

ABANDONED THINGS

CHANI LYNN FEENER

Abandoned Things
Special Edition



Chani Lynn Feener

Also By Chani Lynn Feener

*For a list of YA books by this author, please check her website. All of the books listed below are Adult.

Bad Things Play Here

Gods of Mist and Mayhem

A Bright Celestial Sea

A Sea of Endless Light

A Whisper in the Dark Trilogy

You Will Never Know

Don't Breathe a Word

Don't Let Me Go

Between the Devil and the Sea

Echo

These Silent Stars

Under the name Avery Tu

Kieran

Dorian

Kismet Cafe

His Dark Paradox

Abandoned Things

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Special edition—2023

Dear Reader,

This isn't a Dark MM like some of my other books, so this isn't a massive list of trigger warnings like I usually provide in the beginning of books that are marked as Dark. That being said, there is some triggering material, which was listed on the Amazon purchase page, so please sure to check that before deciding to read.

Just to cover my bases, here are some of the triggers that were listed, but possibly not all:

Aggressive male lead, detailed mention of abusive parents, alcoholic parents, and minor dub con. Rook starts off as an anti-hero and acts like one.

Now that that's out of the way, I wanted to write a quick note to all of you about this book. *Abandoned Things* is actually the fusion of two stories I've wanted to write for years, but also struggled with. I could never find the right footing with either, and kept whiffle-waffling between whether to write them as YA, NA, or Adult. In the end, they came together as one story and I couldn't be happier with the results.

Obviously, I chose to write Rook's story as an Adult Romance, but I kept the original tale, *Gold and Silver*, as a YA. At the end of this book, I've included the first two chapters of my version of *Gold and Silver*, a version that I thought would never see the light of day. I'd given up on it more times than I can count, and while there's actually close to two hundred pages of it written, I know it's not something I'll ever complete. Frankie getting to finish it in *Abandoned Things* was sort of a fun way for me to finally set that project aside and let it go.

Why am I bringing this up? Because I wanted to explain ahead of time that, if you do choose to read those two chapters and like them... You won't be getting any more. Sorry in advance! The reason I'm including them in this special edition is because I think they give a better insight into Lis, someone who was very much a side character in *Abandoned Things*, but

one who still played an important role. She's why Rook was so desperate to get back, right?

I hope you all enjoy this freshly edited story (thanks, Amy!) and all of the bonus material at the end! It was great getting to revisit Rook and Frankie and extend their story a bit! If you end up liking this, please consider leaving me a review! I'd love to hear what you all think about their ending—their real ending, now.

Thank you for reading!

Sincerely,

Chani Lynn Feener.

To all the readers and writers who ever wished a character was
real.

Prologue:

The world around him began to wink in and out, his vision blurring. It wasn't hard to guess, even in his state with his thoughts growing cloudy, that this was all due to the blood loss. That he wasn't going to be able to hold on much longer.

With some effort, he turned his head, tipping it back so that he could look at her one last time. Tears were dripping down her rose-stained cheeks, making tracks through the thin layer of dirt that had collected there during her run through the forest. Her blonde hair was wild and tangled, tiny bits of broken leaves and twigs poking out at odd angles.

"You don't look like a princess," he said, the words gravely and low. It was a struggle just to get them out, but he forced himself to continue past the pain. If this was to be his final moment, he wouldn't waste it.

A loud sob escaped past her full lips and he realized she was holding him in her lap when he felt her arms tighten around his shoulders and across his chest. A glance down showed she was pressing her small hands against the wound.

Blood was already smeared up to her elbows.

Resolutely, he sighed. Or, he meant to, it came out more like a cough than anything. He grimaced afterward because it caused more tears to pool into her pale green eyes.

He recalled the joke he'd made months ago, about how her people were considered so cold-blooded, they were unable to shed tears. He'd never admit it, wouldn't get the chance to anyway, but he regretted saying that to her now.

There were a lot of things he regretted; he didn't want his final moment to become one of those things as well.

Reaching up, he managed to brush the tips of his fingers across her jaw before he lost sensation in his arm and it dropped back down to his side.

"Rook!" she screamed his name, leaning in closer so that he could make out the smattering of freckles across her

nose. Fake freckles, drawn on there with makeup to help keep her cover.

Still, fake or not, they were endearing.

The lengths she was willing to go to for her people was endearing.

“I love you,” he told her, voice now a mere whisper, easily carried off by the wind.

When she squeezed her eyes shut, however, he knew she’d heard him.

The corner of his mouth tipped up, and his vision narrowed in, so that for a brief moment all he could see was her face hovering above his own and nothing else.

“I love you,” he repeated.

And then everything went black.

Prince Rook of Bronze was dead.

Chapter 1:

The chapter was gone.

Frankie stared at the blank document, eyes practically glued to the screen as if he hoped words would magically reappear on the page. This morning, before running off for class, he'd saved before and after he'd emailed the file to Maggie. He was sure of it.

And yet...

The chapter was gone.

He'd pulled another all-nighter to get chapter eighty-three written. It'd taken a couple of beers and sheer will but he'd somehow managed to write the scene he'd been dreading ever since he'd realized that was the direction the story was taking. Rook was a fan favorite, and Frankie doubted his decision to kill him off, but...

As far as he could see, he'd painted both of them into a corner. There was no other way for Rook to get the kind of happily ever after he wanted. At least this way, Frankie had been able to give him redemption and a moment of love between him and the series' female main lead, Lis.

But now it was just...gone.

He'd spent almost an hour combing through all of the files on his computer in the off chance he'd accidentally titled it something weird or saved it in a strange location. Of course, that wasn't the case. Then he'd run a full search. It was nowhere to be found. It'd just vanished. Like it had never existed to begin with.

Technically, the file itself was still there. At the top of the blank document was the title he'd saved it under Gold and Silver Chap 83. There was even the chapter header at the start of the page, the two words almost teasing him with their existence and the empty space that followed after them.

Had he...deleted it? He hadn't had that much to drink though, just enough to take the edge off so he could go

through with it. But there was no other explanation he could think of. His roommate, Adelaide, was currently studying abroad this semester, and they were the only two who had a key to the apartment.

Frankie groaned and dropped his head onto his folded arms on the table. All of that work and all of the trouble just to be able to do it *gone*. The only upside was he was ahead—his publisher already had the next two months' worth of chapters, so they wouldn't fall behind because of this—but still. It'd been difficult enough for Frankie to write it the first time. Now he had to do it all over again?

Killing off a main character, even a secondary one, wasn't exactly easy.

He wanted to cry.

He wanted to scream about how unfair it was.

He had to get ready for the release party.

Frankie peeled himself up off the floor of the living room, staring down at his computer one last time before forcing himself into motion. What he really wanted to do was pound out the chapter again while it was still somewhat fresh in his mind, but he couldn't be late for the party. No matter what had happened, Maggie had gotten a blank document in place of the chapter she'd been promised. Frankie couldn't follow up one mistake with another, which meant putting his own wants aside and getting his ass into gear.

It wasn't the end of the world, he tried to comfort himself as he got ready. Really, he should just be grateful that this was the first time a mistake like this had happened. He also made a mental note not to drink and write again. The only explanation was that when he'd thought he was hitting the save button, he must have actually been deleting.

He was an idiot.

Twenty minutes later, the ordeal was still swirling in his head when he pulled into the parking lot behind Troll Books. The store was situated on Main Street and was attached

to a bakery on the right and an antique jewelry shop on the left.

It was Halloween, and most storefronts had gone all out with their decorations. At first, Frankie hadn't been sure doing the event on a holiday made sense, but his agent had convinced him it would work out and he trusted her. Even though the official signing didn't start for another half hour, there were already a ton of people wandering about the plaza, some dressed in costume, others just going about their normal daily lives.

He glanced over at the box resting on the passenger seat next to him and sighed.

Frankie had written the first volume of Gold and Silver during his freshman and sophomore years of college. A new serial novel platform had opened up and he'd originally submitted thinking it would be good practice—he was majoring in Creative Writing, and the end goal was to one day become a published author. But he hadn't actually believed the serial novel format would get him anywhere.

At first, it'd appeared to be going the way he'd anticipated. He'd gotten a handful of readers on the first couple of chapters, some who were nice enough to leave feedback suggesting improvements or telling him they liked it—nothing negative. It'd been somewhere around chapter ten that suddenly things had changed. The story had gone from having a few followers to hundreds in less than a month, and those numbers had only grown.

The company hosting the novels had reached out, offering to sign him, and it'd taken him days to process that it was all real. He was going to be a published author, with a publisher and everything, and he hadn't even graduated from college yet.

They'd released Gold and Silver Volume One six months after he'd signed the contract, and it'd been a huge success. It'd meant Frankie had to step up his writing game, with an improved release schedule that released a chapter

every Sunday night, instead of the random times he'd done so in the past while struggling to write and maintain his GPA.

He'd gained enough popularity that Adelaide constantly joked that he should just drop out of school to avoid having all of that debt afterward, but he'd liked attending and understood the importance of continuing his education in the writing field. So, instead of leaving, he'd worked his ass off balancing both his work and school life, and all of that should have culminated in him graduating last semester.

If only he hadn't flunked Oceanography.

It was a general education class, required for graduation, so even though Frankie had more than enough credits and had completed all of the coursework required for his major, he'd been unable to receive a diploma. Admittedly, he'd cried that first day and had gotten wasted at Ignite, the local bar down the street from campus.

The strange part was when he'd asked his professor why she'd flunked him, she'd told him that he'd done crappy on his final presentation and then had failed to turn the material for said presentation in. It'd been worth seventy percent of their final grade, and without it, she'd given him an F.

Only, Frankie had turned that paper in. He was certain of it.

“Sort of like you didn't delete Chapter 83?” he mumbled to himself, yanking the top of the box off and tossing it into the back seat. He was frustrated and he needed to get his shit together. Signings were already draining enough as it was without him going into them already in a bad mood.

Because he'd still been in school, he'd been worried about his peers and his professors finding out about his book deal. Even when he'd first posted chapters online, he'd used a pen name, wanting to remain anonymous since it'd only been meant as a fun past time and a way for him to hone his skills. After being signed, he'd kept the pen name, and since the first signing event had been held at the local bookstore not far from

Willow Wills University where he attended, he'd come up with a "clever" disguise to help conceal his identity further.

Frankie pulled his mask from the box. It was the same one he'd worn to the first signing and the couple he'd done since. Tonight's event was to honor the release of Volume Two, and while Lucy, his agent, had suggested he get a new mask, he was particularly fond of this one.

It was in the shape of a white wolf, with gold dusted around the large eye holes, the snout, and the tips of the ears. When he'd been thinking up pen names to use, Frankie had jokingly gone with Cuthwulf, finding it funny. Now, having a moniker that meant "famous wolf" as a successful writer was more embarrassing than ironic. Since his fame was already synonymous with it, however, Frankie had no choice but to keep it.

By that point, he'd figured if he was already going to look ridiculous, he may as well go all in, hence his on-the-nose mask. It'd helped that there was a pretty popular masquerade chapter in Volume One. Fans had loved the added mystery to him and had started attending the other signings in masks of their own, so it'd worked out in his favor in the end.

Once he had the mask in place he checked his outfit one final time—he was in his nicest pair of black jeans and had on a white dress shirt with pale gold pinstripes to match the mask. He waited until he was sure no one was looking his way and then exited his car and sprinted through the packed lot toward the back entrance to the bookstore.

Posters had been hung up on the windows boasting about the event. For Volume One's launch, the company hired an artist to create images of the three main characters. Sage, Lis, and Rook all stared at Frankie as he approached, and it was stupid, but he purposefully avoided looking at the one of Rook.

The guy wasn't real, but he felt guilty about killing him off anyway.

Even if the first attempt hadn't taken and he was going to have to write the whole damn thing again.

He almost groaned aloud thinking about it, catching himself just in time as he made his way down the narrow back hall and slipped onto the main floor of the bookstore. He paused there, taking in the decorations and letting the anticipation of it all sink in and sweep away the stress of the missing chapter.

While it was true Frankie would be happier to stand off on the sidelines than be a focal point at these types of things, he couldn't deny the rush of excitement he felt when he saw that the store was already packed with people waiting for the event to begin.

He loved seeing people read his books, loved the swell of pride that came over him when he overheard them discussing it amongst themselves.

He didn't waste too much time taking it in, however, spotting Lucy over at the café section a moment later.

Lucy noticed him while he was on his way toward her, and she waved him over with a big smile on her face.

“Look! You're going to love these!” Lucy turned and made one last comment to one of the employees about the cookies set out on the table, then snatched one up and held it out to Frankie as he approached. “What do you think?”

The cookies were individually wrapped, some in see-through gold, others in silver or bronze—a color to represent each of the main characters. They were all shaped the same, stars the size of her palm, coated in a pale yellow icing and lightly dusted with copper glitter.

“And we've got these!” Lucy replaced the cookie, making sure it was perfectly lined up with the others on the table, and turned to grab another item off the counter.

Frankie accepted it when she held it out, admittedly impressed with the packaging. The chocolates were packaged in sets of three with a clear wrapper so the designs could easily be seen. They were the size of half dollars, a dark black with intricate gold crowns decorated on the tops.

“Hopefully these will appease the Archer fans,” Lucy said, tapping a long cherry red nail against the chocolates, “since we didn’t give her a cookie.”

Talia Archer was the villain in the trilogy, and while she wasn’t as popular as Sage or Rook, she still had a decent following despite how infrequently she appeared on the page.

“Maybe I should have made her less of a hot badass,” Frankie only half-joked, handing the chocolates back so Lucy could replace them.

“Bite your tongue.” One of the employees called Lucy’s name across the shop and she held up a hand to indicate she was coming. She motioned at Frankie to follow her and the two started walking. “What do you think? We went all out this time.”

Frankie dutifully took another look around the store.

Streamers and strings of silver and gold twinkle lights hung from the ceiling, some in spiraling patterns, others dripping straight downward over the tops of shelves and tables. Another poster depicting Frankie—in his mask—holding the second volume, smiling, was set in front of the area they’d sectioned off for the signing. There was a corkboard decorated with fan art in the corner by the back door, and a blank chalkboard in the opposite corner of the store for fans to write something while they waited for their turn or browsed.

Frankie passed a small table that boasted having this month’s top teen reads, and he paused. Masks had been set around the table, resting on top of book covers so the whole display was a glittery beacon in the center of the store.

He tapped the nose of one, a navy blue and gold half-mask with a black lace boarder around it. The tip of his finger came back covered in sparkles and he grimaced.

The scene in Volume One had seen Lis, the female main character, sneaking into the palace of her rival, Prince Sage. She’d been trying to collect information about his allies and their plans and had been able to move about due to the fact

she'd infiltrated his army already. Instead, she'd gotten caught up in a coup d'état, which had resulted in the death of Sage's father. She'd inadvertently saved the prince from undergoing the same fate, and the two of them had been thrust together from then on.

"People loved them so much," Lucy explained, coming back over to Frankie who was still staring down at the masks, "we decided we should bring them back even though there's no masquerade scene in book two. Anyway, I heard about the missed deadline."

"I'll get the chapter rewritten as soon as possible," Frankie promised.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "This is why we collect chapters months in advance. Besides, you've never missed a deadline before."

Frankie was meant to email Chapter Eighty-Three over this morning, but readers would be receiving Chapter Seventy-Six on the website in two days when Sunday rolled around. There *was* time.

Still.

"Let's get you over to the desk and ready to sign," Lucy told him, clearly seeing that he was still uncomfortable about his mistake. At twenty-five, she was only four years Frankie's senior, and more often than not, felt more like an older sister figure to him than anything else. She draped an arm around his shoulders, needing to stand up on her tiptoes in order to accomplish that, and then gave him another reassuring smile.

"Trust me," she said. "It's going to be fine."

"Yeah." He tried to return her cheer but only managed it to a degree.

"Fans will be lining up soon," she reminded.

Deciding not to let her down further, Frankie put the mystery of the deleted chapter aside and followed her over to the section of the store setup for him to sign.

Chapter 2:

It took two hours for Frankie to start to feel drained, plastering a smile on his face every time a new fan stepped up, the look a bit more forced each time.

The turnout had been better than expected, with a line still leading to the door, despite how long he'd been sitting there signing books. The stacks that had been set up on and around the long table he was seated at were dwindling for the third time, and after he finished signing the copy in his hands he motioned to Lucy that they needed to go in the back and bring out some more.

“I made this for you,” a girl in her early teens said excitedly as she stepped up. She opened a powder pink folder and took something out, sliding it across the shiny mahogany surface of the table.

Frankie grinned, feeling a rush of energy as he lifted the set of watercolor bookmarks to get a better look at them. There were four in total, each one depicting one of the main characters of the trilogy as well as Talia. They'd been hand drawn and colored with watercolors, flecks of gold, silver, and bronze paint added afterward for effect. On the backs, quotes from the characters had been written in fancy calligraphy handwriting.

“These are gorgeous!” Frankie told her. “You made them yourself?”

“Yes!” The girl tucked a strand of honey-blond hair behind her right ear shyly. “I just love the Gold and Silver trilogy.”

Frankie carefully set the bookmarks aside and grabbed one of the copies of Volume Two, flipping open the inside with his pen at the ready. The girl quickly gave him her name, and as he wrote it, Frankie asked, “Who's your favorite character?”

“Rook!”

His hand paused for the briefest of seconds in the middle of his signature. Hopefully the girl hadn't noticed.

"I just love him!" the girl continued to gush. "I know he's the antihero, but he's so great? I like that he's not a pushover and he's willing to do anything to get what he wants and protect his people."

"Sage wants what's best for his people too," Frankie said, knowing he shouldn't since he didn't want to give any hints away.

"He's my best friend's favorite," the girl told him, "but she couldn't come tonight. Can you sign this copy for her?" She placed another book on the table and Frankie smiled at her absently. "We went to your first signing together! It was super nice then too, but I think it's so cool that you hired cosplayers this time."

"What?" Frankie finished his signature and handed the books back, trying to mask his frown at the odd statement.

"He's standing outside!" the girl pointed toward the front door. "His costume is so realistic! And he looks exactly as I imagined! Did you help pick him out?"

"Gracie," the girl's mother sent Frankie an apologetic look and tried herding her daughter off to the side, "people are waiting for their turn."

"Thanks again!" the girl, Gracie, took the books and beamed at Frankie one last time before moving away so the line behind her could step forward.

"He really does look like Rook," the next girl to step up said. "The guy outside? Wow."

"We didn't hire anyone," Frankie confessed.

"Must just be a really serious fan getting into it for Halloween," the new girl told him with a shrug.

There were other people dressed in costume sprinkled around the bookstore, and a few had even been commented on to Frankie already. But he hadn't heard anything about the guy out front. He considered asking Lucy to check it out, then

opted against it. Chances were good, if he was a fan, he'd eventually jump in line to get his signature and Frankie would get to see him and his cosplay then.

The night kept moving onwards, and Frankie got swept up in the excitement. Fans hung around by the café, showing off their cupcakes and cookies and chocolates. Some debated over their favorite characters and why they were the best, others tried to guess what would happen in this week's chapter.

Frankie tried not to listen in too closely to the latter—or at least to not make it obvious that he was. He'd been worried already, but now he had to admit he was growing more and more nervous about rewriting that chapter that had gotten deleted. He'd already known how beloved Rook's character was, but having physical proof of that love up in his face like this was...a lot.

But he also didn't want to waver on his decision; it'd been hard enough for him to come to the conclusion he needed to kill Rook off in the first place.

"That was the last one," Lucy said when the line had finally come to an end. While there were still people in the bookstore, the crowd had thinned substantially over the last hour, the sky outside the windows inky black.

Frankie dropped his pen to the table with a light clatter and stretched his arms above his head, relishing the way his joints popped. He'd been sitting in that chair since the sun was still out, and now that he'd been made aware, he noted his right foot had fallen asleep and the fingers in his left hand were cramping some.

"Here." Lucy handed over a cupcake on a tiny plastic plate. "You haven't eaten in hours."

Frankie tried not to grimace at the Rook cupcake, probably would have gone so far as to ask for a Sage one if there hadn't still been a few lingering fans within earshot. Sucking it up, he took the dessert with a smile and ate it quickly—mostly to get it out of his sight.

How the hell was he supposed to write his death scene *again*? He couldn't even look at a cupcake in the man's kingdom colors.

The world of Gold and Silver was split into four kingdoms, Gold, Silver, Bronze, and Iron. The people of Gold could wield and manipulate daylight, while the people of Silver could control moonlight. Sage was the King of Gold, while Lis was—unbeknownst to him—a princess of Silver.

The people of Bronze had blood magic and were often referred to as the Demon sect. Rook was one of their princes. Though he'd never made an appearance in the episodes collected to make Volume One, he'd been referenced many times as the possible villain both Gold and Silver were out to stop. By Volume Two, however, they'd realized that Talia Archer, the Queen of Iron, was their biggest threat.

The people of Iron had control over shadows, and those who were very powerful could even create beings out of them called the Gloom.

For fun, Frankie had given each of the kingdoms a color to help represent them, but now, surrounded by spots of Red, he was regretting that choice. It was almost laughable, how nervous he was about killing off one of his characters in his own story.

It was what Rook needed too. It was the only way Frankie could see him being able to die a true hero and not just the antihero. He'd protected his people and saved the woman he loved as his final moment. It didn't get much more heroic than that. Surely readers would see it from that perspective as well.

Right?

"I'm going to start cleanup," Lucy told him then, already busily checking things off a list on the clipboard she always carried around with her. "Are you going to stick around?"

Frankie only had one class—damn Oceanography—because he'd been forced to take it again to qualify for his

diploma and he'd already attended it today. His weekend was pretty much free, so there was no real rush to get home, but...

"I should probably get home and do that rewrite," he said, and something about his tone must have clued Lucy in because she stopped what she'd been doing and turned to him with a frown.

"Hey," she came over and rested a hand on his arm, "are you having second thoughts again?"

He snorted. "Always."

"We've talked about this," she reminded. "Do what you feel is right. It's your story, Frankie. You get to decide."

Technically, there was a meeting every couple of months where he was asked by the publisher to give them a rough idea of where he thought the plot was going, but yes, for the most part, she was telling the truth. It was his story.

"Kind of hard to believe while surrounded by all of this," he grumbled, taking a look around.

There was a group of teens, two girls and a guy, huddled in front of one of the life-size standees of Rook, taking a selfie less than twenty feet away.

"It's your fault for making Rook so great," Lucy teased.

"Is he?" Frankie had always thought he was kind of an ass, but he could see what Lucy meant. Even he'd fallen victim to Rook's charms. In the real world, his type was typically more like Sage's character, warm and friendly. But in fiction...He'd never admit it out loud, hadn't told anyone, even his roommate and best friend, but he'd had a secret crush on Rook for ages now.

That was probably another reason it was so hard for him to write that chapter.

"Did you see the cool costume everyone was talking about?" he asked, mostly to distract himself. If he started thinking about how much *he* liked Rook, it'd be game over. "Apparently someone came dressed like him."

“A few people came dressed like him,” Lucy corrected, but he shook his head.

There’d been costumes, sure, but nothing as realistic as the fans who’d spoken to Frankie had suggested. It was to be expected, as a Demon Prince, Rook had a lot going for him in the looks department, including four massive curved horns, two on each side of the top of his head, black claws, and a tail. Not the simplest of costumes to put together.

“He supposedly looked like the real deal,” Frankie said.

“I didn’t see him.” Lucy glanced around as if she’d get lucky and he’d still be there somewhere, letting out a disappointed sigh when there was nothing. “Bummer. Hopefully he’ll post to social media and tag us.” She started ordering her workers to help clean, shooing him away when he tried to help.

Too tired to argue, Frankie said his goodbyes and exited the bookstore the same way he’d entered, undoing the wolf mask as soon as he’d made it back to his car and was sure there was no one around. It was a lot easier than it’d been when he’d arrived, with the parking lot all but dead by this point, and all of the cars that were there were parked closer to the front entrance.

He thought about the chapter the entire drive, trying to replay the exact wording he’d used the first time. As a pantsner, the type of writer who didn’t like to overly plot things out, Frankie’s first attempts at a chapter were always the best. They held more flow and passion, and more often than not he joked that it was more like he saw a movie playing in his head and he was merely jotting down everything he saw, instead of creating it himself. When he wrote, he could hear the characters speaking in their individual voices. Sometimes, if he was really in it deep, he could even smell some of the details, like the wet grass of the Hem forest in Bronze, where Rook and Lis had been meeting before the attack which would result in his ended life.

Having to write that all again...It wouldn't be the same. It would lack something that the original hadn't. Sort of like how the suspense and thrill were removed the second time one watched a movie. The first viewing had mystery and appeal; the second had less since the viewer already knew what was going to happen.

By the time he'd made it back to his apartment, the frustration had built up inside him with renewed ferocity. He didn't want this new version to be somehow less than the first draft, and he was so lost in his head trying to replay each and every interaction, that he'd already unlocked his door before processing he was even home.

That was probably also why he didn't notice the shadowy figure looming off to his right until it was too late.

Thinking it was merely a trick of the light, he frowned and turned, expecting to find it was nothing more than the bush, blinking when instead the shrouded outline of a large body started to form.

Frankie opened his mouth—either to scream or ask who was there, he honestly wasn't sure which—but a large hand shot from the darkness, sealing over his lips. With a strength that had his heart plummeting to his ankles, his attacker shoved him backward, over the threshold and into his apartment.

His heel caught on the edge of the throw rug in the hallway and he stumbled, landing with a solid whack on his ass. Pain radiated up his spine.

The shadowy figure eased his way in after him, slowly, like he had all the time in the world. The door clicked shut behind him, and after a brief pause, he reached out and tapped the light switch on the left wall.

The overhead light flickered to life, bright golden beams illuminating Frankie's attacker instantly.

Frankie's mouth dropped open, the world coming to a fuzzy standstill as his mind struggled to piece together what he was seeing.

“Rook?”

Chapter 3:

There was something both thrilling and terrifying about coming face to face with an exact replica of a character you created. Frankie was forced to acknowledge this fact as he stared up at the towering man who'd just roughly shoved him into his apartment building one-handed.

Even from where he still sat on the floor, Frankie could easily place his six two height—of course, because he'd waffled between adding an extra inch or not when he'd first created him. He could also imagine the defined muscles that were hidden beneath his silk and leather clothing, could envision the way his long torso tapered off at the hips, could picture the thick scar across his right thigh...

Frankie violently shook his head and bolted to his feet. This must be him, the cosplayer everyone was talking about all night. He looked way too much like Frankie's character not to be, the likeness was practically uncanny. It was almost like this person, whoever he was, had crawled into his head and snatched every last detail of Rook from his mind.

Even the exact curvature of those horns. The front set were straighter, closer to the top of his forehead, aiming backward where they met with the second set. This set was longer and curled more like rams horns. They were both dark maroon with black tips, the same inky shade as the set of claws on his hands.

His outer jacket was crimson, hugging his upper body and opening at his hips. It trailed down to his calves. There were hints of black, bronze, and gold detailing. Leather pants were tucked into knee high boots, and he was wearing fingerless gloves. Finally, his hair, a burgundy red, was left long and down, just past his shoulders, the exact shade Frankie had always imagined it being.

He shifted on his feet and the light caught the solid piece of bronze at the center of the leather wrap around his waist.

“Where did you get that?” the words were out of Frankie’s mouth before he could think twice, feet carrying him a few steps closer. He reached out to brush a finger against the belt buckle.

The royal crest had an intricate capital R at the center, flanked by two leopards—which Frankie had written as orange in that world. There was a crown at the top of the design, one with sharp tips and harsh angles. This same crest used to have a D instead, to represent his house name, but after Volume One, as soon as Rook had taken over from his father, he’d changed it.

Absently, his eyes drifted back down to his thigh.

The man made a hissing sound and yanked away, the force of the move causing Frankie to lose balance and almost fall forward against him.

Luckily, he caught himself before contact could be made, slamming a palm against the entranceway wall to hold himself up.

“Look,” the severity of his situation rushed back to him and he straightened, retreating a bit to put distance between them, “it’s flattering that you like my books and all, but this is breaking and entering. You need to leave now, or I’m going to have to call the cops.”

The man tilted his head, hard gaze sweeping down his body with clear distaste.

A lump formed in his throat, dread causing his heart to pump a bit faster, and Frankie forced himself to swallow and focus.

“You are not what I expected,” the man spoke suddenly, voice low and smooth, the timber causing shivers to travel down Frankie’s spine.

Not because it was an attractive voice.

Because it sounded *exactly* like how he’d always imagined Rook’s voice would sound.

He didn't even care that the way he said it made it clear he wasn't pleased by what he saw. Frankie was too freaked out to feel offended.

"I'm a writer," he found himself replying anyway, "not a celebrity. It doesn't matter what I look like so long as I get the books done. Did you follow me from the bookstore?" He pulled his cell phone from his back pocket, not giving him time to answer. "I'm serious about the police. You need to leave, now."

He chuckled darkly, causing Frankie's hackles to rise, and took a single step closer. "Do. I'm curious how well trained your protection in this world is. You were kind enough to give me Ivan." He glanced absently over Frankie's shoulder, peering briefly down the hall toward the kitchen and living room. "Do you have a head of security as well?"

Ivan Flare was Rook's one and only friend. The two had grown up in the Bronze palace together, and Ivan's job had always been to protect his prince from any and all threats.

He took his job very seriously, so much so, it was rare for the two of them not to be seen together. Or, at the very least, for Ivan not to be hiding in the shadows, secretly protecting Rook from the sidelines.

At the mention of him, Frankie felt another sweeping wave of dread. Was he hinting that he had a partner? Was there someone else currently trying to get into the apartment? Were they already here?

For the first time he regretted insisting they go with the condo style apartments and not just grabbing a two bedroom in a building like Adelaide had suggested. Frankie hadn't wanted to worry about a ton of noisy neighbors distracting him while he was trying to work, and with his current situation, there were only the neighbors on either side.

It also meant, however, that there wasn't any added security. Just the parking lot and a brief walk to Frankie's front door where one needed an old-fashioned metal key to get in.

Because these weren't college apartments, despite how close they were located, there wasn't even on campus police to patrol the area. No one would come unless Frankie called, and something told him, despite this guys bravado, there was no way he was going to let Frankie dial 911.

Frankie wasn't exactly small, but at only 5'11" he was rather short in comparison to this guy. He was fit too, but not nearly as much so as the attacker, and while he'd taken self-defense classes, he got the impression physically fighting wasn't going to do him much good here.

"What do you want?" he asked, since threats didn't seem to be getting through to him. When the guy took another step closer, Frankie retreated three. Now was so not the time to let pride get in the way, not when there was a crazy psycho in his house.

For a moment, it didn't appear as though he was going to answer, but then, through clenched teeth, he stated darkly, "Lis."

"What?" Frankie blinked at him, caught off guard. "Then...go...find...her?"

Did he have a cosplaying girlfriend as well as someone dressed as Ivan out there?!

Enough was enough. Frankie lifted the phone, opting to take the chance, quickly hitting the home button to turn the device on, relieved to find it wasn't broken after he'd been shoved onto his ass earlier. He'd just turned on the phone app, when the guy clamped a hand on his wrist.

His grip was strong, almost to the point of pain, and he tugged Frankie forward so that his feet practically shot off the ground. In the next instant, he had him slammed back against the wall, the framed photos of Frankie and Adelaide rattling from the impact. He tightened his hold, and Frankie let out a cry, unable to hold onto the phone any longer.

The device dropped to the ground, and as soon as it was on the floor, the man kicked it away.

Using his much larger frame, he crowded Frankie against the wall, blocking him in on either side while keeping his captured wrist pinned in place.

A rush of indignation flickered through the overwhelming fear. Clearly there was something wrong with this guy, whoever he was. He was taking this whole roleplaying thing way too far, had obviously spent a lot of time and money perfecting his costume...There had to be something legitimate that he wanted to get out of this, Frankie just had to figure out what that was.

“I’m going to need you to backup, asshole,” Frankie found himself saying a second later, part of him panicking at the sound of his own words, urging himself to shut up before he made things worse. He’d always had a bad temper when cornered, and it appeared that it overrode his survival instincts. “Let’s try and use our big boy words instead of flexing our muscles, yeah? I can’t exactly help you if you give me a concussion.”

His head had rebounded off the wall pretty good just now, and he was not pleased about it. If the guy started breaking things, however, that anger would quickly turn to fear and then Frankie would lose any semblance of alertness. He couldn’t have that. Better to keep him focused on Frankie, get to the bottom of why he was here, and end this.

The guy’s brow furrowed slightly, almost like Frankie caught him off guard with his language. Sadly, he recovered quickly. “I expected help to arrive sooner. Do you really need to call them in order for them to get here?” He glanced at the phone, frown deepening. “That seems useless. Why would an enemy give you enough time to do that?”

“I don’t have enemies,” he told him.

He grunted. “What do you call me then?”

“A crazy person?”

His eyes narrowed. “I suppose you’d know better than anyone if that’s true or not. You did, after all, create me.”

Okay...

“Jesus,” he exhaled sharply, the full weight of his situation coming down on him, “you really are insane aren’t you? You don’t actually...” He shook his head, managed a humorless chuckle somehow. “No. You can’t think that. You’re just messing around, right? You don’t really believe that you’re—”

“Rook Dalibor,” he cut him off, pausing for a moment, like he was waiting for his words to settle in. “Take your time. Trust me, it took a while for me to come to grips with who *you* really are as well. I spent the day wandering around in a daze. Fortunately, I’m not really one for an existential crisis.” He hummed in the back of his throat. “You didn’t really make me that way. I suppose, ironically, for that I should be grateful.”

Frankie couldn’t help it. He laughed.

“Finding out your creation is real is not nearly as disturbing as discovering your creator is,” the guy said, “believe me. If that’s even what you and I really are. My world exists. Whether you made it or not, it’s real and it functions on its own.”

“What?” What the hell was going on here?

“I read your books, at least the first two,” he told him, glancing at his cell phone on the ground again quickly before getting back on track. “Even when I wasn’t written on the page, I was living my life. You and the readers just couldn’t see it. So either you’re actually a psychic who can glimpse into my world, or I really live in a fictional place which you have the ability to control. I’m hoping it’s the latter.”

Frankie gaped at him. “Why?”

Who would prefer to be fake? Even in his delusion this guy was crazy.

“Because,” he brought his face closer, so that Frankie could make out the streaks of glittering bronze in his brown eyes, “that means you have the power to change things.”

“Change things?” he parroted, well aware that he was being stupid right now. But, really, the guy *was* massively insane. It was clear by his expression that he well and truly

believed everything he was saying. He really thought he was Rook, a character Frankie had *made up*.

Sure, the similarities were spot on, in a creepy way even. But that didn't mean—

“Like my death, for one.”

Frankie stilled. He hadn't told anyone about killing off Rook, not even Lucy. The most he'd mentioned to his manager was that he was unsure about a big event. It'd been a well-kept secret, so much so, he hadn't even written it down in his notes for fear of Adelaide snooping. And she *was in Korea*. That's how paranoid he'd been with this information, and yet somehow...

“How...How do you know about that?” Frankie was not buying into his nonsense, not even a little, but...That was admittedly weird. “You guessed, right? I mean, that was a seriously good guess, wow. Wait,” he locked eyes with him, “you didn't tell anyone, did you?”

If he'd told this massive spoiler to *anyone* Frankie was seriously going to lose it.

“You can't go around spoiling the ending for other—”

He slammed his palm against the wall by his head, startling Frankie into silence. “Is that all you care about? You don't even feel a little bit bad for me? For taking my life?”

The proximity between them had increased, so that Frankie's face was now close to the guy's neck and he could no longer meet his gaze while talking. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, the fear and the worry clouding his mind and vision, but once they did, they focused on something he hadn't noticed before.

Frankie reacted, free hand reaching out to snatch at the silver chain peeking from beneath his collar. He tugged the pendant he knew was attached out from hiding.

His boldness must have shocked the guy, because he shot back a step, eyes going wide when Frankie followed, all of his focus on the delicate piece of jewelry he was now holding.

The medallion was no bigger than a dime, with a tiny griffon head embossed on the center.

Griffons were the national animal of Silver, Lis's kingdom. She'd gotten this particular necklace as a gift from her uncle when she'd been six, but she'd never worn it before. It hadn't been mentioned in the books, and in Chapter Eighty-Two, she'd gifted it to Rook just before they'd been attacked and he'd died.

Chapter Eighty-Two hadn't been published yet.

"What are you—" he sounded affronted, but Frankie wasn't listening to him anymore.

Frankie shoved him back in a move that mirrored his earlier one, somewhat pinning the man to the opposite wall while his hands pulled his collar away. The move exposed a swath of tanned skin, the strong curve of his neck...

...And the still healing cut.

It wasn't very deep, but it was clearly fresh, the wound still red and caked in flakes of dried blood. Frankie was no expert, but if he had to guess, it looked like he'd gotten it sometime late last night or early this morning.

The scene played through his head uncalled for, Rook shoving Lis out of the way of an incoming arrow just in time. How three of Archer's soldiers had appeared then and attacked, wielding their traditional throwing knives. Distracted with trying to keep both himself and Lis safe, Rook had taken a hit to the neck.

"Barely a scratch," Frankie whispered, recalling the exact words he'd used when writing the scene out last night.

"The blow I delivered in turn was far from," the guy said, tone dropping so that he was speaking almost as softly as he was. "I slit his throat clean through."

"No." Frankie spun around, practically running toward his bedroom, passing the kitchen and making his way through the living room in order to reach the door he'd left open in his rush to get to class this morning.

He ran a hand through his black hair and dropped to his knees in front of a set of short drawers. It'd been so long since he'd last taken the item he was looking for out, and he ended up having to pull open two of the drawers with no luck before he finally found the small wooden box he'd stashed at the bottom.

There weren't many things from his childhood that he'd kept, but there was one, a gift from his uncle that he'd gotten on his tenth birthday. Frankie whipped the lid open and reached inside, moving other things around as he dug for it.

The only explanation was this guy had been in Frankie's apartment while he'd been at school. Since the pages of the final chapter had already been deleted, it still wouldn't make sense how this guy knew about that final scene, but Chapter Eighty-Two was on Frankie's computer, and that necklace—

...Was right here. In the box. Where it was supposed to be.

Bile rose up the back of his throat as he slowly pulled the necklace free from the box. He held it up, staring at the tiny medallion with the griffon on it. Identical to the one currently being worn by the guy who'd just attacked him.

Just as Frankie was starting to question everything he thought he knew, something shot over his shoulder, grabbing at the necklace, and yanking it away.

He spun around, about to yell at the guy, only to have the words die in his throat.

The guy had taken the necklace from Frankie, but he hadn't used his hands to do it. Instead, he brought the medallion up to his face, clutching the end of the chain tightly.

With his tail.

"Why do you have this?" he asked, clearly perplexed.

"Why do you have *that*!?" Frankie retaliated, pointing at his tail. He desperately wanted to pretend that it was fancy animatronics, but...It was real. It was moving, and it was real

and— He shot to his feet and grabbed at one of those horns without thinking, tugging hard enough to jerk the guy's head.

The horn didn't budge.

"That's not glued on." He let go, ignoring the curses being thrown his way, and dropped down onto the edge of his bed, feeling suddenly like the world was ending. "You have horns and a tail."

"You gave them to me," the guy growled, rubbing at his horn and glaring at Frankie.

"Just," he held up a hand, dropping his head into the other, "hold on a second."

There was a moment of silence and then, "Ah, so you believe me now."

"People don't have working tails here," Frankie snapped.

The guy—*Rook*—frowned. "I saw many tails while I wandered your kingdom today."

It took Frankie a second but then he groaned. "It's Halloween. What you saw were costumes. People dressing up for fun."

"Like demons?" He hummed. "Interesting."

"That's probably why you got away with looking like this," Frankie motioned down his body. "Tomorrow you won't have as much luck." It hit him what he was saying and he grimaced. "How do you go back?"

"The question you should be asking yourself is how you're going to satisfy me enough to let you continue breathing."

Right, *Rook*—that was still going to take some getting used to—was dangerous. Frankie had written him that way. Not entirely evil, but nowhere near good either. He was ruthless, and daring, and pretty much everyone, including Talia Archer, feared him to some degree.

And he was currently standing in the middle of Frankie's tiny bedroom.

"Yeah, sure. I'll get right on that." It would be smart to be afraid, and he was, but at the same time...this was all just so impossible?

"I'm sensing some sarcasm," Rook said, eyes narrowing. "Be careful, creator. I'm not above taking my extremely shitty day out on you."

"Haven't you already been doing that?" Frankie wasn't exactly having a stellar day himself. "Fictional characters don't just come to life. This is the real world."

"My world felt real to me, too," he stated.

"What's your favorite color?" The tail had done it for him, but that didn't mean he wasn't after more proof.

He hadn't written about Rook's favorite color in any of the books, but he'd had a discussion about it at random with Adelaide one night last year when they'd been out drinking with some of their classmates.

"Gray," Rook said, and Frankie snapped his fingers.

"Ha!" He'd caught him. "Wrong. His favorite color is purple."

His mouth twisted in disgust. "My mother was murdered beneath a wisteria tree. I can't stand the color purple."

"Damn." Frankie's shoulder slumped. "Why didn't I think of that?"

The death of Rook's mother was a major life altering event for him, one that had greatly helped to make him the man he was today.

"You still wake up in a cold sweat from nightmares," he recalled. "Of course that color would be triggering for you. It's a good thing I didn't actually put that in a book otherwise ___"

“Are you fucking serious right now?” His harsh words had Frankie jolting in surprise. “I didn’t come here to listen to you talk about your technique or watch you sit in some quaint little shop greeting subjects like you’re royalty.”

At least that proved that he had in fact been the cosplayer outside the bookstore.

“How did you find me there?” Frankie asked.

“This town is small,” Rook replied. “I saw the posters.”

Frankie inspected his face a little more seriously. “I tried to work closely with the artist who drew them to get you all as perfectly depicted as possible.”

“That drawing looks nothing like me.”

Frankie bristled. “It’s close enough.” As far as problems went, him liking the posters was pretty low on Frankie’s list. “How did you get here? To my world, I mean?”

Some of the irritation in his gaze dwindled. “I’m not sure.”

It was hard to tell what upset him more, the fact that he *was* here, or the fact that he didn’t know *how* he was here. The Rook Frankie had created was a control freak.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” When he glared, Frankie rolled his eyes. “Look, right now you and I are both in the same messed up predicament. I don’t have any idea what’s going on either, so if we talk it out together, maybe we can figure out what the fuck happened and get you back home where you belong.”

“Where you can finish me off,” he accused, “you mean.”

“Just tell me.”

Rook exhaled in frustration. “I was on the Cliffs of Hem, with Lis. We’d been attacked and I was mortally wounded. She had me in her lap.”

“You told her you loved her,” Frankie nodded, ignoring the flash of anger in Rook’s gaze at that. “Then?”

“I died,” he snapped. “And then I woke up here.”

“Here?”

Rook pointed out the door. “In there, technically.”

Frankie stood, giving the other man as wide of a berth as he could manage in this cramped room, and walked to the living room. This space was bigger, though not by much. There was a single couch and a set of drawers with a tv on it, and a coffee table. Frankie’s laptop was still on the table.

“Right where you’re standing,” Rook told him when he rounded the table to stand in front of his computer. It was the spot between it and the single bay window. “I woke up there. My injuries were gone.” He swallowed. “And I was alone.”

Like the color purple, that was also a trigger for him, one that Frankie understood because it’d been a feature he’d plucked straight from his own psyche.

But that didn’t matter right now.

He dropped to his knees and clicked the computer, waking it from sleep mode. The same blank page that’d been there when he’d left for the event filled the screen. “It looks normal.”

The chapter had been there when Frankie had woken up this morning. He’d quickly saved and sent it to his editor and then had rushed out the door, already late for class. When he’d returned four hours later, it’d been gone.

“Do you know what time it was?” he asked.

“The sun was high in the sky,” Rook thought it over, “so probably mid-afternoon.”

“Most likely an hour or so after I left then.” Was that why the chapter had vanished? “Did you touch this?”

“I didn’t even know what that was,” Rook said.

“You do now?”

“I read about it.”

“It doesn’t make any sense.” Frankie opted to focus on how he’d somehow come through the computer.

“You are incredibly annoying,” Rook told him. “Haven’t you gotten over the shock yet? Strange things happen all the time. That’s how the world works.”

“Not my world,” Frankie corrected. “Not this world.”

He gave him a droll stare. “I don’t believe that at all. But then, I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that everything currently happening in my home is all because of you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re tiny.”

“I’m above average height.” For both an Asian and American man. Something told him explaining his mom was Chinese and that made him half and he was actually taller than most of her family would make much of a difference. Some of his cousins on his dad’s side were taller than him at around six feet, but that still didn’t make him short by any sense of the word.

“You have no fighting skills,” Rook added.

“We haven’t even fought,” he said, before he could think better of it. “You snuck up behind me!”

“Yes, that’s typically how enemies attack.” It was clear Rook found him amusing now. “You also don’t know how to match your socks.”

“I—” Frankie dropped his gaze to his feet. He’d gone all out with this outfit, planning it to the very last detail so he’d look great at the signing.

Except for his socks, which he’d grabbed on the way to class this morning and hadn’t thought of changing out of even when he’d switched to dress shoes for the event, one was a pale pink while the other was white.

“I’ll give you that,” he ended up saying, because whether he liked it or not, the truth was the truth.

And the truth was there was a very real yet incredibly fictional character in his apartment, one who had the ability to snap Frankie in half if he so wished.

Deciding to switch tactics, Frankie opened his mouth to say something nice instead in an attempt to defuse the situation, but movement out of the corner of his eye distracted him. He turned toward the entranceway and sucked in a breath. “Shit!”

His reaction shot Rook into motion, and the prince spun on his heels just in time to avoid the sharp end of the knife coming straight for his gut. He twisted to the side, grabbing onto his attacker’s wrist, also giving Frankie a good look at the perpetrator at the same time.

The air got caught in his lungs.

He knew him too.

Neko was Talia Archer’s right-hand man.

He’d also been the one who’d shot Rook at the cliffs that day.

And now he was here, being thrown against Frankie’s refrigerator.

Frankie felt his vision cloud over, and almost lost feeling in his legs. He probably would have passed out even, if not for what happened next.

Neko climbed off the ground, looked Frankie dead in the eye, and rushed him.

Chapter 4:

Rook recovered quickly, pulling himself off the ground of the small kitchen as he summoned his sword with his magic.

But not quickly enough.

Neko rushed Frankie with his fists, having dropped his weapon during his and Rook's brief scuffle. He swung, clearly surprised when things didn't go as he'd planned.

Rook had to admit, he was a bit surprised himself.

Frankie ducked under the swinging arm, twirling deftly on his feet like a dancer to come up behind him. Then he lashed out, kicking at the side of Neko's right leg, right behind the knee. The move effectively took him down.

Neko slammed to his knees and Frankie backed away.

Without much thought, Rook reached out and grabbed onto Frankie's wrist, positioning him behind himself. There was no telling what would happen to him if his creator was murdered, and he wasn't willing to take the chance. Especially not when Frankie had yet to rewrite the story like Rook wanted.

When he'd first arrived in this place, he'd been confused, certain that the Iron had done something to him, trapped him somewhere. Outside, the world had been strange and foreign, with massive structures and moving metal monsters. It was good that he'd ended up at the bookstore, where he'd been able to read up on this world.

Even that had soured however when store employees had begun setting up for the signing event, and Frankie's books had been organized and displayed on a round table.

Books with depictions of Rook, Lis, and Sage on them.

Then, he'd been stunned, snatching the nearest copy of Volume One up only to flip through the pages like a madman.

He'd always believed his reading skill a gift, his photographic memory and intelligence something to boast

about. Something that set him apart from his brothers and the rest of Visera. He remembered training in the dead of night as a child, when the rest of his clan was asleep, intent on proving his worth.

Back then, he'd worked so hard his hands and feet had constantly blistered and bled, but in the end he'd accomplished his goal. He was the most powerful demon in the Bronze Kingdom, one of the most powerful people in the world as a whole. Rook had always taken pride in that, because, even with all else against him, *he'd* made it happen.

Only, according to those books, he hadn't.

According to those books, he wasn't responsible for any of the things that had taken place his entire life.

Him being born weaker than his siblings?

He could thank Frankie Harlow for that.

His father hating him upon sight?

Frankie Harlow.

Lis falling for that pretentious dick of a king Sage Fallon?

Frankie. Fucking. Harlow.

Rook's mother's death?

He almost shoved Frankie toward Neko after all, bitter that he couldn't. There were still too many unanswered questions, but as soon as he discovered the answers he sought, as soon as it became clear he didn't need Frankie in order to keep him and the rest of Visera alive and running, he'd destroy the creator himself.

And he'd enjoy it.

But first, he'd have to take care of the Iron asshole rising to his feet.

Neko took one look at Rook's blade—thick enough it was as wide as his entire hand, and probably heavier than Neko could manage even if he somehow wrested it away—and

must have come to that same conclusion for he took a step back instead.

He wasn't retreating, however. Bringing his hands out in front of himself, Neko mumbled something under his breath, too quiet for Rook to hear.

Not that he needed to. It wasn't the first time he was seeing a summoning.

He swore and rushed forward, but for the second time that night, he was too slow.

The Gloom formed quickly, a dark shape spiraling out from between Neko's cupped hands. It swirled and grew in size, like a tiny tornado of ash, and burst toward Rook with a screech that pierced his eardrums and stunned his senses.

Gloom's were annoying on a good day.

Today was not a good day.

Rook brought up his weapon and called on his magic. The blade started to glow a dim orange-red and he sliced it through the air at the Gloom.

It severed the creature in half, tendrils of red snaking throughout the cloud before it could reform. The scream got worse, increasing in volume before turning so shrill that Rook was forced to slap his hands over his ears.

Fortunately, it didn't last long. A moment later the Gloom burst into a cloud of dust, tiny bits of ash raining down all over the living room.

Behind him, Frankie began to cough, but Rook was unaffected, his gaze searching through the dissipating cloud for signs of Neko. Only, the other side of the room was now empty. He spun around, but there was only Frankie at his back and with another curse, he turned toward the hallway leading to the exit.

Rook raced down it, even knowing that it was too late. He stopped at the threshold, peering out into the night across what he'd read was called a parking lot. It was dark and

though many lights were on in nearby buildings and cars still littered the streets there was no sign of Neko.

He stepped back inside, slammed the door shut, and twisted the lock for good measure. He'd been foolish earlier for assuming that there was no danger here, should have made sure the place was locked from the get-go. A mistake he would not make again.

Storming back into the living room, he paused when he found Frankie hadn't budged a single inch. His eyes were locked on the floor, where a white—or, at least, it had been white—area carpet was set beneath the small table.

“I want to be angry,” Frankie said as Rook moved back up to his side, surprising him with how calm he sounded, “but all I keep thinking is this must be how Gus felt when Lis accidentally lured the Gloom to his home and destroyed the place.”

Rook took in the damage. It wasn't too bad, considering there'd only been one of the creature, though there was no way that ash was coming out of the white rug. The couch might be salvageable...it was already a dark gray, so there was a chance.

“Oh,” Frankie continued when Rook didn't speak, “that was a few months ago. Lis—”

“I know,” Rook cut him off. He hadn't been there when it'd happened, had actually never met this Gus person Frankie was speaking of. However... “I read the books.”

“Oh,” Frankie repeated, a bit dejectedly this time. His shoulders slumped a little. “No wonder you're so pissed off.”

Frankie had written many things, personal and otherwise. He'd gotten into Rook's head, spread him out on the page for all to see. It'd been unsettling to see thoughts that Rook had never shared with anyone before printed in ink. Some of them he'd forgotten he'd even had, some were mere fleeting sensations and nothing more.

He was disturbed, but that hadn't stopped him from reading each and every word, including the ones about Lis and

Sage.

He wasn't the only one Frankie had lain bare.

Lis's thoughts had been there too. Her struggle with hiding her identity while she infiltrated the Gold army, pretending to be one of them. How hard it was for her to keep up the rouse when she started getting closer to Sage. She'd tried to resist her growing feelings, but had been unable to.

With no other options, Rook had decided to place the blame for that on Frankie, because the alternative...

Lis was meant to be with him. Not Sage. She had feelings for him too, he'd read it plain as day in the books. She cared for him, it was just that Sage was in the way. But he didn't have to be. Not with Frankie at the helm of everything.

Of course, nothing was ever that easy, especially not in Rook's experience, and now that he was here, he found his conviction already wavering.

Did he really want to mess with someone else's emotions? Manipulate them into doing something—like choosing him—that they otherwise wouldn't?

Wouldn't that make him no better than the creator he'd come here to berate?

He shoved those thoughts down, not wanting to face that possibility. He deserved a happy ending after all the shit he'd been put through.

"Do you think he came through when you did?" Frankie asked, breaking the silence a second time. At Rook's frown, he elaborated. "There's no gate there, at Hem Cliff's? But the more I think about it, the more that's the only thing that makes sense. You slipped through an active gate and entered the real world."

Gates were magical doorways that led to other areas of Visera, but he'd never heard of one leading to any other world or universe. Leave it to him to be the first to make that delightful discovery.

Rook had always had poor luck.

“Scientists have been talking about the possibility of alternate universes forever,” Frankie continued, mostly to himself. It was clear from an outside perspective he was simply trying to sort through these events the best he knew how. “Portals tearing through time and space to create doors into an alternate reality. Is a fictional world still considered an alternate reality?”

“Don’t call it that,” Rook snapped. He saw the hypocrisy, but couldn’t bring himself not to. He didn’t want to think about how his home, his life, was maybe nothing more than a made up story concocted by the man before him. But he also needed that to be the case in order for his fate to change.

All things with Lis aside, there was a much bigger plot point he wanted to fix. If Frankie wasn’t in control, that meant the moment Rook got back home, he’d be right back on the cliff, dying in the arms of the person he cared for the most.

Not ideal.

“How old are you, anyway?” Rook guessed young. Many of the people who’d shown up at the book event had been as well. There’d been an about the author section in the back of the books, but it’d consisted of a couple of lines and little more, all using the pen name that Frankie seemed to go by. Rook wouldn’t have even known it was a fake name if he hadn’t heard the bubbly blonde woman who’d met with Frankie at the event call him by his real one.

After that, he’d recalled seeing it written on papers here when he’d woken in the morning, and it’d been simple enough to put two and two together.

“Why don’t you want anyone to know your real identity?” he asked. As much as he loathed admitting it, the creator wasn’t unattractive. In fact, the moment he’d pulled the mask off his face in the parking lot, Rook’s breath had actually caught in his throat.

Thankfully he’d been alone. The last thing he needed was for the other man to know he found him pleasing to the eye. He was lithe, with a toned frame and oval shaped face. He had a strong jawline, but soft features otherwise, the type of

gorgeous that felt approachable and would have people flocking in a bid to gain his attention.

Frankie was the kind of attractive that couldn't be ignored, so he had to know he was hot. Which meant he wasn't hiding because he was embarrassed about his looks.

"From what I've gathered, your profession is considered a good one in your world." It was in his as well, but with the Four Kingdoms all at war, people paid more mind to soldiers and rulers than storytellers.

"I turn twenty-two in a couple of months," Frankie said, but he didn't answer the second question. "That was a Gloom. Like, an actual, real shadow monster."

"It was."

"I shouldn't have made them so..." Frankie made a face at the ash, "messy."

"There are a lot of things you shouldn't have written," Rook drawled. "But you're going to fix them."

"How?" He finally seemed to come out of his daze, turning toward Rook with a glare. "And what about Neko?"

"What about him?"

"We can't just leave him out there," Frankie stated. "My world isn't equipped to deal with an Iron the way yours is. What if he attacks someone?"

"I suppose that'll be another tragedy you're responsible for."

Frankie's jaw clenched and Rook waved his hand, so that his sword vanished, before crossing his arms.

"What? Did I hit a nerve?" He hadn't said anything wrong.

"I'm a *fiction* writer," Frankie snapped.

"Do I not look real enough to you?" Rook growled back. "Like it or not, I'm here."

“Yeah, and so is the psychotic right-hand of the most evil woman in all of Visera,” Frankie reminded. He rubbed at his temple, jumping a second later when music started to randomly play. His surprise didn’t last, however, and he shook his head at himself as he went to the small hallway and retrieved something off the floor.

Rook had read about what a cell phone was, and knew that with it one could call for help. Despite his earlier challenge for Frankie to do just that, he didn’t want to deal with a bunch of random soldiers from a random universe.

“Hello?” Frankie answered the call and the music stopped. “Adelaide. Hey—”

Rook snatched the device out of Frankie’s hand, holding it up high enough where the other man couldn’t reach and inspected it. Once he thought he’d figured it out, he brought it to his ear and replied coolly, “He’ll have to contact you later.”

It was fairly obvious the big red button would put an end to the call and he pressed it and then slipped the phone into the breast pocket of his jacket, easily sidestepping Frankie as he struggled to get it back.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Frankie tugged at his arms, but his strength was almost laughable compared to Rook’s.

Amused, he allowed him to continue with his struggles for a bit, tiring himself out. It would be easier for Rook to take control of the situation if Frankie was both physically and mentally exhausted, and considering everything that had taken place in the past hour, he was willing to bet the other man was close to reaching that breaking point.

Sure enough, a moment later Frankie let out a wild and frustrated sound, heaving himself away from Rook in the process.

“Done?” Rook asked.

“Why did I have to make him such an asshole?” Frankie muttered, though it was clear he was being loud

enough to be overheard on purpose.

“You also made me a demonic prince with a seriously big sword,” Rook reminded, pleased when that had Frankie tensing up. He needed the other man afraid of him, wanted him to understand that he wasn’t above doing anything and everything he had to in order to get back home. To get back to Lis. Alive.

A thought struck him. “Do you think she came here too?”

Frankie didn’t need him to elaborate. “How am I supposed to know? I wasn’t even aware *you* were here. And don’t forget Neko. He just got the jump on the both of us, meaning you have no way of knowing either.”

Back home he could sometimes sense others with power, but it didn’t always work, and not many knew about his ability. That was how he’d discovered Lis’s secret in the beginning, how he’d known that she wasn’t what she was claiming to be. He’d taken an interest in her after that, curious to see why this girl was pretending and purposefully getting close to the Gold King.

Figuring it couldn’t hurt, he straightened his spine and closed his eyes, trying to focus on letting out those feelers. It was as Frankie had said though, there was nothing.

“My other powers work in this world just fine,” he said, remembering how he’d summoned his sword with no problem. He did so now as well, to double check that nothing had changed. It appeared in his right hand, and he pulled at the handle, easily separating it into two pieces. When he brought them back together, the swords fused again like they were supposed to.

“Meaning either she’s not here,” Frankie considered, “she’s too far away, or that ability just doesn’t work even if the others do.”

“You basically just listed everything,” Rook pointed out.

“What do you want me to do? I’m just as confused right now as you are.”

“I doubt that. You’re not the one who found out your world is fictional.”

Frankie paused. “Touché.”

“Neko’s presence doesn’t change anything.” He needed to get them back on track. “We’ve wasted enough time.”

“Right, we should start by figuring out how you got here—”

“No.” Rook grabbed him by the back of the neck and shoved him toward the small table. “Write.”

Frankie glared at him, but plopped down in front of the open laptop. “You don’t have to be such a jerk all the time, you know that, right?”

“Says the guy who murdered my mother.”

“I didn’t—” Frankie stopped, inhaled slowly, and then tapped on the keyboard to his laptop. “You know what, forget it. I don’t even care. I want this to be over—or more aptly a really bad fever dream—just as much as you do.”

“Then fix it,” he demanded.

Frankie opened his mouth to argue, but Rook aimed his sword at him, effectively shutting the guy up. Watching as he got to typing, Rook came around and eased down onto the couch, close enough he could watch what he was doing.

Frankie only got a few sentences in before he stopped. “Can you not do that?”

“Do what?”

“Hover.” Frankie waved at him. “I can’t concentrate with you leaning over me. Just, sit back and let me work.”

“You need to—”

“Not have you die,” he rolled his eyes, “yeah, yeah. I got that.”

Rook eyed him. He didn't appear to be nearly as distraught as he'd been before. Either Frankie was coming to grips with this new reality, or he'd lost his mind completely. It didn't really matter one way or the other to Rook, so long as the job got done. But that didn't explain why he was being so amicable about changing the story for him.

Admittedly, Rook had anticipated more of a fight. Had it been the Gloom? Maybe Neko's appearance had actually worked in Rook's favor, scaring Frankie enough to get him to comply.

"You aren't making a fuss," he said, watching for any telltale signs.

Frankie didn't give any though. He merely hummed and kept typing.

"Aren't you upset?" If someone came to him and told him he had to make alterations to his life's work, he'd be a little miffed to say the least.

"It doesn't exactly feel like my story anymore," Frankie said, almost as if he'd been able to read Rook's mind. "You're here, flesh and blood. I don't like you, but it's impossible for me to pretend you're nothing more than a fictional character at this point. And if you're not fictional, then I can't have you dying on that cliff. That would be murder. And," he sent Rook a quick glance before turning back to the screen, "believe what you want, but I'm not a murderer."

He wanted to tell him to say that to all of the people who'd already died—there'd been many, side characters and main ones who Frankie had killed off in the first two volumes of his series—but Rook refrained for reasons unbeknownst to him.

Instead, he settled more comfortably back against the couch cushions, the events of the day catching up with him finally, causing him to realize he was also exhausted.

"We'll see," was what he ended up saying, before he shut his eyes, drifting to the steady clicking and clacking of his

creator's keyboard.

Chapter 5:

Frankie came awake with a start, momentarily confused as to where he was and what was going on. Sunlight streamed in behind him casting his shadow across the long chestnut coffee table. His computer screen saver was on—a rotation of photos of his favorite BL actors from a recently aired series he'd fallen head over heels for.

He blinked at the actors smiling faces as the waking world started to trickle back into existence. This wasn't the first time he'd fallen asleep out here, working on his computer at the coffee table, but he had the feeling there was something important he wasn't remembering. Something—

—shifted on the couch at his right and his head whipped over, everything coming back to him all at once the moment his gaze settled over the sleeping demon prince.

Rook.

Rook was real.

And currently asleep on his couch.

They must have fallen asleep sometime in the middle of the night, though Frankie couldn't recall which of them had passed out first. He'd been deep into his writing, reworking the scene so that everything was the same except for the ending.

He'd made sure that the arrow wounds Rook had received weren't nearly as severe as they'd been in the first draft. Though he had passed out, and still in Lis's arms, it was with a very clear indication that he was going to make it as soon as help arrived to take care of him. Frankie had no idea how he was going to work his surviving this into the rest of the story—especially considering he only had another three chapters left in it after this one—but he'd cross that bridge when he came to it. For now, he just needed to worry about what would happen with the very real Rook *here*, and not the one in the story.

Frankie swept a finger across the touchpad, waiting for his laptop to wake. He'd send over this new version of the chapter so that his publisher had it and then—

He blinked, thinking for sure he was seeing things.

A blank word document stared back at him, the page almost tauntingly white.

“That’s not possible,” he whispered, quickly accessing the files. He knew for a fact he’d saved it. He’d been so paranoid, he’d saved after every page even. That was a total of eleven times. There was no way the file was blank and everything was gone.

And yet...No matter where he checked, the results were the same.

Everything he’d written last night, the entire Chapter Eighty-Three, had vanished as if it’d never been.

Just like the first time.

Frankie sat back and ran both hands through his hair, tugging lightly on the dark strands as frustration filled him up. He had no idea what he was supposed to do from here. He’d tried, he’d done exactly what Rook had wanted but the words just didn’t appear to want to stick.

He caught the time in the corner of his computer and inwardly swore. He’d overslept, he didn’t have a chapter again, and now he was late for his workshop on top of it all.

Deciding that there was nothing more he could do here at the moment, he got up and went to his room to change. After tossing on his favorite pair of gray jeans and a plain button up shirt, he went to leave, but something sparkled on the ground.

His necklace. Rook must have dropped it earlier.

He stooped and picked it up, looking at the tiny silver medallion before he shoved it into his pocket and re-entered the living room.

What was he supposed to do about the sleeping prince?

Rook was too big for his tiny couch, his legs dangling over the edge. He was on his side with an arm curled beneath his head, the other tossed over the armrest. His nails, long and black and impossibly sharp, gleamed in the sunlight, and for a moment Frankie found himself distracted by them.

Them, and the details of his heavy sets of horns. They were sleek, less shiny than his nails yet still polished. Frankie was tempted to reach out and touch them, curious about how they'd feel.

He cleared his throat and shook his head at himself. What was he thinking? Rook was dangerous, he better than anyone knew that. He certainly wasn't a cat taking a nap in the sun, waiting for Frankie to come along and give him a few pets.

He'd probably slash Frankie's hand off even.

He clutched his wrist protectively against his chest for a second and then recalled his phone tucked out of sight in Rook's pocket. He debated whether or not he should just leave without it, but there was a good chance Maggie would call today asking about the chapter and his new deadline.

Rook's breathing was even and steady as Frankie stepped closer, keeping his eyes locked onto his face as he slipped one hand beneath the side flap of his jacket. His fingers wiggled a bit until he felt the solid weight of his phone. Then he pinched it and slowly eased it out, holding his breath all the while for fear of waking the demon prince.

Which was an altogether ridiculous thing to be thinking about. It was so ridiculous, in fact, that before he could help himself, Frankie snorted humorously. It was barely audible, but it was enough.

Rook's eyes popped open, the black of his iris's taking over his entire eye for a second before it was replaced by a copper brown as he came to his senses.

Frankie found himself tossed onto the ground in the next instant, the breath whooshing past his lips as a solid weight came down on top of him, momentarily crushing his

ribcage. He slapped against Rook's shoulder until the other man eased up a fraction of an inch, just enough he could suck in a breath.

Rook's face hovered dangerously close to his, their nose's practically touching. The anger in his gaze had Frankie stilling beneath him, the fear strong and swift.

"What do you think you're doing?" Rook demanded, voice low and gravelly from sleep.

"My phone," he blurted, mind racing to come up with an explanation and only managing the bare minimum. He'd written once that Rook tore a man's jugular out with his teeth, hadn't he? Right now, Frankie couldn't recall if he'd left that in or if it'd been removed during edits.

Rook's tail flicked in the air over them, and then reached down, wiggling its way between their pressed chests to pull his phone free. It waved it over Frankie's head. "This?"

"Yeah." He swallowed, and Rook's gaze dropped to the motion.

They remained like that for another moment before the demon prince finally pushed himself off, scowling down at Frankie.

He scrambled away, shooting to his feet and moving to put the coffee table between them.

Rook gave him an amused lift of his brow at that, obviously understanding his line of thinking. Though they both knew a table would do little good to protect him from the prince if he chose to attack.

Something caught his attention and Frankie blinked. "That's..."

The demon prince lifted his right hand. Around his wrist was a braided red leather bracelet with a magnetic clasp. "I forgot that I took this."

"You were snooping through my stuff?"

"Of course."

“And just, helped yourself to my jewelry?”

“Does it have any particular meaning?” If he noticed the annoyance in Frankie’s tone, he ignored it.

“It’s sort of like the red string of fate,” Frankie said, deciding answering was better than playing this conversation out any further. “At least, that’s why I bought it, it reminded me of one. There are multiple meanings for different cultures. Some of them involve tying two soulmates together, typically on the ankles or fingers, while others use it as a means to ward off misfortune. Clearly, that didn’t work.”

“Clearly.” He removed the bracelet and set it down carefully on the table. “I like it. It’s my color.”

“I like it too. I like all of my stuff.” Frankie stared him down pointedly.

“Who were you hoping to call? You never did tell me about your protection.”

“I don’t have protection,” Frankie said. “And I wasn’t going to call anyone. I’m late and I don’t like going anywhere without my phone in case there’s an emergency.” He had experience with being in messed up situations with no way to call for help. He wouldn’t willingly put himself in something like that again. Ever. “Give it back.”

Rook chucked his chin toward the laptop. “What about your chapter?”

Shit, he’d been hoping the guy wouldn’t ask.

“You saw me writing it all night,” he reminded before sighing. “It was gone when I woke up.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. I’ve checked, and it’s nowhere. This is the same thing that happened yesterday.”

“When I appeared.”

“Yeah.” Frankie pursed his lips, considering the situation. “Since it’s still just you and me here, I think it’s safe

to assume—for now—that the chapter didn't delete itself yesterday because of your arrival.”

“Still,” Rook was frustrated by this turn of events, but he didn't appear to be blaming Frankie or accusing him of lying, which was something, “it can't be a coincidence that I appear and it disappears.”

“How do you explain today then?” Frankie asked. If there'd been someone else in the apartment, he would have woken. He wasn't a deep sleeper, even had sleeping pills to help him on particularly bad nights.

Rook shook his head, just as lost as Frankie was.

They'd need to figure it out, but right now they were getting nowhere, and Frankie was going to be late for sure if he didn't leave within the next two or three minutes. He held out his hand.

“My phone.”

Rook cocked his head. “Why should I? Where are you going?”

“Do you want me to sit here and write it again?” Frankie snorted. “That's a waste of time, and I have other commitments.”

“Such as?”

Seeing that he wasn't about to drop it until Frankie told him, he opted to just explain. “I'm part of a writer's workshop made up of students from my major. We meet every other Saturday at the on campus library. I have to be there in less than ten minutes and the parking lot fills quick.”

“That hardly sounds like an emergency.”

“I never said it was. But it *is* important.”

“To you maybe,” Rook said. “Personally, I could care less.” Still, he thought it over. “Library? I read about those. I'm coming with you.”

“What, why?” The last thing Frankie needed was to babysit a demon prince while he tried to give constructive

criticism to his workshop group.

“It’s a library,” he explained, with a tone that signified he thought Frankie was an idiot for not figuring it out on his own, “a place where people can do research and learn things. Like, I don’t know, how portals and alternate realities work, for example.”

Frankie had to admit, he *was* kind of dumb for not having thought of that himself. And, from the sounds of it, Rook was willing to do that research on his own. Whether he liked it or not, Rook was here, he was real, and they needed to figure out a way to get him back home, preferably before he lost his cool and cut Frankie in half with his massive sword.

“Okay,” he waved a finger down the length of him, “but you can’t go looking like that.”

Rook frowned. “It was fine yesterday.”

“Yeah, because like I mentioned last night, yesterday was October thirty-first, which we call Halloween. People dress up on that day. You probably still got a lot of attention, right?”

“Many people told me I looked cool.”

“That’s because they thought you were in costume. Just, trust me, you can’t go like that. You have to change.”

“Trust you?” Rook grunted. “Not likely, creator.”

“It’s Frankie,” he corrected. “You can call me by my name.”

“You can call me Prince Dalibor.”

“Going to be honest,” Frankie said, “I’m not going to do that. But seriously. Come on. Change.”

Rook’s gaze darkened some. “Are you forgetting who’s in charge here, *Frankie?*”

“My world, my rules.” Was it risky to talk back to him? Of course. But Frankie also knew the importance of standing up for himself. Rook wouldn’t respect him otherwise. That’s how Rook was. It was how he’d written him to be.

“This is in both of our interest. You can move around without worry in your human form, that’s all. We don’t have demon’s here.”

“There were many books referencing demonic entities in that store,” Rook told him smugly, as if he’d caught him in a lie.

“They weren’t talking about real demons, or,” he corrected himself, because who was he to say for certain there was nothing paranormal on the planet, “if they were, there’s no proof that they’re right and they actually exist. In Visera half the Bronze clan are demons, but here you’d freak the fuck out of people and the police will get involved. Not worth it. I can’t do anything if you’re arrested.”

“So what you’re really saying is you have no power here.” Rook clucked his tongue and rested his hands on his hips. His tail finally dropped the phone into Frankie’s still waiting palm. Without another word, he shifted, the air around him heating some, his image shimmering slightly like an item dropped into clear water.

His main features remained the same, but the horns slowly receded into his skull until they’d vanished, his nails doing much the same until they were short and round at the end of his hands, though still black. His hair changed last, shortening and altering from that deep red to a warm brown. The whole process took only a couple of heartbeats, Rook’s human form taking place of his demonic one, a trick he often used to his advantage back home.

The only thing his magic couldn’t solve was his clothing. He was still dressed in the red jacket and the leather knee-high boots, neither of which would do for where they were going.

Motioning for him to follow, Frankie returned to his room, tossing open his closet door to riffle through for something that would hopefully fit him. They weren’t the same size but a t-shirt would probably do and he found a dark green one and held it out to Rook.

Rook took the shirt and began stripping out of his clothes without prompting, dropping them haphazardly onto Frankie's bed.

He grabbed a leather jacket that he'd gotten one size too big and had never worn before, figuring that would work, but got stuck on the pants for a moment before he recalled he still had a pair of Zac's from last year.

"He's not as tall as you, but he's six feet so, close enough," Frankie said, digging for the jeans that had been shoved to the way back of the closet. He pulled them free and turned to find Rook eyeing him.

"Who's six feet?"

"My ex." He didn't want to talk about it, so he thrust the pants at him and went to step out of the room, leaving him to finish changing.

"Was he attractive at least?" Rook called out behind him.

"He's no prince, but he was all right." Right up until he'd left Frankie for a guy in their Advanced Arts class who was more interested in hitting up the clubs on Thursday than staying in writing.

Frankie almost couldn't blame him, which had made the breakup somehow even worse.

"I would tell you about one of my ex's, but you already know all about them." Rook stepped from the bedroom, adjusting the collar of the leather jacket.

Which hadn't looked even half as cool on Frankie as it did on him.

Damn.

It was hard for Frankie not to stare—had been hard from the beginning, but at least then he'd had the horns as an excuse—but now...Rook was gorgeous. When he wasn't snarling or threatening someone, in any case.

"This isn't going to work," the words popped out of his mouth before he could help himself, and he was forced to

explain when Rook gave him a questioning look. “You’re going to stand out still.”

He reached up to touch the top of his head, as if to check and be sure his horns weren’t showing. “How so?”

“Forget it.” There was no way in hell Frankie was going to tell him he was hot. No. Way. In. Hell. “Come on, I’m already late.”

Chapter 6:

Frankie had joined the workshop group his sophomore year. Adelaide had been invited by one of her classmates, and she'd asked if she could bring her best friend along. In the end, she'd lasted for a single semester before dropping out, but Frankie had stuck around, enjoying the company and the feedback.

All five of the members were Creative Writing majors, and while the group was also meant to be enjoyable, it was nice having a collection of people who took the whole writing process seriously. If any of them needed help working out a scene or a plot hole, they were always more than happy to put their heads together and come up with a solution.

It was because of this that Frankie always felt a little bit guilty about keeping his identity a secret. He'd almost cracked on more than one occasion, had wanted to confess that he was actually already published under the pen name Cuthwulf, but something always held him back.

It helped that none of them seemed to be interested in his books and no one had ever, even in passing, mentioned Gold and Silver. The second one of them did, he would have felt obligated to tell them the truth, and he didn't want that kind of pressure.

Didn't want to be cornered.

The way the workshop worked, they met up every other Saturday at Jacobson Library, the on campus library. They'd bring along with them the work distributed at the end of the last session, and all of their notes for the writer, and take turns going over each person's submission. There were a couple of rules to help keep it time manageable, like they were only allowed to submit one chapter if it was from a longer work, and had to keep it under fifteen pages if it was a shorter one.

They'd all agreed on these rules at the beginning and so far it had worked perfectly for them. Even Frankie, with his

busy schedule, had the time to keep up with it, and no one had ever missed a deadline.

Since he couldn't bring along chapters of Gold and Silver, Frankie used these sessions as an opportunity to hone his skills and try his hand at other genres. With his original series finally coming to an end after all of these years, he was ready to try something new, and these workshops allowed him to dip his toe into different waters and test it out.

So far, he'd come to the conclusion he wasn't all that great at Historical fiction, or contemporary. While the pieces he'd submitted to the group hadn't been poorly received, they'd certainly lacked the enthusiasm that his science fiction and fantasy pieces had gotten.

Frankie didn't want to risk his next project being something that would flop. Being a one hit wonder? His greatest fear.

His gaze inadvertently trailed over to the far left corner where Rook sat in front of one of the computers. The demon prince was hunched in his seat, all of his attention riveted on the screen as he scrolled with the mouse. Frankie had written him as intelligent and quick witted; Rook could not only adapt easily, he could flourish. Bringing him to the library might have been a mistake.

Pretty soon the guy would be telling things to Frankie that even he didn't know and he'd lived all his life here.

He shook his head at that and tried to concentrate on Jane as she gave feedback to Ethan. They were seated around a rectangular table in one of the few sections of the library where talking was allowed, since so many students met up here for group projects and whatnot. And even though those two were on the opposite end of the table, Frankie could hear them just fine. He was simply finding it difficult to focus.

"Hey," Ri, another fifth year student Frankie had met last year, leaned closer to him, keeping his voice down so as not to disrupt the flow of conversation between the others, "everything good?"

“What?” Frankie forced a smile to his lips. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You seem out of it.” Ri was kind of the unofficial workshop leader, always the first to notice if one of them wasn’t feeling all right or if they needed something. He’d stayed back another semester in order to continue his studies, deciding that he’d wanted to double major in psychology. “Maybe it’s just low blood sugar. Did you eat today?”

Frankie had mentioned once, in passing, that he often forgot to eat, too busy with his studies and work. It was a bit embarrassing to be a grown adult called out on something like that, but he realized that he had, in fact, not eaten anything yet.

“I woke up late,” he explained, eyes wandering back over to Rook again before he caught himself and forced his gaze to Ri.

As far as attractiveness went, Rook didn’t have anything on the college student. Ri was tall, with broad shoulders and a fit body Frankie had seen working out at the school gym a time or two. His hair was inky black, worn short, and curled slightly at the front and over the tips of his ears.

His eyes were what always drew Frankie in however. They were the deepest shade of blue he’d ever seen, and whenever the older boy rested them on him, Frankie felt his heart stutter in his chest.

Not that he would ever act on those feelings. Ri was nice to everyone and had never shown a personal interest in Frankie whatsoever. In fact, Frankie wasn’t even sure he could call them legitimate friends outside of the workshop group. They’d exchanged numbers in the beginning along with everyone else, but they’d only ever spoken through the group chat.

“Hold on,” Ri stood, “I’ll go grab you something from the store downstairs.”

There was a school convenience store attached to the first level of the library where they sold snacks and tissues and things like that.

“That’s okay, I—” Frankie went to rise but Ri rested a hand on his shoulder, affectively giving him pause.

He smiled. “It’s no problem. If you’re not feeling well you shouldn’t be walking up and down those stairs. I’ll be right back.” He sent that last part to the rest of the group who nodded and continued discussing Ethan’s horror story submission.

Frankie watched Ri weave his way through the other nearby tables before disappearing into the stacks, grateful for the gesture even though his current state had little to do with food and everything to do with the fictional character come to life sitting in the computer section.

Hopefully Rook found something, although to be honest, Frankie wasn’t holding his breath. When magic was mentioned in this world, it was typically referring to stories and made up plots in television and in books. The chances of finding someone who could actually explain how and why a book character had come to life? Slim. Especially since it was a fairly popular plotline in media.

Rook was probably combing through all the fiction trying to find a needle in a haystack that may not even exist.

Frankie looked back over, just in time to catch sight of something dark slithering around Rook’s feet. He squinted at it, figuring it was just a shadow cast by the row of floor to ceiling windows that took up the entire left wall or the dozens of lights hanging from the ceiling. Only, the dark thing twisted in an odd way

Then it slowly began to wrap itself around Rook’s ankle.

Frankie shot out of his seat, slamming his hands down on the table at the same time. The resounding whack echoed throughout the library, instantly silencing his group and everyone else who was seated nearby.

He barely registered the stares, too focused on Rook. He somehow managed to mumble an apology to his group

before he rushed across the library toward the demon prince, who was watching him now as well.

His gaze swept the floor but there was no sign of the shadow he'd seen, though he was certain it had been there and not merely in his mind. He wasn't seeing things.

Frankie grabbed onto Rook's wrist and led him away, off to the side where the study cubbies were. They were small rooms with a door and a desk and computer inside where students could go to study in peace and quiet. Most of them were already occupied, but he finally found one toward the end of the hall.

He shoved Rook inside and then shut the door, peering out of the glass window back the way they'd come to see if they'd been followed by the creature.

"It was a Gloom," he explained before Rook could ask. "It was crawling up your leg. You didn't feel it?"

Of course he hadn't, that's what made shadow monsters so dangerous. They could adjust their form, light as air one moment and dense as smog the next. If they didn't want to be felt as they crept all over you, they wouldn't be.

Not able to see anything out the window, Frankie finally turned toward Rook.

Rook's gaze dropped to the base of Frankie's throat.

The necklace. Frankie covered it with his palm and then tucked it beneath his shirt. He'd pulled it out of his pocket when he'd sat down and started setting out his supplies for the workshop, and with nowhere else to safely keep it, had put it on.

"A Gloom followed us here," Frankie said, wanting them to discuss the thing that truly mattered. He had no reason to feel weird about the necklace in the first place. It'd been his at the start, after all.

"I didn't see anything," Rook told him.

"What about sensing? Can you sense anyone nearby right now? Like Neko?" If a Gloom was here, that meant there

had to be an Iron powerful enough to release them. Neko was the only one in Frankie's world, so it was safe to assume it'd been done by him. "He could have waited outside all night and followed us here."

He hadn't seen anyone strange lurking about the apartment parking lot, but then, Frankie had sort of been in a rush this morning.

Rook cocked his head, sending out his feelers—or whatever it was he actually did. A few seconds later he sighed. "Nothing."

"What good is having a demon around if he can't even sense an Iron." Frankie didn't actually mean it, but this whole ordeal was frustrating. "Yesterday everything was normal, and now suddenly I'm standing here with you talking about actual monsters. What the fuck."

"Wait here." Rook took a step closer to the door and moved Frankie to the side. "I'll go take a look—" The computer on the table behind them clicked and then started to hum suddenly, cutting him off.

"Did that just turn itself on?" Frankie asked, watching as the screen brightened and it started booting. The whole process happened way faster than it typically would, and the second the word doc button was clicked and a blank page opened up both of them took a step back. "I don't like this."

The brightness started to go up, from normal to blinding in less time than it took to blink, and Frankie and Rook both threw up their arms to shield their eyes from it. The sound of wind whipping through the room kept them from speaking, and a gust of it slapped against them. The whole ordeal was shocking, yet swift.

One second they were being battered by a forceful gale and the next...nothing.

Frankie slowly lowered his arms, expecting to find the computer had magically shut down and that's why it'd stopped. He gaped at what he actually saw. "Rook."

They were standing in the middle of a thick forest, a tall canopy blocking out most of the sun, casting them in shadows. The air smelled sweet and earthy, and beneath their feet debris of leaves and moss created a cushion. It was the blood red sap that dripped down the narrow trunks of nearby trees that gave their location away.

“This is the Hem forest.” Frankie felt like he’d been tipped on his axis, breath catching almost painfully in his lungs as his brain scrambled to make sense of what he was seeing. They’d been standing in the library and now they were in the middle of a fictional forest set in the Bronze kingdom.

How?

Rook inhaled deeply, clearly pleased by this turn of events. “Home.”

“Yeah,” Frankie’s panic only grew, “*your* home. How the hell did we get here and how do I get back?”

“Sucks, doesn’t it?” Rook sent him a dark look, the corner of his mouth twisting up in a mocking half grin.

Frankie clenched his fists at his sides, but self-preservation kept him from snapping back at him. If they were in Hem, the capital of the Bronze Kingdom, that meant they were in Rook’s territory. It hadn’t been safe for him before, in his world, but now...Things weren’t looking great. He couldn’t afford to piss the demon prince off.

“Please tell me you found something back in the library,” he said instead.

“No.”

“Fantastic.” The forest all looked the same to him, just trees and more trees and a couple of bushes. Some ferns. Maybe. There were a few dangerous creatures that lurked about these woods, but they only came out at night, and even though it was mostly blocked out, Frankie could still see telltale signs of sunlight slipping through cracks in the canopy.

Besides, as long he stuck close to Rook, everything would be fine.

Right?

He sent the man in question a sideways glance, uncertainty brewing.

“Relax, creator,” Rook chuckled, clearly sensing the turn in his thoughts, “you haven’t yet fixed my story. I won’t let you out of my sight until you do.”

“Comforting.” He’d meant it sarcastically, but they both heard the thread of truth in his voice. He may have written the book—literally—on this place, but there was a big difference between imagining something and actually experiencing it. “And don’t call me that.”

It wasn’t just the creatures Frankie had to worry about. Most of the people who lived in this world contained some type of magical ability. Not only was Frankie powerless, he also didn’t belong to a kingdom. Considering all four were in the state of war, that could be a very bad thing.

A sound came from the distance, unintelligible at first until it got closer to them.

“Rook?!” A female was calling for him, but it was clear that she hadn’t seen them and didn’t know where the demon prince was. “Rook?!”

Frankie recognized who it was a second after Rook did.

“Lis.” Rook practically breathed her name and then took off, racing through the forest at a speed far superior to humans. Too fast for Frankie to even have a chance at following.

He blinked as Rook was all but swallowed by the trees, still standing in the same spot they’d magically appeared in a moment ago.

So much for not letting Frankie out of his sight.

Asshole.

Chapter 7:

Frankie trudged after him, cursing his name all the while. How dare he leave him behind like that? Alone? In the middle of fucking nowhere? What a complete and total dick. No wonder he was the antihero and only the second lead. Sage would never have left Frankie behind. Why'd it have to be Rook to come through the gate and end up in Frankie's living room?

Maybe it was a defense mechanism, but Frankie's mind started playing through a different scenario, one where it had been Sage who'd shown up instead. How differently would things have gone? Sage would have been a hell of a lot nicer about it, in any case, although...

Sage was a king who'd grown up in the midst of a war. He was hardly made of sunshine and rainbows, but at least he kept himself to a code of honor—unlike Rook, who didn't care about anyone but himself.

Frankie sighed. That wasn't true. Damn it.

Rook was good to his people, and to Lis. He was trying to help her put an end to the warring, and going after the Iron Kingdom, the force behind all of the discontent throughout the Gold, Silver, and Bronze kingdoms.

Roughly ten chapters back, it'd been discovered that the Iron Queen had been pulling the strings behind the shadows for a long time now, ever since the death of her brother. That death had taken place before the start of Volume One, so Frankie didn't know anything about him other than his passing had greatly affected Talia Archer. She'd sworn revenge and she'd held true to that promise.

Half of the things that had happened between the three other kingdoms had been problems set in motion by Talia, later blamed on someone else to help sow seeds of hatred and doubt.

Lis had spent the better part of her life believing Sage's father was behind her brother's death, for example, only to

have recently discovered that it'd been Talia all along. Talia had wanted to return the favor, an eye for an eye—or, in this case, a sibling for a sibling.

There were many situations like that, some more subtle, others massive events that had turned the tides, leading to bigger battles and more deaths. All the while, the Iron Kingdom had blended into the background, quiet and still. Many had believed that they'd died off, but no. They'd merely been lying in wait, biding their time. With the death of Sage's father and Rook's sudden rise in popularity and importance to the Bronze, Talia had deemed it finally time to make her presence known.

Frankie hadn't had to work too hard on that plot twist. It'd practically written itself. In the entire Volume One, he'd also believed that the Bronze were the biggest threat to Gold and Silver. It'd been an interesting breakthrough when he'd realized that actually, Iron was the true evil. It'd made sense and given him the chance to provide more redemption for Rook before his upcoming demise, and he'd played with unveiling as many of Talia's deceptions in Volume Two as he could without losing focus on the three main characters and their romantic developments.

A large twig snapped under Frankie's foot and he stumbled forward, catching himself roughly on the side of a tree. The bark was serrated and he cut himself across the palm, hissing at the pain. When he'd first described this forest he'd loved that detail, that some of trees were dangerous in their own right. But now...

He stared down at the three cuts and the blood that welled. It looked real, it certainly *felt* real.

And if all of this was real, didn't that beg the question, had he created it...or had he merely gotten a glimpse of another reality? Which sounded more arrogant, he vaguely wondered?

Frankie had no clue how long he'd been walking when another cry cut through the air, drawing his attention off to the right. He'd been heading straight, since that was the only

direction he'd been able to see Rook go, but now he deviated, slowly making his way through the brush as he followed the voices.

He came to the edge of a clearing and the scene that greeted him was familiar. It took him a moment to figure out why, but when he did he sucked in a sharp breath.

Rook was standing by a cliff with Lis by his side. The two were facing off against two Iron soldiers, and he had a knife wound in his right arm.

Lis was holding her gun, a weapon that shot ice bullets, but if Frankie recalled correctly she was out of rounds. Keeping it aimed was all a front.

Against them, even with Rook injured, two Iron's were nothing, but that's not what made the fight uneven. It was the swarm of Gloom's their attackers had brought along with them. Several twisted in the air, some taking humanoid form, nothing more than a silhouette.

Everything was almost exactly how Frankie had envisioned it when he'd first written the scene, except for one thing.

Neko wasn't here.

In Frankie's version, Neko was front and center, taunting Rook and Lis. He'd been the one controlling the Gloom, and had even brought out one strong enough to contend against the demon prince, gifted to him by Talia. It had been because of it that eventually Rook had fallen. Without that major threat...

Frankie searched through the attackers and then glanced around himself to see if there was any chance another threat were hiding, like he was. If they were, they were doing too good of a job, however.

He had a choice to make. He could either wait this whole thing out and hope for the best, or he could put his life on the line and interfere. Neither sounded like great options, but if anything happened to Rook, the only person who knew

who he was in this world, things could go from bad to worse for Frankie.

Rook and Lis were strong enough to handle half a dozen Gloom's and two Iron, but they were also being backed toward a cliff...Hadn't Frankie's initial idea been to have Rook fall off of it and end it that way?

Shit.

Before he could overthink it, Frankie slunk forward, keeping low to the ground. He didn't have any weapons—not that he even knew how to use one—but there were a couple of sticks and he searched for one that could be at least somewhat threatening in appearance.

One of the Iron lifted his hand, about to send a wave of the Gloom after them, and Frankie gave up his useless search for a stick and straightened.

“Hey, assholes!” he called as loud as he could, internally wincing. He was so stupid. This was dumb. He was going to die here in Hem in Rook's place.

Unsurprisingly, he was successful in gaining their attention. All eyes whipped his way and he smiled and waved like the idiot he was. “Hi.”

Rook took the opportunity to lash out while they were distracted, shooting forward with his demon speed, summoning his sword at the same time. He swung, cutting two of the Gloom in half, sending that red power pulsing through their forms so they exploded in a rain of ash. Then he twisted on his heels and brought the blade to one of the Iron's throats.

Frankie's eyes went wide as the guy was beheaded, and before he could help it, he bent over and threw up the couple sips of water he'd gotten from the water fountain before the start of the workshop.

By the time he managed to stand up straight again, there was nothing left of the attackers but piles of black dust and two mostly still together bodies.

Lis lifted the barrel of her gun, pointing it at Frankie, and even knowing it was empty, he froze.

“He’s with me,” Rook told her, kicking at that one Iron’s head so that it rolled a few feet away as he returned to her side. “Are you okay?”

Frankie scowled. *He* was fine, thanks for asking. Dick.

“You got to them before I got a chance to take part in the action,” Lis pointed out with a snort. “Who do you think sent them?”

“Neko,” Frankie found himself answering, moving closer and giving the bodies a wide berth as he did. “He should have been here.”

“I recall that from the first time,” Rook agreed. “What do you think has changed?”

He pondered for a moment, frowning. “Do you think it’s because he’s still back there?”

Frankie and Rook had come through a gate in the computer in the library, that much was now apparent. But Neko hadn’t been there, which meant he was more than likely still stuck in Frankie’s world. If he was there, that would explain why he couldn’t be here.

“More proof you really came from the book,” he said, mostly to himself. There’d been a chance that the Rook who’d appeared in his apartment had been a copy of the one he’d written, but that idea was now dashed. “There’s only one of you. You can’t be in two places.”

“And neither can he.” Rook hummed and nodded his approval.

Lis glanced between the two of them, brow furrowed. “Okay, explain to me what’s going on. Now.”

Frankie stepped forward, rubbing his sweaty palm against his thigh before extending it to her. “I’m Frankie. It’s nice to meet you.”

“It wasn’t nice to meet me,” Rook grunted.

Frankie gave him a pointed look. “Should we go over how it was we met, exactly?”

Lis would love that and they both knew it.

Rook scowled but said nothing.

Lis didn't take Frankie's hand, instead glancing questioningly between the two of them all over again.

Like Sage and Rook, she'd grown up with war, and had arguably had just as rough of a childhood as Rook had. She'd spent most of it learning how to conceal her identity, how to become someone else and slip through the cracks unnoticed. Training to become a spy and an assassin. By twelve, she'd left her homeland to join the Gold army, pretending to be one of them, and had impressively climbed the ranks, making general by eighteen.

She was brutal and efficient, but could also be kind and caring to those she was close with.

She certainly wouldn't trust Frankie simply because Rook, a man still considered partially her enemy, vouched for him. The two may have developed a tentative friendship over the past year, but Lis was always on the alert. She had to be as the heir to the Silver throne. There were too many people relying on her to succeed in stopping Iron, and she took that seriously.

It was the major reason why she'd fought against her feelings for Sage for so long, only finally confessing to them at the beginning of the volume Frankie was currently writing.

"He doesn't look like he's one of yours," Lis said, inspecting Frankie.

She had long blondish-silver hair, left down in waves, and wore a tight uniform made of black material with leather straps and a shoulder holster for her gun. She also had a long sword, currently held in her other hand. The outfit was from the Silver Kingdom, different from the one she'd been depicted in during the first two volumes of Frankie's story when she'd still been pretending to be Lis Bright, a poor Gold orphan from the south.

Her real name was Felicity Sen, Crown Princess of Silver.

But even though they knew that fact now, both Rook and Sage still called her Lis out of habit.

“He isn’t,” Rook replied, casually cleaning the edge of his blade off on the pant leg of one of the dead Iron. “He’s from... somewhere else.”

“Descriptive,” Lis drawled. “And you trust him?”

“I did just help you out,” Frankie felt the need to remind.

“I need him,” Rook corrected a second later, ignoring his comment.

Lis wasn’t won over and it showed. “I came here to discuss our next move,” she licked her lips, trying not to be completely rude yet obvious wanting to make herself clear, “not meet one of your friends. I appreciate the aid just now, but if you don’t mind, I’d like some time alone with Rook.”

Frankie hadn’t written anywhere further than this chapter, meaning for all he knew there were others lurking in the forest right now just waiting to pounce. Knowing he was safe here, with the two of them, he scrambled to come up with something to say that would convince her to let him stick around.

“I can help,” he blurted. “You’re here to talk about finding Talia? Rook was able to get a rough location, but I can give you an exact one.”

Rook’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t interrupt as Frankie continued.

“She’s moved to the Hidden Palace, you know, the one of old? It’s surrounded by Gloom, but there’s a secret passage accessible by the East Sea.” Frankie tried to recall all of the notes he’d jotted down for the big fight he’d envisioned.

He was going to have a grieving Lis and Sage sneak into the Hidden Palace, intent on finally putting an end to Talia’s dark rule. With her out of the way, real peace could finally start being discussed amongst the remaining three kingdoms. So long as Talia was alive, that wasn’t possible.

“All of the Gloom are connected to her,” Frankie said. “Once she’s gone, they’ll disappear. It won’t matter how strong an Iron is, there won’t be any Gloom left for them to control. Without that power, you can easily subdue them.”

“You have it all planned out,” Rook said darkly, “don’t you.”

Frankie kept his attention on Lis, not wanting to deal with Rook’s temper at the moment. He understood where the other man was coming from though. He was thinking that Frankie had known all of this the entire time and yet had kept it to himself instead of offering it up to save the kingdoms sooner.

“How do you know this?” Lis asked, but there was a twinkle of hope in her light blue gaze. “If that’s true, we can take a small team and infiltrate without anyone knowing. As long as we aren’t discovered, we can get close enough to her and—”

“It won’t be that easy,” Rook stopped her, still staring at Frankie. “It never is. Trust me. There’s always a plot twist.”

“I’m a writer,” Frankie snapped. “I was doing my job.”

“Tell that to the dead.”

“I didn’t know any of this was real!” Maybe it was because he felt guilty, or maybe he was just over putting up with Rook’s accusations, but Frankie lost it. “This is hard for me too, you know? I’m a human stuck in Visera with only an antihero to rely on! Last night, you came out of nowhere and —”

“Enough,” Rook growled.

“No,” Frankie shook his head vehemently. “No, you don’t get to decide that.”

“What?” Rook took a threatening step closer, bringing himself right up into Frankie’s personal space. “You can put words into other people’s mouths but no one else has a right to control what you can and can’t say?”

“I was writing a book!”

“You were writing our lives,” he corrected. “Mine and hers. We might not be real to you, Frankie, but for us, all of this exists. This is our reality. This is our home. You can’t just —”

“Write whatever I like?” Frankie stated coolly, catching Rook off guard with his tone. “Funny. Isn’t there something specific you wanted me to do?” He tapped at his chin. “What was it again?”

At this point he was already fucked, being that he was stuck out here in another universe. Since yesterday, he’d been trying his best to keep his composure around Rook—admittedly failing more often than not—but he was at his limits. The demon prince wasn’t the only one with a sharp tongue and a bad temper.

“Are you sure you two are friends?” Lis asked, cutting through the budding tension with her hesitant question.

“Yes!” they both snapped at the same time.

Rook scowled.

Frankie rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

Another moment passed and then Lis cocked her head a moment before a shrill cry cut across the sky. A large winged creature with the head of a gray eagle and the body of a white lion swooped down, causing a massive gust of wind to shoot toward them.

Frankie was pushed back a few steps, just managing to brace himself as the creature hovered above Lis, low enough for her to reach up and grab a fistful of its fur. He watched as she hauled herself up onto its back, patting the side of the creature’s neck fondly before she gave her attention back to Rook.

“I’ll let Sage know about the Hidden Palace and we’ll get back to you,” she told him.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he warned. “We need to come up with a plan together.”

“And we will,” she assured him. “But I have to get back right now. I’ll be in touch.” She sent Frankie a friendly smile and then tugged on the creature’s fur, directing him back up into the sky.

“That was an actual griffin,” Frankie said dumbly, watching them fly away, blending with the darkening gray sky. Uz had been Lis’s personal griffin since she’d been a child, with the two bonding a couple of years before she’d been sent to infiltrate the Gold army. He was friendly and loyal when it came to her, but standoffish and untrusting of others.

When he’d written it, Frankie had assumed the griffin idea had stemmed from his childhood wish to have a pet, one he’d never been able to fulfill. Now, seeing it in person, he wasn’t so sure.

“What if I didn’t create any of this?” he murmured. What if all of this really had existed already, on its own, and he’d merely accessed it somehow? What if the stories he’d been writing, the ones that had helped make a name for himself in the book community, didn’t belong to him at all?

Should he be sad about that? Feel like a fraud?

Or should he latch onto this string of wonder and excitement brewing within his gut?

How many people, writer or otherwise, got to claim they’d visited another reality?

“If you didn’t,” Rook’s low spoken words cut through his awe, reminding him that he wasn’t alone, “that means the likelihood we’ll be able to put an end to this war is slim to none.”

“Don’t you mean, the likelihood Lis will fall magically in love with you instead is slim to none?” he corrected before he could help himself. When he turned and saw the look on Rook’s face, he actually felt a little badly about it, though, and sighed. “I’m saying, even if I don’t control things that happen here, that doesn’t mean my information is incorrect. Think about it, you’ve read the first two books. Did I get anything wrong?”

Rook thought it over for a moment, taking the question seriously, before giving a curt shake of his head. “I can’t speak for the others, but everything you wrote about me was accurate. Uncomfortably so.”

Frankie tipped his head. “Don’t like that there’s someone who knows you so well, huh?”

His gaze darkened. Up until now, he’d remained in his human form, probably not recalling that he was even in it, but after that comment, he changed. The shift came quickly, his hair turning red and lengthening, horns sprouting on his head, tail flicking wildly behind him. He looked a little less intimidating wearing Frankie’s human clothing, but not nearly enough for his message not to be clear.

Frankie swallowed the sudden lump in his throat and laughed awkwardly, holding up his hands in a sign of surrender. “Kidding. Just kidding.”

Rook wasn’t amused.

“Okay,” he took a step away from the bodies, putting some space between him and them so he could think, “we came through a gateway in the school library—weird, by the way—and ended up back here.”

“Technically, we ended up in the middle of the woods,” Rook reminded.

“There must be a gateway there too.”

“Or your theory about the gateway’s being how we’re traveling is incorrect.”

He frowned. “Give me something better than.”

Rook couldn’t, and they both knew it.

The gateways weren’t anything all that spectacular or original, merely pockets of magic strong enough to create a portal from one location to another. Frankie had written about a few of them over the course of the story, but he hardly knew where they were all located. It was safe to assume there were more out there than he, or Rook, knew about.

It was also safe to assume that the gateways were how they were moving back and forth between worlds, and that they should be able to use one to do so again.

Because as tempting as it was to explore the world he'd only ever seen in his mind, Frankie sure as hell was not staying here. He needed to get back home, the sooner the better. Preferably before they ran into anymore Iron or their creepy Gloom soldiers.

"Can you do that thing and make it appear?" Frankie asked.

Only those with magic of their own could manipulate the gateways, otherwise, they worked of their own accord. There'd been tales of people accidentally sucked into one and spit out in the midst of the Bronze Kingdom, or in the frozen tundra of Silver, far from civilization. He hadn't thought much of those whispered stories when he'd been writing them, because they'd always come as rumors spouted by side or background characters, most of whom hadn't even been given a name.

He'd considered it an air of mystery, maybe a detail that could come in handy at a later date, but certainly not something he needed to take seriously or pick apart.

Now he wished he'd spent more time discovering the truth and having characters ask questions about gateways and how they worked.

"You've traveled through these the most," he said, "how come you didn't realize that's what happened to you when you appeared in my living room?"

"There's no identifying sensation," he told him, holding out his hand above the ground. "There was no way for me to know."

That was true. When they'd been sucked in just now, it'd been a gust of wind and nothing else. Out here on the cliffs especially, if Rook had felt that, he'd merely think it was a gale.

Frankie opened his mouth to ask another question, but then something glimmered on the air with a rainbow sheen that reminded him of a bubble. The gateway formed at Rook's calling, flickering into view between the grass and his still hovering palm.

It was about the size of a door, rectangular and long and wide enough to easily fit them through. But when Rook reached forward, he was met with resistance, his fingers tapping against a solid surface.

He frowned. "It's locked."

"What?" Frankie nibbled on his bottom lip. He'd never heard of them doing that before, and from the way Rook's brow was furrowed, neither had he. "Can you unlock it?"

He glanced up at the sky. "Not now. We'll have to come back in the morning." He waved his hand and the gateway disappeared. "Let's go."

"Go?" Frankie took a look around at the empty cliff, eyes latching onto the bodies accidentally. "Go where?"

"You wrote it," Rook drawled, taking note of how squeamish Frankie was being.

"Sure, but there's a big difference between writing someone getting their head hacked off and actually witnessing it," he stated.

"Rook Dalibor was a villain, dark and wicked, and calculating. The kingdoms feared him, and for good reason." Rook lifted a brow. "You wrote that too."

"But like with all good villain's, there was a reason for his chaotic nature'," Frankie continued the paragraph from memory. "And though he was devilish, he was hardly the devil incarnate. Rook wasn't cruel for cruelties sake, despite what the rest of Visera believed. Only, very few ever got close enough to realize this, and so the demon prince's reputation spread throughout the four kingdoms like wildfire."

Frankie had rewritten that paragraph three times, determined to get it right. He'd wanted to capture the character perfectly since it was his first official on page showing. Up

until then, Rook had only been mentioned by other characters in the book, but the readers hadn't gotten a chance to meet him themselves.

"If you're going to recite it," Frankie said, "at least do the whole thing. I never wrote you out to be a monster. And, for the record," he waved at the bodies at their feet, "I don't think killing these people makes you one either. Forgive me if I don't like the sight of blood and literal guts. It's nothing personal."

"Why did you make me a villain?" Rook asked then, catching him off guard with the sincerity in his voice.

Admittedly, Frankie didn't know how to respond. He hadn't put much thought into it, to be honest. Every story had a good antihero, and Rook had simply filled that role. He'd had no idea readers would fall so hard for him, or that he'd develop such strong feelings for Lis as the story progressed.

"Maybe," he ended up saying, "I didn't. Maybe you've always been what you've always been and I simply put that down on paper."

Rook clenched his hands into fists at his sides. "That sounds a lot like you trying to shove off responsibility."

"I don't know." He ran a hand through his hair. "Maybe? I'm just as in the dark here as you. Does it matter though? Right this second, I mean? We should be figuring out how to get back."

Rook glanced up at the sky. "We need to get to shelter. It'll be dark soon. You won't like what roams this forest at night."

Frankie had a few ideas, and no, no he would not.

"Weeping Palace isn't far from here," Rook told him. "But we need to leave now to make it in time."

Right, the reason he'd agreed to meet with Lis here in the original chapter was because it was close to his home. He'd left his advisors and Ivan behind to come out here and meet with her in secret. To steal a moment alone. But then

they'd been attacked, and without backup, Neko had gotten the jump on him.

“They won't be searching for you,” Frankie said, recalling how he'd planned on starting the next chapter. “You're too prone to going off on your own and no one is willing to question you. Originally, I had Lis and Uk deliver your body to the bone courtyard.”

“Meaning if we do meet anything nefarious in the woods, we're on our own,” Rook pointed out, and it wasn't hard to read between the lines.

He meant Frankie was on his own.

Perfect.

“Let's go, creator.” Rook started for the edge of the forest.

“I told you not to call me that,” he grumbled, but fell into step behind him.

Chapter 8:

It was only a twenty minute walk to the palace, and though Rook could have made it in half that time, he kept his pace slow enough for Frankie to keep up.

Which, Frankie hated to admit, he appreciated.

He made weekly trips to the gym so it wasn't like this was too much exertion for him, but he hadn't done any outdoors activities in a while. More than once, he almost tripped over underbrush, or walked directly into a low hanging branch. By the time the palace walls came into view, the cuffs of his pants were caked in mud and there were no doubt small marks on his face from all the ferns that had lashed against his cheeks.

He rubbed at them as they approached, taking in the sight of a real castle. It was exactly how he'd pictured it, right down to patches of wild flowers growing against the high copper colored stone walls that surrounded the sprawling palace. Frankie thought about the castle's backstory, mind wandering over the information about both it and Rook that he knew.

Weeping Palace was originally built against the side of Mount Pawn hundreds of years ago. The Dalibor royal family had once made it their official home, but had since moved to a newer residence at the heart of their kingdom. Rook and his brothers had all been born in the other palace, but as soon as he'd come of age, his father had banished him to this one.

He hadn't exactly been alone, however. He'd had a staff large enough to help him spruce the place up, though his father had been clear that was only to help keep up appearances to their people. He'd also had Ivan, his one true friend, who'd stood with him through thick and thin. They'd only been sixteen at the time, but they'd flourished out here together.

Now, Rook was stronger than all of his siblings. Stronger than his ill father. There were rumors that he was

going to be next in line, whether Dean Dalibor liked it or not.

But no one had actually asked how he felt about the matter. If they had, they would have known better than to make assumptions.

Rook didn't want to be king. He never had. Frankie knew what he truly wanted.

What he wanted, what he'd always wanted, was a home.

He'd done his best over the years to turn Weeping Palace into that for himself.

Thick reddish-yellow ivy climbed the sides of the high stone walls, stretching across them to slink onto the sides of the palace itself. There was an archway leading in, and there were no guards to greet them as they came upon in, easily entering.

The bone courtyard opened up to them, all rough white, uneven stone. There were three sections to it, one used for sparring on the far left, another with a long table at the right, and the center where Rook met with any guests he didn't want actually roaming around inside his palace.

The palace itself was a massive gothic structure made up of three buildings. Two spiral towers stretched up to the sky, tall enough their tops were swallowed up by clouds. It was large enough to house a small village, but there were only a handful of residents who actually lived here, including the servants.

The main doors opened when they'd made it to the first step leading up and Ivan appeared just within the entry way, hands in the pockets of his tight velvet jacket.

Ivan's horns were black as night, and he only had the one set that curled back over his midnight hair. He was almost the same height as Rook, and equally as imposing. The two of them had been mistaken for brothers a time or two by people who didn't recognize Rook, but Ivan always took it as an offense. Not because it was an insult to him, but because it was one to his prince.

Frankie had always had a soft spot for Ivan. Out of all of the friendships in the Gold and Silver trilogy, his and Rook's had always felt the most authentic. Ivan cared for Rook even when his own family had tossed him aside. He understood him and considered him in everything that he did.

If not for Adelaide, Frankie might have felt jealous over the friendship even. Growing up, he hadn't made many lasting friendships, most of them born out of convenience. Once they'd graduated from middle school or high school they all lost touch.

"Who is this?" Ivan asked, voice warm like melted honey. It was a shame, because he almost never spoke with any inflection, his expression typically a mask of indifference. Even now, as Frankie openly stared at him, he merely looked back enigmatically through dark eyes.

"No one of importance," Rook said, heading up the steps and pushing past him into the foyer.

Frankie tried to stick close, but he hesitated once he'd reached Ivan and the hulking demon didn't make way like he had for his prince. He let out an uncomfortable sound and forced a smile to his lips. "It's nice to meet you. I'm—"

"Not important," Ivan concluded for him and gave him his back, striding after Rook without a second glance.

He should have anticipated that, really. He blew out a breath and entered, pausing to take in the stone ceiling that stretched above him and the two sets of staircases carved into the walls on the far side of the room. They led to the same hallway which would branch off and lead into the castle, and without realizing what he was doing, Frankie began mapping out all of the directions in his head, noting which rooms he'd always favorited and how he could reach them.

"Shut the doors and get inside," Rook snapped a moment later when he noticed Frankie was no longer following him. He'd already made it halfway across the pale stone floor and seemed annoyed that he had to bother with Frankie at all.

He did as he was told but stuck his tongue out as soon as his back was turned, not trusting doing it openly with Ivan so close. He'd written more than one scene where Ivan reacted in his prince's defense before anyone was able to give an explanation, and he didn't think a little frustration was worth possibly losing an appendage.

Despite the massive size of the place there wasn't a speck of dust in sight, and Frankie felt a little embarrassed about the state of his apartment. Had Rook noticed their bookshelves hadn't been cleaned, like, ever?

"A message came for you while you were out," Ivan told Rook as the two crossed the wide space, barely noticing how Frankie lingered, trying to take in everything all at once.

"It's from Bon," Frankie stated absently while he internally wondered about who the older man in the painted portrait hanging over the fireplace was. He hadn't included that detail in his description, but then, he hadn't spent more than a paragraph on describing what was essentially just a space meant for moving through. "He and Lionel got caught by a group of Gold soldiers in Till and just managed to escape. He needs an extension on whatever task you gave him before they set out." He cocked his head. "Actually, what task *did* you give him?"

Ivan was staring at him, clearly suspicious, but Rook merely looked annoyed.

"You don't already know?" Rook drawled, and Frankie shrugged.

"I hadn't gotten to that part yet." He hadn't thought too much of it, either, figuring that the pieces would come together when they needed to.

"How is he aware of what the message says?" Ivan asked. "I haven't even opened it."

Rook pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "You need to stop doing that if you don't want to make every single person you come into contact with here question your loyalties."

Frankie blinked at him and straightened. “Oh.”

That made sense. Whoops.

“Also stop telling people it’s nice to meet them,” Rook added.

“Why? Jealous?” He’d meant it as a joke, but when neither of the other two in the room seemed to find it funny Frankie crossed his arms. “Yeah, fine, whatever. Can I say just one more thing though?”

“What?”

“Can I stay in the Blue room?”

Ivan’s brow shot up. “Has he been here before?”

“One more word like that, and I’ll throw you in the dungeons.”

Frankie had described what it was like down there in Chapter Sixty-One and shuddered to think of it.

“You can go,” Rook turned to Ivan. “I have to take care of this before anything else.”

Ivan seemed to want to argue, but after another glance at Frankie, who waved his hand in the air with a smile even he thought was dumb, he must have realized there was no way he could constitute as any sort of threat toward his prince. “I’ll be in my study if you need me.”

He slipped under the archway at the far wall, disappearing down a hallway. The sound of his footsteps against the stone echoed back to them, and for a moment neither spoke as they waited for Ivan to get out of hearing distance.

“So,” Frankie clapped his hands together, “Blue room?”

“I didn’t notice how shameless you are,” Rook said.

“Yes, well, you’ve only known me a day.” And, honestly, he was sort of laying it on thick on purpose. It was either that or completely and totally breakdown. He was in a make-believe world that up until last night he’d thought he’d

created. Ivan and Rook and Lis and Gloom's were all actual living, breathing beings, and he was currently standing in the middle of a foyer large enough to fit his entire apartment complex.

"Did you feel like this yesterday when you woke up in my living room?" he asked, not really sure why he was bothering. But it wasn't like there was anyone else he could talk to about this sort of thing, no one else that he knew of who'd experienced what they had.

"Like what?" Rook cocked his head, but for once he didn't appear to be judging.

"I don't know," he lifted a single shoulder and slipped his hands into his front pockets. "I can't really explain it. Disoriented, maybe?"

For a moment he didn't reply, merely stared back at Frankie with a blank look on his face. Just as it was starting to become uncomfortably awkward, he said, "Yes."

Last night, their first meeting had been pretty hostile. Frankie had instantly taken a dislike to the other guy, but now that the proverbial shoe was on the other foot, he sort of understood where Rook had been coming from. He'd never admit it, but he'd most likely been scared and confused.

"How long did it take you to find the bookstore?" At least Frankie had the advantage of knowing about this world and how it operated. He knew—relatively, in any case—what to avoid and where to go if he needed help. Rook didn't have that luxury.

"Too long," he replied coolly, but then added, "I learned a lot there."

"I was always jealous of your photographic memory." On more than one occasion during an exam he'd complained to Adelaide about how it wasn't fair.

"What are you doing, creator?"

Frankie frowned.

“Is this sympathy?” Rook asked. “If so, I don’t want it.”

“That’s not—” He stopped himself and exhaled slowly. “You really are an antihero, you know that?” He’d never met anyone who could get on his nerves as quickly as Rook did.

“One thing I read while I was there,” Rook began, “is the definition of antihero. You like to throw that word around a lot, but I don’t think it’s applicable to me.”

“No?” Frankie didn’t bother stripping the annoyance from his tone.

“I have morals and courage,” Rook pointed out. “An antihero would not.”

“I’ll give you the latter,” Frankie held up a finger, “but morals?”

He straightened his shoulders. “I have morals.”

“Where?” Frankie made a big show of searching him. “Are you hiding them in your pocket? A person with morals wouldn’t have walked away when that orphan was begging for scraps on the street.”

It was clear by the expression on his face Rook didn’t know what he was talking about.

“A year ago, in Eris,” Frankie elaborated. “When you and Ivan were walking the streets, searching for a Gold hunting party to mess with.”

They’d heard word that Gold soldiers had accidentally gotten lost in the forest that overlapped the Bronze and Gold borders. The soldiers had been a hunting party looking for an escaped prisoner and were taking rest at a local tavern, trying to lay low until morning when it would be safe to travel through the forest once more.

Since they were at war, Frankie didn’t really begrudge Rook for seeking out the enemy, but the girl he’d ignored had been half frozen and near starved when she’d mustered the courage to approach him. He hadn’t so much as given her a

glance, simply walked away as if he hadn't heard a single word come out of her mouth.

Then he'd found the hunting party and...well. By the end of that, he'd owed the pub owner a lot of money for repairs. News had spread around and his reputation had been bolstered.

"The girl?" Rook asked, seemingly recalling suddenly.

"Yeah," he nodded, "around eight or so."

"She was eleven," he corrected. "Her name was Marina and I sent Lionel to get her once I was done with the Gold bastards hiding in my kingdom. Last I heard, she was doing quite well with her new family."

"New family?" Frankie couldn't help but be surprised. He'd never written anything like that.

Bon and Lionel were two other members of Rook's small inner circle, subjects he'd grown up with who had military experience and training, and whom he also considered friends. They were so close and skilled there was even a joke amongst the people that if Rook ever wanted, he could assign them and Ivan each to a ruler and take the entire realm by force, combining the four kingdoms.

It was a joke, of course. They were strong but not nearly strong enough to kill Sage or Talia, or even Lis's father the King of Gold, on their own.

"I did notice that part was left out of your book," Rook mused, growing amused all of a sudden. "There were many details missing, actually, all minor, but all things that altered the picture you were so carefully painting. I thought you'd done it on purpose, but seeing that look on your face now, that obviously wasn't the case."

"I had no idea," he confessed.

"It wouldn't have fit your narrative of me," Rook stated, then waved a hand toward the staircase on the left. "Let's see if you can even find the Blue room."

Frankie hesitated but ended up heading to the stairs, slowly making his way up them with Rook following a bit behind. He knew the way, but it was hard not to get distracted as he walked.

Like by the burning question, how many other things had he gotten wrong about Rook and the rest of the characters in Gold and Silver?

How well did he know any of them, really?

And why was that so absolutely crushing to think about?

* * *

The Blue room wasn't blue at all. Instead, it was built in a half circular shape, and decorated in tons of rich browns and deep reds. Both the door and the four poster bed were situated on the flat side of the room, with a desk set to the far right, before a closed window. The opposite wall, the one that curved, held a fireplace and floor to ceiling bookshelves that curved right along with it.

The room had once belonged to Rook's great uncle and had been casually mentioned in the story when he'd had to go searching for a book and had come here to find it. Ever since, Frankie had been fascinated with the room itself, longing to visit even though, at the time, he'd believed it was all in his imagination.

He went straight for the bookshelves, running his fingers carefully over the spines of leather bound books. Some had writing embossed in gold or shiny red, others were blank. The corner of his mouth tipped up as he skimmed over them, inhaling the unmistakable scent of old paper, leather, and charred wood. The fireplace didn't appear to have been lit in a long time, but Frankie disregarded it quickly, moving past it to follow the shelves to the other side of the room.

"You seem pleased," Rook's voice cut through Frankie's admiration. He sounded undecided about something, but whatever that may be, his words didn't give any hints.

Frankie glanced at him over his shoulder, half smile still in place. “It would be kind of strange if I didn’t love books, don’t you think?”

“Is this why you wanted to come here specifically?” He remained in the doorway, and just as Frankie was starting to believe he was going to turn around and leave him on his own, he took a pointed step inside and closed the door with a soft click at his back.

“I’ve wanted to see it since you came here to grab that copy of Magic Mayhem,” Frankie said. “I thought it was interesting that your uncle dubbed it the blue room even though there’s no color in here. ‘Because books let you explore from the sky to the sea’. I always liked that explanation.”

There was a brief silence and then, “You thought you wrote it.”

Frankie chuckled, not bothering to try to conceal the slight embarrassment he felt at that. “It’s not like I had any reason to think otherwise at the time. Have you ever met your uncle?”

He’d passed before the start of the books, but Frankie didn’t have any clue when, or if Rook had ever known the man personally.

“We’d met once or twice,” Rook told him. “He wasn’t allowed in my father’s court often. Uncle En was the black sheep of the family.”

“Something you two have in common.” Frankie carefully slipped one of the old tomes off the shelf. The paper was thin and almost transparent, the print so small that in the dim lighting of the room he couldn’t make out any of the script. He glanced back at the fireplace. “Do you think you could light that for me?”

Rook snorted. “Do it yourself.”

Frankie didn’t want to admit that he wasn’t exactly sure how. He’d never made a fire on his own before, and certainly never without the use of a lighter which...they didn’t

have here. His brow furrowed and he nibbled on his lower lip, but Rook didn't seem to notice.

Rook moved over to the desk, opening a drawer to pull out a stack of blank paper which he placed on the surface before motioning Frankie over. "Come."

He bristled but opted not to argue, slipping the book back in place before slowly making his way over. His frown deepened when Rook pulled out the large wooden chair and stepped to the side, indicating Frankie should sit.

"Write," he angled his chin down at the paper, keeping one hand on the top of the high backed chair.

With no other choice but to comply, Frankie settled down onto the seat and reached for the fancy fountain pen that Rook had also pulled out for him. He'd used one of these before so it wasn't nearly as off putting as the fireplace, and he brought the tip to the first blank page, pausing just before he made actual contact.

"What do you want me to write?" he asked, realizing he wasn't entirely sure.

Rook heaved out a sigh, like he thought he was stupid and leaned in a bit closer, so that his head hovered next to his. "The story, obviously. See if you can write it here, since you were unable to in your world."

He didn't think it would work, but it couldn't hurt to give it a try.

Frankie pondered it for a second and then got to work, picking up where he'd left off initially. He wrote Chapter Eighty-Three for the third time, skimming over most of the details he'd meticulously added in the first two attempts. It wasn't like he could carry these pages to his publisher anyway.

He got to the end of page one, pushing it off to the side to immediately start on page two. All the while, Rook kept close, leaning over his shoulder, eyes watching every flick and shift of Frankie's wrist.

The demon prince didn't make a sound until Frankie got to the fourth page. Then his sharp curse broke through

Frankie's concentration, giving him pause.

Frankie turned to ask what was wrong, but in doing so, his gaze managed to catch sight of the pages he's put to the side once he'd been done with them.

Gone was any sign of ink. Not even a period remained. They were completely blank, as if they'd never been touched.

He mirrored Rook's curse, dropping back against the seat, dismayed.

"I didn't think it would work," Rook said a moment later.

"Yeah, but it's still disappointing," Frankie agreed, rubbing a hand down his face. He turned to glance up at Rook, who had straightened. "Did you actually see it disappear, or did it happen while neither of us were looking?"

Rook didn't answer right away, distracted by something on the side of Frankie's face. Eventually, he reached out and rubbed the warm pad of his thumb against the curve of Frankie's jaw.

Frankie's breath caught in his throat, eyes widening slightly at the unexpected contact. Finally, he noticed just how close the two of them actually were, with Rook standing near enough he could reach out and wrap his arms around his narrow waist if he wanted. Bury his nose against the hard plains of his abs...

What the actual fuck was he thinking?

Frankie shook himself out of it just as Rook pulled back, staring down at his thumb.

"You got ink on your face," he explained, rubbing it off on the side of his pants before motioning back toward the blank pages, completely unaware of the wild turn Frankie's thoughts had just taken. He rested his hand on the back of the chair once more.

Only, this time, Frankie was painfully aware of it. Aware of the length of his strong arm, and the heat from his body wafting toward him in this otherwise frigid room. He

swallowed the sudden lump in his throat and tried to concentrate on what the demon prince was saying, but it was more difficult than it'd been only a second prior.

“...no point in trying again,” Rook finished a sentence, but Frankie hadn't caught the first half of it. “Why not change tactics?”

“How so?” Frankie was secretly proud of himself for managing to form that sentence, even if it was only two words.

Rook tapped the page directly in front of him. “Try writing something into existence instead. Let's see if that sticks. Maybe it just didn't work because, technically, the events you were writing already took place here.”

He hadn't considered that. Frankie was writing Chapter Eighty-Three, but that had already taken place the second Rook had met up with Lis on the cliffs. He couldn't rewrite history, whether he was here or back in his world, so it made sense that his writing hadn't stuck.

He glanced back over at the cold fireplace and then quickly jotted down that it was roaring to life. He went all in too, filling the paragraph with details about crackling logs and the smell of burning cedar. All the while, he imagined it too, the same way he pictured what he usually wrote back home. In his mind he saw the fire vividly coming to life, the flames licking at the stone walls, casting heat throughout the room.

Nothing happened.

He finished and sat back, both of them staring down at the page, then over to the fireplace.

The words didn't vanish like before, but the fireplace remained cold.

“Well,” Frankie sighed, “that didn't work either.”

“No,” Rook agreed, crossing his arms as he pondered their predicament. “It appears that you aren't useful in my world.”

“Ouch.”

Rook looked at him, and Frankie stilled beneath his suddenly dark expression. “Does that hurt your feelings?”

Something about the way he said it clued Frankie into the fact he’d hit a nerve somewhere, and he found himself shaking his head in the negative, not wanting to piss the demon prince off.

“Have you forgotten your situation?” Rook asked, almost as if he was able to read Frankie’s mind. “You’re my prisoner, creator, and I only have reason to keep you around so long as you’re serviceable.

“Don’t call me that,” Frankie said automatically, though it came out more a whisper than anything. He was feeling the first telltale signs of fear in a while, and survival instincts had kicked in, helping him refrain from his usual witty retort back.

Even if he hadn’t currently been stuck in this room with Rook, he was in the Bronze Kingdom, in a realm that wasn’t his own. Rook was the only person he could turn to for help, and, like it or not, Frankie needed him. In his awe at seeing the palace in person, he’d forgotten the direness of his situation.

It was a cruel way to remind him, threatening him like this, but it was still a reminder that Frankie needed.

“What should I call you then?” Rook bent down, bringing himself at face level with Frankie. “Engineer? Architect? Should I keep it on the nose and merely refer to you as writer? Or maker, perhaps?”

“Frankie,” he said. “Just call me Frankie.”

Rook sneered. “No. Make no mistake. We aren’t close, and we aren’t friends.”

“I got that,” Frankie stated, though he still lacked any agency in his tone.

“Good.” He stepped away. “Stay here. We’ll try the gateway again in the morning.”

Right, because so long as they were in his world, Frankie was useless to him. As the demon prince moved to the door, the renewed distance between them seemed to have Frankie's courage returning.

"She's never going to love you," he found himself saying, and Rook came to an abrupt halt. "Not the way you want her to, anyway."

He didn't turn around to face him, his back rigid, but his hands fisted down at his sides, giving him away, and his voice was dripping with animosity when he finally spoke next. "She will. You're going to make sure of it."

"I won't." Though their meeting had been brief, now that Frankie had come face to face with Lis, there was no way he'd be able to manipulate her like that. She was real. A real person with her own identity and thoughts and wants and needs. How could he mess around with that?

Before, when she'd been merely a character on the page, things had been different. But now? It wouldn't sit right with him, especially since he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Sage was who she truly wanted.

"She loves him," he said.

"Shut up."

"She's loved him for a while."

"I told you to be quiet." Rook started shaking, but Frankie didn't bow down.

He needed to get through to him. Maybe if Rook realized there was no chance for him and Lis, he could let this whole idea go and move on with his life.

Maybe he'd let Frankie do the same.

"She cares about you, she does, but it's not the same as how she feels about—"

Rook crossed the room in a blur of motion too fast for Frankie's human gaze to track. He grabbed onto the ancient desk and shoved with all his might, shoving it with little hardship.

The whole thing slammed against the bookshelf, sending books toppling off to clatter to the ground. At the same time, the desk itself was smashed at one end, wood older than the both of them splintering upon impact. The jar of ink hit the ground, shattering, and loose pages swirled in the air.

Frankie had jumped back, but now he turned his horrified expression onto Rook.

The demon prince was glaring at him, his eyes rimmed in red. The horns on his head seemed to lengthen slightly, and his tail flicked with agitation behind him, making a slight whistling sound as it did.

Rook had just destroyed a priceless heirloom and Frankie was admittedly scared half out of his mind.

He didn't react well to bursts of anger from others, especially not the physical kind. He felt his throat closing up and his lungs constricting, and it cost every single modicum of effort to remain standing and not start gasping for breath. Instincts had him still as a statue in the face of a predator, afraid any little movement might draw more of that unwanted, violent attention.

Flashbacks from his childhood whisked through his mind and Frankie felt tears prick at the corners of his eyes despite all his efforts to remain in control.

Rook opened his mouth but ended up closing it again without saying anything when Frankie visibly flinched. His gaze wandered over to the demolished desk, before returning to the now skittish Frankie.

He turned on his heels and stormed out of the room, slamming the door shut at his back. A second later, the telltale click of a lock slipping into place echoed throughout the room, followed quickly by the sound of retreating footsteps.

Frankie waited until the sounds disappeared before his legs finally lost all sensation and he collapsed to the ground.

He sucked in air, pressing a palm to the center of his chest as it squeezed painfully. The tears which he'd been

stubbornly holding back burst forth now, streaming down his frozen cheeks as he struggled to get a hold of himself.

He hated this.

Hated falling apart.

Hated that his past could still creep up on him and catch him off guard.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there on the icy floorboards, but after a while, once his breathing was back under control, a humorless laugh slipped past his lips. The whole reason Frankie had turned to writing in the first place was for escape. Ironic that now he was trapped here, in a world he'd used to run from his problems back in his own.

Frankie curled in on himself, resting his chin on his knee, arms banding tightly as he peered sightlessly at the empty hearth. The cold seemed to seep straight through to his bones, but he hardly noticed, mind already elsewhere, faraway.

Chapter 9:

After spending a good portion of the morning discussing the message from Bon with Ivan, Rook left the study slightly annoyed. He'd avoided answering any and all questions about Frankie, which had only soured Ivan's mood, and in turn, his. It wasn't like him to keep secrets from his closest confidant, but some things simply couldn't be said.

What was he meant to do? Tell Ivan that they might not even be real people? They were this close to finally putting an end to the war, and he needed Ivan to remain focused. Having an existential crisis wouldn't be beneficial for anyone. He especially couldn't tell Ivan that he'd died and come back to life.

Ivan would try and kill Frankie if that got out, and Rook didn't need the extra hassle of trying to keep the creator alive. Instead, he'd explained that there was somewhere he needed to be, so he might not be available for a bit and Ivan shouldn't worry. It was the best he could do in terms of explaining where he was about to disappear to.

The sun was already hanging high in the sky by the time he made his way toward the Blue room. Though he'd locked the door after leaving last night, he'd ordered a servant to remain nearby in case Frankie made a fuss. According to that person, however, there hadn't been so much as a peep from the room all night or morning.

The creator must be a deep sleeper. Too bad for him, it was far past time he got up so he could complete his duty and rewrite that chapter.

Rook didn't bother knocking when he got there. Why should he? This was his palace.

Instead, he twisted the brass key and undid the lock, shoving the door open and entering with a flourish.

Only to come to a standstill just within the threshold.

For a moment, confusion swept over him as he stared at the empty bed. The sheets were still pulled up and it was clear no one had slept in it all night. Considering how cold it got in the place, there was no reason he could think of for the bed to have gone ignored. At the very least, Frankie should have needed to make use of the heavy comforter.

He turned back to look at the door, but he'd definitely locked it and there was no way Frankie could have picked the lock and slipped away without him or the servant nearby knowing. So then, where had he gone?

He took a step further into the room, breath catching in his throat when he finally spotted the creator.

Frankie was lying on the ground, his cheek pressed to the floorboards. His arms were wrapped around himself but he wasn't moving. His lips were purple and his skin had a slight tinge of blue, and for a second Rook wasn't even sure if he was still breathing.

He rushed over, dropping to his knees, hauling Frankie up into his arms.

Frankie's body flopped against him like a ragdoll. He was cold as ice.

"Ivan!" Rook called for his second in command, already lifting Frankie up so that he could carry him to the exit. He rushed down the hall, meeting Ivan who was bounding up the stairs two at a time as he passed. "Get some merth!"

"We're out." Ivan stopped on the landing and watched as Rook rushed past him, curiously frowning at the unconscious man in his hold.

"Make some then!" he growled, entering the bathroom at the other end of the hall. He slammed the door shut with his heel, carrying Frankie quickly over to set him down on the edge of the river stone sink.

His private bathroom was luxurious by many standards, with a large mirror trimmed in copper and everything carved out of brownish-gray river stone from the

sink to the tub. The bathtub itself was large enough to fit four grown men.

Rook carefully rested Frankie back so that he was propped up by the mirror, and then placed his palm down on the surface of the sink right next to where Frankie sat. He pushed demonic magic through himself, heating the stone beneath the smaller man, afraid to pull away and relinquish his own body heat until the deed was done.

Frankie stirred, but didn't wake.

At least it was a good sign.

Rook stepped away quickly, twisting the spout on in the bathtub so that hot water poured into the basin. He didn't stand by and watch it fill, moving back to Frankie as soon as he was able, to help strip him out of his chilled clothing. He tried to be gentle, but even the fabric of the man's t-shirt felt like ice to the touch, and in his worry he ended up tearing the cloth.

He dropped the shredded remains carelessly to the ground and then reached for the snap at Frankie's jeans. He'd already tugged both that and his underwear halfway down his thighs when it finally struck him exactly what he was doing and he paused.

He tried not to, but his gaze landed on the place between Frankie's legs, to his flaccid cock and he felt a zap of guilt hit him.

Along with something else.

Fortunately, Frankie let out a soft sound then, breaking whatever strange spell Rook had been under.

He got back to work removing the other man's clothing, chiding himself. Whether or not Frankie would be embarrassed later wasn't important. There was no way around this. He needed to get warm and fast before he became hypothermic.

Just how long had he been sleeping on the floor like that? Rook wondered as he tore off his own clothing next, stepping out of his pants before checking on the tub. It was

halfway filled, steam wafting up, and he shut it off. Picking Frankie back up, he carefully carried him over and stepped over the rim, lowering down with the other man cradled against him.

Despite the steam, Rook had been careful not to make the bath too hot at first, knowing that it could shock Frankie's system if he tossed him too quickly into heat. He needed to slowly chase it away, let the warmth seep in.

He leaned against the back of the tub, resituating Frankie so that he was lying over his chest, Rook's legs at either side of his smaller form.

The water reached Frankie's mid chest, and he shifted again, the space between his brow pinching as he let out a soft moan that sounded more pained than anything.

"Give it a moment," Rook soothed, dipping one of his hands into the water. He cupped his palm and lifted it to the base of Frankie's throat, pouring it down his front over the bare skin that was unsubmerged. He repeated this motion a few more times, and then he held his palm under for a moment and poured out more of his magic, bringing the temperature up another couple of degrees.

Frankie made another sound and Rook wrapped an arm around him, cradling him close.

He hushed him. "You'll be all right." The corner of his mouth turned up wryly. "I can't have you dying on me, now can I? You've yet to do a single thing for my benefit."

Rook wondered what would happen to him and the others if their creator died. Maybe nothing would happen at all. Maybe Frankie hadn't even created them. It wasn't a risk he was willing to take either way.

He kept them there for a long time, until Frankie's shivers had subsided and his skin had returned to that flushed golden hue. The human never woke, but Rook was fine with that. It would be too hard to explain why they were both naked in the tub together, and he didn't particularly care to bother.

As soon as Frankie's breathing had evened out, Rook climbed out and dried them both off, careful not to leave the smaller man unattended and without a heat source for long. It wasn't nearly as cold during the day as it was at night, but he didn't want to risk the chill setting back in.

When he exited the bathroom with Frankie in his arms, he hesitated. In the end, he took him to his bedroom instead of the Blue room. It was located on the opposite end of the hall, down a separate corridor, though it didn't take too long to reach. He'd left the door open so it was easy enough to enter, and he went straight for his bed.

He'd just settled Frankie beneath the thick comforter when a knock came and Ivan appeared.

"The merth is ready." Ivan was holding a wooden tray with a single bowl. The smell of herbs and spices drifted from it.

Rook went to step away from the bed to take it, but suddenly a hand shot out, grabbing tightly onto his wrist. He was yanked back half a step in his surprise, dropping down onto the edge of the bed. Within seconds, his entire arm was engulfed by Frankie's as he clung to him.

"Don't go," Frankie's voice was weak, scared. He made a sobbing sound and tears came to his eyes, though he never opened them.

"What—" Ivan began, only to have Rook stop him with a hand.

"He's still asleep," Rook explained, carefully watching Frankie's expression as it contorted into one of fear and sadness.

"Dad," Frankie said, either caught in a bad dream or a bad memory. "Stay. Don't leave me. Please."

It was the desperation in his voice that had Rook sighing and curling two fingers at Ivan to come closer.

His second brought the tray directly to him, frowning down at the softly crying human clinging to Rook's arm. "Who is he? You've never mentioned him before."

“It doesn’t matter.” Rook tried shifting but Frankie held steadfast.

“I can’t help you if I don’t understand what’s going on,” Ivan argued.

“He’s sick,” Rook told him curtly. “The idiot practically froze to death, that’s what’s going on. I’m not pleased about that. *That’s* what you need to know.” That was all he needed to know. He gave him a pointed stare to make that even clearer, only turning his attention back to Frankie once Ivan nodded in understanding.

“Of course, my prince.”

He still wasn’t in the mood to try and explain about multiple realms and the possibility that they were all just storybook characters. Even with Frankie in this state, that didn’t change that fact. He especially didn’t want to mention that Frankie was the author of said story.

There was no telling how Ivan would react, whether he’d believe him or not. It’d certainly taken Rook the better part of an entire day to come to terms with it himself. But it wasn’t just that.

Ivan would never agree with Rook’s plan to return to Frankie’s world. He’d never liked Rook’s feelings for Lis, and he definitely wouldn’t approve of Rook taking the risk of getting stuck in another world just for the chance to be with her. Honestly, laying it all out like that, Rook had to admit it did sound crazy, even to him.

Admittedly, he’d demanded that in the heat of the moment, more out of anger than anything else. Did he want to spend the rest of his life with someone who’d been written to love him? Wouldn’t he spend every day questioning whether those were Lis’s true feelings?

He didn’t want to force her.

Hell, after reading the books, getting a glimpse into her mind...Rook wasn’t entirely sure he even loved her. She wasn’t the person he’d thought she was.

Their relationship wasn’t what he’d thought it was.

Still, even if he no longer wanted to force Frankie's hand when it came to his relationship with Lis, that changed nothing in regards to the rest of his demands. He refused to lie down and die.

He wouldn't leave Frankie alone until he was sure that was no longer his fate.

"Keep the pot hot," Rook instructed, referring to the rest of the soup that Ivan had made. "And call the physician." Even though he was warm now, there was no telling how sick Frankie was going to be. It would be beneficial to have a doctor on hand for whenever he began showing symptoms.

It was clear Ivan wanted to say something else, but he ended up snapping his mouth shut and disappearing down the hall.

Rook tried to ease himself out of Frankie's hold a second time, but the other man continued to sob quietly against him, shifting closer so that he could wrap his body around Rook's from behind. He sighed and changed tactics, tugging his arm up, causing Frankie to lift into a seated position at the same time.

Even then, Frankie still didn't wake.

He shifted Frankie further up the bed and twisted quickly, so that when he was reached for again, this time it was his right arm instead of his left. Frankie latched on, but Rook didn't mind since now he was able to reach for the steaming bowl of merth on the end table.

With both of them seated up against the backboard of the bed, it was easy enough for Rook to spoon feed the soup to Frankie. It took a little coaxing to get the other man to part his lips, but he seemed to come too enough to at least comply.

"You probably already know about this," Rook spoke, even though he wasn't sure Frankie was even listening in his state. "It's the same stuff I took when I fell ill last winter? You wrote about it."

It was rare for demons, especially ones as powerful as he, to get sick, but Rook had caught something and had missed

an important meeting because of it. Lis had thought he'd tricked her into an ambush, and he'd spent weeks after, once he'd recovered, making it up to her, trying to get her to believe that it'd been an accident on his part.

Ivan and the doctor had taken turns force-feeding him this stuff, which was mostly bitter, but it'd done the trick and he'd recovered in less than a day.

"I'm not sure if it'll have the same effect on a human body," he admitted, reaching out to brush a stray drop from Frankie's bottom lip with his thumb. The touch had the other man snuggling against him more closely and Rook frowned. "Why did you sleep on the floor?"

There was no way Frankie's body didn't warn him of the danger. He had to have been shivering all night, long before he'd slipped into unconsciousness.

Rook recalled the broken desk and the wrecked bookshelves and his expression darkened. "That can't be why." He glanced down at Frankie. He'd lost his cool, sure, and they hadn't known one another for very long, but he hadn't gotten the impression that Frankie was quick to scare.

Frankie recovered from Rook appearing out of nowhere, forcing him into his apartment that night, hadn't he? By the next morning, he'd been able to look Rook right in the eye and hadn't tripped over his words or anything. Even when Rook threatened him, it only stuck a third of the time. The other occasions, the danger seemed to roll right off Frankie's shoulders, and Rook was more often than not met with a snarky remark.

But then...

"I'm at a disadvantage," he admitted. "You know all about me, but I know nothing about you." He stiffened as soon as the sentence left his mouth. The only reason he wanted to know anything about him was because it would help him in the long run. That was all.

Scowling at what he was doing, Rook tried to pull away from the other man again, but like before, Frankie held

firm.

“Dad,” Frankie moved one of his arms to link it around Rook’s waist instead, “don’t go. Don’t leave me here.”

“I’m not your dad,” Rook said, raising his voice some in the hopes it would help snap him out of it. It had the opposite reaction, however, and Frankie immediately started to cry harder.

“I don’t want to be alone,” Frankie sobbed.

Seeing him like this was a big difference from the uptight guy Rook had been presented with all this while. For a moment, it distracted him, the glisten of tear tracks on his reddening cheeks, and the way his nose was scrunched up in the middle. He found himself pressing a finger against the spot between Frankie’s brow in a poor attempt to smooth out the wrinkles.

“Shit.” He gave in, dropping the spoon into the half empty bowl and placing it back on the end table before shifting closer to Frankie. “All right, calm down. I’m not going anywhere. It’s okay.”

“Don’t,” Frankie’s words stopped on a hiccup.

Rook tugged down the blanket so that he could slip beneath it, and then pulled Frankie down so that he was lying on his side. Before he could properly lie down next to him, Frankie was on him again, burying his face against Rook’s chest, tangling their legs beneath the comforter.

Part of him recoiled at the contact, but the other part...

“I am not enjoying this,” he swore to himself, but his hand ended up diving through Frankie’s dark hair, cupping the base of his skull, holding him close as he cried.

Frankie’s fingers fisted in the material of Rook’s shirt at his back. The poor guy was really out of it. Rook could already see how mortified he was going to be when he came to and realized what he’d been doing all this time.

The corner of his mouth tipped up in a malicious half grin at the thought, but then Frankie sniffled against him and

he lost the expression.

“What happened to you?” It wasn’t fair, really. Frankie knew all about Rook’s past. All about the situation with his father and his brother’s. But when it came to Frankie, Rook knew nothing. Did he have a family? Was he close to them? When Rook had explored his home, he’d discovered that there was another bedroom filled with female items.

Was it Frankie’s sister?

Girlfriend?

Did Frankie also like women? He’d mentioned dating a man before.

This clearly wasn’t about a past lover though. Whatever had triggered Frankie, it had to do with his father for certain. Had he been abandoned as a child?

Rook’s heart stuttered in his chest at the thought. He understood what that was like. His father had tossed him aside at a very young age, labeling him as too weak to be important. Instead, he’d showered his older siblings with attention, ensured they always had everything they could ever want or need. All while Rook was left forgotten in the shadows.

But that was fine. It was in the past. It was over. And, hadn’t Rook become all the better for it? He was stronger now than any other member in his family, including his asshole father. If he wanted, he could storm into the main palace right now and declare an official challenge for the crown. He was positive he would win.

That wasn’t what he wanted, though. Never had been. Never would be.

Let his idiot brothers fight for the useless title.

But Frankie wasn’t like Rook. For starters, he was fragile, even with all that lithe muscle on his wiry body, it was obvious he wouldn’t stand a chance against any serious danger in this world. He was also soft hearted. When he’d mentioned that orphan girl yesterday, it’d been as though it was something that had lingered in his mind for a long time.

He was far from innocent, Rook tried to remind himself as he peered down at the smaller man nestled against his side. All of the tribulation currently going on in the world outside was because of Frankie, and yet...For some inexplicable reason, the thought of someone having hurt Frankie so deeply, deeply enough to cause him to sob in the arms of his enemy, made Rook angry.

At least he'd been given the proper tools to deal with his abandonment issues. It didn't appear as though Frankie had been given that same courtesy.

"Whoever is writing your story is far more brutal than you, it seems," Rook stated, sweeping a loose strand of black hair off of Frankie's forehead tenderly.

It was a while before Frankie's breathing returned to normal and Rook was able to ease him away, mostly to be sure that the guy was getting enough oxygen. He certainly hadn't been with his face pressed against his shirt like that. He didn't move far, worried that it would set him off a second time, but rested Frankie's head on a pillow.

He propped up on one arm and stared down at him, brushing some of the tears off the curve of his jaw and the corners of his eyes.

Frankie nuzzled deeper into the pillow but didn't protest the contact.

"You're lucky you're cute when you're unconscious," Rook whispered. He paused, let the words settle in, considering them. He exhaled in defeat, glad that at least he was coming to this realization while alone.

He did find Frankie cute. Not that it mattered. It didn't. But that was something to acknowledge, if only for his peace of mind. He didn't need to fight against his attraction since it was surface level anyway. As soon as he was better, he'd take Frankie to the cliffs and figure out a way back to his realm. Then he'd force the other man to write the ending he wanted, and that would be that. He'd return here and their connection to one another would be severed forever.

An image of Frankie when he'd been trying to pretend he wasn't afraid the other night in his apartment came to mind and Rook chuckled. He'd glared at Rook and straightened his spine as if that would somehow intimidate him.

What was his pen name again? Cuthwulf? Rook had been curious and had looked up the meaning. Famous wolf.

When he thought of wolves, he thought of majestic and sometimes vicious creatures. He thought of predators.

Frankie was anything but.

“You know what you remind me of?” He brushed another loose strand of hair off of Frankie's forehead, then tested his temperature, glad to find that it was normal. “An aardwolf.” He considered it, then asked, “What do you think? Since you don't like me calling you creator, should I call you that instead?”

As if he could understand him—even though he most certainly couldn't—Frankie made a sound that could easily be mistaken for one of agreement.

Rook grinned down at him. “I'm going to take that as a yes.”

They were going to be stuck together for the unforeseeable future anyway, Rook may as well have some fun with it.

Chapter 10:

Frankie's head felt like it'd been squeezed between a vice and his throat was dry to the point breathing in hurt. He groaned and tried to get closer to the solid source of heat that he was sprawled over, mind too fuzzy to process exactly what he was doing until a second later when whatever that solid thing was shifted beneath him.

His eyes popped open, vision swimming momentarily at the suddenness of it. He was in a room, a big one, far larger than the Blue room, in the center of a bed with a pile of blankets over him. His head wasn't resting on a pillow, instead his cheek was pressed against a firm shoulder, his right arm clutching a tapered torso. When he shifted his leg, he concluded he'd also tossed that over the man he was basically sleeping on top of.

Tipping his head back as slowly as possible, Frankie was greeted by the sharp curve of the bottom of Rook's jaw. The demon prince's red hair spread out on the pillow, the tops of his horns touching the headboard as he took shallow breaths and held Frankie loosely against his side.

What the actual fuck was going on? Frankie's mind reeled, and he struggled to recall literally anything that could explain why they were both in bed together, but he was drawing a blank. The last thing he remembered was Rook getting angry and smashing the desk against the bookshelf. After that...

It was a fog.

Thinking back on the sudden outburst, Frankie raised a fist and made a motion as if he was going to punch the sleeping Rook, sneering for good measure.

Rook didn't look anything like the pissed off villain he had last night. His features were relaxed, mouth at ease and not pinched at the corners like it usually was. The guy was almost always scowling at one thing or another. His lips were

full, a pale mauve shade, and looked soft to the touch. His nose was long, and his cheekbones were well-defined.

He'd always understood the appeal—many of his fans had fallen hard for the demon prince—but seeing him in person like this, less than a foot away, Frankie felt something inside of himself stir, despite how big of a dick the guy had been to him. All those old fantasies he'd secretly played with in his head when he was alone flickered through his mind again and he gulped.

“You're not so intimidating when you're sleeping,” Frankie murmured.

“Should I keep pretending then?”

He let out a yelp and pulled away so fast he almost toppled right off the bed.

Rook blinked lazily, then stretched his arms above him before turning his head on the pillow to look at Frankie. “How do you feel?”

“Like I just had the life scared out of me,” he snapped, pressing a palm against his chest. “How long were you awake?”

“I barely got any sleep at all,” he said, reaching out to grasp Frankie's wrist. “Someone stuck to me like an octopus all day.” He tugged him back down and rolled onto his side, pressing a palm to Frankie's forehead. A pleased sound rumbled up his throat. “Your fever's broken.”

Frankie frowned. “I had a fever?”

“You've been sick for almost two days.”

“What?” He sat up again, glancing out the window. Sunlight pooled in bright and intense. He turned back and noticed the color of the shirt he was wearing. “Why are my clothes different?”

“I had to change yours,” Rook said matter-of-factly. He continued to lounge in bed as if this conversation were entirely normal for two people who all but hated one another.

“You—”

“Relax. I only looked a little.”

Frankie’s mouth dropped open and he was left speechless.

Finally, Rook lifted into a seated position next to him, the move bringing them closer. The corner of that full mouth of his that Frankie had been admiring tipped up in a mocking look. “Don’t worry, Aardwolf, horribly ill and unconscious isn’t my type.”

With a flick at the tip of Frankie’s nose, Rook rolled out of bed, stretching more completely before heading across the room toward a wardrobe.

“Why am I here?” Frankie asked.

Rook’s bedroom was spacious yet mostly empty. The floor was made of dark wooden boards in no discernible pattern, and the walls were such a deep shade of brown they were almost black. Behind the bed, there was a stone mural that stretched almost across the entire wall, waves of silver stone reminding Frankie of either a mountainous region or the waves of the ocean.

The bed itself was covered in silks and furs, all black, and there was only one end table off to the right, the side Rook had been sleeping on. A fireplace to the side was crackling, the flames still going strong enough there was no telling when it’d been lit. Across from the bed and to the left, tucked in the corner was a massive wardrobe taller than even Rook, but aside from that and a single desk in the opposite corner, there were no other decorations or furniture. There wasn’t even a door leading to a bathroom.

“You almost froze to death,” Rook replied. “Why didn’t you make a fire in your room?”

“I don’t know how.”

The demon prince paused with a shirt in his hand and turned to frown at him. “Excuse me?”

“We have this thing called electric heat where I’m from,” Frankie stated.

“I read that many humans in your realm still know how to make a fire. Isn’t camping a popular pastime?”

“I’ve never been camping.” He shrugged.

Rook stared at him a moment longer then went back to selecting an outfit. “It was too cold in that room for me to bring you back there, so I brought you here.”

“Sure you weren’t just embarrassed about the tantrum you threw?” Frankie instigated.

Rook paused. “Is that what set you off?”

“What?”

He came back over to the bed, carrying a few items of clothing with him. “I found you passed out on the floor, half frozen to death. Even if you couldn’t make a fire, there were enough blankets on the bed to keep you from getting sick.” He met Frankie’s gaze and held. “What happened?”

Frankie shifted uncomfortably under his scrutiny, running his fingers through the furs covering him. “Nothing.”

“Liar.”

Frankie dropped his eyes. It was bad enough that Rook had been forced to take care of him—he wasn’t even going to let his mind wander to the whole changing his clothes bit. He didn’t want to share anything else that could be seen as a weakness.

He wasn’t completely delusional; he understood the only reason Rook had shown him even that kindness and nursed him back to health was because the demon prince needed him. This wasn’t about Frankie at all, it was about Lis. He probably would have left Frankie there to die otherwise.

Before, he’d always liked the cold, calculating quality Rook had. But then, when he’d been writing the story, Rook’s personality hadn’t directly affected him the same way it did now.

Two fingers slipped beneath his chin, carefully lifting his face up until he was forced to meet Rook’s gaze again.

Rook had come around to Frankie's side of the bed, his expression gentler than he'd ever seen it before. "You can tell me, Aardwolf, I won't judge. Not that."

The strange nickname had his brow furrowing. Right, he'd called him that once already and it'd gone over Frankie's head.

At the look of confusion, Rook chuckled lightly. "Another thing I read about in your bookstore. The animals in your realm are more interesting than the ones in mine."

Frankie didn't agree with that statement even a little, but okay.

Rook cocked his head at Frankie's continued silence. "You do know what that is, right?"

"Yes," he snapped. He knew what an aardwolf was. He just didn't understand why the other man was suddenly calling him one. They weren't even really wolves at all. "It's a tiny species of hyena that mostly eat insects."

"They're small and adorable but they like to act tough. When they feel threatened, the hairs on their backs lift to give off the impression they're bigger than they actually are." Rook gave him a pointed stare and Frankie bristled. That only caused him to laugh. "Exactly."

Was he messing with him?

"Don't call—"

Rook clucked his tongue, instantly stopping him. "You get one veto and you've already used that on *creator*, I'm afraid. From now on, I'll call you what I like. Now that that's settled, you haven't explained what happened yet."

"And I'm not going to." Frankie slapped the hand from beneath his chin away, only noting that he should have done it sooner once it was too late.

"Are you certain?" Rook planted his palms on the bed, one on either side of Frankie and leaned in.

"What are you doing?" Frankie tipped backward in an attempt to avoid him as he brought his face closer.

“This seemed to be the most effective way to get you to talk,” Rook told him, his meaning clear.

Frankie’s eyes widened. What the hell had he said while he’d been sick?!

“Were you afraid to be left alone in a strange place?” Rook speculated, shaking his head when that caused Frankie to glare. “No. Was it the cold itself? Do you have a problem with it being cold?”

“I wasn’t triggered by the cold, asshole,” he practically growled, shoving Rook away.

He allowed him to, the force only managing to push him back a single step, but it put space between them that Frankie desperately needed, so was good enough.

Rook thought it over. “It was me, wasn’t it.”

Frankie looked away a second time and gave in. “You don’t have to break things to make a point.”

“Did someone hurt you?” his voice darkened.

“No one hurt me,” Frankie said.

“There are scars on the bottom of your feet,” Rook stated. “On your arms. One behind your right ear. No one hurt you?”

“I—” Instinctively, he lifted a hand to his ear, catching himself. “The physical injuries weren’t on purpose. She didn’t mean to do it.”

“She?”

He blew out a breath. “You’re really not going to let this go, are you?”

Rook’s unwavering stare was his answer.

“Fine. Growing up my mom had a bad addiction to alcohol and an even worse temper. She’d get into it with my dad over anything and everything and it almost always resulted in something being smashed or thrown across the room. Sometimes I’d be in the way and I’d get cut. The scars on my feet are from busted dishes, the ones on my arms are

probably from the time she threw an ashtray at the wall and when she tossed a lamp through the TV screen.”

“And the one behind your ear?” Rook asked.

“My dad bought me a model airplane one Christmas and spent the day building it with me. She woke up around eight pm after drinking non-stop the night before, got pissed we celebrated without her, and broke it.”

His eyes narrowed. “Broke it how?”

Frankie bit the inside of his cheek, hard.

“You said it wasn’t on purpose.”

“Fine, that one time it was, okay? Happy?” He felt tears and quickly ran the back of his hand over his eyes in an attempt to get rid of them. He hated thinking back on those times, tried his best not to. Even after years of therapy, it still messed him up whenever he did. “I’m better now,” he ended up saying anyway. “I only get triggered sometimes. In rare cases.”

“Like when someone suddenly explodes and slams an entire five hundred pound desk into a wall like it was nothing?” Rook’s question was obviously rhetorical, so Frankie didn’t bother responding.

He did, however, sniffle. He couldn’t help it.

In the next instant, Rook was perched on the edge of the bed next to him. He lifted a hand, running his fingers through Frankie’s hair as if petting him.

“She hit me with it,” the words came out of him on a whisper. “The plane. She smashed me on the side of the head. I had to be taken to the ER to get stitches and I couldn’t hear out of my right ear for a few days. That was the first and only time she ever did anything like that. It was the last straw for my dad. He left her.”

Rook continued to touch him, gently, soothingly, and before long, Frankie was actually leaning into the touches.

“He left you too, didn’t he.” Rook wasn’t asking that time either.

Frankie squeezed his eyes shut. Shit. “What did I say while I was sick?”

“You begged me not to leave you,” Rook told him without skipping a beat. “You called me dad.”

“I’d apologize but—”

“It’s my fault you were in that state,” Rook cut him off. “I’m the one who needs to apologize. I got angry and reacted without thinking.”

To cover his shock at the fact he was saying sorry, Frankie babbled, “You’re a demon. I should have expected it really.”

Rook’s hand stilled at the base of his skull for a brief second before he continued to stroke his long fingers through the short hairs there. “It won’t happen again. You have my word.”

“Why?” Frankie was suspicious. The last they’d spoken, Rook had seemed like he wanted to rip his head off. Now he was being sweet and attentive. Kind.

He considered his answer for a moment before shaking his head. “I’m not entirely sure, Aardwolf. I just hated seeing you like that. I don’t want it to happen again. And... You aren’t the only one who’s been messed up by their parent’s poor choices.”

Right. If anyone could understand his daddy issues, Rook could. Frankie had always considered that something they had in common, in fact, even though it wasn’t the same.

“We were both abandoned,” Rook said quietly.

“Do you hate me a little less now?” Frankie blurted, clearly catching Rook off guard.

“I never hated you,” he replied after a moment. “I just didn’t like you very much. Look at it from my perspective.”

Frankie wrote the book. The book in which Rook lost his mom and his family all hate him. Of course he’d been mean when they’d first met. “But...you like me now?”

Rook dropped his hand. "I don't like you either. I need you."

Frankie tried not to show how that statement hurt, especially since it shouldn't.

"That doesn't mean I have to treat you like shit though," Rook continued. "Just, fix my story."

And they were back to this again.

"It's not that easy." Honestly, he didn't know why he bothered. He already knew it wasn't going to get him anywhere.

Sure enough, Rook pulled away and got back on his feet. "Since you're better now, let's get something to eat and get to the cliffs. The sooner we make it to your world, the sooner this can all come to an end."

"You could just stay here," Frankie suggested. "This is where you belong."

Rook gave him a look and Frankie sighed and tossed the covers off.

"Or we can go get breakfast."

* * *

No one had ever bothered taking the time to nurse him back to health before. That was the only reason why his feelings had altered some toward the demon prince, and why it'd stung a little to hear that he wasn't liked. Frankie spent most of the hike to the cliffs trying to convince himself of this, too lost in his own thoughts to attempt carrying on a conversation.

Rook led them silently, clearly dealing with his own musings.

Probably Lis.

He better than anyone knew how sincerely Rook felt about her. She'd been the first to come along and treat him like a person and not just the big bad demon prince to be feared. They'd opened up to one another, talking about how Lis felt

pressured by her father into becoming a spy, how they hadn't been close since the death of her brother.

Rook had related due to his poor relationship with his own dad, though he hadn't been able to understand on a personal level her connection to her sibling, since he'd always hated all of his. Still, there'd been something in common between them, someone to share that burden with.

For Lis, that had been important because she hadn't yet confessed to Sage who she really was, and it'd been eating her up inside. By the end of Volume Two, that had changed. Sage had found out and the two of them had grown closer than ever.

Rook said he'd read both books. That meant he'd read both Lis's and Sage's inner thoughts on the page. He had to know how in love they were.

It was selfish of him to try and break them up. Frankie needed to keep reminding himself of that fact. Reminding himself that just because he hadn't let him freeze to death, it didn't mean he wasn't still the same person that Frankie knew him to be.

Because of how he'd grown up, all Rook knew how to do was take. If he wanted something, he took it. Plain and simple.

Kind of like what was going on right now.

They finally made it to the cliffs. The bodies were gone, but Rook didn't seem surprised. He'd probably sent someone out to clean up. He waved his hand over the same spot as before, making the gateway visible again.

The rainbow sheen winked and sparkled.

"How do we know if it's going to work this time?" Frankie asked when nothing immediately happened. He took a step closer and bent over it. It was mostly transparent, and he could see the thick green grass beneath.

Before Rook had a chance to answer, Frankie felt a slight tug around his neck. With a frown, he glanced down to see the necklace he was still wearing begin to shake ever so slightly. He frowned, about to tell the prince to look when

suddenly he was sucked head first straight through the gateway.

He didn't even have enough time to scream.

Chapter 11:

He hit the arm of his couch, the pain minimal yet still pulsating for a second as he landed on the scuffed floorboards.

The gateway had deposited him back in his apartment.

Frankie felt a wave of relief, happy to be home and in one piece, only to suck in a breath a second later when Rook's body appeared out of nowhere.

Rook fell directly onto the floor, hitting with a heavy thump that had them both wincing. For a second, he lay there, staring sightlessly up at the ceiling as he regained his bearing. By the time he sat up, the ache in Frankie's shoulder had dissipated.

"It was the necklace," he said.

"I saw," Rook agreed, getting to his feet. "It makes sense. I was sent here shortly after Lis gifted me hers. There must be a connection somehow."

"Maybe..." Frankie nibbled on his bottom lip, but then decided to just say it. "Could it have something to do with the fact that there are two of them?" When Rook didn't immediately call the hypothesis stupid, he continued. "We've already established I can't control everything, some things are fixed." Like Rook's favorite color not being what Frankie had thought it was. "But what if there are some things I can do? Maybe not change, but add?"

"You think you wrote this necklace into existence in my world," Rook caught on.

"Yeah. If I did, that means that I inadvertently created a connection between your realm and mine. Hence," he held up his hands, "gateway."

"That's..." he pursed his lips, "not the most ridiculous thing you've said thus far. But there's no way to prove it. And your theory means you don't, in fact, control everything that happens in Visera."

Frankie knew what he was implying. “I’m not trying to shirk responsibility here. If I really created your world, and if I really control everything that happens there when I write about it, then—”

“What?” Rook cut him off brusquely. “You’re going to go back with me and walk the streets shaking people’s hands saying you’re sorry?”

Frankie flinched.

“You may be responsible for the creation of a worldwide war,” Rook reminded.

Was he ever going to stop bringing that up? Frankie understood why he was angry about it, but they didn’t know for a fact that Frankie actually had been behind it, he’d already explained a dozen and one times that he’d thought he’d been writing a story.

Just a regular story about people who didn’t actually exist. People who had no autonomy.

Frankie’s phone went off then, and with a start he realized he hadn’t even bothered checking to see if he had service when he was stuck in Visera. He pulled it out of his front pocket, fumbling with it a bit. When he saw that it was a call from his editor, he held a finger up to Rook, signaling for him to be quiet.

The demon prince didn’t like this, crossing his arms and cocking out a hip with a slight glare, but he obliged anyway, mouth thinning into a straight line as he watched Frankie answer.

“Maggie, hi,” Frankie glanced at the digital clock on the end table by the couch as he spoke. It was around two in the afternoon. The meeting at the library had been on Saturday, but the clock said that it was now Monday.

“Frankie, I was hoping you had a minute to talk,” Maggie, the editor who’d been assigned to him since he’d signed the contract with Immersive Books, sounded a bit frazzled.

“Sure,” he said. “What’s up?”

Had they tried to get a hold of him over the weekend? He needed to check his phone for missed texts, calls, emails... Damn. There was so much to do now that he'd lost over forty-eight hours of time.

"It's about the pages you sent over," she began. "We're ahead of schedule, so if you rushed these by chance because you felt badly about missing the deadline, it's really all right. If that wasn't the case...I think I'm just a little confused. It's pretty late in the story to be adding new characters. Were you thinking about doing a possible spinoff?"

Frankie sat there silently for a moment, lost. "I'm sorry?"

"It's great if you are," she quickly rushed on, obviously taking his hesitation to mean that he was nervous. "I'm more than happy to move our meeting up on the matter if you'd like."

They'd already discussed signing him for a new web project, and had agreed they'd speak more on it once he'd had the time to develop an idea and direction he'd like to go in. The date had been set for the week after the final chapter was sent in for review, and honestly, Frankie had been so caught up in his doubts about killing off Rook at the final hour, that he hadn't put much effort into brainstorming what his next project might be.

He also hadn't sent in any pages.

"Maggie, this is going to sound crazy, but I have no clue what you're talking about. What pages?"

"Chapter Eighty-Three," she said. "You sent it over this morning." She paused, then asked, "You didn't pull another all-nighter getting this done, did you?"

She thought he was tired and that's why he wasn't following.

Frankie rubbed at his temples and sighed. "Can you send me the chapter? I don't think I have a copy."

"Did it get deleted again?" The sound of ruffling and then the clicking of a keyboard came through the line. "There

you go, check your inbox. I've included the document with my notes attached. If you want to take it in this direction, obviously I'm not going to tell you not to, but unless this is a setup for another book, or you have a plan for the plot you haven't told me about, I'm not sure this is a great idea. Also, can I ask why you gave the character your name?"

"I what?" His phone dinged indicating he'd received the email, but he didn't bother looking just yet.

"The new character, the mysterious one that Rook knows," Maggie elaborated. "You named him Frankie. I was wondering if that's meant to be an Easter egg of some sorts, since everyone only knows you as Cuthwulf."

"I've got to go. I'll call you back." He hung up without waiting for a reply, opening his email in an almost state of panic now.

She was implying that....

No.

There was no way.

Right?

He clicked open the file, scanning over the top of the page where Chapter Eighty-Three was written clear as day and felt a twist of dread fill him with each sentence.

"What's going on?" Rook asked.

"This can't be happening." Frankie flicked to the second page.

"What can't be?"

"Lis took a fighting stance, determined not to allow the Iron soldiers to see her cower, but before she could make any moves, someone burst from the tree-line off to the right. Her gaze trailed over him quickly, but he was dressed oddly and there was no telling what kingdom he belonged to." Frankie read out loud, unsure how else to explain. "'The strange newcomer took in the scene, and called out, 'Hey, assholes!'"

He dropped the phone in his lap and looked up to meet Rook's gaze.

The demon prince seemed just as shocked as he was. "That's what you said back on the cliffs."

"It's exactly what happened on the cliffs, down to a T," Frankie confirmed. "The whole first couple of pages of the chapter is. My editor claims I sent this to her this morning."

"Which is impossible."

"Yeah."

Rook's frown deepened. "That sounds like the chapter is told in Lis's POV."

"It is," he confirmed.

"Was it always?"

"No. Originally it was told in yours." He'd wanted to give Rook a proper sendoff and allow the readers one last glimpse into his mind. It'd been the best way to get across that Rook was all right with his own death, so long as it meant Lis had stayed alive. That single act of self-sacrifice was meant to show character growth and prove that his feelings for her had been legitimate.

Now...

"No one dies on the cliffs," Frankie said, turning back to his phone screen.

"Don't sound so disappointed, Aardwolf," Rook drawled, though his words lacked the usual bite they had whenever he said something like that. He began pacing. "We need to figure this out. When you tried writing the chapter yourself, it vanished, both here and in my realm. But when you were stuck there, suddenly the chapter wrote itself?"

Frankie pondered it. "I don't think it's me. I think it's you."

Rook paused and frowned, silently urging him to explain his reasoning.

“I couldn’t write a chapter with you in it because you were here, sitting next to me.” Again with the not being able to be in two places at once. “When you returned to your rightful place, the story was able to pick up where it’d left off.” Because the end of Chapter Eighty-Two had been just before Rook and Lis had been attacked. There was no way for the plot to skip over what had happened to them and move on to another scene without first concluding it.

“That implies the story has a mind of its own,” Rook pointed out.

“Maybe it does.” Or maybe he’d absolutely lost his mind after all and he was hallucinating all of this. Who knew.

“What happens next?” Rook indicated the phone with a lift of his chin. “After I kill the Iron and their pets. Who does the chapter follow?”

Frankie skimmed over it. “Still Lis. She leaves us on the cliffs and rides straight to Gold to meet with Sage.” The next part had him shooting to his feet. “She shows up just in time to save him and his crew from a Gloom attack!”

That...had not been part of his grand plan. At all.

Rook was supposed to have died, and a distraught and vengeful Lis would have gone to Sage to demand he help her find Talia’s lair. Rook had given her the general location before they’d been attacked, so she was aware of where that was roughly. The two of them would have spent another chapter trying to narrow the search down.

But there wouldn’t have been an impromptu attack, not with the final battle so close, and not when Frankie knew that he’d need to spend a good amount of time in Lis’s head dealing with her emotions over losing Rook. The readers wouldn’t have been satisfied if she’d simply moved on and forgotten about him.

Frankie looked to Rook again. “I didn’t write this.”

“We’ve established as much.”

“No,” he shook his head, “no I mean, I didn’t intend to write this either. This wasn’t meant to happen. He wasn’t

supposed to be attacked this close to the end of the book. I...” He swallowed the heavy lump in his throat, “I have no idea what’s going to happen next.”

“Isn’t that typical for you anyway?”

Frankie sent him an incredulous look. Why wasn’t he more concerned?

“You did a Q&A at the signing,” Rook elaborated. “You answered a question about your writing style and said you don’t like to plan too far ahead and more often than not have no idea which direction the story is heading in. Isn’t this the same thing?”

“No!”

Rook quirked a brow, clearly not convinced.

“There’s a difference between not knowing and there being a possibility of figuring it out, and having it *just happen*,” Frankie tried to explain. “If we keep the chapter as is, I don’t have any control over the events that take place in it.”

“I can see how that may be difficult for you,” Rook said, but there was a thread of mockery in his tone that was impossible to miss. “You’re so used to being the puppeteer, after all.”

“Can you not?” He felt a spark of irritation, rewording his worries in a way he thought maybe Rook would actually be able to connect with. “If I can’t control the flow of the story, I can’t exactly help you with Lis, now can I?”

As hoped, that wiped any semblance of a smirk off the demon prince’s face.

Frankie needed to think. Clearly there were rules in place here, even if he didn’t quite understand the how or why of it all. The necklaces, for one, were proof of that. If they acted as keys to open the gateways, and that only started as soon as Frankie had written an identical version of his into the story, could he do it again?

Not that he really wanted to test it out, but it was still a working theory like it or not, and if they had even a hope of getting on top of things, they needed to understand exactly what it was they were dealing with.

He'd worry about the how of it all later.

"Now that we're back," Frankie dropped down in front of the coffee table and flipped open his laptop, "let me see if I can write the next chapter. I can't redo Chapter Eighty-Three because you have to be in it. But let's see if I can go off of how it ended." Maybe there was still a chance he could get things back on track.

"And if you can't?" Rook asked, but Frankie waved him off.

"I need to concentrate." He'd only skimmed over the end of the chapter Maggie had just sent, so while his computer turned on he read through it again, even more unnerved with each passing paragraph. At the very end, Sage had been injured, though not badly, and Lis was with him in his study helping to bandage the wound.

She was talking about Rook and his strange new friend.

Sage took the opportunity to teasingly probe whether or not she was jealous.

She said of course not. They flirted a bit.

Then the chapter ended with them making out just before a knock on the door interrupted them. It didn't show who was on the other side.

"All right," Frankie murmured to himself, pulling his notebook closer to skim his notes really quick as he let his mind process everything and try to come up with a new plan. What he'd originally intended to happen now obviously couldn't, at least not the way he'd wanted before. There was also no telling if he'd be able to pick who he wanted on the other side of that door, or if it was already predetermined.

Since there was a knock, it was safe to assume that someone had to have already been standing out in the hall to

have made the sound. Frankie had no way of even guessing who that someone might have been. If he got it wrong, would the chapter refuse to stick, like before?

Could he even write them at all anymore or were they going to write themselves from here on out?

“Stop panicking and do something,” Rook’s deep voice cut through Frankie’s spiraling thoughts.

Right. He wouldn’t know until he tried.

He couldn’t know for certain, but Cue would be the most likely person knocking, so Frankie chose to write him in. He started with Chapter Eighty-Four at the top and quickly dove into it, weaving Cue into the story, switching to Sage’s POV to keep it interesting—because even after everything he’d just experienced the book was still important to him. He’d spent too much time with these characters to let everything fall apart for them.

It wasn’t as difficult as he’d feared, getting the plot heading in the direction he wanted. It was as simple as having Cue deliver information on the Hidden Palace and where he believed they could find it. They’d sent a hunting party back in a previous chapter already, so it was easy to make it so that party had returned with information. That, paired with what Frankie had told Lis on the cliffs, set them up nicely for the final battle against Talia.

The only real issue was what Frankie was going to do about Rook. Originally, with the demon prince dead, he didn’t have to worry about him. But now...If he was still alive, it wouldn’t make sense not to have him join the others during this attack. Lis said as much to the others, and Sage felt a pang of jealousy that he quickly concealed.

Frankie paused with his fingers on the keys, frowning slightly.

It was pretty typical when he entered a flow state for the words to just come without much prompting. More often than not this led to the characters doing and saying things even he hadn’t expected—that was one of the things he’d always

liked most about writing. Discovering the story and getting to know the people within it was every bit as exciting for him as it was for the readers.

But he hadn't expected that from Sage, especially not this far along. With only four chapters left to go before he and Lis were meant to ride off into the proverbial sunset together, it seemed out of place to Frankie.

He glanced over at Rook who'd stopped his pacing and was now flipping through one of Adelaide's romance novels, which had been on the short shelf against the left wall.

If Frankie played Sage's jealousy up now, it could be a way in for Rook...But the demon prince wasn't paying attention, and despite his threats, ripping away the man Lis actually loved and replacing him with Rook wasn't exactly something Frankie was onboard with.

He deleted the line about Sage being jealous and continued, a bit more mindful as he wrapped up the chapter.

The group came up with a plan, one that included Rook only because it had to, where they would sneak into the Hidden palace by use of a gateway. There was one in the Silver Kingdom that Lis could gain them access to, she just needed to speak with her father first.

Frankie kept many of the details vague, since he hadn't yet thought them out himself. Initially, Lis would have insisted they not waste time coming up with an extensive plan, fueled by her grief and fury over Rook's death. With that element removed, it didn't make sense for them to basically rush into a mission that could very likely get them all killed.

He'd have to think on it more, but for now, this would do.

A little over an hour passed by the time he lifted his head from the screen again. He'd re-read the chapter, done a little cleaning up and editing, and then had emailed it over to his publisher. Aside from when Lis had brought the Frankie character up to Sage, he hadn't mentioned himself again.

Hopefully Maggie wouldn't mind that he wasn't further exploring that aspect as of yet.

He still needed to figure out how he was going to handle it. Obviously he had no plans of ever returning to Visera, which meant Frankie's appearance in the book had to be a one-off. Worst come to worst, maybe he'd have to take Maggie's suggestion and use it as a coming out of sorts.

If fans really complained about the sudden appearance and disappearance of a new character—one who delivered priceless information conveniently only to vanish right after—the only way Frankie could see himself appeasing their ire was to step forward and unmask Cuthwulf.

He'd never intended to use the pen name forever, only until he'd graduated and wouldn't have to be concerned about alienating himself from his peers...

His laptop dinged, letting him know he'd received an email, and he checked quickly to find a response from Maggie letting him know that she'd gotten it and was starting to look it over now.

Which meant the chapter hadn't deleted itself like the others.

He clicked back over to Word Doc just to be certain, and sure enough, it was all still there.

"That confirms that," he said, drawing Rook's attention his way.

The demon prince was on his fourth book, the other three stacked up on the corner of the top of the shelf. He dropped the one he was holding onto the pile with little care and walked over, crossing his arms as he waited for Frankie to continue.

"The chapter took," Frankie told him.

"So if I'm here you can't write about me in there."

Frankie gasped, reminded of something. "Holy shit! How did we forget about Neko?"

"I didn't forget about him." Rook shrugged.

He got to his feet and headed for his room. "I'm going to change and then you and I are headed back to the library."

"Why?"

"We can't just leave that psycho in my world," Frankie said, but Rook didn't seem all that concerned.

"It's not really my problem," he drawled. "Besides, do you really want to head back there and risk getting sucked back into Visera? We only just returned."

"Right." Duh. He reached up and unclasped the necklace from around his neck, then pointed at Rook. "Take it off."

"Excuse me?"

He made an exasperated sound. "You know what I mean. Come on. This is important."

"Going back there would be a complete waste of time," Rook argued. "You don't honestly believe he's still there? Doing what, exactly? Reading?"

"That's what you did when you first got here," Frankie pointed out.

"Don't compare me to that idiot."

Fair.

Still.

"Please just take the necklace off so we can check. He attacked us with Gloom's, both here and at the library. What if he's going around hurting people?"

"I fail to see how that's my problem." Rook settled down onto the top of the armrest on the couch. Then he cocked his head. "You didn't let me read the chapter before you sent it. Was there something you didn't want me to see, perhaps?"

Frankie thought about Sage's jealousy and how he'd erased it.

"Hiding something, Aardwolf?"

He forced himself to straighten to his full height and motioned to his laptop. “Go ahead and read it while I’m getting changed. But then you have to come with me.”

“All right,” Rook surprised him by agreeing, standing once more. “But only because it’ll be a pain in my ass if Neko kills you.”

“Real sweet.”

Rook sent him a devilish grin that had Frankie turning on his heels and all but scurrying to his room.

As far as he was concerned, Neko wasn’t the problem. The real threat to Frankie was Rook.

Chapter 12:

Monday afternoons on campus were typically bustling so Frankie made sure that Rook presented himself as human as the two of them parked and headed toward the school library.

Of course though, Rook had been right. They didn't find anything in the building, not even Frankie's things which he'd left there when he'd been magically transported to another realm. The lady at the front desk told him that nothing had been left behind on Saturday and that he should check with his friends, so he'd sent a text in his group chat.

"It's too sunny out here for a Gloom," Rook said later as they wandered down the stone paths leading around campus. With nothing else to do and no other leads, they'd figured sticking around to be sure there weren't any other signs of Neko would be smart.

Frankie motioned with his chin toward a large oak tree where several students were sprawled out doing homework beneath it. "There's shade."

Iron's only needed the tiniest hint of a shadow in order to summon a Gloom. And there was no real rule that a full bodied Gloom couldn't step out in the sun. It dampened their powers, sure, and there needed to be a nearby source of darkness for them to retreat to as soon as possible, but that was about it.

"Forget about Neko," Rook sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets, taking in the campus.

There were a lot of people out, some sitting on blankets, others on steps leading up to various buildings. There was chatter and laughter, and others being quiet and studying on their own. It was a little chilly out, but with the sky as clear as it was, a light jacket or sweatshirt was good enough, which explained why there were so many students taking in the fresh air. It would get cold pretty soon and then they'd all be forced indoors for the rest of fall and winter.

“I’m not just going to forget that there’s a known killer who has magic powers roaming about,” Frankie argued.

“I guess you can’t, since it’s your fault.”

“I didn’t bring him here.”

“No, but you—”

“I don’t think I created him either,” Frankie interjected. He’d been thinking about it a lot since meeting Rook. “There’s too much evidence against it.”

“Such as?”

He thought about Sage’s unexpected jealousy and Rook’s favorite color and how the story had rewritten itself without him.

“Pretty much everything?” he ended up saying, blowing out a breath. “And no, this isn’t me trying to get out of my responsibility. Believe me, I wish I’d created you more than anyone, but it just isn’t looking like that’s the case.”

Rook was silent a moment and then, “You want to have created my world?”

He sighed. “I want your world to be fiction like I always thought it was,” he corrected. “I want to be proud about the work I’ve done these past few years. Before, thinking I’d created Visera and everything in it, I could be. I was. But now...If I didn’t actually create any of it, what does that make me?”

“A nonfiction writer?”

Frankie came to an abrupt stop on the wide path, turning to glower at Rook. “I’m being serious.”

“So am I.”

“Forget it.” He shook his head and started walking once more. “I don’t know why I thought you’d understand.” Or care.

Frankie almost wished that Rook had left him half frozen on the ground in the Blue room instead. At least then he wouldn’t be filled with these conflicting emotions. Part of him

was sort of endeared toward the demon prince now, and the other part—the smarter part—knew that was ridiculous.

Just because Rook was hot and his type—and no longer a fictional, 2D character—didn't mean that suddenly Frankie needed to develop a thing for him. He especially didn't need to after the guy had committed *one* good deed. That didn't wipe away all the other things Rook had said or done since his arrival. He'd been nothing but controlling, dramatic, and arrogant since he'd shoved Frankie that first night.

Had he said he was his type?

Wrong.

Frankie had never been into the alpha male, pushy kind of guy. He preferred people who treated him like an equal. People he could rely on. Rook wouldn't even give him a few comforting words when he was down.

“When are you going back?” he asked before he could think better of it, the edge in his voice giving away more of his feelings than he'd meant to.

Rook's eyes narrowed slightly but that was the only reaction he gave. “Trying to get rid of me already, Aardwolf?”

“You read the chapter I wrote,” he said. “You need to be in Visera in order to take part in the group attack.”

“Right, the big final showdown.” Rook clucked his tongue. “I'm not all that interested actually.”

Frankie sent him an incredulous look. “You can't be serious.”

“Why not?”

“Hold up.” Frankie grabbed onto his sleeve, bringing them both to a stop yet again. “You've spent all of this time trying to put an end to the war, and now that the chance to actually do so is finally here, you're going to bow out? You can't do that.”

“Why?” He tilted his head and the sunlight created a shiny halo over his dark brown hair.

All it did was remind Frankie the guy actually had horns.

“Worried it’ll ruin your precious story?”

Frankie dropped his hand. “You’re an asshole.”

“It’s tempting to say that you made me this way, but,” he gave him a lengthy once over, “I think you’re too innocent to have created me.”

“You hardly know me,” Frankie snapped, sucking in a breath when Rook took a large step closer, bringing them almost chest to chest.

His voice dropped into a near whisper. “I held you in my arms for an entire night. Felt your body’s heat against mine. The steady rhythm of your heartbeat. I think I’ve got an idea of who you are, Aardwolf. Like it or not.”

It was impossible to tell what he meant by that last comment.

Was he saying he didn’t like it, or was he telling Frankie it didn’t matter if Frankie didn’t like it?

The near proximity and the suggestive way the demon prince spoke had his mind momentarily fritzing and all he could do was stare up at the other guy.

Until someone called his name, completely breaking whatever insane spell he’d been under.

Frankie retreated, renewing the space between himself and Rook just as Ri jogged up to them.

The senior was smiling, though there was a silent question in his gaze as he glanced between Frankie and Rook before finally settling his eyes on the first. “Hey, what happened to you the other day? I came back from the store and you were gone.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.” Frankie ran a hand through the hairs at the base of his skull and gave an awkward laugh that had him inwardly grimacing. “Something important came up suddenly and I had to leave.”

“Without telling the rest of the group?” Ri shook his head but tugged his backpack off his shoulder and pulled out a notebook and stack of papers. “Here, I gathered your things for you when it became obvious you weren’t going to make it back for them.”

“Thanks!” He took them with a sigh of relief. “You’re a life saver.”

Ri chuckled. “First time anyone’s ever accused me of that.” He motioned toward Rook. “This your friend?”

“Just ignore him. He—”

“Rook,” Rook interrupted, staring Ri down with an unfriendly expression.

“What grade are you?” Ri asked. If he was put off by the icy demeanor, he didn’t show it. “Any chance you’re interested in joining the drama club?”

“Right,” Frankie jumped in, already knowing whatever Rook planned to reply with it wouldn’t be kind, “I heard about Chase.”

“Broke his leg during basketball Thursday,” Ri said disappointed. “Now we need to find a new lead for the play next month.”

“Isn’t there usually an understudy?”

“Get this, he was in a car accident Saturday. He’s fine, but he hit a tree swerving to avoid some animal and now there’s a cast on his arm and stitches in his forehead. We’re all worried we’re going to have to cancel. Four weeks isn’t exactly a lot of time for someone new to step in and learn all the lines. I’m desperate at this point.”

“Wish I could help.” Frankie held up a hand when Ri opened his mouth next. “I can’t act. And I don’t have the time to anyway. Sorry.”

He chuckled. “Was worth a shot. Anyway,” he turned back to Rook, “let me know if you change your mind. Where are you guys headed? I didn’t think you had class on Mondays?”

“We’re just walking around,” Frankie said.

“Want to grab lunch?” Ri hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “I was just headed to the cafeteria.”

“Sure.” Frankie made a point of not looking to Rook, already knowing that the guy was glaring at him for accepting the invitation. But he needed a breather, one that didn’t involve him being alone with the demon prince, and this was the perfect opportunity.

Rook fell a step behind him and Ri as they headed toward the cafeteria building, but he followed all the same.

* * *

“I don’t like him.”

“You hardly said two words to him the entire time,” Frankie pointed out with a snort.

Rook had basically sat there scowling at Ri while the three of them had eaten lunch at the cafeteria. He’d made one noncommittal sound when Ri had attempted to make conversation with him, and that was it.

“He wasn’t even worth those two words,” Rook grumbled, tipping his head toward the passenger seat window in an attempt to keep Frankie from being able to hear.

He laughed, unable to help it, and then made a mock apologetic face when Rook sent a glare his way for doing so. They were in the car on their way back to his apartment, and though they’d failed in finding any sign of Neko, talking with Ri had put Frankie in a good mood. It’d felt very...normal.

Even though it’d only been a few days, it felt like forever since the last time Frankie had gotten to do something average, something that every other college student got to do—like eat lunch with friends on campus. Even his meeting with the workshop group on Saturday had been filled with distractions, not to mention how it’d ended. He hadn’t realized how stressed out and tense he was until he’d been joking around with Ri, talking about nothing.

It was obvious from his sour mood that Rook had not gotten the same enjoyment out of it that Frankie had.

“How long have you known each other?” Rook asked.

“Me and Ri?” Frankie had to think about it. “A little over a year. Why?”

“You seem close.”

“Not really.” He almost confessed that the only person he was close with was halfway around the world studying abroad, but kept that to himself. “We don’t really see each other outside of the workshop group.”

“You saw one another today,” Rook said.

Frankie gave him a sideways glance quickly before returning his eyes to the road. It was mid-afternoon now and traffic caused from people leaving work early had already begun. “Look, I’m sorry you had to hang out with us, but it’s not like you could have driven yourself back.”

He took in the controls and Frankie’s hands on the steering wheel. “I probably could. It looks easy.”

“Yeah, well, looks can be deceiving. Case in point,” Frankie clucked his tongue, “you look like a nice enough guy right now. But you’re actually a demon with a bad attitude and a god complex.”

“I’m a prince,” Rook stated. “Sue me for having grown up being treated a certain way.”

Frankie blinked. “Where’d you hear that expression?”

“I read it in one of the books here.” He waved the question off and turned back to staring out the window.

Not for the first time, Frankie found himself jealous of Rook’s ability to not only speed read, but also retain all that information so easily. If he’d had that ability, he’d travel the world visiting different libraries. He was curious how many of the books in the bookstore Rook had gotten to before Frankie had shown up for the signing and caught his attention.

Or, better yet, how many he'd read before he'd discovered copies of Gold and Silver on display. That had to be life altering. Frankie certainly wouldn't have been capable of reading anything else, acting like everything was okay, after finding out his entire life and everything in it was really just a world inside a storybook.

That had clearly been Rook's initial reaction. That's why he'd stalked Frankie home and threatened him. Because he'd believed that Frankie had made it all up and was therefore able to change things.

Maybe Frankie really could. But he doubted he'd created it all. Even if he had initially, if he was the one who'd set things in motion, clearly the story had a mind of its own.

Still, now that he was thinking about it, there was something he'd really wanted to ask but had so far been too afraid to...

"You read Volume One and Two," Frankie began tentatively, "most of which is told in Lis's point of view. Your personality isn't exactly the forgiving type...How can you still want her this badly after literally seeing into her mind?"

By the end of the first volume, Lis's feelings for Sage were pretty obvious to the readers. She'd only just begun to see it for herself, but it was there, even in her personal thoughts. In Volume Two, she completely gave in to those emotions.

"At the same time she was meeting you," Frankie continued tentatively when Rook didn't immediately reply, "getting to know you, she was falling for someone else. How are you still so invested when you've read the things she said about Sage? You've got to know—"

"She doesn't love me," Rook cut him off. "Yeah. I know."

Frankie waited a moment, but when he didn't go on, he sighed. "But you still want me to change the end of the story? You want me to make her somehow magically forget that she's actually in love with Sage just so she'll be with you?"

That was sad, and it was obvious he thought that by his tone, but Frankie couldn't see any way around having this conversation. If Rook was going to continue to threaten him into altering the ending, they needed to have this discussion. He needed to give it one final attempt to see if he could convince him not to go this route.

And not just because his career was on the line—poorly ended series, especially ones as popular as his, could seriously harm sales of future projects—but because, morally, it just wasn't right, and...

“You deserve better than someone who didn't want you until forced into it,” Frankie said, voice dropping some. He refused to meet Rook's gaze, but he felt his eyes on him again. “I just mean, whether I wrote you into existence or you already existed before I typed out the first word of Gold and Silver, you aren't the main villain of the story. You deserve happiness. Real happiness.”

“You wanted me to die,” Rook reminded him, but he was speaking softer now as well.

“I didn't—” He exhaled slowly and tried to collect himself. “You would have gone out protecting the person you loved the most, and it would have been the catalyst for Lis. Would have pushed her to go after Talia and take the risk to do so. As far as plot goes, it made sense.”

“I'm not some side character in one of your books,” Rook paused and let out a groan. “Or, at least I don't feel like one.”

“I know,” Frankie said. “I'm sorry. For almost killing you.”

“You *did* kill me,” he corrected.

“Right. My bad. It won't happen again.”

Rook shifted in his seat, turning a bit more so that he could face Frankie more easily. “Do you mean that?”

“I can't exactly murder the guy who's going to help me catch Neko now can I?”

“Careful, Aardwolf,” he drawled, “it’s starting to sound like you said all of those nice things just so you could use me.”

“We’re using each other.” Frankie pulled the car onto his street. “I can’t let Neko move around in my world. We both know how he is, it’s only a matter of time before he gets bored and someone ends up dead. We have to get him back to Visera.”

“And in return for my services?”

“I’ll make sure you don’t die in the final chapters. But,” he pulled into his driveway and shut the car off, finally gathering enough courage to turn to Rook, “you have to go back for the final battle. No matter how I try to spin it, it just doesn’t make sense for you not to be there if you’re still alive.”

He narrowed his eyes. “So, I’m just supposed to trust you’ll keep your word and won’t simply have me murdered while fighting Talia and her Iron soldiers?”

“Why would I do that?”

“To ensure Lis and Sage can ride off into the sunset together, like you’ve always wanted.”

“I’ve always *intended*,” Frankie said. “That’s not the same as a want.”

“Isn’t part of the reason you intended to kill me off because you were afraid I’d try something funny and attempt to separate them at the end? What if you conclude your story, but I’m not finished with mine?”

He was asking what Frankie would do if Rook planned on separating Lis and Sage once the official end to the book came. Since there was no way of knowing what would happen the second after he typed out the words *The End*, Frankie didn’t have an answer. From what they’d gathered together thus far, it seemed as though everyone had lived before Frankie had started writing the story, but even that was no guarantee. What if those memories were fake? Concocted by whatever world operated inside of the book?

There were too many unknowns to be sure, and they might never get answers. At the end of the day, Frankie supposed it didn't really matter. Either way, whether they lived in a world of his creating or in a world he'd somehow found a weird psychic connection to that had allowed him to write about it, the people of Visera clearly had autonomy.

Rook was his own person. Living, breathing.

"You make your own choices," Frankie found himself saying.

"That's it?"

He pretended to ponder it a little longer. "How about I throw in a new love interest at the very end for you? The best way to get over someone is to get with someone new, isn't it? I have some control over the happenings in your world, story or not, so I'm sure I could easily write in a female character you'd like."

"You just pointed out I'm not the type of person who'd settle for someone forced into liking me, and yet your solution is to create another woman and make her like me?"

Frankie waved his hands in the air. "No, no, I didn't mean it like that. I'll just put down that she finds you attractive and that's all. The actually getting to know one another and seeing if you click will be on the two of you."

"I panicked," Rook confessed then, and at first Frankie didn't understand. "When I read your books, read Lis's true feelings, I panicked and gave into my anger. It was a lot to take in on its own, that I might not be real, but it also felt like I was reading her diary in a sense, catching glimpses into her private thoughts. Finding out I wasn't in them. The person I thought I loved fell for someone else, and then I died. For nothing."

"It wasn't—" Frankie began, but Rook wasn't finished.

"She never felt anything for me aside from friendship," he said. "It was all in my head. And then to realize that hundreds, if not thousands of people had read your books and

knew that too? Knew that I was in a one-sided love? It's utterly humiliating. I was livid."

"At me."

Rook nodded his head in agreement. "At myself as well."

"Why?" Frankie frowned.

"Because how do I know if my feelings were even real?" he asked. "How do I know I didn't fall for Lis because you wrote it that way? You planted a seed of interest in my mind and it grew from there? Perhaps."

Even after all of this, Frankie had never once considered that Rook's love for Lis was "made up".

"I don't think I have that kind of power," he disagreed. "Just like how I couldn't change your favorite color."

"You never officially wrote my favorite color," Rook reminded. "It's never mentioned in your books. It's very likely that nothing becomes set in stone until you do."

"I mean...It's a theory." And not a bad one, but Frankie really didn't need something else to feel guilty about.

"Bolstered by the fact that Felicity Sen isn't my usual type."

It was so strange hearing him say Lis's full name that for a moment Frankie didn't process the actual sentence. Once he had, his brow furrowed. "What?"

"A do-gooder who also happens to be the heir to a throne?" Rook quirked a brow. "Being good is boring, and I've spent my whole life trying to avoid any claim to my own throne. Why would I fall for someone like that?"

"Because..." There was a whole list of reasons that Frankie had jotted down once in his notebook, but now it was like every single one eluded him. He settled for the first thing that came to mind that sounded believable. "She's hot?"

He grunted. "Am I that shallow?"

“No.” How did they get onto this topic again? “She’s smart too though. You liked that you could have a conversation with her without her tripping over her words. She’s strong.”

“What do I need a strong partner for?” he sounded so serious that it threw Frankie for yet another loop. “Am I not strong enough for the both of us?”

“I...never pegged you for the caring type.”

“Meaning you’re unaware that after Chapter Fifty-Two, when Lis and I were lost in the Memory Cave and she was attacked, I’m the one who bandaged her wound?” He didn’t give Frankie a chance to answer. “It wasn’t written in your book, which means you aren’t. Another detail that proves that while you may be able to manipulate some things from my world, you don’t have control over everything. You’re limited.”

The thought that he maybe didn’t know Rook or Visera as well as he believed, the same one that had flashed through his mind back at Rook’s palace, hit him now. A numbness spread through him and for an embarrassing moment Frankie actually feared he might be about to cry.

It was an altogether confusing feeling, one that tore him in two very different directions. On the one hand, wasn’t it amazing then? Amazing that he’d somehow found a connection to another realm and the people living in it? On the other...didn’t that make him a fraud? He couldn’t be a fiction writer if he didn’t write fiction. If he didn’t make things up with his craft and ability and put them to paper.

And if Frankie wasn’t a writer, then what was he? Was he even going to be able to work on another project after this, or would Gold and Silver be a one-hit wonder after all?

Was he a mere month away from the end of his career?

“I want something real,” Rook said, and it was impossible to tell if he knew the internal struggle that Frankie was undergoing now. “That’s why I’ve changed my mind about Lis. Don’t misunderstand, it isn’t out of the goodness of

my heart. I don't care about manipulating people to get what I want, it's as you've already stated, I'm a demon, and a prince. I like who I am and I have no intentions of changing. But you were also right about that other part. I do deserve more than that. More than a girl who's destined to become queen to a kingdom I could care less about."

Rook unbuckled his seatbelt and practically shoved open the car door. Once he was out, he placed an arm over the hood and leaned back in, catching Frankie's eyes. "And, Aardwolf, even if I had agreed to allow you to write in another love interest for me, why would it have to be another female?"

Frankie stared at him.

"It seems you've forgotten I'm pansexual," he clucked his tongue, and then he was off, rounding the front of the car and heading toward the door to Frankie's apartment without a second glance back at him.

Frankie was left sitting there, mouth slightly hanging open as he watched Rook pull the apartment keys out of his pocket and slip them into the locks.

He hadn't known Rook had even taken the keys off him.

He hadn't known he was pansexual either.

Chapter 13:

“I never put that in a book—” Frankie entered his apartment and slammed into Rook’s stiff back. The other guy barely even budged, and he was about to ask him what was up when Rook extended his arm to keep Frankie from moving around him.

“Wait,” there was a warning edge to his tone that instantly had Frankie listening. “Let me check and make sure they’re gone.”

“Make sure *who* is gone?” Thoughts of Gloom filled his head and he shivered.

Confident that Frankie would stay put, Rook moved deeper down the hallway, disappearing into first the living room, and then the kitchen. He checked the bedrooms and bathroom last before returning with a heavy sigh.

“Someone was here—” he started to say, before something caught his attention over Frankie’s shoulder. Without another word, he darted past him, out into the parking lot. He moved too quickly for Frankie’s eyes to follow, seemingly vanishing within a heartbeats time.

“Fuck.” Frankie so didn’t want to be alone right now, but he also wanted to see what was going on, so he turned and slowly made his way into the apartment. Another curse slipped past his lips when he saw what awaited him.

The place had been tossed. Couch cushions were flown about, one of them torn to shreds, white tufts of stuffing littering the floor, along with loose lined pages from one of Frankie’s notebooks.

Not his Gold and Silver notes, thankfully. He’d taken those with him before they’d left earlier and it was still back in the car. Upon closer inspection, he saw that the notes were from the oceanography class he was being forced to take a second time, and even though he technically needed them, he wasn’t too bent up about their destruction.

Everything else though, and what it implied...that was a different story.

Aside from the living room, everything else seemed untouched. Even his bedroom had been left alone.

It didn't take him too long to figure out why.

"My computer!" Frankie shot into motion, lifting up scattered books that had been knocked off the shelf and cushions and blankets. He searched under the couch and chair, even stepped into the kitchen to see if maybe it'd slid across the wooden floorboards but to no avail.

His laptop was missing.

The sound of approaching footsteps had him tensing until Rook turned the corner.

"They took my laptop," he said, placing both hands at the back of his neck as he surveyed the damage. "Assholes. Who'd you chase after? Did you catch them?"

Frankie glanced up when Rook didn't respond, gasping when he noticed the single trail of red rolling down the man's right forearm. "What happened?!"

He stopped before Rook, reaching out to take his arm, ignoring the demon prince's sounds of protest. There was a gash on the side of his wrist, not deep enough to need stitches, but definitely something that required tending to.

"Sit here." He dragged Rook over to the couch and pushed him down onto it, then turned and went to the bathroom to grab the first aid kit.

"It was a Gloom," Rook told him when he returned.

Since the coffee table was still flipped and on the other side of the room, Frankie settled for kneeling, popping open the first aid kit box to riffle through for the items he'd need as Rook continued.

"I chased him down the street but he wasn't alone. Another got the jump on me."

Frankie brought a disinfectant pad up to Rook's arm. "Did they get away?"

"No," Rook didn't so much as wince when Frankie pressed the pad to his injury, "one slashed me with its claws a second before I sliced it in half. I didn't see any others, so I came back here to make sure you weren't also being attacked."

"Neko took my laptop," Frankie said as he cleaned off the blood carefully. "Maybe he thinks he can use it to get back home?"

"Or he's trying to change the story," Rook suggested.

"It won't work."

"How do you know?" Rook asked.

"Because there are a ton of fanfics written about Gold and Silver," Frankie explained. "None of those plotlines have come true." There was no way to be one hundred percent certain of that fact, but he was pretty sure he was right. "I'm the only one who can write the book."

"What if you can only do it on that laptop specifically?"

He shook his head and pulled out a bandage large enough to cover the two inch cut. "Nah, that laptop was new. I bought it like three months ago. Volume One and Two were both written on another, and most of book three was written in the school library between classes."

Frankie had been so busy last year desperately trying to pass oceanography and his other classes that he'd almost never come home for anything other than sleep. And some nights not even that. There was a cubby in the library that had seen more of him than probably any other student in the history of ever.

He'd been annoyed that he was writing on a shitty computer that wasn't his, sending himself the files through email before deleting them to ensure no other student stumbled on them and figured out his secret. But now it was kind of nice, being able to put any doubts about Neko being able to do whatever he pleased with Frankie's book aside.

“It’s not the computer,” he repeated, peeling off the backing of the bandage and sticking it over Rook’s injury. He smoothed out the edges carefully with his thumbs. “It’s me. And we know the computer isn’t what got you here from Visera either, it was those necklaces. If Neko stole it for either of those reasons, he took the wrong thing.”

“You’re saying he should have kidnapped you instead,” Rook said. He didn’t sound like he liked that idea.

Neither did Frankie.

Done with the bandage, he closed the box and got back to his feet, staring down at Rook for a moment as he spoke. “Hopefully he doesn’t figure that out.”

“If he does,” Rook’s expression darkened, “I’ll break any part of him that touches you.”

Frankie chuckled. “Thanks.”

He left to return the first aid kit before Rook could deliver his usual “it’s not for you, it’s for me” spiel, and the demon prince didn’t bother saying it once he’d come back.

Rook was too busy staring at the bandage on his arm with an odd look on his face.

Frankie frowned. “Is it coming off already?”

“No,” he shook his head and dropped his arm before Frankie could come closer to inspect it. “Was anything else stolen?”

“Don’t think so.” He settled his hands on his hips and viewed the messed up living room. “Just trashed. If all he wanted was the laptop he could have at least taken the thing and gone without doing so much damage.”

“He was making a point.”

“Yeah, that he’s a dick.” At Rook’s scolding look he rolled his eyes. “Fine. But what now?”

“We should find him and get your laptop back.”

Frankie shook his head. “Forget it. I’ll just buy a new one.” He was fortunate enough that Gold and Silver had made

him a decent amount of money. He'd been able to comfortably afford his bills and still have a little breathing room for over a year now. "Though I do agree we need to find him before things get out of hand."

He was mad about everything else he'd kept on the laptop, but after spilling coffee on one in high school, he'd gotten into the habit of backing up everything important, so he wasn't too bent out of shape over it. Anything he needed was still available to him.

Really, it was the principle of the matter that pissed him off.

"This is the third time he's come to you," Rook said. "Once he figures out that the laptop is useless to him, he'll no doubt try again."

"Do you think he stalked me at the book signing as well?" Frankie asked. "Or did he follow you? Assuming you both came through the same day he had to have in order to figure out my identity." There wasn't even a photo of him in the mask on the backs of the physical copies.

"He most likely hung around here and waited for you to return," Rook told him, distracted by his own thoughts. He rubbed his hands together and pursed his lips, clearly upset. "It isn't safe here, we should find somewhere else to stay."

"No way." While he acknowledged knowing that Neko had been in his personal space rummaging around gave him the ick... "He's an Iron, which means he controls shadow. Gloom can get in anywhere, like how they did at the library. Technically no place is safe and I refuse to abandon my own home because of him."

He wasn't being brave, it was simply logical.

The Bronze and Iron kingdoms used to be the strongest of the four, but Gold and Silver were jealous and joined forces to take over. After they'd won against the other two, however, they'd fought and split as well, creating a war between all four kingdoms. That's why there was night and day, with blood and shadow left to play in the space provided by both.

It'd been a rocky, quickly jotted down origin story, a mythos really, that Frankie had put somewhere within the first ten chapters of the original web novel.

“You're a Prince from Bonze,” Frankie said with a shrug, “if anyone can take on an Iron it's you. Unless you plan to ditch me now that you've changed your mind about the whole Lis thing?”

This wasn't the time to rehash their conversation from the car, but in all honesty, it was bugging Frankie even more than his tossed living room was.

“So long as Neko is out there he's a threat to you,” Rook told him with a scowl. “And if he's a threat to you, he's a threat to me.”

Frankie felt a flash of warmth course through him for no explainable reason at those words. But then Rook continued and doused that tiny ember.

“You need to complete the story,” he said, “until then, nothing can happen to you.”

He turned away to hide the disappointment—especially since there was no reason for him to feel that way—and headed to the kitchen for some water even though he wasn't thirsty. The lunch he'd just shared with Ri churned uncomfortably in his stomach.

He couldn't be falling for *Rook*. He just couldn't. For one, Sage was way more his type. For two, the guy had threatened him time and time again. So what if he'd suddenly had a change of heart and realized he was being a controlling asshole in regards to Lis? Nothing else had changed.

Rook wanted him to finish the story so that he and the others got a happy ending.

That was what Frankie wanted too.

So why...

Forget it. He yanked open the fridge and pulled out his water bottle, twisting the top off with a little more force than necessary, so that some of the contents sloshed over the side of

his hand. He hardly noticed, chugging a third of the water down as his mind reeled and his frustration toward himself grew.

It was a combination of Rook having taken care of him back in Visera when he'd been sick and the earnestness in his voice when they'd talked in the car that had him softening toward the other man. But that was where Frankie had to draw the line.

"I propose a truce," he said suddenly, turning back around to find that Rook had followed him into the kitchen without him noticing. He startled some, but had fortunately drained enough of the water that there wasn't a repeat spill.

Rook was standing on the other side of the kitchen island, his palms pressed against the glossy granite surface. At Frankie's odd reaction, he tipped his head, eyes narrowing ever so slightly in silent question.

Frankie cleared his throat. "Between the two of us. No more threats or pushing me around, and you have to help me catch Neko before he hurts someone. In return, I'll uphold my promise not to kill you off in the rest of the story. I'll have the three of you defeat Talia and all get a happy ending. We could be...friends, sort of. Deal?"

His expression never wavered, making it impossible for Frankie to tell how he was feeling about the suggestion. "Friends?"

"Yeah," he let out an awkward chuckle, "you know, like buddies."

Rook lifted a thick brow.

"That was a weird word choice," Frankie agreed to the wordless criticism. "You know what I mean though. Since we're stuck together anyway—"

"I'm not stuck," Rook corrected him. When that gave Frankie pause, he reached beneath his shirt and pulled free the small griffin medallion. He must have found it in the mess and put it back on. "I can get back at any time with this, remember?"

That was their working theory, anyway. They didn't know for sure yet since it'd only happened the once that they were definitely aware of, but he obviously believed it.

"Weren't you the one telling me to go," Rook continued, "back in the car just now?"

"The ending won't make sense if you're not there," he stated dumbly.

"But now you want me to stick around and help with your Iron problem?" He clucked his tongue. "Kind of taking advantage of your new *friend*, Aardwolf, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm not exactly equipped to take care of him on my own."

"That's true, your magic only works in this world."

"I don't have magic."

Rook grinned. "What do you call your connection to Visera? You wrote in a damn necklace and pulled both me and Neko into your world. What's that if not magic?"

"That wasn't *me*," Frankie insisted.

"Then who was it?"

"I...don't know." But it hadn't been him. Frankie hadn't once thought about his characters ever becoming real. According to all of the dramas and books he'd read where similar situations happened, it was almost always because the main character made some sort of wish. That hadn't been the case for him. He'd never hoped for Visera to be real or anything of the like, and while he felt connected to his characters, that's all they'd ever been to him.

Characters in a book.

Fictional.

The closest he'd ever come to hoping otherwise had been—

He froze.

The night he'd gotten drunk in order to write Rook's death scene was almost a blur, that's how much he'd had to drink just to get himself to do it. But now that he was thinking about it...

"Shit!" He slapped both palms over his mouth, whacking himself in the face with the water bottle in the process, though he hardly noticed. The murky memory of him crying like an idiot in front of his laptop screen returned to him, playing through his mind like a horror film he couldn't shut off.

Because he had, in that one moment of weakness, made a wish after all.

"I wish I didn't have to do this," he'd said as he'd typed out the final fight scene for Rook. *"If you were real, there's no way you'd let these guys get the better of you. But there's no other way to make the story work."*

Frankie groaned and swiveled, dropping his head against the kitchen island. He wrapped his arms around himself to hide his face from Rook as the memory continued.

"I bet if you were here you'd come up with something."

He'd stopped talking out loud to his computer then and had finished the chapter, cried a little more, and promptly passed out at the coffee table. When he'd woken the next morning he'd been so late for class he'd hit send to his publisher and then had left without a second thought. Later, he'd blamed being emotional on the alcohol, but he hadn't spent too much time picking apart the weird things he'd said in private.

But...Frankie didn't have magic or power or anything of the like. He was ordinary. More than, even. The most fantastical thing about him was that he was Cuthwulf, and now he knew even that wasn't all that great considering he may or may not be a fraud.

He groaned again and rapped his forehead against the counter, only to have a hand settle on the back of his neck and pull him away from the granite. He let out a startled yelp and

scrambled to shove Rook off of him, stumbling back so that he hit the counter that lined the kitchen.

Rook frowned at him. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” his voice came out too high pitched. It didn’t go unnoticed. “Nothing,” he tried again.

“You remembered something, didn’t you.” Another rhetorical question.

“No,” Frankie answered anyway.

“Liar,” Rook didn’t skip a beat, but a glimmer of humor entered his eyes. Almost lazily, he moved closer. “I’m right, aren’t I? You did something to bring me here, didn’t you?”

“No,” he repeated. “How would I even know how to do something like that?”

“Not on purpose,” he readily agreed. “Summoning me would have been an accident, but you definitely did it.”

“The necklaces did it.”

“That’s true.” Rook stopped before him and leaned in, dropping a hand to the edge of the counter on either side of Frankie. He didn’t touch him, but his face hovered in front of his as he caged him in. “But you created the necklaces. And you gave one to me right before I was meant to die.”

“I gave one to Lis,” he stated.

Rook snorted. “If you’re able to create things in my world from scratch, that means Lis had it for less than a minute before she pulled it from her pocket and gifted it to me. It was always intended to be mine. You’re the one who intended it.”

The only way to be sure would be if Frankie did a test, same as before. He’d need to write something else into the story that existed here and give it to one of the characters. Only, the thought of purposefully bringing any of them into his world was terrifying. They didn’t belong here. Whether their world was real or a place that existed inside of a book, that’s where they were meant to be.

Frankie shoved Rook back and straightened.

Rook eyed him quietly for a second and then shrugged. “I suppose it doesn’t really matter. The who doesn’t really make a difference, does it? It’s already done and I’m already here. And so is Neko. It’s the why and the how that we should be focused on. We already have a tentative understanding of the how of it all. Let’s concentrate on the why.”

“Why?” Frankie said and Rook smirked at him.

“Why are we here?” he reiterated. “Why did we get pulled from the story?”

He hadn’t considered there’d be a reason, honestly. “What if there’s no why? What if it just happened and there’s no purpose to your being here at all?”

Rook hummed. “That could be the case. Actually, it’s the most likely answer even.”

“So then—”

“Why did you wish me out of the story?” Rook interrupted. He’d waited until Frankie had let his guard down and had started to believe he was going to let that topic go.

It was so obvious that he’d played it out that way on purpose that Frankie felt an inkling of anger dash through the embarrassment he’d been feeling.

“Why did you want to see me?” Rook’s tone lost its edge, softening some in an almost coaxing manner.

“I didn’t.” Frankie shoved off the counter and went to move around the kitchen island, giving Rook a wide berth.

But the other man was having none of that and used his speed to reach the other end first, affectively blocking Frankie’s path. “What did you want then?”

He was going to keep pressing until Frankie confessed, he could tell. Rook was the most stubborn person he’d ever met, more so even than Frankie himself, which was saying a lot.

“I didn’t want you to die,” he blurted. “Happy? That’s what I was thinking the night before you appeared, when I was writing Chapter Eighty-Three. That I wished there was a way you wouldn’t have to die. I hated myself for being too stupid to come up with a better plot twist, and I got drunk. I blame it on the alcohol,” he muttered that last part, but they were standing close enough there was no way Rook missed it.

Not wanting to discuss this further, or expose himself to the demon prince’s scrutiny, Frankie moved away. This time Rook let him.

“I’m going to take a shower,” he said before ducking into the bathroom. He flicked the lock and leaned against the solid wood, closing his eyes in an attempt to ground himself. Ever since they’d returned from Visera this morning, something had seemed *off* between them.

The problem was, Frankie wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know what that something was.

Chalking it up to it having just been a weird day, Frankie turned on the shower, setting it to hot and attempted to scrub the weirdness from his skin.

Chapter 14:

The next day Frankie left Rook in the food court at the mall, entering a store across from it. The plan was to buy a new laptop, their whole reason for coming here in the first place, but they'd ended up spending a good two hours shopping for clothes for Rook instead.

He'd complained about Frankie's pants being too small, and though he'd wanted to argue, Frankie had to admit that was true. The ends of the legs had barely made it to the tops of Rook's ankles. Now he had enough clothes to last him a week at least, not that they knew how long he'd actually be staying.

On the ride over, Rook had asked a ton of questions about Frankie's publisher and deadlines. There were an intended three chapters left to conclude the story, and typically he got at least a week to write the first draft of each. Because of this, the actual publishing schedule was back by almost half a dozen chapters, giving Frankie a little wiggle room in case something happened and he missed a deadline—which he'd never done up until last week when the chapter had vanished on him.

Frankie didn't understand why Rook needed to know all of that, but he'd answered anyway, if only to keep the topic off of himself and how he'd reacted last night. When he'd come out of the bathroom after the longest shower of his life, Rook had already tidied up most of the mess in the living room. It'd been next to impossible for him to contain his shock over it, but Rook hadn't seemed offended by the reaction.

He hadn't brought up anything else about how he'd gotten there or what Frankie had been thinking. Instead, he'd suggested they order dinner and take the rest of the night to catch their bearing after everything that had taken place.

Somehow, they'd ended up eating Chinese from cartons in front of the TV while some bad movie about witches played. Rook had been riveted by the screen since

he'd never seen anything like it before, which had allowed Frankie to space out.

By the time the movie had ended, it was pitch black outside and the two of them had simply gone to bed, with Rook taking the couch with little complaint while Frankie retired to his room. He'd picked his necklace off the ground where it must have fallen and stared at it for a long time before finally dropping it onto his desk.

Knowing that he wasn't wearing it was only a small comfort as he entered the store and took in the rows of various devices. Since he couldn't see or sense gateways, there was never any telling where one was, and considering both times someone had entered either world, it'd been where there was a computer screen, Frankie hadn't wanted to take any chances.

That was another reason he'd asked Rook to just stay outside. He didn't want to ask him to remove the necklace as well, and didn't want to risk bringing up the conversation from yesterday. It was easier this way. Plus, with the food court right there, all Frankie had to do was step near one of the storefront windows and he could literally see the guy seated a few yards away.

Rook was swirling a tiny color changing spoon into a pint of frozen yogurt, more enthralled by the way the plastic altered from yellow to blue than by the cold dessert itself. They didn't have anything like that back in Visera, and he apparently hadn't read anything about it in any of the books he'd consumed at the bookstore, because he'd immediately asked Frankie if it was magic.

The clerk behind the counter had laughed, thinking he was joking, and Frankie had been forced to play along, chuckling himself while pulling Rook away. He'd deposited the demon prince into a chair and had ordered him to stay put. Surprisingly, Rook had listened.

Frankie shook his head and turned away from the glass. There was never any telling what Rook was going to do, no way to gauge his reactions ahead of time or guess his next move. His mercurial nature made it next to impossible.

He recalled the way he'd broken the desk back in his palace as he began to browse down the aisles. The juxtaposition between that man and the one currently eating frozen yogurt in a mall cafeteria was immense. Actually, since his outburst, he'd seemed legitimately different. The ways were subtle, so much so it was hard for Frankie to put his finger on them, but he knew they were there.

What had changed? Did he feel bad about inadvertently making Frankie sick?

A laptop in mint caught his attention and he paused to inspect it. He wasn't looking for anything overly elaborate, just something with enough storage space and at least 16GB of RAM since he was frequently leaving a million and one tabs and programs open so he could research as he wrote.

He reached for the display device to get a better idea if it was what he wanted when suddenly something pulsed in his right pocket. With a frown, he pulled back, placing his hand into his jacket to feel around for whatever was moving. His phone was in his back pants pocket so it couldn't be that. When his fingers met with metal, his brow furrowed even more.

Frankie pulled the item free, eyes going wide when he saw that he was holding the griffin necklace. The one he was positive he'd left sitting on his desk back home when he'd grabbed his car keys.

The silver seemed to wink at him, a single sparkle under the fluorescent lighting of the store.

Then the laptop he'd been looking at flickered to life, and before Frankie even had the chance to retreat a step, let alone turn tail and run, that familiar swooping sensation sucked him forward.

And sent him spiraling to another world.

* * *

"This has got to stop happening," Frankie groaned when he hit the ground. Hard.

Lifting himself up onto his hands and knees, he spit out a dry fallen leaf that had stuck to his lips and sat back to take a look around.

“Another forest,” he grumbled, “that’s great. Just great.”

It wasn’t until he’d stood and was brushing off the rest of the debris clinging to him that he realized two very important details.

The first was that he was alone. Rook hadn’t been in the store with him when he’d been sucked through the computer.

The second was the leaf he’d spit out was rimmed in gold along the edges. As were all the other leaves both on the floor and still clinging to branches. Leaves like that only grew in one kingdom, and it wasn’t Rook’s.

“Oh shit,” he uttered a second before the sounds of grunts and clanging metal reached his ears. He jolted and turned in that direction, hesitating over what he should do. He couldn’t very well stand here forever, but...Heading *toward* the sound of danger didn’t seem like a good call either.

His gaze swept the ground, desperately seeking out any signs of the gateway, but without the help of someone with magic, he wouldn’t be able to see it no matter how hard he tried.

Should he wait and hope that Rook noticed he was missing? Would he come for him if he did? If he hadn’t actually seen Frankie disappear, he might just assume he’d gone off without him and was still shopping in the mall.

Frankie covered his eyes and swore again, before sending a glare down at the necklace he still clutched in his right hand. How the hell had it gotten into his pocket when he’d left it behind?

The sounds grew louder and he shoved it back into his jacket before opting to just throw caution to the wind. It wasn’t like he had many other options and standing around twiddling his thumbs had never been his strong suit. He made

his way carefully through the forest, sticking close to trees with larger trunks that he could easily duck behind.

It wasn't until he'd gotten to the edge of the forest and spotted a familiar rooftop that he realized with another startle where he was.

Gleam, the capital city where Sage lived. This was the Golden Wood, a large forest that attached to the west side of the Glittering Palace, where the King of the Gold Kingdom made his home. They were situated far from it, still deep enough in the woods that all that could be seen was one of the tall sandstone towers in the near distance.

A well sat forty or so feet away, a place that Sage usually visited whenever he was going through a difficult time. It reminded him of his mother, who used to take the child version of him here to make wishes whenever he'd been scolded by his father. She'd passed a long time ago, and since his father's death, Sage hadn't visited the well—at least not in Frankie's version of events—since Chapter Forty-Two.

It took Frankie another moment to find Sage among the warring bodies, but once he had, he couldn't help but look on appreciatively as the man twirled around his opponent, arching his sword through the air.

Sage fought against several Gloom and was already covered in a sheen of sweat. His second in command and best friend, Cue, was with him, the two of them fighting in unison against their enemies. He was dressed in brown leathers with golden accents on his sleeves and at his waist. His blond hair hung loose around his head, dropping to his shoulders, and there was intensity in his green eyes.

Before he could fully appreciate the scene before him, something hard slammed into Frankie's back, sending him forward rolling across the small clearing, straight into the fray. He twisted on his heels to face whoever had just pushed him, sucking in a sharp breath when his eyes met with Kirk's.

Kirk was an Iron soldier, and pretty high standing at that. He was recognizable by the scar across his left brow, one that led all the way down to his chin. He had an onyx stone

piercing in his right eye brow and a tongue ring that he flashed when he grinned down at Frankie.

It made sense that there was a powerful Iron nearby controlling the Gloom, but in his excitement over seeing Sage in real life, Frankie had allowed himself to get distracted.

Stupid.

He got back to his feet, retreating from the advancing Iron as his mind scrambled to come up with a plan. He was far enough from the others fighting that he at least hadn't bumped into any of them when he'd been shoved, but that didn't mean none of the Gloom less than twenty feet away wouldn't branch off from their current targets and come for him.

Frankie needed a weapon. Fast.

There was a dagger buried on the other side of the well. Sage had buried it there a little under five years ago after his mom's death. It'd been made of pure gleam, a golden metal that was as hard as iron and could only be found in the city it was named after, so there was a chance the blade wasn't dulled too much, not that it really mattered. He'd take whatever he could get at this point.

He darted across the clearing, sliding through the mud toward the well at the last second. He'd dropped just in time too, because one of the throwing star Kirk was known for using imbedded itself between two of the gray stones of the well a second later, almost hitting where Frankie's hand was resting.

With a gasp he pulled back and shuffled behind the well entirely, momentarily stumped as he tried to recall exactly where it was Sage had buried the weapon. There was a small nick in the stone at the bottom and he had to shove the growing moss and grass down in order to find it, but he did. Another throwing star hit one of the wooden beams that held up the shingled roof to the well.

Kirk was toying with him, but that was a good thing. He clearly didn't think Frankie was an actual threat—to which

he'd be mostly correct—so he was taking his time while the others were distracted.

Not that Frankie could be certain that Sage or Cue would help him either, since they had no clue who he was and he was dressed rather oddly for someone in Visera.

He broke a nail digging through the dirt, but didn't allow that to deter him. Luckily, it'd rained a short time ago and the ground was still wet and pliable, making it a lot easier for him to scoop out clumps. The second he spotted the first bit of metal he picked up the pace, letting out another yelp when Kirk leaped up onto the lip of the well and leaned over to peer down at Frankie.

Snatching the blade free, he didn't bother wasting time cleaning the rest of it off, merely stabbed upwards, adding another slash to the side of Kirk's face, who'd been rather unsuspecting.

Frankie shot backward as the man let out a howl, a line of red appearing next to the deep scar.

Okay, maybe that hadn't been the smartest of moves. Now he'd pissed the guy off.

He shifted the handle of the dagger in his palm and took a fighting stance, pretending that this was just another day in class and he wasn't quite literally about to fight for his life. Originally, he'd taken the kali classes in order to improve his descriptions during fight scenes, but now he was grateful he'd taken such a liking to it and stuck with it for as long as he did. Though...his last lesson had been over a year ago, before he'd gotten too busy juggling work and school and had to quit.

Kirk shot off the well, sailing through the air for him and Frankie quickly sidestepped, twisting on his heels so that he came around the man's other side as soon as he'd landed.

He slashed forward with the dagger, slicing a thin line through Kirk's side, then ducked to avoid his circling arm when he went to hit him back. Kirk wasn't holding any weapons of his own, but then, with the Gloom readily available to him, he probably hadn't thought he'd needed it.

Clearly he'd intended to hide out in the woods waiting for them to finish the job.

Kind of foolish, if you asked Frankie. There was no way a handful of Gloom and one mid-level Iron were strong enough to kill Sage and Cue.

Was this a distraction, perhaps?

Thinking about the possible motive as if this were still merely the plot of his novel was a mistake, and it cost him.

Frankie took a rather strong punch to the jaw, his head snapping to the side painfully. He stumbled, twisting on instinct when Kirk advanced with his movement. The dagger jabbed straight through the guys left side and they both froze.

Warm liquid dripped over the top of Frankie's hand and he pulled back, yanking the dagger free at the same time.

Kirk dropped to his knees, hands pressing against the wound. His pain filled glare landed on Frankie, promising retaliation. But before either of them could do anything more, a sword swung, the long blade heaving clean through Kirk's neck, severing his head in one swoop.

His head hit the ground and rolled, coming to a stop once it'd hit the tip of Frankie's right shoe.

Frankie blinked down at it for a moment, mind processing. Then he turned and heaved his breakfast out and into the well. He vomited over the ledge, the sound of his sick hitting the water within echoing back up to him. Once he was done, he dropped to the ground, back propped up against the well, dagger still held in his grip.

He'd written scenes like that a hundred times, hell, had made them more bloody and graphic even, but like with the situation on the cliffs, but seeing it in reality wasn't the same.

There was a difference in feeling the almost popping sensation of a blade sliding through someone's skin and organs over imagining what that might be like.

Frankie might be sick again.

Unfortunately, he didn't really have the chance to get up and yack a second time, because in the next instant, that bloody blade was aimed his way.

He blinked up at Sage, noting the way the other man was staring him down and recalled the dagger he was holding. Frankie dropped it pointedly and held up both hands, palms out in the sign of surrender.

"Frankie!" the sound of Lis's voice followed quickly by her appearance over Sage's shoulders had him sighing.

He dropped his arms and heaved in relief. He'd never been so happy to see someone before in his life. "Thank god."

Sage glanced at him, expression morphing to a slight frown. He turned when Lis approached but didn't drop the sword. "You know this man?"

"It's Frankie," Lis said, shoving his wrist down to move the weapon out of Frankie's face. "The one I told you about."

He thought it over and then sneered in distaste. "Rook's friend."

Ouch. The animosity between these two was seriously toxic. Frankie maybe should have thought of that beforehand, when he'd been busy enamored by Sage's fighting instead of worrying over how the hell he was going to get out of here without being caught.

Too late now.

Using the well, he lifted himself and sent a partial smile to Lis. "Thanks. I really didn't feel like getting stabbed today."

She glanced down at Kirk's body. "Bet he thought the same. Nice move with that dagger. Where did you train?"

He was tempted to lie since he obviously couldn't tell her the truth, but Sage didn't care either way and interrupted before he could come up with something believable.

"What are you doing here?" He looked over Frankie's shoulder toward the tree line.

“I’m alone,” he told them, knowing that he was searching for Rook.

Lis frowned. “Rook didn’t come with you?”

“It’s dangerous in these woods,” Cue mentioned, finally coming over after checking to be sure all of the Gloom were dealt with. He cleaned the edge of his sword off on his pant leg with little care for the stains it was going to cause, and then held out a hand toward Frankie in greeting. He winked when Frankie hesitated to take it.

Right, Cue was a serious playboy. Frankie had almost forgotten. Before, he’d thought he’d probably modeled the man after his ex, but now he had no idea.

“Frankie.” He took the guy’s hand but let go quickly, clearing his throat and turning back toward Lis. “Rook and I got separated. That’s why I’m on my own. I didn’t realize I was so close to the Glittering palace.”

“You’re shaking,” she noted, then looked to the dead man once more and seemed to understand. “Your first kill?”

“Technically,” Sage said, “you didn’t kill him. I did.”

That was true, while the blow he’d delivered had been severe, an Iron like Kirk probably could have survived it if he’d gone and gotten medical attention quickly enough. But without his head....Well.

Frankie nodded, but that didn’t do anything to help with the shivering. He couldn’t forget that sensation when the tip of the blade had punctured Kirk’s side. It was nowhere near similar to when he’d stabbed dummies on the mat during training sessions.

“You’re pale,” Lis rested a hand on the side of his arm and he actually flinched. A look of pity flashed across her face. “Let’s get you inside. It’s not safe out here.”

Sage didn’t argue, turning to lead the way across the small clearing and back through a thinner part of the forest.

“Were you traveling with Rook?” Lis asked a moment later after they’d all walked some in silence. “I haven’t been

able to get a hold of him. I sent a missive to Ivan but he said he doesn't know where he is either. The two of you apparently vanished. He's been concerned."

"Rook is fine," Frankie said, inwardly flinching. That implied he could tell them where to find him and he couldn't. Not if he wanted them to keep him safe and not simply toss him in a cell and torture him for information. If he told them Rook was in another universe right now, they'd call him crazy for sure. "At least, he was the last I was with him."

"What happened? Were you attacked?" Sage glanced at him over his shoulder before facing front once more.

Sage was the stoic type, whereas Rook combated with wit and sarcasm, Sage was known for his quiet disposition and icy demeanor. Ironic, considering his kingdom represented the sun and the warmth. His life had hardened him, however, the loss of his parents having taken a toll. On top of that, his upbringing with his father hadn't been easy. The late king had been preparing his son to take the crown and fight in a war.

Most things, he kept to himself. Lis had only just managed to crack through that hard exterior in Volume Two. Which meant, unless Frankie had a miracle up his sleeve, he had no hope of being able to do the same in a short period of time.

Best to stick by Lis and ask for her help instead.

Which was really a pity, because it was fascinating being next to Sage Fallon in the flesh. Sage had a lot of baggage, but who didn't? At the end of the day, he was considerate, and caring. He'd do anything for his people, and he had a warm heart, even if that was hard to see from the outside.

"I'm not entirely sure," Frankie told them honestly. "A gateway opened suddenly and the next thing I knew, I was in the east side of the forest." There was a gateway there he'd written about a couple of times, so now that he was aware he was in Gleam, it was easy enough to guess that's where he'd been deposited. "Do you think you could bring me back there and open it for me?"

Lis cocked her head. “You can’t open it yourself?”

“I don’t have any magic,” he admitted. Not everyone in Visera did so it wasn’t too strange. Besides, only those with a lot of power could manipulate gateways.

“Where were the two of you before it happened?” she asked. “Why couldn’t any of us get ahold of him?”

“He’s...” Frankie said the first thing that came to mind, “busy. He’s searching for something that can help in the fight against Talia.”

Not a complete lie, it was just, technically Frankie was that something. Rook thought he could use Frankie to write the perfect ending, which he wouldn’t be wrong about, except...

Frankie couldn’t do anything from *here*.

“What makes you think he’ll be waiting for you on the other side if we do open the gate for you?” It was obvious from his tone that Sage didn’t believe Rook would bother. They made it to the courtyard, the sprawling palace made of golden sandstone towering above them. He stopped and opened his mouth, about to say something else when a low whistle cut through the stillness of the place.

Something shot from a cropping of bushes on the opposite side of the courtyard, a thin black needle that moved too fast for any of them to react to. It hit Sage in the side of the neck, protruding from his throat.

He grabbed at it and pulled it loose, but wobbled on his feet.

Frankie inhaled sharply and ran forward to catch him just as he was about to fall.

Cue rushed after whoever the culprit was, leaving them behind.

“It’s cuth poison,” Frankie said, struggling to hold the massive king up. Most of his weight was being deposited on Frankie and he was buckling under it fast. “We need to get him treated immediately or he’ll die.”

“He’ll what?!” Lis rushed to Sage’s other side, throwing his arm over her shoulders to help with the burden. Together they turned toward the entrance, crossing the courtyard quickly. “I’ve never heard of cuth poison before!”

That was because Frankie had only mentioned it once in a scene with Talia. She’d talked about how it’d been her older brother’s favorite means of attack before he’d been defeated and killed. The recipe for the poison had disappeared along with him. Frankie only recognized it now because he’d sketched out what the darts containing the poison had looked like, for some reason fascinated by the intricate design on the ends.

The dart Sage had yanked from his neck had the same design. The end shaped like a rain drop with a tiny snake wrapped around it, forked tongue sticking out.

Sentries at the doorway threw open the doors at their approach and they dragged a quickly fading Sage inside. The foyer was similar to the one in Rook’s palace only with a single staircase in the center of the room instead of two.

When Lis tried to move toward it, Frankie held her back.

He motioned over to a dais set by a roaring fireplace instead. “No, put him there, there’s no time to bring him to his room.” Sage’s bedroom was on the opposite side of the palace. It would take at least ten minutes to reach it. That was too long.

Once they’d carefully deposited Sage on the tan colored cushion, Frankie desperately searched around for someone who could be helpful. His eyes landed on a man wearing round glasses who’d appeared moments ago and he snapped his fingers at him.

“Odi,” Frankie didn’t bother wasting time explaining how he knew the guy’s name, “in the cellar on the seventh shelf, grab the pink bottle. And then on the third, the gray one—no,” he shook his head, “wait, not gray, the blue. The light blue, not the dark one.” Next he turned to Lis. “In the kitchen I need you to get a mortar and pestle. Toss two sprigs of iff in

there, and bring me the vial of turmeric.” When neither of them immediately moved his patience wore out. “Hurry!”

The desperation in his tone must have done it, both of them snapping into action. Odi, the man in charge of keeping the palace running smoothly, ran across the foyer toward the door beneath the stairwell, disappearing. Lis ran the opposite way, racing beneath an archway that would take her to the winding corridor leading to the kitchen.

Frankie dropped down on the edge of the dais and tipped Sage’s head to the side so he could get a good look at his neck. He estimated that it would take Odi at least four minutes to gather all the things he’d asked for, and Lis two minutes longer than that. They’d be cutting it close. Real close.

He pressed his fingers at either side of the angry looking puncture wound, wincing when that caused Sage to groan in pain. “I’m sorry, just deal with it a moment longer. I promise I won’t let you die like this.”

Even Rook’s planned death had been less anticlimactic. An assassin hiding in the brush? Pathetic. Sage couldn’t go out like this.

Purple lines had started to stretch out beneath Sage’s skin, visible all across his neck. Once the poison reached his heart it’d be too late to stop it. He was pale and shaking, though when Frankie touched him his body felt like it was on fire.

He got to work undoing the man’s heavy leather shirt, unlacing the front and lifting Sage—with some difficulty—so he could tug the garment completely off. They had to get his temperature down as fast as they could, it would help slow the spread of the poison, buy them some time for the others to get back.

But he stopped at the shirt, eyes on the top of Sage’s leather breeches as he considered and then discarded the idea of removing them as well.

He settled a bare chested Sage back against the plush dais and fanned him with his hands, trying to think of anything else that could be useful in this situation. He replayed the ingredients in his head, listing them all off to be certain he'd asked for everything he needed. One forgotten item and Sage would die.

“You...” Sage’s words trailed off and it was clear he was finding it hard to speak.

Frankie leaned in closer, tipping his ear toward his mouth in an attempt to hear. “What’s that?”

“Can you...” He sucked in a sharp breath and twitched.

Frankie pressed against the curve of his jaw to move his head and swore. The purple lines had gotten darker. When he glanced down at Sage’s shoulder, he could see that they’d begun to trail across his right pec.

“Hurry up!” he yelled as loud as he could, even knowing the odds of either Odi or Lis actually hearing him in this massive castle were slim.

Sage grabbed onto the back of his head and tugged him back down suddenly, and Frankie’s eyes went wide.

“What—”

Sage pressed his lips against his firmly, the heat from his brow instantly seeping uncomfortably into Frankie’s forehead, the slick from his sweat sticking to him. The king’s mouth was plush, but his lips were dry, and when he opened them and stuck his tongue out, tracing a line across the seam of Frankie’s mouth, it was as though he was prodding at Frankie with a hot poker.

It may have been enjoyable if not for how hot Sage’s body had become, and how sudden and shocking the fact that he was kissing him at all was.

The sound of returning boots hitting the stone snapped Frankie out of his shock and he tugged himself free, momentarily staring wide-eyed down at Sage.

The king was looking back at him, but it was impossible to tell if he was aware of his surroundings or what he'd just done. He seemed like he was out of it.

“Here!” Lis burst into the room and practically shoved the items into Frankie’s arms.

Odi came storming up from the basement a second later, completely out of breath. “I grabbed the wrong one at first!” he said in apology, the bottles clinking in his hold as he brought them over.

Frankie dropped to the floor in front of the dais and got to work, popping tops off of bottles with little care as he murmured the measurements to himself. Once everything was in the mortar he ground them together with the pestle until there was a thick sludge-like paste the color of mud. The smell was bitter with a hint of frost and he leaned in to get a good whiff of it to be certain it was the right scent.

Satisfied, he climbed back onto the dais and scooped up a hefty amount of the medicine with his fingers, smearing globs of the stuff directly over the open wound on Sage’s neck.

The King gasped and grabbed at his wrists, forcing him away.

It was painful and Frankie let out a cry but ground his teeth together. “Hold him still,” he ordered the others, and this time they didn’t hesitate to comply, even though it was clear whatever he was doing was causing Sage added discomfort.

They must have seen how dire the situation was and realized that this would be a lot of wasted effort on Frankie’s part if his goal was to murder Sage.

It took both of them to keep Sage down, and even then he managed to peel himself off the dais an inch or two, but Frankie kept adding globs of the medicine to his neck, rubbing it in and coating it down across the man’s chest, making sure to cover every single one of those purple lines branching beneath his skin.

“Let him sit up,” he said, moving to sit behind Sage instead while Odi and Lis complied. He took an elbow to the chin when Sage struggled against that two, momentarily seeing stars but he shook it off and focused.

The lines on the man’s back weren’t as bad and he covered them quickly. After one final check beneath Sage’s arm to make sure he’d gotten any that had reached there, Frankie got off the dais and silently motioned that they could let Sage go now.

As soon as he was free, Sage shot to his feet, eyes filled with a rage that had fear gripping Frankie tight. He reached for him, grabbing at the back of Frankie’s skull and hauling him forward so that he slammed against Sage’s front, hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

Lis called Sage’s name and Odi grabbed at his king’s arm, but both were ignored.

Sage stared Frankie down for a lengthy moment before he captured his mouth in yet another kiss, this one more bruising than the last.

Frankie tried to shove him off, pounding on his chest to no avail. When the other man’s tongue forced its way past his sealed lips, stroking deep, he actually gagged. All that did was spur Sage on.

His free arm banded around Frankie’s waist, hauling him harder against him so that his feet practically lifted off the floor and their teeth knocked together.

It was getting hard to breath, and there was a whooshing in his ears now making it hard to make out the screaming of the others as they tried to knock sense into Sage. Frankie’s vision winked in and out and as a last ditch attempt, he slammed his palm against the wound at the side of Sage’s neck.

That did the trick.

The pain was strong enough that it startled Sage and he dropped Frankie with a wild roar as he covered the injury and

stumbled back. His legs hit the side of the dais and he dropped down onto it.

Frankie fell to the ground and scrambled backward.

Sage let out a low, animalistic growl and caught Frankie's gaze again. He made to stand, wavering on his feet. His brow pinched, the angry look disappearing as he struggled to remain standing.

"Sage?" Lis called tentatively, hand held out toward him, though she was careful not to make contact.

The king's eyes rolled back into his skull and he dropped. Fortunately, he landed on the dais, but the sheer weight of him shook the whole thing.

Lis gasped, at his side in a second. She inspected him and then exhaled. "He's still breathing. He just passed out."

She and Odi shared a look of relief before they seemed to recall Frankie's presence.

He wasn't paying them any mind at all, however. He stared at the unconscious Sage, eyes wide, mouth slightly hanging open and said the first thing that came to mind.

"What the actual hell."

Chapter 15:

Frankie paced before the large window that overlooked the west side of the castle, nibbling anxiously on his bottom lip. Lis was too worried about Sage to bring him back to the woods and open the gateway, and while he understood where she was coming from, that didn't help soothe his unease.

Where was Rook? Was he okay?

He most likely hadn't seen Frankie slip through the gate in the store and that had happened hours ago. He'd probably already searched through the entire mall, twice, looking for him.

Had he gone back to the apartment, thinking he'd ditched him?

Frankie paused. They'd come to an agreement. He'd promised that he'd help with the end of the story and Rook had promised to help deal with Neko. Despite their rocky beginnings, he'd felt that they'd grown, if not closer this past week, at least close enough to trust one another to keep their word.

Rook had to know that Frankie wouldn't bail of his own volition.

Maybe he was searching for a gateway to enter Visera. Maybe he was already in Visera but he didn't know where Frankie was...If he'd used a different gate then he would have appeared in a different part of the realm.

"I thought you said he was going to be fine?" Lis interrupted Frankie's panicky thoughts, startling him some. She was sitting in a wooden chair next to the large king sized bed in Sage's room.

The king was resting in the center of it, having been carried up here by Cue after he'd passed out downstairs. Lis had insisted she remain by his side, and since he at least knew she was safe to be around, Frankie had stayed with her.

“He will be,” Frankie confirmed, glancing at Sage once and then quickly away. His lips burned whenever he thought about the aggressive kiss—kisses, really—that they’d shared a little over an hour ago. While it was true he’d thought about what making out with Sage would be like once or twice, he’d never envisioned it happening quite like *that*.

In truth, he wasn’t even sure what had come over Sage to cause him to act that way. As far as Frankie knew, the poison from the dart only caused fever and a mild frenzy—one not of the sexual nature. Sage’s heartbeat would have sped up until the poison reached the organ and his body couldn’t take it anymore, resulting in a heart attack.

The only reason Frankie had even known that much, and known the cure, had been because while writing Volume One he’d debated whether or not to give the deadly poison to Talia. He’d written notes about the uses and the antidote, and had even mentioned it casually in one of the scenes she’d been in, but in the end he’d nixed the idea of giving it to her. He’d thought it would make things too easy for the villain if they had a poisonous dart like that.

She must have figured out the formula anyway. Could it be his fault? Had he planted the seed in her head? Or was this mere coincidence?

He hated that he didn’t know. It shouldn’t matter, considering there was nothing he could do to change the way things worked, but knowing at least would be a comfort.

Or it would make him feel guiltier, depending on what the answer was.

Did he control this world at all, or did he merely have a view into it that allowed him to write things down that were already going to happen?

“Forgive me,” Lis said, “but you don’t look all that convincing at the moment.”

Frankie blinked at her and then inhaled, trying to calm his nerves to no avail. “I’m not worried because of him,” he told her.

She cocked her head. “Is it Rook?”

“We got separated,” he reminded. “I don’t know where he is.” Or if he was all right.

What if Gloom’s had attacked? Or Neko? Neko had gotten the jump on him in the original version of Chapter Eighty-Three, which meant given the right set of circumstances he could kill Rook. And even if Neko hadn’t shown, the mall would eventually close. Would Rook be able to find his way back to the apartment on his own?

“He can take care of himself.” Lis gave him a confident smile. “Trust me.”

That was true. Frankie should be more concerned about himself at the moment.

“You two seem close.”

He snorted before he could help it, eyes going wide as soon as he had.

Lis found it funny though, chuckling some as she resituated in her chair to better face him. “I’m serious.”

“We aren’t,” he disagreed. “We’re just...” He didn’t know how to describe what they were.

They weren’t friends, had only just recently come to a truce of sorts, but he couldn’t very well say as much to her. Right now, she was the only one here who could help him, and she trusted Rook’s judgement, that was the only reason she was allowing Frankie to hang out here in this room with a sick Sage.

She was protective over the king for obvious reasons. She wouldn’t want a stranger anywhere near him if not for the fact Rook had vouched for Frankie and Frankie had ultimately just saved Sage’s life.

“Taking it slow?” Lis guessed, glancing at Sage. “I get that.”

“No we—”

“It’s okay,” she cut him off. “I won’t judge. I mean, he’s a demon but he’s still a prince, right? Plus, I may not feel the same about him as you do, but I do have eyes. I can see how hot he is.”

Frankie dropped down to the edge of the window, a bit taken aback by that confession. For a second, the rest of what she’d implied didn’t register because he was so caught up in it. “You’re into him?”

“Gods, no,” she laughed, “he’s way too charming. Not my type at all.”

“But you think he’s attractive?”

“Everyone thinks he’s attractive,” Lis said, clearly finding Frankie’s reaction amusing. She leaned forward and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Don’t tell anyone, but even Sage has admitted to thinking Rook is good looking.”

“No way!” He clapped his hands over his mouth at his somewhat loud outburst.

“Seriously,” she insisted. “I made the same expression when he told me. Honestly, it’s a good thing the two of them never spend any time together, or he might realize he’s more compatible with Rook than he is with me.”

Frankie frowned. “That’s not true.”

He’d never even once considered that Rook and Sage might be interested in one another, or hook up, let alone actually fall in love like Lis was suggesting.

But then, he was reminded of the fact that he hadn’t been aware Rook was pansexual either. He’d never bothered considering Sage’s sexuality, but considering the forced kiss and how unsurprised Lis was by it...

“Is Sage also into guys?” he asked, needing to know, tossing politeness to the wind.

“Sage is bisexual,” she told him. “I thought everyone in the four kingdoms knew that. Didn’t you know about his ex?”

“His what?” Frankie didn’t even know he’d had an ex. Although, he supposed it made sense. Sage was in his early twenties, old enough to have dated a few people, even if Frankie had never written about any of them. In his mind, he’d always sort of figured he’d been too busy with the war and training to become king and Lis was his first real relationship.

Apparently, he’d been wrong.

Lis sighed and reached out, covering Sage’s hand on the bed with her own. “His ex-boyfriend died in battle four years ago. From what I’m told, Sage has never really recovered.”

“Died how?”

“He didn’t follow orders and snuck out to the front lines,” Lis said. “No one knows what he was thinking, he didn’t tell anyone his plans. Sage realized he was gone too late, and by the time he’d made it to the battle...He witnessed the killing blow.”

“Who did it?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think it was anyone important. I do know that Sage got his revenge. He entered a rage and took out the rest of the Bronze army on his own. It was a bloodbath. I can’t believe you’ve never heard of it. It’s called the Golden Battle. People consider it the defining moment for Prince Sage, the moment he stopped being a child and became a man.”

He would have been seventeen at the time, if Frankie’s math was correct. That was far too young to lose someone that close, and it was too dark even for Frankie’s standards.

Gold and Silver had a lot of death and destruction, of course it did, it was a high fantasy novel about four warring kingdoms. But Frankie had never considered giving any of the characters a wound like that. Like losing a person they’d been in love with in such a horrible way.

Lis had lost her brother. Rook his mother. Sage his father. But none of them had experienced the loss of a

soulmate type relationship, at least not as far as Frankie had known.

He turned to Sage, seeing him somewhat differently now.

In his mind, Sage had always been a strong, confident character. That confidence came off as cold and dismissive sometimes, but that was only because he took his role as leader seriously and wanted to protect his people at all costs. Now, knowing that he'd once been a kid in love, and that he'd had that love stolen from him...It changed the reasoning behind Sage's frigid demeanor.

"No wonder it took so long for him to open up to you," he murmured, thinking about how the romantic relationship between him and Lis had taken a good ten or so chapters more to develop than Frankie had initially anticipated.

"How do you know that?" Lis's brow furrowed, but he shrugged and came up with a believable enough lie.

"It's kind of obvious," he said.

"Is it?" She blew out a breath. "We aren't officially together, you know? We agreed not to put a label on things until after we've defeated Talia."

Because even after that was done, it wouldn't be the end. They'd still need to figure out how to handle the rest of the Iron kingdom, and Lis would need to return to Silver for a bit and play the role of princess. The two of them weren't sure how they were going to make a relationship work long term. Frankie understood that because he'd already written out a few different conversations between them where they discussed it.

Treading carefully so that he didn't accidentally let slip something else about them he shouldn't know, Frankie changed the subject. "He should wake soon."

"Really?" She smiled. "That's great."

A knock on the door came then, and Cue opened it enough to pop his head in. He nodded at Frankie but then gave his attention to Lis. "The guys are back from their stakeout.

Since Sage is still unconscious, I figured you should at least hear what they have to say.”

“All right.” Lis stood but then hesitated.

“Go ahead,” Frankie reassured her. “I’ll watch him.”

She seemed to debate over whether or not that was a good idea before it must have hit her that he’d literally saved Sage’s life once already. It would be stupid for him to harm the king now. “Call me if he wakes up while I’m gone?”

“Sure thing.” Although, what did she want him to do? Stick his head out into the hallway and yell at the top of his lungs for her? This castle was huge.

With one last glance in Sage’s direction, Lis left, carefully shutting the door behind her.

The quiet settled over the room immediately and Frankie sighed. This so wasn’t how he’d expected to spend his Tuesday. Not to mention he had class tomorrow...Shit. What if he didn’t make it back in time? The absolute last thing he wanted was to fail Oceanography again because he’d missed a quiz or some other bullshit.

He’d switched professors this semester and was taking it with someone else, and so far things had gone a lot more smoothly, but still. He thought about how Adelaide had tried to convince him to go to the Dean after he’d failed the first time. She was convinced that the only reason he’d gotten an F on the final project had been because the professor was racist against Asians.

Sometimes, Frankie regretted not taking her advice. Honestly though, he’d been too afraid to risk it. He thought that was probably the reason the professor had singled him out as well, but there was no proof, and the only other Asian in the class had passed—though, it’d been with a D.

Sage coughed then, breaking the silence and Frankie shot off the window ledge and rushed over to him.

The king was blinking his eyes, clearly waiting for his vision to adjust, and he frowned when Frankie reached him and helped ease him into a sitting position.

As soon as he'd propped Sage up against the backboard of the bed and was confident he was awake enough not to fall over, Frankie took a deliberate step in retreat, putting space between them.

"How are you feeling?" he asked after a moment when all Sage did was stare at him with a frown. Frankie ran his palms over his thighs and cleared his throat. "You might be achy still, but that should fade. We got you the antidote kind of late, so you've been out for a while."

"Why do I get the feeling I did something I shouldn't have?" Sage said then. He pursed his lips, and a second later his eyes dropped to Frankie's mouth. "Oh."

"It's fine," he rushed to say, waving his hand in the air. "You weren't yourself. Don't worry about it."

"I apologize. I don't know what came over me."

"It's fine," he repeated, mostly because he didn't want to talk about it.

Too bad Sage didn't feel the same.

"I mistook you for someone else," he admitted, rubbing a hand down his face wearily. He rested his head back against the headboard and closed his eyes for a moment. "It won't happen again."

"Did you think I was Lis? You were pretty out of it." Frankie realized too late that he shouldn't have asked that.

Sage cocked his head. "Yes. That's probably why I made that mistake. I really am sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"It was only a kiss."

"It was sexual harassment," Sage corrected. "I promise I've never done anything like that to anyone before."

"I know."

Sage watched him a little longer and then exhaled slowly, regaining his bearing. "I was rude to you, before the unwanted kiss, I mean."

“You heard I’m friends with Rook,” Frankie shrugged. “I get it. Anyway, Lis just went to meet with a scouting party about the possible attack on Talia. I’ll go get her.”

“Wait,” Sage stopped him. “Where are you from?”

Frankie tilted his head, unsure why he was asking. It must be obvious that he wasn’t from around there though, since he hadn’t been offered a change of clothes and was still in his jeans and printed T. “Somewhere else. You wouldn’t have heard of it.”

“How do you know Rook then?”

“We sort of...stumbled into one another,” Frankie said, trying to think of how to best word it. “It was an accident.”

“And now you’re helping him?”

“I’m helping all of you,” he corrected. It’d always been the plan to see Sage and Lis succeed.

“But you aren’t from Visera?”

“No.” Why keep it a secret? This world was filled with magic, and so long as Frankie kept the part about this possibly being a world inside of a book out, it shouldn’t be a big deal to confess he was from a different realm. “I’m from somewhere else. That’s why I need to get back to a gateway, so I can go home.”

“That’s why Lis hasn’t been able to get a hold of him,” Sage guessed. “He’s not in Visera anymore.”

“He’s still doing everything he can to stop Talia,” Frankie wasn’t sure why, but he gave in to the urge to defend Rook. He understood the animosity between the two, but now wasn’t the time for it. If anything, with the final battle on the horizon, things would go a lot more smoothly if the two could somehow put their differences aside.

Especially since Rook had made the decision to step back from Lis. That couldn’t have been an easy choice to make. Frankie hadn’t gotten the chance to say as much before they’d realized his apartment had been broken into. He made a mental note to bring it up the first chance he got.

Sage's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "You like him."

"We've gotten...close." Why did everyone keep asking him about his relationship with Rook? He needed to change the subject. "Is there anything else? Because if not, I'll go—"

"What's your world like?" Sage's odd line of questioning must be due to the poisoning. His body was still recovering despite him being awake now and out of the danger zone. It wouldn't hurt to stick around and humor him a bit.

"Nothing like this one," Frankie said.

"You aren't split into kingdoms?"

"Well, we are, sort of."

"And what about war?"

"We've got that too."

Sage rested back against the headboard and clucked his tongue. "It sounds exactly like my world then."

"In some ways," he was forced to admit. He took a second to think of a better way to explain it without having to launch into a whole diatribe. "When Rook first arrived, he spent hours in a bookstore researching, and there's still a ton he doesn't know or understand."

"And you? What are you where you're from?"

It took him a moment but he realized what Sage was trying to ask. "I'm just a regular person."

He snorted. "Rook never shows an interest in regular people."

"Like I said, we were sort of forced together." Frankie was finding this conversation uncomfortable for some reason, and he shifted on his feet. There were so many things he wanted to ask Sage, so many things he wanted to know, and yet...None of those questions seemed to come to mind now that he finally had the chance to do so.

This was a once in a lifetime opportunity—who else got to meet their main character in the actual flesh?—but there

was an odd feel to the air, making it feel kind of heavy and cloying in the room, and instead of sticking around, excited, like he should be, he found himself itching to leave.

“But there’s no Iron,” Sage cut into his thoughts, “where you’re from?”

“No,” he recalled Neko and grimaced. “Actually, there is now. Neko slipped through the same gateway as Rook the first time he appeared. We haven’t been able to find him. That’s one of the reason’s Rook’s stuck around. He’s helping me.” Sort of. Frankie left out the part about how it was a tentative agreement.

Sage dropped his gaze, seemingly lost in his own mind.

Frankie slowly made his way over to the door while he pondered whatever it was he was pondering, pausing abruptly when Sage lifted his head on him again.

“The poison...How did you know about it?” There was no accusation in his tone, which was good, because Frankie wasn’t sure how he’d explain his knowledge.

“I’ve heard about it,” he ended up saying. “I’ve always had an interest in stuff like that.”

“You saved my life.”

“It’s no big deal.” Frankie forced a grin in a poor attempt to lighten the mood. “Plus, now I can say I saved a king.”

“I saw something,” Sage said tentatively, as if unsure if he wanted to proceed, “when I was under the poison’s influence. Remembered something, really. Something I’d prefer to have kept forgotten.”

He wondered if Sage was referring to his ex, the one that Lis had mentioned earlier, but didn’t want to ask. Instead, he waited for the king to continue on his own.

“It was a long time ago,” he sighed. “I thought I’d moved past it but...”

“It’s okay,” Frankie told him. “You’re allowed to feel however you feel. There’s no need to be embarrassed about

it.”

Sage blinked at him. “How did you know I was embarrassed?”

It was pretty obvious, but Frankie kept that to himself.

“You should talk to Lis about this,” he suggested, motioning with a finger toward the door. “She’ll be more helpful than I am.” Considering he was a stranger in Sage’s eyes.

“How much have you heard about me?” Sage stopped him from leaving yet again. “I mean, is what you’ve heard all from Rook?”

He shook his head. “No, I already knew about you before he and I met. You’re a good leader, you’re strong.”

“Intense, cold, no sense of humor,” Sage filled in, but Frankie grunted.

“That’s only on the outside, in front of your army. With Cue and the others you’re—” He stopped himself, but it was too late.

Sage stiffened. “How—”

“I’m going to get Lis.” This time, he didn’t wait for the king to approve, practically bolting out the door.

He was already halfway down the hall before it hit him he had no clue which meeting room she’d gone to.

Chapter 16:

“I really appreciate this,” Frankie said over his shoulder to Sage as they made it to the spot in the forest where he’d appeared a day ago. Honestly, it all looked virtually the same to him, so it was a good thing that the king had escorted him out here personally.

Lis and the others had stuck behind, working on the plans for Talia. Frankie had tried to listen in on some of the meetings, but they’d shut him out. He couldn’t really blame them. It wasn’t like it was personal, but no one actually knew who he was, and without Rook there to vouch for him...It made sense.

He wouldn’t trust a stranger with the literal fate of the world either.

Though, he’d been pretty surprised when Sage had offered to bring him to the gateway himself. He’d thought for sure the king would have catching up to do now that he was out of bed and feeling better.

“Of course,” Sage replied, coming to a stop at a small empty area. He waved his palm over the ground and a shimmering rectangle identical to the one Frankie had seen with Rook on the cliffs appeared. “Are you sure there’s nothing else I can do for you before you go?”

Sage was the type of person who hated being in debt to anyone and always tried to live fairly. If someone gave him something, he wanted to give something in return. Because Frankie had saved his life, he was hell-bent on making them even. But there was nothing for Frankie here, and too much time had passed since he’d left Rook alone in the mall.

“Honestly, there are so many things I want to ask you,” Frankie admitted, figuring this was his last chance to speak with the man. “I’ve wanted to meet you for...A really long time.”

“You could stay,” Sage suggested, but Frankie quickly shot that idea down.

“I don’t belong here.”

He hummed in understanding. “You’re worried about leaving Neko in your world.”

That too. He was actually more concerned about having left Rook, and was eager to make it back and ensure that the demon prince had found his way safely to the apartment and was okay. Rook may have read up on his world, but there were still so many things that could go wrong. Things that could happen unexpectedly, to anyone.

What if he’d gotten into a car accident or something, for example? There’d be no one there to help claim him and the police would get involved.

No, Frankie needed to get back ASAP. It was unfortunate, but it looked like he was going to have to discover those things he wanted to know about Sage the old fashioned way.

Through his writing.

“Can you return?” Sage asked.

Frankie fingered the necklace in his front pocket. “Yeah, but I don’t plan on it. The past two times were an accident. From here on out, I’m going to be a lot more careful.”

He’d already thought about buying a lock box and stuffing it into his closet. He had no clue how the necklace had found its way off his desk and in his pocket, but locking it away to ensure it couldn’t happen again was his only real solution at this point.

“So then...this is goodbye?” Sage sounded a bit disappointed, and Frankie was caught off guard by that reaction.

When he’d first been spotted, Sage had almost cut his head off. Now he was sad to see him go? Must be because he was curious about Frankie’s world. He hadn’t even considered the fact that Sage would have questions of his own about where Frankie was from.

Sage was the curious sort, always had been. Before he'd been forced to take up the mantle from his father, he'd been playful and spirited. Always seeking out an adventure, desperate to learn more. That was a version that Frankie didn't actually have much personal experience with, however, since it'd happened off page. He'd written about it once or twice though, using it as a means to showcase just how deeply his father's death had affected him and how seriously he took the role of king.

"I'm sure Rook will share details with you once he's back," Frankie said, mostly just to reassure the other man. It was a toss-up whether or not the demon prince would cooperate with Sage long enough to actually carry on a conversation with him that didn't include sarcasm and insult lobbing.

Sage clearly thought the same because he snorted.

Frankie took a step closer to the gateway and felt the first prickles of heat from the charm clutched in his palm. "It's working."

"You don't get to choose when you go?" Sage had control over when and where he used a gateway, as did the rest of the magic wielders in Visera. That was why it'd been so shocking for Rook when he'd been sucked in without any say in the matter.

"Nope." He couldn't hold back his excitement at getting to go home, and didn't bother. Waving his hand, Frankie smiled, taking in one last long look at the character he'd spent the past three years getting so close with on the page. "It was really nice getting to meet you, Sage."

He should have gone with something like "your majesty", and Sage's eyes widened at the more intimate addressing. Before he could say anything back, however, the gateway flashed and in the next instant, Frankie was gone.

* * *

Frankie expected to arrive back in the electronics store in the mall, so when he hit the ground on his knees and

realized he was on tweed carpet instead of scuffed linoleum tiles, he frowned.

It was the school library. He'd somehow come through another computer, though a different one from the one he and Rook had left through before. This one was set in the science section, tucked into a far corner between stacks, completely out of sight from anyone who may or may not be seated or browsing nearby.

Opting to figure out the logistics of that later, he shot to his feet and raced through the library, only vaguely aware of the librarians he passed who all shushed him for being loud.

"Hey, Frankie." Close to the entrance, Ri was standing by the checkout, holding up his student ID to the woman across the desk.

Frankie barely spared him a glance. "Can't talk right now, sorry!"

He was halfway across the parking lot before he recalled that his car wasn't here, obviously, and he swore, spinning on his heels as he searched for the bus stop. There weren't any around this side of campus. Patting down his back pocket had him cursing again. He'd left his phone with Rook when he'd entered the store the other day.

At least he had his wallet. He ran around the library and across the quad, making his way toward the front of the school. The student help building was able to call him a cab, and it didn't take long for it to arrive.

He tapped his foot the entire drive over, growing more and more anxious with every passing second.

When he scanned his card in the back, the machine seemed to take forever to process, and he was out of the vehicle so fast, he actually had to turn back around to slam the door shut.

The apartment was unlocked when he got there, and he practically stumbled inside, coming to a halt the second his eyes landed on the man standing by the couch, currently staring down at Frankie's phone.

Frankie lost all fight then and dropped back against the wall, needing its support to help stay on his feet. He pressed a palm to his racing heart and took a moment to collect himself and even out his breathing before he even attempted to speak.

Rook was staring at him when he finally reopened his eyes, and there was a spark of fury there that had mostly been unexpected.

He held up his hands. "It's not my fault," he exclaimed. "I don't know how it happened, but I ended up back in Visera." He made his way across the living room, stopping at Rook's side before giving him a thorough inspection. "Are you all right? Did anything happen while I was gone? How did you get back here? You didn't run into Neko again did you?"

Rook pulled his arm free from where Frankie had been clutching at the sleeve of his shirt, steely expression never wavering even when Frankie frowned up at him. He pointed toward the phone screen. "Explain this."

"What?" Frankie glanced at the screen, absently taking in script, more interested in getting answers from Rook. But then a word caught his attention and he pursed his lips, grabbing the device to scroll through the word document Rook had been looking at.

Chapter Eighty-Five was typed out at the top.

He sucked in a breath.

"Your publisher just emailed letting you know that she received it," Rook told him. "So I opened it to check, and here it is in your sent folder."

"It just appeared?" Frankie quickly scrolled through, skimming it as he went. It was a new chapter all right, told in Sage's POV, starting from the fight with the attacking Gloom. Apparently, he and Cue had been out there talking about how concerned Sage was about this final plan. He feared things would go wrong and it was foolish of them all to storm Talia's Hidden Palace together. He wanted to convince Lis to stay behind, but knew she would never agree.

They were attacked before either of them could come up with a solution to assuage his fears. Shortly after that, Frankie had burst onto the scene.

Even though this wasn't the first time reading about himself from another person's perspective—since that'd already happened with Lis—it was weird being in Sage's head, reading his thoughts on Frankie. His initial suspicions.

“He thinks you're cute,” Rook practically growled, surprising Frankie.

He turned and glanced up at him. “Where does it say that?”

“Keep reading.”

Frankie obeyed, too curious not too. There was more suspicion as Lis arrived to stop him from attacking, and then their small group heading back to the castle.

Sage described the pain when the dart had suddenly hit him, the burning sensation and the way his mind had seemed to cloud and fog, making it hard for him to focus on anything or understand what was going on.

They'd dragged him inside and placed him on the dais and then...

He'd kissed Frankie the first time.

He hadn't mistaken him for Lis.

Frankie's mouth hung open as he read, shocked.

Sage didn't know what he was doing, but he knew he didn't want to stop. Knew he wanted more. The person in his grasp clawed at him but he refused to let go, unwilling to lose something that precious to him a second time. Another boy's face swam before his vision, golden skin and hair as dark and shiny as ink.

He could still hear the sound of that boy's laughter in the air if he closed his eyes and concentrated hard enough, a small miracle, considering it'd been so long since the last time he'd actually heard it.

Liam.

He wasn't so out of it to know that this wasn't Liam in his arms right now, wasn't Liam's warm lips pressed against his own. The smell was different, and the taste...But Sage struggled to hold on anyway, those old memories sparked back to life, as if raised from the dead in a way that Liam never could be.

How had he forgotten? The grief of losing his first love had hit him hard. Sage had spent too much time on it, wasting away locked in his room. Refusing to come out or do his duty.

Then his father had been called away, murdered on the road, and Sage had been forced to make a choice.

Continue to grieve for something that could never be, or fight for the kingdom that was still here. The kingdom that needed a strong, prince, one that wasn't so easily felled by emotion. He'd chosen the latter, and in doing so, had buried those memories and those feelings so deep within himself he'd actually managed to forget.

But now those dormant sensations were sleeping no more, and he felt them rise up to the surface, felt the cloying ache in his chest and the urge to weep and scream and rage all over again as if the death was fresh and new.

The boy in his arms shoved him away, and Sage blinked at him, really seeing him for the first time.

No, not a boy. A man. A grown man.

Sage felt something twist within him.

The man, whoever he was, was a vision. Gorgeous.

He wanted to touch him again.

Frankie shot up from where he'd sat on the couch, unable to read further. "That," he pointed at the phone and shook his head, "what the fuck?"

"You say that," Rook stated, indicating the chapter still, "later."

“I—” He turned to the demon prince and froze. “You can’t be mad because of *that*?”

Rook didn’t so much as blink at the accusation, holding his gaze steady.

“Come on,” Frankie threw up his hands, “I had nothing to do with that.”

“You kissed him.”

“He kissed me!” He corrected, not even really sure why he was bothering. What did it matter, to either of them, if Frankie was making out with someone? He was too flustered to back down, however, logic and rationality too far out of grasp. “I pushed him away! That’s got to be in there too!”

As if to prove it, he glanced back down, scrolling ahead a few paragraphs until he got to the part where he’d administered the antidote only to have Sage jump him again.

“See!” He tapped the screen with his finger. “There! I pushed him away and then he passes out.”

“And afterward?” Rook asked. He crossed his arms over his chest. “What happened then?”

“What do you mean?” He checked. The chapter jumped from there, seeing as how it was told in Sage’s POV, starting up again the moment that Sage opened his eyes in his bedroom upstairs. The part where Frankie and the others had carried him up there and Frankie’s conversation with Lis were missing.

“He wakes up,” Rook said, “and the two of you are alone in his room.”

“Lis had just left,” Frankie told him. “She was called away—” Finally, he was hit with some sense, stopping abruptly. “Wait. Wait, why are we talking about this? Why does any of this matter?”

“Excuse me?” Rook’s eyes narrowed into slits.

“Sage was attacked with a weird weapon,” Frankie began, thinking about the four inch black dart that had been pulled from the king’s neck. Cue had held onto it to inspect it

further, but Frankie still found it odd that it had shown up this close to the end of the book. “I know I never wrote them in there, but they were used by the late Iron king.”

“You’re lucky the target was that bastard and not you,” Rook stated. “What about how you narrowly escaped getting cleaved in half by that Iron?”

Right, no one had questioned how Frankie had known where that blade was buried. He supposed that *was* rather fortunate for him. There would have been no good way for him to explain that one.

With a sound of pure frustration, Rook reached out and tugged Frankie over toward him. He ran his gaze over him, hands roaming lightly as if seeking out any injury. The concern written across his face was so similar to what Frankie had been feeling when he’d first arrived that for a moment he didn’t resist.

Until one of Rook’s heavy palms settled on his hip, the touch slightly more possessive than Frankie figured he’d meant for it to be.

He pulled away, retreating a step, ignoring the way Rook’s eyes flashed in irritation. “Can we focus, please?”

“I couldn’t care less about the King of Gold,” he told him. “You were almost killed and there was nothing I could do about it. I didn’t even know until this chapter appeared fully written.” He ran a hand through his dark chocolate hair in frustration.

“What did you do once you realized I was missing?” Frankie asked, tone a little less frantic this time around. Rook was safe and so was he. That was what mattered here.

“I tried to get to you,” Rook finally replied. “I had my necklace, and I figured if you’d vanished anywhere it was in that store with all the computers. But no matter how many times I walked up and down the aisles, nothing happened. I went to your school next, back to the study room, but nothing there either.” He pursed his lips. “I have a feeling the gateways are set on a timer.”

Frankie cocked his head. “What do you mean?”

“When we first arrived in Hem,” he explained, “we couldn’t get back right away. The gate was locked and we were forced to head to my palace. It wasn’t until forty-eight hours later, when we returned and tried again, that it worked. Since you used the gateway to go there on your own, it was used the once and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get it to unlock and allow me entrance. That was over a day ago. Sure enough, at least twenty-four hours later and here you are.”

There were rules involved with magical portals, of course, but since Frankie hadn’t utilized them too often in his story, he hadn’t bothered to explore what all of those rules may or may not be. There was a good chance that Rook was correct, and if that was the case...

“We have to be extra careful not to get sucked in again,” he said. “Losing an entire day is insane.”

“Wouldn’t want to miss your class or another book signing,” Rook drawled, clearly being a sarcastic ass about it.

Frankie stuck out his tongue before he could help it, which had the demon prince quirking a brow in mild surprise.

He didn’t, however, scold him for his insubordination, so that was something. The Rook from even a week ago would have threatened him bodily harm for sure.

Baby steps.

Rook crossed his arms. “I’m less concerned about us getting forced back and more concerned about how we’ll both survive these next couple of days.”

Frankie had no idea what he was talking about, and that much must have been apparent because Rook elaborated without further prompting.

“The King of Gold and I,” he stated, giving Frankie a look like he thought he was crazy for not picking up on this on his own. “The two of us can hardly survive living in the same realm as one another, I don’t know how you plan on making things work in this tiny apartment of yours.”

“...Why would you need to worry about being around Sage?”

Rook blinked at him, momentarily caught off guard. He dropped his arms back at his side. “You didn’t bring him with you?”

“Why would I have brought him with me? You know I can’t write anything about the characters if they’re not still in Visera. Having Sage here would be—”

“You actually don’t know?” Rook clucked his tongue and pointed to the screen one last time. “Scroll to the end, Aardwolf. You’re in for a real treat.”

He hesitated but ended up lifting the phone once more. He brought the document all the way to the end, read when Sage had brought him to the woods and opened the gateway for him.

Sage hadn’t wanted him to go, had wanted to spend more time getting to know Frankie. That on its own was a little off putting—Frankie had no idea that’s how the other man had been feeling—but it was the very last paragraph that had him gasping.

Sage watched Frankie disappear and thought to himself he wished he could go with him.

Hearing his call, magic answered.

One heartbeat the King of Gold was staring longingly at the gate, and the next he was gone, whisked through it to parts unknown.

“No fucking way!” Frankie read those last lines a few times, then glanced up and noticed his car keys on the edge of the coffee table. Snatching them up, he was already halfway across the living room before he realized he was alone and he turned back. “Hello? Let’s go.”

“Go?” Rook asked.

“To get Sage.” Frankie couldn’t believe the King of Gold had come through with him and he hadn’t even noticed. “I left the library so quickly I didn’t even think to check. He

must have come through a few seconds after me, so I didn't notice."

Rook chuckled. "You *left* him there? Alone?"

"I didn't do it on purpose!" Frankie fought the urge to stomp his foot like a child when that only made Rook's grin widen. "Stop being so pleased about this and let's go."

He pretended to consider it and ended up shaking his head in the negative. "I think I'll pass on rescuing him."

"Fine," he blew out a breath, "then I'll go on my own."

"On second thought." Rook followed after him, glaring when Frankie sent him a questioning look over why he'd suddenly changed his mind. "The last time we were separated you were attacked by Iron and almost hit by a poisonous dart. There's no way I'm leaving you alone."

"Sage was the target," Frankie pointed out as he locked the front door behind them, "remember?" He took in the parking lot. "Where'd you park my car? Wait." His eyes widened. If his car was back here... "Did you drive yourself here?!"

Rook straightened to his full height, clearly preening. "It was no big deal. Driving is easy."

"How did you even know how to do it?"

"I watched a video in the computer store online when I realized you weren't coming back there." Rook started for the left side of the lot. "Come on, weren't you worried about the little king?"

"We aren't done talking about this," Frankie called, picking up the pace to practically chase after him. "That was super illegal!"

Realizing who it was he was talking with, Frankie gave up. Rook never cared about breaking laws anyway.

Chapter 17:

“Please tell me I’m seeing things,” Frankie mumbled out of the corner of his mouth to Rook as the two of them stood in the doorway to the auditorium.

“Let me see your phone,” Rook replied back, and too distracted to wonder why, Frankie handed it over. Without skipping a beat Rook took a photo of the stage.

“Hey!”

He grinned down at the picture and then shoved the device into his front pocket, ignoring Frankie’s hand and his disapproving glare. Rook started down the slight ramp walkway leading to the front of the auditorium, a lightness to his steps that hadn’t been there only a moment prior when the two of them had desperately searched all over campus.

Or, well, *Frankie* had been desperately searching. Rook hadn’t really seemed to care whether or not they found the King of Gold.

Fortunately, they had.

Unfortunately...

After giving Sage’s description to everyone they came into contact with, they’d finally been told that someone kind of matching it had followed Ri to the drama club. The club room itself had been empty, but Frankie had checked the auditorium as a last resort and sure enough, that’s where everyone was.

Including Sage.

Sage, the King of Gold, revered ruler and all around cool and collected badass...Who was currently dressed in white tights and an odd blue and gold and white detailed tunic thing that Frankie couldn’t even place.

What had the theme for this semesters play been again?

Winter something or other...

The outfit wasn't even the most shocking part. Sage's long hair had been cut and styled, swept back over his face.

He looked like a completely different person, nothing like the character Frankie had spent the past three years writing about. That helped explain why it'd been so difficult to find someone who could send them in the right direction based on the description Frankie had originally given. He'd been asking if anyone had seen a tall guy with long blond hair possibly dressed in brown leathers.

Rook made it to the front first, stopping at the foot of the stage, clearly trying not to laugh at Sage's appearance.

There were several members of the drama club up there, most of them moving props and painting stage decorations and set scenes. Ri was standing in the center, leaning in toward Sage with an open script between them. It was obvious that he was trying to explain the lines.

"Frankie." Sage lifted his head, noticing him standing there and practically shoved past Ri to the edge of the stage. He dropped down off of it, landing on both feet, grabbing onto Frankie's shoulder tightly as if to test and be sure he was actually really there. He breathed a sigh of relief upon the contact. "Thank the gods."

Frankie opened his mouth to ask what was going on, but suddenly Rook was there, yanking him away from Sage.

Rook situated Frankie slightly behind him, shoulders pulled back, spine straight. He glared at the King of Gold and the air around them seemed to crackle and pop with an intensity that hadn't been there a moment ago.

"Don't," it was one word, but it slipped past Rook's lips with so much dark animosity that Frankie actually shivered behind him.

Sage saw his reaction, glancing at him with a look of concern before anger morphed his features and he set a steely gaze of his own on the demon prince.

"Hey," Ri, who'd taken the stairs at the side of the stage instead of jumping off of it like Sage, came over then,

sheepishly running a hand through the short hairs at the back of his head. He looked between the two towering men before resting his attention on Frankie. “Sorry, I sort of took advantage of your friend here.”

“Excuse me?” Frankie frowned at him.

“He came in looking for you and accidentally walked into one of our props. It’d just been painted and well,” he motioned to the clothing Sage was wearing, “yellow paint got all over him. This was the only change of clothes I had on hand and after seeing him in them—”

“He told me he’d help me find you if I helped with his play,” Sage interrupted, staring at Frankie now. “It seems fairly simple, plus he’ll let me keep the clothing.”

“Yeah,” Frankie shook his head, “you’re not keeping those,” then he turned to Ri, “and he’s not going to be able to be in your play.”

“He already promised,” Ri said. “Come on, man, you know how hard it’s been to find a replacement for the lead role. It’s important, and he doesn’t seem to have a problem with it.”

“If Frankie doesn’t want me to do it,” Sage told him, “then I apologize, but I’ll have to decline.”

“What about his hair?” When Frankie had left Sage in the middle of the woods, he’d still been sporting his long golden locks. He crossed his arms, feeling an inkling of annoyance toward Ri. On the one hand, he did totally understand where the guy was coming from, and it was obvious he must have mistaken Sage for another student, but on the other...

Sage didn’t know a thing about this world or how it operated, and if he’d asked Ri for help finding Frankie, Ri could have easily sent him a text letting him know.

“He got paint in that too and then he asked me if we could cut it,” Ri said, throwing his hands up when Frankie narrowed his eyes. “Seriously, he asked. I didn’t suggest it or anything. Sal happens to be good with hair so she offered to do

it if Sage was serious.” He pointed to one of the girls working on the stage and she waved, unaware of what the conversation was about.

Frankie knew of her, and knew that she’d been working at a hair salon for a while to help pay for her tuition. Admittedly, Sage’s hair cut did look good...

“This is so fucking weird.” He rubbed at his temple, trying to alleviate a migraine that was beginning to form. Out of everything that had happened to him thus far, how was this the strangest thing?

Not only had the King of Gold somehow wished himself into Frankie’s world, but in less than an hour, he’d gotten roped into playing the lead in a college play *and* changed his hair style?

“I thought he was cosplaying,” Mark, another member of the drama club joined in as he was passing, carrying a part of the set with painted flowers on it. Since his hands were full holding the giant piece of painted wood, he bumped his elbow against Ri. “Right? He looked like that character everyone is always talking about. The one from that book series?”

Frankie felt a sliver of panic and acted on it without much thought. He reached out and grabbed onto the end of Sage’s blue spandex sleeve and tugged him away from the group toward the exit. “Sorry he can’t participate.”

“Hey!” Ri called after them, but Frankie didn’t slow, determined to get them out of there before Mark could say anything else. There was a curse and then, “What about my costume?!”

“I’ll return it later!” Frankie wondered how much Sage knew about this world in relation to Visera. He wouldn’t have suspected that Sage had enough time to figure out that his world came from a book, but then, he had appeared in the library, of all places, and if asked earlier, Frankie wouldn’t have guessed that the guy would have enough time to change his hair and join a school play either so...Fuck.

They were halfway down the hallway before someone grabbed onto Frankie's wrist, squeezing just hard enough to make him come to an abrupt stop.

He turned, frowning to find Rook standing next to him. The demon prince was holding him tightly, with a tense expression written across his face.

Frankie glanced down and realized with a start he was still pulling Sage along, and it was with the same hand that Rook had grabbed. Abruptly, he let go, dropping Sage's arm as if burned.

Rook didn't immediately follow suit. Instead, he stared Frankie down a moment longer, a swirl of emotions passing through the dark centers of his eyes before he finally released Frankie.

He shifted on his feet under Rook's scrutiny, uncomfortable for some reason. Why did he feel almost guilty? He hadn't done anything wrong.

"Is this about the hair?" Sage asked, cutting through the tension like a knife, causing both of them to blink as if torn from a silent standoff. At Frankie's frown, he elaborated. "You seem upset. Should I not have cut it? It appeared to be the smart move. Everyone here has short hair."

Right, and considering Sage knew nothing about this world, he would have fallen back on training. Since his kingdom was at war, he'd been trained in situations similar to this, taught what to do if he accidentally found himself stuck behind enemy lines. Hide, and most importantly, *blend*. Though there weren't many physical differences in appearance between the Gold, Silver, and Iron kingdoms, their dress and style made it easy enough to tell most of them apart. Not knowing where he was or what he may encounter, of course Sage had played it safe.

Frankie shouldn't be surprised by how quickly he'd altered his appearance after all.

"No, it was..." Kind of unnecessary, considering there were tons of guys who wore their hair long, but Frankie

couldn't find it in himself to say as much. "It's fine. It looks nice."

Rook crossed his arms.

Frankie tried to ignore him, not really understanding why he was sulking in the first place. It wasn't like he'd meant to bring Sage here. This was as much of an inconvenience to him as it was for Rook, more so even, since this was *his* world.

Sage smoothed a hand over the top of his blond head, the silky strands practically glistening in the harsh fluorescent lighting of the drama building. He looked ridiculous in the tights and the striped long sleeved tunic, and yet...

Students glanced at him and whispered to themselves as they passed by in the hall, and Frankie got the impression it wasn't because they were making fun of his outfit. Fortunately, this wasn't Visera, so drawing unwanted attention wasn't really that big of a deal.

"I lost you," Sage said then. "I must have come through the gateway just a minute too late. By the time I arrived, you were already gone. It's a good thing I ran into your friend otherwise I'd still be wandering that library. I was told this is a school?"

"Yeah," Frankie confirmed. "And sorry about that. I had no idea you came with me. If I had, I would have waited. Are you okay? Did anything else happen?"

"Aside from the paint and the hair?" Rook drawled, mockingly.

Sage narrowed his eyes at him. "Not all of us have your abilities, Prince of Bronze."

"I have many things that others lack," he took a pointed step closer to Frankie's side, the move unmistakably possessive, "and clearly want."

Sage merely grunted then turned back to answer Frankie's question. "Nothing else happened. I was attempting to learn the lines of that play when you thankfully arrived. I enjoy the arts, but admittedly, I've never wanted to be a participant."

Frankie had never thought about what forms of entertainment they may have on Visera, aside from singing and dancing. It was interesting to hear that they put on plays there as well, but he knew better than to allow himself to get sucked in at the moment. “We should—”

Sage’s stomach rumbled loudly.

He wanted to get them back to his apartment where they could figure out their next move—as in, how to get Sage back into the book where he belonged. But he couldn’t very well allow the guy to go hungry.

Frankie sighed defeated. “Come on.”

Chapter 18:

“What are you doing here?” Rook didn’t like it. What’s more, he didn’t like that he didn’t like it.

Sage had always been one of his least favorite people on the planet—or any planet, for that matter—but his presence here was grating his last nerve and he didn’t understand the why of it.

The two of them were seated at one of the rectangular tables by the floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the quad. Since it was around dinner time, the cafeteria was packed, with throngs of people loudly chattering and the frequent clattering of utensils and plastic trays. There was a rich, meaty aroma in the air, which Frankie had clearly enjoyed since he’d instantly perked up when they’d entered and mumbled something about cheeseburgers.

They’d gotten in line and he’d helped them make their selections—more so Sage, who didn’t recognize most of the menu items—and then had escorted them to the corner table by the windows, clearly trying to get them as far from the crowds as possible. Not that there was a real chance of that with how many students were currently there.

After that, he’d left the two of them at the table alone, after much hesitation, to go to the bathroom. Just before he’d turned away, he’d sent Rook a pointed look.

As if he’d take the aardwolf’s silent threats seriously.

Sage, who’d been staring at a French fry, looked at him from across the table. The interest in his eyes dimmed, and he glowered, dropping the uneaten morsel back down onto the grayish-blue tray.

“Frankie mentioned Neko is here,” Sage said. “I wasn’t comfortable sending him back to a world where a man like that was left lurking in the shadows.”

Rook stiffened slightly, but otherwise kept his cool. “He doesn’t need you here to protect him.”

“Why?” he snorted. “Because you’ll do that? Please. We both know you aren’t the sort.”

“Have you forgotten about all of the times I’ve protected Lis when you weren’t there?” Rook retorted, only partially regretting it once the words were out because bringing her into this was pointless.

“More like she protected you,” Sage snapped, but it was obvious Rook had hit a nerve, and he just couldn’t help himself but press on it further now that he had.

“We protected each other.” That was mostly the truth in any case. He’d come to her aid and she’d come to his. The fact that she had, that she’d helped him at all, was one of the reasons he’d been drawn to her in the past.

Up until that point, he’d believed all of Gold and Silver to be his enemy, every single citizen cut from the same pretentious cloth. Lis had proven that prejudice wrong. She had the ferocity of the Silver people, but she hadn’t turned her back on Bronze innocents when they’d been attacked by Gloom.

She’d been passing through one of their villages, on her way to carrying out a mission for Sage, when it had happened. Fortunately, Rook had also been nearby and had arrived in time to help stop the madness and prevent any casualties, but he hadn’t made it soon enough. If she hadn’t been there to help fend the Gloom off, many of the villagers would have been slaughtered before Rook had even gotten word of the attack.

She’d made it out without a single scratch as well.

Lis didn’t need anyone’s protection, least of all Rook’s. But they worked well together, fought well together, and he’d mistakenly thought of that instant connection between them as to meaning something more.

He’d thought he was in love with her...

He was only just now starting to realize that love hadn’t been romantic.

“You don’t need to be here,” he forced himself to even out his tone, to not give himself away. The last thing he wanted was for the King of Gold to start questioning things Rook didn’t yet have answers to himself. He needed more time to figure out what this was, what he felt. To be sure that he wasn’t making the same type of assumption as he had where Lis was concerned. He didn’t want Sage poking his nose where it didn’t belong. “I will handle Neko.”

“Will you?” Sage didn’t believe him. “How long exactly has Neko been here?”

Rook clenched his jaw.

“Why haven’t you already dealt with him?” he insisted. “Surely you could have found him on your own. Even amidst all of,” he glanced out the window, taking in the tall stone buildings that made up the campus, “this.”

When he’d first entered this world, things had been strange to him as well. There’d been an adjustment period, one Sage was still going through.

That didn’t mean anything to Rook, however. The other man’s comfort levels were no concern of his. Besides, the sooner he left, the less it would matter whether or not he knew the difference between a cell phone and a computer mouse.

“This realm is a bit bigger than ours,” Rook told him. “And I’ve been kept busy.”

Sage cocked his head. “Are you sure you even really want to find him?”

Rook felt his shoulders tense under the other man’s scrutiny.

“As soon as Neko is gone, what reason would you have to stay?”

“What reason could I possibly have to stay now?” Rook retaliated. “What Neko does here is no concern of mine. This isn’t my world.”

“So if he goes on a killing rampage like he did that time in Ember?”

Ember was one of the largest cities in the Bronze kingdom, where most trade took place. A couple of years ago, Neko had led an attack on it. Since it bordered Iron, Talia had decided she wanted to claim it for her own. She hadn't been successful, but many had perished during the three day long battle for control.

Rook wouldn't wish that type of loss on anyone other than Talia herself, and yet he found himself leaning back in his plastic chair, putting on an aloof air he didn't actually feel. Who in their right mind could, when reminded of that level of carnage?

“I said I'd stop him, and I will,” he said.

“But not because you care about protecting the people here,” Sage guessed.

“No. It doesn't matter to me what happens to them. Let them bleed.”

“Good to know,” the sharp sound of Frankie's voice came from just over Rook's shoulder and he actually straightened in his seat.

Turning, he watched as Frankie walked the rest of the steps toward them, stopping at the head of the table. He stared Rook down, his anger impossible to miss. And something else. Something a lot like disappointment.

Damn it.

Rook turned to Sage, certain the man had done it on purpose.

“Better he knows who you are now,” Sage said, clearly understanding Rook's silent accusation, “before he gets too close and learns the hard way.”

“You have no right to get between us,” Rook practically growled, giving into the animosity he felt toward the King of Gold.

“He was forced to work with you before,” Sage stated, “but I’m here. I can handle Neko, and I won’t allow him to hurt innocents either.”

Rook stood so quickly his chair slid backward, clattering loudly against the wall. It drew the attention of some of the nearby tables, whispers starting up around them, but he hardly paid them any mind. There was only one person’s opinion he cared about, and a random stranger or even the arrogant prick of a king still seated across from him.

“Stop,” Frankie said, but before Rook could get even angrier at that, he rested a hand gently on his arm and blew out a breath of frustration. “Both of you.”

Shock that he was also reprimanding Sage, his hero personified, had a good portion of the anger dissipating in a flash.

While Frankie had been gone, Rook had read some of his notes on Gold and Silver. He’d poured over the handwritten, somewhat messy, script, practically consuming page after page of information written in Frankie’s specific tone.

There were two notebooks in all, surprising considering how long the series had been going on for, but they were packed full of ideas on plot and character development. There’d been checklists for events that needed to take place, and ones for edits and things to add, a thought here or a motive there.

There’d also been smaller notes written in the margins, personal thoughts seemingly jotted down simply because Frankie couldn’t help himself.

It’d become abundantly apparent that he had a soft spot for Sage, and not just because he was the main character in Frankie’s story. There were sentences about how hot his appearance was and what type of outfits he might write him wearing in later chapters. Thoughts on things he might say or do in the future that would be swoon worthy enough for readers—things that clearly Frankie himself found swoon worthy.

He'd been more than halfway through the second notebook when the phone he'd set on the coffee table had dinged. When he'd started reading the new chapter on it, he'd felt this growing sense of dread that at first he hadn't been able to put his finger on.

It wasn't until the very end, when he'd read that Sage had followed Frankie through the gateway, that he'd *wanted* to follow him, that it'd hit him.

What if what Sage was saying was true, and now that he was here, the hero of Frankie's story, Frankie would no longer want to keep Rook around?

They'd made a deal, sure, and up until this point, Rook had been threatening him in order to stay, but if Sage and he fought there was no telling which of them would win, and besides...He had his pride too. If Frankie didn't want him, could he bring himself to fight to stay anyway?

Why did he even want to stay?

So long as Frankie kept his word about keeping him alive during the rest of the book, that's all that should matter to Rook. He didn't want to die. There was still so much for him to see and do, in this world and in his own.

Up until this point, he'd really only known war and fighting. He only knew how to talk his way out of problems and trick those around him in order to move ahead. To keep himself and his people safe. All his life, Rook had not only needed to look out for attacks from the other three kingdoms, but from his family as well.

His brothers still didn't like that he existed, despite him having no interest in the throne. At least three times a year they sent someone to stir up trouble for Rook. He was always on guard, even in his own home. Even around Ivan, a person who was more family to him than his actual blood relatives.

A person he needed to present a strong front for, because no matter how close they were, Rook was still his prince.

Things with Frankie were different.

Hell if he knew why, but they were.

He'd stepped aside for the King of Gold where Lis was concerned, but that was the extent of his kindness. He'd be damned if he allowed the other man to chase him away from Frankie.

Frankie was his.

"I said stop," Frankie cut through his thoughts then, obviously picking up on the fact that Rook was working himself back into a state of anger. "Seriously what is wrong with you two? Can't you just get along for two minutes? All I did was go to the bathroom. Do you really think I'll feel safe if I have to worry about whether or not you're going to kill one another the second my back is turned? Just," he pressed those long fingers of his to his forehead, wincing some in discomfort, "finish eating so we can get out of here."

"Are you unwell?" Sage rose to his feet, hovering close to Frankie's side now. When he reached for him, Rook made a sound in the back of his throat warning him off that had the King of Gold glaring his way for the millionth time in the past half hour alone.

"Is this how Lis felt?" Frankie suddenly asked, though it was clear the question was more for himself than either of them. "Because this is stupid. You know what, forget this."

He turned on his heels and practically jogged across the cafeteria, easily dodging and weaving between other students as he went. His graceful movements would have been impressive even, if not for the fact they were taking him further away from Rook.

Rook went after him first, shooting into motion, leaving Sage to either follow or not. He didn't really care what the King of Gold did, his only thought of Frankie and ensuring he didn't allow him to move far enough to leave his sight. The last time that happened he'd been sucked through a gateway.

The sheer panic that Rook had felt when he'd realized Frankie was no longer in the store...He'd tried picking that apart as well, while he'd waited back at the apartment, pacing

so much it was a wonder he hadn't worn a path in the floorboards. His reaction made no sense, was too intense. It'd barely been a week that he'd known Frankie, and the beginning of their relationship hadn't gone cordially.

Rook had blamed him for every bad thing that had ever happened in his lifetime, and been about ready to tear Frankie apart and draw magic from his blood. He'd considered it, even. Had played with the idea of giving it a try, seeing if he could collect enough magic from the smaller man to send himself back to Visera. It'd only been because he'd had no clue how he'd ended up in this world, or how to get back, that had stopped him.

He hadn't cared about Frankie then. He'd only cared about himself.

Maybe things were different now, maybe they weren't. He wasn't exactly certain of anything really. But one thing he knew for sure was that he couldn't let Frankie leave him behind. If anything happened to him while he was on his own...

Frankie wasn't Lis. He hadn't had years of intensive training. Yes, he could hold his own in a minor fight, but against Neko? There was no way.

He reached him outside, Frankie having already made it halfway down the stone path that twisted from the cafeteria building toward the library parking lot where they'd left the car earlier. The sky had begun to darken, dusk starting to settle in around them. The street lights that lined the sidewalks had all been lit, their orange glow highlighting the infuriated look on Frankie's face when Rook grabbed at his elbow and spun him around.

Frankie snatched his arm back, hands tightening into fists at his sides. He hadn't realized just how upset the smaller man was, but seeing that bitter expression on his face had Rook pausing.

"Don't touch me," Frankie said, voice low as if to keep the approaching Sage from overhearing. Almost as though he didn't want the King of Gold to hear the two of them fighting.

“Let’s just get back to the apartment and deal with everything else there.”

The sidewalks had been packed with milling students while they’d been eating, and even a moment ago when they’d all but rushed from the cafeteria, but the second Frankie turned to continue on to the parking lot, Rook noticed that the foot traffic had thinned and it was practically only the three of them left out.

There were still others all the way on the opposite side of the quad they were walking the edge of, but it was far enough away he couldn’t make out any facial features. Since it’d gotten dark so quickly, everyone must have wanted to get indoors as fast as possible.

Frankie came to abrupt halt in front of him, forcing Rook to a standstill at his back.

“Did you see that?” he whispered, and despite his anger filled words earlier, he pressed into Rook, trying to get closer to him and further from whatever it was he’d spotted that had him so spooked.

Rook took in their surroundings but couldn’t find anything wrong.

“What is it?” Sage stepped up to their sides, already slipping into a partial defensive stance. He looked absolutely hilarious in his outfit but the seriousness of the situation made it so Rook couldn’t even chuckle at the sight.

Which was annoying, because making fun of the King of Gold was one of his favorite past times, and sadly, Sage didn’t supply many opportunities for him to do so.

Something shifted to their left, but before Rook could mention it, a shadowy figure shot from the darkness, appearing under the bright light of one of the street lamps.

The Gloom started off in a nonhuman form, a mere twist of charcoal smoke that wrapped itself around Sage’s entire arm. It tugged back, dragging him off his feet, taking him easily down to the grassy ground behind the lamp post.

Sage fought with the creature, rolling and trying to catch hold of it to no avail. Every time he did, his hands went through its body, grasping at nothing but air.

The idiot knew better.

Grinding his teeth, Rook moved, summoning his sword and yanking it apart so that he was holding two blades instead of one. His power thrummed through him as he sent it swirling down the shiny metal, heating it a vibrant red. As soon as he was upon them, he slashed down, cleaving through the smoky figure.

The Gloom let out a shriek that was more akin to the whistling of a tea kettle and burst apart, but before Sage could so much as lift himself from the ground, three more shadows swarmed them.

Rook cursed and dropped one of his swords to the ground for Sage, twirling and hacking through the air with the one still in his left hand. Since they were ready for him this time, the Gloom dodged and weaved out of the way, and he hissed in frustration as the creature all but toyed with him.

The second he realized it'd led him further onto the quad, away from the sidewalk, he felt a jolt of panic. Abandoning the creature, he spun back around, already bolting back toward where he'd left Frankie.

Sage was busy fighting off the other two Gloom, clearly just as distracted by the task as Rook had been.

Meaning he didn't see the rather large shadowy form rising up behind Frankie.

Rook shouted out a warning, even knowing there wasn't enough time.

Sensing something above him, Frankie tipped his head back, eyes going wide a moment before the Gloom descended on him.

Rook watched in horror as the shadow swallowed Frankie whole.

Chapter 19:

Another loud crash had Frankie huddling closer to the corner of his bedroom. His hands were clasped tightly over his ears, face buried between his upturned knees. He was whispering to himself, meaningless mumbles about kingdoms and princes and people who knew how to fight monsters. People who weren't afraid to face them, even when those beasts were blood related.

It was a habit he'd developed a couple of years ago, a coping mechanism to help drown out the sounds of things breaking and the screaming. The never-ending screaming. It didn't really work, but it was better than nothing.

Frankie wasn't allowed a lock on his door, so the best he could do was prop a chair beneath the doorknob and pray that his parents kept each other occupied and forgot all about him. He was already certain neither had noticed him returning from school less than a half hour ago. Even though he'd heard the yelling from outside, he'd gone in. The neighbors had been out and staring and he knew better than to draw their attention.

The one other time he'd done that his mother had been furious and had trashed his room. She'd even torn the books he'd needed for class and he'd been scolded by his third grade teacher the next day for coming without them.

So he'd gone inside, taken off his shoes at the door in an attempt to make less noise as he snuck to his room.

And had promptly stepped on broken china.

He'd made it to his room anyway, sneaking past the two of them fighting in the living room, and had gotten the chair under the doorknob before retreating to his corner. There'd only been two pieces of the broken dinner plate still stuck in the pad of his foot and he'd picked them out while biting on his bottom lip.

Blood was smeared all over the floorboards now, and he knew he'd have to clean it before his mother got the chance to see, but it would have to wait until it was safe to go out. He

wouldn't be making any trips to the bathroom for a washcloth until the fighting was done.

Every now and again he picked up on some of the words being thrown back and forth, most of them insults and curses. His mother spoke in a slurred scream while his father's deep voice attempted to boom over hers. The yelling didn't bother Frankie as much as the rest of it did.

Something large hit the wall directly outside his room and he jerked, tightening his arms even more when whatever it was broke apart and crashed to the ground. Probably a piece of furniture this time, something small enough for his mother to lift, but big enough for him to have heard it.

One of the dining room chairs, perhaps?

They only had two left...

Something made of glass shattered, followed by his dad swearing and Frankie's sniffling turned to sobs as the sounds continued.

Was she throwing all of their cups in the kitchen?

He shouldn't be trying to guess, should be focused on his story instead, escaping from this nightmare. But every time he started whispering to himself another thing would break and cause his heart to leap.

All at once the noises stopped.

Frankie held his breath, straining for any sound at all, but there was nothing. Typically he'd be able to still make out his parents arguing, even if the worst of it had passed and his dad had somehow gotten his intoxicated mother to calm down. But...there were no hushed sounds of their voices or the soft padding of their footsteps down the hall.

He was just starting to ease out of his protective pose when the doorknob jiggled. He froze, his back still pressed to the corner. Frankie lifted his head as he watched in terror as it continued to twist.

The small chair resisted when whoever was on the other side tried to shove the door open, but it didn't last long.

A dark figure entered slowly, easing the door the rest of the way so the chair legs scraped against the ground before the whole thing finally toppled and clattered to the floor.

Frankie shook and whimpered, forcing himself to remain still, as a woman entered. His right shoulder was up against the same wall the door was set in, facing where it opened. Outside, the sun had started its descent but the light from the hallway was suitable enough for him to make out the woman's features when she turned toward him.

He'd thought it was his mother but...At twelve years old, Frankie wasn't used to seeing strangers in his home. They were never invited due to the fact his parents didn't have any friends, or his dad was simply too afraid of others finding out how bad his wife's addiction had gotten.

He sent a quick glance past her, but there still weren't any other sounds. Where were his mother and dad?

The strange woman kept herself turned so that only half of her was in the light, giving him a glimpse of silky black hair and almost translucent skin. She looked...wrong somehow, not entirely human but he couldn't quite put his finger on why.

She clucked her tongue, the sharp sound cutting through the silence and then took a single step toward him. "So this is it?" Her voice was guttural, not at all what he'd anticipated. She didn't sound very feminine despite her form. "This is your big, dark secret?"

Frowning, Frankie forced himself to stand, using the wall at his back for support since his little legs were shaking so much. Only...he was taller than he should have been. With a start, he held out his hands, confusion growing when he saw how large they were. He was still dressed in the same clothes he'd worn to middle school that day, and they fit him just fine, but...

"It's no fun scaring children," the woman said, still in that same masculine voice. "That's too easy. I prefer you be as you are, the adult you."

“Adult...” He shook his head. “Who are you?”

“Is it this?” she asked, ignoring his question. Moving over to his desk, she reached for one of the books that were neatly lined against the top shelf. When she tilted her head toward him, it was impossible to make out her expression with the hallway light to her back, but he got the sense she was smirking at him.

She sent the book sailing across the room a second later. It slapped into the wall and Frankie flinched even though it'd been nowhere near him. Taking that as her answer, she laughed, then in a whirlwind of destruction, she began to toss anything and everything she could get her hands on.

Books went flying, along with his desk lamp and his computer monitor. Both crashed to the ground, breaking and sending bits of plastic and shards of glass scattering. A baseball went through his window, then she rushed over and yanked the curtains down hard enough to tear it from the plastic rings, sending those clattering against the metal pole.

Frankie didn't know when he moved, but he was back to huddling in the corner, shielding his head. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he gasped, the tightness in his chest making it hard to breathe.

“I knew you were broken,” the woman cackled, the sound almost cartoonish in nature. If he hadn't been in the throes of an actual panic attack, he may have even found it funny. “I was biding my time, waiting for you to come around. But this.” Another throaty laugh. “Poor little writer afraid of some noise. I bet you were never loved, were you?”

His vision was starting to blur and it wasn't because of the tears. He struggled to force air into his lungs but couldn't. Real fear gripped him tight, held him captive, and the woman's words were only somewhat making their way past the whooshing sound in his ears as his heart picked up pace.

“What do you think? Should I love you?” she asked darkly, voice changing at the end, deepening even more.

Someone grabbed him then, but it wasn't the woman, she was gone. This new person latched onto his shoulders, forcing him onto his feet away from the wall. They shook him, but if they spoke he couldn't tell. Frustrated with his lack of interaction, the person dragged him across the room to the broken window.

Frankie only registered what was about to happen a second too late.

The person situated him in front of the bay window, and then they shoved.

He tumbled backward, arms pin wheeling as he toppled from the second story. He felt broken glass still stuck to the windowpane slice through his calves and then there was nothing but wind rushing past him and the horrifying sensation of falling.

* * *

Frankie came to heaving, gasping for air, clawing at whoever held him. His nails dug into leather at first, then into flesh, but he hardly noticed as he tore skin. It took a while for his brain to register where he was, for him to realize he hadn't hit the ground outside his childhood home and wasn't dead or in any kind of pain.

The panic still held him in its clutches, but the burning from the broken glass was gone and his clothing had returned to normal.

Normal, as in the gray jeans and plain button up over a t-shirt he'd put on the other day before heading to the mall with Rook. Not the khaki shorts and red shirt he'd worn to middle school. Because that had been years ago and Frankie was no longer that scared little kid hiding in his room from his fighting parents.

Someone shushed him, and it hit him that he was sitting on the cold ground, just off the sidewalk on campus. Strong arms were banded around him, one around his waist, holding him up in a seated position, the other clasped tightly between Frankie's hands.

He dropped his gaze, saw that he'd dug his nails into that person's wrist, beneath the cuff of their jacket, and had drawn blood. Blinking, he tipped his head back and met the person's gaze.

Rook.

A sigh he hadn't even been aware he'd been holding slipped past his lips as all the tension raced out of him the second he processed Rook was with him. The tears flowed anew, and he couldn't even find it in himself to be embarrassed, only crying harder when Rook pulled him in and wrapped him tightly in his embrace.

Frankie's forehead pressed against the hollow of his throat, his tears instantly drenching the thin material of Rook's shirt, but the demon prince didn't pull away in disgust or annoyance, instead he clutched him harder, all the while shushing him lightly, gently.

He didn't give him false platitudes. Didn't tell him to stop or say that it was all right. Nothing about this was all right. Nothing about what Frankie had just experienced was either.

Rook merely held him and made comforting, low sounds. The steady beating of his heart beneath Frankie's cheek and the lulling noises easing him out of the panicked state he'd been trapped in.

He had no idea how long they stayed like that, but Rook didn't complain once, didn't relax his hold, even after Frankie's sobs had turned to sniffles.

Vaguely, he realized someone else was talking nearby, but Rook got them to stop almost immediately and the soothing silence returned. Cocooned in the comfort of the demon prince's arms, with only his hushed whispers and the gentle background noise of cars driving on the streets, Frankie felt himself relax.

However long they'd stayed like that, it must have been a while, because the wind blew suddenly and Frankie shivered.

“Aardwolf,” Rook coaxed finally loosening his grip just enough that he could plant two fingers beneath his chin and tip Frankie’s head back. He searched his face, must have seen Frankie’s bright red nose, swollen eyes, and all the tear tracks because his brow furrowed. But he didn’t speak on it. Instead, he brushed some of those tears away and then gently suggested, “Should we get out of the cold?”

Frankie nodded, and was bracing himself to attempt to get to his feet when suddenly Rook stood, lifting him into his arms all in one motion. He gasped, flinging his arms around Rook’s neck instinctively.

Rook swiveled on his heels and headed toward the parking lot wordlessly, not even glancing down at Frankie who was staring up at him in a mixture of shock and perplexity.

Movement over the prince’s shoulder was what snapped him out of it, and Frankie’s eyes widened when he spotted Sage trailing closely behind.

“Are you all right?” the King of Gold asked once he had Frankie’s attention. Like Rook, he kept his voice low, as if afraid to spook Frankie.

He managed a single nod of his head, but didn’t trust his ability to speak just yet.

They made the rest of the trip to the car in silence, but once there, Rook paused, clearly upset about something.

He hesitated between the driver’s seat and the back door, expression switching between doubt and annoyance. Finally, after a lengthy internal debate, he sighed and turned to Sage. “You’ll have to sit with him in the back. He’s still in shock.”

“Of course.” Sage reached for Frankie only to have Rook pull him away. “Now isn’t the time for this,” he stated. “He’s shivering.”

Frankie was. He felt himself already fading in and out again though, only partially aware that the two of them had gone back to disagreeing. Already.

Clenching his jaw, Rook gave in, but he didn't hand Frankie over. He took a step away from the back door and indicated with his chin that Sage should open it.

“What is this?” Sage asked as he did, pulling the metal door open, taking in the interior with wonder. “A carriage?”

“Of a sorts.” Rook waited until Sage had slipped inside and moved to the opposite seat before he bent and carefully placed Frankie down on the one nearest. He took his time settling him in, making sure he was comfortable before he tugged on the seatbelt and snapped that in place across Frankie as well. When there was nothing else for him to do, he pulled back, hesitating a second time, bent halfway in the car. It looked as though he wanted to say something, but in the end, he opted not to.

Frankie felt a little better, but not by much. He wanted to get home even more now than he had prior to the attack, so he didn't, resist when Sage replaced Rook's warm body with his own, leaning slightly into him when the King of Gold draped an arm around his shoulders.

Rook shut the door and then slid into the driver's seat, pulling out the keys he must have taken off of Frankie at some point and inserting it. The engine came alive and in no time he had the car reversing and them heading for the parking lot exit.

“You can drive this thing?” Sage's question was obviously rhetorical considering Rook was clearly doing so. “How long have you been in this world?”

“Less than a month,” Rook replied.

Frankie tried to stay awake to ensure the two of them didn't completely destroy one another, but the intense douse of sudden fear had really messed with him, and he found himself slipping into mild unconsciousness, eased by the hum of the engine, the warmth of Sage next to him, and the knowledge that Rook was there.

Chapter 20:

“Yet you’ve already learned how to do all of this?”

In any other instance, Rook might be a little smug about the obvious envy in the King of Gold’s tone, but right now worry for Frankie consumed him. He just wanted to get them home, into the relative safety of the apartment, where he could look after him properly.

“Neko broke into Frankie’s place before,” he said then, figuring it was best to put his animosity toward Sage aside, at least when it would benefit Frankie. “You can create wards, put one on his house once we’re there.”

“Of course,” Sage replied quickly, and when Rook risked a glance off the road and into the center mirror, it was to find the king had wrapped his arm around Frankie’s shoulders and tucked him close against his side.

He let out a low sound before he could help it, not bothering to wipe the glare from his expression when Sage’s eyes met his in the reflection.

Sage cocked his head. “I thought you were after Lis, Prince. Change of scenery change your mind?”

“It’s clear how you and Lis feel about one another,” Rook said, only to have Sage snort.

“So you’re what? Stepping respectfully aside?” He shook his head. “I don’t think so. I don’t think you have that sort of thing in you.”

“Think what you wish.” Rook turned them onto Frankie’s street and scanned the area ahead for any lurking shadows. He wouldn’t feel comfortable until they got inside. There was no telling if Neko would choose to attack again tonight.

Frankie wasn’t fully unconscious again, but his eyes were closed and he didn’t seem to mind resting against the King of Gold.

A sharp twist of jealousy pierced through Rook's gut and his hands tightened on the steering wheel as he brought them into the apartment complex parking lot.

"What the Gloom showed him," Sage said, "you know what it is, don't you?"

He obviously already knew the answer to that, so Rook didn't bother responding, focusing instead on parking the car. Before stepping out, he took another lengthy look at their surroundings, though if there were more of the shadow creatures nearby, they were hiding themselves well.

That was the major issue with waging war against the Iron. Their ability to manipulate shadow and call forth creatures like the Gloom made them formidable, even against Rook's people. The Bronze relied on blood and blood magic, but more often than not, powerful spells took time. More time than it did to say, summon a shadow off a wall and turn it into a living monster.

"Just how close are you two?" Sage asked, and this time Rook gave him his attention, swiveling in the leather seat to stare at him.

The bastard still had his arm around Frankie, but Rook tried to calm himself by thinking about how that was probably a comfort to the aardwolf right now, and that was what he needed most.

Because, yes, Rook had a pretty good idea what the Gloom had showed Frankie. Their greatest attack was trapping people in a virtual nightmare. Typically, they showed someone their greatest fear, or their most painful memory. Considering how affected by the past Frankie still was, it wasn't hard to surmise that he'd most likely been shown snippets from his childhood.

Rook's gaze lingered on Frankie's left ear and he wondered if he'd been forced to relive the memory of that Christmas with the model airplane.

"It's none of your concern," Rook ended up telling Sage, before he shoved open the driver's door and yanked

open the back one. He was reaching for Frankie when suddenly Sage grabbed onto his wrist, stopping him. A flash of anger swept through him strong enough he almost lost control and switched back to his demonic form right there in the middle of the parking lot. “Let. Go.”

“He isn’t a toy for you to play with,” Sage said. “He’s kind, and he deserves—”

“You’ve known him for a split second,” Rook stated darkly. “You don’t get to speak for him, or about him, for that matter. Now, let go, before I make you. Frankie won’t be pleased with me, and I’ll have ruined any chance of him ending the story properly, but if you continue to push me, I’ll do it anyway.”

Sage’s brow furrowed at Rook’s confusing words, and he took advantage of that hesitation, lifting Frankie into his arms. Rook turned and carried him to the front door, the key already in his hand so that he could easily let them inside. He didn’t bother waiting for the King of Gold, bringing Frankie straight to his bedroom first.

He rested him on the top of the covers and crouched down at the side of the bed, running his fingers lightly through Frankie’s hair, brushing it off of his forehead. When that caused the smaller man to blink and peel his eyes open, Rook paused.

“Wait here,” he told him, keeping his voice low and gentle, like back on campus.

Frankie nibbled on his lower lip but then gave a single nod of his head before his eyes slipped shut once more.

Sighing, Rook rose and left the room, though he kept the door open so he could better hear in case anything happened. He met Sage in the hallway.

“Start making the ward,” he demanded. Powers varied, even amongst citizens of each kingdom, but the Gold royal family all had the ability to create protective barriers around spaces, ones that could keep creatures like the Gloom out. It wouldn’t work on a regular person, so Neko would still be

able to enter the apartment at will, but he wouldn't be allowed to bring any of his monsters in with him, or create them once inside, so that was something.

The Gold Kingdom relied on the sun for their magic to work. They recharged during the daylight hours, storing energy directly from the sun's rays. It was the opposite for people of Silver, like Lis, who relied on the moon the same way.

For Rook, it was blood, a power source available anywhere and everywhere. That's what made the Bronze such a strong force to reckon with. But even with blood magic, there was nothing Rook could do to keep the Gloom out. He needed Sage's help for that, as much as that irked him. But for Frankie's safety, he'd put his pride aside and confess to that fact.

"I've been keeping guard at night out here," he motioned to the living room and the couch where he'd been sleeping—uncomfortably—since his arrival in this realm. "They've entered twice that I'm aware of. The first time Neko attacked outright, the second he stole from Frankie. We need to prevent that from happening again."

Sage tilted his head. "Why are you so concerned for him? What is it about this one person that has you so protective? Aside from with Lis, I've never seen you like this before."

"You and I aren't friends," Rook snapped. "There's no reason to share. Are you going to do it, or not?"

"Of course I'll do it. I already promised as much."

Rook wanted to go back to Frankie, but he held his ground. "Begin then."

Sage sneered. "I don't need a chaperone."

"Can you guys not start this again?" Frankie stepped out from his bedroom, resting a shoulder against the frame as he turned to face them. He was pale and seemed exhausted, like it was a struggle to keep his eyes open.

It most likely was. The Gloom would have sucked him into the recesses of his subconscious. Pulling him out of it like Rook had would have left him groggy and disoriented, the same way someone suddenly woken from a deep sleep would.

“Go back to bed,” he urged.

“Only if you two promise to behave,” Frankie told him. “I don’t think I can handle more fighting tonight.”

Rook stilled, and a quick search of Frankie’s sunken shoulders and downcast expression clued him in to the fact he’d been correct in his earlier assumption.

Frankie had revisited his childhood where his parents were constantly fighting and his mother always broke things in drunken fits of rage. He meant he couldn’t handle listening to anyone verbally argue, for fear it would trigger him all over again.

Knowing that, Rook forced his stance into a more relaxed one, slipping his thumbs into the front loops of his jeans. He flashed Frankie a partial smirk when the guy finally lifted his gaze on him once more. “All right, I promise not to make things difficult, but you have to go back to bed. Deal?”

Frankie didn’t so much as hesitate, humming his agreement before turning on his heels and disappearing back into his room.

Satisfied that he’d be getting the rest he needed, Rook shifted, intent on telling Sage to start the creation of the ward when the King of Gold’s expression gave him pause.

Sage’s eyes were slightly widened, and any of the tension he’d been carrying only a moment prior had left. He stared at Rook in mild shock for a lengthy moment, before blurting, “Did you just agree to get along with me for someone else’s sake?”

Rook pushed past him, heading back toward the front door. That’s where they should probably start, with the entrances and exits and then work on the rest of the place.

“Even Lis couldn’t get you to do that,” Sage said at his back, clearly unwilling to drop the subject even though it was

obvious that Rook didn't want to get into it.

“Would you stop bringing her up?” He shook his head, only just keeping himself from snapping the words at the last second. “She has nothing to do with this.”

Not anymore, at least.

Guilt wasn't an emotion he was very familiar with, but he was self-aware enough to know that's what he felt whenever he thought about Lis and how he'd wanted to force her into liking him back through Frankie's writing.

He'd just finished reading the final volume when he'd spotted Frankie wearing his mask, smiling at a girl across the table he was signing autographs at. Seeing him so happy after reading something that had made Rook so upset...It'd set him off. It'd been easier too, to blame Frankie for everything that had gone wrong in his life. To blame him for the fact that Lis didn't love him.

Her thoughts had been printed plainly across the pages, her inner mind laid bare to him. Really, he should feel ashamed that he'd read them at all. It had to be considered worse than reading someone's diary. He didn't however. It wasn't his fault Frankie somehow had the ability to pull things from their heads.

Wasn't Frankie's fault either.

None of this was.

“I know where we are,” Sage confessed suddenly. “This is the real world, and ours is a fake, isn't it?”

Sage had followed Frankie through the gateway that led to the library. They should have assumed he'd poke his nose around a bit before stumbling into Ri. Though it was a college library, there were sections for leisure reading, and Rook had spotted copies of Gold and Silver by Cuthwulf, both Volume One and Two, on the shelves. Sage must have seen them as well.

“I assumed you had no idea,” he said.

“I wasn’t initially going to bring it up with you,” Sage told him. “We’re hardly on friendly terms, as you’ve mentioned. And Frankie...Well, I wasn’t sure how much he truly knew or was involved. Until now, that is.”

Rook cocked his head in silent question.

“He’s the writer, isn’t he?” Sage didn’t give him time to answer. “That’s the only explanation I can think of that fits.”

“Fits what?”

“Why you’re here.” He motioned with his chin toward Frankie’s room. “Why you’re sticking so close to him and pretending to be nice.”

It was tempting to argue, to plead his case, but Rook caught himself. Why should he? He owed the King of Gold nothing, and what’s more, Sage’s opinion didn’t matter.

“Think what you want.” He pointed to the front door. “Begin, King. We’ve wasted enough time on your notions.”

“What’s the goal?” Sage asked, ignoring him. “Befriend him, trick him into thinking you care, and then convince him to rewrite the story for you?”

He chuckled darkly. “That’s not exactly my M.O.”

“No,” Sage agreed thoughtfully, “it isn’t.” He pursed his lips. “Did you threaten him already?”

Yes.

“Whatever is between Frankie and me is none of your business. Now the ward—” Rook stopped abruptly when Sage took a calculating step forward.

“I’m making it my business.”

He’d promised Frankie he’d behave, and he’d given it his all, he really had, but the King of Gold was pushing it too far. “As you’ve already pointed out, this is not Visera, and we are not in your kingdom.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to turn a blind eye when someone is in need,” Sage stood his ground.

“What Frankie *needs* from you is to put up the damn ward,” Rook practically growled, “nothing more.”

“I won’t let you use him,” Sage insisted.

“You’ve known him for two days.”

“It was long enough.”

“For what, exactly?” Rook felt his insides twisting and barely controlled the urge to lash out at the other man. “You came all the way here and discovered that our world is from a book. Yet you seem rather calm. How much did you manage to read?”

Sage didn’t have the same abilities or skills that Rook did. He couldn’t speed read and he didn’t have a photographic memory. There was only so much he would have had, especially considering he’d gotten into a paint accident, had his hair cut, and changed outfits all in roughly an hour before Rook and Frankie had come looking for him. That was hardly enough time for him to have read all of volume one, let alone both books.

“I skimmed through it,” Sage said after a brief pause. “Once I realized what it was, I figured there was no need to read it thoroughly. It’s my story, isn’t it? I know it well enough already.”

Rook’s fists tightened at his sides. “You aren’t the only character in there.”

“But I am the main character,” Sage stated, and while his tone lacked any hint of smugness, it was obvious by the intense look in his eyes he felt that way. “Lis and I are. You’re the second lead at best. We’re you even in the first book? I didn’t see you when I was flipping the pages.”

He was, but not until about midway through, and even then it’d been by name only. He hadn’t made an official appearance until closer toward the end, just as it was concluding. But he was a fan favorite, and he took up a lot of space in book two.

Of course, that hadn’t stopped Frankie from trying to kill him off in book three, but Sage didn’t need to know that.

And besides...Rook had read Frankie's notes on the matter.

He hadn't wanted him to die on the cliffs, had hated the idea of it, in fact. Even though at the time he'd believed Rook to be a figment of his imagination, entirely made up, he'd mourned over him.

Hell, the poor guy had needed to get drunk in order to even put the words to page.

Then Rook had gone and messed it up by living through it, and more, entering Frankie's world on top of it.

He'd thought he'd been brought there as a chance for revenge, a way for him to finally set his life right and get everything he'd believed he'd deserved, even if he had to do so through force. The second he'd felt panic over the missing writer, when he'd run through the mall searching high and low for him, that's when he'd realized his mistake.

He hadn't slipped through that gateway to force Frankie's hand. To make him write a better ending where Rook got the crown and the girl.

He'd slipped through *for* Frankie.

"Stick to your story," Rook found himself saying, the words slipping past his lips evenly. "Keep your kingdom and your heroic deeds and your princess."

Sage frowned.

"You're right," Rook said. "You're the main character there. But not here. There's nothing for you here."

"Frankie—"

"Is mine." The claim felt so right coming off his lips, he wondered how he'd managed to hide his true feelings all this time. Even from himself. "Frankie is mine," he repeated, admittedly liking the sound of it. "Now, set the damn wards."

Chapter 21:

Frankie was tucked into bed already when he heard the soft click of the door opening and shutting again. He rolled onto his other side so he could see, peering through the darkness at the murky form of Rook as he slowly approached the bed.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice cutting through the quiet despite his attempt at a whisper. He was exhausted, both mentally and physically, so his tone lacked any bite.

Rook paused, and though it was too dark to make out his expression, Frankie got the sense he was surprised to find him awake. “I’m staying here tonight,” he announced, and then before Frankie could protest, he pulled back the covers and slipped beneath them.

“What?” Frankie licked his dry lips and tried to resist the urge to shift away from the large man. The full sized mattress was big enough to fit them both, but with only a foot or so of space between, and that was because Rook had situated himself close to the edge.

He was on his side, facing Frankie, and for a moment he didn’t speak, until, “I’m not staying out there with Sage. There’s no way I’ll be able to sleep in the same room as him.”

He’d been taking the couch all these nights with no complaint, and Frankie had honestly gotten used to him being there. But considering there was only one couch and the living room itself wasn’t that large...

“You can take Adelaide’s room,” he said. He hadn’t offered it up before because it technically wasn’t his space, but Rook was Adelaide’s favorite character. There was no way she’d be upset if she found out he’d been sleeping in her bed.

Frankie made a mental note to give her a call in the morning. It’d been a while since they’d last spoken, what with the time zone difference and everything going on.

Rook shook his head and the pillow crinkled beneath him. "I'll stay here."

"You can't—" Frankie sat up. "Sleep on the floor then."

He snorted as though he found that suggestion funny.

"I'm serious. I'm not sharing a bed with you."

"Why not?"

Because...He just wasn't. Frankie had a lot on his mind right now, and the last thing he needed to add to his problems was the demon prince and his questionable actions.

"Fine," Frankie ended up saying, taking his pillow in one fist as he moved to crawl off the bed, "then I'll sleep on the floor."

He'd only managed to shuffle a few feet toward the end before strong arms were suddenly cinched around his waist, yanking him back against a solid chest. The air whooshed out of him and he froze, the shock forcing him to go as still as a statue.

Rook resituated himself at Frankie's back, his legs curled up at either side of him as he settled him more firmly against his body.

"What are you doing?" Frankie's words came out so low it was a wonder the demon prince could even hear him.

"Relax, Aardwolf," he said, dropping his mouth close to the curve of Frankie's right ear. "This isn't the first time we've sat like this."

"Pretty sure I would remember something like that." And he didn't.

"You were fairly out of it at the time," Rook confessed. "Not to mention half frozen to death. I needed to warm you quickly. A bath was the fastest way."

"You—" He sputtered, mortification causing his cheeks to stain pink. He reached down and tried to pry Rook's arms off of him, but the demon prince refused to loosen his

hold. “How could you do something like that? I was unconscious!”

“I told you before, I only looked a little,” Rook teased, and when he splayed out his fingers and flattened his palm against Frankie’s lower abdomen, Frankie went still all over again. “I didn’t touch anything inappropriate. Even if I wanted to. Badly.”

“You—”

“If you’re going to keep doing that, you may as well say my name, Aardwolf.”

Frankie bristled. “Rook, this isn’t funny.”

“Who says I’m joking?”

“Of course you’re joking.” Although...He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop earlier, but he’d been thirsty and planned on grabbing some water from the kitchen when he’d overheard the two of them speaking in the hall.

Rook had called him his, and even though a thrill had shot through Frankie at the claim, he’d quickly doused that flame in his gut.

Rook simply didn’t want his plans getting ruined. He didn’t want Sage getting involved and possibly helping Frankie avoid changing the ending of the story.

“I’m not going to kill you off,” Frankie said. “We already agreed. I didn’t want to do it in the first place anyway. There’s nothing Sage could say to change my mind, so there’s no need for this.”

He was quiet a moment before asking, “This?”

“You don’t need to remind me about our deal. I remember. The threats aren’t necessary.”

Rook lifted one of his hands, placing it lightly around Frankie’s neck. Pressing on the bottom of his chin, he forced him to tip his head back until their eyes met in the partial darkness. “Do you think this is a threat, Aardwolf?”

He swallowed again, felt the pressure from Rook's palm against his throat with the movement. The touch was light though, more caress than anything. Still... "Isn't it?"

"If I was interested in threats like this, I would have taken advantage when I had you naked in the tub," Rook told him. He cocked his head then, a thin stream of moonlight slipping through the blinds over the window to splay across his face. "You're right to be wary though. I'm not above doing anything and everything I can to get what I want. That includes getting you used to my touch."

Frankie's mouth dropped open, mind momentarily blanking.

"Now," the corner of his mouth turned up, "will you lay back down, Aardwolf? Or should we stay like this a little longer? I can tell you which option I'd prefer."

Rook was hitting on him.

Frankie is mine.

The words repeated in Frankie's mind, despite his attempts to quiet them. Rook couldn't have meant...No. Frankie couldn't go there right now. He needed to take control of this situation. Losing it in front of the demon prince wouldn't be beneficial, and he needed some time to go over this new information.

He needed some time to figure out if it was real or if this was just another means for Rook to mess with him.

Although Frankie couldn't figure out why he would bother. There was no way Rook could have found out about Frankie's crush—especially since that crush had been from before the two of them had actually met in person. He'd been a good book boyfriend, dark and mysterious, a little dangerous. But book boyfriends weren't real. They were fantasy.

When it came to the *very real* Rook Dalibor...Frankie had no idea how he felt.

"Whatever," he ended up saying, partially to Rook and partially to himself. "Let's share the bed."

Rook complied and Frankie tried not to notice the rush of cold air that wafted around him the second that strong body was no longer pressed against his. They settled back down, still facing each other, and despite the fact they were meant to be going to sleep, neither of them closed their eyes right away.

With distance, even the small amount currently between them, Frankie was able to find his center again. He blew out a breath and tried to loosen up so he wasn't so stiff and there was an actual chance of him being able to fall asleep. The weirdness that just took place with Rook could be dissected tomorrow, in the light of day, for now, he didn't want to allow himself to get swept up into something that could possibly be a trick.

Perhaps this was merely Rook's way of getting Frankie to relax... This was the first time he'd entered his bedroom at night, after all. There had to be a better reason than him simply not wanting to share the same air space as the King of Gold no matter how much Rook disliked the man.

"Are you worried about the Gloom?" Recalling those events helped snuff out the rest of his curiosity toward Rook's flirtatious mood. Frankie shivered just thinking about it. He'd written about shadow consumption before, so was aware that's what had happened to him back on campus. It was so much worse experiencing it in person than it'd been living it through a character on the screen though.

Shadow consumption was something only very powerful Gloom were capable of completing, and included engulfing their victim and getting into their head. The Gloom that had attacked him was able to read Frankie's most painful and terrifying memories and seemingly bring them to life around him, trapping him in the past. For a while there, Frankie had forgotten all about being an adult and had fully been back as a kid, reliving it.

The strange woman he'd seen at the end, the one who'd tossed him out the window and had a male voice, that hadn't been his mother. He wasn't sure who it'd been, but he could certainly guess.

As the only Iron trapped in this world, Neko had to have been the one controlling the Gloom, meaning he'd been the one moving around Frankie's head.

Asshole.

"Sage took care of that problem. He's warded the place. They won't be able to enter again," Rook told him.

Since the Gloom were made of shadow, creating an invisible barrier of light could keep them out. Humans wouldn't be able to see it even once activated, but some Gloom would be able to sense it was there. If one didn't and touched it, they would activate the magic and be burned by the spell.

"I'll have to remember to thank him later," Frankie said, quirking a brow when that statement had Rook stiffening at his side. A thought struck him and he let out a little chuckle, already sure he was wrong. "If you're not here because you're worried about the Gloom getting in, don't tell me... This isn't about Sage, is it?"

"I don't trust him."

"He warded the place—"

"Not against the Gloom," Rook cut him off. "Of course he'll fight them with us. I mean, I don't trust him alone with you."

Was he saying he was in here because he was worried that Sage would sneak in otherwise? To what end?

"Sage wouldn't hurt me."

Rook let out a frustrated sound. "Are you pretending to be dense on purpose, Aardwolf, or are you really this obtuse?"

"I already told you he can't convince me to kill you off. There's nothing for you to worry about."

"You haven't noticed the way he looks at you?" Rook asked, and at Frankie's frown, elaborated. "You read the last chapter, same as me. You know he wasn't thinking about Lis when he kissed you."

Right. That.

“He wasn’t in his right mind,” Frankie lifted a single shoulder, “it didn’t mean anything.”

“Do you actually believe that?”

He pretended to consider it and then said, “Since I believe you when you say nothing happened in the bathtub, yeah. I believe Sage was just confused and I happened to be there. That’s all it was.”

“He followed you through the gateway,” he reminded tightly.

“He wanted an escape from his reality.” That had been pretty clear at the end of the chapter. Sage had wanted to get away for a bit and this was his chance to do so. He’d taken it. “That didn’t have anything to do with me either.”

“Your flippant reaction to this is making me want to restrain you again,” Rook stated, catching Frankie off guard with the blunt honesty. “Your precious male lead is currently asleep in your living room and the two of you have already swapped saliva.”

“Yeah, well,” Frankie drawled, tone rich with sarcasm, “apparently you’ve seen my dick so, pretty sure you win here.” He’d meant it as a jab, but when that had Rook seemingly pleased, he rolled his eyes. “Oh come on. I wasn’t being serious.”

“I am,” Rook said pointedly. “I’m being very serious.” He paused and then, “I’m making a change to our agreement.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Are you resisting?”

Frankie didn’t even know what this change was, it would be foolish for him to. He inhaled slowly, trying to find calm. “I guess I won’t know until you tell me.”

“You can’t be with the King of Gold.”

For a moment, Frankie was certain he’d misheard, but when Rook didn’t add anything else he couldn’t help but ask,

“That’s it? Seriously?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Rook didn’t sound pleased by his reaction and Frankie rushed to do damage control.

Not that he understood why he bothered.

“I get that you told me you were giving up on her, but don’t you think you’re taking this whole ‘forget Lis’ thing too far to be believable?” He poked at the center of Rook’s chest. “Sage and Lis are in love with each other. They’re going to end up together, defeat the evil queen, and ride off into the virtual sunset. Even if I wanted to, I don’t factor into that equation.”

Rook grabbed him when he went to pull away, wrapping his hand around Frankie’s finger, keeping him in place. “Do you want to?”

Was it just him, or had the air around them thickened again? It seemed like every other moment between them tonight was electrically charged and Frankie was having difficulty figuring out if it was all in his head or not.

“Aardwolf.”

“Huh?” He’d spaced out. Frankie cleared his throat and thought back to the last thing Rook had said. Did he want to what?

Rook stroked his thumb across Frankie’s knuckles, the touch sending tingles down his arm straight to his core. “The King of Gold. Do you want him?”

Sage was the main character of his book, sure, but that didn’t automatically make him Frankie’s ideal man. He should be, all things considered. Why wouldn’t Frankie want someone who put others first, who didn’t have daddy issues to rival his problems with his own parents? Who wore a literal crown? Sage was a good listener, never pressuring Lis into telling him things she wasn’t ready share. And he was caring without wanting credit for it.

Frankie had gushed over a scene here or there in the previous books, more so in this final one since the romantic

encounters between him and Lis had stepped up several notches. But that was more appreciation than anything. He'd never wished for Sage, or even a man like him.

Sage was a problem solver, even if those problems weren't his own, and he stood by a strict personal moral code. For someone like Frankie, someone who understood that the real world wasn't like a storybook, that things like good and evil weren't always as clear cut as everyone would like them to be, someone like Sage would be too much to handle.

Surface level, he was his type for sure. But once you started digging deeper...

"No," he said confidently. "I don't want him." He sighed. "I want him to end up with Lis like he's supposed to, and I want to end Gold and Silver on a high note. Which means figuring out what Neko wants and getting him back to your world before he hurts someone."

"Before he hurts you." Rook still hadn't let go of his hand, but his tone had softened. "You seem to be the only one he's after at the moment."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I've checked the news and there haven't been any reports of strange sightings or weird attacks by shadow monsters."

"You've been checking the news?" Frankie hadn't even thought of that and yet here Rook was, a guy from a different realm putting in the effort to make sure Neko wasn't causing trouble. That should have been Frankie's job. Instead he'd been whisked to Visera and had spent the day racing back and forth between home and campus.

Wasting time, basically. Now that he was thinking about it, that's kind of all he'd been doing since the start of this.

Sage was right in that regard. They hadn't done anything about Neko.

"What did the Gloom show you?" Rook asked then, the sudden change of topic causing another chill to sweep over

Frankie before he could get a hold of himself. “It was your childhood, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” There was no reason not to tell him and maybe talking about it would do him some good. “Just another day at the Harlow household. My mother was wasted and arguing with my dad.”

“Did she break anything?”

“Lots of things.”

“You were afraid.”

It wasn’t a question this time, but Frankie answered anyway, humming his agreement. “But it wasn’t just my mother, or even, really her I mean. Someone was there. They were talking to me and they weren’t friendly about it. I only woke because they threw me out a window.”

“I was using my magic to try and break the spell, but I felt when you were ejected from the Gloom. Which meant they got what they wanted from you,” Rook figured.

“Which was?”

“Tomorrow. We’ll worry about it then. If we keep this up, you’ll never be able to sleep.”

Frankie snorted. “You’re the one who brought it up.”

“I was curious,” he admitted. “You were in a pretty bad state.”

“Curious?”

“Concerned,” Rook corrected.

“When I was younger, it was pretty typical for me to sneak in and out of the house,” Frankie told him, thinking back to the memory the Gloom had shown him of doing just that. “If my dad was there, he was almost always arguing with my mother already, and if he wasn’t... Well. She’d see me and take whatever was bothering her in the moment out on me. She never hit me or anything—aside from that one time with the plane,” he added before Rook could, “but the verbal abuse was...Bad. Loud noises still spook me sometimes, even if

someone isn't throwing or breaking something. People who raise their voice too easily as well. I tend to avoid them.

“If she didn't see me enter the house though, I could usually avoid it for a while, at least until the hunger got too much and I had to make a trip to the kitchen or starve for the night. I used to wish that I was invisible. That I could fade into the background, entirely unnoticed.” He didn't understand why he was bringing all of this up, but now that he'd started, he found it impossible to stop. “I think that's one of the reasons I was so invested in your character. You had issues with your parents too, were neglected by them, but in the opposite way. You had what I'd always wanted, parents that ignored you, and yet you were just as miserable and hurt as I was.”

Frankie laughed humorlessly. “The grass is always greener, right? It's all bullshit. We all carry something dark inside of us, something planted there a long time ago, when we were too young to know better, too young to do anything to stop it from taking root. Life isn't about all the bad things that have happened to us, it's about what we do with those bad things. My mother controlled me then, but not anymore. I learned that through you.”

Rook's character was damaged. He was a prince with an arrogant attitude and a flippant tongue. He could disarm someone with a single glance, and he wasn't above manipulating those around him to get what he wanted. All his life, his father had called him weak and pathetic, unfit for his last name, let alone the actual crown.

Rook had grown and proven him wrong time and time again. And while the wounds had already been created, and he carried those harsh words from his father always, he'd, for the most part, been able to set them aside and not allow them to haunt or rule him.

“You're powerful enough to stake a claim on the Bronze throne,” Frankie said. “But you haven't and you don't plan to.”

“No,” he agreed. “I don't.”

“Why not? Wouldn’t that be the ultimate revenge against your father?”

Rook shook his head. “The best revenge against people like that, like my father and your mother, is to forget them. “ He reached out and planted his thumb at the center of Frankie’s brow. “Purge them from this place. Don’t let any part of them dictate the things you say or do. They don’t matter, Aardwolf. The only one that matters,” he dropped his hand, “is you.”

It was too dark where they were lying and Frankie wished he’d left the light on so that he could see Rook’s expression properly. He wanted to know what the other man was thinking. Wanted to know what he was feeling. There was a sadness in his voice that weighed on Frankie, one that also seemed familiar.

“Easier said than done,” he told him.

“I know.” Rook clucked his tongue. “I’m still trying to do it myself.”

“Pretty sure you’ve got that last part down,” Frankie joked, laughing when Rook tightened his hold on his finger and tugged lightly in mock retaliation.

“Sleep, Aardwolf,” Rook said. “Tomorrow we’ll figure out how to make Neko pay for making you relive that.”

Frankie didn’t want to feel grateful that someone was willing to commit violence on his behalf.

But he did.

He also didn’t want to admit how safe he felt in this moment, lying next to Rook. But that was true too.

Chapter 22:

Frankie wasn't above sneaking out of the room the next morning. He woke curled up against Rook's side, his leg tossed over the other man, head nestled over his chest. It'd taken some effort to slowly peel himself off without waking the demon prince, but he'd succeeded, grabbing a change of clothing and opting to get that done in the bathroom.

He needed some space to think. Last night had been... Different. Something about Rook had been different, and Frankie couldn't quite put his finger on what. Sure, he'd been a lot nicer than usual, and more open about his feelings, but... Frankie didn't want to get his hopes up.

Hell, he shouldn't even have hopes where Rook was concerned in the first place. They were never going to be anything, and hadn't he stopped wishing they would after that first encounter when the guy had slammed him against the wall? Rook was aggressive and arrogant. It'd been hot when Frankie had believed him to be fake, just another rough around the edges book boyfriend for him to swoon over with the rest of the world. But that didn't mean he actually wanted to be with a guy like that.

Right?

Right.

Although...Rook hadn't acted that way since, and he'd apologized after the incident in his palace with the desk...

Frankie shook his head as he stepped out of the bathroom and quietly made his way to the kitchen. He was making a mountain out of a molehill. Yes, Rook had been flirting with him last night, but it didn't mean anything. He'd been stressed out and scared and the demon prince had most likely been attempting to take his mind off of it. Nothing more, nothing less.

Sudden cursing from the kitchen had him picking up the pace, and he rounded the corner to find Sage standing over the sink, a frying pan in his hand.

The pan was on fire.

Frankie raced over, flicking the water faucet on and pushing Sage's arm so the pan ended up under the spray. The fire sputtered out, flickers of smoke and the thick smell of char tickling at Frankie's nose, causing him to sneeze.

"I'm sorry," Sage said, setting the pan down into the empty sink, "I didn't think this would be so difficult."

"What are you doing?" Frankie tried to keep any shred of irritation out of his voice, but wasn't sure he entirely succeeded. He could have burned the whole place down. A glance over at the kitchen island showed him that the eggs had been taken from the fridge, along with a bag of flour, several oranges and a package of sausage links. He sighed and planted his hands on his hips. "Breakfast?"

"I thought it'd be a nice gesture," Sage ran his palm over the top of his head, smoothing down the blond strands with an awkward laugh. "Turns out, your kitchen is a lot more complex than the ones I'm used to back home."

"Visera runs on magic," Frankie said, moving to start cleaning up the mess. "We have electricity. Let me show you." He got out the toaster for the bread that Sage had set aside on the counter, and then pulled out a clean frying pan.

Going through the motions turned out to be exactly what he needed. It was relaxing doing something mundane, answering questions now and again about what he was doing and how it worked. Sage kept close to his side, but didn't come off as though he was hovering or getting in the way. His curiosity was palpable, and he kept a respectful distance so that Frankie could easily cook without fear of bumping into him.

"What is this?" Sage was staring into one of the mugs Frankie had filled with coffee. He took a tentative sip, wincing at the bitter taste.

Frankie laughed, grabbing the cream and sugar. He showed him how to add them, turning the dark brew to a lighter color, and then urged Sage to try it again.

“Much better,” the King of Gold said, draining half the cup before getting himself a refill.

They’d just finished setting the table when Frankie felt a spark of electricity race down his spine. He turned to find Rook standing in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest.

He had a dark look on his face and he stared back unflinchingly when Frankie met his gaze.

“How like you to show up once all of the work is completed,” Sage broke the silence first, snapping Frankie out of it.

Clearing his throat, Frankie pulled out a chair and sat. A moment later, Rook came over and took the seat next to him.

Sage took the spot on the other side of the table, but his previous good mood had been soured by something as well, and the tension filling the small kitchen was almost unbearable. Fortunately, he started eating, prompting them to.

Frankie had made toast, scrambled some eggs to make it easy, and fried up the sausage links. It wasn’t anything fancy, but it would fill them up.

“Are you feeling better?” Sage asked after a few minutes.

Frankie nodded. “Yeah, a lot better, thanks.”

“Recovery time from an attack of that magnitude varies,” he said. “You should get more rest today.”

“I’m fine.” Frankie didn’t have time for rest, and they all knew it. “We need to find Neko sooner rather than later. He’s getting bolder, if last night was any indicator.” What if he started showing himself to other students or attacking random people on the streets? “Honestly, it’s amazing he’s managed to lay low all this time.”

“I wonder why that is,” Rook finally spoke, twirling his coffee mug on the table slightly.

“He’s had to have figured out this isn’t our world,” Sage agreed, “and that our world comes from a book.”

Frankie paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. “You knew?”

Sage gave him a soft smile, but Rook didn’t give him the chance to answer.

“He has to have a plan,” he said. “Neko isn’t the sort to sit back otherwise. Last night’s attack...there was a reason for it. He isn’t stupid, and we were both there this time. Why risk going after Frankie when you and I are around?”

“A warning, perhaps?” Sage suggested, but Rook clucked his tongue and shook his head.

“He would have been better off attacking you while you were alone,” Frankie told Rook. He’d been away long enough to give Neko the chance. More proof that Frankie himself was the target. But why? He pursed his lips, thinking it over. “Wait.”

He shot up from the table and went back to his room, returning a moment later with his jacket in hands. “My necklace is gone.”

“Necklace?” Sage frowned.

“It’s how Frankie and I travel between realms,” Rook said absently. “The Gloom must have taken it last night when he swallowed Frankie.”

Frankie grimaced. “Could we not with that word choice?”

“Neko must be trying to return home,” Sage assumed. “Do you think he already has? With the two of us here, that puts Lis at greater risk.” He swore. “I should never have come here.”

“Something we agree on,” Rook replied, and the two of them glared at each other across the table for a charged moment that had Frankie shifting on his feet.

“There’s one way to find out if he’s already used the necklace.” He pulled out his cell phone and opened a blank word doc on his phone’s app. Sitting back down at the table,

he started a new chapter, slipping into the flow of the story within seconds.

The last chapter had ended with Sage disappearing from Visera, which meant Lis was the only main character left that Frankie could write. He started with her searching for Sage, worried over him. She and Cue were in the woods, the same one with the gateway they'd used, but there were no signs of them anywhere.

Vaguely, he processed Sage and Rook talking around him, but he didn't really hear the words, too focused on the task at hand. He'd already discovered that in order for this to work, he needed for it to make sense. Anything he wrote had to connect to the previous chapters without disrupting the flow of the story as a whole.

Because of this, it took him a little over a page before he could seamlessly write Neko in. He had the Iron suddenly attack Lis and Cue with his Gloom. They fought them off and eventually defeated Neko, disarming him and cornering him against a tree.

Lis had her gun pointed at his head, demanding to know if he'd done something to Sage, and that's where Frankie decided to end the chapter.

He set his phone down on the table and stretched, staring at the screen all the while to see if it took or not. When he blinked and looked up, the others were watching him closely. "What?"

"You zoned out," Sage said, seemingly awed by that fact.

Frankie frowned. He'd always had a tendency to lose himself in his work, but from the look on Sage's face, it seemed as though it was more than that.

"You slip into a trance," Rook explained, noting his confusion, "whenever you write. It's like you're here but you aren't at the same time. That must be when you connect with our world. Your body is present, but your mind is far away, in Visera."

He'd always assumed he was slipping into a flow state.

“So,” Sage changed the subject, “if Neko really is back there, everything Frankie just wrote will really happen?”

“Yes,” he replied. “The chapter will remain and—” He stopped talking when the words on the small screen in front of him flickered. “What the...”

“What?” Rook rested a hand over the back of his chair, leaning in to get a better look.

Frankie scrolled through the chapter he'd just written, catching sight of some of the words as they magically changed on their own. “All mention of Neko is being rewritten.”

Where he'd written Neko, now the name Steel could be read.

Steel was another Iron who worked closely with Talia. Frankie had mentioned him once or twice in the past, but he wasn't as prominent a character as Neko was.

“That's never happened before,” he mused. Typically, the entire chapter would disappear, the document going blank.

“What does that mean?” Sage asked.

“Neko is still here,” that much was clear, “and Lis and Cue are looking for you. If everything else I wrote stuck, that means this is what's happening in Visera right now. They'll question Steel and ask him if he knows where you are.”

“But he doesn't.”

Frankie blew out a breath and sat back, bumping into Rook's arm. He stilled but tried not to show it.

Neither of them moved away.

“At least we have an answer to our question,” Rook said.

“Yeah, but why did he steal my necklace if he didn't plan on using it?”

“Maybe he doesn't know how?” Sage suggested, only to have Rook shake his head.

“He stole Frankie’s computer probably hoping to change the story himself and get back home. He’s also seen us disappear and reappear in the school library, since the first time it happened one of his Gloom was chasing us. He has to know the way back. So why hasn’t he gone yet?”

Sage fisted a hand on the table, meeting their gazes with a determined look. “Let’s find him and ask.”

“He’s most likely hanging around or on campus,” Frankie pointed out. It made the most sense. Neko didn’t know anyone in this realm, so he’d have nowhere else to go, and the university was big enough for someone pretending to be a student to go about unnoticed.

“We do run into Gloom every time we go there,” Rook agreed. “But we had no luck when we went last time.”

“Still, I can’t think of anywhere else he could be comfortably hiding out.”

“Seems like a solid lead then,” Sage said.

“We can’t go today,” Rook stopped him when the King of Gold rose from his seat. “We need to pick up a new computer for Frankie. He wasn’t able to get one before because he ended up falling through a gateway.”

Sage frowned. “Can’t that wait? Catching Neko seems far more important.”

“You saw what he had to use just now.” He motioned to the phone still on the table. “If we want to ensure he can properly end your story, he needs the right tools.”

Sage thought it over before finally nodding in understanding. “We can’t enter battle unarmed.”

Frankie glanced between the two of them, tempted to ask if they were really agreeing on something or just messing with him. Instead, he went with, “There’s nothing I can do to him so long as he’s here in my world anyway. It makes more sense to take care of Neko before he hurts anyone.”

“Have there been any sightings on campus?” Sage asked. “From anyone other than the two of you, I mean?”

Rook hadn't been able to find anything in the news, but that didn't mean other students hadn't noticed something strange happening. It was possible that students were being targeted, but because the culprits were shadow beings, it wasn't being reported. Who would believe a teen or young adult claiming they'd been attacked by a shadow? Most likely the cops and on campus security would blame alcohol and too much partying.

"You should find out," Rook told him. "Is there someone you can ask?"

Frankie didn't really have many friends, and he was aware. He scowled at him but then realized that there was someone and picked his phone back up, his irritation forgotten as he dialed Ri's number.

He picked up on the third ring.

"Hey, Ri, I was wondering if I could ask you a kind of strange question." Frankie leaned back in his chair, glad that there was actually someone in his life he felt comfortable enough calling about this. Ri would just think he was being quirky again or working through the plot of a new story.

"Sure, what's up?" Ri's voice came through clear on the other end. There was background chatter, making it obvious that he was somewhere crowded on campus, and every now and again he said hi to someone else.

Ri was pretty popular so if anyone knew anything, it would be him.

"Have there been any weird stories lately? Students claiming they'd seen something odd or whatnot?"

"Odd?" Ri hummed in contemplation. "Can you give me more than that? You're being kind of vague, Frankie. Oh —" he snapped his fingers and the sound could vaguely be heard through the line, "wait. There was something. I didn't take it seriously but a couple of the biology majors claimed the west wing of Jameson was haunted."

Jameson was the science building. Frankie only made his way there for his Oceanography class and nothing else. It

was also located on the opposite side of campus from the English buildings and the library which he frequented. He probably wouldn't have even thought to search there until last.

“Really? Haunted how?” Before he got his hopes up, he realized he should do more investigating. It was pretty common for colleges to have ghost stories. It could be nothing.

“I don't know,” Ri said. “They're calling him the Boogeyman. I guess he's been spotted standing in corners of rooms watching people.”

“Couldn't it just be another student messing with them?”

“Apparently he doesn't have a face. They say he's made entirely of shadow or something like that. More an outline of a person than an actual person. Sounds crazy if you ask me. Those science majors should probably crack a window next time they're working with strong chemicals, am I right?”

“Right.” Frankie forced a chuckle. “No one else has said anything?”

“There've been rumors going around about it I guess.” A door opened and the chatter changed to more subdued voices. “Most of them are coming from that part of campus though. Hey, I've got to get to class, was that all you wanted to know?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“No problem. I'll text if I hear anything else, cool?”

“I appreciate it, thanks, Ri.” Frankie hung up the phone and relayed the information to the others.

“If he's making himself known, it's only a matter of time before things escalate,” Sage said.

“We need a new laptop,” Rook insisted, pursing his lips. “We should split up.”

“What?” Frankie wasn't a fan of that plan, and he didn't bother to pretend otherwise.

“It’s the most efficient way,” he said. “Sage can go back to campus and search for Neko and signs of Gloom since he’s spent time there already. I’ve already gone with you to the mall, so I know exactly where to go to get you a new laptop.”

“Wait,” Frankie held up a hand, “why does that sound like you’re planning on going without me?”

“Because I am,” he confirmed. “You stay here. Where it’s safe.”

“My wards will ensure no Gloom can enter your home,” Sage reassured him.

“No way.” Frankie stood. “I’m not staying here while you guys go off doing things. This is *my* world, remember?” They didn’t get to call the shots or put him on ice.

“I’m not suggesting it just because it’s safe.” Rook lightly wrapped his fingers around Frankie’s wrist, holding him. “You need to rewrite that chapter. You haven’t sent it to the publisher yet, which means you can still do so. As of now, Lis is fighting alone, and we both know she won’t get any answers about Sage from Steel. It won’t make sense for the overall plot.”

Which meant the next chapter wouldn’t be easy for Frankie to write himself, and most likely wouldn’t go the way they hoped if the story somehow wrote itself like it had in the past. He needed to at least set it up in a direction that was beneficial for them, just in case.

“We never know when a gateway will open,” Rook said as if having read Frankie’s mind. “If one of us gets pulled back in, there’s nothing you’ll be able to do about the next chapter.”

“I’m confused,” Sage cut into the conversation.

“I’ll explain it to you in the car.” Rook pulled the keys from his front pocket, dangling them in the air.

“When did you take those?” How long had he been planning this? Frankie hated that the plan actually made sense now that he’d spelled it out for them. He did need to rewrite this chapter, since originally he’d done it just to figure out if

Neko was back in Visera. Since they had their answer, he needed to come up with a better chapter. Which meant staying behind.

“You’re going to have to type it out on your phone,” Rook ignored the question.

“Yeah, that’s no big deal.” He wouldn’t like doing it all the time, but once in a while wouldn’t be a problem. “But you can’t just grab whatever laptop you first see. I have specific —”

“I know which one you want,” Rook stated confidently.

Frankie cocked his head. “How?”

“You were talking about it on the drive over the first time, don’t you recall?”

Had he been? Even though he’d been bummed that his had been stolen, he’d admittedly been kind of excited about getting a new computer, since there was a model he’d had his sights on anyway.

“You need my card in order to pay,” he said, only to have Rook pull another item from his other pocket.

“When did you snatch my wallet?”

“While you were sleeping.” The demon prince didn’t sound even slightly apologetic.

“You can’t just take whatever you want without asking.”

Rook gave him a lengthy look but didn’t reply, and Frankie felt his insides heating uncomfortably at the scrutiny.

He’d thought perhaps the other guy had acted oddly last night in a weird attempt to comfort him, but there was that look in his eyes again, the suggestive one that had Frankie’s toes curling in his shoes and his heartrate kicking up a notch. When had those looks started? He felt like he would have noticed if they’d been going on for a while but...

Frankie had spent a good deal of time attempting to avoid thinking too deeply on Rook's actions. Tried instead to concentrate on what was important, getting them and Neko back to Visera and hopefully not blowing up his career in the process.

"We should go," Sage broke through the renewed tension first, glancing between the two of them with a slight frown before he rounded the table and disappeared down the hallway.

Rook rolled his eyes after him. "He's acting like he knows where he's going and can just leave without me."

"Better catch up before he actually gives it a try," Frankie suggested. The last thing either of them needed was to have to go on another mad search for the King of Gold. When Rook turned back to him and opened his mouth, he held up a hand. "I know, I know. Stay inside. Lock the door. The wards only work on Gloom, not Neko himself. I got it. I'll be busy writing the chapter anyway."

Rook must have seen proof of that on his face, because he only hesitated a split second longer before giving a curt nod. He took a step toward the hallway, then seemed to think better of it and moved closer to Frankie, lifting a hand toward his cheek. His hand hovered over his skin for a moment before he made contact, smoothing the pads of his fingers across the rise of his cheek and then down to the curve of his jaw. He tipped Frankie's head back slightly and paused, searching his eyes for something—Frankie didn't know what.

Then he was kissing him and all rhyme and reason fled Frankie's head in a mad dash. Warmth exploded inside of him, rushing over him as their lips came together, soft and exploratory at first, then harder and with more intent.

He kept his fisted hands down at his sides while Rook invaded his mouth, his tongue lapping at the seam of his lips and then dipping inside to tangle with his own. The mixture of shock that it was happening and worry that if he moved it would stop held him still, with only his mouth responding back.

Frankie had dreamed of this a hundred—no, a million times, but that had all been before. When he'd believed that Rook was a mere character in a book and not this solid, flesh and blood man currently setting his soul on fire.

The man who appeared to be just as confused as he was when he finally broke the kiss and separated them. For a while, he stared down at Frankie's mouth, brow furrowed, full lips darkened. Then his gaze swept slowly upward, until they locked eyes.

“What was that for?” Frankie hardly recognized the sound of his voice, but he somehow managed to keep his body from trembling. He dug his nails harder into the flesh of his palm until he felt the sting, welcoming the tiny bit of pain since it helped clear his mind. Somewhat, anyway.

He knew himself well enough to understand what it was he was feeling. Fear. But not because of the kiss, because of what came after. If it'd just been another joke to Rook, if he'd been messing with him...

“Stay indoors, Aardwolf,” Rook said, acting like he hadn't heard Frankie's question. He retreated a step. “I'll come back for you.”

Frankie watched as Rook left, feeling a tumultuous twist of emotions that left part of him wanting to race after the guy and demand answers, and the other part wanting to lock the door behind him and not let him back in.

Even when the telltale sound of an engine roaring to life in the parking lot came, his feet remained rooted to the ground.

Chapter 23:

It was hours before the two of them returned, and by then Frankie had completed his Oceanography homework, sent an email to his professor saying he wouldn't be making it to class this week, and spent time mapping out all of the sudden changes the story had taken since Rook's arrival in his world had sent it all spinning.

His notes were a scribbled mess, but at least he had something physical to look at, a map of the chaos that his plotline had fallen into.

He expected a call from his publisher at any moment, honestly was surprised that he'd only gotten the one contact about it so far. If their roles had been reversed, he would have called the writer immediately and asked what was up.

"None of this makes sense anymore," he mumbled to himself, flipping through pages in frustration. Technically, the problem was it did make sense. The story—or whatever entity took care of writing the chapters that Frankie didn't when he was sucked into Visera—had stuck true to the original plot, following all of the rules Frankie had laid down to a T.

It *made sense*, which was why it was so difficult to find a way to untangle it. If he left it as is, things might end up working in their favor...but what if they didn't?

The sound of the front door opening barely pulled him from his thoughts, and he merely lifted a hand in a partial wave from where he sat on the floor, bent over the coffee table as he continued to jot things down as they came to him. His phone showed the recent chapter that had been sent to his publisher, and he had it set on the table at the edge of the open notebook.

Originally, his story was supposed to be winding down to the end, with Rook's sudden death the catalyst bringing everyone to their boiling point. Instead, a new character had been introduced—Frankie—and had thrown everything for a tailspin.

Now, both Rook and Sage were missing and Lis was left wandering around the realm searching for them instead of figuring out a plan on how to stop Talia. How was Frankie meant to conclude all of this in only two more chapters? With the way things were going, there was no way that was going to be possible.

“No matter how I look at it this doesn’t work,” he said when someone sat down on the couch at his side. He didn’t bother glancing over to see who it was, subconsciously assuming it was Rook since he was the only one with a key. “None of these new changes make sense. There’s only one way to fix any of this that I can see and you aren’t going to like it very much.”

“Why not?” Sage’s voice shocked Frankie out of his concentration.

He blinked at the blond man on the couch, sitting close enough his knees practically brushed against Frankie’s arm, and then over toward the hallway just as Rook rounded the corner twirling the key ring around his pointer.

Rook came to an abrupt halt, eyes narrowing when he took in the two of them.

As if oblivious to the awkwardness of it all, Sage motioned toward the phone on the table. “He says there’s something wrong with the story.”

Rook was carrying a box under his left arm and he came over, placing it down on the coffee table within reach of Frankie before straightening. He slipped his hands into his pockets, keeping the keys, and glanced between the two of them. “Oh?”

Frankie cleared his throat and opted to get down to business, tapping the notebook in front of him. “It’s me.”

“What?” both Rook and Sage said at the same time.

“I messed up the story,” he elaborated. “The second I appeared on the cliffs with you,” he turned to Rook, “things changed too drastically for the end of a book. Now we’ve got characters racing around searching for you and Sage, no doubt

wondering if I'm somehow involved, when they should be working on their plan to take down Talia. Hell, you," he waved at Sage, "should be working on the plan."

"You mentioned there was something that could be done about it?" Sage pointed out cautiously. Probably because of how Frankie had worded it.

He didn't bother correcting the King of Gold by mentioning he'd thought he was Rook before.

"Yeah," he nodded. "I can rewrite it so that I never appeared at all."

"How?" Rook dropped down next to him, crossing his legs as he sat on the ground. Their knees bumped and the prince didn't pull away. "The chapters were already sent to your publisher, weren't they?"

"Yes, but they haven't gone live yet. The first one isn't set to post for another couple of weeks. If I can rewrite it before then, we'll be able to erase everything that took place after." He licked his lips nervously. "We can reset the story so that events flow the way they were meant to in the first place."

Rook's expression darkened. "I died in the original version of your story, Aardwolf."

"He what?" Sage looked confused. "You killed him?"

"No, I—" Frankie felt more than saw Rook glowering at his side and blew out a breath. "Yeah I killed him. But he's fine! See! The dude is too stubborn to die."

Sage cocked his head, an odd expression morphing his features. "Is that why?"

"Why what?"

"Why he's sticking around? Why he's so protective of you? It isn't because he cares, it's because he's worried if he leaves you alone the story will right itself and he'll end up dead like he was always meant to."

Frankie winced before he could help it, a sharp pang caused by those words hitting the center of his chest.

Noticing his reaction, Rook rested a hand over Frankie's thigh, the touch warm and comforting, despite the chilly bite to his tone. "I warned you not to stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Convince me I'm wrong," Sage said but Rook merely snorted.

"I don't have to prove anything to you."

Frankie stared down at where Rook was touching him, the move possessive yet gentle. It sent a thrill shooting down his spine and his head spinning in a way that wasn't entirely pleasant but couldn't be considered unpleasant either. Mostly, he disliked the uncertainty.

How much of this was postulating in front of the King of Gold and how much of it was real? Up until Sage had appeared through the portal, Rook hadn't done much to give Frankie the impression he was into him...Or...Maybe he had. He'd been more than a bit distracted as of late and couldn't trust that something like that wouldn't have gone straight over his head.

If last night was any indicator, Rook was being truthful and he felt something toward Frankie, even if that something was just attraction and nothing more.

"I'm an adult," Frankie stated, because either way, whether Rook was being honest or not, he needed to make that clear to the both of them, "so while I appreciate that you're trying to look out for me," he turned to catch Sage's eye, "I don't need it. I can make my own judgments."

It was swoon worthy in books to see the male lead a little jealous, but this was the real world and Sage really *was* sticking his nose where it didn't belong.

"You know me," the King of Gold said. "You know I can't stand back and watch someone get used or hurt."

"But you don't know me." Yes, Frankie knew Sage, at least, he knew the version of him that he wrote about in his book. That was one-sided, however. "You can't just assume I'm naive enough not to understand the type of person Rook

is. I wrote about him too, remember? I also know him better than you do.”

This was so not the conversation he expected to have, ever, but since they were already in the thick of it...

“We don’t have time for this,” he told them. “Stop fighting with each other and help me figure out what to do about the mess these open gateways made. That’s what I need you for. I don’t need advice about my potential romantic involvements, even if it’s coming from a good place.”

Sage deflated some. “Meaning you don’t view me as a potential suitor.”

Rook’s fingers clenched around Frankie’s thigh involuntarily, but Frankie gave no reaction to it.

He kept the shock he felt at that comment to himself, not wanting to make things worse for the three of them and undo the progress he felt he’d just made with his little speech. Instead, he kept his features firm, hoping not to come off too unkind in the process and gave a curt shake of his head.

“I’m sorry, but no.” Before Sage could respond, he continued, “But you don’t feel that way about me either. You’re in love with Lis, remember?”

“Lis is a brilliant person,” Sage agreed. “She’s strong and caring and intelligent.”

“If you end that sentence with a *but* I will hit you,” Rook practically growled.

Sage’s eyes flashed with barely restrained frustration. “Why? Are you angry in her honor or upset that I might have feelings for Frankie?”

“You don’t,” Frankie insisted.

Sage inhaled slowly as if giving himself a moment to think it over. “I might.”

Rook made a strange, almost animalistic sound that was pretty on par for a demon.

Frankie merely hung his head. How had this gotten so messed up so fast? This wasn't the story he'd intended, or wanted. And he didn't for a second believe that Sage truly felt anything toward him.

"Have you considered," he began, trying hard not to come off like that asshole who was trying to tell someone else how they really felt, "that maybe you're just afraid of staying in Visera and all the responsibility that comes with that?"

Sage clearly didn't like that suggestion, but Frankie wasn't finished.

"You get things done and you never complain," he said, "but inside you're stressed out and nearing the end of your patience. You need a break, I get that. You're so close though, Sage. There are only two chapters left before you can finally get your happy ever after."

"My life isn't a story," Sage interjected. "I understand that from your perspective it is, but from mine..." he shook his head, "This is just my life, Frankie. You say everything is going to be okay, but I don't *feel* that. And, honestly, you can't know that without a shadow of a doubt either. Look what's happened," he waved at the phone still on the table. "It's gotten away from you. Who's to say it won't end badly for us all? You may not have control over it anymore."

That was a terrifying notion, and something that Frankie had been dealing with ever since Rook had appeared. He'd spent years on this book series though, and he wasn't willing to give up, even more so now that he'd actually met some of these characters. Now that they were real, living and breathing people, there was no way he was going to give in and allow the story to choose its own ending.

"That isn't going to happen," he stated confidently.

"How can you be sure?"

"I can't, yet." He spread his hands over the notes he'd spent the past few hours working on. "But I'll be able to prove it soon. While you two were out, I was busy testing theories, starting with the chapter I wrote this morning. I deleted it."

“Why?” Rook asked.

“To see if it would come back on its own,” Frankie explained. “Like you said, I never sent it to the publisher. I’m hoping that does mean that it wasn’t official. If that’s the case, then anything I write here,” he reached for the box Rook had brought, the one that had the new laptop in it, “can be rewritten and edited as many times as it needs to be without becoming set. Just like it always has. I do edits on every chapter before I send the final version in.” That’s why he’d thought to check if this would work.

“What does that mean in the long run?” Sage nibbled on his lower lip.

“The chapter rewrote itself to remove Neko earlier, but didn’t fully disappear like it did when I tried to write one with Rook in it,” Frankie told them. “That means that if it’s a minor character, the story will fix and alter things to fit the plot on its own, but if it’s a major character there’s too much work and it’ll scrap the whole thing.” They’d already realized there were rules to this, but discovering more of them was something that would be beneficial, especially now that they were down to the last wire.

“That means that what I wrote earlier happened in Visera. Lis was searching for you and she was attacked by Steel. Leaving the chapter like this is too risky. Now that you’ve both been here, there’s no telling if you can affect the flow of the story on your own.”

“You’re referring to the fact it writes itself whenever you travel to Visera,” Rook surmised. “You think there’s a chance that’s not happening just because you’re the writer?”

“It makes sense, but what if we’re wrong?” Frankie had to consider all the angles to avoid stumbling into another compromising situation. He should have tried harder to learn all of these rules from the beginning. “What if traveling between the realms changes something? If you go back without me, for example, what if the chapter writes itself again even though I’m here? If that does happen, I won’t be able to control it.”

“And you won’t be able to stop Talia from winning.” Rook hummed in understanding.

“She can’t win,” Frankie said.

“Because it would ruin the ending of your precious story and you’d lose readers?”

“Because, even if not literally, I’ve spent the past three years of my life in Visera and I don’t want to see anything bad happen to it.” Frankie cared about the characters—the *people*. “Knowing that you’re all real, there’s no way I’ll be okay with Talia taking over and destroying everything.”

“Tell us more,” Sage said, “about your plan. You still have control over the chapters that you write. So? How does that help us?”

“What if I can convince the publisher to scrap the chapters that they’ve already received?” No matter which way he turned it, that seemed like the best solution all around. “I doubt they’re very fond of them anyway. It shouldn’t be too hard of an ask.”

“How can you be certain that will work?” Rook sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. His other remained on Frankie’s thigh, almost as if he’d forgotten it was there. “What if the chapters simply resend themselves?”

“I won’t know until I try.” He shrugged. “If all of the copies are deleted, I think we have a chance though. It’s our best shot.”

“Which brings me back to—”

“I won’t kill you,” Frankie cut Rook off, “obviously. I’ll write it differently. You two can get attacked on the cliffs as planned but you defeat them.”

“You said there needed to be a motivator,” he reminded. “Something to push Lis to finally attack Talia and put an end to everything. If my death no longer serves that purpose, how do you plan to fill that gap?”

“Will you murder someone else?” Sage frowned.

“Of course not.” Frankie made a face. “Rook can convince her.”

“I what?” For some reason, he didn’t sound all that happy.

“Lis listens to you,” to an extent, “she’ll trust you if you suggest taking the fight to Talia. You already know where her base is located. All we have to do is come up with a logical reason you would have to search that area. Then the plot still runs smoothly, and in its intended direction, and there will be no loose ends for the story to find fault with and rewrite on its own. It’s a flawless plan, really.”

“Sure,” Rook drawled, “except for the part where we have no way of knowing if that will actually work. Don’t think I didn’t catch how in order for this to even have a chance I’d also have to return to Visera.”

That was the part that Frankie figured he wouldn’t be pleased with.

“We can talk about that,” he said, “at least, we can talk about what you hope to happen from there, but there’s really no other way to do this. In order for the story to work, you have to go back. You can’t just vanish. There’s no way to explain where one of the main characters suddenly went, or why they’re not involved in the final battle.”

“You can think of something,” Rook stated, but Sage shook his head.

“He’s right,” Sage agreed. “Sticking to his original plan seems like our best shot. It’s either that or risk everything falling into Talia’s hands. I won’t risk my people’s lives like that.” He held Rook’s gaze steadily. “I don’t think you would do that either, Prince of Bronze.”

It was clear that Rook wanted to argue, but in the end there was nothing he could say. He ran a hand through his hair and got to his feet, retreating to Frankie’s room without a backward glance. The sound of the door slamming shut didn’t surprise either of them.

Frankie sighed. That'd gone pretty much exactly as he'd anticipated it going.

“He'll come to grips with it,” Sage reassured him. “If he thinks you're going to kill him off—”

“He doesn't,” Frankie said. Rook had already told him that he knew he wouldn't, and he believed him. This didn't have anything to do with him dying on the cliffs and everything to do with what came after. He met Sage's gaze. “Would you be happy about going back to a world where you don't get the girl and end up another prince in a long line of them? Rook won't get Lis or the throne if he goes back.”

“It's not Lis that he wants.” Sage tilted his head when Frankie grew silent. “He's been pretty open about that much at least.”

“It's because you're here. He doesn't like the idea of competing against you again. That's all.” It made sense to Frankie. Rook already lost Lis, of course he was being territorial where Frankie was concerned. It must be a real ego bruiser, thinking that yet another person might choose Sage over him.

“I thought that at first as well,” the King of Gold admitted, leaning back on the couch. “I don't think that's the case anymore. Does it matter anyway? What do you want?”

That was the problem. Frankie didn't know.

He uncurled from the floor and paused, considering setting up the new laptop before deciding it could wait until tomorrow. “I should go check on him before he does something stupid.”

Sage didn't stop him when he left, and Frankie was grateful for that at least. They didn't need to pick up the earlier part of their conversation where the king had spoken of his feelings.

Frankie was convinced the two of them, both Sage and Rook, were simply confused. They'd been thrust into an impossible situation, in a completely foreign world...of course

their emotions were heightened and playing tricks on them. They were both adventurous and keen to new things.

That's all Frankie was to them.

Something new.

He didn't bother knocking on his own bedroom door, slowly opening it and stepping in to find Rook hadn't switched on the light. With a click of his tongue he flicked the switch, needing a second for his eyes to adjust when the overhead light came on.

Rook was sitting on the edge of the bed, slumped over with his head in his hands.

Frankie had expected him to be angry, but the feeling he gave off now was more forlorn than anything, and that threw him for a loop, causing him to hesitate by the door for a moment before he closed it behind him and approached. When he eased down next to him, Rook didn't so much as twitch.

They sat there in the quiet for a while, Frankie not knowing what to say. He fiddled with his thumbs in his lap as he waited, but when it got too much he finally cracked.

"We can figure out a way to make your ending better," he said tentatively. "I get not wanting to return to a world where you don't end up the hero, but that doesn't mean you'll get nothing. We can—"

"Do you honestly believe that's why I'm reluctant to go?" Rook dropped his hands and angled his head toward Frankie. His gaze was intense, his lips pursed some in mild displeasure.

Frankie had hit a nerve without meaning to.

He wanted to look away but found that he couldn't, completely trapped. "I don't know."

Rook didn't like that either, clenching his jaw tightly and shifting so that he was turned more toward him on the bed. "Think, Aardwolf. You're going to write me an ending that I'll like? How?"

"What do you mean, how?" He frowned. "There's—"

“Are you going to write in another love interest for me?” Rook asked bitterly, and it was impossible to miss that he was in fact angry. “Like you suggested before? Just create a new character for me to fall for to take my mind off things?”

“I—”

“Will that even be necessary?” His hands fisted on his knees. “If you erase the last few chapters, it’ll be as if you’ve undone everything that happened. There’s a very real chance my memories will go along with it. But you’re no idiot. You’ve thought of that, haven’t you.”

Frankie had. He hated that he had, but he couldn’t deny it, and it was obvious there wouldn’t be a point in trying. Of course there was a chance, just as there was a chance deleting those chapters wouldn’t work anyway.

“You might still remember,” he ended up saying quietly. “There’s a fifty-fifty chance. I’ll only be deleting chapters in the book. Everything that happened here in my world...none of that is documented. It’s highly likely you’ll retain all of those memories. Memories might not even be erased, it’s just an assumption.”

“You’re acting like losing my mind isn’t that big of a deal,” he growled, and Frankie ran a hand through the hairs at the base of his skull, unsure how to proceed. “It’s easy to talk about when it isn’t going to happen to you.”

“I’m sorry.” He really was. He didn’t like the idea either but this was the only thing he could come up with, and it wasn’t like they had a lot of time. “The deadline is approaching. They’ll need to start preparing for Chapter Eighty-Three in a week, a lot goes into it before it’s actually posted to the site, meaning if we don’t decide now—”

“Sage won’t agree,” Rook stated. “Once he realizes that he might lose his memories—”

“That won’t change his mind,” Frankie corrected. “He knows it’s the best shot for Visera. For his family and his friends and his people. You know that too.”

Rook wouldn't stand by and allow anything to happen to Ivan. Wouldn't stand by and let anything happen to Bronze either. Even if there wasn't a chance for him to ever take the throne, he cared about his kingdom.

"Why are we even talking about Sage?" He never thought he'd say this, but he was sick of having the King of Gold brought into their conversations. And it'd only been two days. He couldn't imagine how annoying this had to be for Lis even though he'd written scenes from her perspective on the matter over half a dozen times already. "It's true this decision will affect you both but—"

"He'll do the right thing and put others first?" Rook finished for him.

"You will too." Frankie didn't back down when Rook turned that intense look on him a second time. "We both know you will, what's the point in arguing about it now?"

"Maybe I'm not the person you think I am," Rook said. "I'm not the hero type."

"I never claimed you were."

"Aardwolf."

"Can I try something?" If he'd learned anything today, while he'd finally been left alone and given the proper time to think, it was that he needed to take the answers he could when he could get them. They might not have a way of knowing if Rook and Sage would lose their memories with those deleted chapters, but there was another question Frankie could get an answer to. Once and for all.

Rook gave him a questioning look but nodded his head.

Frankie inhaled slowly, preparing himself for what he was about to do and all the various ways it could end. Then he pushed the self-doubt aside and gave in to the rest of him.

He shot forward, not giving Rook a chance to process what he was about to do until it was too late. His hand gripped the back of his neck and pulled him close while he leaned in.

Their lips met and heat radiated throughout Frankie's entire body at just that one small touch.

For a split second it was as if the world had gone still, Rook frozen in his hold. Then the spell broke and the next thing Frankie knew, he was lying on his back with the demon prince looming over him.

Chapter 24:

Frankie had thought this was a good idea, but now that he was being flattened by the heavy, solid body of the sexy demon prince, he wasn't so sure.

Rook fit himself between Frankie's thighs with ease, forcing them to spread to accommodate his hips as he ground down against him and nipped at his bottom lip all at the same time. His tongue speared forward, seemingly tasting him everywhere as he continued to bite and suck to the point Frankie felt his insides twisting with need.

His hands dove into Rook's hair, tugging lightly at the strands in an attempt to change the angle of the kiss. He was so distracted by the growing frenzy within him, he didn't even register when Rook complied, tilting his head the direction Frankie wanted.

One of Rook's hands slipped beneath the hem of Frankie's t-shirt, trailing its way up, smoothing over the ridges of his abs, between his pecs. The material bunched around his arm, more so when his hand came out the neck-hole and he grasped at Frankie's throat. Adding a little pressure, he urged Frankie away, their mouths separating with a popping sound followed quickly by the sharp intakes of their wild breathing.

Frankie blinked, trying to regain control of his senses as he stared up at Rook. With the overhead light directly above them, it was hard to make out his expression, and for a moment he worried that he'd done something wrong after all, that Rook was about to tell him it'd been a trick and he'd misread the situation.

"Do you know what you're doing, Aardwolf?" Rook asked, and his voice was husky, a thread of desperation there he didn't bother concealing. He held Frankie down by the throat, careful not to hurt him, and seemingly held his breath as he waited for a reply.

Yes, he was getting answers. Maybe this wasn't going to end well for either of them after all—Rook didn't belong

here and would have to return to Visera—but it wasn't like he was asking for the other guy to make him a promise signed in blood or anything.

“I need to know,” he all but whispered.

“Know what?”

“What it's like to be with you.” Frankie felt himself pressing against the seam of his jeans and almost groaned from the discomfort of it. His gaze dropped down to where Rook's mouth was and he licked his lips, still able to taste the salty hint of him there. “What it feels like to have you inside of me.”

Rook swore, long and low, his entire body coiling as if ready to strike.

“I've thought about it,” he had no clue why he was still talking but the words just spilled out of him, “a lot. This form,” his eyes trailed to the top of his head where his horns would be, “the other one. Both of them.”

Frankie hadn't even admitted this to Adelaide—partly because the girl was so obsessed with Rook he hadn't wanted to “fight” her for him. He should be embarrassed, confessing like this, but instead he felt even more turned on than he had a moment ago. Almost as if putting it out there had freed him from a weight he hadn't even realized he'd been carrying.

“Since when?” Rook asked. “Before I arrived?”

He knew what he was really asking. Did Frankie want the book version, the made up version of him, or was he attracted to the real deal? A week ago, he would have said with certainty that he had a crush on the fictional character and not the real man. But now... Things were different.

“Before,” Frankie told him, then, just when Rook started to pull away he added, “and after.”

“Since when?” he repeated with a little more force.

“I don't know.” Frankie shook his head slightly against the mattress when Rook's hand tightened. “I really don't.”

Rook started to remove his hold again and Frankie slapped his palm over his wrist, keeping him in place.

“Keep doing that,” he ordered, surprised with himself even over his boldness. He’d always been a bit more vocal in the bedroom though. He knew what he wanted and wasn’t afraid to ask for it. A big difference from the quieter person he was elsewhere.

Rook stared down at him in contemplation for a charged moment. “You write books for teens, Aardwolf. The most you’ve seen is a little heavy petting between Sage and Lis. She and I haven’t even kissed.”

“We just kissed,” he pointed out. “I liked it.”

He chuckled and leaned down, stretching his body over top Frankie. The move rested him more firmly against his core, and the unmistakable hard length of him rubbed against Frankie’s. “I don’t fuck like a character in a teen novel.”

“It’s a good thing I’m not a horny teenager looking for a quickie behind the bleachers then,” Frankie stated, moaning when Rook ground down against him. His head dropped back to the mattress again and his eyes fluttered shut.

“What are you looking for?”

“Can we please just get on with it before I completely lose my mind?” Frankie couldn’t remember the last time he was this turned on, but it felt like if they didn’t speed this process up he was going to come in his pants and that really would be embarrassing.

“I’m trying to make sure we’re on the same page,” Rook said, but Frankie let out an annoyed sound that had the corner of his mouth twitching upward.

“Here, how about I set the scene for you so we can get this going.” With one swift motion, Frankie flipped their positions, completely catching Rook off guard by the sudden move. He straddled his waist, grasping at Rook’s chin so he could tip his head back and give him another scorching kiss.

Frankie didn’t keep it going for long, just enough for a taste, and then once his mind started clouding over he pulled

away, hovering over Rook. The demon prince had his hands on his hips, his fingers digging in to his flesh.

“Once upon a time there was a guy who met an antihero and decided to fuck him, so they did, the end. Good?”

“I’m not sure I appreciate how crass you’re being, Aardwolf,” Rook drawled.

“No?” He pressed his lips to his once more, briefly, then grinned down at him. “I can think of a few ways you can shut me up.”

“On the contrary.” Rook sat up, moving with a speed hard for Frankie to follow. One second they were sprawled out on the bed, and the next Rook was carrying him to the opposite side of the room and pinning him to the wall. “I don’t want to shut you up. I want you to scream.”

He dropped his mouth to Frankie’s neck, sucking hard enough that his hips automatically bucked forward from the sensation. Teeth scraped against the sensitive area there next, before he moved upward. Rook bit and licked the curve of his jaw, the spot beneath his ear, sucking hard every now and again so that there were sure to be marks left behind.

Vaguely, Frankie figured he should probably tell him not to do that, but whenever he opened his mouth to say as much, Rook would do it again and he’d lose his train of thought in an instant.

He clamped his thighs around Rook’s waist, groaning when that drew the other man closer and he felt the bulge in Rook’s pants bump against the bottom of his ass.

Suddenly, Rook let out a growl and tore Frankie’s shirt off over his head. He tossed it to the side and then ravished his bared chest the same way he’d been doing his neck, as if trying to consume all of him at once. His mouth sealed over one of his nipples and he sucked so hard that Frankie’s back bowed.

A mixture of pleasure-pain swept through him and his fingers dove through Rook’s hair, holding him close as he continued to torture him with his teeth and his tongue.

Rook dropped his hand to Frankie's pants, undoing the button and then the fly of his jeans. He pulled back enough to glance down, catching sight of the head of Frankie's solid length peeking out from the waistband of his boxers. He let out another frustrated sound and then yanked Frankie off the wall.

He brought him back over to the bed and dropped him, ignoring the startled yelp that slipped past Frankie's lips. Instead, all of his focus remained lower, his hands already grabbing onto the material of his jeans before his body had stopped bouncing from the fall. He tore them off, boxers and all, and dropped them to the ground. Then he took a full step back and took Frankie in from head to toe, his gaze slow and burning wherever it touched.

Frankie swallowed the sudden lump in his throat, feeling exposed in a way he never had before. It was tempting to close his legs, to cover up and hide, but at the first twitch of his knee signaling he was about to, Rook's gaze shot up to his in warning.

Frankie stilled, allowing the prince to look his fill as he waited, the anticipation brewing.

Had he locked the door? Here he was, completely naked, his legs spread with him leaning on his elbows. If Sage walked in on this...His gaze wandered to the door and he let out another partial cry when Rook suddenly hooked his hands beneath the curves of his knees and yanked him toward the edge of the bed.

His ass practically hung off of it and he'd fallen so that now he was lying down again. He blinked at Rook who was staring at him wickedly.

"If you think about the King of Gold again," Rook stated, "I will punish you."

"I didn't—" He sort of had though, hadn't he. Frankie stopped talking.

"It seems like you're not quite distracted enough," Rook said, removing his leather jacket as he spoke, "if you're

able to consider Sage.”

“I just don’t like the idea of him being out there listening,” Frankie admitted. “That’s pretty normal.”

“You don’t like having an audience?” Rook reached for his shirt.

“I absolutely do not—” The rest of that sentence died on his tongue as Rook flung his shirt off, exposing his toned body. Frankie’s gaze ate him up, eyes pinging from his defined pecs to the sharp v-lines and the thin black trail of hairs that disappeared beneath his jeans. His dick twitched and a drop of precome leaked out of the tip, catching Rook’s attention instantly.

Frankie became painfully aware of just how hard he was, his member straining between his legs, the head already glistening from the droplets of precome that had spilled. He’d never been self-conscious of his size—he was pretty average in that department, so couldn’t be considered small in any case—but now under the other man’s scrutiny he found that urge returning, the one that made him want to cover up.

“Don’t even think about it,” Rook said as if somehow able to read his mind. He undid his pants and slipped his hand inside, stroking himself.

Unashamedly, Frankie lifted his head off the bed so he could get a better view, but Rook barely had himself exposed, his pants still high around his waist, his hand and his cock behind the cherry red material of his boxer briefs. Frankie clicked his tongue and scowled up at him.

“What’s wrong, Aardwolf?” Rook chuckled. “See something you like?”

“I can’t *see* anything at all,” he all but whined. “That’s the problem.”

Rook laughed outright this time before pulling his hand free. Hooking his thumbs into his waistband, he slowly peeled them down his long legs, leaving the material a puddle at his feet which he carefully stepped out of. When he was completely bare, he rested his hands on his hips a devilish

smirk aimed Frankie's way as he waited, allowing him to look as he pleased.

Frankie's cheeks heated, but not enough to get him to tear his gaze off of all of that tanned flesh. His eyes latched onto Rook's cock and he gulped, torn between wanting to feel it and worry that it wouldn't fit.

This was hardly the first time he'd slept with a guy, but it'd been a while and no one had ever been as big as Rook before...Nervously, he bit the inside of his cheek.

"Thoughts, Aardwolf?" Rook prompted after a moment had passed where Frankie did nothing but stare with a furrowed brow.

"This is *definitely* not a YA novel," he blurted before he could help it, slapping a hand over his mouth with a grimace as soon as the words slipped free. Damn, that was far too telling, wasn't it?

"Too late to stop now," Rook said, taking a step forward.

Frankie's hand shot out and he pointed to the end table next to the bed. "Top drawer."

With a frown, he went over to it, pulling it open and removing a small white tube. He read the label and then turned back, smirking. "Do you use this to play with yourself, Aardwolf?"

Rook shook the bottle of lube almost teasingly as he came over, settling himself at the end of the bed, between Frankie's still spread thighs. The cap made a popping sound as he opened it, and while holding Frankie's gaze he poured a generous amount into his palm. Tossing the bottle to the side once he was done, he bent over him.

"Wait." Frankie sucked in a breath, suddenly unsure about this. Not because he didn't still want it, he did, but because Rook was a lot bigger than he'd anticipated and maybe sleeping with the demon prince wasn't such a good idea after all and—

Rook clucked his tongue chidingly. "What did I say?"

It took Frankie a second to recall his words about it being too late, but by then Rook was already reaching down.

He splayed one palm over Frankie's lower abdomen, keeping him pinned as his other hand went lower. The tip of one finger prodded at his tight hole, wet and sticky from the lube, and when Frankie ended up clenching even tighter Rook gave him a warning look.

"Open, Aardwolf," he demanded. He motioned with his chin pointedly at Frankie's still swollen member. "You want this just as badly as I do. What happened to 'getting on with it'?"

"Yeah, that was before I saw that." Frankie pointedly returned the same motion, indicating the thick, hard cock jutting proudly between Rook's legs.

"Don't worry," Rook cooed in a tone that could only be considered a mixture of teasing and sincerity all in one, "I'll open you up nice and good for me first. So relax." Something sparkled behind his eyes and a flicker of mischief crossed his features. "Little pig, little pig, let me in."

Frankie scoffed, slightly affronted by the children's book reference—which must have been one of the stories Rook had read in the bookstore that first day. "Am I a pig, or a wolf, pick one and—"

"Neither." Rook shoved his finger past that tense ring, pausing with it all the way inside while Frankie squirmed and sucked in a breath. He waited for him to adjust a bit before pulling out, all the way to the tip, before he rammed it back in and curled it against Frankie's inner walls.

A loud moan slipped past his lips and Frankie covered his mouth with both hands.

Rook didn't like that. He thrust two fingers in the next time, pumping them deep and fast, forcing Frankie to endure the slight burning sensation until it turned to pure pleasure. He flicked his digits around, finding that hidden spot and pressing against it until Frankie cried out again.

When he added a third finger, Frankie inhaled sharply, the sting causing tears to prickle at the corner of his eyes. But he didn't hate it. In fact, he kind of liked the mixture of pain and pleasure, which wasn't exactly a first for him either. He'd always preferred rough sex over the vanilla kind. Maybe that was part of the reason he'd been drawn to Rook's character in the first place.

While it was true that Gold and Silver was a YA, that didn't stop the very adult Frankie from conjuring images exactly like this one. He just wouldn't put those things to paper, but in his mind, he had free rein to think of whatever he pleased.

He hadn't been lying when he'd said he thought of Rook naked before.

"Harder," he demanded on a groan, lifting his hips off the mattress, forcing all three of those fingers to slip in deeper.

Rook hesitated, clearly caught off guard by the command, but he complied. His fingers stretched Frankie's body open, pounding him in quick motions that had the room filling with the slick sounds of sex as the lube squelched inside of him. Burying them all the way, he pressed his thumb against his taint.

The sudden pressure there had Frankie's hips jerking completely off the bed. He squeezed around Rook's fingers.

"That's it." Rook stroked that spot again, digging his fingers in and curling them up against that inner spot as he did. "Scream for me, Aardwolf. If you're going to take away one of my most important memories of you, I need you to replace it with something better." With his other hand, he took Frankie's aching cock, wrapping his fingers tightly at the base.

Frankie hissed, another wave of stinging bliss sweeping through him.

"What's your refractory period?" Rook asked.

"What?" Frankie was only barely able to follow along, too distracted by the feel of those fingers pumping inside of him and the way Rook's hand tightened around his dick. His

balls drew up and he bucked once, moaning in frustration when Rook held steady.

“I’m going to take you,” Rook said. “I’m wondering how long it’ll be before you’re hard again.”

Again? He was hard *now*.

Rook slammed his fingers in so deep that it shoved Frankie an inch up the bed. “Focus.”

“That’s not helping,” Frankie managed between gritted teeth, then tried to figure out what he was asking. “A few minutes.”

Rook paused, ignoring how that made Frankie whine in disapproval. “Minutes?”

“Yeah.” He’d always been pretty lucky in that department. Still, he peeled his eyes open and met Rook’s gaze with a heated look. “If the guy I’m with can turn me on enough, that is.”

Rook quirked a brow. With no other warning but that, he began stroking Frankie, working him with a tight grip while he continued to batter his hole with his fingers.

In the next instant, Frankie came, covering his mouth with his arm and biting down to keep from screaming out loud. His hips jerked as shoots of come splattered against his abdomen, but he couldn’t even bother to care about the mess, too focused on the way those fingers keep twisting and plunging and how Rook was still pumping him.

It all became too much too quickly, his dick going limp as his muscles clenched around Rook’s fingers.

“Stop,” Frankie pleaded, blowing out a breath as sparks of electricity coursed through him. He might be close to oversensitivity, which had never been all that high on his list of fun feelings.

Rook let his dick go, his hand stilling, but he didn’t remove his fingers. He gave Frankie time to catch his breath, collecting dollops of his come off his chest as he did.

Frankie thought he was cleaning him off, but once he felt stable enough to speak, he moved his arm and paused. “What are you doing?”

“I tossed the bottle too far away,” Rook told him. He pumped himself into his own fist, using Frankie’s spunk as lube. “This will do.”

Usually, after round one, Frankie needed at least ten minutes to recuperate before he could get it up again. That was already pretty quick in his book, but amazingly, watching Rook smear his come over his cock had pressure forming in his lower abdomen.

Frankie’s dick twitched and slowly filled.

Rook seemed impressed. “You weren’t kidding. It really only took a few minutes.” Clearly recalling the almost challenging way Frankie had answered, he tilted his head smugly. “Is this working for you, Aardwolf? You like watching me touch myself? Or is it the mess? I would never have guessed you were into that sort of thing.”

“You’re the one doing it,” Frankie pointed out.

“And you’re the one getting off on it.” He pulled his fingers free, causing Frankie to moan. He chuckled. “Greedy little Aardwolf, aren’t you?”

“That nickname started off as an insult,” Frankie said, because he wanted him to know that he was aware of that fact. But Rook merely shrugged like it was no big deal.

“It isn’t one now. That’s what matters.” He flipped him in one fluid motion, had them both kneeling in the center of the bed in a flash with Frankie’s knees resting on either side of his. Rook pushed his thighs outward, forcing Frankie’s legs to spread around him, his ass bobbing down in the process.

Frankie sucked in a breath when he felt the thick, blunt head of Rook’s cock bump against his hole.

Rook had one arm wrapped tightly around his waist, the other over his upper thigh. His fingers splayed out, dipping low to caress against his skin, the back of his knuckles brushing against Frankie’s balls.

“If you cover your mouth,” he leaned in, pressing his warm lips against the spot beneath Frankie’s ear almost tenderly, “I’ll be angry, got it?”

“Rook.”

He shushed him and planted another kiss. “It’s a figure of speech. Don’t worry, Aardwolf, the only thing I’ll be breaking tonight is you, I promise.”

“Oh god.” Why was that so hot?

With no further warning, Rook lifted him into an upright position and then slammed him down, his cock practically splitting Frankie in two as it plunged past that tight ring of defense and buried deep.

He cried out, his head falling back to connect with Rook’s shoulder, but the prince merely chuckled and flicked his hips, driving himself all the way to the hilt.

Rook’s thrusts were steady, measured, his cock stretching Frankie’s hole open around him. He was thick and felt like heated steel against him, so hot that every stroke burned Frankie’s insides, searing him.

He moaned when Rook spread his knees wider, his hand leaving his thigh to take Frankie’s chin and turn his head. His mouth latched onto his, tongue already diving forward to plunder and take, until their ragged breaths mingled. The whole time he kissed him, he kept thrusting, picking up the tempo with each passing twist of his hips until he had Frankie practically bouncing on top of him.

Shoving him forward onto his hands and knees again, Rook tilted his hips, giving himself a better angle before pounding back into Frankie.

Frankie jerked forward with each harsh thrust, but Rook kept him upright and positioned exactly where he wanted him, never allowing him to get far. The sound of their bodies coming together, of skin slapping against skin and the slick suction that happened every time he pulled out was loud enough that Frankie was certain there was no way Sage couldn’t hear.

Thinking about the King of Gold had him tensing, and Rook felt the change immediately.

He lifted him again with a hand around his throat, pushing Frankie down on his surging cock. “The King of Gold doesn’t matter,” he growled against the curve of his ear. “Nothing else matters but this. You wanted to know what it felt like to have me inside you, well, Aardwolf, what does it feel like?”

Frankie opened his mouth but the only sound that came out was a wail as Rook drove into him roughly. Splayed over his lap the way he was, there was nothing Frankie could do about the position. He couldn’t close his legs or readjust, was forced to take it however the prince wanted him to.

He liked kinky sex, but he wasn’t typically one for giving up control, even in the bedroom, so the fact that this was working for him, that being at Rook’s mercy was making his dick hard and weeping...

At his lack of a verbal response, Rook fucked into him roughly, his heavy cock plowing forward.

Frankie screamed, fully seated on that solid cock now as Rook rocked against him, his crown stroking against his prostate with every gyration of his hips.

“Come for me, Frankie,” Rook said, breathing against his nape. “Tell the King of Gold you’re mine.”

He pinned Frankie beneath him, pressing him into the mattress with his weight as he forced his thighs even wider around him. Then he picked up the pace, pounding against Frankie’s ass so hard the bed started to shake beneath them. With each thrust he made sure to hit that place, until he had Frankie gasping and writhing under him.

Frankie’s hands tightened in the sheets, twisting the fabric so hard his knuckles turned white as that pressure began to build to the point of it almost being torturous. Rook’s cock battered his insides to the point he was almost certain he was going to bruise, and he was forced flat against the mattress his own member trapped between his stomach and the comforter.

The material rubbed against his dick, the friction building as Rook practically dragged him back and forth over it, until it finally became too much.

Frankie completely forgot about any attempts to remain quiet as stars burst behind his eyes and he screamed, the second orgasm more intense than the first, his vision winking in and out as Rook fucked him through it.

The prince pumped into him until Frankie was spent and his voice was hoarse, only then did he shove himself deep one last time and fall over the edge himself. He growled against Frankie's neck as he came, filling Frankie up with a flood of warmth as he held him still beneath him.

Though he was pretty heavy, Frankie didn't feel like he was being crushed, not that he could move even if he did. His muscles had all turned to jelly, and if not for the fact he could still feel Rook inside of him, he probably would have thought he'd lost all feeling too.

His eyes were starting to drift when suddenly that cock began to grow, and he gasped and tilted his head.

Rook was staring back at him, and he grinned.

"Absolutely not," Frankie stated, his refusal followed quickly by a lengthy moan as that cock stretched him once more.

"We can't stop now," Rook said, "You haven't done anything you need to be punished for yet, and I really," he nipped at Frankie's earlobe, "*really* want to punish you."

"Sadist," Frankie snapped, sucking in another breath when Rook began to move against him. Despite his insult, his eyes fluttered closed.

"I promise," Rook chuckled, "we'll both enjoy it."

Frankie forced himself to meet the prince's gaze. Once he was certain he had all of Rook's attention, he lifted a hand and covered his mouth.

Curiosity had always been his downfall. Why stop now.

Chapter 25:

Frankie spent a long moment staring at the ceiling while the demon prince snoozed at his side. Rook's leg was tossed over his, keeping him pinned to the bed even in sleep. Morning had come, and sunlight was spilling in through the cracks in the blinds, but Frankie hardly noticed, too distracted by his chaotic thoughts.

What the actual fuck had he been thinking?

He'd *slept* with Rook Dalibor. The Rook Dalibor. The same one who would be returning to his world and fighting a major battle soon.

A groan slipped past his lips and he slapped a palm over his mouth to keep from waking the man at his side, wincing some when all that did was remind him of the games they'd played last night. Pretty much all night.

A quick glance at the clock on the end table told him he'd only been asleep for a little over two hours and it was tempting to groan again. He was going to feel like shit all day, and not just because he wasn't yet sure if he'd be able to walk. Rook hadn't exactly gone easy on him, and they'd gone another few rounds before the prince had even begun showing signs of tiring out.

Frankie was achy and exhausted and...kind of in a state of bliss, honestly.

He couldn't recall the last time he'd felt this content, and that scared him. The plan had been to give into the sexual attraction once and for all and be done with it. Move on so he could focus on what mattered—getting Rook and Sage back to Visera. But now...He tilted his head on the pillow, turning to peer at the sleeping prince.

Sometime in his sleep Rook had switched forms, and the man next to him had long red hair and horns. His breathing was soft, his features relaxed in a way they rarely were when he was awake, and the whole sight was altogether too peaceful.

Too casual.

Frankie should be freaking out about how there was a literal demon right there, not to mention a demon who'd come from another realm, and yet that comfortable, warm feeling in the center of his chest never dissipated, no matter how long he looked. He'd already had a soft spot for the character before he'd discovered Rook was real. For all he knew Rook was merely appeasing his own curiosity and now that they'd done that he'd be over it.

Slowly, Frankie eased up, taking a second to try and figure out how to dislodge himself from beneath Rook's hold without potentially waking him. He needed to get out of here and find time alone so he could think without fear of—

The breath whooshed out of him as he was suddenly tugged back down flat on the bed, a heavy arm settling across his chest to keep him in place when he would have struggled.

Almost lazily, Rook opened his eyes, blinking a couple of times before nuzzling closer to Frankie's side. He ran the tip of his nose down the length of Frankie's jaw and inhaled deeply, letting it out on a sigh that had warm air fluttering against Frankie's neck.

He shivered in response, earning him a chuckle from the prince.

“Where are you sneaking off to, Aardwolf?” he rumbled, tucking his face against the curve of Frankie's throat and shoulder in an intimate gesture that had Frankie's heart skipping a beat.

Was the demon prince...cuddling him?

“Um,” he tried to come up with some kind of excuse but his mind was a blank with Rook holding him the way he was, “nowhere?”

Rook snorted and he felt him smile against him. “Good answer.”

He'd been worried Rook would thank him for the fun time and that would be that, but he hadn't considered even for a second that he'd be...whatever this was. More than ever,

Frankie felt adrift. The whole purpose of last night had been to get an answer to one of his many questions, but instead he felt like he was left with more confusion.

“What is it?” Rook must have felt how tense he was, lifting so that his face hovered a few inches over Frankie’s. His brow furrowed as he inspected his face before he ran the pad of his thumb lightly over Frankie’s full bottom lip. “What’s wrong? Did you have another nightmare?”

“No, I—” He wasn’t going to say he was caught off guard by this tender side of him. “It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

Rook’s eyes narrowed and he cocked his head. “Pretty sure we’re past keeping secrets,” he leaned in closer so that their mouths were close enough to almost touch, “or have you forgotten how deep inside of you I’ve already been?”

Frankie sucked in a breath.

“Should I jog your memory?”

“Wait.” He planted a palm against Rook’s chest to keep him from closing that small bit of space between them.

“If this is about Sage—”

“If he didn’t hear last night,” Frankie stopped him, “he’s deaf. No, this isn’t about him.”

Rook paused. “Then?”

Frankie bit the inside of his cheek, really not wanting to admit the truth but finding no other way around it that Rook would buy. Scrunching up his nose he closed his eyes, unable to meet Rook’s gaze due to the sheer embarrassment of it all.

“I’m sore,” he mumbled.

“What?” Rook tilted his ear closer to him, but it was hard to tell if he was being serious or just messing with him.

“I’m sore,” Frankie stated a little more loudly, grinding his teeth in annoyance at having to repeat himself, “*down there.*”

Rook laughed, the sound airy and filled with mirth before he rolled off of him and stood. He stretched at the side

of the bed, clearly unabashed by his nakedness and then turned to glance down at Frankie over his shoulder. The look he gave him was devilish and had Frankie's dick twitching as though it hadn't gotten the message that the rest of him couldn't handle any more.

"Later then, Aardwolf," Rook promised silkily, gaze roaming pointedly down his body. "Wouldn't want to break you permanently, now would we?"

"Comforting," he drawled, sitting up himself. He yelped a second time when Rook grabbed him by the arm, hauling him off the bed.

He lifted him, tossing him up a little to adjust his hold, grinning when that had Frankie clinging to his neck for support.

Frankie glared at him.

"You said you were sore," Rook teased, heading for the door. "You might not be able to make it to the shower on your own, since I'm the reason for it, I should take responsibility."

"Respons—" Frankie's eyes widened when he tossed open the door without warning and stepped out into the hallway.

Completely naked.

"I'm not wearing any clothes!" he gasped, only for them to round the corner and come face to face with Sage.

The king's mouth fell open slightly before he could get a hold of himself and he coughed, choking on the sip of coffee he'd obviously just taken. His cheeks stained red but he didn't immediately drop his gaze, which only made Frankie feel worse.

He buried his face against the crook of Rook's neck, the most he could do to hide in this situation, and was at least grateful that with the way he was being held his leg was covering most of the important bits.

"Keep staring, King of Gold," Rook said darkly then, "and I'll cut out your eyes."

“You’re the one walking us around in the nude,” Frankie hissed, slapping him on the shoulder. “Just, hurry up and get to the bathroom before I die of humiliation and your only option is to bath a corpse.”

Rook grunted, his smile returning as he turned and headed toward the bathroom. “Dark, Aardwolf.”

Frankie didn’t lift his head again until the telltale sound of the bathroom door shutting behind them came and he was certain they were out of sight of Sage. Once he did, he glared at Rook all over again.

The demon prince shrugged and set him down on the counter. “You aren’t as shy as you like to pretend.”

When Rook turned to flick on the shower, Frankie stuck his tongue out at his back.

* * *

To say it was awkward in the car on the ride to campus an hour later would be an understatement.

As soon as they were done cleaning up the two of them had gone to the kitchen and found Sage waiting there. After some coffee and uncomfortable silence, they’d agreed they should go searching for signs of Neko.

Frankie had kept his head bowed, unable to meet either of their gazes, and had snatched the car keys off the kitchen table before Rook had gotten a chance to.

During the drive, he had a good excuse not to look at them, keeping his eyes on the road, but the trip itself didn’t take nearly as long as he wished it would, and before long he was pulling into the parking lot nearest the science wing.

“Is it going to be like this for the rest of the day?” Rook finally spoke as soon as the engine had quieted.

Frankie whipped his head to the side, finding that the prince was already staring back at him.

Rook had his right shoulder propped against the side of the door, his arm curved and his fingers absently resting against his bottom lip.

It drew Frankie's eyes there and he swallowed, hating that the sound was almost audible in the near silence of the cramped car. Now that he knew what those hands, and that mouth, was capable of, he couldn't keep his mind from wandering. Last night had been...explosive and chaotic and most likely a massive mistake.

But he didn't regret a single second of it.

It'd been a while since his last partner, but that didn't mean Frankie had forgotten how good sex could be. He'd had good sex in the past, but it'd never been anything like what he'd experienced with Rook. Everywhere the prince had touched him seemed to buzz, shoots of electricity sparking beneath his skin with each caress of those long fingers. And his tongue...

Frankie gulped a second time, and the corner of Rook's mouth turned up ever so slightly. He blinked, noticing it, and then straightened.

"Don't be embarrassed, Aardwolf," Rook cajoled, "I enjoyed our time together too. In fact, I'm already anticipating our return home so I can have you again."

"I am sitting right here," Sage stated, reminding Frankie that he was, in fact, there.

"I thought perhaps you hadn't heard enough last night," Rook said back without skipping a beat.

"Oh my god." Frankie was out of the car so fast, the tips of his ears practically on fire as he slammed the door and sucked in a deep gulp of the chilly fall air. He sent a glare over at Rook when the prince got out a moment later.

"What?" Rook shrugged innocently, placing his arms on the top of the car. "We were all thinking it."

"Please stop talking."

"Seriously," Sage agreed, stepping out as well.

"Just making sure we're all clear on where we stand," Rook replied, holding Sage's gaze pointedly.

“Crystal,” the King of Gold snapped. He headed toward the path swiftly, not bothering to wait for either of them.

Frankie frowned after him. “You didn’t have to make him uncomfortable.”

Rook quirked a brow. “Is that what you think just happened?”

“Obviously,” he waved after Sage who was already a good ways away, “look how fast he’s going.”

He tapped his knuckles on the top of the car and laughed. “You’re adorable, Aardwolf.”

“What?” Frankie didn’t get it.

With a shake of his head, Rook turned, slipping his hands casually into his front pockets as he strolled after Sage. “Are you coming or not?” he called when Frankie didn’t immediately follow, though he didn’t turn to see as much.

“Damn demonic hearing,” Frankie grumbled, scowling at his back when Rook chuckled again, having clearly heard him. He was grateful at least that Sage didn’t have the same super ears. Last night was already embarrassing enough whenever he pictured the King of Gold in the living room, lying on the couch, possibly with a pillow over his head, trying to sleep through all the moans and—

He cut that thought short and jogged after Rook to catch up.

“Maybe we should have picked a less busy day.” Frankie glanced around at the quad as soon as they made it to the sidewalk. As per usual, there were students everywhere, moving to and from classes. He didn’t make it to this side of campus that often, but he should have considered that weekday mornings would be packed all over.

“We don’t really expect to find Neko chilling around anyway,” Rook said. “We’re just hoping to catch a glimpse of him or the Gloom. Maybe overhear someone talking about it with their friends.”

That was true. In broad daylight there was little chance that Neko was just walking around. He wouldn't really have reason to, unless he was exploring or trying to pass the time. He'd been stuck here for a while now. Was there a chance that he'd blended enough to make friends of his own?

Neko wasn't really the type, but if meeting Rook and Sage had taught Frankie anything, it was that he'd only ever gotten a glimpse at part of who the characters in his book were. He'd never seen the full picture. They being real people with real lives meant there were a ton of things that happened off the page that Frankie and other readers had never gotten to witness. And those things made all the difference.

He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Rook as they made their way to Sage, who still hadn't stopped moving ahead.

Rook appeared relaxed, at ease despite their purpose for being here. Was it because of last night, or because it'd given him something to tease Sage with?

Frankie wanted to ask, but couldn't bring himself to actually do it.

What would he say, anyway? Should he just outright ask what the hell was going on between them now? If there was anything going on at all? Was last night just a spur of the moment fling? Or a mistake? It didn't seem as though Rook regretted it at least, but that was a small comfort.

Inwardly, he scolded himself for wasting energy on this. It wasn't like it mattered in the long run. Rook was going to go back to Visera and Frankie was going to stay here and finish the story. Once that was done, that was it. He'd have no connection to Rook, wouldn't be able to even glimpse what the prince was doing or who he was with in his realm. Frankie would simply be cut off.

The book was going to end, meaning so were they. It was better if he stopped whatever this was now, before it got more complicated and...

Frankie came to an abrupt halt.

It was already too late, wasn't it? He didn't sleep around, it just wasn't his style, and last night had meant more to him than he'd spent all morning trying to play off like it did. He wasn't okay with the notion that it was merely something in the heat of the moment for Rook. He wanted the other guy to like him. Wanted him to want him.

Because Frankie wanted Rook. Always had.

Even when he'd appeared and was a total dick, a part of Frankie hadn't been able to let go of those fantasies he'd clung to in the dark after spending all day writing chapter after chapter. Those nights his mind had wandered and his thoughts had turned to the demon prince, even during the first volume when Rook hadn't actually made a physical appearance. Frankie had known what he looked like early on, it just hadn't ever felt right to introduce him on the page, so he'd held off, kept the image of Rook for himself for a few months before finally finding the perfect moment.

That moment had been for Rook and Lis though. A way for Frankie to introduce the second male lead and have him fall for the female lead. He'd been a little jealous of Lis then, when he'd read the first draft of that chapter back. She'd just been going about her day when Rook had caught notice of her. At the time, Frankie had just been broken up with by his boyfriend of over a year and he'd felt like he'd never be good enough to attract anyone ever again.

But last night Rook had slept with him. That had to mean something, didn't it? Rook, who had Lis back home but had slept with Frankie instead.

Although...He'd given up on Lis because he'd realized how in love with Sage she was, hadn't he?

Frankie's brow furrowed and his hands fisted at his sides. Was there a chance that he'd merely been a rebound for the demon prince?

"Aardwolf," Rook's gentle tone broke through Frankie's thoughts and his head snapped up, eyes regaining focus. "What's going on in that pretty head of yours?"

Frankie didn't know what to say, so he kept quiet, and Rook took that as an invitation to get closer.

“What's wrong?” He asked, a mischievous grin forming. “Oh, I get it. You're still achy.”

“What?” Frankie was about to ask what he meant when it hit him. “No!”

“It makes sense,” Rook took another step toward him, closing the distance between them, “I was pretty rough with you last night. Maybe tonight we should try something more,” he lowered his mouth to the side of Frankie's head so he could speak directly against the curve of his ear, “gentle.”

Frankie shivered and Rook chuckled and blew a breath against him on purpose. He slapped a palm over his ear protectively and glared, but that only made Rook laugh again as he moved back.

“If that's not it, then what's wrong?” Rook questioned, that teasing glint still in his dark eyes.

“Are you two going to waste the entire day or what?” Sage called them then, the exasperation clear in his voice. He was a good twenty or so feet away, and his yelling drew the attention of passing students who glanced over at them curiously.

Rook clucked his tongue. “I guess you'll have to save it till later.”

Yes, he would. Because Frankie was going to have to have a talk with him about it, whether he liked it or not. Especially if Rook was going to keep making jokes about them having sex again.

They met up with Sage in front of the science buildings, large three story structures made of glass and metal. There was a skyway set between the two buildings, a walkway with the entrance inside that connected to the building next door. The one on the left was where main classrooms were located, while the one on the right was where all the labs were held. This walkway was built over the paths that led to other side of the buildings and toward the south quad.

Sage was watching people move through the skyway, staring at them through the glass walls with interest. When Frankie stopped next to him he pointed with his chin. “Can we go up there?”

“This isn’t the time to play around,” Rook stated with a roll of his eyes, though the words came out lacking any bite.

Sage had a thing about heights that they were all aware of, and considering the walkway attached at the top floor of both buildings, hovering fairly high off the ground, it wasn’t surprising that he wanted to check it out.

“Sure,” Frankie said, leading them toward the entrance, “we should check out the labs too just in case.”

“Remember, we’re not actually hoping to find Neko himself,” Rook reminded.

“It’ll be great if we do though.” Sage grabbed the door before Frankie could, holding it open for him with a gentle smile that Frankie returned.

Rook glowered.

“I’m going to ask around and see if anyone else has any details about the ghost story,” Frankie told them, mostly to stop Rook from acting on his suddenly bad mood. “Don’t bother anyone who looks like they’re rushing to class. You’ll just piss people off and we won’t get anything.”

Neko was a soldier, so it made sense that he’d pick a place on campus that felt secure and stick with it. Weird that it happened to be the science building, but then again, with all the open lab rooms, Frankie figured it probably made it easy for him to find somewhere empty to hole up and sleep. It was also close to the cafeteria, though how he was managing to find food without money was beyond him.

Actually, there was a lot of this he didn’t understand, but he figured Neko must have made friends with someone. The man wasn’t old, appearing around the same age as Rook and Sage who were in their mid-twenties. He’d pass as a college student for sure.

They weren't looking for Neko specifically anyway, because there was nothing about him that would have stood out. The Gloom however would have been more noteworthy. They just had to pretend they were writing a paper for a class about on campus ghost stories and ask around about it.

Simple, really.

Frankie's phone buzzed in his back pocket as he was approaching a student seated at one of the tall round tables set by the glass windows and he paused. A glance at the screen showed it was Lucy. He'd been expecting it, but he still felt a rush of nerves hit him.

"You guys go ahead, I have to take this," he motioned to Rook and Sage, ignoring the way Rook hesitated and answered. "Hey, Lucy, what's up?"

"Frankie, is this a good time?" she didn't sound nearly as enthusiastic as she usually did, which was a pretty big tell.

He settled down at one of the free tables, expecting this to be a long talk. "Is this about the recent stuff?"

"You know I'm always in your corner, and we've always been really big on trusting your process and letting you write whatever you wanted to but..."

"It's bad," he helped her out, figuring he might as well since he already knew that was the case.

She blew out a breath. "I wasn't going to put it like that but, it's a bit inconsistent, yes. The publisher asked me to talk to you about it before they actually begin editing. They're sort of hoping that you'll change your mind. What happened to what we discussed before? I thought you'd outlined the final chapters?"

Frankie didn't typically do outlines, but since it was the end of a three year project, he'd wanted to in order to get all his ducks in a row. Ironic, all things considered.

"Yeah, things just sort of..." he struggled for the right words and settled on, "got away from me. I actually wanted to talk to you about it too. I'm thinking about scrapping it all and starting fresh. We have the time."

“We do,” Lucy quickly agreed. “We’ve got more than enough time in fact!”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “You sound pretty excited.”

“I was honestly worried that you were going to be upset,” she confessed. “I didn’t want that. I love your work, you know I do, and I’m already looking forward to whatever you decide to write next, but...I read what you sent in and I have to agree with the publisher on this that it’s just not adding up. Is there a reason you wrote yourself in suddenly?”

“It isn’t me,” he lied. “I just couldn’t think of a name and used mine as a placeholder. But you’re right. None of it works. I’m not sure what came over me. Probably just the pressure of ending something that’s been such a major part of my life for so long, that’s all.”

“But you’re going to try again? You’re sure you’re all right with that? I don’t want to pressure you, Frankie. This is your story, always will be.”

“You’re not,” he reassured. “We’re totally on the same page, promise. Tell Maggie I’ll get her a new Chapter Eighty-Three soon. But, can she hold onto the old ones until I do? Then she can delete all copies of those other files.”

“I don’t think they need to be deleted,” she said. “We should keep them in case you change your mind or something.”

“No,” in order for this to work, he was certain that they needed to get rid of all copies of the other version, “they have to be deleted. I insist. That’s my one request so please pass it on. I’ll rewrite the last five chapters, but they need to agree to delete the ones I’ve sent in.”

Lucy sighed. “All right, Frankie, if that’s what you want.”

“I do. Just, remember to tell them not to do it until after I tell them I’m ready.” It was stupid, and he should be more concerned about fast tracking this plan and finally putting an end to this madness but...Rook’s worry about losing his

memory was suddenly all Frankie could think about. What if that really happened? What if he erased the chapters and Rook forgot things?

Maybe it was selfish of him to want a little more time but...he did. He wanted it. He wanted the chance to speak with Rook about what this was between them. Even if there was no chance of an actual future. Frankie didn't quite understand what was so important about what happened while they were in Visera, but Rook seemed to think something was, and until he explained it, Frankie couldn't risk his memories vanishing.

So he'd put it off, at least a little bit longer.

"Give me a couple of days," he said. "I want to be sure I have enough time to get it right."

"Sure thing," Lucy agreed. "I'll relay the message. Thanks for taking this so well, Frankie."

"When you're right, you're right," he told her, smiling when that had her laughing. "I'll talk to you later."

"Bye."

They hung up and he exhaled. A couple of days should be enough time for them to track down Neko and get Rook and Sage back through one of the gateways. Once they returned to Visera, Frankie would be able to rewrite Chapter Eighty-Three, and all the rest of the chapters from there. His safest bet would probably be to clear his schedule and write it all in one sitting. Really just get it all finished that way there was no chance for surprises to happen.

Then...it'd be over. His connection to Visera and to Rook would be done. Once the words The End were typed out there'd be no turning back.

Why did he suddenly feel like he was about to cry?

Frankie brushed at the corner of his eyes and stood, annoyed with himself and his reaction. He'd only taken a few steps when commotion caught his attention.

Students were rushing down the main stairs in a serious hurry, almost as if they were running from something. None of

the fire alarms were blaring however, and it was impossible to tell with the crowd what they were exiting the building for.

“Hey,” Frankie caught sight of one of the classmates in his Oceanography class, a girl named Beth he’d spoken to on a couple of occasions, “what’s going on?”

She clutched her notebooks tighter to her chest and glanced over her shoulder. Her skin was pale and she was shaking. “They found something in Lab 6.”

Frankie frowned. Lab 6 had been undergoing renovations since the roof had caved in after a big snowstorm last winter. Students complained about how long it was taking all the time, but since there were more than enough rooms in the buildings, it hadn’t really affected class scheduling so wasn’t too high on the to-do list.

As far as he knew, the room had been locked and no one was allowed access. Since he’d never had a class there himself, he hadn’t even remembered it, but now that she was bringing it up, he realized with a start that it would be the perfect hideout for someone like Neko.

“What did they find?” He half expected her to say a homeless man or even a demon—though the people of Iron appeared just like everyone else, but maybe he’d summoned the Gloom once discovered—so was completely shocked when she ended up telling him something different.

“A dead body,” her voice trembled and she moved out of the way of the crowd, practically shoved against Frankie in the process.

Automatically, his hands went to her waist to help steady her, but he only held her a second before she was suddenly being ripped away from him.

Rook, who hadn’t been there a moment ago, held her arm and glared at her until she tugged herself free.

“What the hell?” Frankie growled, shoving at him and putting himself between them. He turned an apologetic look her way, hoping to calm her nerves some since the poor girl looked absolutely terrified.

Beth wasn't the type of person to roll over when someone mistreated her, which had to mean this whole ordeal with the dead body had shaken her worse than Frankie imagined. Instead of yelling at Rook, she held her tongue.

"I'm so sorry," he told her, "he's an asshole sometimes. Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

"I barely touched her," Rook stated behind him. "You can't say the same."

A flicker of understanding entered Beth's eyes and she held up a hand. "Oh, is this your boyfriend, Frankie?" She glanced at Rook. "My bad. He was just helping me. We should get out of here. Professor Weat called the police and wants everyone to clear the building so there's no further risk of contaminating possible evidence."

That caught Frankie's attention. She'd said they'd found a body but... "What does that mean?" he asked. "You make it sound like they think the person was murdered or something."

"He was," she clarified, swallowing. "I saw it. He was... Someone killed him for sure."

"Did you recognize him?"

She shook her head, turning as the last bit of the crowd poured out through the double doors. Retreating a step toward them, she repeated, "We should get out of here."

Frankie didn't bother stopping her as she sprinted away, looking back to Rook instead just in time to see Sage coming down the stairs now as well. "That wasn't cool, and we're so going to talk about it later," he warned Rook before turning to Sage. "Did you see it?"

"No," he replied, not having to ask what Frankie was referring to. "The teachers already sectioned it off. No one can get near."

"We can't stay here." They were the only three people still lingering and if the police really were on their way to investigate a possible murder, they couldn't be. It'd look suspicious as all hell, especially since neither Rook nor Sage

attended Willow Wills University. “Let’s head to the cafeteria, see if there’s anything else we can find out.”

This being a college campus and all, news spread like wildfire. If they had a hope of learning anything about the body, their best bet was to remain on school grounds a while longer.

Chapter 26:

“Did you get anything at all before everything went crazy?” Frankie asked once they’d settled in the coffee shop on top of the cafeteria.

Since there was more foot traffic here and the windows faced the science building, he figured there was a better chance of overhearing something. They’d gotten coffees and a single muffin which sat untouched on the white plate between them. The circular table they were crowded around was set in the center, close enough to the entrance so Frankie could hear if anyone was talking about the body in the hall.

The cafeteria had two floors, with the dining section on the first level. Stairs inside attached to the hallway connecting the front doors to the coffee shop and also led down into the midst of it, so chatter from below drifted up toward them. They were too far from that to make anything out, but Frankie thought it might be too loud down there anyway.

“A few people mentioned they’d heard about the shadowy figures,” Sage answered first. He was seated between Frankie and Rook, facing the window, and kept his gaze firmly on the science building. “But no one I spoke with had witnessed anything strange firsthand.”

The police had already arrived a few minutes ago, the cruiser parked close to the building. Two officers had disappeared inside and an ambulance had pulled in shortly after they had.

“One girl told me she saw something crawling across a classmate’s legs,” Rook said, “but when she pointed it out and the classmate looked, it was gone. She thinks it might just have been a trick of the light.”

“So, really, we’re just waiting for details on the body before we can confirm whether or not anyone has been hurt by Neko.” Frankie should have insisted they go after the Iron sooner. He’d always known that Neko was dangerous, he’d

just stupidly figured he would lay low and wouldn't risk attacking anyone in this world.

Neko was a follower, someone who only operated through orders. Without them, he rarely made his own big decisions. Stealing Frankie's laptop and attacking him with the Gloom to take his necklace was already pretty impressive, and should have clued Frankie into the fact that Neko was desperate enough to act out of character.

"Did you see it?" a male voice caught his attention and he turned in time to see two students walk into the café. They headed up to the counter, checking out the chalkboard menu hanging over the back.

The café wasn't very large, with only a dozen or so tables spread about and walls painted a rusty shade of red. A single barista stood behind the counter, a guy Frankie had seen on campus and may or may not have had a general education class with before. He didn't rush the students to place their order, clearly as interested in their conversation as Frankie was.

"Beth noticed the door was cracked open and the two of us were curious," the other student, another male, shuddered as he spoke. Frankie didn't know either of them, but the one who'd apparently been with Beth had sandy colored hair, while his companion had dark brown hair cut short.

"So you saw it?" the dark haired one asked, grimacing. "I'll take a white mocha, large, thanks."

"Yeah, he was propped up against the far wall, beneath the windows. He looked..."

"Looked what?"

"I don't know, man, but he'd been there a while." He ordered as well, but Frankie didn't catch it, too busy frowning over that last part.

The body had been there a while? And no one had noticed at all? He got that the room was locked, but there had to have been a smell, right? And if they'd found the door

suddenly open...Had the killer returned to the scene of the crime? Why?

For the life of him, he couldn't think up a reason Neko would do something like that. Not to mention, if he'd stashed a dead body there, Neko wouldn't have been able to use the room as a hideout either. Like he'd sleep next to a corpse? Hell no. Neko sucked but he was still a person, not a monster, and there was certainly nothing wrong with his sense of smell.

"Who do you think killed him?" the dark haired one's drink came first and he grabbed it off the counter, holding it in both hands as they waited.

"I don't even know who he is," the blond replied.

"Was his face too messed up to recognize him or something?"

"No, his face was fine. I mean, gross and kind of bloated or whatever. But, like, fine. I just don't think I knew him."

The dark haired one made a face. "Weird, you practically live in that building. I thought you knew everyone."

"Me too." He grew solemn for a moment and then seemed to snap out of it when his order was handed over. "I'm glad now that I don't."

"Yeah it would totally suck if that was one of your friends." The two of them headed toward the exit, their conversation continuing but growing faint as they moved further away.

"You don't think..." Sage began, only to stop himself before finishing. "This is a very large school, is it not?"

Frankie nodded, understanding where he was going with that. There were hundreds of students on campus, it was odd that someone who spent all their time in the same building didn't recognize the body, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. Hell, Frankie hardly went there yet he'd been there today. Plus all the other students who went just to complete their one class for gen-ed requirements.

“It wouldn’t make sense if it was Neko anyway,” he said aloud.

“That’s true,” Sage hummed in agreement, leaning back in his metal chair. “I also highly doubt anyone here would be capable of getting the jump on him. He’s a highly trained Iron warrior.”

“What are the odds a student murdered another one and stashed the body?” Rook asked, and Frankie nibbled on his bottom lip, seriously considering it.

Obviously there was no way of knowing if there’d been an accidental killing, or even if there was a psycho among them. Like he’d already mentioned, the fact that there were so many students made it hard to guess, it also made it sort of possible but...Nothing like that had ever happened at the school before, and it’d been in operation for almost a hundred years.

Frankie deflated, a wave of guilt practically consuming him. “It was Neko, he killed someone. It had to have been him.”

“We don’t know that,” Rook said.

“It’s the most logical explanation,” he argued. “Someone probably broke into the lab and found him there, and he killed the poor guy, either on his own or with the Gloom.”

“If he’d murdered someone, why would he stick around all this time?” Sage asked. “That kid made it sound like the body had been there for a while.”

“He could have been wrong.” How many dead bodies had that blond guy seen, really?

“This is getting us nowhere,” Rook said, “again. We don’t have enough information to make a judgement call.”

“So what do you suggest?” Sage was legitimately asking. At least they were finally sort of getting along.

And all it’d taken was a dead body.

“We should hang around a bit longer,” Rook told them. “See if there’s anything else we can find out through word of mouth. It’s only been an hour since the body’s discovery. The police will open a case and start questioning people to see if they’ve seen anything. Someone has to know something.”

“Someone has to know the identity of the dead guy,” Frankie nodded, “you mean.”

“Once we have his identity, we’ll be able to move on from there.”

They needed to know who the dead person was and how long they’d been deceased. Then they could come up with a better idea of where Neko currently was and where he might have been staying all this time. If people were still seeing shadows in the science building, that meant he couldn’t have gone far.

“Too bad we can’t search ourselves.” Sage turned back to watching the building out the windows.

Rook eyed him a moment and then snorted. “You’re more upset that you won’t be able to walk down that hallway, aren’t you?”

“It’s a bridge,” Sage corrected, “and it’s very interesting.”

“Oh my god.” Frankie dropped his head in his left hand.

Rook stood suddenly and at his questioning look he shrugged. “Bathroom.”

“Down the hall on the left,” Frankie said, chugging a good amount of the vanilla latte he’d ordered, enjoying the burning sensation as he poured the hot liquid down his throat. He wished he could wash away the guilt he was feeling along with it.

“Can I ask you something?” Sage waited until it was just the two of them before speaking.

“I’m sure the investigation won’t take that long, and they can’t keep the building closed forever,” Frankie said. “We

can go check out the skyway before you leave.”

“No, that’s not it.” Sage waited until Frankie put his paper cup down and met his gaze. “What are your plans?”

“My plans?”

“For you and Rook.”

Frankie blinked at him. For some reason, he hadn’t seen that line of questioning coming, but he totally should have.

Sage sighed. “Do you actually like him? I don’t understand.”

“To be honest,” he said, “neither do I. But yeah...I... like him.”

“Remember when I kissed you?”

The surprises were never-ending today, it appeared.

“I was thinking of someone else when I did it.”

“I know,” Frankie admitted. “It was written in the chapter.”

Sage cocked his head. “Did it say anything about who that person was?”

“No.” He almost mentioned that Lis had told him a few things, but kept that to himself when it was obvious Sage wanted to open up to him.

“His name was Silas. He was the most beautiful person I’d ever seen. We grew up together, and I don’t know when our friendship changed into something more but it was like one day I blinked and we were a couple and that was that.”

“Did your father approve?”

“He was too busy dealing with the war to care,” Sage said. “Maybe he thought it was young love and would fizzle out on its own. Maybe it would have.”

“But then he died.” Frankie saw the flash of sadness cross over his expression before he seemed to get a handle on it.

“He was reckless, we both were. Comes with being young, right? He thought he could prove himself and be made my official head of guard. My father was supposed to choose one later that week. He organized a funeral instead, not just for Silas, but for many others as well. The death toll that battle was high.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Frankie still had a hard time wrapping his head around the fact that he hadn’t known any of this before. It seemed like such a visceral part of who Sage was and what had shaped him as a person, and yet Frankie, someone who’d been actively writing his story for over three years now, had been completely unaware.

“You remind me of him,” Sage confessed, the corner of his mouth tipping up shyly. “That’s why I kissed you while under the influence of the cuth poison. I knew you weren’t really him, but I couldn’t help myself. It was wrong of me.”

“You already apologized.”

“Not for everything.” He grew quiet for a moment before seemingly deciding on something. Resting his elbows on the table, he leaned in closer. “I love Lis, but—”

“Wait,” Frankie held up a hand. “I don’t think you should finish that sentence.”

“Why not?” Sage asked. “If your plan to delete the chapters works, then I might not remember any of this anyway.”

“You won’t remember anything that happened in the chapters I wrote,” Frankie corrected, “which only includes scenes from Visera. You’ll still have memories from everything said and done here.”

Sage gave him a look. “You can’t be that naive, Frankie. If you rewrite the chapters completely, then Rook and I will never have the opportunity to come here. It’ll be as though it never happened. And if it never happened...”

They’d have no recollection of it.

Frankie went cold. He hadn’t thought of that. He’d figured that Rook and Sage would return to their world and

sort of just, take off from where their characters had left. Not that it would erase their experiences here because, how could it?

“This world is real,” he insisted, aware of the slight panicked note in his tone, “it’s not like yours. I can’t just undo things that have happened already. Which means there’s no undoing the fact that you and Rook were both here.”

“That’s true, but it doesn’t guarantee that he or I will remember. For us, it could be like it never happened. Because the characters you’ll be writing about need to forget in order to complete the story the way you intend it. Isn’t that the case? Isn’t that why you stopped me just now?”

Frankie didn’t want to have this conversation anymore. There was no way of knowing if any of these assumptions were true, any more than they could know if their previous ones were. It might not even work at all. The chapters could end up set in stone even if he had them deleted.

“I have feelings for you,” Sage said softly. “Maybe that’s because you remind me of Silas, maybe it isn’t. It doesn’t really matter. All that matters is I do, and that’s not very heroic of me, is it? To have feelings for someone who isn’t the female lead. In order to successfully end the story the way you hope, I can’t remember these feelings.”

“That’s why you think you’ll end up forgetting?”

“That’s why I think the story, or whatever entity controls these things, won’t let me remember.” He didn’t sound all too upset about that possibility. “Lis and I should be together. We make a strong team, and what’s more, our union can bring peace to the kingdoms. And I do still love her. I love her enough to forget all about this world and everything in it.”

“Including me,” he gathered.

Sage nodded. “Yes, including you.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

“Because even though we don’t know what’s going to happen with Rook and I, you’re right. You live here and

there's no way to alter your memories of us." He hesitated and then said, "You're in love with Rook."

"I'm not sure I'd call it that." Yet. But he was close. He knew that. Didn't mean he was ready to admit it.

"Call it whatever you want, it isn't going to change your ending, Frankie. He and I have to go back. We can't stay here. We don't belong."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes," he didn't mean to snap it, but the word came out harsher than he'd meant and he didn't retract. For the first time ever, he wasn't very fond of the King of Gold, even if he was only telling the truth.

Maybe because of it.

"I've felt the pain of loss," Sage told him kindly, reaching out to cover his hand on the table with one of his own. "I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Especially not someone I care about."

"I appreciate that," Frankie exhaled, forcing himself to calm down. It wasn't fair to take his emotions out on Sage when he was only trying to help. "But it's already too late."

"Too late for what?" Rook's angry voice had Frankie jolting in his seat, quickly pulling his hand out from under Sage's. The prince had just come back and was standing a few feet away with his arms crossed.

Sage rolled his eyes. "You really need to do something about that jealousy issue of yours. It's incredibly unattractive."

"Too late for what?" Rook insisted, eyes locked on Frankie, completely ignoring the King of Gold.

He'd wanted to talk to him about this anyway, hadn't he? Since they'd been caught, he may as well get it over with. Sage had managed to gather his courage and confess even though he'd been completely aware that it would get him nowhere. Frankie could do the same.

Even if his confession brought him to a dead end as well.

“To get over you,” he offered, surprised when the statement came out firm and clear.

Rook seemed taken aback.

“It’s too late to get over you,” Frankie elaborated, just in case. Slowly, he stood and made his way over, stopping just in front of him. “So I’m not going to bother trying. Is that okay?”

He held his breath as he waited for a response, his heart sinking a little more with each passing second.

Then Rook closed the distance between them, the tips of his boots connecting with Frankie’s sneakers. He reached out and delved his fingers through the hair at the back of Frankie’s skull, pulled him in close so that their lips were a mere breath apart.

“Oh, Aardwolf,” he drawled, silky and suggestive, “there wasn’t even a slight chance I was going to let you run away from this. You can’t escape me.”

“You should work on that gross possessiveness too,” Sage chimed in.

“Shut up,” Frankie and Rook told him at the same time.

Frankie laughed, and then he pressed his mouth against Rook’s in a rough kiss, not caring in the slightest that both Sage and the barista were watching them.

Their time was limited, and he wasn’t going to waste another second of it.

Chapter 27:

“Stop looking in the rearview mirror like you forgot your puppy,” Rook said bitterly a few hours later. They were already close to Frankie’s street, yet he couldn’t seem to stop checking behind them, and apparently the prince had noticed.

“Are you sure this is a good idea? To leave him behind like that?” It was just the two of them in the car.

They’d stayed on campus for most of the day, but hadn’t gathered much more information. The police were apparently going to be showing around a composite sketch of the dead person to see if anyone recognized him since they hadn’t been able to identify him on their own. It was getting late and they’d already eaten both lunch and dinner on campus, so Sage had suggested Frankie and Rook head back to the apartment while he stayed there in case there were any updates.

Frankie had been against it at first, but Sage had mentioned the quiet area in the library and how it was open twenty-four-seven. He’d have a warm place to sleep once he got too tired and it made more sense for one of them to stay there.

It was important that they figure out this whole dead guy thing, so he’d eventually agreed.

But that didn’t mean he didn’t feel bad about it.

“Maybe—”

“Stop worrying about the King of Gold,” Rook told him. “You’re starting to make me jealous. Again.”

Frankie sighed. “Sage is right, you really do have to work on that. It’s not a cute look.”

Rook sent him a glare as he pulled into the parking lot of his apartment building and shut the car off. Undoing his seatbelt, he threw his hand over the back of Frankie’s seat and swiveled to face him. “Look me in the eye and say that.”

Frankie scowled. “Threatening me isn’t cute either.”

“You like me like this,” Rook disagreed, smirking. “You like me a little rough, a little bad. A little...” He licked his lips, drawing Frankie’s attention there instantly, “possessive.”

Sure, Frankie was into all of that *in the bedroom*. But when it came to daily life...

“What happened with Beth,” he said, “back in the science building, you can’t do things like that. I like you wanting me,” he poked him in the center of the chest with a little more force than necessary, “but I don’t like you acting like I’m an object or hurting other people who get too close. That’s not all right.”

“Fair.” He grabbed Frankie’s finger and squeezed comfortingly. “I was worried that she was attacking you, but —”

“This isn’t Visera,” Frankie interrupted. “And if you’d taken a second longer to look, you would have realized what was actually going on. Don’t make excuses for your shitty behavior.”

“Can I tell you something I don’t like about you as well?” He didn’t ask it out of anger, which was the only reason Frankie found himself nodding. “Please stop letting Sage touch you. I understand you don’t have feelings for him—you don’t—”

“I don’t have feelings for him,” he clarified. “Not even a little.”

“Good.” He blew out a breath. “That’s good. But still. I hate seeing him all over you. I hate that he thinks he’s better than me and therefore a better suitor for you. He isn’t. No one is. I’m your best choice, Frankie.”

That should have made him ecstatic to hear, but instead he felt a well of sadness open up within him, threatening to swallow him whole.

“I spoke to Lucy, my agent, earlier,” he said. “She agreed to talk with the publishers about deleting all of the

copies of those chapters. You have to go back, Rook.”

“Maybe I don’t.”

Frankie pulled away. “That’s not—”

“Let’s stop talking about this for now,” he suggested. “And let’s stop sitting in the parking lot which isn’t warded and get inside where it’s safe.”

Since that was a pretty smart plan, Frankie went along with it and the two of them exited the vehicle and headed toward his apartment. He still felt bad about leaving Sage behind, but it made sense and it was too late to go back now since they were already here.

He flicked the light in the hallway on and removed his shoes, making his way toward the kitchen for some water. He’d only gotten halfway there when suddenly he was swooped up and carried the rest of the way by Rook.

“What are you doing?” He was set down on the kitchen island, but before he could jump off, Rook was there caging him in.

Rook settled between his legs, forcing them to part to accommodate him, and placed his arms at either side. In this position, Frankie was a couple of inches higher, and Rook had to tip his head back to stare up at him, but he was grinning.

Frankie recognized that smile.

“Seriously? We just got here,” he reminded.

“And we’re alone,” Rook pointed out, trailing his fingers up Frankie’s right thigh suggestively.

“Last night—”

“We fucked hard,” Rook cut him off. “Tonight, I promised to show you gentle.”

“And if I say no?”

“Are you saying no?” That grin never slipped.

They both knew where this was going, and they both knew Frankie wanted it just as badly as he did.

“No,” he said, and then laughed, “no, as in I’m not saying no. But I am saying,” he pushed Rook’s arms away, “I’m not having sex with you in the kitchen, which is a shared space. My roommate might not be here right now, but that doesn’t change the fact I’m not doing it where she also happens to eat her Lucky Charms every morning.”

“All right.” Rook grabbed him, lifting Frankie enough he could slip his hands beneath his ass.

Frankie wrapped his legs and arms around him as he turned, heading from the kitchen to his bedroom. He didn’t bother shutting the door, but he did set Frankie down carefully, letting his feet touch the beige carpet before releasing him.

“Better?” Rook asked and Frankie pretended to think it over.

“No,” he shook his head and tugged at the hem of Rook’s black dress shirt. “You’re still wearing too many clothes.”

Rook covered his hands with his own, urging him to let go of the material. Slowly, he pulled it out the rest of the way himself, fingers working the bottom button free, and then the next, and the next. He made his way up them, eyes never leaving Frankie’s, holding him captive in a spell of sorts as he undressed for him.

As soon as all the buttons were undone, he slipped the material off his shoulders and down his arms, allowing it to drop to the ground in a pool at his feet. For a moment, he merely stood there, allowing Frankie’s gaze to roam over his bare chest, the air surrounding them seemingly crackling with more and more energy with every passing second.

It wasn’t until he took a step forward that Frankie finally snapped out of it, hands settling over his wrists when Rook grabbed onto his waist and walked him backward toward the bed. The mattress sunk a bit under his weight, but Frankie hardly noticed, too focused on Rook.

The prince undressed him meticulously, with skilled fingers and languid movements that only helped heighten the

anticipation. Once he had him completely naked, he pressed a palm to his shoulder, gently pushing him down until he was lying on the bed, staring up at Rook.

“Pants,” Frankie demanded, though he couldn’t get his voice to rise higher than a whisper.

Rook chuckled and obliged, slipping out of his jeans and then his boxer briefs just as slowly as he’d removed everything else. By the end of it, Frankie was already a panting mess, and that fact didn’t go unnoticed.

He retrieved the bottle of lube from the drawer and squirted a generous amount onto his fingers before resting a knee onto the edge of the bed and climbing on. With his other hand, Rook eased Frankie’s legs apart to accommodate him, then dropped down over him, propping himself up with his left arm. Still holding Frankie’s gaze, his right hand reached down, smearing lube down the globe of his ass cheek before diving further in to find his opening.

Rook teased him with light touches at first, circling the tip of his finger around his hole, barely even pressing against that tight ring of muscle.

He hadn’t even penetrated him yet and Frankie was already a writhing mess, unable to stay still beneath him. With a mewling sound he lifted his hips, momentarily pulling away from the touch only to come back down on it harder. Unfortunately, that didn’t do anything to spur Rook on, and he kept to his own, torturous pace.

“Can I try something?”

“God, yes.” Frankie would let him do whatever he liked so long as he did *something*.

The air heated and a second later Rook’s tail flicked around his body. He remained in his human form otherwise, but that tail snaked forward, dipping low as soon as he was certain Frankie had caught sight of it.

Frankie sucked in a sharp breath when he felt the narrow tip press against his entrance. It wasn’t unpleasant, merely foreign, and he tensed up a bit before he could help it.

“Relax,” Rook coaxed, still prodding him with his fingers as well, “accept me, Aardwolf.”

That tail pushed in deeper, wrapping itself around one of Rook’s fingers as they both slipped inside of Frankie’s body. Once there, the triangular head spread, opening him and stretching him from within. It wasn’t as wide as the prince’s cock, but it certainly had more reach than his fingers alone.

A strangled sound emitted from Frankie’s parted lips and his back bowed on the mattress.

Trusting he was fully stimulated now, Rook finally slipped another finger inside, delving deep and curving up against his prostate. When that had Frankie’s hips coming off the bed again, he grinned and repeated the motion. It hadn’t been that long since their last fuck, and Frankie’s body sucked his fingers up greedily with very little resistance.

It wasn’t until he added a third that Frankie felt the first spark of painful discomfort, though it quickly faded, replaced by a steady stream of pleasure that had him tossing his head back against the mattress and moaning. He spread his thighs wider, lifted his hips a little higher and held them there while Rook pumped in and out of him.

The second he came close to coming, Rook stopped, pulling out and leaving him empty.

Frankie’s eyes opened and a frustrated whine rumbled up his throat.

“Patience,” Rook said as he lined his cock up with Frankie’s entrance, “I’ll give it to you. Promise.”

Frankie opened his mouth to tell him to hurry, but Rook must have known what he was about to say and took action before he could. The words turned to a drawn out cry as he was suddenly filled with all nine inches of the prince’s cock.

Rook settled himself over Frankie with his arms at either side of his head, giving him a moment to adjust to the weight and size of him before slowly pumping his hips. He pulled halfway out and rammed back in, withdrawing each

time at a slow pace only to thrust forward in a swift motion that had stars sparking behind Frankie's eyes.

Frankie lost all sense of self, clinging to Rook's shoulders, digging his nails into his back with every forward stroke. When lips were pressed against his he reacted, flicking his tongue to lick them before forcing his way into Rook's mouth. He tried to kiss him desperately, but Rook wasn't having it, slowing the pace so that it was more in tune with the unhurried thrusts of his cock.

"Gentle," he chided when Frankie nipped at him, "remember?"

"I don't like gentle," he stated, only to have Rook quirk a challenging brow.

"You sure about that?" He lifted up enough to glance down at Frankie's hard dick between them. "Someone didn't get the memo."

"Shut up." Frankie pulled him back down, wrapping his legs around him to dig his heels into his ass and force him in deep. He moaned, eyes rolling back in his head at the pressure.

Rook trailed soft open mouthed kisses down the length of his jaw and over his neck, regaining control of the pacing when that had Frankie sighing beneath him. Moving further down, he latched onto one of Frankie's nipples and sucked, causing him to arch into the touch. "You're so hot like this."

"Faster." Frankie kept his eyes squeezed shut, tightening around Rook's cock every time he felt it bury itself deep inside and hit that spot he liked. He made a frustrated sound when he wasn't immediately listened to. "Rook."

"Tell me you want me," Rook said, and the words poured out of Frankie's mouth almost before he'd finished the sentence.

"I want you. I want you so bad."

"How?"

“Hard,” he growled, that frustration growing even more. His dick was heavy and tight and he was so close to the edge, but not quite there.

“Couldn’t you get that from someone else?”

Frankie’s eyes popped open and he frowned up at Rook, too blissed out to realize how serious of a question that actually was in the moment. “What? Of course not. I don’t want anyone else. I just want you. And your amazing cock. God, your cock feels so good. But I don’t want it gentle. I want it rough. I want to feel like you want me back.”

Rook faltered for a second but another warning growl from Frankie quickly had his hips rolling once more. “How can you say that when I’m already fucking you like this? Obviously I want you back.”

He pouted a little before he could help it. “Sure, because I’m here. But what if Lis—”

Rook bent down and bit his nipple. Hard.

Frankie yelped and tried to pull away from the sharp pain but Rook settled more of his weight overtop him, pinning him more firmly to the mattress. He glared, but the prince didn’t seem all that affected by it.

“If you do something bad you get punished, remember?” Rook shook his head, a flash of anger in his eyes now as well. “Don’t bring her into this. Don’t bring anyone into this. It’s just you and me in here, Frankie. It’s just the two of us.” He started picking up the pace, the tempo of his thrusts increasing with each word. “If I wanted someone else I wouldn’t be with you now. Wouldn’t be doing this.”

His next thrust plunged into him so deep Frankie’s mouth popped open on a silent cry of pleasure.

“You’re mine, Frankie.” Rook started hammering into him, so that his voice had to combat against the loud sounds of their bodies slapping together and the bedframe shaking and clattering against the wall.

The possessiveness in his tone sent Frankie over the edge and the orgasm hit him almost from left field, sneaking

up on him despite how attuned to the building pressure he'd been. He cried out, gasping through the continued spearing of Rook's hips, come splattering between them.

Even after he'd gone limp beneath him, Rook didn't let up, pounding his hole brutally as he panted above him.

By the time he finally reached his peak as well, Frankie was so lost to sensation all he could manage to do was groan as he felt the warm gush of fluid fill him.

Rook collapsed over him, but he didn't stay motionless for long. In less than a minute he was back to trailing light kisses across Frankie's sweat soaked skin, nipping lightly at his collarbone and his chin.

He pressed his mouth to the curve of Frankie's ear. "I don't want anyone else either."

That promise, spoken so sweetly, had the same effect on him that Rook's possessive words had and Frankie found himself growing hard all over again, his dick pressing against the prince's stomach.

Rook glanced down and laughed. "You're so easy to please, Aardwolf."

"So then please me."

With another laugh, Rook met the challenge head on.

Chapter 28:

Rook and Frankie were making coffee the next morning when they heard the front door open and slam shut. The prince went to check out who it was first, pausing in the entrance to the kitchen with a frown.

“How did you get here?” he asked a moment before Sage came into view.

The King of Gold brushed past him, coming over to the kitchen island to stand across from where Frankie was. His blond hair was disheveled and his cheeks were pink, as if he’d run across the parking lot to the front door, or...

“You didn’t come from campus, did you?” Frankie asked, unable to contain his worry. He placed the mug he’d been holding down onto the granite with a heavy clacking sound and rounded the island. Just before he was about to reach for Sage’s forehead to check his temperature, however, he caught himself, eyes traveling over the man’s shoulders to where Rook was still in the doorway.

Rook quirked a challenging brow, almost as if silently daring him to do it and Frankie made an awkward apologetic sound and retreated a full step.

Sage didn’t need him to fuss after him anyway, and Frankie didn’t want to hurt Rook’s feelings. It’d probably taken a lot for the prince to confess that it bothered him—no matter how obvious it’d been, what with him acting like a jealous nightmare every time Sage was within breathing distance. Frankie wanted to respect his boundaries.

“I ran here,” Sage confirmed, seemingly unaware of the silent communication between Rook and Frankie.

“Why didn’t you just ask to borrow someone’s phone and call?” They hadn’t left Frankie’s phone with him, but he had given the King of Gold his phone number. “I would have come to pick you up.” Although it was only a ten minute drive, walking or running would have taken around a half hour.

“I forgot phones are a thing here,” Sage said, and that made Frankie concerned, because Sage wasn’t the forgetful type. Something must have happened. Sure enough, he continued with, “The police are sending around sketches of the dead man to try and identify him. I got a good look. It’s Neko.”

“What?” Rook was next to them in a flash. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Sage nodded. “Yes, it’s definitely him. And there’s more. Judging by the state of decomposition, they’re estimating that he’s been dead for almost a week now,” he met Frankie’s gaze, “possibly even two.”

“That’s....” he shook his head, “that’s not possible. He attacked us. He’s attacked us multiple times since his arrival.”

“Did you ever actually see him there?” Sage asked.

“Aside from the first occasion when he came into the apartment,” Rook thought it over, “no.”

“Sure, but there’s no one else in this world who can control Gloom,” Frankie insisted, feeling panic settle over him. “It had to have been Neko.”

“Or whoever killed him.” Rook didn’t appear as though he liked that concept any more than Frankie did.

“No.” He refused to believe that they’d missed something this major. “No one else came through the gateways. I would have known.”

“Like you knew when I did,” Rook motioned toward Sage with his chin, “or when he did?”

In both occasions, Frankie had been none-the-wiser. He never would have known about Rook’s appearance or his existence if he hadn’t shown up in front of him that night. If someone else had come through from Visera and they didn’t want Frankie to know it’d be easy enough for them to hide.

Shit.

But who would hurt Neko?

“Gold, Silver, and Bronze aren’t exactly in an alliance,” Frankie said, “but there’s no one in your kingdoms that’d come through and purposefully stay hidden. Look how easy it was for you two to find out about the books.”

He wasn’t trying to brag, but Gold and Silver was everywhere. It was super popular and even talked about on campus. Assuming someone had found and murdered Neko in that science room, that meant they’d been there around the other students and the library. Not to mention the flyers that had been hung up that week of the signing event...The images of Sage, Lis, and Rook had all been printed on those flyers.

“You’re missing the most important part,” Sage replied, waiting until he had both of their attention again. “Neko was murdered yet you two have been continuously attacked by Gloom. That means it’s another Iron who came through, not one of ours. An Iron is here, one powerful enough to take down someone like Neko.”

“Was it a sneak attack?” Rook suggested. “Perhaps it was someone Neko trusted and they caught him off guard.”

“The killing blow was to the front,” Sage informed them. “I was able to overhear the police talking amongst themselves. It was definitely a murder, and he struggled. There are several wounds to his chest but they haven’t been able to identify the murder weapon yet.”

“He fought with his attacker and lost?” Frankie had to sit down. Neko was one of the most fearsome fighters the Iron had, it would have taken a lot to go toe to toe with him and win. “Who the hell is it?”

He pulled out one of the bar stools beneath the island and dropped down into it, mind reeling. There was no one specific that came to mind. People hated him, sure, but they were all loyal to Talia and the Iron Kingdom. Killing off one of their strongest warrior’s right before a huge battle would be idiotic. Even if this murderer hadn’t been aware of Talia’s plans to put an end to things, they were still in the midst of a war.

“They’re brazen,” Rook said, crossing his arms. “Whoever this person is, the fact that they took out Neko and have been hanging around us all this time makes them even more dangerous than we first suspected.”

“He stole my necklace,” Frankie remembered suddenly. “When I did the check, I was writing about Neko. What if this person has already returned to Visera?” They wouldn’t have known about it because they didn’t know who the person was. He couldn’t try writing about someone he didn’t know the identity of. “Think about it, we haven’t encountered any of the Gloom since.”

“It’s only been a couple of days,” Sage pointed out, though it was obvious that he was considering it himself.

“They were trapped here and they wanted a way home,” Frankie kept going, trying to fit all the pieces together. “Maybe they saw Rook was with me and that’s why they never showed themselves. They tried stealing my laptop to write them back into the story, and when that didn’t work, they opted to steal.”

“Why didn’t they just take the necklace off one of you from the beginning?” Sage asked.

“They might not have known about them,” Rook guessed. “We didn’t at first.”

“There was a Gloom in the library when we went through the gateway that first time,” Frankie said. “And, even though I didn’t see anything weird at the electronics store, whoever this person was could have been there too, watching us and seen the necklace in my pocket move.”

“If someone has been watching you, that means they’ve been waiting for the right opportunity.” Sage began pacing in front of the kitchen island. “We’ll have to hope that they’ve used the necklace to return to Visera already, if that’s the case.”

“Why?”

“Because if they’re still here,” Rook said, “then they may be upset at having Neko’s body discovered.”

“It could have ruined their plans or outed their presence to us sooner than they would have liked,” Sage confirmed. “They might act rashly as a repercussion. But if they’re no longer there, that means they’ve already abandoned this world and most likely don’t intend to return to it. Therefore, Neko’s discovery won’t make a difference, and they won’t know about it anyway.”

“All right,” Frankie nodded, “that all makes sense, but —” His phone started ringing, cutting him off and he frowned when he saw Maggie’s name on the caller ID. For a second he debated whether or not to ignore it since they were in the middle of an important conversation, but decided not to and picked up. “Hey, Maggie, what’s up?”

“Frankie, I thought we agreed that you were going to work on rewrites?” Maggie sounded perplexed on the other end.

“Yeah,” he frowned, “we did. I’m figuring out my original notes and will start soon. Didn’t Lucy tell you I asked for a couple of days? Why?”

“You sent us a new chapter this morning,” she told him. “We’re just a bit lost. If the plan is to scrap everything from Chapter Eighty-Three on, why did you send us Chapter Eighty-Four? I also don’t think you’ll be able to wrap up the entire story with only one more chapter with how you left things off.”

Frankie slowly got to his feet, panic momentarily causing his tongue to stick to the roof of his mouth and make him unable to speak. When he finally got a hold of himself, his voice came out a little shaky. “What do you mean? I didn’t send you anything. What happened in the latest chapter?”

“It came from your email,” Maggie said, though there was doubt in her tone now. He heard the sound of a mouse clicking on the other end, no doubt her pulling up the file, and then she confirmed, “Yeah, it says it right here that it came from you.”

“I didn’t send anything,” he told her. He’d played dumb before because it was easier, but now...He’d literally

just spoken to them about redoing everything. There was no good way to explain that he'd then sent her another chapter without it seeming like he was messing around. This was his career, and one he hoped to have for the rest of his life. A flash of anger smothered some of the panic and his expression hardened.

"My laptop was stolen recently," he ended up telling her. "I only just bought a new one the other night, which is why I asked for some time before I sent over the new Chapter Eighty-Three. I didn't log out of anything on the old one before it was snatched, so whoever sent that chapter must have used it."

"Seriously?! That's horrible! Did you report it?"

"I didn't want to bother with all the paperwork," he said. "But I'll change my email password now and make sure everything is secure then get back to you. Until then, please don't accept anything that supposedly comes from me. I promise, I didn't send that chapter this morning and I'm still very much invested in what we talked about the other day."

There was a brief pause and then, "That's a relief. I was really thrown for a second there, Frankie. I'd already spoken with everyone on the team about the changes and we were all excited. We're big fans of Gold and Silver and we want the best possible ending, same as you."

"Agreed." Frankie ran a hand through his hair. "I still want to proceed with starting over."

"Good," she sighed, "that's good. I haven't told anyone about this chapter yet, so for now I'll just pretend I didn't see it."

"Thanks, Maggie." Frankie hung up and instantly opened his email app, heading to the sent folder. The email that she'd received was there and he clicked it, scanning the new document "he'd" supposedly sent.

Rook and Sage must have realized that something big was happening, because neither of them bothered breaking his

concentration to ask about it. Instead, they waited while he read.

Frankie paled as he made his way through the chapter. It wasn't very long, around four or five word doc pages only, and felt rushed. He could see why Maggie had been so concerned about whether or not he'd be able to conclude the story with only one chapter left to go. By the time he'd made it to the end, he felt sick to his stomach, unsure how he was going to explain to the others what exactly had happened.

He couldn't figure out *how* it'd happened either. Since all three of them were here, it didn't make sense that a new chapter had come in without him having written it himself. Unless...

"The person who stole my necklace is definitely in Visera," he realized. That was the only explanation for how a new chapter had come through. "My publisher got a new chapter this morning. And..." he decided to just blurt it out, "Lis was attacked."

"What?!" Sage grabbed onto his arm, forcefully turning him toward him.

"I thought you never sent that chapter?" Rook was referring to the one Frankie had been working on when he and Sage had left him at the apartment.

"I didn't," he clarified. "Because I didn't, Lis was still at Sage's at the start of this one," he waved the phone, "with Cue. The two of them were waiting for Sage to get back and had only just agreed to go out looking since it'd been a while. They'd only made it part way into the forest before they were ambushed by Iron. But, it doesn't say who the Iron were. They were wearing masks apparently."

His mask. The white wolf with golden detailing. Something else that only someone who'd been here, in his world, would know about.

"Where were the rest of my guards?" Sage demanded.

Frankie shook his head. "I'm not sure why, but they weren't there. Lis and Cue went alone."

He swore.

“How did it end?” Rook asked.

“Cue was stabbed by one of them and left there, but Lis was taken. She was knocked out. That’s all it says.” Frankie couldn’t even begin to guess who was behind this attack. It wasn’t exactly Talia’s style—at least, not the version of her that he understood—and now that they knew for a fact it couldn’t be Neko...

“The chapter sent itself to your publisher,” Rook considered everything calmly, though it was obvious by the tight knit of his brow that he was every bit as worried as Sage was, “so it’s safe to assume that you’re right, and that means whoever was stalking you here returned to Visera. From experience, that’s the only way a new chapter can write on its own without your help.”

“There weren’t any descriptions that you could follow?” Sage cursed again when Frankie told him no. Then he turned to Rook. “We need to get back. Now. You still have your necklace. Open a gateway and let’s go.”

“We don’t even know where she’s been taken,” Rook stated, only to have Sage glare at him.

“Of course we do! She was attacked by Iron! It’s got to be Talia or at least someone working for her.”

“If this person was really watching us,” Frankie pointed out, “then they probably know the rules same as we do. This could be a trap.”

“So, you what? Want us to wait around?” Sage growled. “No way. It could be too late already. We need to go.”

Frankie flinched at the harsh tone, but Rook took him by the elbow lightly and shifted so that he was partially behind him and further from the pissed off King of Gold. It was clear that Sage just wasn’t thinking straight at the moment, and that Frankie shouldn’t hold the animosity against him, but it still stung.

“He merely wants us to be smart about this,” Rook said. “You can take my necklace and—”

“We both have to go,” Sage cut him off, sounding incredulous. “You can’t be serious? You can’t stay here knowing that Lis is in danger. What if she’s killed? Would you be able to live with yourself?” He paused and then glanced between the two of them. “Oh, I get it. Because you have a new love interest suddenly Lis doesn’t matter.”

“Stop it,” Frankie demanded, hands tightening into fists at his side. “I get that you’re freaking out but that’s no excuse for being an asshole. None of us want anything bad to happen to her.”

“This is your fault,” Sage turned on him. “If you’d spent more time rewriting the story and less time taking the Prince’s dick—”

Rook shoved the King of Gold clear across the room with his magic, a cloud of red shooting from his palm, slamming into Sage’s chest.

Sage hit the wall with a loud thud, rattling the shelves and the tiny jars of seasoning kept there. He recovered quickly, however, leaping back onto his feet, gaze wild and furious.

“Enough!” Frankie put himself between them, holding out his arms to keep them at bay. He’d deal with how hurt he was by Sage’s words later, when he was alone and it wasn’t a waste of time to bother with things like that. As of now, Lis and figuring out the safest way to rescue her was more important than his bruised ego. “This isn’t helping! We need an actual plan! If you rush in there and fall into a trap, then no one is going to be able to save her!”

Sage grew quiet and dropped his gaze.

Rook picked up Frankie’s phone from where he’d dropped it onto the counter when he’d used his power on Sage and quickly read the document. He was a much faster reader than Frankie and it only took him a minute to get through the entire thing. When he got to the detail about the Cuthwolf

mask his eyes slipped toward him briefly before going back to the screen.

“They had to have taken her back to Talia’s lair,” he concluded once he was finished. “There’s no mention of a threat or a ransom note left behind, so it’s the only logical explanation. They also left Cue there, still breathing.”

“He’s a witness who can tell others that it was Iron.” Frankie hummed in agreement. “That’s also why I think they want you guys to show up.”

“It’s definitely a trap,” Rook set the phone back down, “and we still have no idea who this person we’re dealing with actually is, but...She was injured when they took her. There’s no telling what they’ll do next.”

There was no reason for them to have taken Lis at all. Talia was at war with all of Visera, not Lis specifically. It was true that Lis held a vendetta against the Iron Queen due to the fact she was behind Lis’s brother’s death, but Talia wouldn’t have cared much about that, considering she’d murdered many people’s loved ones over the years.

“They’re luring you there.” It was the only explanation that Frankie could come up with. “They’re using Lis because they know you’ll both show up, and once you do, they’ll have all three of the royal bloodlines from Gold, Silver, and Bronze. If they take you guys out, especially Sage, the rest of the world will have to give in.”

Sage, Rook, and Lis were known for being the strongest forces in the fight against Talia and her desire to rule all of Visera. With them defeated, many would be too scared to continue the fight.

“Even if it wasn’t Talia specifically who sent the stalker to us,” Frankie continued, “she’s still got to be behind all of this. She’s the one in charge. They’ll have taken Lis to her for sure. If they stole my laptop, that means they could have read those other chapters sent to my publisher. In the first one, I tell Lis I know where Talia is hiding.”

“Which would explain why they didn’t bother leaving a note behind,” Rook stated. “They know we’re aware of where to find them.”

“A direct attack is our only option,” Sage rejoined the conversation then, though he’d at least calmed himself enough that his voice no longer came out aggressive. “If we join forces, it doesn’t matter what they have waiting for us, we’ll stand a good chance of rescuing Lis and defeating Iron once and for all.”

“We will,” Rook said, “if we have Frankie helping.”

It wasn’t hard to figure out what he meant by that. “The second you two re-enter Visera, I’ll be able to write about you again.” He rushed from the kitchen, leading them into the living room where the box with the new laptop still sat. Frantically, he began tearing the packaging open, pulling out the pieces and immediately went to plug the computer in and boot it up. “Since gateways are based on location and not objects, this should work just as well in sending you guys there. Once you are, I’ll immediately begin writing a new chapter.”

“With Frankie controlling what happens,” Rook reassured Sage, who was frowning and trying to follow with the limited information he had on the rules, “he can ensure that we’re able to get there, help break Lis free, and destroy Talia. The second she’s dead the rest of Iron will heel.” He glanced back at Frankie. “And you get the ending you always envisioned.”

“But I only have one chapter to do it,” Frankie reminded, nibbling on his bottom lip as he started setting the computer up. It always took a while for a new computer and he went through the motions as quickly as he could while the three of them continued formulating this new plan. “I’m going to have to tie everything up quickly, but efficiently. If it doesn’t make sense, the story will alter details on its own, like we saw with Neko’s name the other day.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to write a new identity for the stalker?” Rook asked.

“He wasn’t mentioned in the official story,” Frankie thought it over but ended up shaking his head, “but I don’t think so. He’s a real person who visited this realm already. I don’t think there’s any way to change that. But I can make sure that we don’t see them. Instead, I can write something like Talia was done with him and killed him herself, not wanting anyone else around to take credit for what she believes will be her greatest accomplishment.”

“Killing us.” Rook crossed his arms.

“Exactly.” Frankie needed to make sure he covered all of their bases before he started typing so that there was no chance for the story to change things on them. This was too important; their lives were literally at risk here. “In the original ending I envisioned, you’re the ones who ambush Talia. But now I’ll have to write that in reverse. You guys need to collect your people and head to her hideout, but only bring in a few of them. Leave the rest hidden.”

“Have them come in just as Talia thinks she’s bested us,” Rook figured.

“Yeah, the cavalry will arrive, surprising her, and you’ll fight your way to her.”

“How will we know if you’re able to actually accomplish this?” Sage asked.

“We won’t,” Rook answered for him. “We just have to trust that this is our best bet.”

“Why not try erasing all of the old chapters now?”

“Because if it doesn’t work,” Frankie explained, “then we’ve wasted time. We don’t have any of that to spare. Right now, the goal is getting to Lis before anything awful can happen to her.”

They still had no way of knowing if they even *could* delete those other chapters.

“It becomes official once it’s emailed to my publisher,” Frankie told them. “So as soon as I’m finished with it, I’ll send it over. Maggie already knows not to take anything from me so

it'll just sit on her computer. You guys will be fine and then ___”

“I'll come back,” Rook said determinedly.

“*And then* you'll erase everything from Chapter Eighty-Three on,” Sage announced, following closely.

Frankie looked at him. “Then I'll re-write it straight to the ending and send it all at once. There won't be any room in-between for something to go wrong, even if I have to stay up for two days to get it finished.”

His computer was finally set with everything downloaded and ready to go. On slightly wobbly legs he stood and motioned Rook forward. “You can take out the necklace now. I think you and Sage have to be close together for it to work. He wanted it badly enough when I left the last time, that's why he was sucked through, but better safe than sorry. If he's left behind, I don't have any other way of sending him to Visera and you'll be on your own.”

“The story won't work without its main character.” Rook pulled the necklace out from where it was beneath his shirt, but he didn't move any closer.

“I'll give you two a minute.” Sage disappeared back into the kitchen.

“He'll be back in less than that,” Rook stated.

“Yeah, he's really worried.” Frankie couldn't blame him. “Be careful, okay?”

“I should be saying that to you. I don't like this. I don't like leaving you here alone, especially when we still have no clue who the stalker was.”

“This is my world, remember?” Frankie tried to smile but it fell flat. Truthfully, he didn't like this plan all that much either, but not because he was afraid of being here. He was afraid something would go wrong in Visera and Rook would get hurt. Again. “I'll be fine.”

“Don't leave the apartment until I return,” Rook said. “Please.”

“Are you sure you’ll even be able to get back?” He didn’t want to hope, not right now when it wouldn’t change anything but... “I’ll have to delete the chapters as soon as I’ve finished wrapping up this false storyline. You might end up losing your memories after that, and even if you don’t—”

“The way you clung to me when you were sick,” Rook interrupted him, and when Frankie frowned, explained, “That’s the memory I want to hold on to. That’s when it started, these feelings I have for you. I won’t forget.”

“We don’t—”

“I won’t forget,” he repeated more firmly. “I promise I won’t. Now, promise me you’ll remain inside while I’m away.”

“All right.” Since Frankie planned on being busy writing their chapter and keeping them safe by doing so, Frankie didn’t see why he would leave anyway. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

Rook seemed to sense the change that came over him then and he took a step closer, glancing at the open laptop before stalling. He didn’t want to risk accidentally opening the gateway and was clearly torn over being so far from Frankie.

Even knowing this, Frankie couldn’t bring himself to go over there. If he did, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to let Rook go, even knowing that he had to. Lis was a good person and she needed help. Frankie couldn’t allow his personal fear to get in the way of what was right. He just needed to trust that he could control the story from here and keep Rook safe. That was the only real option.

“I am coming back,” Rook reassured him. “I swear.”

He gave another tentative smile, not trusting his own voice to give a verbal answer.

“Frankie,” his gaze hardened, “I am. I won’t abandon you.”

Rook would come back after all of this, but that didn’t mean he would stay. They were still going to have to re-write the story and in order to do that, he’d need to return to Visera

all over again. They both knew this, but neither of them brought it up.

“I won’t abandon you either,” he ended up replying.

“Are you ready?” Sage came in with little more preamble than that, his patience obviously out. “Every second we remain here is another second we risk Lis being tortured or worse.”

“Yes,” Rook licked his lips and then motioned for Sage to follow him closer to the coffee table. “Let’s go end this.”

“Stay safe,” Frankie told them.

“Keep us safe,” Sage replied, but it didn’t come out meanly. “And keep yourself safe as well.”

Frankie nodded.

“I suppose for us, this is goodbye.” Sage cleared his throat. “I apologize for my actions earlier.”

“I understand.”

“Still.”

“Thank you.” Frankie felt slightly overwhelmed and tried hard to keep himself together before them.

Getting to meet his characters in the flesh was already a miracle. Sage wasn’t going to be coming back like Rook, even to give a final farewell, which meant this was the last time they’d ever see each other. It was...a bit bittersweet. On the one hand, he’d be returning to where he belonged and Frankie would be able to give him the happy ending he deserved.

On the other...it was sad knowing Frankie would never get to see him again. Like parting with an old friend.

The necklace around Rook’s neck began to vibrate, cutting the moment short.

“It’s opening,” Rook managed to say a second before there was a gust of wind.

Frankie retreated, getting as far away from the computer as he could, realizing that he'd been stupid and hadn't considered that he might get sucked in too. He held onto the thought that he wanted to stay and not go, hoping it would work in the same way wanting to leave had for Sage. He kept his arm up in front of his face for a while, the air crackling and popping around him, and then everything went still.

Slowly, he lowered his arm and looked up.

To find he was alone.

Chapter 29:

They made it back to Visera with ease, arriving in the same forest outside of Rook's palace and separating for a bit so that they could each gather their forces and put things in order. Knowing that everything was finally coming to an end, that they were going to be walking into a trap and risking their lives for the sake of their kingdoms, left an almost twisted sense of thrill in Rook's gut.

He was excited for things to finally be over, and looking forward to getting his hands dirty. That was the one major downside with Frankie's world—he had no real use for his powers and he didn't need to fight anyone except for the occasional Gloom. And now with Neko dead and the real culprit somewhere in Visera...There'd be next to nothing for him to do back in that realm.

Except for Frankie.

The corner of his mouth tipped up at that thought, and he didn't bother wiping the expression from his face. It'd taken three days for him and Sage to get everything in order, meet again, come up with a set plan of attack with their generals and commanding officers, and set out. A whole, torturous seventy-two hours, each and every one filled with worry for Frankie, even knowing that for his Aardwolf, time would be moving much more swiftly.

Since Frankie only had a chapter to wrap everything up, he'd skim over the details, most likely wouldn't even mention his and Sage's return, and would get right down to business. Rook found himself constantly trying to pick exactly which moment might be the one Frankie started the chapter at, almost like a game to help distract him from the fact they were currently separated by worlds.

He wondered if Frankie knew his thoughts too, or if he'd chosen to write the final chapter in either Sage's or Lis's perspectives. It would make the most sense to do it from Lis's considering she was being kept by the bad guy at the moment, but he hadn't thought to ask before he and Sage had left. The

other option would be to do it from Sage's, as he was the main male lead.

Rook, as the second love interest and the anti-hero of the story, wouldn't be a very smart choice. It made logical sense, yet he found he didn't like how that meant there was an even greater separation between them.

It was almost laughable now, how he'd managed to trick himself into believing he was in love with Lis before all of this. What he'd felt for her was nothing in comparison to what he felt for Frankie, more a curiosity and kinship than anything. She'd been one of the few people who hadn't been afraid or disgusted by him. Who hadn't looked down on him as the youngest prince of Bronze, the one rumored to have a devilish disposition and a flippant view of right and wrong. She'd treated him as an equal and for that he would always be grateful.

But it hadn't been love, from either of them.

Having read Gold and Silver, he understood that for her, Rook had come along just when she'd needed a friend the most. He'd filled that role, given her someone to openly talk with, to be herself with—something she couldn't do with Sage at first because she'd been hiding her identity. She'd acknowledged to herself that Rook was attractive, but she'd never felt anything stronger for him than close friendship.

It'd made him angry when he'd first read it. When he'd first realized that he'd literally never stood a chance with her because the ending of the story had already been predetermined. The leads of a story were always the ones that ended up together. Now, however, when he thought about it, it only made him want to laugh.

Lis and Sage were good for each other, and together they would be able to build a stronger Visera. That was never a role Rook was going to be able to take on, not only because he was the last in line for the Bronze throne, but also because he had never had any interest in ruling a kingdom, let alone two. For him, just getting by day to day was enough. Keeping his

circle of people safe and protected was enough. He'd always been greedy, but never for fame or power.

"Thinking about someone we know?" Sage spoke, and Rook straightened where he stood just outside the tent flap leading into the massive tent at his back.

He'd been staring absently up at the night sky, lost in thought, and hadn't even realized the other man had arrived. Foolish, considering they were currently camped out in the middle of the woods, close to enemy territory. Another day and they would break off into smaller parties, with the larger ones heading in the wrong direction to create a decoy while Rook and Sage led the real attack straight to Talia's doorstep.

"We know a lot of the same people," Rook said, gathering himself before turning to stare at the King of Gold, who'd approached from the side of the tent.

"Surprising, isn't it?" Sage came up to his side, slipping his hands into his pockets. His hair was still short, but he was back in his usual clothing of deep brown leathers. "It was an altogether interesting experience."

"Tomorrow and the day after will be as well." That's when they planned to initiate the attack. Tensions were high in the encampment, with men and women seated around small fires, voices soft and low.

Sage glanced out at them, a mix of soldiers from all three kingdoms. "I haven't seen Ivan since this morning."

"He's off on a personal assignment," Rook said.

"We need all the help we can get here."

"He's needed elsewhere. This is nonnegotiable. Worry about your own people, King of Gold."

Sage grunted. "How will you operate without your second in command?"

He was mostly being a sarcastic ass, but Rook answered anyway. "I've got Bon and Lionel. We'll get to Lis and put a stop to Talia's reign. Unless you're concerned about your own soldiers?"

“I trust them,” Sage said.

“Then we’ll be fine.”

“And Frankie?” Sage tilted his head, catching Rook’s gaze again.

“Frankie will be fine as well.” He had to be.

Sage hummed in understanding. “You’re not at all what I thought you were, Prince of Bronze.”

“Funny,” Rook turned back toward the entrance to his tent, “you’re exactly what I thought you were. A royal pain.”

* * *

Someone screamed nearby, but Rook couldn’t bother taking the chance to look over and see who it was.

They’d walked straight into an ambush, despite all of their careful planning, and were in the throes of a brutal battle. Iron and Gloom surrounded on all sides, preventing them from getting any closer to the throne room where Lis was supposedly being kept.

Rook and Sage had made it through the secret underground passage that Bon had been able to discover with little complication, but they hadn’t been able to sneak their way through the actual Hidden Palace with as much luck. Granted, they’d known that Talia would be expecting them; the hope had been she wouldn’t know *when*. Sending most of their army the long way around was supposed to have thrown her off and bought them time.

“What is Frankie doing?!” Sage called over to him, slashing his sword straight through an Iron soldier. Blood splattered across his face, staining his pale blond hair, though he hardly seemed to notice, already swinging at another opponent. Another scream had Sage cursing. “He’s killing our people!”

Frankie couldn’t make this easy on them, Rook knew. This was a book and his job and he’d need to make the final battle believable but... Taking a look around, the carnage was off-putting. The Gloom outnumbered them five to one, and

their attacks were more brutal than their Iron masters because they messed with their minds.

The screams all came from people who'd been swallowed by the creatures, same as Frankie had been back on campus that night. Once they were incapacitated it made it easy for an Iron soldier to deliver a killing blow.

"Something's not right," Rook realized with a deep sense of dread that formed a pit in his stomach. There was too much death, they were losing too heavily. Frankie would want to make it believable but he wouldn't want to paint them into an impossible corner, and from the looks of things, that was where they were headed.

Sage killed another Iron then destroyed a Gloom on his way closer. "What? Do you think something happened to Frankie?"

He didn't want to believe it, however...

"This wasn't the plan," he pointed out. Sure they hadn't really gone over one at length with Frankie in their rush to leave, but this definitely wasn't the type of thing Frankie would allow. Before, maybe, but now that he knew these people he wrote about were real? Never.

In the corner of the massive stone hallway, Lionel was gripping an injured shoulder and barely holding onto his sword. Rook couldn't even see Bon or Cue in the mass of bodies, so there was no telling whether or not either of them were okay.

Frankie wouldn't harm the people closest to him and Sage. He was positive of that fact. "Either this is all an extremely, over the top elaborate scheme, or..."

"Something's not right," Sage repeated with a curt nod. "I agree. But what can we do about that from here?"

"Nothing." Rook shot out a hand, blasting an Iron back and away from Sage before he could strike. "We just have to fight as best we can and trust that Frankie can do the same with whatever is happening on his end."

“You don’t sound all that concerned,” Sage pointed out.

“I’m a mess and all I can think about is finding a gateway and forcing it to open for me,” Rook corrected tersely, “but that isn’t possible, so all I *can do* is stand here and fight and try to save Lis like originally planned. Are you with me or not?”

Sage opened his mouth to reply, but before he could get a word out a loud bang pierced their eardrums.

Rook tilted his head back, eyes going wide as a massive crack split across the ceiling.

There was no time to get out of the way when the chunks of stone began raining down on them all.

Chapter 30:

Lis couldn't move her right arm, but she wasn't overly concerned about it. She'd had worse done to her in the past, and was confident that as soon as she managed to shake loose from her binds, she'd be able to pop her dislocated shoulder back into place. Already, she could sense night descending, even though there was only the one tiny square window set in the ceiling on the opposite side of the vast, stone room.

Even if she couldn't get to it, seeing a stream of moonlight should be enough to give her a slight energy boost. She was just going to have to hope it would do the trick. As a princess of the Silver Kingdom, her connection to magic cast by the moon was stronger than most. If she could just get a boost strong enough to push her energy toward the ropes binding her wrists and ankles...

She knew the others would be coming for her. It'd been a few days already, as far as she could tell, which had to mean they were getting close. But that worried her. The whole time she'd been kept here, she'd seen Talia all of twice. Aside from that, she'd mostly been left tied up in the empty throne room, with only a handful of silent guards as her company.

She hadn't been told why she'd been taken, which most likely meant it was to be used as bait. Had Talia somehow discovered that they found out her location? If so, did the Queen of Iron have the same idea as they had?

Was she using Lis to lure the others so that they could finally put an end to all of this? Sage was smart, he would have come to that same conclusion.

That didn't mean he wouldn't still risk it, however. Lis trusted that for her, he would. Which was why she was so anxious right now. The thought of him purposefully walking into an ambush for her sake made her sick to her stomach. She couldn't lose him, especially not to the Iron, like she had her brother all those years ago.

A shout snapped her out of her thoughts and her head lifted, eyes going straight for the large opening across from

her that doubled as the entrance to the throne room. They were in a massive cave, partially underground, and though the Iron Kingdom was wealthy, Talia had really taken the whole “secret lair” thing to heart.

The room was cold, and aside from a few wall scones and the massive iron throne sitting atop the dais at Lis’s back, empty. She’d been tossed onto the steps and left there, and had only been brought food and water once a day by a servant who hadn’t even looked her in the eyes, let alone uttered a single word.

Maybe that was why her ears perked up at the sound of voices down that corridor, the lack of human sound all this time causing her to be highly attuned to its sudden presence. It was another moment before she recognized who it was, partially annoyed that they weren’t being more cautious, considering they had to be sneaking around.

She waited until they were close enough she could see firelight in the hallway casting their shadows across the entrance, then she opened her mouth to call out and let them know where she was so they could—

Frankie’s phone chimed loudly and he jumped, his fingers hitting random keys on the keyboard. He looked at the string of nonsense he’d typed and cursed, planning on ignoring the call. But when he glanced down at where he’d set the phone off to the side of the coffee table and spotted Ri’s name flashing across the screen, he frowned.

“Hey, what’s up?” he answered, not wanting to ignore the guy who’d been so nice to him all this time.

The sound of heavy breathing and pounding footsteps echoed through the other end of the line, and for a moment that was all that came before finally Ri’s panicked voice slipped through, raspy and terrified. “Help!”

Frankie bolted up off the floor. “Ri?! What’s going on?!”

“Those shadow things,” Ri let out a little yelp and there was a bang before the running footsteps continued, “they’re

here!”

“Where are you?!” Frankie snatched the keys off the table and was halfway out of the room before he remembered what he’d been doing. And how important it was. He froze.

“I’m in the library! Frankie, please, I don’t know—”

The line went dead.

Frankie stared down at the phone, torn. He needed to finish the chapter, but...He’d left things just as Rook and Sage were about to appear and rescue Lis. He’d set it up perfectly for them and if he just left it halfway, it should sit there until he returned to finish writing it. Names had altered on their own before but full chapters had never completed themselves if he’d started it. But still, maybe he should—

His phone went off again.

“Ri?!”

“I’m hiding in the computer room in the library,” Ri whispered, the desperation in his voice ringing clear as day. “What are these things? Frankie, I—”

“Ri?!” The line went dead again and making a decision, Frankie ran for the door.

He’d go help get Ri out of there and then he’d come back and finish the story. As important as that was, if Ri was in danger right now because of him...Rook would understand him taking a half hour to go and help the other guy.

Still, Frankie sped all the way to campus, even running a red light in his haste.

* * *

The lights were all on in the library when Frankie got there, which helped to calm his nerves. Although, logically, shadows existed where there was light to help cast them, so he didn’t let his guard down as he wandered through the stacks on his way toward the back where the computer room was located.

The librarian position was typically filled by a student this late at night, someone who was hired by the school to stay up and watch over the place until morning while the actual librarian clocked out for the day. The front desk was empty when Frankie had passed it, but that didn't really mean anything.

Whoever was manning that position was allowed to leave briefly to get a snack or water or use the bathroom. Frankie had been in here late some nights and had left without seeing a soul before, so it wasn't that unusual.

Which was what he kept reminding himself as he passed through the library, taking in all the empty tables and the quiet stillness of the place.

The door to the computer room was shut when he finally reached it, and the lights in there were off. Frankie hesitated before reaching for the handle, glancing down each end of the hallway he was standing in. The left led back into the heart of the library and he could still see the stacks, while the right led to the bathrooms where he thought maybe he'd be able to find the student librarian if he checked.

But first, Ri.

Slowly, he eased the door open and poked his head inside, trying to adjust to the darkness. All he managed to make out were the long plastic tables and the computer monitors set atop them. The motion censored lights didn't even activate when he took a full step inside.

"Ri?" he whispered as loudly as he could without raising his voice, still searching for any signs of the other guy. "Ri?" He waited, holding his breath as he did, but there was no response. Panicked that he'd arrived too late, Frankie started walking down the center aisle, checking each side and under the tables.

When he got to the front of the room and stopped before the large whiteboard he was forced to admit that there was no one else in there with him.

Had he gotten the location wrong? Or maybe Ri had gone home? If he'd thought he was being chased by something, something that had scared him enough to call Frankie, Frankie didn't see how he would have risked stepping out of this room alone.

But then again...He didn't really know Ri all that well. Perhaps the second it'd seemed like the Gloom were gone, Ri had made a break for it. He could be back in the relative safety of his dorm room right now.

Frankie pulled out his phone and checked, but he hadn't missed any calls or texts. With nothing else to do here, he stepped back out into the hall, about to search the rest of the library more thoroughly, when the door to the bathrooms clicked open.

A boy he didn't recognize stepped out, startled slightly when he saw Frankie standing there. He chuckled. "Wow, man, you scared me."

"Are you the librarian on duty?" Frankie asked as the guy approached him. He looked like he was probably a Junior, making him only a little bit younger than Frankie.

"Yeah, can I help you with something?"

He didn't appear to be shaken up or anything...

"I was looking for Ri Lawson," Frankie said, "he called me like ten minutes ago but he's not here. Have you seen him?" There was a good chance this guy didn't even know who Ri was, but he had to ask.

The librarian thought it over and shook his head. "I stepped out for a bit earlier to grab a coffee downstairs, and there was only one other student here at the time, but it was a girl. I haven't seen the drama club president since the beginning of my shift a couple of hours ago."

Frankie nibbled on the inside of his cheek. "What about...This is going to sound weird, but you haven't seen anything strange here, have you?"

"Strange?" he frowned, clearly not understanding.

“Never mind.” Frankie went to leave.

“Sorry I couldn’t help.”

“That’s all right.” Frankie was too distracted by thoughts of Ri to really pay the other guy much more attention, leaving the library and heading back toward the parking lot where he’d left his car. He tried to call Ri on his way, but the phone just kept ringing and ringing with no answer.

Ri wasn’t the type of person to pull pranks, and they weren’t exactly close enough for one as serious as this, so Frankie had to believe that the call had been real. So what happened to him? Why wasn’t he still in the computer room? Had one of the Gloom actually gotten to him? And if so...why and how?

Whoever had been controlling them before, the person who’d murdered Neko, was no longer in this realm. With him gone, the Gloom should have vanished as well. But if not the Gloom, what had Ri seen that’d spooked him enough to contact Frankie?

Something wasn’t adding up here but he didn’t really have the time to waste figuring it out. He couldn’t search campus for Ri, not when he’d left in such a rush with the chapter only halfway complete. He needed to get back and end the story for Rook and the others. Then, once he was certain that was all set and they were safe, he’d come back and find the other student.

As soon as he made it to his car, he pressed the key into the lock, determined to get back home as quickly as possible. Sending off a text to Ri to call him once he saw the message, he pulled open the door and was about to step inside when someone shoved him hard from behind.

Frankie was forced into the car, pushed all the way across the center console and over into the passenger seat. The emergency break dug into his side and he let out a sharp breath before his head hit the passenger door window.

Whoever had just attacked him climbed in quickly after him, yanking the door shut and sticking the key into the ignition.

“What—” Frankie shook his head, trying to clear his vision and see who the person was in the semi-darkness of the parking lot, but his attacker spoke, cutting him short.

“Sorry, Cuthwulf,” a familiar voice said as he turned the car on, “we’re out of time.”

Frankie blinked, working through the burst of shock. “Ri?”

The other guy turned to him slightly so that he could finally get a partial look at his face through the swath of light from the overhead street lamp. It was Ri all right, but when he grinned, he looked like a different person entirely and Frankie found the air catching in his lungs.

Then his comment fully registered and it was almost as if he’d been doused in a bucket of ice water. “What did you just call me?”

“No time for questions,” Ri clucked his tongue. “You’ll have to save those for later. In fact, I think it’s best if you check out for a bit.”

“What—” Frankie didn’t get the chance to finish that sentence.

Something thick and black twitched in the back seat, finally catching his attention, and when he turned it was to find that a Gloom was forming. Before he could even open his mouth again to get a scream out, the creature rushed forward, engulfing him in a thick and heavy darkness.

Chapter 31:

Frankie felt sick to his stomach when he came to, groaning through the discomfort. It felt like that time he and Adelaide had gotten wasted off of Tequila freshman year—something he'd never done again. The coffee he'd been chugging all day churned in his gut and he felt cold, both symptoms he'd experienced the last time he'd been swallowed by a shadow monster.

“Hurry and wake up already,” Ri's annoyed voice trickled through the lingering fog clouding Frankie's mind.

He pried his eyes open, wincing at the harsh lights. When he tried again, it was better, and with a start, he realized he was back in his kitchen, seated on one of the stools at the granite island.

Ri was standing in the doorway, the only exit out of the medium sized space, twirling something on a silver chain absently around his pointer finger as he leaned against the doorframe. When Frankie met his gaze, he grinned, the look dark and slightly unhinged.

The person before him was so far removed from the relaxed, laid back guy Frankie had come to know that it took his brain another minute to fully process what he was seeing was real and not just another false reality conjured by the Gloom. But this felt different than it had then, and he couldn't see any reason why the shadow creature would bother showing him a vision with Ri.

“There you are,” Ri said. “It's about time. You've always been a little slow though, haven't you.”

Frankie had never invited Ri to his apartment before. The fact that he'd known exactly where to go, how he kept making comments about Frankie's character, and considering the Gloom in the car just now...

“Who are you?” He recalled being called Cuthwulf just before the Gloom had knocked him out. Any chance that Ri had simply found out that he was the writer and was teasing

him had gone out the window as soon as that had happened. “You lured me to the school, why?”

“Fun.” Ri shrugged. “And curiosity, mostly.”

“Curiosity about what?” Since he knew where to find Frankie, he could have just come over. Why scheme to get him to go to the school instead? Ri had his own car, so it wasn’t like he’d needed the ride. And— “This place is warded.”

“Gloom can’t get in,” Ri confirmed, grin widening as if he were proud somehow that Frankie had caught on to something on his own. “I needed them to incapacitate you, and that wouldn’t be possible from in here. Luring you out was the best bet.”

“You wanted to see if I’d actually come,” Frankie guessed.

“We aren’t besties,” Ri nodded, “so there was always the chance you wouldn’t, considering the important work you were conducting here.”

For the first time since waking, Frankie noticed the laptop sitting in the center of the island. Ri must have moved it from the living room while he’d been unconscious. The page on the screen was still exactly where he’d left off.

“You’re too nice for your own good though, Cuthwulf. You’ve paid for that more times than you’re even aware.”

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you ever wondered how you failed Oceanography? You turned in that final assignment and yet the professor insisted it wasn’t there. Because of that, you were forced to repeat a semester just to complete that one general education course.” He sighed in mock pity. “Poor thing.”

Frankie searched Ri’s expression, piecing his meaning together and only growing more confused because of it. “*You made me fail?*” That was the only thing that made sense here. “Why?”

“I snatched your assignment while the professor was out,” he shrugged, “it was easy. Convincing her not to give

you another chance was as well. She was a bitch already, so all I had to do was lie a bit about how you told me you hadn't done it but were trying to trick her and that was enough."

Okay, but *why*?

Unless...

"You were trying to keep me at school." Frankie was pissed, but he'd already spent a good amount of time hating that professor and there were more important things at hand here than tapping back into that old hatred. Ri was right there, too. She'd always been a bitch. Of course she'd listened to the gossip of another student instead of Frankie. "You needed me to stay close and that was the only way to guarantee it."

Ri snapped his fingers and caught the necklace he'd been twirling. "Almost there. Keep going."

He could summon and control the Gloom, he'd proven as much in the car. Which meant he wasn't from here.

"You're from Visera, aren't you?" Frankie posed it as a question, but it was rhetorical. "You're also the one who murdered Neko."

"He was boring." Ri rolled his eyes and ambled toward the other end of the island, dropping his elbows onto the edge. "And he recognized me, so there was that little dilemma. He's loyal to the Iron Kingdom so I considered letting him live, but that didn't last very long."

"When did you do it?" The police had been able to give an estimation, but that didn't mean it was accurate.

"About a day or so after his arrival." A light seemed to go off in Ri's head. "Ah. You're trying to decide if it was Neko who attacked you all these time or me. You can just ask, I'm happy to tell you now that we're coming to the end."

That was a weighted statement if Frankie had ever heard one.

"Yes," Ri smirked, "it was me. In the library. At the mall. In the quad. Me, me, me. All me."

“You stole my laptop,” his eyes dropped to the necklace Ri was still clutching in his left hand, “and my necklace.”

“The first item turned out to be useless,” Ri said. “Looks like you’re the only person in this realm with the ability to alter the story. The second item however,” he held the necklace up, “this has been a big help. It’d been a while since I’d last been home. I should thank you for allowing me to finally return there.”

“You should have stayed there.”

“Is that a threat, Cuthwulf?” Ri appeared a little thrilled by that prospect. “It’s true I can’t summon the Gloom in here. That puts us on a more even playing field.”

Which brought Frankie to wondering why, out of all the places Ri could have brought him, had Ri chosen the one place in this realm that was warded? He’d purposefully put himself at a disadvantage. For what reason?

“I can see the wheels turning.” Ri circled a finger at the side of his head, laughing a little when Frankie glowered at the move. “If you take our power into consideration, I do suppose you and I are level. After all, you’re the first of your kind I’ve heard about it a long, long time, and I, well, I’m me.”

Frankie frowned, but Ri wasn’t finished.

“But,” he began to round the table slowly, dragging the pads of his fingers against the smooth surface of the countertop as he did so they made an awful squeaking sound, “if you consider our physicality, well,” he leaned in, “you don’t really stand a chance, now do you?”

He moved faster than Frankie could react, grabbing the back of his skull and slamming his head down against the counter.

Frankie’s forehead smashed into the hard granite and he cried out, lifting a hand protectively to his face even as Ri yanked his head back and tightened his fingers painfully in his hair.

“You see, Cuthwulf,” Ri practically purred, “you and I are very different. For starters, I’m not nice and I bore easily. This past year with you has been fun, but now that you’ve allowed Rook into our game, things have gotten pretty stale and I’ve started to lose interest.”

Year.

He’d been here for an entire year?

That made sense, since he’d just admitted to being the reason Frankie had failed his class last May, but still. The revelation that came with that was off putting at best.

“Rook and Neko weren’t the first ones to come through a gateway.” They just happened to be the first Frankie was aware of. He reached back and held onto Ri’s wrist, though only managed to ease his hold on his hair a little. “Skip to the important part. Who are you really?”

Ri chuckled. “I guess you get bored too after all. Do you really want to know?”

“You’re from the Iron Kingdom,” Frankie said, “and you were strong enough to take on Neko.”

“I stared him right in the eye as I killed him,” Ri confirmed.

“But I don’t know you.”

“There are lots of people you don’t know, Cuthwulf,” he sounded disappointed by that response. “Here, and in Visera. How could you possibly think to know everyone that inhabits an entire world? Is that your lingering arrogance showing? The same one that led you to believe you’d actually created my realm from nothing?”

“I did create it.” Maybe. But damned if he was going to just sit here and let Ri talk to him like that. If anything, he needed to do something. Rook wasn’t here, meaning Frankie was on his own. He needed to think.

“Got me,” he laughed. “You did.”

Frankie frowned but he wasn’t finished.

“Your power is pretty unique. I heard stories about people from different lands being able to turn stories into reality, but I’ve never seen that kind of power before.”

“You keep saying that,” Frankie latched onto that word, “that I have power.”

“Of course.”

“I don’t.”

He tightened his grip again and Frankie ground his teeth at the sharp pain. Ri glared. “Don’t act the fool, it’s unbecoming. What do you call what you’ve been doing all this time? Can humans in your world typically summon people from other realms? Can they play with people’s lives simply by typing on a keyboard? No? Didn’t think so. That’s power, Cuthwulf, your power.”

“But I’m not from Visera,” Frankie said, admittedly a little dumbly.

“Technically, no one really is, at least, they weren’t up until recently. Visera didn’t exist until you made it so. Meaning that magic, *your magic*, isn’t from my realm,” Ri told him. “It’s from somewhere else.”

“Somewhere...” Frankie was finding it difficult to follow all of a sudden.

“Or it’s from here.” It appeared Ri didn’t even understand what he was talking about. “It’s hard to tell. Either this is the only real world, or there are many ‘real’ world’s out there. Either your magic came from here or it came from somewhere else. Either—”

“Please stop.” Frankie was starting to get a headache and it had nothing to do with the lump forming on his forehead.

“Well,” Ri shrugged, “whether there are other worlds or not, the point is, mine wasn’t technically one of them until you woke it. Visera started out the same way any other fictional tale does, as an idea in your head.” His grin returned tenfold. “But then you made it a reality, if only temporarily. Would you like to know how?”

“I—” Frankie so didn’t want to play directly into Ri’s hands and yet... “Yes.”

“Magic is funny, half the time the people who can wield it don’t even know about it. You’re able to breathe life into stories, create reality from fiction. Of course, your power only goes so far. As soon as you made Visera real, it took control of itself. That’s why there are things that happen there that you don’t know about. Why the people there all have their own thoughts and control their own actions unless you write it on the page yourself. The magic you gave is keeping that realm alive. For now.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s still just a story,” Ri shrugged as if he wasn’t talking about his own world. “All stories must come to an end eventually. When that happens and you’ve finished telling Gold and Silver, the magic will disperse and the world will return to what it was before. Nonexistent.”

“And the people in it?” Frankie tried to keep the franticness from spilling out but did a poor job of it. “What happens to them?”

“They cease to exist,” he said. “Or they’re frozen perpetually. Or maybe they’re freed from you as the writer and you lose control and access. Who knows.”

He exhaled sharply. “They could die? All of them.”

“They were never really alive to begin with,” Ri corrected. “Stop feeling so bad about it. It’s not like it’s your fault. If anything, they should be grateful you gave them a chance to begin with.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Everyone dies, Frankie. That’s just how things go.”

“Sure, but I don’t—”

“You won’t be,” he told him, a bit too chipper for the topic of conversation. He patted him on the back a bit. “And besides, you’re going to use that magic to gift other characters a chance too.”

“Are you kidding? I’m never writing again!”

Ri rolled his eyes. “Not everything you write automatically comes to life. You need to actually *do* something to make that happen. I wasn’t sure what exactly that was until I realized what you and Rook were carrying around. It’s the necklaces, isn’t it? A year ago you must have written a real-world object into the story, and that’s why I was able to come through. It would have woken the book. Then you did it again with Rook.”

Frankie hadn’t...Oh. It’d been a scene in the Iron Kingdom. He’d been burned out and was struggling to come up with good enough details to describe Talia’s throne room so had used the gold and black silk curtains Adelaide had put up for Halloween.

Not long after he’d added them in, she’d taken them down and packed them away, and since she was abroad during the holiday this year, they’d stayed in whatever box she’d kept them in, tucked in her closet.

If this was all true, that meant Visera had been operating as a real place for over a year now and he’d just been completely unaware.

“If it makes it any better,” Ri said then, “I remember being told that, while the world technically stops existing in the sense we can no longer reach it, many believe it actually continues on, just on its own, and the drained magic that returns to the spell caster,” he pointed to Frankie to indicate he meant him, “merely seals the gateways so that it can longer be interfered with. Personally? I think that’s optimistic fairytale bullshit, but if it helps you sleep at night...”

“Anyway, what matters is, you’re going to wrap Gold and Silver up and then you and I are going to write our own story. A better story. One with the two of us in it, preferably ruling the world. All you have to do is write in a real-world object and bam. The gateways will form and open for us.”

“You’re crazy,” Frankie said.

“I thought that about people who believed in your kind before. Beings who could bring stories to life? Those were creatures of myth and fables. No one thought they were rooted in any semblance of reality. Then one day I woke up here—well, not here, it was in the middle of that quaint little bookstore of yours—and I realized those stories weren’t fake after all. You were there.”

Frankie almost shook his head, because he had no recollection of Ri, who most likely would have been dressed as someone from Visera if he’d come through a portal but... About a year ago had been when the first official book signing for Volume One had taken place. It’d happened in the same bookstore and he’d worn his mask and sat at a table in roughly the same area as the one he’d conducted this most recent signing at.

If Ri had come through in the store, it was safe to assume he’d stumbled on the physical copies of Volume One, just like Rook had. Finding Frankie would have been easy enough from there, since he’d literally been signing books for people.

He could have followed him home just like Rook had as well...

“Why?” Frankie asked. “Why go through all of this? Why not just confront me then and there?”

“I needed to figure out how you activate your power first. Not to mention...ruin the game?” He clucked his tongue. “Never.”

“This isn’t a game.”

“Sure it is.” Ri jabbed a finger straight into the center of Frankie’s chest with more force than necessary and then pointed at himself. “There’s you and there’s me. Two players. One game. Well,” his look turned dark all over again, “three players now that you’ve invited the demon prince.”

“I didn’t—”

“You summoned him,” Ri cut him off tersely. “Don’t deny it. I know that’s what happened.”

“How?” How could he, when Frankie wasn’t even sure of that himself? He was *pretty certain* that’s how it’d gone down, but there was no proof.

“Try and keep up, would you? Because that’s how I got here,” Ri surprised him by saying. “You summoned me, Cuthwulf. You summoned me, so I came, and now here we are.”

Frankie shook his head, only partially aware when that caused strands of his hair still in Ri’s grasp to pull at his scalp. “I didn’t. I don’t even know who you are.”

“I took on a nickname, just like you,” Ri said. “Take a guess what it stands for. Go on.” He shook Frankie violently when he didn’t jump to answer. “Do it.”

“I don’t know.” How the hell was he supposed to guess what Ri was a nickname for? There were a million and one names out there.

Ri made as if to bash his head against the counter again and Frankie scrambled to come up with anything to prevent that from happening.

“Ryan,” he blurted.

“Wrong.”

“Richard?”

“What’s with all the R names?”

“Give me a hint.” Otherwise there was no way Frankie was going to be able to even come close.

Ri considered it and then, “The first letter is G.”

A list of names filtered through Frankie’s brain, and for the first time he was glad that his extensive research into such things was actually coming in handy.

“Three syllables,” Ri added in an almost sing-song voice. It was clear he was getting off on this, but that he also wanted Frankie to hurry up and get to the punchline.

He hadn’t been kidding when he’d said he bored easily.

Names that began with a G and had three syllables that made sense for Ri.....

Frankie swallowed and tried his luck. “Gabriel?”

Ri released him and clapped, the loud sound clattering throughout the kitchen space. “You got it!”

Gabriel...Gabriel...Who—

Frankie’s eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open slightly before he could help it.

“Oh good, I see you’ve caught up now.” Ri held the necklace up, waited until he had Frankie’s full attention, and then snapped the chain. Once he had it in two pieces, he snapped it again, until it was nothing more than a mess of metal. Then he closed his fingers around it, a swirl of black smoke spilling out from his clenched fist.

When he opened it again, there was nothing left but a small pile of dust in the center of his palm. He blew it into Frankie’s face, laughing as Frankie sputtered and flinched.

He’d just destroyed the only connection Frankie had to Visera, but he couldn’t worry about that right now, not after that major revelation.

There was only one Gabriel character from Visera that Frankie was aware of.

Gabriel Archer, the late King of Iron.

Talia Archer, the current queen’s, older brother.

“You died,” Frankie stated, wiping the remains of the necklace off his face. Apparently the ward kept Gloom out but didn’t prevent an Iron from using their magic in any other capacity.

Fantastic.

“Did I though?” Ri—no, Gabriel—tapped his chin mockingly. “I don’t believe I did.”

“It was mentioned,” Frankie insisted, “in Volume One, when they’re talking about Talia, it’s mentioned that she took the throne after her brother’s death.”

“I read that chapter,” he nodded. “It does say that. But, Cuthwulf, do you recall there ever being any proof?”

Frankie froze.

“You should have covered your bases better if you didn’t want any surprises,” he tsked.

“How?”

“I never died. There was an attempt made on my life, of course, but it was unsuccessful. I ended up escaping, but was trapped instead. I spent a good many years stuck in a hole in Mount Shade. The only reason I was able to survive is because I could still control the Gloom. I fed off of their energy. I was stuck there until one day a gateway appeared. There’d never been one there before, trust me, I would have used it. But it was there, so I tried my luck, and it led me straight to you.” He tapped his finger on the end of Frankie’s nose.

“Why didn’t you go back?” Frankie asked.

“I couldn’t,” he reminded. “I didn’t have a necklace. In fact, there were no items like that yet. You created that lovely little loophole when you brought Rook through.”

He didn’t know about the curtains, but then, he was still right. Frankie couldn’t imagine anyone carrying curtains around with them on the regular.

“I didn’t bring him through,” he insisted. “The necklace I wrote in did, but that was never my intention. I was trying to—”

“Murder him on the cliffs,” Gabriel waved his explanation off, “yeah, yeah, I already overheard as much.”

“How long have you been spying on us?”

“I’ve been spying on *you*,” he corrected. “If anything, Rook and that other fool just got in the way.”

“Other...” Sage. He meant Sage. “Don’t you care?”

“About?”

“Sage being the main character, and you being...well, thought dead?” Rook’s reaction had certainly been vastly different from Gabriel’s.

“At first I was angry,” he hummed in acknowledgement, “but then I saw this world for what it was and quickly got over that pesky emotion. Why should it matter anyway? You may have breathed magic into it, but that world isn’t real. This one is. Why would I risk returning only for you to end the story? What if what I’ve heard is wrong and everything really does just vanish the second you type the words The End? I won’t risk ceasing to exist. Not when there are other options.”

“But you did go back,” Frankie pointed out. “You stole my necklace to do so.”

“Yes, well, my sister is clever but she’s no genius. And after meeting Neko and seeing firsthand the types of people she surrounds herself with...well, no one else was going to help her, now were they?”

“Help? You care about her?”

“That surprises you?” Gabriel cocked his head.

“Honestly? Yeah.”

He snorted. “That’s good because no I really don’t. However, Iron needs to win this war so that the story can finally come to an end. You’re going to ensure that happens and then you and I, Cuthwulf, are going to find ourselves a new playground.”

Frankie felt fear poke holes in his resolve at that last part and struggled to stay on task. He needed to gather information now, while Gabriel was talking, and think of a way out of this while he did.

So far, he was coming up blank.

If Gabriel really was who he claimed, that meant he’d had years of hardcore training in battle. Even without the Gloom, he could easily overpower Frankie in this tiny apartment.

He really had just called him to the library to mess with him.

“If it’s not for your sister, and it’s not for yourself so you can go back and reclaim the crown,” he asked, “then why does it matter who wins?”

“It doesn’t,” he corrected. “It matters how the story ends. More importantly, who ends up dead on those final pages. I wouldn’t care if you killed off Talia as well, but you and I both know there are rules to your power, same as the rest of us. You can write anything into existence, but it has to make sense. It has to be believable and true to the overall story and characters thus far. A YA series ending that bleakly, with everyone dying and there being no winner? No. However, yours is a story of a war torn land. Talia could win. As long as someone comes out on top in the end, that’s all that matters.”

As much as he hated to admit it, that was true. There were plenty of books out there that ended in crappy ways just like that. Readers hated them and tended to boycott the authors after, but that didn’t stop them from happening every now and again. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time a main character got killed off in the final battle, meaning Frankie *could* make that happen.

“I’m not going to do that,” he said.

“You are,” Gabriel insisted. “Because unlike you, I cover *my* bases. The last thing I want is a surprise in the shape of one Rook Dalibor while you and I are trying to take over another world. If he’s allowed to live, he’ll come for you. We can’t have that.”

“I’m not going to do it,” Frankie declared, “and I’m not helping you go anywhere.”

Gabriel rested his hand at the back of Frankie’s neck, splaying his fingers out so that he was touching as much of him as possible. “I knew it wouldn’t be easy to convince you,” he said, a touch of excitement in his tone that had Frankie’s stomach twisting into knots. “That just doubles the fun.”

Frankie's forehead whacked against the granite a second time and he saw stars.

Chapter 32:

“There we go,” Gabriel sounded far away despite the warmth from his breath against Frankie’s cheek that indicated he was actually incredibly close, “almost done.”

A pain filled moan slipped past his lips, but all that did was cause his vision to wink in and out all over again. Everything was blurry and seemed to spin when he tried focusing on it, including the glow of the open laptop in front of him.

Gabriel was standing behind him, his front pressed flush against Frankie’s back. His arms were wrapped around him, caging him in, and his hands were over Frankie’s, directing them across the keyboard. It was slow going this way, but he managed to force Frankie to type, evidenced by the fact he sounded pleased whenever he spoke.

Desperately, Frankie tried to regain his wits, but he’d hit his head one time too many and it was difficult to think past the throbbing behind his temples and the trickle of wet blood he felt dripping over his right eyebrow. Try as he might, he couldn’t make out a single word on the screen, couldn’t track the movements of his own fingers as they clattered at the keys.

He needed to put a stop to this before it was too late but he was shaky and only semi-conscious, and for the life of him he couldn’t see a way out.

If only Rook were here...

But he wasn’t. He was currently in Visera, relying on Frankie to conclude the story.

“Stop,” Frankie managed to bite out.

“Just a little bit more,” Gabriel told him distractedly, too focused on manipulating Frankie’s movements. “After that, we’ll clean up that nasty injury and then brainstorm where we should go next. We know already it’s possible for

you to travel as well, and so long as I have you with me, there will always be a way back to this realm.”

“Stop.” He only partially picked up on what the other guy was saying, but that didn’t seem to concern Gabriel all that much.

“I’m thinking somewhere easily taken over. Maybe we can write me in as a long lost relative to whoever currently sits on the throne or something like that. I want power fast so that I have more time to play. Then once that gets old, we can move on to another, and another. The universe is infinite with your ability and my imagination, Cuthwulf, think of all the possibilities for us out there.”

“No.” Frankie didn’t want to go anywhere with this psycho.

“I was going to let you end the story however you wanted,” Gabriel told him then. “It was interesting reading every week, seeing what direction you were taking things. I was waiting for you to finish this story, for me to figure out how to activate your power, and then I was going to seduce you and trick you into sending us to the next world. It was all planned out. It would have been perfect. Then you had to go and summon Rook here and ruin everything. This,” he let go of his hand long enough to press his fingers against the bleeding knot forming on Frankie’s forehead, “is your fault. I wasn’t going to hurt you. This isn’t the story I wanted for us. You only have yourself to blame.

“I kept my distance at first, only befriended you a little so you wouldn’t get distracted and I wouldn’t be tempted to force you to end things earlier. If I did, there was always the chance you would catch on that I had ulterior motives and I wasn’t going to risk that. We were so close. I’d already booked a table at that Japanese restaurant in town you like so much for next Friday.”

That was supposed to be the day of Frankie’s final deadline. But how the hell had Gabriel known about that?

Gabriel sighed. “I’ll have to remember to cancel, since we won’t be here for it now. Just a couple more paragraphs

and it'll all be over. Rook and Sage will both be dead and the only other living beings that are aware of your power will be gone. Without that threat looming over our heads we can—”

Frankie wasn't sure what caused it, possibly the mention of Rook dying, but suddenly a rush of adrenaline hit him and he reacted without thought, not giving his body any time to lose that spark.

He slammed his elbow back into Gabriel's ribs, catching the other man off guard.

Gabriel grunted and was shoved backward from the blow, giving Frankie enough time to attempt getting away from the computer.

He slipped however, his legs giving out from under him, and ended up knocking the laptop down. Both he and it fell to the ground and he landed with a hard thud on top of it. He felt and heard the screen crack, felt the keyboard come apart beneath his shoulder. When he tried to sit up, he slipped on broken keys, crying out when his head hit the tiles.

Gabriel was there suddenly, yanking him up off the floor by the collar of his shirt. He slammed Frankie back against the kitchen counter, knocking over the drying rack full of dishes so that plates and bowls slipped off and shattered on the ground as well.

Frankie's stomach twisted at the sound, mind momentarily blanking as he was thrown back into his past and the fear that he'd felt back then.

Ri was too angry to notice the way he tensed up however.

“Did you really think you were going to win this?” he growled right in Frankie's face, shaking him again for good measure. “I have your other laptop. All we have to do is go and get it.” Tossing him clear across the kitchen, he stepped over broken bits of plastic and porcelain, his boots crunching the mess.

Frankie slid in some of it, cutting his bare arms on tiny pieces before he could stop his body from moving. Scrambling

back to his feet, he backed toward the doorway, watching as Gabriel drew nearer.

“I’m not taking you anywhere,” Frankie swore. “I’d rather die.”

Gabriel snorted. “Don’t be so dramatic. Dying isn’t as easy as it is in one of your books. It’s painful and oftentimes slow. Look at you. One beating and you can barely stand. Do you really think you’ll hold onto that conviction once I start torturing you for real?”

Admittedly, that idea didn’t appeal to him, but Frankie clamped his mouth shut and glared.

As soon as he cleared the doorway he turned, intent on racing down the hallway and getting to his room to lock the door—because leaving the protected apartment would be suicide, considering out there Gabriel could turn the Gloom on him—but movement down the opposite end gave him pause.

He blinked, thinking he was maybe seeing things after having hit his head so many times, but when the person standing across from him came closer, he inhaled sharply.

Ivan had left the front door wide open, clearly having just arrived, and seeing the state Frankie was in raced toward him. Before Frankie could ask how he’d gotten there, Ivan was shoving him out of the way and bolting into the kitchen.

He slammed into Gabriel, not giving the Iron a chance to even process he was there. The two of them connected with the refrigerator, separating long enough for Ivan to summon his golden short blade.

At the same time, Gabriel conjured his own weapon, a black sword with a curved tip. Metal clanked against metal as the two fought.

Frankie remained frozen for a long moment, trying to figure out how Ivan had even gotten there. But then he remembered the laptop, and what Gabriel had been forcing him to do up until now. Frantically, he went for the broken device, giving the two fighting men as wide of a berth as was possible.

The thing practically fell apart in his hands when he tried lifting it. More than half the keyboard in shambles, the keys scattered all around him, and the top had popped off on one side, barely holding on. The screen didn't so much as flicker when he tried the power button.

He didn't know whether he should be relieved or not. The chapter hadn't been completed and hadn't been sent to his publisher yet so...It should be fine, right?

But didn't that also mean that everything he'd written himself, before Gabriel's arrival, had also been deleted?

Would the story write itself now that there was no chapter here that he was actively working on?

Frankie felt his panic rising, sweeping over him in never ending tidal waves. What was he going to do? What was going to happen to Rook? What if—

Ivan screamed and Frankie's head snapped in his direction.

Gabriel had him pinned to the counter with the sink, the tip of his sword already an inch or so deep into Ivan's middle.

He was going to kill him.

Frankie glanced around for anything he could use as a weapon, but another cry from Ivan had him gripping the laptop already in his hands. With a burst of movement, he found himself on the other side of the room and he brought the remains of the laptop over the back of Gabriel's head.

Bits of plastic exploded in every which direction, but Frankie was already dropping to his knees, grabbing at one of the broken pieces of a dish that was nearby. He drove the pointed shard straight into the back of Gabriel's thigh, trying not to think too hard on the warm blood that poured over his fingers or the copper smell in the air.

Gabriel made a sound of outrage and turned, kicking Frankie over. He slapped his palm over the wound, twisting to try and get a better look at it.

Ivan used that distraction to yank the sword blade free from him, swinging his leg up to knee Gabriel in the face. He dropped to the ground immediately after, blood pouring from his center.

Roaring, Gabriel lifted his sword to deliver a killing blow, aiming for Ivan's throat.

Frankie snatched the golden weapon up, still on his knees, and swung. The blade cleaved deep into Gabriel's side, sticking there.

Everything seemed to go still then.

Frankie's eyes widened and he let go, falling back onto his ass. He'd just...

Gabriel glared at him and managed a single step, looking like he was about to kill Frankie after all. But he lost his footing, crumpling to the floor. He growled, clawing at the ground in an attempt to get to Frankie.

The two of them were so distracted with each other, neither noticed Ivan moving.

The injured soldier took up his sword and drove it down, stabbing Gabriel through the back.

Gabriel sputtered.

Ivan twisted the blade.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. One minute Frankie had been scared for his life and then...

"Holy shit," Frankie said.

"Are you all right?" Ivan asked, falling against the counter a second after he spoke.

Frankie was still too distracted by Gabriel. He watched in a mixture of horror and relief as Gabriel sucked in one last breath and then...stopped. His body sort of just crumpled to the ground, losing all life and movement in a matter of seconds, head barely even making a sound as it hit the tile.

"Frankie," Ivan called him firmly.

“He’s dead.”

“Frankie.”

“We killed him.” Frankie blinked. “He went to school with me.” He’d just killed a classmate!

“Snap the fuck out of it!” Ivan yelled, and that did the trick.

Frankie finally tore his eyes off their attacker and met Ivan’s gaze. The soldier didn’t look so good. “Are you—”

“Dying?” Ivan interrupted, clutching at his middle. Blood poured through his fingers, dripping down his arm. “Yes.”

“No.” Frankie got up and went to him, careful not to touch his wound as he helped lead him from the kitchen and to the living room. Just as they were about to exit, he glanced back at Gabriel’s body.

“You were defending yourself,” Ivan stated. “Don’t feel bad.”

“He was—”

“Who he was doesn’t matter,” he said. “What matters is he can no longer hurt you.”

Frankie eased him down onto the couch. “Thanks to you. You came at just the right time.”

Ivan rested his head back and winced when Frankie tried to move his hands away to get a look at the injury.

It was deep.

Really deep.

“Let me—” Frankie was forced to stop when Ivan reached out and took his wrist.

“Don’t bother. I told you, there’s no coming back from this.”

“I’m not going to just stand here and let you die.”

“Neither of us really have a choice.”

Frankie blew out a breath. “I’m remembering now why you’re friends with Rook. You’re both stubborn assholes.” He said it mostly to distract them from the truth of Ivan’s statement. His words were blunt and harsh, but he could do nothing about the fact his body shook slightly. “I’m sorry. This is all my fault.”

“The Prince sent me,” Ivan told him through labored breaths. “He ordered me to keep you safe. I was doing my duty.”

He wasn’t sure what to say, the guilt and the fear getting the best of him. The sound of his phone going off shocked him out of it and he frowned, momentarily surprised by the fact his phone had survived that whole ordeal despite him having been tossed around like a ragdoll.

“Hello?” he answered tentatively the second he read Maggie’s name.

“Frankie, I got the ending. Please tell me you’re definitely redoing that?”

“What?” He felt himself go cold.

“You killed off everyone? Seriously? How could you let Talia win like that?” Maggie continued, unawares of his reaction.

“What do you mean, killed off?”

“Everyone,” she said, and she sounded just as out of it as he did, though for a different reason. “And like that? How could you? Even if this was just a rough draft you planned on deleting, I can’t believe you sent this to me. I’m sorry, I’m being unprofessional and a total fan girl but I can’t believe you had them all crushed to death like that!”

“I…” Frankie swallowed the lump in his throat, “what?”

“The Hidden Palace collapsed on them,” she told him, finally seeming to realize that there was something wrong with him. “Wait,” she let out a small sound of relief, “wait. In my total and complete panic over that ending it slipped my mind

that you might not have written this. You didn't...right? Please tell me you didn't?"

"Delete it," Frankie blurted. "Delete everything. All of it from Chapter Eighty-Three on."

"So you didn't write it? That's such a—"

"Delete it now," he snapped, twirling toward the kitchen before recalling the laptop was totally destroyed. That had to be enough. That had to be enough to consider it deleted off that device. He pulled his phone away from his ear long enough to glance at it before pressing it back. "Maggie, delete it all right now. Every copy."

"Okay, are you sure now is—"

"Do it. All my emails with the chapters too. And be sure to delete this one. Don't leave any copies around."

"Frankie—"

"Promise me," his words came out on an almost sob. "Promise me you'll delete all of it."

There was a long stretch of silence before, "Of course. Of course. I'll do it right now, Frankie. It's all going. I'll even delete the recycling bin."

"I'll send the right chapters soon." He hung up before she could say anything else, opening his email on his phone and deleting everything from his sent box without even checking to see if they were files sent to her or not. Everything went to be safe. Then he did the same with his inbox.

"What's going on?" Ivan asked, reminding Frankie that he was there.

Bleeding out and dying on his couch.

He didn't have a laptop anymore which meant his phone was the only option.

"This wasn't the plan," he said as he pulled open the word app. "This wasn't the plan."

But he couldn't wait, couldn't waste time trying to come up with some other solution. If the chapter was sent to

Maggie that meant in Visera it had *happened*. And Rook—

“He got away, like last time,” he insisted to himself, the panic bubbling. “He has the necklace. A gateway opened and—”

“Frankie,” Ivan sounded like he was fading fast, and that was the only reason Frankie paused to look over at him. He struggled to pull something from his leather pants pocket, holding up the necklace with a blood stained hand. “I need to get this back to him.”

That explained how Ivan had made it here, and any hope that there was a chance Rook had actually survived the collapse and was somewhere in this realm was gone.

But if that ending had already taken place, getting that necklace back to Visera wouldn't do anything now. If Rook was already dead, he couldn't use it.

“It's too late,” Frankie told him. “It's too late for that.”

Even if deleting the chapters erased all of Rook's memory of him, and even if he didn't have a way back here, Frankie had to rewrite the story. Now. Before it was too late to even hope to save him.

He'd left to go help Ri and look what had happened? He wouldn't make that mistake again. He wouldn't allow anything to distract him right now. This was all that mattered. Saving Rook was all that mattered.

“I'll stop it,” he swore. “I'll stop it from happening and save him.”

Gabriel had claimed the story locked him out once he'd ended the story, but *he* hadn't ended anything. That had to count for something, right? There had to still be a chance.

“What are you doing?” Ivan asked.

“Saving my prince.” Frankie started typing away furiously.

“How—” his sentence cut off after just one word.

Frankie froze, and glanced over at the empty space on the couch where Ivan had just been. All that was left were a couple of blood stains.

The man had completely and utterly disappeared.

Maggie must have deleted all of the chapters.

He took a moment to silently thank Ivan for saving him. Since he'd vanished, hopefully that meant that he'd returned to Visera and was no longer at risk of dying. Making a mental note to be sure to write Ivan into the story after Chapter Eighty-Three, Frankie got back to work, determined to finally give them all the ending they deserved.

Praying to magic or gods or whatever power was listening to let him do so.

Chapter 33:

The world around him began to wink in and out, his vision blurring. It wasn't hard to guess, even in his state with his thoughts growing cloudy, that this was all due to the blood loss. That he wasn't going to be able to hold on much longer.

With some effort he turned his head, tipping it back so he could look at her one last time. Tears were dripping down her rose colored cheeks, making tracks through the thin layer of dirt that had collected there during her run through the forest. Her blonde hair was wild and tangled, tiny bits of broken leaves and twigs poking out at odd angles.

"You don't look like a princess," he said, the words gravely and low. It was a struggle to get them out, but he forced himself to continue past the pain. If this was to be his final moment he wouldn't waste it.

A loud sob slipped through her full lips and he realized she was digging her nails into the flesh of his wrist, even as she slid toward the edge he was currently dangling off of.

The bracelet she'd gifted him just before the attack, a braid of red leather the same shade as his hair, was at risk of being torn off in her attempts to keep him from completely falling from the cliff. For some reason, that prospect upset him more than the idea of tumbling to his death did.

"Let go," he told her, voice soft yet firm. "Felicity, it's all right. Let go."

She blinked at him, no doubt noting it was the first time he'd said her real name out loud, but didn't immediately do as asked.

They'd been meeting to figure out their next move against the Iron Kingdom when they'd been attacked. As far as he knew, no one was aware they were out here and so no help was coming. Between the two of them, they'd managed to take out their attackers, but a single Gloom had slipped through their defenses and had gone straight for Lis.

To avoid her being the one in this predicament, Rook had shoved her out of the way. He'd caught himself on the edge while Lis had killed the Gloom, but had suffered an arrow just beneath the shoulder during the fight and now it was costing him. Try as he might, he couldn't lift himself and had fallen too far down for her to get a good enough grip to truly help him...

The fall was at least a couple hundred feet down into a fast running river. The chances of survival, even for a demon such as him, were slim.

His weight pulled Lis a little closer to the edge.

"I didn't go through all of this to save you," he stated, "only to have you kill yourself in the end anyway."

Vehemently, she shook her head, the tears streaming more freely now. "We can make it."

"People are counting on you," he reminded.

"They're counting on you too!"

His arms felt like they were going to pop free from their sockets, which meant she couldn't be feeling much better. He needed to put an end to this before it got worse and she really did end up dying with him.

"I love you," he told her, voice now a mere whisper, easily carried off by the wind.

When she squeezed her eyes shut, however, he knew that she'd heard him.

The corner of his mouth tipped up. "At least this way I get to die a hero."

"Don't say that! You aren't going to—"

Before she could finish that sentence, Rook shoved her hands off of him and let go of the rock siding.

She screamed and reached out, but it was too late.

Rook kept his gaze on her as he fell, until she was nothing but a speck in the distance and her screams had been completely swallowed by the whooshing air sailing past his

ears. He wished things had gone differently, that he'd gotten the chance—a real chance—to be with the person that he loved. If he could go back, he would. But at least he'd gotten to do the right thing. He'd saved Lis, and that, he wouldn't change.

Touching the leather bracelet, he closed his eyes and accepted his fate.

Chapter 34:

The chapter was there.

Frankie stared at the document, eyes practically glued to the screen as if he hoped the words would magically disappear on the page.

Which made no sense, because of course this was what he'd wanted. He'd banged out the entire final five chapters of Gold and Silver practically without stopping to come up for air. Aside from bathroom breaks, he'd lived on that spot on the floor in front of the coffee table for two days straight.

When he'd sent the chapters to Maggie through email, hitting send had felt like a culmination of all the stress and anxiety he'd experienced these past couple of weeks. He'd been afraid it wouldn't work, that they'd somehow be rejected either by his publisher or whatever magic controlled the story itself, but he hadn't been aware of the sliver of doubt he'd carried over what it meant if it was accepted.

Now he was.

He scrolled through the file on his phone, the screen practically close enough to touch his nose. It was all there. All five chapters, starting from Chapter Eighty-Three. He'd ended it the way he'd initially intended, with Lis and Sage and their friends all secretly infiltrating the Hidden Palace. They'd attacked Talia, who hadn't been as caught off guard as they'd all hoped—because Frankie had known leaving out all excitement wouldn't have worked for the story, and there would have been a real risk of it rewriting itself again—and a couple of the side characters had been wounded—to various levels of believability, yet not killed—but they'd made it through.

Talia had been defeated and the kingdoms had finally agreed on a peace treaty. Sage and Lis announced their plans to marry and merge their two kingdoms, and Ivan, who'd been one of the ones Frankie had injured during the final battle to

account for the wounds he'd received here protecting him, had made a full recovery and taken over Rook's palace.

Rook's body had never been found. Most presumed him to be dead, pointing out there was no way he could have possibly survived that type of fall, but Ivan waited anyway. He was certain one day the prince would return.

Frankie had added a note in the email with the chapters asking that he be allowed to add an epilogue to the story. Maggie had agreed, and reading that he deflated some, his body giving into the lethargy. He slumped against the couch, his head falling to the still bloodstained cushion and he realized his vision was winking in and out, clearly from exhaustion.

He'd been too afraid to risk stopping, however. Had needed to get all five chapters to Maggie so that they would be official, so that the events would be set and there was no room left for awful surprises. Adding in the bracelet... Well, that had been a bit selfish, admittedly.

After what Gabriel had told him, Frankie acknowledged that he should have refrained. He should have had more self-control and respected the world and the characters. Though there was no way of telling if they'd returned to being merely fictional now that his necklace had been destroyed by Gabriel, Frankie should have had enough self-control to resist testing it out. And yet...

He couldn't do it. He had to at least *try* to find a way out for Rook.

So he'd written in the bracelet that Rook had been so fond of, the very one that was currently clasped around Frankie's right wrist. After he'd sent the email to Maggie, he'd gotten up to get some water and had gone into his room to retrieve the piece of jewelry. She'd emailed him back fairly quickly, so he hadn't had much time to do anything more than that, and even though she hadn't yet read all of what he'd sent, she'd skimmed to the end and had loved it. If she'd read Chapter Eighty-Three, there'd been no comment about why he'd changed the necklace to a bracelet.

Frankie hoped that the bracelet would act as another key and open a gateway for Rook at the last moment, just as the necklace had the first time. But in case it didn't, he'd requested an epilogue, the only chapter he'd yet to write.

The reason he'd sent Rook off a cliff instead of having him die in Lis's arms had also been carefully thought out. Frankie had been buying them both time.

If the bracelet didn't work, Frankie could write him reappearing in the epilogue. He'd be angry he missed the final battle, of course, but he'd be alive. He figured he'd make it so that he'd been stuck somewhere, seriously injured and healing. It'd be believable and he'd get to live.

That last part was all that mattered to Frankie.

His eyelids began to droop and he didn't resist the temptation to sleep, realizing that he'd done everything he could and all that was left was for him to wait. When the darkness overtook him, he settled into the deepest slumber he'd ever experienced. He didn't even have the energy left to dream.

* * *

He woke to the sound of his phone going off. Groaning, he slapped around the ground blindly until he found it, not bothering to peel his eyes open as he answered and brought it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Frankie!" Maggie's sharp burst of excitement practically pierced through his eardrum and he winced. "Oh my god! Frankie, you're brilliant! I stayed up all night reading what you sent and I love it! Love it! It's everything I could have hoped for after all these years with these characters!"

"Even Rook?" His voice was crackly and weak, and he cleared it, forcing himself into a seated position. Once that was done, he took it a step further and climbed to his feet, trying to ignore the way his muscles ached all over. A glance at the clock on the end table showed that he'd only been out for a few hours. A stream of sunlight spilled through the closed blinds, and he glowered at it.

Maggie really must have stayed up all night reading.

“Please tell me there’s more to his story,” she whined. “I understand why that had to happen, but you know how well-liked he is by your fans.”

“They aren’t the only ones,” he mumbled to himself. Then it hit him. It was morning. He’d been out for hours... “So, this is it, right? You’re approving the end of the story?”

“Of course! I’ve already sent this on to the second editor. We’re all super excited for the epilogue too, by the way! When do you think you’ll be sending that over? I’m sure you need a break first after pumping this out—”

“I’m sorry, Maggie, I’ll call you later.” He hung up and spun on his heels, making his way desperately through his apartment like a madman. He checked everywhere, no matter how ridiculous, even behind the shower curtain—as if Rook would be hiding there for some reason.

But he wasn’t there.

Frankie was alone.

The chapters were approved and more than enough time had passed for Rook to have come through a gateway... Having pieced together the timetable of the initial events, he’d entered this realm shortly after Frankie had hit submit and left for class. It didn’t even sound like it’d taken until Maggie had read and approved the original version of Chapter Eighty-Three. Which meant....

He wasn’t coming.

Frankie dropped right where he stood in the middle of the hallway, slumping to the ground in a heap as his breath caught on a sob. Either it hadn’t worked and no gateway had opened for Rook, or it had but Rook hadn’t remembered anything about Frankie or this realm and had refused to go through it.

He shouldn’t be surprised, it was a very real possibility and one that he’d been painfully aware of from the start. The fact that Ivan had disappeared the second the first set of chapters had been deleted should have been further proof that

this was how it was going to end. He'd fooled himself into believing otherwise, into having hope despite there being no real reason to.

Rook was gone.

Frankie hadn't even gotten to tell him how he really felt, and just like that, it was already over. Everyone else got their happy ending, but not him. Maybe that was the price he had to pay for inadvertently bringing a world into temporary existence.

Wrapping his arms around himself, Frankie gave in and cried. He cried until his tears dried up and his voice was gone.

* * *

Later, when he finally managed to drag himself off the floor, he went back to the coffee table and pulled over the open notebook. For a moment, all he did was stare down at Rook's name, written in his own messy handwriting, but then he snapped himself out of it and got back to work.

Rook may be gone forever, and he and the rest of Visera may cease existing as soon as the final The End was typed on the screen, but before then, Frankie was going to ensure he had the best possible send off.

He wrote pages and pages of notes on how he could explain where Rook had been during the events of the final four chapters of the story, which had taken place over the span of a week. Because it was an epilogue of Gold and Silver as a whole, he had to make sure the main focus was on Sage and Lis, which meant getting Rook's part of it all just right so that he could have the proper amount of page time to fully wrap up his story without overshadowing the main characters.

Once he had a set plan, he put the notebook down and rubbed at his eyes. He was still tired and physically drained, and now adding to it all the ach in his chest and the overwhelming sense of loss he felt...He needed a nap. And maybe an excuse to put off writing the epilogue just a little longer.

Because once he did that would be it, not just for him, but for the others as well. If Gabriel had been telling the truth, ending Gold and Silver could return Visera and all the characters within it back to the page, cutting off the flow of magic that had breathed life into them and given them their own agency.

Frankie rubbed at his temples as he stumbled to his room, practically throwing himself onto his bed. That was all too depressing to think about and he was at his limits in the sad department.

He thought he was all done with the tears, at least for now, that he'd cried them all out and couldn't anymore. But the second his eyes landed on the extra pillow next to him, the one that he'd gotten for Rook, an overwhelming wave of grief slammed over him and he was right back to it.

Frankie fell asleep with the pillow muffling his sobs.

Chapter 35:

“I see what you were trying to do here,” the familiar voice, followed by a sharp clicking of his tongue, slowly coaxed Frankie from his sleep, “but I’m fairly certain I told you I wasn’t interested in having a forced relationship.”

Frankie blinked but everything was blurry despite the sunshine filling the room. His eyes were almost sealed shut by the tears he’d shed and he had to rub at them to clear away the gunk in order to actually see. The second he did, he gasped and bolted upright. “Rook.”

The prince was perched at the end of the bed, seated right on the edge. Frankie’s notebook was in his hands and he casually flipped through pages, either unaware of the way Frankie was currently gaping at him or ignoring it on purpose.

He was back in his human appearance, but was in the clothing he would have been wearing in Visera. The long red coat and fingerless leather gloves should have seemed out of place surrounded by the mundane setting of Frankie’s bedroom, especially since Rook wasn’t sporting his tail or his horns, but instead he looked good.

And, more importantly, *real*.

Frankie pinched himself anyway, twisting the skin on his arm roughly. It hurt. This wasn’t a dream.

Rook settled on a page and folded the notebook over, holding it up for Frankie to see. It was the one where he’d scrawled down his thoughts on who had helped rescue Rook and nursed him back to help—because, logically, there had to have been somebody. He couldn’t have survived on his own having fallen from that height and landing in running water.

After much consideration, Frankie had decided to leave that job up to a set of twins, one male the other female. They were both attractive and kind, and had taken care of the Prince of Bronze even knowing who he was. While he hadn’t written anything explicitly suggestive about them or how they felt

toward Rook, it was clear there was an open possibility left there.

Rook tapped the center of the page, scowling. “I’m gone for a few days and you’re already writing me a new love interest—”

Frankie pounced, slamming into him hard enough they both tumbled from the bed and landed on the carpet with a heavy thump. He hardly felt it, too distracted by the feel of solid muscle beneath him, the rough material of the fabric and the heat from Rook’s skin. Real, all of it, real.

He straddled Rook, then cupped his face in his hands and kissed him. Frankie put everything he had into the kiss, all the pain and the doubt and the fear and the worry. All the relief and the hope and elation at having him back here with him. Of getting to see and touch and taste him again when he’d been so sure—

“How?” He pulled away, holding Rook in place when the prince made to capture his mouth again. “How are you here? When you didn’t show up I thought...”

Understanding flashed through Rook’s eyes and he softened. Sliding his fingers through Frankie’s hair, he gently cupped the back of his skull and lowered him so he could press his lips to the center of his forehead.

“I came through the gateway in the mall,” he explained. “The electronics store was closed and there was no way for me to contact you. I had to wait until they came to open and then they wouldn’t let me leave without answering questions on how I’d gotten there and why. Fortunately, they saw I hadn’t stolen anything and believed I’d merely gotten locked in accidentally. Then there was the matter of getting back here without any money to pay for a ride...It ended up taking longer than I’d hoped. I’m sorry, Aardwolf, I came as soon as I could.”

Another tear slipped past Frankie’s defenses and he quickly brushed it away. He hadn’t even thought about that. In his panic, it’d completely slipped his mind that there were

other places Rook could have come through. He hadn't even considered checking the school library, let alone the mall.

"I'm sorry," he said, "it's my fault. I left you there. You had to figure out how to get out of that situation on your own when I should have been—"

Rook sat up so quickly, Frankie didn't have a chance to react. One moment he was lying beneath him and the next he was clutching Frankie close against his chest, holding him in his lap. "You're the only reason I'm here at all," he reminded. "I'd be dead if not for you."

Frankie snorted, mostly to keep himself from crying again, although this time the tears weren't caused by sadness. Part of him still couldn't believe Rook was really here, holding him. "That's ironic."

The first time they'd met, Rook had accused him of wanting him dead, after all, and now he was thanking him for saving his life.

"Do you remember?" Frankie tightened his arms around Rook's back, keeping him close, not sure he'd be able to handle looking him in the eyes as he asked. "Everything?"

"Everything," Rook confirmed, but Frankie couldn't allow himself to be fully relieved just yet.

"Like, everything, everything?" He shook his head at the stupidity of that question. "You wouldn't remember if you'd forgotten something." That's what forgotten meant.

"I promise you," he insisted, "I remember it all. I remember leaving you here on your own and immediately regretting it, and sending Ivan here in my stead to protect you. I remember entering the Hidden Palace with Sage, and the ambush, and the ceiling collapsing overtop us."

Frankie frowned. "How? I erased all of that. How can you remember something that never happened?"

"Probably because it did?" Rook didn't sound certain himself, but continued anyway. "It happened to me. Even if you undid it. One minute the ceiling was falling and the next I

was back in the woods walking with Lis, headed toward the cliffs.”

“Did she...?”

“I don’t believe she remembered, no. It didn’t seem like it, anyway.”

“Maybe you remember because you’ve been here?” Frankie guessed.

“Does it matter why?” Rook asked. “All that I care about is that I do.” He squeezed him a little harder. “All that matters is I’m here with you. Thank you for the bracelet, by the way.”

“I wasn’t sure it would work,” he admitted.

“It did.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d want to come back even if a gateway opened.”

“I did.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Frankie.” Rook forced him to sit back and meet his gaze. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be. If I had to fall off a hundred cliffs, a thousand, to get back to you I would gladly do it.”

Frankie searched his eyes. “Were you afraid?”

The corner of his mouth tipped up. “For my life? No.” He pulled Frankie’s face back toward his and kissed him softly, lightly. “I had faith you wouldn’t let me die. The only thing I feared was that the bracelet wouldn’t work and I would end up trapped in Visera. But that wasn’t the case, and here I am. Shouldn’t we focus on that? Enough talking about the how, Aardwolf, or the why. Let’s discuss the who.”

Frankie’s brow furrowed. “I don’t follow.”

“I’ll do the following from here on out,” Rook said. “I’ll follow you anywhere and everywhere, until the end of time. If you’d had any thoughts of escaping me, Frankie, full disclosure, it’s too late. You already made your choice when

you chose to save me on the cliffs. I'm yours." He paused for a second, inspecting Frankie's expression. "You're the whole reason I'm here. Take responsibility."

In the beginning, Frankie had wondered why he'd written Rook as such a massive asshole. From the second the two of them had met, the prince had been tossing his weight around, threatening things like bodily harm if he didn't get his way. He'd been frustrating and aggressive in the worst kind of ways, and ultimately everything Frankie rejected in a potential romantic partner. But the person before him now, the one looking at him so earnestly...

"Did I secretly write you having a soft side," he asked before he could help it, "or did you become this way on your own?"

"It was you," Rook answered without skipping a beat. "Whether you wrote me this way or the time we've spent together did it, no matter which way you turn it, it all comes back to you. You made me like this, desperate for your attention and determined not to let you go. Tell me what to do, Frankie, to get you to accept me. Whatever it is, whatever it takes, I'll do it."

"You already did." Whether this was a miracle or magic, it didn't matter. Rook was right. Who cared how it had happened? They were together. "You already kept your promise. You came back to me."

The kiss this time was tentative on both their parts, almost like it was their first and they were trying to get a feel for the other. It was clear to them that things were going to be different, that with the story ended and Rook having decided to stay, there was no longer the threat of him having to return to Visera looming over their heads.

There was a lot they needed to talk about, like where they went from here, what they both expected out of this relationship. But all of that could wait. For now, Frankie just wanted to enjoy this, enjoy the feeling of solace at having the prince back in his arms after being so certain he'd never get to again.

Rook had other ideas.

He reached for the notebook and held it up. “Let’s get back to this.”

“Or,” Frankie slipped his hand down Rook’s front, dipping his fingers into the waist band of his tight leather pants, “we can skip the foreplay and get right down to the fun part.”

Rook let out a surprised chuckle and tossed the notebook carelessly over his shoulder. In one swift motion, he rolled them, pinning Frankie to the floor beneath him. “I like the way you think.”

“I like you,” Frankie said. Although that was obvious, considering, he wanted to say the words. “I like you a lot.”

Rook shifted over him, settling more comfortably between Frankie’s spread thighs. “Aren’t authors supposed to not have a favorite character?”

“I lied before. We do.” He licked his lips. “You’re mine.”

“Yes,” Rook grinned down at him, “I am.”

Epilogue:

One Year Later

“That was the last one! You did great, Frankie.” Lucy gave him a wink and was quickly called away by one of the bookstore employees before he could give a reply.

Exhaling, Frankie dropped back in his chair, the cheap plastic creaking beneath his weight. The event had lasted a little over three hours this time, which was insanely long by his standards. His hand had started to cramp halfway in and he was afraid to stand, certain his legs would buckle beneath him if he tried.

But minor discomfort aside...The release party for the collected physical copies of Volume Three of the Gold and Silver trilogy had been amazing. Everything had gone off without a hitch, and there'd been so many people the line had gone out the door and even wrapped partly around the outside of the bookstore.

Of course, many of the people who'd approached him to sign their books had a thing or two to say about how he'd handled Rook's story arc, but that was to be expected. He'd read comments online and in reviews, so it wasn't too much of a surprise and nothing he hadn't already been aware of. Though most of them were just glad Rook had lived, there were some that were pretty bummed he hadn't joined in on the final battle.

Many readers had thought for sure he'd arrive just in the nick of time with the rest of the cavalry Sage and Lis had planted around the Hidden Palace, and had been disappointed when he hadn't shown. For the most part though, everyone liked the epilogue.

Before he'd sat down to write it, he and Rook had taken their bracelets off and burned them. Just to be safe. Neither of them had wanted to leave anything to chance, and with their only means of opening a gateway gone, there was

no fear of it accidentally happening and one of them vanishing on the other.

Frankie had been a little worried that he wouldn't be able to write the epilogue with Rook here, but they'd both refused to risk sending him back to Visera to do it. Sure enough, he hadn't been able to write Rook directly on the page, however he'd managed to make it work. Instead of having him actually there, Frankie had focused instead on Lis and Sage, and had the two of them talk amongst each other about how relieved they were Rook was safe and had been found.

He'd left it so the reason Rook hadn't come himself was because he was still healing, and had Lis make a joke about how maybe Rook had really just fallen for one of his rescuers. It'd given readers who were fans of his something to consider, and more than one had brought it up to Frankie excitedly, asking for more answers about whether or not he really was in a relationship with one of them.

Frankie's response had always been that Rook was definitely with *someone*. They'd found that answer mysterious and fun, but the guy who'd stuck nearby all night always grinned when he heard it.

Rook's powers remained even though the story was done and he was in this world permanently, and he'd chosen to attend the book signing in his original form, horns and all. He'd been swarmed by fans before the event had even officially begun, and had been kept almost as busy all night as Frankie.

"Did you have fun?" Rook appeared at his side now that Lucy and the line of people were gone, his tail flicking behind him.

Frankie caught a couple of girls staring from across the store, whispering amongst themselves. "Did you?"

He glanced over at them and then smirked, planting a hand onto the table before Frankie could get annoyed by his reaction. Leaning in, he brought his face close, stopping with

less than an inch between them, the mysterious smile still in place.

“I’ve always wanted to kiss you while you were wearing this thing,” he said, tapping the snout of the wolf mask secured over Frankie’s face. Then, without further warning, he sealed his mouth over his, tongue stroking in deep the second Frankie gasped and his lips parted.

The giggles across the bookstore turned to shrieks followed by more laughter, and since there were still many other people there, it set off a chain reaction.

When the clapping started, Frankie pushed Rook away, his ears turning red from the flush of embarrassment. He dipped his head, but Rook took his chin between his fingers and forced him to look back up.

“Are you dating Rook?!” a girl in her late teens who was standing with another group of friends closer by boldly asked.

Frankie blinked behind the mask, but Rook wasn’t nearly as shy as he was.

He wrapped an arm around Frankie’s shoulders and tugged him in close against his side. “He is.”

“Wow is that why you spent so much effort on your costume?” She covered her mouth to hide her wide grin. “That’s so sweet!”

“How much did that cost you?” one of the guys in her group asked, taking in everything Rook was wearing, eyes lingering a little longer on the tail that flicked behind him. “Is that animatronic too? Damn, you really went all out.”

Frankie stood abruptly, not wanting to give Rook the chance to say something like “it’s all real”. Sure, they’d take it as a joke, but it wasn’t something he wanted to bother with. Besides, if they looked closely enough, there was always the chance someone would catch on and realize that no, it was not animatronics.

He smiled at them politely and slipped his hand into Rook’s, pointedly backing away from the table he’d spent the

past three hours at. “Thanks for coming! Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Frankie turned on his heels and practically dragged Rook behind him, heading straight to the back of the store. He caught Lucy’s attention on the way there, waving at her and pretending not to notice when she tried to signal for him to come over.

“Shouldn’t you talk to her before we leave?” Rook asked as they reached the back exit, though he didn’t bother stopping him when he shoved open the door and led them out into the brisk night air.

All at once the quiet engulfed them, with only the distant sound of vehicles on the road and the slight tinkling of laughter from the main parking lot on the other side of the large brick building.

He kept going, intent on getting them to the car without further delay.

Behind him, Rook chuckled knowingly. “You know how excited she was to talk about your latest chapter.”

Frankie had been working on a new story for the past three months, though nothing had been made public yet. The plan was to wait for the final volume of Gold and Silver to release in paperback, and then announce the release of the new project a few days after. To prepare for it, Frankie had written more than half of what was intended as the first book already, even though they were sticking to the same serial novel format.

A new chapter would be released every two weeks, and while there’d been teasers, not even the title of the project had been announced. His publisher had opted to keep incredibly hush hush about it in order to drive up the anticipation, since Gold and Silver had done so well. The intention was to keep that momentum going and get readers to return for Cuthwulf’s next work.

The first six months after everything had gone down with Visera and Gabriel, Frankie had been too afraid to write

so much as a word. After sending in the epilogue chapter, he'd put off getting another new laptop, making excuses for weeks on why he was too busy to be bothered before Rook had finally called him out on it.

Then, after they'd come home with a new one, there'd been another struggle of him sitting in front of the blank screen with no clue what to write.

Or even if he should.

If he believed Gabriel, so long as he didn't include any real items that he owned, it shouldn't matter if he wrote. The story would remain fiction and the characters wouldn't come to life. But...he hadn't been sure if he could trust Gabriel, and that had tortured him. The last thing he wanted was for Rook's biting words about him being responsible for creating pain and suffering to come true. Again.

Ironically, the very person who had told him those cruel things before was the one who coaxed him into giving it a try. He hadn't wanted Frankie to give up on something he loved, something he'd worked so hard to achieve. He'd claimed it was worth the risk and okay to be a little selfish.

Frankie still wasn't entirely convinced that was true, but...He'd given in and tried.

The new story had come to him in a flash, a rush of words streaming from the tips of his fingers. He'd come out of it a few hours later with the first ten chapters and a bored Rook scrolling through social media on his phone nearby.

Since he was staying here for good, that was one of the first things Frankie had done. Gone out and gotten him his own cell phone. The rest of it, finding ways to get him an ID and the like had come much more easily. One of the perks of dating someone with magical abilities.

Frankie had discussed getting together with Lucy after the event earlier, and had been excited to talk about the midway point of the book he was working on too.

Before.

Now all he could think about was getting the two of them out of there, away from all the longing gazes and the lingering touches to Rook's "costume".

"Lucy and I can talk about it tomorrow," Frankie said, catching sight of the dark red Honda Civic and picking up the pace.

"Are you saying there's something you and I have to do that can't wait until then?" Rook asked, clearly playing dumb. He was enjoying this. He always liked when Frankie got flustered over the attention other people gave him.

Secretly, Frankie kind of liked it too, because it always led to situations like this.

They made it to the car and just as he was reaching for the driver's side door handle, Rook made a move. Frankie found himself pressed back against the door in a heartbeat, the prince's arms up over the hood to keep him blocked in. "You haven't answered my question, Aardwolf."

Frankie groaned when Rook pressed into him and the hard length of his cock bumped up against his own. Silently, he cursed himself for choosing a new place located further away from the bookstore than his old one had been.

After he'd finally completed the semester and passed his Oceanography class, Frankie and Rook had agreed to move out of the apartment he'd shared with Adelaide. It'd worked out in the end, because she'd fallen in love with Seoul and had decided to stay indefinitely. He'd packed her things and shipped them back to her parents, and then he and Rook had moved into their own place.

With his book sales, he'd been qualified for a small loan and had found a tiny two bedroom house in the same town. It'd been one of those right place right time things, and he'd joked it was like fate when he'd signed his name on the paperwork and gotten the keys. He loved everything about that home.

Except for the fact it was another three minutes' drive from the bookstore than his old apartment would have been,

and in his current state, that may as well be a lifetime.

“Get in the car,” he ordered, tone a bit more firm than he’d meant it as the sexual frustration grew to a boil when Rook rubbed against him a second time.

“What for?” Rook gave him a mock innocent look that was fooling nobody.

Reaching back, Frankie undid the silk tie holding the mask in place and pulled it free. Cool air kissed his bare cheeks and he shivered slightly at the sudden chill.

The second Rook saw that, his expression turned more serious, and he pulled away, easing Frankie off the car so he could open the door for him. “Why didn’t you say you were cold?”

“I wasn’t,” he told him, but Rook was having none of it, urging him into the car before shutting the door and rounding to enter on the other side.

As soon as he was in, he took the keys from Frankie’s hand and turned the car on, quickly adjusting the heat so a steady stream of warm air gusted over them. Once he was confident it was warming up inside the tiny car, he finally turned back to Frankie, only to find him grinning like an idiot.

“What?” Rook pursed his lips.

“Nothing,” Frankie shook his head. Then he pretended to think it over and added, “Was that the *gentle* portion of the evening?”

Rook stiffened in his seat at the suggestive question.

Frankie’s smiled widened when he didn’t get a reply. “Should I head home now?”

“Yes,” Rook stated, voice husky and deep.

“Or,” Frankie looked back toward the bookstore, “maybe you’re right and I should go back in and talk to Lucy. I mean, I did promise her, and this,” he waved a finger between the two of them, “can wait until—”

Rook captured the back of his head and kissed him possessively, instantly shutting him up. By the time he pulled away, they were both breathless. “Home. Now.”

“I love you.” It wasn’t the first time he’d said it to him, but Frankie liked that whenever he did, Rook seemed to preen slightly. This time was no different.

Rook straightened and tipped his chin, staring back at Frankie with heat in his eyes. “More than Storm?”

Storm was the new main character in Frankie’s current project.

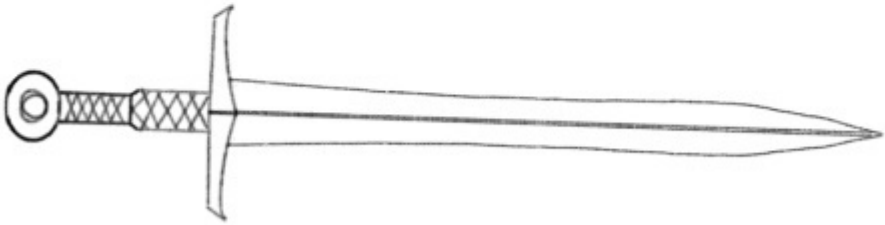
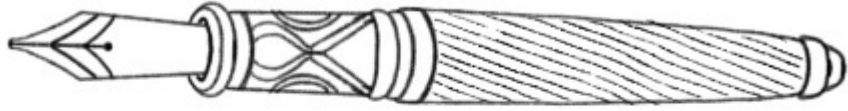
“Way more,” he said confidently.

There were going to be many characters in Frankie’s career as a writer, but he was only ever going to have one favorite.

Rook took his hand and brought his knuckles to his lips, kissing them softly, so different from the man he’d been in Visera, or even the one he’d been when he and Frankie had first met that night a year ago.

“I love you too, Aardwolf.”

Their story wasn’t nearly finished, but Frankie could think of a few ways he’d like to end the night. Without any further prompting, he got the car running, and took them home.



Bonus Material:

The original cover was created using these fun designed characters I found and purchased on deposit photos by Ravven. Even though it was very different from my other covers, I felt like the video game feel of them fit this particular book really well, which is why I still wanted to find a way to utilize them in this special edition!

Here are the main characters of Abandoned Things/Gold and Silver!







Felicity 'Lis' Sen

Princess of Silver

Uses a secret identity to infiltrate the Gold army.

Falls for Sage and is eventually found out.

Chapter Eighty-Three:

Rook's POV

It took him longer than it should have to realize that he wasn't being crushed beneath the weight of heavy stone. Rook stumbled on his next step, frowning as his brain struggled to comprehend what was going on.

"Rook?" a concerned voice called to him, and when he turned it was to find Lis standing at his side, worry creasing her brow.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her before he could help it, only noting how odd that question would be after it was already out. What was *he* doing here was more like. The last thing he recalled, he'd been in the midst of a bloody battle with the Iron, and the ceiling had cracked above them and—

That was it. There was nothing but the sudden rush of pain followed swiftly by darkness. Had he...died?

He almost snorted.

How many times was he destined to die and come back?

That thought knocked something loose in his mind and he finally registered where the two of them were and what that most likely meant.

"This again," he growled, sneering as a mixture of fear and frustration swarmed through him. He tried not to cling too strongly to the first, but the second was impossible to shake loose. He was sick of this damn chapter and all of the events that took place within it. It'd been bad enough he'd had to live through it the once, but a second time?

"Are you all right?" Lis asked, reaching up to press the back of her hand to his forehead. When he shot out of reach, her frown deepened. "You're acting oddly."

If they were here, back in Hem forest, that meant something had gone wrong on Frankie's end. Was he all right?

If he was rewriting this gods awful chapter, clearly not. This must have been a last resort for him.

But...Rook could still remember everything about the other world and his time there. Could still recall the warmth of his Aardwolf's body against his own. The glimmer of laughter in his eyes. The sound of his voice...

"Have you seen Frankie?" Rook didn't really care about keeping up appearances with Lis, not when there were more important things to deal with. He watched her expression closely, trying to find any tell that she knew who he was referring to, but it became apparent a moment later she did not.

"Who?" Lis shook her head at him. "You were fine a second ago. What's gotten into you?"

She didn't remember.

She didn't but he did.

"Is it because I've traveled through the gateways?" he mused. It was the only explanation he could think of, his hand already moving to his front pocket, seeking out the necklace.

The one he'd given to Ivan.

Hell.

He was trapped. He was trapped in this world and the man that he loved was locked in another. What had once been his home, the place he'd longed the most to return to, was now nothing more than a literal hell.

"Do you have something for me?" Rook turned to Lis then. That was right, in the original chapter, he'd received the necklace as a gift just before they'd been attacked. His eyes took in their surroundings and he tried to remember where exactly they'd been when that had happened. "Come. Let's keep walking."

It was only a little ways up ahead.

"Are you sure? Maybe you should rest," Lis pursed her lips, yet still fell into step at his side when he began striding forward. "Also, I'm not sure how you knew, but yes, I do have something for you actually."

Rook opened his mouth, but the words got logged in his throat. When he tried to stop moving, his legs wouldn't listen, marching him forward completely against his will. He'd never experienced anything like it before, but the panic it brought him didn't last. If Frankie was written the chapter over from the beginning, that meant he was controlling the flow of the story. Perhaps the reason Rook couldn't govern his own actions now was due to that, and the only reason he'd never noticed before was because he hadn't been aware of what was going on.

Back then, he would have said and done the things Frankie willed of him without realizing they weren't actually his own actions.

The cliffs were directly ahead, the forest opening up to show a morose gray sky and grass leading to muddy stone. He knew what it was like to watch helplessly as his blood stained the silver rock, could picture the large bird that had flown overhead and the tears glimmering in Felicity's eyes just before he'd lost his battle and succumbed to death.

He so didn't want to go through that again, but there was no stopping it. Maybe he didn't really want to anyway, when he considered what letting this play out could mean. After everything they'd gone through together, he had no doubt Frankie would do everything in his power to keep Rook safe.

He had to believe there was more to this plot than his demise, that Frankie had meant it when he'd promised he would never allow that to be his ending again. If dying on this cliff was the only way, so be it.

Rook would greet death with open arms this time around.

They came to the spot where she'd gifted him the necklace the first time and anticipation thrummed through him. No matter what happened next, he was going to find a way back to Frankie.

He had to.

“It’s nothing special,” Lis said, pulling something out of her pocket, “Just a small token of my appreciation. You’ve really been a great ally in a time when I really needed one and I want you to have this.”

Rook held out his hand, and though on the outside his expression remained relaxed, internally he frowned when it wasn’t a necklace that she dropped into his palm but a twist of red leather.

A pang of longing hit him and he would had gasped if he’d had control over his body. The sight of the object in his hold was proof of what he’d hoped for. Proof that Frankie would never abandon him again.

This was it. This was his chance. He just had to figure out how to use it.

“This bracelet is something I kept with me from my kingdom,” Lis explained. “Now the red reminds me of your hair. I thought it’d make a fitting gift. Do you like it?”

“You didn’t have to give me anything,” Rook said, the words spilling free. It was like being on autopilot. It was his lips moving and his voice speaking, and yet he had no say in anything that came out of him. “A token of friendship, you called it.”

Lis glanced away, recognizing the tone he’d used. She’d known how he felt about her, had figured it out a few chapters back, but pretended not to have noticed. “Once this is all over, and we’ve defeated Iron, I hope we can all be friends. You, me, and Sage.”

Rook wondered if Sage had maintained his memories of Frankie as well. It was selfish, but he hoped not. He didn’t like the idea of sharing his Aardwolf with the King of Gold, not even just in memory.

He flashed her a devilishly charming smile even though on the inside he felt nothing for her other than a warm familiarity. It was interesting how different he was from the person he’d once been. Back then, he would have done anything to have this woman acknowledge him. Now all he

wanted was Frankie to roll his eyes at him and call him an asshole.

“You know, Princess, I’d make a much better—” Rook already knew the attack was coming, but even still, he couldn’t dodge.

The Gloom came swiftly, spilling out from the trees to rush them, forcing the two of them closer to the cliff’s edge.

The fight happened quickly, a mere blur of motion. He and Lis worked together, fighting against the creatures with their fists and magic. They shredded through the shadows and kept close.

When he saw the arrow zipping through the air, he reacted, jumping in front of Lis to take the shot meant for her. The pain was immediately, the breath whooshing out of his lungs. It wasn’t until his back foot slipped on the wet mud that it dawned on him this was different from how it’d gone down the first time.

His body dropped, and at the last second he managed to catch himself on the edge of the sharp stone. It dug into his forearms, slicing at the exposed flesh on his wrists, but it was still nothing compared to the shooting pain of the arrow sticking out of him.

The metal tip had gone straight through his upper body, and the strength in his arms was nothing compared to what they’d usually be. That, added to the blood that poured out of him, and he started to feel the direness of his situation rather quickly.

If he loosened his hold on the leather bracelet, perhaps he’d be able to collect enough strength to hoist himself over, but there was no way that was going to happen. He would never let go of the only piece of Frankie he had left. There was a chance something else had gone wrong, because this was so different from the first time he’d died, and as it were, Rook wouldn’t have access to the gateway if he fell off the cliff, but...

He trusted his Aardwolf.

That trust chased away the fear.

The world around him began to wink in and out, his vision blurring. It wasn't hard to guess, even in his state with his thoughts growing cloudy, that this was all due to the blood loss. That he wasn't going to be able to hold on much longer.

"Help me put the bracelet on," he pleaded with Lis the second she dropped to her knees and reached for him. Those words were his own, and not knowing how long he'd have the freedom to speak as he willed, he added more desperately, "Please! Do it!"

She clearly wanted to argue, but took it and slid it over his hand, crying out when he lifted his palm off the stone all the way and fell further down. Her grabbing onto him was the only thing keeping him from falling then and there.

With some effort he turned his head, tipping it back so he could look at Lis one last time. Tears were dripping down her rose colored cheeks, making tracks through the thin layer of dirt that had collected there during her run through the forest. Her blonde hair was wild and tangled, tiny bits of broken leaves and twigs poking out at odd angles.

"You don't look like a princess," he said, the words gravely and low, coming out of him the way they had before.

A loud sob slipped through her full lips and he realized she was digging her nails into the flesh of his wrist, even as she slid toward the edge he was currently dangling off of.

He was so close.

"Let go," he told her, voice soft yet firm. "Felicity, it's all right. Let go."

She blinked at him, no doubt noting it was the first time he'd said her real name out loud, but didn't immediately do as asked.

They'd been meeting to figure out their next move against the Iron Kingdom when they'd been attacked. As far as he knew, no one was aware they were out here and so no help was coming.

The fall was at least a couple hundred feet down into a fast running river. The chances of survival, even for a demon such as him, were slim. Frankie knew this.

There was a plan, Rook just wasn't aware of the details, but it was obvious in order for it to be executed, he needed to fall.

His weight pulled Lis a little closer to the edge.

"I didn't go through all of this to save you," he stated, "only to have you kill yourself in the end anyway."

Vehemently, she shook her head, the tears streaming more freely now. "We can make it."

"People are counting on you," he reminded.

"They're counting on you too!"

His arms felt like they were going to pop free from their sockets, which meant she couldn't be feeling much better. He needed to put an end to this before it got worse and she really did end up dying with him.

"I love you," he told her, voice now a mere whisper, easily carried off by the wind. He didn't mean it the way he used to, but there was still some truth to the words anyway. Meeting Frankie had changed the course of his entire life, but it didn't fully erase who he'd been in the past.

Lis had been a great friend to him, a spot in the darkness he hadn't been aware he'd needed. For that, he would always be grateful toward her.

The corner of his mouth tipped up. "At least this way I get to die a hero."

"Don't say that! You aren't going to—"

Before she could finish that sentence, Rook shoved her hands off of him and let go of the rock siding.

She screamed and reached out, but it was too late.

Rook kept his gaze on her as he fell, until she was nothing but a speck in the distance and her screams had been

completely swallowed by the whooshing air sailing past his ears.

Then he pictured the person he really wanted to see, and he prayed with everything in him for a chance to do so again. He prayed and he swore that if he was giving a third chance at life, he would make it count. He would be good, and more importantly, he'd protect the person he loved most.

Touching the leather bracelet, Rook closed his eyes and accepted his fate.

When the familiar warmth greeted his back, followed quickly by a flash of light, he grinned.

The portal had opened.

And it was taking him home.

Found Things

A Bonus Short

Rook's cock speared into him and Frankie cried out, his palms slapping against the slick surface of the granite counter top. "Wait!"

They'd just gotten back from Adelaide's Halloween party, and they'd barely made it to the kitchen before suddenly Rook had shoved him over the island and hiked up the white shawl Frankie had worn. His shorts had gone next, leaving him at the demon prince's mercy in less than a minute.

Frankie had gone to the party as a ghost, since writing had kept him distracted up until the week before. Both Rook and Adelaide had to have reminded him a dozen times, if not more, and yet he'd still managed to forget to go shopping for a costume.

Earlier, Rook had scolded him for it.

With his tongue.

And his teeth.

And his fingers.

Which was no doubt why he opened up for him so easily now, his body sucking in all nine inches of that hard length with only a minimal amount of sting.

Rook snapped his hips forward, grinding into him with enough force stars winked behind Frankie's eyes.

"I said wait," Frankie somehow managed to get out, though the words were spoken between pants and the harsh sounds of slapping skin as Rook continued to fuck into him at a rough and steady pace. Just the way he liked.

"Why on earth would I do that, Aardwolf?" He dug his fingers into Frankie's sides in delicious warning. "We've both been thinking about this all night, me rearranging your insides

with my cock, just,” he punctuated the rest of his sentence with deep thrusts, “like, this.”

That was true, but...

“Don’t think I didn’t notice how frequently you adjusted yourself,” Rook added. “It’s fortunate you chose such a baggy costume after all. It helped hide how horny you were from the rest of the party. I should have dragged you into the bathroom and taken you right then and there. The fact that I controlled myself shouldn’t go unnoticed. So I repeat, why would I stop now that I finally have you right where I want you?”

“Because—” Frankie groaned, momentarily unable to speak as that thick cockhead dragged against his prostate, sending jolts of electricity throughout his entire body. He got a hold of himself a second later and gave it another attempt. “Because we have an audience!”

Rook paused behind him with his cock pulled halfway out. “What?”

“Our son!” Frankie flung a hand out toward the kitchen counter, where a fluffy black Main Coon cat was watching. When he’d told the demon prince he’d wanted a pet, Rook had approved under the agreement they selected the largest and most vicious of pets available to them.

To say he’d been less than impressed when Frankie had returned home with a kitten would be an understatement. Even now, after Bronze had grown forty inches in length, Rook still liked to complain about how a three headed attack dog would have been better.

Seeing he’d finally gotten their attention, Bronze swished his jet black tail and tipped his head at them as if in judgement. His round copper colored eyes settled on Frankie’s and held unblinkingly.

Rook pulled all the way out, but before Frankie could so much as open his mouth to suggest they take it to the bedroom, he drove his cock back in all the way to the hilt.

“It irks me that you insist on calling that creature our child,” Rook drawled as he pounded into him over and over again at a punishing pace. He planted a palm to the back of Frankie’s neck and shoved him more firmly over the table, forcing his ass to tip up and the angle to change, so that on the next thrust, he fucked in even deeper. “He’s covered in fur.”

“And?” Frankie snapped back, trying to hold onto the thread of discussion and not succumb to the world shattering skills of the man so thoroughly taking him. “You have horns and a tail!”

“What?” Rook’s voice took on a playful note, and a second later the object in question flicked into Frankie’s view. “This tail?”

“Hold up,” Frankie stuttered when it dipped back out of sight. “We cannot have wild, kinky demon sex in front of —” The sentence ended on a high pitched wail when he felt the tail wrap around the base of his dick and squeeze.

Rook started to pump him in time with his thrusts, the flat, triangular tip of his tail rubbing over the head of Frankie’s cock. It stroked him and teased, slipping into his slit just enough Frankie could feel it there before retreating.

“What was that?” Rook leaned in and asked silkily when Frankie whimpered. “Still want me to stop, Aardwolf?”

Three years since their first time and he was still a slave to the prince’s cock.

“Don’t.” Frankie shook his head as much as he was able with Rook’s palm still pinning him by the neck. Shifting onto his toes, he offered himself up, moaning when the demon prince’s balls slapped against his taint. “Don’t stop.”

He chuckled. “What about our son?”

“What?” Frankie frowned. “We don’t have one of those. We have a fur ball. Let him watch. Who cares. I don’t. Just keep going.” He lifted his head enough to find Bronze’s gaze—which was still creepily on him—and mouthed the words “I’m sorry”.

If Bronze hadn't already been neutered, Frankie was certain he'd understand though.

Rook reached around him and grabbed a fist full of his balls then, and that combined with the feeling of his tail still wrapped around Frankie's dick, and the cock stuffing him full, was the final straw.

Frankie screamed as his orgasm hit him, uncaring as he made a mess of their kitchen and emptied out over the side of the granite island. His body jerked as he came, his breaths a series of never ending gasps and grunts as Rook continued to pound into him, stretching him impossibly wide.

"Rook," Frankie begged once it became too much, tears pricking at his eyes as over sensitivity started to set in.

The demon prince hushed him and then with one last plunge he buried himself and groaned as he fell over the edge as well. He pumped him full, hips undulating throughout the whole process, until he'd spilled every last drop inside of Frankie. Then he collapsed over top him, pinning him between his solid weight and the hard surface of the counter.

"You ruined my costume," Frankie muttered as soon as he was able to get his breathing to even out. "Some of us don't have the luxury of changing our appearance at the snap of our fingers."

Since Frankie had forgotten to get a costume, Rook hadn't bothered with one either, opting to just go in his demon form.

He'd gotten tons of complements all night long, as well as lingering gazes and flirtatious comments from other guests. Which was probably what had turned Frankie into a mess of bundled, turned on nerves.

Even after all this time, he could still get jealous if too many people put their hands on his demonic man.

Rook hummed and lifted himself just enough to plant a soft kiss to the back of Frankie's neck. "I'll make it up to you."

"Well then get to it."

He paused and then pulled back, slapping Frankie's thighs apart and ignoring his indignant huff at the treatment.

Frankie didn't have to look himself to know he was already hard again.

"I will never get over how quickly you ready for round two," Rook told him, a pleased rumble making its way up his throat. Without giving Frankie a chance to respond, he lined himself back up with his eager hole and pushed inside with one hard flick of his hips.

They both groaned as they came together for what was going to be the second of many times that night alone.

* * *

"Here," Rook reached up and brushed the pads of his thumbs across the rise of Frankie's cheeks, "Allow me."

They were in the bathroom upstairs, facing one another in the large tub. Steam wafted around them and the hot water was already doing wonders for the aches and pains in Frankie's muscles.

"Your tears made a mess of it," Rook laughed at him, and though Frankie hadn't seen, he could picture what his face probably looked like.

He'd painted white makeup around his eyes the size of the holes in his costume to make the ghost look more cohesive. Now, it was no doubt smudged and a cakey mess, thanks to both the crying and the sweat—courtesy of the demon prince now tenderly whipping his skin clean.

Rook gave up using his hands and reached for a washcloth off to the side, dipping it into the bath before dabbing it at the spots of remaining makeup. "Next year, let's try something sexy."

Frankie's brow winged up. "You didn't think my outfit was sexy?"

"Considering you wore nothing but those tiny short underneath and only I knew?" Rook licked his lips. "Oh, it was sexy all right."

“Then...?”

“I heard about couple’s costumes tonight,” he said. “You never mentioned them before.”

This was the first year they’d attended an actual Halloween party, since Frankie was usually busy with book signings that day of the year. Though his newest project was doing well, he’d agreed with his publisher that the feel of this one had more wintery vibes, and so they’d pushed off his usual even to January.

Adelaide had been ecstatic when she’d heard the news, since she’d been wanting to introduce them to her new boyfriend for months. She and Sam had been dressed as pirates, and Frankie had noticed Rook’s interest in the matching outfits.

“Okay,” Frankie said, closing his eyes when Rook motioned to him to do so. The cloth lightly brushed against his skin. “I’ll let you pick what we go as.”

“We should throw our own party,” Rook surprised him by saying next.

Frankie blinked at him. “You want to?”

“Why not.” Done with his work, he dropped the cloth back to the edge of the tub and leaned in closer, wrapping his arms around Frankie’s waist to keep him in place as he grinned. “We’re wealthy enough. We can easily upstage Adelaide’s party.”

“One,” Frankie held up a finger, “we talked about playing nice and being less competitive, remember? Two...” He trailed off, realizing that there wasn’t actually a second point he wanted to make. With a wave he rolled his eyes. “Oh, whatever. If you want to throw a party, throw a party. But we don’t have to wait until Halloween, you know.”

“Do tell.” Rook dropped his chin to Frankie’s shoulder, somehow managing to engulf Frankie’s entire body with his arms and legs. Water sloshed over the side of the tub, but neither of them cared or noticed.

“Why don’t we host a Friendsgiving this year,” Frankie suggested, lifting a hand to run his fingers through Rook’s hair. He’d always wanted to throw one, but in the past he hadn’t known enough people, and there hadn’t been a good enough reason to go all out for that kind of celebration because of it.

Now...

“We can invite my friends and your friends from work,” he offered. “Our dining room table seats twelve. That’ll be enough space.”

The past two Thanksgivings they’d spent just the two of them over take out turkey dinner boxes from the local diner. Frankie felt a little badly that he hadn’t allowed Rook to fully experience the wonders of that particular holiday, so maybe in this way, he could make it up to him.

“I’ll let you decorate the house however you want,” he added as a bonus incentive, not that he thought for a second Rook was about to turn him down.

The demon prince had gotten bored with life at home while Frankie wrote pretty quickly. He’d been working at Shots of Love as a bartender for over two years now. He was surprisingly good at it, and knew how to turn on the charm for customers. Because of that, he’d made friends with the rest of the staff and the owner right away.

Shots of Love was both a restaurant and a bar, so the two of them went in for dinner on occasion and Frankie had gotten to meet everyone. It was nice seeing Rook establish his own life here, and also great seeing how relaxed, and unhurried with it all he was. Not having to worry about saving a kingdom did wonders for his stress levels, that was for sure.

“All right,” Rook said, turning to kiss the spot beneath Frankie’s jaw. “It can be our trial run.”

“Trial run for what?” Frankie asked.

“Planning a big event.”

He frowned and pulled back, forcing Rook to stop using his shoulder as a prop. “What other event do you need to

plan for? Are you really that invested in a Halloween—”

Rook shook his head and reached for him, lifting Frankie by the thighs until he was straddling Rook’s waist. “Couple costumes weren’t the only things I heard about tonight.”

“What’d you hear?” There’d been so much chatter, he couldn’t even begin to guess.

“I knew about it already, of course, but after hearing more about it at length...” The corner of Rook’s mouth turned up. “I understand weddings are a big deal. I want to be sure I’m prepared to do my part.”

Frankie was certain he’d misheard and for a moment all he could do was stare back at him. “I...What?”

Rook’s tail appeared suddenly and flicked out of the tube, stretching toward where he’d discarded his black jeans earlier. It wriggled into the back pocket and came back out a second later with something shiny attached to the end. He pulled it forward and held it between them, waiting for Frankie to glance down.

A hammered band of bronze winked in the overhead lighting of the bathroom.

“That’s a ring,” Frankie blurted dumbly.

“I was told this was how you did it properly here,” Rook’s tail lifted it an inch higher, as if he was worried Frankie hadn’t gotten a good enough look. “I know it’s typically gold, but there was no way—”

“Are you asking me to marry you right now?” Frankie interrupted bluntly.

Rook seemed a little nervous, and it was such a far cry from his usual cocky demeanor that it threw Frankie even more. “Yes. Will you?”

“Will I?”

“Will you marry me, Aardwolf?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have a castle in this world. Or a fortune. Or and army at my disposal, but—”

“I said yes,” Frankie repeated.

“I don’t make much at the bar—”

“Rook.” He grabbed his face between both hands and held him still, grinning like an idiot. “I make enough money to keep the both of us more than comfortable. And we already have a house, so why would we need a castle? You could quit bartending tomorrow and that wouldn’t change my answer. Yes. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

The corner of Rook’s mouth twitched. “I’ve gone from a respectable prince to a kept man, it seems.”

Frankie paused. “Does that bother you?”

“No,” he chuckled. “Why should it?” He slapped a palm against Frankie’s left ass cheek and squeezed. “Keep me all you want, Aardwolf. Keep me forever, in fact. I see no shame in riding your coattails.” His gaze turned wicked and suggestive. “The same way you see no shame in riding my...”

Something slipped between Frankie’s crease and trailed low, prodding lightly at his hole.

“...Tail,” Rook finished before pressing it past that ring of muscle. He stroked in deep, widening the head of his tail to stretch Frankie open.

Frankie dropped his head back and moaned.

“You’ll marry me?” Rook asked again.

“Yes.” Frankie dropped down, pushing his tail in deeper and bit onto his bottom lip at the way it sent shivers skittering up his spine. He planted his hands on Rook’s shoulders and lifted, working himself on that devilish appendage until he was a writhing, panting mess and he would have said anything Rook wanted to hear.

As if sensing that, the demon prince cupped his cheek. “Tell me you love me.”

“I love you,” Frankie said without skipping a beat. Then his eyes opened and he gave him a pointed look. “Say it back.”

Rook chuckled and kissed him. “I love you, Aardwolf.”

“That’s—” Frankie froze and a look of worry came over the demon prince’s face.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Please tell me you took the ring off your tail before you inserted it inside me?” Frankie stated.

For a moment, he was silent, and then Rook burst out in a laugh that echoed throughout the bathroom and no doubt startled Bronze wherever he currently was in the house.

“Does that mean you like it?” Rook asked.

“I’d like for it not to be in my ass!” Frankie planted his knees on the bottom of the tub and was in the process of lifting himself off the tail when suddenly Rook’s hands were on his hips and he was slamming him back down. He cried out but then glared as soon as the initial burst of pleasure left him.

“Relax,” he said. “The only thing going up there is my come.”

Frankie made a face, but before he could respond, Rook held out a fist and turned it over.

The ring was safely in the center of his palm.

“Put it on me,” Frankie demanded, holding out his hand. “Then you can fuck me like a demon without me freaking out about somehow losing it.”

“Greedy little Aardwolf, aren’t you?” Rook slipped the ring onto his finger.

“Your greedy little Aardwolf,” Frankie agreed, checking the ring in the light. It was a perfect fit.

Just like them.

“That’s right,” Rook pulled his tail free and then shifted Frankie higher so that his cock could press against his entrance instead. “Mine.” He eased him down until he was fully seated and then kissed him. “Forever.”

“Forever,” Frankie nodded and opened his mouth to welcome his demon prince’s tongue.

He had no idea what forever entailed in the real world, but he was excited to find out.

Thank you for reading Rook and Frankie’s story. I hope you enjoyed your time with them as much as I did!

Curious about Gold and Silver? Frankie’s book was actually one of my old, unfinished projects. I could never get the feel of it right, and it switched between being a YA and an NA more times than I can count. I decided to share some of it with you anyway, since Lis didn’t really get any spotlight in the story, and Rook and Sage’s love for her was a pretty big plot point throughout! So, in the hopes you can better see why they both fell for her, here is what would have been the first two chapters of my version of Gold and Silver. The first thing you may note is it doesn’t start at a masquerade, and Sage is already king. Alas, Frankie is a better writer than I and came up with a better starting point than I managed to. I considered rewriting it to fit, but since this is my version and not his...How about you just think of it as one of his first rough drafts? One that went unpublished, which, fair warning, the rest of this story will forever be. Unpublished. I have no intentions of ever finishing this sadly. Read at your own risk!

We all know what happens to them already anyway though, right? ;)

Gold and Silver

Chapter 1:

Lis made her way through the camp on sure feet, weaving through soldiers too hungover from the night before to take notice and move out of her way first. A few called her name, or nodded, or glanced away so quickly it was almost believable they hadn't seen her.

She grinned, and it was both vicious and beautiful, a fact she knew well because she'd secretly practiced the look in the mirror before implementing it in her everyday life. Her uniform was snug, the deep forest green leather far too hot for the beating sun, and it was an internal struggle not to rip the damn thing off here and now. But it signified her status so that anyone around who didn't know her—and there were many—would understand her position was above theirs.

Being a general in the Gold army certainly had its perks, and over the past two years she'd held the title, she'd made a decent name for herself as one of the most ruthless and affective fighters the Gold had.

“You can't avoid this forever,” Barry reminded, easily keeping step with her. He glared and bared his teeth at those stupid enough not to step aside, not nearly as gentle about it as she. His uniform was similar to hers, though over his left breast he bore the emblem of the Crow, a symbol showing that he was her right hand man.

There were many sigils in the army, all standing for different positions. When she'd first arrived, it had taken Lis weeks to memorize them all. Now, she could close her eyes and decipher them by feel alone.

“Careful,” she warned, though there was little real threat in her tone. “This is a subject you'll want to tread lightly on.”

The camp was huge, surrounding the entire castle in a stretch of a mile, so as to be large enough to hold a little under half the Gold king's army. Thirteen days ago, twelve of his fifty generals had been summoned, along with their men.

There was still no official word as to the why, but Lis was pretty sure she knew already.

A member of the high council had recently been slain in his bed, which meant the king would be searching for someone to take the empty seat. Both she and Barry hoped she stood a chance at it, being that she'd lead her men into more battles than any other general here, aside from her mentor, Finn Morgan.

Commander Morgan was already a part of the high council, and therefore, not competition in this given instance.

"We've been here a week," Barry stated, dropping his voice low as they passed through a more crowded area. It was always like this, the closer they got to the Ring the more people there would be. "It couldn't hurt to ask him, that's all I'm saying."

"I didn't ask your advice." The sounds of cheering began to fill the air and immediately her heart began pounding along with it in excitement. "Keep it to yourself."

Built towards the west side of the camp, and closer to the castle than any other settlement, the Ring was always bustling. What had probably once been used to train horses now held a different purpose, one of violence and entertainment. The wooden posts that circled the space and the rungs that helped form it were constantly being repaired because of out of hand fights. Just the other night, Lis had tossed a man through one of them herself, splintering the gate in two.

She turned the corner around a massive teal tent and quickened her steps when the Ring finally came into view. It was almost thirty feet in diameter, with the wooden fence about four feet high.

Originally, it'd been set up as a sparing ring, however things had escalated by the time Lis and her men had arrived. Now, so long as no one ended up crippled or dead, there were no rules. Anyone could participate, and anyone could be challenged. In the ring, rank didn't matter, only skill.

“Fine,” Barry said, still at her side, “I won’t bring it up again. But can we please discuss this at least. Getting mixed up in the fighting pit is—”

She stopped listening, her attention already trained on the match currently taking place. Two men, both at least twice her size and in dire need of a bath. It was apparent that the fight was already coming to a close, seeing as how one of them was barely able to stay on his feet.

She watched him somehow managed to dodge and weave out of the way of his opponents fists, but it wouldn’t last.

Her fingers went to the zipper on her jacket and she breathed a sigh of relief as the cool air hit her flushed skin. She’d prepared for this already, and had done away with the traditional black shirt that was worn beneath. Instead, she had on only her undergarment—a thick burgundy material that hung over the front of her neck, draped over her breasts, and then was wrapped around her back and came back around to the front.

It left her stomach bare, all the way down to the tops of her hips where her leather pants started. The long sleeved jacket was the only part of her clothing that contained her sigil, so without it, she would be harder to identify.

At least, that had been her hope—and the case—for her first two trips here. After that, word had gotten around she was a general, and then that she was Lis Gray. Now, it was next to impossible not to be recognized, and she could already feel the telltale signs of eyes on her as she twisted and tossed the jacket at Barry.

“You don’t have to stay,” she told him, already knowing he would. Pushing her way through the thicker crowd around the ring, she placed a boot against the lower rung and began to stretch. “Just make sure you don’t lose that,” she pointed to her jacket, “I don’t have another.”

“Lis—”

“We’re done talking now, Bare. I won’t be persuaded.”

He let out a frustrated heave. “No, you never will.”

She flashed him a grin just as the current fight came to a stuttering end. By the time she turned back the dizzy man was on his back in the dirt and the referee was holding out his arms towards the winner.

Angling her head, she inspected him, noting that he was actually three times her size, with at least two feet of height and three feet of bulk. His biceps were clearly larger than her skull. But as he turned a circle to help pump up the crowd she noted he was slow, either from his previous fight or simply because of his size.

It didn't matter either way.

“I think the general is going in!” a yell went up the second she placed her hand on the top rung, aiming to lift herself over. A round of cheers followed, louder and more rambunctious than the ones she'd walked in on.

Lis didn't care about the attention, that wasn't why she came here. She'd still be coming if there was no one to watch, no one to call out the name that wasn't really hers. So long as there'd be someone waiting to fight, that was all she wanted.

Barry didn't understand her sudden interest in it. He didn't get why she felt the need to beat up—and be beat up by—her fellow soldiers when she'd already made a strong name for herself out on the battlefield. In his mind, she had nothing to prove, and therefore, this was a childish waste of time.

The thing she couldn't tell him was that it wasn't about proving herself either. It was about one very clear and simple thing. Being able to forget.

In the ring, with no rank, and no responsibility save the one to keep herself upright, she could truly be herself. There was no worry about allegiances, or allies, or masks. There was no pretending, and no false words or smiles. She could say what she wanted, do what she wanted, and it'd all be taken as part of the fight. As her letting off a little steam.

Because though she'd carried it, and had been carrying it for the past five years now, Lis Gray was not her name. She

wasn't really a Gold citizen, and therefore, she wasn't really a member of the Gold army. Outside of it, she had to fight with them, as one of them. But in there?

In the ring she could do what she always really wanted to do.

Beat the shit out of her true enemy.

She hopped over the fence in one swift move, the sound of her feet hitting the dry ground swallowed up by even more cries. The previous winner had spotted her and he was smirking at her, eyeing her up like she was a cute pet his five year old daughter might like.

More than two thousand soldiers in the king's army had been called to Grint, the capital of the Iron kingdom, and at least a third of them were here now. Watching. Waiting. Screaming out the name Lis.

Her gaze traveled to her left where the castle could be spotted, less than half a quarter mile away. It was all spires and towers and arches made of sandstone. This particular castle had stood for some four hundred years, and was the home of the royal Gold family, her enemy.

Hers, not Lis Gray's.

Despite all her years of service, she had not once stepped foot within its walls. When she'd made general, she'd thought for sure the king would at least show up to the ceremony, so she could get a look at his face. But he had not. Five years, and she still didn't know what her enemy looked like.

She would, she promised herself, turning her attentions back to the opponent across from her. Even if it took her another five years to do it.

The burly man was already eyeing her, a broad grin splitting across his grimy face. Smears of dirt lined his cheeks and his brown beard was scraggly and knotted. He made a big show of pounding a fist into a palm, eliciting more ruckus from the crowd.

She wondered what her brother would look like if he'd been allowed to become a man. Would he have grown a beard as well? Would he have been as tall as this man here? Not as wide, she thought, more tiger, less bear, that was for certain. The possibilities haunted her, what his voice might have sounded like, whether or not he'd be better at her with a bow, or a sword, or anything, really.

Gold had taken her brother from her.

"You look angry, general?" her opponent called then, his voice baritone and teasing. "Already predicting your defeat, are you?"

Her smile returned, washing the old look away as if it'd never been. Right now her past didn't matter, and neither did her future. Only the present. And kicking his Gold-born-ass back to next Tuesday.

The wind blew a thick waft of blood and sweat towards her and her heart raced in anticipation all over again. It was brutish, fighting like this, and something her father would no doubt disapprove of had he known. Which he never would. The only word her true people ever heard of her came from her own mouth.

There were secrets even from them that she would keep.

"Actually," she took a step closer so that the referee was now positioned directly between them, "I was pissed that the hordes of the Gold army couldn't offer me anything better." She gave him a mock once over to drive the insult home, laughing when he let out a growl.

Suddenly, the ref's arm slashed between them, signaling the start of the match. Before she could blink her opponent was rushing her.

She let him get close, enough that she felt the stench of his beer soaked breath against her cheeks, before she dropped suddenly and twisted to the right. Lifting her left leg in the process, she tripped him, chuckling again when he toppled and slammed into the ground with a heavy thump.

A thick tan cloud of dust shot into the air, but he was already twisting around before it could resettle. His brown eyes brimmed with fury and he swung his right fist at her without getting fully to his feet.

The blow grazed the side of her arm, and she slammed her knee up against his chin, snapping his head back.

This was why she did this, why she liked coming here so much. Here, she could shed the disguise and not worry about who she was, Lis or otherwise. Here, she was nothing more and nothing less than a fighter in a ring. One purpose. One identity.

It was liberating.

She shot forward on nimble feet. He stretched out his arms to catch her, but she twisted left at the very last second, going to her knees and shifting so she was sitting on the dirt directly behind him. She put her feet together and planted them at the small of his back with enough force to cause him to stumble.

Before he could regain his footing, she stood, pressing her left foot at the narrow of his back and gripping his shoulders. As she shoved off she forced him down further, so that his time he landed in the dirt on his front.

She twisted in the air, somersaulting as she went and came to a stop less than three feet away from him crouching.

He lifted his heavy head and spat out a mouthful of grit, cursing.

She cupped a hand to her left ear and angled it towards him grinning. "What was that?"

He growled. "It's on."

"Bring it, sweetheart."

He dove for her, and she snapped back, barely missing his clawed hand. Hot head was getting angry.

"Calm down," she said evenly. "You lose your cool, you lose your head."

“I am calm.” He slashed his elbow towards her brow, but she caught his arm and ducked beneath it.

With the side of her hand, she jabbed him in the throat, then leapt and kicked him in the chest with both feet.

This time he remained standing, and grabbed hold of her right ankle before could get her barring. He yanked her forward, leaned down to reach for her arm.

When he was low enough, she used her other foot to kick his head, then wrapped her ankle around his neck. With all of her strength she pulled, using his momentum against him. The ending result was his face back in the dirt, with her straddling his upper body.

“The ref’s gonna start counting,” she bent and whispered into his ear. As if on cue, the ref started for them. “If you’re going to do something, now’s the time.”

He waited a moment then let out a bellow, lifting so quickly she toppled off him. His knuckles met her jaw, once, again on the other side. It felt like someone was beating her with a cement brick. The third time, she blocked with her arm, landing an uppercut to his firm gut.

The breath whooshed out of him, and she turned placing her back against his front, latching onto the arm he’d been hitting her with, keeping it extended.

She slammed her elbow back against his right cheek, brought her foot down on his, hard. With a heave, she gripped his neck and used him to lift herself, landing behind him. She kicked him one last time, between the shoulder blades.

He went down and she advanced but he rolled to his back and help up both hands, palms out.

“Yield.”

She blew out a breath and scrunched up her face. “Seriously? Come on, you’ve got to have better than that. I still have at least forty-five minutes to kill.”

“Yield,” he repeated. “Someone else will take my place. Beat them up, general.”

She rolled her eyes and waved, dismissing him. She placed her hands on her hips and kept her gaze down, needing a minute to calm her racing heart. Who she was began bleeding through the adrenaline, and it was pissing her off.

It wasn't really escapism if it didn't do the job.

The ref was calling for someone else, but she paid him no mind. Anyone would do, so long as she got to lose herself in the rush that was all that mattered. She was so focused on herself that it took her a minute to register the gasps. When she looked up, her eyes honed in on him instantly, as if drawn by a magnet.

Though it was apparent a good portion of the onlookers recognized him, she did not. And there was no way she'd forget a face like his.

He was tall and lean, in the process of removing his leather jacket, though he kept his tan shirt on. When he approached, his height became even more apparent, at least six one, as did the glimmer in his blue eyes.

The cheering from earlier had dimmed some, though a quick glance showed she wasn't the only one in attendance confused by this. Could be he was one of the four commanders—she'd only met two. His hair was various shades of blond, glinting in direct sunlight like coins trapped in ice.

She snorted at the ridiculousness of her own thoughts.

"It seems my popularity is waning," she said lightly, just to fill the intense silence that had surged between them.

"I don't usually enter the ring," he admitted, shrugging a single shoulder while his gaze remained steady on hers.

"Curious to know how it feels?"

"I saw your last match," the corner of his mouth twitched up, "and I was wondering how that felt."

"Getting your ass kicked?" This was...strange.

"No," he canted his head, "having you on top of me."

Her eyes narrowed into thin slits, and the ref chose that moment to call start. When her opponent didn't react right away she grew even more unnerved by him. His statement was clearly an attempt at distracting her—he wasn't the first to try flirting—but for some reason the husky way he'd drawled the words out had affected her.

And it was pissing her off.

He started out slow, ambling around her in an almost lazy half circle that same glimmer of interest in his gaze. Like he was assessing her for something.

“This isn't a staring contest,” she reminded him, blinking when her words came out more curious than accusatory like she'd intended.

He used her momentary distraction to pounce, coming in from the left only to faint and hit her at her right when she went to block. A fist landed at her solar plexus, hard enough to have the breath instantly whooshing out of her. Then he linked an ankle around hers and yanked so that she toppled to the dirt.

Her hands clapped against his ears before he could pin her down, and she moved back onto her feet. Next, her fist cracked against the side of his jaw, effectively forcing him back down when he went to rise.

He laughed and shook his head, no doubt to clear the ringing.

She hit him again, but when she lifted her knee to the other side of his face he caught around the back and tugged. She went down hard, kicking out at his chest to shove him away before he could make good on his comment. Acting on instinct, she ran, leaping and linking her leg around his neck tight enough to cut off his airway.

Using gravity against him, she twisted and he ended up on his back this time, with her straddling his tapered waist.

“Where did you learn to fight like this?” he asked past wheezing breaths.

“My father,” she said truthfully, jabbing him in the throat with her open hand right afterwards. A second later she

realized he wasn't even attempting to dislodge her.

His arms were at his sides and a hint of a grin touched his lush mouth.

"If you aren't going to take this seriously," she practically growled down at him, "get out of the ring."

"Sorry, gorgeous, just enjoying having my curiosity satisfied."

"Don't call me that."

"Not inappropriate here," he stated. "In the ring stature and whatnot doesn't matter, remember."

She landed a punch to his left side. "Not why you're not allowed to call me that."

In response, he rolled, switching their positions. Before he could make another remark, she hit him, whipping his head to the side. She went for his jugular again, but he caught her wrist pinning her arm down to the ground. He brought his face to hers so they were only a breath away.

"That wasn't very nice."

Damn, the guy was strong. He looked it, sure, but not *this* strong.

"This *is* war," she countered, knocking her head against his. She used his momentary pain to wiggle free, kicking out and connecting her heel with his jaw.

He so did not seem happy about that.

Suddenly, he latched onto her left wrist and twisted, yanking her arm painfully. The move gave him enough room to wiggle free, and he used her same arm to shove her face first onto the ground. A heavy knee pressed against her lower back, keeping her in place against her struggles.

She tried kicking him, but he was smart, having moved over her enough to avoid the brunt of her blows. The most she managed was to jostle him, and not nearly enough to get loose. Gritting her teeth, she resisted the urge to curse when she realized there was no way she was going to win this.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the ref about to call it.

“You know,” his warm breath fanned against the back of her neck, “I really do like this position.”

Chapter 2:

She'd been beaten in the ring for the first time and she didn't like it.

She liked even less the fact that she'd been so clearly dismissed by her opponent the very second after the ref had called him winner. She'd barely gotten a solid foot on the ground before he'd leaped over the fence and been swallowed by the cheering crowd.

Even more pissed off than she'd been, Lis made her way back over to where Barry still stood, watching with a wide eyed expression. He went to hand her jacket back once she was over the fence but she shook her head, too hot and covered in dirt to put it on.

Her thoughts viciously went back to her brother and she clenched her teeth. How disappointed would he be if he could see her allowing a Gold boy get the best of her?

"You were distracted," Barry broke through her inner torment then, watching her closely. "How unlike you."

"I was not," she snapped, snatching the jacket back after all. She held it at her side as she began leading them through the throngs, the way they'd come only twenty minutes prior. Usually, she spent hours in the ring, but that was because she'd never lost. Losers had to concede to other fighters.

Damn rules.

"Liar."

If he only knew.

"General Gray," a firmer tone cut across the groups of people and she turned to see Finn. He was standing off to the side by one of the dark blue tents, arms crossed, expression tight.

"Good," Barry leaned in to say to her, "maybe he'll finally put a stop to this nonsense."

She sent him a scathing look over her shoulder.

He had the good sense to drop his gaze.

“Commander,” she bowed her head when she reached him.

Finn Morgan was only ten years her senior, but years of war had left him with wrinkles in the corners of his mouth and eyes. That aside, his chocolate hair was thick and his gray eyes attentive as ever. He was well fit, broad shoulders and corded muscles over his arms and legs. She’d seen more of him during training and drills than she’d have cared to, in fact.

He glanced at her sweat stained skin and then briefly over to the Ring before angling his head to the right. “Come with me.”

Despite the fact she was still burning from the heat, she forced herself to slip her arms back through the jacket as she did as her ordered. Keeping it unzipped helped a bit, but she was already wishing she could return to the cool shade of her tent.

She knew better than to ask where they were going, so simply fell into place a step behind and to the side of him, keeping her gaze steady as they went. Curious eyes followed them, but she paid them no mind. A part of her whispered fearful things about discovery, but she ignored that too.

If they’d found her out, surely she would have been arrested in public.

Lis frowned ten minutes later when he finally stopped them in front of a tangled mess of old buildings. She’d been told upon their arrival that these stone monstrosities doubled as storage space for weapons when the armory within the castle was over filled. It was three buildings, really, all of various heights that had been stuck together with the same sandstone that the castle was made of.

The largest of the three was at the far left, at least forty feet high with just as many windows placed sporadically around all four sides. Why anyone would build something so senseless was beyond her, but then, where she came from

architecture was an art form. It was much more difficult building things that lasted in snow than on dry land.

“Climb it,” Morgan told her and she couldn’t help her look of surprise.

“Excuse me, sir?”

“You heard me, general.” He nodded towards the closest building, the smallest one. It was only about fifteen feet. “Climb it. All the way to the top of that one.” He pointed to the highest building.

She was already stripping out of her jacket—again—when she asked, “Will you tell me why I’m doing this, sir?”

“I will not, no.”

“Very well.” She motioned a soldier who’d been standing by the door to the small building idly. When he came forward, she passed him her jacket without a second glance. Already, her mind was working over the obstacle before her, searching out the best foot and hand holds.

When she’d been younger and new to the Gold army, there had been many occasions just like this. Finn liked to throw random training challenges at her, seemingly odd tasks that all had a purpose in the end. If she could complete them.

It’d been a very long time since he’d last put her to a test, but that same drive she’d gotten back then to please him returned tenfold and she found herself almost as excited as she’d been in the Ring.

Before she’d gotten her ass handed to her by some pretty Gold boy. Her good mood washed away.

As far as she knew, people didn’t use these buildings as a rock climbing exercise, so she was already wondering why he’d chosen them when her hand folded around the first windowsill. The stone was rough against her skin, and from within the widow she thought she caught a whiff of char, almost as if something had recently been set ablaze within.

The window she’d chosen was right next to the front door, and she boosted herself up onto the edge and reached for

the top of the doorframe. Climbing it, she hit the roof of the smallest building in a matter of moments.

The second one was about twenty feet, and she paused to debate how she wanted to proceed. On the one hand, if she went up this one first, then tried the third she'd have a safer path. If she fell either times the fall wouldn't be very far. She'd only have to survive a topple to the roof below, which was more than doable.

It would, however, take twice the time, and with the sun still blaring overhead and her stomach suddenly growling she realized her body was impatient.

That could be a bad thing or a good thing really. She risked a glance over the edge of the first roof, not impressed with the meager ten feet she'd managed so far. She hadn't risen in rank because she'd played things safe. She'd risen because she'd made herself noticeable.

Mind made up, she shifted on her feet, aligning herself with the edge of the roof and the top of the same side of the second building that she'd first climbed. Her arm needed to stretch a bit further than she'd hoped in order to reach the ledge of the first window, only a foot above her head. Once her fingers wrapped around it, she took a bracing breath and then pushed off.

For a split second she hung only by four fingers, but then she was lifted and her feet planted safely where her hand had been. Following these motions, she made her way across the expanse of the second building until she was climbing the wall of the last. It was a straight shot up from there.

If she fell, she'd break a limb at best, her neck at worst. That prospect didn't deter her, though, and less than five minutes later she tossed herself over the side and onto the final roof. Barely out of breath, she stood and walked over to prop her elbows and stare down the forty feet at Finn.

Whether he was happy or not at her success couldn't be seen.

“Shall I climb back down?” she called after a heavy moment of silence.

“What’s the rush?” a smooth voice came at her back and she spun around. “You only just got here.”

It was the boy from the Ring, the one who’d bested her. For a split second, she debated tossing him over the side, but rationality won out and she remained where she was. Unlike her, he’d redressed, only instead of the thin tan shirt he’d had on when he’d first entered, he was now wearing something else.

The material of the dark green shirt hugged him in all the right places, and left his strong tanned arms bare. But that wasn’t what had caught her attention—as hot as he was—it was his sigil that held her eye.

A circle with a crown at the center, surrounded by thorny vines tipped in gold.

She shouldn’t stare, and knew her mouth was hanging open but couldn’t help that either. Suddenly, the idea of tossing him over became even more appealing. She could do it too; it was only the two of them up here, no guards, no backup. She might even be able to get away with saying he tripped and the whole thing was an accident.

But then her gut started churning and that sliver of fear from earlier returned. Had they somehow found her out? Had her cover been blown?

“Sorry for the deceit,” he told her easily. “It had to be done. I needed firsthand experience with your skills.”

The door leading to the roof opened then, cracking against the stone. Finn emerged, toeing the hatch back into place once he was standing next to the boy.

No, she corrected with a hiss, *not the* boy.

The king.

She was finally getting her meeting with the Gold King.

“So this is her then,” the king moved closer. She felt his gaze roaming over her body like fire and barely resisted the urge to punch him. “I see what you mean, Commander Morgan. She seems strong.”

“Smart, too, your highness,” Finn added, and there might have even been a hint of pride in his tone.

“Smart enough to be useful, I hope.”

“I’ve no doubt. She and her men have taken out more of the Iron than any others.”

“Including your own,” the king’s mouth twitched slightly, “if word is to be believed.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “That happens to be the case as well.”

“Good.” The king stopped directly before her, waiting until she’d lifted her eyes to meet his once more.

She braced herself for a knife in the gut, still holding onto the possibility that this was a trap. When all he did was stare, her control faltered. She could feel him trying to get a read on her, and knew that if she didn’t allow something to slip, she’d give herself away.

Quickly, she summoned an image of her brother, murdered in cold blood when they’d been children. She held onto that, the contours of his face, the blood splatters across his white cheeks. She’d been the one to find him, had caught sight of the assassin, a woman garbed in green, fleeing from the scene.

If only she’d been then what she was now, she could have avenged him. Instead, her seven year old self had been able to do nothing but cry and call for help.

She focused all her energy on how she’d felt afterwards, the determination that had sprung up. The loyalty to what remaining family she had left. And then she allowed some of those emotions to slip through, passing them onto the king as if unwillingly.

Magic was a thing only possessed by the royals and a very higher families.

Everyone knew about the Gold family and their gifts, the ability to feel what others were feeling. It was said even that this king had more power than any others of his line ever had. If that were true, she needed to be extra careful around him. She'd had years to prepare for this, however, to hone her own abilities, and was confident that she could fool him now.

"You're very ambitious, aren't you?" the king murmured, seemingly distracted by whatever emotions he was currently feeding on from her.

"I have goals," she forced her face to remain impassive when she added, "your majesty."

"Yes, I've gathered as much." He held out a hand towards Finn who placed a scroll in his palm. Then he unrolled it and turned so that his shoulder brushed up against her own. Exposing the surface of the parchment to her, he waited as she inspected it.

It was a map, easily recognizable.

"This is the Bronze kingdom," she said softly, mostly to herself. As if of its own accord, her right hand reached out and she touched one of the small red dots towards the right. A cropping of mountains circled a medium sized city there.

Her eyes took in the four other small red dots that bordered the outer edges of the mountains, mind racing to process and translate this new data.

"You want to take Obsidian." Satisfied that she had it, she pulled back slightly and risked a glance in the king's direction. She froze when it was to find his face was less than three inches away from her. She put more space between them, even going so far as to cross her arms over her chest.

Hatred for him swirled through her and she fought it off before his abilities could get a read on it. Finally, after all of this time she was finally in the presence of the Gold King. And she couldn't even kill him.

Yet, she reminded herself.

“Yes,” the king spoke then. “I do. I’ve been told it’s next to impossible, however. What are your thoughts on the matter?”

“Obsidian is their highest guarded city, aside from Hem where the royal family resides.” This time, she allowed a bit of the smirk to show. “But nothing’s impossible, sire. Anything can be conquered. Anything can be taken.” She glanced back at the spot on the vast map again. “You just have to know how to go about doing it.”

“And how would you then?” he asked. “Take it?”

Immediately her eyes wandered towards the edge where the map tapered off and the page ended. If this were her plan, her people’s mission, then she’d come in from the neighboring land. White kept their borders carefully patrolled, but she could easily get them to lower their guard enough for her and a small Gold army to pass.

That might cause undo suspicion, however, not to mention she’d be helping evict one enemy for another. Something told her the Sen family, those who ruled Silver, wouldn’t appreciate that.

“Here,” she tapped the edge before she could change her mind. It was a risk, but in that moment home sickness gripped her, and really, she couldn’t come up with something better under such short time.

“That’s Silver territory,” he said.

“It is,” she agreed, careful not to let her ire show. Obvious much? “It’s also the safest way into Bronze. These mountains,” she motioned to the two closest to the end of the map, “practically fall on the border. We can sneak in through Silver. There are woods here, thick, easy to hide in. By the time they see us coming, *if* they see us, it’ll be too late.”

“And if the Silver army catches us?” Finn was the one to ask. “Surely they watch that border as closely as we watch our own lands that touch the Bronze kingdom. We could end up having to fight two armies instead of one.”

“We can make it through,” she assured him, hoping her confidence wouldn’t be taken the wrong way.

“You’ve been there before?” the king lifted a brow at her.

“Yes.”

“Elaborate.”

If the king believed for even a moment that she was playing him, she’d be locked away and tortured until she spilled.

Which would never happen so...basically she’d end up being tortured to death. Didn’t really sound like much fun.

“When I was a child.” The best lies were those most closely resembling the truth. She could picture the woods even now, after so many years. How the fir trees grew thick and the pine trees towered high enough they blocked the dull gray sky. Her world was snow covered and pure. Thinking about it made her lungs hitch and her yearn to breath the frozen air.

“My parents took me, and my brother. It was before the Unrest, before the war.” Her parents had loved those woods, any woods really. They’d been outdoorsy people, just like she and her siblings were.

“Why would they take you there?”

“They wanted me to see the world,” she said. “They wanted me to see all three kingdoms, and the best they had to offer. We were on our way to Obsidian, in fact, having just left the Crystal city.”

Thinking of the Crystal city proved too much, and she quickly shoved those memories away before they could distract her from the task at hand.

She looked back at the king, held his gaze. “It is the best way, your majesty. And I can get us through.”

“Finn’s vouched for you,” he told her after a contemplative moment, “and I trust his opinion utmost among my men. However, you and I have only just met, and I am a cautious man.”

“As well you should be,” she commented, making sure to keep her tone even.

He chuckled and then rolled the map back up and handed it to Finn. He kept his eyes on her the entire time.

“Are you angry with me, General Gray? For my deceit earlier?”

She shrugged a single shoulder. “You’re the king. You can do as you please.”

He canted his head as if contemplating his next words. She was pretty sure it was all an act however, and whatever he was about to say was something he’d planned on saying all along.

“Have dinner with me tonight. I need to see for myself that you’re all Commander Morgan has made you out to be.” He wasn’t asking, that was obvious, and judging by the sparkle in his eyes, he enjoyed wielding such power over her.

“Of course, your majesty.” This was what she wanted, right? To get close to the king, to become one of his inner circle. It was the only way.

“You’re free to go then, general, for now.” He nodded his chin at the hatch. “You could take the stairs with the commander, or climb back down the side after all, if you’d prefer.”

The corner of her mouth twitched up.

“My pride isn’t that big, your majesty. The stairs will do just fine.”

He grinned then surprised her by stepping over to the edge of the roof himself. “Very well. Until tonight then, Lis.”

She watched as he twisted over and disappeared from sight. Part of her wanted to rush and watch his descent, see if he was really skilled enough in climbing. Her feet remained rooted, however. She couldn’t afford to appear too eager, too interested. Meeting him was only the first step. If she wished to truly help her people get revenge, she needed to play this out, like she’d been doing all this time.

Patience.

“Your plan is a good one,” Finn said then, drawing her attention his way. He hadn’t moved either. “As long as you can get us through White territory without us running into one of their patrols. Are you certain you remember the terrain well enough?”

She nodded. “Was that an interview?”

Some of his tension eased and a small smile touched his lips. “You showed an interest in the empty position on the high council.”

She frowned, recalling her earlier conversation with Barry. Her friend had been annoyed because she had decisively not shown an open interest, not to Finn, anyway. She’d purposefully left the topic alone when in his company.

“You don’t think I noticed your ears perking up every time someone mentioned it in passing?” he questioned. “I know you well enough, Lis.”

No, she wanted to say, you do not.

Out of all of the people in the Gold kingdom that she’d met over the years, there were only three that she regretted having to lie to. He was one of them. Barry and his twin sister, Naomi, were the other two.

They were also some of the only people who knew part of the truth. They knew that she’d joined the army because of the death of her brother, only, they believed that it’d been Bronze who had murdered him. She’d told them she’d wanted revenge on her enemies for what they’d done, and she’d meant it.

And Bronze was her enemy. They were large and believed to vastly outnumber the Silver army.

Another lie to add to the pile, though this one was not of her own making.

Bronze was her enemy every bit as much as Gold, that was the only part she kept from her friends. Because it hadn’t been Bronze to cut down her brother. It hadn’t been Bronze

who'd spilled the blood of a child so carelessly on the snow. Hadn't been a Bronze assassin who'd run afterwards like a coward, leaving the tiny seven year old girl left screaming over her slain hero.

She'd looked up her brother more than anyone in the world, even more than their father.

And Gold had taken him from her.

"Watch your tongue tonight," Finn warned her, "with the king. So long as you do well, I'm certain the position will be yours."

"Thank you, commander." She thought he understood what getting her here meant, but he didn't. Relief and guilt warred within her.

"You should return to your camp," he motioned to the hatch. "I'll retrieve you for dinner within a few hours."

She tried not to throw up as she descended the stairs, thinking about how she was about to dine with the Gold King. Thinking about how badly she just wanted to stick a knife in his throat and finally be done with it.

With all of it.

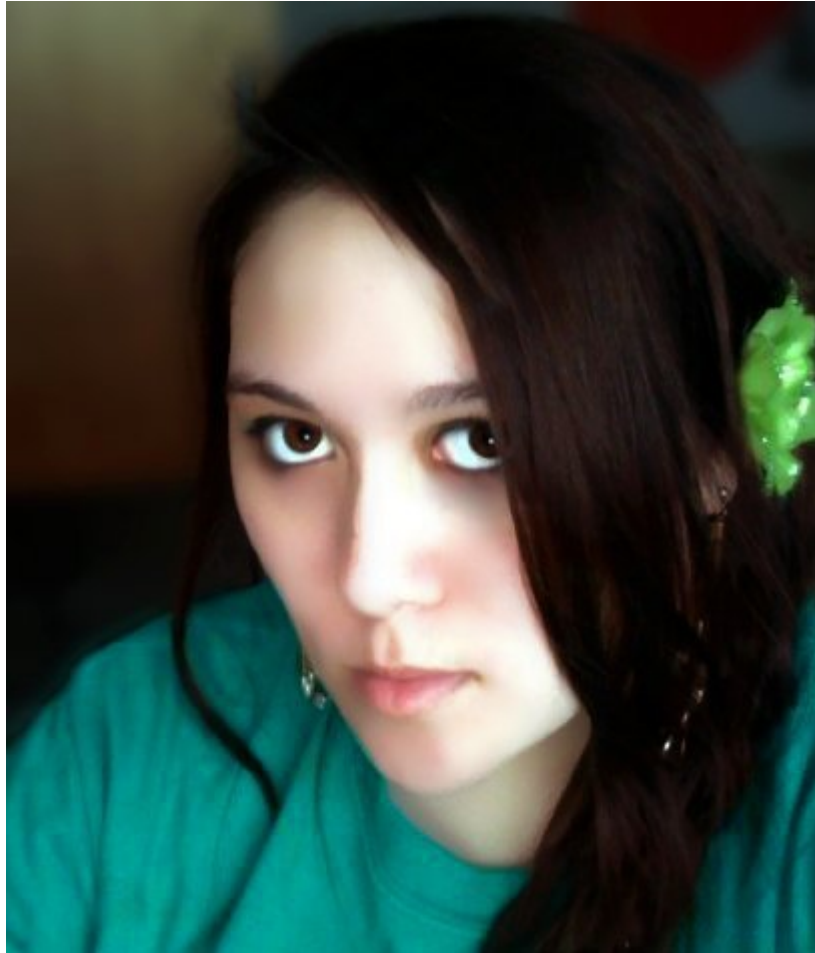
..And then she discovered it'd actually been Iron that murdered her brother, and she fell in love with Sage, and they along with their sometimes friend, more often times enemy, Rook, defeated the Iron Queen. And they all lived happily ever after.

The End.

Oh. Wait. And Barry died. Don't ask me how. But he did.

The Actual End.

About the Author:



Chani Lynn Feener has wanted to be a writer since the age of ten during fifth grade story time. She majored in Creative Writing at Johnson State College in Vermont.

To pay her bills, she has worked many odd jobs, including, but not limited to, telemarketing, order picking in a warehouse, and filling ink cartridges. When she isn't writing, she's bingeing TV shows, drawing, or frequenting zoos/aquariums. Chani is also the author of teen paranormal series, *The Underworld Saga*, originally written under the pen name Tempest C. Avery. She currently resides in Connecticut, but lives on Goodreads.com.

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