

MAY SAGE WRITING AS

ALEXI BLAKE

SK

WRATH  
OF THE  
WICKED



# WRATH OF THE WICKED

A SEVEN KINGDOMS FANTASY  
STANDALONE

MAY SAGE AS ALEXI BLAKE

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Wrath of the Wicked  
A Seven Kingdoms Standalone Novel  
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# CHAPTER ONE

# THE WAY OF MONSTERS



# DARIA



The most beautiful lie I've ever heard is that monsters are made, not born.

I smile as my ethics professor vehemently argues his point, citing examples of bloodthirsty beasts who chose to rise above what nature dictated for them. Good little vampires feeding on volunteers, dark witches saving lives, and even fairies breaking bargains to protect their loved ones. In contrast, he cites perfectly common, regular people raised in loving homes, only to turn into mindless killers, liars, and cheats. Nurture supplanting nature.

My father would have laughed himself hoarse if he'd heard that crap.

He'd find it amusing that I take ethics in the first place, but it's a mandatory course for all those studying sciences and technology. The Five Kingdoms' Superior University is trying their best to ensure we don't create anything too monstrous ourselves.

I narrow my eyes as I feel the air shift, seconds before a sharp object presses between my shoulder blades hard enough to sting, small enough to ignore.

I don't turn. I don't need to. I know exactly who's pushing my buttons. Again.

One day, he'll manage to warrant a reaction from me. He won't like it. I won't like the consequences.

"Hey, common girl. Do you think ugliness is hereditary, or the result of nurturing?" the boy who delights in endeavoring

to get a rise out of me asks, echoing our professor's reasoning.

His group of friends chuckle under their breaths, just low enough that Professor Paur can't hear, although as far as insults go, this is one of his worst to date.

One would think a bully such as he would know that words only hurt when there's enough truth sprinkled through them for the target to recognize themselves.

I'm not ugly, though I certainly don't have much claim to true beauty either.

My mother's countenance is legendary and my youngest sister took after her. Their raven hair gleams blue in the light, and their gray eyes shine like stars, even in the darkness. Men have offered jewels and priceless treasures for nothing more than their smiles.

It is useful in our family trade. No one is ever afraid enough of what hides underneath loveliness.

I take after my father. My brownish hair is coarse and quick to knot, so I keep it in a braid and out of the way, prioritizing practicality and efficiency over indulgence in my appearance. I also have his eyes. Most of the time, they are black, which is boring in Dorath. Common.

It has been years since my pupils have turned into another color, and in an effort to keep it that way, I never pay attention to the boy at my back.

My vanity has never been geared toward my physical appearance, so his words completely fail to wound me. Even if I had cared, I would have known in my heart that I am, by any standards, pretty enough.

He's a fool, but a harmless one, this prince of ours.

Aeron Sinclair, newly dubbed heir to the throne of Dorath, and therefore, my liege—as far as he sees it, anyway—started to pick on me the moment I set a foot in Five.

I'm not the only Dorathian here, although we do have a world-renowned college in Rhunar, but I certainly am the only

one not bearing a famous name, or surrounded by opulent proof of wealth. That makes me an easy target for the privileged idiot.

The prince ordered me to bow on day one. I kept walking. I was within my rights to do so for various reasons, all of which I wish to keep to myself. His minuscule frontal lobe doesn't understand how a girl such as me would dare to disregard his words, and he took it as an invitation to "show me my place." The fact that we started at the same time three years ago means that we share many classes and assemblies. He's often in my way.

One day in the far future, I will laugh and laugh and laugh myself sick about his presumption. Probably over his corpse. In the meantime, I sharpen my patience. It's always good practice.

"Now, now, Aeron," another voice chimes in, low and rough, like a whisper and a chuckle.

This time, I tense and bristle. I easily identify this voice too, though I've heard it less often, and seldom addressing *me*.

"*Hello, little dove,*" were his first words to me, three years ago, just minutes after Aeron demanded I bend the knee to him.

A dove, *me*. A small, harmless, useless bird representing peace and love. How *ridiculous* that is.

But he's got every right to be as ridiculous as he'd like. He's another prince, one far from harmless, and with a sharper tongue.

"Be kind." Like Rovon Briar even knows the meaning of that word. "If the poor girl knew anything of beauty, she certainly wouldn't wear *that*."

I breathe out, indifferent to the new wave of titters, this time more enthused.

This gibe is better aimed than Aeron's. I may not be hideous, but I am rather badly dressed.

Unlike almost everyone else in Five, I don't choose my outfits like I expect to attend a runway show after class.

Though the insult finds its mark, it leaves me cold. I don't care about my clothing. Rován can be far crueler when the mood strikes him. He could find something I do care about and tear it apart with ease.

I have seen the prince of Flaur open his mouth and use that enchantingly captivating voice of his to form words sharper than blades, until his hapless victim bawls on the floor. I caught the heat in his usually pale eyes as they turned a deep moss green, and realized that he *liked* it. Causing pain delights him.

We monsters recognize each other.

All the poor girl did was ask if it was true that his father was one of the fae—as though his delicately pointed ears and the sweetness of the air around him weren't proof enough.

I suppose he showed her.

The weaker barb does support Professor Paur's nonsense: Rován *is* a monster, but he doesn't always go for the throat. We can fight our natures when we want to.

But we are what we are, no matter how we file down our claws. I can't let myself forget it. My dreams won't allow it.

I know better than to engage him, reply to any word he might cast in my direction. I don't even let myself meet his eyes. There are many dangerous things on this battlefield they call a university, but none make my blood run cold like this man.

I would have deferred ethics another year if I'd known he was taking the class, but how could I suspect it? We've never studied the same thing. He's in law and politics, and I, in science. He's post-grad, with two masters under his belt—six years ahead of me. But this ethics class is an elective open to any grade, and necessary to graduate for many fields.

School only started two weeks ago. I might drop the enrollment, if it's not too late. I'm not a coward—just something of a realist. I can ignore the foolish boy-prince and

his friends. If Aeron pushes me too hard, I can walk away. But Rován does not spare those he seeks to hurt.

It has been three years since I killed anyone, and if the Briar prince and I come to blows, my hands will run red and my heart will beat black once again.

He's twenty-six, and in the last year of his doctorate—I checked. He'll be gone next summer. We've managed to survive in each other's periphery for this long. What's one more year?

I take my time packing my things in my battered red leather satchel at the end of class, to ensure the fool, the monster, and their circles are long gone by the time I walk out.

Magnapolis is always hot this time of the year, but the air feels heavier than usual now. I relish it. It makes me think of my home, its endless dunes, its red silk, its scent of jasmine and ashes and blood.

I miss it all so much, I am tempted to return every day, every moment.

The main thing keeping me here, in this stuffy world city, are my father's three last words to me.

Words have power. I learned that before I met Rován Briar.

*Never come back.*

## CHAPTER TWO

# FASCINATION

# ROVAN



I've noticed something new about the freak today. She doesn't sweat. Who doesn't sweat in this weather?

I would put it down to the fact that she's from Dorath. She's seen springs hotter than our summers. But Aeron was also born in the southernmost kingdom of the continent, and he's oozing stench like the rest of us.

I add the odd detail to the list of strange things about my adorable little freak.

The fact that I seem to be the only one to notice there's something fundamentally wrong with Daria Stone never ceases to amaze me. How can they not realize that the outwardly unassuming "common" girl is more of an oddity than any of us demis? I knew at first glance.

The first time I saw her, I stared hard. Not that there's anything particularly remarkable about any of her physical features; a pointed nose, a square chin that would have looked almost masculine if not for those high cheekbones, lashes so long they belong on a horse, and a shiny brown mane braided down her back, catching reddish highlights in the sun, she's the quintessential Dorathian woman. Cute enough, but not worth a second glance in a crowd of beautiful noble women whose imperfections were long erased, either by genetics or spells.

I stare all the same, because unlike me, and my friends, and my foes, and anyone else in this joke of a university, and



any living person I've encountered, even in the land of the fae...she doesn't have a presence.

My ability to sense the powers around me is innate; I've never needed to cultivate it, but I could distinguish auras, and know whether the footsteps approaching belonged to my nurse, my mother, my guards, or my brother before I could speak. Most demis ought to be able to do the same. I suppose they're so busy trying to sense who's the most powerful person in the room, no one bothers to notice that the pretty little dove feels like *nothing*.

I blinked, staring at her, as though she might be something I came up with in a dream, or a mirage, because the place where she stood on the asphalt was *empty*.

I've always considered the colorful haze surrounding each person, beast, and some of the more sentient plants to be proof of life, proof of a soul.

And she has none.

That can mean one of two things. She's either found a way to constantly conceal her aura, or she simply doesn't possess one. Either way, she's a freak of nature. Something stranger than anything here. Stranger than the terrifying witch my friend Reiks is courting, stranger than *me*, although I don't quite belong in this world.

I was intrigued enough to approach her all those years ago.

"Hello, little dove," I drawled, wearing my most charming smile, only showing a few sharp teeth in a kind warning. Nature shaped me to seduce my prey, and many find themselves fascinated by what they see on the surface, never sensing the dark pit underneath. I didn't want to charm the girl, just get her to let me take a peek under the surface.

She didn't shiver at the two pointed canines, nor did she seem particularly enamored. Or bothered. Or...anything.

I called her a dove in my mind from the start and I still do, when I don't think of her as a freak. She's so small, only reaching my chest, though her ornate boots add a couple of

inches to her height. Is she part pixie? No, a pixie's presence is small, but it *exists*.

The nickname proved accurate. I later discovered she has a habit of climbing high, to the top of the roof of the old castle now housing the dorms, without a care that a fall might break her neck. By now, if she materialized a pair of wings and flew away, I wouldn't be surprised.

I thought she might like to hear the moniker, and earn another one of my smiles, fangs and all. When I see fit to be pleasant, I rarely leave anyone—man or woman—indifferent.

Yet she set those dark eyes on me, and remained completely cold.

“Your Highness.” She didn't curtsy—nor did she have to, as a subject of another realm, though it's considered a common courtesy. She also didn't swoon, or shrink, or even smile. “I'm late for class.”

Then she walked past me, utterly unaffected. Her dismissal baffled, amused, intrigued me. I am never ignored. I am either loved or feared.

Not by she.

I've greeted her a few times since, and was received with as much nonchalance at each occurrence. She's not playing hard to get. She just isn't *interested*, which only serves to make me more curious.

What does she want, this dainty freak of mine? What is she doing here, if not trying to better her life by making connections above her station, like any of the students who aren't at the top of the world already? I thought she might not care for me because her concern was Dorath, but she treats Aeron with more callous detachment than she does me, if possible.

I don't understand her at all, and she's a wonderful distraction from my many plights, so I keep watching from a distance, seeking her out in study halls, library alcoves, in corridors. At least I'm not creeping about smelling her panties behind her back. Yet. What's her smell like, I wonder? I don't

think I've ever checked from up close. At a distance, I sense something floral.

I can't recall how many nights I've spent researching what manner of creature this dove could be. Someone with no presence, no sweat, no obvious ambition, and no regard for rank. I might as well be searching for a corpse, or a ghost.

The air's not spelled in the ethics classroom, and whatever machine they employ to keep it pleasant must be broken, because it's as stuffy and unbearable as outside.

I'm disgustingly sweaty.

For a moment, I wish Zale were here to cool it with a wave of his hand. But then, Zale would be here, attempting to get under my skin for fun. I think I prefer dealing with the heat than with the king of Ravelyn. We're friends of a sort, but that doesn't prevent us from doing our best to drive each other insane.

I wouldn't mind getting Daria to teach me that specific trick of hers. I can spell my skin to ensure whatever moisture I secrete smells pleasant, and use plenty of deodorant, but Daria's skin has no shine, appearing completely cool in the sweltering heat.

*What are you, little dove?*

The class is dismissed. I leave with Aeron and his flock, though I'd much rather linger and watch Daria do her best to avoid us. It's not just that I don't know what manner of creature she is. I also don't *get* her motivation, her goals. I want to take a glimpse beyond the dark eyes, right into her mind.

But I keep my distances, as always.

Daria Stone is far better off without me. For one, I've never been close to anyone without hurting them in one way or another. Causing pain is my nature. But more worryingly, if anyone knew how obsessed I am with this girl, they'd mistake my fascination for tenderness, and see her as a weakness they could exploit to get to me.

And then, they'd kill her.

## CHAPTER THREE

# DEALS AND BARGAINS

# DARIA



In my dream, I am covered in blood, and I smile. It could be a fantasy or a memory, I don't know. I try not to dwell on the meanings of dreams. Most don't reveal anything of importance, and those that do, I'm happy to ignore. I've had enough premonitions to last me a lifetime.

I wake with the sunrise, as I was always trained to, and after the barest of ablutions, I give into my need to climb out of my window, along the downspouts and sills, until I reach the pale blue tiles of the roof.

I always feel better up high, with a full overview of my surroundings. Besides, the cityscape is beautiful in the early hours of the morning, with the mist and dew obscuring the lower ground.

Our dorm is set up in what used to be the Vanemir royal keep, so I'm greeted by a gargle of gargoyles and ornate features. I've taken to calling the dragon right above my dorm *Shrob*, which means "fat" in the old tongue, seldom taught in Dorath now.

I instructed myself when I was nine and my mother wouldn't give me further assignments. I was bored. *Sprita*, the words of the little folk, and the first language ever recorded in Dorath, is tedious and complex, so it kept me busy for a couple of years. When I mastered it, I took up violin, the only thing more boring I could think of.

I have always been insatiable, for knowledge, for power, for entertainment, for *more*. One of my many flaws, and the

reason why Five is the perfect place to hide for someone like me.

And I am hiding. From enemies, from ghosts, from those in my family who didn't understand why I needed to leave, but also from myself.

"I figured I'd find you here."

I don't turn toward the voice. I heard, felt, and identified the newcomer as soon as he opened the latch leading up to the roof from the attic. A little late for me, but my guard's mostly down these days, and my training's woefully neglected.

And the newcomer knows a thing or two about hiding himself when he wants to. "We haven't spoken in some time, Red."

I don't do well with small talk, so I remain silent, hoping he'll get to the point fast enough.

The young prince moves with grace, but carefully, as he chooses the safest way to get to the edge of the roof, where I crouch as I survey the city before us.

"Did you hear about the attack on Blythe?" Natheran Reiks asks me.

I answer the question he didn't voice. "I wasn't behind it. If I had been, she'd be dead, not hiding in Flaur."

The crown prince's head snaps to me, and his silver-gray eyes are sharp, probing.

Did he think I'd believe the tale he spun? According to any report, his fiancée tragically died saving his life after a vicious attack on his way to school, right before the start of the year. He knows me better than that. Death and deception are my trades.

I'd noticed Blythe Ostra's gay as they come. I expected her to conveniently disappear in the near future, so he wouldn't have to marry her. I was bored and intrigued enough to check out the crime scene, and to follow the trail of breadcrumbs leading to Blythe's true fate.

Reiks didn't leave many cues, efficiently hiding her whereabouts. The trail that could lead anyone to her, I erased for him, unbidden. I wasn't getting paid for it, or even earning a favor, but as I said, I was bored. And I don't dislike the future king of Anderkan. He's the kind of devious I admire, and look at with some fondness, as it makes me think of my father.

"I didn't think you were guilty," Reiks finally says. "You, or any of your kind. Thank the gods. Otherwise, I would be buried six feet underground by now." He has the courage to laugh.

He's right. If he had been a target of the assassin's guild, his name would have been carved under his ancestors' on his country's memorial walls. Whoever conducted the hit on him was inept.

"I need to find a way to contact your guild," he tells me. "Not through the usual channels. I need to speak to someone high up—as high as possible right away."

I snort. "Only that."

He barges on, ignoring my contempt. "There's a woman I need to protect. If the guild takes a contract on me? Fine. But I will do anything in my power to ensure she doesn't get caught in the crossfire."

This intrigues me.

I've been acquainted with Natheran Reiks the Seventh for three years. He found me playing violin in the streets of Magnapolis just to have something to do. I don't know what clued him in as to what I am, but he stopped in his tracks and approached me.

*"A Wicked from the Shadow Guild, here?"* He tilted his head. *"I do hope you've not been sent for me."*

*"I'm not with the guild,"* I grumbled, too stunned to think to lie.

Coming close to the likes of me without being certain of my purpose is either foolish or extremely brave. I haven't yet decided where he stands.



Reiks offered me what I never thought to wish for: a place here, in the prestigious Five Kingdoms' Superior University. In exchange, he asked only for one favor he wouldn't name then.

I don't kid myself. I know what he'll demand of me eventually. All that anyone has ever wanted from me.

Death.

I was desperate enough for what he could provide to take the deal anyway.

"Is that your favor, prince?" I check, if only to see how badly he wants to protect this lucky girl of his.

Reiks considers my question for a second, then inclines his head once. "Yes. Yes, it is. You will be free of any duty toward me if you can ensure Alis is protected against the Wicked."

I am so rarely surprised, or pleased. My laugh is unfamiliar, rough, and hurts my vocal chords. "Alis," I repeat. *Alice* is a common enough name, but he says it ending the sound with a clear snake-like hiss. *Ae-lyz*. "Alis Frejr?"

The prince nods again.

He watches me strangely, like he's never seen me smile, and he probably hasn't. I can count on one hand the number of people who have in the last years, and have at least two fingers left over.

If I were of fae blood, I would have let him waste his favor, but fair is fair.

"She has nothing to fear from me or the guild," I tell him.

Alis is my friend. My one friend here. That makes her the one person who'll never be hurt by a Wicked, so long as I live.

And according to some, I will live until the end of time.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE PAWN AND THE  
PUPPET

## ROVAN



The reason I pay more attention to auras than some is sheer survival instinct. Sensing those around me is the reason my neck is still upon my shoulders. I've been dodging close calls with death since age seven, staying one step ahead thanks, at first, to that one ability. Later, I added other weapons to my arsenal.

By the time the stranger knocks at my doors, I know he's a veteran warrior with a slight limp, a sheathed sword on the right side of his belt. Ceremonial nowadays, though the blade certainly saw its fair share of blood in its time.

He favors the left, mostly due to the wound he sustained in his knee. I don't doubt he could use either hand in a pinch. I also know he's out of shape—his heart rate isn't that of a spry young man still training regularly.

An old soldier, promoted to royal envoy when he could no longer serve.

I don't bother to retrieve the dagger under my pillow before I drag myself out of bed and open my own door, wearing nothing but breeches and my belt, with its assortment of flasks filled with venoms, spells, and poisons. If he wanted to see me dressed, he should have come after six in the morning.

"Your Highness," the envoy bearing the blue and gold of Flaur says, not hiding his surprise, either at my attire or the fact that he's not received by a footman.

Though royal quarters would have been mine for the taking, I opted for a smaller room I could manage without a staff. Less chance of anyone slipping powders in my drink.

“What does the old woman want?” I’m not one for polite conversation. At least, not with a servant of the enemy.

It might seem a little dramatic to call one’s own mother an enemy, but she has tried to murder me countless times, so it seems fitting enough.

Objectively, I understand. I am dangerous.

My twin brother and I were born eleven minutes apart and only one of us could be the heir to the throne of Flaur. Half of the kingdom believes the second twin is supposed to rule, according to an old law, and the other half favors the elder child. From my very first breath, I’ve divided the kingdom.

My mother never approved of the existence of her second born, but she only started sending assassins after we started school. I suppose I ought to be grateful to have had seven years of safety. Few threats to Aude Briar can boast as much in the Golden Mountains.

There’s no proof that the queen is actively trying to dispose of me, naturally, but I’ve seen it in her eyes and read it in her heart. Plus, I’ve tortured my fair share of would-be killers who confirmed it. Their testimony under duress would have never stood in a court of law, even if they’d lived long enough to give it. Still, it satisfies me.

The attacks ceased three years ago. I rage every time I remember why, the darkness in my blood rising to the surface, making me want to lash out.

The envoy clears his throat, bows, and hands me an envelope, sealed with the Briar sigil: flowers under a bleeding heart.

I know better than to touch the paper with my bare hands. Who knows what it could be laced with. A spell to make me compliant, a draught of eversleep, a love potion to make me fall madly for Chiara Mallone, the harpy my mother would have me wed. “Leave it.”

I retreat back into the room, door open. He can drop it on the floor or my desk, I don't care either way.

The man clears his throat. "With your leave, the queen had hoped you would confirm your attendance."

So, it's an invitation. "The queen is always hopeful where I am concerned."

Hopeful for my death, or my submission, or my disappearance, depending on the day.

"Sir..." He hesitates. "I was told not to depart without an answer."

Poor old warrior. He likely didn't do anything to deserve to be used as an arrow between two warring royals. "Where did you hurt your knee, the southern rebellions or the fae war?" I ask out of curiosity.

The wound appears well healed, and he certainly can move around on it, but it would have been serious for him to exchange his armor in favor for court attire. I suspect he must have received it over a hundred years ago.

He's a demi, naturally. The Flaurian army doesn't employ many common-blooded soldiers. Nor does my mother.

He's startled for a moment. "Against the fae uprising in the east, Your Highness. I had heard your powers of deduction were unparalleled."

I roll my eyes at the flattery. "Hardly."

"Many believe that you would make a great king," the envoy pushes. "With a claim as strong as your brother's and better...abilities."

White-hot anger courses through my body.

I've been approached for as long as I could remember by those who want to know my feeling about robbing my twin of his crown, but never as boldly, as openly as I am now.

"What abilities would that be?" I grit between my teeth. "My *sight*?"

I am, by nature and habit, a suspicious person. Forty-seven murder attempts would do that to a man. I used to believe that there was a chance my mother wasn't the only one sending murderers after me. I thought Sylvan might have done the same. Why wouldn't he? His crown is threatened by my every breath. I might have in his shoes.

Then that night, they came at me with a new sort of poison, acid gas—something I hadn't fortified myself against yet. Something that succeeded in eating my flesh.

It was my brother who dragged me out of the trap, at the cost of his eyes. And since he's now blind, the queen wants *me* on the throne. He's become unsuitable, the reject, the one to be rid of. Or rather, he would be, if I was playing her game.

The envoy has the sense to physically recoil, taking two steps back and holding his hands up. "No, no, I merely meant your intellect, my prince. A man able to sense the purpose of anyone approaching him would make for a powerful king indeed. I misspoke."

Yes, he did, and yes, he meant it as an insult to my brother. If only he knew. My skills are nothing to Sylvan.

Though he annoyed me, the old soldier is too irrelevant for me to crush. I consider doing so for sport, but it's too early in the day for effort.

"Tell my mother I'll pass on whatever ceremony she wants to parade me at."

"But sir, the court is coming to Magnapolis in order to celebrate your birthday."

I groan. Of course, she'd drag them *here*, since she can't get me to come back home. Not that it'll change anything. I have no intention of playing the role of her show pony. I have no intention of taking her crown either. I turned my back on it a long time ago.

"Like I said. And shut the door on your way out."

## CHAPTER FIVE



THE BOOKWORM AND  
THE PRINCE

# DARIA



I should move.

The library is the vastest space in the entire campus, larger than the massive chapel or the formal ballroom that used to be able to house the entire court of Vanemir.

One would think the infuriating prince would find another place to sit than in the alcove right in front of my spot by the fire, but here he is.

Only this is *my* place of choice, close to every book I need to check for my microphysics, chemistry, and astrology classes, and right below the oil portrait of a pouting old lady with a smile full of secrets, and near the fire.

The library's cool year-round to protect the books—some are ancient and fragile—so the heat is essential to me.

I claimed this shabby red armchair years ago. I'd hate to retreat because of a gaggle of spoiled brats. Besides, I was here first. They chose their seats apurpose. If I do relocate, they'll likely follow. Worse yet, they might take my desire to be left alone for cowardice and pounce, as predators are wont to when they sense a weakness.

I shut the thick volume on thermodynamics with a sigh. It doesn't contain what I need for my paper, and it was the last in my pile today, so I need to hunt for other references.

Here, it's perfectly acceptable to leave the books out on the tables—in fact, it's encouraged, as the librarians prefer to ensure they're shelved correctly—but I take my stash with me. I know exactly where they're supposed to go.

I've worked in the library since my first semester, for spare cash and something to occupy my time.

Idleness is venom. When I'm not busy, I think. I remember. That's when dangerous thoughts slither in my mind, and more perilously yet, my heart.

I could go back. I've been away for long enough. I'm older now. Wiser. I know myself better. I can refuse the assignments that don't work for me. Not let the nature of the job poison my heart. I can—

Except the job isn't why I left. I've never had issues killing. If someone's actions have warranted a hit from the Shadow Guild, I don't mind snuffing their noxious presence out of Xhera. Death is part of life—a necessary one. My existence proves it.

I left because none of *my* deeds mattered.

By the time I was twelve, I had more kills than my twenty-year-old sister. At fifteen, I received the honor mark at the base of my neck, signifying that I've taken a hundred targets—a mark only the highest shadows receive.

And still, I was no one. I *am* no one. The gods willed it so.

It's no wonder that I grew depressed, but a depressed assassin is a dangerous thing—for me and others.

I knew, to my core, that I needed to find another kingdom, another purpose. I have a highly logical brain, and sciences appeal to my inquisitive nature. I feel better now than I did the year or two before I left the guild. I could make a place here. I have to try.

“Look what we have here. A street rat in the library. Are you lost?”

This boy is exhausting. Someone ought to put a dagger through that pretty neck of his. I could do so. I would, if he didn't happen to be the little brother of one of my rare friends.

Loken, the banished prince accused of killing his stepmother a couple of years ago, used to sneak out of his

golden palace and into the house of coin, demanding lessons in thievery and agility.

My father gladly obliged. “Maybe we’ll finally have a king worth his grain of sand,” he used to say.

He was older than me, but always kind, charming, and eager to learn.

I remember showing him the trick to balancing himself on a rope. All right, I mostly chased him with two knives, threatening to stab him if he didn’t make it to the other side, but it worked.

I see Loken in Aeron’s golden frame and stormy eyes. So, he can breathe. For now.

I shelve the books and retrieve two more, getting frustrated. I’m fairly certain I’ve read them before. I didn’t see anything about elemental magik being transformed into electricity. The research might be too new. What I truly need is an e-stone tablet, so I can check out the papers on the globe, but I can’t afford one.

Well, that’s incorrect. There’s plenty of money in my guild account. I was housed, my sisters used to give me their old clothes—Tamira at first, but Samara also grew taller than me in her teens, and she loved nothing more than accumulating new frocks, so I got hand-me-downs from her too. There was an impressive library in the House of Shadow, and many magnificent treasures to look at in the House of Coin.

Between all of the material things available to me, I’ve never had a reason to spend much of the money I got for all of my assignments. And the guild pays *well*. I gave away a portion and hoarded the rest. I have a well-padded fund. But the moment I access it, my mother will know exactly where I am.

I’ve well and truly disappeared, using every tool at my disposal to ensure she wouldn’t find me. The only thing I kept is my first name. It’s common enough. I can’t afford that kind of mistake, unless I’m ready to lay another dozen false trails after making a withdrawal—preferably to another country.

That's too much work to go through the trouble unless my need is dire.

I could ask Reiks to front me the cash. He would, too, but he'd have a price. And I owe that calculating prince enough already.

"You know," Aeron says, getting up from his seat in the alcove to stalk to me as I approach the neat shelves. "I was bored over the holidays, and I wondered what the water readers might predict for someone as tedious as you."

I tense.

He makes it sound like looking me up was without any forethought, but I know better. This was premeditated. He'd have to have checked out information about me before entering my details on the Dorathian records.

I never suspected he'd be intrigued enough to go to the effort. How I wish he'd leave me alone.

"What do you think I found, Daria Stone?" He smirks, leaning forward.

He thinks he has me cornered; I suppose he does. What he doesn't realize is that this path doesn't lead to his victory. It leads to a pen jabbed into his throat.

"Don't get into my personal space." It's a warning. I'm on edge today, and he shouldn't push me.

Obviously, he doesn't consider me anything worthy of concern, so he sneers. "I can get into wherever I'd like. I am your *prince*."

Does he realize how creepy he sounds?

"Are you?" I purposely make myself appear bored, matter-of-fact. I need him to drop it. "You didn't find anything about me in the records, did you?"

It would have been hard to, with the wrong name, the wrong age, the wrong birthdate and location. I don't even think my file in the school system has an accurate *height* for me. I'm five foot nothing, but I told them five foot one when they asked. No one questioned it.

“You’re from Dorath,” he states confidently. “Your accent might be lighter now, but you drawled like a peasant when you first arrived. And look at you.”

He waves to me, without elaborating. He’s right, of course. I am amber skinned, dark of eye and hair. The typical southern woman. If my complexion were of a deeper brown, I could have come from Southern Anderkan.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I was born in Anderkan,” I lie easily. “We moved to Dorath when I was ten, and I grew up there, but my waters were never read.”

I am comfortable with lying, sounding as uninterested as if I was talking about the weather forecast. He can’t find a flaw in my words or tone. I’ve fooled many a smarter man than him.

“So, you’re an immigrant.” He wrinkles his nose. “Come to take honest people’s jobs.”

I snap. “I don’t even *live* in Dorath, idiot.”

The fact that that boy is going to be our poster child is sad. Loken would have made a *much* better monarch.

Thankfully, Aeron’ll never have to make one important decision in his life.

Dorath might have kings and queens, to sit at the table with the rest of the kingdoms’ rulers, but they’re nothing but props, pawns in a game other nations fail to understand.

There are two rulers in the city of sand. The Shadow Assassin, and the Master of Coin.

Or as I like to call them, Ma and Pa.

## CHAPTER SIX

# UNDER THE FEATHERS



## ROVAN



I'll admit it freely: I don't like my "friend." We fell into the same company by default. He's going to be king, so completely ignoring him would be unwise in my position. Besides, Reiks wouldn't have allowed it.

Natheran Reiks has no actual authority over me, but he's annoyingly adept at making himself a nuisance when he doesn't get his way.

I was rather opposed to the idea of having a friend, but Reiks all but kicked my door open and informed me we were going to hang out one day. I think I said no seven times. Friends, or anyone I might care about, were a weakness I thought I couldn't afford at the time.

The eighth, he came with a vial of elixir, accompanied by the recipe—something I wouldn't have been given access to. That shit can cure most venoms and poisons. I was in, for better or worse.

Reiks is our uncontested leader, for the simple reason that no one else wants to be. Without him, we'd all drift apart. He decided we should let the new heir to the Dorathian throne in our group, so, we did, but I'm not fond of the kid. Nor does he, really. I think the only person who can stand that idiot is Selina, but she's female and he reportedly has a big dick, so I don't take her judgment into account on that subject.

Yet among us, I am undoubtedly the one spending the most time with Aeron. I wouldn't if I could help it, but I fell into it for various reasons. We follow the same course of study—

Political Sciences—and though I am a doctorate candidate and he’s just working on his masters, we occasionally end up in the same classes.

He also enjoys a good sparring session, and there aren’t many people I can cross swords with without taking a pound of flesh. For all his flaws, Aeron isn’t a bad fighter.

And there’s the fact that Aeron loves nothing more than to stalk my favorite freak. I suppose we have that in common, though for vastly different reasons.

I’m intrigued by what makes her different, fascinated by everything other people fail to see. I want to know what she is, what makes her tick. He just wants to get his dick wet.

I don’t even think he realizes that he wants her, but he’s a cliché: a boy pulling the ponytail of the girl he likes. It would be entertaining to watch if it wasn’t so profoundly pathetic.

I am almost certain I’ll find him in Daria’s general vicinity when I walk into the library to work on my thesis. She’s almost always in here after her classes, until they close at one in the morning—either working on her papers or assisting the librarian. What I don’t expect to find is them *talking*. That’s rare enough. He insults her occasionally, but she usually ignores him.

I tease her too, though I never push it too far. She doesn’t pay any attention to attempts at civilities, so the only way to get her to engage me is to push her buttons.

“What did you just say to me?” he snarls, with a degree of ire I’ve never sensed from him before.

She doesn’t usually respond to his taunts at all, but clearly she must have gotten on his nerves today. I curse myself for missing anything out of the ordinary.

“I pointed out the fact that I am here, in Magnapolis—which every person on Xhera can claim for their own. It’s an *international* city. Ergo, I’m not stealing any Dorathian’s work. Not that immigrating equates to theft. If anyone wants to employ someone, it’s their business and no one else’s.”

That's the most I've ever heard her say. He must have expressed something offensive about either her or a loved one.

I approach the advanced applied physics aisle, though I wouldn't even begin to understand a word in any of those books.

My undergrad field was in applied magiks, specializing in potions, then I switched to politics, which is more useful to me, as I have a better grasp of brewing than most of the professors here. Actual physics and chemistry aren't unlike potions, but I still have trouble understanding the core concepts. Mostly because I don't need to. Magik is much easier.

"You called me an *idiot*," Aeron growls. "I am a prince."

"Unfortunately, one doesn't preclude the other. The world *would* be a better place if monarchs could lose their titles for being a moron, but I don't think that reform would be very popular."

I huff a laugh, and cover my mouth.

She's sassy. Why didn't I know that, after watching her for so long?

Because she doesn't talk to me, that's why. I hate Aeron more than usual, for managing to get under her skin today.

"Who do you think you are?" Aeron's voice has risen to a shout in his anger and frustration.

I speed up, drawing closer.

"The person who's going to crush your balls so fucking hard if you don't *step out of my space right now*."

My heart skips a beat. That voice. That...power.

I sense her. I see her. For the very first time in three years, I can feel Daria Stone.

Her presence and aura are potent. Burning hot. It's completely, utterly unlike everything else, everyone else.

In Aeron's shoes, I'd step back. I'd walk away. I wouldn't even be ashamed to run.

Then again, I'm itching to inch forward, to see, to touch, and *taste* that brand-new power, so maybe I wouldn't have obeyed either. My need to see more of her surpasses my sense of self-protection.

"You're a little bitch, you know that?"

I reached the aisle just in time to see Aeron close the distance, bringing his fist to her neck in a dominant grab.

Even I know that's too far. He shouldn't touch her. She doesn't want to be touched by him. She'll react. And if she doesn't, *I* will.

I take one step, but in that half second, Daria moves in a way I've never seen anyone move.

Not any demi, despite the blood of gods running through our veins. Not any folk, although we are made of pure magik, derived from nature itself.

She takes hold of his arm, crushing it in her grasp. Despite her dainty little limbs, Aeron screams as her fingers dig into his flesh. Then her leg snaps up and wraps itself around his neck like a snake before flashing downward.

Fast, precise, lethal.

He falls on his back with a bone-crunching sound.

She isn't done. Next, she casually steps over him, and plants the back of her heel right between his legs.

"I made you a promise, *my prince*." Her voice, usually so toneless, sings a little, almost seductive. She's blossomed into a cruel, deadly rose. "Never forget that I always keep my word."

Half of the library is rushing to us, following the sound of Aeron's agonized sobs, but my eyes remain fixed on the thing standing over my least favorite companion.

Her aura's mostly muted again, but there is the hint of a red shadow burning in the depths of her previously black eyes and running through her long, flowing tresses.

As she lifts her gaze and sees me, the red glower fades. She gasps in surprise and looks around, like she forgot where she was for a moment.

Her head snaps toward the left, in the direction the many approaching footsteps come from. I watch her bite her lower lip as she calculates her best course of action. Is she going to tell them he fell? Run and hope no one else sees her?

I wait eagerly, hungry for more. She snapped and showed today what I've always suspected. The five-foot-nothing pretty dove has talons. Sharp, well-practiced weapons she hides under the appearance of normality. She can no longer hide from me.

*Got you, sweet little dove.*

I take another step, and open my mouth to offer to play interference. No one would question that I flattened Aeron on his ass if he did anything to deserve it, and the imbecile would likely corroborate it, rather than admit he was beaten so badly by a short, adorable girl.

But before my stunned eyes, a bright, thick, red mist gathers right in the middle of the library, surrounding Daria. In the blink of an eye, it disappears—and so does she.

*Holy fucking shit.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# A FAIRY BITE

# DARIA



**S**hit, shit, shitty cakes.  
Now I've done it.

I'm in trouble, and it's completely my fault. I let my temper get the better of me. I should have just ignored the idiot as I usually do, but between my frustration, my nostalgia, and his stepping into my personal space like he belonged there, I snapped.

I've never liked anyone but my closest friends and family being anywhere near me, but even they know better than to crowd me at less than a foot away.

I'm not in a huge amount of immediate trouble. I know men well enough to realize there's a higher chance of Aeron cutting off his own dick than admitting what I did to him. But he's seen me use my shadows, a specific kind of magik only wielded by one bloodline, one clan. *Mine*.

Worse yet: Rovan Briar saw me.

One of them is going to talk.

The obvious solution—slicing their throats and getting rid of the evidence—would be too problematic, given who they are. Two princes, one of them destined for a crown. I'd destabilize the continent just to delay the inevitable. Inevitable, because upon hearing of the crime, my mother would conclude I was likely behind the hit. Killing princes is one thing. Getting away with it? Quite another.



I'm going to have to move. Find somewhere else. It's frustrating when I'm just one year away from a degree here, but if I remain, Ma is going to track me and drag my ass back to Rhunar, no matter what I have to say about it. And she'll have me observed to ensure I won't leave again. Lady Ryzan isn't big on free will when it interferes with what she thinks is right. Which is one of the many reasons why she's an excellent leader.

I still in my small, comfortable room. As I stay here year-round, taking some courses in the summer in my endless war against boredom, I made it mine, though it's just a dorm. My canopy bed has red silk curtains and plush, velvety cushions that make me think of home.

I'm not comfortable now. A shift in the power in my surroundings alerts me of an intrusion I wouldn't have thought possible.

“Neat trick.”

I can't comprehend what I feel, what I hear, or what I see when I spin on my heel.

I vanished from the library, in the main faculty building, and reappeared here in the attic of the dorms less than five minutes ago. At a jog, it's a good fifteen minutes away. And more importantly, my door was—is—shut. I haven't heard of felt anyone approach from the corridor. Yet somehow, here stands Rován Briar.

“I have tricks too,” he says with a beautiful, terrifying smirk, no doubt reading my confusion.

I call to the shadows again, and a short, familiar curved blade forms in each of my palms.

The prince chuckles and holds his hands up. “Hey, I'm not here for a fight. I've just seen your moves, Daria. I like my balls and my ego unscrambled.”

I don't let go of the shadowblades, though keeping them does burn through my energy. Was it always this hard? It's been too long since I called to them.

They feel good in my hands, though they cost me too much energy.

“I’m just curious.” The prince flops on my small bed like it’s the most natural of things for him to do, his booted feet resting over the wood panel at the end. “What’s a Wicked doing in Five? And anonymously, to boot.”

Eyes narrowed, I keep watching him, trying to puzzle out his motivation for following me here. Maybe he’s simply nosy. I might be, too, in his shoes.

Ultimately, I decide it doesn’t matter what he’s here for. The conclusion I came to moments ago still stands: disposing of him would create more trouble than he’s worth. I’d only do it as a last recourse, if he gives me no other choice.

I twist my wrists and the blades vanish. “So, Wicked can’t get an education?” I grunt, defensive and tired.

“You do, certainly. Beheading 101, stabbing for beginners, poisoning in a pinch, right?” Braced against my pillow, Rován produces a green apple out of nowhere and takes a bite.

“How did you do that?” I hiss.

He doesn’t have room in his tight, dark pants’ pockets for the fruit. He didn’t have it moments ago. He took it out of thin air.

I’ve never seen another person materialize anything.

One of the prince’s eyebrows arches. Fair. He has questions, too, and I avoided answering.

“I didn’t fit in with my family.”

“I relate. But why the fake name? You could have enrolled as a Wicked. You’d have had a much easier time at Five. Everyone would be kissing your ass.” In the seconds I take to consider my answer, he somehow unravels the truth. “Holy shade, you’re a runaway.”

I groan. That makes me sound so juvenile. “I’m nineteen, and fully emancipated since I was sixteen.”

The legal majority in most places is twenty-five, but given my former employment, being considered an adult early proved necessary to be able to travel independently.

“And what, the moment they gave up authority over you, you legged it out of the guild?”

That’s an oversimplification of my situation, but I nod.

“Why?” He leans in eagerly.

“It doesn’t matter,” I mutter. The truth is far too personal, sad, and embarrassing. “You can tell your friend I’ll be gone by tomorrow.”

“No need. I modified his memory.” He takes another bite of the apple. “He won’t remember a thing.”

I narrow my eyes. “You *what?*”

He shrugs indifferently. “Aeron’s mind is hardly secure. Embarrassing for a prince to not have mastered the art of shielding oneself, if you ask me. It was easy enough. As far as he’s concerned, he insulted my brother and I kicked his ass.”

He’s explained the how. The why, not so much.

“Why would you do that?” Maybe I should thank him, but I feel cornered, and cornered snakes bite.

Something tells me Rován Briar doesn’t often act without cause. He’s holding all the cards in his hand, and he made sure to be the only one to know my secret. He wants something from me. Likely, the use of my blades.

“Because he’s a little dick—metaphorically. I haven’t checked the physical counterpart—and he would have taken his insecurity out on you. Now you owe me one,” he states simply.

That’s undeniable. “Just one,” I say.

I tense, waiting for the name, the assignment. Who does this pretty boy want me to murder for him?

He takes a moment to think. “All right. If I only get one question, tell me how those shadows of yours work.”

That's it? He wants knowledge in exchange for the massive favor he just did for me?

The fool might not have realized he could have demanded blood for it.

"If I answer you, you won't tell anyone I'm here?" I check.

"Of course not. Then you'd leave. You're too interesting."

I'm simply baffled, and mistrustful. He can't mean that. I'm just a pawn he's stowing in his pocket for later use. Whatever we agree to now, he still knows who I am. He could blackmail me later.

*He can try.*

I lick my lower lip, weighing my words, my thoughts. I don't miss how his gaze zeroes in on the tip of my tongue. Somehow, his look unsettles me.

Suddenly unable to bear the silence, I talk. "I was born with the shadows. We all are, in my family." I don't think it's common knowledge, like most things about the Wicked line. People don't even know our true name—Wicked is just what we let outsiders call us. Then, I remember Rován's part fae. "Do you *promise* you won't tell anyone?"

Full-blooded fae can't lie, but a half fae shouldn't be able to break an explicit promise either.

"That you're here, or about your shadows?" Rován asks.

"Both."

"I promise," he vows easily.

I can't sense a trick, so I explain. "The shadows are like an external entity, but also part of us. I'm entirely human—common—but for them. They help me out, like a friend always there to have your back. In time, we learn to ask for the right things—to get away, to disappear in the darkness."

"Or for pretty little knives," he jokes.

I nod in agreement.

"And your hair?"

I wrinkle my nose. “What about it?”

I avoid thinking about my hair more than strictly necessary.

“It changed when your shadows are visible. They’re deep red, like wine or blood.”

I shrug. “I don’t control that.” In truth, I’d forgotten all about it.

He tilts his head. “Huh. Handy.”

“There’s a price, though.” Why I’m volunteering the information, I have no clue. “They bleed us. They’ll take our lives if we let them. We have to feed them, otherwise we’ll die.”

“Feed them, how?” Roven asks, but just as quickly, he guesses, “You mean, kill someone.” He doesn’t seem bothered one way or another. “How do babies manage, then? I don’t suppose you crawled out of the womb all murderous.”

My lips curl up a little. It is rather amusing, to speak to someone so utterly unaffected by my nature. “The blood cravings start later, around puberty.” By then, we’ve all killed enough to keep our darker selves sated.

“What about your aura?” Rovan’s leaning forward eagerly.

My eyebrows crease in confusion.

“How do you repress it? I can’t feel your presence most of the time.”

That’s news to me. “No clue.”

Rovan’s eyes widen. “I wonder if that’s what your shadows are—a physical manifestation of your aura. I only saw it today for the first time, when Aeron got on your nerves.”

I call to my shadows to test his theory. “How about now?”

The man sits up straighter, his pale eyes flashing darker green, full of some emotion I can’t identify. Half fear, half excitement.

“It’s...different. But yes, I feel you now.” He huffs a short, nervous laugh. “You’re positively terrifying, you know that?”

Somehow, it makes me beam.

From him, I’ll take it as a compliment. He scares me in equal measure.

He finishes his apple in three bites and gets to his feet. I feel my stomach drop when I realize he means to leave now. I don’t want that yet.

“You didn’t tell me how you got the apple. Or how you got in my room so fast, without me seeing you.”

“That’s the same answer.” He smiles. “Magik.”

“Duh.” I roll my eyes. “I was hoping for specifics.”

“It’s an old, unusual form of magik you likely wouldn’t have come across.”

“Are you always such a tease?” I grumble.

“Hah! You’re one to talk, mysterious, murderous little thing.”

I narrow my eyes at *little*, though it’s accurate enough, especially compared to his tall, slender frame.

I think he means to evade my question, and I stew resentfully, because I did reveal Wicked secrets. The least he can do is return the favor. But Rován says, “I can’t show you if you’re not touching me. Are you going to squash my balls if I come too close?”

I don’t want him close. That’s why my heart stops, before speeding up. I lift my head. “Can’t you explain?”

“Not well.”

I hesitate. Curiosity has always been my defining characteristic, hence why I enjoy academia. And it should be safe enough, right?

I’m lying to myself. Nothing about this prince suggests safety.

Still, I want to know. “Fine.”

My throat is too dry, my pulse, racing. Rován closes the distance between us in slow strides, like someone approaching a feral beast, unsure whether it might bite.

When he's even with me, he rests one hand at the small of my back, sliding under my tank top to connect with my skin.

The moment his fingers brush me, the world as I know it disappears. Not only because his touch comes with a jolt of power, buzzing through my entire body, shooting tendrils of electric vibration inside me.

The room was my simple, familiar space moments ago, and now, it's filled with colors whirling around, and vines, and flowers. I focus on one of the moving blue balls flashing about, and see a tiny little creature with diaphanous wings, from which a dull light emanates.

“Beautiful.”

The thing chirps happily. “She says she likes you.”

I look at Rován and gasp.

He was always gorgeous, even more so than most demis. I never liked looking straight into his perfect face because tearing my eyes away was so hard, because I could hardly breathe when I looked, because he's a creature designed to entice anyone with a single glance.

The being in front of me is something else.

He seems somewhat taller, with broader shoulders and thinner everything else. His skin is far paler, and his eyes—those pale eyes—hold a power I can't escape. I would keep staring into them forever if he willed it. Upon his dark, shining hair rests a simple silver crown—a circlet pointing down to his nose. He's no mere second princeling here in this strange world I'm glimpsing.

He reaches into the air, and one of the vines untangles itself to rush to his palm, depositing one blooming green apple. “You want a bite? It's delicious.”

His musical voice, always so adept at charming or cursing, is darker, slower, lower, and so powerful the air vibrates

around us when he speaks.

Then he lets go of me, and his enchanting world disappears, though the fruit's still in his palm.

I feel like I could cry at the sudden, incomprehensible loss.

I can't manage speech yet, but Rován hands the apple to me.

It feels strange in my hands, like it's infused with laughter and smiles and songs. A piece of the magik he just let me sample. I hold it, dreading to feel the magik fade, but it doesn't.

"What was that?" I manage to murmur after some time.

He grins. "Just a little taste of Ilvaris—the fairy world beyond the veil. It's worlds away, far in the stars, but there are enough portals leading there on Xhera. Hence the existence of fae descendants here."

He's explaining, but not really. "I don't understand how I could have seen it, felt it—how this apple can be here. There's no portal to Ilvaris in my room, right?"

"I have wild blood, Daria. A lot more of it than anyone here nowadays. Wherever I am, there's a link to the other world."

I nod like that makes sense. Like he hasn't ripped apart my world by giving me this glance into something else, something *more*.

Something I want to see again.

I don't tell him any of that. If he realized right now how much I want, how much I crave another taste, he could use it against me. I can't give him that kind of power over me.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# A DEBT OWED

## ROVAN



When mortals are unexpectedly given a look into the fae world, they react in one of two ways.

The most common is that they run away, spend the rest of their lives plagued with nightmares. The other is as intense, but instead of horrors, they're haunted by dreams of wonders.

She's given me information about the Wicked that I've never heard or read before. I owed her, and we folk don't do well with unpaid debts. If all she wanted was to know my tricks, I was obligated to comply.

I wasn't sure where she'd stand, hence why I was reluctant to answer her question, but part of me wanted to let her step into my world.

Daria could have noticed spiders the size of horses, a den of snakes under her feet, or the blood against the wall. But the heart of Ilvaris called to her, letting her discover its blisses. She's bitten. She'll want more.

I smirk, satisfied with the outcome, as I hop on her windowsill. "And this is how I got to you," I tell her, taking hold of the vine she can no longer see, and letting it swing me down to the floor, five stories below.

The vine flashes with a dizzying swiftness I once found terrifying, but I've used the tools of the other world for long enough to know that while they enjoy frightening me, they won't actually hurt me.

Still spotting her frame in the distance, I dip my chin in farewell as it drops me in the courtyard. I shove my hands in

my pockets and return to my dorm—in the tower of magiks across the grounds.

Today was a good day. No one tried to kill me, which is always a win. Aeron's fear while he struggled on the library floor was intense enough that I could feed on it, even though it wasn't directed toward me. That means I won't need to find my own prey, at least for the coming week. And more importantly, I know what my little dove is now. *Finally*.

In hindsight, I should have guessed as much from the get-go, but who would think hardened, bloodthirsty—or shadowthirsty?—assassin when looking at that slip of a girl? No one, which is probably a factor she uses to her advantage.

*Used*. She left the guild. I didn't ask how she fed her shadows now. I wouldn't have wanted to come across as judgmental. What does it matter if she spills blood? My own predilection is just as twisted.

And Daria got a hint of what I am, the thing beyond the flesh. Most would recoil in fear. She didn't. I don't think that woman is afraid of anything at all.

I'm smiling when I reach my door, though my eyes narrow at finding it open. I always lock it and seal it with enchantments. I don't have to focus to sense who's dared let themselves in my space uninvited.

My aura, my presence, my smell, only a little steadier, calmer. I push the door to find my twin seated on my armchair when I return to my room. He's paging through the book I'd left on my bedside, a new guide on poisonous plants.

I don't ask how he got inside, despite the charms protecting my domain. My magic recognizes him for what he is: me. Or at least, the parts of me that aren't damaged, mistrustful, and bitter.

“She sent you,” I say, shaking my head. “Well played, Mother.”

There is no force in Flaur capable of bending my will, except for him.

I owe him my life, my freedom, my *eyes*. I can't imagine a hundred years of doing exactly what he wants would even the scale.

Except Sylvan never asks anything of me.

"I sent myself," Sylvan corrects.

If he said it, it must be the truth. Neither of us are able to formulate a lie—a fact we like to keep to ourselves. I think the little dove suspects as much, or she wouldn't have taken such pains to exact a promise from me.

I grin. Someone ought to tell her that she has to ensure my kind spell out the entire vow, word for word, or the words aren't binding. *I promise*, I said, and I could have promised all matter of things, because she didn't make me say the words, clearly and without loose threads I could wiggle out of.

Not that I plan on betraying her, but I do delight in trickery.

I make myself stop thinking of the pretty little dove, focusing on my twin. I haven't seen him in three seasons, as I've escaped the duty of returning to Flaur, happy to play the traveling ambassador in any other country during my breaks rather than facing the Golden Mountain.

I don't ask what Sylvan's doing, thumbing a book he can't read. He relishes the feeling of the rough, heavy pages, the scent of freshly stamped ink, the leathery binding. I know he does, because I would in his shoes. There's more to books than the words written on their pages. The artistry starts without.

"Lovely binding. New print, real Anderkanian ink, first edition. Was it a good story?" he asks me eagerly.

I wonder if someone takes the time to read to him now. He used to devour so many books in the night, the only time there was no duty required of him. Squashing the impulse to grab the first novel on my bookshelves and start it out loud, I answer him. "It wasn't a story at all. Just a guide to try to keep myself above ground."

My twin snorts, his pale eyes smiling at the corners. "She's no longer trying to kill you."

Not since the attack that changed both of our lives. Now, my mother wants to crown me instead, which is infinitely worse.

She might have started sending hits on Sylvan, but he's always been her golden child, her favorite. I might make more sense as an heir to her single-track mind, but she doesn't intend to harm the child she actually wanted. Besides, I've taken precautions to ensure she cannot touch a single one of the annoyingly well-brushed hairs on his head. If he dies, she loses *both* heirs.

Aude Briar lived three hundred years without being able to conceive, though she started trying in her second decade, fucking her way through her court.

She had little in the way of family, and Flaur has seven royal lines descended from its prolific founding father, the yew king Odrin. The Briar line has ruled for the last nine hundred years, but Aude, the eldest, killed her siblings in their infancy to ensure she'd take the throne upon her father's death. So, she had no heirs by blood—a weakness any of the other families could have exploited to undermine her authority. After all, why invest in the will of a queen, when her legacy is so fragile, uncertain? Upon her death, the other families would have started warring to determine who'd sit on the throne next.

For three centuries, she struggled to get pregnant, but she only got her wish after making a deal with the folk of Ilvaris. For the same reason she murdered her own flesh and blood in her youth, she wanted one child, not two. Yet here we are.

“She isn't,” I admit to my brother. “But the Thorns and the Eldars, the Palmers and the Blossoms, the Rivers and the Florins, are another matter altogether.”

“Don't forget the Mallones,” my brother happily adds.

I wrinkle my nose. The Mallones aren't technically a royal line, but they mixed blood with the Rivers and are twice as devious. “They don't want me dead, they want me married to their viper of a daughter.”

“I can't decide which would be worse.”

I'm not worried, and nor is my brother. While princes of Flaur, none of those families have the resources necessary to take out an efficient hit on me. If my mother, their queen, couldn't murder me, there's little chance that they'd manage to. It would be another story if the assassin's guild got involved, but as they've never tried to kill me, I have to conclude that if my mother contacted them to take care of me—which is likely—the assignment was rejected. If they didn't accept the bounty of a queen, they won't do it for her lesser highborns.

“Why are you here, if not to drag me to mother's party?”

“I'm exactly here for that,” Sylvan says. “I need you there, brother.”

I never could quite decipher Sylvan's expressions, even before his eyes glazed over. Now, he'd have an easier time reading that book than I would trying to see what he's thinking. I might have taken much from our father, but Sylvan certainly inherited his ability to hide all emotion.

“You need me to stand by your side,” I glean. “Show my support.”

I should have thought of it myself. In the last three years since he's lost his sight, Sylvan has been navigating the sharks in the Golden Mountain. I mostly remained here in Magnapolis, buried under my research, but he's still the crown prince of Flaur.

My absence could well have fed the fools who look at my brother and see weakness because of his disability.

*Shit.*

Besides, it's not just my birthday. It's also his. If he wants me there, what choice do I have, considering everything I owe him?

“There better be wine.”

If I'm honest, I knew I'd cave the moment I saw him, little as I might like to spend any length of time in the company of our mother, and the royal families, and the nobles pitting us

against each other. Not to mention, Chira Mallone, the viper endeavoring to latch herself onto me. “A lot of wine.”



## CHAPTER NINE

# THROUGH THE WATER

# DARIA



Something fundamental has shifted around me, though looking at my daily routine, it's hard to pinpoint what.

On one hand, nothing has changed at all in the last weeks.

I run when I wake up, to rid myself of my restless energy, and on my way back, I pick up coffee from the small pavilion in the square across the grounds—they make much better stuff than the cafeteria or even the library's staff machine.

I switch my order to two cups after a familiar rush of wild energy announces my friend's approach.

Alis Frejr feels like the calm right before a thunderstorm. I know there's more to her than what I can see on the surface, and I'm not about to pry. She's not the only monster in hiding.

We met at the library, where she decided to volunteer rather than work for money, like me. Her family's as rich as most kings and queens on the continent, so she doesn't need the cash. We bonded over our general unpopularity, though Alis could be worshipped if she so wished. She has money, power, and the right name, but she chooses not to use any of it.

I suppose we also have that in common. I have my reasons, and she's smart enough that I'm sure she has hers. I *could* ask her why she likes to hide, but I like our relationship just as it is: warm, but staying on the surface, never digging deeper. Plus, it comes with coffee. She brings me some whenever she thinks we're likely to meet.

"I do love you," she groans when I wordlessly hand her the caffeine fix.

Running, class, library, bumping into Alis, climbing atop the roof, running again. Indeed, nothing much has changed in my life.

And yet everything seems different. I no longer feel weighed down by the monotony, by the fact that I seem to be running away from my past more than toward something. It has more than a little to do with Rován, and the world he showed me with a single touch. I want to see it again. I need more. It was a thing of wonder and magiks, calling to my shadows, to my heart.

I now research Ilvaris in all of my spare time. I know there are several portals here on Xhera, hence why so many of us are descended from the folk. Most were shut during the fae war, and those which remain are guarded, to ensure only friendly folk can pass to our world, but they exist. I could take one, someday. I'm not stupid enough to think about packing up and leaving tomorrow, unprepared. Ilvaris is a savage land, entirely populated by monsters. There are no, or precious little, common-blooded mortals in the land of the folk.

But I could go there. And something tells me I will.

I was fated to never belong to my homeland. It used to be a curse, a blight I could never escape, no matter what I did. Now, I'm starting to understand what it could mean.

And worse yet, I am starting to hope.



In Dorath, all children are called to the waters in their seventh year. I remember seeing the boys and girls around me shake with fear, awaiting their fate. I wasn't afraid.

For centuries, everyone in my maternal family had been given the same fate, the same casting. We are the Wicked, shadows of the assassin's guild.

My father was born in a family of traders from the western banks, and when he was shown the sword, he knew he'd join the assassin's guild, but his water reading also showed a single gold coin and a scale. That perplexed many in his time. How could one be both an assassin and a merchant, when the two guilds are fierce competitors? Not enemies, as such, but they certainly don't share members.

Then he married my mother and bridged the gap, uniting the House of Shadow and the House of Coin into the single most powerful force in the mortal lands of Xhera.

When my name was called, I walked to the fountain with my head high. I think I must have smiled. I used to do so often, before then. I was certain of what the witch reading my fate would see. A sword and a crown, shrouded in a dark veil. Just like my mother's, and my sister's.

I like to sit in my father's study and appraise his treasures with him well enough, but my true passion is hiding, sneaking into impossible places. It could make me a decent thief, but I know deep down, I am a shadow.

I lowered my face under the surface of the water and kept it down as I was instructed. The priestess had said we should hold our breath as long as possible, until the very last second, when we were on the verge of death.

I waited and waited for the panic to rise, for myself to need a breath. Then when the wait grew boring, I took a breath under the surface of the sacred water, and waited some more. I could have remained there my entire life, had strong hands not dragged me away from the Fountain of the Gods.

The witch supposed to read me was holding my shoulders, her eyes wide and all white as she threw her head back and shook.

*"Nothing. You will be nothing to Dorath. You will be nothing to Xhera. You will live until this world is ashes and see*

*the rise and fall of all empires. Your fate isn't of this world, child.*" Her eyes rolled back into place, and she stared at me, black pupils filled with pity and fear. "You are cursed."

After hearing these words, I certainly was.

It didn't matter how hard I worked, how much I pushed my mind, my body, how many assignments I fulfilled—twice, ten times as many as my elder sister. I still felt like nothing, forever chasing a purpose that I'd never achieve.

The witch of the waters is never wrong. She's a priestess whose order was gifted with foresight by the god of light himself. She doesn't decide or decipher, she only lets the enchanted waters where the old gods used to commune pass through her, and spells out the words they whisper to her ears.

The gods were crystal clear.

My family could have made things harder for me after the reading. I've heard of many nobles rejecting their children when they were read an unfavorable fate, but my mother trained me like she always had, and my father never stopped reading me stories, letting me sneak into his office, or asking me to play chess with him.

My sisters snuck out of their rooms to curl up next to me that night, and many nights thereafter. I do feel guilty about leaving them, when they've been so kind and loving. But I was slowly dying in the country I loved, the country that will never truly be mine.

I was just sixteen when I left. I don't think I'll ever go back.

*You will be nothing to Dorath.*

I've never seen the beginning of an answer to the riddle of a prophecy I was read, until Rován Briar showed me the other world.

Ilvaris was no more than a terrifying tale at the back of my mind—somewhere mortals don't survive a day without protection. But it could be my answer. It could be where I belong.

## CHAPTER TEN

# BETWEEN TWO PRINCES



# DARIA



When I enter my boring weekly ethics class and sit at my usual desk, I no longer dread whatever malice Aeron's got in store for me. While Rován might have erased his memory of the events of the library from his mind, Aeron hasn't bothered me since, in words or deeds. Rován might have effaced the beating, but whatever he did left the fear.

Aeron looks at me, though, often frowning, always intense. But so long as he doesn't speak to me, I don't let it bother me.

Rován's appearances are more unsettling, but when I tense, it's not out of apprehension. He's a link to Ilvaris, my new fixation. I want to ask him everything about it, but I don't know how to broach the subject.

I expected him to ignore me the day after he snuck into my room, but he didn't. We're certainly nothing like friends, but he never fails to greet me, and I'm just as polite, though the interactions feel awkward, like there's an ocean of questions and secrets between us.

Today, my usual neighbor is absent when he arrives, and he sits directly at my left, tilting his chin to me. "Hello, Stone."

"Hello, Briar."

We both sound like we're in on a joke. I'm not really a Stone, and he knows it. He's much more than a Briar, as he showed me.

We don't exchange another word and the class starts.

We're to discuss hoarding wealth and resources today. Professor Paur means to make us understand that it's bad for the entire society, when his family owns a sapphire mine in Anderkan.

I crack a smile, and doodle at the corner of my notebook, not bothering to record anything.

I don't disagree, at the heart of things. Food and water and clothing and art and roofs overhead and healthcare ought to be a right for all, and for that to happen, the highest class should certainly redistribute their wealth differently in most of the country.

There is no homelessness in Dorath, and anyone hungry can knock at the closest door. It is the duty of any citizen to feed strangers without question or critique. The theaters are free, though it's possible to hire a box or book a private performance. There are mind-blowing public libraries, and the university in Rhunar doesn't cost anyone a dime.

Still, we hoard our wealth. We guard it like dragons. We kill for it. It is the nature of our race to want to excel, to have more, more, more. I don't believe jewels, fine silk, painted whores, and great palaces are a sin as such. They give us something to strive toward. There's nothing wrong with rewarding hard work, or wanting to pass on the best of what we have to our children.

It's a fine line, and a more complicated topic than our teacher would have us believe.

Rovan passes me a crumpled note, and I snort after unfolding it to find a caricature of a man standing on a mountain of jewels, making speeches.

I'm smiling when I glance at Rovan.

I don't smile for long.

Part of me knows he can deal with the arrow aimed at him. He's done so for years, decades if the rumors are true. He's going to feel it and move any second now.

*Any second now.*

My eyes seek out the provenance of the shot, beyond the open window, on the next roof. I see the crouched figure of a man with a long, heavy, automatic bow.

We're in a room with almost four dozen bored students, and I can't afford to slip again. Putting Aeron on his ass was already a mistake—one I would have paid for by losing my home here, had Rován not intervened. I can't do it again, though I itch to call to my shadows and go to the roof. Take the man down before he can try another shot. Torture him until he reveals who hired him. Make him *scream*.

I shouldn't care so much. Maybe I've missed having something to do, a puzzle to solve. Maybe I miss the blood. The last time I called my shadows in the library was like a drop of wine on an addict's tongue. I know what it's like to be myself again, and I crave it.

Rován's not moving. His attention is fixed on me, and my reaction, rather than his surroundings. He has a fraction of a second to notice the bolt and move. That fraction of a second isn't enough for most people, but I have an inkling that Rován could manage it, if he feels the danger *right now*.

He doesn't seem to.

*Dammit.* I call the shadows impulsively, recklessly, and they whip low on the floor, shoving Rován aside so roughly he falls back, instants before the arrow flashes through the open window.

I recall the shadows, hoping no one noticed the red mist.

I don't have to look to know where it will plant itself. My mind's calculated its trajectory without my consciously trying to. It'll kill the boy one row behind me.

I should let it do its job. In the last three years, I've managed to make myself not murder Aeron, for Loken's sake. That's enough, isn't it? I don't have to risk my own life, my place here, and my safety for him.

But I shift, and take the hit in my shoulder rather than letting it plant itself in the Dorathian prince's chest.

I scream, not because it hurts like a bitch—although it does—but because an ordinary girl is supposed to scream when they have a half-inch thick, two-foot-long projectile stuck in her arm. I also wince, smelling a distinctively sweet and floral stench. Poison.

I definitely didn't need this freaking mess on a Raverday morning.

Two princes seriously owe me today, though only one of them is aware of it.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# IN THE DARK

# ROVAN



I'm not unfamiliar with panic. We have danced together for some years. We understand each other, she and I. I like to think of it as a she, mainly because of its temperamental, unexpected, uncontrollable nature. After being close companions for so long, panic rarely tries or manages to master me. Today, it doesn't even have to try.

I rush to Daria, grabbing her bleeding arm.

“Shit!” I swear, not missing the dark marbling running under her skin, already snaking to her veins.

Poison. An efficient one, by the looks of it.

I panic. I stare in complete horror, thinking about the many different ways I'm utterly screwed if this girl dies right now because of me.

First of all, her family *would* get on my ass about it, and I'd get myself murdered. I very much doubt the Wicked would make it a nice, easy death too. After being responsible for the death of one of their precious daughters? I'd die *hard*.

Then there's the fact that she's in this situation because she tried to save me.

Scratch *tried*. I'm not sure I would have survived the shot if she hadn't pushed me out of the way, distracted as I was by looking at her instead of paying attention to everything else.

So if, by some sort of miracle, her family of seasoned assassins decided to be lenient and let me live, I'd let guilt eat me up.

And there's also the fact that I simply don't want her to die. At all. My mind rebels against the notion with unprecedented vigor. I am no stranger to death and I usually greet it with less compunction. This time, she's my enemy.

Watching Daria has been a constant source of entertainment for the last year because she's interesting. I'm not done. *We're* not done. She has to live. She just has to.

"Remain calm, and stay away from the windows!" The professor's voice cuts through my stupor.

It occurs to me that while I was sitting by her side, unmoving, Daria was wincing, pulling the weapon out of her arm herself and ripping the bottom of her boring black T-shirt to fashion a bandage. She's wrapping it around her own arm, holding some of the fabric in her mouth.

I stop being an idiot and step in to take over just as Aeron walks to her, pressing down her arm.

Her eyes are filled with fire as she glares at him. "Don't touch me," she growls.

If he remembered what happened the last time he got too close, he wouldn't have dared.

"You're bleeding," he points out. Way to state the obvious. "Someone has to put pressure on the wound or you'll lose too much blood and pass out."

She looks like she might bite his head off, but her attention snaps beyond him, returning toward the window. "Down!" she screams.

I know she's talking to me, and I'm not about to question *her*. I drop to the floor, turning to look just as another arrow plants itself on the opposite wall, passing right where my head was before she warned me.

I crawl to her and take over from Aeron, tying her makeshift bandage tight. "We need to get you out of here."

"We need to get *you* out of here," she counters. "It took him four minutes to line up the second shot. You have that long to get to safety."



I'm not going anywhere without her. "You've been *poisoned*. Woodsong, unless I'm mistaken."

The substance is lethal to the folk, specifically, but it affects anyone with elemental energy. I don't know what kind of magiks the Wicked wield, but our abilities aren't all that dissimilar. She can manifest things from the ether—her blades, *herself*. That implies she has access to another world. There's a high chance the poison will affect her as much as me. Even if it doesn't, no living thing would have a good time with a poison designed to suck the elements out of their veins and bones running through their system.

"I know," she snarls, sounding pissed rather than frightened.

"If you make it to the closest door, I'll take her the other way," Aeron proposes.

I didn't know the guy had that kind of balls.

Daria shows her teeth. "*You* are not taking me anywhere."

I pity the poor prince, who inexplicably believed she'd make a good damsel in distress. "She needs to come with *me*," I argue. "I can handle the antidote."

In fact, there's one right there on my belt. The issue is, it's designed for *me*, finished with a drop of my blood. I'll need to brew a fresh batch for her.

She ought to feel weaker and weaker, and eventually pass out, but instead, I sense her presence rising, making itself known. If we don't leave now, there'll be another issue to contend with: her shadows will manifest themselves, and I'll have to manipulate the minds of every student in this room, or she'll leave Five. The thought of her going away isn't as disgusting as the possibility of her death, but I rebel against it all the same. She has to stay right here, where I can see her, and touch her, and smile at her.

"Fine," Aeron relents. "I'll close the curtains."

I'm surprised by his bravery, imagining him running toward danger, but instead, he flicks his wrist, and all the

curtains in the place shut in one blast of wind. I forgot he could manipulate air.

Now I glare at him, offended by his stupidity. “Couldn’t you have done that, like, five minutes ago?”

His cheeks heat under his tan. I’m being unfair. I froze up too, petrified for Daria’s sake rather than mine. I don’t much care to be fair to Aeron Sinclair though.

I take Daria’s hand and start to run to the back entrance. Aeron dashes out toward the front door as planned, joining the throng of students.

There are wide windows on either side of the classroom doors, all with a clear view of the building where my attacker is perched. How are we getting out of here? And beyond this hallway, how am I getting her back to my room to heal her? The antidote ought to be administered within an hour of poisoning. It’ll take me at the very least half an hour to brew it, and I’ll have to cut corners.

“We need to get out of here.”

“We need to shake him loose,” she whispers back, tilting her head to Aeron.

Now he’s out of the doors of the classroom, he’s following us at a distance like a lost puppy, instead of running out of the building. He has it bad for Daria. So bad he might even have admitted it to himself now.

If we’re out of his—and everyone else’s—view, she can use her shadows to get herself where she needs to go. “Can you transport me, too?” I check.

“I won’t need to.”

Her response is cryptic, but I’m not about to stand there and question her, when she’s told me exactly what she needs. Privacy.

Fortunately, I was a bored freshman once. “Follow me.”

Her hand still in mine, I dash out at a run against the crowd, heading deeper inside the building rather than trying to get out.

“What are you doing?” I hear Aeron’s voice call after us. “That way!”

Everyone’s rushing to the nearest exit, not just our class. I can only hope that the confusion will confuse the archer, and they won’t spot me immediately.

I’m relieved to walk past blast doors and turn into a hallway angled in a different direction, though it still has windows. There are a few students running around, but less than in the main corridor. I drag Daria to a small, inconspicuous door marked Staff Only.

It’s barely more than a cupboard, a service room filled with cleaning supplies and first aid kits. If we had time, we could actually bandage her arm properly, but the poison is my priority.

I try to turn the light on, for her sake more than mine, but it’s not working.

My vision’s acute in the dark. I take a look at her arm and my jaw tightens. It’s darker than it’s supposed to be at this stage, which means the poison is working fast. It’s either a new blend, or it moved quicker through her system for some reason.

I grasp her arm, push the bandage out of the way, and bring my lips to the wound before she can stop me. I suck.

It’s not the first time I’ve tasted blood. Hers is sweeter than most, with a tinge of magik. If not for the acid poison burning my tongue as I take it in, I would have liked it.

I don’t feed on blood. My sustenance is pain. Right now, I’m getting a delicious taste of both.

Daria snatches her arm back. “You don’t need to poison yourself, too.”

I shrug, retrieving a flask from the belt hanging low on my pants. I take a small sip, not bothering to waste more. It was barely a taste. I’m gratified to see the complex maze of dark filigrees lighten a little under her skin.

“If you can get to my room, I have elixir.” It’s priceless, incredibly complicated to brew, and takes over a year to be ready, but given the look of the area surrounding the wound now, I don’t want to risk not having time to prepare and administer a specific antidote. “I’ll tell you where it is.”

“My shadows can only take me where I’ve already been, or at least somewhere I’ve seen,” Daria replies, immediately letting go of her control.

In a shift of potent energy, the familiar red mist engulfs her, bathing the room in a dim light. As I watch, it converges around her arm.

“Not that it matters. I’ll be healed in a half a day.”

The shadows do a much better job of sucking the poison out than I did, but the thought that she can spontaneously heal is ludicrous.

I may know what she is, but I still don’t understand it. Part of me wants to set my studies aside and start a full thesis on the blood of the Wicked.

“You will?”

Daria’s wicked smirk is a sight to behold. Someone ought to immortalize it in a painting, and name it *Violence*. “People get exactly one chance to kill me. And they’d better make that shot.”

Then, without warning, she’s gone again, leaving me surrounded by bottles of bleach and mops.

Great. I realize immediately that she’s gone to kill my assassin. *Alone*.

*Spending any degree of time with that woman isn’t going to be great for my sense of masculinity, is it?*

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# A SHORT TRIP

## ROVAN



I was mistaken. Murdering the archer would have been far too shortsighted, and Daria's certainly not that.

I turn up at her room with a freshly brewed antidote for woodsong only missing a drop of blood and chocolate, in the event that poison makes the tiny assassin as cranky as it makes me.

She cracks the door a few inches, and peeks out to check who's come. "Oh, it's you."

Daria opens it fully, and I see the shadows are still floating in the air around her, caressing her skin almost affectionately. She holds one of her slim, hiltless blades in her left hand. I don't miss the sheen of fresh blood staining it.

On her chair, next to a small study desk, there's a tall, burly guy bound at the ankles and wrists behind his back. His bare arms are bleeding in several places, as is his torso.

"My would-be assassin, I take it." I kick the door shut after letting myself in.

The man's trying to scream, and wiggling in his chair, but Daria's shadows choke every sound that comes out of his throat.

"Don't call him that. It gives us professionals a bad name." Daria bites her lower lip. "Did anyone see you walk to my room?"

I cock an eyebrow, not expecting the bashfulness. "Would it matter if they did?" I grin, surprised and amused to notice

her blush.

She cares about the opinion of others enough to not want them thinking here at night. I wouldn't have thought her shy. I can think of so many different ways to tease and embarrass her. Though I'd risk getting stabbed, it seems worth the danger.

"You don't let many guys into your room, I take it."

"Rovan!" she snaps, exasperated. "I'm not noticed here. I like it that way. If people thought you and I were on bed-hopping terms, they would start to pay attention to me. I can't afford that."

It's a perfectly logical concern, and her golden cheeks have heated to a perfectly delicious shade of pink.

Suddenly I do imagine myself spreading her out on her tiny bed, see how far that blush extends. Tugging that plain top a few inches down those smooth shoulders and pressing my mouth right there. Then I'd bring my lips to her collarbone, following a trail down her stomach. I'd press my hand to her mouth to keep her from screaming and—

I try to banish that disturbing vision.

Sex is very simple to we demis, and simpler still for those of us with fae blood—a primal need we all have to see to. But sex with *this* woman? Less so.

I prefer to give into my lust among strangers. In the past, when I was too young and foolish to choose my partners more wisely, I would fuck princes and princesses, nursemaids and knights, and those I discarded proved all too willing to betray me when they lost my attention.

My affairs were never anything close to a relationship, but people latch on to me, never wanting me to let go. I can't help it. I am what I am. I deliver pleasure with ease and generosity. I don't set out to make anyone think they could have more than a good old fucking session, but always, they wonder. They hope. They think if I am so willing to kneel at their altar and worship them for hours, surely I care.

I rarely do, and I always lose interest.



Daria Stone has been a fixture in my life for three years, in her own way, and she's fast becoming someone relevant—something like a friend of sorts. She *did* take an arrow meant for me, after all. I'd like to continue enjoying her company, so it means my keeping hands, my tongue, and my cock to myself, sadly. That lip she likes biting is quite inviting.

*Stay*, I tell the member twitching in my pants. All other concerns aside, there's the fact that when I do mess it all up with her, she would likely stab me.

The thought of impending demise should calm my cock down. No such luck.

I need a distraction, so I tilt my head toward the man bound to her chair. "Did he say anything?"

"'Aaargh,' mostly," she replies, calm and matter-of-fact.

I laugh. She's *so* adorable. "Shame. I wonder who sent him. My mother has stopped trying to kill me, after all."

Her dark eyes widen. "So, it was the queen behind all those assaults?"

I figured that as a Wicked, she might have known. "Didn't she try to hire your guild?"

"I didn't always hear the assignments, especially those we refuse. And we would have refused." She's categorical.

I guessed as much, given that I'm still breathing, but I always wondered why. "You seem sure."

She lifts her chin. "The assassin's guild might take assignments now, but we were initially founded to better the state of our kingdom. Each life we take has to be of benefit to our country, or to the world at large. Slavers, thieves, liars, corrupt politicians—we'd even kill them for cheap, or free. We don't touch little boys."

I would have called her idealistic, but my neck, firmly attached to my shoulders, seems to corroborate her declaration. My mother has plenty of money—Flaur's only rival financially is Dorath, and she has access to the kingdom's

coffers. If they were happy to assassinate anyone for a price, they would have accepted her bid to end my life.

“So, let’s find out who wants me gone now....” I approach the man, and watch his bleeding wound already closing over.

He’s a demi of some persuasion, with lightning-fast healing. Maybe a shifter.

“Could you free his mouth?” He’ll have a hard time managing a word over the shadows stuck in his throat.

He’s practically gagging on them.

Daria hesitates. “He cannot be allowed to scream here. Thin walls.”

I can’t help it: I picture her spread on her bed again, screaming for mercy as I sink my teeth deep, marking her thigh, her neck, her breasts. I *have* to get my shit together where she’s concerned. For one, I don’t want to hurt her. From an intellectual perspective, I know I don’t. But the part of me I can’t help, the monster inside? It’s salivating over her. I don’t even crave *blood*. What I feed on is more aberrant than a physiological need.

“Whoever’s staying next door likely saw me come in. They’ll assume I’m the one screaming if they hear him,” I reply with a wink.

She rolls her eyes, but then focuses her attention on his mouth, and his immaterial bonds disappear.

The man immediately sucks in air to scream, intending to make an inconvenience of himself for Daria, but before he can exhale a word, I wrap my hand around his throat and smile.

Unlike last time, I drive the trip to Ilvaris, purposely calling to the most sinister place I can think of—its darkest woods, filled with untamed horrors that wouldn’t hesitate to take a bite out of me if given the chance.

Then I let go of him, never breaking the connection with the fae world, leaving his soul stuck over the veil.

His eyes widen, showing mostly whites, and he thrashes against his restraints with renewed vigor.

“Let me go. Let me go!” he begs, moving so erratically his chair falls over.

“Who sent you?” I ask.

The man starts to sob, and I see a wide claw mark materialize on his back, slicing through his torso. “Please!”

“Who?”

He sobs harder. “They’ll kill me.”

“It looks like a redcap is about to make a meal out of your soul anyway. You won’t die here if they kill you in fairy,” I state, my intonation flat. “Not right away. You’ll just keep breathing in and out, completely empty, for the rest of your miserable life, pissing yourself, never eating, withering away.”

A gut-wrenching scream cuts through the air. Daria’s neighbor is most likely not going to think I’m having a great time. In fact, she’ll likely call security. We should have taken this to my room.

The corner of my lips extends as waves of energy emanate from the bound archer. There it is. My meal of choice.

“Nobles!” he finally yells. “Three of them. Leroy Blossom, Victor River, Arther Palmer. That’s it, I swear. Please.”

I call him back to his torn, bleeding form, stealing the poor redcap’s meal. But after all, if I leave his soul in fairy, I’d have to drag a body out of this room, which is rarely ever fun.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# TWO WORLDS

# DARIA



I'm not confident letting the downtrodden archer go is the best of ideas, now that he's seen my face and what I'm capable of, but Rován assures me he won't breathe a word.

"Won't you, my friend?" he checks sweetly.

The poor man's entire body shivers, and he swears up and down that he never would, and begs, "Please, please, *please*."

I can't deny I'm impressed. I'd just started on my interrogation when Rován came, but I didn't get a name out of the archer, and I used my knives at least five times. That means the guy is accustomed to torture. Yet what Rován did to him made him pliant within instants.

"What *did* you do to him?" I ask.

Rován makes himself comfortable at my desk, taking the now-vacant chair. "I took his mind to Ilvaris, like I did yours that day, after the library." His most blinding smile has an edge. "He got to meet one of the wild folk—one with a taste for blood, intent on eating him alive. And he couldn't move."

I wince. "If my mother knew the fae could do that, she'd hire a bunch."

"The fae can't do that. Not all of us, that is," he amends.

I tilt my head. "Then why—"

"Are all common folk able to do the same thing? All demis, all Wicked, for that matter?"

He makes a fair point.

“World travel is something my father’s line manages better than most,” Rován tells me.

I don’t ask when he realized he could use it as a tool for torture. There is much more than meets the eye to this ridiculously pretty boy. I always knew that, based on his presence, the vials of poisons and antidotes at his belt, the casual way he can ruin someone’s life without much of a thought. He’s a fellow monster, all right.

“Who’s your father?” I hesitate and reword. “Well, I guess what I mean is, what is your father?”

“You might have heard of him. He fought in the fae war—on the other side. His name is Alder Larch.”

It doesn’t ring a bell, so I shake my head. History isn’t my favorite subject—I prefer to focus on what’s happening now.

“He commanded the armies of the night court at the time. Now he’s their king. He is one of the gentry. All of them are good at glamor; spells of deception—changing their appearance, making you believe things that aren’t there—but their power ranges enormously from one line to the next. Alder’s specialty is being able to create portals, to whatever destination. I inherited a fraction of his abilities. When I was younger, I couldn’t control it. I almost ended up sucked into a black hole.” Rován chuckles like the chilling prospect is nothing but a good joke. “So my father turned up one day and took me to Ilvaris to train me. I only stayed a year, but time passes differently there.”

I remember reading that somewhere, but I can’t recall the details. “How differently?”

“It’s hard to explain. There aren’t even the same number of hours per day, or days per week to count things by. But I’ve always been identical to my twin, and when I came back, I looked a year or two older than him. We only went back to being mirror images of each other when we stopped aging.”

I have about a million other questions to ask him, but he’s already getting up, and short of tying him to the chair in the

archer's stead, I can't think of a way to make him stay without coming off as far too eager.

"I really do appreciate you saving my ass in class. I am in your debt." And he's loathed to admit it.

I shrug indifferently. "It's fine." In truth, I acted solely on instinct. I didn't think. Or rather, I did, and logic demanded I let him die. But I didn't. I'm feeling rather vulnerable about making such a rash move on his behalf. I'd rather not dwell on it.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" He's looking at my slapdash bandage. I didn't pay enough attention to my first aid lessons.

I forgot all about it—and the fact that my midriff is bare after tearing half of my clothes off.

"Oh, it's fine." I lower the binding. "See?"

The wound's still there, but the nasty black tinge the poison caused is already gone, and I can no longer smell it. I would have been freed of it earlier if I could have let my shadows purge it immediately.

Rovan takes my arm, his long fingers closing on my skin, and tugs me closer to look at it in detail, a crease between his eyebrows.

He's too close, and I should tell him. Didn't I just lose it on his friend a day ago when he dared to encroach on my space? But while I notice, I'm not hating it.

"You're really healing fast."

He lets go before I step away.

I clear my throat. "Well, I need a shower and a change of clothing. Thanks for checking on me."

One corner of his lips curves up. "I'm dismissed, I see." He starts to walk to the door. "Don't think I haven't noticed you're not sweating, and you still smell of wild roses, despite running in the heat and chasing assassins along rooftops."

"I still need showers," I chuckle.



Though I suppose the technical word is *like* rather than need. The principal goals of ablutions are preventing infection and managing body odors. My shadows take care of both. But not showering makes me feel icky regardless.

I accompany Rován to the door, and he turns back to me before he crosses the threshold.

“Before I forget,” he says, handing me a small item wrapped in red foil.

I just look at it, confused.

“That’s a chocolate bar. I always feel like eating chocolate after a poisoning, so I figured I’d bring you some. I didn’t know you’d clean your bloodstream of something meant to kill you in half an hour.” He snorts, like he finds my immune system utterly ridiculous.

What is ridiculous is this prince bringing me candy.

“Thank you?”

I don’t think I could ever get used to seeing that secretive smile of his from up close. It’s too dangerous for mortals to hang out with people like him. Everything about Rován Briar was designed to seduce, entice, fascinate, and torture.

“And here I thought you were highly sensible. You’re thanking a half fae, now.”

I bite my lip. I know no one should thank a fairy. There are millions of tales explaining why. They take thanks as admissions of debts owed, and can demand favors in return. I just didn’t think the rules would apply to a half-fae, half-demi, all infuriating prince.

“Well, I am grateful for you bringing me chocolate,” I rephrase. “Though it wasn’t necessary or requested.”

“Too late. By all natural laws, you owe me, Daria Stone.” He smiles like he’s joking, but his eyes burn like he most definitely isn’t.

I make a mental note to forget everything I thought I knew about him. He’s entirely fae, from the toes of his boots to his smooth wild hair. “I owe you? I just saved your life.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask much. It was, after all, just a little candy bar.” His tone is playful, coaxing me to press the issue.

I cross my arms over my chest and glare, though I am only faking offense, and more than happy to play along. “What do you want, then?”

“A smile.”

I roll my eyes.

No wonder fairies have a reputation for stealing hearts. He’s not even trying to seduce me, yet he’s getting under my skin more than any boy I’ve ever known, even back in the day when all the ambitious teens in Rhunar were vying for my attention, to try to snag a place in the Wicked clan through me.

“A smile?”

He shrugs. “They’re rare enough from you.”

Well, little as he might know me, he’s certainly got that right. It has been a while since I’ve smiled openly and often. Though in the last few days, I can remember a few instances that have made me do so.

I let the corners of my lips hike up and open my bedroom door. “Out!”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# THE ROYAL PRIDE

## ROVAN



Aeron's peeved, which would be hilarious if I wasn't equally irritated by his entire existence.

"Since when are you and that girl a thing?" he mumbles, with no small degree of resentment.

We're walking in the same direction, to join the other member of the quaint get-togethers Reiks likes to call every now and then.

Reiks told me his new girl calls us the royal pride. It's certainly fitting enough. He'll be the king of Anderkan, Zale has been the king of Ravelyn since he was a kid, and Selina's the sister of the future queen of Vanemir. Loken used to complete our quintet before his banishment. Now we're stuck with the annoying—and right this moment, annoyed—little brother.

"That girl," I echo, my irritation rising.

I have called her a girl a time or two, but I didn't mean it in a demeaning, belittling way like he does.

Aeron shrugs, endeavoring to appear indifferent. "She's just a common. One in a million from the streets of Rhunar."

I don't know who he's trying to convince, himself or me.

There are reasons commons and stronger demis are discouraged from forming an attachment. We're more dangerous, for one, and bursts of magiks in anger or excitement aren't unheard of. Commons are too fragile for us. But mostly, it has to do with the fact that they age and die in

the blink of an eye. Most demis live half a dozen of their lifetimes.

I wonder how long a Wicked lives. Then I curse myself. I shouldn't let myself look for reasons Daria and I may or may not work. We wouldn't. Not because of what she is. I'm the problem. I've never met anyone I don't want to hurt, and Daria's no exception.

Aeron's not acting like someone worried about hurting her. He says common like one says rat, with disgust and contempt. We're almost at the library, so I'll be rid of him soon enough.

"She's nineteen, and you want to slip between her thighs." Aeron glares at me, but doesn't bother formulating a denial. "At least do both of you the decency of calling her a woman."

"Well, she's a *common* woman."

I've never thought of her as a common. I may not have known what she was, but I always thought it was *more*. Aeron likes to diminish her in his mind, to think himself her better, and he doesn't deal with his attraction well as a result.

"Whatever," he grinds between his teeth. "I don't want her. She's just so haughty, barely even acknowledging *me*. I'm her prince!"

I've always been fascinated by how easily most people can formulate lies; they roll off their tongue so effortlessly. Whenever I try to say anything I don't believe, the words clog my throat.

"I was just wondering why you didn't tell me you were with her, is all."

He's so crotchety, I'm finally growing amused, though my own annoyance never wavers.

At least, I am self-aware enough to know its cause. We both would very much like a taste of my dove. I accepted it, weighed the pros and cons, and deemed it unwise. I'd hurt her. Not in the metaphorical, abstract way most men hurt their partners. I'd physically hurt her. I'd choke her while diving into her too hard, too fast. I'd use my claws and fangs. I'd

deliberately cause her pain. It's one thing to screw a demi used to it, aroused by it, like that. Daria's just too small, too young, too precious. She's the kind of woman one makes love to. I'm the kind of guy who only knows how to hate-fuck. Making love sounds like a complete bore to me. We're not compatible.

Aeron isn't thinking about anything so complex. He's just an elitist, racist, arrogant sod, vexed about his own desires.

"Have I ever bragged of any of my conquests to you?" I ask, deciding against correcting his assumption.

Aeron's not annoyed by my keeping things to myself. He's just frustrated he can no longer torture her with impunity. If his assumption about us means he'll leave her alone, I'll let him think whatever he'd like. The entire world can believe she's mine, for all I care.

We reach the concealed passageway behind a large painting of one of my ancestors, and I slide behind it first, finding everyone else already seated. I purposely take a seat close to Zale Devar because Aeron gives the ice king a wide berth.

He and I aren't the closest of friends. There's plenty of fae blood in Zale's veins, but where I am a child of the unseelie realm at the core, he's a stickler for order, rules, and honor. If we were in Ilvaris rather than here, we would likely have been on opposite sides of warring kingdoms. I think we both realize that without Reiks, we would never have exchanged a word. Yet for all that, we understand each other better than anyone else. He has needs, cravings that demand to be satisfied, just like mine.

His just happen to be slightly more civilized.

"Devar."

"Briar," he returns the greeting icily.

His absence of intonation, emotion, or friendliness only serves to make me want to tease, get under his skin. "You're no longer on track to become valedictorian, I hear. At least your replacement is easy on the eyes."

The air in the room suddenly drops by several degrees, and the candles flicker. The king himself remains entirely calm, almost bored.

I chuckle. “Thanks. This summer is dire.” In fact, it’s getting chilly, but I’ll never show when he gets to me. “How about you, Nath? How’s the wicked witch?”

Reiks doesn’t even spare me a glance.

“One day, Rován, one of your friends is going to snap and murder you, and you’ll have no one to blame but yourself,” Salina predicts. It’s probably accurate.

I’m only glad none of my friends have heard a word about Daria yet, because they’ll certainly return my mocking with a vengeance if they knew.

“What are we here for now?” I ask Reiks. “But seriously, where’s that pretty, albeit uncommonly tall girl of yours? Lost her already?”

Natheran’s silver eyes flash. “Alis is asleep. We’re drawing near Lughnasadh. It’s not easy on her kind.”

Lughnasadh. I’d forgotten it was approaching. “Is it tomorrow?”

The wheel of the year of Xhera is marked by eight sabbats, widely celebrated by all demis with dances and songs, food, and orgies. Mostly orgies. I am affected by it on the day itself—how could I fail to be, when the very foundation of the world shakes with magiks, the taste of wine and the stench of lust—but my core belongs to another world. I get wilder on solstices and equinoxes than on random festivals. Still, I ought to remember Lughnasadh, as I was born the day after.

“It’s on Baltaday this year,” Reiks tells me.

So, my birthday is Grapurday. I should check whether my mother set her party up to on the day itself, considering I’ve agreed to attend. And find something for my brother. I’ve sent him a present every year, but we’re actually going to be together for the first time in years. I’ll have to make it special. He’ll find something great, so I’ll feel terrible if mine isn’t appropriately epic.



“And as for your other question, we’re here to talk about the rebels planning a fucking attack somewhere—possibly a number of somewheres.” Reiks unrolls a long parchment, and the fun is over for the rest of the morning.

We pore over merchant’s guild reports, to make sense of the damnable maps our spies snatched from rebels, but the obvious solution—the one suggesting that they might have assembled a force large enough to attack five locations all at once—is too ludicrous to believe.

As my friends exchange outlandish theories, and try to untangle schemes from a few threads, I think about having Daria here right now, by my side. She could very well have solved our riddles for us in instants, come up with plans, and we’d be drinking tea and talking about the weather by now.

As I smile, I don’t miss Aeron’s dark scowl across the room.

Poor Daria. She has two suitors, one too cowardly to even admit to himself he wants her and the other too kind to ever make a move.

If she were mine, I’d take from her what I want from everyone else, everything else. What I need to survive. Pain.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# AN UNEXPECTED TURN

# DARIA



I don't often get mail. When I do, it's expected. Bills, administrative requests. I knew I'd receive the first letter on my pile today. They come like clockwork around festivals.

My lips curl up at the thick folded parchment sealed with dark wax and gold foil. The sigil pressed on it is a single rose flanked by two snakes—a personal statement rather than a symbol anyone could use to identify the sender by.

*My sand rose,*

*I have succeeded in convincing your mother not to burn the world down in an effort to unearth you—for now. Still, she rages that you're no longer by her side, and she does frequently refuse to grant me her favor because I am guilty of letting you go, and concealing you from her. She'll live, and with some luck, so will I.*

*Your little sister has renewed her efforts to prove herself just as bloodthirsty as you, which of course delights my lovely wife. As for Tamira, she's completed a month of study with my guild, and has not once stabbed any of the masters struggling to teach her the art of bookkeeping.*

*I am forever proud of my three treasures.*

*Send word, so that I may appease the dragon with the knowledge of your wellbeing for another season.*

*Forever lovely,*

*Your father*

No names, other than Tamira's, and that one's common in Dorath. If anyone had found the missive, they couldn't have deduced anything as to its provenance or destination. I appreciate how my father always strives to let me live my life as I see fit, though doing so has put him at odds with my mother, who wouldn't mind caging me up if it kept me by her side.

I press the letter to my chest on my way out of the mailroom, still grinning.

“What's this?”

At first, I don't even look up. It's not the first time I've come across the beauty with a full head of fat blue ringlets, dressed in a modest green suit but with an array of priceless jewels on display. She and her two friends—a dark woman in clothes fitted so tight to her skin they look like they're painted on her, and the blonde who likes to dress like a princess—started school around the same time as Alis Frejr and I. Alis calls them the three Cs. I'm not even certain which one is Camil, Chira, or Caelin.

Women like them deeply disgust and unsettle me.

They bullied Alis when they realized she wouldn't fight back, but since the beginning, they've completely ignored me. I'm beneath their notice, someone with no famous name. Alis can handle herself—she simply chooses not to—so I've decided to try to pretend they didn't exist.

But the blue-haired demi princess plants herself right before me and plucks one of my letters out of my hand. “Why would Flaur's royal attaché contact *you*?”

I'm too stunned to think to snatch it back before she starts to open the dark green envelope I took for some sort of spam.

The spoiled bitch gasps audibly, pulling the letter out of it. I take it out of her hand and sneer. “Did no one bother to tell you not to put your hands on what doesn't belong to you?”

I might like this university well enough, but sometimes I truly do hate the people I share it with.

“Look who’s talking,” she retorts, eyes taking me in slowly. “Whose husband did you have to screw to score an invitation to the ball?”

I blink in confusion. An invitation? A ball? None of those words make sense. I return the insult nonetheless. “Don’t lower me to your standards.”

“Look at it,” one of the other Cs—the one in a tight gold playsuit—laughs. “A common whore, talking back to a *princess*.”

Ah, so the curly-haired conceited girl still scrunching my empty envelope in her fist is the princess, then. Chira Mallone of Flour.

“Common I may be,” I admit, because that’s technically true. I’m not a demi, and I don’t have any rank in Dorath either. “But only one of us looks like a whore. Newsflash: it’s not me.”

I turn on my heels, taking no notice of the barrage of insults following me as I read the words in my hand.

By all the gods of light and shade, she’s right. Somehow, I’m invited to a ball.



The letter is still clasped in my hand by the time I make it into the library. The queen—or whoever penned the fine calligraphy for her—profusely apologizes for any inconvenience I might have felt in taking an arrow meant for her son, and with many thanks, proceeds to invite me to a ball this weekend. One thrown for the birthday of their princes.

*Dear Ms. Stone*, it reads, and I’m concerned that she knows my name.

That makes very little sense to me, and I am still trying to read between the lines. That she wants to see me and take my measure is evident. The question is, why? She shouldn't bother to think of me one way or another. It's concerning that she does.

I ought to attend, if only to observe her, and assuage any curiosity she might feel about me. Ensure she believes I am a perfectly inconsequential girl, and forgets my fake name, my very existence.

“Since when does my mother write to you, dove?”

I felt Rován's presence, but I didn't bother to acknowledge it, no longer concerned by him the way I was for the last few years. I may not know much about him and his power, and his very nature, but he doesn't mean me harm. We're...friends? Is that what we are? Friendly, at least.

As his steps join mine, I don't look up, though I do feel myself tensing.

“Since today,” I reply casually. I hand him the letter, pushing it against his chest.

I finally make myself turn, face him and look up, and up, and up, until my gaze meets his captivating green eyes. “What do you make of this?”

I don't think Rován likes losing staring contests. It takes him a while to look away. Still, eventually, he scans through the words on the thick paper. I watch a crease form on his forehead between two annoyingly perfectly shaped eyebrows, as his eyes travel to the top again, and start from scratch.

At long last, he hands it back to me. “You can't go.”

“Oh, can't I?” I ask, deceptively calm, though I balk at being told what to do.

His jaw tics. “Daria—”

“There haven't been many men foolish enough to believe they could control me. I wouldn't have thought you would be counted among them.”

“I am rather attached to my various appendages,” he assures me. “But this is concerning. My mother is dangerous, Daria.”

“And I’m not?”

He has the look of a man caught in a trap, with no escape whichever way he looks. I can’t help cracking a smile and he groans, giving in. “Fine, come if you must. But you’d better give me a gift. Something extravagant, and large and gold.”

I snort a laugh and roll my eyes. “Right. That sounds like something a library assistant can afford.”

His eyes dip down and take me in all the way from my pretty, but worn boots to my eyes in one fast sweep. “So that’s why you dress the way you do. You’re strapped for cash since you’re cut off from your guild.”

In truth, I had a host of pretty dresses, gorgeous suits, and tailored working clothes back at home mostly because Tamira and Sam ordered them. I don’t have a taste for fashion. I don’t have much money here, but if I’d inherited a tenth of my father’s flamboyance, I’d make do with my salary and still look fabulous. On this, I took after my mother, who sees nothing wrong with practicality alone.

I have five identical pairs of cargo pants in two different shades, ten short sleeve compression tops that I can wear for just about any activity, five cardigans, and one coat. I make do with that. I could use a jacket for the mid-season. My coat’s too warm for right now, as the nights are getting cooler, and cold rain is starting to fall. But I couldn’t bring myself to go shopping for one. It wasn’t my favorite thing in Rhunar, even with my sisters dragging me along. Here, alone and on my budget, it’s akin to torture.

I don’t tell him any of that. “I’ll try not to feel insulted.”

“Your pants are an insult to what I surmise is a rather shapely pair of buttocks.”

My mouth falls open in a wordless gasp, at the slight as well as the praise. “They’re perfectly fine.”



“Tell me you have a dress to wear to the ball, if you insist on coming.”

I don't recall insisting on anything—I just implied I'd do as I saw fit. With his mention of wardrobe concerns, the idea has less and less appeal. But what common girl would pass on a noble ball? Not attending seems to be the best way to bring attention to myself. Would that I could get away with going in my usual garb. But he's right. I'm going to need a dress.

“I'll figure something out,” I grumble. “Now, leave me alone. I have a paper to study for.”

He doesn't leave, dragging a second battered armchair to my table next to the fireplace, but Rován brings his own books and focuses on his studies, leaving me alone.

I'm self-conscious at first, but his presence isn't as unsettling as I would have thought. I get used to it. Worse yet: I'm starting to like it.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# THE MAGIKS OF THE LANES

# DARIA



I work at the library all day on Baltadays, and the ball's at the end of the weekend, so I opt to plan my shopping expedition right after class on Strejaday.

Magnapolis took a turn in the past week. It's still hot, but the air's heavy and humid, showing all signs of an upcoming storm. I don't do well in the rain. Not only am I irritable, all my instincts tell me I should be bundled inside a blanket fort with a book and a hot drink instead of bothering to do anything—which suggests I'm at least part cat.

Maybe I should finally pick up a mid-season jacket while I'm out. It ought to make the rain mildly less vexing. Though any appropriate attire for a Flaurian ball would likely deplete my meager savings. I am lodged and fed at Five, but all of the other expenses fall on me. The books alone cost a fortune, even with my library discount. I haven't managed to put away much cash in the last years.

I make my way south, taking a public hovercraft that takes so many turns the journey lasts an hour and a half. It's later in the day, and most of the shops in hightown close by the twentieth hour, while the undercity never sleeps.

There's a better chance of matching my budget in the poorer part of Magnapolis, though I'm not certain of my chances of finding an attire suitable for a royal ball here.

Flaur is all about ornate windows, gold trim, and carved finery. They're a country of abundance, like Dorath, but instead of relying on the strength of their people, Flaur's

wealth comes from its natural resources: a fertile land with four moderate seasons, it's an agricultural paradise. If it was run by someone like my mother, it would become the ruling empire to which all other kingdoms bow. Instead, the Flaurians are content to compose poetry and ballads, throwing too many balls and tending their gardens.

In short, being badly dressed is likely considered the vilest of crimes. Which explains Rován's obsession with my practical, unoffensive cargo pants.

I walk down rows of wonky lanes, all tilting toward the east, as if trying to dip into the canals. I love it here. The colors alone make this part of town completely different from the stylish, uptight hightown area. Doors are painted anything from bubble pink to bright red and spotted with dots, like a ladybug's coat.

"Excuse me?" I ask a man crouched by an open wooden door, scrubbing its stone step with a wet brush.

The grouch glances over his shoulder and sneers, showing two missing teeth at the front. "What do you want?"

I take a coin from my back pocket and hold it up. "You wouldn't happen to know where I can find the tailors?"

I've heard that the undercity lanes are divided by profession—the metal workers in one area, the fishmongers and butchers and bakers elsewhere, and so on. I could roam the streets and discover their secrets by myself if I had the time, but it's already late. I wouldn't want to arrive to my destination after the shops close up. I'm late enough as it stands, considering that anything I purchase will likely need altering. Being shorter than the international average has many an advantage. People underestimate me, for one. That has proved useful on a number of occasions. And I can buy my cargo pants in the children's section, which my wallet appreciates.

But dress shopping is going to suck.

"Down three canals, on Beaufort Hill." He scratches his chin. "But I recon you're better off on Glitter Lane. Cheaper

bargains, better wares for the price, 'cause they don't have to pay for shop upkeep, you know."

Like most old grouchy men, he knows his shit, hence why I opted to disrupt him. "Where would that be?"

"Just keep walking, and turn at the seventh street. You can't miss it. It's as wide as two lanes and packed at this time of day."

I toss the copper mark in the air, and he catches it in both hands.

I've taken a few steps when his voice reaches me again. "Be careful of what price you agree to. Especially if you deal with the night market folks."

I toss him a second coin for his warning and make my way through the sinuous streets.

I like the undercity more than I would have thought. Though there's a glaringly obvious lack of sand and music, it reminds me of home. I reach the large, paved avenue, wider and somewhat straighter than the others, just as the sun dips low under the cityscape in an explosion of purples and reds. I can feel the energy buzz as stands are setting up or packing up on either side of the wide avenue, changing from day to night market.

I take my time, looking at the displays. No point in hurrying when they've just arrived.

My stomach growls as I approach a street food cart roasting some sort of meat over hot coals. The smell is just not fair. He could sell his goods for ten times their worth and no one would protest. To my surprise, when I reach him, the man hands me a skewer before I can ask for a price. I lick my lips and take it. The first mouthful has me moaning.

"How much do I owe you?"

He looks me over and hands me an envelope. "You can take the letter to my sweetheart. Roza. She's up the lane, waxing for the shoemaker. Short pink hair, you can't miss her."

I look at the letter in my hand, trying to spot the trap. That's far too easy a job. Then again, he gave me one skewer, not an emerald ring.

"I will." I decide not to thank him, just in case. "Delicious stuff."

"Yeah, I catch the best squirrels up in the park."

If that's what he can make of squirrel meat, I'd love to see what he'd do with a nice cut of venison.

His toothy grin expands. "But the secret is in the sauce."

"What's in the sauce?" I'm half interested, half suspicious.

"Wouldn't be a very well-kept secret if I told a visitor passing by," he replies reasonably. "Enjoy the lanes, young lady."

And to my surprise, I am enjoying myself. The chaotic array of choices, from jewels to sweetmeats, from curses and potions to candles and bric-a-brac keeps me interested, and far from bored. Someday, I'll have to bring my sisters.

The first tailor I spot has a short frilly dress set up on a mannequin, and choices of fabric, with a large sign claiming he'll happily design anything from scratch in one day. I can't imagine he's likely to be very good, at that speed, but though not to my taste, his sample dress is well crafted. I linger a moment, but choose to travel up to the end of the lane and back before deciding on approaching any merchant. Besides, I have a letter to deliver, and I won't feel easy until that job is done.

Another tailor has a dozen already designed pieces on a hanger, though none are gowns. I find a third already measuring a woman, pinning yards of fabric around her and hand-sewing some bits into place. I watch with interest.

"Come back in two hours," the old woman croaks, and her client sighs in relief.

"You're a lifesaver, Johel. Who knew my old dress no longer fit!"

As the client leaves, the graying tailor grumbles under her breath. “Anyone with eyes could have told you as much.”

I chuckle and find myself approaching. “This was clever work. I could already see the shape, just with a few pins and cuts.”

The tailor, Johel, snorts in reply. “If you think you’re the only pretty thing to hope a compliment will get her a discount, you’re mistaken. You’re not even the first today.”

She seems affable enough, so I don’t let her words deter me. “Does it work?”

“Only always. Come, sit. You’re in dire need, clearly.” She grimaces at my clothes, more offended than Rován.

I try not to roll my eyes. “There’s nothing wrong with practical, comfortable stuff.”

“Clothing can be practical and becoming all at once, sand child.”

I straighten up at the name she uses.

*Sand.*

But I’m just being paranoid. There’s no way she could know who I was. Even if she did, this random tailor in a poor street of Magnápolis wouldn’t know that Sand is the true family name of the Wicked. She called me a sand child because I’m from Dorath, just like she might have called someone from Ravelyn an ice child. There’s no other explanation.

“Well, I’m not looking for practical, just becoming.” I hop on the stool she pats by her side. “There’s a ball in two days. I don’t have appropriate clothes for it.”

“I suspect you don’t have appropriate clothes for many things,” she grouses. “And I’ll handle the dress. There’s a boy to impress, yes?”

I open my mouth and close it. “Are you some sort of seer?”



Not that I'm actively aiming to impress anyone. But it wouldn't hurt to show a certain smug, arrogant prince that I can, in fact, wear something not meant to hike in.

"I'm a small business owner. Same difference." She starts to sketch on a notepad, stealing glances at me over the rim. "You like red, don't you? And leaves, rather than flowers."

"I like flowers," I claim, though I do tend to enjoy leaves, now that I think of it. I've pressed leaves from all over the place into a notebook—my version of journaling. I don't recall having ever done so for a flower instead. "What are you?"

"That's not very polite to ask. How would you feel if I asked you what *you* were, girl?"

Fair point.

"We haven't discussed payment," I remind her.

I suspect she's very good, and more than a little magical, so I likely can't afford her.

"You'll pay me ten gold now, as well as a hundred plus a favor, after you marry the boy."

I laugh out loud. She's a character, that's for certain.

Ten gold isn't much for a true gown. A hundred is a high price indeed. She's banking on recouping her cost and then some if I find a better fortune. To be honest, I assure her, "Those are fair terms, but you stand to lose, as I'm not marrying any boy anytime soon."

Marriage is a concept I haven't paused to think of. Not in Rhunar, and certainly not here. Men are meant for flicking clits and sending on their way. I've never even considered keeping one.

"Not until you get my dress, you won't," she stridently declares. "You don't have fabric. Luckily for you, you're a wee thing and I have a few bolts left of what I'm working with right now."

She measures me and asks for my address.

I offer her the gold she quoted, and she practically bites my head off for the affront. “Not before the work is complete,” she insists. “Run along, sand girl.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# THE GIRL IN A STORY

# DARIA



I've never been one to make a fuss about social events, but back in Rhunar, I used to attend a different one every week. Not to mention, I had a closet full of hand-me-downs, access to my sisters' and my mom's wardrobe and jewelry box, so I didn't have to stress out about what to wear. And at those parties, I was a valued guest.

Tomorrow night, I'm only attending to avoid suspicion from the ominous queen of Flaur, and the one host I do know—Rovan—doesn't want me here. He only relented because he suspected I would have stabbed him if he kept implying I was too weak to deal with his family drama. Rightfully so.

I left the famed Glitter Lane fairly upbeat last night. I delivered the note to one suitably delighted pink-haired shoe scrubber, with a dress on order that Johel promised to deliver in time, and I even found a trinket for Rovan.

I hesitated to waste money on a present when there's a chance he won't even open it, or would hate it, or find it too cheap for his liking, but it is a birthday party, and I insisted on attending. It's the least I can do.

This morning, I don't feel as optimistic. What if I'm expected to dance? The Flaurian court has complex formal dances. I learned a few in my youth, in stealth training—blending in is essential to any shadow—but they evolve every year. What if Aude Briar is just as awful as Rovan insinuated? Then I'll likely murder her and there'd be hell to pay. Regicides ought to be carefully planned, not rushed into impetuously. And what if that damnable dress never arrives?

I do my best not to think about the party. I run twice as fast as usual, and much farther, in a fruitless attempt to settle my nerves. By the time I hop into the common shower in the attic, I want to strangle myself. I'm all twisted up over a prince, and a ball, and a dress designed by a suspicious crone in a night market. I feel like an idiotic girl in a story. Even as a child, I always grew frustrated with their useless concerns. What did it matter what they wore, so long as they were armed with enough blades to get themselves out of whatever situation was thrown their way? Or stab the prince.

I always related to the wicked witches more than the pretty, useless girls.

I'll have my shadows. I don't need anything else.

I crack a smile, imagining myself walking in wearing nothing but that. That'd give the Flaurians something to talk about.

I've just gotten myself changed into fresh cargo pants and one of my identical tops when someone knocks at my door. In three years, I've never had anyone in my room, not even Alis, and this is the third time someone's sought me out this term. I'm expecting Rován, because who else would come here, but I don't recognize the lanky man at the door.

He wears the black uniform of the university maintenance staff.

"Ms. Stone?"

"That's me," I reply, confused by his appearance. Did I break some sort of dorm protocol I'm not aware of?

The man pulls a tray I hadn't paid attention to, farther down the hallway. "Delivery, miss. If you would sign to acknowledge receipt?"

I scribble on his e-stone tablet, and he hands me a large, sleek black box.

I *am* expecting a delivery, but not this fast. I thought it'd arrive tomorrow at the earliest.

I tell myself not to expect too much—I gave the poor tailor such a short deadline, she didn't have much time to get something done. The dress will be simple. I don't mind simplicity. Hopefully, it's well fitted. That's all I can ask.

I lift the lid and unfold the tissue paper to reveal the fabric underneath.

I think I gasp.

The garment on top of the thin red paper isn't a dress at all. It's a jacket.

No, the simple word doesn't do it justice. The frock is made of the finest steelsilk, a featherlight armored fabric my own family favors on assignments. Lined with a soft, red undercoat, the black panels are minutely stitched with gold threads along the edges. Vines and leaves, a small bird in flight, a crescent moon at the corner of the high collar, and another one, facing the opposite way at the bottom. It seems to tell a story—my story, though I didn't share one word of it with my tailor.

I also never told her I needed a jacket, though the fact that I wasn't wearing one in the evening might have made it obvious.

That she's more than she appears was obvious yesterday, but right now I itch to return to the lanes and spy on her, watch her dealings, understand what manner of creature I now owe a favor to. But only if I marry a boy, which is rather unlikely.

I slip a sleeve on and marvel at the softness of the fabric, in and out. It has been some time since I even touched something this soft, this comfortable. It fits like I was born to it, like I made it up in a dream.

The box is too large for just this piece and I can see more paper underneath, so I dig through it, and unveil a dress this time.

It's as much a dress as the unique, beautiful thing I now wear is a jacket, but I can't call it a gown either. It's not formal or grand, long or complex. It's *me*. Plucked right out of my core, fitting me as well as my shadows.

I press it against my chest and grin. It looks like I'm ready to go to the ball after all.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE WITCH AND THE  
ASSASSIN

# DARIA



I'm considerably more cheerful by the time I arrive to start my shift at the library. I've tried the dress on and kept looking at myself in the mirror. I'll never doubt Johel's abilities again. The only thing I'll look closer at will be the payment owed for her skills. A favor? I must have been desperate to agree to it without thinking it through. But I have the dress, and for now, that's all that matters.

I'm itching to tell Rován about it, so I keep looking in the area where he normally sits—not far from my own spot—but he does not come. The library is quieter than usual, and no wonder.

For every demi, there are ninety-nine commonborn people on Xhera, but in places like Five—elitist institutions only letting in the wealthy, the famed, and the titled—commons are in the minority. Today's Lammas, the sabbat of the harvest, and like every seasonal festival, it fucks with demi brains. There are too many people releasing wild magiks on days like today, which reduces them to beasts led only by instinct.

I shouldn't have expected Rován to come study. I'm even surprised to see Alis show up for her shift. She seems wary, worse for the wear.

We work in different sections, but I opt to take my break when I see her head into the staff room.

She's lying back on the comfy old sofa we claim here, looking exhausted, frustrated, unstable.

I do the only logical thing when facing an exhausted, potent witch. I make coffee. The fact that she didn't even bother to do it when she first walked in tells me how badly she needs it.

"I thought you'd be on your way to the Evil Forest, or whatever," I say, handing her a mug of latte as I sit next to her.

She eagerly nabs it and starts drinking directly, though it's piping hot, because my friend is weird. Between her and Rován, it seems I only befriend absolute freaks. Which is fitting, as I'm one of them.

"You're a goddess," Alis groans gratefully. "And it's the Darklands."

Like anyone on Xhera doesn't know the name of her homeland.

The Darklands are the only remnant of the old Xhera, before the gods were sent away beyond their barrier, before the portals to other worlds were destroyed. It's a wild, dangerous place filled with monsters extinct in the rest of the world. It's also full of resources no one can find elsewhere. They haven't crowned any king or queen, but Alis's family are their leaders. Which is why no one contests the independence of the Darklands. No kingdom's foolish enough to antagonize the Frejrs, not after the Dark War.

At the time, it had only been Vanemir, standing alone against the rest of the continent. They should have lost. They should have all perished, and their lands should have been split and absorbed by the other kingdoms. But they had Valina Frejr on their side, so they won. One witch against four armies, and the armies *lost*. Everyone learned their lesson, and left the Darklands well enough alone.

Now there are hundreds of Frejrs—Valina is prolific, birthing a child every hundred years or so, and most of her children went on to have their own offspring. Their power might be diluted from generation to generation, but the youngest of the Frejrs are still more powerful than almost

every other witch on Xhera. Their clan is terrifying. Even my mother's uneasy when she has to think of them.

And then there's Alis. Denim-clad, easygoing, unassuming Alis, who doesn't even study magiks. Yet there's so much power brewing under the surface, the hair at the back of my neck stands when I approach her sometimes.

"Same difference," I quip. Evil Forest works just as well as Darklands. "Why aren't you going home?"

She evades my question, narrowing her eyes. "Why aren't *you*?"

I wince. Fair enough. Our friendship isn't about sharing the messy stuff.

I give her a logical answer that doesn't feel like a lie. "Home's a long way away. A full day's ride, if I splurge for a direct train. Not all of us can afford hovercrafts."

Accurate enough. Never mind that I never had any intention of returning. If I ever do, it'll likely be in chains, dragged by my mother.

Alis gasps, suddenly looking downright miserable. Shit. She's feeling guilty now, because she's assuming I'm too poor to do what I want.

"Don't pity me. That was just an excuse." I chuckle nervously. "The actual answer is that I don't want to return to Dorath. I could catch a ride if I really wanted to."

And I wouldn't need to. I'd shadow travel there in the blink of an eye. Great distances are draining, but I could manage one way and nap it off for the rest of the day.

"Why? Don't you get along with your family?"

*This'll teach me to try to get personal.* "I wouldn't say that." I take a sip of my drink to give myself a second to think. I can't sound too enthusiastic, or she'll really wonder why I don't want to see them. "They're fine, all things considered. It's my role within the whole family dynamic I'm not fond of."

I'm proud of myself for managing not to utter a single lie. Rován would appreciate it.

Before she can lob another question—all the while pointedly avoiding mine—I hop up. “We’d better get back to it.”

We finish our shifts on opposite sides of the library, and head out at the same time.

Alis is chatting to a familiar raven, like she expects the bird to understand every word. And indeed, he looks like he might.

“Cute bird.”

She straightens up with a start. Clearly, she didn’t hear or sense my approach.

“Gosh, you’re stealthy.”

I grin, amused. Good to know I still am, despite not keeping up with my training for so long.

Alis’s eyes widen when she sees me. “Nice top.”

She sounds confused and shocked to see me in anything but plain garb. I shrug self-consciously. “It’s windproof,” I say, frustrated for feeling the need to justify myself. I can wear something pretty just because it pleases me, too. “Can I pet him?”

“Not sure. He’s not mine.”

“I know that.” Everyone has seen this bird flying around a certain tall, gorgeous, cold prince I owe a favor to.

I really ought to stop treating favors as my currency of choice.

“Who’s a pretty raven? And you look quite intelligent, too.”

The bird is in full agreement with my assessment, chirping happily to tell me so. I somehow imagine I can understand the little bird, either in his eyes or his lilt or his soul.

“Hey, you doing something tonight?” Alis asks, interrupting my staring too intensely at the pretty black avian. “I have to go to a thing.”

That's not vague at all. "What kind of a thing?" I ask, unwilling to commit until I know a lot more.

"A party, I guess." She shrugs, trying to hide her nervousness. "At the Lunar Club. It would be nice to have a familiar face around."

Ah. "The Lunar Club... That's not really my kind of hangout."

I don't have an actual thing against the popular royal club of choice, but because of its exclusive clientele list, the place is often targeted by gossip reporters and photographers. I've stayed away for a reason.

"Oh?" Alis's anxiety spikes, her voice an octave higher.

Lying by offering a version of the truth has worked out so far, so I stick to it. "Way too rich for my blood, for one. I'd have to get back to work just to afford one cocktail over there." I smile to myself.

"Where did you use to work?" she asks innocently.

I walked into that one. "Here and there."

"I'll cover the drinks," she replies, clearly desperate for company.

I hate that I can't be there to help her out, but it wouldn't be wise.

The ball I'm planning to attend in two days isn't wise either. One potentially disastrous venture per weekend is all I can risk. "I'll still pass. Sorry, I'd love to hang out with you—really—but not there. I'm not fond of the company. You have fun, Frejr."

She's defeated. "You enjoy Lammas."

"What do you say in the north, again?" I ask, though I remember.

"May your harvest be bountiful," Alis quotes.

"That. Harvest well, friend!" I wave before heading to my dorm. She'll be just fine tonight. Whether she wants to admit it

or not, the Lunar Club is where she belongs, surrounded by the rich, the powerful, the privileged.

And, if I'd wager, escorted by Natheran Reiks.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# FRIENDS AND FOES

# ROVAN



The rest of the world spends so much time fantasizing about dancing with princes that they easily overlook the fact that the highborn ancients don't know how to throw a freaking party.

The younger generations aren't so bad at it. Reiks organizes some decent soirées, like the one I missed last night to ensure I wouldn't be completely wasted today. I need my wits about to swim with the sharks. But formal royal balls are a bore.

Men and women who have been doing their best to murder me for years, if not decades, bow low and wish me well at the start of my twenty-seventh journey around this sun. Never mind that it's actually my twenty-sixth here.

They tell my brother he looks well, all the while whispering venom and curses when they think no one can hear.

This thing started an hour ago, and already, I'm itching to make an escape.

"Oh, here she comes," Sylvan mutters. "Viper incoming."

I don't have to look: I smell Chira's distinctive perfume.

Sylvan once made it known that he was fond of elderflower, the one scent he can't stand, and soon enough, all the ladies of the court were wearing it, alerting him to their presence from paces away. He can be smart, my brother.

Chira's not trying to marry him these days. With my mother's blessing, she now wants to plant her claws into *me*. She somehow unearthed the fact that I favor the smell of roses, and had a bespoke perfume designed, mostly derived from the flower. It could very well have worked if she knew how to use it, but my nose is sensitive, and she sprays clouds of it. Hopefully, no one will tell her.

The princess heads straight to the dais where my brother and I are standing on either side of our mother's empty throne.

She's in a sparkling teal gown pooling at her feet, backless, dipping low on her tailbone, her blue ringlets styled in a complex headpiece that looks far too close to a crown. Objectively, she's quite the beauty, but she holds herself like someone who's never doubted either her worth or her place in the world: at the very top. Confident is an irresistible attribute. Arrogance, not so much. And there's the fact that she was eagerly chasing Sylvan until the accident. Anyone who deferred to me after earns nothing but contempt from me.

They believe I'll take over, and they'll keep believing it until Sylvan's coronation, no doubt. Maybe beyond. They don't comprehend that I have no desire to take over Flaur, a country that barely even feels like mine.

I have other plans. Plans the likes of Chira Mallone doesn't fit, even if she'd tempted me in any way.

"Sylvan." She oozes to a deep curtsy, as though that would excuse the breach in etiquette. Princess or no, she shouldn't address the crown prince by his first name uninvited. She's playing with fire, in her effort to make herself appear much more important than she is. "Rovan," Chira adds while she's low on the floor, her eyes seeking mine out in what she sadly believes passes for a sultry look. "On behalf of the Mallone family," she says, no doubt for Sylvan's benefit, "happy birthday, my princes."

She retrieves two presents—one gold, wrapped in a green bow, and another, green, with a gold bow—from her purse.

I don't acknowledge her existence in any way, ignoring the gifts she's attempting to hand to us, despite there being two large tables set up just for that purpose to each side of the dais.

Sylvan clears his throat. "Right. Thank you for coming, and for the presents. You can drop them off on your way. We'll open a few of them tonight."

She's dismissed, and she doesn't like it, but there's nothing she can do.

Chira moves along, and we greet Selina Aevan, who was sent to represent the royal family of Vanemir, as she lives in town.

It's always strange for me to meet my friends outside of Reiks's circle. We're supposed to be perfect strangers, rather than people used to each other's company.

"Your Highnesses, my mother and sister thank you for the invitation, and regretfully had to decline. It's my pleasure to have come in their stead."

"It's always a pleasure, Princess Selina," Sylvan assures her. "How's that terrifying great-great-aunt of yours?"

"Valina?" She snorts. "I still gladly hide when I hear she's visiting. Pit me against a dragon, but not that witch."

"You're a woman of keen sense."

"I believe one of her great-granddaughters is here today."

"Oh!" If Sylvan's worried about meeting a Frejr, he doesn't show it. "I do hope they'll bring us something positively magical."

"Speaking of." Selina's usually direct, but she hesitates, before telling my brother, "It is my understanding that you like to read, Your Highness. I had a book transcribed in tactile writing. I hear there are too few novels ever printed that way. It's a thriller I enjoyed. Nothing too special, but—"

Sylvan takes a step toward her, leaving his spot for the first time in the hour since the start of this endless series of

introductions, and Selina cuts herself off. “Where is it?” he asks, eager, hungry. “Where’s the book?”

I hate her a little for ruining my idea. She could have run it by me. I would have told her to find something else.

She retrieves her present from the pile of offerings closest to Sylvan and brings it back for him.

He makes short work of the wrapping and immediately starts to run his fingers over the first page. Then he catches himself, remembering where we are, and shuts it regretfully. “This is wonderful, Selina.” He reaches out to touch her hand. “Thoughtful, too. It won’t be forgotten.”

I think for the first time, I see my warrioress of a friend blush. “Right. Well, I’d better get going. Let others get their claws into you and all.”

“It’s only fair,” he agrees, wearing one of his real smiles.

She leaves us and makes her way into the vast, vaulted ballroom with a full fresco painted on its ceiling, a wall of endless windows so high I pity the poor fools cleaning them daily. The opposite wall is covered in large, tall, gold mirrors. They mostly stay covered during the day but now they’re polished, reflecting the bright light from the dozens of chandeliers. A series of columns lead to a gallery of priceless art, priceless paintings, marble sculptures, and antique tapestries.

This ridiculous palace is a piece of the Golden Mountain court, right in the middle of Magnapolis. A symbol of opulence, allowing any excesses. Bubble wine flows on a pyramid of flutes, violins and flutes trill in the air, and though no one touches the feast laid on one side of the ballroom, it smells and appears excellent.

There’d better be cake.

“I thought you were going to fall on your knees and propose that instant,” I whisper.

“A *thriller*,” Sylvan replies just as low. “I might have proposed, if it didn’t guarantee she’d get trampled by a mob of jealous debutantes.”

“And Mother. Don’t forget Mother.”

“How could I?”

I have an excellent retort at the tip of my tongue to keep the banter going, as it’s a distraction from the dreadfully dull party, but just then, all thought flees from my mind.

Daria is here.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



# AT HER LEISURE

## ROVAN



At least I think it's Daria. I can't quite be sure. Because the Daria I know, the Daria Stone mask she presents to the world, is that of a simple common girl from Dorath with no taste for fashion or care about her appearance. A tomboy.

The woman entering the ballroom isn't hiding from anyone or anything. Her sheer confidence is enough to make my cock twitch.

And then there's the dress. One shouldered, falling like a sheath over her bust, then gathered at the waist, the flirty, outlandish style seems to have been made for her. The bustier is covered with delicate golden appliqué. From this distance, I have to focus my acute vision to distinguish the details: leaves and little birds, each one different. Some in flight, others poised to sing or dance. They're having a veritable party on her layers of tulle. It falls in asymmetric plaited layers, stopping right above her knees.

There's a second layer on top, not unlike old-fashioned, rigid crinolines, except it's over the skirt rather than under it, and made of golden fabric that seems soft to the touch, even though she's at the other end of a long hall. The contraption is woven like a basket, in thick, neat squares.

It might have looked like a flirty cocktail dress rather than a ball gown, if it hadn't been the vibrant red of Dorath, making it a statement piece. I wonder why I expected anything else. She wasn't going to show up here appearing weak, or in her terrible cargo pants, knowing the court of Flaur is just a

fighting pit where the contenders are extremely well-dressed. I've never seen anything like Daria's dress, but after tonight, there will be dozens of copies cropping up. The women of the court are going to fight among themselves to find out where she got the clever dress designed.

The dress *is* gorgeous, and I could look at her in it for hours on end, requiring no other entertainment, but I barely spare it a thought after my gaze reaches her face.

No, she's definitely no longer hiding.

Her usually braided hair is loose and thick, silky waves drape her, falling low on her back. She wears nothing but a red headband with a gold bird on her head. There's no jewelry, no precious stone anywhere on her person, but everyone in this ballroom will remember her. I'm rather proud of my dove tonight.

I trail each of her steps, like the rest of the courtiers and guests. It shouldn't surprise me that, instead of making her way to us as is the custom, she heads to the food, beyond the row of painted columns.

Sylvan chuckles. "You were saying something about me spontaneously falling to my knees?"

"Aren't you supposed to be blind?" I remind him with a shake of my head.

I know he sees much more than he lets on.

"When three hundred guests all stop talking, and whisper or gasp, I take note. Especially when my brother is among them." He surprises me by asking, "Tell me what she looks like, this potential sister-in-law of mine."

I shake my head, but no denial crosses me lips. I consider refuting his assumption, but the vague unease that comes to me makes it clear I'll never be able to get the word out. *Shit*. The fact that my body's protesting the very thought of my saying anything different shows I do like the sound of it. I want her. But there's no future where I claim Daria and we both emerge unscathed.

I destroy everyone I touch. I aim to. I can't forget that my desire doesn't stop at touching her golden skin. I can see myself dig my claws into her. Press until it hurts, and savor every cry of pain along with her pleasure.

I am what I am. There is a reason my father chose to mate and procreate with a woman he couldn't stand, a woman who lives a world away. He didn't want to hurt anyone he cared about. And nor do I. I'd sooner wed Chira than Daria.

"She's just a friend," I finally say.

Sylvan grins. "That's not what I asked, brother. Go on. Tell me." He's uncharacteristically eager. I don't think he's ever asked me to describe anyone, anything.

"She's dark haired. Very long, and wavy. Natural. She's from the desert, so her skin's warm." I think of a word for the exact hue, as my brother can't see it for himself. "Amber. She has black eyes right now."

"Right now?" he catches, and I curse myself for the slip.

"I've seen them change." I can reveal that much without spilling a secret that's not mine to tell. Many a creature on Xhera has changeable eyes, when they call to their power.

"She's a demi, then," he concludes.

I don't know how to answer that. Are Wickeds demis? I'm not quite sure. The term describes a specific race, born of the mix between divine blood, from a time when the immortals lived among us, and mortal blood. Demigods. We dropped the "gods" bit in the last few centuries. These days, most demis only have a drop of immortal blood.

The Wicked appeared only a few short centuries ago, and no one knows their origins. Their powers are different from most. After seeing her in action, I feel whatever she is aligns closer to a fae than a demi. Her abilities transcend this world.

I opt to say nothing at all. He didn't ask a direct question.

"She's wearing a pretty red dress. Something unusual, new: a over-layer weaved like a golden cage. And she's dolled up, too. Not very much, but she usually forgoes makeup

altogether. She's beautiful," I conclude, "and different from everyone else here."

There are a few guests from Dorath, but the ambassadors living in Magnapolis tend to tone down their origins. Their deep skin has lost their tan, and if they wear red, it's muted. Daria's unapologetic.

"A desert beauty," Sylvan muses. "Now that's something they'll talk about."

I don't like that. I don't want this vicious court to take notice of her. She can take care of herself, but I don't want her to have any cause to.

"Not if she stays in her corner, munching meat all day," I retort, satisfied she chose to play the role of a wallflower, despite her entrance, despite the dress, and the damnable *hair*.

I wonder what it feels like to the touch.

"We can't have that, now can we?" Sylvan ripostes, with a bright, full smile before walking down the dais, and making his way toward *my* little dove.

The freaking jerk.

He's only taken a couple of steps when the herald raps the marble floor with his oversized stick. "Her Grace, Queen Aude Fern Briar of Flaur!"

My brother sighs, turning on his heels to return to his spot by the throne, and I grimace, as our mother appears, in a dazzling gown, shimmering like stars upon a bed of moss-green silk. I don't doubt each of the stones stitched to her affair is made of real diamond. It's a boring dress, all things considered—a simple bustier, puffy full skirts. The result is no less effective when paired with a heavy necklace of sapphires and diamonds, and a crown to match.

Aude is, objectively, quite beautiful. She looks nothing like Sylvan and I, petite and buxom where we're tall and lithe, golden blonde where we boast raven hair. The only thing we have in common are our pale eyes, though Sylvan turned paler yet, and blue rather than green.

The crowd falls low in a rush of silk and taffeta, until she lifts an imperious hand, and all rise again. They part to let her pass, and I tense at every step she takes toward us.

I hate this woman more than anything, anyone, but when she reaches us and lifts her hand to me, I take it, and bend to kiss the back of her palm anyway.

Seventy-three years.

I have another seventy-three years to endure this. Then I'll be able to claim my place, where I truly belong. I fake a smile. "Mother. Fashionably late, as usual."

"Late?" She turns to face the crowd, and moves the yards of tulle out of the way before lowering herself to her throne. "The party doesn't start until I get here, boys."

Sadly, she's right.

She claps her hands twice, and the room falls silent. "Time to dance," she announces, her voice resonating clearly in the still hall.

We all live and breathe at her pleasure, like puppets on her strings.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# THE TASTE OF FEAR



# DARIA



I've been to a lot of parties—most in Dorath, some in other kingdoms. I've encountered most kings and queens, though some never knew I was there, watching from the shadows. The others never looked at me. My sisters, yes; my father, certainly; my mother, of course. But me, the shorter one, the one whose fate didn't auger a future in the guild? I might as well have been transparent, like a true shadow. Which is good. Shadows have little else to do but stay and watch. I learned to read people, and one of the things I've noticed is that first impressions are rarely wrong.

I hated Natheran Reiks the Sixth on sight. Zale Devar's a tyrant, but so is my mother, so who am I to judge? Vanemir's ruled by a kind king who's seconded by his ruthless sister—a combination I appreciate. It works well.

I'd not seen Aude Briar in person before, though I've been to her court to take care of a certain import-export businessman who used his business as a front to smuggle slaves.

She looks young—as most demis from stronger lines do—and incredibly beautiful, in a traditional northern continental way. Blonde hair, generous curves, teeny, tiny waist—she's a porcelain doll. A witch must have stitched quite a few spells to make these proportions work without her falling to pieces in a strong wind.

But what surprises me with the queen is that she doesn't only appear like a twenty-something careless, flighty girl. She also *feels* like one. Nothing in the depth of her eyes betrays

centuries of knowledge and power. She doesn't exude authority or even charm. If someone removed the crown on her head and her sparkly meringue of a dress, I would never have guessed her position. She's exactly like any girl at Five.

The crown may be hers, but she lacks majesty, grandeur. As if *she* doesn't belong to the crown. She hasn't learned what to do with it. No one must have taught her how to rule in her youth. Yet she holds her court by the balls; everyone watches her warily, as if they expect her to snap and start whipping them with a riding crop any second.

Either of the boys by her side would make a better ruler, even Rován, though his brother holds himself more formally, commanding and proud.

He usually wears dark colors—black, mostly, with some forest green and royal blue. Today, Rován's in white, playing the part of the charming, debonaire prince. Where his brother's suit is lined and embroidered with gold and icy blue, Rován's frills are black. Even with that small rebellion, he looks like someone I've never met before.

I eat a third pastry. It's at least two more than what is considered polite, but they're just so *delicious*.

At their queen's bequest, the musicians switch from chamber music to a three-point jig, and the court makes room at the center of the hall for a company of professional dancers who sway, jump, and tap the floor with their heels.

It's merry enough, and certainly skillful, though the rigid style isn't my preference. When they're done, the dancers mingle with the crowd, and the court starts to take over the floor, far less daring or enthused as they do what they can to imitate the steps.

I stuff a mousse on a bed of mushroom in my mouth.

“You should try the cheese soufflé. It's to die for.”

I think I recognize the voice at first, but Rován's lilt is different. I look up, and find myself in front of his brother, the crown prince.

In a pristine white suit, with green and silver embroidery, his hair brushed back, and those glassy blue eyes staring straight ahead, Sylvan Briar looks so different from Rován, though they're identical twins but for the shade of their eyes.

I'd heard he'd lost his sight in an incident, and never thought to pity him. There are plenty of great thieves, spies, and murderers missing a limb or a tongue or their eyes in Rhunar. But I suppose it must be frustrating to have lost something so long taken for granted—especially when his own twin, his mirror, still has it.

“Only if you loosen the strings of my corset. I'm about to burst at the seams.” The words are out before I realize they're rather flirtatious.

He chuckles. “Oh dear, that would be a terrible idea. You're my brother's *friend*, after all.”

“No string loosening among friends of a sibling.” I nod sagely. “It's written in stone on the laws of nature.”

Sylvan's grin broadens, making him look younger, more carefree. “I'm always delighted by lies. Aren't they heavy on your tongue at all?”

“Nope. I can tell you twenty lies and never feel a thing. It's truth that weighs a ton.”

“You are positively charming,” he announces.

“Same to you, though I suppose it's in your job description.”

He extends his hand. “Sylvan Briar.”

We both know I know who he is. He's asking for my name, rather than offering his. “Will you own my soul if I give you my name?”

“If you *give* it, certainly—but only your true name, not whatever you call yourself.”

I don't understand the nuance, but I introduce myself all the same. “Daria. I call myself Daria Stone.”

“And how would you like a dance, Daria Stone?”

“To Flaurian folk prancing? Not at all. In fact, if I can escape it the entire evening, I certainly will.”

“It is rather stilted, isn’t it? But I don’t know if you heard. I’m the crown prince,” he whispers conspiratorially.

Just like the queen did half an hour ago, Sylvan claps his hands. The crowd doesn’t fall completely silent this time, but they all turn to stare and whisper.

“I have a request!” he proclaims. Then he bends toward me, and speaks low. “What are we dancing to?”

I realize I never agreed to dance in the first place. He’s cornered me as easily as a cat to a field mouse.

This prince isn’t harmless. Neither of them are.

As it happens, I don’t mind dancing, so long as it’s not their stupid, rehearsed, elitist jive.

“A waltz?” I blurt out, choosing the first thing that comes to mind.

“A waltz!” he repeats much louder.

The crowd immediately starts to echo his shout. “Waltz! Waltz! Waltz!”

Claps and rhythmic footfalls of pointed heels punctuate the demand, joined by laughter and more eagerness than I’ve seen here until now. They want to please their prince.

Most of them, in any case. I don’t miss the others, the silent ones, staring directly at him, assessing his every confident move, like they’re expecting him to fumble, stumble, and fall.

I’ve known him for all of three minutes and I could assure them he won’t.

His mother stands from her throne on the farthest wall, and the demanding shouts instantly die in everyone’s throat.

“Well, you heard them!” the queen says. “A waltz.”

Her court applauds and parts to let Sylvan and me join the floor. The musicians comply with their new orders, changing

their tune to a classic waltz.

Sylvan leads beautifully, never missing a step or bumping into any of the couples around us. If I knew him well, I'd ask if he relies more on his hearing or his sense of smell, because it's clear to me that he's able to sense things around him.

I watch Rován join us, his hand on Chira's back, and I wrinkle my nose in distaste. Of all the women here, he had to ask her? She's repulsive.

"So, you met my brother at Five?" he guesses.

"Yeah." I tear my eyes away from the brother I'm not dancing with.

"You can't have many classes in common."

"Only one. He spends a lot of time with the Sinclair boy, though. Aeron's in my grade."

"Rován and Sinclair?" Sylvan chuckles. "By all the gods, he must be desperate for companionship."

I snort, in complete agreement. "They're studying the same field."

"For the moment," Sylvan says. "I'm sure my brother'll embark on a completely different course of study once he's done with this doctorate."

I blink. "You think so?"

The crown prince nods. "Oh, yes. He'll spend as many years as he can in academia, if it means he doesn't have to return home."

I'd thought he'd be in Five for another year at most. Apparently not. I find myself smiling.

"How about you? Do you like studying?"

"Very much so. I spent five years at Five myself. Until I lost my sight, that is. Mother recalled me to Flaur afterwards."

I grimace. "That can't have been easy. But I did wonder: have you checked if some witches can restore it? The Frejrs' power is almost boundless."

He only smiles, as the music slows and finally stops.

“Another dance, Daria?” he proposes.

But I’m no longer paying attention to him, or the music, or even the queen.

Something I haven’t felt in years—in another *life*—is shaking me to my core. My heart races in my chest, out of excitement first, then, a raw, unexpected fear takes hold.

I grasp Sylvan’s wrist and whisper. “Take cover. Hide. Crawl if you must.”

I rush across the ballroom, just as the lights of the many chandeliers flicker and die. A dark, thick mist crawls from every window, every door, plunging the room into complete darkness.

I take Rován’s hand and drag him away from his partner, from the dance and the crowd, pinning him against a column.

“What—”

I press a finger to his lip, meeting his wide eyes. *Quiet*, I want to say, but I don’t dare make a single sound.

Slowly, I retrieve the pin on my headband, pulling it out. It’s a good five inches long and pointy—better than nothing.

The lights flicker again, and come back on.

“What was that?” he whispers.

Something’s wrong. Their presence should have dissipated by now, but I still feel them close.

“My family,” I say, just as the windows all open in a dramatic gust of light and shadow.

The crowd gasps as Samara, Tamira, and Ryzan Wicked manifest themselves in the center of the room, all three dressed in their finest silks, covered in jewels. My mother’s in the simplest dress, but she’s never needed much adornment to stand out. The crowd gasps and I breathe out.

They aren’t here to murder anyone. They just like to kill an entrance.

I can't quite decide why I was so afraid for Rowan. He's a friend of sorts, and I'd hate to lose him, but I shouldn't have been this terrified at the prospect, yet I can still feel my heart beating slightly too fast.

Maybe it has something to do with the fact that my mother is staring right at me, her eyes roaring with fire.

*Shit.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



ON THE STROKE OF  
MIDNIGHT

# ROVAN



I thought Daria didn't know fear. I was mistaken, but only because I hadn't met her mother yet.

I've heard about the Shadow Assassin. Who hasn't? They say she moves like a breeze, more fluid than wind, and can slice a throat in the blink of an eye and then she's gone, like a dream or a nightmare, leaving nothing but blood and screams.

They also say she's a beautiful witch, able to ensorcel men without a single spell, just a look.

I didn't expect the rumors to prove so true.

Daria's mother didn't stop aging in her twenties like mine and most of the demi women out there. Our systems tend to settle once we reach our optimal form. For some, it's early, barely out of the teenage years. Others age for much longer. She's all woman, with graceful curves, a sinful mouth, and endless lashes.

I see much of Daria in her confident stride, her perfect, smooth skin, and the incredible curves, but my dainty dove looks more like the older sister than the stunning mother leading the deadly trio.

"By all gods!" I whisper, as the Wicked ruler finally redirects her gaze away from Daria, seeking my mother.

The two sisters stare at her too, and I can tell they want to cross the room. They don't. They obediently follow the ethereal creature leading them.

"You're drooling a little," Daria remarks.

She's smirking and rolling her eyes, both amused and exasperated. But who could blame me—or her, for that matter? I would have run away too, if these had been my family members.

“It's magik, right?” I ask. “She was changed by charms. She can't have been born like *that*.”

“Alas. My little sister was absolutely perfect from the start, too. A plump, gorgeous baby with fat cheeks. She didn't even get a pimple in her teens. She'll look like Ma when she's her age. No magik required.”

I curse. Mortals aren't supposed to be this spellbinding. They just aren't. “What *are* you guys?”

“Wicked,” she retorts, as though it's an explanation. “Though clearly, the beauty thing skips a few of us.”

I roll my eyes, in irritation more than amusement. “You're beautiful. They're *ridiculous*.”

I can't trust allure like the two women's appearance. It's clearly meant as a trap, to deceive anyone looking their way. The most venomous animals are usually brighter. I should know. Nature made *me* lovely, too, and I'm the worst kind of curse for anyone who falls for it.

Instinctively, without thinking it through first, I reach out for Daria's hand and squeeze it in mine. “Tell me, what it was like? Growing up in their shadow.”

Her brows crease and she stares at our hands, but doesn't snatch hers back. “Peaceful, mostly. I mean, there were people trying to use me to get to them, but I learned to spot those early.”

“And then you stabbed them?” I check.

“And then I occasionally stabbed them,” she admits. “Though I mostly did ignore them. Less satisfying, but just as efficient.”

My thumb's pressing into her palm, drawing a figure eight over and over, and I can't seem to stop it. “You know I have no interest in your mother, right? Or your sisters. Or anyone

you're related to. In fact, if they never approached me at all, I'd live a much happier existence. And no doubt a longer one."

Even if I hadn't known they were the best assassins on Xhera, I'd feel the exact same way. They're terrifying. What possessed my mother to invite them here? I assume it was her decision.

The Wicked ascend my mother's dais. It's a powerful move from Aude, I'll give her that. The fact that they consented to come will increase her own standing in the international arena. The guild leader doesn't often associate with other kingdoms.

But why would she have taken that gamble?

"What do you think it's about? Them being here."

Daria shrugs. "They attend royal parties all the time. My guess is, your mother has an assignment for them, and she wants to charm them first."

A cold chill trickles down my back.

She wouldn't, would she? I made it clear that if Sylvan dies, I'm leaving this world, putting her right back where she was twenty-eight years ago. Alone.

I consider joining them to spy on the conversation, but I don't belong there. The court needs to see my brother chatting with those people, not me.

Where *is* Sylvan?

I scan the crowd, but he appears within moments, at the head of a company of servants carrying sculpted benches and stool. He joins them on the dais, as the servants set up seats—an attention I've never seen my mother bestow on anyone.

I breathe out as Sylvan starts to engage the youngest Wicked girl in a conversation. He's lucky he can't see, tonight. At least he can manage a word without making a fool of himself, unlike most men in her presence. Daria's right: she's a clone of her mother, perfectly proportioned under the almost sheer black silk covering her curves.

“I’d better go.”

My heart drops, and uneasiness settles over me. I don’t want her to go. She should stay right here, hiding from the revel with me. “Is it wise? For you to move away now.”

“They saw me already. I have to head out, while they can’t sneak away to follow me.”

I understand the meaning behind her words. “Head out,” I repeat. “You don’t just mean leave this party, do you?”

She shakes her head, and licks her lower lip. “Now they know I’m here, they’ll find my trail back to Five. I have a few minutes to make an exit—however long your mom will keep them busy for.”

Shit. “You can’t leave.”

“I have to, one way or another. You don’t know her. You just see the pretty face and the boobs. She’ll drag me home.”

“You can’t leave,” I repeat, shaking my head, though she’s saying she will, one way or another. Either now, on her terms, or dragged on a leash by her beautiful mother. “Where would you even go?”

“I don’t know. Ravelyn? They won’t think of it first, because I hate the cold.”

I could offer to put her in touch with Zale, smooth her transition. I could give her a fast, untraceable transport. Instead, I repeat, “You *can’t* leave, Daria,” because they’re the only words I can formulate.

Shit. *Shit*, I’m an idiot.

I should have realized it weeks ago, the moment I found her looming over Aeron, her heel digging into his balls, surrounded by fire and screams. My curiosity was sated. I should have lost interest there and then. I’d solved the puzzle—or rather, watched it solve itself. But I wasn’t satisfied. Not even close.

I chuckle low, feeling foolish, panicked, and elated all at once.

I'm not one to lie to myself, yet I completely missed it. Sure, I figured she made my dick twitch the moment she got all murderous. And I was *curious* about my little dove, but that was only part of my fascination, wasn't it?

So much for not being as blind as Aeron. I *liked* her all along. I simply watched her because I liked looking at her.

I only got it when she threatened to go away. I can't let her go. I won't. It's stupid and I absolutely should, for her own sake as well as my sanity.

I can't be with her. Even if she were into me—and that's a huge leap, considering the fact that she doesn't react to me at all—I can't let myself cross that bridge. Not when I can clearly see myself closing my grip around her neck, my clawed fingers digging in. I'll never want her as much as I want to hurt her.

But none of that matters. If I don't fix this for her, she's going to leave, vanishing in the middle of the night.

I have to stop it. There's no other choice.

"I'm sorry. Don't crush my balls," I beseech her.

My hand still in hers, I step out from the privacy of the alcove where she dragged me when she thought I was in danger. She likes me at least enough to not want me to die at the hands of her family. For now. I'm not quite sure she'll feel the same way in two seconds.

"Your attention please," I call, projecting my voice loud and clear through the hall. I was taught to make myself heard in public from a young age. "I would like you all to meet Daria, the woman I intend to marry."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# MURDER AND MISCHIEF



# DARIA



“I ’m going to murder you,” I grit between my teeth, each word barely over a whisper.

Never in my life have I been this furious. I told him I wanted to keep a low profile, and this is what he does?

I don’t tend to hold on to anger. When something bad happens, I act to sort it out, bury the problem—usually in a shallow grave—then I put it behind me. I don’t let it rot and fester and eat me inside; I’ve seen too many times what that does to people.

If I could have screamed at Rován right away, I might have let it go, but as he dragged me to our mothers’ sides, that wasn’t in the cards. I’m growing more irate with each passing moment.

Aude Briar first looked at me like a lion would a rat in their path—with the clear certitude that she could crush me, but the assurance I was not worth the effort.

Then, my mother made things worse. “So, this is what you were up to, daughter. Seducing little princes.”

Watching the queen going from predator to pleasant courtier in the space of ten seconds would have been funnier, if I wasn’t too busy squirming under the weight of Ryzan Sand’s steady, threatening gaze.

“You can’t deny it was smart,” Rován bends to whisper in my ear. “Your mother can’t take you away now. You’re a future princess of Flaur.”

Yeah, well, sure. Now, Ryzan thinks she's getting a foothold in the court of one of Dorath's greatest rivals. Even if she wants me home, she wants *that* more. But that doesn't change the fact that he screwed me over.

I'll never be able to rely on anonymity again, unless I change my face, which I'd rather avoid. Even after we end this farce, people will know me as the girl who used to be engaged to Rován Briar. "I'll strangle you slow. And those balls you were so concerned about are going to be flatter than a freaking pancake by the time I'm done with you."

He winces.

From the bench on the other side of Aude Briar, both of my sisters are glaring at me like they're dying to use one of the many knives hidden in their eye-catching, sensual dresses, but Tamira does crack the ghost of a smile. I guess I wasn't as quiet as I thought. Or her hearing improved again.

All seven of us are seated on the royal dais, projecting unity through the incendiary curveball Rován just threw at everyone, when I can guarantee almost every single one of us wants to strangle him.

Except maybe his twin. Sylvan, squeezed between my sisters, looks like he's two seconds away from exploding into laughter. I scowl at him, too.

The queen and my mother are talking at—rather than to—each other, both pretending they have control of the situation. To hear them, one would believe forming an engagement between our families was entirely their idea. They're discussing trade and intelligence agreements to append to our nonexistent marriage contract.

How could Rován do this to me? To *himself*? It'd be easier to sneak out of a doorless, windowless dungeon while strapped to a movement-tracking bomb than to wiggle out of this deal.

Then another thought comes to mind. How *could* he say it at all?

*I would like you all to meet Daria, the woman I intend to marry.*

“I thought you weren’t able to lie,” I mutter, my tone accusatory.

It could have been the best lie of all.

“I didn’t.” Rován shrugs next to me. “I intend to marry you, if that’s what it takes for you not to have to disappear and run away for the rest of your life. Princes *have* married for worse reasons.”

I step on his foot, crush it, wishing I was wearing pointier heels.

Sylvan can’t stop himself from chuckling now, though he hides it behind his sleeve. “And it rids you of the Mallone threat,” the crown prince says. Our mothers are too taken with each other to pay attention. “Smart move, brother.”

“Chira?” I ask, confused as to what she might have to do with the conversation.

Rován winces as she nods. “My mother was pushing me to marry her.”

He has the sense to move his foot when my heel moves to stomp it again, so I elbow his ribs instead.

“Ouch! I didn’t drag you into this to be rid of Chira, dove. I just don’t want you to have to leave everything behind—all your hard work, your things, your *home*.” He tilts his head and admits, “Not that it isn’t a nice bonus.”

“So you guys aren’t actually together, huh?” my elder sister says.

The first words we’ve exchanged in three years. Only...not really. She’s asking Rován. Tamira is pissed, with good reason. I would be, in her shoes.

“They are now,” Samara chirps merrily. “Unless either of them would like to enlighten Their Graces that they aren’t getting shiny new political agreements?”

I grimace, imagining just how my mother would respond to that.

“So, how have you been?” my little sister asks me.

This time, it's Tamira stepping hard on the marble dais, on the spot where Sam's foot was milliseconds ago. My elder sister glares at her, but Sam's unrepentant. "What? I missed her. And I'm curious."

"She didn't send a word to us in three years, you doormat. All she gets is the silent treatment until she *apologizes*," she hisses pointedly, switching to her awkward, heavy-handed sprita.

I roll my eyes, and decide to continue in the old tongue too. It's a good call—Ma never took the time to learn it. "I sent words. And birthday presents." That reminds me of the small box burning a hole in one of my pockets.

Rovan's *not* getting it now.

"A note at the bottom of a letter addressed to *Dad* doesn't count!"

"That lip gloss with real gold foil sparkles definitely counts," Sam argues for me.

"Lip gloss" is the only thing she says in the common tongue, probably because there isn't an equivalent in the language, dead for over one thousand years.

"Yeah well, you got lip gloss. I got a *book*." Tamira crosses her arms on her chest.

"A really good book that took a lot of work to put together for you. And you've read it three times."

"What book?" Sylvan wonders in the common tongue.

I glance at him, impressed that he managed to understand us at all. Few people bother with sprita these days, even in Dorath. For the last hundred years throughout Xhera, every school has taught their students in the common tongue, which is also used in business, entertainment, and politics, so local dialects have slowly died away.

"An account of the Dark War, as told by the Aevan queen herself. Her journals were never printed, but Daria copied it by hand into a leatherbound journal," Sam gushes. "It's beautiful. Where did you find the original?"

“The library at Five has it in their rare book section.”

“So you were at Five!” Samara exclaims. “Tami combed through Vanemir after she got that book.”

I crack a grin. I expected she would.

“Which is exactly why she didn’t want to be in contact with us directly,” Sam reasons calmly. “Come on. Da’s easy to reach sneakily; all you have to do is attach a correspondence to his next convoy. If she’d sent *us* letters, Ma would have found details on the sender. Right?”

I nod, knowing both of my sisters have already realized as much. Tamira’s just naturally pricklier. “I’m still sorry. And I missed you, too.”

Tamira keeps glowering.

“I’ll get you the same lip gloss,” I add.

“Fuck the lip gloss, I want to know who made that dress,” my elder sister negotiates.

“Me first!” Sam squeals. “Does it come in black?”

“Some scary-ass seer type I found in the undercity. It’s bespoke, so I’m sure it’ll come in whatever color you want. I’m not certain I haven’t sold my firstborn child for it.”

*You’ll pay me ten gold now, and a hundred and a favor after you marry the boy.*

It seemed a lot sillier before tonight. Because unless I’m very much mistaken, I might just have to marry Rován Briar someday.

My younger sister checks out my dress again and makes a quick assessment. “Worth it.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# BEHIND THE DOOR

## ROVAN



The queen and the assassin shake hands, coming to a verbal settlement sealing the agreement I started impulsively. Aude informs her court that, indeed, I am engaged, as though my words aren't enough to make it official. All the while my new fiancée glowers at me, ready to bite my head off the minute we're alone.

As much as she'd like to strangle me, she can't deny my idea has solved all her problems. And now, she's mine, in the eyes of the world. I grin and wrap my arm around her shoulders. Mine, mine, mine, at least right here, in the bright lights of the hall of mirror.

When the curtains close and the doors shut behind us, I have to let her go, because the many ways I want to tear into her would end with her snapping my neck.

I can't deny the satisfaction coursing through me as we receive congratulations. I'll pay for this later, but for now, Daria smiles and receives them politely. Of course she does. She was raised to blend into any court, to get herself out of any situation smelling like roses, a skill necessary as an assassin and vital as a royal.

Eventually, I get tired of indulging the sycophants. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have yet to dance with my betrothed."

*Betrothed*, a word that would have sent me running yesterday. And today, I say it with an arrogant, winning smirk.

The only person I danced with was Chira. My mother snapped her fingers, had her come to us and informed me I



was to waltz with her, putting me on the spot. I only went along with it because a turn around the room with Chira is superior to chatting with Aude.

“You realize they’re going to expect us to tie the knot, right?” Daria says as I lead her to the floor.

I chuckle. If my mother could get away with it, she’d have us wed before the end of the party to ensure no one could backtrack.

The Wicked are like the Frejr in many respects: mysterious, secluded, keeping to themselves. I don’t think I’ve heard of any one of them marrying outside of their guild, or their country. With Daria at my side, she hopes to strengthen the family, and use her name as a shield. It’s the perfect alliance, far more valuable than the Mallones. Instead of pacifying the other royal families, Aude could cow them, under the threat of a Wicked retaliation, should they attack her, *us*.

“We’ll tell them we’ll do it after we’re done with school.” I place my hand at her back and draw her close.

“And then what?” she pushes.

The music starts and I set off in a foxtrot. At first, I wonder if I should have checked whether she knew the dance, but at the first steps, I realize Daria’s fluid in my arm, like an extension of myself. I don’t even need to lead, and she doesn’t try to make me follow. We just work together, effortlessly.

“Well?” Daria pushes. “What’s your grand plan?”

Oh, right. She had a question. A fair one, too. Unfortunately for either of us, I don’t have much of a plan past my need to keep her right here in the capital where she belongs. I don’t want to marry her. I can’t. She’s already temptation wrapped in decadence. If she and I were sharing a house, a contract, a bed, I’d give into my impulses and claim her in all the ways I want to. All the ways that’d destroy her.

“We’re both into academia. I don’t intend to stop my studies anytime soon. Do you?” She shakes her head. “That ought to buy us a decade or two. And then, you can find me

with my head between someone's legs and call it off if you'd like."

Daria finds that particularly funny. "*Tamira* would murder you."

I shiver. The taller, slightly older clone of Daria is particularly scary. "Fine. I can find you with your head between someone's legs, then."

She chuckles, swaying in perfect harmony with me. The sound of her laughter makes me want to tease her. "Anyone who knew me would realize that wouldn't be a deterrent. I'd want to watch. Or join in."

What in the seven hells am I doing? I shouldn't flirt with her, dammit.

Daria laughs again. She's not easily shocked, my dove. "You're assuming we'd want you to join in."

The party's considerably less dull with her by my side. We dance. We eat too much and drink far less than I expected to tonight.

My mother insists that the Wicked stay with us, reluctant to let them go until the ink's dry on whatever agreement she and the Shadow Assassin came to.

I lead Daria to the grandest guest rooms, right across from the royal suite.

"Do you need anything? Something to sleep in? Tea?" I offer at the door.

She shrugs. "I have a slip under the dress. It'll do, thank you. And I'll pass on tea from someone with that many poisons in his pockets."

Not wearing my belt is always a trial. I feel naked without my assortment of poisons and antidotes, but it'd clash with the crisp white suit. I did slip a bloom of wolfsbane in my jacket and two vials in my breast pocket, though. Of course, she'd notice.

I lift an eyebrow. "And here I thought you liked to live dangerously."

“You’re the one who cornered an assassin in front of three thousand people today,” she quips, her pretty lips curving up.

Eyes homing in on that pouty mouth, I’m dying to close the distance between us, taking those lips. Never mind that three scary women who doubtless carry many pointy things are housed on both sides of Daria’s room and would gladly jump in to protect her honor if she squealed. And she might.

I have no idea how she’d receive advances on my part. She likes me. She might even trust me a little. Sadly, I have no clue whether Daria wants me. Usually, that’s a non-issue, but nothing in her behavior suggests attraction.

Which is good. Great, in fact. No matter how she feels about me, I have to stay away.

“Sleep well.”

“Happy birthday,” she tells me. Then she hesitates, a hand on her handle. “I have a present for you.”

“You do?” I can’t remember ever being this excited. “Where?” My eyes roam over her body, fully taking her in. Before I can stop myself, I’m leering. I can’t help it. Who knew she was hiding such curves under her terrible clothes?

She rolls her eyes. “Never mind. You don’t deserve it.”

“I do!” I protest. “I promise to be a good boy for an entire day if you give it to me.”

“A whole day, huh? Sounds challenging for you.” She retrieves a tiny flat box from one of the folds of her skirt—sadly not her bustier, depriving me of the opportunity to take a peek between her shapely breasts.

It’s a crime how her usual tops flatten everything. As her fiancé, I consider it my duty to see to her wardrobe as of tomorrow. Step one will be finding and torching the factory of her current pants supplier.

I unwrap the box eagerly, feeling as excited as a little kid. I must have five hundred presents waiting for me in the hall, but I don’t care one way or another about any of them. This one? I need.

I reveal a small, flat box, just the size of my palm. Inside, there's the hilt of a golden dagger, expertly sculpted.

"Press the stone at the center," she tells me.

I do so, and a blade twice as long as the hilt comes out. I drop it in surprise, and Daria easily catches it, twirling it around her hand before handing it back to me hilt-first.

"It's well balanced," she says with a shrug. "It's not new, or ancient, or precious, but I like it."

I suspect she likes it *because* it's not new, or ancient, or precious. Growing up in her family, she's bound to put more emphasis on useful than special.

"I like it too," I assure her.

Only I'm not talking about the blade. I'm talking about her lips, and the way her hair turns dark red when she lets her shadows free, and the swell of her massive breasts in this dress. I would bite those lips. I would pull that hair and mark those tits while pounding into her like she's nothing but a two-coin whore. I'd fuck her like I hate her, and rejoice in her misery.

I am an unseelie prince of one of the wild courts, and I desire nothing more than her agony. Would that I had met her in a hundred years, when I'm less impulsive, less driven by need and hunger. But I am twenty-seven, and I know there's little chance of my doing anything but giving into my nature with her.

So I bid her good night and let her walk into her room. I don't leave until the door is shut, wishing she'd lock it too, to entirely remove the temptation.

Who am I kidding? It doesn't matter how many doors stand in the way. In my dreams, I'll be peeling that red dress off of her, one layer at a time. And the two things preventing me from doing it in real life are her indifference and my resolve. If she wanted me, if I allowed myself to find out whether I can seduce her, there wouldn't be a lock on Xhera complex enough to keep me out.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# THE WICKED WAYS

# DARIA



I am in no way surprised to find the three women seated on the large canopy bed covered in silky silver. If anything, I would have been shocked if they hadn't come.

I sigh. "Are we really doing this?"

Ryzan's low chuckle has made grown men cry, but I've heard it often enough not to outwardly shiver.

When the air vibrates to my left, I'm prepared for the attack. I block the shadow sword, extending my two blades into cross knives on instinct, but the impact is strong enough for me to lose ground, my foot gliding along the smooth mahogany.

"You got stronger," I hiss between my teeth.

My little sister's grin is predatory. "Or you, weaker."

"Probably both," I admit, twirling on my feet to evade Tamira's first arrow.

The second, I catch in my hand. Samara takes the opportunity to strike again, aiming for my back as my elder sister's bow grazes my front. I'm concerned by neither of them. Oh, they can and will hit me if I let them, and it'll hurt like a bitch, but Tami and Sam are merely pissed at me. My mother's another story. And the problem is that I can't see or feel her anymore.

Ryzan's one to push, and push, and push us harder. She's severe with her employees, but from her daughters, she expects nothing but perfection. She's put my life in danger

countless times, believing any child of hers would get herself out of the situation. She had me jump from high buildings with nothing but rope and a hook when I was seven. She left me alone, asleep in a den of lions. She showed me my worst nightmares, expecting me to conquer them. And I did, but I always emerged with broken bones and torn flesh.

Tonight won't be any different, especially after all this time. She'll see that I suffer.

*"Suffering is proof you're alive, Daria."*

I can't watch for her while my sister distracts me, so I switch from defensive to offensive. I hate doing it. I've never tried to hurt Sam before. She's two years younger than me—she wasn't even fifteen when I left—and I've always felt protective of her, the baby of the family. But I need one of them incapacitated, and for one of us, that means seriously injured.

She's easier to get to than Tamira, whose bow allows her to stay at a distance. I don't know how much time I have until Ryzan decides to strike.

I see my opening when she aims for my flank, and with a grin, let her blade claim a bit of my flesh. Catching her arm under my elbow, I twist around, breaking her wrist. As she grunts a curse, I shorten my shadowblade and bring it to her pretty, pretty face.

My baby sister's many wonderful things—kind, thoughtful, clever, and fiercely protective of those she loves—but for all her many great qualities, she's also vain. And who can blame her? I would be too if nature had gifted me a face like hers.

She gasps, dropping her sword. The one-inch cut along her chin wounds her more than a dagger to the guts would have.

"How could you, you bitch!" Sam screams.

She'll be healed in half a day at most, but she's going to curse my name for every one of those moments.

As she rushes to the closest mirror, I throw my bloody shadowblade, cutting the string of Tami's bow.



My elder sister narrows her eyes and lifts her chin, letting her weapon disappear into her mist of silver shadows. It'll fix itself in the ether, eventually, but it takes hours. Our weapons heal in tandem with our flesh.

Tamira brings her hands together and cracks the knuckles, along with her neck. "You think I need a bow to put you on your ass?"

"I don't." She's done so many times without it over the years, and I am woefully out of practice.

Besides, unlike Sam, Tami doesn't have obvious weaknesses. None I can exploit right now, unless there's a block of fancy cheese somewhere in this ornate, gaudy room. Even then, she would likely take the time to beat me to a pulp then eat it while seated on my unconscious body.

I lengthen my right knife to a dagger again, and morph the one in my left hand to a shield, wincing as the shadows suck energy out of me to obey my bidding. I'm going to crash hard after all this. Back in the day, shadowmorphing was hard enough, but without practice, it's taking a lot more effort than before.

Tamira's jaw tics. She won't be able to use her bow—whatever shape it takes, it'll be broken after I cut the string, and unlike me, she only has one shadow weapon. Summoning two was one of the many ways I attempted to overachieve when I lived in Rhunar. I passed out for a good week after doing it, but it was worth it, for seeing my sisters' expressions. They only have one weapon each.

If it were just she and I, I'd keep things fair and get rid of my weapons, too, but Ryzan's here, somewhere, watching, waiting for me to let my guard down.

"Oh, by the gods, you almost got my eye! My eye, Daria!" my little sister screams. I don't think she's in the room anymore—she must have found a bathroom.

I can't afford to let her drama distract me. Besides, I wasn't anywhere close to her eye.

Tamira launches herself at me like a literal blur of punches and nasty kicks, faster than I've ever seen her move, completely at one with her shadows. Oh, she's gotten *good*. I don't have any choice but to defend my vital points, and take hit after hit, while I wait for an opening that doesn't come.

Defensive only works in the understanding that the offensive is going to make a mistake at some point, but Tamira doesn't make mistakes. She isn't arrogant, or too sure of herself. She's never missed a day of training, my perfect, responsible, protective big sister.

Suddenly a smile spreads over my lips, despite all the pain. I know exactly what to do. It's underhanded and unlike me, or her. Only Sam would even *think* of something so outrageous.

I drop the shield, let the blade vanish in my hand and wrap my arms around Tami's shoulders. She stops my punch, utterly stunned, as I draw her closer, squeezing her.

I did it so she'd stop beating me to a pulp, but it's nice all the same.

"Huh. Sneaky."

She sees through me, but she still hugs me back.

"So that's what you learned in the last three years, hm? To cheat."

"I learned thermodynamics," I counter with a huff.

"*Fascinating.*"

I let go of Tami, turning on my heels to try to find the direction the low, throaty, sensual voice comes from.

My eyes fall on the spot where I abandoned the shield mere minutes ago, but it's disappeared. *Of course it did*. Ryzan got rid of it. So much for not letting myself be distracted.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# DESERT ROSE

# DARIA



I recall the dagger, extending it in a long sword, but I feel out of place with just one weapon, accustomed as I am to holding two. Entering into a fight with my mother while at a disadvantage is never a good idea.

Losing the blade is much worse than damaging it. My shadows will form it again but it'll take days instead of hours.

“Did Da give you my letters?” I ask hopefully.

I managed to appeal to Tamira’s softer side. Maybe I can do the same with my mother.

“What makes you think I was interested in *letters*? Arrogant child.” Her shadows gather low on the floor, covering the entire room.

So much for that.

“I miss you?” I try. That worked on Tamira earlier.

“Did you? You don’t sound quite sure.”

I hadn’t sounded certain, but only because I sense her approach, and it is a force dominating the entire room. “I did,” I assure her, and that’s the truth.

I love and I missed Ryzan, my mother, even with her insane training and her domineering ways. What I didn’t miss was the way I felt in the Rhunar, always inadequate, out to prove myself, yet never satisfied. I wasn’t even truly a part of the guild, the prediction always planted between me and any achievement.

There were looks. Some pitying, some wary. What was I to do, to never deserve a part in my country, my guild?

If I ever see that priestess again, I would sit her down and have a long talk about self-fulfilling prophecies. Had I—and the rest of the world—never heard those words, would I have risked becoming what fate dictated for me?

Never mind. If I ever see that bitch, we wouldn't be having any kind of conversation. She'd have to speak around my blade, planted deep in her throat.

“Well, that could have been easily remedied. You knew where I was.”

I walked right into that one.

“Da told me to stay away,” I spit out, all the while mentally apologizing for throwing my poor father under the hovercraft. “After my last job, he told me Dorath, Rhunar, the guild, were all toxic for me.” And it had been.

The sense of dread I have known for years settled the moment I'd finished hiding my trail.

“And you didn't think to check whether I agreed.”

This time, I hear where she's coming from, but it's too late. Before I can shift, she's at my back, my wrist twisted between my shoulder blades and her other hand holding my neck in a deadly grip.

Then with a single, effortless move, she flips me on my back, and lowers her knee to my chest. “Looks like you missed training, too.”

“Ma—”

She punches me so hard my ears ring.

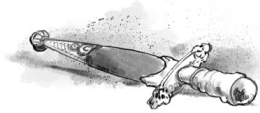
It's hardly my first time, and I can easily focus despite the pain. “I killed so many people, Ma.”

“That's your *job*,” she reminds me, her knee sliding higher, to my throat.

“I didn't have to. I could have hidden in the shadows and only taken out my targets. I was *dangerous*. To the guild, to

everyone.” She doesn’t want to hear this.

She never could understand, even when I was all but crying for help.



When I started to amass more bodies than those I strictly needed to, I wasn’t concerned. I didn’t even notice. Tamira is the one who told me I was making a mess one day. I realized then that I was doing it because I wanted to, because I liked it. I was frustrated, angry, or depressed all the time, except when I killed. So, I took every assignment I could, more than ever. I even made it a game. I’d wake up in the morning and guess how many people I’d end up killing by sundown.

I wasn’t worried, until I looked up from a pile of bodies I was burning in an empty courtyard and saw the child staring at me. I looked into his eyes and knew I was a monster. The worst kind. Those who thrive on pain and death and chaos.

So after delivering my report to Ma, I snuck into my father’s office. I spilled everything. All my frustration, all my despair. I think I screamed. I know I definitely cried. Da held me until I fell asleep.

When I came to, he had a backpack packed for me. “I had identification done for you. It’ll pass any government check, even in Dorath. You’re now Daria Stone. There’s a guild kit from my intelligence department in there, and some money. Not much—it needed to be untraceable, and I can’t manage more before morning. You have to leave now. It can’t be planned. If you scheme, she’ll see it and she’ll find you. Now’s the perfect time: you just came back from a job, you’re not due to pick up another assignment for a few days. I’ll cover for you as long as I can.”

“What do you mean, Da?” I asked, except it wasn’t truly a question. I just never imagined him telling me to leave.

“This life is killing you, and I’m tired of seeing you slowly die. You have to leave. You’ve known that for ten years.”

I sniffed, and nodded. “Ma...she doesn’t understand. When I say, ‘I killed a hundred people today,’ she smiles, nods, and asks me how I handled the cleanup. She doesn’t see the problem with me.”

“Because you’re perfect and beautiful, and she’s intelligent.” He tilted my chin. “There’s no problem with you. You’re just a rose, drying out in the desert. You survive, but you lose more and more of yourself. Go, right now—you need every second you can get to plant a trail *she* can’t follow. You’ll find yourself a garden.”

“And Daria?” I looked over my shoulder, finding him shedding a single tear. “Never come back.”



“You think I don’t know that?” my mother snaps between her teeth. “You should have come to me!” She’s not one for losing her cool, but her voice rises to a shout. “How dare you leave without saying goodbye? How *dare you!*”

I block the next punch, lift my legs, and wrap them around her head. If it had been anyone else, I would be able to flip them on their back, but Ryzan’s balance is too good for that. Instead, I squeeze them together in an effort to suffocate her, just as she chokes me with her knee.

For a wild moment, I think neither of us are likely to tap out. We’re too stubborn, too alike in many ways. There’s a reason she wasn’t alarmed by my behavior. She understands bloodlust like most never will. What horrified my father enough for him to send me away was nothing to her.

And yet...her words surprise me.

*You think I don’t know that?*



The objective answer is yes. I entirely believed my mother had no clue about my struggles—that, or she didn't take them seriously. If she's telling me otherwise, I call bullshit. She was my handler, and all she did was give me more assignments, letting me distract myself by plunging my hands in blood, not realizing how it was affecting me.

And yet...

Three years. I've managed to stay away three years.

The first few days, every week, every passing festival on the wheel of the year felt like a miracle. How had I escaped? I congratulated myself on my genius for managing to hide my trail so effectively. And with time, I stopped fearing that she'd turn up to drag me away. But I've seen her on a hunt. I've seen her dragging out ghosts that didn't leave a trace, people shrouded by powerful allies.

If she didn't find me, it could have been because she wasn't looking.

Or because she knew exactly where I was and left me there.

I let go first.

"I'm sorry," I manage to croak.

Ryzan snarls, but she finally lifts herself up gracefully, like an unfurling cat.

I cough, my lungs desperate for air, and she's barely winded.

"Humph," she huffs. "I'll show you sorry. You're going back to training—every day, three hours. No exceptions, no excuses. No child of mine should be this weak."

I *am* now the weakest one of her three girls. To my surprise, I don't seem to mind as much as I should. I start to smile, but I hide it, least she finds it offensive and whips my ass for the taunt.

"Now tell me about the boy," my mother orders.

And so I do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

# OVER THE CITY

## ROVAN



I don't have to hunt Sylvan down. He's leaning against his door, hands in his pockets, waiting.

"So much for *just a friend*," he mocks before I can announce my presence with any sound.

"She is," I insist, twirling my shiny new dagger in my hand, albeit with far less dexterity than Daria.

"And it must be the truth or you couldn't say so," he agrees. His tone couldn't be any more sarcastic.

We both know no one lies as well as the fair folk.

I roll my eyes. "Come on, before I change my mind. I have a present for you."

"That's my line, brother."

Naturally, my present surpasses Selina Aevan's. She had one book transcribed for him. I ordered a hundred. Nonetheless, I'm irked that my idea seems less original thanks to her.

Sylvan had an entire set of potion brewing implements made for me, in fine gold, by far superior to the pewter ones I usually handle. I don't do well with iron—though as a half-fae, I can stand it better than my full-blooded brethren—and silver often counteracts the spells I'm trying to cast.

Gold instruments are rare finds because of their cost and the lack of general demand, but I'd managed to get a spoon, a knife, and a ladle with enough weight and protective coatings to withstand my magiks from an antique store. The expense

was atrocious, but ultimately worth it. They are some of my most prized possessions, and I've been dreaming about acquiring more.

I don't remember telling Sylvan about it, yet he somehow guessed that the cauldron, flasks, knives, stirring spoons, and scales were exactly what I wanted. As much as the thought had occasionally made me drool, I wouldn't have wasted half of my generous yearly allowance on it—which is what these cost.

I'm half tempted to immediately try them out, but it's late—so late it's verging on early—and I need to have my wits about me on the morrow. I can't make my escape and leave Daria to face the wolves alone when I'm the one who threw her into this new role.

She's my fiancée now.

I chuckle, shaking my head in baffled amusement. A season ago, the thought of having one of those would have caused anything from nausea to an acute panic attack. Being shackled to a painted noble woman—Chira, or someone just like her—was one of my worst nightmares.

My mother's agreement with my father has prevented her from betrothing me without my explicit agreement, as is often done for children of my rank. She can't force me into anything; I'm not technically her subject or her property, to her endless frustration. If anyone had asked me mere weeks ago, I would have proudly declared that I likely would never attach myself to any woman in Xhera. And for all that, I'm the one who dragged Daria into the hall of mirrors and told the world she was mine.

I knew then my actions will have consequences. The first is having to deal with Aude in the light of day on the morrow, without hundreds of guests and rules of propriety curbing her worst behaviors. Strangely, I'm not as troubled by the idea as I would have expected. I like to avoid Her Royal Bitchiness as much as possible, but if Daria's by my side, it might even prove entertaining. At the very least, I can daydream about my future bride strangling my mother while she pontificates.

Instead of letting myself waste the next few hours playing with potions and poisons, I head to the uncomfortable, unfamiliar sleigh bed I haven't used in half a decade.

As the sun rises over the horizon, I'm still staring at the canopy, my mind showing no sign of fatigue. With a frustrated sigh, I get up to shut the blinds and hide from the daylight. I'm not, by nature, a creature made for living under the sun.

Approaching the window, I feel a slow smile spread across my face as I spot a figure perched atop the roof, like a gargoyle, and surrounded by a cloud of red mist. It looks like I'm not the only one too restless to stay in bed.

Even from a distance, she calls to me like a beacon, my eyes immediately seeking and finding her.

Instead of plunging the room into darkness and giving sleep another futile attempt, I open the window and hop out, stretching the veil between the worlds to grab hold of a vine that lashes out in the air, propelling me to the top of the roof on the opposite wing, close to Daria.

She's wearing a sleeveless red slip that's a little translucent—no doubt what she had under that impressive dress of hers—so I take pains to avoid watching her too closely.

I only take one rapid, sweeping glance, but I don't miss the shape of the curves on display. Her breasts are sacrilegious. Free of the boned confines of her dress, they stand firm despite their heaviness. I could wrap my entire palm around one and have plenty left to bite. I make myself look away, but then I spy the long, wavy hair. It kisses her shoulders, reflecting the red light of the shadows floating around her.

She's obscenely alluring right now, and she isn't even trying to be. Chira and the entire court ought to take notes.

I redirect my gaze toward the horizon. Yes, that's much safer. I pretend she isn't branded on my mind, and sit by her side, leaving a good foot between us.

"That's cheating, you know," she tells me. "Jumping up and across the whole building like that. You're supposed to *earn* your climb."

That's rich. "Says the girl who can literally disappear and get her ass anywhere."

"I can. I still climbed up there properly, brick by brick," she replies primly.

"So it only counts if there's a risk of my breaking my neck?"

"Precisely," Daria quips, turning to me.

I lose all humor when I get a look at her face. In my rush to look away from temptation earlier, I didn't linger long enough to see that a network of dark bruises mars her smooth, warm skin, expanding on her cheek, her neck, her arms, her well defined legs. I'm done averting my gaze. I take in every inch, fury rising at every instant.

The rage isn't tamped down by the sheer need to close the distance between us, dragging her to me and taking those dark, maddening lips. If anything, my unwelcome desire only feeds the anger, because I know, *I know*, I can't give into it, especially not now, when she's already hurt.

"Who did this to you?" I can barely recognize my voice in the low, threatening growl that comes out of me.

"Hm?" She cocks her head, sounding confused. "Oh!" She looks down at her own body, and scoffs. "That. It's just a Wicked reunion. My mother wanted to see if I was keeping up with my training. The bruises will be gone by morning."

Her *mother* hurt her so much her entire body's black and blue? I can't process that. Oh, I understand shitty parents, but what doesn't compute is the fact that Daria doesn't seem to mind at all.

I cup her chin and tilt her face to see all of it. Before my eyes, the first bruise I spotted morphs, turning yellowish. A shadow on her right side suggests it must have been a black eye moments ago. She heals faster than the archer who tried to kill me, faster than a shifter.

*What are you, little dove?*

“I want to make her pay for hitting you—*marking* you.” No one’s allowed to. Not even me, and certainly not some asshole assassin queen she ran away from. With good reason. I never doubted she had valid cause for all the choices that led her to Five, but the state of her body makes it clear.

Daria seems to find my words a source of profound amusement. “Make her pay? She’s eaten great warriors for breakfast.”

I don’t care who she is, I’ll find a way to get back at her for it.

“They didn’t hurt me,” Daria tells me, even as I stare at the proof of the opposite. “Well, not any worse than I hurt them. I actually drew blood.” She winces. “On my little sister’s *face*.”

I blink several times. “The pretty one?”

“The *gorgeous* one,” she confirms with a smug smirk.

Except I don’t think the younger Wicked, or even the elder one, could hold a candle to Daria at this moment, her thick mane flying all over the place in the gentle breeze, her shadows flirting at the edge of her skin, fire flickering in her eyes.

I try to look away again, but I’m thoroughly transfixed. At least, my gaze doesn’t dip down to her breasts much, though I can see the shape of her nipples through the thin fabric.

I clear my throat. “How did she take it?”

“I think she’s still checking mirrors.” Daria snorts. “Cuts take a little while longer than bruises, but she’ll be fine by the end of tomorrow. It’s just normal for us to train that way. The people we might seriously fight against—they’re not going to pull punches. Going soft on each other wouldn’t make sense.”

I might see the logic behind her words, but I unequivocally, passionately, hate the fact that she’s injured—and by extension, those responsible for the marks. I’m calm enough to notice that I can’t sense any pain coming from her, and that settles some of my uneasiness.



“You can’t walk around like that now. People are going to look at you. You’re my fiancée.” Saying the words, feeling their truth around my tongue, brings a satisfied grin to my lips.

*Mine, mine, mine.* By that logic, I should have every right to lower my mouth to her shoulder, her neck, her lips, maybe even the hard, irresistible areola delineated on the fabric of her slip.

“Yeah, about that. I do hope you realize I’ll get you back for forcing my hand,” she says with a slow, wicked grin.

“I do hope you realize that for all your garment covers you, you may as well be naked,” I retort, echoing her tone.

In fact, nakedness might be less tempting than this teasing little slip, giving glimpses of her skin under the sheer fabric.

If she cares one way or another, she doesn’t show it. “A well-bred prince wouldn’t have pointed it out. Or looked for that matter.”

“Whatever makes you believe I am well-bred, dove?”

She laughs easily and lies back on the blue tiles, closing her eyes. “I’m not certain how to thank you without owing you some unnamed favor,” Daria says. “But I wanted you to know—I appreciate what you did. I mean, don’t ever, and I do mean *ever*; put me on the spot like that again...but thanks to you, I can be myself again. I think I even made up with Ma.”

I lie down next to her, watching the sky banish the remnants of darkness beyond the river. “I was entirely selfish. I didn’t want you to leave. Besides, something had to be done about Chira Mallone.”

She elbows me in the side, and I chuckle.

I’m fast becoming addicted to this amusing, stunning, deadly, dainty dove of mine. And it’s only a matter of time before I screw it up, because I can’t imagine my restraint will last long. Especially if she makes a habit of walking around dressed like *that*.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE SERPENT AND THE  
DOVE

# DARIA



I wake up nestled against Rován's sculpted, warm chest, still on the roof, surprised I fell asleep at all.

I don't sleep during the day, and certainly not around others—at least, anyone I don't trust. I have been known to stay awake for an entire week rather than risk dozing off in the wrong crowd. Yet, here I am.

Before today, the list of those I would have let my guard down for was short. Five of them, I'm related to. The sixth—Loken—I'd known for more than half of my life. I sit up, feeling uncommonly agitated, and not just because I apparently decided to nap on a man who should be almost a stranger.

*A stranger? He's your fiancé,* I remind myself with a derisive snort.

He might have started this farce to get me out of a pickle, but I foresee getting ourselves out of his so-called solution will be harder than he anticipates. A problem for another time. Strangely, I'm not particularly alarmed about it. When the time comes, I'll wiggle out of it one way or another. In the meantime, I have an understanding with a friend. Someone I trust. That's all there is to it.

Right now, I look away from his deceptively angelic sleeping face, and try to focus on why I feel a strange shift in the air of my city. It's hard to define or quantify, but there's something going on. Something different.

"Morning," he grunts, voice still rough with languor.

It's unfair that he woke up looking like *that*. His dark, shiny hair's artfully ruffled, messier than he prefers, but still perfect. His eyes seem brighter than usual, though it could have more to do with the natural light. I usually see him indoors.

Meanwhile, there's no doubt that my hair's a bird's nest, and I probably drooled on his fancy shirt.

Seeking a distraction, I look to the sky, taking in the position of the sun. "It's closer to the evening."

A lazy smile spreads across his unfairly handsome face. "What's with the hair?"

I narrow my eyes. "Not another word."

"It's all over the place, like—"

It occurs to me that this man takes more liberties with me than most would while knowing who I am, because I've never taught him that actions have consequences. In an instant, I hover over him, a hand around his neck in a tight hold.

"You're not very good at obeying, are you, Rován?" I choke him a little, and smirk as he winces, those usually pale eyes now a moss green. I have all of his attention now. Every ounce of it.

I don't care about my messy hair. I care about the fact that he isn't scared of me when he should be. He ought to remember I'm not only his friend, I am someone he should respect, fear, rather than keep trampling over whatever boundary I attempt to draw.

To my confusion, he titters, delighted.

Ma was right. I've lost my edge. He's not even a little bit worried.

That, or he knows I wouldn't hurt him. I've killed thousands of people, and I won't hurt him. Not unless he corners me into it. Maybe not even then.

I can't quite pinpoint why. Is it because he's my friend? No. I would have killed Loken if he'd gotten in my way back then. But not him.

“Well, I’m at your mercy,” Rován murmurs, his expression as smug as ever. “So what now, dove? Are you going to hurt me?”

I should. Part of me wants to, to prove to him—and to myself—I can. I call my one remaining blade and lift it toward his face. He doesn’t so much as flinch.

“You don’t have any sense of self-preservation, do you?” I’m fighting a battle I don’t quite understand, against myself more than him.

I press the side of the blade against his skin.

*Cut him. Slice this pretty face. He’ll heal, and he’ll learn. You can do it. You cut your own sister!*

“I do, actually,” Rován replies, conversational. “I’d be dead by now if I didn’t. But I can tell when someone intends to harm me. What you’re doing is trying to make me come to heel.” He sits up, bringing his face mere inches from mine, as though there wasn’t a shadow blade long enough for me to take his eye out between us. “And, my sweet little dove, I’m not a gentle puppy you can train.”

Moving as fast as I did, Rován wraps one arm around my chest and closes the distance between us, bringing his lips to mine in a mind-flaying, earth-shattering kiss that takes over my entire body, my sense of self. The world might as well disappear as he takes my lips like they belong to him.

I lose all sense of where we are, who we are, what I am. Nothing in the universe matters except the taste of his lips and the softness of his tongue, running along the edge of my teeth, teasing, coaxing. I wage another battle, trying not to react in any way while knowing without a single doubt that I’m about to lose it.

His hand slides along my bust, and I shiver. I can’t help it. My lips move over his, and he grunts low in his throat before tearing himself away. We were fighting, and he knows he’s won.

I’m panting. I don’t pant, not after running ten miles, not even after fighting my sisters and mother, but I am now. He’s

stolen my breath along with my thoughts and reason.

*What in the seven hells was that?*

My question must have either crossed my lips or been written on my face, because Rován answers it with his usual arrogant aplomb. “You have your weapons, dove. I have mine.”

And what powerful weapons they are. Sharper than my daggers by far.

He kissed me to make a point, and I think I hate him a little for it.

I’m too stunned to move, until a shift below me makes me acutely aware that I’m sitting on top of him, his arm still around me in a mockery of a tender embrace.

He’s hard. His cock is right there, through his white trousers, proudly standing at attention. He bites down on his lip rather than release his laugh when he takes in my expression. He knows I noticed, and he’s delighted by the fact that I’m gaping like an idiot.

I can’t help it. I didn’t expect to be greeted by a rigid, large appendage right under me.

I muster what pride I can project and narrow my eyes. “I really should stab you. Do that again and I will.”

My face is on fire. The corners of his lips curve higher yet, and I push to my feet, turning to hide my blush.

“Some things are worth a little pain.” Rován always has a retort at the ready.

I choose to drop the subject as swiftly as possible, as I can’t imagine I’d win a battle of wits with a half-fae prince. “Would it be a terrible breach in etiquette to make my way out of here without taking my leave of your mother?”

“Quite terrible, and possibly punishable by hanging or flogging back home, but we’re in Magnapolis.” He shrugs. “And you’re from Dorath. You can do as you please, so long as there’s no Flaurian crown on that pretty head of yours.”

It has not escaped my notice that Rován takes care to shower me with flattery since last night—he's called me pretty, beautiful, and gorgeous. He's seen my family and figured I could use a little panegyric, which is embarrassing in itself. I should assure him that I don't suffer from any self-esteem issues, despite growing up in their shadow. But then he might stop, and I don't dislike it.

“Besides, we were nowhere to be found all day. Everyone likely assumes we're already gone. Or screwing each other's brains out in a corner.”

He's looking for another reaction, and I refuse to give him one. “All right. I'll get going, then.”

“Aren't your mother and sister still here?”

“They'll find me if they want to.” I can't sense them anywhere close, but now they know I study at Five, and I'm certain they'll make a point of stopping by the dorms.

“And beat you up some more?” There's an edge to his voice.

Seeing me hurt really seems to bother him. It's rather sweet.

I'm not used to it. My father, or Loken, or anyone in my old life saw me in a worse state and never thought to question it.

“You didn't see the other guy,” I joke, though none of them sustained half as many wounds as me.

To be fair, they were three against one, which wouldn't have worked out on my best day. At least they were kind enough to take turns. If they'd attacked me in one go, they'd have broken every single one of my bones.

“I'm coming with you,” he states, leaving no room for negotiation.

I'm about to tell him I've had quite enough of his company for the foreseeable future, just to be contrary, but before I can say a word, a deafening explosion resonates all around us.

So, so, close.



I look around and spot smoke rising from a nearing street, only a few blocks away.

“The square,” Rován says.

I don’t know the streets of Magnapolis well, but I can tell he’s right: the smoke is rising from the main square.

A second explosion shakes the ground, and this time, I watch it. Debris flies across the city, falling in the garden of the Flaurian palace, and much further. A third bomb detonates right away.

“It’s the Hall of Peace,” I guess, because no other building would be worth attacking that many times.

I’ve only just uttered the last word when another blast discharges.

Only it’s not exploding streets away, in the distance.

It’s right here.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

# DUBIOUS PRIORITIES

## ROVAN



I trail Daria's steps as she dashes across the roof, her deft footfalls nimbly avoiding all obstacles. Somehow, though not nearly as steady, I make it without falling on my ass.

The gilded gates surrounding the gardens of the royal palace have been destroyed, and a large group at least a thousand strong runs toward the entrance, firearms in hand.

"They're commons," I murmur, actually confused.

How, or more realistically, why, would a group of common-blooded mortals storm a palace defended by hundreds of lethal, armed demis? How can they even hope to last minutes against our guards, our soldiers?

They're numerous, I'll grant, and also armed to the teeth, with guns, by the looks of it. A bullet to the chest is as efficient against most demis as it is on mortals. Still, we have many forms of magiks on our side. We can peel their skin away, stop their hearts, boil their blood with a wave of our hands.

The shooting starts below. I guess they're not waiting for anyone to wave.

"Up there!" someone shouts. "That's the prince, on the roof!"

I only hear the shot ring in my ears, then a brusque force pushes me down and I'm flat on the roof, bright shadows hovering over me. I grunt, though I'll gladly take the stun of the fall over a bullet between my eyes.

Daria drops to a crouch, head low. “They’re after you. We have to get you far from here, right now.”

“I’m getting an eerie, unwelcome *deja vu*,” I grumble. “And I’m not going anywhere without my brother.”

Sylvan’s close, I can tell.

Daria mutters a curse under her breath.

I almost say she’d do the same for her family, but the truth is, she wouldn’t. They’re likely here, too, and she’s not worried about them. The benefit of belonging to a clan of highly skilled murderers.

“Look down there! They already breached the doors. We can’t wander around the castle looking for him,” she reasons. “Do you know where he’d be?”

I have no clue about Sylvan’s routine, but it doesn’t matter. “I can sense him when he’s close.”

There are only two creatures on Xhera with the distinct stench of Ilvaris: he and I. My knack for sensing the powers in my vicinity has always been more acute toward my twin.

“Fine,” she relents. The crease between her eyebrows doesn’t disappear with her capitulation. “But if you get yourself killed, don’t come crying to me.”

That’s my dove. A little danger isn’t about to deter *her*.

“We need to get off this roof, first. Have you seen a hatch or a door anywhere?”

She reaches for my hand, and the moment I clasp it, my world turns red, empty of anything but an endless pool of vermillion, running around me like a river of blood. There are whispers in the emptiness, a million words said all at once. I can’t make sense of any of it, but I want to hear them. I want to hear *more*. But in a flash, before I can focus on any of the words, I find myself inside an unfamiliar but easily identifiable room; blue and silver, well appointed, with Daria’s dress hanging from the top of the open wardrobe. It’s her guest quarters.

She inhales and exhales slowly, a hand against her chest.

“Are you all right?”

“Carrying someone—not easy,” she explains, her voice too ragged for my liking.

“Sit down. You need to rest. I’ll get you water.”

“Hello? I don’t know if you recall, but there were people with guns pointed in our direction minutes ago,” she snaps. “Mostly *your* direction, but hey, since I’m your fiancée now, I’m fairly certain I’m on their list, too. And they’re currently in here with us. I’m *not* sitting down. Lead the way.”

If she’s well enough to be this cross, we can go.

I pay attention to the auras around me, and open her door confidently.

Daria roughly shoves me forward—using her palms this time, rather than the shadows. A bullet whirs past, embedding itself in the wooden panel of her door, uncomfortably close to where my chest had been seconds before she knocked me out of the way.

She throws a dagger and a man at the end of the hallway falls backward with a scream. The blade reappears in her hand.

I grimace, apologetic. “I didn’t sense him at all.”

“They’re *common*,” Daria reminds me. “Their presence isn’t like that of demis.”

I feel incredibly stupid for not guessing as much, or specifically scanning the area with that in mind.

It’s not like commons don’t have any aura—unlike Daria when I first knew her. They do. It’s just weaker, less noticeable, and...I’ve never had any reason to pay attention to them before.

No wonder they’re shooting me.

Daria moves in a way I haven’t seen yet, like a feline, half leaping, careful to step as softly as possible, feet soundless on the polished hardwood.

She crouches next to the dead man and checks his coat, retrieving another gun and ammunition. “They’re well

prepared,” she muses, surprised.

And she would be.

“My friends and I figured there was a coordinated insurgence coming. Just, you know, not this fast. I should have told you,” I say, startled by my own admission.

I don’t report to anyone, but I feel like I *should* have informed her all the same. Shared my day, my concerns.

“That explains why your mother invited mine,” she gleans. “She wanted intel—or a hit on the organizers.”

I hadn’t even thought of that.

I follow Daria, imitating her movements as well as I can.

“Well?” she prompts in a low whisper when we’ve reached an intersection.

Oh, right. I’m the one supposed to direct us.

I close my eyes to focus my other senses. Scanning through the thousand presences around me, I make a point not to neglect the magikless common-blooded men and women I sense. Some feel frightened, on edge, others, determined, excited.

I disregard them all, seeking the only one that matters to me.

“Where are we headed?”

“Nowhere,” I whisper back.

She opens her mouth, but pauses before she makes a sound. Seconds later, my brother appears at the end of the corridor, dressed in one of his more casual white suits.

His hands and a good six inches of his sleeves are covered in blood.

## CHAPTER THIRTY



THE BRAVE AND THE  
STUPID

# DARIA



I am less disconcerted by the crown prince of Flaur now than I was last night, when all he wore was a smile and a mask of courteous gallantry. Sylvan Briar is finally wearing his true face.

“You’re good?” Rován checks.

His twin inclines his head. “I ran into a few hiccups. Nothing I couldn’t manage.”

Clearly.

“Let’s get going,” I urge.

The sound of screams and bullets flying is all around us. As is the stench of death.

We’ve been lucky so far—skillful, too, but if chance hadn’t been on our side, we would be dead. Magiks and shadows are wondrous weapons and shields, but both take far more time to ready than firing a bullet. I can handle one or two, if I hear the shooter move before they pull the trigger, but if we do really encounter a larger group, we’ll be in trouble. I can transport myself to safety. At a push, I could take Rován again—though my first time traveling with him has taken its toll. But moving all three of us? It’d likely drain the life out of me were I at the top of my form, much less now.

“There are several of our guests and members of our court here,” Sylvan says.

I glare at Rován, who shrugs helplessly in response.

“We can’t rescue everyone in the castle,” I reply between clenched teeth.

I’m an assassin, not a guard. Killing people and going on my way is a lot easier than keeping them alive.

“Well, I can’t abandon them. I can’t be seen fleeing in the face of danger. I might as well piss on the throne otherwise.”

I groan, conceding his point. “I hate politics.”

“It’s not just politics. There are kids here. The children of last night’s attendees. Servants. *Innocents*. And we’re stronger than they are. Doesn’t that make it our duty to at least try to help them?”

That’s what I get for cavorting with princes. At least Rován and I understand each other. He wanted to help his brother, but he never stopped to think about servants or innocents. How would they be better off if their princes were murdered here today? The long-term result will be more restrictions and sanctions on commons. Because there’s no doubt in my mind that, in the long run, the demis will always win. It’s not just that they hoard the wealth of the world. If push comes to shove and they’re forced to fight to the death, their powers can cause devastation, freezing and setting the air ablaze, killing mortals by the hundreds in the matter of seconds.

But Sylvan cares. Which is probably why he will make, by far, the better king to Flaur.

Rován’s built differently; more practical and disillusioned. Like me. I look at him, half hoping he’ll tell me to knock his brother out and drag him away. Instead, he sighs, resigned to his twin’s stupidity.

That’s his weakness, then. He loses his sense over those he cares about. Sadly, it’s a flaw I apparently share, because instead of leaving the two fools to it, I find myself calculating our chances.

I’ve never been sent on a rescue, but I know we’re outmanned—by a lot. I have the experience, Sylvan and Rován are powerful, as are many guards and even guests in

this castle, but the thousands of intruders have surprise, bombs, and guns on their side.

I don't like those odds. I don't usually get into situations I don't know, for a fact, that I'll win.

"We can try to get people out, but we have to be smart about it," I stress. "No rushing out of doors without looking." I narrow my eyes at Rován. "And no," I wave toward Sylvan's bloodstained hands, "whatever that was."

"We're in your hands," Sylvan soothes me, smooth and reassuring.

I don't believe it for a second. He'll go off script if he feels like he should. Putting three minds like ours at work together is a recipe for disaster. I'd know. Rován and Sylvan aren't unlike my sisters, in the sense that they'll do whatever the fuck they want.

"I need to understand what I'm dealing with here," I say. Dragging him along while not knowing his true limitations is likely to make everything harder. "You can see." It's a statement rather than a question.

"In a manner of speaking." Sylvan's cryptic, reluctant to show his hand.

"So, we don't need to worry about you walking into a door, or missing a hand gesture?" I check.

He hesitates. "I *see* better now than I did before. Don't worry about me."

I guessed as much. He would have hired a witch to get his sight restored otherwise. "Well, I don't know this place. Lead the way."

I don't think either of the princes are very familiar with the Magnapolis palace; Rován spends his days at the university and Sylvan, in the Golden Mountains of Flaur. But they do know the layout well enough to get us to a service staircase.

We've only gone down one flight of stairs when we come across a flock of shuddering men and women in gray uniforms. Servants.

“Your Highness!”

“My prince—”

“There were men and women shooting in the armory. Breaking things.”

“They lined up the lords in the yard, sir.”

They all talk at once, the cacophony barely intelligible, but we get the gist of it.

“They should be safe enough here,” I whisper to Rován.

I don’t think the rebels are likely to purposely seek out servants. Running around the palace is riskier than staying put in the dark, narrow spiral staircase.

The lords in the yard are another story. They’re likely to be well guarded—if they aren’t dead already.

“Have you seen guards or knights?” Sylvan checks.

“A few are pushing back. Many died, Your Highness. And some are wounded. My man—”

I tune out the chatter and concentrate. Now that we have a better overview of the situation, I’m not reassured. “We could create a disruption in the courtyard?” I’m hesitant. “Something to force the gunners to move. But you should stay here,” I tell Sylvan.

There’s no doubt he, Rován, and their mother would be the primary targets of this crowd, but I can’t handle a mob all by myself. I can trust Rován to look after his own self-interest, not play the hero. Sylvan’s nature is too volatile. I never liked heroes.

Predictably, the prince shakes his head. “These are my people. I have to help.”

I can’t believe the two Briar princes are related, let alone twins. Sylvan absorbed both shares of the noble stupidity in the womb. “Fine. But when you get yourself murdered, I owe you the biggest I told you so.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

# A ROCK AND A SHADOW

## ROVAN



**M**y mother favored Sylvan long before she decided to murder the other twin. Who could blame her? I was a child who wanted to pluck wings off butterflies and legs off spiders. I didn't—not while I was observed and judged at every one of my waking moments. But by the gods, I craved violence and chaos. Sylvan was the golden prince, the kind, smart, selfless boy. The future king.

Chira might have decided to set her sights on me now, but before the incident that cost my twin his eyes, she was flocking toward my brother like the rest of the court. Reiks and his royal pride include me because I'm the Flaurian prince residing in Magnapolis. When in the Golden Mountains, he's always favored my brother, too. Everyone does. I am the other one, the spare.

Not to Daria. In fact, unless I'm much mistaken, she *can't stand* Sylvan, and would gladly leave him behind if it wasn't for me.

I shouldn't like that as much as I do, but I am the evil twin, so I relish her distaste for my perfect brother.

Still, they should get along. I hope they do eventually. She's going to be in my life for the foreseeable future and he's my reflection in the mirror, the light to my darkness.

Daria's a Wicked shadow. She's more comfortable with the dark. If it had been up to the two of us, we'd be sipping wine from the comfort of a lovely remote room with a view by now.



But no, Sylvan has to stay and help people who would have loved nothing more than to throw him to the wolves.

We descend the rest of the way in the service stairs, and instead of stopping on the ground floor, Daria takes us down again, to the servants' domain. As a child, I spent a fair bit of time down below, stealing sweetmeats off the peevish chef's trays before they were sent up.

Today the trembling chef is hiding under his counter with his staff. My mother had her decorated staff travel with her. Thankfully, for the most part, they seem unharmed—by the smell of it, the same can't be said for their trousers. The invaders didn't make their way below stairs. At least not yet.

“That's the princes!”

“Your Highnesses—”

Daria groans, and I bring my finger to my lip, shushing them. “We can't attract attention,” I whisper. “That'll lead them here. Now, has anyone checked the delivery route?”

Back in Flaur, the kitchen used to get its deliveries from a small service entrance, on the opposite site of the grand, noble courtyard. I may not be as familiar with the layout of this castle, but I doubt my mother would allow her servants' deliveries to come the same way as her hovercraft.

“They were in the courtyard,” a maid sniffles. “They might see us!”

“Make your way to the doors. We'll cause a diversion. They'll have enough on their plates. You make your way out as soon as you can.”

Daria nods her agreement with my plan. I don't say what we must both think: those people didn't come here to kill servants. So long as they don't get in the crossfire, they should be fine.

“What now?” I ask as the staff leaves.

“We should go to the courtyard.” Sylvan sounds frustrated. “Assess the situation.”

“We know the situation,” Daria snaps. “They’re lining your people up to shoot them as soon as whoever’s in charge tells them to. They’re likely just searching for you two and your mother now.”

“Mother was called to the Hall of Peace,” Sylvan says. “Emergency session.”

That’s news to me. I remember the explosions we saw on the roof, clearly detonating in that direction. But I can’t believe my mother would do me the courtesy of dying that way. I’m just not that lucky.

“Well, then, if they know that, you’re their target. And we’re going to give them what they want.”

We both stare at Daria with wide eyes.

“You’ll go out there with your hands up, and offer yourself up in exchange for your people,” she tells my brother.

She really does hate his guts. “How does that help anyone?” I growl.

“Then,” she continues, ignoring me. “We plunge them in darkness and blow them up. It’ll give you seconds to lead the crowd away. We can head back to the castle, rendezvous here and leave the same way the servants are taking once it’s done.”

I hesitate, not liking the sound of this plan at all. It puts Sylvan at great risk. What if they open fire without asking questions?

But no, these rebels have a cause, and no doubt, a hierarchy. They’re here to make a point.

This scheme relies on the assumption they’ll want to make a show of killing a crown prince, if they think they have the upper hand. But there are too many variables. They could be startled and shoot on sight.

“Could we manage all that?” Sylvan’s strangely calm.

“You’ve seen my mother covering the Hall of Mirrors. My shadows will do the trick so long as I don’t have to spread them over too large an area, or keep it up for long. As for the rest...” Daria gestures to the old-fashioned furnace blazing at

the end of the kitchen, intended for roasts and baked goods. “I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

I survey the coal piled to either side of the traditional oven. It’s lucky the chef refused to upgrade to modern methods.

“I’ll need it ground into powder. You can handle that, right?” she checks with us.

My brother and I nod in unison. Folk blood means an affinity with the elements, earth, first of all.

“Will it do the trick?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah. Coal dust is highly volatile, hard to control. But it’ll burn. It might even explode.”

It’s a plan, which is better than what we had a minute ago.

Darkness won’t bother Sylvan for obvious reasons. My eyes manage well enough in the dark, and I don’t doubt Lady Shadow will be entirely comfortable, but the commons should be confused enough for us to have a few moments...

Besides, this idea makes Sylvan appear like the perfect self-sacrificing hero he is. No one will dare question his right to rule if we pull off this stunt.

The only problem is that if we don’t, then he’s dead.

“I’ll play the bait,” I offer.

I owe my brother a blood debt. I didn’t think anything could ever level the scales. This just might.

Daria chews her bottom lip, which indicates I’ve made the right decision. “He’s the one who wants to be seen helping,” she reminds me.

“Like anyone would know the difference if we exchanged clothes.” I smirk, knowing I have her. She’s either going to have to admit it’s too dangerous, or let me do it.

Sylvan shakes his head. “I want to do it.”

“I’m the bait or I’m dragging you away right now,” I state, implacable.

“You don’t get it,” Daria groans. “I have to handle the shadows and the powder. For that, I have to be close, too. Whoever’s not the bait has to protect our positions—both of us. Sylvan, do you think you can make sure I live long enough to blow them to pieces, all the while covering your brother?”

Nothing she could have said would have shaken my resolve as much as this. Because while Sylvan doesn’t appear to dislike Daria the way she does him, there’s no doubt in my mind that given the choice, he’ll prioritize me. Over her, over our plan, over the nobles at the rebels’ mercy.

How about me? What choice would I make if it was between them?

I know I’d let the court fry, but Daria or Sylvan?

I decide I don’t need to find out.

“I’m the bait, and that’s final.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

# BITTER SWEETNESS

# DARIA



If Rován dies because of his sanctimonious double, I'll murder Sylvan myself.

I have to admire both of them. The crown prince genuinely cares—not just about being seen doing the right thing, either. And while Rován doesn't, he loves Sylvan more than he loves himself.

Still, I'd exchange the two idiots for one of my siblings now. If Sam or Tami were here, I know my plan would succeed. I know we'd come out of it unscathed. But these two are too passionate, and not disciplined enough. I can't count on them to make the right decision in the heat of the moment.

Which means that as well as being the sword pointed at our enemies, I have to mold myself into a shield and protect them.

I'm already tired. Physical exertion is one thing I can easily ignore, or set aside for a time. I can keep going when it matters and collapse later. My shadows are another story. They have quantifiable limits, and if I push them, they'll start to suck the life out of me.

Had I known where we would be right now, I wouldn't have used my shadows needlessly this morning, and again, half an hour ago when I transported us downstairs. We should have found a hatch like Rován suggested.

I certainly wouldn't have dropped my second weapon. I feel vulnerable without it.

I killed the boy earlier, and I took the time to absorb some of his essence, but I'm still weaker than I'd like to be.

I try the many servants' stairways leading to every part of the castle, discreet and unnoticed. It's not my first foray into the help's domain. Their corridors and narrow walkways are designed to remain unseen, invisible.

It takes a few tries, but I find the underground path leading out to the yard meant for the staff to carry refreshments to wandering nobles during garden parties. I don't venture far, opting not to risk revealing my presence. Instead, I creep close enough to sense what we'll walk into. At least seven hundred men and women reek of fear—our hostages—and half as many infused with excitement, anticipation, and highly winded.

That's not necessarily good. If there are only about three hundred rebels here, where are the rest? I counted a lot more from the roof.

But it doesn't matter. What we're planning should be swift enough to only involve those who are already present. If the rest remain in the palace looking for the princes, all the better. I just hope the situation won't change drastically until we're ready.

When I'm done with my reconnaissance, I return to the kitchen and watch the brother focus over the clay pots filled with coal.

Elemental magik can be rather beautiful, if a little unnerving. The coal flies in a soft, controlled whirlwind over the ceramic, crushing itself into fine particles before returning to the receptacle.

I don't immediately notice, but the two princes have changed into each other's clothes. Rován can pull off the preppier look—he did so yesterday—but the dark pants and half-open shirt look borderline ridiculous on the uptight prince.

“How desperate are you to fasten those five buttons?” I taunt, enjoying his apparent discomfort.



The crown prince doesn't appreciate my humor, judging by his snarl. I could tell him no one's supposed to see him—he can likely close the shirt if he wants to. I decide to abstain. Like his brother, he does have a rather comely, sculpted chest. It would be a shame to cover it.

The twins' methods couldn't be more different, though they come to the same result. The heir makes his coal dance in an orderly, graceful fashion, particles splitting in perfect harmony. Rován's coal is faster, and plunges in a chaotic storm. I am suitably impressed. Neither prince drops so much as a single lump.

"All right, where do you want it?" Sylvan's completely cool. If the effort has cost him much energy, he doesn't show it.

I hesitate. Usually, I would have transported it with me to the end of the corridor, but I decide I need to conserve my energy, given that this foolish venture relies on my abilities.

"You guys can carry it."

I lead the way, letting the princes lift and lug along the heavy, cumbersome containers. I doubt they're often asked to perform manual labor, but neither of them complains.

We take a last turn and reach an archway large enough for a carriage and its horses in the old days. I feel the heavy, humid heat of the city coming from the end of the passage.

"You can leave the powder here," I whisper to the princes.

Day has already given way to night, but lanterns and faint streetlamps set up beyond the gilded gates illuminate the courtyard. There aren't any palace lights on this gangway, but we can detect the dim exterior luster.

I stop halfway through, wordlessly looking up at Rován. He's ridiculously tall. Strange that I never noticed. I'm on the shorter side, if I compare myself to the average, but I don't think I've met any man as tall as the royal twins. It must be the fae blood running in their veins, making them reach for the stars. They're also slim but not, by any stretch of the imagination, fragile.

I think of Loken, strangely. Another prince, from another time in my life. I wish Rován had opted to sharpen his weapons the way the Dorathian prince did. I wouldn't worry so much about him if I knew he could take care of flying bullets.

"You're not allowed to die," I tell him, giving a strict order.

The corner of his lips quirks up, and I narrow my eyes. "You could offer an incentive. Promise me a kiss, and I'll do my best to survive until then."

He's ridiculous, and I shouldn't laugh, but I can't stop the nervous chuckle. "Fine. Survive, and you may kiss me until you're tired of it."

Sylvan snorts. "Mortals. They don't know the worth of a promise, do they?"

Rován doesn't look away from me as he answers his brother, eyes dancing with amusement. "They really don't."

I have yet to come up with a retort in defense of mortalkind as a whole, when my prince leans his lithe frame toward me and brings his mouth to mine.

This kiss is nothing like the one from the rooftop, when he was making a point, cowing me, dominating me. It's fleeting. Sweet. It tastes bitter like poison, because I know he's saying goodbye.

"Consider that a deposit," Rován says. "How's my glamour?"

I don't know what he means at first, but his eyes catch the dim light, and I notice the tint of his irises, green a moment ago and now a pale blue.

"Perfect." Yet, he wouldn't fool me. I'd know this is Rován, not Sylvan, despite the fact that they're now completely identical.

And then he walks out into the courtyard, holding his hands in the air.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

# THE PRINCE'S MASK

# ROVAN



I t's not the first time I've played the role of my brother. We used to exchange places whenever there was something one of us wanted to avoid, like violin lessons. He hated the dexterity exercise, much preferring to spend his days reading under his bed.

I loved playing. I still do. One of my secrets. Once there's something I love, I hide it. I lie and cheat and hurt others, just to ensure no one can take what little I have left.

I turned up to every one of his lessons and pretended not to know how to play the basic Flaurian anthem. It was great fun.

Today's not my idea of fun, but I'm suited for the job. All I need to do is to walk with the utter confidence that the very paved stone I step on, and the ground beneath it, belongs to me.

Sylvan's confidence is boundless, and completely warranted. He is the strongest royal on Xhera. Not Reiks, for all his machinations, not even Zale and his dominion over ice and misery. Sylvan, an immortal capable of controlling every element, manipulating the weak, and if push comes to shove, calling the might of the night court of Ilvaris to his aid, by right of blood.

I share every one of his blessings save for one: Sylvan knows he deserves all of it. I realized long ago that I'm not made for Xhera. I don't try to integrate myself here. I was never meant to stay.



I weigh the familiar bow in my hands, and breathe out as I let the arrow fly, aiming for a point so far in the distance I barely see it. This exercise isn't about seeing at all. It's about what I'm made of, down to the smallest particle. What my soul is shaped for.

I don't open my eyes, too stressed out to check for the outcome.

When the crowd erupts in applause and screams, I grin, and look up from the arena where I've competed for the last week to the royal box.

My father's green eyes aren't kind. They never are. His smirk isn't the smile of a loving father either. I am the son of the night king. Love and kindness aren't in the cards for us.

What I see is pride and concern. The pride needs no explanation. I hit the target dead center, as I usually do in training. The only thing that could have messed it was my nerves.

The concern was more complex. A tender soul might assume my father is simply worried about my welfare. There are many who'd gladly slip poison in my drink, or a dagger between my ribs, to please this or that lord. But part of the problem is that Alder Larch believes I could be the one holding the dagger, the one pouring the poison. I proved myself a worthy fairy prince today, despite my diluted blood, despite the fact that I wasn't raised here in Ilvaris. He brought me to his world to protect and train me, after one too many attacks on my life on Xhera.

I wasn't supposed to excel. I wasn't supposed to be loved by his court and earn the new high queen's affectionate smiles.

Just like in Flaur, I am a threat as much as an heir.

The boys and girls who studied with me in the hollow hug me.

“Not so bad for a half mortal,” the smug future high monarch grants.

Their shots were much better than mine, and from much further, but I take the praise. I relish my moment, knowing, deep down, that it wouldn't last.

My father comes to me that night, as I expected and dreaded.

“You're a sensation,” he tells me without inflection.

I suppose I am. Here, no one cares if my skills match my cruelty. No one cares I revel in screams and feed on pain. We're all monsters in this world.

“You realize how dangerous that is, don't you? You're a little boy to their eyes right now. Not much of a threat. But in five years? In ten?”

I lower my gaze. I can see where he's coming from. I was thrust into classes meant for the children of the gentry, and most were older than me. I was their little friend, the boy they didn't mind showing tricks to. A novelty. I was no threat. That won't last long.

“Will I be a threat to you, then?” I ask my father.

“Yes,” he says, because our kind aren't liars. “If you wish to be.”

I don't think I would.

I wouldn't say I love this strange, cold man, but I certainly respect him, and I don't want his position. Not yet.

“I called you now,” he tells me, “because it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. The high queen's children were studying, and her advisor's children with them. Anyone of import was with you in this classroom. The allies you made will define the fate of the night court for the next thousand years. But they are children. You are a boy. You don't yet have

the wisdom or confidence to make the right decisions. Pride will move you, or them, to strike against each other.”

More truth, each hitting their mark deep in my twelve-year-old heart. I’d made friends over the last Ilvarish year. Friends I believed I’d keep for life. Would they truly seek to hurt me?

Part of me knows the answer. If I keep excelling, they would.

“Go home. Return to Xhera. You’re stronger than them now—stronger than a hundred of them. Stay there until you’re a hundred years old. Wise enough to make the right decisions. Our time moves much slower. Only thirty years or so will have passed here by then. Come back, and I’ll give you the throne.”

I look up into my father’s eyes, shocked. He couldn’t mean that, could he?

“Why do you think I birthed you in the first place, boy?” he asks with an easy laugh. “I am tired of this crown. You’ll grow tired of it too, in time. It is a heavy weight—most of all, when you bear it alone. But I’ll pass it to you only when you’re ready. I’ll not have you squander my legacy.”

And so, he sent me back, and I bide my time in this tedious world that was never quite mine.

Pretending to be Sylvan is easy. After all, all I have to do is be myself.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

# THE WICKED DEAL

# DARIA



I feel Sylvan's impatience crackling like a living flame. If we had been facing demis, they would have sensed us based on that alone. As it stands, it only serves to irritate my already frayed nerves.

"That's the prince!" someone shouts.

"I surrender," Rován replies.

I can't see him from the vaulted path, but I sense the excitement rising, the panic, the wonder.

He's giving his people cause to hope and fear all at once.

"Hands right where we can see them!"

I don't like the stench and sound of fright in the rebel's voice. Their fingers are hovering over their triggers. One nervous shot and that'd be it.

"Are you ready?" I whisper to Sylvan.

The other prince nods.

I don't like any of this. I might have come up with this plan, but my preferred course of action would have been to leave this place an hour ago. I was just doing as well as I could with the cards I've been dealt when I proposed the strategy. We're so far outside my area of expertise. I don't know how to save anyone. We won't have much time. I doubt the coal powder will incapacitate everyone, and when panicked, people tend to lash out. At least one of us is bound to get hurt. And the most likely target is Rován, because of his position.

“It’s time.” I barely recognize my voice.

One of the basic things about starting any assignment is to go into it with a clear mind, and mine’s a storm right now. I will myself to shed my concerns, closing my eyes, focusing on my breath.

“If we’re disrupted, it’s your job to keep me safe until the fire starts,” I tell Sylvan, uncomfortable about putting my wellbeing in his hands. If it had been Rován in his stead, I would have felt much better. “If I die, I can’t spread the powder, and the shadows dissipate. Then you’re all screwed. You focus on Rován *after* I’m done.”

Sylvan nods his agreement, and I close my eyes, calling to all of the shadows I harbor in my soul.



Some hundred years ago, there once was a mother crying over her child. It was born weak, the babe, and died within seconds, but she loved it all the same. So she prayed to the gods of light and shade. She begged them to give breath back into her small little lungs.

But it wasn’t within the gods of Xhera’s power, even if they had been listening.

We use the word gods, as though they’re all powerful and all seeing, but in truth, the creatures beyond the immortal shores are simply immortals, frozen in their youthful bodies, and capable of greater deeds than those commonborn or even their descendants. They’re not gods in the true sense of the word. Gods are creators and overseers of life forms.

Still, the mother cried for seven days and nights, refusing to bury her little girl, rejecting food and water. She only had prayers.

The legend says it was an old woman who appeared to her on the eighth night.

“Don’t waste your prayers on the wrong folks,” the crone told her.

She was a short, unassuming lady who didn’t alarm the woman at first.

“But if you mean all the words you’re whispering, you should pray to the right gods. You should pray to the Wicked.”

“The Wicked?” the mother asked, confused, and too desperate to fear. “What are the Wicked?”

“They’re known by many names. The ancients. The soulless. The sins. The eldritch.”

The woman didn’t know any of those words, and none of them mattered anyway. “They can save my baby?”

“One of them can,” the woman clarified.

“Which one?” the mother urged.

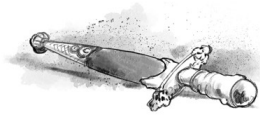
“Death,” the woman replied. “Life took the babe. Death can give it back. For a price. Luckily for you, we have everything we need here to call upon it. Maiden.” The old woman’s hand pressed against the unmoving baby’s chest. “Mother. Crone. Even Death itself can be called by such force.”

Then, the mother knew to fear. She also knew to hope. “What would it want in exchange?”

“Does it matter?” the crone asked.

And the mother shook her head. She’d lost her husband to a war, and her father to old age. She had nothing but the dead child against her chest, and she was ready to pay any price to have her back.

“Well, then. Shall we call?”



Every one of us knows the story of how my mother was reborn at the end of the last Fae War. What none of us know is the price her own mother paid to bring her back from the edge of death.

But we the Wicked have our shadows, testimony of an old deal. We know their price. We know what they demand. We know who they answer to.

Death.

There's no cheating the shadows.

I call all of them all the same, only keeping a flutter alive in my chest. It's a dangerous gamble, but if I take enough lives, they'll replenish enough for me to thrive. If I don't, I'll be weak, but I can manage so long as I don't use up the last strand jealously kept inside my heart.

My shadows, carrying every granule of coal, slither along the paved courtyard, and the confused screaming starts. All they can see is red mist.

“Now!” I tell Rován.

I light a match I picked up in the kitchen and throw it as we dart into the obscured square.

Then the shooting begins, just as the entire courtyard catches fire.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

# RED SHADOWS



# ROVAN



I'm used to the darkness. My sensitive eyes much prefer it to the light of day. This is something else. For the first time, I think I can put myself in Sylvan's shoes.

Daria's shadows are all-encompassing. All I see is a thick, red cloud. I don't have Sylvan's experience with relying on my other senses, but I'm still able to locate the presence of the demis. I dash toward them, staying low as the rebels start shooting at the spot where I was seconds ago.

At least they didn't expect my speed, or hear me move.

Reaching the nobles, I whisper urgently. "On your feet. Right now. We need to go."

If I were my brother, I would have used pretty, gallant words to urge them, but they should consider themselves lucky I'm here at all.

A scream pierces the chaos, and my blood runs cold. It's not my brother. It's not Daria. I'd know if it was.

"Cease-fire!" one of the rebels roars. "Cease-fire! Taura's been hit, you fools. We can't see a damn thing. Someone get a torch!"

I crack a smile. *Yes, please, someone light a spark in these shadows, heavily coated with coal.*

"My prince. You came for us!"

"My husband, Your Highness. He was in the palace. Have you seen my husband?"

“Please, Your Grace—”

I tune out the chorus of praise, pleas, and obeisance and I take the hand of the closest noble—it’s a small hand. A child, I’d wager, but I can’t see a thing. “Grab hold of each other and run *now* or we all die.”

I don’t have time to explain, and I can only hope they won’t make me.

“Return to the hostages!” one of the commons says. “If you can get visual confirmation, open fire immediately before they get away.”

Thankfully, highborns tend to have a strong will to live. They stop talking and let me lead them away from the courtyard, toward the back of the palace, rather than the obvious. People would expect anyone fleeing to make for the gates at the front, but that’s not likely to help anyone. If this many rebels made it into the palace, how many are there in the street? And whoever survives the oncoming onslaught devised by Daria will likely come to help them.

The shadows dance with fire and the shrieking starts just as we clear the courtyard, reaching the royal garden.

I escort them all the way to the service entrance leading right back into the underground kitchen and cellar. I then direct the crowd to the transports—vans more equipped to carry sacks of grain and meat than nobles, but they’ll do. “Can someone drive?”

I sure as all seven hells hope so, because I’m not going to chauffeur them.

“I can,” a heavysset man with a long red beard offers.

A young boy also lifts his hand. Two drivers. That ought to be enough.

“Then get the hell out of here.”

“But my prince—”

I tune them out, already ripping the fabric of this world to catch a vine that propels me back to the front of the edifice, hovering over the fire.

Where are they?

I'm still blind, between the red shadows, the fire, and the smoke, but I sense my brother. He's alive. As is Daria. They're somewhere down there, right below me.

The question is, why aren't they moving out of the way?  
And there's only one possible answer.

Something went terribly wrong.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

# ONE TOO MANY

# DARIA



**C**ornered animals bite back. We all knew that. There was a strong chance of retaliation from the rebels once we attacked.

My plan was to immediately retreat back into the castle, retrace our steps, and leave the same way the kitchen staff did, but the underground path was set ablaze as surely as the courtyard. The princes must have dropped some coal powder as they carried it out. I should have expected it.

“We’ll have to head out to the square,” Sylvan reasons, unfailingly calm.

I nod. “I’ll clear the shadows so we have a safer path.”

I don’t think I can control the fire, but if I clear a tunnel, we might avoid the worst of it.

I wince as I focus, already bone-tired to the soul. I’ll get better. Once the screaming rebels die, I can absorb their essence and replenish. Removing my shadows shouldn’t cost me much then.

I haven’t needed to accompany my orders with gestures for years—since I was a child first learning to direct the shadows—but I wave now, and a gap burrows through the darkness.

“Get down!” Sylvan screams, just as I feel the air vibrate. Too late. Far too late. The bullets are already in flight, coming far too close, and aimed straight at my chest.

The rebel hidden by shadows and smoke acted on instinct, pulling on his trigger the moment he felt movement, and I was

too tired, too distracted, and maybe too arrogant to sense him. I move, but I can tell they'll hit their mark.

Then I'm knocked over, pinned to the ground so hard it hurts, completely unexpectedly.

My eyes widen, and my lower lip trembles.

*No.*

I don't say the word out loud first. I sit up and watch in horror.

Sylvan's body lies over mine, heavy, unmoving. The stone-carved chest I admired moments ago is riddled with bleeding bullet holes.

A metallic click calls my attention, and I'm once again looking at the wrong end of a barrel.

I throw my shadowdagger without even looking. The man squeezes the trigger as he falls backward with a yell muffled by the blade buried in his throat. All his bullets fly toward the sky.

"Sylvan." I shake his shoulders gently.

He's breathing, but only just.

It's not in my nature to dwell on regrets or guilt, but I regret every unkindness, every thought I've formed over the last day.

"You saved me," I croak, my eyes filled with tears. "You saved me, you idiot."

That's the problem with heroes. They're ready to sacrifice themselves for everyone. Even those unworthy of it. Even the villains.

"I didn't," he groans, weak, barely over a whisper. "I saved *him*."

I don't think I understand him, but I cry all the same. I can't do anything. I don't know how to heal anyone other than myself—and my shadows do the job, not me. If only Alis were here. She'd know what to do.

I'm still laying uselessly under him, my hands on his shoulders when Roan appears through the flames. I only cry harder, feeling the life of his twin flicker and fade over me.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. He saved me. I'm sorry," I repeat, again and again.

"You—" Sylvan manages words, but only just. "You have to go."

Except I can't move.

I've killed hundreds. Thousands. The fire today added almost half as much to my record. And for all that, I can't deal with this one death. I can't explain it. It breaks part of my self, part of my soul.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

# A VOICE IN THE DARK

## ROVAN



I don't care about the flames. I don't care about the rebels and their guns. May they all die screaming. If one approaches now, they will.

I feel like a ghost as I make my way to my brother and press my hands on the gaping, bleeding wounds in his bare chest.

He can't die. He can't.

Fire blazes in Daria's eyes and for one wild moment, I think she has had enough of both of us. She lifts her dagger and I half expect her to shove it down my throat. Instead, she throws it at the man reloading the automatic gun, though another one will take his place.

We were arrogant to think we could best them simply because of our abilities, because we live longer, because of the blood running in our veins. In the end, we all bleed.

Daria takes both of our hands, and I am once again plunged into a red void. Only this time, I can hear the voices.



They're much clearer, those whispers surrounding the empty mist.

I focus on the sound of laughter and I see a little girl perched on top of a long string, walking on it without a net or rope. The fall could kill her, but she doesn't care. She'll never fall. She believes it, and so it is true.

"Come on, Your Highness. A kitten could do it," she teases, glancing behind her shoulder.

I recognize the boy she's looking at. I knew him at that age: my friend, Loken. He smirks back at her, and the vision disappears.

Now the little girl's slightly older, no longer smiling.

*You will be nothing to Dorath. You will be nothing to Xhera. You will live until this world is ashes and see the rise and fall of all empires. Your fate isn't of this world, child.*

Daria doesn't flinch, or cry, or utter a single word. Her face is a mask of cold indifference, but I watch the light in her eyes die as the witch finishes her words. "You are cursed."

Flashes of her life pass before my eyes—training with her sisters, missions, lives she took with either pleasure or indifference, and her first kiss, then Loken's hands on her amber skin. I don't like that one bit. And finally, I see her that day we met. She stands somewhat smaller than she did in her youth, her spark long gone, her passion dead.

She's changed in the last three years. The fire's returned to her eyes. I've seen her smile again. She's well now. The weight that ailed her is gone. I'll see to it that it stays gone.

The scene shifts again, to a strange, hollow cave in deep, twisted woods.

I see two women crouched hand in hand, heads bowed, whispering into the dark. I hear the dark whisper back.

*There will be a price.*

The wood seems familiar, and the voice is bone-chilling, yet I want to hear more. I need to. It's important. I can tell.

I'm frustrated when the shadows dissipate. I want to stay right here, in her mind, in her world, and unpeel every layer to understand my beautiful little dove.

My surroundings are completely unfamiliar. At first, I think I'm standing in a field, but looking around, I see that it's just a wild, unkempt garden.

I get the feeling we're no longer in Magnapolis. It's colder, and already darker here. We moved far enough for it to be daytime, while it was the early evening moments ago.

Didn't Daria say she could only transport herself to places where she's already been?

No one answers. The only thing I hear is my brother's labored grunting.

*Shit, his wound.*

I follow the sound, finding him a few paces away, lying on the tall grass. I rush to press my hands on his wounds again, lest he bleed out.

"Daria?" I call.

The last time she moved us, her hand stayed in mine when we arrived, but it was from the roof to a bedroom a couple of stories down. This time, unless I'm mistaken, she's taken us to another country. Hundreds, if not thousands of miles away.

Where are we? More importantly, where is she?

"Daria!" I call louder, even as I cover Sylvan's chest. I can hear the slight tremor in my voice. I want her right here. My brother's bleeding out and I *need* her.

"Rovan?" It's not the voice I want to hear.

In fact, I don't even understand how I'm hearing Blythe Ostra right now. I lift my eyes from my brother, long enough to see my old friend rush out a small cottage's door, barefoot.

"By the gods, Rov, is that Sylvan? How are you here! What's going on?"

How would Daria have thought to take us to Blythe? I could cry.

"He's hurt, Blythe. Please."

The tall, beautiful blonde who used to be betrothed to Reiks places her hands over mine.

Blythe wasn't born with magiks. She was blessed with another gift: money. Piles and piles of gold, which made her one of the richest heiresses on Xhera. And what rich future queens want, they usually get. When she begged her father to have a witch enhance her with magik, I remember mocking her. Now, I could kiss her. Blythe didn't ask for the ability to control fire, or move stone. She didn't want to learn spells and hexes. What she received was the gift of healing.

There's another pair of lips I want to devour.

Where is she?

I finally move my hands away from Sylvan's chest and rise to my feet, looking around.

I can't sense her, and it makes me profoundly uneasy. I couldn't sense her for the first three years of our acquaintance, but she's no longer hiding. She just used her shadows. I should feel her. She should be here.

I trace my way back to the spot in the long grass where I was transported, eyes seeking, mind searching, scanning the entire area.

I see a slight depression in the line of grass, and with a frown, head over there.

My steps grow faster and faster.

"Daria!" I yell, finally spotting her.

She's passed out on her back, that stupid sheer slip hiking up her leg.

Reaching her, I bring my hand to her face and smile down at her. "Hey. You did it. You brought us to Blythe. Sylvan is going to be fine."

She doesn't so much as twitch.

"Hey," I repeat. "Daria."

My hand is trembling when I bring it down from her still, peaceful face, to the side of her neck.

I don't know how to check for a pulse. Why would I? I know people are alive because they have an aura, a presence. But Daria doesn't without her shadows. I reason that's all it is. The shadows are gone, so I can't feel her. There can't be any other explanation. And she's quiet because she used up too much energy. I saw how taxing the short trip down from the rooftop had been with one extra person. Taking all of us this far must have...

It must have...

I know how magiks work. They give, but there's always a cost. I know what pushing the limits can do to a demi, and while Daria's shadows are nothing like our magiks, the same principle applies to all things, in every world.

She sacrificed herself to take me and my brother to safety. She's dead.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



THE SPIDER AND THE  
SHADOW

## ROVAN



The mother let the crone take her all the way to the border of Dorath and well beyond, her small bundle still cocooned at her breast. And then, she took the portal to the other world, without even asking a question. All that mattered was her child. Her little Ryzan.

Yet, for all her resolve, when she reached the entrance of the cave and looked inside, she knew fear.

“Hello?”

“Why, hello there,” the voice replied from deep inside. “What do we have here?”

“A bride,” the crone replied proudly.

The mother didn’t like that at all. “I’m no one’s bride.” She’d only just buried her husband, a good man. Even if she ever wished to wed again, it wouldn’t be to whatever lurked in the recesses of the stone.

The crone clicked her tongue. “Peace, child. Bride is just a word for a woman born without a mate assigned by fate. I was one of them. Our kind is rare—very rare. And just as useful.”

She felt like a lamb coaxed to the altar suddenly. “Useful?”

“The child,” the crone said, talking to the darkness rather than the mother. “You can bring it back, yes?” She sounded eager, almost victorious.

“I can,” the darkness replied.

The mother steeled her resolve. Did anything else matter at all?

“There will be a price, however.”

“Name it,” the crone said.

“What does any prisoner want, Spider?” the voice chuckled. “There will come a time the brat’s blood will be capable of liberating me. And it will.”

The crone didn’t like that at all. She scowled fiercely. “And what will you do once free?”

The only answer was a deafening silence.

“Please,” entreated the mother.

And then the shadows of the cave shifted, revealing a man with a face so beautiful looking into it was almost painful, on the right side, and completely decomposed, like a long-dead corpse, on the left.

He lifted his decrepit, dried hand, and demanded, “The child.”

The mother shivered. Could she do this? Could she hand her precious baby to this thing, let it twist her?

But her baby was already dead. What was the worst that could happen?

She passed him the small body, which easily fit into the thing’s large hand, and Death filled it with his shadows.



I am strangely calm. There’s nothing to worry about at all.

“Rovan?” my brother croaks, limping to us. “I’m so sorry.”

I don’t know whether he’s listening for a heartbeat or something else, but either way, he knows.

“We killed her, you know,” I tell him. “You, with your boundless heroism; me, with my desire to save you.”

My brother is silent as I scoop her up in my arms, careful with her head as I gather her to my chest. I rise to my feet.

Sylvan puts his hand on my shoulder in a gesture meant to be supportive.

“You might want to let go, brother,” I caution. “You don’t want to come where I’m headed.”

Sylvan blinks, as he understands me.

“Rovan—” he hesitates. “There’s no portal. Moving minds to Ilvaris is one thing. The corporeal journey could kill you. Look what pushing too far did to her.”

The stare I train on him is enough; he lets go with a sigh. “At least let me help. Use some of my energy.”

“You need it to recover,” I reason. He’s no longer dying thanks to Blythe’s magik, but she’s not strong enough to have completely healed him. He’ll be fine in time, but now’s not the time to take his energy.

“You need it to survive,” he counters. “You can’t bring her back if you’re dead yourself.”

I shake my head.

I’ll survive. And so will she. I’ll fight the gods themselves if that’s what it takes.

The moment my mind understood that Daria was gone, I connected every dot. I remembered the forest I saw when her life flashed before my eyes, and realized exactly where it was. I know who the voice belongs to.

Deep in a forest, beyond all civilization, into a woodland so dark and perilous only the wildest, wickedest fae venture, there’s a prison designed to hold the strongest foe Ilvaris ever had to face. An immortal who roamed the emptiness of the universe since before the creation of anything, and will outlive time itself.

I remember the two women kneeling before the cave.

*There will be a price.*

I open a portal right where I stand, ruining the neglected garden, and not caring one iota about anything other than taking us where we need to go. Energy vibrates around me as I'm plunged into darkness, and then move faster than light, each of my cells threatening to explode, held together by nothing but my will. My wrath.

We reach the center of the darkest forest of Ilvaris: the Night Woods. There, in a spot where all of the power concentrated in this land converges, strengthened by spells so strong no living creature dares cross, there is a cave going deep, lower than the level of the sea.

Already standing at its entrance, there's a dark-haired, half-rotten man with pale eyes.

I don't miss the fact that Death looks far too much like me.

That can't be a coincidence. I'm starting to think nothing in my life up to this very point has been.

"Thanatos," I say, formally addressing the monster to end all monsters by his name.

And Death smiles upon me. "If it isn't my favorite grandson."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

A DEAL WITH THE  
ELDRITCH

## ROVAN



I knew my father was the son of an eldritch. Everyone does. He never told me, but the kids studying with me in the hollow liked to gossip. I never knew which one, but the boys and girls in my classes liked to speculate. They figured the king of night must have been the son of darkness, or stars, or coldness. No one would have named Death itself.

Because if Alder Larch is the son of the first, the strongest creature in the universe, why hasn't he taken the crown of Ilvaris? Why hasn't he freed his father? It makes little sense to me. I am sure, however, the thing inside the cave knows all the reasons that led us both here.

"If you want a deal, you bring her back first," I tell him. I'm not even listening to a word until Daria's breathing again. I can't think, I can't function with her cooling in my arms.

Death leans against the entrance of his cave. "So demanding."

I figured Death would be sympathetic, almost welcoming, but clearly, it belongs right here, in Ilvaris, the land of the ruthless, cold, savage fae.

I open my mouth to curse him out, or beg—I can't quite decide—but before the first sound crosses my lips, my attention is called by movement against me.

Daria's chest is rising, and then falling.

She's breathing. She's *breathing*.



I almost fall forward, relief flooding so fast through my bloodstream, it's overwhelming. The only thing keeping me grounded is the fact that she's in my arms. If I fell, she'd crash-land too. My need to keep her safe surpasses anything else.

She blinks and I look into those beautiful black eyes, unfocused, confused.

"Rovan?" she rasps.

She's alive. She's alive. I press her against my chest, squeezing too tight. *She's alive.*

I laugh. I can't help myself.

"I'm alive?" she checks, as befuddled as me.

She'd really known the travel to Blythe's would claim her life.

"No thanks to you." I could throttle her. "Don't you scare me like this again. Ever."

"Sylvan?" she checks, her voice weaker than I'd like. "And where are we?"

"Who cares about Sylvan?" She's so frustratingly casual about *dying*. "Or where we are. Promise me not to put yourself at risk like that. You can't do it again."

"If you recall, I wanted to get to safety, like, hours ago." She rolls her eyes. "Maybe listen to me next time?"

Her eyes catch sight of the cave and the creature inside.

I would have much rather ignored him for a little longer—as long as he'd let me—but Daria moves to get to her feet, gasping as she stares.

"Why, hello, little shadow," Death greets her, polite and friendly.

"So it is true," she whispers. "My mother—you brought her back to life. You gave us our shadows."

"I gave nothing." Death is the picture of nonchalance. "Your grandmother agreed to a service that I provided, and the

bill came due today.”

That’s highly sobering.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Death pushes off from the walls of the cave and smirks. “The Spider saw an opportunity some years ago, and brought me the dead child of a *bride*.” Death pauses then explains, “Brides are unnatural phenomenon, built by ancient witches in a time when all species were fighting for supremacy. They created five of them—women who were not born, but designed, and therefore, did not adhere to the laws of the fates. Find your fated mate, and your life follows its natural course. You get stronger, more settled. But if a bride chooses you, you can access power that shouldn’t have been within your reach. They’re the upgrade, unburdened by the limitations of fate, and their entire existence allows us to cheat the will of the gods. The will of the fates.”

“You mean brides change how the future is supposed to unfold?” Daria asks.

Death inclines his head. “I recalled her soul from beyond the borders of my domain, and mended her body with shadows. In exchange, the mother agreed that one of her descendants would free me.”

I don’t like any of that. “What spider? And free *you*?” What would happen if Death itself was unleashed? To this world? To all the others?

“The first spider, weaver of many lies,” he replies cryptically. “She’s an ally of sorts.” He hesitates. “Occasionally. You may call her ‘Grandmother’ if you two ever meet.”

My head’s starting to hurt. “How are we supposed to free you?” I ask, focusing on the important information.

The last thing I need is more vaguely ominous, highly creepy extended family.

“You sit back and do nothing,” Death tells me, his eyes set on Daria. I note that they’re red, filled with fire, just like hers

when she calls her shadows. “I hear you’re a good little assassin, however.”

She inclines her head. “Who do I have to kill?”

“I’m bound here by a specific spell. They made it impossible to break.” The corner of his lip twitches up. “See, I can only be freed by the dead daughter of a dead daughter’s matricide.”

My jaw goes slack. How in the seven hells did he *know*? His red eyes seek mine. “The spider’s a seer, boy.”

Daria shakes her head. “I can’t kill my mother.”

“Oh?” Death is amused. “Would you like to renege on your deal? Because you’ll find the result to be a great deal worse. It’s not just that she’ll die. She would never have lived. And nor will you.”

Or her sisters, for that matter.

“You don’t understand. I *can’t* kill her. She’s much stronger than me.”

I think of the creature in the Hall of Mirrors, effortlessly commanding the space at her entrance. I remember the bruises all over Daria’s body.

I only just got her back. I can’t send her to her death at the hand of the Shadow Assassin. I just can’t.

“Anything else,” I beg. “Give us another way.”

“Children.” Death’s shoulders rise and fall in a familiar show of exasperation. “Never using their brains. I’ll let you work this one out for yourselves. You have three days until the past rewrites itself without little Ryzan Sand drawing breath.”

## CHAPTER FORTY

# TWIST OF WORDS

# DARIA



“So, Death is a dick,” I say as we walk away from the cave.

My tone is light, and from the glare Roan directs at me, he doesn't appreciate it.

“So are you,” he seethes. “All that talk of my having to stay alive. I remained perfectly safe at all times, while the two of you did your best to get yourselves killed!”

I wince. “I figured if I didn't move us, the three of us would likely burn anyway. It made sense to limit the causalities.”

In actual fact, I'd just acted on instinct. Part of me had hoped I'd make it. Why wouldn't I? I'm strong. I've beaten the odds many times, accomplishing things others would have deemed impossible. My very existence is implausible. But I'd known there was a high chance that my actions would exchange my life for theirs. And I'd done it anyway. Without thinking. Without regrets.

“Thanks, by the way. For getting me to Death, making him bring me back.”

“You're *thanking me?*” he scowls, even angrier.

He thinks I'm being reckless. His green eyes narrow on me when he sees me smile.

“Well, if any deed is worthy of thanking one of the fae, I think bringing me back to life counts.”

Although we did apparently play into Death's plan.

Or maybe a spider's plan. I can't keep up, or make sense of most of what I've heard.

A rustling in the foliage makes us both halt and look into the darkness, uneasy.

We aren't alone in these woods. And worse yet: we're the ones that don't belong.

"I've had a really bad day. Whatever you are, know that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to rip something apart piece by delicious piece." I've not heard Roan use that soft, suave voice, at least, not directed to me.

I remember him talking to the girl who asked him if he was really a half-fae so many years ago. No wonder she screamed. My instincts are all wrong where he's concerned, because I shiver in pleasure and grin as the creature opts to slink away quietly.

"Stay close," he tells me.

"That sounds far too much like a command, Briar," I retort.

"That would be because it is. You owe me your life, remember?" He lifts his imperious chin, daring me to contradict him. "And I claim it as mine, for now until the end of days."

"You're ridiculous."

"And you're in my service. Closer, I say. It's an order."

I make a point of staying put, to prove to myself I can. Except my feet aren't listening to me. I take a step, and another, until I'm almost flush against his chest.

"You didn't."

"I absolutely did enslave you, my pretty little dove." His voice is soft as feather. "It seems to be what it takes to keep you alive."

I gasp in outrage. I thought he was going to demand another smile or a kiss, something small and irrelevant. Instead, he made me his creature, his to command. *Forever.*

“You bastard!”

He grins easily. “Don’t fret. I won’t abuse my position, unlike just about any other fae whose power you could have put yourself under. I recommend not thanking anyone else. In fact,” he grins, “I forbid it.”

“You’re a complete and utter jerk!” I scream.

“Our relationship just got so much easier, don’t you think?” He throws his arm over my shoulder and starts walking. “Do I have to command you to follow?”

I grab his arm and throw him over my shoulder. He lands on the soft forest ground with a loud thud.

Rovan simply laughs and hops back onto his feet. “Oh, we’re going to have wonderful thousands of years together, bird.” I half expect him to command me to never hurt him again, but he doesn’t.

I can’t believe he put me on a leash. I can’t believe I trusted him. Clearly, dying has fried my brain.

“Where are we going?” I grumble.

It’s cold, I’m still wearing the stupid red slip and nothing else, barefoot, and while I’m not one to complain uselessly, I’ve had a *day*.

“Out of these woods, then we can take the portal back to Xhera.”

It isn’t lost on me that he’s completely familiar with this strange, beautiful, eerie world.

“It’s daybreak, luckily, or we’d have more than the occasional hag to fear. But the woods are vast, and we only have three days to do what we need to do.”

Namely, kill my mother.

I haven’t let myself think much of this impossible task, but now, I do.

We either all die, or only she does. I can explain things to her. She’ll let me do it to save the rest of us. I know she would.



But Death didn't ask for a sacrifice. He asked for matricide. That's a completely different beast.

"I'm sorry we have to do this," Rován says gently, despite his irate mood. "You love your mother."

I do. I make myself shrug. "Too bad we don't have to kill yours," I joke, somewhat lightly.

Rován comes to a sudden stop. I look around, expecting a threat I haven't sensed yet, but there's nothing I can sense. A bird or two, small animals in burrows—no predator.

"By the gods," he curses. "Death *is* a dick."

"I said so myself," I remind him.

"He could have just spelled it out for us."

I roll my eyes. "Well, he isn't the only cryptic dick. Spelled out *what?*"

"He wants the dead daughter of a dead daughter's matricide," Rován reminds me. "You don't have to kill your own mother."

I wrinkle my nose, completely lost.

"You can kill mine. You'll just need to wed me first."

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

# INTO THE FAIRY WOODS

## ROVAN



“**W**hy is marrying me the solution you think of to every one of my problems?” Daria grouses.

I manage to smile.

Hours ago, when she was dead in my arms, I believed I never might again, but she’s right here, with her endless attitude and her boundless arrogance. As if I hadn’t been carrying her corpse through several universes for a chance at bringing her back.

I’m reeling, a million different feelings boiling inside me, and all feeding a desire for retribution. I want someone to scream in penance for all the pain I lived through. Daria’s the only one here, and hurting her isn’t an option. But I want to all the same.

I’m too tired to think straight. Opening a portal out of thin air has drained almost all of my magik; I need sustenance—the kind I can’t get from animals or plants. And I need to sleep for about a thousand years.

I can’t yet. We’re still in the Night Woods. The sun is rising. The creatures that dwell here in daylight are giving me a wide berth, but we’re at the center of the expansive forest. Some of the worst of the woodland folks could yet be awake. We need to get out of here before the next nightfall.

I don’t know how I’ll manage thirty miles today. I don’t even know if I’m walking in the right direction. My instincts tell me to keep going northeast, to reach the border of the court of night, but my sense of direction isn’t at its sharpest, and I

barely remember how to follow the stars in these skies. Not to mention, they're fading with the light.

"Most women would be flattered," I finally reply, keeping my tone as relaxed as I can manage.

I might be exhausted, but she died after using up her energy mere hours ago. She doesn't need to know that we could be lost. She doesn't need to know that I could collapse.

"Most women don't realize your primary concern is to escape Chira Mallone," she mutters.

Dratted Chira hasn't entered my mind at all. I chuckle, tilting my head. "Who do you prefer to kill, Ryzan or Aude?"

I'm fairly certain the entire universe agrees that out of those two, my mother is the one deserving of death.

A breeze of wind catches the nearing branches, and their leaves ruffle, making me aware of the temperature. I shrug out of Sylvan's jacket, and drape it around Daria's shoulders unceremoniously.

"How are you? Aren't your feet hurting?" I make a full mental inventory of her state. Why didn't I notice she's practically naked, or trembling? Because I was too busy being hurt and irritated and afraid, that's why.

"Slimy, but fine. I prefer to walk barefoot."

She is suffering. I can sense it. I could even feed on it if I wished. But she's too weak and tired for me to even be tempted, though I am starved.

"I'd prefer if you'd cease this posturing and let me know how you're actually doing," I snap, letting some of my exasperation slither out. I exhale a calming breath and speak softer this time. "You don't need to pretend. Not with me."

Daria wets her lower lip and admits, "I *am* tired. I can barely feel my shadows. But there's not much we can do about it, right? We need to get out of here, back home, get married, and kill your bitch queen of a mother. Within *three* days."

So she does agree to my plan. There's that, at least.

“Whining about it doesn’t help at all,” she concludes.

I lower my arm from her shoulders to her midriff, bend to catch her under the knees and sweep her off her feet, carrying her against me again.

“Rovan!” she screeches.

“Rest. Sleep if you can.”

“You can’t cart me around all the way!” she protests nonsensically.

I am sapped, ready to collapse on any vaguely flat surfaces, but Daria’s nothing but a tiny little bird. “The day I can’t bear your weight is the day I keel over, dove. Sleep. Don’t make me order you.”

I am enjoying myself immensely after her careless show of gratitude. I didn’t have to take what she offered, but someone had to teach her caution. Besides, I’ll never give her any order she’d disapprove of—unless her life is at stake again. Then, all bets are off.

She holds up her middle finger to my face, a rude gesture that needs no translation in any language, but she does close her eyes and rest her head against me.

I keep walking, one step after the next, ignoring the soul-deep fatigue, the strain on every one of my muscles, the allure of sleep and hunger. I need to get her to safety. Little else matters to me.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

# A HAG IN THE WOODS



# DARIA



I wake to the sound of voices, and blink up at a soft light. My sense of smell snags on a rotten undertone, barely concealed by the scent of cleaning solution—something like vinegar, maybe a bit of bleach.

I'm instantly on alert, as I can't recognize any of my surroundings, but I calm down when I see him. I'm still in his arms. I should have guessed as much from his distinctive smell.

Rovan's wearing Sylvan's once-white suit, now marred by sweat and mud, but for all that, he smells like a winter breeze.

He's talking to an old lady with teeth too sharp, skinny legs on razor talons, and azure skin covered with soft white fur, or down.

They're negotiating, by the sound of it. I listen, too tired to move.

"Only till daybreak," he tells her in sprita. "We don't need food, or anything else. Just a roof for the night. There's another ten miles of wood, and I don't want to risk it now. My fiancée is wounded. Please. I'll pay you your weight in gold when I return."

"Well, you don't ask for much for a princeling," the woman grudgingly admits, sticking to the old tongue.

It hits me then. Of course they'd speak that language here. They're in the fae world. The folk tongue isn't dead at all, here.

“But there’s no treasure you can give me in exchange. I live in the woods, boy. I have no need of gold.”

Rovan doesn’t like that. “What do you want, then?”

“How ‘bout a lock of them hair? They’re good hair. Young. Sturdy.”

Her bulging, wide eyes are set on me.

“Not hers.” Rován’s firm. “You may have mine.”

She snuffles. “Boring. Smooth and shiny and dark and all the curls. I’ll take secrets and blood any time.”

“She can have my hair,” I croak, as neither of them seem to realize I’m awake.

“No,” Rován stresses, just as the creature claps her hands. “Fabulous!”

“She can’t have your hair,” he hisses at me. To her, he repeats, “You can’t have her hair.” Then he explains to me, “She’s a hag. A wise woman, with lost knowledge of all spells. She may use it for spells and curses, dooming you, shortening your life, cursing you. When will you learn to be careful of the folk?”

He sounds positively frustrated, and so tired. I lower my feet to the ground. He doesn’t need to carry me when he’s barely staying upright.

“What do you want to do with my hair?” I ask the hag.

“Cook it in a stew,” she replies without hesitation.

“All of it?” I check.

With luck, I’m being careful enough to satisfy even the grumpy, completely exhausted prince.

“All of it. Pretty young women’s hair does wonders for hip pain, I’ll have you know. It’s cold in the woods, and my poor joints are a-screaming. Now, do we have a deal?”

I call my blade and slice a lock off my messy mane before Rován can forbid it. The hag’s shining sharp teeth flash as she grasps it, running on her skinny legs to the kitchen area.

Her house is small and circular, carved in hardwood. This story serves as a sitting room and dining room, and library and kitchen. It's clean of dust, but completely chaotic. A ladder hangs from hatch on the roof, leading to an upper story. A bedroom, presumably.

"We're still in the woods?" I whisper, watching her add my hair to the black pot steaming on an open roaring fire.

Rovan inclines his head. "I couldn't make it out before nightfall. I noticed the smoke and headed here, hoping for shelter."

"So, we're in a witch's cottage deep in creepy, dangerous woods," I whisper. "What could possibly go wrong?"

"No law is more important than that of hospitality on Ilvaris. So long as we're good guests, she'll behave. I just wouldn't have wanted to meet her out there."

She wanted my hair to season her soup. What else would she have tried to feast on if we'd been her prey rather than her guests? "Me neither."

Rovan only asked for a roof, but the witch does offer us a bowl of her strangely fragrant stew.

"Is it safe?" Rovan checks.

"Safe enough," the hag cackles.

He's sufficiently satisfied to bring the bowl to his lips.

I'm too famished to dwell on the fact that the concoction contains my hair, among other likely dubious things. I eat it, and it's delicious.

"You can take the bed upstairs. I don't sleep much at night. I expect you gone by the time I get back in there in the morning."

I don't ask how she's planning to spend her night. What would have been a polite inquiry elsewhere may just result in nightmare fodder.

She bundles herself up in a coat that has seen better days, takes a water skin filled with steaming water and heads out.

“I like her,” I announce as she closes the door.

“She’s eaten at least a dozen beating hearts so far this year. Of course you do.” Rován’s practically falling asleep on his feet.

“Upstairs, you,” I command.

He allowed me to rest while he walked and walked and walked all day.

“No, thank you. I think I’d rather sleep right there on the floor.”

Part of me also dreads stepping into the hag’s den, but if Rován said the truth about the hospitality of fairies, we don’t have cause to fear her.

“You’ll sleep much better on a bed.”

And presumably, the creature has one of those tucked away upstairs.

He doesn’t make a move to head up. Too late, I realize he’s not reluctant because of the horrors he’s expecting in the hag’s bedroom. He’s simply that worn out.

I tuck myself under his arm and coax him forward, one step at a time, carrying him. “That’s it. Up you go.”

I would much have preferred stairs over a ladder, but Rován does make himself climb up.

To my surprise, the bedroom’s pleasant enough, and void of the half-eaten corpses or rotting skeletons I would have expected. There’s only a bed, too small to comfortably fit the two of us. I’ve slept enough, though.

Heavy curtains frame the small window, draped in an unexpectedly elaborate way. They’re open now, and I opt to leave them that way. The hag wants us gone by morning. It wouldn’t do to miss dawn.

I help Rován onto the bed. He tumbles on it gracelessly—another testament to his addled state.

I move to return downstairs, but Rován doesn't let go of my hand. "Stay," he mumbles, spreading over the mattress with the boneless suppleness of a cat. "Safer."

I hesitate. There really isn't much room on this bed. But as Rován keeps saying, I'm not very big.

I don't have much to do downstairs. It wouldn't hurt to rest some more, given that my shadows are currently weak.

We have a trial ahead of us. We both need to be at our best.

I lower my body next to his on the bed, and he presses me against him. He's snoring before I can blink.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

# WORD OF THE FOLK

# ROVAN



I don't usually linger in bed, but wild horses couldn't tear me away from the softness, the heavenly smell, the comfort of this bumpy mattress, far too worn and thin.

My reluctance to rise is at least in part due to the fact that while I slept and ate, I haven't replenished my strength. I hunger for far more than witch stew. But something tells me that if I was completely sated, I'd still want to remain right here, surrounded by the scent of roses and sunshine.

It's all her, the woman cushioned against me.

I decide I don't have to make myself budge yet. It's dark out. We have a few hours until the wood hag comes back with an excuse to use our blades.

If we trespass for longer than she has invited us for, we're bad guests, and therefore, excellent snacks.

I'm less worried about the hag now that I no longer struggle to stay upright. Granted, she's strong, if she has made these woods her home. I likely could handle her at my full strength, but now? I'm not certain.

I tell myself it doesn't matter that I'm a mess. Daria's feeling better by now. She should be able to kill the hag if it comes to it. I'd rather not risk it, in any case. If I didn't have to live another day with Daria facing danger, I'd live a much simpler, happier existence.

Besides, we're in the hag's house. She was as civil as propriety demanded, and there's no reason for us to part as enemies. She had her trophy, to my great reluctance. We just



have to make a gracious exit, as she demanded. Then, I'll send her plenty of gold anyway, just to ensure that she's in my debt more than I am in hers. That's the way of the folk—pushing debts onto others to avoid the risk of owing favors. They're much more valuable than riches.

The fact that I cannot be sure I can take care of one wood hag is a concern. I need to feed, and soon. And the beast inside me knows just what it wants to sink its teeth into.

I'm no better than the hag, salivating over Daria, except she only wanted a taste of her flesh, while I crave something infinitely worse.

I can see it. I can imagine myself flexing the claws currently retracted and running them along her skin, drawing blood as my fangs dig into her shoulder and my cock pounds her dripping cunt. I can almost hear her screams. I'd delight in every single one of them.

The member in my pants is positively rigid, poking right against her back. I will it to relax, in vain. Closing my eyes does little to quell my ardor. I can still feel her against me, smell her, visualize all sorts of positively wicked things. I distract myself by listening to the steady rhythm of her heart, and to my surprise, it works better than anything else. A contented smile spreads over my face. It's more soothing than any song, after I've heard it go silent. I concentrate on it, familiarizing myself with every beat.

I calm down, and my hunger recedes, but there's no helping the bulge pressed against her. I shift under the tatty wool throw, to put some distance between my cock and her skin. At the first sign of motion, Daria wakes with a start, sitting up and looking around, eyes narrowed.

I notice her heart's steady as ever. She's alert, ready for anything, but not scared. My dove rarely is.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you,” I whisper.

She falls back on the bed with a deep sigh. “I didn't mean to fall asleep at all.”

“It’s good that you did. We weren’t going anywhere overnight, and we both need as much rest as possible.” Since we’re awake, I ought to stand and get ready, but between her warmth, smell, and proximity, I can’t bring myself to move at all. “In fact, let’s get right back to snoozing. We’ll leave at first light.”

What’s the point of rising until then anyway? We shouldn’t take anything from this cottage and venturing out of doors would be unwise.

Daria seems to be in agreement, as she makes no move to get up. She isn’t about to waste an opportunity to tease me, though. “Who knew sloth was your vice of choice?”

“Oh, I embrace many vices, but if I had to choose one, it wouldn’t be sloth.”

She’d only have to move her perky little butt three inches to feel which debauchery I’d prefer at this very moment.

“So, we have two days left,” she says, ruining all attempts at levity with a touch of reality.

I groan into my pillow and shake my head. “That’s not quite accurate. Time passes differently here. Thanatos gave us three Ilvarian days, which translates to about nine on Xhera.” My brows furrow in concentration. “I don’t know the exact math, and we shouldn’t miscount—but if we returned now, we’d have about six days. Let’s say five, to be safe.”

Except we’re stuck in the woods for another four or five hours, unless we wish to risk coming across creatures stronger than I am at this moment.

Getting out of the forest likely will take us the better part of the morning. At least now that Daria’s awake, our pace will be better than yesterday’s. That means we’ll have a day and a half at most—and only if I’ve led us in the right direction. I can’t be entirely certain.

“Two days or five; either way, it’s far too short a timeline to organize a wedding and an assassination. Well, the latter shouldn’t be a problem, but the first? Ceremonies take forever

to organize for anyone. And you're a *prince*." She says my title like some would say "slug" or "pile of manure."

My title is the least of my appeal to her. If anything, I get the feeling she'd like me more without it. What a strange woman she is.

I understand why it's a deterrent in this case. As a royal, I can only wed with the queen's approval. Her situation is hardly easier. I remember enough of Dorathian customs to know that brides have to be given away by the head of their families for any contract to be legally binding. Daria, while emancipated, likely would wish her parents' approval, too. At least if we intended to celebrate a real wedding.

Given the practices of our respective families, if we were to request to be married as soon as was feasible, our mothers would likely set a date weeks, if not years away. We don't have that kind of time.

Luckily, we don't need it.

"Here, marriages don't have to be celebrated in public," I tell her. "We can't lie, remember? Our word is our vow. It's unbreakable, so we don't see the point in signing documents or registering with higher authorities."

"Handy, but I'm not a fairy," she reminds me.

"I don't think it matters by the laws of nature." Plenty of mortals have wedded folk. "And whoever crafted the binding spells holding Thanatos likely was more concerned with fairy customs than with mortal pieces of paper."

"So, we could do it right now? Get it out of the way while we have nothing better to do."

I snicker. "How you flatter me, my bride. Restrain your excitement."

She rolls her eyes. "How do we go about this? Do we need witnesses? Would the hag mind?"

"The hag would be well in her right to eat us if we waited for her. We don't need witnesses, or candles or priests, or blessings. Our vows will suffice."

“So, we can just say a few words and be husband and wife?” She’s flabbergasted.

“Only as far as nature and fate are concerned,” I retort, only half joking. “You could find yourself a husband to wed with a party, parchment and signatures, too.”

I’m flippant, but in truth, I hate the words even as they cross my lips. She damn well shouldn’t, because she’d be *mine*.

I’m in a world of trouble.

“Well, let’s do it, then.” Daria’s facetiousness fails to conceal her nervousness. She doesn’t quite sound like herself.

Nor do I.

Yesterday was enlightening to me in many ways. I’ve seen Daria face death and lose the battle. I know what it feels to look into a future she’s not part of. I want to tie her to me. I *need* it.

“We’ll have to phrase it carefully,” I say, to be fair, and kind, and everything I normally am not. For her sake, I try to be. “Fae or no, you might find them hard to weasel out of. You’re making a promise to the folk, to Ilvaris, to nature. It’s as binding as your thanks.”

She knows not to underestimate those now. “Why don’t you show me how it’s done first?”

I take a moment to think. “I, prince of Flaur, heir of the line of Larch, will see to your protection and your needs so long as you wish me to remain by your side. By my troth, I swear it.”

This is another show of kindness. I’m giving her plenty of means to renounce me should she wish to.

She’s breathing harder than before, and the heartbeat I familiarized myself with earlier is galloping.

“That’s it?” she asks after a moment.

“You’ll have to return the vow, and it’ll be binding.” I’m not surprised by my eagerness, my hunger for those words out

of those lips.

“I, Daria Stone, of the line of the Wicked, will—”

“Don’t promise to fulfill my needs,” I think to tell her before she can echo my sentiment word for word.

“Why?” she asks, predictably, sitting up to look at me.

I would have rather avoided this conversation altogether. “Because you don’t want to provide what I feed on.”

“What do you feed on?”

Of course she asks.

I exhale. “Why don’t you promise to kill my enemies? You ought to enjoy doing that.”

“*Rovan*,” she admonishes, her tone both probing and disapproving.

“Curious, vexing little dove,” I murmur. “I feed on pain; I delight in suffering. If you give me an oath concerning my needs, I’ll take both from you.” I’ve endeavored not to for as long as we’ve known each other, and I’ll try to keep her whole until her last breath. “If you say those words, when I’m starved, you’ll feel compelled to feed me—just like I’d have to provide what you need if you were thirsty, hungry, or if your shadows demanded a sacrifice. Give me something you can live with.”

She tilts her head. “I’m not afraid of pain, *Rovan*. I actually quite like it. Suffering is proof you’re alive. My mother used to say that all the time, and she’s right.”

I stare into her fiery eyes, speechless. She doesn’t know what she’s saying. She has no idea.

“I vow to see to your protection and—”

I shake my head. “You don’t—”

She barrels ahead. “And your needs so long as you wish me to remain by your side,” she tells me, repeating each of my words. “By my troth, I swear it.”

It's too late. She's promised me her sword, and her shield,  
and her pain.

Daria's my wife, by all the immortal laws of flesh and  
souls. And I am ravenous.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

TO THE LETTER



# DARIA



At first, I tell myself I'm being ridiculous. He's *not* going to kiss me. Rován only ever does it to make a point. Or when he knows he's likely to die, but that doesn't count. Anyone would kiss available lips before their probable demise. I've done as much many a time. But there's no fire or guns or even a hag in the vicinity. He only told me he needed pain, and presumably, kissing me isn't going to achieve that.

But ridiculous as the notion is, he kisses me all the same. Except it's not fleeting, or teasing, or trying to coax a response out of me. He kisses me like he's done it a hundred thousand times and knows I belong to him, bypassing all softness, not bothering to explore. His tongue claims my mouth, my lips, my mind.

I moan into it, demanding more, more, more. And this time, instead of withdrawing just as my insides are set ablaze, Rován delivers. I gasp as his hands move, one cupping my breast and the other, venturing lower yet, then slide to the apex of my thighs. His wicked, nimble fingers play me with the dexterity of a virtuoso, and in a matter of instants, I scream, soaked and incapable of staying motionless.

Rován chuckles against my mouth. "Regretting your defiance yet?"

I'm incapable of speech, so I shake my head.

"You will. Right about now." His mouth travels to my neck as his fingers seek the nub between my legs.

Then he pinches it.

I scream at the top of my lungs, startled by the sudden waves of pleasure and pain flashing through my entire body.

“I warned you,” he groans against my lips. “I keep warning you. You keep defying me.” His teeth trail along the skin of my arm, then join the hand playing with my breast. My clit still firmly between two fingers, he closes his mouth over my nipple and runs his tongue around the lobe.

I can't comprehend the many different sensations I'm feeling all at once. It's all too much.

When he lets go of the poor, tortured nub of frayed nerves, I release a breath and a sob, but before I can catch my bearings, one of his finger's entering me, fast, harsh, overwhelming. He's fucking me. It's just one finger. It shouldn't feel this staggering, but he's so fast, curving right where I desperately need it, and his hand smashes against the ultra-sensitive nub of nerves each time he enters me. I come without warning, drenching his hand. He doesn't even slow down.

His mouth leaves my nipple and seeks the one of the other breast. I think he might lick it, like he did with the first, but instead, he brings his sharp teeth to the edges and bites.

“Rovan!” I scream.

It doesn't sound like a protest. I don't know if it is.

“This is what you vowed to take. Pain.” His eyes flash a bright green as he grins over my breasts.

He's being cruel on purpose, finally entirely shedding the mask he wears every day.

If he expects me to be scared, he doesn't know me very well. “Is that all you've got?”

It's all swagger. I am terrified. Not of him, so much as the fact that I'd rather die than stop feeling more.

Rovan grasps my hips and drags them to him, pinning me down over his massive hardness, leaving no barrier between us except his pants. He tears the fabric of my dirty red slip with ease, sharp claws rasping against my skin underneath.

“I’m going to fuck you,” he tells me, swaying my hips up and down. “And since we’ve exchanged these vows, I could fill your belly with my heir.”

I gasp, eyes widening.

He must be kidding. I’ve never so much as given children a thought, and if I did, I wouldn’t want them for a hundred years.

“It wasn’t the plan. I was going to keep you safe, and coddle you, and treat you like the precious little dove you are. But you just wouldn’t listen, would you, Daria?”

I open my mouth, but before I can speak, he’s kissing me again.

“Enjoy seeing to my *needs*, wife.”

I didn’t see him free his cock, but a telltale velvety hardness presses right at my center, and pushes into me.

All thoughts, all protests, flee as he fills me so completely in one hard, demanding thrust, I can only throw my head back and moan. His claws rake against my back as his hips move in and out of me, harsh and fast. My core, my mind, my very skin are on fire. This time, I see the fall coming at a great speed. I’m just powerless to stop it. I’m getting fucked like a ragdoll, torn apart layer by layer, and I’m going to come all over him again.

I feel my shadow kiss my skin like a soft purr. They like this. I like this. I heal from each of the surface wounds he inflicts on me at record speed, even for me. He’s not trying to harm me—just cause me the kind of pain that can easily be confused with pleasure, especially when both are served to me in spades all at once.

I’ve had sex before, many times. It was a distraction amongst others, healthier than murder, but less satisfying. If Rován had fucked me like this back then, I would never have had a reason to leave. I would never have found my life unfulfilling. I could do nothing else for the rest of my day and be completely content. Sated.

I've come apart for the second time when he moves me, pinning me against the bed, and this round, I think to participate, rather than let him use me in all the ways we both crave. I lift my hips and meet his harsh thrusts, wet, slapping sounds joining my moans and his grunts. Just when pleasure gets too overwhelming, he remembers to deliver a dose of pain, flickering my battered clit. I explode and he keeps drilling me into the frame of the poor bed, squeaking in protest against the floor.

We're going to break it if we aren't careful. And we aren't careful.

I feel his rhythm speed up, his impossibly large cock engorge as his panting grows frantic and his thrusts, erratic.

"You can't come inside me!" I hiss.

It's one thing to fuck me into oblivion, but purposely getting me pregnant is quite another.

He smirks. "But what if I *need* to, wife?" Rován teases.

I think of the many ways I'll torture him if he dares ignore me, but to his credit, he withdraws his cock, coating my stomach with warmth, rather than my insides, before collapsing over me.

We're both panting like we've been running for hours. I wordlessly try to comprehend how anything could have felt this mind-blowingly delicious.

Rován eventually lifts himself up, and I miss his weight over me. He cups my chin, forcing me to look at him right in the eyes. "Did I hurt you too much?"

I shake my head. "You hurt me the perfect amount."

His green eyes glint with someone I can't recognize, then his mouth closes over mine again.

He kisses me like he has an eternity to spend, this time. And I kiss him back, refusing to let my mind get in the way of the bliss.

We're just enjoying each other's touch, as innocently as anyone can while entirely bare and covered in seed, then all of

a sudden, he's hard again, and I'm lifting my hips, seeking his cock.

Rovan rolls off me, returning to the position he was in when we woke up, right behind me, and brings his arms around me, pressing me to his chest. He enters slowly, and rocks his cock in and out of me, unhurried, as though we have all the time in the world, his mouth kissing my neck, my shoulders, his hand on my breasts, then intertwining with mine over my head.

The need inside me coils and demands to be sated. Answering it, he pins me down on my stomach, and sinks into me harder, faster, instinctively knowing just what I crave without my having to utter a single word.

He doesn't hurt me even once.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

# WEBS OF LIES

## ROVAN



I'm considerably less aggravated by the time we head out of the hag's cottage. Making Daria scream and writhe beneath me for three hours straight would do that to any man.

I didn't just feed on her, I feasted. I inflicted pain and pleasure in spades and inhaled all of her suffering. I thought I might break her if I let myself unleash the beast. How wrong I was. She loved it. I can't quite believe how much she savored every moment, and I can't let myself think of it, or I will bend her down against the nearest tree and rehash it all.

Sadly, we don't have the time to lose.

"Are we even going in the right direction?" Daria grumbles.

She's tetchy this morning. One would think half a dozen orgasms would put her in a better mood, but it's cold, raining, and neither of us are dressed appropriately for it.

She looks ridiculous in my shirt and socks, with the remainder of her red fabric tied around her middle. The edge of the makeshift garment reaches her knees and covers her better than her red slip ever did. I offered her my jacket again, but she rejected it.

"You see shape of the high peaks, beyond the trees, in the distance?" I point in their direction, unsure her eyes can detect them yet in the murky gray skyline, barely distinguishable through the thick line of trees. "The night court is beyond those."



I started to recognize the landscape a few moments ago. Unless I'm much mistaken, we'll reach the edges of my father's domain before midday.

"That's so far."

"Luckily, we won't need to make our way there. The portal we have to reach is at the edge of the woods. Our pace isn't bad. We should put the forest behind us in the next few hours. I can carry you again if you'd like?" I offer.

"I think not." She lifts her chin proudly, clearly put out with me.

She was malleable enough naked and spread out in my arms, and I find myself wishing I could fuck her into a better mood. "How about you tell me how I offended you, so that I may offer a thousand sorries? Then we'll have a better journey."

"I'll pass on fake apologies."

I cork an eyebrow. "Do I have to order you to tell me?"

She groans and stomps her foot. "You didn't have to come inside me, Rován!"

Ah.

The thing is, I really did.

The first two times I exploded, I managed to pull out of her maddening heat. The third, I attempted to, and failed. By the fourth, I was done trying. The animal inside me needed to mark her. So I did.

"Well, if that's the concern, I could have bred you either way, you know," I say reasonably. "Pulling out is hardly what one would count as effective prevention."

I expect her to throw something at me. The only surprise is that it's a twig rather than her dagger.

She's so easy to tease.

"Why don't you take contraceptive brews?" she yells, accusatory.

“Because I don’t fuck around much.” Oh, I’m hardly a monk, but I haven’t had a regular partner for as long as I’ve lived, and temporary contraception has served me well enough when I’ve had need of it. “Why don’t you?” I counter. “You’re the one opposed to birthing my heirs.”

I chuckle at her glare.

“I used to when I needed it. People avoided me for being common at Five, remember? I certainly wasn’t going to jump into the bed of people who despised me.”

“Much to Aeron’s chagrin,” I say.

Pride and amusement rise in my chest. Aeron wanted her, and now she’s mine—wedded and marked, and thoroughly fucked for good measure.

“Don’t concern yourself overmuch. We folk find it hard to breed. It takes planning, intent, the light of the moon, and the gods know what else to successfully manage it. Why, my parents fucked almost nonstop for two seasons straight before Sylvan and I were conceived.”

As per usual, I am not technically lying. I’m simply not mentioning the fact that we have a much better chance of making a child, she and I. I need her focused for the next day and a half. Then we’ll have all the time in the world.

*So long as she’s alive.*

She’ll have to be. I can’t imagine the alternative.

What would it look like, a world without the Wicked? It might entirely rewrite the history of Xhera. My history. My fate.

“Well, if you’ve impregnated me, I hope you enjoy changing diapers, late-night feedings, and parenting, because I can assure you, it’ll be your problem.”

“Deal. I can spend all my days at home and spoil our dozens of children while their mother murders all our enemies, and then pass my nights begetting more heirs.”

“Funny you believe you’d have any energy after running after the litter of children you seem to imagine for hours on

end,” she sallies, incapable of resisting banter, even when annoyed, and cold, and no doubt, tired.

“Hold your tongue! I’ll never be too spent to satisfy my wife.”

She rolls her eyes, letting me win this round.

Daria’s walking a few steps ahead of me, and I let her, quite liking the view I have from behind. At least until I catch a flash of light right ahead of her.

“Down!” I yell.

She’s moved out of the way before the word’s out of my throat. The nearest tree tilts and falls, cut in three pieces.

The next blade comes for me, and I’m ready for it. The earth beneath my feet surges upright, blocking it. I look around, trying to find the direction our enemy’s coming from, but there’s nothing at all. Not even my wife.

Where is she?

Panic rises in my chest.

“Daria?”

Who could have taken her without me sensing, seeing a thing?

“Daria!”

I set out at a jog, only to come to a sudden halt when two bodies fall to the muddy forest floor, both motionless.

Goblins, green of skin and with teeth smeared with blood. I prod the closest one with the toe of my boot, to see if their fall is a ruse of sorts, just as Daria leaps down to the ground, her landing utterly silent.

I blink up at her.

“You’re not the only one who had to feed,” she reminds me.

Her shadows twist happily around her. They seem to have a personality, wants, and desires. I don’t know if they’ve just become more understandable to me with time, or if she’s

giving them more freedom now than she did when we first met.

“You can be scary, you know that?” I tell her as she kneels beside one of the corpses and strips it of its boots.

She grins, suitably flattered. “Don’t you forget it.”

She presses the bottom of one of the goblin’s tattered leather boots against her sock-clad sole, and sighs. Far too large for her dainty little feet. She has better luck with the second.

“How do you feed?” I ask as she sits on the mud.

I vowed to meet her needs. I might as well learn what they entail.

“I have to kill, and the shadows do the rest.” She tilts her chin toward her feet. “See?”

The red mist still surrounds her, but I note wayward strands reaching toward the corpses at her feet. Their color seems to intensify for a moment.

“How did you end up drained yesterday?”

I’ll see that it never happens again. Ever. Not until the end of time. Not until *after*.

“Well, the fire did likely kill many people in the square, and I caused it, so it would have replenished me, but we left too soon for my shadows to assimilate the essence they need.” She winces. “And to be fair, such a long distance, transporting three people, would have pushed my limits no matter what.”

And she did it all the same. For me. For Sylvan. Mostly me.

I can’t decide whether I want to strangle or kiss her. We don’t have time for either.

“It is understood that you’ll never do such a thing again,” I state.

She rolls her eyes, hopping to her feet. “Right. Next time I’ll do nothing at all and the three of us can die.”

I'm at her side in the blink of an eye, lifting her chin. "Never again. If a course of action is likely to result in your death, you will not take it again."

I would order again her if I could, but the bond we sealed with words and deeds demands otherwise.

"Rovan, you and I both know you're glad I saved your brother. Don't pretend I matter more than him to you."

That's just the thing, though.

She does.

I am not in the habit of wearing my heart on my sleeve. What I care for, I hide. My violin, my golden tools. It stands to reason that every one of my instincts demands I do the same toward my mate, built for me by fate, made to complete my flaws, so that we might both stand higher together than we ever would apart.

If I were anyone else, I'd tell her what I worked out the moment her heart stopped beating.

But I can't afford any vulnerability when we're about to face the woman who's tried to rip everything I hold dear away from me.

Tomorrow—or in three days, depending on which sun we're under—we'll kill my mother and I will be free, or Daria and I will both die.

I let go of her chin and force myself to step away. "Let's get going. We don't have time to lose."

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

# OUT OF TIME-ISH

# DARIA



We've finally left the woods, reaching a paved road leading up to a walled fortress in the distance.

"We're here."

I look at the castle, but Rován shakes his head and points to a spot just a few paces away, where the grass seems slightly brighter than the rest.

That's it. Just grass, surrounded by a few white mushrooms.

He takes my hand as we approach the entirely ordinary space. "Don't let go of me at any point. Fairy portals are tricky at the best of times, but I can direct us to the right place."

"Rován? It's a patch of grass." For a wild moment, I wonder if he's lost his mind. We're going to step on it and nothing at all will happen. "Are you sure that's it?" I don't hide my skepticism.

I expected something much grander. A vaulted doorway, at the very least. If this is the almighty portal, why isn't it guarded, protected, defended, claimed?

"Ready?"

I have no idea what to expect. "Yes?"

He smirks like he sees through me, understands every one of the doubts etched on my features. Rován brings my hand up to his face and presses his lips on it. Heat rushes to back of my palm, and I can feel myself blushing, which is ridiculous. He



explored every inch of my body for hours on end just this morning. A kiss shouldn't make me blush.

"Hold on," are his last words, before we step into the fairy circle.

I brace myself, heeding his instruction.

Then the world disappears under my feet. I'm thrown left and right, by something faster than a moving hovercraft in midair. I'm being torn apart, lapped up bit by bit. Is this how I'm going to die? Again? The first time, I didn't feel anything at all. I retreated into my shadows and never left them. This time, I'm too overwhelmed to even feel pain, though my body's being battered. Before I think to scream, the onslaught ceases, and we're both laying down on a comfortable, unfamiliar, luxurious bed that smells like Rován.

We're in his room for sure. As the bed was slept in recently and is unmade, I assume we're at Five.

I landed right on top of him, and his hands move down to my hips in a gesture that feels instinctive.

"That was the most horrible experience of my life."

"You jumped worlds before," he says. "Admittedly, you were dead at the time, but still."

"I'd much rather do it dead," I retort.

He nips my bottom lip, almost punishingly. That's all it takes for my skin to flush and my core to purr, remembering the last time we were on a bed, only a few hours ago.

"Oh, no, you don't." He shifts under me and practically jumps out of bed. "No hooded looks, no lip biting, no *nothing* from you. We have less than three Xheran days to murder a highly vigilant queen—that's assuming rebels didn't do it for us, in which case we'll be obliged to go after a shadow assassin. No time for screwing your brains out."

I don't know who he's trying to convince, himself or me. "I don't recall offering."

He peels his jacket off his shoulders, and drops his pants next. I don't miss a second of it, eyes raking over his toned,

perfect body as he walks past an ajar door—leading to a bathroom, presumably. “And stop leering!”

“Make me!” I shout back.

I have the sense not to follow after him. I need a shower—badly—but he’s right. We don’t have time for anything involving me and him, wet and naked in each other’s general vicinity.

We’re combustible together. I could lie to myself and pretend he simply jumped me because I was there, available, and yes, technically married to him, even if only in the eyes of fate and nature. But it’s more than that. I’ve never felt this unrelenting need to keep touching, tasting any man. I couldn’t stop myself. If it weren’t for daybreak, and the firm deadline before us, I don’t think anything could have dragged us away from that dirty, tiny, uncomfortable bed.

He’s quick in the shower, coming out of it with his hair wet and his sculpted chest glistening. That’s not exactly fair, considering his admonishment about my looks and leers. How am I supposed to stop staring? Especially now that I know he can make use of those fingers, and the member pointing at me from under the towel tied at his waist.

“I hope you left hot water in there,” I say, voice too dry as I make my way to his bathroom.

I’m parched, all of a sudden.

“Daria?” he says when I pass him.

“Hm?” I don’t even blink.

“Five minutes,” he grunts. “That’s all we have. Understood?”

By all the gods and their scions, let it mean what I think he means. If he’s just giving me a length of time I can spend in the shower, I might murder him, and myself. “Yep. Perfectly understood. Five minutes.”

Then he’s pinning me against the wall, and crashing his lips against mine.

Gods, yes.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

# A MINOR BETRAYAL

## ROVAN



The first thing I do when Daria heads into the bathroom is charter a hovercraft using the e-stone tablet gathering dust in my desk drawer.

“Our transport is due in half an hour,” I shout from the bedroom, wisely opting not to walk into the bathroom. I have too much to do, but she can relax. If she stays out of the way, I’ll be more productive. “Take your time, dove.”

Then I get to work, starting several potions all at once. The gold cauldron would have certainly helped, but I’ll manage without. I even use the iron pot I usually avoid unless the recipe demands it, though it singes my fingertips.

As they simmer, I replenish my collections of poisons, loading my belt with more flasks than usual, and hiding others in my jacket.

It’s good to look like me again. The prince charming disguise never sat well on me.

Once every brew’s under control, I run out of my room and scale the stairs two by two until I reach a floor where I’ve never stopped before.

An amber-skinned beauty opens her door as I take the first step onto the Frejr domain.

“What do you want?” the woman hisses.

I’m familiar with her. Who isn’t? Marline Frejr leads her clan here at Five.

“I was hoping to see Alis?” I ask, polite because I don’t feel like waking up covered in warts or sporting pig ears.

Marline’s eyebrows squint. “What business could *you* possibly have with my cousin?” she demands, half threatening, half exhausted.

She’s on edge, and no wonder. When we left—three or four days ago in this world—we’d just been attacked. I’m sure everyone’s stressed out.

“She’s screwing my best friend, I’m screwing hers. We’re practically family, really. And I have a favor to ask.” Come to think of it, it doesn’t have to come from Alis. In fact, the tall, willowy witch likely doesn’t have any clothes that would fit Daria. Their chests alone are nothing alike. Marline’s no Daria, but she’s more voluptuous. “But you’ll do. Do you have a gown? Something court appropriate that I may borrow or purchase from you.”

She seems intrigued. “Unless you’ve taken to cross-dressing, this is for that friend of Alis’s you’re screwing?”

I nod. “We’re in a rush. I’d be much obliged.”

“I want to meet your brother,” she tells me, naming her terms.

I tilt my head. “You do?”

It’s surprising they don’t know each other, as both are deeply vested in international politics.

Marline inclines her head. “He’s hot. And he doesn’t stink of malice the way you do—the way most people do. Get me fifteen minutes with him and you may have your pick of my wardrobe.”

I wince, feeling like I’m betraying my own flesh, throwing him to the wolves. Or the very pretty, extremely dangerous witch. “Deal.” He can survive her for fifteen minutes. Presumably.

I return to my room to find Daria drying her hair with the towel I left out for her, and otherwise completely naked.

How cruel she is, this wife of mine. “You’re getting dressed right now,” I growl, holding on by a thread.

And no wonder. I’ve read of fated mates finding each other. They’re known to rut for days, until they pass out, close to starvation. We’ve only had a few hours. I haven’t had my fill of her. I can’t imagine ever having enough of her skin, her heat, her curves.

She chuckles and wiggles her body into the dress I’ve bargained for.

It fits her in a way that messes with my brain as much as her bare skin did, the deeply plunging neckline covered in lace displaying her ample chest. The black dress is formal, with long lace sleeves and a full skirt. It would have looked perfectly appropriate on about anyone else, but this is Daria. Any man would want nothing more than to peel it off her skin.

“I miss your terrible pants,” I say longingly.

I wanted her then anyway, but I didn’t have to constantly be reminded of everything under her clothing.

I’m glad I have three brews to distract myself with. I finish the eversleep draught, the antidote, and poison I started working on. None were made from scratch today—I keep half-finished potions at the ready, just in case. The habit has served me many times over the years—particularly the many antidotes.

I hand a small vial to Daria. “Elixir,” I explain. “It’ll cure more ailments and speed up healing. So long as the person’s somewhat alive when they drink it, they have a good chance at recovering from just about everything.”

“Handy, but I have my shadows for that.”

We’ve both seen how unreliable they can be. “Keep it anyway.”

She frowns. “Do you have some for you too?”

How frustrating she is. “Keep it,” I insist. “We need to get going.”

I halt when we reach the doors leading out of the tower of sorcery.

Since when has my dorm been surrounded by a forest of thorns?



## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

# BEYOND THE GRAVE

## ROVAN



The journey from Magnapolis to the Golden Mountain isn't a short one. Back in the day, on horseback or in carriages, it took at least three weeks, with several perilous stops at the borders of Vanemir. Since then, the common folk have pushed the advancement of technology—a way for them to stay relevant in a world filled with demigods. None of their inventions are as widely used as hovercrafts; floating cars able to hover a few feet over the ground in the city, but also reaching a blinding speed once up in the air.

Naturally, rare are the commons who can afford one. The more I think, the more surprised I am it took them this long to form an organized rebellion. This world truly sucks for them.

It sucks for me too, and I have done little but anticipate my departure, hence my lack of enthusiasm about general Xherian politics. I didn't bother to look at their living conditions. Why would I? They're my brother's concern, not mine.

But I do live in this world, for now at least. Perhaps I should give Reiks and Sylvan a hand in fixing it.

I'll consider it after murdering my mother.

The chartered vehicle isn't as fast or luxurious as an official Flaurian hovercraft would have been, despite costing an absolute fortune. In the wake of the devastation from Raverday, they're precious commodities. I'm not the only one to need urgent transportation. My bid merely eclipsed the competition.

With large leather seats and tinted windows, the vehicle is comfortable enough. Daria and I are left to the privacy of our seat at the back, cut off from our driver.

I have many ideas on how to spend the few hours of freedom we have until we reach my homeland. Sadly, the most productive of them involves discussing strategy.

“Once we get there—”

Daria shakes her head and points to the front of the vehicle, cautioning me against openly talking of any scheme. The driver could be listening in, I suppose.

I nod, to show I understand, and bring my hand to hers on her lap, simply because I can. I now have every right to touch her as much as I’d like, and I intend to take advantage of that as frequently as possible.

“Once we get there,” I repeat, “we ought to announce our union. Mother will be furious, obviously, and likely take us away from the crowd to shout at us.”

Having to murder a queen is one thing, but doing so publicly would cause too many problems. If we have to, so be it, but we might as well try to avoid it.

“Ah.” She nods. “Well, then, we certainly should.”

I want to tell her about the number of guards usually around Aude, and her habit of sneaking lords into her bedchamber before breakfast, and so many things I ought to have mentioned when we were alone. I’m surprised she hasn’t asked. Maybe she doesn’t need to know. What do I know about murder? That’s her area of expertise, not mine.

We can’t speak of anything relevant and I opt not to ruin the dress I so dearly bought by spreading her over the soft seat. Instead, I choose the next useful thing I can do tonight. I lower my head to her lap and close my eyes.

“Wake me when we’re there?”

I’m asleep in the blink of an eye, feeling utterly safe in this world, for the first time in two decades.



“Rovan?” Daria whispers what feels like seconds later. “I think we’re going to land shortly.”

The Golden Mountain—or Terigoldron, as the formal name goes, though it’s so cumbersome no one makes use of it—is a high, solitary mount with a snowy peak, surrounded by the fields of golden wheat it was named after long before my ancestors built the gaudy palace covered in foils of gold centuries ago.

This time of the year, right at the start of the harvest season, it’s quite beautiful. I’ve never seen it as anything but a gilded prison.

I frown as we approach the castle’s gate. Something’s wrong.

Instead of being greeted by the thousand lights of the many chandeliers, I am met only by darkness. Inexplicably, the castle is empty. That makes little sense. Even in the absence of the queen, some courtiers reside here year around. At the very least, there should be some servants.

I lean out the window, and indeed, there’s a black flag hanging from the highest tower, right next to the Flaurian sigil.

*No.*

I’ve never seen this particular flag raised, but I read about it in my youth. “This is the sign of royal mourning.”

Suddenly, the darkness of the castle is logical. Everyone, down to the lowliest servant, would attend a royal funeral.

What in the seven hells happened?

Such formal measures wouldn’t have been taken for distant cousins. If the Golden Mountain is dark, it’s because one of the Briars died.

I know Sylvan survived the attack, thanks to Daria. Unless something went horribly wrong after I took us to Ilvaris, that leaves only one royal who could have perished.

I remember thinking that my mother wouldn't do me the courtesy of dying quietly in the Hall of Peace a few days ago. But of course she would, now it completely ruins my plans.

"My mother's gone," I whisper, devastated.

Who would have thought Aude's death would be cause for anything but celebration? But the bitch died too early. We're going to have to murder Daria's mother instead.

Daria bites her lip, far less dejected than me. "Not necessarily."

"No one else, none of the lower princes, would warrant a full blackout like this." She doesn't want to believe it, but we have to face the truth and plan our next move.

How can we murder Ryzan Sand, one of the strongest, most powerful women with Xhera?

"I think," Daria says. "I think the ceremony could be for you, Rován."

*Oh.*

We were attacked three days ago, and I did disappear. Even my own brother, who knows I made it out of Magnapolis, can't have been certain I survived transporting Daria and I to Ilvaris—or my encounter with Death.

All of a sudden, I'm laughing out loud.

It's for *me*. My mother would have happily announced my demise after I was missing for a couple of days, only too glad to believe it.

"Well, then. Let's crash my funeral."

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

# THE QUEEN'S SURPRISE



## ROVAN



The hovercraft lands as close to the palace entrance as any foreigner can, beyond the gates, a half-mile away from the base of the mountain inside which the Flaurian court was carved.

As we walk up to the gilded entrance, I tell Daria everything I thought I missed before. “My mother keeps four guards on herself, and Sylvan has two. All are highly trained demis—there are half a dozen of them, and they work by rotation.”

She tilts her head. “Don’t stress out. It’ll be fine.”

I force a breath out. “So, you don’t need to know that?”

Daria shrugs, indifferent. “I’ve never met a queen who walked around without guards. I assumed there would be more than four. That’s good to know.”

Why do I find her effortless confidence incredibly sensual?

“So, how do you see things going?”

“I’ll observe and when there’s an opening, I’ll murder her,” she replies simply. “Hopefully, without any witnesses. Otherwise, I’ll kill them, too.”

I chuckle. “Only that, huh?”

“It’s not overly complicated, usually. Spying, stealing, that takes craft. Murder is a sport of opportunity.”

Reassured by her poise, I redirect my attention to the palace.

Too stunned by the dark palace, I didn't notice them from the hovercraft, but the entire court is gathered in the formal gardens to the east of the gate. Hundreds of people, all dressed in black, surround a new feature. I can only see the tip, but unless I'm much mistaken, it's a large onyx statue of my effigy.

"Rushing the artwork in three days must have cost a fortune." I whistle. "Who knew Aude cared?"

"Unless she had it made ages ago. She's been trying to murder you for a while," Daria reminds me just as we reach the gate.

Two guards in formal blues stand, holding firmly to their firearms, eyes forward under the rim of their fur-trimmed top hats.

I clear my throat, but the first doesn't budge. He could very well have mastered the art of sleeping with his eyes open.

"Well, the gates please."

"State your name and business," he grumbles under his mustache, bored, without so much as looking up.

Some guard he is.

His younger colleague has the sense to elbow him, and nod his head to me.

"Rovan Briar." I'm all smiles.

The guard muffles an apology, his eyes wide. "It's only, sir, they thought—"

I take pity on the poor man. "I figured what they thought. The gates, please."

The senior guard fumbles with the keys, but does unlock the pedestrian door behind him before clearing his throat. "If I may, sir, it's a pleasure. A real pleasure."

I'm surprised to hear sincerity in his voice. I don't think I've seen him before, and if I did, I never paused to take in his face. I likely talked to him if we crossed paths—I'm not a heathen—but I'm also not my brother. I don't do much for the

good of the realm. I've never felt invested in it. They have Sylvan, and he's enough.

"You are?"

"They're talking about revising the common citizens' rights—access to knowledge, schools, that sort of things. Right to gather. Citing your death as one of the reasons why they should." The old man shakes his head. "If you pardon my saying, it's not right, sir. The commons suffer enough."

I can tell the guard is a demi. His colleague nods in agreement. I doubt they're the only ones thinking that.

I'm being used as a poster boy for oppressing the lower class.

"Who's pushing that reform?" Daria asks, though I think I can guess.

"The queen, miss."

If Daria's surprised, she doesn't show it.

I take her hand and lead her to the garden. The court parts to let us proceed to the statues, with hushed whispers at first, and then, audible gasps. By the time we reach my mother at the foot of the memorial, they're shouting my name.

I've seen hatred in Aude's eyes when she looks at me for almost as long as I can remember. For the first time, there's no distaste, no scorn.

Only horror and fear.

## CHAPTER FIFTY

# HIDDEN PLAYERS

# DARIA



I don't understand the queen's expression, and one glance at Rován is enough to see he doesn't either. Behind the surprise, she seems terrified of her son. She quickly hides it under a mask of schooled indifference.

"Rován! By the gods, where have you been?" If she meant to sound like a relieved mother after having believed her child taken from her, she misses the mark by a landslide.

Her tone's accusatory, angry, alarmed, but certainly not pleased.

By her side, Sylvan catches my eye and smiles at me briefly.

I suppose I was dead the last time he saw me. I give him a little wave, feeling awkward. I don't particularly like him. There are too many lies and pretenses and mysteries surrounding him. I can appreciate a cryptic prince as much as the next girl—I put up with his twin, after all—but there's something more to Sylvan. Something cold as ice hidden beneath the goodness, the beauty, the heroism.

But now, after he jumped in the line of fire to save me, I don't have much of a choice. He's one of my people, by blood debt and by oath. My husband's twin. My savior. I have to like him, don't I?

I can't believe I owe my life to a *hero*. My sisters wouldn't let me hear the end of it if they knew.

"In Ilvaris." As always, Rován's words are nothing short of the truth. "We escaped by way of a portal to the fae realm on

Raverday. It took us a day to return—which is much longer here. Apologies if I frightened you by disappearing, Mother.”

Oh, he frightened her, all right, but his reappearance had more to do with it than his retreat.

“I do quite like the statue, in any case. We should keep it. It brightens the garden, don’t you think?” Rován plays the part of the foolish, irresponsible rake, and excels in his delivery.

I cough to conceal a chuckle, bringing the queen’s serpentine eyes to me. I survey our surroundings, taking in the guards at her side, and those standing farther away. Six, as Rován expected—a couple for Sylvan, four for the queen.

I’m frustrated that I can’t kill her now. The setup is almost perfect. The crowd is thick enough for the confusion to work to my advantage, but we just arrived. The suspicion would directly fall on us—on me specifically, especially if I made use of my shadows.

If we were desperate for time, I’d risk it all the same, but according to Rován’s vague calculations, we still have a couple of days. I’m better off sneaking into her room later.

There will be a better opportunity—a time when I can dispose of her without being seen. She’s hated enough that anyone could be behind her death. I just need to time it right.

“And do the Wicked know you’ve taken their daughter to another world, or do they believe she died, too?” the queen presses.

“No one keeps tabs on me, Your Grace,” I reply, uncaring that she didn’t address me directly.

She huffs, thoroughly displeased though she can’t quite pinpoint why. Then her eyes narrow over the mark on my arm, visible through the lacy sleeve, and widen when she looks at her son, and find the hint of a matching brand under the hem of his black jacket.

“Ah, yes,” Rován acknowledges casually. “Daria and I got married.” Undeterred by the court’s aghast whispering, he carries on, perfectly playing the part of the foolish prince. “You’ll no doubt disapprove of the breach of etiquette, but

we'd just only barely survived an attack. It felt like the right time. I'm sure you don't mind, Mother, do you?"

She very much does mind *something*. I don't think our nuptials are the crux of her issue, however.

"I see," the queen says between her teeth. Out loud, she declares, "Well, it appears my son survived the vicious attack of those criminals. And now we have much to speak of. You're all dismissed."

Just like that, the crowd scatters, gossiping excitedly.

"With me, right now. All of you," Aude hisses, and darts off, without glancing over her shoulder to see if we follow, making her way to her private quarters.

Sylvan slides next to me, no longer concealing his amusement. "Well, you certainly haven't lost your touch," he tells his brother. "As far as entrances go, that's one of your most dramatic ones yet."

"You could have told her we were alive and saved us the whole scene," Rován retorts, rolling his eyes.

"Why would I do that?" Sylvan asks.

I smile. He isn't that bad after all.

I notice the six guards trailing after us.

"Don't concern yourself with them," Sylvan tells me. "They're with me."

That makes me frown in confusion. Him, not the queen? At least four of them ought to be her men. "They are?"

"Uh-huh. We're good friends. We train together often. Besides, knights are often elevated from the plebe. No nobleman's son wants a job as tedious as guarding a royal night and day. We want the same thing."

I decide I have underestimated and misunderstood this man all at once. He isn't a hero. At least, not just that. "And what would that be?"

"A world where our fate isn't defined by an accident of birth."



We reach a conservatory too large and luxurious to be considered anything short of a ballroom, plunged in darkness like the rest of the castle, but the fading light of day in the early evening is enough to see—all of us are comfortable in relative darkness.

The queen's pacing among her shrubs of roses, barely concealing her rage, her worry.

As soon as she sees us, she turns them on us. "How could you do this? We're going to look foolish because of you. And her mother could take offense. What were you thinking, Rován?" The queen's voice changes when she addresses her son without her court listening in.

Instead of the sweet, plaintive high pitch, she's curt and almost threatening.

I watch the guards close the glass windows behind us, and I purposely take a step closer to Rován. My wrist twitches, eager to feel the familiar weight of my blades.

It would be easy to dispose of her right here, right now, but I don't quite know what Sylvan's take on it would be. The guards would be one thing, but I can't kill Rován's twin if he stands against us. So I let the scene play itself out, assuming the part she expects me to: a besotted, silly little girl infatuated with her son's nine-inch appendage and his regal jewels. "My apologies, your highness. We didn't realize you'd be against it." I bat my lashes.

"I wouldn't say I did much thinking," Rován adds. "See, we were alone, exhausted, hurt, and we promised to protect each other. You know how the folk work, Mother. It was enough. We can still have a full-scale ceremony here if you insist. I'm sure you have plenty of food on order for my funeral."

If I had a child as smug and irritating as Rován is endeavoring to be toward Aude, I might have wanted to kill it too.

"We'll have to order a cake," Sylvan volunteers somewhat helpfully.

I join in. “We’d need musicians. What wedding doesn’t have music?”

The name of the game seems to be *Annoying Queen Aude* and I can’t deny I have a knack for it. Her jaw tics. “Listen to me, all of you. I need you to stand with me this week. Stop opposing me, stop throwing wrenches in my plans. I’m doing my best to keep Flaur as we know it standing!” Her voice rises to a shout.

Her agitation is beyond what I would have expected for the current situation. Any parent, mine included, would be annoyed at being bypassed, but why is Aude afraid? “How would us getting married get in the way of that?”

The queen narrows her eyes at me. “Like you don’t know.”

I have no clue what she’s talking about, but I opt to let her think otherwise. “We didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You knew what the seer said,” she screeches at Rován. “You knew you were supposed to wait until your twenty-eighth year to wed, or you’d doom us all, and yet you rushed into it selfishly, risking our kingdom, our way of life! *My life!*”

One glance at Rován tells me he has no clue what she’s talking about. Not one. As I redirect my gaze toward the unhinged, screaming queen, my eyes fall on his twin, and I take a step back.

While Rován’s as clueless as me, Sylvan’s smirking.

He’s pristine as ever, all in white, but I think back to when I saw him with blood all over his hands. How it looked like his natural state.

“He has no clue, Mother,” Sylvan tells her. “He never heard the seer.”

The queen’s eyes widen.

I notice the guards’ approach. I see their hands move to their swords.

“He wasn’t born Rován at all. I was.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

# MASTERS OF DECEPTION

# ROVAN



**N**ineteen years ago.

I don't like playing chess with Rován. He's far too good at it. He's far too *good*, full stop.

I lose again, though I use every trick I can think of. He goes for my queen, and as always, I fold. What's the point of playing without a queen?

"How was Dorath?" I ask my brother, before he can talk me into another game.

I wanted to go, but Mother forbid it. It wouldn't do to let her precious heir into a country full of thieves and assassins. Rován always gets to do the fun stuff. Play outside. Travel. See the world. All I have to myself is my violin.

"Instructive," my twin retorts cryptically. He likes to keep things to himself, cultivating secrets like sharp weapons. "We went to witness the divine water readings. Mother allowed the priestess to look into my fate."

I gasp, positively green with jealousy. "Really! Well, what did she say?" I'm eager for a glimpse of his future. Maybe she mentioned me, too. With luck, I won't expire of boredom before I can grow a mustache.

Not that I'd grow a mustache.

My brother rolls his eyes. "Some nonsense about my changing Flaur. Like I could. I am the spare. You'll make all the changes."

I hate that more than anything else.

I am Sylvan Briar, prisoner of the crown, checked, coddled, lied to, and judged for every action, every wayward thought.

*Some nonsense about my changing Flaur.*

“What did she say, exactly?” I’m so eager. “Word for word.”

I know Rován’s memory is as sharp as mine. He wouldn’t have forgotten, even if he dismissed the prediction.

“She was speaking to Mother, not me. She said, ‘on the eve of Rován Briar’s wedding, at the age of twenty-seven, there will come a chance to change the fate of Flaur, destroying the old ways.’” Rován shakes his head. “Like I’d get married that young. Like I’d get married at all.” He rolls his eyes.

A change in the fate of Flaur sounds marvelous. “Maybe that’s it. Maybe you should be the one who changes things,” I grumble, speaking the words I’ve thought of many times in the darkness of my mind.

Rován angles his head. “What do you mean?”

I shrug. “No one can tell the difference between us and you know it. We’ve played each other’s part enough times to know it works. If you slept in my bed and wore my clothes and followed my schedule, and answered to my name, you’d be Sylvan. You’d be the heir.” And I’d be free.

My twin’s eyes have always been harder to read than mine. Where I run hot, expressing my feelings as they come to me, he has a cool, self-contained mind. “You’d give me the crown?” he checks.

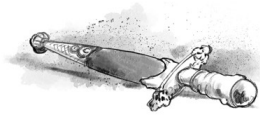
I think about the endless lessons, the many times I was told to stay inside while he could play. The fact that he was allowed to go to Dorath and I wasn’t. “Gladly.”

Rován carefully considers my offer. “What if someone asks for my name? We can’t lie.”

“We don’t have to. I can give you my name, and you can give me yours. If we swear to it, I’ll be Rován, and you,

Sylvan.”

No one so much as guessed that we’d changed places. How would they? And neither of us breathed a word of it. Until now.



When the attacks started, I believed my mother wanted to prevent that future, and my twin wanted me dead so I wouldn’t change my mind and take his place again, or reveal our secret. But he burned his eyes rather than let me take the brunt of the spell meant to kill me. He might be power hungry, ruthless, and calculated, but he’s my brother. I thought we understood each other. But I don’t understand why he’s telling Mother now about the exchange.

At least not until he unsheathes the sword at his belt and stabs it into our mother’s heart.

Her wide eyes are filled with confusion and betrayal.

I feel neither. Then the six guards’ swords flash, one of them aimed at me. Another, at my wife.

I lift my fist and call out to my power. The first vine lashing into the air knocks aside the sword aimed at Daria—although she’s already dropped to a crouch, instinctively moving out of the way. The blade falls on the floor with a dull thud.

“Don’t,” my twin says coolly. “We need to be harmed, or they’ll suspect us, too.”

“You’re *not* hurting Daria,” I growl. “Touch her and die.”

“Either we are making this look like we were all attacked, or she’ll be framed as the murderer,” Sylvan states, his voice

reasonable.

“You can’t kill your mother,” Daria hisses.

It didn’t occur to me in the sudden confusion, but she’s right. That’s *her* job.

Death told us the dead daughter of a dead mother had to commit a matricide. Killing her mother-in-law fit the bill. If she can’t, she’ll have to go for her own mother.

But it’s too late. The queen’s fighting to breathe, bleeding out on the smooth marble.

“I was fated to,” he tells her. “My mother took me to Rhunar on Beltane, nineteen years ago. She was worried for the fate of her realm, with twin heirs. She’d picked one, but already the court disagreed with her choice. So she had your seer check my fate, as I was the spare. And what a fate it was.” Sylvan repeats the words he said to me long ago. “On the eve of Rován Briar’s wedding, at the age of twenty-seven, there will come a chance to change the fate of Flaur, destroying the old ways.” Then he includes something he never told me back then. “And you, Aude Briar, will perish with the ashes of your obsolete world.”

He’s known all along. He’d been waiting for this day, planning it carefully. No wonder he moved to save Daria.

“Why didn’t you say?” I muse, confused.

“You were the heir. She treated you well until you took my name. I figured you’d have something against my murdering the bitch,” my brother says.

Maybe he’s right. We’ll never know.

“She saw that I’d be the reason she died, so she tried to kill me. Only, by then, I’d become Sylvan.” He winces. “I’m sorry for what she put you through, brother. I did my best to stop it.”

And he did stop it, at the cost of his vision.

“My taking your place was my idea.” But I was the one who suffered for it all the same.



“Look, Aude is a terrible queen, and she has to go,” Daria says reasonably. “But I need to be the one killing her. *Please* let me.”

I can already tell, none of her words are going to work. My brother killed the queen. He’s won a long game he’s been playing for years. He’s not going to risk her, or anyone, messing with his victory.

There is only one way for this to work in our favor. I have to play against an opponent I have never beaten. I retrieve the guard’s sword and lift it, pointing it at my twin.

Sylvan— I cannot think of him by any other name now— chuckles. “Oh, please. You, coming to dear old mom’s rescue? This is just too good.”

“I don’t give a fig’s ass about Aude. But you’re going to let Daria do what she needs to.”

“Or?” He tilts his head. “We’re seven against two, brother.”

Among those two, there’s my wife. “I’ll take those odds.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

# UNTIMELY DEMISE

# DARIA



Sylvan picked his six traitors carefully. They're all well versed in swordplay. I would have fared well against them on a one-on-one basis, but all six fall on me, rightfully identifying me as the threat, and letting Sylvan handle his twin.

They're fast, lethal, and they all have tricks up their sleeves.

I block a blade and parry another, but then I lose my balance, the marble floor under me covered in a thin, slippery layer of ice. I jump back up to the ground, more careful with my footfalls. I barely avoid the next blade aimed at me, and a second scores the sleeve of my pretty dress. I show my teeth, growing irritated.

Unless I misread the situation, we're ultimately on the same side—they just want to let Aude die right now, and I don't have the leisure to explain why she shouldn't. I decide to stop playing. I don't have time for any of this. The queen's close to drawing her last breath. I call to my shadows, binding them with red mist, and slide over the icy floor until I reach the woman. Blood spouts out of her throat, choking every breath she takes. She has seconds left, if that. Even if I were to cut her head off right now, I likely wouldn't be considered the one who actually killed her. Sylvan did that with a well-aimed strike, puncturing a lung, flooding her airways with blood.

"Damn him," I groan.

I hold the queen's wound down to stop the bleeding. That hardly seems to help. Glancing up, I see the two princes exchanging blows, each of them precise, lethal. Roan might just have intended to keep his brother occupied in order to let me kill his mother, but Sylvan doesn't seem to know how to spar for show.

Sylvan's blade catches Roan's shoulder. I don't think I'm the one directing my shadows, but I feel them fly through the greenhouse and surround my husband, illuminating him in the darkness.

Then he disappears, only to materialize behind Sylvan's back, and bring his blade to his throat.

It took me years to master that trick, but he mastered it in instants.

"Yield," Roan demands between gritted teeth, having bested his twin.

Sylvan growls, but doesn't so much as twitch, taking the threat seriously.

Too bad it's in vain. He engaged his brother in combat so that I could get to the queen and kill her myself, but it's too late. Despite my feeble attempt at keeping her alive, her chest rises and falls one last time.

I pin my arm against her chest and rhythmically press on it to get her heart beating again, except all it seems to achieve is to increase the blood pooling on the floor.

All of a sudden, I remember the flask in my pocket. It's likely too late, but I retrieve the elixir, open her mouth, and shove the contents inside. I blow into her mouth and close it again.

"Come on!" I resume my onslaught against her still chest, desperate to get it going.

I took basic healing classes as a child, but I'm by no means an expert. We need a Blythe, or better yet, an Alis here. We only have me.

I groan in frustration, and punch the chest, hard, if only to make myself feel better.

To my utter astonishment, the queen awakes with a deep, haunted gasp, sitting up, her eyes wide in shock.

I did it. Somehow, I did it. I saved her.

I sigh in relief. “Thank you,” I say, to whatever god spit her back out of hell. No doubt, Death himself.

Then I catch her head between my arms and my chest, and snap her neck.

“It’s over,” I announce, rising.

I let the queen’s body fall back where it belongs.

I free the guards from my shadows. They hesitate, so I hold my hands up to show I’m done fighting. “I just wanted to kill her myself, that’s all,” I assure them.

They’re pacified. The same cannot be said for the twins.

Sylvan knocked Rován’s blade aside and resumed their combat. They’re both taken by a dance I’m all too familiar with. No words will put an end to their bloodlust. So I just sit next to the corpse and watch.

They’re clearly overdue for a good fight. I find it does wonders to smooth familial discord.

“Should we stop them?” one of the guards asks another.

They glance at each other, clueless how to go about it.

“I put ten gold on the one in black,” I say.

The guards hesitate. “Ten on the crown prince,” one finally grumbles.

All state their stakes, and I grin, knowing I’m about to make quite a few coins. They stand behind their prince, naturally. He’s likely won in the past. At the start of the fight, my husband seemed to be on the losing side, but now that he’s claimed half of my shadows, he’s dominating it. The only reason why he hasn’t yet won is kindness.

Sylvan backhands him with the hilt of his sword, and any niceties disappear. Roan dissipates and reappears high in the air, kicking Sylvan's head so hard the prince falls right on his ass.

I grin and extend my hands to the cluster of guards. "Pay up."

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE



# DEALS WITHIN DEALS

# DARIA



The story of how the rebels viciously attacked the queen a second time travels. We, naturally, valiantly endeavored to save her life, all in vain. In a show of gratitude, we distribute trophies, titles, and mountains of gold to the brave guards who did their very best.

They pay me the sixty golds they owe me from their large reward, so I doubly win.

The new king of Flaur proclaims that while a few savages saw fit to tear his mother apart, there would be no retaliation from the crown against the good people of Flaur. In fact, he names this day the Day of Forgiving, when each year, the crown will forgive the crimes of six men and women in their dungeons, in the name of unity.

Sylvan is so full of shit.

He also happens to be a good king in the making.

“You really don’t mind?” I whisper after we suffer through the benevolent, well-received speech. “That he took your crown.”

Rovan shakes his head. “The crown was never mine or his—it should have belonged to the worthiest heir. That’s him. I don’t care about Flaur. I never did. Just like he doesn’t care about Ilvaris.”

“And you do.”

It makes sense. Rovan’s different in the fae world. He stands taller, prouder, whereas here, he seems to hide at least

part of his might. Sylvan's happy to rule with words and schemes, but Rován's all about unsheathing raw power. This world is too frail for him.

Rovan grins. "You should have seen the best of it. We only trekked to those creepy woods, but you'd love it, dove. I know you would."

"I already do." Ilvaris has the right amount of savage beauty and surprising, dangerous twists. I'm not likely to be bored, or too dangerous for its inhabitants. If anything, I'd be the prey. I grin, imagining it. I'd feel alive every day. "I'd love to see more."

"I'll take you," Rovan promises easily.

I can't deny his words reassure me. I thought he might get sick of me after the last few days when we stayed glued to each other—and married each other, too. I figured he'd want to say the words that would break our bond and move on. But at least, he'll take me to his home, first.

"I'll take you to meet the high queen in her Hollow, and her heirs—we're good friends. I'll take you to my father's keep in the night court. And some day, we'll rule over it."

"*We?*" I can't help it. My heart's beating fast.

"We. You know I'm never letting you go, Daria." His fingers trace the mark on my forearm. "This isn't a marriage bond."

"It isn't?" I know nothing of the customs of Ilvaris. I didn't even question it. It's quite pretty, and I like it.

I more than like it.

"This is one of the many proofs that you're my mate, chosen, *built* for me by fate. So, no, little dove. Nothing in this world or the next will ever prevail upon me to let you."

I wait for the surprise, but while his words should be positively shocking, my mind rests, utterly unruffled. Of course, he's mine. And clearly, part of me knew it all along.

I lift my chin. "How presumptuous of you. You're assuming I'm not going to walk away."

Rovan leans over me and presses his mouth to mine, nibbling on my lower lip. “Well, you did offer a lifetime of kisses, as many as I wish, whenever I wish, remember?”

I wrinkle my nose. “I definitely don’t remember all that.”

“That would be because you’re terrible at fairy bargains. So much so, in fact, that I’m tempted to gag you once we get to Ilvaris, lest that pretty mouth of yours land you in a world of trouble with all sorts of folk.”

That wouldn’t do. The only one allowed to take advantage of me is him.

“A little late for that,” a somewhat familiar voice pipes up.

I blink. I hadn’t heard any noise, nor felt a presence, but we’re no longer standing alone in front of the new, uncrowned king’s dais.

Two people have joined us—if I can call them that. The first, I’d recognize anywhere, though his face is entirely charming now.

Red eyes, a beautiful straight nose like Rovan’s, and a mouth curved into a cruel smirk. “You did well, shadow child,” Death tells me.

He wasn’t the one who addressed me before, and my attention’s fixed on the blonde beauty by his side.

I’ve seen her somewhere, I’m quite certain, but I can’t place it.

“You’ll recall you owe me quite a bit of gold, and a favor, too,” the stunning creature tells me.

I gasp. “*Johel?*”

It can’t be. She was a little old lady in the lanes.

Death glance at his companion, and echoes my bafflement. “*Johel?*”

“I go by that name in this world.” The tailor who crafted my beautiful red dress in so short a time shrugs. “I can’t very well use my real one. People would ask for all sorts of things.”

“You’re the spider,” I guess, finally connecting dots that should have been evident.

A seer, a weaver, who’d underpriced herself terribly to come to my aid when I needed it. I shouldn’t be surprised she had a dog in the fight all along.

She sighs. “I hate that name. Spiders are creepy.”

“Hence why it fits so perfectly,” Death retorts. I think I see the shadow of a smile on his striking face.

“You knew everything from the start,” I say, somewhat accusingly.

She shrugs. “Hardly everything. Just that you two would free my mate, eventually. And that you have terrible taste in fashion. You’ll find an updated wardrobe when you get to Five—and to the night court. I’ll not have the mate of a grandchild of mine wearing *khaki*.”

“What’s wrong with khaki?” I question. It’s a perfectly fine color, and handy when one wishes not to be seen in the woods or the desert.

“Everything,” everyone responds all at once.

I roll my eyes. “So, you wanted a favor?” I say, remembering the deal I struck for the dress.

“About that.” Then the striking blonde smiles and I decide that Death is the less scary of the two. “When you’re queen of the night court, in some seventy years, you will lift our banishment, allowing us to settle in Ilvaris.”

I look at Rován.

Death and his spider, our future neighbors? That can’t be good.

Rován sighs. “I don’t suppose we have much of a choice in the matter, do we?”

“None,” Johel replies cheerfully.

“Fine. But my sisters want dresses, too,” I think to add, for Tami’s sake.

“They’ll strike their own deals,” the spider says with another terrifying smirk.

Then, they’re surrounded by shadows, and gone in the next blink.

# EPILOGUE

## ROVAN



Rovan's having a far better time than his brother at this party.

Sylvan, newly crowned and just as newly engaged, ought to have been smug as all seven hells, but instead, he growls. "How do you do it?" he demands, his regal voice dropping to a threatening whisper.

My little sister chuckles. "It's pretty easy, actually. You calculate all of my logical moves. I destabilize you with a stupid one, and then you're too confused to realize what I'm doing," she explains, replacing the white pieces on the chess board.

She's won seven times in a row so far.

To be perfectly honest, I was confused and rather disapproving when Sylvan spontaneously asked my mother for Samara's hand. For one, the fact that he asked Ryzan rather than Sam herself got on my nerves. But Ma gave her approval, and to my surprise, so did Sam. Now that I've taken a moment to think about it, the golden court, so fond of appearances and luxuries, will perfectly suit her. Besides, she'll quite like having a crown.

I've observed them all day, and most of the night. I can only conclude that somehow, they like each other. I didn't even realize they knew one another.

"It must be nice for Samara," Rovan says.

I huff a laugh. "Kicking your brother's ass every game?"



“That too.” Rován chuckles happily. “But I meant, knowing that someone chose her for more than her face.”

I consider his words. Sylvan’s senses are extremely keen, but for all that, he likely can’t actually picture her perfect features. Yet he chose her all the same.

No wonder she accepted him.

“She’ll be a wonderful queen.” He kisses my shoulder. “And so will you.”

I snort. We both know that I’m unsuitable for the night court. The ways of the folk are full of trickery. I have to learn their customs, their schemes, their snares before I even step into his father’s domain to be presented. But I will. I’m dying to shape myself into someone worthy of an immortal throne. Having a challenge, an ambition to work toward, is refreshing after all those years of endless wandering, waiting for my fate to change.

Something suddenly crosses my mind. Spotting the crone happily knitting in a corner, I make my way to her.

She’s shown up unexpectedly every now and then, armed with new seasonal clothes. She dressed Sam, and Tami, and by his request, Rován on occasion. I’m not certain Sylvan thought to invite her to his engagement, but he isn’t foolish enough to reject her once she turned up.

“Johel,” I say awkwardly, knowing that’s not her actual name.

Johel, the poor merchant fostering orphans in the lane and answering fashion emergencies like a fairy godmother, is one of the aspects of a very complex person. *Thing*.

“Daria,” she greets me with a wave to the free seat at her side.

I take the invitation. “Will I know your real name someday?”

“My mother called me Ilena Johel,” she tells me. “It’s real enough.”

I very much doubt that, but I'm not about to ask for more than she's prepared to give.

"Something just came to mind." I hesitate. "You know Rován—" I reword my statement. "Well, one of the twins had their future read in Dorath nineteen years ago."

She inclines her head. "Yes, the old Rován—not to be confused with the new one, of course. That's not confusing at all."

I can only agree. "Isn't it strange to you?" I ask.

"What, that their future was set just when you were born?" The crone's smile shows her teeth. "Not at all."

"You're saying there's a link between my birth and their fate?" That makes very little sense.

All of a sudden, instead of the old woman, I'm staring into playful eyes and smooth, beautiful skin. She looks even younger than she did at Death's side, though no less threatening. "Don't ask questions you don't want answers to, girl."

But I very much would like an answer. "Tell me."

Ilena Johel leans in and licks her lips. "You're a *bride's* grandchild, Daria. Fate did not plan for your existence. This is why it attempted to wipe your mother out—limit the damage. But Death revived Ryzan, and now here you are. All three of you. Entire futures were rewritten the moment Ryzan drew breath, and again when you girls were born. But you aren't the only *bride's* spawn here," she reminds me.

I blink into her mesmerizing eyes. "Rován."

"And Sylvan, yes. They're of my line, so fate didn't have a mate in store for either of them—or for you. It bridged the gap."

She's saying a lot of things I don't understand, but I file them at the back of my mind all the same. "So, what? Fate got lazy and assigned me as Rován's mate because it was easy?"

"Rován *and* Sylvan, girl." She chuckles. "I did wonder which one you'd pick."

My jaw drops. She must be kidding, right? “No way.” I’m shaking my head vehemently. I couldn’t stand Sylvan at first. He’s grown on me, but we would have murdered each other if left in the same room for too long.

“I warned you not to ask. Don’t fret. You made your choice, and your sister’s fate was as volatile as yours. They’ll suit each other very well, too.” She slides the bundle of fabric she’d been working with needles onto my lap. “There!”

I stare at it in confusion, lifting it. It’s a minuscule hat, too small for my fist.

“It’ll be born in the winter,” she whispers. “To keep it warm. I’ll make socks, too, before I go.”

“I’m not pregnant,” I hiss.

A storm passes in the depths of her silver pupils. “Of course not, dear.”

At first, I tell myself it must be the truth, because she’s one of the fae. Her skills, her slightly pointed ears, her presence, and the fact that she’s the king of the night court’s mother all suggest it.

Then I remember her own words. Whatever she is, or was born as, she’s a bride, first and foremost. A creature without fate, not planned by the universe. I sincerely doubt she’s incapable of weaving a lie if she feels like it.

If she’s handing me a baby’s hat, I’ll have need of it.

“I’m going to murder Rován.”

The End

This is the end of the Seven Kingdoms...at least in the mortal realms.

*Rotten to the Core* happens in the Immortal Shores, with a brand new cast of character, and a lot of differences. For one, it is a lot darker and steamer than these three books. If that

doesn't scare you, come to [the romance book coven](#) for news about its release and future fantasy titles by May as Alexi Blake!

## BONUS

It took me a while to assimilate that Aude is well and truly gone. Her shadow has haunted my steps for twenty years. Even after she stopped attacking me, I never could find it in myself to relax. Who knew whether she'd change her mind, growing exasperated by my stubborn, ornery nature? If I refused to be her heir, I had no use and my existence was diminishing Sylvan's position.

But she's gone, murdered twice for good measure. It hits me on Sylvan's coronation. I'm free—or as free as I will ever be with the royal cousins circling. I don't have to be quite as careful as I always am. Not anymore.

I kiss Daria's cheek, and move toward the musicians playing in a corner. "May I?" I ask politely.

Dumbfounded, the poor man has no choice but to hand me his instrument. I take it reverently, loving the weight in my hand, the smoothness of the varnished wood, the thickness of the strings.

I play. For the first time in over nineteen years, I play violin in public, and my heart's never been lighter. The musicians stop their tune, not attempting to match my pace or the complexity of the music. Eyes closed, I give myself to the music, feeling the next note, abandoning all control.

Another song joins mine, lower, slower, different, but so well suited the notes merge in a whimsical dance. My eyes fly open, and I chuckle.

Of course it's my wife, by my side, having commandeered another violin from the poor troupe.

The court and the guests here to celebrate the start of my brother's reign have ceased all chatter, their eyes on us as we continue our improvised melody. Daria's more technical, but her fingers move just as deftly.

Her little sister is the first to rush forward and clap slowly, in rhythm with our folk song. The sound of footfalls hitting the marble and measured applause join in. And then, they're dancing, and laughing, and losing all sense of propriety, because few are those who can resist fairy songs.

Daria and I don't need to speak; we end the foray in the same low note, exactly in tune.

I hand the violin back to its owner. "It's a good instrument. You were kind to lend it."

The man shakes his head. "I wouldn't dare take it back—not after this. It chose you, my prince."

He also gives his spare to my wife. I'll see he's well compensated for them.

"You play," I note, leading her out of the hall.

"Seldom, and not nearly so well as you."

"Come, wife. Humility doesn't become you." I like to call her my wife, reminding her of what she is—what she'll always be.

"Oh, I play well compared to most people in this world," she rewords, with an indifferent shrug. "You're just better."

I'll take the praise. There are precious few disciplines where I can claim to best her.

We reach our apartments in the Golden Mountain—rooms that have been mine since I was seven, yet never felt like it until now. I place my violin on a console table, and Daria's joins it.

I only meant to put it away and head back to the throne room. It wouldn't do to disappear this night. Sylvan needs my

support, today more than ever. His court is flooded with people of relevance, the Frejr, the Wicked, the Rhodes, and many more. He can't afford rumors suggesting I have reason to resent his appointment, and my absence would suggest just that. But we're alone in my rooms, and I can think of many things I'd much rather do than smile at politicians.

“Daria?” I say, leaning over my dove.

“Hm?” She lifts her chin, eyes closing in on my mouth.

“Just five minutes.”

## SECOND BONUS

He came unannounced in the night, as most nightmares do.

I instinctively chuck a shadowblade at the intruder and it finds its mark, planting itself in its chest.

Alder Larch looks down to the weapon lodged inside him and sighs as he removes it. “I rather liked that jacket.”

I recognize him instantly. He looks like Death, but with his mother’s stormy eyes, and her fairy ears.

The king blends in with the night; not like my family and their shadows. We disappear. He embraces it.

“You must be my son’s wife.” His voice isn’t unlike Rován’s, though deeper, slower.

“I must be,” I groan sleepily.

I bring myself up to a standing position. By my side, Rován’s still asleep, curled around little Kate. He handles her at night, and nothing can wake him except for her cries.

“I hear you make a sport of murdering in-laws.” He hands me back the blade.

I roll my eyes. “Only those who deserve it. You do have terrible taste in women, but that’s not an offense punishable by death.”

He wrinkles his nose. “Aude was rather appalling, was she not? But pretty enough. And rather flexible.” He’s *definitely* the twins’ father. “My mother warned me whoever bore my children would die. I had to pick appropriately.”



*Good old Johel.*

“May I?” he asks eagerly, approaching the bed.

I gather Kate in my arms and stand to hand her to him.

A slow smile spreads over his pale face, awkward, like he’s not used to using those muscles.

“She’s so small.”

“She was born three days ago,” I tell him.

“I know. I came immediately.”

I remember the time difference between our world and theirs. He must truly have rushed here the moment he knew if he appeared this fast.

I ponder this strange man who barely had a hand in raising his children, yet came so fast to see this child of ours.

“Why did you leave the twins with Aude?” I demand, rather than ask.

“Weapons need tempering.” That’s all he has to say.

I understand him, strangely. I’ve seen his world. Only the strongest can survive in Ilvaris. Though they both evolved into powerful men, his sons were fragile once, and he wouldn’t have wanted them to suffer in his court.

He cares, in his own way. A neglectful sort of care that I can’t relate to, but I don’t judge him for it.

“I won’t temper Kate,” I warn, chin high. “I’ll protect her.”

“Did my mother suggest the name?” Alder asks drily.

I nod. Kate is a rather common name, but I liked it, and Rován didn’t mind. “How did you guess?”

“Because Hecate has an ego the size of Ilvaris. She asked if Rován could be Hector, you know.”

“Hecate,” I echo, eyes wide. I know that name. I’ve read it in old tales, myths from a past so long ago it’s no more than a seed of a legend now. “Isn’t that the name of a goddess?”

Alder inclines his head. “The Mother, Maiden, and Crone, goddess of spells, weaver of fates.” He brings his lips to Kate’s dark curls. “Sleep well, little one. You carry a legacy of several worlds. And may the gods aid anyone who dares to touch a hair on your pretty head.”

He hands her back to me after those words, words that feel like a spell as well as a promise, and then, he’s gone.