

WAR
OF THE
MAZZA

— BOOK FOUR OF THE MAZZA SERIES —

BLAKE BLESSING

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MAZZA SERIES

BOOK 4

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War of the Mazza

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All I have to say is, it's about damn time!

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THREE WEEKS LATER

THE VIBRATIONS TRAVELING up my arm from hitting the post felt great. *Too* good. So, I swung my nun chucks against it again. And again.

And again.

My bones jarred from the force of my hits.

A chunk of loose hair caught in my mouth the next time when I shrieked in anger.

“Iss. Iss,” Jari panted as he ran up to me, “the post didn’t do a damned thing to you. You know that, right?” He swiped the sweat off his forehead as he placed a hesitant hand on the back of my neck.

Brave of him.

“I doubt it minds,” I gritted out as I forced my arms down to my side, chest heaving from more than exertion.

Ever since the attack, my frustration and self-pity had been on the rise. The only thing that seemed to bring me a smidgen of comfort was beating the posts into submission. Our asses had been gloriously handed to us, we had lost seven beloved Mannos, and to top it all off, we’d discovered some very unsettling facts.

Like the existence of another Mazza. One who clearly was on the evil side of the equation.

And that my one and only long term fuck buddy was one of her bonds.

What the fuck?

“Iss?” Jari stepped back.

“Sorry.” I blew out a breath and threw my head back to glare up at the sky. I’d been operating on this low level of rage every single day. The longer we went without any kind of plan, the more my emotions were getting the best of me.

And my powers?

Yeah, those still hadn’t really surfaced either.

If it wasn’t for our marks tying us all together, I’d really doubt I was who they thought I was. I’d never experienced imposter syndrome, but I imagined this was what it felt like.

I didn’t *know* anything.

I couldn’t *do* anything.

Everyone looked at me like I was going to suddenly sprout golden wings and fly us to victory on rainbow glitter farts.

It was so much pressure, without anything in my tank to back it up. I would take any kernel of hope, but right now? There was exactly *nothing*.

Bone dry.

Every time I’d broached the topic about getting the metal statue with Yunez, *when* he was around, he shook his head. Said we weren’t ready.

But mostly, he’d been absent, tucked away with his generals.

Thankfully, Rand had been around for our training. Even now, he was across the courtyard tossing me questioning stares, while he worked with Nato on blocking. A skill Nato had never had, but they were trying to see if he could develop it with our bond.

Did I say the guys were slowly building in power?

They were. Slowly, but it was an improvement.

Better than me, who seemed to be going backwards.

“I’m done with my pity party. I’ll leave the post alone to fight another day.” My fingers flexed around the nun chucks. The warm wood strong and unbreakable in my grip.

Jari gave me a crooked grin and stepped forward as he raised his hands. “You’re allowed to have one a day. Who am I to get in your way? And have I told you how sexy you are when you’re angry? Your face flushes so pretty.” His voice dropped as he brushed my chest with his and dropped his head to nuzzle my cheek. “Just like when you come on my cock.”

If I wasn’t already hot from the anger and exertion, his words would have pulled a different kind of heat to the surface of my skin.

The bead of sweat traveling down my spine already felt obscene.

Jari dropped his head to press his lips against my ear and his hand gripped my hips. “What do you say we go back to our room and get a workout of a different kind in, hmm?”

My eyelids fluttered shut, but they opened as I caught a glimpse of Rand storming across the yard.

“No, whatever you’re trying to do, absolutely not.” My sweetheart Manno was all fire and ice as he stopped right front of me. He tugged me away from Jari with a glare at my Levan mate.

“Rand, what’s your problem?” Jari tossed his hands up in exasperation as Nato joined our group. He worked his jaw as he glanced between us and the rest of the Mannos on the field, who were trying not to be too obvious in their observation of us.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re at war. We all need to take this seriously. All of us. Especially Isolde. The last thing we want is for any of us to die, and after the other Mazza and her bonds destroyed us, I would think you’d see how serious this is.”

“War? What war? Yunez is gone all the fucking time. We haven’t left these walls since that day, and it seems like the world is turning just fine without us.” Jari dropped his voice. “I understand this is important. I understand why. But we can’t keep going on like this.”

Egan stalked toward us, his rust red hair slicked back with sweat. We all turned to watch him for his last few steps before he pulled me away from Rand. “Let’s take this to the suite,” he growled, massaging his palm over the flat of my stomach. “You’re all too loud and everyone here is paying too much attention.”

I glanced around and he was right. Every Manno on the field was trying not to send surreptitious glances.

My LL each surveyed the field and Nato sighed.

“I agree with Egan. Let’s go back to the suite. We all need a breather.” Nato, my Zien mate, had been the leader of our Lusty Legion until secrets were revealed around the true state of the Fennin world. Now that we knew the existence of the Mannos, and Yunez settled into my bonds, Nato was no longer the leader.

He’d been quietly shuffled to the backseat. I could never tell if he was bothered or not, but I thought he, like the others, saw the benefit in adding Mannos to our LL.

Rand nodded, and a—for once—quiet Sage joined us as we left the field. We’d passed a few Mannos in the hallway and we nodded. Thankfully, no one tried to stop us. I had the suspicion I was still wearing a face like thunder, so why would they approach when they thought I might bite their head off?

Reaching our suite, Rand pushed the door open and headed straight for the water, pouring all of us a glass because at the end of the day, he was always the nice guy. I hoped the others appreciated that.

“What’s going on?” Sage took the glass, condensation already gathering on the outside. He wouldn’t meet my gaze, instead training all of his focus on Nato. “Why were you all huddling on the

field?”

Sage was usually an asshole. It was true, he was my asshole, but sometimes I wanted to use the nipple clamps on him, and not in a fun way. Ever since they'd discovered Brody was a past “relationship”—hell, relationship was too kind a word. Ever since that day, he'd had a coolness about him. I understood it. When I had to see Lucia, it hurt like hell. But if he didn't snap out of it, and realize we all had a history, especially after I learned about the cherries, I was going to beat him bloody with my nun chucks, then fuck him to death.

Because I had *that* much anger.

I waited for someone else to explain. But Nato dropped his gaze and crossed his arms. Egan shook his head and went to raid the cabinets. Jari raised his top lip as he stared at Rand, and Rand...

He still had fire behind his eyes, even as it was dulling now that we were in the privacy of our home. Or maybe he was losing it because he saw where Jari was coming from?

“I can't go on like this much longer,” I confessed as I dropped on the couch. “I'm with Jari on this one. We need a plan. We need to work together to form a plan, do reconnaissance, research this other Mazza, anything to be productive.” I tried and failed to keep the bitterness out of my tone.

“Isolde, Issy.” Rand dropped to his knees in front of me, pressing the defined planes of his chest against my legs as he took my hands in his. Sympathy glinted in his gray eyes before they steeled in determination. “I love you so much. So much that I'm going to give you a hard truth.” He took in a deep breath. “The best thing you could do right now is train. Train your body, mind, and powers. Reality has slapped us in the face and we, at least I, realize we're not ready to win. We'll be humiliated, tortured, or killed if we aren't ready. The rest? It's important. But not as important as making sure you can defend yourself.”

Nato set his glass down on the table and walked over to us. He laid a hand on Rand's shoulder but waited until he looked up at him to speak.

“You're right. No one is disputing we aren't ready. Not even by a long shot, but you have to see, going through the same training motions every day with no results isn't helping any of us. We're in a rut.”

Egan huffed. “We're more than in a rut. We're drowning in a sea of irritation and self-loathing.”

Rand rubbed his forehead and sighed. “What would you have us do then? Go on field trips to learn more about this other Mazza and hope they don't catch us? We'll surely be killed.”

“I'd like to catch at least one of them...” Sage grumbled, and I shot a glare at him, which he ignored.

“I'm not saying we have to stop training all together.” Jari took a seat next to me, wrapping his arm comfortingly around my shoulders. I sunk into him, accepting everything he was trying to give me. He looked at me with his bright blue eyes, then to Rand. “But we need to break this up. Whatever we're doing isn't working and we need to change it up.”

“Is this how all of you feel?” Rand glanced around at all of my bonds.

Each of the men nodded, even Sage.

“I can't make this decision for us.” Rand shook his head. “I wish I could. But Yunez has to be here.”

“Where the fuck is he anyway?” Sage finished off his water and dropped his glass in the sink, harder than he should have.

“He's with his generals. He's trying to learn everything he can so we can come out on the other side unscathed,” Rand stood, resignation stamped all over his body.

“So,” Jari started, quirked a brow. “He's researching, planning, and doing all the things that we

should be doing too. Only, he's doing it alone."

"You don't understand the responsibility Yunez has—" Rand defended him.

"I think we can all understand, at least on a surface level, the responsibility and knowledge Yunez wields. But what I think Yunez—and you—have forgotten, is that we're all in this together. Are we a family, or not?" Nato asked.

"We're a family, right?" I looked to Rand, begging him to be on our side. That would only leave Yunez.

"Of course, we are. Of course, we are," he agreed.

"Then I think we know what we have to do," Egan extended a hand to me.

"What's that?" Rand asked, his brow furrowing as he watching Egan tug me up from the couch.

"We need to go collect Yunez. Make him include us," I said, walking with Egan toward the door.

"Right now?" Rand yelled behind us.

"Right fucking now," Jari confirmed.

Except when we opened the door, Yunez crashed right into me.



“GET READY. WE HAVE TEN MINUTES,” Yunez rushed out as he moved some of his midnight hair out of his face. I drank in the sight of him.

I hadn't really seen him in days. And even when I had, it was always his back as he left the apartment to go hole up with his generals. Had he even slept?

The deep purple circles under his eyes said that he hadn't.

“Ready for what?”

“Wade is almost here. We have one chance to learn what he knows and ask for a favor.” Then Yunez was gone. He'd disappeared into his room, apparently to get ready.

Now that we were all bonded, we had moved into his suite. A long time ago, he had rooms and beds prepared for everyone. A nice little way to say he wanted us all together, since he didn't have the same layout in the other suites. Not even close.

Which would have been great, if he'd been sleeping in it with us.

“Oh shit. This could be really good, or really bad.” Rand burst into action as he ran into his room and came right back. “Isolde, you need to dress like we're going to a political function. I know we talked about training, but right now, we need to fake it 'til we make it.”

Then he was gone too. My original LL exchanged glances.

“Who is Wade?” I glanced at each man.

“I don't know, but I think we better get ready. We did ask to be involved.” Jari pressed a kiss to my head then took off toward his room.

We did ask to be involved, but I thought there would be some heart to hearts first. Not getting tossed in the deep end and not understanding what was going on.

But shit, I couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

All at once, the rest of us scattered, going to our respective rooms with our closets. Mine was off of the main bedroom next to Yunez's.

The sound of water splashing echoed from the bathroom as I pushed through the hangers looking for something nice to wear. Mostly, we had tactical wear that was appropriate for sparring. We hadn't really had the occasion to need anything fancier.

Oh, there was the floss outfit hanging in the corner that the Cherries had gotten for me. Nope, that wasn't an option either.

How did that even get in here?

Moving toward the end in a furious pace, I finally found a simple golden shift dress. It wasn't fancy. Nothing like I'd wear to an actual political dinner, but it was better than waltzing out like a bounty hunter. Right?

Hell, I had no idea. Without any context of what I was walking into, I was guessing. The two men who had any idea what was going on weren't hanging around to answer questions.

I grabbed the hanger and dashed toward the bathroom.

Sweat was still drying on my skin, and I'd be an embarrassment to myself if I didn't rinse the salt off my skin. I'd do my best to be ready in ten minutes, but damn, I had to draw some lines.

Yunez already occupied the shower as the hot streams of water beat against the back of his neck. He was perfectly still, his form just visible through the steam.

A grin hooked the corner of my mouth as I stripped. He had said ten minutes. It had barely been two.

I opened the glass door, and his gaze jerked up as I joined him, pressing my bare body against slick, hot muscles.

That familiar ache throbbed in my core as I pushed up to my toes to press a gentle kiss on his lips.

Out of all my bond mates, he was the one I knew the least. Had the smallest amount of time with. And I hadn't wanted to admit to the others or myself, but I missed him. I craved time with him like I'd been able to have with the others before everything went to hell in a hand basket.

His violet eyes flared as I pressed my hands against his chest, and slowly lowered myself to my knees. He blocked the water from hitting me, but the steam was plenty to keep me warm.

His flaccid cock twitched and filled as I got closer to it.

"Iss. There is not time. How I wish there was, but we have no *time*," he almost whined.

"Shhh. You said ten minutes. We can do this." I licked the crown and it bobbed. Then I sucked the tip into my mouth and used one hand to pump his length.

He groaned, loud and long.

Any other time, I would have savored this first taste of him, but like he said, we were on a time table.

One of his hands speared into my hair as his other braced on the wall behind me. His upper body curved over me as if he was trying to be as close to me as he could in this position.

With Yunez, I'd never question how pleased he was with our lovemaking. Not with continuous, torturous sounds falling from his lips.

"Iss, you are so good at this. I love the way your lips feel. Heaven. This is pure fucking heaven," he gasped between his groans. He bit his lip, his brow furrowing. His face was the epitome of sweet, aching torture.

I kept my head angled so I could see his face the entire time, speeding up when his mouth dropped open and his eyes closed. His cock hardened even more in my hand, and he tapped my throat.

"I'm going to come."

Good, I thought. I removed my hand and swallowed him whole, working my throat against him as much as I could, while focusing on not gagging. It was hard, no pun intended, but once the salty taste of him hit the back of my throat and his head dropped back in pure unfettered bliss, the warm glow of satisfaction pumped through my veins.

Trembles wracked his body as his fingers flexed in my hair. His groans softened to whimpers and when he stopped, he caressed my cheek as he slipped from my lips.

Wow.

I had been in a pissy mood, and even though I hadn't come, giving him this pleasure went a long way to improving my mood.

Who knew?

"Thank you, my love," he said softly, the violet softened to a lavender.

Nuzzling my cheek against his thigh, I gave him a pat on the ass, then stood. I loved that ass. Nice and firm.

Later, after Wade was gone, I'd have to get him to let me snuggle up against it. He needed sleep and I wasn't taking no for an answer.

"While I rinse and get dressed, I want you to fill me in. Who is Wade, why is he important, and why is he here?" I slid around Yunez and reached for the shampoo. Wade would just have to meet me with wet hair, because I was washing the workout and defeat off my body.

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned. The dark circles still present but now they were lessened by the light in his eyes. Yunez dipped his head and pressed a sweet, lingering kiss to my lips. We breathed each other's air and just reveled in this one stolen moment. Sighing like he didn't want to come back to reality, he stepped out of the shower.

The cooler air momentarily washing over me before the steam billowed in the small space. That was a great benefit about being in Fennina with magic users. The hot water never ran out.

"Here are the...cliff notes. Wade is the lover of Toste, the Caen leader. Toste is notoriously grumpy and hard to deal with. Comes with the house really, think of him as a grizzly in personality. But Wade is a softer man of the Levan House. Water is his element of choice and that works great with Toste." I quickly scrubbed the dirt off as Yunez continued filling me in. "Wade is an acquaintance maybe even a friend, and he has agreed to come hear our story. Except, he was not supposed to be here this soon. He sent word ahead that he is almost here, but the messenger got lost due to my glamour. He is now essentially on our doorstep."

I nodded while I turned the water off, even though he couldn't see me. "Is it bad that he's here unannounced?"

Yunez paused; the room completely silent on the other side of the glass. "I would like to say no. Everything I know about him says he is a good man. Thoughtful and caring. However, I think we can all agree, that images and personalities are never what they seem."

A quietness blanketed the room. How were we supposed to trust anyone if we couldn't be sure of anything?

"Do you still lack the sight?" I asked softly as I shut off the water.

Yunez waited for me while holding a towel open. His gaze was somber as I stepped out. He wrapped the fluffy material around my body, using his hands to rub the moisture from my skin.

"On everything that matters," he said gravely.

There was a knock against the open door, and we both turned to see Egan standing in the doorway. He was dressed in a green tunic that made his pale skin glow and his burnished red hair shine.

I was so primed from taking care of Yunez, I couldn't stop my appreciation of how his tunic molded his body.

"Batse is at the door. Says Wade is waiting for us in the dining hall." Egan let his gaze trail my warm skin, and he pulled my shift dress off the counter and carried it to me. He spread it over his arm, letting the fabric slide off before he held it up to me. "You'll be beautiful in this, Issy girl."

"That means we have exactly five minutes to be in the hall to still be considered good hosts." The tension that had leaked out of Yunez came back with a vengeance as he sped out of the room. The towel loosened and right before he disappeared we caught sight of one taut ass cheek.

Egan and I glanced at each other and busted out laughing.

Damn, it felt good to just laugh. Had we laughed at all since the attack? I hadn't. Even Jari's attempts of humor had fallen short under the weight of the impending world.

"I still can't get used to seeing...or hearing, Yunez in any kind of sexual way. He wasn't joking when he said he was a screamer." Egan smirked and mirth twinkled in his eyes.

Another laugh bubbled up, and I shook my head as I dropped the towel to pull on the dress. He was vocal. But I loved it. There wasn't anything sexier than hearing a man as he experienced the sweetest pleasure.

Egan's gaze was hot on my skin, but he made no move to touch me. We all understood what was at stake.

He waited with me, his presence keeping me warm and subtly happy as I quickly wrapped my wet hair into a bun that I hoped looked more sleek than it did wet.

I opted for no makeup, but it wasn't really a thing in most of Fennina anyway. After three rushed minutes, Egan held his arm out for me to take.

When we entered the main room, everyone waited for us by the door as they talked in hushed whispers. Once they turned around, Jari whistled, giving me a lopsided grin, even as Rand smiled softly and Nato just flat out grinned.

Sage, the asshole, watched me coolly.

Whatever. I'd deal with him later.

"You look lovely, Isolde," Yunez grinned, swiping his hair out of his eyes as he opened the door. "Shall we?"

"Did you fill them in on what you'd told me?" I asked as I moved through the doorway. Yunez took up my other side as the rest of the guys fanned out around me.

"I did. As much as I had time to."

"What have you been doing without us?" I lowered my voice just in case there were any ears lurking nearby. But I shouldn't have worried. Everyone here was more than loyal to Yunez.

He blew out a harsh breath, but his features quickly reformed into the Cheshire cat's smile. "I've been trying to figure out the best way to announce us to Fennina."

"Without us?" I measured my words slowly.

"What?" His head jerked back, then he glanced around at everyone. "I—"

"It's not time for this right now." Nato shook his head once, calling me out for bringing this up at the wrong and very public time. Shit, he was right. Why hadn't I shared my thoughts when we were in the bathroom? I knew the answer to that but I refused to acknowledge it.

I'd seen the weight of responsibility grinding down on his shoulders and thought with my little head instead of my big one. I was no better than a man.

I accepted my flaws, it was part of self-awareness.

Shaking my head to dislodge the random thoughts, I caught Egan sending me a questioning look. "Sorry. Rogue commentary in my brain."

He huffed a laugh but didn't say anything. Thank God. The fear of the unknown combined with the constant pressure of being the Mazza was making me crazy. I'd rather they suspected than knew what kind of lunatic they had in their bed.

"Thank God," Cabbie ran over to us on black stiletto heels as we neared the dining hall. "Doll, what the hell? You can't play political games under cloak and dagger looking like a washed-up alley cat dressed you." He shook his head and pursed his generous lips to the side. "Seriously, Yunez? You have me and the Cherries here. *Use us*," he pleaded.

Turning away, he stalked toward the entrance, throwing his arms open to signal the guards to open the doors.

“If you would like, my love, I will call Cabbie in next time to dress you,” Yunez whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

All I could manage was a grimace. I did not want the worlds impression of me to be a sex toy wielding, floss wearing diva. I’d already succumbed to sex toy wielder. That was where I drew the line. No matter how much I loved them, that look just wasn’t for me.

“Wade, lover. Yunez, his Mazza, and their lusty legion have arrived!” Cabbie stepped to the side and bowed with a flourish.

The Mannos were so used to our ridiculous name by now that they didn’t even twitch in surprise, they merely tucked their chins in respect as we entered the hall.

Who I assumed was Wade, stood in the center of the room, surrounded by a small entourage of men and women, with his head canted and his brow furrowed.

I got it. It was unusual. I doubted the other Mazzas had named their harems, but I loved that we had one. It made us seem solid.

If I was right, Wade was of medium height. Brilliant blonde hair, light blue eyes. The picture of what you’d imagine for the boy next door - if that boy was in his mid-twenties.

There was a softness about him. Something kind, and I saw now why Yunez would have reached out to him over Toste.

Wade first zeroed in on Yunez, then moved immediately to me, and his eyes widened even as the rest of his slender body froze.

We stopped a few feet short of him, and from this distance he didn’t appear to be breathing.

I’d grudgingly gotten somewhat used to the stares of adoration, of hope that came from the Mannos and other workers here. But Wade’s stare unsettled me.

He wasn’t looking at me as if I was going to save the world. He looked at me as if he’d seen a ghost.



SUDDENLY, he stumbled forward, throwing his arms around me.

Egan growled, accompanied by a host of other male sounds that showed their displeasure.

Shocked, I held my arms out to the side as this new and strange man sobbed into my shoulder. His tears wet my skin like a warm summer rain, and his bright joy soaked into my skin.

I frantically searched out Yunez, but he stood off to the side with a slight frown on his lips, his gaze was distant, searching threads. Whatever he was seeing brought a deep groove between his brows before it disappeared on a sigh. He blinked and smiled at me with a soft happiness.

Weird.

But we always knew Yunez was the odd squirrel.

“I don’t know you, but I do,” Wade whispered against my neck.

“I don’t know you at all.” Was that regret in my voice? Hell, he was just so nice that I couldn’t bring myself to think of him as the creeper he was being right now. What I would have liked, was an explanation.

“You will. I promise, you will.”

Sage stalked around to stand next to Yunez and crossed his arms. “That better not be another past fuck buddy,” he gritted out. I flipped him off behind Wade’s back.

“He is not. He is, however, a missing piece of Isolde’s past,” Yunez shrugged good naturedly, like all was fucking well in the world.

I raised a hand and patted Wade on the back. “Who are you?”

He released me, well, he stepped back to hold my arms as his gaze learned every inch of my face before pausing on the mark with pride.

“My childhood best friend went missing ages ago. Just vanished without a trace. I’ve missed him—I’ve missed him so much.” Wade’s voice broke over the last few words.

Wait...

Was he saying...?

“Why do you think your best friend would have anything to do with me?” My voice was thick for no reason. I’d never really searched for my family. And when I had tried to investigate them, there hadn’t been any information left to make a trail.

Still holding me, Wade twisted to look at Yunez. “You have the sight, don’t you, my friend? Can you see? Can you confirm?”

Wade knew Yunez as Yunez? Or was he seeing Phin?

Yunez nodded. “For some reason, her birth and how she came to be on Earth was hidden from me, but I have seen Lars in your past threads and I believe you are right.” His gaze shown bright when it landed on me.

Mannos started to press closer, as if the tease of learning more about the Mazza was too much to resist. When he noticed, Yunez raised a hand for the servers. On cue, they brought out the food and pitchers of drink, circling the tables and pulling some of the Mannos away. Although most stayed.

“Let us take this conversation up to the platform,” Yunez ushered us up to the front.

Jari and Nato gently extracted me from Wade, although he loathed to let me go. At their mean mug expressions he relented, but kept his gaze on me the entire walk to the table. He also opted for the chair directly across from me.

I thought he might have tried to take the seat next to me if Jari and Nato hadn’t taken them for themselves, wrapping possessive hands around my shoulders. If I were Wade, I’d also have worried I’d get a knife to the gut if he’d tried.

“Who are you again?”

I almost wanted to roll my eyes at Sage’s severe frown as he questioned the man.

“Sage,” Rand quietly reprimanded.

“No, it’s quite alright.” Wade waved a hand, his hair flowing around his face as if he actually embodied water. He speared Sage with a look too full of happiness to be rude. “I take it you’re part of the Lusty Legion Cabbie announced?”

“I am.” Sage sat up, his chest puffing out.

“Interesting name that.” His amused gaze flicked to me for a few seconds before going back to Sage. “My name is Wade, and I met Yunez some...what is it now—three, four decades ago?”

So that answered that question.

“I believe four decades.”

The soft smile curving over Wade’s mouth seemed to whisper of their friendship over the years. They must have been fond memories for him.

“I understand you have something important to discuss with me,” Wade’s gaze flicked to Yunez once more, “but I think it would be better if we started with your Mazza. What is your name, dear?” He reached his hand across the table to take one of mine in both of his.

Egan and Sage growled, but Wade ignored them.

“Isolde,” I answered on autopilot. There was conversation going on around us in the hall, but I was still stuck on how he might know my past, maybe even my parents?

Wade pressed his lips together as tears filled his eyes. “That’s a lovely name. Ishana must be your mother. I’d bet on it.”

Ishana...

“You don’t know?” I asked.

Nato curled me tighter against him as Jari slipped his hand in mine, both showing their support.

Regretfully, he shook his head. “I don’t for sure. I can only tell you that you’re the spitting image of my best friend. A man I haven’t seen in too long. Ishana was also a friend. We grew up together. She always loved Lars, but he didn’t return her feelings as far as I was aware. We were children then. And I left home when I was barely an adult. When I tried to track him down, I discovered he’d gone missing.”

I clung to every word, aching to know more.

“You never tried to track her down?”

Hesitantly, he shook his head. “She was more his friend than mine. Although, now I wish I would have.” He paused. “I have a feeling I would have just found an empty trail like I did with Lars.”

“You think this is true?” I turned to Yunez. Why hadn’t I ever thought to ask him about my origin?

“I do.” He nodded. “I will put some work into this once we are back in our suite and we have time, but you really are the spitting image of Lars. If you are not his daughter, then you have very strong blood ties to him.”

I nodded and somehow my fingers found their way to my lips. Wondering about my parents had never really been at the top of my priority list. My life was what it was.

And when Nato and my LL abducted me, I had more important things on my mind, like trying to not let the hype of essentially being their messiah get to me.

Now that it was practically shoved in my face, why hadn’t I wondered where I came from? *Who* I came from?

Were they good people?

Were they still alive?

Did they die a grisly death to save me?

Was I the next HP?

“You’re thinking much too hard,” Nato whispered in my ear as he squeezed my thigh.

“Isolde,” Wade called my name. I soaked in his handsome yet soft features. “Later, we should chat, I can tell you many stories about Lars. Some of Ishana too.”

“I’d like that,” I said quietly. I was still fucking reeling from this revelation. As much as I constantly felt like a failure of a Mazza, I could add failure of a daughter to that too.

“Yunez…” Wade tucked into his meal. “What is the reason for this meeting that couldn’t wait?”

“I am glad you asked. Because time is absolutely of the essence.” One side of Yunez’s mouth quirked up in a devilish grin, even if it didn’t reach his eyes. “There is a war brewing. One most of Fennina will never see coming. I need an audience with Toste. If you are willing, I thought you could assist with securing us a favorable meeting with Toste.”

Wade snorted. “The only way you’ll get a favorable audience with him is if I blow him before you arrive.” He winked at me. “Which, I’m sure you know, is no hardship.” Then he sobered. “But tell me more about this war. There’s tension in the realm. Sure. But nothing I would constitute as a precursor of war.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard whispers of the Shadow Society?”

“Everyone has. And that Rainer—my apologies Rand, I’m sure since you’re sitting at this table your apple was thrown far from that tree—has too much ambition inside that pretty head of his.”

Yunez traced the wet rim of his cup as a low hum filled the air. “Yes, well. The big secret is that Rainer is not part of the Shadow Society. At least, not the real one. He has a healthy following that masquerade under the name, and they have even started taking their steps toward ensuring a war with Earth, but the war I am speaking of, it will be much more dangerous to those here. In Fennina.”

The silence amplified Wade’s confusion as he glanced around the table. “Okay. I only followed half of that. Who is the Shadow Society if not the group of over eager dicks under Rainer?”

“I am glad you asked,” Yunez said in an ominous voice as he pressed his chest against the table to lean closer. Sage gave him a droll stare as Jari grinned and shook his head. I really was learning how dramatic Yunez liked to be.



Wade cast his gaze down at his plate, idly pushing the food around. Yunez had finished filling him in on the most important details twenty minutes ago. While we picked up light, fluffy conversation, I had kept my eye on Wade.

He was digesting everything I'd had weeks to come to terms with. I got it. It was troubling and anxiety inducing. But all I could think about was getting him alone and picking his brain on who my parents were.

Were they in love? Would they have loved me?

Hell, my inner child, with insecurities and all, threatened to surface.

"I am stuffed," Yunez breathed out as he pushed away from the table. He patted his flat stomach as he leaned back in the chair.

Jerking his head to the side as if to dislodge any cotton thoughts, Wade forced his gaze to Yunez. "My apologies. I'm trying to wrap my head around what this means for Fennina. You still didn't say. What are you after? Why invite me here? Toste would take this meeting regardless of my involvement given the circumstances."

"He would, but it would be extremely helpful with you already in the know." Yunez tapped two long fingers on the table.

Wade accepted that with a single nod. "And I suppose I'm not to tell him of this meeting?"

"No, by all means, tell him everything I said. I'm not asking you to keep secrets on our behalf. Just answer my call when I make it."

"I can do that," Wade said quietly, the corners of his lips downturned from his continued hard thinking. "If you'll excuse me, I think I need to freshen up in my room. I need to leave early in the morning to continue on my way to Senadia."

"Of course, of course." Yunez waved a hand magnanimously. "Your room is prepared for you and your party. Let us know if you need anything."

Wade stood and I rushed to stand up too.

His eyes softened as he glanced at me. Good. At least I wasn't coming off as an insensitive asshole.

"Before you leave, maybe tomorrow morning, can we chat?" I curled my fingers until my nails bit into my palms.

"Sure, child. I'd be delighted to." Then he bowed to our table and started making his way to where the rest of his party sat off to the side. A server met them, probably to show them to their room.

I hadn't even moved to sit down when the doors to the hall opened. A much smaller group of people moved through. It wouldn't have meant much to me, except Egan knocked his chair over in his haste to run to them. He whooped in joy before catching them in a group hug.

Yunez reached over the table and touched my arm, an amused smirk on his face. "Are you ready to meet his family?"



OH SHIT.

Egan's family?

I'd never met the family of any of my past boyfriends. Hell, not even the families of any of my friends. Not really.

The man laughing boisterously as Egan smothered them in hugs looked nothing like Egan. He was bulky, as bulky as I'd seen any Fennin, with black hair, brown eyes, and freckles. Lots and lots of freckles.

Then there were the two girls jumping and squealing, their tinkling voices warming my heart. *They* looked just like my Caen mate.

They looked like they were in their late teens or early twenties. But with our fresh-faced, long-lasting youth, that really meant nothing, since everyone was forever twenty-one. Or maybe that meant everything?

The man who had to be his father barely looked a day over twenty-seven. It was odd just because he was Egan's dad.

"Do you want to go over and say hello?" Nato cupped the back of my arm as he dipped his mouth to my ear.

I peeled my lips away from my teeth in a grimace. "No? But yes? I've never met anyone's family before. And Rand's family doesn't count because they're cunt nuggets."

Jari snorted, then covered his mouth with his fist. Rand shook his head with a half-smile on his face. He knew I was right.

"I'll escort you. They're sweethearts, you have nothing to worry about." Nato held out his arm and grinned down at me.

Blowing out a breath, I nodded. Here went nothing.

Their lips were moving, and I had a clear shot to Egan and his family, but their voices were too low for me to hear what they were actually saying. He stepped back and glanced over at me, a wide, winning smile spreading across his face as he moved to the side and wrapped an arm around each sister.

The younger, shorter sister looked up at Egan with nothing short of adoration, then right at me.

My steps faltered.

Holy hell, she really was the spitting image of Egan. What a female version of him would look

like. Then his other sister moved her attention to me, and she was just as stunning. They were both little Egans.

My heart squeezed. He'd make beautiful babies.

You know, if there wasn't a war getting ready to happen and a whole secret House thirsting for our demise. Or a quasi secret society trying to take over Earth. We couldn't forget about Rainer and his crew.

"Freyja, Laila, Da. I want you to meet my mate. My Mazza." Pride blared through his words. "Isolde, Issy for short."

His father stepped from around him and pulled me away from Nato. He engulfed me in a hug so tight, it must have been what children felt when their parents held them. It was safe, warm, and comforting.

Tears prickled my eyes.

The Smith's had been good to me, as much as they could have been with being so old, but they never cared for me like this.

"It's a pleasure to meet ya. I haven't seen Egan in two years, and our life wasn't a pleasant one. Not the later years. I've never seen him smile like this. Thank you," his said in a gruff voice for my ears only.

"Egil. I hope I don't have to tell you that Iss has all the bonds she needs. Six, in fact."

I opened my eyes just in time to see Nato groan and Sage roll his eyes. I laughed, but it came out choked.

"Six?" Egil stepped back, slowly releasing me and taking his place by his daughters. His gaze moved between Egan, Nato, Jari, and Sage. His nose crinkled as his gaze landed on Cabbie, towering over him in his tight black outfit and stiletto shoes.

"No, no, sweet cheeks. Not me." Cabbie shook his head.

His brows raised at Cabbie's favorite term of endearment. I guess Cabbie was of the age where he could go for the son...or the father.

Then Egil glanced around our small group, gaze landing on Rand. My sweetheart gave him a tentative smile and small finger wave.

"That's five," he said in a stronger brogue. But he continued to look around the group, completely skipping over Yunez. The squirrel started smiling so big, the LL shook their heads and dropped their gazes. Sage even covered his face with his hands. "Then where's the sixth?"

Yunez stepped forward, clearing his throat, but Egan saved his dad from whatever ridiculous thing he was about to say. One thing I'd learned, Yunez loved to have fun whenever he could. It probably broke up the dire future he currently couldn't see.

"Yunez, Da. Yunez is the sixth."

Egil gasped, his eyes rounding as big as the Fenin moon. "No," he said disbelieving.

"Oh honey, it's true." Cabbie clapped him on the back. "When they give you a room, just don't get placed next to theirs. Yunez...he's very vocal."

I slowly closed my eyes. The mortification was real. Cabbie wouldn't even know that! They were down the hall and too far to hear anything of substance. Right?

"So, um. You...and your friends...um...all..." Laila started, her faced beet red. But she couldn't finish her thought out loud. Freyja grinned, her face just as uncomfortably red.

Clearing his throat, Egan nudged his sisters toward his father. It was adorable! As much as I was embarrassed, I loved how the tips of Egan's ears pinkened. "Here Da, let me walk you to a room. It's time for bed, and I'd love to catch up with you."

“I’ll go with you. The suite next to mine is empty.” Cabbie glanced questioningly at Yunez, who nodded.

Egan shot me a sweet look as he glanced between me and his family. I made the decision easy for him.

Walking over, I pressed a chaste kiss to his lips and turned to his dad and sisters. “It’s nice you meet you all, I’ll see you in the morning for breakfast.”

“Pleasure,” Freyja grinned and winked.

“Same,” Laila said softly.

“Come on now, I’ll help get you settled in. If all goes well, tomorrow, Iss can show you how lethal she is with the nipple clamps.” Cabbie slung an arm over Egil’s shoulders, who choked on his spit.

“Cabbie,” I groaned, but they were already several feet away. He looked over his shoulder and smirked. The man didn’t see anything wrong with using sex toys in all different capacities. But he knew it embarrassed me, and shit, he loved to toss it out.

Jari chuckled as he sidled up next to me. “You mean, you don’t want to follow them after that comment?”

“Hell no. I’m not sure I can even show my face in the morning. Egil and his sisters are going to think I have wild orgies with you all while clamping your nipples.” I peeled my top lip back in despair.

“You’re saying you don’t have group sex with your mates?” Yunez cuddled up to my back and placed his chin on my shoulder. Many of the Mannos glanced our way, unable to keep their gazes off of their fearless leader.

They’d have to get used to this part of Yunez at some point. I was convinced. At least, that was what I was hoping for.

I turned to give him a flat stare. I was not ashamed of him, them or anything we did together. But I wasn’t going to let him put me on the spot. It tickled him too much, the ass.

Incredibly hot, sexy ass, but still an ass.

“Why don’t we head back to our room? Wade has gone for the night, and I’d really like to get some answers.” Every bit of the frustrated aggression that had been dogging all of us earlier was stamped over Nato.

Jari nodded his head, and Sage met Yunez’s gaze with a steady one of his own.

Straightening away from me, Yunez sobered.

“Ah. I see.” He fingered a lock of hair falling in his eyes and pushed it to the side. “Then let’s go.”

Jari slid his fingers through mine to walk with me through the hall. I smiled at the Mannos who glanced our way. Waved at a few. Once we passed through the double doors, the rest of his castle was mostly empty. There were only a few times the place was bustling and that was usually in the mornings, when the Mannos went to the field, or when they were rushing to dinner.

What did the people do the rest of the time?

When we reached our suite after a continuously building silence, I waited for Nato to unlock the door, and once it was open, Sage went first.

Since the other Mazza had made an appearance, they made a habit of preceding me into any room to double and triple check there was no surprises. Especially since Yunez lost the sight.

We filed into the main living area, arranging ourselves on the couches and chairs, except for Nato. He stood in the center of the room. Should I be up there with him? This was as much my stand as it

was his.

No, I'd let him be the voice. We were in a group relationship and the last thing I wanted was for Yunez to think we were ganging up on him.

Although, Sage's death stares were enough of a clue, if he was wondering. I almost grinned. Damn, despite our current situation, these boys made me smile. And Sage's affinity to be a jerk just made me love him all the more. It was just who he was.

"You have me where you want me, now, what are you going to do with me?" Yunez winked at me, even though his face was completely straight.

"Something has to change. We can't keep going on as we are." Strong words from Nato as he kept his body relaxed and his chin up.

Yunez let out a calm breath. "What would you change, Donato?"

I winced. The use of a full name felt like a reprimand, but it was probably just Yunez becoming more serious.

"How about not excluding us as if we were your students. That's where I would start first." Nato crossed his arms and braced his feet apart.

Rand rolled his lips as his gaze bounced between the two.

"Are you not my students? You are not anywhere near prepared enough to go up against the other Mazza. After that fight, I am more scared than ever for our lives. I am never scared, not like this. For us to stand a chance, you all need to be better skilled, a more cohesive unit. That is not now." He shook his head, and the vehemence behind the action broke my heart a little.

Nato blew out a harsh breath. "What do you want us to do, Yunez? Every day we run through the same training drills, eat the same food, see the same people, experience the same failures. Is this how we're supposed to win the war?"

Yunez's brows lowered. "I see."

"Do you?" Jari piped up. He almost never inserted himself in the serious conversations. But now, the somber look on his face clogged my throat.

Sage sighed and nodded. "We're drowning here, Yunez. We're quite literally fucking drowning. Every single day that nothing changes, we're losing a little more steam."

Yunez nodded, dropping his chin to his chest. We all gave him the time he needed to think. When he raised his head, he looked directly at me.

"Is this how you feel too, my love?" His voice softened in something like regret.

Sucking in a deep, fortifying breath, I closed my eyes for a second, gathering my thoughts. Because I did feel the same exact way as the guys. I was getting defeated before the battle even started. We got our asses kicked one time, and without any visible progress, I was falling under the nasty cloud of self-doubt and unworthiness.

Then again, Yunez cared so much. Some might even say too much. His entire life had been dedicated to his cause. To get the future—our future—that he wanted.

Our happily ever after.

And damn, but I felt torn.

I opened my eyes and met his beautiful violent eyes. "I'm sorry, Yunez. I wish I were stronger. I wish I had more patience, but I agree with the rest of the Lusty Legion. We need to do something different. Because whatever we're doing, it's not working."

Standing up from my spot on the couch, I went over to sit next to him, leaning my head against his shoulder as he twined his arm around mine. It wasn't anything sexual. I just needed the contact, and after not seeing him very often, I thought he needed it too.

“I love you all.” Yunez coughed. “And you do not make anything easy on me.”

Tipping my head back, I caught the faint blush under his skin. “We love you too,” I answered for everyone.

He laughed, then choked. “Good. I am glad I can foster such tender feelings when I have neglected you all. I *am* truly sorry. For someone who should be so smart and intuitive, I am afraid I can be quite dense. I have always relied on the sight, and without it, I am as clueless as a tween boyfriend.”

We all chuckled, and I splayed my hand on his knee.

“I think we can forgive you,” Rand said wryly with a crooked smile.

“Good. I am forever grateful. Now, let me do what I should have done from the beginning. What do you want to do?”

“Should we have this decision without Egan?” I picked my head up, glancing at the door, as if Egan would walk through at any minute.

The door opened, and Egan walked through.

I froze.

That was coincidence. But how odd. A strange sensation rolled through my body, like I was expecting this to be some sort of beginning where my powers awakened.

Yunez cast me a speculative glance but didn't say anything.

Everyone else stared at Egan.

“What?” He pulled up short, swiping a hand over the back of his head, his smile falling but doing nothing to take away from his radiant joy.

“Nothing,” Rand murmured. “What did you come back for? Aren't you going to spend the night with your family?”

His smile coming right back to life, Egan came over and plucked me from the sofa, and settled me over his lap. He pressed a soft kiss to the crook of my neck with a low, playful growl.

“We're going to chat in the morning. They're tired from traveling, and as much as I wanted to stay with them, I needed to be here more. Anyway, it's weird to watch my da and sisters sleep.” He paused. “Why, am I interrupting something?”

“No, you're just in time actually.” Nato said slowly. “Yunez?”

Yunez shook his head. “Your fellow Lusty Legioners have sufficiently shamed me and put me in my place. I hear none of you are happy. I assume this is your feelings too?”

Egan sighed, nuzzling his cheek against the back of my head. “Everyone except for Rand has gotten tired of our routine, Yunez. You're damn good at what you do, but right now, we feel like you're taking on everything without us. Like we're not good enough to help you.”

I rolled my lips together, trying to hide any expression on my face. That was exactly what I was battling with. What I thought we were all battling with.

It was almost comical. It just took one battle to hand us our asses and steal our confidence.

“That was never my intentions. I am truly sorry.” Yunez bowed his head. “What can I do to make it up to you all?”

“Include us,” Sage said. He stood from his place on the couch and walked over to Yunez, tugging him up off the couch and into a tight hug. “You're the best of us, and we need you to teach us. Or let us help you. Give us a purpose.”

“I can do that,” Yunez said gruffly. “Starting tomorrow. I will join you for the morning session. Train with you, in truth, and then you all will come with me to speak to my generals. At some point, we must take our places with the Fennin society. You might as well take your place at my side now. Here, with my generals, will be the test run.”



“WAKEY, WAKEY, BISCUITS AND GRAVY,” Cabbie sang.

“Who let him in here?” Sage grumbled, snuggling right up to my ass.

Yunez chuckled. “I did. I was up already. If you all want to start your place at my side, as my partners and co-leaders, then you better get up.” Yunez whipped the blankets off, and I screamed, clutching my bare breasts.

“Honey, don’t worry. I’ve seen perkier tits than yours on the Cherries.” Cabbie waved my concern away.

I gasped in groggy outrage as he leered at Egan’s backside.

“Now that is a sight. There’s not a Stag who has a better bum than your men. If they ever need another profession, they can happily work at the Pleasure House. I understand you probably don’t want them to actually offer services, but they can be nice window dressing.” He nodded as if that was a fantastic compromise.

“Go away,” Nato groaned. “At least until we’ve had time to put on pants.”

“No can do.” Cabbie grinned, tightening the sash on his silky black kimono. “I’m afraid I’m here to supervise wardrobe updates. If you’re about to take the realms by storm, you’re by dicks going to look good doing it.”

Egan chuckled. “I’m afraid to look. I’d say that was just a saying but I’m fairly certain he’s got some kind of bedazzled banana hammocks waiting for us.”

Cabbie rolled his eyes as I crossed my arms over my chest and sat up.

“Now who’s being dramatic. I’ll be in the living room with the tea.” He flounced away, swishing his hips as he left.

“If you’d like to eat breakfast in the hall, hurry up. We’re doing things differently today,” Yunez stepped up to the side of the mattress and cupped my cheek, lowering his face for a morning kiss. “We are in this together.”

“Damn straight,” Jari said through a yawn.

We climbed out of bed, joking and laughing as we got dressed, all in black tactical gear to Cabbie’s dismay. Already I could tell today was going to be different. The lingering black cloud of hopelessness was gone. The day was brighter. A new beginning for us, one where we were a team.

“Why did I come to help if you all were going to look like slightly different clones? You too, doll? Really?” His bottom lip stuck out in a pout.

“Sorry,” I laughed as I made my Fenin version of coffee. It tasted very similar, except the kick was much stronger. I liked it. “I need to be comfortable and confident as we meet with Yunez’s advisors. And this is what I’m comfortable in.”

Cabbie grumbled and headed toward the door. “I need to check in with the Cherries. They’ve been taking turns rotating on perimeter duty.”

“Let us go too. The hall opens for breakfast in five minutes. Leaders are the first on site and last to eat, as is the leader way,” Yunez lectured as he held the door open for us.

“That lesson would have been nice when we first met everyone.” Sage shot Rand an accusing look as if he was in on this secret. From the extra time he’d had with Yunez growing up, who knew, maybe he was.

Yunez shrugged. “It was not important at the time. The Mannos needed to see you as comrades and friends first. No one expected you to be leaders when you were but babes.”

“Can we afford not to be leaders when we’re on the brink of war?” Nato asked as he fell into step beside me. Rand took the other side this time, smiling softly when I glanced at him.

“We are in war.” The usual mischievous expression gave way to an expression that spoke of millennium of experience. “Make no mistake about it, my Lusty Legionnaires. Once we leave my home, I doubt we will be back before the war is decided, whichever way it falls.”

No one had any questions after that. I watched my feet as we walked the rest of the way, lost in the heaviness of Yunez’s words. Outside of the attack from the other Mazza, we were protected here. We had this nice bubble that was nearly impenetrable, even if it was no longer the secret Yunez had built it to be.

“Good morning, Yunez. Lusty Legion.” Batse winked as he bowed. He opened the door to the hall and joined us as we walked toward our table. True to Yunez’s words, there was barely anyone here this early.

“Morning,” I smiled.

Jari had just pulled my chair out for me when Wade appeared in the door. I grinned, hoping he would sit next to me. After the revelation yesterday, I was dying to speak to him, to pick his brain about my parents.

The guys must have been in tune with me because they left the seat to my right open. Yunez took the seat in front of me again and spoke in low tones to Nato.

Good. Already, Nato’s confidence was coming back. He just needed to feel a part of what we were doing. The separation had been hard on all of us, but as our original leader, it had hit Nato the hardest.

“Hello, Isolde.” Wade’s soft smile was warm and welcoming.

“Morning,” I chirped, shifting anxiously in my seat. We’d need to go to Yunez’s war room after breakfast, and as much as I needed a change from the monotonous training, I hated leaving Wade when he could tell me so much about my past.

“I believe I owe you a walk. Would you like to join me on a stroll through the courtyard after our morning meal?”

The smile on my lips died. It was ridiculously obvious. “I can’t—”

“Of course, you can. I can fill the others in on what we’ve been working on, and you can join us after your time with Wade.” Yunez wasn’t to be argued with. And it wasn’t like I was trying too hard anyway.

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

“We’re sure,” Rand confirmed.

“I believe your men will be fine without you for a bit.” Wade looked over the table, studying each man. The stare wasn’t unkind, but there was definitely something working behind his eyes that I couldn’t decipher.

“I’ll be leaving today, Yunez. I’ll speak with Toste in private, but it would be better if he heard from you sooner rather than later. When can we expect you all to join us?” Wade snapped his napkin out before spreading it over his lap.

Doing the same, Yunez also filled his goblet with juice. “Soon. There are some things we need to address first, then we’ll be on our way to Senadia.”

“I can hold him off for a week, maybe two. If you take too much time though…” Wade trailed off.

“I have no plans to leave you to explain everything to Toste. That would be counterproductive to our goals, and I would not ask that of you regardless.”

“Understood.”

The servers came around and filled our plates with seared slices of ham and eggs. They set baskets of rolls in the center, and I grabbed one with the butter tub. Other servers were already making their way around the room servicing the Mannos.

Nato caught my eye and grinned. I couldn’t help it. His smile was contagious and all I could think about was how he loved to describe food, and cooking.

“Da!” Egan greeted, pushing out of his chair. “Laila, Freyja.” He gave each of them hugs. “Come sit.”

I waved, and they all smiled in return. “Did you all sleep well?” Look at me being all domestic and shit. I could do this. I could build normal healthy relationships with my LL’s families. You know, at least the ones who weren’t trying to take over the world and dominate the human realm.

“Like a babe,” Egil said. “The spread looks delicious. As good as your mum would have made,” Egil said thickly as he cupped the back of Egan’s neck. The girls looked down at their plates, staying quiet. Were they hiding tears? Did they miss their mother the way Egan did?

Egan cleared his throat, his cheeks pinkening. “No, nothing beats mum’s cooking. Nato comes close, but that’s it.”

Nato reached across Sage to grip Egan’s shoulder. My dark haired mate sent Egan as much comfort as he could in an understanding look.

Conversation turned to fluffy things. Who had the hardest hit on the training field, when I would whip out the nun chucks, how long before the Mannos put on another show, especially now that Egan’s family was here.

And from the way the girls were eyeing some of the men, I imagined it wouldn’t be too long. Several of the Mannos were just as enamored, making points to stand, flex, and strut close to our table. So much so, that Egan started to growl at the crowd.

Egil laughed. “Son, they’re adults. You’re bonded. It’s not like we can keep them locked in the tower. They have too much of your mum in them to stand for that.”

Freyja smirked and Laila outright grinned.

“I’m afraid we’ve spent as much time as we could with you all.” Yunez glanced at the position of the suns through the window. “Our generals are waiting on us.”

We all exchanged looks. We finally got what we ask for when there are people here we wished to spend time with.

“Isolde?” Wade stood and held out his arm. I glanced at the LL, and they all shot me encouraging looks. We didn’t leave immediately when I took Wade’s arm, instead, each of my guys gave me a kiss goodbye.

“There are guards around the courtyard, so you all will be safe. I’ll come find you soon if you want me to?” Rand tucked his fingers in the band of pants, like he just liked the physical touch.

“I would love that. But give me at least thirty minutes.” I grinned.

“I will protect her with my life,” Wade promised gravely. “And I’ll deliver her to you all within the hour. I will have to be on my way back to Toste anyway.”

“Perfect,” Jari said through a genuine smile, even as some of his long blond hair fell from his man bun. It was great to see the light filter back through his face.

Who knew how long this small reprieve would last. Our luck, it probably wouldn’t be long, but I was determined to savor it.

Yunez led the group through the now full hall of Mannos, stopping to chat with a few here or there. He was also doing a bang up job of roping the LL into conversation. Rand naturally fell into place at his side, but the others needed a little encouragement.

And it only took a small amount before they were engaging the Mannos just as strongly.

“They’ll be great leaders of Fennina one day,” Wade casually commented.

I jerked my gaze to his as he started moving us toward the outside door. “That’s not our goal.”

“Isn’t it?” His liquid blue eyes watched me with an intensity that hadn’t been there over breakfast.

“No.” I shook my head with more vehemence than was necessary, but he caught me off guard. We cleared the doors before I continued. “We want to stop Rainer. Save Earth. Put a stop to the archaic and harmful agenda of the Manno house. But that’s it.”

Wade steered us down a path that I was pretty sure led to the outside edges of Yunez’s personal courtyard, just on the other side. Lush green vines and bright orange blooms climbed the walls on either side of us.

“Hm.” Wade pushed his lips to the side as we kept our walk to a steady, calm pace, completely at odds with the fucking wild stampede happening inside my chest. That was a dangerous thought. If he believed that would be the rest of Fennina too? And what would that mean for our safety?

“What does that mean?” I snapped, then took a deep breath. I didn’t believe Wade was trying to offend me, but he was getting my hackles up.

“Easy,” he cooed, patting my hand tucked in the crook of his arm. “I mean no offense. I’ve known Yunez for many years, and even before he shared with me, what I’m sure is not the entirety of the situation, I knew he was destined for great things.” The side of his mouth lifted. “Not surprising, since he’s the male version of the Mazza.”

“Mannos aren’t relegated to the same rules as Mazza,” I repeated what Yunez had explained to me what seemed like forever ago. “Almost the entire population inside the castle are Mannos. If what you say is true, then there’d be years and years of infighting with all the Mannos trying to gain the top spot.”

“You mistake me. Not because he’s a Manno. You can’t deny that there is something...tangible about Yunez that is absent in most all the other Mannos. Your Rand has some of the same qualities as Yunez, more so than the others, but not as strong. It makes sense to me that Yunez would be spearheading this effort to save the world. But you think life will go back to the way it is now once everything comes to light?” He smiled sadly, a furrow deepening between his eyes. “You haven’t been a part of our society very long, and I thank the gods your parents were able to hide you somehow. But everything is about to change. And when it does, our society will not be able to just fall back into old habits. With Yunez leading the charge, our people will demand more of him. If I’m right, they’ll demand everything.

“You’ll need to prepare, Isolde. Because they won’t just demand it of him. If what I think will

happen comes to pass, they'll demand everything of you. Of your Lusty Legion.

“You'll be the leaders of our combined realms.”



YEAH, the ground pretty much dropped out beneath my feet. How the hell was I continuously getting hit with these revelations?

Seriously?

First, I never thought about my parents. And that also added an element of guilt to my shock. Then, Wade rode in and told me that he knew them.

Like, why hadn't I thought about them more after I found out I wasn't human?

Then, this? Now that he'd put it out in the universe, I knew—knew—others would have these same thoughts.

Where was my Zien powers of sight to help me out? Where were Yunez's? Or had he seen this particular problem? Maybe he had and he just saw it as a problem for our future selves.

Though, that didn't seem like Yunez's style.

"Isolde, are you okay?" Wade's brow creased in concern.

I started blinking rapidly. After he dropped his bomb, I had just stared at him, eyes burning, until he broke me out of my moment.

"Sorry. I think you knocked my brain offline. I'm back now."

He stared, then laughed, tossing his head back. "Okay, you are definitely Ishana's child. She had that same strange sense of humor. I wish I would have gotten to know her more when we were young." His laugh softened until he just grinned at me.

My heart jumped into my throat. Did I have her sense of humor? Was that something that was genetic over learned?

"I suppose you want to know more about your parents?" He patted my hand again and we resumed walking.

A guard in the distance nodded when I made eye contact with him. I returned the gesture and he grinned. Wow, these men, it took so little to make them happy. Or maybe they just liked to be seen.

"Whatever you have to tell me, I'd love to listen. I was adopted as a baby, and my adoptive parents didn't have any information on my birth parents." If they had, they never shared it.

"I would love to, you know this—"

"Wade!" A frantic voice called in the distance. "Wade!"

We spun around, waiting for a body to appear with the voice. Within seconds, a young man with white blond hair appeared. He raced toward us, a grimace painted over his face resembling pain, or

panic. Maybe both.

“Wade,” he stopped a few feet away, wiping the sweat from his forehead, then shaking his hands like he couldn’t not move.

He was one of the guards who had walked in with Wade that first night, but he meant something to Wade. More than a guard.

Wade released me and stepped closer to the man, cupping his shoulders and dipping down to look in his eyes. “What’s wrong, Isa?”

“A messe...a messenger. Bird. Arrived.” He sucked in deep breaths between each word. How long had he run? “We rotated...outside the wards...in case of emergency... Senadia...under attack... Toste...hurt—”

“What?” Wade roared, tightening his hold on the guard until he cried out. Immediately he loosened his grip. “We need to go.” He glanced at me, all the color in his face gone. “Come, I’ll take you back. I need to go. Toste,” he cried, then grabbed my hand, racing back to the castle.

His hand trembled in mine and I squeezed his. For once, I felt like the strong one, like I was the support.

We needed to go with him. Whatever was happening, we could help.

As soon as we reached the doors to the hall, Wade shook free of my hold and he and the guard fled through the other hallway.

Shit. I didn’t know where Yunez’s war room was. The entire place was empty so I couldn’t even stop a servant.

Batse passed by the main doors, then back peddled and entered the hall. “Isolde?” He grinned, but when I rushed him, he straightened, losing the carefree attitude.

“Batse, I need to find Yunez and the LL.”

“This way.” He turned and led the way, moving at almost a run. If I could have kept up, he most likely would have flat out ran. “What happened? Weren’t you with Wade?”

“I was. He got a message—” I started to relay it word for word, but should I? Could I truly trust Batse? Or should I hold information to myself until I’d had a chance to tell Yunez?

Shit, this leadership stuff was harder than someone might think. That, or I just wasn’t a natural. Probably both.

“I need to talk to Yunez and the rest of my Lusty Legion.”

He nodded and picked up his pace as if he understood my dilemma perfectly. Maybe he did. He was a Manno after all. I wasn’t yet sure all the ways his powers were different than the majority of Fennina. For all I knew, he could read the emotion coming off of me, like a woman can read red flags after the breakup.

“This is it.” He rapped four times on the door, before pressing his palm to the smooth wood surface. His hand glowed for a flash of a second, then the door snicked open and swung inward.

Yunez and Rand were already on their way around a large table. Nato and Sage pushed to their feet, while Egan and Jari looked on with confusion.

“What’s wrong, my lady?” Rand reached me first.

How did he—

That wasn’t important right now.

“Wade is on his way back to Senadia. We have to go with him! They’re under attack!” I ended on a near screech, gripping Rand’s collar. I switched my gaze to Yunez, imploring him with every ounce of persuasion I could muster. “Please,” I whispered. “We have to go help them.”

For the people of Senadia. For a potential ally.

For Wade, the one and only connection I'd found to my true past.

Yunez's eyes glazed over as they flicked from side to side. The moment seemed to stretch an eternity while Yunez tried to access his sight. At some point, Rand wrapped his arm around the top of my back, pressing me against his front. Egan had even molded himself to my back, purring softly, trying to tame the wild, whipping helplessness that lashed through me.

Whatever Yunez was finding, or not finding, was taking so long. Too long. I took a moment to try and catch my breath, moving my gaze over the room.

Three of his generals were standing by the far wall layered with notes upon notes. Diagrams were drawn, pictures were pasted, and frayed corners moved with the air current of the room.

Where had the wind come from?

Batse had taken a spot next to the generals, who were all clasping their hands in front of the stomachs, waiting gravely for whatever Yunez would decide.

A few minutes later, when I had only just begun to calm down, Yunez fell to his knees, grimacing in pain while clutching his head. A small trickle of blood leaked from his nose. My heart skipped a beat. I'd never seen Yunez affected this much. He was all powerful, wasn't he? He seemed that way...

"I can't. I can't see. The blocker they have is too powerful."

"This is the other Mazza?" Sage growled as he dropped down next to Yunez, placing a firm hand on his shoulder.

"I don't know. The signature I'm reading is slightly different."

"We need to go," I said, tearing out of Rand's and Egan's hold. "They need us."

"No," Yunez barked. "We're not ready. *You're* not ready." He threw out a hand and gripped the table, shakily pulling himself up from the floor.

"What? No. We can't stay here while people need us," I shouted.

"You would go to your death? You would take us to ours?" Yunez raised his voice to match mine, just as emotional, just as frayed.

Molten anger mixed with fear boiled inside me, furiously lapping over every inch of my insides. I stared down at my open palms through a red filled haze. Something was happening. I wasn't sure what it was, but it hurt, and burned, and raged inside me like a tempest storm unable to break free.

Was this what we were meant to be? Cowards on the sidelines? Could I live like this? I left everything in the human world for them, for me. For the destiny I was always meant for.

But this hiding, waiting, letting others die when we could help.

We had to at least try...

The room whited out, a ravaged scream tore from my throat.

Just as soon as it happened, everything turned back to normal. My men were all prone on the floor, having been knocked down by some unseen force.

By me...

Even the generals were all in various disoriented states around the room.

"What the hell was that?" Jari groaned as he sat up, rubbing the back of his head.

"I think that was some of Issy's powers bleeding through," Yunez whispered in a hoarse voice as he scratched his head.

"I understand your concern, Yunez." Batse grabbed a chair and pulled himself up from the ground. "I would have thought going to Toste's aid would be a suicide mission, but what if this is exactly what you need?"

"What do you mean?" Egan climbed to his feet and tugged me to him. I barely felt the touch, or

shifting closer to him. I was numb after that crazy energy release. It felt great to have an outlet, but now I was left feeling bereft.

“Isolde hasn’t come into her powers yet, even with the bonds. That means something is wrong. Or perhaps, she’s being blocked as well but on a greater scale than just sight. But just now, a very emotionally charged episode broke through to connect her to her powers. What if helping in Senadia could be the bridge she needs to access the powers that have been eluding her?” Batse shrugged like his theory was just another idea in the pile.

Except, it wasn’t.

It was a completely plausible idea that I hadn’t thought of before. Could that really be the case? I was blocked and maybe, just maybe, forcing myself into a dire situation, where more often than not something of my powers bled through, would crack open the seal for good.

If so, I wasn’t the failure I thought I was. My lack of powers would be the result of fucking Brody and his hangry harem.

Joy soared inside me to tangle with the deep sense of urgency to get to Senadia. I needed Batse’s theory to be true.

“Batse, I appreciate your insight, but I cannot take Isolde into battle no matter how sure of the idea that this could unlock her powers,” Yunez said angrily, brushing imaginary dirt from his shirt. “I cannot risk it.”

“How can you not?” I cried. What happened to the fearless leader of the Mannos? The one who had a plan for everything and a sexual innuendo to boot? Where was *that* man? “There is more at stake than just our lives. Or my life. We can help. And we’ve already wasted precious time as it is. We need to go, now.”

Surprisingly, Sage threaded his fingers through mine. “I’m with Iss. We need to go. I didn’t wait my whole life to find my Mazza to hide away and let people die during cruel attacks. That’s not who we are. That isn’t who you raised us to be.” He shook his head in disappointment at Yunez.

On that note, humor sparked, clearing away some of the snapping feelings twisting up inside me. Sage’s comment on Yunez raising them, even if it was distant and deliberate, it lent to underlying daddy issues.

Whose issues, I wasn’t sure, but it seemed like someone in our group had daddy issues.

Rand held out his hand to Yunez. “You can’t protect us from everything. We need to save as many people as we can. They don’t even know why they’re being attacked. We’re going.” Rand shot his friend and mentor a stern but steady look.

My heart twisted. It was the first time he had seemed to go against Yunez’s wishes.

Glancing between us all, much like he had last night, he sighed and twisted some of his black hair to the side and out of his eyes. “Each of you hold a piece of my heart. Being crippled with the loss of sight, I feel ill equipped to do more than hope for the best as we go into any kind of conflict. But you’re all right. Let’s get ready to depart. I’ll notify Cabbie.”

“Actually,” Batse said, a dangerous glint sparking in his eyes. “I’ve been working on something with some of the other Mannos in secret. Come with me.”



“GO, get dressed. We’ll be waiting for you in the front courtyard.” Batse shoed us away, which wasn’t hard. Before he was finished speaking, I was rushing through the halls with the LL on my heels.

I had never been to Senadia, but if it was like Helfai or Louniva, thousands of people’s lives could be at stake.

Was it *the* Mazza? The Mannos? Or Rainer and his cronies causing trouble just because they could?

The wild, whipping emotion started to rise again, and I exhaled, clamping it down. I wanted my powers. I needed them, to show myself and everyone else that I could do this. I could be the Mazza they needed.

But I didn’t need to create casualties along the way if I could help it. Not with my guys.

When we reached our rooms, there were no words needed. We were already dressed in our tactical outfits we’d been wearing to practice in. I threw the lid off of the weapons chest, and we strapped a series of knives and various other weapons on our waists, chest straps, and tucked in our boots at the ankles.

Not me though.

I took two small daggers out to place one on each hip for an *oh shit* moment. Then I picked up my nun chucks. Those was the only weapons I really needed, or the only ones I trusted myself with.

Jari was the last to finish equipping himself, and once he turned to face us, we were off again, racing toward the courtyard. A steady hum of anticipation built under my skin the closer we got.

The worry was still there. So was the fear and self-doubt that had come to be a second skin. But now, I had a purpose.

For good or bad, I was going to help. And anyone who got in the way of us and the people of Senadia... They needed to pray to whatever deity they worshiped to save them.

Because after the hellish few weeks we’d been through, I needed an outlet.

As I looked around at the various levels of determination on everyone except Yunez, who wasn’t so much determined as deadly, I realized they needed an outlet too.

We needed a chance to redeem ourselves after the other Mazza and her bonds handed us our asses.



The courtyard was completely full of Mannos. All were dressed for battle, but two thirds wore tunics with the emblazoned three suns emblem on their chests and backs.

Simms had a stack of the same tunics over his arm. When we stopped next to him, he started handing them out. But where everyone else's were black, these were a purple so dark and rich, from a distance they appeared black.

He winked as I slowly took a smaller size from him.

Wade's words stuck in my head. Were we setting ourselves up to take over Fennina? I didn't think we were, but once we rode in with differentiating tunics, ones specifically designed to set us apart as leaders, how could I pretend that we weren't setting ourselves up for exactly that.

"So, this is it?" Sage adjusted his weapons over the three suns tunic while he gazed out over the sea of warriors.

We were coming out to Fennina. Once we stepped off this sanctuary, there would be no coming back.

Yunez joined him. "This is it. Once we leave, we will not come back until we have won, or we have lost. I wish I could offer you all words of hope and encouragement..." he trailed off, his voice catching.

"We aren't young pups anymore." Egan clapped Yunez on the back. "We don't need pep talks. We walk beside you now, not behind you."

Yunez nodded.

"Egan!" One of his sisters yelled over the crowd. Both girls appeared as they elbowed Mannos out of the way, Egil on their heels. "What's happening?" Freyja cried, reaching out to fist her hand in his tunic.

"There's an attack on Senadia. We have to go help them." He cupped her jaw and kissed her forehead, holding out his other arm for Laila to hug him. Wrapping both arms tight around his sisters, he squeezed his eyes shut. When they opened, they blazed as he sought out his father. "Stay here, protect the girls, and we'll be back as soon as we can."

Egil gently tugged the girls back, whispering in their ears. Then he stepped away, gave them a little push back toward the castle and squared his shoulders.

"Not this time, son. I'm going with you. I was a fine soldier back in my day, and my place will be at your back. The girls will be safe here behind the wards."

Laila and Freyja clutched each other's hands, a calm resolve settling over them as they held their father's gaze. *Please gods, don't let it be the last time.* As tears filled their eyes, they shot Egan one last look full of love before running off toward the castle.

"Da, the girls need you," he choked up. "I can't take you away from them too."

"Shh," Egil whispered as he laid a hand on the back of Egan's neck and pulled him into his chest. "You're not taking anyone away from them. But I want my girls to live a long happy life. I'm willing to sacrifice mine to ensure that. They understand this is the way of the realms. Don't you?"

Eyes misting over, Egan nodded, then threw his arms around his dad.

"We're here!" Cabbie slid to a stop, wearing shiny combat boots and coming in about five inches shorter than his usual stature, which was still crazy tall.

Hordes of barely dressed Cherries surrounded him in a seductive formation as they arched their backs, stuck out their chests and whipped their ponytails around.

Only fools would see them as a non-issue. We knew different. They'd saved our lives more than once. I was glad to see the Mannos focused on Yunez and the other Commanders instead of the deadly seductresses. Now that shit was about to hit the fan, they were focused and refused to be distracted.

Pride warmed my chest as I glanced around my people, both Cherries and Mannos. Yunez had done well training his men and hand picking his leaders. And I'd always be grateful to Cabbie and the Cherries.

Batse stepped away from the commanders and whistled sharply. His gaze trained to the sky, he closed the short distance between us.

"The commanders and I have been working on a project for decades. We didn't tell you Yunez, because we didn't want to get your hopes up. But if we succeeded, this would just be another ace in our pockets. And I'm proud to say, we've succeeded.

"We could have filled you in a decade ago, but by then, we had been keeping this secret for so long, it became almost a point of pride, that we'd be able to surprise you when you needed it the most. And I'd say you need some good news right about now, no?"

A hint of a smile flirted with his lips as he watched the billowing white clouds in the distance. When he dropped his attention back to us, he grinned.

I didn't see anything to grin about. Was he bringing in airplanes? I thought that kind of technology didn't work in Fennina?

"You didn't," Yunez breathed as a wonderous, boyish grin transformed his features into the sexy, mischievous man I'd first met. "How did you keep it a secret for so long?"

"We learned blocking from you. Although it's nothing of the scale you need for war, or that the other Mazza and her harem achieved, we're proud. And this was a way for us to practice our skills while bringing something unique to the cause," Batse shrugged, still smiling.

Just then, several large containers dipped out of the clouds, attached to ropes. The carriers hidden.

"No! You didn't?" Egan whooped, clearly having a strong suspicion on what they did.

"Holy shit," Sage and Nato breathed together. Then they started jumping and hugging each other in a rare show of enthusiasm.

Sage stopped and turned to us with his arms still around a grinning Nato. "I've never actually seen one in real life before. They were tales told to wayward Janer boys to keep us in line."

"Not just Janer boys. Pretty much all Fennin children." Jari sounded no less impressed as suddenly a dozen dragons dropped out of the sky.

They were...gorgeous. Majestic.

Shiny scales of iridescent midnight colors glistened under the Fennin sun. Call me Daenerys because I was about to have my own dragon, bitch.

"What the ever loving hell?" I shouted as I gaped as yet another five cleared the clouds without any kind of containers. Were those containers what I thought they were? "Dragons are real? Why wasn't that part of the initiation into the Mazza club? The first thing you told me was that I wasn't human. The very next thing should have been that dragons are fucking real," I huffed.

Batse and Yunez laughed, the sound light and filled with excitement. Soon, all the commanders and many of the Mannos were laughing and shouting their own versions of battle calls.

Mannos scattered right as the containers dropped with a ground shaking thud. The dragons landed around them, the ropes from their harnesses curling.

They were without a doubt, the most beautiful creatures I'd ever seen. Up close, the midnight scales were actually made up of greens, yellows, and blues. Their eyes were a fiery yellow, blazing

from within.

A few of the dragons huffed small bits of fire from their noses, unbothered by all the attention they'd gathered. A few more preened and stretched their necks, feeling every bit as beautiful as the awed looks on our faces suggested. Even the usually unbothered Cherries were caught offguard.

"Does this mean there are dragons on Earth?" I whispered, approaching one of the dragons that didn't have a harness. Or at least not one attached to the shipping containers.

"No, when the Fennins separated from Earth, the dragons came with them, but they weren't friends, not even allies. The dragons knew they wouldn't survive long with the way the world was going and decided to take their chances in the realms. They're intelligent beings that have never been interested in the politics of Fennins or Humans," Yunez filled me in as he stepped up next to me.

We both desperately wanted to get closer to the dragons, but if he was thinking like me, I was afraid I'd be a snack rather than getting a pet. But if not friend, why friend shaped?

"We've never been able to approach them. How did you do it?" Yunez looked to Batse.

The young commander blushed and his smile widened. "Many, many years of bribery and treats. They promised to help us when we needed it, but they won't engage in the battle. However, they will help get us there."

I nodded. That made total sense. They communicated with the dragons as if they were people. Of course.

A greenish blue dragon, the one that I had been slowly approaching moved over to me, dropping its head and turning to the side so its yellow eye stared into my soul.

The dragon was one of the smaller ones, but still the size of a small bus.

"Hello there, creature."

I blinked. Was that...

"You do speak, do you not?"

"Are you...talking to me?" I asked aloud and Batse laughed. Yunez and the LL just stared in wide-eyed awe. When I glanced at them, their expressions were still too mellow. The dragon must only be talking to me.

The dragon snorted. *"Smart creature. I didn't realize there were any dumber than the flirt."* There was a distinct feminine ring to the words circling my head.

"Hey," I snapped, my brows pulling down over my eyes. "That's not very nice. This world is all new to me."

A soft laugh tinkled in my head. *"Then they have done you a disservice to not have taught you of my people. Come, you may ride with me."*

I blinked. "Are we riding in those containers?" I pointed, just in case the dragon didn't know what I was talking about. I almost slapped my forehead. The dragon may have been onto something when she said I was dumb.

"Those are for the soldiers. You and your mates will ride with me and my sisters. We understand status, and you must arrive in battle in style. The flirt has told us of the war brewing." She—because I was sure it was a girl now—bent her front legs to lower down to the ground.

And...I see the harness she wore wasn't a harness at all. It was a saddle—without a pommel. I gulped.

"You're very pretty. But I'm afraid of heights." I patted her shoulder, the sleek scales cool under my touch.

She snorted again. *"On."*

"Okay," I agreed as I scrambled onto her back. I didn't even need help. The way her legs folded

and the holds on the saddle were perfect to climb up.

“The pretty one may ride with you.”

“The pretty one...” I murmured as I looked over the guys. Ah, her gaze seemed to be stuck on Sage. Laughing, I jerked my chin over my shoulder. “Come on Sage, she said you’re riding with me.”

He pressed a hand to his chest as his face paled. Suddenly, I melted. He was afraid of portals. Was he also afraid of flying? Or was it going into an attack that brought up memories of his childhood?

“He’ll be safe with us. My sisters and I will not let you die before you reach Senadia. You have our vow,” she said as her ribs expanded with her breathing.

“What’s your name?” I asked as Sage took my hand to climb up behind me. I should have assumed I’d have a buddy rider. It was a double saddle after all.

“Varga,” she purred.

Sage settled and wrapped his arms so tight around my waist, I didn’t have to worry about him falling off as we flew. Me being able to breathe? Yes. But not for him falling.

Batse gave another sharp whistle. “Mannos, we take three ships, and the Cherries the fourth. I need two volunteers to go with the Cherries!”

About fifty men raised their hands. I snickered. They knew when to put on their business face, but also didn’t pass up an opportunity when it presented itself.

“Draga, Risa, go with Cabbie and the Cherries.”

“Whatever for, sweets?” Cabbie adjusted his own Three Suns tunic with his silky sash.

“Motion sickness. They’re excellent healers and mind workers.”

“Good point.” Cabbie grimaced. He must get motionsick himself.

“Don’t worry. It shouldn’t be bad. No worse than a gently rocking ship.”

“Mmhmm.” Cabbie didn’t seem convinced.

The Mannos and Cherries loaded into the containers in record time. With Yunez and Jari on one dragon, Nato on one by himself, then Rand and Egan on another, we lifted off the ground.

It was everything I avoided about topsy turvy carnival rides.

“Oh shit!” I yelled, and Sage was right there with me, adding his own frantic, high-pitched scream.

“Don’t worry. We’re extremely skilled. Just enjoy the ride.”

Three powerful beats of her wings later, we were soaring over the land at rocket like speeds. They were like torpedoes, zipping across the sky. With every wing beat, we rose higher and higher, until the clouds cloaked us from the ground. The cool, moist air felt good on my overheated skin.

I had to admit, not being able to see how high we were eased some of my fear.

Then I realized we should have found Wade. But hell, he’d left a decent amount before we did, and it would have delayed us getting to the fight if we had wasted time looking for him. As much as this sucked, it was better we go straight there.

“How far is Senadia?” I yelled over the wind.

“Usually two days by horse,” Sage answered.

“Don’t worry, magic ones. We will have you there within an hour.” Varga veered hard to the right and laughed as we screamed. The shouts of my LL in the distance said their dragons did the same thing. I think they were a little sadistic, but I liked them.

The hour she promised flew by quickly. Then we were descending from the clouds, and my breath caught in my throat.

There was an attack going on. I hadn’t exactly forgotten, but the new experience had somewhat

overshadowed my earlier nerves. Now, though? All the worry, fear, and determination barreled through me.

Black smoke rose from most houses, as fires littered the countryside. It looked like it had been going on for days.

Grunts and yells of battle worn men and women reached our ears over the clangs of swords and metal.

“Dear God,” I whispered, gripping the saddle edge tighter.

Wisps of purple smoke floated here and there, telling us exactly how this battle started. Sage’s breath caught as his cheek pressed into the side of my head.

There on the top of a hill, opposite the stronghold that must have been Toste’s home, was a man I had hoped I’d never see again.

Sliad.

This was about to get very personal for Yunez. And I was going to make sure that bastard didn’t leave the field.



THE PRECISE MOMENT the people on the battlefield saw us, fighting stopped. Their mouths slackened as they stared wide eyed at the dragons coming in closer.

Wind stirred beneath us, yanking swords out of the hands of the Mannos and building a dirt storm that distracted everyone on the ground.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Jari tipping to the side, his hand moving in circular motions while his eyes were bright jewels in his face.

Sliad glanced up, bared his teeth in a ferocious smile as he raised his own arms. Just as a strong gale tried to knock us off course, Rand flicked his wrists and combated the move. He went one step further and heavy rain pelted the hill where Sliad stood.

“Not today, Sliad!” Yunez yelled, kicking his feet out of the stirrups. His dragon swooped right over Sliad’s position and Yunez jumped off, falling with a yell and tackling Sliad to the ground.

Whatever powers each Manno possessed, Yunez seemed determined to have it out the old fashioned way.

Varga flapped her wings as she landed. Behind us, her sisters landed, and on the other side of the field, the doors to the containers were already opened, as Mannos and Cherries jumped out before they were even on the ground.

The Mannos and Cherries screamed incensed battle cries as they launched into the fight.

There were three different groups of people on the field. One group of soldiers in tattered red and gold uniforms, one group of soldiers in light gray and black uniforms—who I assumed to be the Mannos considering how Sliad was dressed. Then there were the regular people in dirty, torn clothing. Most were adults but there were some young children out there too and I heated.

They fought the *children*?

As soon as the people of Senadia saw the onslaught of our soldiers, they cheered and fought with a renewed vigor.

Sage jumped down, then I followed. I almost ran out onto the field myself, but I stopped. Who knew if I’d ever see Varga again and I wanted to properly thank her.

I laid my palm flat on her nose when she dropped her head down to my level. She snorted softly, this time not with any attitude.

“Thank you, friend. I hope I’ll see you again one day,” I said.

“*You will. Maybe not today, or tomorrow. But one day. Until we meet again.*” She kicked off the

ground, soaring into the air on a burst of power.

Across the field, the commanders quickly released the ropes from the harnesses and they too lifted off the ground. They circled the battlefield, following Varga's lead.

She focused on an isolated pocket of enemy Manno soldiers and dipped down, bathing them in fire. A raucous cheer went up, as the other dragons followed suit with the different tents the enemy Mannos had set up.

After the last one caught a healing tent on fire, they headed off the way we came.

Nato and Jari stepped up on either side of me. "I thought they were to remain neutral?"

Egan unsheathed his knives, as he closed his eyes. "When the realms are burning down, there is only so much neutrality nature can take. I won't question it. Even just their perceived assistance helps our chances."

"Agreed. You all ready to kick some ass?" Sage pulled his sword from over his shoulder.

"Absolutely," I grinned, then ran into the crowd of bloodthirsty people, my LL covering my back.

I searched for my powers, anything to help us win, but there was nothing. A dry well that seemed like it never had that first drop of water. Which I knew was a fucking lie.

Frustrated, I grunted and spun with my nun chucks, catching Mannos off guard with my weapon of choice.

A child who couldn't have been more than ten growled and attacked a Manno soldier, biting him right on the ass cheek. That was, unsanitary, but effective as the man yelped and dropped his weapon to grab his ass with both hands.

A little fox who looked just as young circled the man, attacking his ankles as he turned.

"Son of a—" He raised his hand to strike the girl, but I threw out my arm, wrapping the chain of my nun chucks around his wrist, and yanked sharply, satisfied with the abrupt snap of bone. The man screamed as he fell to his knees.

The child surprised me by stepping back, but the tiny fox jumped and ripped the man's throat out.

Untangling my nun chucks, I nodded to the child and fox. "Stay close to me. I'll protect you when I can." I wanted to check them over, then shove them off the field, but from the chaos surrounding us, our best chance was to fight our way off together.

The girl wiped some of the bloody grime off her face as she returned the nod. "That man hurt my mama."

My heart cracked right down the center. She never should have had to see that. "Stay with me," I repeated.

"Okay," she agreed, and the fox barked. We tore through the field, taking down soldier after soldier, and somehow, I collected five more children. Two with animal companions, one with small lightning bolts in each hand, and another with daggers melting and reshaping into different tiny weapons as he needed them.

Tears filled my eyes with each new child I took with me. They were so young, ranging from about eight to thirteen maybe. Where were their families? Who taught them to fight when they were so young?

My entire LL, sans Yunez, joined me as we headed toward the castle. On the hill, Yunez and Sliad had moved apart and were now slinging elemental magic at each other.

Sounds of fighting came from inside the castle.

Go help Yunez or join the fight in the castle? As much as I hated to make this decision...

The castle. Yunez was a big boy. He could take care of himself, and he was more than well matched with Sliad. Whoever was inside, they needed us.

I exchanged looks with my LL and they all nodded their agreement. Even without my powers, we were on the same page. Good.

We sprinted toward the double wooden doors hanging mostly off the hinges. The children yelled as they followed on our heels.

I wanted to tell them to stay back, to find their parents. But how could I take them out of the fight when they'd already proven their ferocity more than I ever had?

Inside, fires burned flags and tapestries. What was once intricate, beautiful pieces of furniture were scattered pieces of splintered wood across the halls. Even under pure destruction, this place was a work of art.

Growls reverberated around the stones, and I had to pause to figure out where the sounds were coming from. I was ashamed to say that one of the children yanked on my pant leg.

"That way!" She shouted, then took off.

"Shit!" I started running after her, hoping the LL was on my heels. I couldn't keep all the children safe on my own, and most certainly not if she was rushing headfirst in front of the adults.

Our clambering footsteps echoed over the growls as our group followed the little girl. She disappeared into a room with wide double arched doors. I slid in behind. How the hell my boots were able to slide over stone floors, I had no idea. But they did.

The crowd behind me must not have realized I was stopping, because Sage and Rand knocked me over—right into the arms of a snarling shirtless man.

He steadied me, then set me aside as he continued circling a Manno in that gray black uniform. His light brown hair was streaked with old blood, as fresh blood trickled from a gash across his back.

Snarls ripped from the man's throat as a few men who were standing along the wall started stripping out of their clothes. Like most all the other Fennin I'd met so far, these men were no exception to the stark beauty.

Each man growled low in his throat, flexing their arms and pecs, joining the main man in circling the Manno. They were a pack, well-coordinated and in perfect sync as if they'd done this a million times.

The children with animal companions started doing their own growls and pacing back and forth along the wall. They were trained to stay out of the fight, but the adrenaline from the battle and pheromones permeating the air were too much for them to sit still. It was like they were acting on their base instincts.

The Manno sneered but it wasn't nearly as impressive as the Caen members.

"Give it up, Rultshirt," the main man growled. "You're out numbered and out matched."

"I may be out numbered, but Mannos are never out matched."

Yeah, that man hadn't seen us arrive. Otherwise, he might think differently. If he happened to look my way, the mark on my face would hopefully incite a little fear without prompting me to make an idiot of myself.

The leader, who I had suspicions was Toste, canted his head and listened to something I couldn't hear. "You've lost the fight. Your friends on the field have been defeated. Are you still willing to die on this hill?"

"Lies," the Manno spat, but he was struggling with holding his composure. He tilted his head to the side, then screamed his rage. Was he listening to something too?

Toste, pretty sure he was Toste, glanced at us, his gaze catching on my mark, and he grinned, all sharp canines. "It seems we have friends who have come to join our fight. Would you like to meet one

of them?”

The Caen warrior beside Toste stepped forward, spun the Manno around with harsh movements and pushed him toward us. Light flared in his palms as he faced us.

In two steps, Rand stood in front of me and used his own power to bind the man. The stone floor cracked and grated as it formed around his feet. He lost his balance, falling to his palms, which were suddenly encased in stone as well.

The man screamed and yelled as he tried to free himself, but ended up looking like a cat trying to wrutch up a hairball. That, or maybe a man trying out horse play without a safe word. Not a very fierce picture.

“That was anti-climatic,” one of the Caen men said on a frown. “And very unsatisfying. I’ve waited to tear his heart out. Now, his death wouldn’t carry the same victory.”

Each of the Caen men were haggard with dark circles under their eyes and bruises and cuts peppering their skin. With the threat currently a non-issue, they seemed to deflate, losing some of their ferocious presence.

“You won’t keep me for long! The Fiasla Realm will be your new leaders! You wait and see—”

Toste’s foot shot out and hit the Manno right on the temple, and he slumped down in an awkward downward dog. Ouch, he’d hurt like a mother fucker once he was able to get up.

“I couldn’t listen to that a second longer,” Toste sighed, then grinned at his companions. “And I disagree, it was very satisfying.”

They laughed like they’d had the time of their lives the last few days. Then they sobered as they turned back to us.

Toste’s expression went from masculine exuberance over a bloody win, to the grim frown of someone before they delivered terrible news.

It suddenly dawned on me, he had no idea who we were. With the dragon’s aid, we would have beat Wade here. That couldn’t be good. That couldn’t be good at all.

Especially when Yunez was who knew where.

What I did know, was that Toste wasn’t looking at us as if we were friends. He was staring at us like we were an inconvenience that had conveniently saved their asses.

“Take them to the tower.” Toste swiped a tan hand across sandy brown, disheveled hair. The drying sweat causing it to stick up away from his face.

“Hey, we came to help you!” I tried not to sound indignant; I really did. But I literally begged for Yunez and his Mannos to let us come here, and if I got us all thrown into Fennin prison, they’d never let me have any input again.

“Don’t think I don’t appreciate that, I do, but these...” his top lip curled, “sorry excuses for Fennins wouldn’t stop spouting about the Mazza that was going to be the destruction of us all. They could hate you because you’re their downfall and not mine, but I don’t trust you either.” He motioned to the group of shirtless, grungy, GQ models. “Take them away.”

And that was how I landed almost my entire Lusty Legion in the tower like we were Rapunzel clones. Here was to hoping Yunez actually knew Toste and could get us free.



“WELL, THIS IS GREAT.” Sage kicked a dusty old chair into the wall. We all watched as it crumbled into a thousand splinters waiting to happen.

Honestly, I was surprised they left us any furniture at all. What with us being dangerous Fennins and all.

The children, bless them, tried to argue on our behalf, and one apparently was Toste’s child, but the Caen men didn’t feel their opinion was greater than the safety of Senadia.

“What do you see out of the window?” Nato grunted where he had Jari on his shoulders.

The tower they’d thrown us in was, in fact, a tower. It was a circular room of stone, much like the rest of the castle. Except there were no windows for us to use bedsheets to climb down from. The only windows were these super skinny, horizontal things that required a man of ten or eleven foot height to see out of.

“The battlefield is empty of living people. There’s a smattering of dead, probably on both sides,” he said dourly, but there was nothing we could have done to save them. “It looks like they’ve rounded up the remaining Mannos who weren’t able to make an escape and placed them in the city square.”

“How are they holding them?” I plucked a fractured piece of wood from the floor and chucked it across the room from sheer boredom. Boredom and self-recrimination.

“The city square in Senadia is a cell. When the people come together to power it, it’s an unbreakable cage from the inside. They just need to have one from each house. And although most of Senadia is heavily made up of Caen members, they do have a grouping of each house here,” Rand said as he dropped down next to me.

He’d been great since we got tossed in here. Never once had he looked at me accusingly. It just wasn’t in his nature. The others hadn’t either, but I still felt like they had these whispers of thoughts in the backs of their heads.

“Why didn’t they just toss us in with them?” I asked sourly as Jari hopped off of Nato’s shoulders.

“Because they clearly didn’t like us. On the off chance that we are the good guys, they would want to keep us separated. That’s my working theory anyway.” Rand smiled and nudged my shoulder with his.

“Oh, great.” I rolled my eyes. “Was it even worth it to come here? I think they would have ended up saving themselves.”

Man, why was I being such a sourpuss?

“It was worth it,” Sage said as he clasped his hands behind his back and paced the room. “At the very least, you saved some of the children. That’s very valuable in itself. If nothing else, most Fennin cherish and love their children.” He stopped and glanced up at the window. “Two, and maybe the most important, the Fiasla Mannos want the world to know they exist. And by coming to Senadia’s rescue, needed or not, we showed the realm that there are other players on the board just as powerful, and willing to fight on their side. That’s worth our, hopefully short, stay in the tower.”

“It could be worse.” Egan tried to smile but it ended up as a grimace. “We could be in the dungeon. That’s a very unpleasant place, Issy Girl. I don’t think you’d rather spend your time there. Da showed it to me once to get me to stop sneaking off when I was a child. It did the trick.” He scratched his head and sent a longing look at Jari. “You didn’t happen to see Da on the field did you?”

“No,” Jari said quietly with a firm shake of his head. “I haven’t seen him since he ran out of the container. But I saw Farrah and her friend at his back. I think Cabbie might have assigned them to take care of him.”

Egan blew out a breath. “Good.”

“While we’re in here, we might as well use the time,” Nato said pensively as he walked over to me. He stopped with barely a foot between his feet and my knees. The gold in his amber eyes soaking up all my attention. I loved his eyes. They had a tendency to come to life any time he looked at me or our LL.

But right then, the way he worked his jaw and the arch of his brows added to his seriousness, and I panicked.

“Why do I feel the sudden urge to run?” I laughed but it came out as a trembling huff.

He shrugged, still not smiling. “You had a brief burst of power at Yunez’s home. It’s what made Yunez change his mind on coming. Did you have any powers when you got here?”

I moved my head side to side with all the speed and reluctance of a turtle going to its death. “Nothing. I tried, but every time I reached for a power, there was nothing there.”

“Hmm.” Nato glanced at Egan and Rand who were positioned next to me. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“What?” I scooted back but hit the wall far sooner than I had hoped. They had me effectively pinned between them, and I didn’t think they had even meant to do it. At least not Egan and Rand.

“Batse thinks you’ve been blocked. That you only have access to your powers when you’re experiencing high bouts of emotion.” Nato shot an overtly suspicious look at Sage and Jari as they crept up beside him.

A slow smile spread over Jari’s face as he pulled his blond hair away from his face. He took a weathered hair tie off his wrist and put his hair in a low bun. It was his favorite one that he’d carried here from the Earth realm.

“I think we can use this time to experiment. There are no guards, and the door is completely locked with no bars for anyone to spy on us.”

“What about bugs? Birds? Rodents?” My voice was getting shrill just thinking about the possibility that someone could be watching us. Or more aptly, watching me get railed by my mates.

Then again, heat pooled in my belly. I hadn’t felt this turned on in weeks. There had been too much going on, too many things pulling our attention in different directions.

Jari was onto something though, as much as I hated to admit it. With no way out, no one coming in, at least until Wade got here, and that was more than a day away if my calculations were correct, we only had time.

And they wanted to use it to sexually torture my powers right out of me.

Yes, please.

I mean, no! Someone could be watching.

Oh hell, I didn't even sound convincing to myself.

"Sex is a common and celebrated part of our society. No one will care if they are watching. But think of this, Issy Girl." Egan leaned forward, a crooked grin forming over his face and his sharp canines winking in the dimming light. "If we're right, and we find a way to unlock your powers, you could use them to get us out of here."

"Why can't you get us out?" I looked at Sage and Rand. They could manipulate metal. The locks had to be metal, right?

"No, they set us in here with a catch, much like they've trapped the Mannos within the city square. It would take the original casters to release it, or someone much more powerful to let us out." He studied me intently, and I see the warring hunger and curiosity in his gaze.

They all wanted this. They wanted to set me on fire to douse the flame, then rinse and repeat all over again. For their pleasure, for mine, and the thimble of hope that I might just be able to get us out of here.

"Okay," I breathed.

Nato snapped his fingers. "Rand, Egan."

As if they had rehearsed for such an occasion, Rand and Egan snagged my arms and had me splayed on the floor in two seconds. In another three seconds they had me bared completely.

"How the hell did you do that?" I spat, twisting and trying to break free.

"We're motivated," Egan grinned down at me.

"Sage?" Nato asked, now leaning against the wall with a clear view of my pussy. But apparently not for long.

"My pleasure," he purred as he dropped down between my thighs. Egan and Rand each grabbed a thigh to spread me wide. The bastards still had my wrists pinned to the ground too.

Sage ran his hands up and down my inner thighs and I clenched in anticipation. "We didn't have the best start, did we, Iss?" He murmured as his gaze hungrily drank me in. "I have to tell you though, there's nothing I would do different, as long as it meant I'd always be right here."

Wetness trickled down the crease of my thigh, and a lascivious smile bloomed over Sage's beautiful full lips. Lips that I hoped would have a better use soon.

No, I wanted them to stop.

Didn't I?

Hell, no. I wanted all the orgasms a girl could get and they were taking too long to get to the good stuff.

Using more patience than I had, Sage scooted back to lay prone on the floor, placing his face right over my pussy. He nuzzled his nose against the soft hair and inhaled. "Gods damn. I love the smell of you."

The entire time, he continued to rub his hands up and down the insides of my legs. It was like my nerves were fried and every little touch was bringing me out of my skin.

"Lick me," I panted as he slid his nose around that sensitive bud. I was shit at delayed gratification. And I was pretty sure I'd be shit at this too, because I had the patience of a toddler hyped up on sugar.

"Not yet," he planted a kiss right over my clit, then pushed up to reach my breasts. He let his body press into mine, his hard cock hitting that sweet spot as he drew a hard nipple into his mouth. He was clothed and he still felt this good. I groaned, rolling my hips to get the right kind of friction for a

happy ending.

Sage backed away. He freaking backed away, and what ground I had made toward climax fizzled away into a sad abyss.

“Uhhmm. No climax for you. Egan, Rand, you think you can help?”

“Would love to.” Egan lowered his head to my breast, sucking the tip Sage had just been kissing into his mouth. Rand took the other in between his lips, delivering a sharp bite of pain.

I yelped.

Down below, Sage’s hot breath fanned over my aching pussy while he used his thumbs to draw small circles on the sensitive skin next to my lips.

Such empty pleasure they delivered. It felt so good, I ached *so good*, but it was just a promise of something greater to come. And these cunt nuggets stopped as soon as I started to have any sort of flutter.

“I think she needs something to suck on.” Nato motioned for Jari.

My Levan mate grinned wickedly, as he stripped out of his tunic, and unfastened his pants. He pulled his long, thick dick out, right before he kneeled next to my head.

Jari combed his fingers through my hair as he palmed his dick. “So beautiful,” he whispered. “But you’ll be even more beautiful with my cock in your mouth.”

Just when I was about to melt from how sweet he was, he had to go and say something that set me ablaze in a different way.

I opened, and when his head slipped between my lips, Sage’s tongue flicked over my labia, then dipped down inside so he was tongue fucking me with the same rhythm as Jari was fucking my mouth.

Oh damn, this was—I couldn’t—Just thinking about Sage watching me pleasure Jari turned me inside out. Was he watching Jari’s face, or mine? Did he enjoy seeing me suck on one of his best friends?

“How are you feeling?” Nato’s shadow fell over me.

I had no idea what he was asking.

Oh! Did I feel close to my powers. Hell no, I was having a great time though, losing myself to their collective touch.

“I think we need to amp it up.” Nato touched Sage’s shoulder and he disappeared. Then, without any warning, Nato slammed inside me.

I yelped, earning a groan from Jari.

Nato pounded into me with so much force, Jari placed a hand at the top of my head to keep me from hitting the wall.

It was coming. I was so close to that crest, groaning and screaming with each thrust, then he was just gone.

That mother fucker had pulled out completely.

“Rand,” Nato panted, sounding pained.

My sweet, loving Manno mate pushed into me with much more care and control, but once he started going, he was every bit as wild as Nato.

I convulsed and curled my fingers. He was hitting a different spot, but one just as good. Again, I was so close to the edge, and then he was gone.

The climax drifted away, leaving me sweaty and hurting. I wanted to rage against them. Knock them over and bounce on their dicks until I found the orgasm I’d been chasing so desperately.

Then Sage took Egan’s place, and I swore, he was fucking me like he had a vendetta against me. The way he stretched me to the point of pain had my eyes nearly rolling back in my head.

And that cunt nugget left me too!

Egan took a turn, growling and snarling as he rolled his hips against mine, pressing on my stomach to hold me still for his use.

I was so close. I groaned and Jari came, coating the back of my throat with his release.

I fluttered, and just when I was falling over into that beautiful edge of pleasure and pain, he stilled.

Fire engulfed me. Part frustration, part anger, part unsatisfied despair.

“That! What you’re feeling right now, direct it at the door. Think of how we’re locked in here, get rid of it,” Nato dropped by my head as he spoke frantically.

Trying to hold onto my sanity, I moved my attention to the door, as I felt something big build within me. I couldn’t name it, I couldn’t even control it, not really, I just knew I needed to get it out.

“Go Egan. Hard.”

And he did. He started to pound into me, and I squeezed around him, not wanting to give him an opportunity to stop. It worked. He started growling and moaning, crashing his hips against mine so hard, that my orgasm exploded inside me. My vision whited out as my screams filled my ears.

The next thing I registered was being flipped over, Sage sliding into me from below, Rand tapping my cheek, asking for entrance to my mouth. I’d just swallowed around him, when Nato started to push inside my ass.

My skin was feverish. Even though I’d just had the best release of my life, having three of my mates inside me stoked the dangerous flames that hadn’t ebbed at all.

It felt like I was cracking apart.

Then they started moving.

Hands gripped me everywhere. Nato had a grip on my head to tilt my face up and arch my back. Rand cupped my cheeks as he pumped his dick in my mouth. The deep concentration on his face tugging directly on my clit.

Sage, my favorite asshole, roamed his hands all over my body.

We could have moved together for minutes or hours. I wasn’t sure. All I understood was the way their bodies molded to mine. We were one. The tide of pleasure crashed over me a second time.

Each of my mates joined me, adding their own pleasure to mine, filling the small space with our scent, sounds, and power.

By the time I came floated back to reality, I opened my eyes and stared directly at the open, smoking doorway.

The doorway that had been locking us in an hour ago.

“Holy fuck!” I screamed.



SAGE FLOPPED BACK, his arms falling against the stone as he tried to get his breathing under control. Nato sat back on his haunches, both of them looking at me with a delicious sheen of sweat glistening on their skin. Neither were stark naked like I was.

Their pants were undone, and all of my men were bare chested.

Like I said, delicious.

“How do you feel? Do you have any residual powers?” Rand pushed his hair out of his face and leaned back against the wall as if our sexcapades had taken everything out of him.

Funny, I felt energized and ready to run a marathon or two. Maybe there was something to that delayed gratification.

I reached for that well of power that felt like such an integral part of me just moments ago, but there was nothing there. I could feel the absence of it, I knew exactly what I was missing out on this time, and it irritated me ten times more because there wasn't even a leftover drop.

What the hell? Could this be the work of a blocker? Could blockers even block a power source for a Mazza?

I had no idea, and I think it bothered the others that they didn't know either.

“Only the memory of it,” I scoffed at myself. Those familiar feelings of self-disgust crept back in.

“Hey, hey,” Egan said quietly as he cupped my cheeks and tipped my face up. His burnished red hair falling haphazardly over his clear tan skin. “This is great. We learned something we didn't know before. We're at least making progress.”

“And this knowledge is good for what? That you guys will have to sex me up anytime I need to use any kind of powers? Like that will go over well on a battlefield. It's very inconvenient,” I said through suddenly squished lips.

The guys all had various levels of humor and smug satisfaction in their chuckles.

“I'm not complaining.” Jari tried to hide his grin, but it popped out anyway. The guys exchanged looks then busted up laughing.

“I don't know about you all, but I'm thinking we should head out before they find that we've blown through their wards and door,” Sage scratched his head as he studied the empty space that had held us hostage just a few minutes ago.

“Oh, they already know the barrier is blown,” Rand supplied helpfully.

“Agreed. Let's go see if we can find Yunez. The quicker we get him, the better chance we'll have

of extracting all the Mannos and Cherries without any more collateral damage.”

We took a minute to make ourselves presentable, and then we were on our way. Right outside the room was a staircase, because like Repunzel, we were stuffed into the penthouse suite. Egan had been right; it could have been much worse if they had put us in the dungeon.

No guards were posted here, and there were no sounds of footsteps coming up the stairwell. That, in itself, was concerning. I shot Rand and Nato a concerned look.

Nato’s brow furrowed as if he was thinking along the same lines as I was. Rand was too focused on heading down the stairs. Eight flights of stairs from my count. I was incredibly thankful we were going downhill this time.

Rand shoved the wooden door open at the bottom, and Wade bowled into him. Because we were all running behind him, we pushed them to the ground and created a cuddle puddle of Fenmin.

Wade grunted. “How did you get out? I was coming to open the door.”

“How did you get here so fast?” I asked as Jari lifted off my back, then removed me from the pile.

“We alternated between running and riding, never taking a break.” His voice was thin with exhaustion.

Now that he mentioned it, he was wet from sweat with bags under his bloodshot eyes.

“The question is, how did you get here so fast? I’m pretty sure you were all deep in meetings with Yunez’s commanders when I left.” He quirked a brow as he glided to his feet.

“Dragons,” I blurted. “But we lost Yunez. Did you see him on your way here? Wait, how did you know we were locked up in the tower?”

“Come.” He gestured for us to follow him. “You didn’t lose him. He’s exactly where he didn’t want to be. In a screaming match with Toste because my lover is...hot headed when he’s ambushed. It’s unfortunate that I wasn’t able to make it here first. In hindsight, I should have waited five minutes, then I could have caught a ride with your Mannos.”

Sure enough, we entered another hallway and the distant echoes of shouting reached our ears. What I now knew as Toste’s voice blanketed every inch of the hallway. Then Yunez would answer with a yell full of exasperation instead of real aggression.

Wade moved at a slow pace, probably bone tired from his run. I didn’t blame him. On top of the hard trip, he showed up to a wasteland of a victory. Toste’s people may have won, but they had suffered a fair number of casualties. There had been too many bodies on the field to believe otherwise.

How many children were orphaned today?

In fact, where were the children we had saved? I hoped they had been treated with kindness after we were locked up. From everything I witnessed, they would have been. The Caen people were emotional but nurturing.

“You locked up my mate and our Lusty Legion after we saved your asses. That is not the way to show gratitude, Toste.” Yunez’s voice traveled clearly now that we were almost upon the entrance.

They must be in a throne room, or something equivalent, from the echoes.

“I appreciate the help, but that still doesn’t tell me if you’re on the right side. For all I know there are three sides. Yours, theirs, and mine. Your word isn’t good enough. Look at how my people suffered!” Toste started out calm and ended in a fevered yell. “Look at our home!”

“What about my word?” Wade asked as he stepped into the room. We followed him but stopped just inside the threshold. If the guys were thinking like I was, it was a better play to not appear threatening.

“Wade,” Toste breathed. His face crumpled and he rushed forward to grip his shoulders, then

wrapped him in a fierce hug. The bright joy warring with despair on Toste's face hurt my already battered heart.

"It is fine, my love. All is well with me. We'll make sure our people are taken care of." Wade rubbed a soothing hand up and down Toste's back.

"And avenged. The babies..." His breath hitched.

"I know," Wade whispered.

I could see why they worked so well. They clung to each other as if they needed the other to breathe. There was clear love in the lines of their bodies. Toste's raging fire simmered to a comfortable warmth in Wade's arms, and the water Fennin's easy going nature became something strong and beautiful in Toste's embrace.

They made each other better.

"Is she..." Wade started but didn't finish as if the answer would hurt too much.

"She's fine. She wasn't hurt." Toste swallowed. "The Mazza saved her."

"So, you locked her and her mates up as thanks?" Humor threaded through Wade's words.

"I didn't know if they could be trusted," he grumbled, burying his face in Wade's neck as the Caen warriors formed a half circle around Toste's back. They looked like they desperately wanted to be included in the hug, but the need to protect them both was too strong.

"They can. What do you say we let the Mannos and Cherries inside to feed them and offer them shelter. Then you and I can sit down with Yunez and his mates."

"Yunez?" Toste straightened, his face crinkling as he looked around the room. "He's here?"

"Oh shit," Jari cursed behind me.

Yunez sighed and raised a finger. "I am Yunez. And Phin."

He must have dropped the glamour because Toste snarled so loud, the floor vibrated.

"Tos—" Wade started, but Toste lunged around him...and froze.

"Toste, this was exactly what I wanted to avoid. I appeared as Phin to you, because we are equals. I wanted to ease you into my true identity." The showmanship that Yunez usually projected was gone. His shoulders drooped and he let out a long, sad exhale.

He was a man weary of the world in this moment.

"You think to deceive me?" Toste's voice became guttural, barely recognizable.

"Toste!" Wade barked. "There is a good reason for all of this. There are things you need to know, but you need to calm down before we can tell you."

Two Caen warriors came forward to grab his arms and shuffled him back. Whatever hold Yunez caught him in released now that his people had control of him.

"Get Rene," Wade ordered one of the warriors. He sprinted away while Wade turned to face us. "Go with Isa. He'll get you settled into a set of rooms and make sure the Mannos and Cherries are brought inside as well. I'll come fetch you soon."

"Are you going to be okay?" I stepped forward. Toste was his lover. His mate, but the man was feral. He was spitting mad as he tried to yank free from his men.

A woman with curves for days came through the side door before I even finished my question. Long raven hair, a sheer gown that hid nothing from the imagination. Her gaze was locked between Wade and Toste.

"Don't worry, Isolde. We'll be just fine. Toste just needs a little, calming." He turned to the warriors as he and the woman approached Toste together. "Leave us."

Nato started pulling on my arm as what was happening registered in my head. It just took a few minutes because...I'll blame it on the stress of the last day instead of the carnal promise of the scene

before me.

The men left as ordered, and we were almost out of the door when Toste backed up against the wall, hands fisted. He continued to growl at Wade and the woman, but he made no move to hurt them. He didn't even raise a finger against them. Not when they cornered him. Not when they lowered to the floor together.

And not when they reached for the band of his pants.



11

“THAT WENT WELL.” Yunez was way too chipper as the door shut behind us.

“What went well about that?” Sage gave him an incredulous look.

“Wade did exactly what I hoped he would. He is making Toste more agreeable. I admit, things did not go *exactly* as I hoped. The attack...arriving before Wade. But we could have done much worse. I believe you were right, Iss. We needed to come to their rescue. My apologies that I have let my newfound fear cloud my judgement. I will do better.” He placed a hand over his chest and dropped his head.

Well, okay then.

My mind spun in a million different ways and ninety percent of them were in the wrong, and inappropriate, direction.

Down girl, I mentally berated myself. I had literally just got my brains fucked out, but a subservient Yunez was making me feel like I needed a round two.

“Who was the woman?” I cleared my throat and changed the subject. Although that didn’t help because that last visual was overstimulating my already fried body.

“That was Rene. Their other lover and mother of their children,” Yunez supplied as he took a laid back position on the bed, as if all was well in the world. I guess for Yunez, all was well. For the moment anyway.

“Wait. I thought Fenin were monogamous outside of the Mazza relationships.” I sat down on the end.

Barely two seconds passed before Yunez grabbed me under the arms like I was a child and pulled me into his lap. He hummed happily. “They are. However, like humans, just because that is the normal structure, does not mean it is the *only* structure. Wade and Toste are mates. However, they wanted children.

“I believe Wade told me they interviewed over a hundred women before they found Rene. It is not what you would consider a love match, she is not their mate in the traditional sense, but what they have works, and she has given them each their own child and have created a beautiful family. And even though she has essentially served her purpose, or the reason they sought her out, she still warms their bed.”

His entire explanation was fascinating, but my brain stuck on one sentence. “Interviewed them how?”

He flexed his hips underneath me, his growing hardness pressing against my ass.

Yunez snickered, but it was Rand that answered.

His cheeks pinkened as he coughed. “They tested out their abilities, sexually. I guess they thought if they were going to spend time making children, they wanted a partner they could thoroughly enjoy.”

“And they tested out over a hundred women?” My eyebrows kissed my forehead. That was... wow. And I thought I was the scandalous one of the Fennin society.

Nato shrugged. “It’s not unlike how the Mazzas of the past picked out their bondmates. Not all of course, on occasion they picked their bonds purely because of the powers a Fennin possessed, but some wanted to make sure they’d be satisfied in all ways.” He ended with a smirk.

“Huh, you mean I could h—”

“No!” They all yelled in various forms. Actually, Sage had yelled *hell no*.

I laughed, snuggling into Yunez’s lap, enjoying the moment of peace with my bonds. “I was kidding. I have no desire to try out the sex skills of Fennin waiting to join my ranks.” Now, enjoying the ones I’d chosen over and over again?

Yes, please.

“Hmm. I think Iss is asking for a demonstration. To really make sure that she made the right decision.” Yunez’s violet eyes twinkled.

“You know, sometimes I really like the way you think.” Jari stood and reached for the hem of his shirt.

A knock came at the door. Jari and Yunez both groaned.

“If that’s Wade, this gives a whole new meaning to the term minute man. We’ve been here what, like five minutes?” Sage complained as he walked to the door.

Jari cast his erection a pitiful glance before rearranging his tunic.

Isa stood there holding hands with the first little girl I’d saved on the battlefield. “My apologies. My sister, Loni, wanted to come and make sure you’re well.”

“And my friends.” She nodded succinctly and looked down the hallway. Her fox companion sat down at her feet, its fluffy tail wrapping around its body.

Sage leaned his head into the hallway and looked in the direction the little girl had indicated. A freeing—and unusual—laugh bubbled out of his throat. “I don’t think we have enough room in here for everyone.”

“It’s okay. We’re little.” She waved and a tinkering of children’s voices reverberated down the hall and then ten or twelve children flooded the room. Isa was the last to step in, smiling bashfully.

“Like I said, I’m sorry. But she wouldn’t be appeased until she saw you for herself. As you can see, her pack of friends were just as adamant.”

Now I could see the resemblance. This was Wade’s son. And the girl must be Toste’s daughter. At least in looks. There was clearly an abundance of love between the siblings.

“Mazza! A little boy of about eight cried in delight as he scrambled up the bed. He stopped when his knees touched Yunez’s. “You’re alive!” When he grinned, he flashed off a beautiful Jack-o-lantern smile.

I smiled and touched his cheek. “Yup. Me and all my friends are here. Unharmmed.”

“Dad threw you in the tower,” Toste’s daughter growled. “That wasn’t very nice of him. Daddy Wade says Dad is too hot headed.”

“Like someone else I know,” Isa said fondly as he stepped forward to ruffle her sand-colored hair.

“Shut up, Isa! Daddy Wade said you have just as much Toste in you too.” She crossed her arms

and the fox yipped in agreement. It seemed like a move to assure her he was on her side more than he knew what was going on.

Adorable.

The whole exchange reminded me of the bobcat when Egan had first taken me into the woods. I didn't think I'd ever get tired of the wonders of being a Fennin.

"Are you hungry?" She suddenly turned to me.

"Um...sure." I hadn't really thought about it, but now that she mentioned it, my stomach growled. And here I thought I had been hungry for...other things.

"Good. Cook is making his best meal in celebration. I told him that you were sitting at the table with Dad. He's going to be nice to you, I promise."

Isa rolled his eyes and grinned.

I bet Daddy Toste was about to be in a fantastic mood, but not because she said so. The son seemed to know it too. I grinned back at him. He knew exactly what his parents were up to. And I guess here it was just a fact of life.

My LL settled in the bed around me as Isa took a chair by the window. For the next thirty minutes, we watched the kids play and wrestle and argue.

It was nice to see that the recent attack hadn't affected them. Or maybe they were still riding on the high of a victory. Thankfully, none of the kids here had lost anyone in their families.

Later, if Toste was agreeable, I wanted to go visit with the families who had lost someone. If only to show them that someone cared, and that we wouldn't let an attack like this stand.

This time, when a knock came, it was slower and maybe it was my imagination, but seemed much more relaxed.

Isa stood up and opened the door to reveal a smiling Wade. Yeah, he got it good. His ruffled hair and flushed cheeks just confirmed it.

"Ah, Isa, Loni. I should have known I would find you here. I searched the main hall and didn't see you."

"She wanted to make sure the Mazza was okay after father's terrible, terrible, treatment of them." Isa grinned.

"Yes, well I hope you've found they weren't offended by Toste's knee-jerk reactions?" Wade stepped in and dropped a loving hand on top of her head. She dislodged it when she tipped back to look at him.

"They're fine. For now. But they get to sit with you and Daddy Toste at dinner and he has to apologize," she said with a steel of will. This little girl wasn't used to being looked over. I loved it. And the fact that she genuinely seemed sweet.

"Of course, Sweetie. Toste is ready to apologize as soon as we make it back downstairs. Are we ready?" He lifted his bright blue eyes to us.

"We're ready," I said as I climbed out of Yunez's lap. The guys stood and stretched.

The little girl circled her finger and the other children all fell into line around her. She was undeniably the pack leader. Wade held out his hand, and the girl placed hers in his. Then they left first, as the children fanned out around them.

Isa shook his head with a soft smile on his face and followed.

"The way they act, it's like they're little werewolves, or something. Is that how it is with the Caen people?" I asked quietly, lacing my fingers with Egan's.

"Sometimes. We do have stronger instincts. Some children lose some of their more feral natures, and others are so in line with their powers, they prefer animals over Fennin."

“She seems very in tune with her instincts and with the other children,” I noted.

He grinned. “Yes, some form little packs. Only time will tell if they stick together. She’s definitely Toste’s child.”

We passed quite a few people as we headed toward the dining hall. Most were dirty and bedraggled as they tried to set the castle back to rights. Others were dashing this way and that with piles of linens and other items in their hands.

What was present in every single person we encountered was a fierce hope, tempered with determination. Their steps were sure footed as they moved with purpose. They weren’t broken by the attack. If anything, they seemed stronger, but that could be what I wanted to see since I hadn’t seen them before.

“The actual dining hall was ransacked,” Wade said as he glanced over his shoulder with a grim expression. “We’re eating in the study until we can make repairs. I know you won’t mind.”

“Of course not.” Nato dipped his head in a sympathetic gesture.

Wade pushed open the door to the study, and immediately, I was floored. The study was the size of a small library that could have been the backdrop for the Beauty and the Beast movie. Rows and rows of large, beautiful bookshelves. They were organized by size and color. A ladder system was implemented around all the shelves.

“It’s something, isn’t it?” Egan whispered. He didn’t strike me as a reader, but anyone could appreciate a nice library. And one full of ancient knowledge? That was even more valuable.

“Mhmm,” I hummed as we walked toward the table that looked wildly out of place. Everything was dark, rich tones of wood. Then there was this white table in the center that seemed like they’d gone out and picked it up in IKEA.

Toste was stretched back over a chair, a velvet robe loosely tied at the waist and open at the chest. His bare legs flashed under the table, and I had the sneaking suspicion that he was naked underneath.

His cheeks were also flushed, and there was a relaxed vibe rolling off him. The mild hostility that had been there before was gone.

Well, no. That wasn’t right. He hadn’t been hostile, more like cautious and maybe a bit regretful. He’d reminded me of a cornered animal acting out of fear than any real desire to punish us.

“Yunez, Mazza,” he said as he nodded his greeting. There wasn’t a smile, but we were definitely more welcome after Wade had taken care of him.

“Toste,” I returned in the same neutral tone. Yunez pulled out my seat and brushed the back of his knuckles across my neck as I started to sit down. Then, right before my ass hit the chair, he pinched my ass.

I’d had time to get used to his antics, so instead of flying out of the chair like I had when Aamori had dinner with us, I merely shot a glare over my shoulder.

And Yunez, the only tell that he was a dirty old man, was the twinkle in his eyes.

“We apologize for any concern we may have caused you with our uninvited arrival,” Nato started, unaware of the exchange between Yunez and me. “Isolde and our Lusty Legion never intended to gain an audience with you this way.”

I snuck a questioning look to Yunez. He was the leader, and once he was added to our group, the others all naturally deferred to him. I mean, he was freaking seven hundred years old.

He winked.

Ah, okay. Nato was falling into old habits, and Yunez was happy to let him take the lead. I got it now.

“Hold on,” Toste interjected, waving a hand. “Before we jump into pleasantries, there’s something else we should discuss.” His mouth was a hard slash across his mouth. “We’re about to have visitors.”



WADE SIGHED, and took the seat next to Toste, the little girl scrambling up into his lap. Isa took the chair on the other side of Toste and I took a minute to soak them in.

They had built a beautiful family for themselves. I hoped, with the coming war, they wouldn't be torn apart.

I'd do everything I could to make sure they made it out to the other side unharmed.

"What visitors?" Jari asked, looking between Toste and then each of us.

Oh yeah. I'd already gotten sidetracked.

Toste grunted, and the skin pinched around his eyes. "Before you arrived, we'd been fighting these rultsharts for two days. They had an unimaginable number of fighters." He drew in a deep breath. "We weren't losing, but we weren't winning either. If your...people hadn't shown up when you did, we might have lost from sheer exhaustion." The words were torn from his throat on a soft growl as if he hated to admit that shameful truth.

No one spoke. I, and apparently the others, were giving him the time he needed to get his words out.

"The children had escaped their hiding place," he shot his daughter a quelling look and she beamed, very proud of herself.

We all laughed.

"Which seems to have worked out. None of the...Mannos...seemed to want to hurt the children. Shocking, but true. Otherwise, I don't know how we wouldn't even have lost one." Toste caught Wade's hand and kissed the knuckles.

"The blond haired one, I think he was the leader—"

"Sliad," we all chorused.

"Sliad," Toste sneered, "thought this city would fall with minimal effort. He wasted no time in telling me all about who he was, why they were shunned from society, and how they were going to take their rightful place over Fennina. Not within our society, but over it."

Yunez rubbed his chin. "I think Sliad would have shared his history and motives with you regardless. They are ready for Fennina to know about them. I am not even sure they were trying to win. It would not surprise me if they only wanted to arrive in style, really shake things up and spread word of their existence through fear."

Toste cut his eyes at Wade for barely a second. "Yunez, it is my understanding you have the sight.

Why would you be guessing on their strategies?"

Grinding his teeth, Yunez fisted one hand on the table. "Unfortunately, I am not omnipresent. Not as much as I would like to be. And the Mannos, the Fiasla Mannos, have a blocker. A powerful one. For some time now, I have not been able to see their path. At all."

Deafening silence blanketed us. Toste stared hard at Yunez while giving nothing away in his gaze about his thoughts. Then he landed the bomb he had alluded to.

"The first chance I had, when Sliad was distracted and pushed outside, I sent messengers to the other three capital cities to share the news." His eyes glinted. "But Phin won't be there to receive the message."

"Well, technically, Phin will be."

"What?" I blurted out as my LL twisted to gawk at Yunez.

"How can you be in two places at once? That's not a superpower I'm aware you have." Sage crossed his arms.

"I am not in two places at once. But mental manipulation is not a power that is unique to just me. Several Mannos possess it. When I cannot be in Helfai, one of my Mannos poses as Phin to keep up appearances. It is quite handy." He glanced at Rand out of the corner of his eyes.

Mateo...the trainer in Rainer's house.

Of course. Why hadn't we questioned what happened when he couldn't be there?

"Toste, tell them what is happening," Wade softly admonished as he tightened his arms around Loni.

He straightened, looked at each of us. "Aamori is on her way here. As well as Ureste. They'll be here in the morning as far as the scouts were able to discern. They'll be arriving with a full contingent of guards to help protect the city. Or at least, that's what I requested. With Ureste, I can never be sure what to expect. Aamori might comply, but it would only be to help her image. What will 'Phin' be doing?" Toste asked with a note of suspicion, like he didn't really believe Yunez was Phin.

"Guards will come. My house would not let you lose more people than necessary because of the Fiasla realm. What exactly did you tell them?" Yunez tipped his head to the right then left to crack it.

"Exactly what Sliad shared. There was a fifth house that left Fennina because of our jealous, greedy ways. And that they were back to take over the realm, running Fennina the way it should have been ran from the beginning."

"That's not going to win us any favors," Rand said quietly, leaning against the table to be closer to Yunez.

"No, Rand, I do not suspect it will," Yunez sighed. Looks of dread papered everyone at the table. Even Loni appeared to know how this would affect the rest of us.

"They're not going to want to hear you out." Nato shook his head. That was my exact thought. Unfortunately, everyone had the same one. When we all were on the same page, that meant that we were most likely right, right?

I hoped not.

"They will hear you out," Wade said, steel in his musical voice. "Toste and I will make sure of it."

"Hold on, what happened to Sliad?" I turned to Yunez. We hadn't had an opportunity to talk, and that seemed like a really important piece of information.

Yunez did his own ferocious impression of a growl. "The bastard got away. When the tides turned, several of his warriors attacked to drive me back. And when I cleared them, he was gone. He hung out on the edge of the property to make an escape when he needed one. I am sure he never meant

to actually take over Senadia. They would have to use a considerable number of resources and sacrifice many lives to actually take over here. And this early in their endeavor, I do not believe they could afford to pay that particular price.”

Low growls erupted in the room. From Toste, Egan, Loni, and several of the guards lining the walls.

“Why here? Why my city?” Toste slammed his fists down on the table. Water and wine sloshed over the side of our glasses in the wake of his anger.

“I cannot say for sure. I can only speculate that you have the greatest stores of resources. On the off chance they did manage to win the city, they would have had gained quite a bit. But that is only a guess.” Yunez shrugged, then rubbed a long-fingered hand down his face.

Glancing at Wade apologetically, Toste squared his shoulders against Yunez. “You’re the leader here. I’ve heard you treat your Mazza and mates as equals, but your age and wisdom make you the true leader. From what Wade tells me, you’re also the mastermind behind the only chance we have to squash any resistance that comes against us.

“As much as I hate to share this, we only sustained the hold on our city because our mates, children, and elderly fought at my warriors’ sides. The powers they wielded,” he slumped back in his seat. “I believed him. When he said they were the male form of the Mazzas, then proceeded to use powers from each house, and then some. My question for you... and your Mazza,” he added as an afterthought, “is why should we believe you’re any better than them?”

“Toste!” Wade’s cheeks pinkened.

“My dear, I understand you don’t like this question, but it’s one we need to ask.”

“It is fine, Wade,” Yunez waved his concern away. “I would have the same question in his position. And I expected as much.” He bent forward, his violet eyes bright as if burning from behind. “Toste, I could give you any number of excuses. Any stories of why I believe I am the side you should bank on instead of forming your own, but I’ll instead give you facts, and you can do with that what you will.

“What Sliad told you was true. There was once upon a time a fifth house. The Manno house. They left this realm with an abundance of hate and frustration to build their own society and realm. The Fiasla realm. I think we can all agree, those are not the pillows that create a peaceful society.

“I would love to tell you that it was sunshine and butterflies until recently, but that would just be a lie. I grew up in that society, and it is full of strife and machinations. Which, I am sure you can appreciate, as that is part of any house in Fennina. However, they have an insane amount of firepower and a base where no one in this realm, save me, can access. Their loved ones are safe as they bring war to Fennina.”

Toste’s mouth turned down on one end as he listened to Yunez. I thought he was going for a short, succinct reason for why Toste should join us, but I wrongly forgot that Yunez had a secret love of theatrics. As he let his face fall into shadows from the lamps burning around the room, he was absolutely playing it up.

Our hosts, including Wade, were hanging on his every word.

“You can bank on three things. One, the Fiasla Mannos are bringing war to Fennina. Two, they will not stop until they have taken control of your lands and people, or until they have exhausted all their resources. Three, I will be here to fight at your side.”

One of the Caen men on the edges of the wall shook his head. “How do we know you aren’t part of them? As a spy? Otherwise, wouldn’t you have shared this knowledge sooner?”

Yunez rubbed his index finger down the bridge of his nose. We’d asked this of him. Something

very similar. So would the other house leaders. Wouldn't he tire of repeating the same story a thousand times? I know I was getting tired of it on his behalf.

Hell, I wanted to create a set of cliff notes to refer people to when they had questions. Or he should have gathered everyone in an auditorium to share the news. More efficient that way.

"I have always, and will always, operate on getting the best possible outcome for our people. And every time I wanted to share something with anyone, it created a ripple effect that was not in our favor. If you have any friends or family with the sight, ask them how that works. Take their word for it. As for why we are telling you now? Our hand is being forced," he answered grimly.

The Caen men looked to each other. I could see the wheels turning in their heads. Did they believe us? Could they? Would they lose family and friends if they didn't?

I guess I was lucky that I had come into the world with my LL from the get go. It saved me a lot of heartache.

"What of you Mazza? What do you have to say for all of this?" Toste turned honey brown eyes on me.

I gulped. I hated being put on the spot, damn it. Especially when I didn't feel like I had a lot to contribute.

"Daddy! Be nice." Loni reached over and popped him on the shoulder. He didn't acknowledge her.

"This is a new world for me." I let my gaze wander between all of my Lusty Legion. "But already, I have found people I love, people I would die for, and a home. I want to live in a world where I can keep everything I have come to hold dear. I will not let Fennina or Earth fall under the rule of assholes if I can help it. That's good for no one but the people at the top. I've spent most of my time at the bottom and those are the people I want to save the most."

I blew out a breath. Damn, I really was killing it. It could be the confidence boost I got from the fight, but I was coming into my own. I truly believed that.

Now if I could just break past the barriers holding my powers back.

Darkness started to fade in and out of my peripheral, until my vision completely whited.

Uh-oh. I was pretty sure I knew what that meant.



SCREAMS RANG IN MY EARS. *I couldn't see anything. Not really.*

The world was one jumbled race of silhouettes accompanied by the smell of smoke and fire.

Something was wrong. But was this attack happening now? Or in the past? I hoped it was in the future so we'd have time to stop it, but a coldness in my gut said that wasn't the case.

"They're going for the dungeons! Bar the doors! No one gets in and no one comes out!" A man shouted.

"Ah, sweet goddess," someone muttered before they released a litany of prayer.

I jumped out of my seat, my heart pounding, my chest caving in from an unimaginable pressure. Just as quickly as the vision came on, it cleared, leaving me staring at a group of slack-faced Caen men.

"Isolde, what did you see?" Yunez asked as he whipped me around and gripped my upper arms. He gave a slight shake when I didn't immediately answer.

"I don't know. I think it was an attack. I'm not sure when. Now, or in the past. I don't know. I couldn't see anything. Not really. It was different than what happened with Travon." My voice trembled and I lifted a weak hand to press against my heart. Like that would help the wild, erratic beating.

"Where? Was there anything that gave clues about where it was taking place?" Urgency seeped from his hands and right into my bloodstream.

"I—I don't think so. Whoever was attacking was going for the dungeon. And the guards were scared. They didn't want who was in the dungeon to be free. Or captured. I don't know!" I yelled, stomping my feet.

How could I be this *useless*? Powers were trickling back in, and they were little more than a nuisance. What good was a vision of something unknown, with no time stamp, place, or people to help us?

Yunez's gaze took on that far off quality like when he tapped the sight, except his eyes didn't fully glaze over. "Dungeon. Dungeon," he whispered to himself. "Who would be locked up somewhere that the city wouldn't want free?" He released me and I fell into Sage's waiting arms as Yunez paced around the room.

"This couldn't have anything to do with Isolde's parents, right?" Wade interjected and a pang of hope speared my chest. Could it be they were still alive? I discarded the thought as soon as it popped

in my head. I'd only be setting myself up for heartache if I allowed myself to wish for something that had pretty much zero chance of being true.

Without acknowledging Wade, Nato joined Yunez. "If she couldn't fully see anything, does that mean there was a blocker at play?"

"That could be. But who would have been hanging out in a dungeon? Who would be powerful enough that someone wanted them to be free, but the city wanted to keep under lock?" Yunez mused, combing his fingers through his hair.

"Which cities have dungeons? Helfai does not, right?" Toste stood, bracing his fists on the table.

"Helfai does not. That is correct. Do you have anyone here that you would not want broken out?" Yunez turned to Toste.

"No. We have no long term prisoners. It's not the Caen way. We hold them for a short period of time, then we either execute or set them free."

"So that leaves, Lounivia or Ariste. Both cities have dungeons." Yunez dropped his head to glare at the floor. "When did you say the other city leaders would be here?"

"Tomorrow morning at the latest, based on the information my scouts presented."

"We need to meet them. Aamori and Ureste would both travel the last leg of the journey through the Wilden forest. We need to meet them head on. Confront them. Otherwise, too much time might pass."

"Shouldn't you be able to see what happened? Aren't you powerful enough?" A different Caen man stepped forward this time. The questions were obnoxious. More like he truly believed Yunez could do anything.

Same, man. Same.

Yunez's face twisted up into something heartbreaking. "Unfortunately, I am not all knowing, and more and more lately, my sight has not been...reliable. The best we can do is head off Aamori and Ureste. And hope like hell they will have information that will lead us to what really happened."

"Go, we'll meet in the stables. I'll ride with you." Toste looked at Wade. "Will you be all right here? I don't want to leave our children without at least one parent."

"I'm going with you." Isa stepped forward, his teeth grinding.

"No!" Both parents yelled.

Then Wade added in a much softer tone. "We don't know who the threat is. We need you here where you'll be safe. Think of your mother."

"I need to protect Father Toste."

"And if you die so I can live?" Toste shot back. "No. Absolutely not. You'd be sentencing me to a life of misery."

"I am not a pup anymore. I'm strong. Capable. I need to go with my fellow men and not coddled like the Caen prince." Isa didn't wait for anyone to further object as he started toward the door in a sure gait. "I'll meet you at the stables."

Wade's laugh was soft, yet tinged with sadness. "He may be of my loins, but he's you, up and down. Both children have so much of you in them."

Toste cupped Wade's cheek. "I know. And for that, I'm sorry. I can only hope they get the best of you as they grow up."

"The stables." Egan tugged on my hand, and my LL started toward the door. They were having a private moment and even though I'd been entranced, I could understand that my mates hadn't wanted to intrude.

Maybe one day...

No, I need to think about the now. Because there might not be a one day if we didn't take care of Rainer and the Fiasla Mannos.

"Shit, I need to bandage the boobs to minimize bouncing." I tried to pivot toward our rooms but wasn't successful.

"We can't! There's no time. We need to figure out where that vision was and who they were after." Yunez started jogging, leaving the rest of us in his dust.

"You have a theory. What is it?" Sage asked as he caught up with Yunez. Now we were all flat out running.

"It could be nothing."

"Humor us," Rand said, pulling up next to me. We ran in a two row formation. Probably so everyone would have the best chance of hearing us. Any house members we passed on the way were quick to step out of our way.

"The Fiasla Mannos have effectively blocked me. But what if they haven't blocked Iss? It could be they are trying to do a blanket blocking, but her sight is more powerful than what they anticipated. They could also have trouble blocking her without her unique mental signature."

"But Brody..." I started to be cut off by growls from both Sage and Egan. "He would have my signature."

"Yes, interesting that." Yunez didn't expand on it anymore.

By the time we reached the stables, horses were being brought out, and the guys were barely breaking a sweat. Yunez looked like he just came back from a leisure beach stroll.

Then there was me.

"Are you all right, Mazza?" A young stable boy rushed up to me. Why? Because I was wheezing like it was an Olympic sport and I was going for gold.

"I'm fine. I just need to be in a little better shape." He nodded and backed away. Probably afraid for his future with a Mazza who couldn't run from the castle to the stables. That was a long run though! At least a mile.

When we conditioned at Yunez's it was all about fighting and weapon control, not cardio.

"We'll pick this conversation back up when we have a moment to ourselves." Yunez spoke out of the side of his mouth.

A small group of Caen men and women appeared with Toste at the forefront. They wasted no time with their long-legged stride, and when they reached us, several leapt onto horseback.

"That's our cue," Jari said with a squeeze to my hip as he passed.

"Is this a bad time to tell you all that I've never really ridden horses?" I eyed the majestic beasts with a critical eye. What were the chances that the death of the Mazza would come from the hooves of demon horses instead of revered and feared evil masterminds?

"It's fine, you can ride with me," Sage said as he grabbed my waist and hoisted me up on the back of a very pretty black horse. The coat was so shiny, it gleamed. The horse pranced in place as if it was ready to run. I hadn't seen its face, and hopefully that meant the horse didn't have red eyes.

"Okay then," I breathed as he swung up behind me. The saddle was strange. It didn't have a horn like most saddles I'd seen. It looked more sleek and the shape conformed to the horse's back.

That was a blessing. I wouldn't be bouncing against the hard horn. Some might find that erotic, but it seemed like it would be painful.

His arm went around my waist, and he pulled me back until my ass was snug against his groin. I nearly groaned at the contact. I saw bad things happening.

"Do you really think this is a good idea?" I asked on a breath.

“Why wouldn’t it be a good idea?” His arm squeezed me tighter as everyone in our band of merry men and women, mounted their horses.

“Because rubbing up against you the entire way is going to turn me on. And I’m pretty sure from that growing appendage, you’re going to be turned on too. How are we supposed to have a serious conversation with anyone like that?” I grabbed fistfuls of the horse’s mane as we started to move. A small yip escaped me. But I powered through my point. No pun intended. “I can. Probably. But you might have a raging erection. Not comfortable for chats with anyone not in the sausage brigade. Ever. But especially not when we’re trying to solve mysterious visions.”

He chuckled darkly in my ear. “You let me worry about that. I’m just glad to have you in my arms,” he sighed.

There I went, melting into a puddle of Mazza goo again.

It seemed like we were just getting to really know each other when the world came down around our ears. Or I should say, realms. All I wanted was time to be together to just...enjoy each other.

“You have me in your arms now.”

What promised to be a lurid moment, softened into something sweet. I reveled in the feel of my endearing asshole against my back. Then I snickered. Sage would forever be the asshole to me, and I meant that in the most loving way possible.

“We ride!” Toste yelled, then he kicked his horse and shot off like a roman candle. His warriors yelled and raced after him.

Sage’s chest hit my back as he did his own kicks, and then we were off.

“Oh shit!” I yelled. Very eloquent of the Mazza. I got a few strange looks but then they paid attention to where they were going. I guess there was only so much gawking you could do on horseback when you were on a speedy mission.

There wasn’t much talking after that. In fact, none at all other than, eek, ah! And ouch! As we moved through the forest.

Where Yunez and Toste thought we would run into the other house leaders must have been far away. Too far for my poor aching ass.

No wonder Sage hadn’t been concerned about arriving with an erection. Riding was painful. My thighs ached, my ass ached, and I was certain there would be huge ass bruises everywhere that touched the horse.

After hours of ass pain, and not the good kind, we slowed. The horses had soapy stuff on their butts, and they were breathing hard. Some of the Caen warriors jumped off and started petting their rides, murmuring *thank yous*.

“That’s our cue,” Sage said as he swung off behind me. He held up his arms like I was a toddler, and I was ashamed to say that I reached for him.

“Ow,” I whispered as he pulled my flopping body off.

He laughed as my other mates joined us. Jari checked me over and squeezed the back of my thigh and lower cheek.

“Double ow.”

“We should have hooked up a cart for Issy,” Nato said as he pulled me into a hug.

“I second that.” I tried not to whimper. I did. But I failed. Hard.

There was a distant clatter of what could only be hoofbeats. That had to be them. And from the sounds of it, there were a lot of people on their way to where we were.

They might not know Yunez’s part in everything yet, but they would soon. And Aamori was more interested in how she appeared politically than actually placing her people’s welfare above

everything else.

This could go really well, or it could go really, really bad.

“They’re here,” Rand said as he searched through the trees for our newcomers.

Shouts rang out.

They were indeed here.



THE HORSES and Fennins grew closer, and by closer, I mean that they surrounded us in quick succession. Orders were called, then hands and weapons were drawn.

Our own warriors fanned out around us, dropping into defensive stances.

“Halt!” Toste raised a hand to the men and women facing us.

I was hidden behind a pile of LL muscle, but I pushed through their protective wall. I appreciated what they were trying to do. But as Yunez had shared with us, when we left his home, we were in this war. We were constantly on watch, and I was going to make any type of favorable dent in the outcome of our war.

“Toste?” Aamori asked, as she rode to the front of the line. “Your messenger had quite a bit to say, most importantly that your city was under a massive attack.” She raised a brow, adding a bit of snark to her elegant stature.

Then one of our favorite people rode up behind her.

Theon.

Oh joy.

He swept our people with a hard stare and sneered when his gaze landed on me, and more specifically Sage.

I took a deep breath. A lot of secrets that Yunez had held close to the vest were about to come out. I glanced around at the dense forest under a crescent moon. The pale yellow cast a mild glow I was surprised reached us under the tree coverage.

Was this really where we were about to do this?

“Senadia was under siege by the Fiasla Mannos. And thanks to Yunez and his own Mannos, we were able to fight them back.”

Sage and Jari both groaned as Yunez scrubbed a hand down his face. It was fast. So fast, that when he dropped his hand, and smiled enigmatically at Aamori, I questioned if he had shown that very human reaction.

“Aamori, it is always a pleasure.”

“Yunez.” Her brow furrowed as her horse started to step sideways. She pulled the reins and the horse stopped. “What is Toste referring to? Mannos?”

“Where is Ureste? We might as well review all the nitty gritty details with everyone together.” Yunez glanced around, searching for the Levan leader.

“Right here,” a deep booming voice preceded a man with a long, gnarly staff. I tried to keep the shock off my face, but I was pretty sure I failed. I was just zero for everything today.

This man. Ureste. He was a very attractive, very strapping, younger version of Gandolf. Complete with the long flowing hair, but minus the beard.

“I believe Toste’s men are setting up camp. Let us go grab a seat as his warriors create a fire and work on a late dinner. What I have to share is part of everyone’s history and shouldn’t be shrouded from their ears.” Yunez waved for us to follow him through the trees.

Ureste and Aamori exchanged glances, and for a brief moment, I thought we were going to have an argument on our hands. But they stiffly nodded and motioned for their people to follow. It was only Theon who seemed sour about the decision.

As we walked through the forest, I glanced around for signs of this late like dinner.

We must be safe tonight if his sight was working. Otherwise, how did he know that the Caen members were setting up a firepit and outdoor kitchen a hundred yards away?

Oh. There they were. Maybe he just had better eyesight than I did.

I damn sure hadn’t realized they’d have time to pack food boxes. What were those? The Fennin version of Ready Made Meals? I squinted to get a better look at what they were unpacking.

Ah, they were leather satchels, not cardboard boxes. That was a slight plus.

And...the ingredients looked suspiciously like Mac n’ cheese.

Listen, I wasn’t complaining. We were about to have a shit show on our hands, and I could absolutely go for some comfort food.

My Lusty Legion and I arrived at the newly, but primitively, constructed firepit. Ureste and Aomori weren’t far behind at all, but Yunez gave them a closed lip smile and a hair flip as he watched the woods behind them.

Soon, there was a fairly large crowd of people gathered around the firepit. Some took seats on stumps or rocks. Others stood off to the side. Everyone watched Yunez with unblinking gazes as if they were both wary but curious.

I got it. Yunez had that electric draw about him. Nato sidled up to his side, whispered something in his ear, and I realized, Nato would have it too once he fully came into himself. He had the natural charisma of a leader, he just needed to mature into his powers like Yunez.

“All right, Yunez,” Ureste said with flick of his staff. When he set it back down, thunder rumbled overhead.

That’s right, he was a Levan leader and he was showing off a little of his displeasure.

“We’re all here. We’re tired from such a long run to reach Toste’s people. Tell us why this wasn’t an epic waste of our time.” Ureste hadn’t said the words unkindly. But he also hadn’t smiled either.

“Gather round, my good people of Fennina,” Yunez called, stepping onto a stump to have the best vantage point. Knowing Yunez, he probably also wanted them to have a good look at him too. A whisper of a smile kissed my lips.

“There have been too many secrets steeped in our society. None of them good, and all of them born of greed, fear, and vengeance. I will not sugar coat it for you. I will not glaze over the uglier parts of our history. It is time you knew the truth, and whatever we decide will come of it, we will make that decision together.”

Rand and Sage shot me confused looks.

That was new. As far as I knew, this wasn’t a democracy. The Fiasla Mannos and Rainer had to be stopped. As the Mazza with my bonded mates, we had a duty to keep them safe.

I worried my lip.

Oh hell. Hopefully Yunez had seen the outcome, but I wasn't sure how this was going to affect our plans if the other houses decided we were the bad guys.

Yunez rolled into the story that I'd heard a few times. There wasn't a sound in the field outside of the Caen members, who were already very acquainted with these truths. The newcomers clung to every word. It almost seemed like he held them in a trance, but Yunez was just that mesmerizing.

By the time he reached the recount of what happened at Toste's castle, some were enraged, some were white with fear, and a few were blank faced.

Aamori's hand fluttered over her chest as her lips pursed together. Ureste had adopted a strong frown, leaning his arms over the top of his staff.

"My Mazza and my bondmates, have given a promise to keep you all safe. We will do everything within our power to defeat the Fiasla Mannos and stop Rainer from taking over the human realm." Yunez's gaze skated over Aamori, but she remained passive, giving nothing away in her expression. "What you have to decide, is how much you're willing to fight for Fennina. Are we all people of Fennina? Or are Mannos the enemy of everyone regardless of the house?" He paused, his chest rising slightly.

"How can we know that you're telling us the truth? These are big accusations." One man called in the back.

"Telly," Toste stepped forward. "Listen to me when I tell you, Yunez and his bondmates saved us. They did not ask for payment or favor before diving in. I'm ashamed to say, I even locked their Mazza and some of her mates up until I could confirm their genuinity." He shot a sheepish smile toward us, then glared at the crowd. "You all have to make the decision for yourselves. But as for me and my house, we support the Mazza and her mates!" He thrust his fist in the air and all of his warriors gave a whooping battle cry.

Oh shit. Tears touched my eyes. There was so much emotion in that collective sound. Their recent pain still too fresh.

The man nodded, but seemed like he had more questions to ask.

"As the head of Janer house, I need more information. Yunez, I suspect you won't be too tired to meet with the heads of houses here? Or should we call for Phin?" Aamori looked around as if he would appear out of the woods.

My jaw hit the ground when Phin did step out. He nodded to us as he approached Yunez. "Yunez, I'm glad to see you've survived this initial strike. My people have constructed a tent with a sound barrier surrounding it. Shall we?"

Okay, this was weird. But Yunez had said there was always a Manno taking his place to keep up the ruse. He caught me staring and winked, the cheeky bastard.

"You four go ahead. I need to talk to my Mazza and then I'll join you."

"Don't you think the Mazza ought to be a part of this important talk?" Ureste smoothed his fingers over his chin.

"Yes, but not yet. She has something else to attend to. Something I'm afraid isn't any of your business," Yunez added when it looked like Aamori was going to interject.

"It's time," Yunez slipped his arms around me and pressed up against my side. He dropped his head to nuzzle my temple. "I'm sending you with Rand, Jari, and Sage. You will be quick. Take absolutely no deviations from the mission. Do you accept?" Yunez leaned back and his twinkling eyes snared me.

"Huh?"

The guys laughed, and Jari patted me on the back. "It's okay, Issy. We're used to the effect Yunez

has on you by now. The short answer is yes, we'll do the mission."

"What mission?"

Another round of laughter rolled through my LL. As nice as it was to hear them enjoying the moment, I was being serious. Yunez hadn't said what the mission was.

"What fucking mission?" I growled.

Nato grinned and chucked me under the chin. "You're cute when you're angry."

"Uh huh. I bet." When I was angry, I looked like a spitting wet cat. Definitely not the cute kind. "Mission?"

"All right, my love. Remember what I told you when you woke up after the other Mazza attack?"

"That we would do everything in our power to save Fennina?"

"Not that. What else did I tell you?"

What had he said? That whole week after the attack seemed to pass in a haze. "That you really needed a cold beer and chicken wings to appreciate life again."

Sage snickered.

Yunez sighed. "It pains me that you are not joking. Many years ago, I gifted a stone statue to Aamori for safe keeping. She didn't know the significance, only that it was a sign of goodwill when she took over as head of her house."

"The statue in their dining hall?" Sage asked, swiping his hand over his jaw. "I remember that. It vibrated with power."

"It is power. Actually, it is an amplifier. The other Mazza and her bonds all had a small piece of it around their necks. We need that statue back to level the playing field."

"And I guess asking for it back is considered bad form?" I chewed my lip. I didn't see good things happening here.

"We cannot let anyone know that we have it. More importantly, we cannot let anyone know what it is. It is bad enough that the other Mazza have them. If there are others, we need to make sure we are the only ones who have access to it."

"You act like it's the only one." Nato furrowed his brow.

"It is the only one. It is a meteorite that hit Earth close to one of the portals. I smuggled it through when I realized what it was. Someone else must have discovered it, because as far as I know, it is the only one."

I scanned the woods behind him. Many of the Fennins milled about and chatted with one another. No one was glancing our way and it made me wonder if Yunez, or hell, even Rand or Nato, were making them see things that weren't real. Or diverting their attention would probably be the more accurate description.

"How are we supposed to carry it? That thing was huge." Jari pushed his lips to the side. "I'm strong, but I can't lift that much. It's not a metal is it?" He looked between Sage and Rand.

"No, it is not. It *is* a rock. But I have faith in you all. You will have exactly four hours to get in and out. And not alert anyone that you are there." Yunez looked between us and a brief flash of worry flashed through his eyes. "Without the sight, I cannot give you any clues on what to do or avoid. Just follow your instincts. My love, your powers are coming in. Listen to them."

I nodded.

He framed my face with his hands and kissed my lips. "Now, I must go play politics with my other heads of houses. Return. All of you."

He left and Nato took his place, dropping a toe curling kiss against my mouth, then he spun me into Egan's arms, who one upped him with a growl of possession.

Without any other words, they left me with my bonds that were going with me. “I guess this means we get to really test out the extent of your powers.” Jari bit his bottom lip as he looked off in the distance, probably toward Aamori’s home.

“Oh goody,” I deadpanned. This was going to be fun.



“ANYONE KNOW how to call our winged friends back?” Jari braced his fists on his hips as he looked over the treetops, like he was expecting them to appear just from his thoughts.

That would be nice, but it didn’t happen. Sadly.

“No. But there are horses.” Rand pointed at the horses currently munching on grass under the trees.

I groaned. “Please, no. My ass can’t take any more time in the saddle. No more riding for me.”

“I concur. Riding doesn’t agree with Issy.” Sage shook his head vehemently, but when I glared at him, he broke into a grin. It was good to see he wasn’t a grumpy ass all the time.

“Cart and horse?” I asked, too much forced hope in my voice.

They looked around, and Jari sighed. “Yeah, let’s grab the food cart. It has already been unloaded but they haven’t unhooked the horses yet.”

“Won’t those horses be tired?” The rear ends of the horses were soapy from a hard run.

Sage pointedly looked around. “And what fresh horses do we have here that haven’t been ridden hard?”

Okay, fine. He was just an asshole and I needed to accept it.

“Fancy a hike?” I snarked.

“I wouldn’t mind a hike,” Rand said as he caught my hand and brought it to his lips. “But I don’t think that will meet the timeframe Yunez requires. Too much could happen before we even get there.”

Even though he disagreed, he did it in a way that melted my heart.

“Man, you have got to stop making us look bad. Between you and Yunez, you two have too much going for you.” Jari shook his head but winked when he caught me looking.

“Psst.”

I jerked my head around. I could have sworn I heard something.

The guys glanced around too, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The cooks were across the clearing, quietly talking to each other as they prepared the food. Yunez and the others couldn’t be heard or seen anymore.

Loud breathing of the horses, and the swish of their tails joined in the natural symphony but that was it.

“Over here.”

The sheen of Cabbie’s dark hair caught my eye before I even realized what I was looking at. A few Cherries, ones I weren’t familiar with, stood sentinel at his back.

“Think we’re supposed to go over and talk to him?” Jari scratched the back of his head as he squinted. A teasing smile flirted with the edges of his lips. He dropped his hand and some of his blond hair mussed from the rough movement.

“I think, yes.” Rand tugged my hand as he walked toward Cabbie.

“Word on the street is, you need a way to get to Aamori’s stronghold?” Cabbie’s eyes twinkled as he glanced to his two Cherries and then back to us.

It seemed they were at least in warrior mode, dressed in tight plasticky spandex jumpsuits. I was glad they saw the practicality in not wearing the floss suits on a mission. The idea of thorns and abrasive twigs having access to the nether regions just made me cringe.

“That is the word. Tell me you have something up your sleeve that’s not five more hours on horseback. I don’t think my thighs would take it.” I shook my head ruefully. “And Yunez gave us a four hour limit anyway.”

“Oh honey,” one redheaded Cherry stepped forward and grazed her fingertips up the outer edge of my thigh, stopping just under the swell of my cheek. “Your thighs are shaking. We have some exercises we can show you to really get your endurance up. Thigh muscles are your best friend in the pleasure industry. It’s all about those fast twitch muscles, right?”

Jari choked on his spit while Sage glared at the hand almost on my ass. Rand just raised his eyebrows like he was unsure what the appropriate reaction should have been.

“Thank you. After we save Fennina, I might take you up on that.” I cleared my throat. Yes, this was slightly embarrassing, but I did have six mates. I needed to be able to please them all.

Hell, who was I kidding. I needed to be able to please myself.

“Pencil us in.” She winked.

“Okay, Diya, that’s enough flirting. She’s got enough cocks to keep her busy.” Cabbie rolled his eyes as the guys giggled like tweens. “Let’s get out of here so we can get to Aamori’s and back.”

He turned and strutted through the woods as if it wasn’t littered with branches, twigs and hazardous rocks. After tripping over all of those things in various order, he stopped, and turned around, elegantly spreading his arms to the side.

“I’d like to draw your attention to the stones.”

I dropped my gaze to his crotch, but Sage poked my side. “He means the actual stones behind him, not his balls.” His hot breath whispered over my ear, and I burned in embarrassment.

“Mine are rather impressive, but Sage is right. These stones are like mini Waesarises, except they’re not as powerful. They can’t traverse the realms, doll, but they can get us to Aamori’s.”

“What? How do you know about these?” I stepped forward and pressed my fingertips to the cool surface. They didn’t give off any vibrations or anything that suggested they were objects of power. If I had walked through here alone, I would have disregarded them all together.

“Louniva is my city. I know as much or more about it and its residents than Aamori does. These beauties were created by a man who detests her with a passion. She doesn’t even know they litter her land so no part of her territory is inaccessible to him and his friends.” His white teeth flashed.

“And you’re one of these friends?” Jari looked at Cabbie in new appreciation. I got it. I appreciated the hell out of Cabbie right then too.

“Of course, he’s one of the regular patrons of the Stag room. I’ve even tried to recruit him a time or two, but servicing others is not his thing.” The wistful smile on Cabbie’s face let me know exactly how good this mystery man was at servicing someone else.

“Mmhmm,” I hummed and nodded slowly.

“Alright, lovers. You know what to do.” He whipped out a machete knife he’d hidden somewhere under his silky clothing and sliced his palm. Rand sliced his left hand at the same time, and they slapped their hands on the stone.

A slow, whirring vibration filled the air as a turquoise blue glow surrounded the space between the two boulder sized rocks. This was the power I’d been looking for before.

“You two go first, I’ll bring up the rear. We have to protect the Mazza.” Cabbie motioned to the two women who nodded and stepped through the field.

I grabbed Sage’s hand, and he gulped. When he glanced at me, his eyes were wide but determined.

“Together?” He whispered.

“Together,” I quietly returned. Jari and Rand both nodded. They’d come after us, but Sage would go over with me.

We took four long strides forward, then we were through the portal. It was like we stepped through a fine mist, that evaporated with our next breath.

Well, this was a surprise. Was Aamori so removed that she had no idea the portal connected right to the bedroom Theon had so kindly shown us to when we were here before?

The Cherries stood at the open door, watching the hallway with faces set in stone. Pun intended.

“This is unexpected,” Jari whistled as he glanced around. “But welcome. *Definitely* a welcome surprise.”

“Right?” Sage agreed.

Once we were all together, we turned collectively to Cabbie.

Did he know the mission Yunez sent us on? Just how much could he hear when I thought Yunez had blocked the sound?

“Well, what are you waiting for? Go get what you came for.” Cabbie waved his hands like we were wasting his time.

We exchanged a glance, then we raced out of the room. I said raced, but really, I let Rand and Jari lead the way. From the one time I was here, I wouldn’t be able to get to the dining hall. So, I followed at a steady jog.

The halls were completely empty as our footsteps and breathing echoed off the stone. Before, there had been dozens of people milling about, and with it so empty, an eerie feeling crept down my spine.

“Is it just me, or should Aamori have left a few guards here to protect this place?” I huffed as we rounded a corner.

Sage furrowed his brow as he turned to get a look behind us. “It is odd.”

“Agreed,” Rand and Jari both chimed in together.

We slowed to a cautious walk as we entered the hall.

This time, there were no tables, no throne. Nothing to alert us our presence to anyone that had stayed behind. We were the only souls in the place.

It was weird.

And felt like a trap.

“This is it, huh?” Sage stepped forward and pressed his hand on the stone. “Shit!” He jumped back as soon as his fingers touched the surface. “What the hell? It didn’t do that the last time I was here.” He shook out his hand.

“Do what?” Jari asked as he touched the stone statue with his index finger. “Fuck!” He pulled his hand back, shaking it out just like Sage had.

“What? You couldn’t take my word for it?” Sage asked drily as he blew cool air on his palm.

Jari shrugged. “I have a higher pain tolerance than you do. I thought you were being dramatic.”

“Why you—”

“Stop.” Rand caught the back of Sage’s shirt and tugged him back. “Now isn’t the time for games. Don’t you see the bigger issue? We have to get this back to Yunez and how are we supposed to do that

if we can't touch it?"

"Your earth/weather powers?" I asked hopefully.

Cabbie's expression flattened like he wasn't impressed with my answer, but hell, what other options were there?

"If there was enough wind here, then sure, I could try and blow it up to the portal, but the air is completely stale in here." Jari looked up as if he would suddenly find that gust of air he was looking for.

"I'm a metal worker, remember? My powers don't work on stone." Sage twisted his lips to the side.

"Well, shit."

We all turned in shock to Rand.

"Did you just curse?"

He startled, then shrugged sheepishly. "I'm racking my brain for a solution. I'm coming up short too."

I studied the statue. It was something you might expect to encounter at a modern art museum. It wasn't anything perfect or chiseled. The form of the stone itself was naturally beautiful, and the air got thicker the closer you stood to the rock.

Stepping forward, I slowly raised my hand. I hadn't even realized I was doing it until I laid my palm flat on the stone and it didn't hurt me.

"Hm. That could be useful," Cabbie whispered to one of the Cherries who mumbled their agreement.

I wanted to tear my gaze away from the statue, but I couldn't. The warmth traveling up my arm and through my body was just too much, felt too good, to break away.

This was different than when I was touched it before. More enticing.

More exciting.

Then the world around me faded as a new scene unfolded.

Brody ruffled the hair of a young boy, smiling down at him. "The world will be different one day, Bean."

"I hate that name," the kid rasped. His hair was long and stringy. No life shone through at all.

"What? But you love beans so much. It's practically the only thing you'll eat." Brody dropped his hand. The smile slipping off his face as a profound sadness filled his eyes.

"That's because I can't stomach anything else." He lifted his hand and I gasped. He wasn't a little boy. He was a teenager at least, but he was so emaciated, and gaunt that he appeared younger.

"I know. But we're working on it. How about I call you Shadow. Does that work better?"

"Shadow?" A deep divet appeared between his eyes as one side of his mouth turned down.

"Yes, shadow. You've been raised in the shadows, and when you get your revenge, you'll do it, from the shadows. Because that's where your powers lie. Fitting, right?"

The kid thought that over so hard, I could practically see the wheels turning in his mind. Then he nodded. "Okay, you may call me shadow."

The scene swirled again, dissolving completely until I was left with only the statue in front of me.

"Iss?" Sage stepped up beside me, fluttering the back of his hand across my cheek. "Vision?"

"I think so..." I blinked a few times. Why show me that? The few times I'd experienced anything with the sight, it had been centered around people who were around me or touching me.

But Brody wasn't here. And I had no idea who the kid was.

“It’s the statue. It’s bringing your powers to the surface,” Rand started, then his face lit. “This is what we need. You’ll be able to master your powers and we’ll be able to take care of Rainer and the shadow society in no time.”

“Wait. Shadow....” Did that have anything to do with the boy?

I turned toward Cabbie, but something else caught my eye. In the far corner, where the platform was the last time, a figure stood in the doorway.

A figure I recognized all too well.

“Brody!”



“WHAT?” Cabbie glanced behind him.

“Brody! He was just right there!” I released the stone and wavered. “Whoa.” Tingles attacked my body in hot waves, messing with my equilibrium.

“Are you okay?” Rand asked as he and Jari rushed to my side. Sage had already taken off down the hallway after Brody.

“Yeah, I’m good. That just felt weird when I released it.” I lightly brushed them off and sprinted down the hallway. They followed right on my ass as I followed the sound of feet beating against the floor.

A shout rang through the hall, and we pushed ourselves to run faster. Sage was a good fighter, but Brody and his mates had already proven just how lethal they were.

I slid past the room where we had popped in through the portal, and nearly got bowled over as I pivoted to backtrack.

“Oof,” Jari breathed out as I shoved at his chest.

“They’re in there!” I pointed to the room.

The Cherries dashed in, clearly having better awareness as they ran, and we followed behind them.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Sage gripped Brody’s very human style T-shirt in his fists.

“Listen man, this isn’t what you’re thinking.” Brody held his hands up as the Cherries circled around his back. One sneered when he glanced at her.

“Tell me, what am I thinking?” Sage growled.

“That I’m the enemy.” Brody said drolly and raised an eyebrow. His gaze flickered to mine and his eyes softened.

“I wouldn’t look at her if I was you,” Jari said as he crossed his arms and blocked Brody’s view of me. “Where is your Mazza and mates?”

“I left them.” He audibly gulped.

“You left them?” I couldn’t contain the question. That was wild, crazy, and slightly suicidal. His Mazza was like the dominatrix from Hell, and she didn’t seem like she’d easily let him go.

And us Mazzas, we could find our mates.

If Brody really did leave, which I wasn’t buying, that would be very dangerous for him.

“I never wanted to be *with* them.” He sighed, his body losing any sign of tension. Funny, since

Sage's body seemed to absorb everything he lost.

"Doll, this sounds like a very personal conversation. You want us in here with you or guarding the door?" Cabbie flicked his fingers at the Cherries and they moved behind him and took on what I would consider the vixen warrior stance. Feet spread, chests pushed out, and pouty lips as they glared at Brody.

He didn't even pay them any attention, but he was never really a pussy chaser when I knew him. Although, my limited experience with Brody wasn't exactly watching how he interacted with other people in public.

No, it was how we interacted in the bedroom.

Brody leaned to the side, but as soon as his sad eyes came into view, Jari stepped to cover me up again.

"Why don't you step in the hallway. Make sure no one comes in," I said to Cabbie as I moved around Jari, earning a scowl.

"You got it, dollface." They left, shutting the door behind them.

Jari, Sage, and Rand fanned out until they had Brody in a circle between them. I moved to stand across from him. Not too close, the guys wouldn't allow that.

Brody was too much a threat in their eyes.

Now that he had an unobstructed view, he gazed at me, soaking in the sight with so much wistfulness, it started to make me uncomfortable. Especially when Sage snarled and Jari grunted. Rand studied him with a passive eye, but I could tell he didn't like this any more than the other two.

"Okay, you have us all alone. We're humoring you. Why are you here?" I tried to insert confidence into my tone, but this was a situation that wasn't made for building confidence up in a girl. It was more like the embarrassment of running into a dirty one night stand with your partners.

"I needed to see you—"

"Bad way to start." Sage pulled a knife out of his belt and ran his finger across the blade. It glowed as his hand passed over it. Holy shit. He was heating it up. I didn't know he could do that.

Brody ignored him. "I never wanted to leave you. But I needed you to bond with others first. I wanted to tell you what you were, but it was obvious you had no idea—"

"I really don't like this conversation." Jari stepped forward.

"I'm not such a fan either," Rand added.

Okay, that was all fair. If the roles were reversed, I would cut a bitch. And came close the last time. At least Sage had pushed the one Cherry out the door. We didn't really have that option with Brody. He was too much of a key player.

"I have my mates. So going down memory lane is pointless." Hurt flashed in his eyes, and I felt a momentary twinge of guilt. But I had to be mean to be kind. Nothing good would come of him sharing these regretful confessions. It was a good thing Egan and Nato weren't here. They would egg Sage on and that might cause a fight.

He didn't say anything, so I tried to prompt him.

"Why are you really here?"

After a long, drawn inhale, he scrubbed a hand over his face. "I grew up in Fiasla. My family are large supporters of the Shadow society."

I paused. The boy from the vision flashed through my mind, but he couldn't be part of the Shadow Society. It was too old of an organization for him to have any meaningful part in it. Right? I mean, unless Brody was older than I thought he was. Damn it. That actually could be the case.

"It was foreseen that I would be matched with a Mazza. I had hoped it was you, but I waited too

long. When I came back through, you were gone, and I knew, without the sight, you were already bonded. I felt it.” He thumped his chest with his fist.

I thought the guys would have interjected, but they only glared.

When I didn’t comment, he cleared his throat and continued. “When I went back to Fiasla, my parents were waiting with Jewel. She already had her core and needed a Manno.” Sadness crept through his words. “As much as I like some of her bonds, I can’t stand *her*. To put it frankly, she’s a fucking evil bitch.” His nose crinkled and spit flew from his mouth.

“We could tell,” Jari raised a brow. He didn’t want to agree with him, but he couldn’t deny his first impression apparently.

“Why did you leave? Or should I say how?”

“She’s trying to position herself as the next queen—”

“Fennina doesn’t have queens,” Sage interjected.

“If Fiasla has their way, the three realms will be united under one ruler. The head of Fiasla believes it will be him. Jewel has other feelings about it.”

So there was dissension in the ranks. That could work in our favor.

“You thought you could escape her evil clutches and come back to Issy?” Rand asked, crossing his arms. As the gentlest of the three, he spoke the softest.

“No—I—” He didn’t get out another word as a portal lit up between two boulders coming out of the floor.

A hand reached through and caught Brody’s shoulder, then a knife tip appeared through the side of his chest.

I screamed, jolting forward as Sage threw out an arm to block my path. “Brody!”

He grunted, as he was pulled back, a few droplets of blood on the floor was the only sign I hadn’t made up that entire exchange in my head.

Well, that and the fact that Jewel and one of her other mates stepped through the blue mist. “You really have to start safeguarding your secrets better,” she sneered as she brushed her hand down her high ponytail.

I didn’t have feelings for Brody, but I didn’t want him to be stuck to this bitch for the rest of his life. Was this really how his future was going to play out? Forever a slave to this bitch, who would track him down if he tried to escape her.

“What do you want?” I gritted out. A better comeback would have been nice, but the fiery anger scorching my insides wouldn’t allow for any type of articulation.

“Oh, you know. The usual. My mates to all stay in their lane, the realms to come together, me on the throne. Isn’t that what every girl wants?” She smirked, and it really highlighted the devious light shining in her eyes.

I wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box, but damn, the Mannos in Fiasla had to see this woman was bonkers.

“I can honestly say that’s not what I want,” I said as Jari and Rand took positions at my sides.

“That’s probably a good thing. Disappointment can suck. And you’re already the underdog. I’d hate to see you fail at yet another thing.” She nodded to her mate, and he grinned as he slapped his freshly sliced hand on the rock next to him, then reached behind her to get the other anchor.

“What did you do with Brody?” I demanded, pushing against Sage’s arm that was still holding me back.

“Don’t worry about Brody. Mannos are hard to kill. And I didn’t get his heart.” She shrugged. “You should be more worried about yourself and your father-in-law.” Jewel turned to her mate. “Isn’t

that the human term?"

"Yes. Those nasty creatures try to form unrealistic bonds with their mates' families." The man pushed his lips together to form a very dickish smile.

Asshole.

Then it registered what she said.

"Father- in-law?" I glanced at the guys. She could be talking about Egil, or she could be talking about Rainer. Chances were, she was talking about Rainer and his goal of world domination.

"Yes. He's expecting you."

A hand landed on my back and pushed me forward. I barely got a yelp out before the guys and I were barreling toward the Mazza. She stepped aside, and I crashed right through the blue mist.

"Well, hello there, son of mine. It's nice of you and your friends to join us."

I'd fallen to my hands and knees on unforgiving stone floor. When I glanced up, I stared right into the furious eyes of Rainer.



OKAY, I was pretty sure I was still in Fennina. That Waesaris wasn't for inter-realm travel, so we still had to be somewhere on the Aamori's lands, right?

The slight disorientation and rapidly beating heart played havoc on my critical thinking skills so I wasn't as sharp as I wanted to be.

Shit, I was pretty sure this was what HP felt like when he "won" the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

The next question was, how big was the Aamori's territory?

Not that I'd been able to look away from Rainer, but there was literally nothing recognizable out of the corner of my eyes.

His eyes blazed as he held my stare. Then he curled his top lip and bent forward. He looked nothing like Rand, and I was glad. There was too much cruelty in his features.

"Isolde, are you going to greet me? The gods know my good for nothing son won't, will you Rand?" He turned to Rand, and I swore he was about to spit on him, but he didn't.

"He's not your son anymore. Rand doesn't claim you." Sage pushed up from the ground and stood directly in front of Rand. My heart pitter pattered at the sight of Sage standing up for the man he once thought would take his place in my bonds.

Rainer straightened and tugged on his fitted tunic. I glanced around quickly once his attention was directed at my mates. We were in a clearing, the moon bright overhead, and there were whispers coming through the trees. Lit torches circled the field, giving an ominous vibe to the place.

"Be that as it may, unfortunately, now that he's claimed the Mazza, I can't exactly disown him. Especially when my allies are so ravenous for her." He cast a side glance at me, before returning his gaze to Rand.

"No one is getting Issy, that's not how it works." Jari stepped forward and gently gripped my arm, helping me to stand up.

"Really? Could have fooled me. From the way I see it, you're at the mercy of me and my people. Just in time to go on a little field trip." Rainer signaled to whoever was behind us, and guards came out of the woods, pressing closer on every side.

I searched for words, something profound, inspiring, or hell, I'd settle for sarcastic, but I couldn't form a thought with more than three words.

The familiar buzz flared to life, and when I turned to the side, I saw a Waesaris glowing that brilliant blue I'd gotten accustomed to. Instead of between rocks, this one was anchored between two

large, incredibly ancient, trees. This was a portal to go between realms.

We were in trouble.

Hooded figures crowded around us, several branching off to stand right at Rainer's back.

Jari slid his hand down to hold mine, his fingers giving me a light squeeze. "You're going to have to give us more to go on. As far as we're concerned, you're a weak nuisance compared to the real villains of the story."

Rainer laughed. "What do you mean? I've successfully cracked three governments and my Zien guards have already started managing the local offices, police forces, and drug companies. If I was such a waste of space, I doubt I would have been able to do all of that."

"Who do you think the real powers are here?" Rand asked as he stood, brushing his knees off. He avoided contact with Rainer until the very last second, and when he did lift his gaze, hurt sparked in the depths of his eyes.

"Son, I've tried to teach you how the realms work. Our system, it's not working. It's collapsing as we speak. Someone will rise to the top. It's inevitable. I intend to be that person." Rainer pulled a watch out from his pocket and wiped the surface with his thumb.

"Are we late for an important date?" Jari asked sarcastically.

"We're right on time," Rainer said softly.

"How do you think we got here?" Rand asked. "You're not the leader you think you are. You're more of a puppet. Do you even know there's a third realm?"

Rainer tensed for a fraction of a second before he shrugged. "The first rule of war is you never give your opponents the advantage of knowing all your secrets. Even if I'm viewed as a puppet by some, no one knows the full power at my disposal. What could have been *your* disposal." He actually sounded regretful.

I squeezed Jari's hand to let him know I had a plan.

It was a lie. I didn't really have a plan, but we couldn't exactly stay here and be Rainer's willing captives. Not when Yunez was counting on us.

"Rainer," I called, wanting his attention on me.

It worked, but all of his guards looked toward me too. That wasn't so good. If I wanted us to make a run for it, we'd never get far.

"In case you aren't aware, there's a war already starting. The Fiasla Mannos have declared war on Fennina. The Mazza that sent us here, they're on the Manno's side. And everything you think you know is wrong. You may believe it's okay to be thought of as a puppet, but you're really *just* a puppet. Are you going to stand by and let them use you, or stop them?"

As soon as I mentioned the third realm, the guards started whispering, and they continued to grow until I would have to shout if I spoke again.

If Rainer knew about the third realm and their agenda, he hadn't shared with his people.

"Are you going to help Fiasla destroy everything Fennina has achieved, or are you going to help the people of our people?" I raised my voice.

"We are working our own agenda. Don't try and turn my men against me, Mazza."

"What is this about Fiasla? What is that?" One man stepped forward, tugging his hood back. His silver hair gleamed under the moonlight as he glared at Rainer. "Have you been keeping secrets from us?"

"Of course not. I'm not even sure what she's talking about, except that she's trying to shake your trust in me. Grino, when have I ever steered you wrong? Was it not I who saved your family from starvation? Was it not I who took you under my wing to train? I treated you like a son, but you let a

few loose words from pretty lips change your conviction?" Rainer tutted.

The man, Grino, glanced at me. His jaw worked as he glanced between us. Then his gaze settled on me and Rand.

"What are Mannos?"

"They're trying to shake your belief in me. They can't be trusted. Especially not this whore of a Mazza." Rainer glared at us as he motioned for two of his people to step forward. They uncoiled chains, ready to tie us up.

"Mannos are the fifth house. They've hidden themselves from society because they were ostracized and taken advantage of," I yelled, backing away from the chains. "But that time in their own realm, the Fiasla realm, has made them bitter, and vengeful. And Rainer has played right into their hands to help take over the Earth realm. He's doing their dirty work for them!"

"Wait." Grino held up a hand and the guards stopped mid-step. "A fifth house?"

Who was this Grino? Were these his men?

Rainer yelled as he unsheathed his sword, and swung, cutting off Grino's head. He continued to yell even as the head rolled on the ground and blood spilled down his chest before the body dropped to its knees.

"Now," Rainer huffed as he sheathed his bloody sword. "Who else would like to waste my time? I have my son back, the Mazza under my control, and a trip to the Earth to oversee. Let me know now before we go if you have an issue with my agenda."

Silence reigned around the field.

I was overrun with shock. I couldn't pull my gaze away from the body seeping blood. My mates must have felt the same way. Nope, the whole group of people here must have felt that way, because no one was moving. I wasn't even sure anyone was breathing.

"Da..." A smaller hooded figure stepped forward. She yanked down her hood, then dropped to her knees in front of the fallen body. "Da—" She choked out through a sob.

Still, we watched.

Rainer wiped his brow with a handkerchief, not plussed at all that a wailing child was at his feet mourning her father.

"You did this," she murmured. "You killed my Da out of greed and pettiness." Her voice was thick with emotion, barely understandable as she pushed to her feet. She stumbled, like she'd had too many drinks, but when she finally stood tall, she unclasped the hook at the neck and whipped the cloak off.

A young woman, not a child.

She braced her feet and raised her hands. "Tell me the truth, Janer scum." Her voice boomed as if she were yelling down from the sky. "Why did you kill my Da?"

Her hands glowed a soft lavender and her hair started to float around her head. An intense wave of power settled over the field as she stretched her hands toward Rainer.

He gasped, showing his teeth as he tried to back away. But Rainer didn't move, he couldn't. His feet were glued to the ground even as he twisted his body back and forth, seeming to try and work himself free from her spell.

Then words spilled from his lips in a rush. "He was questioning my authority. I need to take the Earth Realm. He was...wasting my time."

"Wasting your time..." She nodded absently like she could almost get behind him. "He brought you men, supported your cause, and took care of his people. He was beloved, and yet he wasted your time." Her voice lost some of its power, yet her hands remained upraised. "I am here for another

reason. You've just sped up my timeline."

She closed her fists, and then Rainer yelled out seconds before he crumpled to the ground. Blood dripped from his nose and his body remained unnaturally still.

"Is he..." Jari started.

"I think so." I darted my gaze to Rand, who stared at his father with a blank expression.

We crowded around Rand, trying to be inconspicuous about what we were doing. It wouldn't have mattered. Now that Rainer was gone, none of the hooded people came toward us. They all went on one knee and bowed their heads.

It was either respect for the girl, or Grino. Either way, they were currently no threat to us.

The girl turned and wiped tears from her eyes as she picked up her cloak and laid it over the body and head. Her movements were slow as she said a closed eye prayer before facing us.

Silver hair fell around her shoulders and her blue eyes glistened. Her small mouth pinched in distress, but she held in all other emotion.

"I hear you are the Mazza." Her voice was so sweet and soft now, achingly different from the voice that had just assaulted Rainer.

"I am." I cleared my throat. "These are some of my mates." I motioned to each of the guys who dipped their head in greeting. Except Rand, he continued to stare at Rainer.

She stepped closer and I sucked in a breath as the light from the closest torch fell over her face. A mark, similar to my own, was on her chin. The girl tipped her head back allowing us to see it more clearly.

"I am a Mazza too. My father was testing out Rainer to see where I would be the safest." She stopped and bowed her head.

This poor, poor girl. She lost her father, killed a man, and now was left with strangers. Well, maybe not. The people around us were still kneeled. They would take care of her.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Fifteen. My Da didn't want me to take mates for at least three more years. He was trying to make it safe for me to do that."

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Don't be." Her face hardened. "I knew Rainer was a bad man. I planned to stop his invasion of Earth anyway. Now, my people and I will be able to finish the job without his interference." She excused herself and her people rose from the ground. A few seemed to crowd her to take orders.

"Should we let her go off on her own? She's just a baby." I couldn't help but think she was in danger being so young.

"She just took down Rainer without batting an eye. She's okay," Sage said in a hushed voice. "The Earth realm will be no issue for her or her people. The more pressing question is, why is another Mazza popping up?"



“DOES IT HAVE TO MEAN ANYTHING?” Jari whispered back.

“I have no idea. I need somewhere to come down from that adrenaline rush.” I pressed my hand to my chest as it pounded furiously against my breastbone.

Whiplash from a burning rollercoaster would have felt better than this aftershock. My body trembled and I was struggling to comprehend what had just gone down.

If what I thought happened happened, Rainer was dead. This young, barely old enough to have her first kiss, Mazza was off to save the human realm, and we were about to let her.

She was probably more capable than me.

“Rand, are you okay?” I reach out and touch his arm. He turned, his eyes wide and glassy.

“I hated him. He was a terrible man. But it still hurts that he’s not here.”

I folded my arms around him, and the other guys joined in our hug. We held each other for several minutes. When we finally separated, the field was empty and the Waesaris was deactivated. I’d never stuck around to see how long they stay open, but it was apparently not very long.

“Can we take the rock portal back to Aamori’s?” I still whispered and I had no idea why. It wasn’t like anyone was around to hear us. Rainer certainly didn’t care anymore.

The girl had someone gather her father, because we were alone with Rainer.

“We can. I’ll get it ready.” Jari peeled away and Sage went with him.

“Are you really okay? I think it would be normal to be upset.” I smoothed my hands down the back and pressed my forehead against his chest. He closed his own arms loosely around me.

“I’m not upset. I don’t know why it hurts at all.” Rand didn’t cry, but his eyes were wet and his lips a tense frown. My sweetheart was confused and heartbroken.

“Ready?” Sage asked softly.

“Yes,” Rand croaked. “My lady, after you.” Rand turned me toward the rocks and nudged me forward. I caught his hand. The first time, I’d gone through holding Sage’s hand, it was only right that I held onto Rand this time. He needed the contact more.

We stepped through and appeared in the small room. Whatever people the Mazza had brought with her were no longer here. “Do you think they stuck around?”

Jari walked to the door and peeked out into the hallway. “I don’t think so. Let’s go check out the statue and then we can figure out what we have to do for the night.”

“Where did the Cherries and Cabbie go?” Sage glanced around as we made our way down the deserted hallway. After the field, everything was so much louder here. The silence. Our breathing. The lack of movement in the place.

It was like my senses were on hyperdrive.

When we reached the edge of the dining hall, the Cherries stood guard over the statue while Cabbie lounged in one of the chairs. Two mangled bodies were twisted on the ground. No blood, but they were tied with sex toys.

“Are they dead?”

“Deader than my last relationship.” Cabbie hopped up and strutted toward us. “I’m glad to see you all are fine.” He looked us over with a critical eye, most of his exuberance missing.

“What happened here?” I stepped over the bodies and moved closer to the statue. I didn’t touch it. I didn’t want to risk another vision until I was ready for it.

“Those two rultsharts got by us and pushed you through the portal. Then they ran here, and we managed to overtake them before they managed to take the stone,” the shorter Cherry replied in a husky voice. Then she kicked one. Yep, they were both very, very dead.

“I’m not convinced they could have actually taken the statue,” Sage kicked the other body, probably for fun.

“*They* might not have, but the Mazza is definitely strong enough. She jumped through the portal though once you went through it. Did she not show up where you were?”

“No. She didn’t. Can you rekey those things?” I inched toward the statue, starting to feel high from the power rolling off it.

“I’ve never seen a smaller version like that. Yunez’s sapling Waesaris was new to me too. I’m assuming yes, you can rekey them, since that Mazza didn’t join us. How long before you think they’ll be back for this rock?” Jari rapped his knuckles on the statue but jumped back with a yelp. “Damn it! That hurt.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t learn your lesson the first time.” Cabbie raised a brow. “I guess it’s a good thing you’re pretty.”

A choked laugh escaped my throat.

“I have no idea how we’re going to get it out. But I need to sleep before we leave. I feel like I’m running on fumes.” I sighed, tucking stray hair behind my ear.

“How do your powers feel?” Rand turned woeful eyes my way.

“I feel...” I stopped, trying to gauge if I felt any different. “I do feel better. I feel...fuller? When I touched it earlier, there was an immediate vision.”

“Do you want to try it again?” Sage closed his arm around my lower back.

“Not particularly, no.”

“Why don’t you try to channel a different power. Maybe if you are focusing on something else, you’ll be able to work on a different house power. We need to send a message to Yunez. Too much time has passed and we don’t have a clue how to move the statue.” Rand looked toward the ceiling. “There are crows on the roof. Think of them, imagine you’re sitting next to them, and want them to carry a message for us. Then touch the stone.”

“You know there’s crows on the roof?” I glanced up. There was no way we would be able to see or hear anything up there.

“I can feel them with my Caen powers.” Rand closed his eyes. “There are three. One female and two males. Go ahead, touch the stone and think about what’s up there. About connecting with them.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m doing this for you.” Raising my hand, I closed my eyes right as my skin

made contact. The warm stone felt good, the power sending vibrations up my arm.

Birds on the roof.

No, crows.

Three crows on the roof.

Suddenly, I regretted never picking Egan's brain a little more on how his powers worked. Or Yunez and Rand, since they had many of the same abilities.

Nothing happened.

No visions, no sudden souls appearing in my mind's eye, nothing.

"Nothing is happening." I sighed in frustration.

"Give it time." Rand pressed his front against my side and massaged my hip. "Think about when you're trying to find your mates. That thread that appears. But instead of tracking someone who is connected to you, think about opening your mind up broader than that. You exist, and the world exists around you. What do you see?"

I tried, I really, really tried, and all I saw was darkness.

"Nothing."

"Not physical things. What do you see with your power."

Blowing out a breath, I tried again.

Think broad, things that were there but not physically.

Something started to form in my mind, but it wasn't anything I saw like when I tracked my mates. It was more like an awareness that couldn't get a solid grasp on.

I sensed Rand, then Jari and Sage. Cabbie was in the far corner with the Cherries watching with fascination.

"I can feel everyone in the room," I murmured, eyes still squeezed tight.

"Good. That's good." Rand caressed my side. "Now, what do you feel up above? Try to move yourself to the sky." He nuzzled the side of my face and my pussy clenched.

Shit, he just lost a parent. I shouldn't be getting turned on right now.

Focus, Iss.

I tried to float higher, and it worked. "It worked!"

"Very good. Now, what do you feel on the roof?"

I wasn't sure if I was on the roof, but there were other beings here. Three to be exact.

The more I familiarized myself with the feeling, the more I could make them out. Little smoky wisps of birds formed, and all three looked toward me as if they knew I was searching for them.

One squawked and fluttered its wings. Another flew a few feet closer, then hopped the rest of the way.

"I think one of the male crows is trying to communicate with me." I grinned. How cool was this?

"He is, I can see it. Tell him you need to send a message. Tell him where to go and who to talk to."

"Can you understand me?" He squawked.

"Oh wow," I breathed. *"I need to get a message to Yunez, one of my mates. Can you tell him we're safe, but we need more time before we can rejoin him?"*

The crow made a noise of agreement. I wanted to squeal in excitement. Then the crow spoke again, and I got the distinct impression that he was asking where he was supposed to go. And irritated I hadn't included that in my message.

I huffed out a laugh. *"Okay, okay. They are here. Do you know where that is?"* I pictured the clearing where we left Yunez and the others.

Hell, could he even see into my head like that?

Project, I chanted. *Project!*

He squawked one more time and then he flew from the roof. The other two crows looked at me, sung their farewell, then chased after their friend.

I popped my eyes open and twisted to Rand, my hand still on the rock. “Did you see that? I think it worked!” I beamed, pulling my hand from the stone, and then throwing myself into Rand’s arms.

His body shook as he held me. “See, I knew you could do it.”

Rand leaned back and I lifted my legs around his waist and planted my lips on his. He tipped his head to the side and opened his mouth, his tongue stroking against mine.

I needed this outlet. There was so much adrenaline rushing through my body, I needed to fuck, and I needed to fuck now.

Something told me Rand needed this too. He needed a distraction, to know that he was wanted and worth something. I wanted to give that to him.

“Well, girls, I think the Mazza will be busy for the night. How about we call some of the other Cherries and stand guard?”

I thought they said yes, but by that time, hands were on my back, and we were being guided somewhere else. Rand stumbled and when he righted himself, he started kissing down the column of my neck.

I moaned and fluttered my eyes open to see where Sage and Jari were.

They were walking next to us, one of either side. Both men had lust burning in their eyes.

“Do you want to be alone with Rand, or can you handle all of us?” Jari asked.

“Nope. She’s getting all of us. After the day we’ve had, we could all use a little confirmation that we’re all still alive.”

Jari grunted his agreement.

“Rand, how do you feel about getting up close and personal?” Sage patted him on the back.

I groaned when Rand nipped at my pulse. He tipped to the side and Jari righted us, even as Rand squeezed my ass rhythmically.

“Right here,” Sage pointed to the room next to us and Jari steered us in. Once we were over the threshold, I gripped Rand’s hair and tipped his head back.

“Rand,” I breathed, my chest rising and falling from the building sensations. “Is this okay? Are you okay?”

He stopped, released my ass and I slid down his body. When my feet hit the ground, he stepped back, struggling to catch his breath.

“This? With you? Always. I need you.” He curled and uncurled his fingers.

If I wasn’t so turned on, I would have thought it was adorable.

Jari and Sage exchanged a look, then Sage turned his molten gaze on me. “Strip.”



I ABSOLUTELY DIDN'T WASTE any time.

As all three of them watched me, I made a show of removing each article of clothing. Sage tracked my fingers as I unbuttoned the top.

Jari's gaze was glued to my bare shoulder as I moved the shirt down my arm, slowly revealing the smooth skin.

And Rand's brows pulled low over his eyes as he took a step forward. I held the shirt out and dropped it to the floor. The soft noise didn't mute the thickening tension in the room.

"Ho, there. Enjoy the show before you storm in. This is a group activity, which means you have to wait your turn." Jari grabbed the back of Rand's shirt and tugged him back. He smirked, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Sorry," Rand grunted.

We all laughed, and I turned, giving them my back. I glanced over my shoulder as I undid the strings on the pants, and then shimmied them down my hips with all the patience in the world.

When I bent over to shove them to my ankles, they groaned and a self-satisfied smile teased my lips. I wanted them so bad, pretty much all the time. My thoughts often ran to appreciation of the way they moved, the way their muscles flexed, or the nice rounded curve of their asses.

It was nice to know they wanted me just as bad. It was good for a girl's self-esteem.

Hands suddenly gripped my hips, and a hard dick rubbed against my ass through thick pants.

"Sorry, this view was just too tempting," Jari growled, flexing his hips and pulling me back against him.

"This is too tempting." Sage threaded his fingers through my hair and lifted my face until I was level with his erection straining against the fabric. I nuzzled my nose against it, and he groaned.

He was so turned on, his cock throbbed against my face, and I smiled. It wouldn't take much to get him off. Just a teensy bit of attention.

"I thought we took turns." Rand sounded a little put out, but amused at the same time.

"We do. Then you missed an opportunity," Jari said through a laugh. Then he slapped my ass and stepped back. "All right. I'll let you be the first to take her there. Mainly because I want to finish her off."

Rand didn't say anything, but soon his loving hands caressed the curve of my cheeks before dipping to the center, spreading my wetness around all the sensitive parts.

Then they were shifting me over a desk so I had something to brace against. When did that get in the middle of the room? I was almost positive it was against the wall when I came in...

As soon as I was back over it, I pawed at Sage's pants to get them open. I reached in, feeling the smooth silky head of his cock as I pulled down his pants with my free hand.

His cock bobbed so beautifully right in front of my face. Long, thick, hot. Then a warm tongue licked a hesitant trail under one cheek. I sucked in a sharp breath as Sage smoothed my hair back.

I looked up at him, but my eyes nearly rolled back in my head when Rand sucked my clit in his mouth. He massaged it with his tongue so perfectly, I almost squealed.

"Feels good, doesn't it, Sweets," Jari said from beside us. I twisted my neck to look at him, and the sight dried my mouth completely. He was fully nude, stroking his cock while his hot gaze watched every way Sage and Rand touched me.

If I was aroused by the way they were making me feel, my skin burned twice as hot to be watched as they pleased me.

Rand started working one finger inside me, then two, as he still sucked on my clit. The heat started to build in my core as I stroked Sage and lowered my head to suck on the head of his cock.

Soon, the room was all full of tempered gasps and low moans. As Rand sped up and added a third finger, my body twitched, and I choked on Sage's cock when I started coming.

"Iss, hell, that feels so good." He gripped the sides of my head and started stroking inside my mouth as I kept gagging on his hard cock. Warmth hit the back of my throat as Rand stood up and pushed inside of me.

"Yes, I love this. I love the feel of you gripping me," Rand moaned as he moved.

Sage made small, erotic noises as he jerked. I swallowed everything I could, and he patted my cheek and kissed the top of my head as he stepped away. "That was amazing. Thank you."

Then Jari was there, wasting no time to slide in. With each push of Rand's hips, I jolted into Jari. Back and forth they moved me between them, and I thrived on the erotic dance. So much, I started humming around Jari and squeezing around Rand, just to make them lose their tempo and break their silence.

My skin was scorched from the inside out, hands were touching me everywhere, gliding and gripping, sliding and tugging. I closed my eyes, lost in the sensations and then a second wave of pleasure crested over me, and Rand started pounding against my ass.

I squealed and held onto Jari's hips for support as he thrust into my mouth. Another blast of liquid heat hit the back of my throat as Rand yelled and kept pushing against me, like he would climb inside me if he could.

The room came slowly back into view. I must have blacked out and my guys had shifted us to the bed. Someone lifted the covers over me, and two very naked bodies were pressed up against me.

I wanted to ask where the third was, but when I opened my mouth, all I could do was yawn.

"Go to sleep," Rand whispered against the back of my head. "In the morning, we'll figure out what to do with the statue and go back to our family."

Our family. I liked the sound of that. I'd spent most of my life solo, or with the Smiths, and now I had not one or two people that mattered to me. I had six that I would sacrifice my life for.

The thought warmed me in a different way than being snuggled up to some of my guys, and completely content for the moment, I drifted off to sleep.



A shout jolted me out of my sleep and I shot to a sitting position.

Cool air hit my breasts and I grabbed the sheet to cover myself. When I glanced around, whatever lights had been on before had been extinguished, and only a small sliver of light came through the window.

“Rand,” I whispered as he thrashed next to me. “Rand,” I repeated.

Jari groaned on the other side of me and sat up, placing a hand on my back. “Is he okay?”

“I think it’s a nightmare.”

“Here, I’ll turn on the light,” Sage said as he rolled out of bed and lit a match. Once the lamp gave off a soft glow, I got a good look at Rand. He was twisted up in the sheets, pouring sweat, wearing a pained expression.

My heart broke for him.

Did making love help or hurt his grief process? Shit, I didn’t know, and the sting of regret pressed down on my shoulders.

I lowered myself to the bed and stroked his chest. “Rand, wake up,” I cooed. “Rand.”

He gasped and looked around wildly. When he noticed us all staring down at him, he scrubbed a hand down his face. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to ruin everyone’s sleep.”

“We get it,” Sage said as he walked around the bed to perch on Rand’s side. “Bad dream?”

“A weird dream. Rainer was actually a good father, and when he died, I was devastated.” He went quiet and closed his eyes.

“That makes sense.” Jari nodded. “You felt something when he died,” Jari held up a hand. “Don’t say you didn’t. We all saw you afterward. But that wasn’t what you thought you should feel at the loss of a parent, was it?”

Rand opened his eyes and locked gazes with Jari. “I don’t know. Maybe not. I—I just don’t know. I need to contact Ralina though.” He scrubbed two hands down his face this time.

Oh, snap. His sister and his mom. Although he’d never really said if he was close with his mom or not. She hadn’t made a great first impression when I met her. Or even a nice second impression.

I winced.

“What’s that look for?” Sage asked, bracing a hand on the bed and leaning toward me.

“Sorry, I was thinking about something else.” I shook my head as if that would dislodge the unwanted thoughts. They seemed disrespectful in the quiet of the night. “I’m up, and I don’t feel like I’m about to drop anymore. Should we go try and figure out how we’re going to move the statue?”

Sage sighed as he looked out the window. “Might as well.”

“Yeah, let’s get dressed,” Jari stretched his arms over his head.

We took a few minutes to drunkenly stumble around the room while searching for our clothes. Mine were mostly in a pile, although theirs seemed to be all strewn about.

However, as soon as we opened the bedroom door, the low hum of conversation filled the hallway. I pushed the guys back in the room and shut the door and it was deathly silent again.

Then I opened the door. Voices filled the air, and lots of them.

I turned and gave my mates a questioning look. Rand shrugged sheepishly. “I may have put a sound barrier around the room so no one would know anyone was in here.”

“We had the door locked but I can appreciate your preparedness.” Jari slapped Rand on the back, grinning. Some of the darkness Rand had woken up with dispelled as a smile tugged on the corner of his lips.

Sage scratched the top of his head as we meandered down the hall. “I feel like we should be creeping up on the commotion to make sure we’re not under attack.”

“I don’t think so,” I grabbed his and Rand’s hands. Who knew when we’d be able to steal time like this again, and I had grown to crave the physical touch. “I don’t have any strange feelings like we’re about to walk into danger. And weirdly, I could be totally wrong, but I feel like I have a stronger connection to my powers.”

“Really?” Rand stopped, and by default stopped Sage and me. “Close your eyes and picture the great hall. Tell me what you see.”

“I don’t know if it will work with being put on the spot.” I would have rubbed my hands nervously down my thighs if these two didn’t have hold on my hands.

“You can do it. We believe in you.” Jari was usually the jokester, but as he leveled his gaze on me, he was completely serious.

I sobered. Nodded. Then closed my eyes. If they could believe in me, when I’d been more of a joke and basket case, then I could believe in myself.

Since yesterday, I did feel stronger. I knew what it felt like to connect to the power source. Now, I just needed to recreate it and not sike myself out.

The darkness engulfed my mind, and I imagined the great hall.

Then my eyes popped open.

“Run!”



WHEN WE REACHED THE HALL, tons of Cherries were yelling and swinging their sex toy battle weapons. Balls of fire were being hurled, vines racing across the floor, and one person was even encased on a mound of dirt.

This was the Rusty Nail all over again.

“I’m going to help Cabbie!” Jari touched my shoulder and sprinted to the corner, where a number of people were boxing Cabbie into a corner. His kimono was ripped open and his hair in disarray. He snarled as a woman jolted forward to jab him with a blazing knife.

“Bitch!” He yelled and smacked her across the face.

“Savage,” Sage muttered as he peeled away and dove into the crowd.

“You ready?” Rand palmed the back of my neck. I glanced at him, keeping the majority of my focus on the pandemonium exploding around us.

“Who are these people?” I whispered, tensing my body, ready to follow after Sage and help the Cherries.

He gulped. “These are my mother’s people. She must have heard about Rainer’s death.”

“The Mazza is here!”

We both snapped our heads around. Lavi was suddenly standing on top of the statue that we very much needed. What the hell, man? Was it only Mazzas and mates that couldn’t handle touching it?

The fighting stopped and heads turned our way. It was really eerie.

Two beats passed, then a third of Lavi’s people raced to us.

“Oh shit,” I gasped and held up my hands. Wait, I had my knife.

I grabbed it out of the back of my pants just in time to block a dagger aimed straight at my face.

Okay, noted. Lavi didn’t place any value on me being the so-called messiah for their people. But, I mean, fair. We were the catalyst that got her husband killed.

“Behind you!” I yelled at Sage and hoped on small mercies that he could read my mind and know I was talking to him.

He did. He twirled and punched the man trying to decapitate him.

With him safe. I settled into the cadence of fighting. It was fast, energizing, and stressful all at the same time. People swung, I parried, poorly, but I parried. Where the hell were my nun chuck nipple clamps?

“Here!” A Cherry, one that looked really familiar, tossed me a pair, and for the first time in ten

minutes, I took a deep breath.

“Thanks!” Now, it was time to kick some ass.

With every swing, twirl, and kick I settled deeper and deeper in the mindless zone I only ever achieved with the sex toy weapon.

One person fell, then another. And another.

Lavi’s people were not warriors, and it was glaringly obvious. The more I took down, the more confident I became. Before long, my hands started to heat, and when I swung the nun chucks at the next head, the tips blazed and cut a flaming line across his cheek.

“Holy shit,” I breathed, stopping mid-fight.

“Keep going! Don’t fucking stop!” Sage yelled.

It snapped me out of my shock and I kept going. Ducking fists, sidestepping tackles, and jabbing my red hot nipple clamps into stomachs, chests, and in one case a mouth.

The man screamed and I winced at the smell of burning flesh.

Gross.

Lavi’s people dwindled and I relaxed, right before Lavi popped up in front of me.

“You,” she seethed. The previously mechanical and personalityless woman snarled, holding a long sword in both hands. The tip pointed right at my chest. “He wanted to recruit you, but I told him you were too weak to help the cause. And now you’ve killed him.”

“I didn’t kill him!” Technically I didn’t. Was that splitting hairs?

“Of course, you did! Even if you didn’t give the killing blow. He made a deal to extract you from those people.” She adjusted her grip on the sword, pressing it forward like she wanted to thrust it through my chest. Who was I kidding, that was absolutely what she wanted.

“No more distractions. It’s time for you to die.”

Pain burst in my head, and I screamed as I dropped to my knees and gripped the sides of my head. My vision blacked out and I swayed. This was what hell felt like.

“Mother!” Rand sounded like he was a million miles away, through a tunnel, and a wild windstorm.

Something dribbled out of my nose and tears started to steam down my face. I didn’t even try to stop them. It was simulating a release and I needed all the mental help I could get.

Hands grabbed me and jerked me from the ground. I whimpered and they set me back down.

The pain subsided, but my body was still so raw. The blurry image of Jari appeared above me. When he reached for me, I tried to shake my head and whimpered again. It was just too much.

Instead of trying to touch me, he laid down beside me and put his head right next to mine, gazing into my eyes. As far as comfort went, it was really fucking good. I just couldn’t do anything with it until I got rid of this disastrous feeling.

Grunts and pants filtered through the haze, and not the good kind. I mustered up the energy to turn my head. Rand was fighting with Lavi and it seemed like Lavi was winning. Not because she was the better fighter or more skilled.

No, Rand was only on the defensive. He wasn’t attacking at all. Just blocking her shots. Every time she cut him, he cursed but didn’t strike back. Even with the opportunity, he held back.

“Don’t let...her...hurt...you,” I croaked. It was barely audible, but I couldn’t take the idea of him letting his cunt nugget of a mother take him down. I got that it was his mother, but you never, ever let anyone lay a hand on you, no matter their relationship to you.

She backhanded him and his head snapped to the left, blood spewing across the floor. Not waiting for him to recover, Lavi nicked his shoulder with her blade. He grunted and stumbled backward, still

not raising a hand to her. Then in quick succession, she sliced his calf, side, then stopped with the blade tucked under his chin.

Lavi was playing with him.

And he was letting her.

Pure, unadulterated rage swept through me.

Rand was the sweetest man I had ever met. He was kind, caring, and funny in a quiet way. How he came from two toxic parents was beyond me. But I wasn't about to let him suffer at her hands any longer.

I was still weak as a kitten, sprawled over the floor, but the anger fueled the power locked away deep inside my psyche.

Zeroing in on the ugly hatred on her face, I pushed.

I pushed with everything I had and then some.

She screamed, dropping her weapon and shaking her head back and forth.

"Isolde! No!" Rand yelled, pain suffusing the smooth timber of his voice. He dropped with her.

Everything inside me froze.

That woman didn't deserve to breathe his air, but I wouldn't take her life. It wasn't mine to take, especially if he cared so much...

When she flopped onto the floor like a dead fish, I let the darkness take me under. This shit hurt, and I wasn't about the pain.



"You all right, Doll?" Cabbie cooed.

"Go away," I groaned and tried to swat at the hand stealing my pillow. I always hated waking up like this. It couldn't have been morning.

"Did anyone ever tell you, you sleep like a dead corpse. Face down and in the starfish position. If it wasn't for the snoring, I would have thought you were deceased. When the Cherries start your lessons up again, we'll make sure they add sexy sleep poses to the agenda. Lord knows you need it. Not that I think you have anything to worry about. Those men would eat off of your toes if you wanted them to." He sighed like he couldn't believe what he was saying, and yet he one hundred percent believed it.

If I wasn't so groggy and over life, I would have laughed. I just didn't have it in me. What I did have, was more sleep. So, I snuggled deeper into the blankets.

Then the blankets were gone.

"You fucking hoe!"

"Ooo. Is that a human curse word? Not very offensive." Cabbie stole my pillow too, the fucker. "I have two useful ones, and you have three. Who's the bigger hole?"

"Cabbie, leave her alone. She expended too much energy too quickly and needs to recharge." Sage, my asshole Sage, was coming to my rescue. When I was ready to face the world again, he was totally getting a blow job.

"Sage, darling, it's been ten hours. I know you sent a message to Yunez, but we're currently in a war. My girls are sending in reports of attacks on smaller villages in each House's region. Now that the Fiasla secret is out, they're not messing around."

I opened one eye just in time to see Cabbie tossing out his hands.

“No one is saying a war isn’t happening outside these walls. But we can’t leave until Issy is up. And she won’t be up and useful until she’s recharged.”

“Then you better fuck her. Should I send the others in?” Cabbie snarked. “There’s a contingent of Stags who arrived in the night if you need assistance or advice.”

“Wha?” I couldn’t even form full words.

“What are you talking about?”

That. That was what I was trying to say.

“Mazzas are sexually thirsty beings. You must know this. They taught it in second school.” Cabbie paused dramatically. When Sage didn’t say anything, Cabbie dropped his head into one perfectly manicured hand. When had he had time to do his nails?

“Sage, Sage, Sage. What am I going to do with you? Yunez should have made sure you all were properly educated before unleashing you on the world.”

Sage stiffened. “We were working on it, but if you remember, we didn’t exactly have a lot of say in when Fiasla came out.”

“Fine, Uncle Cabbie is about to give you the birds and the bees chat. Iss, are you listening?”

“I’m here. Barely awake, but here.” All of my limbs were so full of lead, I only managed to adjust my head to get a better look at Cabbie.

“In the simplest terms, Mazzas are horny as fuck. Not just because they have a buffet of dick to choose from, or a small army of men to satisfy. It’s deeper than that. She can draw energy from her mates. She’s sleeping, because she’s depleted. She’s slept to regain her energy before, right? After the temple, then after the Mazza attack?” He waited for us to comb through our memories. He was right. I slept for an unusually long time after each event.

“Well, you’re in luck, my friend. You not only have a mate that is so powerful she needs multiple mates, but one of the two ways,” he held up two fingers, “that she can be replenished is sex. Sleep and sex. That’s the key to a happy healthy Mazza. Maybe toss her a cheeseburger every now and again and she’ll be yours forever.” He turned his head to me. “That’s what it’s called right? The human meal that so many love.”

I tried to grin, because this was not like any birds and bees talk I’d ever received. Only one side of my mouth quirked. “It is cheeseburger. I also enjoy sushi and pizza. I’m an equal opportunity kind of girl.”

“Honey, with all your dicks, I’m not surprised.”

Sage was still standing there, watching Cabbie with absolutely no light behind his eyes.

“Sage!” Cabbie snapped his fingers in front of his face. He jolted.

“Stop being fucking rude.”

“I’m going to walk out this door. You have exactly fifteen minutes to infuse some energy back into our Mazza or I’m sending in the Stags.” He pointed at Sage with raised eyebrows, then sauntered through the door and shut it behind him.

The lock turned without anyone touching it. Sage apparently had enough brain power to use his power. Although for him, just like my other mates, their powers were so ingrained in who they were, it was probably like breathing.

I wasn’t jealous at all. Not one single bit.

He turned, running a hand through his hair. His burnished hair was tousled just enough to give him a devilishly handsome appearance. But looks were never something he struggled with. Lucky for him, his asshole only added to his attractiveness.

Yet right then, he seemed both excited and concerned.

He slowly walked toward the bed, then climbed on the foot, bracing his hands on either side of one leg.

One naked leg.

Oh hell. That whole conversation had happened with me butt ass naked on the bed. Whatever. It wasn't like Cabbie didn't see more profane things on the daily. It was, after all, the nature of his business.

“What do you say, Issy? Want to give this theory of Cabbie's a try?”



WITH HERCULEAN EFFORT, I flopped over onto my back.

“At this point, I’m ready to try anything to feel normal again.” I paused. “Well, more like I did before we raced into the fight Rand’s mother started.”

Wait. “What happened? Is Rand okay? Please tell me I didn’t kill my mate’s mother.” That was a whole other level of dysfunction I didn’t want to add to our relation this early in the game. Or ever.

There was nothing I could have done about Rainer, and I didn’t feel bad. I also didn’t want to be the one to swing the axe.

Sage moved further up the bed and now had a fist on either side of my head and his knees on either side of my hips. His face was almost over mine but not quite, like he wasn’t quite ready to dominate me.

“Rand is okay. So is Lavi. When he yelled, and right before you passed out, you stopped whatever you were doing. Cabbie all too happily has a few of his Cherries sitting on her until we can figure out what to do with her.” He dropped down to nuzzle my temple, then lifted back up.

I sighed. “Good. I didn’t mean to do that. I just couldn’t stand watching her hurt Rand and him not defending himself.” If there was feeling in my arms, I would have twined them around his neck.

“As much as he’s never gotten along with his parents, I think it was harder for him to fight her than he thought it would be. Call me sexist if you want, but I think he could have more easily fought against Rainer.” His lids lowered, hiding his gaze.

“Sage?”

When he brought his gaze back to me, his eyes were too full of feeling. “I know something about being attached. Maybe not the same way, but I understand it. Don’t be upset with him because he couldn’t hurt his mother.”

“I’m not upset. I’m more worried he’ll be upset with me.” I tried to lift my hand, but only my

forefingers twitched. Why was this time so much different?

“He’s not upset with you. He’s worried you’re mad at him. Seems to me, there’s a lot of worrying going around.”

I chuckled. “Maybe. Are you okay?” He seemed off. Somber. Sensitive.

“No,” he said, then drew in a shuddering breath. “I’m attached, Issy. I’m so fucking attached to you. Every time something big happens, the life we could have flashes before my eyes. It hurts. Haven’t I hurt enough? Haven’t we all hurt enough?”

By the grace of whatever gods there were, I lifted my hand and cupped his cheek.

“Yes, but we aren’t doing this for us. We’re doing this for the Fennins. Haven’t they suffered enough? If we don’t save them, who will?”

“Yeah, but who’s to say we’re going to win?” Ouch. “Every fucking time we’ve gone up against the other Mazza, we’ve had our asses kicked. Last night ended okay, but Lavi’s people weren’t warriors. They were blind followers with too cushy of lives to really have any fire to do damage. I don’t want to lose you, Iss. I don’t want to lose our family.” He stretched his body out and pressed his chest against mine, burying his face in my neck.

I stroked the back of his head as I waited for his pounding heart to settle. But would it? There was only so much I could say to comfort him. And really, everything he said was true. Nothing was certain. Fate doesn’t make promises. Yunez saw that in his sight. I didn’t have more than a drop of experience with the sight and I understood it.

“We have to do this. We don’t have a choice, Sage. If we don’t, who’s to say we would even be able to live the life we want. The Fiasla Mannos could see us as a threat to their power and try to either kill us or imprison us. What’s the thing you want most about the future we could have?”

A tremble ran through him. “When I think about our future, I think of raising a family together. I think of building what was taken from me.”

I almost made a breeding kink joke, but he raised his head, and I couldn’t. There was too much hope and uncertainty in his eyes.

“How many kids do you want?” I asked.

He slid his arms under my shoulders and rolled his hips. “Hmm. How many would you be willing to have?”

I blinked. Did he have a breeding kink? “Uh, I’m not sure. A couple I guess.”

“You know we’re all going to want to have a little mini me. We’ll love all the kids, but I want one to look like me. We need at least six. Maybe seven.”

“Say what now?”

He started smirking and his eyes twinkled.

“I’m kidding. Kind of. How about we have this conversation after the war is over and we’re all feeling...lusty.”

I outright laughed. “You all aren’t called the lusty legion for nothing.”

“What do you say, I help you get some energy back, and then we go take care of the statue and get back to the rest of our family.”

My breath caught. I loved that we had built a family already. With or without kids, we had a family, but if that was what would make Sage happy, I could do kids. I wouldn’t mind a little light green eyed, brown haired child who looked like Sage. I’d even take a tiny asshole, because I wasn’t sure he could produce anything else.

Sage rolled his hips again, hitting that sweet spot. As I start to moan, he pushed away from me and moved down my body. Kissing a scorching path along the way, he massaged my thighs, pushing them

apart as he settled between them.

I couldn't really move my head, but if I could have, I would have thrown in back from the ecstasy of the first touch of tongue to my clit.

"Remember the first time we were together?" He murmured as he swirled his tongue around the bundle of sensitive nerves.

"Mmm." It was emotional, fierce, and perfect. I wouldn't have it any other way. And it all worked out in the end, didn't it?

"Consider this my apology." He dipped his head and rocked my fucking world. Sucking, licking, kissing. A glorious alternation to really push every hot button I didn't even know I had. Soon, he pushed one finger inside me, curling up and hitting the g-spot. Then it was two fingers.

What I could only describe as magic started to trickle through my body as I made embarrassingly kittenish noises. There was no doubt in my mind he knew exactly what he was doing to me. I gave it all away. I didn't even try to hide my enjoyment.

Warmth flooded my core as strength traveled through my body. It wasn't a shock to the system like I expected. More like waking up. Getting back what I'd lost by pushing too much of my power at Lavi.

Waves of bliss crashed over me as he performed a specific movement and stuck to it. I gripped his hair, rhythmically curling my toes as I screamed.

My vision blacked out for a few precious seconds while I panted.

Oh my hell. Sage wrecked me. When the last tremor wracked my body, I opened my eyes to find Sage pressing his cheek against my thigh, looking up at me as if I was everything to him.

"I love you," I breathed. Actually, it came out garbled and something like 'uh wuv yu'. Hopefully, he knew what I was trying to say.

"I love you too," he said solemnly.

Sucking in a breath, I combed my fingers through his hair, fixing the damage I had done.

"How do you feel?"

How did I feel? Pretty damn good. And back to normal. Mostly. Except stronger. "Okay."

He grinned. The fucker knew I was totally downplaying what he just did. "You know something good to come out of this?"

"Something good came of this?" My mood took a tiny dive. I couldn't think of anything good about Lavi's emotion fueled attack.

"Oh yeah." The grin widened into a smile. Did he come too just now? Because there was no reason he should be this happy. "Did you hump the bed?"

"What?" His face twisted up in confusion. Still hot. "No," he said with a scowl. "I did not hump the bed. I have you, and I would never lower myself to something so... desperate." He scoffed, and for a second, I saw some Rand and Yunez's formal influence shining through.

"Then why are you smiling?"

Just like that, he was once again grinning like a lunatic. "You've used your powers a couple times in the last twenty-four hours. That means that you're coming into yourself."

"Are you sure it's not just the statue?" I bit my bottom lip. I had accessed my powers easily. But what was different this time? Before, they manifested mostly when we were in danger. Could Lavi threatening Rand have been enough to trigger it?

"Maybe that's part of it, but you're stronger, surer of yourself. I can feel the power rising inside you." He seemed downright giddy.

"Oh shit. We have to move and take the statue with us! Who knows when the next wave of attacks

will come!” I yelled and threw him off of me with more strength that I thought I had. Sage wasn’t a child, but I literally tossed him aside like one.

He groaned and sat up on the bed. “What was that for?”

“We’ve been too lax! That’s how Lavi found us in the first place! Who knows who she’s working with and who she shared our location with! Yunez stressed the importance of that fucking rock and we need to get out of here!” I scrambled out of bed and searched for clothes.

“Wait!” Sage caught my arm as I ran past him, and I jerked to a halt.

“What?” I yelled. “I’m sorry. I just realized we have things to do.” I cleared my throat and stuffed my boob back in my bra when he released my arm.

“Lavi was working independently. Cabbie had his Cherries interrogate her and she did give up that information. And their form of torture?” He shivered. “Let’s say Rand couldn’t watch it for a multitude of reasons.”

“Oh, God.” I laughed, then covered my mouth. It was so inappropriate. I was blaming my slap happy state. And the Cherries? With their sex toy weapons. I could only guess what they did to Lavi to make her talk.

“Yeah...” Sage drew out as he scratched the back of his head and looked toward the door. “So don’t worry about anyone finding out we’re here. She didn’t have any connections to the Fiasla Mannos. And Rainer apparently kept her pretty far out of his business. I’m not sure if they were a love match...” His voice went high. “But it seems she was more of a trophy wife than anything else.”

“Okay, that’s good. Right?” It felt weird to say that, but we really needed a freaking break. He didn’t answer, and I awkwardly changed the subject. “Let’s go get the statue. Then we’ll be ready to blow this joint.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind,” I said as I snatched clean clothes I hoped were for me off the back of a chair.

“Like I said, we have nothing to worry about,” Sage reassured me as he opened the door.

As Jari raced up the hallway, I had one thought and one thought only.

“Famous last words,” I mumbled to myself.



JARI SKIDDED TO A HALT.

“Um... Iss. That’s uh... I like it.” The corners of his lips twitched as he flicked his gaze down my body and back up again.

I glanced down right as Sage began snickering. “Oh hell!”

In my panic to get something on, while simultaneously trying to get Sage to light a fire under his ass and help me save the world—okay, maybe I was also enjoying the moment we’d had too—I had donned something very similar to a floss outfit. Only, think ripped spandex instead.

Yup, that was under boob cleavage showing. Was that a term? I was making it one.

“This is what was in the room, damn it!” I snarled and stomped by him. There was one person I could thank for that. The person who had stared at my bare ass while I was trying to become one with the mattress.

“Issy, you don’t even know why I was running up to get you,” Jari called after me, a note of the worry popping into his voice that had been in his face.

Oh yeah. He had looked terrified when we stepped out into the hallway. I hope another group of random enemies weren’t suddenly trying to break down the doors.

I turned, pasted a blank look on my face to try and hide my earlier irritation. “What’s wrong?”

Jari glanced at Sage, then me. “Yunez sent a scout ahead. They’re all on their way back here. It seems Aamori was alerted to our presence. As soon as she received the message, she packed up her people and started back. She’s refused to talk to Yunez.” He worried his bottom lip and scanned the hallway like she might suddenly pop out of the closet or something.

“Where’s Rand?” I glanced around, apparently also fearing a surprise closet attack from Aamori.

“He’s trying to figure out what to do with the statue, but every time he touches it, he gets zapped back.”

That just didn’t make sense. “Then how were the other mates of the Mazza able to touch it?”

We moved toward the great hall together. I started to ask if we should make it look like we weren’t here, but I guess at this point, it would be a wasted effort. After all, she knew we were here.

“Maybe because they had shards it was a smaller amount to work with?” Sage tossed out.

I paused. The stone statue as a whole was extremely powerful. It had nearly knocked me off my feet. But what if it was just a small piece on a necklace? Would that be just enough to perpetually fuel my power? And what about the other Mazza? Was she so powerful because of the rock?

Who was I kidding? She was probably powerful because she'd been trained growing up. I was trained in... waitressing. Not a fair comparison.

"Sage, I think you're genius. What are the chances we could hack it into smaller pieces to move it?" I resumed walking, and we picked up our pace. By the time we reached the great hall, we were almost jogging.

Nothing like a little time sensitive stress to really make a girl workout.

"Wow," Rand breathed as he rose from a crouch by the statue.

"See, Doll? We told you that those outfits would do wonders for your relationship." Cabbie strutted over to join our group.

I ignored him. If I didn't acknowledge the outfit, I could pretend I wasn't wearing it.

"How are we going to get the statue out of here before Aamori gets back? Or should we? She's going to know that we've taken it." I spun, taking in the entirety of the room. It was completely open. No cubby spaces.

"Doll, if you'd stop ignoring me, I'd tell you I have a solution." Cabbie didn't let me ignore him and planted himself right in front of me. I had to tip back to see his face.

I blew out a breath. "I'm sorry. I'm a bit embarrassed and if I didn't acknowledge the outfit, I could pretend I wasn't wearing it." There. I just spit out the whole truth.

"No, you have to own it!" He gushed dramatically. "It was built for your curves and you have to work every advantage."

"Can we get back to the solution?" Jari cut in. "They're going to be here in ten minutes."

"Watch." Cabbie nodded, and a group of barely dressed Stags walked toward the statue. One even winked at me, causing Sage to step closer and curl a lip.

They placed their hands on the stone and...nothing.

"It doesn't hurt them..." I whispered.

"The statue saves that particular pleasure for the mate bond. We'll carry it away." Cabbie snapped his fingers, and the men lifted it up, and started carting it out.

"That's good and all, but what about when Aamori shows up and it's missing?" I throw my hand out to encompass the very empty space.

"I can take care of that." Rand waved a hand over the area and the statue was back.

"Fuck. Duh," I said under my breath. I couldn't keep forgetting I was in a league with magical beings. Otherwise, we'd never win.

Stepping forward, Jari and Sage both joined me as we set hands on the statue. It hummed and had the normal warmth from before, but that was really it.

"This was anticlimatic," Sage said as he turned to me with a smile tipping his lush lips. "I feel like we should have done more."

"Aren't you glad the Pleasure House is on your side?" Cabbie flicked a piece of invisible lint off of his shoulder.

"Absolutely." I grinned.

"Just remember to give me credit in your acceptance speech."

That scared the ever loving shit out of me, but before I could respond, doors somewhere close by banged open. The walls shook with the force and then angry stomping came right for us.

"What is the meaning of this!" Aamori's voice boomed. She strode into the hall and her battle leathers squeaking with each step. Right or wrong, I couldn't get the social media sound out of my head of the shoes squeaking over the gymnasium floor.

Really poor timing, Isolde, I scolded myself.

Yunez and the rest of my beautiful mates came in at her heels looking completely unbothered.

“I tried to explain to you, Aamori—”

“No!” She spun around, fisting her hands down by her ass as she bent forward. “I won’t listen to you this time, Yunez. After the secrets you’ve revealed, I don’t know that I can take your word for anything. The people of Fennina deserve better!” She dragged in a deep breath and turned back around to face us. If her eyes were weapons, I would have been gouged on the spot. A slow brutal death.

“Aamori,” Rand said softly, stepping forward and bowing low at the waist.

Oh shit, that was right. She wanted my man.

Hell to the no, lady. I started to step forward but Sage stuck his fingers in some of my spandex holes and held me back.

Immediately, Aamori’s expression softened. “Rand. Are you about to spew lies to keep your secrets?”

“No. I want to share with you why we came here.” He stepped forward, and she softened even more, the bitch. When she didn’t interrupt him, he continued. “We got word that the other Mazza was here. In fact, one of her mates had broken away, unbeknownst to us. When we caught up with her, she tried to take our Mazza. We chased her off but needed time for recovery.”

Damn.

I blinked.

That was the truth and so far from it, I couldn’t quite comprehend that he was actually going to get away with this. With the truth!

“The other Mazza?” Aamori asked like she wasn’t sure she was asking the right question.

“Yes. The other Mazza. She works for the Fiasla realm, and we’ve learned she rules her mates with an iron fist. She stabbed one through the chest right in front of us. We do not know if he lived.” He pulled in a breath. “And it seems my father has died by an unknown hand, and my mother led her people here to attack. She believed his death was by our hand. It was not.” Rand bowed his head, signaling that was all he had to say. Some of his inner turmoil showed through his body language and my heart, along with Aamori’s, hurt for him.

The freaking woman fluttered her hand around her throat and nodded. There wasn’t one single follow-up question to test his validity. I narrowed my gaze on Rand. Was he using his Manno mojo to subdue her?

I wanted to be pissed if he was, but I also wanted to fuck his brains out for saving our asses.

“You would put your life on your word?” She gazed at him with wide, twinkling eyes. Theon just rolled his. He must be used to his mother’s antics.

“I swear it.” Rand lifted his head but clasped his hands in front of him.

“Well,” Yunez said as he stepped forward, clapping his hands and doing his famous head toss. “Now that that is settled, I believe we were strategizing the war. It seems we need to catch up on exactly what Lavi was doing as well.” He walked over and pulled Rand into a quick, but gripping hug. “I am sorry, my fellow mate, for your loss. And it saddens me we do not have time to let you grieve.”

“I’m fine.” Rand sounded awfully choked up for being fine. “We need to take down the Fiasla realm so we can move on with our lives.” His words were so quiet, I think we were the only ones to hear him.

Yunez nodded, released him and addressed the room. “Let us continue our discussions in the morning. Especially now that my mates have done you a service, Aamori.” He gave her a pointed

look. “Leaving your house unprotected could have cost you.”

She stiffened but didn't say anything else.

The room started to empty, and Yunez came over to place his hand at the small of my back, leading us away. I glanced over my shoulder just before we passed through the hall doors.

“Mother! Stop this. You can't let them walk out like that.” Theon's voice rang through the hall.

We stopped, and Yunez tugged me back inside with the others at my back.

Theon waved his hand in front of Aamori's face as if she was in some kind of trance. She wasn't. She couldn't have been. Even though I'd had the random thought that Rand could have used his Manno mojo on her, I didn't actually believe it.

“What?” She snapped, but her tone was weary and irritated.

Instead of responding to her, Theon snapped his fingers at their guards along the wall. “Take them to the dungeon. When we've sorted out a plan for Fennina, then we can let them out.”

Aamori quickly shook off whatever her issue had been and she entered into a screaming match with her son. Her arms flailed wildly and she pushed up on her toes.

“You are not house leader! This is not your call to make!”

“Sorry, mother. Until we get this sorted out and you can prove you're not coerced by the enemy house, I'm inserting myself as temporary house leader. Your counsel has already approved.” Theon crossed his arms and watched her lose her shit.

I started to step forward, but someone caught my arm. When I glanced back, it was one of the guards who had been close to us on the wall. I reared back my fist, ready to punch his fucking lights out. We would not be imprisoned again dammit.

Except Yunez, my crazy old squirrely man, Yunez caught my hand.

“Do not fight,” he whispered in my ear. “The guards are following Theon's orders, not Aamori's. If we fight, we cause a different kind of war.”

A different kind of war my ass. This was already war and titty-hole Theon was throwing away his best allies.

“To the dungeon,” the guard towering over me growled at the others.



“NO ONE IN OR OUT,” the not very nice guard gripping my arm said to the woman outside the cell before he tossed me in.

I grunted as Egan landed on my back. Nato fell on top of him, then the others followed in quick succession. These guards were so gentle to throw us all in a Fennin pile. Not.

The cell door slammed shut. The woman waved her hand and the lock clicked into place.

For every movie I’d watched with a dark, dank, moldy dungeon, Aamori or whoever built this place, must have watched the same ones. Because this was so cliché it wasn’t funny.

Dark gray moss grew over the broken stones and rusty manacles hung off the wall. Oh wait, there were actually a couple people attached to the manacles on the far side of the cell. How long had they been here? A while from the looks of it.

We could at least see through the bars, so we weren’t completely isolated. If we’d had to stay in Toste’s tower for a longer duration, it would have been torture.

“What are the chances that the prisoner in your vision was one of us?” Nato asked as he gripped one of the bars above his head and stared down one of the guards posted outside. There were four in total.

One met his stare with a passive face. The others did a very poor job of pretending not to see us.

“I don’t think her vision was about us.” Rand paced the floor as he checked out every corner of the cell.

“Well?” Sage asked.

When I glanced at him, he only had eyes for Yunez.

“Well, what?” Yunez held his hands up nonchalantly.

“How did this happen? What does this mean? Who was the person in Issy’s vision?” He fired question after question.

Yunez sighed and walked over to where I was still sprawled on the floor and dropped down next to me. “You are asking these questions of me as if I have the answers. I unfortunately do not.”

“Can they hear us?” I nodded at the guards.

“No, I placed a barrier around us.” Rand waved a hand while pacing.

“Okay, take the sight out of it. What does it mean that Theon had the authority to throw us in here?” Sage continued. “You’ve been playing the political game for forever and a day. Give us your best guess.”

Jari nodded like Sage voiced his very thoughts.

“I believe we can call this a coup. And no, it is not in our favor. Theon was always a little shit.” Yunez shrugged like this unfortunate turn of events was akin to getting a tub of stale popcorn at the movies. Unfortunate and a nuisance, but not deadly.

Nato turned from the bars and took up the other piece of nice stone next to me.

“Theon has always been pompous and arrogant. It wouldn’t surprise me if he has been planning this for a long time.” Nato tugged on my wrist until I turned my hand up and threaded my fingers with his.

Moving his thumb over the back of my hand he murmured, “so soft.” Then to the greater group, “Will the other house leaders stand for this?”

Again, we all turned our attention to Yunez.

“What?”

We busted out laughing and the small release of endorphins did amazing things to break up the sudden tension.

“Oh shit,” I gasped. My stomach knotted and that intense feeling of dread curled around my shoulders. It had been a long time since I’d had the danger signal.

Really? It was happening now that we were locked up?

What the fuck?

“What do you feel?” Nato flipped onto his knees in front of me as he gripped both sides of my head. I tried to focus on his beautiful deep amber eyes and that piercing golden strip, but my vision was darkening around the edges.

“Danger,” I whispered, unable to draw in a full breath to speak any louder. “There’s danger coming but I don’t—I don—”

“Focus Issy.” Yunez pressed in on my side. “Use your sight. Your powers are inside you. They are not locked away anymore. What do you see?”

“You can do this, Issy girl.” Egan laid a hand on my shoulder.

“I believe in you,” was barely more than a whisper as another hand touched my back. Sage.

“Dig deep. You have a greater awareness when you’re connected to your powers.” Rand’s warm breath fanned over my ear.

The darkness almost overtook my vision then receded. It lapped over my consciousness as I started to sweat. A hot bead trailed down my temple. I focused but there was nothing to focus on. It was like grasping at air. Nothing tangible.

Yet my gut continued to clench as I waited for the other shoe to drop.

I had just opened my mouth to cry out at the unfairness of it all when an explosion from above rocked the walls. There was no sound, but the vibrations nearly knocked Nato onto his back. Hell, Jari did fall on his back.

A groan came from the corner. “What was that?” The words were barely recognizable.

The guards had landed on their asses and as soon as they regained their feet, they raced toward the stairs. Whatever was happening, they were compelled to leave their post. That couldn’t be good.

“Rand, remove the barrier.” I gritted my teeth. As much as I didn’t want to hear what was going on, we needed to know. Maybe it would jar me out of this weird, painful stasis.

Rand dropped it, and the screams... The screams pierced my ears.

“We have to get out of here!” I grabbed onto Nato’s arm and pushed myself up. “Can we get out of here?”

Stumbling over to the bars, I gripped them and tried to shake my way out. Of course, that didn’t

work. I hadn't had much exposure with metal work, unless you counted blowing the tower door up. I wasn't even sure how to access that power. I had no concept of what it felt like.

"With the guards gone, I think we can get out of here." Nato appeared beside me; his mouth drawn into a taut line. "The four of them were each from a different house to combat any escape attempts. Rand? Sage?" He glanced over his shoulder.

"On it," Rand said under his breath. He and Sage both had their eyes closed concentrating on our escape.

Surprisingly, maybe ten seconds passed before the lock snicked open. I swung my head from them to the door, then back to them. That seemed...anti-climactic.

"Let's go." Jari cracked his neck from side to side.

I took two steps before I spun on my heels. "The prisoners!"

"You don't know why they're down here! They might deserve it." Sage tugged on my arm, but I shook him off.

"It doesn't matter. We can't leave them as sitting ducks." When I turned, Yunez already had one prisoner loose. It was a woman. I thought. It wasn't as easy of a tell as you might think. Aamori clearly didn't believe in hospitality for prisoners.

I ran to the other prisoner and ducked down, trying to detect signs of life. There was a slight shift of the ragged garment clothing them. Okay, that wasn't much but I could work with that.

Another boom sounded from above and from the sounds of it, more than one of my guys were knocked to the ground. I shifted the hood back to see who it was I was helping.

"Can you hear me? We're going to remove the cuffs." Yunez slid into place beside me as he hovered a hand over each cuff.

The hood fell back, revealing a white haired man with sunken cheeks and a few missing teeth. It was a struggle for him to lift his head, but when he did, my entire existence froze in that one moment.

His eyes. They were *my* eyes.

His wide set mouth held the exact same frown I often sported.

My epiphany was unique to me because he squinted like he couldn't focus on my face. "Who are you?" His voice was barely a whisper on the wind. It was something scratching and painful.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. There was nothing I could say.

"Lars, it is good to see you alive, my friend. I know a few people who will rejoice with this news." Yunez cut his gaze to me for the briefest second, then finished removing the cuffs.

"Is that..." I turned my head, but it was so difficult, like trying to move through quickly cooling wax. There was one other prisoner here. If this was Lars, then there was a good chance that the other prisoner was...

"Nerro," Lars said. Nato and Yunez helped Lars up from the ground while Jari and Rand helped me to my feet.

"Who?" My voice was like sludge in my ears. That wasn't Ishana?

"Ner—" he coughed, hacking up something nasty—"Nerro."

"It's a man," Sage called with an insurmountable amount of regret in his voice. He knew this would break my heart before I could even comprehend what I wished for.

"Friend." Lars started coughing again and a long string of drool and blood dangled from his mouth. Twisting his head, he wiped his face on his cloak. "Met here."

Two more explosions went off in quick succession. I glanced up at the ceiling.

We needed to be upstairs, working with the Fennins to help save the realm. Yet, how could I fully engage when I had just met my father? Maybe I would feel differently if I'd met him on the street as

we both ran toward the fight, but I hadn't. We'd discovered a severely mistreated and malnourished man instead.

If we left him, with the battle going on up above, I might never see him again. And that would be so incredibly cruel.

"We can't leave him here." It was a statement. An order.

"We are not leaving him here. But neither can we take him into battle. That would surely sign his death warrant." Yunez readjusted his arm around Lars.

"We—"

"Iss," Yunez snapped. "We will not leave him here. This is my promise. We will find a different place to let him rest while we join the fight."

"What if someone finds him?" I tried really really hard not to get emotional. I wasn't an emotional person. Not before I found my LL. But the stress, the shock, the building frustration, or maybe a combination of all three blanketed my mind until I had a swirling cocktail of unwanted fear and anxiety.

Nato grabbed my shoulders and gave me a small shake.

When I met his concerned yet troubled stare, he dipped his chin just a bit. "Someone might find him. He's in no condition to watch after himself. We can't guarantee he'll make it, and I wished like fuck I could. But we can't spare anyone when innocent people are suffering. We can't. Not when our presence could mean life or death for thousands of Fennins. But we'll do everything we can to make sure he comes back."

The heaviness of his gaze held me captive, providing a warm comfort I wouldn't have expected in that moment. When I was able to draw in a breath, I gave two sharp nods. "Let's find as safe of a place as we can before going up...Please?"

"You got it." Nato let go and turned around. "You heard her. Let's find Lars and Nerro a cubby to hide in."

Sage and Rand had the cell door open. Lars and Nerro each had two men half helping, half carrying them as we escaped. The dungeon was one entire room. Except at the very bottom of the stairs.

One small door stood on either side. I opened one, finding a half bath. Spinning, I threw the other door open, and bottles of liquid crashed to the ground. More than a few shattered and the sharp scent of bleach hit my nose.

"Damn it. That would have been the perfect hiding place." All relative, considering there were no good hiding places during an all out war. Although, the fact that there was a bathroom and cleaning closet in the dungeon struck me as hilarious. I would have laughed if the tension crackling in the air wasn't so smothering.

"I got it." Jari placed a hand on my lower back as he stepped around me. He crouched down, placing two fingers on the ground and the stone floor immediately shifted and reshaped. The stench of bleach was still there, but not even a tenth as bad as it was.

"You impress me every day, Jari." I touched his back.

"Yunez! Are you down there?" A voice echoed down the stairs. It was familiar. I could almost place it, but the face of the voice eluded me.

What caught my attention was the pain and panic speared through those few words.



JAN CAME to a halt as he barreled down the stairs. His likeness to Yunez was so uncanny, that I sucked in a breath when he appeared. Even with his blood streaking his face, and stress twisting up his features, he still looked so much like Yunez.

“Jan? What’s going on upstairs?” Sage asked as he grabbed my hand and tugged me forward.

Yunez gripped Jan’s shoulders and gave a little shake. “Talk, cousin. What has happened?” His voice was strained while his eyes briefly glazed over as he tried to access the sight.

“Chaos. Utter chaos,” he gasped as he gripped one of Yunez’s forearms. “Fighting...Mazza.”

“Oh, shit.” I squeezed Sage’s hand and grabbed Egan’s as I dodged Jan to run up the stairs. If the Mazza was upstairs, that was bad news bears.

Steps pounded on the staircase behind me, and I threw a hand out as my fear and anxiety leapt in my throat. The door guarding the entrance to the dungeon blew open, banging against the stone wall.

“Hell, Issy girl,” Egan murmured before planting a kiss on the side of my head and moving around me.

I stood in stupefied silence while my men and Jan filtered around me. When I was the last one left, still clutching Sage’s hand, I jolted back to myself. I did it. Just then, I’d used my powers, and it had been like second nature in a weird way.

Diabolical laughter rang through the hallway, coming from the grand room that had been the site for so much trouble in the last twenty-four hours. I knew that voice.

“Let’s go!” I yelled. We took off at a cautious run. If this wasn’t a life or death situation, I might have cracked myself up. As we coordinated our efforts on glancing right and left, we almost seemed like a pack of sexy men—and me—doing a Sanderson sister impersonation.

Ridiculous.

I changed my timing so I had the opposite side covered while everyone else’s attention was turned to the right and vice versa.

A few younger people ran past us as we neared the entrance. As soon as Jari stepped through, he caught a young man who had been blasted off his feet.

“Thank you!” He quipped with a scowl and ran back into the fray. And it was a fray. Men in gray

signaling the Fiasla Mannos were scattered throughout the floor.

Everyone was fighting.

Everyone.

Toste. Aamori. Ureste.

All of their people. Even in exhaustion from traveling, they bore savage smiles as they wielded their house powers. Knives flew, rocks formed barriers, small animals and birds dove in and out of the crowds.

The heat in the room sweltered, and the stench of sweat and blood clogged my nose.

Then there was the Mazza and her mates on the other side of the room. Her laughter was still tumbling from her poisonous lips as she held a struggling man's head in her hands and kissed his forehead. He fell with a scream.

She was using her Zien powers. Damn it.

And her mates, minus Brody, were fighting at her side with brutality and disregard for innocent life.

I didn't need to say a word. My LL and I moved as a synchronized unit through the throngs of screaming people. I threw out a hand and froze a knife mid air, saving Aamori from a back stab.

It fell to the ground, and whatever noise it made was swallowed up by the sounds of war.

Egan caught a man in a chokehold, giving his neck a sharp twist, saving Toste from yet another attacker. He gave Egan a nod and kept fighting.

We helped where we could as we moved across the floor, but never straying from our destination.

When we were feet from them, the Mazza dropped another dead soldier at her feet and straightened, licking her lips and smoothing her hand down her thick, lustrous braid. Damn her for having great hair in the middle of a fight.

"Well, well. If it's isn't the Mazza wannabe. Had any luck learning how to be an ass kicker yet? If my memory serves right, you and your men were subpar at best." Her manic laughter bubbled up once again.

She was absolutely high on the pain she was causing.

Fury burned under my skin and I cracked my neck as I searched for that well of power Rand described. It was there, right in the back of my mind. Now that I knew where it was, it was like it had always been there, just waiting for me to access it.

I mentally dipped a toe in. Testing the water. As soon as I touched it, warmth sizzled through my limbs and settled in my fingers and toes. My scalp prickled in awareness. Hell, I could probably count every hair on my head, that's how jazzed up I was.

"Where's Brody?" I glanced at her five mates, who took their time dispatching their latest victims to stand at her side. Each man just as deranged as the last time I saw them. Especially curly. He looked extra ecstatic to be here.

"Dead, I'd say." She shrugged.

I wasn't prepared for the sharp pain that stabbed through my heart, but I couldn't deny that it hurt to hear. She could be wrong. Doubtful. She was a Mazza after all and could feel her bond mates, but I didn't want him to have died because he sought me out.

"Why are you here?" Fuck, we needed to get this party started, but I couldn't stop the questions from tumbling out.

"We were invited." She dipped her chin just enough that her smile was even more diabolical. "Enough of the chitchat. I'm ready to have some fun."

Just like when we met outside the Yunez's castle, she threw her hands out and explosions went off

around the room. “A little smoke adds to the mystery, don’t you think?” She stepped forward on her tall heels Cabbie would die to see me wear in battle.

Where was Cabbie? I snuck a quick glance but didn’t see him. There was no time to continue the search because the Mazza was heading right toward me.

“Sure.” I threw out my hands, hoping on all the sex toys in Cabbie brought with him that this would work.

I submerged myself in that pool of power, channeling destruction as much as I could, and very clearly singled out the corners.

Fuck my life. It worked.

A round of explosions went off and gray smoke twined around us. Jari might have used a little bit of wind to blow my hair back from my face. I couldn’t confirm, but it seemed too dramatic for the moment.

The Mazza smirked. “Very good. But you didn’t actually hit anyone. You like the smoke and mirrors, don’t you?” That was all she said before she dove.

She caught me around the middle and tackled me to the ground. My men yelled around me as they engaged her mates. I ached to check on them, but I couldn’t because I was grappling on the floor with an oiled up seal, damn it.

After an embarrassingly brief struggle, she straddled my waist. And sat back. She didn’t even try to restrain my arms because she felt I was that much of a nonthreat.

Lucky me.

Using a move one of the Cherries had taught me, I angled my fist and snapped it right against her pubic bone, getting as much of a cunt shot as I could. She howled and rolled backward.

Hot hands, hot hands, I chanted.

I scrambled on top of her and slapped her across the face, leaving a red, blistering handprint behind. Grinning, I caught her wrists and pinned them against the ground. “How’s that feel, bitch?”

She’d just been bitchslapped. I could have crowed my victory.

Good thing I didn’t.

A long leg appeared in front of my face right before she used it to guillotine me backwards.

“Argh,” I gurgled as I reached for my throat. Rookie move. She caught my hands and stretched them out over the top of my head, then the mother fucker head butted me. “Ouch!”

“How would you like to sleep?” She transferred both of my hands to one of hers. Just before she touched my temple, I did another hope dance in my head as I tried to recreate the Zien power I’d used on Lavi as I head butted her back.

“You first.” I gasped for breath as my head throbbed but the Mazza rolled to the side.

“Damn, Doll. Did you need to head butt her to use that gift? You’re going to give yourself a concussion.” Cabbie picked me up and dusted me off.

“No,” I groaned, rubbing my forehead. “I could do it without touch, but I wanted a little payback.”

He snorted and handed me my nun chucks. “Here. Now let’s kick some ass.”

I let my mind take me into the zone as I wrapped the chain around Curly’s neck and yanked, while I kicked the chest of an approaching Fiasla Manno. Curly slid to the ground with his sightless eyes wide.

Oh, shit. Don’t actually be dead. I hadn’t really killed anyone. At least, not anyone I’d had to stare at afterward.

Pushing the thought out of my mind on a shaky exhale, I used my trusty nun chucks to help my LL and clear out some of the Mannos. At one point, Egan was at my back, then Nato. Yunez and Rand

seemed to work a bigger circle around us with a mixture of powers and hand to hand combat.

With the Mazza down for the count, we were making headway, turning the tides. Before long, there were very few Fiasla Mannos left standing. I sucked in a deep breath, readying myself to dive after the next one when a man screamed his frustration.

Sliad.

He stood on the platform and touched the two rocks behind him with bloody hands.

“Where the hell did those come from?” I yelled.

“I don’t know!” Jari answered as he clotheslined a Manno.

“There are portable Waesarises now?” What the hell man. As soon as I learned the rules, there were five exceptions that popped up.

More and more Mannos ran through the blue mist to join the fight. All were pristine and fresh faced, while everyone here was dirty and bruised. We couldn’t have been fighting more than an hour, maybe two, but it seemed like a lifetime already.

Mannos poured through the portal until there was barely any room to throw a punch. The fallen were being trampled and our people were being forced to the middle.

“No, no, no.” This wasn’t good. I jabbed my fingers into the eyes of the Manno in front of me with hot fingers...because what else was I supposed to fucking do? There was no arm space and I had mastered hot hands.

Random weapons, birds, and vines flew overhead as people fought with the only thing they could. Their powers. One by one, all of my allies and our men were forced to their knees. Rand grunted in pain next to me as a knife speared his shoulder.

Egan let out a hurt growl at my back as a vine tightened around his neck.

In my distraction, large, calloused hands gripped the sides of my head.

Fuck, I knew what this meant. I braced myself for a pain that never came. Instead, the man’s eye rolled back in his head, and when he fell, he revealed a very angry, and very alive Brody at his back.

He watched the man fall with a cold gaze. The Mazza somewhere at our feet started to stir, her groan of pain more than a little satisfying. Until Brody glanced at her and the groan turned into a squeal before cutting off all together.

I wouldn’t look. I wouldn’t ask. Now was not the time.

A gurgle that somehow made it over the cacophony of grunts and flying objects pulled my attention to the platform. A tall, slender man stood behind Sliad. His hair was long and his skin pale. He looked so familiar.

Where had I...

Blood spilled over Sliad’s tunic. He’d slit his throat before I ever turned. The man held Sliad to his chest until he took his last breath. All the while, the fighting had stopped, birds landed, objects fell.

Once Sliad was dead, the man tossed him away like yesterday’s trash. The men closest to the platform stepped back, not wanting to catch him.

Cold. Those were his men.

The man on the platform glanced up, and for a brief second, our gazes collided, like he knew exactly who I was.

Instant recognition slapped me in the face. This was the Shadow from the vision.



BUT IT WAS MORE.

Everything was coming back to me now. The floodgates, whatever powers had been hindering sight seemed to have lost their hold.

This man was not only the boy from the vision with Brody, but he was the boy from the vision who had been imprisoned. Scenes flitted through my head like reels of a movie.



"Sir, there's a mark here, on the babe's thigh," a nurse turned the baby over just a little in the towel. He must have been minutes old, the film of white substance still sticking to his skin.

"There's nothing there," the boy's mom whispered as she panted on the bed.

The elderly doctor took a peek, and shook his head. "That's a beauty mark. Nothing more."

Holy shit! The kid was a Manno. And his mom? What was she? A Mazza? Zien member?



Theon stood on the other side of the cell. He crossed his arms. "I know there's something different about you, boy. Don't pretend."

The boy, bigger than when he was taken, didn't say a word. His stringy hair hung in his face and he seemed happy to leave it as a barrier between him and Aamori's son.

"Fine. You won't talk? Your friend will." Theon motioned to one of the Iron guard accompanying him to go into the cage. I sucked in a breath when the man removed his hood. Travon.

The boy flinched but didn't say anything as Travon plucked a girl, maybe eighteen or so, from the cell.

"You've lost your mother. You have no home, no possessions. Your pathetic existence is here in this room. You had one friend. But you're about to lose her too. Still want to keep your silence?" Theon crossed his arms.

"Maybe he doesn't have any secrets, sir." Another guard cleared his throat.

"No, his bitch of a mother spilled too many secrets when she was drunk on my cock. And when I

brought it to the elder, she confirmed that he would cause my downfall.” He ground his jaw.

“Then why not just kill him?”

“Because, I want to know how he’s my downfall. It could be that it’s not actually him, but something he causes. I need the details before I get rid of his worthless sack of bones.”



“Psst.” Brody unlocked the door and stepped inside. The guards were watching the hallway, deep in useless conversation about their stale dinner.

He used his powers to cast an illusion.

The boy glanced up, but he didn’t make any other moves. He looked older now. Maybe by a year or so. He’d also lost more weight.

“I have food. And water.” Brody crouched down, opening his cloak to reveal his offerings.

“I know who you are. What you are.” The unuse in the boy’s voice broke my heart. If people could sound like heartbreak and hopelessness, that would be this boy.

“Hmm, you don’t say? I know who you are too.” Brody plopped down, stretching his legs out and crossing them at the ankles. “It’s going to be okay you know. I *see* it.”

“I don’t want that future.”

“Yeah, well, people are depending on you. I’m depending on you. But I tell you what. You don’t have to make your decision right now. I’ll come back and visit from time to time.”

The boy shifted, his hair moved just enough for his fierce blue eye to make an appearance. He nodded and ate the food.



“Really, Brody? You couldn’t leave her alone?” The boy, now a man sighed as he pressed his hand over the stab wound.

Brody chuckled, but it was wet. “I had to try and warn her. I had to try.”

“Love sick.” Shadow was what he went by. Shadow shook his head.

“Yeah, well, I’m attached to that bitch. Anything is a better choice than her.”

Ouch. That stung, but I also didn’t disagree. Anyone was better than her.

“I told you not to go through with it. Not when you didn’t bring the other woman here.” Wait. They were both Mannos. Had he wanted me to bond with them? After I had my core mates?

Studying both men, I tried to imagine if that would have happened. They were attractive. Clearly, I mean, Brody was an ex bed buddy. But when I tried to envision an actual relationship, there was nothing. No spark. No real attraction other than appreciation for their surface features. That was every Fennin though.

It would never have worked out the way they wanted.

“My parents were breathing down my neck. Without Isolde, I wouldn’t bring you into the bonds. That bitch would only abuse you.”

“And kill off one of three unlikely chances to unseat the general. Right?” Shadow quirked a brow.

I straightened. The general was the leader of the true Shadow Society, wasn’t it? I thought I’d heard that somewhere.

Was that Sliad? Had he been the leader right under our noses the whole time?

Brody grinned, a bit of sadness crowding in at the edges of his expression. "You're more than just a means to an end, Bean."

"Don't call me that," he snapped.

"Sorry," he raised his hands. "Shadow."

When Shadow stepped back, the wound was a faint line. Not the killing blow he was before. "One good thing came of this. When she attacked you, it severed the bond."

Brody's gaze glazed over. "Good. And she doesn't suspect either."

Shadow shrugged and threw away the bloody clothes surrounding Brody. "It's not well known. We only know because I prefer books to people."

They shared a low chuckle.



The room reappeared, and all the Mannos were blinking rapidly. Had we all shared a vision together?

I glanced at Rand and Yunez who were also coming out of their own sight haze. "Did you all see that?"

"We saw something," Rand murmured.

"The so called war the Fiasla Mannos were trying to wage is over. The general is dead." Shadow motioned to Sliad's body. "Fiasla Mannos, back through the portal. As the new head of your house, I command it." He had so much control and confidence oozing through his pores that no one questioned it. I almost went through the portal.

Men opened it up, then in pairs, they disappeared. More than a few of them seemed relieved, like this wasn't a fight they had wanted in the first place. There were a couple that sneered at Shadow as they passed, but Shadow raised a brow. With that single action he let them know he'd deal with them later.

Brody motioned to some of the Mannos, maybe men who had always been on his side? And they picked up the Mazza and her mates, carrying them through. I didn't think they were all dead, but I didn't want to look too closely.

All the Mannos were through the portal except for Brody and Shadow. It was like this was an insane plot twist that no one saw coming and we were frozen to our seats waiting for the final shoe to drop.

"There will be much clean up to do in the Fiasla realm. For the pain and damage they have caused, I apologize." Shadow bowed his head as his words traveled loud and clear. "When you are ready, we will meet and discuss the path forward for our futures. I will await your call." That was the end of his pretty speech, but he wasn't yet done.

When he raised his head, he speared Theon with a hardened gaze. "However, there is one debt I demand today. Theon, son of Aamori, and next in line to lead the Janer people, you have committed many grievous acts against me and mine. I demand your head, and that of your right hand man, Travon of the Iron Guard."

Gasps and hushed whispers rose through the small crowd.

"Like hell," Theon spit, his hackles raising as he was figuratively and literally backed in a corner. "Aamori no longer runs this realm. Her integrity has been compromised and the people will not stand for it. To demand my death is an act of war." He glanced around, but whatever support he thought he'd

get didn't come.

Instead, people stepped away from him like he was the walking embodiment of the clap.

"Ah yes, let's talk about acts of war." Shadow nodded like this was an excellent idea he wished he'd thought of. He was serious, yet I could have sworn this was his own version of dry humor. I almost laughed. Thank the gods, I didn't. "Good people of Fennina, Theon has been planning this event for quite some time. The Mazza and the General of the Shadow Society found their way to you quite easily today because Theon invited them in. He did plan to take over his mother's seat, and he planned to take out any opposition with the fight here today. I don't believe I need to express what a terrible idea that was and all the ways it could have backfired." Shadow dropped his hands to his sides. The relaxed state of his body showing he felt no threat by the rising tension in the room.

Aamori, back in the corner, her beautiful hair a mess and dirt and grime streaking her clothes, pressed her fingers against her lips as she stared at Theon with glistening eyes. From what I knew of her, she would have hated to show this kind of emotion to this many people. She'd also hate that her son was her enemy.

But that was where she was, and she seemed at a loss of how to react.

"If I may," Yunez called, raising one hand to Shadow, keeping his gaze locked on Aamori. "Our people believe in a fair trial. His mind must be searched and evidence brought against him. Of which I have no doubt the people can produce," he said as he cut his gaze at a shaking Theon. "But we must follow our process. Aamori. Allow me this favor. My Mannos will detain him. We will conduct the investigation. If he is found guilty, he will die by our hand, and not yours."

Clearing her throat, she blinked rapidly. "That sounds like a favor to me, Yunez. Not to you."

He bowed his head. "Regardless, I would do this. I would see our people safe and save a mother the hard task of condemning her son."

She closed her eyes, shudders racking her body. "I consent."

"What? No! I have supporters! I have men who follow me!" He screamed, kicking and punching until our Mannos subdued him with pathetic ease.

"Then consider this the favor Aamori, give Travon to this man." Aamori gasped.

"He's one of the leaders in my Iron Guard."

"He's guilty," Yunez returned. "I have seen his misdeeds and guilt with the sight, as I'm sure most Mannos or Zien members with the sight in this room can attest to. If you need proof, we are happy to stand in testimony. You need only ask."

Aamori glanced around the room, searching for any nay sayers. At least, that was what I thought she was doing.

"Is there anyone here that would stand witness for Travon?"

No one spoke. The equivalent of Fennin crickets.

"Aamori," I spoke up. "I have had visions of Travon, before this day, and involving that man." I nodded toward the platform. "Travon is not a good man. He has exploited his power and tore this man away from his home as a young child. He is guilty."

Murmurs of assent rumbled through the people.

"Very well then. Guards! Find Travon and deliver him to this man." Several men and one woman snapped to attention. As they left to search for Travon, Brody walked over to me, caution filling every inch of his body.

He glanced hesitantly at my LL then back at me. "A moment, Isolde?"

Egan growled and Sage sneered. My other mates, they looked on with mild curiosity.

I nodded, but I made no move to leave with him. Whatever he needed to say, he could say it here,

with my men.

“I’m sorry. I just want you to know, I’m sorry.” He started to turn away but I caught his forearm.

“Brody,” I said, and waited for him to turn back. “You have nothing to be sorry for. I hope you find happiness.”

He dropped his gaze and nodded, then he walked toward Shadow and an unconscious Travon on the platform. The Waesaris had lost its power and Shadow wasted no time to fire it up again.

Then in a blink, they were gone.

I glanced around at the confused faces of almost everyone. The only one who wasn’t confused was Yunez. He had a soft smirk on his face, as if all was right in the world.

If he was good, I was good.

Because really, who was I to question his super squirrely old man ways?

EPILOGUE

“NOT EXCITED to take part in the new council?” Wade sat down next to me on the bench.

I was mid process of tearing up a blade of grass, and now that I wasn't alone, it felt silly. “No. Actually, that's a hell no.” I glanced over at the Levan member who had become something of an uncle to me over the last couple months.

“That will be hard when Yunez has offered up his home for meetings and resides as head of the council.” He smirked.

I frowned.

“You were wrong, you know,” I said, happy to change to the subject. Although this wasn't a much better topic.

“How so?”

“I'm not queen, and Yunez never wanted to set us up as the reigning sovereigns of Fennina.”

Wade chuckled. “Well, I admit, that did shock me. I thought the people would demand it, but it seemed we had quite a few saviors on our side that we weren't even aware of. Hard to pick one set of leaders when we had many heroes. I think a governing council was a good solution. People are voted in like the democracy the Earthers use. A win-win.”

“Sure,” I agreed and shrugged. I didn't care, as long as I didn't have to be queen. The pressure I had felt as the Mazza was unbearable. To have the expectations and responsibilities of a queen? I shivered.

“Have you checked on any of your friends from Earth to make sure all is well?”

“I didn't really have any friends there. But yes, I did go back with my LL to check it out. Visit my old diner. Everything was normal. Nothing has happened, as far as they're concerned.”

“Remarkable, isn't it?” Wade sighed as he turned to take in the view of the courtyard.

A ghost of a smile whispered over my lips. “Clarie is a badass. At fifteen with a small contingent of warriors, she saved Earth. Pretty cool.”

“I hear you all have set her up close to here to train her.” He glanced over with a smile. “Loni has already been asking to come meet her.”

“Just to keep up her knowledge and skill. She was already well ahead of me.” I tried not to sound bitter, and I wasn't really. I just couldn't help wondering how different my life would have been if I'd grown up in this realm.

“Then you just let me know when I can bring Loni over. I'll bring Toste and we can make it a family affair.”

“I'd like that.” I grinned over at him.

“Speaking of,” the humor fled his eyes. “I’ve been in touch with Lars. He said you’ve been to see him.”

“I have. Many times.” As much as it broke my heart. Every opportunity I had I went to see him. We would have brought him here, but his mistreatment had done so much damage that he was in a healing center for at least a few more months. At least they hadn’t broke his mind. Much.

“Do you know why Theon had locked him away?” Wade asked.

I blew out a breath. That was the favor Yunez had wanted from Aamori. The chance to question Theon on my parents. It was clear Lars had been there many years. But it had all been pointless.

There was a shiny hole in Theon’s memories. He had no idea why Lars was there, except that he deserved the punishment. We had a sneaking suspicion that Sliad might have had something to do with it, but we’d never really know.

As for what Lars remembered, it wasn’t much. He remembered my mother, and he remembered them running to the Earth realm when they realized I was the Mazza. She died in a hit and run accident not long after they crossed over, and he left me on the steps of the hospital in hopes I’d have a normal childhood. He said he always planned to come back for me, but he was captured before that happened.

“No, we think one of the Fiasla Mannos found him and tried to extract my location from him. But neither Lars nor Theon remembers.”

“That’s a shame. I’m sorry, Isolde.” He reached over and gripped my hand.

I returned the squeeze. “When he’s out, we want to come and have dinner at your place. He insists.”

“I’d love that.”

“Hey, there you are.” Nato dropped down to a crouch beside me, pulling my free hand to his lips to kiss my fingers. “You missed Theon’s sentencing.”

“We knew what the sentencing would be. I didn’t need to see it.” I cupped the back of his neck and pulled him to me for a kiss. “I did attend Lavi’s. That was more important to me.” We all had been worried how Rand would handle it, but he’d done surprisingly well. Of course, she was sentenced to a working camp for women, it wasn’t a death sentence like Theon was facing. He could still visit her if he wanted to, although I hope he never did.

She didn’t deserve Rand or Ralina in her life.

“Ready to head to our room? Sage prepared dinner for us.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. “Sage did?”

Nato smirked. “Yes, he found the sentencing as useless as you did.”

We laughed as we stood up. I turned to Wade and threw my arms around him. “Thank you. You’ve been the best honorary uncle I could have ever asked for.”

“No problem, child. I just wished I could have known you sooner.”

Wade touched Nato’s shoulder before heading back toward his own quarters. “Working with Yunez to run the council really suits you.” I bumped my shoulder against his.

“It does, doesn’t it?” He smiled down at me as he threaded his fingers through mine.

“Yes. You’re a natural leader, and watching you come into yourself more and more every day is amazing. I’m in awe of you, Nato.” I stopped and glanced up at him. He turned and cupped my cheek with his other hand and lowered his face until his lips just brushed mine.

“What am I going to do with you?”

“Fuck me often, I hope.” I grinned. “And maybe do that food porn thing you do so well. It would really help with the fucking.”

He laughed, then pressed his lips to mine. "I think I can do that. What shall I make for you next, hmm? Succulent, perfectly seasoned steak? How about plump, juicy, fall off the bone ribs with a side of creamy, mashed potatoes that will melt in your mouth?"

"Yes. All of it. Yes." I nodded.

He laughed. "That can be arranged. But I want you to know something. The sulking you've done? And don't pretend you haven't—" he pressed a finger to my lips to stop me from speaking. Nato was right. I had been sulking just a bit when I thought no one was looking. "There's no reason for it. We kicked all the ass, and we did it without the help of the stone amplifier. If that doesn't tell you that all our practice paid off, I don't know what will."

I opened my lips under his finger but I didn't know what to say. He was right. I'd been beating myself up about how things could have gone better, how we could have saved more people if I'd been a match for the Mazza from the beginning.

It was weird, I know. It had to be some kind of survivor's guilt with a twist. They had been out to kill in that last fight and we lost quite a few of our people, including some Cherries.

"You're right. We did do that. By ourselves." And locked the amplifying statue away where the playing field would be level from here on out.

"Are you good now? No more sneaking off to pout? Or if you feel like you need to, you'll talk to one of us first so we can put your head on straight?" He pinched my chin and tilted my face up.

I sighed. "You're such a pain in the ass." Then he slapped mine.

"Come on, Iss. Let's go to our rooms. Everyone is already there waiting for us."

"What about Egan's family? Aren't they arriving today?" I twisted, like I expected them to pop out from behind a bush.

"Tomorrow. They sent a missive. Their trip was delayed because the girls wanted to visit a local fair."

"Perfect, then I have you all to myself all night," I said, turning my face to hide my grin.

At our door, Nato twisted the knob and pushed it open. I had no idea why, but butterflies soon burst into a wild orgy in my stomach. Was that foreshadowing? Were we about to orgy it up? I wouldn't complain.

Not at all.

The scent of fresh flowers hit my nose as we stepped inside. Colorful petals were spread all over the floor, beckoning us to move further into the suite. Warm light flickered over the walls from candles on various surfaces.

But it was the sight in the dining room that had my eyes as big as freaking dinner plates.

All of my mates, sans Nato, stood naked around the table, stroking their hard cocks.

Heat flushed every surface of my body.

I'd seen this porn before. We were about to have a bukkake scene.

I was down.

Oh look. Nato joined my troop of courageous cocks.

"Is this all for me?" I started pulling off my clothes as I bit my lip.

Yunez smirked. "This is always all yours." He gestured to the guys.

I laughed and covered my face as I made my way over to the table. Egan and Jari helped me up, and I laid down, all spread out for their dinner.

This was a life a girl could get used to. With the realm safe, my family with me, more knowledge about myself and my history than I thought I'd ever have, I could get used to this.

And it all started because of a missed Uber ride.

Well, orchestrated by Yunez, but potato potatoe.

You get the picture.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

The End

AFTERWORD

Holy hell! Finally!

If you have followed me for a while, you might know that Marks of the Mazza was my very first book baby. It's the whole reason I started my writing journey. For that, these characters will always hold a soft spot in my heart.

And now it's finished! After 4 years!

In the grand scheme of things, 4 books in 4 years isn't that crazy, but boy does it feel like this conclusion was a long time coming. I hope you enjoyed their wild and silly ride as much as I did. This series is definitely a palate cleanser, which I never realized I needed.

Thank you to the girl gang for always being there for me as I whine and cry about adulting and deadlines lol. Heather is the real OG, and I could never have gotten this far without her. She's expert at wielding whips. ;)

Now, what's next?

I've been on a contemporary streak for quite a while. And for some strange reason, my stories are getting darker and darker. I hope you'll still give my new series a chance!

Book 1 ([Addict](#)) just happens to be releasing this December. Check it out if you it tickles your fancy.

If you're in the mood to check out my backlist, all links can be found in the next few pages for these books. However, if you have strong stalking game...

You can stalk me on my [Facebook Author Page](#), [Bookbub](#), and you can also find me in my closed reading group [Blake's Book Babes](#). In the reading group you can interact with me directly, find excerpts and information on upcoming releases, as well as play games and enter for giveaways. If you're addicted to TikTok like so many of us (covers face) I also post teasers on there!

I'd love to have you join me!

XOXO

Blake

OTHER TITLES

Bastard Brothers of Carnage

[Addict](#)

Mazza Series

[Marks of the Mazza](#)

[Bonds of the Mazza](#)

[Secrets of the Mazza](#)

Astrid Scott Series

[Pretty Lies](#)

[Ugly Truths](#)

[Busted Dreams](#)

[Vivid Fears](#)

[Brittle Hope](#)

Fragile Minds Duet

[Fractured](#)

[Altered](#)

Standalone RH Romance

[Pin-up Girl](#)

Co-Writes with my Co-wrify

Standalone Series

[Kiss of Fate](#)

[Taste of Karma](#)

Cardinal Sins Series

[Kill Song](#)

[First Chorus](#)

High Note

Last Word

Standalone MF Romance

Full Glasses and Burju Shoes

WHO IS BLAKE?

Blake Blessing is no longer new on the Indie scene, but she's still ecstatic about this chapter in life! She is a mom, wife, art enthusiast, and author.

She attended ten different schools growing up, so books became her constant friend. Escaping into books of all different genres made life fun and exciting. Blake was also raised on music and still blasts it through the house and car at every opportunity.

She has a weird sense of humor and a penchant for chocolate milk. It only makes sense she would one day go on to write her own stories.