

THE TOWER SERIES - BOOK ONE



BLOOD
VOW

ZARAH HEMLOCK

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TRIGGER & CONTENT WARNINGS

THIS BOOK IS MEANT ONLY FOR PEOPLE 18+

Blood Vow is a dark fantasy romance containing topics that can be upsetting, disturbing, and possibly triggering. I HIGHLY recommend reading over ALL of the trigger and content warnings listed below before moving forward.

Imprisonment/Slavery, Trafficking, Non-Con/SA, Dub-Con, CNC, Mutilation, Off Page CSA, PTSD, Physical/Mental/Emotional Abuse, Breath/Knife/Blood/Primal/Cum/Spit Play, Off Page, Forced Pregnancy, Off Page Miscarriage, Murder, Torture, Suicidal Ideation, Medical Trauma, Explicit Sex Scenes , Explicit Language

PLAYLIST

The songs are an order for overall vibe as you read through the story, not for specific chapters.

<https://sptfy.com/P1Hd>



To the healers,

*Stop bleeding yourself dry for the undeserving—that power is
yours, and yours alone.*

It's time to heal yourself.

“Strong women will always bear the dangerous burden of a weaker man’s pride.”

— Keri Lake, *Nightshade*

NAME PRONUNCIATIONS

In order of appearance

Villiana (Vill-E-Ah-Na)

Nickname: Kotsbar (kost-baar)

Zigmund (Zig-muh-in-d)

Lysander (Ly-SAN-der)

Locren (La-K-Ren)

Thorin (Thaw-ruhn)

Ryu Japanese Pronunciation: (Deu) say as one syllable

Americanized Pronunciation: (Ree-yoo)

Ophir (O-Fear)

Avi (Ah-Vee)

PROLOGUE

10 YEARS old

I CAN BARELY REMEMBER the last time we had peace—normalcy. My brother tells me it was all ripped away, along with our mother. I remember everything about her. Her smile and laugh. The way she would sing me to sleep and kiss my boo-boos. But after she was taken is kinda fuzzy in my mind. The memories are all jumbled up in my brain.

My brother and I have been on the run for a long time, and although the bad guys are after us, Ziggy tries to make our adventures fun. Still, I hate it so much. All I want is to be an ordinary girl with a normal life, but that isn't in the cards for me.

Today we stopped for a swim before finding our next—*temporary*—home. The fog over the river is thick, but the water is crystal clear. Running full speed, the grass tickles between my toes as I jump in fully clothed. I hold my breath for as long as possible, counting every passing second. Only pushing to the surface once my lungs are begging for air.

“Did you see that, Ziggy?” I yell out to my brother, trying to catch my breath. “I held my breath for thirty seconds! A new record!”

He runs over and picks me up from under my arms, spinning me around. “Kostbar! I’m so proud of you. You keep going and one day, you’ll be able to swim away.”

I pause, crinkling my nose. “Why would I ever want to do that? I have you, Ziggy, and that’s all I need.”

My brother has been acting weird lately. I know the bad guys that took Mama are looking for us, but he’s moved us three times in the last month. At this point, we’re making shelter somewhere new every night.

Ziggy’s face shifts into a sad, soft smile.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, tilting my head.

He tightly clenches his jaw as unshed tears brim his eyes. He opens his mouth to say something but quickly shuts it when the sound of rustling comes from the other side of the river, followed by a sharp whistle and commands.

Ziggy grabs me by the shoulders, fear radiating from his body. “Kostbar, I need you to run and don’t look back no matter what you hear. You keep running until you are far, far away from here, okay? I will catch up. I need you to go right now.”

My heart is racing. Sparks of gold involuntarily shoot from my finger, creating anxious fireworks. He doesn’t have to tell me what’s going on. The look on his face says everything. The Collective is here.

“Absolutely not, Zigmund! Don’t you dare be the hero. Please run with me. You are all I have, and I won’t leave you.” Sobs wash over me, my lungs seizing with every breath.

“If you don’t run right now, you will end up just like Mama, and I will never see you again. Please go. I love you so much, little Kostbar.” Placing one last kiss on my forehead, he

takes off across the river, leaving me behind. Just like he said he never would.

So, I run, run until my feet bleed and my legs shake. Mud and dirt caked between my toes; my legs cut up from running through the brush. I look around the forest, knowing I need to find shelter.

Entering a lush opening, I slow my pace . The colors are so vibrant, with flowers in full bloom. It's clear that whoever lives in this area takes pride in it. And tucked into the tree line is a little house covered in moss. Thank the Gods.

Soaked to the bone and shivering, my small fist pounds on the door relentlessly. Finally, the door flies open, and a portly older satyr with raven eyes stares daggers into me.

“Why in the name of the Gods is a little elf beating down my door!”

“Please help me,” I beg. “The Collective. They're after my brother and I. Please, I need shelter just until my brother gets here. Ziggy said he would be right behind me.”

The satyr's eyes widen before looking up to the sky and shaking his head. Stepping aside, he holds open the door. “Quick, into the house.” He ushers me in. “You have a safe place here.”

As soon as I'm safely inside, he introduces himself. “My name is Lysander. You can call me Lys.”

“Lys,” I repeat. “Thank you for helping me.”

“Really, it's no problem.” Lys shows me to the kitchen and hands me a glass of water. “And what shall I call you, little elf?”

Clutching the glass between my hands, I whisper,
“Villiana.”

ONE

VILLIANA | Present - 26 years old

CRACKING OPEN MY HEAVY LIDS, a splitting headache greets me. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, begging for moisture. Blinking a few times, I rub the sand from my eyes.

It takes all of my willpower to sit up and blindly search for the lamp string to illuminate this windowless cell of a room. My body screams in protest from the strain, so stiff that every movement feels as if my muscles will tear at any moment.

My mind swims with the remnants of the drugs they gave me last night. It's been six years of this. Six years of waking up feeling unrested and sick to my stomach. Six years of playing the game '*what happened to me last night?*'. I learned quickly not to ask questions, or you'd feel even worse the following day. Like right now, as the pilled beige sheet falls from my body, I watch goosebumps break out across my bare skin, leaving me wondering how and why I'm completely naked—something I'll never truly know.

Grabbing the pillow from behind me, I scream into it before tossing the lumpy thing across the room.

It's better you don't know, Villiana.

Staying in bed would be ideal. Then again, that would just result in being manhandled into reality anyway. A hiss escapes my lips as my bare feet hit the cool stone floor. Now to find my clothes. My eyes roam around the cramped space, searching for my dress, which is balled up in the corner. Hobbling forward, every step is excruciating. A colorful string of curses spill from my lips as I bend over. Pulling the fabric over my head, the hem drops to my thighs, revealing specks of blood around the neckline and back.

“Surprise, surprise,” I scoff to myself sarcastically.

Well, that explains a lot—Locren came for a visit.

Everyone rejoiced the day I presented as a healer, singing praises to the gods for granting me such a divine gift. Quickly thereafter, they were singing another tune, urging me to hide my gifts. To stay in the shadows in fear of what my future may hold. My kind has been hunted for their blood for a century: the key to healing the realms and temporary immortality. Unfortunately, I expected my life to bring me here—locked away, never to be seen again. It was only a matter of time before I became another statistic, a number, a nothing. Just another healer lost in the sea of death and despair.

“Wakey, wakey, Princess! It’s time for your donation.” Banging reverberates off of my door as my guard yells for me to get moving. The door flies open just as I’m slipping into my ratty old shoes, and the sloppy looking Orc comes barreling toward me.

“I told you to get the fuck up!” He yells into my face, spittle landing on my lip. The smell that emanates from him, good gods, is vomit-inducing. Really something wonderful to wake up to every day.

“Good morning to you too, sunshine,” I chirp as I’m yanked by my arm.

Pulled toward the doorway, my feet stumble over each other. Bax huffs in annoyance and continues to drag me, knees scraping against the dirty floor instead of letting me right myself. “Maybe if you stopped drugging me, I could walk out on my own.”

Throwing me to the floor, he locks the door behind him. He turns around and looks down at me darkly, smoothing the three strands of hair on the top of his head like he’s about to take me on a hot date, rather than to be assaulted by a needle.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about the scraggle you call hair. I would be more concerned about brushing those cracked tusks of yours. Didn’t you hear, ladies love a man with a beautiful smile!” I snark, pushing myself off the ground to dust my dress off.

Bax grabs me by the neck and slams me against the wall. “You’re a dumb cunt. You know that? I could tear that little scrap of fabric they call a dress off you and sink my fat cock between that slit of yours right now.”

Looking directly into his canary yellow eyes, the corner of my lip turns up in amusement. “Would it be worth it, though? Taking the chance of impregnating me with your plebeian sperm. Locren would *love* that.” My voice oozes with sarcasm. Knowing that I’m right, he doesn’t speak a word. Instead, he crushes my bicep in his oversized hand, ushering me away.

The dimly lit corridor is narrow—barely accommodating two beings—paired with a high arched ceiling. Stone walls covered in moss and mold emanate a scent that tickles your nose with the urge to sneeze. They don’t care to make it homey. Why would they when the rooms are glorified holding

cells for their personal blood bags? Every step we take kicks up a plume of dirt, leaving your skin coated in a fine layer of filth. You never feel clean here.

At the entrance to the wing, there is a large iron gate. I'm convinced it is there only to serve as a reminder that you are indeed a prisoner. We are always escorted from place to place. We all have been given magic blockers, and honestly, the consequences of trying to escape are not worth the possibility that we could get out.

Bax impatiently shoves the key into the lock, calling it a son of a bitch when it doesn't immediately turn over. A clink of the lock finally turning is followed by a loud groan of the old metal being pushed open.

It takes a few more minutes of walking before a sterile scent filters through the air signaling we've finally approached the donation room.

"Move your ass. We're almost there, and I'm already drained from being around you," he complains, shoving me in front of him.

As my foot crosses the threshold, I have to throw my hands up to shield myself from the blinding artificial daylight. You would think I would be used to it by now, but living like a mole really hinders your eyes' ability to adjust.

When my vision finally adapts, I'm greeted by a bright smile.

Just reaching four-foot-eleven, my best friend, Thorin, is a bitty pixie with a big attitude. She has the most exquisite umber skin with chestnut curls that just touch her shoulders. Her eyes are large and gold-flecked, paired with a smattering

of freckles across her face. Her resting bitch face cannot be matched, nor can her beauty.

“You two can eye fuck on your own time.” Bax pushes me down into the horribly uncomfortable chair next to Thorin. Strapping my forearms onto the arms of the chair, my skin pinches between the leather and metal buckle, but the bite doesn’t bother me anymore.

Swinging my legs back and forth, my foot *accidentally* slams into his shin.

“You are lucky you’re already in that chair,” the guard mumbles. Rubbing his snub nose against the shell of my ear, he adds, “I’m seriously considering taking my chances with Locren.” Pushing off the chair, he stomps away like a petulant child.

“You love pissing the guards off, don’t you, little brat?”

“Aww, baby girl, I thought you liked my smart mouth. You told me it does wonders,” I say in a low sultry voice.

Thorin cackles, “Why else do you think I keep you around!”

The loud crash of the door hitting the wall pulls my attention away. My doctor marches toward us with his nose in my file. He roughly grabs one of the preset metal trays and drags it over. Flipping the file closed, he preps my IV line. “Make a fist,” he grumbles as he slaps my arm a few times, trying to find a vein. Once he finds one he likes, the needle pierces my skin.

He quickly checks over everything, picks up the file, and turns to walk out. “I’ll be back, and don’t even—”

I cut him off. “Try to remove the line. I still don’t know how you think I would be able to do that.”

Thorin's gaze burns my face as soon as he's gone, assessing the damage from last night's rendezvous. "You look like shit. Locren did a number on you."

"Oh, thank you for your kind words." Rolling my eyes, I scoff at her.

"Seriously, Vi, are you okay?"

Shifting uncomfortably, flashes of last night run through my mind. Since my moon cycle begins soon, the breeding has started again. My bloodied wrists are painted purple bruises from being cuffed. My core burns from the abuse. I would do anything to erase the memories.

"I'm fine. I always am," I say dejectedly.

My eyes shift down at the stone floors marred with blood. How many beings sat in this very seat? I wonder if my mother was one of them—I'm sure she was.

"Stop. You can lie to yourself all you want, but your scars aren't invisible to me." Thorin's voice breaks me from my thoughts.

Wrinkling my upturned nose at her, I cringe at the idea of talking about last night. Every second spent with the man is a waking nightmare. He doesn't creep into her room in the middle of the night and use her body as his personal fuckdoll. While I know that Thorin has seen horrors of her own, I am profoundly grateful that Locren doesn't favor her.

Giving Thorin a sidelong glance, I find that her mask has momentarily slipped, revealing the anguish hiding behind it. I'm abruptly taken aback by my own thoughts. Who am I to judge whose life is worse? There could be a million things she doesn't want to talk to me about, and here I am, angry at her for caring.

“Thor, do you think we’ll ever get out of here?” My voice is meek. I rarely bring up the idea because it is impossible.

Loose curls fall into her face as she drops, shaking her head. Keeping her eyes trained on the floor, her voice is barely a whisper. “Who knows, Vi? I just know that wherever you go, I go.”

There is no doubt about that. I would rather be stuck in this godsforsaken place forever than leave her behind. When Thorin arrived three years ago, I knew I had found my twin flame—especially after hearing her call one of Locren’s lackeys *twinkle toes*. We are a match made in hell. Sometimes I wonder how I survived before her.

Luckily, she knows it’s time to change the subject. Instead of pressing on, she tells me everything about the new girl. The kelpie is from the water realm and only fifteen. She apparently put up one hell of a fight. Not surprising at all, those devilish horses are all bark *and* bite. At least she didn’t have too long of a life outside the compound. Eventually, her old memories will fade, and she will only know this place as her reality.

AFTER THE DONATION, Bax dragged me back to my makeshift tomb.

With my back pressed against the mattress, my fingers find the pilled spots on the blanket, tugging them until they’re torn away. It’s easy to get lost in the warzone of my mind. Racing thoughts plague every moment of silence surrounded by these drab gray walls.

My eyes trained on the moldy ceiling, I flex my fingers, searching for some sort of spark—of course, nothing happens. I miss my pretty, golden magic so much; even though I almost

don't remember what it's like to have it. One thing's for sure, I'll never forget the deep ache inside me from the loss of it.

Images of the past play in my mind, reminding me there was once more to me than a prisoner.

Memories of my mother reading to me and tucking me into bed. How she smiled down at me with love emanating from her brilliant violet eyes, mirroring my own.

All the time my brother spent teaching me how to harness my magic, starting me off by healing animals, then scrapes and bruises. Eventually, he started to show me how to slow down sickness, but he never got to finish the job.

Then Lys took over, teaching me how to harness my magic fully. During the day, I would practice, and at night he would play his flute while we sat by the fire. He saved me when I thought it was the end. He held me when I woke up crying, screaming for Ziggy. Some nights, I swore I heard my mother singing to me. I wandered around the house looking for her, praying it was real. Never once did I find her. Lys did everything in his power to protect me, but I still wound up here.

The idea of disappointing him rips my heart to shreds.

Would he be angry with me for not fighting harder or figuring out a plan?

Squeezing my eyes shut, hot tears spill down my cheeks.

Just this once, I allow myself a moment to feel.

TWO

Villiana

SHOOTING AWAKE, I suck in a deep breath, my heart galloping in my chest. Something feels wrong.

I feel...*good*?

Nothing hurts—no aches and pains, no migraines, not a single pang in my stomach. I'm refreshed and coherent for the first time in years. There's no haziness looming over my mind. I remember taking a shower and being brought back to my room. I even remember Bax complaining that he had to deal with me instead of dropping my unconscious body into bed.

They didn't sedate me.

Confused and a little frightened, I search my surroundings for some kind of answer. In the corner of the room, something catches my eye. Stacked in a neatly folded pile, new clothes wait for me on the chair, with a new pair of shoes sitting perfectly underneath. Pulling the thin sheet from my body, I pad over to the mysterious gift. Carefully I inspect the pile. Instead of a dress, I was given a pair of loose cotton pants and an oversized tunic—no underwear, but still a vast

improvement. The shoes are newly woven, with not a single hole in sight.

I pull off my night dress, toss it onto the bed, and tug on the tunic and pants. Slipping into my shoes, I flex my toes a few times to see how much room I have—they're a perfect fit.

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. The door rattles on its hinges behind me.

Quickly raking my finger through my knotty bedhead, I separate it into two sections, braiding each before Bax can barrel in.

“You'd better be up and dressed. I'll take you to the mess hall naked if you're not. I don't give a shit.” The key jingles in the lock, clicking over to let the ugly bastard in.

Not two steps forward, he stops dead in his tracks. “You look...uh, lively this morning.” His hunter-green cheeks become stained a muddy pink as a heated gaze roves over my body, clearly flustered by my appearance. Clearing his throat, he shakes off whatever thought he is having. “And where did you get those clothes? They're not regulation.”

Rolling my eyes, I drift to the doorway. “I woke up, and they were here. Talk to the Brownies.” *Not that he will ever find one.*

“Whatever,” he grumbles, pushing into the hallway.

The clarity I have this morning makes the walk to breakfast seem more vivid. I notice every vine snaking down the cracked walls, the pitted spots on the metal gate. My hearing is more honed, picking up soft cries as we pass one of the rooms. And when we get outside, holy fuck, the world is colorful. I don't remember it looking so...*alive.*

Stepping through the oak door of the next building, I pay close attention to every room we pass. You never know when someone's loose lips will provide useful information. I listen to the grunts come past the training rooms and pick up on the scent of disinfectant wafting from the primary medical area, getting nothing of value.

Once we get to the long musty hallway, Bax leads me down a dilapidated wooden staircase that brings us to the mess hall. Every step you take seems like it might be your last. I think we've all prayed at least once that we would fall through and end this nightmare.

"This is your stop, Princess." Bax slaps my ass hard at the entrance.

"Oh, look! If it isn't the *trophy*. I bet she's been stuffed full already. No need for breakfast," One of the newer girls, a siren, sneers at me.

I've grown used to the whispers and rumors about my relationship with Locren—I whore myself out to everyone for special treatment is the classic line. Though, anyone here long enough doesn't envy the attention I've attracted from him; they pity me.

Leaning against our usual table, Thorin waits with a bright smile. "Good morning, beautiful!" She jumps at me as I reach the table, wrapping her arms around my neck for a tight hug. "Fuck that ugly fish bitch," she grits, squeezing me tighter until her affection chocks me.

Dropping Thorin to her feet, I catch the vacant expression she quickly masks with her signature bubblyness. As we wait for the bell to chime for food, I watch her maneuver herself until cross-legged on her chair; she chews on her lip, unable to hide the defeat gleaming from her gold-flecked eyes.

“I had nightmares again all night. The drugs don’t help, either.”

I give her a sad smile. “Same as always?”

She nods and replies, “Yep, same as always.”

Thorin didn’t have an easy life before The Collective. She wasn’t captured like most of us—she was bought. Thorin’s parents sold her off for a large sum of money when she presented as a healer. She was kept in a holding facility where they performed tests. They would mutilate her and make her heal herself repeatedly to see how long it would take for her magic to deplete. They bound her magic to see if other healers’ blood would work. They took her innocence without any remorse and did so much more. My little pixie is a true warrior, but unfortunately, her mind likes to remind her why.

The bell chimes, and we both get in line for food, watching as servers scoop slop into each tray. The Brownies are housemaid Fae, only appearing when a job needs to be done. They do their tasks quietly and do not like to be acknowledged. Instead of thanking them, we leave small trinkets. Not that we have much, but occasionally, we are given one sweet to prevent us from fainting after a substantial donation. Most of us pocket them and leave them for the Brownies. They are just as much slaves to this place as the rest of us.

Sliding back into my seat, I stare at my plate, pushing the mystery meal around with my fork. The food is...edible at best. It gives us enough nutrients to survive, but it’s not like they care what it tastes like.

“So... what’s up with the new clothes?” Thorin asks, waving her fork around.

“When I woke up, they were staring at me from across the room. It’s a true love story.”

“Really?”

“Even weirder, I was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Completely free of any sedatives.”

Thorin coughs, slapping herself in the chest as she chokes. “What?! New clothes *and* no drugs?” Standing, she marches around the table and pulls at the new fabric. “It’s not even a new dress! They gave you pants and a shirt. Please don’t tell me they gave you underwear. If they did, it’s definitely your funeral outfit.”

My breath catches.

Fuck, what if she’s right? What if I’m about to head to my death after this? Why couldn’t I have a last meal? Maybe a shower?

Thorin clears her throat. “Vi, I’m kidding. They couldn’t get rid of you if they tried. I’d kick their ugly asses.” She punches the air. “But in all seriousness, it is a little concerning.”

Slapping her hands away, I finally release the breath. “I guess we’ll find out after this. If I die, you’ll never truly be rid of me, Thor. I’ll haunt you for the rest of eternity.”

Thorin pops a kiss on the top of my head before skipping back over to her seat.

“You don’t have underwear. Right?”

“No, Thorin, my coochie lips are still catching a breeze.”

While we both laugh, making light of the situation, I’m terrified of how much what she said might be true.

THINGS GET EVEN stranger after breakfast when Bax brings me into the donation room. In the middle of the room one of the arachnids waited for us to arrive.

“Her doctor sent me down to tell you that little miss trophy isn’t to be strapped down today.”

Bax scoffs. “The fuck you mean, she *‘isn’t to be strapped down?’* How am I supposed to keep her from bolting?!”

The spider shrugs, his sleek black legs clicking against the stone as he leaves. “Not my problem. I’m just the messenger.”

Bax tightens his grip around my arm, backing me against the sharp edge of the seat. Looming above me, his hot breath assaults me as he lowers his face to mine. “If I find out your ass left this seat, I’ll make sure you can’t sit down for weeks.”

With a grunt, he storms from the room.

Minutes tick by, and I contemplate making a run for it. Staring at the empty room, I cautiously inch forward, ready to stand up, eyes locked on the hallways as I do so—whether or not I’ll make it past the threshold is very questionable.

The second I push out of the chair, an unfamiliar doctor strolls through the door. My thighs loudly smack against the metal seat as I drop back down, terrified to move another muscle. But the man strolls by me as if he never noticed my disobedience.

Like a moth to flame, I am completely entranced by the sight before me. The doctor’s steps are light and flowy as if gliding across the floor. He is exceptionally tall and slender, dressed in a loosely laced taupe tunic and a black leather vest. The rolled-up sleeves of his shirt expose beautiful red and

black tattoos. The red is incredibly bold against his pale skin—which is almost translucent.

His brilliant sapphire hair is tied up in a bun with a matching leather string. His features are defined—sculpted—and almost too perfect. His nose is long with a small bump below the bridge, complemented by high, sharp cheekbones, while his chin comes to a soft point with a short and kempt beard matching his hair. As I continue to gawk, I notice his eyes, almond-shaped and multicolored—blue, green, and gold—with elongated pupils. I’ve only seen eyes like his a few times in my life, but I already know.

He’s a dragon.

“Good morning, Villiana. My name is Dr. Saito. I will be your doctor from here on out. I’m going to place your line, and afterward, I will do a quick test of your blood and check your blocker levels. Do you have any questions for me?”

I stare blankly at him, too lost in his presence to understand what he’s saying. When my brain finally catches up, my jaw snaps shut, and I straighten my spine in disbelief. Not once since I’ve been here has anyone told me what they are doing, let alone asked for my input. It’s refreshing, but highly suspicious.

“Uh...yeah. What happened to Dr. Dick-Lick? Believe me, I’m ecstatic he’s gone, but I’m also curious.”

“Understandably so. Dr. *Delick* has been transferred to the men’s facility and will not be returning,” he says confidently.

I drum my fingers against the armrest, trying to read between the lines. Shrugging it off, I clap my hands together with enthusiasm. “Good enough for me, doc. Let’s get this party started.”

Saito chuckles—and not in a condescending way, either.

Coming around to the side of the chair, he presses a hand against my arm. An icy feeling pours out of him like fresh snow on a winter's night. It tingles as it creeps throughout my body, relaxing my tense muscles.

Setting my IV, he draws some blood into a few tubes, placing them on the tray beside me. When he removes his hand from my arm, I feel a loss deep in my chest.

Maybe I am dying. At least they gave me a nice view on my way out.

Curiously, I watch as Saito pours each tube into separate bowls, sprinkling different powders in each one before swirling my blood. Turning his back to me, he tries to hide how he dips his finger into the mixture; a shimmery blue substance wraps around his skin before slipping back into the bowl.

Saito pours the contents into one of the empty tubes beside him. As he examines each of them, he hums and down writes notes.

“Alright, Villiana, it seems you are no longer ovulating, and your energy levels are deficient. I will make a note of that in your chart now. Drink this, and you should start to feel better.”

He hands me a cup of murky liquid. It looks gross but smells sweet. Slowly, I tip the cup to my mouth, taking a small sip—it tastes like blueberries. Something about it makes me relax in my chair and press the warm mug to my smiling cheek.

A few minutes later, he takes the empty cup from me. “Feel any better?” He asks.

I nod. “Much, thank you.”

Saito pulls a chair over to sit next to me, holding a notebook and a pen against his chest. “Villiana, how many shots a month do they give you?”

My eyes scan over him, searching for an ounce of sarcasm. I’m unsure how he thinks I can answer his question. It’s cute that he thinks the staff tells us anything. “I’m sure you’re aware they drug me before I get my blocker. So, I have no clue.”

Again, he hums as he makes a note, not bothering to look up at me. “Very interesting. Well, you’re all hooked up. Try to get comfortable, and I’ll be by to check on you in a little while.” Saito exits the room, leaving me unbound, trusting me not to take off.

Dropping back onto the stiff headrest, I try to make sense of everything.

Who is this man, and why is he here? What could The Collective, or even more so, the head honcho himself, gain from this?

Wracking my brain for some kind of answer, something finally clicks. Thick sludge of anxiety creeps up my spine, taunting me.

I can’t get pregnant.

13 YEARS old

Blood. So much blood.

Jumping out of bed, I run straight into the washroom. I strip out of my clothes, desperate to find the source of the

bleeding, only to realize that I'm not dying. Well, not in the traditional sense. I started my moon cycle.

I fix a steaming hot bath for myself, burning my skin when I sit down, but I prefer it that way. Pulling my knees to my chest, I lay my head on top of my knees, taking a few deep breaths. I miss Mama so much. My body starts to shake with fat tears sliding down my nose. She would know what to say, how to comfort me. I love Lys, but what does he know about all of this?

I hear a quiet rap on the door. "Vi, are you in there?"

"Yeah, Lys. I'll be right out."

"Are you okay?" His voice is soft and filled with concern

"I just need a few minutes," I say, swiping my nose across my arm.

"Okay, Hun. I'll be here when you're ready."

After a few more minutes of soaking, I step out of the tub. As I quickly get dressed, I proceed to stuff my underwear with toilet paper.

Just as I'm about to step into the sitting room, I place my hand over my belly, whispering a spell to help with the cramping. The last thing I want to do is go in there and discuss this. What thirteen-year-old wants to talk to their pseudo-grandpa about their moon cycle? The answer is none.

Lys is sitting in his chair, sipping a cup of tea. I walk to the middle of the room but go no further. "Hey. Uhm...I started my moon cycle. I will clean the sheets or make new ones. I'm sorry."

He shakes his head. "Oh, Kostbar, don't even worry about that right now. It is a natural part of life and nothing to be

ashamed of.” Lys closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Sit down, Vi.”

I walk over to the couch and gingerly take a seat. Lys turns and places my hands in his very large palms. “It’s time to have a talk. One that I never thought I would have to have with anyone, but it is crucial you understand what life may have in store for you.”

I rip a hand away and slap him on the arm. “Eww! I am not having the frogs and the fish talk with you. Absolutely not!”

Lys doesn’t move.

He doesn’t laugh. He stares solemnly. “Oh, Hun, I wish that was the talk.”

A nervous giggle escapes me, “Okay, let’s hear it.”

There is a long pause before he speaks again. “Villiana, you know I will protect you with my life, but it doesn’t always work that way. I know you’re aware of what The Collective does. How they take all the healers, bring them to their facilities, and harvest their blood. But do you know what happens with women specifically?”

I shake my head slowly. “No.”

“Well, since most of the healers are in captivity, they aren’t reproducing on their own, and The Collective keeps the men and women separate in fear of rebellion. So, there are no babies that are naturally receiving their healer genetics. But The Collective needs you all.”

Lys pauses and looks up to the ceiling before turning to me.

“Vi, they force the women to breed with The Collective’s chosen males. Do you understand what I’m saying?” With every second, it seems as if his obsidian eyes become darker.

I don’t move. I barely breathe as I stare at him in fear. Fear for my mother, who has been gone for many years. Fear for the women who have been abducted. Fear for myself because while Lys can protect me now, can he really protect me forever?

“Vi, I am going to spell your womb. It will make you barren until you decide you would like to have children. I will teach you the reversal spell, and you will make sure you memorize it. But I need to make sure that you always have the choice of children. I can’t stop them from doing disgusting things to your body, but I can give you this.”

With tears in both of our eyes, I bury my head into his soft chest and nod. “Okay. Thank you.”

“I need you to lie down. I’m going to place my hands over your womb. When I start chanting, you will feel a burning sensation. It will be very painful, Vi, but I know that you are strong.”

My hands tremble as I lower back onto the couch. I’m terrified, but I try my best not to show it. I don’t want to be like those women, so I will do whatever it takes to prevent that from happening.

And if one day I do become one of them, I will be prepared for the worst.

THREE

Ryu

CROSSING THE BOUNDARY INTO BONECLIFF, my stomach flutters with anticipation. When I left work last night, I could only think about the stunning elf I had met. There is something that makes me want to get lost in her. Villiana invaded my every thought—even in my dreams, I couldn't escape her.

Now I find myself speed-walking to the main medical room, rushing to the processing table to snatch her file. My eyes skim the pages, finding that she is supposed to perform an endurance test later today. With Nose stuffed into the notes, hurried to get to the donation room that I slam right into someone's back.

"I'm so sorry, I was checking my patient's file rather than paying attention," I apologize before looking to see who it is. When the man turns around, my boss' reptilian eyes meet mine.

"Dr. Saito, no worries at all! I'm glad to see you take your job so seriously. My prize is very special," he says with a dazzling smile.

“Of course, sir. That is why you hired me,” I grit out through my teeth.

Clapping me on the shoulder, he leans close to my ear. “Yes, it is indeed. I suggest you take excellent care of her, Dr. Saito. We wouldn’t want to lose such a brilliant man as yourself. Now, I would hurry off,” he says with a hiss to his voice.

I give him a curt nod. “Understood.”

With Villiana’s file tucked safely under my arm I push the building door open, hustling over to the dormitories. Rounding the corner, I see the entrance to the donation room ajar, giggles reaching my ears. Quietly, I lean against the frame, crossing my arms over my chest to observe them. Villiana is hovering over a pixie—who I believe is named Thorin—too wrapped up in some scheme to notice me.

I use the moment to really take in Villiana. She’s surprisingly tall, about five-foot-seven, with a delicious figure—full and soft, yet still muscular. Her pale-yellow skin is dewy with a permanent glow. Peeking out from her long obsidian hair are slim, pointed ears adorned with vines tattooed into her skin. Her high, defined cheekbones are complemented by a small pink scar traveling across her delicate upturned nose to the top of her left cheek. However, her lustrous violet eyes and full rosy lips are what caught my attention the most. Everything about her screams power.

Thorin’s animated voice pulls my attention to her.

“Come on, baby girl! Get this strap off of me before someone comes in,” she tries to whisper but does a poor job of it.

“Hush, Thor, you are so loud. I’m getting them off, but you and I both know we can’t leave.” Villiana pulls the leather back, and the jingle of the buckle sounds, signaling she has freed Thorin’s arms.

“Fuck yeah! I love you, you little sexy bitch.” Thorin jumps up, wrapping her petite body around her.

I clear my throat, and their heads whip around, but their bodies stay frozen.

“Good morning, ladies.” I try to hide my amusement behind a dampened smile.

The two of them stare at me with very different expressions. Thorin bites her lip, stifling a laugh, but Villiana’s full lips are popped open, eyes locked onto mine with a mixture of fear and heat.

Thorin lets go of Villiana, landing on her feet with a soft *thud*. “Good morning, Dr. Saito,” she chirps. A devious smirk creeps across as she looks over to Villiana. “I’m sorry, my friend has no manners. She is too busy drooling to answer.”

A blush creeps up Villiana’s cheeks as she redirects her gaze at Thorin. The *I will kill you in your sleep* look she gives her is priceless.

Bowing her head, Villiana avoids all eye contact. “Good morning, doc. I’m guessing you want us to sit down?”

The corner of my lip turns up and I quickly stroke my beard to cover it up. “If you don’t mind. This way, we can get your donation over with.”

The girls take a seat as I prep Villiana. Shortly after, Thorin’s idiot doctor shows up, grumbling as he fastens her straps so tightly that her skin puckers beneath the leather. Once Thorin’s deep skin turns a purplish hue, the doctor marches to

the cabinets, violently throwing the doors. Dropping the supplies onto the metal tray beside Thorin, he gleefully shoves the needle into her arm. Thorin's eyebrows pinch—the only sign of discomfort she shows.

By the time I'm done with Villiana, Thorin's doctor has poked her three times, still fishing in her vein for the sweet spot. I can't help but cringe at the sight.

“Dr. Casslin, would you like me to do that for you? I don't mind,” I ask him.

Grunting, he throws the IV line at me, dirty needle and all. “Go right ahead. I fucking hate pixies. If it's not their veins fighting you, it's their attitudes.”

My immediate reaction is to tell him that he's the problem, but I don't. Instead, I force my mask into place and play into my role. Sucking my teeth, I nod, replying, “Such a big nuisance for such a little thing.”

Dr. Casslin dramatically shoves his chair back before standing up. “Good luck,” he sneers before leaving the room.

It's no secret The Collective doesn't care about the girls here, but you would think they would at least try to procure their blood efficiently. But unfortunately, neither is of this man's concern.

I can't wait to be rid of this place.

Snarling, Villiana gives me a death glare. “What the fuck was that all about, doc?”

I ignore her anger, skillfully setting up Thorin's line first. Once the two of them are hooked up, I take a few steps away before speaking again.

“I figured you’d want your friend to stop suffering at the hand of an incompetent doctor.” I try to have a bite to my voice, but something about this girl makes it impossible. “You two might as well get comfortable. You’ll be here for a while.” I turn and head for the door.

“*Wait,*” Thorin yells out. “Thank you.”

Turning to face her, I nod once. “You’re welcome.”

I promptly make my way to the apothecary. It is a small room with wooden shelves against dirty stone walls and wooden beams across the ceiling with herbs hanging from them. It’s not much, but I find comfort in it.

It is apparent that the other doctors rarely use herbal medicine—if at all. I run my finger across one of the workbenches sweeping away a thick layer of dust. The place is disgusting. Like the bench, dirt and dust cover all surfaces. There is no sense of organization. Jars are haphazardly placed with no labels, what looks like a tincture is half-made, and tools are splayed across the workspace. But, seeing that I will be working here for a while, I might as well make it efficient.

Cleaning calms my nerves, giving me a sense of control. Every swipe of a surface and arrangement of an item clears my head more and more. Once everything is tidy, I take my time meticulously checking the hanging plants, taking down the ones ready to be jarred and rearranging the others by type.

I search the room for a healing paste but it’s nowhere to be found. These girls can’t heal themselves. Do these doctors not care of the risks they are taking by leaving these girls with open wounds? It wouldn’t be so bad if the girls weren’t being stuck every day—sometimes multiple times in a day.

Locating the needed ingredients, I grind some tea leaves and boil water to make Villiana's tea and a wound paste: slippery elm, comfrey, myrrh, bayberry, and garlic.

Bracing my hands against the bench, I hang my head between my shoulders. *What am I doing?* I like to make a plan and stick to it. I didn't anticipate the visceral reaction Villiana's presence would have on me, nor my inability to play the part.

I don't have to be a piece of shit to be a good doctor. I can treat her with kindness and still be in character. Right?

Huffing a sigh, I traipse back into the donation room, to remove Villiana's line and place the paste onto the site.

"All right, you are to report to the fitness room in two hours. I will have you brought back to your room, and one of the guards will bring you food. Before you leave, please drink this tea so you are at peak performance." The silence I am met with is deafening.

"What's the catch?" Villiana gives me a questioning look.

Her answer takes me by surprise. "Excuse me?" Narrowing my eyes, I look at her with confusion.

"If you're looking to fuck me, you'd better get on the sign-up sheet and wait your turn. And if it's Thorin you're after, good luck. She bites," she says flatly.

I flick my gaze at Thorin, who is now cracking up. "Oh, sexy lizard man, I'll give it to you right now. You look like the quiet yet kinky type."

Clearing my throat, I try to maintain my professional cover. Because let's be honest, the images I have of Villiana bent over every surface in here are not helping this act I'm trying to put on.

“I can send you back with no food if you would like,” I state with false bravado, trying to push my authority around.

“Fucking figures,” Villiana mumbles under her breath, rolling her eyes.

I feel my trousers instantly tighten. Her brattiness calls to something hidden deep inside me. It’s unusual for me to feel so out of control that I need to assert my dominance.

When she looks at me again it’s full of challenge and defiance.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I suppress the groan creeping up my throat. I have to get the fuck out of here before my cock gets me in trouble.

Calling in a guard, I walk out of the room with my mind racing. I can’t get outside fast enough. As I push through the door to the outside of the building, the cool air welcomes me with open arms.

WALKING UP THE COBBLESTONE PATHWAY, I release a breath at the sight of our stone house. The warmth of the fireplace emanating from the sitting room and a mouthwatering aroma from the kitchen greets me as I push open the heavy door.

Following the scent of garlic, lemon, and dill, I find Ophir stirring a sauce on the stovetop. “Welcome home, darling! How was your day at work?” he sing-songs, waving a wooden spoon in the air. The vaulted ceiling sends his boisterous voice throughout the house.

His presence alone begins to calm me down. He’s the one being that knows me better than myself. Being with Ophir makes me feel alive and loved in ways I could never put into words.

My body moves forward on its own accord, reaching out for home.

A bright smile bursts across his handsome face; his slate eyes never leave mine with every step I take. Mixing the spoon through the sauce, Ophir pulls it out and licks it, groaning at the taste. “Damn, I’m good.”

He walks over and shoves it toward my face. “Open.”

The second the lemony sauce hits my tongue, my eyes roll back. *Fuck, that is good.*

“Good boy,” he says, kissing me on the head with a satisfied smirk.

I hang my jacket on the back of the chair, take a seat, and bury my head in my hands. “I need about six drinks and a cold shower.”

Ophir looks over at me. “That bad, huh?” He hands me a drink, and I shoot the whole thing down.

“Eh, this girl is going to give me a run for my money. Her sassy mouth is going to get her in trouble. At the very least, over my knee with the way she’s going. I don’t need this kind of distraction. It’s a job, not a hookup.”

Well, that’s what I keep telling myself. If I were a different man, I would screw her and get her out of my mind. Unfortunately, I have never been one for a quick fuck. Intimacy, on the other hand, I crave, which is why I don’t do casual relationships. It’s messy and dramatic, both of which I can’t stand. And that’s precisely whatever this feeling is. It has only been two days, and I’m drowning—this will only get worse.

A devious look crosses his face. “Mmmm, she sounds like a lot of fun.”

I roll my eyes at him. Now *that* is someone who needs both intimacy and lust. He likes to fuck their mind and body—I would know.

Choosing to ignore Ophir's comment, I get up to grab another drink instead. "When I tested her blocker levels today, I found something very interesting. They're giving her at least four times the dose needed. Why in all the realms would she need that much?"

I hear the chair scrape across the floor. Ophir plops down and throws his feet up on the table—fucking heathen. He raps his fingers on the tabletop, thinking for a few moments. "You said she was tall for an elf and surprisingly muscular. Maybe that's why?"

I understand his logic, but his knowledge of herbalism is minimal.

When I glance at my hands, I can still see that my finger is a slightly different color—darker than before. Her levels were high enough to minimize the use of my magic locally. I can only imagine what it would be like to have placed my entire hand in her blood. That leads to my next question: How are they filtering her blood for use? If they were to give it to anyone, it would also render them powerless. The typical dose of blockers gradually dies out and is easily separated from the healer's blood. But there is no way they would be able to do that with Villiana.

"Something is very strange about her. There's more to this assignment than we've been told."

The front door slams open and closed—Avi's home. "Here," he says as he shoves new swords at us. "I just finished these, and please be careful because they are spelled to prevent coagulation. I'm not dealing with either of you bleeding out."

Ophir admires his new toy. “Thanks, brother. I really do appreciate it, but I noticed you didn’t engrave our sigils. Any particular reason for that nonsense?”

Avi laughs. “I like to live dangerously. Keeps us on our toes.”

I admire the craftsmanship that went into making this sword. Avi is a jack of all trades and is dangerously brilliant. I have yet to find something this man can’t do. Well, other than having some common sense.

Avi makes himself a drink before sitting down next to Fear. He motions to me and asks, “Why does he look like he drank vinegar?”

Fear takes the glass from Avi’s hand and slugs down the amber liquid in one gulp. “Seems like our mark is a sexy little minx who Mr. Medicine Man over here can’t keep his mind off of.” He raises his eyebrow suggestively.

I stand up and flick them both off. These two are going to be the death of me. I swear, I can’t tell them anything.

Bringing my sword to my bedroom, I’m careful not to catch myself as I slip it into its sheath. Sitting down on my bed, the plushness of my mattress makes me contemplate if bathing is necessary. I could easily fall asleep just as I am. Unfortunately, not only is Bonecliff filthy, but it also leaves me feeling like I’m coated in infectious sludge.

Sighing, I begin to undress. I take my boots and set them at the end of my bed. Next, I strip out of my leather pants, tunic, and leather vest, folding each neatly and placing them on top of my trunk. I make my way to the washroom naked—I have nothing to be ashamed of, nor would it be the first time the guys have seen me without clothes.

The bathroom is the sanctuary in this house, so it happens to be the nicest, too. The walls are gray, and taupe stones are decorated with hanging plants, making it feel as if you were outside. A large window looks out on the back of the property, providing an abundance of natural light. The far corner has a small open shower with a drain in the floor. The shining star of the whole room is the large soaking tub in the middle. And by large, I mean huge. It will comfortably accommodate Ophir's seven-foot-five, three-hundred-thirty-pound body.

Turning on the tap, water begins to fill the tub. I throw some eucalyptus into the steaming water. Once I'm in, I fully submerge myself, then come up and rest my head against the back of the tub.

When we took on this mission, I knew it would be difficult. I've never heard of anyone actually leaving The Collective's compounds, but that doesn't mean it's impossible. What I wasn't expecting is the feeling I get when I'm around this beautiful elf. Touching her brought a comforting and familiar warmth—like some part of me recognized her. I would say that our magics were intermingling, but that wasn't likely. Villiana is a mystery that I need to crack. But for now, I need to release this built-up tension.

I close my eyes and picture her thick, toned body, imagining her dripping with sweat after today's endurance test. How her tunic would stick to her like a second skin. I imagine her getting into the showers after she finished. Slowly removing her clothes, bending down, showing off her delectable ass, dewy with sweat. She would soap up her body, her nipples pebbling as she ran her hands over them. The suds would create a path down her body.

I groan, palming my painfully erect cock. Listlessly stroking, I conjure up a visual of Villiana. This time she is taking her soaped-up hands, rubbing them across her stomach. As she rinses off, her hand makes its way to the apex of her thighs. Gradually, she dips her fingers through her slit, dragging her wetness forward. Teasing herself, her breath catches as she picks up the pace. Her breath becomes more ragged. I begin stroking myself harder as her moans sound off in my imagination; my own match them. The mere thought of her throwing her head back in ecstasy sends me over the edge.

I think I've found a new obsession.

FOUR

Villiana

I GET a week of feeling fantastic and daily meetings with my sexy new doctor before reality comes crashing down.

Last night a notice was slipped under my door informing me of a live feeding event for the elite donors—the ones who can't throw enough money at The Collective in trade for a taste of immortality. The letter continued stating I am to have all *unwanted* hair removed from my body, special baths to ensure my skin is soft and shiny, and I must eat the supplied meals to guarantee the highest quality blood. At the bottom was a *request* for my presence first thing in the morning.

I'm ready and waiting for my lovely guard to bring me to Locren's office on the other side of the compound this morning.

Making our way through the gardens, we come to the front of his house—more like an estate—and I'm reminded how extravagant and gaudy he is. In the center of his yard is a golden fountain depicting a naked woman pouring water into a large bucket. The golden theme carries on to the front of the house with matching handrails on the staircase and an ornate snake head knocker.

Bax knocks on the door with a hand tightly wrapped around my arm.

Long pointed fingers appear on the side of the door, a grotesque goblin greeting us.

“Ah, I see you have a sweet little treat for the Master. Bring her inside and then leave. Master will not be happy if your stench lingers.” The goblin holds the oversized door open and leads us to Locren’s office. “Master will arrive in a minute.” Motioning to a spot in front of Locren’s desk, he says, “Get in the proper position to greet him!” before hobbling from the room.

I make my way to the front of the desk, lower myself to my knees, and bow my head. *This man is certifiable if he actually thinks that I will ever truly serve him.* I continue to stare at the cold marble floor, shifting my weight. I don’t know how long it has been, but when Locren comes prancing through the door, my legs are going numb.

“Oh, I see my favorite healer knows how to greet her Master properly. Eyes on me, elf.” His voice is loud and commanding, and I would do anything not to look into his eyes. “I said, eyes on me!” Locren shouts when I don’t move fast enough for his liking.

The moment my gaze meets his, my vision tunnels, the ambient sounds in the room disappear, and I’m left with nothing but the sight and sound of Locren.

“Oh, my prized possession, you are truly a trophy. Now, up with you. And while you’re at it, remove your clothing. You are much more fun to talk to when I can really look at you,” he hisses.

“As you wish, Master.” Unable to fight his mind control, I do as he says. My body may follow, but everything in me screams to stop. I remove my clothes as fast as possible because I do not want to prolong this visit.

Groaning in appreciation, Locren sits behind his desk with his legs wide, purposely putting his erection in full view. What is really unfortunate is that he is attractive—especially for an older man. Tall with olive skin and a masculine face. His strong square jaw has stubble, dimples in his cheeks, and a pronounced brow. His slicked-back hair is so blond it’s almost white.

Locren is a powerful basilisk. His ability to control is the strongest I’ve ever seen. Most of the time his eyes are a piercing gray. They lure you into his gaze and the moment he has your attention, his eyes shift red, locking you in.

“As you are aware, there will be a live feeding event at the end of the week. This is a very important event that must go perfectly. All of my best girls will be pleasing the donors in any way they are asked. And you, my dear, will be the star of the show. I want you dressed immaculately and on your best behavior. You will walk around the ballroom allowing any donor access to your blood. They may drink directly from you or a cup—whatever their choosing. You will be supplied with salve, which you are to use to mend your wounds after every feeding. But the most important job you have at this event is to tend to the needs of the elite benefactors-. There will be a private room intended for this purpose.” Tapping his fingers against the armrests, Locren waits for my response.

“Yes, Master. I will do whatever is needed.” Tears run down my face in the only outward sign of revolt my body will allow. “Anything to please you, Sir.”

A cruel smile breaks out across his face. His perfect teeth shine with promise. “Anything, you say?” Locren taps his thigh. “Come.” My feet move forward on their own.

“Now, now, my little trophy. There is no need to cry. This is not the first time I will take your mouth. Nor will it be the last time.” Locren pulls me forward by my waist. He runs his hands up my sides and over my breasts. My stomach lurches, wanting to expel the little food I’ve had today. “So perfect,” he hums to himself.

“On your knees, Villiana. Hands behind your back. And don’t you dare try to look away from me,” he says as if I have control of it.

I plant my knees on the marble once again, this time between his legs. He unbuttons his pants and frees himself.

Tapping his length against my lips, he says, “Open up.” He grabs my jaw so tight it will bruise, forcing my mouth open. “Yes, just like that.” He guides himself in until my nose hits his pelvis. This time I do gag, and Locren shoves himself further down my throat in response. He begins fucking my mouth ruthlessly.

I try to will myself to think of anything else but this moment. His hands are in my hair so tight I fear that he may rip it from my scalp. His breath becomes ragged, and his stomach tightens. With a groan, he finishes down my throat, but some seeps out the side of my mouth, dripping to the floor. Roughly, he pulls himself out.

“Be a good little whore and clean that mess.”

Released from his gaze, I shamefully lick the semen off the ground.

“Put your clothes back on while I send one of the goblins to fetch Bax. That filthy animal doesn’t deserve to lay eyes on what’s mine.”

Locren tucks himself back into his pants, stands up, and walks out of the door like nothing happened, leaving me wallowing in shame.

THE ONLY GOOD part of today is getting to be outside for a short while. Walking back to the dorms, Bax’s pace is on the slower side for some reason. Maybe he pities me, or maybe he just wants to enjoy the sun; either way, I’m grateful. The warmth feels good on my face, and I can softly hear the falls beyond the camp.

Bax looks down at me. “I was ordered to bring you to the shower before the donation room.”

I nod because nothing sounds better than a shower right now. Maybe it will burn the sins from my skin.

The wash house is minimal. It’s a wide open room with five shower heads on the far wall. Across from the showers is one long mirror that is cracked in several different places, but it is the only time we can actually see ourselves. When you walk in, there is a small shelf with clean dresses and towels, and a bin to throw out dirty ones. There is a small hallway next to the wall of showers that leads to the toilets, with small dividers between each that give the illusion of privacy when there are no doors.

Bax leaves me in front of the building and waits outside. Stripping out of my clothes, I fold them and set them to the side—I’m not taking the chance of never getting them back—to turn on the shower. I don’t bother with cold water. *I want it*

to burn. I lean my head against the wall, letting the stream of scorching water pelt down on my back. My body begins to shake, threatening to let out a sob. All of a sudden, I feel a gentle hand on my back.

“Vi, it’s me, babe. It’s Thorin.” Slowly turning around, I find her golden eyes.

“H-how did you know I was here?” I hiccup.

“One of the girls heard Locren wanted to see you. I figured this is where you would be afterward. I told my guard I had to shit real bad.”

A laugh slips from between my lips.

“Do you want me to sit with you for a minute? We don’t have to talk.”

I just sit down, and she takes that as a yes. Thorin holds me, and we don’t move again until the water runs cold.

BAX LET me take my time in the showers, but as soon as I walked out, it was all business again. Practically dragging me down the hall, he drops me off at the donation room like he was told to.

I drop down in the chair and wait for Dr. Saito.

Walking into the room with a dazzling smile, he greets me, “Good afternoon, Villiana! How is your day today?” When his eyes land on my face, the smile disappears. He rushes over to me and grabs my chin between his fingers. “What happened?”

Hissing from the sting of his grip, I try to pull myself away—he doesn’t let me. When I don’t answer him, he pulls the collar of my shirt to look for bruises on my neck, assessing the

situation on his own. When I aggressively pull away again, he drops his hand.

Dr. Saito's eyes are filled with disdain as he scans me over. "Villiana, please tell me what happened. Did that fucking Orc do this to you? I can get him removed as your guard. Just say the word."

His insolence is enough to unhinge me. *Like he can help me. No one can help me.*

Getting to my feet, I push him with both hands as hard as possible. I don't have it in me to take on another person. I don't have to explain anything to anyone. Working in this prison, there is no way to be naive to what goes on here, and I'm sure all of my exams after Locren are in my file. His act is bullshit because he knows exactly what happens here.

"Stop with the drivel savior theatrics. I don't know your end game or who put you up to this, but just stop," I scoff.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me loud and clear, Dr. Saito. I'm over your shit. Just stick me with the needle, and let's get it over with." I dramatically slap the ditch of my arm.

Saito looks as if he just ate something sour, his eyebrows sitting at his hairline. Dramatically pushing the tray from his side, he marches to the door. His steps are loud and aggressive, booming throughout the room. Stopping short in the egress, his elongated nails scrape against the wall.

"Stay here."

Oh yeah, like I have anywhere else to go.

Ryu

I STAND in the middle of the apothecary with a heaving chest. Barely holding myself together, I grab a jar and throw it against the wall. Even though its shattering sounds very satisfying, my dragon within tries slipping through as I watch the table start icing over. Seeing those bruises on her face set fire to the frozen rivers that run through my veins. And I swear to the gods, if it's that piece of shit, Bax, I will gut him myself.

Where is this rage coming from?

This. Is. A. Job. That's it. No feelings, no attachments. Just fulfill my duty to get in and get her out. That's it.

I've been here a few weeks, and every day I find myself more drawn to her. Ophir and Avi find it hilarious to watch me lose control over something.

I'm the one who knows how to stay in control.

I keep us all in line.

I make sure our jobs get done.

And now some beautiful, bratty elf is throwing me off.

I stand there for another moment to collect myself. I can't go back in there and have Villiana see me like this. As it is, she thinks I'm like the rest of these perverts.

When I get back into the donation room, Villiana is in the exact spot I left her. Pulling up a chair next to her, I start explaining. "Villiana, I think I have not communicated my intentions very well to you, and for that, I am sorry. I am here to be your doctor. It is my job to make sure you are healthy and unharmed. If you are hurt, I'm here to help you. Seeing a patient with bruises on their face is concerning, but I acted out

of turn. I would also like to make it abundantly clear that I do not have an agenda.”

Villiana looks so defeated—the dark circles under her eyes aren’t helping either. She won’t even look me in the face. She softly asks, “Who are you?”

Well, that’s a loaded question, but I give her the only truth that I can. “Ryu, and if it makes you feel better, you may call me by my first name.”

“Okay. I’m too tired even to try to decipher anything right now, but I will call you Ryu.”

It’s a small victory, but I’ll take it.

“Now, can you please tell me where you got those bruises from?” I place my hand over hers, and she jumps, but doesn’t move away.

Taking a deep breath, she steadies herself and places her hand on top of mine this time, giving me a look like *she’s* trying to comfort *me*. “I had a meeting with Locren. That’s all. You can beat the shit out of Bax if you want, though. He deserves it in general.”

I feel like I was just slapped across the face. My body goes rigid, and I see my claws starting pushing through the skin again. “What did you just say?”

Villiana quickly turns from demure to defensive. “Wow, easy there, Ryu. You’re acting like you don’t know what your employer does.” She pauses and looks at me “You do know who you are employed by, right? Blink twice if you’re here against your will.” I look down where her hand is still on top of mine, trying to calm myself. *Do I know who I’m employed by? Absolutely. Am I here against my will? Well, yeah, kind of;*

it's not my choice. But I made a promise, and I'm going to stick to it.

“Let’s just say I don’t have a lot of choice in the matter, but I have much more freedom than you do.”

I’m going to get questioned for this later, but it will be worth it. “You know what, I don’t think we need a donation from you today. Would you like it if I asked the Brownies to bring food outside, and I’ll eat with you? I will tell Bax not to come.” She eyes me cautiously. I pull my hand back and present it for a handshake, “A peace offering.”

Villiana shakes my hand. “Deal.”

“YOU EAT THIS SHIT?” I scrunch my face after smelling the food they brought us.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mr. Gourmet.” Villiana gasps with a hand over her heart. “Is my cuisine not good enough for you? I picked all the ingredients myself.”

I tilt my head forward. “My lady, I’m sorry to offend. Please forgive me.”

Even though the meal is absolutely vile, I eat it with her. We sit in silence for most of the time, just enjoying the outdoors. Villiana lays back on the grass, sunning herself. Crossing her arms behind her head, a small portion of her stomach and thick hips are exposed. I can’t help but gawk. Her daffodil skin looks so radiant outside. I love the dichotomy of her body: soft and toned at the same time.

I knew before I got here that the women basically wear scraps of clothing, and if that was the only thing I could change immediately, then that’s what I was going to do. So, I had Avi make something new for her. I made sure he used the

same shitty fabric as the rest of the clothing so it wouldn't be that obvious. I haven't said anything to her to allude to the fact it was me, and I don't plan on it either.

"You're staring, Ryu." I move my eyes away from her body to her face to see she has one eye cracked. "Not very professional of you, sir."

"Caught red-handed." Winking, I pick up the bowls and get to my feet.

"Well, Villiana, it's time for us to go back. It has been a pleasure."

She stands up and grabs the dishes from me. "I'll give them to Bax. He can do something productive. This was... nice."

We start walking back into the building. Just as I'm about to open the door, Villiana says, "I don't trust you. Yet. But this was a start."

Something in my chest starts to warm, and my heart beats a little faster. *She needs to trust you if you're going to get her out of here.* But it still feels good to hear her say it.

FIVE

Ophir

I DIDN'T HEAR Ryu come home this evening but found him throwing axes in the yard as I walked past the kitchen window.

Yanking the axes from the makeshift target, he turns around with his brow pulled tight. He marches back to his spot, flaring his nostrils with each pound of his foot.

Even when he's frustrated, he is handsome. I watch the thick veins pulse from his white-knuckled, soft hands as he wraps his fingers around the wooden shaft, throwing the tool into the painted target like it wronged him. He pouts his generous lips, causing his bottom lip to look fuller than usual, as the blade embeds itself perfectly centered with a loud *thunk*.

I don't go outside immediately, curiously watching to see how many times he will pull the two axes from the target just to throw them again. After half an hour, his slim chest heaves up and down, and he drops them to the ground beside him.

When he falls to the grass, he tucks his knees into his chest, looking so vulnerable. No matter what is stressing him, I can't let him go through it alone.

Taking quiet strides toward him, I gently press my hand to his hunched back—Ryu startles. Craning his head, he stares at me with wild eyes. Nostrils flared, his top lip pulled back in a sneer. Dear Odin, the man looks feral. It takes a moment for him to soften his features.

“Sorry. I thought I was alone,” he says breathlessly.

“It’s okay. I just want to check on my sweet dragon.” Offering him a hand up, I smile. “You want to head in? We’re not going to be able to see much soon, anyway.”

The corner of his mouth turns up the tiniest bit. “That’s probably a good idea. I don’t need you moaning about how cold you are.”

As soon as we’re back in the comfort of our home, I light a fire while Ryu makes drinks. Settling into the couch, I throw my arm across the back, taking up almost the entire length. Ryu pads over, tucking himself under my arm.

“So, what happened to the girl today?”

“I don’t know why, but for some reason, I assumed that Villiana wasn’t getting the same treatment as the others there. Turns out she’s getting extra special treatment.” He pauses, taking a huge sip from his glass. “From Locren himself.”

“What do you mean extra special?” I don’t even know this girl yet, and I already feel incredibly protective of her. Of course, no one should ever be taken advantage of, especially in the way Villiana has been, but something feels different.

The waves of anxiety coming off of Ryu makes me uneasy. He has the ability to mimic others’ emotions. Think of an empath, but instead of feeling their emotions, he literally absorbs them. He *becomes* them. Ryu normally would use it as a manipulation tactic on assignments. Beings are much more

comfortable when you mirror their feelings—making it much easier to get information from someone that way.

But every so often, he can't help but be overcome. So, not only is the girl being abused, but he's unintentionally pulling from her. Taking on her burdens like he always does. And that alone makes me hate this *Locren*.

Ryu sucks his teeth. "She came into the room today with fresh bruises on her cheeks. It looked like someone was squeezing her mouth open. They were perfectly finger sized."

My hand tightens around my glass so hard I'm surprised it hasn't shattered. A growl crawls up my throat. "That snake is a piece of fucking shit. How much longer do you think this is going to take?"

Shrugging, he replies, "Well, I wanted to talk to you about something. Villiana's guard needs to go. There's no doubt in my mind that roughing her up isn't the only thing he does. I'm not playing stupid anymore."

Hmm. "So, you want me to kill him? I can do that."

I would *love* to do that. I'm not usually a violent man, but my body hums at the prospect of killing. The blissful silence that comes after the life has been drained from a body, watching the evil seep onto the floor as the tangy scent of blood consumes my senses. I won't kill for the hell of it, but fuck, do I enjoy it when I have to.

"I do. But I also want you to replace him. It's time for you to come in; this will be the perfect opportunity. I will tell Locren that I saw Bax trying to *touch what is his*, so I had to handle the situation." Standing up, Ryu begins to pace. "I'll bring up that I know someone who isn't inept and can care for his favorite healer. No matter what, I want you in there by

tomorrow night. No more waiting.” As he walks into the kitchen, he pauses. The smirk on his face tells me he is scheming. “Get Avi—I have an idea. And then we need a plan.”

Oh, I love when he gets like this. Things are about to get bloody.

RYU DID a recon of Bonecliff as soon as he started working, bringing home a hand-drawn map of what he could conjure up from memory. So, when we discussed our new plan last night, I knew I had to memorize the entire layout of this place before the weekend. There will not be an inch of the camp I don’t know about.

After Ryu snuck me in this morning, I spent most of my day stalking the Orc, staying as hidden as possible. Even though I would love to get a good look at the girl who has Ryu’s dick in knots, I know it would blow up our plan.

Now that nightfall has come around, I find my way to the guard’s quarters to look for Villiana’s guard, only to find him asleep with his legs up on a table, leaning back in a chair. *Don’t you know you never fall asleep on the job? You never know who may come around.*

I walk over and slap him on the back of the head, “You Bax?”

Shooting awake, he throws his arms out to balance himself, almost falling from the chair. “Are you looking for a fight? Because that’s what it seems like right now,” he says, righting himself.

“I’m going to take that as a yes. Locren asked for you, saying something about you being too rough with his prize

possession.” I know how to rile him up, and it’s way too easy.

“Motherfucking doctor needs to mind his own business. Sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong gets you dead.” Bax side-eyes me in a warning.

Raising my hands in the air, I go on the defense. “Not my deal, man, but I would leave before Locren comes looking for you himself.”

Bax grunts, slowly getting out of his chair. I wait a minute after he leaves to follow him. Rounding the corner, I see him moseying to his destination. Calling my shadows, they envelop him in darkness.

“What the hell—” he shrieks.

Pressing my chest against his back, I whisper in his ear, “Death comes for us all, and today is your lucky day.”

Bax’s breath catches, and I send my shadows down his throat to muffle the sounds of his screams. I don’t have much time, but I don’t want this to be quick for him. I start by breaking both his disgusting tusks off at the base and stabbing them into his sides; I feel his body react and it sends a thrill through me. I take out the beautiful kris that Avi has made for me; this is the first time I get to use it, and nothing excites me more than breaking in a new toy. Before he can register what is happening, I gut him, sternum to groin. With a skillful flick of the wrist, I drag the blade against his exposed throat, allowing hot streams of crimson to spew. Groaning in pleasure, I take a moment to look at the sight in front of me before palming my painfully hard erection.

I kick the Orc’s disemboweled body into a dark corner, unsure how long I have before someone comes around. Quickly, I head back into the guards’ quarters and peel off my

soiled clothes, stuffing them into the bag I had stashed away. Now that the messy part is over, it's time to find Ryu. He said he would be waiting in the apothecary for me, so that's where I head.

Strolling into the room, I can one hundred percent tell that Ryu works here. It is overly clean, not a thing out of place, and *of course*, he is at one of the tables prepping some kind of medicine.

“It's done?” He must have heard me walk in.

“Yep! I wish I could have played with him more, but I made do. Oh! I got to use my new kris. Smooth as butter,” I say gleefully. “But...we do need to clean up that mess as soon as possible. Did you talk to Locren?”

“Unfortunately, yes. He didn't think twice when I told him you would lay down your life before letting anything happen to his prize healer. You start in the morning, bright and early, so you'd better have your happy face on.”

“You got it, boss!” As I'm about to leave the room, Ryu has something to add.

“One other thing... Her best friend is with her whenever they can be. Her name is Thorin, and I would like you to keep an eye on her too. She came into medical yesterday in really bad shape—a black eye, fat lip, blood under her nails, and walking with a limp. The doctor assigned to her is incompetent and has way too many other patients. He, like everyone else here apparently, doesn't give a shit what happens.”

The corner of my mouth turns up. His carefully curated words do nothing to hide the truth beneath them—Villiana cares, so he does too.

JUST AS RYU WANTED, I'm outside Villiana's door bright and early. I wait a little while before knocking; no need to get on her bad side on the first day. After a good twenty minutes, I finally rap against the wood.

"Hold your horses, Bax! Gods forbid you are one second past your timeline."

My jaw drops when she opens the door—I get it now. Her raven hair is in a high ponytail, brushing against her back. She's wearing the hideous clothing Ryu had Avi make, but it can't hide every perfect curve of her body. Her pink tongue peeks out of her heart shaped lips while she tries to close the door behind her. When our eyes finally meet, I swear to all of the gods she can see my past, present, and future. I feel like I'm drowning. I have no intention of ever breathing again.

Her lips part as she looks me up and down. "Who the fuck are you?"

Shit. I didn't think this through entirely. I give her my nickname. "Fear."

Quirking her sculpted brow at me, she smirks. "Fear, huh? Should I be afraid of you?"

I chuckle. Yep, I'm definitely going to have fun with this one. "I'll let you make that decision."

"Well, at least you're much, much nicer to look at than the last asshole." She turns to walk down the hallway, "Where to, big guy?" Breezing past me, her scent catches my nose. She smells like sugared lemons in the summertime.

"Mess hall, training, shower, donation. I'll have to check what happens after that."

I stand close to her as we trek to our first destination. She walks a few paces ahead of me every so often, giving me a

splendid view of her thick hips swaying back and forth—perfect for grabbing.

I hear a loud squeal when we step foot in the mess hall.

“Vi! *Who is this?* Where is fuckhead? Are we keeping this one?” The pixie motions to me. This must be who Ryu was talking about: Thorin. There’s still some bruising around her eye, yellowing around the edges, and her lip has begun to scab over. But overall, she seems okay.

Villiana hugs Thorin. “Bax got the boot, and I upgraded to this eye candy. His name is Fear.” She wiggles her eyebrows at Thorin.

“Mmm, can he be mine too? I can be a *very* good girl and share.” She gives me a sickly sweet smile.

“You ladies have a nice breakfast. Villiana, I will see you afterward.”

As I’m walking away, I hear Thorin say to her, “Maybe you should let him see *all* of you.” That earns her a slap on the arm.

Oh, I like her. I like her a lot.

SIX

Villiana

I DON'T KNOW who is looking out for me, but I'll gladly worship them for sending me these beautiful men.

Fear is gigantic in the best ways possible. His body is made up of hard planes of muscle and soft squishy bits. I just want to rest my head on his cute little belly. Standing at *least* a foot and a half taller than me, I have to crane my neck to appreciate his gorgeous face. A strong straight nose sits perfectly between deep-set slate eyes. His red hair is shaved on the sides with a long braid on the top, and a long red beard to match. Oh, and his smile. Panty melting—if I had any. He looks like a challenge I'm willing to take on.

Maybe Thor is on to something. I've had every single right taken away from me, and I haven't been able to make any decisions about my body since we've been here. What's the harm of having a little fun with my guard? The idea is so empowering that it makes me giddy. Me, making a decision? Damn, that sounds good.

When Fear comes to pick me up, I think I will start the seduction process. *If I can remember how to do that.* I guess more of convincing him to risk his job and life. If Locren ever

found out that someone other than him and his chosen few had touched me, I think he would burn down this place with everyone inside.

Things would be so much different if I had a little of my magic.

As if it can hear my thoughts, I feel a tingling in my fingertips. *What the...?* I look to find a very faint golden glow emanating from them. Tapping my thumb and forefinger together, I watch sparks of magic that form between them.

I sit there staring at my hands like they are going to whisper the answers to me. When was the last time I had a blocker? I haven't been drugged in a few weeks, so I've been pretty clear-headed and should be able to remember getting the shot done. Meaning... it had to be when Dr. Dicklick was still my doctor. I definitely heard him say something about me getting another one soon.

Holy fucking shit, some of my magic is coming back.

Remembering that I'm sitting in the middle of the mess hall, I quickly shove my hands under my butt, hoping no one else noticed.

"Vi, why are you acting so weird?" Thorin nudges me. "First, you space out into La-la Land, and now you're sitting on your hands. Did Fear rearrange those pretty little brains of yours?" she asks, looking at me skeptically.

I don't particularly enjoy lying or hiding things from Thorin, but I don't know how to start explaining this. I don't even know what's going on. I also don't want to put her in unnecessary danger because of me. So I say, "Yeah, I think he might have."

“Maybe you should let him rearrange your guts, too.” The look she gives me is like she’s about to fuck me on this table right now.

This is good. I can direct the conversation far away from my magic. “What do you think I was daydreaming about?”

I sigh in relief when her hands slap hard against the tabletop startling me. “PLEASE, PLEASE DO IT. And maybe let me watch. I’ve been deprived of safe, sane, and consensual for too long. I don’t have to touch; just watch. Well, if you want me to touch, I can. It’s not like we haven’t before. Oh, do yo—”

“*Thorin Pixiepie Cockgobbler!*” I grab her face between my hands. “Snap out of it, you horny bitch!”

“That’s not my name. I don’t hate it, but it’s not my preferred meal. But, then again, I’m not too picky.” Before I get a second to respond, she pops a chaste kiss on my lips. “Sorry, Vi, I got carried away. Love you!”

Behind us, I hear someone clear their throat. “It’s time to get going.”

Fear is here.

My face flushes, cheeks burning hot. I start to remove my hands from Thorin’s face to stand up when she grabs me, pulling me against her mouth. “Show him what he’s missing,” she whispers before her full lips part and her tongue brushes against mine. She is right. It’s not like we haven’t done this many times before.

I open, allowing her tongue to brush against mine. I get lost in the moment and deepen the kiss, running my fingers up the back of her head. Thorin nips at my lip, and I let out an embarrassingly loud groan.

Pulling away, she brushes her lips against the shell of my ear, “You’re welcome.”

Partially stunned and partially turned on, I stay locked in place, staring off into the distance. When I finally get up to leave, I look up at Fear. His eyes burn with pure lust, even breathing a little harder. And he is very obviously turned on. If the imprint in his pants is any indicator of what he’s packing, I’m afraid to see the real thing.

Great, now that’s all I’m going to think about when I’m with him.

My beautiful, scheming little pixie has put operation *Fuck Fear* into full swing. The entire walk to the training room, I can feel his eyes burning into me.

I glance to the side to find his jaw clenched tightly as he accidentally brushes his hand against my ass. “Is there something you would like to say to me?” I ask slyly, cocking my head.

“That was quite the show you two put on in the mess hall.” He strokes his mustache and continues down into his fiery beard.

Before I was captured, my sex life was...minimal. There were a few guys and girls from the town I had hooked up with, but it was nothing but a fumbling mess. Except for the one succubus, Tatiana. That girl showed me the cosmos with her tongue. She also taught me how empowering submission and pain could be, allowing me to take control of my anxiety and trauma. But the way Fear’s eyes run down my body sets my skin ablaze. I feel like a blushing virgin.

“Why do you think it was a show?”

“Uh, are you and Thorin...together?” Fear asks, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Would that bother you? If we were together?”

“Not at all. Just curious, I guess.” His eyes are brimming with questions.

“No, we aren’t together—not in the traditional sense anyway. She’s my best friend, and we’ve found many types of comfort in each other over the years. We both like sex and trust each other implicitly, and when we’re together, it is our choice. So no, we’re not together, but I will always love her in a way that’s only meant for Thorin.”

I do love her, and it’s not like a sister or lover. It’s not that she’s a woman because gender has never mattered to me in my partners; I just know that we aren’t meant to be any more than we are right now, and we’re both okay with that. The love I have for Thorin can’t be explained. If there is ever a day I get out of here, she’s coming with me. I would rather die here than leave her behind.

He nods, eyes softening with understanding.

“Now I have a question, my dear guard. Why come work here with The Collective? Do you want to drink from me and gain immortality? Or maybe spread your seed to create a new generation of healers?” There is something about Fear that feels different from the other Collective employees. I can tell he is much deeper than his surface appearance.

I barely hear him grumble, “*It’s not your blood I want to get a taste of.*” Stopping outside the training room, he looks down at me. “Would you believe me if I said it was complicated?”

“For some reason, I do.” Turning into the training room, I grab the pile of clothes waiting for me—a tight-fitting pair of pants and a sleeveless shirt. I start stripping out of clothes right there because pretty much everyone in the camp has seen me naked. As I bend over to put my pants on, I hear a sharp intake of breath. I look over to see Fear leaning against the wall. His eyes look like they’re about to fall out of his head. Snickering, I pull them on, slowly standing up.

“You okay over there?” I turn to face him. “You know you don’t have to stay for my session.”

“Yep. Everything’s *A-okay!* But I think I’m going to stay here. I have nothing better to do, and I’m interested to see what they have you do,” he rushes out.

I shrug. “Suit yourself.”

With that, I start stretching. A few other girls are already here and are waiting to start, but I get into the zone, a little bliss in my mind for a fraction of time, when I hear my trainer walk over to me.

“Let’s get started, shall we?”

Today starts with sprints back and forth across the room. Next, we move on to picking up a boulder about the size of a water pail off the floor, standing up and lifting it above my head. I do three sets of ten before moving on to the next activity; sparring. Over the years, I have gotten a lot more acclimated with beating the shit out of the other girls. At first, I felt bad. None of us wanted to be here; why torture each other? But now I think we all need it. There is something about channeling your aggression onto someone else.

Sometimes I think about this whole training situation. Why train us? There is a very high likelihood that we would be able

to beat the piss out of the guards and such over time. My only guess is that since they've spelled this place against us specifically, they don't think we would be powerful enough without our magic. It doesn't help that they drug us, too.

As we end the session, I take a minute to stretch once more. Sweat is pouring down my face and into my eyes. I can't wait to get into the shower. I go over to my pile of clothing and grab my leather tie to gather my hair into a bun.

"I'm ready for that shower now." I wave to Fear. "I'm sorry for my stench," I say when he gets next to me. "I'm sure I'm not the most pleasant to be around right now."

Fear pulls out a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes the sweat from my face. He brings it to his nose and sniffs. "Smells kind of good to me."

My mouth falls open as I stare at him not knowing whether to be horrified or turned on. I don't even know how to respond. *Who says things like that?*

The corner of Fear's mouth turns up as he leads me to the wash house.

KNOWING the next stop on my journey is the donation room, I pick up my pace. Somewhere I once dreaded is now what I look forward to. When I first saw Ryu, he gave off type-A: tight-laced and high-strung. But looks can be deceiving.

As I prance into the room, my steps falter. Ryu is leaning against a table, reading. His long legs are crossed at the ankles while one of his hands wraps around the edge of the stone table for balance. His long sapphire hair is down and brushing against his angular jaw. I watch his nose wrinkle in distaste from whatever he's reading.

I feel a looming presence behind me before warm hands are placed on my arms.

“You might want to take a breath. We don’t need you passing out,” Fear says, leaning down to my ear.

Ryu must hear him because he snaps the book shut just before blue, gold, and green eyes flick to mine. “Good afternoon Villiana. How has your morning been?” He asks, keeping his eyes trained on me—long pupils dilating. It takes me a second to remember how to speak, so he takes the opportunity to look up at the massive man behind me. “I see you have a new guard.”

“Hey, doc. Yes, I got a shiny new guard this morning. He’s like my shadow.” Nodding my head towards Fear, I add, “Apparently, his name is Fear, and I’m supposed to decide if his name suits him.”

Ryu’s gaze turns to Fear’s hands on my arms. “Nice to meet you, *Fear*.”

Why was that said so aggressively? Am I going to have a dick-measuring contest between these two? Not going to lie, Fear would probably—no, definitely—win.

Utterly unfazed by Ryu, Fear ruffles the top of my head. “I will be back in exactly one hour, little one. I’ll see you then.” Fear salutes us on the way out.

I dramatically swoon at his words, placing the back of my hand against my forehead. “Oh, I get a nickname! I’m actually pretty tall, but I guess everyone is shorter than you. Okay, big man, I’ll see you later,” I chirp and wave Fear off.

“You seem friendly with your new guard,” Ryu says with a bite to his voice.

“He’s fun—much better than Bax. Can’t forget easy on the eyes. Plus, I could use a new friend.” I plop down into the chair and stick out my arm. “Alright, doc, put it in me.”

Ryu freezes. His eyebrows raise to his hairline.

“The line, doc.”

“Oh, uh... yes, let me grab that” He drops his eyes in embarrassment, crimson staining his alabaster skin. I can’t help but smirk. These men are too fun to play with.

Ryu comes back over and places my IV. He wipes his hands on his pants once he has finished. Is he nervous?

“So, any new gossip?” Ryu asks.

I bark out a laugh. He is so bad at small talk. “Well, one of the girls puked all over her new stud. Something I think we have all wanted to do.” By the end of the sentence, his easy-going demeanor is gone and replaced with a scowl.

“He deserved it. Disgusting swine.” Ryu abruptly gets up from his chair and leaves the room. When he comes back, it’s with a steaming hot cup of tea that smells amazing. “Blueberry and honey milk tea?” He hands me the mug, and I take a sip. Damn, that is good.

“This is the best-tasting thing I’ve had in ages. Thank you.”

“It’s not a big deal at all. I’m glad you enjoy it, Villiana.”

He touches my shoulder, and I get the sensation again. Immediately my body chills and burns at the same time; I can feel my magic wanting to push to the surface. I should be worried about what that means, but I’m more concerned about the look Ryu now has on his face. He doesn’t remove his hand.

Instead, he keeps it there and continues to stare at me. The longer this goes on, the more vulnerable I feel.

Do I have feelings for my doctor? No matter what that answer is, I could never do anything about it.

When Ryu finally does remove his hand from my shoulder, I feel a literal zap that causes me to jump, like my body does not like the loss.

Am I just horny? It's the only plausible answer.

For the rest of the session, neither of us speak. Ryu stands on the other side of the room, pretending to be busy, and I close my eyes like I always do.

A tingle starts in my fingers making me gasp, spring open in shock. Ryu stands in front of me, his hand atop of mine. As he wordlessly removes my IV, rubbing salve on it, I study the sharp planes of his face.

“Thank you for yesterday. I’m not used to kindness from anyone other than Thorin. Not once have you asked anything of me. You’ve been a total gentleman over the last few weeks.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Villiana. You deserve to be treated with respect. You aren’t an object—no matter what this place believes.” Offering me a hand up, I slide my palm into his. A chill creeps down my spine, and his hand becomes clammy. “You can say no if this sounds weird or makes you uncomfortable. But can I—can I hug you?”

The question shocks me. Ryu looks so exposed standing there with our hands connected, waiting for me to stand or answer him. After weeks of icy fireworks and longing stares, I feel something snap inside me. It screams to go to him, but a small nagging voice in the back of my mind tells me not to.

Fuck it.

Like a magnetic force is pulling us together, I practically jump into his arms. When our bodies collide, I gasp. I let myself settle into him, laying my head against his chest. It feels right—safe. And it scares the shit out of me. Before I say or do something stupid, I wrench myself out of his embrace and scurry toward the entranceway.

“I’m so sorry, Villiana. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I will get your guard now, or you can follow me to him.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m just not used to... that kind of touch.” My voice shakes as I speak. “I’ll wait here.”

When he walks out, I slide down the wall and curl into myself. I can practically hear Locren’s voice ringing throughout my mind, “*Stupid little girl. You will always be mine.*”

I am stupid if I thought anything could ever come of this feeling between Ryu and I.

SEVEN

Avi

RYU PACES the floor in front of the fireplace. “Slight change of plans. I have to back away a little bit. I did something stupid, and now I don’t think Villiana is going to fully trust me for a while.”

My first reaction is to scold him for being careless, but after studying his face, I quickly decide otherwise. He looks tortured; I haven’t seen him this unraveled in a long time. His hair is down but not brushed. The clothes he’s wearing are disheveled. His vest is open and almost falling off of him, and the shirt is unlaced and untucked from his pants, which are also unlaced. What did he do to this poor girl that’s got him looking like this?

“You didn’t *hurt* her, did you?” Ophir stomps toward us, looming over him. Ryu isn’t short, maybe just over six-feet, but he is dwarfed next to Ophir. He looks like a child about to be scolded by his father. The interaction is definitely interesting, so I lean back on the couch and watch the show.

“You know I wouldn’t fucking hurt her!” Ryu stops for a breath. “I hugged her.”

Everyone is dead quiet. Fear and I look at each other, trying to stifle a snort which quickly turns into unrestrained laughter. “You—you *hugged her*? That’s what your meltdown is about? Do you need some affection? If you ask nicely, I know someone who might be able to lend a hand.” I give him a devilish grin, patting Ophir on the arm as a suggestion. That earns me a death glare from Ryu, but I can’t help but notice the pools of lust forming in his marbled eyes.

Ryu doesn’t take the bait and remains in his doom-and-gloom mood. “I don’t think you guys understand. It felt like our bodies were physically knitting together, like we are meant to be one. I think Villiana felt it too because she basically threw herself across the room and shut down.” He looks over at Fear. “That’s when I came and got you. I’m just afraid that she won’t want to be too close to me for a while. And until then, I think I should look into why physically touching her caused these sensations.”

Fear and I both nod our heads in understanding. Whatever is happening between Villiana and Ryu is tearing his logical side apart. Even though Ryu has put in a ton of work to build a trusting relationship with her, he definitely needs to step back.

“Fear, you’re going to pick up the slack. Do everything you can to make her feel safe with you. Don’t go over the top because she’s already suspicious of us. I know we’re supposed to blend in, but I can’t even begin to think about giving her the same treatment any other employee at that gods forsaken place would.” Ryu goes into the kitchen, brings the entire carafe of wine back, and drinks straight from the neck. Turning to face me, he gives me an unreadable look. “Avi, at the event, you are going to have to be just like any other donor. You have to treat her like shit. Don’t take advantage of her or put your hands on her in any way she doesn’t consent to. Actually, just

don't touch her at all. I'm telling you to let your demon out a little—a *little*. I don't need you going full Rakshasa on us. It will be almost impossible to reel you in, and we have a job to do.”

My demon stirs, very excited at the prospect of coming out to play. I don't remember the last time I let him have full reign. “This is going to be so much fun.” My words come out more gravelly than normal.

Fear side-eyes me. “Be on your worst best behavior, Avi.”

I guess it's my turn to be on the receiving end of his anger. Waving him off, I get up and walk out the front door. I don't know what's up with those two, but there's no reason to get so worked up over the elf.

I need to clear my mind, and a walk down to the river is exactly what I need. Recently, it feels like everything revolves around The Collective and Villiana, and I'm not too happy about that. I can't remember the last time the three of us went out and blew off some steam. I like to indulge in life's riches. I want to drink, fuck, and destroy how and when I see fit. I have no master; not even Ryu, even if he leads us.

The second I'm in the forest, everything seems to melt away. Everything is so lush and green; wildflowers are everywhere you look, their fragrance giving you a warm welcome. The trees form a canopy above me, leaking light between their branches. After spending much of my life in the wilderness, there's a certain peace it brings me. It is both silent and loud at the same time—I can think clearly but never feel alone.

Toeing off my boots, I carry them in my hand, needing to feel the dirt beneath my feet. To feel grounded. With every step the earth pulls the heavy sludge like energy from within

me, guiding me to the river where the water is unnaturally clear and blue, with water lilies floating all around. It beckons me. Whispering promises to cleanse me of my anxieties.

Stripping down to nothing, I jump. The water feels cool against my hot skin and the energy of the river flows through me, rejuvenating me.

The whole world falls away.

Slowly, reality materializes around me—my mind feels quiet and clear. I find my way back to the house, heading straight to my workshop instead of going inside, doing anything to keep my Demon at bay.

Regardless of what most think, I don't particularly enjoy that part of me.

EVERYTHING IS quiet when I finally decide to go back into the house. I don't see Ophir, but I do find Ryu hunched over the table in the sitting room with books everywhere.

"Find anything good?" I ask.

"Oh...Hey, man. I didn't hear you come in. Obviously, I've been reading a lot, but I'm not coming up with anything worthwhile," he says, motioning to the mess surrounding him. "Except that her magic is probably returning. I stopped giving Villiana the blocker, giving her a better chance to escape, but it shouldn't be fully back yet." Ryu rubs his hands over his face.

Looking over his shoulder, I see paragraph after paragraph about souls and destiny. It's giving—tall tale.

"I feel like there's something else you're not telling me." I try to handle him with kid gloves because he looks like he's one second from snapping.

“There is something else, but it’s not worth mentioning because there’s no way it’s true.”

I pluck one of the books off the table. *A Sociological History of Magic*. Flipping through the pages, I say, “Try me. Maybe I can help hash it out.” The pages are filled with different types of Fae and their lifestyles. I try to find a chapter about elves, hoping maybe I can be of some kind of help.

Blowing out a breath, Ryu slides a piece of paper into the book he is reading and snaps it closed. “The other answer is that our magics are trying to mix...to form a bond.”

I look up from my research to gauge his reaction. I can’t tell if he’s upset or just in shock. “That’s impossible. You can’t bond outside your kind.”

For a moment, the only sound in the room comes from the fireplace crackling. Ryu sits and stares into space before his haunted eyes finally meet mine. “See, that’s the thing; it’s not impossible. It’s a common misconception and the difference between a bonded and a true mate. Bonds form through the mixing of magic. Anyone can choose to mix their magic, usually when they get married or find their life partner.”

Never breaking eye contact, he takes the glass that has been sitting precariously at the edge of the table. Ryu swirls his wrist; the ice clanks with each movement. Tilting his head back, he gulps down the amber liquid.

“With a mate, fate chooses for you—the divine powers will force your paths to cross. Your essences endlessly search for one another, finding the other half which completes your mind, body, and soul; there is no stopping the initial bond. It’s called an alchemic mate.”

Never in my life have I heard of an alchemic mate. Of course, bonds are common, so it's not shocking when it happens. But this...this seems outrageous.

I scoff at him, dropping the book I've been holding on top of one of the stacks. "So, there's nothing you can do? You're bound to the being because of what—fate? That seems ridiculous. What if you hate them; you're just stuck to them for eternity?"

"Do you will your heart to beat? No. It simply does. That being is your destiny, and there is no fighting that."

From how he snaps at me, it would be safe to assume I have offended him.

"Okay, what do your fancy books say about what happens if you find your alchemic mate?"

Ryu nervously wrings his hands as he says, "Well, it seems you become bonded, but don't become mated until you complete a blood vow."

"Do you hear yourself, Ryu? You sound deranged right now." I want to ask him what a blood vow is, but I'll wait for another time. Although, it would explain why Ryu is inexplicably drawn to Villiana and why physical touch is reactive for them. I'm just wondering how possessive it will make him if this is the correct theory.

Ryu stares into the fireplace. "Don't tell Ophir. I don't want him to back off, and I don't want him to think I'm trying to stake a claim or push him to the side."

I stand beside him, placing my hand on his shoulder. "Let's get Villiana out of there, and we will worry about the rest later. Try not to touch her unless necessary. It seems that a reaction

will happen no matter what you do, but at least that will minimize it.”

Two days and counting until the live-feeding event, and it sure sounds like it will be a shit show.

EIGHT

Villiana

FEAR WAS WAITING for me outside my door with a flirtatious smile this morning, and a mug of that orgasm-worthy tea Ryu makes. I could smell the sweet honey before I heard him knock. He even let me sit and enjoy the cup of bliss before making me take on the reality of the day.

Being around him makes me feel somewhat normal again, which is something I haven't felt in a long time. However, true normality came with Ziggy and Mama, and I miss that more than anything. It was simpler then and I was young enough not to have a clue about how devastating life would be when I got older. .

6 YEARS old

“Good morning, little Kotsbar! Did you have the sweetest dreams last night?” My mother’s voice is cheery as she asks me about my dream. It’s a routine she loves, inquiring about what Ziggy and I saw in our dreamscapes and then trying to interpret the meaning behind them.

“We were dancing in a field of flowers, and there were fireflies all around us. Ziggy came running towards us and placed a flower crown on my head. Then he said, ‘when you make the vow, you will change the world’.” I pull on the sleeve of her dress. “What does that mean, Mama?”

She bends over and places a kiss on top of my head. “It means you are destined for greatness. Never forget, you’re brother and I will always be there, but maybe not in the way you expect us to.”

“Okay, Mama.” I give her the biggest hug ever. “Is Ziggy making breakfast? He makes the bestest breakfast in the whole wide world!” I start to bounce on my toes, hopeful that he is.

Ziggy yells from the kitchen, “Yes, baby sister. And I made your favorite blueberry muffins with lavender ice cream!” I run as fast as I can, grabbing a muffin.

“You’re the best, Ziggy! I love you so much!” He picks me up all the way into the air. Oh, this is my other favorite!

“You ready to fly, Kostbar?” I nod enthusiastically. Next thing I know, I’m floating above my brother, flapping my arms as hard as I can.

Mama comes over and plucks me out of the air. “Just remember, Villiana, your destiny runs through your veins. You are amazing, my baby girl, my little Kotsbar.”

THE MEMORY FADES from my mind as I’m pulled back to reality by Fear playfully scratching my head. “What’s going on in that mind of yours, little one?”

“Just thinking about the past, that’s all,” I say, looking up at him with a sad smile.

Pulling me under his arm, he sighs. “Ah. One of the most comforting and painful parts of life. Chin up, beautiful. You never know what the future holds.”

I want to laugh. My future is indefinitely woven into the walls of the compound.

As if I conjured hell itself, I hear a scream from down the hall.

“Get the fuck off me, you good-for-nothing piece of shit!”

I start sprinting toward the voice because I know exactly who it is. Rounding the corner, I see Thorin braced against the wall by an arachnid. His shifted body has one spindly arm against her throat. Another is pushing her dress up beneath her breast, and a third between her legs.

“Shut the fuck up, slut,” He croons in her face. “You are going to give me what I deserve for following your mouthy pixie ass around. I’m going to take this pussy fast and hard, and then you’ll remember who is really in charge.”

It’s like time stops, the hallway fades away, and all I’m left with is the horror in front of me. My body reacts before my mind. I push all my energy into my hands, and the guard flies across the hall.

The only sound I can hear is the rapid beat of my heart as my feet carry me to him.

Dropping down to the balls of my feet, a crazed smile breaks out across my face as I cock my head to the side. He looks so pathetic lying there, limbs tucked into his fuzzy body. My arm springs out, smashing my palm hard against his chest.

“You see,” I say, watching golden magic leak from my fingertips. “Life is such a fickle thing. One minute it’s there, and the next it’s gone. We healers need a life force to use our

magic. And while we heal the body, we can rot it too.” Prying his life force from his body, I watch his eyes turn gray, his legs shrivel, and his body collapse in on itself.

Suddenly, I’m being ripped backward into a soft chest.

“Little one, I need you to come back to me. He’s dead. He can’t hurt anyone anymore.” Fear softly strokes my head. He keeps whispering in my ear, “Come back, little one.”

I blink and pan over to the remains on the ground. Never in my twenty-six years of life have I done anything like this. My body starts shaking. “Where is Thorin? Is she okay? Please tell me she’s okay!”

“Baby, I’m here. I’m mostly okay, just a few bruises. Turn and look at me, Vi.”

Keeping me tight against him, Fear spins on his knees so I can see Thorin. Very slowly, he lets me go, and Thorin runs to me and dives into my arms. We both start hysterically crying.

“My savior,” Thorin says into my neck. “I love you so much, but please never put yourself in harm’s way for me ever again.”

I stare at Thor through teary eyes. “I would do it a million times over. I can’t lose you. You’re my twin flame.”

No one speaks about my magic or the fact that I just killed someone. Instead, Fear lets us sit there for a little while before picking us both up, cradling us like children.

“I’m bringing you to Ryu. I’ll come back and take care of this afterward. I promise, no one will ever know.”

As we arrive at the medical room, I feel like I’m in a dream state. Fear lays us both down into the same bed and

pulls the covers up. He walks over to Ryu, who is in complete shock. As soon as Fear walks out, Ryu comes rushing over.

“Villiana, Thorin, are you okay? Well, okay as you could be?” He laces his fingers through mine, and everything is better. I truly feel safe with him. I start crying again, my other hand grabbing Thor’s and squeezing tightly.

“Please check her over,” I murmur. “She needs it more than I do.”

Ryu asks Thorin if she is okay with him touching her. She weakly nods. Ryu is so gentle with her as he looks at the bruises on her cheek and around her throat. I hear him whisper to her, asking if he can perform an exam. She says nothing happened and declines. Ryu doesn’t push; he respects her boundaries.

“Villiana, I need you to let go of the guard’s life force. You’re safe now. I need you to release it. It will only harm you if you let your body absorb it. I promise never to speak a word of this.”

I look down at my hands, and a black sludge-like energy is swirling around them. My breath is labored again.

Thorin takes her hand from mine and rubs small circles into my back. “Vi, do you know how to let go of it? I can teach you if you don’t.”

I shake my head. Ryu gets up, grabs a metal orb, and places it in my hands.

“Okay, Vi, find that heavy feeling in your chest and the noise in your mind, and picture yourself pouring it out of you and into the orb. That is the only thing you need to focus on.”

I close my eyes and do as Thorin instructs. As I do, I feel my hands grow ice-cold and burn hot simultaneously. The

more I pour the sludge from me, the lighter I become; the clearer my mind is. I open my eyes when the Spider's life force has totally left me. Ryu has his hands over mine, and he's freezing the orb, but my hands aren't affected at all. Gently he removes the orb from my hands and continues to freeze it more and more. I watch him put pressure on the orb until it ultimately turns into what looks like powdery snow. "What did you just do?"

"I slowed down all the energy until it could no longer function. I froze it until it disintegrated."

"*What are you?* I thought you were a dragon, but now I have no idea."

"I'm an ice dragon."

There's no way I can hide my surprise. "You are amazing."

RYU LETS Thorin and I sleep for a while. When I finally start to rouse, he walks over with a small vial.

"It smells horrible and tastes worse, but it helps."

I drink it. He wasn't lying, and it is absolutely disgusting. "Thanks, doc. You seem to keep saving my ass in one way or another."

A loud snore ricochets around the silent room. Peering over my shoulder, I find Fear with his feet up against a bed and sitting in a chair. He's out cold. "You obviously know each other. And I know it was you who had Fear assigned to me. I don't know how you did it, but I can't begin to express my gratitude. He is a wonderful being."

"I'm glad you think so because I happen to agree."

Looking back over at the sleeping Fear, I can't help notice how his giant frame seems so delicate like this. His little belly pokes out, softly moving up and down as he sleeps. I notice for the first time that he has runes tattooed on the sides of his neck.

He brought me back to reality. Something about him settles the darkest parts of me—always keeping me grounded. I wish I could have him with me tomorrow for the event, but there is no saving us from it. Thorin and I are survivors. There isn't a force in the world that can take that away. We will continue to weather the storm, and we'll do it together.

NINE

Villiana

PUSHED onto a large wood slice platform, Brownies swarm around, stripping the clothes from my body before they cleanse me, scrubbing so hard that my pastel yellow skin starts to look orange. Today is the day that I've been dreading, but at least I can finally get it over with.

The Brownies work hard to get me ready. The dress that has been selected for me is a glittery mesh fabric that almost looks like very small chain mail. It shines gold and silver when I move. It is completely see-through, and that's exactly why I've to wear it.

I stare at myself in the mirror, not knowing who is staring back. The top of my hair is braided into a crown, and the rest falls in soft curls. I have enough shimmer dust on my body to light up the night sky, but it makes my creamy skin look radiant. The Brownies paint my lips in a dark, sultry red that makes them stand out, and my eyes are shadowed in soft greens and brown. I am beautiful and elegant. Even if I'm mostly naked, I'm proud of the body I have.

"All right, you're finished," one of the Brownies announces before leaving me.

While several sets of footsteps scuttle from the room, another commands attention as they enter. I see Locren approach me through the mirror.

Slinking behind me he wraps his arms around my waist, spreading his hands across my lower stomach. “So exquisite, my trophy. You are going to bring us so much money.” His lips brush the shell of my ear, running his tongue down the edge. “You will be a good little whore for our guest, won’t you? You’ll let them use your body, because deep down, you will love the attention.”

He begins moving his hands down to the tops of my thighs. “And if you aren’t a good little slut, you can get reacquainted with my switch, and then my cock, and maybe my hands around your neck. Actually, maybe you shouldn’t listen because that sounds like an awfully good time to me.”

It takes everything in me to remain calm. I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth, grounding myself as much as possible.

“Yes, Master, I will be good.”

He steps back and claps his hands, sauntering off. “Splendid! Let the feeding begin!”

Fear comes into the room dressed in a black tunic and black leather pants. His hair is braided back like usual, but beads and strips of leather run through it. The sides of his head are freshly shaven, and his beard is impeccable. When he looks at me, there’s a twinkle in his stormy eyes.

“You look breathtaking, little one. They don’t deserve to see you like this.”

My cheeks flush at his statement. “You don’t look so bad yourself, big guy. Are you ready to escort me to this

nightmare?”

“As ready as I can be. “

The way his eyes scan my features is less *I want to fuck you* and more *I'm worried about you*. “I can't be with you tonight, but I will be patrolling the event. Find me if you need me.” Fear sticks out his elbow, and I wrap my hand around the back of his arm.

Walking outside, it's hot as the sun. I'm thanking the gods for this dress right now because I think I would pass out otherwise. We make our way to the tent to find that it's spelled to be at least fifteen degrees cooler.

Fear hands me a small tin. “It's just plain salve. Remember, you can heal yourself again but make it discrete.”

I take it from his hand and pull him down on his beard until he is at eye level. “Thank you, Fear.” I say, placing a soft kiss on his cheek.

I walk to the center of the tent and wait for someone to come to me.

There have to be over a hundred donors here tonight. The Collective's events make an exorbitant amount of money for *the cause*, and donors get to dress to the nines and play with their food.

The tent has been glamoured to look like a ballroom. Candlelit crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, and gaudy velvet fabric is draped around the room to give it a sensual feeling. I don't know who they're trying to fool because every being here knows exactly what tonight is—there's no need to dress it up.

The only positives are that I have my powers back, and Locren can't control me anymore; though I still have to

pretend.

It doesn't take very long until this middle-aged woman walks up to me. She's dressed in a long, white lace gown that includes a ridiculous train. Her neck and ears are adorned with rubies so large it's astonishing she can stand upright.

"You must be Villiana. I have heard *so* much about you." The woman takes out a small dagger and brings it to my wrist. Making a small cut, she squeezes my blood into her cup. When she has taken enough to fill her glass, her wrinkled lips close over the wound. Her eyes flutter closed, moaning as the blood slips across her tongue. "You taste even better than I thought you would." The woman swirls the warm sanguine liquid, mesmerized by how it coats the inside of the glass. Brining it to her lips, I watch her throat bob as she drinks down every drop.

Most of the night continues this way. A few weathered old men take me to the private room to pleasure them. *Disgusting*. Toward the end of the night, a new patron walks up to me. He is absolutely stunning, with skin that's the color of buttery cedar. The top of his shirt is loosely laced with dark strands of chest hair peeking through. His dark curly brown hair is perfectly coiffed, matching his cocoa eyes beautifully. The man is probably only a few years older than me—very unusual for these events.

"Good evening. Are you Villiana? Locren has told me to find you specifically."

Great. Just fucking great. Well, at least I have an idea of what to expect. He extends his hand towards me, wanting me to take it. I place my hand in his with a feather touch. "Yes, I am. How can I serve you tonight, Sir?"

He rubs his calloused thumb against the back of my hand. “I’ve heard that you are the sweetest one around.” Grabbing me by the back of the head, he pulls my hair forcing me to stare him directly in the eyes. “And that you have the tightest pussy too. I would love to taste your sweet, sweet nectar. Would you like to prove to me that you’re a good girl?” Minty breath slides across my face as he speaks in a hushed voice.

If I could roll my eyes, I would. They’re all the same no matter the age. “If that’s what you wish, Sir. We have somewhere much more intimate we can go, if you would like.”

Lacing his hand in mine, he leads us to one of the private rooms, already knowing the way. He rubs delicate circles with his thumb, acting like it will soothe me somehow. As we approach the room, I spot Fear, who seems to have noticed me too. I give him a look trying to let him know to stay close by, and he gives me a curt nod.

The man Locren has sent guides me into the dimly lit room. He oozes confidence with each step toward the plush red couch. He leaves me to stand in front of him while he lounges. “Dance for me, little elf, and don’t hold back.” As he leans back, he spreads his legs wide, throwing his arms around the curved top of the couch.

I start dancing slowly, swaying my hips to a made-up tune in my head. I run my hands sensually up my ribs, gliding them to my breasts. I massage them, feeling my nipples harden. An image of Fear pops into my head, and I get more into my dance. Turning around, I slowly raise my dress to show the man my ass. Would Fear like this? Would he want to touch me? I continue to pull my dress up until I get it over my head, dropping it on the floor next to me. The man groans loudly in approval.

“Is this okay, Sir?”

“You are doing amazing, Villiana. Turn around so I can see all of you.”

I do as I’m told. “What would you like me to do now, Sir?”

Running his hands up and down his thighs, he assesses me. “Get onto your knees and crawl to me.” He says, crooking his finger, then opens his legs wider. “I want you between my legs.” His voice is rough like he is no longer himself.

I get down to the floor and push my ass into the air a little bit, really making a show of it. There’s a carpet on the floor, but it’s still hard against my hands and knees. The closer I get, I start thinking of Ryu and what it would be like to crawl to him. Would he be sweet or rough? The idea of me submitting to him doesn’t make my skin crawl like I thought it would.

I realize that I’ve stopped moving when I hear the man slap his thigh.

“I said, crawl to me!” His voice is dark and booming. His eyes have turned black, and what looks like tusks are slowly forming from his top jaw. I pick up the pace, putting myself between his legs finally.

“Is that okay, Sir?”

He hums, “Now stand up and lay over my leg with your beautiful ass in the air.” Grabbing my jaw, he says, “Don’t make me wait.”

I put myself over his knee, knowing what is to come next. His hand comes down against my ass. The initial hit startles me, but it doesn’t take long to transform into an entirely different feeling. Every hit gets more brutal, and pain and pleasure begin to blend. The next spank pulls a moan from my

lips. My thighs become slick, and my breath picks up. His hand gently massages my warm skin, soothing the ache.

I feel wrong for liking this.

“I can see why Locren calls you his trophy. Look at that pussy glistening for me.” I can feel the heavy rise and fall of his chest against me as his fingers grip the hot skin of my ass. “I *need* to touch you. Tell me I can and I’ll make you feel *so fucking good*.”

The man’s voice comes out strained, as if he’s pleading—is he...*asking* me?

His grip tightens impatiently, yet he still waits for my answer.

“Okay, Sir.”

When his fingers rub up and down my slit, collecting my juices, there’s no controlling the sounds coming from my mouth. He finds my clit, making lazy circles, teasing me. Bringing his finger further back, he dips two fingers into my pussy. I let out a shaking moan. Oh, gods, this feels good. This is the first man here who has paid to please *me*.

Slowly, he begins to pump his fingers in and out of me.

“I’m going to continue to play with you, Villiana. I can see how your pussy weeps for me.”

Grinding the base of his palm into my clit, he picks up the pace. My legs start shaking, and my moans get louder. The man must take that as a compliment.

“You’re doing *so good*.” He curls his fingers, finding that perfect spot. Within seconds, I’m coming harder than I have in a long time. A sob slips from my lips, and my walls clench

tight against his fingers. The man pulls his hand from my core and stares at the evidence of a job well done.

“Look at me,” he orders. When I do, I see him licking his fingers clean, moaning as he does so. “Get on your back and show yourself to me.” The man picks me up and places me on the couch beside him. I spread my legs wide open, allowing him to get a good look at my arousal.

He gets down on his knees between my legs and breathes in my scent. Holy fuck, this is hot. The man dips his tongue into me, beginning to fuck me with it. I’m panting uncontrollably, and there is no doubt that I will come again.

Flattening his tongue against my clit, he eats me out like my pussy is the key to immortality. The man licks and sucks and bites incessantly. His moans match mine. My chest heaving, legs shaking, I grab his hair, shoving his face closer; he chuckles against my sensitive skin.

Barely pulling back, black eyes stare into mine. “Be a good girl for me and come again. You’d better soak my face. I want to be able to taste you in hours to come.” He returns to his assault, slipping two, then three fingers into me. He starts to pump harder, and I feel my orgasm about to roll over. The man sucks on my bundle of nerves hard, and I come all over his face, absolutely drenching him.

“The sweetest I’ve ever tasted. Thank you for allowing me this honor.”

He doesn’t even wipe his face, a smug smile ghosting his shiny lips. He picks up my dress and throws it at me.

“We’re done here. I will leave, and you will stay.” Adjusting his glaring obviously hard-on, he looks down at me. “I hope you think about my tongue for the rest of the night.”

“Are you at least going to tell you your name?”

“No.” He walks out without a second glance.

I immediately feel dirty. Shame burns through my skin for actually enjoying what he’s done. He may have brought me pleasure, but I was only a toy to be played with.

Hearing the door open, I snap my legs closed. Fear cautiously comes toward me.

“Little one, may I sit next to you?” He waits patiently for my reply.

“Yeah, that would be okay.” I pat the spot beside me.

“When I heard you groan in pain, I was going to come in, but it quickly changed to a much different kind of sound. So, I waited outside until he was done. Did he hurt you?”

Fear has to be one of the sweetest men I have ever met.

“No, big guy. He surprisingly *kind of* asked for my permission. I knew he would take it if I said no, but he did wait to see what I had to say.”

Fear pulls me into his chest, rubbing his hand up and down my arm. “Do you want me to stay with you while you get yourself together?”

I want to crawl inside of myself right now. “No, it’s okay. I’ll be out in a minute.” Once he’s outside the tent, I clean myself up, slide my dress back on, and quickly fluff my hair.

As I step out to meet up with Fear, Locren is standing outside waiting for me. His snake eyes stare me down like prey, so I know I’m not going to like whatever he is about to say.

Wrapping his arm around my waist, he pulls me in close. His nose traces the line of my throat, fangs dragging against my skin before he sinks his teeth into me. Fire rushes through my body. His toxins course through me, eating away at my veins like acid. Time ticks by slowly as the wooziness takes over. With my lashes fluttering closed, Locren draws his fangs from my neck, placing a bloody kiss on my cheek.

“Well, my trophy, I was just offered an outrageous amount of money for you. Luckily for me, I worked out a deal where I would get you once a month, *and* a steady supply of blood. Meet me at my estate in an hour. You leave tonight.”

My mind goes from distant to enveloped in absolute terror. I was *bought*. I didn't even know that was an option. I have to find Thorin because I'll smuggle her out if I have to.

The scent of cinnamon and clove blankets me like a warm embrace. “What was that all about, little one?” Fear cups my face in his huge palm.

I look at him through watery eyes. “This may be the end of the road for us, but I need one last favor. Help me find Thorin and get her out of here. I don't care how many beings have to die. I won't leave her behind.”

He kisses the top of my head and takes me by the hand. “I will do everything in my power to find her. I promise I'll watch over her if we can't get her out.” I know the last part is a promise he can't keep.

“I'm sorry, but leaving her behind isn't an option. I would also like to say goodbye to Ryu, if possible,” I say with pleading in my voice. Fear pulls me into a tight hug.

“Let's go find him before we have to find your new owner.” He crinkles his nose at the words.

“Lead the way.”

TEN

Ryu

“I TOLD you not to fucking touch her, and what do you do? Tan her ass and bury your face into her pussy?”

I am fuming. This was not the plan. My plan was perfect, and there was no need to deviate. “On top of that, I said to let your Rakshasa out a *little bit*. Your eyes are completely black, and your tusks are fully grown. That doesn’t sound like a little bit to me. You were supposed to stay in control of yourself!”

“You do your medicine man thing, and I’ll do my demon thing. I had to make it believable without taking advantage of her. I didn’t drink from her or anything. Plus, she came so good for me.” Avi has the audacity to give me a devious grin—he’s not even remotely sorry.

“Fuck, Avi! Villiana has no choice in serving the guest! You *did* take advantage of her.” I rub my temples as a winter plume leaves my nostrils. His moral compass is so misconstrued; just once I thought he would try to be righteous.

Avi slams his hand down on the table causing the apothecary jars to rattle on the shelves. “Listen to me, and listen to me good, Ryu. There was nothing that wasn’t

consensual. Don't be mad at me for getting to taste her first. I will not be made out to be a monster. I may be a demon, but I would never take away someone's choice. I did my job. I got Locren's attention by asking him to see her and then spending time in the private room with her. I did not feed off Villiana. I did not have her touch me. I'm not going to feel bad about what I've done. For gods sake, I sent Ophir to check on her afterward. Locren even let me purchase her!"

Avi's skin is starting to shift to a dark blue, his nails elongating into talons, and his height and size are rapidly growing. It is evident that I pissed off his Rakshasa, and it wants blood. I haven't seen Avi lose control over his demon in a long time, and because of this, I back off. But then my mind registered what he said.

My head snaps up so fast I don't know how it's still attached. "Did you..? Did you just say you *purchased* her?" A low growl rumbles from my chest. It feels like my brain has been liquefied because nothing he's saying makes sense. "What happened to smuggling her out? What happened to distracting Locren? Hmmm? Can you answer me, Avi? And what exactly did it take to convince that conniving snake to let you have her?"

Avi is wise to look nervous. He knows he fucked up, and I can't wait to hear his explanation.

"Uhm...well, we're going to have to figure out how this one will work. I offered him a considerable sum of gold and..." He braces himself as though I'm going to hit him—right now, I very well may. "The only way he would agree is allowing him to see her once a month and still get a steady supply of blood donations."

I can't stop the pure rage and power that comes out of me. I begin to freeze the whole table; the room drops at least fifteen degrees, and my scales start breaking through.

"Can you repeat that for me? Because I don't think I heard you correctly," I ask him through pointed teeth.

"I know it's not ideal, but I figured if we could just get her home, we could figure out the rest after. And maybe she will be okay with a couple of vials of blood if that means her freedom?" Avi starts backing away from me, knowing that he's in trouble. As I'm about to rip him to shreds, I hear someone walking toward the apothecary.

"Go now. Find somewhere to hide. I don't care where or how you do. I don't want to hear you so much as breathe."

This time, Avi doesn't fight or question me. He slinks into the corner and throws a glamor up.

"Ryu, we have some interesting news to tell you," Ophir says, striding into the room. He turns around fast when he sees the table is frozen solid and my partially shifted state.

"Hey, little one, can you wait right down the hall for a minute?" He asks Villiana before she can come in. "It seems that Ryu has made a huge mess. You can barely walk into the room."

"I don't care about the mess, Fear. I want to see him before I leave forever. Now let's go."

There is no stopping her from coming through that door. She sounds determined, and if I have learned anything about her, she will never back down or lose her attitude. Entering, she stops dead in her tracks. Villiana takes in the scene before turning her eyes to me. She doesn't say anything right away, but approaches me without caution.

Wrapping her arms around my waist, she presses her head into my chest.

“Let’s breathe together, Ryu. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Just keep going until you start to feel peace in your mind.” It feels like forever that we stand there, breathing together. Finally, she places a hand on my chest and puts a little space between us.

“There you go, doc. Doesn’t that feel better?”

I find that my skin has returned to normal, and the room is warming up, allowing the table to thaw. “You weren’t afraid of me?”

“No. I know that there’s good in you. I knew you wouldn’t hurt me. I used to get a lot of panic attacks, and Lys would do that for me when I couldn’t control my magic.” The warmth in her voice relaxes me even more. This beautiful elf surprises me more everyday.

Searching her eyes for some kind of answer, I find so much hidden hurt in her endless pools of violet.

Cautiously, I reach out to tuck a loose curl behind her ear and run my hand down her cheek. Whether she does it intentionally or not is questionable, but she leans into it.

“Fear said you had something to tell me?”

Villiana huffs. “Yeah, this is my last night here. Well, last hour actually. I somehow got purchased—with stipulations, of course. I didn’t even know that something like that was possible.” Grinding one of her feet into the stone floor, she continues. “So, it looks like this is goodbye, Ryu. In the last month you’ve been here, you’ve shown me more respect and kindness than I’ve had in a long time. I will never forget you, doc.”

Then something I never dreamed would happen does. Placing both hands on my shoulders, Villiana rises up on her toes, and kisses me. Her lips are pillowy and warm. The contact makes my whole body buzz. Involuntary, my hands go to her hips and pull her tight against me, but I don't take it any further. This kiss is a true gift. No one told her she had to. She doesn't feel obligated. She just wanted to, and I will never take this moment for granted.

“I have no idea why touching you makes my body hum with power and comfort, but I'll miss that too. Goodbye, Ryu.” She turns around and doesn't look back, and my soul feels like it's being torn from my body.

ELEVEN

Villiana

WALKING AWAY from Ryu is much more difficult than I thought. I don't fully understand my feelings toward him, but it doesn't matter anymore. I'm pretty sure my new home will be worse than it is here. There will be no Fear, no Ryu, and worst of all, no Thorin.

Tapping on Fear's arm, I ask, "Do you think we can stop at my room for a minute? I want to at least try to think of a plan to get Thorin out."

We *will* get her out, but there is no way I'll take her with me. Maybe Fear and Ryu can set her up in a safe location. I hope we will meet again one day, but if not, I can die knowing I got her out.

Fear stops momentarily, "Little one, let me handle that. We can go to your room and find Thorin before you leave. Where to first?"

"My room, please." That will give me a moment to think before the madness begins. I head for my cot and sit down when we get to my room. Tonight's events have worn me out, and I'm beginning to crash. Unfortunately, I don't have time

for that, so I lean forward with my elbows against my thighs and cradle my face with my hands. “Will you sit with me for a few minutes?”

“Anything for you, Villiana,” Fear says, the bed dipping as he sits down.

I have two burning questions that I need the answers to. “Hey, Fear, what’s your real name?” I don’t expect him to tell me, so I’m a bit taken aback when he does.

“My name is Ophir, but you may call me whatever you’re most comfortable with.”

Ophir. It really does fit him. “When I asked you if I should be afraid of you, you told me I would have to find out. Maybe I’m an idiot, but I don’t fear you. Quite the opposite: I *crave* you.”

Ophir’s eyes light up, pillowy lips parting. “I’ve been dying to do this since the moment you mouthed off to me.” In an instant, I’m lifted from the bed and roughly dropped into his lap. With lust overtaking his slate eyes, he goes in for the kill.

Fear runs his hand up the back of my head, threading his fingers through my hair. His lips crash against mine. This kiss is very different from the one with Ryu. No, this is all fire and passion. The moment our lips touch, it feels like a key has slipped into a rusted old lock, but instead of the lock breaking, it effortlessly opens.

A part of me I thought I lost forever overtakes me—the part that has hope.

His mouth opens, so I do the same. Our tongues create a beautiful dance together. I wrap my arms around Ophir’s neck, trying to get as close as possible. The kiss becomes much

more heated. Fear's hand comes up and massages my breast, and I groan, rocking my hips against him, feeling him hardening beneath me. Gods, how much I want this man right now is unhealthy, but I know we are running out of precious time.

Pulling back from him, I'm panting. "Hey, big guy, there is nothing more I would like to do right now than finish this, but we're almost out of time. Please forgive me." I can tell it pains him to stop, but he still does.

"Oh, little one, I understand. Thank you for sharing this moment with me. Are you ready to go find Thorin?" He lifts me off my cot with him and carries me to Thorin's room. Letting me down, I knock on her door. When she opens it, she looks exhausted. I immediately feel guilty. Here I am, enjoying myself and feeling happiness, while my best friend just went through a night of total hell.

"Hey, babe. What's going on?" Her voice is groggy and sleepy.

"Do you want me to heal you, Thor? You look like you need it." I invite myself into her room.

"Thanks for telling me that I look like shit." She snickers. "Normally, I would say no, but they drained me real low tonight."

Oh, it must be bad for her to accept help.

Thorin lays down on her cot and waits for me. Kissing her forehead, I hover my hands down her body and chant. Gradually, I see the color come back to her lush skin. Her freckles look brighter, and her round lips get their natural blush back to them.

Sitting back up, she gives me a tight hug. “You will always be my favorite.” Even her voice sounds clearer.

I sigh, trying to think of how I’m going to explain everything to her.

“Thor, we need to talk.” I don’t wait for her reply because I don’t want to prolong this. “Tonight, I was purchased by a donor.”

Thorin’s mouth drops open in shock. “How... that’s...”

“Impossible? That’s what I thought too, but Locren makes his own rules.” Letting out a shaky breath, my voice trembles as I add, “I leave tonight.”

Tears stream down Thorin’s cheeks. I wipe them away and give her a soft smile. “I would rather die here with you than leave without you, but there’s no way I can take you with me.”

Thorin drops her eyes. Fresh tears drip onto my hand. “I know.”

Slipping my hand under her chin, I tilt her head to stare into her golden gaze. “I will not leave you behind.” I look over to Fear, who gives me a short nod. I turn my eyes back to Thorin. “He’s going to get you out.”

Thorin looks over at Fear with a million emotions on her face. “It can’t be that simple. Right? “

Fear walks over and gently hugs her tiny frame. “I made a promise to Villiana, and I have no intentions of breaking it. Plans are already in motion.”

Thorin slips from his grasp and drops to the floor, sobbing. I kneel beside her and rub her back. “I have to go now, but Fear will be back for you. Be ready, okay?”

She nods, and I kiss her on the nose. “I will always love you.” I don’t want to leave, but I have to. “Let’s go, big man. I can’t put this off any longer.”

Hanging my head in defeat, we walk from Thorin’s room. It’s soul-crushing, and the only thing I can do is pray to the gods that Fear can get her out of there.

Not caring about anyone seeing, I lace my fingers through Fear’s. He gives me a little squeeze, slowing his pace.

“I’m proud of you, Villiana. I know how difficult it is to put your trust in someone else, but I will not fail you.”

Sniffing, I wipe my running nose with my free hand. I don’t care how gross it is; this is probably the cleanest I will look where I’m going.

Turning my body to stand before him, I crane my head to look him in the eyes. “For the first time in a long time, I do. I trust you because I know that you will do everything in your power to keep Thorin safe, just like you did for me.”

Something washes over his masculine face that is unreadable. His eyes are soft, but his jaw is clenched tight and nostrils flared. He squeezes my hand but doesn’t speak a word.

WE HEAD towards Locren’s estate like it’s the long walk to my execution. Fear hasn’t once tried to shrug me off or let go of my hand—regardless of the looks we have been getting from the other girls.

At the base of the staircase leading to Locren’s front door, I tug on Fear’s arm. He searches my features with worry etched in his.

“For what it’s worth, you are the second best thing to happen to me in the last six years. Thank you for just...being you.” I stand up on my tiptoes, trying to reach for a kiss, even though I will never be able to.

He chuckles and meets me the rest of the way. “First would be Thorin, obviously.”

The corner of my mouth turns up. “Obviously.”

Stepping up to the door, Fear uses the gilded door knocker to signal our arrival.

One of Locren’s goblins lets us in, leaving us at the front door. I brush my hand against Fear’s, looking for even the briefest amount of comfort. When Locren walks into the foyer, a familiar man is in tow.

I was bought by the spanking guy?

“My beautiful Villiana, my most precious prize, tonight I pass the torch to your new owner. This is Malik. You will be leaving here with him, and he will supply you with everything he believes you need. But don’t worry; we will still see each other, and what a wonderful reunion that will be.”

Malik presses a kiss to my hand. “It’s time to go,” he says, pulling me towards him.

Fear’s stormy gaze holds a faint hint of emotion. I try to convey goodbye to him without making it obvious.

Locren yells to us as we leave, “Oh, Malik, don’t damage my precious trophy—because no amount of money will ever make her not mine. You may find yourself in an early grave if you do.” Shooing us out, he continues, “Move along.”

It’s time to see what this future will bring.

TWELVE

Avi

I BRING Villiana to my horse, lifting her onto the saddle before sliding in behind her. “The ride will take a while, so try to make yourself comfortable.”

Of course, she doesn’t answer me. I wouldn’t answer me either.

I want to tell her everything right now. I want her to know that I mean no harm. Explain that I’m not the bad guy—I’m her savior. But she would never believe me. No, she is going to be livid and teeming with questions.

Then comes the issue of this alchemic mate bullshit Ryu was going on about. I don’t even want to know what’s going to happen with her living under the same roof as him. And I can tell Ophir has a thing for her too. Villiana is definitely beautiful, I won’t deny that, but I don’t understand the obsession with her. She is a job, one that’s almost complete. And when that job comes to an end, she will be gone, and our house will be broken.

Ryu, Ophir, and I have known each other for a very long time. Ryu had a wonderful home life, the ideal family. His

parents loved him deeply and did everything they could to give him the best life possible. So when Ophir, who is two years older than Ryu, comes around with no home, no friends, no anything, of course, Ryu takes him under his wing. After a year of Ryu sneaking food and clothes to Ophir—who was living in a very rudimentary hut in the woods—Ryu finally told his parents, and they welcomed him with open arms.

My life was a little different than theirs. Ophir definitely had it hard, but he wasn't found a kiss away from death on the docks in the middle of the city. It was actually Ryu's dad, Akira, who found me. I was beaten and left with a broken arm, five broken ribs, and a stab wound in my side. Akira rushed me home to his wife, Emi, who happened to be a healer, but she never used her power in public. I owe my life to Emi and Akira. Not only did they bring me back to life, but they also gave me a family. I cannot imagine a life without my brothers—even if I will always be their 'baby brother.' The four year age difference between Ryu and I is partially nothing, but the way they act, you would think I'm still a child. Now at twenty-nine, my life is very different, and I can't have some random elf come in and fuck it all up.

After a long two hours of riding, we finally arrive at the house. My heart is racing, not knowing how this is about to go. Taking a deep breath, I hop off the horse. I go to help her down, but she refuses, throwing her legs over like she's been riding her whole life.

"Welcome home, Villiana." I try not to sound too disappointed.

"I'm *so* happy to be here," she says, rolling her eyes at me.

Unlocking the door, I pray to the gods that Ryu isn't just standing right there. He left as soon as the brat walked away

and without a doubt is home already.

A sigh of relief explodes from me when I find the house empty. “To your right is the sitting room and fireplace, and to your left is the kitchen. If you walk down that hallway, you will find the bedrooms and washroom. There is also a large backyard that you are welcome to use. You will be sleeping with me from now on. The other rooms are off-limits, and I will know if you go snooping. Tonight, you may sleep alone.” Walking down the hallway to my bedroom, I assume she will follow, but she doesn’t.

“This is my room. Come along.” She slowly makes her way into the room and stands there. She still hasn’t said a word since walking through the door.

“Okay, can I have some clothes to sleep in, or do you want me to sleep in this dress? Better yet, do you want me to sleep naked?” Villiana raises an eyebrow at me in question.

“If you wait one minute, I’ll get you some clothing. Stay here.” I shut the door behind me and continue walking down the hallway until I reach Ryu’s room. “Hey, I need some clothing that your elf can sleep in. You’re the slimmest, so I figured that would be the best option.”

He turns around from his desk and walks over to his dresser. “She’s in your room?” he asks as he hands me a shirt and lounge pants.

“Yeah. I’m going to sleep on the couch tonight. *Do not* go in there. I told her that Ophir and your rooms are off-limits. Hopefully, she won’t be coming in here. Give her the day before we drop this on her.”

“Fine. That makes sense,” Ryu grumbles. “How is she doing?”

“How do you think?”

Nodding solemnly, he turns back to his work.

I retreat back to my bedroom and quietly open the door. Bracing myself against the door jam, I see Villiana sitting on my bed with her hands in her lap. I place the pile of clothes next to her and step away. “You can wear these. Would you like to wash up before bed?” I’m trying to be as nice as possible, but it’s well into the night, and I’m exhausted.

“I would. You can just point me in the right direction,” she says, taking her clothes with her.

“Go back down towards the kitchen, and it’s the first door on the left. Let me know if there is anything you need help with. I’ll be in the sitting room. Tomorrow we’re heading into the city to buy you clothes. Try to get a good night’s sleep.”

Villiana

THROWING OPEN THE DOOR, it reverberates as it bounces off the wall.

Fuck Locren, and fuck this guy.

I traded one prison for another. Except this time, I’m on my own.

Stripping my dress off, I kick it away and reach into the shower to turn it on. As I turn the knob, a sprig of eucalyptus hanging from the shower neck catches my eye. The more steam, the mintier the shower smells. I guess even psychos need to relax.

I hiss as I test the temperature. It's like lava and exactly what I need.

My movements are automatic, running off routine. I look around for a bar to wash my body and hair with, only to find three different bars of soap. Randomly snatching the one in the middle, I lather it into my hair. A familiar scent overcomes me—rosemary and lemongrass, with overall earthy undertones. *I know this*. I can't quite place from where, but it comforts me. Unfortunately, the comfort quickly dissipates as the scent becomes suffocating.

The more I try to gulp in air, the tighter my chest feels. The bar slips through my shaking fingers as I back against the glass wall. The blood pumping through my veins rings louder than the water pelting against the tiles. Screwing my eyes shut, I try to push past the nagging feeling drilling into my skull, telling me something is wrong. Of course, something is wrong; I have been purchased by some psychopath who probably wants to wear my skin as a robe.

Counting the stones that make up the wall in front of me, I try to slow my breathing. As my mind begins to clear, I'm overwhelmed with the visceral need to go home, except it's not the home I grew up in. It's the home I have made with Thorin, Fear, and Ryu: a home that isn't a physical place but an emotional one. I feel like I've lost the last string of happiness I will ever have. I haven't had an all-consuming panic episode in a long time, but I think it's warranted with everything that has occurred tonight. Why else would the scent of soap set me off; it reminds me of something I could never have.

Peace.

When I finally step out of the shower, I snatch the towel from the sink, drying myself before throwing it back. As I get dressed in Malik's clothing, I get a sudden rush of coolness—there must be a window open somewhere.

The house is silent as I exit the washroom. I assume Malik has fallen asleep, igniting my burning urge to snoop through all the rooms, but I don't want to push my luck tonight. There will be plenty of time to scavenge the house. Instead, I tuck myself into his bed.

“Oh, dear *gods*.” I could orgasm from the pillowy heaven cocooning me.

He is never getting this room back.

THIRTEEN

Villiana

BAM, Bam, Bam.

“I’m coming in,” I hear Malik say through the blanket over my head.

I crack my eyes and pull down the covers to see it’s barely light. Ugh, The Collective didn’t even have us up this early. “Oh yes, come right in. I wasn’t asleep or anything.”

Reluctantly coming out of my cocoon, I stretch my arms above my head and wince. Last night’s festivities wreaked havoc on my body. “Is there a reason we are up before the sun is? Because if you remember correctly, we got here in the middle of the fucking night.” I am obviously not a morning person.

Malik has yet to say a word, standing rigid in the doorway.

“*Hello!* You came in and woke me up. Not the other way around. So why don’t you start talking?” I say, waving my hands around.

He is staring into space, or at least that’s what I initially thought. Following his line of sight, I realize what his eyes have locked onto. The shirt I was sleeping in has risen enough

that he has the perfect view of my bare pussy. Grabbing the blanket beside me, I throw it back over my lap.

Malik shakes his head, avoiding eye contact. “Get dressed. We’re going into the city. Meet me in the kitchen when you’re done.”

“Okay, one question. Do you want me to wear this or my dress from last night? Because those are my apparel choices right now.”

Malik walks over to his dresser, pulls out a tunic, and throws it at me. “Wear this. It will be long enough to fit you like a dress, and you can wear the shoes you have.”

I yell to him as he leaves the room, “And underwear? Do I get those?”

He turns around, peeking his head back into the room. His smug face shines with a dangerous smile. “No.” *His favorite word.* That is the only answer I get, no explanation.

I traipse to the kitchen after cleaning up in the washroom and getting dressed. Malik is standing with his back to me, currently brewing tea.

Being able to get a good look at him, I notice that he’s probably only a few inches taller than me. His hair is still wet from showering. It accentuates his curls even more than before. His pants are a tan hide and fit his body a little too well. The ass on this man is not natural. His shirt is white, tucked into his pants, with the sleeves rolled up. His arms are toned and tanned, dark hair dusted over top, and no ink in sight. I take another moment to stare at him uninterrupted. I wish his personality matched his good looks.

“I can feel you staring at me back there.” Malik turns around with two cups of tea in his hands. Placing them on the

table, he nods to the fruit and bread that is already sitting there.

“Eat. I can’t have you passing out.” He pulls a white cotton mask from his pocket and hands it to me. “You must wear this when we get close to the city. It is spelled to only allow clean air in. This way, we can avoid contracting the sickness. You’re no use to me if you’re dead.”

What a fucking prick. He wants me healthy, not because I matter but because I’m an investment. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it still hurts. At least at the camp we knew that we weren’t thought of as living beings.

I sit at the table, forcing myself to eat the food he offers. Good gods, that’s delicious. I have a foodgasm from the flavors bursting in my mouth. I’m not too fond of giving him the satisfaction of knowing I’m enjoying anything he gives me, but I will not pass up eating real food to serve my pride.

Once every crumb has been eaten, I bring the trays to the sink to wash them. Malik grabs my wrist to stop me. “You don’t have to do that. Just leave them in the sink.” He doesn’t let go of me, pushing my hair behind my pointed ear. “I can braid it, if you’d like.”

“I’ve been doing my hair for a long time. I don’t need any help. Thanks.” I pull my wrist from his hand and step back. “When are we leaving?”

Malik pins me against the countertop, his hips tight against mine. I try to distance myself by leaning back, but he follows. “I tacked the horse while you washed up, so we can leave now. And no, you do not get your own horse. I don’t need you taking off on me,” he finally answers, his nose a breath away from mine.

My heart races with the insane desire to close the gap between us. I know what his lips feel like between my legs, but how would they feel against mine?

His dark brown eyes bore into mine before he pushes off the counter and stomps away.

I can already tell this is going to be an interesting day.

I HAVE NEVER BEEN to a city.

Growing up in Wrenwood, it was all lush green woods. The trees were so tall it seemed like they never ended, and the many rivers ran crystal clear. There were many different parts of the town that served other purposes. The village I lived in was called Sable. Our job was to grow and harvest vegetables.

Once a month, all of Wrenwood come together in the town center to have a market. The event supplied each village with all the food and goods to survive until the next month. If one town was falling behind or didn't have a high yield, the other village didn't mind helping out. It was a wonderful place to grow up. Of course, like anywhere, we had terrible beings, but there were so few that it wasn't an actual worry to the citizens of Wrenwood. Amazingly, it seemed that the plague could not reach us. I'm not sure if it was the large community of healers or other very powerful beings, but I never had to experience the horrors that I'm about to.

As we get to the edge of the city, Malik reminds me to put my mask on and makes me promise I will not leave his side. Once I agree, we continue. There's no way to prepare someone for the sight before me. Beings of all kinds litter the streets with all levels of sickness. Some wander around, talk to themselves, or yell at the buildings. Others are just sitting on

the walkway, staring at nothing. The closer we get to the city center, the worse it gets. I am so grateful for this mask on my face—I don't even want to know how foul the stench is. Gaunt, frail bodies are everywhere, some missing limbs, and, worst of all, are the dead bodies. While there aren't a lot, it's still shocking to see. Malik must notice my reaction because he places an arm around my waist while the other steers our horse.

“I've never actually seen the effects of the plague,” I whisper. “No wonder they want us.” I can't hold back the tear that rolls down my cheek. “Back home, no one would have thought twice about helping others. Maybe that's why it was hard to understand why my beings were hunted. But, at the same time, there's no way that the healers can fix all of this.”

“Well, all of the blood donations from you at The Collective weren't given to these beings. It goes to the donors, and you and I know why.”

“Which makes *you* a part of the problem. *You* are a donor. You take away these beings' chances of survival. Don't blame The Collective when you're just as guilty.” I can't help but lash out at him.

Malik leans back from me as if I had just slapped him. He tightens his arm around my waist until it is painful. “You know nothing, little girl. Don't you dare fault me for something you don't know anything about.” The words flow from this mouth like venom into my veins.

“You bought me!” Some of the city folk turn to stare at us. *Oops.*

As discreetly as possible, Malik wraps my hair into his hand and pulls back hard. “You don't know me. Do not assume to know my reasoning or what I am willing to do.

Now, keep your mouth shut and follow me into the store.” He roughly lets go of my hair and dismounts the horse. Hoping I don’t flash my goods to the whole city, I swing my leg over the horse and let myself down.

I wait as Malik ties our horse to the post and let him lead the way. The inside of the store looks nothing like the rest of the city; it’s bright and clean. Everything is organized perfectly—it kind of reminds me of Ryu. An old satyr comes hobbling out from the backroom. Her skin may be wrinkled, but you can tell she was a beauty in her prime.

With bright eyes and a warm smile, she walks right over to Malik and pulls him into a huge hug.

“It is so good to see you, Hunny! I haven’t seen you in quite some time. No time to visit this old lady?” Watching their interaction is so strange. She genuinely means what she’s saying, and I’m stunned.

“Oh, and who is this lovely lady you have brought me today!” She says, clapping her hands gleefully.

“Anabell, this is Villiana. Villiana, this is Anabell.”

I extend my arm out to shake her hand. She slaps it out of the way and comes in for a hug instead. For a minute, I melt into her. While she may not be Lys, she reminds me of him. My heart hurts from how much I miss Lys.

“Oh, dear, any friend of—”

Malik cuts her off so fast you would think there was an emergency. “We don’t have much time in the city, Ana. I’m sorry, but we do have to be quick about this. Villiana needs all new clothes. Get her anything you think she may need for a long stay with me. Don’t worry about soaps, you know w—I make them.” Malik rushes out like word vomit.

Anabell's eyes narrow at him, trying to read the situation. "Of course, I will help. You brought her here in your old tunic." She turns to me, "Follow me to the back, and we will get your measurements first."

I follow closely behind her until we get to a curtained-off area.

"In with you." She gently pushes me into the room. "Okay, love, I'm going to need you to take off that tunic, and if it's alright with you, I will run my hands over your body. Once I finish, I will have your precise measurements, and we can find some clothes for you." She waits for me to answer her or remove my clothes.

"Uhm, I don't have anything under this, ma'am. I don't know if that's okay." I pull on the bottom of the shirt, feeling shy suddenly.

Anabell puts her hand over her heart and sucks in a breath of surprise, "That boy let you leave the house with nothing underneath? Unacceptable!" Shaking her head in disgust, she takes a deep breath to calm herself. "I don't mind your nakedness as long as you are comfortable with the whole process." Then she says, "I'm going to beat that Avi black and blue," under her breath.

Who the fuck is Avi?

"Thank you, ma'am. And you may use your hands. It's alright with me." I give her a small smile as I answer.

Placing a hand on the small of my back, Anabell says, "I may be old, but I hate being called ma'am. Please, call me Ana." She taps her hand a few times against me. "Since you seem to be in a time crunch, let's get this show on the road."

I pull the shirt over my head and lay it beside me. Closing her eyes, Anabell starts at my neck with a ghost touch. She continues skating down my arms, then down my sides, over my hips, down my legs. Opening her eyes, Anabell walks away, leaving me to stand naked in the middle of the room. When she returns, she has arms piled with clothes. She goes back out and comes back with more underwear than I know what to do with. Do I really need that much?

She has me try on every outfit, knowing damn well that everything fits but wants me to see it. Her abilities are something to envy. I have never in my life had clothing fit me like this. I've seen myself naked millions of times, but I have never seen my body accentuated like this. I'm impressed.

“Can I ask you something, Ana?”

“I believe you just did, my dear.” She chuckles but nods in agreement. “Ask away.”

“I don't mean to be rude, but why do you stay in the city? I'm sure there are much nicer places you could live.”

She wrings her hands with a solemn expression. “The city wasn't always this bad. As healers fled their towns, they took refuge here. Unfortunately, the city's tight quarters lead to the plague spreading with ease. Even now, with the plague almost eradicated, we haven't been able to escape it fully.” Ana takes each garment, folding them into a neat pile. “Carnelian City has always been my home; doesn't matter if it's a trail of blood or bodies, nothing could get me to leave.”

I feel horrible for asking. I have no right to judge this woman and her life choices.

“I'm sorry if I offended you,” I say softly.

“No need to worry your pretty little head, darling. I would have asked too.”

Once we leave the fitting area, Anabell brings me to the other part of her store which is filled with personal care products: hairbrushes, toothbrushes, lotions, body oils, and even special underwear for your moon cycle. After she’s done putting together the items, she calls Malik over to bring it all to the front.

“What do I owe you, Ana?” Malik asks.

“Nothing at all. This lovely lady came to me with nothing; now she has everything. If you don’t take care of her, and I hear about it, she is coming to live with me.” She places all of the items into a sack, and all I can think about is how we’re going to bring this back to the house. Next thing I know, Anabell is saying some incantation I don’t recognize, and the sack shrinks to the size of a coin purse.

“My dear Villiana, whatever you do, do not open this until you get back home. Once you open the sack, it returns to normal size, and I don’t think you want to carry this on horseback.”

I pull her into the hug this time, giving her a tight squeeze. “Thank you so much, Ana. Truly. You are so wonderful.”

“Oh hush. I wanted to do it, so I did.”

Giving Malik a pointed stare, she addresses him. “Remember what I told you. Now get going. You’re going to want to get home before dark.”

We exit the store before remounting the horse and—in my newly acquired clothes—I look down at Malik. “You better have paid her. I don’t care how well you know her. She deserves to be paid.”

“Of course I did. I left an entire purse of gold in the drawer of her desk. Regardless of how you think of me, I’m not a thief, nor do I take the kindness of others for granted.”

I *want* to believe that there is more to this man than a trafficker and sexual deviant, but I’m not sure how much trust I can afford to give him.

FOURTEEN

Ryu

I WAITED until Avi and Villiana left to start my day. I spent the first part of my morning making Villiana soaps and tea. While the soap was cooling, I jarred the tea mixes, then spent the rest of the morning collecting fresh herbs, fruits, and vegetables from our gardens. The transition from the compound to the outside world will be difficult, and I want to do everything I can to make our house feel like a home to her.

The time must have gotten away because while hanging the freshly picked herbs, Villiana's voice reaches my ears as the door opens.

Scrambling, I try to find a place to hide or how to get out of the room, but I'm too late.

"*Asshole.*" She huffs to herself. Avi follows closely behind, kicking the door shut.

Despite my best efforts to remain unseen, when I adjust my hand on the table, I knock the shears to the floor with a loud thud.

The look on her face will be burned into my mind for eternity. Confusion, shock, and, most of all, hurt. The room's

atmosphere becomes heavy with tension while everyone stares at one another. She's holding her breath and rapidly moving her eyes between Avi and I. This is not going to be easy to explain.

“Does someone want to fill me in on *what the fuck* is going on here? Because from my point of view, someone has been lying to me, and I would love to know who,” her voice wavers. Her beautiful eyes are painted red with tears threatening to fall over. I have never seen her this distraught—not even after seeing Locren.

I hate that I did this to her. I want to scream that I did it *for* her. There is no reality where I would have left her at the compound. My essence is begging me to pull her into my arms and tell her everything is going to be okay, but I can't. I'll be lucky if she doesn't tell us to fuck off and run out of here.

“Where would you like me to start?” I ask weakly.

“Who are you guys? Why am I here? Have you been lying to me the whole time?” I watch as her magic begins to crackle in her palms.

I take a step forward, but she pushes more magic to the surface. A halo of gold surrounds her body.

“You know very well that I have my magic back, Ryu. I suggest someone start talking right fucking now.”

Avi lets out a whistle while propped against the wall—an *I told you so look* on his face. “You can handle this one, boss. I'm going to head to my room,” he says, pushing off.

Villiana throws her hand out, and a swirl of her golden magic slams Avi in place against the wall. “Oh, no you fucking don't! You are going to stand right there until we are done with the conversation. And then I will decide what I will

do with you.” She is not kidding at all. I genuinely believe she will try to kill us if she doesn’t believe me.

“Let’s start with your first question. My name really is Ryu Saito. His name,” I point to Avi, “is not Malik. It’s Avi, and he’s one of us.”

Villiana’s nostrils flare, and her jaw clenches. “One of *us*?” She asks through gritted teeth.

Avi has the gall to laugh. He knew that this whole situation would turn to shit. He practically begged me to let him take the lead. But I needed to be in control.

“Ophir lives here too. The three of us have known each other for a very long time. And to answer your second question, it is very complicated.”

Still, she has Avi pinned to the wall and a death glare in her eyes. “Well, you better start breaking it down right now.” Villiana’s violet irises seem to swirl with a golden hue. It has been so long since she was able to use the magic teeming out of her that it is flaring before our eyes.

“Avi, Ophir, and I were tasked with getting you out of Bonecliff. We have been trying to plan and execute this for two years now. I used a contact of ours to get an interview with Locren, and then he hired me. He told me that I would exclusively be your doctor and that he would figure out what to do with the rest of Dr. Mycop’s patients.”

“Are you actually a doctor, or was I an experiment?” Villiana interjects.

“I’m an herbalist and do have a...medical background. But am I a doctor by trade? No. May I continue?” Villiana gives me a short nod. “When I became your doctor, I asked you how many blocker shots you were getting a month because your

levels were extremely high. I have never seen anyone be able to handle that much poison. When you said that you didn't know, I went to Locren. He informed me that you were getting the equivalent of five doses in one shot. They had a hard time fully blocking your powers when you got there, so they didn't want to take a chance."

I take a breath, collecting myself. "Can we go to the sitting room and sit down? This isn't a quick story. I promise Avi will stay seated in a chair away from you."

Squinting at me in a silent threat, she releases Avi. There's no doubt he could have broken through her magic, but he is behaving for now.

Villiana reaches for me but stops before our skin touches. "Just go over there."

Once everyone gets settled in their own spot in the sitting room, I proceed. "So, back to your blocker. I had already decided that I was going to stop giving it to you so you could use your magic if you had to. I couldn't let you be completely defenseless anymore. The tea I gave you every day not only relaxed you, but it helped prevent detox symptoms."

"The blueberry one?" she asks.

"Yes.. I continued to treat you while looking for a way to get Ophir into the compound. After the incident with Locren, I couldn't wait anymore. Bax was an abusive piece of shit, and Ophir rejoiced as he killed him before then replacing him." I can see that Villiana is starting to relax into the chair a bit, which allows me to breathe a little easier. "Everything that happened between you—which I am not privy to—was very much real. But he will have to give you the answers you are looking for about him." I run my fingers through my beard as a nervous habit.

I don't want to talk about this anymore, but there's no way I can stop. "After finding out about the donor event, I knew it would be the best opportunity to get you out. Avi was supposed to make you think he was a donor when he approached you so you didn't question him when he brought you to the backroom. Though it seems *someone* decided they had a better idea than what we had planned. He was supposed to talk to you, flirt a little, until Ophir could get you out. Instead of just following the plan, Avi took it upon himself to offer Locren a deal—which I have no intention of holding up. Somehow, he convinced Locren. And, well, now you're here... Do you have any other questions?"

Villiana's expression is unreadable. She makes me wait for her answer.

"Where is Ophir? Did he really get Thorin out?" The pleading in her voice is heartbreaking. Of course she would worry about the pixie. Why did I not think of that?

"Ophir is currently transporting her to a safe location. It was not easy—by any means—to achieve, but he did. When he returns, you can ask him all the questions you would like. I have a feeling he would be more than accommodating."

"As long as she's safe..." She takes a deep breath. "Who sent you?"

I should have known she would ask this question, but it's not one I can answer right now. One more little lie won't hurt, right? "We got an anonymous letter detailing everything they needed of us. The letter said that once we got you safe to write to them and they would reveal themselves."

"You broke me out of the compound...because an anonymous being sent you a letter? Do you know how absurd that sounds?" Villiana abruptly jumps out of her seat. "Did

they offer you money? Does this mean I actually *was* bought? What if this person is a psycho and wants to kill me? I can't believe how stupid you all are."

Villiana stares into the fire for a minute and then looks me dead in the eyes. "I know that there is more to this story than you're telling me. But, if you lie to me again, my disappointment will be the least of your worries."

I said what I had to, and I will leave it at that. "That is all I have for you right now." It's not a lie, just a brush-off.

Villiana makes it look like she is leaving but walks over to Avi and slaps him across the face. "*And you!* You're a fucking swine. I don't care how skilled your tongue is, you took advantage of me. You may have thought you were doing something good, but you know what they say, *the road to hell is paved with good intentions*. And I'm not sleeping in your bed again."

With her eyes still trained on Avi, she addresses me, "Show me where Ophir's room is. I'll be sleeping there until he gets back. Afterwards, you guys can figure out which one of you is sleeping on the couch."

Just when I think Avi may be able to hold his tongue, he proves otherwise. "You think I have a skilled tongue?"

A resounding *crunch* fills the air as Villiana punches him straight in the nose. Blood pours down Avi's genuinely stunned face. His lust filled eyes lock onto hers. A devilish grin proudly showing his blood stained teeth.

"You broke my fucking nose, holy shit!" Avi starts laughing so hard he bends over clutching his stomach, crimson droplets hitting the floor. "Damn, elfie, you burn much brighter than I give you credit for."

Villiana goes to punch him again, but before she can make contact, he grabs her wrist. “You caught me off guard this time, but don’t think it will ever happen again.” And then he releases her.

“I’m going to put my stuff in the room, and then I’m going to take a nice, long, hot bath. And neither of you will bother me. You can shit and piss outside like the rest of the animals.” She places a hand on her hip and pops it to one side, waiting for me to show her where to go. I walk past her, our bodies nearly touching as I do so.

I point to the last door at the end of the hall. “That’s his room. It should be unlocked. I don’t know how clean it will be, but if it’s a mess, let me know, and I will clean it while you bathe.”

“Sure. You can move now.” Villiana opens the door to Ophir’s room and slams it behind her.

I’m about to go into my own room when I hear Avi come up beside me. He’s already reset his nose and stopped the bleeding.

Leaning next to the door frame, Avi says, “Well, that went as well as I expected. I have no idea why you two idiots thought she would be okay with your whole charade. I could not give a shit less though. To be honest, I have no connection with the little spitfire and have no desire to fuck her, well, other than getting to eat delectable pussy. That was definitely a highlight of my week.” Patting me on the head like you would a child, he continues, “You and Fear have fun fighting over her like a piece of meat. Unless you like to have your toys play together.” After clapping me on the back, he leaves me with that tidbit.

Villiana

WHEN I GET inside Fear's—ugh, *I don't feel like I should even call him that anymore*—bedroom, it's not clean, but also not dirty. His dresser sits against the wall to the left of the door. It was left partially open with a shirt hanging over the side like he was running late for something. On top is a painting of Ophir, Ryu, and Avi. They look so young and happy, standing in front of a lush lakeside. A small part of me resents them for their happiness.

Pathetic, I know.

The most massive bed I have ever seen is pushed into the far right corner of the room. A fluffy gray comforter and about five extra-large pillows have been thrown haphazardly, showing the wrinkled gray sheets beneath. A small pile of dirty laundry is at the end of the bed. Other than that, the room is clean, not that there is much more in here to have a mess. The dark curtain over his window blocks most of the sunlight, with one lamp next to his bed to illuminate his whole room. The only other thing in the room is a bookcase filled with cracked spines and worn pages.

I leave the sack of my things against the dresser and plop down on top of the bed. As soon as I do, I almost regret staying here. I'm enveloped in his spicy scent of clove and cinnamon. Everything about Fear's personal space is warm and welcoming. But was that all a lie? Does he care about me at all? I would like to think so because in the short time he was my guard, I grew very fond of him—yeah, *fond*. Not caring enough to remove my clothes, I bring my legs onto the bed and lay down, pulling the covers over me. "Please tell me something was real. I need it to be real. Shit, I need you, Fear."

I say into his sheets, and then I let myself cry as sleep pulls me under.

“HELLO, Kostbar. I’ve missed you so much, baby.”

Everything feels fuzzy, but I know that voice better than my own. “Mama? Where are you?” I’m trying to focus my eyes, but it’s not working. Desperately, I start putting my hands out, trying to find anything. “Please tell me you’re here.”

“I told you, Villiana, that I will always be with you, just not always the way you expect me to be. I’ve been watching you for a very long time, Kostbar. You are so strong.” Her voice sounds close yet far away at the same time. I have to strain my ears to understand her fully.

“I miss you so much, Mama. Can you come back to me, please? Please come back to me! I need to be with you again!” I’m screaming into the nothingness, crying so hard that I can’t breathe. Then, just when I think I’m going to pass out from not getting enough air, I feel a feather-light touch on my cheek. My vision focuses enough to make out that it’s my mother.

“My sweet girl, you’re exactly where you need to be right now. I need you to promise me something, though.” Her touch stitches parts of my soul back together that I didn’t even realize were broken.

“Tell me what to do, and I will do it for you.” I lean my face into her touch, even though it’s barely there.

“Villiana, I need you to let your men earn your trust back. I’m not saying today, but I’m saying that they’re vital to your journey. Can you please do that for me?” Her touch is dissipating, and her voice is getting further away.

“They hurt me! They used me and made me believe they cared about me!” I’m screaming into nothingness again, just hoping Mama is still here.

“But did they? Villiana, promise me you will try...” And then there is only dead silence.

“Mama, no, I need you! Please, please come back! I will try.”

FIFTEEN

Villiana

“I PROMISE, MAMA. I PROMISE.”

“Villiana, are you okay in there? You never came back out last night, and I didn’t want to bother you.” Ryu’s voice from the other side of the door rouses me from my sleep.

Is it morning already? Obviously, I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

“You can come in,” I call out to Ryu, not moving from my spot in Fear’s bed.

He cautiously opens the door, poking his head in before entering. “Are you sure you’re okay with me coming in?”

I can’t help the laugh that comes out. Being lighthearted with him comes naturally. “Didn’t I say to come in? Stop standing in the doorway, but shut the door behind you. I really don’t want to see Malik—or Avi—whichever name he wants to go by today.”

Seeing Ryu outside of the compound is completely different. Despite the current climate of the house, he is much more relaxed. His long sapphire hair is down and messy with bedhead. His brow isn’t permanently scrunched like he’s

trying to solve an impossible problem. Typically his shoulders are so tense they're up to his ears, but now they sit much softer. The happiness I feel seeing him like this just reinforces the feelings I've developed for him over the last month.

It takes me a minute to notice he's shirtless. Perfectly lean, muscular, and covered in beautiful red and black tattoos. I want to go up and get a good look, but I refuse to touch him or even get too close.

Leisurely strolling forward, he gives me a weary smile. "Hey."

"Hey," I say as I nervously nibble my bottom lip.

Ryu wrings his hands. "Can I sit with you?"

Everything in me is screaming no. My heart cries out in my chest to stop, but my mouth says, "Yeah. I think that would be okay."

Stupid, stupid mouth.

The moment he sits down, I want to take it back. A very specific scent invades my nostrils: rosemary, lemongrass, and soil—it was his soap I used in the shower. I was wearing his clothing the other night. How could I be so blind to this whole situation? With a new sense of fury, I scoot up on the bed as far as possible, trying to create space between us. The movement catches his attention, and grief flashes across his face.

Ryu doesn't say anything about the space, just moving on to his next question, "Would you like to have breakfast with me? I promise to make you something vastly superior to what you have been eating." He winces at his own words, realizing he's picking at an open wound. I know that I have to eat, but

I'm petty enough to starve myself. It wouldn't be the first time.

"I think I'm going to take that bath I was planning on last night before I fell asleep, but thanks anyways." *See, I can be nice.*

Ryu doesn't back down. He is determined to keep me in the same room as him for as long as possible, so I can't avoid the current situation. "That works out well, actually. I'll just make breakfast while you're bathing." He places his hand on my knee, and I almost kick him from how my body reacts. It feels like our bodies are physically being welded together, with little explosions of energy racing through me. He must notice it as well because the pressure of his hand increases on my knee. His eyes widen in awe, and I can see he's breathing a little faster. Inching back, I put some space between us. We will have to talk about it eventually, but I don't have it in me to do it now.

I slip off the bed, taking a few steps before stopping. I chew on my lip, contemplating how I want things going forward. Ryu's heart has always been in the right place, even when he was lying to me. I'm hurt, but I can't stay angry forever. I have to try, just like he is right now.

"You know, you do owe me a real meal. I guess I could join you," I say softly, my back still to him.

I hear his breath hitch. "Really?"

Looking over my shoulder, I give him a soft smile. "Yeah."

With that, I turn back around and head to the washroom. As I push the door open, I realize this is my first time in—well, I don't know how long—that I can shower in private. There were times at the compound when the showers were

empty, but it felt like I was constantly being watched. I hope Ryu is okay with waiting because I'm going to enjoy every minute.

Time passes by in an indiscernible length. It could be minutes, hours, maybe even days, at this point, but all I know is that my pruned hands and feet tell me I should probably get out.

I step out of the shower looking for my clothes, but there aren't any. I was too busy trying to escape Ryu's presence. I'm going to have to scurry down the hall as fast as possible.

Wrapping a towel around me, I opened the door and hope for the best, but that hope was futile. I slam right into Avi, causing my towel to fall to the floor. I freeze, eyes locked on his stupid gorgeous face for way too long before I reach down to grab my towel.

"Is everything okay over there? I hear—" Undoubtedly, this would be my luck. Stark naked, fresh out of the shower, with my ass in the air, Ryu walks into the hallway and sputters behind me at the sight. Boy, he is definitely getting a show right now. I snap my body upright as fast as possible.

Avi bends down to grab my towel. "You dropped this," he says, in the most condescending way possible. I yank it from him, but I don't bother putting it back on. What's the point when they both have seen me naked?

"Ryu, I'll be back in a few minutes, and then we can have breakfast."

"Uh-huh." That's the only thing he seems to be able to say.

I stomp into the room, throwing the door shut. My heart rattles against my rib cage. There is something very wrong with me because as I stand here, clenching my legs together,

all I can think about is how it would feel to be between them. I take several deep breaths to center myself, quickly get dressed, and follow the sickly sweet scent to the kitchen.

“That smells amazing,” I say as my stomach growls loudly. “What did you make?”

Ryu turns around with a plate in his hand, piled high with food. “Honey cakes with elderberry syrup.” He places the plate in front of me.

“Is this all for me?” I ask, my eyes practically popping out of my head.

“Eat as much as you want. I can always make more.”

Avi strolls into the kitchen in skin-tight pants and a loose linen shirt. Why does a man so evil have to look so fucking good. Rounding the table, he snatches a cake off my plate. “Hell yeah, my favorite!” he says, shoving the whole honey cake into his mouth.

“I’m going to take these and head back to the room.” I look over at Ryu. “Thanks for the food.” There is no way I’m having breakfast with Avi.

“Wait! Avi, you can take your own damn food and eat in your room. I don’t particularly want to be around you right now, either.” Ryu shoves a plate of food at him.

“Oh, I see. Princess Villiana rules the house and—most of—the cocks now. You didn’t even give me syrup. Not cool, bro.”

Well, I guess that confirms that I’m not the only one developing feelings.

“Get fucked, Avi,” Ryu growls. A few seconds later, we hear Avi slam his door shut so hard that it rattles. Ryu makes

his plate and sits across from me at the table.

We can't stop looking at one another, but neither of us can manage to make conversation.

SIXTEEN

Ophir

BETWEEN GETTING Thorin safely out of Bonecliff, placing her with one of our contacts, and getting back home, it's taken a little over two weeks of traveling. It would have probably taken longer if I hadn't traveled in my Jötun form—being a giant has its benefits.

Crouched outside the front door, my little one tends to the garden, hands caked in dirt. She looks so fucking good, tiny and delicate, but edible nonetheless. Her round ass is perched on top of her heels, making it look even bigger. Good gods, being away from her for so long was torture—maybe more painful than being away from Ryu.

Shifting my weight, my hips bash into the trees, making a horrible whining sound. Oh fuck, I have to shift now. I don't need her to be afraid of me. It's too late for that, though—I mean, it is hard to miss or not hear me.

“You're a fucking giant? This is amazing! And makes a lot of sense.” Villiana stands in awe, not alarmed in the slightest.

I'm shocked when she comes running to me, jumping into my arms as soon as I return to normal size—I'm fortunate that

my clothing is spelled to grow and shrink with me. When she nuzzles her face into the crook of my neck, I feel my body relax for the first time in weeks.

“I am so happy to see you! Really, truly happy to have you back.” The smile she gives me is brighter than a thousand suns. “But don’t think for one second that you’re off the hook. You have a lot of explaining to do, big guy.”

“Let’s get inside, little one, and I will answer all your questions.”

I don’t bother to put her down, carrying her bridal style over the threshold, earning me two very different looks from the guys. One is disgusted, while the other beams with pride. “Hey, medicine man, demon boy. How has everything been while I’ve been gone?”

Ryu looks to the floor, and Avi shakes his head, not bothering to stop making his drink.

It’s Villiana who answers.

“Seeing how everyone has been lying to me, you owe me some answers,” she says, pointing down the hall to my room.

“I’ll be there in a minute, little one. Go ahead,” I tell her before turning to Ryu.

“Alright, what’s going on?”

He sucks his teeth and glowers at Avi. “This one took advantage of Villiana at the event and kept up the lie that his name was Malik. She accidentally caught me in the house before he could explain everything to her. She made me break it down for her, and now she hates us. Well, I thought she hated all of us. She was quite happy to see you.”

Oh, this is bad. How did she even want to speak to me?

“She wasn’t very understanding. Not that I blame her. I don’t know what would have been a better way of doing this.” Ryu shifts his weight back and forth; his brows knitted together.

For someone so logical, he has no interpersonal skills. For once, I wish he would have listened to me.

“We could have told her the truth from the beginning, or at least, very quickly. Instead, we allowed her to stay in that miserable existence. We pretended there wasn’t anything to do beyond being kind to her. Maybe if she had known, she could have worked with us to get her out. None of us knew the compound like Villiana.”

Ryu runs his hands through his long sapphire locks. He doesn’t know what to say because he knows I’m right and hates being wrong. “Fear, she wouldn’t be alone with me for too long. She pulls away from my touch and refuses to sleep anywhere but in your room. I assumed it was because you weren’t here, but I really don’t know. I will say things between us have been smoothing out though.”

Pulling him in closely, I bend down, giving him a reassuring kiss. “If she hated you, she would have found a way to leave already. Give her some time; I can tell she still cares for you.”

Looking up at me, his molten eyes gleam with seas of sadness. “How do you know?”

“Because she looks at you the same way I do.”

Ryu’s eyes shine with hope as he lies his head against my chest and nods. I hold him, ensuring he soaks in every drop of love I have for him. With every passing second, I can feel some of the tension melt from his body.

Stepping away, Ryu gathers his hair up into a bun, then returns to working on tea blends for the house. “Villiana will not be in the same room as Avi at all. She will go anywhere else to keep away from him. Our vicious kitten broke his fucking nose out of rage.” When he looks at me this time, the corner of his mouth turns up in a satisfied smile.

That’s my girl.

“These last two weeks have been tough. Especially without you here,” Ryu whispers.

“I’ll go talk to her. Maybe I can try to smooth out some of the details.” I try to sound hopeful. “I’ll go to her now, and then I can update you later.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Before I walk away, he adds, “I should have taken you more seriously. I’m sorry.”

JUST OPEN THE DOOR, Ophir.

With my forehead pressed to the cool wood of the door and my palm practically crushing the knob, I haven’t found the courage to face Villiana yet. I’ve been stuck like this for the last five minutes thinking of all the ways this could go wrong. We lied to her; *I* lied to her. Lies that could have cost her life if things went sideways. At the same time, it’s better for her to be angry with me than still at the compound.

After she left with Avi, I made it my goal to get Thorin out as fast as possible. It was definitely a challenge, but I would do anything for Villiana. The entire trip home, I dreamed of her every night. The way her lips felt against mine. How she ground against me, letting out little moans. The defiance in her eyes when she acts like a brat.

But the reality of the situation never settled in my mind. Why I thought I could come home and Villiana would be ecstatic about her new living arrangements is beyond me.

Finally, mustering up the courage, I turn the handle and go inside. Villiana is curled up with the blanket tucked under her chin. Her eyes are shut, and while she may still be awake, I don't want to disturb her.

We can talk in the morning.

Quietly, I turn back around and shut off the lights.

“Don't even think about walking out of here. It's time to have a chat,” she croaks in a rough, sleepy voice.

Flicking the light back on, she opens the blankets and pats the space beside her.

“Little one, I'm filthy from traveling. If you want me to get into bed with you, I'll need to clean up first. I promise I'll make it quick.”

Villiana nods as she buries herself back under the covers. “Only if you promise to come back. Regardless of the conversation we need to have, I missed you—a lot.”

“I've missed you too.”

I kiss Villiana's nose then take off to the washroom. I don't think I've ever showered so fast in my life. The thought of her in my bed is very motivating. When I return, Villiana has changed into an adorable sleep set made up of very short shorts and a tiny little shirt with pictures of toadstools all over them.

Getting into bed, I sit down across from her. “Alright, Villiana, ask whatever your heart desires. I have nothing to hide.”

“First, please call me Vi. More importantly, is Thorin okay?”

I knew that would be her priority. It’s funny because, during the entire trip with Thorin, she asked a million questions about Vi’s safety, threatening me any chance she could. These girls love each other unconditionally. They would die for one another, making me admire them more.

“Thorin is safe with one of our contacts. They will protect her, no matter what.” I try reassuring her. I know Thorin is safe; Vi just has to believe me.

“Can I see her?” She asks in a dejected tone.

No matter my answer, I know she will find her way back to Thorin eventually. I can’t imagine how I would feel being separated from Ryu and Avi. They’re a part of me, and I could never be whole without them. But I can’t have Vi risking her life when we know Thorin is safe.

“Eventually. But right now, it is unsafe for either of you to leave your current location. Locren thinks he will see you again, but Thorin is a fugitive. I promise that when it’s safe, I will bring her here.” Reaching out, I clasp her tiny hand and rub my thumb against her soft skin.

“I guess I can understand that. I don’t like it, but I understand.” She leans against the wall, ready to move on to her array of questions. “Was anything real? Why didn’t you tell me the truth?”

Seeing the hurt in her eyes makes me sick.

I give myself a moment to collect my thoughts and figure out the best way to explain the situation to her. “Was anything real? *All* of it was. I’m not a guard by trade, but I was assigned to you and took my job very seriously. You may not believe

me, but Ryu did too.” Combing my fingers through my long beard, trying to find the right words. “I didn’t tell you anything because I trusted Ryu’s process. He truly believed he was doing right by you by keeping you in the dark. He figured you would have plausible deniability if things went horribly wrong. Did I agree with it? Not completely, but I have never seen him doing something out of malice in all the years I have known him.”

“I—I can see that. He doesn’t seem like a vindictive person,” she says tautly. Quirking an eyebrow at me, she tries to lighten the mood. “So, did you actually kill my old doctor and guard?”

I can’t help the laugh that bubbles out of me. Those shit stains haven’t even been a blip in my mind.

“Yes, I did, and I would do it a million times over. They were worthless specks of dirt. I just wish I could have killed Bax slower. He didn’t deserve a quick death. It was very gory, though.” Not gory enough, in my opinion.

“Did you know what Avi was planning?” Vi is very direct; she knows what she wants to ask and doesn’t pussyfoot around it.

“Absolutely the fuck not! When I came in and saw what state you were in, it took everything in me not to turn around and rip his spine through his throat.” Wiping my hands down my face, I sigh. “I know it’s hard to believe, but Avi is a great guy. He is and always will be my little brother. Avi lives in the gray area. I don’t know if he told you or if you’ve figured it out yet, but Avi is a Rakshasa. Do you know what that is?” I don’t want to piss her off, but she also needs to understand the complicated nature of our little demon boy.

“No, I’ve never met nor heard of a Rakshasa. Is it some type of demon?”

“Yes. Rakshasa lives on a delicate line between good and evil. When in his demon state, Avi loses all morality. He is violent, hedonistic, greedy, possessive, and the embodiment of a demon. But in his unshifted state, Avi has to fight those urges daily. He tries to keep himself busy being a productive member of society. He makes all the clothes for the Green Goddess boutique in the city. He also does black and leather smithing here, creating weapons we can use to defend ourselves and the city. He’s even developed a spelled mask to block the plague from spreading. Avi wants to be good, but doesn’t always know how.”

Vi inches closer, causing our legs to press against each other. “The Green Goddess? Is that the shop that Anabell owns?”

Ahh, I see she’s already been there. Avi just wants us to think he hates her, but she must mean something to him if he brought her down to Ms. Otman. He could have easily made everything she needed here—we rarely outsource our goods.

“Yes, that’s the place. I assume he took you there?” I ask.

“I got a ton of clothes and other goodies. He even paid Ana a decent chunk of change.” Vi’s brows knit together as her lips fall open. “That means he paid for the clothes he created.” I can see the conflict brewing in her mind, but ultimately her malice wins, and she puts up a mask of indifference.

“Last question,” A blush tinges on her cheeks, and for—the first time—she looks shy. “Do I mean anything to you?”

My heart starts racing, and my hands become clammy. Staring into the swirling pools of her violet eyes, all I can see

is hope and hurt. She wants it all to be real. She feels the connection between us just as much as I do.

Her body calls to me like a moth to flame. I need to be closer. I need to swim in her spicy and sweet scent—citrus and sandalwood—a perfect match to her personality.

My fingers clasp her delicate chin, tilting her head upward because I want her to see what she does to me—how possessive I feel. “More than you could know. The feelings I have for you are indescribable. I was a starved man when we were apart.” It’s out there now; there’s no turning back.

I watch stray tears run down her cheeks, a few settling into her scar.

“Me too,” she whispers. Those two words set a fire in my chest. But she isn’t done just yet, adding, “You make me feel safe.”

And those simple words are what break me. My needy lips seek hers out. I feel my magic searching for hers, performing an elegant waltz before fusing.

Pushing up onto her knees, Vi deepens the kiss. She lets out a soft moan, kissing me like a lost lover—slowly and laced with unspoken promises.

My soul screams to profess my undying devotion to her, but it’s too soon...*right?*

Slowly separating, our chests heave in tandem.

“What just happened?” Vi’s words come out in nothing more than a whisper. Her pupils are blown out, leaving only a small ring of her iris.

“Just broken pieces fitting together.” The words tumble from my lips without thinking. “Would it be alright if I stayed

with you tonight, little one?”

Pushing me down onto the bed, she places her hand and head on my chest. “Don’t think that this means I’m not angry with you,” she says, giving me a pointed look.

“I wouldn’t think any less.”

Melodically, I trace the shape of her ear until her breaths even out. Only then do I close my eyes and follow her into the dream world.

SEVENTEEN

Villiana

I WAKE up to the thunderous sound of Fear snoring, questioning how the whole house isn't shaking.

Everything feels lighter after talking to him last night. Fear is an open book; never feeling the need to lie to me. That being said, I think it's time I talk to Ryu. Fear put it into perspective for me, and while I'm still furious, I can kind of understand why Ryu did what he did.

I search through the sack of clothing, trying to find a cozy knit sweater. I need a barrier between us if there's going to be a serious conversation. The rush of his touch shouldn't be clouding my judgment.

Slipping from the room, my feet carry me to the sitting room where I find Ryu making a fire. "Good morning, doc."

Ryu startles, dropping the poker to the floor. "Villiana, I didn't think anyone else was up, or I would have had breakfast ready. Do you want me to leave?"

Ugh, I guess I've been pretty tough on him lately.

"No. I think it's time that we sit down and talk." I take a seat in the chair closest to the fireplace, curling up with my

knees against my chest. Ryu brings over a pelt blanket and tucks me into it before finding a spot across from me.

“Do you have specific questions or just want to say your piece? I’m happy with either option.” He is so nervous that his voice shakes as he speaks.

“I’ll start with what I have to say and then ask questions if I have them.” Wrapping my fingers tightly around the edge of the blanket, I yank it up to my neck as my shield. “I heard what you had to say a few weeks ago and wasn’t ready to receive it. Talking to Fear last night made me realize I need to give you a real chance at a conversation.”

Ryu takes his tea from the table, wrapping his long fingers around the burning hot ceramic without so much as a flinch. With his lips pressed to the rim, he leans back into the chair, showing off his toned, porcelain chest. Ryu is so pale you can easily see the blue veins running throughout his entire body.

Also, what is with these guys and the lack of clothing?! I can’t concentrate under these conditions.

“Uh...” Picking my jaw off the floor, I force myself to get back on track. “When you came to the compound, it was the first time anyone other than Thorin had shown me true kindness in years. I was skeptical at first, but you never wavered. You seemed to genuinely care about me as a person, not just a patient. What upsets me the most about this is how much you hurt me. I let my walls down, and you made me regret it.” I pick at my fingers to avoid looking at him. I’m a fool for thinking physical space would make this easier. Nothing about being around Ryu is easy. It’s a constant battle not to say fuck it and throw myself into his arms.

“I know telling me the truth from the beginning seemed like a crazy idea, but you could have told me. You knew how

much I trusted you. I would have helped. I would have thought you were insane, which you are, but I would still have helped.”

Ryu nervously chuckles, looking down at the floor. His silky hair falls into his face like an emotional shield. I can tell he’s taking in what I’m saying, even though he’s clearly uncomfortable. He has always been a listener, attentive and interested.

“When I came to find you the night of the event, you acted genuinely surprised. But now, knowing Avi went rogue, it was the perfect opportunity to tell me the truth. Instead, you let me believe I was being trafficked. I was terrified, Ryu. I was happy to be free of the compound but frightened of what was in the future. But the biggest blow was catching you in the kitchen the next day. How do you think that made me feel? To find the man who has been caring for me, helping me get my powers back. Shit, you helped me cover up a *murder* I committed. It really fucking hurts. And Fear isn’t blameless either; I’ll throw that out there. But the betrayal from you broke a part of me. Ryu, I want to trust you again...I just don’t know how to.”

I feel like I’m emotionally wrung out when I finish. I didn’t realize how raw the situation has made me feel. I’m not angry—I’m *devastated*.

So many emotions passed over Ryu’s face during my confession. He takes his time to digest everything I just told him.

“You are absolutely right, Villiana; I did break your trust. I hurt you in ways that I probably can’t begin to understand. There is nothing that I can say that will make it better or excuse me for my actions. The only thing that I can say is that

I never meant to hurt you. I thought I was doing this the best way for everyone, but I wasn't. I hope that one day you can forgive me. I am truly sorry for the pain I have caused you.” He runs his hands over his face. I see that his eyes are glassy, and his hands are shaking. *Is he crying?*

RAGE TAKES OVER. It's a rage that's been simmering for so long that it boils over with a little extra heat. “How about treating me like a fucking adult and letting me make decisions about my life?!” Ryu shrinks back as if I slapped him, watching the arcs of golden power emanate from my fingers.

What the fuck is wrong with me? The man is not only *telling* me how sorry he is, but it's written all over his face. Digging the heels over my palms into my eyes, I do my best to ground myself.

One.

I am in control of my emotions.

Two.

I am in control of my words.

Three.

I am the ruler of my life.

“I'm willing to let you try to earn my trust back. I don't want to avoid each other anymore. But don't expect me to bounce back to the way things were before.”

“I understand that. And thank you, Villiana.”

“Vi. I don't want to be Villiana anymore.”

With my heart beating loudly in my ear, I find the courage to ask the most complicated of questions. “Ryu, why does it

feel like my body is trying to meld with yours when we touch? I know you feel it too, because I always notice your reaction.”

His eyebrows shoot up, and he combs his finger through his freshly trimmed beard. He definitely wasn't expecting me to ask him.

“I'm going to be completely honest with you, Vi—I don't know. After the first few times it happened, I started researching it, but I have yet to find an answer. Do you know of anything like this happening before?”

“No, never.” Anxiously picking at my finger, I add, “But I have also noticed it's been getting stronger every time we touch. Are we not going to be able to make skin contact until we figure this out?” I'm not a fan of that idea, to be honest. While he needs to earn my trust back, I can't ignore the way my body calls to his. Not touching him would be like breaking off another piece of myself.

“That is your choice to make, Vi. I know that being around you makes me happy. Who knows, maybe we'll get used to it, but I want you to feel comfortable.”

I hate him for being so kind and understanding. I want him to be an asshole so I can stay mad at him longer.

“Let's take it day by day for now. We should start with breakfast and tea,” I say, trying to lighten the mood. The idea of food is incredibly appealing. “Hey, doc, can I still have that blueberry tea, or is it more of a medicinal thing?” His visceral reaction to the question does something for my cold, dead heart.

“Absolutely! Most plants have many purposes. This particular blend does have medicinal benefits but can also be consumed for enjoyment.” Ryu practically skips into the

kitchen to pull the tea tin from the shelf. The whole house fills with the delectable aroma and my mouth waters. Loud footsteps come from the other side of the house.

“I hope you made enough for me, sweet dragon. You know that’s one of my favorites,” Fear chirps. My mouth waters for a whole new reason when he comes around the corner.

He looks even bigger standing there shirtless in lounge pants. His whole upper body is covered in all-black tattoos. On each shoulder, he has a raven that comes up around the back of his neck and halfway down his arms. At the center of his chest, there is a large symbol; it looks sort of like a snowflake. The center is a small circle with eight lines meeting in the middle. Those lines stretch out all around, with three horizontal lines between the circle, and the top, which looks like Us, with a little bit of the line coming through the middle. The symbol is encircled with runes. It’s a symbol of protection. Intricate knots and runes are on the sides of his hips, wrapping around his soft belly.

They are absolutely gorgeous.

The smug bastard comes so close I can bask in his warmth as though his arms are wrapped around me. “I think you’re drooling, little one.” He drags his thumb across my lower lip, which is, without a doubt, hanging open. When he drops his hand, he walks over to where Ryu is standing. They beam at one another, love and adoration shining bright.

There’s much more to their relationship than they let on.

“Hey, medicine man, give me a mug for the lady.” Looking over at me, he asks, “Do you need sugar, Vi?”

Ryu proudly butts in, “She takes it with a little honey and a few crushed blueberries.” Fear gives him a look that,

apparently, only they understand.

“What the doc said. If that’s how he made it for me before, it’s the right way.” Fear hands me the mug, and I almost drop it. “Fuck, that is hot! How did you even handle that?” He must have no feeling in his hands because I’m pretty sure it took a layer of skin off.

“Calluses. I work with my hands all the time,” Fear says mischievously. *He wants to play a game this morning. He’s challenging the master.*

“All the time? You must be exceptionally skilled.”

“Oh, you have no idea, little one.” Fear arches his eyebrow at me.

“But I do, big guy. I, too, use my hands a lot. I even use them to help out others. I’m always thanked afterward for a job well done,” I say, hovering my hands over the sides of the mug, pretending to run them up and down.

“They seem to be a little small to handle the big jobs, though. You would need a helping hand.” Fear walks over to me and places his hand against mine to show me the size difference.

“Are you sure about that? You haven’t experienced my talents, so you wouldn’t really know.” I scoff at him while sliding my hand down his palm, and when I reach his wrist, I try to wrap my hand around it, slowly stroking it up and down.

“I know you have a smart mouth, that’s for sure.”

“That’s not all it is. I can promise you that.” I bring his hand to my mouth and lightly bite his thumb. There’s so much heat in Fear’s slate eyes.

“I’m still here, guys! Take it somewhere else,” Ryu interjects, sipping on his tea while leaning against the countertop.

Getting up from the table, I walk over to him and press my body tight against him. Then, running a single finger down his chest, I say, “Oh, doc, do you want some attention? I’m very good at sharing. I’m an elf of many talents; I can help out in more ways than you know.” Ryu turns bright red, and Fear howls. When I realize what I’m doing, I step back quickly and return to my tea.

I can’t give Ryu fun Vi yet.

EIGHTEEN

Avi

I SLEPT in my workshop last night. I couldn't be in the house with everyone making me out to be the bad guy. I did what I had to do, and it worked. Was I a little out of line? Maybe. But it's not like the guys don't know my nature. And Ryu specifically asked me to let my Rakshasa out a bit. After all these years, you think he would know what happens when I do.

While my Rakshasa and I are one being, I try to balance out that side of myself. I have to go against everything in my nature, and I don't think anyone truly understands how hard that is. As much as I don't want to admit it, I was very out of line making that deal with Locren, but I will figure out a way to fix it and get out of it. I should just kill him, but it's not that easy. The problem is that Locren is only a cog in a much bigger machine. He is just a higher-up, which is why he runs the Bonecliff compound.

The Collective was formed by a succubus named Adora. Adora's mate had fallen ill with the plague and was quickly dying. Being a demon, not many beings want to come to your aid, but she found a healer who was willing to help. The

healer, Vera, worked on Adora's mate tirelessly, nearly draining her magic after every treatment. Each treatment would help Adora's mate temporarily, but after a few days, he would start to decline. Adora heard word of healers using blood magic to heal others and had fantastic results. She rushed to Vera, begging her to try the blood magic on her mate.

Adora promised to care for the healer and her family, so Vera agreed. After a month of consuming the healers' blood daily, Adora's mate fully recovered. Adora was ecstatic but afraid that her mate would relapse, so she asked Vera if she would be okay leaving some blood with her, just to be safe. Vera just wanted to move on with her life and be able to spend time with her family, so she left a jar of blood behind and wished Adora and her mate well.

Adora had her mate drink small amounts of blood every day, and after two weeks, something strange happened. Her mate was attacked while visiting the city; they had stabbed him in the chest. It should have been a fatal wound, but her mate didn't even bleed. When he came home and told Adora what happened, they knew it had to be because of the blood. The hole in her mate's chest started to heal, but the next day it began to reopen, pouring blood from his chest. Quickly, Adora had her mate drink more of Vera's blood and placed some in the now open wound. The bleeding stopped immediately.

That's when they realized that immortality was only temporary. Well, power does bring greed. So, when Vera refused to supply them with any more blood, Adora imprisoned Vera and her mate and killed her children. After that, Adora was determined to never worry about mortality again.

After that day, Adora went around telling everyone about the power healer blood held. Quickly, it went from the healers using their blood to stop the plague, to healers being abducted left and right. They all realized that it would be easier to *collect* the healers if everyone worked together, and that is how The Collective was formed.

Now, many years later, Adora has stepped down from her position, handing it off to her great-granddaughter as the head of The Collective. Adeline is a ruthless bitch and doesn't care about any being except those who serve her—and even then, she couldn't care less if something were to happen to them.

She abducts and trafficks every healer The Collective can find. And the worst part is that she doesn't care about the age of the beings she is hunting. She allows the children to be assaulted and raped, the pain being inflicted upon them not even touching whatever conscience is buried deep below. Then, when they come of age, the girls are used as broodmares to men The Collective sees fit for breeding. And the men are forced to impregnate the women—although they're barely old enough to be called that—of The Collective. If they cannot perform, the men's semen will be collected by any means. If the children do not present as healers by age ten, they are killed. Adeline refuses to allow the healers to produce children together because it's too much of a risk.

So really, Locren is just a blip in the system, but his death would not go unnoticed, nor would it be taken lightly, if only for the fact that it could result in the leak of information about the organization.

Still, we have to be very careful how we dispose of Locren without causing a scene.

My only solution is to have Villiana supply a small amount of blood that we will dilute with animal blood and send it to Locren. As for the visitation issue, I may have an idea, but I sure as shit won't do anything without consulting Ryu, Ophir, and Villiana.

I refuse to be the villain in the story.

I COLLECT everyone and bring them to the table to discuss my plan. While Fear fidgets in his seat and Ryu taps his fingers against the wood waiting for me to speak, Villiana looks at me like I'm about to murder her.

Good. Hate me, baby.

“Alright, now that everyone is together, I want to discuss a plan that I've come up with for the Locren issue until we can kill him.”

Ryu and Fear seem hopeful, but Villiana sneers at me.

“You mean the issue *you* created?”

Leaning across the table, I roughly grab her chin between my fingers. Fear moves fast, but Villiana throws her hand up, telling him to stop. Tilting her face up, I give her a piece of my mind. “Listen here, you little *brat!* I made a shitty decision, but it got you out of there, and now I'm trying to fix the problem. I can do nothing if that would be better for you! I'm tired of this woe-is-me bullshit. Are you going to listen, or are you going to get the fuck out?” My voice drips with venom.

Oh, how I love a good fight.

Giving me big doe eyes, she bats her lashes. “How's your nose feeling, Avi? I see your black eyes are gone. I can re-

break it if you're missing them." The words slither from her mouth with a hiss.

A feral growl rumbles through bared teeth as I wreck my hand away, not caring that the force sends her backward. Villiana really likes to provoke me, and I'm not falling for it tonight.

Fear bends down to her ear, brushing his finger over the point, "Do you crave violence, hellion? I do love blood."

Ryu backhands Fear's chest. "Knock it off and stop trying to cause trouble."

Seeing how easily the mighty giant melts for this girl is disgusting. Ryu has been a lost cause from the jump, and I'm not completely immune to her existence. Villiana is effortlessly sexy. She holds herself with an air of confidence most could only aspire to have, and her body would make the strongest man break. Worst of all, I can't get the taste of her out of my mind. *Fuck.*

I palm myself through my pants under the table. She is becoming a cancer to this family, and I won't let us die—I will do anything necessary to protect us.

Ryu side-eyes me with a knowing smirk. "Avi, please continue. I would like to hear your ideas." I don't need him coming to my defense, but I am thankful he doesn't bring attention to my current issue.

"Are you high or something? Your pupils are blown out. Or are you getting all demon-y?" Villiana is too perceptive for her own good. It doesn't help that Fear looks smug as he teases a finger along Villiana's collarbone, causing her to sigh.

He read my fucking aura.

I swallow hard, feeling as if I'm being strangled by my own esophagus. "I'm fine. Now, if everyone is ready to listen, I will continue."

"You have my undivided attention, Avi," Villiana snaps pointedly.

"It's coming to the point where we need to send a shipment of blood to Locren. Before you yell at me, I have a plan, but you may not totally be on board." Reaching down, I grab the horn of a stag's head and drop the carcass in front of us with a *plunk*.

"Why the fuck is there a decapitated stag on my table, Avi?" Ryu looks at me with disgust.

"Other than the vest you'll be getting from it? If we take a small amount of its blood to dilute Villiana's, we can probably get away with it for now. It's not foolproof, and Villiana, you'd need to be a *willing* participant." I pause to see if she has anything to say.

"I don't like it, but I don't see any other way. Plus, it's not like I haven't been giving blood for years. I'm used to it."

Well, damn. That went much smoother than expected.

"Now, the second issue is visitations. I never had any intention of following through with that part of the deal. So my solution, for this time around, is we send Locren a letter stating that you're in no condition to travel because you have toad pox. It sounds stupid, but toad pox is extremely contagious and can put you out of commission for weeks. Locren is not going to be happy, but I think he'll let this time slide."

Everyone nods in agreement when I finish speaking. *Thank the gods.*

“The blood we obviously have to send through a carrier, but the letter would have to go out immediately. How do you plan on doing that?” Villiana snarks, trying to be a smart-ass.

“Well, magic, of course.” I get some paper and a pen and begin to write the letter. Once I’m done, I sign it, seal it in an envelope, and place my hand on it.

“What are you doing?” Villiana asks with honest curiosity.

“Avi has the ability to teleport some items—mostly letters and small objects. When he places his hand on top of the letter, he pictures exactly where he wants the letter, or object, to go and it appears there immediately. Most of the time, the recipient thinks it’s been there for a while and doesn’t assume it’s just magically appeared.” Ryu has always been the best at explaining things, so I’m glad he took the lead. Concentrating, I picture the letter sitting atop Locren’s desk, next to all the other letters he keeps there. Slowly, I feel the letter less and less until it’s completely gone.

Villiana watches in awe as the letter dissipates into thin air. “Shit. That was actually pretty impressive.”

“It’s done. I’ll go into the city next week to pick up the response letter.”

I have a secure way of delivering and receiving messages. I create a golem, tell it to deliver the item, and then they turn back to dust once its task is complete. And since golems will only obey their creator, we don’t have to worry about them being possessed by magic. It is much easier to hide our location this way.

I hope this works, for all our sakes.

THREE DAYS LATER, we finally receive a reply from Locren:

MALIK,

A sick whore is no good to me — keep her. I'm sorry you won't be able to use that hot cunt of hers for a while. Hopefully, her blood will suffice. I'll be expecting the donation delivery within the next week, no later. Oh, and if you're trying to go back on our deal or are lying to me, I will find out, and I won't hesitate to kill you.

No one takes my trophy from me.

Locren

NINETEEN

Villiana

THERE WAS a point in time when I had a relatively normal life. I had hobbies like gardening, foraging, reading, and art. The outdoors was my muse—my savior. Every time I had an episode where my lungs ceased working and the flash of the past invaded every corner of my mind, the woods reminded me that I was not being suffocated, that I'm bigger than my panic. I would draw and paint to help me stay connected to the good parts of my past; images of Mama and Ziggy were always my favorite. But I would also create sketches of plants in the garden, mushrooms and berries I foraged, pretty much anything that grew outside. Unfortunately, being imprisoned for six years, you don't get those kinds of luxuries. I gave up hope of being the being I once was because hope caused the type of pain that drove girls to seek the afterlife.

Now, I'm up to my elbows in dirt, helping Ryu tend to the garden. I can tell this is his happy place as well, and I'm glad we can share it. We work in tandem as if we're one person. Ryu wipes sweat from his forehead, smearing soil all over. Instinctually, I dust my hands and clean the dirt off him. As my fingers graze his skin, I feel my magic practically jump

into him—a pool of gold is left under my touch. Ryu’s marbled eyes search mine, waiting for me to pull away. But when I don’t, he closes the space between us. Just as his lips meet mine, his beard tickles my face, bringing me out of the moment. *I can’t do this.*

“I’m—I’m going to grab us some water. Do you want anything else while I’m inside?” I say as I scramble to my feet.

Ryu’s face is unreadable as he traces the spot where our lips touched before answering me. “Uh, sure. Water is fine.” His voice is distant.

Wasting no time, I scurry through the back door straight into the washroom. Locking the door behind me, I find safety for a moment as my heart gallops in my chest. I lean against the wood and slide down, hanging my head between my knees. What am I doing? Ryu is supposed to be *earning* my forgiveness, yet I can’t seem to keep away. I yearn for him. Every cell of my being is starved for a taste.

Bracing myself on shaky hands, I push myself off the floor and amble to the sink. I turn the tap to freezing cold and splash my face—it feels good, but not as good as his icy touch. As I raise my head, I gasp at my own reflection. My lips are spiderwebbed with soft blue lines. Flicking my eyes to my hands, the matching pattern has been embedded.

The world spins around at the implication—we’re sharing magic.

A knock on the door rings throughout the washroom.

“Little one, can I come in, please?”

Fear’s soothing voice coats me like honey, but I still can’t find the words.

“Vi, I’m coming in. I will leave if you want me to. I just need to know that you’re okay.” He waits a beat before I hear the creaking of the door. Our eyes meet in the mirror before Fear notices my lips. I give him a lot of credit for not reacting. He approaches me like a hurt animal, and when he gets close enough, he wraps his arms around my middle.

I sink into his chest, seeking asylum in his arms. Fear tucks my hair behind my ears and hums a sweet tune, grounding me.

“There you go, little one, you’re safe. You can relax.”

Shaking my head, I finally speak. “I don’t know what’s happening, but I’m scared,” I hiccup.

Fear holds me as he brings us down to the smooth stone, and then he begins to rock back and forth gently. “Are you afraid of your body’s reaction or how it makes you feel?”

A tear escapes my eye, rolling down my cheek. How does he know me so well? I know the answer, but I’m not ready to say it aloud.

“How about we stay here for a few more minutes, and then I’ll come with you to get the drinks, and we can both go back outside?” he asks, collecting the moisture with his thumb.

“He sent you, didn’t he?”

Fear only offers me a soft smile before he begins to hum and sway again.

I SPEND the next few days avoiding Ryu as much as possible. We make small talk when eating our meals or have no choice but to communicate, but it’s radio silence between us other than that. I needed space to sort through my thoughts before I

made myself sick over the entire situation. But I can't avoid him forever.

Today we worked on putting together donations for Locren. With just a small amount of blood from me, Ryu was able to mix in the stag blood to make all twenty bags. Locren will be satisfied for now, giving us another month to plan.

As much as I hate to admit it, Avi had a great idea. I still don't like him, but Fear and Ryu treat him like a brother, and I guess that's because they pretty much are. If they can love him, there must be something redeemable.

"I'm almost done packing these up. Avi, this was a great idea." Ryu praises him, patting him on the back. Avi pretends not to be affected by the compliment, but you can tell it means something to him. "Since this is a win for us, I'll make a special dessert for everyone." There's a resounding *fuck yeah!* from everyone.

Ryu is a fantastic cook—not that he lets anyone else into the kitchen very often. Fear has made a few things here and there, but I think Ryu really enjoys it, so the guys let him do his thing. And there's never a complaint about our meals.

After a few minutes, Ryu calls us to the kitchen. As we all huddle in, I can see that he has frozen a bowl—I assume we're having homemade ice cream. It would also explain how he finished so fast.

"Here you guys go, some fairy bread." He puts a plate filled with mouth-watering candy bread down in front of us and then turns around to grab bowls for the ice cream. "And the best part, lavender ice cream. A house favorite!"

It's like time stops, and I can no longer breathe. My vision is tunneling, and I can't hear anyone.

“And I made your favorite! Blueberry muffins with lavender ice cream.”

Hands grab me, tucking me into their body, but I’m stuck in a reel of memories. Ziggy making ice cream on my birthday, when I was sad, or just because he felt like it. Knowing my big brother was always there for me. The one person I had in my life who knew the old me. The *real* me.

A soothing tingle overtakes me, faintly whispering I’m safe. When I come to, I realize that Ryu is cradling me in his arms. “Welcome back, kitten. Are you okay?”

I still can’t speak or move. I’m only conscious of my surroundings, locked in my body.

Fear kneels next to Ryu and wipes the tears I didn’t know were there from my face. “Vi, I promise you’re safe. When you’re ready to come back to us, we’ll be here.”

Then I feel a second set of hands on the sides of my head. Within seconds, my mind is clear. The leathery scent invading my nose clearly indicates that it’s Avi who is touching me.

“How did you do that?” I croak, my voice rough and gravelly.

“I have the ability to release energy. You had an overload of emotions, so I concentrated on removing the energy preventing you from being fully aware.” The way Avi tells me this makes me think that he has experienced it himself.

“Thank you. Really,” I say genuinely to him. My body has stopped tingling but is now pulsing. It’s a soothing and comforting pulse, almost like living in a heartbeat. In Ryu’s arms, I am safe.

At this moment, I realize there’s no escaping him. I don’t want to know what it’s like without his presence, his touch, his

devotion. I only want him to recognize that I don't *need* him; I *want* him.

Even squatting down, Fear towers over me. He maneuvers himself in such a way that he is wedged in the small space between Ryu and I. "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

I want to say no. I want to run from my past and my pain. But I have a sneaking suspicion I will be with the guys for a while. And if that is the case, they deserve to know my triggers.

"I don't like talking about my past. That was a time of true happiness, and it was all taken away from me. I used to sit in my room at the camp and torture myself with thoughts of the past. Letting the hurt and heaviness take me over. I would have flashbacks all the time. My guard would smack me and tell me to stop being a little bitch. So, it wasn't until Thorin arrived that I had someone to help me with it. It would often happen during breakfast because the girls would talk about the food their families would make. Or in the showers when I was alone in my thoughts. Thorin was always there. After a while, I did everything possible to stop thinking about it." My temples throb, begging me to stop reliving the worst parts of my life. I bite down on my cheek until coppery liquid fills my mouth.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, little one. We all understand." Fear reassures me they aren't trying to pull my truths from me.

"No, I have to. It's time I start trying to heal, and maybe I can become a better version of myself."

Burrowing my face into Ryu's chest is the only way I'll be able to explain the next part. The look on his face breaks me.

“Ryu, when you told us we were having lavender ice cream—that triggered this.” Lungs seizing, his body becomes rigid against mine. Chancing a look, I find his creamy skin even paler, with his nostrils flared. “There was no way you could have known, doc. I don’t blame you.” My lips find the crook of his without a second thought, pulling a low and pained groan from him.

“Growing up, my brother always made me blueberry muffins and lavender ice cream because it’s my favorite. He would make it for any occasion, even for breakfast.” I hollowly laugh, thinking of all the times Mama would yell at him for sneaking it to me in the middle of the night. But I keep that memory to myself. I continue, “Ziggy was the best brother. He was only three years older than me, but to me, he felt like a much older and wiser protector. When my Mother was taken, it was just the two of us. We survived a few years on the run before The Collective caught up with us. Ziggy made me run. He told me not to look back and that he would catch up. But obviously, he never did. That’s how I met Lys. He was a crazy old satyr, but the absolute best. He raised me until...”

I don’t want to continue that story. I’m not ready to talk about that day yet. I curl myself tight against Ryu and begin to sob. “I miss them so much. All of them. And I’ll probably never see them again.”

“Vi, baby, I know Avi isn’t your favorite, but please let him hold you,” Ryu begs softly. Avi is the last being in this house I want to be around. The ever-growing judgment weighs heavy on me tonight. Too tired to argue, I look up at Avi and nod in agreement.

The sadness instantly dissipates the moment he wraps me in his athletic arms. Carrying me into his bedroom, Avi does something very uncharacteristic. Placing me on the plush mattress, he climbs beside me, curling his body around mine.

As I drift to sleep, Avi croons a beautiful song. The lyrics come out hushed, but I can tell it's lovely.

Avi

I STAY with Villiana for a while after she falls asleep. In the privacy of my room, I allow myself to admire her—enjoy her nearness. All the roughness about her melts away while she's sleeping. Her cheeks are still slightly flushed, but her brow is relaxed, and her soft lips sit gently parted. I take the chance and trace the slope of her nose, down into her cupid's bow, and every-so-slightly graze the shape of her lips. Her breath catches, but she's still clearly asleep. With a featherlight touch, I run my fingers down her arm and over her full hips—her skin pebbles in response.

All of a sudden, her sweet citrusy scent overpowers me. I can't help myself but press my nose to her neck and inhale—a wave of desire goes straight to my cock. My entire body sparks to life, painful prickles attacking my nerves.

Scrambling away, I fall back, realizing that I'm shifting—quickly.

I can't get out of my room fast enough. I need to leave.

In my hatesly exit from the house, I run directly into Ophir's solid frame.

“*Woah* there, demon boy, where’s the fire?” he grabs me by the shoulder, spinning me around.

“My Rakshasa loved every second of her fear and pain, but it needs more. If I hold onto this energy any longer, I’ll go for her blood next.” *That’s believable...right?* It’s not a total lie. My Rakshasa relished in it, but I’ve been handling energy long enough to control my shifts.

Fear levels me with a look that only a big brother can give. He’s not buying it, and he’s not going to let it go. “Are you sure that’s what is going on? It has nothing to do with not trusting your cock around a certain elf occupying your bed?”

Swearing under my breath, I rap my knuckles against the wall. “I don’t hate her, you know. I just can’t stand the disruption she’s caused in our lives.”

He puts on his squinty face, telling me he’s reading my aura again.

“Fucking stop reading me! Can’t I have one personal thought or feeling?!”

Chuckling, he bends forward, collecting his fiery hair, tying it out of the way. Meanwhile, I’m fighting a full shift. “Avi, we have been working with The Tower for a long time. Doing rescue missions is nothing new.”

I scoff at him. “Have we brought every rescue home, hm?” I egg him on when he doesn’t answer me. “That’s what I thought.”

Fear finally shifts into his giant form as we take a walk through the woods. The darkness doesn’t make a difference because I know this forest, and it knows me. I have never truly been lost here. Even in the beginning, it showed me the way home.

We walk silently for a bit, wandering aimlessly before Fear's enormous body comes to a screeching halt. Which I, of course, go flying into.

Turning, he gives me a very mischievous look. "Want to go to Willie's? That will definitely work this energy off."

Oh, *fuck yes*. We haven't been there in a long time. Willie's is an underground fighting ring, of sorts. You can go to bare-knuckle fights or spar with weapons. He even has a destruction room that's a magical simulation but feels real. Shit, the man made a *meditation* room. Willie created his place for all beings that hold some darkness, or pent up frustration, who need to let it all out. It's the only place of its kind.

We find the unsuspecting boulder in the middle of the forest, press our hands to it, and it opens for us. We take the short stone staircase to get in. Willie's will only appear to those who need it. It's a safe space, and Willie wants to keep out the beings who are just looking to cause unnecessary havoc.

"Avi, Ophir! I haven't seen you since the solstice. Too good for me now?" Willie says with a booming laugh.

Willie is an old, pot-bellied Troll who looks like he's lived ten lives already. His weathered skin is dark blue, has long lost any luster, and deep-set wrinkles surround his green eyes. He's a big, old, surly fucker; like everyone's favorite grandpa who will kick your ass if you cross his family.

"Life has been pretty crazy lately, and we knew exactly where to come to fix that," Fear says while hugging Willie.

Willie pulls out two glasses and places them on the bar before him. "Drink? You seem like you could use it to cool down for a moment. You know I made this place a safe spot to

get out your aggression, but I also don't want you going in there and accidentally killing a patron...or each other."

Fear and I look at each other and shrug. "Sure. Just one, though," I say to him.

"Ha! That's what everyone says. Mead or something harder?"

"Harder," Fear and I blurt out in unison.

Willie, Fear, and I sit and bullshit for a little while. The three drinks take off some of the edge. I put my hand over the top when he goes to pour us another glass.

"I think we're ready to work the rest of this off."

Willie nods his head and walks around the bar. He snaps his fingers, and a hallway of doors appears.

"Pick your poison, boys; where are you headed to?" Fear and I look at each other silently, communicating.

"Destruction!" we say at the same time. Willie flicks his wrist, and the door to the correct room opens. I love this place.

"Have fun, you two! Just remember, you can't actually kill each other!"

Fear and I practically skip into the room and decide what we're destroying today. Picturing a battlefield, we prepare for war. Both of us come from darker nature. Fear can control his urges better than I can, but he isn't a demon. At least here, we can lay waste to the enemy.

TWENTY

Ryu

AFTER THE GUYS LEFT, I moved Vi into Fear's room, knowing that's where she would be the most comfortable. I thought about staying with her but didn't want to overstep. I did that once this week, and I'm trying hard to give her all the space she needs.

It's late when I hear the front door squeak open. Avi and Ophir stroll inside, in much better spirits.

"You two feel better now?"

Their faces bloom with child-like smiles. "We went over to Willie's. We're feeling a thousand times better." I can't remember the last time I was there—maybe I should go. It makes a lot of sense how they got so relaxed so quickly.

"Well, I hate to ruin the mood, but we have to talk before Vi wakes up. We all heard what she said, right?" I ask them cautiously.

"Which part? That her elf brother is named Ziggy? Or that she just so happened to lose him running from The Collective?" Avi asks sarcastically. Dramatically scrunching up his face, he taps his bronze chin as if in deep thought. "The

same Ziggy who created The Tower after annihilating the entire holding camp he was in. Yeah, I can see how this is going to be interesting. Just wait until she finds out we work for her brother.”

I try to process all of this new information. “We don’t actually know if Vi is his sister. It could be a coincidence.” This complicates a lot of things. The worst part is that we found her on a personal assignment. Ziggy has made it his private mission to find her. We just got lucky.

“A very, very specific coincidence,” Avi bites back. “Don’t be stupid.”

“How were we supposed to know? First of all, he goes by Chief Nyx or Zigmund. Only those close to him are allowed to call him Ziggy. Second, he never once said her name, just that he lost his sister. She barely fits the description: shorter, yellow complexion, short black hair that sits at her chin, and no scars. That could be a million different elves. The only distinguishing feature he mentioned was a star-shaped birthmark on her back. We’ve all seen her naked, and none of us have seen a birthmark. Scarring, yes, but no star. Plus, he doesn’t even know that she was with the satyr.” Fear rattles off his points in an attempt to rationalize the bizarre situation.

We all know that hair grows and bodies change. Still, we always pictured a 5’2” cherub-like elf. Not a goddess with long legs, a perfect face, and a body to die for, topped with an attitude to match.

Avi stokes the fire watching the burnt wood crackle. Turning around with the poker, he brandishes it like a weapon. “Do we tell him? Let him show up and deal with the explanation? Because I *really* don’t want to tell her he isn’t the one who sent us. We can’t, right?”

Of course he doesn't. Avi doesn't even want Vi here, and this would be the best way to get rid of her. What he doesn't understand is that it would cause bigger issues to send her away.

"I hate hiding things from her, which is lying by omission. She just started trusting us again. Fuck, she is even okay with being around this shithead," Fear motions to Avi. "But in this case, I think we need to keep this between the three of us until we do some research and know for sure. Telling her without hard evidence could be detrimental. What if he isn't *her* Ziggy? I'm not doing that to her."

"So, are we all in agreement? We hold onto this revelation until we are sure."

With a unifying nod, our fate is sealed.

I hope she understands why we kept it from her.

Ophir

THE MATTRESS DIPS beneath me as I crawl into bed with Vi. She has curled herself tight like a pill bug, her knees partially meeting her forehead. Gently, I unfurl her long limbs until she is mostly straight and then tuck her into my side.

I haven't seen an episode like Vi's since Akira found Avi. He would have regular episodes for years, then he shut off his humanity and went full Rakshasa. There wasn't a woman in the city he didn't fuck, a fight he didn't pick, and we even had to cover up a few murders when he got too angry with beings. It took a long time, but we did get him back. Since then, Avi only has them when the stress levels are too high.

I'm too lost in my thoughts to realize that Vi has woken up.

"Hey, big guy. I'm sorry about earlier." Vi presses herself tighter against me, placing a kiss on my chest.

"Are you okay, little one? And please don't ever apologize for something you can't control. We all have our demons—some of us actually *are* demons." The last comment gets her to smirk.

"I'm a little off, but I'll be okay," she murmurs through a yawn. "I know I have Avi to thank for my clarity. When he's not being a total prick, he's really not that bad." She struggles with admission, but I'm proud of her for looking past their issues.

"I hate to say it, but I told you so. Everyone in this house is in your corner, Vi, no matter how unlikely it may seem." I go to kiss her on the head, but she tilts up, lining up our lips perfectly. With only a breath of space between us, I force myself to hold back.

"You should get some more sleep, Vi. You just went through a mental war field."

She looks at me with stars in her eyes. "I don't want to, Ophir. I don't want it to hurt anymore. I want you to make it better." Entangling her fingers into my beard, she uses it as a handle. Vi kisses me with fervor, sliding her tongue across the seam of my lips. Opening for her, I groan as our tongues meet.

Snatching her full hips, I sit us up, dropping her so she's perfectly positioned in my lap. My hard length grinds against her core. She mewls, rocking her hips.

Twisting her long hair into my fist, I tug her head back, granting myself perfect access to her neck. Peppering kisses

down to her clavicle, her breath quickens. When I reach the base of her throat I bite down on the soft skin. A moan slips from between her lips, vibrating against my mouth.

“You need to tell me you’re sure about this, little one. I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

“I’m sure! *Please*, Ophir,” Vi whines, rolling her nails into my arm.

My hands slip beneath the hem of her top, slowly peeling it from her body. Her heavy breasts bounce as they escape the fabric, and I can’t help but cup them—a perfect fit. Rolling her peachy nipple between my fingers, she lets out a needy cry.

“Mmm...do you like when I play with these perfect tits?”

Vi’s face flushes as she nods furiously.

I take her nipple into my mouth, licking and sucking greedily. She rocks against me, begging for any friction she can get. More than happy to fill her needs, I slide my hand up her leg into the bottom of her sleep shorts, finding she is completely bare beneath. I tease her slit, loving the soft sighs that spill from her lips. Vi presses down into my touch, silently begging for more.

Sliding back further, I dip inside her, collecting evidence of her arousal.

“Oh, little one, was this your plan all along? Leaving me perfect access to your dripping cunt?” Just how long have you been dreaming about this moment?” Removing my glistening finger, I slide it against her bottom lip. “Taste yourself,” I demand.

She wraps her lips around, sucking with challenge in her eyes. Shifting back, Vi slides from my crossed legs, planting her feet on either side of my knees. She shimmies her shorts

down her legs, lifting her feet in air for me to finish taking them off.

Vi lets her legs fall open, blessing me with the perfect view of her gorgeous cunt. With a wicked grin, she skates her fingers down from between the valley of her breast, over her stomach, all the way down until she has two fingers pressed inside her. She pumps in and out, watching me intensely, knowing I'm hanging on her every breath. "It's better to drink from the source."

I don't need to be told twice. Scooping her into my arms, I lie back, placing her pussy onto my face. Breathing her in, I know she will be the sweetest treat I've ever had.

I languidly drag my tongue from her opening all the way to her clit.

"Holy fuu—" Vi's moans are music to my ears.

Lapping up her juices, I suck on her clit hard, she snaps her knees closed around my head.

"Nuh-uh..." I wrench her thighs open, holding her open, giving me the perfect opportunity to spear her with my tongue. Vi rides my face, fucking herself. She looks like a queen upon her throne, taking what she wants. Her breaths become more and more labored. Knowing that she is going to come soon, I flip her onto her back and push one digit into her, gliding in and out. Vi grabs onto my hair, shoving my face tight against her pussy.

"More, I need more."

I add a second finger and curl them inside her while sucking and biting on that little bundle of nerves. She fists the sheets as her walls lock around my fingers,

"Oh gods, Ophir! I'm goin—"

“That’s right, little one. Come for me.” Taking my thumb, I circle her clit while dragging my fingers across that spot inside. With her back bowed, she explodes, soaking my face.

“I’m not done with you yet, Vi.” I lap the release from her drenched center before lazily pushing two fingers back in. Adding a third, I start pumping them in and out until I hear her breath pick up again. She is so wet that it’s running down my hand.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Leaning over, I kiss her cheek sweetly, slowly dragging my lips to her pointed ear. “My beautiful little one, you are such a *good fucking girl*. Can you give me one more?”

As if on command, she cries out ecstatically with my name on her lips.

She lays there catching her breath before sitting up on her elbows, her eyes filled with hunger.

“My turn.”

TWENTY-ONE

Villiana

I'M PRETTY SURE this man is actually a deity because the way he eats pussy is a religious experience.

And now I shall kneel before my god.

My mouth waters at the sight of the massive print in Fear's sleep pants. Placing my hand on the center of his chest, I guide him backward. I know what I'm about to witness is going to be shocking, but nothing could have prepared me. Slipping my hand beneath his waistband, he hisses as I brush against the smooth skin.

There is no fucking way. I almost have a heart attack trying to wrap my hand around him, failing as my fingers don't meet. Fear is, indeed, a giant in *every* sense of the word.

Sensing my apprehension, he cups my face. "You don't have to."

I shake my head. "But I want to."

Dragging down the soft fabric of his lounge pants, his massive cock springs free. Besides the size, it's perfectly straight and already weeping for me. I bet it tastes just as good.

“Nice and wide, Vi. Let me help.”

Holding himself in place, I bow my head, licking the thin trail of precum. Fear balances himself on his arms, watching as I take him in—which is not an easy task. I love how his length twitches as I close my lips around him. Not moving, I try to let my jaw get used to his size.

A primal groan creeps up his throat the further my lips slide down. I pull back until he’s almost out, showing him I’m in control. Curving my tongue against the underside, I press forward until he hits the back of my throat. Both hands wrap around the base, I work my mouth and hands simultaneously.

Fear pumps his hips upwards, causing me to gag. “You’re doing so good, little one. My cock is perfect in your mouth. Do you think you can take a little more?”

Nodding, I hum around him. With confirmation, Fear fists my hair, forcing this length further down my throat.

“So hungry for my cock,” he groans, with a voice as sweet as syrup.

Taking over, he punches his hips up. “I’m going to fuck your face now, Villiana. I can’t wait to see tears stain your flushed face.” I hollow out my cheeks, meeting his strokes.

Moaning loudly, liquid heat runs down my legs. I rub my legs together, trying to get any relief.

“*Fuck,*” Fear groans, pistoning his hips. I can’t help but gag. My jaw burns while the sound of my choking fill the air, and tears run down my face.

“Just like that, little one. You’re doing perfectly. Keep your throat nice and open for me.” I thought he was fucking my face hard before—that was not the case. My nose is running, I can barely breathe, but I love it.

I love the way he uses me.

I love that I could come from pleasuring him alone.

I love watching his eyes glaze over, slowly losing control.

Fear's stomach tightens, and his pace falters. Yanking me back, he pulls himself from me. I gasp in the fresh air. "I'll fill your belly another time. Tonight, I'm going to have your sweet cunt drowning in so much of my seed that you will still be able to taste me," he says with a crazed look.

Maiden, Mother, and Crone, save me.

"I want you on top. You'll be able to take me better if you set the pace." Fear picks me up again as if I weigh nothing. Placing me over his length, he lets me take the lead. Hovering above him, I hold Fear in my hand, positioning him at my entrance, slowly lowering myself onto him. As the head breaches me, I abruptly stop.

"It's not going to fit."

He reaches under his bed, pulls out a small box, and takes out a bottle of lube. Pouring it into his hand, he rubs it up and down his shaft, ensuring it's completely coated. "Alright, little one, that will help. You can take me. I know you can," he says, lining himself back up.

Inch by inch, I sink back down. The stretch is like nothing I've felt before. I didn't know it was possible to feel so full.

"*Mmm*, that's it. I know you can take me."

Rocking back and forth, he fills me deeper and deeper. Every time I think I'm close to the base, I'm wrong, so I use gravity to help work him in. The bite of the burn sends pulses throughout my body. I stay in place, adjusting to his size.

Fear reaches between us and strums my swollen clit. “Lean back and roll your hips, sweetness. Watch your tight cunt swallow me.”

Seeing how stretched my pussy is creates a tidal wave of slick arousal—I roll my hips harder. Fear grabs me hard, guiding my movements.

“Vi, I will take over if you don’t start moving faster. You are the sweetest torture.”

With a devilish smile, I press my hands to his chest and circle my hip. Apparently, he doesn’t take lightly to being teased because I’m flipped onto my stomach with my pussy on display again. A loud smack comes down onto my ass, making me groan. Fear spreads my legs wide to fit between, lines himself up and slams into me. He fucks me unyieldingly. Our wet skin slapping against each other sounds out throughout the room.

“You are perfect; stretched so wide, swallowing my cock like it was made for me.”

Fear adjusts himself so he can get even deeper. Between the pain and the pleasure, I can’t hold back any longer. My orgasm rips through my body, tears rolling down my face. He grabs my hair, forcing me to look up as he hovers over my face.

“Look me in the eyes while I paint your walls with my cum. Look how you bring the giant to his knees.” His strokes become jagged as he fists my hair tighter, before finally spilling inside me. He pumps his hips a few times before pulling out. We both lay there breathlessly for a moment, then Fear drags me into his chest, softly stroking my hair.

“You did so well, little one. Thank you for trusting me with your body when I don’t even deserve your mind.”

“But—”

“No, Vi. You didn’t have to give yourself to me, but you did. Your trust is something I will never take for granted.” Fear kisses me, “I’ll be right back.”

He gets out of bed, and I sit up a little, causing hot cum to puddle between my legs. Shit, I should have waited until he got back. When Fear walks back in with a warm cloth in his hand, he notices the look on my face.

“I made a mess. I’m sorry,” I say, a blush tinging my cheeks.

“Don’t get shy with me, Villiana. I helped create this, so I will help clean it up. Lay back so I can take care of you first.” Fear gently cleans between my legs, picks me up, places me on a dry spot, and crawls in behind me. As he pulls me tight against his chest, my eyes close.

“Sweet dreams, beautiful.”

TWENTY-TWO

Ryu

I HAVE NEVER FELT SO possessive as when I heard Vi crying out in pleasure for Ophir. I want him to be happy above all—I love him—but *I* want that with her. I've been thirsting for her mind, body, and soul since the moment I met her, and to know that she has chosen Ophir ignites something inside me. It took everything in me not to go in there and rip her away from him, but I also couldn't keep my hands off my cock. Poor guy got the brunt of my aggression.

Usually, I'm out of bed shortly after sunrise, but hours have passed, and I'm still staring at the ceiling. Vi has completely unhinged me; I don't know who I am anymore. I'm the guy with a routine that I don't veer from. I know what I'm going to eat for dinner the night before and have a carefully planned day. But ever since Vi has come into my life, I don't know what will happen five minutes from now.

Hauling myself out of bed, I force myself into the shower and then get dressed. Since it's almost lunchtime, I turn on the stove to make something to eat. I choose grilled cheese because who doesn't love bread and cheese—especially on a cool day like this.

While the pan warms up, I look out the window to see that Vi has created a hammock between two oak trees. This is the first time I've seen her look truly happy, lying back with a book in her hand. Turning the page, a smile graces her gorgeous face. Is this what she used to do before Bonecliff?

I realize there is so much about her I don't know. I want her to trust me, but I've been too wrapped up in her presence to recognize that I haven't tried to get to know her past before she became an imprisoned woman. I hope it's not too late.

Knocking on the window, I try to get Vi's attention. Her head pops up, and her eyes meet mine. Opening the window, a burst of cold air rushes in.

"Want some lunch?" I ask her hopefully.

Vi closes her book and hops out of the hammock. "I can always eat."

I know she's at the door before she even opens it—my magic nips at my skin, trying to rush to her. Coming inside, Vi shrugs off her jacket—*my* jacket, I realize—and hangs it next to the door. Turning around to face me, she's sporting a genuine smile, melting my icy heart. She is so beautiful.

"What's on the menu?" she asks, skipping into the kitchen.

"How does grilled cheese sound?"

"You had me at cheese! I'll put some plates on the table for us." Reaching into the cabinet, she grabs the plates, then places them on the table. She goes back and grabs a bottle of dark liquor and the water pitcher. "Do you want a drink or a *drink*?" she asks, waving them up and down.

I shake my head, chuckling. "Surprise me."

"Alcoholic drink it is! Water is boring."

“Vi, you know water is essential to a healthy body.” Batting her long lashes, she twirls her finger in her hair innocently. “Okay, *Daddy*.”

My cock jumps to attention, loving how it sounds coming from her bratty mouth. Gods forbid, I care about her wellbeing.

I turn to the stove to make our lunch, praying it will divert my attention away from the throbbing in my pants. I butter each piece of bread, place two slices of cheese in the middle and drop it into the hot pan. Vi leans against the counter, watching me and sipping on her drink as if she’s going to critique my form. Finishing off her drink, she puts down her glass and comes toward me. Vi presses her chest to my back, wrapping her arms around my center. I’m taken aback when she squeezes me.

“Thank you. It’s nice to have simple moments like this. It reminds me that I have the chance at a normal-ish life.”

My chest tightens with an unfamiliar feeling—contentment. Our lives have kept us on the balls of our feet, and I don’t remember the last time we took time to relax. I love working with The Tower, giving the girls new lives, but all the death and pain takes a toll. I’m burnt out.

Twisting around to face her, I tuck her hair behind her ear and press a kiss on the top of her head. “Don’t thank me, kitten. This is how your life should be.” Vi tilts her head up, our lips barely a breath apart. Painfully slow, we move toward each other, but when our noses brush, Vi stops.

“I think the food is burning,” she says in barely a whisper.

Taking a chance, I palm the back of her head, moving so my lips brush hers.

“Let it.”

I crash against her pillowy lips, drinking her in like she is the antidote for the ache in my soul. She lets out a soft sigh while fisting the front of my shirt to pull me closer—flashes of gold sparkle behind my eyes in celebration. I need more. With my fingers tangled in her hair, I walk her backwards until she hits the table. But as I go to lift her, I hear loud footfalls.

“Are you trying to burn down the house? Fuck. You and Fear need to stop thinking with your cocks for one gods damn moment and realize that there are more important things than her hot pussy,” Avi berates me.

Vi pushes me away, face flushed with embarrassment, and rushes to turn off the burner. I turn my gaze onto Avi—if I could shoot venom, I would. He has been such an idiot since Vi came into our lives. There can only be one needy being in the house—obviously, he thinks it’s him.

Avi narrows his eyes at me as if trying to scold me, but it spurs my anger more. Rounding the table, I feel my claws extend with every step. When I reach Avi, I grab him by the throat, pulling him to my face so only he can hear me.

“You *will* fucking respect her. Whatever your deal is with her, fix it,” I growl, pressing my nails into his neck, careful not to break the skin. “And if the problem is Ophir and I, then the three of us can deal with that privately.” I release him violently and watch him stumble back.

Righting himself, Avi’s eyes turn pitch black, and his nostrils flare. “Fuck you, Ryu. If you can’t see what she’s doing to our family, you’re blind,” Avi spits. He starts marching toward the door but stops when we’re shoulder to shoulder. “And just remember, I *allowed* you to handle me like

that. I could have easily overpowered you, *big brother*.” And then he slams the door on his way out.

I look to find Vi staring into the pan as she flips a new grilled cheese, her shoulders are pulled tight, and her hair hangs in her face. “I’m sorry about him. He’s...adjusting.”

“No, he’s right. I have disrupted your lives, whether some of you like it or not, and I have to respect the fact that I am effectively a stranger.” Her voice is small and somber. She won’t look at me, but she continues cooking our lunch—the lunch I was supposed to make us.

Vi sets the plates down at the table and refills our glasses. She avoids eye contact as we eat silently. I reach out and place my hand atop hers, finally getting her attention. When her amethyst eyes flick up, a turbulent sea of emotions crashes into me, leaving me breathless. Her complexity is something I want to unwrap one layer at a time. I want to know her mind as well as she does.

“I’m sorry, Vi. This was supposed to be a nice lunch, just you and I. I wanted to get to know you, for you to see that I care about you. But you should know that while our lives have changed, it’s for the better.”

Turning her hand over, she laces our fingers together, offering a soft smile. “My world has changed so much, and very quickly. I don’t know how I should feel or act—how to be normal. But I know that I want to get to know you, too. All of you.”

A surge of relief flows throughout me. Even with all of her anger, she’s still willing to try. So I won’t take this gift lightly. I’m going to spend every free moment learning about her. What makes her happy, what foods she loves, or what books

she likes to read. I'll take every book off the shelves and fill them with new ones for her if it will make her smile.

“Tell me a happy memory,” I say, swiping my thumb against her soft skin.

Vi's nose scrunches as she shuffles through her mind, finding the perfect story. Her mood instantly changes, a bright smile stretching from ear to ear.

“After a particularly awful night with Locren, he felt generous and allowed me to spend the day outside. I did yoga in the field, cherishing every moment of warm sun on my skin. I found a small milkweed patch and picked a few to make a flower crown. When I placed it on my head, it was like I was transported back home with my mother and brother—I could smell the fresh pie my mother had made. I don't know how long I was lying in the grass, but an unfamiliar voice pulled me from my daydream. It was so close, like she was standing over me.” Vi tells the story as if she is reliving it. Pure joy beams from her with every word. “Opening my eyes, I found a new girl cuffed to a bench while two guards spoke. She had so much fire in her eyes and fight in her voice. I didn't even think about what I was doing as I walked right over and sat beside her. I introduced myself, and she said her name was Thorin. We talked for a bit, and by the end of the conversation, we promised to burn the world down for each other.”

I realize that I will never be the man Vi deserves if I can't bring her peace, which starts with bringing her to Thorin. I don't bother consulting the guys because I will make the journey with her alone if I have to, but I refuse to be the one who causes her more pain.

“Villiana, would you like to go see Thorin? It's still not the safest time to bring you there, but you deserve to see her.”

Tears form in her eyes as she leans forward. “Are you serious? You’ll really let me see her? Where is she?” Vi shoots off the questions.

“Yes, kitten, I will take you.”

I stand as Vi rounds the table. Jumping into my arms, she throws her arm around my neck, and cries into my chest, “Thank you, Ryu. You can’t imagine how much this means to me.”

I rub small circles into her back. “It’s my pleasure.”

AFTER OUR LUNCH FIASCO, I decided to take Vi to my favorite spot in the woods. We sat and traded stories and dreams. It was everything I could have hoped for. As we return to the house, we open the door to laughter.

“*Ha*, take that, you giant oaf! I win again!” Avi throws his cards down, grabs his drink, and finishes it. I see Ophir try to hide his smirk, but he’s not doing very well. He totally let him win. Some things never change.

Vi jumps into Ophir’s lap, pressing a scorching kiss against his lips. He snakes his hand up her shirt, making a show of his affection.

“Hello to you too, little one. What do I owe to such a greeting?”

“I can’t believe you guys are actually taking me to see Thorin! I didn’t think I would ever see her again.” Her eyes are bright for the first time since Avi brought her home.

“*We are?*” Avi and Ophir say in unison. Two sets of eyes burn into me at that moment.

“Yes, we’re going to pack tonight, and we’ll head out in two days. Avi, we can drop off the delivery to Anabell on the way.” I leave no room for argument.

Avi’s lips thin, his eyes narrowing into slits. “Uh-huh. I’ll get right to packing that up.” The sarcasm drips from his mouth.

I watch Vi whisper into Ophir’s ear. He nods at her and places a kiss on her forehead. She comes over to me and hugs me tightly. “Can I sleep in your bed tonight?” she asks.

“Of course. I’ll take the couch, no big deal.”

Vi scoffs at me playfully. “I meant with you.”

Clearing my throat, I reply, “If that is what you want, then absolutely.”

The way she bats her eyes at me in approval goes straight to my dick. The tension between us has been brewing all day, and my need for her is about to boil over. Vi flicks her eyes down to the tenting of my pants. Then, shooting me a knowing grin, she kisses the hollow of my throat.

“Maybe we should have some dinner before Ryu fucks Vi on the table,” Fear chuckles.

I’m starving...just not for food.

TWENTY-THREE

Ryu

“NOW THAT THE princess is taking a lavish bath... Has that girl messed your head up that bad that you can't see how fucked this situation is?” Avi throws his hands in the air exasperatedly. “Ophir, I would expect this behavior from—he's finally been inside her. But you? I thought you were more logical than that, Ryu. We don't know if the location is being watched. Shit, we can't be sure *we* aren't being watched. Locren is not going to wait around patiently for Villiana to get back to him. I'm surprised he hasn't found me and tried to kill me yet.”

“You will *never* speak about her like she is just some warm hole. Do you understand me, demon boy?” Fear's voice is deep and hostile. Avi goes to swing at him, and Fear's shadows burst out, enveloping the both of them. Knowing that I have to stop them before Vi hears or they kill each other, I drop the room's temperature.

“You two idiots better get your shit together before I create a blizzard in here! We don't have time for your childish nonsense.” I can't understand why Avi won't get over his problem with Vi. He created most of these issues on his own.

As snowflakes fall around the room, the guys finally get the hint. When Fear pulls his shadows back in, Avi no longer has a shirt, and a bruise is forming on his cheek. Fear didn't make it out unscathed, either. Avi gave him a nice split lip.

“Are you two happy now? Can we move on, or do I need to put the both of you in a timeout?” I quickly slide back into the mediator role I've taken my whole life. The guys chests heave, starting daggers into each other, but stay separated. “Normally, I would never condone this, but get one of the bags of blood and rub a tiny bit on your cuts and bruises. I don't need Vi feeling guilty for a decision I made on my own.” I wait for them to heal and continue when everyone is settled.

“Now, if you had just let me speak, you would know I have a plan. It's not foolproof, but we are smart and seasoned in combat.” Grabbing a pen and paper, I draw out the details. Fear and Avi occasionally object or add to parts of the plan.

“The last part is crucial, and Vi has to be involved. Avi, you have a big job here. We need to create her sigil and tattoo her with it. All of the weapons we bring will have her sigil added to them. And you will create some leathers for her. Fear and I will help you with anything you need, but this is not up for discussion.”

Standing up, I stretch my muscles. We've been hunched over this table for a while now, and my back feels cramped. As I reach my arms above my head I feel someone's gaze sear into my skin. My shirt has risen, exposing my defined V-cut, and Fear is looking at me like I'm his last meal. *As if I wasn't horny enough.* Coming up behind him, I undo his braid and massage his head while I address him. “Fear, seeing that your magic is so *potent...*” I curl my fingers in and tug lightly,

causing him to draw in a sharp breath. “You will help infuse everything with magic. I want to ensure it is perfect.”

Avi knocks on the wood to get my attention. “And what are you going to do?” he asks pointedly.

“I’m going to make sure we have all the medicinal essentials.”

Tonight, my word is law.

“Do you have a side you like to sleep on?” Vi asks, standing at the foot of my bed.

“I’ll sleep wherever.”

I watch her bounce into the bed, making herself comfortable with the blankets bunched up around her. Vi is full of life, even after everything that has happened to her. Of course, she has her issues, but don’t we all? When I’m around her, it feels right, like a missing piece of me has returned home.

I get into bed next to her, and we turn to face one another. Absentmindedly, I run my finger along the scar across Vi’s face—she flinches at my touch.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Vi traces the path my finger took, soothing it like a burn. “I’m just not used to anyone touching it. We’ve shared a lot of memories today, but this is not one of my favorites.”

“I wish there wasn’t a story to tell, kitten.” I want to pull her close and comfort her, but I don’t. It matters to me that she sees me respecting her boundaries, only indulging in touching her when she offers herself up. I won’t risk creating a divide in our relationship again.

Vi turns onto her back and stares up at the ceiling. “Everyone who The Collective captures is brought to a holding camp before being placed at a permanent location. The permanent camps don’t care what shape you’re in when you finally get there, as long as you are able to supply blood and bear children for them, and the soldiers really took full advantage of that fact.” She grips the sheets tightly in her fists. “I was twenty and full of fight when I was taken. I wasn’t going with them so easily. I would find any way I could to get away. I memorized the soldiers’ schedules; where they would be and when, when they ate, and when they slept. I even knew which ones would slip away to find some poor girl to take advantage of. I thought I had it all planned out—the perfect escape—but I was sorely mistaken.”

I stop her from continuing. “You don’t have to tell me. You don’t owe me anything.”

Vi doesn’t bother to answer me. Lost in her memories, she goes on. “A guard called Kole found me when I was almost fully over the fence. He ripped me down by my ankle, causing my face to drag across the sharp metal at the top. Blood was pouring down my face and into my mouth, in my hair, all over my chest. When my head smashed into the ground, he climbed on top of me and held me down by my throat. I kicked and scratched, but there was no moving him. He squeezed my neck so hard I started to lose consciousness, and then he raped me. Right there in the dirt. He didn’t care that I was fighting him—I actually think he enjoyed that—or that I was covered in blood. He took what he wanted from me, like I was nothing. When he was done, he dragged me back to the camp and let the rest of the unit have their turn.”

I brush her tears away with my thumb. “You are so strong, Vi,” I tell her softly.

“I’m tired of being strong, Ryu. I may be free of Bonecliff, but I’m not free of The Collective. They will come for me. Locren does not take lightly to being made a fool of,” she says distantly.

“Let me take some of the burdens. Let me be strong for you—you don’t have to do this alone anymore.” Vi turns onto her side, her violet eyes locking with mine.

“I can try. I can’t promise that I will let go completely, but I can try.”

I can’t keep away from her for another moment. I want to swallow her sadness. Cradling her head, my nose brushes hers as we seal our lips together. As our tongues dance together, something inside me feels like it snaps. Sparks of gold and blue dance together, settling into our skin. The delicate kiss of our magic shatters who I once was, creating a better version in its wake.

Flipping us over so I’m hovering above Vi, she instinctively wraps her legs around me. I place kisses down her neck and chest, feeling her heartbeat against my lips. She lifts her arms, allowing me to remove her shirt. Her perfect breasts beg to be touched. Grasping one of the heavy teardrops, I swirl my tongue around her pebbled nipple, teasing her. Lightly sucking it, her back bows and a moan escapes her lips. Giving her other nipple the same treatment, Vi rolls her hips against me, looking for any friction she can get.

My lips find their next destination, trailing kisses down her soft stomach. Her muscles shiver under my touch. Chest heaving, Vi drops her legs open as invitation. I’m happy to oblige her needs, taking the opportunity to slide my hands into

the top of her shorts. Impatiently, I roughly yank them down, taking her panties with them.

Completely bare, I stare down in awe of her. Everything about her is perfect—especially her glistening pussy. Taking two of my fingers, I find her dripping core. My fingers swirl through her wetness, dragging them up to her little bundle of nerves. I explore what she likes, judging by her moans and sighs. More pressure; faster, smaller circles. Anything to hear her sing for me.

“Ryu, *please*. I need more,” Vi purrs, pushing against my hand.

Slipping two fingers inside her, Vi snaps her thighs closed.

“Oh no, kitten, legs wide open for me. I want to see how well your needy pussy takes my fingers.” Opening back up for me, I watch how easily my digits glide in and out of her. Adding a third, Vi’s legs begin to shake—her cunt weeps for me.

“Fuckkkk. Please, sir. *Pleaseeee*.”

Her words ignite me. I could get used to that title. Taking my thumb, I strum her clit while curling my three fingers inside of her.

“*Ryu!*” She explodes with my name on her lip, drenching me with her nectar.

“Such a good girl for me, kitten. You are so beautiful.” Sucking my fingers into my mouth, I taste her. *Fuck*. “And so sweet, too.”

Vi goes to release my painfully hard erection, but I stop her. “Tonight was just about you.”

Laying down on my back, Vi places herself under my arm with her head on my chest. She lightly traces over the tattoos on my arms, outlining each one as if she did them herself.

“Who does these for you?”

I softly run my finger up and down her arm, taking time to appreciate this simple, yet intimate, moment. “They just show up during meaningful events in my life.”

Vi follows them onto my pecs and places a chaste kiss over Tengu. “So, what is this one for?”

I smile, thinking about the day it appeared. “It means honor, loyalty, and courage. Ophir, Avi, and I had made a pact always to stick together and stand up for what was right. The lives they had before were horrid, and we wanted to make sure the important beings in our lives were always protected.”

Vi turns onto her belly, tilting her head to look up at me doe-eyed; she looks so innocent right now. “That’s amazing. You three really are like brothers.”

A sense of pride washes over me as I say, “Yeah, maybe even more than that. Especially Ophir and I. Avi isn’t any less important to us, but we have something... *different*. Kind of like what you and Thorin have.”

Vi doesn’t say anything but seems to understand.

“What about this one?” Her voice is sleep laced; smooth and soft.

Vi traces the shape of the peony on my hip and each petal that has fallen off. Her delicate touch sends waves of warmth coursing through every fiber of my being.

“That’s my sigil.”

“I guess I should memorize it in case we’re ever separated.”

“Hellfire couldn’t keep me away from you, Vi. I never intend to be too far.”

We stay this way, silent and lost in thought. Closing my eyes, I feel myself starting to drift to sleep. With her skin against mine, everything feels right. But a part of me is terrified of what will happen next. I can feel the tug in my gut telling me that something worse is coming, and we’re not prepared.

TWENTY-FOUR

Villiana

LAYING there with my eyes closed, I wait to hear Ryu's breaths even out before throwing on his big fluffy robe and heading into the sitting room.

The nights haven't gotten too cold yet, but it's not warm enough to stay here without starting a fire. So once I get a nice little flame going, I walk over to the bookshelf, running my fingers across the spines. Something happened with us tonight, very similar to the feelings I had with Fear, and I intend to figure it out.

Starting at the top shelf, I slowly scan my left hand over each book, waiting to feel the energy I'm looking for. Lys taught me about the giving and receiving of power—you give with the right and receive with the left. When you seek an answer, you set the intention and search for the energy that calls to you.

By the third bookcase, I start to feel a pull. Finally, when I get to the third shelf, I reach a book that sends a pulsing sensation into my palm. This has to be it: *A Soul for Two*.

I thumb through the first few pages, looking for an index; finding it, I take in the title of each chapter: *How do you know if they are the right one?*; *Understanding Bonds*; *Understanding Mates*. What the actual fuck?

Pressing my hand into the pages, I ask to be shown about energies combining. Each piece of paper starts flipping on its own until the book finds the section it was looking for.

My eyes feverishly scan over every sentence. Things like *bonded* and *magic mixing* litter the page. I freeze when I get to the explanation:

“Magical mixing, or bonding, happens by choice or by fate. If the bonding takes place by choice, the beings must perform a ceremony for unification. If the bonding takes place because of fate, the beings will have no choice in the matter. An intense feeling of connection and devotion will wash over the beings. This usually happens during intimate moments, whether it be physical or emotional. After the bond takes place, it will be challenging for the pair to be apart; heartache is a common side effect. The bonded pair can also sense one another’s presence and emotions, which gets stronger over time.

Please see Chapter 35 to learn more about fated—”

I have become so consumed by what I’m reading that I don’t notice Fear until he softly places his large palm against my back. I jump at the connection.

“Sorry to scare you, little one. I was lying in bed and felt the need to find you. When I heard the crackle of the fire, I figured you must be out here. Is everything okay?”

He felt a need? The book slips from my finger, crashing loudly on the floor. I start to feel woozy as my knees buckle.

Grabbing onto the bookshelf for support, Fear reaches out and steadies me.

“Villiana, what is—” Fear stops mid-sentence as his eye catches the words on the book’s cover at our feet. His eyes flick back up to mine, his face completely blank. “How about you sit down on the couch, and I’ll get you some water?”

“Yeah. Okay.” Fear helps me to the couch before grabbing two glasses of water.

“We don’t have to talk about the book. You head back into bed with Ryu, or we can cuddle up in mine.” He’s trying to pussyfoot around the elephant in the room.

Pressing the cool glass against my burning face, I sigh in relief. “We actually do have to talk, seeing as it pertains to us.” I take a small sip of water, fearing I might throw it back up. “We’re bonded.” Better to just rip the bandage off.

Fear walks back over to the bookcase and picks up the book—he has to see for himself.

“Page one-fifty-five, three paragraphs down.”

I watch as his gray-blue eyes soak in every word. An unfamiliar ache in my chest begins to form—anxiety, no, excitement. It’s definitely not mine. I don’t even know what I’m feeling right now. Cloves and cinnamon overtake me, as well as the feeling of hope. He wants this...

“Big guy?”

“Does this upset you, Vi? Being bonded to me?” He sounds like a child, meek and panicked.

Setting my glass down on the dark wooden table in front of me, I make my way over to Fear. “Am I terrified? Yes. But it

also feels...right. So no, I'm not upset about being bound to you, just overwhelmed."

I contemplate for a moment whether or not I should bring up being bound to Ryu, too—if that's even possible, to be bound to more than one being.

"Just tell me, little one. I know something else is weighing on you." Fear cups my cheek.

Leaning into his hand, resigning to the fact that I would have to tell him eventually anyway. "I'm pretty sure I bonded with Ryu tonight too."

I don't get flooded with specific feelings; Fear just says, "Why don't we talk about this in the morning?"

Ryu

CRACKING MY EYES, I am momentarily blinded by the morning sun. The warmth nestled into my chest tells me Vi is still in bed, but the loud snoring from the other side of the room says we have a guest. The chair in the back corner of the room holds Fear, draped in the smallest blanket, his limbs dangling everywhere.

Gently, I pull my arm out from under Vi's head, stretch, and quietly leave the bed. As I'm about to close the door, I hear Fear's raspy morning voice. "Put on the kettle; we have to talk."

Dramatically dabbing my eyes, I look at him in fake shock. "Are you breaking up with me? I can do better, I promise!" I whisper-yell at him.

“I’ll love you forever, handsome, don’t you worry. But this is about—” Fear motions to the peacefully sleeping elf in my bed. I tilt my head at him in question, but he shakes his head. “Not here.”

Coming down the hall, the smell of burnt wood lingers in the air—they must have been out here last night. The house is so silent that when I open the cabinet to take out the kettle, tea, and cups, it sounds like I’m smashing them against the wall. Once the tea is on, I start another fire, knowing that everyone else is going to be chilly, and then I open all the drapes to let in the natural light.

Ophir’s loud footsteps reverberate down the hall as I pour our mugs.

“Should I be worried?”

He pulls out his chair, getting settled before starting the conversation. “That depends on how you feel about Vi.” Fear picks up his tea, the cup looking so tiny in his hands, and blows on the steaming liquid. He hums when he finally takes a sip.

What a weird question to ask. “You should already know how I feel about her, Fear. I think it’s blatantly obvious.” I give him a side-eyed glare, wondering where he is going with this.

“Good. That’s good to hear...” Pausing, he takes another sip of his drink, drawing this conversation out for no reason. “Because you’re bound to her.”

I let myself fall back against the counter in shock, causing my elbow to hit my mug, sending it crashing to the floor. I don’t move; I’m just stuck with Ophir’s words on repeat.

“What do you mean I’m bound to her?” Is that what those feelings were last night? But that would mean...

“I think you already figured it out, medicine man.” Ophir casts his shadows into the sitting room, having them retrieve a book. Placing it on the table, he turns it so I can read the cover. I’ve read this one before.

“She’s my mate.” I stroke my finger against the gilded cover in utter shock.

Ophir clears his throat, trying to get my attention. “Our.”

“Our?” My words come out in a hiss.

“I’m bound to her too. Have been for quite a while now and never realized it. I found her out here last night, entranced by that book. She figured it out on her own, love. I think this is something that she should start the conversation about, so don’t bring it up to her if she’s not ready.”

I open my mouth to speak at the same time that a door shuts down the hall. Quickly, I shove the book into a cabinet.

“Good morning, handsome. I hope you made some for me.” Vi comes around the table, kissing Ophir first and then me, placing a soft kiss on my cheek. Her face scrunches as she looks down at her now wet feet. “You do realize that you’ve dropped your mug, right?”

She gives me a questioning glare when I don’t answer right away. Then, looking down at the cold tea and broken mug, up at Ophir’s worried expression, and back to my frozen state, she fits the pieces together.

“Why are you so anxious, Ryu? It’s vibrating off of you.”

“I—” The words aren’t forming.

Vi stomps over to Ophir, pressing a dainty finger into his chest. “You told him, didn’t you?” She raises an eyebrow at him in question.

Ophir takes her hand, lacing their fingers together, and pulls her into his chest. Vi’s shoulders drop immediately as he whispers something into her pointed ear. She relaxes into his chest, and I hear a soft, “Okay.”

My skin pebbles, coated in sweat; it’s taking everything in me not to have a panic attack. My life—our lives—have been forever altered, and I have no idea how this is going to affect all of us.

“You’re blowing some serious icy air into the room, doc. I promise you can relax.” Vi leaves the comfort of Ophir’s arms to ensure I’m okay. She confidently reaches up, running her finger through my hair, calming my nerves. “You’re going to give me a heart attack if you don’t start breathing, Ryu. My heart is racing in tandem with yours.” Prying my hand from the countertop, she places it on her chest, over her heart. She’s right; our heartbeats are synced.

Just like she did at Bonecliff, Vi has me breathe with her. Every intake, I pull in renewed confidence in myself and the relationship I am building with her. With every exhale, I push out my insecurities and anxiety. Together, we will figure out whatever is in store for us. One thing is for sure; I need to read more about the blood vow.

TWENTY-FIVE

Villiana

I TRIED to put on a good face for Ryu this morning. It was impossible to shake the anxiety bursting from his skin. The terror of rejection was so intense I could almost taste it. On the other hand, Fear had made it abundantly clear that he was elated by the news. Juggling these emotions on top of my own is too much to digest. So I did what I do best—shoved it as far down as possible.

After everything, I thought going outside to get some fresh air and meditate might be a good idea. Sitting cross-legged in the grass, I focus on the five senses of grounding. I feel the gritty soil as I dig my fingers into the earth. I see the decaying leaves that litter the ground. I can taste the lingering sweetness of honey from my morning tea. I smell...leather?

Coming out of my little bubble, I realize how close to Avi's workshop I'm sitting. I haven't heard from him since last night, and he wasn't too happy with Ryu's decision to take me to Thorin.

My curiosity takes over, wanting to see him in his element, undisturbed, so I get up and quietly walk over to the cracked door.

Peeking my head around, I find Avi lost in thought, meticulously stitching pieces of leather together. Hunched over the table, his eyebrows are knitted together as a few stray curls fall over his eyes, and his peachy, full lips are pressed into a hard line. He is quite beautiful, especially when he's not being an asshole.

I press my body closer to the door to get a better look, and the door creaks slightly. Avi's features soften for a moment before becoming annoyed.

“Come in, Villiana. I know that you're there.”

Sheepishly walking inside, I don't go further than a few steps from the entrance. “How did you know it was me?”

His nostrils flare as he gives me a side-eyed glance. “If it were the other two, the door would have been thrown open without a care.” Avi's body language is guarded, ready to defend himself at any moment. I can't help but roll my eyes. Does he really think I'm going to attack him?

Getting along with him would be optimal, especially since we're going to be living together indefinitely. And if the guys love him, there has to be something redeeming. I mean, he did bring me here, clothe and feed me, and tried to deceive me since that night. Having hope for any kind of relationship with Avi that isn't strained is less than likely though. We will probably tolerate each other at best—even if I'm drawn to him.

“Are you going to move further than the door, or will you just continue standing there, staring into space, and picking at your fingers?”

Glancing down, I find he's right; I dug at my skin hard enough that droplets of blood have made their way to the

surface. I suck at the raw skin and push magic into the area to heal it. I haven't done this in a long time. My nervous ticks have long been beaten out of me. Showing weakness brings me closer to death—at least, that's what my time at Bonecliff taught me.

“I used to pull my hair out until I had little bald spots. Our dad taught me to channel my self-destructive energy into projects; it's why I always try to keep my hands busy.” Avi chews his lip before waving me over. “Come on. You can help me finish this up.”

Shuffling my feet over, I pull out the stool next to him and take a seat. Avi hands me a small oil dish, a rag, and the finished piece he has been working on.

“Dip the rag into the oil and rub it into the leather. The whole thing needs to be coated.” I soak the corner of the fabric, and Avi comes behind me, guiding my motions and demonstrating the process. “It's simple. I like to make circles like I'm trying to buff it out.” The combination of his warm body pressing tightly against my back, rough hand covering the top of mine, and the scent of fresh spring flowers are having a dizzying effect on me. Noticing the dampness between my legs, I cross them, squeezing my thighs tight together.

I hear Avi's breath catch while his hand becomes a vice against mine. He sniffs me and then quickly backs away. “Do you think you're capable of handling this on your own?”

My cheeks heat with embarrassment. I bite my bottom lip self-consciously, nodding.

“Good. When you're done, bring it over to me, and then I have something else I need you to do.”

Even after he walks away, his heat still lingers. A ghost touch tingles against my skin. I shouldn't miss him being near, but I do.

I work quickly and quietly, finishing up the small piece—which I'm pretty sure is a belt. Carefully, I walk the oiled leather to Avi. "Where would you like me to put it?"

He doesn't turn to look at me, just sticking his arm out to the right. "That table against the far wall. Hang it over the wire and let it dry."

Once the belt is away, I round the other side of the workbench. This way, he has to look at me. When I see what he's been working on, I gasp. The breastplate is a deep brown with a V-shaped neckline. It's stitched together in panels: down the center, on either side of the breasts, under the arms, and around the waist. The two center panels and around the plate's hem are decorated with beautifully stitched swirls and brass studs. The shoulders also have brass studs, complemented with chain mail attached like cap sleeves. It is *gorgeous*.

"Take your shirt off and put on a tunic from the pile behind you," Avi says, peering up at me.

"Here?" He doesn't think I'm going to strip in front of him, right?

"Yes, princess, right here. Are you shy all of a sudden?" He cocks a brow at me, eyes full of challenge. He wants to rile me up. He's looking to play with me.

I shrug and pull off Ryu's sweater slowly. I let the material tug my breasts up with it, allowing them to bounce back down as it passes over them. The lust pooling in his eyes makes me want to take everything else off. Unfortunately, I'm already

covering myself back up. The shirt fits me perfectly, falling just below my hips.

“What now?”

“Now, come over here and raise your hands above your head.” Avi crooks his finger at me.

I make a point to stand just a little too close to him. I like to see him sweat. Once I’m in position, Avi gives me a triumphant smile.

“Good girl. You *can* listen.”

He takes the breastplate off the bench and begins pulling it over my head; it’s a snug fit. The back is fully attached at the bottom but corseted at the top, so when he finally gets it onto my body, Avi turns me around and bends me forward so that my forearms are leaning against the bench.

“Take a deep breath in.”

I do, and he pulls the laces tight. I feel my organs smoosh together, but I can still breathe and move.

Pulling me upright, Avi has me face the large standing mirror against the wall.

“Why—why did you make this for me?” My mind is running a million miles a minute. I’m so taken aback by not only the craftsmanship but the gesture.

Avi walks up behind me and, with a feather-light touch, runs his hands down my arms. “You shouldn’t be left unprotected during our travels.”

I continue to stare at myself in awe. No one has ever made anything like this for me before. The gesture feels different.

“I outdid myself with this one. I haven’t made leathers for anyone in quite some time, and I was afraid I’d lost my touch. Obviously, I haven’t,” Avi preens.

“You’re very talented, Avi. I saw daggers, sai, and a katana before. Are these all for this trip?”

A satisfied smirk creeps across his face at the praise like it’s the best gift I could have given him. Avi removes his hands from my arms and walks over to his workbench, picking up one of the sai. “Yes. Now all that’s left is to spell them and engrave our sigils.” He presses his finger to the tip, and a spot of blood blooms from it. Smiling, Avi licks his finger and places the weapon back down.

“That’s pretty cool that all of you have your own sigils. I know they’re very personal, representing who you are within one symbol. Also, it takes a lot of magic to power them.”

“What does yours look like?”

Avi pulls up his shirt, exposing his toned back. On the back of his neck a beautiful unalome sits. The swirls aren’t smooth—which they would typically be. Instead they are jagged and imposing. Moving further up, the top line is broken into dashes.

It means he doesn’t believe that he’ll ever reach enlightenment. Every step of his journey is battered.

Letting the linen fall, he runs his fingers through his curls. “Don’t you worry, you get to have your own too. Doc’s orders.” Avi shows me a piece of paper with a symbol that looks like a star with a large and ornate V going through the center. Simple and elegant. I want to ask why he chose a star, but I don’t think right now is the time to.

“Thank you so much. I’m guessing Fear will be tattooing it on me before we leave?”

Avi snickers sinisterly, “Oh no, Villiana. I get to do something so much more fun.” He stalks toward me until I’m against the wall. Caging me in, he whispers against my ear, “Do you want to know what I’m going to do to you, little star?” His lips caress the point of my ear.

“Yes.” My words come out breathy. “I do.”

Taking one hand off the wall beside my head, Avi reaches down to his hip and pulls out his dagger with a bone handle. The blade is short but extremely sharp. He takes the point and places it at the hollow of my neck. Without nicking me, he drags it up until the point is under my chin.

“I’m going to mark you. I’m going to watch the blood trickle down your yellow skin, and then, together, we will power your sigil.” Avi puts the lightest pressure on the dagger, and I feel a slight sting. He palms the weapon and then takes my chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing me to look him in the eyes. “Do you think you can handle that, little star, or do you not burn as bright as I thought?”

Avi’s eyes are entirely black, and his face gleams with pure excitement. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him smile before, and if it wasn’t so ominous, I might think it’s beautiful.

Removing his other hand from the wall, he places it around my throat, pushing my head up. Avi takes the dagger and moves it to a small section of skin below my collarbone. Finding the center, he begins to carve the symbol into my skin. The bite of the blade causes me to whimper. I always have a little bit of pain with pleasure.

“*Oh*, you like that, you little pain slut. You should see how pretty you bleed.”

My core heats with his words, and I clench my thighs together. When Avi finishes carving my sigil, he dips his head down and licks the blood from my chest. He growls into my raw flesh, “Delicious.”

As if a switch flipped, he removes his hand from my throat, backs up quickly, and hurries out of the workshop. Leaving me to figure out what just happened.

No sooner does Avi leave, Ryu throws the door open. “What did he do to you?” I have never heard Ryu sound this way before. Gone is the soft-spoken, gentle Ryu I’ve grown to know. Instead, he looks like a man possessed.

“It’s not a big deal, doc. He made sure my sigil was really in there.” I look down to see blood trickling down between my breasts.

I feel the coolness of Ryu’s body stop directly in front of me. “Vi, I felt your pain. It wasn’t as if it was happening to me, rather an uncomfortable pressure on the spot on my chest.” His voice wavers with concern.

“I really am fine. I’m sorry that it scared you,” I say, pushing the stray hair from his face. “It’s an effect of the bond, isn’t it?”

“I believe so, but I know we haven’t fully mated. There wouldn’t be any question as to whether or not we were.” Ryu pulls a cloth from his pocket and blots my chest. “For right now, we have to power your sigil. You know you cannot heal this, right? Or we will have to start all over again.” *How long is he going to avoid this conversation?*

“Yeah, I figured, doc. So how do we do this?”

Ryu reaches behind me, pulls the laces off the corset, and then pulls the breastplate off me. Once it's removed, he takes me by the hand, leading me outside. "Lay in the grass face up."

I do as I'm told. "Now what?"

"So impatient," Ryu says under his breath. "As you know, everyone has a well of magic in the center of them. This is very different from your healer magic; it's the source of all your magical ability." He takes my hand and places it over my sigil. "To power your sigil, you must tap into that well. Sometimes concentrating on a memory will help you get into the right mindset. I will have my hand placed on top of yours, pushing my core magic into you as well. Once the sigil is fully powered, both power flows will stop."

Closing my eyes, I try to conjure flutters of the past.

"ALRIGHT, Vi, let's make one of my favorite dishes—stag meat pie."

Lys is so excited to teach me how to cook. Mama had given me some basic skills, but I was much younger when she was taken. Almost every day since I arrived, Lys has shown me one new dish, sweet or savory. We hunt for our meat, grow our own fruits and vegetables, and forage for anything else we may need. He wants me to know how to live off the land if I ever find myself alone.

Pulling out a pie pan, Lys takes some of our homemade butter, greases the pan, then places the dough we made earlier on top of the table.

"Vi, get some of that flour and coat the top of the table; it will prevent the dough from sticking."

I make sure the entire work area is coated, then place the ball of dough in the center. “Okay, what’s next?”

Lys hands me a rolling pin, “Take this and roll out the dough. You want to get it to flatten out to about a half-inch thick.” He waits patiently for me to get it right on my own. Once the dough is flattened, Lys places the pie pan in front of me.

“This is going to be the crust of the pie. Gently pick up the rolled-out dough and place it into the pan. Next, carefully press the dough into the bottom of the pan. Don’t worry about the extra hanging out the sides for now.”

Together, we continue to make the crust, removing the excess dough and pinching the top to help keep it in place when we bake it. Lys shows me how to cut the meat and make the gravy properly. Once that’s all finished, he has me mix the meat, gravy, vegetables, herbs, and spices together, then pour it on top of the crust. Mash potatoes are added to the top before placing it into the oven to cook.

“You did good, kid. I think this is going to be the best stag pie I’ve ever tasted.”

Lys gives me a huge hug, placing a kiss on my head. He is my bestest friend and the grandpa I never had. I will love him forever and ever.

A BLISTERING pain in my chest pulls me from the memory. My eyes snap open to Ryu’s blue and gold marbled eyes looking into mine.

“You’re okay, kitten. The sigil is powered and now scarred over.”

Removing my hand from my chest, I find my skin angry and red, but indeed scarred. Ryu bends forward and blows out an icy cold breath, soothing the area. Pushing myself up on my toes, I press a soft kiss on his lips. “Thanks, doc.”

“Let’s go inside and relax a bit. Blueberry tea sounds good?” he asks, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

Laying my head against him I nod. “Mmmm, yes please.”

TWENTY-SIX

Ophir

WITH EVERYTHING PACKED and ready to go, Avi went out early this morning to create a golem to deliver the blood to Locren. When he returned, Vi was already saddling the horses.

We have opted to travel horseback, even though it will take us almost two weeks to get to Thorin. Ryu and I shifting into true form is no big deal, but Avi would have to let the full effects of his Rakshasa out—we can't have him in full demon mode.

“You know, I've never seen the other guys shift before. I know you all settled for horseback, but I want to ride him. Can I *please* ride him?” Vi bats her eyes at me like it's going to change anything.

“Little one, I'm sure Ryu would love for you to ride him, but this is the safest way to travel right now,” I try to explain to her, placing a kiss on the top of her head

“*Fine.* But I better get to climb upon him, the icy dragon monster.” Vi crosses her arms, huffing and scrunching her face. *Such a bratty girl.*

Walking over toward us, I see Avi carrying a fur-lined leather jacket. “Here.” He shoves it into Vi’s arm. “Don’t need you getting sick and dying on us. These two idiots would probably jump right into the pits of hell with you, and I can’t have that.”

Vi puts the jacket on, buckling and belting it. “You’re going to have to pull that stick out of your ass eventually. I’m not going anywhere, so the faster you get used to it, the better off you are.”

Since we never have company, and only three of us live here, Vi has to ride with someone. Unfortunately, she wouldn’t fit with me, regardless of how large my horse is, and she’s *definitely* not going to ride with Avi. So that leaves Ryu—which he is *very* smug about.

Once everyone is mounted and ready to go, we head toward the city. The trip isn’t bad, but the condition of the city is. From what we’ve been told, Carnelian City was once beautiful with a predominately Fae population. But when the plague hit, it wiped out most beings in and around the city. Over the years, they’ve tried to revive the city, but the plague never entirely left. Now when visiting, you have to wear a mask and get to witness the decay. What a shame.

It doesn’t take us long to arrive at the Green Goddess. Anabell is standing in front of the store when we head inside.

“Boys! It’s always a pleasure to see you.” She hugs each one of us. When she gets to Vi, she kisses both of her cheeks. “I am happy to see you are properly suited this time. I was going to whoop someone’s ass.”

Vi giggles, popping her hip out while giving Ana a dazzling smile. “I would love to see that.”

“All the winter clothes are in there, and Ryu added some soaps and lotions too.” Avi hands Ana the miniature sack. “We wanted to make sure you got all of this before we headed off.”

“Ahh, yes. You said you’re going to see my brother in the letter you sent. Give him a hug and a smack on the head for me. Also, tell him he better make the trip to Carnelian City to see his big sister soon!” She tries to brush it off as nothing, but Ana rarely talks about her brother—it hurts too much.

“Will do, Ana,” I assure her, and we all say our goodbyes.

WE MIRACULOUSLY MADE it a half hour before Vi started to ask questions.

“So, Fear, you brought Thorin to live with Anabell’s brother?”

“Yes, love. He lives in a remote area, and I would trust him with my life. I promise I wouldn’t have dropped your best friend off at just anyone’s home,” I say, trying to keep her calm.

“How long will Thorin be staying with him?”

“For as long as she needs to. We know that she is safe at this location, so I don’t see any reason to move her,” Ryu answers.

“How long is this trip going to take us?”

Avi grunts, very obviously annoyed with Vi’s line of question. “Gods dammit, you are incredibly annoying. It’s going to take a little over a week, longer if you don’t stop acting like an entitled princess. Now, please shut up. I can’t deal with you like this the whole night.”

I watch as she grips the reins of her horse tightly between her fingers. Magic glows beneath them, begging to be let out. She takes a few deep breaths to calm herself, knowing she is about to hop off and beat Avi's ass if she doesn't.

"I swear, if *anything* has happened to Thorin, I will kill you all."

"I have no doubt about that, little one." I try not to laugh because I know damn well that she actually would.

As nightfall nears, we decide to make camp. I build a basic shelter from branches, rocks, and moss. It's nothing fancy, but it will help keep some of the elements away. Ryu builds the fire while Vi makes a basic meal for us. I'm surprised by her abilities considering she has been enslaved for the past six years. She must have learned before she was taken.

"Where is Avi?" Ryu asks.

"I saw grumpy take off further into the woods." Vi points off to the side of us.

"He probably needs to blow off some steam. I'm not going to worry about it"

Vi continues making dinner, and by the time she's done, I have created a nice little sleeping nook for us. Vi is actually in a really good mood tonight, despite her issues with Avi. Ryu finishes telling her about the first time he shifted; he was in the middle of Old Port, had no idea what was happening to him, and had no clothes with him. She snorts so hard that the water she was drinking comes flying out of her nose.

A few hours later, Avi shows back up, looking much more relaxed than before, but still in a foul mood.

"There's food over by the fire if you want it. I didn't make anything special, just some oats and berries." Vi looks up at

Avi from her place under the shelter.

“Mhmm,” Avi grunts before taking the food and devouring it.

For the rest of the night, we all make small talk and then settle in for sleep. No one protests the cuddle puddle we sleep in. Warmth is much more important than pride.

In the morning, we begin our quest again. Every day and night is the same. Avi and Vi bicker back and forth about anything and everything, Ryu plays mediator, and I’m appointed the best job of all—relaxing Vi. As expected, by the end of the first week, everyone is exhausted and agitated.

“How much *longer*?” Vi whines while munching on some berries she’s foraged.

“Kitten, we have three more days. You will make it, and if you can’t stop complaining, I will sedate you for the rest of the trip.” Ryu says into her ear as he holds her in his lap.

“That doesn’t sound half bad.”

“Be careful what you wish for, little star,” Avi chimes in.

“Leave it be. She will be fine. Won’t you, baby?” I ask as I’m packing up our campsite.

Luckily, the following three days go by quickly. But as we approach our destination, Vi stops the horse—her face is white as a ghost. *This does not look good.*

TWENTY-SEVEN

Villiana

I MAY BE DREAMING because there is absolutely no way we are where I know we are.

Wake up, Vi. Hope will break your heart.

I curl my nails so hard into my palm that little crescents have formed. I feel numb; my heart frantically beats in my chest. I sweep my eyes around, noticing everyone has stopped.

“Vi, what’s going on?” Fear’s concern is written all over his face. Carefully, he pulls me off the saddle, cradling me in his arms.

“I know this place. I know this place very, very well,” I say distantly. At this point, my vision is tunneling, and breathing seems impossible. Part of me wants to push him away, give no explanation, and just run.

“Little one, look at me. I need you to breathe. In...Out... In...Out.” Fear’s voice is muffled, but I feel him pass me to someone else. I curl tight against their chest, inhaling their scent. Rosemary and lemongrass. Ryu. My body recognizes him—our energies begin to flow together. With each passing second, my senses slowly return.

“Are we in Foxgrove?”

Ryu’s eyebrows furrow with apprehension. “How did you know that, kitten?”

That is all the confirmation I need. Pushing away, I take off running, dodging the hanging branches, and jump the tree roots with ease. My legs know where to take me. Time and space don’t exist anymore; just my drive to get there. As I enter the clearing, I see the house, and it is precisely as I remember—a small, moss-covered home with a red door and gardens surrounding the whole area.

Next thing I know, I am bashing on the door. This is a dream. This is a dream. It has to be a dream. The door opens, and there he is. He’s older now. His once red hair has gone completely gray, his beard longer than ever, and his ebony horns look a bit more weathered, but his eyes are the same—black as the starless night. I have no doubt it is him.

“Lys?”

His eyes soften as reality sets in. “Villiana? How? How is this possible?”

Throwing myself in his arms, we weep together. At this moment, I am ten years old again. I have found my home again and my bestest friend. I refuse ever to leave him again.

“I’VE BEEN HERE for six months already, Lys. You have been beyond kind to welcome me into your home, but I don’t want to overstay.”

“Villiana, you are welcome in my home for however long you need. I’m going to be honest with you, I don’t know if your brother is ever going to find us, but I will do everything I can to make this feel like your home too.”

“MY BEAUTIFUL VILLIANA. Oh, you have grown so much. I don’t know how you are here, and I do not care. Get your ass into this house,” Lys snuffles as he ushers me through the door. I don’t wait for the guys—they’ll figure it out.

Walking into the sitting room, I find my tiny little Pixie. She looks healthy. Her hair is up in two buns, her skin is radiant, and her eyes are bright. As gorgeous as ever.

“Thor, I know. I’m thinking it too. But this is very real. We are *real*.”

We run into each other’s arms. There are no possible words to describe how I am feeling. I have two of the most important beings in my life in the same house. Lys has been caring for Thorin, just as he did for me for many, many years.

Thorin presses her forehead to mine. “We made it, Vi. We really got out of there.”

I cup her cheeks, swiping my thumbs against her smooth skin. “We did, baby. We defied all odds and made it out alive.”

I hear the front door open and the hurried footsteps of the others. Silently, they take in the scene in awe. Bewildered is the only way to describe the look on their faces.

Ryu is the first one to speak. Taking a few cautious steps forward, then stopping a foot away from us. “How did we not figure it out? The truth was right in front of our faces, and we never put the pieces together. Of course, Lys is Lysander. How could I be so *stupid*?” He kneels beside me, touching my cheek but not taking me from Thorin.

“I am *so* sorry, Villiana. I don’t think I could ever express how disappointed I am in myself right now. If I had figured it

out sooner, I would have brought you here right away. I don't expect you to forgive me. I just wanted to let you know."

Thorin silently nods at me and sits back. I turn to face Ryu, wrapping my arms around his neck, and resting my head against his. I want to be mad. I want to scream and cry and call him a lying piece of shit, but I know he's telling me the truth.

"You didn't know." I kiss the hollow of his neck.

Looking over Ryu's shoulder, I see Fear standing there with tears in his eyes. I can tell he blames himself as well—I go to him. Bending down, he kisses me as if he loves me. Like he never wants to let me go.

"Little one, I know what it's like to lose your family and then find a new one. If we ever separated, I would burn the world down to find my brothers. I won't say I'm sorry because that is not good enough. I will never keep you from your family again." His eyes shine with fire and promise.

"Don't you even think about it, big guy. None of you are to blame." Looking to the right of me, I add, "That includes you too, Avi."

With a few tentative steps, I'm in front of Avi. Reaching out, I clasp his hand in mine, rubbing my thumb atop his dark skin. For a moment, he stands there stiff as a board, but after another moment he squeezes, acknowledging my olive branch. "I didn't know, nor did I really care what your past held. I didn't care about your feelings, just how you felt like a wedge in my family. But Ophir is right. I would do anything to be with my brothers, and you deserve the same with your family."

I am in complete shock by his words—Avi is being *kind*. But it also makes me realize that his hatred is about how my presence affects their family, not me specifically.

“And for what it’s worth, your light burns bright, little star. I can see that you are more complex than you seem.”

Lys claps his hands. “Food and drinks, everyone? Y’all are probably starving after your travels.”

SOMEHOW, Lys got us all to fit around the table and was able to whip up enough food for a small army. Now with full bellies, everyone is hanging out, drinking, and talking. It feels so... natural—like I was never taken from Lys. Like Thorin and I didn’t just spend years in a camp. Like I have known the guys forever.

“Ryu, Ophir, Avi. In the time I’ve known y’all, you have proven to be good men. But seeing that you’ve not only rescued but are caring for my granddaughter, there are no words to express my gratitude.” Lys takes my hand in his and squeezes. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again, Kostbar.” He takes a huge swig of his plum wine and continues, “When you were captured, I spent a year trying to figure out what camp you were taken to and then which compound you were placed in. A year after that, I heard about The Tower. I reached out to one of the local members and told them how my granddaughter was taken, and I wanted to help in any way I could. So, I have opened my home to all who have been rescued. Anyone who needs a safe place to stay until they can safely move on.”

“Thank you for taking care of me, sir.” Thorin chimes in.

“Nonsense! There is no reason to thank me. And I’ve told you to call me Lys.” He smiles at Thorin.

Something Lys said stuck out to me. “What’s The Tower?” I ask suspiciously. The guys freeze. They all have a look of

guilt on their faces. There is something very wrong with this situation.

“What do you mean, love? The boys haven’t told you who they work for?” Lys says with confusion.

Glaring at the guys, I lean back in my chair and cross my arms. “No. They haven’t. Anyone care to share with me?”

I expect Ryu to speak, but it’s Avi who decides to. “The Tower is a resistance group formed to take down The Collective. They’ve been doing missions to rescue the healers and destroy the camps and compounds. The main goal is to cut The Collective off at the head, and that is Adeline.”

“That’s amazing and all, but there is obviously more to it than what you’re telling me.” I squint my eyes at him, trying to figure out what is happening right now.

Avi looks between the guys in warning. “There is something else you should know. Before I tell you, we didn’t hide anything to be hurtful; we wanted to make sure it was the truth first. Which we still have no actual proof of.”

“Fucking tell me already!” I am fuming. I swear if someone doesn’t tell me the truth right now, I’m telling them all to fuck off and leave.

“The creator of The Tower is an Elf who is about thirty years old, six-foot-five, pale yellow complexion, small square jaw, emerald green eyes...and his name is Ziggy.”

I smash the table to pieces with a strength I didn’t know I had.

“*What did you just say?*” My voice is eerily soft and monotone. The look of shame on their faces does nothing to calm me down. My brother is alive? *My brother is alive.*

Lys and Thorin look between the two of us. Lys clutches his mug, and Thorin leans forward in anticipation.

“How fucking dare you! I shared my story with you! You held me while I cried and couldn’t get my mind out of the past. You all heard me say his name. And you thought it was a good idea to hide this from me?! I thought he was dead!” The whole room vibrates, dishes falling to the floor and shattering everywhere.

“Vi, your eyes are red. Not sad red. Ruby red. Do you want to take a walk?” Thorin goes to touch me, but I have no control of myself, slashing my nails across her face with an unnatural speed. Thorin flies across the room. Landing with her back against the wall, she slides herself down. Blood trickles down her cheek; her face is full of hurt. The scene is enough to knock me out of whatever state I’m in.

Dropping to my knees, I shuffle to her.

“*Oh gods!* Thor, I am so sorry! What have I done?” When I get to her, I swipe my finger over her cheek and heal the cuts.

She shies away from me—something that she has never done. “Villiana. I need you to back away and give me a minute.” Getting off the floor, Thorin walks out of the house.

I turn around and look at the sight in front of me. Dishes are broken all over the floor. The table is shattered with drinks and food all over the kitchen.

What is going on with me?

“Kostbar, it’s okay. Why don’t we go into the other room and let the others clean up?” Lys says, offering me a hand up. Feeling myself falling into an almost catatonic state, I allow him to guide me out.

Ophir

I DON'T KNOW if there was ever a time that I hated myself as much as I do right now. Vi's sorrow hit my heart like a sledgehammer, shattering everything in its wake, drowning my mind in both our feelings. We fucked up big time. I just thought we should be sure before telling her anything. I didn't want to hurt her any more than we already had, but the way things are going, we are going to lose her altogether.

I stay seated when Vi and Lys leave the room, looking at the result of our betrayal. At this moment, I wish I could walk away and let her finally be happy, but I can't. You could flay my skin or burn me alive, and it still couldn't keep me from her.

"Since we're getting some truths out...Avi, both Fear and I are bonded to Vi," Ryu rushes out.

"No shit! Do you think I'm blind? I'm more hurt by the fact that you felt like you couldn't tell me. What happened to always trusting each other?" Avi picks up a piece of the broken table and chucks it at him.

Ryu easily catches it, turning it to ice before letting it shatter on the ground. "Oh, you're one to talk! You just gave Vi hope that her brother may be alive and we don't even know if it's true! What if it's just a strange coincidence? Then what? We say to her *I'm sorry, Vi, but your brother might actually be dead. Oops?*"

Avi is seething but is smart enough not to hit Ryu in fear of his bite—no one wants to be paralyzed—and instead puts his fist through the wall. "We've hidden enough from her! We were stupid enough not to figure out who Lys was, and don't

forget that we pretended to be other beings when we first met her. She's twenty-six years old! She deserves to make her own decisions.”

Ryu flings his arms out exasperatedly. His pupils have thinned so much that all you can see are swirling orbs of blue and gold. “Why do you even care, Avi? You hate her. I'm sure you're relieved that she probably loathes us right now. Now we can go back to life without her, right?”

“Don't assume to know anything, Ryu,” Avi growls, deathly serious.

“*Enough!*” My voice booms throughout the room. “Stop bickering like children, and let's figure out how we are going to fix this because we *are* fixing this. I don't know, nor do I care, how we have to, but I refuse to let go of Villiana.”

I glare at the guys when neither of them makes a move to help me. I'm so fucking over all of this. I just want my girl. “I'm going to go find my little one and grovel now. You two should figure shit out before you leave this room because if Lys doesn't kick you out of his house, I will.”

Finding the old wooden staircase, I climb it three steps at a time. The upstairs only has three doors, and it's safe to assume the door that has *Villiana* painted across it with yellow flowers surrounding the name is hers.

Rapping my knuckles against the maple surface, I call out to her. “Little one, are you in here?”

Taking a chance, I turn the knob, finding it unlocked. When I open it, I find Vi sitting on a small bed with her back to me and shoulders hunched forward. Her room is sage green, with vines and yellow flowers painted all along the walls. The ceiling has a starry night sky depicted—it almost looks real—

and a small mushroom lamp sits on the table beside her bed. The floors are a dark cherry wood color.

“Vi?”

“Go away, Ophir. I’m not in the mood to argue right now.” Her voice is hollow and broken.

I stay in the doorway, not wanting to invade her sacred space. She has every right not to want to see me. I wouldn’t want to see me either. “I just wanted to check on you. I’ll let you be.” Reaching for the handle, I start to close the door.

“Wait!” The word rushes out of her.

Releasing the stone, I step into the room. My body fills the space like I’m in a dollhouse, but I would squeeze myself into a foxhole if it meant I could be close to her.

“You can sit in the chair over there,” she says, pointing to the corner of the room. From my place, I can see that she’s holding a drawing. She absent-mindedly stokes her thumb over the image.

“Did you draw that?”

She nods her head. “I was ten years old when my brother left me. He told me to run and never look back. He promised he would catch up, but never did.” Vi scoffs, clearly bitter—I don’t blame her. “I was always artistic, but I really took to it when he was gone. It was my way of making sure I never forgot him.”

Vi lifts her head and stares out the window. “The first six months after Lys took me in, I would wander the woods hoping that maybe I would find him there. I did it every day for an entire year. By the second year, I thought maybe he found a safe place, but after ten years, I figured he was taken that day, or he died.” She places the image into her lap, turning

her head to look at me, “Now, after sixteen years, I find out that not only is he alive, but he’s free. Can you understand why this feels like the biggest betrayal of all?”

I strain my eyes to see the drawing in the dark. When I make it out, I see that it is the exact likeness of the Ziggy we know, only younger. I want to answer Vi but don’t know what to say. There is nothing that I can say to make this better.

“And what hurts the most is not you guys hiding it from me, but that Ziggy hasn’t looked for me. After sixteen years, he moved on and forgot about me. I’m a distant memory to him, just like Mama.”

I get up and kneel in front of her. Grasping her chin, I try to comfort her. “He hasn’t forgotten you, little one.”

Vi throws the drawing onto the pillow beside her in frustration. A dam of tears breaks from her swollen eyes. “You can’t tell me that, Ophir. Where is he, then? Why was it you who found me and not him?” Through her sobs, her words are almost illegible.

I try to find the right words to reassure her. “He’s been looking for you this entire time. He’s made it *his* mission to find you and kill them all. The only problem is that he only can describe the ten-year-old version of you. I can’t speak for your brother, Vi, but from my experience with him, he has never forgotten you. Not even a single day.”

With hope in her eyes, she asks me a question that I can’t answer. “Was he the one who sent you?”

“No, little one. We would never have hidden it from you if that were the case. Shit, we would have taken you to him right away. We told you it was a personal side mission, which wasn’t a lie.” I take a chance, walking over and kneeling in

front of her. When she doesn't tell me to move or get up to leave, I tentatively tuck her hair behind her beautiful, pointed ears and stare into her big eyes that could swallow me whole. "I am not telling you how to feel or react to any of this. All I'm going to ask is for you to talk to Ryu and Avi. You have to understand that we never intended to hurt you, and we all agreed that not telling you was the best thing. No one wanted to get your hopes up for a possible coincidence."

Silent tears run down my fingers as she shakes her head. "I can't believe anything anymore. Show me I should trust you. Prove to me that you're as worthy as I want you to be."

"I understand. I'll let you have some space right now." As I walk out the door, Vi stops me one last time.

"Can you send Ryu in? We have a lot to talk about."

TWENTY-EIGHT

Villiana

I FEEL Ryu near before he even gets into my bedroom. I can't handle any more secrets or lies with everything going on. Neither of us will leave the room without talking about this bond, no matter how much he doesn't want to.

“Hey, kitten. Ophir said you wanted to talk to me?”

I pull my legs onto the bed, then press my back to the headboard. My mind and soul want two very different things right now. My mind tells me to keep Ryu as far away from me as possible. But on the other hand, my soul wants him so close that our bodies combine.

“I *want* you to stop lying to me. I *want* you to make me believe you're actually sorry. But I'll settle for a conversation about our bond for now.”

I'm beyond furious, and I hate how grounding his earthy scent is. Our bond makes it almost impossible for me to hate him. And honestly, I don't want to hate him.

“Absolutely.” Ryu removes his boots and clothes, getting into the bed with me.

“How is this even possible? You’re a dragon, and I’m an elf. I’ve never heard of a magic bond outside your own kind.”

Ryu sighs. “When I first became your doctor at Bonecliff, I noticed that my magic reacted to yours when we touched. As time went on, it got stronger and stronger. So I started to research what might be happening. You’ve read some of what I have in *A Soul For Two*. I happened to have finished that book—twice.” He pauses, rolling the blanket between his fingers. “Everything points to us being fated mates.”

Fated mates. I can’t even wrap my mind around the idea. These feelings between us were predestined—we never stood a chance.

“There’s more to this...” This whole situation feels like I’m living in a dream state. Maybe I’m still asleep on my cot inside the compound. That makes the most sense.

“There is. I’m not sure how you’re going to feel about the next part, but I’m not going to hide it from you. Have you ever heard of an alchemic mate before?”

“I know that alchemy is the study of chemistry and the transformation of matter.”

“Correct. And an alchemic mate is the transformation of souls. It is far beyond a bond. It’s like every cell in your body is attracted to one another. Your soul and magic can’t live without your mate.” Ryu pulls the tie from his hair, tresses of sapphire spilling down onto his back, his finger pulling at the scalp. “To complete an alchemic bond, you have to accept it fully. It’s like a marriage of the soul, which you complete through a blood vow.”

I’m seriously regretting having this conversation right now, especially after everything that just happened. I don’t

know how I feel being connected to someone who continues to lie and hide things from me. But I have to know everything; this is my life, and I can't hide from it.

“And this blood vow is a type of... ritual?”

“I guess that's what you could call it. You have to surrender yourself to the connection through blood sharing, and consummation.”

“Okay, old man, you can just say we would have to have sex,” I laugh anxiously. You read about this in children's tales and romance novels. It doesn't happen in real life. Yet, at the core of my being, I know he's right, and some part of me wants this.

“Do we have to complete the vow? Does something happen if we don't?” I'm hoping we get a choice in the matter. I've had enough things in my life decided for me. For once, I want to make the decisions.

“Uh, well, from what I've read, it's going to become increasingly difficult to be apart from one another for any extended period of time. Also, any sensation of physical touch can become overwhelming. And after the initial bond is created, your magic will do almost anything to keep the mates together. So, no, we don't have to complete it, but we do have to be aware of the side effects.”

“Do you want to complete the vow? You know that would be forever, and forever is a long time, doc.”

Do I want this? Oh, gods, this is a permanent marriage proposal—absolutely no separation. I don't even want to know what would happen if we separated. The consequences of not completing the vow are rough enough.

“Maybe we should talk about this more another time, Vi. A lot has happened tonight, and I don’t want you to be under any more stress.”

Gods dammit, this man is infuriating! Can anyone ever give me a straight answer? “I am not a child, Ryu. Stop treating me like one.”

He rubs the back of his neck, and I can feel his anxiety increase. Ryu’s looks at me with his beautifully sculpted face. His bee-stung lips hang slightly parted, and his brows pinch together. If you put aside all the bullshit, he is a great man, and I know he would cherish me.

“I do. I have wanted to for a while now, and it scares the life out of me. Vi, I think...I’m in love with you.”

All the air is swept from my lungs. Love? *Is that what I feel?* Is that what is overtaking my brain every moment I’m with him? I don’t want to ever be without him, but I also can’t stand to be near him—at least right now.

Mindlessly, I get out of bed and make my way to the window. The crisp autumn air is luscious against my heated face.

“I don’t need you to say it back. I don’t expect you to be overjoyed, but I wanted to tell you the truth. I can leave if you would like,” I hear Ryu say from behind me.

“I need some time to process all of this. Right now, I need to find Thorin and see how she’s doing.” Turning back around, I give him a light kiss, assuring him that I don’t hate him, and walk out of the room.

WHEN I GO DOWNSTAIRS, I hear the guys in the kitchen talking in hushed voices. I walk as quietly as possible to avoid them at

all costs. The first place I stop is Lys' study, finding him nose-deep in a book. *It's good to see that some things never change.* He is so engrossed he doesn't notice me as I enter the room.

“Hey, Lys, have you seen Thorin? I really need to talk to her.”

He lifts his head slightly, looking over his glasses. He looks so academic like that. “She was sitting by the fire pit in the back last time I saw her.”

Giving me his best concerned parent look, he takes off his glasses. “Vi, don't beat yourself up. You weren't yourself at that moment, but it was startling. Unfortunately, the brunt of it was delivered to Thorin. She loves you, Kostbar. Don't be afraid to talk to her.”

Lys places his book down on the table next to him, stands, and then waves me over to him. Clutching my hand between both his palms, he gives me a glassy-eyed smile. “I can't express how it feels to have you home, my *bestest* friend.” The term brings me back to all of the good times.

“ALRIGHT, best friend, let's have some ice cream!” Lys pulls out a small tub that we had made earlier in the day.

“You're more than my best friend. You're my bestest friend in the whole wide world!” I tell him while stuffing my face with the sweet treat.

MY BODY RELAXES, truly feeling free for the first time since I've been out of the compound. “I'm happy to finally be home.”

Lys tilts his head, noticing the heaviness that falls over me. “Sweetie, don’t be blind to what’s right in front of you. I will never be out of your life again, but you were never meant to stay in one place.” Squeezing my hand, he says, “Go find your friend. I’ll be here when you get back.”

I reluctantly leave the study and make my way to the backyard. Thorin is exactly where Lys said she would be, sitting by the fire, mesmerized by the flames. As I’m about to walk closer to her, I notice that she’s spinning a flame in her hand. Having elemental magic is not very common, so it takes me aback at first. Plus, I’ve never seen her use magic before.

“I know you’re there, Vi. You can come closer.” Thorin doesn’t look away from the fire. She just continues to play with her flame.

“I didn’t know you were an elemental. Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

Closing her hand, she finally looks up at me with a melancholy smile on her face. “I thought that if I told anyone, Locren would find out. And who knows what he would do with me after that.”

“You know you can tell me anything, Thor. I would never sell you out.” I’m hurt by her comment because she didn’t trust me enough. But then I realize that I’ve also kept things from her. At the end of the day, you never know who is truly trustworthy.

“I don’t know what happened to me earlier, but I would never hurt you intentionally. I’m sorry you got caught in the crossfire of my rage.” I sit down next to her, resting my hand on her thigh. When she places her hand over mine, I breathe a sigh of relief. “I’m so happy to have you back, Thor,” I say with sincerity.

Leaning her head on my shoulder, she replies, “You’re stuck with me forever, babe. In sickness and health. Death couldn’t keep us apart. This friendship is more than a marriage.” We both break out into a fit of laughter, breaking the tension between us. The idea of losing Thorin kills me; her forgiveness is something I don’t take lightly.

“So, are we going to talk about the fact that you are definitely dating at least two of the three saviors inside?” She waggles her brows at me. Slapping her in the arm, I act offended.

“I am not! We are... I don’t know, but dating is not what it is.” I mean, it’s not a lie.

“You can’t tell me you’re not fucking Ophir. I see the way he looks at you, and even in your fit of rage, he looked like he was about to fuck you against the wall in front of everyone. It was hot.”

The thought of that has me clenching my thighs together. I do like the idea of a crowd, and I don’t think the other guys would mind. In fact, I think they would be very much into it. *Oh, I’m absolutely keeping this in mind.*

“*I knew it!* I know that look—I’ve been on the receiving end of it, and it is a very fun place to be.” Thorin gives me a smug look. “Tell me everything right now, bitch. I want every single detail; leave nothing out.”

Looking around the yard, I make sure there is no one else around to hear. I don’t need Fear gloating; he is cocky enough for us all. “Girl, I didn’t know they came that big. And how it fit, the gods only know!”

For the rest of the night, we sit and gossip, just enjoying each other’s company.

TWENTY-NINE

Avi

IT'S WELL past midnight when I find myself stepping through Villiana's doorway. My demon is itching to bust out and play with her, but I'm hoping just being around her would sate him for a while.

Slinking into her room, I place a silencing bubble around myself to not to wake her up, and settle into the chair in the far corner of her room, watching her sleep.

The moonlight shining through the window illuminates every delectable curve of her body. Her wide hips are perfect for grabbing, and her pert ass made for spanking. Her shorts have ridden up her juicy thighs—they are just *begging* to be marked with my teeth.

I palm my hardening cock.

I shouldn't want Villiana, but I do. She is a parasitic infection that has burrowed its way into my brain, eating away at the hard and calloused parts that keep me blissfully numb, altering my entire being to become dependent on her existence to make me feel alive again. I want to bend her over this bed and fuck her until she cries. I want to wrap my hand around

her pretty little neck and watch her eyes roll back. And one thing I know for sure, she would look so beautiful painted in red. Just the thought makes me groan.

Unbuckling my pants, I pull myself out, giving myself a few lazy strokes. Then, as if she knows I'm watching, she turns onto her back, and her legs fall open.

Humming in appreciation, I spit into my hand and begin to work myself harder. I summon the memory of the incredible taste of her soaking wet center. The scent of her arousal was hypnotizing. I can only imagine how fucking good it would feel to sink deep inside her tight pussy.

Fuck. I can't hold back the moan that passes through my lips, even though she can't hear me.

Villiana stirs in her sleep and slips her hand into her shorts. I feel myself losing control of my demon. Seeing her lying there so vulnerable makes my skin itch to touch her.

I move to stand beside her bed and lean in close enough to run my tongue over her exposed skin. It takes everything inside of me not to touch her, but when her eyes pop open, I know the fun has begun.

"You may be silent, but I can still feel you breathing." Pushing up onto her elbows, Villiana looks up at me. "So, are you here to fuck your hand..." Eyes filled with lust, a devious smile creeps across her face. "Or me?"

I want to say I'm surprised, but I'm not. We've been playing a dangerous game for quite some time.

My tusks are elongating, and my talons are entirely out. Her violet eyes gleam with a mix of excitement and terror. With my knees boxing in her hips, I drop the silencing bubble.

“Little star, have you been thinking of me lately? Do you dream about my tongue inside your sweet pussy?”

Chest heaving up and down, she takes me into her hand. I suck in a breath before yanking her hand away. Grabbing the other, I pin her wrists above her head.

“Did I say you could touch me?”

Slowly running a sharp nail down her chest, I stop at the top of her shirt. “Mmmm, I think you’re too clothed for my liking.” With one swift movement, I slice her shirt down the middle, exposing her breasts to me. I trace the sharp point around one of her nipples, applying a bit of pressure. Her pupils are blown out as she arches into my touch. I take her nipple into my mouth, biting down hard.

Villiana cries out. I bet she screams so pretty, too.

“Oh, does my pretty whore like a little pain? If it’s pain you want, I’d be happy to supply,” I quip. I harshly tear off her shorts and panties with one hand. With her torn panties in my hand, I can feel how soaked she is.

“We can’t have you waking up the whole house, little star.” Smirking, I shove her wet panties into her mouth.

Pressing my lips against the shell of her ear, I whisper, “Now no one can hear you scream, Villiana, but please don’t let that stop you from trying.” Villiana rolls her hips, begging me to touch her. “You do not do anything without my permission. And seeing as you can’t speak right now, you are completely at my mercy.”

I picture the silk rope that sits next to my bed at home and find it in my hand a moment later. Removing my hands from her wrists, I tie them to the headboard. *Perfect.*

“Let’s see just how wet you are for me.” I retract my nails and then reposition myself so that I’m between her legs. Taking her knees, I pry her legs wide open, only to find that her arousal has dripped down onto her thigh. My fingers glide through her slit until I dip two fingers inside her. Pulling them out, I slap her pussy. She whimpers through her gag.

Finding the little bundle of nerves, I pinch. Villiana thrusts her hips out, and I slap her swollen lips. “I didn’t say you could move. How shall I punish you?” I tap on my chin. Allowing one talon out again, I run it down her sternum. The further down I get, the harder I press. Once I am just below her belly button, I break the skin. Villiana’s eyes widen, but she doesn’t move this time.

“So, you *can* be a good little whore. Do you want me to cut you? Shake your head yes or no.”

Nodding enthusiastically, I cut a line down to her mound. Marveling at the blood that seeps from the incision, I swipe my finger across it, swirling the crimson into her soft, yellow skin. Sucking my blood-smearred finger into my mouth, my eyes roll back. I could come from the mixture of her juices and blood. I need to taste it from the source.

Running my tongue along the length of the cut, I plunge my fingers deep into her cunt.

Villiana’s chest rumbles as she releases a silent scream. Her fingers curl into the sheets, trying her damndest not to move. But as I work her harder, her hand shoots out, clawing at my arm.

“Such a fucking brat,” I snicker, wrapping my hand around her throat. Her walls tighten around me, but she hasn’t earned her release. “Nuh-uh. You don’t get to come yet. Bratty little sluts have to wait.”

Sliding a third finger inside her slick center, I tease her clit until her legs begin to shake. Inserting a fourth, I take my time to stretch her. Villiana tries to pull away from me, but I can't have that at all.

“What’s wrong, little star? If you can take Fear’s cock, you can definitely take my fingers.” Gazing at how perfect she looks stretched out for me, I shake my head. “Maybe I’ll get my whole fist in there one day. Watch your greedy cunt suck me deep inside until I can use you as a puppet.” *Gods*, what a fucking sight that would be.

Applying pressure to her sweet spot, I rip the panties from her mouth, needing to hear her beautiful screams.

“*Avi...*”

“Do you think you deserve my cock?” I tilt my head at her. “Beg me.”

“Please! Please, fuck me!”

Completely removing my pants, I pull my dagger from them and slice two lines inside her thighs. Using her crimson blood, I lubricate my cock.

“I’m going to use your own blood to fuck you now, little star.” Lining myself up, I drive into her, biting my lip until it bleeds. It takes every ounce of restraint I have not to explode right now.

“*Fuck*, you feel so good.”

I start pounding into her, my hips bouncing off her with each thrust. The harder I go, the more she claws at the rope, trying to break free.

“Show me how much you hate me, Avi,” she demands with a deep, husky tone.

Lifting her legs until her ass is off the bed, I wrap them around me and use this new position to get even deeper. “It’s time for you to come for me, princess. And then I’m going to feed your starved pussy my seed.” I reach down in between us and strum her bud.

“Avi!” With a gush, Villiana soaks the bed and me.

My balls tighten as she clenches around me. I growl with my release, while she milks every last drop.

Staying seated inside Villiana for a few moments, I relish in her warmth. When I finally pull myself from her, I watch my seed spill down her ass.

Holy fuck, she looks perfect.

Climbing off her, I shove my legs back into my pants and find Villiana’s destroyed shirt.

Peering down her used up body, I toss her the shredded fabric. “This changes nothing,” I gruff apathetically.

Her lips part and brows drop, unexpected hurt flashing across her face.

“Clean yourself up.” I walk out of her room, leaving her a mess.

THIRTY

Villiana

THE CUM SPILLING out of me isn't what makes me feel disgusted; it's the fact that I'm hurt. I wanted him to use me, and that's what he did. I know what Avi and I are to each other, but my stupid heart is not on the same page. The dark and twisted part of me craves him.

My hands drift over the cuts he created to heal them. I hurry to find my robe, tying it tight around my waist before bolting to the washroom. I turn the water on as hot as possible, hoping it will burn away these unwanted feelings. Finally stepping in, I relish in the glorious licks of flames against my skin.

Why am I like this? I'm bound to Ryu and Fear—with the promise of becoming mates. And now, what, I'm fucking Avi? I've never been one for monogamy, so being with the three of them isn't a big deal. Plus, I've never committed to any of them. But it still feels like a betrayal of sorts; maybe not to the guys, but to my heart.

My back slides down the glass wall, and I tuck my knees into my chest. I lift my face directly into the spray, hoping I can drown away my problems. The hot water pelts down on

me, washing away my sin, scorching off the old so maybe I can be renewed.

I don't know how long I've been sitting under the water, but I'm pulled from my haze when the shower door opens. Low slung pants hang off a sleepy Ryu. Even in my self-deprecating state, my mouth waters at the sight of him.

“Hey, kitten.” Still clothed, he steps in and crouches down to my level. “Did you wash up yet?” he asks me lovingly.

I shake my head, unable to find my voice.

Helping me up, he takes shampoo into his hands and begins to wash my hair. Each movement chips away at the walls I've created.

Alchemic mates are a crazy thing. You can fight and deny your feelings all you want, but at the end of the day, you know that your souls were never meant to be apart.

“Head back, baby.” Ryu rinses the suds from my hair. Grabbing the washcloth hanging on the wall, he lathers the bar of soap and washes my body. Carefully, Ryu makes sure every inch of me is clean, but when he places the cloth between my legs, I step away from him. I'm embarrassed that he will find the remnants of Avi.

Ryu grabs my chin in his fingers. “Vi, I know you were with Avi, and I don't care. He's my brother, and I love him, but I will kill him if he hurts you.” Too tired to fight, I let him finish washing me.

Hesitantly, he asks me, “Was it at least consensual?”

“Yes.” My voice is meek and broken.

Stepping out of the shower, Ryu wraps me in a towel and carries me back to my room. Setting me down into the chair,

he proceeds to strip the sheets from my bed.

“Where are the clean sheets?”

“Down the hall, on the right-hand side, in the closet—I think.”

Ryu returns with fresh sheets, makes my bed, and gets new sleeping clothes out for me. He comes over to me and removes the towel from my body. Then, unbending my legs, he pulls my shorts up my legs.

“Lift,” he says, getting them over my hips. “Arms in the air.” He takes my shirt and tugs it over my head. He acts like taking care of me is the most natural thing, like we have known each other for lifetimes.

“Into bed with you.” As I settle under the covers, Ryu climbs in next to me, his body radiating a calming coolness to my overheated skin. When we’re together, I feel complete, and the implication scares me.

I snuggle deep into Ryu’s side, making circles with my finger on his chest. “You really don’t care that I’ve been with both Fear and Avi? Even being bonded to me?”

“It’s hard to describe. I want to keep you all to myself. Lock you away so no one else has the pleasure of looking at you, but I also know it’s unfair. I won’t try to change who you are. If I have to share you, I wouldn’t want it to be with anyone else but them. Just...be patient with me.”

“I don’t know anything anymore. I haven’t even thought of having the relationship talk with Fear. Avi... That’s something to think about another day. I don’t hate him. I wish I did, but I don’t.” I hate myself even more now that I’ve said out loud—spoke it into the universe. The pull I feel toward Avi will only end in heartbreak.

“I woke up when I felt your sadness and hurt. It’s hard knowing how you feel when I can do nothing. That’s when I came looking for you. And please don’t feel guilty. I want to be with you.” Ryu mindlessly twirls my wet hair around his finger, brushing my cheek with his knuckles. I smile into his chest even though the sting of his betrayal is still fresh.

Silence hangs between us but my mind berates me with incessant thoughts.

“You’re going to take me to my brother, and you are not going to fight me on it.” The thought leaches out from my subconscious.

“We can discuss it in the morning. Right now, you need sleep.” Ryu brushes me off, proving he doesn’t intend to take me anytime soon. Once again, I’m treated like a child.

I *will* see Ziggy again, even if that means leaving everyone behind.

“Good morning, Kostbar. Did you sleep well?” Lys hands me a cup of green tea. “Do you still take it with honey?”

I give him a wide grin. “Yes, sir! The Collective couldn’t take everything from me.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, the air changes.

“It wasn’t your fault, Lys. You gave me a home and kept me safe for ten years. You did everything you could do. As much as it pains me to say, The Collective is very smart. They stalk and hunt their prey. You never know who is against you, but *you* are not that being.”

“Vi, I sent you out that night. There was no reason for you to forage at night, but I needed those ingredients for some reason. I could have made another dinner.” Lys looks into his mug like it holds all the answers.

“I was twenty years old, an adult. I was quite capable of going out at night on my own. Hell, I could have been taken in broad daylight—it was always going to happen. I had bested them for ten years. My luck had finally run out.”

20 YEARS old

The twinkle lights I have created illuminate the area just enough for me to find the mushroom. Placing my basket down, I pick what I need.

Suddenly, someone grabs me from behind, and my lights go out.

“Sweet little trophy. I had to come and get you myself. You’ve been a bad girl hiding from me, but I have eyes and ears everywhere. You were always meant to be mine.”

I feel a prick in my neck, and a burning sensation follows. My time is up. I pray that Lys doesn’t look for me. He can’t get caught in the crossfire.

“I hope you’ve saved yourself for me, trophy. I can’t wait to break your tight, virgin cunt.”

The man’s voice is the last thing I hear before I wake up in a holding camp.

Welcome to the rest of my life.

“FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON, Locren had been personally hunting me down. I will never understand his obsession with me,” I say, with the memory flashing behind my eyes. “Lys, I need you to do something for me.”

Clinking his spoon against the inside of his mug, he gives me a knowing look. “You’re leaving again, aren’t you?”

With downcast eyes, I give him a curt nod. “I have to find Ziggy, and the guys will never let me go. Don’t worry, though. I’m taking Thorin with me. Please take care of them while I’m gone.” The last thing I want to do is leave Lys and the guys behind, but if I don’t do this now, I will hate myself and resent them forever.

“Of course, Vi. I was a little surprised you didn’t leave the second you found out. You promise to come back?”

“I learned never to make a promise long ago, but I will do everything in my power to get back home.” Twirling the ends of my long locks, my anxiety steadily rises. “I just hope they won’t hate me for this,” I mutter.

“You are blind if you think those boys would ever let you go. Now, go get Thorin and get out of here before they can stop you.”

Lys takes my mug from me, kisses me on the head, and pushes me out of the kitchen.

“I love you, Lys.”

“I love you too, Vi. I always will.”

WHEN I FIND THORIN, she is already dressed and zipping up her backpack.

She must have heard my footsteps because she looks over her shoulder with a wicked smile. “What? I know you better than that, babe. I was packed last night just in case,” she says as she works her fingers through her hair, creating two long

braids. Shaking my head, I have to laugh. She is a jump first, ask questions later kind of girl.

“Sometimes I think you know me better than I know myself.”

“That’s because I do, babe.” Thorin winks at me as she slings her pack over her shoulder. “Oh! Lys gave me the location of his contact with The Tower, so I know where we need to go.” Thorin pulls out a slip of paper and waves it in the air.

I would never question their motives, knowing that everything they do is with a purpose and out of love. That kind of trust is rare, and I don’t give it lightly. Still, I gasp, feigning betrayal. “Of course he did. Why wouldn’t the two most important beings in my life conspire behind my back.” Snatching it from her fingers, I see the name *Lydia Sibyl: Second in Command*, and *Rhinebeck* scrawled in Lys’ handwriting.

“Let’s get out of here before the big guy tries to fuck you into submission.” I nod in agreement knowing full well that Fear would do it.

Putting a glamor on us, we head out. There is no such thing as being too careful with the guys. As it is, Ryu and Fear can probably sense my anxiety.

Turning the handle, I slowly close the front door until I hear the click of the latch setting in place. Taking one last look at the house, I pray to the gods that the guys will forgive me.

Foxgrove is more beautiful than I remember it being. Most of the flowers have begun to die, leaving behind fields of dahlias and chrysanthemums. Yet, while death has crept in, I feel the most alive this time of year—something about the

colors of autumn infiltrating our surroundings, blanketing us in warmth.

“You grew up here, right?” Thorin’s eyes are wide with excitement, taking it all in. I know enough about her past to understand that she hasn’t had much life experience outside The Collective.

“I’m actually from Wrenwood, but I found Lys here when I was ten.” Watching her makes me realize that I’ve taken a lot of my past for granted. Yeah, Ziggy and I were on the run, but we still had good times. I got to have a childhood, albeit not the best, but I did have one.

There is a long stretch of silence before Thorin glances over at me. “How do you think he will react to seeing you again?”

Kicking a pinecone, I shrug. “I have no idea. Fear told me he’s been looking for me, but what happens when he finds out his sister is a shell of who she once was?” My voice wobbles with insecurity. Will I live up to his expectations? Will I be too broken? Gods only know what he has been through since I’ve been gone.

“He’s not going to let you go, that’s for sure. Do you think the guys would be willing to move to wherever Ziggy is? Otherwise, that’s the end of any relationship you’ve created.”

She makes a good point. The real question is, do I want to go back? Do I want to drag the guys any further into the shit-pit I call my life? Every second I keep them close, I endanger them, including Lys and Thorin.

I won’t say it aloud, but I know Locren is coming for me. He’s been in my dreams for weeks, taunting me, telling me how he knows *Malik* has lied to him and I will be his once

again. My dreams have always been warnings or premonition-like, so I trust my gut. I try to convince myself that my dreams aren't real, but after years of mind control, maybe he has learned how to tap into my mind as he sees fit. I will go with him without a second thought if it means my family is safe.

I'm going to make the best of this adventure with my best friend because I don't know if it will be my last.

As the sun sets behind the mountains, we set up camp. Neither of us brought much with us, just the absolute necessities. Thorin starts the fire with her magic, and I make our almond butter and strawberry mash sandwiches. Taking a bite, I groan from the burst of flavors in my mouth. Even the most simple of meals is an experience at this point.

"What even is this? I've never seen anything like it before," Thorin asks, eyeing the sandwich suspiciously.

I almost choke. Coughing hard, I desperately look for my water. "I can't believe you've never had a nut-butter sandwich before! The mixture of the saltiness from the almond butter and the sweetness from the strawberry mash is something straight from the gods. A spiritual experience."

She takes a bite of her sandwich, and I watch her eyes roll back. The way she moans makes me think she might actually come in her pants.

"I told you!"

"Fuck, that's good! How have I lived my whole life without it?" Thorin asks through a mouth full of food.

"Baby girl, I will never let that happen again!" Licking my fingers clean, I roll out our packs and lay them out to create one giant sleep sack.

“You ready for the world’s greatest snuggle sesh?” Thorin shoves the last bite of the sandwich into her mouth and hops up off the ground. Then, after toeing off her shoes, she shimmies in.

I look at the fire curiously. “Should I put it out, or does it burn out on its own?”

Thorin scoffs at me as if I’m insulting her. “It’s my fire, working at my will. That baby will burn all night and never leave the pit. Now, come, come. Time to sleep.”

Shaking my head, I squeeze in next to her.

THIRTY-ONE

Villiana

THE SUN barely crests the mountains when we leave for The Tower's barracks. The crisp air nips at my exposed skin, causing me to pull my damp jacket tighter around me. That's one thing about camping without an enclosed shelter; everything you have with you will be dew covered. In the summer—when you're begging for relief from the blistering heat—the initial moisture to your clothing is something you savor. But it's not summer now, and I'm definitely not thankful for the dampness.

When Ziggy and I were camping out every night, he would place a protection bubble around us, but that drained a lot of his energy and magic. He did what he had to in order to keep us safe, but in normal circumstances, you have to deal with the elements.

About an hour in, I notice that there has been a soft echo of an additional set of footsteps following us.

“Thor, don't make it obvious, but someone has been following us for the last ten minutes. They aren't doing a very good job at hiding it.”

Her eyes widen, looking around, but she never moves her head. “Fuck. Do you think it’s one of your men?”

“No, it’s definitely someone else. You’re not going to like this, but I’m going to pull them over here.” Searching out their energy, I feel it pulse west of us. I concentrate on it and will them towards us. At first, I have to strain my ears to hear, but as the being is pulled closer, I hear the crunching of dried leaves and a hideous little goblin being dragged through the trees. Shit.

“What, Locren couldn’t come himself, so he sends a minion? How long have you been following us, you little fuck?”

“You stupid, stupid girl. Master had me follow you since the second you left the compound! You were dumb enough to go out alone, making it so easy. And you brought the pixie with you! Master will be so pleased to hear about this,” it sneers at me.

I really am stupid to think that Locren would sell me off so easily. I would force Thorin to leave if it weren’t already too late.

“How have your dreams been? You’ve been getting his messages, haven’t you?”

My blood runs ice cold. I quickly realize that this little shit has been spelled as a conduit. “You’ve been in my head, letting him dream walk?” I grab it by the front of its tunic, ready to punt it across realms.

The little shit lets out a screeching laugh. “Oh, Master is not very happy with your... *activities*. He is going to take the giant’s hands, for sure.”

I've heard enough, wrapping my fingers around the goblin's neck, squeezing until its face turns red. "Too bad your time is up. Maybe you should have thought about being so careless."

In struggling breaths, the goblin manages to get out, "He... knows...everything." And before I get the chance to kill it myself, its body is engulfed in flames. I quickly throw them to the ground, watching as it wails in pain.

"Let a girl know before you light someone on fire, shit!" I shake my hands as if they were also in flames.

"Oh *please*, my flames wouldn't have hurt you, and I was tired of listening to the crap it was spewing," Thorin says, waving me off. "Now we know Locren is coming; let's get the fuck to The Tower. We have a much higher chance of survival if we aren't alone. Not that we aren't much smarter this time."

This encounter lights a fire under our asses, and we book it to Rhinebeck as fast as possible.

Reaching the apex of the hill, we finally see The Tower's barracks. Exhaustion was taking over, and my stomach felt like it was eating itself. If I could have rolled down to it, I would have.

Approaching the tent, we are immediately stopped by a soldier.

"What business do you have here?" the man asks. His face is screwed up like he ate something sour.

"Lysander Coswell sent us to speak with Lydia Sibyl."

The man hums with doubt. "Wait right here."

"I swear to Athena, if they don't let us in, I'm starting fires everywhere."

I flick Thorin on the ear. “Shut the fuck up, you little pyromaniac. That’s the last thing we need them to hear you say.” She grumbles at me but stays quiet.

The tent flap opens, and this tall, slim woman walks out. She has short, curly hair that is so white it’s almost translucent, with skin like porcelain, milky and smooth. Her eyes are a bit unsettling; they are the lightest blue I’ve ever seen. The woman approaches us with her hand extended.

“I’m Lydia. I was told Lysander sent you?” I take her hand to shake it. When our palms connect, I feel a surge of power course through me. I’m so stunned I don’t even react. Lydia’s eyes glaze over and then quickly return to their normal state.

“There is no way.” She shakes her head as she stares at me.

Tearing my hand away from her, I bring it to my chest like she burned me. “Uhm, what just happened?”

“I didn’t think...” She calls into the tent, and an older squat woman with a large nose and hunched back comes waddling out.

“Get a letter to the chief immediately. Tell him that he has to get here as soon as possible,” she commands the woman, then whispers into her ear. The woman looks at me as if she’s seen a ghost.

“Please, come in. I’m sorry for keeping you out here.”

Walking through the barracks, we have to weave through rows of cots. Most of them are empty, but others are occupied by all types of beings in varying stages of health. They must be survivors. Lydia stops in front of a very large, hairy man with a cauldron. “Ahren, this is Villiana and Thorin. They have traveled from Foxgrove and are very hungry. Can you please bring some stew to my tent for them?”

“Of course, ma’am. I’ll bring two bowls over right away.”

“Thank you, Ahren.”

She turns away, but I grab her by the bicep to stop her. “We never told you our names.”

“I know,” she says nonchalantly and continues walking.

Once we are in her tent, I don’t give her a chance to speak. “Do you mind telling me what the fuck is going on?”

Lydia sits down in her chair, crossing one of her long legs over the other. “I’m a seer. And you are the long-lost sister who is in trouble once again.”

I try to take in everything she just implied. But, instead of asking the crucial questions, I snap at her. “What is your problem? You just siphoned my memories, act like it’s no big deal, and then have the ovaries to talk to me as if I’m a hindrance?”

Thorin places her hand on my lower back, centering me, reminding me that we actually need this woman.

“Well, you’re being tracked by Locren, your bonded will definitely be hunting you down soon, and you are here to see your brother, right?” Lydia says matter-of-factly, and I want to punch her in her alluring, petite face.

The hunched-back woman from earlier peeks her head into the tent. “Ma’am, the chief said he will be here in the morning and that he...” She swallows hard, “...expects you to treat our guests in the highest fashion.” Shrinking into herself, the woman blanches as if she is about to be hit.

“You can leave now,” Lydia scowls, dismissing the woman. As soon as she is out of the tent, Ahren comes in with two large bowls of stew.

“Here you go, ladies. Enjoy.” And then he leaves.

Lydia motions for us to sit down in her cot. “After both of you eat, you are welcome to go over to our wash station and get cleaned up. You will stay in my tent tonight. There is nothing to discuss because I already know everything you want to ask. I would like you to meet me in the main tent, bright and early. It’s going to be an interesting day.”

Thorin and I look to give each other a look. What a bitch.

When Lydia leaves us to eat alone, Thorin drops her spoon in her bowl dramatically, jumping at the opportunity to speak. “There’s no way I’m letting go that she said you’re bonded. Ma’am, you’re basically married and *didn’t tell me?*”

I cringe. “Oops?”

“Don’t *oops* me! Who is my new husband-in-law?”

Leave it up to Thorin to take a complicated situation and make it light. “First, it’s more like fiance. Second, it’s fiances, technically.”

She chokes, soup flying from her nostrils. I swear she almost drops her bowl trying to put it down. She flaps her hands like she is about to take off in flight. “*Fiances* with an S?”

I feel like a shitty friend. We have always shared everything, and right now, I’m just as bad as the guys. I wanted time to work through it on my own, but Thorin is just an extension of myself.

Sighing, I drag my hands down my face before looking at her. “Yes, with an S. As in, two of them.”

Thorin taps her toes against the ground impatiently. “Are you going to tell me, or am I going to have to beat it out of

you? Maybe I will set you on fire.”

“Fuck, okay! Fear and Ryu. I’m bound to Fear and Ryu.”

Thorin lets out an ear-piercing squeal. “Hell fucking yeah! Big Papa and Doctor Daddy. I love them so much!” Leaning her head on my arm, she asks, “Are you happy about this development, babe?”

“It’s an adjustment. Ryu just wants to take care of me all the time. But Ophir is who I am closest to out of the three of them. He... makes me happy.” I smile uncontrollably.

“*Ohh*, you *love* him!” Thorin makes kissy sounds, crossing and rubbing her arms. “That’s okay, he loves you too.”

Jerking forward, I choke on my food and spill it all over the floor. “What? Did he tell you that?”

This girl cackles evilly like she’s some mastermind. “You’re not even going to deny that you love him! No, he didn’t tell me, it’s just undeniable. Doc does, too. I’m sure he’s told you that already, though.”

I open my eyes so wide that I’m surprised they don’t fall out of my head. “That’s enough. I’m going to get washed up. You can stay here in your dreamworld.”

“I’m going to take that as a yes! Vi and Ryu sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”

Whipping my head around, I shake my finger dramatically, “Go the fuck to sleep.”

As I’m about to walk out, Thorin calls out to me. “Vi,” she pauses and taps her finger against her lips. “What about the sexy demon? Are we going to have the trifecta? I bet he fucks like a beast.”

“He does, but that is all it will ever be between us,” I mumble. When it comes down to it, there is no *Avi and I*. Just some very hot, quick fucks, and that burns more than I will ever admit. “Nothing is going on with us.”

“Wait! When are you going to give me this nugget of information? I need to know everything. Hate sex is the hottest. How’s his dirty talk? I bet it’s panty-melting. Do you even wear panties anymore, with all of the filthy things you get to do now?”

“*Goodnight, Thorin!*” I have to cut this conversation short because motormouth will never stop asking questions.

Scoffing at me, Thorin crosses her arms against her chest and pouts. “You’re not getting off that easy. You *will* give me some demon dick information, or I will pester you forever.”

Like she’s not going to do that anyway.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

AS DEMANDED, Thorin and I get up at sunrise, not bothering to change out of the clothes we wore yesterday and slept in last night. I braid her curly hair into two cute little braids down the sides of her head, and she pulls mine into a tight bun on top of my head. It’s the only thing that keeps us from looking like we’ve been sleeping with barn animals.

I could barely sleep last night; my body buzzed with anxiety, knowing that today would be the day I got my brother back. Poor Thorin—who can sleep through anything—stayed up most of the night with me. It took hours of reassurance that Ziggy would be proud of who I’ve become and would never judge me for the last thirteen years.

It takes us half an hour to finally meander into the main tent. At the very back I see a new man standing with his back to us. The first thing I notice is the two crossed swords strapped to his back. His shoulders are broad—probably even more so in his leathers—and he is definitely tall. Like Ophir’s, the man’s head is shaved on the sides and long on top. His sage hair is pulled into a messy bun towards the back of his head and shines in the light that leaks into the tent.

I’m about ten feet away when the man turns around, and my breath catches. Ziggy stands there looking so different, yet the same. He is much taller now and has built up a lot of muscle. His hair is darker than I remember it being, and his face is much more structured: a square jaw, a strong nose—slightly upturned—and there are now three long scars over his right eye that travel down to his nose. You can see where his sleeves are rolled up, displaying his golden skin, which is now heavily tattooed. But his emerald eyes are a dead giveaway. I try to will my feet forward, but when I go to move them, I stumble and fall.

He looks confused at why a random elf is tripping over herself in his barracks. He looks to Lydia, looking for an explanation. I watch a soft smile bloom across her face, a small chink in her hard expression. He looks even more confused by her reaction.

My feet remain planted, terrified that he won’t recognize me, or worse, he won’t care.

Ziggy continues analyzing me for what feels like an eternity, his expressions giving away his myriad of thoughts. But it’s when his eyes soften and his face pales do I know he’s finally figured it out.

As he sprints toward me, the world around us falls away. Instead, visions of our childhood play; every smile, every laugh, every comforting moment. Hide and seek, stories before bed, sneaking out at nightfall to watch the fireflies set the sky ablaze—true happiness.

Ziggy collapses to his knees in front of me. With trembling hands, he reaches for me. The moment his palms cup my face, my body is wracked with a sob, hot tears rolling down my cheeks in a stream of relief.

“Kostbar...”

“Kostbar. I need you to run and don’t look back no matter what you hear. You keep running until you are far, far away from here, okay?”

That single word breaks me. My soul shatters and heals all at the same time, sending tremors throughout my body.

Ziggy pulls me into his chest. “I told you I would catch up.”

Arms coiled tight around his neck, I press my face into his chest. “You did,” I hiccup.

Looking over my shoulder, my brother addresses Thorin. “Thank you for being there for my sister when I never could. I can never repay you.” I crane my neck to look at Thorin. Her cheeks are flush, and her mouth hangs open.

“She was just as much there for me as I was her,” she stutters out.

Ziggy helps me stand and wraps his arms right around me. I don’t know if it’s my mind playing tricks on me, but he smells like blueberries and summertime. I can’t believe that I’ve gotten my whole family back in two days. Never in my wildest dreams did I think this was in the cards for me.

“I’ve been told that you created this whole organization. Mama would be so proud of you, Ziggy. You were always the protector.”

He gives me a solemn look. “Oh, Vi, you are the one she would be most proud of. Look at everything you have been through and survived. And now you’re thriving! Although, I heard my soldiers have taken a little too good care of you.” Ziggy raises an eyebrow.

If I could crawl into myself and die, I would right now. I shoot Lydia a look that I wish would kill her. *This bitch is something else.*

“Tell your lapdog to stay out of my mind from now on. Some things my brother doesn’t need to know.”

“I’ll do you one better; I’ll teach you how to keep her out.”

Letting go of Ziggy, I grab Thorin by the hand and drag her next to me. “As you’ve already been told, this is Thorin, my best friend and twin flame. She has been through almost everything with me, and I would never have survived without her,” I tell him, beaming with pride.

Ziggy sticks out his hand to shake hers. “Very nice to meet you, Thorin.”

“You too. I’ve heard so much about you over the years.” She takes his hand, looking at him so demurely—very uncharacteristic of her.

“Let’s go sit down. We have a lot to talk about.” Ziggy walks us over to the table where Lydia and a few other soldiers are.

THIRTY-TWO

Ryu

“It’s time to get up, Ryu. Go tell Ophir and Avi your mate needs you all.”

“You need to go find her. She’s safe, but not for long.”

I WAKE up sucking in a breath. I roll over to snuggle into Vi, but she’s not there. She’s probably just downstairs having breakfast with Lys.

I press my nose into her cold pillow, inhaling her citrusy scent. Instantly my dick stands at attention, begging to be pulled from my pants. Shit, the things this girl does to me.

Reluctantly, I throw off the warm covers. With my feet settling onto the cold wood floor, I drag my hand down my face when I look back down at my pants. There is no way I can go downstairs with this tree on display.

Strolling over to Vi’s bathroom, I turn on the shower. Pulling off my pants, I fold them and place them nicely on the countertop, then step under the blistering spray. A guttural groan creeps up my throat from how good the heat feels on my

sore muscles. My back might as well be broken between riding and sleeping on the ground.

I notice new soaps lined up on the shelf—Lys must have put them in here yesterday. Taking the bar to my body, I rub circles into my chest to get a good lather. Immediately more blood rushes to my cock. The orange zest just made my need for Vi worse. I need to fix this right now.

Precum leaks from the tip as soon as I grab myself. Dragging the slickness around with my thumb, I begin to pump my fist. With my palm pressed against the tile, my heart races as my fist chases a high.

I jolt when a large arm snakes around my center.

“Easy there, frosty, it’s just me.” Fear’s rough voice slides over me like a blanket.

“You scared the shit out of me.”

“Well, I came in to find you and my little one, but neither of you were in bed. When I heard the shower running, I figured I’d take a peek.” He slides his calloused hand down my stomach, fingers brushing over curls of dark hair. “While I expected the two of you, I was still pleasantly surprised to find my sweet dragon lost in pleasuring himself.”

I hiss when Fear’s hand wraps around my painfully swollen erection. Stroking me, he lets out a deep chuckle. “I thought you could use a hand.” Bringing his fingers further back, he plays with my balls—another stream of precum jets from me. “But it seems like you might need my dick instead.” Grinding myself against him, I whine, feeling his impressive length pressing into my back.

It’s been so long since I’ve had his touch.

Fear's beard tickles my neck before I feel the sting of his bite. Bucking my hips forward, I can't help but fuck his hand.

"Is that what you want, my sweet dragon? Do you need me to stretch you out?" He hums into my neck. Nodding with a silent plea, he takes mercy on me and starts stroking me harder. "You're going to be a good pet and cum into my hand for me. And then I'm going use your own release to fuck you."

Crying out, I don't know whether to push against him or rock into his grip. All I know is that I'm not going to last too much longer the way he's playing with me.

"What do you think our girl would think if she walked in right now? Seeing what a perfect little pet you are. I know how much you like to dominate her." With his nose buried in the crook of my neck, he growls. "I bet she would be dripping." My breath becomes ragged at the thought of Vi's slick pussy, needy and ready for us. "Maybe she would let you fuck her face. She looks so pretty with her lips wrapped around you and tears in her eyes." My stomach tightens, and I curl my fingers into his arm.

"I would let you fill her mouth with your seed, but not swallow. No, I would make her spit it down your crack, coating your pretty asshole for me. What a sight it would be." Fuck. The image sends me over, spilling ropes of sticky release into his palm. Fear keeps stroking me until he's collected every drop.

Taking his other hand, he grips my jaw and roughly turns my head to steal a scorching kiss. His tongue swipes against the seam of my lips. Opening, I allow him to deepen the kiss. Instantly I feel myself begin to harden again.

Fear smiles against my mouth. "Such a good pet, my sweet dragon."

Slamming my chest against the cool tiles, he kicks my legs apart. With a featherlight touch, he skates his fingertips down my spine, reaching the globes of my ass and grabs one cheek roughly in his hand. “Hold yourself open for me.”

With one hand on the wall, I hinge at the waist and reach around to expose myself to him. Fear takes the slick mess he’s collected and pours it down my crack, letting it drip onto my back entrance.

A pained groan rumbles from his chest in appreciation. “My gods, *älskling*.” *Darling*. The sound of it rolling off his tongue is like a lullaby.

Coating a finger in cum, he teases my hole, slowly swirling it around the rim. Pushing back against him, he growls. “Be patient. I need to get you ready,” he says as he presses the first finger through my tight ring—my dick is now fully alert again.

A burning heat settles in my belly.

“*Please*. I need more.” He’s moving too slow, and if the massive cock pressing against my sack is any indication, then he won’t hold back for too long.

“I don’t want to hurt you, *älskling*,” he hums, sliding a second digit in with ease.

“I want you to hurt me. I want you to wreck me. I give up all control.” He ruts against me, knowing that I won’t surrender to anyone. My control is my sanity, and by giving it up, it is one of the ultimate signs of love and trust.

Hinging my hips to the perfect angle, Fear notches himself against me, inching into me slowly. Accommodating a being his size is no easy task, but I crave the stretch—the burn. “Fucking *yes*, you are tight.” I can feel his control slipping

with the tightening of his hands on my hips. Clenching around him, I push him to the edge. He surges forward, forcing half his length into me; I cry out in ecstasy.

“I need more, Heiwa.” *Peace*. He has always brought peace to my anxious mind. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Are you sure?” He peppers kisses down my neck.

Turning my head, I meld our lips together, letting our tongues tangle, reassuring him that this is what I want. With his lips against mine, he slams his hips flush against my ass.

The air is sucked from my lungs to breathe life into him.

He desperately groans, dragging himself out just to punch forward again. I feel him everywhere—he takes over my senses completely.

Building speed, he rolls his hips faster as my cock weeps for him. A chorus of moans and slapping skin rings throughout the shower. Fear wraps his hand around my throat and yanks me upright. “Touch yourself, Ryu.” With his harsh breaths brushing against my ear, he fucks me relentlessly as I pump my fist.

“You keep gripping me with your sweet ass like that, I’m going to blow before you come again,” he grinds out through his teeth.

Of course, that only makes me squeeze tighter.

Fear puts pressure on my throat, slowing blood circulation. My vision becomes fuzzier with each passing moment. “Close your eyes and imagine our girl. Her legs spread open, watching your perfect cock disappear into her wet heat. Her screaming out your name. Maybe how she looked when she was stretched so wide, taking every inch of me—just like you are right now. Come for her, my sweet dragon. Just as I will

fill you with my seed for her too.” Stomach tightening, I feel myself falling over the edge. Ropes upon ropes of cum shoot out, coating the wall.

He brutally slams against me twice more before growling out his release. “That’s it. Milk every drop from me.” I feel him pulsing, filling me to the brim.

Pulling himself from me, I whine from the sudden emptiness.

Boneless, my body collapses against his hard chest, both of us panting. Smoothing my hair down my back, Fear kisses my forehead. “We have to tell her about us. She deserves to know.”

“I know. I just hope she still wants to be with us.” The thought of Vi rejecting our bond feels like every fiber in me is being torn apart. I don’t think I would survive it. Still, I would never want to have to pick between the two of them.

His eyes soften, giving me a knowing look. “It’s okay, Ryu. I want you both, but I would choose her too.”

I know he loves me, just as I love him, but Vi is our bonded—we won’t survive without her.

AFTER OUR SHOWER, Fear heads back to bed, and I get dressed before heading downstairs—I need to see my kitten. I walk through the sitting room and into the kitchen where the tiles are at least ten degrees cooler. Lys is sitting at the table with a book, an empty plate, and two half-drunk cups of tea.

“Good morning, Lys.”

“Oh, good morning, Ryu! Are you settling in well?”

“Yes, thank you for opening your home to all of us, sir.” Grabbing the kettle, I fill it with fresh water and put it on the stove.

“Nonsense! Anyone who is important to Vi is important to me.”

I take a mug from the cupboard and raise it to see if Lys would like more. When he shakes his head, I pull out one of the tea tins and scoop some matcha into my mug. The whistle sounds, and I pour the hot water in, watching rings of green form. “Speaking of Vi, do you know where she’s gone off to?” I ask, whisking my tea.

Lys gives me a sad smile and closes his book. “Why don’t you wake up the other two and then come back into the kitchen? We need to talk.”

We need to talk. My heart does not like that answer. My bond is screaming in my chest.

Liquid spills over as I quickly let go of the handle and spin around. “Lys, where is she?” I demand in a cold voice.

“Don’t get short with me, boy. I told you to get Ophir and Avi, and then we can all talk. This isn’t up for discussion. If I have to treat you like a child, I will.”

I take the stairs two steps at a time the old wood creaks under pressure. Throwing the door open, it slams against the wall. Both guys jump from their sleep.

“What the fuck is your problem, Ryu? Will you ever let me sleep in?” Avi whines.

“She’s gone.”

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Fear move as fast as he does at this very moment. Flinging the blanket off of him, he charges

at me butt naked. “What do you mean *she’s gone*?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. Now put your dick away and get downstairs. Lys has something to tell us.”

Avi and Fear get themselves together as quickly as possible, making it back downstairs in minutes. Lys is still sitting there with his tea and book like nothing is wrong. He looks over his glasses at us when he hears us walk in.

“Oh good, everyone is here. Sit down, and for the love of the gods, do not break my new table.”

The three of us try to stay calm and sit around the table.

“Where is she, Lysander?” Fear growls out.

“Watch your tone with me. This is my house, and you will speak to me with respect.” Lys waits for Fear to sit back in his seat and calm down.

“Now, Villiana and Thorin have left for The Tower barracks in Rhinebeck; it’s the next town over. Vi has gone to find her brother, and there was no stopping her or making her wait. She figured you lot would try to put it off until *you* thought it was best.” He looks around with an accusatory expression. “She asked that I watch after you, knowing you would try to do something stupid. She said she would be back, but she needed to do this. Villiana and Thorin are very capable young ladies. They made it through years of torture with The Collective; I know they will be fine with The Tower.”

My mind flashes to the words from my dream this morning. *She’s safe, but not for long.*

Fear gets up, goes to the front door, and literally rips it from its hinges before walking out.

“I will fix that right away, sir,” I mumble.

“Oh, I know you will.”

Avi looks over at me. “You know she doesn’t want us to find her, right?” He seems all too happy about that idea.

I grab him by his curly hair and flip out one of my claws. Pressing it against his throat, I threaten him, “If you don’t want to be around Vi, you can leave. I will not have you disrespecting my mate anymore!” Under my breath, I add, “Especially not the way you did last night, you fuck. If you ever make her feel like that again...” Cold smoke plumes out of my nostrils.

Avi and I are instantly ripped apart, and the air from my lungs is stolen.

“I am done with all of you swinging your dicks around! You have been here for two days and can’t keep your shit together!” The room darkens, and there’s a wind picking up. *He’s an elemental.* I do my best to nod at him, and then he releases us.

“You’re an air elemental? That’s pretty amazing,” Avi says in awe of Lys.

“Don’t change the subject. Now, where was I... Oh, yes! While I respect my granddaughter, I also believe in her safety, first and foremost.” Lys pauses to look at his missing front door. “Do you want to get Ophir, or should I continue?”

“Let him cool down. He’s probably stomping around the woods right now.”

“Very well.” Lys pauses for a moment, checking to see if Fear will walk back in. When he doesn’t, Lys continues. “Villiana and Thorin are safe for now. I slipped a protection tonic into their drinks last night. It won’t last forever, but it will give her enough time to be alone with her brother. I want

you to give her a four-day headstart. It will take them an entire day to get to the barracks, giving her three days with Ziggy. After that, y'all can head out."

Lys takes a deck of tarot from his lap, shuffling them with precious. Two cards fall to the table, facing us.

"The moon and the seven of swords," I say under my breath. "She's in danger."

"Yes, someone has been playing with her subconscious and creating an elaborate illusion. Deception and betrayal are at play, and I will be there for her this time. *We* will be there for her."

Lys brings the deck to his lips—as if he is whispering sweet nothings in its ear. Once his words have ended, he reshuffles—the slapping sound of the cards hitting each other ricochets throughout the silent room. Finally, after what feels like an eternity, Lys fans the deck out in front of him.

"Both of you pick a card, and as you glide your hands across the spread, picture Vi. Feel for her essence. The card will choose you."

"Do you think this shit means anything? It's just a bunch of images on paper," Avi says as he stares skeptically.

You can feel the pressure in the room change. The air feels heavy on my skin, like a bear skin blanket. I look to Avi only to find his face turning red and his hand clawing at his throat.

"It's just air, Avi." Lys' voice is low and rough, with a clenched fist in front of him.

I hear Avi's lungs gasping for any little oxygen they can get. It sounds like a chair screeching against the floor. The asshole is too proud to back down.

“Lys, can you please let him go? I think you’ve made your point,” I try to say as sweetly as possible. I don’t want to be on the receiving end of his wrath.

“Fine. But the skeptic picks first.” Lys releases Avi, who sucks in as much air as he can. His eyes are watery with a few broken blood vessels. This is a lesson he won’t soon forget.

“*You. Fucking. Prick!*” Each word comes out hoarse between breaths. Avi places his forehead against the table; his eyes black as night when he looks up again.

“Think very carefully before you speak again, demon. I won’t be as kind next time.” Lys shows no sign of fear.

“Avi, come on, man. Why don’t you try and see if a card calls to you? Maybe you’ll be surprised.” At this point, I’m not above begging him. The heaviness in the room is not just from Lys’ abilities but the growing pressure between them.

Avi grunts at me while rubbing his throat. Slowly, he takes his left hand—the one you receive energy with—and scans it across the cards. He keeps a bored expression on his face, but I can see his body language change as he goes back over one particular area. Closing his eyes, Avi lowers his hand, gently pulling out a card. He slides the card so it’s in front of him, still upside down.

“Go on, turn it over.” Lys drums his fingers impatiently.

When Avi turns it over, the magician stares him in the face. It symbolizes manifestation, willpower, and reaching your full potential.

My eyes meet his. They are brimming with so many questions that he is too proud to ask. Yet, a part of him cares about Vi’s well-being, regardless of how he presents himself.

Lys clears his throat, and instead of commenting on the card, he nods, signaling me to choose next.

Being bonded to Vi makes this a little bit easier. I can sense her within the cards; it seeks me out, whispering a siren call. It doesn't take me but a second to find the right one. I slide it toward me and quickly flip it over. *Death*.

Avi sucks his teeth. "Well, fuck. That doesn't look good."

"It's quite good, actually; it is the symbol of rebirth. Something must die for it to be reborn." Lys takes both cards in his hands and examines them closely. "Symbolically, that is."

Lys gets up and takes out a tin of cookies, opening the top and placing them in the middle of the table. The scent of lemon and almond fills the air, making my mouth water.

"Enjoy, boys."

"Are you going to explain the other card? What does it all mean?" Avi asks, waiting for an answer and ignoring the cookies.

"Yes. Now, eat a cookie and calm down."

Avi takes a cookie begrudgingly, but the moment it hits his tongue, he lets out a moan. "What is this?"

"Lemon almond crescents. Vi and I used to make them all the time. She perfected the recipe," Lys says as he sits back down, taking a cookie for himself.

"The magician is the first card in the major arcana. It is the first step towards a new journey in life. Like any new beginning, you are full of vigor and develop new abilities along the way. But, as I explained earlier, death is also a new beginning of sorts. It says you must shed the old you to reach

your fullest potential. Holding onto the past will kill you in the long run.”

Lys helps himself to another cookie, crunching loudly with a slight smirk on his face.

“Our Villiana may have cards stacked against her, but she hasn’t even begun to reach her full potential. She will have great power.”

An intense ringing starts in my ears. I cover them in a feeble attempt to block it out, but it’s no use.

“*They are coming, and there will be a reckoning.*” I hear the words bouncing around my brain—screaming at me. I don’t recognize the voice; it’s too distorted. All I know is that I have to get to Vi.

As the ringing subsides, I feel the wetness dripping onto my hands. Blood.

“Someone is trying to send you a message, Ryu. It’s serious if they’re trying hard enough to reach you while you’re awake.” Lys hands me a towel to clean the blood from my hands and ears.

“They said something about *they are coming.*” I can barely get the words out as my skin begins to tighten, feeling as if it may tear. I know I won’t be able to hold back this shift.

Stumbling out of the house, my dragon bursts from my skin. My bones painfully snap into place as my new body takes shape. My scaled body is pearled white, long, and serpent-like. My legs are thick, coming down to three-toed, webbed feet. Each toe is adorned with a razor-sharp claw. Ice appears all over my body: spikes down my back and thick scales on my underbelly. My face, brows, and beard turn pure

white and elongate like the rest of me. The last thing to form is my sharp, pointed teeth.

It's been a long time since I've lost control like this, but my dragon couldn't be contained anymore, not with the threat on my mate's life. I open my mouth, screaming to the heavens; heavy snow begins to fall from the sky. But, before I get the chance to take off after Vi, Fear appears in his full Jötun form.

Reaching down, he grabs me by my sapphire mane, forcing us to be nose to nose. "Only one of us can lose it at a time. So now, let's pull our shit together and make a plan to get our girl."

Puffing frigid air into his face, I agree.

Fear lets me stay outside in dragon form for a bit before returning. "Sulking time is over. Lys and Avi filled me in on the details. We only have three days, my sweet dragon." He walks back toward the doorless entry. "Oh, and help me get the new door up."

THIRTY-THREE

Villiana

BEING BACK with Ziggy is such a mindfuck. On one hand, I see my loving, devoted brother, with whom I would make mudpies and play dress up with me. But, on the other, I see a grown man who is the head of a resistance army—a man who has weathered many storms, and is tired but still stronger than ever.

Last night, we sat down and I told him about everything that has happened over the last sixteen years—not that Lydia didn't already know. He knows about how Locren has been spying on me this entire time, and how his employees are the ones who got me out. The only thing we are all stumped about is who the mystery person is that sent the guys out on the rescue mission. But for today, Ziggy wants to focus on teaching me how to block my mind from unwanted beings before we go back to The Tower's main station.

“When you are dealing with a seer or anyone who can read your mind, you need to clear your head of any thoughts completely, only leaving information that you don't mind them knowing. Almost every single mind reader needs to touch you for it to work. Locren, contrarily, has been dream walking; this

is much harder to block out. In Locren's case, he was using a goblin as a conduit. But other dreamwalkers can get inside just by channeling your energy."

Ziggy has me lying down on one of the cots, handing me a tincture he tells me to drink, and then he places his hands over my eyes. "Keep your eyes closed and picture any memory."

I picture the first time I met Ryu; sitting down in the chair, expecting another day of misery, but it was actually the first day of life.

"You have the memory?"

"Yep!"

I feel a soft tickle behind my eyes and a slight warping of the image of the memory. Suddenly, Ziggy sits down in the chair where Thorin was before. Looking around, I see fury overtake my brother.

"Is this how you lived?" he says, running his hands over the straps hanging beside my arms.

"This is the donation room; it's where they would collect our blood every day. It sucked, but it wasn't the worst thing that happened to us." I can't look him in the eyes as I speak.

"Why imagine this place, then?"

"Well, um, this is the day I met Ryu. My life was never the same after meeting him." Talking about Ryu with my brother gives me very mixed feelings. I want him to know all about my life, but I'm also his little sister, and there is a line to honesty.

"This was an extraordinary plan they made... Back to the point of this exercise. I am able to walk into your dream because you're vulnerable and because I'm touching you, but

also because I know your energy very well. Our magic and energy are so familiar that I can get in without resistance,” he says, studying me. “Now, try to push me out of your head.”

I force myself to push his energy from me. It’s very similar to letting go of the Orc’s life forces.

Ziggy begins to fade from my memory. I did it! I stay in my dream world for a little longer, enjoying my time with Ryu, however I can get it. As I finally come to, Ziggy is sitting next to me, absolutely beaming.

“Look at you go, Kostbar! Controlling my access is easy, so we’re going to have to practice with Lydia, but not today. Now, the key to keeping beings out of your dreams is building a dome by merging your energy and magic as soon as you realize you’re asleep. The more you do it, the quicker you realize you are asleep.”

Thorin squeezes herself next to me on the cot. Pecking kisses all over my face—a few on the lips—she wraps herself around me. “I’m so proud of you, Vi!”

Ziggy squints his eyes at us. “Exactly. So, how good of friends are you two?”

“We used to fuck all the time, but it was friendly fucking! Currently, Vi is strictly dickly. And boy, does this girl have mor—” I slap my hand over her mouth.

“What she is trying to say is, no, we are not together, nor have we ever been.” I give Thorin a death glare. I’m kicking this girl’s ass later. She licks my hand, sticking her tongue between my fingers.

“Yep! What she said, boss man,” Thorin says to Ziggy.

“I see... I think that’s enough of,” Ziggy waves his hands all over the place, “this.”

As we both sit on the tiny cot, Thorin gets behind me and starts braiding my hair, sending a chill down my spine. She is meticulous with her braids; every strand is tight and in place. It's not very often that other beings touch my hair; it makes me feel like a child again.

“How long do you think we have before the guys get here?”

“I'm honestly surprised that they're not here already, Vi. You are going to be in so much trouuuuuble. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for independence, and you know I would jump right off a cliff with you, but maybe you should have at least left them a note.” Thorin pulls my hair extra tight, jerking my head back.

“Lys is going to talk to them. At least, I hope he will. I hope they understand that I'm not running from them. I'm just doing what I think is best.” Saying it out loud makes me feel like a bitch. Maybe they would have listened, but I couldn't take the chance.

I see Lydia heading toward us from the corner of my eye, a map under her arm and a mug in each hand. It's hard to tell how old she is. Based on appearance alone, it seems she is maybe in her late twenties, but how she carries herself makes her seem much more mature. Her looks are unique; nonetheless, she is stunning. Her lips are bowed with almost no color, fading from her natural skin tone to a deep mauve in the center. Her nose is slim with a slight roundness to the tip. Her eyes are wide set and cat-like—she looks like she's about to bed you at any time. The skin under her eyes is almost translucent, with stark red veins like lightning bolts. She's very hard to look away from.

“Crushed blueberry tulsi tea with honey.” Lydia hands us the mugs. A peace offering. “I know I can be...abrasive, but I’m protective of my family. I know you’re his sister, but it was so hard to believe that I went on the defensive. As long as you’re okay with it, I’d like to start over.”

I examine her mannerism, trying to find any tell of a lie. “For Ziggy’s sake, sure. I don’t trust you, but I hope you can change my mind.”

“So, Thorin, you’re a fire elemental. Are you originally from the fire realm?” Lydia casually throws the question out. *Bad move.* Lydia will learn fast not to use the information she fished from my brain without permission.

Thorin’s head whips around so fast I’m unsure how her neck isn’t broken. “How about you stay out of our minds, and maybe—*maybe*—you will earn the right to learn my story instead of stealing bits and pieces from Vi.”

Lydia has the decency to look embarrassed. I have a feeling she’s not used to getting to know beings on their terms. “Fair enough. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Quickly changing the subject—before Thorin lights her on fire—I ask Lydia about the map. “Where is the map for?”

“Oh, yeah! This is the map of The Tower’s current portals in the forest realm. Each portal will allow you to jump to another realm or a different area in your current one,” she says, pointing to each location on the map. “This is how we’re able to get to most of the camps. However, some of them are harder to find or get to. For example, the compound you were both in only appears when you are within a mile of it. And even then, you must be invited in to cross the boundary. Locren is very smart and powerful; I’m impressed that you were able to get out.”

DURING THE PAST TWO DAYS, Thorin and I have been sparring, practicing mental blocks, and spending time with Ziggy. Lydia kept her promise and has been much more pleasant to us. She has also been teaching us not only about the different areas of Terra, the forest realm, but the exact location of the portals that take us to other realms. For example, the portal in Hilltop will take you to Zephyr, air, or the portal in Lemonia will take you to Incedis, fire.

Having everyone back in my life is wonderful, I'm just not used to this much commotion. We lived relatively isolated lives at the compound, only let out of our rooms when we had a planned activity. Otherwise, it was a dreary room. We were allowed to request books but could never choose what we wanted; anything that would give us hope for a better life was out of the question. Thus, I've gotten used to the silence.

Laying out in the crunching grass, I'm enjoying my alone time, soaking up the warmth of the sun and autumn air. The wind whips all around me—faint whispers tickle my ears.

He will come for you.

I shake my head, clearing the sounds. But, again, I hear more whispers.

Together, as one, is the only way.

I get up and head back into the tent. Maybe I'm hungry, tired, or legitimately crazy. Either way, I'm not sticking around to hear anything else.

“Hey, babe! Want to go find out what Ahren's making today? It smells so fucking good.” Thorin loops her arm into mine. And she's right; it has a sweet and spicy aroma.

Kind of like Fear.

“Probably a good idea. I’ve got a massive headache brewing.”

We don’t make it another foot before I feel a stabbing in my chest, like my heart is being ripped from it. I curl forward and dig my nails into my arms, trying to counter the pain, but it doesn’t help. The stabbing turns into full-on chills. I fall on my hands and knees, no longer able to stand upright. Every second I feel colder—my skin is frozen to the touch. Suddenly, something in the back of my mind tells me to run toward the woods. It takes every ounce of energy I have, but I stagger to my feet.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going, Vi?”

“I don’t know. I—I have to go,” I say through chattering teeth.

“Girl, don’t you think it’s a little suspicious feeling like you *need* to go somewhere? Maybe you should lie down.” Thorin reaches for me, making a shocked face when she touches my bare skin. Her warm hands feel searing hot against my frozen body.

“I’m going! I can’t explain why but I know. Please, I have to—” Another shiver wracks my body. Every second I don’t follow is pure misery.

“Well, I’m not letting you go alone.” Thorin comes to my side to help stabilize me. We make it into the woods, and the deeper we go, the more I feel pulled forward. When the pain comes back tenfold, I fall to the ground in a crying, shaky mess.

“I got you, Vi.” Thorin sits down with me and tries to warm me up.

Just as I think I might die from this, I see something coming toward us—a velvet blue mane, a long white beard, and marbled blue eyes. As the creature gets closer, I see a long white body with ice spikes on its back.

Digging into my magic, I find a drop of energy to crawl. My soul knows the creature, and within moments I do too.

“Ryu!” I cry out. The dragon turns his head toward me and snakes his way through the trees, stopping before me. Leaning down until his frigid snowy breath is a hair’s length away from my face, he deeply inhales. Before I can register what’s happening, a very naked Ryu is crouched beside me.

“If you *ever* run from me again, kitten, you will not have such a warm greeting,” he says, nose to nose with me. With a roughness I’ve never seen from him, he slams his lips against mine. The kiss is bruising, demanding. The sharpness of his teeth pierce through my bottom lip as he tries to force them open. Opening for him, I’m surprised to find his tongue is forked as it dances against mine. All the pain immediately dissipates and is replaced with a burning need for him. I claw at him, trying to get as close as possible.

Ryu tears at my clothes, ripping them from my body. Completely naked with our bodies pressed together, it feels like our souls are being forged in fire and quenched in ice. Forever one.

He grabs me by the neck and pins me down into the fallen leaves, “I’m going to fuck you right here in the dirt and show you who you belong to because you don’t seem to understand.”

My core heats, my wetness collecting down my thighs. Ryu pries my legs open, finding my soaking opening.

“You like being put in your place, don’t you, kitten? You know you’ve been a bad little slut, and now you’re going to find out what happens when you make Daddy angry.” Ryu plunges two fingers inside me, curling his finger with every pull. I push myself into his hand, arching my back. “I’m going to stretch you out good, get you nice and ready for me, baby,” he says, adding a third finger, and I cry out. Taking his thumb, he circles my clit.

“Please—*oh fuck!* Please... I need to feel you inside me.”

“So demanding for someone who didn’t think I cared enough to bring them here. Do you think you have earned it?”

Ryu takes his length and slides it up and down my slit, getting it nice and wet. Then, placing the crown at my entrance, he applies a little pressure, just enough to tease me.

“You didn’t answer me, kitten.” He clutches my neck, cutting off my blood supply. “If you get Daddy’s cock, do you think it will make you a good little girl?” Ryu presses harder, trying to squeeze an answer out of me.

“I’ll be good! I’ll be a good girl for you, Daddy! I’ll do anything to prove it.”

Ryu hums and, staring me dead in the eyes, drives himself forward. He moves deliriously slow, making me feel every inch as it goes in. Ryu isn’t as big as Fear, but it is definitely a deep stretch. Once he is fully seated, he takes a few long strokes. At this point, I’m in tears, ready to beg and plead, but he has mercy on me and picks up the pace. The thrusts are deep and hard, bottoming out each time.

Ryu leans back to look at us, joined together.

“*Fuck.* Look at you taking Daddy so well. That’s it, kitten.” Ryu fucks me savagely. Tears are leaking from my

eyes, and my face is turning red from the lack of oxygen. I can't form words, only cries and moans.

Ryu slaps my cheek, using his other hand. "Open up and stick out your tongue." I do as I'm told, and then he spits into my mouth. "Good girl."

His stomach tightens, and his strokes become short. He's squeezing my neck tight enough that my vision is hazy.

"I'm going to coat your walls with my seed, branding you from the inside. But first, you're going to come for me, kitten." Ryu reaches down between us and strums my bud. I clench tight around his cock as my legs shake uncontrollably. As my orgasm tears through me, Ryu's fangs drop, forcing their way into the flesh above my right breast.

I have never in my life felt pleasure like this. My whole world is being destroyed and recreated at this moment. Ryu growls with his release, letting go of my neck. When I suck in the fresh air, he rips into his palm and presses it to my lips. For whatever reason, my body knows what to do. I suck the blood from his hand and instantly come again. Colors flash behind my eyes, which turn into memories. But they're not mine—they are Ryu's. Images of the guys playing outside when they were young, his mom showing him how to use herbs, and his dad teaching him how to harness his magic. The memories go on for what feels like forever, and then it all stops. Lying next to each other in the dirt and leaves, I now understand what it means to be one. There are no walls left between us. I can feel the coolness of his magic running through me.

Exquisite. Absolutely perfect.

"I'm far from it," I say softly to Ryu.

"I didn't say anything" He looks at me with confusion.

“You definitely did.”

Looking at me in shock, he says, “You heard that?”

“Of course I did. I just told you that.”

“Vi, I didn’t say anything—I *thought* it.” Ryu runs his hand down my cheek with a cheesy grin. “We completed the vow, kitten.”

The blood vow. As I’m about to say something, I hear clapping and cheering.

“Wooh! Yeah! That was the best show of my life!” Thorin is screaming at us in the background. I sit up ramrod straight, grabbing clothes to cover myself.

“Oh please, we’ve all been inside of you. No reason to be shy. Plus...” Thorin points to Avi and Fear. “These two are so bricked up right now, I’m surprised they haven’t busted in their pants.”

Fear is practically panting, his pants about to burst open, and Avi’s eyes burn with lust while his chest heaves up and down.

My face flames, and I look down at the ground. Fear’s feet appear in front of me. He takes his finger, placing it under my chin, pushing my head to look him in the eyes.

“Don’t, little one. You are magnificent, and I couldn’t be happier for you and Ryu.” Taking his finger from my chin, he brings it down between my legs, swirling it through mine and Ryu’s mixed release. Fear sucks the cum coated finger into his mouth, groaning like it’s the best thing he’s ever had. “You taste good together, too.”

I stare at him slack-jawed. I swear on the gods, only one thing is holding me back from fucking him right here, too—

and it's not Thorin.

Fear runs two fingers down my body until they are poised against my aching cunt. "Don't give me that look, Vi. I like when they watch, and I happen to love sloppy seconds." With a mischievous grin, he pushes Ryu's seed back into me.

My face burns so hot I could start a fire. I'm pretty sure he's melted my brains. "I-uh... Can someone give me something to wear? I don't think my brother would appreciate seeing his sister completely naked and freshly fucked," I say in jest.

Chuckling proudly, Fear pulls off his shirt and pulls it over my head. It's so big on me I look like a child wearing their dad's clothing.

"Thank you, big guy."

Fear says nothing, giving me a quick kiss.

After Ryu is clothed, we head back down to the barracks. I make a bee-line to the wash station while Thorin grabs me some clothes. Fresh and clean, I find where everyone is hanging out. Watching from a distance, I see the guys and Ziggy interacting so friendly and casually; it makes me feel whole. I sit on a bench beside Thorin and knock my shoulder into hers.

"You're staring." I notice her eyes glued to my brother.

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Villiana."

"Oh, my full name. You know you've been caught," I tease her.

"Let's go to the fire and drink with everyone." She tries to change the subject, but I like to see her squirm a little.

"So you can get closer to Ziggy?"

Thorin pulls me forward. “Shut up, and let’s go.”

THIRTY-FOUR

Ophir

I DON'T THINK I've ever been so turned on as I was watching Ryu and Vi. Oh, and the taste of them on my tongue, dear Odin. We've shared women and men over the years, so that's nothing new. I know how she feels about me, and that's all that matters. If there ever comes a time when she decides she wants to take the vow with me, I will be beyond honored, but I will take her however she will give herself to me.

When I initially learned about alchemic mates and the blood vow, I thought it was just a tale that had been passed down and exaggerated over time. It was unbelievable to watch the blood vow take place. I honestly don't think it happened on purpose, though. It looked like their primal brains took over and made the decision for them—there was no stopping the union.

I'm sure, as a participant, you are too wrapped up at the moment to realize what is happening around you, but you could see their magic and souls meshing together. Brilliant mixes of blues and gold swirled around them, cocooning them until their bodies absorbed them. Even right now, I can see their auras glowing around them.

As I stand by the crackling fire, mead in hand, I observe the scene in front of me. Ryu, Ziggy, Thorin, and Vi, are all huddled together, drinking and laughing. Avi is standing as far away from everyone as possible while being able to soak in the warmth. And then there is Lydia, Ziggy's second in command. She is walking back and forth, constantly in work mode. I don't think that girl knows how to relax. I would try to set her up with Avi, but he's one step away from admitting to being on team Vi.

One of Ziggy's men, Ahren, comes up beside me. "Crazy, innit? Never did I think I would see true happiness on his face. Zigmund is a hard worker—kind and generous, too—but I've never seen him truly happy."

Scratching my beard, I evaluate Ziggy's demeanor, and Ahren is right. Ziggy's aura is a vivid green, matching him perfectly. We've been working with him for quite a while and have never actually gotten to know him.

"I haven't known Vi for very long, but I can say the same for her. She seems... whole," I add.

We stand there in silence together, like two flies on the wall.

It's time to go. They're here.

"Who's here?" I look over at Ahren in confusion.

"I haven't said a word, man. Had a little too much to drink?" he snickers.

He will not stop until he has her.

I look around, trying to find the source of the voice, but the field is completely empty apart from us. A heavy, dirty feeling envelopes my skin as I watch a shadow come up behind Vi. And then I see a glint of a weapon.

Without a word, I send out my shadows, overtaking the being in question.

“Get Vi out of here now!” I yell out to anyone who is listening.

Ryu grabs Vi and throws her over his shoulder, but my little one does not like that, kneeling him straight in the stomach.

“I am not helpless!” Vi marches right over to where my shadows are, pulls a sai from her hip, and blindly stabs into the abyss.

Ziggy tightly wraps his arms around Vi and pulls her away as a few more beings approach. “Fucking let me go, Ziggy! I swear on all five realms; I will stab you too!” Vi screams at her brother, but Ziggy doesn’t listen. Meanwhile, Tower soldiers rush out to assess the situation, grabbing at any shadowed figure they can find.

Lydia yells at me to release the being I’m holding. When I do, she slams her hands over their ears, and her eyes glaze over.

Taking this opportunity, I shift into Jötun form, marching straight into the darkness.

“Ohhh, the big brave giant has come out to play!” I hear the voice inside my head. *“Locren will have his trophy and will fuck her upon your corpses.”*

Seeking energy from the earth, I harness the power to light up the sky around us. Instantly, I can see at least thirty different Orcs on the property.

“Orcs!” My voice booms through the field.

I don't bother with my weapons. Instead, I pick up the orcs and tear their skull from their bodies, spine still attached. The coppery smell invades my nose, making me groan with pleasure.

Magnificent licks of inferno burst from Thorin's back, forming her wings. The beautiful sounds of screams fill the air as orcs are burnt alive.

"Vi!" Avi yells out in a panic. One of the orcs has her pinned to the ground, but she slashes away at him.

Before anyone has the chance to react, Avi has entirely shifted. *These bastards are so fucked.*

It only takes him several steps to reach her and get the orc off of her. Then, in his full Rakshasa glory, Avi literally sucks the soul from it.

At this point, the fight is over. Avi's ability of energy transference is magnified by a thousand in his true form. He goes to every remaining enemy, steals their soul, and then tears the bodies in half.

The two orcs Ryu has frozen, Avi pulverizes, becoming nothing more than frost.

Coming back to normal size, I run over towards Vi to make sure she's okay, when I hear someone laughing hysterically. Going around the other side of the tent, Ziggy stands in the middle of at least a dozen additional bodies, covered in blood from head to toe.

"Is that..."

"A pile of hearts? Yes, sir!" Ziggy's eyes are completely red like Vi's were the other night. His smile is unnaturally wide with pointed teeth. He looks demonic.

“Is my sister okay? She is lethal with those sai!”

“Uh, yeah, she’s good. A few cuts and bruises but nothing that she can’t heal.” I respond to Ziggy, but I am seriously concerned about his current state. I’ve seen my fair share of demons throughout my life, but never a demonic Fae. It’s very unsettling.

“Chief, I’ve got a live one! I’ve been working on his mind. I got some good information,” Lydia calls from the other side.

“Be right there!” Ziggy bends down and picks up one of the hearts. Time slows as I witness his jaw unhinge like a snake and he swallows the heart whole. Ziggy licks his lips slowly as his aura bursts outwards in a smoky red and black swirl. Placing his finger over his lips, he shushes me; the threat in his eyes is clear.

“Let’s keep this our little secret.” Winking, he walks off.

THIRTY-FIVE

VILLIANA | A few minutes earlier

“WHAT A PRETTY LITTLE slut to bring home to the boss. I hope you’ve had fun whoring yourself out.” The orc’s vile breath is hot on my face. Drops of spittle land on my lips.

“Jealous?” I ask through gritted teeth.

When the orc goes to reach for his weapon, I take the opportunity to pull my sai from my hips and start stabbing him barbarically.

The orc snarls at me, shoving my face into the dirt as he pins me to the ground.

Mayhem has broken out all around me. I can hear the clashing of swords and grunts of pain. And the sweet, sweet sound of tearing flesh.

I focus on my breaths and try to find another opening.

The orc grabs the back of my pants and begins to pull them down over my ass.

“You bitch! I’ll show you what jealousy looks like. I’m sure the boss won’t mind your torn-up pussy, as long as it still works.” He tries to spread my cheeks with one hand but

fumbles, giving me the opening I was looking for. I stab him again, this time in the eye.

“Vi!” I hear a demanding voice scream my name, but I’m too busy to look. It only takes seconds before the orc is roughly torn off of me.

Avi stands high above me in full Rakshasa glory. His skin is a deep blue, bursting with muscles. He has two curved horns from the front sides of his head, a set of tusks out of his bottom jaw, and long fangs from the top. I should be afraid, but I’m not; he is utterly breathtaking.

The way he overtakes the battle is awe-inspiring. But part of me wonders why he didn’t shift right away. This all could have been over much quicker.

Thorin rushes to my side, helping me up. Her body looks like rivers of molten lava are running through it. And her flaming wings are finally free and on display.

“Did he—“

“No, he never got to. Avi got him off of me, though I would have killed him myself before I let another being take my body from me.”

“Oh, thank the gods!” Thorin throws her arms around my neck, hugging me tightly.

“Sorry to interrupt, ladies, but I would like to look my mate over.” Ryu is still half-shifted with spikes of ice down his back, pointed teeth, and claws.

“Be my guest.” Thorin steps off to the side.

“Hey, doc. You were pretty amazing out the—” He doesn’t let me get the words out, seizing a searing hot kiss from me instead.

“Kitten, you were the image of power. I’m sorry I ever doubted your capabilities,” he says, tucking his head into the crook of my neck.

My peace is temporary as I hear a growl from behind me. Avi is stalking towards me like I’m his prey. I don’t know why I do it, but I take off running.

Avi is hot on my trail, basically galloping closer. I cut into the woods, dodging trees and hopping over roots.

I catch my foot on a rock and tumble forward, the perfect chance for Avi to pounce.

Landing on my back, he pulls my head to the side by my hair. He deeply inhales my scent and grinds his hardened cock into my ass.

“Your fear smells so fucking good, little star.”

“Get off of me, Avi! You’re not thinking straight.” I try to buck him off of me, but he shoves back into me harder.

“Oh, but I am. This is the real me, Villiana. I absorbed a whole lot of energy for you out there. Now I need to work it off,” Avi breathes heavily into my ear. “So, what you are going to do is run. And when I catch you, the fun will begin.” He lets me up. “I’ll give you a ten-second start... One. Two. Th—.”

I take off as fast as I can, slipping on fallen leaves as I go. I search for a place to hide, and with nowhere to go, I start climbing up a tree. As I’m about to throw my leg over a branch, the one supporting me is yanked down.

“Ten.” Avi’s voice drips with malice.

I feel like a doll. My arm flails and scrapes against the tree’s trunk, causing blood to bloom across my skin. I land in Avi’s clutches, having my chest locked against the tree.

He runs his demonic hands under my shirt. He finds my nipple and pinches hard, sending a wave of heat to my center. I can't help but buck against him as he assaults the other.

He growls into my ear right before he nips the side of my neck. I clench my legs together as wetness pools between them.

"I can smell your arousal, little star. Do you like not knowing if I'm going to fuck you, or kill you?" He palms my breast and digs his claws in.

"*Ahh,*" I hiss.

Something clicks in my head. He needs this. He just brutally killed all of those men because he was worried about me. This is the demon everyone is so afraid to have come out because Avi can't control his urges. But what if I helped him—played into them—allowing him a safe way to be a heathen?

"*Stop, Avi!*" I've got to make his Rakshasa think it's taking what it needs.

"I don't think so." He starts to yank down my pants. "I think you want to feel this demon cock sink into you."

He's right. The harder I *fight* him, the wetter I get.

Avi brings his hand brutally down across the globes of my ass. The smack echoes through the darkened forest. He ferociously cracks against my flesh again and again. I cry out in pleasure more every time. Avi kneels and licks the handprints he's left. "You look so good marked by me." Then, he bites down on the same spot.

"*Oh. Fuck.*" My words come out gravelly.

Avi spreads my legs apart as far as he can with my pants around my ankles. I feel his long tongue come up between my

thigh, lapping my juices. My knees buckle as his tongue dips inside of me. “Mmm, and so responsive too.”

Snatching my pants from my ankles, he flips me around so my back is against the knotty trunk. Finally getting a good look at his face, I can see that Avi has a third eye sitting between his other two, glowing a bright golden hue. His skin is molten with purples, and his wild hair looks like it's made of spun gold.

Avi notices me staring at him and tilts his head with curiosity. The softness is gone as fast as it came, wrenching one of my knees up to my chest. At this point, I'm barely balancing on my tip toes.

With a look of pure evil, Avi pushes himself into me. He is thick, almost too thick. There are ridges down his entire length, causing the strangest sensation. His strokes are short and rough as he works himself all the way in. Fully seated, I press tightly against his knot—something I never noticed before.

He pulls himself almost entirely out and drives back in, knocking the wind from my lungs.

“Aww, little star, do I take your breath away?” Avi gives me a cruel smile as he does it again.

My nails bite into the top of his shoulders while I try to keep myself upright. I dig them so hard that I'm surprised they haven't broken the skin yet.

“Seeing you sprayed in the blood of your enemies is one of the sexiest things I have ever seen,” Avi groans. “But you would look so much better dripping in your own.”

Taking one of his razor sharp nails, he carves into my stomach as he fucks me. The motion of our bodies causes each

pass to go deeper in some spots more than others. Looking down at his work, Avi curses.

“Fuck yes, look how good you bleed for me.”

I’m mesmerized by the sight. Blood stains my pastel skin, trickling down to where we are joined, his knot bouncing against my opening. Avi ruts into me unforgivingly, every stroke sending waves of pleasure through me, but I still need more.

“Harder! Make it hurt.”

“Be careful what you ask for,” he says, rolling his claws into my arm. Blood oozes from the punctures, but Avi doesn’t waste it, licking up every drop.

“*Oh gods!*” The words don’t even sound like my own anymore

“There are no gods here.” Picking up my other leg, he wraps it around his waist, angling himself to get deeper. You can hear how wet I am as our bodies slap together, liquid running down his balls.

Avi uses my weight, driving me down as he pushes up, forcing his knot inside me. Molten-hot pleasure takes over me as my orgasm rips from my throat. Avi doesn’t let up, rolling his hips hard into me.

“Little star, you still have more of me to take.” I don’t understand what he means until he thrusts himself so hard into me that I swear I’m going to tear open. Then, when I think I can’t take anymore, I feel a second knot settle inside.

This time my vision tunnels, and my body shakes as a gush of liquid is released. My mind feels like it has floated into another universe, and I’m looking down at myself.

I hear Avi speak to me again, “I’m going to fill your cursed womb with my demon seed, and we’ll see how strong that spell really is.”

Even in my haze, I realize he’s somehow figured it out.

His body stiffens, roaring out his release with two more pointed thrusts. I feel a flood of cum fill me up. It seems never-ending. When the jets subside, my belly is bloated with him.

Laying us both down on the ground, Avi hovers above me, waiting for his knot to go down. With every passing moment, his features soften, and he slowly shifts back to himself.

Avi gently pulls out and presses into my stomach, entranced by the river of cum which rushes out.

“You are mine now, and I never intend on letting you go.”

THIRTY-SIX

Villiana

WALKING BACK TO THE BARRACKS, there are bodies—and body parts—littered everywhere. We didn't just defeat them, we massacred them. Every single one of us proved to be an integral part of the team.

Ducking under the open ten flap, Avi interlaces our fingers. “I know what you did back there. No one has ever looked at me in my Rakshasa form and been unafraid. Whether you realize it or not, you gave me a piece of yourself. Thank you.” His words are filled with kindness and gratitude; I could get used to it.

“You like to hide behind your demon. It makes it easier to keep everyone at a distance—no one can get hurt that way. But I see you. You may treat me like shit, but when it comes down to the important things, you are always at my side. We are not going to be perfect, and our relationship has a long way to go, but I'm not letting you go either.” With a soft kiss, I drag him in.

Ziggy is standing there with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face as we walk in. “If you all are going to fuck my sister, can you please do it out of earshot?”

“Awww, don’t ruin all the fun, boss man! Some of us like looking and listening. You can just go hide away.” Thorin pouts at him.

“I need a drink.” Lip curled in disgust, Ziggy stomps away from the group.

Fear comes over and wraps his long arms over mine and Avi’s shoulders. “It was about time you two fucked and made up. Now we can be one happy family!”

He has a way of making everything better—lighter. Fear seems like a brute—which he is—but he is so much more than that. That great big body is so full of love and compassion it’s bursting at the seams. I honestly don’t know how I didn’t realize that we were bonded sooner. From the moment our eyes met, I knew that he was special and would inexplicably change my life.

Wood creaks behind us as boots clammer on top of the table. Looking over, I see Lydia ready to give a speech.

“Thank you, everyone, for all of your help! This is a win for The Tower, but the war is nowhere near over. Let’s celebrate this victory tonight, and tomorrow start planning our attack on that fucking snake, Locren!” Lydia shouts out. The whole tent claps and cheers; especially the survivors of The Collective.

“Before we really get down to the partying, does anyone possess the ability of decomposition?” Lydia looks around the room for an answer. “If I can get some muscle to help me, I’ll just make another bonfire with the bodies!”

Thorin snaps her fingers, and fire appears between them. “I can help with that.” Lydia smirks at her, and the two of them walk out to clean up.

I walk over to where the drinks are and pour myself the largest glass of plum wine I can. Two, three—okay, maybe five—drinks in and my world is wobbly. Everything I touch feels like pure ecstasy, and I can taste scents. Swerving my way through the crowd over to Ryu, his earthy smell hits my tastebuds, flooding my mouth with flavor.

“You smell like fresh dirt in my mouth. It’s weird, but I like it,” I slur, leaning into Ryu.

I reach out and run my hands up and down the defined planes of his chest, curling my nails in when I get to his pecs. Ryu grunts as a glint of lust fills his eyes. I flash an evil smile before diving in and biting down below his collarbone.

An appreciative sound crawls from this throat. His muscles tighten as he apprehensively pulls me off. “Ooookay, kitten, I think you’ve had enough to drink.”

“Boooo. I’ll go ask Avi. We’re best *friends* now.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so. Sit your cute butt down.” Ryu gets me to a chair, and I plop down.

Like a sad puppy, I paw at his arm, begging for attention. “I will go to bed if you snuggle me, doc.” Ryu scoops me up into his arms, and it feels like I’m flying.

“Weeee!”

He places me down on Lydia’s cot, taking off my shoes and dirty clothes. Lying completely bare, I watch him rummage through my pack to find some kind of clean clothing, pulling out a shirt he realizes it’s one of his.

“You were going to miss me?” The arrogance rolls off of him.

Of course, that's his first thought. I mean, he's right, but that's not the point. "Just get over here and let me into the pit of greatness."

"The pit of what..."

I sigh at him. "Your arm crook. Now, stop talking and get in."

Impatiently, I wait for him to get comfortable, but the second he lifts his arm for me, I burrow in, pulling myself into a ball against him. Nuzzling my face into his armpit, I drift to sleep with a truly content smile spreading across my face.

I'm safe and loved.

"Oh, my. You have been a naughty little trophy. You think you can keep me out of your head, little girl? Ha! I've been making a home in here for years." Locren's voice floats through my unconsciousness.

"The only good thing you have done is expose The Tower's location and what your weaknesses are. You will bow to me, trophy."

I try building my mental wall, but the alcohol swimming through my system prevents me from completing it. Despite my best efforts, Locren pushes hazy memories into my mind. Glimpses of what I thought may have been a nightmare were in fact my reality.

I'm screaming at myself to wake up, to stop the assault—nothing I do is working.

A burst of light passes from behind my eyes, and the onslaught of images stops.

"Hello, Kostbar."

This time there is no questioning who is with me.

“Hi, Mama. You scared the monster away, just like you always did.” I don’t sound like my current self. The voice I hear is that of my eight-year-old self.

“Villiana, I will always protect you. But while I can only be in here, they will hold your hand through the darkness. Together as one, you are at your strongest.” My Mother’s voice blankets me in love. “The vow of three will complete thee. The power you will unlock will be unmatched.”

Every word is a lullaby.

“You are meant for great things, my sweet girl. Be wary of the ones you surround yourself with. Some of them may not even know that they are not themselves.”

“Who, Mama?”

“Open your eyes, Kostbar. Follow your truths.”

MY EYES SPRING OPEN, and I throw up over the side of the bed. Locren is determined to ruin me in one way or another, and if it can’t be physically, it will be mentally. My hands shake with anger, wishing I was stronger and could keep him out.

“Vi, what happened?” Ryu’s groggy voice comes from behind me.

“I think I drank too much. I’m going to get stuff to clean up the mess.” I’m not ready to tell him anything. I need to figure some things out on my own first.

“I’ll do it. Just lay back down and relax. Do you want me to make you something for your stomach?”

This gives me the perfect opportunity to sneak off for a few. “That would be great, actually. But I’m still getting up and washing myself. I’m pretty disgusting right now.”

“Okay, Kitten. I’ll be here when you get back.” Ryu kisses me on the forehead before helping me out of bed .

Taking a nice long shower is my first stop. Once I feel somewhat normal, I look for Lydia. I find her outside meditating in the sunshine. I feel bad interrupting her, but I really need her. Tapping her gently on the back, Lydia grabs my wrist and pulls me onto the ground before I even know what’s happening.

“*Fuck*, Vi, you can’t just sneak up on me! I could have killed you.” Her wide eyes stare down at me.

“Sorry. I figured it was better than screaming at you.”

Lydia helps me into a sitting position with an agitated glaze. “So, what’s up?”

“I need your help, and I need you to keep this between us.”

She goes to speak, but I put my hand up. “Absolutely no one can know about this. Think of this as proving yourself to me.” I hate pulling that card, but I’m desperate.

Rolling her eyes at me, she asks, “What exactly am I searching for?”

At least she caught on quickly. I run my fingers through the dying grass and take a few deep breaths. “Locren got into my dreams again last night. I tried to block him out, but I couldn’t. He, uhm, showed me *memories* that I had lost. I want to know if they’re real or if he was just torturing me.”

“This is serious, Villiana. You need to tell your guys about this if you won’t tell your brother.”

“Can we just figure out what’s going on first?” I’m practically begging her at this point.

“Lay down and clear your mind for me. You have to let me in. Your instinct is going to be to push me out.”

“Okay.” I lay back, closing my eyes as I place my head in her lap.

“You have to tell me what to look for. There are way too many memories for me to sift through them all. I’m going to see them anyway.”

I recount every memory with as little detail as possible. As I finish, I open my eyes to find Lydia staring at me with fury and tears in her eyes.

“I don’t want your pity,” I say defensively.

“You’re not the only one with a traumatic past, Vi. My tears aren’t for you,” she snaps at me. “Now it’s time for me to go fishing.”

I feel Lydia’s magic forcing itself inside of me. Taking deep, calming breaths, I lower my mental walls down, and her magic flows smoothly into my mind. All of the images from my past start playing as if I am living them again. It’s almost unbearable, and all I want is Fear to be by my side, comforting me.

As if I summoned him, the scent of cloves and cinnamon envelope me. “You can open your eyes, little one. Lydia is done,” Fear says sweetly.

“Villiana, you might want to get the rest of your guys. I’m not telling you anything without a support system.” Lydia can’t even look at me as she tells me. And that’s how I know it’s worse than I thought.

I call for Ryu through our tie. “***Doc, can you and Avi come out into the field? I need you.***” Within seconds, the guys are outside and headed toward us.

“Can someone please fill me in? I heard you screaming in my head, Vi,” Ryu pleads.

“Please sit down because none of you are going to like this.” Lydia waits for everyone to be seated. “Vi came to me because Locren was able to get into her mind again last night. Not only did he threaten her, but he *gifted* her repressed memories.” Taking my hand in hers, Lydia rubs her thumb across the back of my hand. “It’s worse than you thought... Do you want me to tell you everything?”

Wincing, I nod.

“Okay,” she says on a sigh. “I’m sorry for how blunt this will be. Not only is every memory of being raped true, but he also has been trying to get you pregnant for years.”

“I already knew that. All of the girls are bred.”

“No, you don’t understand. *He* has been trying to breed you. He has brought in many different doctors trying to figure out why you are barren. Locren has gone as far as harvesting your eggs, inseminating them, and planting them in your womb. Because it’s a hostile environment, you miscarry every time. When that didn’t work, he started taking your fertilized eggs and implanting them in the other girls. None of them took. And every girl who failed...” Pausing, Lydia turns her eyes down, unable to face me. “He made you kill them.”

With every word she says, the memories flood back. The hundreds of girls he made me butcher, all because I spelled my womb all those years ago. I shake uncontrollably, and my throat feels tight. I’m gasping for any air I can. Avi tries to siphon energy from me, but it’s not happening fast enough.

“I can take them away forever. Just say the word.” Lydia’s voice sounds like we’re underwater.

I find my voice and scream out. “No! I want to remember every single face and name that monster made me take from this world.” Sobbing with rage, I don’t know who I hate more right now—Locren, or myself.

Shadows encircle us and Fear’s beautiful eyes shine with an indescribable anger. “None of this is your fault.” His shadows close in even more.

“Yes, it is! When I was thirteen, Lys spelled me to be barren. To protect me from the possibility of The Collective capturing me. I know how to reverse it, but I never have! It’s my fault all of those girls are dead!”

Fear’s tattoos start to glow, light pulsing from them.

“By the power of Odin himself, I will tear apart the skies to find this man and devour his soul.”

Can he actually do that?

“Yes, I’ve only seen him harness the powers of the gods once, and I never wanted to see it again,” Ryu answers.

“Get out of my head,” I snip.

“It’s not my fault your mind spoke loud enough for me to hear,” Ryu snickers when he finds my scrutinizing eyes on him.

Putting aside my own anxieties, I reach for Fear. “Hey, big guy, let’s hear the whole story before we make any plans.” I run my fingers through his beard, trying to soothe him.

“Lydia, please continue,” I ask her cautiously.

“He has never needed a conduit, because he made you do a ritual that connects you. Locren can access your mind at any time. He can even see what you see. The only thing he can’t

do is look into your memories. So, if he's not in there as the thoughts are being processed, he won't know."

I don't know whether to be relieved or horrified. Ryu and Fear have me nestled between them, trying to ground me. Both have been vocal this entire time, so when I hear Avi speak for the first time, it actually frightens me.

Avi isn't in control anymore—his demon is. "I will find Locren. I will skin him and heal him. I will do it for eternity. I will drink his blood and relish in his screams. I promise you, on both my good and evil side. He will suffer, little star."

I can't handle anything else. I can't be around the guys. I can't be here anymore. I call for the one person who has been there through it all. "THORIN!"

With blazing wings, my perfect pixie comes flying over. "What do you need me to do?"

"Get me out of here. Now," I plead.

Threading her fingers in mine, she guides us toward the forest.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Ophir

THE SMELL of death lingers in the air. The cycle of life stops for no one, but it can be sped up.

My shadows are still hovering above the grass on high alert. I don't think I could pull them back even if I tried. The need to protect my little one is greater than any other need I've had in my life.

"How bad is it, truly?" I ask Lydia.

We all look at each other in disbelief.

"*Bad*. Bad enough that her memories will stay with me for the rest of my life. Don't forget it's almost like being in the room with her as it happens." Lydia's eyes are distant and haunted. "Your girl is a warrior, and you better treat her as so. Working with The Tower, I've seen a lot of horrors, but it's nothing compared to what actually goes on in the camps and compounds. I'm going to assume that Vi is a special case, but I could still see what other girls were going through from Vi's point of view."

Ryu looks like he is in physical pain. He is so overwhelmed that you can see the cording of his muscles.

With his brows creased, the cogs of his brain are working overtime to find an answer because that's who he is. He is the logical one—the rational leader. And right now, he has no answers or control over this situation, putting him seconds away from a meltdown.

“I know that look, medicine man, but you have to hold your shit together for our girl. She needs us more than she will ever admit.”

Ryu shoots daggers at me, scales coming to the surface and frost forming around us. “Don't you think I know that? Don't you think that I would give my life for her? The fact that Locren has been ten steps ahead of us this entire time is what's killing me. I knew the extraction went way too smoothly.”

Lydia quickly interjects before Ryu loses his shit or we get into a fight. “The only way we are going to get ahead of him is by telling Ziggy about this. I will respect Vi's wishes, in the sense that I won't tell him about her memories, but he needs to know that Locren has been spying through her.”

Lydia isn't wrong. The only way we'll get ahead of this is by being transparent and getting to the main Tower barracks.

The tent is quiet since they relocated all the survivors to another barrack. Unfortunately, this location is compromised, and The Tower will have to find a new, more secure spot within this region. It isn't easy just packing up and finding somewhere else. You have to scout the area, ensuring it works logistically, there are no threats, and it is easily accessible but not noticeable. The operation Ziggy and his crew runs is really impressive. I can see that determination—maybe even pigheadedness—runs in the family.

Finding Ziggy is easy. Everyone is always flocking to him like sheep. He is charismatic, charming, and a great leader. But

after what I saw last night, I don't trust him. I believe he loves his sister and will do anything to keep her safe; I just don't know how safe the rest of us are.

“Hey, chief, I have to talk to you, and you're not going to talk until I'm done.” Ziggy isn't shocked by Lydia's forwardness. I think it's safe to assume she's the only one allowed to tell him what to do.

For the next few minutes, Lydia fills Ziggy in on all the pertinent information and gives her opinion about how to handle the situation. With every second, Ziggy's features morph into something more sinister, and his eyes begin to glow again. By the end of the conversation, he no longer looks like himself. The sound of his teeth grinding fills my ears, making me cringe.

“So, you're telling me he's still in her head? That right now, he is listening to her thoughts and seeing what she's seeing? Can someone please explain to me why we let Villiana leave our sights?!”

“Vi and I can contact each other at any time. If she's in distress, I will feel it as well. And to be frank, I trust her.” Prim and proper Ryu has gone, and obsessive and aggressive Ryu is in the house now. There's no stopping him once he gets like this. The worst part is that he will have proof to back up his claims—he always wins. The ones wound the tightest whip the hardest.

“She is in danger and can't be left alone! I can't believe I employ you if this is how you handle sensitive situations.” Ziggy pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to throw his weight around.

My fingers curl tight into fists, ready for a fight. How dare he say something like that! There is nothing I wouldn't do for

Villiana. She's not just some assignment.

She. Is. *Mine*.

“Vi is not alone, and she is not a child. She has survived horrors you couldn't even imagine. Someone knowing her thoughts is nothing compared to that. Yes, she is in danger, and so is this whole operation. Yes, we need to take care of and protect her. But give your sister some credit!” Ryu screams.

Ziggy flings his arms out in rage, narrowly missing Ryu. “But those things aren't happening right now. You obviously don't care much about her or her safety if you think running off and having a meltdown is in her best interest!”

Avi chimes in seconds before I go to beat the shit out of Ziggy. “Oh please, don't act like you know what's best for her when you don't even know who Vi is. A lot has happened in the last sixteen years—she is no longer that defenseless, scared little girl anymore. And if you ever question our loyalty or devotion again—I don't care if you're her brother—I will slit your throat and smile while you bleed out.” Avi's newfound appreciation for Vi couldn't have come at a better time. Ryu and I knew it was always there; I'm happy Avi finally knows too.

The color drains from Ziggy's face. He can't deny the truth behind Avi's words. Regardless of why it happened, he hasn't been around and is practically a stranger to his sister. He stands there in stunned silence before stomping off to his tent.

I suppose there's nothing left to say.

I head towards the woods because I know that's where the girls would go. I don't make it very far when I see Vi and Thorin walking my way. As soon as Thorin sees me, she gives me a tiny nod, turning to Vi.

“I’m going to head back in and grab some food. I’ll see you in a little bit, babe,” she says, blowing her a kiss before leaving.

“Come here, little one. How about we sit on the hill and watch the sunset? There’s no need to go back to all the craziness just yet.”

“You know what? That sounds like *exactly* what I want to do.”

Together we walk to the top of the hill. Sitting down, we huddle close together. The flaming sky above us is a reminder that we survived another day. Yet, at the same time, it proves that we may not make it through the next. Time is a construct, and we must make the most of it.

Vi lifts my arm, tucking her small body into me. “I miss you, big guy. We haven’t had much time alone. I’d give anything to be curled up in our bed right now.”

Our bed. I like the sound of that. I like the sound of anything that implies there’s an *us*.

Huffing out a breath, I turn to Vi. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Eyes as wide as saucers, she starts picking at her fingers nervously. “I don’t like that phrase.”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing bad, little one. Just something that needs to be said.” I can hear my heartbeat thumping in my ears, but now that she’s tied to Ryu, I really need to tell her the truth. “Ryu and I... Well, we love each other. Romantically and physically.”

Vi cocks her head to the side, watching me intensely. Her face shows no emotion other than curiosity.

I continue, “We’ve spoken about it and want you to know that we will do anything for you. Including ending our relationship.”

With glassy eyes, she opens her mouth and then closes it again. I’m so afraid that this revelation has broken her heart, but she shocks the hell out of me.

“I know, big guy. I’ve known from the start. I can see it in the way you look at each other—the passion.” Streaks of tears run down her face as she shakes her head. “I would *never* ask you to end your relationship. How fair would that be of me? Your love has been around longer than I have and will continue for the rest of time.”

“Villiana.”

“Ophir.” She cracks a smile at the formality.

“I love you. I love the way your eyes shimmer with a sea of emotions. I love how perfectly your body fits against mine. I love the way my heart flutters when you’re near. I have never felt something so right in my life.” My heart thumps in my ears, afraid it’s going to chase her away. I don’t know what I would do if I lost her, but I couldn’t hold it in any longer. I love her with every ounce of my being and would rather die than live another moment without her knowing.

Vi’s violet eyes bore into my soul as she laces our fingers together.

“Please don’t feel pressured to say it ba—”

“I love you too. So fucking much, Ophir. Every day with you makes me realize what I have been missing in my life, and in my soul. I knew from the moment I met you that you came into my life for a reason. You were supposed to be mine, as I am yours. You set my soul free,” Vi rushes out with

conviction. She grabs me by the back of the head and kisses me passionately.

“Villiana, I give you everything I am. It might not be much, but you can have it all: my heart, my soul, my magic, my every breath. There is nothing I wouldn’t give you,” I say against her lips.

Vi places my hand atop her sigil, taking her own and placing it on mine. She closes her eyes, and I feel her push her magic into me. Pure ecstasy rushes through me; my sigil emanates a golden glow. I finally catch on to what she is doing and push my magic into her, watching it turn purple. Although we’re already bound, Vi has chosen to prove her love by giving me a literal piece of herself. When the binding is complete, a star has formed behind my sigil and a triquetra behind hers.

“Now you will always have a part of me with you.” Her voice is like honey. Having Vi as my mate fills me with joy that I didn’t think was possible.

Opening my vest and the top of my shirt, I take out my dagger and cut a line above my heart. “Forever?”

Vi takes the dagger from me and does the same. “*Forever.*”

And then she runs her tongue along my chest, lapping up the blood, before closing her mouth around the newly formed sigil. Leaning down, I collect every last drop of her blood with my tongue.

Our bloodied lips crash together like waves on a beach, pulling us under the riptide. Slowly, we peel the clothes off each other’s bodies, taking time to appreciate one another. Laying Vi’s curvaceous body down in the grass, I hover above

her, caging her in. I kiss a trail down her body, stopping at her throbbing core, devouring her. I don't stop until she's a quivering mess. Once she's ready for me, I grab a small bottle of lube from my vest pocket. Coating my length, I take my time sliding into her. I don't fuck her, though—I *worship* her. She is a goddess, and I am just an offering.

With each brush of our tongues, we walk through one another's memories. In a twist of fate, Vi gets to meet my parents in my childhood home in Zephyr, the air realm. I get to live through gardening with her mom. Our old lives meld as one, creating a new future. A future where we are free from the shackles of our pasts. Staring down at my exquisite mate as we both finish, our hearts beat in unison, and I know the blood vow is complete.

And for the first time, I feel the necrotized hole in my chest heal.

8 YEARS old

The piercing screams of a woman sound outside the front door. The screaming turns into crying and pleading, then, with a loud crash, the pleading turns into silence.

My hands tremble where they are clenched tightly around the fabric of my mother's skirt. They're here. They're going to get us.

"Shh, liten prins. It's going to be okay. We have to stay here for a little longer," my mother whispers, swiping away the trail of tears streaming down my face. Her bright green eyes are soft and kind but cannot hide the fear.

"But, Mamma, the bad men are out there. They got someone—I just know it. They're hurting the villagers!" My

voice shakes.

A pounding on the front door reverberates down the hall, making it sound as if they are right next to us.

“Open the gods damn door! We know you’re harboring healers,” a deep voice screams, though it is muffled by the thick wood.

Across the room, my father lifts himself off the dirt floor with anguish carved into every line of his face. “Eevi, I have to go out there. They’ll burn down our home just to find them.”

My mother furiously shakes her head, her shadows simmering on the surface, threatening to burst out at any moment.

“You don’t have to do this, Iver. They’ll kill you!”

My father’s massive frame appears in front of us. Crouching down to our huddled forms, he takes my mother’s cheek in his palm, placing his lips tenderly against hers.

“Yes, my dream, I do.”

He offers me the smallest smile before kissing the top of my head. “You take good care of Mamma, Ophir. Protect the healers too. They have no one else but us.”

He stands back up and heads for the door. He stops at the threshold, hanging his head momentarily, grasping the door frame so hard that it splinters. Looking over his shoulder, his eyes glisten in the candlelight. Giving us one last look, my father says, “I love you both eternally.” With that, he straightens himself, holding his head high and proud as he begins his death march.

Once his loud footsteps fade away, the pounding stops abruptly. First comes the shouting. My mother presses her hands over my ears, but I can still make out grunts and cries, followed by gurgling and dripping.

The dripping sound gets closer.

A small slender man walks in, covered in blood. He has a huge scar from one cheek to the other, looking like someone tried to carve a sinister smile into his ashen face. His aura is heavy and black like sludge; it radiates a magic I've never felt before.

"I have a gift for you." He smiles at us, not intimidated by the vast size difference. Reaching into the hallway, he drags a large object in behind him. It takes a moment for me to realize what it is; the flaming red locks shock the life from me. The man has brought us my father's head.

"You giants aren't that big and bad after all," he snarks.

My mother lets out a soul-piercing wail, unleashing her shadows and cocooning the man inside. I watch as the man struggles against the binds and shouts an incantation. I try hard to translate, only catching the word fire.

My mother's eyes widen as the room becomes stifling, smoke billowing all around us. "Ophir, go! You must leave Zephyr and never come back!"

Panic overtakes me as I watch my mother, the strongest woman ever to live, struggle to hold back this tiny man. "No! Let me stay and fight with you, Mamma. I've grown so big now!"

"Liten prins, I can only hold him off for so long. Go to the hut and get the healers. Take them to Estuarine. The water realm has kept The Collective away for a long time. You will

be safe.” Her words are strained from the lack of oxygen in the room. “Until Valhalla, Ophir. I will be there when it is your time.”

I throw open the window and run, the strong scent of burning wood following me. Sprinting down the mountain, snot and tears freely flow down my face.

I must get to the hut. I must bring them all to Estuarine.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Villiana

NEVER IN MY life did I think I would have a bonded mate, and now I don't have one, but two. And they're not just my bonded; they are my true alchemic mates. A tie that is forged in blood, transforming our very essence. The rarity of this situation makes me not want to believe anything, but my soul knows them. It knows that we were meant to be, like ancient magic has a hold on us. So, as much as I won't admit it out loud, my soul calls to them.

I think back to what my mother had said in my dream, *a vow of three will complete thee*. Does that mean Avi is my mate too? That is not something I will rush. We are just learning to enjoy one another.

Leaving our bubble last night was hard for Fear and I, but necessary. Knowing we can't hide away forever, we're getting ready to make the trek to the main barracks of The Tower.

"Ziggy, you never even told me where we're going. Location wise." My brother has been very cryptic this morning, only giving me bits and pieces of information.

"Noir—the realm of endless night," he says harshly.

“You’re kidding, right? You know they call it the home of nightmares for a reason?”

“*We* are the nightmares, Vi. I’m not the same elf I once was. I have done horrible, vile things. And I will do them a million times over. I won’t stop until everyone in The Collective has been slaughtered. Can you handle that reality?” Ziggy punctuates every word with fervor.

“None of us are who we once were, and I think we can all agree that retribution is needed. But don’t take that tone with me, Zigmund. I’m *so* sorry that I wanted to know more about your life.”

“Ask me again when you’re no longer sharing your mind,” he grumbles.

“What is your problem?”

“Just make sure you and *your men* have your shit together so we can get out of here.” Ziggy shoves things into his pack and then leaves to find Lydia.

“What the fuck crawled up his beautiful ass?” Thorin glowers with her arms across her chest. I quirk an eyebrow at the *beautiful ass* comment but don’t bring attention to it.

I’m not surprised she is aggravated on my behalf. Thorin is very much an empath.

“I don’t know, but I hope this isn’t how it’s going to be from now on. I love my brother, but I refuse to be talked down to like I’m still his ten-year-old baby sister.” There is no way I will tolerate another being trying to control me, nor will I allow anyone to speak to me like I’m nothing. I have spent too much of my life being forced to bow down to weaker men. This bitch doesn’t get down on her knees for anyone—well, there are exceptions to every rule.

“Good morning, little star.” Avi strolls by, giving my booty a slap.

“Good morning, Sir Licks-a-Lot,” I sing-song.

Thorin chokes on her tea. “What?!”

“This demon eats pussy like it’s his ticket back to hell.”

Avi scoops me around the waist and nibbles on my neck. “Oh, really? I’m mighty hungry right now.” I giggle, blushing like an innocent virgin. I like his playful side.

“Wow, you guys are giving me whiplash. Didn’t you hate Vi like two days ago?” Thorin does make a good point. To anyone outside of our group, it seems like Avi and I have been enemies.

“When I make a decision, I stick to it. And I decided that Vi is what I want.” Knowing he wants me makes me grin uncontrollably, even after everything he has put me through. I understand what Ryu and Fear have been trying to tell me about him a little better now. It doesn’t mean I forgive him for all the bullshit I’ve had to put up with, but we’re slowly making progress.

“Mhmmm. You just want to sink your face into those big ole’ pillow titties.” Thorin leers at him with the *I’m watching you* gesture.

Ahren comes toward us with two bowls of strawberry oatmeal and hands them to Thorin. She takes the bowls, thanks him, and places them on the table.

“There’s no use denying that one!” Avi shoves his face into my chest, asking to die of suffocation. As I laugh, his head gets buried further in. I’m going to start to write his eulogy now.

Fear comes around, signaling us to stay quiet. He sneaks up behind Avi, winds his arm up, then slaps Avi's ass so hard I think it wakes up every living creature in the area. Howling, Avi crumples to the floor, desperately trying to rub the sting away. Fear steps over him, giving me a quick kiss.

“Good morning, little one. I got that nasty little bug off you.” He then goes over to Thorin and kisses her on top of the head like a big brother...who likes to watch his sister kiss his girlfriend? Okay, maybe a stepbrother is better—less weird. “Good morning to you too, spitfire.”

Thorin throws herself into his arms, “Good morning, husband-in-law! You're simply glowing this morning.” She wiggles her brows at him.

“Do you know where doc is this morning?” I ask Thorin.

“He left last night for a little trip. He should be back very soon, though.”

What the fuck? Why would he leave by himself and not tell me? I know I was with Fear last night, but that doesn't mean he couldn't communicate with me. I hate to be the nosey girlfriend—or whatever you want to call it—but I would like to know he is okay with everything going on.

“Hey, doc, everything okay?”

“Yes, kitten. I'll be back soon.” He answers right away.

“Next time, can you let me know you're headed out, please?”

“Of course, baby.”

The confirmation eases some of my worries. Other than Thorin, I haven't had anyone in my life worth caring about in a very long time. Every other person just took from me or

simply co-existed. When I was in Bonecliff, we barely existed. There was no need to form attachments; life alone was safer. The second you started to open yourself up to hope, it was quickly crushed. Sometimes getting used to going from solitude to a whole new-and-improved family gets too overwhelming. I'm grateful, but it becomes too much at the same time.

As Ahren and Thorin finish setting the table, we wait for Lydia and Ziggy before sitting down for breakfast. Lydia saunters to us alone; her head held high with a royal air about her. Swinging her leg over the bench, she sits down.

“Good morning, everyone. I hope you all had plenty of rest because we have a lot of work ahead of us,” she says with a genuine smile. Her gaze shifts over, giving me a slight nod when our eyes meet. She's growing on me. I know getting respect in a man's world is difficult, so she has to always stay in character—cold and resilient. But really, Lydia has much more to her than being just a loyal soldier.

“Will my darling brother be joining us, or is he still huffing and puffing over gods know what?”

Lydia slowly shakes her head. “He is...busy right now. We can eat without him.”

I shrug and dig into my food. I'm not going to worry about him having a temper tantrum.

Taking a sip of his drink, Avi breaks the awkward silence. “So, Ahren, how long have you been with The Tower?”

“Hmm, probably five years now. I was living in Incedis, the fire realm, when The Collective came through and did a mass sweep of the town. I owned a tavern and tried to hide

away as many healers as I could.” He looks into his bowl with an emptiness in his eyes.

Thorin blanches at the mention of the fire realm, her home. No good memories reside there, which just adds to the list of reasons she will never return.

“One night, a few Collective soldiers somehow broke through my wards and set the place on fire. Every healer who wasn’t an elemental burned to death, and the ones who were elementals were slaughtered trying to get the others out.” He fists his spoon, squeezing so hard it literally crumbles apart. “I lived in a cottage behind the tavern and woke up from the screams. It could have been me burning alive instead, if I had just given the refugees my home. I wished it was for a long time.”

Lydia places her hand on Ahren’s shoulder. “But you didn’t let their deaths go unpunished.” She looks around the table like a proud mama. “When we heard about the raids, The Tower sent in troops as fast as possible. We arrived to help, seeing the town was devastated, but the survivors banded together to revive it. In the rubble of Ahren’s tavern stood pikes with the heads of Collective soldiers. I’ll give you one guess who was responsible.”

Avi’s hand slams onto the wood, startling us from our somber mood. “My kind of man! Ahren, if you ever need a helping hand, I’ll be there to assist.”

“Here, here!” Fear shouts in agreement.

The rest of breakfast we spend talking about our trip to Noir and the training that will take place once we get there. We avoid all talk about the past ten years.

As we finish up, I notice my brother glaring from the other side of the tent. If steam could come out of his ears, it would be. I don't understand his problem—he could have been an adult and eaten breakfast with us, but he chose not to.

Thorin is still sitting at the table, staring into space after everyone leaves. She looks absolutely haunted.

“Come on, Thor, let's go back to the tent.”

Nodding, she gets up and silently walks beside me. She opens the tent flap and plops down onto the cot.

Sighing, I sit down next to her. “Lay it on me, baby girl.”

“I'm just thinking about the past.” Pausing, she wrings her hands. “ I didn't even understand what a family was until recently. Having beings around who genuinely love and care about me is such a foreign concept that I wasn't sure if it was possible. You are the only person who has truly loved me in my entire life, Vi. I wouldn't have survived without you; I wouldn't have wanted to.”

I don't know what to say to her, or if there even is something I could say that would make it better. How can someone who is so full of love receive none in return?

Covering her face with her hands, Thorin's voice hitches. “Vi, promise me that you won't leave me when all my skeletons are revealed. You may never look at me the same again, but I would rather that than be without you.” She hunches over, and her shoulders tremble. Thorin has never been an overly emotional type, usually using humor to mask her pain.

She lays down on my lap and sobs when I put my hand on her back; I let her cry it out. Sometimes words aren't enough, so you just have to be present. It could be minutes or hours we

sit like this. After a while, Thorin's breaths even out, and I realize she has fallen asleep. The tent flaps open, and Ziggy walks in.

"Is she okay?"

"She will be. This has been a lot of change for both of us. Well, for all of us. I think she needs a mental break," I say softly, trying not to wake her up.

Something shifts in my brother's eyes; it's almost undetectable in the tent's darkness, but I definitely caught it. His pupils elongated. "When Ryu returns, we're going to head out, so make sure the both of you are ready to go. We can't wait any longer." Ziggy's voice is different, angrier. The crease between his brows seems deeper, making his face seem harsher.

"Sure," I say in a questioning tone. I try to examine him further, but I don't get a chance to. Ziggy flares his nostrils at me and then leaves. Something very strange is going on.

I MUST HAVE FALLEN asleep for a while. I'm still on the cot with Thorin, but it's getting dark. Ryu is crouched beside the bed, reaching over Thorin and stroking my hair.

"Hey there, sleepyhead. We have to get on the road."

"When did you get back?"

"Not very long ago, but your brother is antsy, and I didn't want him to come in here and go all commander-in-chief on you two."

"Thor is emotionally overloaded, and that's the last thing she needs right now. Ziggy has had a stick up his ass over the last twenty-four hours. He went from being dead to annoying."

Gently shaking her arm, I try to wake Thorin up. Startled, she flings her arms out to stretch, punching Ryu straight in the nose.

“Shit, fuck! I’m sorry! I didn’t realize you were there,” she says, checking Ryu’s nose over like she’s a nurse. Ryu waves her off, saying he’s fine.

Taking a moment to wake up fully, Thorin and I get out of bed and collect our packs.

I have to thank Lydia for letting us stay here.

Making our way out to the field, everyone stands there waiting for us. Tonight is exceptionally cold, so everyone is huddled together to keep warm. I pull my jacket tighter around me, preparing myself for whatever shit Ziggy is about to throw my way for not sticking to his timeline. The circle parts for me to squeeze in next to Fear and Ryu; looking across from me, I see Lys.

My gaze bounces from Lys back to Ryu. A knowing smile plays across his lips. “You think we would leave him behind? He’s important to you, so he’s important to us,” Ryu explains.

I bounce up and down on my toes, pressing a grateful kiss on his lips. My men are the best.

“Can your old man get a hug, Kostbar?” Lys holds his arms open for me. Skipping over to him, I nestle in. *Home.*

“What did you just call her?” Ziggy growls.

Whipping my head around, I find him baring his teeth as if he’s about to attack. Studying him, I notice there’s something...off about his face. It’s distorted, looking like a combination of his normal self and someone completely different.

It's very possible that I just don't know what he looks like anymore, or even what powers he's developed overtime. But it's very unsettling.

“And who exactly are you? I don't let strangers into my barracks. Gods only knows why you're actually here.” Ziggy's nostrils flare as his eyes burn into Lys'.

When Lys took me in, he asked me if there was something I would like him to call me. At first, I told him to call me Vi, but over time I had told him so many stories of Mama and Ziggy, he just naturally adopted the nickname Kostbar—precious. I never corrected him because it felt normal to hear him say it. Lys had become my only family, and my nickname brought me comfort.

“Ziggy, it's fine. He's family,” I grind out, shooting him a look that says to shut the fuck up. Unfortunately, he either doesn't get it, or simply doesn't care.

“I don't know who this old man is, but he is not family.”

Ziggy steps closer, his large frame towering over us. “Wait. You're the satyr who basically handed my sister to Locren.” Very briefly the corner of his mouth turns up before he turns it into a scowl.

Red—I see red. This motherfucker is really starting to get on my nerves.

“Don't worry about it, Vi.” Lys senses my anger and tries to calm me down, but I'm already flying off the ledge.

I march up to Ziggy, punching one finger into his chest. “This man right here might as well be my grandfather! When I ran all those years ago, I came upon his house and begged for asylum. He opened his home to me without question. I waited for you, but you never came. And while that's not your fault, it

still happened. Never once did he say I needed to find my own way. He taught me how to protect myself and how to use my magic. He showed me what to do so I could always care for myself. And he gave me one of the greatest gifts of all—the choice to have children. I’m not a mother of one hundred Collective children because of him. So *don’t you dare* tell me he’s not my family. And don’t you dare blame him for my capture!”

My palms begin to sweat from the pure heat rolling off my body. I am seething right now. “If taking my family and me in is too much of a burden to you, let me know. Because we are capable of finding our own way.” And then I go for the low blow. “I mourned you for *years*. I truly thought my big brother was dead and took a piece of me with him. And right now, I’m questioning if he did die. I don’t know who you are, because you definitely are not my brother.”

Ziggy doesn’t even have the gall to address me. He eyes the crowd one by one, keeping his mask tightly secured. “Anyone who would like to leave with The Tower, we’re leaving now. The rest of you can find your own way.”

Fuck this. I drop my eyes and hang my head low as if I’m going to beg for forgiveness. As soon as his face turns into a satisfied grin, I knee him in the balls. A string of curses spill from his lips as he leans forward to cup himself. Taking advantage of his compromised position, I punch him square in the jaw.

“I don’t *need* you!” I fume.

Grimacing, Ziggy wipes the corner of his mouth, looking down at his thumb to find blood. Before I know what’s happening, Ziggy quickly sweeps my leg. My arms fail as I

fall backward, teeth clacking together as my head bounces off the dirt.

Looming over me, he presses his muddy boot into my chest, preventing me from taking deep breaths. Tension crackles through the air—and my bond. One of my guys is about to kill him. Wordlessly, I put my hand out to tell them to stop.

“I was willing to take you with me despite Locren knowing everything about The Tower and us, but you are nothing more than a burden. Unfortunately, you know too much,” he hisses darkly. “If you don’t want to come with me, I’m taking one of yours as collateral.” His eyes are wild again, pupils elongating rather than dilating. *What the fuck?*

With his viridian glare and foot still on me, Ziggy lets out a cynical chuckle. Off to the side, there’s a soft feminine cry followed by the dull sound of a body being dragged across dry dirt. *He’s dragging someone over with magic.* Leaning down, his hot breath fans against my ear. He whispers, “Thorin will be coming with me. When you realize how weak you truly are, you’ll come back. Until then, I’m keeping your pixie.”

“Absolutely the fuck not!” I scream into his face, clawing at his leg, trying to free myself.

“Vi! It’s okay. I’ll go.”

Fucking Thorin always being the savior.

He pushes his weight into my chest. I feel my ribs strain under the pressure. This time when Ziggy gives me a victorious grin, I swear I see a flash of razor-sharp teeth. “Excellent! It’s time to go now. Say your goodbyes.” Removing his foot, he looks down at me as if I’m nothing more than shit on the sole of his boot.

Thorin helps me up, and I squeeze her tightly in my arms, too angry to cry. “You don’t have to do this, Thor. I would rather go with him than send you alone.”

She nuzzles into my neck, making it look like she is distraught. “I don’t trust him, but someone needs to keep an eye on him. I won’t be alone; Lydia isn’t all that bad. I promise this isn’t forever,” she says in a hushed voice.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Vi. Now make it look like you’re going to die without me. I want wailing.” Somehow, she can still pull a laugh from me despite the seriousness of our situation.

Giving her a quick kiss on the cheek, Thorin, Ziggy, and the rest of The Tower soldiers head off to the night realm.

Avi comes over to me, looking like death himself. “Where do you want to go now, little star?”

I don’t need my brother. I don’t need The Tower. Almost everyone I need is standing right here with me, and with them, anything is possible.

“Where it all started.”

THIRTY-NINE

Ryu

THERE'S no surprise that Vi wants to go straight to Locren, and I don't blame her, but we can't go in there blind. We already know that he's using Vi like a crystal ball, so the last thing we should do is provide him with how we plan to take him down. The problem is figuring out what it's going to take to keep him out. There is an incredible amount of power between us, but without direction, no amount of magic will help.

Sitting at the round table in the empty barracks, we discuss our plans going forward. Vi is sitting next to me with a vacant look in her eyes. On the other side of her, Avi rubs circles into her back, trying to soothe the metaphorical burn left by her brother. Lys sits across from us, mindlessly shuffling his tarot deck while Ophir paces back and forth.

"There is somewhere we need to go first." Fear and Avi look at me in shock. They know exactly where we're going. I thought we would have more time, but with this turn of events, it's time to jump right in. "But we need to travel with you blinded and preferably unable to hear. We can't let Locren know any more information."

Vi looks at me skeptically. “So, you want me sedated? You know how I feel about that.” Then, with a bite to her voice, Vi asks, “And where may this special place be?” I don’t take it personally. In a matter of months, Vi’s whole life has been torn open, sewed back up, and then lit on fire.

“Estuarine. The realm of water. I’m taking you to our real home.”

“What do you mean your real home? Your house is just outside Carnelian City.” I feel Vi’s confusion.

We have shared a good amount about ourselves, but our pasts are still pretty obscure. The guys and I didn’t have many friends or important beings in our life before Vi. We never stayed in one place for too long, but always made a life wherever we landed. Carnelian City has been our longest homestead; Ophir, Avi, and I finally found somewhere that felt like a home again. We all found jobs, made a few friends, and created a life. But our true home will always be in Old Port City. These days, home has a much different meaning. It’s no longer a place—it’s Villiana.

“I mean the home that the three of us grew up in. My parents’ house. It will take us quite a bit of time to get there, but we can use that time to plan.” I look over at Lys, a little concerned. He isn’t a young man and traveling to different realms isn’t an easy feat. But, on the other hand, I know my kitten won’t leave him behind, making this a risky decision.

I hear Lys let out an exasperated sigh. “I can see those wheels turning, Ryu. I may not be in my twenties or thirties anymore, but I’m still capable of traveling. Worry about something else.”

Was I that obvious? Oh well. At least we have one issue crossed off the list.

Voice filled with hope, Avi asks, “What do you say, little star? Want to see where little Avi, Ophir, and Ryu grew up?”

“Will it help us in the long run?” Vi looks at us curiously.

“Yes, quite a bit.” The certainty in Fear’s voice warms my heart. I know that he was older when my family took him in, but Fear has always thought of my parents as his own, and they honestly are.

“If you say going there will help us to...” Vi silently spells out K-I-L-L, “Locren, then I’m in. I’m trusting you.”

After a moment, her eyes widen with excitement. ***“I have an idea. He’s not a part of our bond, so there’s no way he can hear us.”***

“That is a very smart little one, but what about Avi and Lys?” Fear has a very good point, and so does Vi. Communicating through our bond would be perfect, but Avi would be left completely blind. And unless we only talk to Avi and Lys where Vi can’t hear us, it won’t work.

“Gods dammit. Okay, this isn’t going to work.”

“Would you like to share?” Crossing his arms across his chest and tapping his foot, Avi is not pleased with being left out.

“Sorry, I wasn’t trying to leave you two out. I had an idea, but it won’t work. So I guess that puts us at the original plan.” Vi looks defeated. I know that she doesn’t want to give up that much control—if anyone can understand that feeling, it’s me. No one wants to be unconscious while traveling; it must feel akin to being woken from a coma, only to be put under again, the process repeating over and over.

Lys places five cards on the table in the shape of a cross. Eleven forms between his eyebrows as he examines,

scratching around one of his horns. With the upturn of his thin lips, I see a twinkle in his onyx eyes.

“I might have a solution. It’s not permanent, and I’m not sure how well it will work, but if you’re up for it, Vi, it might be worth a shot.” Lys has been very quiet up until this point. I briefly updated him on what’s been going on with Vi. I left out most of the details, just informing him of the Locren situation. He has a very extensive knowledge of magic and rituals.

“Let’s hear it!” Vi says enthusiastically.

“How do you feel about psychedelics? Because if you’re willing to try a small amount of magic mushrooms, your own mind has a hard time differentiating reality from imagination. It would be nearly impossible for Locren to know what’s a fabrication.” Looking around the circle, Lys assesses everyone’s initial reactions. He continues on, content with what he sees. “You would be pretty dependent on us, but I know this wouldn’t be your first time taking them.” Lys gives Vi a devious smirk.

Ziggy sees Lysander as a threat for all the wrong reasons. He thinks Lys is trying to hijack his family—which is funny because Lys has been Vi’s only family, whereas Ziggy was a passing memory. In all the time we have known Lys, he has proven time and time again that he is a force to be reckoned with. Not only is he a genius, but he is a warrior.

“*Genius!* Give me the drugs. I’m ready to have lots of fun.” Vi jumps up and down, dancing around. “Actually, if we can stop back at the house, we have some growing in the wooded area at the side.”

AFTER AN UNEVENTFUL TWENTY-FOUR hours of travel, we make it back to Lys' house. Vi immediately went to collect the magic mushrooms at the woods' entrance. But, of course, Lys made Fear go with her because there was no way he was letting Vi wander off alone ever again.

Swinging her basket in one hand while she skips through the door, Vi looks adorable. Her long black hair is in two braids today with Fear's beads throughout. She's wearing one of my dark green, long-sleeved shirts—even though she has plenty of her own clothing—and a pair of leather pants she had Avi make before we left. The pants have places for her sai on both hips and plenty of spots for carrying various weapons. She was very insistent on being fully armed at all times.

“Hey, doc, could you make me a tea mix with some of these? I don't want to be sedated, but I'll be okay with something that will make me a little out of it. Also, they taste disgusting and kill my stomach. If I'm going to take them every day, I'd rather enjoy it somewhat.” Vi stands on her tiptoes to kiss me.

“Absolutely, kitten.”

“You're the best! I'll drink some as soon as you have it done, and we can talk about plans. Everything you need is in the kitchen or the garden. If you can't find it, ask Lys. He pretty much has anything you could possibly want.”

I watch Vi prance up the stairs, two steps at a time. Suddenly, someone yells *Oooga Booga!* causing Vi to scream at the top of her lungs. The laughter that follows tells me that Avi was behind the jump scare.

“You fucking asshole! I thought I was going to shit myself. Put away your horns unless you're going to let me go for a ride.” The last part comes out silky smooth, laced with lust.

“Little star, you know I could never turn down an offer like that,” Avi’s husky voice echoes down the stairs. Next thing I know, Vi is giggling, and a door is slammed shut.

Chuckling to myself, I make my way to the kitchen and start by perusing the cabinets, pulling out ingredients as I go: chamomile tea, lemon balm, lavender, orange peel, and caps. I have to make sure that we have plenty of honey to travel with. While searching for a tin to create the mix in, I hear the footsteps of someone walking in.

“Need help finding something?” Lys says from behind me.

“Vi asked me to make her a tea mix for the mushrooms. I’m just looking for a tin to store it in. We’re going to need at least two months’ worth to be safe. The trip alone will take us three weeks,” I sigh. Thinking about how Vi will be in an altered state of mind for so long doesn’t sit well with me.

Lys must pick up on my body language because he tries to comfort me.

“I know that you boys will keep her safe. I always knew you would come for her one day. Not you three exactly, but her three would come.” Scratching his short gray beard, Lys pulls a chair out and sits down.

“My wife was a seer—a very prolific one at that. One night she woke me from a dead sleep to tell me she had a vision of my future. Mariana told me a young girl would come into my life needing guidance. The girl would be brilliant and strong; she would have a higher purpose, and I would be the one to help her become the woman she needed to be. Mar said that the girl would struggle, may even be broken down, but would eventually come out on top with the help of the vow of three.”

Lys shakes his head and lets out a hollow laugh. “I knew that her visions held weight, but never did I think her vision would be so literal. When Villiana showed up at my door, it was a week after my wife died—murdered for refusing to help The Collective find young girls. So, when Vi told me she was running from them, I knew she was the girl from the vision.”

I have no idea how to process what Lys is telling me. His eyes are haunted and filled with pain from the reminder of his wife, but the small smile that crosses his face shows he knows he did right by her. But my main question is, does Vi know?

“No, she has no clue. I don’t plan on telling her either because I don’t want her to think I felt obligated. Villiana is my family, and I know she was put in my path, just like you were put in hers.” I guess I said that out loud.

“I had never heard of an alchemic mate before I met Villiana. I started researching why we were having such an extreme physical reaction to one another. It took me deep diving to find anything, but when I did, everything pointed to our magic wanting to merge. I thought that was crazy, knowing that most beings choose to become bound, and mostly with their own kind. Reading that our magics are attracted to each other on their own, with no relationship between us, I swore something was wrong. As I kept researching, I came across the crazy concept of alchemic mates.”

“A love that is destined—two souls forever in search of one another. Yet fate still gives you a choice to complete the bond. I know. Mariana was my alchemic mate. Growing up, it was an old wives’ tale. So, when Mar and I discovered we were always meant to be, it just...made sense. I have not seen it since,” Lys cuts in. Shaking his finger, Lys speaks to his

long-lost wife, “You did this, Mar. You have a real funny sense of humor.”

“I’m sorry your wife was ripped from the world too soon. She sounds like an amazing woman.” A well of emotions springs from my chest, threatening to fall from my eyes. Just the thought of losing Villiana like Lys lost his wife makes me feel as if my heart is being torn from my chest. I would burn down the world to get her back; I would follow her to the afterlife.

“She was, and more. Take care of my girl, Ryu. I will take care of my Kostbar until my dying breath, and even then, she couldn’t get rid of me. But I must know she will have someone at her side when I’m gone,” Lys says somberly.

“I promise, Lysander. I *vow* to love her, lift her up, and stand by her side for all eternity.” And I mean it. Villiana and Ophir are it for me. Sometimes I feel like Avi feels left out, but it’s a bunch of bullshit; Ophir and I love him infinitely. Our paths crossed for a reason, creating a family that is stronger than blood and magic.

A proud smile stretches across Lys’ timeworn face, his cheeks round and full. He stands up, walks to his pantry, pulls out a round tin and places it on the counter next to me. “I know you will. Just make sure the others do too.” Clapping me on the shoulder, he collects his book and leaves me with a wink from his twinkling eye.

WE ARE all sitting around the fire pit in the back of the house, having dinner. Fear took over the kitchen, making his famous pulled chicken with garlic green beans and mashed potatoes. Vi shovels forkfuls into her mouth, little moans escaping with each bite. She takes her mug of mushroom tea and gulps it

down, licking her lips afterward. The sheer willpower it takes to hold back tossing her over my shoulder and throwing her into bed is incredible. Discreetly, I adjust myself.

Avi placed a silencing bubble around us when everyone finished eating. I enjoy being the outsider for a minute, watching how everyone interacts so naturally. We have known Lys for years because of Anabell, so it wasn't too hard for us to develop a better relationship. But watching Fear grab Vi by the arm to dance while Lys plays his lute and Avi drums against the log... Well, it feels freeing.

Vi plops down next to Avi with a goofy look on her face. He shakes his head, slinging an arm around her shoulder. "I guess the tea is kicking in." We all watch as she runs her fingers through his curls with absolute amazement. Kissing the spot just below her ear, Avi growls into her neck. "Hey, little star, are you ready to start planning? If you're not up to it, one of us can carry you upstairs and fill you in later."

Vi pouts. She would rather not remember anything than be left out.

"Yes, my wildling. Then maybe I'll let you chase me through the woods instead of taking me to bed." Vi wiggles her eyebrows at him suggestively.

The pure hunger that oozes from Avi covers that atmosphere like molasses. Thick, sweet, and dark.

"Alright, I don't need to know about any of this!" Lys wrinkles his nose.

"And maybe if you're a good girl, the medicine man and I might join the hunt," Fear adds through the tie, sparing Lys the discomfort.

Before the three of them take off to have a bacchanal, I start the conversation. “So, let’s start with the journey. Getting to Estuarine will take us almost a month; two weeks on land and one on the sea. A dragon, Rakshasa, and Jötun traveling across realms are not inconspicuous. Meaning no shifting to make the trip faster.”

“I have a way of cutting down time quite a bit. But that means we need to go to Carnelian City,” Lys says.

“And what exactly is in the city that can help us?”

“An old friend. Plus, my sister will be happy to know I’m alive.” he chuckles.

Fear, Avi, Lys, and I discuss the logistics of our travels back home. By the time we have finished, my kitten is asleep in Fear’s lap.

“I’ll bring her to her room and stay with her. I don’t want her to be alone at night.” Fear cradles Vi and takes her to bed.

I guess we’ll have to reschedule that hunt.

FORTY

Villiana

THE DELICIOUS FEELING of Fear between my legs drags me from sleep. He already has me on the edge before I can rub the sand from my eyes, so it sends me over when he closes his mouth over my little bundle and sucks hard. Fear laps up my juices like he's dying of thirst.

Peeking out from under the blanket, his red hair is down, hanging over his eyes, and his beard is glistening. "A breakfast of champions!" He kisses the insides of my thighs, then travels up my body until he gets to my lips, planting a big wet kiss on them. "Hello, little one. Are you ready for our adventure?"

Stretching out like a cat, I groan. I don't want to leave this perfect little bubble, but if we don't end this, I'll be running for the rest of my life. Locren has taken so much from me—I refuse to let him take another second.

Rolling on my side, I admire Fear. He is magnificent. I love seeing him undone; blazing hair down and wavy, sleepy slate eyes, softness to all hard features. I'm dwarfed next to his giant body. How we both fit in this bed is a mystery. Ryu and I barely do, but somehow Fear squeezed in with me.

He caresses my cheek. “Did you dream last night?”

I have to think about it, but I realize I didn't. Not a single dream, or if I did, I don't remember them at all. If this plan works, it would be amazing. Being high all the time isn't ideal, but I know no one will let me be in danger. I bounce onto my knees. “No, actually. Ha! Maybe the tea works.”

Smiling sweetly, he tucks his hands under his head. “This is the first time since we started sharing a bed that you weren't restless.”

“How about you? Any dreams?”

I squeal as Fear rolls over, caging me under him.

“Mmm, little one, I had the sweetest dreams of sinking my cock inside your perfect pussy. Dreams of you singing a chorus of *fuck* and *more*. Oh, it was so beautiful. You looked like a goddess splayed out for me.” Fear nips the shell of my ear and traces circles around one of my nipples. A surge of heat forms in my belly. “These curves bounced with every thrust. You were digging your nails into my back.” Pausing, he groans. “How does that sound to you, Vi? Do you want to make my dreams come true?” He grinds against me as I pant.

The door flies open, crashing against the wall. I jump to cover myself, but Fear hovers closer, pressing her hardness into my stomach.

“Oh no, you two don't! If I don't get to join the fun, there will be no fun! We have a hectic day today. Get ready.” Ryu stands at the door with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face. Someone's jealous.

Pushing my lip out, I pout. “But *Daddy...*”

His nostrils flare as a wave of lust fills the room. Still, he stands there waiting for us to move.

Looking up at Fear, I smirk, not having to say a word for him to know what I'm thinking. He side-eyes Ryu and chuckles as he bends his head down to bite my neck. I gasp at the sting—it's definitely going to leave a mark.

I curl my fingers into Fear's hair, tugging as he moves to the other side and bites down again. Moving lower, he kisses the small patch of skin below the hollow of my throat. He curls his finger under the sheet and pulls it beneath my breasts.

A sharp intake of breath catches my attention. I look over to see that Ryu has moved from the doorway and is now a foot from the bed. Using my magic, I pull him closer.

"Big man, how do you feel about sharing?" I ask, running my hand up Ryu's leg until I reach the tie of his lounge pants. Sliding my hand inside, his breaths become heavier with each subtle movement. The sound that comes out of him as my fingers wrap around his hard length sends a flood of arousal down my legs.

Fear gives me a devious look. "I can be very generous."

I stroke Ryu, feeling him throb against my palm. "We have so much to d—" He can't even finish his sentence as I pull him out.

Fear allows me to shimmy to the side of the bed so I can lick Ryu base to tip, swirling my tongue around his crown. "What were you saying, doc?"

"Villiana..." Ryu growls my name like a curse rolling off his lips.

"Yes, Ryu?" I give him a doe-eyed look, then take his full length into my mouth, sliding him down my throat. I bob my head a few times before I remove my mouth from him, turning to Fear and kissing him deeply. "How does his cock taste on

my tongue, Ophir? Would you like another?" At that, both men groan so loud there is no doubt everyone else can hear us. I flick my wrist, and the door shuts.

He hums, "Usually my älskling is on his knees for me. I can go for a change of pace."

Holy fuck. Picturing them together has wetness pooling between my legs.

"My sweet dragon, she likes that idea. She's soaking my pants." Fear sits back and shows evidence of my arousal.

"Fuck." Ryu leans over me to get a closer look, placing his shaft directly in my face. I take advantage of the position and take him back into my mouth. His hips jerk forward, and I laugh around him. I know I've won when he curls his finger into my hair, shoving me down until my nose presses against his pelvis.

"Is this what you wanted? So hungry for my cock, kitten." Pulling my hair tightly, he uses me, pumping in and out of my mouth.

Suddenly I feel something strange skating toward my core. Instinctively I try to close my legs only to find they are locked open, and Fear is stepping off the bed. I try to look over at him and see the room filling with his shadows.

"Tie her arms to the headboard," Ryu commands as he fucks my face harder. Fear sends more shadows out, locking my arms above my head.

"Don't let our little elf have all the fun." Pulling Ryu from my mouth, Fear spins him around, dropping to his knees before him. "I think I'd like a taste straight from the source." And then Fear swallows him down like an old pro.

“*Shit.*” I honestly don’t know if it comes from Ryu or I but we’re on the same page.

I would give anything to relieve some tension, but with my legs and arms restrained, there is no way. Every pump of Ryu’s hips, every moan and sigh, and the way he grips Fear’s hair so aggressively, has me in a frenzy.

Fear pulls Ryu’s length from his mouth and swirls his tongue around the tip, “As much as I’d love to make you fall apart, I’d rather see your cum dripping out of our girl.” He goes over to his pack and pulls out a bottle of lube, throwing it at Ryu.

“I really don’t think you’re going to need that,” I say, flicking my eyes down the damp spot that formed beneath me. Ryu gets on the bed, positioning himself between my legs. Squirting lube into his hand, he coats himself. Putting more into his hand, it disappears between us. “He never said anything about filling up your pussy.” Just then, his cool, slick finger runs over my puckered hole.

“Relax, Vi. We’re going to stretch you out first.”

“Fuck her,” Ryu purrs to Fear.

“Be careful how you speak to me, *pet*. You can dominate our girl all you want, but you’re still my little slut.” Fear’s shadows wrap around Ryu’s necks in warning—it only makes him harder.

My legs are released, and his shadows enter me. I have never felt anything like this in my life. It starts with some light pressure; gradually, I feel fuller. The fullness gets deeper, pressing on the sweet spot, making my eyes roll back.

Ryu presses one finger in, letting me get used to it as Fear’s shadows begin to fuck me. He moves his finger slowly

in and out. “Relax, baby,” he says as he adds a second finger. Waves of pleasure roll through me.

Fear comes up next to the bed and kisses me. Our kiss is hot and slow. “I’m going to make you come now, little one, and then I’m going to watch my pet fuck your ass.” He strums my clit with precision, his shadows reaching depths I didn’t know they could go. The mix of sensations has me crying out, coming hard.

Before I can even come down, I feel Ryu breach my ass.

“Oh, Gods.”

“You are so fucking tight,” Ryu grits out through his teeth.

My back bows off the bed. There is a slight sting, but it becomes an immense pleasure as he moves. Fear pulls his shadows back, leaving me feeling so empty. I whine at the loss.

“Such a good little whore,” Ryu says, pushing himself fully inside. “I know you can take more, though.” He takes my legs and puts them over his shoulders, driving himself even deeper. I grip the sheets in my fists.

“I just want to wreck you, kitten.”

“Please, Daddy. Destroy me.” As the words slip from my lips, Ryu snaps, fucking my ass hard. His strokes are so brutal that I start to feel dizzy. The slapping of our bodies echoes through the room.

While Fear strokes himself, standing over me, he lightly slaps my cheek. I turn my head, and he rubs thick head across my lips. “Your mouth is looking a little too empty for my liking. Open.” I open for him, and he stretches my mouth so wide I feel his length graze my teeth.

Fear and Ryu work in tandem; one pushes, and the other pulls. Fear is so thick my jaw aches, and tears run down my cheeks.

“Look, pet, she’s crying for us,” Fear says, wiping the tears and licking them off of his finger.

“Fucking beautiful.” Ryu moans before slipping three fingers into my soaking pussy, matching the pace with his pumps.

Fear gives me a devilish look and smacks me in the face, harder this time. My whole body locks up, and stars cloud my vision as I scream around him. I shatter, coming so hard that fluid cascades from my body. Ryu’s breath becomes ragged, and his stomach tightens. With a few more jerking motions, he fills me with my name on his lips. Fear follows quickly after, pulling out of my mouth shooting ropes of hot cum across my face.

“My perfect little cum slut,” he moans. Both of them stand back and admire their work.

Lifting my hand, I go to clean him from my face, but it gets slapped away.

“Don’t you *dare* wipe your present off, you filthy little brat,” Ryu demands.

The guys switch places, and what happens next, I will remember until my dying day. Ryu licks Fear’s cum off my face as Fear laps up Ryu’s from my ass.

Then they kiss each other.

“That’s a job well done,” Fear says as Ryu goes to get a towel.

Ryu comes back and cleans me up. “I think it’s time to get our day going now.”

FORTY-ONE

Villiana

AFTER BEING THOROUGHLY FUCKED, we finally get out of bed and prepare for the day.

Avi found his way into the shower with me, grumbling about being left out, but he was singing a different tune by the time the water ran cold. None of these men are allowed to touch me today; my poor vagina is broken, and every muscle in my body is sore. *So worth it.*

Hobbling down the stairs, I find Lys moving our packs into the sitting room while Ryu paces the floor with a notebook, scribbling like a madman. “We will have to travel on foot, seeing as we have no horses. And because we can’t travel shifted, we need to go over all of our provisions. I don’t want to be one week into the journey and run out of food.”

I have spent a good portion of my life on the run; I know how to pack and what is necessary. I could wear the same outfit for two weeks if I had to. As long as there is water, you can wash things. As for food, you can hunt and gather; everything you could possibly need is around you. You just have to find it.

You would think we will be gone for years, the way he's acting. The man can plan every second of the day down to who is going to use the bathroom and when. Sometimes it's a cute quirk, and other times I want to gag him for how anxious he makes me. Safe to say the man is neurotic.

Fear looks over Ryu's shoulder to try to see the rantings of the madman. Ryu practically tosses the book to him. "This is our checklist. Other than these items, pack as light as possible. Clothes can be washed. All bedding can be made, besides a blanket. I hope you're all okay with sleeping as a pack because it's cold at night, and, as I said, we are not taking anything unnecessary."

Clicking my feet together, I salute him. "Yes, sir!"

Ryu grabs my chin between his fingers, stealing a scorching kiss. "I like the way that rolls off your tongue. I would like it even better if you were on your knees, ready for my—"

Lys clears his throat. "Don't you dare finish that sentence." Giving us a pointed look, he wags his finger at us. "I would also like to remind everyone I will be on this trip. So, make sure to take your extracurriculars away from the group." Yep, he definitely heard us this morning.

Oops.

Everyone takes apart their packs, ensuring the checklist is complete and everything else is left behind. Fear has the largest pack, carrying all our food, bedding, and other camping gear. Ryu's pack contains mostly medicinal supplies. Avi holds all the coins and the map of the five realms. Leaving Lys and I to take clothing and other essentials.

On our way out, Lys places a glamor on the house, making it look like a giant boulder with beds of poisonous flowers surrounding it, trying to ward off anyone from taking over while we are gone.

“Okay, little star, drink up. You’ll be clear-headed for a bit, but remember you have to trust us, or this will not work.” Avi hands me a mug of my mushroom tea and I chug it down. No use in sipping it; I know the end result either way.

About twenty minutes into the journey, the colors around us become more vibrant. It feels like the colors are humming, their vibrations giving me a chill. Every crunching step reverberates as if it is directly in my ears. The effects are kind of beautiful. Experiencing nature in such a heightened way makes you appreciate it much more. The longer we walk, the more the tea kicks in. The path ahead of us tunnels and starts to spin, causing me to walk sideways.

“Uhm, someone may have to carry me soon,” I giggle.

Avi walks in front of me without missing a beat, turns his pack so it sits on his chest, and pats his back. “Hop on, Vi. Let me know when you can’t hold on any longer. I’ll change positions.”

Jumping onto his back feels like floating into the sky. I pull his curly hair and throw my heels into his legs. “Yah, noble steed! Off we go.” I roll my hips against the small of his back, snickering when he shakes his head. “If you keep doing that, you’ll find yourself riding a very different part of me, little star.”

I snort, pulling his hair harder before rolling my hips again. I like to tempt fate.

Time seems irrelevant. It could be two minutes or two hours before I start to feel myself slipping. “I’m a little sleepy,” I murmur as Fear takes me into his arms like a baby.

“Alright, little one, it’s my turn. Just rest.” My head flops into his chest, and I immediately drift off in his arms’ safety.

The distant sound of Lys’ voice filters into my ears. I lift my heavy lids to find we’re in a clearing just big enough for us to stop for the night.

“We should set up camp before it gets too dark anyway. Come on.”

I’m passed to someone else and laid down on a soft surface. A soothing chill envelopes me as a slim body is nestled tight against mine. “Doc?”

“Yes, beautiful?” He tucks me protectively into his arms.

“Just in case you didn’t know, I love you. Thank you for taking care of me and risking your life for me.” My voice is barely a whisper.

Ryu tenses up before our mate’s tie is flooded with warmth, like a giant hug. He relaxes into me, leaning his head on top of mine. “I love you too, Villiana. I would cross dimensions and timelines to find you. Whether it be in this life and the next, there will never be a time when our souls exist that I won’t love you.” He kisses me softly on the nose. “Now sleep, kitten. You still have a while before the effects wear off, and we’re not going anywhere else tonight.”

FIVE DAYS PASS with the same routine: tea, trip, have to be carried, make camp, sleep, and repeat. Then, on the sixth day, I begin to feel weird. Instead of the happy-go-lucky feelings I

had been experiencing, my head is pounding today. It feels like someone is trying to crush my skull between their hands.

“Kostbar, what’s wrong?” Lys bends down next to me.

I press the palms of my hands into my eyes, trying to relieve some of the pain. It does nothing. Every step becomes more difficult as my legs become lead weights. I ignore the feeling for as long as possible before the pain causes me to vomit. My feet stagger, and I trip, knees crashing against the hard soil. Avi lays his hand against my back, collecting my long black hair into his hands so I don’t vomit in it. Colorful lights sparkle with my eyes open like I’m surrounded by fairy fire. My body starts to shake and I curl into myself, pulling my neck into my chest.

“My head. There’s something wrong. So much pain.” I can barely speak, slurring every word. I throw up again, with a throbbing behind my eyes. I can’t hold back my scream of pain. Within seconds, I’m lying on my side, surrounded by my family. Their voices are muffled, and then everything goes black.

There is never-ending blackness; only the scent of burning wood and blood surrounds me. The metallic smell reaches my taste buds and I dry heave. The silence is so stark it makes me uneasy as I search for a single sound. In the distance, I start to hear hushed speaking. I strain my ears to make out what they’re saying.

“You are supposed to be the best clairvoyant! What do you mean you can’t clear her mind?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I have been trying for days, but nothing has worked.”

The first man slams his fist down; something breaks under the force. I hear the sound of heavy footsteps pacing back and forth against a hard floor and the dripping of some kind of liquid. Slowly, a musty scent creeps in.

“This fucking whore is opening her legs for three unworthy men! I swear, if they knock her up before I do, I will skin you alive. Her bloodline is extremely rare and should only be bound to greatness.”

It’s Locren.

The second man speaks up with a stutter, “I understand, sir. But as I’ve told you multiple times, whatever she is doing is breaking down the link between you. The only way to fix it is to redo the ritual, which requires the elf to be present.”

The reverberating sound of a hand slapping against skin echoes throughout the darkness. “THEN FUCKING TRACK HER! I don’t care what it takes. She is, and always will be, MINE!” Locren bellows. “I am going to strap her down to a bed and fill her with as many babies as I can. I’m going to destroy her. If she thinks what has happened to her before was bad, she has no idea how horrible it can really be.”

I strain my eyes, and I’m able to make out some kind of cellar. Chains are hanging from the ceiling. And it feels... cold?

He speaks again, ranting like a madman. “At least I still have some control. The other little shit isn’t even fighting it anymore.”

Wait, other? Who else is he doing this to?

Light cracks through the vision, then I hear a very distant voice.

“Stay the course.” The words are drawn out.

Sucking in a hard breath, I spring up, covered in sweat and shaking with chills. “Locren,” I croak.

Fear rushes over, yelling to the others, “She’s awake!” Taking a cool, wet cloth, he pats my forehead.

“Locren.” It seems to be the only thing I can get out right now. Whether it’s on foot or in my dreams, he is always chasing me. I can’t be so special that I’m worth all the time and effort he puts in. This stupid motherfucker can’t seem to leave me alone.

“Shhh, you can tell us everything in just a minute. Ryu’s going to bring over something for you to drink. It will help a lot.” Fear looks distraught, deep lines of worry etched into his face. “You had us really scared for a minute, little one. Glad to have you back.”

Ryu comes over with a tiny amber bottle; bringing it to my lips, he tells me to drink. The taste is astringent and sour, causing me to gag. Then Avi comes over and places his hands on my head. Very gradually, he pulls the grogginess away. I tap his hand when I feel like I can function on my own.

“I’m feeling better. Thank you, wildling.”

Avi’s veins shine onyx through his bronze skin, running out from his fingers straight into the dirt. All around me, the ground has turned pitch black, like scorched earth. He was wise to direct the energy elsewhere instead of holding it all in.

“Whenever you are ready to talk to us, we’ll be here, Vi.” Lys runs the back of his hand down my cheek.

I nod. “Can I get some water first?”

Ryu is ready with a canteen on hand. After taking a few sips, I sit there and collect my thoughts.

“Locren has been trying to get back into my mind, and it’s not working. He had a clairvoyant with him. They tried to explain that the link would break within a few more days of having him locked out.” My words are choppy, like I’m trying to read from a foreign script.

There is an audible sigh of relief from everyone in the group.

Lacing my fingers into Fear’s, I gently shake my head. “Yeah, I don’t think it will be that simple. I was somehow able to...project myself? If whatever they are doing is causing this, who’s to say it wouldn’t work the other way? There is also another issue.”

“Worse than this?” Fear probes.

“Different. There’s someone else he’s doing this to and, apparently, is very successful—to the point of having some control over the victim.”

Avi rakes his finger through his hair and gives me an apologetic look. “I know there is more, Vi. The darkness that I pulled from you was heavy. You know you can tell us anything, little star.”

I haven’t had the chance to process what was being said. I know they won’t let it go because they think it’s the only way to keep me safe, but I’m disgusted, and that’s not a feeling I want to share.

Thinking it over for a minute, I realize I would want them to be completely transparent with me, so I have to do the same. “Okay, yes, there is more. Locren said something about my bloodline being rare and then went on to talk about how he plans to lock me up and keep me pregnant. To create superior

beings, I'm guessing. Oh, and obviously, he plans on killing you all."

The air starts to feel dense, and a heavy wind picks up. I find Lys standing with his fists clenched and eyes glowing white. I have never seen him like this. Angry, yes, but this is something very different.

"Locren will never access your mind again. He will never touch you again. And I'm going to make sure of it. Avi, lay down next to Vi, please. Both of you on your backs." With his eyes still glowing, Lys walks towards us, getting down to the ground above our heads. "I haven't done dark blood magic in a very long time, but I can't allow this to continue. Avi, you have demon blood, which is vital to this ritual; are you okay with me using it?"

Avi pulls his favorite dagger from his pants and hands it to Lys. "What's mine is hers. Take whatever you need from me."

"I want you both to know this will bind you and complete the vow. The kind of magic I will be using is very potent—irreversible. It will combine you in a way I will never be able to describe, and it is extraordinary. Do you both consent to this?"

Avi laces his finger in my free hand, squeezing it with reassurance. "Absolutely."

I'm not sure why that startles me. Maybe because some part of me thought Avi would never be at the same level as me, and I was okay with it. But knowing that he is willing to go this far is shocking.

"Yes, I do," I finally say.

"I want you both to be aware that this will be a painful process, but it will be worth it. Uh—it's not uncommon to

have waves of pleasure as the spell completes. Once the ritual is complete, you will be able to walk into one another's minds and Avi's Rakshasa will instinctually block your mind from harm."

A tinge of worry creeps into my mind. I don't want to lose what I have with my other guys—they are irrevocably a part of me. "What will happen to my tie to the others?"

"I imagine it will be strengthened, but you and Avi will be able to communicate seamlessly," Lys assures me. "Alright, Ophir, Ryu, I'm going to need you on either side of them. Once I begin the ritual, I cannot stop. Hold hands and hover your locked hands over their chests. Ready?"

"Is everyone okay with this? We do not have to do the ritual if you aren't—"

"I love you, but shut up, Vi. We all know what will happen, and we're still here." Ryu gives a curt nod to Lys. "We're ready."

Lys takes the dagger, and just as he's about to start, he stops. "Every action has a reaction. Don't be surprised if this entire area of the forest dies." Then he begins to chant in a language I've never heard. Avi doesn't move an inch or make a sound as Lys carves a symbol into his forehead—a small pentagram.

Blood pools in the corner of Avi's eyes from the carving, and an orange shimmer coats the top of it—his magic. Lys collects the blood and brings it to my mouth, rubbing it across my lips, and I lick it off. Next, Lys moves over me and repeats the action. The dagger is so sharp I can barely feel the sting of it breaking the skin. Every movement is concise. Lys gives Avi my blood and then places his thumbs over the symbol.

I cry out from the pain, pushing my nails into the back of Avi's hand. It's a searing hot feeling, like my skin is being ripped open. All sound fades away except the methodical hum of Lys' chanting. I don't feel my body anymore. It seems like my soul is floating outside, searching for Avi's. When it detects his energy, the pull is so strong there's no controlling it. Our souls crash hard into each other, exploding into a million little stars, melding together to make one entity.

There is a pulling, knitting sensation as the scent of leather and spring overtakes me, blanketing me with feelings of devotion. Sparks of lightning dance across my body, and flashes of my nights with Avi dance through my mind. His long tongue lapping me up on the couch at the camp. How hard he fucked me in my bed. The way his hand felt around my neck. The delicious ecstasy when he cut into me. I can hear him breathing heavily in my ear. Ragged breaths on my neck. The smell of his sweat and cum all over me.

Burning desire courses through my veins, and just as my orgasm is cresting, I feel the bond and mate tie lock into place. My eyes fly open. Panting, I look around, trying to make out my surroundings.

“Little star, I'm right here.” Avi's voice is so loud in my head that I jump. ***“I can hear your thoughts right now. Ground yourself, Vi. Name five things you can see.”***

My eyes shift, ***“Trees, Ryu, Lys, Ophir, grass.”***

“Good. Now, four things you smell.”

“Wet dirt, crisp air, burning wood, leather.”

“Excellent, baby. Now count to three.”

“One. Two. Three...”

“Welcome back, Kostbar. I hope that wasn’t too terrible for you.” Lys places a kiss on the top of my head.

“It was...interesting. Avi is very loud in my head right now. It’ll take some time to get used to it.” I reach for Avi’s hand only to find the space empty where he once was lying. Getting to my knees, I frantically scan the surrounding area, but there’s no trace of him.

Digging my nails into my leg, I look up to my men. “Where is he?”

Ryu offers me a hand up, looking conflicted about what to tell me. “*Where. Is. He?!*” I ask again.

“He took off for a few. When he woke up, he was in full Rakshasa and didn’t want to freak you out.”

“Gods dammit!” After everything we have just been through, my soul screams for him. I need to feel his skin against mine. I need him. Sprinting into the forest at full speed, I ignore the hazy voices laced with concern calling out from behind me. Now that we are connected, I sense his location easily. About fifty yards in, I find him standing in a densely wooded area, completely naked. As his black soulless eyes meet mine, I know his Rakshasa is fighting for total control.

“Villiana, stay the fuck away from me. I don’t want to do something stupid and hurt you. *Please, go.*” Avi’s voice is sinister and monotone.

Disregarding his plea, I continue forward, reaching for him. As my hand grazes his arm, Avi whips around, wrapping his clawed fingers into the soft flesh of my bicep. With a tusked smile, his eyes gleam with sick satisfaction as blood tickles from each puncture. I don’t pull away, though. Instead,

I step further into him. His hand leaves my arm, grabs me by the throat, and lifts me off the ground. In an intrinsic reaction, I start clawing at his taut grip. Avi squeezes tighter, cutting off my air supply.

“I told you to leave, but you’re a stupid little whore. You wanted to see the monster, well here he is! Do you have any idea what I would like to do to you right now?”

My eyes water, staining my cheeks with moisture. In a strained voice, I say, “Tell me.”

Avi

“TELL ME.”

What a naive little girl. She is clueless as to what I am capable of, and I’m inclined to show her. I want to cut her open and watch as her body cries rivers of crimson for me. I want to fuck her in a puddle of her own blood. I want to dine on her sweet cunt and fuck every hole. I want to ruin her. She’ll be nothing more than a pretty fuck doll when I’m done with her.

But the other part of me is screaming that Villiana is more than just conquest. The rational part of me wants to cherish her and worship her.

“Come on, Avi, give it to me. I can hear exactly what you want.”

Fuck, this fucking tie.

I drop her, and she falls into the dirt below. “This is your last chance to leave.”

This crazy bitch stands up and slaps me across the face. ***“I’m not afraid of you, and you can’t change my mind.”***

“Hurt me if you have to. Cut me. Bite me. *Use me*—I don’t care. But I will not run from you. I know who you truly are, your darkness, and I want all of you. So, no, I won’t leave you, now or *ever*.” This time she speaks aloud, determination woven deep within her words.

I close my eyes and turn my back to her. I refuse to take her down with me.

My little star speaks to me as if I’m her whole world. “My light is yours to take, just as your dark is mine.”

Spinning on my heels, my primitive side takes over. I grab her by the throat, my teeth tearing into her flesh. I drink down the sickly sweet blood that fills my mouth—coffee, vanilla, and caramel.

Fuck! Fireworks of red and gold go off in my head. I suck harder and Vi moans. I can feel her flowing through me. I can smell how turned on my little star is right now. Pure honey drips down her thighs.

Vi starts to go limp in my arms, and in the back of my mind, I’m screaming at myself to stop, but I just can’t. That irrational part pushes harder as she becomes paler and paler, barely able to open her eyes. I wrench myself away as clarity comes through. Frantically, I try to stop the blood, pushing as much energy into her as possible—it’s not working fast enough.

She weakly sets her hand on my cheek. “It’s okay, wildling. I told you I would give you my light if you gave me your darkness, and you gave it to me.” She tenderly smiles at me as if I have gifted her treasures.

“It’s not okay! Little star, I could have *killed* you.” Tears stream down my face, agony filling my dead soul. “What if I didn’t stop? Part of me didn’t want to, Vi.” My energy has brought some color back to her, but she is still weak.

“But I knew you would, Avi. I trust you. I know your heart is good.”

An angry roar barrels toward me before I’m roughly torn from Vi’s body. Ryu looms over me, his marbled eyes filled with malice. Ice seeps into the dirt around me, freezing me in place. With a flash of his razor sharp teeth, he bites down on my arm, temporarily paralyzing me—a power he never uses.

“You almost killed our mate!” Ryu hisses through our mate tie. As his poison takes over, I lay freezing cold, staring at the starless sky. I hate myself. I hate what I am. And I will never be good enough for her.

“Avi Wildling Surname-I-don’t-know! You better cut the shit. I am just as guilty. I will not tolerate that kind of self deprecation. We will work through the darkness together because we are a family,” Vi screams into my head.

As I lay here, completely powerless, my mind tortures me with a vision of the past. Reminding me that no one can ever truly love a demon.

16 YEARS old

“You are a disgusting demon, just like your father. You are a useless reminder of the loss of myself. I can’t even look at you.” My mother shoves me into the dark room and locks the door:

“Mom, I didn’t mean to do it! I don’t know how to handle my demon; you won’t get me help,” I cry out, knowing she can

no longer hear me. And even if she could, she would choose not to listen anyway.

Today I killed our neighbor's entire flock of sheep. I blacked out, and the next thing I knew, I was covered in blood and disemboweled animals lay scattered around me. When I realized what I had done, I ran home to wash off all the blood, but my mother caught me before I had the chance. She beat me, broke my wrist, and threw me into this room.

My mother is a beautiful Nagi, and my father—wherever he is—is a Rakshasa. I only know that much because my mother loves to remind me of the brutality that brought me into this world. How one night, while my mother was coming back from the market, my father found her and brutally assaulted her. I am a product of rape—there is no chance she will ever love me.

I fall asleep on the cold floor and am woken up by three men dragging me from the room. On the other side of the door, my mother stands with her arms crossed and a smirk on her face.

“I hope you feel every second of what your father did to me. You are going to learn what happens to those who are truly evil. And if you live to see another day, I pray that you take your own life.” She spits on me for good measure and leaves me to my fate.

FORTY-TWO

Villiana

IT'S BEEN three days since the incident, and everyone has been a little weird. I haven't heard a single peep from Locren and I'm no longer drinking the tea. Even with this good news, the guys are walking on eggshells around me.

Avi refuses to acknowledge me. He won't be alone with me for more than a few seconds, and if he does, one of the guys is up his ass. Ryu is constantly looking me over, asking me how I feel and about the headaches—not that I'm having any. He's micromanaging my every move. And Fear, well, he's doting on me. I'm not going to complain about the affection, but it gets overwhelming. I'm not allowed to go very far on my own, but I try to find some solitude and meditate daily. At least Lys is trying to keep things somewhat normal.

The days have been getting shorter, and the nights are colder. The death of the season has come upon us, but the bite of the frigid air reminds me that I'm alive.

I hear a gurgle next to me; the telltale sign of hunger.

“Does anyone want to stop and eat soon? I'm starving.”
Lys rubs his belly.

“We can stop whenever you want, Lys. It won’t make a difference in time. Speaking of which, how many more days do we have?” I huff.

“Four,” Avi grinds out. *Holy fuck! He can speak.*

“Nice to hear from you, Avi. It’s only been three days since you spoke a single word to me. I really love that.”

Avi has the decency to look upset about it. He knows I’m not happy but refuses to do anything about it. I think he’s scared of what I might say or do—which is ridiculous. I made myself very clear throughout the entirety of the situation, and yet that still wasn’t good enough.

“Villiana.” The warning comes from Ryu. He levels me with a *leave it alone* look, but I’m not the one who caused the tension; he did.

“Do not *Villiana* me! I’m not going to live like this.” I walk over to Avi and stand right in front of him so he can’t ignore me. “We are irrevocably tied. You are my mate. We will talk, and it will happen right now.” Crossing my arms, I level my gaze at him, overly irked.

I have been on my own for so long that I forgot what it’s like to have to—voluntarily—deal with other beings’ issues. I know I’m not all sunshine and roses to be around. I’m full of angst and hate. My trauma has taken over so much of my personality that I’m not sure who I am. But from the second I met the guys, I’ve been on a roller coaster of secrets, lies, and emotions; I’m so tired of all of it.

“The blood magic was intense and stirred up a lot of emotions. I expected you to freak out a little. Fuck, I was surprised you even agreed to it. And then we woke up, forever changed, and you lost it. Big fucking deal. I came after you

knowing full and well that you were not in the right state of mind. I baited you. I *wanted* you to react and give me something raw, something real. Avi, I know what you are capable of, and I don't care."

Shame oozes from him, pushing its way through our tie. My heart sinks, realizing how much Avi hates himself. It took me too long to recognize that just because he's a demon, doesn't mean he's evil. I contributed to his self-hatred, and I despise myself for it.

I approach him like he is a scared animal, with small, calculated steps. When I go to touch him, he shies away. It hurts. I want to punch Ryu and Fear in the face for planting this seed of doubt. "You think you're a monster? You are far from it. Monsters are the beings that take children from their homes, rape and abuse them—they breed more monsters. Monsters hide in the deepest shadows because if you can't see them, you can't stop them."

This time when I grab his face, he doesn't move. "You are *my* wildling. You don't live inside the lines. You embrace your lightness *and* darkness, never pretending to be something you're not. Even when I didn't want you, I needed you. I always knew you were mine. Just as I am yours."

Avi leans forward and kisses me. It says a million things in just a touch. Leaning into him, I wrap my arms around his neck. I need to touch him. I need him to understand. Breaking away, we realize everyone has left us alone.

"Please don't hide from me, Avi."

Stroking my hair, he replies, "For you, I will try."

IT TAKES another four days before things start to get back to normal. Ryu and Fear are still distant from Avi, but Avi and I are good. Lys has been trying to make things lighter by playing music at night—it's working.

As we approach the outskirts of Carnelian City, the sun has barely crested the morning sky. We passed the way to the guys' house a while ago. Now the outlines of the brick-and-mortar buildings appear in front of us. Seeing so much open space after traveling through the forest for two weeks is strange. Most of the trees are just skeletons at this point, and the ground is littered with dead leaves, crunching under our feet with every step.

"I can't wait to sleep in a bed tonight," I groan, stretching my arms over my head and shaking out my stiff legs. It will also be nice to have some privacy. I love Lys, but having your grandfather in a cuddle puddle with your boyfriends is awkward.

"It will be even nicer to have you all to myself, little one." Fear grabs me from behind, trapping me in a bear hug. I giggle as I try to escape him—a fruitless endeavor. Behind us, I hear Avi scoff at us.

"That's not how it works anymore, Ophir Saito! We will have a warrior's battle to see where Vi will sleep. No more hogging her." Avi throws his fists up as if he is about to fight Fear—I would pay to see that. Ryu sneaks up behind Avi. Making a knife hand, he chops the back of Avi's knee. Avi crumbles to the ground, and we all burst out in laughter.

"May the best man win!"

"Fuck you, Ryu. That was dirty." Avi huffs like the little brother he is.

It takes me a second, but something he said before clicks. “Wait, are all of your surnames’ Saito?”

“Ahh, you caught that. When Ryu’s family took us in, we took his surname. Fear and I consider them our parents and wanted to leave our dead lives in the past.” Avi puffs up his sculpted chest with pride—as he should. I know one thing very well: blood and bones don’t make a home, but love and trust do.

“Who knows, you may be a Saito one day too.” Ryu winks and walks ahead of us.

A blush creeps up my chest, tingling my cheeks. *Villiana Saito*—that doesn’t sound bad at all.

We all put our masks on just as we approach the city’s boundary. Today the streets seem to be very busy. The businesses have many patrons entering and exiting their storefronts, there are food stands on the sidewalks, and for the first time in a very long time, I see children running around.

“It’s the Frost Moon Festival. Magical things happen on the full moon, my dear.” Lys must have noticed my amazement.

“How do you know that?” The more I think about it, the more I realize that I don’t know much about Lys. I spent my youth with him, but I was self-absorbed. I regret not asking more questions.

“There was a time when I came to visit my sister. I’m sure I’m going to get an earful today.” Lys walks through the city as if he’s lived here his whole life.

When we get to the Green Goddess Boutique, he looks at the door as if it will shock him. Waltzing in without hesitation, I don’t wait.

“Ana!” I call out.

Anabell emerges from the back room with pins clenched between her teeth and fabric thrown over her shoulder. As soon as she recognizes me, she rushes forward and drops everything on the front counter.

“Vi, my love! It’s so wonderful to see you. How was your trip? Are the hooligans with you?” Anabell rattles off her questions in quick succession.

“It was... interesting.” *That’s an understatement.* “I brought back a gift for you!”

She waves me off. “You don’t need to do anything like that! I’m just grateful for the visit.” The bell at the front door rings as it opens, and I can feel his anxious presence behind me.

“Long time no see, big sister.” Lys cautiously steps forward. Each click of his hooves echo throughout the store.

Anabell’s breath catches, and her face pales with genuine shock. “You brought back my brother?” Her eyes are brimming with unshed tears, hands tight around my arms.

“I can return him if you don’t like it,” I giggle in jest.

Playfully swatting the back of my head, Anabell moves me out of the way. She falls into a deep embrace with her brother; it warms my heart to see someone who loves Lys as much as I do.

“Don’t you ever stay away for that long again, Lysander! I’ve told you a million times you can bring our granddaughter with you. Where is she anyway? I know she’s older now, but I would have loved to meet her.” Anabell’s eyes scan the room, checking if anyone else is in the store.

“Ana, you already have.” Lys extends his arm out, and I walk over to his side.

“Hi Ana, I’m Lys’ granddaughter!” Extending my hand, I give her a beaming smile.

She squints her eyes at us and squeezes us in her arms. Damn, she is strong. “I can’t believe this! I have so many questions, but they can wait. Come, come. Let’s get comfortable in the back. Vi, can you call your men, please?”

“Anabell is requesting your presence. So hustle your cute heinies in here!”

The guys enter the store in a receiving line for kisses before making their way over to Anabell and Lys.

For the next few hours, Anabell gets caught up on the last six years and all the crazy details in between. There are many tears and laughs; I love every second of it. Well after nightfall, the guys and I want to head back to the house for the night.

“Ana, spending time with you has been wonderful, but I am exhausted. The guys and I are going to head back to the house.” I look to Lys. “You don’t need to feel obligated to come back with us.”

“Thank you, Kostbar. I think I’m going to stay with my sister tonight. Try to make up for some lost time. But tomorrow, we have an early start!”

“Yes, sir!” I salute him.

Resting my hand on my hip, I look at my men. “Ready, handsomes?”

“Off we go! There will be a battle to the death. I will be the winner, of course!” Avi sprints out of the store like his pants are on fire.

Maybe I'll sleep alone and let them figure the rest out.
That would go over so well.

FORTY-THREE

Ryu

OPHIR AND AVI beat the shit out of each other in the middle of the sitting room. They've been going at it since we got home a half hour ago, but I think the battle for Vi has long been forgotten, and now it's all about who will tap out first.

Vi giggles, shaking her head against my chest. "These two still haven't figured out they've already lost."

"What do you mean?" I ask, pulling her closer to me.

She tilts her head up and bites down on my earlobe. "Want to take a bath, doc?"

Never have I jumped out of a chair so fast. Slings her over my shoulder, I take off running toward the bathroom. Vi's laughter makes my chest tight with happiness.

Once we're inside, I kick the door shut and lock it. Vi sashays over to the bathtub, perching her magnificent ass on the edge. Slowly, she unbuttons her shirt to reveal that there is nothing underneath.

Fuck me.

Slinking forward, I kneel in front of her. "Continue."

She tosses the shirt off to the side and unwraps her hair, letting her long locks sweep across her back. Her violet eyes connect with mine as she pulls on the string of her pants. Helping her out, I pull off her boots. My restraint slips, snatching the material still sitting on her hips, I rip her pants down.

Pressing her knees together, she *tsks* me. “So impatient, doc. Don’t you know that good things come to those who wait?”

“Start the bath, Villiana. Now,” I tell her sternly.

Opening her legs widely, she covers herself and winks. “Yes, Daddy.”

Oh, she’s testing me now.

Turning around, Vi leans over to turn on the tap, placing the smooth globes of her ass in my face. Very aware of her position, she shakes it at me. I have to take a bite—I can’t help myself. As my teeth close around her skin, she yelps and shoves her ass further into my face. Perfect. I spread her open to find her dripping. Her natural scent sends me into a frenzy, making me take a languid lick front to back.

“Ryu! I haven’t had a proper wash in two weeks! A quick dip in the stream is only going to do so much!” Vi’s words are mixed with a screech and a sigh, so I give her another lick.

“Stop moving, kitten.” I will take my girl all natural any day. I want to bathe in her nectar.

She can’t stop squirming. I stop everything I’m doing and step away.

“Why did you stop?” Vi pants.

“I told you to stop moving. You haven’t been a good listener, kitten, and now you will see what happens to bad girls. Get on all fours. Ass in the air.” She shuts off the water and stares at me. “Every second you aren’t here is another second added to your punishment. Get. Here. Now.”

She gets down and crawls to me, and what a beautiful sight it is. As she meets the tips of my shoes, she turns around and follows my directions. I have the perfect view of her glistening pussy from this angle.

“You don’t take direction very well, kitten, and I don’t mean just right now. Fear and I told you to let Avi cool off, but you didn’t listen. Instead, you tempt fate. Do you know what would have happened if Avi had killed you? I would have had to kill him, my own brother. That is if he didn’t do it himself—so reckless.” I growl in frustration

“I knew that he wou—” *Slap!* My hand comes down hard on her core. Her body recoils as she gasps.

“Did I tell you to speak?”

Vi drops her head in submission.

Running a soothing hand down her back, I say, “You can answer me, kitten.”

“No. You didn’t.” Her words come out breathy.

“Let’s try that again...No, what?”

“No, Daddy. You didn’t say I could speak.” Her voice drips with venom, but her arousal all over my hand tells me a different story.

“I would never douse that fire inside you—I like you wild but *safe*. You will learn to compromise. Now, you will take

your smacks. How about one for every time you put yourself in danger?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Ten it is. Count.” I bring my hand back down against her lush ass. I revel in the satisfying sting against my palm.

“*One*,” Vi moans out.

I reward her obedience by massaging her searing skin.

By the time we get to seven, she is in tears, her legs are shaking, and juices are dripping down her thighs.

“Can you take the last three? I’ll treat you afterward, baby girl.”

Vi nods in agreement.

Slap. “Eight.” *Slap.* “Nine.” *Slap.* “Ten!” The last one, she screams out.

As promised, I reward her by sliding two fingers into her aching pussy. Her walls immediately clench around them, just as her legs give out. Banding her arm around her middle, I lower us onto the cool stone floor. Putting her across my lap, my erection presses against her soft stomach. I slip my fingers back into her, Vi’s soft moans going straight to my throbbing cock.

“You did so well. Would you like to come now, kitten?”

“Yes, please.” Her voice is so small it’s evident that she has drifted into subspace. I place a kiss on her temple while adding a third finger. I pick up my pace as I dance my fingers against that spot deep inside her. Her legs shake again, her cunt swallowing my fingers. She comes with my name on her lips. My hand is soaked when I pull it away.

Adding hot water, I pick her off the floor and place her down into the tub. Stripping out of my clothes and boots, I step in behind her.

“I love you, Vi,” I tell her as I massage the soap into her hair.

She rests her back against my chest and lets out a soft sigh. “I love you too, Ryu. Thank you for that. I needed it.”

Once her hair is clean, I take a cloth and wash every inch of her body. Afterward, I wrap her in a towel and carry her into my bedroom. Placing her on the bed, I grab her brush and carefully comb her hair, lotion her body, dress her in one of my shirts, and tuck her under the covers.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes. Do you need anything?” I ask, kissing the top of her head.

“I’m okay. Just come back soon.”

Closing the door, I notice the house is silent now. I guess the guys gave up and went to bed. I quickly go back into the bathroom, take care of the endless ache in my pants, and clean up. Hurrying back into the room, Vi is on her hands and knees presenting me with her swollen cunt, two fingers gliding in and out.

“You didn’t think we were finished, did you?”

THE EARLY SUN floods the room with the warmth of its rays. Rolling onto my side, I realize I’m alone in bed, but the space is still warm, so Vi hasn’t been up for very long. Heading toward the kitchen, I hear her lyrical laughter and Lys’ voice.

Rounding the corner, I see Lys standing at the stove, making pancakes with fresh sausages. Vi has already finished

her first plate, swirling her finger through the syrup.

“Are you done playing with your food, Kostbar? I could use some help getting the rest out onto the table.” Lys watches Vi continue fingerpainting with the syrup. She grabs the platter of sausages and walks to the table, taking a bite out of every piece with a mischievous smile.

Lys catches her from the corner of his eye. “Villiana! Knock it off, or you don’t get another plate,” he scolds her, waving the spatula in the air.

Vi huffs, placing the rest of the food in the center of the table. She grabs the plates to set each spot but—like the little brat she is—licks every single one out of spite.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t see that, Villiana.” Lys shakes his head at her.

I can’t help but chuckle while watching their interaction. It’s so simple and pure.

“Would you like to join us, Ryu, or would you like to continue just to watch?” he asks teasingly.

Vi hops off her chair and skips to me, covering me in sticky kisses. “What’s up, doc? Ready for a fun-filled day of adventuring?” She is too hyper for being up for such a short time.

“No time like the present. Where are the other two idiots?”

“Avi and Ophir are in Avi’s workshop. They’re making sure we have weapons that are easily carried. Avi also said that I needed leathers. I told him not to make them, but he insisted,” Lys says as he places the pancakes onto a platter.

“Sounds right. I’ll go get them for breakfast.”

It's frigid this morning as the winter solstice is approaching. I should tell Avi to make sure everyone has coats too. Opening the door to the workshop, I'm hit with a wave of heat from the blazing forge. I find the place an absolute mess. Fear quenches two swords, a rough-cut karambit, and freshly carved hilts on the bench beside him. Avi is in the corner, stitching together the chest plate for Lys, tongue peeking out the corner of his mouth. Pieces of leather are thrown everywhere.

"How long have you two been up?" They obviously didn't hear me come in because Avi jumps at my voice, stabbing himself in the finger.

"Gods dammit, Ryu. Announce yourself next time." Avi sucks on his finger.

"I've been standing here for a few minutes already, but obviously, you two are very deep in thought." I gesture around the room at all of the mess.

"To answer your question, we never went to sleep. After you very rudely commandeered our girl, we decided to come out here and make sure we had everything together for the rest of the trip. I know we won't be back anytime soon, so we took advantage of it," Fear says as he shapes out the karambit, sparks flying around him.

"That's very smart. You know you won't be sleeping anytime soon, though?" I can't decide if they are geniuses or morons. At least I know they are prioritizing all of us over themselves. Both of them hold up mugs.

"We know," they reply in unison.

"Coffee isn't going to be enough, but I like your optimism."

Fear scoffs at me. “If you think I didn’t spell these to amp up the stimulant, then you are not as bright as I thought you were.”

“Great. Now you won’t sleep for three days and will be grumpy bastards.”

“Better than half dead, grumpy bastards!” Avi singsongs.

“Fair enough. Now, I came here for a reason; Lys made pancakes and fresh sausage. Maybe you both would like to eat?” I quirk an eyebrow.

Fear and Avi drop everything and go running out the door.

I put my hand up to stop them. “Smother the forge first!”

Sex and sustenance are their greatest motivators.

AFTER EVERYONE ATE, Avi and Fear cleaned up the workshop, and we all got our packs ready for the rest of the travels. We knew we were back home, so we packed a little differently than usual. Heavy on the weapons, very light on everything else. It will take us about a few days to get to the port, where we will have to sail the rest of the way to Estuarine since the realm is an island.

Lys claims he has a way to cut the time down, so we are currently on our way to see his friend. Going back through the forest, we stop at a very familiar boulder. Lys places his hands on the rock, and it disappears, revealing the staircase.

“Your friend is Willie?” With a slack-jawed stare, Avi makes his shock evident as we head down to Willie’s place.

“Of course you lot would know the old bastard,” Lys mumbles. Walking up to the bar, he knocks on it nonstop.

“Hold the fuck on or get the fuck out!” I hear Willie yell from the backroom. “*What?*” He comes out focused on the glasses he’s carrying.

As soon as Willie sees Lys, his face lights up.

“Lysander! How are you, you furry old fuck?” Willie makes Lys look so small, slapping him on the back as he pulls Lys into a tight hug.

“Who are you calling furry? Have you seen yourself?” The two of them act like they’ve known each other their whole lives.

“What do I owe for this visit? Because I know you didn’t travel out here for a quick chat.” Willie gets straight to the point, knocking a knuckle against the bar top.

“Unfortunately, you are correct—we need your help. My granddaughter is in trouble, and we need to use your portal to get to Estuarine. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t an emergency.” Lys tries to keep the conversation light, but the heaviness of the situation seeps out anyway. He gives Willie an apologetic look, knowing that he just gave away one of Willie’s secrets.

Willie side-eyes us, but when he sees Vi’s downcast eyes, he nods.

“I assume the rest know how to keep this information to themselves?” he directs his question to Lys, but it is obviously meant for the rest of us.

Lys puts one hand on his heart and sticks the other out to Willie. “I swear it.”

Willie does the same, and they create a magical pact.

“Give me a minute. You’re lucky it’s too early for anyone else to be here.” Willie opens up the hallway of doors and

walks to the end. Cutting a symbol into his palm, he presses his bloody hand to the wall, and the portal appears. “Well...” he yells down to us.

I take Vi’s hand in mine and we make our way to the portal. The closer we get, the stronger the pull is—like we’re about to get sucked into a vortex of nothingness.

I look back at Fear and Avi, but they seem unfazed.

Crossing his arms over his broad chest, Willie addresses the group, “Have any of you traveled by portal before?”

“I have. My brother and I were on the run for a long time when we were young.” Vi runs her finger through her hair, giving away her nervousness, but her voice is confident.

Willie gives her a sharp dip of his head. “At least you know what to expect. For the rest of you, it will feel like your body is about to be pulled apart. Once you are on the other side, it will feel like it snaps back together. You will feel disoriented and more than likely vomit. One of you must clearly picture where you want to go, and everyone must hold hands. It will ensure you get to the right destination. Otherwise, you may end up in a different location from each other.” Willie’s instructions sound more like demands. I won’t complain because he is saving us here. “Got it?”

“Got it,” we all say in unison.

“In that case, have a safe journey, and please find your way back to me when it’s all over. And *you...*” He gives Lys a pointed look, “You better come and visit more often. No excuse.” Willie embraces Lys again as they say their goodbyes.

I take the lead as everyone joins hands. “Everyone ready?”

As everyone agrees, I step through.

FORTY-FOUR

Villiana

“VILLIANA, my sweet girl. It’s time for the truth to reveal itself. You have been so brave.” My mother’s voice reverberates around me.

“What do you mean, the truth?”

“Just as it sounds. You have completed your vows and are now ready for the veil to fall. Together you will prevail.”

My mother is speaking in riddles. She has been giving me the answers all along but is making me work for them. I try to open my mind to this dream more but something is blocking me. Maybe it’s the ritual with Avi.

“Mama, can I win this? Am I going to make it out alive?”

“The power you hold is endless, but only you can make it work. You are the key, Villiana. Not your men or anyone else. You, Kostbar. Locren will win if you don’t trust in yourself, and that future is not bright. It leads to pain. So much pain and death.”

My heart is racing. This is a lot of pressure on one being. Why is it my job to save the future? I mean, I was going to kill Locren either way, but this makes me on edge.

An image of Avi breaks through the blinding white light of my dream.

“Are you alright, little star? I could tell you were in distress.” Avi’s voice is smooth and sweet, like honey. My anxiety melts with his presence.

“Yeah, wildling. I’m just dreaming of my mother.”

“Hello, Avi. I’m so glad to see you with my daughter. It has been a long time coming.” My mother speaks as if he can hear her; though as Avi’s body freezes up, I’m pretty sure he can.

“Uh, thank you. It’s an honor to be your daughter’s mate,” he responds to my mother, making it clear that they can communicate. This is all so strange.

“I love you, Villiana. Just remember who you are.” My mother’s words are filtering out.

“I love you too. I miss you so much, Mama.”

Remember who I am.

MY VISION FADES AWAY, and I find myself surrounded by water and sand. The sound of the waves crashing against the beach is so familiar, yet so foreign. The air is different here too; heavy with moisture and peppering my nostrils with saltiness. The sun is so bright I have to shield my eyes to appreciate swirls of orange and pink adorning the ethereal sky. I have never seen anything quite like this.

Mesmerized, my voice barely comes out as a whisper. “So, this is home?”

When no one immediately answers me, I realize they are all hunched over, trying not to throw up. Wimps.

“I’ll give you guys a minute.” Sitting down, the ground is surprisingly warm. I pull off my boots and run towards the water. The warm tide against my toes is such a stark contrast to the brisk temperature.

Fear comes up beside me, “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Staring out into the endless sea, I nod. “It is. I’ve always felt most at home in the water. It calls to me.” I dig my feet into the wet sand.

He takes me by the hand, leading me further into the water. Bending down, he swirls his finger through the water, pearlescent ripples form. “Estuarine is ripe in magic. Everywhere you go, you feel high off of energy. It’s also why the water stays so warm.” He deeply inhales, holding it for a moment. Then, as he lets out the breath, all the tension melts from his body.

I could stay like this forever.

“Come on, lovebirds! Let’s head into the city center,” Ryu calls out to us.

Turning around, I notice the thick forest of willows dusted in snow. “It’s only a ten-minute walk to Old Port.” The absolute giddiness radiating off him and Avi makes me worried that they’re plotting something.

“Race you there!” Fear’s voice bellows next to me before he takes off sprinting. He is surprisingly fast for a man of his size. Ryu is hot on his trail as the two of them head toward the city.

Lys stands there frozen in awe. After slipping back into my boots, I bump him with my elbow to let him know we’re leaving.

I link my arm with Avi's. "This is where you three are the happiest."

"That obvious?"

I smile so hard it hurts my cheeks. "It's not a bad thing. I just haven't seen this much bliss in a long time."

I DIDN'T REALIZE JUST how big the city was going to be. Made of stone and wood, the buildings are all multi-level with many windows to let in natural light. Each level has a grandiose balcony protruding from the building. The streets are made of weathered cobblestone. And, of course, they have many docks in the port.

"Welcome to Old Port City, our true home." Avi spreads his arms wide and spins around.

We spot Ryu and Fear standing outside a tavern, speaking to a woman who looks around my age. I can tell that she's Fae, just not what type. Her hair is a pastel pink and short, curling around her chin. Like myself, her skin is a muted shade of yellow, but hers is covered in freckles.

When we approach, Ryu waves us in. "Trix, this is Villiana, our mate. Vi, this is Lutrixa. She is a long-time friend and the owner of this tavern." When I go to shake her hand, Trix pulls me for an unusually tight hug.

"It is so wonderful to meet you, Villiana!" She rocks me back and forth in her embrace. "*Wait!* Did you say *our* mate?" Trix squawks in my ear.

"It's nice to meet you, too. You can call me Vi. And yes, the three nutjobs are my mates."

When I try to pull away from Trix, she pulls me back in, squeezing me tighter as she squeals. I give into the affection, knowing there is no way out—she means well.

“Come in, come in! I can’t wait to introduce you to Alana!”

The inside of the tavern is cute and quaint. Naked bulbs hang from the rafters, illuminating the room. The seats float at the bar and seem to adjust so you are at the correct height when you sit down. There are a few patrons; a couple sitting at a table and eating, and some others seated at the bar, drinks in hand. Behind the bar, there is a tiny woman with a shaved head. Her ears are pointed and adorned with gold rings down to her lobes. Her upturned nose also has a gold ring in it. The woman’s long and full lashes accentuate her deep blue eyes.

“Babe, look who’s back!” Trix’s excitement hasn’t waned at all.

“Holy fuck! The heathens have returned. What have you assholes been up to?” Alana sees that they’re not alone and gives me a skeptical look.

I hear Avi growl behind me. “Lana, that is our mate you are glowering at.”

Alana throws her hands in the air. “I just haven’t seen her around.”

“She has a name...” When I go to shake Alana’s hand, she takes it. “I’m Vi. A pleasure to meet you.” I do my best to make sure I sound friendly. I’m not the most social person, so I try to keep my mask from slipping.

“Yeah, you too.” The way she smiles at me tells me she knows I’m trying.

“When did you lovebirds get hitched?” Fear asks.

“About five years ago. Long overdue, if you ask me. We’ve been together for fifteen years. I had to ask Trix twice before she said yes.” Alana cocks her head at her wife.

Covering the side of her mouth like it’s a secret, Trix whispers to me, “I like to watch her squirm.”

“Do you have an open room I could stay in for a few nights?” Lys comes up next to me at the bar. I feel bad; I kind of forgot he was here.

“Trix, Alana, this is my grandfather, Lysander.” They both say their hellos to him. Trix tells Lys they have a room as long as he needs and brings him upstairs to show him.

“I guess he wants to give us space when I meet your parents?” I’m a little disappointed by it, but I’m also grateful. Plus, when was the last time Lys could explore somewhere new?

When Trix comes back down, she has their cook bring out piles of food for us, and gods damn, is it good. Like really good—you could even say orgasmic. We spend the majority of the day drinking and eating while everyone catches up. Lutrixa and Alana have known Ryu their whole lives, living only a few minutes from each other. Fear and Alana dated for a very brief amount of time before she figured out that she was gay.

Lutrixa and Alana are wonderful. They try to keep me a part of the conversation, but the longer we sit there, the more I realize that I don’t know how to make friends. While I wouldn’t trade Thorin for the world, our friendship was formed due to circumstance and forced proximity. You know what it’s like to have your mind screaming at you to be yourself and try to meet new beings, but your trauma says fuck no, they’re just going to leave anyway? You feel like a fraud. You become that little voice in your head, a version of what

your trauma wants you to be and not anything of who you truly are.

Avi sits beside me, picking at his fingers. He doesn't seem to have a relationship with either Trix or Alana. When I place my hand on his thigh, he jumps. I can feel his anxiety and fear of rejection pulsing through our mate tie. It becomes evident that Avi is afraid of how I will see him. There is something more to the story than what he is telling me, but I don't want to push him—especially here.

“You want to go outside for a minute, wildling?”

Avi looks at me from the corner of his eye and barely blinks. Wrapping his hand over the top of mine, he squeezes, letting me know that he needs to get out of here.

“I want to take a short walk down to the bakery. I could smell it as we walked up, and I haven't stopped thinking about it,” I announce to the group.

“I'll take you, little star. Maybe I'll even buy you a treat.” Avi's mask is right back in place, with a dazzling smile to tie it all together.

“Have fun, you two. Don't be cheap; bring us back something,” Fear teases, raising his glass at us.

Avi and I put out coats back on, make sure all of our weapons are hidden and secured, and head out of the tavern. I'm not expecting the blast of cold air to hit my face as the door opens; it is so toasty inside that I forgot about the chill outside. Avi pulls the fur-lined hood over my head; the softness tickles my face.

“Did you even know there was a bakery down the street?” Avi questions me as he puts his arm around my waist.

“Nope. But I figured it’s a city; there must be one somewhere around here.” I give him a sly grin, bumping my hip against his.

The walk to the bakery isn’t very long, but we take our time getting there. I stare in awe of all the shops and beings around us. They don’t seem to mind the busyness; if anything, it looks like they thrive in it.

I don’t regret the life I had growing up with Lys. I had so much freedom and was able to explore. The woods are so peaceful, and I could always find a way to entertain myself. But something about this city has me romanticizing the idea of living here. Maybe busy streets would counteract my busy mind—keep me distracted from the thoughts that plague me.

The sweet scent of cinnamon sugar and apple pie hits my nostrils. The man behind the counter is wearing a white apron covered in flour and chocolate. He’s placing fresh treats into the display as we enter. The bell chimes, and the man dusts his hands before greeting us.

“Welcome! How can I help you today?” he asks.

“Can we get a dozen fried dough balls, two extra large sticky buns, and whatever dinner loaf you suggest? We’re headed to my parents tonight, and we haven’t seen them in quite some time.” Avi rattles off the order with ease.

“The works coming right up for the handsome couple!” The man gives me a wink before turning around to pack up all of our goods. I hear Avi growl next to me.

“*Aww, are you threatened by the nice old baker?*” I tease him. Avi grabs a handful of my ass and squeezes hard.

“*Mine,*” he grits through his teeth. The simple exclamation has heat pooling between my legs. When the man goes to hand

me the bag of goods, Avi rips it away. The look on the man's face says he knows exactly what he's doing and getting a laugh out of it. Avi hands him much more coin than the total cost before walking out and slamming the door.

“You are such a savage. Did you think I was going to fuck the baker on the counter in front of you?” At this point, I'm just provoking him for the fun of it. Avi drags me into a hidden alleyway. Dropping the bag to the ground, he grabs me by the throat and shoves me against the wall, the impact stealing my breath.

“You want to know what happens to mouthy little brats?” he challenges, nose to nose with me. I lean in like I'm going to kiss him, licking his cheek instead. Avi acts so quickly that I don't have a chance to react. He pulls down my hood and wraps my hair into his fist. Pulling back so hard that my scalp stings, he forces me to look him in his eyes—which are currently black as night.

“You want to dance with the darkness? I will consume your every breath and watch light drain from your eyes. I will kill every single being that looks at you too long if I have to because you are *mine*.”

“I'm pretty sure you mean *ours*, little brother.” Fear's devilish voice permeates the air.

“You're right on time—glad you heard me. I'm just about to teach Vi what happens when she wants to test me. Would you like to give me a hand?” Avi's tusks present themselves, his eyes boring so deeply into mine I know I'm his prey at this moment. And honestly, that's what I want to be.

He turns us, putting his back toward the street. “Down, slut,” he barks in a rough tone. Snapping his fingers at me, he

points to the ground. Wetness floods my panties as I drop to my knees.

Fear steps around Avi and takes his place behind me. “Oh, you fucked up, little one.”

“Hold her in place. She’s about to be my little fuck toy, putting her mouth to good use.” Avi instructs Fear, stepping forward so his toes are touching my knees. Fear is happy to oblige, grabbing my hair just as Avi had moments ago. “Take me out,” he snarls.

I pull the laces of his leather pants, loosening them enough to reach my hand inside. Enclosing my hands around him, I freeze—his face isn’t the only thing that has shifted. Pulling him from his pants, I try not to show my intimidation. The ridges of his cock bounce through the web of my hand as I give him a few strokes.

“Open,” Avi demands. The second my mouth is open wide enough, he thrusts himself all the way down my throat, making me gag. Fear chuckles behind me.

Holding my head against him, Avi flicks his eyes to Fear. “Put those shadows of yours to good use, Ophir, and hold her mouth open.”

His shadows shoot out like tentacles to pull the corners of my mouth as wide as they can, allowing Avi to slam his cock down my throat.

“And now for the best part....” He’s fucking my throat mercilessly, and then a knot slaps against my stretched lips. My jaw burns, and I try not to gag with every thrust.

“*Fuuckin’* yes. Her throat is squeezing me so tight,” Avi moans loudly.

Unexpectedly, I feel something slither down the back of my pants, straight to my needy pussy. Fear groans behind me. “She’s loving this. She’s drenched.” He slides a shadow into me hard, causing me to gasp around Avi.

He pauses with his ribbed shaft completely filling my throat. I can’t breathe, anxiously trying to pull air through my nose.

“I told you: I am your darkness. And now I will take your light,” Avi grunts. He nods his head at Fear in a silent message. More shadows shoot out and fill my nose, restricting what little breath I have left. If I thought Avi was being rough before, I was sorely mistaken. The sheer power behind his pumps makes me wonder how he hasn’t snapped my jaw. Spots speckle my vision when Fear places his hand around my throat.

“You like when Avi uses you like the slut that you are?” Fear’s voice sounds distant while my vision tunnels. “All ours to use and abuse.” The degradation forces an explosive orgasm from me. The scream comes from deep within me, using the last bits of oxygen I have. Avi roughly pulls out and the shadows are retracted from my nose, a long string of spit following. I desperately gasp for air, my heart thudding against my ribs so hard it might actually break through.

Just when I think it’s over, Avi picks me up under my arms, forcing me to stand up, “Have you ever taken two men at once? Stuffing both your holes packed so tight, you feel like you’re going to split open?” Avi hisses in my ear.

I shake my head, but curiosity is brimming over.

“Wait! Someone might see.” My eyes shoot down the alleyway, watching as beings pass by, none the wiser as to what is happening.

“If anyone is stupid enough to stop to watch, I’ll kill them,” Fear states matter-of-factly.

“You can’t just go around killing beings!” I slap him in the chest.

A deep chuckle comes from his chest, “Watch me, little one. Now, let’s soothe that ache between your legs. I can smell how turned on you are.”

I briefly feel embarrassed but no longer caring if anyone can see us, or if they know how much I want them. “We’ll see how well you can take care of it.”

Avi pulls off my coat and throws it on the ground. The brisk air feels wonderful against my scorching skin. Dropping to one knee, he unlaces and pulls my boots off with lightning speed. My pants and panties follow quickly thereafter.

Standing there naked from the waist down, the guys assess me with hungry eyes.

Fear picks me up by my ass, and I wrap my arms around his neck to steady myself. “Wrap your legs around me, little one.”

I feel Avi’s hand snake underneath me, pulling Fear from his pants. I hear a cap being twisted off and feel cold liquids rubbed against my pussy and ass. Avi takes some more lube coating Fear’s cock and lines him up with my entrance. A breathy groan falls from Fear’s lips as he uses my body weight to drop me down onto him. The air is sucked from my lungs from the quick intrusion—the stretch burns so good. He backs up against the wall and picks me up, just to impale me again.

“Bounce, Vi,” Fear says, slapping my ass hard. I press my knees against the brick and use my body weight as leverage. With every movement, my knees scrape against the wall. I

push myself harder against it, using the bite of pain and waves of pleasure to chase a high.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I moan out, sliding up and down Fear’s thick length. Moments later, Avi’s chest is pressed against my back. He swirls his finger around my back entrance and pushes it in. I clench hard.

Fear groans like a dying man. “*Dear. Fucking. Odin.*”

Avi takes his time stretching me out, adding a second finger, scissoring them inside me. “Hold her still, brother.”

Fear stops me from moving, and I hear Avi apply more lube. But the second I feel him move behind me, lining himself against my asshole, I second-guess everything.

“You aren’t both going to fit—there is no way. Fear barely fits unshifted. Adding Avi’s demon dick to the mix will rip me in half.” My core floods from the thought.

Avi rubs circles into my back. “We’ll go slow, and if you want to stop, you just tell us, okay Vi?” His ability to shift from authoritative to sweet and caring is impressive.

“I’ll—I’ll try,” I say with a shaky voice.

“You’re such a good whore for us,” Fear praises me, kissing me hard as Avi begins to make his way into me. Every ridge pushes through my tight ring, and pleasure shoots throughout my body. The more turned on I get, the more relaxed I become. When Avi becomes fully seated, we all moan in unison.

“Gods, that’s a crazy feeling, you sliding against me.” Fear seems fascinated by Avi’s anatomy.

Both begin moving slowly at first, getting me used to the burning goodness. The teasing pace is driving me crazy.

“More. I need *more*.” I’m not above begging. I need to chase the pleasure that has been building up inside of me.

Their thrusts remain slow and leisurely, despite my pleading. Naturally, I decide to step up my game with some light taunting. “Prove to me you own me. Show me why I should be yours.” The animalistic sounds I get out of them reveal I’m about to get exactly what I asked for.

They fuck me in tandem like it’s a race. A melody of grunts, groans, and slapping of bodies fills the alley. My hands grip Fear’s coat hard, holding on for dear life. It’s not long before I’m mumbling incoherently.

“I’m so fucking close,” I slur out.

I feel Fear’s stomach tighten, and Avi presses hard against us, pistoning his hips. A raging fire builds in my core. Fear breaks first, letting out a string of curses; his seed spurts deep inside me. “That’s right, little one. Squeeze me tighter. Milk every drop from me.”

Avi pulls me from Fear and pushes me forward until my hands and face are against the brick wall. With warm cum dripping down my leg, Avi rolls his hips hard against my ass, getting even deeper than before. Reaching around, he finds my clit and strums me, sending me to oblivion. My eyes roll back, and a hoarse cry is thrust from me. It takes me every spark of energy to keep myself upright as Avi follows behind me with a roar, fingers biting into my hips.

We stand there catching our breaths before Avi pulls out. His release trickles out of me.

Fear comes over and helps me get dressed, and Avi pulls my coat back up my arms. I kiss both of them softly.

Sighing, I mumble, “We should probably head back to the tavern so Ryu doesn’t think we’re dead.” I wince from the soreness as I start to move.

“Oh, little one, he is *very* aware of where we are. Avi told him.”

I blush at the thought.

Returning to the tavern, Ryu sits there with lust radiating from him. His fists are clenched tightly in his lap, and I can see a hint of his talons.

“I should tan your ass right here for pulling that shit while I just sat here.” Ryu scolds me through our tie as if it’s my fault I just got my insides rearranged—okay, maybe it is a little bit.

I gingerly sit down in the seat next to him, placing a chaste kiss on his cheek.

“Sorry, doc. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Are the four of you going to need a room too, or are you headed to your parents?” Alana asks, filling up everyone’s glass again.

“We’re going to head straight to our parents. It’s been a very long time, and I don’t think any of us want to put it off any longer.” Ryu downs his mead and stands up, ready to head out.

“I get that. Stop by before you leave the city again! It was really nice to catch up.” Trix comes and gives us all her death grip hug.

Leaving the tavern, Fear slings his arm over my shoulders. “Ready to meet the parents?”

“Do I even get to...” I take my hands and wave them around my freshly fucked pussy, “freshen up?”

“Nah, I like you marked as ours.”

Asshole.

FORTY-FIVE

Villiana

TERRIFIED.

That's exactly what I'm feeling right now. Tendrils of panic creep up my spine, encircling my throat to rob me of my breath. I have experienced a lot of evils in my lifetime, but none have shaken me quite like the prospect of meeting my mates' parents. I've never been in a relationship long enough to meet the parents, nor have I ever wanted to. But this time is different. Not only is it forever, but I love and care about them.

Everyone says *be yourself*, and *you're perfect just the way you are*. But how is that possible when I don't even know who I am? The pathetic reality is the elf I used to be was stripped away, her soul wiped from existence. Now I'm an empty shell, desperately searching for a crumb of self love. What happens if they hate me? I would never ask the guys to choose me over their parents.

As the taste of metal floods my mouth, I realize I've bitten my lip hard enough to break the skin. I quickly heal myself and lick away any remaining blood—they don't need to see how much I'm freaking out.

Avi appears next to me and laces his fingers into mine. “Let it go, little star. Let me have your worries,” he coos as he pulls the energy from me.

“I don’t know how to let go.”

He stops walking and calls out to Ryu and Fear in front of us. “I’m taking Vi down to the waterfront. We’ll meet you by the bridge shortly.” Avi pulls off the pathway into the field of tall grass. Just as I’m about to ask how we’re supposed to find our way through, the grass parts on its own, creating a path straight to the water.

“How—”

He smirks with a twinkle in his chocolate eyes. “The land knows my magic. It’s my home.” Letting go of my hand, he pulls his jacket off, dropping it on the ground, followed by his shirt. I cock my head, trying to figure out what he’s up to.

“Come on! We’re going for a swim,” he shouts as he runs down the path, tossing his shoes and pants off on the way.

Fuck it. I drop my pack to the ground, throw my clothes on top of his, and run. As soon as my body meets the water, magic surges beneath my skin—I feel like I’m vibrating.

Avi’s bronze arms pull me closer until the swell of my breasts are pressed against his chest. “Let it go, Villiana. Let the lake take it away.”

And then I do.

I close my eyes, let the dam break open, pouring myself into the water around us. All of the panic, anxiety, and paranoia. All of the overwhelming negativity that is threatening to break me.

Avi's masculine face appears in my mind, looking proud. "Open your eyes, little star. Look at what you've created." My lashes flutter open to one of the most magnificent scenes—the water is glowing with millions of sparkling lights. It looks like we're swimming in the sky.

Avi sweeps my wet hair to the side, placing soft kisses along the peak of my shoulder. "Energy cannot be created or destroyed, but it can be transformed." Cupping his hands, he brings the liquid to my face and then opens his fingers. I watch the luminescence trickle down his arms, leaving a trail of tiny stars.

Turning to face him, Avi's whole body shines like he is a god. I trace the line of his face from his heavy brow, over his defined cheekbones, and around his diamond shaped jaw. His lips part as his eyes watch my every move intensely. I bring my hand to his wet curls, gliding my fingers through, memorizing everything about him at this moment. I feel like I'm looking at him for the first time—the *real* him.

Electricity pulses between us, begging me to press our bodies together. As my breasts press against his hard chest, I gasp. Lightning zips through my veins, into my heart, making it rap against my ribcage. Avi runs his hand up my back and into my hair. Cupping my head, he pulls me into a mind-melting kiss. The world around us disappears with every sweep of our tongues, every caress, every sigh, and groan.

Pulling away, he leans his forehead against mine—our pentagrams pressed together. Lys wasn't lying; it is indescribable the connection I have with him. I'm blessed to see a side of Avi that no one else will.

"Thank you," I murmur.

“Don’t thank me. I know what it’s like to be so wracked with anxiety that you can’t move. I know how destructive the negativity can become. I will always take care of you, Villiana.” Tucking me under his chin, he rubs small circles into my back. “Let’s go up to the house. I promise my parents will adore you.”

TO GET to Saito’s home, we have to walk through a maze of thick foliage with pink and white blossoms sprinkled throughout.

The house the guys grew up in is stunning, sitting beside a large lake with willows at the shore. Floating atop the water are giant lilies with even larger pads—each like an island of its own. A small creek cuts through the Saito’s property, requiring you to cross a footbridge to get to the front of the house. The house itself is made of creamy white wood and has a dark brown gable roof. The shape is narrow but tall. Long windows take up most of the front of the house, with a small porch swing fastened to the overhang.

“Feeling better, little one?” Fear asks as we approach.

I smile. “Much.”

The four of us walk up a short staircase to the front door. I’m surprised when Ryu knocks instead of walking right in. All the guys beam with happiness and excitement as they surround the entrance. I stand off to the side, staying on the porch, feeling safer with a space between the door and myself. After a few moments, a slim woman about my height with long sapphire hair, opens the door.

“My boys! Oh, my gods, I can’t believe you’re home!” she cries, opening her arms wide and looking for a group hug.

Miraculously, they make it work. Seeing this small woman engulfed by these three large men—especially Fear—seems so silly.

“And who is this beauty with you?”

“Mom, this is Villiana. Vi, this is our mom, Emi,” Ryu says, radiant with pride. Emi pushes past the guys to greet me. When she is an arm’s length away, she stops.

“May I hug you, Villiana?”

Nodding, I close the gap and wrap my arms around her. When she embraces me, it’s a mother’s hug—there is no other way to explain the feeling.

“You raised amazing boys, Mrs. Saito,” I say softly and sincerely.

Emi pulls back and cups my face. “Please, call me Emi. And my boys are amazing all on their own, but thank you for such a wonderful compliment. Let’s head inside so you can meet my husband, Akira.” Emi pulls me forward, leading me into the house.

The interior is just as beautiful as the exterior. It’s an open floor plan with walls lined with bookcases filled with hundreds of books and trinkets. Immediately to the left is a simple wooden staircase, and a luxurious kitchen sits on the far left. All different types of plants decorate the home, accompanied by the warm daylight leaking in from the floor-to-ceiling front windows.

“Kir, the boys are home and they brought a guest!” Emi calls up the stairs to her husband.

A tall, muscular man comes walking down the stairs. His face is the replica of Ryu: long and strong features, with green marbled eyes, and a snow white complexion. His chocolate

brown hair sits on his shoulders. Akira flashes me one of the most genuine smiles I've ever seen.

Emi introduces me to her husband, her fingers pressed lightly against the base of my spine. "This is Villiana."

I extend my hand out to Akira. "It's very nice to meet you, sir." He reaches out, gripping my palm in a firm shake.

"Akira is fine, honey. Welcome to our home."

Avi comes barreling past me and flings himself at his father. "I've missed you, Dad," Avi croons.

"As I have missed you. All of you boys! Your mother and I are elated to have you back."

Avi laces his fingers through mine as Fear and Ryu come up behind me. Akira gives them a questioning look.

"Mom, Dad, we have something to tell you." Fear's voice is jubilant as he announces, "Vi is our mate." Panic tries to creep back in from the deafening silence that followed the announcement.

Emi's eyes fill with unshed tears, her features morphing into something more... reptilian. "My boys are mated? All three of you are her mates?" Hopefulness oozes from her and calms me.

"Yes," the guys say in unison.

Emi claps excitedly and screeches in a way only a mother can. "I HAVE A DAUGHTER! Oh, Villiana, welcome to our family!" She places a kiss on each of their cheeks.

Akira is behind me, congratulating Avi, Fear, and Ryu. Afterwards, he places a hand on my shoulder. "You are a blessing," he says.

A blush creeps up my face; I have never felt this special. I shrug shyly. “Your sons have saved me in more ways than they could know. I’m the one who’s blessed.”

Ryu trots towards the kitchen where Emi is already pouring everyone a drink. “There is a lot more we have to tell you too.”

Standing around the large island in the middle of the room, we all take a drink.

Akira raises his glass to make a toast. “To our sons and new daughter!” Our glasses clink together before we shoot our drinks back.

As soon as Emi finishes hers, she clasps her hands together enthusiastically, “I can’t wait to tell your Aunt Lilly! She should be back any second.” The rapid change in the guys’ demeanors chills me to the bone. Searching our tie, I’m flooded with so many emotions at once: anxiety, guilt, sadness. I seek their eyes, and they tell me the same thing.

“We’re so sorry, Vi.” Ryu looks whiter than usual—which is an impressive feat.

“Please understand we all wanted to tell you but swore we wouldn’t until it was time.” Avi chimes in.

Looking at Fear, I beg for an explanation, but he looks down at the ground. “Just remember that we love you and never intended to hurt you.”

The front door opens and closes—an aroma chokes me. My head begins to pound, and pressure builds behind my eyes. I press the heels of my palms into them, trying to relieve the pressure, but as the scent gets closer, the worse it gets. Just as I think I’m going to pass out, soft hands reach out for me—lemon and verbena.

“Forgive them. It is not their fault. Forgive them.”

The voice is ringing in my mind as if I just stuck my head in a bell. Visions flash behind my eyes.

A naked figure is tied to a post. Head hung lifelessly, their hands and feet are bound, and a large shard of crystal has been stabbed through their chest.

Another vision comes.

This time I’m in the vision; I can feel and hear everything. It’s a woman. Her skin is gray and leathery. When I touch it, there is no buzz of magic, and the soul is barely hanging on. Where the crystal protrudes from her chest, blood pours down her naked breasts. Strange symbols are carved all over her. I hear another woman gasp from behind me. She rushes over to the naked woman and speaks.

“Please be alive. Hang in there, sweetheart. I’m going to get you home and try to heal you.”

The new woman turns her head, and it’s Emi. She is much younger, not much older than Ryu is now. Her face is frantic as she cuts the naked woman from the post. Emi leaves the bag of flowers and herbs on the ground as she lifts the woman into her arms. As the naked woman’s head lolls back, her blood crusted hair falls from her face.

My mother.

“I’m so sorry, my sweet girl. Please wake up, and I will explain everything.” My mother’s saccharine voice filters through my thoughts. She is running her hand around my ear like she did when I had nightmares as a child. I’m so afraid to open my eyes because if I do and it’s not her, I will be heartbroken. But if it is, I no longer know the difference between what’s real and fake.

I reluctantly open my eyes to a sight I never thought I would see again. Her once radiant yellow skin is now dull and marred with scars. Her blonde hair is very short now, cut around her ears, and her curls make it look spiky. My mother's violet eyes are awestruck as she assesses me.

“They really got you out. They did it.” My mother's tears fall onto my face. A sob racks her body, and she pulls me into her chest. I still haven't spoken—I'm barely breathing. Something in me snaps and clutches onto my mother's shirt.

“Mama.”

She kisses my forehead, and everything goes black.

FORTY-SIX

Ryu

THERE IS a time in everyone's life when the lies and deceit catch up to them. Avi would tell you it's your Karma collecting its debt. The balance of good and evil must be restored, even if it was a necessary evil. And it seems our time is up.

“Explanations. Now!” Dad demands. Bending over Vi and Lilly, his hands hover over Vi's head, trying to fix whatever just happened to her. His silver magic encircles her, but her body isn't absorbing the magic like it's supposed to—it's rejecting healer magic.

No one wants to speak first. We don't even know how to start explaining this situation. The words feel stuck in my throat; no matter how hard I try to get them out, I can't. Fear is sitting on a stool nearby, his finger locked behind his head as he hangs it between his legs. Avi has backed himself up to the wall and slid down so his knees touch his chest. And me? Well, I stand there, rooted in my spot, with my mouth hanging open and eyes locked on Vi.

“Uh—we. Uhm,” stuttering, I do everything I can to try my voice to work.

“It’s my fault. Don’t get mad at the boys. I asked them for help, and they agreed.” Lilly’s head snaps up, eyes puffy and red, tears dripping down her chin. She rubs her chin against her arm, cradling Vi even closer. “Villiana is my daughter.”

A glass shatters, and Mom stands deathly still with a look of betrayal written across her face. She doesn’t even bother trying to clean it up. Instead, she comes towards us, glass crunching under her feet. It’s not very often that I see Mom lose control, but she is well on her way. Her claws are out, and her teeth are long and sharp.

“Your *what?*” Her voice is monotone, thick with disbelief. Lilly’s confession makes it hard to tell if she feels angry or hurt.

“I’m so sorry, Emi. When you found me, I never thought I was going to live. You saw what those monsters did to me. They took me, leaving my children motherless. I was so afraid to talk about them because I thought they would find them if I spoke their names aloud,” Lilly hiccups between labored breaths.

She continues to stroke Vi’s face, staring into the distance mindlessly; her face transforms into something dark. We’ve seen that look before, and it’s the same one Vi had when she lost control at Lys’ house.

“Did you say *children?* As in, more than one child you never mentioned? Lilly, you could have trusted us!” Mom comes down next to her, looking like she is about to slap Lilly, but when their eyes meet, my mother’s features soften. Under all of her animosity, she knows that she would do the same.

“Yes. I have a son, too. His name is Zigmund,” Lilly sighs.

My poor mother's eyes are about to fall out of her head. It's hard to have such deep-rooted secrets come to light after years and years of friendship. We call her Aunt Lilly, for fuck's sake. I can only imagine how betrayed my mother feels right now. If this were Ophir or Avi, I would probably beat the shit out of them.

My dad has yet to say a word about this confession. He sits back on his heels when he can't get Vi to wake up. Pulling his hair at the scalp, he admits he can't fix the issue.

Avi springs to action. Breaking whatever spell he was under, he pushes our dad and Lilly out of the way and instinctively places his forehead to Vi's. I notice that he presses their pentagrams together, the ones Lys carved for the ritual.

Avi's dark, glittery red essence and the golden hue of Villiana's swirl together around them. Vi sucks in a deep breath, their combined essence is pulled into her lungs. Avi whispers softly so only she can hear it, kissing her forehead, cheeks, and lips.

"What did you just do, Avi?" Dad asks, staring astounded at him.

Avi holds onto Vi like a man possessed. They're in their own world right now.

"Avi and Vi are bound by blood magic. It's a long story, which we were going to explain. But he's able to get into her mind, which probably pulled her out of her brief state of comatose—her mind most likely put her into it to protect her," Fear speaks up from his seat. His knee bounces up and down, making the table in front of him shake. "To be transparent, we are all bound and tied to Vi. We are alchemic mates. True mates, not chosen."

“Why don’t we give them a minute?” Dad suggests. “Lilly, Emi, let’s clean up the glass and go into the sitting room. We should talk alone for a minute as well.” He doesn’t sound angry or disappointed; just curious. Dad has always been the peacekeeper of the family. Whenever there was a fight, he was there to break it up. Or when Avi had panic attacks and no one could reach him, Dad would be the only one who could calm him.

When they leave us in the kitchen, Fear and I get onto the floor with Avi and Vi. We don’t get too close just in case she still needs space. Vi gradually sits up, and Avi gives her a little room. Her violet eyes are now ruby again, and tiny fangs peek out from under her top lip. I don’t know what to make of the site in front of me; I have so many questions, but I don’t think anyone has the answers.

“She’s really here? It isn’t some fever dream?” Vi’s brittle voice sounds as delicate as her current state. She digs her fingernails into the wooden floor, bending them back.

“She is, kitten, and she has a lot of explaining to do. But she is the one who asked us to get you out,” I say hesitantly.

I can’t even begin to imagine what Vi is going through right now. Over the last few months, everything she once believed true has been proven otherwise. She escaped The Collective, was reunited with Lys, found out her brother was alive and not imprisoned, and discovered she was destined to be mated to three different men. Now she learns that not only is her mother alive, but has been living with her mates for years. And let’s not forget her brother is possibly evil and has taken her best friend hostage.

Some beings don’t experience that much change in a lifetime; I don’t know how much more she can take, but I have

a feeling we'll find out.

“What can we do for you, little one? None of us expect you to forgive—let alone believe—us. We can take you back into the city, to Lys, if you would like.” Fear takes his chances reaching for her hand. When she doesn't pull away, he lets out an audible sigh. Ophir has always hated being deceitful unless it was absolutely necessary. He says it only creates cracks in a relationship, and he's right. I don't know how we could have done things much differently, though. She would have never believed me if I had told her that her mom had sent us to get her out. Vi would have laughed in my face and told me to get fucked.

“*Absolutely-the-fuck-not!* I deserve an explanation! While I want to be livid at all of you, I can also see how you were pawns in this charade.” Vi calmly stands up—almost too calmly—and dusts herself off. Then, without a word, she walks straight into the sitting room where Mom, Dad, and Lilly are. The guys and I scramble to our feet, getting ready for whatever blowout happens. Any murmurs from the other room cease the second she steps in front of them.

“This is what's going to happen, Mother. I am going to hear you out. I will listen to every word you say and really take it in. Then, if I decide I don't want to be a part of your life, you will respect that and leave me, and my mates, alone.” Vi's voice is cold and calculated, giving Lilly a pointed stare.

“That is fair. Can we sit down together?” Lilly asks, agreeing to her daughter's terms.

“Akira and I will go make some tea, and we can sit at the table,” Mom says as her and Dad slink off to the kitchen.

Vi and Lilly don't look away from one another while we wait. They appear so similar yet different. Villiana has her

mother's coloring, eyes, and height, but there is something much more...*ancient* about her, almost like she's lived a thousand lives.

The heaviness in the atmosphere is suffocating, weighed down with contempt. I chance a look at the guys, but they have locked their eyes on Vi. Her chest is heaving as she curls and uncurls her fingers in a fist. You can see little half-moons imprinted into her palm, the skin threatening to break.

Reaching through our tie, I press my magic into her, hoping the coolness will help settle her raging blood.

“Avi, help her. Vi's mind is in overdrive, and she could use some relief,” I call out to Avi, hoping only he can hear me.

He must have heard me because he walks up behind Vi and places his hands on the sides of her head again. Vi's shoulders sag within seconds as she falls back against Avi's chest.

“Tea's ready,” Mom calls.

Everyone finds their own space at the table.

The need to protect Vi is so strong Avi, Ophir, and I fight over who gets to sit next to Vi. Eventually, Fear pulls his chair behind her because he's the tallest.

Vi steeples her fingers. “The floor is yours, *Lilly*. Don't leave anything out. This is your one and only chance to prove to me why I should trust you.”

Lilly looks ashamed, running her fingers through her short curly hair.

“I guess I'll start at the very beginning.” Lilly blows out a shaky breath. “When I was sixteen, I thought I was in love with this older guy. He was nineteen, and I was fifteen when we met. He was charming and cunning. He made me feel like I

wasn't just some broken girl from a broken family. He paid attention to me, made me feel wanted when no one else did. At first, he was doting and sweet. He would read me poetry and take me places where we could enjoy each other's company. Over the next year, his behavior began to change slowly. He groomed me into exactly who he wanted me to be. By the time I was eighteen, I was pregnant with Ziggy.

“I was overjoyed at the prospect of being a mother, and I thought he would be the perfect father. The further I got into my pregnancy, the less useful I became, especially when the morning sickness started. Every day I grew sicker, I figured that was just a part of pregnancy, but I knew something was wrong when the cramping began. I ransacked the house until I finally found a vial of cat's claw.”

She takes a shuddering breath before continuing. “He was poisoning me, trying to force a miscarriage. I knew that if I didn't leave, he would kill my baby and then me. So, at seven months pregnant, I ran. While on the run, I taught myself the power of illusion in hopes it would keep us safe.” Tears bloom in her eyes but she blinks them away, determined to keep telling her story. Locking eyes with Vi, Lilly keeps going. “He found me six months after I gave birth and almost beat me to death. I somehow managed to escape by the skin of my teeth. After that day, I moved every month.”

Vi remains motionless, her hands pressed together in front of her on the table. I can feel her mix of emotions through the bond; her heartbreak over what her mother had to suffer, her anger that it was kept from her for so long, her annoyance that Lilly is taking so long to get to the point. But the biggest and most crippling emotion that she is trying to push down is guilt. Guilt that she doesn't want to hear any more of Lilly's tale because she knows she'll have to let go of her anger.

“You can feel all of these emotions, kitten,” I tell her through the mate tie. *“This is a lot to take in. None of us are going to judge you.”*

“When Ziggy was two years old, I met a wonderful man named Storm. He took us in and protected us. Eventually, I told him my story, only to realize my ex was his childhood best friend. He knew what Ziggy’s father was capable of and promised never to leave our side. A year later, you were born.” Lilly stops, giving Vi a sad smile, then takes a sip of her tea. I can’t imagine how hard it is to have beautiful memories tainted by such horrors.

“We finally had a home; you and Ziggy had a stable life with loving parents. Life was wonderful...until it wasn’t.” New tears stream down Lilly’s face—heartbreak on show for everyone to see.

“Ziggy’s father was able to track us somehow. It was three days after your brother’s fifth birthday when he showed up. Storm tried to shield us with a glamor, but it wasn’t quick enough, so I hid you and your brother in the bedroom with me. After hours of waiting, I went in search of Storm, only to find him slaughtered. His heart was cut from his body and stuck to the wall with a sword. A blood-stained note on the table read, *If I can’t have you, no one can. And of all beings, you pick someone I once called a friend. He was never as strong as me. You’re pathetic. I know about your daughter, and I’ll be back for her one day. You can’t run from me forever.* I was terrified.” Lilly stares into the depths of Vi’s soul as she delivers the final blow. “That man—Ziggy’s father, my abuser—his name is Locren DeTrill.”

Villiana

EVERYTHING SOUNDS SO LOUD. I can hear someone sip their drink, and it sounds like they are slurping it down in my ear. I listen to all three guys breathing around me, their heartbeats—rapid and rhythmic. With every inhale, I hear the air fill my lungs.

Locren is Ziggy's father. Locren is my mother's abuser. Locren has been stalking me since birth so The Collective could traffic me. He took me under the guise of my healer bloodline, but actually took me to torture my mother. He repeatedly beat me and raped me, and had me murder innocent girls for what—the fun of it? A memory comes to the forefront of my mind—something Locren said during my vision.

“I'll explain this more later on, but in a vision I had, Locren said something about my bloodline being special. What did he mean by that?”

My mother's eyebrows shoot up to her hairline and the color drains from her face. She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out, hands shaking uncontrollably. “Villiana, you—godsdamnit—your father was Storm Isidora. Your real name is Villiana Nyx Isidora, and you are the last of the original Elvin bloodline. You possess power that is unmatched; it may already have manifested without your awareness. And Locren is the only other being in existence who knows this.”

This is bad.

I need air. I need fresh air right now.

The chair screeches loudly against the floor as I push myself away from the table as far as I can with Fear behind me. I run and open the front door and let it slam behind me. My skin prickles the second the cool air hits my bare arms—

the bite reminds me that I'm still alive. I plop myself down on the porch swing, pumping my legs a little to get it in motion, stopping when the swaying continues on its own.

My mental and emotional capacity no longer exists; every moment alive feels like a burden. I don't ever talk about it, but my mental health has long since deteriorated. I often wonder how I'm still alive, not because of the events in my life, but because I don't know how I haven't ended it myself yet. Sitting here, I contemplate what would happen if I went through with it. Locren wouldn't be a threat anymore because I wouldn't be around to pursue. The beings around me would be safe—my mates would be safe. Maybe they would find someone who could give them the world, because I know I can't. I can barely give them a scrap of myself.

It's nightfall by the time Ryu comes out to check on me. The swing stopped moving a while ago, and now I'm curled into myself with knees to chest, head resting on top. Ryu sits down beside me, a pillar of strength in our silence. He wraps his arms around my body and pulls me into his warmth.

Falling into him, I close my eyes, knowing I'm safe and loved. We stay like this until darkness completely sweeps over the sky.

“Whatever you're thinking about, stop. I never want you to feel the anguish that has been flooding out of you. I will spend my whole life showing you what you mean to me. I love you more than life, Villiana.” Ryu holds me tightly, flushing our tie with devotion.

“I love you too, Ryu. You give me a reason to keep going.” Fresh tears leak from my puffy eyes. I don't deserve him—any of them.

“I think I’m ready to go back in,” I say into his chest. Right now, I choose to live in the moment, tucking away my insecurities. I’ll deal with the rest of my emotions when I no longer have a target on my back.

“Okay, kitten. Everyone should be off doing their own thing by now, so you don’t have to interact with anyone else tonight if you don’t want to.” Ryu picks me up and carries me inside, up the wooden stairs, into one of the bedrooms. Placing me down, he begins to undress me.

“Come on, we’ll get you showered,” he says, leading towards a closed door in the bedroom. Opening the door, he reveals a surprisingly large bathroom with a stone soaking tub against the back wall, with a large shower head above it. Ryu goes into a cabinet next to the tub and takes out two glass vials. He turns on the tub, opens the caps, and puts two drops of each into the filling tub: eucalyptus and lavender. Ryu waits until it’s filled with hot water and then helps me in.

“I’ll give you some space. I’ll be right outside when you’re done.”

I curl into myself again, but this time I let myself cry. I let all the pain, sorrow, and betrayal drip into the bathtub. I wish Thorin were with me so badly, but my half-evil brother has her captive, doing gods knows what to her. Why did I let her go? I should have stayed away from Ziggy, but how was I supposed to know what would happen?

After what seems like hours, the tears stop flowing. My eyes are swollen, and my head is pounding. I lean back against the tub and close my eyes for a moment.

It is pitch black, with only the stars for illumination. I’m sitting in a field of nightshade, rows and rows of it surrounding me. Getting to my feet, I look for any indicator of

civilization; the area stretches on and on. I walk to my right and see where that takes me—rubbing my fingers together, the caked-up dirt flakes from my skin.

“...I miss you so much. I don’t regret my choice, but it doesn’t mean I don’t need you,” a voice comes from the left of me. “I know it’s crazy that I’m talking to the sky, hoping that somehow you hear me, but things are just hard right now, and you are the only person who has cared to listen. The medic said if I ate these flowers and then bleed onto the crystal, I might be able to communicate with you, but I’m pretty sure it was a bunch of shit.”

Thorin sits cross-legged on the ground—a small fire in front of her and the blood-coated crystal in her lap. Her eyes are closed, but I see her drawing something into the dirt next to her. When I get closer, I see it’s my sigil.

“You should get your money back. What a quack,” I say in jest.

Thorin’s head whips around, and a mad grin stretches across her face. As I run toward her, she jumps at me. Laughing hysterically, I spin us around in circles.

“I figured that, at most, I would hear you; how are you here?” Thorin pinches my arm to see if I’m real.

“That hurts, bitch!” I pinch her back. “I have no idea how I’m here in corporeal form. I was sitting in the bathtub, and next thing I know, I’m standing in this field.”

“Makes sense why you’re completely naked,” Thorin snickers at me.

I look down and see that she’s right; I’m as naked as the day I was born. “I don’t know how I didn’t notice that.” I shrug and wrap the blanket draped over Thorin around me.

I check her over, trying to find any obvious signs of abuse.

“I’m okay, Vi. Ziggy is an asshole but not an abuser. Lydia is surprisingly cool, though,” Thorn says, and I give her a skeptical look.

Sitting down, I realize I can’t feel the heat from the fire. I really can’t feel anything else but Thorin. I must be floating between planes.

“I have so much to talk to you about, but I have no idea how long we have together. How about we pretend we’re just regular beings with total freedom, for now?”

“I like that plan, babe.”

Thorin and I enjoy each other’s company for a little while, reminiscing about the dreams we once had. How we never saw a future outside the walls of the compound. And now we’re here, with our magic back, roaming the realms, dead set on revenge.

“Love you, Thor. I’ll see you sooner than you think,” I rush out before I’m pulled back into my body.

“Kitten...” I feel Ryu trying to wake me up. Cold water splashes around me, jumping as I settle back into myself. I look down at my pruned hands, recognizing that I’m shivering.

“Sorry, I think I fell asleep.”

“You’ve been in here for over an hour. When you didn’t come out, I got a little concerned,” Ryu says, picking out a fluffy towel for me, coming back over, and holding it open. I step out of the tub, my skin feeling unnaturally tight. Ryu wraps the towel under my arms and tucks the tail so it stays up on its own. Going to the side of the bed, I pull the covers down, drop my towel, and get in. The sheets feel so silky against my skin. I moan as I snuggle in.

I debate not telling him about seeing Thorin, but it might be important to know. Ryu kisses me goodnight and goes to leave the room. Just as he's stepping out, I stop him.

“I was somehow transported to Thorin. Maybe an astral projection; only, she could touch me, but I couldn't touch or feel anything else.” When he doesn't respond, I continue on. “I will listen to the rest of my mother's story, but we are leaving for Noir afterward. Once I've had time to digest everything my mother has just dropped on me, I will decide how I want to proceed with my relationship with her.”

He stands there with one hand on his popped-out hip and the other stroking his beard; it's a rather funny sight.

“I'll send Avi to get Lys early in the morning. He should be here too.” Ryu flicks the light off. “Goodnight, Vi.”

“Stay.” I pull the blanket back, and he crawls in beside me, pulling me in tight to his body.

FORTY-SEVEN

Villiana

MY FINGERS DANCE across the ornate spindle as I reach the bottom of the staircase. The mellow morning sunlight illuminates the sitting room, where I find my mom curled up in a chair reading. It has been twenty-two long years since I last saw her, and we have both changed so much. No longer does she carry a bright aura, only left with a dull shimmer of the woman she once was. Her face has aged, crows' feet sit next to her eyes, and expression lines have formed on her forehead. The biggest change of all is the intricate symbols carved into her skin. She doesn't seem ashamed, wearing them proudly—a representation of her survival.

Paralyzed by fear, I haven't worked up the bravery to approach her. It's not that I don't want to; it's just...I don't know how to be her daughter anymore.

She is still your mother, Villiana.

Taking a deep breath, I make purposeful strides toward my mother.

The corner of her lip turns up when she hears my footsteps. "Did you have good dreams, Kostbar?"

Words I never thought I would hear again spill from her lips. Everything in me wants to hate her for hiding away for so long, but I don't. I want to curse the world for taking her away from me. But just like I did when I was a child, I throw myself at her. Not missing a beat, she opens her arms, pulling me into her chest. The dam I've been building to keep my hurt and pain pushed away busts open. Her warm scent encases me in a bubble of protection as I silently sob into her.

My mother caresses the tip of my ear, tracing over my vine tattoo. "You know, you grew those vines all over the house. You were three years old when your magic started manifesting in the cutest ways. One day, your father and I were outside tending the garden when we heard you screeching and giggling. We rushed around the corner to find you pushing against the side of the house, your little lilac dress bouncing as you moved. Every time you pushed into the stone siding, more vines of all different types would spring up."

"I don't remember any of that," I said dolefully.

"You are exquisite, Villiana," her voice so small that I'm sure she's talking to herself.

I feel Fear checking in with me through the mate tie, but I don't respond.

Loud footfalls from the staircase—a result of my lack of communication. When Fear gets to the bottom, he doesn't move any further. I'm sure he wants to give us space, but I need him close. My mother must know that too because she calls him over.

"Come over, Ophir. You're her mate; I will never keep you apart."

“I can wait, Aunt Lilly. I don’t want to interrupt—just checking in. I felt Vi’s grief and wanted to make sure everything was okay. But I can see she’s in good hands,” Fear croons lovingly.

Pulling myself from my mother’s arms, I go to him and press myself into his soft belly as he holds me tight.

I kiss his lips. “I need you just as much,” I assure him.

“Greetings, Kostbar! Are you two going to join us for breakfast?” Lys peeks his head around the archway leading to the kitchen. I didn’t even realize he was here already. He’s wearing a long-sleeved, olive flannel shirt with a carob-colored leather vest. His typically wild hair is combed back neatly, and his white beard is braided and tied with a leather string. Someone wanted to make a good impression.

My mother’s brows pinch in confusion. “Did he just—”

“Yes.” I stop her before she can pass any judgment.

Lys’ hooves clack against the floor as he steps into the sitting room, stopping next to me. “Lys, this is my mother, Lilith. Mama, this is Lysander. He raised me from age ten. He may not be blood, but he is my family and the reason I survived for so long after Ziggy was taken.” I emphasize his importance to me.

My mother bounds out of her seat towards Lys, throws her arms around him, and begins crying. “Thank you for taking care of my baby. Thank you for being there when I couldn’t be. You’ve raised a wonderful and strong lady.”

“The gods blessed me with your daughter, Lilith. I’m lucky to be able to call her my granddaughter.” Lys glows with pride, and it fills my heart.

One day, I will have my whole family together and be complete in ways we could never have been before. But right now, it's time we plan for the death of Locren DeTrill.

“BEFORE YOU START MAKING PLANS, I must finish my story and explain a few other things. It will help you a lot to know this information.” My mother swirls her wine around in the glass. She's made it clear that she needs some liquid courage to tell everything else.

So, of course, we're all sitting around the table, three drinks in; enough to calm us all, but not enough to make us useless. I lost count of how many drinks Fear has had; the big bastard has a very high tolerance.

“Okay, Mama. We're ready whenever you are,” I encourage her. She tilts her head back, sipping down every last sip of her drink, then wipes her mouth with the back of her hand—tapping on the glass, it refills on its own.

“I guess I'll start when I was taken. When we moved to Wrenwood, I warded the town's boundaries with blood magic.” She shakes her head, peering up through her lashes. “Storm had left me a small amount of his blood in case of an emergency, knowing the potency of the original bloodline would create an unbreakable system. If Locren's magical signature passed the boundary, I would know.

“The sun had barely risen when I was awoken by a vision of The Collective army breaching the border. I was so tired of running from him, but I was not going to allow you and your brother to be taken by that monster. We had a crisis room in the house, which included a trap door that led to the outside. I had it glamored to look like the rest of the wall so that it would

remain a secret. Ziggy was so young, but I knew he would have to know how to get out in an emergency.”

I watch as my mom takes a drink of her wine, seeing the slight tremble to her hand. I can't imagine how difficult it is for her to relive these memories, to share her grief aloud.

“Waking you and your brother up, I made you breakfast with a sleeping potion—you were out in minutes. I placed you both in a hidden room. Kissing you both goodbye, I spelled it closed. I created an illusion of you and Ziggy bundled up, following me as I left. One of The Collective soldiers saw me leave and tracked me; my plan was falling into place. Eventually, they got cocky and made themselves known. I told the illusions of you to run and then ran directly toward the soldier. They brought me straight to Locren. The look of satisfaction that marred his face as I was presented to him naked and roughed up will be burned into my mind for the rest of my life. The soldiers were ordered to find you and Ziggy. They were told to kill your brother and bring you back to him. They thought you'd gotten away.”

Emi slides her long slender fingers into my mother's palm and squeezes softly, channeling some of her energy and support to her friend. My mom smiles at her, a silent thanks for the comfort being offered.

In another life, I'd have grown up with my mom in a quaint town like this one. The guys would have been my childhood friends and we'd have spent a lifetime together. My mom and Emi would have been friends without the trauma shadowing their meeting, and I'd have experienced the love of having a big family. It would have been safe and happy and filled with so much love.

But wishing for and picturing another life wouldn't help anyone. Instead, I'm here, listening to the torture my mom endured at the hands of that bastard—the same one who tortured me too.

“Locren drugged me before bringing me to a dilapidated house in Incedis, the realm of fire. The first thing he did was carve all these *beautiful* marks into my skin.” My mother pulls off the sweater she had put on earlier, the short-sleeved shirt underneath revealing the symbols.

“Some of these are so I cannot be tracked. Some of them are to weaken my mental state, but the rest of them prevent me from using my magic—permanently. He took away the ability to heal myself or anyone else. He kept me hostage and used me as he saw fit; whether for my body, information, or a weapon. He tortured me to find out where I sent you, but I never broke. He could break me in every single way possible, even take my life, before I would subject you to his evil.” She takes a deep breath and gulps down the rest of her wine. “He kept me for years until he got tired of me. Locren brought me here, bound me, and tied me to a pole. He stabbed a crystal dagger into my chest, leaving for dead. The crystal drained me of my life force—it was slow and excruciating. By the time Emi found me, I was lucky if I had a day left.” My mother pauses to look over at Emi and Akira. Their love for each other is beautiful, and I understand very well.

I notice Avi has started to shift. The rage that is radiating off of him is potent.

“*What's going on, Wildling? Do you want her to stop?*” I check-in with him.

“*Another time, little star.*” Even in my head, his demon has come to the surface, evident by the tone of his voice.

“Emi and Akira took me home and brought me back to life. I’ve been with them for fifteen years and had the pleasure of seeing your mates grow into the wonderful men they are today. I couldn’t be happier about this.” My mother wraps up the story relatively fast, leaving out how exactly she knew where I was.

Very suspicious.

“I concur! I’ve also known the boys for quite some time. Only the best for my Villiana,” Lys adds.

I take a chance asking this in front of everyone, but I want all the answers, “How did you know I was in a compound and exactly where it was located?” I raise a dark eyebrow at my mother.

“Blood magic. *Dark* blood magic. Since Locren took my natural magic away from me, I found a way to tap into my genetic magic. Your grandmother was a seer, so I knew that ran through my blood. I just had to tap into it. Since you are of my blood, it was easy after I mastered harnessing the seer magic.” She says this so matter-of-factly, like there aren’t huge repercussions to using dark magic.

“How did the boys get involved, Lilly?” Akira’s voice has a hint of acidity to it.

Nervously tapping his alabaster fingers against the cherry wood table, Ryu explains. “About a year ago, we found a letter on our kitchen table. None of us remember receiving it, so we were cautious and looked for any familiar magical signatures. We didn’t find any at all, so we opened it. Aunt Lilly told us about Vi and where to find her. How she knew we were working with The Tower is beyond me.”

Reaching across the table, my mother places a supportive hand on top of Ryu's. "I didn't know... I had a vision of Villiana. Well, more of a message. Villiana needed to find her three to complete the vow and fulfill her destiny. After that, I researched all types of vows, which were never-ending. Then, a week later, I dreamed of the three of you with a figure I couldn't identify. But the tell for me was Ryu making blueberry muffins and lavender ice cream. Instantly, I knew Vi was the fourth being. When I woke up, I tried to think of anything that could be a vow the four of you would take, and then it clicked. Storm once told me how the original elven families created something called a blood vow when they found their true mate: the highest form of bonding, giving your mate the ability to access all of you, including all magical abilities. Blood Vows are extremely rare, Villiana. Only those who come from original bloodlines carry the ability to complete it."

My mom looks between us, a genuine smile on her face. "You four were destined for each other long before you were born. I just knew. That's why I specifically sought you three out for the mission."

I close my eyes to try and ground myself. I'm so on edge that I can feel every pump of my heart push blood throughout my body. I don't want to walk out on everyone again, but I need to step away momentarily. Excusing myself, I make my way to the oversized windows in the front of the house; the floorboards creak under my feet. Sitting so close to the window my knees touch, I admire the cerulean blue sky. It looks warm and welcoming, but the chill permeating my skin, where it sits against the glass, tells a different story.

Now that I'm alone, I can see if my mother's words are true. Placing my hand against the glass, I try to push Ryu's

magic through me. I clear my mind and picture frost forming on the window. The beautiful, milky, fern-like shapes crystallize from the thin coat of ice. There's a tingle in my fingertips, and when I open my eyes, I see that the entire window has frosted over. *Holy fuck.*

Once the initial shock wears off, I practically sprint into the kitchen. "It's time to go to Noir! I'm not waiting around for a miracle to happen." A shit-eating grin is plastered on my face as I say, "To beat the one you fear the most, you have to become what they fear the most, and that's exactly what we're going to do."

Locren doesn't stand a chance.

FORTY-EIGHT

Villiana

“UH, are you sure this is the right entrance?”

I stand at the bridge to Noir with a look of perplexity etched across my face. Most would assume bridges have a beginning and end, but this one disappears into nothing. Stepping up, the bridge groans under my weight as if it will drop me through at any second. Constructed of rough-cut logs, haphazardly secured together by either hopes and prayers, or magic—I’m hoping for the latter.

My mates stand there with their arms crossed, looking disgruntled, all because I told them if they try to treat me like a damsel in distress, I will withhold all sexual activity until I see fit. It worked, but they are *not* happy about it.

On the other hand, Lys thinks this is hysterical as he dips his head, pressing his lips together to hide his amusement.

“This is the only known entrance, other than the portals we don’t have access to. Either you walk across, or we’re going to stand here for eternity.” The sass that emanates from Ryu is laughable. He’s as threatening as a little bunny—well, to me, at least.

Shrugging my shoulders, I advance forward. I white-knuckle grab the railing when the bridge begins to sway; bits of wet wood and moss collect under my nails, but I continue anyway. No matter how short or gentle of a movement I make, it feels like the bridge is trying to throw me off it. *Wait...* maybe it is.

Testing the extent of my new abilities, I channel Avi's ability to redirect energy and stretch my arms out beside me. I focus on sucking in the dense energy of the atmosphere, pulling until I can't anymore. I move my arms to face directly in front of me, redirecting the contained energy into the abyss. Nothing happens at first, but as I push more, the scenery changes. The bridge slowly disintegrates into a dirt and stone pathway, and what was once emptiness is now a dark landscape of mountains. It was all an illusion, a deterrent.

"Well, frog guts and snail trails, would you look at that," Lys says in awe. He has always come up with the weirdest but best idioms. "Your mama was right, you can harness their abilities."

Preening, I turn around and bat my lashes at them. "Come, come. Time is of the essence."

THREE DAYS.

We have been wandering the mountainside, trying to find our way for *three days*. I probably should have contacted Lydia to let her know we were on our way, but I didn't want to take the chance that my brother would find out. I'm counting on the element of surprise because I'm clueless as to his state of mind—I don't need a firing squad waiting for us. Lys made an excellent point earlier: the further we walk, the darker it gets, meaning we are heading in the right direction.

“Vi, if you don’t suck it up and do your mind thing with Lydia, I’m going to lose my shit,” Avi snaps at me. “We’re not going to find our way in the *realm of endless darkness* on hopes and dreams.” He’s been refusing to sleep very much because he *doesn’t trust the mountains*.

“I hate to agree with cranky pants, but maybe you should. I understand your reservations, but never getting there is worse.” Fear always sides with me, so for him to say that Avi has a point, I probably should swallow my pride.

Huffing, I kick the dry dirt beneath my foot. “Fine. I may carry seer genes, but I’ve never tried to access them. You’re aware this might not work?”

“You have quite the bratty mouth, kitten. Actions have consequences. Remember that,” Ryu playfully threatens me, but when I turn around and shake my butt at him, all playfulness disappears. “You better run.” His voice comes out deliciously dark and grave, and since I like to rile him up, I sprint.

He lets me get a good fifty feet before he charges after me. Unfortunately, the rocky terrain is not my friend. Losing my balance, I slide forward, cutting up my hands and knees. With a grunt, I roll onto my back to sit up. Hissing at the sting, I pick the tiny pieces of rock out of my skin. Noticing my knees are bleeding, I gingerly maneuver myself upward. A few droplets of blood fall. When they hit the ground, they splash a glowing green color.

Ryu doesn’t even notice what is happening, too busy examining my very minor scraps. “I can heal myself. I’m fine... but *that* isn’t,” I say to him, squeezing my fist tight, forcing out some blood. This time when my blood lands, the ground stays fluorescent. “What the fuck?”

“It’s a warning system. Someone has spelled the area with a protective shield, and your blood has made the creator *very* aware that we’re here.” Lys has made his way over to us, searching all around us for what is being protected.

Suddenly, I hear Avi clobbering over to us like a happy little puppy. In Rakshasa form, he proudly displays his trophy: a Fae he tore in half. The poor guy never stood a chance. Avi drops the man in front of us and licks the sticky blood off his fingers like it’s the most delicious thing he’s ever tasted—a sight that turns me on way more than it should.

“Oh no, little star, you are by far the best thing I have had the pleasure of tasting. Blood is a close second,” his demon says, smooth as velvet. “I found this fucker, hands aglow, ready to attack, and you know I can’t resist a good kill. Though, we may have a bit of a problem.” He throws an object into Ophir’s open hands.

It’s a pin. A pin with the image of a burning tower being struck by lightning embossed into it—the very same as depicted on the sixteenth card in the major arcana, The Tower.

Avi just killed one of my brother’s guys.

“I guess the good news is that we found them,” Ryu points out.

“Can you freeze the barrier? I’ve seen you freeze a life force before,” I ask him.

“I can try, but it will take a lot of energy and probably most of my magic.”

I don’t even think twice. Removing my dagger from its sheath, I slash my forearm and shove it against his mouth. “Drink up, doc.”

With a look of apprehension, Ryu seals his lips around the laceration. Blue and gold eyes shimmer as he pulls the warm blood into his mouth. His talons burst through his skin, creating pinpricks on my arm.

Knowing the effect my blood had on Avi, I try to pull my arm away, but he growls at me. So, I hit him in the balls. “No more for you! Get your lizard ass to work.”

Ryu quickly shifts into all his dragon glory. The sickening sound of his bones breaking as his new form emerges, followed by a beastly scream. Ryu pushes his front legs off the ground and lifts his long-bearded face to the sky. Instantly the temperature drops way below freezing, snowflakes tumble down all around us, and frost coats the patchy grass and dirt.

In the most elegant motion, he whips his scaled body around in an S-shape motion and surges up an invisible wall within seconds. Reaching the dome’s top, Ryu lifts onto his back legs and throws himself back down with all the power he holds. Shock waves ripple through the air as the barrier begins to become opaque. I have no idea how large this protection bubble is, and I can only imagine how difficult it will be to dismantle the entire thing; something inside me tells me to help him.

I follow my gut, moving towards the forcefield. Screaming voices reach my ears, warning me not to touch it, but it’s too late. I place my hands against the freezing dome and upon contact, my palms adhere to the surface like a tongue to frozen metal. Closing my eyes, I imagine cracks forming at the top. Putting more pressure on it, I notice that the surface is brittle.

“I’m going to try and push through. Can you come down and help me?” I silently ask Ryu. He slithers down, wraps

himself around me, and uses his strong, scaled body to press with me.

“One. Two–”

We shove everything we have against the field, producing a giant fissure. Ryu quickly encases me into the coils of his body on instinct. He lets me out when nothing falls on us, nor does anyone come running out.

“Fuck, that was hot, little one. I do love me a big, strong woman,” Fear says, palming his dick through his pants as he trots toward us.

“Old man is still here,” Lys shouts. “Let’s keep it grandpa friendly until I’m out of earshot. Alright, boys?” He claps Fear on his back.

“Yes, sir,” Ryu replies apologetically.

“Not a fucking chance!” Fear and Avi answer at the same time. Lys shakes his head at them.

“And you’re not even that old. You could be Ophir’s father. What, you’ve got to be about thirty-five years older than Vi, right?” Avi probes Lys.

“Stop trying to butter me up, boy. We have somewhere to be.”

While the two are bickering, Fear and I ogle Ryu’s perfectly sculpted naked form as he takes clothes from his pack to redress. The things I would love to do right now are unholy, and the pools of lust in Fear’s slate eyes says he feels the same.

Resigned to the fact I won’t be living out any of my desires, I redirect my aggravation. “If you two are done, I would like to go see my best friend,” I snap at Lys and Avi.

Making a show of it, Fear winds up and effortlessly punches a hole through the crack we created. “After you, little one.”

Once we cross the barrier, the entire scenery changes. The beautiful meadows from my dream are all around us; poisonous flowers decorate the brush. The barracks are blazing bright in the darkness about one hundred feet ahead of us.

Oh, and a herd of soldiers are on their way.

“If you would make it a tiny bit easier to find you, we wouldn’t have to break your shit!” I yell as loud as I can. One of the men throws his hand up, signaling everyone to stop.

“Villiana, do you know how difficult it is to form that barrier? How much magic it takes?” Ziggy berates me, plodding forward.

I throw my hands into the air in an exacerbated manner. “I had to get in somehow! Don’t get your balls in a knot; I’ll help repair it. Now, take me to Thorin.”

As if I summoned her, Thorin’s flaming wings light up the sky, jetting straight for me. Her tiny body barrels down, landing on top of me.

“BABY! Oh, how I’ve missed you,” Thorin cries, peppering my face with smooches.

“Knock it off,” Ziggy groans under his breath. In response, she shoots a small ball of fire at his feet, causing him to yelp and jump backward.

“Shut the fuck up, boss. No one asked you,” she bites out.

I quirk my eyebrow at her in questioning. Seeing them interact like this is very interesting. I wonder just how well my

brother has been treating her. When a blush creeps up her face, it tells me everything I need to know.

“He’s just an asshole.”

“Mhmm,” I hum at her, lips pressing together to stifle my laughter.

Fear comes over and picks up both of us, placing us on our feet. “Maybe we should take this inside, ladies.”

“Okay, big man.” Reaching up on my tiptoes, I try to kiss him, but I’m still a long way from his lips. Fear chuckles, bending down to meet me.

“Yeah, no. I’m leaving,” Ziggy whines as he walks away.

Prude.

FORTY-NINE

Villiana

“I SEE you decided to bring the satyr along.” Ziggy’s hands are pressed to the table as he leans forward into Lys’ personal space. Lys doesn’t seem fazed. If anything, the twitch in his lip says he’s holding back a smirk.

“Why yes, big brother, I did bring one of the most important beings in my life along. Who, I will have you know, is extremely smart and skilled. So, that’s the end of this conversation.” I check my nails, looking bored. It won’t end well if he doesn’t give this shit up soon.

“It’s over when I—” Ziggy starts to speak, but he quickly grips his throat like he’s choking. His face starts turning red.

“I’m going to have to stop you there, Zigmund. I understand we are in your house, but you *will not* disrespect Villiana. You can build compost from all the shit you spew about me for all I care. But, if you would like to test my loyalty to her, I can show you what other party tricks I am capable of.” Lys’ low, threatening voice cuts through the room. His fist is curled tight, showing precisely what he’s talking about, pulling the air from Ziggy’s lungs. “*Do you understand me, child?*” Lys asks him.

Beside me, Avi snorts, amused by the whole situation.

“I’m glad Lys said something because I *will* kill him if he speaks to you again. I don’t care that he’s your brother.” Ryu’s words surprise me. Mr. Calm, Cool, and Collected does have a mean bone in his body.

As soon as Lys sees Ziggy nodding anxiously in understanding, he releases him. Ziggy gasps for air, coughing with red, watery eyes and shaking hands. When his eyes meet mine, I can see that he’s learned a valuable lesson—the definition of *fuck around and find out*.

“Now that’s over, we have things to talk about. Ziggy, would you like to speak in private first, or would you like me to share with the class?”

Ziggy glugs his water, slamming the empty glass down dramatically. “Anything you have to say, you can say in front of my family.” He exaggerates *family* like I won’t understand or respect the beings he loves. Like *he* wasn’t the one who just disrespected a member of *my* family. Fucking hypocrite.

I present one more opportunity for us to have a private conversation. “Are you sure? The things I’m going to say are heavy and personal.”

“Yes, Vi. Just start talking.”

I don’t know how to go about telling him everything. Mama had just laid it all out on the table, but we didn’t really give her any other option. Mama being alive will be a lot to take in, but how do you recover from discovering that your father is a psychopathic rapist? At the end of the day, I know that Ziggy is the same brother he has always been underneath. I love him too much to break his heart.

Fear grabs my hand under the table in support. Taking a deep breath, I start.

“There’s no reason to beat around the bush. Mama is alive, and I’ve seen her. I just found out that she was, so don’t think I’ve been hiding this from you.”

The color drains from Ziggy’s face. He practically falls back in his seat, the cogs turning in his brain, trying to make sense of it. “How?” his voice shakes.

“Ryu, Fear, and Avi’s mother found her practically dead, nursed her back to life, and she’s been living with them ever since. She—she’s different now. Still the mother we loved, just different,” I say lightly.

“Is she okay now?”

“She’s alive. I don’t think she’ll ever be okay again.”

Being the one to give the news is miserable. Watching the emotions flash across my brother’s face breaks my heart. I can see the ten-year-old boy who had to become the sole caretaker for his sister—the boy who had to grow up way too fast.

“There is a lot I have to tell you and catch you up on, but that will have to wait until later.” I look over to Lydia, who I know is with my brother—it’s undeniable, and I try to connect with her mentally. Pain radiates throughout my skull the harder I push until I feel a slight give. She’s letting me in. Lydia’s eyes are the size of saucers when she realizes I’m trying to push into her mind.

“He’s going to need you after this. Promise me that no matter what I say next, you will not look at him differently, and will still take care of him,” I say to her.

“I promise,” she replies.

Happy with her answer, I continue. “We have different fathers, and I know who yours is.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Mama was in a relationship with a man who groomed her, among other things. She loved him and was ecstatic when she got pregnant, but he was an abuser, and mom ran.” I decide that I can’t tell him this from across the table. I walk around, and Thorin gets up for me to sit down. Ziggy turns towards me, fear flooding from his every pore.

With unshed tears in my eyes, I take his hands in mine. “Ziggy, your father is Locren.” The second the words leave my mouth I throw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his middle. He doesn’t hug me back, though. He doesn’t move or speak. He does nothing at all. If I couldn’t hear the rapid beat of his heart, I would think he was dead.

“Ziggy, do you want to go outside?” Lydia asks him softly, placing her hand on his back.

“Tell me everything. Do not leave out a single detail no matter how horrible it is, Villiana,” Ziggy pushes out flatly.

For the next hour, I rehash everything Mama had told me. I don’t water it down for him because he needs to understand the extent of the issue. Once I finish telling him about what our mother told me, I fill him in on all the details of what happened with Locren from the day I was taken to the last vision I had of him.

Thorin pulls me into her as I tell the story. The further I get, the more I break; the guys don’t even try to take her place. By the time I’ve given him every painstaking detail, the table is broken, and almost everyone in the tent has cried or is still in tears.

Now, Ziggy sits in the dirt in the corner, tucked into himself. His hands are white knuckled into his emerald hair, pulling so hard I'm surprised he still has hair on his head.

Being held in the compound at Bonecliff, I learned to internalize everything. I quickly figured out that no one was going to be there for me, no one cared about me, and most of them could care less whether I lived or died. That is until Thorin got there. Pouring so much of myself out to beings is terrifying, and I immediately regret it.

To protect my family, I will become the scariest version of myself. I will tuck away my humanity, and when I look evil in the face, I will unleash every bit of hate and rage I have inside me. I will slaughter Locren. Not for myself, but for my mother, father, brother, and every single girl he has destroyed in his wake.

Ophir

AFTER SUCH AN EMOTIONAL NIGHT, I know that Vi will need to rest. She'll try to push us away and tell us she's fine, but she's far from it. I will give her space now because I respect her. I love my little one more than life, but I will never let her take on the world on her own again. When you love someone, their pain is your pain. Their problems are your problems. Their anger is your anger. Together, we will walk through hell and come out forged in fire, stronger than ever.

While I find it easier to give Vi the space she needs, Ryu has difficulty stepping back. He's always had an innate need to fix everyone's problems. I keep a close eye on him as he

anxiously paces around the tent, unable to stand the idea of being away from her right now.

“Will you stop pacing? You’re making me dizzy,” Avi whines, sprawled across one of the cots. He seems unfazed by the whole situation, but I know it’s a matter of time before he snaps. I’m hoping he saves it for Bonecliff.

“I can’t. My skin is crawling with the waves of unease that is seeping into the tie.”

Stepping in front of Ryu, I cup his face in my palm. His body softens at my touch, and his heart rate slows to a normal rhythm. “She will be okay, my sweet dragon. There will be times when she will need someone other than us, and right now, that’s Thorin. We both know she couldn’t be in better hands.”

Lifting his head, he presses his soft lips against mine and nods. “You’re right.”

Kissing him once more, I back away and grab my coat off the cot. “I’m going to go take a walk. I’ll be back later. Please try to relax.”

I push open the flap of the tent, heading into the main tent to see if I can find a drink, only to run directly into Ahren. He’s a big motherfucker, only a hair shorter than me.

“Sorry, man. I wasn’t paying attention,” he says, turning to face me. There’s something about his tangerine eyes that are so unsettling—very ambiguous.

“Hey, a lot is going on tonight. I don’t think anyone is really all there right now. Anyway, I was looking for somewhere I could get a drink. Want to grab one with me?”

“I like that plan. Come on. I’ll show you where we keep the good stuff.” He pushes back the heavy canvas, leading me

to another area of the barracks. A sickly sweet scent fills my nostrils as we head toward a firepit where a few soldiers hang out. Ahren walks up to a tiny thing of a girl and bends down to kiss her on the cheek. She looks exceptionally petite next to him.

“Ophir, this is Fallon. She makes the best damn candy wine you will ever have in your life. Fallon, this is Ophir. One of Villiana’s mates,” he introduces us. Fallon takes my hand in hers, and holy fuck does she have a grip on her. Note to self: do not underestimate this one.

Fallon is an attractive girl. Her hair is up in a messy bun, curly and a blazing copper color. Her straight nose, sharp chin, and close-set turquoise eyes give her a demanding presence. But let’s be honest, Vi’s beauty is unmatched.

“*One of?* It’s not often that you find one mate, but multiple is almost unheard of,” she states with surprise.

“One of three. My brothers and I are very fortunate to have Vi as our mate.”

“Impressive. I’d like to meet her. She’s got to be pretty cool to put up with that much bullshit,” Fallon says, raising a fiery brow at me. “Anyway, I’m guessing you’re here for some mind blowing hooch. Let me grab you guys some glasses.” Her attitude translates into the way she walks, deliberate steps with a sway in her hips.

Gazing up at the starless sky, I notice just how dark it is right now. I feel all kinds of messed up from the lack of light; it’s felt like one continuous night since we’ve been here.

“You get used to it. Days are irrelevant here, so it’s not worth trying to figure it out,” Ahren says, staring into the fire in front of us—the only light source. “We’ve had this as our

main location for five years now. So it's much more jarring to leave the realm than it is to be here at this point. Plus, it's home."

As I'm about to ask him if he's actually from Noir, Fallon meanders toward us with three large mugs filled to the brim. She shoves two mugs toward us with one hand, bright pink liquid sloshing out the sides.

"Drink up, boys! Next week is going to be crazy, and I'm not going to be easy on you. So enjoy the peace while you can," Fallon holds up her mug in a salute and chugs it down better than most guys I know.

"What are you talking about?" I ask her before taking a tentative sip of her concoction. The second the liquid hits my tongue, sweetness explodes across my tongue. I can see why it's called candy wine.

"You don't know? I'm the head of defensive magic, and I'll be making sure you all will be in tip-top shape to take on The Collective." Fallon gives us a deviant smirk before leaving us with a wink. I don't even know what to think of the whole interaction with her. It's just as weird as the rest of this night.

"Trying to replace me already, big guy?" I hear Vi's melodic voice from behind me. I feel her place her hand on my back as she swings under my arm.

"Never, little one," I say, kissing her forehead. "Feeling better?"

Vi snatches the mug of candy wine from my hand and slams it back just as Fallon did. She immediately makes a sour face and shakes her head. "What the fuck was that? Pure

sugar?” She licks her lips, tasting the remnants of the wine on her lips.

Ahren chuckles beside us. “Oh, I’d say you’re going to regret that, but honestly, you’re going to have fun tonight. You might want to find some privacy in your own tent soon.”

Vi’s eyes widen, shoving the mug into my chest. “*What? Why?*”

“Fallon is a succubus. All her drinks have a little something extra, if you get my drift. If you drink it slowly, you feel good, but if you kill it like you just did...” He pauses, raising his brows suggestively. “You’ll be fucking like rabbits tonight.”

I can’t tell if the look on Vi’s face is of excitement or dread until she gleams at me, eyes filled with lust.

“I definitely could use a little unwinding,” she says with a mischievous grin. “I propose a bet! Whoever taps out last wins.”

“And what are the spoils?” The corner of my mouth turns up.

“Me, of course!” Vi smooths her hands down her curves.

“And if I lose?”

“Then you’ll have to be a good boy and *watch*.”

Sounds like a win-win to me.

FIFTY

Ophir

AN HOUR LATER, Vi and I are stumbling into the tent, clawing at each other's clothing. Walking Vi backward, she trips over something on the ground.

“What the fuck, guys? I'm sleeping down here!” Avi grumbles in his sleepest voice.

Vi giggles as she slips and falls to the ground next to him.

“Soooooorrrryyyy, wildling,” she whisper-yells at him. Vi starts rubbing her hands against Avi's short beard, moaning at the sensation. “Ohhhh, your face feels soooo good.” She starts rubbing her face against his like a cat.

“Are you drunk?” Avi doesn't push her away, rather just stares at her bewildered.

“Yep! And the big one over there is too. We have some veerrryyy special wine.” Vi continues. “You want some? We brought a teeny tiny bit back with us.”

I pull out two jugs that I shoved into my jacket, shaking them back and forth. The hot pink wine swirls around in the container.

“That’s a teeny tiny bit, Villiana? What did you two do, raid the rest of the stash?” Avi grabs one of the jugs from my hand, pops the top, and gulps it down. “I’m going to need this shit to deal with you two luses.”

“Give me some, too. You guys are so fucking loud.” Ryu’s hand pops out from under the blanket on the cot. Vi jumps on top of Ryu, and he lets out an *oompf*. She holds the jug way above his head and starts to pour it into his mouth, spilling it everywhere. Realizing that more is getting on his face rather than in his mouth, Ryu grabs the jug from her and wipes his face with the sleeve of his shirt. “This is so sweet. What is this shit?” he asks, inspecting the foreign liquid.

“Candy wine. We met one of Ziggy’s girls, Fallon, and she makes it herself,” I say like a proud Papa, even though I’ve just met this girl.

“SHE’S A SUCCUBUS! She makes it extra special. Just wait until your dick starts to tingle,” Vi quickly adds, bouncing on her knees to straddle Ryu’s leg. Instead of stopping, she slows her movements, grinding herself against him, letting out a sexy little sigh. “That feels really good.”

“Does it now, little one?” I get a wonderful idea that Vi will definitely be on board with.

“Mhmmm...”

“Show me, little one. Show me how good he makes you feel,” I say through our tie.

Vi’s eyes light up with delight and mischief. Her coat and boots are already on the floor, so she reaches for the bottom of her shirt and pulls it over her head, leaving her bare-chested. When she drops her arms back down, her full breasts bounce with the movement.

“*Fuck, yes,*” Avi sits up a little straighter to get a better view.

Vi takes Ryu’s hand and sticks it into the top of her pants, “Take them off.”

I’ve never seen him move so fast. Vi sits up, allowing him to shimmy her pants over her hips and pert ass. She helps Ryu pull them off the rest of the way, revealing that she has nothing underneath, just the soft, short curls above her slit.

Getting up off the cot, Vi stands in the middle of us all, looking around. “So, I’m the only one undressed? Am I going to have to play with myself?” She runs a single finger from between the valley of her breasts slowly down the center of her body. We all are rooted in place, entranced by her.

“No takers? Okaayy...”

Vi brings two fingers to my mouth. “Can you get these wet for me, big guy?” she asks, making circles against my bottom lip.

The corner of my mouth turns up before I open for her. She slides her finger into my mouth, and I suck, running my tongue between them. She doesn’t wait for me to open them again and slides them from my closed lips. Slowly swaying her hips, Vi walks over to the chair next to the cot. She sits down and presents herself for us all to see her soaked pussy. Taking the fingers that were just in my mouth, she spreads her lips open, collecting her wetness before pushing them inside of herself.

I have never wanted something as much as I do her. I want to die buried between her thick thighs.

There is no holding back the rumble from my chest. Not much different from the sounds the guys make as well. Avi

crawls forward on his hands and knees until his face perfectly sits between Vi's legs. Drawn to her like a moth to flame.

"*Good boy,*" she says to him, playing with his short curly hair. "Would you like a taste?" Avi lets out a desperate mewl and nods. Vi smirks down at him as she slides forward, shoving her pussy into his face.

I'm not usually the one to like being the sub, but seeing how powerful she looks commanding him on his knees has me hard as steel. I look over to see that Ryu already has his cock out, stroking himself at the sight.

Avi drags his tongue through her slit, closing his lips over her clit, sucking it. Vi moans as she rolls her nipple between her fingers. Avi takes over, gripping her thighs and sliding her further down the chair and pressing them open even more. He doesn't just eat her sweet cunt, he *ravages* it.

"You lost our wager, Ophir, so now you get to watch." Vi thinks she's taunting me, but I like to watch. I *love* to watch. And I also like her messy and dripping before I get a hold of her.

"Ryu, I think her smart mouth is looking a little too empty. Why don't you remedy that issue?"

Ryu gets up from the cot, coming around to the other side of Vi's chair, fisting her hair in his hand. He taps his glistening head against her lips, signaling her to open up. She obliges him, sticking her wet pink tongue out.

"Say *please, Daddy*. And then maybe I'll feed you," he says, spreading his precum along her outstretched tongue.

"Please, Daddy, will you give me your cock?" She bats her lashes at him in the brattiest way. Ryu bites his lip as he guides himself in. At the same time, Avi decides to bite the inside of

Vi's thigh. She yelps, sending vibrations all along Ryu's length.

"Gods damn. Make her do it again."

Avi bites down on the other thigh, and Ryu hits the back of Vi's throat. Teamwork makes the dream work.

Vi bobs her head up and down Ryu while grinding her pussy against Avi's face. She squirms like a worm on a hook so brilliantly.

"Avi, get on the chair. Little one, I want you to ride him, but don't you dare let my pet fall from your mouth. If you want to come, you'll have to work for it." I make the command with a deep and sultry voice.

While everyone gets in position, I pull myself out, spit into my hand, and start pumping my fist. Taking my thumb, I collect the bead of cum from the head of my sensitive cock.

Vi easily slides down Avi's length, soaked from saliva and juices. Avi sharply intakes a breath.

"You feel *so fucking good*, little star." Vi rolls her hips in response to his praise, and he sucks his teeth.

With her head still turned to the side. Ryu starts to fuck her mouth, his balls slapping against her chin every time he shoves himself all the way in. Avi grabs Vi's sides and guides her as she bounces up and down on his lap. She cries out when he drives upward.

"So responsive, little one. You look exquisite stuffed to the brim. You'd look even better with all your tight holes filled." I saunter over to look into her teary eyes.

Ryu pulls out of her mouth, and a string of thick spit forms.

Vi smiles at me, flushed face still bouncing. “Yes, please.”

“Such a good whore for her mates,” I praise her as I shove three fingers down her throat, making her gag.

“I’m not going to last much longer, guys,” Avi says with heavy breaths through gritted teeth. He pounds up into her, gripping her so hard there will definitely be bruises afterward.

“Good, I want her sippy before I fuck her luscious cunt. It will make it easier to stretch her out.”

Speeding up the process a bit, I bend down and insert one finger alongside Avi. Vi screams out, and her legs begin to shake. Avi’s strokes become shorter the more I move with him. I take my other hand and play with his balls—I swear his whole body locks up.

“I think he likes that. Do you want to see me break both of you?” I purr into Vi’s ear. When she cries out yes, I carefully push another finger in. With a few more pumps, both Vi and Avi are screaming out their orgasms. I feel hot cum dripping down my fingers as Avi twitches inside her.

Taking my fingers, now coated in both of their releases, I bring them up to Ryu’s lips and smear it all over. He pokes out his tongue, licking my fingers and then his lips clean.

“*Holy fucking shit.*” Vi reacts to the sight with her breathy voice.

“You aren’t the only thing we like to share, Villiana. The three of us are *very* close,” I chuckle in her ear.

Stripping off my pants, I lay down on the cot, and Vi crawls on top of me. Positioning myself at her dripping entrance, she drops herself down, bottoming out immediately.

“Eager little brat.” Pulling her tight to my chest, I look over her shoulder at Ryu, who’s watching intensely. “Grab the lube. She’s not stuffed enough for my liking.”

He grins, grabbing the lube from his pack; he coats himself. He walks up behind Vi, and I watch as he pours the clear liquid down her asscrack. She jumps in surprise.

The lube drips down onto my balls, and Ryu collects it to rub it against Vi’s puckered hole. I feel his finger glide against the thin skin inside her. I’m patient as he starts to open her up.

“More, Daddy. I want *more*,” Vi begs Ryu. He adds another finger into her ass, and I begin to move. As she starts to relax more, Ryu can scissor his fingers inside.

“Put your fucking cock in me already!”

My brows shoot up, knowing that Ryu does not like being told what to do. He roughly pulls her head back so she is looking at him.

“You are not in control here, little girl. You get my cock when I say you do. You come when I say you do. Now open your mouth,” he demands. Vi opens her mouth, and he spits into it. “Say thank you.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

“The slut can behave, I see.” Vi’s pussy throbs at his words.

“Now, my little cum dumpster, you can have me.” Ryu pushes his way through her tight rings.

I may be thicker but Ryu is very, very long. It feels like he’s pushed a foot inside her before he is flush against her body. I cannot help but rock against the moment, searching for relief.

“*Oh my gods*, you are so deep,” Vi whines with pleasure.

Bringing my lips to hers, I steal a searing hot kiss, biting her bottom lip. “That’s right, little one, *we* are your gods,” I tell her.

Ryu and I start to move together, working as a single unit, while Avi watches next to us. Heavy breaths, moans, and cries fill the night, telling everyone around that our mate is thoroughly satisfied, but Avi has other plans.

“We don’t need you to wake the whole barracks, Villiana. I think I need to keep you quiet.” Vi understands what he is implying and opens her mouth for him. Avi presses one knee down next to my head and has his other foot planted onto the cot. I have the best view in the house as I watch my brothers defile our girl, the faces of ecstasy all around.

Vi has so much spit in her mouth that she makes a slurping sound as she swallows Avi down. When some drips onto my face, it spurs me on. I hold onto her tight, pounding into her hard. I can feel that I’m not going to last much longer, but I need Vi to come first again.

I pinch and roll her nipples hard, and her walls squeeze tightly around me. Ryu ruts into her ass, moaning into Vi’s neck. I slam into her as hard as possible, my stomach tightening, and I do it again. I feel a scream vibrate from Vi’s chest as a flood of liquid soaks the bed. Finishing with a roar, my cum stuffs her to the brim.

“Someone make her moan again. That feels fucking *fantastic*.” Avi’s eyes roll back as Vi hums and hollows out her cheeks.

Vi screams against Avi’s cock when Ryu’s claws pierce her ass. Droplets of blood bloom as he loses control, exploding. It

feels like it goes on forever before he stops.

That leaves Avi, whose siena stomach muscles are flexed so tight you can see every striation of muscle. He quickly pulls out of her mouth, and as she gasps for air, he shoots his load all over her face and chest. Avi leans down, licking his own mess from her cheek, causing a groan to rip from my chest.

Everyone stays in their position, trying to catch their breath. Vi lays her head against my chest, closing her eyes. I tuck her hair behind her ear and then caress the point of it, tracing over her cute little tattoo.

“You are a goddess among men, Villiana. We will worship you long after our souls disappear into the night sky.”

FIFTY-ONE

Villiana

SWEAT RUNS DOWN MY BROW; the salty liquid burns as it falls into my eyes. I quickly duck and swipe my sai out, hitting the leg in front of me. My opponent bellows, causing them to lose focus long enough for me to turn and disarm them quickly.

“Tap out already! As soon as you do, I’ll heal you,” I taunt, circling them.

“Never!”

“Come on, Avi. She’s got you good. Time to give up your pride,” Fear yells out from the sideline.

“Little star, you’re going to pay for this later.” Avi reluctantly throws his hands in the air, looking disheveled and bleeding. I run at him as soon as he surrenders, jumping into his arms.

“Mine. Every perfect inch of this curvy body is mine, so I’m the real winner.” Avi murmurs into my hair as he grabs a handful of my ass.

His eyes burn with lust when I drop to my knees, but when I wrap my hands around his bleeding leg to heal the cut I gave

him, he scowls at me. Because I was definitely going to blow him in front of everyone, including my brother and Lys.

Men.

We've been in Noir for a fortnight already, honing our skills—okay, mostly mine—and making sure we're ready for whatever happens when we get to Bonecliff. The compound is well-armed, and Locren is well-guarded. It's not like we can just walk in there, kill him, and go on our merry way, no matter how much I would like to get on with my life. That being said, this is our last day here.

Avi offers me a hand, pressing his hot lips against mine as soon as I'm upright. Leaning into the kiss, I run my nails across his scalp.

“Wooo! Get it, girl.” Thorin shouts and claps somewhere nearby. Smiling against Avi's lips, I break away and curtsy.

“Thank you, thank you.”

In a dark, gravely voice, Avi asks, “Do you want to take a walk, little star? I haven't had any time just you and me in a while.”

“Sure, wildling.”

We head off to one of the fire pits on the other side of the barracks—thankfully, no one is there.

Sitting down on the log, Avi takes a pelt lying close by and wraps it around my shoulders, huddling close together. It is just on the cusp of winter and getting colder by the day.

As I stare into the dancing flames, Avi shifts his weight, clearly uncomfortable.

Reaching up, I run my hand against his scruff, loving the way the short hairs tickle my fingertips. “Are you okay,

wildling?” I ask him.

“Hmmm,” Avi taps his chin, contemplating. “Of course.”

“Your body language says otherwise.” My heart rate picks up. *Did I do something to upset him?*

Closing his eyes, he’s quiet as he collects his thoughts.

“I know I did everything I could to push you away, and I’m sorry for the things I’ve done. I was stupid and afraid to let anyone in. My experiences have shown me that I’m not good enough to be loved—my own mother tried to have me killed because I was a product of hate. So I didn’t want to open myself up to loving someone with nothing in return.”

Licks of flames illuminate Avi’s deep brown eyes when he opens them. “I don’t know if you believe in Karma, little star, but I can’t think of a single thing I have done to deserve you. And no matter how afraid I am, I do love you. Because even on the darkest of nights, you shine bright and guide me back home—to you. You are my home. You quiet my demon and settle my soul.”

Avi cups my face and runs his thumb across my cheek, collecting the silent tear that has escaped. He looks terrified; raw emotions take over as tears pool into the corners of his eyes.

“Here’s the thing, you *do* deserve to be loved, and you are. I love your dark. I love your light. I love how fiercely loyal you are and how you put your whole self into what you believe in. And most of all, I love you, Avi.” The words pour from me like a spell. Every sentence weaves our bond tighter than before.

Avi sweeps his hand into the back of my hair as our mouths crash together. Our tongues dance together with

passion. Swinging my leg over to straddle him, Avi grinds up into me, his hardening cock pressing against my hot core. I groan into his mouth as I roll my hips.

He slides the pelt off of me and then begins to unlace my vest, taking that off next. I pull the ties on the sides of his leather chest plate, loosening it enough for him to rip it right off. Our movements become rushed as we tear at each other's clothes.

"Up," Avi commands, slapping my ass. He undoes my pants as soon as I'm standing, peeling them down over my full hips. Then, picking up each foot, he removes each boot and finishes taking off my pants.

Standing completely bare, Avi runs his hands down my body, sending a shiver throughout my body.

"Beautiful. Simply perfect," he sighs, kissing all of my soft curves. His fingers dance to the soaked center, where he easily slides inside me. I gasp, finally getting some relief.

"Is this all for me, Villiana?" Avi pushes another finger into me, slowly pumping in and out. "I see your eyes aren't the only things that weep for me."

"Please. I need you, Avi," I beg. Every second our bodies are apart is torture.

Avi stands and pulls down his pants, his erection springing out. He sits back down and pats his thigh. "Come here, baby. Face me when you sit."

I go to him and do just as he asks. Avi holds himself in place so I can lower myself onto him. As soon as he fits himself inside of me, an inferno is set off; a burning hot desire that makes the fire behind us feel cold.

Pressing my knees into the rough bark, I lift myself almost completely off him just to drop back down hard. Avi curls his hand around my hips, thrusting himself deeper.

He sucks air between his teeth. *“Fuck, baby.”*

I smile to myself, loving the reaction I get from him. Brazenly grinding my clit down against him, I ride him hard, meeting him stroke for stroke. He’s burrowing so deep inside of me in every way he can.

Picking me up, Avi lays me down on the grass. Positioning himself between my legs, he drives back into me. Tilting his face to me, I press my pentagram against his. His eyes are the clearest I’ve ever seen, not a single sign of his demon in sight. I’m getting pure unadulterated Avi, and I will savor every second.

A chorus of moans and slapping bodies filled the air as he pounds into me.

“I love you, Avi,” I pant into his neck.

“Say it again.”

“I love you.”

Avi slows his pace, still slamming into me so hard I’m driven up the grass. My back bows when he takes one of my nipples into his mouth.

“That feels so good,” I moan, digging my nails into his back.

“Say that you’re mine. Tell me you won’t leave,” Avi says as his voice breaks.

“I’m yours! I’m never leaving!” I cry out in ecstasy.

He snaps, the first sign of his Rakshasa appearing when his cock swells painfully large, stretching me wide open, but when I look into his eyes, they're still clear. Avi's knot presses against my soaked entrance. He pauses, searching my eyes. When I nod, he pushes slowly. The first knot pops in fully, and he gives me a moment to adjust before sliding the second in.

I scream out in pleasure, coming hard, so incredibly full and stretched. He begins rutting against me like he's trying to fuse our bodies. My limbs feel like jelly, my head swims, and my eyes roll back. Every movement sends the most exquisite shocks throughout me.

Avi's breaths become short, and his stomach tightens. With two more short thrusts, he lets out a raspy moan in my ear. An endless flow of cum explodes into my womb.

The two of us lay there, joined together, trying to catch our breaths.

"Thank you, little star," Avi whispers.

"Never thank me for loving you, wildling."

HOURS LATER, Thorin and I check over everyone's packs once we all wake up. Finally, it's time to leave for Bonecliff, and we need to be as efficient as possible. Ziggy, Lydia, Thorin, Lys, the guys, and myself are taking the trip. Our group is more substantial than I would like, but I also understand why everyone is joining. Thankfully, with Ziggy coming along, we know all of the portals around the compounds. And the guys' knowledge of where Bonecliff is—and how to get in—should make this an easy trip.

"Thor, what's your weapon of choice? If you're going big, you get one; if you're going with something small and

concealable, you can take multiple,” I ask as I run my hand down the table of weapons Avi has so graciously supplied or created while we’ve been here.

“Seeing as I have firepower, grab me something small. I probably won’t use it anyway,” Thorin replies with her back to me. She stands in front of a full-length mirror admiring the leather armor that Fear and Ryu worked on together—Avi is the one who is typically the leather smith but he was preoccupied, and the guys are just as capable.

She looks powerful, all suited up. Everything hugs her petite yet curvaceous body just right. And she has plenty of holders and pockets for the fun stuff. Coming up behind her, I drape my arms over her shoulders just in time to catch a flash of pain in her eyes.

“We will find them and slaughter them all, I promise. You’ve been here for me throughout all of my drama, and I will be there through yours. And if we ever find your parents, I will personally torture them for eternity,” I profess, looking at her through the mirror.

Thorin doesn’t like talking about her past, but she can’t escape it forever. She made me, so I will return the favor.

I watch as Ziggy enters the tent from the corner of the mirror. He openly stares at Thorin, not caring to hide his interest any more. A curious mix of emotions crosses his face as he studies her. Some of those emotions I have seen in my own guys, and that’s how I know he’s got it bad.

“Hey, Ziggy, is it time to go?” I turn and ask him. He blinks a few times before clearing his throat.

“Uh, yeah, soon. Everyone is going to come in, pick what they want to take, and then we’re heading out. Are you ready

for this, Kostbar?”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Are you?”

“Let’s not make this about me, Vi. I’m not even close to being ready to talk about it,” Ziggy snaps, smoothing down the front of his gray shirt and playing with the cuffs. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap,” he quickly adds, averting his gaze.

To say things between us have been tense is an understatement. Ever since I tore into him, he seems to understand that I will not cower before him—I’m not his soldier. But we are both trying to make our relationship stronger.

Thorin wordlessly walks over to Ziggy and wraps her arms around his center, laying her head against his stomach—the height difference between them is about the same as Fear and I. Ziggy places his hand against the back of her head, stroking her dark curly hair.

“Let’s go kill this snake.” Thorin stomps her boot down, pressing her point.

Pushing the flap of the tent open, we find Lys and Lydia are deep in conversation. Lys’ brow is furrowed, tight expression lines form and his crow’s feet are extra pronounced. Whatever they’re talking about, Lys isn’t too happy. When Lydia notices us, she waves us over.

“Thorin, Vi, I want you two to be on high alert at all times. Locren lost you both once and won’t let it happen again. And I don’t want to hear about how you’re a strong independent woman. If I were in your situation, I would be told the same exact thing.” Lydia goes into commander mode quickly. Her short white hair is braided on the top, and the rest is in its

naturally curly state. She looks almost identical to the day we met—all work, no play.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know. I want to get this over with already. I feel like we’ve been playing for a year, and it’s only been a few months,” Thorin waves Lydia off.

“Why don’t you go find Ryu, babe? Drink some of his delicious tea and relax while you can.” Thorin squeezes my hand and softly smiles. I pick up on her needing a minute without me, so I don’t argue.

Ryu is pacing—what else is new—around the barracks, anxious to leave as well.

“Hello, handsome. Do you want to make me some tea?” I ask him gently, pressing a quick kiss against his perfect lips.

“You haven’t asked me to make you tea in quite some time. That would be really nice. Ophir and Avi are in the tent, doing gods know what. You know that they always find some kind of trouble.” Ryu slaps my ass as he walks away. I grab it, rubbing the sting away.

“Asshole!” I yell playfully to him.

When I open the tent, I’m stunned to find the guys curled up together, sleeping. I can’t help but giggle, seeing Avi as the big spoon. Both guys shoot up in a panic, looking around the room. Avi shakes his head as his eyes land on me, but Fear jumps up, coming at me like a speeding arrow. Throwing me over his shoulder, I slap him on the back and laugh.

We all are as cheerful as possible for the next hour before Ziggy announces we’re leaving and to meet him where he found us the first night.

“And you know exactly where each portal will take us and where to go once we’re on the other side?” Ryu questions my

brother, bouncing on his toes.

“Ryu, I know your worry is based around my sister, and I appreciate that, but I’ve been running The Tower for years. I’ve been successfully doing extractions and take-downs. I think it’s time for you to give up the control you’re so desperately grasping for. Respectfully.” Ziggy uses his big boss voice, guiding us through a particularly thick brush. I still have no idea how they have functioned here for so long. My eyes adjust to the darkness, but I still fall all over the place, and I have to listen to Ziggy constantly huff about it.

Sorry, I’m not fucking nocturnal.

We’ve been walking for over an hour through this maze and it seems like we’re getting nowhere.

Ziggy stops short.

“We’re here.” He takes out a small knife, makes a shallow cut across his palm, and then presses it against the air. The area absorbs his offering, and a glimmering purple swirl appears. “We have about ninety seconds to all get through before it closes again. When it closes, you’ll be left behind if you’re still on this side.” He goes first, and then I follow. Blinding light surrounds us the moment I step through.

Ready or not, here I come.

FIFTY-TWO

Villiana

I CAN TASTE the misery in the air as we stand outside the compound's gates. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would willingly come back here—but here I am, and I will make sure this slimy fuck can never hurt another girl again.

It took some time to get used to being in daylight. But now that I've adjusted, I can take in the monstrosity in front of me. The fence has to be thirty feet tall and made of pure stardust steel, topped with barbed wire. When you get within a hundred feet of it, you walk straight into a thick, spelled wall that instantly begins to drain your magic.

“You don't have to do this, Villiana, if you don't want to go back in there. I can only imagine the nightmares you and Thorin went through in there,” Ziggy says, giving me a sympathetic look.

Dressed in his leather armor head to toe, all the plating, straps, buckles, and the two swords strapped across his back pull together his general look. At this moment, he isn't Ziggy, the big brother who cooks and bakes. No, he's Zigmund Nyx; the general of The Tower. The reaper of souls.

I also didn't realize how common it was to have your own sigil. In the real world, most beings don't have to consider the need for a sigil. The need to contact one another at any time. The need to protect yourself from dangerous magic and weapons. But here, in our little group of warriors, we all hold our own symbol and wear it with pride—some of us even carry each others'.

“Even if I wanted to stay here—which I absolutely don't because I'm part of this—it's too late. There is no way that Locren wasn't alerted the moment we got within a mile of Bonecliff. I wouldn't be surprised if he already has someone waiting for us out here.”

My eyes rapidly scan the area, searching for any sign of one of Locren's minions to no avail. Which means that they are just beyond this barrier, and it's going to be an ambush.

“I'm going in. I'm not waiting anymore.” I push through the sludge-like barrier, my limbs feeling heavy and overwhelmed. It's like walking against a gale, the force of it trying to push you back with every step. Someone grabs my hand, coming through with me. Once I make it through, I take deep breaths and shake out my body. I see that it's Lys standing beside me.

There's not a single speck of dirt out of place as I look around. Everything is exactly the same, almost like it's been perfectly curated to match the last time I was here. It's terrifying. Whatever's coming, whatever Locren has planned, is huge—I just hope we're ready for it.

The others make it through and we head towards the gate, getting to work on trying to get in. The guys have found their way in before, so hopefully they can figure it out relatively quickly.

“Villiana!” I hear Lys scream in a panic. I turn to see what’s happening, but it’s too late.

Everything happens in slow motion. Ryu runs forward, panic in his eyes. But it’s Lys who jumps in front of me, forcing air to push me out of the way as a blur speeds through the sky. The object hits him in the chest and he collapses to the ground.

I fumbled down next to Lys to check him over, only to find a barbed arrowhead has made its way through him. I go to break the end off but scream as soon as my skin makes contact.

“*What the fuck is that?! Why can’t I touch it?!*” I scream out to whoever is listening. I reach under my leathers to find my shirt and tear a strip of cloth to wrap around my hand. With my hand covered, I try to touch the arrow again. “I’m so sorry, Lys. I’m going to get this fixed. I can’t pull it out, but I can try to get the arrowhead off.”

Trying again, the searing hot pain radiates throughout my hands, even with it covered. Gently turning Lys over, I see that his face has turned ashen.

“Ryu! Can you give him something? Can someone check for bleeding?”

“Kitten, the arrow is spelled. There is no way we can get it out.” Ryu kneels next to me and looks down at Lys’ leathers.

“No, there has to be a way! We haven’t even gotten into the compound!”

Another arrow flies through the air, landing next to me this time.

Lys weakly clutches my hand in his. “My beautiful girl, you need to leave me here. I can’t go with you.”

“You’re going to be okay. I’m going to fix this.” My eyes scan him, frantically trying to find another way.

Lys’ breaths are shallow, and his eyes are glassy. “No, Kostbar, you aren’t going to fix this.” He smiles at me, bringing my hand to his lips, kissing the back of it. “I always said I would protect you with my life, and I meant it.”

Everyone is scrambling around me as more and more arrows are shot at us, but I refuse to move from this spot. I refuse to let Locren take Lys.

“I’m so proud of you, but it’s time for you to be strong and let your mates be here for you,” Lys mutters between broken breaths. I see thick, red blood flowing over my leg, collecting in the grass below us. No matter how much I scream and plead with the gods, I know that it’s not going to change what’s happening.

Lys is going to die.

“You’re my bestest friend. I don’t know what I’m going to do without you. I don’t want to exist in a world without you in it.”

“*Live*, Villiana. You’re going to live.” Coughing, blood sputters from his mouth. “Now, go give that moron hell, my girl. It’s for me to go.”

“I’m sorry, Vi, but we have to go now! We have to get into the compound now. We’re all going to die if we don’t move!” Ziggy screams at me, slapping his gloved hand against the massive steel wall.

I look back down at Lys, his black eyes blinking closed. I lay my head on top of his. “I’ll love you forever,” I whisper, only for him to hear.

“And always.”

And those are the last words Lys will ever say to me.

MY EARS RING, static blocking out all other sounds around me. Rage vibrates from my body, and my hands shake. I take one last look at the blood-matted fur on my grandfather's leg before I explode.

I feel my magic burst from me, throwing everyone and everything away from me. I sink my fingers into the damp gritty earth and pull the energy into my fingertips. Tenderly, I lay Lys into the grass before marching to the steel fence, pressing everything I have into it.

The metal peels back, forming a giant hole.

I don't realize I'm screaming until Fear pulls me into him, trying to calm me down. "I've got you, little one. I've always got you."

"He's gone, Fear. He's *gone*, and that fucking monster has taken another thing from me." I sob into his neck, rivers of tears soaking him. I grip the collar of his chest plate, the smooth leather trying to slip from my fingers. How cruel fate has been. A single arrow to the heart erased millions of precious moments. The most caring man I know, the one that raised me—saved me—is dead.

My safe haven, brought down by the simplest of weapons.

Fear grips my chin between his fingers and forces me to look at him. "Look at what you just did, Villiana. Use that hate and anger to tear apart the universe if you have to, but don't give up."

A symphony of clashing metal and gurgling blood plays in the background, the others already fighting with guards. The

smell of iron hits my nose and then my tongue, snapping me out of my trance.

My family needs me. Fear is right; I need to channel my energy correctly.

A cruel smile stretches across my face as I let go of Fear. I need to become the nightmare the monster cowers to.

“That’s my girl.” He pulls one of the leather ties from his beard and uses it to tie up my long hair just before his shadows shoot from his body.

Tapping into the well of magic I have acquired from my mates, I shoot ice shards into one of the Orcs running toward me. The icicle makes a *shhlup* sound as it impales the torso. The guard falls forward, trying to pull it from his body, but I’m quicker. I call upon the Rakshasa within me. Long, black claws extend from my fingertips which I use to sink into the man’s chest. I feel his erratic heartbeat as I wrap my nails around it and pull out his life force.

Watching all signs of life drain from the fucker’s eyes is a thing of beauty. I absorb the energy and use it to fuel myself, feeling stronger than I ever have before. If this is what it feels like to be a demon, I can see why Avi has difficulty holding it back. Pure power tastes so good.

Fear stands next to me in full Jötun form, towering over everyone. “If you want to feel true power, channel the power of the gods. They have been both friends and foes to my beings over the millennia. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind sharing for the greater good,” his voice booms.

I feel him push his magic into me, and I close my eyes to focus.

I call upon the great Norse gods for your help. Grant me a small piece of your powers to exterminate this evil from this earth.

“Daughter of elves, we hear your pleas and will help you, but there is something you should know. You already hold immense powers that are untapped. Look within yourself, and you will find all that you need.” So many voices respond as one in my mind. How I understand their native language is beyond me, but I don’t question the gifts I am given.

When I open my eyes, the sun has been swallowed by the blackened atmosphere, and lightning cracks across the sky. Electricity dances over my skin.

“ENOUGH!” My voice roars violently through the atmosphere, and then time literally stops. Everyone and everything around me has frozen in place. A ball of fire is formed between Thorin’s hands, ready to be shot out. Ziggy has his sword stuck deep into an orc’s side. Ryu has shifted and is shredding a man with his claws. And Avi looks terrifying as raw magic is pulled from a man’s chest and straight into his open mouth. But none of them are unscathed. Slashes mar their skin as blood seeps from their wounds. Blood and dirt cake their clothing.

With speed I didn’t know I possessed, I run through the yard, slashing throats with my sai. Ripping hearts from chests, I consume pure energy from all I can. When I clap my hands together, everyone unfreezes. I watch a hundred bodies drop to the ground, lifeless. My family slaughters the rest.

I scan through the wreckage, making sure everyone is accounted for, but I can’t find Lydia anywhere—until I hear her scream. Standing at the bottom of an ornate staircase,

Locren holds a knife to Lydia's throat, as calm as can be. He looks bored with the massacre in front of him.

“My darling trophy, I see you've finally come home!” Locren's voice is jubilant as he walks forward, dragging Lydia. “I've grown tired of your temper tantrums. It's time for you to come to where you belong.”

“And where exactly is that?” I call out to him, crossing my arms.

“At my feet,” he proclaims, his voice saccharine.

Locren whispers into Lydia's ear, and her eyes glaze over white. We all watch as she drops to her knees before him and undoes his pants. When she takes out his disgusting shaft, I throw lightning straight at his chest. The energy fizzles as it slams into an invisible shield.

Locren wags his finger at me. “Silly little girl. Do you think I'm that stupid? I know who you are, what you are. I have been drinking your blood for years! I know how to protect myself from your magic.”

I see Ryu weave his way toward him; the temperature drops rapidly, and thick snow begins to whip in the wind.

With a snap of his fingers, Locren has Ryu shifted and immobilized on the ground. “You've been a very naughty serpent. I should kill you now, but playing with you will be more fun.”

I throw my hands into the air and freeze everyone before they can make another move. Of course, Locren is unaffected.

“I'll go with you. Only if they can all leave.”

Locren groans as he fists Lydia's hair, fucking himself with her face. The sight makes my stomach turn.

“You see, I don’t trust you. So, I will be taking my son as well. He should have been dead long ago.”

“No. *All* of them go,” I grind out ominously.

I carefully maneuver my way around the dead bodies and debris. Dead grass crunches beneath my boots as I stalk forward.

“You don’t make the rules, little bitch!” Locren screams, the vein on his forehead throbbing as his face turns red. Then he quickly takes the knife still in his hand and slashes it down Lydia’s cheek. She cries out as he laughs and finishes all over her face. “Another worthless whore.” He throws her to the ground and then kicks her in the stomach.

“I’m losing my patience, Villiana. Get your brother and come to me now, or I will start killing off everyone else you love.” He has the gall to look bored.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I clench my jaw, knowing there’s no winning in this situation. “Okay, I’ll get Ziggy, and we’ll go with you.”

I let go of everyone and make my way to my brother. Ziggy’s mouth hangs open, and there is a dullness to his green eyes—a mixture of hurt and understanding etched into the crinkle in his brow. Taking him by the hand, we give ourselves over to the monster.

It started with us, and it will end with us.

FIFTY-THREE

Ryu

WE ALL CHARGE forward at once, trying to stop Vi from handing herself over.

“I love you all so much, but I will kill you myself if you don’t let me go.”

Vi’s words cut deep, burning a hole inside of me. I know what she’s doing, but it doesn’t hurt any less.

I stand in the middle of the courtyard, completely naked and vulnerable. I don’t think I can shift because I can’t even feel my dragon right now, and my magic is tapped out. I pull at my silky blue hair like it will give me the answers, but it doesn’t.

I’m useless in this situation.

Thorin flies forward, embers falling through the sky. The smell of soot peppers the air as she zooms past.

Locren’s lips start moving, speaking words I can’t make out. Thorin’s wings disappear within seconds, falling from the sky, skidding across the rocky ground. When she tries to sit up, Vi keeps her down, shaking her head at her in warning. I barely catch it, but she mouths the word *please* to her.

“Ms. Thorin, the poor unwanted child. I quite literally own you, pixie. Or did you forget your family sold you to me for almost nothing? You may have escaped me for some time, but you will always be my property.” Locren scoffs at Thorin, looking down at her like a crumb on the floor.

Ziggy’s eyes burn with hatred, but he doesn’t make a move to stop Locren either. It’s almost as if Vi and Ziggy are resigned to their future. But my girl is smarter than that. I *have* to believe she is smarter than that.

“Let her go, brother. You need to trust that she has a plan.” Avi’s voice filters through my mind. Looking at him, I see that he’s already shifted back.

“This is fucking stupid.” Fear grumbles, his shadows shrouding him like nightfall. The little bit of light that seeps out around him makes him look like evil incarnate. Standing well over ten feet tall, his body is all corded muscle, ornate tattoos, and menacing slate-gray eyes that make you feel even weaker. Ophir may be a fluffy ball of love with us, but the rest fear him.

“If you would rather turn yourself over to be chained and bred than fight to stay with your mates, you can’t be my problem anymore, Villiana. When he has broken his favorite toy and no longer needs you, don’t come to find us,” Avi yells out, scratching his short dark beard. His leathers are destroyed, pants split down his quad and barely hanging onto his leg. He looks defeated, but he’s playing a delicate game.

“Seems I’m the only one who likes a broken dolly. Especially if I’m the one breaking it.” Locren’s voice drips with venom.

“He will never stop if you don’t go. Please trust me,” Vi begs us.

“Time to go, trophy. You better make haste, or I can show your mates how happy I am that they defiled what’s mine.”

Vi gives us one more passing look before turning towards the estate.

“What the fuck ar—” Ziggy begins to speak, but Locren backhands him.

“Shut the fuck up, you pathetic waste of space.” Spittle flies into Ziggy’s face as Locren screams inches away.

The three of them walk up the stairs to Locren’s mansion, the door slamming behind them. Lydia lies at the base of the stairs, curled into a ball. Thorin is splayed out in the dirt in disbelief. And the rest of us know we must regroup and develop a better plan, because the longer Villiana is here, the worse she will be forced to endure.

THREE WEEKS later

BONES CRUNCH under my foot as a man howls in pain. He’s missing two fingers and all of his nails already—not that he needs the use of this hand anyways.

“Let’s try this again. Where did Locren take them?” I ask the elf, grinding my toes down to punctuate my question. The elf hisses and then spits a wad of blood on my boot.

“It doesn’t matter! If she’s not pregnant, she’s probably dead. And as for the other one, who the fuck knows? I wouldn’t be shocked if Locren’s torturing him just for existing. Bottom line, I would rather die by your hands than his.” He makes a good effort to swing his other broken arm at

me, but it's still laughable. I have to give it to him, though. He's fighting until the bitter end.

Bending down to his level, I twist the dagger sticking out from his thigh, and he bellows in pain. "You will pray for death, Cole, because what we have in store for you is much worse," I threaten in a hushed tone.

Standing up, I wave Lydia over. "He's all yours. See what you can pull from him before you have too much fun." Looking very pleased, she prances to our latest victim.

Thorin was able to heal Lydia's face most of the way, but it's still scarred—magical weapons will do that. The cut was deep, exposing her cheekbone. She also had three broken ribs and a bunch of cuts and bruises, but it's nothing compared to the lingering emotional damage Locren inflicted. We're trying to figure out how he was able to break through her mental blocks. Lydia is a very talented seer, so it should be near impossible.

I close the metal door and walk down the hall to the rest of the group.

The first thing we did after Vi surrendered herself to Locren was stake out the grounds around the compound. Locren was prepared for everything; he made it so the second we walked out the gate, everything disappeared. We patrolled the area for an entire week, walking into the grounds which were once Bonecliff. One night Ophir came running back to the campsite, yelling about how the compound had reappeared. Unfortunately, when we did a recon, the entire place had been evacuated.

The following night, we returned to Noir and debriefed the soldiers, and as we were about to leave again, Fallon and

Ahren told us they were coming along. So now we're back at Bonecliff since it has been abandoned.

"How'd it go?" Fear asks, placing his scrying crystal down. He looks like shit. The shaved sides of his head are grown out, and his hair hasn't been taken care of in days. His red beard is wild, and we're lucky if we get clothes on him.

Ahren surprised us with his abilities in divination, among other magic talents, which Ophir took quickly to.

"Nothing. He didn't even slip up and give us some description we can work with." I take off my vest and throw it onto the table with all the other crap. I'm tired; *so, so tired*. I feel like I'm failing Vi and should be doing more. But I also know she had her own plans, and I need to believe she can execute them.

We've set up shop in the old mess hall since it is one of the biggest rooms here. Plus it has a kitchen.

"The girls are training again?" I ask him, making my way over to the stove to make some food for everyone.

"Mhmm. Even our little demon boy went with them. I think he's going stir-crazy, but it's good for him to work it out. Also, Fallon does *not* take it easy on him. It's very entertaining to watch him get flustered over his delicate masculinity." Fear chuckles, finally pulling a shirt over his head. He rolls up his sleeves and catches me watching him.

"What? We're well past the solstice, and it's a little chilly in here."

The double doors fly open, and Lydia comes barreling toward us. Stopping at the table, she plants her hands down and tries to catch her breath. When she picks up her head, she looks crazed.

“I got a look at where they are. It’s the same place Vi had the vision of. It’s underground and close by,” she pants, eyes glazed over, clearly still in a vision. “I need something to write with!”

Fear slides a pen and paper toward her. She catches it without having to look, then starts drawing frantically. Her hand moves quickly and fluidly over the paper.

“Get in here now, and bring the girls. Lydia found something!” I call out to Avi. He should be a part of this.

Thorin is the first in here, hovering around Lydia, trying to see what’s on the creamy piece of paper. Fallon, Ahren, and Avi follow close behind.

Everyone is gathered tightly around the wooden table, impatient, waiting for Lydia to come out of the vision. Finally, she finishes, and her crystal blue eyes scan over everything she has drawn out, then flips it around. A stone-clad room, chains hanging down from the ceiling, a board with cuffs attached to the wall. She continues drawing a table closest to us—it is covered with all different types of tools for torture. In the corner is a stairwell, gated off by a locked iron door. Lydia turns to Ahren, his hair bouncing with the movement.

“Can you use this to locate them?” Lydia asks hopefully.

“I can try, but there isn’t much to go off of. Are there any other distinguishing features? For example, does it smell musty; is there light coming into the room; could you hear any sounds?”

Lydia rubs her temples, the dark circles under her eyes giving away just how much of a toll this all is taking on her too. “It smelt like a basement, like mildew and dampness.

There was no noticeable natural light, just torches... *Fucking think, Lydia!*”

Thorin rubs her tiny hand in circles on Lydia’s back. “It’s okay, babe, this is a lot of pressure.”

Lydia pushes her away without even thinking, “Fuck you, Thor. Don’t patronize me!” She slams her fist down on the table, shouting at Thorin.

“Don’t you fucking get bitchy with me, Lyd. I care about them too. My best fucking friend is in there, but I still care about whether you’re pushing yourself too far,” Thoirn snaps back, not taking anyone’s shit, per usual.

“Ladies, let’s get your personal shit under control and look at the facts. It’s been a long three weeks, and I’m tired of cleaning up dead bodies and trying to get information,” Fallon interrupts, pulling her thick hair back. Lydia squints at her, choosing not to continue with her bullshit.

“I heard a woman scolding someone. Talking about *how risky it was to bring them here*, and that *it could fuck up everything*.” Lydia drops her head to the table, sagging her shoulders in defeat.

Ahren speaks up again. “I can work with this. Thank you, Lydia.” His deep voice is smooth like a balm on a burn. “Avi, can you help me out? Your energy transference abilities may be valuable with this.”

“Absolutely, man,” Avi says happily as he heads over to another table with Ahren.

I walk back over to the stove and turn the flame on. “Does anyone want to help make some dinner? We need fuel if we’re going to make it through the night,” I ask anyone listening.

“Yeah, I’ll grab some vegetables from the kitchen. We can make a stew,” Thorin chirps as she heads toward the other room.

Everyone is overworked and running on nothing but rage. So I’ll do what I do best and rally; be the leader that is so desperately needed.

Avi

FIVE WEEKS since Vi was taken

SHOOTING AWAKE, I fall to the floor next to my cot. A stabbing pain shoots through my stomach; my insides feel like they’re being torn from my body.

Pushing myself to my knees, I immediately fall forward.

Fire. My legs are on *fire*.

I need someone—anyone—who can make this stop.

“One of you fucking help me!”

The caustic sensation creeps up my thighs and onto my stomach. Sweat begins to pour from me as I crawl forward on my forearms. Every movement is excruciating.

It’s too much.

Dropping to the hard stone floor, I relish in the coolness.

Behind me is the sound of a lamp crashing, followed by staggered footsteps. The scent of clove and cinnamon floods the small space.

“It’s Vi,” Ophir grunts, sounding just as pained. “I had to sedate Ryu because he was screaming in his sleep.”

Fuck. I can't even imagine the pain my little star is feeling if this is the reaction we are having.

It's been five weeks since the day she walked away like none of us ever mattered, and every day the torture gets worse. At first, it was an uncomfortable sensation, alerting us that our mate was in trouble, but the weaker she got, the stronger the tie's response was.

Ryu was the first one to go under. About two weeks ago, he collapsed during a briefing with Lydia. His dragon flickered in and out while he clawed at his throat. He couldn't get a breath in. Thankfully I was able to pull the energy from him—not without inflicting pain on myself—but Lydia had to hypnotize him into an unconscious state while Thorin healed the gashes along his neck and chest.

Next was Fear. He couldn't stop puking, screaming about how his pelvis felt like it was being torn open. I've never seen the big bastard in such a state. Finally, the torture reached me.

Ahren and I were having a grand 'ole time with one of Locren's goblins. The little fuck screamed so beautifully as I peeled the skin from his muscles, blubbering on about how *Master* portaled to another realm. We were ecstatic knowing we didn't have to blindly search Terra anymore because they weren't even here. As I cleaned up our mess, I fell forward onto the metal table. Clutching my stomach, I felt warm liquid leaking through my shirt. An incision spanning the length of my hips had formed.

Every day since, the three of us feel every mark placed on Villiana's body.

FIFTY-FOUR

ZIGMUND | Eight weeks after being taken

POWERLESS.

Something I haven't felt in a very long time and something I promised myself I would never feel again. But as I stand here, chained to the wall, watching my sister get beaten for the fifth time this week, all I can think about is how I've failed her yet again. What kind of big brother can't protect his sister? I've dedicated my entire life to finding her and others in her situation, and it's gotten me nowhere—other than being a slave to my deadbeat father. *Father... yeah, no.*

Villiana's head hangs to the side, showing off her brand-new black eye and bloody nose. She is naked, strapped to a medical chair, legs spread wide open, giving me a view that no sibling should ever have to see. A so-called doctor brings his chair between her open legs and sits down. He picks up some strange-looking tool that looks like a duck's bill, and I hear a click, click, click as it opens up. Vi doesn't move. She doesn't say a word. Lifelessly, her head hangs off the side of the table, staring into space.

"I'm sorry, I can't find any reason for her being barren. We've done every test and examination possible. The only

thing left would be to cut her open, but that would ruin the integrity of her womb, giving you even less of a chance of pregnancy.”

Locren takes the scalpel from the tray next to the doctor and slits the man’s throat—a spray of blood paints Vi’s face. “All of you are fucking useless! I was able to knock up her pathetic mother and I wasn’t even trying. This has to be Storm’s fault. No wonder the originals are all dead.”

He paces back and forth next to the table before unstrapping Vi and dropping her in front of me. Locren unchains my arms, leaving my legs in cuffs.

“Make sure she doesn’t die. I know your magic is useless, so figure it out,” Locren mumbles before leaving us alone.

“Kostbar, I’m here. I’m so sorry I’ve failed you so badly.” I lay my head on her chest, not caring that it’s bare anymore. Tears stream from my eyes, washing away some dirt that coats my sister.

I feel her arm weakly lay on my back. “I do have a plan, Ziggy, I promise. Just trust me to keep myself alive long enough to execute it.” Vi’s voice is small but determined.

“Villiana, what could you possibly have in store? Allowing yourself to be abused for eternity?” I want to shake some sense into her. I have it easy down here. I’m clothed, fed, and pretty much left alone, other than having to endure the mental abuse of watching my sister be raped and beaten. Locren has weakened her enough that she doesn’t even try to use her magic or hold a mental block.

“Ziggy, do you remember when we were first on the run, and you taught me how to find my well of magic and conserve it?”

“Of course.”

“Well, that’s what I’ve been doing. I’ve made myself weak, knowing that when the time is right, I will be able to use it all. Promise you will leave me here,” Vi pleads as she stares at me with bloodshot eyes.

“Are you fucking insane, Villiana?! There is no way I’m doing that.”

“You once told me to run and never look back. Now I’m going to need you to do the same.” Vi’s eyes pierce into me, demanding my obedience. I hear a click, and weight falls from my ankles.

Did she...

“Go find our family. Tell them where I am, but trust that I can take care of myself.” Vi takes my hand and presses it to the raised scar on her chest. “This is my sigil. Memorize it and contact me if you can.”

I feel like a failure, weak and disgusting. I feel like I’m leaving my sister in the lion’s den, but if this is the only way I can help her, I’ll do it.

“Go, Ziggy. You probably have a good ten minutes before he comes back down to check on me. He didn’t even bother to blindfold us when he brought us here. You know how to get out.”

“I’ll come back for you,” I promise her.

“I know.”

FIFTY-FIVE

Villiana

“MY LITTLE TROPHY has been a bad, bad girl. Tell me, how did your brother get out of here, hmm?” When I don’t answer Locren immediately, he takes a switch and brings it down across my stomach. “I said...” He drags the switch across my searing hot skin. “How—” *crack* “Did—” *crack* “He—” *crack* “Get—” *crack* “Out!” Welts blossom all over my yarrow skin.

Locren’s eyes turn his signature ruby red, getting ready to command me to do something. “Go to the chair and bend over. Hang your arms off the sides.”

I pretend to be under his spell, following his directions. Once my breasts are pressed against the cold metal and my arms are in place, he uses the leg cuffs to lock me in place. I already know what’s coming next, and it takes all of my willpower not to react.

“Maybe I can fuck some sense into you, Villiana. Now be a good girl and scream for me.” Locren spreads my cheeks open and slams into me dry. He violently fucks my ass, and all I can do is bite my lip until it bleeds, just as other parts of me do.

“I said scream for me, you little bitch!” Locren lashes out, fisting my hair. This time I do cry out. I am only so strong.

My heart breaks even more knowing Ryu, Ophir, and Avi can feel all of this. I imagine my love for them and how I would do anything to protect them. I hope they can feel my affection. I took a vow that is forever, and this is only for now.

When Locren finishes his brutal attack, he pulls out, leaving me sliding down the chair, only being held up by the cuffs around my wrists. I hear the screech of a chair pulled across the floor, and a weight drops into it. Locren’s harsh breaths are the only thing to be heard for a few moments.

“You disappoint me so much, trophy. But I *will* break you, and you will realize you only have one god—me. You will not so much as take a piss without my permission,” he says venomously. “I’m going to leave you like this for a while so you can think about your behavior.”

The chair screeches again, and Locren comes to stand over me. He pulls my head back to force me to look at him. “Still as beautiful as ever. Even more than your mother.”

The sound of dripping water lulls me to sleep. I just need a little nap to regain my energy.

“Villiana, baby. Remember how much power you have. You are an Isidora, my sweet girl. You can do anything.”

Ophir

TEN WEEKS since Vi was taken

FREEZING water pelts down my shoulders as I’m crouched under the same shower Villiana was forced to use for years.

I punch my fist into the stone wall, weeping, begging the voices to disappear.

I can't do this for another day. I can't live another second in my little one's mind.

It's always Locren's muffled voice and Ziggy's soothing chants, but that's not what is killing me. It's Villiana's screams bouncing around my skull. Her prayers hoping that we don't know what's going on. Her lowest moments when she wants to give up and begs for death. But my little one never speaks any of it aloud—she's too strong.

Today is a particularly horrible day. Ryu has tried to bury himself in work, but I've seen the bow of his back. The blood seeping through his clothes from the whip marks. Avi has lost himself to his Rakshasa, living in the torture room, maiming anyone he possibly can. And when he's all alone, his screams echo throughout the halls.

As for me, Locren's voice is loud and clear as he rapes our girl. He coos about how he will break her.

Somehow, Vi was able to get Ziggy out and has been paying the price.

Locren beat her, burned her, wrapped his scaly fingers around her delicate neck, squeezing until she was on the brink of death.

Letting my body fall to the side, my heavy lids close, completely and utterly exhausted. I promised myself I wouldn't fall victim to the barrage—that I would be strong for my family. But I don't know how much more I can take.

“OPHIR, WAKE UP.”

A rough voice penetrates my dreamless sleep. A large hand slides under me, trying to pull me off the floor. They don't smell like my sweet dragon or demon boy.

“Come on, man, let me help you up.”

I only want to open my eyes if I find Villiana and Ryu curled up with me.

“Gods dammit, Fear, get the fuck up!”

“Leave me alone. *Please*,” I beg whoever is there.

“No. I know where she is.”

My half-dead heart is shocked back to life. Forcing my eyes open, Ziggy's haunted emerald ones stare back at me. His face is gaunt and bruised.

This has to be a dream.

“It's not a dream,” he bristles. “I know where Villiana is. So get your hairy ass up, and let's get her back.”

FIFTY-SIX

Villiana

FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Locren is out for blood. There is nothing he hasn't done to try and torture me, and he's just becoming more outraged by the fact I haven't given in.

Sitting in a chair across from me, Locren's head hangs down. He takes the heels of his palms and digs them into his eyes.

His usually well-kempt, short, white-blond hair is now long and shaggy around his ears. The youthful look he once had has been replaced with crow's feet and dark eye bags. He hasn't even attempted to shift in days. I never look forward to seeing him in basilisk form—he looks like a giant scaly worm. He's running out of patience and steam, which is precisely how I want him.

“Villiana, your usefulness is running very low. I would hate to dispose of such a perfect specimen, but you're presenting to be more of a pain than I would like,” Locren sighs, still looking at the floor. “You know, your mother was once my trophy, too. So moldable and innocent. She was the *perfect* little trophy.” He finally lifts his head and looks at me. “Would you like to see her again?”

Locren gets up from his chair and kneels on the floor, pushing the matted hair from my face. I can only imagine what I look like right now, because I sure know what I smell like. He hasn't once let me wash or get dressed. I don't have anywhere to use the bathroom, and most of the time, I'm chained to the same spot, so there have been many nights I've slept in my own waste.

"I hate to admit this, but I'm so tired, Villiana. And I hate being tired. Thankfully for me, I have decided to get rid of my headache." He runs his hand down the side of my now thin body. "Hold me, trophy, just once." Locren helps me sit up, then lays his head in my lap.

He has made one very stupid mistake in his moment of weakness—he has me completely unchained. I have been so patient, waiting for the right moment, and he has just handed it to me.

Locren closes his eyes, and I make my move. Closing my eyes once more, I ground myself. I pull from every ounce of magic I have stored and every bit of magic I can reach through my bonds. My body begins to take a new shape, expanding in size, rows of sharp teeth breaking through my gums, scales forming all up my arms. I've become a mutant.

Calling upon Fear's shadows, I cloak the room in total darkness. Next, I find Avi's Rakshasa and slowly pull all of the energy in the room into me. A dark, demonic laugh escapes me, knowing this is finally the end.

Locren's eyes fly open, my ability to see in the dark finally coming in handy.

"What the fuck is going on?" he shrieks.

“You silly, silly boy. You have greatly underestimated *my* power,” I say in a voice I don’t even recognize. Snapping my fingers, a ring of fire forms around us. I want him to see what a true nightmare looks like.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you haven’t been drinking from me this entire time—too obsessed with getting me pregnant.”

Locren quickly crawls backward as far away as he can get from me. He looks utterly terrified. I feed off his fear. It makes me that much stronger.

“What the fuck are you?” He is breathing so fast, I can hear the erratic beat of his stupid little heart.

“I am what the monsters fear. I am your worst nightmare, pure unadulterated power, a gift my father left me and the gods have granted me. You think you have taken everything from me, made me weak and powerless. You are a fool, Locren DeTrill, and now I will show you what it really means to be powerless.”

I channel Ryu’s ice powers, freezing Locren’s hands and feet to the cold, dirty ground. “This is what it’s like to not be in control of your own body.”

Next, I slam my black-clawed hands against his skull, allowing my seer abilities to take over. I search his mind, finding every fear he has ever had and making it seem to be a reality. “This is what it’s like to not be in control of your mind.”

Locren screams in horror. His body shakes, lost in his nightmares.

“Please, make it stop! I will let you go! I will let you leave. I won’t come for you again!” he cries.

Getting nose-to-nose with him, I let my icy breath overtake his space. “*Oh, how I love to hear you scream for me, little boy. Your tears are so sweet.*” My long forked tongue licks the wet trail down his face, freezing it along the way.

Locren continues to cry and beg and plead. I let him sweat it out for a little longer before I become tired of playing with my food.

Punching my fist through his chest, I grab his disgusting heart and pull his life force into me.

“And this is what it’s like to not be in control of your own life. To watch someone slowly take everything you are from you,” I growl into his face. “And by the way, Lilith is very much alive. She says to go fuck yourself. You never owned us.”

Very, *very* slowly, I pull, feeling the ventricles snap from the tension. Sliding my hand from his body, I hold his still-beating heart out in front of me, and then I devour it.

Licking the sticky basilisk blood from my fingers, I look around me. A hysterical laugh bubbles from my throat.

I laugh so hard my stomach hurts.

I laugh so hard that I cry.

I cry for the girl I once was.

I cry for the woman I had to become.

But most of all, I cry for being truly free for the first time ever.

This is what it’s like to have true control.

FIFTY-SEVEN

Villiana

“COME ON, baby girl, it’s time to wake up.” I hear a familiar voice, but it’s so distant. “Villiana, if you don’t open those beautiful violet eyes right now, I swear I will cut off Fear’s dick. No more giant cock for you!”

Blinking a few times, I try to clear the haze from my eyes. A cute pixie face with freckles and golden eyes stares at me with distaste. When she realizes that I’m awake, she squeals.

“I knew you wouldn’t allow yourself to lose good dick!” Thorin cries, clutching me too tight.

“Maybe I just wanted to look at your sexy face,” I try to talk, but my voice is so hoarse. Every word feels like razor blades in my throat.

Thorin kisses me hard on my cracked, dried lips and then continues to kiss all over my face.

“Stop fucking kissing my sister, Thorin!” I hear Ziggy say as he approaches us. I reach out to him; he takes my hand, cupping it between his.

“Piss off, Ziggy. Or I’ll tell you *all about* how I used to fuck her too.” Thorin flips him off and pulls me closer, kissing

me a few more times just to tick him off.

“I knew you would find them.” I smile up at my brother, my dry lip splitting in the process.

“I would look in every crevice of this world if it meant I could come back for you,” Ziggy coos with a broken smile.

He stands beside Thorin in brand new leathers, embossed in The Tower’s symbol. His hair is braided back, proudly showing off his pointed ears. He looks much cleaner than I last saw him, just as sad, but so much better.

“Can somebody help me up? This congealed mess I’m currently lying in is not my favorite.”

Thorin puts her hand behind my head and back, pushing me up slowly as Ziggy pulls my arms forward. My head spins when I’m upright, making me dry heave.

“Little one?” Fear says, sounding so vulnerable. He waits for me to answer before moving forward.

“Hey, big guy. Did you miss me?”

Fear takes four large steps, getting to me in seconds. He pushes everyone out of the way and picks me up. Crushing me into his enormous chest, I take a sharp breath, not having had the opportunity to heal myself quite yet. I honestly don’t even know if I could right now, anyway. My energy and magic are completely depleted.

Fear winces. Realizing that I’m in pain, he places me on my feet.

I lean against his massive frame for support and comfort. “I love you so much, Ophir. So, so much.”

“Get out of my way!” Avi commands, pushing his way through. He stops dead in his tracks when he sees me. Avi

wraps his arms around my legs as he falls to his knees in front of me, placing his face against them. “Little star, you are a goddess.”

“Get off the floor and kiss me, silly,” I softly say to him.

Avi stands up and gives me a scorching kiss—I don’t even care how much it hurts. It feels so good to have him against me. The way his hand moves all over my body reminds me how very naked I still am, making me want to cover up.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of, kitten. Please don’t hide yourself away.”

Hearing Ryu’s voice sparks the little bit of energy I have left in me, and I run to him. My feet are screaming from the welts at the bottom of them, my ribs pulling in my chest, and all of my muscles cry in pain, but I don’t care. Nothing could stop me from getting to him right now.

He stands in the doorway, looking breathtaking. He also has a Tower uniform, his long blue hair in his signature bun, and his eyes are clear and carry a strength I have never seen before. My shy, reserved doc stands bold and proud. He carries himself with an air that demands respect.

“Movin’ up the ranks, I see.”

“I would move the fabrics of time to get you back, Villiana. Please don’t ever do that to me again.”

I try to stand on my toes and press a kiss onto his lips. Ryu melts into me, dipping me backward in a flamboyant manner. *Show-off.*

Behind me, I hear something that sounds like a steady stream of liquid. Craning my painfully stiff neck, I find Ziggy peeing into Locren’s cavernous chest.

Tucking himself back into his pants, Ziggy turns around with a devious grin. “Best piss of my life.”

“Can we get out of here, please? I’m in desperate need of a shower and some food.” I’m not above begging right now.

Running his thumb against the edge of my jaw, Ryu presses a soft kiss into my temple. “You got it, kitten.”

“So, THE TOWER TOOK OVER BONECLIFF?” I ask Ziggy, standing in the middle of the new and improved courtyard.

“It was abandoned after we broke in that day. We’ve slowly been finding all of the girls that were once here and rehabilitating them. The compound is so large and set up with everything we could need; I couldn’t look past the opportunity. I hope you’re not too upset.”

I shake my head, “No, I’m happy to see it being used for good. It is bizarre to be here under different circumstances, but I can get used to it,” I say in awe of how much work has already been put in.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve had the dormitories demolished. There was no way I was leaving that evil place up.” Ziggy points over to the area that once held the room where I slept for all of those horrible years.

“Yeah, it does, actually. I hope you rebuild something, though. All of the girls and guys deserve somewhere to recover.”

Looking around the compound that was once a place of contention for me, I never thought that any good could come of it; I wanted to burn it to the ground. Thorin and I struggled every single day not to be a danger to ourselves because many

girls thought taking their own lives was the only way to be truly free. And honestly, I considered it many times myself.

I have no idea what happened to everyone who was here before, but I know that The Tower will find them and bring them to justice. Unfortunately, The Collective is nowhere near over with its agenda; so much work still needs to be done. Locren was just one grain of sand in a sea of evil.

When my family found me lying in the remains of the man who tortured me, I had been there for three days. I don't remember anything after the moment I ended his life, but as long as I can remember that moment for the rest of my life, I will be happy.

There are many things I need to do, like have a proper memorial for Lys, but first, I need to see my mother. She needs to know that we will never have to run from her abuser again.

“Are you coming with us to Estuarine and see mama?”

Ziggy rubs the back of his neck and looks at the ground, “Not this time, Kostbar. I don't think I'm ready to face the realities that come with seeing her again.”

He sounds pained by the prospect. So much time has passed, and so many truths have been revealed. I want to say that I would feel the same as him, but being surprised was the best thing for me. It's the only way I could possibly take in all of the information she had to give me. I love my mother, but she isn't the smoothest.

“When are you guys going to head out?” he asks me.

“Tomorrow morning, Thorin wants to meet her too. I think it would be good for her to get away from everything for a while.”

“I agree. She deserves some peace.”

I examine Ziggy for a moment, unsure if I should approach the subject with him.

“You care about her, don’t you?”

A blush creeps up his chest and face. He turns his face to me but doesn’t look at me. “Uh.”

“It’s okay; I already know you do. Please take care of her. She’s everything to me. I don’t know how I could live without her in my life.”

“You know I will, Villiana,” he promises me, sealing it with a tight hug.

I decided not to talk about it anymore and go and find my mates. The three of them are sitting around a table playing cards with Ahren and Fallon. Fallon throws down her cards and jumps up, laughing at them.

“Pay up, fuckers! You guys really suck at this.” Fallon slaps her open hand.

Begrudgingly the guys throw five coins down on the table each. Fallon scoops them towards herself, shaking her ass as she stuffs the money into her pockets.

“You’re going to send my guys to the poor house, girl,” I come around and bump my hip against hers.

“It’s not my fault that they insist on trying to prove themselves. Plus, they’re all sore losers, Ahren included.” Fallon shakes her finger, scolding all of them.

Behind me, I hear someone shaking what sounds like dice. Thorin comes around with a devilish grin, and I already know what she’s going to say.

“You want to make them cry, babe?” she gloats, shaking the dice once more.

“You two think you can beat us at dice? Do you little girls even know how to play?” Avi scoffs at us.

“Ohhh, you are so fucked, brother. You should know better than to taunt our girl.” Fear stands up and gives me his seat. I tilt my head up, puckering my lips for a kiss.

“You and Ahren against Vi and I? Seeing as we are just stupid *little girls*, that shouldn’t be a big deal for you.” Thorin is playing with fire, riling Avi up like this, and I’ll be the one to pay for it later, but I always did like a bit of pain with my pleasure.

“You’re on.” Avi stretches out his hand, and Thorin takes it.

“Twenty coins on the girls,” Ryu shouts, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a coin purse. He shakes it in the air, the coins clinking together. Leaning over to me, he kisses me hard.

“Give him hell, kitten.”

My existence has been nothing but a gaping wound slowly bleeding out. Every day a little more life drained from me while trauma infected my every organ. That is, until I found beings who loved all the sticky, broken pieces of me. They became the sutures that held me together while I healed myself on the inside.

Life isn’t perfect, but it’s mine, and mine alone.

EPILOGUE

VILLIANA | Three months later

SPRING HAS FINALLY COME BACK AROUND; ALL the flowers are popping up, and the temperature has warmed up. I had planned to wait until the garden was in bloom to come back, and now that the yellow flowers can smile at me, I know it's the right time. In my hand, I hold a clay jar containing the only thing left of Lys. It's raining today, which is appropriate for the mood.

Standing in front of Lys' garden, I allow my tears to flow freely. I remove the top of the jar and sprinkle his remains into the flowerbeds; this was always his favorite place to be.

"You know he's proud of you, little star. Lys loved you so much," Avi holds my shivering body, absolutely soaked from the rain.

"I miss him so fucking much. I wasn't ready," I say as a sob racks my body. I drop to my knees in the mud, ruining the bottom of my purple dress.

Avi squats down next to me, rubbing my back, being here for me but not trying to stop my sadness. "You are never ready to lose someone you love, Villiana."

We stay there until I'm shaking from the cold, and I have no more tears left to cry.

“Let's go inside; I'm sure Ryu already has the tea on. And I bet if you ask Fear, he will start the bath for you. He might even try to squeeze in with you.” Avi and I laugh, picturing Fear's giant body trying to fit into an average bathtub. He helps me up, and we go inside; the warmth of the fireplace feels so good on my skin.

Fear comes down the stairs, towel in hand. “Come one, little one, let's get you a bath.”

Avi and I crack up. “I told you so,” he says between breaths.

The sweet smell of honey and blueberries fills the air as Ryu strolls in from the kitchen, tea in hand. A look of heartbreak etched across his face. “Is he finally at peace, kitten?”

I know he could feel every moment of pure misery I was going through. They all can. Still, each one of my mates places a different part. Ryu is the caretaker. He showers me with love by always putting my needs first; making sure I'm always well taken care of. Ophir is the protector. Every moment we are together is a moment in which I feel safe. And Avi is the rock. I never have to explain what or why. He allows me just to feel. Each of them are equally important—sometimes, they take on all roles simultaneously. All of my mates love hard and unconditionally and are undeniably my home.

“Yeah, I think he is.”

Thorin

ONE YEAR later

Fire surrounds us. I've tried to put it out, but nothing is working. Every breath I take feels like a thousand shards of glass in my lungs. Ziggy carries Lydia to the center of the ring, checking over her injuries.

"Where is everyone else?" I shout out, hoping he can hear me over the blaring alarms.

"I have no idea. I'm sure that they're fine..."

I try to sit up, but my arms slip out from under me, skinning my forearm against the ground. I'm so weak, but I have to help Ziggy right now. Lydia is unconscious, and I'm the only one who could possibly help her.

I crawl forward, pulling myself with one shaky arm. Ziggy helps me sit up, and I hiss from the pain.

"Do you know what happened to her?" I ask, scanning my eyes down her body. I stop when I notice that her breastplate has a slit at the bottom of her rib cage. Gingerly, I pull open the sliced leather, only to find blood pooling underneath.

"She's been stabbed; I don't know if it pierced her lung."

Suddenly, the alarms stop, and the blazing fires disappear. In the silence, someone clicks their tongue.

"Aww, the not-so-happy family. Did the rest abandon you, or are they dead?"

Ziggy's head snaps around. "Adeline..."

A tiny woman with curves for days and short lavender hair stands twenty feet away, tapping her foot in the sand. Her blood-red lips are turned up in the most narcissistic smirk as he looks down at us.

“In the flesh, baby.”

The End

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE...

Villiana, Ryu, Ophir, and Avi's story may be over but there is so much more to look forward to! The next book in The Tower Series will be written in tandem with this storyline from Thorin's POV—you're in for a wild ride with my wild pixie baby.

I hope you loved reading about Villiana and her boys as much as I loved writing them!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Holy mother forking shirt balls (I love you if you get this reference), I actually did the damn thing!

To my husband, Mike. Thank you for being my biggest supporter. Thank you for holding me through the tears and talking me through my panic. Thank you for sacrificing our time together so I could lock myself away and write until my eyes burned. Thank you for never letting me quit. But mostly, thank you for loving me and always believing in me—especially when I didn't. I love you so much and could never have done any of this without you.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zarah Hemlock is an INFJ-T who is addicted to anything coffee, Halloween, and books that make you question your sanity. When she's not writing dark, smutty, and fantastical stories, she's a mom, wife, and teacher.

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