectedly sweet, with the vague taste of tropical fruit along with the tea, spices, and honey. The food itself was familiar, if not exactly like anything I'd had before. It looked like very thick pancakes with dark fruit sauce, and it was absolutely delicious.

That might have been because it had been a long time since I'd eaten, and I'd since passed more magic through my body than I'd thought I could without dying. Or they might just be delectable.

Either way, I wasn't going to look that gift horse in the mouth as I devoured every bite. Yeah, sure, maybe they were poisoned. Not super likely, but really, if someone was trying to poison me, I was probably screwed anyway.

And Dad?

Oh, he wasn't going to poison me, at least not yet.

First off, he didn't know for sure how against him I was. He probably thought I still had some loyalty to him as my father.

After all, as he'd made clear throughout our childhoods, I was his favorite, because my magic and my sight were stronger than Blaze's. Because he thought I would be of more use to him. I had no doubt he'd still try to use me the same way he had then; he just didn't want to admit to everyone else that I was his kid while he did it. He hadn't understood me when I was a child, and that seemed unlikely to have changed.

Sure enough, I was just wiping up the last of the berries with my not-quite-pancakes, which seemed to be some kind of cross between blackberry and blueberry, both sweet and tart at the same time, when the door opened without so much as a knock first. Less than a second later, my father sashayed in like he owned the place, a large man in armor standing behind him in the doorway. The armored man looked me in the eye, his expression nervous as he hovered there.

Having grown up with Travis Keyes, I was well familiar with his lack of interest in my privacy. I lifted my chin in a nod to the man, assuming he was the guard the woman who'd brought the food had mentioned, and waved him off. He was probably more concerned that my father was going to kill me than that I was offended he'd been allowed in, but I wasn't worried about either.

Could my father kill me? Maybe. Would he? Unlikely. Most important of all, if he tried, I could at the very least take him to hell with me. He knew that too, so I didn't expect him to try it.

No, he'd do what he always did.

The door slammed in the guard's face, and as expected, a second later I was subject to my father's "I'm so disappointed in you" expression. Brows drawn together in a line, lips pursed like he'd encountered a particularly sour berry, and arms crossed over his chest. As someone who'd been disappointing his asshole father for as long as I remembered, I was well-versed in the look.

"What's this nonsense about Halana being in danger? A portal between the worlds could only do both worlds good." He waved at my empty plate. "You come here and accept our hospitality with no thought. Halana struggles to feed itself. Did it not occur to you that you just took the food off someone else's plate? That problem could be alleviated through trade with Earth."

If I'd been Blaze, I'd have bought the guilt trip. Hell, he had, many times. He'd been the first person to go wide eyed and sad over tales of starving children in Canada, because after Spirit's Loss they couldn't produce enough food to satisfy their population.

Father had always been good at making people feel bad about themselves. In point of fact, his constant manipulations were probably why I'd become completely inured to the ability to feel shame. My brain had gotten so overwhelmed by the constant attempts to shame me that it had started rejecting the very concept of shame.

I also remembered too well that when we were ten, Travis had stopped buying enough food for both Blaze and me. I'd never been sure if he'd wanted us to fight over what was there like some kind of post-apocalyptic battle royale, but for me, the answer had been simple: I'd started stealing test answers with my ability to see the future and selling them to my fellow students.

One thing had led to the next, and suddenly I was talking to a friend of a friend of a friend, then-college-student Elizabeth Revelle, whose father was looking for someone just like me. Someone who could tell him the future and help him avoid the cops. After that, it had just been a matter of climbing the criminal ladder. I'd owned my own club by the time I was legally able to drink, and I'd never looked back.

Maybe that had been Travis's intention, forcing one of us to think outside the box and make his own way in the world. If that was it, he hadn't realized one very important thing: by failing us that way, he had failed Blaze. If I'd been more of a self-involved kid, like most of them are, I'd have taken the food my brother needed, and he'd have suffered for it. Sure, I hadn't let that happen, but our father had put us in a position to practically force it.

I was willing to accept a lot of things from people. Failure, both intentional and not, was a part of life, and for the most part I found it forgivable. Hurting my brother? I'd never forgive that from anyone.

The familiar moment of vertigo hit me, followed by a series of simple images. The guard outside coming in. Me leaving with him. The king, dwarfed by an enormous bed, sitting in front of his own stack of pancakes. Like all visions that were close and absolutely set in stone, it was a simple sketch in my mind, nothing wild or bright or painful to look at, just a sort of . . . warning.

I wiped a finger along the rim of the plate, tracing the last vestiges of fruit sauce and then licking it away. "I remember the not enough food game, Dad. We had enough money for a mansion on the hill, but not enough to feed two kids? The fact that you're playing it with the population of a whole planet here doesn't make it better, and I'm not going to feel guilty for something you're choosing to do."

The way his jaw clenched told me I'd hit the nail on the head. Motherfucker.

It had been one thing when I'd dropped out of school to take care of my brother. I'd never begrudged Blaze a thing,

and even let him think the money for his education had come from our father and not my illegal pursuits.

It was another thing entirely to think he was playing that game with the lives of . . . fuck, how many people were on Halana?

“As far as the fact that you nearly destroyed your own planet and mine, that’s entirely true, full stop.” I sat up, picking up the tray and setting it aside, leaning toward him and meeting his eye. “Your little plan to force the worlds together was *literally* forcing the worlds together. Turns out two planets can’t share the same space.”

“You’re exaggerating,” he insisted, shaking his head like he was the one who could see the fucking future and knew I was wrong.

I turned away from him, climbing out of the bed and heading for the chair I’d draped my jeans over. Giving him my back and showing him my boxer-clad ass seemed like the right amount of disrespect. I pulled the jeans on, painfully aware of the lump in the pocket that was my cards.

The same deck of vision cards he’d given me when my gift of sight had manifested, now tatty and threadbare around the edges, a few cards with visible scars on them. Someone had once accused me of marking them with intentions of cheating him, and I’d laughed. You couldn’t cheat the future. It always came around with what it had promised, whether you wanted it to or not.

“You believe what you want, Dad. You always have.” I pulled my jacket on—yes, okay, Blaze’s jacket. “I’m done worrying about what you believe and what you don’t. I’ve been taking care of myself since long before you abandoned us. You’re not necessary.”

A sharp knock rang through the room, and the guard opened the door right after. “I’m sorry to intrude, Lord River,” the guard said, looking at me and very deliberately pretending my father wasn’t there.

The whole moment was super fucking weird. People back home sometimes called me respectful names when they wanted something or were afraid of me. But it was Mr. Keyes or Sir or one memorable—bizarre—time, “Godfather.”

I’d never been called lord anything before. Still, the guy was doing his best, and trying not to let my asshole father intimidate him. That seemed to be a hell of a feat on Halana, so I met his eye and nodded. “No problem, my dude. What can I do you for?”

He blinked in confusion, and that was precisely what I’d wanted. He wasn’t thinking about Dad anymore. “Um, I—the king has requested your presence.”

“We are speaking,” my father hissed at the man.

I stepped between them. “And I’m sure he wouldn’t have chosen to interrupt us if that were up to him. Correct me if I’m wrong, since I don’t live in a place that has a king, but I’m pretty sure that when the king summons you, you go see the king.” I looked at the guard. “Right?”

“Yes, my lord,” the guard agreed. “The king’s word is sacrosanct.”

I slid my hands into my pockets and turned to shrug at my father. It was annoying, but having my hand on the cards was a relief. It wasn’t because of him, or because he’d gotten them for me. It was because those cards were my companion in a way he’d never been my father. “Sorry, old man, but the king calls. And like you said, we don’t even know each other. It’s not like you’re my father.”

The guard stared at me, his eyes bugging out, but when I turned my back on my father and left the room, he followed me. I wasn’t the least bit surprised to hear the crash of my father breaking something behind us. If there was one thing I’d learned from him, it was how to throw a tantrum when I didn’t get my way.

## CHAPTER 6



## *Lasya*

“ENTER,” I barked at the knock on my door.

Eral came in at his usual clip, setting the morning correspondence down on the desk to my right, in the perfect position for me to move on to it next. “Nothing that needs your immediate attention, my lord general.” He glanced back at the door, as though assuring himself it was closed, before ducking his head in my direction. “How did your evening go?”

Eral didn’t exactly know what I did when I left the palace for my meetings with the rebellion. We’d never discussed what was happening. Never chatted about my hatred for Tojan, or my intention to see him dead for the good of all Halana.

But he knew.

Eral was a clever fellow, and my right hand in every way. He had a hundred years experience with the guard, and I’d spent the last eight years training him as my replacement, in case Tojan got to me before I ended him. I was rather young to have a son, and unlike my father, wasn’t interested in fucking everything that moved. No, my preference lay in lithe little redheads with obnoxious smirks. And cocks, which was another inconvenience for the notion of having children.

It was considered abnormal for a mage to have a preference for one gender or the other. Just another way for me to be outside the norm. Caring about people other than myself and preferring men? Practically monstrous.

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. “About how you’d expect. Everyone is more interested in River Keyes than

reality.”

“You have to admit, he’s something different.” Eral leaned his hip against the edge of my desk, and my mind conjured up an image of my father, disapproving of such a casual attitude in one’s inferiors.

He’d disapprove of Eral for being an elf even more, though. Or rather, for not being a mage. Most of my kind didn’t like to admit that they themselves weren’t elven. They liked to think they were elves, but better.

That might have worked if we hadn’t all been born in our natural forms. If we didn’t revert to them when . . .

“He is different,” I said, breaking my own distraction. “I cannot disagree there’s the possibility that he’ll help us, but—” I broke off and looked up at him, lifting a brow and waiting for him to fill in the rest.

“We count on ourselves first. On the plans we’ve already made, because we know the moving parts in them. We don’t know River Keyes, don’t know how he’ll act, and can’t count on him.”

I breathed deep and nodded. It was reassuring to remember that Eral was there, and he knew what to do. That even if Tojan found me out and had me killed, Eral would go on. He’d likely have to do it outside the palace, have to go to Mellara for sanctuary, but he knew more about the fighting elves of Halana than anyone bar me. He would make a difference. Our effort would not be lost.

I nodded, riffling through the envelopes and dismissing them as largely irrelevant. At least, the current happenings at the palace had to come before them.

“If you’ll indulge me, though, my lord general, we could at least ask him about—”

“No.”

He sighed but didn’t question me. Didn’t continue the subject. Instead, he went back to the thing everyone was talking about. “The king is having a dinner tonight for Lord River.”

Of course he was. It was a miracle that Tojan didn't know how much the king hated him, with how the boy did these little things to tweak him. But in one of the most important ways a person could be weak, Tojan was. He thought he was the cleverest person in every room and every situation. If he didn't know a thing, he didn't think it could be true—didn't think it was possible *to* know it.

His arrogance was how we would end him, I was sure. He just hadn't yet left the opening that would allow us to see it done.

"I should be spending my time with Lord River regardless," I answered, holding back my scoff with some difficulty. Tojan wouldn't dare kill him right now. Not with the facts hanging over his head. If River Keyes died after Tojan ordering it, and after the following implication that someone had tried to destroy Halana and it might be him, it would weaken his position. Tojan was arrogant, but not that arrogant.

Also, that didn't matter. What mattered was that the king had asked me to take care of the man.

"It's the last day of the month," Eral pointed out, his voice almost a whisper. He didn't want to say it any more than I wanted to hear it.

So I didn't say anything, just gave him a nod to indicate I'd heard as I shoved myself up and out of my chair. "You have Lord River's security handled for the moment? I'll go see him when—when I'm done."

"Of course." He pursed his lips and glanced away, like perhaps he didn't have it handled all that well. "The priest went to visit him this morning. The king called him away, but the man I had on him said they didn't seem terribly . . . friendly."

I snorted at the very notion, lowering my head and twisting my lips. "Did you think you needed to tell me that? He's the old bastard's son, and Tojan wishes he weren't here, weren't his son, or at least hadn't told everyone about it. Either it's all a very good act, or it seems likely he has as much love for his father as I for mine."

Eral winced at the idea but didn't question it.

"I'll go now." I motioned to the door. "So that I can get back and get work done today. Is there anything you need from me before I go?"

He shook his head and took a step back, as though if he were too close to me, I might ask him to come along. Like I would do such a horrible thing to anyone, bar Tojan.

I gave him a clipped nod and marched off. Down the stairs, into the dark belly of the palace, where no sunlight ever fell. It wasn't a dungeon, exactly, and had been created as a safe place more than a prison.

That intention didn't change the fact that it was where my father had been for eight long years. Where he would spend the rest of his wretched life, until he had the good taste to die.

The room he stayed in smelled . . . truth told, there were no words to explain how awful it was. There was the fire and sulphur smell that our kind took on naturally, particularly when unwashed for long periods of time. Worse, though, was the chamber pot that was only emptied a few times a week. The festering wound. And the food.

My father lay on a bed the size of most bedrooms, surrounded on all sides by platters of food. Bread and fruit and full haunches of meat on the bone. The trays were only taken away as the food was eaten, so some of them stayed for days. Long enough for the remnants of eaten food to start to stink and mold.

In the middle of all this stink and filth lay a creature that was almost more slug than elf, or even mage.

For most of my life, my father had been the ideal of physical perfection. He was tall in all forms, strong and muscular, able to toss a person across a room with little effort.

Then, on the very same night the king had been killed, the old man had fallen abed, unable to move around as he had before.

We never talked about the festering wound in his midsection that had never healed and filled the room with the

pungent scent of blood and . . . other things I preferred not to think about. Over the last eight years, my father had gone from being a strong, vital creature, to a black hole.

He ate and shat and ate and slept and ate some more.

And that was all. If he'd been anyone else, had ended up in that bed under any other circumstances, I'd have had sympathy. But I was as certain as I could be that my father had been injured in the course of murdering his king, Artyom's father.

"About time you came down to see me," he said from his position, propped up on a wall of pillows, a leg of some unfortunate fowl lying greasy and half eaten on his belly, half on the perpetual bandage he wore around his middle. It was hard to tell if the stain on the linen was from his wound or the fatty meal. "It's your duty to see me at least once a month, as you agreed. A man might start to think you were ashamed of me."

"I promise you, Father, I was ashamed of you long before you were bedridden." I skirted the edge of the bed, sitting in a chair near the end, where he couldn't reach out and touch me with his filthy digits.

He laughed uproariously, and I wondered . . . did he truly think I was joking? Or did he know how much I despised him? How much I wished every day that he would just die and release Halana from his care. Even more, if he knew, why in the dark he found it amusing.

He ate as much as any five elves could, lying there doing nothing.

For the first year, I'd suggested that despite being bedridden, he could do something. Accomplish something. Write a book, correspond with friends, teach someone about his life so they could write a book. Literally anything.

But no.

Apparently this was the way of a dying mage.

He lay in bed and ate. He hadn't been able to shift forms in eight years, so there he was in all his magical . . . glory. Stuck

in his true form. Unable to even have proper company, since he couldn't shift into his elven form.

Taller than me, his skin permanently the pale shade of a mage, but with an extra gray pallor that made him look dead already. With all he was eating, one might have expected him to have gotten fat, but no. His muscle had withered away, certainly, but he weighed no more than I did. Probably rather less, without his previous muscled bulk. His forward-curved horns were getting brittle, little bits flaking off and lying in his bed with him.

I didn't think the sheets had been changed in years. Not since he'd broken the arm of the girl who'd been trying to clean him up, while in the throes of a purposeless rage.

No one helped him anymore. They just delivered food and took away empty plates and changed the chamber pot occasionally. And they left him to stew in his own filth, just the way he liked it.

He rolled his eyes at me. "Always so prissy. No wonder the kingdom's gone to the dark since I've been down here."

"I can't imagine what gave you that impression."

"Tojan's still alive, isn't he?" He lifted the fowl leg to his mouth and tore off a bite, leaving a greasy sheen on his lips as he grinned at me. "You've hated him since you stopped loving him, so I figure that's a failure all by itself."

"Tojan isn't the one sitting around eating Halana's food and giving nothing back," I said, watching him devour the entire leg in a few more bites and toss the bone aside as he grabbed for the next closest thing to eat—a pastry that looked like it had once been lovely. I tried not to notice the spot of mold on one side and hoped that it was simply the kitchen sending him leftover scraps that were already going bad.

I looked away, staring at the door with all the force I could muster. This was the worst of all worlds. I wanted a world where Mellara was fat and happy, eating all she wanted, surrounded by her living sons.

Instead, my sick father ate up all that she and her family should have had and thought nothing of it, while she mourned, and Halana went hungry.

“Isn’t he?” my father asked, tone knowing. When I looked back at him, his eyes were boring holes in my head. “There are spells, you know, in the old books. Rituals.” For the first time in years, I watched him shift position, sitting up and leaning toward me. “You could steal his life force and . . . give it to someone else.” He lifted his hands, oil-slick fingers spread, like he was doing a magic trick and it wasn’t obvious just what he meant.

If I was horrified by my father as he was, the notion of him once again hale and hearty was even worse. This? This, he had limited control over. He was sick, and if he stopped eating, it got worse. If he stopped eating, he would die, and as much as I wished for his death, I couldn’t demand it. I couldn’t blame him for eating, only for not caring how it affected the people around him.

If I found such a ritual and stole Tojan’s life force, my father was the last person I’d give it to. In his heyday, healthy and strong, he’d been as bad as Tojan. Maybe worse.

Besides, a ritual to steal a life? That seemed much more like something Tojan would try than me. I was still struggling with the idea that magic could happen outside myself, let alone using that outside magic for something as horrible as stealing life.

No, I wouldn’t be healing my father.

Instead of addressing his suggestion, I leaned back and watched him for a reaction as I told him about River Keyes. He didn’t seem to know anything about him, but neither did he seem shocked by the idea of Tojan having a son. “He disappeared for over a decade, remember,” he said when I finished the story of the destroyed throne room. “Long enough to have had a son. That timing would make the boy a child, though. Not even thirty.”

*Not even thirty.* What a strange thought—that confident, strong man being practically a child. It almost made me feel

guilty for considering his offer to . . . what had he said? *Fuck out some of that tension?*

Even now, wondering if he was under thirty, knowing that I didn't need the distraction of a beautiful man in my bed, part of me wanted to take him up on it. Damn him, this was the last thing I needed.



## CHAPTER 7

## *River*

THE KING WAS, in fact, sitting in the middle of a gigantic bed when I arrived, eating a stack of pancakes that looked exactly like the ones I'd finished not so long ago, complete with berry sauce. He smiled up at me, eyes twinkling like only a little kid with sweets could.

“Did you enjoy your breakfast, Lord River?” He cut off a piece of pancake and dipped it in a container of extra sauce, closing his eyes and savoring the taste. “Syrniki are my favorite.”

The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite place it, so I just nodded. “They were delicious. And the fruit, too.”

He gave me a wide smile, nodding vigorously. “And everything else? To your taste? The room was acceptable?”

“Everything's been wonderful, Your Majesty.” That seemed like a good bet on what to call him, since others had done the same. Not that I knew a damn thing about royalty.

Without conscious thought, I pulled my cards out of my pocket and started shuffling them as I walked over to join him, sitting on the edge of his bed. The king paused his eating to watch, and only then was I reminded that my shuffling was unusual on Earth. Here? Probably unique. I was used to being around people who saw me every day, and they didn't even notice when I shuffled anymore.

Most people I spent time with even had the kindness—or fear of me—to refrain from pointing out that it was a nervous

habit. I usually managed to make it seem more impressive than anxious, so maybe that helped. At least, my ego hoped so.

“You play cards?” the king asked, not looking at me, interested but somehow removed, as though he expected to be dismissed.

That was weird, right? Sure, he was a kid, but wasn't he also the boss of everyone? If he wanted to play cards, I'd have thought someone would jump to show him how.

“I don't.” I flipped the deck so the backs were down, and did a quick cascade shuffle, then a butterfly cut. It was one of those things that my hands did automatically after years of practice, but it impressed people who hadn't seen it before. “They're not playing cards. They're vision cards.”

The king, who had lost all interest in his pancakes, stared at my hands like a kid at the circus. Which I supposed, in a way, he was. I was a strange, exotic creature who could do tricks he probably hadn't seen before. He got so distracted that he lost his grip on his fork and it clattered to the plate. That got his attention back to the conversation and not my tricks, so he snatched his fork back up and looked at me before digging into his food once more. “What are vision cards?”

“Seers use them among my people. Do you have seers?”

“Seer—you mean people who see the future, like you mentioned yesterday? There are stories, but I don't think any currently living mages can do it.” He stuffed a bite of food in his mouth, his eyes darting back and forth as he chewed and swallowed, faster than he had before. “You really can see the future?”

I sighed, letting my head fall back and my shoulders go lax, staring at the ceiling above us. “It's . . . complicated. I can, some. I saw this, I knew I'd come see you while you were eating. But until yesterday afternoon, sitting by myself in a hotel room, I thought the world was going to end. I couldn't see anything after that until the moment I decided to save it.”

His gaze narrowed, not in anger, but thoughtfully. “Was it a difficult decision?”

“Yes.” That probably wasn’t enough explanation, so I sighed and went on, staring at my hands as I shuffled. “I see the future from the outside, not through my own eyes, and for most of my life I thought my brother was the one who had the ability to save the world, and that he’d die doing it. I wasn’t willing to make that sacrifice.”

The king took a deep breath, letting it out in a whoosh, his face a shade paler and eyes wider than they’d been a moment earlier. “It was easy when you realized you were the one who would die. Are you going to die?”

I shrugged, staring at the rich velvet duvet for a moment, then shaking myself and going back to shuffling. “I might. This place isn’t safe for me.” I glanced around, making sure we were alone, but for his guards. “I’m not sure it’s safe for anyone, even you.”

His answering look was knowing, but he didn’t say a word, just nodded.

“But the death I was expecting would have been yesterday. I thought I’d die breaking the portal between our worlds. I didn’t think I’d be able to make the leap all the way to Halana, and I was trying to break the tether between the worlds at the same time.”

We were quiet for a moment while he ate and I shuffled. His gaze was still curious, but it was sharper now. Too knowing for a kid his age—he reminded me of me as a kid.

“You being alive probably means the tether still exists,” he finally said. “If you weren’t sure you could break it and still get to Halana. You made it here safe, so you must have followed it.”

He was probably right. I was no spirit mage, so I didn’t know for sure, but it made sense. I mean, I hadn’t even known how someone made the thing, or what it really was. How could I trust that I’d broken it?

“Which in turn means that Tojan will continue to try to smash our planets together.”

Fuck. This kid was smarter than me, apparently. I sighed. “We should find a way to break it for good.”

“That might trap you here.” I looked up from my deck and caught his eye. I didn’t need to tell him that didn’t matter. We understood each other. Two whole worlds mattered more than me getting home. Especially when my baby brother was on one of them. We both knew some things were more important than what we wanted. “I’ll ask Lasya to look into it, of course. Or perhaps the librarian, since she isn’t as busy right now. She’s very clever and a mage who isn’t loyal to Tojan.”

It sounded like a rare thing, the way he said it: a mage who wasn’t loyal to my father. That was less than ideal.

“Sounds sensible.” I went back to shuffling and he to eating, and we were both quiet for a while.

“So you can see the future again now,” he said as he finally pushed his empty plate away. “You just haven’t seen much of it yet.”

“Something like that.” I held up the deck. “And this is a focus for it. Like . . . like a tool. I know how to see the future. It comes to me naturally. But it also helps sometimes to have something to make a scaffold to build the vision on.”

I’d been through this conversation enough times to know the pattern, so when he opened his mouth, I held up a hand. Closing my eyes, I let my mind drift forward. Not far, just far enough to show the king I wasn’t imagining my ability. I let my magic drift into the cards, thinking of this too-experienced, too old for his age young man, shuffling, shuffling . . . and then in quick succession, pulled and dropped three cards onto the bed.

Reopening my eyes, I flipped the first. The three of daggers.

I froze.

That was not what I’d been looking for. The card was about tragedy of the highest degree. Not minor heartbreaks or setbacks, but real and true loss. Abject suffering.

The image of a closet swam up in my vision, a small area on the floor cleared. A portrait of a handsome blond elf holding an equally beautiful elven woman, the two of them staring adoringly at each other, both of them looking very like the young king.

I didn't know why I was surprised at how bad things were after knowing Elethen, but somehow, I was.

"Is it very bad?" The king's knowing eyes were on me, not the card. Of course, because he was too fucking clever. The picture wouldn't mean as much to him as my shock at seeing it.

I took a fortifying breath and shook my head. "That's not—This isn't what's coming. It's now. It means—it means things on Halana aren't going so great right now."

The king lowered his head, looking up at me through his lashes, a tiny, ironic smirk on his face. "Not so great is a bit of an understatement, no?"

"A bit," I agreed. "This is—it's one of the worst cards in the deck."

The king nodded. Didn't even take a second to try to deny it. He motioned to the other two cards, their backs still facing up. I flipped both in quick succession, trying to brace myself for what would come. Could it even get worse?

The six of daggers. The ten of flames.

The king's short fingers stretched out as though he'd touch the latter, the image of a prostrate man surrounded by fire. "That doesn't look good, but you don't seem quite as unhappy about it."

I tapped the six. "You're trying to move forward. It's hard, but that's not a bad thing. Just complicated." Stopping to finger the edges of the flame card, I sighed. "I wish I could say it'll be simple, but this means . . . it means it's a lot to deal with, and you've been carrying it mostly alone, but you're going to need help to get where you're going."

He leaned forward and looked closer at the cards, nodding.

For some reason, I felt like I needed to fill the silence. I wasn't the kind of guy who did that, but the whole reading, the images of Halana it was giving me . . . it was disconcerting. Crowds of people. Crates of fruit. A serious, determined Lasya, marching down a familiar corridor. "Sorry that was so heavy. I was looking for something clever to show you I can see the future, like"—I paused and pointed to the door—"your general is going to come in that door any second now."

Obligingly, the door opened a moment later and Lasya strode in, hesitating when he found me pointing at him, and the king looking on, hand covering his mouth to hold in a giggle.

When he'd recovered from his amusement, the king reached out and covered my hand with his much smaller one. "Don't apologize, Lord River. I've always known I would need help in the end. Perhaps . . . perhaps it will come from you."

"All of Halana would leap at a chance to better aid you, my king," Lasya said, with the same intensity he did everything. It was the kind of line delivered in a melodramatic TV show or one of those giant epic fantasy books I never made the time to read. I'd always thought it would sound silly, hearing someone say something like that in real life. Instead, it was actually . . .

Well hell, I wanted to help the kid too.

I mean, I already had wanted to help him, but somehow Lasya's fervor was catching.

The young king smiled at him. "I think we both know that isn't quite true, Lasya, but your loyalty is what keeps me alive. To say nothing of how it gives me hope that we can fix what's broken."

Lasya's lips tightened, but he didn't answer that. How could he, without lying? My father was a bastard, and I was sure he wouldn't leap at a chance to help anyone but himself.

The king, though, wasn't interested in continuing that conversation. "I've asked the kitchen to put together

something special for dinner tonight. A few of father's favorite dishes." His beatific smile and twinkling eyes told me this was something important, but I was beginning to realize just how deep the political situation on Halana was.

And for the first time since I was eight years old, I didn't know shit. The visions were thick on the ground, but none of them made sense yet. Fire and swords and beautiful furnishings and people I'd never met were all interesting, but they didn't tell me a goddamned story, which was what I needed.

"That sounds lovely, Your Majesty." Lasya bowed his head to the king, stepping closer, and a weird whiff of something rotting and awful wafted off him. He hadn't smelled like that before, had he?

Seeming to have the same thought as me, the king scrunched up his nose.

Lasya blanched, but didn't say anything, clearly aware of the smell.

"You're a good man, my general," the king said, turning to slide out of bed. "Too good for some people. Now I need to bathe and change clothes. I've asked my tailor to help Lord River with some proper court clothing, since he arrived to us with no trunks. Shall we meet back here in, say, two hours, so that we can discuss the matter of this portal between worlds, and how to ensure the threat is gone?"

Lasya bowed deep, taking a step back. "That sounds an excellent plan, Majesty. I'll take the opportunity to freshen up myself."

The king gave a light sigh and nodded. "The depths of the palace are home to unpleasant things. You're a braver man than I, going down there at all."

At that, Lasya clearly stifled a smile. "Indeed, Majesty. Perhaps one day we'll clean them out. They could likely be put to much better use."

The king's answering smile was brilliant. Lasya left, and as half a dozen guards and I followed the king into the next room,



where an industrious young woman with a measuring tape and rolls and rolls of fabric waited, it didn't flag for a second.

## CHAPTER 8

*Lasya*

THE KING OFFERING me a chance to bathe away the remnants of my father's sickroom was precisely what I'd needed. Not that my bad mood was washed away with the stink of him, but it certainly improved.

The king liked River. That had been apparent the night before, but seeing them together in the morning had cemented it.

Of course, the king was inclined to like everyone unless they gave him a reason not to.

I suspected that River was more like me. Less trusting and slower to care about people, let alone warm up to them.

Still, he'd been kind to the king from what I'd seen, and not enough people had that opportunity. His Majesty was constantly surrounded by people who owed him their allegiance or their lives, and even if they liked him, it never occurred to them to show the young king kindness, only deference.

Even me, most of the time. I was too worried about preserving his life to make it better. Not that I'd have known how to do that anyway. The kindest thing my father had done for me when I was Artyom's age had been leaving me alone for nearly a month because he was angry with me over some minor infraction I'd committed against his pride. I rather hoped the king didn't think of me as anything like what I'd thought of my father.

Even then I'd wished him dead.

But there had been no one about at the time to blunt my father's rage for me. No one to support me when I was in need. I didn't know how to be that for someone else.

Perhaps that was what River could do. He'd seemed to handle the king touching his hand well, when I was still inclined to pull away from most physical contact that lasted longer than a second.

I glanced down at my heavily scarred hand and wondered, not for the first time, why anyone would want to touch such a repulsive thing to begin with. Two centuries of learning the sword and dealing with my father had left me more a canvas of silvery scar tissue than an elf.

I could probably get rid of it, since my elven body was merely an extension of my magic, and not real in any meaningful way. But why? I had earned those scars. They were as much a part of my soul as anything else, and since they didn't stay on my own body, which healed far too efficiently for that, they might as well show to the world in this way.

People had a right to know what they were dealing with when they met me, and since I couldn't show them my true form, this was the next best thing.

It had tempted me, as a child, to go rampaging through the center of Madranai in my true form, to show the people what they were allowing to lead them. But the cool head my father had forced on me had prevailed in the end. I'd realized that the mages would simply kill me, and then dismiss me as a monster. It would prove nothing and accomplish nothing.

True change happened slowly, and in smaller ways.

True change happened when the people saw the rebels giving them food and largely getting away with it, thanks to the information I could give them about guard movements. When the people realized they could be fed, if those in power wanted it to happen.

When slowly, one by one, they demanded that right.

It might take the rest of my lifetime to do it that way, but I would damned well see it done if I could.

Unless Tojan managed to murder me, which was always a danger, I would live to see another dozen centuries. And in that time, I would see Halana fed. See Artyom ruling over a content people, as he should.

As his father had wanted.

King Veren, who had been my age, and born into privilege and extravagance, like me. Who had been spoiled and coddled, rather unlike me. Veren had loved that life, embraced it fully, until he'd fallen in love with a baker's daughter—an elf.

Until he'd seen his son born an elf, without even a touch of magic in his blood, and realized that this sweet, innocent child that was the center of his universe was the very thing his fellow mages reviled and mocked and killed at will. That they would never allow his beloved son to sit on the throne.

At least not for long.

He'd tried to change things, but too much, too fast, and paid the price in his own blood. He hadn't expected my father and Tojan to turn on him so easily. I wished he'd come to me, but we'd never gotten along, so I doubted he'd even considered it.

If only I had tried harder to speak to him when we'd been children, he might be alive. Artyom might still have a father, and I an ally in my work.

I shook off the growing storm in my head and knocked on the door to the king's chambers. He and River were still with the tailor, the beautiful man wrapped in swathes of deep green silk as Artyom looked on.

"Yes, I rather like that shade," the king was telling the woman. "What do you think, Lord River?"

River, unlike His Majesty, seemed quite uncomfortable. It was a surprise since he'd seemed at ease as the center of attention in the throne room the day before. "I'm sure it's lovely, Your Majesty." He glanced down at it, a tiny frown on his face. "But it's, ah, a bit extravagant, don't you think? And I

didn't exactly bring my black card with me." He narrowed his eyes, frowning, like perhaps that wasn't true, but as I had no idea what a black card was, I didn't know what he was getting at.

The king, ever the smartest person in any room, smiled as though he knew precisely what was bothering the man. "Lord River, you saved Halana from destruction. Surely a few outfits are the very least we can give you as recompense."

Ah, payment. Another way River was different from Tojan, who thought he deserved all fine things by his mere existence.

River bit his lip a moment, as though he weren't sure an entire world was worth some clothes, but ultimately nodded. "As you like, Your Majesty."

He did look very fine in the green, too. My color, as the wily brat of a king damned well knew. Somehow, I was also sure he knew that River himself was to my taste. His sly smile when he turned to me and asked, ever so casually, "What do you think, my lord general?" gave him away.

"Lord River seemed to prefer black and white, if my memory serves," I pointed out, waving to the discarded pile of clothing on one chair.

River blanched at that. "Oh hell no. I mean, um. Those were borrowed. They're definitely not to my taste, but someone tried to burn my house down yesterday, and all my clothes went with it." He swallowed hard and shook his head, whispering once more, "yesterday."

I knew the feeling all too well. Yesterday, everything had been normal. Going on as expected. And now, there was River. Like an unexpected fire in my home, he was threatening to burn everything down.

On the other hand, he was lovely to look at, and so far, he'd only burned down a small part of my home. One I'd never much cared for.

"What color do you prefer?" I asked, leaning casually against the back of the king's chair. It was a habit I'd

cultivated over the near-decade I'd been protecting Artyom. Any sword through his back would have to first go through mine.

He glanced down at the green again and shrugged. "Green is nice. I like green. I usually wear a lot of red, though."

The tailor gasped as though he'd run her through. "With your red hair?"

"What about that shade?" the king asked, pointing at a roll of deep crimson. "It would look good on him, I think. Just no white. We wouldn't want anyone to mistake him for being related to Tojan."

The tailor's eyes went wide at the comment, and she scurried to comply, grabbing the roll of crimson silk.

"One in green and one in red," the king mused, reaching out to run a finger along the edge of the silk roll. "It's enough for a few days, of course, but if you're going to be here for longer, we should commission a whole new wardrobe."

"We don't know that yet," River pointed out. "Though I'm not sure how I'd get home, since I'm not willing to just hop into any old portal and hope for the best. I'd also like for us to know more about them before anyone makes another one at all, given the danger."

The king nodded and pointed at a deep blue roll of fabric. Then, glancing at me, another shade of green, an amused smile twisting his lips. "Let us err on the side of caution, then. At worst, I suspect the resulting clothes will fit me for a few years, perhaps in my twenties."

River's eyes narrowed, and I remembered my father's words about River's probable age.

"And how old are you, Lord River?" I asked, never quite as subtle as I wanted to be.

He pursed his lips as he looked up at me, eyes calculating. "Why do I get the feeling that's a loaded question?"

"Loaded?" the king asked, back to his innocent facade.

Or maybe it wasn't a facade. He was still in his teens, after all. Even someone who'd been dragged as violently toward adulthood as he wasn't actually an adult at that age.

River sighed and looked like he wanted to sit down, but he was covered with pins and unsewn fabric. "Okay, so I'm sure you've noticed my ears. It was one of the first things Elethen noticed."

The king's eyes went round. "Elethen?"

Elethen Voransa. I'd known he'd disappeared in the palace, in the wing where Tojan's men were opening portals. This was the first time I'd heard that he had successfully landed on the other side. Carefully, I kept my face the blank mask of indifference I'd perfected over the years, despite the way the news made my heartbeat thunder in my ears.

It seemed that River's ears were not something that had concerned Artyom. I'd noticed their odd roundness, but hadn't given it much thought either.

"Um, forget I said that." River squeezed his eyes shut, clearly annoyed with himself. I suspected he wasn't a man who misspoke often, but he was also in the middle of a situation no one could have expected. Not even a man who saw the future.

Elethen, though. He spoke of him as though he were alive. As though he was simply someone he'd spoken to, someone he might see tomorrow, if all went well.

I cleared my throat. "It seems that Voransa slipped his guard while being led to the cells," I informed the king, keeping my words short and clipped. I wasn't going to tell the king that Tojan had ordered Elethen's death or that I'd countermanded the orders. I certainly wasn't telling him anything more damning. "I suppose it possible he found his way through one of the portals the priests have been trying to open for the last month."

"Is it?" Artyom asked, his eyes twinkling as he looked at me. "How fortuitous for him."



“Indeed, Majesty. I apologize for the error and take full responsibility.”

Artyom grinned, turning back to River. “I am glad to hear that our rebel leader is well. I’ve always thought him a rather dashing fellow and was sad we had to be at odds.”

River’s answering smirk was . . . everything I’d wanted Tojan to be when I was a child. Knowing and clever and amused, but by something other than horror and violence. “Indeed, Your Majesty. We have a story about someone like him back home. He was called Robin Hood. He stole from the rich and gave to the poor, and people still talk about him a thousand years later.”

The king’s smile somehow widened. “That sounds like a wonderful story. Could you tell it to us?”

I wanted to lead the conversation back to River’s age, but I knew when I’d been circumvented, and knew to choose my battles. I could press for an answer later. I was to be spending the majority of my time with River, after all.

As River told the story of a man who’d gone off to fight in a war and returned home to find his own people starving, it did remind me a little of Elethen. Oh, not the details. There hadn’t been a real war on Halana in millennia, but other things were right. The fact that this Robin Hood’s instincts were good, but his execution was constantly questionable struck me as similar. Elethen had always meant well and acted ridiculously. He was so young, though, barely a century old and embroiled in the political disasters of Halana. It had been little wonder he hadn’t acted with wisdom, but passion.

Too many young elves ended up dead because they followed their passions against the crown, and Elethen’s mother—unlike any other mage I’d heard of—had raised her child as though he were simply any other elf. I couldn’t blame her for hating her own kind, and I felt the same. I wished I’d had a chance to get to know her, though I doubted it would have ended well.

The tailor’s response to the tale of Robin Hood, though, was something else. She kept glancing at the king nervously,

as though expecting him to disapprove. Then immediately after, she looked to me. Waiting for my anger.

Finally, as River reached a point in the story when the hero's unwise actions had gotten him caught by the unscrupulous prince, the woman spoke up, tentatively. "Is that not for the best? It's nothing to celebrate, treason against one's king."

"But it wasn't treason against their king, was it?" Artyom asked, his tone light, his eyes on River, but weight in his voice. "The prince is a usurper trying to take power from a king who is currently unable to help his people. And no good king would ever want his people to go hungry. He would certainly approve of someone doing whatever was necessary to see his people fed."

The tailor's measuring tape fell through lax fingers, and for a second, she stared at the king in shock. She gathered her wits quickly, apologizing for her clumsiness and watching me, again waiting for me to do something angry or violent, no doubt. Instead, I inclined my head to her.

It wasn't the wisest thing the king had ever done, but I could hardly blame him. It couldn't be easy, being a very clever young man as he was, and knowing that until he had a firmer power base, he couldn't fix what was hurting his own people. Knowing that his people were suffering, and surely some of them blamed him for it. Knowing that in fact, if he thought giving up his position would see Halana fed, he'd do it in an instant.

Sometimes, the truth was going to slip out of him. Even I struggled to hold it in, and I'd been alive nearly two centuries longer.

The king cleared his throat and did what I'd expected to have to do myself. "Now then, Lord River. As delightful as the tale is, what has it to do with your ears or your age? I'd noticed them, of course. I thought it perhaps a scar, but that is strange, both round."

River touched his ears, self-conscious, and nodded. "So, I'm not an elf. The people from Earth, we're human. We're

shorter than elves, and we have round ears. And . . . we only live to be about seventy or eighty.”

“Seventy or eighty what?” the king asked, guilelessly.

“Years. Years old. We die of old age before a hundred, usually.”

The tailor dropped her tape again, and the room went silent.

## CHAPTER 9

**AWKWARD.**

I'd been trying to avoid the subject altogether, since it was clear that elves and humans were different, and had very different life expectancies. I wondered if mages were different yet again, making the conversation awkward on every level.

"That is something of a surprise," the king said, his voice breathy. Poor kid was shocked.

Well, he could join the club. I couldn't begin to process the things I'd started to learn in this meeting. I fucking hated politics on the best day, and this place was all goddamned intrigue and backstabbing.

Worse yet, I was pretty sure my father was at the heart of most of it.

It had been impossible to know Elethen more than an hour and not know that his people were starving, and now the king had practically said aloud that he knew about it but didn't yet have the power to help.

I shrugged. There wasn't much to say, since I was getting the feeling they lived, oh, just a little longer than us. Elves in stories always did, so why not these ones too?

"Then I suppose," Lasya said, meeting my eye with his intense peridot gaze, "it is a good thing that you are not Tojan's son. If you were, you might live quite a lot longer than you expected to. I know one who has lived longer than they expected to, and it was not a happy surprise."

The bottom dropped out of my stomach at the implication. They both knew I damn well was my father's son. If he'd had any part of making us, which seemed likely, given the unfortunate resemblance, Lasya might have a point. I looked human, but . . . was I?

Worry tangled in my gut. No, I didn't care if they all turned into seven-foot horned demon guys, but finding out I did too, after twenty-five years of self-defining as human? That could mess with a guy. Living a few hundred years didn't sound like the worst thing ever, but of course, you never knew till you got there. Plus I didn't know if it was a few hundred or a few thousand, and those were different things.

"But this means you are a child," Lasya added, his jaw clenched. He actually looked pissed again. What the hell?

"I am fucking not. Maybe if I'd grown up an elf I'd be a kid, but I'm human. As a human, I'm well into adulthood, thank you very much." I narrowed my eyes at him, glaring, daring him to question me.

The king burst into laughter. "He is clearly not a child, Lasya. Regardless of his people or his age. I am a child, yes. But even if he were as young as I, he is not."

"Under thirty," Lasya muttered, and I lifted an eyebrow. How the hell did he know that?

"Twenty-five," I agreed, meeting his eye with challenge. "And I've probably had more sex than you."

The king fell back in his chair, laughter pouring out, his whole body shaking.

"Wait, so how old are you?" I asked the boy. I did not want to have to justify my view of him as a kid if he was my age.

"His Majesty is thirteen," the tailor whispered as she went back to busily sticking pins in the fabric covering me.

Thank fuck. He looked younger than that to me, but at least he wasn't twenty or something.

I glanced up at Lasya, who was still staring at me, one eye twitching just a little.

Uh oh.

I quirked a brow and stared back, trying to be both demanding and careless at once. I wanted to cross my arms, but again, fabric and pins.

“Two-hundred and ten.”

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

“Okay, maybe I haven’t had more sex than you.”

The poor king was going to die laughing in a minute if we didn’t stop.

“Ninety-six,” the tailor whispered, clearly not wanting to be left out of the conversation. She gave me a sweet smile when I glanced down at her. “I have a brother your age. He’s . . . a child. Nothing like you at all.”

“Of course,” the king agreed, gasping for breath between words. He pulled himself up and composed himself—mostly—before going on. “River was raised by a people who expected him to be an adult at this age. His actual race makes little difference. He was trained to be an adult.”

I refrained from mentioning that my father had basically abandoned us to our fate when we were ten, and disappeared altogether when we weren’t much older than the king. Since the king was obviously an orphan, he didn’t need to hear about shitty parents.

Still, I lifted my chin and stared at Lasya in challenge.

After a moment, he sighed and shook his head. “You do seem at least twice your age.”

I got the distinct feeling he’d just called me a teenager or something mildly insulting, but I shrugged. “I’ll take it. For now.”

The king’s shoulders shook with mirth again, and I figured even if I missed out on hot sex, it was a job well done. The kid didn’t seem like he laughed enough.

From a spot behind me, the tailor whispered, “who wouldn’t?” When I turned my head to look at her, she sent a

meaningful look in Lasya's direction, though my body was blocking him from her view. Then she gave me a little wink, and bit her lip and ducked her head like she couldn't believe the cheek of herself.

Ninety-six years old. Well hell, who could blame her? Grandpa was still a hottie at two-hundred and ten. Plus I was getting the feeling that two hundred was still pretty young, which was a bit mind-blowing.

On the other hand, I bet he knew his way around a bed.

I was still trying not to think about how long I might live, being my father's son.

"While we have the tailor here, do you need anything new, Lasya?" The king looked up at him with the worst fake innocent act I'd ever seen.

"You trying to get him naked for us, Your Majesty? I do appreciate all the gifts, but you don't have to keep going with them." The tailor's hands froze on me, and I could feel her whole body trembling. I thought that maybe she was actually having fun. She was definitely trying not to laugh out loud.

Lasya's eyes were focused on me, and for the first time since age had come up, I had some hope he could get past it. Because that wasn't a look one gave a little kid. "My wardrobe is quite full, Majesty. If Lord River wants to see me naked, he's going to have to work harder than that."

Shit. That had gone from zero to holy hotness in about two seconds flat.

"Harder than saving the whole planet from destruction?" I wanted to stick out my lower lip in a pout, but he didn't need a reminder that he'd just been worried I was a kid.

Everything in the room but Lasya fell away a second later, as he let his eyes drift down my half-dressed body, covered with just a pair of boxers and some draped fabric. The silk was slippery against my skin, and I could almost feel the graze of his eyes as they raked over my body, down, and back up again. I licked my lips, trying to cover the fact that my breath had sped just from the fucking predatory way he was looking at



me. I wasn't a teenager, dammit. I didn't get hard from a sudden breeze anymore.

His deep voice sent a shiver down my spine when he spoke again. "Perhaps we shall have to wait and see the finished garments."

Fuck. I'd never once in my life imagined wishing I could sew, but there we were.

There were a couple of small movements behind me, and the silk fell away from my body, leaving me almost naked in the middle of the room.

Lasya's gaze heated, and his grip on the back of the king's chair tightened, his knuckles going white.

"This one will be ready by dinner, Your Majesty," the tailor said, a sly little smile in her voice that probably matched her face, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from Lasya. "So I suppose Lord River will have his answer this evening."

From the corner of my eye, I saw the king reach out and grab her hand, and the way she startled at the motion. It broke the thing between Lasya and me, and we both turned to look. He'd started to pull away at her shock, but she leaned in and squeezed his hand instead. "I hope my work will please Your Majesty."

"It always does, thank you," he answered, with that sweet voice only a child could manage. There was something else in it, too. Something that sounded heartbreakingly like hope.

The hope of a boy for recognition and acceptance, because, I realized with sudden clarity, no one could truly give it to him. Anyone who tried to give him the approval a child needed would be faced with the fact that he was a king, and approving of him was sort of insulting.

"Indeed," I agreed, nodding and hopping down off the dais I'd been standing on for the tailor to do her work, ignoring my state of undress. "Thank you both for doing an excellent job. I feel better dressed already."

I reached for Blaze's jeans, sighing as I had to put them back on. After having silk draped over my ass, denim was

such a disappointment. Sure, it stood up to hard work really well, but what hard work was I going to be doing?

If I found a way home, I promised myself, it was going to be silk all the way. Maybe I could get the king to give me a trunk to take everything home in. Including his hot general.

## CHAPTER 10

## TWENTY-FIVE.

The king was correct, of course, that if River was an adult among his people, he was an adult. It would be patronizing of me to assume I knew better. A tiny voice kept telling me, though, that I was believing that because I wanted to—because it was convenient for me. Very like a mage.

Because when the tailor delivered the clothes and River changed, he was . . .

Darkness take me, I didn't even want to go to dinner.

He'd been sending heated looks my way all afternoon, while he had told the king the story of how "spirit mages" had disappeared from his world, and with them, the ability to do great works of magic, like opening a permanent portal between worlds. He'd been a bit cagey about what the difference was between these spirit mages, which was apparently what they called us, and those remaining on his world, but it had seemed more nervous than devious.

Still, it was something to keep an eye on, just in case. River seemed to be on our side, but that didn't mean he wasn't a masterful liar, or even a ploy on Tojan's part, trying to gain my confidence and then turn on me.

It wouldn't be the first time.

Even with that sitting in the back of my mind, I couldn't stop thinking about him standing there almost naked in front of all of us, looking at me in utter challenge. Like he *wanted*

me to toss him over my shoulder and drag him back to my rooms right that moment.

Once he'd changed into the green silk tunic the tailor had made him, with hose a few shades darker that showed off his graceful, lithe legs, I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Him, in my color. Looking at me like he wanted everything I had to give, his silver eyes smoldering.

His father had never been so beautiful, not even to my child eyes. Tojan had been a distant thing, far above me—and then when I knew him, as far away as I could keep him. River was something else entirely, and keeping him away from me was the furthest thing from my mind.

I only hoped it wasn't a mistake that destroyed everything I cared for.

That thought was enough to cool my ardor in time for dinner.

And if that had been enough to stop my ruminations on sex, then Tojan's arrival in the dining room was a bucket of ice water straight on my cock. Somehow, the king hid his hatred better than I did. But then, if my open hatred helped to hide Artyom's in any way, then it was hatred well spent.

This dinner was rather different than usual. The dining table wasn't exceptionally large, since we were in the king's private dining room, not the feast hall. Usually the only people eating there were myself, the king, and Tojan. This time, the king sat next to River, the two of them taking up a single side of the table, their heads bent toward each other like old friends conspiring to come up with a prank. It did my heart good to see Artyom smiling that way, even if it sent a stab of worry through me. The boy had already been through so much. If River turned out to be a plant working for Tojan . . .

River, well . . . damn him and his wicked smirk, that simply reminded me of things I needed out of my mind while Tojan was in the room.

When the priest had swept in, followed by his usual entourage of two guards and a minor priest, he'd stopped cold,

glaring around the room.

The extra guards I'd assigned to the king, I remembered with sudden amusement. Tojan was used to having the biggest following, and suddenly there wasn't enough space in the room for his people, because the king had six guards stationed around the room.

I sent him a smile. "You understand, with my added responsibility to Lord River, I had to make sure His Majesty was still well protected. Your people can wait in the hall if there isn't enough room for them."

A muscle in his jaw jumped, but he managed to keep from clenching it outright. Instead, he gave me a syrup-sweet smile as he waved his guards off with a sharp motion. "Of course. His Majesty's safety must take precedence."

"Always," I agreed. We held each other's gazes for a long time, like a contest of will between predators.

"Damn right," River agreed loudly, grabbing both of our attention. He was grinning at us, like he knew damned well what he'd interrupted and was quite pleased with himself. "I mean, even if he wasn't the king, he's the best company I've had in ages, so clearly he's the guy to protect."

Tojan's sweet smile turned sour, and he dropped into his chair with none of his usual grace, the legs of it rubbing across the rug with a sound that made the hairs on the back of my neck rise, and a shudder run down my spine. He glared at River's chair, placed between himself and the king, as though the inanimate object were at fault for the extra distance.

As though he wanted to be near the king for any reason but to kill him.

Artyom, meanwhile, was staring at River as though he'd created the sun with his own hands. I recognized the expression. I'd given it to Tojan at that age. I hoped for Artyom's sake that River truly was more worthy of it, as he seemed to be.

"I asked the kitchen to make my father's favorite," Artyom told River, the stars never leaving his eyes. "It's a peasant dish

my mother made him, dumplings stuffed with mushrooms and potatoes.”

Tojan looked even more sour, and I wondered if he could progress that way, and perhaps turn his whole face inside out if he pursed his lips hard enough.

River snapped his fingers. “Russian. It’s Russian.”

The king cocked his head, and I had to admit, so did I. “Rushing?”

“No, no, it’s a, a nationality on Earth. Syrniki for breakfast, that’s Russian, I think. I really should have seen it a million miles away, with the way you all talk. Russian. I used to know this Russian guy. Sasha.” His gaze drifted off into the distance, and he gave a little sigh.

I’d never hated someone I hadn’t met before, but there we were. I’d known a Sasha once. Fucked a Sasha. But this one, I wanted to crush. Or at least crush River beneath me and make him forget the man who was making him sigh dreamily.

“Anyway, he’s dead now. Tragic, but that’s what happens when you get into a shootout with the cops.” He shook himself and turned back to the king. “Pierogi, I think they’re called, yeah? Love them. Sasha’s baba used to make them with cheese, and called them . . . um—”

“Vareniki,” the king offered, and River nodded, pointing at him.

“That’s the word. She used to give me a ton of them, and more to take home because she thought I was too skinny.” He shook his head sadly. “Lizbeth and me took care of Baba, but she didn’t live long after Sasha died.” Seeming to realize he was talking about something no one in the room knew anything about, he winced. “Sorry, first boyfriend. Lots of weird conflicting feelings.”

“Boyfriend?” Artyom asked, fascinated by the new word.

“Um, person I dated? Significant other?” His lips quirked up at one corner and he glanced at me, then Tojan. “Lover?”

That, finally, was a word the king recognized. “Ahh. He was courting you.”

River gave a little chuckle and shrugged. “Sure, we can call it that. Mostly he was hot and scary, and I was a lonely kid at the time.”

“And scary is good,” the king said, his sly little matchmaker smile making a recurrence.

River’s answering smile was almost blinding. “Damn right. Scary guys are the hottest. When you know they could break you in half, but they’d rather . . . well, you might be a little young for that talk. Though I was only like two years older than you when I dated Sasha. Probably illegal and not okay, but it worked for me.”

“That is an entirely inappropriate way to speak to the king, yes,” Tojan said, his teeth clenched together so hard that his sibilants hissed.

River shrugged. “Sorry, I didn’t have a father figure to tell me things like that. Hard to say what’s appropriate and not.” River glanced over at Artyom, giving him a wink. “Though Sasha let me call him Daddy sometimes.”

Tojan choked on a sip of water, and the king giggled. I doubted he understood the concept, but the image of Tojan sputtering was plenty amusing.

I’d heard of such things before, pretty young men who wanted to call someone “Daddy.” I suspected River wasn’t all that interested in the idea and cared more about shocking Tojan—about telling Tojan that he’d been replaced with ease by a stranger.

I didn’t particularly care about what River called his lovers, but his clear and abiding hatred for Tojan was possibly the sexiest thing I’d ever witnessed. For the rest, well . . . I’d been called scary more than enough times, but I’d never had anyone think it attractive before. At least, not enough to say so right in front of me.

Dinner was served, and it truly was delicious. That Tojan hated the dish because he considered it peasant fare made it all



the better. It was a mage conceit that meat was expensive and rare, therefore it was better than any other food. I didn't give a damn what was on my plate, as long as it tasted acceptable and was filling. Delicate glazed tarts and giant haunches of meat were largely wasted on me, one far too much work for the outcome and the other more food than I required.

Food was fuel. It was too tied up in the disaster of Halanan politics to be anything else for me. How could I coo over a decorated lemon cake while people on the streets of Madranai died for want of a potato?

It didn't take long for me to realize some very important things, as River paid most of his attention to Artyom, only glancing at Tojan occasionally after landing an insult aimed at his supposedly absent father.

This was unique.

Yes, I always paid more attention to the king than to Tojan, but I had never been his friend, only his defender. With a friend, the king's personality bloomed, along with constant smiles, clever observations, and a brightness I'd never seen in the boy. I had known he was smarter than the average child, but his conversation with River made it painfully obvious.

Likewise, Tojan's side of the table seemed to grow darker as dinner went on. Part of me was surprised that Tojan showed so much anger on his face and in his every movement. My instinct was to think it a show, faked for my sake. But then I remembered a thousand dinners before, where the only people in the room other than the three of us were Tojan's lackeys, catering to his needs and complimenting him constantly.

He literally had not eaten a meal in more than eight years where he wasn't the center of attention, and he had lost his ability to hide his reaction to that—the sheer rage at someone else being more important than himself.

This, more than anything, made me believe in River's hatred for him.

Just as I didn't believe Tojan's followers could reject the priesthood even as a lie when trying to infiltrate the rebellion,

it was impossible to believe that River's amusement at his father's growing anger was faked. He fairly glowed with joy, his smiles often and bright, and his laughter infectious. How could anyone who loved Tojan manage that?

By the end of dinner, the king was flagging from the excitement of the day, so I sent him off with his guards, watching as they left the room in a tight knot. A room that was suddenly empty but for Tojan, River, and me.

I half expected the priest to throw a tantrum, yell at River for his insouciance, or at least toss out a threat. His expression was thunderous, and I had no doubt he wanted to haul off and hit him. Kill him, even.

No one ever insulted Tojan but me, and I usually kept my mouth shut in his presence. It had always been easier to glare and seem impotent in the face of his power, while working against him behind his back.

I wouldn't lie to myself, watching River insult him had been a balm that soothed my soul.

"We should speak in private," Tojan told River in a clipped tone, ignoring my presence but for the fact that his words clearly wanted that presence gone.

River leaned back in his chair, slouching down and pulling out his cards, shuffling them lazily from one hand to the other in a rippling snake-like line. Where had he even hidden them in his tunic? It had clung to his body so perfectly. "Should we?" he finally asked. "I mean, you're not my dad, after all. And the king wants me to stay with his general."

"*His general* knows nothing of the politics on Halana," Tojan snapped back, sneering at the title. "Or of the intricacies of magic required to build a"—he clenched his jaw for a moment, before taking a deep breath and continuing—"a *safe* portal between the worlds. One that doesn't threaten anyone."

How hard had it been, I wondered, to admit that he might have been wrong? He didn't believe it, clearly, but he wanted River to work with him, not against him, so he was making a show of giving in.

If this was an act, it was the best I'd ever seen, even from Tojan.

River just lifted an eyebrow and kept shuffling. "I dunno, he seems pretty clever to me. Maybe if you used small words and talked real slow, you could actually tell people what you're trying to do, instead of keeping secrets that might get whole worlds destroyed? Not that you'd ever do that."

He pulled a card out of the deck, seemingly at random. A gilded picture of a crown. I didn't know what it meant, but clearly Tojan felt it offensive, as he stiffened in his chair. Another fell next to it, upside down, a man on a horse with six flaming stars above him. Another upside down, a man on a throne, surrounded by fire.

"I see you've gotten very good at card tricks. Almost as good as you are at insulting people."

River didn't even try to deny it, just offered a slow grin. "What can I say? These cards are the only decent thing my father ever gave me. The least I could do was get good at using them." He sat forward and tapped each card in turn. "Arrogance. Arrogance. Arrogance. But I gotta say, the fact that you see this and assume I'm aiming it at you says something, doesn't it?"

"That you're a spoiled brat with an attitude problem?"

"That you know what these cards mean, when no one else on Halana has ever seen a vision deck."

Without a word, Tojan stood and stalked out of the room, River continuing to smile after him.

## CHAPTER 11

## *River*

“HE’S KILLED men for less than that, you know,” Lasya drawled a moment after Dad flounced off to parts unknown.

I stuffed the loose cards into my deck and went back to shuffling before offering him a shrug. “I don’t doubt it. He’s always been a selfish asshole, and here he’s a selfish asshole with way too much power. Plus Elethen seemed to think that mages were the root of all evil.”

He flinched at that but didn’t deny it. Interesting.

“Do you think he’ll spare you because you’re his son?”

I snorted at the very idea. “Why start now? I mean, he already tried to have me killed yesterday. He stopped feeding us when we were ten or so. I’ve always been more tool to him than son.”

The face Lasya made at that was something special. Clenched jaw, almost a snarl on his lips, and a hardness in his eyes that was somehow worse than his anger at me yesterday. It was an expression I was happy not to have aimed in my direction. I wasn’t sure it was meant for my father, either—it seemed too personal a pain—but I wasn’t going to ask.

After a moment, his face went blank once more, something he was eerily good at, and he stood from his chair. “Shall I escort you to your room?”

I stuffed down my initial disappointment at the suggestion. Just because he hadn’t said “let’s go to your room and fuck

like bunnies” didn’t mean it wasn’t what he wanted. He wasn’t pushing me off, at least not yet.

And if he did? Fine. I was River fucking Keyes. I could always find someone to fuck if I wanted to. I wasn’t hard up, and even if I wanted him, I didn’t *need* him to reciprocate. Maybe he was too stuck on my being under thirty, convinced I was still a little kid.

I wouldn’t fuck someone I thought of as a kid, so I couldn’t hold a grudge for that. Just for the rigid thinking that led to it. Also, the fact that it would probably lead to him treating me like a child. He hadn’t done that yet, so I held out hope.

Not that I’d helped the matter by bonding so thoroughly with the child king, but damn, the kid had desperately needed the attention. And his reaction to it had been adorable, so I’d found myself unable to stop once I’d started.

Maybe I’d get shot down, but I decided it needed to be brought up. “His Majesty needs a friend. Preferably someone his own age.”

Lasya closed his eyes and gave a deep sigh, but after a long silent moment, he nodded. “He does.”

“I take it you can’t do that?”

He looked down at me, eyes calculating as they’d often been during the afternoon, and he finally turned to the door and started walking, holding a hand out for me to come along. I decided to be a cheeky ass and grab it, like he’d been offering to hold hands.

He stared at that for a moment, our fingers twined together. It reminded me of the king’s reaction when I’d patted him on the shoulder—like being touched was a foreign idea he’d never considered before.

Finally, he shook off his surprise, but shockingly, not my hand. Instead he turned and led us out into the hallway, turning toward my room. Well, I assumed that was where he was leading me, since I couldn’t have found my way anywhere in the palace yet. “I considered it early on. The problem is that

while it would be difficult for someone to get away with killing the king—he’s constantly guarded since his father’s death, whether by me or someone else—it wouldn’t be as hard to kill any companion we found, hurting the king yet again. Or worse, to slip in an assassin as that companion, if Tojan knew we were looking for someone.”

Jesus. Fucking political intrigue was the worst.

“Maybe someone a little older, who’s training to take a job like yours?” I was reaching and I knew it, but Lasya cocked his head in thought, so I plowed on. “Do you have someone who’s supposed to come after you?”

His face scrunched up like he was in pain, so I guessed that was a no. “I have only been in this position for eight years. As Tojan delights in reminding me, I am already but a child trying to fill his father’s boots.”

“You—you’re over two hundred years old. You can’t convince me that’s still a kid. Even for a demon.”

“Demon?” His face scrunched up again, but this time it was almost cute, the actual confusion.

I waved my free hand dismissively. “You know, mage. Big horned dude who pretends to be an elf.”

His breath caught for a second. So it *was* supposed to be a secret. Interesting. Elethen had implied as much, but part of me had assumed it was because he’d lived his life as a peasant on Halana. Part of me had assumed it was more of a nudge nudge, wink wink, say no more sort of thing among the nobles of Halana. I’d also assumed they were all mages, but I was beginning to wonder about that as well.

These people kept so damn many secrets that it made me feel like an amateur. But then, I’d always been the face of the organization while Lizbeth had run things behind the scenes. I was the open secret, and I damn well liked it that way.

Lasya opened a door I’d been about to walk past and used the hand I had tucked into his to swing me inside.

For a second I was startled, then convinced that my reference to demons had crossed a line, and he was going to

kill me and leave my body in a random room in the palace, to be discovered at some point in the future.

But as I spun inside, followed quickly by him, I realized that unless all the guest rooms at the palace looked the same, this was, in fact, my room.

Behind me, Lasya closed the door and locked it, then once again spun me around to press me into the wall. In the blink of an eye, he was . . . he *was*.

His facial structure hadn't changed that much, still all high cheekbones and intense eyes, but everything was sort of turned up to full volume.

Fuck me, he was bigger than Elethen as a demon, a little taller, but more than that, he was—he had to weigh twice what I did, or maybe more, with all that hard muscle. And I wasn't a weakling. I was a solid one-sixty.

Where Elethen had been a marble Adonis in his demonic form, Lasya looked like—he looked like a *demon*. Like a forest god that the villagers both feared and worshipped, leaving him offerings in the night.

Glittering black eyes, teeth sharp enough to tear out my throat, and shiny ebony horns with edges that looked as sharp as knives . . .

“He showed you his true form,” Lasya asked—demanded, really—his slightly deeper voice in this form sending a shiver down my spine. “Voransa showed you.”

“He didn't really have a choice. We'd been attacked, and someone tased him.” Damn, tased wasn't going to mean anything to him, was it? “Shocked him. Like—like being struck by lightning, sort of. He lost consciousness, and control of his form went with it.”

Some of the tension went out of his body, but his eyes narrowed. “But . . . he is well?”

I snorted, pretending an ease I couldn't possibly feel with Lasya looming over me like that. Not that I was nervous. No, in fact, I—fuck, I needed him to back away a step, or in a minute he was going to be reminded of how much I fucking



loved scary guys. “He’s fine. Probably fucking my brother right now. They were made for each other, all selflessness and adorable worry for strangers.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and I realized—he was relieved. He wanted Elethen to be well. Like the king and his tacit approval of Robin Hood, Lasya thought well of Elethen.

The tangled web of Halanan politics wasn’t going to give me so much as a minute to breathe, apparently.

When Lasya opened his eyes again, it was only halfway, and the expression wasn’t suspicious or angry, but—he breathed in again, deeply, through his nose, and the corner of his lips quirked up.

Uh oh.

“You weren’t just trying to scandalize Tojan.” It was a strange observation and managed to completely distract me from the predatory gleam in his eyes for a moment. Scandalize my father? I’d done it at least once during dinner, but I hadn’t lied while doing so. That was usually my trick with everyone. I acted like an asshole and pissed them off, sure, but I didn’t lie while doing it unless I had to lie to keep from being arrested.

He reached out with a black-claw-tipped finger and ever so gently tipped my chin up, forcing me to meet his eye. “This lover of yours. This Sasha. Was he more frightening than I?”

I had to quell a hysterical giggle at the very notion. Yeah, Sasha had been six foot, and beefy, and scary as fuck to fifteen-year-old me. For a human. Was there any human alive who could compare to a seven-foot demon with jet black eyes that swallowed light, and glistening horns sharper than daggers?

I managed to control the laughter before it came out, and instead shook my head. When I finally opened my mouth, my voice came out high and breathy. “Is there anyone scarier than you?”

His sharp-toothed grin made my breath catch in my chest.

Instead of stepping away, he pushed toward me, crushing me against the wall, sliding a thick thigh between my legs to press on my already-growing erection. “You *do* like being frightened, don’t you? Your enjoyment is quite apparent.”

Normally, I’d have said something snarky back. Normally, I wasn’t staring up at a monster whose giant cock was pressing into my belly, already hard and demanding.

He ran his clawed finger from my chin down my neck, a gentle touch wrapped in a threat that could tear my throat out in a second, and fuck if it wasn’t making my dick even harder. I licked my lips and leaned into him, pressing the thin skin of my sensitive neck into his claw.

He answered by adding the rest of his hand, five points of barely-there pressure running over my skin.

His breath ghosted over my ear as he leaned in, running his tongue over the outer shell. “Such a delicate thing, this human body of yours. Nothing like a sturdy elf at all. Do you want me to fuck you here, against the wall? Just shove you against it and fuck into you? Or would you prefer me to lay you across the bed and run my hands over your soft skin, like the precious thing you are?”

I scoffed at the very notion. “I’ve never been a precious thing in my life. Not even when I was a baby. You want me, then fuck me.”

This time when his eyes narrowed, I didn’t register anything in my own reaction but excitement. I didn’t know if he’d do what I ordered, or—well hell, I’d known him a day. I didn’t have a clue what he might do.

Instead of shoving me against the wall and fucking me, he picked me up and literally tossed me onto the bed. It was four feet away, and for a heart stopping second, I was airborne, before landing on the bed with a bit of a bounce. I wondered if that meant the mattress had springs instead of feathers or . . . whatever it was medieval mattresses had in them. Another reminder that I wasn’t on medieval Earth, I supposed.

I didn't have long to worry about that, though, because a moment later he was coming toward me. He was dressed a little more casually than he'd been moments before, I realized. As an elf, he'd been in formal clothing, covered in buttons and buckles, and with that sword at his hip. In this form he was wearing a loose tunic and pants, and not much else. When he stripped off the tunic and dropped the pants, I realized, nothing else at all. Apparently, demons didn't put much stock in underwear.

I didn't have time to feel overdressed because a moment later, he was stripping my tunic off. I could see him fighting himself when he got to the hose, taking the time to untie the waist and pull them down instead of just shredding them off me with his claws. He tossed my clothes all the way across the room, one of the soft slippers hitting the door with a little thump, he'd put so much muscle into the throw.

"I said—"

"I heard you." He gave me that grin that showed all his teeth again as he stalked his way up my body on all fours, motions supple and elegant like a tiger stalking prey. Humans always looked ridiculous on all fours. He looked like he was going to eat me alive, and instead of making me scramble to escape, it made me pant in anticipation.

Yeah, I was a little fucked up. What about it?

"You said to fuck you, and I intend to." He lifted his palm, and for a wild second, I thought he'd slap me. Instead, he caressed my cheek, soft and slow. "But I'm going to do it how I want to, and you're going to take it."

"Am I?"

"You are." He settled his knees between mine and then shoved them open, stretching my legs so far apart that the pull was almost uncomfortable. "What's more, you're going to love it. You're going to scream my name. Beg for more. Feel my cock for days, and long to have it inside you again."

Beyond my pathetic panting at the idea, the way my pupils had to have blown wide and my body gone lax, I tried to keep

up my cocky attitude. “You sound pretty sure of yourself.”

He didn't bother with an answer, just followed his previous path down my neck with his teeth, threatening to bite down. And I just . . . let him. He licked and nipped his way down the whole of me, leaving tiny pink scratches all over my body where his teeth hadn't quite broken skin to draw blood. By the time he got anywhere near my cock, I was already ready to start begging.

Fuck, hadn't anyone ever told him not to play with his food?

When his tongue reached out to lave the head of my cock, half of me expected teeth to follow. Maybe even wanted them, in some bizarre way that didn't make any fucking sense. I was immediately distracted by the way his gaze met mine, and that wicked smile he gave that told me he could read my mind. Or at least, my body language, and how I'd completely given in to him.

I hadn't done that in years. Hell, maybe not since Sasha. It had been a long time since I'd met anyone who warranted that kind of surrender. Yeah, maybe in retrospect Sasha had been less than a good man, given his sexual relationship with a teenager, but it had informed what I'd grown up to be all the same.

And Lasya was more than Sasha had ever dreamed of being.

He sat up, giving me a full view of his enormous cock, and my whole body shivered at the sight. Fuck me. I didn't even have a dildo that big.

Shit.

Wait.

“Lube,” I said, my voice a little too breathy to be as demanding as I wanted. “No way you're putting that in me without lube.”

He quirked an eyebrow in a way that suggested maybe he didn't think I got to make such a demand, but gamely enough, asked, “What is . . . lube?”

I stared at him in shock for a second, eyes wide, darting between that tree trunk between his legs and his eyes. He was fucking with me. Had to be. There was no way he'd ever gotten that inside anyone without—

He cocked his head, squinting at me, and reached down to the duvet, picking up—when had that gotten onto the bed? The man was a fucking magician. It was a bottle of something yellowish and liquid and made my breathing calm somewhat. “Oil?” I asked, hopeful. “It’s—it’s lube. Something slick, to —”

He laughed, the sound rich and deep, as he unstopped the bottle and poured a generous amount onto that giant, magnificent cock, running his hand over it a few times to spread it around. Thank fuck. He climbed back up my body, settling between my legs. “Did you think I would simply shove myself inside you?” Reaching up with hands still covered in oil that smelled oddly familiar, he rubbed his index finger across my lips. “What sort of lovers have you had, that you must worry about such things?”

Then he grabbed my thighs, pulling my ass up onto him, rubbing his oiled cock against my hole before slowly starting to nudge his way inside. Without prep, the stretch was—fuck, so much. His avid gaze said he knew why I was gasping for breath, my cheeks hot and a pathetic keening sound forcing its way out of my throat. Every part of me wanted to make a snarky comment, but all I could do was drop my head against the duvet and breathe as he pushed into me.

“I want you to feel me,” he murmured, rubbing my thighs, then my sides, and finally, my ass, trying to work out the tension gathering there. “Want you to feel so full you can’t think of anything but my cock.” Pressing his claws to the thin skin of my thighs, he scratched lightly. “But only a mindless brute would make you bleed unintentionally.”

*Fuck.*

When my ass met his groin, I gasped in a deep breath, then another, and before I could go for a third, he was sliding out and slamming back inside. I slid three inches up the bed, and it

took every ounce of the scrambled mess I called brains to shove my hands up over my head, to keep him from pushing me up any farther.

He looked amused at the effort, and it only took one more stroke, his cock touching every fucking part of me as he slid out and shoved back in, to realize I wasn't going to be able to keep myself in place. My trembling arms versus the power of his thighs was a laughable battle.

Fortunately, his goal wasn't to injure me, so instead, he reached up and took my hands in his. He looked at them for a moment, unmoving, our fingers twined together against the dark blue duvet—mine pink and shaking with exertion, and his smooth and pale as marble, with black claws. I wasn't sure what to make of the expression on his face, but it passed quickly enough.

Then he pressed my hands palm up into the bed, holding me in place as he fucked into me. His groin slapped against my ass with a loud smack on every stroke, his cock filling me up so completely that I couldn't think of anything else. The pressure, the movement, the feel of him stretching me out, pushing his way inside while all I could do was whine at the intrusion—it was more sensation than even the burn of my trip through the void.

When he pressed our bodies together from hip to chest, the trail of black hair down his belly rubbing against my cock with every jarring thrust, it was almost too much. I opened my mouth to stop him or, hell, maybe beg for more, but all that came out was a gasping moan.

The sparkle in his eye told me he knew damned well what he was doing. When I opened my mouth to try again, he gave a particularly hard thrust, the slap of him against my ass feeling almost like he was smacking it with his hand. Not that I'd put that past him.

Or complain about it if he did it.

When he leaned down and nipped at my neck with those sharp teeth of his again, heavy balls hitting my ass as he rammed into me, it was too much. I arched up against him,

coming so hard that my vision whited out, crying out wordlessly as he continued to fuck himself into me, like I was a blow-up-doll, simply there for him to fuck until I popped.

I lay there as he fucked me, a limp, wrung out noodle, until he let go of one of my hands and reached up to wrap it around my neck. He didn't press down, didn't block my air, but the feel of him there was enough to make my dick give a valiant twitch, trying to get back in the game.

It was just what I'd been whining to Blaze about the day before—wanting someone who *had* me. Who knew what I needed and gave it to me. Took me. Fucked me so hard I saw stars without me telling him how to do it.

His hand squeezed just slightly around my throat as he reeled back, teeth clenched and whole body tensing as—fuck me, I could feel him coming inside me, the pulsing pressure of it. That was a new sensation.

Lasya stayed tensed like that for long seconds, filling me even more before releasing me, dropping his head to look into my eyes with his intense black ones, then slowly pulling his giant cock out of my abused ass, leaving me a gaping mess with his come dripping out of me.

He pulled back and inspected his work, and for the first time since *my* first time, when I'd been fifteen and nervous about whether my body was attractive enough, I squirmed under the gaze of another man. I had to be a fucking mess. He seemed to enjoy it, given the smile he shot me and the fact that he made no move to clean it up.

No, he left my ass swimming in his come, rolled me onto my side, and curled up behind me, an arm wrapped around my middle.

“You seem pleased with yourself,” I said when I finally managed to make words go again.

His rumbling laugh was answer enough, and the actual answer made me shiver, my cock once again twitching with the need to get hard. “I am pleased. You look perfect when you've been wrecked on my cock. Some day when you've had

a less difficult day, I'll have you again when you're already dripping with my come. Fill you again and again. Make you so completely mine you'll never want a different cock."

I didn't bother telling him he'd already ruined me for another cock. There was no way anything else could compare to what he'd already given me. I'd already been unimpressed with the cocks I could get on Earth; this was only going to exacerbate the issue if and when I got home.

Fuck, that was going to suck.



## CHAPTER 12

## *Lasya*

RIVER SLEPT as he did everything: completely. He didn't wake when I slid out from behind him, only squirming and mumbling in annoyance until I put a pillow behind him and covered him with the duvet.

With almost any of my past lovers, I'd have used the pitcher of water in the corner to clean him up before covering him, not wanting him to wake a mess. This time, something in me wouldn't allow it. He needed it. Needed me on him, in him, covering every part of him.

Or maybe it was me who needed the scent of myself permeating his skin.

I didn't take the time to examine the need, and for the first time in a long time, followed my instincts without question.

I did, however, pick up his scattered clothing and drape the pieces over a convenient chair, setting the slippers in the seat, bottoms facing up.

Some pathetic part of me wanted to stay there, curl up behind him under the duvet and just . . . watch him breathe. It didn't make any sense. I hardly knew him, couldn't trust him, and didn't even know how long he would be on Halana. He had to want a way home, and the king had certainly implied that we would be looking for a way to send him back if it was safe to do so.

For a while, I stood there beside the bed, unable to decide what to do.

His face looked younger when he slept, losing that smirk and the tense set of his jaw he always had when awake. I was all too familiar with it, with needing the armor of a hard expression to hide from the world.

Still, His Majesty had been correct. Even when River looked younger, it was perhaps a hundred, not the under thirty that he actually was. Was life on his Earth so much harder, I wondered, to make its inhabitants age that way? Or were they like mayflies, short-lived in a perfectly natural cycle that simply moved faster than that of elves?

Mages seemed to live longer than elves, from my experience, so why not? I'd never known a mage—or was it demon? What did that even mean?—who had died of old age. Not that many elves on Halana did either, but that was different. Mages killed each other in vain bids for power while elves suffered and starved, often because of those ridiculous power games.

The oldest mage I knew was Tojan himself, and while I didn't know precisely how old he was, I knew he was older than my father, who'd seen twelve centuries come and go. The only elf who might compare was Mellara, and I'd never built up the courage to ask her how old she was. It wasn't really an appropriate question, no matter how curious one might be. The difference was that Mellara was weathered and wrinkled, while Tojan's only sign of age was the graying at his temples.

And there lay River, snoring lightly, looking for all the world to be a hundred or so, when he might not even live to be that age.

Could I even survive it if he stayed on Halana and only lived to be seventy? He'd be gone in the blink of an eye, and I'd be worse off than I had yesterday.

I shook myself out of the ridiculous thoughts. There was no reason to assume he'd stay. No reason to assume that he would want to continue on with me if he did. Most of all, there was no reason to assume he would die so young, given that Tojan was his father. Perhaps he'd made a "human" child, but

I doubted it. River had to be something else entirely. Tojan wasn't the kind of man who did things in halves.

Besides that, something about River felt different. I could almost feel magic inside him when I ran my fingers over him, like a banked bonfire blazed right underneath his skin. Surely all humans couldn't be like that.

I scrubbed my hands down my face, shaking my head to rid it of such ridiculous thoughts. River was what he was, and I couldn't start making plans around him when I didn't even know whether he was to be trusted, let alone staying.

His comments about Elethen had been—

No. I didn't have time for that.

I redressed in my tunic and trousers, then shifted back into my elven form before slipping out the door into the hall.

Where Tojan stood, leaning against the opposite wall, slouched and smirking, like he'd caught me with my hand in the sweet jar. I supposed that in a way, he had.

“Did you enjoy him?” he asked, tone even more sly and knowing than usual, and I felt it on my skin like oily filth, clinging to me and making me as disgusting as he was. He glanced past me, as though looking for River, so I shut the door—too quickly, and it made a thudding sound that reverberated through my arm. Dammit, I'd been trying to be quiet.

“I don't think my enjoyment is any of your business.”

He tsked at me, again treating me like a child he'd caught being naughty. It was what he'd always done, trying to make me feel small and young and unintelligent. In turn, it made me want to do unwise things, like draw my sword on him. This time, however, he was looking past me, at the door, as though he could see through it. “Such a disappointment.”

“Then you admit he's your son, for you to be disappointed in?”

He scoffed and waved dismissively. “Of course not. He's merely disappointing in the way all strangers are. He could

have been something important. Something useful. He's chosen not to be."

Useful. Just as River had said, a tool more than a son. Just as my own father had treated me my entire life. A means to an end, not a person. Just as they both treated all the elves on Halana. Numbers, tools, objects to be used and discarded at will. Not intelligent creatures who had feelings and wishes and dreams.

"You could go back with him, you know," he said, lifting me out of the red haze of my anger.

"What?"

He rolled his eyes as though I were slow and frustrating, waving at the door again. "Once we figure out how to establish a portal—yes, yes, 'safely'—he'll go back. We both know he will. And we both know you would love to follow him. You hate it here. You hate the palace. You hate your peers. You hate me. You could just"—he held a hand up, then mimed snatching something out of the air—"go. Spend the rest of your days on Earth with little River Keyes. Fucking him into his bed and standing behind him glowering at whoever irritates bratty ingrates there on Earth."

"That would please you so much," I sneered, baring my teeth at him. "It would leave you free to destroy Halana at will."

"Destroy Halana," he scoffed. "I would never. Halana is mine. I want it to flourish. To have access to the empty space once more, so we can travel among the other stars."

I stared at him, blinking repeatedly. Had he run mad in his dotage, and we'd missed it because we didn't know how old he was?

I'd heard the legends of the empty space as much as any child, and millions of stars in it that great planet-ships traveled between, but—those were children's stories. There was no empty space with other planets. There was only the dark. Our sun, and an endless void of nothing.

My disbelief must have showed clearly on my face, because he huffed an irritated sigh. “Of course an artless fool like you wouldn’t understand the opportunity of millions of inhabited planets. Millions of peoples to conquer.”

And that, once again, sounded like Tojan. Crushing Halana under his thumb wasn’t enough. He wanted millions of worlds to do the same to.

Of course, the stories also said that Halana had been banished to eternity alone in the void because of actions precisely like what Tojan was suggesting. And River had come from his Earth, which was certainly another planet. So perhaps it was all true. A million stars with a million worlds, and Tojan wanted to continue a shameful legacy that had already earned Halana eternal punishment.

How like Tojan.

I didn’t bother answering his insult, because it didn’t matter. He couldn’t take his power to Earth and the stars beyond it, and the king, River, and I would see to it that he never did.

“Perhaps it’s past your bedtime, old man,” I told him instead. “If you wish to speak to Lord River, you can do it tomorrow when he wakes.”

It was Tojan’s turn to snarl at me. He pushed himself off the wall and took a step forward, teeth bared and jaw clenched. “Then perhaps what truly matters to you is seeing your brother again, as long as he yet lives.”

All I could hear was the blood rushing in my ears after that. I drew my sword, brandishing it right there in the middle of a palace hallway, ready to leap at Tojan. A slow, sinister smile crawled onto his face, his eyes going black to show his magical nature. He didn’t transform fully. He didn’t have to.

Because of course, I didn’t frighten the priest.

He hadn’t come into his position by accident or through weakness. He was the most powerful mage alive, and for all my swordsmanship, all my ability, and talent, and outright posturing, I didn’t stand a chance in a fight against him.

But there I was, a complete jackass, having drawn the sword myself in a fight I couldn't hope to win.

## CHAPTER 13



I ALMOST JUMPED at the bang of the door, sitting up in the middle of the bed.

Of course Lasya had left. I hadn't expected him to stay, and I was no Juice Newton who needed to be anyone's angel of the morning. I'd ceased to be anything angelic before my voice had broken.

So Lasya leaving wasn't what was bothering me.

What was?

The low tone of voices in the hall. Maybe he was talking to the guard he'd been leaving outside my door? Except there hadn't been anyone there when we'd arrived, so why would someone have appeared now, when Lasya hadn't sent for them?

Plus these voices didn't sound like someone passing off guard duty.

They sounded irritated.

I glanced around and found my clothes neatly laid across a chair, so I slid out of bed, almost losing my balance for a moment when my ass clenched around nothing and was none too happy for it. Even the discomfort of having gone to sleep without washing up was overcome by the deep ache in my body.

Wishing Lasya was inside me still, ridiculous waste of breath that I was sometimes. I shook my head at my own nonsense and headed for the chair.

I'd just tossed my tunic over my head when I heard the sword unsheathed just outside my door.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I ignored the fitted, semi-stretchy pants and rushed to the door. I'd worn stranger things in my life than what was essentially a minidress.

I threw the heavy wooden door open to find Lasya and my father locked in what was clearly intended to be mortal combat.

Lasya held his sword in one hand, clearly trying to shove it forward into my father's heart, but my father was literally holding it off with a hand around the blade. A hand that didn't seem to be cut by the grip he had on the thing.

*How?*

Meanwhile, his hand was around Lasya's throat, squeezing tight, and Lasya's cheeks were going red. It wasn't dire yet, but he clearly wasn't breathing.

"Stop it, both of you," I demanded. Not that I really cared whether Lasya ran the bastard through, but given the feral look in Lasya's eyes and the smug smile on my father's face, I didn't think that would be the outcome of this particular fight.

"Go back to bed, little River," my father cooed without looking away from Lasya's eyes. "This is none of your concern."

The excitement on his face was . . . was he fucking getting off on this? On trying to murder someone? I very deliberately avoided looking at his groin. That was information I didn't need about anyone, let alone my fucking father.

With his left hand, Lasya also motioned for me to leave. To go back into my room and leave him to his fate.

Not. Fucking. Happening.

"*I said stop.*" I pushed every bit of will into my voice. It was the tone that had stopped hardened criminals in their tracks and had people falling all over themselves to apologize to me in the past.

These two didn't so much as budge, and Lasya was beginning to tremble with exertion and lack of air.

"I'm warning you, Dad. Last chance."

Still nothing.

It was strange, not being the biggest fish in the pond anymore. Not having people leap to do my bidding.

On the other hand, I still had the upper hand. Lasya just didn't know it, and apparently, my father had forgotten.

I summoned a ball of fire in my palm, and lobbed it, overhand, to a point between them. Closer to Dad, yeah, but I was looking forward to fucking Lasya again. I didn't want to damage the goods. If Dad fucked up and went up in flames? I'd survive.

Well, if they didn't have me executed or something inconvenient like that.

The fire hit the stone wall on the other side of them, splattering almost like a paintball and sending tendrils of flame in every direction.

Both of them reared back, which was the precise effect I'd been going for.

Lasya took two steps back into the center of the hall, clinging to his sword with tenacity that impressed me, holding it steady even as he breathed deep, clearly affected by my father's previous grip on his throat. There were red marks, quickly going purple, all across his neck.

Son of a bitch.

I summoned another fireball to my hand, this one considerably bigger, and turned to face my father.

He did have thin lines of blood across his palm and fingers from where he'd grabbed Lasya's blade, but dammit, he should have lost fingers to that grip, not gotten the equivalent of a fucking paper cut.

"I warned you to stop." I had to work to keep the smile off my face at finally being able to turn the disappointed parent

look on him.

His eyes glittered in the low torchlight of the hallway, reflecting the flicker of my fireball. “I do not take orders from you. You’re nothing but a construct. Nothing. Worthless. You can’t even follow simple instructions.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. Leaning up against the wall like we were just having an everyday conversation and not a fight that might end with someone dead, I tossed the fireball up and caught it again when it fell. His eyes followed it. He wasn’t fire-retardant, and he fucking knew it. Maybe Lasya couldn’t take him in a fight, but I’d bet that fire could, if I made it hot enough. If I hit him somewhere vulnerable.

He sure as hell wasn’t leaning into having a fight with me like he had Lasya, and I didn’t think it was because he had soft, fatherly feelings for me.

“You’d be so much better off if Blaze were the one who’d come through the portal, Pops. He’d probably still fall for that fake paternal devotion and disappointment. You should know by now that I couldn’t give two shits about your approval. I’ve known you were garbage since I was eight.” I leaned forward, like I had a secret to share, and he took half a step back before bracing himself in place, scowling at me through narrowed eyes for forcing him to show weakness. “Not gonna lie to you. I was grateful when you decided to take yourself out and leave me and B alone. We were better off without you. Hardly took any convincing at all to get him to avoid going to the authorities, because you stopped mattering long before you left.”

He hissed like a goddamn snake, and for the second time in a night, turned and stalked away from me.

I watched him go, and then continued watching the corner he’d turned for a moment, like he might come back and try again. When I was sure he wouldn’t return, I let the fireball sputter out in my hand, and turned back to find Lasya slumped against the wall, watching the same corner, still breathing harder than usual.

Somehow, I knew before he even opened his mouth that the first thing out wasn't going to be a sweet thank you and an offer of more hot sex. He and I were far too alike for that. He'd been weak in front of me, and he hated anyone seeing him that way. I couldn't blame him, but I also wasn't going to take shit from anyone.

There I was, my ass still sore and dripping from our first fuck, and we were about to have our first real argument.

## CHAPTER 14

## *Lasya*

A BANKED BONFIRE, I'd thought him, and I had been right.

He'd created and thrown a ball of fire at the wall, leaving a black smudge of soot on the stone. If not for the proof, I'd have thought it a hallucination brought on by my inability to breathe at the time.

More than that, he'd seemed perfectly prepared to throw another ball of fire in Tojan's face. He hadn't done it, so I couldn't know for sure, but nothing about them had ever seemed the least bit friendly.

Still . . .

"I was fine," I told him, stiffly, shoving my sword back into its sheath.

"Yeah, the bruise on your throat told me how fine you were already, thanks." He didn't move from his slouch in the doorway to his room, but he did turn toward me. His expression wasn't precisely angry, but perhaps—unimpressed?

And with good reason.

I'd been as close to death as I ever had in my life in that moment, and he'd saved me.

But damn it all, I didn't like owing anyone, and I wasn't yet sure I could trust him, so it twisted unpleasantly in my gut instead of being a relief.

Would I ever be sure I could trust him? Probably not, no. Everything could be a ruse, a long term lie to try to worm his

way into my inner circle before betraying me at the worst possible time. Everyone could be a traitor in a court run by Tojan.

But also, if he were on Tojan's side, wouldn't he have just let the monster kill me?

I glared at him, pushing down on the urge to rub at my throat. It was swollen, and I suspected that if I didn't heal it, I'd be struggling to speak in an hour. Not a real option, that, so I concentrated on healing the damage for a moment, then bared my throat to him.

It was difficult to do, show someone my throat, even knowing that he wouldn't lash out in an attack. If he meant to kill me this night, he'd have let Tojan do it.

Oddly, he didn't simply scoff and dismiss me. No, he inspected the skin I'd bared. In fact, he pulled himself out of his lazy slouch, took the two steps that separated us, and leaned in to look. It might have been the most awkward moment of my life, including the first time I'd had sex, but after a moment, he nodded and stepped back.

"Looks pretty good, considering he almost killed you a minute ago."

I narrowed my eyes and pursed my lips, but before I could rebut his entirely true statement, he threw up a hand, glaring at me.

"Don't try to bullshit a bullshitter, Lasya. He was winning. I have functional eyes, and anyone with that could have seen that he had the upper hand. He walked away with a goddamn paper cut from that big sharp sword of yours, and you're still gasping for breath."

"Do not presume to know my ability to defend myself," I said through gritted teeth, holding myself stiffly.

He scoffed and shook his head. "Don't be so fucking stubborn. It's not a crime to have weaknesses."

I stepped into his space, towering over him, teeth bared in a silent snarl. Part of me wanted to shift into my true form and lash out. It wasn't a crime to have weaknesses, it was fucking



*death*. As Tojan had just proven when I'd practically shown him my soft underbelly, and he'd been all too willing to strangle me right there in the hallway.

Before I could open my mouth and either make things worse or . . . well, make them even worse than that, Eral rounded the corner with two guards. His expression was as serious as I'd ever seen it, and the hive of angry wasps already buzzing away in my stomach intensified.

River glanced at the approaching guards and saw something else entirely. He gave a gusty sigh. "Of course. I suppose I'm under arrest for attacking daddy dearest?"

Eral turned to stare at him, cocking his head in surprise. "Attacking . . . His Excellency?" He glanced over at me, a little nervous. "I don't need to arrest him, do I?"

"No." I waved him off. "Tojan will never admit that a slip of a thing he keeps claiming isn't his son chased him off."

Eral and both guards turned shocked eyes on River, who was still looking a bit smug about that. I couldn't blame him. If I could create and throw around balls of fire, I'd have killed Tojan long ago. Perhaps I'd have died for it, but the biggest threat to Halana would have been dead.

I closed my eyes, balling my fists and releasing them, reminding myself that was not the way to handle things. Killing Tojan wasn't the battle. It was all mages, consuming the majority of Halana's food.

Stopping Tojan would simply leave an empty place for another monster to step into. We had to stop the monsters altogether before we could make the change last.

When I opened my eyes again, they were all still staring at River, who was once more slouching in the doorway, looking like a . . . like a loris. A cute little furry creature who seemed sweet, but when provoked, bit viciously with poisoned teeth.

It was Eral who finally shook himself out of the stupor and turned back to me. "I brought guards for Lord River's door, my lord, and I need to speak to you on a matter of importance."

“A secret matter of importance?” River asked, his slow, lazy drawl exacerbating the feeling of a predator emanating from him.

Darkness, but it made me want to drag him back into his bedroom and fuck him again. He could probably kill all of the damned guards and me as well with the fire burning inside him. I supposed there had to be a limit to it, but either way, knowing he had that power inside him was . . . heady.

Eral’s lips twisted in something that resembled apology. “State matters, I’m afraid, Lord River. No offense is intended.”

State matters? In the middle of the night?

“Is the king well?” I demanded, since that was the only thing that was truly important.

Eral, knowing me as he did, put his hands up in a pacifying gesture and answered almost before I’d finished asking the question. “The king is fine, Your Excellency. It’s something else.” He glanced at River, then oddly, at the guards, then at me.

Oh hells. It wasn’t a state matter at all. It was about the rebels.

I nodded and turned to River. “We can continue this conversation at another time, Lord River. I’ll leave you to your sleep.”

River, on the other hand, snorted and waved me off. “How about let’s skip the conversation and go back to the rest of the evening next time I see you? We’re never going to agree on this, so why bother with the fight?”

I hated everything about that, even though I couldn’t explain why.

But he was definitely right about one thing. There was no reason to continue arguing at that moment, and there were many reasons not to. I gave him a sharp nod, then to the guards Eral had brought, and turned to march down the hallway toward my quarters.

Eral and I walked in silence until we reached the shelter of my rooms, door closed and locked between us and any other people in the palace.

“Well?”

“Another rebellion hold has been raided. I don’t have details, but word is working its way through the servants.” He took a deep breath and clenched his jaw for a moment, but finally steeled himself and went on. “There’s been no word from your contacts.”

No word.

Normally, no word from my contacts was a good thing. It meant everything was progressing as planned. But when the rebellion was attacked, I always got word from them. Just a simple note, delivered to Eral by a servant, indicating tiny details about what had happened. Who had died, who had been taken.

No word?

No word could only mean one thing, and it had me shoving down any hint of an emotion, pressing it to the back of my mind, to deal with later. I had no time for weakness.

Mellara was the one who had been taken, since she was the one who sent me the notes. Or worse, some or all of the inner circle who knew about my involvement had been taken.

It might mean they were dead, and the rebellion had lost its entire heart in one fell swoop. It could mean the end of the rebellion, or years of rebuilding.

Or it could mean they’d been taken prisoner, and at that very moment they were being tortured for information. Torture that would inevitably end in their deaths.

And information that would lead straight to me.

I shook off the tiny notion of my impending death and turned my mind to solutions. “Any movement in the cells?”

He shook his head. “No one’s arrived in the palace dungeon since this morning. Not that there’s much room there. He keeps the place packed like a barrel of apples.”

Tojan did keep the palace dungeon quite busy, arresting people for crimes that ranged in the list from actual offenses to the ridiculous “he spoke ill of a priest.”

But if he had Mellara or the rest of them and they weren't in the palace dungeon, where could he be keeping them?

I obviously couldn't ask Tojan, and most of my truly loyal men were in the middle of guard rotations on the palace, the king, and River. That meant there was only one thing to do: sleep be damned, I had to get out there and find out what was happening myself.

## CHAPTER 15

IN THE MORNING, no one summoned me.

I wasn't sure whether that was a good sign, or—no, that's not true. I knew something bad was going on. Lasya being dragged off in the middle of the night for some big secret “state matter” or whatever, and then the king, my father, and Lasya all ignoring me the morning after?

There had to be something big going down.

The only one of them I suspected might not be looped in was the king himself, but one didn't go around demanding audiences with the king to confirm gut feelings. So I ate the breakfast they brought me, put on the clothes they'd given me, and started wandering around the palace, just shuffling my cards and looking around.

It was a little inconvenient, since I had two big beefy guards following me around, but I wasn't new to the concept of bodyguards. I'd had at least one following me around most of the time since I'd been about seventeen, when Lizbeth's father had realized just how useful my visions could be. And since his enemies had realized I existed and was useful to him.

So with my experience, at least I knew how to make bodyguards more useful—push them into being reluctant tour guides. “So this wing of the palace doesn't have anything at all in it?” I asked for the second time.

Glancing in a mirror at the end of the hall, I watched the two of them make eye contact with each other behind me. One shook his head at the other, who frowned. The one who didn't

want me to know what was up was the one to speak. “Nothing at all, Lord River.”

“Then why does it exist?”

That stumped him, and he clammed up.

“The kitchen is at the end of the next hall,” the other guy hedged. “But it isn’t useful for a lord, not really.”

Nah, the kitchen definitely wasn’t the tea I was looking for. “That makes sense,” I agreed, as amiable as possible. “And the rest is guest suites?”

“No, the guest suites are in the north wing,” the other guy said, his tone getting shorter and more irritated with every question.

The guy who wanted to tell me sighed. “There are servant quarters on the ground floor of this hall. But it’s the dungeon, Lord River. Downstairs is the dungeon. But you’re definitely not allowed down there.”

“Ahh.” I let them lapse into silence for a moment, because frankly, I didn’t know why I wasn’t supposed to know about the dungeon. I also didn’t want to go down there.

Who would?

I didn’t have enough knowledge or power to know who was being held for valid reasons and who wasn’t, and frankly, I didn’t have a light enough hand to try to do anything to make subtle shifts. All I could probably do with the dungeon was make a mess and get in trouble.

But not bothering them any more about the dungeon meant I’d given in to them, and they should now be more charitably inclined to give me something I did want. Unless the pissy one was just too annoyed that I’d persisted, which was possible. I doubted he loved playing babysitter to the guy who was essentially the king’s new pet jester.

So I took a chance and asked for something I cared about.

“What about a library?” I asked, turning my head slightly toward the guy who’d been giving me answers. “Palaces are

supposed to have libraries. Everybody's gotta love books, right?"

He was quiet for a second, and I worried that somehow, books were taboo and weird on Halana.

It was Mr. Pissy who spoke up, sounding confused. "We can take you to the library, if you like. The king might be there, though, and you shouldn't disturb his studies."

"Can we go to a part of the library where he won't be studying?"

"We . . . can, yes."

Great, the dude was confused by the fact that I didn't actually want to bother the king. Did he really think I was just trying my best to make a spectacle of myself?

It was, admittedly, what I did best. That didn't mean it was the only thing I was capable of doing.

"Let's do that, then."

Without any more hesitance or arguments, they started pointing me in a new direction, hopefully toward a giant room of books.

Where there were books, in theory, there was knowledge. And as much as I rarely had time for reading in my daily life, I'd always enjoyed it, and at this moment, knowledge was exactly what I needed most. History of Halana? I was there for it. Books about mages and magic? Yes, please. I'd even take a book on the shitty politics I kept running headlong into, if they had one.

There was nothing in any world like a repository of knowledge to get you where you needed to go.

Sure enough, the library was—well hell, it was the most impressive library I'd ever seen, and I had a fair amount of experience with them. It seemed like it filled a whole wing of the palace, and had floor to ceiling bookshelves, including those rolling ladders like in movies.

To start, I wandered up to the first shelf we passed and pulled out a book at random. *The Fall of the Orlov Empire*.



I grinned at that, and the friendlier of the guards looked at me like I'd just started laughing in the middle of the library. His voice was too loud, and reverberated off the stacks upon stacks of books, coming back at us from every direction. "The fall of the Orlovians was an enormous tragedy. Thousands died. Why are you pleased?"

A sharp, rebuking "shh!" cut across the room, and my grin turned wild. Ahh, libraries. They could be counted on to be universal, couldn't they?

"Because," I whispered, tapping the title. "I can read it. Y'all are practically Russian, so I was worried the books would be in Cyrillic or something."

He looked confused at the word Russian, which wasn't a surprise, but he seemed to get the gist of what I was saying and nodded.

That was when a goddess rounded the nearest bookshelf, bearing down on us like an avenging angel who wanted to know what monster had dared breach the sacred silence of the library. She was well over six feet tall, like everyone around these parts seemed to be. Her hair was wild and gold, in an up-do that was either failing her or intentionally messy, and it looked like a halo with the light behind her. Her eyes were deep brown, and her plush lips were pursed in irritation.

Both guards cringed in her presence.

If I wasn't already hoping for a repeat performance with Lasya and his fucking perfect cock, I'd have taken a shot with this library goddess for certain. Librarians were the best, and this one was exceptional.

I slid the book back onto the shelf, making sure to position it flush with the others, and offered her my best "I'm a good boy, or at least I can pretend for you," smile, and inclined my head the way Halanans were prone to doing to people they respected. Or pretended to respect, for some of them.

"You're the librarian?" I asked in my very best respectful library patron whisper.

Her sharp gaze took in everything, pausing on the guards, then me, taking in every detail of my bearing and clothes. “You must be Lord River.”

I inclined my head again.

“I am Zina. Yes, I am the librarian. Were you looking for something in particular? The king is in the middle of his studies, so it would be best not to interrupt. His tutors are easily annoyed.”

I held up my hands. “Please, I wouldn’t want to bother the king. I’m here to learn.”

She quirked a slightly suspicious brow. “Learn what?”

Oh, what I could have done with an intro like that back home. But even as a thousand possible pick-up lines entered my mind, I dismissed them all. What I needed was Lasya’s glittering black eyes glaring down at me. No offense to Zina, but she couldn’t compare.

“More about Halana,” I suggested, tapping my left thumb with my right index finger. I tapped another finger for each item I added to the list. “History, politics, magic, heck, even mythology if you think it’s worth learning.”

Her eyes had narrowed, but she was nodding. “You’ve been dropped in a strange land, and you want to know more about how to handle it.”

“Precisely. A book on what’s considered good manners wouldn’t even go astray.” I glanced around the library, then shook my head and looked back at her. “But since I doubt you employ the Dewey Decimal System like libraries back home, I wouldn’t know where to start looking for what I need.”

She gave a sharp nod, turned, and motioned for me to follow her, so I did. She took me to a private study room that had a table with four chairs and told me to have a seat. A moment later, she started stacking books on the table.

The guards stood in the corner and stared, wide-eyed for some reason. Maybe they didn’t know the language of the library.

When the stack of books was too high for me to see over, she came back and sat across from me, pulling them down one by one. “This is the history of the current empire. It is”—a look of distaste crossed her face, and I interpreted it to mean the book was heavily biased—“incomplete.” She moved on to another volume, tapping the gilt title. “This is the story of King Artyom’s grandfather. It is complete”—the word she used sounded harsh and angry, but I didn’t recognize it even from the many times I’d heard Sasha rant in Russian. Both of the guards cringed, though, so I assumed it was some less than kind descriptor.

On the other hand, I’d already learned something: His Majesty’s name, Artyom.

The next one was the first she slid in front of me, instead of just stacking it back up on the other side of the table. “This is the story of the king’s parents. It is . . . considered to be fiction by most. Romanticized nonsense.”

I slid it even closer to myself. “I’ve always been a fan of romanticized nonsense.”

The quirk of her lips told me that we were understanding each other. She went through the other books, explaining what they were, who they were about, and what I might hope to learn from them.

After the eighth, I looked up at the guards. “Do you guys want to wait outside? Maybe play cards or something? No one is going to attack me in the library.”

They glanced at each other. They definitely wanted to take me up on it, but well, pissing Lasya off had to be a hell of an inspiration to do your job as well as possible.

I leaned forward, meeting their eyes in turn. “The guards you relieved this morning, they told you some stuff, right? Maybe about a certain black mark on the wall across from my room?”

Again, they shared a look, and both hesitantly nodded. This time the librarian seemed interested as well.

“They weren’t exaggerating. Even if someone attacks me, I promise I’ll live long enough for you to come do your jobs.” I motioned to the door. “Besides, you’ll just be outside. And it’ll give you a chance to complain to each other about what a pain in the ass I am.”

One of them opened his mouth, no doubt to deny it, but I gave him my best “bitch, please” expression, and he stopped. Then they ducked their heads and trooped out.

“They are the general’s loyal men,” Zina told me. “You could have spoken in front of them without fear of reprisal, unless you want to speak against him.” She leaned her head forward, catching my eye and holding it. “And as much as I wish to like you, you will not find an ally here if you wish to speak ill of Lasya Zarani.”

I couldn’t hold back laughter at that. “Here I was worried I’d have to jump through hoops to figure out whose side you were on. I didn’t send them away because I want to say shit about Lasya. I sent them away because it’s easier for them to deny knowing anything if you change your mind and decide you’re going to report on this conversation to my father. To Tojan.”

She sucked in a breath and leaned even closer. “Then it’s true, the rumor?”

I shrugged and ran a finger over the book cover in front of me. “He denies it.”

She bared her teeth, and I could have sworn I caught a hint of that sharpness that one wouldn’t see in the mouth of the average elf. I really was fucked up, I decided. I could pick a mage out of a room of elves, and they were always the hot ones.

Except that Lasya and Elethen both had seemed to think most, if not all, mages were actual bad guys.

“First of all, my father is a lying bastard, and I wouldn’t trust him if he told me my own name was River, which it is, and he did. Secondly, why is another mage like you on Lasya’s side? They mostly seem to agree with my father.”

Her eyes widened incrementally, and she looked me over again. “You’re certain you need this information you asked for? You already seem to know more than most.”

“I want to know *everything*.”

She reached out and tapped the book. “It’s sweet, really, if short and tragic. A spoiled brat trying to escape the rain goes into a bakery and finds the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen. They fall in love, marry. She dies giving birth to their second child, who also dies. The king dies of a broken heart.”

I opened the book, leafing through the pages and realizing that it was hand-written. No printing press? Jesus, these people needed technology like whoa. Or maybe certain books weren’t allowed to be printed on a press, like, oh, ones that glorified the love of a king for his peasant wife. “Sounds like bullshit to me. Not that people can’t die of a broken heart, but around here, everyone seems more likely to die of a stabbed heart.”

“A stabbed heart does seem likely, doesn’t it?” She leaned in even more, lowering her voice so far I had to strain to hear it. “I have another story for you, then. One intended to scare children into obedience, perhaps. One about a man who tries to change the world to be a better place for the woman he loves and the son who is his whole world. And about a priest and a general who creep into his bedroom and murder him, because they don’t want the world to change.”

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

Scare the king into obedience, she meant. My father and . . . wait, and Lasya?

“After that,” she went on, “the general disappears. Rumor has it he’s still alive somewhere, but grievously wounded. His handsome young son takes over his job. But unlike the rotten old general, the new general wants to continue the dead king’s work and protect the new king. But they still have to contend with the priest, who is without question the most powerful man in the kingdom. It’s a rather dissatisfying ending, but perhaps the author has a few chapters left to write.”

I sat back in my chair, breathing deep.

That explained . . . well fuck, it explained everything.

I had a niggling question about why she was telling me, but who was I going to tell about it? If I was secretly working for my asshole father, he already knew it, and I still didn't have enough credibility to get someone killed or fired if I told what she'd said. And if my father already knew she wasn't his ally, which seemed likely, he had to know what she believed.

Plus even my asshole father had to know better than to fuck with a librarian. They *knew* things.

"Yeah, that sounds like an unfinished story to me. Could still have a satisfying ending."

Her tiny smile was amused and pleased at once. "We're in a dark moment of it, I'll give it that. The priest seems to be the one with all the power. But that doesn't mean it can't have a happy ending. I always favor happy endings, rare as they are."

"Me too," I agreed. "Back home there's this ridiculous notion that the best books have to be sad, but that's just pretentious crap. Happy endings are the best."

Her secretive little smile reminded me of Lizbeth, and while it gave me a moment of homesickness, on the whole it was a lovely, enlightening day. Zina was definitely my new favorite Halanan. After Lasya and Artyom, of course.

"So," I asked as we settled back in after eating lunch together. "What do you know about magic portals between worlds?"

Her tinkling crystalline laughter filled the room. "You don't hold back, do you?"

"Never if I can help it."

## CHAPTER 16

THE PRIESTS HAD strongholds and safe houses all over Madranai, of course. Most of them were intended as safe places for mages who worked for Tojan, though, not as secret torture dungeons.

We quite literally had the dungeon at the palace for that, and thanks to Artyom's grandfather, the place was well appointed for people who wanted to hurt strangers.

Which wasn't to say that there was nowhere other than the palace to do such things. Rich mages with power did all manner of horrific things in their homes. It was one of the reasons that just removing Tojan from power wasn't enough.

But those mages didn't all give the priesthood access to their facilities, and Tojan wouldn't use a place that didn't belong to him anyway. As many of those as there were, I was running out of options.

The people of Madranai had given me a wide berth as I swept through the streets in my heavy black hooded cloak, sword on my hip and scowling as darkly as possible. They had to assume I was looking for a likely victim to answer for a crime I'd imagined up, as so many of my type did.

Still, when I rounded a corner into a narrow street, a small girl took a step toward me. It was a hesitant, lurching thing, as though she both did and didn't want to approach me, but she was trying. I paused and reached into a pouch on my belt, pulling out a handful of copper coins. I could have given her gold, but that was likely to get her arrested for stealing in



Madranai. More likely a homeless waif would have a copper or two. Or a few dozen that she could spend in different places without notice.

I held up a coin to show her, which to be fair, didn't make me less menacing. A rich man offering money was unlikely to be giving from the good of his heart, and more likely to want something horrific in return.

This girl had already wanted to approach, though, and the lure of copper was enough to get her to slink forward.

"They say you're looking for something, Sire," she whispered as she approached, glancing around to make sure no one else was listening. "I thought . . . I thought perhaps you were looking for Grandmother."

Mellara. It was what the young of Madranai called her. I hid the way my breath caught at the reference but held out my hand to dump the coins into hers when she stretched them out, cupped to receive the paltry offering. She stared at the handful of copper coins as though it was the most incredible thing she'd ever seen.

Possibly, it was.

It was enough to feed her for months, likely.

I knelt down in the street in front of her and she startled back, staring at me in shock.

"I *am* looking for Grandmother. Is she safe?" I wouldn't ask where she was. That was an excellent way to chase the girl off on the assumption I wanted the woman dead. But asking after her safety seemed—

The girl shook her head wildly. "They"—she stopped and looked around again, her eyes round with fear, and lowered her voice even more, so I had to strain to hear it—"the priests have them boarded into a warehouse in the brothel district."

No. Oh no.

Not just a warehouse.

*The* warehouse.

I'd been wandering the city looking for Tojan's people, but they had locked the rebels up in their own place. But why?

The girl seemed to sense that I was on her side, because her confidence grew, and she leaned in. "I—I heard one of them say, Sire, they're going to burn it down at sunset, so all Madranai will see their shame."

I sucked in a breath, then reached out and curled the girl's fingers closed over the copper coins. "You should go far from here. Take the coins and go hide. Be safe."

She nodded, her eyes watering, biting her lip. "Will Grandmother live?"

I wanted to lie to her, tell her Mellara would live forever, but that wouldn't help anyone. Preserving the illusion of safety for a child who lived on the street was no act of kindness. "I don't know. But I'll try to help her if I can."

She swallowed hard and nodded, squeezing her eyes shut to force away her tears, and then darted off into a nearby alley.

Mellara was the only reason a lot of children like her survived at all. There was an army of them, children and young people in Madranai who would follow the old woman into the dark if she so much as asked it. But Mellara never would, because she wasn't the villain in this story. She would never ask anyone to die for her but would offer her own life every time.

Damn Tojan, I would not let him take that away from Halana.

From me.

From Artyom.

I rushed down the side streets toward the brothel district, trying to keep out of sight of the thoroughfares frequented by the rich—by the mages—and hoped I wasn't too late. I'd spent the better part of a day searching the streets for any sign of them, and now here I was having missed a whole day of Tojan's scheming, right back where I should have gone to begin with, but hadn't, because I hadn't wanted to lead anyone to them.

Tojan might have killed both River and Artyom while I'd been wandering the streets trying to find the rebel prisoners.

No. I had to have faith in my loyal men and their ability to do their jobs. They would have died before letting anything happen to either the king or River, and if anything had happened, they would have found me and told me what was going on.

I made a second's detour to take myself to a specific street corner where I'd left a runner, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him along with me as I hurried on.

"Ten men," I told him as we ran. "A medic if you can get one. The sewer entrance in the back of the closed brewery in the brothel district. As fast as you can get them there."

He didn't say a word, just nodded and rushed off toward the palace.

I pressed on my magic, willing my legs to move like the wind and not tire, and I had no doubt he was doing the same. The sewers of Madranai were disgusting, but if the priests had barricaded the rebels into a building in the brothel district, they were a way in without being seen. They were practically a tunnel system that ran underneath the city.

Just, well, a tunnel system half filled with sewage and rats.

Without hesitation, I forced the locked door of the abandoned brewery and rushed inside, barely taking a moment to prop it closed so that any guard patrols might not notice it. The grate over the sewer was both locked and heavy, but this day, my magic was going to help me. It was going to help the people of Halana in a way that magic rarely did. I wrapped my fingers around the heavy iron lock, toughened my skin and strengthened my body, and pulled as hard as I could. The metal gave way with a creaky scream, buckling out and then giving entirely, and I tossed it aside.

The stench that wafted up almost made me gag, but it wasn't much worse than the time I spent visiting my father every month, so I pushed it away from my mind and leapt into

the darkness. It wasn't safe to have a torch, so I had to trust in my sense of direction.

It only took two broken grates to find the right one—one that led into the warehouse.

I had no doubt I was in the right place because the moment I forced it open, the first thing I smelled that wasn't sewage, was smoke.

Darkness take me, I couldn't be too late. I *couldn't*.

I pulled myself out of the muck with a disgusting slurping sound from my feet, and shoved up into the warehouse, stalking through the rows of crates.

Crates . . . of dried orange slices, some of which were starting to catch fire on the edges of the warehouse, lending a strange citrus tang to the smoke. The priests were burning the food.

“Mellara,” I hissed, as loud as I could risk, even with the din of the fire everywhere around. I couldn't let the priests discover me or everything truly was lost.

A sharp clattering sound from farther into the warehouse grabbed my attention, and one of the circle came around the corner, cloak held over his mouth and nose, and eyes wide. He dropped the cloak and mouthed my name, so I waved him over.

“Where is everyone? I have a way out, but we have to go now.”

He nodded, gasped for breath, and nodded some more, tears streaming down his face from the burning smoke, and led me to a corner where others were trying to hide from the flames.

There were six of them there, alive.

What there was not, was Mellara.

I clenched my jaw and tried to ignore the hole forming in my heart at the understanding that she was probably already dead. Of course she was. She wouldn't hide in a warehouse and wait to die. She would die fighting to protect her people.

For now, I couldn't think about that. I had to save who I could. To save the future of Halana.

So I picked up the smallest of them, the woman who'd been in the circle almost as long as me, crying and near unconscious, and looked around. Nearly everyone else seemed able to walk on their own, except an old man who was being helped by the fellow I'd first seen.

So I waved for them to follow me and headed back to the sewer entrance.

"The oranges," the woman in my arms choked out. "Mellara would want us to—"

"The oranges can't be saved," I whispered back. "Our way out is through the sewer, and they'd hardly be edible after being dragged through that."

She seemed to deflate in my arms and nodded, burying her face in my dark wool cloak and shaking with sobs.

"When we get down there, everyone keep a hand on the person in front of you. It's dark, and you won't be able to see anything." I looked at each of them, and there were nods around, but almost all eyes were on the ground. Defeated.

How could I blame them?

When we got through the tunnel to the brewery, one of my men was waiting above the grate. "Keep quiet," he whispered, leaning most of his body into the hole to relieve me of my burden. "They've got patrols circling the area to make sure no one escapes."

I helped to hoist them up, one by one, into the waiting arms of my men. When the last came to me, that first man, I held him for a moment, gripping his arm with perhaps too much tenacity. "You're sure there was—there was no one else alive?"

He clenched his jaw and looked away, shaking his head. "They—they stabbed her. She was gone before they even started the fire. They took two others on the street, took them away."

Without another word, I hoisted him out of the hole.

And then I hesitated.

I could go back for her body. It was the least I could give her, wasn't it? That last tiny bit of respect.

She'd have given me a tongue-lashing for even considering it, but . . .

"Your Excellency?" one of my men asked, his tone uncertain. Worried about me. He held his hand out to me, waiting for me to take it and come up.

The first woman, the one I'd carried through the sewer, rolled over from her spot next to the open grate and leaned her head toward me. "Don't you dare. We need you."

"I owe her everything."

"We all do." A tear fell from her eye into the muck at my feet, and it wasn't from the sting of the fire. "We would all die to go after her, but the only way you can help her now is by going on, Lasya. By feeding Halana. By ending the monsters who killed her."

I slumped where I stood, but nodded, and when my men offered me a hand up again, I took it.

We waited in the brewery for hours, hoping against hope that the priest's men didn't search the place, but ready to go back into the sewer to find a new escape. They never came, too confident in their victory to put forth more effort.

So in the middle of the night, I sent my men away, one by one, escorting members of the rebellion to safe houses of our own throughout the city. Scattered like petals on the wind to try to cut our losses if anyone was discovered.

The woman left last, having regained enough strength to walk, thanks to help from my medic. Before she did, she reached out and grabbed both of my hands, squeezing them so tight it reminded me of River's grip. "You saved the rebellion tonight. Not for the first time and likely not for the last. I know you don't feel like a savior, and you don't feel saved, but it doesn't change anything. Mellara would be proud."

I dipped my head to her, but I couldn't speak. Didn't dare, for fear of what weakness might pour from my lips.

When I was alone in the brewery, I started out for my own very lonely walk back. I incinerated my destroyed clothes in the kitchen fire at the palace, bathing and then trading them for a spare set of clothing I kept in an empty room in the servants' quarters. The last thing I needed was to be caught wandering through the palace stinking of shit.

And wander I did, through one hall and then another.

Part of me longed to march into Tojan's quarters. To kill him with my bare hands.

But I'd already tried that the night before, and it hadn't gone in my favor. Wouldn't ever go in my favor. He was stronger than me in every way that mattered.

I wandered by River's room twice. Three times.

I was annoyed that there were no guards on the door, but likely they'd pulled them away to help with the disaster at the warehouse.

With my hand on the doorknob of River's room, though, I couldn't go in. It was the middle of the night, and he was doubtless asleep. It was likely to end with him throwing a ball of fire at me, at best.

So I trudged back to my own suite, throwing off my clothes as I wandered through the sitting room, not particularly caring where they landed. I'd clean them up in the morning.

When I reached the doorway to my bedroom, though, glittering silver eyes met mine, and they weren't Tojan's. They weren't a damn thing like Tojan's, in fact. They were soft and sleepy and kind in a way Tojan was incapable of even pretending to be.

River was lying across my bed, half dressed and on top of my duvet. I had no idea how he'd found my rooms, let alone been allowed inside by my loyal men, but somehow, I found that I didn't mind. It made the lack of guards make more sense.

I couldn't bring myself to be suspicious after the night I'd had. The disaster I hadn't quite managed to avert. So I finished stripping, then went to the bed and stripped him as well. He watched me all the while, not saying a word, and not protesting at all as I stripped us naked.

And then I dragged us both under the blankets, curling around him and closing my eyes.

He didn't ask.

"Her name was Mellara," I whispered, and thanked my good sense for putting myself at his back, because I didn't need anyone, not even him, seeing the way I had to blink away a tear. I hadn't cried since I was ten, when my father backhanded me so hard my ears had rung for a week, with the admonishment that I had no right to cry. I'd had very few rights, growing up my father's son.

River didn't say a word, just lay his head on my upper arm and pulled my other arm tighter around him.

So I went on. "All the hungry of Madranai called her Grandmother, because she was precisely that to all of them. She lost three out of five sons to Tojan and the king's grandfather, so I don't think she ever managed to have any real grandchildren. She's spent the last five hundred years, or dark, maybe longer, trying to change the world. Trying to feed the hungry on Halana. She's the one your Elethen worked for. She said he had a trustworthy face, and people would follow him. And they did."

The story poured out of me. How I'd met Mellara when I'd run away from home, determined to try to escape the life I'd been destined for. Trying to escape my father the general, and worse, to escape becoming the next general myself. How she'd offered to help me, and I'd hidden in her home for days, watching her give everything to the people who came to her. Watching no one ever help her in return.

Realizing that someone had to do it, and that most of all, I was one of the only people on Halana in the perfect position to do so. To go right back to court and insert myself in the middle



of things. Become the next general and try to change things from the inside.

River didn't ask about what I did for the rebellion. He didn't ask for details about their work or their movements or the names of their members. No, when I finished the story, the first thing out of his mouth was, "why did you run away?"

"My father did something I couldn't reconcile myself with."

"Not to you, though. He beat the fuck out of you when you were a kid. Treated you like shit. You didn't run away because of that." I had no idea how he knew, but he said it so simply. Like it was common knowledge, and he didn't need my confirmation. Maybe I was silent too long, because he explained after a moment. "I've known enough abuse victims, Lasya. It's not hard to recognize. Especially not when I see it every day in the mirror."

I clenched my jaw, once more pushing down on the urge to hunt Tojan down and stab him. "He raped a woman. I shouldn't have been surprised by it even then, but I was. I couldn't . . . I'd spent a hundred years trying to convince myself that someday I could be like them. I could *want* to be like them. That was when I realized it would never happen. I could never want that."

"And Mellara showed you a different way. That you didn't have to be like them. You didn't have to want that or work toward it."

"She gave me a true purpose. Something to want that didn't make me hate myself and everyone else."

"And tonight?"

I trembled around him as I squeezed him tight and whispered. "And tonight, we lost her."

## CHAPTER 17

## LASYA WAS A REBEL.

He was a fucking rebel.

No, he was *the* rebel.

One of the most important men on Halana, working against the whole status quo, trying to make Halana livable for all its people. No wonder he'd been so suspicious of me from the start.

And for some reason that defied all logic, he'd chosen to trust me with that tonight. Exhaustion, I thought, and grief.

He'd lost one of the closest things he had to real family that night, and he just hadn't been able to hold it all in anymore.

I'd been worried as I'd convinced his men to let me into his room, that he'd be angry to find me there. Something about my afternoon with the librarian had convinced them, though, and it was all starting to make sense. The librarian was a royalist—completely loyal to the king.

The fact that she'd accepted me, taken me under her wing, and late in the afternoon even shown me through the section of magical books they had, had convinced Lasya's men that I wasn't working for my father. I could have told them a million times, until I was out of breath for speaking, but actions were always louder than words.

I still wasn't completely sure what had made Zina trust me as she had, but it had been the catalyst that moved everything.

And I would prove her trust right, whatever it took.

I sure as fuck wouldn't ever give my father an inch, not after what I'd learned during the day. Hell, given last night to do again, I'd probably have thrown that second fireball right at his head, the complete asshole. I'd be tempted again when I next saw his smarmy face, and I'd never been great at impulse control.

There had to be a reason Lasya hadn't just gathered a dozen men and killed him, though. Probably even a sensible one.

I was awake long after Lasya, who was exhausted and drained from both staying awake the whole night before with no sleep, and from losing Mellara. It was strange for me, mourning for a person I'd never met—a stranger with whom I had no connection at all.

Still, I felt more about her than I did my own father.

She'd spent multiple human lifetimes trying to save a whole planet full of people. I'd had to be convinced to save one planet; I sure as hell wasn't as self-sacrificing as her. But she'd decided what was worth her life, and she'd spent hundreds of years working toward it, and anyone who didn't respect that was a heartless ass.

Like, you know, my father.

Still, it wasn't too hard to find sleep myself, tucked into Lasya's solid arms. I hadn't felt so safe in years as I did there and then. Even in a world that seemed determined to kill everyone with the tiniest conscience. And I certainly qualified as having the tiniest conscience. Too bad so many people on Halana didn't.

I woke to the smell of meat, which was a nice change.

Not that I was complaining, but I was definitely an omnivore, and most of what I'd been served on Halana had been vegetarian. Blaze probably would have loved it.

Also, it made sense. I was pretty sure it took way more work and space to raise animals for slaughter than to just grow vegetables.

A bunch of wholly useless flashes of vegetables and grains growing popped into my head. Ahh, visions of the future. So fucking useless most of the time.

But then one hit me that had me sitting bolt upright in bed. Lasya, pale and shaking, clutching at his stomach and looking like death. Mushrooms. Death. Mushrooms.

A young man had just set a tray in front of Lasya, who was sitting up in bed, looking tired but pleased at the food. A big hunk of some red meat with a side of cooked mushrooms. He inclined his head to the man, then motioned to me. “I apologize for the unexpected addition, but Lord River will need breakfast as well.”

The man’s answering smile was strained, and that was what did it.

I shoved the tray away from Lasya, who turned to stare at me in shock.

I glared at the man. “Are you trying to poison the general yourself, or did someone put you up to it?”

The man glared back at me for a fraction of a second, then grabbed a knife off the breakfast tray and lunged—not at me, but at Lasya.

Lasya got himself together faster than I did, smashing the man’s knife hand away with such force that the crack of bone breaking was audible throughout the room, then planting his other hand in the asshole’s chest and shoving him away.

His strength was incredible—the guy went flying five feet, his back hitting the bedroom wall with bruising force. Instead of trying to leap at Lasya again while unarmed and sporting a broken something or another, he decided to turn tail and run.

Oh fuck no.

I hopped out of bed and chased after him, even dressed in nothing but my boxers as I was. The guards in the hall turned to stare as the young man came running out, and when they saw me follow, they turned their weapons on him without hesitation.

It was something I was used to back home, having the instant and questionless backing of the muscle, but it was a bit of a surprise on Halana.

The guy hissed at them, and for a second it reminded me of my father. Then it turned into . . . something else. A real hiss, and not the cat kind. The snake kind.

He turned back toward me and his pupils went slitted, and a moment later he was streaking toward me, not a man at all, but an enormous snake, as big around as my waist, mouth open and giant fangs aimed at me.

It was the first time I'd ever been attacked by a giant goddamn snake, but it wasn't the first time I'd ever been attacked, so I reacted without conscious thought. I drew my hands up and together and summoned the fire.

I sent a gout of flame right into the serpent's face, and when it let out a horrific half-elven, half-snake sort of . . . scream, I didn't stop. I only let up when it dropped to the floor, slowly transforming into a demon.

A badly burned demon, who in fact, might be the first one I'd seen who was less than seven feet tall. Its burns tried to heal, the edges of the blackened skin going bright red and moving inward slightly as some progress was made, but even as a demon, his healing simply wasn't enough to combat the burns.

Lasya had come up behind me, wrapping his arms around me and staring as the demon twitched and shuddered before letting out one final horrific death rattle.

Before either Lasya or his guards could say a word, a voice came from the end of the hall.

"Murderer!" A young blonde woman in robes similar to the ones my father constantly wore was marching toward us, finger outstretched and pointed at me, her eyes wide and chest heaving. "You have murdered a mage. A member of the priesthood."

"Why would a priest be serving my breakfast?" Lasya countered, narrowing his eyes at her.

She waved him off dismissively, as though he was unimportant. “If a priest was serving you food, you should be properly honored.” Her eyes glimmered and her pupils, like the other guy’s, went slitted as she glared at me.

I was about ready to offer her another fireball when Lasya stiffened next to me. I glanced at him, and then in the direction he was looking. Two more priests and a handful of guards were marching down the hall to join her.

Apparently they’d come prepared.

I wondered if they had planned to trap me or Lasya. Or maybe both. Maybe they meant to kill Lasya and blame me for it? The assassin himself had been determined to go for Lasya, even when the poison was discovered.

I reached down and squeezed his hand, and lowered my voice so that hopefully only he would hear. “Don’t. Don’t give them an excuse to hurt you. They’ve got me dead to rights. I killed that assassin, and he’s one of theirs. But you’re the goal. They wanted to kill you, not me. I’m just an inconvenience they want out of the way. You’re the prize.”

Every muscle in his body was tense, ready to spring at them, but there were too damn many. I wouldn’t, couldn’t, take the chance that they’d kill him in the fight. After what he’d told me last night, it was pretty fucking clear that Lasya was one of the only things between my father and Halana.

Losing him would destroy everything.

“Could you grab me my tunic, Lasya?” I asked him, pretending to smile. “I’m sure as hell not getting arrested mostly naked.”

The woman started to say something, but I lifted a brow at her, flicking my fingers and letting them flame up just enough to make a point.

“I’m going with you willingly. How much do you want to test that?”

She scrunched up her nose at me and glared like I was dog shit on the bottom of her silk slipper. Then she turned to Lasya with a triumphant expression and a smile so cold butter

wouldn't have melted in her mouth. "Aren't you going to do your duty and protect the priesthood, general?"

Thank fuck for hundreds of years of training—Lasya kept his calm. In fact, he rolled his eyes at her. "No. If you don't have the training to do your duty and defend yourself, Tojan would prefer you dead. I'm going to get River his clothes, and he's going to dress." Instead of going for them himself, he motioned to one of his guards, who rushed into the room. "And I warn you now. I know all of you. I know your names and ranks and where you rest your heads at night. And if Lord River happens to die without a proper trial *in front of the king*, I will see each and every one of you executed for treason."

"The king has no—"

"I suggest you not finish that sentence unless you want me to kill you for treason right now," Lasya snarled at her. "Do you think your friends will do their jobs and murder me if I'm killing you because you insult the king?"

Her jaw clenched in anger, twitching, and her eyes went slitted once again, but she shut the fuck up.

"Thank goodness," I drawled. "I was afraid she was incapable of being quiet for a minute. Is that a priest thing?"

"Do not prod them," Lasya muttered at me. "You'll be alone with them soon and I won't be able to defend you."

I smiled up at him. "I can take care of myself. Promise. And if they try for treason, I can handle that too." I met her eye and held it in one of those nature documentary stare-offs.

The guard came back with both of our clothes, and more important, Lasya's sword, but I didn't look away until after she did. No lackey of my father's was going to out-bitch me.

I dressed as Lasya did, though he dawdled more than I did and then insisted on accompanying us to the dungeon. He was definitely convinced they were going to try to kill me the moment I was out of his sight.

Hard to blame him, given the venomous looks the woman kept shooting me.



The guards in the dungeon looked at the group of us, clearly uncomfortable with the procession of people, both important and unimportant.

“We don’t have an empty cell,” the guard there mumbled, shuffling his feet and biting his lip, but not looking anyone in the eye. It was impossible to tell whose side of the mess he fell on, so I decided to assume he was one of Dad’s till proven otherwise.

“Put him in with that other redheaded traitor filth,” the woman suggested, smirk on her face and eyes on Lasya.

Still trying to work him up and make him lose his temper so she’d have an excuse to murder him.

I tutted at her, shaking my head sadly. “Amateur. Only my dad being an asshole can piss him off that much. And maybe me.” Before she could figure out what I was talking about, I turned to the dungeon guard. “Let’s do this thing. I only know one redhead who’s an insufferable douchebag, and I’m pretty sure you don’t have him in a cell, more’s the pity, so I’m excited to meet my new BFF.”

The guard blinked repeatedly, clearly unable to parse my slang.

The guard with Lasya, on the other hand, was starting to get used to me, and he gave an involuntary chortle before getting himself under control.

I barely had time to take a deep breath and pat the firm lump of my cards sitting in my tunic pocket before I was marched down into the palace dungeon.

*Oh*, I thought as the stone walls closed around us, the dank smell and lack of any light but torches making the place feel so much smaller it was nearly claustrophobic. *That’s why they call it a dungeon. That sucks.*

## CHAPTER 18

## FUCKING PRIESTS.

Tojan's right hand woman continued giving me her slimy, ophidian smile as the guard marched River away.

I met her eye and kept my gaze impassive, as much as I longed to draw my sword and stick it in her belly. But River had been right—that was her goal. She wanted me to give them an excuse. She wanted to kill me before I could summon aid, and then present it as a *fait accompli*.

Tojan had upped the stakes.

He'd killed Mellara, and now he was trying to kill me.

Was this the endgame for him? Did he have all his pieces in place?

With that possibility, her posturing felt insignificant, and her smirk faded into the background. Tojan was making his final play, and I wasn't ready.

When we marched back out of the small guardroom between the dungeon and the rest of the palace, however, Eral and a dozen of my men were waiting. Ready. At least half of them were mages.

I motioned to two of those, and when they stepped forward, toward the guard room. "You'll wait here and make certain no one tries to take Lord River out of the dungeon until the king is informed of this assassination attempt that he saved me from."

Then I turned to Eral. “Have the traitors tried to murder the king as well?”

“He’s still abed,” Eral promised. “Still fully guarded. When he wakes, we’ll be sure someone tests his food well before it reaches him and stays with it every moment.”

The priest scoffed, waving Eral off as though the concerns for the king were nothing, the gemstones in the dozen rings on her fingers glittering in the light. “Please. No one is trying to kill anyone except the general’s murderous lover. If someone makes an attempt on the king’s life, we’ll know who it was.” Her smirk told me that there would definitely be an attempt on the king’s life. “And then you won’t be able to defend that traitor.”

This time it was Eral who kept me level, by chuckling at her. “How do you suppose a man who arrived on Halana two days ago got his hands on one of the rarest poisons on the planet? It’s the only poison that the general wouldn’t have sniffed out in a second. You’ll never prove that lie with facts.”

Of course it was one of the rarest poisons on the planet. Eral was turning out to be very good at his job, to have realized that so quickly.

She hissed at him in irritation, and the sound reminded me of the other priest who’d shifted into a snake. I hadn’t known him, but shifter types did tend to run in families, so I guessed. “Son or brother?”

“What?” she snapped back, turning her glare from Eral back to me, where it belonged.

“The traitor priest who tried to murder me. The one that River saved me from. The one lying dead in the palace hall, soon to be in the trash heap where he belongs. Was he your son, or your brother?”

She snarled and took a stumbling step toward me before one of her fellow priests held her back. Pity. Another step and I’d have had the excuse to kill her as well.

I liked snakes themselves well enough, but it seemed the world could do without another mage who shifted into a snake.

At that, I motioned to my remaining men, and they trooped after me down the hall, only Eral glancing back to where we left Tojan's people glaring after us. I didn't have time to waste. I had to find help for River.

And with the king still asleep, I got to start in the worst possible place.

I returned to my own rooms long enough to dress properly and pick up the dish of poisoned food from its place on my bed, and headed out immediately, into the belly of the palace.

This would be his single chance.

While he'd given me the information about a ritual that might help him regain his strength, we'd both known I had no intention of helping him. Frankly, he preferred me that way. It was one of the only signs I'd ever given my father that I might be like him—my hatred of him.

This changed things, though. If he gave me what I needed —

I still didn't want to help him, but to save River? To save the king? I would sell anything, give anything. I would beg, murder, and steal.

I would even help my father.

The stink of him as I marched into his room sent my mind back to the trek through the sewer the day before, and made me want to gag, but I held it down.

My father lifted a brow, looking me over, then at the plate of poisoned food I was carrying. "What, an offering? For me?"

"Tojan has gone too far," I told him, ignoring his jab about the food. We'd get to that. "He's had his own son arrested for saving me from an assassin."

My father snorted and bit into a hunk of cold pork. Then, before chewing and swallowing, so I could see the sickening churn of food in his mouth, he spoke. "Sounds like him. Little weasel spent a whole century trying to have me assassinated once a week when I first took over for my father."

That—that was disturbing, and perhaps explained some of my father’s hardness. It didn’t excuse anything, but it might explain it. Also, it didn’t matter now. The assassination attempt wasn’t what mattered.

“He’s had River thrown in the dungeon.” I tried to stress the sentence, leaning forward. “He’s going to try to murder him for saving my life.”

Finishing his bite, he took another, chewing and watching me with something I could only call confusion. Finally, he asked, “so?”

“What do you mean, ‘so?’ He saved my life. It should be rewarded, not punished.” I almost flung out the hand with the plate in it, still bearing its poisonous fare, intended to cause the end of me.

It said something that even now, even knowing it was poisoned and not doubting for a moment that River had been correct, I could sense nothing of the poison. The priest wouldn’t have served my food to begin with if it hadn’t been poisoned—priests did not serve—and his violent reaction to being uncovered had proven River right. River had seen the future, as he’d told us he could.

And he’d used that sight to save my life.

As much as I wanted to cling to the vestiges of my mistrust, it could stand no more. Tojan had wanted me dead. From the poison, to the knife, to the arrangement of the priests in the hall.

If River had not been there, seen the poison and stopped me eating it, and then again stopped me from fighting with the priests, I would be dead. He had foiled his father’s plotting not once, but twice in a single morning, and to his own detriment.

Possibly to end in his own death.

But I couldn’t allow that. Not even if I had to make a deal with the monster before me.

But somehow, my father wasn’t seeing the opportunity. He shrugged. “What difference does it make? Any blood of Tojan’s must be as much weasel as he is. If he saved you

today, it was so he could kill you himself tomorrow.” He rolled his eyes as he bit off another chunk of meat. “You’re being an emotional fool, as always. Sentiment is what’s going to kill you. You’re so weak, I don’t know how you came from me.”

I glowered at him, trying not to jump straight to yelling. That wouldn’t help River at all. “I came to you for answers, not amoralizing. River is no more like his worthless father than I am like you, and he’s worth saving.”

He dropped the hunk of meat onto the tray closest to him, where it crushed some kind of shaped pudding, and leaned up to snarl at me. “There’s no way anything of Tojan’s blood has any value. He’s a fucking peasant, born of elves. That he had magic at all is a miracle.” I was still blinking in astonishment at the accusation when he rushed on. “If you’ve half a piece of me in you, boy, you’ll do the smart thing and let him die. Maybe if you can actually kill someone and not just go around *saving them*”—he stressed the words with a high, nasally voice—“you’d actually start to act like the successor you need to be.”

Peasant.

Tojan, born of elves.

Was it even possible for a mage to be born of elves? Probably, if there were enough mages in their lineage. It would explain so much of Tojan’s hatred for commoners, if he’d been born one.

As for my father—

“I suppose you want me to kill him and the king. Put my own ass on the throne and continue Tojan’s work crushing Halana under my thumb.”

His grin was as oily as the hunk of meat he’d been chewing on a moment before. “Now you’re talking like a Zarani. A true lion. We were born to rule Halana, boy. We’re more than they are. Nobility. Not peasant rabble grown too big for their own britches.”

He glanced down at the plate that was still in my hands, his eyes roving over the fresh beef and mushrooms, still warm

from their initial cooking. His eyes, as always, were full of avarice. But this was what he'd been reduced to. All of his avarice was aimed at poisoned food, and his greatest goal was convincing me to be as much of a monster as him.

Had he forgotten his goal of getting me to steal someone else's life in his favor? It certainly seemed that way.

And more, it didn't matter.

If all he had to offer me was the urging to let River die, he was just as worthless as I'd always thought him. I would find no answers here. Instead of trying again, I gave up, once and for all. Instead of telling him why I'd brought the plate, and what it likely had on it, I dropped it onto one of his trays and walked out of the room.

Even if he somehow managed to survive the poison, which I doubted, I would not see him again.

Well, he'd wanted me to murder someone.

I supposed he simply hadn't expected it to be himself.



## CHAPTER 19

## River

OKAY, so this was the bad place.

Or *a* bad place, whatever.

The whole place stunk of mildew and piss and something dusty that I didn't want to put a name to. No, I was not picturing piles of bones in every corner. Much. The stone wall, when the guards had "accidentally" shoved me against it on the way down, had been damp and slimy. I was annoyed more that my poor green tunic was probably ruined than at the implied disrespect of one of my father's followers shoving me around.

I remembered Blaze under Dad's influence when we were kids. It had been awful. He'd been like a soulless zombie, trying so hard to be the son our father wanted instead of himself. I knew that trying to please our father led to nothing good; I didn't expect that to be different here.

The secret was this: Dad was more like me than Blaze, and being like Dad always made you a bad person. Always. I'd spent most of my twenty-five years looking at every action through that lens, knowing that if I thought "this is what Dad would do here," then it was the wrong thing to do.

The torches were all positioned along the main hallway as they led me down. There were no lights in the cells, so when they stuffed me into one of them, it took my eyes a while to adjust.

So for a moment after they shoved me in, relocking the barred door behind me and then leaving without so much as a

“dinner’s at five,” I just stood there, breathing shallowly through my mouth, blinking to try to get my eyes to work.

I wasn’t immediately jumped on, so that seemed like a good thing.

Yeah, I’d been obnoxious and claimed I’d be besties with my cellmate, but that didn’t mean it was true. I could only hope he wasn’t a huge guy named Thrasher who’d been looking to make a cellmate into his bitch.

Yes, I was sure I could take him down, but I didn’t actually enjoy killing people, and frankly, I didn’t want to sit in a cell with a dead body for who knew how long, let alone get in trouble for killing a second person in a single morning.

The first one had been well deserved and frankly, in self-defense. This? That would just be bad luck and timing for both of us.

“Are you blind?” a soft voice drifted through the dark cell. It was below me, so he was probably sitting down and hadn’t moved. That could be very good, since maybe he was super chill. Or it could mean he was injured. “Do you need help?”

I swallowed and shook my head. “No, not blind. Just human. Which I guess means nothing to you. My eyes are for shit, but they do kind of work, they just need a minute to adjust to the dark.”

“You speak strangely, new man,” he said with a chuckle. “Do you need help finding your way? No reason to stand there, and I would avoid being too close to the bars. They like to clang them as they pass, just to hurt sensitive ears and make sure we don’t get much sleep.”

“Sweet.” I took a deep breath and let it back out slow, then started trying to find my way across the room. “You’ll tell me if I’m about to step on you, yeah? Or like, tip over the piss bucket?”

He laughed at that, and that boded well. It was a nice laugh. Happy, not cruel. “It’s in the corner, you’re fine. Just another three or four steps forward and you’ll reach the wall.

Then you can sit down. The floor's filthy, but no filthier than anything else down here."

"Thanks for that." I followed his instructions and sure enough, my outstretched fingers found a wall, so I turned and sat down, my back against it. There was a faint sense of warmth from my right, so I figured I was near him. "Don't suppose there's a bed or something in here?"

He chuckled again. "No. No meal service either, unless you count them throwing a hunk of bread at us and leaving a cup of water once a day. Better than I've eaten on the streets some weeks, though. Just don't tell them that, or they'll withhold it on account of you being able to live without it."

"Well fuck," I said, trying to affect annoyance. It wasn't hard—I was pretty fucking annoyed. "I missed breakfast, so I was hoping for something tasty. No bed, no breakfast. The service here leaves a great deal to be desired. Has anyone left a Yelp review?"

"A what?"

"Sorry, that totally would have landed back home. I'm, ah, not from around here."

For a moment, we sat in silence, but it wasn't the comfortable 'nothing to say' kind of silence. It was something else. "You're the king's new guest," he finally said.

Fuck. Did everyone on the whole damned planet know about me?

I sighed and nodded. And since I wasn't sure how much better his sight was than mine, followed up with words. "Yep, that's me."

"And you've already offended the king so greatly that he's put you here?" His chuckle this time was a little less amused and more . . . defeat.

"Nah, the king's got nothing to do with it. He's a great kid. It's my fucking father. He tried to have Las—the *general* assassinated this morning. I—" fuck. If I admitted to people in prison that I'd saved Lasya's life, was that the way to a quick shanking in the shower room?

Come to think of it, there probably wasn't a shower room. Given the smell of the place, we were probably just all in these cells till either we died or Dad decided it was time to murder us.

Next to me, though, the man sucked in a breath. A moment later, he was leaning down toward me, whispering furiously. "The general? They tried to kill the general? Is he alive? Did they hurt him?"

He sounded the next best thing to frantic, so I shook my head and matched his whisper. "He's . . . well I'm not gonna lie and say he's fine, he's fucking pissed. They tried to poison him, then stab him, and then they tried to set him up to fight them, probably hoping to get in a lucky shot." I bit my lip for a moment before admitting. "But I took care of it. Just, I killed a priest while I was doing it, so they stuck me here."

I could finally make out the shape of him in the dark, the sheen of his wide eyes as he blinked at me in shock. "You killed a priest? A real priest?" He lowered his voice to a tiny hiss. "A *mage*?"

I couldn't hold back my smirk at that. "Damn right. Dude was trying to assassinate someone. And then, you know, he turned into a giant snake and came at me. I didn't have a choice but to defend myself."

The outline of him moved slightly, his head changing angle to look me over. "You're not tall enough to be a mage. I've never met a short mage. How did you do it?"

I waved him off. "Mages are different where I'm from, and I'm one of them."

He seemed mollified by that for a moment, then turned himself back to the other topic, keeping his voice low, so it wouldn't carry outside the cell. "You're one of the general's people, then? A royalist?"

"You could say that," I agreed easily. "The king's a pretty great kid. He'll probably be a great king someday."

"I agree," the man said, and he sounded sincere. "My mother adores him. She says he's Halana's hope for the

future.”

“I think she’s right.” I didn’t want to say anything that might be considered treason all by itself, even if this guy seemed on the level, but there was no reason not to bolster him, was there? Sure, he might be a spy for my father, but I couldn’t be called a traitor for telling the truth about the king. “I was talking to him about Elethen Voransa.”

He sucked in another shocked breath. “To the king? What did he say?”

“He called him dashing. Said he was sad they seemed to be on different sides.”

Somehow, this led to me, for the second time in a week, explaining the story of Robin Hood and his quest to feed his people and free them from a usurping tyrant. Slowly, my voice went back to its usual volume as I spoke, since the story wasn’t a secret like Lasya’s true loyalties were. Given the hush that fell over other nearby cells, my cellmate wasn’t the only one listening. But hell, the king had liked the story, so why not?

“Mother will love that story if I ever see her again,” my cell mate said, his voice a little raspy with use. Come to think of it, I was a bit parched myself. And of course, I’d spent hours talking after I’d been told that we got a cup of water a day.

“Mother” stuck in my mind after he said it, though.

Mother.

Grandmother.

Mellara.

*We lost her.*

I swallowed hard and hoped that my ability to see was making connections that didn’t exist, not seeing things in the future that I hoped weren’t true.

“You will,” I told him. It was the first time in my life I’d ever made someone a promise about his fate without seeing

that future first. I prayed to anyone who would listen that my father didn't make me into a liar.

## CHAPTER 20



THE KING WAS . . . confused was perhaps a kind word for it.

When I arrived in his room, six guards and Eral were all standing around his bed, watching the priest from earlier as she stiffly cut a piece of everything on the king's plate and ate it.

"Not that bit," Eral told her as she cut the end off a bit of meat and went to eat it. "Cut a piece from the other end."

She clenched her jaw but did as she was told.

Eral was clearly enjoying himself, and I couldn't blame him one bit.

"I take it we have a problem, my general?" the king asked me, even as he continued watching the woman chew and swallow, the sour expression never fading from her face.

I waved a hand at her. "Her son attempted to poison me this morning, Your Majesty."

"Brother," she gritted out, finally answering my earlier question. "And you haven't proven there was poison."

I rolled my eyes and motioned to what looked to be an untouched container of berry sauce on the plate. "You didn't try that. And when I didn't eat the food, he grabbed a knife and tried to stab me. Does that no longer count as attempted murder among Tojan's bootlicks?"

"You would know all about trying to stab an unarmed man without provocation, wouldn't you?" Her lips peeled back and

canines lengthened, a threat if I'd ever seen one, but no doubt if I said anything, she'd claim provocation or grief or some such. Still, when I pointed again, she huffily cut off another piece of pancake and slobbered it into the sauce, spilling it across the plate.

The king frowned at her, but she seemed determined to pretend he didn't even exist. How very like Tojan's people.

"Has anyone lodged a complaint that I attempted to stab them?" I asked.

Tojan hadn't. I knew he hadn't. Admitting that would force him to also admit why he hadn't killed me for the offense, and Tojan would die before saying that River had scared him off.

She glared at me and stuffed another bite of the king's breakfast into her mouth.

The king, meanwhile, lifted a pale brow at me in question. I offered a strained smile and glanced at her, then back at him. He nodded, understanding.

Her irritation deepened, spreading to fill the room with a tension thicker than pudding, but she finished her work. I motioned to one of the mage guards in a corner of the room. "You'll stay with her and be sure she doesn't force it back up, yes?"

He bowed to me, nodding, and followed her out.

The king watched all of this with mildly irritated fascination, and then pulled his breakfast in front of him and stared at it a moment. "Do we not believe that she would be willing to die in order to see me dead?"

"To see *me* dead, Majesty," one of the guards corrected, much to Artyom's annoyance. Not annoyance with the guard, though. More with me, or with the very situation. He despised everything about The Custodia.

"And it would be better to see me poisoned than to have you starve yourself, Majesty," the man added. I inclined my head to him in respect for his complete willingness to give his life for the king, and he returned the gesture. He knew what he

was offering every time he took a turn guarding His Majesty. Every time he cast The Custodia.

“If that happens, this farce will be over,” the king said, a surprising amount of venom in his high, usually sweet voice. “If he poisons me, we will all know the who and why of it.”

“Which is why his second is the one tasting your food, Majesty, particularly given that her brother is the one who tried to murder His Excellency this morning.” I’d never heard Eral speak to the king before, but it was well done. He didn’t bow or scrape—or patronize as so many of Tojan’s people did. I’d known he was the right man to be my successor, so that was simply another piece of proof.

The king nodded and finally dug his fork into his food.

“The assassination attempt has given us another issue,” I finally told him.

This was it. I was about to put River in his path. It was one thing for the king to like a stranger and invite him to stay at the palace. But him doing anything about River’s incarceration would be in direct and public opposition to Tojan.

I’d spent eight years avoiding asking that of him. Trying to keep him away from it, in fact. Letting them avoid each other, avoid the inevitable coming confrontation until Artyom could gain enough power and experience to handle things for himself.

And now I was going to ask him to move directly against Tojan for River’s sake. For a man I’d only known a few days, who was also Tojan’s son.

But also, a man who’d risked his life to protect me, repeatedly. Whom I’d told about my secrets, and who had kept them to himself even as they had marched him into the palace dungeon.

“Lasya,” the king chided, patting a spot on his bed. “Sit down and tell me what’s happening. Stop looking so tragic. I’ll worry you’re a hero in a book, and you’re going to throw yourself off the cliff over the palace in a fit of misery.”

“I have a bird, Majesty,” I pointed out. “Little point trying to end oneself that way when one can simply turn into a crow and fly away.”

The king gave a sigh, but it was more wistful than annoyed. “I wish I could turn into a crow and fly away.”

Eral gave him a commiserating look, as though he wished the same, and then they smiled at each other, and my lieutenant flushed and ducked his head, probably shocked at his own cheek in front of the king.

It was perfect. Perhaps he could be both guard and friend in a way I hadn't managed.

Still, that wasn't the purpose of this moment. “Lord River saved my life from both attempts this morning, Your Majesty.” Technically, I'd saved myself from the second, but without River, I wouldn't have had that chance. Sitting on the bed as the king had ordered, I scrubbed my hands down my face. “The assassin turned on him, shifted into a constrictor snake, and rushed him in the hall. He killed him to defend himself.”

The king's eyes had gone wide, and he stared at me for a moment, silent, his fork hanging from his fingertips. “He—he killed a constrictor snake? A mage, that had shifted into a constrictor snake? They're enormous. How did he kill him?”

In my periphery, I saw all the guards glancing at each other, clearly agreeing with the shock. River was a tiny slip of a thing, not even average elven height, let alone compared to a mage, so I couldn't blame them for the surprise.

“As it happens, Majesty, it's something he already implied to you and me before. There are other kinds of mages where Lord River comes from, and he is one of them.” I looked at Eral, and he pursed his lips and nodded. The story was already spreading around the palace, then. No reason to try to keep it quiet. “He can make fire. He burned the assassin to death.”

The king continued to stare at me for a moment before shaking himself out of it. He turned back to his food, cutting the remains into pieces, but not eating any of it as yet. “I should like to see that.”

“I’m sure River would be happy to show you, Majesty. But the priest’s lackey insisted that he be imprisoned for killing the assassin. He’s in the dungeon now.”

About to finally eat his first bite, Artyom paused and set his fork down. “They imprisoned him for saving your life?”

“They did.”

“And nothing else? No other crime?”

“No, Majesty. The excuse is that the attempted assassin was a member of the priesthood.”

There were a few quiet grumbles from corners of the room. My loyal men were tired of the priest’s machinations, and I couldn’t blame them. Likely they thought we should just kill the bastard and be done with it.

Darkness take me, I was of the same mind myself, if I could have managed to kill the bastard. That had always been my biggest problem. No, killing Tojan wouldn’t heal Halana, but if I could have done it, I would have.

The king pushed his plate away, the food uneaten.

“Everyone in this room knows that your father killed mine. Yes, Lasya?”

A few of the men gasped, but I had no doubt it was more in shock at the king’s honesty than that they hadn’t been aware. “I believe most all of Halana knows it, Majesty, though many of them think it was me, since it was never publicly announced that my father was retiring and I was taking his place..”

He snorted and waved that away. “No one who has ever met both of you believes that. You are nothing like him. You don’t even look like him.” The king scooted over to the edge of the bed, pushing himself off and walking to the huge closet that contained his clothing. “My father was a mage. Everyone knows that. Do you know why, when Lord River told me he could see the future, I didn’t doubt him?”

My men were clearly in shock at the implication, turning to look at each other, eyes wide. I was with them. Was he

implying—“Did your father see the future, Your Majesty?”

He gave me a tiny smile and motioned to a corner of the closet. “Not like Lord River. Not a lot. Not often. But after mother died, I used to come sleep with him sometimes, because we—we were both so alone.”

From somewhere behind me, there was an actual sniffle. It was hard to blame whoever had given it.

“One night when I joined him, we were talking about things. About how the world was changing, and we were going to see to it that every man and woman like Mother had a chance at a happy life. And then he just . . . stopped. He stared into the distance for a moment, and then he told me to go here.” He pointed at a spot in the closet. “He shut me in the closet, and told me to be very quiet, no matter what happened.”

I felt like I’d been punched in the gut.

He’d been there, right there in the room, when his father had been murdered.

Artyom’s voice had gotten very small, reminding us all of the child he was. He’d been even younger when his father had been murdered—barely five. “I’m tired of pretending that your father and Tojan aren’t monsters, Lasya, and I’m sure you are too.”

I swallowed hard, my shoulders slumping. “It helps nothing, but I suspect my father is causing his own demise right this moment. Not that I didn’t help it along.”

The king cocked his head curiously but didn’t ask what I meant. He simply took it in stride and moved on. “Then we will focus on Tojan. How do we kill him and make this end once and for all?”

I flinched, mostly because I didn’t have a good answer for that question, not because I was bothered by the notion of killing him. Killing Tojan *wouldn’t* end it. It would end Tojan’s schemes, yes, but he had hundreds of priests ready to step in and continue his work. Every single one of them would be happy to continue starving Halana to keep the peasants hungry

and under their thumbs. It was an overwhelming fact, and Artyom had too damned much to deal with already.

“A holiday,” Eral said, out of nowhere. When everyone in the room turned to stare at him, he shrugged. “It was one of the things Lord River was talking to the librarian about yesterday afternoon when I took a shift guarding him. In the old days, sometimes the king would declare a holiday, and everyone who had committed a minor crime against the crown, like failing to pay taxes, would be pardoned. She said it was a small thing, but that it made the crown’s job easier and the people happy.”

“Killing a priest is hardly a small crime, even if he is an assassin,” one of the guards said, hesitating and ducking his head when everyone looked at him. “Begging your pardon, Majesty, General. But as much as I agree he needed to be killed, it’s not the same as failing to pay taxes.”

“And it doesn’t end Tojan’s reign,” another pointed out. “If the king wants the bastard dead, we should just kill him.”

“No,” I whispered, my mind catching on to Eral’s point. “The king declares a holiday. He empties the dungeon, pardons everyone but the actual murderers and monsters—dark, I don’t even know if there are any real criminals down in the dungeon any longer, or if it’s just people Tojan dislikes. Then the king announces a *feast*. Tells the city that we’re going to give them food. It will be the biggest gesture the crown has made since before I was born.”

“We make it clear it’s the king, not Tojan,” Eral added, a smile spreading across his face. “It undermines Tojan completely. *Grandly*, even. The people of Madranai eat for a day next week, and they welcome their missing family home, and they know their king is who they can thank for it.”

The king came to stand in front of me, his clear blue eyes still nervous. “I can do that, right? I’m the king, so I can do that?”

“You can, Majesty,” I agreed, nodding solemnly. “But you know this sort of action is why my father and Tojan murdered your father.”

With that, his worry cleared, and his eyes hardened into determination.

“I do, Lasya. But I am tired of waiting for the time to be right. Tired of needling him and letting that be enough. He’s hurting everyone on Halana, and we’re not stopping him. More innocent lives end every day we don’t stop him. I can’t wait to be fifty, or even thirty. I can’t keep losing good people. They tried to kill you. They’re trying to kill River now. Who next?” He made his hands into fists and set them on his hips, and in that moment, he reminded me strangely of his grandfather. Not murderous, perhaps, but set in a course. Absolutely sure of himself. “I’m done letting them take from us all, Lasya. They can’t have one more day, one more person. *Not one more.*”



## CHAPTER 21

THEY DELIVERED our water and bread, and it was just as impressive as expected.

What wasn't expected was the wizened little old man in the cell across from us, who glanced one way then the other, apparently looking for guards, then took a single gulp from his cup of water and held it out as far as he could reach, whispering, "you can have the rest of mine if you keep telling stories."

And hell, I'd always loved being the center of attention, so that wasn't about to change. I gave him my best shit-eating grin and inclined my head. "You got it, buddy. I'd ask for requests, but I don't know any Halanan stories, only Earth ones."

My cellmate snorted as he split the chunk of bread in half and handed me my part. It looked like mine was suspiciously bigger, but what was I gonna say about that? He met my eyes and took a bite. "If this Robin Hood was any indication, yours are better anyway. Halanan stories usually end in tragedy."

"That sounds shitty," I agreed. "And I can totally do happy endings. We're the masters of happy endings back home, even if some of us think they're not as classy as tragedy."

My cellmate's name was Arceny, and it was a little weird—he did look like me, sort of. Well, me as an elf: five or six inches taller than me and with long pointy ears, but the bright red hair and gray eyes were the same. He even kind of had that upturned nose that had always annoyed me a bit.

I made the old man take another drink, but then took the extra water and sipped at it over the next few hours, talking till I was hoarse, then resting for the few moments as the guards did their rounds, pausing to glare at all of us, and talking some more when they left.

And because I fucking liked it, I started with the entirely true story of Elethen Voransa, and how he'd accidentally gone to Earth and saved it.

Apparently, these hardened criminals in the dungeon liked it too, a few of them cheering or whistling as I told the best parts. I left out the whole demon thing, since I didn't think they needed to deal with that, but it was clear that the lot of them were already inclined to think of Elethen as a hero.

Which confirmed my initial opinion that my father was a dick, and the assumption that most of the people in cells were probably there because they wanted a goddamned meal and weren't afraid to demand it. Or maybe steal it.

I was a criminal, and not the selfless kind who gave to the poor. Who was I to judge?

After that was exhausted, I turned to old school fairy tales, and no one complained that I focused on heroes who were maybe a little less than perfect. From Aladdin to Hansel and Gretel, I just ran through every story I could remember. Frankly, by the end, I was getting desperate, and about to start using movies I'd heard of or making up my own stories, but instead, my voice gave out.

I half expected complaints when I gave up but got none. Only a chorus of thanks that susurrated through the whole cell.

That, I didn't know what to do with.

Arceny patted me on the shoulder. "Our thanks, friend River. This is the best day some of us have had in years. There isn't much to think about in this place but the mistakes that landed us here."

I snorted, and I'd have said something unpleasant about my father, but again, my voice was pretty screwed up. Arceny encouraged me to finish my water, and a few people

whispered offers to try to give me their bread the next day if I'd talk again, which I motioned to him to turn down. Sure, I was a criminal, but I wasn't taking payments from people who had nothing. I'd only taken the water because my voice would have gone out long before without it.

The two of us went back over to the inside wall of the cell, leaning against the stone, and then we fell asleep leaning against each other. Sure enough, the guards came by every few hours, clanging a metal cup against all the bars on the cells as they passed.

What utter fuckwads.

The second time it happened, I leaned forward, watching the shadows until I saw the glint of metal, and flicked a bit of fire into the cup, heating the metal to near red hot. The asshole guard yelped and dropped it.

I didn't expect it would stop him from continuing, but he might at least understand what it felt like to be fucked over by a complete stranger simply for existing.

It was still the middle of the night, though, I was pretty sure, when someone started making a fuss. It just sounded like directionless shouting at first, but as it progressed, there was a lot of "you can't" and "no right"—the latter followed by what sounded like a vicious backhanding. The voices went quiet after that, but the noises continued. The clang of a cell door opening, followed by quiet voices and shuffling feet. Then a few minutes later, again. And again.

It took us about an hour to realize that they were taking the prisoners out, and they weren't coming back.

Arceny and I looked at each other, hope and concern warring for top billing in my brain, and I assumed he felt the same. Except we were in a place where even the stories had sad endings, so maybe he was just assuming the worst.

He clenched his jaw and swallowed hard but didn't lose his straight posture. "If they're executing us all, thank you for the best last day I could have had in this place, friend. Your stories were wonderful."

I reached out and squeezed his shoulder, using the raspy whisper that had come back to me while I'd slept. "Don't give up on us yet. If they want to kill me, I'm gonna make them work for it."

It was Lasya's voice that interrupted the conversation. "That is why everyone wants to kill you."

I hopped up and crossed the room instantly, almost walking straight into the cell door before I realized it was still closed. An angry looking man with a black eye that was swollen halfway shut stuffed a key in the lock, fiddling with it jerkily. He glared at me with his good eye, like I was the one who'd hit him.

I paused and looked him over. I was pretty sure it was the guard I'd burned earlier in the night, so I guess I deserved the glare, for one reason or another.

Still, I couldn't resist poking him. He was an asshole, after all. "Lasya, did you bitchslap this guy? Is that why he hates me?"

Lasya laughed, and the rich sound of it filled the whole damned dungeon. The door swung open, and I launched myself through it, throwing my arms around his neck and clinging like a monkey.

Were we in the right place for that in our maybe-relationship? I didn't know about before, but now we damn well were. He was springing me from the clink; he was officially my favorite. Even if I hadn't wanted to fuck him again.

But I did.

A lot.

This just made me want him even more.

"I merely reminded him that the king is the authority in this place,"—he raised his voice to be heard by everyone around us—"and if the king wishes to release all the prisoners in the dungeon and announce an amnesty and a feast day, then that is the king's right."

Well that set everyone in the whole place talking.

Fuck me, Artyom didn't make gestures by halves.

I leaned up and lowered my voice to a whisper. "Is that safe for him?"

Lasya set his jaw and shook his head, but . . . something had changed. I could see it in his eyes, even if he was hesitant to meet mine.

The din around us, prisoners cheering, drowned out the exchange between us.

But then one of the prisoners shouted, "it's because of River!"

Another few shouted my name, but no, I had to fix that. I raised my voice as loud as I could, even as hoarse and abused as it was. "I think you mean King Artyom. Your king is tired of a certain group of self-important assholes hurting the whole damn planet. Because he's your king too, not just theirs, and he knows it."

The noise slowed for a moment, but then they took it up, and after a moment, the shout was almost deafening. Artyom. Artyom. Artyom.

I winked at Lasya, and he gave me a firm nod, his eyes filled with determination.

Yeah, something big had changed. I hoped it wasn't just because of me.

Okay, no, I wouldn't have minded it being because of me. I hoped it didn't go badly if it was because of me. I sure as hell didn't want to be responsible if it resulted in my father murdering the king and Halana's hope for the future disintegrating.

The guard started to swing the cell door shut, but I reached back and grabbed it, holding it open.

"He's in for treason," the guard whined. "Surely amnesty doesn't apply to that."

Lasya's voice remained pitched to carry. "The king's amnesty is absolute. Every prisoner in the dungeon. And tomorrow morning you'll be assigned a new task. One not designed to hurt the people of Halana."

I lifted a brow at that, because that was a surprise. Every prisoner? Were they all in for petty crimes, or were we talking killers and such too? Or were there none of those in the palace dungeon? That made sense too, if my father had been using it as some kind of private dumping ground for people who pissed him off.

Arceny slid into the doorway of the cell, hesitant like he hadn't been all day. He didn't meet Lasya's eye, but Lasya winced at the sight of him. And hell, I did too. There was a nasty cut across his cheek, and claw marks that ran down his neck into his shirt, all of which I'd missed in the low light in our cell.

I didn't know how long Arceny had been in the cell, but given how little he'd healed, I suspected not long.

I also had no doubt, from the incredibly brief look Lasya gave him, that they knew each other.

Ah, that made sense. He was one of Lasya's rebels. It also gave me a sense of foreboding about what we'd spoken of earlier—Arceny's mother.

Lasya's broken, hollow voice in the night.

*We lost her.*

I swallowed hard, but latched onto Arceny's hand, dragging him along with us. One of Lasya's men joined us initially, then followed the guard as he continued to the next cell while Lasya led Arceny and I out past rows and rows of empty cells.

"You should give my buddy Arceny a job," I whispered to Lasya as we walked. "He's pretty badass, plus he looks kind of like a hot elven version of me."

Lasya lifted a brow at me, then looked up at Arceny, cocking his head. "Funny. I always thought he looked like his mother, but I see your point."

Arceny finally looked at Lasya, who looked quickly away. For the first time, Arceny's shoulders fell. He sighed and dropped his head. "I suppose I should be pleased for her, at least. She always demanded that I not let her outlive me. Her last beloved son."

*Jesus fuck and goddammit.*

I was going to have such a hard time not throwing a fireball in my fucking father's asshole face the next time I—almost ran right into him as we exited the dungeon into the weird little guard anteroom between it and the palace.

I clutched at my magic, ready to throw, but Lasya's arm tightening around my waist made me pause.

"Tojan," he said, voice perfect and even and completely free of his personality.

My father . . . he was in a rage. His gray eyes were sparking with pure fury, jaw clenched and whole face just . . . tight. His voice held more violence than I'd ever heard from him before, and that was saying something. "Zarani."

Lasya smiled at him. "It's been a long time since you called me by my family name, Tojan. Have I done something to displease you?"

"I should have known you were on the side of the criminals. After the way you let Voransa escape—"

Lasya snorted and waved dismissively. "I can hardly be held accountable for him disappearing through one of the portals *your* mages were creating, can I? If anything, you're the one who looks like a collaborator."

"We both know who's working with that peasant filth," my father spat back, drops of spittle flying with the last words.

Even when I'd been a kid, he'd hated poor people. It had never made sense to me, hating people who already had more than enough to worry about. People who'd never hurt you.

But at the time it had just been another thing on the pile of stuff I found disgusting about Travis Keyes. Now it was something else, and that something was fucking weird. He was



making the poor of Halana poor. How could he be mad at them about it, when he'd designed it that way?

Before Lasya could respond, one of the robe-clad priests rushed up to Tojan, handing him a note. He flipped it open and scanned it, and my stomach dropped.

Every time it seemed like we were making progress something shitty happened, and the smile that crossed my father's face in that moment told me we weren't done with that pattern. One step forward, two steps back, whatever it was.

I just hoped we didn't trip over the proverbial foot he was holding out and fall on our faces this time.

He turned and started to walk off, ignoring us, and well . . . I couldn't help myself. "You've been running away from me a lot lately, daddio. One might think you were afraid or something."

The look he shot me over his shoulder was so venomous I was surprised I didn't fall down dead where I stood. *That* was more like it. I offered him my most obnoxious saccharine smile.

Maybe what came next would suck, but at least I'd gotten to call him the coward he was.

## CHAPTER 22

## *Lasya*

RIVER WAS a little dirty and his voice was hoarse, but for the most part, he didn't seem ill-affected by his day in the dungeon.

In fact, he insisted on waiting and meeting the men who were being taken out, and “shaking their hands,” which was apparently an Earth custom among people one considered equals. They, in turn, seemed just as enthusiastic about meeting him face to face.

I had someone bring him food and a soothing honeyed tea for his throat, but he stayed for over an hour, just greeting the people being set free. He took to the story about the king wanting to give something to Halana, and suddenly, there was no greater supporter of Artyom than River Keyes. Not that he'd ever been anything other than supportive, but I'd never seen such fervent backing before.

What was more, the men coming out of the dungeon were so ready for a hero, any hero, that they took it up happily. Artyom had given them something no one before him had, and it was his first major public act as king.

If Tojan had seen, he'd have likely screamed in anger.

It was glorious.

After the cells were cleared, I finally talked River into leaving—mostly because I offered him a bath, which made his eyes light up and brought a smile to his lips that he hadn't even given me.

I was not jealous of a bath.

Besides, I could use one as well.

We'd stationed people in the kitchen to watch all cooking activity, and to accompany every meal sent to His Majesty—and me, but Artyom was the one in true danger now—so I had hopes that at least in the short term, we had Tojan stymied.

Especially after his little show near the dungeon, I was certain he was working on a way to fight back, but we would have to wait and see what happened.

I started tugging at River's tunic the moment we stepped into my suite, even as he turned to me, one eyebrow raised. "I thought you were taking me to my room?"

"This is your room now," I said, distracted trying to find the ties that held the waist tight. "I ordered a bath delivered to my tub. It's better than the one in your old guest quarters. And I had the tailor bring your clothes here as well, so you can change into something clean when we're finished."

He stopped wriggling about, which was both good and disappointing, since it let me strip him, but also, I rather liked the feel of him squirming against my body.

I tossed the filthy tunic into a container for clothes to be cleaned and followed it quickly with his hose and the strange Earth underclothing he'd insisted on continuing to wear every day.

Perhaps he'd put them back on when they were clean again, but for the moment we were rid of them. Maybe I could ask the laundry people to keep the things. I preferred to think of him bare beneath his hose. That way, all I would have to do was yank down his hose, and he'd be ready to take my cock.

His eyes narrowed at me as I considered it. "What are you thinking? It's something pervy, isn't it?"

"That depends, what is 'pervy'?"

I unbuckled my sword belt and set the sheath across the nearby table, and his eyes went round with shock. "Wait, what are you doing?"

“I am preparing to take a bath. You?”

“Oh hell no, this is my bath. You’re not taking—”

“Our bath,” I corrected, grabbing his hand and leading him over to the room divider that hid the tub from view. The thing was plenty big enough for both of us.

It was strange, I thought, looking at our twined fingers, how quickly I’d become used to touching him. I’d been touching other people since he’d arrived as well. I had almost touched Mellara’s son when we’d spoken. Arceny, River had said his name was.

Odd, to know it and not simply think of him as a member of the circle. We’d freed four of them from the dungeon, and I considered it more than a good day’s work. Two of those we’d thought lost to us forever some time earlier, so it had been good to find them.

“Oh wow. That’s, uh. Pretty sweet.” River was saying when I shook myself out of my thoughts, staring at the tub, filled with lightly steaming water, surface shimmering with the oil I always used in my bath. “Okay, I give, it can be our bath.”

I smirked at him as I stripped out of my own clothing, and his eyes trailed down my chest, fascinated. It took me a moment to realize why: the scars. He’d seen my true form, which had no scars at all. He’d never seen the mess that was my elven body.

I considered changing forms, or even trying to remove the scars, but that was childish. River was a man of the world, even if not our world. He hadn’t been shocked or horrified by anything but Tojan’s cruelty, which was objectively awful. Surely he wouldn’t hold my scars against me.

He reached out and traced a deep line where my father had nearly carved out my liver when he was teaching me the sword in my twenties, then one across my belly from a sparring match with Tojan where he’d stabbed me in the gut because he’d been angry with my father. Since I’d received the wounds as an elf, they had remained on my elven skin.

Not a single expression crossed his face while he looked. While I bared more scarred skin.

The first reaction he gave me was when I bared my cock, already hard and ready for him. He huffed a sigh and groaned. “Oh that’s not fucking fair. How are you just as goddamned hot in this form?”

I didn’t have a response for him. Only a body that had been ready to drag him in and claim him again since the moment I’d seen him sitting in that cell, leaning against Arceny, talking about people wanting to kill him.

It had taken the better part of a day to make security arrangements, feast arrangements for two days hence, and work with His Majesty to write a proclamation that said everything we wanted it to and nothing we didn’t. I’d hated leaving River there in a cell, but also known that I needed to make sure His Majesty was safe before moving River, since he’d at least been secure there in the dungeon with my people watching.

Distasteful as the dungeon guards were, they hadn’t dared to hurt River when they knew they’d be held accountable for it.

“I assure you, I am willing to fuck you in any form I take.” I cocked my head in thought for a moment, then shook my head. “I doubt we could find a way to make it work with the crowd, though. Perhaps the—”

River slapped a hand over my mouth, his eyes wide. “Whoa, there, buddy, let’s try the elf dick before we go jumping into talk of probably illegal things, cool?”

I couldn’t hold back my amusement at that, shaking my head and laughing at him. I finished with the last of my clothes, tossing them aside and turning back to him. “Bath time, then.”

He stuck out his lower lip like a child denied sweets. “No cock?”

“Cock in the bath, after we wash,” I corrected. “We’re both filthy, I suspect. You definitely are.”

He glanced down at himself and winced. “Yeah, I guess a day in prison hasn’t really helped me with that. That place is gross.” He leaned into me with a smile. “You got everyone out of prison for me.”

I wrapped one arm around him, then the other, everything in me going serious in an instant. “Of course I did. I would never let you pay such a price for saving my life.” I swallowed hard, considering my next words, but deciding to let them out, consequences be damned. “And I am becoming fond of you unusually quickly.”

River grinned back at me. “You know what? I’m becoming fond of you unusually quickly too.”

He twined his arms around my neck and leaned up to press his lips to mine, but a moment later he was pulling back, his nose scrunched up adorably. “You’re right, I need a bath. Then cock. In that order, unfortunately.”

He tested the water with his fingers, a look of pure bliss crossing his face at the warmth of it, and then climbed in without hesitation before motioning me over, scooting forward and waving at the spot behind him.

It seemed he wanted me to cuddle him in the bathtub, and I found that I had no complaints about that. I grabbed up the washrag and climbed in behind him, washing his back and chest.

He didn’t complain a bit about my hard cock pressed up against him, and we both ignored it for long enough to get clean. Or perhaps ignored was the wrong word, the way he kept pressing back against me, leaning his head on my shoulder and undulating his hips as I ran the soapy rag along his legs.

I grabbed his waist and pulled him against me. “If you keep squirming like that, I’m going to fuck you before I finish washing you. Is that what you want?”

His sly smile gave me my answer before he opened his mouth. “I mean, fucking is the goal.”

He snatched the rag out of my hands and turned around, straddling me and scrubbing my chest, then my arms, all slow and sensuous. I'd never seen bathing as anything but perfunctory before, but I was never going to look at a bath the same way again.

Not after he slid the rag down to brush gently around my cock as he licked his lips, meeting my eye with brazen desire on his face.

Two could play that game. I grabbed his thighs, pulling him forward so that I could reach back and position my cock at his entrance. Some lovers in my time had wanted sweetness—soft touches and hours of preparation before I fucked them. Some had wanted things fast and rough.

We hadn't discussed it, but I had the feeling River wanted something else altogether. Not quiet, rough fucks in the dark because he wanted to orgasm and be done with it already. He didn't want me to hurt him.

He just wanted me to be . . . well, silly as it sounded, *me*.

Perhaps it was a perfect coincidence that what he wanted and who I was dovetailed into the same person—I didn't know. What mattered, on the other hand, was the way he went loose in my arms as I pressed the head of my cock against his ass, ready and wanting. The way his hooded eyes were hot with the banked embers of the fire always burning inside him. The punched out little breathy moan he gave when I pushed inside his hot, tight little hole. There was just enough oil in the bath to ease the way, but perhaps not make it precisely *easy*, and River didn't seem to mind that at all.

The water sloshed around us as he rode my cock, me holding his hips and shoving myself inside him, as deep as I could go.

I grabbed once more for the soapy rag, then reached and rubbed it over River's cock as he bounced on mine, biting his perfect pink lower lip and keening low in his throat.

It didn't take long, only a few dozen strokes before he tensed around me, coming wet and hot against my belly,



leaving stripes of his release to mark me as his own. The press of him around me, tensing and releasing, was nearly enough to send me over the edge, but no. I needed more.

Part of me didn't want to wash it away, but the purpose of the bath had been to get clean, so I wiped my belly with the rag before he collapsed against me. Then I wrapped my hands around his slick legs and stood from the water, him still hanging on my cock where I held him as I walked us over to the bed, dropping him on the duvet where he was at the perfect height.

Perfect for me to drive myself into him, over and over, feeling the sheer heat of him wrapped around me, lax and pliant and glistening with moisture from the bath.

“Holy fuck,” he muttered when his eyes finally opened. “How is it possible for you to be this fucking good?”

I squeezed his hips, grinning down at him. Then I let one hand trail over his skin, running my fingers along his softening cock, making him arch up.

“Oh my gods, too soon, Lasya. There's no way I can—” he cut off with a high whine when I managed to hit the right angle, his body arching up. So I fucked into him again and again at that angle, hard and fast.

The sound that came out of him was the next best thing to a scream as he threw his head back into the bed, and come dribbled out of his still-softening cock. He tightened around me almost painfully, and this time, it was enough to send me over the edge along with him, roaring out my orgasm as it took me, filling my whole body with River's fire as I filled him with my release.

I hunched over him, resting my head on his shoulder as I slowly came back down to Halana. It was perhaps the most powerful orgasm I'd ever had, and I couldn't name why.

“You absolute asshole,” he whisper-panted, even as he wrapped an arm around me. “Fuck I think I might love you.”

Love.

It was a word I didn't even hear regularly. Certainly no one had ever said it to me. I'd been told that someone loved my cock before. My taste in clothing. My way with cutting words, even.

No one loved *me*.

I must have given some sign that the words had affected me, because River patted me on the shoulder. "It's okay. You don't have to do anything about it. It doesn't have to mean anything to you. We've known each other less than a week."

He didn't understand. It wasn't that I thought him premature. It was that I thought him *impossible*.

Was this all an illusion? Was I imagining River's very existence in the throes of some poison-induced fever?

If I was, I decided, it was a good way to die. Better than anything I'd ever hoped for.

Yes, I would take River's love, real or imaginary, and I would hold it tight for as long as I was allowed to have it.

## CHAPTER 23

## River

I WOKE to visions of Elethen fixing up the house thick in my mind, which was new while here on Halana. He was rebuilding the frame, hanging drywall, painting. He had help doing it, but for all that I tried, all that I wanted it to be Lasya to be standing by his side, working with him, I could see no sign of it.

At least there were visions with both Blaze and Elethen. Holding each other, talking, sitting on the couch in the living room eating potato chips.

In reality, Lasya was still there. Holding me, right there in the middle of his bed. We'd cleaned up the mess left after sex, and just thrown ourselves onto his rich brocade duvet, lying together.

It was weird, having said I loved him. It wasn't that . . . I didn't think I'd shrivel up and die without him, like I'd once thought of Sasha—it was nothing that dramatic and all-consuming. It wasn't a teenage infatuation.

It was just—everything he did fit me. Every word he said was right, even the ones that were wrong. Even when he annoyed the fuck out of me, it worked.

I'd never met anyone like that before except for my brother, and as much as I loved him, I wasn't into that particular kink. Sure, I figured I was hot enough for other people to lust after—they'd done it, so why not? It was just that *I* didn't lust after me. Therefore I didn't lust after Blaze. Cute red-headed twinkles weren't my thing.

Stunningly beautiful jerks with nasty tempers that they had well under control, who were hiding marshmallowy centers? Sign me the fuck up.

Anyway.

I was probably rushing into things, but it was hard not to. I had lived past my expiration date, and as much as the visions were running thick and fast, none of them were telling me a damn thing about my own future. Just Blaze and Elethen, mostly.

I wasn't even getting much from Halana in general, which was fucking annoying. I really could have used so much as the tiniest sign that Artyom was going to survive to a ripe old age and be a great king, but I was getting nothing at all.

A bloody handprint on a half-burned crate that seemed to have dried oranges in it. What good did that do me? I couldn't even be sure it was on Halana, since I hadn't seen anyone here eat oranges. Maybe Blaze was going to start serving them as snacks at The Dark, to try to make people healthier or some silly shit.

A callused thumb brushed across my cheekbone, and I turned to find Lasya watching me. "Are you looking at the future?"

I couldn't hold back a snort at that. "I wish. I haven't had a really useful vision of the future since I got here. Maybe my power is linked to Earth, so it doesn't work right here."

"Magic does seem to be very different here than there." He pulled me closer to him, rolling me over to face him. "Do all mages on Earth have the ability to call flames to their command?"

"No. It's, ah, probably the rarest elemental power, actually. Lots of air mages, lots of water mages. Some earth mages. A few fire ones. But no one with powers like yours. Well, I guess Elethen now, but no one else." I tangled our legs together, smiling at him. "I suppose we should be happy for that, but when we had mages like you, they—I don't think they were

actually like you. They were human. At least, I assume they were.”

“That would make them unlike us,” he agreed. “All mages are born in the other form. It is what we truly are, on the inside.”

The way he said it told me what he thought of it. The same thing Elethen had—that the horned, black-eyed, demonic form made him bad. It was ridiculous. Humanity was still trying—and sometimes not bothering to try—to recover from the awful belief that a whole race of people could be good or bad, intelligent or not, industrious or lazy. It seemed that Lasya had the same problem, but he was aiming it as a weapon at himself.

“No group is a monolith,” I told him. “Even mages have good people and bad people. You’ve got mages guarding the king right now, don’t you?”

He narrowed his eyes but nodded thoughtfully.

“And you trust them?”

“With Artyom’s life.”

“So they’re good guys.” I whipped out a hand like Vanna White showing off a new letter. “Which means it’s possible for mages to be good guys.”

“Possible, but rare. And all those I know have told me they wish they were not. The hunger is uncontrollable, and it devastates Halana.”

It made sense. I’d watched Elethen eat twenty fast food sandwiches in a sitting, and I knew he could have kept going, given more food.

To say nothing of the fact that as long as some people were born with that kind of power and some weren’t, it would mean that the have-nots were seen as lesser. And people like my dad had apparently used that have-not status to literally make most of the planet into an underclass of servants.

It wasn’t exactly the sort of thing that had an easy answer. Or any answer at all, that I could see.

Lasya disappeared and the world went bright gold for a moment, and then the only thing I could see was a book. A thick, brown leather covered book, etched on the front with magic runes that I couldn't read, the letters looking as though they were burned into the hide. The lighting was too bright, unnaturally so, but it was the library here in the palace, I was sure.

More than that, I knew I needed that book.

No, I couldn't read it. But I needed it. I needed to get dressed and go get it, immediately. No time to waste, nothing else first, the book.

*Now.*

I sat up with a start, throbbing pain in my head, to find Lasya watching me with concern. "Are you well?"

I wiped at my nose, hoping it wasn't bloody like the last time I'd had a strong vision accompanied by head pain. Admittedly, this hadn't been the same as then. That had been the moment I'd truly realized that it was my life, not my brother's, on the line and decided that I could pay that price.

It had been the moment that the futures of Earth and Halana had decided they would spin on, because I wasn't going to let them crash into each other. With all the viciousness of a mob cutter with an icepick fetish, the new visions had stabbed their way into my brain one after another, until I'd mercifully passed out, only to wake on the floor covered in blood and giggling like a virgin on X while Blaze and Elethen worried over me.

"I'm fine." I sucked in a deep breath and let it out. "But we're getting dressed and going down to the library."

Lasya made a face, and I raised a brow at him. "Let me guess, you find Zina intimidating?"

His scowl at that was priceless. "I do not. She is . . . a formidable woman. But the library is not my place."

"It's your place today. And for the record, Zina thinks you're great. She told me that if I wasn't on your side, she and I couldn't be friends."

His eyes widened fractionally, but he didn't say anything, just gave me a slightly confused nod and went to retrieve new clothing. "The things the tailor brought for you are here," he said as he went, motioning to a trunk. Sweet. Just what I'd wanted, a trunk so I could take them with me.

Except . . . I watched Lasya disappear into the closet, and it occurred to me that I wasn't sure I wanted to go home anymore. Oh, I'd never leave Blaze alone, thinking I was dead, but maybe . . . maybe I could just send him a letter. Let him know I was okay and living here with the hottest man ever born. That maybe I'd be back if we ever called it quits.

I didn't have time for that thought right then, though. Something about the vision had me on edge. I had to do it now. Had to leave Lasya's quarters, had to take him with me, had to, had to, had to.

So I pulled the trunk open and yanked out the first clothes I found there. The crimson silk tunic with a pair of sage green . . . pants? Were they called pants here? They were more like yoga pants than jeans, a little stretchy and tight on my legs, but either way I wasn't going to complain. They were comfy and warm.

I looked a little like Christmas, but that was okay. Christmas was fun. I liked giving presents to the people in my life.

I went over to the clothes hamper he'd tossed my stuff in and dug through till I found my cards, still tucked into the tunic pocket, pulling them out and hiding them away in my new tunic.

Lasya marched back out of his closet a moment later looking like a million bucks, also in a crimson shirt, but everything else black, his sword buckled on once more, and these over-the-knee buttoned leather boots that reminded me of a pirate and made me want to lick him.

Throwing a cloak over one shoulder like some kind of medieval fashionista, he held out an arm for me, like I was getting an escort to the ball. Fine by me. I was no Cinderella, but I could fake wicked stepmother any day.



All the best generals liked the evil stepmother, right?

## CHAPTER 24

## *Lasya*

**IT WAS** a vision of the future. It had to be that, because there was no other reason for River to suddenly demand to go to the library.

And clearly, I had been a non-negotiable part of the trip. He hadn't asked me to come, he had ordered it.

It had been long enough since I'd gotten an order from someone I liked, it had felt unfamiliar.

Had it ever happened? Possibly not. I'd hated my father and Tojan for nearly as long as I could remember, and Artyom's father had rarely come in contact with me, let alone told me what to do.

With Mellara, everything had been a request more than a demand.

And there was River, a constant surprise. He wanted me to order him around when I fucked him. Wanted me to manhandle him and shove my way inside him, fuck him until he screamed. But somehow, even with that, I didn't intimidate him at all, and nothing stopped him from telling me I was escorting him to the library, like there was no doubt.

Tojan and the dungeon hadn't intimidated him either. It was as though he was incapable of being intimidated.

Given the fire in his veins, it made sense for him to expect obedience when he commanded it.

To say nothing of the way I followed along with his demand to go to the library without a single complaint.

The head librarian did not intimidate me.

It was just that . . . she was a mage older than I was, and a powerful one. Also, she'd overseen my schooling, and she was a harsh critic.

*Read the book again, Lasya, and this time read what they aren't saying.*

How in the dark was I supposed to read what the writers *weren't* saying? I didn't have a hard time reading, but I'd never been good with subtext in books. It was easy to read body language and facial expression in person, but black and white words said nothing but what they said.

"You really don't like the library, huh?" River asked when we were nearing the place, knocking his shoulder into my arm. "I promise Zina doesn't bite. I mean, I didn't ask her to, but —"

I turned, grabbing him by the hips and shoving him into the wall, mashing our lips together in a harsh kiss, invading his mouth with my tongue, staking my claim to every inch of it.

When I pulled back, he was panting, eyes closed and half-smile on his swollen lips.

"You will not ask the librarian to bite you. That is for me to do, if you require someone to bite you."

His tiny smile turned into a full grin, and his eyes opened, half-lidded and full of the glowing embers of his fire. "Duly noted," he agreed breathily. "As for biting, we're pro-biting in this house. Biting is good. As long as, you know, you don't take a chunk out of me."

I let my teeth sharpen for a moment, using my battle shift and baring the long canines at him. He shivered, and it wasn't in fear. Or if it was, it wasn't the kind that made him push me away.

"We're definitely going to have to revisit this conversation after we get the book."

The book. That was something—more information than he'd given me before. "What book?"

He blinked in confusion, then shook his head. “Jesus, great job, River. I had a vision of a book. Big brown tome kind of book, with magic runes burned into the cover. I couldn’t read them. But we need the book.”

“For something specific?”

He sighed like a man thoroughly put upon, but I quickly realized it wasn’t at me. “Damned if I know. The visions don’t really work that way. I know we need to go to the library, and I know we need to get the book. That’s . . . pretty much all? I’m telling you, if anyone ever lets you pick your magic powers, don’t pick visions of the future. They’re fucking useless most of the time, and when they’re not, they suck.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I pulled away, righting our clothes and turning us back on our path toward the library. The description could likely be any of a hundred books, but I knew less about magic books than I did of battle and strategy ones. Zina would know. She’d been practically one with the library since before I’d been born.

When we walked in, she glanced up from the leather chair she was sitting in, reading one of her books. She looked like the queen of her own domain, sprawled over the chair and its matching footstool, and frankly, she might be. Even Tojan didn’t question her rule over the library.

She looked from me to River and back, then lifted a brow at me. “They’re a little more fragile than we are, Lasya. You need to be careful with your toys.”

I scowled at her. “River is not a toy.”

And of course, that had been what she’d wanted to hear, flashing me her brilliant smile and pushing out of her chair. “You can’t blame me for checking in. He looks a bit worse for wear, and I heard someone shoved him in the dungeon for a whole day.”

“That was Tojan,” I ground out, practically spitting with rage at the reminder. I doubted I’d be able to let it happen again, even given the same circumstances. The first time had

been bad enough, and spending the last twelve hours with River had been . . .

I couldn't quite put a finger on it, but something between us had changed.

Or perhaps it was something inside me. Something that had truly accepted that River wasn't Tojan's creature, and he actually seemed to care. About Artyom, about Halana, and somehow, about me.

It was still confusing, but I wasn't going to let it get away from me.

She slunk up to us, graceful and boneless as the small cat she sometimes shifted into. "I received a copy of your proclamation."

"The king's proclamation," I corrected.

She laughed. "Your proclamation, Lasya. I taught you to read and write. You think I wouldn't recognize your cleverness in it? You may never have learned to read for subtlety, but you can write it."

River popped up onto his toes like an excited child. "Can I see?"

Amused, she went to her desk and retrieved the parchment, handing it to him.

I scowled between them as he started to read but I—I did not need to stand about and wait for his opinion of my writing. "We've come for a book," I told her.

"Some book in particular, or will any do?" She scooted one halfway off the shelf. *Proper Manners for the Uninitiated*.

I shoved the book back in and crossed my arms. Damn her, how could she still make me feel like a child? "A book River saw. A magic book with a leather cover and runes burned onto it, he said."

"Oh wow," River muttered next to me.

"What?"

“Huh?” He stopped reading and looked up at us, blinking like a baby owl. “Oh, sorry, just reading this. This is pretty damn slick, Laz.”

Laz?

The librarian damned well chortled, so I glared at her again. She mouthed “slick” at me, but finally, thank the darkness, turned and motioned for us to follow.

I hooked my arm into River’s elbow and practically dragged him along as he went back to reading. “Did you know that you didn’t once mention my father in this whole thing? It’s like he doesn’t even exist. No wonder he was being such a little pissbaby back at the dungeon.”

Pissbaby?

It was like he was determined to confuse everyone around him.

“I did know that, yes. I wrote it.”

“Zina was right,” he said, motioning to her. “I don’t know about your reading, but you can write like a boss. ‘*The king’s first act on behalf of all Halana,*’ pointing out that he hasn’t been the one doing all that shit Dad’s done, but putting his name on this thing. ‘*A feast for every Halanan,*’ so Dad can’t try to claim it was only aimed at the rich assholes. This is great. In order to stop this, the douchebag has to literally say aloud that he doesn’t want to feed the poor and he won’t follow the king’s orders.”

I still didn’t know what a douchebag was, but River seemed to use it often as an insult. Also, he was correct. Those things had been my precise intention when writing the thing, and Artyom and I had gone over and discussed the purpose of every line.

I supposed my time in the library as a boy hadn’t been wasted.

“Burned runes,” Zina was whispering, somewhere behind a shelf nearby. A book with a pale blue binding peeked out from the end of the shelf. “This one?”

It did have burned runes, but River had said brown. “No, a brown book.”

“Brown,” she muttered. “Brown with burned runes.” Her footsteps retreated further, and I turned to look at River, who was still reading the proclamation. Or re-reading it, as he must have finished it by now. It wasn’t that long.

He looked up from the paper, smiled, and leaned in to kiss me on the cheek.

That was odd. Another thing I didn’t think anyone had ever done to me before. Well, maybe Mellara? It was a sweet gesture. Familial. It wasn’t how I thought of River, but no part of me had disliked it. I simply hadn’t ever had a relationship with a lover before that was in any part sweet.

“It’s not on these shelves,” River told Zina as he passed me. “It’s on the locked ones.”

Locked shelves? That didn’t bode well.

I’d never seen the section of the library River led us to, but sure enough, there was a locked case of books. A metal case, too, not wood like most of the rest of the library. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to be sure that no one would get to those books.

I thought of my father’s reference to ritual spells to steal Tojan’s life and took half a step back from it.

Sure enough, when she unlocked it for us, there was the book River wanted, right at eye level and facing out, almost like it had wanted to be found.

There was no time to be squeamish about magic, though, so I stepped up and accepted the book when River offered it to me. I half expected Zina to snatch it away, pointing out that I was terrible with subtlety again, and I shouldn’t have magical books that might have rituals to steal lives.

Not that I expected that to be River’s answer to our problems. It was my father’s answer to them, which by itself meant that River wouldn’t be interested in it.



The librarian didn't so much as ask questions about why we wanted the magic book, just let River scoop it up and hand it to me. She didn't even remind us to bring it back in the same shape in which we'd borrowed it, just called after us that we knew where to find her if we "needed" her.

I resisted the urge to bare my teeth in her direction. We did not need her, and that would not change. I was plenty for my human mage.

The majority of the book was written in magic runes, and they were not my specialty. I could read them, but it took me time as I leafed through the giant tome.

It contained all the major codified spells of our people. The Finding, the first ritual all children used to find their shift animals. The Custodia. There was even a ritual that said it was for opening portals, which made me jerk back in concern. A portal seemed a very dangerous thing, after the way River had arrived on Halana.

As I moved past the magic I knew, strength and healing and shifting, the spells became more disturbing. The theft of life my father had wanted. Spells to transfer—or steal—another mage's magic. A spell to remove magic altogether.

"Wait," River interrupted. "Read that again."

"To Remove Magic," I repeated, feeling once again strangely willing to follow orders.

"From what?"

"It doesn't say." I flipped to the next page of the spell. And the next. And . . . "This is a very complex ritual."

"Just for removing magic? You said the one to transfer it was only a few pages long. You'd think that would be more complicated, since you have to preserve and move it, not just take it away."

He was right. It was like the difference between removing a limb carefully then trying to reattach it to someone else, and simply slicing one off. Not that reattaching limbs was possible on Halana, but I'd struggled with the notion of moving magic from one being to another as well, and when I'd expressed

doubt, River had said that reattachment of limbs was possible on his world. Difficult, but possible.

The spell to move magic had looked long and complex, but this one was ten times as long. “The air pattern,” I muttered as I flipped the page. “The fire pattern?”

River’s hand came down on the page. “Show me.”

So I did. He traced the lines of it with his hand and gave a shiver. “Yeah, that’s . . . that’s something. Important.”

My eyes strayed to the end of the page, and I stared. “This is where the mage of the spirit will need aid. It is not possible to perform the ritual without them giving up their own heart of magic.”

“What? That sounds fucking terrifying. What’s a heart of magic?”

I stared for a moment, then looked up at him. “Their magic. It means their magic. The mage of the spirit will no longer be a mage. He will be trapped in whatever form he performed the ritual. Forever.”

We stared at each other, then back down at the spell, before River asked, slightly shakily, “Why would anyone do that?”

I flipped to the next page, skimming the words as I went, and paused at the end of the instructions. “The heart of magic in every mage in the area affected will be dispersed and made one with the land.”

I looked up at him, and we both simply sat with that for a moment.

“You’re going to have to protect my scrawny ass with that sword of yours for the rest of our lives, you know.”

Somehow, despite what we were looking at, I smiled at him. What could I say? We were looking at a spell that would literally take the magic out of every mage on Halana, and there he was, telling me that not only would he go through with it, he’d stay with me after.

There was no way to know if I’d revert to my natural form and be stuck that way. No way to be sure I would survive at

all. In performing the Custodia, a mage set his heart of magic inside someone else, and if it was destroyed, the mage usually died. Admittedly, there were often extenuating circumstances related to that.

After what felt like an eternity of silence, River spoke again. He was nervous. It was understandable; so was I. “We’re both thinking the same thing here, right? I mean, this is . . . it’s kind of everything you’re worried about. You think if you stop my father, another mage will just jump in and take his place, because they all have more power than elves, and they’re not afraid to force everyone to their will with it.”

I nodded, tapping the last line of the ritual again. Hearts of magic dispersed. Made one with the land. Did the land have magic inside it? What would the land do with that magic?

And what of River’s magic? Was it fair to ask him to give it up?

I turned to the next page, expecting some new horror of a spell, but instead, there were scratched notes.

The first was in a long, elegant hand:

*Devised as a punishment for spirit mages who committed the most horrific of crimes, to remove most of their capability to harm others. If used with a proper circle, the magic removal will affect every spirit mage within, removing their magic and leaving them stuck in the form they are currently using. Inverting the circle could be catastrophic.*

And then below it, in Tojan’s handwriting:

*The inverted circle must be what the humans used to get rid of their spirit mages, but they have no other forms, so the weaklings just died. Damn them.*

“Spirit’s Loss,” River whispered. “Fuck, Lasya, this won’t take my magic, just yours. Just spirit magic.”

I nodded. “Then this is precisely what we need.”

Perhaps losing part of myself wasn’t what I wanted. Perhaps, in fact, it was the most terrifying thing I’d considered

in my life. And taking away the magic of every mage I knew? I didn't have the right, did I?

I thought of those mages loyal to me, and how they might react to the loss. It was a lot to give up. Power. Strength. They would have to relearn so much. But they already cared more about Halana than themselves, and I didn't doubt they would give up anything to make it safe. Some of them would even be happier that way.

There would be no all-consuming hunger any longer, no constant gnawing in our bellies when we only ate a normal, elven amount of food. No one who could or would eat and eat and do nothing else while the rest of Halana starved. Because Halana could not feed both the mages and elves—because nothing could feed the mages.

Nothing could ever truly sate our hunger.

Except this. Making us all elves, just like the rest of Halana.

Perhaps I didn't have the right to make this choice on behalf of all mages. But how could I not make it for the elves?

## CHAPTER 25

## *River*

I COULD SEE the moment Lasya decided. He was still twisted up about it, but he was certain, too.

I couldn't blame him.

And hell, I'd have made the same choice in a second. I had, even when I'd expected that it would affect me.

This spell probably wasn't going to kill anyone. Just stop some of them from having power over others. Power they'd proven over centuries that they would use to hurt people.

I was a selfish asshole, but honestly, I was most worried about Lasya. Not that I wasn't going to miss that hot ass demon form, because I was, but I knew he'd feel bad about this choice.

There was just one other problem.

“So. There's a fire pattern. And an air pattern. Earth and water too?”

He paged back through the ritual then looked up at me, nodding. “Yes, all of them. What does it mean?”

“Offhand? I'd say maybe a long time ago, Halana had five kinds of mages, just like Earth did. And now you've just got one.”

Lasya's shoulders dropped and his head fell forward. “The spell cannot be performed without more mages like you. Even if we think it the only way to solve our problems, we cannot use it.”

“I didn’t say that,” I hedged, leafing back a few pages and tapping on one of the earlier spells.

Lasya reared back. “A portal? But you said the last one almost destroyed Earth and Halana.”

“And I stand by that. But that was a permanent portal the size of a football field made by a full circle. We just want a tiny little temporary portal made by you alone. At the moment.” I winced, because of course, the whole idea wasn’t that simple. But Blaze was smart. Hell, my brother was one of the smartest guys I knew, and not just because he was my twin, so we were the same. I was solidly of the belief that he was actually smarter than me, as much as he’d have never believed it.

If anyone could figure out how to make a portal without destroying the worlds, it was him.

First, I copied the portal spell exactly, line for line, making sure to recreate even the things I suspected were accidental accents and marks from after the printing. Then, I wrote a note.

*Blaze. Guess who?*

*Yeah, not dead. Long story. Need a full circle to make all spirit mages on Halana un-magical for keeps. Any way you can figure out how to get me Bart, Verity, and a water mage who isn’t you?*

*Fair warning: with no spirit mages left on Halana, they’ll probably be trapped here. If they’d rather send other people, I get it.*

Bart was an air mage, of course, and Verity earth. My very own square, Blaze and the two of them, not that I’d made it on purpose. It wasn’t like a square was all that much use anyway.

Except for this once, with Lasya’s help.

It turned out that when you had a connection to Earth, sending a portal there wasn’t all that hard. I had Lasya read me the translated spell word for word a few times, and—

*Tethers.*

Christ on a cracker, me and Blaze were the tethers they'd all been going on about, but not just because we existed—through the connection to motherfucking Tojan. Like two tacked ends of a string, except that with Dad, that string had been tiny and frayed, because Blaze hadn't been close to him, and I hadn't loved him.

With Blaze? Please. We had this.

Lasya was still concerned about portals being dangerous, but we needed a circle, and there was no way around it.

If we just opened a small temporary portal, the worlds would be safe—it had been done multiple times with no ill effect. Well, except that one priest who'd exploded in the void between worlds. And the one who'd expended all of his magic to create the portal, killing himself.

I was concerned too, obviously, but for other reasons. Like how that priest had died because he'd used up all his magic, and we were talking about a spell that used up all the magic in every mage. The spell said they would live, but we'd seen it was possible to die of lack of magic.

Lasya went through the ritual, complete with some gobbledegook about fire and flood, which . . . jeez, Dad, on the nose much? Had he fucking named us Blaze and River so he'd have a fire and a flood like in the ridiculous ritual chant?

*Asshole.*

Joke was on all of us, when I'd turned out a fire mage and Blaze a water one.

When a tiny portal the size of a cat formed over the chalk circle Lasya and I had drawn, it wasn't anything like the other ones had been. It didn't have a forbidding black center, looking across the void between Halana and Earth.

It opened straight into my goddamned living room. And there, just like the vision I'd seen not so long ago, were Blaze and Elethen, sitting on the couch eating potato chips. They both turned to stare at the portal, and I shoved the pages we'd written through.



Blaze leapt forward, snatching them as they fell out, and from the shape his mouth formed, I could tell he was shouting my name. That was my baby brother. I smiled and waved, then shot him the ASL sign for tomorrow. We'd both taken it as our language elective in high school, so I figured he'd remember.

Hell, even if not, it looked cool anyway, and that was what really mattered, right?

Elethen, standing behind Blaze, was staring at Lasya, expression dark and . . . was that worried? Not too shocking, I supposed, other than him caring enough about me to worry. He probably suspected that I was working under duress, since they had been on opposite sides of the political conflict, and I was pretty sure Lasya's part in the rebellion was totally on the down low.

And he was probably only worried that Blaze was going to get dragged into Halanan politics, which was more than understandable. I wouldn't allow that to happen.

I'd burn down every fucking mage alive before I'd let them hurt Blaze.

Especially our father.

Trying to show Elethen that Lasya was safe . . . ish, I turned to him and motioned across my throat. "Cut the portal now."

He seemed to have an instinctive understanding for what I was trying to do, inclining his head and then reaching out to rub away the activation rune at the base of the chalk circle.

"It did not seem particularly dangerous," he said looking at the empty space in the air where the portal had hung.

I shook my head. "I don't think it was. I think it's just when you're trying to make it permanent that it tries to suck the worlds together. Plus I think—I think that the connection is better now. I think the tether is me and Blaze. And before, I think it was us and Tojan, which . . . is the weakest fucking connection I can imagine."

He considered for a moment, then nodded. "It did open directly to him, which seemed odd. He . . . he looks very like

you, this Blaze.”

I scoffed at that. “He looks exactly like me. We’re twins. It’s a human thing, I guess. Two babies born at the same time with the same genes.”

Lasya didn’t seem fazed by the idea at all, just plowed forward in the conversation. “And he is romantically entangled with Elethen Voransa?”

“He is. I’m pretty sure they’re that sappy disgusting forever kind of thing. Exchanging rings and all that jazz.” I paused, frowning. “That’s a marriage thing. You have marriage here, right?”—when he nodded, I went on—“on Earth, people who get married usually exchange rings. Some old custom.”

“A circle to represent eternity,” he offered, which was—huh. I’d never thought of it that way. “Many do the same here. Some mages force all of their servants to wear a ring with their mark for the same reason.”

I shot him double finger guns and a fake grin. “That’s totally fucking gross. Sounds about right.”

I was about to make the snarky suggestion that he could get me a set of handcuffs instead, since they were also a representation of being held together, but I could slip them anytime I wanted, and also, handcuffs were convenient for sexy times once in a while . . . but there was a series of sharp raps on the door to his rooms before I could even broach the topic.

Before he could even answer, the sound came again. He went to open the door while I used my hand to wipe away the remnants of the chalk circle. Didn’t want anyone to know what we’d been up to.

“General, you have to leave immediately,” Lasya’s second was saying from the doorway. “The priest’s men are on the way to arrest you.”

I hefted the book into my arms and joined Lasya in the doorway. “Arrest him? What the fuck for?”

The man bit his lip, meeting Lasya's eyes for a second then looking away. "They say you murdered your father. That you wanted his position as general."

"He . . . he *has* the position as general," I pointed out.

The man looked to me and nodded. "I think—I think the king will be able to fix it, but that doesn't help right this moment, and they aren't going to the king asking permission. They're planning to murder you on sight. If they catch you in the palace, they'll kill you."

That strange expressionless look was falling into place on Lasya's face. Battle armor, I realized, the same way my cocky asshole grin was. He nodded. "He will try to avoid the king finding out as long as possible, so that he won't receive orders that countermand his wishes."

There had to be some truth behind the claim, then, if Lasya was treating it as a serious accusation.

"The king *will* countermand it," the man hissed, leaning in. "You already told him, and he practically praised you for it. The bastard got no worse than he deserved. Better, likely."

Lasya fell completely into his serene persona and nodded. "Yes. But that isn't our first concern. As of now, I am a fugitive, and you are in charge of the guard. You'll order them to arrest me on sight, so that I can be brought before the king for his judgment."

The man's look was one of pure outrage, and he opened his mouth, no doubt to refuse, but Lasya held up a hand to stop him.

"The king comes first. I appreciate your loyalty, Eral. You cannot know how much I appreciate it. But the king must come first, always. If my own men arrest me and bring me to him, the result will be precisely as you expect, but we cannot treat me as though I am above the law."

My father's plan was as clear as though we could see into his head. If Lasya didn't survive long enough to see the king or be excused, it didn't matter if the king wanted him executed or not. And as long as the priests hadn't heard the king order

that Lasya was not to be harmed, they could claim innocence and pretend the law was on their side.

Shoot first and ask questions later as a plan of attack.

“But he can’t arrest you right now,” I added, making both of them look at me in question. “I’m sure the first place they stationed people was around the king. If you even try to get there right now, you’ll be dead before you get close. We have to go.”

Eral nodded, intelligent eyes narrowed in thought. “They’re likely also stationed at every exit to the palace, though. Even the servants’ entrance you often use, general. The king has taken his first steps to true rule. The priest knows that if he allows this to continue, he won’t be able to handle both of you. He’s trying to make quick work of you so that you won’t be here to protect the king.”

It was a good call; I could see why Lasya considered the guy indispensable. Still, this was one step, and my father had two. “You need to get to the king. I know he’s got a huge guard on him already, but if my father can’t get to Lasya, or even if he does, murdering the king is the next step. Make sure the king’s guard is impenetrable, even by all my father’s mages. Lasya and I can handle ourselves, even if I have to kill some assholes to make it happen.”

Eral met my eye, nodded like the order had come from Lasya himself, and took a step back. “Anything else before you go? I will inform the guards of the change, and that you’re to be arrested if they find you.” He glanced around, then gave a little half-shrug. “In an hour or so.”

Lasya smiled at him but shook his head. “That is all, Eral. Good luck and darkness shelter you.”

“And you, my general. If I do not see you again, it has been an honor, and you may trust that I and the king’s guard will fight to the last to keep faith.”

In unison, they reached out to grip each other’s shoulders for a second, and then Eral was striding away.

Lasya watched him go, and only when he was gone did he turn to me, eyes concerned. “You should leave me. I have no way out of the palace that Tojan’s people do not know of. Likely, they even have archers on the roof in case I attempt to shift and fly away.”

I scoffed at him. “I said I’d get you out even if I have to kill some assholes, and I meant it. Also, I bet I know a way out. Or at least a good place to hide.”

Lasya scowled at me. “The library.”

I held in my laughter and didn’t even make a joke about Zina probably being a good biter, since we had enough trouble without me being an ass and picking a fight. I did, however, agree. “The library.”

## CHAPTER 26

## *Lasya*

IT WASN'T the first time I'd fled the palace, but it was the first time I'd done so as a wanted man.

River had been right about the library, of course.

We ducked from one hallway to another, hiding in dark rooms and shadowed alcoves to avoid patrols of priests, and the moment we walked into the library, Zina was waiting at the door.

I stepped between her and River, entirely expecting the pattern of my life to continue with another betrayal.

Not from River. Never from River, not anymore. From the woman who'd taught me how to read and told me that I was both an excellent strategist and the world's poorest reader, both with a smile and tone of exasperated fondness.

She didn't attack, though. Instead, she motioned for us to follow, leading us back into the depths of the library, where there were almost more books than light, and no windows to speak of.

"Librarian?" came the call of a familiar voice as we reached what seemed to be a dead end, and my belly rolled with nerves. Was this the moment of betrayal? When she called out that she had the traitor cornered?

The voice was Tojan's second, so it would be easy enough to get the priesthood's aid.

Zina turned to us, face entirely serious as she reached out to tap one book, then another on the very last shelf in the row.

It sprang open on silent hinges, and she motioned us in even as she called out, “one moment, priest, I’m just reshelving in the back.”

Then she turned to us and whispered, “Take the second exit, not the first.”

Without another word, she closed the bookshelf after us, leaving us in total darkness.

It didn’t last long, as River pushed the book of spells into my chest and held up a hand, summoning a ball of fire to hover above it. His smile was cocksure and a relief to see.

“Told you,” he whispered, and turned to follow the path before us.

I couldn’t complain—he *had* told me, and he’d been right. Zina had not betrayed me. Nor had Eral. Or River. I had to swallow hard and push my emotions down. I didn’t have time for that. In the moment, I simply allowed myself to be grateful that I was alive and I could try to preserve myself and my home for just a while longer.

If River’s brother managed to find the mages we needed and send them over, they would no doubt be sent straight to us, since River was the tether. We just needed to hide and live long enough to get to that point.

To end the tyranny of mages on Halana forever.

Even if it killed me in the end, it was a small price to pay for the safety of millions. The safety of my king and the people I’d sworn to protect. Any price was nothing, if it went to that end.

We followed Zina’s instructions, taking not the first exit from the tunnel, but the second, and it led us into a small alley in the merchant district. It wasn’t precisely a safe place to be, as some of the richest merchants were mages who supported Tojan, but hopefully word hadn’t spread this far yet. Tojan still had to believe me trapped somewhere in the palace, and the quieter he kept this disaster, the better for him.

Publicizing that a mage had been murdered was the last thing he wanted to do, lest it give anyone ideas on how to deal



with the rest of us.

But where could I go? The warehouse was gone, burned to ash. The last house I knew Mellara to live in had been raided when Elethen had been taken prisoner. There were safe houses for members of the rebellion scattered across the city, but I wasn't wanted as a rebel. I was wanted as a murderer. I couldn't drag them into that.

The thought came to me in a moment of clarity. Elethen. Of course.

I'd only been there once before, but I would never in my life be able to forget the way.

I shoved the book under one arm so that it was hidden by my cloak and grasped River's hand, leading him out of the merchant district, down temple row and into the former university district. It had been a rich area once, hundreds of years before my birth. When Halana had been flourishing, and we had a school for higher learning. Before Artyom's grandfather, my father, and Tojan had taken over.

It was a little run down now, but still too expensive for the majority of Halanans, with beautiful marble architecture and lush gardens, many of them overgrowing because of neglect. It had been the perfect place for Elethen to live, romantic scoundrel that he was.

River and I found the correct alley and made our way behind a row of homes, to the wrought iron staircase that led to the second story of the building. I handed the book back to him and dropped to my knees before the door, much to his amusement. He was less amused and more impressed when I pulled the lock picks out of a belt pouch and made quick work of the door.

It smelled a bit dusty inside, but not so much that it was going to hurt anyone. Elethen had been living there just a few weeks earlier, after all, when he could manage to get in and out without being seen.

A lot of mage families who had once had money but run through it lived in the district, and the building had belonged

to his mother before him. It was all that was left of the Voransa family legacy.

The rest of the place was decorated with their own legacy—The Crow’s legacy.

Beautiful objects one or the other of them had stolen and been unable to fence. Shiny things they’d been drawn to and unable to part with, like a silver samovar that I doubted had been used in over a century, but sat on a table, perfectly preserved and polished.

River looked around, eyes narrowed in confusion. It was understandable. The place was a cross between a museum of perfectly preserved art objects and a half-abandoned bird’s nest.

“What the hell is this?”

I spread my arms and tried for a theatrical smile. “This is the lair of the great criminal mastermind, The Crow.”

“The—are you saying this is Elethen’s house? He fucking lived in this . . . this mausoleum?”

I didn’t know what a mausoleum was, but I liked the word. It fit, somehow. Instead of answering, I wrapped an arm around River’s waist and led him into what had once been a parlor, arranged for receiving company with a heavy wool rug, dusty velvet furniture, and thick draperies on the walls. There, above a fireplace, was a portrait of a stunningly beautiful woman with raven hair and bright green eyes.

River paused, staring at it.

He turned to me. “Am I losing my mind?”

“I doubt it.”

“That’s . . . that’s—”

“Esfir Voransa. Last member of an old noble line of Halana, but whose family had nearly nothing by the time she was born. Nothing but a very beautiful daughter, whom they hoped to marry well, but who refused to marry at all. At one time courted by *the general himself*.” I stressed the last,

cocking an eyebrow and nodding as though it was something terribly important.

The way no doubt everyone had at the time.

“She decided she wanted no part of the controlling ass and broke off their courtship after less than a year.”

“And when she discovered she was pregnant?” River asked. Of course he’d already figured it all out. How very River.

“The first time, or the second?” I asked.

He shook his head. “The first time she turned the baby over to his father. Maybe she was too young to be taking care of a kid, or maybe she just thought his father could give him a better life. Or hell, maybe she knew he wanted a baby and could take him away from her if he learned about his existence.”

“The last, likely,” I agreed.

“And the second. That was the time he raped her. The time that almost made you run away for good.”

I nodded, staring at the only image I’d ever seen of my mother. The only time I’d ever seen her not sobbing as I smuggled her out of the palace, taking her away from the room my father had imprisoned her in. “And Elethen, she kept. She managed to keep him a secret and hide him from our father. She hid from him the rest of her life. She even had the front doors to this mansion boarded up so that it would appear she’d left Madranai. When my father had it broken into searching for her, there was nothing there but covered furniture.”

River dropped the book on a nearby chair, making it let out an enormous puff of dust, but ignored that in favor of turning and throwing his arms around me. “Jesus Christ, Lasya. That’s so fucked up.”

“I think you know what it is, though, to be an older brother. Even if he will never think of me that way.”

He pushed back, eyes wide. “You let him escape.”

I laughed. It was the strangest feeling, a weight lifted off my chest. Only Eral had known of my plan to help Elethen escape custody, and not the real reason for it. Not that I wouldn't have helped any member of the rebellion if possible, but this had been different. Important in the way little but family could be, and even if Elethen always hated me, he would forever be the only family I had left.

I'd had to protect him.

Just as I'd begged Mellara to help him when I learned he'd been arrested for stealing. And Mellara, as she did for everyone but herself, had gone so far out of her way for my brother. The woman had started a riot to have him broken out of a cell, just because I'd asked it of her.

By the time he'd been dragged into the palace in shackles, though, it had been too late to just set him free in Madranai again. He couldn't so much as take a walk in the city without being recognized, and Tojan had started making so-clever comments about how similar we looked. Little wonder, when we both looked exactly like our mother.

Setting Elethen loose in the palace and trying to herd him toward where Tojan's priests were opening portals had been a desperate, last-ditch attempt to save him.

If he stayed on Halana, he was as good as dead. So I'd had to give him a way to escape Halana, and somehow, with absolute perfection before I'd even had hope for such things, it had worked. He was in a good place, sitting in luxury with River's puppyish little brother, safe and happy.

And in a way, I'd asked him to once again dive into the disaster that was Halana. I could only hope that he did what River had asked of his brother and stayed out of it.

There was no food in the house, because we were in Madranai and not the palace itself, but fortunately, we'd eaten well that morning. I was sure that as a child of Tojan, River had known hunger at some point in his life. The man liked to weaponize hunger too much for it to be otherwise.

Since even Tojan didn't know this place—he'd have razed it to the ground years ago if he had—we were safe for the moment. As safe as a wanted man on the run and his lover could be.

All we had to do was wait.

## CHAPTER 27

MY MIND WAS SWIMMING through the circles inside circles of intrigue.

Elethen and Lasya were brothers. Not even half-brothers, just straight up brothers. The absolute tap dance Lasya had been doing for years to protect Elethen was mind-blowing.

I'd always thought my one virtue in the world was that when our father had failed, I'd helped to raise my brother, and he'd turned out a better man than me. Somehow, Lasya had done the same thing, but more.

Also, it was a little weird, wasn't it? We were . . . sort of fucking our brothers' lovers' brothers.

Okay maybe not so much weird as tongue twister. Or both.

Plus poor Elethen didn't have a clue unless I'd missed something major about him, and I doubted that. But then, I imagined that had been Lasya's goal. If I'd been able to spare Blaze any knowledge of our father, I'd have done it in a heartbeat. Good for Lasya.

I was still worried about what was to come.

I wasn't naive enough to think Blaze would do as I asked. He would come himself, of course. How could I expect otherwise of him, when I would do the same?

But that meant that there was a good—bad, really—chance that Blaze was going to learn about Tojan. That our father had never loved us. That everything in our childhoods had been a lie. That we'd been created as the exact tools he'd treated us

as. He barely even saw us as human, and that only because he looked down on humans so completely anyway.

Hell, he hadn't even bothered having me murdered. I wasn't worthy of assassination, and he'd always thought even less of Blaze than me.

Unconsciously, I bared my teeth.

Lasya raised a brow. "Thinking of your father or mine?"

"Both," I hissed. Then I recalled the accusation. "Did you really kill your father?"

Lasya considered for a moment, eyes going hazy. "I suppose I did," he finally said. "I took the poisoned food to him when I went to ask him to use whatever influence or knowledge he had left to help me get you out of the dungeon. I—I am not certain why I took it. He was even more an ass than usual. Told me I needed to let you die. I didn't much think about it. I just dropped the plate onto one of his and left him to it, without warning him it was poisoned. He'd been staring at it. I suspected he would eat it. No. I knew. I knew he would eat it."

That all made perfect sense to me. I'd have probably done it all more intentionally than Lasya, if I were being honest. The only thing that didn't make sense was—"One of his?"

Lasya's nose turned up in distaste, as it so often did when we were discussing mages, and he told me about his father, and the fact that for eight years, all he'd done was consume ever-increasing amounts of food. More important, how he'd ended up an invalid because Artyom's father had wounded him during his actual assassination.

Good for Artyom's father. Hell, that action, hurting Lasya's father, was probably the only reason Artyom was still alive. The only reason he might survive to be an adult.

*Well done, Artyom's father.*

I just shrugged and leaned on his shoulder. "You killed a monster. Human mythology is full of stories about heroes slaying monsters, and this was definitely one of those."



“Only you among all people think me a hero,” Lasya said, voice filled with a too familiar self-loathing, and . . . nope. Not acceptable.

There wasn't a lot we could do right then. We were hiding until we got help, so we couldn't go out or talk to people or hell, even go get food. But there was one thing I was pretty sure we could do.

I pulled away from him, snatching the book back up—the thing was not leaving my sight until we'd finished the ritual—then taking his hand and wandering through the rest of the . . . I hesitated to call it a house, but I didn't have a better word, either. Maybe Lasya had been right when he'd called it a lair. In places, it looked almost like an antique store.

Anyway, bedroom. There had to be a bedroom somewhere in the place, right? Elethen didn't sleep standing up.

It was the last door at the end of the hall, and no, Elethen did not sleep standing up. Somehow, it was the nicest room in the place, almost as beautifully decorated as Lasya's rooms in the palace.

I dragged Lasya over to the bed, dropping the book on a small bedside table, and turned to look at him. “The way I see it, there's one thing we can do with the next day while we wait for backup.”

He quirked a brow, but didn't point out the obvious.

So I did.

“I propose we spend the next twelve hours or so fucking, then sleep some if we're so inclined.”

Lasya's smile—his real, genuine, pleased smile—was one of the most beautiful things I'd seen in my life. “And Zina says that *I'm* the best strategist on Halana.”

“I mean, strategy and tactics are different things. Just because you're great at seeing the big picture doesn't mean you don't forget things in the moment. Now, I was promised a biting, if I recall correctly.” I stepped into his space, and in that less-than-a-breath that it took me to do that, he'd reverted to his true form and was already wrapping his arms around me.

It took just a second to acclimate to the unexpected height change, popping up onto my toes to plant a kiss on him.

I forced myself not to think about how I'd miss that enormous demon after the ritual. It was worth it. What was more, it was Lasya's choice, not mine, and if it made him happy, then anything was worth the price.

He laid me across the bed and stripped me slow, one piece of clothing at a time, scraping his sharp teeth over every fresh stretch of bared skin, but still not biting. When I glared at him, he grinned that sharp grin, but continued on his chosen path.

The hot, perfect, utter asshole.

When he'd stripped me completely naked and stood over me, still fully dressed, he pulled away, looking me over as though I was a canvas he'd painted, satisfied with his work. He ran the tip of one claw up my cock, gentle and soft with just the slightest hint of threat because, you know, it was a fucking claw.

Just as I opened my mouth to demand that he get on with it, and faster than I could track with my eyes, he reached down to grab my ankles, and flipped me onto my belly. "On your knees," he growled out. "Give me your ass."

*Fuuuuck.* Yeah, that was what nearly every other sexual relationship I'd been in had been missing.

Lasya, basically.

Slowly, because I was nothing if not a brat in situations like this, I pulled myself up onto my knees, shooting a look over my shoulder. I wasn't sure whether it promised heaven or hell, but it made his eyes narrow with lust, and that was what mattered. He grabbed at something on Elethen's bedside table—a bottle of oil. That was convenient.

A moment later oiled fingers were pressed up against my ass, pushing their way inside. "Prep," I managed to say around a grunt at the force of him. "That's a first."

"Are you complaining?" He sounded amused, so it seemed I'd gotten it right. Sometimes when I was an asshole it hurt people's feelings. Lasya was good at seeing through my

bravado like no one else had ever been. Even more, he seemed to know what I wanted. “Besides, I’m planning to fuck you into this bed until you can’t remember anything but the feel of my cock inside you. Can’t start by hurting you if I plan to properly take you apart.”

Case in point.

His thick fingers pressed into me, and I hadn’t known he could control the claws, but I didn’t get so much as a twinge from them, so he must be able to. Still, he only gave me a few strokes, stretching me out, before pulling back.

I leaned forward onto my crossed arms, so just my ass was sticking up in the air, my knees spread wide. Behind me, the rustle of clothes told me he was finally stripping—or at least baring his cock. Not that there was anything compelling about the image of him fully dressed and fucking me into the bed.

I didn’t arch up at all.

Okay, not much.

The bed shifted as he climbed up onto it, grabbing my hips in his iron grip, manhandling my ass into place right where he wanted it. A second later he was sliding into me, his oiled cock head slipping past the outer ring of my entrance.

I wasn’t much given to poetry, but somehow, it felt like coming home.

The top half of my body went lax as I breathed out, letting him hold me in place and fill me up. He rubbed a hand down my back, soothing and sweet even as he pushed inside me, an inch at a time.

When he was fully seated inside me, balls pressed against my own, he paused there. I wanted to squirm or whine or force him to do something, but he seemed to know it, as he slid a hand down to grab my hair, holding me in place with one hand in my hair and the other still on my hip.

I wanted to demand that he move, but something stopped me. I didn’t know if it was the fact that he was a fucking seven-foot-tall demon who could snap my neck with a twitch,

or if I just knew that if I waited, he'd not only give it to me, but he'd give me exactly what I didn't know I needed.

He always seemed to do that.

After too goddamn long, he slid out with the same excruciating slowness as he'd slid in.

I sucked in a breath to demand he fucking get on with it, and of course, that was when he did. He shoved back in with enough force that it pushed the breath out of me, leaning down to chuckle in my ear. "Problem, sweet?"

"Asshole," I gasped out, his cock rubbing against every part of me as he slid out again, and oh hell, my eyes rolled up in my head and I couldn't . . . couldn't . . . words.

Every nerve ending lit up with the electricity of him fucking me with abandon, his cock hitting my prostate by default because it hit fucking every part of me with each thrust. I couldn't move, couldn't talk, couldn't even think as he slammed into me over and over, and that high pitched whine couldn't possibly be coming from me, could it?

Fuck, it was.

He used his grip on my hair to pull me up onto my knees, my back pressed to his chest, then dropped my hair and wrapped that arm around me. He pinched at one nipple and then the other, making me jerk back and forth, whimpering, while the hand still on my hip held me firm against him.

I let my head fall onto his shoulder. Or his upper chest, since he was fucking giant-sized. I tried to pant out his name, but a hard pull to my nipple as he thrust all the way inside once again turned it into a gasp and moan.

"Still trying to complain?" he whispered in my ear, and I could *hear* the grin in the words. "Ahh, of course, I haven't given you your biting, have I? So remiss."

He let me fall forward onto my hands once more, bending over me and sinking his teeth into the spot between my shoulder and neck, like a fucking vampire.

Who always thought vampires were hot? Yeah, me too.

The sting was too much. I reached down and took my cock in hand, trusting Lasya to hold me up, and he didn't let me down—literally. It took less than two tugs, twisting my fingers around the tip of my cock and squeezing, before I shot off like a goddamn rocket, the feel of Lasya's teeth in my neck almost more the focal point than my dick.

That was when something super fucking weird happened.

Behind me, Lasya tensed, and . . . white-hot pleasure shot through his body, echoing into mine, making my cock keep helplessly twitching and jolting in my hand as—as we both came, and I felt it, growing and bursting within us like a bonfire. Like an explosion.

My hand dropped, and I collapsed in his arms, only his iron grip holding me up and keeping his teeth in my flesh.

Where they belonged? That was a weird thought.

He rolled us to our sides, and we collapsed there in the middle of the bed, trembling with aftershocks of the explosion for a long time, drifting on that tiny sting of his teeth in me, and the slow burn of his cock pulsing inside me.

His mind inside me. Sated and warm and pleased and just as confused as I was, but not the least bit unhappy about it. Pleased at being connected to me in a way that felt almost alarmingly permanent.

And yet, as horrified as I knew I would have been if it had been anyone else, somehow a connection to Lasya didn't feel like too much. It wasn't overwhelming, and I didn't have the tiniest urge to escape.

No, if anything, a smug satisfaction was growing in my chest from the awareness that he was mine. Irrevocably and perfectly, Lasya Zarani was mine.

The sudden ability to feel what he felt only meant that I could help him when he needed it. The presumption that he was getting the same? Without feeling it, I'd have assumed I would see it as an intrusion. But it wasn't. It was . . . comfortable. Never again would he have to feel as though I might betray him. He could always know that I would never.

That I despised my father even more than he did, and I would never let him hurt another person if I could help it.

It wasn't a prison cell.

It was the kind of perfect acceptance that I'd never even hoped for.

## CHAPTER 28

## *Lasya*

I WOKE WITH A START, convinced someone was rapping on the door.

My mind was sent right back to Eral knocking wildly on the door of my suite in the palace until we answered, only to tell us that I was a wanted man. That the priest and his followers would kill me on sight.

Because I had murdered my father.

I searched the constant hollow space in my chest, so much smaller than it had always been before, looking for some tiny amount of guilt or shame over my actions. I found none. I was glad he was dead. I only wished someone had killed him sooner. Artyom might still have a father. I might still have a mother.

The rapping came again, but this time it definitely wasn't a dream. Someone was knocking on the door.

Were we discovered?

That was ridiculous. If Tojan's people had found us, they'd have broken down the door and killed me, not knocked like polite little assassins.

On the other side of the door came a deep sigh. "I can smell that you've been fucking in my bed. I get it, I really do, but also, we need you to come out here and explain why you've summoned us here with a circle of mages."

Oh no.

No, this was the opposite of what I wanted.



I jumped out of bed and rushed across the room, snatching the door open so fast it rattled on its hinges. “What are you doing here? We asked for elemental mages, not you.”

Because of course, standing there on the other side of the door was Elethen Voransa.

Elethen Voransa looking rather unimpressed, at that.

“I don’t take orders from you,” he sneered, looking me over with absolute disgust. More likely disgust at me personally than at my nakedness, but it still made me want to cover my scars. “Even less so when you’re asking me for favors and fucking in my bed. Did you convince Blaze’s brother that you’re less a monster than your friends, and he should back you in some coup against the boy king?”

Was that truly what he thought of me? I shouldn’t have been surprised. It was probably what all Halana thought of me. Just another manipulative monster, like my father. Like Tojan.

An arm wrapped around Elethen from behind, and a boy who looked very like River came to stand beside him. “Elethen, I know you’ve only known my brother a few days, but you know damn well no one can manipulate him that easily. He’s the most jaded asshole alive.”

It wouldn’t have surprised me if someone had told me this boy was River’s son just as River was Tojan’s. He didn’t seem any more of a literal child than River, but there was a softness around his eyes that River had lost to harsh reality at some point in his life.

Without offense to Elethen’s lover, that sharpness in River was one of his most attractive features.

Elethen didn’t take his eyes off me, though, narrowed and filled with hate. “You don’t know them. You don’t know what they’re like. How they treat my people.”

A groan came from the bed, and River sighed and sat up. “Fuck, Blaze, couldn’t you wait till noon?”

“It is noon!” the boy insisted, then, with a little less strength, “Well, almost noon.”

“It’s ten,” came a dry, masculine voice from another room. “Take your time bossman. The hunk of beef standing guard over you looks like he could take it out of a guy.” A blond man ambled into the doorway, leaning in the frame with a lazy smile. “I’m Bart, by the way.”

“Bartholomew, do not flirt with the boss’s beefcake.” A woman who looked nothing like the librarian but somehow reminded me of her followed him into the doorway, taking him by the ear and pulling him back into the other room.

He went without complaint, but he shot me a wink anyway, after giving me a twice over.

That was . . . odd.

Every part of my life was odd, anymore.

Well, except Elethen, who hated me every bit as much as expected. He leaned in, narrowing his bright green eyes that reminded me so much of every glance I took in the mirror. “If you even think about hurting any one of these people, even River, I will remove your balls and feed them to you.”

That was . . . vivid.

“What the hell?” River asked, grabbing his tunic from the end of the bed and shoving it over his head before coming to stand next to me. “Where did you get language like that?”

“Bart,” Blaze answered. “He’s taken it upon himself to teach Elethen proper Earth English during his off hours.”

“And that involves removing people’s balls?” I asked as I unsubtly wrapped my arm around River.

Elethen noticed it too, his eyes narrowing even more as they shot to mine. He really wanted to follow through on that threat. “Only people who threaten those I care about. Not that you’d understand caring about—”

“That’s enough,” River said, and it was sharp enough that it gave even me the urge to be quiet. “I understand how you feel, Elethen, but you don’t know a damn thing about what’s going on. If you want to blame something on Lasya, make it that. The mess on Halana isn’t his fault, but he did try to keep

you away from it as long as he could.” He glanced over at his brother, their eyes meeting for a long time, the younger’s—or no, I supposed he wasn’t actually younger—*Blaze’s* going wide after a moment before he looked back at me.

It appeared that River and his brother could have conversations entirely based on facial expressions. The biggest part of me was more jealous of the relationship than worried about everyone finding out the secret I’d managed to keep a hundred years. None of my secrets seemed to matter that much any longer. Soon, either no one would be a mage, or I’d likely be dead, and either way, my secrets would be irrelevant.

Blaze cleared his throat surprisingly loudly, getting Elethen’s attention. “First off, River, we’re all four going to sit down and talk about this. *Soon*. But the first thing we need to talk about is what the hell is going on right now. Elethen says this is his house. And you—you’re an important guy in the government who lives in the palace. Why are you here?”

“I am a wanted man,” I informed them. Elethen started to scoff, but I interrupted them. “I killed my father, the king’s former general, and the priest has ordered his followers to kill me.”

That stopped him. He stared at me a moment, but then shook his head. “No. That’s a lie. You *are* the general. Your aura is the same as last time I saw you. No two people have the same exact aura.”

I inclined my head, agreeing. “I am. I have been the general for eight years, since the king grievously wounded my father when the old monster and Tojan assassinated him.”

Elethen blinked, over and over, apparently overcome with shock that I’d told the truth. The people of Halana weren’t used to hearing truth from people in power anymore, I supposed.

Not that I was in power.

Had I ever truly been so? Perhaps all power was simply its own kind of cage.

“Okay, and with that, I think we can let them have a minute to get dressed and come out while you think about that.” Blaze patted Elethen on the shoulder, getting his attention. “Yeah?”

Elethen nodded and followed him back into the parlor, looking uncertain and off-balance the whole way. It hadn’t been my intention to unsettle him that much.

I frowned after him, but River sighed and grabbed me by the arm, dragging me into the bedroom and pulling me back toward where we’d left our clothes scattered.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “He doesn’t even know you.”

I wasn’t sure whether to accept it or deny it, but in the end, it didn’t matter. My brother’s hatred for me was something I’d accepted long before, and we needed to focus on Halana. On the spell and the mages and making the world safe for its people.

I simply nodded and dressed, buckling my sword onto my hip last as River retrieved the book from its spot by the bed and joined me in the doorway.

“We’ve got this,” he said. I didn’t know what that was supposed to mean, but it sounded generally supportive, and I appreciated it. River would be with me, no matter how much anyone else despised me.

I still wasn’t entirely sure why, but at this point, able to feel his determination, I didn’t doubt it.

As we entered the room, River held the book aloft. “We think we’ve found the spell that caused Spirit’s Loss, or something very much like it.” The people sitting around the chairs and sofas all blinked in shock, since that definitely meant more to them than me. “The problem is that here, there are only spirit mages, and they’re mostly kind of assholes.”

Elethen snorted. “Understatement.”

“So you agree?” River prodded, and when Elethen nodded, he smiled that sexy, predatory smile of his. “Good. Then you’ll think that we’re right when we say we want to recreate the spell.”

“What?” River’s brother demanded, sounding shocked and horrified in that way sensible, moral folk often did. “We can’t just murder a whole bunch of people because some of them are bad, River. That’s—”

“We don’t think it’ll work that way here,” River soothed. “I’m not gonna pretend it’s nice. It’s going to make them not mages anymore. It says it takes their magic and gives it to the planet or something like that.”

“*The earth*,” I clarified. “Not Earth like your planet. The land.”

River smirked my way. “Look at you, reading for subtlety. Sorry, *the earth*. The point is, they’re not going to die, they’re just not going to be mages anymore. No demon form, no shapeshifting, no holding power over all of Halana because they’re stronger than elves.” He glanced at Elethen. “Which is why I didn’t actually invite you, no offense.”

“You’re sure it won’t kill them?” Blaze was biting his lip, staring at the book as though it was going to bite someone.

“It was designed by them, to be used on others of their kind.” River tapped the book. “They said it was a punishment for people who misused their magic. And I know, this is awful and we’re essentially punishing some people who haven’t done anything wrong. I’ve met a handful of mages while I’ve been here, and some of them have been great. But as a group, I’d like to think good people would prefer to lose some of their abilities than watch millions of elves starve and die.”

“Let’s do it,” Elethen agreed instantly. “If it will stop the mages from starving Halana, let’s do it now.”

I glowered at him. “Absolutely not.”

The sneer he turned on me wasn’t unexpected, but it did make my belly twist. He wouldn’t listen to me. And worse, I couldn’t blame him.

## CHAPTER 29

“FUCK, ELETHEN, CALM DOWN,” I growled at my brother’s too-damned-angry boyfriend. I was about to have to bitchslap a demon in a minute.

Yeah, I got it. He’d thought Lasya was one of the bad guys for a long time, but he needed to stop and listen.

“He has a way to free my people, and he’s refusing—”

“Until you leave,” Blaze interrupted, eyes full of comprehension.

Elethen turned and stared at him. “What?”

“Thank you, little brother. Yes. What Lasya is saying is that yes, we’re planning to do the spell, but not with you here.” Elethen looked ready to protest again, but I held up a hand. Weirdly, he stopped. “If you’re here when we do the spell, there’ll never be any opening another portal again. We’ll all be trapped here, including Blaze, Bart, and Verity. I . . . when we were first talking about it, I thought maybe it would end up that way for all of us, but it’s only going to strip the spirit mages here on Halana, the way Spirit’s Loss only worked on Earth. If you go back to Earth, wait a day for us to do this thing and the spell to end, and then reopen the portal, everyone should be able to go home.”

I glanced at Lasya, who flinched at the statement. I could literally feel the growing pit in his stomach. The conviction that even after last night, I was going to leave him. But I couldn’t interrupt this discussion to talk to him about it.

We could talk about me staying after the spell. He'd be all selfless like always, trying to convince me to go home and be with my people. And I'd tell him that his cock was plenty people for me, and we'd fight, and we'd fuck, and I'd force it to be okay. Elethen and Blaze could always visit on the regular, so it wasn't like it was a forever choice. It'd be nice to have more than one spirit mage survive the thing, so we'd have good ones on both sides to open the occasional portal, but we didn't have any handy spirit mages to send with Elethen other than Lasya. We needed one to perform the spell, and Lasya would never ask Elethen to do it.

It hurt that he had to be the one to give up part of himself, but I figured if his people were happy and his king safe, Lasya wouldn't care at all.

Elethen stared at me a moment, then looked at Lasya. "You." He sounded incredulous. "You are going to perform this spell. Destroy your own magic."

"I am," he agreed, lifting his chin, and I could feel the hurt and pride swirling around inside him, somehow intrinsically linked.

Gods, I wanted to curl back up in bed with him. How had he survived, pretending to be the bad guy all these years? I could almost feel little pieces of his soul breaking off and dying as his brother looked on him with suspicion. Not that Elethen had been given much reason to do different over the years, but Elethen was Blaze's problem. Holding Lasya together was mine.

Across from me, Blaze met my eye with an accusatory glare. He had eyes. He'd been spending a lot of hours looking at Elethen for a while now. He knew. He wanted to hash it all out now, but dammit, we didn't have time for that. We needed to get our shit together and do the spell before someone did manage to hunt us down.

Before Daddy Dearest showed up, and I had to fucking explain that. How had three families fucked up a whole world so much?



“It sounds to me like this might be the right thing to do,” Verity said, interrupting our stare-off. “But I’d like to discuss a few things first, to satisfy my own conscience. If—if the spirit mages don’t just stop being magic. If they die. Is Halanan society going to fall apart like Earth’s did? I can live with my guilt at killing people, but if we collapse an entire planet, that’s . . . I’d do anything for you, River. You know that. But it’s a lot.”

“The mages are like the French nobility before the revolution,” I answered, having spent hours considering the very same question myself. “I won’t pretend none of them are good. I don’t believe the spell will kill them. I truly believe they’ll simply no longer have magic. But if they all dropped out of society tomorrow, it’d be more an ease than a drain. Plus I’m not sure how much Blaze and Elethen have told you, but spirit magic is all on the inside. It can’t really be used to grow crops or feed people. It’s hard to use it for the good of all elf-kind. Even the good ones among the mages are mostly using their brains and skills for that.”

“I have forty-one mages in the guard that I trust,” Lasya told them all, matter-of-fact. With this, he was comfortable. Facts, and his people. “They are the only mages in Madranai city, bar the librarian, whom I believe to be truly good. Likely, there are a handful of others. But all mages in the world number less than ten thousand, and they are consuming or destroying more than half of Halana’s resources. Enough food to feed a million elves, easily, and there are only perhaps twice that many people on all Halana.”

The room went silent at the explanation, everyone looking a little ill.

After a long silence, Lasya went on. “Every one of those forty-one mages who work for me have vowed to give their lives in service of the king. Many have expressed their wish that the . . . the hunger, that is an eternal part of us, were not a part of them.”

“Hunger?” Bart asked. “You mean how Elethen can eat like ten sandwiches in a sitting and still eat Blaze’s leftovers?”

Lasya nodded, and Elethen flushed dark red. “I do not intend to—”

Bart scoffed at the apology, waving Elethen off. “Dude, you’re one guy. And it’s not like you’re stealing food from people who need it. Earth has plenty to feed a demon. A dozen of you, even. And I gotta be honest, I think if we could find a minute to send some over to protect them from this, Earth would be so pleased to have spirit mages, they’d be happy to feed them till they exploded.”

It wasn’t the worst idea I’d ever heard, but I wasn’t sure we really had time for it, or ability to get to whatever mages Lasya trusted enough for that.

It might be nice if we could get Zina to safety . . .

“But Lasya is a wanted man,” Verity said, always my perfect right hand, pointing out sensible flaws in wishful plans. “We cannot simply walk down the street and have him choose those he’d protect. I assume the warrant isn’t a matter easily handled?”

Lasya scowled. “No doubt Tojan has detached his priests, told them not to listen for orders from the palace. The king has likely rescinded the death warrant by now, but Tojan and his lackeys are determined to see me dead this time. They will murder me and claim to have been unaware that their orders had changed.”

“The king?” Elethen asked, clearly confused. “The king is a child.”

“Thirteen,” Lasya said, his tone clearly in agreement. “But . . . He has been waiting eight years, and he was finished waiting. I could hardly stop him when he wanted to move against one of the men who murdered his father.”

“At least not when it matched your political goals?” Elethen needled, eyes narrowed in suspicion once again.

Lasya swallowed hard and stared at his feet. “Yes. I partially allowed the king to follow his wishes because they agreed with mine.”

Hell no. I wasn’t having that. “To save my life, you mean.”

The whole room went silent and everyone but Lasya turned to me.

“That’s what you’re talking about. The king’s proclamation to pardon everyone in the dungeon and have a feast day tomorrow. That was the king’s first move against Tojan, and you allowed it because it got me out of the dungeon.”

Lasya, looking stricken and deeply ashamed, nodded, closing his eyes.

Silence fell again, this time for longer.

Of course Bart was the one to break it, the bratty little asshole. “Welp, I’m in.”

I loved him.

“As am I, of course,” Verity agreed. “I was anyway, but I want to note that you’ve satisfied my conscience. While I admit to still knowing next to nothing, it sounds like this isn’t simply a good thing for Halana, but an essential one, despite the ethical quandary. Leaving the mages to continue to starve millions of elves would also be a choice, and it isn’t one I could make in good conscience.”

Blaze watched Elethen, who was staring at Lasya like he was a three-headed dog who’d done a trick—like he was somehow both horrifying and fascinating at once. Finally, Elethen shook himself and turned to my brother. They looked at each other, a litany of micro expressions giving away the fact that they were having a whole discussion with that look.

I couldn’t lie, I had a moment’s jealousy at their silent communication. That had always been my thing with my brother, and I’d been replaced. Sure, it was part of being an adult, but that didn’t mean I had to like it.

I couldn’t really begrudge it, though, since I could feel Lasya sitting beside me. Even if what I was feeling at the moment was the man I was falling in love with stewing in his own self-hate. All I could do was send him as much reassurance as I had in me. It was never an amount I’d found impressive, but it was all I had.

“What are you all keeping from me?” Elethen finally demanded, frowning at each of us in turn. He pointed at Blaze, then Lasya. “You feel sad and guilty. And you look like a kicked dog. You’re *the general*. Terror of all Halana. How are you the innocent party in anything?”

“Ahem.” Bart pretended to clear his throat, making everyone turn to him. He did love to be the center of attention. It was probably why he was my favorite. Seemingly from nowhere, but for me, proving why Verity loved him, he pointed at the picture over the fireplace. “So that’s your mom, right?”

Elethen stared at him a moment, then nodded.

Bart lowered his head, giving Elethen a look like he expected him to connect the dots. When he just got a blank stare, he sighed. “So, do all elves have black hair and green eyes?”

“No,” Elethen said, frowning at him. “It’s unusual. Why —” He shot up out of his seat, shaking his head. “No. That’s nonsense. It’s—why would that—” He turned to Lasya, clearly expecting a denial, but Lasya was looking up at the picture, deep sadness on his face that was mirrored in his soul.

“I only met her once,” he admitted. “The night I took her out of the palace. Freed her from father. I never wanted you to know, but I suppose it makes less difference now that he’s dead.”

“He’s dead,” Elethen said, voice flat. “You killed him. You killed—the general.”

“I did,” Lasya agreed, lifting his head again. As conflicted as he was about most things, in this, he was not. His father had been as much a monster as Blaze’s and mine, and I knew if I had another chance, I’d burn him where he stood and never look back.

Elethen was still staring at Lasya, wide eyed. “And the priest has put out a warrant for your death for it.”

“He has.”

Elethen shook his head and started pacing the room. “This doesn’t make any sense. Mother would have told me. She’d have—I’d have known. This is a lie. It can’t”—he stopped and looked at Lasya once more, then spun away to resume pacing.

As much as I wanted Lasya and Elethen to hash things out, it was my turn to once again push the conversation back to what we needed to be talking about. “I understand your anger, but we don’t have time for it right now. As you just pointed out, Lasya is wanted. If priests find us, they will kill us. And right now, they have the power to do that. The last one turned into a giant snake and threw himself at me.”

Verity stood from the sofa she and Bart were on and motioned him up. Together, they started to push it out of the way. “This room should be big enough for just about any size circle,” she said, looking at me askance, so I nodded.

Lasya and I had gone over the spell, and the parlor was more than enough room for the casting.

Elethen, as much as he clearly wanted to rage over his upturned worldview, was at heart a sensible fellow, so he ducked his head in a nod and started helping Blaze move things.

He did shoot Lasya a glare as he did it, though, and while I fully expected more venom about my lover being a monster, and the swoop in Lasya’s belly at the expression told me he expected the same, what we got was something else.

“I’ll still cut your balls off and feed them to you if you hurt River, brother or not.”

## CHAPTER 30

**BROTHER.**

No, he hadn't been happy about it, but he'd called me brother. I had to tamp down the ridiculous hope in my chest that he could ever think of me as anything but the hated mythical general.

Darkness knew I'd spent enough time hating myself for the title; I couldn't expect him to feel different about it.

"So first another portal to send Elethen home," Blaze clarified, giving the man in question a concerned but hopeful expression.

Elethen scowled, glaring at me, pointing at his dagger as though to remind me of his threat. Like I was going to forget it. But then he nodded. "I suppose."

"Do you think you can make one big enough for yourself . . . by yourself?" Bart asked, throwing himself down on the moved sofa. "Not that the boss lady wouldn't be able to hunt up a new circle to help you out, but since B, Ver and me are staying on this side for now, you'll have to be able to get back without our help from the other side."

It was good, distracting him from his dislike of me. Elethen frowned for a moment, then shrugged. "Guess I'll have to try it?"

"It might be harder from this side and coming back," River threw in. "Since it's, you know, based on a tether, and right now the tether is weaker than it was."

Which precipitated a conversation on what a tether was, and how the strength of the connection between the brothers had seemed to make it easier to build a portal.

Elethen shrugged and sat his ass down on the bare floor as I leaned the rolled-up rug in the corner. He whipped out a hunk of chalk and started drawing a circle for the portal, just big enough to pass a person through.

He also kept glancing up at me, expressions ranging from angry suspicion to curiosity. I didn't want to let my imagination run away with me, but the fact that he was willing to be curious seemed a good sign.

I was reminded that River could feel my emotions when a ball of reassurance that definitely wasn't mine bolstered me. There was no way I'd felt that hopeful about anything in my life, let alone whether Elethen would ever stop hating me.

Not only could River feel my emotions, he could offer me his.

It was so strange. I was used to having no one to lean on in any way, and suddenly there was River, in every way. Wending his way under my arm as we watched Elethen draw his circle. Being a rock I could cling to in the storm.

Even distracted as Elethen was, he was fastidious about the details of the circle. If I had any right to be so, it would have made me proud.

Finally, he stood and turned to look at Blaze. "How long do you want me to leave for?"

Blaze considered, looking at Elethen, then me and Lasya. "Maybe like River did yesterday in the note. Give us until tomorrow morning?"

Elethen and I both cringed at the suggestion, even though I wasn't the one leaving. I didn't want to imagine being on a different world from River for an entire day while he put himself in danger trying to save people.

Particularly not while Tojan lived.



I shouldn't pity Elethen. I would have to deal with worse when this was over. When my magic was gone, likely taking my brand-new connection to River with it, and then even worse, he went home to Earth.

I would be alone again, both in mind and bed, but this time I would know what it was like not to be alone. How could it not be worse?

Elethen went through the motions of making a portal, but the portal that resulted was no bigger than the one I'd made the day before—barely big enough for a sheaf of papers. He sighed and shook his head. "Looks like it's going to take a whole circle."

The others didn't seem particularly bothered, simply stepping up and lending him their strength as he closed and recast the circle. If I hadn't already thought River a wonder unlike any other, that would have settled it. I could feel the power from the others move in the room, feel it swish around Elethen and see him direct it neatly into place.

So simple, the way the five of them fit together. So neat. Perfection.

I supposed I would have my own chance to try my hand at it soon enough, if only once. For Halana, once had to be enough.

The portal flashed open in a different place than the one I'd opened the day before. It reminded me of the palace, with dark wood furnishings and rich, jewel-toned accents. A beautiful blonde woman sitting on the edge of a desk looked on, not seeming especially surprised by the appearance of the portal, but slightly curious.

River gave her a little wave, and she smiled and winked at him, then made a strange hand motion I didn't recognize, one index finger rubbed along the other, shaking her head. His wicked grin increased.

The sound of a crash at my back had me spinning in place, horror filling me.

It wasn't possible. How would Tojan's people have found this place?

But there she was, Tojan's smiling, sycophantic second in command. "Well, well, well, look what we've found, friends. A fugitive from justice."

Behind me, Elethen let out a curse, then muttered, "We should have just done the damn spell."

"Go through," I ordered him. "Follow the plan. We will do the spell. We just have to handle this first."

"Go to the dark," he spat back, but the curse lost some of the sting it might have otherwise had when he stepped up next to me and glared at her. "I suppose you have found a fugitive, priest trash. Maybe just not the one you were expecting."

She laughed. "Oh, this is too good. The murderer of the general, consorting with Elethen Voransa."

"We're not consorting," Elethen denied, horror in his voice. "That's disgusting. He's my brother!"

The whole room went silent, and . . . somehow, I felt taller. He had claimed me before the lot of them. Yes, he still didn't trust me. Maybe he even still hated me. But he had claimed me. At least, enough to make the point that we weren't fucking, because that would be strange.

Well, perhaps less strange among mages than elves, but I wanted him no more than he wanted me, so it worked just as well.

None of that truly mattered. What mattered was—

The priestess laughed, the sound breaking off in a hiss as she turned into a huge snake. The priests around her drew weapons, and we were outnumbered.

Darkness, we were outnumbered even if all of River's friends could fight, and I had no reason to think they could. A moment later, given the way Bart backed into a corner holding onto Verity, doubt was gone. We were considerably outnumbered.

Fortunately, neither River nor his brother seemed to have any hesitation about fighting, and I knew Elethen was at least a passable fighter. I pulled my sword off my belt and tossed it to him. He caught it easily, glancing it over and then inclining his head to me.

Not that I thought him incapable with his daggers, but a sword kept him arm's length from the villains. I hadn't heard about him having a fighting shift, so I presumed he did not.

Stepping forward, I let my own fighting shift take me, and gave the loudest roar I could.

A few of the priests paused at the sight of my great black lion.

Long had the line of Zarani defended the crown of Halana. Lions had a reputation among the people because of it, even though there were no wild lions on the planet. As such, the lion had even made its way into imagery like the king's throne.

And this day, the lion would die for his king if need be.

Not that I intended to die. I had a spell to perform.

I threw myself at the woman-turned-snake, fast enough to dodge when she lunged for a bite and come around behind her, leaping at the back of her neck. She dodged me in return, and we twisted around and around each other, each trying to sink their teeth into the other first.

As I passed one of her lackeys, I aimed my whole body at him, letting my back paws just pass him, then shoving them backward in a lunge that both propelled me forward and dragged my claws across his throat before he even realized what I was doing. He went down with a gout of blood, and I managed to keep from slipping in it.

The previously unknown but quite familiar voice of Blaze called, "try not to burn the house down, River."

River's answer was a cackle and all I felt from him was a sort of excited amusement. Without even seeing what he'd done, I adored him even more. I suspected he could burn the world down and my affection would only grow.

The steel-on-steel clash of my own blade against another told me Elethen had engaged as well.

I didn't have time for this game with the snake mage. Even with the one I'd already likely killed, we were outnumbered, and I needed to end it. I stopped and turned our twisting the opposite direction, and the mage froze with surprise just long enough for me to get my teeth into her.

Like any cat with a snake, once I had my teeth in her, it was a matter of shaking her into submission. Or rather, breaking her spine so completely even a mage couldn't heal from it. It wasn't easy with a snake as big as she, but my teeth bit through muscle and sinew, grinding all the way down onto the bone, and I snarled around it, bearing down with all my jaw strength.

She went lax under me as her spine snapped, the breath leaving her in a wheezing hiss as she deflated like a popped air bladder. I turned, looking for the next priest. River was fighting two of them, looking manic and pleased, another smoldering at his feet, and easily holding his own. Blaze seemed to be fine, holding two of his own back with what seemed little more than a glass worth of water, bound into swirling chains.

Elethen was trying to fight two with my sword.

Unacceptable.

I leaped onto one of them, raking my claws down his back, making him scream and collapse under the weight of me as I clamped my jaws down on the back of his neck. It distracted the other enough for Elethen to finish him with a vicious, twisting stab to the gut that spilled his innards over the wooden floor.

Blaze tossed one of his forward with the watery chains, and Elethen finished him with ease as well. By the time I turned to River, he'd dispatched all three who'd attacked him, and was poised, ready for more.

Every part of me wanted to roar out the victory, but above me, Elethen went pale and took a step back.

There was only one thing that could mean.

I spun to find Tojan in the hall, flanked by more of his priests, a mad light in his eyes as he smiled at me. “Hello, Lasya. I think this has been a long time in coming, no?”

Somewhere behind me, Blaze’s voice had gone shaky and breathless. “Dad?”

I lunged at the priest, hoping against hope that if I was fast enough, if I manage to surprise him, if only I could do well enough just this once—

My teeth had just scraped the sides of his face when he grabbed me by the chest and threw me away from him. I hit something soft and warm as I flew backward, dragging it along with me.

A strange, unfamiliar feeling fizzed against my fur, making it all stand on end, and suddenly, I was looking at Tojan from the wrong side of a portal.

I hit—no, *Elethen* hit something hard behind me, his whole weight thrown into it by the bulk of me, and he let out a grunt of pain followed by his whole body collapsing.

Followed by the portal collapsing, with both of us on the wrong side.

I turned, in a panic, to make sure that *Elethen* was well. He’d hit his head on the corner of the blonde woman’s desk. She was kneeling next to us, looking him over with concern. His heart was beating, and he was breathing fine. Thank goodness for him being a mage—the bleeding barely got started before it slowed and stopped altogether.

The woman and I both looked up at the empty space where the portal had been a moment before.

“It fell apart when he lost consciousness,” she explained, and it made sense. He’d made it, so he’d been necessary to maintain it.

But it couldn’t be. Wasn’t acceptable.

River and his friends were over there, on Halana, facing Tojan and his priests alone.

I had failed, completely and utterly.

She reached out and buried a fist in the ruff of my mane, apparently not the slightest bit intimidated by me or my fighting shift. “I’ve already made calls. We’re arranging a new circle. It’s just going to take a while.”

I didn’t want to tell her she wasn’t helping—she was the only person in the room who was even trying to help, what with Elethen unconscious and me lost in misery. But by the time we could arrange a whole new circle, it would be over.

And I was sitting there, useless, on Earth.

## CHAPTER 31

FUCK.

Fuck everything.

Okay, no, I could handle this.

Yeah, no big deal that we'd just lost the best strategist on Halana. I mean, I wanted to smack him for jumping at my father like that, but it had actually been a sound plan. For just a moment, I'd thought it might work. Dad's eyes had gone round with shock, and he'd almost been too slow to react.

But the fucker was as slippery as an eel, so of course he'd caught up in time to save his own skin.

Unfortunately for him, I was his son, and I was just as slippery.

"Blaze," I shouted, snatching up the book. "Water wall."

Blaze didn't even hesitate, just trusted me and threw up the water he'd been using to stop the priests in a wall that cut them all off from the four of us.

"Do you think I can't overcome a few cups of water?" our father asked, voice booming, and fuck but I wanted to slap him.

So I did the next best thing: I smiled, and then I fucking smacked him down.

That is, I threw my fire into Blaze's wall of water, dispersing it into steam and throwing it forward, laying on as



much heat as I could as I pushed it out, burning them all as the steam exploded out at them. The room filled with screaming.

I turned and grabbed Blaze's hand, then joined Verity and Bart where they were in the corner, flinging open one of the windows and turning to Bart. "Something to keep us from hitting the ground hard enough to break would be helpful here."

"Consider it done, bossman," he agreed with a wild laugh, and he hopped out. The rest of us followed, and true to his word, Bart used his gifts to lower us gently to the ground.

I could do this.

The path we'd taken the day before wasn't complicated, and I was an observant person.

I dragged them down one alley, and then another, then onto a heavily travelled street. But I wasn't a wanted man, and we didn't have one with us anymore, so I didn't have to worry about that. Sure, people looked at us, but no one kicked up a fuss.

I just needed to get into the palace without running into any of Dad's people.

"River," Blaze panted as he ran after me. "River, that was \_\_\_"

"I know who it fucking was, Blaze. I was hoping we'd get through this without you ever having to learn he was alive."

"But—"

I turned a corner harder than strictly necessary, trying to distract him. It was the right corner. I almost crowed in victory, running my hands around the edge of the secret tunnel entrance until I found the latch, then yanking it open and ushering my friends and brother inside and closing it behind us.

I summoned a fireball to hover over us and turned toward the palace. "No time for chatter about assholes who should be dead, and if we're lucky, soon won't be mages."

"Soon—River, is dad a mage? A *Halanan* mage?"

“Yes,” I snapped. “And he literally only created us because he wanted to open the portal between worlds, okay? We’re fucking tools to him, and he doesn’t care if we live or die as long as we give him what he wants.”

Blaze went quiet, hunching in on himself.

Beside me, Verity smacked me on the shoulder and gave me an icy look.

She was right. I was an asshole, but dammit . . . no.

There was no dammit, no excuse for me to get all angry and defensive.

I motioned her and Bart to go ahead of us and fell back with Blaze.

“I’m sorry. I’m being an asshole. I’m scared. I’m scared for us and for Lasya and Elethen, and for fucking Halana and Artyom, and frankly, Dad’s the reason I’m scared about all those things right now. I really, really need you to not—not get caught up in how he’s our father. Does that make any sense? I’ll try not to be an asshole, but—”

“But he’s a bigger one?” The comment was accompanied by a hesitant smirk, and it unwound something inside me.

“He really, really is.” I waved in the direction where we’d left the priests. “Remember when Lasya mentioned Tojan? That’s him.”

“The other guy who killed the king, with your boyfriend’s father.” He paused and cocked his head, considering for a moment. “*Our* boyfriends’ father?”

“Yeah, on both counts. When we say Halanan mages are bad, we mean him. Tojan, our dad, is bad. He’s fucking Louis the fourteenth. Actually, he’s way worse than that. Louis was mostly just a selfish asshole who didn’t care about people getting hurt. Our father is a psychotic murderer who’s trying to starve a whole world full of people so they’re easier to control. And also I’m fucking Lasya and that’s gonna continue happening if I have a say.”

“Why not just kill your father?” Verity asked from ahead of us. She paused at a ladder leading up. “And is this our exit?”

“It’s not. I don’t know where it leads, but the librarian said don’t take it when we were on our way out.” We continued forward, and I sighed. “As for Dad, killing him will just have someone else stepping into his shoes. Maybe the others aren’t as bad as him, but they’ll try to continue his legacy, even if they aren’t quite as impressive at being criminal masterminds.”

“He’s Moriarty and they’re just street toughs,” Verity clarified.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Our dad is Professor Moriarty.” Blaze’s voice was . . . was he fucking amused?

I turned to him, shocked. “Are you laughing?”

He fucking smiled at me in the near-dark, lit only by the fireball I’d set over our heads. “I just . . . Our dad is Professor Moriarty. No wonder you ignored everything he said and raised me yourself.”

I looked away, almost tripping over my own feet.

“What, River, you thought I didn’t notice my twin brother was more a father to me than my actual father?” He stopped in his tracks. “Wait, are we demons too? Are we going to get our magic wiped in this thing?”

“I don’t . . . think so.” Yeah, I was hedging. *Sue me.*

He nodded, not even put off by it. “When they get the portal open again, we should make sure there’s a full circle on both sides of the thing.”

“If we can get another mage to do the spell, both of your boyfriends can stay spirit mages,” Bart pointed out. “Super hot, bee tee dubs. Ten out of ten, would fuck on command.” He shot Verity a look, like he was making sure she took notes.

She rolled her eyes at him. “When is the last time River shared a lover with you, Bartholomew? That’s not how he

works. I doubt Blaze thinks any differently.”

“Nope, sorry,” Blaze agreed. “Totally selfish here.”

Bart sighed as though put upon, but I knew damned well that if Verity told him tomorrow that she didn’t want him playing with anyone but her, he’d be fine with it. They slept with other people, but in the end, they belonged to and with each other. Well, and Lizbeth often enough. They were quite happy as a trio.

Blaze leaned into me as we walked. “Did you really think I was going to freak out that hard about it? Do what he wanted when he’s clearly lost his marbles?”

I hadn’t, not really. I’d been more worried that he’d be devastated, but I wasn’t going to say that. “Nah, just wasn’t sure how you’d react. You know what I need for future situations like this? I need a bracelet that says, ‘What Would River Do?’ ”

He turned a gimlet stare on me at that. “You are River. You know what you’d do.”

“I know,” I agreed. “But shouldn’t more people think about it?”

Blaze groaned and scrubbed a hand down his face, and once again, all was right with the world. Or worlds, whatever.

We reached the end of the tunnel, and I had to search harder for the way to get the bookshelf to open from the wrong side. The tunnel was clearly intended as an escape more than an entrance, no surprise.

When I figured it out, I gestured with my hands for everyone to wait for me, and handed Blaze the book with a solemn expression, trying to telegraph just how important the damn thing was. He nodded and hugged it against his chest, so I went off in search of Zina.

She was sitting in her chair reading but looked over to me as I approached. “Lasya’s been pardoned, of course,” she whispered. “But you know as well as I do we’ve gone beyond that. Tojan can see his plans crumbling, and he’s done letting anyone be in his way. If he sees you or Lasya, or even the king

at this point, I think he'll be inclined to stab first and try to make excuses after."

"Lasya's safe for the moment," I whispered back. "He's on Earth."

This was where things got tricky. I knew she was on our side, but it was a bit of a leap from helping us escape and survive to helping us destroy her own magic.

"You've read that book?" I asked.

One corner of her lips turned up, and for a moment, she just stared at me. "You really did it, didn't you?"

"Did what?" Yes, of course I had. That wasn't going to stop me from playing ignorant.

"You brought a full circle of elemental mages to Halana. You're ready to perform the inverted magic removal."

I couldn't help chuckling at that. "And you said Lasya was the best strategic mind on Halana."

She shrugged. "He had to learn it somewhere, after all." Then she pushed up out of her chair and motioned for me to follow her. "Come along. If Lasya isn't here, you'll still need a Halanan mage to help you."

"And you're willing to do that?"

She stopped and turned, her expression all bemused surprise. "Did you think there was a chance I wouldn't?"

"It's a lot of power to give up."

Her eyes lifted, scanning behind me, and I could tell Blaze and the others had slunk out of the shadows when her eyes focused. She smiled, and it was oddly tremulous. "I admit, I'll miss shifting. But I won't miss the hunger. And more, I won't miss watching the people of Halana suffer under tyranny."

"We should do it now, before the others come back," Verity said, ever the voice of common sense. "You know Elethen and your man will come back as soon as possible, after how they were ejected onto Earth, so we need to move fast."

Without any further question, she led us through the stacks, into a large room. There were maps and charts on the wall, and a big table covered with books to one side, but the majority of the room was empty, and the floor slate, perfect for drawing a spell circle.

Without a word, Zina pulled a piece of chalk from her robe and started inscribing the circle. Her strokes were long and elegant, and she glanced up at me as she did it. “You should check and be certain I’m not inscribing the wrong runes. This is Halana. You have to be careful who you trust.”

“I trust you,” I told her.

Blaze, smart man that he was, opened the book to the page I’d marked and started looking the spell over.

She quirked a brow at me, but didn’t ask, so I shrugged and explained anyway. “You know what’s in the book and gave it to us anyway. And then you helped us escape.”

“Maybe I was hoping for you to bring me my very own circle.”

“You’re a Halanan mage. I’ve yet to meet one who thought they needed to count on a circle to get what they wanted.”

Her tinkling laughter filled the space, and she finally nodded. “Fair enough. We’re taught from childhood to be arrogant to the point of putting our lives in danger. Not likely one of us would think we needed a circle to get what we wanted. Most of us would do what Tojan has and manipulate everyone around us until we didn’t need a circle.”

She finished the runes, and Blaze did check it after her, asking questions and generally impressing her with his cleverness.

We were almost ready to start when the double doors banged open. In an instant, I imagined my fucking father yet again, but this . . . oh, this was so much worse than just that. This was my father, following the king.

The king was still surrounded by his guards, but they looked unhappy, and the boy looked small and pale.

“Whatever it is you think you’re doing, it stops now,” my father announced. “Or the boy dies.” He and his followers looked like something out of a horror movie, his skin raw and peeling from the steam burns I’d given them not so long ago.

“Now wait just a minute,” one of the king’s guards said, only for my father to backhand him.

The priests in the room outnumbered the king’s guard, which I presumed was why they’d agreed to go along with this. In hopes of coming across someone who would help or avoiding a real fight altogether.

But one of the guards, a mage, met my eye. He glanced at my father and back, and then held my gaze, his eyes boring into me, demanding I understand something.

“No,” Artyom whispered, glaring at both of us. He looked small and young with his fear, but he said the word like a king. Like a man who fully expected to be listened to. “Absolutely not.”

An image came back to me, that same guard taking the king’s hand and performing some kind of spell where magic had crept down his arm and up Artyom’s.

The Custodia.

It had been one of the spells Lasya had read to me while we looked through the book. A mage placing his heart of magic outside his own body, inside someone else’s.

*The Guard*, it meant.

“I’m afraid you don’t have a say in this,” my father said, so smug I wanted nothing more than to throw a fireball in his face.

“You fucking better be able to heal,” I muttered to the guard. I knew mages could heal from things humans and elves couldn’t, but I’d also killed a bunch of them myself, so I knew damn well they weren’t unkillable.

I summoned a fireball to my hand. “Sorry, Dad, we’re kinda busy right now. Could you come back later? Or better yet, never?”

He snatched a dagger out of his belt and held it at Artyom's back, right behind his heart. His lips peeled back from his teeth in a snarl, but . . . his eyes were a shade lighter than usual, and they weren't quite focusing on me. I'd damaged them with the steam attack.

That was it. I looked down at Artyom, glancing down at his feet and back at his eyes, then lifting myself onto my toes.

I wasn't entirely certain how The Custodia would work, but I was pretty sure that a dagger to the lung could be healed a lot fucking easier than a dagger to the heart.

His eyes narrowed, but he caught on, slowly lifting himself up onto his toes, altering the set of the dagger pressed into his back.

When I was pretty sure he was as high as he could go, and also one of the priests next to my father was looking at him funny, opening his mouth, likely to ruin everything by speaking up, I tossed the fireball at my father's face.

All hell broke loose.

My father plunged the dagger into Artyom's back, and next to him, the guard gasped in pain. A second later, blood dribbled out of his mouth. He didn't waste that second, though, grabbing the king's shoulder and shoving the boy forward, toward me and Zina and Blaze.

Blaze grabbed Artyom, clearly terrified for him, but when he turned him around, there was a hole in the back of his tunic, but no wound. Jesus, that Custodia was an efficient spell. It made more sense why Lasya had insisted upon it—and also, why Artyom didn't like the idea. Poor kid didn't want anyone else to die.

Because the wound was in the guard, who was ignoring it in favor of pulling out his sword and turning on the priests.

I stepped between my people and the fight, summoning a fireball to each hand. Not that I was looking forward to frying a few more assholes or anything.

My father growled at the guard, turning to his true form—and damn was I jealous of that. It wasn't fair my father could



be close to seven feet tall in any form, and there I was, trapped at five-foot-eight.

He slashed his claws out in the direction of the guard, and the man took a step back, not quite as steady as it should have been, what with the perforated lung he'd gotten defending the king. I took up the slack by throwing another fireball past him at my father's face, so that he had to step back instead of following through.

He still managed to dodge, though, and my throw hit the wall, sputtering out against the stone.

I was damn sick of it. He was trying to kill a man who'd already put himself in harm's way to save his king's life. A *child's* life. A child I fucking liked. I rushed at them, dodging around the guard and throwing myself at my father, fire in both hands and slamming them onto his chest again and again as we both fell to the floor.

"Dodge this, asshole," I ground out, and he screamed as his clothing caught fire.

That wasn't enough, though.

Mages were too fucking resilient, and he'd just heal and torment more children, starve more elves, treat my brother like there was something wrong with him for being a good person.

So I pushed. I pushed the fire into him, like I'd never even thought about doing before. I set fire to his very blood, making it boil in his veins, curdling as it congealed inside him. He arched up, screaming in terror and pain as he started to smolder.

His scream cut off a moment later as his whole body went slack. Steam wafted up off of him and everyone around us froze, staring in shock as I heaved for breath and held my hands just over his still burning chest. If he moved, I'd be on him again, but he didn't. Not a breath. Not a single shudder.

I stood, letting the flames on my hands remain, burning, as I looked around. "Who wants to go next? Who wants to fucking stab a little kid?"

One of the priests twitched, moving away more than toward me, and I bared my teeth, ready to lunge at him. He cringed away, but what kept me from attacking wasn't his fear.

It was Blaze's arms around my waist, his chin tucked into my neck. "They're surrendering, River. It's okay. The king is okay. We won. It's over."

Over.

"Not quite," Zina corrected. "We still have to perform the spell."

We turned to find that she'd chalked a second circle into the slate floor, beside the one for the spell.

Verity looked it over, nodding. "I take it we should get any mages we don't want affected into the second circle as soon as possible?"

The guard who'd protected the king looked at the two circles, then at Artyom. Who looked at me.

"We're removing magic," I told him. "I know, it sounds shady as fuck, but it's going to—"

"Stop the hunger?" one of the guards asked, and he sounded hopeful, not afraid.

"That," I agreed. "And it's going to stop people like my father from hurting the people around him by virtue of having talents they don't."

That was when another group of palace guards arrived. I recognized one as Eral, thank fuck, so I didn't think it was going to be another fight. Next to him was an ancient-looking woman with an eye-patch, walking next to Arceny.

Eral frowned, staring down at my father's body, then giving it a kick. "We missed the fight." Then his head whipped up, eyes wide, and he stepped away from the body. "Sorry, m'lady."

She snorted at him, smacking him on the shoulder. "Don't you m'lady me, boy. And don't apologize for this." She looked at my father for a long time, single eye glassy and—was she

actually sad about his death? I wasn't sorry I'd killed him, but I was sorry if she was sad, even though I didn't know her.

Lasya's hollow, heartbroken words swam up in my head.

*We lost her.*

"Mellara," I announced. "Or do you prefer Grandmother?" Then I turned a smile on Arceny. "I told you you'd see your mother again!"

He ducked his head at me and smiled back, but then turned to his mother again, still a little concerned.

She, meanwhile, was staring at me. She motioned to the body. "You did this?"

I wasn't ashamed of it. I wouldn't be. I'd done the right thing, and that was rare enough for me that I was going to fucking own it and be proud of it. So I drew myself up. "I did. He was my father, and I killed him. I did what had to be done."

One of the priests opened their mouth, maybe to refute the claim, but she shut up when she got a handful of glares and a raised fist aimed in her direction.

Mellara nodded, stepping forward until she stood right in front of me. "He took three sons from me. Never felt a bit of remorse for killing his brothers, because they were elves. He thought they were less than him."

His . . . brothers.

She might have meant it in that way where all of Halana were supposed to be one big family and all that, but somehow, I was pretty sure she meant it in a more concrete way. Grandmother.

I blinked at her. Arceny looking so much like me. Like my father.

They were brothers.

I glanced over at him. My uncle?

Blaze leaned on me, staring as much as I was. He whispered into my ear, "Is she saying . . ."

“Yep. Pretty sure, yeah.”

“If you’d like to step into the protective circle, Grandmother,” Zina said, and for a second, I thought I was getting another message, but no. Zina was saying it in the everyone’s a big family way, not that she was like, a cousin or something. This was weird enough without that.

But apparently, my grandmother and uncle were mages. That was a surprise.

The room was sorted in an instant. Half the mages wanted no part of the circle, happy and willing to lose their magic forever. The priests wanted in, of course, but fuck those guys, they weren’t getting it.

In the end, ten of Lasya’s men, Mellara, and Arceny were safely ensconced in the circle that would hopefully preserve their magic, while the others announced that they’d be happy to see it go.

Mellara offered to perform the spell, but Zina shook her head. “Please, let me. I’ll be quite happy with the result, I’m sure.”

And so we performed the ritual. It didn’t take long, once the patterns were etched and the circles in place. Zina pulled our magic into herself, twisting it into the pattern from the book and then sending it back out, attached to her magic, pulling it out as it went.

She collapsed in the middle of the circle with a gasp, but before I could shake off the effects of the magic draw and go check on her, a portal opened in the middle of the room, and Lasya and Elethen jumped through.

“No!” someone shouted, and I wasn’t sure if it was Blaze or me, but it didn’t matter.

The anti-spirit-magic wave hit them, washing over them both.

## CHAPTER 32

## *Lasya*

I **WAS** the one to help the hastily assembled circle make the portal back, since Elethen was still a bit out of sorts from his head wound.

“From a great oaf cracking my head open,” he’d said, but there had been a grudging smile with it.

How strange.

Seeing River alive through the portal had been all I’d needed to go rushing through, and clearly Elethen felt the same, since he pushed his way in alongside me. I heard the shout of . . . fear? Warning? I couldn’t have said exactly, but either way, it had come just too late.

The anti-magic washed over me, pulling at an enormous part of myself as it cut through me, trying to cut it off and take it away.

The anti-magic ritual. They’d found another mage willing to perform it, and Elethen and I had both hopped into the middle of it.

Fear cut through me for my brother. Yes, I knew he’d been willing to do the spell—had pushed for it, even, demanding to do it right then. But I’d spent days reconciling myself with the coming loss of my magic.

I had only been connected to River for a few hours, so while it would hurt to lose that, I hadn’t had time to become used to it.

Elethen, on the other hand, had paced like a caged tiger the entire time we'd been trapped on the wrong side of the portal, uncomfortable being away from Blaze.

The anti-magic wave was like the worst storm I'd ever faced, wind whipping about, tearing at my very soul, trying to force it out of my body. Most of the mages on Halana would never forgive us for taking this step, I was sure, if for no other reason than the fact that the tearing hurt awfully.

It was odd, though.

The group of priests and handful of guards in one corner had simply sat down, like they'd had the wind knocked out of them. Not as though they were being ripped at.

When it passed, I felt as though I'd been torn into bits and then had them pasted back together. Elethen looked the same.

The others simply looked . . . smaller than before. Slightly shaken, perhaps.

Elethen looked at me, his eyes narrowing. "Do you feel different?"

"Other than the pain?"

"Other than that," he agreed.

I looked down at myself, considering.

I didn't, really.

"Of course you don't," came a familiar voice that made my heart pump harder. "You're connected to an elemental mage. He anchored your magic within you."

I spun around, eyes wide and hoping I wasn't hallucinating or dead or simply mad. "Mellara."

She was there. In a small circle of mages. Mages? Mellara . . . was a mage. She had survived Tojan's lackeys stabbing her and escaped the fire because she was a mage. I fell upon her like a starving man fell on a feast, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her in for a hug before remembering that . . . wasn't really something I'd done before. Perhaps it was inappropriate.

But she didn't pull away. No, she laughed and hugged me back. "I told you, didn't I? That you'd be the one to save Halana."

"I did nothing," I denied. "I wasn't even here."

Arceny, coming to stand next to her, shook his head. "You kept us alive for years."

"And I'm not sure if you noticed this, but my blood has this tendency to be stubborn." She squinted, looking hard at— at River?—then nodded. "No doubt it took some work to prove to him what was going on and that we were worth saving."

Was she saying that she was related to River? Darkness, it was all too much to absorb at once.

River flung himself at me, patting me down and muttering. "I can still feel you."

"Because you're bonded," Mellara announced. "Likely the only two mages on all Halana who bonded themselves to an elf or a human. And through the bond, mostly immune to spells that don't affect the elemental mages."

The anti-magic ritual had passed us over, both of us, because of River and Blaze.

I squeezed River against me for all I was worth.

Mellara was alive, and River was alive, and Artyom, admittedly looking a little overwhelmed and worse for wear, was alive. They were all fine.

"Tojan?" I whispered, almost afraid to ask. He wasn't a mage anymore, though, even if the monster from my nightmares hadn't been bested.

River bit his lip and glanced away from me, but pointed to—oh my, that was disgusting. And it was Tojan. Dead. Burned. No doubts in my mind how that might have happened.

I leaned hard on my lover.

My . . . love. The feeling swelled in me, and I turned down to look at him. "I really am becoming quite fond of you."



“Back atcha, you big scary asshole,” he murmured against my chest.

## *Epilogue*

### River

**LASYA WAS THERE** in my future, as it turned out, even if I hadn't been able to see it before.

Rebuilding the house on Earth. Standing at Artyom's side when asked for. Next to me in bed, every night, regardless of what bed we were in.

His suite in the palace when we stayed on Halana. Mine in the mansion on the hill when we were on Earth.

Halana, as it turned out, didn't really need a general too much, so we only spent half our time there, especially after he and Elethen learned how to open portals big enough for people without needing a full circle—mostly a matter of practice. And making temporary portals drew the worlds no closer to each other, so there was no danger.

Lizbeth's business changed track a little after our adventures. For the right price, she rented out the services of a full circle of mages, under the table and very hush-hush, to start rebuilding the parts of Earth that had bent and broken after Spirit's Loss. It was slow going, but it was, in fact, going. Three of the remaining mages on Halana had relocated to Earth permanently to work with her, and our business was even more lucrative than it had been before, without even having to break the law.

Unless, you know, we wanted to.

Blaze's ex-partner was where he belonged, in jail for burning my clothes. Yeah, yeah, trying to burn our house down. Whatever. Same thing.

Meanwhile, Halana was an agrarian society that had been shoved down for generations, and its people were thrilled to simply have things continue with Artyom as their king, but now with food enough for everyone.

Many former mages were making the attempt to fit into society, some of them having luck doing so. On the other hand, some had been discovered doing things so horrific after the ritual that the king had reopened the dungeon just for them.

And the priesthood?

Abolished for good.

The king's greatest advisors were his former general and an old woman known to all Halana as Grandmother.

Who also just happened to be my actual grandmother.

Blaze fucking bloomed with her attention, and I couldn't even bring myself to be jealous of the close relationship they formed. She was our goddamned *grandmother*. And Blaze had lost enough time and hope thanks to our asshole father, to say nothing of what Tojan had taken from her—his own fucking mother.

Three of his own brothers, killed because as mere elves, he thought them worthless. I sometimes wondered if Arceny would have eventually followed despite his having magic, simply because he was inconvenient and had that worst flaw of all according to Tojan: a conscience.

Uncle Arceny was actually kind of the best.

After the Fall of Magic—a day the elves had added those capital letters to in order to call it a holiday, not a horrible folly like Spirit's Loss on Earth—Uncle Arceny had taken to traveling Halana, gathering stories from everyone there and writing them down. His only rule was that it be a new kind of story for Halana: every single one had to have a happy ending.

He'd sent me two books so far, and I suspected I'd get another every few years as long as he lived, which would hopefully be some centuries yet. Elves were pretty long-lived when they weren't being intentionally starved to death.

Speaking of which, I'd been seeing myself and Blaze in visions of the future that seemed centuries off, if the technology in them was any indication. I also looked more elven as the years passed. Annoyingly, though my ears grew pointier, I didn't seem to get any taller over the centuries, Lasya still towering over me. I supposed at least I'd gotten something useful from Tojan after all, if only his DNA. It seemed we were his sons after all, simply half human, not golems or constructs that would fall apart after our purpose was met.

Blaze and Elethen got married, of course, almost the instant anyone brought it up. They were married on Halana, by the king himself, who'd been beside himself with glee at presiding over the wedding of the ever-so-dashing Elethen Voransa, folk hero of Halana.

Elethen's story had gone in Arceny's first book, and unlike my sanitized version that had removed my brother-in-law's criminal past and magical ability, Arceny told the whole story. And the people of Halana loved the criminal bastard even more for it.

Of course, another story had gone into that first book, too. The story of a man who had played sheep in lion's clothing for nearly two hundred years, trying to feed Halana while he undermined the evil priest and his own father, the last general of Halana. A man who'd fallen in love with his own dashing criminal, the son of the evil high priest, whom they had vanquished together through the sappy-ass power of true love, or something silly like that.

I guess all stories have a grain of fiction in them, even the ones based on the truth.

Me?

I would read Uncle Arceny's books as he sent them and be happy I wasn't trapped in a fairy tale, even a sticky sweet one

with a happily ever after. My happily ever after involved getting railed into a mattress every night by the big bad lion, and I wouldn't have given it up for anything.

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You're the best. <3

*Also by Sam Burns*



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## *About the Author*

Sam is an author of LGBTQIA+ fiction, mostly light-hearted fantasy romances. Most of her books include a little violence, a fair amount of swearing, and maybe a sex scene or two. Oh, and let's not forget a fox. He'd be offended at being forgotten.

She is a full-time writer who lives in the Midwest with her husband and cat. Someday, she plans to be a full-time writer who lives near the ocean with her husband and cat.

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